



FOREVER

2020 Sampler Featuring:

The Book of Second Chances

The Boyfriend Project

Make Mine a Cowboy

The Paris Secret

A Lady's Guide to Mischief & Mayhem

READS FOR ALL SEASONS

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Hello Librarians!

Welcome and thank you for joining Forever at ALA Annual! Your tireless dedication and commitment to getting books into the hands of readers is always a thing of wonder, but no more so than now, when getting books to readers is one of our greatest challenges. We are so appreciative of the hard work that's gone into keeping all of us both safe and surrounded by the books we love!

I'm thrilled to introduce you to Forever's Digital Sampler of our upcoming titles, which includes books that will make you laugh, make you cry—and will always deliver an HEA to make you smile. In the much-anticipated *The Paris Secret*, *New York Times* bestselling author Natasha Lester will transport you to WWII-Paris, with an unforgettable story of love, sacrifice, and the hardships faced by the first female pilots. Across the English Channel, award-winning author Manda Collins speaks truth to power in *A Lady's Guide to Mischief & Mayhem*, a fresh and flirty Victorian London-set rom-com about an intrepid lady reporter and the tall, dark, and serious detective with whom she matches wits!

Fast-forwarding to the present-day, we simply cannot stop texting, tweeting, and chatting over Farrah Rochon's heartwarming and hysterical trade paperback debut *The Boyfriend Project*! Fans of Abby Jimenez and Jasmine Guillory will love Farrah's friendship-driven romantic comedy about three women who go viral when they discover they've all been catfished by the same boyfriend! In Katherine Slee's charming debut, *The Book of Second Chances*, the shy granddaughter of a beloved children's author makes her own life-changing pact—to follow the clues her grandmother left behind and embark on a journey that takes her to bookstores around the globe. Last but not least, author and fellow librarian A.J. Pine absolutely enchants in her western romance *Make Mine a Cowboy*, where a no-strings cowboy has one summer to show this big-city girl how she's tied him all up in knots—before she leaves Meadow Valley for good!

Despite the changing world around us, one thing remains constant—the success of a book starts with just one reader, one person falling into a world they never want to leave. And you, dear librarian, are that reader. We hope you'll find something in this sampler that speaks to your heart, that carries you away to a land you never want to leave, that introduces you to friends that will stay long after the last page is read.

From Paris to California, rom-coms to cowboys, this sampler showcases just a taste of what Forever has to offer in the coming months. Please follow us on social for the most up-to-date news on our releases—and we'd love to hear from you what books are making your heart sing!

All my best,

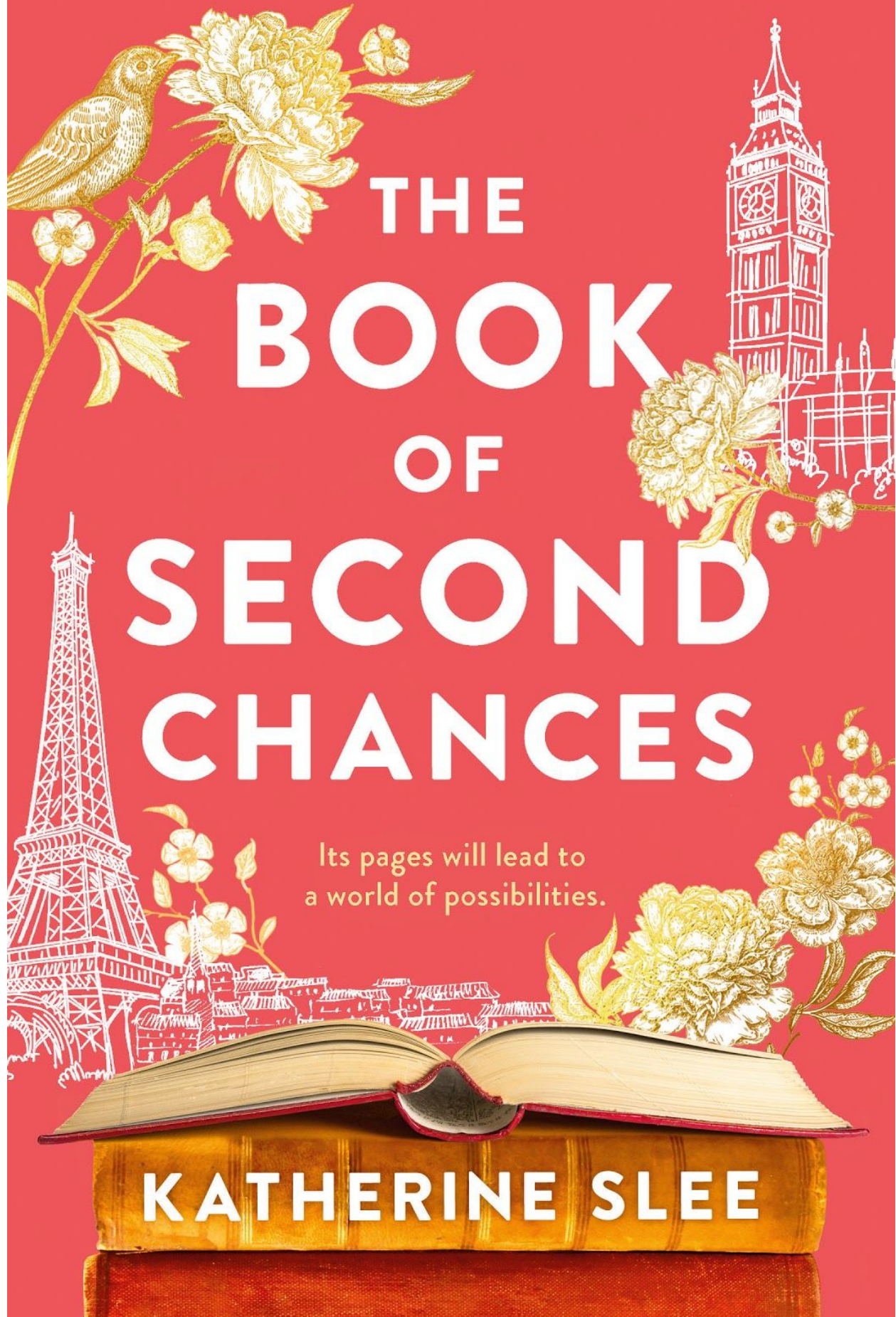
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H a c h e t t e B o o k G r o u p



THE
BOOK
OF
SECOND
CHANCES

Its pages will lead to
a world of possibilities.

KATHERINE SLEE

A charming, uplifting novel about love, loss, and finding your way in the world, perfect for fans of *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* and *The Keeper of Lost Things*.

Emily can't remember the last time she left the house. Or spoke to anyone besides her grandmother, beloved children's author Catriona Robinson. After Catriona's death, Emily is at a complete loss . . . until she gets an unexpected letter from the woman she loved most.

Catriona has revealed there might be one last, lost unpublished manuscript in her wildly popular book series. And she's left a secret diary and trail of clues that only Emily can follow. From London to Paris to Verona, Emily traces her grandmother's past, finding out more about her family — and herself — than she ever imagined possible. Hopeful and adventurous, *The Book of Second Chances* celebrates books and bookstores, the power of imagination, and having the courage to shape our own destinies.

THE BOOK OF SECOND CHANCES

Katherine Slee

Forever Trade Paperback

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CATRIONA ROBINSON'S SWAN SONG

*Or does Britain's favorite children's author still have one last
adventure to share?*

Interview by Suzie Johnstone

Catriona Robinson was one of this generation's most beloved and best-known authors. Her series of children's books, about a girl in a wheelchair who discovers a magical atlas that transports her all over the globe, has been read and adored by millions. She has also written several works of adult fiction, most recently *Enchantment*, which was shortlisted for a number of literary prizes last year.

A notoriously private person, Catriona spent the majority of her time at her home on the Norfolk coast, but in recent years was also a guest lecturer at the University of Cambridge for their creative writing course. It was at Cambridge that I was fortunate enough to meet her. She was giving a lecture to the upcoming finalists and, from what I have heard, it was both inspiring and humble, with a sprinkle of humor thrown into the mix.

The hotel in which we met was perhaps not what you would have expected from a woman who, by her own admission, was most comfortable in dungarees and Wellington boots. The establishment in question had a double-height reception hall, an industrial spiral staircase,

and contemporary lighting. There was also a mezzanine library with recessed shelving and plush velvet furniture, which is where I chatted to Catriona over a pot of tea and a slice of her favorite lemon cake. She was wearing a pleated black skirt with turquoise silk blouse, and her hair was styled in a loose chignon. She was animated, relaxed, and even asked our waiter if she could buy the tea set, which was decorated around the rim with paintings of turtledoves, from the hotel. If I hadn't known otherwise, I would never have guessed the woman seated across from me had only months left to live.

You're about to give a lecture to the next generation of writers. What is it you've enjoyed most about teaching here?

I never had the opportunity to go to university myself, not least because it wasn't as commonplace for women back then as it is now. But also because I never believed I was good enough, certainly never thought I would end up here. I am a strong advocate of the fact that all children, irrespective of their gender, race, socioeconomic background, should be encouraged to reach for the stars, to be the very best version of themselves they can possibly be.

I have no degree, no formal literary training, and yet am now teaching at one of the most renowned universities in the world. There is no one pathway to success anymore, indeed what does the word even mean?

What does it mean to you?

When I first began to write, it was out of a simple curiosity for the world. A way to put down onto paper all the crazy

ideas and characters I kept thinking about. But I never considered it to be anything more than a hobby and certainly never dreamt it would take me on the incredible journey I've been fortunate enough to enjoy. Success should never be measured by the amount of money, or things, you have, but more the sense of achievement it gives you.

How much of your own success do you put down to happenstance?

One could argue that life is nothing but a series of serendipitous events, both good and bad. I try to adhere to the rule that there's a balance to this universe, this life, and no matter how much pain and hardship we face, there is always something, or someone, to give you hope.

There's a quote from *Anne of Green Gables* that I have pinned up on my refrigerator at home, which pretty much says it all: "I don't know what lies around the bend, but I'm going to believe that the best does."

What gives you hope?

My granddaughter, Emily.

You've spoken before about how the idea for Ophelia came from her.

Yes. As I'm sure everyone is aware, Emily was severely injured in a car accident fifteen years ago. I used to tell her stories while she was recovering, and she liked to draw pictures of the characters. My publisher saw something we had been working on, just for fun, and the rest, as you say, is history.

It seems to be a real collaborative effort between you and Emily. Does that come with its own challenges?

(Laughs.) Of course, we're family, which means we're always going to have disagreements. But Emily's real talent is knowing exactly what it is I am trying to describe to the readers and, somehow, she manages to reproduce it in her pictures.

Did Emily's own disability influence the stories you wrote?

Emily doesn't have a disability, but people will believe what they want to believe. My books are there to entertain, but also to educate, to inspire. So many people stay in one place for too long, become stagnated by society, by money. But there are all sorts of wonders out there, just waiting for us to find them.

What made you change direction in your writing, move away from children's books?

As a writer I'm always looking to explore new ideas, find new challenges. Ophelia and the world we created became such a huge part of our lives for such a long time that it seemed necessary for me, for both of us, to draw a line under it all. Try something different.

***Enchantment* has had mixed reviews from readers, despite its literary success. How much of this do you think is due to the fact it's aimed at an adult, rather than a younger, audience?**

It doesn't surprise me, because people come to expect a

certain style, a certain subject, from well-known authors. And yet if I'd written another children's book, it would have been criticized for not being about Ophelia. Life is about experimentation, about exploring the magic hidden within the world. I wanted to look at the links between science and philosophy, about how it affects the human spirit. About the finite amount of time any one of us has on this planet and how, when forced to confront that, we would each change our behavior, our outlook.

In reference to the main theme of *Enchantment*, if you knew this was your last day on Earth, how would you want to spend it?

You do know I'm dying? Oh, goodness, your face, I'm sorry. Death seems to have this effect on me. I forget how hard it is for other people to deal with.

What was the question again? Oh, yes, last day on Earth. Crikey (more laughter), wherever did I come up with that idea?

There is a place, on the coast of France, that holds a special place in my heart, not least because it's where I wrote my first book. There's something about the light there that is so peaceful. I would wake early, have warm croissants and strong, black coffee for breakfast, followed by a long walk along the beach, with the sea between my toes. Then I would dive beneath the waves and feel the strength of the tide, a reminder of all the power in this world we have no control over. Fresh langoustines roasted on an open fire and champagne drunk at sunset. All with Emily by my side.

Nothing spectacular, nothing fancy. Because when

you wipe away all the layers of spit and polish, all anyone ever has are the relationships, the memories, they forge along the way.

Do you have any advice for aspiring authors out there, no matter how young or old?

Say yes to everything. Take the risks, regret only the things you don't do, because mistakes are more important than success. You can't write, you can't connect with people if you haven't any memories to draw on, no matter how painful they might be. You see, the things I remember most clearly from my life are those I wasn't supposed to do, but I did them anyway.

Did any of those things involve men?

Aren't all the best mistakes about love?

Have you been working on anything new?

There's always something new. Another idea, another character, another story.

Is that the reason for this interview?

I haven't always been so elusive, so reclusive, as it were, but rather my lifestyle has simply been a result of unfortunate circumstances. This interview is most likely to be my last and, to be completely honest, I no longer feel the need to hide behind the veil of my stories. I only hope that something good can come out of what Emily and I have created, that the end of one journey could perhaps mean the beginning of another.

Does this mean there's some truth to the rumors about a new series, featuring a grown-up Ophelia?

There's always an element of truth to every rumor. Let's just say there is something, but I'm not yet certain it will ever be shared with the world.

You're famous for leaving clues in all of your books. Is this another treasure trail, another puzzle, you want your readers to solve?

Well, that would be telling.

Catriona Robinson died peacefully at home last month, after a long battle with cancer. She is survived by her only granddaughter, Emily, who has remained unavailable for comment.

1



COCKATOO

Cacatuidae

Emily sat by the back door, sketchbook open on the kitchen table, waiting for something to happen.

The shadows on the lawn were slowly disappearing as the sun rose in the summer sky, and next door the church bell-ringers were warming up for their weekly practice. Everything was as it should be on a Monday morning in August, but Emily felt that there was a gap in the day, one which she was trying to figure out how to fill.

She was stuck, waiting for inspiration to strike, but even a second cup of tea and slice of lemon cake had done nothing to shift her focus back to the task in hand.

A selection of inkpots stood next to the sink, ready for when Emily decided which colors to add to the picture of a cockatoo she had drawn over breakfast.

The problem was, the brief she had been given by her publisher was for a lifelike depiction of the bird, with no whimsy or magical elements, but whenever Emily looked at him (for he was most definitely a him, with such a proud crest on his head), she was struck by a desire to paint his feathers with all the colors of the rainbow. Her mind was misbehaving and kept going off on tangents, imagining the cockatoo being able to transform, much like a chameleon, whenever he needed to hide from whomever or whatever he was flying from.

There was another picture in her head too, of a little girl seated in a wheelchair with the cockatoo perched on her shoulder. She was whispering to him, gently stroking his breast and watching as ripples of color passed from the bird and onto her skin. For no matter the pictures that Emily was asked to draw, her imagination always seemed to bring her back to Ophelia, the iconic character her grandmother had created all those years ago.

“*Cacatuidae*,” Emily sounded out the Latin term for the bird as she wrote it underneath the branch he was perched on. She spoke slowly, feeling her way through each syllable, and realized it was the first time she had said anything out loud for days.

The whole point of agreeing to the illustrations was that it was supposed to be distracting her from the fact she was all by herself. Naively, she had thought a new project would be all it took to fill the hours of the day, when she otherwise had nothing in particular to do and nowhere to go.

The song on the radio changed, the velvet notes of a clarinet playing *Peter and the Wolf*, which filled Emily's mind with a picture of a boy running through the snow, longing to get back home where his mother was waiting with a turkey on the table and presents under the tree.

I'm sorry, she thought, looking at the cockatoo as she turned the radio off, before closing the sketchbook and tidying away the pots of ink. *It would seem you're destined to be decidedly ordinary after all.*

Emily had spent years creating illustrations that were anything but ordinary. Her pictures were filled with fantasy and make-believe, designed to bring to life the incredible stories her grandmother had written. But ever since her grandmother's death, Emily had found herself unable to concentrate on anything new.

She looked across to the room that led off the kitchen, her grandmother's study. One wall was taken over by shelves filled with dozens of her grandmother's red notebooks, which contained all the ideas for every book she had written about Ophelia and her pet duck. Ten books in all, no more, no less. But now the whole world seemed to think there was another, one that Emily knew there had never been time to write.

How could she do this? Emily thought to herself. The doctors had said there was still time. Time to finish her work. Time to seek out another possible treatment.

Time to fight.

Her grandmother was the one person in the world who understood. Who had shared in the misery of losing both parents in a car crash so many seasons ago and the pain of Emily's subsequent recovery. She was the only person

who had been there throughout the years of cruel taunts from children who were supposed to be her friends.

She had promised to love Emily, to take care of her always. But now her grandmother, the famous Catriona Robinson, couldn't protect anyone.

Outside came the sound of footsteps on the garden path, a pause, then a tumble of post that appeared through the letter box and landed in a heap on the doormat. No doubt more notes of comfort, of sorrow, from people Emily had never met. Handwritten notes from grieving fans—all of them detailing how amazing and talented her grandmother had been. Every one packed with personal stories of how her books had helped excite their early imaginations.

Emily went into the hall and bent down to retrieve the post, began to sort them into piles of letters and junk, catalogs and bills, when the shrill sound of a telephone disturbed the quiet. The answerphone clicked on to record.

"Emily, darling, it's Charlie." A woman's voice crossed the distance from London to Norfolk, and Emily could picture the person on the other end of the line, seated in a large, bright office on the twenty-second floor of a skyscraper overlooking the river Thames. "Look, I'm sorry to keep asking you the same question, but I'm being pressured by the board to put out a press release about this damn manuscript." There was a long sigh, and Emily closed her eyes, waited for what she sensed was coming. "Are you there? I know you don't want to talk about this, but at some point you're going to have to answer all these questions about Catriona, about her life. It doesn't have to be in person, but you owe it to the fans—"

The room fell silent as Emily pulled the answerphone's

plug from its socket, then threw it to the floor, where it landed on the carpet with a soft thud. She looked down at the letters clasped tightly in her hand before walking into the living room and over to the fireplace, where she tossed them all into the grate. Next, she went back out to the hall to retrieve a large cardboard box by the front door, taking it back to the fireplace and opening the lid. Inside were hundreds of fan letters, most of them unopened.

I don't want your pity, Emily thought as she began to take them out and stack them in four neat piles by the fire.

Emily had never before wanted to run away, had in fact done everything she possibly could to stay within the safe confines of Wells-next-the-Sea, a happy little town on the Norfolk coast where life moved at a suitably slow pace and the wider world largely left her alone. That was, until her grandmother had given that interview, telling the world and everyone in it that there was, quite possibly, another manuscript ready and waiting for all to discover. There had been such an incredible frenzy after the article was published, with phone calls and emails and strangers turning up at the door, thrusting phones in Emily's face and asking her if it was true. The kind of chaos Emily had been sheltered from when her grandmother was alive. But she didn't have any answers, neither then nor now, because she hadn't asked her grandmother about the unfinished story. It was beginning to feel as if she had never asked her anything of importance, and now it was too late.

On the opposite wall to all those notebooks hung a small, square picture of two bluebirds. It was so very different in style to all the other paintings in the house, but Emily had never asked where it came from, or why it was right next

to the space where her grandmother always worked. It was just one example of how Emily had simply assumed, in that slightly arrogant way of a child, that adults had no real past before their children were born. Now, more than anything, she wanted to be able to talk to her grandmother, to discover everything that had happened before.

Emily went over to the mantelpiece, looking at each of the photographs stood on top. She wished she could go back, find at least one answer to all her questions.

For years, Emily had allowed her life to be decided for her, first by a long series of doctors and then her grandmother. It was always Catriona to whom she had turned whenever she was in need, relied on to make all the decisions, allowed to take responsibility for pretty much every aspect of her life. It wasn't until Catriona had decided to forgo further treatment that Emily was forced to acknowledge how isolated, how dependent on her grandmother, she had become.

Emily looked across at the piles of letters she had created, thought of what would happen to all those words if she were to set them alight. Imagined them dancing up the chimney and into the sky, where they would mix together and perhaps create something new, or get caught in the beak of a passing cockatoo who would fly across the ocean and deliver them to a boy who dreamt of one day growing up to be a famous author.

"What am I supposed to do?" Emily sighed as she sank to her knees and looked across at her grandmother's desk, where an ancient typewriter had sat, untouched for months. Twenty-eight years old with nothing to show for her life other than a shelf full of books. What was she, who was she, without the late, great Catriona Robinson?

2



ROBIN

Erithacus rubecula

Mr. Thomas could see someone moving around inside the house as he approached. The outline of a person who dipped and turned beyond the window. The house itself was tucked away at the end of a long gravel path next to the church. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it sign for *Meadows Cottage* written in the same hand as that on the envelope he'd been instructed to deliver by the woman whose absence he felt each morning when he woke.

It was his dog Max who'd first brought them together, just shy of one year ago. Max was running in circles around a pile of belongings, tail thumping in

contentment as his bark resonated through the morning air. There had ensued a momentary tug of war as he'd retrieved one end of a belt from Max's jaws, then he'd crouched down to discover a small gold ring half buried in the sand beside a pile of clothes now wrinkled through with sandy paw prints. He had turned full circle in search of another person, and found a woman jogging toward him, breathless but smiling, with hair slapped in sodden streaks over her face. She was wearing nothing more than a silk slip, soaked through by her swim in the sea. She'd apologized for the confusion, laughing about how it must have seemed to a man who was simply walking his dog and discovered a pile of abandoned belongings.

She had introduced herself as Catriona, her hand small and chilled inside his own. A hand he would go on to hold many times as the two of them walked Max each morning, before she returned home to the granddaughter he'd never had the chance to meet, until now.

Part of him wanted to walk away, to continue with his morning as planned—a stroll across the beach, followed by a strong, black coffee, croissant, and newspaper at the nearby café, then home to continue work on the raised beds in the back garden.

But another part of him knew it was folly to ignore a dying woman's wishes. A woman who had chosen him because he understood that Emily's world was about to be turned upside down.

Max nudged his master's leg, pulling him back to the here and now. The garden was still: petals sleepy under the advancing sun; bees going in search of a late breakfast;

a robin perched atop the handle of a garden fork, with a worm held tight in its beak.

The dog barked, and the bird took flight as the front door opened. A young woman dressed in a pale green T-shirt and denim shorts appeared in the doorway. Her skin held the beginnings of a tan, all except for a large stretch of scar along her jaw. Standing barefoot, the nails of each toe painted a glossy red, she watched Mr. Thomas from under a heavy fringe that stopped just shy of her hazel eyes.

There was something unsettling about her gaze, Mr. Thomas thought. The way it drew him in to look at her a moment more, to recognize the curve of lip so like her grandmother's, and the freckles across her nose.

"Are you Emily?" he asked.

A single nod of reply as she bent down to rub behind the dog's ears, a smile that broke through the scar when she was rewarded with a lick.

"I have something for you," he said as he held out the envelope he'd kept safe for six long weeks. "It's from your grandmother."

She considered the offering a moment before taking it, then turned to walk back inside, a small wave of her hand inviting him to follow.

The dog pulled free of its lead, trotting behind the woman who disappeared into a room at the rear. Inside, the cottage was cool, its stone walls clinging to the remnants of night, with a small living room to the left and a narrow staircase straight ahead. A cuckoo clock ticked away in the corner, and he was forced to duck his head to avoid a beam as he passed through to the kitchen. The

scent of toast and coffee drew his eye to a table by the back door, where an empty plate and cup sat next to a sketchbook open to a blank page.

Emily stood by the butler's sink and he watched as she turned the envelope over in her hand, looking at it from one side then the other. She held it up to the light, then tossed it in the sink, where it landed atop a slowly disintegrating tower of bubbles, dark tendrils of ink beginning to soak through the paper.

"Ah, yes," he said, with fumbling fingers that betrayed his exterior of calm. "There's also this." Out of his pocket came a fountain pen, with bottle-green marbling and gold lid. Emily took the pen, held it in her palm, then suddenly cried out, bashed her fist against the porcelain and slipped down to the floor.

"Are you okay?" he asked, rushing to her side, only for her to dip her head, try to hide her tears. "I'm so sorry," he continued, reaching out a hand, then bringing it away. "Do you know what this means?" Catriona hadn't told him. Asked him only to deliver the letter and pen.

Emily nodded, then shook her head, a low moan escaping her lips. Max came over and laid a paw on her leg. The dog seemed to understand her pain, emitting a soft whine as she wrapped an arm around his neck and buried her face in his fur.

"Is there anyone who can help?" Mr. Thomas asked, looking around the kitchen for some kind of sign of what he was supposed to do. His eyes skimmed over the obvious, the everyday items so commonplace to all. A laptop, a coffee machine, a collection of keys hanging from a row of hooks on the wall, two pairs of Wellington boots

stood side by side by the back door. A framed cover of a children's book, written by one of England's best-loved authors.

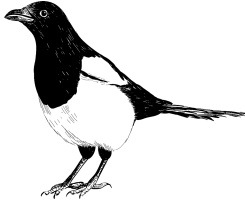
Emily still sat on the floor, one hand absently stroking Max's ears, the other turning the pen over and over.

All of a sudden, he felt the full weight of his intrusion, of witnessing something he should not, and it made him agitated, annoyed at his decision to come here, to play the hand of fate when it really was none of his concern.

"I really am so very sorry," he muttered as he took hold of Max's collar and lifted him away from the woman. "Please accept my apologies for barging in on you like this. It wasn't my intention to cause you any distress, only I made your grandmother a promise and, well, it's not something I felt I could ignore." He was rambling, a nervous habit of his, all the more obvious in a room so silent, apart from the tick of a clock and the click of Max's claws on the floor as they left.

She gave him no more than a cursory glance as he left, and it wasn't until he closed the door behind him that he realized, for all his blathering, for the shock of what he had passed on, she hadn't said a single word the entire time he was there.

3



MAGPIE

Pica pica

The man was gone. The dog too. It made Emily feel sad and relieved all at once. To have someone give her a message from the grave was so very typical of her grandmother. Planning it all down to the person who would deliver the news, with a dog no less, as if that might somehow soften the blow.

She picked up her cup, around the rim of which were tiny paintings of turtledoves, and poured herself another coffee. She cradled the warmth in her palms and tapped her pen against the side, tried to think when her grandmother could have taken it. Perhaps she had hidden it

away in the pocket of her cardigan, or inside a packet of tobacco, knowing it was somewhere Emily would never look. Emily had searched all over for the pen, tossing cushions aside, even removing books from the shelves in the study and going into the greenhouse to see if it had mysteriously ended up next to the tomatoes.

“Look for the signs,” her grandmother would always say. “Don’t forget to look for all the clues and miracles tucked away in every corner of the world.”

But what sort of clue was this? Emily unscrewed the lid, raised the nib to her nose and breathed deep. It always made her think of the tube of Germoline, all pink and sticky, sitting at the back of the cabinet above the bathroom sink. A leftover cream from childhood with such a distinct smell. The pen had been a present from her grandmother, something to help Emily have confidence in herself, her drawings. She told her she shouldn’t ever think of rubbing something away, that all the images she created were there for a reason and she should treasure them all. Ever since, Emily always sketched in black ink, never pencil.

A long sigh, because all of the memories only served to remind Emily that she was alone. She closed her eyes, tried to remember the look on her grandmother’s face the last evening she had been alive, tried to recall the exact words spoken before she had kissed her good night and Emily had turned back to her work, away from the sound of footsteps on the narrow stairs. The creak of floorboards overhead as the old woman settled down to sleep.

Emily blew into her cup, let the steam rise and cover her face. Felt tears on her cheeks, grief tangled up with anger at being left all alone.

There was a sudden cackle of magpie, and Emily opened her eyes, sought out the culprit that sat in the apple tree at the edge of the lawn. Two sharp whistles and the bird swooped down from the branch, hopping across the grass, then in through the door and up onto the kitchen table.

“Hello, Milton,” Emily said in a small whisper.

The bird pecked at the toast crumbs on offer, then went over to tap at a biscuit tin placed high on a nearby shelf. Emily reached up to bring the bird back down, leant in close to whisper a reprimand, which made Milton cock his head in response.

Two black eyes regarded her for a moment, then he leapt over to the sink. Head down, tail up, the magpie went, its beak investigating a saturated envelope that Emily snatched away and dropped on the table.

“No,” Emily whispered, a slam of cup on wood before she stormed out to the garden.

She couldn't look at it. Certainly couldn't open it, or read her grandmother's final words. Because that would make it real, make this more than just a passing distraction from the monotony of life. Make her grandmother's threats and promises come true: that one day soon Emily would be on her own.

If she read the letter, she had the strangest feeling that everything would change, and she wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

Toes on grass, curling through the damp to feel the earth below and the tiny stems of daisies scattered all around. Daisies she used to make into chains, then drape over the outstretched branches of all the trees that ran

around the garden's perimeter. A shield to stop the outside world from looking in.

Always looking, always staring. Always wanting to know about the famous author and, perhaps even more so, about the silent child.

Emily leant against the rough trunk of the apple tree, looked down to where Milton was waiting at her feet. He had been joined by a robin, who sang out his greeting, then fluttered up to land close to her ear.

A soft breeze stirred the feathers at his breast, bringing with it the scent of honeysuckle and spun sugar from the vicarage next door. The vicar had a notoriously sweet tooth, and Emily would sometimes sit with him as he wrote his sermons, accompanied by a plate of biscuits or Danish pastries that his wife would bake. Perhaps she could pop in, let him read the letter instead?

No matter who read it, she would need to admit that her grandmother and her legacy were gone.

But admitting was impossible. Admitting would make it true.

Her throat began to close as the truth settled in her heart, and she let out a low sob that pierced the garden's calm.

Milton shook his head, then scuttled back across the lawn. The robin sang out his own note of remorse, and Emily imagined a chorus of birds landing in the apple trees at the back of the garden, a mismatched group of magpies and wrens, crows that perched up high, and swallows that dipped and turned through the brightening sky.

She knew she was doing it again—escaping inside her own imagination, never allowing herself to acknowledge

the reality of what she had lost. Because she had lost so much and she didn't want to have to start again.

Emily took a long, slow breath, wiped her eyes, and went back to the kitchen, where Milton was pecking at the last remaining crumbs on the breakfast table, her grandmother's letter unopened by his feet.

"Okay," she sighed as she slipped her finger through the seal. Out came a single sheet of paper embossed with her grandmother's neat, black script: no more, no less. Just a few letters on a page. Was it some sort of breadcrumb trail she was expected to follow?

Emily tore the paper into ever smaller pieces, as one by one they fell to the ground, and she scuffed them away with her feet, wanted them gone.

She had no need to keep the piece of paper intact to find the source—Emily knew the address by heart. It was what was waiting for her there that made her hesitate, made her look to the table, where her sketchbook lay waiting, offering up an alternative.

As she smoothed the pages flat, Emily traced her fingers over another drawing she had been working on, of a girl now grown, cycling through the countryside, with all the possibility of life right in front of her. A girl she had created in this very room when she was no more than a child herself. When she was battered, broken, and unable to talk, but who found another way to give voice to what was inside her soul. Pictures of a tiny heroine who had been stitched into the imaginations of millions of children all around the world, accompanied by the extraordinary words of her grandmother. A girl whose adventures only existed in the mind of someone who was

gone. Really gone, leaving behind nothing more than some stupid clue.

But if she didn't go, if she didn't follow the demands her grandmother had left, she could pretend it wasn't so.

Except for the man who'd delivered the letter. He would know. Before long he would figure it out. She had seen the way he looked at her. His mind processing the physical similarities between her and her grandmother. He had seen the framed cover of the first edition, a cover instantly recognizable the world over. It wouldn't take long for all those dots to be connected.

Once more her grandmother had preempted how Emily would react, knew she would try to hide, to protect herself from the reality of what had happened. She'd made sure there was a witness who would eventually force Emily's hand.

In those last days before she died, her grandmother had spoken of something left behind from long ago. A secret kept safe, that she wanted Emily to find. It was a game of sorts; a hide-and-seek puzzle so beloved of Catriona Robinson. Follow the clues to find the prize. A chocolate egg, or a tiny wooden door nailed to the side of a tree that she claimed belonged to a fairy. Except this time Emily wasn't sure if she wanted to play.

The magpie tapped his beak against the biscuit tin. He seemed to be waiting for Emily to make up her mind. Either that or he simply wanted another treat. A swift roll of eyes, a final slurp of caffeine, then back outside Emily went.

Leg tossed over the saddle of her bike, bare feet on pedals, she rode through the village as the wind whispered

secrets through her hair. Tiny speckles of pollen touched her skin as she sped along the road.

She felt them staring, heads turning as she went. The bird lady. The silent one. The stranger in their midst, who stood at the back of the church so no one could hear her sing.

Overhead Milton flew: her chaperone, her minder, a streak of black-and-white who seemed to know where Emily was headed. To a bookshop in the neighboring village. Not the main one, that sat in the center of the High Street, surrounded by hairdressers and charity shops. This particular shop was hidden away down a side alley, a chalkboard sign hanging above a painted door. Emily had spent much of her childhood there, protected by the make-believe words of people she had never met. Including those of her grandmother, who wrote stories about a girl named Ophelia whose only friend was a pale, gray duck. The two of them traveled all over the world in search of fairy tales and adventure. They had been adventures Emily had never dared to know in real life.

As she cycled close, Emily saw that the door was open. The air around its frame speckled with light that trailed to the floor then seeped inside. It was Thursday. The shop would normally be shut up tight, all a-slumber. Only today was not a day like any other—Emily could sense that now.

With her bike propped against the wall and Milton keeping watch, she crossed the threshold, felt the air settle on her skin as the door swung to, sealing her in.

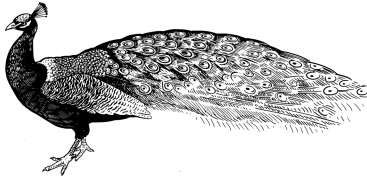
The space was both familiar and strange. Every surface was covered with books. Shelves that stretched to the

ceiling, side tables and chairs that sagged under the weight of all those words. The comforting scent of paper and ink hung in the air.

But there was something else as well, something Emily couldn't quite put a name to. At the far end of the shop, a trio of steps led down and through an archway to a small space dominated by an ancient leather chair. On either side stood a tower of books that looked sure to topple if ever they were bumped. Sitting still was the bookseller, a paperback open on his lap. His hair was the color of winter's frost, his buttercup waistcoat undone, and one finger traced over the letters as he read, thin lips moving in silent recognition.

His head raised only a fraction as she approached.

"Ah, Emily," he said, blinking through the smudged lenses of his spectacles. "I was wondering when you were going to show up."



PEACOCK

Pavo cristatus

In her lap, Emily held two documents that the bookseller had procured from a drawer and handed over with a flourish, like a magician lifting the rabbit from his top hat. One was the Last Will and Testament of Catriona Robinson. The other a letter from her grandmother's solicitor. Both were typed on thick, embossed paper with an elegant signature at the bottom of the final page.

But neither of them made any sense.

"You are the sole heir," the bookseller said, seemingly oblivious to the way in which Emily's hands were shaking.

“All you have to do in order to inherit your grandmother’s estate in its entirety is follow the clues.”

“The clues,” Emily whispered, looking back down at the pieces of paper, thinking of the envelope delivered by a stranger and his dog.

“It says so right there.” He pointed to the will, to a paragraph that Emily had read twice already but was having trouble understanding. “The books, the rights, and every single item within the house.”

“But not the house.” Emily’s lips began to tremble, the last word coming out as nothing more than a whisper. Because the accompanying letter clearly stated that the cottage in which she and her grandmother had lived for the best part of fifteen years did not, in fact, belong to them but had been rented from a businessman named Frank.

