



THE Promise
OF
Deception

ISLES OF ILLUSION  BOOK 1

JESSICA SLY

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Isles of Illusion

Book One: The Promise of Deception

Book Two: The Art of Misdirection

Book Three: The Magic of Redemption

An Isles of Illusion Story: The Hope of
Resurrection

The Promise of
Deception
Isles of Illusion

By
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Dedication

To my Almighty Creator, for whom all my work is done. I dedicate this first step of my journey to you and offer up this book with open hands.

“Whatever you do, do it from the heart,
as something done for the Lord and not for people.”

— Colossians 3:23 (CSB)

Chapter One

London, 1913

I STARED AT THE CLOSED DOUBLE doors looming through the darkness before me. Sweat gathered on my torso, worsened by the stiff corset that confined my ribs and prevented deep breathing.

A muffled din seeped through the doors and echoed through the empty hallway stretching behind me, the discussions just out of earshot. They didn't know my life was about to change, that within moments my independence would be snatched away.

Footsteps clicked before Mr. Ford emerged in my peripheral vision. I pinched my skirt to quell the rising anger within me. Then I met his gaze.

"Don't look so despondent, Adelynn." His mouth curled into a grin, crinkling the skin around eyes the cold color of lead. "This is a joyful day."

I lifted my chin. "For whom?"

"For my son, of course. But also for my wife and me, your mother, and—I should think—for your father, were he here."

I reached for the pearl necklace at my throat, but Mr. Ford wrapped his long, icy fingers around my wrist before I could touch it. I jerked, but he held fast.

"Be still." He reached into his waistcoat pocket with his free hand and drew out a ring. He splayed my fingers and slipped it into place. The rigid gold band scraped the skin at my knuckle and drew a pinprick of blood. I held my breath as I peered at the large sapphire oval encircled by a halo of diamonds. He had spared no expense.

“A shame Basil didn’t have the means to supply one himself.” He admired my new adornment. “But I’m confident that with this promotion, he’ll be able to provide for you in your marriage without our assistance, though we’ve been happy to give it thus far.”

“I’m sure he is grateful for your generosity,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Indeed.” He smirked and bent in a curt bow. “Make us proud.” Then he turned and stole through one of the double doors, the cacophony of the crowd intensifying in volume before muffling once again as it swung shut.

I let out a heavy breath, fighting back tears. A pulse thumped where the ring stunted the circulation. What more could I do? Every means of escape had been exhausted.

I wrapped my arms about my middle. *Heavenly Father, deliver me from this cage.*

“Adelynn?”

I jumped.

Baze appeared at my side and caressed my elbow. “Sorry to startle you.” His even tone provided a welcome calm amidst the turmoil. He searched my face with his soft caramel eyes. “You look stunning.”

My cheeks warmed. I dropped my gaze and focused on the gray pattern of his brocade waistcoat peeking out beneath a black dress coat.

He touched my shoulder. “You’re pale, Al. Are you well?”

His use of my childhood nickname—unconventional though it may have been—made my heart flutter. I shrugged. “A little short of breath is all. The excitement of the evening, you know.”

“Well, that won’t do.” He shook his head, and a clump of fringe escaped his slicked brown hair and fell over his forehead. “The crowd is expecting bright eyes and beaming smiles.”

“I’m not much in the mood for smiling.”

He raised his eyebrows. “For me, then?” He flicked my dangling earring. “I’ll get you to crack, Al. You know I can.” He grinned and flicked

it again.

Wrestling away the urge to smile, I tried to block him, but he caught my hand. Noticing the ring on my finger stopped him short. “Where did this come from?”

I swallowed. “Care to wager a guess?”

His shoulders stiffened. “I’ve almost saved enough to buy you one myself. He knew that. You must give it back. We don’t need to rely on his resources any longer.”

“I think he would beg to differ.”

A muscle twitched in Baze’s jaw. He opened his mouth, but I spoke first. “Not tonight, Baze. Please?”

He hesitated, then released my wrist. I fingered the ring’s cold gems. Baze was only doing what a husband-to-be should, trying to provide for his family. But his authority didn’t hold as much sway over me as his father’s, not when I stood to lose all that I held dear. I didn’t dare remove the ring.

Baze rubbed the slight ridge on his nose—the result of breaking it as an adolescent—and turned toward the door. We stood in silence, shoulder to shoulder. The light brush of his coat on my bare arm sent elated chills racing up my neck, but a dull ache prodded my temples.

“Baze?” I whispered.

His voice rumbled low. “Yes?”

“I . . .” Shame choked my words. I wanted to tell him everything of the conflict that churned within me, everything that had transpired to bring us to this moment. He wasn’t at fault for this. He believed our engagement to be sincere, that both parties had entered the accord willingly. But telling him he believed wrong would shatter him. Could I bring myself to do that, especially after we’d spent our entire adolescence sharing memories and building trust?

