

Where Rivers Meet

A Novel by Amy Leigh Harden

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Chapter One

September 1956

Max Fahey glanced toward the pub's door as it opened, letting in a flash of sunlight and a girl. A woman. She set her suitcase on the floor and leaned on the bar to speak with the bartender. From the corner table he couldn't see her face, only her figure and blonde hair pulled into a bun. The severe hairstyle didn't hide her youth.

John Howard-Smith turned to follow Max's gaze. "What's caught your attention?"

Max looked back to his half-empty pint of beer. "Nothing."

"Sure. Nothing." John took a swig of his own beer. "'Nothing's' cute. Curvy."

Max snuck another glance. He couldn't place it but there was a familiarity to her. If she'd turn, he could see her face.

"Go talk to her. Offer to buy her a drink. Offer to carry her suitcase." John gave him an encouraging smile and the lines around his eyes deepened.

Max shook his head. "I'd be the worst boyfriend and a crappier husband."

He'd been making the same argument for year.

"I'm not suggesting you propose to the girl. Go talk to her."

"Did Aggie put you up to matching making for me?"

The phrase 'Shrewsbury School' floated over from the bar. Max and John turned in unison toward the bar. The bartender pointed at them and the woman followed his finger with her eyes.

“She’s asking directions to the school.” The bartender called over.

Even after ten years, Max recognized Frances. A matronly bun replaced the victory rolls she wore in high school, but he’d know her heart-shaped face and grey eyes, big and serious behind her glasses, anywhere.

Frances MacArthur.

Max raised his glass and gave her a ghost of a smile.

Frances’s mouth moved but Max couldn’t hear her words. She backed away from the bar and reached down to grab her suitcase. Her eyes never left Max’s until she turned and ran.

The door slammed behind her.

“What was all about?” John asked.

Max glanced at his wristwatch. Half past. She must’ve arrived by the 1:10 train.

Frances MacArthur -- his own personal harbinger of doom.

John turned in his chair to look at the now shut door. “What are you staring at now?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

Max hid his shaking hand under the table. What was he going to do? His life was calm and happy in England. Frances would ruin everything.

“You look ill.” John leaned in closer. “How many pints have you had?”

“Only one.” Max willed his hand to be steady and picked up the glass. He swirled the amber liquid around watching the foam circle the glass.

Damn her.

Why did Fate send Frances to Shrewsbury? And to the school where he taught.

Of all the schools in all of England...

“She’s the new mathematics teacher,” Max said.

“How do you know that?”

“She’s the American we’re expecting to teach. MacArthur is a common enough last name. It never occurred to me...”

“Except she’s not a man. The headmaster will be surprised.” John chuckled.

Frances was probably already up at the school discovering she wasn’t wanted. What then? She’d be on her way back to London on the 4:40 train.

But she’d seen him.

Would she say anything?

All he had to do was sit in the pub until she got back on the train. Then she’d be gone back home to Atchison, if Atchison was still her home. It’d been ten years. After all this time if anybody was looking for him they would have found him. He’d long assumed nobody was looking.

But he owed Frances.

“John.” Max swilled the rest of his beer. “I’ve got to go.”

“Go? Where to?”

“To be a knight-errant.”

#

Max paused for a moment outside the door to the headmaster’s office. Frances’s suitcase and hat box sat on the floor beside the empty secretary’s desk. Once he knocked, he was involving himself in problems that were none of his concern. Did he really want to get involved?

He knocked twice on the door, and the low voices within the room quieted. Nobody dared to interrupt the headmaster when he was having a closed-door meeting. Max was friends with John and Aggie, two of the headmaster's least favorite teachers, so he didn't suffer any misapprehension that the headmaster was fond of him. But the man wasn't a total tyrant. Besides, Max couldn't be fired without the approval of the board.

The door swung open and Frances stood in the office. He recognized her expression from when they were young. A brave face and a quivering chin. She'd be crying within five minutes.

"Miss MacArthur. How do you do?" Max held out a hand, and she shook it for the briefest of moments before dropping it.

She took a step back.

"Are you surprised to see me?" he asked. Surprised wasn't the word to describe her expression. Terrified was more like it.

She took another step closer to the headmaster's desk and further from Max. "What are you doing here?"

"I teach here. Literature." He shut the door behind him and turned to the headmaster. "How do you do, sir?"

Headmaster Glenfirth sat at his desk with stooped shoulders and a scowl. Students thought the headmaster was close to ninety. In actuality he wasn't yet seventy.

