



JENNIFER BACIA

A society marriage of
convenience – a legacy
of hate and betrayal

A VERY PUBLIC SCANDAL

A VERY
PUBLIC
SCANDAL

JENNIFER
BACIA

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PROLOGUE

*H*arry Bowman didn't know his life was about to change. As he made love that evening he was reminded yet again of his good fortune. The woman he held in his arms never failed to arouse him. Not even now as he stared down the barrel of his sixty-third birthday.

But the young woman he had married did more than arouse his lusts. She had brought him back to life.

That was the way Harry saw it anyway.

He knew there were plenty among his colleagues who had laughed behind his back when they found out he'd asked Margaret to marry him. That was almost two years ago and she'd just turned thirty-two.

Jealous of course. Because he'd managed to land himself a young beauty. But then he hadn't let himself go like the rest of them. He was too vain for that. Even in the city he'd swum daily, played tennis at his club and kept himself fit. He was proud too of his head of thick, if greying, hair.

But more than twenty years at the Bar hadn't left Harry Bowman with too many illusions. As one of the country's leading criminal lawyers, his fees matched his legendary reputation and he was now a very rich man.

He'd felt certain that in all probability it was his wealth rather than his acclaim or his sharp and seasoned mind that had encouraged the slim, curly-haired brunette now moaning into his ear to accept his proposal.

But he'd been a pragmatist - and a widower - too long to worry overly about that. He loved showing off his young pretty wife, loved having someone to spoil and indulge, and if his happiness lasted just a short while, well he would accept it on those terms.

It had taken a heart attack six months ago to convince the high-flying lawyer that he had married a woman who genuinely loved him.

With compassion and patience Margaret had nursed him back to health. And then it was she who had insisted they get out of the city, away from the rat race he'd endured for so long.

'Let's be totally unoriginal, darling,' she'd said one night when they were discussing the future. 'Let's head for the sunshine and minimum stress. What do you say?'

She was stroking his scrotum during their first sexual exchange since his attack and Harry felt filled with the heat of passion and conviction.

The transition had been unbelievably easy. Within weeks they were ensconced in a double-story beachside mansion decorated in the colors of the sea and sky and Harry felt as if God had shown him the path to heaven.

Life was as good as it was ever going to get, he thought now, as he dug his fingers into his wife's grinding buttocks: Margaret, the house, the environment, and just the odd interesting case to keep his brain ticking over.

He could feel his climax approaching. His wife's quivering breathing told him she was right there with him. An experienced lover, Harry knew better than to spoil her intense concentration with too frenzied movements. Together, slowly, they climbed the path to dark unconscious bliss.

And then the abruptness of the interruption killed it for both of them. Margaret slumped back from his embrace and swore ferociously under her breath.

'What the hell...!' Harry glanced at the bedside alarm as his phone

shrilled in the darkness. Five after ten. When he'd been at the peak of his profession late calls invariably meant trouble.

'Shall I answer it?' His wife's voice revealed her annoyance.

'No, leave it to the machine.' Harry felt his erection die. 'Probably a wrong damn number.'

But Harry Bowman was mistaken. As the answering machine clicked on he heard a voice he recognized and a message that brought him instantly alert.

Beside him his wife held her breath and listened too.

'... it's urgent, Harry. You're the only one I can trust. They're charging her with murder.'

With a rush of the old familiar adrenalin Harry Bowman knew it was going to be a long night.

* * *

THE COUNTRY WOKE to the scandal the following morning. The story was headline news. Shock and disbelief were the almost universal reactions.

Eve Taylor.

A devastating combination of brains and beauty. At thirty-three, the country's top-ranking media personality.

A woman who had interviewed presidents and kings, whose ruthless pursuit of the facts invoked fear among prime ministers and corporate fat cats alike. For three years her prime-time program, "Taylor Made", had operated at the nation's cutting edge, dominating the ratings as it broke a cascade of major stories.

And now, in an almost cannibalistic orgy, it was Eve Taylor herself who was being devoured by the media machine she had ruled over for so long.

