

Shelter  
From  
Storms



Sandra Lindsey

# Shelter From Storms

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At last. Louis breathed a prayer of thanks for the snow he'd cursed all day. Against the white fields, the brick mansion showed vivid red. Mature trees surrounded the house, their branches bending with the snow settled on them.

He remembered the day the saplings were planted; the weather then had been normal for April: wet, with a spring chill lingering in the air. Had today's weather been mild like the previous fortnight, or wet like eighteen years before, he'd not have seen the house. The white of the ground brought contrast to the view, and the effort of travel forced his pause before climbing the next slope.

The ever-present wind, with a dazzle of snowflakes, bit through his tattered coat and torn shirt, stealing away yet more of the warmth he cradled to himself. Crossing his arms and bunching rag-wrapped fists into his armpits, he focused again on shuffling aching feet through the wearily soft snow.

“Benighted country!” he cursed as he slipped and the icy ground numbed his out-flung hand. “Bloody English with their English bloody weather. No wonder they kept hold of Gascony so long! Same bloody contrary, uncivilised—” He stopped himself, lean frame stilled, and joined schoolroom learning to memories of recent days. “Not in England any more, am I? Pays-de-Galles. That’s why those folk stared at me and answered in a foreign tongue yesterday.” The puzzle solved, awareness returned of his exposed situation halfway up a snowy hillside and he forced himself on with laboured breath.

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The butler’s nostrils flared when he opened the door to Louis’s tugging on the bell-rope, and his eyes lit with displeasure above hearth-warmed cheeks. “Kitchen door, beggar! We’ll find you scraps and shelter in this weather, but get away!”

The servant’s venom burst the dam of patience holding Louis’s last reserve of strength. Instinct, bred since before he could walk, shifted his stance such that without changing an inch in height he now towered over the man on the step above him.

Blue-tipped fingers dipped into a threadbare pocket and withdrew a single calling card he'd kept as a talisman. Its thick paper and golden script, proclaiming his father's title and the Christian name they'd shared, had been a memento of former prosperous times. Hiding his true feelings, he tossed it carelessly in the direction of the butler and stepped past before the man knew he'd given way. Louis waited, tapping his poorly-shod foot and inspecting his fingernails as the butler scrambled for the fallen card.

"I will inform Mr. Elcott. Do not move," the butler growled at the clearly unwelcome occupant of his master's hallway, and, "Gwylim! Ensure he stays put!" before disappearing through one of the many panelled oak doors.

Louis had no intention of moving. It took all his effort merely to stand still. The only movement he felt capable of was vertically downwards, and he had no intention of giving the stuffy butler the satisfaction of returning to find him collapsed in a swoon.

From the corner of his eye, he watched the young footman eye him nervously. That would be Gwylim, trying

to work out how a rag-and-bone wraith successfully challenged the stout butler. Maybe, pondered Louis, this was such a backwards place that the young folk still believed in magic? He smiled to himself at that which, he was pleased to note, increased Gwyllim's agitation. He smoothed his expression to impassivity as the door behind him opened. Swift footsteps pattered on the parquet floor as he turned and strong hands clasped his upper arms.

“Louis!” Swift kisses to his cheeks and a blessed, radiant, well-remembered smile. Daniel. “Louis! It is you! My God, you're...Come! Come into my study. Gwyllim! Tell Cook there's a guest for dinner.”

\* \* \* \*

Daniel settled his unexpected guest into a sumptuous armchair near the fire in his study before pouring brandy into two glasses and drawing a second chair close.

“How...? What...? I thought...” Daniel, glowing with health but clearly befuddled by a torrent of queries and half-formed thoughts, paused long enough to hear Louis answer in a voice scratched dry by thirst.

“You thought the worst. Blasted...” Louis ran out of words and sipped the brandy he’d been offered. “Blasted folk. They got Father. Mother died last year. Before...We thought her death a curse but proves to be a blessing for she never saw the hell they’ve made of France.” He fell to silence, unused to company after his solitary struggle north.

“And you?” probed Daniel, “How came you here? Why —?”

