

This Side of Murder
Verity Kent Book 1
By Anna Lee Huber

Chapter 1

You might question whether this is all a ruse, whether I truly have anything to reveal. But I know what kind of work you really did during the war. I know the secrets you hide. Why shouldn't I also know your husband's?

June 1919
England

They say when you believe you're about to die your entire life passes before your eyes in a flurry of poignant images, but all I could think of, rather absurdly, was that I should have worn the blue hat. Well, that and that my sister would never forgive me for proving our mother right.

Mother had never approved of Sidney teaching me how to drive his motorcar that last glorious summer before the war. Or of my gadding about London and the English countryside in his prized Pierce-Arrow while he was fighting in France. Or of my decision to keep the sleek little Runabout instead of selling it after a German bullet so callously snatched him from me. In my mother's world of rules and privilege, women—even wealthy widows—did not own motor cars, and they certainly didn't drive them. She'd declared it would be the death of me. And so it might have been, had it not been for the other driver's bizarre bonnet ornament.

Once my motorcar had squealed to a stop, a bare two inches from the fender of the other vehicle, and I'd peeled open my eyes, I could see that the ornament was some sort of pompon. Tassels of bright orange streamers affixed to the Rolls-Royce's more traditional silver lady. When racing down the country roads, I supposed they trailed out behind her like ribbons of flame, but at a standstill they drooped across the grille rather like limp seagrass.

I heard the other driver open his door, and decided it was time to stop ogling his peculiar taste in adornment and apologize. For there was no denying our near collision was my fault. I had been driving much too fast for the winding, shrubbery-lined roads. I was tempted to blame Pinky, but I was the dolt who'd chosen to follow his directions even though I'd known they would be rubbish.

When my childhood friend Beatrice had invited me to visit her and her husband, Pinky, at their home in Winchester, I'd thought it a godsend, sparing me the long drive from London to Poole in one shot. I hadn't seen either of them since before the war, other than a swift bussing of Pinky's cheek as I passed him at the train station one morning, headed back to the front. All in all, it had been a lovely visit despite the evident awkwardness we all felt at Sidney's absence.

In any case, although Pinky was a capital fellow, he'd always been a bit of a dodo. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd survived the war simply by walking in circles—as he'd had me driving—never actually making it to the front.

I adjusted my rather uninspired cream short-brimmed hat over my auburn castle-bobbed tresses and stepped down into the dirt and gravel lane, hoping the mud wouldn't damage my blue kid leather pumps. My gaze traveled over the beautiful pale yellow body of the Rolls-Royce and came to rest on the equally attractive man rounding her bonnet. Dark blond hair curled against the brim of his hat, and when his eyes lifted from the spot where our motorcars nearly touched, I

could see they were a soft gray. I was relieved to see they weren't bright with anger. Charming a man out of a high dudgeon had never been my favorite pastime.

One corner of his mouth curled upward in a wry grin. "Well, that was a near thing."

"Only if you're not accustomed to driving in London." I offered him my most disarming smile as I leaned forward to see just how close it had been. "But I do apologize. Clearly, I shouldn't have been in such a rush."

"Oh, I'd say these hedgerows hold some of the blame." He lifted aside his gray tweed coat to slide his hands into his trouser pockets as he nodded toward the offending shrubbery. "It's almost impossible to see around them. Otherwise, I would have seen you coming. It's hard to miss a Pierce-Arrow," he declared, studying the currant-red paint and brass fittings of my motorcar.

"Yes, well, that's very good of you to say so."

"Nonsense. And in any case, there's no harm done."

"Thanks to your colorful bonnet ornament."

He followed my pointed stare to the pompon attached to his silver lady, his wry grin widening in furtive amusement.

"There must be a story behind it."

"It just seemed like it should be there."

"And that's all there is to it?"

He shrugged. "Does there need to be more?"

I tilted my head, trying to read his expression. "I suppose not. Though, I'll own I'm curious where you purchased such a bold piece of frippery."

"Oh, I didn't." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "My niece kindly let me borrow it. Just

for this occasion.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Had he been one of my London friends I would have accused him of having a jest, but with this man I wasn't certain, and told him so. “I'm not sure if you're quite serious or simply having a pull at me.”

“Good.” He rocked back on his heels, clearly having enjoyed our exchange.

I shook my head at this teasing remark. He truly was a rather appealing fellow, though there was something in his features—perhaps the knife-blade sharpness of his nose—that kept him from being far too handsome for any woman's good. Which was a blessing, for combined with his artless charm and arresting smile he might have had quite a devastating effect. He still might, given a more susceptible female. Unfortunately, I had far too much experience with charming, attractive men to ever fold so quickly.

I pegged him at being just shy of thirty, and from his manner of speech and cut of clothes, undoubtedly a gentleman. From old money, if I wagered a guess. A well-bred lady can always tell these things. After all, we're taught to sniff out the imposters from the cradle, though it had begun to matter less and less, no matter what my mother and her like said about the nouveau riche.

He pulled a cigarette case from his pocket and offered me one, which I declined, before lighting one for himself. “If I may be so bold . . .” he remarked after taking a drag. “Where precisely were you rushing to?”

“Poole Harbor. There's a boat I'm supposed to meet.” I sighed. “And I very much fear I've missed it.”

“To Umbersea Island?”

I blinked in surprise. “Why, yes.” I paused, considering him. “Are you also . . .”

“On my way to Walter Ponsonby’s house party?” He finished for me. “I am. But don’t worry. They won’t leave without us.” He lifted his arm to glance at his wristwatch. “And if they do, we’ll make our own way over.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” I replied, feeling anything but. Some of the sparkle from our encounter had dimmed at this discovery. Still, I couldn’t let him know that. “Then I suppose if we’re going to be spending the weekend together we should introduce ourselves.” I extended my hand across the small gap separating our motorcars. “Mrs. Verity Kent.”

