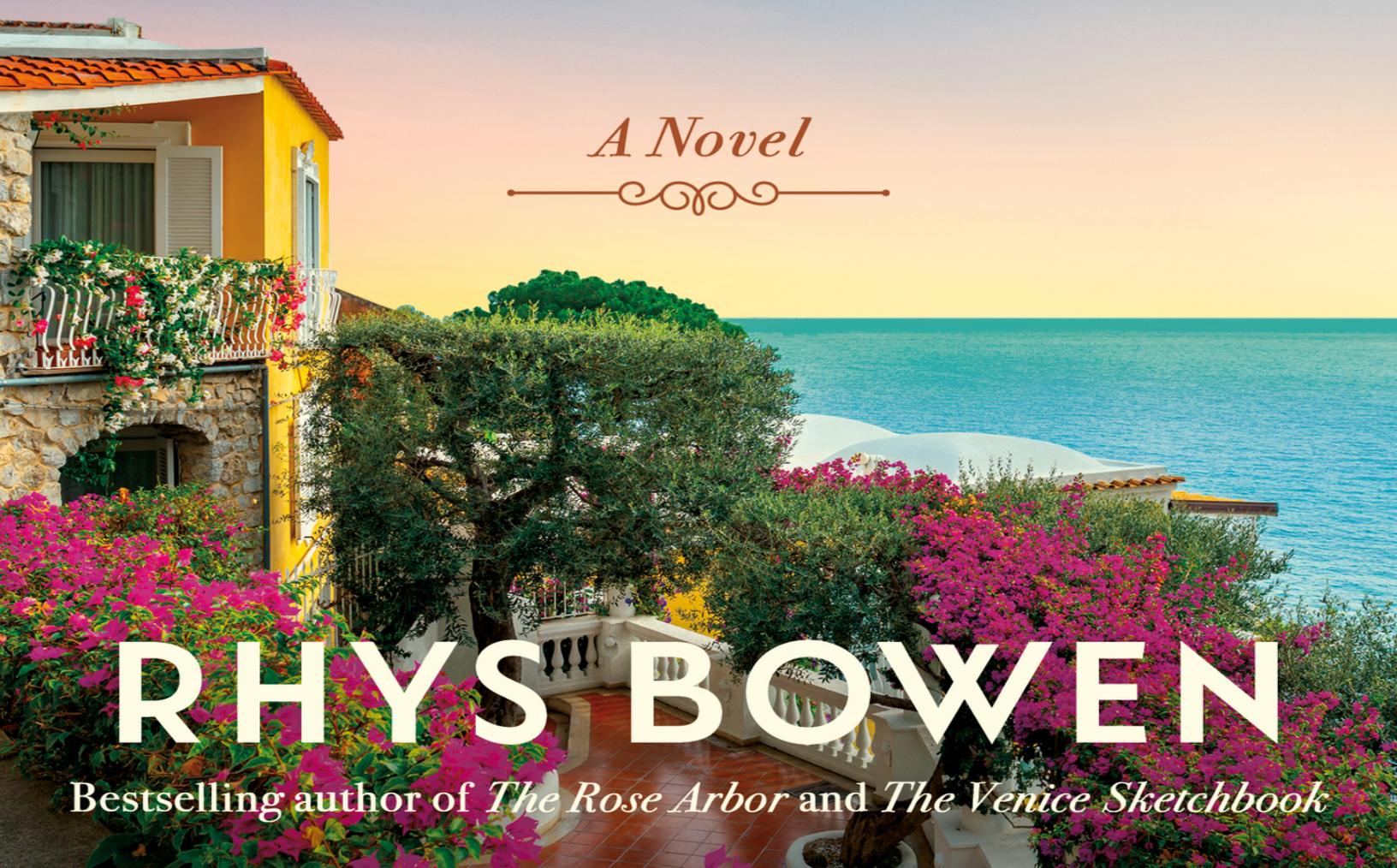


MRS. ENDICOTT'S *Splendid* ADVENTURE

A Novel



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—

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First edition



I'd like to dedicate this book to Danielle Marshall, my former editor at Lake Union, with thanks for all her support and her friendship, wishing her great success and happiness in her new venture.

