



The Flower and the Flame

Copyright 2009, Lexi Adair

Cover Art: Lisa Amrine

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are no construed to be real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely incidental.

All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief excerpts or quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

"Why can't men be like that?" Madison Parker gestured to the television screen.

"Because," Sara murmured as she stepped into Madison's apartment, picking her way through the clutter of empty take-out that littered the floor. "We don't live in a movie."

Madison ignored her best friend as she turned up the sound on the television, trying to drown out Sara's sighs of disappointment.

"It's been a week, Maddie. Don't you think you should take off that sweatshirt?"

Madison glanced down at Jeff's rumpled NYU sweatshirt. It had been one of his favorites. One of the few things he had left behind when he had gone back to his wife. It still smelled like him and she needed that.

From the corner of her eye she saw Sara cross to the answering machine. "You have twenty-three messages." She punched her finger into the button on the machine. Jeff's voice filtered through the room and made Madison's heart ache painfully. "Are these all from him?" her friend asked. "I can't believe that asshole is still calling you. You need to delete them."

"No!" Madison jumped up from the couch, nearly tripping over a pizza box as Sara's finger inched towards the delete button. "I need those!"

Sara cocked an eyebrow, and then hit the delete key anyway.

"I can't believe you did that."

"I did it for your own good." Sara waved a finger at her. "There's nothing he could say to make up for what he did and you are only torturing yourself by keeping them."

"I can't believe you did that," Madison murmured again as a new wash of tears streamed down her face. She had shed so many over the last week it was a wonder she had any left. But her tears, like the ache in her heart, seemed a bottomless well from which she could never escape.

She stormed past Sara, turned into her bedroom room and flopped helplessly on the bed.

She heard Sara's footsteps drawing up behind her. She turned her face into the pillow, muttering into the cotton case. "I should have known he'd go back to her."

"I told you that you were playing with fire getting involved with a married man. They always go back."

She knew Sara was right, but that knowledge didn't help soothe the emptiness that threatened to devour her.

She felt Sara's hands slip over her, gathering the folds of her sweatshirt. "Take this damn thing off."

Madison shot up, slapping her friend's hand away. "Leave me alone."

Sara drew back and cocked a brow as if daring her. "You're going to make me get out the big guns aren't you?"

Madison let out a whimper as she flopped back down, this time drawing the blankets over the top of her, hiding beneath them.

She felt Sara's weight shift off the bed. "All right, girl, you asked for it."

Madison blew out a heavy breath beneath the blankets as she heard Sara's footsteps fade off into the distance and the front door slam moments later. Oh she was in for it all right. In for a lifetime of loneliness.

* * *

A knock on the door drew Matt away from the stack of papers upon his desk. He blew out a heavy breath at the interruption. He certainly didn't have time for whatever awaited him beyond the door. He still had five depositions to go through before they went to court next week.

He pushed himself away from the desk and stormed across his apartment to the door. He opened it to find Sara standing on the other side, a hard line drawn across her face and her hands propped up on her hips. "Whatever it is, it'll have to wait."

Sara scoffed out a breath as she pushed past him and stepped inside without invitation. "Something has got to be done," she huffed as she turned about on her heels to face him.

Matt cocked a brow but there was no doubt in his mind what Sara was referring to. Madison and her married man drama had been the topic of conversation for over a week now and quiet frankly it was getting old. Not that it was at all surprising that Jeff had gone back to his wife. He could have told Madison they always go back, but she wouldn't have listened.

"Is she still in that damned sweatshirt?"

"Yes, and it's time we did something about it."

How did he get roped into this? "What's this we business?"

Sara narrowed her gaze on her brother, a warning tone that he had heard so many times in his youth vibrated through her words. "Matthew Daniel Stratford, you march your butt right on over to that apartment and help me do something with that girl."

Matt stifled a laugh. "God, you sound like Mom."

"March." She pointed to the front door.

He knew when he was licked. No one said no to his baby sister...no one. He turned through the open door and stormed across the hall. Sara followed silently behind him as he shoved his way into Madison's apartment.

"Run a bath," he said as he headed for the bedroom.

Sara swept past him and disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. "Maddie, you've got to come out of there." When she gave no response he gathered the comforter in his hands and yanked it clean from the bed, letting it pool at his feet. His gaze swept up the length of her. Over the rumpled sweatshirt to her mass of blonde locks to the dark smudges of makeup beneath her eyes. "I gotta tell ya, hun. This emo thing you got going on ain't exactly a turn on."

