

Love's
MASQUERADE

by

RADCLYFFE



2005

CHAPTER ONE

Auden Frost read the form letter again.

Dear Ms. Frost:

Your interview has been scheduled for Monday, March 17th, at 10:00 a.m. in Suite 4000, the Palmer Building, 1900 Rittenhouse Square.

We look forward to the opportunity to meet with you.

Sincerely,
Abelard H. Pritchard
Director of Operations
Palmer Publishing, Inc.

It was eight-thirty. If she walked slowly, stopped at Starbucks, and read the morning *Inquirer*, she'd only be half an hour early. Her destination in one of the elegant stone edifices that bordered the historic square was five blocks from her three-story brownstone on St. James Place.

Early is good. Early shows interest; early shows reliability. Early shows...punctuality. She grimaced. *Early is desperate. And I'm not desperate...yet.*

She still had a few thousand dollars left in her savings account, and she had resumes out to every publishing house, magazine, and press in the tri-state area. Thank God for Great-Aunt Sophie and the long, rain-filled winters.

Soon after Auden had begun her freshman year at Penn, Aunt

Sophie had decided that the Philadelphia climate was bad for her arthritis and had precipitously moved to Florida. She'd declared Auden manager of the apartment house she owned and offered her niece the ground-floor apartment with reduced rent as payment for her newly designated duties. Now, seven years later, the Center City enclave west of Rittenhouse Square was so popular with young professionals that the rents had become ridiculously inflated, and Auden never would have been able to afford to live there under other circumstances.

And I won't be able to stay here much longer unless I get a job soon.

Eighty-four. Before stepping outside, she stopped in front of the walnut-framed, full-length mirror just inside the entranceway and checked her appearance. Medium height, medium build, medium-length golden-blond hair. Ordinary in every respect. The pale green suit was well cut if not terribly expensive and the ochre silk blouse, an admitted extravagance, was both.

The morning news had said unseasonably warm, so she decided to forgo her winter coat, choosing a raincoat instead. Outside on the marble steps, she turned sideways to allow the third-floor tenant to pass on the narrow stoop.

"Hi, Gayle."

"Aud, hi. I was going to ca—Shylock! No!" The petite, tawny-skinned woman in a Temple sweatshirt and baggy blue jeans yanked on the lead of the black and brown mixed-breed terrier by her side.

Laughing, Auden put a hand down to stop the inquisitive nose before it landed unceremoniously between her thighs. "I do *not* need dog smears today, thank you very much."

"Today's the big interview?"

"Yep." Auden agilely circumvented the dog and escaped to the sidewalk. Looking up at her tenant and best friend who lingered on the small landing, one hip braced against the wrought-iron railing, she added, "This is the perfect job. Right location, right division, right... everything. Wish me luck."

"You don't need luck," Gayle stated, juggling leash, a cup of coffee, and a take-out bag as she unlocked the door. "You've got brains. Call me later with all the details."

"Don't you have to work?"

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“Just got back. I was the float resident last night.”

“Okay. I’ll check in this afternoon after you’ve had a nap.”

“Call me,” Gayle repeated as she disappeared inside. “I want to hear everything.”

Auden took a deep breath and started off. *I just hope there’s something to tell.*



Despite every delaying tactic she could devise, Auden was still fifteen minutes early. When the brass-plated doors of the double-wide elevator slid silently open on the top floor of the Palmer Building, she had hoped to find a lobby or hallway where she could loiter a few more moments before entering the appointed office. No such luck.

Directly across the wine-colored, carpeted expanse stood a waist-high, dark wood counter that clearly designated the reception area. The executive suite appeared to occupy the entire top floor. As Auden approached, a perfectly coiffed redhead looked up with a practiced smile from behind the adjoining desk.

“Good morning,” the receptionist purred. “May I help you?”

“Yes, I have an appointment with Mr. Pritchard.”

The smallest of frowns, quickly extinguished, marred the flawless forehead for a millisecond. “Your name?”

“Auden Frost.”

“Just a moment.” A half-swivel on the leather chair, a flash of fingers flying across a keyboard, a series of entries scrolling down the computer monitor. Another pleasant smile. “I’m sorry. I don’t see your name. Perhaps it’s with another division? I doubt that Mr. Pritchard—”

“I have the confirmation here,” Auden interrupted smoothly, taking care to keep her voice even. She passed the letter across the wide surface.

A quick scan and yet another smile. “If you’ll wait just another moment, please,” the redhead said with an inclination of her head toward the sofas and chairs to the right of the reception desk.

“Of course.”

