

Chapter One

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride," the priest intoned in a monotonous voice.

Sarah turned blushing as she faced her husband for the first time. It was done. They had said the words and stood in front of their families so now it was true. Gazing upon her husband she found his expression emotionless and indifferent. With a sigh he leaned forward to kiss her...

...Cheek.

* * *

Sarah woke and slowly sat up. She sat there several moments before looking over at the other side of the bed to find it empty, as it had been for the past three years. With a sigh she stood and quietly made her way to the bathroom stepping into the shower.

Three years ago she married her Prince Charming...or so she had thought. Lucas Stanton was the grandson of Alice Stanton, one of the most prominent business people in New York. Despite being a woman Alice succeeded in a male dominated world and was known as the First Lady of Business standing on even ground with the likes of Augustus DeLair, Richard Prescott and Emerson Carlisle.

Her own son proved inept at business so Alice maintained the reins of her company until her grandson showed promise. She groomed him to be her heir and the next head of Stanton Incorporated skipping over her own son in an unprecedented move. However, the changing of the guard came with a price: she insisted Lucas marry and not to just any woman, but a woman of her choosing. Alice's last acquisition was Tomlinson Tech, the company Sarah's father started, brought out of obscurity and drove to bankruptcy.

For as long as Sarah could remember her father had been fascinated by gadgets and electronics. He was a fair programmer so starting a technology company seemed to be a sure way of earning his fortune. But good with computers did not translate to business smarts. Poor management led to the company's inevitable demise but her father refused to submit and went to other companies wanting them to buy out Tomlinson and secure the funds he needed to maintain his lifestyle.

Most turned him down outright but Alice Stanton humored him. They finally settled on a deal giving Sarah's father ten percent over the company's market value, several shares in Stanton Inc and a bride for Lucas. Sarah couldn't believe her father when he delivered the news. She denounced the deal but a private interview with Alice herself changed Sarah's mind. So she agreed to the arrangement though she at least secured herself some conditions.

According to what she heard Lucas also balked at his grandmother's deal but in the end acquiesced to her demands to ensure his position as company CEO. Sarah didn't know if he had gotten any conditions out of his grandmother as she did but she supposed it didn't matter. The wedding was set.

It had always been Sarah's dream to have an autumn wedding but her father insisted on a spring event to secure the deal as soon as possible as he wouldn't receive his money until after the fiscal year. He left Sarah to plan and make the arrangements all the while cutting an already limited budget once a venue was secured. Luckily getting by with limited funds was nothing new. In fact it had been her mother's specialty.

While her father's passion was technology her mother's had been antiques. Finding the potential and beauty in something old, reviving it and making it new again was her calling and Sarah learned how to do it at her side. There wasn't a garage sale, thrift store, street fair or flea market her mother passed up in her quest and the same passion lived on in Sarah.

With her shrinking budget Sarah decorated the church and reception hall on her own making the repurposed look chic and sophisticated. That also included her dress which was really her mother's old wedding gown although her friend Vicki handled most of the alterations. Despite her efforts and the exclusive guest list it seemed she had not impressed her groom or high society. Of the few reviews she read all were of the opinion she fell well short of the Stanton's reputation. She could bear society's criticism. It was her husband's open dismissal that hurt.

During the reception he danced with her only once and never even looked her in the eye the entire night, which she supposed was more than her father or brother did. After dinner a limo took them to their new villa, a wedding gift from Alice located in Astoria. Lucas preceded her to the door barely holding it open for her as she stepped inside their new home for the first time.

Giving her the keys he turned back to the door, "Here you are then. Have a good night."

"What?" Sarah blinked. "What do you mean? Aren't you..."

"You honestly think I'm staying here?" he scoffed. "I have a condo downtown. Why would I stay here?"

"But..."

Lucas laughed, "You thought this was an actual marriage? It's a stunt, a show, concocted by my grandmother. It means nothing."

