

Love Lost

by

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“Fathers and Daughters” first published in
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Something Borrowed

The dusky light from the high church windows created an aura of stillness through the stone nave. Melanie savored the quiet, the dusk, the scent of lighted tapers, and the small bouquet of wild roses she had wrapped in her handkerchief before entering the church. She didn't think Jane would remember flowers, but weddings ought to have beauty.

Already seated in her dark pew, she watched as the two elegant gentlemen paced the nave, and she sighed contentedly. She refused to envy her lovely older sister's good fortune in capturing a man like Damien Langland. With her beauty, wit, and vivaciousness, Jane could grasp the world by the hand and dance with it. Surely, after marrying that old man for her first husband, she deserved a handsome young man for her second. It didn't matter a whit that Damien, Earl of Reister, had always been the next best thing to penniless. Jane had fortune enough for both of them. And Damien not only had a title and looks, but he also possessed intelligence, character, and the kindness not to scorn his fiancée's crippled sister.

The wooden bench made Melanie's hip ache abominably. She should have brought a pillow but she had thought the service would be quick. She didn't know

what was keeping Jane. Surely she knew Melanie's absence would be discovered soon and their parents would go looking for her. She was flattered and more than a little surprised that Jane had even thought to ask her as witness knowing how difficult it was for Melanie to escape their parents' dotting care. She understood Jane's secrecy, though. Their parents had prevented this marriage once before. A penniless earl wasn't good enough for their diamond of a daughter.

Melanie shifted uneasily again and noticed the gentlemen glancing impatiently at the closed church doors. They had arrived fashionably late. Jane was even later. Only Melanie had arrived on time. She hadn't relished hurrying up the aisle with her clunking cane. The vicar had assured her she could remain in her pew throughout the service. She didn't literally have to stand up with Jane, just witness the ceremony.

The vicar in his vestments excused himself to see to a parish matter, assuring them he would return as soon as he saw the carriage arrive. Melanie couldn't blame the man for tiring of standing idly between these cold stone walls when the sunshine beckoned outside. She cast a worried glance to the anxious groom who had taken to staring at a sunbeam through the stained glass window above the altar.

The earl's best man pulled out his pocket watch and whispered something to Damien. The earl stopped his staring long enough to check his own watch and shake his head. He wouldn't leave yet. Melanie gave a sigh of relief. Damien wasn't the faint-hearted sort. He would trust in Jane. Idly, she let herself drift into daydreams of herself as bride. A husband like Damien could take her to London, show her the sights, introduce her to people who would appreciate her character and not scorn her disabilities. A husband would give her freedom.

As the hour grew later, Melanie became increasingly nervous as the groom, who now paced back

and forth in front of the altar. In his cutaway frock coat and tight pantaloons, with the long tails of the coat flapping, Damien made an elegant figure as he strode back and forth. She couldn't imagine why Jane tarried so long. She worried some accident had overcome her between here and London. She worried their parents would discover Melanie's prolonged absence and come after her.

Occasionally, it had occurred to Melanie to wonder if her parents' suffocating concern for her had more to do with their embarrassment at having a lame daughter than any real anxiety for her welfare. Most days, she shut off those ungrateful feelings. Today, her fear for Jane's happiness made her resentful of her father's refusal to allow Melanie to do anything on her own.

She didn't really think her father would prevent Jane's marriage a second time. After all, Jane was thirty years of age now, an independent widow. Surely this time she could marry for love and happiness. Melanie didn't know why Jane had insisted on this secrecy, or involved Melanie in it, knowing the disaster that would happen if their father found she had left the house without his knowledge. It was almost as if Jane wished the worst to happen.

Melanie breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of a carriage arriving. And then she had the panicky thought it might be her father after all. He could still interfere with the marriage. Or he could just drag Melanie away before Jane could get here.

She had never done anything on her own in her life. From the day she had contracted the fever that had left her left leg withered and weak, her parents had hovered over her every movement. They had never returned to London, choosing to send Jane to an aunt for her Season rather than leave Melanie by herself in the country. She had never gone to London, or any farther than the village church. She had no life of her own, no friends other than

those from the village thought suitable by her parents. She had wealth enough for a hundred people and nowhere to spend it since her parents saw to her every material need. She ought to be grateful, but she was twenty-five years old and as frustrated and rebellious as any adolescent.

