

*The*  
DISHONORABLE  
Miss  
*D*ELANCEY

REGENCY BRIDES  
A LEGACY *of* GRACE

CAROLYN MILLER

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Publications

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Brighton Cliffs, England*

*April 1815*

The Honorable Clara DeLancey stood atop the chalky cliffs. Above her, heavy clouds menaced the moon, revealing then concealing the scene below. At her feet glowed the lantern borrowed for tonight's escape, while far beneath the English Channel churned white and deadly. Wind whipped clothes around her body, tugging at her, like the despair that had tugged for months, begging release.

Leaning forward into the night wind, only half hoping it would retain its furious strength, she closed her eyes and breathed in the salty tang as sea spray tinged her cheeks. Another breath. Another. She hadn't felt this alive in weeks.

The wind rushed in her ears, a growling, savage thing. How capricious nature could be, how cruel; capable of causing shipwrecks, yet also of sustaining life. How strange that something could be one day so admired, the next feared or despised. A broken laugh escaped. She, like nature, fell into the latter category.

A kaleidoscope of images raced through her mind. A handsome man. A ballroom filled with the expectations of the *ton*. A beautiful lady. A broken promise. Soul-sweeping shame.

The anger burned again, as if stoked by the very fires of hell. How could he? She dragged in another breath. How could he reject her?

She opened her eyes. Peered down through the gloom to where specks of foam denoted the crashing waves of high tide. The wind continued its merciless grasp, teasing free her hair from the cloak's hood. Would the wind hold her should she step out? Did she even want it to? She leaned forward, further still. The growling surf grew louder, louder. Should she dare—

"Miss!"

She jumped. Pebbles scattered beneath her feet, upsetting her balance, and she was sliding, sliding, closer to the treacherous edge—

And in that moment, knew she did not want to die.

A scream erupted from her depths.

A firm hand grasped hers.

She clung desperately, as ebony locks lashed her face. Angry fire roared down her right arm until it felt like it would snap. She scabbled frantically amid the rock and wispy tufts of grass for a handhold, tearing her left hand's nails and skin.

Slowly, slowly she was hefted to the clifftop, the final tugging momentum surging her forward to collapse on the grassy verge. She dragged in air, heart pulsing faster than her fingers could ever play, and rubbed her right arm, so near to being wrenched off. She would never play piano again!

She'd nearly never played anything again.

Guilt streaked through her, twisting her insides. How dared she have been so foolhardy? How dared her rescuer risk his life for her?

She glanced to where he lay gasping beside her, one hand over his face. An angel sent from the Almighty? No. Not unless the Almighty employed angels who looked like disreputable seafarers, dressed as this person was in a battered cocked hat and sealskin cloak. She inched away, pushing to her grazed hands and knees, wincing as she rose. She snatched her hair back, pulled the hood down nearly to her eyes. Perhaps he hadn't really seen her, would not recognize her and add further shame to her already impressive roll of dishonor.

"Miss?"

Angels didn't growl, did they? She peeked across. And they definitely wouldn't have a propensity for startlingly blue eyes capable of flailing a person with an angry glare.

"What the blazes did you think you were doing?" the most unangelic creature yelled, getting to his feet.

She scurried back, wretchedly rabbitlike, away from the dim-glowing lantern. "Th-thank you." Her voice was too soft to be heard above the wind's roar. She tried again, slightly louder. "Thank you."

The man stood—sandy haired and taller and far broader than she'd first realized—and took a step toward her. "Thank you? That's all you have to say?"

What more could she say? She lifted her shoulder in a little shrug.

He took another step toward her. "What on earth were you doing?"

She paced back. Lifted her chin. "Thank you for saving me"—her voice was now too high, too squeaky—"but I do not think I need tell you of my personal business."

"Tell of your personal— Miss, I'll have you know I just saved your life! You could have died. *I* could have died! What fool game were you playing at?"

She tugged the cloak closer as shivers rippled up her spine, through her limbs. How could she explain her moment of insanity? It wasn't a game, but life and death. Her eyes filled. Thank God the hood hid her features, offering small hope of recognition.

He studied her a moment, his fair hair gleaming in the moody moonlight, the hard contours of his face softening a smidgen. "Look, miss, I'm sorry for startling you. But you were standing so close." He shook his head. His frown returned. "What are you doing here at this time of night, anyway?"

