

A  
GAME  
Most  
FOUL

ALISON GERVAIS



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*A Game Most Foul*

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*For Maya and Grace,  
my reason for everything.*



## PROLOGUE

The man kept his head down as he walked swiftly across the old cobblestone sidewalk, an icy chill that had nothing to do with the weather settling deep into his bones. The setting sun was beginning to cast eerie shadows along the row of houses lining the street and the man quickened his pace, pulling his coat more tightly around himself.

He was intimately familiar with these streets. At one point in time, he had called them home. In that moment, he longed to be somewhere else—*anywhere* else. He couldn't recall the last time he'd walked these streets without feeling as if someone was breathing down his neck, watching his movements around every corner . . . as if they knew the secrets he carried.

No, it had been quite some time since the man was happy to be in London. So, the offer of part-time employment had been unexpected but flattering. The man had never considered himself a teacher, but perhaps this was fate's way of offering a much-needed change of pace. Perhaps this could be a new chapter for the *both* of them—the man and his well-kept secret.

"*Blast!*" the man muttered to himself as he sidestepped a fallen dustbin in the street.

*He* would still be awake in their cramped flat above the old pub, waiting for the man's arrival no doubt, in the chintz armchair strategically placed in front of the window. Still in the



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same dressing gown from a few days ago, hair unkempt with a glass of brandy in hand, reeking of pipe tobacco.

The man found himself wondering yet again how it had all come to *this*, and he stopped suddenly, pressing a fist against the sudden ache in his chest.

The fresh wave of guilt brought with it a suffocating feeling, intense enough to nearly rip the air from his lungs. What had the man been thinking, that he could leave him alone for hours at a time? That he would be well enough to look after himself without stumbling into trouble or some kind of danger?

*But he's perfectly capable of taking care of himself*, the man tried to tell himself. *At least physically. He's been doing it for over a century...*

Still, the man's reasoning didn't completely erase the feelings of guilt or worry. He didn't think he would ever stop worrying.

The man did his best to shake himself from his stupor as he set off down the street again. By the time he'd reached The Bronze Archer pub, he'd almost convinced himself that all he needed was a strong cup of tea and perhaps a good book to sink his teeth into and all would be right again.

The man paused in the doorway of the pub's rear entrance, clutching the key to his flat so tightly his knuckles turned white. The raised hair on the nape of his neck, the icy sliver of fear causing his gut to constrict, were no stranger to him.

He tried to sneak a look over his shoulder as surreptitiously as possible. The street was empty. The only noise came from a few rowdy patrons in The Bronze Archer. The man stood in the doorway for a moment longer, eyes sweeping up and down the street for any sign of life—any sign that someone was watching him.

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The man finally gave a disgusted scoff and stepped inside, slamming the door shut behind him. Must he deal with crippling worry *and* paranoia?

“Bloody losing my mind,” he grumbled, trying not to stomp his way up the narrow steps to his flat.

All thoughts of the figure shrouded in black that the man had imagined watching his every movement disappeared as he reached his door.

He could hear the sounds of a violin while still outside on the staircase, and the man couldn’t help but smile. It had been a good day then.

He felt himself take his first breath of air that day where he did not feel as if he were suffocating. He’d been worrying for nothing.

He unlocked the door to his flat and slipped inside.

“I’m home.”

The sweet tune from the violin cut short, and a hoarse voice spoke from the darkened corner of the nearby sitting room.

“You took your time, my dear doctor.”

The man scoffed again as he unbuttoned his coat. “I’m not a doctor anymore. I haven’t held a medical license since nineteen ten.”

There was a laugh from the corner. “Once a medical man, always a medical man. Or I suppose,” the voice continued amusingly, “I could call you *professor*.”

The new title still didn’t feel quite right either, but perhaps it would with time.

They would make do. Against all odds, they always had.





# 1



## CHAPTER

# KEEP IT TO YOURSELF

It was an honest reaction to the loud sneeze that came from the man standing ahead of me in the line at customs.

“Oh, bless you.”

The man barely managed a backward glance in my direction; from what I could see of his face before he moved forward, he looked like I’d just told him to pound sand.

I quickly fixed my gaze on my shoes. Did people in London not say *bless you* when someone sneezed? My first half hour in England after a less than thrilling international flight and already I was approaching an anxiety-ridden meltdown. Fantastic.

I checked my cell phone again for the thousandth time, rereading the last text message from my great-aunt Adele.

