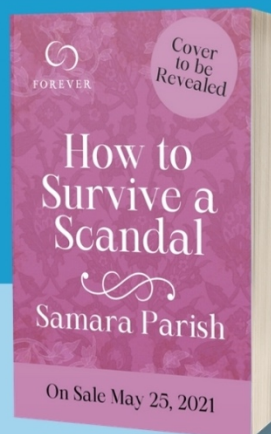
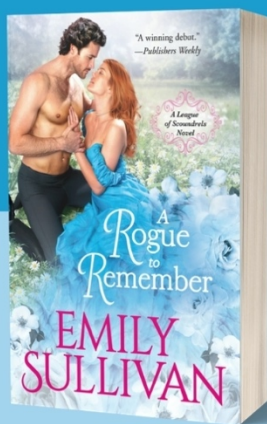


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Farah Heron



FOREVER

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CHAPTER ONE

For most urban dwellers, Sundays were a day of rest and relaxation. Not for Reena Manji. For her, Sundays required vigilance and a thick skin. She had long ago learned that the only way to survive the so-called fun-day was to erect a proverbial steel wall around herself. But today's wall hadn't prevented her deep sense of disappointment when she woke up to see Brian's betrayal. She approached him slowly in her kitchen. Three days of headway meant nothing. Today, Brian the Rye, her temperamental sourdough starter, hadn't risen at all.

Her shoulders fell. "Seriously, Bri?"

Her first mistake had been naming the starter after a man. After a dozen failed relationships, Reena felt confident that she knew next to nothing about the male segment of the species, except maybe that they often needed some tender coaxing to get them to behave. But she didn't have the time or energy to coddle Brian through his histrionics now.

So she parked him in the fridge, dressed quickly, and downed a cup of cold brew coffee. Sunday brunch with her family was nonnegotiable and would start in less than half an hour. A slight hangover from last night's nachos and rosé wine upstairs had Reena hitting snooze on her alarm one too many times, and she was now dangerously close to being late.

As she dropped her keys into her purse, ready to head out, she noticed an unfamiliar man lugging a bike backward up the exterior stairs to her building, while struggling with a six-pack of what looked to be imported beer.

Her head tilted as the mystery man reached the top of the stairs and attempted to wedge the bike on the narrow porch before opening the door into the building. He wore shiny black athletic shorts and a gray muscle shirt. No dreaded Lycra, which told Reena either he didn't take riding too seriously or had enough fashion sense to avoid those sorts of monstrosities. As he bent

to put the beer on the porch she was treated to a peek of toned thighs and...*yum*, a spectacular ass. Ripped arm muscles flexed as he lifted the bike to rest it on the railing around the porch.

A brown Captain America. *Nice*.

She stepped closer to the door—outwardly to help the man, but really to get a better look. Plus, Reena had questions.

How did he ride a bike while holding a six-pack?

Did he really live here, or (perish the thought) was he just visiting someone?

And most importantly, did his front come anywhere close to matching that fine back view?

Reena pushed the door open for him and finally got a glimpse of his face: smallish eyes, thick brows, and dark floppy hair. Plus, a meticulously trimmed douche-beard a touch too trendy for her tastes. What a shame. He did have that nice sweaty-man smell, though. God, it had been too long.

“Thank you,” he said as he passed through the door into the tiny hallway, leaving his bike outside. “I’m not sure I could have managed that on my own.”

Mystery man had a British accent! And a deep, almost aristocratic voice. Totally unexpected. He put the case of beer down in front of the door across from hers and took a key out of his pocket before turning to Reena. He stared wide-eyed for several seconds before speaking.

“Oh, shit. It’s you. You’re my neighbor. You live here?” he said, pointing toward her door.

“Yes...why?”

“You’re the one.” Dark brows raised as his mouth widened to a grin. “The goddess who makes my apartment smell like a bloody French boulangerie!”

Reena’s eyes widened. Goddess? She’d been called elfish, pixie, and even a sprite once by a Renaissance fair-type boyfriend, but Reena Manji was never a goddess.

“It’s driving me fucking mad!” Sexy-voice continued, tilting his head and winking. Kind of flirty, this one.

Reena reassessed her first impression of his face. When he was smiling, his dark eyes sparkled under the fluorescent lights of the narrow hallway, and his lips looked wide and expressive. And that voice? Kind of swoony. Couple that with the impressive physique, and Reena started to think today looked better. Nothing like a little British Isles to spice up this building. Some fun, flirty banter with a sexy Brit to boost her self-esteem each day. Plus, he liked the smell of her bread. Double swoon. And, she glanced at his hand resting casually on his doorknob, he appeared single—no ring.

“Thank you.” Reena beamed. “Baking bread is my hobby. I’ll bring you some one day. I have to head out now, but nice meeting you, neighbor.”

“The pleasure’s all mine.” That charming smile again. White, straight teeth. And...a dimple on his left cheek? Mr. Uninspiring quickly advanced to Mr. Pretty Damn Hot. He should never stop talking with that voice. Or smiling with those teeth. Thankfully, he hadn’t yet. “I’d love to take you out for a pint if you’ll share any extra baked goods lying around. Are you free tonight? I’m Nadim.” He held out his right hand to shake.

Ooh, did he just ask her out? “I’m Reena.” She shook his hand, taking note of his firm, confident grip. Nothing worse than a weak handshake.

A moment into their handshake however, Nadim's face fell. His smile dissolved and furrowed lines appeared on his forehead. What the hell?

Eyeing her intently, he snatched back his hand and ran it through his sweaty hair.

"Bollocks," he whispered. "You're Reena Manji?"

She spoke slowly. "Yes."

"Aziz Manji's daughter?"

Obviously. "Yes...why?"

"Fuck. You live here?" He tugged at the back of his neck. Finally meeting her eyes again, he smiled sheepishly. "I've made a terrible first impression. Any chance we could start over?"

Her eyes widened.

"Forget all my swearing, and pretend I'm showered and dressed respectably. I had this suit picked out for our first meeting," he continued. "And my hair was supposed to be clean. Also, you didn't see that beer. And I didn't call you a goddess...although, I meant it..." His voice trailed off, losing power as he seemed to shrink in the hallway.

"Why? How do you know my father?"

He smiled again, but this time the smile looked forced. It didn't quite reach his eyes. "I am here in Canada to work for him." He sighed. "Your father and my father just entered a business partnership together. And apparently...you and I are to be married." He shrugged, one side of his lip raising slightly. "Surprise?"

CHAPTER TWO

Reena closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Crap. Not this again. Her captivating stranger tuned out to be just the same as the countless other men her parents had dug out of the *Muslim Bachelors* “R” Us warehouse. She met his sheepish smile with a blank gaze for several seconds before mumbling something about being late and rushing down the stairs. Cute smile, sexy voice, and strong legs could not even come close to overriding this monstrous problem with the new hottie across the hall: Nadim worked for her father, and his presence in her life had been orchestrated by her parents. That was a great, big *no*. Yet another thing she couldn’t have because of them.

There were two things Reena could always count on during her weekly brunches at home. One, there would be soft puri. Puffy, pillowy rounds of fried flatbread ready to sop up spicy channa and yogurt. And two, her overinvolved parents would attempt to insert themselves into every aspect of her life, all while her younger sister, Saira, managed the impossible feat of being both passive-aggressive and self-involved in the same breath. Reena attended these brunches religiously for the puri, not for the quality time with her family.

And, as expected, the heady scent of strong chai and spices eased her annoyance as she walked into the house after driving the ten minutes while fantasizing about being an orphan. She inhaled deeply as she removed her shoes. *This*. This was why she decided to come today. Nothing like her mother’s cooking to ease stress, even stress induced by her parents themselves.

Of course, Reena was deluding herself. She hadn’t *decided* to come to brunch for the puri any more than she had *decided* to come for the family judgments disguised as scintillating

conversation. The word *decided* implied free will. And when it came to family, free will was nothing but a convenient illusion Reena created for her own sanity.

She operated under the assumption that giving in to these insignificant demands on her life would trick them into leaving her alone with the big stuff. It sort of worked. She'd stood her ground on *some* big decisions. Like her decision *not* to work in the family real-estate development business. Her decision *not* to live at home, despite being single. And her controversial decision several months ago to insist her sister move out of her apartment. But it became harder to make her parents understand she had no interest in any of the approved Muslim men they had been parading in front of her since she reached the age of twenty-five. Including this new overseas model.

But at least the puri helped make up for this emotional torture. She took another from the platter and added it to her plate heaped full of channa masala.

"Reena," her father said, pouring himself more chai, "I don't know if I told you, but my friend Shiroz from Tanzania is investing in the Diamond building project. His son Nadim has come from Dar es Salaam to work with me. I've put him in your building."

Dar es Salaam, Reena's parents' hometown, was the largest city Tanzania, a country with an active and vibrant minority Gujarati-Indian population. The Diamond project was her father's biggest real estate development to date—a large retail/residential building north of Toronto. She knew there were foreign investors from Africa involved but hadn't heard about the involvement of any flirty beefcakes who sounded more British than Tanzanian.

"I hope you will make Nadim feel welcome. He's a very smart man. Graduated from the London School of Economics. He's religious and well-mannered, and has a promising future ahead of him. You two have much in common."

Proof that Dad knew nothing about his middle child. No one acquainted with the real Reena would call her well-mannered. Her sweetness ran surface-level only. And clearly, her father didn't know Nadim too well either. The man swore like a Manchester United hooligan and invited her out for a pint upon first meeting, all while holding a six-pack of beer. Reena had nothing against drinking, as evidenced by her low-key hangover most Sunday brunches, but in her religious Muslim father's opinion, *well-mannered* and *respectful* meant no alcohol.

Also, Nadim seemed a bit of a player—winking at her, calling her a goddess, and asking her out before even knowing her name. Reena enjoyed players for a good time every now and then, so long as she recognized what they were. But it was troubling that Nadim asked her out when he knew he was supposed to marry his boss's daughter (the fact that he unknowingly flirted with his fiancée seemed beside the point.)

Saira smirked across the table while stirring a green smoothie. "Sounds a little ambitious a match for Reena, don't you think? He's probably completely bald, like that architect guy you dug out for her."

"Saira!" Dad said, his hand up to quiet his youngest daughter. Wow. Was Dad standing up for Reena?

Reena herself didn't bother glaring at Saira. Didn't even glance at her. Just mopped up her channa with that last bit of puri before licking the masala off her fingers. It wasn't worth it.

Saira was currently smack dab in the middle of a year from hell, and her coping strategy of taking subtle jabs at her older sister seemed to be working for her, so Reena kept her mouth shut. It was the least she could do after Saira lost her job and came home to cry to her fiancé Joran, only to get an eyeful of Joran's naked ass above his cousin visiting from his hometown in

Holland, or something. Saira wasn't Reena's favorite person, but she wouldn't wish that sequence of events on her worst enemy.

"Reena, I know you will be on your best behavior with Nadim, and make the *man* feel comfortable at *home*," Mum said, smiling. "Your father has known Shiroz Uncle since primary school. They are already like family."

Reena tensed. It was impressive the way Mum could say *marry this man*, without actually saying *marry this man*. Even if the proposed groom himself hadn't leaked her parents' intentions himself, she would have known what they were up to.

"Mum..." Reena groaned. "I just—"

"Na!" Mum snapped. "No more excuses. You're *thirty-one*, beti. No more single in the city...it's time for you to settle down! Look at Khizar! He's having twins! Even Saira was engaged, and when that didn't work, she found Ashraf!"

"Seriously, Mum? What do you mean, *even*?" Saira snapped.

Mum smiled, patting Saira's hand. "Shush. Reena is older than you. It's her turn to find someone successful." Mum looked at Reena with a proud smile. "Ashraf is management!"

Technically. Reena was happy that her sister had put her life back together and was dating again, but managing a mall kiosk selling prepaid cell phone plans hardly made Ashraf upwardly mobile.

"We're getting older," Mum continued. "I don't want to worry about my children anymore. Who will take care of you when we're gone?"

Reena had no idea if Mum realized how ridiculous she sounded. This wasn't Regency England and she was no Mrs. Bennett, desperate to marry her children off well to prevent

financial ruin. How the hell could a beer-drinking, douche-bearded, bicycle-dragging flirt be Reena's answer to avoiding spinsterhood?

"Promise me, Reena. Don't be like with the other ones. Promise me you will make an effort with Nadim," Mum pleaded.

Reena forced a smile. "Anything else going on?" she asked. Deflect and distract. Reena wouldn't make promises she had no intention of keeping.

"I heard on the Facebook site that Salim Shah lost a small fortune on a hotel deal gone bad," Dad said.

Holy crap, *the* Facebook site?

"Dad, since when are you on Facebook?" Reena made a mental note to switch her profile to unlisted.

"I've joined a new group there. Ismaili business networking group." Keeping tabs on his professional rivals was Dad's favorite pastime.

But Reena was trying very hard not to be as judgmental as her parents. Time to change the subject again. "What's that?" She pointed to a glossy black bag on the sideboard.

"Oh, it's for you." Mum reached behind her to get the bag and handed it to Reena. "I was in Zipporah yesterday and they had these lovely rollerball perfumes. I bought you a langi langi one." She handed the bag to Reena.

"Sephora, I'm assuming." Reena took it and peeked at the small glass bottle in it. It was ylang-ylang essential oil fragrance. Langi langi was the name used for ylang-ylang flowers in Dar es Salaam, and Mum knew Reena had always loved the scent. It was a generous gesture...but Reena had to wonder...

“You know in the summertime all of Dar es Salaam smells like langi langi. There is even a big tree in the courtyard of the Jamatkhana in town. I’m sure the smell will remind Nadim of home.”

There it was. The gift was to lure the man in with a siren scent. Reena opened the bottle. It did smell amazing.. She’d been to the Dar es Salaam Jamatkhana, the Ismaili Muslim place of worship, and the entire courtyard was filled with huge trees with fragrant blooms. This scent totally reminded her the warm tropical breezes there. She sighed, closing it and putting it in her bag. “Thanks, Mum.”

“Now tell me, Reena,” Dad said, “is there any more news about your company hiring a director of finance? It’s high time you took a management role. If not at Railside, I am sure we can find a company with more growth opportunities.”

Reena finished chewing her channa before answering. “I’ll definitely inquire, Dad, but I have no interest in leaving Railside right now. I love it there,” she said, an enthusiastic smile plastered to her face. It was a lie. She hated her job. In fact, she hated working in finance altogether. But if Dad knew that, she’d once again get grief for insisting on this line of work instead of working in the family business. She wanted that like she wanted to lick a metal pole in January.

Reena had enough of a life outside of work that she didn’t care that she didn’t find her work fulfilling. But Dad would never ask her about that life—in his eyes, only her work mattered. Not hobbies. Not bread. She couldn’t let on she’d been seriously thinking of enrolling in a night school program in artisan bread baking, hoping it would temper the monotony of the day job. That conversation would be weird—*hey, Mum and Dad, my finance job is sucking out*

my soul every day, so I'm draining my savings to take an insanely expensive class to learn to make better baguettes and a really good pain de campagne.

“Well I’d hate to hear that your career is stagnated,” Dad said. “You know, at your age I had—”

“Saira has news,” Mum interrupted as she passed the dish of channa to Reena to refill her plate.

Saira smiled. “Mum, I wasn’t going to tell Reena yet! It’s still not confirmed.”

Reena prepared herself to hear Saira’s fabulous news. It would be fabulous—in the Manji house bad news came whispered in hushed voices in darkened rooms, not told at the brunch table. If told at all. Maryam Aunty had been admitted to hospice before anyone told Reena she had cancer.

Straightening her spine, Reena took the bait. “What’s going on, Saira?”

Saira’s brows shot up as her smile widened. “Remember Janice? From high school? She works PR for publishers, now. She saw my posts on the Nourish blog and thought I should write a cookbook. She’s helping me with a book proposal!”

Reena blinked. Her sister was aiming to get published? A cookbook?

“Clean living is so big now, and Janice thinks I can sell my Indian take on it.”

Reena took another puri and squeezed the whole flatbread in her mouth at once, cheeks expanding like a hamster eating a burrito.

“Careful, Reena,” Saira said. “That’s how many puri now? You don’t need all that refined wheat.”

Sage advice from her sister. The puri was now a gummy, doughy ball in her mouth. She took a long gulp of lukewarm chai to wash down the bread before speaking. “That’s great, Saira. Good luck.”

“Yeah, isn’t it amazing! My therapist thinks it will be healing for me.”

Reena drained her chai, wishing for whiskey in it. Healing. That was why she couldn’t be angry at Saira. Saira needed this more than Reena did. And technically, no one in the family knew it was Reena’s almost lifelong fantasy to write her own cookbook. And they didn’t know just how close she’d come. That a small independent publisher had approached her and asked her to pitch a project when her cooking blog was still going strong. But the book deal fell through thanks, in part, to Saira. Reena wasn’t over her dream crashing and burning, and having the very person who lit the match now rub it in her face felt a bit much.

She ate another puri, chewing until the gummy mass almost choked her.

“Reena, you should be proud of your sister. Look how well her life has turned around,” Mum said.

After hitting some serious rock bottom, Reena *was* glad Saira had a job at Nourish, her favorite health food store. Was glad her depression was being managed with professional help. Even glad Saira had a new relationship. But being glad about Saira writing a cookbook? She tried to be a good person, but Reena wasn’t Mother Teresa.

“Reena, did you hear Khizar is being considered for junior partner in his firm?” Dad asked. No surprise he changed the subject—a cookbook project couldn’t come close to the prestige of his eldest child being promoted in one of the capital’s biggest accounting firms.

And that’s when Reena decided she had done her filial duty for the week. Time to get the hell out of this house. She had already heard about Khizar’s likely promotion—he’d texted her

about it before he even told their parents. But any conversation with Mum and Dad about her brother's success would very quickly delve into the type of firstborn hero worship that usually left Saira in tears and Reena wondering if a thirty-one-year-old could emancipate from her parents. True, Khizar always outshined his younger sisters, with a great job, a loving wife and not one, but *two* babies on the way (trust Khizar to take overachievement way too far). But Khizar also had the distinction of being the nicest of the three of them. Reena tried to avoid the sibling rivalry her parents seemed to want to instill, lest she start to resent the only member of her family she really trusted. She knew her limits—she already felt mighty small because of Saira's cookbook news. Khizar's absolute winning at adulting might be a bit too much to pile on top of that heap of self-loathing.

Reena mopped up the final puddle of channa on her plate with the last bit of her puri. "I didn't notice the time." She took her plate to the kitchen, rinsed it, and placed it in the dishwasher. "I have to feed...Brian." Crap. That was a terrible excuse.

"Brian? You got a dog?" Saira asked.

Mum snapped her head toward the kitchen. "Keeping dogs is haram in Islam. You can't have a dog."

"I don't have a dog." Reena sighed. "Brian is a sourdough starter. A rye bread one. Get it? Bri the rye?"

Mum's nose wrinkled. Reena needed to get out of this house before Dad and Saira joined in voicing their displeasure about Reena's obsession with bread.

Saira's face puckered in the exact expression Mum had just sported. Uncanny, really. "I guess rye flour is better than all that refined wheat, but maybe you're taking this little hobby too far?"

“Noted, Saira. Thanks for brunch, Mum and Dad. See ya later.” Reena rushed out before someone else could drag her through the mud anymore. And she really did need to feed Brian.

CHAPTER THREE

Twenty minutes later Reena stood in her kitchen, thinking about how to save poor Brian. She lifted the jar and held it up to the midday sun. Some minuscule bubbles dotted his grayish surface, but those were probably just regular bacteria fermentation—not yeast development. Sue, her other starter, tripled last night, with large airy bubbles and a pleasant acidic smell when Reena lifted it to her nose. Sue always behaved. Brian had always been tricky. Her first rye starter, he preferred spring water instead of filtered. Organic rye flour instead of regular bulk-store stuff. And even then, like this morning, sometimes he still refused to do what Reena expected of him. She wasn't going to give up on him yet, though—she'd try increasing his feedings before taking drastic efforts.

After carefully weighing equal amounts of rye flour and spring water, she stirred them into the jar. As she fastened a rubber band around it, her phone rang and the screen lit up with the knowing scowl of her best friend holding a blackberry-lavender cupcake. Reena had snapped the picture months ago, when Amira had been ranting about sexism in cupcake shops. Her expression had been so quintessentially *Amira* that Reena wanted to preserve it for eternity.

“Meer,” Reena said instead of hello, “remind me again why distancing myself from my toxic family means still going to family brunch?”

“You're supposed to distance yourself *emotionally*, Ree. We're Indian, it's impossible to distance physically. What'd they do this time?”

“The usual. Dad found me yet another husband prospect. I left as they started their ode: *Khizar the Perfect and His Auspicious Promotion.*”

“Khizar's not really perfect, you know. Remember the time he tried to make a salad and burned the lettuce?”

Reena snorted. She'd forgotten that one. Smiling, she closed the jar of sourdough.

Amira had been Reena's best friend since grade two, and their friendship lasted through tween drama and high school fights over cute boys and loaned makeup. Amira had left town a few times over the years, twice for university, and again about two months ago for a job and to live with her boyfriend, and Reena had not forgiven her friend for abandoning her yet again. They still spoke daily, though, and probably always would.

"How was Saira?" Amira asked.

Reena sighed. "She's pitching a cookbook to publishers."

"She's not."

"She is. A clean-eating cookbook." Reena cringed as she placed Brian on his perch on the windowsill.

"The woman who wrote a manifesto against gluttony in food blogs that directly attacked her own sister's livelihood shouldn't get to make money writing recipes."

Reena didn't want to get into this again with Amira—who would no doubt use it as proof that it was time for Reena to revive her old blog. Uncharacteristically, though, Amira did what Reena usually did—she changed the subject. "Who'd your dad try to set you up with this time?"

"Actually, this is pretty funny. He's my new neighbor." Reena told her friend about the brown Captain America (Captain Tanzania?).

"So, your dad moves a buff Tanzanian guy with a British accent and a love of bread next door, and this is a problem for you?" She paused. "Your parents would never force you to marry this guy, would they?"

"No. Not force, but yes, strongly encourage. And then I'd never hear the end of it from them. Mum still claims she found Nafissa for Khizar, remember?"

“Yes, and Khizar and Nafissa have a beautiful love that transcends time and space! Why wouldn’t you want that?”

Reena rolled her eyes as she put away the rye flour. Her previously cynical friend had gone all rainbows and butterflies since she fell in love with a small-town lumberjack-type musician.

“I don’t want what Khizar and Nafissa have,” Reena said. “They had to leave town to get away from the gloating and intrusion from Mum and Dad. I know my parents will intrude no matter who I’m with, but I’d like to minimize their role in my relationships.” Reena shuddered. “They’ve been looking for a suitable match for me for years. Clearly, they have no faith I’m capable of finding someone on my own. Believe me, it’s for their best interests, not mine.”

“What’s a suitable match? Someone in your tax bracket?”

“No. Someone in theirs.”

“Okay maybe giving in to your parents’ matchmaking isn’t the best idea, but I do think it’s time you got back on the dating horse. In fact, that’s why I called. Duncan and I have decided to have a housewarming party two Saturdays from now. It will be full of sexy male musicians.”

Reena groaned. Not her best friend, too? Why the hell did everyone insist on throwing men her way lately? Amira knew Reena was on a dating break.

Reena’s twelve ex-boyfriends and countless hookups and casual dates were not a source of shame for her. But her sister’s engagement implosion had felt like a wake-up call.

In the last three months, Reena had been there to watch several friends fall stupidly in love with men who were so perfect for them that bluebirds practically followed the happy couples wherever they went. Another friend was even proposed to by his boyfriend in a tearful serenade in front of an audience of hundreds. Reena wanted that. All of that. Not necessarily the

huge, singing spectacle or to be followed by woodland creatures, but she wanted the *certainty* that their feelings were *real*. And *real* feelings could not start with meddling parents, or friends, for that matter.

Unwanted man-buffet aside, a weekend with her best friend did sound lovely. “Can I come early?”

“Yeah, come Friday. You can help cook.”

Reena hung up the phone with a smile. She loved having something to look forward to, and a weekend in the country sounded perfect. The fact that she could use it as a reason to skip Sunday brunch also helped. She’d play her deflect-and-distract game with any matchmaking attempts, and just engage in a bit of light flirting and admiring of Duncan’s friends. Because although she knew her Amira meant well, Reena felt positive she was not ready to ride any horses anytime soon.

<ORN_SB>

Reena’s heavy limbs and pounding head slowed her as she walked up to her building Monday evening. It had been yet another brutal day at the office. All day, just numbers. Reports. Spreadsheets. Sales data. Numbers, Numbers, Numbers.

Letting herself into the building, she noticed her friend Shayne on the stairs heading to the second floor. A Black man with the most enviable sense of style of all Reena’s friends, he was wearing a stunning purple brocade vest with ripped jeans and a T-shirt today. An outfit only Shayne could pull off.

“Reena! Haven’t seen you in a bit.” He stepped back down and hugged her. “Come catch up at Marley’s. I picked up this amazing barrel-aged saison beer and triple crème Brie. We’re celebrating.” Marley, aka Mahreen, was Reena’s cousin, and Shayne was Marley’s best friend.

Marley lived in one of the top-floor units, and Shayne officially lived in a nearby basement apartment with roommates, but he preferred Marley's couch most nights.

Reena smiled. "What are we celebrating?"

He raised one manicured eyebrow. "That Monday is over? I don't even know. Today felt like a day and a half, and I need a drink. Plus, it's always a good time for cheese."

Good point. "Let me change and I'll come up. I have some bread and plums I can contribute."

Ten minutes later, Reena was curled up on Marley's oversize white couch with a glass of craft beer in one hand and a slice of her own sourdough topped with Brie, thinly sliced golden plums, and a light drizzle of honey in the other. Heaven. Like Shayne, she needed this drink.

"Reena, who is the new haircut on your floor?" Marley asked from her perch on a massive round armchair.

"Nadim. He's working for my dad."

Marley sipped her beer. Reena had spent most of her life intimidated by the beautiful cousin with the Victoria Beckham smile. Tall, with large brown eyes, high cheekbones, full lips, and thick, long, straight brown hair, she looked polar opposite to Reena's short-and-cute vibe. Marley worked in the fashion industry, selling high-end designer clothes to desperate city-wives, and she had mastered aspirational flawlessness. But Reena had learned that beneath Marley's cool perfection lay a sweet shyness with people she didn't know too well.

Shayne also worked in the fashion industry—as a part-time menswear sales associate, while he built up his portfolio as a fashion photographer. He had been a huge help to Reena with her blog and taught her how to capture and edit the pictures that took it to the next level.

“Shayne’s been stalking the guy since he first heard him speak. He has a thing for accents,” Marley said, narrowing her eyes at Shayne.

Shayne nodded. “He’s quite striking. Very intense eyes. And that voice...I wonder if he’d let me take his picture. Do you know if he’s into men?”