“But good news, my dear,” the bookseller said, smiling across at Emily. “If you complete the trail before the lease is up, then you will be given first refusal to buy the cottage. And at fair market value.”

Fair market value. Emily repeated it to herself. Nothing about this was fair. Her grandmother had lied to her, let Emily believe she was safe.

“Which means,” the man continued with a swift glance at his watch, “by my calculations, you have exactly ten days to complete the task.”

His words were forming in the air. Words Emily recognized but did not know how to respond to. Because the letters and sentences that flowed from this man’s lips were about a trail, a test of sorts, at the end of which was the prize her grandmother had spoken of before her death.

They’re like the notes of a wretched symphony, Emily

thought to herself, imagining his words transforming into notes, wishing there were actual music to drown out the sound of his voice.

She began to tap her foot on the ground in sync with the rhythm of his words, imagined herself spinning around like a dervish, faster and faster, until she disappeared inside one of the books that held up the walls of this ancient shop. She could see herself dancing through fields and over streams heavy with fish, looking for the scarecrow and a road made of yellow brick.

Emily stood, dropped her grandmother's will on top of a pile of books, and went to the door that led to the small patio at the back of the shop. It contained nothing more than a few porcelain pots and a watering can in the shape of a frog, one of its painted eyes staring up to the heavens.

"This is your first clue," the bookseller said, holding out a book for her to take.

She knew what it was before he slipped it into her hands. Before she turned it around to reveal a picture of a handsome peacock, his tail spread wide so that dozens of eyes were winking back at her. It was a copy of the book that had made her grandmother a household name just shy of fourteen years ago, reprinted only last year in hard-back, with a peacock replacing Emily's original drawing of a little girl and her duck.

Emily had first sketched the bird last spring, during a visit to a National Trust garden. Her grandmother had wandered around the gardens, chatting with the gardener about what best to plant in her garden in order to attract more butterflies. Emily had watched the proud bird strut

along the edge of the croquet lawn, as if it were master of the house.

They don't start growing their fancy tail feathers until they're three. Emily had picked one up off the lawn, spun it between her fingers and watched the colors blur. The head gardener had commented on how, despite their beauty, peacocks actually tasted pretty foul. Her grandmother had laughed at his terrible joke while all Emily could do was muster up half a smile, turning away and back to her drawing.

The garden. Her grandmother's garden. What would happen to it if the cottage were sold? It was what had provided Catriona Robinson with comfort, especially in the last few months when the pain was too much for her to venture even to the village. It was what kept Emily grounded, connected to her grandmother somehow, whenever she felt the sadness lurking. That and the birds who came every morning for their breakfast crumbs and would sit with Emily while she sketched in the late summer sun.

What would happen to all those memories if the cottage were to be home to someone new?

And what about me? Emily suddenly realized. Where was she supposed to go?

The idea of starting again was terrifying. So many years spent in one place, with one person, only for it all to be taken away from her at once. The books they had written together had been her constant, her way of coping with the life she had been dealt. The partnership forged between an unlikely pairing, which gave them both so much joy. The letters and pictures sent by readers from all over

the world, telling them how much they loved the books with all the secrets hidden within each picture.

Clues Emily and her grandmother would come up with together, laugh about the strangeness of some, talk about the links back to folklore or simply an object from her grandmother's life, before.

"Open it," the bookseller said, and Emily noted the anticipation, the excitement, in his voice.

"You," she replied, handing back the book with trembling fingers, afraid of what more was about to come.

He regarded her for a moment, then set the book down on a nearby trestle table and slipped his forefinger inside the first page, easing the spine apart to reveal the dedication.

For Emily.

If you don't try, you'll never know.

Emily stepped closer to peer at the typed words that she knew didn't marry up with the actual dedications in each and every book in the series. Ten in all, written in the back room of her grandmother's cottage, typed up with a clatter of keys through hailstorms, heat waves, and everything in between.

If you don't try, you'll never know. It had been one of her grandmother's favorite catchphrases. A mantra of sorts that she would dish out during the first few years of Emily's recovery, whenever she stubbornly refused to join in. But what on earth did it have to do with where she was now?

She turned around, walked through the shop to the

children's section, to where row upon row of books by Catriona Robinson sat. Emily removed one, flicked to the dedication page, saw the same two words as had always been—*For Emily*—then put it back again. She took out another, this one whose cover had a picture of a girl swimming under the sea, a bright pearl clutched tight in her hand.

For Emily.

Another, with the same little girl soaring on an enormous swing through a starry sky.

For Emily.

Each and every dedication was the same—apart from the one she had just been given.

It was a clue. A clue to the next part of the puzzle her grandmother had put together in secret, that she'd kept hidden from her. But why?

"The first one is my favorite," the bookseller said, pointing at one of the books Emily had discarded on the floor. "The idea of a magical atlas, transporting a little girl with a disability all over the world. Teaching her about people and places she could never hope to know. I only wish I had that kind of imagination."

The stories had been their way of escaping, of pretending that the real world wasn't there, if only for a little while. But life, Emily knew, had a way of creeping up on you, even when you were doing everything you possibly could to pretend it wasn't.

"I can't," Emily whispered, leaning against the bookcase and closing her eyes. She could see herself as a girl of thirteen, seated in a wheelchair beside a lake. Her legs were wrapped in a tartan blanket with tassels she liked to

twist into plaits. Her face was bandaged tight so that only her nose and one eye peeped free, and, overhead, nightingales called out their evening song. By her side, just like every night since the accident, was her grandmother, with a flask full of hot chocolate and a red leather notebook, open on her lap.

Would it have come to this if not for that twist of fate, when her grandmother's publisher had come to visit and asked if she had been working on anything new? Emily sat in the back garden, quietly reading, and Catriona had decided to show her friend the outline of a children's book, along with Emily's illustrations. If she had never discovered the book, would Emily still be standing in a tumbledown shop, being asked from beyond the grave to complete a ridiculous treasure hunt in order to claim her inheritance?

The scent of tobacco, laced through with vanilla, pulled Emily from her thoughts, and she opened her eyes to see the bookseller drawing deep on a curved wooden pipe. Tendrils of smoke made their way up and out of the back door, mixing into the sky without a trace. He looked like a character from one of her grandmother's books: all waxed mustache and twinkly eyes.

Emily allowed the scene in front of her to shimmer at its edges, began to imagine the world in which such a character would exist, or at least the world they would have created for him. A grassy hillock hidden deep in the forest, where he lived with only the trees for company. Or an underground network of caves, ruled by a dastardly gang of moles, who paid him to keep the humans away.

Emily could see it all in full Technicolor: the perfect shade of emerald green for his front door; a rocking chair in which he sat and smoked his pipe in front of the fire when the winter's evenings closed in; circular miner's lamps worn by all the moles as they excavated a kingdom underground. A whole world no one knew anything about, until a little girl and her pet duck came knocking one day, seeking shelter from a storm.

"She said you would know where to go next," he said with a small nod in Emily's direction. "She said all the clues were right in front of you."

Of course they are, Emily thought. Her grandmother had always taught Emily to look closer, to see what others would not. But what was it she wanted Emily to see? And what if she chose not to?

"How many books?" Emily spoke slowly and with care, her mouth stretching over each syllable.

"I'm afraid I have no idea," he replied. "Nor if all the clues will be books."

Ten, Emily thought as she bent down to collect an armful of books and began to place them back on the shelves. *Surely she can't be sending me off to find them all?*

"What if I say no?" Emily sighed with the effort of all the words at once, turned her face away so the bookseller couldn't see the clench of her jaw, the flushed skin on her neck.

"Well," he replied, drawing deeply on his pipe. "There was no mention of what would happen were you to refuse. But, well, I for one would be rather disappointed if you didn't find the rest of the story."

"What story?" Emily turned to see the bookseller

holding out a red leather notebook, identical to those her grandmother had always written all of her ideas and early drafts for each story in.

“She brought it to me a couple of months ago, along with the other book and documents,” the bookseller said, a clear note of excitement in his voice. “Told me to keep it a secret, which, I must say, has been particularly difficult ever since that newspaper interview was published.”

Emily opened the notebook to the first page, recognized it as the beginnings of another story about Ophelia, but one that her grandmother had never quite been able to get right. It was about the ghost of a boy who was asking Ophelia for help to solve a crime he had witnessed, but Catriona had been concerned the topic was too dark for the children it was aimed at.

Flicking through the pages, Emily’s eyes scanned the mind maps, random words, and snippets of conversation that often made up the opening pages of her grandmother’s notebooks. But then the pages simply stopped, because someone had ripped them from the spine, leaving behind thin lines of paper, like crocodile teeth grinning back at her.

“She told me she hid the rest,” the bookseller said as he stepped closer and pointed to the missing pages. “Somewhere only you would be able to find it.”

But, as far as Emily was concerned, Catriona Robinson had never finished this book. Or had she? Because the months before she died were spent in her study, supposedly setting her affairs in order, and Emily had naturally assumed this was the case. Could it be that this is what she had spoken of before her death? Had she spent that time

writing another story, one that Emily was now being sent out to find?

“Why hide it?” Emily muttered, looking from the notebook to the rest of the books on the floor. Bending down, she picked up the last book and flicked through the first few pages. Emily paused as she came to the final illustration in the book, one of Ophelia sitting at her kitchen table and eating an enormous slice of birthday cake. The words of the new dedication swirled through her mind, bringing with them the memory of where Ophelia originally discovered the magical atlas.

Years before, on the first birthday Emily had spent in Norfolk with her grandmother, they, too, had been sitting at the breakfast table, listening to the radio and deciding what to do with their day, when someone knocked on the front door. Emily had hidden behind the fridge, peeping round to see Catriona answer the door to a postman holding a large, square box.

“Come and see,” Catriona had said as she placed the box on the table and slit it open with a kitchen knife. Inside was another, smaller box, this one made from pale-blue cardboard and tied up with a satin bow. Emily had watched as her grandmother opened the second box to reveal a cake decorated with glistening chocolate swirls.

“Would you like a piece?” she had asked, using the same kitchen knife to slice through the soft sponge. Emily had shaken her head, because the sponge was a deep red, not the chocolate brown she had been expecting. In response, her grandmother had offered up a nonchalant shrug and used her finger to wipe the blade of the knife clean, then licking off the butter cream icing.

“If you don’t try, you’ll never know.”

Every year since, a red velvet cake was delivered to the cottage in Norfolk. It was sent all the way from Fortnum and Mason in London, next to which a rather famous bookshop could be found.

“No,” Emily gasped, and the book she was holding dropped to the floor with a soft thud, its cover facing up to show a little girl and her pet duck skipping through a snow-covered forest.

“Emily?” The bookseller looked over to see Emily’s face riddled with panic. He moved toward her, but she backed away, hands raised.

“No,” she said once more, turning to flee from the shop, not stopping to collect either legal document or her grandmother’s book. The spokes of her bike wheels blurred as she disappeared along the street, wind whipping back tears from her face, a magpie following in the sky.

Emily wanted to scream. She wanted to rip the thought from her mind and go back to before, to when all was as it should be. Too many memories. Too much she didn’t want to remember hidden within those walls. And yet it was exactly where her grandmother was trying to send her back to.

It felt so unfair, like a cruel, manipulative trick that Emily wanted no part of. Perhaps she could simply stay at home and refuse to give in to her grandmother’s demands? After all, it was not as if Catriona could force her to do anything anymore. But the curiosity in her had already been aroused. Emily understood this was exactly what her grandmother had wanted—had predicted would happen. She felt something in the pit of her stomach then—the

strange idea that today had only just begun. There was something about the twitter of birds in all the trees she cycled past, as if they knew something she didn't.

The scent of summer rain hung in the air, and church bells called out the hour as Emily came to a halt at the edge of the path that led to her home. Propped up against the garden gate was a young man wearing oxblood cowboy boots, a tan leather jacket, frayed jeans, with a guitar looped over one shoulder. The same man who, as a boy, had been too afraid to duck his head under the water on their shared holidays, the boy she had eventually teased and cajoled into jumping from the jetty into the icy blue.

"Tyler," she whispered as she watched him lift his head and smile as she approached.

About the Author



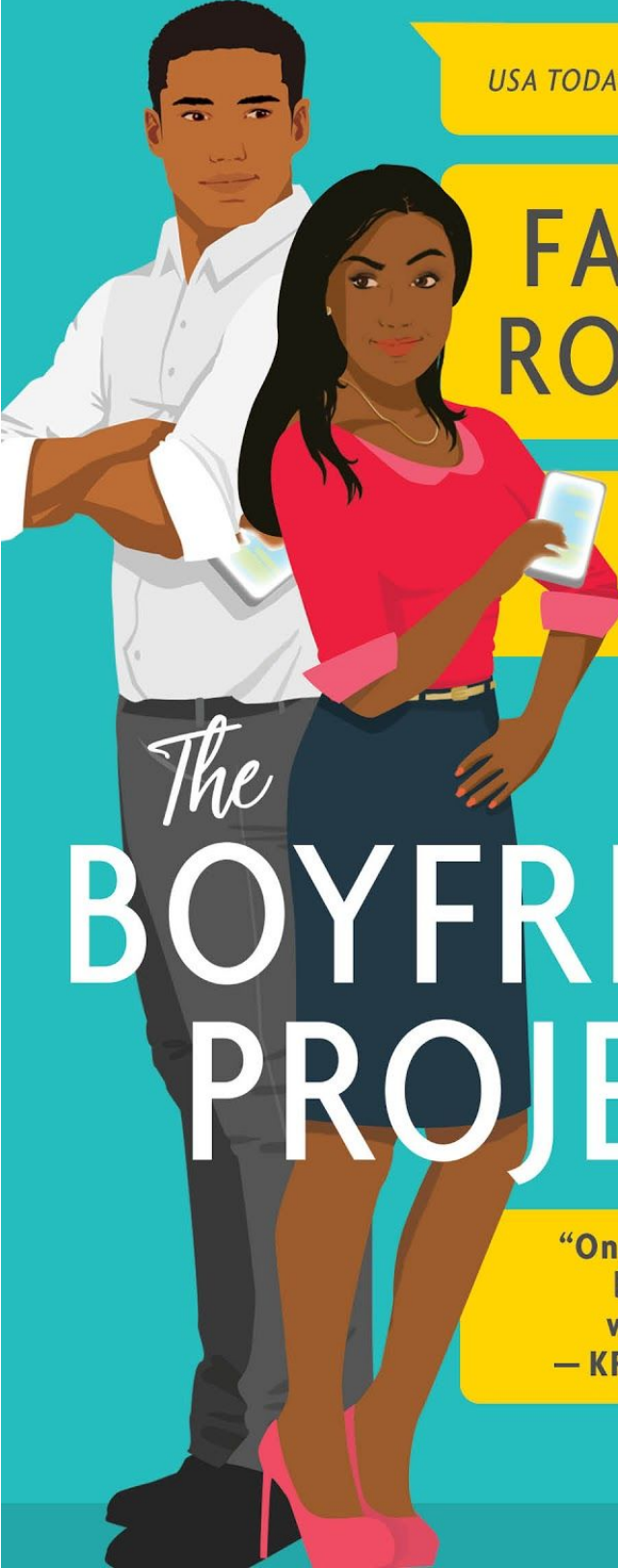
Author: Katherine Slee

Credit: none

Katherine Slee has a Masters in Modern History from Oxford University and is a member of MENSA who left the crazy and chaotic world of investment banking to enter the crazy and chaotic world of being a stay-at-home mother to two children and wife to a workaholic husband. She grew up as a bit of a tomboy, with scars on her knees and mud in her hair, and as a result developed a taste for everything from *Star Wars* to whiskey, with a dash of ornithology thrown into the mix. When she's not either reading or writing, she enjoys baking (with various degrees of success), photography and walking the dog. Her favorite place to be is on the beach in France, where the light is always surprising and the ice cream is the best she's ever tasted.

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“Strong female
friendships and a
great love story.”
— JASMINE GUILLORY



The
**BOYFRIEND
PROJECT**

“One of the absolute
best romance
writers today.”
— KRISTAN HIGGINS

In this witty rom-com celebrating the “unique joys of strong female friendships,” three young women bond when the live Tweeting of a disastrous date leads them to discover they’ve all been duped by the same man. (Jasmine Guillory, author of *The Wedding Date*)

Samiah Brooks never thought she would be “that” girl. But a live tweet of a horrific date just revealed the painful truth: she’s been catfished by a three-timing jerk of a boyfriend. Suddenly Samiah-along with his two other “girlfriends,” London and Taylor-have gone viral online. Now the three new besties are making a pact to spend the next six months investing in themselves. No men and no dating.

For once Samiah is putting herself first, and that includes finally developing the app she’s always dreamed of creating. Which is the exact moment she meets the deliciously sexy Daniel Collins at work. *What are the chances?* But is Daniel really boyfriend material or is he maybe just a little too good to be true?

THE BOYFRIEND PROJECT

Farah Rochon

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Chapter One

“Alexa, play Drake.”

Releasing an intentionally loud, dramatic sigh, Samiah Brooks lolled her head toward the opened bathroom door and called out, “Don’t just tell it to play a certain artist, Denise. Tell it what song you want it to play.”

Muffled footfalls shuffled across the bedroom’s alder hardwood floors. A moment later her sister appeared in the doorway.

“I don’t know any Drake songs. That’s why I asked the damn Alexa thingy.”

Denise lumbered into the bathroom, plopped onto the toilet’s closed lid, and palmed her substantial belly. The opening bars of Drake’s “Best I Ever Had” began streaming through the HD speakers discreetly positioned throughout the condo.

Denise pointed upward. “Is that him? Is that Drake?”

“Yes.” Samiah sighed again. She capped her Fenty Beauty 410 foundation and traded it for the liquid eyeliner. Tugging her lower lid downward, she muttered as she swiped the thin brush along the rim of her eye. “You know you can’t fake this kind of thing, right? Your students will see right through it.”

“Shows how much you know. I’ve been faking it for years. No one’s caught on yet.”

Samiah glanced over her shoulder and grinned. “Make sure you don’t say that around your husband.”

“Oh please.” Denise batted the air as she adjusted her position on the toilet seat cover. “He knows I sometimes have to fake it with him too.”

“Dammit!” Samiah nearly poked herself in the eye with the eyeliner brush. She swung around and glared at her sister. “You said that shit on purpose.”

“What?” Denise asked with wide, guileless eyes. Her knowing smirk nullified her weak attempt at innocence.

“If I gouge myself in the eye with this thing, I’m telling Mama it was your fault.”

“She’d never believe you.” Her sister gestured to the array of palettes scattered across the leathered granite vanity. “Why didn’t you get all dolled up before you went out with me? You wait until we get back to pull out the heavy artillery?”

“Jealous?”

“As if. I can barely remember to pack lip balm in my purse.”

Samiah tsked as she used the smudger brush to blend the shadow into the crease of her eye. “Master the smokey eye and you can conquer the world.”

“Is that your new motto?” Denise said with a snort.

She cocked one perfect brow as she peered at her sister through the mirror. “As someone who hasn’t worn a fully made-up face since cassette tapes were still a thing, you can’t grasp just how difficult it is to achieve this look.” She turned, closed her eyes, and pointed at her eyelids. “Girl, do you see this blending? I honestly just want to stare at myself in the mirror all night.”

Samiah dodged the incoming bath puff, pitched with precision by her National College Softball Championship-winning older sister.

“Hey, help me pick out something else to wear. I’m not feeling the silver dress anymore. It’s too dressy for the club Craig and I are going to tonight.” She pushed

down on Denise's shoulders when her sister tried to rise. "You stay here. I'll bring the outfits to you."

Samiah made her way to the bedroom's huge walk-in closet and slid the knotted pine barn door—the deciding factor in buying this condo—to the side. She stepped in and thumbed through her dresses.

"What about that blue one you wore to your classmate's wedding a few months ago?" Denise called. "What was her name? Tabatha?"

"Tamyra." Samiah grimaced, recalling that night. She'd spent much of the wedding reception getting hit on by Tamyra's sexagenarian uncle, whose fake silk shirt seemed to lose more buttons as the night dragged on. She'd spent the next morning scrubbing a stain from the bust line after he'd sloshed her with his Jack and Coke while pressing her to dance to an Isley Brothers tune from the mid-70's. Samiah doubted she'd ever wear that dress again.

"Not that one," she said. In fact, if Denise wanted it, she could have it.

She settled on dark blue skinny jeans and a red cowl-neck sweater, which seemed more appropriate for this evening's amended plans and the unseasonable nip in the air on this mid-August night. Austin usually felt like a sauna until at least late-September.

Originally, she and Craig were supposed to start their evening with dinner, but he'd texted just as she was leaving work to tell her that he'd gotten caught up at the office and wouldn't be able to make it downtown until late. He'd offered to call and cancel, which was the least he could do since she had been the one who'd spent a half hour on the phone securing the dinner reservation.

Samiah would be lying if she said she wasn't annoyed. She'd been looking forward to returning to the Asian fusion spot where they'd had their first date a few weeks ago. The restaurant continued to generate an insane amount of buzz around town and reservations weren't easy to come by.

But she wouldn't bitch about it. At least not too much. Joining Denise for beef patties from the Jamaican food truck down the street, along with Amy's Ice Cream, had soothed the sting of missing out on good sushi. And the night was still young. She and Craig would enjoy a little late-night noshing and gritty blues music at the new club that had recently opened on Sixth Street, the epicenter of Austin's nightlife.

She unhooked a faux suede cropped jacket from the hanger and held it up just under her chin.

Come to think of it, each of her four dates with Craig had been at a club or bar on Dirty Sixth, as some locals called it. Granted, she was the one who'd suggested they go to this new blues club, but only because it was the first thing that came to mind on such short notice, and Craig never seemed to have any suggestions. Next time she would propose something with a different flair, like exploring the caverns in Georgetown or a hike in Bastrop State Park.

"Let's see what you'd say to that," Samiah murmured as she returned the jacket to the hanger.

A couple of the guys she'd dated in the past had been surprised to learn that, despite her sharp business attire, perfectly styled hair, and always on-point makeup, she was an outdoors girl. Hell, it had surprised her too. Samiah had grown

up in Houston's Third Ward. The closest she'd ever gotten to the outdoors was eating a sandwich on a bench in Moses LeRoy Park, with the traffic from I-45 whizzing overhead. But in the three years since she'd moved to Austin, she'd acquired a taste for the unique adrenaline rush one received at the completion of a hike to the summit of Mount Bonnell or a bike ride through Zilker Park.

She tried to picture Craig trotting up the rocky terrain of the Texas Hill Country in his loafers. The image refused to even take shape in her mind.

Maybe they could compromise and go to one of those indoor rock-climbing places. At least there would be air-conditioning. Craig would insist upon air-conditioning. And no bugs.

Are you sure about this guy?

Samiah quashed her pesky inner voice that had started making an appearance more frequently than usual. Craig wasn't perfect. No one was perfect. But at least he was employed, had manners, and could sorta tell a decent joke when the occasion arose. Okay, fine. So his sense of humor left something to be desired. Was that a good reason to write someone off? If she wanted a laugh, Netflix provided a vast selection of comedy specials to choose from. Having a sense of humor had fallen several notches on her list when it came to attributes she required in a significant other.

A lot had fallen off that list. These days, a full set of teeth and a playlist that consisted of something other than the Isley Brothers would earn you at least a wink.

Craig might not be her ideal Mr. Right, but he was right enough.

The sound of her sister's distinct laugh drew Samiah's attention. "What are you cackling about in there?"

"Just something on Twitter. This poor woman is on the absolute date from hell."

"And she's tweeting about it?"

"Yes. In real-time. It's like watching a train wreck." She heard Denise's footsteps padding toward her. Her sister's seven-months pregnant belly appeared before she did. "Apparently, the guy she's with thinks he's the answer to every woman's dream. The lines he's trying on her are sooo tired."

Been there. Done that. Got the ticket stub, T-shirt and bad memories to show for it.

"Listen to this," Denise said. "So, this fool told her he works in clean energy and is all about the environment, yet he's driving a Mercedes SUV. Not a hybrid, but a gas-guzzling SUV."

Samiah frowned. A tiny knot formed in her stomach, but then she reminded herself loads of people drove Mercedes SUVs.

"Oh, and get this. His Benz? It's a rental."

"How does she know it's a rental?"

"Hold on, let me scroll up." Her sister paused for a moment. "Okay, here it is. She said she knew it wasn't his the moment she got in because she'd rented that exact Mercedes from a luxury car dealership in Round Rock to impress people during South by Southwest last year. She got a discount because it has a cigarette burn on the passenger seat. The exact cigarette burn his has."

Samiah's hand arrested on the faux camel leather jacket she was about to pull from the hanger. "Did she mention a color?"

“No. I’ve been refreshing my feed like a crazy person, but she hasn’t updated her timeline in the last minute.” Denise looked up from the phone, a wide grin on her face. “This is why I love Twitter.”

“To read about bad dates between two people you don’t even know?”

“Yes.” Her sister’s unapologetic response would have wrangled a laugh from Samiah if she wasn’t so busy trying to quell the manic butterflies whirling in her belly.

Stop being ridiculous. Plenty of people who work in clean energy probably drive a Mercedes SUV with a cigarette burn on the passenger seat.

“Did I mention the tweet about his apartment?” her sister asked. “He told her he lives in those fancy apartments up near The Domain but this girl happens to know the property manager there. She had her friend run his name and, of course, the fool was lying about that too.” Denise laughed again. “He messed with the wrong one.”

The unease that had settled in the pit of Samiah’s belly began to blossom.

“Oh, she tweeted again!” Another laugh. “Now he’s trying to woo her with his favorite dish.”

“The Volcano Sushi Roll,” Samiah said, barely able to get the words past her clenched jaw.

Her sister’s head popped up. “How’d you know? You’re not even on Twitter.”

Samiah jerked the jacket loose and flung the hanger on the floor.

“Oh, shit,” Denise said. “Don’t tell me…”

But Samiah didn't have to tell her anything. She could tell by her sister's horrified expression that she'd figured it out.

She pulled on her jacket and stuffed her feet into her favorite quarter-strapped heeled boots. She'd be damned if she walked in there looking like an enraged, spurned woman. Or worse, some wounded animal. She would burst through those doors showcasing her fabulousness. Let that bastard see what he would be missing out on for the rest of his sorry-ass life.

"Where are you going?" A thread of panic lined the edges of Denise's voice.

"They're at the new restaurant a couple of blocks away," Samiah answered. "The same place we were supposed to go tonight." She stopped short. "He used the reservation I made. Son of a bitch. I was on the phone for a half hour trying to get that reservation."

"You mean he had the nerve to bring another woman to a restaurant in *your* neighborhood? He must have balls of steel."

"I wouldn't know." And thank God for that.

She'd actually considered Craig a gentleman because he hadn't tried to get her into bed on the first date. Of course, he'd tried on each subsequent date, but Samiah had made a promise to herself long ago not to give up her goodies until she was good and ready. The fact that it had never felt right should have been her clue that something was wrong. Apparently, her vajajay had sensed he was a rat long before she had.

“And just what do you plan to do when you get there?” Denise asked as she followed her back into the bathroom. “Beat him up in the middle of the restaurant?”

“I won’t lay a hand on him. I just want to see his face when I walk in.”

Her sister looked down at the phone and gasped. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“What?” Samiah ran to her side.

“Another girl just tagged herself on the Twitter thread. She’s been dating this Craig guy too.”

Samiah didn’t just see red; she saw a burst of fiery crimson.

“This is like that TV show. You know, the one where the people meet online but you don’t know if they’re telling the truth about who they really are? What do they call it?”

“Catfishing,” Samiah hissed.

She’d been catfished. Or, at the very least, scammed into believing Craig was something he definitely was not.

A combination of mortification and rage congealed in her blood. Every single time she heard one of those stories, she’d felt sympathy for the poor, unsuspecting fool who got caught up in it. But that sympathy always came with a heavy dose of judgment. She couldn’t understand how anyone could be so gullible. Never could she imagine that she would become the victim of some slick-tongued, rental-car-driving asshole’s scam.

“I’m not sure going to that restaurant is a good idea,” her sister said. “Maybe you should take some time to cool off.”

“Nope.” Samiah unwound the silk headscarf from around her head and used a wide-toothed comb to release her flat-ironed hair from the wrapped style. She parted it on one side and let the soft locks fall to just under her chin in a sensible yet sexy bob. Because, yes, she was determined to look like a queen when she cursed Craig’s lying, three-timing ass out.

She left the bathroom and, with one last look in the full-length Cheval mirror she’d inherited from her grandmother, grabbed her clutch from the dresser and stalked out of her bedroom.

“What time is Bradley coming to pick you up?” she asked her sister.

“In another half hour.”

“This shouldn’t take long, but if I’m not back by then, use your key to lock up.”

“Don’t get yourself arrested,” Denise called from the condo’s front door. “And text me as soon as you get back.”

Samiah stuck a hand in the air and waved in answer as she marched down the hallway and into the elevator. She concentrated on taking deep, calming, cleansing breaths as she traveled from the twenty-first floor to the lobby without interruption. She exited her building and started down Nueces Street, arriving at the restaurant in minutes. She spotted Craig’s clean-shaven head at a table in clear view of the entrance. Couldn’t the bastard at least *try* to be discreet? This place was steps from her home. She could have strolled by at any time.

Samiah told the hostess she was meeting friends. The young girl didn’t even question her as she invited her in. She made a beeline for Craig’s table, sidling up to him with a bright smile.

She infused as much cheer into her voice as she could muster and said, “Well, I guess your work meeting got canceled, huh? Lucky you!”

He jumped at the sound of her voice and looked up at her over his shoulder, his eyes wide with an *oh shit, I’m caught* look.

She hit him with a super sweet grin.

That’s right, bitch. You’re caught.

Samiah looked to the woman sitting across from him. The red globe over the light fixture that hung above the table cast a rosy glow across her light brown skin. Her reddish brown hair was done up in thick box braids and she had cheekbones Samiah would sell her soul for.

“Hi.” She extended her hand with a genuine smile. “I’m Samiah.”

“Taylor,” the woman answered with matching politeness. “I thought for a minute that you were London.”

Samiah nodded toward the phone sitting next to a half-eaten plate of sushi. “Is London the other woman on Twitter?”

Taylor nodded. Amusement glittered in her light brown eyes.

“Twitter?” Craig asked, his sweat-slicked forehead scrunching up in confusion.

“What’s going on here?”

“Your lies are catching up to you,” Samiah answered. She nodded at Taylor, who’d propped her elbow on the table and now perched her chin on her closed fist. “Let me take a stab at this. He invited you to go out to a club after dinner, but just gave you a lame-ass excuse for why he needs to cut the night short.”

“His mom is sick,” Taylor said, biting her lip to contain the smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

“Ah, yes, I’ve heard about his sick mama. Actually, *I’m* his sick mama. He’s supposed to meet me in another half hour.” She tilted her head to the side. “I wonder who played the sick mother when he fed me that line on our first date.”

“That would be me.”

The three of them turned as a statuesque woman with rich brown skin, a head full of enviable coily, natural hair, and shoes to die for approached the table.

“At least I think it was me. Hello all, I’m London.” She plunked her hands on her hips, her wry smile directed at Craig. “The Internet is amazing, isn’t it? One of my fellow Walking Dead tweeps retweeted this hilarious first date from hell into my timeline. Imagine my surprise when it turns out to be the exact first date I had, down to the Volcano Sushi Roll.”

“You have to admit that sushi roll is amazing,” Samiah said.

“Incredible,” London agreed.

Taylor pushed her plate toward them. “It’s the best. Dig in, ladies.”

They’d started to garner attention from the other tables. A number of people were openly staring, and the hum of whispers filtered in from various corners of the restaurant.

“I haven’t had dinner yet,” London said. “Should we order another?”

“Okay, now, wait a minute.” Craig put both hands up. “Let me—”

“Shut up.” Samiah cut him off. “You don’t get to speak here.”

“Come on, Sammy.”

“Shut. Up.” If he knew how close she was to elbowing him in the throat he would walk out of here without saying a word. The grip she had on her rage was tenuous at best. “And don’t call me that stupid nickname. My name is Samiah.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” London said around a mouthful of sushi.

“Yes, it is. So is that jacket,” Taylor added. “I love the way it cinches a bit at the waist instead of being all boxy.”

“That’s the reason I bought it,” Samiah answered, looking down at her jacket.

“Hey, are you ladies up to listening to some blues music? My ‘date,’” she said with an eye-roll “was supposed to take me to that new club on Sixth. I’d hate for this makeup to go to waste.”

“Oh, I don’t blame you,” London said. “That smokey eye deserves to be seen. I end up looking like a raccoon whenever I try for that look.”

“I can give you some tips,” Samiah offered. “It’s all in the primer you use.”

“Alright, enough of this.” Craig pushed his chair away from the table and stood. “I can explain—”

Samiah whirled on him. “Read the room, Craig. Read the fucking room,” she snarled, unable to pull off the blasé pretense a second longer. She was hurt and upset and ready to lay into this asshole. “You’re caught, you lying piece of dog shit. Your stupid little game is over.”

The other patrons weren’t even bothering to hide their interest now. Even the wait staff had stopped what they were doing. All eyes were on them, but Samiah was too incensed to care about the scene they were causing.

“I don’t know how many other women fell for it, but it’s over.” She jabbed her finger against his chest. “Lose my number. If you try to contact me again I’m calling the police.”

“Same goes for me,” London said as she pulled Craig’s chair to the side of the table to get closer to Taylor’s sushi roll. Taylor passed her a new pair of chopsticks from the container in the center of the table and slid the soy sauce closer.

“The number I gave you was a fake, so I don’t have to worry about hearing from you again,” Taylor said. She tossed her napkin on the table and joined Samiah. Folding her arms across her chest, she said, “Make sure you fill up your Benz before you return it to the car rental place. They charge an arm and a leg if you bring it back on empty.”

His eyes widened. “How’d you know?”

Samiah had to refrain from punching him in the gut. “You’re pathetic,” she spat.

“Can I get a to-go box?” London called. “Also, add another Volcano Roll to the order. He’ll pay for it. His cheap ass still owes me from our last date.”

“Oh, let me guess,” Samiah said. “He forgot his wallet at work?”

“And the Apple Pay on his phone was acting up,” London said with a nod. “He isn’t very creative, is he?”

Two women at a nearby table laughed out loud. One of them held up a phone to snap a picture.

Great.

Samiah turned back to Craig. “You are a horrible person, and your jokes are corny. I wish nothing but the worst for you.”

A waiter arrived with a black paper bag and handed it to London. She stood and motioned for Samiah and Taylor to walk ahead of her.

“Don’t I get a chance to explain?” Craig called.

“No!” the three women said in unison as they marched out of the restaurant without a backward glance.

Chapter Two

Samiah squinted against the sunlight slicing across her face through her living room’s floor-to-ceiling windows. Grimacing, she expended a supreme amount of effort to open her left eye. She quickly shut it. A dull thud repeatedly beat against the back of her skull, reverberating around her brain like a Ping-Pong ball moving in slow motion.

“Is there coffee?” a strange voice croaked. “Please tell me there’s coffee.”

Samiah bolted upright and twisted around on the sofa. London Kelley stood next to the eight-foot soapstone island that separated her kitchen from the living room.

Make that *Doctor* London Kelley, as Samiah had discovered last night.

“I’ll take kombucha if you have any,” came a muffled voice from somewhere underneath the mound of pillows on the living room floor. Taylor Powell moaned

before leveling herself up on her elbows. “You see this headache right here? This is why I don’t drink alcohol.” She straightened. “I gotta pee,” she said before scrambling up from the floor and racing toward the bathroom.

Exhausted and hung over, Samiah still had the presence of mind to acknowledge that she should be concerned about waking up to find two strangers in her home. Strangers who were now familiar enough with her home to utilize the kitchen and bathroom without her help or permission.

