

A
HISTORICAL ROMANCE
COLLECTION



*Something
Borrowed*



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*A Heart
in Disguise*



RACHEL SCOTT MCDANIEL

CHAPTER 1



New York City
April 1, 1918

FOR THE SAKE of the Allied powers, Clara Westlake pretended to be a rock. Not in a figurative sense, as in an emotional slab of strength. No, she'd been ordered to imitate a stone. Her knee itched, and a rogue curl tickled the edge of her ear, but she focused on keeping still. After all, who ever heard of a fidgety boulder?

At least she'd chosen a breathable fabric, which helped, considering her whole person was swathed in her latest creation: an earth-toned camouflage suit. The morning dew seeped through the burlap, making her entire left side damp. This posed new questions. Would a soldier prefer a loose, airy fabric for comfortable breathing or one that would prevent moisture from leaking in? The soggianness could prove miserable over time. Would cotton panels on the sides help? She mused over the possibilities while remaining crumpled on a stretch of land in Van Cortlandt Park.

Because even though Clara was safely tucked beneath a towering maple tree in the Bronx, New York, the suit she now tested would be shipped overseas to an awaiting sniper. It was her job to make the soldier invisible to the enemy.

Her superiors had been satisfied with her work so far. She took encouragement from that. If the US government deemed her garments worthy, then who was Hollywood to so easily dismiss her? She'd been a lowly seamstress among elite designers, but it hadn't been her pieces that were

inferior. Perhaps if that'd been the issue, she'd still have her job at the studio. But she couldn't dwell on that fiasco at the moment. Or the betrayal from the man she'd blindly trusted.

Noise from the nearby walking path broke through her thoughts.

"There you are!" A masculine shout almost made her jolt.

Had she been spotted? She didn't recognize the man's tenor voice. But that didn't mean anything. Her superior, Lieutenant Towle, would often send naval officers through the park to test the efficiency of the suits. A human scavenger hunt. Thankfully, she'd chosen a hiding spot by the rock ledge. There was no risk of her getting stepped on. It had taken only one boot to the gut early on for Clara to wise up and position herself away from the trail.

Though her current angle prevented her from spying anyone along the footpath.

A rushed *click, click* of heels revealed the man hadn't been speaking to Clara but to an approaching lady. Relief swept through her for maintaining her cover, but she didn't exactly relish the idea of being an earwitness to a lovers' rendezvous.

Especially now, when romance had entirely lost its appeal. Which was a sad position for a twenty-six-year-old woman. Most ladies her age were already married with children. What was Clara going home to? An empty apartment. How was she spending her evening? Doing laundry. So, no. She wasn't thrilled to be a forced bystander to this couple's tryst. It would only remind her of how awful she'd been at past relationships.

Maybe she could crawl away. Though Lieutenant Towle had ordered all the camoufleurs to remain in place unless a civilian spotted them. Upon that occurrence, they were to assess their surroundings, select another hiding location, and try again.

From what she could hear, the couple exchanged warm pleasantries and, thankfully, continued on.

They hadn't noticed her.

A smug smile lifted her lips. Clara wasn't slight of frame. No, she was taller and a bit more rounded than most of the other camoufleurs, which made her concealment a triumph. She hadn't always appreciated her

height, but it had led her to learn to not only sew but also design her own clothes. A skill that brought her to this place—helping the war effort.

Just then, Clara's stomach decided to abandon its role as a vital organ and assume that of a jungle tiger. At least the couple was far from earshot. When had she last eaten? It didn't matter she couldn't think of it or—

Another ravenous growl.

She'd gained a lot more respect for the snipers who wore these camouflage suits. They camped out in no-man's-land for hours on end; meanwhile, she couldn't keep her stomach mum for forty minutes.

Maybe curling more onto her side would quiet her stomach. Or she could roll over and face the trail. Right now, she aimed at the footbridge, which, through the sheer face covering, afforded a pretty view of the blossoming cherry trees. Before she could shift, movement sounded behind her. Hopefully the two lovebirds weren't returning, deciding this curve in the path was more secluded for . . . amorous activities.

This could get awkward. Perhaps she should make her presence known.

Then again. She closed her eyes as if it helped her hear better. It couldn't be the couple. The footfalls were different. No sharp click of heels. Instead there was a shuffling noise.

Step. Swish. Step. Swish.

Whoever it was walking toward her seemed to be dragging something along the ground. Seconds later, another set of footsteps echoed on the walk. Heavy. Concise.

Deep voices revealed the persons in question were both gentlemen and unfortunately stood only a few yards from Clara. She wasn't one to eavesdrop. Though even if she wanted to, she couldn't. Not fully anyway. Because the men conversed in German. Which shouldn't be alarming except their hushed tones and shifty inflections almost suggested they were conniving something.