She shook her head. Took a pace away, inching closer to the path, not the cliff edge.

He snorted. "Meeting a lover, is that it?"

A broken laugh escaped, sounding like the rasp of a dying bird. If only he knew. He was obviously not a member of the *ton*—otherwise he would most certainly both recognize her and know just how unlikely *that* scenario would be. She shook her head again.

"No?" His brows shot up, his gaze intently curious.

Clara stepped back another pace. She had the feeling if she fled he'd simply chase her; if she spoke again, this illusion of anonymity might be pierced. Either could prove fatal. If she somehow returned home without either occurring, she might have a chance to slip into bed and pretend this some kind of Gothic nightmare she would never dream again. She took another pace back.

"Still nothing to say for yourself?" He gave a surprisingly warm chuckle. "Look, can I at least have your name? Or where you live? I'm sure there must be someone somewhere who cares about you."

Cared about her? Sadness rolled through her, churning and crashing as the waves pulsing below.

"Look, miss, I understand you might feel embarrassed, but I promise not to tell your parents." The wind began to shriek. "You do have parents, don't you?"

She took another step back. He followed. What a bizarre cliff-top dance in the moonlight this must seem to those angels tonight, those angels who had definitely not descended to assist her, electing as they had to watch the show like a poor man from Covent Garden's uppermost stalls. Why would God send angels to help her? He certainly didn't care.

Another step, another. When she judged enough paces met, she whispered another thank-you, then turned and fled into darkness.

Behind her, she heard, "Hey!" but she did not stop. Could not stop. Thank God Mother could not see her. Thank God Lady Osterley couldn't see her! Any hope of regaining a reputation would surely be lost. Legs pumping, she picked up her skirts and ran faster, even faster, until another sound gave her pause. A short cry, then a thud. Her heart thumped. Surely he couldn't have fallen from the cliff? She glanced behind, saw a figure prostrate on the ground. So maybe the angels had decided to assist her after all. But delaying to check he was not hurt would eat into her escape and her chance to remain unknown. She picked up pace, panting, lungs burning. Anyone who saw her would think her a madwoman. Another broken sob escaped. Anyone who knew her would think the same.

Eventually, with lungs fit to burst, her mouth tasting of blood and metal, pulse thundering in her ears, she recognized the path she'd walked daily this past fortnight had opened onto the lane linking Brighton to Rottingdean. She slowed, nearing the gentle crescent of near-new houses that formed Brighton's outermost limits. None of the brick-and-stucco terrace houses were, of course, large enough for her parents' satisfaction, but that mattered not; the Winpooles received few visitors these days. Besides,

satisfaction played little part in her family's world anymore; what they could afford being of far greater importance.

She hurried past the central garden with its sad statue of the Regent—designed to win the builder acclaim but instead reaping disdain for its disproportions and now-missing right arm—carefully avoiding the gravel as she rushed to number ten. Fortunately, their elderly neighbors' lights were dim, but still she needed to moderate her frantic breathing to be as soundless as possible. A step up to the front door—remaining unlocked, thank God—a twist of the handle, and she was inside, had removed shoes, was creeping up the stairs, careful to avoid the eighth and ninth steps which always creaked. A heart-pounding minute later she was in bed, her pelisse hung crookedly on the back of a chair, her cloak puddled on the floor, two more items she would need to remedy tomorrow morning.

She crooked an arm around her pillow, huddling into warmth as the clock downstairs struck midnight. The witching hour. The hour of affliction.

She closed her eyes, her escape still beating frantically in her chest, and begged the dreams to stay away.

Cursed hour? Cursed life.



“Benjamin Richmond Kemsley!” His sister's eyes widened.

Ben stumbled to the fireplace, holding out his hands, wishing they would heat faster. He might have faced a thousand nights of icy furor on the open seas, but he'd never felt so chilled as he did tonight. He snuck a peek at his sister. Sure enough, her jaw still sagged.

Matilda closed it with a snap. “What on earth were you doing, racing out of here like that? And now, look at you! You appear to have faced Boney singlehanded!”

He fought the pang of regret at missing a fight that now could never be and nodded to Matilda's husband. The Reverend David McPherson possessed humility and meekness that often proved the perfect counterbalance for Matilda's volubility, volubility a trait all Ben's family seemed to possess.