As usual I'd like to thank the entire team at Lake Union as well as my fabulous agents Meg Ruley and Christina Hogrebe. You all make my job such a joy.

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CHAPTER 1

Surrey, England, 1938

The bombshell was dropped over breakfast, normally a time of silence apart from the rustling of the *Times*, a complaint about the timing of the boiled egg or an occasional outburst when Mr Endicott read something with which he did not agree.

“That pumped-up little popinjay Mussolini has marched into Abyssinia, of all places. What on earth for? No natural resources that I’ve heard of. No good will come of it, you mark my words.”

At the other end of the long mahogany table, Mrs Endicott spread honey on a thin slice of toast. She always found it hard to eat until her husband had departed to catch the eight fifteen to London. But on this particular morning Mr Endicott put down his newspaper with a defiant grunt and stared straight at her.

“What’s wrong, Lionel?” she asked. “Did I not cook the egg to your satisfaction? I’m sure I gave it three and a half minutes exactly.”

“Ellie, we must talk,” he said. “I’ve been trying to find the right time to say this, but there never seems to be a right time.” He gave that little cough in his throat, something he did before making a pronouncement. “Well, here goes, then. Ellie, I want a divorce.”

Ellie Endicott stared at him, her mouth open. The request was so unexpected that she could find no words. In fact, she wondered if she had heard right.

“Well, say something,” he said impatiently.

Ellie stared at him, trying to take in what he had just said. “I don’t know what to say.” She fought to sound calm. “I’m speechless, Lionel. I had no idea you were unhappy. Have I not been a good wife to you? I have certainly tried to make your life run smoothly. I boil your eggs for exactly the correct amount of time. I’ve made sure your blasted shirts come back from the laundry starched just enough so you don’t get a rash on your neck. I’ve entertained all your boring business associates . . .”

Lionel Endicott held up his hand. "Please do not blame yourself for this, Ellie my dear," he said hastily. "Nobody could fault the way you have taken care of this house. It runs like clockwork. No, this has nothing to do with you. In fact . . . you see . . . the point is that I've met someone else. Someone I want to marry."

"You want to marry someone else?" She stared incredulously at his round face, his sagging jowls, his thinning hair that he attempted to comb over. Who would want Lionel? The thought passed swiftly through her head.

Lionel had gone very red. "I do. Her name is Michelle."

"French? But you hate the French."

"No, she's as English as you or I. Just a fanciful name. And a beautiful girl. Smart, pleasant . . ."

"‘Girl,’ you said?" Ellie was attempting to outstare him now. "You're going to marry a girl? Lionel, may I remind you that you are fifty-five years old."

His face was still red. "Well, not exactly a girl. Late twenties. Well educated. Went to a university, you know. Works in our overseas banking division."

When his wife said nothing, he shifted nervously. "Come on, old thing. You can't say that our life has been one of high romance, can you? We've grown comfortable with each other. You're like an old stuffed armchair . . ."

"I most certainly am not," she replied. "I work hard to keep myself trim and fit. I walk into the village every day to do the shopping."

"I meant figuratively. Something I've grown accustomed to. Comforting."

"But not exciting."

"No," he said. "Not exciting."

Behind them the clock chimed the hour.

"You'd better go," she said. "You'll miss your train."

"I'm not taking the train today. I'm meeting with my solicitor after work. Get the ball rolling. I'll take the Bentley. You don't need it, I take it?"

"Would it matter if I did?" she demanded, anger overtaking her shock. "Your needs have always come first."

His expression softened. "Look here, old thing. I don't want to make this hard on you. I know it's a bit of a shock, but all good things must come to an end, as they say. I'll make it as smooth as possible for you. No

unpleasantness. I'll admit to being the guilty party, of course. I'll make sure you're given a good allowance. You won't have to worry about money."

"You're just going to leave me and move out?" She toyed with the words, as if trying to digest them.

