

Seeking Gold

Abbey Downey

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SEEKING GOLD

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Written by Abbey Downey.



Riding Toward Love



A *pril 1900*
Paris, France

Mattie Coburn froze when a hand grabbed her arm, stopping her before she slid a foot into the stirrup to mount her mare, Polly. “Excuse me, but I can’t let you get on that horse.”

At the starting line of the busy equestrian practice field, with horses, riders, and spectators all around, she might have missed the words if they weren’t spoken so closely to her ear. Irritation burned through her like a flame across paper as she turned toward the stranger, noting his impeccably chosen suit and good looks despite her annoyance. He spoke in a deep voice with a clipped accent that marked him as British. One of the things she’d most looked forward to about being in Paris for the World’s Fair and Olympic Games was the variety of interesting people. She might enjoy having a conversation with him very much. If he wasn’t ordering her around, of course.

But the reality was, she had only been in Paris a few days, with most of that time spent preparing for the equestrian competition, and she’d already encountered far too many people who thought a lady shouldn’t be riding in the Olympics, no matter how skilled she might be. So Mattie lifted one eyebrow in slow deliberation. “She’s my horse and I don’t believe you have any authority to tell me what I can and cannot do.”

A flare of amusement made the man's brown eyes glow. And pushed Mattie's exasperation a notch higher. "In ordinary circumstances, I wouldn't dream of it. But I still can't let you continue. Your—"

"It's my turn to practice now. Please excuse me."

Without waiting for him to stop her again, Mattie found her footing in the stirrup and began pulling herself up to swing a leg over the saddle. But a split second later, her breath caught when the world suddenly tilted and she was falling backward, trying fruitlessly to grab anything to stop herself. She felt one of the man's arms slip across her back, slowing her descent enough that the impact with the ground only forced the breath from her lungs rather than causing any injury.

Her would-be rescuer's face filled her vision from above. "As I tried to tell you a moment ago, your saddle may not be safe."

Mattie wanted to shoot back a witty retort, but she still hadn't caught her breath. He helped her to her feet, keeping his arm around her until she was steady. His touch was warm, which was pleasant on a chilly spring morning. That had to be the only reason she regretted the moment he stepped back.

"I'm sorry I couldn't catch you. Are you injured? Should I call for a doctor?" Despite the ironic tone in his initial reaction, he did look genuinely concerned. Maybe he really had been trying to stop an accident rather than keeping her from riding simply because of her gender. A pang of remorse washed away Mattie's irritation when she realized that perhaps the tension between them was due more to her unwelcoming response than his actual intentions.

Replacing her top hat, Mattie straightened the slim, black skirt of her riding habit and tried to brush the dirt off herself.

“Thank you for trying. I’m not injured, only startled. What do you think happened?”

“Look here.” He knelt and examined the saddle that was now on the ground next to Polly. The cinch that should have wrapped around the horse’s belly was torn in two. At least it hadn’t let go when she was riding, sending her tumbling from Polly’s back mid-stride. Mattie’s heart thumped hard at the thought of an accident destroying her dream of becoming the first female Olympic winner. It would be a tragedy to be forced out when she was so close to achieving such a momentous goal. “Thank you for trying to warn me. But how did you know about the damage?”

Holding up the leather pieces, the man frowned. “I could see it pulling apart when the groom brought her out to you. Look here, does the damage appear too clean? As if it’s been cut rather than split from wear?”

Joining him, Mattie examined the saddle, too. For a moment, she was distracted by his nearness. The scent of the pomade that kept his blond hair in place drifted over her, and it reminded her of home, of cigar smoke filling her father’s study while she curled into a big chair and read a book.

Shaking off the warm memory and the resulting pull toward her rescuer, she turned her attention back to the cinch. He was right. The edges were too even and straight for it to have occurred naturally. There was no hint of damage to any other spot on the saddle and she hadn’t been using it long enough for that kind of wear to occur naturally. Mattie stood, using Polly’s warm flank to brace herself. “Who would have done such a thing?” she mused.

Her companion straightened as well, glancing around the arena as if he could pick the perpetrator from among the people

millling around the stables or the riders on the course. Mattie had to crane her neck to look up into his face, but she was close enough to see a growth of stubble on his chin. She liked that bit of imperfection in his looks. It suited him. "Is there anyone who wouldn't want you to practice today?"

Father. Mother. Every man out here. The words popped into Mattie's mind unbidden, but she managed not to say them out loud. "Of course there are people who don't want a woman competing in the Olympic games. But I can't think of anyone who would go to this length to keep me from just practicing. We've only recently arrived in Paris. I don't know anyone here, so I couldn't have made any enemies yet."

A gentle smile softened her rescuer's angular face as he tipped his hat to her. "I can remedy that. I'm Lewis Stedry. I was sent by the Olympic organizing committee to oversee today's practice time."

A thrill quickened Mattie's heartbeat. If she could get direct approval to compete from a member of the organizing committee, the male entrants would have to accept her presence there. "I'm Mattie Coburn. And again, thank you for saving me in spite of my efforts to oppose you."

Mr. Stedry turned serious again, leaning in close and speaking for her hearing only. "Women may not generally be encouraged to enter the athletic events, but I won't stand for any of our competitors to be threatened. I'd like to determine exactly how this came about. Do you have time between practices?"