A noise drew his attention to the drawing room door and the other member of the household, young Tessa, her red hair tousled as if she'd just woken from sleep. “Benjie!”

“Why aren't you in bed, little sister?”

“I heard noises.” She frowned. “Why aren't you in bed?”

“Because I am not seventeen.” He tousled her hair, smiling as she protested this usual display of affection.

“What on . . .” Her blue eyes widened, as she took in his appearance. “For heaven's sake!”

Humor faded as the events from earlier grew large in his mind again. Yes, he'd felt heaven's urgent call guiding his steps tonight. "Just that."

"What happened?" Matilda gestured him to sit, handing him a cup of steaming tea. "You had us worried."

"I . . ." Couldn't explain, really. How to say he'd felt a sudden urge to go to the clifftop, when it was nearing gale-like conditions outside? Couldn't. "I needed a walk."

"Tonight?"

He nodded to his sister, even as he exchanged glances with the reverend. He could perhaps share his suspicions with his brother-in-law, but not while Tessa was in the room.

Matilda scowled. She glanced at Tessa, murmured something, resulting in a hug for him and a whispered, "I'm glad you're safe" before the youngest family member departed.

Leaving him with his not-to-be-so-easily-placated sister. Her brows rose. "Well?"

He shrugged. "I was using Tessa's telescope, and I saw a light."

"A light?" She sighed. "Don't tell me you were off saving the world again?"

"All right. I won't."

She snorted, but it sounded more like a chuckle. "Why you think you need to rescue everyone and everything, I'll never know."

"Mattie," her husband murmured.

Ben studied her levelly, as a hundred raw memories surged through his soul. African skies, desperate children, shark-menaced waters, a life unsaved . . .

Pink tinged her cheeks. "Well, yes, there is that." She sighed. "My brother, the rescuer."

"Not always," he muttered. He cleared away the emotion clogging his throat. "I saw a light atop the hill."

"What? Someone was out in this weather?"

"Aye."

"Who was it? Anyone we'd know?"

He slid David a look before meeting his sister's blue gaze. "I'm hardly acquainted with my new brother-in-law, let alone all the people of your acquaintance, dear sister."

The rose hue darkened but the intense stare did not waver. "Why do you think they were there?"

"I don't know."

He thought about the girl. He did have a suspicion, but such an action was so drastic he barely dared form the thought, let alone speak such a thing aloud. What would cause someone to abandon all hope, ignore God's principles, and risk eternity?

The pain etched in his heart sharpened. He'd seen men give up, men in war, those flung into seas, men who'd succumbed as pain or blood leached all life from them. But he'd never known someone to yield who was healthy—and from the way she'd sprinted off, the firm body he'd so briefly held, the lass was certainly healthy. His face burned.

“Ben?”

He glanced up, met their worried faces, worry he'd seen too often in the weeks since his return from the seas ringing Cape St. Francis. He smoothed his forehead free from scowl, forced his lips up. “What does a man need to do here to get another cup of tea?”

Mattie eyed him, then rose and exited the room.

The fire snapped, crackling warmth through the wee hours. Outside, the wind continued its weird moan. He pressed against the pain still throbbing in his knee. The absence of his sister might bring a hush to the room but never to the questions in his heart. Why had God allowed him to live? Was it for nights like these, when he just might have made a difference?

Matilda reentered the room carrying a fresh teapot and mug. She poured, he murmured thanks, and she resumed her seat. “Did you injure yourself?” She nodded to his dirt-stained leg. “You know the doctor wants you to be careful not to twist things again.”

Too late for that. He batted away her worries with a genuine-enough-sounding laugh. “You worry too much, Mattie.” He turned to his clerical brother-in-law. “I'm afraid you'll discover my sister has a tendency to overextend her gifts of compassion.”

“One of the reasons I care for her so.”

Ben smiled, pleased to hear his sister's soft sigh and see the pink filling her face. “You'll do well,” he said to the new husband, garnering an answering grin and a mild “I hope so.”

Mattie put her cup down with a clatter. “So you do not know who it was?”

He shook his head, trying to shake off the disquieting twinge that he had met her, once upon a time, when he was a different man in a very different world. “All I know is that she left that lantern.” He gestured to the small tin lantern on the table beside the door.

“She?” His sister exchanged a glance with her husband. “Benjie has never been able to withstand helping a pretty maid in distress.”