Baze eased his fingertips down the inside of my forearm—electric heat flaming under my skin—until he reached my hand, entwined our fingers, and lifted them to his mouth. His firm lips warmed my knuckles where he

brushed a kiss.

“You need not fear.” He tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow. “We’ll face this together as we always have. And we always will.”

The sentiment conjured fresh tears. As I opened my mouth, the double doors swung outward. Intense light poured over us. I clutched at Baze, much tighter than I intended, but nevertheless, I said a prayer of thanks for his stability.

We stepped into the glistening room stretching nearly fifty feet across and half as wide. A bright Paganini concerto drifted from a string quartet against the far wall and lifted to the vaulted ceiling and jeweled chandelier. As we halted, the composition and the chatter quieted. Each fashionable guest turned to watch our arrival. In the new silence, every murmur resounded against the marble floor and embellished walls.

Mr. Ford took a spot beside us, his petite wife on his arm, and addressed the crowd. His booming voice carried to every corner. “It is my great pleasure to introduce my son, Basil, who, as of yesterday, was promoted to detective inspector in the Metropolitan Police Criminal Investigation Department.” The crowd applauded and clinked glasses. When they fell silent, he flashed me a brief smirk.

I held my breath. Sweat trickled down the small of my back.

“It is also my delight to make the first public proclamation of my son’s official engagement to the lovely Miss Adelynn Spencer. I encourage you all to wish them well before the evening expires.”

More applause erupted. I tensed and tried to step backward, but Baze held me in place and whispered, “I can’t believe you would try to abandon me to face these people alone.”

“You’re a detective inspector now,” I whispered back. “You can defend yourself.”

“You’ll not get off that easily.” He flashed a sideways grin. “A good officer always brings reinforcements.” With a chuckle, he tugged my arm forward. “Come. Follow my lead.”

The mingling began straightaway with a flock of the Fords' distant relatives, followed by my father's House of Lords acquaintances and a flurry of people I'd never had the pleasure of meeting. By the time Baze's best mate and Yard companion, Bennett, and his wife, Emily, caught up to us, I was quite ready to collapse into their arms.

Bennett clapped Baze in a hearty handshake, his spectacles reflecting the chandelier light. "Good job, ol' boy. Didn't think you had it in you."

Baze laughed. "Have I ever given you reason to doubt me?"

"Don't get me started." Bennett rolled his eyes.

Emily and I exchanged amused smirks. As she glanced back at her husband, her bright smile radiated pride across her pale elfin face and into her deep blue eyes.

Bennett moved to me and grasped my shoulders. "As for you, I offer my largest congratulations—or perhaps condolences. You finally netted yourself the elusive Basil Ford." His hazel eyes twinkled. "How you ever convinced that rascal to propose, I'll never know."

The brief flutter of excitement in my chest turned to stone as I recalled the proposal. Baze had said it was his happiest moment. But it had been quite different from my perspective—his father had given me no choice but to say yes.

Bennett looped his arm around Emily's waist and tipped his head to each of us. "You've a fine wedding to look forward to. And just in time." His hand drifted across Emily's round stomach. "Our Michael shall need a close companion."

Emily lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, it's Michael now, is it?"

"Sorry." He twirled his finger into one of the rich golden curls pouring over her right shoulder. "Katherine, I meant."

"Bennett!" She swatted his chest.

"All right. Enough." Baze waved his hand as though to separate them like misbehaving school children. "There'll be no arguing here. This is a night of celebration."

Emily giggled and settled her gaze on me. She grasped my hand as she cupped her blossoming belly. Her gloved fingers, though small, felt solid and reassuring.

In the distance behind her, an approaching trio of men caught my eye. When they had closed the distance by half, I recognized Baze's three older brothers.

Baze followed my gaze and groaned. "What do *they* want?"

In moments, they were upon us, swarming Baze like a frenzy of sharks. Aubrey, the tallest yet youngest of the triad—though still a good seventeen years older than Baze—draped his arm over Baze's shoulders. "Thought you could escape us, eh?"

Bennett nudged his wife with his elbow. "Quick, Millie. While they're distracted."

Needing no further prodding, Emily hooked her arm through mine and tugged me away. I sent an apologetic look Baze's way as his brothers snuffed out the last view of him.

Leaving Bennett to rush to Baze's aid, Emily and I weaved through the crowd. We stopped near the open patio doors leading to the garden terrace shared by the Fords and my family. A light breeze shifted the drapes and carried with it mist from the steady rain outside.

When Emily squeezed my hand, her fingers came across the engagement ring. Her eyes went wide. "Good gracious, that's enormous!"

