

Praise for Carolyn Miller's
Regency Brides: A Legacy of Grace

“Displaying a flair for comedy and witty dialog, Miller is clearly an author to watch. Her debut Regency rockets off the page with clever, snappy repartee, creating an exciting and fast-paced read. Fans of Georgette Heyer and Julie Klassen will love this romance.”

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, starred review

“An engaging, page-turning read worthy of a Regency reader’s time. . . . *The Captivating Lady Charlotte* has complex characters, a sweet, slow-building romance, and twists and turns.”

—*RT BOOK REVIEWS*

“This romantic story is reminiscent of Jane Austen: finding love despite the societal norms of the day while adding the spiritual elements of extending God’s grace and forgiveness.”

—*CHRISTIAN MARKET*

“Carolyn Miller brings a story of high hopes, deep forgiveness, and a quiet kind of love that rings with truth. Drama and high society combine in a tale Regency lovers won’t want to miss!”

—ROSEANNA M. WHITE, best-selling author of the
Ladies of the Manor series

“Fans of historical romance will love Carolyn Miller. . . . With just the right touch of inspiration and interesting historical detail, Carolyn transports you back to Regency England.”

—CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *A Refuge at Highland Hall* and *Shine Like the Dawn*

“From the moment I cracked the pages I was transported to another era with a heroine as compelling as Lizzie Bennet and a Darcy-esque hero.”

—LISA RICHARDSON, author of *The Peacock Throne*

“With compelling characters and an engaging story, encapsulated by the romantic era of Regency England, Carolyn Miller’s writing style is reminiscent of Jane Austen, with a modern sense of wit and spunk.”

—AMBER STOCKTON, author of more than twenty novels,
including the best-selling *Liberty’s Promise*

“*The Elusive Miss Ellison* will delight the hearts of Regency romance lovers with its poetic narrative, witty verbal swordplay, strict social constructs, and intriguing touch of mystery. Carolyn Miller is a bright new voice in the Regency genre.”

—LOUISE M. GOUGE, award-winning author

“*The Captivating Lady Charlotte*, Carolyn Miller’s second Regency novel, surprised me. I was expecting a sweet romance and adventure, but I got so much more. The hero’s story is touching, truly heartbreaking, and I loved seeing the heroine learn what true love really is. Well done! More please!”

—JULIANNA DEERING, author of the *Drew Farthering Mysteries*

“Lovers of Jane Austen will be enchanted by Carolyn Miller’s debut novel. . . . This beautifully written book is definitely worth reading!”

—DAWN CRANDALL, award-winning author of
The Everstone Chronicles

“*The Elusive Miss Ellison* is a delightful romp. Light and enjoyable, but also rich with the theme of forgiveness. A lovely read.”

—ANGELA BREIDENBACH, Christian Authors Network president
and best-selling historical romance author

“In *The Elusive Miss Ellison*, Carolyn Miller has created a heroine who will steal your heart and a hero who is as frustrating as he is charming. . . . Will capture the imagination of those who love the Regency period and win over those who are experiencing the era for the first time.”

—MARTHA ROGERS, author of *Christmas at Holly Hill*
and *Christmas at Stoney Creek*



The
DISHONORABLE
Miss
*De*LANCEY

REGENCY BRIDES
A LEGACY *of* GRACE

CAROLYN MILLER

 Kregel
Publications

The Dishonorable Miss DeLancey

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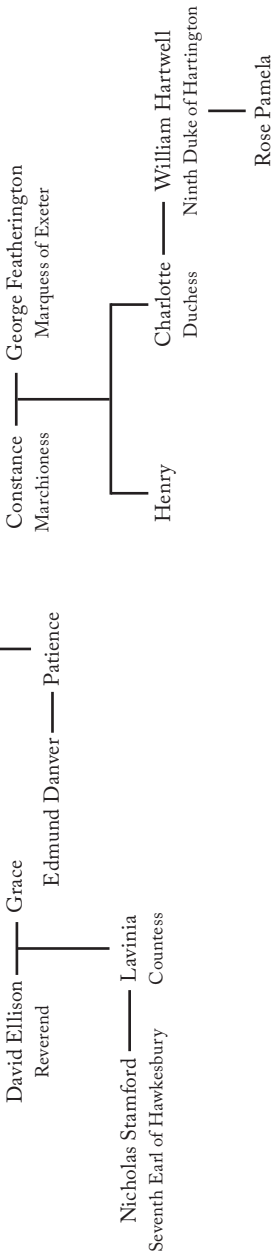


For my sister Roslyn.