Yet in the few short hours since she’d met them, Taylor and London no longer felt like strangers. Being conned by the same lowlife accelerated the sisterhood-development process.

Samiah placed her bare feet on the cool hardwood floors and rested her elbows on her thighs, covering her face with her hands. She still wore her jeans from last night, but at some point had changed into her favorite blue and gray Rice University T-shirt.

“Hey, chica? Coffee?” London called again.

“There are coffee pods in the cabinet above the Keurig. Sorry, no kombucha,” she directed at Taylor, who had just resumed her spot on the floor. “I’ve seen it, but I’m too chicken to try it.”

“Chicken? After the way you went after Craig last night? Woman, there is nothing chicken about you. You are bad ass.”

Samiah grimaced. She didn’t want to hear the name Craig ever again. She’d cloaked herself in fury and indignation last night, but in the light of day his

treacherous deception cut through her like a switchblade. How could she have been foolish enough to trust him? Why hadn't she seen through his lies?

"Did he try calling either of you last night?" London asked.

Samiah reached for her phone and checked the screen. Other than a couple of missed calls from her sister and an exorbitant amount of Facebook notifications, her phone was clear. She would call Denise later. She didn't know when she would look at Facebook.

"I guess he heeded my warning," Samiah said. "He didn't try to contact me at all."

"I wasn't lying when I said I didn't give him my number," Taylor remarked, wrapping her arms around her bended knees. "It was a burner phone. A friend suggested I use one after this guy she met on a dating site started stalking her."

"Shit, that's scary," London said. She plopped onto the sofa next to Samiah, her fingers wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee. Her crinkly curls were mashed on one side. "This place is gorgeous, by the way. I didn't get a chance to tell you that last night."

"We were all too busy bitching about that asshole," Samiah replied. "But thanks."

A foggy veil obscured her recollection of the past twelve hours, but she remembered inviting London and Taylor back to her place after deciding she wasn't up to going to the blues club. She'd probably never step foot in there now that it was linked to Craig and his lying ways.

Samiah glanced to the right and noticed the empty vodka bottle, stray lime wedges, and copper tumblers on the glass end table, remnants of the Moscow Mules she'd made last night.

“Is anyone up for breakfast?” she asked. “I can order something.”

London lifted her cup. “This is my normal breakfast.”

“Aren’t you a doctor?” Taylor asked. “You should know better. You need protein to get your day off on the right foot.”

London replied with a grunt before sipping her coffee.

“What is it you do for a living again?” Samiah asked Taylor. “Sorry if you mentioned it last night. Everything is a bit fuzzy.”

“Personal trainer and nutrition expert,” Taylor answered. She was way too bubbly now that she was fully awake. Samiah would have found it endearing if her head wasn’t pounding so much. “Which means that I should know better than to pollute my body with the half-liter of vodka I consumed last night.”

“It was warranted.” London settled back on the sofa, crossing one long, slim leg over the other. “If you can’t get drunk after finding out your boyfriend has been cheating on you with who knows how many other women, when can you get drunk?” She turned to Samiah. “By the way, I figured out this morning that you were the first to date him, at least among the three of us. You went out with him on the Friday of the Fourth of July holiday weekend, and my first date with him was that Sunday night.”

“He told me he had to go to Dallas that weekend. Things were just sooo busy at his job that he couldn’t take the holiday off.” Samiah snorted out a humorless laugh. “I swear I thought I was smarter than this.”

“Hey, I’m no dummy, and he fooled the hell out of me too.” London shrugged.

“He ran a good game. I’m just happy I never slept with him.”

“I didn’t either!” Samiah said. “It’s as if our instincts knew better.”

They high-fived each other.

Taylor pouted. “I’m kinda bummed I found out he was a dog before I got the chance to sleep with him.”

“What?” Samiah and London’s simultaneous screeches echoed off the condo’s high ceilings.

“What?” she asked with an incredulous shrug. “It’s been a minute, okay? I swear I saw cobwebs the last time I looked down there.”

Samiah burst out laughing then regretted it. The hammering that had all but subsided returned to her skull with a vengeance. She drew her feet up on the sofa and tucked them underneath her.

“You can do better than Craig Walter’s lying ass,” she told Taylor.

“I thought his name was Craig Johnson?” London said.

“He told me his name was Craig Milton,” Taylor said. “And if I could do better, I would have been out with better last night. I don’t know about you, but this dating shit has been brutal for me since I moved to Austin.”

Samiah was still reeling from the revelation that Craig’s cheating behind had given them all different last names. She’d looked him up on social media. Everything had seemed legit. She wondered if he’d set up profiles for all his different names. How much time and energy had that leech put into this little scheme of his?

“I hear you on the dating front,” Samiah said. “Craig was the first guy in six months who’d made it past a second date.”

“Look, I’m from this area and it’s been brutal for me too,” London added. “I guess that’s how he was able to dupe the three of us. There’s slim pickings out there.”

She drained her coffee mug and set it on the sofa table. “And now I have to find someone else to take to my damn class reunion. Shit.”

The three of them released commiserating groans.

“My ten-year reunion was a nightmare,” Samiah said.

“I used my move to Austin as an excuse to skip mine,” Taylor said.

“Well, this makes fifteen years for me, and there is no skipping it. That’s what I get for being class president.”

“When is the reunion?” Samiah asked.

“It’s still a few months away. Thankfully, our high school’s homecoming is late in the season this year.” London shoved her hands in her hair and fluffed out her mangled curls. “I hate this shit. The only reason I started dating Craig is because I didn’t want to show up alone. I did that for both the five- and ten-year reunions.”

She choked out an incredulous laugh. “You’d think this whole pediatric surgeon thing I have going on would make up for being single, but not with that crew.”

Samiah knew that song all too well. Whenever she went back home to Houston, the talk quickly shifted from her career to her relationship status. It was nauseating.

And infuriating.

“You know you can rent a date, right?” Taylor asked as she gathered her braids in one hand and wrapped a purple scrunchie around them. “And not just from Craigslist.” She gasped, her eyes widening. “I’ll never be able to go on that website again after last night.”

“Taylor’s right,” Samiah said. “Why don’t you just go with one of those escort services?”

“I kind of wanted it to be real, you know? A fake relationship with a Rent-A-Date guy sounds like something from a super sweet Hallmark movie.”

“That’s only if you two end up married with two-point-five kids and a basset hound named Molly.”

Samiah grinned at Taylor’s quip. Her sense of humor beat the hell out of Craig’s.

“If I took an escort to my class reunion, I’d spend the entire night worrying about whether or not we’d get found out. I’d rather go alone than deal with that kind of anxiety.” Her resigned sigh struck a familiar chord. “What’s a little judgment from people you only see once every five years, right?”

“I get what you’re saying, but to be honest, why do you even care?” Samiah asked. She looked from one woman to the other as her question began to resonate in her head. “Why do any of us care? So what if I’m not dating the perfect guy? Who says everything on my checklist needs to get checked off?”

“You have a checklist?” One of London’s perfectly shaped eyebrows arched. “Do tell.”

“Everyone has a checklist. And mine is almost complete.” She ticked items off on her fingers. “I’ve got the fancy downtown condo I always wanted. I have a fabulous job in my field. I still expect at least a few promotions in the near future, but to say I’ve only been with my company for three years, I’ve done pretty well for myself.”

“Is that the extent of the list?”

“No. I also drive the car of my dreams.”

Taylor perked up. “Oooh, what kind?”

“Mustang GTE.”

“Full package?”

“Full package.”

“Oh, you are definitely a boss bitch. Why did you think you needed someone like Craig in the first place?”

“Because even with this nice condo and her incredible job and her boss bitch car—whatever that is—people will still question why she doesn’t have a man,” London said.

“Bingo.” Samiah sighed, her shoulders wilting in defeat. No matter how successful she became, there were some who would still think her life was lacking because she didn’t have a significant other.

But why should she care what those people thought? What anyone thought? Why in the hell was she putting herself through this kind of trauma for the sake of attaining some impractical, ideal life that would never be enough for those people? Samiah sat up straight, planting her feet back on the floor.

“You know what? Fuck that,” she said. “Fuck. That.”

“Fuck what?” London asked.

“This. Craig. All of it. And fuck anyone who says what I’ve accomplished isn’t enough. Do you know how much time and effort I’ve put into finding someone? The hours I’ve wasted filling out dating profiles alone makes me wish I’d gone ahead and punched Craig in the stomach.”

“You’re right,” Taylor whispered, her voice tinged with awe. “You are absolutely right. Want to know how I ended up on that date with Craig? Because one of my friends signed me up on a dating site because *she*’s tired of imagining that I’m lonely.” She pointed to her chest. “I’m not lonely. I’m too busy to feel lonely. Hell, when I wasn’t live tweeting our date last night, I was invoicing clients. My time would have been better spent at home working on my marketing plan.”

Taylor directed her attention at Samiah. “Maybe it’s time you rethink that checklist. If a conman like Craig is all there is out there, you’re better off using that time to do something that will actually make you happy.”

Her words collided with the beliefs Samiah had held since her freshman year of college. She had not gone into any of this lightly. She’d taken stock of her life, examined every crevice, and devised a list of goals that she firmly believed were crucial to living the kind of life she wanted to live.

Happiness had not been part of the equation when she’d made her plans. The concept was too vague for her to fully grasp it. She felt safer, more in control, when dealing in absolutes. True happiness—whatever that meant—would follow once she finally achieved these concrete items she’d set out to attain.

But she *could* define happiness for herself if she tried hard enough. She thought about the boxes of sketchpads and reams of notes in her closet and knew one thing that would make her happy.

No. You been over this already. You don’t have time for that.

Samiah cradled her head in her palms. This was too much for her hungover brain to think about right now. “Why are you making so much sense?”

“Right?” Taylor asked, as if she’d surprised herself. “But it *does* make sense, doesn’t it? Imagine if we’d all devoted the time we wasted with Craig to doing something worthwhile. Isn’t there something you’ve always wanted to do that you haven’t done yet? Stick that on your checklist instead of looking for some man who doesn’t deserve you.”

“Of course you wouldn’t have discovered the Volcano Sushi Roll if not for Craig,” London said. “But I get your point.”

“Her point,” Samiah stressed. “Is that we’re three beautiful, successful women who swallowed the bullshit society tries to feed us. Every single one of us is much too good for Craig Walters. Or whatever his name is. The point is—”

Their heads turned at the sound of two sharp knocks on her front door, followed by the distinct click of the lock disengaging. A second later, the door opened and her sister and brother-in-law, Bradley, walked in with wide eyes and big smiles.

“Oh, wow,” Denise said as she took in the sight before her. “I didn’t think I’d find all three of you here.”

“It’s a good thing we went with the half-dozen bagels instead of just three,” Bradley said, following his wife to the sofa.

“Carbs,” Taylor said with a dreamy sigh, making grabby hands toward the bag Bradley carried.

He held up a finger. “Just a sec.” He pivoted toward the kitchen.

“So, how are you, ladies?” Denise asked as she rested on the arm of the sofa next to London. “It would seem you all had quite a night.”

“Yes, we did,” Taylor said with a cheeriness Samiah couldn’t comprehend after the night they’d had. Her disposition was as bright as the sun streaming through the tall windows.

Samiah made the introductions. “Ladies, this is my sister, Denise, and her husband, Bradley. Guys, this is—”

“Oh, we know who you both are,” Denise said, her cagey smile setting off an alarm in Samiah’s head.

“I’m pretty sure the entire world knows who they are by now,” Bradley said. He set a platter of bagels with flavored cream cheeses on the glass sofa table, then rested his hands on Denise’s shoulders and started massaging her neck with his thumbs. “Well, maybe not the people in Australia.”

“Yet,” Denise added.

Dread slithered down Samiah’s spine. “What are you two talking about?”

“I figured you hadn’t seen it yet, based on how calm you all are.” Denise pulled out her phone, swiped across the screen, and held it up. “It was at 500,000 views last I checked.”

“What!” Samiah, London and Taylor all yelped at the same time.

Samiah grabbed the phone. London and Taylor gathered around her. Someone at the restaurant had captured their argument with Craig and posted it online. Her stomach dropped.

“Bossip picked it up. So has BuzzFeed. No TMZ, though,” Denise said around a mouthful of the cinnamon raisin bagel she’d just bitten into.

“Only a matter of time,” Bradley chipped in.

Samiah increased the volume on the phone, although now that the fogginess of the alcohol had worn off, she now recalled what was said last night with stunning clarity.

Lying sack of dog shit?

Yikes. She hadn't remembered that.

"There's another video that was shot from the opposite angle. That's the one I saw first," Denise said. "I was so afraid you'd punched that Craig guy, but then I saw you'd only poked him."

"You should have punched him," Bradley said. "I would have punched him if I was there." His ginger-colored brows curved inward with his frown.

Samiah looked up at him and wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. Craig wasn't linebacker-big, but he probably had a good seventy pounds on her perpetually thin brother-in-law. What Bradley lacked in heft, he made up in heart. Handing the phone back to Denise, she stood and walked over to him, wrapping him up in a hug.

"Thank you, honey." Samiah sniffed. "But I don't think any of us have to worry about Craig anymore."

"I'm just hoping his other women have seen the video and know not to trust him either," Taylor said.

"You think there were others?" Bradley asked.

"Yes," the four women in the room answered.

Her sister and brother-in-law left them with breakfast and a promise to check up on Samiah later in the week. Once they finished off the bagels, she, Taylor and

London sat in her living room, encountering the first awkward silence between them since their eventful meeting. The horror of knowing the most painfully embarrassing moment of their lives was now fodder for memes around the world muzzled all other thoughts.

London was the first to break the silence. After crossing her legs, she rested her clasped hands on her knee and said, "I'm happy I changed out of my scrubs before going to the restaurant last night. If I'm going to get caught on camera, I want to get caught in something that shows the world I have a nice ass."

"You have a great ass," Taylor said.

"So do you," Samiah told her.

There was another beat of silence before the three of them burst out laughing. Now that the dam had broken, Samiah couldn't hold it in. She rolled over on the sofa, cackling until she caught a stitch in her side.

"Oh, my God." She took another moment to catch her breath. "I needed that."

"We all needed that," Taylor said, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. Silence fell over them again, then Taylor added, "Well, I should probably get going. I've got a bunch of meal plans to put together for my clients." She reached for her ankle-high boots and slipped them on.

London slapped her hands on her knee and stood. "I should go too. It's been forever since I drank like this. I need to sleep off the rest of those Moscow Mules before my shift tomorrow." She braced her hands against her lower back and stretched. "Thank God I pushed those hernia surgeries to the middle of the week."

Samiah looked from one woman to the other as something akin to panic stole over her.

“So is this it?” she asked. “*This* is how this ends?”

London hunched her shoulders in a cautious shrug. “Are we supposed to hug or something?”

“Yeah. No.” Samiah shook her head. “I mean...maybe?”

She didn’t know what she meant, but she knew it didn’t feel right to just walk away from each other after everything they’d been through over the past twelve hours.

“This just feels...I don’t know...anticlimactic. We should share phone numbers. Or, at the very least, connect on social media.”

“I guess you’re right,” Taylor said. She reached into her black clutch and drew out a couple of business cards. “I like you two. You get to have my real number,” she said with a wink. “Give me a call sometime and let me know how you’re both doing.”

“I’ll go you one better,” London said, slipping the business card in her back pocket. “Why don’t we meet for drinks next week? Just to check in on each other. I have a feeling things will get a little crazy following this viral video.” She shot Taylor a good-natured grin. “I’ll even bring the kombucha.”

“I prefer the ones with ginger, thank you very much.”

Relief flooded Samiah’s veins. She would explore just why it was so important not to lose touch with these two later. For now, she was just happy they were going to connect again.

“It’s a date,” she said. “Shoot me a text with whatever time works best for the two of you and I’ll come up with a place to meet.”

“Aww, now I *d* want a hug,” Taylor said. She stretched her arms wide and gathered London and Samiah in an embrace.

Samiah saw both women to the door with a promise to contact them later in the week. Then she went to her bedroom and fell face first onto the bed. Grabbing her phone, she pulled up the YouTube video and groaned. Another twenty thousand views since she’d last watched it less than a half hour ago. This was such a freaking disaster.

She set the phone beside her on the mattress and twisted around, staring up at the stark white ceiling. She wondered if she should add another item to her list.

Item 58: Have half a million people witness the most humiliating moment of your life.

At least it would be an easy one to check off.

Chapter Three

Samiah had always viewed her condo's close proximity to the high-rise that housed Trendsetters IT Solutions as a bonus.

Today, she regretted the hell out of her short commute to work. The compulsion to retreat grew stronger with each loathsome step she took toward the building.

She'd considered calling in sick, but quickly recognized the futility in that. Her coworkers' scrutiny would be waiting for her, whenever she returned to the office. It was better for her to face their judgmental reaction to Saturday night's disaster now and get it over with.

As she pushed through the building's revolving doors, trepidation slithered along her spine like a serpent, poised to bite her in the ass at any moment. The lobby teemed with employees of the various tech companies occupying the building. As usual, Samiah felt overdressed in her Anne Klein jacket and pencil skirt, surrounded by all these people who had never grasped the concept of Casual Fridays. Every day in the Austin tech world was Casual Friday. Maybe *she* should have opted for jeans today. Maybe then she wouldn't stand out so much.

Hyperaware of the gazes that followed her as she walked through the brightly lit lobby, Samiah focused on the bank of elevators straight ahead. The swirling hum of the floor buffing machine drowned out any chatter before it hit her ears, but she caught several people pointing out of the corner of her eye. One woman even gave her a thumbs' up. Samiah acknowledged her support with a brief nod and smile before slipping onto a nearly full elevator.

Familiar faces surrounded her, but she didn't know a single name. This building had over thirty tenants. Everyone treated one another with reserved politeness and

congenial respect, but other than the smokers who congregated in a corner of the concrete patio on the south end of the property, no one took the time to get to know anyone who was not a coworker.

Unless someone was hunting for a new job, of course. That's when Samiah usually found herself engaged in a casual conversation with a fellow building-mate. It would start out innocent enough, but would eventually meander into a discussion about possible job openings with the company that occupied the building's top two floors. Trendsetters's forest green and white badges were the envy of the building. She was blessed to have joined the firm just before its newest iteration of WiMAX integration software hit big, making them the industry leader in providing WiFi hotspot payment systems in developing countries. Numerous hotels, fast food chains and coffee houses around the globe utilized Trendsetters's products to pay for the "free" WiFi they offered their customers. And their client list continued to grow. Everyone wanted to work here. Samiah wouldn't give up her position for anything or anyone.

But that didn't mean she couldn't use a day off every once in a while. Like today. She'd have loved to play hooky today.

With stops on nearly every floor, it took a full eight minutes to finally arrive at the twenty-second. The elevator doors opened directly into Trendsetters's very trendy lobby. Its focal point, The Water Wall, took up the entire space behind the receptionist's semicircular desk. It featured a waterfall that changed colors throughout the day and cascaded down a steel wall speckled with embossed quotes

from tech giants. Her favorite was the one from Steve Jobs: *I want to put a ding in the universe*. She'd made it her motto the moment she first read it.

On either side of The Water Wall stood twin glass and chrome curving staircases that led to the twenty-third floor, where Engineering and Security were housed.

Even more eye-catching than the water feature were the row of brick red benches on either side of the lobby. Each seat was held up by a strong, transparent acrylic rod that extended from the wall, making it appear as though the benches were suspended in mid-air.

“Good morning,” Jamie Claiborne, Trendsetters’s receptionist, greeted with a bright smile.

Samiah braced herself for the onslaught of questions she knew awaited her. “Good morning,” she replied.

She waited.

And waited.

When Jamie returned her attention to her computer monitor without mentioning what happened Saturday night, Samiah breathed her first easy breath of the morning. Maybe today wouldn’t be awkward after all.

In the time-honored tradition of speaking too soon, the moment she stepped behind The Water Wall and into the main work area, an eruption of applause broke out.

Heat suffused her face; her ears felt as if they were on fire.

She was all for being applauded at work, but not for something like this.

Get it together. Be cool. Be charming. Don’t let them see you sweat.

Holding her hands up, she summoned a good-natured smile from some part of her being that hadn't shriveled up and died over the weekend and addressed the office as a whole.

"I know everyone is dying to hear whether or not I beat Craig up after the video ended. I did not. See." She flipped her hands back and forth, showing them her unblemished knuckles. "No scars."

Laughter and more cheers rumbled throughout the office. Samiah hoped that was enough to satisfy them.

She should have known better.

She couldn't take two steps without being stopped by a coworker wanting to know how it felt to be Facebook Famous or asking if she really didn't know that Craig had been conning her. Because *of course* she would knowingly date a guy who was conning her. Managing to not roll her eyes every ten seconds would likely be her greatest feat of the day.

It took a full twenty minutes to make it to the sanctuary of her private office, although it wasn't all that private. Ninety percent of Trendsetters's office space was transparent—literally. The walls and doors of most offices and conference rooms were made of tempered glass.

Before she could stow her purse in her desk drawer, Aparna and Christy from Engineering came into her office wanting to know the scoop, followed by Rashad and Ali from the marketing department. Samiah didn't know which she wanted to do more, bang her head against her desk or scream at the top of her lungs. Neither was acceptable, so she pasted on a fake grin and entertained the good-natured jibes.

She wouldn't have to feign an illness if she wanted an excuse to leave work early. Pretending this was all some hilarious joke and not her fucking life they were laughing about had sparked a headache the size of the old Houston Astrodome. An announcement that there were donuts and hot chocolate in the communal kitchen granted her a reprieve from the constant stream of nosy coworkers dropping in. Grateful for the first moment of quiet she'd experienced all morning, she used the opportunity to read over her notes for the presentation she and the members of her Product Planning team were scheduled to give this afternoon. As she edited one of the slides, a message popped up, informing the entire team that their two o'clock meeting had been moved to noon.

“Shit.”

It was bad enough she'd lost half the morning to coworkers pestering her about that viral video. Now Grant Meecham was stealing another two hours of prep time from her.

She shouldn't have been surprised. Grant, Trendsetters's Director of Global Sales, had called the meeting, and whenever Grant set up a meeting he did everything he could to schedule it over lunch so that he could eat on the company's dime. Cheap bastard.

“Hey there, Miss Celebrity,” came an irritatingly sweet voice from somewhere over her shoulder.

Samiah's eyes fell shut at the nauseating sound. She dialed up another fake smile before turning her chair around.

“Good morning, Keighleigh. Can I help you?”

Her coworker moved from where she'd stood just outside the door, sauntering up to Samiah's desk. "I just wanted to know how you were doing. Sounds as if you had yourself an...um...interesting weekend."

Samiah fought the urge to roll her eyes.

There was one in every company. For Samiah, Keighleigh Miller was *the* one. The one who clawed at her nerves on a daily basis, the way Denise's pesky cat Boomer used to claw at Samiah's bedroom door whenever her sister wasn't home. The one who constantly kissed up to management. The one who, on more than one occasion, had tried to take credit for Samiah's work.

She was willing to play along with the "rah-rah, we're all in this together, there's no 'I' in 'team'" bullshit Trendsetters pushed onto their employees, but only to a certain point. If the side-eye she'd caught several members of their team throwing Keighleigh's way at last week's meeting was any indication, Samiah wasn't the only one who'd grown tired of her coworker's shenanigans.

"Yes, it was an eventful weekend," Samiah said, dropping her smile. She was tired and overwrought and unwilling to engage in any further pretense. She sat back in her chair and asked again, "Can I help you with something?"

"No." The purple tips of Keighleigh's white blonde hair swished along her leather jacket's upturned collar. "Like I said, just checking on you."

Keighleigh tried way too hard to be the rebel who thumbed her nose at society's rules, but Samiah knew better. She'd happened upon her Facebook page while killing time one lazy Friday evening and encountered several pictures her coworker had been tagged in from high school. Keighleigh had been your average,

run-of-the-mill cheerleader type. This edgy persona was all an act. Samiah wouldn't be surprised if her nose ring was a fake.

Stop it.

She despised cattiness among women in the workplace. Things were rough enough for their gender, especially in the male-dominated tech world.

But Keighleigh Miller had started this shit. From the moment she'd joined the Production Department, she'd shown her willingness to double cross whomever she deemed a threat or impediment to her rise to the top. Another of their coworkers, Amy Dodd, had learned that the hard way after Keighleigh innocently let it slip that Amy had confided in her that she was struggling with a project she'd been assigned. Their supervisor, Justin Vail, had placed Keighleigh on the project and she'd taken over—after Amy had already completed most of it.

Samiah refused to fall victim to Keighleigh's backstabbing.

"Thanks for checking on me, but honestly, I'm fine," Samiah continued. "Now, I really need to get back to work."

"Oh!" Keighleigh's green eyes—probably contacts—lit up. "Are you working on the proposal for Swiss Burger?"

"I am," Samiah answered, her Spidey senses on red alert.

"I wondered what you were thinking when it came to that conundrum their CTO mentioned. I mean, I can understand them wanting to reduce connection speed after someone has been online for more than thirty minutes, but I don't know how they do that without coming off as, well, cheapskates."

"Well, that conundrum is what today's meeting is about."

Keighleigh leaned in closer, her lips turning up in a wily smile, as if she and Samiah were in a partnership and she had a secret to share. In a conspiratory whisper, she asked, “So what are you planning to present to Grant?”

Was she serious? Samiah wanted to tell her that she was born on a Tuesday not *today*. Instead, she said, “A few ideas I’ve come up with.”

She matched Keighleigh’s smile with one of her own as she picked up her coffee mug and pushed back from the desk. “You know what? I just realized I haven’t had any coffee yet. No wonder I’m feeling all ragey.” She started for the door, but turned when she sensed Keighleigh wasn’t following her. Samiah arched a brow at her coworker.

“Oh, I guess that’s my cue to get back to work,” Keighleigh said.

Samiah nodded. As if she would leave her to snoop around in her office. “I know you want to wow Grant with all those awesome ideas you’ve come up with.” She sent her another saccharin smile. “Meet you in the conference room.”

Chapter Four

“We call this a semi-open concept work environment. Studies show that team members work better when they’re able to bounce ideas off one another without the obstruction of walls, but too much of an open environment impedes productivity. I think we’ve found a healthy balance here at Trendsetters,” the HR director, said, his bald head gleaming under the panel of LED lights high above.

Daniel Collins nodded and smiled. A response wasn't expected. Having experienced more than a dozen episodes such as this one over these past two years, he'd learned the subtle nuances of navigating the first day on the job. He knew based on the inflection in Owen Caldwell's voice when a polite, interested nod would work and when the man expected him to make an actual comment. So far, he'd gotten by with a few hums of approval.

As they continued the tour, Daniel compared the layout of the software company's vast office space to the mental map in his head. He'd meticulously studied the floor plan weeks ago, but things changed. Desks were moved, partitions were erected. Being cognizant of the space around him was imperative to the success of his new job.

"And here we are at your home away from home." Owen's cheerful voice was a bit grating, but the man was trying to make a good first impression. Interesting how that went. It should have been the other way around, but Daniel's résumé had spoken for itself. Trendsetters was lucky to have him and they knew it.

They approached a polished, six-by-three foot desk made of thick light oak. It was identical to the two dozen that were arrayed in neat rows in this section of the office, each with two large monitors that angled toward each other. There were a few people milling about, but for the most part, everyone seemed focused on their computers, ear buds and earphones shutting them out from the rest of the world. They could all be in cubicles for this.

"Jamie set you up with the basics, but if you need additional supplies they can be found in the supply closet I pointed out earlier. Except for external hard drives,"

Owen added. “If you need an extra one, you’ll need to see Laurie in Operations and sign for it.” The HR director clapped his hands together. “Did I miss anything?”

Daniel shook his head. “I think you’ve covered it all. I’m ready to dive in.”

“That’s what I like to hear. And remember, we take ourselves seriously, but not *too* seriously. Work should be fun.”

Owen clamped a hand on his shoulder and Daniel fought the urge to knock it off. As the head of Human Resources, Mr. Caldwell here should know better than to put his hands on an employee without their express permission.

He let the incident pass. He wasn’t here to start shit. At least not with some straight out of central casting HR Director. He had a job to do, and it required him to lay low and not make waves.

Daniel rolled the ergonomic office chair back from his desk and sat, nearly groaning at the way it cradled him. Trendsetters didn’t skimp when it came to office furniture, that’s for damn sure. He could live in this chair.

He powered on the twenty-four-inch iMacs and jerked back as a barrage of welcome messages populated the screen.

Owen’s cheerfulness should have forewarned him that Trendsetters was one of *those* work environments. He’d hoped for at least a day or two before he would be expected to actually interact with people. That was always the hardest part.

He’d been stoked when his new supervisor, Justin Vail, explained that the Research and Development Department was trying to get away from emails and migrate to a messaging system. Nothing chapped his ass more than a bunch of

Reply All emails. And that one guy who always replied with *Dittoto* every email? That asshole could go jump in the river. He wouldn't be surprised if Owen Caldwell was Trendsetters's Ditto Guy. He fit the part.

But Daniel wasn't sure this messaging software was any better than email. Was he expected to reply to each individual message?

Relief rushed through him when he hovered his mouse over the first one and a thought bubble filled with a half-dozen emojis popped up. He quickly clicked the thumb's up on each message, then took a few minutes to familiarize himself with the company's software, opening his orientation folder to the page with his login information and setting up new passwords.

Five minutes in, he got an uneasy feeling. It prickled the back of his neck. He glanced to his right and discovered the source. The pretty brunette with the Catwoman glasses was staring at him.

Morgan Broomfield. Twenty-five. Graduated top of her class at Texas State. Considered a genius for her work with data structures and algorithms. Was arrested for staging a Black Lives Matter march on campus her senior year.

No one he had to worry about.

She smiled. He smiled back.

Daniel returned his attention to his computer. He counted to four before looking up to find her standing at his desk.

"Hi. I'm Morgan," she said, sticking her hand out. "Welcome to Trendsetters."

"Nice to meet you, Morgan." He shook her hand, his eyes following her movements as she settled a hip against his desk.

“You’ll be introduced to the entire team at the Morning Crush—that’s what they call the daily department meeting where everyone gives a brief update about what they’re working on for the day—but I wanted to introduce myself ahead of time.” She had a pretty smile. And those light gray eyes were stunning. Daniel knew exactly what she was saying with those eyes, which is why he kept his expression intentionally neutral.

It happened every time he started a new job, usually within a matter of hours. He could count on at least one or two new coworkers—male and female—to engage in some kind of behavior that broadcasted their interest. A flirtatious smile. Overly aggressive eye contact. Some were brazen as hell, but others, like Morgan here, were refreshingly subtle.

Planting her backside and thigh on his desk was a bold move, but could also be seen as just an open, friendly gesture from a coworker who wanted him to feel welcome. It was the eyes that gave her away. They were assessing, with just a hint of eagerness. Daniel could sense her trying to gauge his reaction, wondering if he would reciprocate.

He would not.

A workplace romance wasn’t on his agenda. That didn’t mean he would immediately rebuff her advances if any were forthcoming. He needed to discern whether or not his extremely friendly new coworker could be a possible asset before he threw any *I don’t do office hookups* vibes her way.

He would have to revisit his notes before he decided what to do about Morgan. Just because she didn't automatically stand out to him, it didn't mean she wasn't useful. Maybe he'd missed something.

"Thanks for the warm welcome," Daniel told her. "It's been a while since I went through this whole first day on the job thing," he lied. "It means a lot."

"It wasn't that long ago since I was the new kid on the block," she said.

She'd been here a year already.

"You'd think I'd be used to it," he said. "Military kid."

He knew Morgan would jump on that. He remembered from her dossier that she'd spent much of her formative years traveling from one Army base to another.

"Same here." Her teeth sparkled like freshly polished pearls, and that flirtatious glint in her eyes moved her closer to the aggressive category.

Rule number 50 in the handbook. Make them believe you share something in common. It encourages people to let their guards down.

"We Army brats have to stick together," Daniel said.

Shit. She hadn't revealed that her family was Army.

His heart began to hammer within his chest as he waited for her to call him on his mistake. His entire body wilted with relief when she continued smiling the kind of smile that told Daniel she was mentally staging the Instagram selfie that would announce their new relationship.

Damn. He'd caught a lucky break with that one. He would have to be more careful.

Her ringing cellphone saved him from having to endure any more of this conversation. She looked down at the screen and said, “I have to take this. Enjoy your first day on the job. And if you need anything, I’m right over there.” She pointed toward her desk, and Daniel caught sight of another of his new coworkers—*Jessica Lui, UCLA grad, budding homemade soap-making business*—giving him serious eye action.

Unlike Morgan, Jessica already had a spot on his potential asset list. Not only did they have the connection of their Asian heritage, but she’d also been a member of the development team that launched Trendsetters’s WiMax software. It had been over a year since she’d been a part of the team, but it was still worth building an alliance with her.

Maybe an office romance wasn’t off the table. Whatever it took to get the job done.

###

“Are you ignoring me?”

“I’m not ignoring you. I’m working.” Samiah glanced up at the camera on her computer screen and shot her sister an exaggerated smile. “See. I’m still here.”

“Stop smiling like that. You look like a deranged serial killer. Have you checked the view count today?”

“If you keep bringing up that stupid video you’re going to turn me into a deranged serial killer.”

“Just look at the view count!” her sister shrieked. The giddiness in her tone was so uncalled for, but then Denise thought the response to the video of her fight with Craig was something Samiah should be excited about.

“Again, I’m working,” she said. “I don’t have time to look at YouTube every five minutes, and to be honest, I don’t care how many views it has.”

Lie.

“Over eight-hundred thousand,” Denise said, not catching Samiah’s not-so-subtle hint to drop the subject. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it hits a million by the end of the night,” her sister prattled on. “Oh, and I heard that sushi place is getting inundated with reservations. The three of you should be given your own special table there. You’ve put that place on the map.”

“It was on the map even before that video went viral.”

“Well it’s not just *on* the map, now, it *is* the map. Maybe they’ll name a sushi roll after you! Hey, don’t roll your eyes,” Denise said. “It could happen.”

The doorbell chimed and her sister’s face froze on the screen. A moment later, she reappeared, sporting a huge smile. “Sorry, my phone automatically switches to the doorbell app whenever it rings. Guess what’s being delivered?”

“Lunch?”

“The baby bed!” The unmitigated joy on her face triggered the first genuine pleasure Samiah had felt since Saturday. “I need to let the delivery guys in. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait!” Samiah stopped her before she could hang up their FaceTime call. “I had to listen to you go on and on about that stupid video for the past twenty minutes, and *now* you want to disconnect? No! I want to see the bed too.”

“Not until the nursery reveal,” Denise said. “Besides, it’s still in a box. The delivery guys have to assemble it.”

“Fine. But text me a selfie of you standing in front of your microwave with the time showing once they leave. I want to make sure they don’t murder you.”

Her sister rolled her eyes. “No more *Forensic Files* for you. And I know it’s my fault,” she added before Samiah could speak. “But maybe you should take a break from it.” Denise was the one who’d forced her to sit through an all-day marathon of the true-crime show. Now she was hooked.

“Love you, honey,” her sister said.

“Love you too,” Samiah returned before ending the call.

She tried to focus on the presentation she was set to deliver at lunch, but thoughts of the escalating view count on that damn video continued to grab at her attention.

A couple more minutes ticked by before she gave up the fight. Minimizing the window with her presentation, she opened the browser and went to YouTube.

She did a double take. Had the video made the home page?

“No way.”

It was in her browser history. That’s why it was the first thing she saw. Had to be.

Yet, even as she begged her brain to believe the lie, Samiah knew better. She

peeked over at the What’s Popular tab and saw the still image of her mouth wide

open, preparing to light into Craig's lying ass. Denise was right, the video would definitely hit a million views before the end of the day.

She tipped her head back, releasing an aggrieved huff toward the ceiling. She wanted to take a nap and wake up to find all this humiliation behind her.