Her fate, she knew, rested now in the hands of Harry Bowman. 'Try not to worry,' the grey-haired attorney had said quietly when he'd faced her in the windowless detention room of the central city Police Station. 'Bail won't be a problem. It's all a matter of procedure from here.'

But with the lawyer gone, Eve for the first time felt her control

begin to waver. Fiercely she bit back her tears. She had tried so hard and in the end she had failed. It was as if history was determined to repeat itself.

* * *

THE SMALL WOODEN cottage was hidden at the end of a long overgrown drive. Fresh, cool air and lush vegetation made the Blue Mountains a popular tourist spot yet residents well-enough off could still buy themselves tranquility and privacy.

In the fragrant shady garden two elderly women sat in what could have passed for companionable silence.

Janet Byrne placed her empty tea cup on the tray beside her. Her arthritic hands were unsteady as she tried to come to terms with the shock of the morning's headlines. The newspaper was now stored safely out of sight despite the fact that not once in their recent years together had the woman she cared for shown any interest in the printed word.

Indeed, Marianne Rolfe showed interest in very little. Incapable of speech, she spent each long day in silent contemplation, her hands occasionally kept busy with the needlework that draped her lap.

In an agony of despair Janet Byrne glanced at the frail grey-haired woman beside her. Marianne Rolfe was in her late sixties but youthful beauty could still be traced in the fine bones and contours of her face.

Despite the years that had passed, Janet had never forgotten her own breathless reaction at first sight of that stunning perfection. But beauty had not saved Marianne Rolfe from tragedy and now the same curse had extended to the next generation. And unlike the scandal of thirty-odd years ago, this time there was nothing Janet could do...

The older woman's heart squeezed in pain. She could only pray that the horror that had overtaken Maryanne's daughter would be forever beyond her comprehension.

But then, she thought pityingly, who knew what went on behind that endless brooding silence.

There was an expectant hush in the room. Five people surrounded the hospital bed: the surgeon who had carried out the operation, three of his colleagues, and the woman who had made it all possible.

The patient was a girl of about seventeen, slim and fair haired. She looked confused and vulnerable, as if unsure as to why she was the object of such attention.

'You've been very brave, Marianne.' It was the woman who spoke. She was handsome, big boned, in her early thirties. Mamie Howard spoke perfect French but she could never be mistaken for a Frenchwoman. Even apart from her lumpish lack of style there was something about her that was quintessentially English.

Now her dark eyes glowed with intensity as she addressed the girl in the bed. 'The operations have been a success, my dear.' She spoke slowly, watching carefully to see if the girl understood. It was always difficult to know.

'It's been almost two weeks now since the bandages were removed. There will still be a few bruises, a little puffiness, you understand, but I think you will not be displeased.'

One of the medical assistants couldn't suppress a chuckle. The

English and their talent for understatement. His colleagues caught his eye and seemed to share his amusement.

Doctor Pierre Martell, the internationally renowned plastic surgeon, was more reserved as he studied his handiwork. He remembered his first view of the patient. He had truly wondered then just what might be possible.

But the Englishwoman had pleaded with him. 'She is so young, doctor. As long as you can do enough to stop the stares and ugly comments.'

Pierre Martell refused to give false hope. But on closer clinical examination he saw that the bone structure was intact. That was something. Then, as operation followed operation, he could see he was going to achieve much greater success than his initial prognosis had indicated.

Now, as the Englishwoman raised an enquiring eyebrow at him across the bed, Doctor Pierre Martell gave a silent satisfied nod. Yes, he decided, he had excelled himself here. The girl would have every reason to be delighted.

'Are you ready, Marianne?' Barely able to contain her excitement, Mamie Howard asked the question without any expectation of a reply. The girl in the bed never spoke. The trauma, of course. Such a tragedy. But now, at least, the tragedy was lessened...

Mamie opened her voluminous handbag and removed a tortoiseshell hand mirror. Eyes shining in anticipation, she passed it to the young patient.

Slowly the girl in the bed raised the mirror to her face. Her breath caught; her blue eyes widened in disbelief as she absorbed the perfection of the surgeon's art.

