

MOLLY'S  
LETTER

A TEA ROSE STORY



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A TEA ROSE STORY

EXCERPT — CHAPTER ONE







## ❧ Chapter 1 ❧

*New York City, June 1891*

Fiona Finnegan Soames took a deep breath and reveled in the quiet.

The Saturday crowd had been relentless. The clock had just struck six and she was exhausted. Her customers were gone now; her staff, too. The tearoom had been scrubbed and swept, the silver polished, the cushions plumped, and the day's earnings safely locked away.

She was standing in the back garden of her Gramercy Park brownstone by herself, yet she was not alone, for arching over the doorway, trellised along the high brick walls, and dipping gracefully over the tables, were her beloved tea roses. They were her creatures and she was theirs, and no matter how weary she was, she made a point every evening to spend a peaceful moment walking among them.

The profusion of blooms—in dusty pinks, deep reds, ivories, and soft yellows—was breathtaking, and as Fiona admired them, a gentle breeze swept down, making it look as if the flowery heads were nodding, as if they understood.

The tea roses were why Fiona had bought the brownstone, why she'd taken the immense gamble of opening a tearoom. When she'd first seen them, growing so tall in the abandoned garden, neglected and weed-choked yet flowering defiantly, they had spoken to her. They had whispered that she, too, would endure. That she would rise above the ruins of her life and bloom.

She reached up now, pulled a crimson rose to her and inhaled its beguiling scent, and for a moment she was no longer in New York, but in East London, sitting at the top of a set of stone steps. A boy called to her, a boy with a smile that promised her the world and everything in it. He handed her a single red rose.

Fiona tried to box the memory away, afraid of where it would lead her. To a sun-dappled river. To autumn air tinged with coal smoke and the scent of tea leaves. To her past, a place to which she could never return. But the memory refused to be confined. It danced down the hallways of her heart, pulling her along with it, showing her a stolen kiss. Coins in an old cocoa tin. A thin gold ring with a tiny sapphire. So many first times, and then the last time, at the lapping river's shore. Tears threatened. Fiona blinked them back and released the rose, hoping to release the ghost it had conjured as well. As she did, a voice carried out to the garden from the tearoom.

"Fee! Darling wife! Where in blazes are you?"

The voice was a man's—English, like her own, but impossibly posh. Before Fiona could answer, her husband of

not quite two years, Nicholas Soames, bounded onto the terrace. At the sight of him, her sad memories faded like a cold mist in the bright morning sun. A smile spread across her face—a broad, beautiful grin that brought color to her cheeks and made her indigo eyes sparkle.

Tall, slender, and heartbreakingly handsome, Nick was wearing a cream linen suit and a sky-blue cravat. His color was high, and his blond bangs, usually neatly swept back off his high forehead, had flopped down over one eye. He was holding a bottle in one hand.

“Why do you have champagne?” Fiona asked him.

“Because we’re celebrating!” he exclaimed. “We’ll have a toast after supper. With Michael and Mary and Alec and Nell and the boys.”

“Who are we toasting?”

“New York’s most brilliant art dealer!”

Fiona craned her neck, pretending to look past him. “Where is he? I’d love to meet him.”

“Aren’t you funny,” Nick said. He plunked the bottle down on a table, pulled her close, and whispered three words in her ear. “I sold it.”

Fiona pulled back from him a little, the better to see his face. Her eyes searched his. “Sold what?”

“The Van Gogh.”

Fiona’s hands came up to her mouth. “Nick, you *didn’t*.”

The painting, *Irisles*, had arrived in a crate last year with several others of sunflowers and almond trees. They’d been shipped over from France by Nick’s art-dealer friend, and



the painter's brother, Theo. Fiona had watched as Nick had unpacked the paintings one-by-one, and had found herself strangely drawn to them. They were raw, bold, and inexplicably moving.

"Durand-Ruel bet me a hundred dollars that I'd never sell a single canvas," he crowed now, referring to the legendary French art dealer who had been Nick's employer when he lived in Paris, and who now operated a rival gallery in New York. "I can't wait to collect my winnings. I'll buy you a bauble with them, Fee. Something bright and shiny. What would you like?"

"I'm not sure," Fiona said, her brow furrowing. She thought for a second, then snapped her fingers. "An adding machine!"

Nick's eyes widened in dismay. "How thoroughly appalling."

"How about a set of industrial scales, then? They'd make processing bulk orders of tea much more efficient."

"How about a pair of earrings?" Nick countered. "Or a pendant to dangle invitingly above your cleavage?"

Fiona snorted. "Cleavage doesn't sell tea."

"Cleavage sells everything. Now lock up, will you? We're late for supper and I'm starving," he said, ready to leave. "I hope Mary is making roast chicken tonight. And roast potatoes. With gravy and rolls and—"

Fiona caught hold of his hand, stopping him. He turned to her, his eyes questioning.

"I'm proud of you, Nicholas," she said quietly.

They liked to tease each other. About everything. All the time. But Fiona was not teasing now. She knew what success meant to Nick for she knew what it had cost him: his family, his country, the man he'd loved.

"Of course you are," Nick said breezily. "How could you not—"

Fiona cut him off. He was trying to deflect her words and the emotion underneath them—it was his way—but she would not let him. "I mean it, Nick. I'm proud of you."

Nicholas tried for a smile, but it turned into a wince. He looked down at their clasped hands, saying nothing, just twisting the gold wedding band on her finger back and forth. Then he leaned his forehead against hers and for a long moment, they stood that way, not talking, for what they felt was too deep for words.

They had met in England, as Nick was getting on a ship bound for New York and Fiona was trying to do the same—without a ticket. Nick had saved her life, and Seamie's, too, by getting them on that boat. And, later, after they'd arrived in New York and a dread disease had carried him to the brink of death, Fiona had saved his. Though their marriage was unconventional, their bond was unbreakable. They were not lovers but the truest of friends. They belonged to each other, heart and soul, and always would.

Nick was the first one to break the silence. "Let's go, old mole. Or else you'll make me blub and that won't do. New York's most brilliant, and handsomest, and wittiest,

and also most stylish, art dealer cannot be seen out and about with red eyes and a snotty nose.”

Laughing, Fiona led the way inside. Nick picked up his bottle of champagne and followed her. As he made his way through the tearoom, she locked the terrace doors, double-checked that the oven was off, and grabbed her shawl off the back of a chair.

“It’s strawberry season. A Victoria sponge for dessert would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Nick said, as Fiona locked the front door. “Slathered with jam and whipped cream? Mary is such a good baker.”

“How come you never talk about my cooking so fondly?” asked Fiona, as they set off up the street.

“Because your cooking is egregious, my darling girl. That dish you made last night?” He shuddered.

“The pork medallions? They were French! *Escalope de Porc au Cognac!*”

“They were a felony.”

Fiona scowled at him.

“Don’t give me that look. You know it’s true. You are many wonderful things, Mrs. Soames, but a cook is not one of them.”

“I suppose you’re right. And a Victoria sponge *does* sound awfully good.”

Nicholas offered her his arm and she took it. She was still tired, her body ached from the long day, and her heart ached from her memories. But she was happy, too. Happy

for Nick's success, and happy for her own. Happy for second chances. Happy, most of all, to be walking arm in arm with her husband, her best friend, through the soft summer evening and the city of their dreams.