"Go away," Madison grumbled as she buried her head beneath the pillow.

"Not happening." He took hold of one of her ankles. "We're not going anywhere 'til you get out of that damn sweatshirt."

She tried to kick his hand away but Matt refused to release his grip. She wasn't getting away that easily...not again. "You going to take that damn thing off or am I going to have to do it for you?"

Madison peeked at him from beneath the pillow, her emerald eyes alight with a wicked fire. "You wouldn't dare."

Matt let out a muffled laugh. Oh wouldn't he? He scooped her into his arms, her small frame and that ridiculous oversized sweatshirt that smelled of another man's musk cuddled against his chest.

"Put me down, you big brute!" she screamed as she struggled against him.

"Gladly." Matt tightened his grip on her even as she fought him. He stormed past Sara into the bathroom and held Madison over the full tub.

"You wouldn't dare," she warned again, eyeing the bathtub wearily.

"Oh, I think you know me better than that." Without giving her a chance for further protest, he plopped her down into the water.

Madison flailed about in the tub, splashing water over the ledge and soaking the rug beneath his feet. "You asshole!" she cursed as she finally drew herself upright, wiping away the droplets on her face.

Matt picked up the bar of soap on the ledge and tossed it into the bath water. "Why don't you give yourself a scrub while you are in there? You smell like three-day-old Chinese."

Sara giggled softly from behind him and as he turned about, he met her in the doorway. "Need anything else?"

"I think I got it from here," she smiled, resting her hand on his arm. "Thanks."

"You sure? Might need some help peeling that thing off her now." A slow smile crept over his lips. He wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, but he would have been more than happy to see Madison out of that sweatshirt. Not just because he longed to see those pale curves hidden beneath, although there was that. But because he couldn't stand the reminder that she had given her heart to someone else. It had once belonged to him, so long ago. She had forgotten that now.

He tucked all that inside, like he tucked away everything else. Masking his own heartache beneath the cocky bite of his words. "I'm thinking it might take a crowbar and a blow torch."

Sara gave him a playful shove out the door. "Oh, I think we can handle it. Now scoot."

* * *

Madison dropped her hands angrily into the water. "You are so dead to me."

Sara simply smiled as she pulled a towel off the rack and held it out for her.

Madison shook her head and looked down at the sweatshirt. She sucked in a shaky breath and turned her watery gaze on her friend. It was as much the heartache as the humiliation that brought tears to her eyes. "Help me out of this, will ya?"

Sara helped her peel the heavy fabric from her body. She pulled the dripping sweatshirt away, water cascading off of it to flood her bathroom floor. "I'll hang it up to dry."

"No," Madison murmured, trembling beneath the onslaught of chilled air that wafted over her naked body. "Just throw it away."

Sara cocked a brow in question. "You sure?"

"Yeah," she whispered then pulled the shower curtain shut. No, she wasn't sure, so she hoped Sara was quick about it before she changed her mind. Though she knew she should put it behind her, it was the last tangible memory she had of her affair with Jeff and she wasn't sure she could bear to see it go.

She slipped back down into the tub and closed her eyes as the warm water chased away the chill. If she couldn't wish the humiliation away, maybe she could wash it down the drain.

* * *

Madison was curled up on the couch with one of her favorite romances, the afghan she had crocheted over the last few weeks laying across her lap. A knock reverberated through her apartment, drawing her attention from the page.

Setting the book down, she cast a glance at the couple entwined upon the cover. Oh, why couldn't real men be that romantic? The last romantic gesture anyone had made for her was the box of generic chocolates Jeff had given her on Valentine's Day...right before he had taken his wife to the opera.

She threw back the afghan as the knock thudded against the door again. "Yeah, yeah," she muttered. "I'm coming."

She padded across the apartment and yanked open the front door. Sara shoved her way inside, a huge grin turning up the corners of her mouth. "Get dressed, we're going out."

Madison blew out a heavy breath as she shut the door quietly behind her friend. "I don't feel like going out."

"You haven't left your apartment in weeks," Sara scolded. "It's a beautiful spring day and we're going to enjoy it."

"I hate spring." Madison groaned as Sara made a bee-line for her bedroom. Reluctantly she followed and found her friend digging through her closet. "What *are* you doing?"

"Finding you something to wear," Sara called from the closet. "You certainly can't go out like that."

Madison glanced down at her faded, tattered T-shirt and dingy gray sweats. So what, she looked like a bum. Who the hell was going to see her anyway? She flopped down on the bed as Sara came out of the closet with a cotton halter dress in a pale pink floral pattern. "I told you I don't feel up to going out."