"This interruption is rude. What is this about, Mr. Fahey?" Glenfirth asked.

"I want to help."

"Your help is not needed."

"In the staff meeting this morning we discussed the new geometry teacher. From the

States. Everyone expected someone..." Max glanced at Frances standing rigid with her hands clasped in front of her. "Someone older."

"I expected a man!"

"That too," Max said.

"What is your interest in this?" the headmaster asked.

"Miss MacArthur and I went to school together. Back in the States."

"You see the present dilemma with the situation as it is then."

"Is there a dilemma? We need a geometry teacher and now we've got one." Max snuck another look at Frances. He'd never known her to keep quiet for so long. She'd changed more than he could've imagined.

"The teachers at Shrewsbury are men," Glenfirth said.

"That's tradition, not a rule. Mrs. Howard-Smith is one of our best teachers." Max spoke without thinking. Dragging Aggie into the fray wouldn't help. The mere mention of her name was nails on the chalkboard to the headmaster.

"Are we to change four hundred years of tradition because of this girl, Mr. Fahey?"

"Tradition versus expediency. We need a teacher."

"I have six years' experience teaching." Frances' voice trembled.

"I need a man!"

Max and Frances would both be looking for a job if Max voiced the irreverent quip that came into his mind.

The headmaster grabbed a folder off his desk and held it up. He flipped through the contents. "Two letters of recommendation. Neither list her gender. She is only referred to as

Frances. Which is a man's name.”

“When it's spelled with an 'i', not an 'e'.” Frances put her hands on her hips.

For a split second he was back in Atchison with Frances standing on her front porch lecturing him over some indiscretion. Laziness, probably. A sin she detested. He had to hide a smile behind his hand. Was Frances making him homesick after ten years?

The headmaster slipped on half-moon reading glasses and scanned another page from the folder. He pointed to the top of her transcript with one brittle fingernail. “There's no gender listed. Possibly a deliberate attempt to conceal her gender.”

“Deliberate? Vassar is an all-girls' school,” Frances said.

“How can we be expected to know every obscure American school?”

“Obscure? Vassar?” Frances turned to Max. He could see her internal battle — put the headmaster in his place or try to keep the job. She took a breath.

Max handed the transcript back to the headmaster. “She took women's tennis for two semesters.” Max forced himself not to laugh. If he laughed, the headmaster might punch him and the temptation to punch back would be hard to resist. Punching Glenfirth would right a dozen wrongs over the previous years.

“It appears a mistake was made by the school.” The headmaster admitted grudgingly and slipped his glasses into his pocket.

Max bit his cheek to keep from grinning.

The headmaster walked around to the front of his desk. “Miss MacArthur, did you realize this was a boys' school when you submitted your application?”

She shook her head. “I didn't even realize it was a boarding school.”

“Mrs. Howard-Smith was here before my time. I’m not prepared to make exceptions—”

“For a highly qualified math teacher?” Max tapped her letter of recommendation.

“Irrelevant.”

“What will the board of directors think when school starts and we’re short one teacher? Again.” Max tucked his hands into his trouser pockets. Bringing up the board was a calculated risk. Classes started in a week and parents would complain loudly to the board if Shrewsbury didn’t have a geometry teacher on staff.

The headmaster’s scowl deepened, and he narrowed his eyes. “Miss MacArthur may stay until the Christmas break.”

Frances' face lit up. Ten years hadn’t taught her subtlety.

“I’ll find a replacement by Christmas,” the headmaster said.

“Thank you, sir.” Frances took his hand and shook it.

The headmaster patted her hand and pulled his back. He opened the top drawer to his desk and produced a key ring. “Since you and Mr. Fahey seem to be acquaintances of long standing, he can show you to your quarters.”

A grimace replaced Frances’s smile. “Max and I...Mr. Fahey, that is... we aren’t friends.”

The headmaster dropped the keys into Max’s hand, then busied himself with a stack of forms on his desk.

“I...” Frances turned to Max and took a step back.

Was she going to insist on holding onto old grievances?

“Let me show you where your rooms are,” Max said.

Why had he embroiled himself in her affairs? If he'd kept his mouth shut, he would've been able to rid himself of the problem more easily. But she would have gone straight back to the States and blabbed where he was. Then there would be trouble on his doorstep.

He'd have to talk to her.

He'd have to explain.

#

"I can carry my own bags, thank you." Frances reached to take her suitcase from Max and grabbed his hand in her haste. She pulled back. How much more humiliation did England have in store for her today?