Reena curled her legs under her. “Shayne, did you invite me up here to get me to dish up on the new neighbor?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “But I brought beer and cheese, so I know you’re fine with it.”

Reena laughed. Her friends knew her well. She took another slice of bread and topped it with the cheese and plums. “I don’t know if Nadim is into men. I hope he’s not *only* into men. It would be a bit of an issue, since he’s supposed to marry me.”

“What?” Marley said, laughing.

“Yep. My father and his father are hoping we’ll marry and combine the families and business interests. I am assuming my hand in marriage was a bargaining chip in their deal.”

“Jesus, Reena!” Shayne said, his expressive eyebrows reaching unparalleled heights. “An arranged marriage!”

“No,” Reena said. “A *facilitated* marriage. They won’t force me to marry him, but they will lean on me heavily. Mum may have already bought a mother-of-the-bride sari.”

“Still though...” Shayne shook his head. “But it could be worse. Maybe you should take one for the team? Can you imagine that voice in the bedroom?”

Reena rolled her eyes. “I’m not marrying anyone my parents choose, no matter how sexy his accent. They’re already way too involved in my life as is! I’d very much like to pick my *own* husband. Plus, the man’s a mystery! He’s not even from England, but only went to university there. I think he’s a player. All flirty and charming—”

“You have an issue with him flirting with the woman he is supposed to marry?” Marley asked.

“Yes, because he didn’t know who I was then. He practically cheated on me. With me!”

Marley laughed. “I met him yesterday when I took out my recycling,” she said. “He seemed perfectly respectable. Nice suit, too. Topshop, I think.”

Reena poked a fingernail into the crust of her bread. She didn’t want to talk about Nadim anymore. She wanted to ignore the awkward fact that he lived too close to avoid. She took a bite, relishing the sensation of the acidic fruit cutting through the creamy cheese. The sourdough flavor was there, but this wasn’t her best bread. She had been distracted and overproofed the loaf last night, resulting in less caramelization on the crust. Oh well, lesson learned—don’t get sucked down the rabbit hole of looking at bread-baking courses online while actually baking bread.

“What’s going on with you? You still seeing that Celeste girl?” Reena asked Marley.

“Technically,” she said. “but not really. She’s been working nights all week and I’m on the early shift.”

“They’ve mastered simultaneous orgasms on the phone, though. So, there’s that,” Shayne said matter-of-factly before sipping his drink.

“Shayne!” Marley said, before falling back on her seat in a fit of giggles. Beer always affected Marley this way, and Reena found it adorable. She couldn’t believe she had once found her cousin cold and distant.

“Hey, this is a no-secrets zone.” Shayne smiled. “I also have some promising prospects for regular simultaneous orgasms. I hooked up last night. Anderson Lin. What a name, right?”

And he always goes by Anderson, never Andy. Oh, and Reena, you'll love this, he works at FoodTV."

Reena sat up straight. "Really? Can he introduce me to the Barefoot Contessa?"

Shayne laughed. "Unlikely. He's a mere production assistant, and this isn't the Hamptons. Anderson is *young*." Shayne sighed happily. "I love them fresh out of college. So pure."

"You shouldn't just be meeting TV chefs, Reena, you should *be* one," Marley said. "I can't get over how good your stuff is. And you teach so well—my aloo gobi would be nothing without you."

Shayne smiled. "Anderson did mention a search or contest or something they're doing for new talent. I didn't get the details because that's when I noticed he had the tiniest earlobes I'd ever seen. Seriously, they were like little Tic Tacs attached to his ears. I half expected them to be peppermint flavored, but sadly...no."

Reena snort-laughed before taking a long sip of beer. "You're a doll, Shayne, and I'm happy you have some tasty lobes to suck on, but I have no interest in cooking on TV."

"Why not? This is perfect for you," Marley said. "At least get the details. Shayne, call him now."

Shayne recoiled. "Oh, my god, I can't do that."

"Why not?" Marley asked.

"I called him first thing this morning, I couldn't resist—I *love* sexy sleepy voices. So now"—he checked his watch—"I can't call him for at least thirty-six hours. Minimum. Forty would be better, but I absolutely cannot go past forty-two."

"What?" Reena frowned. "Why?"

Shayne tilted his head knowingly. “Seriously, Reena? I know you’ve sworn off dating, but it hasn’t been *that* long. I’m in the most delicate time. Going from hookup to relationship is the hardest maneuver in modern love.”

“I’ve had twelve boyfriends and I never followed such strict rules.”

Shayne raised one brow. “Exactly. Twelve *ex*-boyfriends.”

Reena winced. It was true, but she didn’t need it pointed out.

Marley picked up Shayne’s phone from the coffee table and thrust it at him. “Shayne, you’re being ridiculous. Just call him.”

Shayne rolled his eyes at Marley. “Fine. But if I get friend-zoned, your vintage McQueen scarf is mine. I’m doing this privately.”

He took the phone into Marley’s room and shut the door.

Marley chuckled. “Honestly, I’ve never seen him like this. He’s so smitten with this guy that he’s talking out of his ass.”

“Well, I hope we don’t mess up his chances. I’m pretty sure I don’t want to do this FoodTV thing anyway.”

“Why not? You’d be great at this. You’ve done other contests, haven’t you?”

“Not for a while.”

“Well, let’s hear what Shayne has to say before you make a decision.”

Reena smiled blandly, but she couldn’t imagine any more information that would tempt her. After everything that had happened to her blog, she did not want to be put in the spotlight again in the food world.

Ten minutes later, Shayne wordlessly sat back down on the couch, eyes glistening with excitement.

“Well?” Marley asked, leaning forward on the couch.

“Anderson...” Shayne sighed and fanned his face with his hand. “I just absolutely can’t with him. You know what he just told me? He said I was the first person who’d ever—”

“Shayne, the contest!”

He seemed to snap out of his daze. “Right. Yes.” He scanned the room, then grabbed a pad of paper from the coffee table. “Here...this is complicated, you’ll want to take notes.” He tossed the paper and a pen at Reena. “So, this is the most *Reena* thing that I’ve ever heard about, and if you don’t it, I will no longer be able to gloat that my friend is the savviest blogger out there. This thing is made for you.”

“Yes...but Shayne, I’m not actually a blogger anymore. I—”

“Ah!” He put his hand out to stop her. “Just listen and trust, Reena. So, it’s called the FoodTV *Home Cooking Showdown*. It’s not a search for a new network host, per say, but the winners get a one-off special. The buzz is they don’t want to commit to promising a show, but are using the contest as an unofficial open call for new talent.”

Shayne frowned and poked the still blank paper in Reena’s hand. “You’re not writing!”

She rolled her eyes, but wrote FoodTV *Home Cooking Showdown* on the sheet.

“How do you apply?” Marley asked.

“You do an audition video to get in. They pick, like eight contestants or something out of the auditions. Then the contestants make two more videos by themselves from home. And I think they get to go to the FoodTV studios? I kinda zoned out then because I was imagining Anderson wearing one of those headset things on set...I want to play director and innocent ingenue with him...”

“Shayne,” Marley said, laughing.

“Right. So, it’s public voting, not expert judges. Because really, it’s about the personality and what the food looks like, not the taste, or anything.”

“This sounds like a reality show, Shayne.” Reena had no interest in that. None.

He nodded enthusiastically. “Yes!”

“I don’t—”

Shayne grinned. “Here’s the inside scoop that only someone who is *intimately* acquainted with someone on the production team would know—they are really hoping for a bit of diversity in the contestants. They want to showcase all the different food cultures in Canada. They are not going to pick any run-of-the-mill Mike and Michelle McBasic. I think you’d be a shoo-in.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Because I’m brown?”

Shayne nodded. “Yeah, and because you’re the best cook I know. And you’re cute as shit, too. Marley can fluff up your hair a bit and put you in something sexy. And believe me, you *want* the grand prize.”

The more he said, the more Reena was sure that she didn’t want to do this, but Shayne’s expression was so annoyingly smug, she wanted to wipe it off his face. “Okay, fine. I’ll bite. What’s the grand prize?”

He smiled broadly. “Get your pen ready...the *Home Cooking Showdown* is in conjunction with the Asler Institute of Culinary Arts. The winner gets a ten thousand-dollar scholarship.”

Damn.

Reena stilled. That changed everything. The artisan bread course was at the Asler Institute. With that scholarship, she could finally enroll. Hell, she could take the whole baking and pastry arts program.

She bit her lip. Soooo tempting.

“You have to do it, Reena,” Marley said. “Seriously. We’ll help. Shayne can film it, and I’ll help with your hair and clothes. You don’t need help with the cooking part. We’ll make sure you get this, Reena. No one deserves—”

“Cool your jets, Marl,” Shayne interrupted with one hand up. “There is one glitch. There is something Reena doesn’t have that she would need as a contestant.”

“Oh? And what’s that?” Reena asked.

Shayne smiled his knowing, mischievous grin, which Reena knew not to trust. She wasn’t going to like whatever he had to say, and he relished it.

“What you need, my dear friend, is a husband.”

About the Author



Author: Farah Heron
Photo: James Heron

After a childhood raised on Bollywood, Monty Python, and Jane Austen, **Farah Heron** wove complicated story arcs and uplifting happily-ever-afters in her daydreams while pursuing careers in human resources and psychology. She started writing those stories down a few years ago and never looked back. She writes romantic comedies and women's fiction full of huge South Asian families, delectable food, and most importantly, brown people falling stupidly in love. She lives in Toronto with her husband, two children, and a rabbit. She is considering getting a cat.

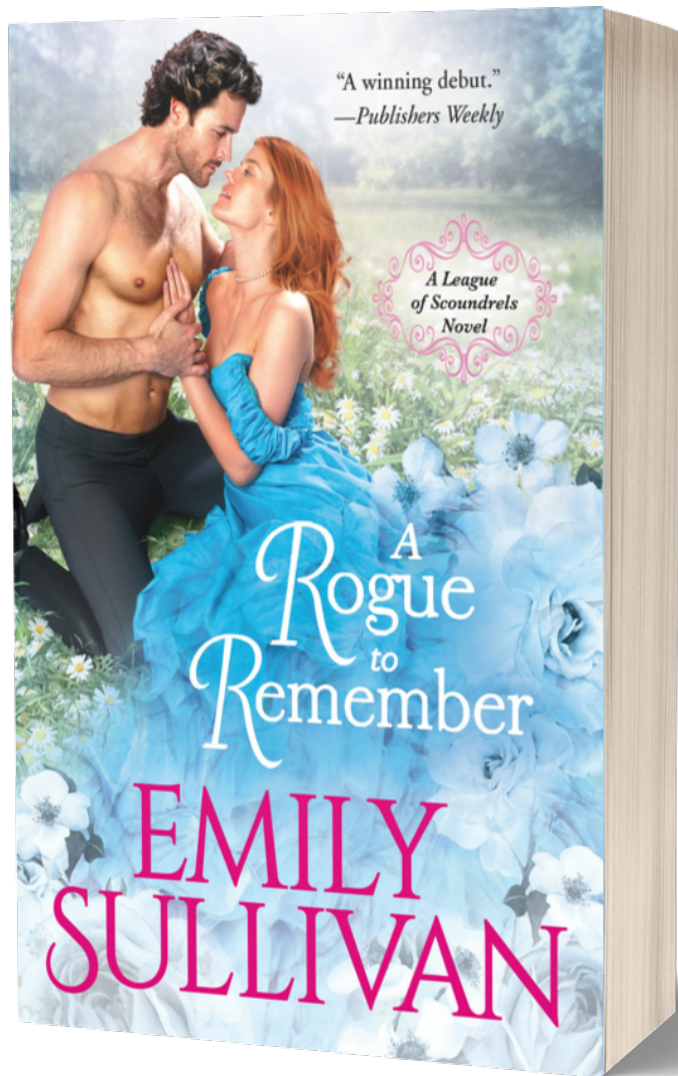
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A ROGUE TO REMEMBER
A League of Scoundrels Novel
by Emily Sullivan



FOREVER

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

~Oscar Wilde

Chapter One

1897

A village near Pistoia, Italy

I have all the time in the world now.

It still felt strange to Lottie Carlisle to have every day stretch endlessly before her, especially with the season starting in a few weeks. But there was no rigid schedule to follow now. No social calls to uphold, no days at home to maintain, no balls, or picnics, or musical entertainments. No more stilted conversations with vapid young men trying their hardest to talk about anything other than her money. And, especially, no more sneering matrons and supposed friends asking why, oh *why* couldn't she make her poor old uncle happy and find a husband. The man did worry so.

Poor old Uncle Alfred indeed.

Now on the cusp of his sixth decade, Sir Alfred Lewis was considered a veritable pillar of London society, a renowned collector of antiquities whose travels as a young man had once taken him to nearly every corner of the Empire. He had even published a popular memoir on the subject. This garnered him the admiration of many and a knighthood from the queen, but very few knew that Uncle Alfred was also involved in the highest levels of government. He delighted in playing the role of a mild eccentric in public while ruthlessly protecting the Crown's interests in private. Even Lottie barely knew the full extent of his activities—and never would.

Lottie paused to assess the canvas before her. She had been trying to capture the soft, golden light of the Tuscan hillside that surrounded her for days now, and not once had she come close to doing it justice. She managed to eke out a few more sickly clouds, then set down her

paintbrush. Hopefully that was enough progress to please her painting instructor, Signore Ernesto, when he came for their lesson tomorrow. She could already hear him chiding her hurried brushstrokes. *Pazienza, signora. Pazienza.*

Patience. A word Lottie had always had little use for. But now time was all she had.

She walked over to the balustrade that separated the cottage's terrace from the steep hillside's drop and placed her palms against the sun-warmed stone. Lottie had fallen in love with the view on sight when she first came to the village more than a week ago. The owner had been reluctant to let it to a lone woman—even one who claimed to be a respectable young widow—but was not foolish enough to turn down a full year's rent in advance. Now Lottie woke up to this view each morning, while the large back terrace with its vine-covered pergola provided the ideal spot to work on her *en plein air* painting.

The air was ripe with young spring. She closed her eyes and tilted her head toward the April sky, smiling as the sun kissed her face. No doubt her fair skin was freckling even more with each passing second, but it hardly mattered now. For the first time in her twenty-four years, Lottie was free.

And all it took was complete and utter ruination.

“Signora, tu hai un visitatore,” Marta, the housekeeper, said as she bustled onto the terrace. The older woman didn't know very much English, and though Lottie had engaged a tutor to help her brush up on Italian before leaving England, nothing could prepare her for the rapid cadence of natural speakers. Luckily, even Lottie could pick out *visitatore*.

Strange. Visitors never called at lunchtime, and Marta usually guarded the front door as fiercely as a hound of Hades. “What, now?”

Marta raised her eyebrow. “Un uomo bello *nobile*.”

She shot the woman an exasperated look. “Really, Marta.” As Lottie had explained many, *many* times already, she was not lonely and certainly hadn’t any need for *affetto*. Marta had probably arranged the visit herself, and this “handsome nobleman” was actually the son of her butcher. The housekeeper gave a dismissive little shrug and then, oddly, seemed to hesitate. Lottie only understood half of what she said at any given time, but Marta never dithered over anything.

She looked over her shoulder and then gestured for Lottie to come closer. “Lui dice che è tuo...marito.” She whispered the last word, as if relaying some terrible secret.

Marito?

Lottie frowned. It was reminiscent of *mari*, the French word for “husband,” but that didn’t make any sense. She glanced at the Italian dictionary on the terrace’s lone table. Hopefully the man’s English was better than Marta’s, or else this would be a very short visit.

“All right. You may show him out here, I suppose,” Lottie said with a sweep of her hand.

Marta broke into a rare smile and nodded. “Ah, bene, bene. Una riconciliazione!” She clasped her hands against her chest, as if this was the most wonderful news. Then her eyes sparked with that all-too-familiar determination. “I bring you *tea*,” she declared and hurried back into the house.

“No, Marta!” Lottie called after her. This wasn’t a social call, for heaven’s sake. But it was useless. She might be the mistress, but Marta ran the house. Lottie crossed her arms and leaned against the balustrade to wait for this “handsome nobleman” to appear. The thought was mildly intriguing, given that she had barely spoken to a man under fifty since the Pension Bertolini in Florence. He had been a remarkably bland German named Hans who was traveling

with his father. Hans was polite, spoke excellent English, and didn't remotely interest her. But her chaperone, Mrs. Wetherby, was undeterred: "Imagine! You could have *blond* children!"

The odious woman had viewed Lottie's light auburn tresses as an affront to common decency. A foul blemish that needed to be snuffed out before it could taint another generation. But Lottie cherished her hair. It was just like her mother's had been. She pulled her long braid over her shoulder and absently fingered the end. Her uncle's pompous secretary, Gordon Wetherby, had maintained that his aunt excelled in managing young ladies with "high spirits." Lottie could still picture the way his nose wrinkled as he said the words. Lottie wasn't proud of it, but she had taken some pleasure in imagining both his and Mrs. Wetherby's reactions to her disappearance. Though perhaps she should be thanking him instead. After all, if Mrs. Wetherby had been the least bit pleasant, Lottie might have been tempted to amend her plan.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew her attention. They were slow and heavy. One might even say portentous. This uninvited visitor was clearly in no great rush and expected her to wait. *Bello* or no, this was not the way to ensure a good first impression. Lottie fixed her most disapproving frown on the doorway, where the shadow of a rather imposing man now came into view. The doorway itself was low, and he had to stoop slightly to reach the terrace. Lottie's breath caught at the familiar movement even while her mind tried to reason otherwise.

No. He would never come here. Not for someone as trivial as you.

But before the light even touched his face, a part of her already knew. From a place deep within her bones. A place she could never erase, no matter how hard she tried.

And oh, how Lottie had *tried*.

Her arms fell by her sides as Alec Gresham, her uncle's ward turned protege, dedicated agent of the Crown, only son of the late English poet Edward Gresham, and, indeed, very *bello*, stepped out onto the terrace.

“Well hello, Lottie,” he said evenly. “What a charming cottage you have here.”

No wonder Marta mistook him for a nobleman. He certainly held himself like one, even though nearly every inch of him was covered in road dust. Then the man had the audacity to twist that full mouth of his into a smirk. At her.

As if he were just dropping by for tea.

As if they were still *friends*.

The word caused a faint pang somewhere in the vicinity of her heart. Lottie quickly wiped the shock from her face and glared. She wasn't naive enough to assume that Uncle Alfred, a man who staunchly refused to accept he didn't have complete control over the fates and furies of life, would simply let her be. But to send *Alec* after her?

The gall of both of them was maddening.

But if Alec was at all bothered by this frosty reception, he didn't show it. He sauntered over until he was no more than a foot away, forcing her to look up into the face that was at once both achingly familiar and surprisingly breathtaking. The trace of boyishness that had still been visible when they last met was no more, as his features had fully matured into the kind of stoic, patrician beauty the Romans had adored. His dark hair had grown so long it nearly brushed his collar, the waves as unruly as ever, and his strong jaw was lightly bearded. But beneath that easy charm the same undercurrent of antagonism crackled—just as captivating, and disquieting, as it always had been. His hazel eyes glinted, daring her to look away first. But Lottie stared right back.

Alec filled the silence by studying her with an openness that bordered on indecent. If he were any other man, she would have walked away or taken him to task. But then, if he were any other man, her skin wouldn't feel so flushed and tight, and she wouldn't have any trouble swallowing. Alec's gaze tracked the movement of her throat, then briefly flitted to her mouth. Lottie clenched her hands against the unwanted attraction swelling inside and released a breath.

"Funny. Marta told me a handsome nobleman had come to visit." She narrowed her eyes to match her icy tone. "But I see it's only *you*."

That earned her a chuckle. "I know you don't like surprises, but don't be too cross with me." He tilted his head and squinted; it was a perfect imitation of someone trying to recollect a distant memory. "How long has it been since we last saw each other, anyway?"

The act was nearly as infuriating as the question itself. There was no need to put on a show for her, of all people. Lottie loosened her jaw just enough to answer. "I haven't been keeping track."

It had been five years.

And still nothing about Alec was genuine. He only made it appear so. That was his talent—drawing people in, telling them what they wanted to hear, to see, to *feel*, until they gave him everything he wanted. Then they were discarded.

He smirked again and moved a little closer. "I'd say it's been about five years or so. Not since your—"

"Who told you I was here?" Lottie didn't have time for this. He needed to leave. Immediately. She had not come all this way to deal with people like him and Uncle Alfred. Not anymore. "Was it Mrs. Wetherby?"

Lottie had placed the timetable for the train to Rome on her desk when she left the pension, where even her harebrained chaperone could not miss it. She also underlined the city a few times so there would be no doubt of her destination. But perhaps Lottie had slipped and mentioned the village once...

Alec shook his head. "She was sure you had gone to Rome, but I know a diversion when I see one." His eyes warmed with approval, but Lottie made sure hers remained cold.

At least someone noticed.

She had also left behind a pressed red rose and a little note—love tokens from her imaginary Italian suitor. Had he seen through those as well? That could spoil everything.

"Then I remembered how you always talked about coming here because of your parents." The smile faded along with his voice, but the words still hung heavily in the air between them.

Blast.

That was the problem with childhood friends. They knew your inner workings, your inspirations, all your closely guarded dreams, because they had been there when the seeds were first sown. But while Alec knew plenty about Lottie, it seemed like everything she thought she knew about him—or at least, everything that had truly mattered—turned out to be wrong. He was little more than a stranger. And perhaps always had been.

"After that, it was easy enough to track you here," he continued. "A young English woman traveling on her own is a bit of a novelty around these parts. Especially one with hair as pretty as yours."

She frowned at the shallow compliment even as her traitorous heart beat a little faster. "A fine story, but I can't begin to imagine your purpose in coming all this way." Lottie made sure each word practically dripped with condescension.

Alec's eyes darkened as he stepped closer, filling the air with a familiar woody scent that made something soft and tender curl around her heart. His formerly white shirt was unbuttoned at the throat. The sun had turned his olive skin even darker and threaded his deep brown hair with the barest hints of copper and gold. Her fingers twitched with the old urge to touch those messy waves until she folded her hands tightly against her middle.

Who knew where he had been before this: Turkey, Sardinia, Greece. Perhaps even Egypt. She had never once asked her uncle. All that mattered was that Alec had left. Living in such ignorance all these years made it slightly easier to pretend he didn't exist outside of her memories. But now he stood before her in the flesh, radiating vitality and undeniably real. Lottie caught herself staring at the tanned hollow of his throat and quickly met his eyes, but of course Alec noticed. Yet another smirk briefly hovered on those well-formed lips then vanished. Time to get on with it.

"You know exactly why I'm here, Lottie. And on behalf of whom." Then he raised a dark brow to further emphasize that she had been *very bad indeed*.

She rolled her eyes. "I did leave him a note."

"Oh yes," he scoffed with surprisingly grating sarcasm. "The one your chaperone was too terrified to send him: 'I know what I'm doing. Please don't be too cross'? Did you really think *that* was going to convince Sir Alfred?"

Lottie shrugged, unrepentant. The note had been a hastily dashed afterthought. Uncle Alfred should have been happy with two lines from her. But it was vexing to hear that Mrs. Wetherby hadn't passed the message along. "As you very well know, trying to convince that man of anything is useless. I thought my time was better spent begging for forgiveness. And I

know *why* you're here in the general sense. What I'm wondering is what you're hoping to accomplish today."

For once Alec looked puzzled. "You're to come home. With me."

Lottie couldn't stop the laugh from bursting forth. "My goodness, does Uncle Alfred always send you on his errands? I'd have thought you would be doing something far more important these days."

Apparently, agents of the Crown did not appreciate sarcasm. His jaw tightened as all traces of mirth vanished; in its place was an unfamiliar, world-weary expression that bordered on hostile. "He asked for my help. I'm here as a favor."

Lottie managed not to flinch at the trivial description. She expected to be considered as little more than an annoyance, but they both knew Uncle Alfred never *asked*. He demanded.

"And is that really all you thought it would take? You show up here unannounced and I would simply go off with you?" She laughed again. "That's even less convincing than my note."

Alec moved closer. "This isn't a game, Lottie," he began in a low, harsh voice that sent goose bumps racing up her spine. He then brushed his fingers against her elbow, and the light touch was so immediately recognizable, and so shockingly familiar, that Lottie nearly gasped. As the warmth from his fingertips sunk deeper into her skin, a heady, comforting feeling settled over her until she very nearly swayed against him. "You aren't playing house up here," he continued, unaware of her reaction. "And I don't need to provide a list of reasons because you know you cannot stay."

Lottie pulled away from the hypnotic grasp and matched his glare. "I'm afraid I can, actually. I didn't wander off and end up here by accident. I've let this house for the next *year*."

Alec's eyes went nearly black as he leaned closer. It was impossible not to notice how much larger he was now. "Then I hope your landlord will honor a refund. As it stands, you have been traveling unaccompanied in a foreign country for over a week. Did you not consider what would happen when you deserted your chaperone while staying in a pension that is extremely popular with British tourists? Did you actually think your disappearance would go unnoticed?"

His tone remained cold while only the barest hint of color stained his cheeks. It appeared that Alec had finally learned to control his temper. However, after insinuating that she was both remarkably inane and grossly incompetent, Lottie saw no need to bother with civilities.

"What kind of a fool do you take me for?" she seethed. "The whole *point* was for them to notice."

By running away in such a dramatic fashion, Lottie had hoped to create a scandal so irresistible that it would be written about before the day was out. Those letters would then reach the finest drawing rooms in London before spreading even further with the relentless drive of the most potent plague until her ruination was achieved. And if the letters didn't do the trick, Lottie had every faith that Mrs. Wetherby herself would make sure word spread. The older woman had her own reputation to maintain, but no one would blame her if a willful young lady ran off with an *Italian*.

It would be the scandal of the season, if not the year. Lottie was counting on it.

Alec stared as if she was a stranger. "You mean you...you *wanted* to be ruined?"

Lottie lifted her chin. Proud. Defiant. And entirely unrepentant. "I'd be very disappointed to learn otherwise, Mr. Gresham."

Finally he was seeing her, really *seeing* her for the first time; now he would know how strong she was, how determined, how capable.

“Oh, Lottie,” Alec sighed, as if in deep pain, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “What have you done?”

Chapter Two

The heart-stopping relief that came over Alec when he stepped out onto the terrace and saw Lottie standing there, the picture of health—and *alone*—was entirely too short-lived.

He had forgotten so many things, like the exact shade of her hair or the dimple on her left cheek that came out only when she laughed. He had also forgotten how damned stubborn she could be.

And how disarmingly alluring it was.

Over the years, in the rare moments when Alec dared to picture her, it was only as the girl he had first met: the sweet, seven-year-old orphan afraid of the dark who insisted she had an invisible pony named Buckles. Even earlier, while he was traipsing up this godforsaken hill, he was determined to prove that everyone else was mistaken. *Lottie* hadn't run off with anyone. No, she had merely wanted to visit the little medieval village where her late parents spent their honeymoon and hadn't even considered the havoc her little folly would cause.