Samiah pushed away from her desk before she gave in to the urge to throw the monitor against the wall. For one thing, she'd probably hurt herself. Secondly, she doubted her boss would appreciate the destruction of company property.

She grabbed the World's Greatest Auntie mug Denise and Bradley had given her—their way of announcing that, after four years of trying, they'd finally gotten pregnant—and went in search of a caffeine boost. She'd blown past her two-cup limit an hour ago, but it was either caffeine or alcohol, and Saturday night had put her way over her limit. Her boss probably wouldn't approve of alcohol consumption on the job either.

The moment she walked out of her office, the redhead from Quality Assurance, with bad acne and a penchant for wearing plaid, flannel shirts like her grandfather used to wear, approached her. He held his phone up to her face.

“Snapping a pic for my roommate. He didn't believe me when I told him I work with you,” he said, his thumbs flying across his phone screen.

Stunned, Samiah just stood there, watching him walk away. Was this how it would be from now on? Being accosted by coworkers whose names she didn't even remember?

No. She wouldn't allow it. She just had to make it through today. The fervor over her encounter with Craig would die down and things would get back to normal.

Just make it through the damn day.

She inhaled and exhaled, allowing the deep, calming breath to flow through her.

There. That was better.

She rounded the wall that separated Trendsetter's kitchen from the rest of the office and sent up a silent prayer of thanks when she found it relatively empty. It wouldn't be that way for long. This was more than just a place to heat up leftovers for lunch, it was the epicenter of the entire office.

A half dozen octagonally shaped alcoves were cut into the walls, housing individual booths that were designed more for impromptu breakout sessions than eating. That was normally reserved for the twelve-foot-long frosted glass bar, with a dozen stools on either side. The kitchen area's left wall housed two stainless steel microwaves, an industrial refrigerator, and a beverage cooler stocked with juices, sodas and, most recently, kombucha. Taylor would be proud.

To the right was the coffee bar, which rivaled anything you'd find in a coffee shop.

At the press of a button one could enjoy a cappuccino, macchiato, latte or any number of beverages. An array of coffee and tea accompaniments resided next to the space-age coffee machine, from flavored syrups to individually wrapped chocolate-covered spoons.

As usual, Samiah opted for straight black coffee. On occasion she'd add a couple pumps of toffee syrup when she was feeling fancy. Today wasn't a fancy kind of

day. The lingering affects of those Moscow Mules from Saturday night demanded nothing less than the strongest coffee she could find.

“Hey, hey, hey! It’s our own Real Housewife!”

Samiah cringed at the sound of Peter Stawell’s voice. She turned and immediately wanted to slap the jovial grin from his face. Why did everyone think this was some kind of joke? This was her *life* that had been plastered across the Internet for everybody and their mamas to judge.

Peter nudged her arm. “I have to say, I’m disappointed a catfight didn’t break out between you and that girl with the braids. She looks like she can throw down.”

“Oh, do you want me to contact her for you?” Samiah asked with exaggerated enthusiasm. “I’m sure she’d be willing to demonstrate by kicking your ass.”

Peter’s smile disappeared. “I was just kidding around. Sheesh, Samiah, don’t take things so seriously.”

Yep. She should have taken the day off.

A week ago, she would have apologized to Peter for being a bitch. After what happened Saturday night—and the public’s reaction to it; how people now felt as if her private life was a free-for-all—she felt justified in her bitchiness. She had no intention of apologizing ever again.

She grabbed her coffee cup from underneath the espresso spout and started for her office. She dipped her head down to blow the hot coffee and nearly crashed into a firm chest covered with an oatmeal-colored vest.

“Whoa.” Two strong hands gripped her upper arms, steadying her.

Samiah looked up and had to remind herself to take a breath. Who'd ordered this midmorning snack in khakis and loafers?

"You okay?" he asked.

His eyes were the prettiest shade of brown. Almost like honey. Or was that considered hazel?

Stop staring.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine," Samiah said with a shake of her head. "Sorry about that."

"No apology necessary. I ran into you too." He held a hand out. "I'm Daniel, by the way. I started in R&D today."

Ah. She remembered hearing something about a new hire. "Welcome to the team."

She shook his hand. "I'm Samiah."

His eyes widened for the barest second, but it was long enough for her to catch it.

She narrowed her gaze, then with irritation, said, "You heard about the video."

He hunched his shoulders apologetically. "Pretty hard not to. It's kind of the talk of the office."

Dammit! Could she have one fucking moment when that stupid video wasn't at the center of everything?

"I haven't seen it," Daniel quickly added. "But I hear you put on quite a show."

Great. So this is what she would be forever known for. Not for single-handedly debugging Trendsetters's signature utilities software just months after she started, or launching their annual Thanksgiving donation drive last year, but for cursing Craig Walters out in a sushi bar. Her grad school advisor would be so proud.

Samiah put a hand up before he could ask an intrusive, asinine question. “Please don’t say anything else. I don’t want to talk about that video.”

“That’s fair,” he said. “But I was only going to ask if you were okay. Are you?”

She blinked several times, unsure if she’d heard him correctly. “I’m sorry?”

“I asked if you were okay.” His shoulder lifted again in a slight hunch. “I’ve never had anything like that happen to me, but I can imagine it sucks to be put on display for everyone to see.”

Oh, God. It sucked *so* much. How did he know?

“It does,” she said with a vigorous nod, her hand tightening on the mug. She was so overwhelmed by what appeared to be genuine concern in his eyes that she nearly wept.

He was the first person to ask about her well-being. Her other coworkers hadn’t given a damn about how she was doing. They were all too caught up in the glamour and hype of knowing someone at the center of a viral video.

“Having the entire world witness the most humiliating moment of your life and judge you for it sucks like you wouldn’t believe. And it makes me question my judgment about pretty much everything.”

“Don’t.” He made a move, as if he were about to reach for her. But then he backed off, slipping his hands into the pockets of his pressed khakis. “Don’t blame yourself for what happened. It sounds like that guy was a pro. It says nothing about you.”

She nodded, the sudden emotion welling in her throat making it hard to speak.

“Thank you for that,” she finally managed to get out. “It means a lot to hear it put that way.” Samiah swallowed, then continued. “I’m just hoping it will eventually all blow over. Hopefully someone will record their cat playing Beethoven on the piano and that video with Craig will become a distant memory.”

Daniel snapped his fingers in a gosh-darn kind of way. “I knew I should have gotten a cat. I’m more of a dog person, but those videos don’t catch on as well as the cat ones.”

He smiled and, for a moment, Samiah forgot that she’d said just yesterday that she was putting men on the back burner.

It’s just a smile. Calm the hell down.

It was a nice smile, but still just a smile.

“Samiah?” she heard her name a second before John Kim, a member of her product-planning team, walked up to them. “Oh, sorry,” John said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, but I was hoping we could go over the presentation before today’s meeting.”

“I’m sorry?” She frowned. It took her a moment to remember she was at work. “I mean of course,” Samiah said with a breathy laugh. *What the hell?* She never got flustered.

She turned to John. “Yes, of course. Grab Katie and meet me in my office. I’ll be there in a sec.”

John nodded to Daniel and held out his hand. “You’re the new hire in R&D, right?”

“Daniel Collins,” he answered.

“I’m John. I’ll be the one bugging you when it’s time to work on the regression testing for the new CRM software.”

“I look forward to it,” Daniel said with a smile.

Good Lord, the man had a dimple. He had outrageously gorgeous cheekbones and a freaking dimple. So not fair.

John left them standing at the coffee bar. An awkward silence stretched between them.

No!No! No! No!

Why did this feel so awkward? There should be no awkwardness here. He was just her coworker.

Samiah cleared her throat and held up her coffee mug. It was probably cold now, but she wouldn’t dare stick around to brew another cup. “I should finish this in my office. I have a presentation to give at noon.”

“I heard,” he said, pitching his chin toward where John had just left. He stepped aside, giving her ample room to pass. She slid past him, ignoring the quiver in her stomach.

“Hey, Samiah?” Daniel called after she’d taken a couple of steps.

She coaxed herself into showing a bit of restraint by turning slowly. “Yes?”

“Don’t sweat all the attention that video is getting. You did what you had to do.”

Her heart lifted with a rush of gratitude that nearly brought tears to her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. “I really needed to hear that.” Then she raced for the sanctuary of her office.

About the Author



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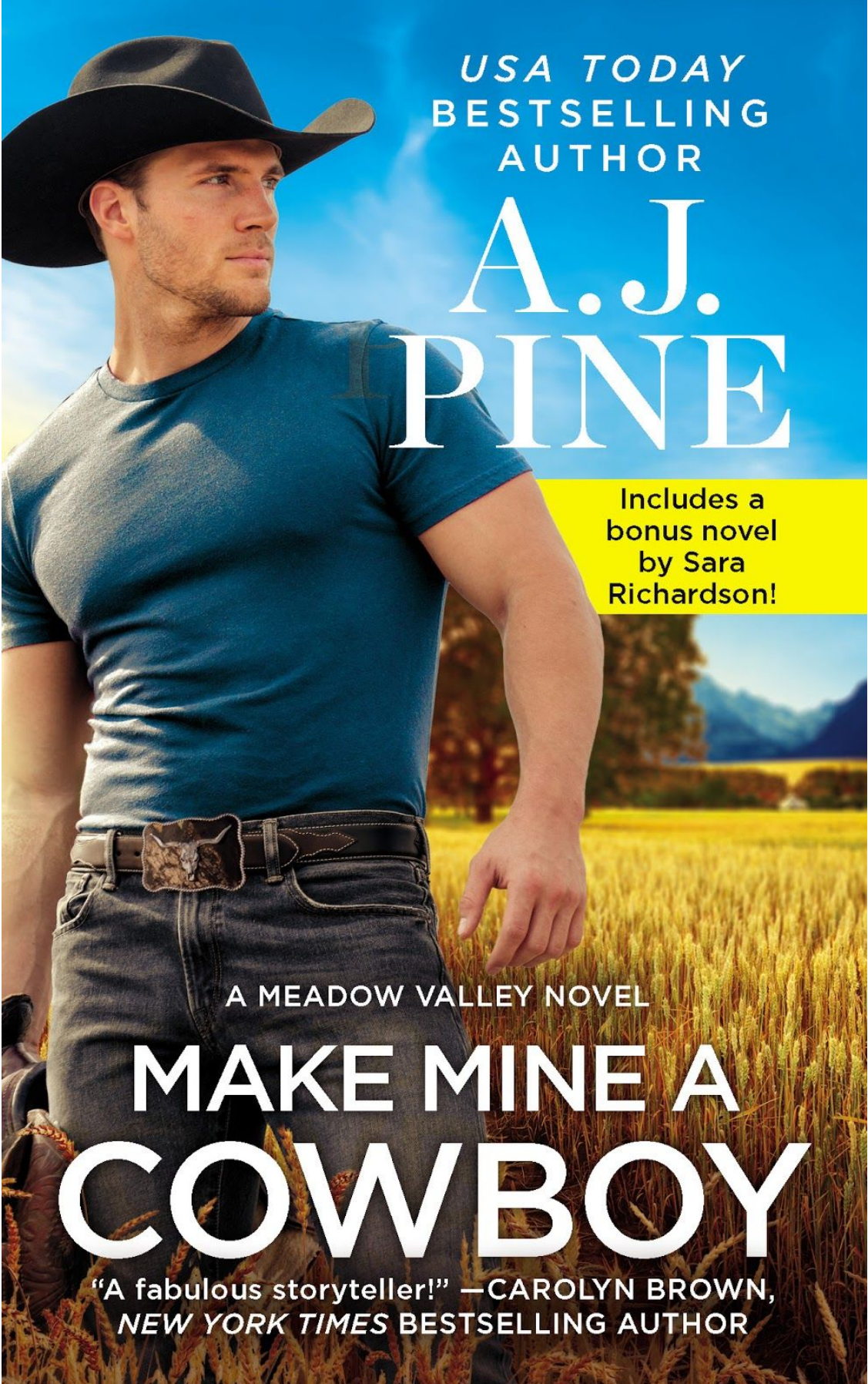
Farrah Rochon is a *USA Today* bestselling author and two-time finalist for the RITA Award, Romance Writers of America's highest honor. *Cherish Me* was named one of the “Best Romance Books of 2018” by BuzzFeed and hailed by *Library Journal* as “reminiscent of Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage*.” When she is not writing in her favorite coffee shop, Farrah spends most of her time reading, cooking, traveling the world, visiting Walt Disney World, and catching her favorite Broadway shows. An admitted sports fanatic, Farrah feeds her addiction to football by watching New Orleans Saints games on Sunday afternoons.

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MAKE MINE A
COWBOY

"A fabulous storyteller!" —CAROLYN BROWN,
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

From this “fabulous storyteller” (Carolyn Brown, *New York Times* bestselling author) comes the next Meadow Valley western romance series.

Dr. Charlotte North has no time for a player, not even one as tempting as Ben Callahan. Besides, Charlotte is only in Meadow Valley for a few months to help her grandmother. After that, it's back to New York and the career she loves. But when her gran starts to meddle in her personal life, Charlotte knows just the man to help her out. Ben's the perfect no-strings boyfriend, until Charlotte discovers that beneath that rugged, charming exterior lies a sweet and bighearted cowboy.

Ben Callahan is tired of people assuming he's an immature playboy, so when the smart and sexy Charlotte asks him to be her pretend boyfriend, he jumps at the chance to show everyone that he's changed his ways. Though he and Charlotte are calling their relationship fake, Ben's heart says otherwise. Two months with Charlotte isn't nearly enough. Will Ben be able to prove he's worthy of her *for real* before their time together is up, or will she leave Meadow Valley — and him — forever?

MAKE MINE A COWBOY

A.J. Pine

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Chapter One

Ben glanced around the well-appointed doctor's office. A couple hours ago, he was in bed with a beautiful woman after an equally beautiful, worry-free couple of weeks, pretending this day didn't exist. That was how Ben spent most of his time, ignoring the more serious side of life. He'd gotten pretty good at living for the day and not worrying about the future. His *own* future, at least. But today was different. Today wasn't about Ben. It was about his brother Sam. Sam was as good as they came, and because of that, he deserved good news. So Ben silently begged whatever higher power would listen that Sam was as healthy as he looked.

Everything from the embossed medical books on the shelves to the framed certificates and accolades on the walls said that Dr. Kegan knew his stuff. And the high-backed upholstered leather chair behind the desk and matching love seats—one on which Ben sat wedged between his newly reconciled mother and father while Sam and his girlfriend, Delaney, sat on the other—said the good doctor knew his stuff *well*. Which was a good thing, because he was about to spell out the rest of Sam's future.

Six months ago, Dr. Kegan had drawn Ben's blood for the exact same reason—to determine whether he carried the gene markers for early-onset Alzheimer's. Ben hadn't made a production of it, hadn't sat face-to-face with the doc and been told that sometime in the next twenty to thirty

years, his brain would start to deteriorate just like his father's had. No, Ben had opted for a phone call to the lab followed by several pints at Midtown Tavern. Then it was home to an empty bed at the ranch he ran with his brother and friend. There was no one there to comfort him or help him ease into the news, but that had been his choice. He didn't want to burden Sam and Colt with a future he couldn't avoid. He didn't want to burden anyone with what he knew he couldn't change. No attachments meant no mess, no broken hearts, no pain. *Work hard and play harder*, right? Wasn't that the saying? Ben respected the motto—at least the second half of it. “They always leave you waiting,” he said, shaking his head. He pushed himself up from the couch and began pacing. “Doctors. They know what they're about to tell you could change your whole life, and then they schedule you a half hour before they even *think* about entering the room. I swear, bedside manner goes out the window as soon as they get the cushy office and all the awards and—”

“Hey there, little brother,” Sam interrupted. “I appreciate you getting all wound up on my behalf, but I'm in no rush. But if you need to be somewhere...”

Ben raked his fingers through his hair and stopped pacing.

“Sorry,” he said. “I'm just anxious—for you.”

The office door clicked open a crack, and they could hear the doctor before they saw him.

“Lori, please tell Mrs. Dunlap I'll call her later this afternoon. She took the news a bit hard.

Wait, you know what? Tell her I'll stop by after we close up shop here. We can talk about options for Mr. Dunlap's care, and she can show me pictures of the grandkids.”

Delaney laughed. “You’re right, Ben. His bedside manner is the worst.”

Ben scowled and leaned on the arm of his brother’s couch rather than sitting all the way down again.

“Good morning, Mr. Calla—” Dr. Kegan caught himself when he realized Sam had come with a full entourage. “Good morning, *everyone*, I suppose.”

Sam stood and shook the doctor’s hand.

The two men were roughly the same height and of similar lean build.

Ben narrowed his eyes. The two men looked nearly the same age as well. Had Dr. Kegan been that young six months ago?

“Hope you don’t mind,” Sam said, interrupting Ben’s thoughts. “Brought the whole family.”

The doctor waved Sam off. “Of course not. I love giving good news to a packed house.”

Delaney sprang to her feet and grabbed Sam’s hand. “Good news?” she asked excitedly.

A weight lifted immediately from Ben’s shoulders. His brother was okay. *He* wasn’t, but Sam was. He thought he might be angry or resentful, but all he felt was complete and utter relief.

The doctor smiled and clapped Sam on the shoulder. “I was going to wait until I was sitting at my desk all professional-like, but what the heck? Congratulations, Mr. Callahan. Just like your brother, you are in the clear. Keep in mind that your genetic code means you’re both safe from early-onset Alzheimer’s but normal risk factors still exist for anyone to develop the disease later in life. Medicine is making strides, though, so who knows—”

“What did you just say?” Ben interrupted. He was standing now. They all were, Ben’s parents included.

Dr. Kegan crossed his arms. “I said normal risk factors still—”

“*Before that,*” Ben said, taking a step closer. “The part about *both* of us being in the clear. Because I spoke to someone at the lab six months ago who told me otherwise. I’ve spent half a year thinking that life as I know it is on a ticking clock.”

The doctor stared at Ben for several long seconds before he spoke. “The lab told you your results were...*positive?*”

Ben let out a bitter laugh. “Are you telling me they were wrong?”

Dr. Kegan rounded his desk, picked up the phone, and dialed a four-digit extension. After a few beats, he said, “Hi. This is Davis Kegan over in neurology. I need to verify results for a Benjamin Callahan.”

Ben winced at the use of his full name. He felt like a kid in trouble. But this might actually be worse since he was about to be told *again* that by the time he was his father’s age, he’d likely be living in an assisted living facility as well.

Dr. Kegan cleared his throat. “No. *Not* Benjamin Wallace Callahan. Benjamin *Phillip* Callahan.”

Ben glanced toward his father, who was holding hands with his mother. His illness had torn their family apart—and then brought them back together. His parents had something rare, something he didn’t believe existed in the real world, but he was damn happy it existed for them.

He held his breath as he waited for the doctor to hang up the phone, and it felt like everyone else was holding theirs too. He wasn't sure if he should be hopeful or angry or both. So he figured not breathing was the logical course of action.

“Uh-huh,” Dr. Kegan said. “I see. Yes, this will have to be reported. Thank you.”

He hung up the phone, and the room was so silent Ben swore he could hear his own pulse.

Dr. Kegan cleared his throat. “So it turns out the lab has another Benjamin Callahan on record—a sixty-two-year-old man from Bucks Lake. *He* tested positive for early onset. *You* did not. I am so sorry for the mix-up, and it will be dealt with. But, Sam *and* Ben, you are both in the clear.”

His mother gasped, and Ben saw his father swipe away a tear. He expected his brother to kiss Delaney before anything else, but instead Sam pulled Ben into a firm embrace.

“Everything is different,” he said when Sam stepped back.

It felt like a haze had cleared. He got that nothing in life was certain. He could walk out of the hospital and get run over by an ambulance. He could choke on a cherry pit after sneaking a taste from Anna's produce delivery to the ranch—and he almost did once. Thank goodness Luis, their chef, knew the Heimlich.

“No one dies in my kitchen,” Luis had said. “And stop stealing my fruit!”

Technically, it was *Ben's* fruit since he was co-owner of the ranch, but he wasn't going to argue after Luis saved his life.

And now it had just been saved again.

“I need to go,” he said absently. He wasn’t sure where, but he needed to get out of this office.

“Ben, wait,” his mother said, but he shook his head.

“I’m okay,” he insisted. “Really. I just need to think.”

About how he’d been living his life—all fun and no connections. About whether or not he could change after living that way since he learned his future might look a lot like his father’s.

He counted on Sam and Colt for backup at the ranch, often shirking his duties because in the long run, it didn’t feel like it mattered. Maybe this was a start. For once he could do something for his brother that mattered, even if it was simply doing his job.

“Take the night off,” he said to Sam. “You and Delaney should celebrate. Colt’s got lunch and dinner, and I can cover the evening activities or make sure one of the part-timers can.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “I’m going to take you up on that before you change your mind. Thanks, Ben. Are you sure you’re—”

“I’m good,” he insisted.

He backed out of the office door and into the hospital corridor.

He suddenly wanted to make something of his life, like taking his career seriously, to start. And maybe it was time he stopped living with a roommate and built himself a home, started establishing some permanence in his life.

On one side of the ranch, there was a piece of land owned by the bank. Ben had had his eye on it since he moved to Meadow Valley just over two years ago, not that he’d have done anything with it. It was his *What if?* It was how he busied his mind when there wasn’t someone to leave the

bar with on any given night. The bank was willing to unload it for a steal since the previous owner had already poured the foundation for a house and small stable—and then had lost their financing and let the property fall into foreclosure. No one wanted to dig it up and start from scratch, so Ben looked at it as a secret challenge. He designed a home to fit the layout, a home he'd never build. But now? If he bought the land, that would prove he could commit to something that really mattered, that it wasn't too late to turn his life around after letting it unravel.

He followed the detour signs to bypass some indoor construction and somehow found himself at the ambulance entrance of the emergency room. He was about to pivot and retrace his steps when he saw Lieutenant Carter Bowen wheeling a gurney into the ER. And sitting on the gurney, with one arm immobilized and eyes narrowed, was Carter's great-aunt and owner of the Meadow Valley Inn, Pearl Sweeney.

"What happened?" Ben asked, rushing to Pearl's side as Carter called out things like *minor laceration* and *possible dual fracture* to the admissions woman behind the front desk.

Pearl waved Ben off. "Oh, I'm fine. I was on the ladder clipping dead branches from the tree in front of the inn—curb appeal is everything, you know—and I lost my balance. It's nothing."

Carter turned around, his eyes full of worry as he glanced from his aunt to Ben. "She most likely broke her right ankle and wrist. Her elbow needs sutures, and—" He blew out a calming breath.

"You could have killed yourself, Aunt Pearl. Don't you have someone on staff who can take care of stuff like that for you? Hell, call me over anytime. That's what family is for."

Pearl's jaw tightened. "Are you telling me I'm too old to take care of my own inn?"

"No," Carter insisted. "I'm not stupid enough to suggest something like that. But you are the heart and soul of that place—of this *town*, even. If something happens to you, it's not just the inn that suffers."

"The inn!" Pearl said, her anger morphing to something more like fear. "If you're right about my injuries, then I can't walk or cook or—"

It looked like reality was finally setting in.

"I'm right," Carter said. "I'm sorry, Pearl, but once they fix you up, it's going to be a long road to recovery. You're going to need live-in help. And you'll need to increase everyone's hours at the inn so you can take care of yourself. I'll do whatever I can when I'm not on shift, but it's not going to be enough. We can put the call out on the *Meadow Valley Courier* webpage. Maybe people can sign up for shifts."

Pearl sniffled, all of her bravado dissipating. Ben hated seeing her like this.

"I can't ask my employees to take on twenty-four-hour shifts," she said. "That's all me. They have families to go home to." She patted Carter on the cheek with her good hand. "You're so good to me. I know you'll help when you can, but you have your own life to worry about.

Everyone in town does. I'll have to see what's in my budget, but if I'm going to need overnight support as well as someone to help me get around the place, that means dipping into my savings, and—"

Ben rested a hand lightly on the older woman's shoulder. "We'll figure this out. You've got a whole town behind you, Pearl."

He got it. He ran a ranch. She ran an inn. It was more than a job. It was a lifestyle, and she'd need someone to fill in every hour of the day she couldn't work, which was all of them.

She held her head high and nodded. "You have a good heart, Ben Callahan."

He did, didn't he? Maybe he wasn't the best at showing it to his brother, his parents, or the few others he let past his own wall of bravado. But his heart was there, beating behind his rib cage. It might be a little rusty, but it still worked, didn't it?

"What about the chief?" Ben asked. Chief Burnett and Pearl had been dating for quite some time.

"Can he help?"

She shook her head. "I can't ask him to do that," Pearl said. "He has an entire fire station to run.

Adding more hours to his load isn't safe for him—or for you, for that matter," she said, eyes back on Carter. "You both do forty-eight-hour shifts as it is."

Carter nudged the gurney forward, and Ben moved out of the way.

"We need to finish this discussion later," he said. "We need to get you evaluated by a doctor and sent to radiology and verify the fractures, make sure they can be set without surgery. Ben, do you think you could swing by the inn and make sure everything is okay, let them know Pearl's out for the rest of the day? Also, I hate to ask, but I'm on shift until this time tomorrow. Could you maybe give Pearl a lift home when all is said and done?"

Ben nodded. “I’m on it. I’ll head back to town and see what I can do about getting some extra help at the inn. I’m sure your staff will be more than happy to step up until you get back,” he said, hoping to reassure Pearl. “How long do you think X-rays and all that will be?” he asked, directing his attention back to Carter.

“An couple of hours at least.”

Ben nodded once. “Then I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Pearl grabbed his hand. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Ben Callahan. I always knew you had a good heart.”

As long as that heart—and other parts of his anatomy—steered clear of her granddaughter. No, he hadn’t forgotten about that, about Pearl showing what she really thought of him. But maybe getting her to change her mind was as easy as offering her a ride home from the hospital.

“I owe you, Callahan,” Carter said, then turned his attention back to his aunt. “Okay, Aunt Pearl. Let’s see what kind of damage you did and get you all fixed up.”

Then Carter wheeled Pearl away, leaving Ben standing there determined to show he was ready to do something more. To *besomething* more.

#

Ben had not only checked in on Pearl’s staff but he’d also stayed at the inn for the entire two hours helping check guests in and cleaning breakfast dishes while the kitchen staff prepped for lunch. By the time he’d made it back to the hospital, he found out Pearl was being prepped for surgery.

Things were more serious than we thought, Carter texted when Ben arrived back in the waiting room. If you want to head home, I can let you know when she's released. IF she's released today. It all depends on when the orthopedic surgeon on call has a break in their schedule.

But Ben felt the urge to stay, to see this thing through and be there for Pearl like he'd said he would.

Already cleared my calendar for the rest of the day and can move things around tonight if needed, he replied. If it's okay with you, I'll hang out until you have news.

Carter responded immediately. Remind me to buy you a beer next time our paths cross at Midtown.

Ben laughed. I'll hold you to it, he texted back. Are you staying with Pearl until then? Can I come check in on her? How about I head down to the cafeteria and grab us both some coffee and something to eat?

Ben was restless and wanted to do something to help.

Sure, Carter said. That would be great. I'm sure Pearl would love the company. It'll give me a chance to check in with the station and make sure everything's okay over there.

So Ben headed over to the cafeteria and did as he'd promised. He also made a stop at the gift shop and picked up a few Get Well balloons to hopefully brighten up the otherwise sterile room.

It turned out to be another few hours before the surgery actually took place, and by then, Ben was all in.

“I’m not leaving until it’s done,” he’d said as Pearl was wheeled out the door, Carter following her to the operating room. “Want to make sure all went well. And who knows? You might still need a ride home.” He winked at Pearl, knowing that she was likely spending the night at this point.

And then he’d headed back to the waiting room, made himself as comfortable as he could in one of the waiting room chairs, and...waited.

Apparently that waiting turned into him nodding off. What could he say? Doing stuff for others—the whole *not*being selfish thing—was draining, physically and emotionally. Even if Pearl didn’t put *him* on a pedestal, she was like a grandmother to him. For a guy who had put said emotions on hold for not only the past six months but also since his father received his own diagnosis, this whole putting-his-energy-into-caring-about-others thing was going to take some getting used to. What better way to do so than with a nice, long nap?

Chapter Two

Charlotte North stood in line at her favorite New York City bodega, grateful she was on time enough that said line wasn’t yet out the door. She waited in the narrow space between the magazines and newspapers and the wall-to-wall selection of candy in front of the checkout counter. She could *smell* the coffee, but what she really needed was to taste it. Or have someone

inject it into her veins. But the coffee in her insulated thermos, which she'd just filled to the brim, was still too hot to drink. By the time she found a seat on the subway, it would be ready for the perfect first sip, but oh how she needed that perfect first sip now—or ten minutes ago.

She'd been home from Meadow Valley for a week already, but somehow it still felt like she was on California time. Or maybe, despite her best judgment, she still longed for lazy mornings and a warm body she could wake up next to.

She shook her head and quietly scoffed at herself.

Sharing her bed was *not* something Charlotte did on the regular. Not for lack of enjoying such activities but because such activities did not fit into her routine. And she certainly relied on routine.

Today, she told herself. *Today my life will get back in sync.*

And she'd stop thinking about how good it felt to forget about the real world for a while.

Or how good it felt when a certain cowboy did certain things to her that made the real world so easy to forget.

“It's dark when I wake up in the morning and dark when I get home from work. Why is daylight saving time a thing?” a woman asked from behind her. “Also, I already finished my scene. Do you think they'll still charge me?”

It was the same opening to almost every morning conversation.

Charlotte looked over her shoulder and smiled at Vicki, a woman who lived in the same neighborhood and ran on a similar schedule. They rode the same train to work, but Vicki got off two stops earlier.

“How were the boys this morning?” Charlotte asked, inquiring about Vicki’s twin sons. She knew about her bodega buddy’s family life *not* because she’d asked but because Vicki was the kind of person who told you everything whether you wanted her to or not. Charlotte—not great at small talk—was always grateful for someone who could carry the entire conversation. All it took was one question, and Vicki took care of the rest.

“Still sleeping when I left, thank goodness,” she said. “One of these days, I’m going to talk my clients into afternoon instead of morning appointments, but that’ll have to wait until Bill can change *his* schedule so he can pick the boys up after school.” She sighed, then tucked her mermaid-colored hair—a mixture of varied shades of blue and purple—behind her ear. “Don’t do the whole married-with-kids thing, Char. You won’t know which way is up.” Then she held up her index finger and shook her head. “Scratch that. *Do* it. Do it all because it’s the best ever, but make sure you have a Bill—not *my* Bill, of course—to *remind* you which way is up when you forget. Or where your missing phone is when it’s already in your hand. That’s why I almost had to skip the coffee and scone and head right to the station. Glad I’m not the only one in a rush.” She laughed, then tapped Charlotte—who’d completely turned around to face her—on the shoulder. “You’re up!”

Charlotte blew out a breath and spun to face Antonio, the older man who owned the corner shop and made the best pot of coffee this side of Manhattan. Maybe in the entire city.

“Miss Charlotte!” the man exclaimed. He called every woman *Miss*. “You’re running late again this morning.”

She winced and inserted her debit card into the chip reader like she’d done every morning for the past few years.

“Thanks for noticing,” she said. “Again.”

Antonio laughed. “Hard not to notice when it’s so unlike you. You’re just so dependable. I can set my watch by your arrival. How do I know what time it is if you’re three to five minutes late?” he teased.

She narrowed her eyes at his smartwatch. “The internet makes sure you don’t forget.”

But Antonio wasn’t entirely off base. Charlotte was never late. At least, she hadn’t been up until this transitional week. Not for years. She hadn’t taken time off since medical school, which was fine by her, because time off meant time away from routine, and time away from routine just got her out of sync. Like now. But part of her contract with Children’s Pediatrics and Dentistry was that practitioners were required to take their four weeks of paid vacation, though preferably not all at once.

“A burned out doctor is *not* what our patients need,” Dr. Nowak—one of the two managing partners of the practice—explained upon asking Charlotte to sign on the dotted line, which she’d done happily. Squeezing in those four weeks before the end of the year wasn’t easy. Even

knowing she'd lose the days if she didn't use them, Charlotte had yet to be successful. But when your boss finally says, "Take some time off before I change the lock on the office door," you book a last-minute trip to see your favorite person in the whole world—your gran. And you meet a man you never intended to meet who *maybe* let you forget about routine for a while but who *never* made you a cup of coffee as good as Antonio's—or at *all*.

But Ben Callahan did make her wonder what it would be like to wake up on the regular with a warm body pressed to hers rather than rolling over onto cold sheets. Not *his* warm body, of course. Ben Callahan didn't do *on the regular*.

Then again, neither did she.

"Miss Charlotte?" Antonio asked, snapping her back to the present.

"What? Oh, right. Was I serious about the vacation? If I said *serious as a heart attack*, would that be poor form for a medical professional?" she asked, hoping her weak attempt at humor would mask how out of sorts she felt.

He waved her off. "It's good to have you back, Miss Charlotte. See you tomorrow morning?" he asked, his thick salt and pepper brows raised.

"And the morning after that," she said. "And the morning after that."

#

Charlotte's phone buzzed as she unlocked the office—she was the first one in as usual. She liked the fifteen to twenty minutes she got to herself to get her bearings before the phone started ringing off the hook with the latest child ailments of the day.

Mom: Look at this view! The bride and groom are going to look AMAZING with this in the background.

Attached to the message was a photo of a castle on a cliff overlooking the sea.

Amazing, Charlotte texted back.

Mom: One of these days you'll take a vacation and come with us on location! You don't know what you're missing!
It's Dunnottar Castle. We're doing photos here first and then heading over to Stonehaven. Wish you were here. Dad says hi. Mwah!

And then the texts stopped.

This was pretty much how she communicated with her parents these days, via text across international date lines. They were free spirits, wedding photographers who traveled the globe to capture clients' destination weddings. Their daughter? Not so much.

What was wrong with a little structure, with always knowing what came next?

"Nothing," Charlotte mumbled to her phone as she made her way behind the front desk and into her small office.

She took off her winter jacket and exchanged it for the white coat she wore to see patients. Then she pulled her planner out of her bag and opened it to the pocket where she'd tucked away the picture she printed the night before, the one of her and Gran that she'd taken at the Meadow Valley Inn the morning before she left. She taped it onto the wall next to the one of both her grandparents, when Gramps was still alive, and sighed as her throat tightened.

And then she flat-out *laughed*.

Belly laughed.

Because while she and her grandmother stood in front of the inn, arms around each other's waists as Chief Burnett snapped the photo with Charlotte's phone, there was Ben Callahan sitting on the porch swing, one cowboy boot crossed over the other and his Cattleman tilted up. He was staring straight at her, a devilish grin spread across his face.

"Photobomber!" she said, still laughing, the tightness in her throat dissipating.

Ben Callahan might not be any more than a fond memory of the one week Charlotte let go of the real world and the stresses that went along with it, but he was a memory that made her smile, even when she wanted to cry.

The office phone rang, and she blew out a breath. She heard someone answer it up front, which meant the day had officially begun.

"Dr. North?" she heard a few moments later on her office phone's intercom.

"I'm here, Patti," she responded to their office assistant.

"Kyle Scanlan is on his way in. Mom thinks it's another ear infection. I'll grab his chart and put it on the door of exam room one."

"Thanks, Patti," she said.

Ear infection. Good. Well, not *good* for poor Kyle Scanlan. But good to start the day with something easy, routine, and fixable.

#

By lunch—and it was a late one today—Charlotte finally felt like her week was back on track. She collapsed into one of the chairs in the breakroom and waited for her frozen meal to do its thing in the microwave.

“Dr. North?” Patti’s voice came through on the intercom, and Charlotte picked up the phone that was on the wall.

“Hi, Patti,” she said.

“Sorry to interrupt your lunch. But there’s a call for you on line one. Someone named Carter Bowen.”

Charlotte’s heart sank. She’d just seen her cousin in Meadow Valley. And while she loved him dearly, they weren’t the chat-on-the-phone type of cousins. Charlotte wasn’t the chat-on-the-phone type of person. Period.

