
Chapter 1

Thanksgiving: Thursday, November 25, 1920

No Ackermann family holiday gathering was complete without a forced performance by a hapless conscript. The household was a more-or-less benevolent dictatorship and the tyrant in charge delighted in watching and listening to members of her extended family sing, play the piano and recite verse. No one understood this quirk of the Ackermann matriarch, Lucille, but everyone indulged it because in almost every other way Lucille was an exceptionally lovable person.

Lucille's elder daughter, Romilda, loved her mother devotedly but had to wonder how much the current situation was taxing Great Aunt Frances' affection for her niece Lucille.

Great Aunt Frances glanced around nervously, wringing her hands. "Lucy, dear, I don't think anyone wants to hear my Dame Carruthers just now. We'll be sitting down to supper shortly. I'd hate to put anyone off their feed and spoil the lovely meal I'm sure your people are about to present."

Lucille laughed the sweet bell-like sound that Romilda would always associate with home, love and on-demand recitations of

Anglo-Saxon poetry. Still, Romilda suspected that no amount of endearing laughter would reconcile poor Great Aunt Frances with her niece's demands.

Lucille clapped her hands with glee. "Oh please, Auntie. Just one song?"

Great Aunt Frances sighed, bravely resigned to her fate. She glanced about, making brief eye contact with her nephew William who was seated at the Ackermann family piano. William had only just completed a recital at his sister Lucille's request, and knew he was being press-ganged into service as accompanist to his aunt. Lucille was elated.

"Her first song, Willy! Dame Carruthers' first song. You know, 'the screw may twist and the rack may boil'."

"That rack may *turn*, Lucy dear, but I'm not sure what circumstances would produce a *boiling* rack."

Lucille laughed again and clapped her hands. "See, Auntie, this is why you need to sing the aria. I'd get all muddled."

Resigned to their fates, Frances and William did as Lucille demanded. Great Aunt Frances squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. William flipped through the Gilbert & Sullivan sheet music until he found the aria Lucille requested. As the first few notes of "*When Our Gallant Norman Foes*" soared and Great Aunt Frances' golden contralto reverberated through the parlor, Romilda relaxed into her chair and looked around at her family.

Her beloved mother Lucille, of course, silver fingerwaves gleaming in the lamplight; Frances and William at the piano; Romilda's father and Lucille's devoted knight, Roland; cousin Augusta and her darkly handsome violinist beau Rex; and, of course, Romilda's baby sister Odelind and Odelind's sweetheart James. Gathering to celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday with her favorite family members filled Romilda with a warmth that was dimmed only slightly by the lingering pain of missing Edwin. Romilda closed her eyes as the golden tones of Frances' deep voice washed over her. She conjured the image of Edwin's face.

April, five months away, would mark the third anniversary of Edwin's death.

Keenly as she missed her late fiancé, Romilda was conscious that Edwin—laughing, witty, warm-hearted Edwin—wouldn't want her to be gloomy in the midst of a family celebration. She opened her eyes and forced a smile, hoping her mood would soon match her appearance. Romilda managed not to gaze mournfully at Odelind and James, so young and so obviously in love, and instead concentrated on paying her full attention to Frances and Willy and their admirable performance.

Great Aunt Frances sang and sounded as excellent as Romilda imagined she would have from the stage at the Casino Theater in New York City back in '88. Romilda listened. Her enjoyment of Frances' performance, still sterling even thirty years past her prime, gradually thawed the grief riming Romilda's heart. The grandiosity of Gilbert & Sullivan's tribute to the Tower of London held Romilda's attention.

After the final chorus, Lucille led the family in a standing ovation.

Odelind scampered over to the piano. "You played beautifully, Uncle Willy." She threw her arms around William, who smiled sheepishly.

"A finer Dame Carruthers I can't imagine," Romilda congratulated her great aunt, who was beaming in spite of her earlier protestations. Frances may have retired from the stage, but the stage would never truly be through with Frances.

"You're too kind, dear." Frances shook her head. "Your mother and her demands!"

"Well, I can't complain if Mama's demands result in such high-caliber entertainment."