Silly, lovely Lottie.

It never occurred to him that Charlotte Elizabeth Carlisle, born into one of the finest families in England, and beloved only niece of the illustrious Sir Alfred Lewis, would knowingly do anything to destroy her sterling reputation.

But the remarkably composed and steely-eyed young woman before him suggested otherwise.

Alec had vastly underestimated her.

A careless error. Inexcusable for an agent of his experience. It would not happen again.

Lottie watched him with hawklike concentration. Her brows, a few shades darker than her hair, pulled together, but Alec couldn't speak. It had taken him years to learn how to control

his emotions, but this anger had come on so suddenly, so *fiercely*, that it nearly took his breath away. How long had it been since he let such raw feelings surface?

Oh, about five years or so.

He moved next to her and pressed his palms against the balustrade. He took a few deep breaths until the vibrant pulse of anger faded into that cool, familiar numbness. "I won't pretend to understand what possessed you to do such a thing, or *why*," he said, turning to her. "But to no one's regret but your own, your reputation is still somewhat intact."

Lottie let out a frustrated huff. "Well, that is disappointing to hear," she said dryly. "I had hoped Mrs. Wetherby would be hysterical. She threw a fit at the slightest inconvenience. I thought my leaving would at least elicit the same response as being served a lukewarm pot of tea."

Her cynicism was even more provoking. And bizarre. She had never been so cold before.

What happened to you, Lottie?

The question was on the tip of his tongue, yet he could never ask such a thing. He might have enjoyed her confidence once, but that had been a very long time ago.

"I assure you, she was in great distress," he growled instead. "But she has no wish for word of your little jaunt to spread, so she made up an excuse to explain your sudden disappearance from the pension."

She cut a glance at him, genuinely curious. "Did she? What was it?"

"That you went to Rome to meet some school friends, where she would shortly join you."

It was a decent enough lie, though Mrs. Wetherby had already been cracking under the pressure when Alec met her in Florence. The woman was remarkably incompetent, but at least that toad Wetherby had guaranteed his aunt's discretion.

“Huh. I hadn’t realized she was capable of such a deception. Was it accepted by the other guests? There was a trio of spinster sisters staying there who seemed to live exclusively on bits of gossip.”

Alec gritted his teeth. He was unfortunately familiar with the women she spoke of. “Barely. Mrs. Wetherby had to leave the pension the day I arrived to keep up appearances. But it will all be for nothing if you don’t return to England very soon.”

She lifted her chin. That mulish look was another thing he had forgotten. “I won’t be going anywhere. And certainly not with *you*.”

“If you don’t come with me now, your uncle will only send someone else later,” he countered grimly. “And they might not be as considerate of your well-being as I am, especially if they learn the circumstances that preceded your visit.”

No doubt there were scores of men who would be all too happy to escort her back to England. Alec was prepared to drag her kicking and screaming down the hillside for that reason alone. She swallowed hard but made no response. He glanced down and noticed that one hand was balled in a tight fist by her side. Perhaps she wasn’t so composed after all...

“You should also know I didn’t come here merely to save your reputation,” Alec continued, taking pains to soften his tone. “Though that was the initial reason, the situation has grown more urgent. Your uncle suffered some kind of apoplexy a few days ago. Mr. Wetherby sent a telegram while I was still in Florence.” Alec had never met Wetherby in person. All communication between them was strictly limited to telegrams and letters, yet that hadn’t stopped him from concluding that the man was a complete ass. “He indicated that it was fairly mild, as far as these things go, but there is the danger your uncle could have another.”

It was difficult to imagine Sir Alfred, who always exuded power and control, suffering from any kind of impairment, but age spared no one. Lottie's frown deepened and she looked out across the landscape. Once Alec had been able to read her so easily, but she had no reason to hide anything from him then. Now he could only guess at the conflicting emotions warring inside her at the news. As his guardian and her uncle, Sir Alfred had, for lack of a better word, raised them both. But Alec's relationship with the enigmatic man wasn't nearly as complicated as Lottie's was. And, given the circumstances, one could assume that things hadn't exactly improved over the years. "If he does, he may die."

Lottie did not respond. At this angle, without those eyes hinting at the steel underneath, she could be the very picture of fresh, English innocence. Her slight curves had grown more pronounced over the years, but her peaches-and-cream complexion was still as smooth as polished marble with a faint dusting of those freckles he had always adored. The last time he saw her, Lottie had been trussed up in yards of white silk for a ball held in her honor. She had looked lovely then, but he much preferred her like this. In her sensible dark blue skirt and well-loved silk blouse, with wisps of hair coming loose from her braid.

Alec fought back the urge to trail his finger down her cheek. Would she be warm and soft, or cool and hard? He leaned closer and faintly inhaled that familiar rosewater scent now mixed with the sharp tang of the oil paint that stained her fingertips. She had never looked more like herself than she did at this moment. Or maybe it was simply that he had missed her. So very much.

"Thank you for your concern," she said stiffly as she shifted away from his reach. "And for delivering the news in person, though it seems hardly worth the effort on your part. If I choose to see him, it will be on my own terms. I'm sure you have a long journey back to

wherever it is you live now. On your way out, be sure to tell my housekeeper you were mistaken in coming here. You—you must have thought I was someone else.”

There was a slight catch in her voice. A chink in her armor. And Alec wouldn't let it slip by.

“That might be difficult,” he began, “seeing as I already told her I was your husband.”

Lottie abruptly faced him, her green eyes round and wide. “You *what?*”

Alec gave her a lopsided smile. “Well, I had to get inside somehow. And I didn't think she would believe I was your brother.” He gestured to the thick russet braid that snaked down her chest. Lottie's hair had always been her most prized possession, and for good reason. It was glorious. Here, with those golden Tuscan hills as a backdrop, it gave her the otherworldly glow of a Titian goddess.

“But I told Marta I was a widow!” Lottie hissed and clapped a hand to her forehead. “Oh, what must she *think* now?”

Alec's lips quirked. “She seemed rather delighted by your subterfuge, actually. I believe she imagines you came here to punish me.” A corner of her mouth lifted. Apparently that was an appealing idea. “I was properly scolded for not arriving sooner,” he went on. “According to her, you are much too lonely up here all by yourself.”

The housekeeper had also sworn that the only man who had been inside the house was an elderly chap from the village who gave Lottie painting lessons, which blessedly spared him from the ugly task of forcing some wayward suitor's hand. Mrs. Wetherby was convinced Lottie had run away with a man, though the evidence hadn't amounted to more than a single dried rose and a pathetic note that read *amore mio*. Alec had roundly dismissed the notion that such piddling trinkets would have swayed her. But now he was questioning everything.

Though Lottie claimed she had deliberately tried to ruin her reputation, that might not have been her original plan. She could have been abandoned en route, or perhaps her suitor had failed to materialize at the agreed-upon meeting place. It was understandable why she would not admit such a thing to Alec. Less understandable, though, was why she hadn't returned to Florence immediately.

Unless she is still hoping for his return.

"Marta doesn't know anything," she snapped. "We can barely understand one another."

"Loneliness is a universal language, Lottie," he murmured. One he had mastered long ago. "And it's better for you this way. If she thinks we're married, there won't be any talk when we leave the village together."

She snorted at his caution. "That wouldn't matter."

Alec narrowed his eyes. "You aren't exactly in Timbuktu. Tourists come to this village. If people connect your actions in Florence with your stay here, it will make things worse for you. *It matters.*"

"Only if I cared about my reputation."

Alec's jaw tensed. Fresh heartbreak could certainly make a person act with such recklessness. It was difficult to see anything beyond the scorching pain that burned as hotly as any fire. But what would she do weeks, months, or even years later when the pain finally faded and she was left with nothing but the charred remains of her life?

"We'll talk about that later. For now I'm more concerned with removing any doubt about our relationship. Your housekeeper's been watching us this entire time. From the window."

Lottie cast a subtle look past him. "Oh, Marta," she grumbled.

Alec caught her wrist and drew a small circle with his thumb. The impulsive gesture was something he had done when they were children and she was upset. Sometimes—*many* times—they had only each other for comfort. Lottie froze and stared down at his hand.

“I know I’m in no position to ask, but please trust me. At least with this. Whatever your issues with Sir Alfred are, whatever led you to do this, go to him now. Make your peace while you still can.”

Lottie’s pulse quickened under his thumb as she slowly lifted her eyes. With some effort, Alec was able to maintain his impassive expression.

“Is that why you came? So I would not have any regrets?” Her voice had taken on a husky note that ribboned through his body, leaving a trail of molten need in its wake.

Alec kept his tone carefully neutral. “I already told you why. It was a favor.”

Only a state of extreme desperation would have led Sir Alfred to involve him in the first place but calling it a “favor” was quite a stretch. The thought of anyone else being sent after Lottie had been unbearable.

“And what of your regrets?” Her hooded gaze wandered over his face, his eyes, his lips. “Or do you not have any?”

Sir Alfred’s refusal suddenly came to him. He had not thought of it in years—hadn’t allowed himself to.

Sorry, Alec. I know you’re fond of her, but I can’t give my consent.

Fond had not even begun to describe it.

And yet, as with all of Sir Alfred’s commands, he had obeyed. Without question.

How little some things changed.

His fingers tightened around her wrist. “Everyone has regrets,” Alec said more forcefully than he intended. Then he let go of her. His hand was practically throbbing.

Lottie furrowed her brow for an endless moment while she chewed her lip—a welcome sign of serious consideration. Alec nearly sighed with relief at the sight.

“The note Uncle Alfred sent you,” she began. “Was...was he very angry?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Furious.”

Lottie gave a resigned nod at the massive understatement.

The telegram had been only a few lines, but Sir Alfred always knew how to make his point.

Alec expected her to be more upset—she had been sensitive to her uncle’s moods as a girl—but Lottie merely sighed and shook her head. “I certainly don’t want him to die. I only wanted him to listen. Perhaps I should...” But she didn’t finish, only stared off, lost in her thoughts.

He cleared his throat. The longer they stood like this—tense and distant—the worse it looked to Marta. The woman had let him into the house, but she was still suspicious. One contrary word from Lottie could ruin everything. She might not care about her reputation, but Alec certainly did.

“As I was explaining earlier,” he said a touch too briskly, “I have an idea to help convince your housekeeper, but you’ll need to follow my lead. Can you do that?” He did his best to sound skeptical. Lottie had always hated being underestimated.

True to form, she gave him a withering look. “I’m sure I can manage, but I don’t see why I should.”

He stepped closer and brushed a stray curl behind her ear. She inhaled sharply at his touch but didn't object. To any observer this would look like a welcomed lover's caress. "If Marta sees me kiss you," he began, "she won't doubt a thing. She won't even remember these past weeks."

Lottie's expression didn't change, but her breathing quickened slightly. "How impressive. I didn't realize merely *witnessing* a kiss could lead to memory loss."

Alec's lips curved. "Though I've been told my talents in that realm are substantial, the point is that it makes for a better story. We need something that takes attention away from you. Imagine: Instead of a dubious young widow staying here alone and arousing suspicion, we're a young married couple on their honeymoon. The groom kept delaying their journey because of business in Florence, so the bride grew cross and came without him—very sympathetic. No one would blame her."

As he spoke, Lottie watched closely. She still hadn't learned to play the coy, bashful lady. Alec had forgotten how penetrating, and slightly unnerving, her gaze could be. It set his blood moving far more than any saucy wink or fluttering eyelash ever had.

"But when he finally arrived, and after a fine bit of groveling, all was forgiven." The corner of his mouth lifted at the thought of all the ways he could beg forgiveness from her. "Who could resist that?"

Lottie's cheeks took on the most becoming shade of pink, but she let out an indignant huff. "Why is it that people always seem most titillated by stories of fallen women or romance?"

Alec's smile grew. He needed to think of a way for her to say *titillated* again. "I haven't the faintest. I've always preferred a good mystery myself. But in this case, I say we indulge the masses.. And don't leave any room for doubt."

There was no need for them to actually kiss, of course; it merely needed to appear that way to Marta. But before he could clarify that little detail, Lottie spoke up.

“Fine. You may kiss me,” she said flatly. Then her gaze sharpened. “But it had better be good.”

Alec managed to keep his cavalier expression while internally his reaction was nothing short of pathetic. He had never been one to back away from a challenge, or turn down the chance to kiss a beautiful woman. A tiny voice inside his head suggested that perhaps it wasn't a good idea to kiss *this* beautiful woman in particular, but the half-hearted warning was easily dismissed.

“As my lady commands,” he said with a dramatic sigh. Best not to look too eager.

In one swift movement, his hand laced around her nimble waist while the other cupped her nape and gave it a little squeeze. She let out a gasp as her head tilted back but didn't offer any protest as he gently set his lips to hers.

One could almost believe she was enjoying this.

As if it wasn't enough for Alec to come strolling in and upend all of her plans, now he was trying to further unnerve her with a kiss. No doubt he assumed she would be positively shocked by the mere *idea* of kissing him, but Lottie had been kissed before. Three times, actually. Ceril Belvedere had even pressed her against the wall of Lady Arlington's balcony. It had been rather exciting, at least in the moment, but this...

Once, for a very brief period, Lottie had spent untold hours imagining what it would be like to kiss Alec. And even she could not resist the chance to see if her dreams lived up to the reality.

Apparently her imagination had been *decidedly* lacking.

Yet it wasn't only the feel of his lips on hers, so firm, commanding, and confident. It was the way he held her close and cradled her in his arms. As if she really did belong to him.

As if he really did want her.

Alec squeezed her neck a bit more and her mouth opened slightly. Then he gently parted her lips further with his own. That hardly seemed necessary for Marta's sake, but then one would expect him to be fully committed to his duty. Uncle Alfred had made that plain years ago when Alec left.

He will do whatever is necessary. That is not the kind of life for a man with a family. The Crown must come first. Always.

Lottie had never once spoken to anyone about her feelings for Alec, as she hardly knew what to make of them herself. Alec's friendship had always been invaluable to her, and yet at times she had ached for something more. More than she could ever put into words. More than she ever dared act upon. But her uncle seemed to understand. There was little use trying to have secrets from a man who had spent much of his life either ferreting them out or keeping them safe. And if Uncle Alfred had known, it stood to reason that Alec did as well. Perhaps far longer than she realized. Lottie had once deluded herself into thinking that Alec had morals, a sense of common decency, and, dare she think it, a fondness for her. But he had done a very fine job of divesting her of all those pesky illusions. Completely. Alec wouldn't think twice about exploiting anything he could in order to bend her to his will. Even something as innocent as her girlhood affection.

No, *especially* something like that.

Well, she wasn't a girl anymore, and he wasn't the only one who could be shocking. Lottie pressed her tongue to his, determined to show him *exactly* how little this meant to her—

but Alec immediately froze. Her cheeks, already flushed from his attentions, burned even greater at this misstep. Rejection wasn't humiliating enough on its own; no, she must also resemble an overripe tomato. But before she could pull back and recover what little remained of her dignity, Alec hauled her against his chest so close she could feel every thudding heartbeat. With each rhythmic pulse the kiss seemed to grow only more fierce, more desperate, and more dangerous.

Lottie gathered what little remained of her frazzled nerves and raised a hand to push him away, but the appendage had other ideas. Instead, her fingers sunk into his hair, mussing those thick waves, while her nails gently scraped his scalp. Alec shivered and gripped her harder, which only further weakened her already feeble resolve. Just as her knees began to tremble, Alec splayed one large palm between her shoulder blades while the other moved close to her backside and firmly anchored her against his form. Every inch radiated heat, strength, and undeniable maleness.

Unlike the other gentlemen of her acquaintance, Alec did not fritter away the daylight hours in private clubs before spending the evening enjoying more shallow entertainments. His body was a weapon, and he treated it like one. She grazed a sizable bicep, and he immediately flexed beneath her fingertips. An appreciative moan rose from her throat, and Alec only kissed her more deeply. The insidious whisper in the back of her mind suddenly grew very loud:

Perhaps this is real.

Alec tore his mouth from hers, as if he had heard it. After a moment Lottie's eyes fluttered open. She was flushed. Breathless. But Alec seemed as cool and collected as before. He was staring past her with a sharp, calculating look in those fathomless hazel eyes.

“There,” he murmured. “That ought to do it.”

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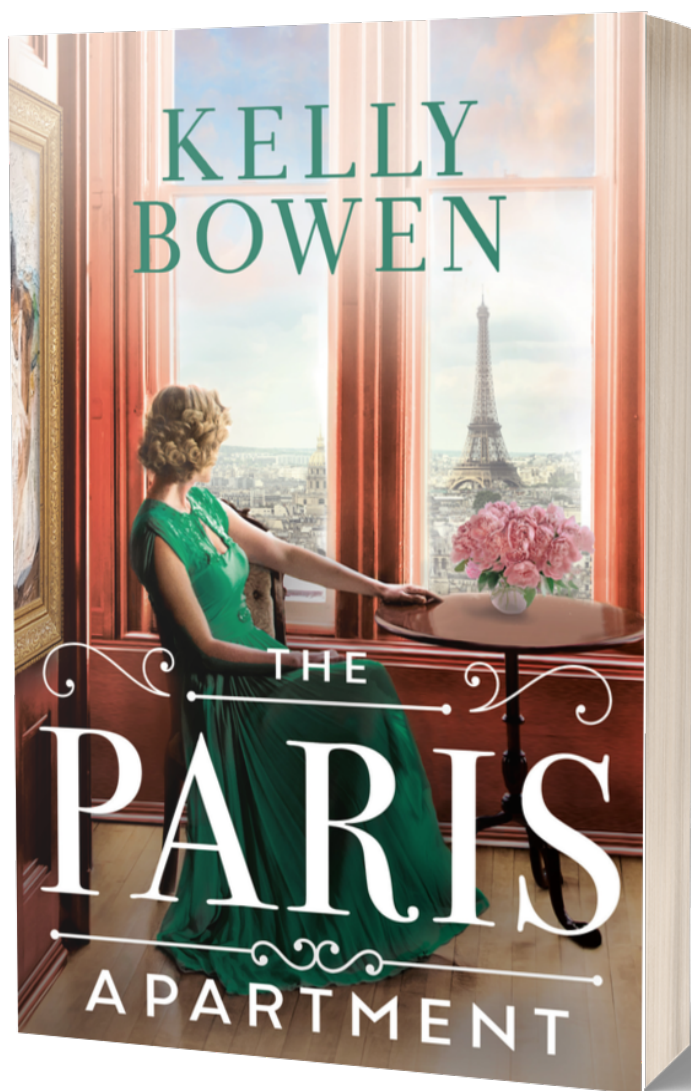
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THE PARIS APARTMENT

Kelly Bowen



FOREVER

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*To the unsung heroes who fought hatred and persecution with
uncommon courage and strength.*

Your sacrifice and efforts will not be forgotten.

Chapter 1

Aurelia

Paris, France

10 June 2017

The woman was nude.

Painted in a swirl of angry scarlets and oranges, the woman's arms were flung over her head, her hands outstretched, her hair a cloud of midnight floating behind her. Caught in the shaft of light that fell through the open apartment door, she gazed out with dark eyes from her canvas, angry and accusing, as if she resented the intrusion of her space and privacy. Lia froze in the open doorway, one hand clutching the heavy key and the other gripping the packet of neatly organized legal papers that said she had every right to be here.

And that this unknown apartment, along with all its contents, now belonged to her.

It is an incredibly valuable property, the lawyers had assured her. *Your grandmother must have adored you*, the administrative assistant had said enviously as she had examined the printed address. And Lia hadn't replied to any of them because Grandmère's motives in death were as murky as they had been in life, and Lia couldn't be sure that adoration had figured in either.

"Utilities should be on," the building's concierge said from the top of the stairs behind Lia. The property caretaker was a surprisingly young woman with a close-cropped pink bob and

a quick smile who had introduced herself simply as Celeste. Lia had liked her immediately. "I'm not often in the office but I'm always around if you need anything else. Just ring me."

"Thank you," Lia replied faintly, slipping the key into her pocket.

"You said on the phone this place was your grandmother's?" Celeste leaned casually on the stair railing.

"Yes. She left it to me when she passed." Or at least that was what the lawyers had said when they had summoned her to their offices and laid a steady stream of documents before her. And while the flat had been paid for and maintained from an account with Grandmère's name on it, as far as Lia knew, Estelle Allard had never lived anywhere other than Marseille.

"Ah." The woman's expression softened. "My condolences on her passing."

"Thank you. It wasn't unexpected. Though this apartment was a...shock."

"Not a bad one as shocks go, I think?" Celeste remarked. "We should all be so lucky."

"True," Lia acknowledged, playing with the enameled pendant at her throat. Until this morning, the antique necklace had been the only gift Grandmère had ever given her, presented without fuss on her eighteenth birthday. She considered the concierge. "How long have you worked here?"

"Six years."

"I don't suppose you know anything about this apartment? Or my grandmother? Estelle Allard?"

Celeste shook her head. "I'm sorry, I don't. While I'm familiar with most of the tenants in the building, in truth, I had no idea who owned this apartment, only that it's been unoccupied since I started."

On impulse, Lia jammed the packet of paper under her arm and unzipped her portfolio bag. From inside, she withdrew a small painting, about the size of a legal document.. It was a vivid, if somewhat clumsy, painting of a manor house surrounded by clumps of emerald trees and silhouetted against a cobalt sky. Along with the key to this apartment, the painting had been the only other thing her grandmother had specifically left her.

“What about the name Seymour? William Seymour? Does that sound familiar?” Lia asked, holding the painting toward Celeste.

Celeste shook her head again. “No. May I ask who he was?”

“No clue. Other than the artist who signed this painting.”

“Oh.” Celeste looked intrigued. “Were you thinking that he was once a tenant here?”

“I have no idea,” Lia sighed, sliding the little painting back into her bag. She hadn’t really expected an answer but she had nothing to lose by asking.

“I can check the building’s records for you if you like,” Celeste offered. “We have archives going back a lot of years. If a William Seymour lived here at one point in time, I might be able to find out.”

Lia was touched by the kindness of the offer. “No, that’s all right.” She didn’t want to waste this woman’s time. At least until she had done a little research of her own.

“Sure. But if you reconsider, just let me know.”

“Thank you. I will.”

Celeste seemed to hesitate. “Are you planning to live here?” she finally asked.

Lia opened her mouth to answer and then closed it. The simple answer was yes, at least temporarily. But beyond temporarily? Lia had no simple answer for that.

“None of my business.” The woman ducked her head. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Lia smiled. “I haven’t made a decision yet.”

“I hope you stay,” Celeste said sincerely. “It would be nice to have—”

The sound of a lock being released, accompanied by a brief torrent of hysterical barking, made Lia turn. An elderly woman emerged from the apartment across the landing and shuffled toward her. A small bundle of writhing, white fur was clamped under one arm, a pointy cane clutched in her other hand. She was dressed like a model from a midcentury American advert peddling soap or vacuums, in a wide-skirted floral dress with a pinched waist and a string of heavy pearls at her throat. Her white hair was curled around a liberally powdered face, her lipstick an angry crimson. Color had bled into the deep lines that tracked outward from her lips, and the whole effect was rather macabre. Unbidden, Aurelia could almost hear Grandmère *tsk* in disapproval.

One should never notice your cosmetics, Lia. Unless, of course, you only wish to be noticed but not seen.

At the time, an adolescent, lip-gloss-loving Lia remembered being annoyed by the cryptic, critical comment. Now, Lia couldn’t say Grandmère had been wrong.

Lia’s neighbour was now shuffling across the marble floor, her eyes fixed beyond Lia at the tall, nude painting propped up inside the apartment and visible in the meagre light. She looked as shocked as Lia had felt when she had first opened the door, though that shock was fading into clear condemnation. Lia pasted on a smile and stepped more fully into her doorway, blocking the view inside.

The woman scowled and craned her neck, trying to peer past.

“Good afternoon,” Lia said politely, her ingrained boarding-school manners demanding that she make some sort of greeting.

In response, the dog resumed its frantic tirade, the shrill noise bouncing mercilessly off the marble floor and plaster walls. The woman's face soured further, and she produced a piece of sausage from somewhere in the folds of her dress. That silenced the barking, two beady eyes now fixed not on Lia but on the prize held in clawlike fingers.

"You own this apartment?" the woman asked into the ensuing quiet with a voice like sandpaper.

"Yes." A fact that was still so new and novel that it was hard to answer with conviction.

"I've lived here my entire life. Since 1943," the woman said, her eyes narrowing.

Lia's smile was slipping. "Um. That's a long time—"

"I know everything that goes on in this building. And in all that time, no one has ever gone in or come out of that apartment. Until now."

"Mmm." Lia made some noncommittal sound. She wasn't sure if that was a question, a statement, or an accusation. She adjusted her grip on the legal envelope, pressing it against her chest.

"You living here by yourself?" Her gaze shifted to Lia's left hand.

"I beg your pardon?" Lia resisted the urge to shove her hand in her pocket.

"You seem old to not have a husband. Too late now, I suppose. Unfortunate."

Lia blinked, uncertain she had heard right. "I'm sorry?"

"I know your type," Lia's neighbour sniffed, her eyes lingering first on Lia's heavy backpack and the portfolio bag, and finally on her bare shoulders and the straps of her red sundress tied around her neck.

"My type?" Lia's patience was wearing thin, and irritation was starting to creep in.

“I don’t want to hear your music. No drugs or booze or parties. No strange men prowling around my door at all hours of the night looking for you.”

“I’ll try to keep the men confined to daylight hours,” Lia replied pleasantly, unable to help herself.

Celeste, who had remained silent through the entire exchange, snorted in laughter before trying to cover it up with a fit of coughing.

The woman’s head snapped around.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Hoffmann.” Celeste composed herself. “How are you doing today?”

Ms. Hoffmann gave the woman’s pink hair a hard look, scarlet lips twisting into a sneer. “Degenerate,” she muttered.

Celeste’s phone chimed, and she glanced down at the screen. “Duty calls,” she said, shooting Lia an apologetic glance. “Let me know if you need anything. And welcome to the building.” She pushed herself off the railing and vanished down the stairs, triggering another hysterical tirade of barking.

Lia used the distraction to retreat into her apartment and close the door behind her, abruptly enveloping herself in a stuffy darkness but saving herself from further conversation.

“No wonder you’re angry,” she muttered in the direction of the nude canvas that rested somewhere in front of her. “I’d be angry, too, if I’d lived across from a neighbour like that since 1943.”

She didn’t get an answer.

The air in the apartment was thick with the scent of age and dust, suggesting that the apartment had been unoccupied far longer than the six years Celeste knew about. Lia set her

belongings down and let her eyes adjust to the gloom. Deeper in the apartment, on the side that would face the wide, sunny street, faint lines of light were seeping around what Lia surmised must be heavy curtains covering the windows. Enough light to give the suggestion of shapes but not enough for her to see anything clearly.