Mattie couldn't help grinning. A member of the Olympic committee was taking her seriously. As she held Mr. Stedry's gaze, she realized that, just as wonderfully, a handsome man was offering to be her champion. "I would be delighted to help.

Against my mother's wishes, I've read a good many dime novels and can predict the outcome of almost any of their mysteries. This case shouldn't be too difficult to solve."

Mr. Stedry's brown eyes widened. "I was thinking more along the lines of giving me a more detailed account of your day so I could then speak to whoever was responsible for the care of your saddle."

Heat rushed up Mattie's neck. She was acting impulsively again. Mother warned her about it regularly, but Mattie had found it nearly impossible to respond with measured reactions when something was as exciting as the idea of pursuing a saboteur with this charming gentleman.

Refusing to meet his eyes in case his expression was filled with disdain, Mattie nodded. Too vigorously, probably. Her mind raced, trying to come up with a response to this mortification that Mother would approve of.

To her surprise, Mr. Stedry once again wrapped his fingers around her arm and gently tugged until she was facing him. Without meaning to, she glanced up and found that he looked anything but disdainful. He seemed to be...charmed. "Miss Coburn, I was a bit caught off guard, that's all. Since you were the target of this treachery, I thought you might need to get away from the situation to recover. But if you're that interested, I'd be delighted to have your company in solving this mystery."

Mattie was again able to meet his genuine smile with one of her own. "We can call it *The Case of the Compromised Cinch*."

Mr. Stedry offered his crooked elbow to her. "Or *The Mysterious Saddle Saboteur*."

Laughing together, Mattie slipped her arm through Mr. Stedry's and let him carry the damaged saddle while she led

Polly back to the stable. And as they went, her heart overflowed with more hope than ever for a life-changing result at the Paris Olympics—whether she won or not.



Love Illuminated



M*ay 1900*
Paris, France

Leaning against a stone wall near the Palace of Electricity in the heart of the Paris World's Fair, Nora Oberly examined the familiar profile of her companion, Warren Teague, while he looked out over the Seine. She liked the short beard he'd grown while in Paris, which added a few years to his otherwise youthful features. But it was his kind eyes that always held her captive. In too many ways, she found him exceptionally appealing. Far too much so for a man who was only supposed to be her best friend's brother. What would dear Helen think if she knew the longing in Nora's heart right now?

All around them, electric lights twinkled in the falling dusk while visitors to the exposition marveled at their novel beauty. The sound of water hitting stone echoed from a fountain with lights inside that caused it to glow like nothing else Nora had ever seen. Nearby, her family and Warren's sister, Helen, admired the view as well. But Nora and Warren were just far enough away to feel isolated from them. And it was all incredibly romantic.

"Nora, I want you to be my partner for the tennis doubles competition."

The dreamy thoughts instantly halted, and she tilted her head up to stare at him. Warren was good enough at tennis to

win in the Olympic games that were happening alongside the exposition, but Nora would only consider herself barely proficient. Why on earth would he ask her to be his partner when there were much better players in Paris who would jump at the chance? "I'm afraid I'm not very good at tennis. You don't want me to be your partner."

Turning to face her, Warren stood mere inches away, looking completely sincere. He meant the unexpected request. "You have enough skill to build on. I was hoping you'd let me instruct you. It would be a way to prove I can teach while giving you a chance to compete. I know how much you wish you could be part of the Olympics."

Nora's heart raced. She'd thought only Helen knew that her interest in the Olympic games went beyond being a spectator. It took her breath away to realize that Warren had noticed the longing in her heart without her needing to tell him. She'd dreamed of being the type of athlete who could win a competition at this level. But what if her lack of skill kept Warren from winning?

Glancing over her shoulder at her parents, she wondered what they would think. Father was lifting her six-year-old sister, Priscilla, high in the air and explaining how the electricity worked while Mother and Helen watched. Mother would worry about a lady competing in public, although her fondness for Warren might help convince her. But Father was likely to champion Nora's cause. He loved to support his girls and didn't put nearly as much stock in what others thought as Mother did. "Let me consider it."

Warren smiled. "Certainly. The tennis competition is scheduled for early July. That doesn't leave us much time to prepare, but you can take a few days to think it over."

The others joined them then and they all stood watching the lights glow and people from all over the world coming and going. After the chilly spring they'd experienced during the first weeks of their long stay in Paris, the warmer evening was about as pleasant as Nora could imagine. Standing so close to Warren with the sound of the Seine lapping the shore and awed voices speaking a variety of languages all around them, it was impossible not to imagine how easy it would be to fall in love in Paris.

Nora sighed. If Mother had her way, Nora would have to set aside all thoughts of love. Her oldest daughter being twenty-five and unmarried was the bane of Mother's existence, an endless source of consternation and worry for her. So she paraded suitor after suitor in front of Nora, most of them more interested in her father's athletic equipment empire than in the woman they claimed to want to marry. Nora only wanted time to find a man she could care about and who would return those feelings. Why was that such a terrible thing?

"What's that sigh for? Still worried about what happens when we return home to New York?" Warren's eyes searched her face, his voice low enough that the others wouldn't hear.

How did he read her thoughts so easily? While Helen had always been the person in her life that she couldn't hide anything from, this trip had revealed that she and Warren also understood each other effortlessly. "Unfortunately, I'm always worried about that. Mother gets more forceful all the time and Father...I know he doesn't want to push me, but I don't think he disagrees with Mother, either."