The face was an oval of ideal proportion, the nose slim and straight, the jawline and cheekbones once more sharply defined, the skin as fresh and perfect as a newborn baby's. Mesmerized, Marianne Walenksa stared at the reflection.

She was... achingly beautiful. A triumph of art and medicine.

'C'est perfection, mademoiselle. Un miracle, n'est pas?'

It was the irrepressible assistant who broke the spell. Tears of emotion filled his eyes.

And then the second miracle occurred.

Marianne Walenksa found her voice. The voice she hadn't used for over three years.

She screamed.

She howled.

She shrieked out a stream of foul curses, each worse than the one before. And with the terrible force of her anger she hurled the mirror across the room. Shards of glass sprayed over the dumbstruck onlookers as it shattered against the wall.

'You've made me beautiful!' she screamed in wild-eyed fury. *'I will never forgive you! May you all burn in hell forever!'*

* * *

An icy rain was falling the day they returned to England. The girl sat in the First Class carriage, her face turned towards the window, avoiding the eyes of the other occupants. Her fury was no longer evident but it hadn't diminished.

They lied to me, she raged inwardly.

As soon as she'd finished growing they could operate, they'd told her. Merely give her features some semblance of 'normality'. It was for that reason she had endured the pain.

But they had betrayed her.

* * *

MAMIE HOWARD KNEW she had to do something. And soon.

It was three months since their return to England and the girl was barely eating, hated to leave the house, and spent most of her time alone in her room. She spoke, but chiefly in monosyllables. Mamie was worried sick.

James Howard was worried too, but more about the effect the

situation was having on his wife. He loved Mamie dearly. Now that the war was over he wanted their lives to get back to normal. He to his law practice in Oxford, Mamie to her cooking and gardening and books.

But Mamie Howard had seen too much as a Red Cross nurse to be the woman her husband expected to find when he finally received the official discharge from his regiment. For Mamie had been there during the final days in Berlin, had witnessed the liberation of the hells of Dachau and Auschwitz. These were sights she would never forget. Sights that made her sick with guilt at the idea of returning to the ordered existence of her elegant country home with its historic past and expensive antiques, its rambling roses and overgrown orchard.

That was part of the reason she had brought the young Polish girl back to England with her. To try to do something, no matter how small, to atone, to make up for all she was lucky enough to still have while others continued to suffer.

'James, I've got to do something about Marianne.' Mamie spoke her thoughts aloud as they sat on either side of the open fireplace. It was a cold evening, the nip of winter already in the air.

James Howard lowered his newspaper and took in the anxious lines on his wife's face. Her obvious distress made him answer curtly. 'You've done enough, Mamie. Three years the girl's been with us. You've fed her, clothed her, taught her, nursed her. Arranged and paid for the operations. And what've you got in return? Neither gratitude nor warmth.'

His face was stern. 'If *you* haven't had enough, I certainly have. She's not worth it, Mamie. It's playing havoc with our own lives.'

To his surprise his wife nodded in agreement. 'You're right, darling. I thought love and support would be enough. But they're not. Not after what she's been through.' Mamie Howard's face darkened. She remembered piecing together the girl's story. How she had come to have those terrible facial injuries. Mamie knew she couldn't give up.

'I've decided what to do.'

Her husband looked at her enquiringly.

'I'm going to take her to London. There's a top flight psychiatrist I've read about. Phillip Vaughan. He specializes in just this sort of post-

war trauma. I'm going to make an appointment for Marianne to see him as soon as possible.'

James Howard saw the determination on his wife's face and knew there was no point in arguing. He murmured a reply and resumed his reading. The war had changed everything, he grumbled inwardly. Women didn't know their place any longer.

* * *

PHILLIP VAUGHAN'S suite of rooms was in the ubiquitous Harley Street. He was a busy man but Mamie Howard was a determined woman; she managed to wheedle an appointment for one morning two weeks later. Only achieving Marianne's cooperation was not quite so easy.