Carefully, Lia inched forward out of the foyer, past the dim outline of the canvas, and made her way toward the windows. The floor beneath her creaked with each step as if it, too, resented her intrusion. She reached the curtained wall and extended her hand, the tips of her fingers colliding with a heavy fabric that felt like damask. So far, so good. Nothing had jumped out or fallen on her head or run over her toes. She found the edge of the curtain, rings rattling on their rod somewhere above. Without hesitating, she pulled the curtain back.

And regretted it immediately.

As blinding sunlight spilled through the antique panes, thick, choking clouds of dust billowed around her. Lia gagged and coughed, her eyes instantly watering. She fumbled frantically with the latch on the window, relieved beyond measure when it reluctantly gave way. She pushed one of the leaded-glass panels open a crack, ignoring the groan of protest from the hinges, and pressed her face out into the fresh air.

She stayed that way for a good minute, her head stuck out the window, gasping and hacking and trying not to imagine how ridiculous she must look to people passing by down below. Perhaps she should have just left the apartment door wide open. Perhaps she should have sent the charming Ms. Hoffmann in first.

Her coughing finally subsiding, Lia took a deep, fortifying breath and straightened, bracing herself for what she might find. She turned slowly away from the window. And discovered that, upon her death, Grandmère had not left Lia an apartment after all.

She'd left Lia a museum.

Dust still swirled but the brilliant light illuminated walls covered in patterned wallpaper the grey-blue of a stormy sky. Dozens of painted landscapes- and seascapes in gilded frames were hung on the wall opposite the windows, some capturing images of bucolic country scenes, others freezing ships forever in their quest across the horizon, and each one bursting with saturated color.

In the center of the room, upholstered Louis XV sofas in dust-covered turquoise faced off against each other across a wide Persian rug. A long writing desk bridged the ends of the sofas closest to Lia, and it was against the desk that the tall, nude canvas had been propped, facing the door to greet anyone who entered.

On the back wall adjacent to the windows, an elaborate marble mantelpiece swept over an empty hearth. A bracket had been mounted to the wall high above the fireplace, suggesting that a piece of art had once hung in the tall space, although whatever was once there wasn't now. And above her head, a chandelier hung from the center of the room, its dripping, dazzling crystals muted only partially by dust.

On unfeeling legs, Lia headed deeper into the apartment. She stopped at a dainty side table at the far end of a sofa and examined a collection of framed photos. With care, she picked up the first and wiped the glass. A young woman had been captured leaning against a light post in front of a jazz club, wearing a silky, beaded dress that clung to each and every curve like a second skin, a fur stole draped carelessly over her shoulders. She held a cigarette holder in one hand, eyes meeting the camera's lens with smoky, sensual indifference. Lia turned it over.

Estelle Allard, Montmartre, 1938 was written in pencil across the back.

Lia swallowed hard.

Though she had been told repeatedly by the estate lawyers that this apartment was the domain of Estelle Allard, Lia realized that she hadn't truly believed it until right now. She hadn't truly believed that her grandmother, who had not once in her life mentioned that she had ever travelled to Paris, much less lived here, had kept a secret of this magnitude for this long.

And Lia couldn't even begin to imagine why she would have done so.

She set the photo back down and examined the second. In this one, the beautiful Estelle was behind the wheel of a low-slung Mercedes, leaning out the window and laughing at the photographer. Her hair was loose over her shoulders, a jaunty hat cocked over one eye. Lia blinked, trying to reconcile these sultry, fearless images with the rigid, reserved woman Lia had known. She failed miserably.

She turned her attention to the last of the photos and frowned. A German officer stared back at her, unsmiling and severe. From his uniform, it was clear that it was an image from the First World War. Lia frowned and turned it over but there was nothing written on the back. She set the photo down and glanced at a pile of magazines stacked beside it.

She slid the top one to the side. The issue beneath, devoid of dust, was easy to read. *Signal* blazed from the upper left corner in bold red text, the cover beneath dominated by an image of a Nazi soldier with an intense expression. A strip of the same bold red color ran down the spine of the magazine, *September 1942* easily visible at the top. Lia snatched her hand away.

"This is not happening," she said into the silence, as if saying it out loud would make it true. Because she already knew without opening the magazine what she'd find. German propaganda and glossy pro-Nazi photos, all published at a time when Nazis had overrun and occupied this very city.

Lia stared again at a young Estelle Allard laughing from her Mercedes and the nameless German officer before she turned away from the photos and the magazines and all their ominous implications. With a queasy dread settling into her gut, she made her way past the ornate hearth mantel and around the corner. Here, the space narrowed into a formal dining room. The center was dominated by a rosewood table surrounded by eight matching chairs. On the wall to her right, a cabinet taller than she was lined the space, rows of crystal, silver, and porcelain dinnerware displayed on the shelves.

On the wall opposite the cabinet was another collection of paintings, striking and arresting portraits of men and women in clothing from centuries past. Lia bit her lip hard enough to hurt as the dread intensified. Art had been a desirable souvenir for the Nazis during the occupation, entire collections stolen—

“Stop it, Lia.” She shook her head, not caring how foolish she sounded, talking to no one. “Don’t be absurd.”

Yes, there was Nazi propaganda in the apartment. But a single photo and a handful of magazines did not mean that the paintings on these walls had been stolen or otherwise illicitly obtained. It did not mean that her grandmother had deliberately kept this collection here, in this apartment, for any reason other than that she had liked art when she had been younger. Conjuring conspiracy theories was best left to Hollywood. And radical zealots.

Lia tore her gaze from the paintings and continued through the dining room, stepping into a hallway. On her right, a doorway opened up into a kitchen with a tiny stove, a small refrigerator, and a deep sink set into a countertop free of clutter, save for a single crystal tumbler.

Just to her left, a set of French doors stood open, the dim outline of a four-poster bed denoting this last space as a bedroom. As in the living room, lines of sunlight from tall windows

were visible on the far wall. Lia entered the room, skirted the bed, and, with a great deal more care than she had taken earlier, eased the heavy curtains open.

In the light, the room was a decidedly feminine space, the walls papered in a shade of rose, the edges near the ceiling only slightly yellowed and discolored. The room consisted of a double bed, a dressing table and chair, and an enormous wardrobe, all carved with a provincial flair. The bed was neatly made, and the linens, once washed, would likely be the same rose hue as the walls.

The room was impeccably tidy save for a garment that had been tossed carelessly on top of the smooth coverlet, crumpled and forgotten and dulled by dust. It was an evening gown, Lia realized, moving to lift it by its thin straps. A stunning creation of lemon-yellow chiffon and crepe, beaded with crystals, and something that would have been obscenely expensive no matter what century it had been purchased in. Not something one would toss aside like an old pair of socks.

Bewildered, she let the dress drop back to the bed and eyed the narrow, arched doorway in the corner beside the wardrobe. It led into what looked like a modern walk-in closet. A dressing room, Lia guessed, though there was almost no space to walk in. On both sides, dresses and gowns and furs and coats hung crammed together, spilling out on top of one another in such numbers that Lia couldn't even see the back wall. Shoes lined the floor, dozens and dozens of pairs, and along a shelf at the top, hat boxes were stacked. Smaller jewelry boxes, some of them covered in leather and satin, were piled in front.

“Good Lord,” Lia mumbled, the excess hard to comprehend.

She backed away and cautiously opened the wardrobe next, expecting to be inundated with another jumble of extravagance. But the wardrobe was almost empty, the cavernous interior yielding only a half-dozen gowns.

These gowns, protected from the years of dust, were a collection of couture silks and satins, each one exquisitely embroidered, appliquéd, and detailed. Lia ran her fingers along the length of a sapphire-colored skirt before pulling her hand back, afraid that she would soil the fabric. She closed the wardrobe and rested her forehead against the double doors. The gowns, the shoes, the furs—there was a fortune in clothing here. Just like there was a fortune in fine furnishings and fine art.

All of it hidden for over seventy years.

Lia had fallen down a rabbit hole. An overwhelming, insane rabbit hole that made a jump to abhorrent conclusions far too easy. She lifted her head and took a steadying breath. Assumptions never ended well—a career dedicated to science had taught her that. She would give her grandmother the benefit of the doubt. She would not believe the worst until such time as she was presented with irrefutable proof.

For right now, she would put conjecture aside. Instead, she would make a list of things that needed to be done, tasks that required her attention immediately. Lists were made of numbers and needs, and not speculations and suppositions. Lists were ordered and rational, and they had always helped her focus on what she could control when presented with disorder and uncertainty. Yes, a carefully curated collection of lists was exactly what she needed right now.

Feeling a little better, Lia headed back toward the bedroom doors but stopped abruptly as she caught sight of her reflection. A little tarnished and spotted, the mirror mounted above the dressing table nonetheless revealed the troubled lines that still suffused Lia's features. Almost

involuntarily, she sank onto the little chair, ignoring the dust, not taking her eyes off her reflection. Had her grandmother been the last to be reflected in this mirror? And if Lia could go back in time, what would she have seen? Who would she have seen?

Her eyes dropped to the surface of the dressing table. A collection of decorative glass bottles huddled in the center. A pair of women's gloves lay discarded beside them, abandoned where they had been dropped. Beside the gloves, propped up against the bottom of the mirror, was a small card. A postcard of some sort, Lia thought as she reached for it.

It was a black-and-white photo of a long, looming building, a row of Roman columns lining the entire façade like an ancient temple. An impressive display of architecture, marred only by the Nazi flag snapping proudly in the wind in the foreground. Dread returned and manifested into something far more sinister. Very slowly, Lia turned the postcard over.

For the lovely Estelle, it read in scrawled, faded ink. With thanks, Hermann Göring.

Lia dropped the postcard as though it had bitten her and stumbled to her feet, knocking the little chair to the side. Despair warred with revulsion, leaving her nauseated. She was such a fool. Only a fool would have clung to hope. Only a delusional fool would have refused to truly accept the evidence scattered all over this apartment. As far as irrefutable proof went, Lia couldn't imagine anything more damning.

She still had no idea why her grandmother had chosen to leave her this apartment but the reason that she had kept its existence a secret was abundantly clear. Because her grandmother, a woman who had hung the French flag out every May in celebration, a woman who had repeatedly declared her love for her country, hadn't been a patriotic citizen at all. Her grandmother had been a liar and a traitor and a fraud.

Her grandmother had been a Nazi collaborator.

Chapter 2

Sophie

Wieluń, Poland

31 August 1939

Sophie Seymour had been eight years old when she'd first heard someone refer to her as unnatural.

It had been at Heloise Postlewaithe's birthday party, an event that Sophie had attended only because Mrs. Postlewaithe had invited the entirety of her daughter's summer Sunday school class. The party had been an affair marked by fancy frocks with copious ruffles, rich cakes and tepid tea, and games that had bored Sophie to death, quite frankly. She'd wandered away from the shrill fracas of musical chairs and pass the parcel without anyone noticing and made her way to the Postlewaithe's library that was up on the first floor.

The Postlewaithe's country manor was impressive, their library equally so. Here, amid the blessed silence and the soft afternoon light, Sophie had found a Latin primer, no doubt a leftover from a previous Postlewaithe's Eton days. At eight, Sophie was already fluent in French, Spanish, and Italian, though she'd never seen the root language from which all of those had been derived. She'd been instantly captivated and settled down in a warm corner of the room in which to read.

As absorbed in her newfound study and tucked away upstairs as she was, she hadn't heard the discovery of her absence. She hadn't been aware of the uproar and panic when it was finally discerned that an eight-year-old girl was missing or hearkened the fears that, as the initial search had turned up nothing, she might have fallen into one of the manor's ponds and drowned.

It wasn't until a frantic Mrs. Postlewaithe had finally discovered Sophie in the library an hour later that Sophie had any indication that anything was wrong. She'd yanked Sophie to her feet, relief dissolving into fury, and snatched the primer out of Sophie's hands.

"What is wrong with you?" she'd demanded, her face flushed an alarming shade beneath a stylish coiffure that was still perfectly in place.

"Nothing," Sophie replied, blinking with incomprehension.

"You left the party."

"The noise was hurting my ears," Sophie explained, trying to be polite.

"You ruined Heloise's party," the woman hissed. "Ruined it all."

"I don't understand."

"We all had to look for you. We thought you'd drowned."

Sophie shook her head. "I know how to swim," she tried to reassure her hostess. "My mum made both my brother and I take lessons before we were allowed to go exploring on our own."

The woman's lips curled in disgust. "Perhaps your mum should have also taught you that stealing is rude. Taking things that aren't yours."

"I wasn't stealing," Sophie told her. "I was just reading. And I was going to put it back when I was done."

Mrs. Postlewaithe looked down at the Latin primer. “And you’re a liar too,” she sneered. “You can’t read this.”

“I can.” Sophie had never been called a liar by a grown-up before. It made her stomach feel awful. “It’s just Latin,” she tried to explain. “And this book starts with basic grammar in tables and uses that to build up more complex sentences. It’s not that hard. I could show you.”

“I don’t need you to show me anything. I know my place in this world. You need to learn yours.”

Mrs. Postlewaithe stared at Sophie and Sophie had stared back.

“You are an unnatural creature,” the woman continued, her expression as hard and cold as the diamonds that hung from her neck. “No one will ever want you. There is something wrong with you.”

That conversation had been thirteen years ago, but Sophie had never forgotten it.

“Am I unnatural?” Sophie asked, staring up at the ceiling.

Beside her, Piotr rolled over in bed. His dark hair was thoroughly tousled, eyes the color of the Baltic Sea thoroughly amused. “Is this a trick question? A test for new husbands?” He propped his head up on his hand.

“You’re laughing at me.”

“You deserve it with questions like that.” He reached over and stroked her bare shoulder. “You’re not having regrets, are you?”

“I regret we did not do this sooner.”

“That makes two of us.” Piotr Kowalski was smiling as he said it. “If I had known that you would have said yes, I would have asked you to marry me the day you ran me over with your bicycle.”

“I did not run you over. I avoided you and hit a tree. Mostly.”

“No, I think you ran me over on purpose. You couldn’t help yourself,” he teased.

“I ran you over because I was late for work. And you should know that I did my best not to fall in love with you.”

“Mmm.” Piotr leaned forward and kissed her with a thoroughness that curled her toes.

“You never stood a chance, wife.”

Sophie managed to nod because he was right. Love had been wearing the green-brown uniform of a Polish cavalry officer and had not cursed or seethed when he’d been sent sprawling by her inattention and haste. Instead, love had gently helped her stagger to her feet, her hose torn and beyond salvage, her knee scraped and throbbing, and her lip split and bleeding. He’d righted her bicycle with easy motions before turning back to her, concern stamped across his features.

She’d made a cake of herself after that, in the face of his kindness and his devastatingly vivid blue eyes, babbling apologies and stammering something about needing to get back to the embassy. He had only wet a linen kerchief with his canteen and wiped the blood from her lip with a tenderness that had suddenly made her want to burst into tears. She’d fled, clambering back on her bicycle and pedaling away, realizing only when she’d reached the embassy that she was clutching his kerchief, now stained and crushed.

She’d locked herself in the loo and unsteadily put herself back together as best she could, thoroughly mortified. The practical part of her knew she’d likely never see the kind blue-eyed officer again but instead of relief, she’d felt an intense regret.

“Why did you come back that day?” she asked suddenly. “To the embassy?”

“Because the extraordinary, beautiful blond girl who kept apologizing in at least four languages stole my only kerchief, and I wanted it back.”

“You brought flowers.”

“Because she had also stolen my heart. Though I never got that back, nor do I want it returned. That will be yours forever.”

Sophie glanced down at the band around her finger. In the long rays of the sun that was beginning its descent over the roofs and spires of the city, the ruby and tiny pearls gleamed with a lustrous glow. “You, Piotr Kowalski, are a shameless romantic.”

“Guilty.” He flashed her a roguish grin. “It’s why you love me.”

“I love you because you are kind and brave and honorable. Because you are patient and gentle and smart.”

“What about handsome?”

“The most handsome man of all.” Sophie smiled.

“Indeed. Do go on. What else do you love about me?”

“Now you’re just fishing for flattery.”

“Yes. You can have a turn later. I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

Sophie laughed before sobering. “I love you because the day I told you that I would become a professor of languages at Oxford, you asked why I hadn’t already applied. And where we would live.”

“Perfectly reasonable questions.”

Sophie toyed with the edge of the sheet. “Most men wouldn’t think so.”

Piotr caught her hand. “And I am not most men. Where is this coming from?”

“Childhood insecurities,” Sophie mumbled. “I’m sorry. This is embarrassing and not at all a romantic topic on our wedding night.”

Piotr sat up, the hotel bed protesting the movement. He slid an arm under her shoulders and hauled her up against him. “Any man who would wish to extinguish the fire that burns so bright in you is no man at all. Whatever dreams you wish to chase, I will chase them with you.”

“I am the luckiest girl in the world right now,” she whispered, looking up at him.

“Careful,” he replied, his eyes dancing. “You might be accused of being a shameless romantic.”

“I’ll have you know that the women in my family are not romantics, shameless or otherwise,” she sniffed. “We leave that to our menfolk.”

“I can’t wait to meet them.”

“You will.”

“They will not be angry? That I married their daughter without even meeting them?”

Sophie bit her lip. For as long as she could remember, marriage had ever been an enemy to her ambitions and dreams and an adversary to her independence and freedom. Her antipathy toward the institution had increased each time some meddling matriarch told Sophie that it was well past time that she abandon her frivolous studies and do what was natural—marry well and settle down.

A thousand times she had sworn to her family that she would never fall in love. Never marry. A thousand times she had sat down at her writing desk to tell her family that she’d been a liar. And each time, the words hadn’t come. She would remedy that as soon as she got back to Warsaw tomorrow.

“They will love you,” she told him. That was the truth.

“I wish my parents were still alive and could have known you,” he said, his finger tracing patterns along the top of her arm. “Though they would have been appalled that I did not marry

you in front of a hundred people, in a church filled with flowers, with a brass ensemble to serenade us out. Or that I did not take you to Paris or Vienna for our honeymoon and sleep on silk sheets.”

“That all sounds complicated.” Sophie squeezed his hand with hers, twining her fingers through his. “This world is complicated enough.”

“I didn’t even manage a proper photographer.”

“I didn’t particularly want to marry a proper photographer.”

“Very funny.”

“I love you,” she said simply, those words seemingly inadequate for the storm of emotion that was constricting her chest.

He glanced over at her, holding her eyes with his own, the smile slipping from his lips, his expression intense. “I love you too,” he replied.

“I wish your leave wasn’t so short. I wish you didn’t have to go back to your regiment tomorrow. I don’t want to lose you again so quickly—”

“This was the best leave of my life.” He cut her off. “And you can’t lose me. You’re stuck with me for good. Your last name is now the same as mine. You are wearing my grandmother’s ring. I’m well and truly yours.”

Sophie closed her eyes and listened to the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear.

“The answer to your question is yes,” he said presently. “You are unnatural.” His lips found the hollow behind her ear. “Unnaturally brilliant, unnaturally beautiful.” His hand slid under the sheet over her hip. “And most of all,” he whispered, “unnaturally bewitching.”

Sophie opened her eyes. “Show me,” she said.

And he did.

Sophie wasn't sure what had woken her.

She lay in the bed, listening intently, but nothing disturbed the stillness aside from Piotr's steady breathing. Her husband had indeed had more than a few ideas on how best to spend what little time they had had before he was required to report back, but then so had she. Both had finally fallen into an exhausted, sated sleep sometime in the small hours before dawn.

She crept from the bed with care and opened her small suitcase as quietly as possible, feeling for her clothes.

"Leaving me already?" Piotr sleepy voice mumbled out of the dark.

"Just to watch the sunrise," she said, pulling a simple frock over her head. "Go back to sleep."

"Not a chance. This is the first dawn of the first day of our life together. I'm coming with you." The bed creaked, and a light flickered on.

Sophie buttoned the collar of her dress and slipped on her shoes. Piotr joined her a moment later, and they exited the old stone building and stepped out in front. Turning away from the empty street that led back in the direction of the town center, they circled the hotel and found themselves in a deserted, grassy expanse. Based on the long, dilapidated building that sagged forgotten on the south side of the space, Sophie guessed that, in a century past, the expanse might once have been a carriage yard.

Dawn was pushing at the horizon, a soft gold glow layered below the bruised purples of a retreating night. The air was cool, sharp edges of an encroaching autumn lurking on the breeze. Sophie caught Piotr's hand and tugged him along a well-trodden path that crossed the yard to end near a pasture gate, dew making the toes of her shoes wet where they brushed the grass.

They reached the gate, and she leaned over the rail. The wood was rough beneath her arms but she paid little attention, delighted to find that the fenced enclosure was home to a dappled mare and her foal, both appearing like apparitions in the watery light. With fingers of mist swirling through the tall grass and an ever-lightening sky behind them, the horses looked like they might be posing for a postcard, the sort of photograph of the Polish countryside that was sold in the streets of Warsaw. The beauty of the scene made her sigh. She wanted to fix this moment in her memory forever.

“Isn’t it lovely?” she breathed happily.

“He is a handsome little fellow,” Piotr replied. “I like his shoulders and legs already.”

Sophie made a face at her husband. “The landscape, dear,” she said dryly.

He kissed her. “That too.”

In the pasture, the copper-colored colt pranced and bucked before nearly toppling sideways.

Sophie laughed. “I think he’s trying to impress you. Angling for a cavalry job, maybe.”

“Perhaps.” He ducked through the rails and held out his hand. “Come,” he said, grinning. “Let’s go make friends.”

Sophie followed him and took his hand. She’d never ridden as a child—her parents hadn’t kept horses at the family’s Norfolk estate—but Piotr had taken her often. It was not long before his deep love for the noble creatures became hers as well.

The mare whickered a greeting and turned toward them, approaching as the colt continued to prance beyond. The mare stopped beside Piotr and blew gently against his arm. He reached up and scratched between its ears, murmuring something that Sophie couldn’t hear. The horse lowered her head.

“You’ve cast a spell on her.” Sophie joined him, watching the way his hands moved over the horse. She’d always loved Piotr’s hands, strong, rough, callused, and yet infinitely gentle. Even the most nervous of mounts seemed to settle under his touch.

“I have done no such thing,” he said softly. “Merely introduced myself. The colt will come when he’s ready.”

Sophie watched the colt circle Piotr and the mare, tossing its head. Finally, it inched closer, its nose almost touching Piotr’s shirt. Piotr didn’t move, merely continued to stroke the mare’s neck, speaking quiet words. The colt moved closer still, and Piotr shifted his hand from the mare to the colt. It shied away. Piotr returned his attention to the mare.

“He’s skittish,” Sophie said.

“No,” Piotr murmured. “Trust needs to be earned. He is only reminding me of that fact.”

The colt came back toward Piotr. This time it didn’t shy when Piotr lifted his hand. He rested his palm on the colt’s withers for only a few seconds before removing it. The colt lowered its head and took another step closer.

“There you are,” Piotr breathed. He ran a hand along the back of the colt with slow, gentle movements. “Trust cannot be a single-sided affair. One day, this horse might be asked to do the impossible. Charge into a situation when every instinct he possesses is telling him to flee the opposite way. But he will do what you’ve asked because you have earned his trust. Trust is everything.”

He dropped his hand and stepped away from both the mare and the colt to join Sophie and slip an arm around her.

She laid her head on his shoulder, a quiet ache constricting her heart. She wished that she could stay in this perfect moment forever but she could feel time slipping away from her. From them. “I wish you didn’t have to go,” she whispered.

“You’re the one who stole a car from the Foreign Office and needs to return it before they come looking.”

“I didn’t steal it, I borrowed it. I’ll have it back before they even know it’s gone. And what I do with my days off are my business. Don’t change the subject.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “My regiment isn’t even mobilized.”

Sophie grimaced. “But they were.”

“Everyone was, for a day. And now we’re not. It seems it is just a great deal of hurry-up-and-waiting for something that might never happen. Most of the boys in the squadron don’t think we will see action.”

“Most of the boys in your squadron haven’t heard what I’ve heard in the embassy,” Sophie muttered.

“Hitler is ambitious and arrogant, yes, but he is not stupid. I have to believe that he will not risk war with Britain and France by pushing into Poland.”

“I’m not so sure, Piotr. I’m worried.”

Piotr turned to face her. “I know. I am too.”

Sophie sighed and watched the mare and her colt wander away a few paces. “I’m sorry. We agreed that we wouldn’t talk of politics and war in what little time we have—”

“Don’t apologize.” He tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “Maybe we should. Maybe we need to talk about what should happen if the Germans do decide to do something stupid.”

She frowned.

“I think you should leave Poland.”

“What? No.”

“Just until things settle—”

“And go where?”

“To France, at least. From there you’d still be able to get back to England in case—”

“No. My home is where you are.”

“I want you safe.”

“I will be safe. I’ll be in Warsaw. Where I’m needed. Where, in my own small way, I can still contribute to whatever diplomatic efforts are being made to avoid disaster.” She stepped forward and slipped her hands around his waist. “I will not run, and you will not send me away. We are in this together, come what may.”

“But if the worst happens—if there is war—I need to know you are all right.”

“I’ll be fine—”

“Promise me that you will do the smart thing when the time comes, Sophie. That you will take care of yourself and not do anything foolish.”

“Piotr—”

“Promise me.” His demand was urgent.

Sophie bit her lip. “I promise.”

“Thank you.” Piotr rested his forehead against hers. “I didn’t really think you’d agree to go.”

“Good. I’m glad we got that settled.” The breeze gusted, and she shivered.

“May I at least take you inside and warm you up?” he asked.

“Mmm. I like that idea much better.”

Arm in arm, they started back toward the hotel. The dappled mare was cropping grass just ahead, her colt dancing in playful circles around her.

Sophie’s stomach growled. “What do you think the chances are we might find something to eat—”

The mare’s head came up abruptly, her ears pricked, her attention riveted in the direction of the hotel.

Sophie stopped, Piotr along with her, but she could see nothing in the shadowed carriage yard that might have alarmed the mare. In the street beyond, a dog started barking incessantly, joined by a handful more. Sophie frowned. The mare snorted and backed away, head high and nostrils flaring, before breaking into a canter toward the end of the pasture, her foal at her heels. And as the sound of the mare’s pounding hooves faded, Sophie heard the engines.

She didn’t understand where they were coming from at first. Her mind did not immediately register the high-pitched whine of rapidly descending planes until a flash of light in the southwestern sky caught her attention. She stared dumbly as the spots became larger and louder, approaching the village.

“Are those ours?” she whispered.

“No,” Piotr croaked.

The first bomb detonated somewhere in the center of the village, the muffled thump and roar followed by a series of explosions. Smoke and dust billowed into the air and still the planes came, the white-and-black crosses painted on the undersides of the wings now visible. More explosions followed, a never-ending string of destruction that shook the ground. And through that, the chilling sounds of rapid gunfire.

