

LADY JAYNE
DISAPPEARS

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To my dad who, like Aurelie's father, inspired a love of fanciful stories in my young heart and always had time to spend with the little girl who shadowed him.

PROLOGUE

Walk among the normal folk by day, but in your heart know you are Robin Hood in disguise.

~Wolf Harcourt

LONDON, ENGLAND, 1861

"Well, Miss Harcourt. Are you, or are you not, Nathaniel Droll?"

I squirmed on the chair across the desk from the old managing editor they called "Ram." How awful it was to hear that precious name on the man's meaty lips, but of course it was only a name to him. "That is a complicated question, sir." The crinoline under-layers of my skirt poked my legs, which grew warmer with each minute I spent in the offices of Marsh House Press.

"So is switching the final chapters at the last minute. You will forgive my doubt when a snit of a girl comes in here, supposedly on behalf of a nationally famous author, yet appears to be no older than his first novel. Have you proof of your connection to him?"

This would take a great deal of explanation. Perhaps it was time to retreat. But no, this had to be done. Turning back now meant the final installment of the novel would release in a few days, and the man of my dreams would find out how deeply I was in love with him. It was not possible to

imagine an existence beyond that dreadful occurrence.

"Here is one proof." I set my notebook before the balding bulldog of a man who reigned over his desk full of papers and clutter. "Is it not the same type Droll has sent you for years?"

He whipped through the book with harsh fingers, tearing a page at the top, then shoved a pen and inkwell toward me across the desk.

Of course. I would need to show him my handwriting for comparison.

Leafing to an empty page, I drew the pen from its heavy well and wrote, *I am Aurelie Harcourt. I collected Nathaniel Droll's pay at 32 Headrow Lane in Glen Cora, Somerset.* The letters formed by my shaky hands had taller loops and were slightly less perfect than the rest of the writing in the book, but it was an unmistakable match.

He yanked the book toward him, inspecting it as seconds ticked by on the clock behind him. I focused on the ivory-topped fireplace in the room's shadows, counting the ticks.

Finishing his assessment, he leaned his heavy frame back against the chair and studied me, every button and tuck of my brown traveling gown. Thick fingers pulled at his jowls. "Well, well. I've always wanted to meet the great enigma who has earned me so much, and here he sits. A woman. A rather plain one, at that."

As if I was unworthy.

"Transcriber." My voice cracked. "I've been his transcriber for years."

"How is it you came to know Nathaniel Droll?" His eyes narrowed.

Could I refuse to answer? He hardly believed me anyway, that much was obvious.

"A long, uninteresting story, sir. But right now I am merely here to enquire about changing that ending." I waved a hand toward the notebook before him.

Holding his spectacles in place, he studied the book, then me, then back to the book, his left eye nearly disappearing beneath the folds of skepticism. "He's never done this before."

"This book is different."

He growled, squeaking his chair back and folding his arms. "Tell Mr. Droll he is lucky. First, because you caught us before we printed this installment. *Barely.* Second, because his fame has earned my pleasant side today." He lit an ornate pipe and puffed, exhaling tiny balls of smoke.

"I know it's a lot to ask, but—"

"Fortunately I'm a wonderful person." He waved the gathering smoke away from his face, grimacing at it.

A trapped breath released from deep in my chest. I'd succeeded. Everything was safe. "So you'll change it?"

"Well, that depends. If I hate this ending, I shall use the one he already sent. It has been approved, and this has not."

I straightened against the unforgiving spindles at my back. "I cannot let you print that."

"Oh, oh, oh, the little transcriber forbids me." He swiveled in his chair and tapped his pipe in a tray. "I'll not take risks with the final installment. Sales are predicted to break records at this house, and that ending *will not disappoint.*" He slapped his hand on the desk to emphasize his words. "The first chapter sells the book, but the last chapter sells the next. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, but I must ask that you—"

"Where the devil did you come from, anyway?"

"Well, I—"

“We’ll have to cut his pay, you know.”

“That will be fine. But can I—”

“Just how old are you?”

Frustration eclipsed my self-control. “Two hundred and three. How old are you?” I shut my mouth behind the escaped words.