So why was he calling her now, especially on her office line?

She took a steadying breath, trying not to remember the time years ago when an unexpected call from Meadow Valley had carried with it the worst kind of news.

“Thanks, Patti,” she said, a lump already forming in her throat.

Receiver pressed to her ear, Charlotte pressed the blinking button for line one.

“Carter!” she said with forced cheer. “Miss me already?”

“Your cell is on Do Not Disturb, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Um...yes. I’m at work. Hi to you too?”

“It’s Pearl,” he said without any further explanation. No smile in his voice. Just the two words she dreaded the most.

“What?” she asked, her voice breaking on that one word.

“She’s okay,” he added. “Sorry. I should have led with that. Or maybe hello. I’m just outside her room while she talks to the doctor, and I don’t want her to hear me...”

Charlotte let out an exasperated groan.

“*Jesus*, Lieutenant. You’re a *paramedic*. You’re supposed to have better bedside manner than that!”

Her cousin laughed, which meant whatever happened to Gran wasn’t so bad that Carter couldn’t laugh.

“She told me not to call you,” he said. “And when Pearl tells you *not* to do something and you still do it, there’s usually hell to pay.”

“Carter? Carter, get back in here and tell them I’m not spending the night in the hospital when I have a perfectly good bed—a much more *comfortable* bed—at the inn.”

Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of her grandmother’s voice.

“See?” he said. “It’s like she can see through the damned wall.”

“*Carter*,” Charlotte said. “Tell me what happened.”

“Right,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper now. “She was on a ladder trimming branches in that overgrown tree in front of the inn, and she fell. Broken wrist, ankle, and a few lacerations. But she’s going to be fine.”

Charlotte swallowed and reminded herself that she was a doctor. When it came to stuff like this, so much could be fixed. That was why she'd gotten into medicine in the first place.

"I'll come back," she blurted. "To Meadow Valley. The practice won't love it, but I still have three weeks of vacation time I need to get rid of. They'll understand. I'll come back, make sure she gets home okay, and spend a few days helping her adjust."

Carter was quiet for several long seconds.

"The ankle break is too severe to be set without surgery," he finally said. "They're prepping her now." Another pause. "Char...The wrist alone would have been bad enough. But the ankle? A bone break like that on a woman her age? She'll be in a wheelchair for at least six weeks, possibly two months."

Two months. The words hung in the air while neither of them spoke.

"If you tell her I told you, I'll deny it," Carter said with a soft laugh. "But this is big, and I didn't want to keep it from you. Of course, I'll keep you posted on how everything goes, and we'll figure out getting her help at the inn even though she claims she'll be back at it this time tomorrow. We've got it under control."

Charlotte shook her head and let out a small laugh. Gran *was* stubbornly independent. Charlotte should know. She took after the woman.

"I'm coming back," she said again. "For however long it takes. I'll figure it out on my end and get on the first flight out of New York I can find."

"Whoa," Carter said. "That is *not* why I called. If she gets out of surgery and finds you here—"

“She’ll be *relieved*,” Charlotte said. “She’d never admit it, but she needs more help than anyone there can give her part-time. Again, the practice won’t love it, but I have those three weeks left. The other five weeks, I don’t know. I’ll take it unpaid, extend my contract, whatever I need to do. But I’m coming back to take care of Gran and the inn, and there’s nothing you can say to change that.”

Charlotte wasn’t able to do a thing to save her grandfather from the heart attack that took his life, but she could make sure that Pearl didn’t put herself at risk again.

Carter laughed. “You’re worse than she is, aren’t you?” he asked.

Charlotte smiled. “I learned from the best.”

Chapter Three

“Oh my God. Where is she?”

Ben heard the woman’s voice, but it didn’t register that she might be talking to him. So he readjusted his hat over his eyes and went back to sleeping off his feelings.

“Hey!”

He heard the voice again, and this time it came with a kick to the toe of his boot. He took his time straightening and pushing the brim of his hat up so he could see who his assailant was.

“Doc?” he said, calling Dr. Charlotte North by the nickname he’d given her when they’d enjoyed a no-strings-attached fling—his favorite kind—before she’d gone back to New York and he’d gone back to life as he knew it.

His eyes registered the disheveled auburn ponytail and the wildness in her green eyes. He’d spent an entire week being the cause of such wildness, but this was different. Especially since he was pretty sure he’d been in the hospital waiting room this whole time and *not* in bed with Pearl Sweeney’s granddaughter.

Then it clicked. “Oh, damn. Pearl. I’m sorry. I just—”

“Fell *asleep* while my gran was in surgery?”

Ben sat bolt upright. “I was just going to shut my eyes for five minutes. Twenty tops.” He chuckled. “Guess the day took a lot more out of me than I thought.”

Waking up to her though...He’d done it before, but seeing her now felt...*he* felt...

Charlotte crossed her arms. “My grandmother broke bones that needed to be surgically set, and you’re *laughing*?”

He stood. “No. Shoot. Doc, that’s not what I meant.” He reached for the hand that gripped her rolling suitcase with white knuckles, but she snatched it away.

Okay. He deserved that. He could see how things might look, but he was here, at the hospital, waiting to make sure her grandmother was okay. If he could just explain...

He opened his mouth to do that, but she didn’t give him the chance.

“Carter said she’s in recovery.” She lifted her chin and smoothed out nonexistent wrinkles in her clothes. “I just need to read her chart and verify what he relayed to me, and then everything will be fine.”

“Doc,” he said softly. He had this sudden urge to make sure she was okay, but she shook her head.

“Call me Charlotte, please. I need to go see her and make sure she knows there’s nothing to worry about. I cleared it with my practice. I’m taking a two-month leave of absence until she’s back on her feet.”

And she spun on her heel and left, abandoning their conversation *and* her suitcase.

He grabbed the handle and wheeled it after her, but before he reached her, she was already hightailing it to the nearest elevator.

That went well.

He glanced out the waiting room window and saw that it was pitch dark outside, so he pulled out his phone and finally checked the time.

“Eleven-*thirty*?” he said aloud and then laughed. “She’s pissed that I was sleeping thirty minutes before midnight?”

He shook his head at no one in particular. She was out of sorts. He got that. And he guessed he wasn’t the first person she expected to see upon arrival.

It wasn’t like he was prepared to see Charlotte North again so soon either. Or under such circumstances. And was it bad that while she’d yelled at him he thought about the last time he’d

heard her—uh—*speak* with a raised voice? It had been her last night in town. And maybe a time or two the morning after. He wasn't going to send her back to New York without a reminder of the best part of her stay in Meadow Valley.

Maybe after things with Pearl were settled, he could show her a good time again.

He shrugged and turned toward the exit door, pausing before he left to glance at his buzzing phone. It was Carter.

Are you still here? My cousin said she saw you. They're obviously keeping her overnight for observation. Sorry I forgot to tell you when surgery was done. Just one of those days, you know? Will keep you posted about a ride home after she's released tomorrow if you're still up for it.

No problem, Ben texted back. And tell your cousin when she's ready, I'll drop by the inn with her suitcase. She left it in the ER waiting room. And before you say you'll come grab it, I'd like to be the one to deliver it. I'm wide awake now, so I'll be up for a while.

He strolled through the door and out into the brisk, dark night.

It had only been a week, but seeing Charlotte again—*today*—it felt a little like a sign.

Their time together had been great. No, scratch that. It had been damned near spectacular. Head clearing and distracting but...the thing was, the thrill of seeing her unexpectedly should have only awakened feelings a bit below the belt. But it hadn't. Okay it *had*, but there was something else.

He paused when he got to his truck and blew out a steady breath. Then he shook his head and laughed.

Slow your roll, Callahan.

This *something else* was nothing more than the culmination of his medical news on top of Doc—*Charlotte*—arriving here after receiving the news about Pearl. Coincidence. *Not* a sign. He threw the suitcase into the bed of his truck and absently whistled a tune.

A two-month leave of absence, huh? He guessed the good doctor would be looking for another distraction, and who better for the job than a man who was newly in the service of doing for others?

Because oh the things he could do to—er, *for*—her.

Chapter Four

Charlotte sat in the chair of her grandmother's hospital room and stared at the sleeping woman.

Gran was okay, but it was going to be a long road to recovery.

Maybe she shouldn't have lashed out at Ben like that, but she needed to be angry at *someone*.

She couldn't be angry at her mother for being MIA because she'd followed up her gig photographing a wedding in Scotland with a thirtieth anniversary vow renewal in Salzburg. Her mother and grandmother hadn't seen eye to eye since Charlotte's father had lured her mother

away from Meadow Valley, first to L.A. and then to the farthest reaches of the world—as long as the happy couple was equally happy to pay their fee. And when her mother couldn't make it back to the States in time after Gramps died, the two had stopped talking altogether.

Charlotte had played the middle ever since, trying to coax her mom back to Meadow Valley for at least a short visit while also trying to coax Gran to text her daughter to let her know she still thought of her.

“A relationship can survive physical distance,” Pearl would say, “but not emotional absence.

And your mother's been gone longer than she's been overseas.”

Yet that was how Charlotte had survived since they'd all lost Gramps. Emotional distance.

Texting. Solving the problems she could—with science and medicine and clear-cut answers.

What would Charlotte say when Gran woke up? “Mom sends her love from Austria. Sorry she can't be here after you almost killed yourself.”

She exhaled and closed her eyes. Her neighbor back in New York, Megan, tried talking Charlotte into joining her meditation class, but Charlotte always found an excuse to decline. Mostly it was due to time, and mostly that was the truth. But the other truth was that it was simply easier to do her own thing, to read her medical research journals and stay connected to a world that made sense. A world that had hypotheses and experiments. Conclusions and answers. Plus, as far as meditation was concerned, there was an app for that—several, actually. And each one she'd tried using—which she hated to admit was probably a few *more* than several—had failed. Miserably.

It was like she thrived on stress. *Not* that she wanted to. She simply didn't know how to relax.

But she could really use some de-stressing right now.

She opened one of her many meditation apps and followed the first direction, which was simply to focus on her breathing as she attempted to tune out the hustle and bustle of the medical staff outside the door.

Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale...

Still inhaling and exhaling, she heard her alarm on her phone go off—not here in Gran's hospital room but in her memory.

Wait. It was working? It never worked. This had to be some sort of fluke, but it was a fluke she needed, so she followed the thread.

She was in a bed, rationalizing that if she didn't open her eyes, then it wouldn't really be morning. And if it wasn't morning, it meant her vacation wasn't over, that she wasn't heading from Meadow Valley all the way back to New York City. Not that she didn't love New York. She did. She missed her bodega with the best coffee, the cacophony of horns honking, morning commuters shouting into their wireless earpieces, and the ridiculously handsome stranger in the three-piece suit who always got on at the stop after hers and somehow ended up in her train car. They never spoke and likely never would, but the routine of it—the familiarity of her entire morning commute—comforted her.

The alarm sounded again. Or maybe she'd set a second one so she wouldn't miss her flight.

But—ugh—just a few more minutes before dealing with the real world.

She felt the covers pull away from her side, and warm lips pressed a kiss to her naked hip. It was the kind of kiss that definitely melted a girl's worries away—or turned them into something steamy.

She hummed with delight, then fumbled for her phone on the nightstand, silencing it for good.

Kisses trailed up her side, dangerously close to her now-exposed breast, and a strong hand gently uncovered her face so those same warm lips could find hers.

"I'm gonna be late," she said, her voice half pout and half purr.

But Charlotte North didn't do anything by accident, which meant she'd worked in enough time for a little of this when she'd set her alarms last night.

She finally opened her eyes, squinting against the morning sun sneaking in through the shuttered windows. And there he was—Ben Callahan—her rancher. Well, her vacation rancher. She didn't have time for much else, and lucky for her, her cowboy was on a permanent vacation from anything resembling a relationship. It had made for a perfect escape from reality, and after today there'd be a whole country between them.

"Do you want to be late?" Ben asked, his dark hair sticking up at all angles, his jaw covered in scruff.

She propped herself up on her elbow and tousled his already tousled locks.

Looking at him, at those mischievous blue eyes, she wanted to be all kinds of late. She wanted to miss her plane. She wanted to prolong the fantasy as long as she could.

"I could be late," she said. "As long as I'm not keeping you from anything."

He glanced at his naked wrist and then grinned that devilish grin that had gotten her into this same situation—the day they'd met.

“Nothing important on the docket today other than making sure I put a smile on your face that lasts the whole flight home.”

He pulled her on top of him, and she yelped with laughter.

“Just like that, Doc,” he said.

She rolled her eyes and pretended the nickname annoyed her. And it would have if anyone else had said it, but Ben somehow made it sound sweet, sincere, and almost real.

It might have been the closest thing to a relationship she'd ever had. But it wasn't real.

He kissed her, and she forgot what she was thinking.

Kisses were good like that.

Charlotte hummed softly.

Someone cleared their throat, the sound most definitely coming from *outside* her memory.

Oh God. Had she hummed out loud? Did it sound like—

“You awake there, cuz?” a voice whisper-shouted.

Her eyes flew open to find her cousin Carter standing in Pearl's doorway.

“Yes!” she whispered back, then stood and tiptoed to the door, grateful she hadn't woken her grandmother with her hum. Moan? WHAT DID CARTER HEAR?

“Must have been a good dream,” he said with a grin.

She backhanded him on the shoulder. “Cut me some slack. I just flew across the country worried out of my head. And it’s”—she glanced at her watch—“almost *midnight*. Which means for me it’s about three a.m.”

Carter held his hands up in a peace offering. “I will say nothing else about whatever—or *whoever*—you were dreaming about.” He laughed and then mimed zipping his lips. “And you? Worried? That’s a first.”

Thank the stars for his discretion—and for a familiar face when everything else felt like chaos. “I’m *not* worried. Not anymore now that I know Gran is in the best possible hands. The surgeons did a great job. And she’s resting comfortably. While I wish circumstances were otherwise, all is right with the world—or will be in a couple of months.”

Carter laughed. “Do you read your patients’ charts to wind down at the end of the night? Or do you just snuggle up with the *New England Journal of Medicine* and call it a day?”

Charlotte glanced down at the chair in which she’d dozed off—at the medical journal that had been splayed on her chest, where it had fallen when she fell asleep. “If you must know, it’s *Pediatric Allergy and Immunology* these days. The office is going to start doing allergy testing after the first of the year, so I want to make sure I—”

“Know everything about everything?” Carter teased. “You’re still you.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, but she actually enjoyed her cousin’s teasing and the familiarity of being in a place where people got her.

Before coming out for the fall festival, Charlotte had only seen Carter a handful of times since they were kids, their paths crossing when they'd both visit Meadow Valley in the summer—him traveling all the way from Houston and her from L.A. Somehow Meadow Valley had reeled him in though. Or maybe it was his fiancée, Ivy Serrano, who had done that. She guessed it was a combination of the two. For Charlotte, this had only ever been a place to visit. Now she had to find a way to make it home for the next six to eight weeks.

Carter grabbed Pearl's chart from the door and nodded toward Charlotte.

"You already read it, I assume?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Didn't have to. Dr. Alvarez and her nurses filled me in as soon as I got up here. Dual fractures in the ankle, both pinned in place during surgery." Her foot was wrapped in a soft splint and bandage to manage the post-surgery swelling. "She told me I have to bring Gran back in a week for the plaster cast. The wrist, luckily, was set without surgery, but it was still a bad break. They want her in a sling so she doesn't get overconfident and start using her hand before she should."

Carter smiled. "Sounds like Doc knows who she's dealing with."

Charlotte's eyes widened at her cousin's use of *Doc* and hoped he didn't notice. She'd been so cold to Ben in the ER, but in her defense, he was sleeping when he should have been...what? It made sense now. He'd been there waiting for Pearl, which meant he'd been there to help. She just hadn't been mentally prepared for him to be the first person she saw. Not that there was any

way to prepare for seeing your vacation fling asleep in an emergency waiting room because he was worried about your grandmother too.

“Hello? Charlotte? Did you hear anything I just said?”

She blinked and saw Carter’s hand waving in front of her face.

“What? No. Sorry. Guess I got caught up in thinking about what could have happened. She’s really lucky, you know?”

Carter nodded. “She is, but she’s not going to feel so lucky being confined to a wheelchair.

That’s what I was saying when you zoned out. There’s no way she can use crutches or even a cane without her right hand. She can’t do any of the cooking for the inn let alone run the place.

Are you sure you know what you’re in for?”

Charlotte forced a smile and nodded. “The inn’s kitchen has a microwave, right?” She let out a nervous laugh. When Carter called her earlier today, he’d assured her Gran’s injuries weren’t life-threatening, but he’d also made it clear that Pearl was in no shape for her day-to-day duties at the inn and that she wouldn’t be for quite some time.

Pearl was it for Charlotte—the one constant in her life that wasn’t work or routine. Even if Gran was 3,000 miles away, she was the closest relationship in Charlotte’s life. Gran was her *person*, and Charlotte hadn’t thought twice about dropping everything to help her—which meant she really hadn’t thought this through. Leaving her job and her stable life to run an inn? What the hell was she thinking? She couldn’t cook, and she certainly didn’t know how to fold a fitted sheet or...or even register guests.

Seriously. What had she done?

Carter winced. “Pearl has a small cooking staff. I’m sure it’ll be fine. Just in case, though, I’ll see if Casey from Midtown Tavern can stop by tomorrow and give you a few pointers. Just try not to let Pearl know if you start serving pub fare. She’ll flip.”

Charlotte laughed, for real this time. “If it’s between that and my favorite Trader Joe’s meal for one, I’m guessing she’d prefer the pub fare. You think Pearl will be relieved or even more worried when she finds out *I’m* her temporary replacement?”

Carter laughed too. “You’ll be fine,” he insisted. “Also, the nearest Trader Joe’s is close to two hours away, so you’re probably going to have to make some changes to your diet staples.” Carter glanced at his watch and then back at Charlotte. “Okay. You’ve been up for almost twenty-four hours. We need to get you to the inn.”

“Oh my God,” Charlotte said. “What time does breakfast start? What do I need to do? Who do I need to call?”

Carter placed a hand on her shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze. “It’s okay,” he said.

“We’ve got tomorrow covered. Let me get you home so you can get settled and sleep. You don’t need to worry about anything other than getting some rest.”

Instinctively, Charlotte reached for her suitcase. Suddenly, she realized it hadn’t been there since she’d made it to Pearl’s room.

“Oh my God,” she said.

“What?” Carter’s brows furrowed.

“My suitcase. *All* my things. I wheeled it into the ER, and I have no idea what happened after that.”

Carter grinned.

“Ben Callahan texted me. Said he grabbed it when you left it behind and that he’ll swing by the inn and bring it to you whenever you get there.”

She cleared her throat. “Well...text him and tell him he can drop it off now...before I get there.”

Carter shook his head. “No can do. He said he wouldn’t feel right handing it over to anyone but the owner. But I’ll call him and tell him you’re on your way.” He raised a brow. “I’m guessing the guy wants to see you. Hey, that’s not who you were— I mean, when you were dreaming just before...”

“Of course not!” she lied.

Her throat tightened. She sure did enjoy seeing *him* in her mind’s eye, but that was all she had time for. No distractions this time around. No leaving reality at the door. She was here to play caretaker for her grandmother and for all the patrons and employees at the Meadow Valley Inn.

She swallowed. “Oh my God, Carter. What did I sign up for?”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze. “You signed up to do a really good thing for someone who needs you. And don’t worry. You’ve got an entire town to support you. Take it from someone who less than two years ago was an outsider too. Now this place is more of a home to me than Houston ever was.”

She nodded. “So everyone welcomed you with open arms as soon as you got here?”

He shook his head. “Oh hell no! A probie in my company tried to run me out of town. Took getting trapped under a burning ceiling beam in Mrs. Davis’s old house to set things right, but it’s been smooth sailing ever since.”

A burning ceiling beam?

“Have you ever given a pep talk before?” Charlotte asked. “Because that one sucked.”

Carter laughed. Pearl stirred in her bed, but she didn’t wake.

Charlotte shushed him, and they moved farther down the hall from her grandmother’s doorway.

Carter held up a finger as he brought up Ben Callahan’s number on his phone’s screen and initiated the call. He put it on speaker, and Charlotte held her breath. Why? She had no idea. But she was well aware that she was neither inhaling nor exhaling as she listened along with her cousin.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Hey. It’s Ben. You know what to do.”

Beep.

Carter groaned. “Thought you said you’d still be up, Callahan. I’m taking Charlotte to the inn.

I’ll make sure she has what she needs for the night, but if you could swing by with her suitcase in the morning...” He glanced at his cousin and winced. “You know what? Make that early afternoon. Thanks, Ben.”

Charlotte scoffed. “Early afternoon? What am I supposed to do without my stuff until early afternoon?”

Carter shrugged. “*Sleep*. Pearl has toiletry type stuff for purchase, right? We’ll grab you a toothbrush and some toothpaste. Maybe even a Meadow Valley Inn T-shirt for you to wear to bed. You’re set until tomorrow. Maybe next time think twice about storming off without your suitcase.”

Her mouth dropped open. “How do you know I *stormed*?” she asked, incredulous.

Carter raised a brow.

“Okay. Maybe I stormed. I was— and *hewas*—” But there was no use in arguing. Her cousin was right. The inn had what she needed to make it through the night, and chances were she *would* sleep past noon, if her body even remembered how to do such a thing.

She blew out a long breath. “Fine. Let’s go. But if he calls you back before we get there, we’re going to the ranch for my stuff. Okay?”

Carter crossed his heart. “Scout’s honor.”

She laughed. “You were never a Boy Scout.”

“Fire lieutenant’s honor, then. That’s gotta hold some weight.”

He put his arm over her shoulders and pulled her close. “It’s good to have you back, cuz,” he said, then kissed the top of her head. Then he gave her a warm smile, and the weight of the day lifted, if only slightly. His dark auburn hair matched hers, a reminder that while they hadn’t been close growing up, they were family. The next two months were *not* going to be easy. But she had support. She could do this.

They paused outside Pearl's door, and Carter nodded toward his sleeping aunt. "She didn't want to ask too much of her employees, but they rallied as soon as they all learned how bad the fall was. They've got your back. And so do I."

Charlotte pressed her lips together and tried to smile back. She could swab a reluctant child's tonsils like nobody's business, diagnose an ear infection in seconds, and administering vaccinations? Please. She could do it without her patient shedding one tear.

But running an inn? No clue. And she only had one afternoon and one evening to figure out how to do it. By the time Gran came home tomorrow, Charlotte wanted her to see the Meadow Valley Inn as the same well-oiled machine she'd left it the day before.

"Okay. Let's go," she said. "Time to sleep off this day and then give myself a crash course in the art of hospitality."

"In that case," Carter said, "your chariot awaits."

#

Charlotte startled awake and for a moment didn't know where she was. Then the familiar layout of the room—the bed facing the bathroom, her clothes from yesterday balled up on the dresser—sunk in, and she let out a breath.

She grabbed her phone from the night table and looked at the screen.

1:10 p.m.

But she'd set an alarm for eight—and had likely shut it off in her sleep-deprived state. She knew she wasn't expected to get to work this morning, but sleeping the day away was unacceptable. She could be learning. She could be getting to know the staff. She could be...

She sprang out of bed and realized she was wearing nothing but a Meadow Valley Inn T-shirt and her underwear.

A knock sounded on the door, and she gasped, promptly forgetting her attire as she ran to open it.

A knot tightened in her stomach.

There stood Ben Callahan—cowboy hat on his head and devil-may-care grin spread across his face.

“Mornin’, Doc. Or should I say, good *afternoon*?” he asked, tipping the brim of his hat up with a flick of his finger. “Fancy seeing you here. Love the outfit, by the way.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, but her shirt rode up. Then she crossed them over her knees but realized that hid nothing. So she promptly slammed the door shut, raced over to the dresser, and grabbed her wrinkled pants. Then she ran her fingers through her hair, pulled it into a ponytail, and groaned.

He's seen you first thing in the morning before, she reminded herself. It was just usually post-orgasm that she looked so disheveled, which meant he was happy no matter what her appearance. Now though? And after she yelled at him last night?

She groaned, ran into the bathroom so she could splash some water on her face and brush her teeth, and was back at the door in—she guessed—less than two minutes after having slammed it. There he stood, still grinning, and he had the audacity to wink at her.

“Take two?” he asked.

She tried to ignore how sexy he looked standing there with her luggage no worse for wear beside him—or how it was sort of nice of him to have taken care of her suitcase in the first place. It also didn't help that her attempt at meditation turned into a replay of their last morning in bed together. The week they spent together was a fantasy—a really fun fantasy both of them always knew was going to end. She wasn't on vacation anymore. She didn't have time for fantasies or fun or...cowboys.

“Thanks for bringing my suitcase,” she said coolly, reaching for the handle.

Ben slapped a palm down over said handle at the same time so that she grabbed his hand rather than the case.

She sucked in a sharp breath and pulled her hand away.

“Come on, Doc.” He tilted his head down just a notch to meet her eyes. Charlotte was tall at five foot eight, but Ben still had at least half a foot on her. He was a strong physical presence, but she was strong too. She could resist his charm, his use of that silly nickname she'd never admit she liked. But nicknames were personal. They evoked connection, and although their bodies had connected on more than one occasion, those *occasions* were behind them. In the past. They would not be *connecting* again.

“Please,” she said, trying not to sound cold. “Call me Charlotte. We’re not— I mean, we don’t...you know...anymore.”

He grinned. “Is the good doctor tongue-tied?”

She groaned. “No, it’s just been a long day, and I’m drained. I don’t have it in me to argue with you right now.”

“Are we arguing? I wasn’t aware. I thought we were having fun. You remember fun, right? And I didn’t mean to sound like an insensitive jackass. Couldn’t forget about your grandmother if I tried. I’d have asked how she was doing, but Carter filled me in.”

At this she smiled, her shoulders relaxing. “Why, Ben Callahan, are you getting all sincere on me?”

He laughed. “I see your power to banter has returned.”

“Look,” she said, then motioned between them. “This was fun, but we both agreed it had an expiration date. I need to focus on the inn, on taking care of my grandmother. That’s the only reason I’m here. As soon as she’s up and about again, I need to get back to my life. I don’t have time for anything else.”

Ben held up his hands. “Doc...” He cleared his throat. “I mean...*Charlotte*. While I do enjoy that you always think I’m hitting on you, I wasn’t going to offer anything other than taking your suitcase inside. Maybe show you how to use Pearl’s registration software and where she keeps the longnecks in the cooler. It’s 5:00 somewhere, right? It’s the same system we use at the ranch,

so I know it well. But, hey, if you've got everything under control, I'll get out of your hair. Just wanted to do my part—for Pearl, of course.”

He started to back away from the door.

“Wait,” she called after him. Charlotte swallowed the knot in her throat. She wanted to prove to herself that she could do this, to prove that she was as self-sufficient behind the welcome desk of a small-town inn as she was wearing a white coat in an exam room. But she'd assumed people called for a reservation and she just wrote it down in a fancy ledger or something. She was sure they had something similar at the pediatric practice where she worked, but *she* didn't make patient appointments. That was Patty and Patti, the two front desk receptionists.

Ugh. She needed help and from the very person she didn't want to find helpful or caring or concerned because *past in the past* and all that.

“Registration software?” she finally said.

Ben winked. “Customer calls, books a room, and *you* enter it into the system. Keeps you from double-booking. You wouldn't want a couple of honeymooners showing up and asking them to share the suite with the couple who hasn't left yet, would you? Can't say that would go over well on Yelp. Do people still Yelp, by the way? I should see what they're saying about the ranch if they do.”

Charlotte's palms grew damp and her pulse quickened. Where was her routine? Her certainty?

Without those things, she was at a loss. “Um...right,” she said. She was already in over her head.

He crossed his arms. “I'm thinking that you might be in need of my...expertise.”

He was either teasing or flirting or both. But Charlotte's head was spinning so much that she couldn't tell, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. She cleared her throat. "Okay. Yes. I need to learn how to do that. Like, right away." And even though she'd just woken up, a cold beverage sounded *really* good after the night she'd had. When was the last time she had a drink in the middle of the day? Better yet, when would she be able to do this again? After Ben showed her the ropes, she'd be off and rolling—on duty pretty much twenty-four-seven.

Ben grabbed the suitcase by the handle, not bothering to extend the rolling arm.

"That thing weighs at least fifty pounds," she said. "You can just roll it on in if you want."

Then she realized that her whole life fit into one large suitcase. Suddenly fifty pounds seemed lacking.

He shrugged. "This is quicker. Besides, aren't you impressed by my brute strength?"

She let out a nervous laugh. "Showing off doesn't impress me."

And that was the problem. She *was* impressed. She'd initially found the idea of Ben Callahan attractive. A strong, sexy cowboy who literally made people swoon. This was no exaggeration. She saw it firsthand at the fall festival—how he drew looks from basically anyone with a pulse, how strangers flirted with him, how all the locals, especially women, knew his name. It hadn't bothered her. It *still* didn't. Ben was a story to tell her friends—well, as much as her colleagues and neighbors were her friends—back home. She had no circle of girlfriends she brunchted with on Sundays or anything like that. There was hardly time in her life for that. But if she did, she'd tell them about the man ripped from the page of an L.L.Bean catalog. She'd talk about how he

was a *really* good fantasy—who was now going to teach her one of the most important aspects of running the inn, which didn't feel very fantasy-like at all.

“Well,” Ben said, lifting the case with ease and depositing it on the luggage rack beneath the window on the opposite wall. “If upper body strength doesn't do anything for you, there's always my brain.”

He raised his brows.

She wiped her damp palms on her pants.

“I'm good with just learning the computer system,” she said. “That's all I need.”

The last thing she needed was to find Ben Callahan's brain attractive too—or to move into the highly unfamiliar territory of what she might actually *want*.

“As you wish, Do—*Charlotte*,” he said with a grin. “Happy to be of service.”

About the Author



Author: A. J. Pine
Credit: Amy Pine

A librarian for teens by day and a romance writer by night, A.J. Pine can't seem to escape the world of fiction, and she wouldn't have it any other way. When she finds that twenty-fifth hour in the day, she might indulge in a tiny bit of TV to nourish her undying love of vampires, superheroes, and a certain high-functioning sociopath detective. She hails from the far-off galaxy of the Chicago suburbs.

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A priceless Dior collection
reveals a heartbreaking story
of wartime friendship, love,
and sacrifice.

THE PARIS SECRET

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE PARIS SEAMSTRESS

NATASHA LESTER

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Paris Orphan* comes an unforgettable historical novel about a secret collection of Dior gowns that ties back to the first female pilots of WWII and a heartbreaking story of love and sacrifice.

England, 1939: The Penrose sisters couldn't be more different. Skye is a daring and brash pilot, and Liberty the one to defy her at every turn. Even if women aren't allowed in the Royal Air Force, Skye is determined to help the war effort. She's thrilled when it reunites her with her childhood soulmate, Nicholas. She's less thrilled to learn Nicholas is now engaged to an enigmatic Frenchwoman named Margaux Jourdan.

Paris, 1947: Designer Christian Dior unveils his glamorous first collection to a world weary of war and grief. He names his debut fragrance Miss Dior in tribute to his beloved sister Catherine, who forged a friendship with Skye and Margaux through her work with the French Resistance.

Present Day: Fashion conservator Kat Jourdan discovers a priceless collection of Dior gowns in her grandmother's vacant cottage. As she delves into the mystery of their origin, Kat begins to doubt everything she thought she knew about her beloved grandmother.

THE PARIS SECRET

Natasha Lester

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Prologue

PARIS, 12 FEBRUARY 1947

In a grand townhouse at 30 Avenue Montaigne, Margaux Jourdan is helped into an ivory silk shantung jacket with a padded and flared peplum, and a pleated black wool skirt. The skirt falls, shockingly, all the way to mid-calf—such an excess of fabric for a post-ration world. A strand of pearls is placed around her neck, and she is finished off with a wide-brimmed hat and black gloves. Even after the desecration of war, a woman's hands are still too startling to be left unclothed.

Madame Raymonde spins Margaux around as if she were a ballerina in a music box and allows her chin to fall just once into a satisfied nod. She indicates with her arm that Margaux should step through the doorway of the *cabine* and into the salon.

Thus, the legendary Dior Bar Suit is conveyed via Margaux's body to an unsuspecting world.

In the grand salon, a crowd of elegant Parisians—Jean Cocteau, Michel de Brunhoff from *Vogue* and Marie-Louise Bousquet from *Harper's Bazaar*—sit shoulder to shoulder with barely any room between them for breath. Some people are standing against the wall, and others line the staircase—such has been the demand for tickets to this show, which canny profiteers have sold to the clamorous for more than it costs to buy black-market butter.

The salon wears its muted palette of pearl gray and white as subtly as a concealed zipper. The Louis XVI medallion chairs, the gilt picture frames topped with fontanges bows and the Belle Epoque chandeliers all seem to declare that time has stopped and it would be best to pay attention. Unfurled fans rustle like premature applause, and the air is scented with perfume and Gauloises and anticipation. Everywhere, skins are atingle.

As Margaux glides along she hears gasps, sees heads lean forward and hands twitch as if they wish to skim the *en huit* curves of her suit. She completes her circuit and passes through the gray satin curtain, behind which stands Christian Dior—the man who stitches seams with magic, whose gowns transcend fashion. Eighty years hence, should one be asked to name a couturier, his will be the first name spoken. But that is all still to come.

Christian gifts Margaux a smile. The show continues. Nobody needs to declare that it is spectacular; it is a fact known without words.

The finale is, naturally, a wedding gown. Margaux stands perfectly still while she is dressed. Then she steps back into the salon and the collective intake of breath is so violent it almost depletes the room of oxygen. For Margaux appears to be wearing a full-blown white rose plucked at its moment of true perfection. Or at least that is the illusion she purveys in her voluminous skirt: a lavishness—no, a prodigality—of silk billowing like optimism around her before funneling in at the waist to a span of just twenty inches—a requirement for any Christian Dior model.

Of course, none of the spectators know that Margaux only possesses such a waist because of years of deprivation; that it is a legacy of a time when such a gown would have been as shocking as the sun appearing in the midnight sky. But it does no one any good to recall what can never be undone, so Margaux concentrates on her feet, walking slowly enough for the crowd to apprehend that what they are seeing

is extraordinary, but also fast enough that she is gone too soon, leaving yearning cast behind her like a shadow.

There is hardly enough space amongst all the people for the gown's stupendous skirt and it brushes against one of the tall, white columned ashtrays. Nobody except Margaux notices the ash spill to the floor. Nobody notices either that it is minus fourteen degrees outside and that Paris has been shivering through a winter of postwar electricity rations and coal shortages. Christian's dress has the power of erasure.

As she exits the salon, the applause is so thunderous it could rouse the dead. But Margaux knows nothing will ever rouse her dead.

The mannequins return to the salon and stand in a line. Christian—or Tian as he is known to Margaux and a few select others—bows and accepts his congratulations.

He singles out Margaux, still wearing the wedding dress despite the fact that she will never be a bride, raises her hand to his lips and kisses it. "*Magnifique*," he says.

Christian's sister, Catherine Dior, kisses Margaux's cheeks. "You were *magnifique, chérie*."

Carmel Snow from American *Harper's Bazaar* steps forward. Her fingertips whisper rapturously against the silk of Margaux's skirt. "Dear Christian," she says, "your dresses have such a new look."

And Margaux knows, as if she were suddenly able to divine the future, that this is how Christian's collection will be spoken of from now on. A New Look, for a new world. A world in which death and loss and heartbreak will hereafter become muted emotions rather than a rawness tearing always at one's skin. They will not be a way of life, as they have been throughout these last years of war. The New Look will be the perfect amnesiac for a generation that has survived the war and does not wish to recall anything of it.