The burn in his face returned. “She wasn't pretty.” Possibly untrue, but he'd barely been able to make out her features, shadowed as they were by that hood. All he knew was she possessed raven black hair and a high-pitched voice that suggested she was younger than her sweet, ripe form declared.

“Oh! A hag!” Matilda chuckled. “Perhaps she'll turn out to be a beautiful princess in disguise.”

“I doubt it,” he said flatly.



“How disappointing,” Mattie said. “Well, heaven knows you need a wife. Perhaps we’ll need to find this lady of mystery and learn her secrets.”

He pushed his chair back, forced himself to rise without wincing. The poor wild creature he’d barely met tonight give up her secrets? “Good luck with that.”

“We don’t need luck,” Mattie replied, an evil gleam in her eye. “We just need God.”

He nodded, said his goodnights, and left to ascend the stairs to his bedchamber, his heart sinking. Experience chanted that Matilda would not rest until the mystery lady was found.

## CHAPTER TWO

The knock disturbed her dreams. Wild dreams. Frightening dreams of plummeting, plummeting to hungry rocks below. Clara woke with a gasp, breathing hard, yet striving for quiet as the maid knocked again and then immediately entered the room.

“Begging yer pardon, miss, but madam wants you downstairs.”

A glance at the windows revealed sunlight peeking past the curtains. “What time is it?”

“Near noon, miss.”

She sat up in a hurry. “I had no idea it was so late.”

“You missed services today.”

They missed services most Sundays. Why should today be any different?

Martha remained hovering in the doorway, as if not sure what to do. Clara fought the flicker of annoyance. Oh, to have a proper lady’s maid again, one who knew to wait to be granted admittance, one who could fix hair as well as hold her tongue.

Martha moved half-heartedly towards the chair holding the abandoned pelisse.

“Please leave it. I’ll deal with it later.”

“Are you sure, miss?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

The look of chagrin on the woman’s face filtered regret through her heart, but Martha exited before Clara could apologize for her tone. Sighing, she pushed aside the bedcovers and moved to pull open the curtains. Other signs of her late-night exploits stared at her: the damp cloak, muddied shoes. She picked up the cloak, snapped it once, twice to get rid of the worst creases. Martha would doubtless have another word to Mother should further clothing be sent down for cleaning without reason. And Clara had possessed no reason to wear that cloak in days. No reason sufficient she could give her mother, anyway.

She dressed in a plain morning gown, then moved to the dressing table to attempt to bring order to her hair. Despite merciless tugging, dark strands refused to settle. Again the wish for the services of a proper maid arose, was smothered. Until one could be certain the servants’ wages paid for their silence as well, Father had decreed no more staff were to be employed. Those few currently with them had served the Winpoole family for years and kept their mouths shut from habit, if not loyalty.

The timber-framed oval glass revealed her reflection. Lank hair. Skin too pale. Green eyes deeply shadowed underneath. Her nose and eyelashes were still good, but her chin seemed too pointy these days.

And was that a spot? She peered closer, angling her neck to examine her chin. Groaned. Definitely a pimple. Though why should she care when nobody else would . . .

Her eyes filled. Shoulders slumped. How had it come to this? How had she, once the toast of London ballrooms, come to sitting in a cramped bedchamber in an ugly house on the farthest outskirts of a once-popular resort town? Obsessing over a spot.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. She herself apparently did not matter. Her value to her parents lay only in whom she might marry, and having failed to land the Earl of Hawkesbury as they'd so long wished—as she'd so long dreamed—their increasingly desperate attempts to fling her at any matrimonial prospect had diminished in both quantity and quality of would-be suitors. God knew—the world knew—at five-and-twenty she was a veritable old maid. Perhaps one day her parents would join her in giving up.

She shook her head at her foolishness, blinking away the moisture. Surrender was a concept her parents had never learned. Mother still seemed to believe the earl would “come to his senses,” as she said, and divorce his wife to marry Clara, when any simpleton could see how devoted he was to Lavinia, Countess of Hawkesbury, gazing warmly at her as he'd never done with Clara. But still Mother persisted. That was the Winpoole way. After all, neither she nor Father had given up on Richard.

“Miss?”

Martha's call broke into her reverie. She pushed away from her memories, refusing to glance at the looking glass, and made her way downstairs to the room that served as both parlor and breakfast room.