Max held the door to the hallway open. "Miss MacArthur—"

"Don't start any of that "Miss MacArthur" nonsense. It sounds stupid coming from you." Frances walked by his side down the hallway. "Not as stupid as calling you 'Mr. Fahey' though."

"I'll tell everyone not to call me Mr. Fahey. At least when you're around. Don't know how that'll go over with the students."

Unbelievable. He was teasing her.

Why did she want to laugh?

She should be terrified.

She took a breath and forced herself to look haughty. "I have no intention of being your friend."

Max stopped and turned to her. "Do you think I want you here?"

"If you hadn't gotten involved—"

"I pay my debts, Frances. If anyone asks, we went to high school together. Nothing

more.”

“There is nothing more.” She followed Max out the royal blue double doors of the administration building. They cut across the green lawn of the courtyard. “Who knows you’re here?”

“You know I’m here. If my intention was to hide, then I’m not trying very hard.”

“That’s a witty remark that says nothing of substance.”

“Let’s get out of the open air where all my colleagues can hear us. We can have a nice row in private. Your rooms aren’t far.”

“Is that what we are to have?” Frances was proud of her response. She sounded disinterested, much more a woman of the world. Certainly not an unworldly girl from the Midwest. And certainly not a girl scared of him.

In the sunlight with Max walking beside her like they were on holiday together it seemed unreal that he’d played the starring role in her nightmares for the last ten years.

He turned down the path away from the chapel. “Your classroom will be in this building to the left.” He nodded toward an imposing brick building. “Unfortunately for you.”

Frances counted a dozen chimneys as they walked by. “Why unfortunately?”

“My classroom is there as well.”

One of those windows might be her classroom. She hoped it would overlook the river. Or at least the courtyard. She wouldn’t ask Max which window was hers. She didn’t want him to know how excited she was.

“Faculty housing is around the corner.” He pointed with his free hand to a squat brick building down the path.

It was less grand than the main building or the chapel, but Frances couldn't wait to see inside. Bushes of pale pink roses lined the three steps up to the door. The scene was something out of a dream.

"Is this where you live?" She glanced to Max.

"There's a duplicate of this building behind the chapel. That's where I live."

Frances sighed in relief. The school building was four stories tall, perhaps if their classrooms weren't close, then there'd be little chance of running into him coming and going. She might not see him at all.

They walked into a small entranceway and down a narrow hallway with brass sconces and burgundy carpet. Frances counted the doors. Her apartment was six doors down on the left. Flat. They called it a flat, not an apartment. She'd have to remember that.

Max opened the unmarked door with a key and stood aside to allow her to enter.

"I'll take my bag, thank you." Frances reached for her bag. He was crazy on top of everything else if he thought he was welcome in her apartment.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Go in."

"Not with you." She shook her head and took a step further away.

"Bloody hell, Frances. Go in. I'm not going to eat you."

She shook her head. "No."

"I don't wish to fight in the corridors." He gestured toward the open door. He'd grown since she'd last seen him. He was taller and less willowy. His nearly black hair was neatly parted on the side and longer than Frances remembered — he'd sported a crew cut in school. His tweeds gave him a soft, scholarly look. In her memories he wore slacks and plaid shirts and a

letterman jacket. The resemblance to his father was unsettling.

Frances glanced up and down the hall and wondered if they were being watched. The hall appeared deserted but being unseen was the tactic of the successful busybody. She and Max had grown up seeing the best at work.

She had to remember he was a monster and couldn't be trusted. But looking at him in the hallway he seemed to simply be Max. The boy next door.

"I've already infuriated the headmaster. I'd rather not completely torpedo my career by screaming at each other in the hallway."

The headmaster knew Max was with her. What could he do to her? Nothing. She'd be safe enough. Frances took three quick steps and was in the small flat that would serve as her home for the next four months. She'd expected it to be home for longer but suddenly that was the least of her concerns.

A kitchen window provided a glimpse of the cricket fields. The living area boasted of little more than two chintz chairs beside a fireplace, a coffee table, and a writing desk in the corner with a chair borrowed from the kitchen table.

She ignored her unwelcome visitor and walked around.

"The char woman will have made sure it was clean," Max said.

Frances ran her fingers across the back of a kitchen chair. "You think I don't like it?"

"It's small." He took her luggage to the bedroom.

"It's perfect."

"Do you think so?" He looked it over from the bedroom doorway.

