



THE SECOND
MRS. ASTOR

© A Novel of the Titanic ©

SHANA ABÉ

New York Times Bestselling Author



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The Second Mrs. Astor

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For Wendy McCurdy, with my deepest gratitude,
for taking a chance on this haunted fairy tale

PROLOGUE

August 23, 1912

My Darling Jakey,

I gave you his name. He gave you his eyes and that swirl of fair hair. I suspect your chin is mine, however, and I suppose that's as it should be. Your father towered, remarkable and alone, over everyone we knew and certainly over my heart. There can be no true living reflection of such a man left, not even you.

As I write, you're nestled in your bassinet, so tiny and tranquil. Whenever the breeze from the nursery window swells the lace curtains, scented of horses and muggy summer rain, your lips purse into something I fancy is a smile—one that strikes me to the bone. I am filled with both astonishment and despair to think that you will never know Jack, nor he you. Even these four months later, the truth of it will still steal up on me, as surprising and damning as a blow from behind: Jack will never see that dimpled smile, or celebrate your first steps, or fall in love with the shape of your toes or the burble of your laughter. And you, my own brilliant miracle of a son, will never have a single memory of him.

Yet my mind overflows with memories. I am a waterfall of memories of Jack; I drown in them; and so for your sake, and perhaps for my own peace, I will write down what I can for you now. Someday—some faraway day—I will hand these pages to you, and my memories will become your own.

I won't begin with our ending, which everyone in the world knows anyway: that jet satin night, the slight rumbly tremble that shook me in our bed—like it was nothing, like the ship had briefly and inexplicably sailed over a field of stones. The groggy minutes spent getting dressed, my body heavy with five months of you and the unyielding desire for more sleep.

Making our way abovedeck. Watching the panic begin to wheel, stronger and stronger, through the masses, until the shoving and screaming had consumed everything the North Atlantic had not.

Being helped through the slant of that promenade window, teetering at its brink. Your father's hands, hard and certain, pushing me along. Women

moaning, crying, stretching out their arms to their men left behind on the ship. Trying to find a place in that lopsided little lifeboat—

Well. I suppose I've begun with our ending, after all. But as I said, everyone already knows it, has shed their tears over it and offered their (copious and entirely uninvited) opinions about it. Our beginning, however, belonged only to us.

And it was sublime.

He had been noticing me for weeks. I felt his gaze whenever we happened to be at the same garden party or concert, or riding through the same park or visiting the same club. Colonel Jack Astor was likely the richest man in America, and difficult to miss. Missing the force of his gaze was more difficult still—a calm lucid gray, clear as a winter dawn.

(I made the mistake once of telling him so. He laughed, bussed me on the cheek, and called me infatuated. I do think I was more subtle than that. I did say *winter*.)

Your grandmother drifted about in spasms of hope. Your grandfather was more pragmatic but no less optimistic. It didn't seem to bother either of them that Jack was divorced and nearly thirty years older than I.

"He would be fortunate to have you," my father said.

"Do not contradict anything he says," commanded my mother.

"He has said practically nothing to me so far beyond *how do you do*," I pointed out, but we all three knew it was merely a matter of time and opportunity for that to change. I was young, but not *that* young; I'd already been escorted to picnics and teas by a clutch of interested fellows. I knew what that clear, steady gaze of Colonel Astor's meant.

He invited us for a weekend at his cottage in Bar Harbor, even though we summered at our own—far more modest!—residence in town. It was a penny-bright August in Maine, and everything was scented of honeysuckle and cut grass and the salty strong sea. We were not the colonel's only guests during those few days, but it seemed by the attention of the servants and splendor of our rooms that we were the ones who mattered.

There was a dance to attend, and seven-course meals, and a trip around the harbor upon Jack's steam yacht *Noma* (I did get seasick, but I believe I managed to successfully hide it). We played games of whist and croquet, poker for the gentlemen. The hours spun out, lazy and golden, and nearly all of them remain a blur to me except for one singular moment.

Mother and Father and Katherine were resting after Saturday's luncheon. The colonel was to take us on an automobile ride along the coast later on, and Mother had wanted to look her best for it—because even then, we were shadowed by the press. I considered myself already at my best, and lying about in bed in my corset and all my hairpins for an hour sounded interminable. I'd slipped away as soon as she'd started snoring.