He broke off as Louis’s gaze turned on him. “How? I don’t quite know. I evaded them, though memory of that time escapes me now, and found my way to a boat with a captain who hid me for remembrance of my grandfather; he took me as far as he dared, to the very shores of England though it’ll cost his life and all his family’s if any of his crew lets on why the voyage took so long. Once there I thought: of all the men I’ve called ‘friend’, you’re the only one who’ll recognise me without wig or powder.” Louis slung back a large swig of brandy and gagged as it hit the back of his throat. Painfully, he forced himself to swallow but blanched as it churned up his insides.

Daniel was on his knees beside him in an instant. “Louis! Louis, what’s wrong?”

“Naught,” Louis gasped, waving a hand in dismissal. “I should remember not to drink on an empty stomach.”

Daniel flew to the bell-pull and within moments Gwylim joined them. “My friend is ill. Send someone for Dr. Jenkins,” he ordered.

“No.” Louis’s thin protest stopped both men. Were he able to muster the effort, he would have wept from joy at this proof that Daniel still cared enough to send for a doctor on his behalf.

“Do not trouble your neighbours in this weather. Food and a warm bed will make me well swifter than a doctor’s machinations.”

“I think you mean ‘ministrations’.”

“Perhaps.”

In the silence of Louis’s not-quite-agreement Gwylim left. Daniel frowned, and Louis silently cursed the misfortune that had sapped his strength. As Daniel sat and drank in silence opposite him, Louis watched the flames dancing through logs on the hearth. For days—

weeks—his thoughts had focused on journeying here. With that goal now achieved he found his thoughts disintegrating like apple blossom at the tail of spring. In place of the emotional reunion he had once envisaged he merely sat and awaited the call to dinner.

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A young lady, neatly dressed and her hair fetchingly curled, met them at the dining room door. She smiled politely at Louis but rested her gaze on Daniel with a slight raise of a dark eyebrow.

“Harriet!” Daniel clasped her hand in his free one—his right arm supported Louis who, having rested a short while now felt more fully the effect of his exertion, “this is Louis, Baron d’Alloncy, a good friend from my youth. Louis, my wife.”

“Enchanté.” Louis gathered his strength to smile warmly, bow, and kiss her delicate fingers. Only his training in courtly behaviour enabled him to hide the surprise and sudden jealousy he felt at discovering his former lover had not held true to their boyish promises. “Daniel has exquisite taste,” he complimented. She blushed and he straightened, continuing, “Although he is



quite mistaken, my lady, and you must not let him lead you astray. I am no more the Baron d'Alloncy than you are. No such title exists in the new country being carved from the remnants of France.”

“Baron or not,” she replied with a soft smile and genuine warmth, “you are my husband’s friend, sir, and welcome in our house whenever you please.”

\* \* \* \*

While Daniel and his wife worked their way through a three course meal, Louis partook of a single bowl of soup and two slices of home-baked bread. Refusing their urgings, he begged of them not to take it as meaning anything against their cook’s excellent fare. “For as my eyes and nose, and the longing in my heart, tell me your meal is of the highest rate, but I hold now to the advice given me by my soldier-uncle when I was a boy. He saw many campaigns and survived as many a siege, and one day between wars his tales took a sombre turn in response to my boyish giddiness. ‘If ever you are in the grip of hunger, as we were at Pondicherry, when food comes your way take it steady and slow, for the quicker you shove it down your gullet, the swifter it’ll come back

up,'—if you'll pardon my phrasing, my lady. An old soldier thinks naught of speaking so plain, and I have not wits enough about me to avoid directly quoting him at the dinner table. Sincerest..."

Harriet waved him to silence. "I've cousins myself who serve in war, and I've always known their advice to be forthright but good. Eat and drink as you see fit, sir. Our cook is as thrifty as she is fine and the meat we leave tonight will not be wasted— we shall have pie later this week and be all the more glad for having not eaten it all at one sitting."

Despite his best efforts and the fortification of his meal, Louis's drooping eyelids betrayed his need for rest and Daniel offered his arm once more to aid his way to the guest room prepared for him. "Sleep well, my friend," Daniel wished him at the door, holding him close before parting with a kiss on his sunken cheek. "Until morning."

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Leaving his room for breakfast the next morning, Daniel almost collided with Gwylim. He frowned as the servant skidded to a halt on the polished floor.

