



A DECEPTION AT  
THORNECREST

ASHLEY WEAVER

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# CHAPTER ONE

Thornecrest, Allingcross, Kent  
April 1934

It was on a sunny spring morning in the eighth month of my pregnancy that a woman arrived on my doorstep claiming to be married to my husband.

The day started out much like any other, with no hint that I would soon be involved in a melodrama worthy of any of the radio plays with which I had lately been amusing myself. I arose early and breakfasted heartily before going to the morning room to complete my correspondence. My husband, Milo, was in London for the weekend, tending to some business with our solicitor, and I was taking advantage of the solitude to catch up on my letter writing.

Things had been quiet at Thornecrest, our country house, over the past few months, and, for once, I didn't mind the slow pace. My pregnancy had been progressing well, and we were expecting our first child in a month. Many of the anxieties I had felt in the initial stages of my pregnancy had

begun to subside as we neared the birth. Perhaps it was the growing bond with my child. Or perhaps it was simply the knowledge that the baby's arrival was inevitable, whether I was prepared or not.

I was composing a letter to my cousin Laurel, who was on holiday in Greece, expressing just such a sentiment.

*I am growing more and more excited the closer I come to the baby's arrival. I had worried that I might be anxious, but I am feeling rather calm and confident about it all. Perhaps when one realises that life is about to be irrevocably altered, there is little choice but to embrace the change with open arms.*

Little did I realise how apt this sentiment would prove to be.

A brief clearing of the throat drew my attention from my letter. I looked up to see Grimes, our butler, standing in the morning-room doorway.

'Excuse me, Mrs Ames,' he said.

'Yes, what is it?'

He hesitated, and that was the moment I knew that something must be amiss. The butler was normally the epitome of unflappable professionalism, but I could tell he was doing his utmost to remain composed. That didn't seem to bode well for whatever he was about to say next, and I felt a brief surge of alarm that something might have happened to Milo before Grimes's next words put me more at ease.

'There is a young woman here . . .' The words trailed off, and I waited for him to continue, wondering at his uncharacteristic reticence.

‘She gives her name as . . . Mrs Ames,’ he said at last.

I frowned. Certainly it wasn’t my mother. Grimes was acquainted with her, and he wouldn’t be acting so strangely if it were she. Despite her somewhat aggressive personality, she was not the sort of person to ruffle Grimes’s feathers. No, it must be someone else.

But there was no other Mrs Ames. Though my maiden name and my married name were, coincidentally, the same, neither Milo nor I had another female relation with the same surname. Unless it was some distant relative of whom I was unaware.

‘Does she say if she’s a relative of mine or of Mr Ames’s?’ I asked, to prod him forward.

He seemed to be marshalling himself for some unpleasant task, and then he came out with it.

‘She claims to be Mrs Milo Ames, madam.’

I blinked. Surely he had misspoken. He did not correct himself, however, and I realised that he meant what he said.

‘Mrs . . . Milo Ames,’ I repeated after a moment of heavy silence.

‘Yes, she’s come looking for Mr Ames . . . her husband.’

This was growing more bizarre by the moment.

‘There must be some mistake,’ I said. It was the only logical conclusion.

‘Undoubtedly,’ he replied. I could tell, however, that he was not convinced. Grimes had never especially cared for Milo, and he didn’t put forth much effort to hide the fact. Even now that Milo was making great strides towards putting his past behind him, Grimes remained staunchly disapproving. Perhaps it was because Grimes had always

been loyal to Milo's father, and Milo and the elder Mr Ames had never seen eye to eye.

In any event, there was nothing to be done about this mysterious situation but to face it head-on.

'You'd better show her in,' I said. 'I'm sure we shall sort this all out.'

He nodded. 'Very good, madam.'

I rose from my seat at the writing desk and smoothed my hair, telling myself that I should remain calm. I didn't want to jump to conclusions. While it was true that my husband had something of a colourful reputation, I didn't think that bigamy would be much to his taste. After all, one marriage had often seemed to require much more effort than he cared to exert.

Nevertheless, I was a bit flustered by the idea that someone else was claiming to be married to him. It was all so strange.

A moment later Grimes returned to the room, followed by a young lady.

'Ah . . . Mrs Ames, madam.'

'Thank you, Grimes.'

I knew he was curious, but he was too proper to linger in the hope of overhearing something; he turned and left, closing the door softly behind him.

I turned my gaze to my visitor. The girl was young and very pretty, with pale blonde hair and cornflower-blue eyes. She was also distressed. Though she tried to hide it, I could tell that she was in a state of barely suppressed agitation. Her gloved hands were clenched at her sides, her face was ashen, and she was breathing much more quickly than the walk from the front hall to the morning room would normally dictate.

I was quite sure that Grimes had not told her what she was walking into, and I tried to decide the best way to broach the subject.

