

Chapter 1

The Fourth of July, A New Old Agenda Item, & High-End Research



Jasmine Bailey never wore white, not stark white, not even for her shirtwaists. A strawberry blonde whose natural beauty bordered on the antique, true white made her look, in her own not inconsiderable opinion, dead—or worse, about to be.

And that would never, ever do for her wedding dress, no matter she had to flout tradition to have it be the way she wanted. In the greater scheme of things, what was one more flouting between friends?

So she happily stood model-still for her umpty-umpth fitting of the slightly aged-looking, Chantilly lace gown with the five-foot, removable train.

Bridget O’Leary née O’Doul, their resident fashion designer, had outdone herself. Between us, I think it’s because she and her much-beloved husband, Milo, had eloped, *ergo* she didn’t get to design her own, so she poured all of her talent, love, hope, and dreams into my Jasmine’s exquisite garment.

Whereupon, that same designer, Bridget, straightened up and sighed.

Jasmine replied, somehow, in total silence.

Bridget flashed her a smirk.

Jasmine had surprised every single one of her siblings after Finn proposed officially.

When Jaq, my eldest, had asked her what kind of wedding they wanted, Jasmine Genevieve Bailey—daughter number two—had answered, “A big church wedding.” She’d glanced reflexively at her betrothèd, sitting happily to her right at our second-floor boardroom table in Chelsea Towers. He’d nodded his agreement.

“On the Fourth of July,” she’d continued.

Gemma and Jezebel stared mutely at their older sister.

Jaq, the eldest, rose to the occasion.

He said, eloquently, “A big church wedding on the Fourth of July.” Then he paused. “Have you a preference about time?”

“Yes,” said Jasmine, “right after the late morning service.”

Jaqueline assumed this meant at Church of the Guardian Angel, just a block down the road. They all knew the priest there did a ten o’clock service daily, mostly for octa- and nonagenarians, and the few West Side Catholic women who were free to leave their children (read: wealthy enough to have help) in the daytime.

Finn echoed her, “Noon.”

It went without saying that Jaqueline would give his sister away, as I have been on the incorporeal side of life for some time, and her mother longer still.

“Jas,” began her one-younger sister, Gemma. “Who do you want to organize it?”

Gemma was, uh, leading the witness here.

Jasmine rolled her violet eyes. “Who else, Gem?”

“Me?” Gemma squealed. As if she was surprised.

“Who else?” Finn repeated, flummoxed.

“Goody!” escaped Gemma. “My God, darlings, that only gives us ... why, not quite three weeks!” She ended on a squeak.

None of the girls knew ... well, one did, dimly ... that there were special accounts set aside for each daughter’s wedding.

“I’ll supply the budget,” volunteered my youngest, Jezebel. She was in charge of all things financial for the Bailey Empire, as she was the one who’d shown a marked aptitude for finance and business from well before the time she could form full sentences.

Well, as you know, when it rains, it pours.

A lot had happened to the Bailey quartet since I’d left them in April three years previously. Maybe better said, a ton. Also maybe better said, not *to*, but *because* of the Bailey foursome.

They had moved from our Upper West Side mansion to flats on the rooftops of the four matching buildings of the entire City block I’d won in a poker game on the third night of the Great Blizzard of 1888, and which they’d inherited, on West Twenty-Third Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues in the metropolis of all metropoli, New York City.

Each of them had a beautifully-appointed suite of rooms on two floors which afforded them privacy and proximity to one another to the degrees they each desired. A perfect cross-town or north-south city block apart.

Aimée, the Bailey attorney, and Chief Operating Officer for their viceties businesses, had looked up over her smudged spectacles from her perennial paperwork.

“Jasmine, Finn, the Fourth of July is a Wednesday. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” Jasmine reached for her omnipresent spectacles, and took them off to clean them. “We don’t want a big party.”

“You don’t—” Jaq started.

“No,” said Finn. “We want a big wedding, and a family luncheon.”

Gemma’s beautiful face fell.

She adored nothing better than to stage a big anything.

Jezebel looked, for a brief moment, like a short-eared owl. “I see,” she breathed.

“Yes.” Jasmine had returned her glasses to the bridge of her nose. “I thought you would, Jezy.”

Gemma gazed at her sister, principally clueless. Something of a rarity for her, but who knew what she yet knew about these things.

Jaq had soldiered on, “Jas, I’ll give you away, yes?”