And so I was seated alone in a corner of the brass-and-mahogany citadel of the cottage's library, flipping through the pages of what I suspected to be a book of Grecian poetry. I was the successful product of a proper finishing school, but Latin was my strength. Beyond the most basic alphabet, I did not speak or read Greek. I was instead studying the strangely emphatic flow of the letters, the structure of the stanzas, guessing at sounds and meanings, when I sensed that he had entered the chamber.

Thinking back on it, I realize now he must have been stalking me a bit, waiting for the perfect instant to encounter me alone, and normally I would have been both flattered and prepared. He was, after all, the reason I was there. But as soon as I realized he was walking toward me, all I could think was, *Oh, no.*

I wished, with all my heart, that I had any other book in my hands but the one I did. If he asked me about it, I'd either have to lie and say, yes, indeed, Grecian poetry was so divinely brilliant . . . or else admit that, like a toddler, I was merely entranced with the pretty shapes.

I looked up as he approached, tall and angular and so sharply handsome, his pale brown hair combed flat against his skull, his moustache neatly trimmed.

"May I?" he asked, gesturing to the burgundy leather chair opposite mine.

"Please do." I closed the book and turned it over, so that the title and author were hidden against the folds of my skirt.

He sat. He crossed his legs. The sun-pebbled sea in the window behind him shot platinum along his hair and starched collar and the taupe serge of his lounge coat.

As I said, he was older than I, but in that moment, with light gleaming so bold and blinding behind him, he might have been a young man on the verge of his first brush with courtship.

He cocked his head, met my eyes directly.

"How lovely you are, Miss Force."

I looked down at my lap as I had been taught, and murmured, “Thank you.”

“And how opaque.”

That made me look up again. *Opaque?* Was it a compliment?

The colonel smiled. “Like no woman I’ve ever known before. Your mind is a mystery to me.”

“Oh,” I said, “sometimes it is to me, as well! But I’m not really very mysterious, I’m afraid.”

He leaned back his head and laughed. I felt the sudden spark of the power of that, of making a man like John Jacob Astor laugh in genuine amusement. Of making him *react*. It rushed like lightning through my veins, hellish and bright.

I think, from that instant, we were both doomed.

CHAPTER 1

June 1907

Newport, Rhode Island

The first time she saw him, she was essentially invisible: thirteen years old, a schoolgirl on holiday, her hair dripping from the sea, sleek wet mermaid curls clinging to her arms and back. She was nestled, legs tucked under her, in the coarse silvery sand of Bailey's Beach, her ruffled cap tossed beside her. Her nose was tingling hot and she didn't care, because it was breezy and warm, and the sun was a high glorious pinpoint, and if it were ladylike in the least to stretch out all the way in her bathing costume to make a sand angel, she would have.

But Madeleine was not five; she was thirteen. And as it was just after eleven in the morning—the hour that only ladies were welcome to swim in the red algae-choked waves—Mother was bobbing nearby. She was *always* nearby. Maddy's removal of her cap was transgression enough.

Gulls screamed and darted overhead. Madeleine lifted her chin and followed their loose circles, ragged-tipped wings, dragon shadows dipping and spinning against the sky.

A gaggle of girls a few years younger than she stood shrieking at the shoreline, kicking froth and sand at each other, too timid to venture all the way in but too aware of their bare shins and feet to resist the cool water. They were nearly louder than the birds.

Like Madeleine and every other female on the beach, the girls wore black. Black bathing bloomers, black shirtwaists with fat blossoming sleeves, everything from their necks to their knees down to the bones of their wrists thoroughly concealed. It was as though each and every summer noon, the exclusive strand of Bailey's Beach became haunted by covens of fashionable, water-soaked witches.

A pair of carefully plodding bays hauled a carriage past the long arabesques of seaweed that marked the tideline, stopping at the very last stretch of dry sand. Blue-liveried footmen leapt free of the carriage; large, mysterious bundles were liberated from their leather straps in the back. Maddy twisted to watch as the men—who weren't *technically* allowed on

the beach right now, but they were only servants, so that was all right—swiftly erected a saffron-striped tent, complete with rug, wicker chair, and folding table, and then returned to the carriage to assist a solitary lady down to the sand.

She was white-haired, stooped. She squinted crossly at the sudden hard light but was so quickly guided inside the tent that Maddy barely had time to take note of the glimmer of jet beading on her dress and the garnet brooch pinned to her bosom. As soon as the lady was seated, a wind-tousled maid began unpacking a hamper for her meal.