The old lady patted Romilda's arm. It was time to head into the dining room for Thanksgiving dinner, but the merry conversations bubbling among the group did not pause as they migrated from room to room. Chatting with Frances about New York and

her years on the stage, Gilbert & Sullivan in general and *The Yeomen of the Guard* in particular, and the clatter and clamor of the family arraying itself around the Ackermann dining room table were almost adequate distractions from the fact that one face wasn't among the beaming visages, and never would be.

As the family bent their heads in prayer, Romilda squeezed her eyes shut and prayed: *Thank you, Lord, for two beautiful years with Edwin. Thank you for my family. Thank you for all the comforts we enjoy, and the meal we're about to share. All I ask is I keep my blessings in mind and not allow myself to sink again into the swamp of sorrows. Amen.* With a deep breath, Romilda opened her eyes and rejoined the family with renewed determination.

The meal was pleasant. Lucille led the conversation with her usual aplomb and there was much laughter all around the table. Gradually Romilda's mood truly did improve, though the fact that she'd been struck so suddenly by Edwin's absence nagged at the back of her mind. She thought of him daily, of course, and imagined she always would, but it had been a year or so since Romilda pulled herself out of a morass of numbness and despair so severe that her family hadn't known what to do, and had whispered about seeking treatment advice from a psychiatrist until Romilda appeared to shake off the worst of her melancholia.

Since that time, Romilda had resigned herself to living out her days without romantic love. Edwin had been her last chance, really; it was an unlikely romance from the start and in a horrible way she wasn't surprised when fate stole him from her. At the darkest and bitterest point of her deep mourning, Romilda figured poor Edwin's death was merely the universe correcting a clerical oversight: *that Romilda Ackermann was never intended for marriage! Nuptial bliss is not for her! Take away the boy and let her get back to her rightful place in life.*

That rightful place, Romilda reflected as she chewed a mouthful of roast turkey, was right behind Odelind. Her little sister, whom she loved with the fire of a thousand suns and

admired fiercely, was a spark, a flame, a brilliant torch illuminating everything in her orbit. Romilda didn't even resent her status as Odelind's plain and steady sister. There was no shame in being a distant, *distant* second to Odelind Ackermann: Odelind was slender and swanlike, distinctly brilliant of intellect and accomplished in every artistic endeavor to which she applied herself, she had high cheekbones and wide, startled eyes and her lips were a perfect Cupid's bow. Odelind was funny, kind and simply magnetic.

Romilda understood that she herself was not without laudable qualities. She too was intelligent, though of a steadier and more studious nature less likely to be described as 'sparkling' or 'brilliant'. Romilda was bookish and thoughtful. She liked to take an idea and let it roll around inside her head so it could collide with existing ideas and new knowledge unearthed from books. She rejoiced to sit in silence and explore ideas in endless journals for no one's eyes but her own. Romilda was content to keep eighty percent of her thoughts to herself. Between Odelind and their mother, the Ackermann household didn't lack for witty conversation and laughter. Generally, Romilda was a reasonably happy person, rarely resentful.

Still, despite her overwhelming love for her little sister, Romilda couldn't help but feel a pang of wistfulness when she caught sight of James gazing rapturously at Odelind. The only person on earth who would ever look at Romilda the way James looked at Odelind, had died on an army cot at Fort Riley, Kansas, two years, seven months, and twenty-four days ago. So she would be a spinster, and that was all right or at least Romilda had determined that she could settle for *close* to all right. And Romilda *was* genuinely happy for Odelind, her pretty little sister, and for James who loved Odelind and was wildly loved in return. Before April 1, 1918 Romilda never would have guessed it was possible to be truly happy and so sad at the same time. Two and a half years later, she understood it was indeed possible to spend

much of one's time deeply happy even as a fog of sadness lingered.

After dinner, which was followed by rounds of pumpkin pie and coffee and Mama's signature dessert – cranberry mousse, the one item Lucille insisted on preparing herself – more coffee, and three spirited rounds of charades, everyone was pleasantly exhausted. Conversation tapered off and the lull that ensued was the first moment of actual silence since the family guests had arrived hours earlier.

Romilda glanced around the parlor. Mama and Papa sat side-by-side on the davenport, fingers entwined and Mama's head on Papa's shoulder. Great Aunt Frances perched on the piano bench, eyeing the stack of sheet music at her side. Uncle William stared out the window into the blackness of the November night—somewhere out there was Rau Lake, with its little island densely wooded with fir trees, but all one could see was the reflection of the scene in the Ackermann parlor.