“Is something wrong, Clara?” Mother asked, her brow knotted. “I cannot remember you sleeping this late.”

“No. I'm just a little tired.”

“Tired?” Father said, adjusting his newspaper with a snap and a frown. “You've barely stepped from the house in days.”

Except at night.

“How can you be tired?”

“Oh, leave her be, Phillip,” Mother said. “All young ladies feel a little out of sorts at times.”

“Well, it's been going on for months now.” His dark eyes studied her, not without a trace of compassion, Clara thought. “I wish to know if there's even any point in sponsoring another season for you.”

A season?

“Heaven knows the last however many have been a sad disappointment. What does it take for a young man to come up to scratch these days?”

“If only Hawkesbury—”

“Enough, Frederica! I do not want to hear your foolishness again. What’s done is done and can’t be undone, so I wish you’d stop this farcical nonsense and leave the poor man be.”

“The poor man? After what he did to our dear girl?”

Shame quivered afresh as her parents continued their familiar battle. How could she have been so gullible as to believe the earl had ever truly cared? She’d been swept along on a tide of emotion, ably supported by both her mother and his, the dowager countess who could never forgive Lavinia’s well-connected relatives for casting aspersions about the Hawkesbury family so many years ago. Her son’s marriage to a woman the dowager had long despised had made the marriage difficult, a fact Clara had seen with her own eyes, and something that continued to spark hope in Mother’s breast, even if Clara could no longer share in her optimism—or wished to. There’d been something so tremendously affecting about how the earl’s wife had received them last year, her grace in a time of sorrow as indisputable as it was unsettling. Clara had yet to reach a point of wishing him well, but she could no longer wish them ill.

“Well, what do you say to that?”

She looked between them. What had just been said? “I beg your pardon?”

Father coughed. “Perhaps there is no point in sending you again if you cannot be bothered listening when someone speaks. You really must try harder to act interested, my dear, if you want to land a husband.”

“Yes, Father.” They continued to gaze expectantly at her. “Oh, and I do wish to visit London again.” Hope flickered within. Perhaps one of her old friends would be willing to receive her now. Anything had to be better than the infernal boredom of Brighton. A pleasure playground it might prove for those with sufficient funds and friends; a lonely outpost for those lacking either.

“We won’t be able to go for a few more weeks. And I’m afraid we won’t be able to attend every social function of note,” Mother said with a sigh and a sideways glance at Father. “Cost, you know.”

And a lack of invitations. Her fingers clenched. How long must she pay for her brother’s sins?

“Never mind that,” Father continued. “She’ll get to the ones that matter. But I want you to put off this gloomy manner and find something of your sparkle. Men don’t like a sour face, my girl.”

Men didn’t like her anyway, even when she hadn’t been so wretched in heart. She pasted a smile to her lips. “Of course not.”

“There! That’s what I want to see. Now just act happy and all will be well. You’ll see.”

She kept the mask glued on as she nodded. Well, if Father wanted her to secure a husband and leave the shelf of unwed ladies, she’d be the best little actress he’d ever seen.



The organ's piping continued as they exited the church into sunshine. Tessa released Ben's arm and moved to talk with some other young ladies, their bright chatter suggesting a friendship of some standing. He studied the milling congregants, glad to finally get the chance to properly examine those attending, now that he didn't need to keep his movements surreptitious from the front row, next to his sisters. But still the lady who had haunted his dreams last night remained elusive.

Young ladies there were aplenty, no doubt due to Matilda's ease of manner, and unexceptionable family, but young ladies with midnight hair and flashing eyes were not to be seen. Though perhaps a sermon on Leviticus was more inclined to induce dull eyes rather than flashing, regardless of the congregant's age or gender. He esteemed his brother-in-law but could not esteem the dry-as-a-desert address given today.

"Have you found her?"

He glanced down at Matilda, peering around like a small, blond robin. "Found whom?"

"Your mystery lady, of course. Don't pretend you were not looking."

"Then, no. I have not."

"Hmm. Well, perhaps she goes to St. Michael's. You might try there next time."

"Of course I won't go there, Mattie. I'll attend the service where my brother-in-law presides." Even if the sermons weren't to his taste. He glanced down, met the twinkle in her eyes.

"I will speak to him about the sermon topics. He seems to feel he must follow the bishop's prescribed texts, but I think we both know if he does, the pews will empty faster than a sailor's bottle of rum."