Just outside customs. Can't wait!

It was a godsend that Adele was putting me up for the summer, I knew that. I never would’ve been able to attend the prestigious summer writing seminar offered by London’s



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Ashford College otherwise. Scrounging up enough to cover the airfare by working at a local deli for the last year had been hard enough on top of juggling graduation requirements.

This was just going to be awkward, sharing a living space with someone I hadn't seen since I was in kindergarten. Awkward, but not *bad*. This was what I was telling myself at least.

When it was finally my turn to approach the customs desk, the guard gave me a quick once-over. "Passport."

I slid my passport across the desk and he flipped it open, holding it up to examine.

"What brings you to London?" he asked without looking away from my passport.

"Visiting family," I answered quickly. "Summer college program."

"Hn."

I started to break out into a cold sweat the longer I stood there, watching the guard inspect my passport.

*There's absolutely nothing wrong with my passport, I kept reminding myself. It's not like I'm a felon or anything. I've never even gotten a parking ticket.*

The guard finally nodded, stamped the darn thing, then slid my passport back across the counter toward me.

I nearly tripped over my feet as I made a break for it out of line, stuffing my passport back into my shoulder bag. One hurdle down—about a million more to go.

The area just outside customs was surprisingly packed for a Sunday afternoon. Another bolt of panic zipped through me as I leaned up on my tiptoes, trying to peer over the heads of the crowd. How was I supposed to find Adele in this mess?

"Over here, Juliet! *Juliet!*"

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I sighed in relief when I finally picked out the elderly woman waving at me through the people milling around, shouting my name. Great-aunt Adele looked a lot older than I remembered, dressed in a pair of khaki capris and a floral button-down, her hair steel gray in color, framing her face in soft waves. She had me in her arms for a hug the moment I reached her.

“Oh, it’s so good to see you, Juliet!”

I tried not to cough as I inhaled too much of her amber perfume. “Uh, Jules, please, if that’s okay. And it’s good to see you too, Aunt Adele.”

Adele leaned away, lightly gripping my shoulders. “Well, in that case, call me Adele.”

“Adele,” I repeated. “Right.”

She smiled, touching a strand of my hair that had come loose from my sloppy ponytail. “My, you’ve certainly grown, haven’t you?”

I struggled to come up with a smile of my own. “I mean, it’s been a while . . .”

“Right, right.” Adele nodded. “The family reunion in Sedona years ago, I remember.” She gestured to my shoulder bag next. “Surely you have more luggage than that?”

“Just one suitcase.”

Adele put an arm around my shoulders, steering me through the crowd toward baggage claim.

Ten seconds later it became obvious Adele wasn’t experiencing the same awkwardness at our reintroduction. She was asking questions left and right, about how my flight was, how my mom and stepdad were doing, if I was looking forward to the first day of the writing seminar tomorrow. Adele apparently loved to talk.

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“Ah, the flight was okay. Food was nothing to write home about,” I told her, quickening my pace to keep up with her surprisingly long strides. “Mom and Roger are doing well. They just bought a new house closer to the university Roger teaches at. And yeah, I’m . . . super excited about the writing seminar.”

It might’ve been more accurate to say I was *scared out of my freaking mind*, but I wasn’t about to share that with Adele.

Ashford wasn’t a very big college, but its summer writing program was renowned. The fact that I’d somehow managed to secure one of six slots available was nothing short of a miracle.

Adele must’ve seen something in my face that let on to just how nervous I actually was; she gave me another friendly squeeze. “You’re going to love London, Jules. And I may not have read any of your writing, but I do know how special this seminar is. I’m sure it’s very well deserved.”

*Well deserved.*

I knew my writing could stand on its own. I’d known from the age of five that writing was what I was *meant to do*. And the never-ending encouragement from my high school creative writing teacher, Mrs. Gutierrez, was the entire reason I’d applied for Ashford’s seminar in the first place. The letter of recommendation from my stepdad Roger, an associate professor of literature, probably hadn’t hurt either.

“Thanks, Adele,” I said. My smile was genuine this time. “I appreciate that.”

I was lucky enough to find my suitcase at the baggage claim without trouble, and then Adele was leading me out of the airport toward the taxi line.

“I try to walk when I can or take the Tube, but I thought you might like to see some of the sights,” Adele said to me as we

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stood in line. “Then we can hit the supermarket just down the road from my flat. Your mother mentioned you’re a big coffee drinker, but all I’ve got is tea right now, I’m afraid.”

