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The Potter's Lady



JUDITH MILLER



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Judith Miller, *The Potter's Lady*
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To Rosie Curran-Benger,
my dear friend Down Under.

*But now, O Lord, thou art our father;
we are the clay, and thou our potter;
and we all are the work of thy hand.*

Isaiah 64:8

Chapter 1

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
May 1872

Rose McKay stared out the narrow window of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. Her gaze darted between passing buggies and wagons before perusing the pedestrians traversing Broad Street. Where was Ewan? Her brother said he'd be here by two o'clock. If he didn't hurry, they'd miss their train.

"Why don't you sit down, Rose? Staring out the window isn't going to make your brother appear any sooner." Mrs. Fisk, director of the school, nodded toward one of the perfectly arranged chairs in the sitting room.

Inimitable paintings and sculptures, all of them fashioned by students who had attended the school, adorned the entry hall and sitting room where visitors were received. To have a creation displayed in either place was considered the most prestigious award any student could achieve. Each year, one student received the Excellence in Design Award. Along with the plaque came the honor of having one piece of work on display. Rose's heart

warmed at the thought of her own work joining those of the previous students. This year, she had been the award recipient. Though Rose had been honored by the announcement, her fellow students had resented the choice and had been quick to make their feelings known to her.

Rose had never been truly accepted into their ranks. She was, after all, an Irish immigrant who never would have gained entry into the prestigious school had it not been for the influence and money of Frances Woodfield, Ewan McKay's mother-in-law. Still, the harsh comments of the other students when she'd received the commendation, as well as during the remainder of the year, had been painful.

"I do wish the upholstery had been completed prior to your departure, Rose. You must return so that you can see the divan when it is completed." Mrs. Fisk motioned to the west side of the room. "We'll place it over there in front of the fireplace, where it can be seen to full advantage."

The hours Rose had devoted to designing the divan's upholstery had been innumerable, and seeing the completed project would have given her great joy. Yet not enough to remain any longer than required. Although she'd done her best to remain cheerful and kind during her two years at the school, she no longer wished to endure the pranks and unkind remarks of the young women here who considered themselves to be above her. Returning home would relieve her of future ridicule.

She rubbed her arms and shuddered as she recalled the spring dance. Rose had never had an escort for any of the parties or dances at the school, a matter Melissa Bonsart insisted upon resolving by arranging an escort for Rose. When Rose didn't immediately accept the secondhand invitation, Melissa had resorted to an angry diatribe, stating the young man, Matthew Skilling, was from a fine Philadelphia family. When Rose could

listen to no more, she'd relented and fallen headfirst into Melissa's trap. A trap that had served to undermine any remaining trust she'd had in these false friends.

Raucous laughter and unkind remarks had followed the arrival of an Irish lad dressed in tattered clothing. When Rose discovered the girls had convinced the young Irishman he would be welcomed at their party, Rose's anger swelled. There had been no "Matthew Skilling." Not only had they embarrassed her, they'd also humiliated the young man who, like Rose, had done nothing to deserve their callous treatment.

Truth be told, the conniving behavior of those girls reminded Rose of her Aunt Margaret. Their meanspirited actions had awakened Rose to a sad understanding: There were far too many scheming people willing to abuse others for their own pleasure, power, or greed.

"Did you hear me, Rose?" Mrs. Fisk nodded toward the fireplace.

"Yes. I think you've chosen a perfect space. If I ever return to Philadelphia, I'll be sure to stop here first." Rose, however, secretly doubted she'd ever return to Philadelphia. Though she'd received an excellent education at the design school, the young women she'd encountered during the past two years had imbued Rose with a distinct distaste for Philadelphia and its social mores.

"I'm saddened to see my very best student returning to the hills of West Virginia, where I doubt you'll ever use your education. I want you to write to me if you're unable to find employment that satisfies your creativity."

Rose strained forward for a glimpse outside. "Thank you, Mrs. Fisk. I'll keep your offer in mind, but . . . Ewan's arrived!" She jumped up from her chair and rushed toward the front door. Before he had an opportunity to knock, Rose yanked open the

door. "I thought you would never get here. What kept you? We'll have to hurry, or we'll miss our train."

Ewan arched his brows and chuckled. "Good afternoon to you, too, Rose." The scent of blooming lilacs wafted through the open door. Had it not been for the long, cold winter, the two flowering bushes outside the front entrance would have bloomed six weeks ago.

Rose grinned and took a backward step to allow her brother entry. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to assail you the moment you arrived, but I've been worried, and I missed you so." She turned to look at the grandfather clock that stood sentry in the hallway. "We could miss the train if we don't hurry."

"We have plenty of time, Rose." Ewan stepped inside and wrapped her in a warm embrace. "I didn't realize you were so eager to leave."