‘Good morning,’ I said, deciding upon the conventional greeting.

‘Who are you?’ she asked bluntly. There wasn’t any aggression in her tone, and I took it that she had been expecting to see Milo . . . or whoever she thought her ‘Mr Ames’ was.

‘I’m Mrs Ames,’ I said.

This caught her off guard. She looked a bit uncertain then, and I considered how I should proceed. One wasn’t exactly taught the proper etiquette for such situations, after all.

‘Mrs Ames?’ she repeated at last.

I nodded.

‘Who . . . who is your husband?’

‘My husband’s name is Milo,’ I said.

She grew a shade paler, if possible, and it seemed to me that she swayed ever so slightly on her feet. I took a step towards her, but she collected herself and met my gaze before looking me over. It was, I thought, the first time she had looked closely at me, and her eyes stayed for a moment on my rounded stomach.

‘You’re going to have a baby,’ she said in the dazed tone of someone who has been met with a terrible shock.

‘Yes.’ For some reason, I felt almost guilty admitting it. She burst into tears.

Good heavens, this was going poorly.

After the briefest of pauses I hurried to her side, trying to decide how best to comfort her. Displays of great

emotion had always been vexing to me, and this situation was particularly bewildering.

‘He told . . . He said that he loved . . .’ Her words broke off into a sob, her face buried in her hands.

I was at a total loss, but I was now certain that it wasn’t Milo who had seduced this young woman. He wouldn’t have made such a rash declaration.

I gently took her arm and led her towards the white Louis XIV sofa before the fireplace. She sank into it, still crying into her hands, and I looked around for a handkerchief. It was, I feared, too late to spare her gloves, but she might at least have a proper place to wipe her nose.

I discovered a clean handkerchief in the drawer of my writing desk and brought it to her.

She took it, still crying, but it seemed as though she was beginning to get control of her emotions.

I lowered myself into the chair beside her and waited for her to speak.

‘I’ve made such a fool of myself by coming here,’ she said at last.

‘Why don’t you start from the beginning?’

She sniffed, wiping her eyes on the corners of the handkerchief, and then looked up at me.

‘I met him in Brighton. I was taking a little holiday there. I’m a typist for a small company in London, but I had a few days off and a bit of savings, so I thought that I could benefit from the sun and sea air. It was very quiet since it was the off-season, but I enjoyed that. I’m not much of one for crowds of people.’

I nodded encouragingly.



‘And then, one day, I was walking along and there he was. The most handsome gentleman I had ever seen in my life.’

Though I did not believe this young woman had married my husband, the description was accurate enough. Milo was remarkably good-looking, a fact that never failed to attract the attention of women wherever we went.

Of course, he was not the only handsome gentleman in England, and it was a stretch of the imagination to believe it was he who had bumped into this young woman on a beach in Brighton. Milo didn’t even particularly care for beaches; they wreaked havoc on his Italian leather shoes.

‘When did this happen?’ I asked.

‘It was the last week of January,’ she answered promptly.

Despite knowing that it could not possibly be my Milo to whom she was referring, my traitorous mind cast itself back to see if I could remember his whereabouts at that time.

He had been gone, I realised. He had been tending to some business affairs regarding a nightclub in which he had invested. Though I was quite certain he had been in London at the time, I supposed he might very well have gone south to Brighton instead. Not that I believed he would do such a thing.

‘Would you like some tea?’ I asked suddenly. I ought to have offered before now, but the truth of it was that I wasn’t as concerned with my duties as hostess as I was with delaying her story. For some reason, my unease was building, and I needed a few moments to collect my thoughts.

But she shook her head. ‘I don’t care for any, thank you.’

And so there was nothing I could do but say, ‘Then please continue.’

‘I’m afraid I was gaping at him,’ she said. ‘He looked

just like a cinema star. I knew he was going to walk right past me, so I thought that I would look at him for as long as possible. But he stopped in front of me. I stared at him for a moment, and then he leant down and picked something up out of the sand. “You’ve dropped your glove,” he said. I hadn’t even realised that I had let it go. He held it out to me, and when I reached to take it, our fingers touched.’

I found myself caught up in her romantic story, but the sudden recollection that she was allegedly telling it about my husband took some of the fun out of it.

‘And so you formed an attachment?’ I said, hoping to spare myself some of the details. I still didn’t believe it was Milo, but it was all so strange. What I wished more than anything was that he would suddenly appear in the doorway and straighten all of this out.

‘He remarked how cold my fingers were, and would I fancy a warm cup of tea? So we went to the tea house. We talked for hours. And after that, we spent a great deal of time together over the next week. When it was nearly time for me to return to my job, I didn’t know how I was going to bear it.’