“You must not run, Gwylim,” Daniel chastised him.

“Sir, I’m sorry, sir,” The boy looked truly contrite. “But it’s your guest, sir. He won’t wake, and I’ve been sent to tell you. ‘As soon as possible,’ Mr. Rowlands told me, sir! I’m sorry, sir, I won’t...” Gwylim trailed off and disappeared as Daniel waved him away.

Louis wouldn’t wake? Daniel felt fear pool in his heart and all thoughts of breakfasting vanished as he hurried through the corridors to Louis’s room.

“...gracious Lord, heal him who suffers now after wandering alone.” Daniel heard the end of his butler’s prayer as he dropped to his knees beside Louis’s bed and clasped his friend’s hand between his own.

“You’ve sent for Dr. Jenkins?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. Bring him here directly he arrives.”

Rowlands retreated, leaving Daniel alone with his unconscious friend. He felt more lonely even than he had as a child, wandering the rooms of this house, wishing for siblings with whom to squabble and share his time. He also prayed as he bent over Louis’s hand and swathed it

in kisses, though his invocation was convoluted, pleading, and broken by gasps as he fought the tears a gentleman should never be seen to shed.

After an age, a polite knock sounded at the door. Daniel drew a breath, kissed the hand once more, and stood.

“Dr. Jenkins, sir.”

“My guest,” Daniel explained to the doctor, “an old friend, recently escaped from France. He arrived yesterday, weak but alert.”

“He ate with you?” the doctor asked as he examined his patient.

“Yes—but plain food only, nothing rich.”

The doctor nodded sagely and completed his checks. “I cannot say for certain what is ill with him or when—if—he may recover. He is feverish, but that is not unknown with extreme cases of exhaustion such as he may have suffered, if, as you say, he comes from France. On the other hand, I cannot rule out the chance that it may be some fever which is yet to show its distinctive mark. Mrs. Elcott and the children are at home?”

Daniel nodded, echoed by the doctor. "I would advise they keep away from this room. Minimise the contact your guest has with the members of your household until he is past the worst or we know what we are dealing with." Another nod. In the background of the room, the butler set Gwylim flying off down the hallway again. "If he worsens, or recovers; in short, if his condition alters, I may be able to advise you further. In the meantime, Mr. Elcott, I am breakfasting today with Reverend Edwards. Shall I ask him to call on you?"

"Yes, please." It sounded like his usual voice, though Daniel felt numb and hoarse within. "My thanks, Doctor, for attending so swiftly at this early hour."

"My carriage was readied to convey me to the Vicarage; it was but a short diversion to call here first." Shaking hands, the doctor departed.

Daniel turned to face the butler. "I will remain with my friend. Please convey my apologies to Mrs. Elcott. I know you and she are used to running the house without me when I am in town, so imagine me there, if you can spare Gwylim to attend us."

“Indeed, sir, I anticipated you would wish it so. I will show the Reverend up when he arrives.”

\* \* \* \*

The days dragged. Little changed. At times Louis cried out from fevered dreams: sometimes in English, other times in French, always garbled. On occasion he'd wake and Gwylim or Daniel would feed him broth spooned from a pot kept warm by the fire.

Every few days brought a visit from Reverend Edwards or the doctor, and Daniel encouraged the household in prayer and the hope that their efforts were enough to bring the Frenchman back to life.

Eight days after his arrival, Louis seemed no better. The sun streamed mockingly through the window panes, and Daniel found himself discreetly abandoned as tears of frustration and grief ran down his cheeks. Feeling Louis's skin and finding it cool—almost frigid compared to its temperature an hour before—he gave up fighting his desire and climbed atop the bed to lie side-by-side with his friend. Tracing with his fingertips the lines that creased Louis's face, he wondered how many were brought by his current condition; was this the only

misfortune to have befallen his former lover since they'd been torn apart? Or was it simply that they both grew older? Louis had but two years' advantage over him; it seemed too little to cause the disparity between the face before him and his own.

"My friend, my love, my Louis," he murmured, kissing him on the lips.

The sick man's out-flung arm contracted, curled around his friend's shoulders, and his eyelids fluttered open.

