

UNDONE BY THE STAR

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A Stephanie Browning Romance

ONE

Hurriedly tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, Alexis Kirkwood dashed across the cobblestoned courtyard and ran up the back steps of The Sadler Hotel. As always, the moment she entered the hotel's hushed interior, she straightened, breathed in its luxurious ambience, and felt a rush of pride. This was where she was meant to be.

"Psst, Alex."

Barely breaking stride as she crossed the plush carpeting, Alex glanced over her shoulder. Her friend Kate was angling towards the dining room, a sheaf of luncheon menus under one arm and a gleaming silver tray under the other. Alex slowed. "I thought you were on nights?"

Kate fell in beside her and nodded wearily. "Double shift. I said I'd stay until six...and your shirt's out at the back," she whispered as she spun off. "Wouldn't want to blow your image...."

Alex had to laugh. It served her right for rushing. More than a dozen employees might be out with the flu, but it was business as usual at The Sadler. And, as head concierge at one of London's most exclusive hotels, that included dressing the part, perfectly tailored suit, crisp white blouse and two-inch heels. Slipping behind one of the potted palms flanking the library, Alex dealt with the offending shirttail.

She was on her way towards the front of the lobby when the night manager flagged her down, his normally keen eyes red-rimmed with fatigue.

"Miss Kirkwood. A few details if I may?" He brought her up-to-date on a variety of scheduling and housekeeping issues, including the anticipated arrival of a high-profile guest who had never stayed with them before. "Unfortunately, we have a plumbing problem in the VIP suite and no one on site to deal with it...as yet. I know it's not your job, Alex, but if you could watch out...."

"I'd be happy to."

“Although you might want to start with the Right Honourables,” he added with a wry smile and a tilt of his head. “George is already out front with the car.”

One look told Alex everything else she needed to know. The Rt. Honourable Matheson Smith-Jones and his wife were in an alcove, one fuming, the other anxiously patting his pockets.

After bidding her colleague farewell, Alex threaded her way through the lobby towards them. Their capacity for mislaying theatre tickets and room keys was legendary, but Alex had known them for a very long time.

“Lovely to see you again,” said Alex as she reached the distraught couple. “Your driver is waiting, and...voilà!” she exclaimed, deftly plucking a small envelope from the elderly gentleman’s breast pocket, “...here are your tickets!”

He beamed. “Bravo, Miss Kirkwood!”

“Shall we go then?” asked Alex. She leaned over to secure the open handbag dangling from Penelope Smith-Jones’ arm, but the Rt. Honourable’s wife had a fresh target. A very large, dark-haired man wearing sunglasses and a hoodie was bearing down on them from beyond the elevators.

The older woman bristled with indignation.

So did Alex.

Dishevelled men strolling through the lobby were not unheard of, but this one was particularly unsettling. But why? What was it about him? Her eyes dropped to the scuffed work boots, automatically checking them for dirt, swept up the length of his jeans, tantalisingly snug, and then landed on the beat-up canvas hold-all in his left hand. Her gaze rose, drawn by the square jaw brushed with the perfect shadow of a beard. His mouth was full, lips mobile but firm. His eyes...well, it was probably a good thing they were hidden by sunglasses.

“Miss Kirkwood?” he asked hefting his bag as though it were as light as a feather. “I was told at the tradesman’s entrance that you were the one to see.”

Her brow creased. “But why would anyone send you...ah....” This must be the substitute plumber. Interesting. If this was the guy they sent to fix the toilets, she would have to spend a little more time in maintenance.

But with the Rt. Honourables hovering beside her, the hotel booked solid, and a non-flushing toilet in the VIP suite, she had to take charge. “You’re late,” she said.

“In that case...,” He slowly removed his dark glasses. “...I do apologize.”

Blue. His eyes were the most arresting shade of blue, aquamarine and crystal-clear, and they were now eyeing *her* with interest. Alex felt her pulse quicken; a wave of heat rose from her chest, and for a moment, the clock stopped. *Oh for heaven’s sakes*, she scolded herself, just because he was the most gorgeous handyman she’d ever seen, was no excuse. And blue eyes notwithstanding, he should have waited for her in the service area.