"Indeed, it is." I tried to keep hesitation from my tone.

She frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I'm merely tired is all." The ache in my temples deepened. "It's been a long evening."

"No, there's more than that." Her expression softened. "What's troubling you?"

Empathy poured from her eyes, but I shook my head and peered out at the crowd. Baze's five nieces, ranging in age from twelve to twenty, had grasped hands and now skipped around him in a humorous dance.

I let my gaze wander and singled out a lone gentleman across the room wearing a black top hat and tailcoat. He appeared to be in his early thirties, with dark raven hair and a cool demeanor. I pointed, hoping Emily would catch on. “What do you think of him?”

Though she flashed one last silent plea, Emily eventually looked to where I gestured. After a moment of sizing him up, she said, “There are definite skeletons in his cupboard.”

I grinned as he sipped from a champagne glass. “Skeletons of the criminal sort?”

She wiggled her fingers. “I was thinking more of the secret espionage sort.”

“Foreigner?”

“Most assuredly.”

“Family at home?”

“A wife and child . . . and a mistress overseas.”

I tsked. “What a scoundrel.”

Emily studied the crowd before pointing. “Her.”

She had selected a robust woman wearing a glittering pink gown, her brilliant white hair twisted into a magnificent design adorned with feather plumes and jewels. Her layered makeup gathered in the deep wrinkles of her face.

I tapped my chin. “Lifelong heiress, daughter of a famous millionaire.”

“Married?”

“No, never. But she had a childhood sweetheart who broke off their engagement. She’s spent her whole life pining for him and has since wooed many a man, leaving behind her a wake of broken hearts.”

Emily pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. “A real *femme fatale*.”

I scanned the party guests again and located an aged gentleman with a short, bent stature.

“You should be wary of storytelling. That’s how rumors begin.”

I stifled a squeal and jumped behind Emily. *Excellent, Adelynn. Take shelter behind the pregnant woman.*

At second glance, I recognized the newcomer as the man we had selected for our first narrative. The top hat cast shadows across his sharp cheekbones but couldn't dim his stark blue eyes.

The man smiled. "If I may ask, what type of tale did you spin for me?"

My cheeks flamed. "I apologize, sir. It's merely a little game of ours."

"I pass no judgment upon you." He held up his hands. Then he doffed his hat, bowed, and straightened in one smooth motion. "My name is Cornelius Marx." He returned the hat to his head and looked into my eyes. "You must be Adelynn Spencer, the blushing bride-to-be."

My cheeks flushed, and I resisted the urge to cover them with my hands. "Yes."

"And I'm Emily Bennett." She gave a tight-lipped smile and narrowed her eyes. "Are you a friend of the Fords?"

"New acquaintance, actually. I recently moved to the city and am looking to expand my connections." He cocked an eyebrow. "What better place to start than a party full of politicians and police personnel?"

"Well, I hope you find what you seek." I dipped in a small curtsy. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Marx."

"Before I take my leave, I would like to offer you and your fiancé a gift in honor of your new engagement." He reached inside his jacket, produced a small card, and handed it to me. It was blank, save for his name in the center, composed of a swirling script. "I am the proprietor of a new entertainment locale in town, the Empress Theatre. It will feature world-class magical spectacles, performed by one of the finest magicians I have had the pleasure of meeting. We are hosting our debut magic show next week." He nodded at the card. "Show that to my doorman, and you will be well looked after."

I tipped my chin. "That's very kind of you, Mr. Marx. Thank you."

"Cornelius, please." He bowed. "It's been a pleasure, ladies, but I'm

afraid I must be off.” His eyes found mine as he lifted my hand and kissed the back with warm, soft lips, raising the hairs on my arm. “Congratulations, Adelynn. I wish you every happiness from this moment forth.” With a final tip of his hat, he straightened and vanished into the crowd.

Emily spun toward me. “That was awfully forward of him, addressing you by your Christian name.”

“Yes, I suppose it was . . .” I massaged my forehead as the ache worsened.

“Are you all right? You’ve grown pale.” She touched my shoulder.

Sharp pain shot through my head. I opened my mouth to cry out but made no sound. Darkness swarmed my vision.

Through the shadows, a London street materialized around me. I stood alone alongside the cobbled road. The Thames sparkled black in the distance. Behind me, the two red-bricked buildings of New Scotland Yard towered through thick fog. The glowing face of the distant Clock Tower showed nearly twelve o’clock.

Surveying the empty street, I edged a foot forward. It struck a semi-solid object. I looked down.

The body of a man lay strewn on the ground, face gray and frozen. Blood stained the pavement around him.

A laugh pierced the night. It had come from my body—but it hadn’t been my laugh.

What’s happening?

The scene faded. Then all fell silent.

