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By Kate Hoffmann

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A very intimate battleground

Amelia Sheffield arrives in the sleepy town of Millhaven, New York, to collect what was promised her for a museum exhibit: an antique bed that George Washington once slept in. The problem is one incredibly infuriating—and incredibly sexy—innkeeper who insists the bed belongs to him. Of course, Sam Blackstone has no idea how dirty Amelia is willing to play this game...

Sam is furious—and intrigued—when he learns that Amelia plans on sleeping in the bed until it's hers. But he can be just as stubborn as her. After all, that bed could keep his family's inn from closing. Which means he'll sleep in the bed, too. And if she wants to play dirty, he's right there with her!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kate Hoffmann has written over 70 books for Harlequin, most of them for the Temptation and the Blaze lines. She spent time as a music teacher, a retail assistant buyer, and an advertising exec before she settled into a career as a full-time writer. She continues to pursue her interests in music, theatre and musical theatre, working with local schools in various productions. She lives in southeastern Wisconsin with her cat Chloe.

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"Samuel Jefferson Blackstone! Where are you?"

Sam winced at the sound of his younger sister's voice as it echoed through the ground floor of the Blackstone Inn. He gave the pipe wrench one last twist, then wriggled out of the cupboard.

"I'm in here," he called. "In the kitchen."

By the time Sarah reached the kitchen, he was washing his hands in the newly repaired sink. At least he'd thought it was fixed until he heard the unmistakable drip of a leaky drainpipe. Sam cursed softly.

This was one of those moments when he was painfully reminded that the Blackstone Inn didn't come close to turning a profit from year to year. If it did, he could call a real plumber to take care of these nagging maintenance problems. But Sam couldn't recall a time in his life when the inn had provided more than a meager living to the person who owned it—and right now that guy was him.

"Is it fixed?" Sarah asked.

"Not yet," he muttered.

"Did you use the goop and the strips?"

He shook his head. "Just the goop."

Sarah rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I told you to use the strips, too. That's how James fixed it the last time."

Sam glanced over at his sister. "Maybe you could call James and invite him over to dinner? Take him to a movie and then just casually mention our leaky pipes?"

"Do you really want my entire dating life taken up by romancing the various craftsmen around town?" Sarah asked, grabbing an apple from the wood bowl on the counter. "I've dated electricians, roofers, carpenters, masons... I draw the line at plumbers."

"James seems like a nice guy," Sam commented. "And it would be very helpful if you married someone handy. That would solve all our problems."

"I'm not going to date James." Sarah pushed away from the counter. "Besides, you and I both know exactly what would solve our problems. And since you refuse to find a ridiculously wealthy wife, it's going to be at

least another twenty-five years of this."

A wife with deep pockets would certainly help, Sam mused. But why would a woman with money saddle herself with an old inn and a husband who was tied to it like a ship to an anchor? This was his burden. Why would he wish it on any woman, especially a woman he loved?

"You don't have to stick around," Sam said. "The inn isn't your problem."

She shrugged. "I don't have anywhere better to be right now. And if I leave, who is going to cook the meals for our demanding guests?" Sarah started out of the kitchen, then stopped. "Oh, I thought you should know. I saw moving vans parked in front of Abigail Farnsworth's house. It looks like they're finally clearing her stuff out. You might want to go get the George Washington bed before they cart it away."

"Jerry Harrington told me they'd call me when I could pick it up," Sam said.

"I'm not sure I'd trust him with something so important."

"He's our cousin."

"Oh, good Lord," Sarah said. "Half the people in this town are related to us in some distant way. Abby Farnsworth is our third cousin twice removed."

"Fourth," he corrected. Sam grabbed his keys out of his pocket and hurried to the door. "Stick the bucket back under the sink to catch that leak. I'll get on it later." He sighed as he remembered all the other repairs the old building needed urgently.

The Blackstone Inn was the third oldest inn in the state of New York and the only one of the three in continuous operation since the time of the Revolutionary War. It sat on a beautiful bluff above the Hudson River on the outskirts of the town of Millhaven.

It had been built by Sam's seventh great-grandfather, added to by his sixth and fifth great-grandfathers, and been passed down for nine generations to the eldest son of the eldest son in the family.