“They’re strafing the streets,” Piotr shouted, yanking Sophie forward. “We need to find cover.”

They ran from the pasture, Sophie’s heart in her throat and terror clawing at her insides. She scrambled through the pasture gate, scraping her hands on the wood. The hem of her dress snagged on a nail as the planes screamed their approach. Desperately, she yanked herself free and pushed herself away from the gate, breathing hard. Piotr was beside her, urging her to run faster. She had taken only two steps forward when the hotel abruptly disintegrated before her eyes. Stone was hurled into the air, and the force of the explosion threw her back against the gate and then to the ground.

The breath was knocked from her, and as she gasped for air a cloud of roiling dust enveloped her, filling her mouth and her nose and making her gag. She turned onto her stomach, ignoring the searing pain in her ribs, and dragged herself farther back into the pasture, past splinters of railings and posts. Disoriented, she pushed herself to her knees, and then to her feet, pressing her hands to her ears. The world had gone strangely silent, a distant ringing replacing the shriek of the planes.

The dust was clearing, though flames and smoke still billowed heavenward, smears of horror against what once promised to be a perfect September sky. The space where the hotel had been was only a pile of scattered brick and timbers, only the northern wall jutting up like a broken tooth. Sophie staggered forward. Where was Piotr?

She tripped over a pile of broken brick, a woman’s shoe sticking out incongruously from the mound. Beside it, the matching purse lay, papers spilling from the inside and fluttering back and forth. Around her, people appeared, covered in dust and blood and looking like ghostly

spectres. Most were running blindly while some wandered aimlessly, and a few simply cowered on the ground. None were Piotr.

A shadow passed over her head and then another. The ground seemed to vibrate under her feet. To her left, small puffs of smoke and dust were erupting, the bodies of those who had run by her jerking awkwardly and then crumpling to the ground. A pair of hands grabbed her and spun her around. She found herself looking into brilliant blue eyes, and she almost wept with relief.

Piotr was shouting something at her as he pointed toward the dilapidated carriage house, which was still standing. He pushed her toward the building, and Sophie fought to make her legs work, the sensation that she was running underwater making her feel slow and sluggish. The ringing in her ears was starting to dissipate, replaced again by the roaring and shrieking of engines. Behind Sophie, a woman's scream was abruptly silenced.

Hidden by the wall of swirling smoke that rose from the remnants of the hotel, another plane was approaching unseen, its high-pitched whine filling the air. A thump reverberated through the ground followed by the rattle of more guns. Sophie stumbled as she ran on, panic making her clumsy. Piotr steadied her, urging her faster toward the darkened doorway that had long since lost its door.

They had almost reached the carriage house when the plane burst through the veil of smoke and flame over the hotel. Clods of earth exploded as the gunner shredded the ground beneath him. Piotr shoved her forward, and Sophie landed hard halfway through the doorway of the carriage house. His weight came down on top of her as the plane roared past, punching the air from her lungs and driving her chin into the ground. She squeezed her eyes closed, the coppery taste of blood in her mouth. She tried to move but Piotr's weight still had her pinned.

“Piotr?” she rasped.

He didn’t answer.

“Piotr?” she asked again, a new sort of terror surging through her. Sophie shoved herself to her elbows, Piotr’s weight shifting slowly from her back. She made a sound she didn’t recognize and struggled feverishly out from under her husband, dread giving her a strength she didn’t know she possessed.

“No, no, no, no, no.” She was on her knees beside him now, afraid to touch him, afraid not to.

He had rolled onto his back, and his dark lashes lay still against dust-caked cheeks. Blood bloomed across his chest, mottling his once white shirt with a macabre pattern of red.

He was breathing, but barely. With shaking fingers, Sophie used the torn hem of her dress to wipe a smear of blood from his lips with as much care as she could manage.

His eyes fluttered open.

“Did you...run me over...with your bicycle again?” he managed roughly.

Sophie swallowed a sob. “Not quite.”

“Didn’t...think so.”

“You’re going to be all right,” she told him. “If you survived me, you can survive this.”

He might have smiled but his eyes fluttered closed again. “Don’t cry.” His words were barely audible.

She dashed away the tears that had escaped and tucked her hand in his. His fingers were cold. So very cold.

“Look in my...front shirt pocket,” he whispered.

Sophie did as he bid, her hand shaking. In the pocket of his shirt she found a photo, a black-and-white image of her mounted bareback on a big-boned gelding. She was grinning triumphantly at the camera, her hair tumbled around her shoulders, her clothing muddy at the elbows and knees. Sophie recognized it instantly.

“You took this picture the first day you took me riding.”

“Yes.”

“I lost count of how many times I slid off that poor horse.”

“Yet you kept...getting back up.” Bright blue eyes opened again to meet hers. “You need to get up again today.”

She shook her head, her breath catching on a sob. “Not without you.”

“Make it count, Sophie. Every day after this one. Make it all count.”

“I love you.” Her tears were falling unchecked now.

A new, distant thunder was approaching, and Sophie crouched over Piotr, as if she could protect him from whatever new threat was coming. Out of the corner of her eye, hooves flashed as the mare galloped wildly past, the copper-colored foal nowhere to be seen.

Sophie straightened and pressed a soft kiss to her husband’s lips.

And fourteen hours after she had become a wife, Sophie became a widow.

Chapter 3

Estelle

Near Metz, France

17 June 1940

Twenty-two widows.

Twenty-two was the number of men wearing wedding bands who died before Estelle Allard could get them to the field hospital in her ambulance. And it was barely past noon.

She wasn't entirely sure when she had started noticing that detail or why it seemed to matter so much to her. Each one of the men she transported from the front lines was a loved one to somebody, married or not. Perhaps it was because she had always wondered what it might be like to love and be loved with the entirety that a marriage suggested. To have someone simply accept your flaws and love you despite them. Or maybe for them. To love so deeply and so completely that you couldn't imagine a future without that person.

The thought of a love like that was as terrifying as it was enviable because it could be lost in a second. As it had been for the twenty-two women who were waiting for a love who would never come home again.

Estelle's ambulance bounced over the deep ruts across the field, and she shifted down to bring the battered vehicle to a shuddering halt, eyeing the rows of men waiting on stretchers.

Rows of writhing, screaming, and bleeding men and still more who were simply lying in ominous silence. So many. Too many.

“What the hell took you so long, Allard?” a haggard medic barked at her as she shoved her door open and slid down from the hard bench.

She swayed slightly as her feet hit the ground. “And it’s good to see you’re still alive too, Jerome.”

“You were gone too long.” Jerome de Colbert ignored her greeting, kneeling beside one of the prone figures on the ground. “You need to be faster.”

“There’s no fuel,” she replied dully. It was always the fuel that slowed her down. That slowed all the drivers down. The little that was in the ambulance’s tank had come from a newly abandoned farmyard a mile south, the inhabitants terrified enough to have left everything behind in the face of the invading Germans.

“Rachel driving behind you somewhere?” he asked, standing.

“Maybe?” The truth of the matter was that she hadn’t seen her dearest friend since dawn, and then only as they had driven past each other in the farmyard being used as a field hospital. Estelle had tried very hard all day not to think about all the awful things that might have befallen her. Tried very hard not to imagine Rachel wounded or dead, her ambulance crippled or obliterated by the steady shelling.

Even now, the ceaseless guns roared and rattled, almost drowning out the screams and moans of the wounded and dying awaiting transport. The air was stagnant and gritty, and the stench of gunpowder and smoke mingled with the sharp scent of blood and urine. Estelle put a hand on the ambulance door for a moment to steady herself before she hurried forward toward the next group of wounded men waiting to get to the field hospital.

She crouched beside a soldier lying motionless on his stretcher, his arm flung to the side, his entire head swathed in blood-and-dirt-caked rags.

“Leave that one,” Jerome said gruffly. “He didn’t make it. See if the one beside him is still alive. I’ll be right back to help you load.”

She reached for the soldier’s lifeless hand and rested it gently on his chest. The gold of a wedding band glinted in the sunlight filtering through the haze.

Twenty-three widows.

She touched the band. A Hebrew word had been engraved in a familiar—

“No.” Estelle froze for a fraction of a second before she fumbled for his tags. She pulled them from beneath his stained uniform. They were sticky with congealing blood but were still legible. *Alain Wylar*.

Estelle dropped the tags and lurched away from the body as if that would make what she already knew less real. Her throat constricted, and she fought the urge to simply collapse and weep, because that would accomplish nothing in the face of so much suffering and death and loss. Instead, she struggled to her feet, though her vision seemed to waver and the ground tilted precariously beneath her. She found herself on her hands and knees, nausea roiling through her.

“Jesus, Allard, when did you last eat?” Jerome was back, crouching beside her, one of his hands resting on her shoulder.

“Yesterday?” It was hard to remember. It was harder still to keep the days separate.

Jerome grunted. “Here.” What looked like a piece of dried sausage was thrust in front of her face. “Eat this. I’ve got enough casualties without adding you to the goddamn list.”

Estelle sat back on her heels and did as she was told. She accepted the additional offer of a canteen and took careful sips of tepid water.

“Have you slept?”

“Enough.” An hour or so sometime between midnight and two. There wasn’t time for sleeping.

The spots before her eyes were clearing, and the nausea receding, though the tightness in her throat was still there along with a chronic, aching sadness that seemed to have settled deep in her chest. She put a hand over Alain’s for the last time.

“You knew him?” Jerome was watching her with reddened, tired eyes, unnaturally bright against the dark smudges of soot and mud that covered his face.

“Yes,” Estelle managed.

“Who was he?”

“Rachel’s brother.” *My brother*, she wanted to say. Because he was just that, in every way but blood. Though in Estelle’s experience, blood didn’t count for much when it came to family. “He has a wife. Hannah. And a three-year-old daughter. Aviva.”

“Goddammit.” Jerome dropped his head. “Goddammit,” he repeated.

“I should be the one to tell Rachel.”

“Yes,” he mumbled. “I’m so sorry, Allard.”

Estelle handed the canteen back to him. “Me too.”

Jerome stood and held out his hand, helping her to her feet. He had kind eyes, Estelle thought numbly as she took his hand. The color of melted caramel, steady and—

The ground in the field beyond Estelle’s ambulance suddenly erupted. She dove to the ground, soil and debris flung into the air like a geyser raining down on them and the patients. Something stung the skin near her temple but Estelle ignored it.

“Goddamn Boches,” Jerome was screaming in the direction of the front lines. “Goddamn stop for a goddamn minute so I can do my goddamn job!”

Estelle clambered back to her feet. Something warm trickled down the side of her face, and she brushed at it angrily with her sleeve.

Jerome turned and thrust an empty tin at her. “I need you to drive,” he said, hoarse from shouting. Bits of debris fell from his shoulders. “And bring back more bandages. We’re stripping corpses to use their goddamn uniforms for wraps. I can’t keep up.”

Estelle took the box and tossed it in the front of the ambulance. She returned to help load those who were still living into the back.

“Hurry back,” Jerome panted as he slammed the back shut. “Please.”

“Yes,” she said. “Don’t die on me in the meantime.”

“Likewise, Allard.”

Estelle swung back into her ambulance and stomped on the clutch, jamming it into gear. The vehicle gave a tortured groan and then rolled forward, jolting mercilessly. A soldier in the back shrieked in pain. She maneuvered the ambulance onto the uneven road and accelerated over the rise, driving as fast as she dared. She’d gone only perhaps a half mile when she was forced to slow to a crawl. In front of her, the road was clogged with people fleeing away from the front lines that were continuously inching closer. Most were walking, many with small children in their arms. Some had wheelbarrows or dog carts. The lucky ones had horse- or ox-drawn carts or bicycles, and there was even a tractor farther up, belching black clouds of exhaust. But all had fatigue and fear etched deeply into their faces.

She stayed on the road for long minutes before she veered away from the crowds and bounced into a pasture, following a rutted track that had once been a livestock trail. She burst

through a hedgerow and found herself almost at the newest field hospital that had been set up yesterday in a modest manor house abandoned by its previous tenants. Surgeries were being conducted in the kitchen and what had once been a parlour. In the rest of the rooms, men were laid wherever there was space, waiting. Waiting to die, waiting to live.

Uniformed men came out to meet Estelle as the ambulance coughed and jerked past the barn and empty livestock pens. They unloaded the patients from the back, but instead of turning toward the manor, they headed for the barn.

“Stop,” she protested. “These men need to go to the manor. They need a doctor.”

“No room,” one of the men mumbled, adjusting his grip on the stretcher. “Manor’s full. An’ they all need a damn doctor.”

Estelle stared after them and sank down on the back edge of the ambulance, the doors still hanging ajar. She rested her head in her hands, her palms pressing hard against her eyes. She was tired. So very tired.

She forced herself to sit up. She had never been a quitter, and she would not quit now, not when men like Alain had sacrificed everything for her and for their country. She returned to the cab of her vehicle and checked the fuel gauge. She would not make it to the front lines and back with the fuel she had left.

Estelle stood. Perhaps in the last hour someone had secured more fuel or perhaps a cache had been brought up from—

“Estelle!” The sound of her name had her spinning, and she saw Rachel running toward her. Most of her dark hair had escaped its bindings and spilled across her shoulders in a tangled mess, and her uniform, like her face, was filthy.

The immediate relief at seeing her friend alive and whole was snuffed violently by a suffocating wave of grief. She swallowed hard.

“Estelle,” Rachel said again as she reached her and enveloped her in a hug. “I was so worried. The men coming back said that some of the shells were reaching beyond the lines and—” She stopped and pulled back. “You’re hurt.” Rachel reached up to touch Estelle’s temple, and her fingers were bloody when she withdrew them.

“I’m fine,” Estelle whispered. She realized that the tears she hadn’t shed with Jerome were now running freely down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

Estelle tried to speak but couldn’t seem to make the words come out.

Rachel backed up a step. “Alain.”

Estelle nodded.

Her friend put a hand out and grasped the ambulance door. “Is he—” She couldn’t seem to say it either. As if neither of them saying what they both knew would make it not true.

“I’m sorry, Rachel,” Estelle said. “I’m so sorry.”

Rachel staggered and sat down hard on the back of the ambulance. She didn’t speak, didn’t move, and Estelle had no idea what to do. Or what to say.

After a moment, Rachel stood and approached Estelle. “How much fuel do you have left?”

“What?” Estelle shook her head, not understanding.

“How much fuel do you have? My ambulance isn’t drivable anymore; the front axle broke when I—”

“Rachel.” Estelle cut her off. “What are you doing?”

“I’m doing what Alain would have wanted us to do,” she said, her voice shaking. “There are men out there who he would have considered friends, men he fought beside, men who are still fighting. Men who need our help. He would not want us to fall apart now.” She took Estelle’s hand and squeezed it tight.

“Rachel—”

“I won’t cry now,” she said, and the pressure on Estelle’s hand increased. “Because if I do, I won’t be able to stop. And that helps no one. We need to find some fuel.”

“Yes.”

Rachel let go of Estelle’s hands. “We need to get back to Jerome.”

The two women started across the yard, skirting the smallest of the outbuildings. Estelle hadn’t gone more than a dozen steps before she stopped, abruptly aware of the stillness of the yard. Vehicles sat unattended, posts had seemingly been deserted. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a young soldier running toward the barn.

“What’s happening?” she called out.

“A radio address,” he replied without slowing down. “From our government.”

Estelle exchanged a look with Rachel, and for the first time in a long while, hope surfaced. Estelle started forward, daring to believe that this would be the announcement they had been waiting for. That somehow, some way, more troops and more help would be coming. That the goddamn Boches would indeed be driven back to where they had come from and their seemingly unchecked aggression halted before it was too late.

The barn doors had been propped open, and Estelle and Rachel stepped into the cavernous space. Along the wall to Estelle’s right, a dozen patients languished on beds of straw. The one closest to her was moaning and mumbling, an empty space where his lower left leg

should have been beneath his thin blanket. The others lay motionless, a handful watching her with haunted eyes shadowed by pain and exhaustion.

At the far end of the barn, a radio had been set up on a barrel, the long antenna snaking up through the hayloft and out the roof. A knot of men in various uniforms was crowded around. Estelle picked up her pace, anxious to hear what was being said. Rachel was on her heels. But as they got to the end, someone reached up and turned off the radio, the silence in the space unnerving and absolute. Only the whimpers of the patient by the door could be heard.

Estelle faltered. The expressions on each face ranged from grave to dismayed, furious to forlorn. One aging soldier, old enough that he had likely fought the Germans twenty years ago, was crying openly.

She grabbed the arm of a nearby medic. "What has happened?"

"We've surrendered."

Estelle stared at him, not comprehending. "I don't understand."

"Reynaud has resigned, Pétain has taken power, and his first action as premier has been to ask the Germans to let France surrender."

"That's not possible." Because that would mean everything in these last months had been for nothing. That all this suffering and death and sacrifice had been for nothing.

That Alain's sacrifice had been for nothing.

"It's done." The medic pulled his arm from Estelle and stalked away.

Rachel made a tortured sound in her throat and sank to the ground on one knee, her hand over her mouth.

The others who had been listening to the radio were dispersing. Estelle and Rachel were left alone, staring at the space the crowd had just occupied. Dust motes danced in the light streaming down from the open loft door above, disturbed by their movements.

The generals in resplendent uniforms and the politicians in tailored suits had assured Estelle and everyone else that France was prepared for Germany. They'd asserted that France would crush any hostile overtures the Germans might dare to make. They'd proclaimed that the Maginot Line, with all its tunnels and troops and arms, was indestructible and impenetrable. And they'd affirmed that there was no tactical way an army could invade through the Ardennes or navigate the River Meuse. France would never fall.

They had all been liars.

About the Author



Author: Kelly Bowen
Credit: Jody Sie

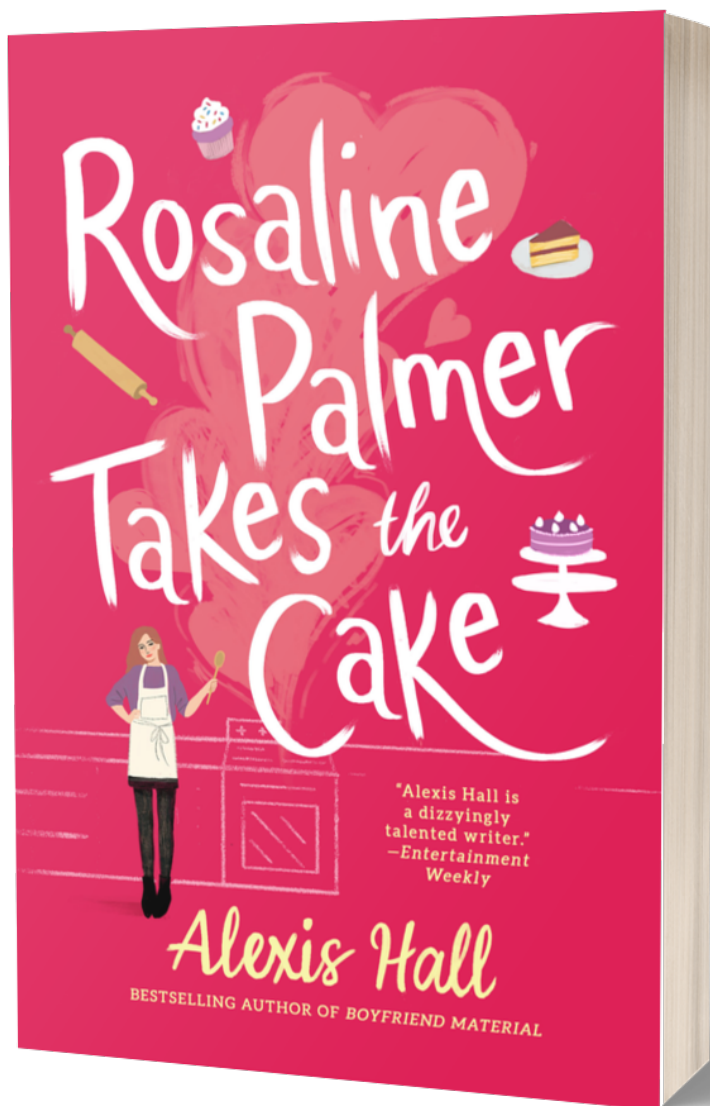
Award-winning author Kelly Bowen grew up in Manitoba, Canada, and attended the University of Manitoba, where she earned Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees in veterinary studies. She worked as a research scientist before realizing her dream to be a writer of historical fiction. Currently, Kelly lives in Winnipeg with her husband and two sons.

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ROSALINE PALMER TAKES THE CAKE
Alexis Hall



FOREVER

Week One

Chocolate



Friday



“Most of the bakers have opted for a traditional sponge mix, consisting of, like, eggs and flour and shit,” narrated Lauren helpfully or—from a different and more correct perspective—unhelpfully. “Single MILF Rosaline, however...”

Rosaline looked up from her food processor, whose capacity for raw beetroot she had wildly overestimated. “The BBC are not going to describe me as a single MILF.”

“Maybe not, but”—and here Lauren fluttered her eyelashes outrageously—“it’s how I think of you.”

“And what,” asked Rosaline, laughing, “does your wife have to say about that?”

“Allison thinks you’re a MILF too.”

“You know it’s still objectification if you’re a lesbian.”

“Actually, I think you’ll find it’s empowering.”

“No, it isn’t.” Rosaline grabbed a wooden spoon and tried to scrape the worst of the purple gunk out of her coarse grater attachment. “And besides, I bet Allison’s never used the word ‘MILF’ in her life.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect.” Scooting her stool closer to the bench, Lauren dipped her finger into the molten chocolate that Rosaline had set aside to cool. “Look, why *are* you putting beetroot in this otherwise perfectly good cake?”

“It’s a beetroot cake. It wouldn’t be a beetroot cake without beetroot in it.”

“Most of the bakers”—Lauren went back to her narrator voice—“have chosen to make something a human being might want to eat. Kitchen temptress Rosaline, however, has decided to add beetroot for no fucking reason.”

This was just Lauren being Lauren. And normally Rosaline was fine with Lauren being Lauren. But right now, it was the last thing she needed. “It’s not for no fucking reason. It’s for a very good fucking reason, which is I want to stand out and not get sent home immediately because my cake was too ordinary.”

“They don’t send people home in week one for being ordinary,” said Lauren cheerfully. “Ordinary gets you to at least week four.”

Rosaline combined her ingredients in a sufficiently stabby way that she was sure she’d knocked the air out of her egg whites. “I don’t want to get to week four. I want to win. And I have to win because otherwise I’m spending the rest of my life working shit minimum wage jobs to support my daughter while my parents shake their heads sadly and occasionally make me beg them for money.”

“I…understand where you’re coming from.” This was about as close to gentle as Lauren could get. “But honestly, going on a reality TV show feels like a bit of a Hail Mary.”

“I mean yes,” Rosaline admitted. “But I have actually thought this through. Best-case scenario, I win, pay my parents back with the prize money, and get a slightly better job. Worst-case scenario, I get eliminated, and what have I lost?” She stared into the bowl of brownish-purple cake batter that was supposed to be velvety and was definitely not. “Apart from my time. And my pride. And any sense of privacy. And all hope for the future. And what little remains of my family’s respect. Fuck me, you’re right. This is a terrible idea.”

“It’s not terrible. It’s…” There was a pause while Lauren, who was a professional word-finder and should have been able to do it more quickly, searched for a word. “Bold. And that’s good. It’s good to be bold.”

“The last bold thing I did was decide I was keeping the baby, and while I’m glad I did, as decisions go it’s not exactly been without consequences.”

“Ah, yes. I believe that’s what they call *life*.”

Rosaline glanced at the clock, then at the oven, then at the clock again. “Well, today’s consequences are that I had to go directly from taking Amelie to school to an extra shift at work to make up for the time I’m taking off, and I got back late because the bus was late, and now it’s I can’t finish my practice cake before we have to go and pick Amelie up again, so I can say goodbye to her before running off to spend a weekend—”

“Gallivanting around a stately home showing off your buns?” asked Lauren.

“You know”—Rosaline made an unmistakable gesture with the nearest utensil—“I’m this close to stabbing you in the eye with a spatula.”

“Stabbing me in the eye with a spatula will make it very hard for me to either drive you to the station or spend my free time looking after your daughter.”

“Oh well fished. Of course, your altruism is somewhat marred by the fact Allison is going to be in Glasgow for the week and you blatantly have nothing better to do.”

“That,” retorted Lauren with great dignity, “is only *partially* true.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. You’re a wonderful person and I’m very grateful.” With a melancholy *schlorp*, Rosaline returned the spatula to the batter. “Slightly concerned that you’ll kill my child, but grateful.”

“Hey, I’ve never killed her before.”

“But it’s a whole weekend.” A plaintive tone crept into Rosaline’s voice. “I’ve never been away from Amelie for a whole weekend.”

Lauren shrugged. “So you should be glad to have a break from each other. Besides, your mum’s taking over on Sunday, so how much damage can I do?”

“Knowing you, quite a lot. Although, honestly, not quite as much as my mum.”

“Cordelia will do *fine*.” Lauren put a consoling hand on Rosaline’s shoulder. “Amelie actually likes her because children are hopeless judges of character. And anyway, terrible parents make incredible Grandparents. It’s their final way of twisting the knife.”

“Thanks. You really know how to make me feel better.”

“It’s my calling. Now come on, let’s go nab the moppet.”



Twenty minutes later, Rosaline was standing in an emptying playground, resolutely moppetless. She was briefly clutched by the nebulous certainty that there’d been a terrible disaster—possibly involving sharks, a runaway combine harvester, or the child catcher from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. But then Miss Wooding, Amelie’s teacher, appeared in the entryway and made an unmistakable beckoning motion.

That was never good.

Because it could only mean that your child had done something bad or that something bad had been done to your child.

Steeling herself and feeling far too much like she was about to be given detention, Rosaline hurried over.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, hoping to sound maternally concerned, rather than preemptively guilty.

Miss Wooding, who, as far as Rosaline could tell, was made entirely from marshmallows and pixie dust, gave an insipid smile. “If you wouldn’t mind coming with me, I’d just like to have a little word with you about Amelie’s behaviour.”

Well, at least her daughter wasn’t unconscious or on fire. Murmuring her general assent, Rosaline let Miss Wooding lead her into the building, past hip-high coat pegs and colourful finger-painted displays about road safety and recycling.

Amelie’s classroom was a pleasant, airy space, decorated with number lines and misspelled poems about summer. Amelie herself was squirming under the watchful eye of a teaching assistant.

“Mrs. Palmer,” began Miss Wooding, and Rosaline decided not to correct her, “I’ve been feeling for a while that we should have a conversation about the kind of language Amelie uses in class.”

Oh dear. She and Lauren swore in front of Amelie a lot, but she thought she’d done a pretty good job of explaining that there were some things you could say at home that you couldn’t say outside.

