



A NOVEL

THE  
WINGED  
TIARA

J'NELL  
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BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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A NOVEL



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THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*The Winged Tiara*

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*To Lettie:  
One chicken of doom just for you.*

THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798



# PROLOGUE

*Paris, France*

*12 November 1918*

HANDSOME MEN ALWAYS MADE FOR the most delicious dreams. Even more divine when they were real.

Head fuzzy and limbs still weighted from remnants of sleep, Esme Fox snuggled into the soft pillow as her mind lingered on the man. There had been crowds all around, music playing, bells ringing, then without warning the press of bodies parted and there he stood. Buffed and pressed in his army uniform, hat tilted dashingly to the side, and a grin that stopped her heart in its tracks. She had no choice but to sway straight up to him and kiss him.

Curling her legs under the bedsheets—odd that her nightgown wasn't tangled as it usually was—her mind flipped to a quiet booth tucked in the back of a pub. Holding hands, her fingers lacing perfectly with his. Quiet laughter over their shared sense of spiky humor, her giggling as he pulled her from the depths of her hidden self. Talking as if their souls had been wait-

ing to meet and share a lifetime's worth of hopes and dreams of becoming more than what their pasts dictated. A whispered confession of wanting to fall in love, to see what they could make of it. Her question of why not find out?

A slow throbbing began to drum through her head, distorting the images. A large room with rows of benches and lovely windows of stained glass. A man in a long black frock standing with them. He held a book of some kind and droned on while she lost herself in a pair of magnificent brown eyes that gazed at her as if she were the sun and stars.

She pressed her hand to her forehead as the throbbing paraded around her skull.

The man—the handsome one, not the black-frocked one—had smiled at her, kissed her until she melted against him. Happiness had danced through her. *Let's see what we can make of this.*

Then he was holding a key and fitting it into a door lock as she urged him to hurry while cradling two bottles in her arms.

Then . . . What? The smarting pain blocked out all coherent thought. She tugged her hand free of the blanket and rubbed her temple. Cool metal brushed against her brow. What was that?

Easing upright, Esme blinked groggily at the unfamiliar ring on her finger, then promptly rolled over and vomited a rousing night's worth of champagne into a silver bucket. It had been an excellent vintage, but the exquisite taste was soured upon reemergence. She groped for a linen napkin from the bedside table and patted her mouth before draping it discreetly over the bucket. She blinked several more times and passed a hand—not the one with the band—over her eyes to dislodge the gathered grit.

Bright yellow light poured through the window in blindingly irritating radiance. It wasn't like her to keep the blackout curtains

open. But wait, there were no more Germans. Well, that was not to say that Germans didn't exist, because they certainly did, but there was something about them going home. What was it? The dull ache behind her eyes wrapped around the front of her head as her mind revolted against being bullied into coherent thought.

She glanced around the room, which seemed to tilt oddly to the left. She tipped her head to the side to accommodate. It was a decent room with sturdy furnishings and watercolors hanging on the walls. There on the table, wadded between dinner plates—why were there two?—was a flag of blue, red, and white. A single cotton stocking dangled over the back of one chair while its mate fluttered from the bedpost. Her shoes had been kicked off near the door while her clothes were scattered about the floor like delicate landmines. Well, that wasn't unusual—but the man's uniform hanging from the curtain rod certainly was.

Shifting in bed, she found him. He was stretched out on his stomach with his arms hooked under the pillow. Thick golden-brown curls sprang wildly over his head. His face was turned away, making it difficult to suss out his looks, but going by the tanned neck and white back stretched with taut muscles, he seemed a manly specimen indeed. Judging by the hint of bare, rounded flesh visible just before the sheet had the audacity to cover him, her bedfellow was naked. A quick peek at herself beneath the sheet confirmed she had joined him. Clearly the result of the excellent champagne.

How to break it to the poor fellow? *My dear boy, while I do not recall the nuptials, our time together will be remembered fondly.* Or perhaps, *Your kisses were pure magic so it's best not to ruin them by making further plans.* She nodded to the sleeping form with satisfaction. Yes, that explanation would do nicely.

Carefully slipping out of bed so as not to disturb him, she reached for her chemise and stopped cold as the sunlight glinted off the gold ring. The one resting on the fourth finger of her left hand. Somewhere in the distance a tinny gramophone played “Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag.” Her gaze skittered to the celebration flag on the table and the champagne bottles rolled beneath.

Armistice Day. Yesterday the war had finally come to an end and all of Paris had erupted in celebration. There was singing, dancing, music, drinking, and kissing. She held her trembling hand up to her face. The bold blighter of a wedding band was still there. Perhaps too much kissing.

*No, no, no!*

She dressed faster than a matinee dancer between numbers, not caring that her blouse was missing two buttons or her hair tumbled in a mess down her back. Rounding the bed on tiptoe, she peeked at the man—the word *husband* sent nerves skittering up her spine and she had more than enough to deal with at present—still sleeping soundly. He had a fine nose and full lips that were slightly parted to release soft breaths of air. Blond lashes rested against his cheek into which a dimple curled.

*Who are you?*

A curl flopped across his forehead. For a second she had the exhilarating urge to flip the lock back in place, but a slight stirring of his legs that shifted the bedsheet a tad lower stopped her.

She needed to leave. Now.

She wriggled off the ring and placed it on the bedside table next to a photograph of what could only be them in inebriated bliss and a marriage license signed by Esme Fox and Jasper Truitt.

Jasper Truitt, her hus— *No! No, no, no!*



She grabbed the photograph and bolted for the door. Before closing it, she dared one final peek at Jasper Truitt and sighed in regret. A shame. He looked rather a dish.

THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798







*Sain-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, French Riviera*  
1922

A BALMY BREEZE LADEN WITH salt and surf trickled through the glass doors that had been thrown open. Party guests flowed in and out of the villa in continuous waves, the women as gaily dressed as tropical fish in their pinks, silvers, and greens while the men resorted to the tried-and-true blacks and whites of formal wear.

Jasper Truitt swirled the ice melting in his scotch as a bead of sweat rolled down the glass and plopped to the travertine floor, narrowly missing his shoe. If only he were a fish. At least then he could jump into the Mediterranean for a cool-off from the miserable heat and none of the stuffed shirts would spare him a second glance.

“Enjoying yourself, Mr. Truitt?” An elegant woman dressed in soft blue with silver hair framing her delicate face floated over to him. A small fox terrier trotted obediently next to her.

“Very much indeed, Madame Rothschild,” he replied with a

small bow. “Your home is quite stunning.”

Madame Rothschild smiled comfortably at her surroundings as if she had been accustomed to wealth all her life. Because she had. A member of the French banking Rothschild family, she was a collector of fine arts, fashion, parties, and homes dotted around the world. Including the posh Villa Ephrussi in which they now gathered.

“Do you enjoy the arts, Mr. Truitt?” she inquired as the six-piece orchestra shifted into a Louis Armstrong number.

“They catch my attention.”

“Then you must return sometime and browse my collections when fewer people are ogling them and trying to estimate how much I paid for each.” She waved a dismissive hand. “As if one could place a price on art.”

“I would be only too happy to return and examine these works to better understand their true value.”

“*Bon.* In the meantime be sure to visit the stone garden. I just added a gargoyle that was saved from one of the churches in Amiens during the war. He is quite fierce, and I adore him. Enjoy the show later.”

“Thank you, Madame Rothschild. I will.” Jasper offered another bow as his hostess departed to be swallowed into the swell of her party guests. Each person grasping to touch even the hem of the famous Rothschild fortune. But for him there were rules to follow. Protocol. An honor code. Strangers were preferable, galleries and exhibits top notch, and passing acquaintances acceptable, but one must never steal from a friend.

It was fashionable for coming-of-age gentlemen to partake in a tour of the continent. Leaving behind the dreariness of England, a lad could experience gondola racing in Italy, bull fighting

in Spain, the nightlife of Paris, and every other frivolity money could find, all while tallying it up to a fine education in the ways of the world. His grandfather, that sly old sinner, had taken him on such a tour.

On the refined soil of England, the seventh Duke of Loxhill was a prominent figure among the nobility and would not acknowledge the out-of-wedlock fruits of his notoriety, but across the Channel no one gave two gold crowns for the upper-crust rules of respectability. In fact, the more notorious one was, the more welcomed they were. So off to Europe they went, Jasper, the bastard son of a bastard, and his grandfather, Duke. Duke introduced him to princes, queens, generals, master painters, novelists, dancers, and every colorful character imaginable. It was indeed a great education.