A chuckle escaped. "I don't know if David will appreciate such candid opinions."

"Well I do know the bishop will not appreciate receiving fewer tithes than what's required." She eyed him, her gaze falling to his left leg. "How is it today? You seemed to be favoring the right on the way over."

He swallowed a sigh. She remained as observant as ever. "It works."

"But not as it ought. Don't you think you should have it seen to?"

"I told you before, Mattie. My knee is fine. I'm fine."

"No, you're not," she said bluntly. "I wish you'd have a grain of common sense and go back to your London man. You don't want to be a cripple before you're thirty."

But he was a cripple before the age of thirty. Mattie just refused to believe it. "Go talk to that older lady over there. She looks like she'd appreciate your advice."

She gave a sniff and marched away, leaving him to nod to those congregants who caught his eye and make small talk with those bold enough to speak with him. He thought he'd spoken long enough last Sunday about his time in Africa, but apparently not long enough for some of the men who wished to know more, before he finally veered their conversation to Napoleon's latest deeds.

Tessa soon returned, the remaining congregants dispersed, and they walked the few feet through the grassy churchyard, now abloom with bluebells and early buttercups. Such a contrast to the wild, uninhabited shores where his desperate walk had only been cheered by the sparse and hardy white flowers that reminded him of tiny daisies. He shook off the memories, replying to Tessa's observations about the improved weather as he ought.

His knee began paining again. He stumbled at the doorway to the vicarage, glad his sisters were too engaged in conversation about the new curate to notice. David eyed him, however. Ben shook his head at his brother-in-law's unspoken concern and collapsed into the sofa, from which he could see the shining sea.

As the sunlight bounced light across the glassy water, in stark contrast to last night's tumultuous waves, his thoughts drifted to Matilda's earlier words. He pressed against the throbbing in his knee. Perhaps he should see Dr. Townsend again. If he saw the old sawbones, he might also have opportunity to catch up with Burford and Lancaster. Perhaps he'd write and see if they were amenable to a visit. Perhaps a trip to London might not be such a bad idea, after all.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Two days later*

Clara walked the half mile along Marine Parade into town, glad to escape Mother's worries which seemed to line the walls like freshly papered-over wallpaper, making their home feel ever-smaller and even more restrictive. She'd abandoned her clifftop walks; they held no pleasure now. Who knew if that man might return, might recognize her? She shuddered. What if he did? What if she recognized him? Her heart raced. She dragged in a quiet breath, willing herself to calm, in case her companion noticed.

Martha's faded, fixed features suggested she remained oblivious as always. She trotted alongside, completing errands for Mother whilst supplying nominal chaperonage. Not that Clara needed a chaperone. At five-and-twenty she scarcely need worry about the propriety of such things. But Mother still did, so Clara did not argue, acquiescence the lesser of two evils.

Clara paused by the iron railings, not too close to where the bathing boxes waited, and shifted the books in her arms. The breeze, so much a part of Brighton life, had settled for moments of bad temper, puffing fiercely now and again, as if to remind pedestrians of its capability. She sucked in brine-laden air—cool, sharp, invigorating. Well she could understand why Dr. Russell had recommended the benefits of seaside visits in the middle of last century. Just breathing in the sea's freshness made her feel healthier, cleaner somehow. Almost like the cobwebs of her soul could be blown away; that possibility hung around the corner.

Which was ridiculous. As pretty as Brighton might be, out of season it was just another fishing village. It might host the Prince Regent's famous Marine Pavilion, but he was not due to arrive for several more months yet. And until he did, neither would the fashionable set, who so often took their cues from the King's heir, like bees buzzing around a rose. So Brighton would remain dull until he tired of London, which she supposed was not such a bad thing. Society-less Brighton held the advantage that nobody knew her. Nobody would gossip. Fewer people to judge. Society-less Brighton also held a disadvantage, however. Nobody might know her, but even after months of living here, neither did she know anyone.

A seagull wheeled solo in the sky, cawing high above a small fishing boat, as if eyeing a prize forever out of reach. A sudden ache swept through her, causing her breath to catch and heat to fill the back of her eyes.

"Miss?"

Clara broke from her reverie to glance at the maid, whose expression spoke of unutterable boredom. "Yes, Martha?"

"I might head to the market now, if you've no objection."