"It's the first day of spring. The sun is shining, the sky is blue and damn it we're going to enjoy it." She held the dress out for Madison. "You march right into that bathroom, put this on and do something with that mop you call hair."

Madison opened her mouth to protest but Sara nudged the dress at her again, her voice dropping to that distinctly motherly tone. "March."

Madison blew out a breath as she rose from the bed and snatched the dress from Sara's hand. She grumbled all the way to the bathroom but Sara didn't bat an eye at her mumbled curses.

Madison slipped out of her sweats, pulled the dress over her head and then raked the brush through her tangled hair. Deciding she wasn't going to be able to do a thing with it, she twisted it up and secured it with a clip, leaving several wayward tendrils to frame her face. She looked in the mirror. Yep, that was as good as it got.

She found Sara standing at the open front door, her purse in her friend's hand. Madison eyed her cautiously as she crossed the living room and snatched her purse. "Are we in a hurry?"

"No sense in wasting a beautiful day." Sara beamed at her.

Madison followed her friend out of the apartment, stopping short to lock her door. As she turned down the hall, she cast a glance at Matt's door. She wondered where he had been. She hadn't seen him since the bathtub incident and it certainly wasn't like him to stay away. Sure after their break-up years ago it had taken some time for them to adjust to the idea of just being friends. But since then Matt had always been the rock in her life. He had always been there, through the ups and the downs. The break-ups and the romances. Why had he made himself scarce now?

She swallowed against the lump in her throat as she walked past his door and tried not to think about the hole Matt's disappearance had left in her heart. It was a sudden and shocking realization that even her whirlwind affair and recent break-up with Jeff hadn't left her as empty as Matt's absence had. What the hell was she supposed to say about that?

As they stepped into the elevator and rode the five flights down, she couldn't help but ask about him. "Haven't seen Matt around. What's he been up to?"

Sara cocked a brow at her and flashed her an oddly suspicious smile. "Working I guess. You miss him?"

Madison shrugged it off as though it weren't important, but in truth it was. More important than she cared to admit.

* * *

Outside the sky was a pale, robin's egg blue. A few sparse pillows of white clouds drifted aimlessly overhead. The sun was bright though there was a slight chill to the air, the last fingers of winter trying to hang on as the season slipped away. Madison gave a little shiver as she sat down at the sidewalk table outside the corner café. She wished she had thought to bring a sweater. She wrapped her hands around her warm latte then sipped, letting it chase away the chill that plagued her.

"You know what your problem is?" Sara asked before sipping from her own coffee.

"No," Madison murmured between sips. "But I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"You don't wait for things to bloom."

Oh, this was going to be good, she just knew it. "What things?"

"Well," Sara said as she slipped a rose from the vase on the table. "Take this flower for instance. How do you think it got to be a flower?"

Madison's brow furrowed as she studied the yellow rose. "What do you mean, how did it get to be a flower? It just grew."

"It was once a tiny seed. It needed soil to nourish it, water to strengthen it and sunlight to make it bloom." Sara drew her fingertip softly over one of the petals before she slipped it back into the vase.

Madison cocked a brow at her friend as a playful smile tipped her lips. "Have you gone off your meds?"

Sara huffed out a laugh at that. "I just mean, love is like a flower. It doesn't bloom overnight."

"Ah." Madison toyed with the sleeve on her coffee cup. "And you think I didn't let things bloom with Jeff."

"I'm not talking about Jeff. There was never a chance that things were going to bloom with him. His seed was already planted in someone else's garden."

Madison huffed out a laugh at that and then sipped from her coffee. So maybe her affair with Jeff hadn't been perfect, after all he belonged to another woman—not that she had known that when they started seeing other. But it had been passionate. Wasn't that how love was supposed to be? Wild and passionate, a whirlwind of romance?

"Passion is like a match." Sara leaned across the table, her gaze settling on Madison's down-turned face.

"I thought you said it was like a flower." Madison brought her gaze to rest on her friend's face.

"No, I said *love* was like a flower. But passion, that sweep-you-off-your-feet sensation is fleeting. Like a match. It burns hot, it burns bright and it burns up quick."

"I'm not following."

"That's what you had with Jeff. It was hot, it was bright, but it was fleeting. Aside from the fact that he was married, it would have never lasted because that kind of heat will eventually burn itself out."

"So you're saying I need to quit playing with fire?" Madison cocked a smile.

"I'm saying that you should look for the flower."