A few silent puffs came from the man behind the desk as he gave a wry smile. His eyes did not leave my face. “Now you are someone I care to speak with.” He leaned forward, the leather chair creaking under his weight. “So, little thing. Tell me exactly how you came to be in possession of Nathaniel Droll’s notebook. How his work bears your handwriting.”

“I cannot do that, sir.”

“I understand completely.” He swiveled away from me, foot over foot. “And I can no longer consider printing your new ending.”

Poised in the little wooden chair his assistant had brought, I bit my lip and gripped the arms. “I suppose I could tell you a brief version of the story. If you promise to strongly consider the switch.”

He whipped around to face me again, eyes glowing, elbows anchoring him to the desk. “Nonsense. If we’re to discuss Nathaniel Droll, I want every detail. Understand? Every little detail. I want to know who exactly is hiding behind that pen name and what his story is. Start with your part, and please do tell me about the imposters too. I’ve been dreadfully curious.”

With a shuddering sigh, I glossed over memories not worth revisiting. Perhaps it would be sufficient to tell him only what happened in the last few months. That would cover the important pieces. With a fortifying deep breath, I slipped into my one and only talent—storytelling. “It started in Shepton Mallet debtor’s prison, which is where I am from. That is, until recently.”

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Lady Jayne dreamed endlessly of escaping to something different, of living a fascinating and dramatic life—until she did.

~Nathaniel Droll, *Lady Jayne Disappears*

A FEW MONTHS EARLIER, SOMERSET, ENGLAND

It must have been the rain that felt so wrong that day, nothing more. It spit at my face and drenched me. I huddled close to the safety of the Shepton Mallet Prison walls as a carriage progressed toward me down the broken street, lanterns swinging. No, it was *everything*. Everything felt wrong without Papa. But this night, it was something specific.

Perhaps it was the sleek carriage, coming to fetch me to my new home, that looked jarringly amiss in this section of town after dark. Why hadn’t Aunt Eudora come in broad daylight so we could stand outside and relish our reunion, hugging and sinking into shared grief? Surely she knew

this was not an area in which to linger once the candlelit windows of decent folk were shuttered. Damp fog clogged my senses, choking my shallow breaths. She was not ashamed simply because of the pickup location, was she? No, I was *family*.

Family that had been abandoned by them for years, though. Perhaps I expected too much.

I squinted at the vehicle as it neared and I frowned. The outline of a top hat, not a lady's plumage, filled the foggy windows. Who else would come to collect me?

What if, *what if*—and this would make a brilliant scene in a future novel—it was not an old widowed aunt coming for the lonely girl, but her own beloved father, alive and well? The emotion of such a reunion billowed in me until I very nearly ripped open my trunks, right there in the rain, and pulled out a notebook to record the beauty of it.

Stop. I had to stop thinking about him.

The coachman reined in the puffing horses, who stamped their impatience in the foggy moonlight, and I held my breath, crouching back into the prison doorway. When the caped gentleman swung down into the rain, I longed for those blank pages even more. What a perfect villain, tall and dark-suited, a forbidding arch to his wide shoulders as he jogged through the puddles. Oh, to pin this man to paper with the exact words. But it was a generally understood rule among writers that the most brilliant ideas only came when one was not within reach of pen and paper.

Approaching, the man lifted his gaze to the prison, dark judgment etched deep in the brooding lines of his face. He removed his hat, nearly useless in the deluge, and swiped rain off his face with his sleeve. Upon spotting me in the shadows, his face darkened further, eyebrows hooding sharp eyes. He was more ominous close up. Threatening, even. I backed up until I hit the rough stone wall. And now, there was no one left to protect me. Not a single person who might report me missing to the constable. Like a kite with its string suddenly cut, I was alone.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

I'd never had to depend so fully on the Lord before this, and it seemed now he was all I had.

My nails dug into the dirty stone at my back. The storm swelled and rain pattered against my shoulders, pouring down my neck and soaking my dress. Why were we not running toward the carriage and huddling under its roof? The man squinted against the shower, as if waiting for me to speak and explain my presence. Yes, he felt it too. Something was wrong.

My small voice cut through the rain. "You are from Lynhurst Manor?" Perhaps I'd been mistaken, and Aunt Eudora's carriage was still on its way.

"Yes, I am." Rain dripped off the clumps of hair plastered to his forehead.