Melanie's hands tightened around her walking stick at the thought that the carriage's arrival might signal an end to this precious moment of stolen freedom. It took only a moment to react to a lifetime of frustration, bringing Melanie to her feet without shyness. Damien had seen her limp before. Though five years older than she, he had visited their neighboring estate often enough that she needn't hide from him. As she limped into the aisle, he cast her no more than a worried look when others often looked away to hide their repulsion or embarrassment. His best man gave her a friendly smile as he hurried to the church doors to escort the bride.

"Damien!" Melanie whispered urgently, catching the earl's nervous attention. "It sounds like my father. I will have been missed by now."

He looked momentarily alarmed, no doubt remembering the last occasion he'd had the audacity to ask the wealthy baronet for his daughter's hand. Sir Francis respected only wealth, and the Earl of Reister had none.

"Where can Jane be?" she whispered with concern, accepting his arm to help her up the step to the raised area before the altar.

"No doubt enjoying herself too much somewhere to break away," the earl replied bitterly. "Do not harbor any romantic illusions about this affair, Miss Melanie. Your sister and I have been old companions for too long."

At the sound of loud voices outside the door, Melanie feared the worst. The worried look the other gentleman sent their way after he peered through the leaded glass confirmed her fears.

For this past hour or more she had sat here idly dreaming how it would feel to stand beside a well set-up gentleman like the earl and to share vows sealing them for a lifetime. It really didn't matter to her if the earl's flaxen hair did not curl rakishly like her daydreams, or if his classically bridged nose had a hump in it. Appearances meant little to her. She craved companionship. She craved freedom. She craved a life of her own. The Earl of Reister represented all that—only he belonged to Jane.

Almost. The earl's friend slipped out the door to delay the family longer. No doubt her father raked the poor vicar over the coals for not notifying them at once that their poor, lame daughter had wandered loose, unaccompanied. What in heaven's name did they think could happen to her in a church?

Outside her own anger, Melanie felt sympathy for the man beside her, dressed in his finest blue frock coat with his cravat gleaming white and elegantly starched and folded. She had always thought him handsome, but then, she admired any man who could talk to her without averting his eyes. She felt his arm stiffen beneath her fingers and knew he braced himself for the tongue-lashing to follow. She could curse Jane for her thoughtlessness. Damien deserved better. She wished she could borrow him for just a little while. Jane had so much, and she had so little ...

The instant she thought that, a notion of such amazing audacity overcame her that Melanie nearly staggered beneath the impact. Her father would deliver a scathing tirade no matter what they did. Why not gain some advantage for both of them out of it?

She had never uttered a bold thought in her life. She thought them all the time, but she never had anyone to speak them to. She knew she could say them to Damien. He was too devastated at the moment to scold her.

She clutched her bouquet of roses against his arm and tugged a little to gain his attention again. She saw him dart a look to the side door and knew his desire to depart, but he wouldn't desert her to the hands of her parents. Damien wasn't that kind of coward.

Gathering her courage, Melanie whispered, "We could walk out there now and pretend the service is already over. I think if you slip the vicar a few coins, he will keep quiet. My father is very clutch-fisted when it comes to charity. The vicar knows I had to contribute my own funds for the church roof."

Damien looked at her, but he didn't seem to comprehend. He wasn't a stupid man. He just didn't see things the same way she did. She'd had lots of experience developing devious means of escaping her father's authority. The elegant Earl of Reister had never done a devious thing in his life. She had no doubt whatsoever that this secretive marriage was all Jane's idea.

"We can pretend we're married, Damien," she explained impatiently. "We can go into London and took for Jane. My father can't stop us if he thinks you're my husband. I'm of age."

"Melanie Elaine Berkeley! Have you lost your wits? If you go into London with me without benefit of vows, you will ruin your reputation. Devil take it, woman! No wonder your father keeps you on such short strings if that's the way your mind works."

She took no offense. Damien had always treated her like a little sister, scolding her deservedly more than once. She shrugged off his protests.