"My standards aren't as haughty as yours, Mr. Fahey." Frances loved how tidy and

compact everything was. “It’s the first place I’ve had all to myself.”

Max laughed. “I must show you the quarters I shared with two other teachers when I started. Then you can tell me how haughty I am.”

They stared at each other across her living room. Frances never could stand awkward silences, but she didn’t know how to start the conversation they needed to have. She needed his explanation. She needed to know why he’d killed Jackie.

“When you disappeared—”

“Disappeared?”

“Nobody knew where you went! You were at mass on Sunday, and then on Monday I looked for you on the way to school, but you were already gone.” Frances turned away. She busied herself opening cabinets and peeking in. Tea. A few tins of soup. Crackers.

“I suppose I did disappear.”

“Fleeing is more accurate, isn’t it?” She crossed her arms and waited for his response. A denial. An explanation. A trite confession.

“Should I have tucked a farewell note under your door? I’d thought you of all people would’ve been happy to see me gone.”

“Happy? You’re a lunatic.”

“Ok, happy was a poor choice of words.” He tucked his hands into his pockets and grimaced.

“Do you know how many nights I lay in bed thinking about you?”

“Did you?” Max looked up sharply with an uncertain smirk.

“Not like that! You’re the last man I’d think about in bed.” Her face burned. Poor choice

of words indeed! The more she said, the worse it got.

“Frances. I’m sorry. My apology’s ten years overdue.”

He was a madman. How dare he apologize away murder. She hated how he could stand there calmly and contritely while she raged inside. She blinked back tears. For years dark-haired men had crept up on her in her nightmares. In the brightly lit kitchen with the cheery vase of mums on the table all she felt was anger.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. Yelling wouldn’t get her answers. “Where did you go?”

“We came to England. I finished school. Studied the classics at Cambridge. Then I came back here to teach.” He leaned against the icebox and picked at his nails. “One of us should make tea.”

“I don’t know how. If you want tea, you’ll have to find it elsewhere.” She gave him an excuse to leave.

“Is it possible I can do something Frances MacArthur can’t? Doesn’t seem possible.”

If there was a touch of sarcasm to his voice, she couldn’t detect it. He sounded nervous and when he dropped the tea canister off the shelf, she was convinced.

How stupid of him to be nervous. He was the dangerous one.

Max set a kettle on the stove and lit the gas burner. Frances watched him measure a spoon of tea into the pot. She tried to imagine him hurting Jackie but the picture wouldn’t form in her mind. The memories of him curled up with a book in his bedroom window or sitting on Carl’s front porch laughing were all her mind could see.

Max placed the tin of shortbread on the table with a pot of tea and a little tray of cream

and sugar. He sat across from her and poured the dark liquid into his teacup. She watched as he dropped in a cube of sugar and a splash of milk and did the same.

“You look exactly like your father.” She stirred her tea, watching the milk swirl and then disappear.

Max froze for a moment, spoon hovering above his tea, before setting it to the side on his saucer. “Do I still? Is that a compliment?”

It hadn’t been intended as a compliment; she’d said it to break the silence.

“Have you gotten sick of hearing how much you resemble your father?” Frances asked.

“Nobody has said that to me for quite some time.”

“You sound so British.”

“Only to a Yank. The students still call me the American teacher.”

“Why did you stand up for me with the headmaster? He’s not happy to have me here.”

Max sipped his tea and the cup rattled when he set it back in the saucer. “He doesn’t like me regardless.”

“Once again...that doesn’t answer the question.”

“You and I both know I owe you.”

The intensity in Max’s eyes startled her, and Frances looked away. She didn’t want to talk about it. Or hear his excuses. Or have him here at all. Maybe she shouldn’t be here. She wasn’t wanted. All she had to do was ask, and her parents would wire her money. She could catch the next ship home.

Had it been a mistake to come to England?

She needed time alone. To think.

To cry.

“Frances.” Max reached a hand out to her, but she yanked hers back.

“I don’t want you here.” She wiped her cheeks with her palm.

“Please. I have to talk to you about—”

She shook her head.

“You can’t tell anyone I’m here,” Max said.

She looked up from her tea and into his dark eyes.

Of course, he was worried about being found. Why hadn’t she realized that earlier? She’d intended to write her brother, Peter. He was a policeman; he’d know what she should do. Then what would happen? Would Scotland Yard arrest Max? Or the Shrewsbury police? Would the sheriff come all the way from Atchison to take him home?