"Oh." But neither of us moved. Was he waiting for my permission? "These are both mine." I indicated my two weathered trunks, which only deepened his look of confusion. "I am Aurelie Harcourt."

"Silas Rotherham."

Rotherham. So dark and sinister. Fitting.

After a few more awkward seconds, he reached for my elbow and propelled me toward the carriage. A head jerk toward the coachman sent the man scrambling toward my trunks. Certainly, those trunks were not of the same caliber as my new sapphire-colored dress, which billowed around my stockinged legs over layers of fabric in a sopping, yet stylish, mess. He must wonder which I was—rich or poor. Yes, that would explain the frown.

The first trunk thudded overhead as I mashed my dress through the too-small door and fell onto the front-facing seat, the man taking the one across from me. How did real ladies manage it every day? The dress was the finest article of clothing to ever touch my body, and despite having owned it for three days already, I did not know how to carry it on my slender frame. Even more so when it hung in wet yards of heavy cloth about me.

Perhaps it had been a foolish use of my scant funds, this costume designed to make me fit in when the rest of me did not. Even more foolish I'd been to give up my last pennies, assuming this wealthy family would hasten to meet all the future needs of a niece they had not seen fit to even meet before now. How fanciful I was.

But I had yet to locate Papa's savings, wherever it was. All those paychecks I'd gathered from Marsh House Press must amount to something that would sustain me. And with death freeing the man of his debts, I could use that money for whatever I needed.

I placed my soggy hat on the seat beside me and wrung my loosened hair onto the floor of the carriage. "It soaks right through a person, does it not?"

The man peeled off his wet coat, struggling out of the sleeves. By instinct born of a lifetime of recognizing need and rising to it, I reached across the space to assist him. When my fingertips touched his warm linen shirtsleeve beneath the coat, he pulled back, slinging his coat to the side, blinking at me with a mixture of shock and mild offense.

I jerked my hands away and backed into my seat with a thud, hurt warming my wet cheeks. Of course, this was a different world than Shepton Mallet Prison. Women were not for soothing and helping unless they were paid to do it.

A grunt outside drew my attention to the window. The coachman yanked in vain at my second trunk, which had taken three men to hoist outside hours ago. I bit my lip, picturing its contents. He'd never lift it alone.

With a dark look, the man across from me stood and forged back into the rain to assist the coachman. Both men strained to lift the precious cargo between them, and they slung it with a thud and a crack onto the back. Lightning pierced the black sky as the two men ran for the cover of the carriage.

Mr. Rotherham hefted himself back inside, now coatless and dripping wet. Almost immediately the carriage lurched forward, reins jingling, and I collapsed against the leather seat. Just that quick, we were leaving behind the entirety of my short life.

Don't look back. Don't look back. Don't—

But I did. Fingertips clutching the window frame, I pressed my face to the glass for one last lingering glimpse of home.

"Have you left something behind?"

"No." I moved back into the seat, pushing my shoulder blades into the leather cushions. Leaving that place was the death of so many things.

The man recovered his breath for several moments, flexing until he found comfort in the tiny rear-facing seat. I fingered the flannel blanket beside me. He would not want me to hand it to him. But when his trembles convulsed into a full-body shiver, the sight compelled me forward, urging the blanket on him. He accepted it without glancing at me and pressed it into his wet clothes to soak up the rain. When he looked up, he pinched his lips in a reserved smile, revealing two fleeting dimples framing his mouth like quotation marks, and I finally relaxed a bit.

"I assure you," he said, "there are plenty of stones at Lynhurst. You need not bring any with you."

"They're books." I shivered, watching the shapes of thatched homes fly by. It must be utterly clear to him that I was a fake, not one who belonged at Lynhurst Manor. Up until a few days ago, my life had consisted of a one-room cell, my gregarious, boisterous father, and our three pieces of furniture. And stories, of course. He'd shown me how to thrive within our odd surroundings—reciting psalms, caring for the weak, loving people—but he'd never taught me to act as one of the elite class in which he himself had been raised. There had been no need.

Homesickness engulfed me. But how could anyone be homesick for such a place?

"Thank you for indulging me, with the books." I indicated the back of the carriage where my trunks lay.

"Of course. Books are essential nourishment to the mind."

