

PITCH IMPERFECT

By **Elise Alden**

Carina Press, Harlequin Limited

2nd June, 2014

ISBN: B00KV5ZEZA

Copyright Elise Alden 2014

author@elisealden.com

www.elisealden.com

Please don't share the text with anyone without first receiving written permission from the author or publisher to do so.

Acknowledgments

I was able to write Anjuli and Rob’s story because of one strong, amazing man who also believes in second chances. Jeremy, you are king of my castle, and our daughters are my greatest treasures. If it weren’t for your love and support—and all the cooking!—this book would not have its happy ending.

Heartfelt thanks to my tutor, Esther Newton, from the Creative Writers Bureau, who read my initial pages in 2012 and told me she’d be the first to buy this book “when” and not “if” it was published. Esther—I am going to hold you to that! I am thankful to Helen Bleck, for reading the first draft and encouraging me to improve it. I am stubborn, and you were right about “that” scene!

As ever, I raise my glass to my “reject harpies” beta readers for this novel, Blake Leyers, Yolande Forres and Lesley Johnson, for their suggestions, WTFs? and emoticons, and for loving my characters. Or, shall I say, for loving Rob. Yes, I kept him a “real” Scotsman!

This book would not exist in this form without the hard work of Angela James and the fantastic team at Carina Press. I’d like to thank Stephanie Doig for giving *Pitch Imperfect* the thumbs up, and Kathleen Oudit and Kingo Ng for going with my flow and giving it a cover that I absolutely adore.

And last, but certainly not least, I am overwhelmingly grateful to a lass called Kerri, who has a way with words most extraordinary. She works her magic at Carina Press, (thank God, ’cause my draft was a mess!) And was my book’s most excellent critic, its supporter and its editing fairy.

Thank you, Kerri Buckley, for your sharp and insightful editing, for dealing with my flights of logic, my computer’s insane machinations and our disappearing in-lines, and for making sure that *Pitch Imperfect* strikes a high C. One day we *will* meet, but I hope there’s not a computer in sight.

Dedication

For Karina.

Chapter One

I never want to see you again.

The words whizzed around Anjuli's mind like ice in a blender. In a few seconds she would have to walk into the Heaverlock Arms, find Rob Douglas and eat the jagged shards. She swore under her breath and went back to her mountain bike. This was the third time she'd changed her mind about going in. It would be just her luck if old Mrs. Wilson were still alive, twitching her curtains, watching her advance and retreat at high noon.

Oh for God's sake, she was twenty-eight, not twelve. Why didn't she grow some *bollocks*? Anjuli rolled her eyes. Because balls were delicate and squidgy and she had a *vagina*, damn it, and it was powerful and firm. She straightened her back and took a deep breath. If she was woman enough to cycle into town on a cold March morning because she got a text Rob was at the pub, she was woman enough to haul her arse inside. Besides, confronting her past in a friendly, neutral environment was far better than facing Rob on his own turf.

Just maybe not today.

Anjuli scanned the village green. She'd moved back to Heaverlock over the weekend but hadn't ventured far, spending all of her time unpacking and celebrating her return with her sister, Ash. Nothing much had changed in the years she'd been away. The seventeenth-century pub, Victorian Town Hall and various shops and cottages still stood, scattered around the square. A population of three thousand, and only one architectural firm: Robert J. Douglas, Architects and Builders.

If she wanted Aberdeen Angus beef, needed a haircut or hiking gear, she was spoiled for choice, but Planning Office-approved restoration architects? Hire one from Edinburgh and she'd need to prepare to pay through the nose. Or...she could approach Rob and hope he wouldn't laugh in her face. An image of him three months ago, furious as he'd stalked out of her London flat, drifted across Anjuli's mind. How could she ask the man she'd treated so abominably to work for her?

Though she cringed at the thought, somehow she had to convince Rob to put his rancour behind him and take on her manor. Legally, she was obliged to restore the Victorian money pit within a year of ownership or she'd face stiff fines. But who cared about fines? If she couldn't pay for the building work she'd be forced to sell the house and that was unthinkable.

Anjuli swore under her breath. Compared to the fortune she'd amassed during her singing career she was practically penniless. She never should have trusted Lordship Wealth Management with her money, never should have let her crooked financial advisor have access to all of her funds, or loaned her rock star ex-husband the money to pay off his gambling debts. And she never should have set her heart on this adolescent dream.

Hindsight was a fat, gloating bitch.

