

The Ghostwriter

EVERY GOOD STORY has a few secrets.

At least, that's what I've been told. Sometimes they're secrets about love, secrets about family, secrets about murder—some so inconsequential they barely feel like secrets at all, but monumental to the person keeping them. Every person has a secret. Every secret has a story.

And in my head, every story has a happy ending.

If I were the heroine in a story, I would tell you that I had three secrets.

One, I hadn't washed my hair in four days.

Two, my family owned a funeral home.

And three, I was the ghostwriter of mega-bestselling, critically acclaimed romance novelist Ann Nichols.

And I was *sorely* late for a meeting.

"Hold the door!" I shouted, bypassing the security personnel at the front desk, and sprinting toward the elevators.

"Miss!" the befuddled security guard shouted after me. "You have to check in! You can't just—"

“Florence Day! Falcon House Publishers! Call up to Erin and she’ll approve me!” I tossed over my shoulder, and slid into one of the elevators, cactus in tow.

As the doors closed, a graying man in a sharp business suit eyed the plant in question.

“A gift to butter up my new editor,” I told him, because I wasn’t someone who just carried around small succulents wherever she went. “God knows it’s not for me. I kill everything I touch, including three cactuses—cacti?—already.”

The man coughed into his hand and angled himself away from me. The woman on the other side said, as if to console me, “That’s lovely, dear.”

Which meant that this was a terrible gift. I mean, I figured it was, but I had been stranded for too long on the platform waiting for the B train, having a small panic attack with my brother on the phone, when a little old lady with rollers in her hair tottered by selling cacti for like a dollar a pop and I bought things when I was nervous. Mainly books but—I guess now I bought houseplants, too.

The guy in the business suit got off on the twentieth floor, and the woman who held the elevator left on the twenty-seventh. I took a peek into their worlds before the doors closed again, immaculate white carpet or buffed wooden floors and glass cases where old books sat idly. There were quite a few publishers in the building, both online and in print, and there was even a newspaper on one of the floors. I could’ve been in the elevator with the editor for *Nora Roberts* for all I knew.

Whenever I came to visit the offices, I was always hyperaware of how people took one look at me—in my squeaky flats and darned hose and too-big plaid overcoat—and came to the conclusion that I was *not* tall enough to ride this ride.

Which . . . fair. I stood at around five foot two, and everything I wore was bought for comfort and not style. Rose, my roommate, always joked that I was an eighty-year-old in a twenty-eight-year-old body.

Sometimes I felt it.

Nothing said Netflix and chill quite like an orthopedic pillow and a wineglass of Ensure.

When the elevator doors opened onto the thirty-seventh floor, I was alone, grasping my cactus like a life vest at sea. The offices of Falcon House Publishers were pristine and white, with two fluorescent bookshelves on either side of the entryway, touting all of the bestsellers and literary masterpieces they'd published over their seventy-five-year history.

At least half of the left wall was covered in books by Ann Nichols—*The Sea-Dweller's Daughter*, *The Forest of Dreams*, *The Forever House*, ones my mom sighed over when I was a teenager writing my smutty Lestat fanfic. Next to them were Ann's newer books, *The Probability of Love*, *A Rake's Guide to Getting the Girl* (I was most proud of that title), and *The Kiss at the Midnight Matinee*. The glass reflected my face in the book covers, a pale white and sleep-deprived young woman with dirty blond hair pulled up in a messy bun and dark circles under tired brown eyes, in a colorful scarf and an oversized beige sweater that made me look like I was the guest speaker at the Yarn of the Month Club and not one of the most distinguished publishing houses in the world.

Technically, I wasn't the guest here. Ann Nichols was, and I was what everyone guessed was her lowly assistant.

And I had a meeting to get to.

I stood in the lobby awkwardly, the cactus pressed to my chest, as the dark-haired receptionist, Erin, held up a finger and finished her call. Something about salad for lunch. When she finally hung

up, she looked up from her screen and recognized me. "Florence!" she greeted with a bright smile. "Nice to see you up and about! How's Rose? That party last night was *brutal*."

