



# RIVIERA GOLD

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## PROLOGUE

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WHY HAD I NEVER considered the possibility that an arms dealer might wield actual arms?

I'd probably assumed that a man who dealt in deadly munitions was only dangerous in the abstract and large-scale – like a battlefield commander incapable of euthanising the family pet.

No: *naturally* a person like this would have a gun to hand. And no ordinary old weapon, but the sleekest, most modern of automatic pistols. Not that the model made any difference at this range, not when it was pointed directly at my heart.

A child could not miss.

A moment of cold silence washed over me, followed by an absurd tumble of questions. Would it hurt? Yes, it was bound to hurt – but would my mind register the pain, or even the muzzle flash, before

flickering out? Did the man have any idea who I was? Could he know that pulling the trigger would bring down the wrath of the British government? Did he have any clue that the young woman before him was wife and partner to none other than Sherlock Holmes? Was he really prepared to ruin this spectacular carpet?

—and then I wrenched my thoughts away from idiocy and my eyes off the mesmerising black circle, looking past it into the old monster's dead eyes.

I cleared my throat. 'I wonder if we might have a little talk? Preferably before you shoot me.'

## CHAPTER ONE

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*Mrs Hudson: a conversation*

April, 1877 – London

THE WARM AIR SMELT of honey.

The air outside had been sharp with the usual London stinks of horse dung and coal smoke and rain, making the Duke's townhouse a welcoming refuge. Granted, by the end of the night the pleasure would be reversed, with exhausted, footsore dancers stumbling away from the smell of sweat and the stifling miasma of women's perfumes and men's hair oil. But for now, drifting from portico to cloakroom, hallway to the ballroom itself, all was promise and sparkle and the sweet aroma of beeswax candles.

Clarissa, whose escort was bent in some confusion over her dance card, caught the apricot colour of silk in a slice of mirror and took a half-step forward to admire the dress. It was new and expensive – very *à la mode*, the result of many hours of poring over sketches with the

dressmaker. The fashion for a long, well-corseted torso suited her, and the lightly bustled train at the back emphasised a woman's front in a way that would have been judged indecent just a few years ago. The nakedness of her shoulders, front and back, was both innocent and tantalising, and the curve of her hips would, she had learnt, tempt a dance partner's hands into a drift downward as the evening progressed and the golden candles began to gutter and wink out, one by one.

She reminded herself to be wary of men who had shed their gloves – and not only because of the stains their palms left on silk.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a figure in black, coming towards her in the looking glass. She turned, pleased that here was one acquaintance who might turn into a friend – an actual friend, rather than a useful name or camouflage. (It helped that she was married, and therefore out of the competition.) 'Dear thing, I was wondering if you'd come. Though how you manage to look so festive and delicious in black, I cannot know.'

The two exchanged near-kisses, and the newcomer shook her head in appreciation of Clarissa's apricot silk. 'Speaking of delicious! Oh, I do look forward to getting out of mourning and being permitted to dance again.'

'When you do, the rest of us will have to work twice as hard to be noticed.'

'That is not something you need to worry about, my dear Miss Hudson. So what mischief have you got up to, since I saw you last?'

'Mischief? Me?'

The two laughed, and then Clarissa's gentleman claimed his dance, and they were away.

The two young women met up again over supper, when Clarissa's favoured partner and the other woman's rather boring husband parked

them in seats, presented them with full glasses, then went off to load plates with tempting morsels.

Clarissa tried to cool her face with a fan the same colour as her dress. 'A night this warm, I'm a bit envious of your getting to sit at the sidelines. My face must be horrid and red.'

'Just nicely pink. I'm impressed that you haven't yet lost bits of your train to some careless set of shoes.'

'I was stepped on twice, but neither time fatally.'

'Trains are not the most practical things for the dance floor. So tell me, before the men come back, is there anyone you're hoping for an introduction to?'

Clarissa Hudson eyed her possible, would-be friend, wondering just how much the woman knew, or had guessed. A married acquaintance could be an asset, since the rules binding women's behaviour were relaxed the moment a ring went on. She'd even seen some of them smoking! But this one, married or not, was both new to London and an amateur in the sport of playing men. It was hard to judge how far her amusement would go before it turned suddenly to shock – or disdain. Either could be fatal to someone in Clarissa's position.

Still, even the most innocent of girls would be forgiven a degree of curiosity towards the opposite sex. After all, wasn't that what the season was for? And she was twenty years old: at the height of her powers when it came to feminine games. 'I don't suppose you know that tall gentleman with the striking eyes, speaking with the Earl of Shrewsbury?' The man was older than they, perhaps thirty, and impeccably clothed from his gleaming blonde head to his polished black shoes. There was an air of vitality about him that promised, at the very least, an interesting conversation.

Plus, everything about him spoke of money.

'You mean Zedzed? We haven't been formally introduced, but

from what I hear, I'm not sure he's someone you need to know.'

'Why ever not? And surely that's not his actual name?'