Cousin Augusta stared into the fire, no doubt silently untangling the plot of her next novel while she watched the dancing flames. Her sweetheart Rex was somewhat inscrutable, sitting in the corner, his expression unreadable. Rex, blind since childhood, wore dark glasses even indoors, which lent him an air of mystery that complemented his patrician good looks, cutting wit and status as an internationally recognized violinist. Like Odelind and James, Augusta and Rex were very, very lucky.

James cleared his throat. He and Odelind exchanged meaningful looks. James stood.

“You know I'm not a fellow with much of a way with words but, um, there are times when a fellow simply has to, um, reach deep down inside and *find* the words. The important words,

p'raps the most important words a fellow will speak in his lifetime."

Odelind beamed at James. Everyone else made surreptitious eye contact with each other, curiosity and concern evident on all faces. James grew red in the face, but he soldiered on.

"Yes indeed, there are times a fellow and his girl—" he paused to grin broadly at Odelind, who grinned right back "—must choose just the most perfect of words with which to explain something important, maybe the most important thing, to the people who are most important to them in the world."

Odelind, still perched gracefully on the davenport, blurted, "We're getting married!"

A collective gasp was followed by a rush of congratulations.

Roland, Odelind and Romilda's father, grasped James' hands and pumped them up and down in an uncharacteristic display of emotion. "My boy, my boy! My new son! I had no idea you'd make the announcement so soon. What a wonderful Thanksgiving surprise. So glad you said it, though. I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep the secret." Roland winked at his son-in-law elect.

James, now blushing furiously, could only stammer his thanks as his face grew redder and redder.

Romilda said nothing, but caught Odelind's eye. The sisters shared a conspiratorial smile, the secret crooked grin they'd reserved for each other since childhood. Romilda leaned in and whispered to Odelind.

"My infant sister? A blushing bride?"

"It's true! Isn't it dreamy?"

Romilda nodded. "Dreamy as can be. I take it the timing alone surprises Papa?"

"Oh yes, James spoke to Papa and asked his permission a few months ago. Mama knew too. But they understood we weren't in a hurry and wanted to make a big announcement when we were

ready. James and I talked about it all the time but he made a formal proposal down on one knee last week.”

Playfully, Romilda punched Odelind in the arm. “I’m so happy for you it’s sickening.”

Odelind giggled. “You always know what to say, favorite sister.”

Cousin Augusta floated over, her mane of onyx-black hair framing the slender face Romilda had always quietly envied. Augusta’s violet eyes flashed with delight. She seized Odelind and kissed her cousin once on each cheek. “You little sprite! Rex and I wish you a hundred years of nothing but happiness.”

Odelind, who idolized the beautiful and accomplished Augusta, blushed. “Thank you. I hope you can attend the wedding. I know you travel so much...”

Augusta scoffed. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. When is the happy day?”

“Oh, James and I want to have the wedding on New Year’s Eve.”

A gasp of shock loud enough to silence all conversation proved to have its origin in Lucille.

“What’s the matter, Mama?” Odelind asked, worried.

“New Year’s Eve?”

“Yes, we thought—”

“But that’s so soon! It’s only two months!” Mama whirled on her heel and caught Papa by the hand. “Roland, explain to them it’s only two months!”

Papa blinked. “Darling, it’s actually only one month...”

“I’d always assumed you’d be a May bride. The wisteria will be at its loveliest, the teahouse will be heavy with roses, there can be a lovely Champagne punch out on the verandah—under the wisteria! Won’t that be nice? Punch under the wisteria?”

Relieved that her mother’s objections weren’t more serious in nature, Odelind set about soothing Lucille with little pats on the cheek and reassurances that she and James would keep the cele-

bration simple in its elegance and there was no need to fret, *et cetera*. Lucille was eventually brought around to accept a New Year's Eve wedding, though she was adamant that two months would barely be time to put together an acceptable celebration but they'd manage somehow.

Gradually, Romilda found she had retreated to the furthest corner of the parlor. She watched her family hug and talk animatedly and plan for this wonderful wedding. They seemed to be surrounded by a halo of gold, and although Romilda never doubted she too was loved and appreciated by everyone in the room, she couldn't shake the sensation that she was located just outside the magic circle and couldn't find her way in.