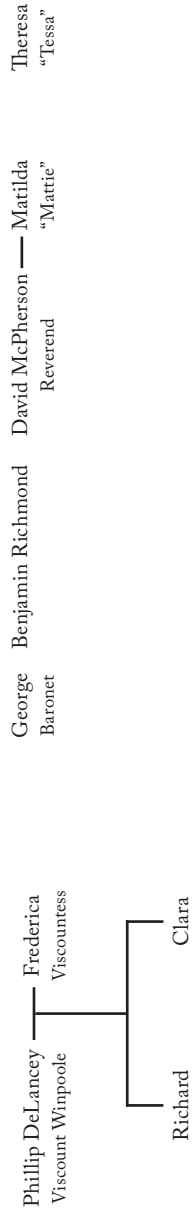


*Thank you for sharing your
love of Georgette Heyer.*

Duke & Duchess of Salisbury



Kemsley family



 CHAPTER ONE

Brighton Cliffs, England
April 1845

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 spattered her cheeks. Another breath. Another. She hadn't felt this alive in weeks.

The wind grew louder, rushing in her ears, a snarling, 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 beautiful lady. A ballroom filled with the expectations of the *ton*. A broken promise. Soul-sweeping shame.

The anger burned again, as if stoked by the very fires of Hades. 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, farther still. The roaring 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, wretchedly rabbitlike, away from the dim glow cast by the 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, 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 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?”

Clara 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 step away, inching closer to the path, not the cliff edge.

He snorted. “Meeting a lover, is that it?”

Another broken laugh released, 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 retreated 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 was some kind of Gothic nightmare she would never dream again.

“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, certain and ceaseless 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 behind. 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 speed, panting, lungs burning. Anyone who saw her would think her a madwoman! A sob escaped. Anyone who knew her would think the same.

Eventually, with lungs fit to burst, her mouth tasting of metal and blood, 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, approaching 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; Lord and Lady Winpoole 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 her 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.

Clara 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.

No one would ever tell her different.



“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 seem to have faced Napoleon singlehanded!”

He fought the pang of regret at missing such a fight 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 ruffled 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 murmured something to Tessa. Whatever that was, it resulted in Tessa hugging him and whispering, “I’m glad you’re safe” before she 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 shook her head. “My brother, the rescuer.”

“Not always,” he muttered. He cleared away the emotion clogging his throat. “I saw a light atop the cliffs.”

“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.

“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 overdo 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. "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."

His smile dipped at her use of the long-familiar, long-despised nickname. "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."

"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."

Ben 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 good-nights, and left to ascend the stairs to his bed-chamber, 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 knock came again and the maid 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?

Meg remained hovering near the doorway, as if unsure 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 she could hold her tongue.

Meg 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 Meg 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, muddled

shoes. She picked up the cloak, snapped it once, twice to get rid of the worst creases. Meg 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 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. Light green eyes deeply shadowed underneath. Her nose and eye-lashes 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 bed-chamber 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?”

Meg’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 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. David, dressed in his clerical robes, greeted them as he did the other parishioners,

with the warmth and candor of his sermon earlier. 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. But still the lady who had haunted his dreams last night remained unseen.

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 found. 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 currently 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 feels 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 steered their conversation to Napoleon's latest deeds.

Tessa soon returned, the remaining congregants dispersed, and they walked through the grassy churchyard, now abloom with bluebells and early buttercups. Such a contrast to the wild, uninhabited African 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.

They passed the large residence of the parish rector, currently empty while he took extended leave in Ireland, his absence thus promoting David to the pulpit. The vicarage—a far more humble abode accorded the rector's assistant—lay a twisting street away. Ben's knee began paining again as he climbed the hill, forcing him to grit his teeth. If David and Mattie's cottage did not possess so excellent a view of the sea and the cliffs towards Rottingdean, he'd be tempted to find accommodation that was far easier to navigate. Not that he could afford it, or—he grinned—that Mattie would permit him. He stumbled at the doorway, glad his sisters were too engaged in conversation 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.