“I use good language.” Amelie folded her arms, radiating outrage as only a wronged eight-year-old can. “I use ‘extemporaneous.’ And ‘soporific.’ And all the other words Auntie Lauren teaches me.” She looked momentarily proud. “I’m sesquipedalian.”

Miss Wooding glided past this with the ease of a lifelong primary school teacher. “It’s true that Amelie has an extensive vocabulary. But she needs to learn that some topics are inappropriate for a classroom.”

“Like what?” asked Rosaline warily. There were a lot of ways this could go, most of them wrong.

“Well, in English today we were learning that it can be easier to remember how to spell a word if you know what the different parts of that word mean. So, for example, with the word ‘bicycle,’ it can help to know that the *bi* part means ‘two’ and the *cycle* part means ‘wheel,’ so a bicycle has two wheels.”

Okay. Way of going wrong identified.

“Like a binary star,” offered Amelie, “because there’s two stars. Or a biped which has two legs. Or bifocals which have two...focals. Or bicarbonate of soda which um...”

“Yes”—and here Miss Wooding gave Amelie a look of gentle disappointment—“but you didn’t say any of that in class, did you?”

“I *would’ve*. You told me to be quiet.”

Miss Wooding’s attention shifted effortlessly back to Rosaline. “The example she gave in class was ‘My mummy is bisexual.’”

“Well you *are*,” protested Amelie, gazing imploringly at Rosaline.

“She’s right,” Rosaline agreed. “I am.”

Always one to take agreement as encouragement, Amelie launched into the rest of the speech. “And that means she likes men and women which is two—which is what you were saying. But Auntie Lauren says that some people think that you shouldn’t say bisexual because that means there’s only two types of people and some people think there are more types of people. And other people think that it *is* okay because it means same and different and different can mean lots of types of people. Which still means two again. Which is what you were *saying*.”

If Miss Wooding had followed any of this, Rosaline couldn’t be sure. Either way, she didn’t seem to think it was relevant. “The issue, Mrs. Palmer, is that children shouldn’t be talking about sex in class.”

“And she wasn’t.” Rosaline really did not need an argument right now, but long experience had taught her that she was probably about to have one. “She was talking about her family.”

Miss Wooding turned the nervous shade of pink that Rosaline found people often turned when her sexuality went from an idea they could support to a reality they had to confront. “I appreciate this is a sensitive topic and one that different people have different beliefs about. Which is why I have to be guided by the policies of our academy trust, and they make it quite clear that learners shouldn’t be taught about LGBTQ until year six.”

“Oh do they?” asked Rosaline, doing her best to remember that Miss Wooding was probably a very nice person and not just a fuzzy cardigan draped over some regressive social values. “Because Amelie’s in year four and she manages to cope with my existence nearly every day.”

Having concluded this was going to be one of those long grown-up conversations, Amelie had taken her Panda pencil case out of her bag and was diligently rearranging the contents. “I do,” she said. “I’m very good.”

Miss Wooding actually wrung her hands. “Yes, but the other children—”

“Are allowed to talk about their families as much as they like.”

“Yes, but—”

“Which,” Rosaline went on mercilessly, “when you think about it, is sort of the definition of discrimination.”

Amelie looked up again. “Discrimination is bad. We learned that in year three.”

The d-word made Miss Wooding visibly flinch. “Now Mrs. Palmer—”

“*Ms.* Palmer.”

“I’m sure this is a misunderstanding.”

“I’m sure it is.” Taking advantage of the fact that Miss Wooding had been temporarily pacified by the spectre of the Equality Act, Rosaline tried to strike a balance between defending her identity and catching her train. “I get that you have a weird professional duty to respect the wishes of people who want their kids to stay homophobic for as long as possible. But hopefully you get why that isn’t my problem. And if you ever try to make it Amelie’s problem again, I will lodge a formal complaint with the governors.”

Miss Wooding de-flinched slightly. “As long as she doesn’t—”

“No ‘as long as she doesn’t.’ You’re not teaching my daughter to be ashamed of me.”

There was a long pause. Then Miss Wooding sighed. “Perhaps it’s best that we draw a line under this and say no more about it.”

In Rosaline’s experience this was what victory over institutional prejudice looked like: nobody actually apologising or admitting they’d done anything wrong, but the institution in question generously offering to pretend that nothing had happened. So—win?

“That’s probably wise,” she said, hoping she’d at least taught Amelie a valuable lesson about standing up for yourself, or compromise, or...or...something?



“What happened to you?” asked Lauren as they got settled in the car.

Rosaline clicked her seat belt into place and checked over her shoulder to make sure Amelie had done the same. “Don’t even.”

“I got into trouble,” said Amelie, “for saying Mummy is bisexual, which is silly because she *is*. So then Mummy told Miss Wooding that was discrimination and then Miss Wooding got really upset and then we got to come home.”

“Fuck me,” muttered Lauren. “What a pile of reprehensible bullshit.”

Taking way more care than she usually did now there was a child in the vehicle, she eased the car away from the kerb. And, on the one hand, that was good because they wouldn't crash and kill Amelie. On the other hand: train, running late, argh.

“‘Reprehensible’ means ‘very bad,’” offered Amelie.

“Just to check”—Rosaline twisted round in her seat—“of the words in that sentence, which are you allowed to say in school?”

“Me. What. A. Of. Reprehensible. And pile.” Amelie paused a moment. “But not fuck or bullshit because some people think those words are bad. Which is silly because they're only words.”

Oh God. This felt like a parenting moment. “Sometimes,” said Rosaline slowly, “there are things that seem silly to you that are important to other people. Just like sometimes things that are important to you seem silly to other people. And that's why it's important to think about what you're saying and doing.”

Amelie digested this. “Like the way Miss Wooding thinks it's silly to have a bisexual mummy?”

Lauren gave an unhelpful snort of laughter.

“A bit.” As so often happened, what had begun as an opportunity to pass on positive values and hard-earned wisdom to her daughter had sharply derailed into not having a fucking clue what she was talking about. “But we've agreed to pay more attention to each other's feelings in future.”

There was exactly enough silence to lull Rosaline into a false sense of security.

“Auntie Lauren?” piped up Amelie. “Why did you stop going out with Mummy? Did you think it was silly she’s bisexual?”

“No.” Lauren kept her eyes firmly on the road. “I’m not the sort of lesbian who thinks bisexuals are letting the side down. I’m more of a vagina half-full kind of homosexual.”

“Oh.” The advantage of having a sesquipedalian eight-year-old was that Amelie didn’t like to admit that she hadn’t understood things she probably shouldn’t. “So what happened?”

“She dumped me. Because I’d been seeing another girl without telling her.”

“Oh,” said Amelie again. She seemed to be giving this serious consideration, and Rosaline tried to develop a sudden interest in passing licence plates. “Did you like the other girl better?”

“Not for long, but by then the damage was done. And she wasn’t even a natural redhead.” She shot a nostalgic look at Rosaline. “What might have been, eh?”

Might have been wasn’t something Rosaline liked thinking about too often. *Might have been* too easily turned into *should have been*. After all, if she’d stayed with Lauren she wouldn’t have rebounded with Tom, wouldn’t have decided it was probably fine to skip the condom one “just this once” too many, and would have lived the life she’d always assumed she was meant to. But then she wouldn’t have had Amelie and that was unthinkable in a whole different way.

“So”—Amelie fiddled with her seat belt in precisely the way Rosaline kept telling her not to—“would you have been my other mummy now, if Mummy hadn’t left you?”

“Not *exactly*.” Lauren really needed to learn when to bail on a conversation. Especially with Amelie.

“If I’d never left Auntie Lauren,” Rosaline interrupted, “you’d never have been born.”

Once again, Rosaline could practically hear the cogs whirring in her daughter's head. Every parent, she suspected, thought their kid was clever, but she liked to think that Amelie actually was, at least a bit. "Thank you for making Mummy dump you, Auntie Lauren."

There was a little pause, and, glancing over, Rosaline was slightly surprised to realise that Lauren genuinely didn't have a reply. Sincerity had never been her forte.

"Do you have homework for the weekend?" Rosaline asked, turning to look at her daughter.

Amelie shook her head.

"Remember, I know you were doing spelling today. And that you have spelling every week. So, I'm going to ask you again: Do you have any homework for the weekend, and is it spelling?"

Amelie nodded.

"Then learn your words when you get home, before you do anything else. And Auntie Lauren will test you tomorrow, won't you, Auntie Lauren?"

"I will," Lauren agreed, "although my spelling is *terrible*."

"You write for a living, Loz. How bad can it be?"

Lauren raised an eyebrow. "You see, they've got these fancy new machines now that *check* your spelling *for* you. Also I'm a bit offended that you think the most important skill in my job is *spelling words right*."

They pulled into the station car park and Rosaline concluded that she could still make her train as long as she was very brusque in leaving her only child and only friend and as long as Great Western Railway was staying true to form and running at least six minutes late.

"Well." Lauren turned off the engine. "This is it. Time to go be moderately famous."

Rosaline dragged her bag out of the footwell. “I don’t want to be famous. I just want...enough money to pay for some things and enough people to think I’m good at baking that I might be able to get a slightly better job.”

“Truly. Yours is a hubris of Homeric proportions.”

“I think you’re good at baking, Mummy,” said Amelie. “What’s hubris?”

“It’s when you think you’re so brilliant,” explained Lauren, “that you fuck up horrendously and then the gods punish you.”

“I’m sorry.” Rosaline scrambled out of the car, feeling like a terrible person. “I love you both, and you’re being really encouraging and lovely and stuff, but I’ve got to run. You”—she pointed at Lauren—“don’t start teaching my daughter Catullus. And you”—she glanced at Amelie—“I’m going to miss you, but be good for Grandma Cordelia and don’t take advantage of Auntie Lauren because I know what you’re like when she’s babysitting.”

“You shouldn’t call it babysitting,” Amelie protested, “because I’m not a baby. I’m a *child*. Then I’ll be a *tween*. Then a *teen*. Then a *grown-up*. Then I’ll be *old*. And then I’ll be *dead*.”

Lauren laughed. “Hardly seems worth the effort, does it?”

It was not an auspicious note on which to start Lauren’s two-day custody of an impressionable young mind. But there wasn’t time to address it now. Flinging her bag over her shoulder, and wishing she’d been able to finish that last fucking practice cake, Rosaline plunged into the rush-hour crowds.



The train was not, as it turned out, six minutes late. It wasn’t even four minutes late, which meant Rosaline had exactly enough time to watch it pulling out of the station without her.

Rationally, she knew that Miss Wooding hadn't intentionally timed her casual biphobia to have the largest and most negative impact possible on Rosaline's life, but fuck if it didn't feel that way. Having trudged all the way back over the footbridge to the information desk, she then spent an unhelpfully long time extracting from a bored station employee the precise combination of trains, short walks, and replacement bus services that would allegedly get her to Patchley House where the show was being filmed.

The first leg—by train to the middle of nowhere—was at least relatively short. The second—by juddering coach to a subtly different middle of nowhere—took rather longer. Then came the third—and theoretically final—stage of the journey, which was on one of those incredibly slow trains that should probably have been retired in the 1970s and stopped at every tiny station in every tiny village between Upper Whereinthehell and Who-Cares-on-the-Wold. Rosaline's original plan had been to use the journey to relax and centre herself or ground herself or do whatever you were supposed to do to get into the right headspace to come across well on reality TV. Instead of, say, the headspace of a stressed-out single mum whose parents—to whom she owed a nontrivial sum of money—would not have been at all surprised to learn she'd failed to get on a train properly.

Then the train stopped.

And didn't start again for forty fucking minutes.

“Uh”—the antiquated speaker system crackled into life—“hello. This is your driver speaking. And this is an announcement for all passengers on the eighteen twenty-three service from Mopley-on-Pond to Tapworth. Owing to a fault, this train will now terminate at Fondle Backwater.”

That did not bode well. Bodewise, things were honestly looking pretty rough. And they looked, if anything, rougher, as the train heaved itself alongside the mid-length slab of concrete that passed for Fondle Backwater station. Not sure what else to do, Rosaline grabbed her bag and disembarked. There was only one other passenger disembarking with her. A man, who—in skinny chinos and a blue shirt casually rolled up at the elbows—looked worryingly like he might have had actual style. He also definitely didn't belong here, but, unlike Rosaline, seemed to be okay with that, surveying the surroundings with an air of composure rather than confusion-trending-towards-panic.

What he could possibly be surveying Rosaline wasn't certain, because the view consisted of sky, fields, and eight sheep, one of whom was regarding her with an expression she chose to read as pity.

“So I'm guessing,” remarked the stranger, who'd walked over while Rosaline was busy being judged by livestock, “that Fondle Backwater wasn't your intended destination?”

Now that he was closer, Rosaline was having to contend with the fact that, as well as stylish, he was also disconcertingly good-looking. In that tall, cheekbony slightly haughty English way that would get you the male lead in a BBC costume drama about a rakish aristocrat who has a tumultuous affair with a coal miner's daughter.

And appears shirtless on a horse at least once a season.

Typical. The first time an attractive person of any gender had spoken to her in months and she felt very much like someone who'd spent their day failing to finish a cake, fighting with a primary school teacher, and being dragged all over the southeast by a barely functional railway company. *Quick, Rosaline, be charming.* “What do you mean? I woke up this morning and I thought, *You know what I want? An evening at a train station with a mildly suggestive name.*”

“Ah, then you should have gone to Much-Tupping-in-the-Weir.” He offered an easy smile, brackets forming at the corners of his generous mouth. “It’s even milder.”

“I hear Lower Bumgrope is nice this time of year.”

“Which is ironic, because Upper Bumgrope is an absolute dump.”

Rosaline laughed, partly amused, but partly just relieved. Because, in retrospect, bumgrope had been a risky gambit, especially as the second thing you said to someone.

“But seriously,” he went on, “as much as I’d love to stay here, exchanging rural innuendos with a delightful stranger, I need to be in Tapworth”—he paused to check an imaginary watch—“about an hour ago.”

There was, as far as Rosaline was concerned, only one reason to go to Tapworth. Well, unless you lived there, but then you probably wouldn’t get lost a couple of miles down the road. Which meant that she was fraternising with the competition. The well-spoken, well-dressed, well...well competition. “What a coincidence. I also need to be in Tapworth an hour ago.”

“Ah. Contestant or crew?”

“If I was crew,” she asked, “wouldn’t I know what I was doing?”

“You could be new.” Another smile. This one with the faintest edge of wickedness. “Or horrible at your job.”

“You got me. I’m a key grip, but I don’t know how to grip anything.”

He twitched an eyebrow at her. “That must cause a variety of problems.”

Oh dear. That hadn’t quite come out the way she’d intended. And perhaps it was Lauren’s influence, or not having to set an example for an eight-year-old, but Rosaline decided to double down. “Yes,” she said sadly, “it makes it very hard to give hand jobs.”

There was a moment of silence. She was worried it was a shocked silence.

Then he laughed. “I see we’ve progressed from innuendo to outuendo. But in any case, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Alain. Alain Pope.”

He offered her his hand, which Rosaline took with all the suavity of a woman who’d just been talking about wanking. “Rosaline, um, Palmer?”

“Well, Rosaline-um-Palmer”—his very, frankly *very*, blue eyes gleamed at her through the twilight—“whatever are we going to do?”

“About my...Look, I’m not really a key grip with subpar job skills.”

“No, I’d taken that as read. I meant, what are we going to do about the fact that we’re trapped at an unfamiliar station when we need to be at a stately home somewhere else.”

Oh. That. “When is the next train?”

Alain consulted his phone. “Tomorrow morning.” He kept consulting. “And there doesn’t appear to be a taxi service, any hotels other than the one we’re trying to get to, and the nearest bus is two villages away, goes in the wrong direction, and stopped running an hour ago.”

Oh God. They were fucked. “Hot-air balloon?”

“Didn’t bring mine with me. You?”

“No, but I do have this”—she dug around in the front of her bag—“tin of travel mints I don’t remember buying?”

“Ah, then we’re saved. We can use these to...to...”

“Fashion a makeshift boat and sail up the river? Barter for transportation with a passing circus. Construct a distress flare with the aid of a bottle of Diet Coke.”

“Do you *have* a bottle of Diet Coke?” he asked.

“Damn. I left it in the hot-air balloon.”

“Don’t worry.” He tucked his phone away. “Worst comes to absolute worst, I’m sure the production company can send someone for us. Of course then we’d be the people who made them send a rescue team out the day before filming even started, and while they *probably* wouldn’t hold it against us, I’m not entirely inclined to take the chance.”

If there was one impulse Rosaline would always understand, it was the impulse to avoid doing things that people in a position of influence might resent and hold over you. In her experience, they usually did. “Yeah.” She tried not to audibly wince. “I think if we can get in under our own steam, we probably should.”

“At the very least, it’ll be an adventure.” He smiled his leave-your-mining-village smile. “So what do you say, Rosaline-um-Palmer. Do you want to come on an adventure with me?”



All in all, Rosaline told herself, it could have been a lot worse. The day was fading into a soft English evening, complete with pastel sky and mellow sunlight. It would have been an enjoyable walk if she’d been able to ignore the smell of silage and the fact she was late for the reality TV show that she wasn’t exactly staking her whole future on. But was also not *not* staking her whole future on. And if nothing else, at least she had company—the sort of company that, if she was being honest, she might have appreciated even if she hadn’t been dumped at a backwater station by a privatised rail company.

“I do hope,” said Alain as they tromped down a country lane that had about a thirty percent chance of leading directly to nowhere, “that you’re impressed by my bold and manly decisiveness. Rather than thinking to yourself, *Oh no, he’s one of those clichés who won’t ask for directions.*”

Rosaline gave a laugh which she hoped communicated “I am mildly amused” rather than “I am trying too hard.” “Who are you going to ask? That tree? The sheep?”

“I’m afraid I only took Sheep to GCSE, and the only phrase I can remember is ‘Where is the bathroom?’”

“Okay.” She had to ask. “What’s Sheep for ‘Where is the bathroom?’”

He had the grace to look...not to put too fine a point on it...sheepish. “I think it’s ‘Where is the baaathroom?’”

“You are really lucky I’m secretly into dad jokes.”

There was a measuring pause. “Hi, Secretly into Dad Jokes. I’m Alain.”

“Okay,” Rosaline told him, “I might have put too much emphasis on the *into* and not enough emphasis on the *secretly*.”

“Don’t worry. Jokes aside, I’m not ready to go full dad quite yet.”

This time Rosaline’s laugh was ever so slightly more forced. She was kind of used to most people her age, or even a little bit older, talking about parenthood like it was part of this unimaginable future you’d get around to once you got careers and relationships and your own dreams figured out. Which made it slightly awkward to come back with “Actually, I’ve been doing that for nearly a decade.”

Their country lane took them across a cattle grid and onto a subtly different country lane, which led onto another. And it was across a field from country lane number three that they finally spotted signs of human habitation. Well, apart from all of the things that were *technically* signs of human habitation but were so countryish that they barely counted, like the hedgerows, the little stiles over rickety fences, and the acres upon acres of grass.

Alain shaded his eyes against the gleam of the setting sun. “Is that a farmhouse? Tell me that’s a farmhouse.”

“Or a secret military base, and either way there’ll be someone we can ask for directions.”

“If it’s a secret base, won’t they just shoot us?”

She shrugged. “They might do that if it’s a farm.”

“I actually live in the countryside and I’ve been shot by farmers far less often than you might imagine. Shall we go and say hello?”

“Okay, but if I wind up full of buckshot, you’re picking the pellets out.”

“And if I wind up full of buckshot?”

“Then I’m using you as a diversion and running for the road.”

He gave her an arch look. “You’re a cold woman, Rosaline-um-Palmer.”

“Not half as cold as I’d be if I was shot dead by an irate landowner.”

Since the alternative was wandering aimlessly or admitting to people who’d be making important decisions about their future they were a gigantic liability, they decided to risk approaching the farmhouse-slash-military-base. This, as it turned out, took longer than they’d anticipated because fields were like the Tardis: much bigger once you got into them.

“You know,” remarked Alain, “I’m very glad you’re here. This would have been incredibly dull on my own.”

“So you’re saying I’m better company than literally nobody?”

His mouth turned up wryly. “If it helps, I can think of some people who would be worse company than literally nobody. I went to a university friend’s wedding last year, and honestly, I’d have been surprised if the bride’s family had read a book between them. I got stuck talking to

one of their many peripheral cousins, and I swear, the man thought grammar was a nickname for an elderly relative.”

It surprised a laugh out of Rosaline—one of the conspiratorial, slightly guilty laughs that you were pretty sure was at somebody’s expense but were also pretty sure was at the expense of somebody you didn’t like. And who, perhaps more to the point, wouldn’t like you either.

“Weddings are the worst. Unless two of your friends are getting married, half the people in the room are people you’d never choose to hang out with. And half the rest just happen to be related to someone you would.”

“In defence of matrimony, I have been to some lovely weddings. I think the problem with this one wasn’t the institution. It was the company.” He gave a heavy sigh. “No sooner had I got rid of Cretin A when the bride’s father grabbed hold of me and spent ten minutes trying to engage me in conversation about which of the waitresses he or I would like to, and I quote, ‘give one.’”

“Urgh”—Rosaline gave an involuntary shudder—“I can’t stand men like that.”

“Neither can most reasonable people. Then again—and I hate to say this—I think they do sometimes get quite a lot of encouragement. The bride herself was very much”—Alain paused, as if unable to find words to express the horrors he was trying to describe—“let’s say that between the fake tan, the fake breasts, and the fake nails I wasn’t entirely sure if my friend was marrying a person he’d met at work or something he’d run off on a 3-D printer.”

Again, she shouldn’t have laughed. Again, she sort of did. And again, she felt guilty for it. Lauren had serious—and honestly, correct—opinions about the way society had gone from judging women for failing to live up to unrealistic beauty standards to judging them for both

failing *and succeeding*. Except, in that moment, it seemed harmlessly liberating to share someone else's judgement of a stranger instead of being judged herself.

They turned through a gap in the hedgerow and made their way up a dirt track towards a sprawling but well-maintained farmhouse. In the yard at the front, a woman with a flat cap was doing something incomprehensible to a tractor.

"Well then," Alain whispered. "Let's see if we get shot."



They did not, in fact, get shot. Instead, the farmer confirmed that there was no reasonable way to get to Tapworth that evening, offering to put them up for the night and run them along to Patchley House in the morning. Spending a night in the middle of nowhere with a man she'd just met wasn't something that Rosaline was exactly wild about, but assuming the BBC had vetted Alain as closely as it had vetted her, there was a better than reasonable chance he wasn't a serial killer.

"Of course I'll take the floor," he was saying. "Or if it would make you more comfortable, I can ask our host if she wouldn't mind me using her sofa instead."

Rosaline was sitting on the edge of a crisply made double bed in the little room beneath the eaves that had been all the farmer had available. She'd fired off a quick text to Lauren to explain about the train drama and that she wouldn't be able to call until tomorrow, and she was now waiting to see if she had enough reception for the message to actually send. When it finally did, she looked up. "Wouldn't *you* be more comfortable on the sofa?"

"Not really." He gave a slightly self-deprecating smile. "My feet would probably hang off the end."

So they split the generous supply of pillows and blankets, Rosaline rolling up on one side of the bed, and Alain constructing a makeshift mattress on the floor.

“What a strange day,” offered Alain after a predictably awkward pause.

“Just a bit,” she agreed. “Are you sure you’re okay down there?”

“Actually, I’m quite comfortable. It reminds me of backpacking on my gap year.

Although since I went with a schoolfriend, who, on prolonged exposure, turned out to be the most flatulent person I’ve ever met, I will say you’re a better companion.”

“So, you’re telling me I rate better than nobody, some asshole at a wedding, and a farting teenager? You really know how to make a girl feel special.”

He gave a soft laugh. “You have quite a talent for turning a compliment into an insult.”

“Thanks, I put a lot of work into it.” There was a long silence. And Rosaline tried to figure out if it was the comfortable silence of people settling down to sleep. Or the uncomfortable silence of a conversation that, like the trains, had come to an unexpected stop in the middle of nowhere.

“I’m beginning to suspect,” said Alain, “that I might have skipped the chapter in life’s instruction manual that covered the etiquette for being required to share a room with an intriguing stranger with whom you have inadvertently become trapped on your way to a televised baking competition.”

Rosaline had skipped a lot of chapters in life’s instruction manual. So many that she often felt like she’d dropped her copy in a puddle at the age of nineteen. “It’s been a while since I checked, but when it comes to basically all social interaction, the advice boils down to ‘Stare straight ahead and say nothing.’ Y’know, the tube principle.”

“Now you mention it, that does sound familiar.” He paused, making Rosaline wonder if she’d accidentally encouraged someone she was enjoying talking to not to talk to her anymore.

“But how about we act like rebels and actually get to know each other?”

And that would have been great in principle. But Rosaline knew how this went. One minute, you were having a nice, normal, maybe slightly flirty conversation, and the next you were having to explain how you’d gone from medicine at Cambridge to a temp job and the school run, and from there it was either “Poor you, what a disaster” or “Gosh, I didn’t think you were the type.” And you knew that the person you were talking to had stopped thinking *Hey, she seems all right; maybe I should ask her out* and started thinking *Hey, she seems like she’s got a lot of baggage; I hope she doesn’t ask me to babysit.*

“But,” she tried, “won’t the space-time continuum collapse if two British people talk about something that isn’t the weather or the buses?”

“You know, Rosaline-um-Palmer”—she somehow knew he was smiling—“I’m willing to risk it.”

Fuck. Oh fuck. *Okay, Rosaline, take control of the situation.* “So what do you do then?”

There was another long silence.

Once it had progressed from a long silence to a long, long silence, Rosaline—convinced she’d somehow messed up—broke it in a panic: “Um, are you okay?”

“Oh yes, fine. Just waiting to see if the universe falls down around us. But I think we’re safe. I’m a landscape architect.”

She had no idea what that was, or rather how it differed from a regular architect, but it sounded like it would be arty enough to be satisfying but lucrative enough that your, say, parents couldn’t object. “Is that an architect lying on his side?”

“Is it what? No, it’s like the— Oh.” He broke off and gave a deep chuckle. “Well, as it happens I *am* lying on my side, so I suppose at the moment I’m both. But more generally, it’s landscape as opposed to residential or commercial, rather than landscape as opposed to portrait.”

“How do you architect a landscape?” she asked. “It’s not like you can be all, *Hey, put another mountain over there* or *Can we take the sky down a couple of inches?*”

“You might be surprised. I had a lake moved once.”

“How?”

“No idea. That’s for the hydrological engineers to sort out. I just pointed at it, and said, ‘I think this is blocking access to the deer park.’”

“I can’t tell if that makes you cool and powerful or...a bit of a middle manager?”

“Honestly,” he told her with a ruefulness she found endearing, “neither can I.”

Rosaline rolled back towards the edge of the bed and looked down. She could make out the shape of him—leaning on one side like a statue of a reclining emperor and looking up at her, his face a mystery of shadows in the starlight. “But do you enjoy it?”