Warren tilted his head closer to her until they were no more than a breath apart. "They care about you, that's always been clear. I imagine they want to see you happily settled with a secure future and they're trying to help you find that, even if their methods are old-fashioned. But you're an intelligent, capable woman in your own right. Trust the path God is leading you down and I know you'll choose what's right."

Confidence brightened his expression and Nora's heart thumped hard, her breath catching in her throat. He had such faith in God, and he was certain she could do anything she set out to do. Did he also genuinely believe more instruction would hone her skills enough so that they could win in tennis? If he had that much confidence in her, shouldn't she return it by helping him build the career he so wanted?

Father approached them and set Priscilla down. "Your mother and I would like to return to the hotel, but your sister is begging to stay. Do you young people want to continue taking in the sights or shall we all walk back together?"

Glancing at Warren, Nora found she wasn't quite ready for the beautiful evening to end. "We'll stay a bit longer."

Father and Mother said goodbye and walked arm in arm toward the main gates. Nora felt a tug at her skirt and turned to find Priscilla. "Nora, will you walk with me?"

Nora's heart warmed, as it often did when her parents' late-in-life surprise baby asked for anything. After spending so many years as an only child while her mother lost one pregnancy after another, Priscilla was as much a blessing to Nora as to their parents. She slid her hand into Priscilla's small one and they joined Warren and Helen to stroll along the street that followed the path of the Seine. Helen turned to walk backward so she could

see all of them at once, glowing with her usual unbridled excitement. “Nora, you’d love the gondolas on the river. We should take a ride.”

Nora smiled at her friend’s bubbling enthusiasm. “You and Priscilla have already gone on them how many times? At least twice?”

“Only three times. It’s an enjoyable ride, that’s all.” A hint of pink tinging Helen’s cheeks combined with a defensive edge to her tone roused Nora’s curiosity. What was Helen hiding? Didn’t they tell each other everything?

Well, except for Nora’s changing feelings for Warren. But how she would ever bring that up to his sister, Nora couldn’t imagine.

No matter Helen’s motivation, Nora had been intrigued by the small boats the entire trip and hadn’t had the opportunity to ride one with Helen and Priscilla. So they made their way to the landing station and paid for two boats. Before Nora could react, Helen grabbed Priscilla’s hand and they rushed to a boat down the line. Nora met Warren’s gaze and they both shrugged. A smile played around the corners of his mouth as Warren gestured toward Helen. “I can see questions in your eyes that match mine, but I believe the answers might be right in front of us.”

There was her dearest friend, blushing under the attention of the handsome young gondolier who’d taken her hand to help her into his boat. It appeared Nora wasn’t the only one who was keeping things to herself. “So that’s what caused her fascination with the gondolas.”

Warren’s hand rose to rest on her back, steering her toward the boat behind the one their sisters were clambering into. “Let’s

get in so we can stay close and keep an eye on them, don't you agree?"

Nora allowed their gondolier to help her in, then arranged her lightweight linen skirt and craned her neck to watch Helen while Warren settled on the small seat next to her. The boat was quite narrow, which made for intimate quarters. Nora tried not to think about how romantic these rides were supposed to be.

The boat slid into motion while Nora watched the bright reflection thrown across the water by all those electric lights, the scene shivering thanks to the waves from all the vessels that slowly paraded through. As they left the Palace of Electricity behind, the massive glow from it faded and a little more darkness shrouded the boat.

The river grew crowded with all kinds of boats thanks to the lovely evening, but the gondoliers steered their small craft between larger ones with ease. With one eye on Helen and her beau, Nora relaxed back against the cushion-covered seat. Warren's deep voice sent shivers through her when he spoke, close by her ear. "My sister appears quite smitten with that young man. Do you think it's an acceptable match? Should I intervene?"

Nora considered the question for a moment, ignoring the pang of knowing her friend hadn't felt the need to confide in her. "Despite the way her curiosity sometimes gets the better of her, Helen is sensible. She's never been one to fall for every man she sees. This fellow must be special."

Warren shifted, and his arm pressed against her side. "And would your parents agree, if it was you falling for a simple gondolier?"

“I’d like to say they would, but you know they can be old-fashioned, at times. Father usually comes around, though, once I remind him that the world is changing.”

Nora turned enough to glance at him and found that he was staring out over the rippling water. His voice was low, hard to hear over the lapping from the gondolier’s oars. “It must be nice to know someone will support your hopes and dreams.”

With her heart aching, Nora reached for Warren’s hand, allowing her fingers to intertwine with his in an effort to comfort him. He’d been given very few options in his life, with this trip to Paris being one of the only times his parents allowed him to do something for himself. And that was only because Warren winning in the Olympic tennis competition would bring more recognition to his family. They weren’t aware that he was trying to use the event to build a reputation as a prestigious tennis instructor so he could get out from under their control.

The reminder of all that was at stake for Warren was enough to make up Nora’s mind. “If you think it will help your cause, I’ll play doubles with you. Anything to be the person who supports your dreams, Warren.”

The words slipped out before she’d quite thought through how they would sound. Part of her wanted to be embarrassed at revealing feelings that might run a bit deeper than the friendship they’d established.

