



JULIE
KLASSEN

*The Painter's
Daughter*

Books by Julie Klassen

Lady of Milkweed Manor
The Apothecary's Daughter
The Silent Governess
The Girl in the Gatehouse
The Maid of Fairbourne Hall
The Tutor's Daughter
The Dancing Master
The Secret of Pembroke Park
The Painter's Daughter

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*To Anna Paulson,
with love*

Reader, I married him. A quiet wedding we had:
he and I, the parson and clerk, were alone present.

—*Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë



The one . . . who keeps an oath even when it hurts,
and does not change their mind
. . . will never be shaken.

Psalm 15 NIV

chapter 1

March 1815

Devonshire, England

INFURIATING ARTISTS . . . Captain Stephen Marshall Overtree grumbled to himself as he walked along the harbor of the unfamiliar town, looking into each shop window.

He glanced down at the crumpled paper in his hand, and read again his brother's hastily scrawled note.

. . . I will let a cottage as last year, though I don't know which yet. If the need arises, you may write to me in care of Mr. Claude Dupont, Lynnmouth, Devon. But no doubt you will manage capably without me, Marsh. As always.

Stephen stuffed the note back into his pocket and continued surveying the establishments he passed—public house, harbor-master's office, tobacconist, and cider seller. Then a stylish placard caught his eye:

CLAUDE DUPONT

Painter, Royal Academy of Arts

~

Portraits by commission, also local landscapes.

Instruction and supplies for the visiting artist.

Inquire within.

Stephen tried the door latch, but it wouldn't budge. He cupped a hand to the glass and peered inside. The dim interior held easels, framed landscapes, and shelves of supplies, but not a single person.

He bit back an epithet. How could he *inquire within* if the dashed door was locked? It was not yet five in the afternoon. What sort of hours did the man keep? Stephen muttered another unflattering comment about artists.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a frowsy woman step from the public house, dumping a bucket of water. He called, "I am looking for Wesley Overtree. Have you seen him?"

"That handsome Adonis, you mean? No, sir." She winked. "Not today at any rate."

"Know where he's staying?"

"One of the hillside cottages, I believe, but I couldn't tell you which one."

"Well then, what of Mr. Dupont?" Stephen gestured toward the locked door.

"Mr. Dupont is away, sir. But I saw his daughter pass by not fifteen minutes ago. Walking out to the Valley of Rocks, I'd wager, as she does nearly every day about this time." She pointed to the esplanade, where a path led up the hillside before disappearing from view. "Just follow that path as far as it goes. Can't miss it."

"Thank you."

For a moment Stephen remained where he was, looking up the hill—thatched cottages and a few grander houses clung to the wooded slope, while Lynmouth's twin town of Lynton perched above. Perhaps he ought to have remained in the coach for the half-mile climb to Lynton. He sighed. It was too late now.

He walked along the seaside esplanade, then started inland up the path. He was glad now he'd brought his walking stick—a thin sword cleverly concealed inside. One never knew when one might meet highwaymen while traveling, and he preferred to be armed at all times. His military training was well ingrained.

The steep path soon had him breathing hard. He'd thought

he was in better condition than that. The month of soft living, away from drilling his regiment, had already taken its toll. He would have a few choice words for Wesley when he found him. Stephen should be with his regiment, not at home doing Wes's duty for him, and not here.

He ascended through the trees, then out into the open as the rocky path curved westward, following the cliff side, high above the Bristol Channel—deep blue and grey. The steep downward slope bristled with withered grass, scrubby gorse, and the occasional twisted sapling. Little to stop a fall. If a man were to slip, he would instantly tumble four or five hundred feet into the cold sea below. His stomach lurched at the thought.

His old nurse's recent pronouncement echoed through his mind. "*You won't live to see your inheritance. . .*" He could still feel the wiry grip of her hand, and see the somber light in her eyes.

With a shiver, Stephen backed from the edge and strode on.

The cry of a seabird drew his gaze upward. Gulls soared, borne aloft by strident wind. Black-and-white razorbills and grey-tipped kittiwakes nested among the rock outcroppings.

He walked for ten or fifteen minutes but saw no sign of the young woman ahead of him. He hoped he hadn't missed a turn somewhere. As he continued on, the temperature seemed to drop. Although spring came earlier on the southwest coast, the wind bit with icy teeth, blowing across the channel from the north, still held in the grip of winter.

He tugged his hat brim lower and turned up the collar of his greatcoat. In less than two weeks he would again exchange civilian clothes for his uniform, return to duty, and make his grandfather proud. But first he had to find Wesley and send him home. With Humphries retiring, someone needed to help Papa oversee the estate. Their father was not in good health and needed a capable spokesman to keep the tenants happy and the estate workers on task. As a captain in the British Army, the role had come easily to Stephen. But his leave would soon be at an end, Napoleon exiled or not.