Margaux is the only one who remembers. Skye and Liberty and Nicholas and O'Farrell are all gone now, in different ways. She will

never say their names again, not to anyone. Nobody wishes to hear the names of the victims. Just as nobody wishes to understand that Margaux's waist is tiny because she is a victim too.

Catherine slips her arm into Margaux's. "Here, *chérie*. Let us raise a glass of champagne to . . ." She hesitates. "The future?"

That word will always have a question mark after it. So Margaux does not drink to the future. Instead she lifts her glass to all of them—herself, Catherine, Skye, Liberty, Nicholas and O'Farrell. As she does so, she feels the spirits crowding around her, pleading with her, as they do every night in her dreams. But just as there was nothing she could do the last time she saw each of them, there is nothing she can do for them now. Except drink champagne, smile and step forward with her New Look into this terrible new world that she cannot comprehend.

PART ONE

skye

... in a solitary life, there are rare moments when another soul dips near yours, as stars once a year brush the earth. Such a constellation was he to me.

—Madeline Miller, *Circe*

One

CORNWALL, AUGUST 1928

I can see your underwear.”

Skye Penrose knew that the ordinary response of a ten-year-old girl to such a statement would be to stop cartwheeling along Porthleven pier like a gamboling star and restore her skirt to its proper position. Instead she paused to change direction, then turned two perfect cartwheels toward the boy who’d spoken. In the rush of her upward trajectory, she lunged at him and gave his trousers a swift tug, dislodging them from his waist and popping at least one button in the process.

“Now I can see yours,” she said, giggling. She’d meant to run away immediately to escape his likely anger, but his face was so astonished—eyes wide, his mouth a well-rounded “O,” just the right size for throwing in a toffee if only she had one—that she grinned and said, “I’m Skye.”

He reinstated his trousers, stuttering, “I’m Nicholas Crawford. Pleased to meet you.” He spoke oddly: his words sharp-angled rather than round, emphasis falling on different vowels so that the familiar became strange.

“I thought it only fair, if we’re going to be friends, that neither of us should know more about the other,” Skye said. “So I had to see your underwear too.”

Nicholas Crawford nodded as if that made perfect sense. He was

taller than Skye, with near-black hair and striking blue-gray eyes, like the sea on an uncertain day. His clothes were clean and pressed, not grubby with play like Skye's.

"Friends," he repeated.

"As long as you can keep my secrets."

Curiosity shimmered aquamarine in his eyes. "What sort of secrets are they?"

"The best ones. Come on, I'll show you."

She grabbed his hand and took off. He didn't hesitate, didn't protest that he ought to tell his mother where he was going, didn't say he couldn't be friends with someone who'd robbed his trousers of a button or two. He ran with her, keeping pace, even though, given his accent and demeanor, he must be from somewhere far from Cornwall— a place where, most likely, one didn't often run free. Together, they turned right in front of the town hall and raced along the sand until an apparently impenetrable rock wall blocked the way.

"Through here," Skye said, showing him a gap just big enough to crawl through.

On the other side of the wall, his mouth opened again, and she knew he was wonderstruck, just as she'd hoped he would be.

"You're the first person I've brought here," she said.

"Why me?"

She considered how to say it: *I've never met anyone so wide-eyed*. It wouldn't sound right. "I thought you'd like it," she said.

They both turned full circle to take in the white-laced sea hurling itself against the cliff face to the left of them, the curve of the bay where the waves simmered in the dropped wind, the cave behind them, which was craggy and dark and promised feats of great derring-do.

"It's all mine," Skye said proudly. "See that house up there." She pointed to the clifftop, where a weather-thrashed cottage sank its toes into the ground, holding on, just. "That's where I live with my mother.

And my sister. The only way you can get to this cove is through the gap in the rock wall or the path that leads down from the house. So it's mine. And now yours too."

Nicholas furrowed his brow. His hand moved to his pocket and he pulled out a watch. "If you're going to share your cove with me, then I'll share this with you." He handed it to her. "It was my father's. And his father's too."

Skye ran a finger over the engraved gold of the case before opening the cover. Inside, she found dignified Roman numerals and a strangely misshapen half-moon.

"Where's your father?" she asked.

"Up there." Nicholas pointed to the sky.

"You don't need to share this." She passed the pocket watch back to him, understanding it was the most important thing he possessed.

"I want to. You can have it one day every week."

His tone was firm. This well-dressed boy who didn't seem to have ever set foot on a Cornish beach had strength of will. And he could run. And he liked her cove.

"That means you'll have to come back tomorrow to get it," she said.

He nodded.

"Do you want to see inside the cave?"

He nodded again.

* * *

Skye stood on the cliff top, Nicholas's pocket watch tucked safely inside a handkerchief, and watched her new friend squeeze through the gap in the rocks and trudge along the sand below. Just before he turned toward town, he looked back and waved. Skye performed a rapid series of cartwheels that she thought might make him smile. Then she went in to dinner.

Her sister, Liberty, who was younger than Skye by one year, pounced on her the moment she entered the cottage.

“Where were you?” Liberty whined.

“At the beach,” Skye said.

Liberty screwed up her face. “You’re always at the beach.”

“Then you could easily have found me.”

“I’m hungry.”

Before she could remind her sister that the kitchen, not Skye, was the source of food, she saw, over Liberty’s shoulder, the Snakes and Ladders board set out on the table. Gold and green snakes wriggled toward illustrations of naughty children and Skye realized, her stomach twisting like the snakes, that she should be the subject of one of those drawings. She’d promised Liberty a game of Snakes and Ladders that afternoon. But she’d forgotten about it in the thrill of finding someone who loved the cove as much as she did—unlike her sister.

Liberty followed Skye’s eyes to the game. She flounced over and thrust it off the table. The dice clattered to the floor, momentarily obscuring the gentle hum of voices from the room next door where their mother was busy with one of her clients.

“I’ll make you a cup of tea,” Skye said. “And then we can play.”

Liberty didn’t reply and Skye thought she might march upstairs and sulk in her room as she was wont to do. But then she nodded and peace was momentarily restored. They sipped their tea as they played and Skye said nothing when Liberty, in order to ascend a ladder, miscounted the number of squares she was supposed to move. She said nothing either when Liberty protested that Skye had miscounted and needed to slide down a snake. Liberty won.

The following morning, Skye was up at dawn and in her swimsuit, waiting impatiently for Nicholas, his pocket watch held tight and safe in her hand. She sat in the window seat in the parlor, staring at her beloved ocean, willing him to ignore propriety and come now, although it was too early even for breakfast. When Liberty appeared downstairs an hour later, she scowled at Skye's swimsuit and let fly with a spiteful foot, which Skye—who'd had plenty of practice—dodged. Then there was a knock at the door and Skye beamed. He too must prefer her cove to breakfast.

"See who it is, darling," her mother called from the kitchen where she was standing at the chipped blue Royal Windsor stove, stirring a pot of porridge. "I'm not expecting anyone until ten."

Skye was already sprinting down the hallway and throwing open the door. Nicholas stood there, alongside a woman with a possessive hand clamped on his shoulder. Skye's smile faltered.

"Is this the girl?" the woman asked.

"This is Skye," Nicholas replied.

"I would like to see your mother," the woman told Skye.

"Come in," Skye said politely. As she held the door wide, the cottage's colored glass oil lamps—they were too far out of town for electricity—flickered with the ill wind the woman had brought with her.

In the kitchen, which smelled as always of woodsmoke, French cigarettes and coffee, Vanessa Penrose turned to greet the visitors. She was resplendent in her long and gloriously ruffled black silk embroidered nightgown, which had draped sleeves and a low neckline. The woman beside Nicholas stared as if Skye's mother were cartwheeling through the house with her knickers showing.

"Have you come for breakfast?" Vanessa said, which made the woman wrench her eyes away from the nightgown. "You must be Nicholas," Vanessa continued. "Skye told me all about you. I'm Vanessa, or Mrs. Penrose, whichever you prefer. Do you like porridge?"

Nicholas smiled at last. "I do."

"He does not," said the woman.

"I do and I'm hungry," Nicholas said with the same quiet determination Skye had heard in his voice when he'd said at the door, *This is Skye*.

"Skye has hollow legs," Vanessa said to Nicholas, "which means she's unable to stand up until she's eaten. You'll simply have to join us."

Skye giggled and Nicholas sat down.

"I am Finella Crawford and your daughter owes my nephew an apology." Nicholas's aunt had a voice like a fish hook: sharp and designed to hurt. It was accented like Nicholas's, but from her mouth it sounded abrasive rather than interesting.

"She ruined a perfectly good pair of trousers and stole a very valuable item," his aunt continued.

Skye reached under the table and pressed Nicholas's pocket watch into his hand, hoping it would help.

"Thanks," he whispered.

Vanessa took an orange from the bowl, cut it in half and juiced it. She poured the juice into a glass and passed it to Nicholas. "Skye told me about the trousers. I can mend the buttons. But Skye doesn't steal."

"You're wrong. She stole my nephew's pocket watch, left to him by his dear father, my brother." Nicholas's aunt dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief but Skye rather thought she was enjoying her performance.

"I have the watch," Nicholas said, holding it up.

"Mystery solved." Vanessa made quick work of three more oranges before sitting down.

"I'm sorry for making a button fall off your trousers," Skye said to Nicholas, using her best manners.

"Buttons and Skye go together like the sea air and smooth hair," her mother said, glancing at Finella's wind-ruffled coiffure.

Nicholas's aunt changed direction. "I was told that you divine the future."

"I do," Vanessa replied.

"My sister-in-law would like a reading." The words squeezed from Finella's mouth as if the idea were as repugnant as animal droppings. "She has suffered a great loss—the death of her husband, Nicholas's father. I've brought her from New York to the country of her birth under the instructions of my doctor; she requires sea air and repose. Given what she's suffered, I'm prepared to allow her to indulge this whim."

Skye's mother poured honey onto Nicholas's porridge. Liberty's eyes widened at the quantity and she opened her mouth to protest, but Skye shook her head furiously at her sister. That honey offered a solidarity that could not be spoken of, yet. Like Nicholas, Skye and Liberty did not have a father.

"I will take your sister-in-law on for readings provided you let Nicholas continue to play with Skye," Vanessa said. "I think they'll be good for one another."

Nicholas's aunt acquiesced with a nod, then turned to leave, forgetting her nephew, but Skye solved that problem by calling out, "Nicholas will be home in time for dinner."

* * *

Over the next month, Skye introduced Nicholas, who was a year older than her—eleven, rather than ten—and who came from a faraway city of skyscrapers, to her world. The world of fossicking in rock pools for hermit crabs and hairy crabs and seeing whose would scuttle away the fastest once put down on the sand. The world of scraping mussels and limpets from rocks, working alongside the red-billed oystercatchers. Of searching for cowrie shells, the fairy-sized, peach-colored slivers

that were so easy to miss and therefore all the more precious, to add to Skye's collection.

Initially, Liberty joined them, trailing behind as they skidded down the path to the cove, bargaining with Skye. "I promise I won't kick you if you stay home and play with me."

"Come and play out here instead," Skye said, knowing she could usually avoid her sister's feet anyway and that summer wasn't a time to sit inside.

But rock pools and shells weren't to Liberty's taste. She sat on the sand, back turned toward her sister, glaring at Nicholas when he tried to give her the biggest and fastest crab to race. Eventually, Skye forgot that her sister was there and, hours later, realized Liberty had gone back up to the house to talk to her collection of dolls, who all preferred tea parties to limpets.

One morning, Liberty was particularly annoying on the way down to the beach. "Don't leave me alone," she whined, over and over.

"If you come with us, you won't be alone," Skye reasoned.

So Liberty did, but once on the sand, she shoved a crab down the back of Skye's bathing suit. It nipped Skye in fright.

"You're a beast!" Skye shouted at her sister.

Liberty threw a fistful of sand in Skye's face and burst into tears.

Skye watched Liberty run home. The sand scratched her eyes in the same way the words she'd yelled at her sister scraped her conscience. She would play two games of Snakes and Ladders with Liberty that night, she promised herself.

"Let's go in the cave," she said to Nicholas.

He nodded and followed her in.

They lay on their backs in the darkest, deepest part, where nothing could be seen. They were silent for only a moment before they began to tell stories that couldn't be told out in the light. Nicholas's story was about his father, who had died from "an excess of emotion," whatever

that meant. His mother had then suffered an excess of emotion of a different kind, but hers had sent her first to bed and then back to England—where she had lived before her marriage—rather than up into the sky to join her husband.

“So my aunt looks after me now. My mother doesn’t go anywhere, except to see your mother for readings,” Nicholas finished, and Skye heard in his voice that he hated it: the loss of his father, the vanishing of his mother, and being subject to the custody of his aunt.

The Penroses would care for him, she vowed. But first she needed to tell him who the Penroses were.

“None of the children in town will play with me. Or with Liberty,” she said. “It’s because my mother tells fortunes.” A gust of wind screeched into the cave, forcing more of the truth from Skye’s mouth. “And because Liberty and I don’t have a father. Not in the way that you don’t have a father. We’ve *never* had one. My mother has never been married. But you’re meant to be married if you have a baby.”

All her life Skye had been told by sneering adults and jeering children that it was a sin to lose one’s father in the way that hers and Liberty’s had become lost. To die was heroic; to be merely absent was ungodly.

Nicholas said, “I like that your mother tells fortunes. I like your mother. And you’re my friend.”

* * *

Not long after, Skye was able to show Nicholas the best thing of all. Early one morning, Vanessa drove them to a grassy paddock that served as an airfield and pointed to a de Havilland Gipsy Moth.

“It’s a beautiful day for flying,” she said.

“Flying,” Nicholas repeated, eyes fixed to the canvas biplane before them.

“You can go first,” Skye told him.

“Don’t leave me here by myself,” Liberty sulked but Skye had no intention of sitting in the car with a sister who hated flying. Instead she ran beside the Moth as it bounced and then leapt into the sky. Nicholas, helmeted and scarfed and jacketed to withstand the chill, waved down at her from the front seat of the open cockpit, and her mother sat at the controls behind.

Then it was Skye’s turn. Once the Moth ascended, Skye took over; her mother had started teaching her to fly six months ago. Vanessa’s voice gave directions through the Gosport tube that connected front passenger to back, although Skye hardly needed them any more.

She handled the turn, and then did what she’d seen her mother do hundreds of times before: she flew into the wind, giving the Moth full throttle, then climbed vertically until the plane inclined onto its back and she felt the stomach-roiling thrill of looping the loop.

She heard Vanessa say in a bemused voice, “Let me know if you get into trouble.” But the Moth anticipated Skye’s every move. At the right moment, she eased off the throttle and adjusted the ailerons to keep herself vertical. The plane arced downwards like a gentle dove to complete a perfect circle.

Skye wanted to cartwheel along the wing, looping her own loop, but she’d pushed against her mother’s equilibrium enough already. She let Vanessa take the rear controls to land.

As soon as the plane had come to a halt, her mother lifted her out, saying, “I don’t know whether to shout at you or to laugh.”

“I prefer laughing,” Skye said. Then she called to Nicholas, “Did you see me?”

“That was you?” he said admiringly.

“That was most definitely my daughter,” Vanessa said. “Trying to show me she’s more than ready to handle a take-off and a landing. Perhaps next year we’ll have you looping the loop too, Nicholas.”

Nicholas placed both hands on the canvas wing of the plane. “Do you really think I could do that?” he asked.

“I’ll teach you,” said Skye’s mother. “I think you have the right temperament for flying—level-headedness is actually more important than daring, no matter what Skye thinks. I’m sure you could teach her a thing or two.”

“I don’t think anybody could teach Skye anything,” Nicholas said, whereupon Vanessa laughed, ruffled his hair and said, “Unfortunately I think you might be right.”

* * *

All too soon summer was over and school interfered with their days at the beach and their flying lessons, but even school was tolerable now that Skye had Nicholas as her friend. That fact was confirmed at the end of the very first day when they were walking out of the school gates together and Skye heard a gaggle of children hiss their usual taunts: “Witch’s daughter! She-devil!”

Skye drew her sister closer as the biggest boy, the butcher’s son, knowing that Liberty was the weaker mark, picked up a rock and flung it at her. Skye deflected it with her arm, refusing to wince at the sting and the blood. Liberty started to cry.

Skye was unsurprised when Nicholas turned away from them and toward the taunters. She’d expected that once he saw how despised she was, he would make other friends; those whose lives weren’t besmirched by illegitimacy and sorcery.

Nicholas stood in front of the butcher’s son and said, politely, “Legend has it that every time you say the word ‘she-devil’ in the presence of one, your teeth will turn gray and then fall out.”

The butcher’s son put his hand up to his mouth to cover the gap of a missing tooth on one side and a graying tooth on the other.

After that, it was accepted that Skye and Nicholas were inseparable friends. And because Nicholas was the smartest kid at school, nobody wanted to risk disbelieving what he'd said.

In the afternoons, they would walk together to Skye's house, where Nicholas would do more schoolwork in the kitchen. The first time, Skye had questioned him about it, telling him she never even bothered to look over her spelling words.

"But don't you want to escape?" he'd asked, then shook his head. "You don't need to. But I need to know I can go anywhere I want to when I'm old enough."

Escape. Skye had dropped into a chair, understanding hitting her forcefully as she realized how much he hated being trapped with an aunt who spared him no love, waiting for his mother to recover. After that, she not only sat beside him and did her spelling words but tackled some mathematics too.

In that way, the year passed quickly by and summer came again. Days were once more spent at the cove, or the airfield with both Skye and Nicholas taking lessons from Vanessa, or exploring the downs and moors behind the house. Occasionally, Skye's mother held weekend house parties and fabulous people descended upon Porthleven, some staying at the house, others cramming into any available room in town. Skye didn't know most of the people, but that didn't matter. The parties were a spectacle, like a sudden summer storm: electric, skin-tingling, alive.

Vanessa would talk Nicholas's aunt into letting him stay the weekend and Skye, Nicholas and Liberty would camp in the garden, having surrendered their rooms to the guests. They'd bathe and dress in the best clothes they owned, and Skye would actually brush her tangled knot of dark brown hair. Then she and Nicholas would slip into the window seat from where they could see everything.

Liberty, who adored the parties, would circle the room, studying

the women's clothes, eavesdropping on conversations, staring at people with pleading eyes until they beckoned her over. She would beam and chat—and nobody would ever guess that she was disposed to slipping crabs down people's backs—until the adults bored of her and returned to their grown-up circles. After those parties, Skye would hear her sister reenacting the evening with her dolls; the dark-haired doll called Liberty would always be given the starring role at the center of everyone's devoted attention.

At one such party, a year after Skye first met Nicholas, Vanessa Penrose entered the room later than most of her guests, looking like someone Skye had never met: a woman with curled and shining near-black hair, and the reddest of red lips. She wore her "French dress," as she called it: a cream silk bodice with a deep V-neckline, and a skirt made entirely of ostrich feathers dyed in various shades of cream and gold. The exposed skin of her décolletage was supposed to be partially concealed with a matching scarf but Vanessa never bothered with the scarf. The combined effect of her lustrous hair, glossy lips and the unexpected gold feathers was that Vanessa Penrose spent the whole night dancing.

There was one man who came to every party and who was always allocated more than his fair share of dances with Skye's mother. Skye watched Vanessa smile at him—a smile unlike that which she bestowed upon her daughters or any of her other guests. They danced beautifully, like movie stars, and even Liberty sat quietly, entranced by their magnificent mother.

The man's lips whispered against Vanessa's ear. Skye didn't want to watch any more. Liberty had leaned her head against the wall and her eyelids drooped so Skye tucked a blanket over her legs. Then she led Nicholas outside, sighing.

"I wish I could dance like that," she said.

"I can show you."

"You can dance?"

He shrugged. "My parents made me learn. They said all gentlemen danced."

Skye laughed. "If you're a gentleman, you'll need a lady to dance with. We both know that, according to the town of Porthleven, the Penrose women aren't ladies."

"I think you are."

He bowed to her with a flourish and a grin, which made her feel less awkward. He didn't tease her for her clumsiness but moved them both through the flawless full-moon night, showing her what to do. In accompaniment, silver ribbons of light waltzed across the sea below them.

"We'll have to do this again when we're older," Skye said, once she had the basics under control. "The clifftop deserves a more splendid dress." She indicated her white dress, which was simple and clean but lacked the panache of gold ostrich feathers.

"What if we're not friends by then?" Nicholas asked, stopping suddenly.

Skye just missed squashing his foot. "Why wouldn't we be?" She stood beside him, both of them facing out to the ocean.

"My aunt says that we'll go back to New York soon. I have to go to school there, the same school my father went to. We'll leave as soon as my mother's better."

"Will she get better?" Skye asked. She only saw Nicholas's mother when she came to the house for Vanessa's prophecies and she always seemed wraith-like; a creature who might simply slip into the sparkling waves and disappear.

"I don't know," Nicholas said.

It was the first time Skye had ever seen him hesitate. She took his hand and squeezed it. "You'll stay here forever," she said. After all, she had a mother who told the future so she could claim some authority on this.

"I hope so."

TWO

The following weekend they explored the moors rather than going down to the cove as the wind had blown up into a tempest, threatening to pick up slightly built Skye and carry her away. The moors stretched on uninterrupted for almost half a mile behind Skye's house and she and Nicholas tramped for longer than they normally would, discovering a broken wall at the far boundary of Vanessa Penrose's land.

Skye scaled the wall and stood atop it, reciting lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play they'd studied at school. As she was declaiming Hermia's angst at Lysander's apparent betrayal—*O me! you juggler! you canker-blossom! / You thief of love! What, have you come by night / And stolen my love's heart from him?*—and reveling in the sound of the canker-blossom insult, resolving to use it with Liberty the next time they argued, she fell off the wall and over the other side.

Luckily she landed in a thicket of overgrown bushes but was still badly winded.

Nicholas's face appeared at the top of the wall and he started laughing. "That's the first time I've ever seen you speechless."

She managed a smile and rasped, "Are you coming over?"

He lowered himself down to land beside her.

As Skye sat up, she realized that before them stood a lost garden; a place that time and overgrowth had hidden from the world. If there

was a house to which the garden belonged, it was out of sight, which meant there was no chance of them being discovered.

A statue of a giant-sized woman lay on the ground in front of them, but she hadn't fallen there; she'd been designed in repose, one hand resting beside her sleeping face. Moss and leaves clothed her body, and her hair was a tangle of ferns. She was possibly the most beautiful thing Skye had ever seen.

"She looks like you when you sleep," Nicholas said unexpectedly.

Skye shook her head. Nicholas had seen her asleep when they shared the tent with Liberty on the night of the party but the very inelegant Skye was nothing like this bewitching stone maid lost forever in a lovely dream.

Then her attention was caught by something beyond the statue: a lake, almost oceanic in size, over which stretched a rope bridge. The water was sheltered by a drapery of branches that looked to be fishing for gold.

Skye raced over and placed her foot onto the bridge. The rope creaked; it obviously hadn't been used for some time. "What do you think is at the other end?" she asked, avoiding the obvious question: *Is it safe?*

"The other side of the sky," Nicholas answered, and Skye smiled.

They'd found a hidden world atop their own; a world without sick mothers and kicking sisters and whispering townsfolk and a school in New York, beckoning.

They were halfway across the bridge when it happened.

Skye heard a tearing sound and whipped around to see the rope beneath Nicholas's feet cleave apart. He plunged down, one hand grasping the rope as he fell. Skye did the same as the entire floor of the bridge disintegrated.

Luckily the sides of the bridge remained intact, giving them something to cling onto. Their legs were in the water, their torsos and heads above it.

“We’ll have to jump in,” Skye said prosaically, as if her heart weren’t thudding faster than the Moth’s propeller at take-off. “We’ll just pretend it’s the sea, rather than slime.” She cast her eyes over the thick layer of green muck that hid who knew what horrors beneath.

Nicholas’s face was pale, his knuckles whiter than bone. And then he said it. “I can’t swim.”

Her insides sank into the water. “Of course you can. I’ve seen you.”

Only then did she realize that no, she hadn’t ever seen Nicholas swim. Even though they spent so much time at the cove, he was always engrossed in the rock pools when she dived out into the waves. She’d seen him in the water up to his knees, but never any further than that.

“I’m going to fall in,” he said.

Skye heard fear in his voice for the first time ever. So she did the only thing possible. She let go, dropping into the water, keeping her mouth firmly closed.

“You can go hand over hand along the side ropes until you can stand,” she said firmly, as if she were certain it would work. “It’ll hurt and you’ll get blisters, but it’s the only way. I’ll swim beside you.”

She didn’t mention the unmistakable dangers.

Nicholas began to move as if he were swinging himself across the climbing frame in the school playground. He was good at that, so he’d be good at this too, Skye reasoned. She swam beside him just as she’d promised, her eyes fastened to his, brown locked with blue, wanting him to know that he could do it. His gaze assured her that he believed her.

They were still a way from the shore when he began to wince; the rope was tearing away the skin on his palms. Skye stretched down with one leg but couldn’t feel the bottom.

“Not much further,” she said, and he kept going, hand over hand, not stopping to catch his breath even though he must have been exhausted and in agony.

Of all the people Skye knew, Nicholas was the one who could do this. Liberty wouldn't; and nobody from school had the stomach for it. Perhaps not even Skye herself. But Nicholas woke up each day in a house without love and, despite that, was the best friend Skye had ever had. If he could endure that kind of pain, he might just make it to shallow water before he reached his limits.

Soon Skye realized that the sandy bottom wasn't far from her feet. "You can let go now," she said with relief. "Then bounce along like you're on a pogo stick. It'll keep your mouth above water."

He dropped the instant she spoke. Being taller than her, he only had to bounce a few times before he could walk. Soon they were out of the lake, where they fell panting onto the bank.

"I don't know why I'm out of breath," Skye said at last, turning her head to look at Nicholas. "How are your hands?" He held them up and she grimaced. "We're going to be in so much trouble."

But Nicholas just smiled. "At least now I can ask you the thing I've been wanting to ask since last summer. Can you teach me to swim?"

"Lessons start tomorrow," Skye said decisively. "Whoever heard of a person who can dance but not swim?"

"In New York one dances," he said, putting on a posh voice so she relaxed into a smile. "In Cornwall, we swim. I'm glad I'm in Cornwall."

"Me too," she said. Then, "Why didn't you tell me?"

He inspected the chafing on his palms. "I thought you'd think I was an idiot."

"An idiot would have been so scared they'd have fallen in and drowned. I never thought you'd do that."

His mouth turned up and Skye felt her heart glow in the sunshine of his rare and exceptional smile.

She stood up. "We'd better get my mum to dress your hands. We'll swim tomorrow."

Fortunately, Vanessa Penrose could be relied upon not to tell her daughter off as long as she was honest. All she said was, “You can’t teach Nicholas to swim, Skye. I’ll take him to the beach each morning for half an hour. You can stay at the house and mind your sister. I’ll also tell Nicholas’s aunt that he scraped his hands while chivalrously chopping logs for me, rather than by rescuing himself from a lake in a place where you probably shouldn’t have been. I know it’s futile asking you both not to go back there, but I will ask you not to return until I’m satisfied Nicholas can swim well enough to tackle the lake, should he chance to find himself in it again.”

They spent the rest of that afternoon inside, resting Nicholas’s hands, listening through the wall to Vanessa with her clients.

The last client of the day was Nicholas’s mother and, when she arrived with his aunt, Nicholas jumped up. “Let’s go for a walk,” he said.

“Don’t you want to know your mother’s future?” Skye asked.

He shook his head.

Skye frowned. If they stayed to listen, then all might be revealed about his mother’s recovery. Skye hoped, on the one hand, that she would never recover because then Nicholas wouldn’t go to New York. On the other hand, she hoped Mrs. Crawford would recover this very day because his mother was the only thing Nicholas never talked about. Skye knew, in her own childish way, that behind that reticence lay a deep hurt.

So she went for a walk with him down to the cove until his aunt appeared at the top of the cliff, hands on her hips, glaring at him and his bandaged hands and saying, “I did not agree to being your nurse.”

Skye watched Nicholas leave with the two women, his mother walking alongside but saying nothing, not defending her son from his aunt’s tongue, just smiling beatifically as if she’d been blessed.

“Will you tell me my future? And Nicholas his?” Skye asked her mother when she returned to the house.

Vanessa shivered. “Not ever, Skye. So you needn’t ask me again.”

“But why?”

“I can’t tell you anything you don’t already have inside you. The future isn’t a promise yet to be kept. It’s an act waiting to begin. Perhaps it’s already begun.”

Skye shivered too. It had never before frightened her, this gift her mother supposedly had for looking into what hadn’t yet happened and placing it before those who asked, like a fingernail-sized cowrie shell, its pearly lips whispering its secrets.

* * *

Another year passed. Skye turned fourteen and began to bleed every month. Her legs lengthened, her chest and hips curved, and the only places she felt at home were in the sea, swimming, or in the sky, flying.

She swam with Nicholas all the time now. And she began to take the Moth up on her own. Soon Nicholas did too. More parties were held, and Skye’s mother continued to dance with the man who whispered in her ear.

Liberty’s kicks became more accurate and bruising until she began to spend less time with Skye and Nicholas, rarely asking Skye not to leave her alone any more. She only tagged along when they visited the lost garden. Even there, she mostly left them to themselves, preferring to sit and stare at the stone maid, entranced, wearing the same dreamy look in her eyes as when she watched Vanessa dance.

Once, Skye asked her what she was thinking. Liberty shrugged and said, “Life,” as if it were obvious.

Rather than risk stirring Liberty’s temper by saying what she thought—*life’s in the garden or in the cove, not in a statue*—Skye shrugged too and joined Nicholas by the lake.

By now, Nicholas was fifteen and had been Skye's friend for four years but she felt as if she'd known him forever. She couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been the most fundamental thing in her life; her ocean and sky.

"Whenever I think of you, I think of the color blue," he said to her in a peculiar voice as they walked back to her house after the last day of school, ready for another long summer. "Water and air."

She smiled, accepting it as a compliment of the best kind. Then she saw his face and she stopped still.

"I'm going to New York tomorrow," he said miserably. "My aunt told me at breakfast. It's only for six weeks though. I have to sit a test for school."

Six weeks. It might as well be a year. All the things she'd imagined they'd do together over summer vanished, like gulls taking off for a long migration.

Skye kicked at the ground, scraping the black from her shoe. The sun vanished, making manifest the dark shadow already cast by tomorrow.

"Come back," she said, suddenly afraid.

"I promise," he told her.

Skye watched him go, like she had the day she'd met him, and, just like that day, he turned back to wave before he moved out of sight. Even though she was far too old for any such thing, Skye flipped into a cartwheel as if to say: this doesn't change anything.

She tried to fly every day of the next month; she'd never been in a plane with Nicholas, so she didn't feel his absence so acutely in the sky. But as her mother couldn't take her to the airfield every day, she bought Skye a bicycle, and Skye cycled there instead. Even though she could fly almost as well as her mother, neither of them were sure what the other pilots would say if they found out that Vanessa had let her fly alone at age fourteen, although there were no rules to prevent her.

So Skye, as tall as her mother now, wore Vanessa's helmet and goggles and pretended to be her; and Vanessa, as always, trusted Skye to stay within her limits.

But it was a wet and foggy summer, as if the sky were crying for the temporarily severed friendship, and Skye couldn't fly when visibility was poor. She spent many a day curled up on the window seat, scowling at the weather.

Liberty wanted Skye to sit with her on the floor, ear pressed to the wall, and eavesdrop on the futures of Vanessa's clients. Skye refused. What right did anyone else have to a future when all Skye had was this rainy, hazy present? Liberty, predictably, tried to pinch her sister in retaliation but then changed tactics and gazed unblinking at Skye, which was much more irritating than physical violence.

"Liberty, can you fill the wood basket," Vanessa said, after catching her in the act.

"Why do I have to do it?" Liberty complained.

"Skye filled it yesterday."

Liberty dispatched, Vanessa made Skye a cup of sweet, milky tea.

"Nicholas's father was a very wealthy man," she said as she measured tea leaves into the pot. "Nicholas will inherit his business when he is of age, and I think he'll soon be groomed to take it over."

"What?" Skye said, attention absolutely caught.

"His mother's condition has, at last, been declared untreatable and his aunt feels it's time to focus on Nicholas. She wants him to be properly schooled, and to reestablish herself in New York. With Nicholas's mother so ill, his aunt becomes, in effect, his mother. He must do as she says."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Her mother smiled. "I was trying to put off the future. But of course it's the destiny Nicholas has always had in him. He's fifteen now. An age when birthright and tradition matter."

Skye felt her eyes tear up. At the same moment, Liberty returned with the wood. She gaped at Skye, dropped the basket on the floor and said, "I won't stare at you again. I promise."

Skye swiped her eyes. "I'm not crying because of you."

Liberty scuttled over and sat beside her in the window seat, and Skye felt a wave of affection for her sister who, despite having tempests to rival those of a Cornish winter, could occasionally show such kindness too.

"He said he'd come back," Skye told her mother.

"I don't know that he will, Skye."

"Nicholas *never* lies."

Her mother sat at the table then, an unrecognizable expression altering the familiar features of her face.

Skye clutched Liberty's hand. Liberty's fingers closed over hers.

Their mother's mouth twitched strangely when she saw their joined hands. "I thought to send you to France, to stay with your aunt for six months or so," she said suddenly. "You could go to school there. Learn all the things I'm not very good at teaching, but which she excels at." Vanessa leaned over and fingered Skye's unkempt hair. "I've never cared about things like hairdos and wealthy families, but now, looking at your face, I think that perhaps I do."

"I don't want to go to France," Skye said.

Liberty cuddled in closer.

They'd only met their "aunt" twice before, when they'd been to France as children. But as Vanessa had never actually married Skye and Liberty's father, this woman in France wasn't really bound to them. Skye shook her head.

"And," Vanessa continued, "I'm tired of seeing everyone's future and doing nothing about my own—one of the few futures, like yours, I will never foretell. I'd like to do what Amy Johnson did and fly to Australia. Just take off and go. I want to see if I have anything more to me. Do you understand?"

“I’ll go with you,” Skye said.

“I want you to look after Liberty for me. If you stay here in Cornwall without Nicholas, you’ll only miss him all the more.”

“But why fly to Australia?” Skye demanded.

“I need to know that I can. I once knew Amy. I was a better flyer than her. But she’s just claimed a record to Moscow, and to Cape Town. What have I claimed?”

Skye felt it then: pain of a kind she’d never known as she understood that her mother’s life in Cornwall, with its occasional parties and two daughters, had its own shadow—a restlessness, a void, an unfilled space.

“But . . .” Skye couldn’t articulate what she wanted to say. “I thought it would be like this forever,” she managed eventually.

“You can’t look for cowrie shells forever, Skye.”

* * *

Six weeks after Nicholas had left, Skye was surprised one morning to see a man picking his way down the path to her cove. Only when the man reached the sand did Skye realize it was Nicholas.

How had six weeks wreaked such change? He was taller, broader, and his face had hardened, all traces of the boy vanished. She stood still, the water taunting her ankles, and folded her arms across her chest.

“Let’s sit in the cave,” she said when he was close enough to hear her.

He nodded and followed her to the cave, where she lay on her back in the darkness and he did the same beside her.

“I start school in New York next week,” he said, his voice deeper now, masculine. “My aunt was going to have someone pack up the house here, but I threw a Liberty-sized tantrum and convinced her to come back for our things.”

“Well, if you copied Liberty, I’m not surprised you won,” Skye said, keeping a smile on her face so it would show in her voice.

The sounds of their shared childhood filled the cave: the ceaseless roll of the ocean toward the sand, the violent unfurling of water, the crash as it spilled. The wind blew in a squall of protest: this couldn’t be happening. Salt water dripped silently over Skye’s cheeks, so many tears it was a wonder she didn’t drown in them.

For a time, neither spoke. They lay on their backs, side by side, hands so close she could feel the electricity of his body buzz from his fingers and into hers. She withdrew her hand from the sand and made a circle with her thumb and forefinger, closing one eye so she could focus through the makeshift ring.