"Daniel," breathed Louis, nudging him down to return the kiss, "I'm here. What day is this? I feel I've been ill a while."

Daniel suppressed a joyous shout which would have brought the servants running in, and did a quick calculation while he savoured Louis's embrace and gazed into his slate-blue eyes. "The twentieth of April, seventeen hundred and ninety-four. It's Easter Sunday, Louis! Trust you to steal the thunder from the Lord himself."

Louis smiled. "I'm not the Christ, but I do intend to rise, if you'll allow. It seems I lack the strength to throw you off the bed myself."

Daniel rolled away, calling for Gwylim as he stood. Flinging open the door, he shouted for water and called for his wife.

"Sir?" asked Gwylim, rubbing sleep from his eyes as he entered the room, then "Sir! Oh, sir!" he cried, seeing Louis struggle to sit and running to his aid.

A maid entered with a fresh ewer of water for the washstand.

"Mrs. Elcott is at church, sir, but I shall inform her of the good news on her return."

"Church?" replied Daniel, his thoughts in a whirlwind of joy and thanks. "Church! I must dress! Louis, I leave you in capable hands."

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The village overlooked by the Elcott's house was not the sort of place one expected commotion and excitability from the gentry. Reverend Edwards frowned as hoof beats thundered to a halt outside the church in the midst



of his Easter Communion service. When the door was flung open, revealing Daniel Elcott, his sermon stuttered to a halt in the midst of a sentence. Apparently oblivious to the attention he drew, Daniel bowed to the altar then hurried down the aisle to his family pew, his face radiant. "Praise the Lord!" he cried, failing to explain himself but kissing his wife on both cheeks, before turning to face the pulpit. "Praise the Lord, my friend is well!" Daniel kissed his wife again, boldly on the lips, before taking his place and dropping to his knees in prayer.

Reverend Edwards was the first to recover, able to send his voice booming out once more before the chattering started. "Good news indeed on this most glorious of Holy days! Christ is risen, and through his power and that of the Holy Spirit, a man is rescued from the very brink of death. May the Lord be as merciful on us all, and shelter and protect all those who follow in His way. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

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Daniel's mood sobered on exiting the church. He realised that in his joyful haste he'd neglected his horse. Contritely, he removed some of the gear, handing the lighter items to his elder sons to carry home, and loosened the girth before rubbing the beast's nose, feeding him a treat found by providence in his pocket, and leading him home at a gentle walk. Harriet took her husband's free arm and the children followed in a gaggle with their nurse bringing up the rear.

"I am glad your friend is well," Harriet spoke for the first time since Daniel's sudden arrival in church. "We must do our best to prevent his over-exerting himself again."

"As much as he allows us to spoil him, we shall."

She laughed affectionately and squeezed his arm. Daniel laughed in return, and, hearing the children whispering behind, paused and crouched down, his arm comically still aloft holding the lead-rein of his mount. The children fell silent and shrank back slightly. "Today is the best Easter I've ever known. Later we'll have a feast and games in the garden!"

They grinned at that, giggling and chattering as they followed behind him.

\* \* \* \*

It was another week before Dr. Jenkins would allow Louis to leave his room. Seven days of boredom punctuated by frustratingly inconsequential conversations with Daniel. Once freed from the room, Louis spent a fortnight building his strength, initially calling on Gwyllim for physical and navigational aid as he explored the house and then venturing alone to the gardens, wandering the paths as he convinced himself of the necessity of leaving before desire betrayed him and Daniel cast him from the house in shame.

Sharing a drink before dinner as the sun splashed through the windows, Louis forced himself to comment on the dramatic improvement of the weather since the day he'd arrived. "As summer seems now firmly on its way, and my strength increases daily, I will not impose myself much longer on your company, my friend." Louis concluded his speech, concealing his heart's true desire behind an expression of polite regard.

"You have an engagement elsewhere? Have we delayed you? Is it the country life which you dislike?"

Daniel's queries tumbled in a scatter as concern etched his brow.

Louis pulled his borrowed jacket close about him, hating himself for hoping, even now, that he could find his home with Daniel "Nay, 'tis naught like that, my friend. I feel I've imposed too long. Not just with illness, but...I did not think, when I made my way to you, that I would find you thus: with wife and children."

