

AN UNLIKELY ARRANGEMENT

Chapter One

January 1929

The voices continued ... muffled, no matter how hard her ear pressed against the thick, wooden door. *Did they say Kirby? Who is Mr. Kirby?* The crisp, winter wind shook the windowpanes, but the gooseflesh rippling on her young flesh was not a result of the cold. She pushed hard, away from the oak barrier. "You can't do this to me, Mother. I am seventeen, a grown woman. Let me out." Ruth Squire rattled the lock while her other fist pounded the heavy door. "Do you hear me?"

No answer; she didn't expect one. She was familiar with discipline, plenty of it, the consequence of a strong will and zeal for adventure, but never like this, locked inside the second-story bedroom. Ruth's hands fell to her side. Crazy from confinement, she paced, a lioness caught in a cage.

"What is she going to do to me this time? Even Father won't talk to me." The metal springs of the bed squawked in protest at her weight. Sprawled across the rumpled bedcover she stared at the only link to the outside world. The flicker of the gas street lamp outside the warbled glass window did nothing to soothe her.

Although...No, not the window, that is how I got in trouble in the first place.

Alone against the world, everyone gone—her best friend Ginny, Father, and worse, she had made an enemy of Mother. Instead of rage and exasperation, her mother remained calm, determined—even sinister. "This side of her is something to fear, I believe."

The growl in her stomach intensified, and thirst ravaged her throat. *What time is it? Do they intend to keep me in here until morning with no food or drink?* A key rattled in the lock, and she jumped up as the door swung open.

Priscilla and Robert Squire entered bearing a white linen-covered tray. "You will eat now, Ruth. We'll talk after you have finished."

“I’m not hungry, take it away.” Ruth’s stomach lurched at the look on her father’s face. His sad blue eyes showed no sign of the familiar, easy smile of assurance. Although he stood taller, he wilted beside his wife, a shadow of a man. One hand smoothed his peppered hair; the other jingled the change in his pocket.

The tray hit the nightstand with a bang. “There is no room for argument. I said eat.” Mrs. Squire crossed her arms against an ample bosom.

Ruth looked to her father for help, but he only sighed, and took a seat in the chair across from her.

The warm aroma of cook’s scones broke down any defiance, and her fists unclenched, although she continued to glare at both parents. She eased onto the side of the bed, hesitant, eyes on the enemy, and devoured the light, flaky scones, and warm tea in short order. The back of her hand swiped across her mouth, a move she knew Mother would abhor, and swallowed the last of the tea in one gulp.

“We have done our best to lead you on the right path. This was your last chance and now it’s time for desperate measures,” Mrs. Squire said.

“I wanted to have a little fun, Mother. All young people like to dance.” The attempt to wiggle out of trouble would prove futile, but she tried anyway. “I’m not interested in the other children, or the fact you value fun over responsible behavior. You are not yet eighteen, and you will not spoil my plans to have you properly married one day with a family of your own.”

Ruth tossed her short black hair and poked out her chin before she spoke. “Marriage? I want to have fun, go places, and see the world. I don’t want to be like you.”

The pop of the slap resounded through the room. Ruth reeled backwards, held her hand to one burning cheek, and blinked in horror.

Though not tall, Priscilla Squire stood strong and broad, a stout woman, in a dark blue, shapeless dress and sensible shoes. Long, streaked, gray hair pulled back into a bun and faded, lackluster brown eyes completed the severe look.

Father sunk lower in the chair and shuddered. Mother rubbed the palm of her hand and strode toward the door...Father slinking after her like a cowed puppy. "Come morning you will have the run of the house, although Sarah's duties tomorrow include sentry and keeper of the keys. Don't try to leave, Ruth. We have arrangements to make in the morning. Now sleep."

The perfunctory remarks stunned her. "Arrangements? What arrangements? Father, what is she talking about?"

The slam of the door and turn of the key sealed her fate. *Unless...Can I get a message to my friends, Danny or Ellen? They probably wonder why I didn't show tonight. Excitement made me careless. I'll try to call in the morning. Maybe one of them will come and help me escape.*

Exhaustion took over. She curled up on the bed and cried until an uneasy sleep overtook her weary body. The jangle of the key in the lock woke her at the murky, black hour before dawn. A slow, steady throb pulsed in her head. She sat up, tried to shake the sluggish daze from her brain, and waited. *Maybe I can talk to them now. Tell them I'm sorry. Surely, they will be reasonable this morning.*

No one entered. She slipped out of bed and tried the knob. The door opened at a touch. She quickly threw on a robe and ventured into the hallway. The stairs creaked and threatened to announce her cautious escape. A quick search of the house soon confirmed her parents' absence, but she found the little Irish maid alone in the laundry room. Sarah O'Brien administered her duties flawlessly and had ever since Ruth could remember. A fixture in the family, Ruth did not consider her a servant, but a long-standing friend and confidant.

"Good morning, Sarah. So, they're gone? This time it must be serious." She waited: Sarah didn't respond. "There's nothing to do but wait in my room, I guess. That's where I'll be if you need me."

The diminutive maid continued folding the linen napkins. "Breakfast's gettin' cold in the kitchen. It'll ruin afore long."

"I'm not hungry yet, and I cannot spend the day in my robe and slippers." She hurried up the stairs, slipped into the bedroom, and closed the door. It took only a moment to pull the cotton day dress

over her head and kick off the satin slippers. She opened the door a crack to make sure Sarah had not followed, took a deep breath, and tiptoed down the hall to Mother's private sanctuary—a room forbidden to her. Once inside, her eyes adjusted to the dim light. "It smells of violets in here—such a feminine scent for my stodgy old mother. What a surprise. I wonder what else I will find. Ah, the window. Should I climb down the trellis?" In three strides, she reached the window. A quick tug of the sash and all hope dissolved. It would not budge. "Now what?" She glanced around. "I don't see the telephone anywhere, either."