Auden settled onto a plush fabric couch, watched as the receptionist

made a call, then glanced out the floor-to-ceiling windows opposite her. She'd barely had time to take in the breathtaking view of the downtown skyline and the Delaware River twenty blocks south before the redhead got up and silently approached.

"Please come this way, Ms. Frost."

"Thank you," Auden replied, barely able to keep the relief from her voice.

She followed through a paneled walnut door into a labyrinth of hallways with smaller rooms opening on either side to yet another set of double doors. There was an intercom discreetly set into the wall.

The redhead pressed a button and spoke softly. "I have Ms. Frost, Mr. Pritchard."

"Come in, please, Alana."

After a nearly inaudible click, Alana opened the doors and gestured Auden through ahead of her.

Once inside, Auden crossed the thick carpet, a deep blue this time, toward another enormous wood desk, behind which stood a tall thin man in a fine gray worsted-wool suit, white shirt, and muted navy tie. He looked to be about fifty, with a full head of dark hair and steel blue eyes. She held out her hand.

"Mr. Pritchard? Auden Frost."

"Ms. Frost." His voice was a well-modulated baritone. "Please sit down." Glancing to the door, he said, "Thank you, Alana."

Another second and they were alone. Auden resisted the urge to survey her surroundings and kept her gaze steadfastly on Pritchard's face. It was impossible to read anything behind his studied expression.

"I'm afraid there's been a miscommunication, Ms. Frost," he advised as he settled behind his desk. "Our records indicate that you were initially scheduled to interview for a position in the nonfiction division."

"That's correct." Perplexed, Auden raised an eyebrow. "And I take it there's a problem?"

"An embarrassing one—for me." He folded his hands and leaned forward. "It seems that the posi—"

"Abel?" A door on the far side of the office opened suddenly and a woman walked in. "Have you got—"

Both Auden and Abelard Pritchard turned in the direction of the

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interruption. The woman who stood in the open doorway was taller than average, with unruly jet black hair and obsidian eyes that appeared fathomless in contrast to her pale complexion. Her gaze locked with Auden's, and for a moment, the silence in the room made the very air seem heavy. Without moving her eyes from Auden's face, she murmured in a throaty tenor, "I'm sorry, Abel. I didn't realize you had an appointment."

"Neither, apparently, did I." Pritchard looked from one woman to the other, startled by the intensity of their expressions. "I'm afraid I failed to inform Ms. Frost that the position for which she was scheduled to interview had already been filled."

"That doesn't sound like you," the woman commented, a frown line forming between her finely drawn brows. She finally released Auden's gaze and looked directly at Pritchard. There was a faint edge to her voice, but it seemed to be one of curiosity rather than censure. "How did that happen?"

"At the moment, I'm not certain."

"What position?"

Auden cleared her throat, more annoyed at being talked about in the third person than she was disappointed to learn that the job for which she had held such hope was no longer available. "An editor in the nonfiction division."

"Editor?" The dark gaze returned to study Auden as the newcomer leaned a shoulder gracefully against the highly polished woodwork of the door frame. "Have you experience?"

The sudden scrutiny from the penetrating eyes was as tangible as a touch, and Auden found her throat unexpectedly tight as she replied. "Yes."

"Perhaps we should talk."

"I'm sorry?" Auden gave a visible start. *Who is this woman?*

"Abel, would you please assemble the necessary paperwork and show Ms. Frost into my office?"

"Hays, I'm not certain—"

The woman turned away. "Thank you, Mr. Pritchard."

Pritchard rose stiffly, then quickly regained his professional equanimity. With a slight sweep of his arm, he indicated the doorway

through which the dark-haired woman had disappeared. “If you please, Ms. Frost.”

Auden had no choice but to follow. A moment later, she found herself in yet another richly appointed office, larger than the one she had just left. The floor was dark hardwood, highly glossed, with a thick Oriental rug in the center of the room. The desk, with several leather chairs facing it, sat in front of another wall of windows; a sitting area complete with sofa, coffee table, and more chairs filled the far corner.

One entire wall was comprised of bookcases, the shelves filled to capacity. The paperbacks interspersed with the hardcovers all appeared to be reader’s copies, rather than the standard bound sets that were often little more than decoration. At first glance, Auden didn’t recognize many of the titles, but that didn’t surprise her. She wasn’t much of a fiction reader. And despite the opulent surroundings, it wasn’t the décor that interested her.