Jasper reluctantly turned away from a gild-framed Fragonard hanging on the wall. Duke had introduced him to Madame Rothschild ten years ago, making her a personal friend. So despite the easy fifty thousand pounds he could collect from one of his discreet buyers for the painting, rules were rules. That and if he was caught lifting one more item he'd be sent right back to jail.

For years Jasper had slipped beneath the authorities' noses, earning himself the rather stylish moniker of Phantom, and not once had they come close to catching him. Until a year ago when his trouser pocket caught on a doorknob and out spilled a ruby necklace and three gold rings. Right in front of a police officer. The police wanted to make an example of the infamous Phantom to discourage all would-be thieves, but Duke had stepped in, and with a few words, Jasper was a free man again.

While he couldn't deny his preference for freedom over a life-

time behind bars, it had chafed him raw to be forced to rely on another man's standing rather than his own. Ah, the complexities of being a thief with a sense of pride.

Of course, such pride didn't keep him from slipping off from time to time to pursue jobs—such as enjoying a stunning collection of jewelry at a party on the French Riviera. One piece in particular.

“Mesdames et messieurs! Ladies and gentlemen!” A man dressed in a starched butler's livery stood in the indoor patio, a squared-off space in the center of the villa with marble columns and arched spaces that greeted visitors upon arrival. Tipping up his chin, he raised his voice to be heard over the din. “If you will all make your way to the garden, please. The show is about to begin.”

A flurry of excitement carried Jasper outside into the evening air, only a degree cooler than inside. The sun setting to the west cast its last orange rays across the crystal blue waters of the Mediterranean while washing the sky in pinks and purples, smattered with stars. The lights glowing from inside the pink villa flooded out to mingle over the deep green grass and palm leaves from which dangled hundreds of light strings. Down the center of the yard stretched a long rectangular basin of water dotted by lily pads. Torches and lanterns had been placed to highlight the many gravel paths leading deeper into the perfumed gardens of lavender and lemongrass.

“Jazz! Jazz!” A familiar voice called through the throng, followed by a sharp whistle. “Oy! Over here.”

From the terrace Jasper made out a waving hand down by the water basin. Desmond Walsh. A degenerate second son of a viscount Jasper had met while serving together during the war.

With a penchant for scotch, cards, and good music they had become immediate friends.

Jasper zigzagged through the crowd and grinned at his old comrade. “Mond, how are you? Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“You know me. Wherever there’s a party.” Wearing an eager grin, Mond offered him a lazy salute with his left hand. His right arm had been blown off at Verdun. “Heard a whiff of it from the gambling tables at Monte Carlo and had to come see the shindig for myself.”

“How did Lady Luck treat you?”

“Well enough at first.” Mond patted his breast pocket where a formidable bulge pressed beneath the fine black jacket. “She’s a fickle mistress, though, and started batting her lashes at an Italian count before long, but I fully expect to entice her back tomorrow night. Care to join me?”

“Perhaps.”

Mond tilted his fair eyebrows with interest. “Unless you have your eye on something here.”

Jasper swirled his scotch. The melting shards of ice pinged the glass. “Perhaps.”

“Got a buyer yet?”

“I have a client,” Jasper said evasively.

Another reason for their friendship. Mond was well-connected in aristocratic circles, and rich people loved nothing more than becoming richer and earning the jealousy of their peers. There was only so much money to go around, but artwork and treasures were an entirely separate level, and Jasper knew how to provide. During the war Mond had noticed Jasper’s unique gift of acquiring goods for the soldiers—goods not even the quartermaster could finagle off the black market. Food tins, socks, cigarettes,

photographs of dancehall girls in their scanties—Jasper knew how to get it all, and soon enough, for a small percentage of the cut, Mond began introducing him to generals and colonels, men who, outside the trenches, were referred to by titles.

Perhaps the greatest strength of their friendship was that Mond never raised an eyebrow when Jasper got the itch to try his hand at a new prize, and on more than one occasion was there to aid in scratching it.

“All right, keep your secrets.” Mond grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and sipped. “But know this, there’s chatter around the craps tables. A wealthy Prussian is searching for a valuable artifact that belongs to his family and has been missing for sixty years. The reward is said to be substantial.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

At the far end of the rectangular water basin, a small hill protruded with stone steps leading up to a rotunda. Torches ringed the structure and highlighted the petite figure climbing the steps to stand within the circle of columns upholding the roof.

“Good evening, my friends,” Madame Rothschild said. A megaphone was stationed in front of her so the audience lined along the basin and closer to the house could hear. “I am very pleased you have joined me here tonight to celebrate beauty, art, and life. After four horrible years of death and destruction we must learn to live again.”

As her speech carried on, Jasper sipped his drink and surveyed the crowd. Women outnumbered the men six to one. Men too old or too fresh-cheeked to fight. Those left of middling years were sparse and often accompanied by missing limbs, eye patches, blasted-off ears, or canes. At least, those were the visible scars. Jasper’s hand trembled, setting the ice in his glass to chattering.

Some scars were buried too deep to be seen. Unless one knew



where to look. A man across the way had shoved both hands in his pockets but couldn't stop his feet from twitching. Nerve shakes. Another fellow pressed his hand to his ear as the megaphone droned on. Loud noises. Back home, people said these were the lucky men, the ones who still had their looks and all their arms and legs. But what did they know?

He shook himself from that maudlin thinking. He'd survived; others hadn't, and that was simply that.

“. . . have gathered the world's finest collection of jewels in a rainbow of colors to celebrate all things that glitter," Madame Rothschild continued. "Many of the items you will see are on loan from private collections. However, take heart. Several of the pieces are up for sale. The proceeds will go to a displaced children's hospital in Nice, so dig deep into your pockets, gentlemen, and buy the ladies something pretty."

At her signal the orchestra dove into a classical piece by Debussy, and at the far end of the basin stepped a figure, moving as if gliding atop the water. The crowd pressed forward with oohs and aahs. The woman was costumed as Marie Antoinette, the infamous French queen, wearing a revealing caged skirt and a towering wig. Draped around her throat were enough diamonds and sapphires to fund an entire country.

"This sapphire-and-diamond parure," Madame Rothschild said, "is thought to have been made for Empress Josephine and later acquired by the House of Bourbon."

The model sashayed to the end of the basin where Jasper stood. She did not walk upon water as the crowd was made to believe, but on a thin layer of glass fitted over the top. Still, the illusion was quite something.

Smiling a pink smile, the model offered her hand. "Care to help a girl down?"

Mond shoved his glass into Jasper's hand, then leapt forward with gallant determination. "At your service, my queen."

By the time her slippered feet touched the ground, a new lady was paraded out on a whirl of Tchaikovsky. This one was dressed in all white with a fur cape tied to her shoulders and sported a crown that looked like a diamond egg cracked open with pearls rolling down the center. She carried a scepter of gleaming ivory topped by a ruby the size of a walnut and a matching ruby brooch pinned to the center of her bodice. It was a miracle she didn't tip right over from the weight.

"And now we journey to Imperial Russia," Madame Rothschild said. "This crown was crafted for Catherine the Second, and the scepter was used by the last Romanov tsar, Nicholas the Second."

As the model neared the end of her walk, Mond was there with eager hand extended to graciously help her down to walk among mortals on the ground. The string of jewels kept coming. Strands of creamy pearls, rich emeralds embedded in tiaras, icy sapphires winking from earlobes, and blood-red rubies dripping from fingers, all encrusted with diamonds and more diamonds.

"What a feast, eh, old boy?" Mond grinned back at Jasper as he assisted a Bavarian beauty whose shortened dirndl left little to the imagination, never mind the Dresden Green pinned to her corset.

Behind her floated Miss Britannia draped in the British flag and—Hullo, what was this beauty? It couldn't be. The Bagration Tiara was said to have been lost in Russia before the revolution, but here it was complete with matching necklace, hair comb, and earrings dripping in pink spinels. The entire set sold to the right buyer could set him up nicely for years.

Jasper edged his way past Mond, ready to help this particular jewel, er, lady down from her walkway. A few delightful words in her ear and they'd slip off to one of the darkened garden paths where it would be only too easy to slide the pieces off one by one into his pocket. Of course, the lady would need to be distracted while this was going on, but who said the evening had to be all work and no play?

