



a novel

FREEDOM'S RING

Heidi Chiavaroli

Advance Praise for *Freedom's Ring*

“A stunning debut from an ACFW award winner, *Freedom's Ring* is a powerful journey into past and present that will inspire, encourage, and uplift. Prepare to indulge in this masterful love story of God and country that both haunts and heals long after the last page.”

JULIE LESSMAN

award-winning author of the *Daughters of Boston*, *Winds of Change*, and *Heart of San Francisco* series

“Heidi Chiavaroli’s poignant exploration of the deeply broken and very human hearts of two Boston women, separated by centuries but connected through a mysterious gold signet ring, captured my heart and fired my imagination. *Freedom's Ring* paints a stunning portrait of the healing power of love and forgiveness through divine strength. Days after reading, I’m still caught up in the rich historical detail, in the intrigue and mystery that brought three centuries together, and still pondering the difficult choices made by each character. Beautifully written, a riveting debut novel.”

CATHY GOHLKE

Christy Award-winning author of *Secrets She Kept* and *Saving Amelie*

“In *Freedom's Ring*, Heidi Chiavaroli masterfully weaves together a moving story about the complexity of love and forgiveness, a novel rich with truth that transcends the barrier of time. Her writing captured me from page one, the strength of her words reflecting the journey of her main characters—past and present—as they sought courage to overcome their fears. A brilliant debut!”

MELANIE DOBSON

award-winning author of *Chateau of Secrets* and *Catching the Wind*

“Heidi has penned an intriguing tale of two women separated by time connected through their search for a strength they desperately need. History and the present are so deftly entwined, readers will be turning pages to keep up with the story tugging on their hearts.”

MELISSA JAGEARS

author of *A Heart Most Certain*

“In her debut novel, *Freedom's Ring*, Heidi Chiavaroli skillfully blends two equally compelling stories, set in two different eras. With fresh writing and a richness of detail, the author does a brilliant job of drawing us into each world. From courage in the face of tragedy to the healing power of forgiveness, this book will leave you with a wonderful message of faith, hope, and second chances.”

SUSAN ANNE MASON

award-winning author of the *Courage to Dream* series

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a novel

FREEDOM'S RING

Heidi Chiavaroli



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PROLOGUE

Anaya

BOSTON

PATRIOTS' DAY, 2013

Death's threshold overwhelmed me in a swell of instant silence and intense heat. The minute before the flash of white and loud *pop, pop, pop*, I'd been pushing the burning muscles of my legs forward in a last throttle of energy, my eyes on the blue finish line of the Boston Marathon. I'd heard my sister's cheers from behind the nearby barricades that separated the racers from the spectators. I knew my niece was with her, and I searched them out, spotted them. Lydia in a Red Sox cap, her daughter, Grace, bouncing with excitement beside her. An insatiable urge to hug them now, in this moment, overwhelmed me. Especially Grace, who trained with me the last four months but would have to wait a few more years to be eligible for the race. Grace, who I knew expected me at the finish line at least fifteen minutes earlier.

I ignored the burning in my lungs and lifted my arms

to reach over the barricade to hug my niece, her eyes bright and dancing.

I never touched her.

I was late. Too late.

Now the foggy quiet fell over me in a thick cloak. I lay on the road, marveling at the blue sky through the sulfur-scented haze. I opened my mouth to cry for help but could not hear my own screams. I lifted my head to see a blur of mangled limbs and blood and glass on the pavement of Boylston Street. The crush of hurting people transformed the celebratory race finish into a hot, smoky place of torture. The scent of burned flesh assaulted my nostrils. Sour bile pooled in the back of my throat. I didn't allow my eyes to roam my own body but let my head fall back on the street.

I would die. Here, alone.

I ordered my harried thoughts to grab an assurance, a sense of peace, about dying. None could be found. Truth was, I hadn't given the afterlife much thought until now.

My eyelids grew heavy, and I knew if I succumbed to their pull, I would be in eternity—whatever that held—in the next moment.

Only thoughts of my sister and niece made me fight. They'd come to support me. What if one of the distorted limbs or lumps of flesh I saw belonged to them? What if they lay somewhere . . . dying?

I cried for help again, my voice faint this time. Muffled sound—animalistic screaming—faded in and out, and then *he* was beside me.

In a place where I questioned whether I'd ever feel human touch again, his warm hand found mine and squeezed. I pressed back and clung with the dregs of my strength.

"You're going to be okay." The words sounded through the muted fog, but I latched on to them as if they were life.