He paused and drew a breath to quell his rising fear. "Yet I see it suits you and brings you much joy. I do not wish, dear friend, to bring scandal on your name. There are those about, in town, who knew us as we were."

"Gossips be damned! I'll not have them drive you from my home." Daniel leaned forward and placed his hand over his friend's. "Have you another place to go? Another friend?"

Overwhelmed by the warm promise of Daniel's touch, Louis could only shake his head in reply.

"Then stay. I would not hold you back, if you wished to be elsewhere, but the joy you see in me? Full half of it's for you: your unlooked-for arrival, your miraculous

recovery and the pleasure I always found in your being near.”

Louis looked away, blinking rapidly, not trusting his voice to hold if he spoke.

“As for scandal, there is no need for concern. Harriet,” no sooner had his wife stepped inside the room than she was called on for support, “the boys grow ever older, and run about like pups. Would not our dear friend here make a most excellent tutor for them? Might we ask him to tame the savage beasts?”

“I think that a most excellent idea, though I would not inflict them on him yet; another month, perhaps, you might keep his company to yourself before sharing his attention with our offspring.”

Louis crossed the room and bowed low over Harriet’s hand, “Madame, your generosity is without bounds. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and pray that I never bring you cause to regret such kindness.”

“Dear Louis,” she said, raising him up and kissing him on the cheek, “your presence brings pleasure to our lives.” She smoothed his jacket straighter, where it fell

awkwardly from too thin shoulders across bony ribs, “And now that your staying is settled, Daniel must instruct his tailor to make you some fitter clothes.”

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The two men stayed up talking late into the night, reminiscing about past mis-deeds and escapades. The thought of Daniel’s wife still heavy on his mind, Louis skirted around the questions he most desired to ask. The mantel clock struck one and Louis’s eyes began to droop. Daniel damped down the fire, leaving it safe for morning, and offered an arm to his friend.

Their tread upon the stair, down the polished hall, sounded loud in the sleeping house. Taking advantage of their being alone, Louis leaned in to wish his friend a tender good night, but Daniel grasped him, holding him against the door in a rough embrace and pressing his advantage through lips parted in surprise. Shocked by the sudden turn in his friend’s demeanour, Louis thrust him back with a force that surprised even himself. Hurt flared through his mind as he stared flatly at his former lover.

“Is this the fee that I am charged for living here?” he asked.

“No!”

“Then what? What is it, Daniel? Three weeks we’ve skirted around, avoided the past, and the moment I accept your offer of a place in your household you launch yourself at me? Am I now your plaything, to be seized and discarded as you wish?”

“No! Not...I...”

“Good night, Daniel. I hope it is simply too much brandy made you foolish.”

Louis took their single candle from Daniel’s unresisting hand, and closed the door between them. A moment later, he changed his mind, opened the door, and Daniel tumbled backwards into the room, crouched with his head buried in his hands.

“Toujours le même, Anglais!” Louis rolled his eyes. “Come in.”

“Tell me I’m wrong, Louis. Tell me it wasn’t our past brought you here when you had need,” Daniel pleaded.

Louis sighed, flopped onto the bed, and patted the coverlet by his side. Daniel sat by him, and Louis pulled him close, Daniel's back to Louis's chest, Daniel's arse in Louis's crotch, just as Louis had been fantasising since the day he left France. "C'est vrai, mon cher," he whispered, hoping honesty would quell the feeling of guilt rising in his breast. "With Father gone, the vineyards, house and all else seized, I had but my life and memories left so I set out to find the love I lost so long ago...I had forgot the turmoil had not spread; that life for you was far from upside-down; had no thoughts of finding you with wife and little ones...I judged you by myself, knew I had stayed alone, could never live a lie. But now I find you here, with your conventional life, and I fear I'll tear you down. One may forgive a young man his folly as long as he's contrite, but a man of substance and influence? It would be worse than Paris, my love. I'd tempt you through the gates of Hell itself if you let me; you ought not allow me near."