His grip was warm, even through my cream leather glove, as he clasped my hand for a moment longer than was necessary. “Max Westfield, Earl of Ryde. But, please, call me Ryde. Or Max even. None of that Lord business.” Something flickered in his eyes, and I could tell he was debating whether to say something else. “You wouldn’t by chance be Sidney Kent’s widow?”

I’m not sure why I was startled. There was no reason to be. After all, I’d just discovered we were both making our way to the same house party. A party thrown by one of Sidney’s old war chums. There were bound to be one or two of Sidney’s fellow officers attending. Why shouldn’t Lord Ryde be one of them?

My eyes dipped briefly to the glow at the end of the fag clasped between Ryde’s fingers, before returning to his face. “You knew him?” I remarked as casually as I could manage, determined not to show he’d unsettled me.

“I was his commanding officer.” He exhaled a long stream of smoke. “For a short time, anyway.” His eyes tightened at the corners. “I’m sorry for your loss. He was a good man,” he added gently.

I tried to respond, but found alarmingly that I had to clear my throat before I could get the words out. “Thank you.”

It was the standard litany. The standard offer of condolences and expression of gratitude that had been repeated dozens of times since Sidney's death. I'd developed a sort of callus from hearing the words over and over. It prevented them from overly affecting me, from making me remember.

Except, this time was different.

"Did you know Sidney before the war?" I managed to say with what I thought was an admirable amount of aplomb. They were of an age with each other, and both being gentlemen it seemed a safe assumption.

"Yes, Kent was a year behind me at Eton and Oxford. Same as your brother, if I recall. They were chums."

I nodded. "Yes, that's how we met. Sidney came home with Freddy to Yorkshire one school holiday."

"Love at first sight?"

"Goodness, no. At least, not for him. I was all of eleven to his sixteen. And a rather coltish eleven, at that. All elbows and knees."

He grinned. "Well, that didn't last."

I dimpled cheekily. "Why, thank you for noticing. No, Sidney didn't return to Upper Wensleydale for six more years. But by then, of course, things had changed."

My chest tightened at the bittersweet memories, and I turned to stare at the bonnet of my motorcar—Sidney's motorcar—gleaming in the sunshine. I'd known this weekend was going to be difficult. I'd been preparing myself for it as best I could. Truth be told, that's why I'd nearly collided with Lord Ryde. I'd been distracted by my recollections. The ones I'd been ducking since the telegram arrived to inform me of Sidney's death.

I'd gotten rather good at avoiding them. At calculating just how many rags I needed to dance, and how much gin I needed to drink so I could forget, and yet not be too incapacitated to perform my job the following morning. And when I was released from my position after the war, well, then it didn't matter anymore, did it?

But this weekend I couldn't afford the luxury of forgetfulness.

As if sensing the maudlin turn of my thoughts, Ryde reached out to touch my motorcar's rather plain bonnet ornament, at least compared to his. "Kent used to talk about his Pierce-Arrow. Claimed it was the fastest thing on four wheels."

"Yes, he was rather proud of it." I recognized the turn in subject for the kindness it was. He'd sensed my discomfort and was trying to find a gracious way to extricate ourselves from this awkwardness. I should have felt grateful, but I only felt troubled.

I lifted my gaze to meet his, trying to read something in his eyes. "I suppose there wasn't much to talk about in the trenches."

His expression turned guarded. "No, not that we wanted to. Motorcars were just about the safest topic we could find."

I nodded, understanding far more than he was saying. Though, I also couldn't help but wonder if that was a dodge.

Almost reflexively, I found myself searching Ryde for any visible signs of injury. I'd learned swiftly that those soldiers fortunate enough to survive the war still returned wounded in some way, whether it be in body or mind. The unluckiest suffered both.

As if he knew what I was doing, he rolled his left shoulder self-consciously before flicking his fag into the dirt. He ground it out before glancing down the road toward Poole. "I suppose we should be on our way then, lest our fellow guests truly leave us behind to shrift for

ourselves.”

“It does seem rude to keep them waiting longer than necessary,” I admitted, suddenly wishing very much to be away, but not wanting to appear overeager. “Is it much farther?”

“Just over the next rise or two, you should be able to see the town laid out before you.”

“That close?”

“Yes, and as I said, I suspect Ponsonby will have told them to wait for us all before departing. He was always considerate about such things.”

“You know him well then?” I asked in genuine curiosity.

He shrugged, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the midday sun. “As well as one can know another man serving beside him during war.” It was rather an obscure answer. And yet Ponsonby had thought them friendly enough to invite him to his house party to celebrate his recent engagement to be married. Of course, the man had also invited me, a woman he hardly knew, though I assumed that was because of Sidney.

As if sensing my interest and wishing to deflect it from himself, he added, “I know he and Kent were great friends.”

“Yes, since Eton. I met Walter once or twice before the war. And, of course, he attended our wedding.” One of the numerous hasty ceremonies performed throughout Britain during the months at the start of the war, between Sidney’s training and his orders to report to France as a fresh-faced lieutenant. I’d only just turned eighteen and hadn’t the slightest idea what was to come. None of us had.

I looked up to find Ryde watching me steadily, as if he knew what I was thinking, for it was what he was thinking, too. It was an odd moment of solidarity under the brilliant June sky, and I would remember it many times in the days to come.

Because who of us ever really knows what's coming? Or what secrets will come back to haunt us in the end? The war might be over, but it still echoed through our lives like an endless roll of thunder.