He wrested his hand from mine and then his arms were under me, lifting me. My eyelids fluttered and I was only conscious of the feeling of security against the blue Red Sox sweatshirt, of pressing my nose into it and smelling something spicy and woodsy to replace the smog of sulfur and singed flesh clinging to my nostrils.

I must have blacked out, for when I woke, an EMT pushed a needle into one of the veins in the back of my hand. The tightness of the ambulance confines tugged a surge of rebellion through my belly. My rescuer would leave me.

"Don't go!" I didn't know what I was saying, and I did. I grabbed for the stranger's hands, and he pressed something cool into my palm, placed my fingers around it, and then laid my hand on my chest. His words faded in and out. Others needed help. Like Lydia. Like Grace. He'd find me.

He said he'd find me.

Some time later, I woke in a hospital bed to hazy thoughts. I tried to comprehend that I'd been in some sort of explosion, that I still didn't know the fate of my sister and niece. In my loosened palm lay the object the stranger had pressed into my bloodied fingers.

A gold signet ring. The flat oval bore an engraving of a shield. An anchor was set in gems at the bottom left of the

shield, and at the top right, the symbol of a horn. I skimmed over the Latin inscription on the top and read the name *Smythe* written in dark-green jewels beneath. The weight of the ring and the worn edges whispered of stories of long ago, stories that had lain dormant for generations.

It felt like a holy relic of sorts, one that had whisked me away from terror and explosions and mangled limbs and broken people.

My arms burned with a sudden longing to hold Grace as the explosion hadn't allowed me to do. I curled the ring in my fist and pressed the call button for the nurse with my other, trembling hand.

In a moment I heard the slight shuffle of rubber shoes against linoleum, coming toward my room. I inhaled a tight breath, pushed aside the horrifying visions from the finish line, and prayed the nurse would have good news of my family.



CHAPTER I

Anaya

TWENTY-THREE MONTHS LATER

I stared at the potted lily in my hand, its pure white petals fresh against the backdrop of my sister's stained wood door.

Maybe flowers were overkill. I wasn't looking for a date, after all. I was looking for . . .

What was I looking for? Why was I here?

The unexpected phone call with my mother the night before replayed in my head, along with the news she had shared.

"I talked to Lydia today. It looks like Roger's going to take a job in the UK."

The statement ripped through me. I hadn't seen Lydia or her family in over a year and a half, but this news broke on me with the sudden realization that I might never see them again.

So here I was, after nearly seven hundred days of silence. Trying to reconcile the fact that each day I could have picked up the phone, tried to mend the fragments of our relationship, but I hadn't.

I closed my eyes, concentrated on the familiar weight of the object attached to the chain at my neck. The ring, Red Sox Sweatshirt, my sister, and my crippled niece—they'd all jumbled together the last two years to create a fierce, writhing fairy-tale nightmare that wouldn't release me from its vicious hold.

I freed a quaking breath, clutched at the cool plastic of the flowerpot in my hand. *Qui fortis salutem tribuet.*

It was the Latin inscription on the ring belonging to the man who'd never bothered to find me after the day of the bombing.

I breathed around the preposterous feeling of abandonment, focused instead on the meaning of the words, tried to draw strength from them, from the ring itself. *Victory belongs to the one who is strong.*

Boston Strong.

I shook my head against the slogan that had rallied Boston to its feet just days after the crisis that rocked the city. I shouldn't think of it now. It only taunted me. Whether on T-shirts, hats, sports memorabilia, bumper stickers,

billboards, or even the destination signs on buses, the two words tormented me, calling me to be something I wasn't.

Strong.

Why I thought I could suddenly draw hope from these etched words just because I stood at my sister's threshold, I hadn't a clue.

I turned around instead of knocking again, convinced I needed something more to face what was behind this door. But the hinges creaked behind me. I turned, and there she stood.

She'd gotten more beautiful the last two years, young womanhood making her blossom and mature. And I'd missed it all.

"Grace . . ." I could scarcely push her name past my lips, for the sudden emotion in my throat. She stood at eye level with me. I'd expected a wheelchair, a crutch, something. But a quick—what I hoped to be discreet—scan of her lower half revealed two legs clad in skinny jeans. She looked like a healthy, normal teenage girl, thanks to prosthetics.

I would not cry.

"Auntie Annie. Wow, you're here."

"I—um, maybe I should have called first, but—"

"No. No, this is great." She opened the door wider, threw her long, honey-colored ponytail over her shoulder. "I was just thinking about going for a run, but that can wait. Mom's out catching up on some errands, Dad's fiddling in the garage, Joel went to a friend's, so, like, it's just me." She closed the door behind us. "I hope that's . . . okay."