“Just so you know...you are here to fix the plumbing, not swan around the lobby.”

There was an instant of silence. “Yes, ma’am.”

This was bordering on farce, and she, Alexis Kirkwood, was in danger of being unprofessional. “Stay here,” she instructed the interloper. “And try to look invisible. You’re a plumber, not a movie star.”

His blue eyes sparkled, his mouth twitched, but he said not a word.

Satisfied, Alex swung her attention back to the Smith-Joneses. “The matinee has been sold out for weeks,” she said brightly as she eased the elderly couple outside and into their waiting car. “And the reviews have been fantastic.” She stepped back and handed the theatre tickets to their driver. “You will have them there on time, won’t you, George?”

“No worries, Miss Kirkwood. I’ll see them safe.”

“Right then.” With a brisk tug on her suit jacket, Alex spun round, took a deep breath and went back inside, only to find Cyril, the assistant manager, lying in wait.

“A word, if you please.”

Alex’s eyes automatically slid past him to the plumber.

He wagged his fingers in her direction.

“Exactly,” said the assistant manager following her sight lines. “He tells me you told him to wait there. The ‘why’ is beyond me,” he huffed, “but do escort him upstairs.”

She humoured him with a “Yes, sir.” Cyril’s angst was understandable. He wasn’t normally in charge of reception any more than she was responsible for repairs, but needs must, thought Alex, as she made a beeline for the man in question.

“Everything okay?” he asked as she approached.

“Follow me,” Alex ordered. She led the way to the hotel’s double bank of elevators. “We might as well go straight up from here.”

After the gentle buzz of the lobby, the intimate interior of the elevator was making Alex much too aware of the man beside her. She could see their reflection in the elevator’s highly-polished brass walls. Alex was proud of her height, but she liked the fact that he towered above her. And he smelled unexpectedly good, like freshly-laundered cotton.

Her eyes slid to his mouth to find him grinning at her reflection. “Shouldn’t we push the button?” he asked.

Mortified, Alex reached out and jammed the button for the fourth floor. Four times.

“That should do it.”

Her eyes shot to his and stayed.

It wasn’t too late to check his hands for callouses. Even a little dirt under the fingernails would be reassuring at this point. “I do hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Me, too.”

The elevator pinged.

They had arrived.

If Marc Daniels had had any doubts about returning to England, the last fifteen minutes had proved otherwise. This could be the best gig he’d ever had. Especially watching Miss Kirkwood in action.

Marc grinned; he’d had no idea being a plumber had so many perks...like having a woman walk ahead of you in a well-tailored skirt and jacket which flattered her shape in all the right places. The colour of the fabric was good, too. Reminded him of burnished steel. He liked the contrast of that strong metallic hue against the soft white skin of Miss Kirkwood’s slim wrists and elegant hands. It suited what he’d seen of her personality as well, rapier sharp with him, but courteous and kind with her elderly charges. He’d watched her shepherd them through the lobby, and the care she took matching her gait to theirs.

Now it was his turn. She led him down a silent corridor to a short hallway with a single door. The lock clicked when she swiped her card. All efficiency, she ushered him into one of the most elegant suites Marc had ever seen. And he’d been in quite a few.

“Here we are,” she said. “I trust you’re up for this?”

He certainly was. Whether or not he’d be able to fix the toilet was another matter.

She pointed toward a door to the right. “Over there,” she said. “I’ll be back to check on the repair as soon as possible.”

Marc’s gaze returned to the young woman. Not yet thirty, he guessed, and all done up for business. If he wasn’t on the job, he thought with deep amusement, he might be tempted to trail his fingers over that lovely skin and muss her hair until she....

“You may have all the time in the world,” Miss Kirkwood snapped, “but a rather important guest will be checking into this suite in less than...” she checked her watch, “...an hour.”