“Sure,” I said. “That sounds great. But, uh, just out of curiosity, how much did my mother fill you in on?”

Adele chuckled as a black taxi pulled up to the curb in front of us. “Oh, nothing, really. Mostly about reminding you to keep a packet of hearing aid batteries on you at all times.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying not to groan. “Of course she mentioned that.”

I was still adjusting to the whole hearing aid thing, even if it had been over a year since I got them. I’d never considered my hearing—or lack thereof—a problem until I’d missed the smoke alarms going off at home and nearly burnt the kitchen down trying to make cinnamon rolls.

I wouldn’t deny they came in handy but keeping track of the tiny silver batteries they required was an unexpected pain. It was now a major pet peeve of mine, that little jingle going off in my ears when my hearing aids were about to die, and then the mad scramble to replace the batteries that came next.

Adele climbed into the taxi after me and shut the door, leaning forward to give the driver an address.

I peeked out the window as the taxi took off from the curb. The sky was covered in a thick blanket of gray, threatening rain. From what I could see so far, the buildings and houses were tightly packed together, backyards bleeding into one another.

“Jules?” Adele’s voice abruptly yanked me back into the present. “We’re here.”

I had gotten so lost in taking in the sights that I didn’t even

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realize I'd spent the entire ride with my face more or less pressed against the window.

"Oh, right."

I got unbuckled while Adele paid the fare. The taxi rumbled off after I snagged my suitcase from the back, leaving us on the sidewalk outside a cute little shop painted a faded sky blue. The welcoming sign above the door, written in an elegant cursive, read *Dreams of Antiquity*.

A display of furniture took up most of the space in the shop window—chintz armchairs, a gleaming writing desk, an intricately upholstered sofa.

Antiquing had never been my thing, but this shop made me want to dive headfirst into it.

"It's not much, but this little shop has been a lifelong dream of mine," Adele was saying as she fumbled with a set of keys. "My own mother left behind a comfortable inheritance, and I was able to purchase the space. My flat is just upstairs, and I've got a—"

"Adele, this is *amazing*."

Adele stopped in the process of opening the shop door and turned to look at me, now pleasantly surprised. "Oh."

"Honestly," I insisted. "This is . . . something else. Can we have a look around first before we go upstairs?"

Adele was still smiling as she finished unlocking the door and stepped aside to let me pass through first. "Be my guest, dear."

I hefted my suitcase across the threshold as quickly as I could, eager to see what treasures lay hidden around the shop. The place wasn't that big, and it was definitely old, the smell of books, furniture polish, and a smidge of dust permeating the air.

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Adele instructed me to leave my suitcase by the small table against the far wall where a dated cash register, stacks of receipts, and other papers sat.

I eagerly set off through the shop. Just from the first look I could tell this little antique business had charm. The floral wallpaper, the array of furniture, knickknacks, several bookcases stuffed with old books of varying size.

I loved it all.

The small corner toward the back where an overstuffed armchair sat, a spindly table beside it with a gleaming typewriter perched on top, was what caught me most off guard. The hanging lamp positioned just to the side of the armchair bathed the area in a soft glow, making the space that much more inviting.

I realized this was it. This was *the* writing spot.

Every bit of writing I would do in London—when I wasn't in class, at least—was going to happen right here.

"It doesn't work, I'm afraid."

I jumped at the sound of Adele's voice behind me.

"Sorry, what?" I said once my breathing had returned to normal.

Adele motioned toward the typewriter, looking sheepish. "That Underwood typewriter. It doesn't work. I've spent some time tinkering with it, but I'm no expert. Pretty to look at though, isn't it?"

"I'll say."

Adele was smiling again. She had a nice smile. "What say we get your things upstairs and go pick up some groceries? It'll be time for tea before too long and you've got a big day ahead of you tomorrow."

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“Sorry, what’s tea? I don’t—wait, hold on.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the time; half past four. It took me one long moment to figure out the time difference between London and Monterey, a whole eight hours. It was still early morning in California.

“Oh,” I said, taken aback. “I’d be eating breakfast right about now at home.”

“You’ll adjust,” Adele said confidently. “Best to get on a new schedule right away, otherwise you’ll never get over the jet lag.”

“Good to know.”

Time difference notwithstanding, I knew I wouldn’t be getting one ounce of sleep tonight anyway.