I tried not to wince, thinking about Rose and I stumbling in at 3:00 A.M. "It sure was something."

"Is she still alive?"

"Rose has survived worse."

Erin laughed. Then she glanced around the lobby, as if looking for someone else. "Is Mrs. Nichols not going to make it today?"

"Oh no, she's still up in Maine, doing her . . . Maine thing."

Erin shook her head. "Gotta wonder what it's like, you know? Being the Ann Nicholises and Stephen Kings of the world."

"Must be nice," I agreed. Ann Nichols hadn't left her small little island in Maine in . . . five years? As long as I'd been ghost-writing for her, anyway.

I tugged down the multicolored scarf wrapped around my mouth and neck. While it wasn't winter anymore, New York always had one last kick of cold before spring, and that had to be today, and I was beginning to nervously sweat under my coat.

"Someday," Erin added, "you're going to tell me how you became the assistant for *the* Ann Nichols."

I laughed. "I've told you before—a Craigslist ad."

"I don't believe that."

I shrugged. "C'est la vie."

Erin was a few years younger than me, her Columbia University publishing certificate proudly displayed on her desk. Rose had met her a while back on a dating app, and they'd hooked up a few times, though now from what I heard they were strictly friends.

The phone began to ring on her desk. Erin said quickly, "Anyway, you can go ahead—still remember the way, yeah?"

"Absolutely."

“Perf. Good luck!” she added, and answered the call in her best customer service voice. “Good morning! You’ve reached Falcon House Publishers, this is Erin speaking . . .”

And I was left to my own devices.

I knew where to go, because I’d visited the old editor enough times to be able to walk the halls blindfolded. Tabitha Margraves had retired recently, at the absolute *worst* time, and with every step closer to the office, I held tighter on to the poor cactus.

Tabitha knew I ghostwrote for Ann. She and Ann’s agent were the only ones who did—well, besides Rose, but Rose didn’t count. Had Tabitha passed that nugget of secrecy to my new editor? God, I hoped so. Otherwise this was going to be an awkward first meeting.

The hallway was lined with frosted glass walls that were supposed to be used for privacy, but they provided extraordinarily little of that. I heard editors and marketing and PR shadows talking in hushed tones about acquisitions, marketing plans, contractual obligations, tours . . . reallocating money from one book’s budget to another.

The things in publishing that no one ever really talked about.

Publishing was all very romantic until you found yourself *in* publishing. Then it was just another kind of corporate hell.

I passed a few assistant editors sitting in their square cubicles, manuscripts piled almost to the top of their half walls, looking frazzled as they ate carrots and hummus for lunch. The salads Erin ordered must not have included them, not that editorial assistants made enough to afford eating out every day. The offices were set up in a hierarchy of sorts, and the farther you went, the higher the salary. At the end of the hall, I almost didn’t recognize the office. Gone were the floral wreath hanging on the door for good luck and the stickers plastered to the frosted glass privacy wall that read TRY NOT, DO! and ROMANCE ISN’T DEAD!

For a second, I thought I'd made a wrong turn, until I recognized the intern in her small cubicle, stuffing ARCs—Advance Reader Copies, basically rough drafts of a book in paperback form—into envelopes with a harried sort of frenzy that bordered on tears.

My new editor didn't waste any time peeling off those decals and tossing the good luck wreath in the trash. I didn't know if that was a good sign—or bad.

Toward the end of her tenure at Falcon House, Tabitha Margraves and I butted heads more often than not. "Romance *believes* in happy endings. Tell *Ann* that," she would say, tongue in cheek, because, for all intents and purposes, I was Ann.

"Well *Ann* doesn't anymore," I would quip back, and by the time she turned in her resignation and retired down to Florida, I'm sure we were both plotting each other's demise. She still believed in love—somehow, impossibly.

And I could see right through the lie.

Love was putting up with someone for fifty years so you'd have someone to bury you when you died. I would know; my family was in the business of death.

Tabitha called me crass when I told her that.

I said I was realistic.

There was a difference.

