

THE DAUGHTERS *of* BAINBRIDGE HOUSE, BOOK 3

A RELUCTANT
COURTSHIP

Laurie Alice Eakes

A Novel


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In memory of another author
who profoundly impacted my writing,
though she was gone before I ever heard her name—
the incomparable Georgette Heyer.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.

Isaiah 61:1

1

September 1813

Miss Honore Bainbridge was about to fall off a cliff. One minute she stood examining a fissure in the stratified rock, and the next, the crack turned into a gaping hole, ready, able, and apparently eager to swallow her whole. Her feet plunged off solid ground. Her pinwheeling arms grasped a spindly shrub struggling for life above the sea, and she clung to it with about as much hope of survival as the infant bush.

She did not scream. She had opened her mouth to do so, but her middle slammed into the rock, driving the breath from her lungs in an ignominious squeak.

And there she dangled with her arms around a sapling, her feet swinging two hundred feet over the sea, and a hawk circling above as though trying to decide if her feathered hat was some kind of new small bird.

“I am not your dinner,” she gasped out to the hawk.

More like supper for several schools of fish.

At least Papa would never know that his youngest daughter had culminated her disastrous penchant for falling in love unwisely by falling off a cliff.

“I suppose this is one catastrophe you can’t get me out of, Lord?” Through gasps for air from her constricted lungs, she managed the kind of cynical prayer that had become her usual way of communicating with God of late. “I suppose you can, but it looks like—”

The shrub began to loosen from its precarious hold on the thin soil.

This time Honore screamed.

“Hold on.” A male voice sped past Honore’s ears.

She gritted her teeth. “I am . . . holding.”

A pity the bush to which she clung was not. Half its roots, connected to the earth shallowly at best, now waved in the constant wind from the sea.

Like someone saying goodbye.

Honore kicked her legs, seeking the side of the cliff, seeking a toehold. No good. Empty space met her flailing limbs. A jagged edge of broken limestone scraped along her side. Inch by inch, her torso slid toward the abyss into water foaming and roaring over a tumble of serrated rock.

“If you get . . . me out of this . . . Lord . . .” No, she was not supposed to bargain with God. She made herself stop staring at the tearing bush between her hands and gazed into a sky made of the kind of clear blue that her beaux had described as dull compared to her eyes. “Please, God?”

The shrub tore a little further. Only Honore’s arms and hands clung to the earth. Only two thready roots still clung to the thin soil.

So, apparently God did not please.

She doubted she could even make the heroine of her novel in progress endure such an incident.

Honore closed her eyes. “Will I see you in heaven, Papa?”

He would not wish to see her if she died without doing something of which he could be proud.

Hands like iron bands grasped her wrists. “I’ve got you,” an unfamiliar voice with a peculiar accent pronounced.

Honore’s eyes popped open, closed, opened even wider the second time. She was not hallucinating. A being was indeed crouched in front of her and gripping her wrists.

“Angel,” she murmured.

If angels possessed medium-dark hair and eyes, and skin too bronzed to belong to a gentleman. Perhaps angels were not gentlemen.

A giggle bubbled into Honore’s throat. She swallowed it down so as not to sound mad—laughing while she dangled off a crumbling cliff.

“No, ma’am, I’m not an angel,” the stranger said. “I’m just a flesh-and-blood man who heard you scream. Now, if you’ll—”

The cliff trembled. The rough-edged rock digging into Honore’s collarbone broke away. She wanted to scream, but tin-tasting lint seemed to have replaced the moisture in her mouth, keeping her silent.

The man flattened himself along the ground. “Let go of the bush and grip my wrists.” His voice was deep, slow, even. “I’m less likely to lose my grip that way.”

“I ca-cannot.”

“And I can’t let you go, so we’ll both go tumbling into the sea.”

She could not be responsible for another death. Nor could she get her hands to loosen their grip on the shrub.

The man’s hold tightened on her wrists. “So one of the Bain-bridge daughters is a coward.”

