



THE ESSENCE OF MALICE

ASHLEY WEAVER

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CHAPTER ONE

Lake Como, Italy
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If my husband didn't die attempting this foolishness, I was going to kill him myself.

It was a glorious spring afternoon on the banks of Lake Como, but my mind was on neither the weather nor the stunning views of the lake with its backdrop of hazy blue mountains that lay before me. Instead, I stood on the balcony of the villa, a hand shading my eyes against the sun, and watched as a seaplane dipped and glided high above the glittering surface of the water. My husband, Milo, was at the controls, and to say I was displeased would be putting it mildly.

The morning had started out with no hint that such dangerous activities were impending. Milo had slept late, and I had gone for a walk along the shore after breakfast. I had arrived back at the villa an hour later to find a hastily scrawled note from Milo informing me that he was going out to fly a seaplane. I had had to read it twice to make sure I had not misunderstood. Considering he had never, to my knowledge, flown a seaplane – or any other type of plane, for

that matter – in his life, the prospect was somewhat alarming.

I could not, however, say it was entirely surprising. Milo had been lamenting only yesterday that it was still too cold for waterskiing, and so it seemed that he had seized upon another, more drastic way to risk bodily harm.

What was more, I knew perfectly well who was responsible for introducing him to this newest type of peril. It was André Duveau, our neighbour here at the lake. He had the villa nearest ours, and he and my husband shared an affinity for racing, gambling, and, apparently, endangering their lives. It was no wonder they had become fast friends.

The plane swooped low towards the water, and my heart leapt to my throat. Unconsciously, I reached out to grip the rim of the stone flowerpot that sat on a pedestal near the railing. Just when it seemed that the plane was going to plunge into the water, its nose rose and it swooped upward once again. I suddenly had the distinct impression that Milo knew I was on the balcony and was frightening me on purpose.

I watched the plane climb higher until, unable to stand there any longer, I turned around and went back into the villa. If Milo was determined to kill himself, I was not going to watch him do it.

Not an hour later, I heard footsteps approaching the sitting room where I had been examining a French fashion magazine and hoping I would not be required to wear mourning in the summer.

My husband came into the room, followed by André Duveau. They were both dressed casually in shirtsleeves

and trousers tucked into boots, the requisite flying costume, I supposed.

Milo had become tanned during our weeks in the Mediterranean sun, and his darkened complexion set off his black hair and made his blue eyes appear even brighter. I was not, however, in the mood to be swayed by how handsome he looked this morning, his hair tousled by the wind. I made sure to give no indication of my relief that he had arrived home safely.

‘So you made it back alive, did you?’ I asked, setting the magazine aside.

‘Got my note, I see,’ Milo said, smiling. He came to where I sat and leant down to brush a kiss across my cheek before dropping into the chair across from me, apparently not fooled by my show of indifference. ‘You needn’t have worried, darling. You know no one brings me back to earth as well as you do.’

I refrained from a retort and turned to our guest, dropping the pretence of acceptance. ‘I should be very cross with you, Mr Duveau.’

He smiled. ‘Allow me to beg your pardon, Mrs Ames. I should be devastated to find myself in your bad graces.’

Despite his very French name, he had almost no trace of an accent, having spent the majority of his childhood, he had told us, in England. He currently made his home in Paris, among other places, but Como was his favourite retreat. He owned an expansive villa and kept several aeroplanes that he flew frequently.

‘I cannot lay the blame entirely at your feet, in any event,’ I said to Mr Duveau as he took a seat. ‘Milo always does just as he pleases.’ Considering how Milo loved to live

recklessly, I supposed I was lucky that he had not taken to the skies before this.

Fortunately, we would not be in Como for much longer. We had only let our villa for a fortnight and would be returning to London within the week. Having spent the past month on holiday in Capri, we had been about to start the journey home when Milo had suddenly decided that a stop at Lake Como was in order. I had been perfectly willing to extend our stay in Italy, and our time here had been lovely and further improved by Mr Duveau's acquaintance.

