

A Prequel to

The Pursuit of Mrs. Pennyworth

A historical romantic suspense novel ~ coming March 2018 from Entangled Publishing

Elliot Baker had just sat down at the table in the Beaumont Café when a young, beautiful woman slid into the seat across from him.

She was all feminine loveliness, from the top of her blonde head to the bottom of her light brown half-boots. Her large blue eyes regarded him, her creamy complexion tainted a light red on her cheeks. Embarrassment? Her wavy hair had been swept back into some sort of hairdo where her fashionable hat sat.

The woman took out a handkerchief, patted the end of her nose with it, and took a deep breath, drawing his eyes to her generous bosom. He swallowed.

“I am so sorry to trouble you here. You are Mr. Elliot Baker?”

His brows rose. “Yes.”

“The Mr. Elliot Baker who is a solicitor?”

“Yesss.” He drew the word out, since most of his clients did not seek him out at restaurants. “Sometimes, that is. I am also an Inspector with Scotland Yard.”

“Oh, dear. I didn’t know that. I am looking for legal advice.”

“And who are you?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. My name is Miss Annabelle Lawton.” She waved her handkerchief in his direction, a light scent of lavender drifting toward him. “I was on my way to your office when I saw you leave, and forgive me, but I followed you.”

Just then a waiter approached the table, and bowed. “May I serve you, and the lady, sir?”

Confused at what this woman wanted, and why she sought him here, he glanced over at her. “Have you eaten, Miss Lawton?” When she shook her head, he added, “Would you care to join me?”

She lowered her voice and leaned forward, the fabric over her breasts straining. He shifted in his chair and forced his eyes upward, not where they wanted to be.

“Thank you, I am quite hungry, but I’m afraid I have no money.” She sniffed, and her eyes filled with tears.

Elliot smiled warmly. “Nonsense, I shall be pleased to have you join me. Do not concern yourself with payment.” He turned to the waiter. “Bring us both today’s special.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.” The man walked off and Elliot turned his attention to Miss Lawton. “What sort of legal advice are you in need of?”

She sighed again, this time waving her handkerchief in front of her breasts, pulling his regard right back to that spot. He must stop. It was insulting to the lady.

“My favorite uncle, my last relative in the world, passed away ten days ago.”

His head dipped. “I am so sorry for your loss.”

She lowered her head in acknowledgment. “Thank you. It has been difficult.” Another deep breath, another view of her marvelous bosom.

“Go on.”

“Uncle Matthew left me a considerable sum of money in his Will. Yesterday, I received a post in the mail, and was quite disappointed to find not the draft I was expecting, but a letter from a solicitor, stating that Uncle Matthew’s Will was being contested.” She touched the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief. “I don’t even know what that means.” Her voice wavered.

Before Elliot could comment, the waiter arrived with their food. They both sat silent until everything was placed on the table, and arranged the way the waiter thought best.

Elliot picked up his fork and knife. “What that means is someone has petitioned the court to review the Will and see if this person has a legitimate claim against your uncle’s estate. Do you have the letter with you?”

She shook her head. “No. I was so upset when the letter arrived that I tore it in two and don’t remember where I put it.”

He closed his eyes. “That was not a good idea.”

“I know. I looked for it this morning, but couldn’t find it.”

Elliot nodded toward her plate. “Why don’t you eat, and we will return to my office and I can make some notes.”

She sighed deeply.

He glanced at her breasts again. The dinner continued.

Three weeks later

Elliot stood as Annabelle glided across the floor of the restaurant, and took the seat he held out for her. As usual, she looked wonderful. She always dressed in the height of fashion, but was vague about her source of income. The issue with the Will was at a stalemate.

It had taken her almost a week to even provide him with the address of the solicitor who had sent the letter, a man he'd never heard of, which she wrote down for him on a piece of paper instead of bringing the actual letter. When he questioned her about it, she cried, and he felt terrible for upsetting her.

She was a sensitive woman, and over the course of their brief relationship he'd come to realize how fragile she was. After spending more and more time together, he was besotted with her sweet nature, and charming ways. He was certain she felt the same about him as he did about her.