'I do not need to see this man! I have nothing to say to him, can you not understand!' The girl faced her benefactress in a fury of opposition.

It took more than a little gentle persuasion but at last Mamie succeeded. 'As a special favor for me, my dear. Please. I hate to see you suffering like this.'

Marianne turned away, her blue eyes dark with contempt. *Suffering...* How could this woman have any idea what suffering meant?

Somewhere in the dark frozen center of her heart Marianne Walenska knew that Mamie Howard was trying to help her. But the girl also knew the danger in letting others close. For closeness inevitably meant loss. And loss meant searing pain...

* * *

MAMIE WAS IMMEDIATELY IMPRESSED by the short, slight man with the intelligent grey eyes and calm efficient manner. He listened without interrupting as she explained why they were there.

'If only Marianne would speak about what happened, I'm sure it'd help, doctor. I thought I could do it alone, but I've realized she needs a professional. I'm sure with your help she'll be able to work this through.'

The psychiatrist shifted his gaze to the girl. She was dressed in an

appalling shapeless dress and her fair hair hung lankly over her face. Almost, he thought with professional interest, as if she were deliberately trying to make herself as unattractive as possible. He noted too that in place of the usual awkwardness of a girl her age there was instead an almost unnatural control, a strangely defensive poise.

Only her darting evasive eyes gave her away. Behind the rigid mask of control festered an agitation it was Phillip Vaughan's task to lay to rest. He wondered what he would find at its root.

During the remainder of that first visit Mamie waited in the reception room flipping through pre-war magazines that did little to distract her.

Just a short informal chat to begin with, the doctor had explained. When, after twenty minutes, Marianne reappeared, Mamie was relieved to note no sign of distress. She likes him, she thought with relief. Phillip Vaughan was going to work the miracle she was praying for.

* * *

THAT SAME NIGHT Marianne Walenska jolted the Howard household awake with her screams of terror.

* * *

BUT SHE AGREED to go again. Yes, she would visit the doctor once more ... but only if she were permitted to go alone. With the train timetable she would manage easily, she assured Mamie.

Uneasy as she felt, the older woman finally gave in. After all, the girl had been to the doctor's suite once already and if she needed to ask directions her English was up to the task. Marianne Walenska had the Slavic gift for languages; as a schoolgirl before the war she had grown proficient in English, French and German.

By mid-afternoon Mamie's anxiety was laid to rest when the girl returned safely and, externally at least, quite calm. It would take time, the older woman told herself, but she was certain the therapy would achieve results.

The morning of her next appointment a week later, Marianne left the house in plenty of time to catch the London train. She refused Mamie's offer to drive her the short distance to the station. 'I will enjoy the walk today, Mrs Howard. But thank you for the offer.'

And to the older woman's surprised delight Marianne Walenska leaned forward and pecked her on the cheek. It was the first demonstration of affection Mamie had ever received from the girl she had dedicated herself to help and her heart swelled with hope. Everything was going to be all right. With Phillip Vaughan's help Marianne was going to get better. Mamie was quite certain of that now.

Eyes bright with expectant happiness she stood waving from the garden gate until the slight figure had disappeared from view.

* * *

MARIANNE ARRIVED at the main Oxford station with time to spare. The small overnight bag was in the left luggage section where she had left it two days previously.

As she purchased her ticket she felt her heart pound with a mixture of excitement and terror. But nothing was going to change her mind. On the journey she went over in her mind the steps she had worked out for herself. Firstly a rented room, then a job. Luckily she had become quite a proficient typist under Mamie Howard's instruction.

As the train drew into London just over an hour later, Marianne fought back a moment of panic. She was alone and close to penniless in a city where she knew no one. It was a frightening thought.

But not as frightening as being forced to confront the past.

* * *

IT WAS a month before Mamie Howard would admit defeat. She spent hours tramping the streets of London but in a city still overflowing with stateless victims of the war, neither her efforts, nor those of the police had found any clue to the whereabouts of the young Polish girl Mamie had tried so hard to help.

'Let it go, darling. You've done everything possible.' James Howard

did his best to comfort his distressed wife. 'The girl had problems no one could do anything about. You can't blame yourself.'