“When I did that cartwheel on the pier in front of you it was just one tiny moment. But now . . .” She faltered, then flung her arms apart, as wide as they could go. “This moment is too big. It’s so big that I can’t see all of it and I don’t want to feel any of it. It’s too big,” she repeated.

She heard a soft thud, as if a cartwheeling girl had toppled to the sand right beside them. Their heads moved in unison toward the sound, but there was nothing there except a memory.

“I don’t want to go,” Nicholas said quietly.

Skye sat up, leaned over and gave Nicholas a hug that was ferocious and quite possibly painful. His arms closed around her too, and she felt that his cheeks were wet, like hers. Then she scrambled to her feet and ran away, feeling something rip against her chest, imagining that in her tear-blindness she must have scraped against one of the walls of the cave.

She ran fast, feet beating against the sand, up to the house and then over the moor beyond. Finally, at the top of the hill, she stopped and sank to the ground. From up here she could see everything, but she couldn’t see Nicholas and that was how it would be from now on.

She touched her chest but found no graze from the rocks, yet it still hurt more than anything ever had.

* * *

Aunt Sophie was as vivacious as Vanessa, but more effusive in her affections: hugs and kisses ended her sentences, rather than fullstops. She was the most elegant creature Skye had ever seen, always dressed in Schiaparelli or Poiret. Liberty watched her with delighted eyes and even Skye, sitting in her bedroom at the apartment in Passy—the sixteenth arrondissement near the Bois de Boulogne—couldn't help but try to discipline her hair so it more closely approximated the lustrous upsweep of her aunt's chestnut coiffure. But that was a minor transformation compared to everything else that happened in Paris.

Liberty was the first thing to change. She forgot to kick Skye. She smiled. She woke up in the morning eager to go to school. Rather than staying inside all weekend, Liberty went to visit her new friends and ate ice-cream with them while strolling through the Jardin du Ranelagh. She became a cool, elegant Parisienne, not unlike their Aunt Sophie.

Skye observed this metamorphosis with open-mouthed astonishment.

The second thing to change was Nicholas. Skye wrote to him almost every day. He never replied.

She'd been wrong when she'd thought, atop the cliff on the last day she'd seen him, that her chest couldn't hurt more than it did in that moment. That pain had been a mere twinge. What she felt now, each day when she searched through the mail and found nothing, was a skewering—deep and raw.

Skye was the one who stayed inside now, lonely.

And then one terrible letter arrived, addressed to her. It came

during the All Saints Holiday when their aunt had taken Liberty and Skye on the train to Deauville in the hopes that being near the sea might cheer Skye up.

As soon as Skye stepped onto the beach, the clouds devoured the sun. The air gathered itself into such a furious wind that waves crested like phantoms, driving away the beachgoers until Skye was the only one left there, shivering, her aunt and Liberty urging her to come away.

She didn't know what was wrong, just that something was. The letter waiting for them on the hall stand when they returned confirmed Skye's premonition. Cloud, the kind that blanketed the sky and swallowed planes, had taken Vanessa Penrose. She was never coming back.

Every night thereafter, when Skye closed her eyes, she saw her mother plunging downwards into brutal absence. She crawled into Liberty's bed, where they lay on their backs with their eyes wide open until sleep dragged them away into nightmares. They would wake crying, Skye hiding her tears in order to console her sister.

That all changed the day Skye resumed her flying lessons. Up in the air, she felt her mother all around her, even heard Vanessa's voice whispering through the Gosport tube: *I love you, Skye.*

Skye climbed into her sister's bed that night impatient to tell her what had happened, eager to persuade Liberty to come flying with her so that Liberty could hear it too. Liberty shoved Skye off the mattress and onto the floor.

"What was that for?" Skye demanded, rubbing the spot where her head had cracked against the wood.

"You can't come in here again until you give up flying," Liberty snapped.

"I'm not giving up flying," Skye said emphatically. "Let me show you—"

"Then get out."

Of everything Liberty had ever done to Skye—the kicks and pinches and stares and moans—those words hurt the most. She got up off the floor, stormed out of the room and went to sleep in her own bed.

After that, they returned to spending most of their time apart, Skye at the flying club and Liberty with friends who preferred gossip to airplanes. The year Skye turned eighteen, she told Liberty she was leaving Paris and returning to Cornwall.

Liberty turned into a demon.

“This is our home, Skye,” Liberty screamed, face red, fists clenched.

“This is an apartment in Paris. Not home,” Skye said quietly, trying to keep calm, expecting Liberty would have her tantrum and then settle down.

Instead Liberty flew down the hall, threw open their aunt’s bedroom door and began to bellow at the top of her voice, demanding that Sophie force Skye to stay in Paris, that she fulfill her promise to Vanessa Penrose to look after Skye and Liberty. Liberty raged all night, relentless, hurling accusations and loathing at Skye in equal measure until, soon before dawn, sick to her stomach with fear that she might actually have sent her sister mad, Skye relented and said, I won’t go.

Liberty didn’t say thank you, just returned to her room, fell into bed, and slept.

Skye lay on her own bed and cried until her eyes were so swollen she could no longer see, until the collar of her dress was so damp with tears she could wring her heartache out of it. The one thing she most wanted—to return to the cove in Cornwall—had just been taken from her.

She didn’t get out of bed until the following day. Liberty spoke not a word to her. That night, when Skye returned to her room, her bed was soaking, as if someone had poured a jug of water onto it. She slept on the sofa.

The next day, the tires of Skye's bike were punctured so she couldn't cycle to the airfield. Liberty smiled at her over breakfast.

The following week, the two assignments Skye had completed for university—where she was studying history and languages—went missing before she could submit them and she had to stay up all night redoing them. Liberty invited a friend over and they laughed and talked so loudly in the room next door to Skye's that she could hardly concentrate.

One month later, after Skye had fixed the punctures in her bicycle tires, she found them slashed through with a knife.

"Oh dear. Not again," Liberty said when Skye pointed out the damage.

They had reverted back to their nine-and ten-year-old selves, except the crabs down the backs of bathing suits had become something crueler.

The day Liberty turned eighteen, Skye wrote a note to her aunt and, while Liberty was out, she collected her things in a suitcase, walked to the train station, and left for England.

PART TWO
kat

Three

CORNWALL, JUNE 2012

Kat's rental car bumped along a track that looked as if it had never welcomed a motor vehicle in its life, her destination her grandmother's uninhabited cottage. It sat atop the cliff, proudly unloved, wind, sea spray and gulls its only friends: banished to the very edge of the world. The downs behind concealed any neighboring properties which were, in any case, at least half a mile away.

The track deteriorated further so Kat parked, stepped out and stumbled as the wind grasped her, pushing her back; for a moment she thought she heard it hiss that she shouldn't be there. She rubbed her arms, regretting both her journey and the very Australian summer dress she'd chosen.

She hurried onto the porch, where the boards complained beneath her feet. She inserted the key in the lock and jiggled the door until it gave way. The smell of decades of neglect hurtled toward her, winding her. What had she just unfettered?

Don't be silly, she chided herself, first in her head and then aloud, hoping to make the unsettled history retreat and the present reassert itself.

Kat pressed on into the kitchen, which looked out across a magnificent expanse of wild sea. The window seat in the sitting room beckoned, and she thought she might sit there, despite the dust, and

have a cup of tea. But she discovered that the kettle was the old-fashioned sort that needed to be heated on the stovetop, and the stove was ancient and fueled only by wood. Better to get on with what Margaux, her grandmother, had rather unexpectedly asked of her.

Kat traveled to Europe from Sydney a couple of times a year to meet with fashion conservation colleagues at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and to deliver papers at conferences and symposiums—just as she had done this past week—but she had never made a trip to Cornwall to look in on this house. Because she hadn't known it existed until three days ago.

Margaux had called her in London and told her that the caretaker in nearby Porthleven, who apparently checked the house regularly, had grown too old and ill to do anything for months. Would Kat mind taking a look?

Kat had been so dumbfounded at the idea of her grandmother owning a Cornish cottage that she had spluttered inarticulate and half-started sentences into the phone, extracting very little information beyond the fact it had been purchased decades ago, and the location of the key. Now, she felt that same dumbfoundedness fix her in place in the parlor as she realized the house was fully furnished and fitted out—but like a museum.

Everything around her was from the 1920s and early 1930s, as if the occupants had gone out for the day, intending to come back, but had somewhere been lost forever. An art deco red celluloid hair-comb sparkling with rhinestones; a fantastic enamel clothes brush in sea-green; paste rings tumbling out of a case; sheet music on the piano waiting to be played. Kat stroked the horn of the gramophone affectionately; marveled at the delicacy of a cloisonné pendant on a crimped brass chain; blew a flurry of dust off a lovely collection of glass kerosene finger lamps in various shades of green. Everything laid out, ready for a moment in history that had, perhaps, mattered to someone.

She briefly imagined lighting the lamps, placing a recording on the gramophone, securing the pendant around her neck and returning to a time long ago when she hadn't made any mistakes and could re-live the past few years with the benefit of wisdom. Something made her shiver, as if just thinking of enkindling the items around her had made the ghosts stir. Why had those ghosts run away, she wondered? And why had Margaux bought this place that was more mausoleum than home?

Kat made herself move into the next room, opening and shutting cupboards and checking inside drawers. She found no evidence of animal habitation and only a few spiders, most long dead, and was soon drawn back into a vortex of questions. Why keep a cottage that was never used? Had her grandmother ever visited? Certainly not in the thirty-nine years Kat had been alive. She should, Kat reasoned, persuade her grandmother to sell it.

She was thinking about real estate agents and international removals when she reached the very last bedroom, empty of everything except a couple of wardrobes. She opened the door of one and a blaze of bright red caught her eye, followed by a shimmer of pink, a beam of sunflower-yellow. Slowly, she reached in. Her hand touched fabric. Expensive fabric: a froth of tulle, a glittering of sequins, the purr of velvet.

She lifted down one of the hangers and what unraveled before her was, quite simply, astonishing. A long red dress—no, a gown—strapless, the bodice shaped to fit perfectly over the swell of one's breasts, the waist nipped in, an homage to the New Look. Tumbling down from the narrow waistline was a skirt that had a life of its own; a skirt that wanted to dance, to spin around and around in a wild and romantic rush of red. Her right hand stroked the silk, as soft as newly born skin beneath her fingers.

Impulse made Kat hold the dress up against her body as if she were

contemplating buying it from a store. She turned to face the mirror and was stunned. Even though she hadn't yet stepped inside the dress, she was no longer Kat. She was the woman she had always meant to be, the woman she'd forgotten to become beneath the demands of working full-time and having two children and divorcing one husband.

Then she glimpsed the tag inside: *Printemps-Été 2012 Christian Dior Paris* and a series of numbers. Kat was holding an haute couture gown, which was what she'd suspected when she first saw it. But why—and how—did her grandmother have a Dior couture gown hidden in the wardrobe of a house Kat had never known she owned?

Kat pulled out more hangers. Each bore something almost as remarkable as the red gown. A dress made from silk rainbows—Kat knew it was called Hellebore—from Galliano's 1995 collection for Dior. A fabulously fun pink dress, strapless like the red, but with a mass of fabric at the back shaped into a flower-like bustle.

Kat stopped taking garments out of the wardrobes and instead flicked through them. They were mostly dresses, but also some suits, skirts and jackets, moving from the easily recognizable 1950s' fit-and-flare silhouette to the shorter skirts of the sixties, the fluidity of the seventies, the just-reined-in garishness of the eighties, the glitz of the nineties, and then on to the classically modern styles like the red gown she had first held. Every piece had a numbered Christian Dior label stitched into its back.

There was one more gown that had her stretching up to the rack, to bring it down and hold it against her body. She had never seen anything like it. A dress of brilliant azure blue, as close to the color of the sea outside as anything man-made could ever be, and with the same prismatic quality, as if the sun sparkled on the rippling skirt even inside this dark room. It was made from an exuberance of silk and tulle, the lavishness of both fabric and color declaring that this dress was epoch-making, one of a kind—a gown her grandmother could

never afford and would never have the occasion to wear. It was almost too magnificent for a princess.

Kat sat down on the bed, shut her eyes, then opened them slowly. The dresses were still there. She reached into her pocket, withdrew her phone and dialed Margaux's number. The call rang on and on, unanswered. She tried again. Nothing.

So she stood up, laid each dress on the bed one by one—sixty-five in total—and photographed them like the impartial and rational fashion conservator she was.

It was late when she finished. She locked the house, returned to her car, expelled a long breath and was unable to banish the questions any longer. Why were the dresses there? And had her grandmother intended for Kat to find them?

PART THREE

skye

They knew, if they stopped to think about it, that they were operating at the very limit of what society could tolerate even in war. But they weren't much interested in society either, or . . . their place in it, and they were so used to being unusual that anything else would have been . . . soul-destroyingly dull.

—Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II*

Four

PARIS, SEPTEMBER 1939

Lunch in Paris with a melange of British and French pilots turned into dinner in Paris, as well as too much champagne.

“We’ll have to stay the night,” Skye said, as the sun hid itself away and the sky became too dark to fly through.

“We will,” Rose agreed, clinking her glass against Skye’s and then against the glasses of the others at the table.

Valentin, a Parisian, offered a toast: “To peace. And may Monsieur Adolf give himself a deadly apoplexy from too much vigorous Nazi saluting.”

Everyone laughed and drank to it so enthusiastically that Rose gestured to the waiter for yet more champagne. And so they drank their fears about Hitler’s ruthless and bloodless purloining of Europe into submission, and Valentin draped his arm over Skye’s shoulders as she entertained them all with stories of the acts she performed in the flying circus in England each summer, acts that helped pay her bills.

“The anticipation of a dreadful accident is what brings people to the circus,” she told them. “I can feel them holding their breath every time I turn the plane over. They want a sensational story to share at the pub: that they were there when the sky let go of the plane and it fell to the ground”—she let her hands fly up into the air, mimicking

an explosion—"and the lady inside died a tragic death." She smote her hand dramatically across her forehead. "I never oblige them, of course."

Laughter and glasses were raised once more, toasting the crowds Skye had disappointed by living through her aerobatics.

"I hear you can wing-walk," Valentin said.

"She made a jolly good display of it at last year's Magyar Pilots' Picnic," Rose said, referring to the annual gathering of pilots just outside Budapest which she and Skye regularly attended for more uproarious lunches.

"I couldn't go to that one," Valentin said regretfully. "I was doing my military service. You must need extraordinary balance for such a thing."

"And damn-fool pluck," Rose added.

"Or an 'incurable reckless streak' and 'a lack of concern for keeping her head attached to her neck.' That last one's my favorite," Skye said, accepting the cigarette Valentin passed her. "The blue bloods at the Civil Air Guard wrote all that and more into a report about my suitability to instruct for them. Luckily there are so few qualified instructors in England, and pilots are needed so desperately to bolster the RAF in case of war, that they employed me anyway in spite of my careless attitude toward my bodyparts."

"To Skye's head," Valentin said, raising his glass. "Long may it be attached to her neck."

Skye laughed and joined in the new toast.

For it didn't matter a bit to anyone at the table that Skye was the least wealthy flyer there and possibly in England too. Her pilot friends were a group of the very early flyers who flew for love rather than because it had lately become an exclusive and vogueish pursuit. They were too raffishly bohemian to ever mention money and were more than happy to pay for the champagne at this impromptu lunch that

Rose had organized just yesterday. Skye was lucky to have inherited her plane from her mother and could thus fly all over Europe with these people, to Cairo too, and even South Africa once. So long as she took up the opportunities that presented themselves to earn money during the flying circus season in England, or instructing for the Civil Air Guard, which she would do again on Monday after she'd slept off her Parisian all-nighter, she'd been able to keep her little plane airworthy and herself fed and clothed.

Midnight approached and some of the party began to drift away.

"My apartment is nearby," Valentin whispered to Skye.

She considered his invitation, but she hadn't drunk so much champagne that she believed indulging in a meaningless physical encounter with a charming Parisian would be a balm against the threat of war. So she refused, and Rose refused a similar invitation from the man at her side, but they both offered the consolation prize of dancing to the music of Django Reinhardt at a jazz club off Rue Pigalle. There, Skye twined her arms around Valentin's neck and he wrapped his around her waist and she let him kiss her, because sometimes it was nice to have the kind of casual intimacy that came without the prospect of heartache.

The night turned into a perfect Parisian dawn, where rain cascaded like velvet from the sky but the sun shone through too, arcing a double rainbow over the Sacré-Coeur. Surely it was a promise of a future without warfare—except that Valentin pointed to the morning newspaper and its headline that read: *Hitler Invades Poland*. The rainbow fell from the sky.

The drive to the airfield was silent. Until Rose said, "I feel as if today is a day for grand gestures."

"It is," Skye agreed, and she let Rose take the front seat in the Moth while she took the rear. After they'd leveled out, Skye climbed onto the wing and proceeded to perform the stunt they'd spoken of at lunch: wing-walking.

She saw the open and gasping mouths of Valentin and the others as Rose flew in low enough to show them that yes, Skye was walking along the wing of the plane, her cerulean scarf streaming behind her and her hair flying too. She flipped into a simple handstand— she'd always wanted to cartwheel on the wing, but even she wasn't quite daredevil enough for that—then waved to her friends on the ground.

They came in to land, and Valentin, who really was exceptionally charming and handsome, kissed her goodbye. Skye promised nothing in the way of correspondence—Nicholas had cured her of that.

Back in the air, she waggled her wings at Rose and the others lined up for take-off in their newer and faster planes, before soaring upward and away, propelled by a tailwind and laughter and possibly still a few bubbles of champagne, trying hard to forget the headline in the newspaper.

But she could no longer ignore it once she landed at the flying club outside London where she taught cocky young men to fly in readiness to join a vastly undermanned and desperate RAF. She parked the Moth in its usual place and climbed out to find Ted, one of her pupils, waiting for her.

“It's over,” he said.

“What is?” Skye asked.

“Civilian flying. It's banned after tomorrow. The Civil Air Guard's being disbanded too. A declaration of war is likely any day, and everyone's grounded, unless you're an RAF pilot. They now own the skies.”

Ted's words made Skye stagger backward, as if a plane had run right through her. She closed her eyes. *Everyone's grounded, unless you're an RAF pilot.* As a woman, she could never be an RAF pilot. Which meant it really was over.

* * *

Two days later, determined to prove Ted wrong, Skye dressed in her most demure navy suit, hoping the dramatically puffed sleeves, nipped waist and flared peplum wouldn't be considered too modish for an earnest pilot like herself. She walked through an anxious London, where everyone seemed to be searching the skies for signs of the war they were supposedly engaged in, but the only evidence Skye could see was the closed cinemas, the absence of children—they'd all been exiled to the countryside—and the red pillarboxes with yellow squares painted on them to detect poisonous gasses.

When she arrived at the Air Ministry, she explained her flying experience to the young man before her.

"Join the WAAF," he said. "Women's Auxiliary Air Force."

"That sounds perfect," Skye said. "Will I be instructing? Or flying—"

The man interrupted. "The WAAF don't fly. They pack parachutes and monitor aircraft movements. Or chauffeur the pilots. You'd be good at that," he said, a suggestive glint in his eyes. "In a car," he added, as if he needed to underscore the fact that she was bound to earth.

"I've never learned to drive," Skye said flatly.

She visited the Air Ministry every day for a fortnight. Each day, the same man, or sometimes a different man, told her the same thing. At the end of two weeks, she came to a halt in the ministry's foyer at the sudden and painful understanding that she would never be allowed to fly.

Her cerulean scarf sagged from her neck. She made herself walk back to the desk. "May I have the application form for the WAAF, please?"

The man smirked. "They urgently need typists for the typing pool."

Skye pictured herself stuck inside a cavernous room with a hundred

other women, their typewriters clacking out the frustrations hidden behind their red-lipsticked smiles. She left London then, unwilling to type her way through a war.

Was this the future her mother hadn't wanted to tell her? That war would come and men would die; and Skye would too, from the inside, cobwebbing over like her grounded plane.

* * *

In the quiet of Cornwall, she would be able to think what to do. Skye caught the train to Helston and the bus to Porthleven and walked up the path from the village to the cottage. It was her legacy from her mother, along with the Moth, an estrangement from Liberty and enough years in France that Skye had become as close to a Frenchwoman as one born elsewhere could possibly be. Even now the accent clung to Skye's words.

Atop the cliff, she stared out over the sea. It was white today, bridal, lace frill after lace frill coursing down from the horizon. The sound of a motorcar made her turn around and as soon as she realized the driver was Pauline Gower, Skye cursed herself for not having thought of her sooner. Of course Pauline would know if there was any chance at all of Skye or any other woman flying while this strange war vacillated on with hardly a bullet fired.

Skye and Pauline had flown together during Skye's first season in Tom Campbell Black's Air Display. Next to Amy Johnson and perhaps Skye herself, Pauline was one of the most experienced female pilots in the country. Her father was also an MP, which meant Pauline knew everyone who mattered and, as a consequence, knew *about* everything that mattered. She was like Rose—a blue blood who couldn't have cared less that Skye's blood had no blue in it at all.

Pauline climbed out of the car and smiled at Skye. "I expect you're

the annoying woman who won't leave the chaps at the Air Ministry alone?"

Skye grimaced. "Yes, that's me." She led Pauline to the old swing-seat on the porch that looked across to France. "I've spent the past year at the Civil Air Guard reciting my number of hours' flying experience to the men I was supposed to be teaching, men who refused to go up with me because I was a 'girl.' I didn't let it get to me because the greater good of them learning to fly was more important. The ones who did submit to going up with me behaved as if an hour together in the cockpit gave them permission to inspect my wings at close quarters. I never complained. But I'm going to chew my tongue off very soon if I have to keep pretending to be demure and compliant."

"Then you mightn't be interested in my invitation," Pauline said. "It will certainly require demureness and compliancy."

"How about a drink? Then I can fortify myself into the right level of decorum."

Skye went inside, found one of the bottles of champagne she'd brought back with her from Paris and poured out two glasses.

Pauline raised hers. "Bottoms up."

"You look too jolly," Skye said, tucking her legs up beside her. "Surely you're grounded too?"

"For now. But I'm recruiting." The sudden flash of satisfaction on the older woman's face was like sun after a week of fog.

"What for? Do the RAF want women wearing feathers to perform some kind of stationary aerobatics to entertain the men in their down time?"

"You'd suit feathers better than I," Pauline said, chuckling. "No. I've been given permission to recruit twelve women for the Air Transport Auxiliary. It's a civilian flying service that will take planes from factories and maintenance units to RAF bases. They don't have enough pilots; you have no idea how many planes are being

manufactured, planes that need to be moved around the country. So we'll have a women's division too."

Ted was wrong. Skye *would* fly. And, what's more . . . "Does that mean I'll get my hands on a Spitfire?" Skye said, beaming, swallowing champagne and euphoria.

"Before you start dreaming of being the first woman to fly a Spitfire, I need you to understand that I have to do things formally. Lunch with twenty women—which is about the sum total of women in England who've ever flown a plane—then a test flight. Even for you," Pauline added before Skye could protest. "Not at Central Flying School though. The RAF, in a fit of pique that this unsavory scheme has been thrust upon them, have refused to allow women to sully their elite school."

Skye exhaled. "Thank goodness for their pique. I have more chance if you're the one doing the selecting. So yes, I will do a test flight. And I *will* be one of the twelve women chosen. I have to be."

* * *

"Skye!" Rose, more sober than the last time Skye had seen her after their Parisian all-nighter, greeted her with a smile at the aerodrome at Whitchurch.

Skye kissed Rose's cheek. Her friend's light brown hair was set in uniformly arranged curls, and her green-gray suit was respectable, and Skye suddenly felt that she hadn't given enough thought to her own costume. She was wearing trousers for a start, along with a red sweater and her usual cerulean scarf, all of which drew too much attention. She patted her hair, which she had made an effort to curl, but it had emerged from the rollers more mane than coiffure.

"The RAF have sent someone along to watch," Rose whispered to Skye, pointing to an air marshal who'd just arrived.

“Then he’ll see a show he’s not expecting,” Skye replied stoutly.

And she believed he would. She knew most of the twenty women gathered there, at least by sight. Each had at least five hundred hours’ flying experience under her wings. It was ridiculous that the RAF wanted them to prove they knew their way around a plane.

Then, with a jolt, Skye realized she knew the air marshal. He was an older version of the man who’d once come to the Cornwall parties and whispered in Vanessa Penrose’s ear in a manner Skye could now describe as intimate. For a moment Skye wanted to step over to him, to ask him how he knew Vanessa, to revel in the bittersweet joy of talking about her mother. But she turned away before he saw her and slipped on her helmet and goggles, which would make it impossible for him to recognize her. Because the fact that she was Vanessa Penrose’s daughter was something she should keep from the RAF. Her illegitimacy would most likely bar her from even taking the test flight.

She moved to stand as far away from the air marshal as she could, watching Rose take off into the sky. Rose landed precisely and, yes, demurely, and Skye felt apprehension push into her stomach like a storm front. Many of the women there, like Rose, were minor aristocracy—they had even been presented at court—giving them the manners and the demeanor and the connections that Pauline needed. Marion Wilberforce was the daughter of a laird. Gabrielle Patterson was the first woman in England to have gained her instructor’s license. Margaret Fairweather had a viscount for a father and her brother was the managing director of the British Overseas Airways Corporation. And then there was Skye, with a dead mother, no legitimate father and a few air pageants in her past. Her heart performed its own stall turn, and she wondered if she’d even be able to climb up into the plane, let alone fly it.

Luckily muscle memory took over and she performed her test flight well. But she couldn’t see why Pauline would choose her. Besides her history of wing-walking, there was her youth: she and Joan Hughes

were by far the youngest at only twenty-one. And the promised twelve women had been cut back to only eight. Skye's chances were less than fifty percent.

She waited until the very end and then blurted out her question to Pauline. "How will you decide?"

"I haven't a clue," Pauline said tiredly, and Skye could see how hard Pauline had fought to get to this point. How important it was that she make the right selection and not run the risk of proving to the RAF that their reluctance to take on women was justified.

Skye thought quickly. She had to give Pauline the evidence that would allow her to place Skye's advantages right beside those of a viscount's daughter.

"I never thought I'd see this as advantageous," Skye began, ideas forming as she spoke, "but I have no real family any more, as you know. When I'm in an airplane, I'm not distracted by the people I love. Worrying over fathers and brothers and husbands who could lose their lives might interfere with the single-minded concentration that makes one a good flyer. I would never suffer from those distractions."

"War changes things, doesn't it?" Pauline smiled gently, the first time that day her face had relaxed at all. "If there's one thing I know about you, Skye, it's that while you might appear to be a careless daredevil on the surface, you've sacrificed a mother to the sky so everything you do up there is impeccable. Trust," she said, as if the conversation had given her clarity. "Perhaps that's how I decide. Who can I trust up there when all is said and done?"

* * *

On the first of January 1940, as the war floundered on with much in the way of preparations and little in the way of battle, Skye became one of the first eight women to join the Air Transport Auxiliary—

the ATA. She was made a second officer, starting at the very bottom, based out of the Hatfield aerodrome.

Austin Reed in London made up their uniforms: a dashing navy-blue skirt and jacket decorated with gold bars. Orit became dashing once each woman had altered it. The tailors at Austin Reed had never outfitted women before and had been overly careful not to touch anything unto-ward when taking their chest and inside leg measurements. The result was trousers with elongated crotches and blouses that could have accom-mo-dated two women. Skye hoped it wasn't a sign of what was to come.

Women didn't receive a billeting allowance and were required to arrange their own accommodation, unlike the men. Rose, Skye and Joan Hughes, who had perfectly appled cheeks and the dimpled adorableness of a baby, found rooms at the Stonehouse Hotel within walking distance of the aerodrome. This further sign that things were different depending on one's gender didn't especially alarm Skye, until she arrived with Rose and Joan for their first day of work.

They stood in the doorway of their new headquarters, staring into the muddy hut that was to serve as the operations office, the mess, everything.

"This is glamorous," said Rose.

"Are there enough chairs for all of us to sit down?" Skye asked.

"No." Pauline's voice came from behind them. "You either have to get here early or perch on an armrest."

At that, Rose, Joan and Skye scooted inside and claimed one of the too-few seats, whose split cushions and uneven legs made it apparent that the women's hut was viewed by the RAF as a rubbish tip.

For the next few days, various newspaper headlines alerted the nation that something out of the ordinary was taking place. The final straw was one that read: *8 Girls "Show" RAF*. Skye winced when she saw it, knowing the RAF would be furious.

Clever Pauline invited the press to Hatfield to introduce this set of

eight “girls” to the general public, reasoning that it might be easier to win over the broader sweep of opinion first, which might then soothe the tempers of the elitist men of the RAF.

At the press call, Skye was told to arrange herself alongside the other women around a tea table, as if finger sandwiches and sponge cake would make them more conventional. The photographers snapped pictures of the silent group, then asked for some “action.”

The women hoisted up their chutes and ran to the planes, only to be asked to do it again because the photographers hadn’t got quite the right shot. Decorum, Skye reminded herself, smiling grimly. But after six such sprints lugging a heavy parachute and for no good reason that Skye could see other than the photographers were incompetent, she felt her patience fading. So when Pauline asked Skye and Rose to each take a Moth up into the sky, Skye flipped the plane into a single flawless and very demure loop-the-loop in order to show the press that women didn’t need six attempts to fly an airplane properly. Upside-down, she felt the joy that ordinarily swept through her when she flew, but that she hadn’t experienced since she’d seen the dilapidation of the women’s ATA headquarters.

Rose grinned at her as they landed.

Skye jumped down from the wing and pulled off her helmet, smiling at the sensation of the mid-air pirouette still swirling through her. She ran a hand through her hair, combing it into a less windblown state—as befitted newspaper photographs of serious young women doing an important job—and saw the combined blaze of a dozen flashlights. She thought nothing of it; was proud of herself for demonstrating the capableness of the ATA women—until the following day when the pictures appeared in the newspapers. Every paper who’d sent a photographer ran a shot of Skye’s plane upside-down and beside it a picture of her, hand in hair, which was swept back becomingly off her beaming face as if she were a model posing for *Vogue*.

“Oh no,” was all she could think to say when Rose showed it to her; and “Oh no,” again when Pauline called her into the office.

The newspapers sat open on Pauline’s desk, displaying Skye’s seemingly model-like stance and her stunt, which now looked like the action of a devil-may-care woman who flung airplanes upside-down one minute and simpered for the cameras the next.

“How bad is it?” Skye asked, sitting down before she was invited to because she honestly didn’t think she could stand. “I didn’t mean it to turn out like that. I never thought they’d be able to catch a plane upside-down.”

“That’s right, you never thought.” Pauline’s words were ice. “This is a letter *Aeroplane* magazine has warned me will be published in their next edition. *I think the whole affair of engaging women pilots to fly airplanes when there are so many men fully qualified to do the work is disgusting! They are contemptible show-offs.*”

Disgusting, Skye thought. Hitler was disgusting. Not women flying airplanes.

“But there aren’t enough men,” she protested. “It’s not as if we’re stealing their jobs. We’re helping,” she said, voice trailing off as Pauline continued to read.

“*The trouble is that women insist on wanting to do jobs which they are quite incapable of doing. The menace is the woman who thinks she ought to be flying a high-speed bomber when she really has not the intelligence to scrub the floor properly*” Pauline finished.

Shame burned through Skye. She closed the newspaper, unable to look at herself, understanding that her tendency to solitariness might be useful when flying an airplane but on the opposite side of it lay a propensity to think only of herself. Which one didn’t do when part of a team.

“Are they going to shut us down?” she asked, then stopped. Shut *us* down. No, shut *her* down. It was the only solution. Rose, Joan and the other five women had done nothing to be ashamed of.

“I’ll resign,” Skye said, trying to block out the image of a future devoid of flight because of her own incurable rashness.

Pauline sighed. “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but enough of the general public are so enamored of you and your derring-do and rather gorgeous face that the RAF have had to chew on their fingernails rather than on us. It would be more of a public relations disaster to close us down now than it would be to let us continue. The press is fascinated. Every man and woman on the street is fascinated—especially the men,” she added. “You’re the poster girl for the ATA, like it or not. And the RAF is smart enough to realize that firing their new poster girl is unlikely to win them any friends. But I’m giving you an official warning. Get another one and you’re out.”

“Thank you,” Skye whispered. “I’ll apologize to everyone. I’ve learned my lesson.”

Which was: don’t be Skye Penrose again. Not *ever*.

“Good.” Pauline’s voice was firm. “We only just landed on the side of good fortune this time. So the warning stands, as does me begging you to fly the planes with nary a smile nor a wing-waggle until this settles. Don’t bugger everything up.”

Skye returned to work determined to never get another warning, to forget she knew aerobatics at all, and to tame every maverick part of herself.

About the Author



Photo Credit: Stef King

Natasha Lester worked as a marketing executive for L'Oreal before penning the *New York Times* and internationally bestselling novel *The Paris Orphan*. She is also the author of the *USA Today* bestseller *The Paris Seamstress*. When she's not writing, she loves collecting vintage fashion, traveling, reading, practicing yoga and playing with her three children. Natasha lives in Perth, Western Australia.

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*A Lady's Guide
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A LADY'S GUIDE TO MISCHIEF AND MAYHEM

Manda Collins

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Prologue

London, 1865

If Sir Horace does not desist from this asinine talk about what constitutes appropriate conversation for a lady, she would do one of them an injury, thought Lady Katherine Bascomb, hiding her scowl behind her fan.

She was quite fond of his wife Millie, who'd been a friend since the two ladies had made their debuts together, but it really was hard work to endure the company of Sir Horace Fairchild as a condition of seeing her friend.

Kate had allowed herself to be persuaded away from the evening she'd had planned of catching up on the latest news of the murderer who was currently roaming the streets of the metropolis, the so-called "Commandments Killer," in order to make up the numbers for Millie's dinner party.

A decision she'd regretted as soon as she was ushered into the Fairchild townhouse on Belgrave Square and saw that the guests were among the most stiff-rumped in London. She'd suffered through dinner, where she'd politely listened to a member of Parliament drone on about the need for something to be done about the coarseness of language in the English press—it never having occurred to him that she was, herself, the owner of one of those newspapers. (Or perhaps it had but he did not care. Men were far less prone to diplomacy in their conversation than ladies in Kate's experience.)

Then, thinking to find some more sensible conversation when the ladies withdrew to leave the gentlemen to their port, she'd been trapped in a corner of the drawing room

with Mrs. Elspeth Symes who'd talked of nothing but purgatives and remedies for digestive ailments for nearly a quarter-hour without pausing for breath.

The reappearance of the gentlemen had given her a chance to escape Mrs. Symes, but no sooner had she accepted a cup of tea and a plate of what looked to be delicious biscuits than Sir Horace began to speak.

If this was what one had to endure to maintain friendships, Kate thought crossly, then really it was better to remain at home alone.

"Not if I do him an injury first," said a voice from beside her. And to her horror, Kate realized she'd spoken her thought aloud.

Turning, she saw that a thin, dark-haired young woman with wide brown eyes and an impish quality had taken the seat beside her.

"Caroline Hardcastle," she said offering her gloved hand. "My friends call me Caro. We met before dinner, but really, anyone who is capable of remembering names after one introduction is not worth knowing, don't you agree?"

Kate blinked. Miss Hardcastle was a tiny creature with large dark eyes and a pointed chin. She was exactly what Kate's mind would have conjured if she tried to imagine a woodland sprite in exquisitely tailored silk.

"These are quite good," Miss Hardcastle continued, biting into a biscuit. "I detect a hint of lemon, but it's not enough to overpower. And the shortbread is exceptional. There's not enough butter but one can't have everything, I suppose."

"I'm Lady Katherine Bascomb." She felt as if she should say something and there were so many options that Kate decided to go with the most obvious.