Although it was probably not a good idea for him to be so enamored of a client, he simply could not help himself. He'd waited all his life for the right woman, and Annabelle was the one.

"You look lovely, my dear." He kissed her on the cheek, keeping everything proper while they were in public. He left his more amorous actions for when they were in private. Yes, Annabelle was definitely the woman for his future.

"I am very excited about this evening's concert." She unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap. She reached over and laid her hand over his, looking into his eyes with caring—which he hoped would one day turn to love. "I have no idea what I would have done without you these past few weeks."

He grasped her hand. "I'm so glad I am able to help." He drew his hand back and took a sip of his brandy. "However, I could do so much more if I am able to contact the solicitor who is representing the person contesting your uncle's Will."

Her eyes grew wide. "Were you unable to contact him?"

“I am afraid, my dear, you must have written the address incorrectly because the letter I sent him came back in today’s post with a notation that the gentlemen is unknown at that address.”

She sat back, frowning. “Truly? I am so surprised.” She shook her head. “I will check the letter again.”

“Perhaps it would be better to just give me the letter.”

“I believe you are right, Elliot. I am so sorry for being such a ninny. I should have done that from the start.”

They enjoyed their meal, and then headed to the concert hall. Elliot had never cared much for concerts, but found Annabelle’s company so alluring that he began to look forward to the concerts they attended. Many times he’d wished they could have more private time together. His landlady did not permit women in her boarders’ rooms, and Annabelle’s boarding house had the same rules.

The only times he’d been able to properly kiss her was when they rode in rented cabs to and from various events. He was growing frustrated, and had decided the time was growing near for him to offer her a proper proposal. Even though he’d only known her for a few weeks, she was the woman he wanted.

She needed someone to look after her, provide for her, so she wasn’t so dependent on the money she intended to receive from her uncle. Court cases for contested Wills could take a great deal of time.

“Wasn’t that truly wonderful?” Annabelle cast him a dreamy smile as the hansom cab rolled away from the concert hall.

“Indeed it was. However, not as wonderful as you are.” He moved across the space that separated them and sat alongside her, taking her hand in his. She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. “This was such a delightful evening.” She turned to look up at him with those big blue eyes. “Thank you so much.”

Elliot took the opportunity to lower his head and cover her mouth with his. She was sweet, soft, warm. The kiss grew more passionate as the familiar clip-clop of the horses’ hooves on the cobblestones continued. The mist surrounding the carriage cocooned them in their own little world, as they traversed the London streets on the way to Annabelle’s home.

Their clothing was in a bit of disarray by the time the carriage stopped in front of her house. Quickly adjusting themselves, Elliot stepped out and turned to help Annabelle down. “Good night, my love. I wish to see you tomorrow to discuss something of importance.”

“Nothing bad, I hope?” Her luscious lips turned into a charming pout.

“Not at all. I will call for you after my shift at Scotland Yard. Shall we say around eight?”

“Of course. What do you have planned?”

He ran his finger down her soft cheek. “It is a surprise.”

Annabelle clapped her hands. “Oh, I love surprises!”

Her hips swayed deliciously as she made her way up the steps to her front door. Turning, she blew him a kiss and entered the house.

The next evening, Elliot presented himself at the Chief Inspector’s office after receiving a summons. He was just about to leave to pick up Annabelle for dinner and a proposal. He smiled to himself as he patted his pocket where the diamond ring sat. Hopefully, this meeting with the Chief would not take long, and he could be on his way.

The older man sat in the chair behind his desk, a pipe stuck between his lips, obviously empty, since he disliked tobacco. Elliot never quite understood the Chief’s peccadillo, but accepted it as part of his nature.

“You sent for me, Chief?” Elliot drew out the chair in front of the desk and sat. The Chief looked up from a report he’d been reading, and leaned back. “Yes, I have an assignment for you.” He shuffled through papers on his desk and pulled out a telegram. “An extremely valuable jewel is being shipped from India to England to be held with the Crown Jewels. We need an Inspector to meet the ship at the Port of London, and see that the jewel is safely transported.”

Elliot nodded. “When?”