With that he left and she was alone. And that was how her marriage began. In the three years they had been married Sarah rarely saw her husband except when he needed to make a public appearance. Only then did he tell her to secure a car and meet him at the venue. She was expected to trot out on his arm like a trained pony. When he was tired of her presence he sent her off on her own with instructions not to embarrass him before she headed home...alone.

It wasn't any wonder she grew paler over the years and lost several pounds lacking any appetite. They never went out to eat and never had a simple conversation. In fact he made no effort to engage her or learn anything about her.

Though they were always careful to maintain the image of the happy couple high society was adept at reading their subtle cues. As Lucas Stanton's wife she should have received numerous invitations to various functions and events but aside from a few sent from friends society ignored her with the same disdain as her husband. All of that she could live with...it was the other thing that tore her heart to pieces.

Stepping out of the shower she wrapped herself in a towel and stepped into the bedroom to hear her phone alert her to a new message. Clenching her jaw she walked over to the bed and glanced at the sender: Madeline. Taking a deep breath she set the phone down, refusing to open the message.

Madeline Rogers was the childhood friend of Lidia Stanton, Lucas's sister. She grew up with the Stanton siblings and was practically joined at their hips. As such Lucas gave her a job as his secretary but Sarah was well aware their relationship was much closer. Madeline never wasted a day reminding her how good Lucas treated her or how many times he made her orgasm during their illicit meetings. Sarah had stopped reading the texts long ago but they came every morning like clockwork. And Madeline's weren't the only messages.

Her phone chimed twice more as it received messages from Lidia and her mother, Patricia. Sarah didn't read theirs either. They were always the same. Lidia's message would demand to know why she was still getting in the way of Lucas and Madeline's love and happiness. At the same time Patricia would ask why Sarah hadn't simply killed herself yet given how easy it would be with various household items. Sarah's personal favorite had been when Patricia suggested using the kitchen knife set her mother-in-law gifted them as a wedding present.

Their messages Sarah could ignore. It was harder when she had to see them in person. Thankfully these moments were few and far between. The only time Sarah had to see them was on the holidays at the Stanton estate. There, at least, Alice's presence curbed their antics since neither would risk upsetting the Stanton matriarch who was always friendly with her. While she was nothing more than an annoyance to Lucas, she was clearly Alice's favorite. But Alice couldn't be everywhere and Lucas never defended her.

Dressing in jeans and a sweater Sarah headed to the kitchen. There she filled a kettle with water and set it on the stovetop to boil. When she first moved into the villa there had been a housekeeper but she tired of the other woman's looks of pity and eventually dismissed her with a generous severance pay and glowing references. Sometimes she missed having the other woman to talk to but the house was small enough for her to care for on her own especially considering she only used three rooms and left the rest locked up.

When the kettle whistled Sarah took it off the burner and poured herself a cup. After some consideration she selected her tea for the day and headed to the table. Opening her laptop she sipped her tea while it loaded. Once it was running she opened her latest email and read where she last left off.

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I woke to the welcome scent of musk and Old Spice. Opening my eyes I gazed upon the visage of the man who had gotten a hold of my heart. A veiled shadow softened his chiseled jaw and his wavy brown hair oozed enticingly over his forehead. My hands itched to run through it but I didn't want to wake him.

Quietly I slipped out of bed covering my naked body with his shirt before padding out of the bedroom. After all these years I had come to accept my looming spinster status so this romance was unexpected. Yet there was something intriguing about this man. He captivated me like no other and it was clear he felt the same about me judging by the way his gaze always followed me. In fact, he almost gave away our game during our stakeout at the underground gambler's den but luckily he was as good in a fight as he was in bed.

My body shivered at the mere thought of his touch and lingering kiss. Shaking my head I went to the kitchen to prepare my customary morning pot of tea turning on my television to distract my devious mind. As I settled on the couch I sipped my chamomile tea and watched the news.

"...In other news Prince Edward announced his long awaited engagement to Princess Margaret. The handsome pair greeted guests at the royal estate last Tuesday to confirm their impending nuptials..."