“Ha,” breathed a voice in Maddy’s ear, accompanied by the sound of a body dropping down onto the grit beside her. Madeleine darted a look at her older sister (grinning and capless and somehow not at all sun-scorched), then looked back at the saffron-tent woman.

“Are you not awed?” Katherine drawled, leaning back on her arms, examining nothing but the unflagging sea rolling in before them. “Are you not suitably cowed?”

“Should I be?” Maddy asked.

“Yes, you certainly should be, little girl. *That* is Mrs. Astor. *The* Mrs. Astor. Dare to stare her in the eyes and you’ll turn into stone. Or is it burst into a pillar of flame? No, wait! You’ll be struck from the social register and die a shriveled old maid.” She gave an exaggerated shudder, still grinning. “The horror!”

Madeleine knew, of course, who Mrs. Astor was. Everyone knew. It was just that she had never seen her in person before; the Forces and the Astors didn’t move in the same social circles. Maddy had always imagined the matriarch of the venerable Knickerbocker set as a woman grown wiry and vicious and strong, with a smile of sharpened daggers and the fingernails of a warlord.

Not this. Not this stout, elderly creature who shied from the sun and had her lobster cut into cubes for her by her maid on her gilded china plate.

“And who is that?” Maddy asked, tilting her head toward the hatted man who was crossing the sand in long, leggy strides toward the tent. (He was definitely not a servant, but no one stopped him.)

“Ah,” replied her sister, in a tone of both confidentiality and superiority. She flicked a strand of drying kelp from her thigh. “*That*, my dear, is her son, the colonel.”

Oh, Maddy thought.

He was comely. She'd heard that he was, but only through school gossip, and *comely* in schoolgirl parlance might as well mean *not so drippy-nosed*, or *not quite yet bald*, or *not so fat as his horse*.

But Colonel John Jacob Astor, gentleman, inventor, and war hero, *was* comely, in an older, hawkish sort of way, rather like her father . . . but on second thought, not at all, because the colonel was fair as her father was gray, mustachioed as her father was not; fit and tall as . . . well, as only himself. Because he moved so quickly, she only just managed to get a good look at him, but what she noticed—what she would remember for the rest of her life from those few warm breezy seconds on that rough Rhode Island beach—was that he was smiling as he walked toward his mother. That he was easily conquering the sand, graceful and determined. And that, for the smallest inclination of a moment, he turned his head and caught her eyes and noticed *her*, there on the sand not so far off.

And then, for an instant, he was smiling at *her*.

It was as though a dart of light from the summer sun had pierced Madeleine's heart. A dart, sweet and wonderful and terrible, right through her heart.

Then he was gone, swallowed by the interior of the tent. Someone untied the flap of the entrance and it fluttered closed, and then there was only saffron and white, and the gulls still calling out overhead.

"Maddy," said her sister, placing a hand on her arm. "You look so queer. Are you all right?"

"Yes," Madeleine said. She sat up straight, wiped a hand across her brow. She licked her lips and tasted salt and sand, relentless, pervasive in her every crease and pore. "Right as rain."

* * *

The next time she saw him, she was not invisible. She was seventeen and draped in greenery: ropes of ivy, braids of ruffled roses, daisies, bright clouds of candytuft (the closest the stage manager could come to rue, sadly unavailable) woven through her dark brown plaits. She was singing, mad, twirling at times across the stage so that her skirts would lift to reveal the smart new boots she'd bought especially for the play.

She was Ophelia—tragic, bereft Ophelia—and had practiced singing her mad, sad lines until her voice had gone hoarse and she'd had to rest it for

two days just to speak again without a rasp.

“He is dead and gone, lady, he is dead and gone; at his head a grass-green turf, at his heels a stone.”

After weeks of rehearsals, the Junior League society had the honor of presenting *Hamlet* in Bar Harbor for two nights only (the Casino’s theater was ever-popular and only borrowed, after all), and this was the second. The previous night’s opening had left Madeleine shaking with nerves, but tonight she felt better; she was a creature composed of flaming hot candle-lanterns and greasy face paint and flowers, saturated in poetry and song. The heels of her boots struck the stage so lightly, she felt at times she might actually be floating.