I sat down in one of the two chairs outside of the office, the cactus in my lap, to wait and scroll through my Instagram feed. My younger sister had posted a photo of her and my hometown mayor—a golden retriever—and I felt a pang of homesickness. For the weather, the funeral parlor, my mom's amazing fried chicken.

I wondered what she was cooking tonight for dinner.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear the office door open until a distinctly male voice said, "Sorry for the wait, please come in."

I bolted to my feet in surprise. Did I have the wrong office? I checked the cubicles—the brown-haired workaholic intern cramming ARCs into envelopes to the left, the HR director sobbing into his salad on the right—no, this was definitely the right office.

The man cleared his throat, impatiently waiting.

I hugged the cactus so tight to my chest, I could feel the pot beginning to creak with the pressure, and stepped into his office.

And froze.

The man in question sat in the leather chair that for thirty-five years (longer than he'd been alive, I figured) Tabitha Margraves had inhabited. The desk, once cluttered with porcelain knickknacks and pictures of her dog, was clean and tidy, everything stacked in its proper place. The desk reflected the man behind it almost perfectly: too polished, in a crisp white button-down shirt that strained at his broad shoulders, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows to reveal rather intimidatingly sexy forearms. His black hair was swept back out of his long face and somehow accentuated his equally long nose, black square glasses perched on it, and there were very faint freckles speckled across his face: one by his right nostril, two on his cheek, one just above his thick right eyebrow. A constellation of them. For a second, I wanted to take a Sharpie and connect them to see what myth they held. The next second, I quickly came to the realization that—

Oh.

He was hot. And I'd seen him before. At publishing functions with Rose or my ex-boyfriend. I couldn't place the name, but I'd definitely run into him more than once. I held my breath, wondering if he recognized me—*did* he?

For a second, I thought so, because his eyes widened—just a fraction, just enough for me to suspect he knew *something*—before it vanished.

He cleared his throat.

"You must be Ann Nichols's assistant," he greeted without missing a beat. He stood and came around the desk to offer his hand. He was . . . *enormous*. So tall I felt like I'd suddenly been transported into a retelling of "Jack and the Beanstalk" where he was a very hunky beanstalk that I really, *really* wanted to climb—

No. No, Florence. Bad girl, I scolded myself. *You do not want to climb him like a tree, because he's your new editor and therefore very, incredibly, stupendously unclimbable.*

"Florence Day," I said as I accepted his hand. His almost completely enveloped mine in a strong handshake.

"Benji Andor, but you can call me Ben," he introduced.

"Florence," I repeated, shocked that I could mutter anything above a squeak.

The edges of his mouth quirked up. "So you said."

I quickly pulled my hand away, mortified. "Oh *god*. Right—sorry." I sat down a little too hard in the uncomfortable IKEA chair, cactus planted firmly on my knees. My cheeks were on *fire*, and if I could feel them, I knew that he could see I was blushing.

He sat down again and adjusted a pen on his desk. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Sorry for the wait, the subways were hell this morning. Erin keeps telling me not to take the B train and yet I am a fool who does every single time."

"Or a masochist," I added before I could stop myself.

He barked a laugh. "Maybe both."

I bit the inside of my cheek to hide a smile. He had a great laugh—the kind that was deep and throaty, like a rumble.

Oh *no*, this was not going as planned at all.

He liked me, and he wasn't going to like me in about five minutes. I didn't even like myself for what I was here to do—why did I think a *cactus* as a gift would make this easier?

He scooted his chair in and straightened a pen to be horizontal

with his keyboard. Everything was neat like that in this office, and I got the very distinct feeling that he was the kind of person who, if he found a book misplaced at a bookstore, would return it to the shelf where it belonged.

Everything had its place.

He was a bullet journal guy, and I was a sticky note kind of girl.

That might've been a good thing, actually. He seemed very no-nonsense, and no-nonsense people were rarely romantic, and so I wouldn't get a pitying look when I, eventually, tell him that I no longer believed in romance novels and he would nod solemnly, knowing *exactly* what I meant. And I would rather have *that* than Tabitha Margraves looking at me with those sad, dark eyes and asking, "Why don't you believe in love anymore, Florence?"

