



At The Water's Edge

by Sara Gruen

We are excited to share an excerpt from the book and an exclusive note from the author to BAM customers!

Note from Sara:

*While researching my new novel, *At The Water's Edge*, I had the good fortune to spend time in the Scottish Highlands, where I fell in love with the people, the land, and the culture. *At The Water's Edge* is set in Drumnadrochit, a tiny village on the shore of Loch Ness where I holed up to absorb the atmosphere so I could share the area's unique warmth, beauty, and charm—as well as the dangers of living there during WWII.*

Madeline Hyde, a sheltered young socialite from Philadelphia, makes the improbable voyage to Drumnadrochit at the height of the war, cajoled into it by her husband and their best friend. As the men become ever more obsessed with proving that the monster in the loch exists, a series of stunning revelations force Maddie to accept that not everything is at it seems. The stakes are high, the costs even higher—and Maddie is faced with an impossible choice that will change everything.

*I'm so incredibly grateful for the continued support of readers like you, and I could not be more delighted to finally share *At The Water's Edge*.*

Sláinte!

Sara

Chapter Two

Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, December 31, 1944

“**F**ive! Four! Three! Two!”
The word “one” had already formed on our lips, but before it could slide off there was an explosion overhead. As screams rose around us, I pitched myself against Ellis, tossing champagne over both of us. He threw an arm protectively around my head and didn’t spill a drop.

When the screams petered out, I heard a tinkling above us, like glass breaking, along with an ominous groaning. I peeked out from my position against Ellis’s chest.

“What the hell?” said Hank, without a hint of surprise. I think he was the only person in the room who hadn’t jumped.

All eyes turned upward. Thirty feet above us, a massive chandelier swung on its silver-plated chain, throwing shimmering prisms across the walls and floor. It was as if a rainbow had burst into a million pieces, which were now dancing across the marble, silks, and damask. We watched, transfixed. I glanced nervously at Ellis’s face, and then back at the ceiling.

An enormous cork landed next to General Pew, our host at what

was easily the most anticipated party of the year, bouncing outrageously like a bloated mushroom. A split second later a single crystal the size of a quail's egg fell from the sky and dropped smack into his cocktail, all but emptying it. He stared, bemused and tipsy, then calmly took out his handkerchief and dabbed his jacket.

As everyone burst into laughter, I noticed a footman in old-fashioned knee breeches perched near the top of a stepladder, pallid, motionless, struggling to contain the biggest bottle of champagne I'd ever seen. On the marble table in front of him was a structure of glasses arranged so that if someone poured continuously into the top one, they would eventually all be filled. As a rush of bubbles cascaded over the sides of the bottle and into the footman's sleeves, he stared in white-faced horror at Mrs. Pew.

Hank assessed the situation and apparently took pity on the fellow. He raised his glass, as well as his other hand, and with the flair and flourish of a ringmaster boomed, "*One! Happy New Year!*"

The orchestra struck up "Auld Lang Syne." General Pew conducted with his empty glass, and Mrs. Pew beamed at his side—not only was her party a smashing success, but it now had a comic anecdote people would speak of for years.

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind
Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and old lang syne . . .*

Those who knew the words sang along. I had refreshed my memory that afternoon in order to be ready for the big moment, but when cork met crystal, the lyrics were knocked straight out of my brain. By the time we got to running about slopes and picking daisies fine, I gave up and joined Ellis and Hank in la-la-la'ing our way through the rest.

They waved their glasses in solidarity with General Pew, their free arms looped around my waist. At the end, Ellis leaned in to kiss me.

Hank looked to one side, then the other, and appeared baffled.

"Hmm. I seem to have misplaced my date. What *have* I done with her?"

"What you *haven't* done is marry her," I said and then snorted,

nearly expelling champagne through my nose. I had sipped my way through at least four glasses on an empty stomach and was feeling bold.

His mouth opened in mock offense, but even he couldn't pretend ignorance about Violet's growing desperation at the seemingly endless nature of their courtship.