Mr. Pritchard handed a slim file folder, which Auden presumed held her job application and resume, to the woman standing beside her. After he discreetly left, Auden found herself looking once again into those dark eyes. Up close, she realized that what she had thought initially to be solid dark pupils were actually nearly black irises flecked with bits of silver and gold. Lovely, hypnotically beautiful. Like the woman.

Auden’s heart beat loudly in her ears.

“I’m Haydon Palmer, Ms. Frost.”

Auden blinked, and the spell was broken. Once again she held out her hand, and the returned grip this time was just as firm as Mr. Pritchard’s, but the skin cooler and very soft. “I’m happy to meet you.”

“Please, have a seat,” Hays said as she gently released Auden’s hand. She moved behind her desk and gestured to the file. “If you’ll just give me a moment?”

“Of course.” Auden tried not to look as shell-shocked as she felt. She hadn’t expected an interview with the president of the publishing company, nor had she expected Haydon Palmer to be quite so...well, so...*Young? Commanding? Stunning?*

While the other woman flipped pages, Auden took advantage of the opportunity to study her. She didn’t look much older than Auden’s

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twenty-five, although her pale flawless skin, elegantly chiseled cheekbones, and sculpted jaw made it difficult to delve beneath the beauty for the usual clues. From where she sat, Auden could make out a few faint lines at the corners of deep-set eyes, but these could have been from laughter as well as years. Only the barest hint of shadows bruising nearly translucent lower lids marred the otherwise perfect face.

The dark silk jacket and trousers fit the lean and angular frame so well that they had to have been custom made. In surprising contradistinction to the exquisitely expensive suit, the head of Palmer Publishing wore a simple white silk T-shirt beneath the jacket. The hands that held the sheet of paper were long fingered and finely boned. Oddly, Auden could discern a faint tremor in them. For some reason, that unwitting confession of physical vulnerability caused Auden to catch her breath sharply. She found Haydon Palmer infinitely more attractive in the face of this slight hint of human frailty.

Hays glanced up to find Auden's blue-green eyes—made even greener, she'd wager, by the reflection of the fabric the blond wore—riveted on her face. The gently searching look was soft and soothing on her skin. As silence descended once again, Hays allowed her gaze to roam over the woman who watched her.

Reddish highlights glinted in thick golden hair, full red lips parted faintly, and the delicately drawn features, coupled with the glow of honey-tinged complexion, created a visage worthy of a portrait gallery. The suggestion of a strong body tempered by gentle curves completed the picture of an extraordinarily attractive woman.

“What exactly did you edit?” Hays asked, her tone low, almost seductive.

Auden dragged her eyes away from Haydon Palmer's face, hoping to dispel the disquieting distraction the woman's presence created. She cleared her throat and replied in a steady voice. “Miller was a scholarly press. I started out editing art history and literary criticism, and for the last year, I was the education division manager.”

An eyebrow quirked. “And that required?”

Auden described her previous duties, an exercise that, in her experience, generally caused a listener's eyes to glaze over. It sounded unbearably dry to most people, but she had enjoyed the order and the

predictability of both the work and routine. Haydon Palmer, however, appeared to listen with quiet attention.

“Miller Press was just recently absorbed by the University of Pennsylvania, wasn’t it?” Hays remarked when Auden concluded.

“Yes. And, as a result, some positions and personnel became... redundant.”

“Redundant.”

Auden swallowed, amazed at the intensity Haydon Palmer managed to project with merely a word. “It’s not a term I care to apply to myself, but that is, in fact, what I have been deemed.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” A smile twitched at the corner of Hays’s mouth. “Have you ever edited fiction?”

“No,” Auden answered carefully. “I won’t pretend there are no differences, but the mechanics must surely be the same.”

Hays leaned back in the dark leather chair and crossed her ankle over her knee. The suggestion of a smile had become a grin, but it was quickly replaced by an appraising stare. “Who’s your favorite romance writer?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Romances. The number one seller in America.”

“I...don’t read them.”

“You *do* read fiction?”

“Uh...occasionally. Well, rarely, actually.”

“What do you read for pleasure, then?”

Auden hesitated. If this was an interview, it was the oddest one she had ever encountered. Since she had no idea where the conversation was going, she decided not to worry about the outcome. She had a feeling she had already failed whatever test Haydon Palmer was conducting. “Biographies, social commentary...some history.”

“Why not fiction?”

“I don’t know...” Auden contemplated the question, surprised that she hadn’t a clue to the answer. “I suppose I’ve never had enough time.”

“Light reading doesn’t satisfy?”

“Not usually,” Auden admitted. “I could never really relate to it. I’ve always been a little...bored.”