Because when you put your hand in the fire too many times, you learn that you only get burned.

My new editor shifted in his seat. "I'm sorry to hear that Mrs. Nichols couldn't make it today. I would've loved to meet her," he began, wrenching me from my thoughts.

I shifted in my seat. "Oh, Tabitha didn't tell you? She never leaves Maine. I think she lives on an island or something. It sounds nice—I wouldn't ever want to leave, either. I hear Maine's pretty."

"It is! I grew up there," he replied. "Saw many a moose. They're huge."

Are you sure you aren't half moose yourself? my traitorous brain said, and I winced because that was *very* wrong and *very* bad. "I guess they prepared you for the rats in New York."

He laughed again, this time surprising himself, and he had a glorious white smile, too. It reached his eyes, turning brown to a melting ocher. "Nothing could prepare me for those. Have you seen the ones down in Union Square? I swear one had a *jockey* on him."

“Oh, you didn’t know? There’s some great rat races down at the Eighteenth Street Station.”

“Do you go often?”

“Absolutely, there’s even a squeak-easy.”

“Wow, you’re a real mice-stro of puns.”

I snorted a laugh and looked away—anywhere other than at him. Because I liked his charm, and I definitely didn’t want to, and I hated disappointing people, and—

He cleared his throat and said, “Well, Miss Day, I think we need to talk about Ann’s upcoming novel . . .”

I gripped the cactus in my lap tighter. My eyes jumped from barren wall to barren wall. There was nothing in the office to look at. It used to be full of things—fake flowers and photos and book covers on the walls—but now the only thing on the walls was a framed master’s degree in fiction—

“Does it have to be a romance?” I blurted.

Surprised, he cocked his head. “This . . . is a romance imprint.”

“I—I know, but like—you know how Nicholas Sparks writes depressing books and John Green writes melodramatic sick-lit, do you think I—I mean *Mrs. Nichols*—could do something in that vein instead?”

He was quiet for a moment. “You mean a tragedy.”

“Oh, no. It’d still be a love story! Obviously. But a love story where things don’t end up—‘*happily ever after*’—perfect.”

“We’re in the business of happily ever afters,” he said slowly, picking his words.

“And it’s a lie, isn’t it?”

He pursed his lips.

“Romance is dead, and this—all of this—feels like a con.” I found myself saying it before my brain approved, and as soon as I

realized I'd voiced it aloud, I winced. "I didn't mean—that isn't Ann's stance, that's just what I think—"

"Are you her assistant or her editor?"

The words were like a slap in the face. I quickly snapped my gaze back to him, and went very still. His eyes had lost their warm ocher, the laugh lines having sunk back into a smooth, emotionless mask.

I gripped the cactus tighter. It had suddenly become my buddy in war. So he didn't know that I was Ann's ghostwriter. Tabitha didn't tell him, or she forgot to—slipped her mind, whoops! And I needed to tell him.

He was my editor, after all.

But a bitter, embarrassed part of me didn't want to. I didn't want him to see how much of my life I didn't have together because, as Ann's ghostwriter, shouldn't I? Have it together?

Shouldn't I be better than *this*?

When I was growing up, my mother read Ann Nichols's books, and because of that, I did, too. When I was twelve, I would sneak into the romance section in the library and quietly read *The Forest of Dreams* between the stacks. I knew her catalog back and forth like a well-played discography of my favorite band.

And then I became her pen.

While Ann's name was on the cover, I wrote *The Probability of Love* and *A Rake's Guide to Getting the Girl* and *The Kiss at the Midnight Matinee*. For the last five years, Ann Nichols had sent me a check to write the book in question, and then I did, and the words in those books—my words—had been praised from the *New York Times Book Review* to *Vogue*. Those books sat on shelves beside Nora Roberts and Nicholas Sparks and Julia Quinn, and *they were mine*.

I wrote for one of romance's greats—a job anyone would *die* to have—and I . . . I was failing.

Perhaps I'd *already* failed. I'd just asked for my last trump card—to write a book that was anything, everything, but a happily ever after—and he said no.