“I do.” She couldn’t make out his eyes, but there was an intensity in his voice that reminded her of the late-night conversations she’d had at university. “It’s like baking in a way. You have to balance the technical with the creative. I mean, there’s no point putting a path in a park that isn’t wide enough for two people to walk their dogs past each other.”

“Well, you could be setting up meet-cutes?”

“I’m sorry. You’ve lost me.”

“Okay, stop me if this getting too technical for you, but it’s when two people *meet* in a *cute* way.”

“Does that happen a lot?” he asked. “You’re making me feel like I’m meeting people wrong.”

“Clearly you are.” She grinned to herself in the darkness. “Because when you’re out walking your dog, what happens all the time is that someone will be coming the other way—down the path in the park that’s too narrow—and your leads will get tangled up and then, depending on what movie you’re in, either you’ll say, ‘Oh gosh, I’m terribly sorry,’ and she’ll say, ‘Oh no, not at all,’ but everyone will know you secretly want to bang. Or else you’ll say, ‘Hey, watch it, lady’ and she’ll say, ‘Move it, mister,’ and everyone will know you secretly want to bang.”

He laughed again, and Rosaline permitted herself a small bask in a glowy feeling. You didn’t make somebody laugh this much unless you were acing it in the wit department, they liked you a lot, or some combination of the two. “What if I don’t have a dog?”

“Then you’re in the wrong kind of movie.”

“Or,” he suggested, “designing the wrong kind of park.”

“Yes, you should think about that next time.”

“Oh should I?” he asked. “Anything else I should bear in mind?”

“Lots of things. Revolving doors to get your coat caught in. Those fountains that are completely flat to the ground and just spurt up out of the concrete unexpectedly. And if you could design all your staircases to be really hard to go down in heels without either breaking one or falling over, that’d be perfect.”

“Are you suggesting”—it was the sort of half-playful, half-dry tone that needed an eyebrow raise—“I deliberately design spaces to be more difficult for women to navigate?”

“Well, how else are we supposed to meet people?”

“I don’t know. I suppose you could always wait until you get stranded at a disused train station. That or Tinder.”

“I think I’ll take the train station. Nobody’s pretending to be ten years younger than they are, and you get fewer creepy messages. But,” she went on quickly, partly from genuine interest and partly to delay the inevitable questions about herself, “what brought you from architecture to *Bake Expectations*?”

She heard him flump onto his back and then utter a soft, slightly self-mocking groan. “You’ll think I’m such a cliché.”

“Yes, because I know so many landscape architects who also make cakes on TV.”

“Honestly, it’s appallingly first world problems of me. I just—” He broke off and then tried again. “I find my job very fulfilling, and—I’m afraid I don’t know how to say this without sounding boastful—I’ve achieved quite a lot of what I expected to achieve in my life. But sometimes I find myself wondering if there isn’t something...something else. Something I’m missing out on.”

This was all very familiar to Rosaline, albeit for very different reasons. “I don’t think that’s a cliché. I think that’s normal. I mean, I hope it’s normal because I feel like that all the time.”

“I’m sure you shouldn’t,” he offered reassuringly. “In fact, *I* probably shouldn’t. But I think it’s a—well, I suppose it’s a hazard of education. It teaches you how large the world can be, but you can never quite encompass all of it. Certainly it’s not a feeling I can imagine the guests at that wedding knowing much about. *They* were perfectly content with season tickets to Manchester United, large-screen televisions, and the occasional opportunity to harass a woman from the top of a building site.”

“Oh, don’t. Once when I was about eighteen, somebody yelled at me like that. And I’d had enough so I stopped and turned around and said, ‘All right then, you and me, right here.’ And he got really offended, and said, ‘Steady on, love; I’m married.’ Like I was the one out of line.” She huffed out an aggrieved sigh a decade in the making. “You can’t fucking win.”

“It sounds to me like you won.” In the dark, his voice was rich with approval. “He tried to make you feel small and you turned it back on him.”

At the time, it had felt like he’d set out to make her feel small, she tried to stop him, and he’d made her feel small anyway. And even now, she was pretty sure that once she’d walked away, the builder and his mates had laughed about what a desperate slag she was. But she liked Alain’s version a lot better.

Unfortunately, contemplating the sociological implications of their gendered reactions to an anecdote about a building site had distracted Rosaline for just long enough that Alain was able to say: “It feels like we’ve talking about me forever, which, while I’m not shouting at you from a building site, I’m uncomfortably aware is still quite rude and a little bit sexist.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” It was about to happen, wasn’t it? “I’m interested.”

And here it came, as inevitable as climate change. “Tell me about you, Rosaline-un-Palmer.”

“What about me?”

“Well, we could start with what you do when you’re not getting stranded at railway stations and work our way up from there.”

Rosaline opened her mouth and closed it again. The thought of saying anything close to the truth suddenly seemed impossible. Because here was someone sharp and confident, with experiences and opinions and an exciting career he was passionate about. And he seemed to

think Rosaline was like him. That she belonged in his world of feeling you'd achieved everything you set out to achieve and having lakes moved at your command and still finding time to bake at a nationally competitive level. How was she supposed to tell someone like that that she'd got pregnant at nineteen, dropped out of university, and worked part-time as a sales assistant while doing an at best adequate job of parenting an eight-year-old? And what the fuck did that say about her? She wouldn't have traded Amelie for all the degrees and opportunities in the world, but just in that moment, she couldn't quite bring herself to admit her daughter existed.

"I'm a student," she told him.

A worrying pause. "Gosh. I...I wasn't expecting that."

"A mature student," she clarified, detecting at once the *Shit, I've hit on a teenager* tone in his voice.

"Oh, thank God." He let out a nervous breath. "I think sharing a room with a woman you've barely met is one thing. But sharing a room with a woman you've barely met who's fresh out of a school gets you on page three of the *Daily Mail*."

"I think," said Rosaline helpfully, "that's usually reserved for pictures of scantily clad women. As a sex pest you'd probably be on page four."

"Good to know. That's exactly the detail I was concerned with." He paused. "I should also say, in my delight at discovering you're not a teenager, I didn't mean to imply that you look old. Would you mind if I just asked what you're studying, and we can pretend the earlier part of this conversation never happened?"

"Medicine?" It was...only half a lie.

"And here I am talking about architecture like it's important when you're learning to save lives."

This was...this was bad. The sensible thing to do was come clean now. Right now. “I don’t know, no point saving people’s lives if they can’t go to a park afterwards.”

He gave a soft laugh. “You’re very sweet. But that’s clearly nonsense. You’ve worked hard and been successful, and you should be proud of that.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling more than a little nauseous.

“Did you not want to go into it straight from school?”

Okay. Get out of the lie hole, Rosaline. Because if you don’t, it’s lies all the way down.

“Oh...I...took a gap year?”

There was a silence like he was waiting for more.

Which was when Rosaline realised that a single year probably didn’t explain the difference between the age he assumed she was and the age of the average undergraduate. “To Malawi,” she continued.

“To Malawi?” he repeated, in a devastatingly interested voice.

“Yes? And I...liked it so much I stayed out there for a while. Working on...irrigation.”
Stop Rosaline stop Rosaline stop Rosaline. “But then I looked at some studies, which suggested that Western tourists going to less economically developed countries and doing what is essentially unskilled labour might do more harm than good. So, I came home. And reapplied to university.”

“Good Lord,” he said, “you *have* lived a fascinating life. I confess, I just thought you might have decided to retrain or something.”

Fuck. That would have been way more plausible and raised far fewer questions. “Yeah. No. Um, I guess a lot of people do that, don’t they?”

There was a rustle of bedclothes in the darkness—the sort of sound you might make as you settled in to hear a remarkable and well-travelled woman tell you her life story. “I’ve always wondered—” he began.

“You know”—Rosaline cut him off urgently—“we’re probably going to have to get up really early tomorrow morning, and I’m sure neither of us want to screw up week one because we stayed up all night talking.”

There was a glow from the floor as Alain checked his phone. “You’re right. I didn’t realise how late it was.”

“Yeah, I kind of lost track of time as well.”

“But I hope we’ll have plenty more opportunities to talk in the future?”

Rosaline winced at the ceiling beams. “I’m sure we will.”

About the Author

Alexis Hall lives in a little house in the south east of England where he writes books about people who bake far better than he does. He can, however, whip up a passable brownie if pressed.

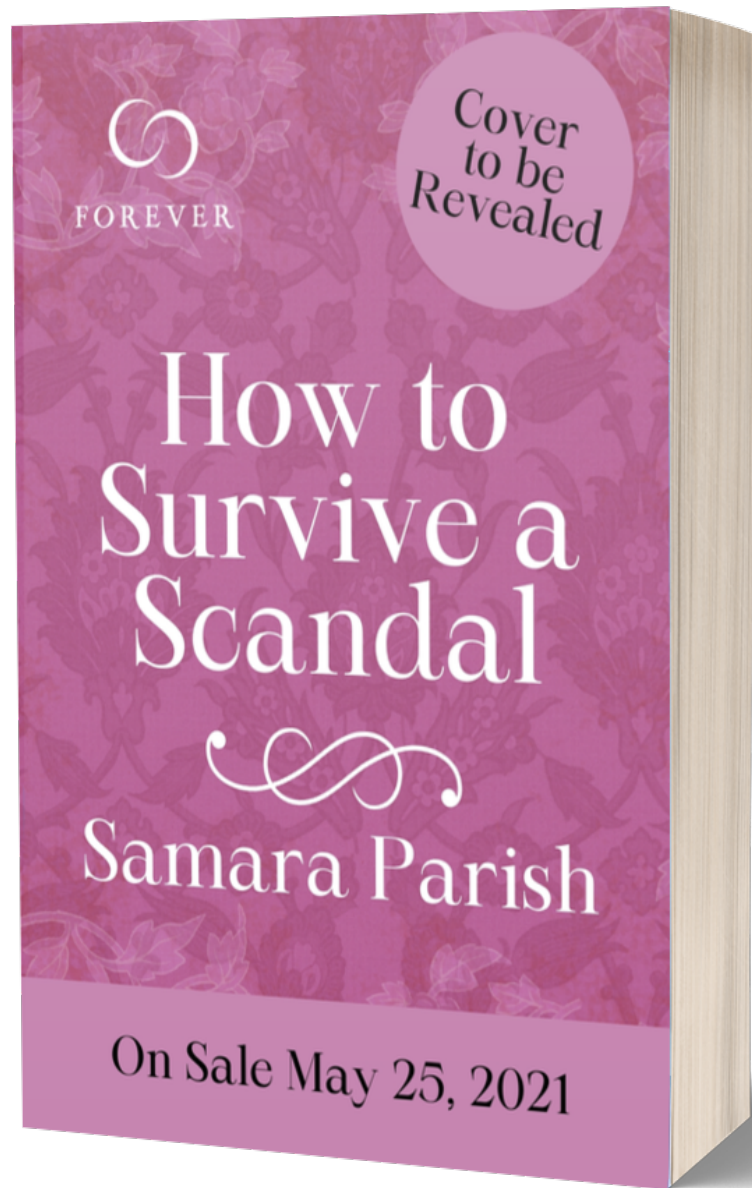
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HOW TO SURVIVE A SCANDAL

Samara Parish



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Chapter One

Benedict Asterly kicked in the door to the Longmans' empty farmhouse. Despite the crash of splintered wood, the chit slung over his shoulder was as silent as a sack of last season's grain.

Lady Amelia Bloody Crofton. Half dead, soon to be all dead if he couldn't warm her up.

He lowered her onto the cold, uneven stone floor before the fireplace.

Damnation. There was no fog of breath, no flicker of pulse, no sign of life at all.

He'd almost ridden past the snow-covered carriage in his effort to get out of the storm.

He'd been an idiot for traveling in this kind of weather but apparently not the only idiot on the road.

Why the devil was an earl's daughter alone in a carriage all the way out here?

He pressed two fingers against her neck. Nothing. He pressed harder.

Th-thump...th-thump. It was faint. It was slow and erratic. But it was there.

Thank God.

He sagged with relief. The ropes around his chest, that had drawn tight the moment he'd seen her pale and unconscious, loosened.

He turned to the hearth and struck flint into the brush with shaking fingers. The scrape, scrape, scrape of steel on stone faint against the howl of the wind.

It caught, and he began the methodical task of building a fire. With each carefully placed stack, his racing heartbeat slowed. Thank God, Aldrich had restocked the wood supply before taking his children to visit their grandparents. Benedict had no desire to reenter the tempest.

Behind him, Lady Amelia muttered.

"I'm here. I'm with you." He turned back to the woman who'd previously declined to acknowledge his existence. After all, a man like him was beneath her notice.

He tossed aside the coarse traveling coat he'd thrown over her and removed her gloves and pelisse, struggling with the weight of her ragdoll body.

Bloody hell she was cold.

How long had she been trapped in that broken-down carriage? At least she'd had the good sense not to leave it.

He took her soft hands in his calloused ones, bringing them to his lips, but his breath did little to warm them.

Unbuttoning the cuffs of her sleeves and rolling the fabric up her arms, he exposed as much of her bare skin to the seeping warmth as he could. Her skin was more than pale. It had a blue pallor that caused his heart to skitter.

“Just stay with me. Please.”

In a cupboard by the bed, he found some blankets. He pulled a knife from his boot to cut a piece and wrap the ends of her sodden blond hair. The rest he tucked behind her head and shoulders.

He untied the laces on her ankle boots and pulled the boots off, pausing at the sight of her stockings.

They were cold and damp. They needed to come off too. But a footman's son had no place touching a lady. And this particular lady? The ice princess would skewer him with the poker if she knew what he was contemplating.

He turned his head aside, giving her all the modesty he could as he reached his hands under her skirts, fumbling with the ribbon of her garter.

“I'm sorry.” She couldn't hear him, but just saying the words made him feel less of a cad.

He tugged the dark wool off her toes. The skin was red and like wax to touch—but it was only frostnip, not yet frostbite.

“You mustn’t...giant calling.” Her words were so slurred he struggled to understand them.

“I’ll bear that in mind, princess.”

Of all the idiotic things he had done, tonight’s escapade was the worst. The carriage had barely made it to the posting house. Instead of thanking God for the solid roof and warm fire, Benedict had left the carriage and its driver to go the last mile home on horseback.

He’d promised his sister he’d be home tonight, after a month away. Instead, he was stuck.

Feeling was slowly returning to his body, if not warmth. He covered Lady Amelia in his coat and then staggered to the bench that ran along the edge of the room. There was a kettle filled with water, sloshy and semi-frozen.

He dumped a small amount of tea inside, grabbed two mugs with his other hand and staggered back to the fire.

The intensifying flame was the best damn thing he’d ever seen.

He hung the kettle from an iron hook and turned back to his biggest problem.

She couldn’t stay on the floor.

There was a large, worn armchair in the corner. He moved it in front of the hearth, as close as he dared. What she needed was heat—and fast—but the fire hadn’t taken a chink out of the bitter shroud of the room.

There was one thing he could do, but damn she was going to flay him alive when she woke. He took off his jacket, pulled his shirt over his head, and picked her up off the floor.

He settled into the armchair, holding her against his naked chest, his bare arms resting along the length of hers. His body heat had to work.

The cold air was whiplike against his skin, and goose bumps covered his arms.

Think warm thoughts. A steam engine furnace. A hot bath. A warm brick under his bed sheets. A warm woman under his bed sheets...

He looked down at the chit on his lap. Lady Amelia Crofton. Diamond of the *ton*. Leader of the fashionable set. Cold as the ice shards on the window. And Wildeforde's bloody fiancée. Damn, this was a mess.

He exhaled hard, trying to steady his shivering through slow, even breaths.

"That's not what I asked for." Lady Amelia's eyes flickered but failed to open. "I said blue."

His laugh was shaky. "Well, tonight's not what I asked for either. And I'm partial to grey."

Her eyes fluttered open. The deep jade green caught the light of the fire.

"Put it under the horse."

He snorted. Even half-dead, she was giving orders. But he would take them, if it meant she would live. Her eyes closed again, the long dark lashes resting against pale skin.

"You're welcome, by the way."

Her grunt was accompanied by a soft sigh—as innocent as a babe. If you were fool enough to believe it.

"Why the devil were you traveling alone?" The snow had been so deep around the broken-down carriage that only a glint of metal from the wheel had given any hint that someone might be in trouble.

There was no response, just a twitch of her nose.

After a long few minutes, warmth finally traveled up his legs. It was a superficial heat, not the bone-deep warmth that came from a hard day's work, but hopefully it was enough to warm her.

"Lemonade."

She put a hand on his thigh and pushed herself up, faltering on her weak legs toward the fire.

His heart leapt to his throat as he lurched up and grabbed her dress, jerking her backward before she could fall into the flames. A dozen buttons popped free and scattered across the floor.

"You will be the bloody death of me." He maneuvered her back to the chair, slumping her over it, her limbs sprawled like a green boy's after his first trip to the pub. Not taking any more chances, he dragged the chair farther from the flames.

"I'll get you your damn lemonade," he muttered, turning back to the boiling kettle. Using the tongs by the fire, he poured tea into the two mugs.

She was every bit as high-horsed as he remembered. Although at least she'd deigned to speak to him—an improvement upon their last encounter.

The first few gulps burned a satisfying trail down to his belly. It was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

"I have your lemonade, princess."

He turned and nearly dropped the mugs.

The bodice of Amelia's dress had pooled at her waist, leaving her in nothing but stays and a chemise so fine it was nearly translucent. His mouth turned to coal dust.

"I'm hot, too hot." She yanked at the neckline of her chemise.

Bloody hell. He picked up the coat he'd tossed on the floor and tried to wrap it around her shoulders as she struggled to escape.

"It's for your own good." Of course, she would refuse help. It didn't come on a gilded plate.

He wrapped one arm around her, pinning her to him. With the other, he stuffed the coat between them and tucked it beneath her armpits.

The fewer layers between her and the heat the better, but she was going to strip his hide with her barbed tongue as it was. Heaven help him if she woke half-naked.

Her struggling subsided, and he managed to lower the two of them back onto the chair. Her ribs expanded and contracted against his chest with increasing force, and the vein on the side of her throat thrummed with more regularity in rhythm.

She was getting stronger. Color was creeping into her skin. Her cheeks began to flush, and her lips slowly changed from blue to white, to a light pink.

No longer looking like she'd been pulled dead from the Thames, she was every bit as beautiful as he remembered.

Confident that she was going to pull through, he closed his eyes.

The door crashed open.

"I'll have your rutting neck, you rutting bastard."

Chapter Two

Amelia woke with a ringing in her ears—a head-throbbing sound like a cymbal wielded by a mad chambermaid. There was distant yelling and a thudding crash accompanied by the rapid, uneven chatter of her own teeth. Last week’s Appleby debutant recital, which she’d foolishly attended, had been unrivaled wretchedness. Until tonight. Whatever this was, it was worse than six tone-deaf society hopefuls.

She sucked in a breath, pulling her knees closer to her chest. So. Cold.

The yelling continued. Maybe Lord Chester had finally been caught with Lord Macklebury’s wife? Maybe the simmering tension between Miss Hamilton and Miss Clarke had finally boiled over.

She would investigate. The second she could open her eyes.

Crockery smashed. “I will kill you, you rutting bastard.”

That was her father...Someone must have been serving the good brandy. Or any brandy, really.

She dragged her eyes open, struggling to focus. *What in heaven’s name?*

She’d never been in a room like this. It was large-ish, roughly the size of a small ballroom, but it seemed to be a bedroom, drawing room, and kitchen in one. The walls were unadorned and tinged black with soot. The floor frightfully uneven. The overturned chair beside her was heavily worn.

But the tableau of characters in front of her? That was the most bewildering of all.

Her father was straddling a half-naked man with a broken table leg, raised and ready to strike. And Edward—

Why was he in town?

He should have come to call.

You'd think he'd be a better fiancé by now. Her stomach rumbled. *Roast pheasant would be so nice...*

“Settle down, man.” Edward said in his duke-ish tone. He had one hand clenched around her father’s wrist, preventing him from murder, the other arm wrapped around her father’s chest.

The flames from the fire beside her created shifting patterns of light on the stone. Why was she lying on the floor?

It was time for answers. “Enff.” The words were thick, and her tongue wouldn’t make the shapes it needed. “Eee nwaaf.” She ran her tongue around her mouth trying to remind it of what it was supposed to do. “Eee. Nuff.” Only one word, yet so much effort.

All three men stopped to stare at her.

Clumsily, she pushed herself into a seated position, the pins and needles in her arms making it barely possible. As she sat, a coarse blanket fell to her lap. She reached down, her fingers fumbling with the fabric. For the life of her, she couldn’t grasp it. Couldn’t even feel it. She looked down.

Her chest was bare but for her loosened stays and thin chemise. Her lungs tightened as though her lady’s maid was pulling at her laces in a fury.

What in heavens?

Panic got her fingers working. She clutched the wool and yanked it to her chin.

“W-w-what is h-happening?”

Her father’s face turned purple. Spittle burst from his mouth like little pellets. He shoved himself off the undressed stranger and bore down on her.

“You...” He jabbed his finger inches from her face. “You little whore.”

She flinched and looked around. Every movement felt sullen and slow, at complete odds to her heart, which beat overtime as if trying to spur the rest of her to flee. She tried to sift through her memories, but as soon as her brain grasped an image, it let it go.

“Step back from her.” It was a quiet warning that promised unpleasant consequences from anyone foolish enough to ignore it. And it didn’t come from Edward. The semi-naked man had made it to his feet and now, sensibly, was putting the rough-hewn table between him and everyone else.

He had her father pinned with a glare hard enough to cause actual damage. Hard enough to force the esteemed Earl of Crofton to take a few steps back from her.

She slowly exhaled.

The stranger leaned against the shack walls, and a blond lock of hair fell over his forehead. Deep blue eyes, the color of a twilight sky, stared into hers. He was not the sort of man she was acquainted with. He wasn’t pretty or refined; he was granite and rock. He looked rough—south side of Cheap Street kind of rough—an image intensified by his bloodied nose and sheer hulking size.

His chest, all brawn and sinew, bunched beneath his crossed arms, and her eyes dropped to the interlocking muscles at his waist, the dusting trail of hair that reached down past the waistband of his breeches.

So *that* was what men looked like beneath their finery.

Despite the cold, a red heat seared across her. She tore her gaze away from his naked torso and found him staring at her, his eyebrows raised as if he knew very well where her attention had been.

Her face grew hot with embarrassment.

“W-well?” she asked, trying to brazen it out. She’d sound more impressive if her words weren’t slurred. “Who are you?”

He gave a deep, weary, frustrated sigh. “Benedict Asterly.”

“And why am I here, like…” she gestured to the blanket covering her.

“You were in a coach, freezing to death.” His voice was flat and unsympathetic.

Yes. It had been cold. The hot bricks at her feet had cooled, and the cold outside had seeped in. Despite piling on every layer she could, she’d been freezing, and it had become harder and harder to stay awake.

“And I’m undressed because…?”

“That’s a darn good question.” Edward’s bearing mirrored the stranger’s—grim, autocratic, guarded.

The stranger—Benedict—sighed, raking his hands through his hair. The muscles of his chest stretched as he did so. “You disrobed yourself.”

“I did not!” The nerve of him. “It takes my maid half an hour to get me into this dress.”

Her father rounded on her again. “And took him half a second to get you out of it.” She was well acquainted with his temper, but never had he been so furious that he’d lost his composure in public.

The stranger pushed himself from the wall. His was a different species of anger. Where her father exploded like fuel-fed fire, the stranger was controlled, lethal.

Every inch of her was startlingly aware of him, of his immense size and the surprising fluidity of his movement.

“I said, step back.” He placed himself firmly between her and her father. “Rather than yelling at a girl, why don’t you tell me which of you idiots left her in a carriage alone?”

“She was supposed to be in London, minding her own bloody business,” her father said.

The shouting began again, all three men obstinate and determined to talk down the others.

The noise was too much.

For heaven’s sake, stop beating your chests and pour me a hot bath.

She ignored the lot of them and wrapped her arms around her knees, focused on taming her shivers. Taking deep, measured breaths, she closed her eyes and let their words roll over her.

Nine. Eight. Seven. She shuffled closer to the fire behind her. Six. Five. Four.

The frigid floor disappeared from under her as the stranger swooped her into his arms as if she weighed little more than a wisp of lace.

“You’re too close to the flames, princess. Wilde, drag that chair over here.”

Did he really just call Edward, Duke of Wildeforde, Wilde?

A muscle ticked along Edward’s jaw, but he did as the stranger asked.

“This argument is ridiculous,” the stranger—*Oh, what was his name?*—said, lowering her to the chair. “I’ve not compromised her, and you damn well know it.”

The words hit like a heavy reticule swung by a careless debutant. She sat back.

Compromised?

Edward fixed the stranger with a frustrated stare. “Of course you didn’t. But you have made a mess of things.”

“*I’ve made a mess of things? Why the devil was a lady traveling alone? Where was her chaperone? Where was her coachman? Where were the people who were supposed to be looking after her?*”

Edward stared at her. Her father stared at her. The stranger stared at her. Heavens, she was tired.

“That’s not of any consequence.” The voice came from a dark corner of the room. It was loud and low-pitched and seemed to settle on the room like a copper snuffer extinguishing flame. A man in an overly ornate, embroidered and fur-covered coat, clearly from the previous century, stepped into the light. She hadn’t noticed him earlier and was glad for it.

His lips were twisted into a sneer. “The chit has debased herself. The only question now is what’s to be done about it?”

A chill prickled across her neck. That didn’t bode well. Best to cut that line of conversation short. “I hardly see that anything needs to be done about it,” she said. “Whatever it might look like, we all know—”

“It looks like you are alone in a house, unchaperoned, with him half-naked and you...disheveled.”

The prickles spread as a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold coursed through her.

“Now wait just one minute. Perhaps we should give them a minute to explain.” Finally, her father had caught up to the potential ramifications of this ludicrous situation.

“What we’ve witnessed is explanation enough. We left the comfort of Lord Wildeforde’s library to rescue an innocent girl in peril. What we found was a harlot engaged in a wanton act of lust.” The man turned to Edward, who was rubbing the spot between his eyes. He rarely did that. Only when his mother was particularly trying. Or when Amelia was trying to lock him in to a wedding date.

The man continued. “You have responsibilities to the family name, to your title, and they include choosing a duchess who hasn’t tugged half the county.”

Her chest tightened, and she scrambled to catch the threads that were unraveling around her. “You wretched cur.” She turned to Edward. “How can you let him say these things? You know they’re untrue.”

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “I know that...I mean, this isn’t...” He sighed, as lost for words as she’d ever seen him. “This is all a confounded mess that looks a sight worse than the truth. But Lord Karstark is right. There is my family’s reputation to consider.”

“Lord Karstark is a jackass.” He could not do this to her, dash it. After all these years. “We have been engaged since I was *five*.”