It would be hand-to-mouth living until her B&B was up and running, but if Brendan finally coughed up the money he owed her she'd be able to breathe more easily. If.

Last autumn, Dr. Coren had warned her about knee-jerk reactions to grief. His book, *Left Behind: A Guide to Grieving for Your Child*, said that heartache makes you do bizarre, unthinkable things. Anjuli rubbed at her chest. Whatever grief had done to her heart had overflowed into her brain, producing mind-numbing stupidity and random decision-making.

Specifically, buying a three-storey manor on an isolated moor with only a river and the ruins of Heaverlock Castle for company. Treating Rob like a talking vibrator that night in London came a close second, then there were her disastrous financial decisions...The list went on and on.

Straightening her back, Anjuli eyed the Heaverlock Arms as she would an overzealous fan. She couldn't change what she'd done during those first few months after Chloe's death, but, thankfully, her brain was back to thinking in sharp, straight lines.

Oh come on, who was she kidding?

Her thinking navigated the same convoluted maze it had for the past nine months, except now she could bumble around in a decrepit old house with no central heating or hot water. That is, until Castle Manor was restored and up and running as a luxury B&B. And for that to happen she had to apologise to Rob. Her conscience demanded it and her financial future depended on it.

Anjuli pushed the heavy oak door open and immediately came to a stop. The Heaverlock Arms was full, packed with a midday crowd of angry, gesticulating villagers. Sitting or standing, their outbursts were punctuated by waving fists and pint glasses hitting tabletops.irate stares were directed at a raised platform in front of the Inglenook fireplace, where Councillor Hamish and a few others Anjuli recognised were answering questions and trying to appease the crowd.

Ash glanced her way, busy serving up pints of lager and drams of Glenfiddich, and Anjuli paused to admire her rapid efficiency. Normally, her little sister was unflappable no matter the circumstances, but today she looked tired, flustered and...bright orange? Ash's pale English skin and blond hair contrasted with the embroidered, flowing tunic and matching trousers of a *shalwar kameez*.

Interesting choice of clothing for an English publican in a Scottish village, but then, Heaverlock had always considered the Carver family "those eccentrics from England," and Ash said she enjoyed living up to their expectations.

Anjuli grimaced. Her sister had eclectic tastes, and her newest quirk seemed to be their mother's Indian cast-offs. But how many times had she told her that orange wasn't her colour? Ash's skin looked pasty green in the dark, low-ceilinged pub.

"Ashton Pelham Carver," Anjuli said, smiling at her sister's sour look.

"You should've been the soldier—I'm the pretty one."

"Primogeniture rules."

Ash snorted and poured a pint. Their parents were fascinated by all things India, and their mother's favourite novel was *The Far Pavilions*. Pamela Carver had named Anjuli after the selfless Indian princess heroine, and when she had produced another daughter two years later, she'd shrugged her shoulders and named her after the British officer hero.

Anjuli looked at the platform. "What's all the fuss about?"

"The wind farm proposal has everybody riled up." Ash poured Anjuli a double shot of Malibu and jerked her chin towards the crowd. "Rob's in the corner somewhere."

"Maybe I should leave it till tomorrow. My thighs feel like jelly and I have some shopping to do before cycling back. Besides, I'm not dressed for begging."

Ash twisted her index finger, and stared at it. "I think big sister is about to wimp out on us, don't you?" She bent her finger into a nod. "Didn't she make me promise not to let her?" Another nod.

Oh, God. "Have you told a shrink about these little conversations with your finger friend? My Dr. Coren would sort you out in no time."

"You're the basket case," Ash said tartly. "Didn't you say you wanted lots of people around when you talked to Rob? Well, half the village is here so go forth and grovel, and make it eight years' worth of forgive my sorry arse."

Anjuli flinched. *Eight years and one heart-wrenching night in London, but who was keeping tabs?* She sure as hell hoped Rob wasn't.

Anjuli watched Ash serve her customers. She read the headlines in the newspaper rack, glanced at the row of spirits on offer and looked at the Specials board. Her stomach

churned as she deciphered Ash's swirly handwriting. Her sister could take seemingly harmless ingredients and produce a meal you'd rather see on *Kitchen Disasters* than on your own plate.

Smoked salmon and raisin sushi with parsnip mash; mutton and pineapple pie with nutty polenta; curried beetroot and kidney bean stew on a bed of lemon kashi and—ick.