This answer begged more questions, but I closed my lips. Any little word might be the wrong one. Lantern light bounced over his face as the carriage hurtled forward.

"I suppose they are the normal fare." The man's voice broke through my thoughts, deep and forced. "Miss Austen, Clennam, Wordsworth, and perhaps a few hymnals."

He really was quite poor at making conversation. "I prefer the serials."

"Of course." His slight frown, a mild look of judgment, turned my stomach. As if my love of serial novels helped him to determine I resided lower than him on the social ladder. Wouldn't he be surprised to find that most of the books filling my heavy trunk were *blank*.

I pinched my lips to keep from spilling my delicious secret—the one that gave me more worth than anyone could guess. If only I dared say the words aloud. *Pardon, sir. Have you heard of Nathaniel Droll? Well, I happen to know the real man who masquerades under that pen name. Ah, the look of shock that would splay over his arrogant face.*

"Novel characters make the finest friends, so I can hardly fault your attachment." He straightened the hat that jostled on his head to the rhythm of the carriage wheels and smiled. "Flesh-and-blood people are more complicated and difficult to know."

"I should say not. So many people are closed up, all tucked inside themselves, yet they bloom open in beautiful ways if you would only take interest in them."

The flick of his eyebrow hinted at disapproval, driving me deeper back into my seat as my face heated. I had done it again.

I tipped my head back against the cushioned seat and allowed the carriage to carry me and my heavy thoughts toward a life where this disapproval would be normal fare. "I hope I did not offend you, sir."

"It was merely a surprisingly deep answer to what I believed a simple question."

"Life is deep, Mr. Rotherham." Oh so deep. Especially when it is a series of intense moments all piling on top of you, fighting for your urgent attention every day. "Which is why books are such a lifeline. Stepping into the pages of someone else's story means joining them in their normal life and pretending that you, for one liberating moment, will also become whole and healthy and wonderfully normal by the end."

His eyes, lifting into a pleasant crescent shape with his smile, assessed me with the softness of grace. "You've managed quite well in the life you were dealt. How were you not mired in sadness every day at a place like that?"

My first instinct was to inform him that Charles Dickens himself spent several years of his

childhood in Marshalsea Debtor's Prison when his father languished there for numerous debts, for no one could doubt Dickens had made a success of his life in the end. But I merely waved off his comment with a simple reply. "There are many good days that outweigh the bad. And besides, imaginations are transportable. They even follow one into poverty."

His face dipped back into the shadows. Laughing? Or disapproving?

No matter. The stress of the week weighed me down much like the wet dress I wore. We'd only buried Papa days ago. "And might I ask who has the pleasure of escorting me?"

"I am a family friend staying at Lynhurst for the summer." He cleared his throat. "They did not feel they could trust so delicate a matter to a servant, no matter how faithful."

"I see." But I did not. What was delicate about the matter of bringing one's niece home?

Long, silent moments passed before the carriage paused for an iron gate to grind open. A crest seemed to seal the gates shut. Had we reached our destination so quickly?

I leaned into the window for a glimpse of the place, but the muted glow of lamplight showed precious little. Three . . . no, four cupolas speared the dark clouds shrouding the roofline. Surely the estate couldn't be as fanciful and amazing as Papa's wild stories, but anything less would not have captured the imagination of such a man. Propping myself higher, I strained to see the outline of the fabled Lynhurst Manor through the muggy dark.

After endless minutes of rolling up the unlit gravel drive, the carriage veered left and halted mere feet from the great house. A large hanging light illuminated an arched stone entryway with double wooden doors not unlike the solid front entrance of the prison. Perhaps I'd feel at home here after all. The mansion's gray exterior wall extended far outside the little circle of lantern light, into what seemed to be eternity.

It was true, then. I'd hardly believed Papa's stories of this place, for what family could live in such wealth while their brother languished in poverty? A mere pittance of their wealth might have freed Papa years ago. Steeling myself against bitterness, I tried to summon an explanation, but could not.

At least the rain had stopped.

Mr. Rotherham alighted. As I pushed off the seat, he held up a palm to stop me. "You'd best let me prepare them first, Miss Harcourt."

I sank into the seat, the damp feel of my thick skirts beneath me. "Prepare them for what?"