Beyond the lights lining the edge of the proscenium, beneath the darkened stained-glass chandeliers, sat the hushed, breathing beast that was the audience. Except for the occasional muffled cough, the subtle twinkle of diamonds in earrings and collars, the beast was unseen, unheard. It was there and not there, anonymous. At least until it roused itself into applause.

But—

On her third twirl (*“You promised me to wed. So would I ha’ done, by yonder-sun—”*), she saw him. She had no idea how she’d missed him before; he was in the front of the house, very nearly center. A demon or a ghost could not have materialized more suddenly out of the shadows. Colonel Astor kept his focus fixed exactly on her, his hands folded in his lap. In the half-light cast from the stage, the planes of his face gleamed dim and harsh.

The toe of one boot scraped the stage; Madeleine stumbled. She stopped and turned in the abrupt silence, then looked upstage and realized the other members of the cast were all staring expectantly at her.

It must be her line. Her mind was a fizzy blank.

She stared back at them helplessly, the roar of her blood louder and louder in her ears.

In the back of the house, someone sneezed once, twice.

Dorothy Cramp, who had been so bitter with envy that Madeleine had won the part of Ophelia that she’d threatened to renounce the League, glared at Madeleine from beneath the tin of King Claudius’ crown.

“How long has she been thus?” Dorothy said again, biting off every word.

The fizziness in Madeleine’s brain cleared; she remembered her song, her wild dance, what to do. She got through her next lines and then swept off the stage in a storm of petals and leaves, and spent the rest of the show watching him from behind a slit in the stage right curtain.

* * *

After the curtain call, which included a pelting of bouquets, backstage was a jumble of cast and crew, everyone talking and laughing. Props teetered in precarious piles; willowy young women in wigs and trousers jostled back and forth, abandoning their wooden swords and bulky vests, hugging and kissing and telling each other how perfect it all was, how spectacular, and how next year they would tackle Molière or Marlowe and all the world would bow at their feet.

Madeleine accidentally bumped shoulders with Dorothy and smiled—part apology, part dare—but Dorothy ignored her and walked away.

By the velvet-swathed entrance to the house stood Mrs. Ogden Mills, a matron so prominent and formidable that Madeleine could not recall seeing her even once without at least four strands of pearls around her neck, no matter the time of day. Amid all the bustle and mayhem of the play’s aftermath, she remained as motionless as a graveyard statue; even caught up in the giddy *we-did-it* silliness bubbling around them, none of the Junior League débutantes dared to venture too close.

“Miss Force,” Mrs. Mills said, lifting her brows and tilting her head toward the man standing, also unmoving, slightly behind her. “Have you met the colonel?”

Of course Madeleine hadn’t; she wasn’t even officially out yet. There was no reason at all for someone like John Jacob Astor IV to have taken notice of her.

She was still in her mad weeds. She dripped with wilted petals and curling leaves. Her hair was fraying from its braids; candytuft dribbled down her shoulders, teeny white starbursts at a time. A stolen glance in a small rectangle of a mirror tacked to a flat revealed her eyes, pale blue smudged with kohl, her skin plastered white, cheeks and lips still painted red as blood.

The colonel glanced where she did, noticed the mirror. The skin along her cheekbones began to prickle with heat.

“Jack,” continued Mrs. Mills, oblivious, serene, “I would like to introduce you to Miss Madeleine Force, daughter of William and Katherine Force of Brooklyn and, of late, Manhattan. You saw her as our Ophelia tonight. Madeleine, Colonel John Jacob Astor.”

There was no choice but to extend her hand. He accepted it, his fingers folding firm and warm over hers.

“How do you do?” she asked faintly.

“How do you do,” he echoed, soft.

It was as though her vision failed and she could not see him, in spite of the fact that he was right there in front of her. She didn’t see him so much as feel his presence; the warm, tanned glow of his skin, the knowing curve of his mouth, the air of a man who knew what he wanted and was not bothered by the wanting, because everything he touched was already his.

Madeleine felt thirteen again, back on that rock-scrubbed beach—that moment when their eyes had met, and his smile seemed just for her.

From somewhere near her left shoulder, a pop of light flared, died, but she didn’t turn her head to see what it was.

“You were excellent tonight,” the colonel said, letting go of her hand.

She stopped herself from wiping her tingling palm down her dress. “I could have been better, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t see how,” he said, and with a nod to Mrs. Mills, angled away. A moment later, he was gone, devoured by the crush.