"Did she actually leave?" he said, scanning the room a little more seriously.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I haven't seen her in a while."

"Then who will give me my New Year's kiss?" he asked, looking bereft.

"Oh, come here, you big lug." I stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on his cheek. "You've always got us. And we don't even require a ring."

Ellis threw us an amused side eye and motioned to Hank that he should wipe my lipstick off his cheek.

Beyond him, the footman was still balanced on the second to highest rung of the stepladder. He was bent at the waist, trying to aim the bottle at the top glass, and had gone from pale to purple with the effort. His mouth was pressed into a grim line. I looked around to see if reinforcements were coming and didn't see any.

"Ellis? I think he needs help," I said, tilting my head in the footman's direction.

Ellis glanced over. "You're right," he said, handing me his glass. "Hank? Shall we?"

"Do you really think she's left?" Hank said wistfully, his lips hovering near the edge of his glass. "She was a vision tonight. That dress was the color of the gloaming, the sequins jealous stars in the galaxy of her night, but nothing, *nothing* could compare to the milky skin of her—"

"Boys! Concentrate!" I said.

Hank snapped back to life. "What?"

"Maddie thinks that man needs help," said Ellis.

"That thing's enormous," I said. "I don't think he can hold it on his own."

"I should think not. That's a Balthazar," said Ellis.

"That's not a Balthazar," Hank said. "That's a Nebuchadnezzar."

The footman's arms were quaking. He began pouring but missed. Champagne fell between the glasses, splashing onto the table and floor. His gloves and sleeves were saturated.

"Uh-oh," said Hank.

"Uh-oh indeed," said Ellis. "Mrs. Pew will *not* be pleased."

"I rather suspect Mrs. Pew is never pleased," Hank said.

Rivulets of sweat ran down the footman's forehead. It was plain to see that he was going to fall forward, right onto the glasses. I looked to Mrs. Pew for help, but she had disappeared. I tried to signal the General, but he was holding court with a replenished cocktail.

I dug my elbow into Ellis's side.

"Go!" I said urgently. "Go help him."

"Who's she talking about?" said Hank.

I glared at him, and then some more, until he remembered.

"Oh! Of course." He tried to hand me his glass, but I was already holding two. He set his on the floor and yanked his lapels in a businesslike manner, but before he and Ellis could mobilize, help arrived in the form of other servants bearing four smaller but still very large bottles, and three more stepladders. Mrs. Pew glided in behind them to make sure all was under control.

"Now *those* are Balthazars," said Hank, with a knowing nod. He retrieved his drink from the floor and drained it.

"No. Those are Jeroboams," said Ellis.

"I think I know my champagne," said Hank.

"And I don't?"

"I think you're both wrong. Those are Ebenezers," I said.

That stopped them.

I broke into tipsy giggles. "Ebenezer? Get it? Christmas? The holidays? Oh never mind. Someone get me another. I spilled mine."

"Yes. On *me*," said Ellis.

Hank spun around and set his glass on the tray of a passing waiter. He clapped his hands. "All right, who's up for a snowball fight?"

We toppled outside and made snow angels right there in front of the Pews' home and all the cars and liveried drivers that were lined up waiting for guests. I gathered one snowball and managed to land it on Ellis's chest before screeching and running back inside.

In the vast foyer, Ellis helped brush the snow off my back and hair. Hank hung his jacket over my bare shoulders, and the two of them guided me to a trio of ornate, embroidered chairs near a roaring fire. Hank, who had had the presence of mind to grab my mink stole on the way back in, shook it off and draped it over the edge of the rosewood table in front of us. Ellis went in search of hot toddies, and I peeled off my gloves, which were stained and soaked.

"God, look at me," I said, gazing down at myself. "I'm a mess."

My silk dress and shoes were ruined. I tried in vain to smooth out the water spots, and checked quickly to make sure I still had both earrings. The gloves were of no consequence, but I hoped the stole could be saved. If not, I'd succeeded in destroying my entire outfit.

"You're not a mess. You're magnificent," said Hank.