“Yes, me. I.” Another chunk of limestone broke away, slamming her diaphragm against the striated wall of rock. “Ooph!”

The man laughed. The gall of him.

She could not let him get away with laughing at her, this—this peasant. She would show him.

She kicked her legs as though the air was water and the motion would propel her forward. The motion set the cliff face trembling.

“Don’t move.” He yanked her hands apart, tearing her gloved fingers from their tenuous clutch on the sapling. “Now hold on to me.”

“I do not think—”

He narrowed his eyes and flashes of gold speared into hers. “I would rather live another thirty years or more. If you wouldn’t, tell me so I can let go and save my own neck.”

“Why, you heartless, unfeeling—”

A slab of cliff large enough to form a table for King Arthur and his knights broke off not a foot away. Chalky dust misted the air. Honore cried out and lunged for her rescuer. Her fingers scabbled at his shirtsleeves, tore through fabric, held.

Muttering something unintelligible above the thunder of falling rock and crashing waves, he started to rise. His body reared up from the ground. Honore slid over the edge of the cliff. What was left of her pelisse tore down the front. Muscles bulged against the sleeves of the man’s shirt. Her muscles strained, ached, surely were tearing away from her bones. Hiccuping sobs shredded her throat. Her fingertips shredded his shirtsleeves. The wristbands ripped away and she lost her hold.

But he gave a mighty heave. She slammed onto the ground. Air whooshed from her lungs.

And the earth tilted beneath her.

“Move!” He surged to his feet, dragging her up after him.

He sprinted inland. Honore followed, limping, skipping,

hopping to keep up with him. Beneath them, the cliff side shivered like a giant with the ague. Behind them, veined stone tore free and boomed into the sea. Ahead of them, a low stone wall that had graced the Devonshire coastline for centuries promised stability and safety.

Honore collapsed upon it and doubled over, gasping for breath. Her hat had vanished. One shoe likely provided a home for the fish, and even a rag picker would reject her gloves and stockings as too damaged, not to mention her skirt, pelisse, and petticoat sliced to muslin ribbons.

“You’ll be wanting this.” Soft wool settled around her shoulders.

She glanced up at him through a spill of hair freed of its pins, took in his torn shirt, and shook her head. “You look as though you need it more than I do.” She curled her fingers around the coat’s collar, intending to hand it back to him.

He stayed her fingers against the fabric. “No, Miss Bainbridge, you keep it. You, er . . .” He looked away, his ears turning a fiery shade of red beneath shining waves of auburn hair.

“But you have done enough, and—” Honore glanced down at her ruined garments and gulped.

No wonder he had given her his coat. No wonder his ears looked about to catch fire. Only her lace fichu, snagged and frayed but still in place, lay between her stays and the view of the world.

She grabbed the lapels of the coat and wrapped it across her chest. Her own ears, along with her cheeks, throat, and everything below her fichu, burned. “Th-thank you.” She kept her head bowed. “Thank you for everything. If I can repay you in any way, just give me the word.”

From the quality of his coat, his shirt—even if it was in tatters—and his buckskin breeches and Hessian boots, he did

not look in need of money. But he did not talk like a gentleman. His voice was pleasant, kind of smooth and rich like Devonshire cream. Yet he sounded like no Englishman she had ever heard, so he was likely not a gentleman. Perhaps a merchant from the provinces or one of the Channel Islands.

“I am a Bainbridge.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know.”

“Of course you do.” She twisted one of the brass buttons on his coat between her thumb and forefinger. “Then you know I have considerable influence in the county.”

And money at her disposal, since she had been left in charge of the estate by default.

He coughed. “Thank you. I don’t need any thanks or favors. I didn’t do anything any man wouldn’t have done had he been near enough to help.”

And strong enough to lift her.

“I-I think you were an answer to prayer,” she admitted.

The first one of those since Papa had died during a debate with his friends over the war with the Yankees, leaving them all shocked and devastated a month after her sister Cassandra’s wedding.

Cassandra’s elopement, the minx.