“Amelia.”

And there it was, the tone he used whenever he thought she was being irrational.

“Amelia, you need a Season before we wed. Be reasonable.”

“Amelia, we can’t possibly marry in the same year as the Duke of Rushford. Be reasonable.”

“Amelia, we can’t possibly wed at all because your carriage got stuck and you almost died. Be reasonable.”

“Don’t ‘Amelia’ me. I’ve been waiting for you for years.” She tried to stand, to go and shake some sense into him, but her legs crumpled.

He examined the pressed cuff of his coat, running a thumb over the embroidered edge. “You’ve always known the conditions. No scandals. It is in the contract we all signed.” His voice carried tainted disbelief, like he couldn’t quite believe what he was saying.

She squeezed her fingers into tight fists. Her nails dug into her palms. “There isn’t a bloody scandal if everyone in this room keeps their mouth shut.”

Edward's eyes widened in shock, but if ever she should be permitted to use profanities, surely this was the time. They were quite surprisingly satisfying. No wonder men used them.

She looked over at the half-naked stranger. He was rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, strikingly similar to the way Edward did.

"Well?" she demanded.

"By noon, it'll be all over the county." The stranger looked pointedly at the ancient peacocking Lord Karstark, and she felt a sudden, all-consuming urge to rake her fingernails down those powdery, tissue-like wrinkles. Her entire life ruined by a gossipy centenarian.

Edward finally looked at her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so, so sorry." It was the first time she'd ever heard him apologize for anything. His tone was bleak, as though he knew full well the pain he was causing and regretted it.

Bile crawled up her throat, and she fought the urge to retch. She couldn't breathe, and the ringing in her ears grew louder.

"I'll be ruined," she choked out. "Please." Her voice caught. She'd never in her life thought she'd plead for anything, but she'd plead now.

His face twisted. He knew it to be true, yet the truth didn't change his mind. "We'll say you ended it. You threw me over. You got tired of waiting. I spent too much time in parliament and not enough time courting you."

But that's not what they would say. Not when this story got out.

Edward could confront a difficult and contentious parliament without hesitation, but if there was one thing that could bring him to his knees, it was the slightest hint of gossip. And tonight would be more than a hint. He would step away, stay out of the scandal, and she would have to defend herself.

She searched his countenance for something to give her hope, but there was nothing.

“Are you actually doing this?”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and he turned away, pulling his hands through his hair as he left.

And with his exit, a fissure appeared. She was Lady Amelia Crofton, daughter of an earl, diamond of the *ton*, third cousin to the King, and the future Duchess of Wildeforde. Or at least she had been.

Lord Karstark smirked and turned to her father. “If Wildeforde sends one of his men to Canterbury now, you could have a special license before Sunday’s Christmas service.”

A bubble of horrified laughter caught in her throat. The situation had spiraled from awful to borderline hysterical.

“Excuse me?” The stranger’s voice rose five octaves. “Now see here.”

“No. Now *you* see here,” her father said. “Someone is marrying my daughter, and if it isn’t the Duke of Wildeforde, it will be you, damn it. God knows no one else will have her now.”

She looked at the stranger—Benedict—waiting for him to say something. Do something. He just stared at the palms of his hands.

Useless men. “Father, I can’t marry him...I’ve never even seen him before tonight.” Her eyes pricked with tears.

The stranger rolled his eyes with a look of unadulterated scorn, which she was wholly unused to having sent in her direction. “We’ve been introduced, Lady Amelia.”

Had they? She searched his face, the unfashionably tanned skin, the harsh stubble on his jaw, the strong, broad nose with an unseemly bend where he’d clearly come out worst in a tavern

brawl. Nothing about him was familiar. “We have?” Surely she’d remember a man of his lumbering size.

He shook his head, clearly disgusted.

Her father nodded. “We can do it after the Christmas service.”

#

By the time Amelia woke, the orange glow of the coals was battling with descending dark. By the time she was dressed, the day had fled.

The maid she’d been assigned by Edward’s housekeeper arrived with a tray. The toast was burnt, the eggs were cold, and the mushrooms she’d asked for were non-existent.

“I realize I’m asking for breakfast during the early evening, but I was hoping for something that wasn’t actually cooked at breakfast time.”

The past twenty-four hours had been beyond humiliating. Never in her life had she felt less in control of a situation. And the cold, congealed mess before her was her mood manifested.

“Yes, ma’am,” the maid muttered.

Amelia raised her chin, thankful for her extra height. “My name is *Lady* Amelia Crofton.”

The only response was a clenched jaw.

“The correct term is *my lady*.”

“Yes, m’lady.” The words came through gritted teeth. The milksop chit scuttled out. No doubt the gossip below stairs was out of control.

As she choked down the rubbery eggs and tepid tea, Amelia assessed what was left of the hours ahead of her. Damage control was needed. It would take a nauseating amount of flattery,

but there was no reason the situation couldn't be rectified. It's not like she was *actually* compromised, just apparently compromised.

With any luck, her father had fixed the disaster while she slept. Every conversation they'd had over the past fifteen years had somehow referenced her impending marriage to Edward.

"Don't wear yellow. The Duchess of Wildeforde is not cheerful."

"Don't skimp on the sugar. The Duchess of Wildeforde is not a pauper."

"Don't laugh. The Duchess of Wildeforde is not a barmaid."

Her father was as invested in this marriage as she was. The whole situation was most likely solved already.

She knew the way to the study. She'd been here briefly just after her first Season. And her third. She waved off a footman's reluctant offer to guide her and strode down the stairs and through the hall to where Edward generally conducted business. Taking a short, determined breath, she pushed open the door.

Edward's study was much like the man himself—grand, richly appointed, and meticulously presented. The curtains fell in even lines, the journal on his mahogany desk was perfectly parallel to the edges. Everything about it called to her discriminating self.

Except her father, slouched in the leather wing-backed chair by the window, deep into his cups. She could smell the brandy from here. The other chair was empty; Edward was absent.

"Well, here she is." Her father tipped his near-dry glass in her direction. "The lady of the hour. The key to our family's salvation and the whore that threw it in the ashes."

"I see you found the liquor cabinet. Again."

He stared at her, eyes glassy. "You had one job."

And here it was, the lecture she'd listened to more times than she'd care to count.

"Marry the Duke of Wildeforde. Become the perfect duchess. Bring..."

She rolled her eyes. "...honor and prestige to the House of Crofton. Yes. I know. I'm working on it."

He let out a long, gaseous burp. "This never would have happened if you were male."

It was truly unfair that her greatest failing in life was something she had no control over. "If I were male, I could have taken one of the horses and saved myself."

His eyes narrowed. He hated it when she spoke back to him. "You're a selfish creature, just like your mother. All I asked for was a son."

"And all she delivered was a daughter. We've had this conversation." Over and over and over. Every time he got deep in his cups.

"All I asked of you was to marry well. Now look at the shit we're in."

"I take it you haven't managed to rectify the situation."

He snorted. "Oh, it's rectified. You'll be married in the morning, after the Christmas service."

She pressed a palm to her chest, noticing the weight she'd been under only as it lifted. "Well, that's a relief. Truly, if all it took to speed things up was the threat of scandal, I would've half-frozen myself years ago. The way Edward has dragged his feet is intolerable."

Her father laughed, the mean, snide laugh he made coming home half-drunk from wherever he'd been gambling—if he'd won. The hairs at the nape of her neck rose.

"You seem to be misapprehending the situation. You'll be married. To Mr. Benedict Asterly of the...Abingdale Asterlys? Do half-breeds come from anywhere?"

She grabbed at the back of the chair as her knees buckled. "You are joking."

“No.”

Straightening, she clenched her hands into tight, fury-filled fists. “This is absurd. I can’t believe Edward would do this to me.”

“You were found in the arms of another man, with your dress...” He waved his hand at her bosom. “What’s so difficult to believe?”

“For a start, he’d have to find himself a new bride. That’s an awful lot of effort for him.”

He certainly hadn’t put any effort into their engagement. In fifteen years, she’d received one letter, and that was to ask the name of a composer she’d mentioned his mother might like.

“Well, he did. Rejected you as if you were a fish gone bad at the markets.” Her father poured himself another drink.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. You’ve never stepped foot in a market.”

She walked to the window and back. And again. Her father was useless. It was up to her to set things back on course.

In the background, the ranting continued. “I told you. Be the perfect duchess. Say the right things, do the right things—”

She swatted his words away.

Lady Wildeforde was in residence. Could she convince Edward’s mother to stand beside her? She’d always been supportive—if somewhat acidic—in the past, and had been instrumental in establishing Amelia as the younger set’s preeminent figure.

“—had to keep yourself out of scandal, and you would be—” Her father wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“I can’t see why there needs to be a scandal,” she snapped. Could he not see that she was trying to focus? “It was just you, Edward, me, and...what was his name?”

“Mister Benedict Asterly.”

She shuddered. *Mister*. Ugh. “Right. Well, surely you can pay him off. Marrying an earl’s daughter might seem attractive, but he’s a country lummo. Give him a thousand pounds and assure him that I’m more trouble than he expects.” Because she would be. That was certain.

“You’re forgetting Lord Karstark.”

Hell. The blasted lord with his vile sneer. “For goodness’ sake, give generously to whatever cause will put the funds into his pocket, promise my first-born child to the relative of his choice, and send him on his way. Really, must I do everything?”

Her father held the snifter up to the light and gave it a nonchalant swirl, studying the brandy as it clung to the sides of the glass. “Karstark. Brother-in-law to Lady Merwick.”

Her heart gave way like slippers on ice.

“Cousin to the Duke of Oxley,” he rattled off, “and rich as Croesus. The only things he values are power and gossip, and you just gave him both.”

Dash it.

He sniggered. “Face reality, Amelia. Abingdale is your new home. I don’t believe your future husband owns a London residence.”

This couldn’t be. It wouldn’t be. Amelia spun on her heel. If Edward wasn’t in his office, where would he be?

Maids fled as they saw her approach. She didn’t stomp—a duchess’s footsteps are never heard—but her clenched fists and brisk pace ensured no one got in her way. Edward could be made to see reason.

He entered the foyer just as she did. Judging by his heavy coat and Wellington boots, she'd caught him just as he was escaping. He stopped, tapping his hand against his thigh. He was uneasy. Good.

She rushed to him and buried her face in the soft linen of his cravat.

Hesitantly, he stroked her hair. This was the most intimacy they'd shared throughout their entire courtship. Typically, it was a stiff embrace. The few times she'd pressed him for a kiss, it had been a perfunctory peck on the cheek.

"Edward." She sobbed. "What is happening? I don't understand." She took in rapid, shallow breaths that made her chest press against his. "I don't know what"—gasp—"to do. Please tell me it isn't true."

Looking up at him, she allowed one tear to roll down her cheek.

"I just can't," he said, his voice catching.

"But we can weather the gossip. You are the Duke of Wildeforde, and I am Lady Amelia Crofton. There won't be a scandal if we demand it, not one they'll remember. You aren't your father."

Edward stiffened before he pried her hands from his lapel and stepped back.

"I can't take that risk. It's not just me I need to think about. I have my sister's future to think of. My brother's. God, my mother—"

"Ugh, your mother. Your mother will be sour and spiteful regardless. She might as well have something to be sour over."

He shook his head, although whether it was at her comments or at the thought of the current duchess, she couldn't tell.

“Why did you do it?” he asked, as though the fight was lost, and he was trying to work out where it all went wrong. “Why leave London?”

Every muscle tensed. Yes, she’d departed London in a madcap state—so hot with fury she hadn’t noticed the cold. But she was not responsible for this situation. How dare he insinuate that she was.

“Why, Amelia?”

“Miss Josephine Merkle announced her engagement. To Lord Cossington. I thought you would want to know,” she bit off.

His brows knitted as though she’d spouted off some complex riddle. “Why would I want to know?”

And there was the crux of their problem. He couldn’t see anything beyond his dry, demanding duty. Beyond managing his estates and serving in the House of Lords.

“For goodness’ sake, Edward. I was annoyed. And embarrassed. Even Moany Merkle is getting married before me, and she only came out this year. I’m sick of waiting. I’ve been waiting for you my whole life. Just do it. Keep your word. Marry me.” She beat his chest with those last two words. He let her.

“I’m sorry.” He refused to meet her gaze, fixating on the painting on the wall behind her. “I must think of my family. When you’re a duke, society holds you to a whole different level of standards.”

She inhaled deeply, counting backward until she was sure a snarl wouldn’t erupt with the exhale.

“Standards? I am the daughter of the Earl of Crofton. Our lineage goes back to the Normans. I can name every peer in Debrett’s as well as their conversation preferences. Ladies

beg me to attend their balls. I'm not the most fashionable young lady. I *am* fashion. The Incomparable. The diamond. And *you* worry about standards?"

Edward at least had the good sense to look ashamed. "I know Asterly. We haven't been close lately, but he'll do the honorable thing."

She struck at him, a soft *thwap* sounding as her hand connected with the padding of his waistcoat. "I'm more interested in you doing the honorable thing, you wretched cur."

Blood drained from Edward's face, but he continued. "He's a good man—a better one than me in many ways. And he'll treat you well."

"He's a country simpleton with the manners of a goat and the breeding of a mule. You'd have me stuck out here in some godforsaken backwater, married to a mere mister and eating what, potatoes and blood pudding? Do commoners even drink tea?"

There was a cough from the doorway. Edward's face flushed red, and she knew immediately who was behind her.

For heaven's sake. A brief wave of mortification assailed her.

"We commoners drink tea. Courtesy of the West Indies."

Chapter Three

Benedict's cheeks burned as he strode into Wilde's study, the sharp-tongued harpy at his heels.

The esteemed Duke of Wildeforde had escaped out the front door.

Benedict had spent the day hammering steel sheets—a departure from his usual work with a sketchpad designing his steam engines. But he'd needed the *thunk, thunk, thunk* of a hammer. Needed to sap the fight from him until he had the exhausted acceptance of a man ready to meet his maker.

A country simpleton with the manners of a goat and the breeding of a mule.

The words blazed across his skin, a stinging reminder of decades-old insults. They could have been taken straight from his mother's diary. Well, to hell with them both.

The aristocracy could hang itself. He didn't care a whit for its good opinions. To think he'd walked in with an intention to marry the ice princess. Now he was just here for the entertainment.

Her father didn't bother to stand as they entered. There was one chair opposite him, and Benedict took it, crossing his legs lazily. He plastered an apathetic smile on his face—a “go to hell” smile he'd not used since he was a bull-headed youth.

Lady Amelia's nostrils flared, but it was the only hint of anger she showed.

Last night, she'd been pale, drab, disheveled. But this evening, awake and furious, she was striking.

It wasn't just her beauty that was arresting. No, it was the crisp intelligence in her emerald eyes that had him transfixed. Pinned down. It was the set of her jaw, delicate but determined. The straight back and squared shoulders that weren't quite disguised by her soft,

ladylike lines. That was why she was a force to be reckoned with. Why her reputation preceded her. She was too bullheaded to have it any other way.

“Amelia, you don’t need to be here.” Her father dismissed her with an unsteady wave of his hand.

“Because you’ve done such an excellent job in my absence?” She stood, arms akimbo, like a veritable Amazon.

Her father’s hand tightened around the glass he was holding, the only sign he’d heard her. He fixed his gaze—as best a drunken man could—on Benedict. “Wildeforde has arranged for the special license. The wedding can proceed as planned on Sunday.”

Benedict slouched farther down into the chair, trying to look detached and uninterested. “I’m unconvinced a wedding’s necessary.”

The words were directed to Lord Crofton, but it was Lady Amelia’s response he was watching for.

He wasn’t expecting the warm smile or satisfied nod she gave. “Mr. Asterly, on this we are agreed. Thank you for your time.”

With that thorough dismissal, she turned to her father, her voice switching from friendly to cast-iron hard. “Now can we be done with this business and focus on bringing Edward around?”

Benedict laughed. He couldn’t help it. She couldn’t honestly think she still had a chance with Wildeforde in the face of such a scandal? They’d been engaged for over a decade, and she still didn’t understand her fiancé’s fears. “He *won’t* marry you.” He reached over to the small table between them and poured himself a drink. Now that he’d decided he wasn’t going to marry her highness, the situation was almost enjoyable.

“Pardon?” Her smile was no longer warm. How many men had shrunk under the force of her cool look? Too many if that had become her expectation.

He sat up straighter. “He wouldn’t risk a scandal in order to marry the woman he actually loved. There’s no chance he’ll risk it out of some obligation to you. His family’s happiness means too much to him.”

Lord Crofton lurched to his feet, stumbling. He bore down on Benedict with a fist raised. “Listen here, you mongrel. You are—”

Benedict stood, and the older man stopped. He had nearly a foot on Crofton and no cause to be reasonable. “*I* am no longer half dead with cold. Nor am I inclined to put up with threats from a man so brandy-soaked he struggles to stand.”

Lord Crofton’s eyes narrowed. Benedict could see him debate the pros and cons of throwing a punch and hoped the pros would win. Smashing something would feel gratifying.

Lady Amelia stepped between them, placing her palm firmly against Benedict’s chest.

It was unexpected. Few men would put themselves in his path when he was angry. This willowy chit had a set of bollocks of her own. Even through the fabric of his waistcoat he could feel her hand—surprisingly hot for someone cold-blooded.

She looked up at him, meeting his eyes, and for the first time, he saw a crack in that ruthless exterior. A hint of uncertainty. A trace of vulnerability.

“Edward won’t marry me?” Her voice, quiet and direct, formed a winch around his heart and pulled.

Perhaps she wasn’t so frigid and dispassionate. Perhaps it was a mask to hide her fragility. He’d been there. He understood.

He shook his head. “I know him, better than most, and he would never have hurt you on purpose. But what he went through when his father died? That left a wound that won’t ever heal. He won’t put his family through that same anguish.”

She took a deep breath, nodded, and walked across to the window. Good. He hated to see any woman cry.

“Then you will have to,” her father said.

It was arrogant and presumptive and everything that was wrong with the aristocracy. To be dictated to—as if Benedict’s life was not his own, as if he had no agency—lit within him a dangerous furnace. “I don’t *have* to do anything. I am not your employee. I am not your subservient. I do not answer to you.”

Lord Crofton waved a hand, as though brushing off an insect or some other low-level irritant. “An honorable man would live up to his responsibilities.”

Benedict could barely keep the rage from his voice. “I fail to see how I benefit from this arrangement,” Benedict continued.

Lady Amelia whirled to face him. If she’d been crying, there was no sign of it. Her green eyes flashed sharp and spiteful.

Oh, there’s nothing fragile about you at all...

She looked at him as if he were a chimney sweep asking to dance with a queen. “I am the daughter of the Earl of Crofton. You are a...man in a patched coat.”

He crossed his arms, brushing the patches at each elbow with his rough, working man’s hands.

“Marriage to me raises your standing to something almost acceptable in polite company,” she continued. Her words were the punishing thump of a blacksmith’s hammer.

“Polite company? Out here in some godforsaken backwater?” he lashed out.

She swallowed at her own words thrown back at her.

“There isn’t much ‘polite’ company out here, princess. Other than Wildeforde, and somehow, I don’t see how marrying his fiancée is going to raise my standing with him. You have no use to me as a wife.”

She brushed a non-existent loose hair from her brow. “I can run a household of fifty servants. I can host the perfect tea party.”

“Can you make tea?”

She sputtered.

“Can you light a furnace? Boil water? Cook a meal, mend a tear, clean a hearth?”

She flinched at each word.

“Do you have any skills at all?”

“I am an excellent watercolorist,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Well, I’m sure that will come in handy.”

He didn’t need a wife. And if he were forced into marriage, he wanted one that could help raise his sister to be a kind and useful woman, who wasn’t afraid to pitch in and get filthy next to everyone else on his estate.

“You’ve made your bloody point.” Lord Crofton had collapsed back into the chair and was pouring yet another drink. “Ten thousand pounds if you marry her tomorrow.”

Benedict’s throat constricted as if a noose were slowly drawing tight. If he married her, he was facing a lifetime of his father’s loneliness. If he didn’t marry her, she’d be ruined. He shouldn’t give a damn, but he did.

“I want the same terms as Wildeforde.”

“What?” his soon-to-be fiancée shrieked.

Her father spat out the brandy in his mouth. “You grasping—”

Benedict interrupted him. “He wouldn’t have accepted a penny less than thirty thousand. Your signature on paper will do.”

Crofton swore and stumbled across the room to Wildeforde’s desk, where he pulled out paper from a drawer and began to scribble.

Amelia stared at her father, incredulous. “What, no bonus if I successfully breed within a year? No extra compensation if my children are male? What if I run five furlongs in under a minute?” She turned to Benedict. “Would you like to see my teeth?”

He sighed. Devil help him if he were making the wrong choice. “He made the same negotiations with Wildeforde. Would you be complaining if I were a duke?”

“I would if he didn’t think to negotiate an allowance or have any money put aside for my own use in case you lose my dowry at the local fair bobbing for apples.”

He bit the inside of his cheek to hold back a retort.

Her father looked up at her. “Really, Amelia. Out here, what could you possibly do with an allowance?”

She pressed her lips together. Then she turned away to stare out the window once again. Had those been tears in her eyes? Or an illusion?

Her father thrust a scrawled note in front of him. He read it over slowly, folded it, and slid it into his jacket pocket.

“Crofton, Lady Amelia. I will see you Sunday morning.”

#

Snow was falling lightly outside, yet Amelia was ready to suffocate from the heat. The small church with its rough wooden pews was densely crowded, and the smell of unwashed bodies made her nauseous.

It took every ounce of self-control she had not to pull at the fur collar of her coat or strip her hands of the white silk gloves.

In front of her, Edward and his mother sat alone on the first pew—precisely where she and her father should be sitting. From the throbbing vein in her father's neck, it was clear the snub was getting his temper up.

She took a deep breath and turned her attention back to the pasty, bulbous man in front of her.

It was a traditional Christmas sermon. The local clergyman talked on and on in a tone of voice that scraped like chalk on board.

She ground her teeth.

Looking dead ahead of her, she examined the back of Edward's head. As she'd lain in bed the night before, she'd convinced herself that Edward was going to change his mind. They'd been engaged for more than a decade, since she was just a child; surely that counted for more than some fear of a little gossip.

Those hopes faded when she'd entered the church. He hadn't looked over when she'd entered. Hadn't chastised his mother when she refused to stand and let Amelia and her father join them. Hadn't even flinched when Amelia had slid into the seat behind him. The muscles in his neck and shoulders were stiff and hadn't moved since the service started.

He was not about to rescue her. So what was she supposed to do now?

She snuck a look at her intended. He sat stony-faced across the aisle. Next to him sat a child—a girl of perhaps ten years? Twelve? She couldn't tell. She'd never interacted with children, not even when she was one.

They were clearly related. Short of the broken nose and despite the long blond braid, the child was the spitting image of him. Tanned and freckled, she had her blue eyes trained on Amelia, brow furrowed.

Amelia stared back.

The girl cocked her head, her lips pursed.

Amelia cocked an eyebrow. The girl was bold. Most debutantes wouldn't dream of staring at Amelia so brazenly.

The stare-off continued until, seemingly satisfied, the girl gave a quick nod of her head and turned to Benedict, whispering in his ear. His eyebrows rose, and he turned to look at Amelia in surprise.

She quickly turned her attention back to her lap, her hands twisting in the grey fur muffler that contrasted against the pale pink of her pelisse. It was pretty, but hardly the pearl-encrusted creation she'd planned to wear on her wedding day. No, that dress was at home in a trunk, along with the rest of her trousseau she'd been building over the years—every piece carefully embroidered “Lady Wildeforde.”

As the sermon ended, people stirred in their seats, waiting for the priest to step down so they could leave. It took everything she had not to be the one leading the retreat. She pressed the soles of her trembling feet hard into the floor.

The clergyman paused for a long painful moment before clearing his throat.

“Before we depart, let us stand together for the union of Lady Amelia Elizabeth Crofton and Benedict Asterly.”

There was a collective gasp among the parishioners. A furious muttering almost drowned out her thumping pulse. Almost.

She looked across at Benedict. He stood and then bent down to whisper something in the young girl’s ear. The girl patted *his* hand—as if *his* life was being demolished—and stood to allow Benedict to make his way to the altar alone.

How had she gotten into this?

She should move. She should stand. But her body flat-out refused to comply—until her father elbowed her in the side. Hard.

She stood and moved into the aisle. She would not give the congregation further gossip. She walked toward the altar, head high, her light steps at odds with the heaviness of her insides.

Taking her place, she was once again reminded of Benedict’s hulking size. She was hardly a petite woman, yet she was barely as tall as his chin. He was a bear of a man, quite unlike the gentlemen she was used to.

She cast a last glance at Edward. His eyes were averted.

Coward.

The eyes of the rest of the congregation were fixated on her. It was a sea of suspicion and contempt. To hell with them. Whatever their objections, they couldn’t possibly be stronger than hers.

The priest’s rasping voice cut through the chaos of her thoughts. Good grief, it had started.

“...is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly...”

To Amelia, this marriage was highly unadvisable, but her thoughts didn't signify, apparently. She bit the inside of her lip, considering what little information she'd gleaned of her husband in the past twenty-four hours.

Benedict was a landowner.

"...It was ordained for a remedy against sin..."

He was on a first-name basis with the Duke of Wildeforde.

"Both in prosperity and adversity..."

He had enough money to warrant a man of business in London.

"...if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace..."

Tears pricked her eyes, but that was where they stopped. Weakness was for lesser women, and she would not cry.

She was not without wealth. She had jewels. It would break her heart to sell them, but she could rent a small house in London or escape to the continent until the gossip died down.

She closed her eyes, pressing her lips together. Her nails bit into the silk of her gloves.

Large hands covered hers, warm even through two layers of fabric. They teased at her fingers, loosening her death grip, unlacing them until she no longer held tightly to herself but to him. She looked up. His expression was unexpectedly kind.

"I take thee, Lady Amelia Elizabeth Crofton, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold..."

Goodness, were they up to this part already?

Her heart began to pound. The ringing in her ears reached a crescendo.

Benedict looked at her intently.

Was it her turn? What was she supposed to say?

The priest repeated himself.

She took a deep breath. “I take thee, Benedict Asterly, to be my wedded husband. To love, cherish, and to obey...”

A handful of words only—choked out. And inside, beyond the walls that kept her safe, something shattered.

About the Author



Author: Samara Parish
Credit: Amanda Hardwick

Samara Parish has been escaping into fictional worlds since she was a child. When she picked up her first historical romance book, she found a fantasy universe she never wanted to leave and the inspiration to write her own stories. She lives in Australia with her own hero and their many furbabies in a house with an obscenely large garden, despite historically being unable to keep a cactus alive. *How to Survive a Scandal* is her debut novel.

You can follow her writing, gardening, and life adventures on social media or by signing up for her newsletter at samaraparish.com/scandal-newsletter.