But Warren didn’t seem surprised, and she probably shouldn’t have expected him to be. Instead, he lowered his head, whispering a mere breath from her lips, “I’ve always known that, love. That’s why I asked you. In a world where there aren’t many people I can count on, I’m confident you’re here for me. Always.”

Then he pressed his lips against hers, the contact sending a thrill through Nora's entire body. Warren was kissing her. She'd dreamed of this, without ever allowing herself to actually hope it would happen.

Setting aside all thoughts about the past and the future, Nora let Warren kiss away their worries. His hands rose to caress her shoulders and Nora leaned closer, surrounded by his scent and warmth, pleasant elements she'd never imagined as part of a kiss. But now that she knew those sensations, she would never forget how they overwhelmed her consciousness.

A sudden bump caused them to break apart long before Nora was ready. And the first thing she saw when she looked up and realized the gondolier had pulled them up at another dock was Helen's wide eyes and her mouth hanging open.

Warren helped Nora climb from the vessel while their sisters waited, discomfort growing in Nora's chest the entire time. Was Helen as hurt by discovering this turn of events as Nora was about her friend's infatuation?

She walked slowly up the bank, unsure if she should meet Helen's stare or pretend nothing had happened.

But Helen rushed to meet her and solved the problem by putting her hands on Nora's cheeks and forcing her to make eye contact. "Nora Elaine Oberly! The fact that you're willing to accept a kiss from her brother is *not* something you let your closest friend discover by accident."

Nora arched an eyebrow but kept her voice lower than Helen's in an attempt not to embarrass her in front of her beau. "Like I discovered the reason you keep riding the gondolas by accident?"

Helen had the grace to blush, but she also shrugged. "That's fair. We've both been so busy during our time here, it all just happened, and I didn't take the time to tell you." Helen linked her arm through Nora's and began pulling her up the bank toward the street. "But we'll remedy that. You spill everything while we walk, and then I'll tell you all about Jaques."

Glancing over her shoulder, Nora saw Warren take Priscilla's hand and follow a bit behind them. She caught his eye, and they exchanged another one of those glances that had been happening between them, one that said much more than their words ever could.

This world's fair might change the course of their futures, but whatever came tomorrow, with Warren on her side, they couldn't help but win.



Love off the Court



June 1900

Paris, France

“*Non*, we will not agree to those rules. My team will not compete in an unfair game.”

Joel Fuller stood toe to toe with the coach of the French Basque pelota team, René Le Maire. The man was easily young enough to be Joel’s son, not to mention that Joel’s position of authority as a member of the Olympic Organizing Committee should have been enough to command a bit more respect. But despite all that, the youthful Frenchman held his ground, which Joel quite admired.

However, Monsieur La Maire’s stance was creating a problem. “There are only two teams entered in the pelota competition. If you withdraw yours, Spain will win by default,” Joel pleaded. He could see the faces of the French pelota players behind their coach. They very much wanted to compete.

But the young coach only crossed his arms over his chest and repeated his answer. “*Non*. Not unless the rules are fair.”

The contested rule was a difference in the size of the court. As they’d begun checking the teams in and setting up for the match, they learned France and Spain apparently had different standards for their courts. Now, thanks to the chaos that perme-

ated these Olympic games, the current size was unacceptable to the French team.

Hoping to find a compromise, Joel tried one more time. “The court walls are permanent. There’s no way to change the size now. Please consider allowing your athletes a chance to do their best with it. They want to play.”

Monsieur La Maire shook his head, spun around with an expressive flourish of his hand, and walked away without another word. His two competitors followed, looking rather discouraged in Joel’s opinion.

Joel took a moment to calm himself. It had taken twenty years of marriage, but his wife, Annabelle, had finally helped him overcome the fiery temper that had marked his youth. He still regretted that he hadn’t been able to learn until just before her death, though. While they hadn’t been unhappy, he couldn’t help wondering how different their early years together would have looked if he hadn’t been so prone to anger.

Shaking off the grief that still accompanied thoughts of Annabelle even after three years, Joel took up his paperwork and went to tell the Spanish pelota team that they had won without stepping foot on the court. At least they would be happier than the French team.

Before he could reach them, however, a beautiful, very well-dressed lady stepped into his path. The upswept blond hair covered with an elaborate wide-brimmed hat was streaked with gray and there were slight creases at the corners of her eyes, making it look as if she was a woman who smiled often. He liked that thought. It reminded him of Annabelle, who had been such a cheerful sort of person.

Smoothing her pale blue and white striped skirt with one delicate hand, the woman met his gaze and drew a breath. Was she nervous to approach him? He wasn't important enough to warrant that. He was just an official who upheld rules, reported results, and had no say in how the events were organized.

When the woman didn't speak even though he could see she wanted to, Joel decided to help her start. "Good afternoon. Can I help you with something?"

"I must apologize for my son, René. He seemed very upset and he was perhaps inconsiderate."

That was certainly not what he'd expected, not the words or the sweet strength in her voice when she said them. "No apology is necessary. Athletic competitions bring many emotions to the surface and most of us struggle to manage them well all the time."

The woman tilted her head while looking up at him. "Are you an athlete as well as an official?"

Joel laughed. The sound startled him a bit. He couldn't remember when he'd last laughed like that, full and unexpected. But it also brought a smile to the woman's lips, which he found he quite enjoyed. "Oh, no. I mean, when I was younger, I certainly spent a good amount of time pursuing physical activity. But the days of being good enough in any sort of athletics to compete are most assuredly past me."