As he raised his hand to her with his most charming smile, the music suddenly changed. Richard Wagner's "Ritt der Walküren." A triumph of brass and galloping horse hooves and warrior shield maidens—and triumphant she was.

The model strode down the walk as if it were her field of victory. Her diaphanous gown slinked over her shoulders and came to a V just above her navel before draping into a skirt that sliced open to reveal long legs laced up in sandals. Enormous wings made of wire and downy white feathers extended from her back and trailed the ground at her feet. If the costume hadn't sufficiently impressed the audience into stunned silence, a crown lifted straight from the brow of a Valkyrie adorned her head. The crowd gasped in delight.

His intended prize.

"And now for our showstopper," Madame Rothschild continued, a bit breathless by this point. "The Valkyrie Tiara. First performed in 1876, Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is the story born of Norse mythology where in the third act we are greeted with "The Ride of the Valkyries"—women who choose who lives and dies on the battlefield. The opera immediately sparked a fashion for all things Norse, including the treasure you see here before you."

Circling the model's head, the diamond bandeau sprouted

two glittering wings shooting straight up—ethereal, majestic, and terrifying—as the stones glimmered like fire. Slowing her pace so her hips swayed to each side in rhythm with her steps, she glanced neither left nor right but seemed to take in her rapt audience all at once. Her deep red lips curved in pleasure, her bobbed black hair glowing as dark as an onyx under the torchlight. Entranced, Jasper took a step closer and bumped the tips of his shoes against the low basin wall.

“... comprised of 2,500 cushion-shaped, single-cut, circular-cut, rose-cut diamonds and set in a frame of gold and silver. The en tremblant diamond wings are constructed using wire-coiled springs so they move slightly when worn. Observe.”

The model turned her head gently from side to side, encouraging the diamond wings to flutter and earning another impressed *ahh* from the crowd. Her smile broadened, one side of her lips tipping up just a bit farther than the other, prodding something in the back of Jasper's mind. Like he'd seen that quirk before.

She was nearing the end of the walk. The audience grabbed at the tiny feathers that loosened from her wings and drifted through the air. Grown men and women squealed with delight as they jumped and snatched for the fluffy bits, then waved them high in the air when at last their treasure was caught. Indeed, the Valkyrie was the treasure of the event, and all eyes would linger on the magnificent piece for the rest of the evening. Not that he was worried; he was rather good at lifting things right from under the spotlight. It all came down to a matter of finesse.

The crowd pressed in around him, but he held his ground. A few more steps and he could take her hand, offer her a refreshing drink, then suggest a cooling walk among the secluded garden

paths to—

The prodding in the back of his mind slammed into him full force.

It couldn't be.

The woman's titled smile flashed over him to the next person but screeched back to him. He saw the recognition in her eyes the same instant it hit him.

Yes. Yes, it could be.

It *was*.

His glass of watery scotch slipped from his hand and smashed on the gravel, sending shards of crystal tinkling over the smooth pebbles. The people around him yelled and jostled away.

Or at least, he thought they did. Every quivering bit of his attention was centered on the woman before him. She blinked and the shared look of disbelief disappeared. With another flash of her tilted smile, she whirled at the audience's resounding applause for a second look and sashayed back the way she'd come.

A hand waved in front of his face. Mond.

"Seems you made an impression on the lady. As you did my shoe." Whipping the silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, Mond wiped specks of scotch from his shoes. He straightened and tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket. "Who is she?"

Jasper rubbed at the heat dashing up the back of his neck.

"My wife."

He darted after her, following the trail of downy feathers as he moved away from the drag of guests clogging the main lawn as they clustered around the bejeweled models for closer inspections. He rushed down a parallel path that veered off behind a scrim of thick-leaved bushes and trees that sheltered a small squared space to showcase a single piece of art.

And there she stood, leaning her back against a marble pedestal with a Grecian hero perched atop. She looked exactly as she did in his dreams, yet nothing at all like what he remembered. Her skin was still the milky color of alabaster, her legs long, and her hair as black as midnight. The last time he'd seen her, those dark strands had brushed her waist after he'd pulled the restrictive pins from her hair on their wedding night. He'd delighted in running his fingers through it to stroke the soft skin hidden beneath. Now she sported one of those fashionable bobs all the women were raging over. On most women the cut resembled a young boy who'd yet to grow into his chest hairs, but on her it was perfection. Shorter in the back and tapering longer in the front to brush her jaw like a razor's edge.

*All right, Truitt, my lad. You can play this one of two ways. First option: the long-lost husband still nursing a broken heart after waking up to find his wife had run out on him. Or the second: cool and calm as if he barely remembers their whirlwind romance and has not spent the past four years searching for her face in every crowd.*

At the sound of his intrusion into her sanctuary, she turned her head in his direction.

"It's you." Her voice was collected with the barest hint of surprise. As if the world had not just stopped spinning and tossed them on their heads.

Second option it was then.

Jasper slipped his hands in his pockets and affected a nonchalant shrug of one shoulder.

"Hello, Esme."

She turned fully around to face him in a graceful swirl of her sheer skirt.

"It's been a long time."

“Four years.”

Her thin eyebrows lifted as if the passing of time caught her off guard. “Has it really been that long? My goodness . . . Well, you certainly look swell. What a surprise to see you here tonight. Of all the places in all the world.”

He moved farther into the private space where the scent of blooming jasmine hung heavy among the dark green leaves. “The world is smaller than we typically think. After all, how could you explain this reunion?”

“Serendipitous good fortune.” She smiled brightly as if to convince him to ignore the obvious topic thundering below their flippant words. At last her smile dimmed and she sank her teeth into her lower lip in capitulation.

“I suppose this is as good a place as any to have it out. Darling, I am sorry for what happened, but you must admit it was all rather rushed and we fumbled into a mistake. Commitment was never my strongest feature and surely you see by now that my leaving was for the best.”

He nodded, not in understanding or agreement, but rather at finally confronting the unanswered questions haunting him. That morning after their wedding he had sat in a stupor for a good half hour wondering where his bride had vanished to. Realizing she hadn't merely popped out for tea and crumpets, he'd run—all right, more like stumbled due to the lingering effects of champagne—down the street shouting her name and asking every person he saw if they'd seen her, but most were still too sodded from their Armistice carousing to notice a runaway wife.

At first the constant whys had harangued him morning, noon, and night, but time had sanded away their cutting roughness, leaving little scabs for him to pick at when the mood struck.

A bottle of champagne often did the trick. Seeing Esme again ripped off the old scabs, and out poured a hundred fresh whys with their stinging edges.

“Did it occur to you to mention that before we signed the marriage license, or did the notion seize you after our wedding night?” The abrasive whys softened to a memory. A smile toyed with his lips. Several memories, in fact. “If I recall correctly, you had no qualms about . . . ah, our time together.”

She plucked at the hair curling near her cheek, covering the pink stain beneath. “Our time together was spent drunk on champagne. Surely you see the folly in our overexcited actions, spurred on by youthful celebration. Really, darling, you should be thanking me for saving us a lifetime of regrets.”

“How do you know there would have been regrets? You left too early to find out.”

“I had no choice. Better to have made a clean cut than drag out the inevitable. No hearts broken or tears shed.”

In that she was probably right. Their marriage had ended before they could discover if there was anything true about it. Anything worth fighting for. His heart may not have broken, but it had certainly been bruised by her cold disappearance. To say nothing of his wounded pride.

“You might have left a note.”

The last rays of the sun peeked through the bushes behind her and dusted her shoulders, setting the gauzy material of her dress aglow like that of a Grecian goddess come to life.

“I am sorry about that, but I was terrified you would wake up and want to hash things out, and I simply couldn't allow it. Clean cut and all that.”

“Yet you took our wedding photograph.”



“A memento. For the lovely time we spent together, though I remember it mostly through a haze.” She stepped closer to him. The hem of her gown swayed over the tips of his shoes. She was quiet for a moment as she examined him, barely needing to look up to meet his eyes due to her exaggerated height. “So your eyes are brown. I’ve often wondered.”

Her gaze dropped to his mouth and for a second, he thought she might kiss him. Despite the desire it kindled in him, he dragged his attention away from her lush, inviting lips to the wings atop her head and took half a step back.