But Mamie could find little solace in her husband's words. 'If only I knew she was all right,' she answered, her voice tight with strain. 'That's all.'

There was nothing James Howard could say to that.

She was safe. After almost four months she felt sure of that. They wouldn't find her now.

Everything had worked out even easier than Marianne had hoped. She'd found herself a cheap room in a lodging house in Lancaster Gate. It was cramped, and the shared bathroom none too clean, but at least she was free of smothering goodwill and doctors who were going to "cure" her.

She had been lucky with the job, too. As secretary to the manager of the Lancaster Regent Hotel she worked in the centrally heated surroundings of a first-class establishment. Shut away in her office it was easy enough to avoid any curious questions from other members of the staff.

On the whole Marianne was content with her lot. She was happy to settle for warmth, food, a roof over her head. Routine brought her a feeling of security. She enjoyed her work, and her leisure was spent exploring London's parks and landmarks or taking in the occasional film or concert as her budget allowed.

She gave no thought to the future. It was enough to have escaped confrontation with the nightmare of her past. Almost before she

realized it a year had passed and nothing seemed likely to alter her routine.

And then Charles Rolfe came into her life.

* * *

THEY MET the evening she was working late shift. It was seven p.m. when the duty manager came looking for her.

'Miss Walenska?' He gave a perfunctory tap at the office door.

'Yes.' Unsmiling, Marianne looked up from her work.

The duty manager, a pale, whippet-thin man in his late thirties, wondered as always why the girl seemed so uninterested in her appearance. Not a scrap of makeup enhanced her features, while the heavy curtain of fair hair lacked any attempt at style. Even the dark hotel uniform seemed deliberately too large, as if to shroud her figure.

Yet for all that, he surmised, Marianne Walenska still had a natural appeal; all she needed was a little fashion sense and know-how to turn her into a real stunner. Not, he thought quickly, that any chap was likely to get past that freezing barricade. Hadn't he read somewhere that the Poles were supposed to be a passionate race? Well, not Miss Marianne Walenska. Cold as an Arctic breeze, that one.

'Got an Australian gentleman in room 343,' he said now, explaining the reason for the interruption. 'A Mr Charles Rolfe. Seems he's just had some urgent correspondence from a firm in Paris and can't understand a word. I told him you'd be able to help ... if you would be so kind.'

'Of course.' Marianne got to her feet. Her ability with languages was one of the reasons she had been offered the job. She followed the manager towards the elevator and they ascended to the third floor without further exchange.

* * *

CHARLES ROLFE WAS a man in his thirties, broad shouldered, with sandy hair and a sprinkle of freckles on his fair complexion. As he opened the door to his suite his agitation was obvious.

The manager made the introductions and said soothingly, 'I'm sure Miss Walenska will be able to help, Mr Rolfe.'

'You need something translated, sir?' The girl spoke English with a charming accent.

'Yes, yes. I'm organizing some business with the French. It's essential I have this correspondence translated with absolute accuracy as soon as possible. Can you do that for me, Miss... er...'

'Walenska,' Marianne supplied. She put out her hand. 'If I might see...'

'Of course.'

Quickly she skimmed the contents. 'There is no problem. It will take only a few minutes.'

Assured that all was under control, the duty manager excused himself while a relieved Charles Rolfe sat his rescuer at the small antique desk.

Five minutes later Marianne stood up and presented the Australian businessman with the written English translation he required.

Charles Rolfe read it through speedily. 'That's wonderful. This makes all the difference. Thank you so very, very much.'

He looked up, beaming his gratitude and for the first time noticed the girl's wonderful eyes. They were a deep stormy blue, almost violet, ringed with thick dark lashes. He wondered vaguely why she hid them under that unattractive heavy fringe.

'I am only doing my job, sir.' And with a curt goodnight Marianne Walenska left him alone.

* * *

CHARLES ROLFE WAS thirty-two and a member of one of Australia's oldest and wealthiest families. His great-grandfather, Patrick Rolfe, had arrived in the colony of New South Wales in 1811 with a few sovereigns in his pocket and an impulsive yearning for adventure.