He paused just outside the carriage, a rare smile flicking over his face. "We all rather believed you to be a collection of bags and trunks."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The solicitor had instructed Lady Pochard to collect the belongings of the distant relative who had died in debtor's prison."

Distant relative? I frowned.

"You can imagine her surprise when she finds out exactly what this relative's belongings include." He shook his hat and replaced it. "Wait here. I'll return for you when I've broken the news to her."

"Welcome back, Mr. Rotherham."

Silas strode through the double doors held open by the butler, who ushered him into the deeply shadowed hall tinged with lemon freshness on wood-paneled walls. A slight bow, then Digory's aged hand came out to accept Silas's coat. The weight of it jerked his arm down, but his

face maintained the placid butler mask. "I trust your errand was pleasant."

"Pleasant as expected." He stamped wetness from his shoes and strode through the arched front hall to the drawing room where Lady Pochard waited. How was one to answer these meaningless questions, really? *A fine day today, is it not, sir? How was your walk? I trust you are in good health this morning.* He should tell them the day was terrible, he had witnessed a murder, and he'd walked to the moon, just to see what they would do.

What a stark contrast from the girl waiting in the carriage. Everything she said meant something, her sentences plump and juicy with originality. Fresh, and delightfully odd.

"Good evening, Lady Pochard. I'm surprised to see—"

"Well, have you fetched them?" Lady Eudora Eustice Pochard huddled in her wheeled chair in the bay of heavily draped windows. The fireplace glowed behind her, giving a soft yet eerie light to this red-and-gold gilded room of her ancestors. Oh yes, he had fetched them. Both trunks . . . as well as the additional piece of "baggage."

"Yes, my lady. Every last belonging of a Mr. Harcourt of Shepton Mallet."

"He is dead?" Digory's faithful-butler mask shattered. "No! Mr. Harcourt—"

A daggered look from Lady Pochard sliced the end off his sentence. The poor man's Adam's apple bobbed, wiry hands working at his sides.

Silas tried again. "As to what I'm to do with—"

"I've told you. All the trunks are to be stowed in the rafters. Unless you have taken it upon yourself to look through the deceased man's belongings to decide their value is greater than attic fodder."

"I have only glimpsed one belonging, my lady, and you will hardly wish to keep it in your attic." Why did he tiptoe around the truth? It wasn't as if it was his fault, any of this.

"Out with it, then." The woman's aged mouth puckered. "I've no patience for your witticisms, Mr. Rotherham. Speak quickly."

He cleared his throat. "A girl, my lady. A young woman of nearly twenty, I'd say."

Realization dawned on the old woman's face in hues of white and ashy gray. "It cannot be."

"I brought her here, not knowing what else to do. If you prefer to dismiss her, perhaps I may at least take her to London where she might find more opportunities." Letting her loose in this area to grab at menial work for pure survival would suck the life out of her. But then, so would bringing her into this house.

"Isn't it scandalous enough to have a family member in this predicament in the first place?" The woman couldn't seem to say the word *prison*. "I'll not have you taking the girl anywhere but this very house." She sat tall in her wheeled chair, as if she were a lady of great beauty, which she was not, at her age. "What has become of her all these years? Who has raised the child?"

"She seems to have raised herself, if there was any raising done at all. She climbed into the carriage alone with me, as if it were quite natural."

"You mean to tell me that this girl has been living with the *debtors*?" The woman huffed. "What a scandal. I suppose she's a wild little thing."

The bang of the front doors drew everyone's attention, then the creak of the inner doors. *Slap-click, slap-click* and then she emerged from the shadows of the hall to stand before them, shining wet hair plastered to her forehead and neck, falling in silky, disheveled tresses over her shoulders. In the light of the house, Silas drank in the full sight of her, wild and beautiful—huge brown eyes,

cheeks cool and fresh like spring, perfect little lips pinched with tension. So this is what the darkness of the carriage had hidden from him.

“Just as I knew she’d be.” Tears pricked the old servant’s tired eyes. Digory leaned forward beside Silas, his hands clasped, as if he ached to throw his arms about the girl and protect her as he would a baby bird.

Lady Pochard leaned forward on her cane toward her servant. “Take care of this matter. And Digory”—her eyes pierced her butler with a look, shining with the awareness of all he’d likely witnessed in this great house—“tell her *nothing*.”