Mrs. Ogden Mills sent Madeleine a pointed look. Madeleine smiled tightly, murmured her thanks, and retreated slowly, gratefully, back into the Junior League crowd.

* * *

It was only much later—hours later, as she lay sleepless in her bed and stared out her window at the cascading, moon-silvered clouds—that Madeleine realized the pop of light backstage must have been a magnesium flash from a photographer, stealing for himself that moment when Colonel Astor had first taken her hand.

CHAPTER 2

Your father's courtship of me began with a daily delivery of fresh hothouse flowers, starting the very morning after we were first introduced.

Someday I will teach you the language of flowers, my darling. Of how you, as a gentleman, will initiate your wooing with a floral message aimed only *just* slightly sideways, signifying nothing beyond the suggestion of *yes, I have seen you*. Yellow bud roses in fern, perhaps, or a spray of violets. A simple corsage, something modest and easily pinned to a bodice, should the young lady so desire. At this stage, always choose a bloom both sweet and candid, one to which no respectable mama could take offense.

Only after that (no fewer than four weeks of teas and picnics and cotillions, and before you groan, believe me, I know how tedious that becomes) may you move on to the flowers more opulent. Gardenias, pearled and intoxicating. Carnations, peach and lemon and cherry. Too many people (Europeans, really) consider carnations to be nothing but a vulgar American indulgence, but in my opinion, there is no blossom more intricate, more deliciously, thickly, fragrantly lavish, than a carnation.

So. After months of courting, you are at last allowed to consider sending red roses, but *only* if your intentions are sincere. Red roses have but one meaning. You will not be forgiven for mistaking it.

After the roses—after the conquest—what is left? Orchids.

In the fullness of time, I trust, the woman you love will tell you of those.

July 1910

Bar Harbor, Maine

The brick-and-cedar prison that was the Forces' summer residence might easily have been a metaphor for Madeleine's entire life: cramped, elegant, strictly contained. Although not one of the sprawling "cottages" famously dotting Millionaires' Row, there was no aspect of the house that was not perfectly proper, and perfectly predictable: the handful of Old Masters paintings on the walls, the trompe l'oeil fresco in the dining room

(Persephone accepting a pomegranate seed in her palm), the Aubusson rugs, the immaculate gleam of the teak handrail topping the banister that guarded the stairs. The windows were small but ocean-facing, never inviting much of the light or wind inside.

Everything in the Force household, and in Madeleine Force's world, was exactly as it should be, and everything was exactly as it always would be. Not a single enhancement had been made in all of her memory, except for the Louis XVI ormolu chairs her mother had brought back from Paris three years ago because the cranberry satin cushions matched the runner in the foyer.

It was a wonder that Madeleine herself had managed to change, to expand from infant to child to young woman, within these walls. She *thought* she had grown; despite the evidence in her mirror, sometimes she wondered. The rooms and hallways did seem more claustrophobic than they had years ago, but otherwise her world seemed always, always the same.

Yet the globe did spin on its axis, and the seasons did flow from one to the next like water along the smooth, certain bed of a stream.

It was the height of summer, the weeks long and shimmering with heat, and the cottagers had descended upon Bar Harbor in a whirlwind of yachts and straw hats and billowing white linen. Drowsy shops, hungry for customers all winter, suddenly bustled with patrons; up and down Main Street, jolly banners snapped in the breeze, announcing fresh clams or imported cigars or exclusive Parisian tea-gowns. Newport, of course, had its matrons ossifying in their marble palaces—but Bar Harbor's balmy months boasted a slightly franker, more daring crowd.

And, as had been true ever since Katherine's debut, breakfast at the Force home (whether in Bar Harbor or New York) was punctuated by the arrival of flowers, which their butler placed strategically, jewellike, all around the dining room.

Pink sweet peas by the chafing dish of buttered eggs. Rubied dahlias at the other end of the credenza. Zinnias, marigolds, and hyacinths positioned between the pearlware figurines along the fireplace mantelshelf. Twin clusters of roses (one cream, one canary) in crystal bowls by the saltcellars.

Each delivery was accompanied by a small pasteboard card, which would be carefully collected and handed to Madeleine's sister, who kept them in a stack by her water goblet for the duration of the meal. And even though not a single one of her beaux ever called before noon—Madeleine imagined