The stranger laughed. “I don’t think anyone’s ever accused me of being an answer to prayer before.” He still did not look at Honore. “Except maybe your father, God rest his soul.”

“You knew Papa?” Honore sprang to her feet, forgetting her missing shoe. The sole of her foot landed on a sharp stone and she squeaked.

He glanced at her then. “What’s—ah, a shoe is a casualty of the rock fall.”

“Yes, and I liked the pair. They fit so well and exactly matched

this gown.” Honore stared at her ragged skirt and started to laugh. Mirth bubbled up inside her chest and burst out like sea foam in a high wind, flying about without purpose or control. She tried to stop, but her chest continued to heave until tears trickled down her cheeks and the giggles metamorphosed into sobs. Covering her face with her hands, she sobbed like a babe missing its mama, deep, rasping hiccups clawing at her chest and lungs.

“There now.” The man cleared his throat, and several sheep baaed in the field beyond the wall.

Honore shook her head, tried to breathe slowly to stop the weeping, and only cried harder.

“Miss Bainbridge, you’re really all right, you know.” His big, strong hand touched her shoulder.

Honore sobbed harder, eyes squeezed shut in an attempt to stop the flow of tears, hands fisted around the ends of the too-long coat sleeves.

The coat’s owner patted her shoulder. “Hush, please. Miss Bainbridge, you’re all right now. No need to cry.”

“I-I-I know.” Honore hiccuped the words and sniffled. “I ca-cannot . . . s-stop.”

“Hmm. Well then. Um, there’s a handkerchief in the pocket of that coat.”

She fumbled through every pocket without finding anything more than the crackle of paper folded into an inside pocket. Her face grew wetter. What was left of her fichu grew wet. Finally, she drew the lapels of the man’s coat up to her face and sobbed into the soft wool smelling of sunshine and bracken and coffee, familiar, comforting aromas that reminded her of home as it had been only two years ago, before she insisted on a London Season and made amok of her debut into Society, before Papa died.

“I want my papa,” she wailed into the stranger’s coat. “Nothing bad happened to me when he was alive.”

“Nothing bad happened to you today.” The stranger smoothed a strand of her hair away from her cheek. “Not in the end. You’re safe now.”

“Without Papa, I will never be safe.”

“That’s rather illogical.” He moved a step away from her. “You scarcely ever saw him.”

“I know. I know.” Honore nodded too many times. “But nothing bad happened to me when he was alive.”

“Ha! That’s not what I’ve heard.”

Her gasp of indignation interrupted her next sob, and she jerked her head up to glare at him. “What have you heard?”

“A great deal.” He pressed a cambric handkerchief into her hand with a muttered, “Apologies. This was in my breeches pocket.”

“Indeed.” Her face hot from crying, from him mentioning his unmentionables to her, and, most of all, from his knowledge of something unsavory about her, Honore snatched the handkerchief from him and dashed it across her eyes and cheeks. Hiccuping sobs still disrupted her breathing, and she dared not speak.

“Good girl.” The stranger smiled at her. “His lordship would be ashamed of such a display from one of his daughters, wouldn’t he?”

Most definitely. But then, Papa had been ashamed of most everything she had done those last months before he died.

With one last heaving sob, her breathing returned to normal. She wiped her eyes a final time and shoved the handkerchief into the pocket of the man’s coat. “I wish those sheep were horses so I could ride home.”

And get away from this bold, kind, and rather rude stranger.

“Unfortunately, they are just sheep.” The man’s tone was abrupt. “I’ll have to carry you.”

“Sir, you cannot.” She stared up at him, her eyes wide.

He met her gaze full on, and for the first time, his eyes’ true color reached her brain. *Colors* was more accurate—brown and gold and green swirled together like paint on her sister Lydia’s pallet. The longer he looked at Honore, the more the gold stood out like sunshine breaking through a cloud bank.

She swallowed against that lint dryness in her mouth.

He swallowed too and grinned. “I can carry you. You can’t weigh more than a calf.”

“A calf?” Honore narrowed her eyes. “You just compared me to a cow.”