Her brown eyes warmed as she examined him. "Ah, *oui*. I do understand that. But I believe you look as healthy as any of the competitors."

She had a heavy French accent, but her English was capable and the quick wit waiting under the surface of her words was intriguing. Joel glanced at the Spanish team, who were still stretch-

ing and preparing for the event. He had work to do, but he couldn't help sparing one more minute for the lovely woman in front of him. "I apologize, I didn't introduce myself. I'm Joel Fuller. And you are...? Besides Monsieur La Maire's delightful and probably very patient mother, that is."

Pink tinged her cheeks at his compliments. "Georgette La Maire. No need for formality. Georgette is fine."

Joel realized at that moment that Georgette was likely Madame La Maire, possibly a married woman whose husband might be with the other spectators at that very moment. But she didn't speak to him like a woman who had a husband. She'd all but flirted with him a moment ago, hadn't she?

There was one way to find out. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Georgette. Should I expect to meet your son's father today, as well?"

Her full lips pursed in a knowing look, proving she'd seen through his veiled probe for information. "I wouldn't think so, as he died ten years ago."

Relief. A ridiculous amount of it washed over Joel.

Where were these thoughts coming from? In the three years since losing Annabelle, Joel hadn't so much as noticed a woman. He'd never intended to remarry, so he kept himself aloof, not wanting to give anyone the wrong idea. But right now, he wanted nothing more than to hand this woman more compliments so he could see that pretty flush wash across her face again.

He still had to go talk to the Spanish pelota team, though. "Georgette, I need to convey the news to your son's opponents. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

"Of course," she agreed. But Joel didn't move. What if she left? Something in his heart warned that he would be disap-

pointed if she disappeared into the vast crowds visiting Paris that summer. He was unlikely to ever see her again in that case.

It seemed she might be having the same thoughts. Her luminous eyes held his gaze and Joel found himself toying with the idea of leaning in to see how she would respond. Which was utterly unacceptable, both because he was working and because they'd just met moments ago.

Determination to work toward the time when he could freely pull her close to him settled in Joel's mind. "Please, will you stay right here? It will only take me a moment. Then I'd like to hear more about René. And...about you, as well."

Her shy nod confirmed his hopes that she would be interested in spending more time with him. Joel headed toward the Spanish team. As expected, they took the news of their win with no argument, although the players looked a bit dissatisfied. Joel knew from experience that earning the victory was better than having it handed to you, but it was still better than a loss.

Returning to the official's table, Joel's heart dropped. Georgette was nowhere to be found. Joel left the paperwork with his fellow judges before scanning the area. Why had she left after agreeing to stay? Would he ever see her again?

A scuffle behind him caught Joel's attention and brought relief from all his questions. There she was, scolding her son in the middle of the path that led from the court back toward the busy street. As Joel approached, he caught bits of their conversation, which was thankfully in English. "René, I am a grown woman. I will return to the hotel on my own when I am ready."

René shook his head. "*Maman*, I worry about you by yourself."

Joel saw his opportunity and hurried to take it. "Monsieur La Maire, your mother and I became acquainted a bit ago. I'm done with my Olympic duties for now and I would be happy to see that she is safely escorted wherever she'd like to go."

Georgette turned her face up toward him, pleasure brightening her eyes. Her son watched them for a moment, then tipped his head and stepped back, allowing Joel to offer his arm to the lovely lady he now had the privilege of escorting around Paris.

With more energy than he'd felt in quite some time, Joel led the way toward the street, not even caring where they went. Maybe later he would demonstrate the few athletic skills he had left. Maybe it was time to take up golf again. And maybe, just maybe, he would open his heart one more time and let in the woman who seemed destined to captivate him.



Fast Track to Love



July 1900
Paris, France

Perry Frazier heard the punch before he spun around to witness the aftermath.

In the middle of the dirt track, surrounded by runners who had just finished a hurdles race, John Peterson stood glowering at Alexander Krantz, who held his cheek with both hands, his eyes squeezed tightly shut in obvious pain. Other members of the United States track and field team rushed to pull the two men apart before more blows were exchanged, but Perry could only shake his head. John's hot-headed behavior would get them eliminated from the Olympic games if he wasn't careful.

Among those who hurried over was a dainty woman whose intelligent features Perry knew all too well. She wore her mass of brown hair piled loosely on her head and a sensible black skirt and white shirtwaist. The force of nature hidden behind a delicate exterior was supposedly John's sweetheart, although most of the team doubted his claims that she was interested in him at all. Miss Olive Wade had a reputation for bucking social expectations and doing exactly as she pleased. And, to Perry's horror, at her side was his sweet, gentle, obedient daughter, Mae.

Marching over, Perry rested one hand on Mae's shoulder, while at the same time sending a glare in Miss Wade's direction.

“Why is my daughter down here in this mess? And why is she with you at all? Where is her nanny?”

The woman was easily a foot shorter than Perry, but she still managed to draw herself up tall enough for him to feel like she was staring into his soul when she rounded on him. “Is that the thanks I get for keeping Mae under my care when your nanny took ill a bit ago? She begged for my help, I’ll have you know.”