She was about to go for a run. A run. I thought she'd never walk—never mind run—again. I knew in my head people who lost limbs could still do many things others could do, but in my mind Grace was as I'd last seen her. Crippled, in a wheelchair. Bruised both inside and out.

I inhaled the scent of pine furniture polish, the house as tidy as my sister's room when we were kids. On counters and hutches were dried flowers of every type—hydrangeas, carnations, larkspur, peonies.

"Let me take that." Grace held out her arms for the lily and I released it, noticing the slightest of limps when she walked to the kitchen counter to set the pot down.

I found my voice. "You look great."

She smiled at me, revealing white, straight teeth. No braces anymore. "Thanks, so do you."

I knew she was being nice. While I'd been severely battered by the bombing, I'd also been fit and trim. Not so much anymore. I hadn't pulled on a pair of running sneakers since the morning of the marathon. I likely never would again. I could live with these fifteen extra pounds for the rest of my life if I had to. Kind of even liked them—a buffer zone of sorts.

"Do you want some coffee?"

I raised my eyebrows, shook my head, and sighed. "I can't get over how grown-up you are. Sorry, yes. I'd love some coffee."

She opened one of the perfectly distressed white cabinet doors and pulled down two mugs. I sat on a barstool and

drew a greeting card from my purse. I slid the card along the counter.

“Happy belated. Sorry it’s late.”

It was an improvement from last year, anyway, when I sent nothing.

Her green eyes brightened. “Hey, thanks.” She ripped open the card, moving aside the fifty-dollar bill as she read the greeting. Nothing fancy or personal. I didn’t want her to think I was trying to flatter my way back into her life.

“Thanks, Auntie.” She placed the card on the counter and came around the island to envelop me in a brief, awkward hug. I was relieved when she went back to the kitchen.

“How many sugars?” Grace opened one of the Pfaltzgraff containers and spooned a teaspoonful of sugar into one mug.

“Two please.” I put a hand on my stomach. “Though I’m trying to work down to one and a half. It stays on so much easier these days.”

Grace smiled and in it I saw she didn’t harbor anything against me. I loved her all the more.

“So seventeen, huh? Driving yet?”

“Got my license a few months ago. We’ve been looking for a car. Mom’s freaking.”

I laughed. “I’ll bet.” I scurried for more meaningless small talk. “How’s school? Any boyfriends?”

She shook her head. “No on the boyfriends. Good on school. Except for pre-calc. Struggling with that.”

“I could help you sometime if you want. With calculus, I mean.” I could have knocked my head against my sister’s

quartz countertop. Who did I think I was, waltzing into my niece's life after nearly destroying it, offering to help her with math?

But nothing seemed to faze Grace. She kept smiling at me, like she was actually glad I came, glad I sat in her kitchen. "I'd like that."

The coffee dribbled into the mug, releasing a French-roast scent into the kitchen.

"So how about you?" Grace switched out the mugs in the Keurig, grabbed cream from the fridge. "Like, what have you been up to? Any boyfriends?" She gave me a sly smile as she placed a cream-colored mug in front of me. I recognized it as one I gave Lydia on her thirtieth birthday. It said *Sisters* on it in large cursive writing. Around the word in a circular pattern was a collection of words about sisters. I didn't want to turn the cup and study it with Grace beside me, but I did glimpse one sentence. *As friends we have pulled together.*

I was surprised Lydia hadn't tossed the cup sometime over the last two years.

"Auntie?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. No—no boyfriends." Not serious ones, that is. "I relocated, actually. For work. Still with the bank. I'm renting an apartment above a garage in Lexington now. Not too far from here—on Belfry Terrace."

"No way."

"Yeah, I like it. Peaceful, you know?"

"Try going to high school. There's nothing peaceful about it."

“Thought you said school was good?” I let the heat of the mug seep through to my skin, then sipped the coffee. It slid down my throat, warm and comforting. This felt . . . normal. I hadn’t expected such an easy transition.

Grace waved a hand through the air. “Oh, it’s fine. Just the usual, I guess. Immature boys; gossiping, shallow girls. I don’t fit in, you know?”

If someone had told me the day before that Grace would confide in me that she didn’t fit in anywhere, I would have instantly blamed it on the terror attack, on her leg. But sitting here with her now, I knew that’s not what she meant.

“The bombing made you grow up faster than them.” I stated the sentence with confidence. It wasn’t a question; I saw the evidence before my eyes, in the way Grace handled herself, in the way she received me with such poise and mercy after all these months of silence.

She shrugged, blinked fast. “I guess so.”