The tea cup slipped from my hand shattering on the floor as I stared at the image on my television screen. It was Edward...my Ed...There was no doubling my eyes. My Ed was a Prince...and he was engaged. How? How had my intuition been so wrong? How could he use me like this? And what was this? Some national thing before his big day?

Calm yourself, Rosemary. It has to be a mistake. Right?

Despite my attempts to explain away the reality before my eyes there would be no denying it. My Prince Charming was an actual Prince...he also belonged to someone else.

So, what then, was I supposed to do?

* * *

Sarah leaned back in her chair as she stared at the query. Yes, what then was she supposed to do?

Since Sarah was young she had two passions in life: antiques with her mother and writing. Throughout her childhood she always had a notebook handy to it whenever inspiration struck her.

She couldn't now pinpoint the exact moment Rosemary Thomas had been conceived but she remembered writing one adventure after another slowly refining her heroine. Rosemary had gone through several incarnations: a fairy princess, a pirate ship captain, even a cyborg in one strange outing before Sarah crafted her into the psychic-medium, tarot card reading, investigator she was today. Readers delighted in Rosemary's search for truth and justice currently spanning six books.

When she was young her mother gave her this advice: write what you know, so to make sure Rosemary's adventures were as realistic as possible. Sarah had taken, from to college classes, interned with a noted photographer, competed in a rodeo, sky dived, rock climbed, scuba dived and traveled exotic locations from the Sahara desert to Paris to the Virgin Islands. Naturally her family knew nothing of any of it.

While her father and brother lost themselves in their computer chips Sarah was left largely unsupervised after losing her mother to cancer. When her father made it big she and her brother transferred to a new, exclusive school. Her classmates, however, were anything but welcoming to new money. In her old school she endured taunting for being a nerd and a bookworm. At her new school she was bullied for not being raised privileged and elite.

There was only one person who showed any interest in her and that was Ruth Clark. The daughter of an editor and publisher, Ruth shared Sarah's love of books and insisted on reading every Rosemary adventure. Their friendship lasted beyond high school and into college where at Ruth's insistence she submitted the latest Rosemary story to her father. To Sarah's surprise he was utterly delighted with the story and drafted a contract to publish it.

Not wanting to draw her family's ridicule or ire Sarah's only condition was to publish under a pseudonym and remain anonymous. Ruth and her father were disappointed since author appearances were the backbone of any book campaign. Sarah said she could still make appearances without showing her face and wearing a wig. The idea tickled Ruth to no end and together they created her persona.

Since the story was written in first person Sarah chose the penname Rosemary Thomas and crafted her look to mimic the character's as much as possible. Rosemary had black hair so Sarah and Ruth shopped for a proper wig to cover Sarah's dark blonde hair. To hide her face they found a pair of sunglasses with wide circular lens. During book tours she wore bright red lipstick and an eclectic assortment of outfits all found in thrift stores and secondhand shops.

Ruth often said when Sarah was in character even she had a hard time recognizing her. With the look complete and contract signed Sarah could bask in the fruits of her labor but also observe from the outside safe in the knowledge only three people on the planet knew the truth. But even Sarah hadn't realized how popular Rosemary was to become.

The first book The Foxglove Files soared to number one and everyone clamored for more. Her first book had been rather mundane taking place in a New York high school and drew upon not only her own high school experience as a student but as her time as a substitute teacher. For Rosemary's next outing Sarah wanted something more exotic. With six gurus in her bank account from royalty checks Sarah decided to head to Paris exploring the city and taking classes in French cuisine, working in a bakery before making friends with a noted photographer who taught her the basics. All her research eventually inspired The Manchinese Scheme.

And so it began, her adventures becoming the fodder to fuel Rosemary's. Sometimes it was difficult to separate her reality from the character. Perhaps that was why when fans asked for a love interest Rosemary responded with Edward and Rosemary's doomed romance. But did it have to be doomed? Even if she didn't have her happy ending maybe Rosemary still could?

Where did the line between fantasy and reality end? Sarah still didn't have an answer. But she kept writing hoping one day she would find it.