“Who else?” returned Jasmine. “Gem, Jez, do you want to be in the wedding party?” Jasmine already had Finn’s two younger twin sisters, Pegeen and Maureen, standing up with her. “Shauna’s agreed to be my maid of honor.” No one batted an eyelash at that; Shauna and Finn were practically inseparable as it was. Who cared that she was only eleven?

“No, Jas, but thanks,” demurred Jezebel.

“Not if I’m to be the wedding planner, Jas,” answered Gemma, more focused on her burgeoning list than on the question. “I’ll be too busy. Have you been to see the good Father yet?”

Jasmine smirked. “Yes, about six months ago. We’ve been through all the counseling, but we didn’t book the church. I thought I’d let you start that ball rolling, Gemma,” invited the bride.

“Good.” Gemma switched her focus. “Jaq, shall we do that soonest?”

“Of course, Gemma,” answered the always-reasonable Jaq, knowing full well that a negatory to that inquiry was not on the menu.

Oh, yes, that reminds me. Menu, I mean, reminds me.

The original vice business, their saloon called The Obstreperous Trumpet, was, as Jezebel had predicted, going great guns, not, counterintuitively, because of its male clientele, although of those sporting men, the *hommes sportifs*, there were plenty.

Instead, my lovelies' salon, Hidden Gems, their exclusive one hundred plus or minus smart women, which was the foundation for all of this mischief, had valiantly adopted the cause of vice in the form of The Trumpet, yes, but also at the urging ... no, suggestion ... uh, not exactly ... um, invitation, nay, insistence of St. Tammany, The Salacious Sundae, the ice cream parlor that was the diurnal tenant of the same space. No one yet knew why they'd insisted.

They patronized both establishments liberally. And, by sheer grace, and some nefarious design, they invited their friends.

Between Mignon, our head trainer; Mrs. Goodness, our floor manager; and the Accomplished Terwilliger, our usual butler, and sometime whatever-else-was-needed, they'd mobilized after that infamous Decoration Day Ice Cream Social, hired, trained, and costumed stellar staff for both concerns, held Grand Openings on one hugely memorable, exhaustive day and night, and were off and running in the black before Jezebel had completely healed.

"The Incident," they called it, the quotation marks loud and clear, if invisible, upon each iteration, and, by design, spoken of as little as possible, had taken a lot out of my youngest, but metaphysician that she is, she'd stayed with her healing protocol until she was so completely restored that both of her doctors—one Western, one Eastern—concluded in complete accord, that she could not possibly have had so much as a scar left from her ordeal.

I'd known she could do it from the first, but knowing when incorporeal is quite a different matter than corporeal knowing.

"Good," said Jasmine, collecting everyone's attention again. She pulled a tattered envelope out of her sleeve. "I've just heard from Margaret, she's coming home, so she'll stand up with me, and I think I'll ask Penelope. So I'll have four attendants to match Finn's. His twin, Quinn," she smiled a private sort of look with her intended, "Moll, Willy, of course, and Jim O'Malley."

So you know, that would be Moll, the former head of Finn's now delightedly in-demand and happily over-worked (and well-compensated) crew; Willy Wilcox, the nominal chief of what Jezebel termed our southern flank—a.k.a. the smuggling business—of which we spoke in

judicious whispers; and Jim O'Malley, Shauna's da, the *ex officio* leader of the male workers in what my lovelies called The Viceties.

Margaret was, I think, Margaret Sanger, that loud-mouthed, relentless apologist for birth control, about which Jasmine herself had some definitive feelings, and Penelope was Dr. Penelope Barton-James, the medic who'd led the very unorthodox team that had helped Jezebel heal, and whose third-floor clinic now thrived right alongside the ice cream and alcohol contingents. A perfect trifecta: ice cream, alcohol, and health. What's not to love?

"You know they're all of quite varied heights, Jas," observed Gemma. "We'll have to place them carefully on the altar so it doesn't look like a sideshow."

I chuckled, loving my Gemma's reference to our circus *bona fides*. Yes, we're those Baileys.

Jasmine guffawed. "By all means, Gem, you decide the order, and we'll abide by your decision, alright?"

Gemma claimed her authority there, did you notice? And everyone, with Jasmine's one-sentence response, fell in line.

A charming gamin face appeared at the top of the stairs, along with the rest of her thoroughly voluptuous self. "Miss Jezebel?" inquired Megan, who had cheerily become Jezebel's assistant after the Social, searching the room. It was rather crowded come to that. "Sister Mary Alice is on her way. She said it's time to add her agenda item to the roster."