"Mr. Andor," I began, my voice cracking, "the truth is—"

"Ann needs to deliver the manuscript by the deadline," he interrupted in a cold, no-nonsense voice. The warmth it held a few minutes before was gone. I felt myself getting smaller by the moment, shrinking into the hard IKEA chair.

"That's tomorrow," I said softly.

"Yes, tomorrow."

"And if—if she can't?"

He pressed his lips into a thin line. He had a sort of wide mouth that dipped in the middle, expressing things that the rest of his face was too guarded to. "How much time does she need?"

A year. Ten years.

An eternity.

"Um—a—a month?" I asked hopefully.

His dark brows shot up. "Absolutely not."

"These things take time!"

"I understand that," he replied, and I flinched. He took off his black-rimmed glasses to look at me. "May I be frank with you?"

No, absolutely not. "Yes . . . ?" I ventured.

"Because Ann's already asked for three deadline extensions, even if we get it tomorrow, we'd have to push it quickly through copyedits and pass pages—and that's only *if* we get it tomorrow—to keep to our schedule. This is Ann's big fall book. A romance, mind you, with a happily ever after. That's her brand. That's what we signed for. We already have promotions lined up. We might even have a full-page spread in the *New York Times*. We're doing a lot for this book, so when I prodded Ann's agent to speak with her, she connected me with you, her assistant."

I knew that part. Molly Stein, Ann's agent, wasn't very happy to get a call about the book in question. She thought everything had been going smoothly. I hadn't the heart to tell her otherwise. Molly had been pretty hands-off with my ghostwriting gig, mostly because the books were part of a four-book deal, this being the last one, and she trusted that I wouldn't mess up.

Yet here I was.

I didn't want to even *think* about how Molly would break the news to Ann. I didn't want to think about how disappointed Ann would be. I'd met the woman once and I was deathly afraid of failing her. I didn't want to do that.

I looked up to her. And the feeling of failing someone you looked up to . . . it sucked as a kid, and it sucked as an adult.

Benji went on. "Whatever is keeping Mrs. Nichols from finishing her manuscript has become a problem not only for me, but for marketing *and* production, and if we want to stay on schedule, we need that manuscript."

"I—I know, but . . ."

"And if she can't deliver," he added, "then we'll have to get the legal department involved, I'm afraid."

The legal department. That meant a breach of contract. That meant I would have messed up so big that there would be no coming back from it. I would've failed not just Ann, but her publisher and her readers—everyone.

I'd already failed like that once.

The office began to get smaller, or I was having a panic attack, and I really hoped it was the former. My breath came in short bursts. It was hard to breathe.

"Miss Florence? Are you okay? You seem a little pale," he observed, but his voice sounded a football field away. "Do you need some water?"

I shoved my panic into a small box in the back of my head, where everything else went. All of the bad things. The things I didn't want to deal with. The things I *couldn't* deal with. The box was useful. I shut everything in. Locked it tight. I pressed on a smile. "Oh, no. I'm fine. It's a lot to take in. And—and you're right. Of course you're right."

He seemed doubtful. "Tomorrow, then?"

"Yeah," I croaked.

"Good. Please tell Mrs. Nichols that I send my regards, and I'm very happy to be working with her. And I'm sorry—is that a *cactus*? I just noticed."

I looked down at the succulent, all but forgotten in my lap as my panic banged on the box in my head, lock rattling, to get free. I—I thought I hated this man, and if I stayed in this office any longer, I was going to either throw this cactus at him or cry.

Maybe both.

I jerked to my feet and put the succulent on the edge of the desk. "It's a gift."

Then I gathered my satchel and turned on my heels and left Falcon House Publishers without another word. I held myself together until I stumbled out of the revolving door of the building and into the brisk April day, and let myself crumble.

I took a deep breath—and screamed an obscenity into the perfectly blue afternoon sky, startling a flock of pigeons from the side of the building.

I needed a drink.

No, I needed a *book*. A murder-thriller. Hannibal. Lizzie Borden—anything would do.

Maybe I needed both.

No, *definitely* both.