"What?" He looked startled at this. "Oh no, dear. I'll stay put. This is a large house, far too big for one person. And I'd still need to entertain, for my business, of course."

"And where am I supposed to go?"

He cleared his throat, then went on, as if he had prepared the speech. "I thought you might want to move up to London. My portfolio contains a nice little flat in Knightsbridge—not too far from Harrods. It's only one bedroom, but you won't be entertaining or anything, will you? It should suit you nicely—easy to walk to the shops."

He attempted an encouraging smile. She continued a cold stare.

"I hate London," she said.

"Then we'll find you a nice little cottage down here. So that you can keep up your activities with the church. I think I saw one for sale in that row near the station."

Ellie stared at him incredulously. "You want me to move to a workman's cottage? In a row near the station? And you carry on here as if nothing has happened? You must think very little of me, Lionel." She took a deep breath. "If we're going to divorce, I want the house."

"What?" The word shot out like an explosion, then he collected himself. "Don't be ridiculous, Ellie. Why would you want a great big house to yourself? It's not as if you have many friends here. All the people we entertain are my friends, my business associates and clients."

"Precisely," she said. "Maybe it's time I started making my own friends. Besides, I like this house. I know it well. I've decorated it, made it what it is. And I'm comfortable here."

"Be reasonable, old thing." His voice was soft, but she noticed he was crumpling the edges of the *Times* with his fingers. *He hates creased newspapers*, she thought.

"I am trying to be reasonable, Lionel." She heard her voice rising, even though she was trying to stay calm. "It's not easy when my husband of thirty years announces that he wants a divorce. But I can assure you I am not going to keel over and play dead. I am going to fight for what I want. I may contest the divorce. Have you thought of that? It will get into the

newspapers. Prominent London banker dumps faithful wife for floozy. Is that what the *Daily Mirror* might say? Hardly good for your image, is it? I think Mr Murchison might not be well pleased with that sort of publicity about one of his VPs."

She noticed he was now swallowing hard, his Adam's apple going up and down. "Dash it all, Ellie, I'm trying to be reasonable. How could you afford to run the house alone? Pay for the gardener and all the things that need doing from time to time? And you'd need a car to get anywhere. And think of the heating bill."

"Very well, then," she said, considering this. "Perhaps I don't want to be stuck in a boring little village, especially where everyone knows me. The last thing I want is pity. Oh poor Ellie. Her husband left her, you know. Perhaps this is the time for me to spread my wings. We'll have the house valued, and all our other possessions, too. You can pay me half."

Lionel's face had turned that angry red again—more plum than beetroot now. He was coming close to one of his explosions, she could see. "But all of this was bought with my money." He spat out the words. "Money I earned working damned hard. Keeping you in a damned nice lifestyle."

"Entertaining your clients and business associates? Raising two boys in whom you showed no interest? Making sure you had clean shirts?" Ellie stood up, her linen napkin falling to the floor unnoticed. "Exactly how much do you owe me in back wages if we tot that up? Oh, believe me, Lionel, I have earned half this house and more. Now, are you going to see reason, or do I have to find my own solicitor and fight this in the courts?"

With that, she stalked out of the room. Her heart was beating so loudly that she was sure it must be echoing from the oak-panelled walls of the front hall. She went through to the kitchen, let the door swing shut behind her and stood, holding on to the pine table for support. Why had she been so blind? Why had she never suspected for an instant that he had been unfaithful to her? She realized with utter clarity that on those occasions he had said, apologetically, that he had another of those boring evening meetings with the shareholders and it had gone on so damned late that he'd better spend the night at his club, he was, in fact, spending the night at a little flat in Knightsbridge with Monique, or Marlene, or whatever she was called. She was pretty sure it was that same love nest he now wanted to foist off on his discarded wife. All very neat and tidy. Lionel liked

everything neat and tidy. One woman moves out of flat and into house, other moves out of house and into flat. There. All taken care of. She could just see the wheels in his brain ticking over.

And she had thrown a spanner into these works. The submissive spaniel had suddenly jumped up and bitten him. He would not be liking it at all. And she allowed herself a small smile.