His training as an architect soon made him an invaluable addition to the new colony. The recently appointed military governor, Lachlan Macquarie, had been appalled by his first view of the unplanned hotch-potch of hovels that was Sydney Town. He was determined to

create a city in the Georgian style he most admired. Accordingly as soon as Patrick Rolfe's skills became known, the young adventurer found himself set the task of designing many of the new colony's important public buildings.

But Patrick Rolfe had other, equally desirable assets. Ruggedly attractive, charming, with a self-deprecating wit, the red-headed native of Lancashire soon found himself a regular guest at Government House. It was at dinner there one summer's evening three years after his arrival in the colony, that Patrick Rolfe was introduced to Bridget Sullivan, the niece of the governor's aide-de-camp.

When they married six months later, Patrick received a government grant of three thousand acres of land and the convict labor to work them. Within a short time, and taking his lead from that other successful businessman, John Macarthur, he had established the breeding stocks of merinos to supply the ever insatiable mills of his birthplace. By the time of his death at the age of sixty-three, Patrick Rolfe was able to pass on to his three sons one of the biggest landholdings in the country.

Over succeeding generations the Rolfe dynasty had made forays into other fields of business but the backbone of the family's wealth remained its fine merino wool. With the war at an end four years previously the textile mills of England, France and Italy were once more hungry for the quality raw material Australia produced in such quantity. It was to re-establish those business contacts that Charles Rolfe had come to Europe.

There was another reason, too. Charles had needed to prove to himself that he was well again, that after four years of almost continuous medical treatment he was fit enough to re-join the real world.

As a squadron leader in the RAAF Charles Rolfe had emerged unscathed from missions that had seen him awarded the DFC and DSO. But then, in the last twelve months of hostilities, his luck had run out. Flying a reconnaissance mission over northern New Guinea, he and his crew had been shot down by a Japanese carrier-borne fighter. Charles, the only survivor, was eventually picked up by an American flying boat patrol responding to his May Day call. Suffering appalling

head and internal injuries, only immediate evacuation back to Australia had given him any chance at all.

In Sydney his mother Edwina had half a dozen leading specialists standing by to try to save the life of her elder son. But for three months his survival had hung in precarious balance. No sooner had one medical crisis been resolved than another developed, until even the doctors began to doubt the final outcome of their strenuous efforts.

But Edwina Rolfe refused to give in. In 1943 she had lost Charles's father to a premature and massive coronary. It made her all the more determined to save her son. Day after day she kept her vigil beside his hospital bed, her sharp eyes searching not only for some sign of a breakthrough but ensuring too that the nursing staff were well and truly kept on their toes.

'This is no ordinary patient, you know!' she was reported to have snapped at the sister in charge over some minor irritation. 'This is a Rolfe. We made this country what it is and I don't want you or anyone else who looks after my son to forget it!' Edwina Rolfe was eminently aware of her position in society.

It had taken a long time but at last there were clear signs that Charles was going to make it. Yet that was just the beginning. The rehabilitation had gone on for close to three years. Charles had had to re-learn to walk, to talk, to dance, to drive a car. It was a slow and painful process.

At the belated thirty-second birthday party his mother had thrown for him after his recovery, Charles looked to all outward appearances the same man who had left home to do his duty for his country. A little thinner perhaps, slightly more withdrawn, but essentially, it seemed, Charles Rolfe had survived the war intact.

Only his fiancée, Peggy Dennison, knew the truth.

A vivacious, dark-haired girl from a high-profile political family, Peggy had had to endure not only Charles's absence during the war but also the long frightening months of his slow recovery. Certain at last of his return to health she was unable to suppress any longer her own urgent needs.

Two weeks before the party she had taken him for a mid-week

drive to Palm Beach, the holiday resort of the well-to-do, north of Sydney. As they neared their destination he could sense her agitation.

'I've got the key to the house, Charles.'

The Dennisons, like the Rolfes, owned a large beach house on the Peninsula. Now, in late autumn, it was closed up for the coming winter.