That brought him up short. This wasn’t a game for her, amusing though it was for him. He really ought to come clean, and tell her who he was. But damn it all, he’d enjoyed being in the company of a woman who didn’t know what he did for a living, who treated him like a regular guy with a regular job. Well, not exactly, he smiled, remembering their exchange in the elevator. She’d obviously picked up on the same vibes he had. Unfortunately, once he revealed his true identity, those feelings would likely evaporate as quickly as they’d come, and if they didn’t, it would play out in the usual fashion. They all wanted him to be the perfect, heroic guy he portrayed on the big screen, not the rather introspective, history buff he was in real life.

Although, Marc had to admit, as he eyed the delectable Miss Kirkwood, there was something he couldn’t quite put his finger on that suggested she might be more interested in who he was, not what he did. The thought sent a shot of warmth through his veins.

At least it did until she raised her left arm and imperiously pointed her forefinger in the direction of the bathroom. “Anytime.”

Fine, thought Marc, if that’s the way she wanted to play it, then so be it. He’d jerry-rigged enough toilets in his day; why not this one? Raising his own hand in mock salute, he was searching for an appropriately sarcastic response when the toilet suddenly flushed. They stared at each other in mutual horror as the door to the bathroom swung open, and out walked what could only have been the real plumber, tools and all.

He took one look at the two of them and his jaw dropped.

“Miss Kirkwood!” he blurted, hoisting the back of his work pants up a notch with his free hand. “I didn’t know you were...toilet’s fixed.

Needed a new flapper is all.” He lumbered to a stop, took in Marc’s presence and frowned. “Who would you be, then?”

Before Marc could answer, Alex had stepped forward, effectively shielding him from the other man’s view. “Bert!” she addressed the plumber. “We didn’t think you were available today. You know what it’s like when we’ve got a full house. All bust and no flush. I’m afraid, I had to call for a...last-minute replacement.”

“That so,” said Bert craning his neck for a closer look at Marc. “Well, he certainly don’t look the part.”

“He doesn’t, does he...?”

She’s in full damage control, thought Marc in admiration. She knows something’s amiss, and she’s already moving to correct it.

“Do me a favour, Bert...” she was saying as she eased the plumber towards the door of the suite, “we’re obviously short-staffed...why don’t you sign on for the rest of the day and I’ll okay your per diem.”

“Right you are, Miss Kirkwood,” said Bert. “Bound to be something needs doing around here.” And off he went with Miss Kirkwood’s blessing.

Marc was not so lucky.

The woman who rounded on him was a blaze of fury. The golden flecks in her brown eyes flashed like molten lava as she advanced towards him. “Tell me you’re a con man,” she demanded. “Or even better, tell me you’re a jewel thief masquerading as an incompetent plumber. Or even a freelance journalist, I could forgive that; we get them all the time. Just as long as you do not tell me,” she exclaimed, underscoring every word with a punch of her forefinger, “that you are the very important guest we’ve been expecting. Because then, I will have to regret this day for the rest of my life!”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why will you regret this day for the rest of your life?” he asked.

She went very still. Her chest rose and fell as a myriad of emotions washed across her face. Their brief encounter had to have meant something to her because, Marc realized with a slight shock of surprise, it had definitely meant something to him. And for her to not know who he was had made it even sweeter. He was right to come to England, to restart his career here. Funny how this situation, this Miss Kirkwood, had suddenly chased away any doubts he may have had.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last. “I put you in an awkward position.”

She nodded. “So, then,” she demanded, “who are you?”

Marc casually set his hold-all on the floor. *Who are you?* was not a question he normally had to answer. But then, he’d put himself in this situation, not her. She’d made an honest mistake under what he now realized were trying circumstances. While he...he’d indulged himself at her expense. He moved towards her, his hand outstretched. “Marc Daniels,” he said somewhat sheepishly.

She didn’t bat an eyelash; and the intriguing interplay of emotion had disappeared from her face. She held his eyes as she slid her hand in his and gave it a firm shake. “Welcome to The Sadler, Mr. Daniels,” she said. “If there’s anything we can do to make your stay more pleasant, please let us know.” Not even a tremor in her voice. The hot-blooded woman had been replaced by the ever-so-cool professional.

And he’d thought he was the actor.

