

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, showing her lips and chin, as she holds a large bouquet of vibrant pink roses. The background is dark, making the roses and her skin stand out. The overall mood is romantic and elegant.

HEIRLOOM
SECRETS

Where the
Last Rose
Blooms

A NOVEL

ASHLEY CLARK

"Tender and true, this novel draws you in from the first page."

—SUSAN MEISSNER, bestselling author of *The Nature of Fragile Things*

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearance of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To Amy Norton—
a precious friend in every season.

We went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance.

—Psalm 66:12b NIV



PROLOGUE

Charleston, 1860

Ashley

Mama thought I was asleep the night 'fore I was sold. I wasn't. I was looking at the patterns of the shadows on the wall, but she couldn't see my eyes from where she sat.

That was a year ago now. Well, roundabouts. Maybe half a year. Guess I don't know the day, just that it was fall and still warm outside, and summer seem like it was gonna take forever to get here.

Not a minute goes by, I'm not thinkin' about her. I'll never forget what she said when she put my best dress inside the satchel, along with some pecans and a braid of her hair.

"It be filled with my love always," she said, and when Mama said *always* she meant it. Problem was, *always* wasn't ours to give.

She put her favorite buttons inside the satchel too. Those butterfly buttons I had always loved. But the buttons fell out when the men took me. And I saw that look in Mama's eyes—tryin' to tell me she gonna find me and bring the buttons with

her. I just know she will. And I remind myself of that look every night when I close my eyes.

Only she'd better hurry. Because the dress Mama gave me ain't gonna fit much longer.

ONE

New Orleans, Modern Day

Alice

Alice always had loved flowers.

There was something about the blend of colors, the hidden roots, the twisting petals as they unfurled in the sun one by one. A symbol of femininity—how that which is delicate can also be strong.

Whiskey in a teacup, as her aunt always said. Well, her aunt and Reese Witherspoon, but honestly, Aunt Charlotte had been saying that way back when Reese was still filming *Sweet Home Alabama*.

Alice swept petals from the floor, beautiful yet fragmented evidence of the fullness the day had brought. She'd been running The Prickly Rose, a customizable bouquet shop on Magazine Street, alongside her aunt for several years now, and Valentine's Day always left plenty of cast-off remnants.

She was sweeping the last of the petals into the dustpan when she heard a knock at the door. A quick glance at the clock confirmed they were a quarter past closing time, and if she didn't leave now, she would be late for her date.

Not that she was particularly excited about a blind double

date on Valentine's Day, but her friend Harper had insisted, so she'd acquiesced.

Still, it was the principle of the thing. No self-respecting person thought so little of his date that he'd buy flowers at closing time. Let alone fifteen minutes after.

Alice was just about to check the bolt on the door when her aunt buzzed past, placing a hand on each side of her own face to get a better look through the wrought iron. She glanced at Alice over her shoulder. "He's handsome."

Alice stepped down to open the trash can, then dumped the petals. "They always are."

Aunt Charlotte turned to face her. "But this one looks like a young Clooney."

"I don't care if he looks like Milo Ventimiglia." Okay, that was an exaggeration. But her aunt probably didn't even know who Milo was, so she wasn't too concerned about the woman calling her bluff. Alice tapped one stubborn petal until it fell into the trash. "We're closed."

Aunt Charlotte hurried closer, glancing behind her as though he could hear them. "But the poor boy needs flowers. It's Valentine's Day, Alice. Couldn't you have a little heart?"

"I see what you did there with the pun." Alice planted her hands at the hips of her knee-length skirt. "But the answer is no. I cannot. He can abide by the store hours just like everyone else managed to."

"I didn't want to have to do this . . ." But before Aunt Charlotte could finish the words, she began racing toward the door.

Alice followed two steps behind but did manage to slam her hand on the door before her aunt could shimmy it open. "What are you, four years old?" she whispered. "He's probably seen us through the door."

"And whose fault is that, hmm?" Aunt Charlotte peeled Alice's hand from off the doorway.

Alice balked. “Why, I have never—”

But Aunt Charlotte was already busy opening the door. She smiled a warning sort of grin at Alice. “What if it *is* Clooney?” she whispered. Her eyes went wide.

“You think everyone is Clooney,” Alice murmured as the man stepped inside. She managed a smile despite his tardiness because, after all, she was just the kind of person to be polite.

The bell at the front of the shop jingled as he entered.

Definitely not Milo, but—dare she say it—even more attractive.

He was tall and seemed even taller because of the way his presence filled the room. His smile revealed straight teeth, his jaw was strong but not sharp, and his shoulders, broad. He wore a relaxed T-shirt over properly fitting jeans, and faintly smelled of cedarwood.

He had on trendy tennis shoes that made him look ready to run . . . both literally *and* figuratively.

But despite his obvious appeal, he was a *customer*. And it was well past closing time. At this point, Alice was so exhausted that Clooney really could’ve walked into the shop, and she would’ve pointed to the *Closed* sign.

“How may I help you?”

One strand of the man’s trimmed brown hair fell askew as he looked at her.

Their gazes locked, and Alice caught herself drawn in by a blend of curiosity and attraction. His eyes were the color of sea glass and the wild waves that made it strong.

Alice blinked, her mind foggy with the memory of waves.