During the Revolutionary War, the inn was an important military landmark on the road between New York City and Albany, and north to Quebec City. After the war, it was a waypoint for settlers moving into the northern reaches of the state. And then, in 1797, when Albany was named the capital of the state, it became a favorite spot for traveling politicians and businessmen.

Sam steered the truck into the quaint environs of the town. He had grown up in Millhaven and from a young age he'd known that his future was predetermined. He was the eldest son of an eldest son and, as such, the Blackstone Inn was his birthright.

There were moments when he felt the burden of his family's history, much like a royal might chafe against a life of duty. For a long time he'd tried to find a way out, but his father and grandfather had both put in their years at the helm. It was his turn now. And there was no out.

If Sam walked away, his father, Joseph, would be forced out of retirement to run the inn, and when he died, a family committee would choose an heir—most likely Sarah. His sister had so much talent, Sam didn't want her to be tied to an old inn in a small town. So Sam accepted his legacy with gritted teeth and a tight smile.

He'd do his duty for as long as he could.

When he pulled the pickup to a stop in front of Abigail's house, he paused before getting out. The George Washington bed had become a symbol of the ups and downs of the Blackstone Inn. Over the years it had been sold and reacquired three times, often to relatives. Sam's grandfather had been the last to sell it. Faced with a financial crisis, he'd finally accepted Abigail Farnsworth's offer, but only because Abigail had promised to return the bed completely free of charge once she'd gotten her money's worth out of it. Which was now, Sam hoped.

He hopped out of the truck and wove his way through the crowd of onlookers bundled against the February chill. As the tangle of moving men removed each beautiful antique, the crowd had a chance to see the life's work of one the state's most respected collectors. After a recent hip injury, Abigail Farnsworth had decided to join her sister, Emily, and retire to the warmer climate of Phoenix, Arizona. And today many of her precious antiques were headed for the auction block.

Sam spotted one of the workmen with the headboard from his bed and he hurried over, only to be brushed aside by a woman dressed entirely in black.

"You can put that in the back of the trailer," she said. "Make sure to wrap it with the moving quilts. Do you have the side rails?"

"Hey!" Sam shouted. "Hold up there." The workman looked up at him as Sam approached. "Where are you going with that bed?"

The guy shrugged. "I'm just following orders," he said.

"That's my bed," Sam said.

The woman turned to face him and the moment their eyes met Sam felt his breath slowly leave his body. She was one of those women you wanted to meet only on your best day, when you'd bothered to shave that morning and put on something other than faded jeans and a T-shirt. And when you had something terribly interesting to say if the conversation lagged—as it just had.

She shifted her sunglasses down on the bridge of her nose and studied him with eyes the color of expensive cognac. Everything about her seemed to ooze elegance, from her dark hair pulled into a loose knot at her nape to her perfect profile, clear testament to generations of careful breeding. A shiver coursed through his body and Sam shifted uneasily.

She's way out of your league, buddy.

"There must be some mistake," she murmured, her eyebrow arched.

Sam reached up and ran his fingers through his tousled hair, then forced a smile. "That's my bed," he repeated.

"This bed?" she asked. "No, no. This is my bed."

Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter that Abigail had written, gifting him what they'd affectionately called "The GW."

"I have a letter here from the current owner, Abigail Farnsworth."

She frowned, then pulled out a paper of her own. "I also have a letter from Miss Farnsworth. But mine states that she wishes the bed to go to the Mapother Museum of Decorative Arts in Boston. I'm here to collect it and take it back to Boston."

"Over my dead body," Sam said.

She glanced at the workman. "Put it in the trailer," she ordered.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll leave it right there," Sam warned the man. He glanced around and caught sight of the town lawyer, Jerry Wright, standing on the front porch. "Stay here," he said to the mover. "I'm going to get someone to sort this all out."

As he walked away, Sam glanced over his shoulder at the woman in black. She'd removed her sunglasses and their eyes met again, and she quickly looked away. Sam smiled to himself. It was the first sign of weakness that she'd shown. The attraction wasn't just one-sided. What was going through her pretty head? he wondered.

"Jerry! Get over here."

"Sam, I was just about to call you."