Alex was halfway down the corridor before she felt the first prickle of tears. What a disaster. If it hadn’t been for the flu bug ravaging the staff, none of this would ever have happened. She didn’t mind filling in for absent colleagues; nothing was worse than having to work when you weren’t feeling well. Except maybe ogling a guest and then mistaking him for a plumber! What on earth would her grandmother say!

Bypassing the elevator, Alex headed for the stairs at the end of the corridor. Thankfully, the stairwell was empty. She desperately needed a moment to herself. For several minutes, she stared unseeing at the soft-toned walls, hands clenched, chest heaving as she sought to control her emotions. She closed her eyes. It was difficult enough being a Sadler, but to have not recognized a guest for who he was, and then mistake him for a tradesman was inexcusable.

She reached inside her suit jacket for her phone. Marc Daniels, he’d said. Easy enough. She quickly keyed in his name, and a second later, up he popped. Alex groaned. A film star! How could she not know! She scrolled through his list of credits feeling slightly sick to her stomach.

“Best action hero of his generation.”

“Watching Daniels on screen is always worth the price of admission.”

Followed by a load of stills, with and without his dark glasses, some of them looked unposed to Alex, others like they’d been released as publicity shots.

He was certainly gorgeous. And those blue eyes were to die for, so why hadn't she heard of him? She read further. American, thirty-six, best known for his recurring role in The Javelin series, rumoured to be dating a Russian model.

And if she'd known who he was, thought Alex with a tiny grin, on a day like today, she still might have taken him for a plumber. A testament to his acting, perhaps? Maybe not. A sudden vision of Penelope Smith-Jones flaring her nostrils made Alex feel better. Not everyone had recognized him.

Regardless, nothing in the online gossip hinted at either bad temper or vindictiveness. Alex sighed. There was little she could do about it now, but it was a less-than-gentle reminder to keep her guard up. Hotel employees often found themselves in tricky situations. And as she well knew, any mistake she made would be put under the microscope.

Taking a deep breath, Alex put her phone away and followed the stairs to the ground floor. Despite the positives online, and the clear eyes of the man himself, she was still anxious. She'd torn a strip off Marc Daniels. But if he complained about her behaviour, he would come off as a bit of a prat. Pretending he was a plumber. Alex grinned. The moment they'd heard that toilet flush was hilarious.

Still, there were no excuses. She'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. And he'd let her. The end.

The lobby hummed with activity. Quietly, of course; this was The Sadler. One hundred-and-forty rooms for an elite clientele, or at least those for whom privacy was the number one priority. All other comforts being attended to, of course.

Cyril raised a finger.

Here we go, thought Alex. She slipped behind the reception desk.

"I've just had a call from Marc Daniels," he said, a slight undercurrent of excitement in his voice. "You seem to have made an impression."

"Good, I hope?" asked Alex innocently.

"He did say you were extremely efficient. Which reminds me," Cyril said as he passed her a slip of paper. "Your messages."

On it was the usual list of last-minute emergencies, to which, Alex mentally added a reminder to pop down to maintenance and sign the work order for Bert. And quell any rumours while she was there. Although she didn't think Bert would say anything, even if he did suspect Marc's true identity. A regular per diem was a luxury.

“Oh, and we’re waiting for Mr. Daniels’ luggage. It’s arriving separately.”

“Duly noted,” said Alex, absolutely certain that short-staffed or not, she’d seen enough of Marc Daniels for one day.

Prowling the suite trying to decide what to do about Miss Kirkwood while the afternoon wore on wasn’t getting him anywhere, Marc decided. He’d made a few calls, bailed on a dinner with his production manager and sent out a few emails, but his thoughts kept returning to what had happened earlier.

In no way did wanting a fresh start in England justify playing anyone for a fool, let alone a young woman trying to do her job. What had he been thinking? Marc frowned. He doubted Miss Kirkwood would be thrown off balance for more than a moment or two, but there was something about the flash of anger in her eyes that he couldn’t forget. He’d behaved like one of those Hollywood celebrities he so loathed.