“I can’t be found, Frances.” Max grabbed her wrist with a clammy hand and held it tight.

“I’m a dead man if I’m found. Do you want that on your conscience?”

There was truth in his worries. He’d hang. And he’d deserve it.

“Let go of me.” She pulled at her arm. “I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you, Frances.”

She studied the face across the table from her. Max wasn’t as handsome as his father, but his face lacked the hardness of the elder Mr. Fahey’s face. Frances wished she could be like her friend Nancy and not believe Max capable of such evil. Nancy never wavered from her stance that he was innocent. But the facts were undeniable, and Frances followed logic.

“As you said, if anyone asks, we simply knew each other in school. We weren’t friends then. We aren’t friends now,” Frances said.

He took his teacup and saucer to the sink. She walked to the front door and opened it. She hadn't intended for her hint to be subtle.

"Thank you, Frances. I'm in your debt yet. Again." In one fluid movement he bent down and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek before leaving.

She shut the door and locked it behind him.

This was madness. How could she keep such a secret? Didn't they arrest people for hiding criminals? She had no intention of going to jail over helping Max Fahey. Peter learned at the police academy that sociopaths could charm anyone. It was their most dangerous characteristic.

All she had done was buy herself some time. Eventually she'd tell Peter she'd found Max but not today.

Frances went to her bedroom and stared at her suitcase lying on the bed. She'd always been excited to unpack when she got someplace new but didn't know if it was worth it. England was supposed to be her home for longer than until Christmas. She pushed the suitcase off the bed then laid down and hugged a pillow to her chest. Max and the headmaster had robbed her day of all its joy. She intended to close her eyes only for a few moments but must've fallen asleep.

Her dreams were of men in the shadows and screaming girls.

#

Max rolled his ball across the Howard-Smith's lawn as Aggie watched and John stood holding the scorecard. The ball stopped short of the jack on the patch of yard they used as a makeshift bowling green. Not terrible, but likely not good enough to beat Aggie, who'd grown up chasing balls and returning them for her father and his friends. The warm September sun only

added to his sense of surrealness with the day.

“Have you been practicing?” Aggie asked in her baritone voice.

“I’ve had three whiskey and sodas. Does that count as practice?”

“I’ll rap your knuckles for being impudent.” Aggie tossed her ball. It rolled across the lawn and stopped next to the jack. “Are you going to tell us about this girl? I’ve been patiently waiting for you to bring it up.”

“Nothing to tell. A girl I knew in the States. I intervened with Glenfirth so we wouldn’t start the year a teacher short again.” Max took longer than he needed lining up his bowl before releasing it.

“Don’t you try that nonchalant nonsense with me. You haven’t said more than a dozen words since you got here.”

“Isn’t that an improvement? Do I normally talk too much?”

Aggie faced him squarely. “Is she an old flame?”

Max’s mouth twitched. Frances was one of the only girls he hadn’t chased in school. “If anything, she’s an old rival.”

Calling Frances a rival didn’t do their former relationship justice. It didn’t sum up how much energy he’d put in trying to best her in grades. Or how infuriating she’d be smirking at him when he’d gotten in reprimanded for daydreaming in class. Or how much he’d resented her easy, happy life.

Max and John turned to watch Aggie take her turn. The ball rolled to the left of Max’s first throw. If Aggie threw her next ball poorly then he’d have a chance.

“You must be eager to hear about your old friends back home,” John said.

Only in bed at night would Max allow himself to think back to life in Atchison. He'd stare into the darkness and try to picture his father's face in his mind. The dark hair greying at the temples. The sky-blue eyes. A handsome face equally ready to sneer as smile.

Did his father wonder how much Max had changed? Or if Max was happy? Or if he'd recognize him if he saw him again?

Did he think about Max at all?

If he asked Frances about Atchison, then she could shatter the illusion Max held for so long.

Maybe it would be easier if his father had showed up in England.

Aggie broke into his thoughts. "John said she's cute."

"John's a romantic." Max shot John a dirty look.

"She tortured me for details. I tried name, rank, and serial number but she wore me down." John rubbed his nose and laughed.

"Torture, indeed. You two are worse than schoolboys. I simply asked him how lunch was and he told me everything." Aggie handed Max his ball. "Hurry and play before we're called in to dinner."

"Frances MacArthur's not an old flame. She isn't even an old friend." Max lined his ball up.

"Maybe she'll be a new flame."

Max released his ball and it veered wildly to the right. Aggie won again.