Her parents' longtime housekeeper, Liesl, was from Germany. Over the years, Clara had learned the basics of the language, which helped her pick out snippets of the current conversation. She listened closely, able to identify the words *crowd*, *April*, *island*, and *attack*.

She sucked in a breath.

Island and attack!

Her mind spun to the incident at Black Tom Island two years ago. Located in New York Harbor, it'd been the largest munitions depot in the country. Though ruled an accident, it was widely suspected German agents had blown it up. The massive explosion killed a handful of people, destroyed twenty million dollars' worth of military supplies, and rocked the ground like an earthquake, sending tremors as far as Philadelphia. The shrapnel even embedded into the Statue of Liberty, closing it down for a while.

Could these men be planning an attack? On Ellis Island maybe? There were always crowds. Or what about Staten Island? Long Island? Her gut clenched. This was awful. She needed to warn someone. But what would she tell them exactly?

The men finished their conversation, and she forced herself to remain still until their footfalls faded. Maybe they'd go in the direction of the bridge, so she could get a good glimpse of them. But no such luck. They retreated the way they'd come. She kept curled on the damp ground for a few more minutes, ensuring all was clear. Heart racing, she jumped from her tucked position among the other rocks.

At the very least, she could attest this camouflage suit had served its purpose. She'd blended into her surroundings. No one paid her any attention. Though right now Clara wished she'd paid attention to Liesl's German lessons. It sounded as if those men were up to no good, but that was all she knew. Thousands of soldiers had taken up arms and sailed to France, her brother included, to protect this nation. Yet it seemed a plan had been formed to bring the destruction here.

Not if she could help it.

She couldn't fight overseas, but maybe she could intervene in this instance. With quick movements, she unbuttoned the hood and the sides of the suit and climbed out, thankful to get a fresh intake of air. She folded the material into a tight square, and with a forced air of casualness, she fluffed her dark hair and walked the direction she suspected the men had gone. If she hustled, she may be able to catch up to them and follow at a distance. Possibly get a description of them for when she gave her account. The more details the better.

The birds seemed particularly loud today. A dog barked beyond the row of trees. She passed a mother pushing a baby buggy.

But after searching for ten minutes on various paths, there was no sighting of could-be saboteurs.

A sigh deflated her chest. She could be mistaken. Her imagination had been known to cause trouble. But something within her told her not to take what happened today lightly.

She had to report it.



“And you think these men plan to obliterate Ellis Island?” The police officer, Detective Jamison, rolled his pencil between his thick fingers, not bothering to jot down anything Clara had told him.

After the incident in the park, she’d located Lieutenant Towle and relayed everything. Her commanding officer had advised Clara to inform the police, since they had full jurisdiction over the city. But as she sat in a colorless room across the desk from a man with dull eyes and a bored expression, it was easy to deduce the detective wasn’t taking her seriously.

She notched her chin higher. “I truly feel it’s worth checking into.”

He glanced at his watch and blew out a breath.

“It may not be Ellis Island but another one,” she clarified. “Perhaps I could speak to the chief?”

That comment made his nostrils flare. “I only relay the cases that have merit to Chief Wallace.” He tapped his pencil on his notepad as if punctuating his remark. “So tell me, how do you suggest we *check into* your story? Did you get a clear glimpse of what these supposed German agents look like?”

“No.”

“Catch their names?”

“No.”

“Are you fluent in the German language to the degree you can translate their conversation without error?”

She shook her head, and Detective Jamison tossed his pencil onto the table in an *I rest my case* gesture. Heat forged her spine.

The detective didn't believe her. Why would he? She'd been in this position before. Miles across the country, in California. This current rejection didn't hold as much hurt as the one that had sent her running home to New York, but it still stung.

Nobody enjoyed being the fool.

"I'm sorry to waste your time, sir." She scooted back her chair. "I honestly felt there was something suspicious."

His brows softened a smidge. "This war has set us all on edge, Miss Westlake."

With a parting goodbye, she stood and made her way out of the office. She understood Detective Jamison's reasoning. She'd given him nothing concrete. No clear information to work with. But he'd so quickly dismissed her.

Outside the station, clouds slid along the slate sky. A fresh scent hung in the air with the promise of rain. Thankfully, her apartment—well really, Desmond's apartment—stood closer than her parents' home. While her brother had purchased the flat with the money he'd inherited from their grandfather, Desmond hadn't been a resident too long before he'd enlisted. She sent up a prayer for his safety. She hadn't received a letter from him since his initial one informing her that he'd made it to France, the world's battlefield.