"No, of course. I must return these books to Donaldson's. I shan't imagine it will take very long." She eyed the maid steadily. "I imagine your errands will take considerably more time."

Martha blinked. "I . . . er, of course, miss."

"Then I will bid you good morning and see you at home."

"Yes, miss."

Clara hastened away before the maid could change her mind. Walking alone, even if it were only such a little way, felt so freeing. She crossed the Parade, hurrying past a draper's cart turning into Manchester Street, walked along the Steyne, and entered the library.

The elegant building was quiet at this time of day, which meant she returned the borrowed books more efficiently than doing so at a more fashionable hour might allow. She moved past the lounge where the newspapers were kept, rushing to escape detection by the overly-friendly Mr. Whitlam, a stout, gout-afflicted gentleman who seemed to have taken up residence in the sofa by the window and made it his mission to speak to her whenever she visited the library. She ducked behind a large wooden bookcase. She might be lonely, and perhaps a tiny part of her still dreamed of finding a husband, but she was not yet desperate. Rounding the corner she found the novels that formed the substance of her reading matter—and Mother's. Two young ladies stood perusing the shelves: one a blond, one a redhead.

"I don't know," the blond lady said, eyeing the book the younger held. "I'm not sure if it's quite appropriate." She glanced up, caught Clara's eye, and smiled. "Good morning."

Clara bobbed her head. "Good morning." How strange of this lady to speak to a stranger. She edged away, fixing her attention on the shelves. Miss Burney's novels always appealed, but had she not read all of them several times now? Surely Donaldson's could get more in.

"Excuse me."

Clara turned to see both ladies gazing at her, sisters if the wide blue gazes and matching features were any indication. The redhead's smile seemed more hesitant than the other's.

"I was wondering if you've ever read *Waverley*. I understand from my brother that it has some graphic battle scenes."

"I have not, although I have enjoyed some of Walter Scott's poems."

"Oh, I love *Marmion*!" the blond exclaimed. "I don't care what those critics say, I like a flawed hero. Makes him so much more believable, would you not agree?"

"Er . . ." Who was this strange lady? As for offering her opinion on flawed heroes . . . "I suppose so, yes."

"We know only too well that heroes can be flawed, don't we, Tessa?" She turned to the redhead, whose bright hair crackled with light as she nodded. "Some can hide their good hearts under a layer of tease."



Clara thought back to her rescuer three nights previous. “Or anger.”

“Exactly so! Oh, you must excuse me.” The blond held out her hand. “My name is Mrs. McPherson, and this is my sister, Tessa Kemsley.”

Clara shook their hands. “Miss DeLancey.”

“Well, Miss DeLancey, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I wonder that we have not met before.”

“I . . . that is, my family has only lived in Brighton for the past year or so.”

“By all that is wonderful, so has mine! Well, more like six months, really. I moved here with my husband.” Mrs. McPherson smiled engagingly. “My brother lives in Kent, you see.”

Clara nodded as if she really did see. Had she ever met such a firecracker of a lady? Mother would have a fit! Father would no doubt call Mrs. McPherson a vulgar mushroom. But something spurred her to stay and continue the unsought conversation. “Is that the brother who read *Waverley*?”

“George? No, I rather doubt he’s read anything beyond a racing guide in years, the more’s the pity. No, Benjie is the one who has always liked reading, which is fortunate when one spends so much time at sea, don’t you agree?”

Benjie? What a peculiar name, like something one might call a pup. He must be quite young, though somewhat precocious to be offering opinions on Scott’s novels at such an age. Aware that both ladies were studying her curiously and awaiting her answer, she finally said, “I imagine it would be.”

The blond chuckled, a warm sound that prodded recent memories, but before Clara could pinpoint which one, Mrs. McPherson had hooked a hand through her sister’s arm and was moving slowly through the room, necessitating Clara to keep up.

“So Miss DeLancey, should we risk it?”

Clara blinked. “Risk what, exactly?”

Mrs. McPherson held the book aloft. “Shall we endeavor to see if this novel be worth reading?”

“I suppose if you do not like it, you can offer it to your brother to read again. Provided he’s not in school, of course.”

“School?” The ladies shared a puzzled look.

So perhaps he was a little older? Oh, that’s right—he was at sea. She offered a wry smile. Mrs. McPherson’s brother was not the only one at sea, it seemed. Perhaps Father was right, and she really needed to pay more attention to what other people said. “The beauty of a circulating library is that one can always return a book unread if necessary. So borrow it, if you like.”