'Then I am forgiven?' Mr Duveau pressed, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

'Yes,' I allowed. 'I suppose.'

He flashed another smile, and I thought it would be difficult for anyone to be cross with Mr Duveau for long. Like my husband, he possessed the irresistible combination of startling good looks and a great deal of charm. His fair hair always looked a bit windswept, whether or not he had been out flying, and, in the short time I had known him, I had seen many women flush under the dual appeal of his warm dark eyes and roguish grin.

'It is I who shall have to work to earn forgiveness,' Milo told him. 'My wife doesn't approve of aeroplanes.'

'I fully appreciate the benefits of aeroplanes,' I said. 'It is the idea of my husband careening about a thousand feet above the ground that doesn't appeal to me.'

'You may rest assured, Mrs Ames, that your husband has the makings of a fine pilot. A few more outings and perhaps we might be qualified to vie for the Schneider Trophy.'

I was not at all assured at the thought that Milo might

make a habit of flying, let alone take up participating in seaplane races. If that was the case, I certainly had a few things to say about the matter, but now was not the time to discuss it.

‘Will you stay for lunch, Mr Duveau?’ I asked.

‘It is a tempting offer, but I’m afraid I haven’t time. I’m returning to Paris in the morning, and I have a great many things to attend to before I leave.’

‘Oh, I didn’t realise that you were leaving so soon,’ I said.

‘I hadn’t intended to, but there are . . . certain matters that require my attention.’

A woman, I thought at once. The careful way he avoided mentioning just what urgent matter called him back made me suspect that there was an affair of the heart involved. I assumed that the lady in question would appreciate his flying to her side. It was rather a romantic gesture.

‘It’s a shame you must leave,’ I told him. ‘But I wish you safe travels.’

‘Thank you. It’s been lovely making your acquaintance. I feel as though I shall be leaving old friends behind. In fact, I’ve brought a parting gift for you.’ I hadn’t taken much notice of the small box in his hand until he held it out to me.

I took it and opened it to find a small glass bottle nestled in a bed of velvet. It was a bottle of perfume. I removed it from the box and examined it. The glass was cut in facets that gleamed in the light shining through the big windows behind me. ‘How lovely,’ I said. I removed the stopper and the rich floral aroma drifted upward.

‘It’s a brand-new scent,’ he told me. ‘You’ll be one of the first women to wear it.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said, taking the stopper from the bottle and dabbing it against my wrist. It smelt wonderful, soothingly familiar somehow and yet exotic.

‘I noticed that you wear gardenia,’ he said. ‘I thought you might like this. It’s called Shazadi. It’s floral, but there is a warm, sensual undertone to it that suits you.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I shall enjoy wearing it.’

He smiled. ‘I hope so. Now I must bid you adieu. It’s been a pleasure meeting you both. Perhaps I shall see you in London sometime?’

‘We should like that,’ I said.

‘And perhaps next time a fighter plane, eh, Ames?’ he said. Then he winked at me and made his exit.

When I was quite sure that he was gone, I turned to my husband. ‘I know it’s useless of me to ask you not to do such reckless things, but you might at least wish me farewell in person before you make me a widow.’

Milo, as I knew he would, dismissed my concern. ‘You worry too much, my lovely. Seaplanes are perfectly safe. Not much different than driving an automobile.’

I was not going to argue the point with him. I had learnt over the years to pick my battles. I could only hope that, with André Duveau gone, Milo would be left without access to this particular vice.

‘Seaplanes aside, it’s too bad Mr Duveau had to leave,’ I said. ‘He’s very charming.’

I waved my wrist before my face and breathed in the perfume once again. There was something rather intoxicating about the scent.

‘As far as that goes,’ Milo said, rising from his seat, ‘when a fellow starts noticing what scent one’s wife wears

and gifting her with perfume with “sensual undertones”, it may be time to dispense with his friendship.’