"Mr. McKay. It's good to see you. Your sister has been quite worried about you." Mrs. Fisk stepped closer. "I've tried my best to convince Rose she should remain in Philadelphia, but she seems to think a return to West Virginia is best." A frown creased the older woman's forehead. "I truly do not believe she'll be able to find employment that will lend her an opportunity to use the skills she's acquired." She shook her head and *tsked*. "Such a shame to have talent waste away, don't you agree, Mr. McKay?"

"Aye, 'tis not good to squander a God-given talent, but I think Rose will discover a way to use her abilities." His lips tilted in a grin. "Civilization does not begin and end in Philadelphia, Mrs. Fisk."

"Of course not. I didn't mean to imply . . ."

Ewan held up his hand. "No offense taken, Mrs. Fisk. Just like the rest of the family, I know Rose intends to find a way to use her talents. Should she have any trouble, I'm sure she'll set pen to paper and let you know."

Rose tugged on Ewan's arm. "We shouldn't keep the carriage waiting, Ewan. I had my baggage delivered to the train station, but we'll need to make certain it arrived safely and purchase our tickets."

Ewan patted the pocket of his jacket. "I've already purchased the tickets." He glanced toward the stairs. "Do you have no friends you wish to offer a final good-bye?"

Rose shook her head. "No. I'm ready to be on my way."

Gray skies loomed overhead as Rose looped arms with her brother and descended the front steps of the three-storied brick building. She was thankful for the education she'd received inside the large second-floor classrooms but glad she would no longer inhabit one of the third-floor sleeping rooms.

Rose lifted her gaze to the third floor. Several of her former classmates stood at one of the bedroom windows. They were laughing and pointing toward the carriage. She hoped their laughter wasn't a signal they'd played some final trick she hadn't yet discovered.

As her brother assisted her into the carriage, Rose glanced over her shoulder. "How are Laura and the girls? I'm eager to see all of them." Rose had been determined to pursue further education, but being away from her younger twin sisters, Ainslee and Adaira, had proven more difficult than she'd anticipated. And she'd sorely missed Tessa, Ewan and Laura's young daughter. She was eager to reunite with all of them.

"They are doing quite well and are every bit as impatient to see you." Her brother maintained a close gaze on her as they rode to the train station. His brow creased with concern as he reached for her hand. "You don't seem yourself, Rose. You've said no more than a few words since we left the school. Is there something bothering you that you have not told me about?"

"Nay. I'm pleased to be going home, but I am a little worried

about locating employment.” She tipped her head to the side and peeked from beneath her bonnet. “And before you tell me to leave my cares at the Lord’s footstool, I’ve already tried. I’m not as successful as you when it comes to turning loose of my worries.”

“I’ll not be finding fault with you, for I’ve had a wee bit of trouble putting my own advice into practice these past weeks.”

Rose turned to face her brother. “What kind of trouble? Nothing with Laura or the girls, is it?”

“Nay. As I said, they’re all fine. I’ll tell you later. We’ll have more than enough time to talk on the train.” He glanced out the carriage window. “I was hoping to have a bit of time to visit Fairmount Park before we boarded the train. Mrs. Woodfield said it would be quite lovely this time of year. Have you been there?”

“Aye. She’s right. The park is beautiful. I visited last spring but haven’t been there since then.”

Her thoughts rushed back to the visit that had proved to be an opportunity for her classmates to inflict another of their many pranks. They had completed their tour of the zoological gardens, and Mrs. Fisk agreed they could go to the small bridge that crossed the brook and then meet her at the pavilion for lunch. Rose still didn’t know who had pushed her into the brook, but the visit had been cut short because of the incident. Mrs. Fisk had been unhappy. After all, she’d reminded them they shouldn’t go near the water. Rose didn’t reveal she’d been pushed. She knew it would only cause retribution.

“Then I’m doubly sorry we do not have time. I’m sure you would have enjoyed another visit.”

Rose shook her head. “I’ve had my fill of city life, Ewan. I’m eager to return to Bartlett.”



They had been on the train for more than an hour, yet Ewan hadn't decided how to tell Rose about the troubles at home. This should be a happy time for her. She'd finished school and was returning to her family. At least that's what she believed. Before they stopped in Grafton to tour at least two businesses, he'd be forced to tell her the truth.

When she glanced at him, he offered her a weak smile. It was the most he could muster right now.

"Tell me what has happened at home these past weeks, Ewan."

He massaged his forehead and pretended to concentrate. "Let me think. What has been happening?" He inhaled a deep breath. "Laura, her mother, and the twins have been busy planning a party to celebrate all your accomplishments. From what I've been told, it is going to be the best party of the season, maybe the entire year. The invitations have gone out, and the response has been superb. Those are Laura's words, not mine." He forced a smile. "Laura and her mother have been busy planning the decorations and creating menus."