“Do you like, Tessa?”

The redhead murmured in the affirmative.

“Then it is settled.” Mrs. McPherson’s smile broadened. She turned to the man at the circulation desk. Clara blinked. How had they arrived at the circulation desk? Did this extraordinary woman sweep all before her path?

Her business concluded, she turned back to Clara. “I do hope, Miss DeLancey, that you’ll risk the other.”

“What other?”

“And permit us to be friends.”

Perhaps it was the frank gaze, or the sisters’ open smiles. Perhaps it was because she felt she could not deny this indomitable force. Perhaps it was the yearning ache she’d felt before, or the tug she felt now. Whatever the reason, she could only give one answer.

“Yes.”



Ben limped back to the vicarage. The letter he’d posted yesterday to Dr. Townsend couldn’t be replied to soon enough. The throbbing in his knee had worsened this morning, a foolish wish to walk along the beach exacerbating the strain. Why didn’t God heal him? Like all members of his family, save his older brother, he dared believe the Bible held true today as it had centuries before. Perhaps he’d used up all God’s favor back on African shores.

He pushed through the French doors to the drawing room, catching his sisters’ commentary to David in the next room. Mattie sounded excited. Even Tessa seemed more animated. Bracing himself for interrogation, he forced himself to walk normally, smile, and ease into the nearest chair.

“Benjie!”

His smile dipped at her use of the long-familiar, long-despised nickname. “Hello, Matilda. How was your morning?”

“I was just telling David. Tessa and I visited the library today. Look what we got.” She proffered a copy of *Waverley*.

“A good read, as I recall.”

“And we met someone.”

Ben raised a brow at his brother-in-law. “Should we be worried?”

Mattie laughed, stroking her husband’s hand. “I think David would not be concerned, save for the saving of her soul.” Her attention returned to Ben. “You, however . . .”

He frowned at her. He did not need his sister’s interference in his nonexistent private life.

“She was so funny. Staring at me like she would a stuffed creature at Bullock’s Museum.”

“Sounds sensible. I suppose you hadn’t been properly introduced?”

She sniffed. “This isn’t London. Nobody cares for such things here.”

“You might be surprised. Not everyone appreciates such informality.”

“Like George?”

George. Their brother. Whose recent ascendancy to a distant cousin’s baronetcy had led to a sudden interest in being correctly addressed, much to the amusement of his siblings.

“She was very nice,” Tessa offered softly.

“Who? Oh, this lady you met. Does she have a name?”

“Miss DeLancey.”

He frowned. Why did that name elicit a twinge of memory?

“Ben? Why do you look like that? Do you know her?”

“I vaguely recall the name,” he admitted.

“Well, perhaps you’ll get the chance to see if you do. I’ve invited her to call on us on Friday.”

“This Friday?”

“Yes.” Her brow puckered. “Don’t tell you won’t be here.”

He leaned back in his chair, his smile growing genuine. “Very well. I won’t.”

“Oh, but Benjie! She seems quite sweet and has a lovely smile.”

“Be that as it may, I have no desire to meet her.”

Mattie pouted. “How can you be so rude?”

“Surely you did not suggest I would be here.”

“Of course not!”

“Then I don’t see the problem. You’d do better to turn your matchmaking attentions to George. Heaven knows our brother will need help to find someone prepared to overlook his pride.”

She laughed as if disappointed. “Very well. But you can’t fault me for trying.”

“I can’t fault you for caring, that is true.”

Blue eyes looked up at him. “You do need to marry one day, Benjie.”

“One day, Mattie. Remember, I don’t like to have my hand forced.”

She grabbed his arm, squeezed gently. “I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.”

Her brows lifted.

He glanced across at Tessa, whose expression matched Mattie’s look of doubt, igniting a pang of conscience. Well, perhaps he’d never be as happy as before that fateful last voyage. But he was content. Mostly. And wasn’t contentment close enough to happiness?

Matilda sighed. "Well, it doesn't matter how much you protest. I'm not convinced."

"That is your prerogative."

"But I am convinced of something." She tossed her blond head. "I feel certain you will meet Miss DeLancey one day soon."

And she stood and exited the room, leaving him wondering about her determined interest and uneasy that her gift for being correct would be in evidence once again.