Remorse instantly spread through Perry, but he wasn’t sure how to back down now without looking like she’d intimidated him. Which she certainly hadn’t.

The argument next to them was growing in intensity. The second modern Olympic games hadn’t been organized nearly as well as the first games four years earlier. Miscommunication, unofficial decisions, and all manner of scheduling issues had plagued competitors for months. The issue of concern now was that the organizers had scheduled track events without thought for the competitors’ values. The French team had boycotted races the day before so they could celebrate Bastille Day. Then that morning, many of the Americans—Perry among them—had skipped events in favor of attending Sunday services, very bothered about the scheduling of races on a day that should be committed to the Lord.

From what Perry could gather, John’s problem was their teammates who had competed despite the day of rest. In particular, Alexander. The church attendees had missed the presence of some of their companions and arrived at the track to see what was happening just in time to watch Alexander win the final round of John’s intended event, the long jump.

But Perry had a bigger problem than the loud, angry words being exchanged nearby or the runners from many different

countries gathering to gawk. "Mrs. Kerne is ill? Why didn't she come to tell me?"

Miss Wade settled both hands on her slim hips and pursed her lips while Perry queried her. "If you're done piling questions on me, we'll start this conversation over."

Her response chastened him. Glancing down at Mae, he found she was watching their exchange with inquisitive eyes. It wouldn't do to set a bad example for the eight-year-old. After all, that was one of his concerns with her being in Miss Wade's company. "Quite right. I apologize, Miss Wade. It's just Mae and I, and I tend to worry over her more than most people think is necessary." He returned his daughter's adoring gaze. "She's simply precious to me, that's all."

"Thank you, Mr. Frazier. That's much better. Now, one question at a time."

A slight upward tilt of Miss Wade's pink lips matched the increasingly humorous glow in her eyes. Was she amused by him? That wasn't generally a response anyone had to his presence. Mae's mother, who died giving birth to her, had called him a fuddy-duddy on more than one occasion. But was it so bad to be the sort of person who took things seriously? Hadn't that enabled him to continue raising Mae while also excelling in running to the point of being able to compete in the Olympic games? He felt his practicality had only helped him survive the circumstances God had placed him in with his faith intact.

But somehow, the idea of fiery Miss Wade finding him amusing stirred up a longing to hear her laugh. To *make* her laugh. Not at him, but along with him.

Shaking that urge off, Perry lowered his voice so he wouldn't sound like a hysterical old woman like he probably had a mo-

ment ago. "First, thank you for taking over Mae's care. Now, what occurred with Mrs. Kerne?"

Miss Wade explained that the older widow had taken ill right after Perry left Mae in her care following the church service. She'd been bringing Mae to the track to find Perry when the sickness overcame her. "I was right there and thankfully caught her when she nearly fainted. I imagine she's overtaxed in this heat. Walking all around Paris with temperatures like this can't be easy for a woman her age."

Perry had to pull his attention from the way her hands gestured wildly to accompany her words. Everything this woman did was exuberant. And he found it strangely fascinating. "Did she leave by herself, then? Should I go after her?"

Clucking her tongue, Miss Wade swatted at Perry's arm, her touch—warm even through the layers of his jacket and shirt-sleeves—sending tingles up and down his spine. "Now Mr. Frazier, what did I say about multiple questions at once?"

Her smile belied the stern look she sent his way. Perry couldn't help but respond to her teasing in kind. "Quite right. My profuse apologies, madam."

And then it happened. She giggled. He, Perry Fuddy-Duddy Frazier, had made this charming, lively woman laugh. Once she finished, she relayed the rest of the tale. "I had one of the hurlers' wives escort her back to the hotel. She'll be quite fine with some rest, I'm sure. But you probably shouldn't expect her to do so much trekking about the city until it cools off. I can spend time with Mae if you need me to."

The way Miss Wade looked fondly at Mae followed by his daughter's happy smile in return made Perry actually consider the offer. Miss Wade might not be the model of what everyone

considered to be propriety, but hadn't it been pointed out to him many times over the years that he was more than a bit overly rigid? Was it possible that rather than being a negative influence on Mae, Miss Wade might be good for her—for both of them?

It was a question that required more time for Perry's analytical mind to think through and determine the most realistic answer. But he had one answer now, one thing he was certain of beyond a doubt. "That would be most appreciated, Miss Wade. I have several races this week and I'd be honored to have you spend time with my daughter while I run." Perry leaned closer so she could hear him over the men who were still arguing behind them and jerked his head in John's direction. "And perhaps you'd spend time with me, too. If you're not spoken for already, that is."

Miss Wade shrugged one slim shoulder. "If you're referring to rumors about me and a certain long jumper, that's nothing I ever agreed to. I don't appreciate loud and pushy men. I rather like a quiet man who always does the right thing."

The glow in her eyes was answer enough, but her words were a thrill to hear. To be chosen over an outgoing, good-looking man like John was something Perry never would have expected. Perry offered his arm, and she took it without hesitation. And in that moment, he realized the real prize was already in his grasp, fuddy-duddy or not.



Love at First Fall



September 1900
Paris, France

One moment, everything was fine. Etta Woodruff savored the beauty of Paris and the expectant atmosphere of the *Exposition Universelle* as the motorized moving boardwalk carried her and her employer, Mrs. Harriet Dupont, past the most popular sights. Etta's heart raced with the reality that she was finally here, at the world's fair that held so much promise for the future.