“The first time we met you had long hair and wore a nurse’s uniform,” he said, collecting himself to business he had actually come for. “Now look at you. Chic and crowned with diamonds. You’ve come a long way in four years. Or were you a princess in disguise and neglected to tell me?”

She, too, took a step back into cool reserve. “Hardly royalty. With the war over I put aside my starched apron and rolled bandages—you remember me telling you I was never very good at it to begin with?—and decided to try something new. I couldn’t go back to what I had been doing before the war.” A brief cloud shadowed her face but lifted just as quickly as she pressed on with her story. “A few odd jobs here and there until I found something I’m rather good at, and it brought me here tonight. Modeling precious jewels most women can only dream of. Such as this.” She lifted her hands to either side of her head, indicating the Valkyrie.

“It’s a stunning piece. May I?”

She tilted her head forward so he could better see all the angles. The sun now dipped beneath the horizon, and the silver-and-gold metal no longer stood separate but melted together

into a rosy hue that burned through the diamonds like pink fire. Beautiful, but not what he was looking for.

He tried another tack. "I imagine it's quite heavy."

"Then you would be wrong. It's certainly no heavier than that tin hat you wore in the trenches. You told me it weighed a ton."

"I was trying to impress you." It slipped out. He was finished with that line of thinking and had shut the door to carry on with his intended purpose, but the heat pressed around them, heavy with memory and laden with the mingling scent of her perfume—an intoxicating blend of orange blossoms. He kicked the mental door shut before the perfume wreaked havoc. "But a tin hat is nowhere near as impressive as a winged crown."

She glanced around quickly, then slowly lifted the tiara from her head. "We're not supposed to remove these, but if you don't tell, then I won't."

"Cross my heart." He made a quick X over his heart, then held out his hands to accept the tiara. As simple as that. His treasure handed to him on a silver platter. He could turn on his heel, vault over the wall, and be off scot-free before she could utter an alarm. Yet something in him resisted, and the door cracked open. It was too easy, and she was too near. After four years of wondering why, he couldn't simply walk away, not as easily as she had, not yet.

"See the wings here?" She leaned forward, nearly touching her head to his to point a red-painted nail at the wings. "The coiled-wire springs allow them to move as if in flight without adding any unnecessary weight." She carefully rotated the piece on his flat palms and pointed to where the thin wires had been attached to the headband.

"The craftsmanship sure is something, as is the myth behind

it.” Jasper tilted the tiara slightly to catch the light twinkling from the electric bulbs strung through the trees. The yellow light glided along the headband’s smooth metal backing, catching slightly on the screws holding the wings in place, but not on the scrolled R that was supposed to be stamped just under the left wing. Blood throbbed in his head. The tiara was a fake.

“Cartier made a number of these back when they were all the rage, but the famous jewel house crafted the Valkyrie to be the most exquisite of them all.”

“Who was it crafted for?” He kept his voice neutral despite his entire plan having gone belly-up. Duke would not be pleased. Where was the real Valkyrie?

Esme shrugged. “There’s a rumor about it belonging to a posh aristocrat’s mistress, an Italian opera singer, long before it went to his bride, but who can untangle the affairs of the rich? Would you mind helping me take these off?” Tugging at the straps over her shoulders that tied the wings on, she turned and presented her back to him. “The tiara may not be heavy, but these certainly are. My back will be sore for a week.”

Jasper reached for the strap only to remember he still held the tiara. Correction, the fake. He cursed silently. The only option now was to start hunting again from scratch. Esme quickly plucked the tiara from his fingers and slipped it back on her head.

“Is it straight?” she asked, feeling the diamond-encrusted band sitting crookedly across her brow.

He gently straightened it, careful not to let his fingertips linger too long anywhere near her face. There was no telling . . . Well, actually there was a telling of precisely what they would do so close to that smooth cheek. He snatched his hands back and indicated for her to turn around.

The straps were white leather made to blend into her barely-there gown. Three in total, one for each shoulder and a center one that held them together to form a sturdy H. He unbuckled the center one first, then the shoulders, and helped ease the massive feathers from her back.

Holy smokes! The pair of them had to weigh at least three stones.

“Ah, much better.” She rubbed the back of her neck. The short black hairs bristled softly against her pale, exposed skin.

“It’s a wonder you didn’t topple backward.” He draped the wings carefully over the statue, transforming the marble man into Icarus.

“If I had, I would have played the part of a Valkyrie slain in battle. Keep it as part of my act.” Smiling with amusement, she stared up at the statue, idly twirling one of the feathers around her finger.

Her back was to him, and their tête-à-tête had dragged on long enough. Any longer and Madame Rothschild might wonder where her showpiece had gone and come in search. Poor woman. She had no idea she’d been duped.

Why was there a fake circulating to begin with? And then there was Esme. His wife. How was he to go about that, and more precisely, *what* did he want to do about seeing her again?

*Boom!*

Jasper ducked, throwing his arms over his head as red flares filled the night sky.

A cool hand touched him. A soft voice filled his ear. “Fireworks. Look!”

He glanced up to see bursts of red, white, and yellow. Not starbursts to cut charging soldiers in half, not artillery shells

whistling down for explosion, but fireworks. Harmless, frivolous fireworks.

Slapping on a smile to cover his thundering heart, he straightened, but not before catching the sympathy in her eyes.

“Yes, fireworks,” he said, pushing away her sympathy as he forced himself to watch the sparkling display over their heads.

There had been fireworks the night of the Armistice. Everyone in Paris went out to see them, including him and Esme, but it hadn’t been long before they could only see each other.

He turned to her. “Do you remember—”

She was gone.





“WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT’S a fake?” Esme didn’t know whose cry of surprise was louder. Her own or that of the aging opera diva standing next to her. Though, to be fair, the old lady’s squawk trembled with a high-pitched vibrato Esme could never hope to achieve. If any patrons at the hotel casino below heard, they would most likely chalk it up to one of the exotic birds flapping about in the lobby’s aviary.

The jeweler, a small mole of a man draped in entirely too much starched black for the Mediterranean climate, looked up from his examination of the tiara. One brown eye squinted from the glare of the lamp desk while the other peered at them through the glass of his loupe.

“I assure you, ladies, this is indeed a fake. LeRoi is a prestigious jewelry house in operation since the reign of King Louis the Fourteenth, who marked us as the royal jeweler when he first commissioned a piece for his mistress Madame de Pompadour in seventeen—”

“Do not presume to speak to *me* of mistresses.” The diva

flapped a wrinkled, impatient hand as she paced the room. “I know all too well about them.”

Countess Rossalina Accardi was not a woman to waste time on inconsequential matters, such as the opinions of others or facts. She demanded her own narrative with an iron will that had broken her free of the chorus when she was only fifteen years old, cast her as a leading lady by eighteen, and made her known as a singing legend by twenty. She had wrestled fame to her bidding and was now past the prime of her long life, lounging over her stardom as if the world should fall at her feet and praise her for bestowing such a gift upon them. A musical Prometheus straight from the Olympic opera houses.

Once upon a time, perhaps she had been great. She certainly had the wealth to claim so, but whatever talent of range and charm she once possessed had been lost under eighty years of wrinkles, a sagging bosom, and enough layers of theater makeup to prop up an entire stage of ingenues.

“Madame Rothschild went to great lengths to ensure each of the pieces for her show were without question.” Esme toyed with the sleek hair curving her jaw as she propped a hip against the desk. Only on the very rare occasion was she wrong about a jewel, and the sensation did not sit well with her pride. Though she would be the last person to admit it. “How could this one have slipped in?”

The jeweler’s mouth puckered. “It is an easy enough mistake when one does not know what to look for in real stones.”

Countess Accardi’s black pencil-drawn eyebrows arced like an irate beetle. “I have scores of jewels at my palazzi. All three of them! Men used to throw emeralds and rubies at my feet. Rubies! Other singers were given flowers that wilted within a week, but

not I. Rossalina Accardi, world-renowned soprano, was gifted gems and furs and carriages. Do you think I do not know what a real diamond looks like by now?"

The jeweler dabbed at the sweat beading on his pasty forehead. "I do not doubt your knowledge, Countess, but some flaws only make themselves known to a practiced eye."

A polite way of saying the old woman was blind as a bat. It was a wonder she could see anything past the thick black kohl lining her eyes.