I thought back to being young and in love, to the undulating waves of bliss and confusion and anguish. Everything had always seemed so very urgent, as though the end of the world would come if romance were thwarted. The future had been alive with possibilities. And then suddenly one was married for six years and heavily pregnant. How quickly life goes by.

‘. . . and he said he didn’t want to say goodbye either. And so we decided that we would be married.’

‘Just like that?’ I asked, rather surprised at the swiftness of it all. Even at my most romantic, I could not envisage

marrying a man I had known for only a few days.

She nodded. 'We . . . we spent one more day together.' One more night, their wedding night, was what she meant. I could tell that from the way she blushed and avoided meeting my eyes.

So this man, whoever he was, had taken her to bed under her assumption that he was her husband, though he had clearly been using a false name. What a wicked trick to play on a young, innocent girl.

'And then?'

'Then I had to return to my job, and he told me that he would follow me to London shortly. But . . . but he didn't. I've been waiting for so long, and I began to wonder if something terrible had happened to him, so I thought I'd better see if I could locate him myself.'

'Did he give you this address?' I asked, wondering how far the charlatan had taken his ruse.

She shook her head. 'I found his name in the London Directory. There was a listing for a flat and . . . and a big house in Berkeley Square. I . . . I thought it must be some mistake, for he had told me he didn't have a place to live in London. But he had mentioned that his people came from Kent. And then I found out that he had this property, so I decided to come here. I . . . I didn't know about you, of course.'

'Of course,' I said gently.

We sat for a moment, both of us, I am sure, contemplating how we might proceed from here. It seemed clear that either there was another handsome Milo Ames who hailed from Kent and had failed, for reasons unknown, to reunite with his new bride in

London or that someone was using Milo's name, for what purpose I couldn't imagine.

The simplest way to deal with things, I knew, would be to have Milo come home directly. I ought to see if he could be reached at Mr Ludlow's office.

It seemed the young lady was thinking the same thing, for she looked up at me. 'When do you expect him back?'

'In a few days, but I should like to clear things up before then.'

She nodded.

'He said his name was Milo Ames?' I asked.

She nodded again. 'Yes.'

'And he was from Kent.'

'Yes.'

'I assume someone must be using my husband's name. What did the man look like?'

I thought I detected a bit of sympathy in her expression as I asked the question. I'm sure she thought I was some sort of deluded cuckquean, left pregnant and alone while my husband ran about seducing other women.

A year or two ago, I might have believed it myself. But, though Milo had done his share of outrageous things in the past, he had left most of his wild ways behind him. Even in the wildest of times, I didn't think that he would have seduced a young woman under such outrageously false pretences. He had never had any difficulties winning women without wedding them. Myself excluded, of course.

'As I said, he looks rather like a cinema star: tall and very dashing, with black hair and the bluest eyes you ever saw.'

Tall and dark. Black hair, blue eyes. Though Milo was certainly not the only gentleman who might fit this bill, it did fit him.

A thought occurred to me. ‘Do you have a photograph, perhaps from your wedding?’

It seemed to me that she flushed slightly, and she dropped her gaze. ‘I . . . I have one, but I left it in London. I didn’t . . . foresee needing it.’

‘Of course. Well, I’m certain there must be some explanation for all of this. Rest assured, we shall get it sorted out in no time.’

‘Yes, I . . . thank you, Mrs . . . Mrs . . .’ She couldn’t quite bring herself to call me by the name she had thought now belonged to her.

‘Why don’t you call me Amory,’ I said. ‘It will make things easier.’

She drew in a relieved breath. ‘And please call me Imogen.’

‘Very well. Now that that’s settled, perhaps we ought to come up with some sort of plan. The first thing we need to do, of course, is speak to Milo about all of this. He’s in London now, but I should be able to contact him and tell him to come home.’

She looked aghast at the suggestion. Her face grew a shade paler before my eyes. ‘Perhaps . . . perhaps it would be better if you were to speak to him without me.’

I could see that she didn’t relish the idea of some kind of dramatic scene. Despite my suggestion she had been deceived, she still thought we were talking about the same man. The only way to rectify that would be to have her meet Milo. I felt bad that Imogen was soon to learn she had been led astray by some rotten imposter.

‘I can certainly speak to him alone first,’ I said. ‘But I think you’ll find that my husband is not the man you met. What you have told me is a very serious matter. I must believe that there has been some kind of mistake, that someone is claiming to be Mr Ames for some unknown purpose.’

She nodded, though I could see that there was some little hint of doubt in her clear blue eyes.

An idea struck me suddenly. She might not have a photograph, but I did. I got up and crossed to the fireplace. There was a photograph of Milo and me there in a small gilt frame. We could clear up at least the question of his identity immediately.

I picked it up and walked to her. I expected, as I handed it to her, to see a look of confusion cross her face. But, instead, she looked up at me, her expression both miserable and pitying. ‘Yes. That’s him.’