Sam cursed. "Sure you were. Come here and fix this. Some woman from Boston is trying to take my bed. The bed Abigail promised to return to the Blackstone."

Jerry hurried down the porch steps and walked across the lawn to Sam's side. "It seems that Miss Abigail made a lot of promises she didn't tell me about, Sam. Half the stuff in that house is promised to more than one party and now I'm left to untangle this can of worms."

"I don't care about any of that. All I want is the bed."

The other man sighed. "All right, come on."

When they reached the bed, the footboard was already inside the woman's trailer and the mover was just about to load the side rails. "Take that out of there," Jerry ordered. "That bed isn't going anywhere. At least not today."

"I'm afraid you're wrong," the woman said, rounding the back of what could only be her black Lexus SUV. She held out her hand to Jerry. "I'm Amelia Sheffield, Mapother Museum of Decorative Arts. I have this letter from Miss Farnsworth gifting the bed to our museum."

"It's not hers to give away," Sam said. "That bed has been in my family for generations and it's coming back where it belongs."

She studied him for a long moment, like a fighter evaluating her opponent. "And you are?"

"Sam Blackstone."

"Oh, yes. I've read the bed's provenance. You sold the antique to Abigail. I'm afraid I didn't see that you'd purchased it back. There would have been paperwork, no?"

Sam let his gaze drift over her beautiful features. "My grandfather, also named Samuel Blackstone, sold the bed. Let's just call Abigail and find out what she thinks."

"I doubt that would solve anything," Jerry said. "She seems to be legally obligated to both of you."

"Who had the first claim?" Sam asked. He held out his letter and compared it to Amelia Sheffield's. "I do."

"But wouldn't this be like a will?" Amelia asked. "In that case, the last draft supersedes all others and my letter would be the valid document."

"I'm not going to be the one to decide this," Jerry said. "For now we'll take the bed to a secure storage facility, along with the other disputed pieces of furniture, and figure this out later."

"That's unacceptable," Amelia said. "We're counting on this piece for an exhibit that opens next week. The day after President's Day."

"That's not going to happen," Sam said.

"Will you just...go away? I need this bed and it's mine by right."

"Not a chance. You think I'm just going to give up because you've got a nice smile and a sexy voice?"

She gasped. "What did you say?"

"Oh, don't pretend to be shocked. I saw you checking me out earlier. There's nothing wrong with admitting that you're attracted to me."

"Attracted to you? Has anyone ever told you that you're delusional?"

Sam chuckled. He usually wasn't this bold with a woman but he needed to keep Amelia Sheffield off balance. She was a threat, to his business and to centuries-old tradition. And he was enjoying flirting with her.

It didn't take her long to return the volley and they continued to throw verbal hand grenades until a small crowd had gathered around them. Finally Minerva Threadwell stepped forward. Sam groaned as she pulled out her notepad. Minerva was editor of the local newspaper and her husband, Wilbur, ran the local radio station. They were the king and queen of Millhaven gossip.

"I understand there's a dispute over the ownership of the George Washington bed," Minerva said. "Would either of you care to comment?"

"No," Sam said.

At the same time Amelia said, "Yes, I would. My name is Amelia Sheffield and I am from the Mapother Museum of Decorative Arts. Our attorneys have looked over the gift letter quite carefully and they assure me that everything is completely in order. The bed will be going to our museum in Boston."

Minerva turned to Sam, an inquisitive look on her face.

"No comment," he muttered.

"We'll hold on to it for now until this can be resolved," Jerry said.

Sam waited until the movers had shifted the bed from the Mapother trailer into one of the moving vans, then gave them very specific instructions to treat it carefully. As he climbed into his truck, he took a last look back and saw her leaning against the Lexus, her arms crossed over her chest.

Sam took a ragged breath. He felt exactly as he had the day he'd been out hiking along the cliffs overlooking the Hudson and the rock beneath his feet had sheared off. In a split second his life had flashed before his eyes and he'd been sure that he was about to tumble into the abyss. At the last moment he'd stumbled back and away from the edge.

It was the same sensation now, as if he'd managed to escape from some terrible danger.

Amelia Sheffield was too beautiful, too sophisticated, and exactly the kind of woman he found intriguing.

"Walk away, Sam," he murmured. "Just walk away."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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