Pushing that unwelcome thought aside, he considered the woman herself. Beautiful, self-contained, soft skin that took on a sweet rosy flush when she was embarrassed, the delicacy of her wrists that the cut of her jacket emphasized rather than hid. She was attractive, yes, but what had caught his attention was her unconscious kindness and burst of justified anger. Marc smiled. No question that he felt a very strong attraction to Miss Kirkwood.

What incredibly bad timing! The paparazzi had been having a field day over his supposed engagement to Vivyana, and while he doubted Miss Kirkwood had the time or the desire to read celebrity gossip, once the press learned he was in London, it would be hard to avoid. They could eat someone like Miss Kirkwood alive if he wasn’t careful, and he hadn’t become as selfish as that.

Nonetheless, an apology was in order.

Then he could put the whole incident out of his mind, find a flat and get on with his next project.

Flowers. He would send a bouquet of flowers. He picked up the phone and then immediately replaced it. Flowers would be too obvious, and too easily misconstrued. And not just by Miss Kirkwood. The rest of the staff might misinterpret his intentions, and he certainly didn’t want anyone at the front desk to make the connection.

The whole thing was ridiculous. He didn't even know her first name.

Putting his erratic train of thought down to jet lag and a seriously tight schedule, he wandered into the bedroom. The bellboy had delivered his luggage an hour ago. Personally escorted by the assistant manager. Marc had been hoping for Miss Kirkwood, but didn't really expect to see her after the way he'd behaved earlier. No doubt she would make herself scarce for the rest of his stay at The Sadler. Which was a pity; she'd stirred something in him that had lain dormant for a long time.

Might as well unpack, order dinner to be sent up, and call it a night.

Yet twenty minutes later, he was standing by the window peering over the cobblestoned courtyard behind the hotel where The Sadler's refurbished mews stood quietly in the gathering dusk. He'd contemplated renting one of their larger suites on a long-term basis, but what he really wanted was a place to call his own.

Committing himself to behind the camera was a big step for him, one he'd always dreamt of taking. When an opportunity to work with an independent company based here in England had come along, he'd jumped at it, knowing it was the right time for a move. Even though an action hero has a best-before date, the public didn't always like it when an actor made a change.

Directing would expose him to another type of attention, yet it wouldn't solve the aching loneliness that often went with stardom. Only a lucky few seemed to escape it.

Deep in thought, Marc almost missed her. She was crossing the courtyard, her arms swinging loosely at her sides. She must be tired, he thought, after the day she'd had. He watched her angle slightly towards an arched opening, wishing he'd had an opportunity to make it up to her, and then she disappeared from view.

Marc pulled back the curtain and waited by the window. Only a knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

Room service.

With reluctance, he let the curtain drop.

The second Alex entered her flat at the back of the mews, she kicked off her shoes and padded across the room to the tiny kitchen. She'd been happy to fill in at the last minute, but what a day! Backed-up toilets, faux plumbers, and a drop-dead gorgeous film star.

Tea.

She needed tea.

Followed by a hot bath, a good book, and bed.

It had taken all her self-control not to turn around and look back at the hotel as she'd crossed the courtyard. But that would have been an acknowledgement of how much her encounter with Marc Daniels had affected her. His incredible eyes and easy confidence had captured her attention from the moment he'd first slipped off his sunglasses. But it wasn't all about looks; he had that indefinable characteristic that made him stand out in a crowd. Once met, never forgotten.

Alex wondered if his ego had been bruised because she had not recognized either his face or his name. Yet the humorous twitch of his lips had told her that he was more likely to be amused than offended. Another point in his favour.

Reaching for the kettle, Alex slowly filled it with water and set it to boil.

No matter what she thought of Marc Daniels personally, she had no trouble understanding his need for privacy. Not everyone knew she was the great-granddaughter of Alexander Sadler, the hotel's founder, and she preferred it that way.

She wanted to earn her place the old-fashioned way – start at the bottom and work her way to the top without jeopardizing her position, or the hotel's reputation. Which meant Marc Daniels was definitely off-limits. Out of sight and out of mind. In fact, totally banished from her thoughts. Starting first thing in the morning...