Jezebel answered crisply, "How long, Megan?"

"Thirty minutes or so," returned the gentle Irish lilt, with a sweet smile.

"Good," said Jezebel, rising. "Jas, Gem, are you through with me? Just send all the bills my way for approval." She did not wait for an answer.

"Jezebel," came the distracted voice of their Chief Operations Officer, Aimée Vanderklein, "you know about the ac—"

My Jezebel cut her off. "I do." She shared a big grin with Aimée.

Aimée waved her out of the room. "I too have calls upon my attention this morning. Excuse me. You know where to find me when you need me." She went off 'round the corner to her rapid-growth, second-floor team, which had taken over the original sewing shop quarters once they'd moved to the thirteenth floor for more consistent light. Dark thread on dark fabric, don't you know?

At that point, Aimée had two female legal clerks—after all, “His Fraudulency” President Rutherford B. Hayes, had gotten women admitted to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1879—and we were over twenty years past that milestone.

Lindsey Harrison had proven her weight in way more than gold, and now studied like a fiend to take the AICPA exam for her certification—Aimée had become friends with Christine Ross, the first woman who’d taken and passed it just the preceding year—whilst she trained and supervised two bookkeepers out of the ranks.

She also trained and supervised a rotating pool of secretaries and stenographers who organized copies and files and all the paper accoutrements of their various industrious pursuits as well as made tea, answered telephones, arranged for messengers, *et al.*

“Gemma? Before you go,” Jasmine called to her one-younger sister, who looked up from her list blinking, “I am in need of both inspiration and, I suspect, an introduction.”

“What for, Jas?”

“An ... investigation, I suppose,” replied Jasmine. She took her place at the table, sipped her now-frigid tea, and met her sister’s eyes. “It’s time,” she nipped her sister’s objections in the bud, “I know, I know, regardless of the wedding and everything else, it’s time to begin my arm of the viceties, and I need to do some research into ... gambling.”

Gemma started to speak.

Jasmine, knowing her sister extremely well, carried on, “Allow me to clarify, high-end gambling. I want to go to The House with the Bronze Door.”

Gemma’s eyes snapped to Jasmine’s. “But Jas ... they don’t—”

“I know they don’t allow women in, Gemma,” said Jasmine levelly, “but that is of no account. They are letting this woman in, that she can’t go as herself notwithstanding.”

Jasmine stopped.

Gemma snickered.

Jaq startled.

“Why, Jasmine,” said my eldest, “aren’t you a surprise?”

Jasmine dropped her eyes modestly, as all women of their generation had been taught, and murmured something unintelligible.

Then Jaq really laughed.

“Jas,” avowed Gemma, “I’ll ask Big Bill Mooney later. Either he’ll know how, or he’ll know someone who’ll know how. We’re off to the opening of *The Knickerbocker Girl* tonight. Lee Shubert just took over the lease at the Herald Square. I’ll report back.”

Then Jaq howled, completely certain of Big Bill’s response. No man in his right mind would ever take a woman to The Bronze Door, no matter how good her get-up.

Jasmine glowed.

It had been determined, the very evening upon which my Last Will & Testament had been read to them that afternoon, that Chelsea Towers, the four yellow-brick buildings they’d inherited—one for each child—would be used for double-purposes. First, in the name of commerce, and as a bow to their location, the very southernmost street to be considered The Tenderloin, that each girl would open a public-facing vice business.

Jezebel would go first, as she was so fond of saying, by adding an innocent little *o* to their already wildly successful salon, Hidden Gems. That too had been her idea. She would open a saloon. Jasmine would be next, and open a gambling hell; then our entertainer extraordinaire, Miss Gemma, would have her fine arts company, known from the beginning as a music hall, and finally, my eldest Jaq, née Jacqueline (long story, another time), would open an exclusive sort of brothel.

These determinations had been made based on the one thing each girl felt was the most vital for women of their time to learn so as to change their lives and fortunes and prospects for the better.

Jasmine’s answer had been on the order of birth control for women, healthcare for women, and the like.

Gemma’s had been a legitimate place for women in the fine arts—oh, a lot more windy, but that was the gist.

Jaq’s was, not surprisingly, the most controversial: a sexual education for women.

Jezebel’s, from the time she’d picked up *Lessons in Truth*, had been a knowledge of the Divine within everyone, including the long-ignored, and oft-dismissed, women of the species.