Then the ragged boy pushed past them.

An unsteady gasp from behind her jerked Etta halfway around on instinct, reaching out to support Mrs. Dupont as she often had to do. But, instead of grabbing the older woman's hand, Etta found only air. The strange angle of her reach caused her body to tilt off balance.

As she fell, Etta's eyes locked on the shocked face of a man who was about to run straight into her from the fastest of the three levels that comprised the boardwalk. His hands shot out, reaching down to catch her under the arms before she hit the step up to his level. The difference in height and speed between the two moving platforms caused the heels of her black boots to drag on the wooden slats as he held her suspended between them.

Time seemed to freeze. Then the little ruffian dared to glance back at her. Etta barely had time to notice his wide-eyed look of fear before he took off again, weaving between the other riders until he disappeared.

Finally, her rescuer hoisted her up to the higher level where he stood, keeping his hands on her shoulders until she gripped one of the posts placed along the boardwalk for balance.

“Are you hurt?”

His voice was warm and friendly, with the most delightful Italian accent. Neatly cut black hair and olive skin confirmed his nationality, but it was his handsome features that kept Etta from responding immediately. She shook her head to clear the effects of his good looks. Other riders all around were staring, fascinated by the unfolding situation. Mrs. Dupont would not stand for her companion to cause a scene. Well, more of a scene. Etta straightened her shoulders. “No, I’m quite fine. No lasting damage. Thank you for asking. And for catching me.”

As she watched, one side of his lips twitched upward in not-quite-restrained amusement. Of all the ways to respond, was this stranger going to laugh at her? She raised one eyebrow and pursed her lips. “Is a lady’s distress funny to you?”

At least he had the presence of mind to look contrite. Somehow, that furrowed forehead added to his charm and made it impossible to be as irritated as she wanted to be. “Oh, not at all. I’m used to more dramatic responses from ladies. Tears. Wails. Swooning, even.”

Unsure whether she should be proud or offended, Etta glanced down the sidewalk, where Mrs. Dupont had left the moving sidewalk to use the stationary path beside it to walk

back. "I really must return to my companion now. Again, thank you for your help."

Checking to see if the middle level of the boardwalk was clear, Etta used the post in her hands to remain steady while stepping down. Then she did the same with another post to step off the slow level and onto the stone path. Before rushing toward Mrs. Dupont, Etta couldn't help peeking ahead at her rescuer as he rode along.

That was a mistake.

The roguish half-grin on his face was going to be hard to forget. Charming and infuriating at the same time. Turning away, Etta marched down the path to meet Mrs. Dupont, who gasped and poked at Etta as if checking for broken bones. "Dear Miss Woodruff, do you need to sit down? I imagine such a tumble was quite disturbing."

Warm fondness washed over Etta at the evidence of Mrs. Dupont's tendency toward excessive worry. "No, I'm fine. I don't need to rest. A gentleman on the boardwalk saved me from injury."

Another mistake. Mrs. Dupont's expression twisted into a perceptive smirk. "Yes, I saw the entire thing. I imagine you young people would likely consider it quite romantic."

Etta shook her head. "I'm not the sort of woman to consider one gentlemanly action to be a promise of marriage."

Mrs. Dupont nodded in approval, patting Etta's hand. "Quite right. You're more practical than most girls your age. That's one of the reasons I chose you to be my companion on this journey. And hopefully, that will continue long after we return to Chicago."

The words brought an onslaught of mixed emotions. Like any woman, Etta enjoyed the idea of a handsome man sweeping her off her feet. But the reality of life had forced her to take on more urgent goals, such as surviving as a single woman without parents to protect her. As much as she might wish her future was compatible with marriage, it was becoming clear that might not be the case. She enjoyed Mrs. Dupont's company but being her paid companion for the foreseeable future wasn't what she'd always hoped God had planned for her.

Wrapping her arm around Etta's, Mrs. Dupont turned in the direction they'd been heading before Etta's near catastrophe. "Let's walk the rest of the way. We're close to the *Petite Palais*, anyway. I'm quite interested to see that famed French artwork they have on display."

Mrs. Dupont kept up a steady stream of commentary all the way to the *Petite Palais*, which was fine with Etta. Their conversation had turned her mood sour, and she needed some time to get herself in the mood for the plans they'd made to fill the hours before they attended the first of the cycling preliminaries.

Inside the grand building with its massive arched stone entry, Etta tried to focus on the beautiful exhibits, but the reality that they were finally in Paris overcame her interest in art. The entire world had converged on the city that summer for the exposition and the Olympic games that were happening along with it. There was technology, architecture, innovation, and all manner of exciting things. It was her chance to fit a lifetime of experiences into one trip. Then she would have to return to her unwanted reality, probably never to enjoy such delights again.

By the time she followed Mrs. Dupont into the fifth room full of French paintings, Etta abandoned trying to come up with

things to say about the artwork. Her employer must have noticed Etta's distracted state. While standing in front of a lovely realistic landscape, Mrs. Dupont nudged Etta lightly in the ribs. "Are you not enjoying the gallery?"

Etta shook her head, trying to clear her mind so she could properly accompany Mrs. Dupont, as she was being paid to do. "Oh, no. The works are quite beautiful. My mind wandered a bit, that's all."