The Inspector glanced again at the paper. “Friday, next. It should dock at 8 o’clock in the evening. You are to be there to meet the man carrying the jewel and escort him to the Jewel House.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will receive another telegram confirming the information, the name of the man you are to meet, etc. which I will pass along to you.”

“Very good. Anything else?”

“No. Just that.”

Relieved at not being delayed from his assignation with Annabelle, Elliot nodded and left the room.

He stepped out of the rented hansom cab and as usual, Annabelle stood on the front steps of her boarding house. Her landlady did not even allow men over the threshold, so they always met outside. He greeted her halfway up the stairs. "You look lovely, as usual."

She turned her cheek for his chaste kiss, and they descended the rest of the way. Once they were settled and the cab moved forward, Annabella smiled brightly. "I just learned that my favorite play of all time will be at The Adelphi next Friday. You must secure tickets right away, since it will most likely sell out quickly. I cannot wait to see it."

Elliot frowned. "Next Friday?" He shook his head. "I do hate to disappoint you, love, but I have an assignment for the Yard that evening."

Annabelle narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms under her enticing breast. "I want to go to that play, Elliot."

"I'm sure it will run for more than one night. I can secure tickets for us on Saturday."

She shook her head, her curls bouncing. "No, Friday is opening night. We must go Friday."

"I cannot do that, Annabelle. I have an assignment."

Tears filled her eyes, and he immediately felt guilty. "Please understand, my dear. I'm simply not able to attend on Friday."

She dabbed at her eyes. "Very well." A few very silent minutes followed as she gazed out the window, then she turned to him. "I shall have to attend with Mr. Linfield then."

"Linfield!" That cur had been sniffing around Annabelle's skirts. Only friends, she claimed. But Elliot knew when a man was interested in much more than friendship, and Linfield was one of them. "I prefer if you don't attend with Linfield."

"He is my friend. I've known him for years."

"Maybe you think he is only a friend, but as a man I know differently."

She raised her chin. "You have no claim on me."

In that she was right. His fingers played with the ring that he intended to present to her tonight after he proposed. Now didn't seem the right time to do it, given their disagreement. That would have to wait until they settled this matter. He looked out the window at the misty evening.

Torn. Annabelle could very well be trying to force him to do her bidding, or she might actually invite Linfield to the theater with her.

That he could not allow.

“Perhaps I can find someone else to take the assignment.” He couldn’t believe he was considering that, but she meant too much to him to lose her to that idiot.

Annabelle gave him a bright smile. “Oh, Elliot! I knew you would find a way.”

“Yes. Well, I will see what I can do.” The happiness he generally felt in Annabelle’s presence dimmed a bit, leaving a small knot in his stomach.

A week later

The banging in Elliot’s door startled him awake, his heart pounding. *What the devil?*

He stumbled across the room and opened the door. The Chief Inspector stood there glowering at him. Apparently, his landlady had no problem with allowing men into the house.

Elliot ran his hand down his face. “What is it, Chief?”

“Did you send Rutley in your place last night to meet the ship carrying the jewel?”

A sudden feeling of doom washed over him. “Yes. I asked him if he would take the assignment for me.”

The Chief pushed his way into the room and stood feet apart, his hands on his hips. “There was an attempted robbery. Rutley was shot, but the jewel was not taken.”

His knees suddenly weak, Elliot backed up and sat on the edge of his bed. “Robbery?”

“Yes.”

“How is Rutley?” The devil take it, he felt awful. Elliot was the best inspector in the Yard, and he’d had prior assignments like last night’s that had gone perfectly. He couldn’t help but believe had he not passed the assignment off, no one would have been hurt.

“Don’t know too much yet. He’s in hospital, and we’ll have more information later today.” The Chief glared at him. “You will oversee the investigation. The would-be robbers got away, and I want them found and behind bars.”

He managed to stand on shaky legs. “Yes, sir.”

“We will discuss your part in this another time. I want these people caught fast. This has already hit the newspapers and the fervor that will follow is not going to be pleasant.” With those words, he turned on his heel and left, slamming the door behind him.

For a few moments, Elliot stood, staring at the door, overcome with regret and guilt. Then, spurred by his determination to bring those who had shot an inspector to justice, he rushed to dress and leave the house.