Too well grounded for light escapism? Hays passed a hand over

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her face and straightened slightly, realizing that she shouldn't have even begun this interview. There'd just been something so compelling about the look in Auden Frost's eyes that first moment in Abel's office. Inquisitiveness, intelligence, strength. She sighed, wondering if her weariness showed.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Frost. I apologize that Mr. Pritchard failed to inform you that the advertised position was no longer available. It turns out that the previous editor decided that early retirement wasn't as appealing as it sounded, and she wanted to come back. She'd worked here for many years, and we felt an obligation to her. It made sense for her to simply resume her previous duties."

"I understand. But if I may ask, why am I still here? Mr. Pritchard could have told me this without taking up any more of your time, or mine."

"Because I *am* looking for someone, Ms. Frost," Hays explained, "to fill a very specific position." She paused, uncharacteristically undecided. Then she shook her head, allowing reason to rule instinct. "However, I don't believe the job is well suited to you."

"Or rather, you don't think *I'm* suited to it." Auden was unable to keep the irritation from her voice. It rankled to realize that Haydon Palmer found her lacking. That reaction made no logical sense, but she found herself determined not to be dismissed so easily. "Do you mind telling me why?"

Hays's eyebrows arched in surprise. There was fire beneath that calmly elegant exterior, too, it seemed. "When's the last time you read a work of lesbian fiction?"

Auden stared. After a beat of silence that seemed to last forever, she answered, "I took a women's studies course my junior year in college."

"Let me guess. Allison, Winterson...maybe Lessing?"

"Among several others, yes." Auden leaned forward, intent and curious, forgetting her annoyance. "Why?"

"Because Palmer Publishing just acquired a small independent lesbian publishing company. It was about to go under and I tossed them a net." For an instant, a hint of pleasure glimmered in her eyes. "As part of the takeover, I have acquired all the contracted works in progress as well as right of refusal for the pending submissions under review."

“And you need an editor to evaluate the manuscripts?”

“No,” Hays said distinctly. “I need a director for Palmer Publishing’s new division of lesbian fiction.”

“Well,” Auden said, trying not to appear stunned, “I can see where the problem is.”

Intrigued, Hays sat forward, her fatigue vanishing. “Oh?”

“Let’s look at what you need.”

Hays blinked. Auden Frost’s face was a study in concentration. She most definitely was not flirting. “All right.”

“Unless you intend to run the division yourself, you’ll need someone who can oversee its development from the ground up.” Auden hoped that she’d be able to think her way through the issues without revealing that she hadn’t much of a clue *what* the problem was. The only thing she *did* know was that she wanted the job. Not because she needed the job, which she indeed did, but because she wanted to show Haydon Palmer that she could do it. Why that mattered, she had no idea either.

“I intend to be involved in the formative stages, but I can’t run the operation myself,” Hays replied regretfully. “I...have other commitments.”

“Well, then, you’ll want someone who can determine the market value of each submission as well as assess its technical merit, negotiate with the author, and work with your editors.”

“Yes, initially, the director may wear many hats.”

Auden narrowed her eyes, hearing between the lines. “You expect the director to edit, too?”

“Just temporarily—there are a few works that I’m told are almost ready for press, and I don’t want them to get back-burnered in the changeover.”

“I have the experience you need.”

“Not with what matters most.”

Auden’s eyes flashed. “You think I’m not suitable because I don’t read Nora Roberts?”

“No.” Hays smiled at the ire in the woman’s voice, impressed by her confidence and passion. “Because you don’t read Thane Cutlass or Laura DeHart Young or Susan Smith.”

“That can be remedied.”

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“Why do you want this job?” Hays asked, completely serious. Her head throbbed, but she automatically dismissed the discomfort. She watched instead the fascinating texture of emotions playing across Auden Frost’s beautiful face.

“Because it’s creative on every level—literally and literarily.” Auden surprised herself with what she said next. “Because this division is new, fledgling, and I’ve been sequestered among the staid and the sheltered for too long.”

“Are you adventurous, then?” Hays asked unexpectedly, wondering how the conversation had turned from the professional to the personal so effortlessly. She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so invigorated.

“I hadn’t thought so,” Auden replied softly. “Until just a few minutes ago.”

Hays stood, steadying herself with one hand on the desktop as a faint wave of dizziness passed quickly through her. She extended her other hand as Auden stood to take it. “Welcome to Palmer Publishing, Ms. Frost.”

“Thank you, Ms. Palmer.” Auden held the cool fingers in hers as she lingered in the depths of dark eyes. “I look forward to working with you.”