Daniel unpeeled Louis's hand from his shoulder, kissed the knuckles, then the palm, then slowly, each in turn, wrapped his tongue around the fingers and drew them between his lips. Louis's pulse quickened and his



grip become more firm. His body, no longer fully in his control, shuddered with grief held back too long.

“Parisian rumours never reached Montgomeryshire ears,” Daniel murmured. “I married not from shame nor to hide a sin, but for duty and for love. I loved you first,” he gripped the hand he kissed between his thoughts, “and I love you still. My friend—*mon cher*—I say this not to hurt you but to lay things plain. But I am selfish; I think only of myself, of my great fortune in having both my loves in one house, and the chance to be with you as well as her.”

Louis shifted, rolled away and Daniel turned so they lay face-to-face. The candle, perched above, cast both their faces in half-shadow, just revealing a wary flickering smile on each. “A half-year ago I would have been selfish too,” agreed Louis. “I would have demanded all of you or none and been on my way to pastures new, but now I am grateful to be alive; thankful to have found you; I will take whatever is offered for the chance to be your friend once more.”

“And more than friend, I hope?” Daniel kissed him on the lips, was pressed away by a finger.

“It’s not just us. What of Harriet?”

“She...We...” Daniel shook his head and grimaced. “In eight years of marriage, she has borne seven children. Four survive, three we’ve lost. On her last visit, the midwife told me bluntly: I’ll leave my children motherless if I don’t keep from Harriet’s bed.”

“Poor Daniel.” Louis smiled softly. “All strong and virile with no furrow to plough. But what of Harriet? Does she consent to being deprived of your attentions? Does she not fear you’ll stray to find another outlet for your desires?”

There was a pause before Daniel replied. “She is the best of women.” His gaze sank to the coverlet. “We love each other dearly, and she told me plain: she wishes to see her children grow. She suggested I may take a lover, provided all is discreet, and she begged me to leave the maidservants alone, for it seems honest staff are hard to come by.”

Louis’s hold on Daniel’s waist remained steady as his mind raced with possibilities suggested by Daniel’s revelation. As he sought to form his thoughts into words, Daniel brought his gaze back up to search his friend’s face.

“That’s not why I’m asking you to stay, Louis,” he urged. “Having known you again, these past few weeks, I wish you to stay as my friend—and tutor to my sons—for I could never find a better man to fit the role. Should you return my affection and consent to deeper intimacy, my joy will truly be unbounded.”

“We must not repeat the mistakes of youth.”

“Indeed.” A shudder ran through Daniel; Louis pulled him close and breathed the scent of his hair, remembering Paris and the rooms they’d shared, the secrets they’d kept and the betrayal by one they’d thought a friend.

“No one must suspect we are more than friends,” Louis whispered, breaking the silence of shared memory, “We must not allow...”

*“Paid â phoeni,”* broke in Daniel.

“Don’t swear!”

“I’m not! It’s...”

Louis stopped him with a lingering kiss. “I remember what it means, my love. I’ll try not to worry. Your father

will be turning in his grave, hearing his only son speak in what he considered a peasant tongue!”

Daniel laughed and returned Louis’s kiss with fervent passion. “I intend to do far more that would discomfit my father than just speak Welsh.”

“Oh really?” Louis felt Daniel’s hands exploring his body, caressing his back and his arse. He hooked his leg over Daniel’s hips and rubbed himself against Daniel’s eager shaft, the fabric of their breeches providing both a barricade and a pleasant friction. “We must not let Gwylim discover you in the wrong bed come morning.”

“I’ll leave before dawn,” promised Daniel.

“Make sure you do.” Louis’s final reservations fell away as Daniel’s fingers slid inside his breeches and encircled his willing cock.

Above them the candle guttered, throwing Daniel’s face into shadow, but Louis closed his eyes to the play of light and allowed the cares and worries of his recent past to drown in the pleasure of the stroke and embrace of his friend.

## Sandra Lindsey

Sandra lives in the land of dragons and low-flying aircraft and writes queer historical fiction, mostly set in the UK. Having enjoyed a good working relationship with Manifold Press as one of their authors, she has now joined the team as a member of the Board.

More information about Sandra's writing and published works can be found at her website: [www.sandralindsey.wales](http://www.sandralindsey.wales) or follow her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#)