I laughed. ‘Is it so strange for him to remember that I wear gardenia? I thought it was very kind of him to give me the perfume.’

‘It wasn’t as kind as you think. He’s got some sort of financial involvement in a perfumery. They’ve probably given him crates of the stuff to foist off on people.’

‘How charming you are this morning,’ I said wryly.

He came to me and took my wrist in his hand, bringing it up to his nose. ‘It does smell lovely on your skin.’

‘Do you think the sensual undertones suit me?’ I asked softly.

‘Oh, immensely.’ He pulled me to him and lowered his mouth to mine, and I felt again that unaccustomed sensation of perfect contentment that had encompassed me as of late. I was rested, relaxed, and very happy. Only a year ago I had been convinced that my marriage was coming to an end. Now I felt that things had never been better.

Then suddenly Milo stilled, pulling back ever so slightly. ‘When did the post arrive?’

I looked up at him and saw that his gaze was directed over my shoulder. Apparently this non sequitur had come to pass as he looked down at the little table behind me where the morning post was stacked. ‘A little while ago,’ I said. ‘Winnelda brought it in. I haven’t looked at it yet.’

Milo released me and reached to pick up a letter. He was always terribly difficult to read, but I could sense a change in his mood as he examined the envelope.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

He hesitated ever so slightly and, though his expression

didn't change, I felt suddenly apprehensive. 'There's something I haven't mentioned to you,' he said.

A variety of scenarios sprang immediately to mind. Given my husband's somewhat colourful past, I imagined it could be any number of unpleasant things. I waited.

'I had an ulterior motive for stopping in Como,' he continued, doing nothing to set my mind at ease.

'Oh?' I enquired carefully.

'It has to do with Madame Nanette.'

I tried not to show my immense relief. Madame Nanette was Milo's former nanny, the woman who had, for all intents and purposes, raised him. Whatever Milo's secret was, it could not be as bad as I had feared.

'What about her?' I asked.

'I had a letter from her, forwarded by Ludlow, while we were in Capri. She's taken a post in Paris and will be travelling with the family to Como. She had seen in the society columns we were in Italy and wondered if we would stop to visit her.'

Milo had received several letters forwarded by our solicitor while we had been abroad, so it would not have attracted my notice. I did wonder why he had chosen not to share this with me before we left Capri. It was not as though the news was something unpleasant. Quite the contrary, in fact.

'How nice,' I said. 'I shall be glad to see her.'

He walked to the desk in the corner and picked up the letter opener, slitting open the envelope and pulling the letter from inside. His eyes scanned the words, his features impassive.

At last he looked up. 'She's going to remain in Paris. She asks that we come there.'

‘Is she unwell?’ I asked, suddenly worried. It was unlike Madame Nanette to request a visit. While she and Milo held each other in the highest regard, they did not remain in close contact. I had only met her twice, once at our wedding and once when we had passed through Paris at Christmas.

‘She doesn’t say. The letter is very brief.’

‘May I read it?’

He held it out to me without comment. I looked down at the piece of paper in my hand. It was thick, high-quality stationery embossed with a coat of arms, the crest of the house in which she now worked, I supposed.

Her penmanship was exceptional, beautiful script flowing in perfectly straight lines across the page.

My dear Milo,

I am unable to leave Paris after all. If you and your lovely wife could find the time to stop and see me, I would be most pleased.

Fondly,

Madame Nanette

In the postscript she had given her telephone number and asked him to ring her upon our arrival.

‘There isn’t much to it,’ I said.

‘No, there isn’t.’

There was something unsettling about the brevity of the letter, though I didn’t know what exactly.

‘Would you mind going to Paris?’ he asked.

‘Of course not. I think we should go as soon as possible. We’d better begin packing at once,’ I told him, mentally

beginning to make the necessary preparations. 'We can take the train tomorrow.'

He smiled suddenly, and it was one of those smiles that made me instinctively uneasy. 'Darling, how would you like to fly to Paris?'