

Praise for *The Agency for Scandal*

“Witty, fiercely feminist, and deliciously romantic, Laura Wood has outdone herself with this thrilling tale of scandal and subterfuge”

Louise O’Neill, author of *Idol*  
and *The Surface Breaks*

“*The Agency for Scandal* is glorious! Clever, funny, charming, and achingly romantic, it is a delight from start to finish. Laura Wood always writes about love and friendship with a deft hand, and this is her best work yet”  
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“Incredibly charming”

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“A perfect mash up of *Bridgerton* and *Enola Holmes* with plenty of Laura Wood’s own magic dust sprinkled on top. A wallflower who’s more than she seems, a dashing duke hiding a secret and plenty of intrigue, romance and snappy one liners make this the perfect comfort read”

Sarra Manning, author of  
*London, With Love*

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The  
Agency  
for  
Scandal

LAURA WOOD

 SCHOLASTIC

*To Gen, Louise and Sophie –  
making books with you is so much fun.*

“The human heart has hidden treasures,  
In secret kept, in silence sealed;  
The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures,  
Whose charms were broken if revealed.”

—CHARLOTTE BRONTË



# PART ONE

London

June 1897







## CHAPTER ONE

When hunting for secrets and scandal during the London season, then there is really only one place to go: the opera.

All those people dressed up in their finery, packed in tight, pretending to watch the drama onstage while actually watching each other? The place is a perfect hotbed for intrigue.

Which is precisely why I was there.

I've always thought the Royal Opera House looks like something from a confectioner's window, all white

and gilt, as if those scrolling acanthus leaves were piped out of sugar paste – good enough to eat. Then there are the boxes full of plush crimson velvet seats, one hundred and twenty-one of them, arranged in golden splendour in a towering horseshoe shape, beneath a soaring domed ceiling. When the place is full it holds almost two thousand people – two thousand pairs of eager eyes, two thousand gleeful voices breathless with gossip. It's quite something.

“Izzy,” a voice rang out then, close to my ear. “Isn't that the Earl of Rathmore over there? Because if it is, that's *definitely* not his wife with him.”

Teresa Wynter has been my best friend for eighteen years, and she is many things, but subtle is not one of them. If the carrying sound of her voice or the infectious charm of her wide grin wasn't enough to draw attention, then the eye-watering lemon yellow of the gown that she wore would certainly do the trick (“It looked much more of a pale primrose at the dressmaker's, Iz, I'm sure it did...”). Several heads swung towards the box where we were sitting to stare in our direction. Or perhaps I should say to stare in *her*

direction. Those gazes slid right past me. As usual, I was little more than a shadow, barely a flicker somewhere in society's peripheral vision. Which, actually, was perfect for my needs.

When you worked for a secret agency of female investigators, being invisible was something of an advantage.

"Eh?" The noise came from Teresa's Great-Aunt Louisa, who seemed to shudder to life for a moment, sitting upright in her red velvet seat. "What was that?" She eyed us suspiciously. Whenever she roused herself it was usually to make her disapproval of our conversation felt.

Teresa's smile was angelic. "Nothing, Aunt."

Louisa sniffed but returned to her dozing without further comment. Teresa's great-aunt was a lady of advanced years, deaf as a post, and seemingly happy to fall asleep anywhere. In other words, she was the perfect chaperone, particularly for Teresa. My friend always maintained she had been born about eighty years too late because she'd most certainly have had a tawdry affair with Lord Byron given half the chance. I

absolutely believed this claim, and I'm not sure Byron would have known what had hit him.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Lady Rathmore," I whispered back to Teresa once Louisa had definitely settled. "I hear she got fed up of her husband's infidelities and has gone on an extended tour of Europe with a certain handsome young footman."

I could hardly keep the satisfaction from my voice. It had been a pleasing outcome for one of our trickier cases. Lady Rathmore was a client, and providing her with the blackmail material that forced her philandering husband to give her financial freedom had been extremely satisfying work. After all, she had been the one who'd brought that money to their marriage in the first place.

Teresa's eyes widened. "How on *earth* do you always know these things?"

"I have my sources." I smoothed down the skirts of my pale grey dress, drab and ordinary in the best of circumstances, but spectacularly outshone by the women attending the opera, whose gowns gleamed against the red velvet, like gems lining a jewellery box.

Father had died two years ago, but despite my friend's protests I was finding the idea of dispensing with my mourning clothes surprisingly difficult.

Moments later, and almost directly across from where Teresa and I were seated, Sylla Banaji drifted in on the arm of her father, Sir Dinshaw Banaji. She did not so much as glance in our direction. Plenty of heads swung in *hers*, however. The candlelight glinted off more than one pair of twitchy opera glasses as necks strained to see how the baronet's beautiful daughter was dressed and if anyone interesting was accompanying her.