Esme leaned across the desk for a closer look at the headpiece. Despite her wearing it for nearly two hours at the party, she'd had barely a moment to examine it for herself. Though Jasper had— She pushed away that bedeviled thought before it had time to prick her.

"What kind of flaws?" she asked.

"The glass kind." His magnified eye blinked at her. "There are a few real diamonds interspersed, but the majority are glass, I am afraid to report. Along with the gold metalwork being dipped."

"Dipped?" Countess Accardi clutched at the triple strand of jet beads looped around her neck as if this bit of information was the last nail in the coffin. "Dipped!" Snatching the tiara from the table, she threw it on the tile floor and stomped on it with her red T-strapped heel. Tiny bits of glass shattered and spewed across the floor like sugar granules.

"Oh! Do not do that, *s'il vous plaît!*" The mole extracted himself from behind the desk and scurried around to brush the broken bits into his doughy palm. His fingers barely missed being stomped on in his fervor.

Sighing, Esme crossed the hotel room and dropped into a scrolled-back chair covered in a material of blue-and-white print



that reminisced the scenery out the large windows. Well, she imagined they did as the countess had locked tight the windows and balcony door and drawn the curtains should anyone have binoculars that could angle up to the fifth floor.

The whirl of the roulette wheels, shuffling of cards, and tossing of dice was muffled beneath the plush rug, marble bathroom with its gold fixtures, and silk-draped bed large enough to roll around on and never find the edge. Pure luxury. But while Esme enjoyed a soak in a claw-foot tub as much as the next girl, she'd rather be sinking herself into a Gin Rickey. Ice-cold with condensation collecting in tiny bubbles on the glass. A thick lime wedge balanced on the rim. If she swirled it hard enough, the clinking ice might drown out Countess Accardi's tirade.

It was but one of many tantrums Esme had witnessed since coming into the countess's employ, though of late they had increased in fury. More screeching, more smashing of valuables. The woman's theatrics could rival any of London's East End brawlers Esme had grown up watching in back alleys, but that was home, where she could settle into the comfort of knowing those same brawlers would be sipping pints together at the pub once they'd had their licks. With the countess there was no such comfort and Esme had to keep her wits about her lest she end up with a flowerpot flying at her head.

"I have paid enough to do as I like." The old woman huffed as she pulled a case of cigarettes and a lighter from the bright red sash tied low around her hips. Attaching the cigarette to a long black holder, she lit the end and drew in a breath of smoke. "Just as I pay you enough to forget your moral scruples to LeRoi."

The jeweler, who had been gathering up the tiara's broken bits, straightened on his knees with a haughty sniff. "LeRoi is a

dignified employer.”

“But not one that pays enough, which is why you take on side jobs for me.”

The mole’s eyes drifted to Esme, who merely shrugged. She had come to work for the countess a year and a half ago, lifting some of the most glamorous pieces in her portfolio, but the jeweler had been enrolled only nine months ago. After all this time working together, she really should learn his name, but then, the countess had never bothered to learn it either. In this line of work, the less personal information offered, the less it could pin one down. A thief never wished to be pinned down.

“The real one is still out there,” Esme said, crossing her long legs and enjoying the feel of real silk stockings against her skin after suffering through the war years with scratchy cotton. “I’ll find it.”

“Oh will you indeed?” The countess rounded on her, beetle eyebrows raising. Smoke curled from her dark lips. Stained a deep berry, the color did little more than exaggerate the feathery lines around her mouth. “I already sent you to find the prize for my collection and you return with *i rifiuti*.”

“Hardly rubbish when LeRoi claims it has some diamonds to its worth.”

“Specks of dust.” The countess raised her foot again to stamp on the stones but found they had been swept safely away by the jeweler. She settled for grinding cigarette ash into the rug in front of Esme’s shiny shoes.

Resisting the urge to swivel her feet away lest the countess think to stomp on them too, Esme smoothed the skirt of her ivory-and-ebony dress over her knees. “You hired me because I’m the best. I have yet to fail in procuring prestigious additions for

your collection, and I don't intend to sully my reputation now."

"This is more than your silly reputation." The countess's eyes narrowed to kohl slits. "This is my life. It is a matter of personal honor to have it returned."

While a sparkler could certainly enhance a lady's life and joy, Esme could not understand the dogged determination and near obsession the countess had with obtaining the Valkyrie. It was all the old woman had talked about for months as they waited until it finally revealed itself as the headline piece for Madame Rothschild's event. Esme never bothered wondering the whys of who bought and sold on the black market. Most were rich eccentrics with too much money, and as long as they paid her, it mattered not what they did with a first-edition Dickens or ruby-encrusted bracelet.

Countess Accardi was different. She'd first bought an emerald brooch in the shape of a panther before asking if Esme could locate a specific ring. Esme hadn't worked for clients directly as she preferred to lift what caught her eye and then sell to the highest bidder, but the countess had offered a sum too tidy to turn down. Since that first ring, she'd been paid to locate and procure more items for the diva, and the earnings had set her up quite nicely, enabling her to hop from one exquisite hotel to the next—as far away from Wilton's Music Hall in the East End as she could get.

Esme didn't back away from the old woman's stare. "I'll find it."

"My grand return to the stage is two months away. It is imperative that I have the Valkyrie in hand for my performance."

Ah, yes. The performance to top all performances, when the grand dame planned to pluck herself from retirement and reclusiveness and foist herself into the stage's spotlight for one

glorious, delusional evening to perform her most beloved rendition from Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Hence the need for the Valkyrie tiara. Perhaps the sparkler was intended to distract from her soprano now sounding more like the song of an aged owl with its wing caught on a branch.

Smoke curled from the countess's lips. "After such a stinging failure, how do you plan to retrieve my tiara?"

"Leave those details to me. It's what I'm good at."

"So you said about this catastrophe." Countess Accardi cut her smoke-rimmed glare to the broken metal bits and stones the mole was carefully separating into piles on the desk. She wouldn't be surprised to find a few of those pieces in his pocket by the end of the evening.

Eager to leave before the woman's stare could sear her to the chair, Esme stood. "A temporary setback. One I shall rectify at once." Right after that drink at the hotel bar.

"See that you do. The Valkyrie belongs in my hands. It is the culmination of everything, the *pezzo forte* to what I am owed. The wrong done by the one who stole it from me will finally be righted." A malicious light glowed in the old woman's eyes.

Well, that was alarming. "What do you mean 'righted'?"

"In my younger, benevolent days I had a distinct pleasure in ruining the reputation of anyone who dared to cross me, having their names smeared to worthlessness. It often drove them to the despair of leaping off a balcony or throwing themselves in front of a carriage. If they made themselves my enemy, there was nothing a drop of poisoned honey in their tea or suffocation with a pillow in their dressing room could not resolve in my favor.

"Sadly, I no longer possess the patience for such endeavors, but for the Valkyrie I will make an exception. Poisoning is too

gentle; suffocation not nearly satisfying enough.” Her eyes blazed. “This particular double-crosser deserves something spectacularly violent for an ending, as befitting the legend of a Valkyrie.”

Esme’s stomach lurched. “I’ve never found violence to be the answer for anything.”

“I have.” The smile of a snake slithered across her face. “As I said, my patience for recompense has grown thin over the years, and I have been forced to assign the deeds to another—with the exception of the Valkyrie, as only my personal touch will suffice.”

She grasped the long rope of pearls dangling from Esme’s neck and tugged, sawing the baubles back and forth across the back of her neck. “Pirazzo’s particular skill is strangulation, did you know?”

Throat dry and skin burning raw, Esme shook her head.

“Quite an art. I’ve watched him work a number of times, and the finesse and strength required in the fingers is astounding.” Dropping the pearls, the countess motioned to a shadow near the door. “Pirazzo, see our pennyweighter out.”

Esme didn’t bat a mascara-caked eyelash as the threat hit her square in the heart and slithered into her cold belly. She had clawed her way tooth and nail to escape destitution, hunger, and fear. Her street smarts had provided a way of survival and earned her a prime living, but not only that, they had provided a life. A life of hopes and dreams where she wasn’t begging for scraps. With one snap of the countess’s bony fingers, it could all end.

If Esme didn’t find that tiara . . . How she wished to slip away and never deal with the old woman again, but she wasn’t foolish enough to pull such a stunt with the countess. Not when the shadow by the door stepped into the light and took the form of a hulking man with a gun and a long, silken cord strapped beneath

the immaculate cut of his suit jacket.

