

The Girl on the Balcony

Frances Hart

AuthorHouse (Feb 5, 2013)

\$25.55 (501pp)

978-1-4817-8275-3

Tom Cruise has nothing on Matt Steele, the sexy action-movie star at the center of *The Girl on the Balcony*. Matt has it all: a self-assured swagger, piercing blue eyes, and a dazzling smile that weakens the knees of female fans all over the globe. One thing he doesn't have, though, is the girl who mesmerized him from the balcony at his London film premiere. In her easy, entertaining debut novel, British writer Frances Hart sets Matt on the trail of this elusive beauty.

The girl in question is Laura Marshall, a high-school English teacher with more love for *Pride and Prejudice* than for *The Avengers*. Laura is not a regular on the red carpet, so Matt temporarily removes himself from the limelight and assumes the identity of one of his upcoming movie characters. Posing as out-of-work actor Jonathan Mann, superstar Matt can approach Laura on her own turf. The attraction between the two is immediately palpable in their playful banter and longing gazes. Romance fans will swoon when the characters finally touch, but they will always be anticipating the looming moment when Matt will have to reveal his true identity. This tension adds steam to the sexy scenes, although Hart keeps things R-rated and under, with more walks on the beach than explicit bedroom romps.

Matt's eventual revelation brings the simmering situation to a boil but also lets some of the steam out of the romance. Although Hart tries to resurrect the passion she created in the early pages—through a series of misunderstandings that would make Shakespeare proud—the romance ultimately loses momentum. Family emergencies, lost cell phones, and sudden illnesses all conspire to keep the lovers apart, and as the misfires and miscommunications pile up, readers may find it hard to recall the spark that brought these two together in the first place.

The story remains enjoyable, however, thanks to Hart's ease with witty dialogue and the introduction of some fascinating secondary characters. Laura and Matt's love story could easily become generic, much like the standard beauty posing on the book's cover, but Hart mixes things up by showing the other people in Laura's life. Scenes with her brother's fiancée, Annabel (as the bride from hell), and Laura's flamboyant and loyal friend, Philip, show her life to be full, not focused only on romance.

Hart's occasional nods to Shakespeare and Austen keep things interesting as well, as Laura leads her students in discussions about things like mistaken identities and social status standing in the way of true love. The literary references are never heavy-handed, and they add thought-provoking layers to a basically simple love story. *The Girl on the Balcony* is most of all an entertaining diversion, a summertime beach book for romance fans.

SHEILA M. TRASK (June 25, 2013)

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