'In this breeze it'll be nicer if we eat our picnic on the terrace than on the beach, don't you think?' There was a slight breathlessness in Peggy's voice as she turned to smile at her fiancé.

Charles knew then what was expected of him.

Less than a month after they had become engaged he and Peggy had made love for the first time. Her passion and lack of inhibition had come as a thrilling surprise. From then until he had joined his squadron they had made love wildly and often. Now her need for him was obvious.

* * *

PEGGY DENNISON'S big blue eyes stared up in confused alarm as her fiancé threw back the covers and left her alone in the bed.

'Is ... is it me, Charles? Have I ...'

'No. No.' Shock made his answer sharper than he intended. His back to the room, he stood by the salt-smearred windows and looked down at the breakers below.

For a long moment he said nothing. Then he forced himself to turn towards the girl on the bed. In an uncharacteristic gesture she lay with the sheets tucked modestly around her chin.

'It's got nothing to do with you, Peg, I promise.' His tongue seemed to be sticking to the roof of his mouth. 'I ... I can't. I just can't. Don't ask me why.'

'Maybe... maybe it'll just take a little time, darling. You've been so ill...'. The words were spoken with such soft understanding he felt like vomiting.

'I think we should go.' Charles snatched up his clothes. Suddenly his nakedness seemed to add to his vulnerability and shame.

* * *

EDWINA ROLFE WAS ABLAZE with precious gems. The fortunes of the Rolfe family were reflected in the diamonds and emeralds that adorned her ears, encircled her neck and her bony fingers. And for the first time since the war the harbor side mansion too was ablaze with lights and filled with guests.

With regal grace Edwina circulated among the country's elite, who had come to celebrate her son's birthday and return to health.

It's just like old times, she thought. *Almost as if the war had never been.* Then her dark eyes clouded momentarily. There were a few missing faces, of course. Including poor Douglas. The shock of her husband's premature death had left her dazed for months. Douglas, always so strong, so focused, so proud of his place as a Rolfe in the history of this country...

Edwina lifted her pointed chin a little higher. Well, she was matriarch now and the standards would be maintained. Nothing would ever be allowed to tarnish the Rolfe name. Her children had been raised to respect their heritage and they would never let her down.

And now, Charles's return to health meant they could all get on with their lives. Thank God, she thought that Hugh, her baby, had been too young for the war. Just twenty-one, he was already working alongside Charles in the family firm, while her daughter Caroline too was settled. A first-rate marriage to the heir to a stockbroking fortune had already produced one child and, at twenty-four, Caroline was expecting again. No, Edwina assured herself, as far as her children were concerned she had no reason to complain.

At the far side of the room she saw Charles standing with two of his cousins. Her prayers had been answered when he had finally pulled through. And now there was so much to arrange with his forthcoming marriage. How she was looking forward to that. Peggy Dennison was a perfect choice; as illustrious a family as their own; the joining of two dynasties just as she'd always planned.

A smile touched Edwina Rolfe's lips. It was her steadfast view that the upper classes had a duty to maintain their purity of stock. Her own

father, a titled if rather impoverished Englishman, had been happy to welcome a genteel and wealthy Australian son-in-law into the family. The benefits to all had been obvious. Within eight months Edwina had become Mrs Douglas Rolfe.

Charles and Peggy, on the other hand, had been engaged since halfway through the war. Certainly fate had intervened, but now there was surely no need for further delay.

Then her dark brows drew together in a frown. She had tried to persuade Charles that this evening would be the perfect occasion to announce the date of the wedding. But he had been stubbornly reluctant, even in the face of her continued pressure. 'Please, Mother,' he'd protested, 'you must leave the date to us.'

Now, as her son's attractive, dark-haired fiancée stepped inside from the terrace with a group of young friends, Edwina's expression brightened. What Charles needed was a bit of prompting, she decided, that was all. Hadn't she always known what was good for him?

The ten-piece orchestra had begun to play in the adjoining room and, moving to Peggy Dennison's side, Edwina slipped an arm around the girl's slim waist.