Esme smoothed the front of her dress to cover the shaking of her hands. “No need to escort me, darling.” She breezed out the hotel room door that Pirazzo held open for her. “I know the way.”

“You better find it, Miss Fox.” He stood at the door, immovable as a mountain, his dark eyes following her down the hallway. Having worked as Countess Accardi’s bodyguard for years, he was not a man to be crossed. “But if you don’t, I’ll enjoy showing you how tight a silk rope can cinch.”

Ice skittered through her veins despite the warm night air. She covered the alarming sensation by waving over her shoulder. “Work on your sweet talk, Razz. That’s no way to get a girl.”

After rounding the corner, she slipped into the elevator and took a deep breath to calm her racing heart.

“Floor, mademoiselle?” the operator politely asked as he shut the cage doors and hovered a white-gloved hand over the operating handle.

“Three—no, lobby, s’il vous plaît.” As much as her silk sheets and a hot bath called to her, so much more did a strong drink to shake the tremor from her bones. Never had she been threatened with Pirazzo’s particular talents in all the time she had worked with the countess, but this tiara seemed to have everyone in a bother. The sooner she found it, the better. Straightaway after that drink.

At ground level she stepped off the elevator and into the lobby, which put the title Grand Hotel into perspective. Designed to invoke the Belle Époque, the room boasted marble pillars, pale-green and white walls with gold trim, cascading chandeliers, and painted frescos. Fresh flowers blossoming in glazed pots perfumed

the air with sweetness as the salty evening breeze spilled through the dozens of open doors leading to the terrace and beyond, the midnight blue of the Mediterranean.

Esme's heels ticked across the marble floor, drawing stares from hotel guests lounging on the swanky couches and chairs. She kept her gaze forward, her head tilted, knowing the striking image she displayed in her svelte black-and-ivory gown and sleek bob. It wasn't vanity, merely truth. Above-average height made a girl stand out no matter her surroundings, so she'd decided long ago to embrace it and never looked back. Or down, as it were.

She glided into the cool recess of the bar, slid onto a barstool, and ordered a Gin Rickey with double lime wedges. It was that kind of night. The muscles strained along her shoulders and back from carrying the weight of those wings despite the sense of awe they had imbued her with. It wasn't everyday she took on the role of a mythological warriorress, but she could certainly see the appeal of such power.

"Here you are, mademoiselle." The bartender placed a tall glass filled with ice and pleasure in front of her.

She slid a generous tip across the bar. "*Merci.*" As she took a long sip, the refreshing blend of gin, lime, and soda water glided down her throat in an explosion of sparkly bubbles that melted her cares away.

A gentle breeze kissed the exposed skin of her back where her dress dipped dangerously low. Turning on the stool, she surveyed the intimate clustering of small tables and chairs, column-lined walls interspersed with towering palm trees, and the stained glass domed ceiling. The entire back wall had been opened to a terrace that extended the space to outdoor seating where most of the crowd was gathered to listen to a band.

“Good band.”

Esme jumped, catching her drink just in time, and swiveled to face the man who had appeared on the barstool next to her. She covered her surprise with a cool smile.

“Jasper. Fancy seeing you here.”

“A notch above many of the holes I’ve stayed in.”

“Oh?” My, that black jacket and tie was the perfect touch for his charming smile. She took another sip for composure, but this time the fizzing bubbles were more frenzied than refreshing. “Are you staying here?”

“I came for you.” He met her gaze straight on. Confident and decisive with none of that wishy-washy uncertainty too many men employed. It was one of the traits she had found most intoxicating about him during their whirlwind courtship. He was a man who knew what he wanted, and he had wanted her. The thought had made her dizzy with desire. Even now, her heart gave a little twirl. But she had been drunk on champagne and the victory of war then. There was no excuse now to trap herself into commitment. Not when relationships were as reliable as candy floss in the rain.

Seeing him again at the party had been unexpected, to say the least, and terrifying at the very most. The man she had raced to stand before a priest and raced even faster to the nearest hotel, only to sneak out in the morning without a word. Without a reason offered to him—her husband.

She had stood in that garden tonight arrayed in a warrior-ess’s finest and waited for him to slash her with accusations and anger. All of which she deserved for her cowardly abandonment, but she had again stepped into her customary retreat of leaving before the other person left her.



She had wronged him by saying yes in the first place, but it was a mistake she was set to rectify. In the meantime she would enjoy returning his gaze, as handsome men were difficult to come by these days. “However did you find me?”

“I followed the trail of feathers.”

“I wasn’t wearing any feathers when I came here. Remember, you assisted me in removing them?”

He plucked a delicate feather from his front jacket pocket and twirled it between his fingers. Tan, long, and masculine. The feather was but a white blur between them.

“Oh, I remember.” That bronzed stare again.

Esme sipped her drink to cool the molten yearning swaying in her belly. “So you followed me?”

“Let’s just say I’m rather good at locating things.”

“To what purpose?”

“I figure we have a few things unsettled between us, and I hate loose ends.” He released the feather and it floated to the polished floor between them.

“Such as our marriage,” Esme said.

“To state the obvious.”

“A divorce would tie that up nicely.” Best to cut him off quickly in case he had the dastardly idea of attempting marital bliss. Or worse, trying to force her to it.

“It would.”

The knotted ball of anxiety in the pit of her stomach eased. Good. He didn’t entertain illusions of shoving a wedding ring back on her finger. This might turn into the most amicable breakup of the age.

He signaled to the bartender and ordered a scotch, neat. The bartender poured the amber liquid into a squat glass and shot it

down the wood bar where Jasper caught it deftly in one hand. Passing the glass beneath his nose, he inhaled deeply and sipped.

He had a strong profile, the kind that turned a woman's head. Cut jaw with the faint darkness of end-of-day stubble. Straight eyebrows with just the right amount of thickness. Aquiline nose hovering above perfectly molded lips, the bottom slightly fuller than the top. And those golden-brown curls that urged her to tousle them into unruly bits. The way she had last seen them flopped over his forehead while he slept.

"Like what you see?" He swirled his glass.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Propping her elbow on the counter, she cupped her chin and settled in for a proper appreciation. If she was going to set him free, she might as well drink her fill now. "You look different out of uniform and sepia tones. I've always thought that if a man can't don a uniform, then he should be in evening wear. Rather dashing, the looks, and no better way to get a woman's heart thumping."

"You told me music does that too. I remember dancing in the Place de la Concorde when a brass band paraded down the Champs-Élysées an hour or so after armistice was announced."

She smiled. A happy day it was after four long years of mud, blood, and death. Laughter and music had filled the air. Jasper had taken her in his arms and not let go. She had not protested. "They played 'Daisy Bell.'"

The band on the terrace glided into a jazzy tune with swinging notes and a hot trumpet that melted through the salty night air.

"Would you care to dance?" A dimple flashing in his right cheek, Jasper stood and held out his hand.

Her fingers flittered out to grasp his, but then pulled back.

She had one too many strings with this man, and it was best not to tie any more. “My pins ache after balancing those wings tonight. Another time perhaps.”

With a gentlemanly incline of his head, he settled back onto his barstool and lifted the glass to his lips. Two sips, as if he was rationing them.

“It was quite the frenzy tonight after you ducked out. Madame Rothschild was beside herself when the tiara couldn’t be found.”

The knot in her belly clenched again. She ignored it with a lift of her eyebrows. “It’s missing? Oh, poor Madame Rothschild! To have the showpiece of her charity event disappear is horrible indeed.” She rubbed her temples. “It was giving me such the headache that I needed to take it off. I returned it inside the villa where the models had dressed. There were jewelers waiting with secure cases to return the items to their proper owners or new buyers. After I took off the tiara and placed it on a velvet tray, the man put it in his case and locked it tight. I can’t imagine what became of it after that.” She shook her head in sympathy. Or what she imagined was sympathy since taking from the rich had never burdened her. “I do hope they find it. Such a magnificent piece.”

“So the crowd believed.” Meeting her eyes over the rim of his glass, he drained it dry.

That was quite enough of that topic for the evening. In fact, his inquisitive brown eyes were far too direct for her peace of mind, particularly during the evening.

Uncrossing her legs, she slid off the barstool and summoned a petite yawn. “Well, this has been enjoyable, but I’m afraid the night’s activities are catching up to me. Are you in town long? Perhaps we can do brunch and iron out the wrinkles for a di-

voice. It's really for the best. Well, good night, darling."