"Oh, I know who you are." Caro discreetly brushed the crumbs from her hands. "I read your column in *The Gazer* religiously. I'm something of a writer myself but my work is mostly about cookery. I was pleased to learn you would be a guest tonight so that I could meet you."

Kate opened her mouth to demur at the compliment, but then Caro's words sunk in. "Caroline Hardcastle. You don't mean to say you're C.E. Hardcastle, the cookbook author? I think you're too modest! There's not a housewife in London without one of your recipe books in her home."

But Miss Hardcastle waived away the praise. "It's little more than trial and error, coupled with writing down observations. I daresay anyone could do it if they felt the inclination."

It was the sort of modesty that was expected of ladies, but Kate disliked seeing someone as obviously talented as Miss Hardcastle so dismissive of her own talent. "Your books are more than just recipes though. There are bits of history and cultural notes. I've read all of them and I only set foot in the kitchen to give instructions to my cook."

Flashes of color appeared in Caro's cheeks. "Thank you. Coming from you that's praise indeed."

Clearly uncomfortable with the discussion of her writing, Caro changed the subject. "It seems we were both captured by less than entertaining conversationalists before we found each other." She cast her eyes in the direction of their host who was speaking to the room at large. "And now we all are forced to listen to this lecture on propriety from a man who is known throughout the *ton* for his affairs."

That was news to Kate. Poor Millie. She'd known Sir Horace was a rotter, she just hadn't realized how much of one he was.

"He is a bit hard to take, isn't he?" Caro said, watching as the man continued his monologue.

"And really, how dare he suggest that any topic should be off-limits for ladies?" Kate scowled. "After all, we ought to know what's going on in the world around us. We are the ones who are most often preyed upon by unscrupulous, and even deadly, men. I, for one, would even go so far as to say that if ladies were encouraged to speak openly about the things that most frightened us, we would all be the safer for it. One cannot protect against a danger that is completely unknown."

As she spoke, Kate's voice rose, and as sometimes happens, it did so during a lull in the other discussions in the room.

"I must protest, Lady Katherine," said a portly gentleman with walrus-like whiskers.

"Ladies are not constitutionally strong enough to hear about the harshness in our world. It is our job as fathers, brothers, and husbands to protect you from the knowledge of such things. Why I know of one young lady who went mad from hearing about such awfulness."

Before she could respond to the criticism, Kate heard a sound that was partway between a train coming into the station and a kettle on the boil. To her amusement, it had erupted from Miss Hardcastle's mouth.

"Mr. Symes, please acquit us with some degree of sense. I know very well you're speaking of your niece, Miss Ruby Compton, and everyone knows that she was and is far

from mad. She simply chose to fall in love with a fellow neither you nor her parents found smart enough and you had her spirited away to Scotland. The story of her madness and fictitious institutionalization might very well fool some people but I knew Ruby at school and had the full story from another schoolfriend."

It was quite difficult to watch the man's mouth open and close, rather like a fish removed from a stream, without laughing, so Kate decided to speak instead.

"I agree with Miss Hardcastle. It does no one any good to be wrapped in cotton wool and protected from the things that pose the most danger. I don't suppose you would agree that it was perfectly acceptable to tell your daughter that arsenic is safe to eat, Sir Horace? Or you, Mr. Harrington, would you tell your sister that your prize bull poses no danger to her?"

Not waiting for them to respond, Kate continued. "Only a mile or so from here, there are girls as young as five years old who know more about the dangers posed by the predators of London than a gently raised young lady of eighteen. Why should an accident of birth mean that we should be kept in ignorance?"

"Well said," said Caro from beside her.

"I think Katherine's right." Millie's voice was a bit shaky, but she pressed on. "There are dangerous things and men in the city, and yet you would protect us to such a degree that we wouldn't recognize the devil himself if he crossed our paths."

Kate rather suspected Satan counted disguise as one of his specialties but refrained from pointing it out.

"An excellent point," Caro said with a smile of encouragement to Millie. "And since Scotland Yard hasn't managed to capture the likes of the Commandments Killer as of yet, then we need every tool at our disposal. And knowledge happens to be the most readily available."

At the mention of the murderer whose string of killings across the capital had even the most confident of men looking over their shoulders, a murmur went through the room.

"Now, Miss Hardcastle, you go too far," said Sir Horace. "The Superintendent of police is a good friend of mine, and he's got his best man working on the case."

At the mention of the man leading the investigation, Kate couldn't stop her sound of skepticism. "If you mean Inspector Andrew Eversham, Sir Horace, then I fear your confidence is misplaced. He's been leading the investigation for months now and hasn't brought forth one reliable suspect."

"There was a hint in *The Chronicle* that Eversham was fixated on the theory that perhaps the killer was a tradesman because he was so easily able to move through the streets," a matronly lady with greying gold hair offered. "But I think perhaps a hansom cab driver could just as easily elude capture."

"What about a servant?" asked Mrs. Araminta Peabody. "They're always around, but one doesn't notice them, does one? Why you there"—she gestured to a footman who was collecting the tea things—"you might be the Commandments Killer and we'd never even know it."

"Eversham is a good man, dash it," said Sir Horace, his florid face growing redder. "I won't have his name or that of Superintendent Darrow sullied in this way. This is just

the sort of conversation that I was warning against earlier. See what's happened already? The lot of you women have grown over-excited. I daresay you've grown feverish, you're so overcome by all this talk of mischief and mayhem."

"Oh, don't be an ass, Horace," said the man to the left of him. He was a doctor, but Kate couldn't have recalled his name at pistol point. "This talk is no more dangerous for ladies than it is for men." He turned to Kate. "I think the Commandments Killer is a woman, myself. Remember that a posy was found on the body of the second victim. It's possible it came from a man's buttonhole, but I don't know many men who would wear forget-me-nots."

At the doctor's words, the room erupted into chaos.

Under the cover of the din, Kate turned to Caro.

"I know we've just met, but I have an idea for my paper and I think you would be interested. What would you think about our writing a column together about this sort of thing?"

"About men trying to stop us from common sense understanding of the world around us?"

Kate laughed. "Not quite. I had something else in mind. A column about our thoughts on the kind of crimes typified by the Commandments Killer. Two of the victims have been women, after all. These are the sorts of things ladies find of interest but are discouraged from speaking about."

Caro tilted her head, a grin widening on her face.

"A sort of lady's guide to murder, you mean?"

"Yes, but I think we should call it *The Lady's Guide to Mischief and Mayhem*."

"A tribute to Sir Horace?" Caro tittered.

"Exactly right." Kate glanced over to where that gentleman was holding forth on more of his notions of propriety. "He deserves it, don't you think?"

Chapter One

One Week Later

"And this is my office," Kate said, ushering Caro into her refuge at *The London Gazette*.

It was unusual for a woman to spend time in what was generally considered to be a male sphere, even more so for her to carve out space there. But she'd made it clear to the publisher, managers, and editors when she'd assumed ownership after her husband's death that she intended to write for the paper and to give her input when she thought it necessary.

“Have a seat,” she continued, gesturing toward an upholstered chair then moving to take her own seat behind the large cherry desk that grounded the room. A thick Aubusson rug covered the floor and gas lamps abolished the gloom of the fog beyond the window. “My secretary Flora will bring us some refreshments in a moment and then we can discuss our ideas for the column.”

Caro, who was outfitted in a deep green silk gown with a matching hat perched rakishly atop her dark curls, looked around her with wide-eyed interest. “You’ve created a refuge for yourself here. I approve.”

They’d started the morning with a tour of the premises, moving from the basement where the printing presses and typesetters were housed, and making their way up to the floor where the executive offices were located. Kate’s office was a corner one and offered a view of the city that was unparalleled—or it would have done if the fog ever lifted enough to allow it. “It wasn’t without controversy,” she said, leaning back in her chair. “Despite my position as the new owner, none of the men in positions of authority were keen on having a lady on the premises day in day out. But they eventually came around.” She was understating things a bit. The manager and several of the editors had expressed their disapproval of her plans in no uncertain terms. When she’d made it clear that they were welcome to find employment elsewhere, however, these objections had mysteriously evaporated. After several years, they’d all learned to work together, and if the men still had complaints, they at least kept them away from her ears.

“I can only imagine,” Caro said with a frown. “There is little men dislike more than having a woman disrupt what they consider their territory.”

Kate removed a notebook from a desk drawer and took up the fountain pen lying on the blotter. “Now, let’s talk about our first column. It should be about the Commandments Killer, yes?”

Removing her notebook from the little purse she carried at her wrist, Caro agreed. “As the last two victims have been women, I think it’s more important than ever that we offer a female perspective on the case. Women are frightened. And rightly so.”

Deciding they’d better get a handle on the case itself before they wrote about it, Kate asked, “What do we know about the investigation so far?”

“There have been four victims, two men and two women, though the order has been man, woman, man, woman.” Carol read the names of the victims from her notebook where she’d presumably already written them down previously. “Each has been left in a conspicuous location, with a note bearing one of the ten commandments left somewhere at the scene.”

“Here,” Kate said, moving to where a slate similar to the ones found in most schoolrooms lay propped against her wall. Lifting it, she hung it on a blank bit of wall from a hook on the back. Taking a piece of chalk, she neatly wrote the names of each victim in one column, the location of the body, and the commandment that had been left with each body in another. “Now, what can we conclude from this list?”

“The commandments are out of order,” Caro said after staring at the list for a moment. “John Slade, the first victim was marked with the tenth commandment ‘thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods’ but the second victim, Martha Peters was left with the fourth, ‘honor thy father and they mother’. And so on.”

“Good point,” Kate said thoughtfully. “I wonder why.”

“It’s possible the killer finds his victims at random and so chooses the commandment to fit the victim, not the other way round,” Caro said. “I read in an article that Slade was known for his jealousy of his brother’s boots, which Slade himself could never have afforded on his own wages. He’d complained rather vocally about them in his local pub the day before he was found dead.”

“Oh!” Kate began shuffling through a stack of newspapers on her desk. Silent until she found what she was looking for. “Here it is,” she said with triumph. “The fourth victim, Betsy Creamer who was marked with ‘Remember to keep holy the Sabbath’ was overheard at a chophouse near where her body was found declaring that she’d not been to church in over a year.”

It took them some time, but after the two ladies had read through the accumulated stories about the four victims, they found associations between each of the victims, the commandments that had been left with their bodies, and something they’d done or said that went against the Ten Commandments.

“This is important,” Kate said with a disbelieving shake of her head. “But we’ve had our best reporters on this story for weeks and they’ve heard nothing about Scotland Yard making this connection.”

“It is possible they’ve come to the same conclusions we have and haven’t told the public about it,” Caro said. “It’s my understanding that they don’t especially care for the press.”

“But there should be some sort of warning,” Kate said. “People are in danger from this killer and there’s been no warning from Scotland Yard about it.”

“To be fair,” Caro said, “I wouldn’t know how to phrase such a warning and I’ve written four books. They were about cookery, mind you, but I’m not unfamiliar with words. Not to mention the fact that because of their circumstances a great many people in London break the commandments on a daily basis.”

“I suppose that makes some degree of sense. We don’t wish to sound as judgmental as the killer, after all.” Kate still couldn’t help but think the Yard could be doing a better job of getting the word out about the possible motives behind the killings. “And perhaps our column can do something to warn those at risk.”

Quickly, they agreed on a basic outline for what they wished to convey in their first foray into writing as a team. Both thought it would be best to give an outline of who had been killed so far, a sketch of their ages and occupations, and whom they’d left behind. Neither wished to dwell on the “sins” that the killer had deemed serious enough to warrant death, so they kept their discussion of the notes and the commandments to a paragraph at the end where they issued a general warning that until the culprit was apprehended the population at large should be very careful about whom they interacted with.

It took them nearly two hours, but finally, the two ladies had a sheaf of pages comprising the inaugural “A Lady’s Guide to Mischief and Mayhem” column.

“I know it’s probably inappropriate to get pleasure from such a dark subject,” Caro said with a rueful smile, “but that was fun.”

“Life is hard enough that I think we must take our pleasure where it is offered,” Kate said pragmatically. “Thank you for agreeing to my mad invitation. Not only because this *was* fun but also because I think we can do some real good with our column.”

“I hope so.” Caro stood and stretched her back. “At the very least we’ll be offering a feminine perspective on what has thus far been a very male-centered discussion.”

“And if our writing can spur Scotland Yard into doing a better job and perhaps even catching the killer?” Kate asked. “I for one would not mind that in the least.”

“Hear, hear,” Caro said, gathering up her things. “I know it’s early to talk about our next column,” Kate said, rising from her chair, “but I think we should do a bit of investigating for it. Perhaps talk to the people at the places where the female victims were last seen.”

Caro beamed. “It’s never too early to talk about writing. And I think we will get along capitally because I was just about to make the same suggestion. When shall we start?”

Kate turned from locking her office door. “Is tomorrow morning too soon?”

“There it is up ahead,” Kate said the next morning as she and Caro, accompanied by Caro’s very large footman, made their way through the heart of Spitalfields. “The White Hart.”

It was their second stop of the day, which had begun with a trip to The Queen’s Arms in Whitechapel where their questions had been met with blank stares and a

decisive reluctance to answer them. Though they'd both donned their oldest, most unfashionable gowns for their errand, their cultured accents marked them as outsiders. That they'd also identified themselves as members of the press only made their task that much harder.

Undaunted, they'd hailed a hansom cab and had him drop them a street away from their destination so that they could get a feel for the neighborhood.

What they'd discovered so far, in the daytime at least, was a lively area teeming with people. There were children playing games in the street, a few of whom watched the unfamiliar faces with unashamed curiosity. A beggar, to whom both Kate and Caro gave a few pence each, greeted them as they reached the corner.

There was nothing that marked the area as any better or worse than other locations in the nation's largest metropolis. And yet the body of a murdered woman had been found only yards away last week. Unable to help herself, Kate glanced toward the alley where Elizabeth Creamer's body, riddled with stab wounds, had been found with a note about keeping the Sabbath day holy propped against her.

"You're to remain out here while we go inside, James," Caro said to the tall young footman who seemed to be more aghast at their surroundings than the ladies he accompanied were.

"But Mrs. Hardcastle made me promise," the young man protested.

"What my mother doesn't know won't hurt her," Caro said sharply. "Besides, I've brought my pistol."

If anything the man's face turned more alarmed.

Taking pity on him, Kate said, "I'll make sure she doesn't come to any harm, James. Wait for us here on the corner. We won't be long."

James nodded at her assurance and turned to stand near the corner outside the chophouse.

"Thank you," Caro said in an undertone. "I didn't realize how fastidious he'd become after being elevated to footman. I used to be able to rely upon him not to take Mama's threats too seriously when he was just a groom."

Kate felt a pang of pity for the young man. He very likely didn't wish to lose his position. And who could blame him?

"Shall we go inside?" she asked aloud.

Together they neared the door of the bustling chop house, where customers brushed against them as they exited the establishment and entering patrons crowded against them as they made their way inside.

The smell of grilled meat and unwashed bodies met them as they stepped into the dim interior, lit with gas lamps on the walls. It was clear at once that speaking with the barmaids would be difficult since even at this hour the place was crowded.

But Kate had an idea.

Taking Caro by the arm, she led her toward the back of the room where a door opened into the alley behind the building.

"I was hoping to at least get a chop out of this visit," Caro said as she followed Kate into the lane.

“We were never going to be able to speak to anyone in there,” Kate said with a shrug as she scanned the narrow area for signs of life. Just to their right a young woman wearing similar clothing to that of the servers inside The White Hart stood leaning against the back wall. “Look,” she said in a low voice to Caro.

Her eyes lighting up, Caro followed Kate as she walked toward the woman.

“Is it always this crowded before noon?” Kate asked as they approached.

The girl had been working for some time if the dampness of her hair and the grease stains on the front of her skirt were anything to go by. The cap she wore over her copper-colored hair was slightly askew and her eyes looked as if they’d seen far more in her young life than she should have.

Those same eyes, a watery blue, looked on the two newcomers with suspicion.

“Factory shift ends at ten, and today was payday.”

“That makes sense,” Kate said agreeably. “We’re from *The Gazette*. Would it be all right if we asked you a few questions?”

If anything the girl’s eyes narrowed even further. “Bout what?”

Kate decided to go ahead and ask without preamble. “Were you working the night Betsy Creamer was here?”

“Worked most nights when Bets was here. She was a regular customer.”

“So you knew her well, Miss—?” Kate left the question dangling in the hopes that the girl would give her name.

She was not disappointed.

“Lizzie Grainger,” she said with a frown. “No Miss. I ain’t puttin’ on airs.”

“And I’m Kate and this is Carol.” Kate gestured to her friend who had taken out her notebook and pencil from some hidden interior pocket of her gown. “Do you mind if we take notes?”

“Suit yourself.”

Thanking her, Kate continued her questioning. “So, Lizzie, you said that Betsy ate here frequently? Did you know her well?”

“Well enough. She didn’t deserve what happened to her, that’s for sure.” For the first time, Lizzie’s face showed real emotion. “She was a good girl. Who cares if she didn’t go to church? Not many around here that does.”

“Were you working the night before she was found?” Kate asked again. “It’s just that there was a story in one of the other papers that noted she’d said something about not having gone to church on Sunday in over a year?”

“Aye, I were here,” Lizzie said with a scowl. “I even saw the fella she left with though nobody from the police ever asked me about it.”

Kate and Caro exchanged a glance. There had been nothing in the papers about Betsy being seen with a man the evening before her death.

“Can you describe him for me?” Kate asked.

“He was a looker,” Lizzie said thoughtfully. “His clothes were fancier than we see around here, too.”

She gave a speaking glance toward Kate and Caro’s gowns. “Like yours.”

So much for their attempts to blend in, Kate thought. She realized now how foolish they’d been to think anything from their own closets would work. The gowns

were several years out of fashion, but there was no disguising how they'd been crafted by London's finest modistes.

"What about his hair?" Caro asked. "Light, dark?"

"It was a bit lighter than yours," Lizzie said with a nod at Kate. "And he was about as tall as you too."

"Did he have a beard?" Kate asked. "Or sideburns?"

Lizzie shook her head. "No, his face was clean."

Kate asked a few more questions but it was clear that Lizzie had told them all she knew about the man's appearance.

"So, you said Betsy left with him that evening," she said. "Was there anything unusual about that? Did Betsy often leave with men?"

Lizzie scowled. "She weren't no lightskirt. I told you she was a good girl. You're like all the rest trying to make it sound like she was asking for it."

Kate realized her error and did her best to make amends. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply your friend was asking for what happened to her. I only wish to find out if this was the first time you'd seen her leave with this man."

"It was the first and last time I seen the man at all," Lizzie said, seeming to accept Kate's apology. "And what worried me about it was the fact that Bets was almost falling down. I knew that gal for years and I never seen her drink enough to make her that bad off."

Could the man have put something in Betsy's food or drink?

Tears shone in Lizzie's eyes. "I should have gone after her. I would have if I wasn't up to me ears in customers and I need this job. But still, I should have gone after her. If I had she might be here now."

Kate reached out a hand to touch the girl's shoulder. "You had no way of knowing what would happen. And if you had followed them he might have killed you too."

Caro offered the girl her handkerchief and Lizzie blew her nose loudly into it. "Keep it," Caro said, her tone rising an octave when the barmaid tried to hand the soiled cloth back to her.

"Would it be all right with you if we put this information you've shared in the paper?" Kate asked. She would, of course, give Scotland Yard the description of the man with whom Betsy had left. "We won't use your name if you don't wish. But it would be a good idea for us to give your name to the police so that they can talk to you."

At the mention of the police, Lizzie scowled. "You didn't say you worked for them."

"We don't," Caro explained, "but if they haven't spoken to you before now it probably means they don't know about the man or what you saw. It might help them find Betsy's killer."

Grudgingly Lizzie nodded. "I s'pose it won't do no harm."

Thanking her, Kate and Caro asked a few more questions about how long Lizzie had worked at the chophouse and some information about her background.

By the time they made their way back through The White Hart and out the front door, they'd been gone for nearly an hour and the look of relief on James' face when they emerged was almost comical.

When he'd gone to hail them a cab, Caro turned to Kate with a gleam in her eye. "How did we find a bigger clue in this case than the Yard has found in all these months?"

"I don't know," Kate said with a shake of her head. "But we're going to put that information to good use in our next column. Even if this man Lizzie described isn't the killer, at the very least he was the last person to see Betsy alive. And if he is the killer, then I for one look forward to having something concrete to warn the vulnerable women of London about."

"And if the police object?"

"They missed their chance to interview Lizzie Grainger themselves," Kate said firmly. "We'll give them the information she gave us before we go to print, but they have no authority over me or my newspaper. And if they ask, I'll tell them so."

Chapter Two

"Sir, you'll want to see this."

Andrew Eversham looked up from the witness statement he'd been rereading for the umpteenth time.

There had to be something here that he was missing.

Already there were four dead at the hands of the so-called Commandments Killer and he hadn't as yet found a viable suspect.

It was hard to believe that before this case he'd been celebrated for his ability to solve cases that left other investigators scratching their heads in confusion.

"What is it, Ransom?" He looked up to see the younger man holding up a newspaper. Was it already time for the papers to be out? A glance at the clock on the wall told him it was nearing dawn and he heaved a sigh. He'd been working all night and yet had found nothing in any of the documents that might point him to the killer's identity

Taking the paper, still wet with newsprint from Ransom, he read the headline and uttered a curse. "Who the hell is this witness?"

A quick scan of the story revealed that one Lizzie Grainger had seen the latest victim, Betsy Creamer, leave with an unknown man on the night before she was found dead.

After nearly ten years on the job, he knew better than to take one newspaper article at face value, but *The London Gazette* was known for its scrupulous attention to

the facts—unlike some tabloids which sometimes invented stories out of whole cloth. The byline gave him another start. He'd never heard of either C. Hardcastle but if memory served, Bascomb was the surname of the paper's owner.

"We spoke with everybody who was at The White Hart on the night Betsy Creamer disappeared, Mr. Eversham." The chagrin on Paul Ransom's babyish face revealed all. "I don't know how this Grainger woman could have been missed."

Ransom might not know how it had happened, but Eversham did.

He should never have trusted Adolphus Wargrove to conduct the interviews with the employees at the chophouse. He'd known his fellow detective liked to cut corners, but he hadn't thought Dolly would be so sloppy with a case this important. That his colleague had also harbored jealousy over Eversham's successes over the years was well known in the Yard, but again, he hadn't thought the man would endanger lives in an effort to ensure this case went unsolved.

As if conjured by Eversham's thoughts, the man himself strode in.

"Bad break, yer lordship," Wargrove said with a grin that belied his words. "How can you have missed such an important witness?"

The nickname was one that the other man had bestowed upon Eversham as soon as he'd learned that Eversham's father, a country vicar, was a baron's son. Never mind that the family had long ago disowned the elder Eversham for marrying beneath him. Or that Andrew Eversham had never even met his grandfather or any of his extended family. He'd managed to dispel most of the suspicion from his fellow officers and underlings at the Yard through careful police work and success in some of the more

complex cases he'd been trusted with. And yet, Dolph Wargrove, who only saw Eversham's successes through the lens of his own failures, never missed an opportunity to remind Eversham that he didn't quite fit in among his colleagues.

It had taken every one of his years with the Yard to prove himself to those who doubted someone from his background could do the job, but he'd managed it.

And now, Wargrove would do his level best to make sure that this oversight of a key witness in one of the biggest cases Eversham had ever worked would be his downfall.

He would have liked to blame the omission entirely on Wargrove but Eversham had never been one to shirk responsibility. He'd known damned well when he delegated such an important task to a shoddy investigator like Wargrove he was taking a risk. But with half of his men down with the ague, he'd had no choice. He only hoped Darrow would understand.

Careful not to let his colleague see his rising temper—any sign of upset on his part would only give the man satisfaction, which Eversham was determined not to give him—he said with a calm he didn't feel, "I believe you took care of the interviews at The White Hart, didn't you?"

If he'd hoped for a show of remorse, Eversham was to be sorely mistaken.

"It's a poor craftsman who blames his tools, Eversham," Wargrove said with mock disappointment. "I thought you were the one renowned for your famous deductive skills. Shouldn't you have figured it out and directed your poor underlings accordingly?"

"Since when have you ever considered yourself anyone's underling, Wargrove?" Eversham couldn't help scoffing at the other man's false humility.

Unable to take any more of Wargrove's vitriol, Eversham rose from his desk. Turning to Ransom who'd been watching the interplay between his superiors with wide eyes, he said, "Come with me. We're going to speak with Lizzie Grainger before the rest of the papers get to her." What he decidedly did not need was for every last detail of her encounter with the likely killer to be plastered across every front page for the afternoon editions before he'd had a chance to glean any new details from her.

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Eversham," Wargrove said coolly. "I'll be doing that in a bit. After you bring me up to date on the details of the case."

Eversham felt a prickle of alarm at the nape of his neck. Before he could question Wargrove's words, the man continued, "Darrow's removed you from it altogether."

"Don't be absurd," Eversham spoke before he could stop himself. "Darrow wouldn't do that without informing me first."

"Go and speak to him yourself if you don't believe me," Wargrove said with a shrug. "And when you're done, I'll need that update as quick as you can. There's a lot of missed ground to cover here and I'd expect you won't want to delay justice for another minute."

Eversham's jaw ached from how hard he clenched his teeth. Without a backward glance, he made for the stairs and Chief Superintendent Max Darrow's office.

"It couldn't be helped," Darrow said even before Eversham could ask. Gesturing Eversham toward a chair, Darrow sighed when he chose to stand. "You know as well as I

do that as soon as the people lose confidence in the Met's handling of a case there's nothing we can do to restore it."

"But sir, I'm the only one who's been on the Commandments case since the beginning." Eversham tried not to sound aggrieved but he'd never been taken off a case in his ten plus years with the Yard. Not only was it a blow to his ego, but more importantly, if he was at fault he deserved a chance to make things right.

"And that's why it's time for a pair of fresh eyes," the older man's bushy brows lowered. "I didn't want to tell you this but there have been some inquiries from not only members of parliament but also the Home Office about this case. They want the Commandments Killer caught and they aren't willing to continue with you at the head of the investigation."

At that news, Eversham sat down heavily in the chair he'd earlier declined. He'd heard of other detectives falling victim to the ill winds of political pressure but he'd naively never expected such a thing to befall him.

The pity in Darrow's eyes was almost his undoing. "I know it's not what you wanted to hear, son, but my job's on the line here too. You've had a good run. Better than most. Let's see what Wargrove can do with it for the time being."

"But Wargrove?" Eversham didn't try to hide the disgust in his voice. He was no longer concerned about sounding petulant now that he knew there was no way to talk Darrow out of removing him from the case. "Sir, he's the worst kind of investigator. Slipshod and at times dangerously incompetent."

"That's enough, Eversham," Darrow snapped. "My mind is made up and criticizing your fellows won't keep you from demotion."

He longed to tell Darrow that it had been Wargrove's mistake that had led to the omission of Lizzie Grainger as a witness but he knew casting blame now would only sound churlish.

There was nothing for it now but to slink off and lick his wounds.

"What do I do in the meantime?" Eversham asked, rising from his chair.

"There's plenty to be done downstairs. Speak to Manton and ask if he's got files that need sorting."

If Darrow had spit in his face, Eversham could not have been more affronted.

And yet, there was nothing to do but take his medicine and wait for the storm to pass.

Ashamed and degraded, he left the superintendent's office. The sound of the door closing eerily like the click of imaginary leg irons, holding him in place while the investigation went on without him.

"This is the last one, my lady." Flora hoisted the third and final mailbag of the day onto Kate's desk at the newspaper.

In the week since the inaugural run of Kate and Caro's *A Lady's Guide to Mischief and Mayhem*, letters had poured into the newspaper offices from all over the country with suggestions as to the identity of the mystery man with whom Betsy Creamer was last seen.

And, much to both Kate and Caro's delight, they'd also received any number of notes from women thanking them for offering a feminine perspective on not only the Commandments murders themselves but also on crime in general. "For make no mistake, even when we aren't the ones what gets murdered," one Sussex woman had written, "we sure be the ones what has to clean up the mess."

If the accolades had been peppered with other, not so pleasant, missives whose authors objected to the very notion of women writing about such dark subjects, well, neither Kate nor Caro had been surprised. There were still a great many in England—male and female—who would never look kindly upon progress. Even when it contributed to the public good.

"Thank you so much, Flora," Kate told the bespectacled young woman. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I daresay you'd disappear beneath a collapsed pile of newspapers," Flora said wryly.

Glancing around at her office which was piled high with the last week's editions of various competing newspapers, Kate had to admit her assistant had a point.

"Will you be taking these to Miss Hardcastle's now?" Kate straightened a pile of letters she'd set aside for Caro to look at. "I'll have the next lot ready to go in the morning."

Before Flora could reply, Caro herself burst through the office door, an enormous Siamese cat clutched in her arms.

"I'm sorry to barge in," she said looking flustered. "But I was walking Ludwig when I heard the news and I came right over."

Upon closer inspection, the cat appeared to be wearing a diamond-studded collar with a leash attached. As if sensing the attention, he began to struggle in his mistress's arms and leaped to the ground.

Turning back to Caro, Kate asked, "What's happened?"

"There's been an arrest in the Commandments case." Caro's brown eyes, which were already large, were positively enormous with excitement. "I saw it on the front of the afternoon edition of the Times."

Whatever Kate had been expecting it wasn't that. "Are you sure?"

Caro reached into the large embroidered bag she used to carry Ludwig when he wasn't on a leash and pulled out a folded newspaper. "Here," she said, "see for yourself."

Taking the paper, Kate saw that just as Caro had said the headline declared that one John Clark had been arrested for the murders of Nate Spinks, Addy Carmichael, Leo Burke, and Betsy Creamer. Clark had fit the description of the man last seen with Betsy Creamer at The White Hart on the night before her body had been found. There was no further information about how he had been linked to the other murders, but Mr. Adolphus Wargrove of Scotland Yard would be available to take questions that evening at 6.

"We did it," Caro said emphatically. "Our interview of Lizzie Grainger led to the arrest of a killer."

But Kate would need to see the man for herself before she would be able to rest easy.

The news that Inspector Eversham had been replaced on the case by Adolphus Wargrove thanks to their column had been welcome, but from what Kate had been able to glean from the crime reporters in The Gazette's newsroom, Wargrove wasn't known for his investigative skills. And Kate found it suspicious that Wargrove had made an arrest only a week after he'd taken over the reins of the investigation.

"Maybe," she said aloud now to Caro. Seeing her friend's frown, she added, "I hope our work led the police to John Clark but I must admit I won't believe it until I hear more from Inspector Wargrove. "

Carol patted her arm. "One of us has to be the skeptical one, I suppose."

Kate laughed in spite of herself. If only Caro had known her before her marriage when she'd taken everyone at face value. The loss of her naivete had not been easy or painless. But she wouldn't dare go back for anything. She liked to think that her eye wasn't so much jaundiced as discerning.

Even so, she wouldn't be the one to rob Caro of her innocence.

"Come," she said aloud. "Let's go and see what Mr. Wargrove has to say for himself."

She moved to gather her things and when she turned back around it was to see that Ludwig was now sleeping peacefully in Flora's lap.

"How extraordinary," Caro said with a shake of her head. "Ludwig dislikes most people. But he adores you, Miss Morrison."

"I have this effect on most animals," the young woman said with a shrug. "I've become so used to it I forgot to warn you."

"Warn me?" Caro asked. "I'm thrilled. You have no notion how difficult it is to find someone to take care of him when I'm away."

"Are you attempting to abscond with my secretary, Caro?" Kate demanded with amusement.

To her credit, Caro looked rueful. "I won't steal her permanently. Only when you don't have work for her."

"I'll look after him while you go to Scotland Yard," Flora offered.

And with Ludwig's care disposed of, for the time being, Kate and Caro set out for Westminster and Scotland Yard.

They were several streets away when the traffic became such that the hansom cab they'd traveled in drew to a halt. A glance out the carriage door was enough to show them that the streets were teeming with people.

Clearly, they weren't the ones who'd come out to see what Mr. Wargrove had to say regarding the arrest of the Commandments Killer.

"I wish I'd thought to bring James," Caro said as they disembarked. "I may dislike being reminded of the fact that I'm not as strong as a man, but I'm not so foolish as to think it's not true."

"We should be all right so long as we stick together," Kate said, looping her arm through Caro's.

It took them nearly half an hour but finally, they were near the entrance to the Canon Row police station which housed one of the better-known divisions of the Metropolitan Police force. A platform had been erected to one side of the door, Kate supposed so that Wargrove would be able to be seen above the crowd.

"What a spectacle," she said in disgust. It wasn't that she begrudged the police a moment to declare to the populace that a dangerous killer had been caught. If the man was found guilty just as much fanfare would go into his hanging. But Kate had never been easy with that sort of gruesome display either.

"I suppose they're thankful it's as well attended as it is," Caro said wryly. "I'd hate to think they'd put in all this effort at pageantry only to have no one show up."

As they watched, several men climbed the steps leading up the side of the platform. A portly man with enormous side-whiskers and a world-weary air stepped forward, and called for quiet. It took some time for the crowd to settle but eventually, they did.

Finally, the older man introduced himself as Chief Superintendent Max Darrow. He said a few words about how hard his men had worked on the case. How glad he was that they'd finally nabbed the man responsible for the Commandments killings. How he was certain the man would be found guilty by the courts. When he was finished, he introduced Inspector Adolphus Wargrove, whose quick thinking had finally captured John Clark.

Kate looked on with curiosity at the policeman. He was a solidly built man with a barrel chest and wiry red side-whiskers. A receding hairline made him look older than

she suspected he actually was. But it was the man's words that she paid the closest attention to.

"I stand before you today, good people of London, as the man who captured the Commandments Killer," he said loudly. And, as it appeared he'd hoped, the crowd roared with approval. "Others tried before me," he said, "but I am the one who succeeded."

"This fellow is proud of himself, isn't he?" Caro shouted from beside her. "It was our interview with Lizzie Grainger that got him a description of the killer. Yet no mention at all of our assistance."

"We didn't do it for the thanks," Kate reminded her. Though she too was annoyed that Wargrove was behaving as if he had found John Clark all on his own. "Though they would be appreciated."

As Wargrove continued to speak, the crowd began to grow restless. More than once Kate was bumped from behind, and though she and Caro struggled to remain together, one strong jolt separated them for good.

"Caro," Kate shouted above the din, but her friend was swallowed up in the maelstrom and she had to fight to remain upright.

The feel of a strong arm about her waist had Kate shouting again, though this time with fear. Twisting to get a look at her assailant, she could see only a clean-shaven face and a ruffled head of light brown hair. "Unhand me!"

"Easy there, Miss Bascomb," her captor said in the same way one might soothe a startled horse. Before she could ask how he knew her name he continued. "Besides. If

anyone should be concerned here, it's me. I'm the one whose career you've managed to destroy."

This last he said calmly enough but she could hear the leashed anger in his tone.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, sir," Kate said haughtily. Whoever this man was he clearly had some quarrel with her and she wished to get away from him with all possible haste. And yet, with the crowd surging around them it was impossible to move away from him.

"Stop struggling," he said curtly. "No matter how much I would rather leave you to this mob, I'm still a sworn officer of the law and it's my duty to help you."

His words brought her up short. "Who are you?" But even as she spoke she knew what he would say.

"Inspector Andrew Eversham," he said confirming her suspicions. "Now stop talking so that I can get us out of here."

About the Author



Author: Manda Collins
Credit: courtesy of the author

Manda Collins grew up on a combination of Nancy Drew books and Jane Austen novels, and her own brand of Regency romantic suspense is the result. An academic librarian by day, she investigates the mysteries of undergraduate research at her alma mater, and holds advanced degrees in English Lit and Librarianship. Her debut novel, *How to Dance with a Duke*, spent five weeks on the Nielsen Bookscan Romance Top 100 list, was nominated for an RT Reviewer's Choice Award for best debut historical romance, and finaled in the Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence contest.

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