I reached for her hand, the awkwardness from our previous physical contact now gone. I may have come for myself, but in this moment I could only think of comforting the young woman before me. “I’m so sorry I haven’t called, Grace. I got your letter. It was just—I have no excuses. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not, like, holding any hard feelings—but maybe sometime we could talk about what happened. I mean, you were there through my surgeries, skin grafts, therapy sessions. Then not long after I moved to rehab, you just stopped coming.”

Like I said, I had no excuses. Still, I opened my mouth to explain myself, but not before Grace squeezed my hand.

“Not today, Auntie, okay? Today let’s just be happy together.”

Tension eased from my body. Tears pricked my eyelids at the simple act of grace. “Thank you.” I wiped my trembling lips with a napkin. I couldn’t hold it together much longer in front of her. “Is it okay if I use your bathroom real quick?”

“Of course. I’ll see if I can scrounge us up some comfort food.”

I laughed around my tight emotions and started down the hall. Once in the bathroom, I opened the window and allowed the cool air to calm my nerves, as frayed as an over-used toothbrush. I wiped the corners of my eyes with a tissue.

Let’s just be happy together.

How simple and sweet. I could do this. I could be happy again, couldn’t I?

If only Lydia would be content with the same.

I opened the bathroom door and a whoosh of air from the still-open window swept across the threshold and into the living room, across the hall. The pages of a book on top of an end table fluttered and a small card flapped to the ground, swirling like a feather near my feet.

I turned to close the window before picking up the business card. When I did, my stomach clenched.

It wasn’t the name on the card. Or even the business, a construction company of some sort. It was the emblem on

the card that made my skin grow hot, then cold with goose bumps. My lungs constricted around my thrashing heart.

I didn't need to fish the ring from beneath my sweater to know the same crest adorned the signet ring I'd been given almost two years earlier. The anchor, the horn symbol, even the Latin I'd memorized at the top.

I glanced at the name. *Bradford Kilroy*.

"Auntie?"

"Be right there," I called.

I lifted the cover of the Bible the card had fallen from and moved it toward the feather-light pages of the book of Psalms. Just before the sharp edges touched the binding, I drew it back. If I released the card to the clutches of the solid book, I might never see it again. It belonged to me. I knew it. And yet how could that be? Lydia knew I had looked for the man who'd helped me that day. Surely she would have said something in the weeks after the bombing.

I stared at the emblem, an exact replica of the engraving on the ring. Somehow this card was connected to Red Sox Sweatshirt; I was sure of it. Somehow my sister had played a part in keeping it from me.

I tucked the card in the back pocket of my jeans and stood in Lydia's dust-free living room, reluctant to go back into the kitchen so shaken up. I tugged on the chain at my neck, freeing the ring from beneath my sweater. I clutched it in my fist and wound the chain around my pinkie finger.

I'd read somewhere that ancient Egyptians would adorn themselves in jewelry—particularly gold—believing it imbued

them with special powers. Like the Egyptians, I'd often looked for spiritual influence in the ring—a magical amulet of sorts left by my mysterious savior. And while a part of me felt silly for putting so much stock in an inanimate object, another part panicked at the thought of not having anything solid I could turn to. At least the ring offered me a tangible connection to the supernatural—something to believe in.

I opened my eyes and slipped the ring back beneath my sweater. I started toward the kitchen, vowing not to let the card's discovery tarnish my time with Grace. She stood at the counter, shaking popcorn out of a bag and into two bowls.

I sat at the bar, suddenly desperate for conversation. “So the UK, huh?”

Her face registered nothing, the bag of popcorn frozen in her hands.

I fumbled for words. “I talked to your grandmother. . . . She mentioned your dad taking a job. . . .”

Grace shook her head and placed the popcorn on the counter. “I—I hadn't heard. I thought—”

I reached for her hand again, a heaviness in my chest traveling downward. “I'm so sorry. You know your gram. She gets ahead of herself sometimes. She probably—”

The kitchen door opened. On the threshold stood Lydia, a brown Stop & Shop bag in her hand, her expression one of stone.

Her gaze took in my presence, saw my hand connected with Grace's. The bag dipped in her arms. She recovered quickly and placed it on the counter.

“Well, isn’t this cozy.” She shut the door, tossed her keys in the small basket on the counter.

I snatched my hand from Grace’s and stood. “Hi, Lydia.”

“Nice of you to drop by.” She didn’t sound like she thought it was nice. She sounded as if she’d rather have a visit from an angry skunk.

“I—um, I should have called.”

Grace stood beside me. “No, Auntie. It’s good you came. Right, Mom?”

If smoke could have poured from my sister’s ears, the fire alarms would have been going off at the neighbor’s house.

“No, Grace. Your aunt is right. It would have been better if she’d called.”