“A young one, small as you are.”

The corners of her mouth tightened. “I will manage to walk, thank you.”

“You’ll cut your foot to ribbons.” And without a by-your-leave, he scooped her into his arms and started along the wall toward Bainbridge Hall.

“Put me down,” Honore commanded.

Lord, please do not let anyone see me.

With her gown in tatters, her person swathed in the coat of a man whose shirt also hung in little more than ribbons, she would be ruined if someone caught sight of them and drew terrible conclusions, as people were wont to do about her of late. Ruined worse than her two disastrous courtships the previous year had left her. At least those men were gentlemen. Villainous, but gentlemen. This man was—

“I don’t even know who you are,” she blurted out.

“I beg your pardon.” He stopped and set her on her feet with the gentleness a body showed a Sèvres vase, then he granted her

a somewhat stiff but proper bow. “Allow me to present myself, since no one else is here to do the honors. I am the sixth earl of Ashmoor.”

“You—you are Lord Ashmoor?” The ground beneath her feet took on the consistency of the quaking edge of the cliff. She swayed. She pressed her fingers to her lips to cover her gaping mouth. She could not call a peer of the realm a liar. Then again, if he was a liar, he was not a peer of the realm.

“Speechless, Miss Bainbridge?” Gold sparkled in his multi-colored eyes. He crossed his arms over his chest and propped one foot on the low stone wall. “Let me see if I can help. Local gossip says I’m too ashamed of my father’s past to show my face in Devonshire, so I’m hiding out on one of the lesser estates. Or maybe you heard that I was locked up in Newgate or Dartmoor or a hulk in the Nore the instant I set foot on these hallowed shores. Is one of those stories close to the gossip you’ve heard about why the new owner of the title hasn’t yet shown his face in Devonshire?”

His wool coat grew too warm for the crisp autumn day. The heat spread all the way to her hairline, and she turned her face into the wind blowing straight from the Bristol Channel. “I, um, yes, I’ve heard all of that.”

“And it’s all true.” He let out a humorless laugh. “Don’t look so shocked. I arrived from New York after the war started and was immediately suspect.”

Honore jumped. “You are an American?”

“That, my dear, is debatable now, since I wasn’t born in the United States or England and have been invested with the title, thanks to your father.”

“Papa?” Honore stared at him. “Papa helped you accede to the title?”

“Our fathers were friends long ago, so I appealed to Lord Bainbridge when I found myself taken up for a spy the instant I arrived here.”

“And your jailers listened to you?” Honore barely suppressed a skeptical snort. “You expect me to believe they contacted a peer of the realm for a foreigner?”

He shrugged. “I was carrying a letter with a royal seal. I expect the local magistrate didn’t want to risk being wrong about my claim of who I was—er, who I am.”

“And just like that my father got you freed and accepted by the Royal College of Arms?”

If she were not missing a shoe, she would have set off across the field for home at a trot. She had spent quite enough time alone with this odd stranger with his claim of a connection to her father. More like a claim to a physician at Bedlam.

“If three months is ‘just like that,’” he responded to her with the ease of the self-assured—or someone so insane he thought he spoke the truth—“then yes, he helped me ‘just like that.’”

Honore gazed at him through narrowed eyes. “When?”

“A year ago.”

“Aha!” She backed away a step, prepared to climb over the low wall around the pasture, one shoe or not. “Papa was not in London or Devonshire a year ago.”

“He was until the end of September and again from the end of November until his passing.” He held his hand out to her without touching her. “I was with him that night, you know.”

“You were?” Honore halted her retreat. “You knew him that well?”

“By then, yes. Well enough to attend a private meeting in Cavendish Square regarding a marriage settlement.”

“A marriage settlement?” A distant bell of memory rang in

Honore's head, and she started to feel queasy. "You wanted my father to find you a wife?"

"It was his idea." He set his foot on the ground and straightened to more than a head taller than she stood. "He considered the earl of Ashmoor a suitable match for his youngest daughter."