"Well, I *was*," I lamented.

I'd spent the afternoon at Salon Antoine having my hair and makeup done, and had eaten almost nothing for two days before so my dress would drape properly. It was a beautiful pomegranate-red silk, the same material as my shoes. It matched my ruby engagement ring, and all of it set off my green eyes. Ellis had given me the dress and shoes a few days earlier, and before the party I had presented myself to him like a flamenco dancer, twirling so the skirt would take flight. He professed his delight, but I felt a familiar pang of sorrow as I tried, yet again, to imagine exactly what he was seeing. My husband was profoundly color-blind, so to him my ensemble must have been a combination of grays. I wondered which ones, and how many variations there were, and whether they had different depths. I couldn't imagine a world without color.

Hank dropped into a chair, leaving one leg dangling over its arm. He pulled his bow tie open and undid his cuffs and collar. He looked like a half-drowned Clark Gable.

I shivered into his jacket, holding it closed from the inside.

Hank patted his chest and sides. He stopped suddenly and lifted an eyebrow.

"Oh!" I said, realizing what he was looking for. I retrieved the cigarette case from his inside pocket and handed it to him. He flipped it open and held it out in offering. I shook my head. He took a cigarette for himself and snapped the case shut.

"So, how about it then?" he said, his eyes glistening playfully. "Shall we go get us a monster?"

"Sure," I said, waving my hand. "We'll hop on the next liner." It was what I always said when the topic came up, which was often, and always after boatloads of booze. It was our little game.

"I think getting away would do Ellis good. He seems depressed."

"Ellis isn't depressed," I said. "You just want to escape Violet's clutches."

"I do not," he protested.

"You didn't even notice when she left tonight!"

Hank cocked his head and nodded, conceding the point. "I suppose I should send flowers."

"First thing in the morning," I said.

He nodded. "Absolutely. At the crack of noon. Scout's honor."

"*And* I think you should marry her. You need civilizing, and I need a female friend. I have only you and Ellis."

He clutched a hand to his heart, mortally wounded. "What are we, chopped liver?"

"Only the finest foie gras. Seriously, though. How long are you going to make her wait?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know if I'm ready to be civilized yet. But when I am, Violet can have the honors. She can pick a mean set of china."

As I set my drink down, I caught another glimpse of my dress and shoes. "I think maybe *I* need civilizing. Will you just marry her already?"

"What is this, an ambush?" He tapped the cigarette against the

top of the case and put it between his lips. A servant appeared from nowhere to light it.

“Mm, thanks,” Hank said, inhaling. He leaned back and let smoke drift from his mouth to his nose in a swirling white ribbon that he re-inhaled. He called this maneuver the “Irish Waterfall.”

“If I do marry her, Ellis and I won’t have a hope, because you girls will gang up on us.”

“We won’t be able to,” I said. “The distribution will be equal.”

“They’re never equal between the sexes. You already gang up on Ellis and me all by yourself.”

“I do not!”

“You’re ganging up on me right now, at this very minute, single-handedly baiting the marriage trap. I tell you, it’s the ultimate female conspiracy. You’re all in on it. Personally, I can’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Ellis returned, followed by a waiter who set steaming crystal glasses with handles on the table in front of us. Ellis flopped into a chair.

Hank set his cigarette in an ashtray and picked up his toddy. He blew steam from the surface and took a cautious sip. “So, Ellis, our darling girl here was just saying we should go on a trip,” he said. “Find us a plesiosaur.”

“Sure she was,” said Ellis.

“She was. She has it all planned out,” said Hank. “Tell him, Maddie.”

“You’re drunk,” I said, laughing.

“That is true, I will admit,” said Hank, “but I still think we should do it.” He ground the cigarette out so hard its snuffed end splayed like a spent bullet. “We’ve been talking about it for years. Let’s do it. I’m serious.”

“No you’re not,” I said.

Hank once again clasped his heart. “What’s happened to you, Maddie? Don’t tell me you’ve lost your sense of adventure. Has Violet been civilizing you in secret?”