After the slightest moment’s pause, he pulled out his wallet. “I need some red roses.”

Alice frowned. She looked at Aunt Charlotte, then back at the man.

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” Alice said matter-of-factly.

He set his debit card on the counter and pushed it forward, as if the gesture would make a difference. “I am aware of that. Which is why I need them.”

Her aunt smiled sweetly, ready to accommodate him, but Alice wouldn’t be so easily swayed. She didn’t like his bullying tone, and handed the card back to him.

“We’re all out,” Alice said.

The man rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll take pink, then.”

“Out of those too.”

“White?”

Alice leaned forward, her elbows on the counter. “I’m sorry. Nope.”

The man sighed as he looked straight into her eyes once more, clearly not used to hearing the word *no*. He pocketed his hands. “Let me put it this way. What *do* you have?”

Alice kneeled beneath the register and chose another arrangement to set up on the counter.

The man touched the whimsical array of baby’s breath, berries, dried cotton, and pine cones as though it were a prickly cactus. He tapped the glass with his finger. “This is a mason jar.”

Alice cleared her throat. “It’s an antique. That’s something we pride ourselves in here at The Prickly Rose—no two of our items are identical.” She wouldn’t mention the flowers were two days old and half-off because the petals had begun to droop. That’s what he got for waiting until the last minute.

“This is stuff you could find in your backyard.”

Had he heard *anything* she’d just said?

“It’s organic.” She swallowed to fight the tide in his eyes, hating the amount of willpower it took to do that.

“I cannot bring her a jar of berries and squirrel seeds. I’m trying to leave a good impression here.”

I hope for your sake your impression on her is better than the one you’ve left on me.

“Sorry we can’t be of greater help.” Alice shrugged, thankful to soon be rid of him. Sometimes these after-store-hours customers could be equally insensitive to overstaying their welcome. “You’ve caught us after closing time, so it’s pretty picked over.”

He turned to the door with a wave over his shoulder. “Thanks anyway,” he mumbled, on the very edge of rudeness.

But as the bell above the door chimed, Alice realized her aunt was smiling a dangerous sort of smile.

“Well, he was darling.”

Alice rolled her eyes. Her aunt was convinced Alice’s prospects for a suitable marriage expired after age twenty-nine. Which left her six months.

She shook her head and fiddled with the mason jar arrangement before placing it back under the counter. “Late for a date on Valentine’s Day? Definitely not my type.”



Sullivan

Obviously, Sullivan had made a mistake. Buying flowers for his blind date had resulted in unequivocal failure.

What was worse, a quick glance at his phone showed he was ten minutes late to meet his friends. And counting. He was lost. In the French Quarter. He had passed this nostalgia shop at least three times now and was walking in circles.

Maybe his date wouldn’t be the flowers type.

Who was he kidding? All women were the flowers type. His mother had taught him that. And his Grandma Beth would disown him if she knew he was about to show up to a date on Valentine’s Day empty-handed.

Sure, it wasn’t a serious date or anything, but the woman was a friend of a friend and the day was really Valentine’s

Day, so he was pretty sure those two things combined qualified her for a bouquet.

A lot of help the woman at the flower shop had been. He had every intention of giving her a one-star review, when his phone lit up with the notification his buddy Peter was calling.

“Dude, where are you?”

Sullivan spun around to get a look at the street name. “I’m here . . . ish. I just can’t seem to find the place.”

“Okay, I’m going out into the street now to see if I can find you.”

Suddenly, he saw Peter waving from one block up. Sullivan waved back and hustled over.

The two men clasped hands. “Sorry, man. I got turned around.”

“It happens.” Peter smiled. “Hey, it’s good to see you. Been a while.”

Sullivan raked his hair back into place with his hand. “Sure has. Engagement suits you, Peter. You look happy.”

Peter’s grin widened. “I am.” Near the restaurant, two women lingered on the sidewalk. Sullivan assumed the woman next to Harper was his blind date for the evening. They were still too far away for him to get a good look at her.

Sullivan wasn’t typically the type to go for the whole blind-date thing. But he, Peter, and Harper were in town for only a little while because of Peter and Harper’s wedding in a few days. Harper apparently wanted to see this woman as much as Peter and Sullivan wanted to hang out together, so doubling up seemed like a good idea. They’d insisted he and his date would get along great.

And really, Sullivan didn’t make a habit of turning women down. Well, not on a first date, at least.

It wasn’t until he and Peter approached the restaurant that the nagging feeling in his chest began. Something about

the woman standing beside Harper was familiar. . . . He had seen her before.

Then she turned, and he saw her face. Her beautiful, berry-squirrel-seed-loving smile. He rubbed his hands over his eyes. *You have got to be kidding me.*

Peter turned, the gesture not lost on him. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s just . . . well . . . Is *that* my date?” Sullivan nodded his head toward where the women stood.

“Yes, and I don’t see why you’re not falling on your knees in gratitude right now. She’s totally your type.”

Sullivan held up one finger and shook his hand. “Funny you should say that, actually . . .”

Peter crossed his arms. “What’s going on?”

“I sort of met her earlier.” Sullivan huffed. “You could say I didn’t leave the best impression.”

Peter hit him hard on the shoulder. “So here’s your chance to make a better one.”