The role of managing the estate should have fallen to his older brother. But Wesley had again gone south for the winter, in spite of their mother's pleas. His art came first, he always insisted. And he preferred to leave practical, mundane affairs to others.

Rounding a bend, Stephen saw a craggy headland—rocks piled atop one another like castle battlements—with a sheer drop to the lashing currents below. He looked down to assure his footing, but a flash of color caught his eye and drew his gaze upward again.

He sucked in a breath. A figure in billowing skirts, wind-tossed cape, and deep straw bonnet stood atop that high precipice. Wedged between a rock on one side, and the cliff on the other, her half boot extended over the edge. What was the fool woman doing?

She fell to her knees and stretched out a gloved hand . . . trying to reach something, or about to go over? Did she mean to harm herself?

Pulse lurching, Stephen rushed forward. "Stop! Don't!"

She did not seem to hear him over the wind. Leaping atop the summit, he saw she was trying to reach a paper entangled in the prickly gorse.

"Stay back. I'll retrieve it for you."

"No," she cried. "Don't!"

Taking her objection as concern for his safety, he extended his walking stick to reach the paper and drag it back up the slope. Bending low, he snagged a corner of the thick rectangle—a painting. His breath caught.

He turned to stare at the tear-stained face within the deep bonnet. He looked back down at the painting, stunned to discover the image was of the very woman before him—a woman he recognized, for he had carried her portrait in his pocket during a year of drilling and fighting, and had looked at it by the light of too many campfires.

A gust of wind jerked the bonnet from her head, the ribbon ties catching against her throat, and its brim dangling against

her back. Wavy strands of blond hair lifted in the wind, whipping around her thin, angular face. Sad, blue-grey eyes squinted against a dying shaft of sunlight.

“It’s . . . you,” he sputtered.

“Excuse me?” She frowned at him. “Have we met?”

He cleared his throat and drew himself up. “No. That is . . . the portrait—it’s your likeness.” He lifted it, also recognizing the style—clearly his brother’s work.

Instead of thanks, her face crumpled. “Why did you do that? I was trying to toss it to the four winds. Make it disappear.”

“Why?”

“Give it back,” she demanded, holding out her hand.

“Only if you promise not to destroy it.”

Her lips tightened. “Who are you?”

“Captain Stephen Overtree.” He handed over the paper. “And you must be Miss Dupont. You know my brother, I believe.”

She stared at him, then averted her gaze.

“That is, he let a cottage from your family. I stopped at the studio but found the place locked. Can you tell me where to look for him?”

“I should not bother if I were you,” she said. “He is gone. Sailed for Italy in search of his perfect muse. His Dulcinea or Mona Lisa . . .” She blinked away fresh tears, and turned the painting over, revealing a few scrawled lines in his brother’s hand.

He read:

My dear Miss Dupont,

That visiting Italian couple we met invited me to travel with them to their homeland. To share their villa and paint to my heart’s content. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, and I could not resist. You know how I love Italy! We sail within the hour.

I know I should have said good-bye in person. I tried to find you, but could not. Thankfully, as a fellow artist you understand

The Painter's Daughter

*me and realize I must follow my muse and pursue my passion.
Must grasp this opportunity before it leaves with the tide.*

*We shared a beautiful season, you and I. And I shall always
remember you fondly.*

*Arrivederci,
W. D. O.*

Thunder and turf, Stephen inwardly raged. How was he to send his brother home now?

"He left no forwarding address?" he asked. "Or even a specific port or town?"

She shook her head. "Not with me. I believe the couple he mentioned was from Naples, but I could be mistaken."

"Did Lieutenant Keith go with him?"

"Carlton Keith, do you mean? I assume so. They seemed to go everywhere together."

Stephen nodded. "Do you happen to know if my brother took all his belongings with him?" He asked the question to determine if Wesley planned to return to Lynmouth.

Again she shook her head. "When I looked in this morning, I was surprised to see he'd left many of his paintings behind, as well as his winter coat."

"Did he not tell your father he planned to leave?"

"My father has returned to Bath on a portrait commission. We thought your brother planned to stay on through the spring. That's why I was so . . . surprised . . . to receive his note."

Was that why she was surprised? The only reason? Stephen didn't think so. Her tears and Wesley's apologetic letter painted a telling picture. Miss Dupont was in love with Wesley. No doubt he had worked his legion charms on her and then left when he grew bored. Perhaps Wesley had loved her, for a time. Or at least admired her. How far had it gone? Had Wes done more than break her heart? Dread rippled through him at the thought.

Stephen asked, "May I see the cottage?"

She reared her head back. “Why?”