'Come, my dear, the engaged couple should start the dancing.'

A high color suddenly flamed in Peggy's cheeks, but Edwina barely noticed as she shepherded the girl towards her son.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' she clapped her hands for attention and the chatter of the surrounding guests died away. 'I hope you have left room on your social calendars for the very imminent wedding of my charming son and his beautiful fiancée. In the meantime I hope you will allow them to lead the way in the first dance of the evening.'

* * *

CHARLES ROLFE KNEW it couldn't be put off a moment longer.

Leaving the crowded dance floor he led the way to the dark privacy of the garden. The music floated out on the night air and in the distance there was the sound of a low hoot from some ship on the harbor.

'It's impossible, Peggy, you know that.' He stood beside her under

the denser darkness of one of the garden's massive conifers. 'It's not going to get any better.'

On three further occasions his humiliation had been merely reinforced.

'Oh, Charles...' Her voice was a whisper.

'I'm so sorry about the liberty my mother took in there. I tried to tell ...' He bit off the words, feeling his temper rising. His mother's domineering manner had always been difficult to cope with. She had got away with it when he was younger but he was an adult now, had fought for his country and survived a war. He would make his own decisions from now on. No matter how difficult.

'I'm sorry too, Charles... about everything.'

'You'll find someone else, Peggy. Someone who can give you children. There's nothing to regret.'

In the darkness Charles Rolfe's lips tightened in bitterness. *Only my lack of manhood*, he thought. *Only my utter uselessness to any woman.*

* * *

THE ARGUMENT WAS INEVITABLE.

In the library later that night, after the last guests had departed, a stunned Edwina Rolfe was informed of her son's decision.

'*Breaking off the engagement!* But *why*, Charles? Why, for God's sake? The Dennisons are ...'

'Mother, please. I don't wish to discuss it further. This is between Peggy and me.'

But Edwina Rolfe wasn't used to having her well-laid plans thwarted. With difficulty she tried to control her temper. 'No, Charles, this *isn't* just between you and Peggy. The Rolfe name and heritage is at stake here. As your father's heir you have a duty to make a suitable match. And there is no one better qualified to become your wife than Peggy Dennison.' Her voice rose shrilly. 'I insist you speak to her first thing tomorrow and say you've made a terrible mistake.'

His back turned towards her, Charles clenched his hands in his dinner jacket pockets. Why couldn't she just accept his decision? Why did she always need to control?

His silence seemed to increase her rage.

'Do you hear what I'm saying, Charles? I *won't* let you throw your life away like this! You are going to marry Peggy Dennison.'

He turned to face her then, saw the tightened lips and the glittering anger in her dark eyes. His mother was not used to being disobeyed; in the face of her rages his father had always given in. Edwina Rolfe was accustomed to getting her own way.

Only not this time, Charles thought stubbornly.

'Keep out of it, Mother.' There was a firm finality to his quiet words. 'This is something you don't understand.'

Face pale, Edwina Rolfe stared at her son. Never before had Charles openly defied her. For the first time she realized just how much the war had changed him.

But I'll win in the end, she promised, with silent fervor.

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Against backdrops of London, Paris, Warsaw and Sydney, Marianne, a beautiful European refugee, marries into a wealthy establishment family. But a mystery lies at the heart of the unusual union.

Haunted by her past, and rejected by a powerful mother-in-law who is determined to destroy this nobody who has 'trapped' her son, Marianne is pushed to the edge. In the scandal that follows, she is forced to pay a shocking price.

Almost three decades later, Marianne's daughter Eve, a high profile media star, is tormented by the mystery of her parents' past. When her search for the truth finds her charged with murder, Eve's only hope lies in betraying the woman who has become her closest confidante.

Jennifer Bacia has lived in Rome, London and Los Angeles. Her first novel was bought for a record-breaking advance and was an international best-seller. Jennifer is the author of 9 novels, including her latest release *Dark Side of the Harbour*, two works of non-fiction and dozens of short stories. She currently lives in Brisbane, Australia.

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