The Heavenlock Arms was the only pub and restaurant in the village, and Ash had mentioned her Monday specials, disgruntled the only person to eat her experimental food was the Polish barman, Viking. The young, blond six-footer had been a weight lifter in Krakow and needed lots of food, she'd said, but having met him briefly, Anjali thought he gave Ash's dishes a go because his English was so poor. He simply couldn't defend himself against her demands.

Ash harrumphed. "Get over there, sis. What happened between you and Rob was a long time ago."

"If only."

"Relax. You know Rob's not the type to hold a grudge for so many years."

"It's not that simple."

"Why the hell not?"

Anjali bit her lip. She didn't want to revisit her recent encounter with Rob and she certainly didn't want to tell her little sister about it.

"Please tell me you didn't do anything impulsive or stupid," Ash said.

"I can't."

"But you apologised, right?"

I never want to see you again. "Uh, not exactly."

"Okay, not the end of the world because you've carefully thought out your apology attack plan."

She needed an apology attack plan? "Of course."

A pitying sigh. "I bet you a shift at the pub you don't handle seeing him the right way."

"You're on," Anjali said with a sniff. "I am cool, calm and collected."

"And oh so screwed. Not just because of your hair."

What was wrong with her hair? Oh. A quick pat told her it had evidently decided to enter a barbed-wire-gone-wild competition. The bike ride into the village had taken a gruelling forty-five minutes and the early March wind had thrust her mop into contention for first place. Anjali pulled her hair into a ponytail. She smoothed down her figure-hugging cashmere top, suddenly unsure whether the blood-red V-neck and designer hipsters had been the right choice. She was under no illusions about her so-called beauty.

Her publicity photos had always been doctored within an inch of their lives but every agent she'd hired had controlled her diet more closely than their own children's anyway. She sucked in her gut. Now that her singing career was over she was free from the need to recede, which was great. Not so great was the fact that her hourglass figure was slowly spreading into Nutella jar proportions.

At least her lips were okay. A Japanese fan had once written a poem about them, praising their fullness in two stanzas. Well, he'd said they were puffy, but that was good, wasn't it? Lots of women got collagen injections so their lips could look like hers.

Anjali caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the bar. She looked like an overripe tomato, ready to burst through its skin. Maybe she should talk to Rob over the phone, or better yet, she could apologise via email and talk to his secretary about the restoration.

"Stop it," she muttered, jutting her chin at her reflection. Rob deserved a face-to-face apology. There would be no more procrastinating. "Damn right there won't be."

From the other end of the bar, Viking gave her a look she recognised as the one barmen saved for patrons who'd had one too many. Great, eight years cultivating an indifferent mask and one encounter with Rob was all it took to peel it off. She was already talking to herself in public. What next, baring her soul to a bartender who didn't speak English?

The rum went down her throat like nectar; sweet, warm liquid she hoped would loosen her tension. Ash gave her another and pointed at the crowd. Hell, what she really needed was something stronger than Caribbean courage, something that would focus her on the target with kamikaze determination.

Slowly, Anjuli weaved her way through the tightly packed bodies, scanning for tall, dark and lethal. A few people stared at her, their eyes widening in recognition. *Don't see me, don't stop for twenty thousand questions, thanks.* A man behind her shouted out and a portly woman turned to give him an irate look.

"Settle down and listen for a change, Bruce. We'll get the right of it now that *he's* going up there."

The crowd parted and—*oh God, it was Rob.* Anjuli's stomach lurched as he approached the platform. An athletic vault and he was up, then bending down to accept a glass of amber liquid from someone in the crowd. Her throat went dry as she absorbed the casual, button-down shirt showing off broad, straight shoulders, the dark trousers moulding to long, muscular thighs.

One blink and Rob was his famous ancestor, the laird of Heaverlock, rallying the village to defend its borders against reivers and soldiers alike. Another, and he was Rob again, asking for cool heads and patience while he gave his point of view. Pausing, he lifted the whisky to his mouth.

Anjuli stared at his hands. Those slender fingers had scorched a path she could still trace on her skin. They had entered her body, explored her every contour and stroked her to ecstasy. Her sweaty palm trembled and the empty glass slipped from her grasp, hitting the flagstone floor and shattering at her feet. *Shit.*

A space opened up around her as people searched for the source of the interruption. One or two gasps, a murmur, and then Rob saw her. Their eyes met, and in his bottomless grey gaze she read every second, every mortifying, gut-clenching moment of their last meeting.