'No, it's from all the *zeds* in his name – he's Russian, or was it Greek?'

'How exotic. But why mustn't I meet him?'

'He has some rather dubious antecedents. An embezzlement trial, among other things, a few years ago.'

'He couldn't be too bad of an egg, not if the Duchess invited him.'

It was the sort of remark a naive young thing would make – but then, naive was the role Clarissa Hudson was playing these days. Her friend-to-be gave a little shrug.

'If you think so. I'm pretty sure my husband knows the Earl – I'll have him bring the two men over for an introduction. Once he's finished deciding whether I want salmon mayonnaise or chicken.'

While the woman in mourning craned her head in hopes of catching her husband's eye, Clarissa gazed over her fan at the Earl and his companion. Mr 'Zedzed' was really quite good-looking. She was not in the least surprised when he felt her scrutiny and turned those intense, pale eyes on her. But she was surprised at her own reaction.

A shiver ran down her spine.

Other girls would interpret this as a shiver of delight. Other girls would raise their fans and turn to a nearby friend and giggle, taking that physical reaction as the first sign of love.

Clarissa Hudson knew better. Oh, she was well practised at teasing behind a fan, at pretending innocence, at making use of the cloud of nearby girls to tantalise a male – but she also knew that the intensity of that return gaze was a danger sign. Turn away. Easier quarry lay elsewhere.

She sat, pinned by those pale and speculative eyes. The stuffy air closed in around her, cloying and heavy, until she forced her hand to



reach out for the other woman's arm, to tell her not to bother asking for that introduction . . .

Too late.

After that night, Clarissa Hudson was never quite as fond of the odour of honey.



# VENICE AND THE RIVIERA

May to July, 1925



## CHAPTER TWO

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VENICE HAD BEEN . . . UNEXPECTED.

Not that it didn't meet my every anticipation. Venice proved every bit as colourful and warm and entertaining as one might wish, taking my memories of past times and piling on a myriad of piquant experiences that would continue to amuse, on into my old age. Venice had been Cole Porter and moonlit adventures, an island of mad women and a community of sun-maddened expatriates. The place had awakened in me a bizarre gusto for cabaret dances, harmless flirtations, and lethargy – all of which I would have sworn impossible mere weeks earlier.

Of course, the serene city on the lagoon was also, in this modern era of 1925, Mussolini's Blackshirts and age-old corruption – threats that we had brought with us – and a startling revenge that Holmes and I could never have shaped on our own.

As I say: unexpected.

Had it not been for the Honourable Terrence Shields-McClintock, a new and almost instantaneous friend, I expect I would have stepped away from the society of Lido sun-worshippers without a thought, grateful to escape back into my normal world.

(Not that my normal world existed any more. Nothing awaited me in my Sussex home but solitude and the hum of beehives in the orchard. Holmes was off on some unlikely task – yes, that is *The Holmes*, Sherlock Holmes, my teacher-turned-partner-then-husband – while our housekeeper, Mrs Hudson, the very heart of the home, was . . . Oh, Mrs Hudson. Beloved and comforting presence, gone away, perhaps for ever.)

As we lounged on the Venice Lido one day in early July, the Hon. Terry had interrupted these sad and pointless thoughts. ‘You need to come sailing with us. Truly.’

I adjusted my sunhat against the rays. ‘Terry, I’ve spent the past two weeks in a series of increasingly odd watery excursions, from gondolas to speedboats—’

‘Stolen speedboats.’

‘—*borrowed* speedboats to – God help me – skis on top of water. If I don’t go back to the mainland soon, what form of transport might be next? Saddling a gargantuan seahorse? Donning artificial gills? In any event, why would anyone revert to an outmoded form of transport that takes weeks to arrive at a place one can reach by train in a day?’

‘Because you’ll never get the chance again, not on a sweet boat like the *Stella Maris*.’

‘I’ll probably never get the chance to enjoy frostbite on Everest or being eaten alive by dingoes in the outback, either. Yet somehow I manage to live with the knowledge.’

‘She’s a stunning piece of work, is the *Stella*. Far too good for her owner.’

‘Who is going as well.’ I’d met the man. Digby Bertram Wellington-Johnes (‘Call me DB – all the gels do!’) was such a stage version of English colonel, from hearty laugh to veined nose to long-out-of-date slang, that I kept waiting for him to give himself away by a wink. The most interesting thing about him was why on earth he’d decided to buy a sailing boat rather than a country house with a hunt nearby. A story he’d started twice in my presence and had never got to the end of.

‘Oh, he’s not a bad sort. A smidge dull, granted.’

‘A smidge? The man makes a dishrag seem exciting.’

‘Well, yes. But there’ll be great food. And you do like the others, and the Italian coastline is just smashing, and there’s loads of interestin’ ports along the way.’

‘Terry, I get seasick.’

‘So we’ll put you up at the prow. Or you can work the rigging, that’ll take your stomach’s mind off things.’

‘Crews never let guests do any of the actual work.’

‘This crew does – I know the captain, he’s happy to shout orders at anyone.’