“I’d like to look around—see if I can find any indication of where specifically he’s gone. I’ll have to try to get word to him in Italy somehow.”

“Oh . . .” She paused in thought, then said briskly, “You might ask the harbormaster, see if he knows where the ship was bound.”

“I shall do that. Thank you. Even so, I’d like to take a look.”

She bit her lip, then faltered. “I . . . don’t think Bitty has been in to tidy it up yet. Perhaps you—”

“No matter. I am pressed for time, so if I could see it now . . . ?”

She drew a deep breath. “Very well.”

Miss Dupont clambered off the precipice, as nimble and sure-footed as a girl, though she looked to be in her early twenties. She gestured toward a path on the other side of the headland. Not the way he had come. “This way is more direct,” she explained.

He fell into step beside her, feeling like a brawny brute next to her willowy figure.

She led the way into Lynton, the higher of the twin towns, past its blacksmith, livery, and old church, and then followed a cobbled path partway down the hill. There, three whitewashed cottages huddled along the hillside, overlooking the Lynmouth harbor and sparkling channel beyond. At the first cottage, she unhooked the chatelaine pinned at her waist and sorted through the keys until she found the correct one. She unlocked the door and stepped inside.

Stephen was surprised at the young woman’s apparent aplomb in entering a bachelor’s cottage, when she seemed so ladylike in her speech and demeanor. Entering after her, he left the door open behind them for propriety’s sake. He walked around the single room and noticed her survey the chamber as he did, as if looking for something. Was there something she didn’t want him to see? He saw remnants of art supplies: an easel, used paint pots, canvases, and sketchbooks. A table and chairs and a simple stove huddled along one wall, an unmade bed against the other. Her gaze flicked to it and quickly away.

She swiped a lacy glove off the arm of a chair and tried to make it disappear up her sleeve. Noticing his look, she murmured, "Must have dropped it when I looked in earlier . . ."

He glanced at the pair of matching kid gloves she wore but said nothing. Instead he fingered through the paintings propped against the wall, then paged through a sketchbook on the table. That same familiar face—her face—looked up at him wearing different expressions. Solemn and reluctant at first, progressing to increasing confidence, shy half smiles warming to full blown brilliance. Her clothing varied as well—prim lace collars giving way to round, open necklines and, eventually, one bare shoulder.

Reaching past him, Miss Dupont shut the sketchbook, her cheeks mottled red. "Yes, I posed for him several times." A defensive note sharpened her tone. "He was most insistent. I had never done so before—not even for my father—and was quite uncomfortable with it. But as you might guess in such a remote place, his choice of models was extremely limited."

Inwardly, Stephen groaned, his stomach sickening. Oh yes. It had gone too far. And Wesley had done more than break this girl's heart. An otherwise innocent girl, if he did not miss his guess.

He asked, "Did Lieutenant Keith lodge here as well?"

"Yes. We offered to bring in another bed, but he said he preferred his bedroll." She looked around the room. "I don't see it. He must have taken it with him."

Sounded like Keith, Stephen thought. "I don't suppose my brother made arrangements to store his belongings, nor paid sufficient rent to keep this cottage until he returns?"

"No. He paid only to the end of the month."

Stephen mentally calculated. A sea voyage to Italy could take two or three weeks each way, depending on weather and the winds, not to mention whatever time Wesley planned to spend there painting. What had Keith been thinking to let him go? To leave without sending word? Or perhaps a letter was even now making its way to Overtree Hall through the post.

Stephen sighed. "I will have to pack up his belongings and somehow transport them home."

She nodded absently. "We probably have a suitable crate in the studio. Come. I will ask Papa's assistant to help you make arrangements."

"Thank you."

She offered him the use of the cottage overnight, since his brother had already paid for it. He politely declined, having secured a room at the Rising Sun, where a warm supper awaited him.

He gestured for her to precede him. "I'll escort you back."

As the sun set, they walked down the switchback path and into Lynmouth.

"Do you know . . ." she began. "Your brother never mentioned a sibling named Stephen. Only a 'Marsh.' Something of an ogre, apparently."

Stephen pulled a face, knowing the act would only serve to pucker the scar on his cheek and make him more ogre-like yet. He explained, "My second name is Marshall. He calls me Marsh—one of several nicknames he reserves for me. Including Captain Black."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I—"

"No matter. It's an apt description."

When they arrived at the studio near the harbor, Miss Dupont used another key to open the door. She frowned at the dim, silent interior. "Maurice is supposed to keep the lights burning and the door open until five at least. Looks like he's been gone for hours."

"Is this where you live?" Stephen asked.

"We have a house in Bath, but when we're in Lynmouth we live in the apartment upstairs. Although, with my father gone I'm staying with a neighbor, Mrs. Thrupton."