She forced her pace to remain sedate as she left the bar and crossed the lobby to the elevator when all she wanted to do was tear toward the nearest exit. Jasper put her in a tailspin and if she wasn't prudent, she would nosedive straight into destruction. A fate she had sensibly avoided since birth. No strings. No commitments. No heartbreak.

The elevator doors opened and out stepped Pirazzo. He dipped his oiled head in acknowledgment. "Thought I would find you at the bar."

"You only just missed me." She moved to step around him, but he placed a heavy hand on her arm. The alarming ice from earlier that she had managed to melt in her drink came rushing back to freeze her insides.

"Do not act so glib, Miss Fox. The countess grows impatient."

Esme nodded calmly as if in perfect agreement and reached to smooth the dark hairs behind her ear, effectively dislodging his meat hook from her arm. "I'm doing my best. Tonight was a minor setback, nothing more. Tomorrow I start a new search, and before long I'll return, prize in hand."

"It is in the best interest of your neck if you do. Something so *bellissima* should not be broken, but your necklace . . ." his eyes dropped to her rope of pearls. "Should we see how many times it can loop around your neck? White pearls against the blue and purple of your face as they cinch tighter?"

Her throat constricted. "Purple has never been my color," she said hoarsely.

"We leave tomorrow for Milan. Contact us there when you have it. And not before. Here. You forgot your bag upstairs." He handed her the black velvet clutch and stepped back into the ele-

vator. The gun flashed beneath his jacket. “Going up?”

Shaking her head, she backed away. “I’ll take the stairs. Stretch my legs.” How odd her legs were becoming the most convenient excuse for avoiding awkward situations. “*Grazie* for the purse.” *And the ever-increasing threats on my neck.*

She would not dwell on the bad. Not only did it spoil her mood, but it slowed her down, and if there was anything of value to a truly talented thief it was quickness. Once this tiara—the real one—was secured, she could hand it off in exchange for payment and skedaddle, leaving the countess and her beast in the dust for good.

The hotel stairs were a marvel. White marble with thin pink veins running through its creaminess and a gold runner sweeping up the center. Lady hotel guests were known to use it simply so they could sway dramatically while the enthralled lobby looked on. Esme had done it once or twice herself for her own amusement, but this time she rushed past the women posing in their finery to the third floor where the bustling sounds faded away into a long hallway with lush palms and bright white doors with brass numbers. Hers was all the way at the end.

“Are you going to follow me all night?” She turned at the sound of hushed footsteps several paces behind her.

Hands in pockets, Jasper grinned at her, the dimple digging deep into his cheek. “Isn’t that what all ladies desire? A man trailing her.”

“Not this lady.” Flirting was all well and good in a darkened garden and bar, but near her room was quite another matter. “I understand we are still legally married; however, I intend to enter my room alone. Apologies if this upsets your marital intentions, but as we have not been living as man and wife, you can hardly

expect otherwise.”

“It may interest you to know—instead of assuming—that I’m not here for that.”

She ignored the slight flag of disappointment. “Oh?”

He closed the space between them. “Why were you talking to that man?”

Her disappointment sallied into amused irritation. “I never pictured you for the jealous type.” Turning on her heel, she continued down the hall. “It doesn’t do you justice.”

“A confident man need not dabble in jealousy,” he said, following. “Unless it’s something worth his attention.”

“Ouch.”

“Nothing you should take personal. After all, you’re not really my wife, are you?”

Clever. She’d forgotten that about him. A smile tugged at her lips as she pulled her room key from her purse. “Then what are you here for? In the bar you claimed to be looking for me, but now you claim I’m not worth your attention. Do make up your mind, darling. You make a girl dizzy.” Stopping at her door, she inserted the key.

“The man. What did he want with you?”

“I really don’t think that is any of your business. Estranged husband or not—”

His hand shot past her, twisted the key, and opened the door. He’d shuffled her inside before she could blink. Stepping in behind her, he closed the door and locked it.

She took a step back into the sudden darkness that flooded them. “Now just a minute. I made it perfectly clear that this is *my* room alone. You cannot barge in here—”

He whirled on her so quickly she was forced to take another

step back.

“Gio Pirazzo is a hired thug. A torpedo. His business is strong-arming people to do as his employer says, and if they don’t deliver as promised, Pirazzo blips them off. Dead.” He didn’t move from the door, but he seemed to soak up all the air in the room. “Tell me truthfully, what are your dealings with him, or rather, his employer?”

She crossed the room and switched on a table lamp. Golden light spilled across the softly colored sitting space. Tossing her purse on the low-slung couch, she poured herself a glass of water from the decanter on the side table before easing into a wicker chair as her mind spun for a reason plausible enough for him to believe while getting him out the door as quickly as possible.

“As I told you, I’ve been modeling. His employer is an eccentric artist who wishes me to try on her latest creations.” A lie was best when it stuck close to the truth. “I have no idea or interest in the security she hires.”

“Nor the type of jeweler, I suspect.”

“This artist does have expensive tastes.”

“Ones that run to the black market it seems.” He was watching her entirely too closely.

She draped her arm over the back of the chair. Languid, cool, precisely as her actress mother had shown her, and completely opposite to the knot of panic tying up her chest. “Whatever do you mean?”

He gave a dry laugh and strolled over to the couch, dropping the room key next to her purse. “You’ll forgive me, but this has been a rather odd night. First, seeing you again. Imagine, putting a ring on a woman’s finger and then four years later discovering her strolling down a pond with wings and a tiara—a tiara that

winds up missing. Then, the same night, you see a notorious hit man and a jeweler who is known to take bribes for ascertaining pieces and their value on the black market.” Perching on the arm of the couch, he loosened the black tie from his throat. “The Valkyrie tiara is worth a small fortune. On the black market it could fetch triple its originally commissioned price.”

She shuddered on cue. “The black market, what a horrid thought.”

“It would be if the tiara from tonight wasn’t a fake.” Tie loosened, he slipped the first button of his shirt free. “But you didn’t know that, did you? Not until you brought it to this so-called artist and her bribed jeweler.”

“How did you know it was a fake?”

“Because I’m hunting the real one. Same as you.”

Esme’s mouth dropped open to a very unrefined O. Not much in life surprised her after watching every possible scenario play out on London’s East End stages, and even more backstage as a child, but this took the cake. While Mimsy—the name her mother preferred as she refused to be called anything as horrid as mum—taught her there was always another act to play, Esme was quick enough to realize when it was time for the curtain to close on a performance.

Closing her mouth, she dropped the doe-eyed innocence. “Very well. I’m a jewel thief if you must know. The best, in fact.”

“I beg to differ. Have you ever heard of the Phantom?”

“I take it that’s you. An impressive resume you have. Paintings from the Musée d’Orsay, artifacts from Cairo, diamonds from the throat of a duchess. I heard you seduced her in her husband’s opera box during the second act of *Don Giovanni*.”

“Intermission actually, and it was a bauble she hardly missed,



considering the duke was at the time sailing on his yacht with his mistress.”

The absurdity of it all. Esme laughed. “Well, this is a pretty pickle if there ever was one. Two thieves. One tiara. Which of us will claim the prize?”

“Depends on who is better at tracking down leads.”

“And those would be?”

He matched her laugh. “What kind of thief would I be if I offered that information to my competition? No matter how beautiful she is.”

Charming, handsome, and flirtatious. She saw right through it. “You don’t know where the real one is.”

He shrugged as if that made little difference to the outcome. “I will soon enough.”

If anything was more mesmerizing than a man’s confidence, she had yet to find it. Standing, she arched her back against the aching muscles. Who knew feathered wings were so heavy?

“Make yourself a drink. I’m going to kick my shoes off. When I return we can discuss location possibilities for the tiara. I’d like to imagine it’s locked in a Swiss bank. I’ve always wanted to try breaking into one. A girl needs a challenge from time to time.”

He gave her that secret smile again, the one that offered a glimpse of his amusement while coyly hiding his thoughts. “May I use your telephone while I wait?”

“Of course. It’s just there.” She pointed to the piece sitting on a low table next to the window before gathering her purse and walking into the separate bedchamber and closing the door behind her. Sinking onto the fluffy bed piled high with pillows, she let out a lengthy but quiet sigh. How many more ways could this evening go bottom-up?