Back in the impromptu wedding meeting-of-the-minds, Finn had kissed his pretty bride-to-be sweetly, as he always did when he took his leave of her, and absented himself from the table.

Bridget had excused herself to the elevator bank and the thirteenth floor, where waited her whirlwind of stitchery teams.

In no time at all, Jaq and Jasmine, devoid of her wedding finery, sat alone amidst the detritus of that fine June morning's elevenses.

Jaq was about to rise and excuse himself to the mews and Greystar, for his usual equine fix of solitude, when Jasmine spoke. "Have you ever been, Jaq?"

"Been?" Jaq settled back into his chair.

"To The House with the Bronze Door?" Jasmine pursued.

"Jas, I'm not the type to kiss and tell. You know that."

Jasmine looked up sharply. "No one asked about kissing, Jaq. I asked about gambling."

Jaq sighed. Leave it to his most ethereal of sisters to become suddenly focused and intentional. "No-o-o, not The Bronze Door, but yes, others."

"What others?" Jasmine barked.

"Jasmine," Jaq began in his best warning tone.

"Ja-aq," Jasmine mimicked.

"I decline to say." Jasmine started to start, but Jaq raised a hand, and she ... subsided, for the nonce. "But I will happily discuss which games of chance I think you might consider once you've had your little adventure."

"Good," smiled Jasmine, as that had been what she'd wanted all along.

Jaq, at this point in ... I suppose when in Rome ... his life was the life of a gentleman, but he had not started life that way, and so, one never knew what experiences had been included in his worldly education, bar those of a sexual nature, which, because of his buttoned-lip policy, were also hard to discern, but nonetheless obvious via the alphabet of women he escorted day and night into the ranks of the various *nouveaux riches* social rounds. The Astors, et al, would be highly unlikely to welcome Jaq through their elite portals. Jaq didn't give a good goddamn about that or them, come to it.

Neither did his three sisters, except, perhaps, Gemma, but only as the opportunity to play her poignant Little Match Girl role. Mark my words, the day would come when Mrs. Astor would rue the day she had not invited my progeny to the tea party.

Megan held the quivering elevator cage open for Jezebel to join her. They would entertain Sister Mary Alice, the Benedictine who had adopted the viceties, and nominated as well as unanimously elected herself *ex officio* to the Board of Directors, upstairs in Jezebel's lushly-appointed flat.

Once The Trumpet had been off and running with The Sundae in a peculiar sort of strange bedfellows way, Shauna, Finn, and their crew had turned their talented attentions toward the four apartments for my lovelies on the level of the rooftop garden, right over floor thirteen.

Each had their own two floors, custom-designed and sketched out by Shauna within the space of a morning—the little-girl architect was a whiz-kid—and constructed over a weekend by scrambling Finn-helmed crews.

Mrs. Goodness and the Grandiloquent Terwilliger had unceremoniously kicked all four out on an early Thursday evening and sent them packing uptown to my quite beautiful, if somewhat abandoned and neglected mansion, at Eighty-Sixth & West End Avenue under the good auspices of Cook, who had bravely held the fort on her own. Mignon, and her equally bossy daughter and training second-in-command, Violette, had gone with them.

Then Moll, Finn's crew head, had organized four literate lieutenants, one for each flat, as well as four separate kitchen crew heads—one for under each flat. Let me explain.

The corner of each building had a three-story cube set into the snug balcony. The first floor was meant to be a kitchen for, of course, each tenant's purposes, but also to coordinate as one for use as suppliers to the all-entertainments rooftop. The rooftop was where Hidden Gems met on Thursday evenings. It had existed quite successfully for more than four years at that point, although the first year had been hosted uptown in the mansion.

That one weekend—I don't know how Finn and Company managed it—but with eight-person crews, three for each flat, and three eight-person crews for each kitchen, they'd set up, custom-built, installed, and finished every bit of what my children had requested.

Gemma needed a room sound-proofed for her largest of baby grand pianos.

Jasmine had asked for a nursery, which told two of her siblings a great deal about where her mind was in those days, despite none of the other three saying a word.

Jezebel wanted a meditation chapel fitted for eight within her abode.

Jaq's décor was so different from the rest as to seem completely unrelated.

Nothing kept all four flats as a set except their locales in the corners, of course, oh, and the neo-classical design executed in yellow-brick to match the rest of the buildings' exteriors.