Being only a year younger than him, she treasured how close they'd always been. Which was why she'd taken over the upkeep of his apartment while he was away fighting for freedom. Freedom that felt fragile, like a single thread pulled taut. She only hoped it wouldn't snap. What would the world look like in five years?

Her mind went back to the incident in the park. She may not have understood fully what the men had said, but she could judge by their dark inflections something wasn't right. Even now, recalling their sinister tones raised the hair on her arms. *Crowd, April, island, attack.* Those four words spun through her like a menacing chant.

And once again, no one believed her. But this time, she wouldn't sit idly by.



Captain Marcus Reeves disembarked from the steamer ship, completely altered from the man he was when he'd left a year ago. Back then he'd been brimming with patriotism, gunning to annihilate the enemy, and determined to make his mark on this war. Now he knew better. His gaze roamed the familiar sights of New York Harbor while he hiked his meager bag further onto his shoulder, grimacing at the awkwardness. His right hand, his dominant one, was permanently flexed, thanks to shrapnel from a German grenade and the blade of a surgeon's scalpel. Learning to acclimate with his left hand for simple tasks like readjusting his bag proved challenging. Maddening.

He inhaled deeply, as if to dislodge the shard of failure, but it seemed stubbornly embedded. This wasn't how he'd pictured his homecoming. He'd always assumed he'd return with his fellow soldiers after winning the war to a roar of celebration from the stateside crowd.

But no. He'd arrived alone on a supply ship; his comrades were still fighting. The only noises were ones a person would expect from a busy harbor. It all hummed through him, collectively yet somehow separately. The clanging anchor chains, caw of seagulls, hollers of stevedores, and occasional steam whistle. He could pick apart each sound. For the past months, he'd lived in a constant state of awareness, his senses on high alert, sifting every noise, categorizing which held danger and which didn't.

Now that he was back in New York, he should focus on toning down his jumpiness. But it seemed part of him now. Another failure he couldn't expel.

He shook his head. No sense standing around in self-pity. His wounds may have forced him home early, but other soldiers had lost much more. On that sobering thought, he picked his way off the pier to the busy street. He probably should hail a cab to his lodgings, but he always preferred walking over being carted around. The horrors he'd witnessed weren't quick to leave a man. It was as if the sharp edges of his emotions needed filing down, and each step relaxed him more. A respite he'd welcome, if only for a short time.

He started toward the Selkirk building—his new home until he decided what course to take. Major Palmer hadn't given him an exact date

to give his answer about a job at the recruiting office, but Marcus doubted the position would remain vacant long. If he accepted, Marcus would go from crawling under barbed wire to sitting at a desk. Most would welcome the break from the chaos, but he'd give anything to be back in France picking off German machine gun nests one by one.

A bicycle sped toward him, and he stepped out of the way, his right hand smacking a metal lamppost. His numb fingers felt nothing, which was a loud reminder he wasn't the capable man he'd been only a couple of months ago.

Maybe he'd hail a cab after all.

With the regions surrounding the piers swamped with activity, he quickly located a taxi and climbed in. He rattled off the address to the wiry man behind the wheel and in no time was at his destination at West 82nd Street.

The driver braked to a stop and subtly raised a brow.

The Selkirk wasn't the ritziest apartment complex in New York, but it was pretty close. The twelve-story building operated more like a hotel, and for a man who'd been sleeping in trenches, it might as well be a castle.

After paying the driver, Marcus entered the Selkirk. The polished floor was a jarring contrast to the caked mud Marcus had trudged through mere weeks before. The people around him were dressed in their finest, a fact that made him ache for the scrubby, haunted faces of his battalion. Faces that flicked through Marcus's mind when he closed his eyes. Those who remained and those who didn't.

An attendant approached, snapping Marcus from the waking nightmares.

"May I help you . . ." His gaze flicked to Marcus's uniform, probably to guess his rank, though he settled on, "Sir?"

"I'm staying in 5D." Marcus adjusted his bag. "I know the way."

The attendant's narrow face scrunched into a puzzled expression, no doubt wondering how a man like Marcus could afford a suite in the Selkirk. He couldn't. But that wasn't any of this fellow's business. So he shouldered past, opting for the stairs rather than the fancy elevator. Marcus trudged up the five flights and stood just outside the door to his home for the unforeseeable future. Fishing out his key, his thoughts traveled to

the owner of this apartment, who wasn't his brother by blood but by everything else. Marcus turned the knob and stepped inside.

His head reared back. Clothes were strewn about. Feminine things draped over chairs and hung from the picture rail. Standing amidst it all was a woman dressed only in a man's shirt.

Clara.

She shrieked, then promptly chucked a scrub brush at his head.