"And it has nothing to do with the handsome fellow who helped you on the way here?"

Etta swallowed hard against the sudden longing that rose with Mrs. Dupont's all too close guess. "Absolutely not. I'm unlikely to ever see that man again, and even if I did, there's no reason for us to become acquainted. Never fear. I'm committed to spending this trip with you."

Mrs. Dupont's eyes narrowed, and she watched Etta for a long moment, until Etta shot her a wide smile that she hoped was more sincere than it felt. Finally, the older woman offered a curt nod and returned to ambling through the displays.

Etta's mind quickly jumped back into the past. Since the Olympic games had been revived in Greece four years ago, she'd been waiting for this exposition. She and Father had hung on news of those games in Greece. It was one of the few times she remembered him speaking to her as an equal, seeking out her opinion. They'd debated the merits of each athlete in their favorite events, shared the task of reading the results in the newspaper, and dreamed of being able to attend in person.

It was only a month after her parents died in a carriage accident that the rumors started about Baron Coubertin—the man who had been instrumental in reviving the games—planning

another round. To Etta's frustration, there had been no official Olympic endorsement of many of the sporting events in Paris. The papers claimed they were only part of the exposition, and the official games would likely never be held again.

But Etta was certain they were wrong. Baron Coubertin was there. He had declared his intention to bring the games to Paris. Why would he be involved in these competitions if they weren't part of the Olympics he'd worked hard to bring back? Even though Father was no longer alive to enjoy the athletic events with her, Etta was determined to attend as many as possible of the remaining contests.

Etta was so consumed with visions of fanfare and intense competition that a bump from behind caught her off guard and sent her sprawling against a solid, warm chest. Her hands pressed against it, and she found herself unexpectedly enjoying the sensation. But then a familiar male voice brought heat to her cheeks. "Are you always this prone to accidents? Or perhaps you're trying to get my attention?"

Looking up, her fears were confirmed. The man from the moving boardwalk stood in front of her, his hands on her arms to steady her, the same way he had earlier. For a moment, she was caught by his laughing brown eyes, which framed a long, straight nose that mimicked the narrow line of his chin. But then her gaze settled on his lips, which lifted in another roguish smile, and she realized how very close they stood.

Taking a large step back, she found herself thumping into Mrs. Dupont, who was very close to her back. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed something she never would have expected: Mrs. Dupont with a smug smile on her lips, clearly hav-

ing played a part in the incident. What on earth had she been trying to do?

Etta's employer looked past Etta to spear the man with a steady gaze. "This is the second time you've rescued my companion and I'm afraid we still aren't acquainted. I am Mrs. Harriot Dupont of Chicago. And this is Miss Etta Woodruff."

The handsome man nodded to each of them with easy confidence. "Piero Gallo, visiting this fine city from Florence. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He sounded as if he was speaking to both of them, but his gaze locked on Etta. Mrs. Dupont smiled. "There, now we can all be friendly. It's nice to meet new people when vacationing, wouldn't you agree, Mr. Gallo?"

"Ah, that may well be true, ma'am, but I'm not able to say at the moment. This isn't a leisure trip for me."

Etta saw Mrs. Dupont latch onto that with a furrowed brow, and her heart dropped inexplicably. Part of her would have liked to see this man again, to learn more about him. But if Mrs. Dupont disapproved, that wouldn't be possible. "Just what business do you have here, then?"

Mr. Gallo's demeanor brightened while he continued to watch Etta. "I'm here for the cycling competition. It starts today, in fact. Perhaps I can convince you ladies to come cheer for me at the finish line."

Suddenly, hope rose in Etta's chest. Was there a more important reason for her to be in Paris than just experiencing adventures before she settled into a life she didn't want? Had God brought her to a different kind of adventure than she would have expected?

“Why, we were already planning to watch all of the cycling events. I don’t think I could cheer for anyone else, now.” Unable to contain an answering smile, Etta spoke before realizing she should let Mrs. Dupont answer for them both. But when she looked to the older woman for confirmation, to Etta’s surprise, the woman winked at her. She had arranged this situation by pushing Etta into Mr. Gallo so they would have a reason to meet him.

The tension that had built in Etta’s chest through their trip vanished, allowing her to feel growing hope for a future that had recently felt very bleak. Perhaps Mrs. Dupont understood her dreams of finding love. Perhaps God had arranged a string of seemingly isolated details to bring her to Paris so she could meet someone who would change the course of her future.

As if he understood everything happening in Etta’s heart, Mr. Gallo reached out to take Etta’s hand in his rough one. He looked deeply into her eyes, revealing that there might be something going on in his heart, too. “I’m honored, Miss Woodruff. And I already hope we get to cheer each other on for a long time to come.”



About the Author

Abbey Downey started writing inspirational romance stories during naptime when her kids were babies and found she couldn't stop. Along with the Adventurous Hearts series, she previously published two books with Love Inspired Historical under the pen name Mollie Campbell. She also works with Spark Flash Fiction producing a quarterly digital magazine that contains love stories under 1000 words.

A life-long Midwestern girl, Abbey lives in central Indiana with her husband, two kids, and one rather enthusiastic beagle. She loves watching her kids play sports and fixing up a 1900 farmhouse with her husband. Connect with Abbey at abbeydowney.com.

Read more at <https://abbeydowney.com/>.