He read between the lines. "Is your father's assistant a lad or a . . . married man?"

"Neither."

"Ah." He nodded, illogically relieved she cared something for her reputation.

A man of about twenty trudged down the stairs in stocking feet. He wore trousers, rumpled shirt and waistcoat, but no coat. His dark hair stood askew, as though he'd just rolled out of bed.

"Bring me any supper?" he asked her. "I'm starved."

"You're on your own, I'm afraid," she replied, setting down her bonnet and gloves.

"Who's he?" The young man lifted an insolent chin.

"This is Captain Overtree, Mr. Overtree's brother. Captain, Maurice O'Dell. My father's assistant."

"Another Overtree? It's my lucky day," he said sarcastically. "What does this one want?"

"Simply to transport the belongings his brother left in the cottage. I would like you to help him."

"I . . . heard he left," O'Dell said. "And good riddance, if you ask me."

Miss Dupont said coolly, "I didn't."

Stephen sized up the young man as he would an opponent. He was barely more than Miss Dupont's height, though stockier. His prominent dark eyes and upturned nose put Stephen in mind of an ill-behaved pug yapping at a larger dog.

O'Dell turned to him, thick lip curled. "I am not merely an assistant. I'm family. Claude Dupont's nephew."

"By marriage, yes," she clarified. "My father married Maurice's aunt a few years ago."

"I won't be making prints forever," O'Dell asserted. "I'm an artist in my own right. I'll be famous one day. Just you wait."

"Sadly, I haven't that much time," Stephen said dryly. "Now, if I might trouble you for a crate and the name of the local drayage company . . . ?"

"We have several crates in the storeroom," Miss Dupont said. "Maurice, if you will see the largest delivered to the first cottage."

"Very well, but don't expect me to help pack up that fop's leavings."

“Then, please mind the shop in the morning while I do.”

She turned to Stephen. “What time shall I meet you?”

“I am an early riser. Shall we say eight—or nine, if you prefer.”

“Eight is fine. I’ll see you then.”

Stephen hesitated. “Are you . . . all right here, or shall I walk you to the neighbor’s you mentioned?”

“I’m all right on my own. But thank you.”

Sophia Margaretha Dupont watched the black-haired, broad-shouldered stranger stride away, barely believing he could be related to Wesley Overtree. Beautiful, heartbreaking Wesley.

She’d had no inkling that things had changed between them—for Wesley at least. She had shown up at the cottage that morning as usual, smiling, stomach fluttering with happiness, eager to see him again, wondering how best to tell him her news. Only to find the farewell note he’d left and the cottage abandoned. Her smile had quickly fallen then. Her stomach cramped with dread. What had she done wrong?

She knew men did not like to be pressured, so she had not pressured him. Had he simply lost interest, or had he realized she was not beautiful enough for him—either as a model or a wife?

She read the rescued note again, and the conclusion seemed unavoidable. Wesley had not only abruptly left Lynmouth, but he had also left *her*. She turned the note over, struck anew that he had written it on the back of one of the dozens of likenesses he’d painted of her. A dozen too many apparently.

Sophie sagged against the studio counter, feeling weary and low. It had been the worst day of her life, except for the long-ago day her mother died. At the thought, she gently clasped the ring she wore on a chain around her neck, close to her heart.

Not only had Wesley left, and her last hope of happiness with him, but then she’d had to endure that mortifying interview with his own brother. The man’s hard, knowing expression left her with the sickly feeling that he’d guessed the truth—that posing was not the worst of her indiscretions.

She remembered Wesley describing his dour and disapproving brother Marsh. And saying “*Captain Black would sooner strike a man than listen to him.*” She had formed an image of a foul-tempered, hardened warrior. A man who had seen terrible things. Who had probably *done* terrible things.

Captain Overtree certainly looked fierce, with that jagged scar, which his bushy side-whiskers and longish dark hair did little to conceal. Had his coloring spawned the name Captain Black or had it been his brooding personality? Perhaps *black* described both. He was taller than Wesley—several inches over six feet—and his strong-featured face boasted none of Wesley’s fine bone structure or handsome perfection. His eyes were striking though. Blue, where Wesley’s were light brown. She would never have expected blue eyes.

Her fleeting comparison of the brothers faded as the reality of her situation reasserted itself. This was no time to think of trivial things. Not when her life as she knew it hung in the balance and was soon to change forever.

She had not given God a great deal of thought since her mother’s death. Church had not played a significant part of her childhood. But during these last few weeks she had prayed very hard, hoping what she feared wasn’t true.

Now her prayer changed. She had been so certain Wesley would marry her. But now he was gone. Even if he came back, would it be in time to save her and her reputation? *Oh, God, let him return in time. . . .*