* * *

Even as Madison turned down the hallway of her building, she still had no idea what the hell Sara had been talking about. Flowers and fire, love and passion. They weren't so different in her mind. What was love without passion? Sure, maybe passion was fleeting, but fleeting was better than nothing. No matter how disastrous her affair with Jeff had been, she had had it, at least for a moment.

She slipped her key into the door and found it was already unlocked. She had locked the door, hadn't she?

She slowly inched the door open, pushing past it and stepped into a garden. Madison drew in a sharp breath as her gaze swept across the dozens of spring bouquets dotting her apartment. A smile crept over her lips as she crossed to the bouquet on the entry table. Between the stems a little white envelope was tucked inside.

She pulled it out, slipping her fingernail beneath the flap as her heart thudded excitedly within her chest. She pulled out the note and read the words scribbled across it. *Roses are red, Madison was blue. I hear love is like a flower, so here's a dozen for you.*

Her gaze trailed down the card to the signature beneath. *Matt.*

Madison sucked in a breath as her heart ached painfully in her chest. Before her mind could process what her feet were doing, she was across the hall and pounding on his door. "Matt? Matt? Are you home?"

She drew in a breath as the door creaked open and she met his darkened gaze. A silent moment drew out between them as he raked a hand anxiously through his hair.

"I... um..." her words had escaped her. There was nothing she could say. Nothing that would convey the warmth spreading through her or the thump of her heart as her gaze settled over him.

He was so handsome, how could she have forgotten? All these years, how could she not have noticed the desire that still burned in his eyes? She wanted to be in his arms again, to know that that was where she belonged. Perhaps where she had always belonged. Like a flower, her love had bloomed. Slow and patient until it resembled this beautiful bud between them.

But she was scared. Scared to make that first step, to close the distance that seemed to loom between them.

It had been her who had taken that first step away all those years ago.

It would have to be her to take that first step now and bridge the distance between them.

She stepped closer as she breathed his name upon her breath. "Matt."

He leaned forward then, burying his hands in her hair as he dragged her mouth to his. His kiss deepened, hot, passionate... like a flame. Madison's hands grabbed at his arms, bunching up his T-shirt in her fists and hanging on as the overwhelming sensation flamed over her. She had missed this, the feel of his mouth against hers, the strength and comfort of his arms. It was so much more than it had ever been with Jeff, because there was a familiarity here. A comfort with Matt that she had never had with Jeff.

He pulled back then, nuzzling along her neck, nipping at her ear. "I'm sorry. I know I should have waited."

"I think we've waited long enough," she whispered.

Matt pulled back and fanned kisses over her face that took her breath away. He swept her into his arms then, kicking the door shut behind him as he stormed through his apartment and settled her on the bed.

He lay on top of her, covering her with his massive frame, nearly suffocating her with the weight of his body. But she liked it. No, she loved it. This was what she wanted, this was what she needed. This was what she had always desired. And now with so

much time between them, she couldn't even remember why she had walked away. She guessed it hardly mattered now. They were together again, the seed of love blooming to full life.

He gathered her dress up in his hands, inching it up her thighs as his fingertips skimmed her panties. He slipped it over her head. His hands trailed softly back down, over her breasts until his fingertips found her panties once more and dragged them down slowly.

He undressed then, slipping a condom over the hard length of him. He settled on top of her, his manhood nudging urgently against her. He covered her mouth with his as he inched himself inside her. He fanned hot kisses over her temples, trailing down her neck then back up to capture her mouth once again. He murmured her name, a soft breath against her lips as he worked himself inside her.

As he brought them, recklessly, feverishly to that delicious drop of desire Madison cried out into the silent room as the warmth washed over her.

He collapsed against her with a heavy grunt as the last of his seed pumped from his body. He lifted up onto one elbow and searched her face, a slow, soft smile blooming on his lips. With his free hand, he brushed back the tendrils of her hair. "I missed you," he whispered softly.

Madison drew in a sedated breath, the passion still flaming over her skin as love bloomed warmly within her chest. "Who says you can't have the flower and the flame?"

Biography

Author Lexi Adair has always been a hopeless romantic. She is an avid reader having cut her teeth on her mother's Harlequin romances at the early age of thirteen. Her stories stem from a deep love affair with the happily-ever-after, although the road taken is sometimes steeped in heartache and deception.

She is a member of the Romance Writers of America and several local and special interest chapters. To find out more about Lexi and her upcoming books please visit her website at <http://www.lexiadair.com>.

<http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/lexi-adair>