Rose sighed. "You know it isn't the party I'm asking about. I'm not a child. There's something more that's causing the worry I see in your eyes."

Ewan leaned against the hard wooden seat, wishing he'd paid the extra price to ride in one of the expensive coaches with padded seating. When they arrived at their next stop, he'd see if tickets were available for one of those more comfortable coaches. Perhaps he shouldn't spend the money right now, but if he was going to be alert when they arrived in Grafton, he'd need some rest.

After inhaling a deep breath, Ewan grasped his sister's hand. "Aunt Margaret has become more difficult to deal with now that

Uncle Hugh has died.” Ewan rubbed his jaw. “She has forced me out of the brickyard.”

Rose’s mouth dropped open. “What? How? You’re a partner.”

Ewan shook his head. “I’m not a partner. Uncle Hugh promised to draw up the agreement after Laura and I married, but since his mind was gone after he suffered the high fever and apoplexy, the papers were never signed.”

The hard wood seemed to poke Ewan’s bones, and he shifted sideways as the train chugged onward. Rose’s eyes shone with fear, or was it anger? Back when Hugh’s illness had rendered him helpless as a bairn, Ewan decided the girls should not be drawn into the problems regarding the brickyard. Laura and her mother had agreed. But now, with Aunt Margaret’s recent decision looming over him, he had no choice.

“Why didn’t I know all of this before now?” Rose’s lips tightened into a hard line.

Ewan offered a brief account of how he’d come to his decision, but her shoulders stiffened when he said he hadn’t wanted to burden her or the twins.

When Rose didn’t respond, he sighed. “Can’t ya see, Rose? ’Twould have served no purpose.”

“I’m not a child. You lump me together with the twins and act as though I’m too young to understand anything.”

“That’s not true, Rose. You were busy with schoolwork, and we didn’t want to distract you.” He hesitated a moment. “I think that’s the word Laura used.” He nodded. “Aye. We should not distract you from your studies.” Deciding it might be best to take the offensive, he folded his arms across his chest. “Had you known about this, what would you have done?”

She was silent for a moment. “I would have come home.”

“That is exactly what we thought you would do. We agreed

you were too close to finishing at the design school, and we did not want you to quit.”

Rose appeared sullen for several minutes, and Ewan decided it was best to let her absorb the news. If he'd only been more observant, Margaret's motives would have been clear months ago. Why had he been so unmindful when, on her own, she'd hired Andrew Culligan? Never before had she hired any worker for the brickyard. She said he'd been hired because of his knowledge and as a favor to a friend, but what friend? Margaret's friends were far and few between, and Ewan had never before heard any mention of a Culligan family. But he'd simply accepted her word and put the man to work operating the pug mill, the horse-drawn machine where they tempered the clay.

Before long, Margaret had reassigned Culligan to work the VerValen machinery. She'd insisted he was far too experienced to be working the pug mill. And she'd been correct. The man knew as much about brickmaking as Ewan, although the two men disagreed about quality. Ewan insisted upon proper mixing, drying, and firing to ensure the finest bricks Crothers & McKay could produce, while Mr. Culligan was prone to taking shortcuts to increase profits. The idea of those extra earnings pleased Aunt Margaret more than the production of first-rate bricks.

When Aunt Margaret had brought Mr. Culligan to the office a few weeks ago and instructed Ewan to explain all of the contracts, bookkeeping, and time records, he'd advised against the idea. “You don't know this man well at all. You shouldn't give him access to all of our financial records, Aunt Margaret. It isn't wise.”

She had vehemently argued that someone else should understand the business aspects of the C&M Brickyard. After all, what if Ewan should suffer the same fate as Hugh? What would

she do then? There would be no one to help her through the muddle. Ewan had considered telling her that Laura could help.

They had purchased the brickyard from Laura's mother, and it had been Laura who had taught Ewan how to keep the books and read contracts. And it had been Laura and Mrs. Woodfield who had introduced Ewan to the men who eventually placed large orders for C&M bricks. However, any mention of Laura's name to his aunt would only create further hostility.

Since Uncle Hugh's illness, Laura had refrained from visiting the brickyard. Aunt Margaret continued to regard Laura as an interloper who'd married Ewan with the idea of one day having the brickyard returned to the Woodfield name. Of course, this assumption was without merit, yet convincing Aunt Margaret had proved impossible.

"I suppose you were right not to tell me right away. There's nothing I could have done, but I wish there was some way I could help." Rose offered him a meager smile, but the usual shimmer had disappeared from her blue eyes.

He reached for her hand and gave it a slight squeeze. "Before this journey ends, you may be able to help me a great deal. Laura's mother is going to loan me money to purchase a new business, so there are some serious decisions to be made. But right now, we must disembark and catch our train to Grafton to tour one of them."