Jasper's voice rumbled through the door as she kicked off her shoes and unhooked her stockings from their silky garter straps, then draped them carefully over the foot of the bed. Having spent the war years in a starched nurse's uniform and rationed cotton stockings, she would never take for granted the luxury of pure French silk. Though, to be fair, she wasn't a true nurse, not in the way those sour old matrons in white wimples were, but she did volunteer at the hospital changing sheets, rolling bandages, and reading to the soldiers as the task demanded. She didn't care much for the sight of blood, but king and country called, and she'd answered like the rest of the womenfolk left behind. It was either that or take to the stage like Mimsy suggested, for the boys. Oh, there was no losing one's knickers or hip swiveling in those places, although one girl did split her pantaloons after a dizzying number of cartwheels down the center aisle. Tickets sold out for weeks afterward in hopes she would do it again.

Behind all the glitz and glamour of the lighting, costumes, and music, Esme had grown up seeing the cracks and the weariness such a life put on the soul. Premature wrinkles cracking makeup. Graying dirty hair stuffed under wigs. Smiles that dropped as soon as they stepped backstage. They only time those actors and actresses felt alive was on the stage. Everything else was a disappointment as they survived from one performance to the next. Esme never wanted to live like that. She wanted to set her own terms of comfort and so she had. One stolen diamond at a time.

Now she was after the biggest prize of her life, only to run smack dab into the man she had been avoiding for four years. She flopped back on the bed and stared at the gilded sea creatures chasing one another around on the ceiling. What was she to do

about Jasper? Not get distracted from the tiara by his charming smile, that's what.

*Excellent plan, Esme. Men were for flirting, not keeping. Now, what about the tiara?* She frowned at a particularly lascivious starfish who watched the ceiling chase from his painted corner with voyeuristic pleasure. *Well, for starters—*

The front door opened.

She bolted upright on the bed. Had Jasper left?

No, a second male voice entered the room followed by the door shutting. What sort of high-handed game was he playing by inviting visitors into her private hotel room? She marched to the door and prepared to fling it open in dramatic fashion when the stranger's excited voice stopped her cold.

*"Valkyrie. New lead. Train tomorrow."*

She dropped her hand from the doorknob and pressed her ear against the door to listen.



3

JASPER CLOSED THE DOOR BEHIND Mond. “Keep your voice down.”

“Afraid of your *wife* overhearing?” Mond’s eyebrows twitched at the closed bedroom door.

Jasper crossed the room and switched on the wireless. Music drifted out that sounded close to what the band played downstairs. “Of anyone hearing.”

“What, your surprise reunion not copacetic?” Mond strolled around the room, taking in the opulent surroundings with an assessing eye. “Being in her hotel room is a promising start.”

Jasper had come close to not finding her at all. Luckily, one of the cabbies at Madame Rothschild’s overheard where Esme instructed her driver to take her. Jasper had arrived not five minutes behind his fleeing bride.

“It would be a promising start if she wasn’t the one who stole the tiara from the party.”

Mond’s brow wrinkled in surprise. “That does put an interesting spin on things.” His brow dropped. “With this kind of

hush-hush information we should have met downstairs, not have it out with the competition a wall away.”

“I would have joined you in the bar, but there’s a hitman running loose and if he overhears us discussing the tiara we’re likely to end up as fish bait. Besides, the lady has a habit of slipping the hook and I doubt she would allow me in here a second time. I have a few wrinkles to iron out with her before putting this marriage out of its misery, but first I need to know what else you’ve found out.”

Jasper dropped into the chair Esme had previously sat in and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. In this line of work one was forced to adapt quickly while navigating the unexpected twists and turns with practiced ease. Of course, one never expected their estranged spouse to get one up on them.

Settling onto the couch across from him, Mond struck a cigarette and inhaled, streaming the smoke through his nose. “After you hurriedly informed me that the tiara was a fake and rudely rushed out of a perfectly good party, I made a few discreet inquiries.” In other words he spoke to his reputable contacts who dealt in ill-reputable trade. “The recent release of this incredible tiara is shrouded in mystery and has quiet the collector enthusiasts shivering with delight at the prospect of obtaining it.”

Thirty years ago the Valkyrie, the real one, had disappeared from public view with Duke hinting at having sold it after his wife died. Too sad a memory to keep, he’d claimed. Then two months ago a whisper had reached Duke that the tiara had resurfaced. The news sent him into a desperate tizzy, ordering Jasper, newly released from jail, after it. Who better than his bastard grandson and pinnacle of all thieves to retrieve the family crown?

When Jasper had questioned Duke why he suddenly wished

to have the tiara again after selling it, Duke rambled on about not being in his right mind due to grief all those years ago and that time had allowed him to find sentimental value in the piece. The tiara was a Roxburgh heirloom and belonged in Roxburgh hands. Perhaps that was why Duke trusted Jasper to fetch it—to prove himself a true Roxburgh and not some shameful family secret, someone worth welcoming into the fold.

“A new whisper arose from Venice,” Mond continued. “A collector of the rare and beautiful has a shop near Ponte delle Tette. Signor Campano. He doesn’t like parting with his collection unless the offer is well over asking price, so be generous.”

“Generous is for those intending to pay,” Jasper countered.

“Be that as it may, dealing with Campano is likened to peeling a turtle from its shell.”

“I’ve dealt with my fair share of turtles.” Jasper’s gaze slid to the bedroom door. *Minxes too.*

“So you’ll be off then?”

“First thing in the morning I’ll catch the train out. I’ll stay at my usual haunt if you need to get in touch with me.”

“And, ah . . .” Mond grinned, smoke curling from his mouth. “Until morning?”

“Make divorce arrangements, it seems.” At Mond’s look of confusion, Jasper settled back to explain—though what he was trying to explain was still foggy to him.

“We married in the craze of a celebration. Passions were high and we didn’t think beyond the next sunrise and were fueled by a great quantity of champagne. Having gone into war and come out the other side alive, I figured the next best thing to survival was finding love. Well, I was young and foolish and captivated by a pair of blue eyes.”

“A mistake from the beginning.”

He'd not thought so at the time. Imagining settling down to wife and home, all of which he could claim for his own. As a bastard, nothing had been his own. Not even his last name as Duke had forbidden all of his illegitimates—of which there were many—from using it. Douglas, Jasper's father and Duke's only son, had chosen their surname from a favored box of cigarettes.

“Why did you never tell me?” Mond asked.

“And say what? After a whirlwind of passion my bride left me mere hours after I placed a ring on her finger? Better to swallow the shot to my pride alone.”

“Sometimes I think that's all women know how to do. Break hearts.”

“Never said my heart was broken.” Cracked, perhaps, but still mostly intact. Jasper pushed the thought aside as he had numerous times over the past four years, and stood.

“Thank you for the information about the tiara. I'll let you know when I arrive, but in the meantime I'm sure you'd like to jaunt down to the bar where I noted no less than six blondes.”

Mond settled more comfortably into the couch and propped his ankle atop his opposite knee as he lit a fresh cigarette.

“All in due time, but not until I meet the mysterious Mrs. Truitt. The only woman who managed to snag and then leave in the dust the most sought-after playboy north and south of the English Channel.”

Jasper knew from experience that once his friend got that look there was no chance of getting rid of him until he was appeased. Even if it meant putting off talking to his wife in private. Crossing the room, he knocked softly on the bedroom door.

“Esme? Might you come out here for a moment? There's

someone I'd like to introduce you to."

No answer.

He knocked again. "Esme?"

When no answer came, he cracked open the door and stuck his head inside. "Apologies for disturbing you, but—"

The room was empty. He swung the door open. The bathroom was dark and the chest of drawers gaped open. As did the window.

He rushed over and thrust his head out to find two silk sheets tied together to form a rope, one end hooked to the bed's headboard while the other dangled a few feet over the grass.

Laughter took hold. Deep and unbelieving, it smothered the curse struggling to fly loose.

That woman. Gone again.



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Bryan Ciesielski

Bestselling author with a passion for heart-stopping adventure and sweeping love stories, J'nell Ciesielski weaves fresh takes into romances of times gone by. When not creating dashing heroes and daring heroines, she can be found dreaming of Scotland, indulging in chocolate of any kind, or watching old black-and-white movies. She is a Florida native who now lives in Virginia with her husband, daughter, and lazy beagle.



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