‘Really?’ Hard, mindless labour did sound more appealing than watching waves go past. (Or listening to an empty house creak and settle.)

‘I posalutely guarantee it. And when we get there, you’ll be just shockingly fit and brown, so burstin’ with human kindness that you could lose it all in Monte and just smile as the croupier hauls away all your lovely lolly. That’s the voice of experience, don’t you know?’

One key word in the deluge reached out and tugged at my ear. ‘Did you say Monte? As in Monte Carlo?’

‘Didn’t I say? We’re headed for the Riviera.’

‘You didn’t, no.’

‘Well, we are – or DB is, at any rate. And yes, it’s the very same

Monte. Den of iniquity, the principality of pauperdom, city of suicides. Then again, it's also where Diaghilev's Ballets Russes has set up. And the Princess Charlotte's a charming girl.'

'Who?'

'Heir to the throne? She and her husband run the place while her father the Prince is off in France. They've got the bit in their teeth, going to bring Monaco into the modern age.'

'You don't say.'

For a man whose intellectual achievements consisted of memorised poetry, the Hon. Terry could be remarkably perceptive when it came to people. Something in my response betrayed my weakening, and he was on it in a flash. 'Aha – Monte Carlo, so Mrs Russell has a secret vice! Do we have to keep you from the tables?'

'I doubt it. I've never seen the appeal in setting fire to a lot of banknotes. No, it's that I have a . . . friend, who may be living there.'

'Oh, jolly good! Any friend of yours is bound to be a ripping gal. She is a gal?'

'She was once.'

'So it's settled. Yes? You'll come a-sailin' with us?'

He might have been a spaniel begging for a thrown stick. Still, I had to admit it was tempting. As he'd said, how often does one meet the opportunity to circumnavigate Italy on a spectacularly lovely sailing yacht? The dullness of our stage-colonel host would be counteracted by the surprisingly amiable company of the Hon. Terry and his friends. And if the weather turned, if the company palled, if seasickness, rich food, or the steady diet of lotos gave me indigestion, there would be any number of ports along the way that would provide an escape home.

'Oh, all—'

He did not let me finish, merely shouted in glee and threw his



arms around me, so impetuous a gesture that it brought with it a flash of my long-dead brother.

And so I had said goodbye to my husband and set off on the *Stella Maris* with the Hon. Terry and friends; twenty-two days of education in the subtle interactions of canvas and rope, tide chart and compass. I spent my days learning the language of wind in the sails and water in the seas, while scrambling to carry out orders. I spent my nights shovelling down huge servings of delicious food, then falling into my bunk to sleep like the dead. My hands blistered and went hard, my skin burnt and went brown, while I learnt about pulling in partnership, the proper way to throw my weight around, and just how deadly a gust of wind could be. When we were under sail, I was never entirely free of seasickness, but I did find that when I was busy enough, or exhausted enough, I could ignore it.

One night when we were halfway up the Tyrrhenian, with Sicily behind us and the outline of Sardinia yet to appear, it came to me that I had been quietly learning other lessons as well, from this man with no more intellect than a retriever. The Hon. Terry was teaching me about friendship.

I had no family, other than the one I had made through Holmes. My few friends were from university, since I'd somehow never found the time to create more. But on board the *Stella Maris*, distracted by aching muscles and thirst and hunger, the bursts of shared laughter and effortless camaraderie opened my heart.

In turn, I found I was ever more impatient for the end of the voyage – or rather, for the person I hoped to find there.

It was ten years since the cool, wartime morning in 1915 when I stumbled across Mr Sherlock Holmes on the Sussex Downs. Ten years since the afternoon I'd met the woman who would become my surrogate grandmother. Mrs Hudson called herself a housekeeper, but from that first day, she was so much more.

In all the decade that had followed, all those long years when I

came to know her worn hands, ageing face, and greying hair better than I knew my own, I never suspected that the heart beating under those old-lady dresses and old-fashioned aprons might belong elsewhere. Never suspected that she had been anything but a landlady-turned-housekeeper – until the past May, when a case brought to light a colourful, even shocking history. The history of a woman named, not Clara Hudson, but Clarissa. A history that came to claim her, and drove *my* Mrs Hudson from her home.

The thought of losing her had been more than I could bear. I pleaded to know where she was going, how she would get along, what she would possibly do without us. Her reply was less an answer than a vague observation – but as a straw, I would continue to grasp it until it crumbled.

It had been night. The motorcar that would take her away had been idling at the front door, and Mrs Hudson had paused in the act of pulling a pair of travelling gloves over those work-rough hands to consider my question. When she'd looked up, she had not looked at me, who loved her, nor at Sherlock Holmes, who had lived with her for more years than I had been alive. She had not even run her eyes over the doorway that she had polished, swept, and walked through for the past twenty years. Instead, straight of spine and with no sign of hesitation, she had lifted her head to gaze resolutely out into the darkness.

'Do you know,' she'd said thoughtfully, 'I've always been fond of Monte Carlo.'