Across the room, the clear glass knob on the closet door twinkled in invitation. "Naturally, the closet, a perfect hiding place." She stepped into the dark, cavern-like wardrobe. Before she found the light, the creak of a door opening frightened her. Footsteps echoed on the wooden floor.

"Ruthie Squire what in the name of everything holy are you doin'? Have you got a death wish, child? Your mum does not even let your papa in here. Come out this instant."

"All right, Sarah, I'm coming. Where did they go, by the way? They tell you everything."

"You know I cannot tell you. They would fire me for sure. Breakfast is awaitin'. Come down to the kitchen."

The temptation to trick Sarah, slam the door shut, and lock it crossed her mind. She studied the back of Sarah's head, haloed by short, blonde hair, and followed her down the stairs. It would not be fair to this woman, a friend for seventeen years. Mother would fire her. "You are right. She is a ruthless woman."

"Oh child, she's protectin' ya, is all."

"You can say what you want. You are not the one choked to death by her rules."

Sarah looked up from the bottom landing. "I live by them, too, girlie. Different ones, to be sure, but rules all the same, and they protect my job here. One day you will learn it for yourself."

"Are you going to lecture me all day or get my breakfast, Sarah O'Brien?"

“Thought you weren’t hungry, girl. At any rate, your breakfast is already made, and I’ll be thankin’ ya to watch your tongue, or we will be addin’ another crime to your long list.”

“All right, all right, I’m coming.”

After a quick breakfast, she thought again of the telephone, but the candlestick device continued to elude her. Mother kept constant guard on it. Father’s office stayed locked. She was sure it was in the forbidden closet. Discouraged, one hand followed the smooth wood of the stair’s banister back to her room. *How do I get inside Mother’s room without Sarah knowing?* The afternoon passed slowly as she contemplated different scenarios of punishment until, exhausted, she plopped onto the vanity chair, grabbed her brush, and brooded over what loomed ahead of her. “Probably boarding school.”

Her fingers dipped into a small pot of rouge, the one indulgence Mother allowed. “Maybe I will make myself up like a clown. They would kick me out of the stupid old boarding school right off.” Her laughter filled the room. “If Mother wasn’t such an old tyrant I would wear lip paint.” She applied the correct amount on both cheeks, enough to give a rosy glow. “I look too young in this brown frock. Let me see...if I pull my hair back like so—yes, much better. I could pass for twenty instead of a mere seventeen.”

“It is good to see you making use of your time, Ruthie.”

The flimsy chair toppled as she jumped to her feet. “Mother, I didn’t hear you come home.”

“Prepare yourself for company. I will send Sarah up to help.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed—a clear warning.

“Please tell me...” Frozen, she watched her mother’s ramrod straight back stiffen, but continue out of the room.

The maid appeared in the empty doorway. “Who is it, Sarah? Who is coming?”

Sarah entered the room, picked up the tortoise-shell hairbrush, and began grooming Ruth’s hair. The housekeeper worked in silence, the brush rough against Ruth’s scalp. The sound of horse’s hooves on

cobblestone and a high-pitched whinny interrupted the two women. Ruth escaped Sarah's grasp and peered through the upstairs window.

"Why is a horse-drawn milk truck parked in the alley? Sarah?" She looked over her shoulder, but the room was empty. *Sarah has turned traitor, too.* Drawn to the scene below, she peered at the sight below. "Why would a headmaster drive a milk wagon?"

The front door's brass knocker reverberated through the house. *My fate has arrived.* The voices enticed her into the hallway to listen.

"Please wait in the drawing room, Mr. Kirby. Our daughter will be down soon." Mother's voice sounded strangely light and friendly.

"Mr. Kirby?" She scurried back to the bedroom determined not to come out. A knock on the door startled her and she sat hard onto the bed, heart pounding.

Her mother swept into the room—all business. "Sarah has prepared the green dress. It is more suitable for receiving visitors. Change and be downstairs in fifteen minutes, not a moment longer."

"Who is Mr. Kirby?"

"If you want to find out you best hurry." Mrs. Squire left the room without further comment.

Alone, Ruth stared at the empty doorway. In the next instant, Sarah appeared—the freshly brushed green satin in her hand. Neither woman spoke as the homespun cotton fell to the floor. Ruth stood woodenly as Sarah pulled the green dress over her head and fastened the intricate buttons.

After a final adjustment, Sarah gave a gentle push at the small of Ruth's back. "Come on, dearie. It's not as bad as all that. Go on now, I'm right behind ya."

Tears threatened to spill over the rims of her eyes as she moved forward on leaden legs.

The conversation in the parlor sounded polite, friendly. The familiar creak of the stairs announced her approach, and her parents turned in tandem to welcome her. The parlor was a favorite room. Ornate Cherrywood framed the forest green velvet sofa, a cozy place to curl up and read. Colorful flowered globes sat atop the twin oil lamps and each graced the matching end tables. Heavy, dark green drapes kept

the warm afternoon sun at bay. In the corner on the settee, next to the glassed bookshelves, sat a man she thought looked too young to be a headmaster of anything, much less a school full of young women.

He stood and removed his hat, exposing sandy blond hair, bright blue eyes, a strong chin, and easy grin. "Ruth, please greet Mr. Peter Kirby. Mr. Kirby, this is our daughter, Ruth." Mother smiled. "Mr. Kirby has agreed to marry you. The ceremony will be next week in the family church."