"What is a reputation for but to catch a husband?" she asked carelessly. "They'll never let me marry. So what is the purpose of maintaining something of no value? If society scorns me, how would I know while locked up in the library staring out at the lawns day after day? I just want a little freedom, Damien. You needn't shackle yourself to me for life. I'm not quite as wealthy as Jane,

but I have enough to pay your ticks, I daresay. While Jane was spending her allowances, I was saving. I'm willing to share."

She saw a wild look of hope and incredulity flare in his eyes, and she knew she'd finally captured some small measure of his interest. "Just imagine walking out of here with me on your arm. My father's face will fall clear to the ground. He'll turn too purple to speak."

A chuckle escaped the earl's compressed lips at the picture she painted, but he immediately followed it with a frown. "Of all the irresponsible behavior —"

"You need the blunt, don't you?" she pointed out inexorably. "And I want to see London. I don't care how long we get away with it. I just want to see parliament, and the libraries, and a museum or two. And Hatchard's. Maybe Elgin's marbles. Anything, Damien. I'm quite desperate."

He stared at her a moment or two, absorbing the despair that must have driven her to such a plea. Melanie knew she wasn't spectacularly beautiful like Jane, but she wasn't hard to look upon. Her plain nut-brown hair couldn't compare to Jane's glorious blond tresses, but their features were similar, except Jane's lips always smiled and laughed while her own often pulled tight with pain. She could learn to laugh easily enough, given an opportunity. She felt her lips quivering now while she waited for his answer, but not with laughter.

"If you mean what you say, Melanie Elaine, I'll marry you in truth," the earl answered fervently, covering the hand holding the roses with a strong brown grip. "Let's get out of here before your father rips James into shreds."

Melanie felt she could float down the aisle on winged feet. She heard angels sing and church bells ring as they solemnly proceeded through the empty church as if it were filled with well-wishers weeping happily. She couldn't have felt more married had the special license in

his pocket had her name on it instead of Jane's. She was going off to London with the Earl of Reister!

The scene outside dampened some of her joy, but Damien had learned a few things in the years since he'd last encountered the baronet, she realized. He took control of the situation immediately.

With a firm air of authority, he placed Melanie's hand in the care of James. "See my lady to the carriage, please, James, while I speak to Sir Francis."

The vicar gaped. Laughter lit his friend's eyes as he bowed over Melanie's hand. Sir Francis went so purple he couldn't speak, just as Melanie had predicted.

In that brief, shocked silence, Damien turned to the vicar, pressing a small pouch of coins – the last to his name – into the vicar's hands. "I'll take care of her properly," he promised with an urgency he hoped the other man understood. "The lady has told me of her love for this church. We will return often. If you ever have need of anything, you must let us know."

The man was shrewd enough to know a bribe when he saw one, but cautious enough to check on Melanie first. When she threw him a kiss and waved before climbing into the carriage, the vicar pocketed the coins and nodded. "I'm certain you'll do what's proper, my lord. I've never known you to do otherwise."

"Proper!" Sir Francis shouted, finally coming to his senses. "This young pup knows nothing of proper! That's my daughter he has there! My little Melanie. He hasn't a twig to light on and he thinks he can take care of a young female of her delicate constitution – "

"Melanie's constitution is about as delicate as Jane's," Damien interrupted rudely. "It's her leg that's damaged, nothing else. I'll not cosset her, for she doesn't want it, but I'll see her safe and happy. They aren't always the same things, you know."

Without waiting for any further reply, Damien strode off in the direction of the waiting carriage. He'd

borrowed it from another friend, the upkeep of carriages much too expensive for his hollow pockets, but it made a good appearance now. He could still hear old Francis screaming as he climbed in and James shut the door behind him. There wasn't a damned thing the old man could do this time.

It felt good to know he'd bested the surly old goat for a change. With a smile of exaltation, Damien sat back against the squabs and turned to share his pleasure with the dainty woman beside him. As the driver took up the reins and the carriage lurched forward, he found himself looking into vivid violet eyes instead of pale blue ones. Staggered at the immensity of what he had just done, Damien wondered what in bloody hell he'd got himself into now.