Then began days and nights of inquiring, questioning, speaking with known informants, visiting jewelers, and known jewel traders. He ate little, slept less. He sent a note along to Annabelle with apologies for not attending her. He offered no explanation, still riddled with guilt over escorting her to the play, and passing off his assignment to another.

They received word from Rutley’s wife that doctors had determined he would not walk again, ending his career, and forcing Mrs. Rutley to find work and leave the care of their two little ones to her mother. The guilt continued to pile on until there were days when the only thing forcing Elliot from his bed was the burning fever to find the culprits and put them behind bars.

Five days after the attempted jewel heist, he received a tip from one of his informants that he’d heard on the street of a group who had boasted about plans to pull off the largest jewel heist, ever. It seemed that the man in the group who’d been bragging about it had disappeared the same night the attempted robbery had taken place.

After two more days of relentless knocking on doors and visiting nearly every seedy pub in London, Elliot finally held in his hand a piece of paper that had the address of the group. With two other inspectors, Foster and Danson, and a serendipitous full moon, they surrounded the house two o’clock in the morning. They checked the first floor windows for activity, and then, certain they were all asleep, broke down the front door and entered.

Chaos erupted, but no shots were fired. Foster and Damon took into custody two men asleep in the front room, while Elliot headed for a closed door. He flung the door open, his gun pointed at a nude man scrambling from the bed, grabbing his pants, which Elliot assumed had a gun in the pocket. “Drop the pants.” The criminal let go and the thud on the floor confirmed the presence of the gun.

The woman alongside him rolled over and sat up, blinking.

“Elliot!” Annabelle pulled the sheet up to her neck to cover her naked body. All the air left his lungs, and the scant meal he’d eaten earlier threatened to make a re-appearance all over the floor.

Taking a few gulps of air to steady himself, he shouted, “Foster!” Annabelle jumped at the sound.

The inspector entered the bedroom, his brows rising at the sight of Annabelle in the bed. “Handcuff this one and turn on some lights.” The entire time Elliot spoke, his eyes never left the woman to whom he had almost proposed.

What a complete idiot he’d been.

After the room was lit and Inspector Foster, along with the criminal, and his pants—minus the weapon—left the room, Annabelle let the sheet slip, so just enough of her charms were visible. “Elliot, we’ve been friends. Can’t you let me go?” Her lips turned into the pout he’d grown to know so well.

Let her go? If he had his way she would hang in the morning. “No. Get up, get dressed and we will be on our way. To Scotland Yard.”

Offering him a smirk, she climbed from the bed and stood fully naked, placing one delicate hand on her hip. “Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

The only thing he was grateful for in his entire mess was any desire he had for her was completely gone. Vanished, like a magician’s sleight of hand.

“Get dressed, Annabelle.”

A snarl changed her lovely mien into something ugly. “You bastard. I bet you’re blaming me when you were the stupid one. I had you marked from the beginning,” she sneered. “You believed everything I told you. I’ll bet your ego was miles high.”

“Get. Dressed.” If his jaw muscles tightened any further, they would snap.

Reluctantly, she pulled on her clothes while he watched her, still fighting the bile at the back of his throat. Once finished, he gripped her shoulders and spun her around. Grabbing his handcuffs from his back pocket, he yanked her hands behind her and snapped the cuffs into place. He stuck his pistol into her back. “Move.”

Later the next day

Elliot paced in front of the Inspector's office, waiting for the chance to speak with him. As soon as the visiting politician left, he knocked on the Chief's door.

“Enter.”

Elliot strode across the floor, and placed his letter of resignation and badge on the Inspector's desk.

The man stared at it for a moment, then leaned back in his chair, studying Elliot. “I know you're feeling guilt over this, Elliot, but I think resigning is too strong of a reaction. Give yourself some time. Take a week or two off and then come back to work. Despite your poor decision, you are still my best inspector.”

“No. My mind is made up. I'm done.” With those clipped words, he left the Chief's office, and the building where he'd been happy in his job. He tossed the diamond ring in a trash barrel outside a pharmacy, and continued on until he was lost in the horde of pedestrians.

Just another face in the crowd.