At nineteen, Sylla, with her easy, cat-like grace and scornful attitude towards society, was often the centre of attention wherever she went. I watched now as the crowd greedily took in her appearance, a hum of appreciative chatter breaking out at the picture she created, clad in a pale blue-and-silver gown that emphasized the raven's-wing shine of her hair and the tawny gold of her skin, with cuffs of slender silver bangles that climbed her wrists.

"How ... *original*," I heard a woman mutter, her tone like the sharp taste of a wine turned sour.

As the daughter of Lady Anne Stanton and her Bombay-born, Oxford-educated husband, Sylla occupied a complicated place in society. Her father may be a retired dragoon, who was made a baronet almost a decade ago, thanks to his vast fortune and philanthropic efforts (as well as his friendship with the Prince of Wales), but there would always be plenty who couldn't see much past the colour of his skin. Or Sylla's, for that matter.

Eventually, Sylla's cool gaze drifted towards me, caught mine – only for a fraction of a second – before moving on. Still, it was enough for me to get the message, loud and clear: *don't you dare mess this up*.

I huffed a sigh. I was not in the habit of making mistakes, but Sylla still treated me like the green recruit she'd approached a year and a half ago. I pulled Father's pocket watch from my reticule where it sat beside a small glass perfume bottle, a folded fan and a handkerchief. There were more than thirty minutes before the performance began; plenty of time.

I leafed through my programme, trying not to let my impatience show. I had seen *Manon Lescaut* when

it premiered here at Covent Garden almost three years ago. I was sixteen then, and Father had been alive. We had sat in our own family box that we had since given up. I claimed this was because Father had been the one who loved the opera and it now had little use – when really there was no way on earth I could afford to keep it.

That was when my days had been all party dresses and wide eyes and husband hunting. It felt like a lifetime ago, as if all of that had happened to another person, and if I was being honest, there wasn't much that I missed. Of course I'd give anything to have Father back ... but the rest of it? Life was so much more interesting these days.

“Ooh, I love that shade of pink!” Teresa's exclamation snapped my attention right back to the scene in front of me. “Do you think it would suit me?”

I followed her pointing finger to a dress that was a nightmarish hue sitting somewhere between puce and salmon. “I think you'd look lovely in any colour,” I said, partly because it seemed the most diplomatic answer and partly because I thought it was true.

Teresa scoffed, but I could tell she was pleased. “I’m wearing pink to the Devonshire House ball, but it’s a much lighter shade, now I wonder if that’s quite right...” She tipped her head to the side. “Perhaps I should speak to my dressmaker again.”

“Leave that poor woman alone!” I said. “I’ve lost count of how many times you’ve changed your mind about that gown.”

“It’s for the social event of the year.” Teresa’s tone was scolding. “Probably the decade. If you ask me, you’re not taking it seriously enough, especially when it’s fancy dress. I heard the Duke of Marlborough has spent five thousand francs on a costume from the House of Worth; you can’t turn up in any old thing.”

I only shrugged. No one was going to be paying any attention to what I wore so it hardly seemed worth worrying about. Teresa let out a tsk of irritation, but went back to scanning the crowd.

Suddenly, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, a shiver tingled across my skin. I didn’t need to turn my head to know what had happened.

Max Vane had arrived.



“That man,” Teresa said, her eyes focused hazily over my shoulder, “really *is* the handsomest I have ever seen.”

Almost against my will I turned and felt the same physical jolt that I always did when I saw Max. I should be used to it by now – I saw a great deal of him in society life – and yet I still felt that curious shock that was half-pleasure, half-pain. He stood, illuminated in the doorway to his own box, the one adjacent to the Queen’s, and only two along from Sylla, impossibly handsome in a perfectly fitted black tailcoat and plain black silk waistcoat. He looked around the theatre with a steady gaze, seemingly unmoved by anything he saw.

I’d been in love with Max Vane for eighteen months now. He, however, had no idea that I existed.

Teresa was not exaggerating about his good looks. Max Vane was built like one of those statues of classical Greek heroes, over six feet tall, and no amount of prim tailoring could hide his impossibly broad shoulders, the well-defined muscles. His face was perfectly proportioned, with a square jaw and full lips, usually set in a firm line. His hair was blond with a slight curl,

cropped shorter than was currently fashionable.

The fact that, with all of this in his favour, it was his eyes that everyone noticed first should tell you how extraordinary they were. A deep, warm green, with flashing lights in them – the kind of eyes people might write poems about ... if they were the sort of people inclined to write poems, that is. (I had only tried it once, with excruciating results and all evidence had been immediately destroyed in the fireplace in my bedroom.)

“It’s a shame he’s always so proper and serious,” Teresa mused. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so much as crack a smile.”

I had. In fact, I had seen Max Vane laugh.