

Jane Eyre's Rival: The Real Mrs. Rochester

by Clair Holland

Chapter 1

You almost didn't realise it was raining until you noticed that the world outside the window was no longer silent. Despite the fragile evening sun sinking low and orange in the west, fat, heavy, corpulent droplets fell from a charcoal sky overhead to beat a rhythmic percussion on the uneven roofs and crooked chimneys of old Cambridge. The gargoyles' stony faces, fractured and split by the frosts and thaws of centuries, became grotesque fountains, spurting and spluttering liquid gold down into the courtyards and private gardens of one of the oldest universities in England.

Lisa looked up. In its final throes of passion, the sunset was ebbing away, slipping between the skyscape and the clouds. It was getting dark and the library was closing. Around her students were collecting up their things and chatting to each other in hushed voices so as not to provoke the reproach of the librarians. She dismissed her thoughts, closed down the computer and collected up her books. Knowing that by now the rain would have soaked the plump seat of her bicycle, she decided to leave it where it was and escape from the rain by running from doorway to doorway. It was nearly ten o'clock, way past happy hour. As usual she had become so caught up in her work that she had forgotten to eat since lunchtime. She would make herself cheese on toast when she got back home. It was no good dropping by one of the many college student bars in the old city centre as student bars don't serve food; at best all she could get there would be a packet of crisps or some nuts.

As she skirted round the puddles and jumped over small rivulets of water rushing mindlessly down the drains to find their resting place in the black waters of the Cam, Lisa reflected on the opening chapter of the book she had begun to write. Well, it was more of a diary really, but one never knew where a diary might lead. And anyway, it was a useful exercise to capture those interesting thoughts and bits of research that would otherwise become lost in a mountain of scribbled scraps of paper and post-it notes. Writing things down to get them out of oneself and onto the page, open for examination and the possibility of new interpretations, was meant to be a cathartic experience and heaven knows she could do with some healing right now. Sure, she knew how liberating it was to be independent, but it could also sometimes be a solitary and lonely existence being a student.

Living in Cambridge and being constantly surrounded by people and parties and never being quite alone, she was still, paradoxically, lonely at times. Night times to be precise. Night times when the libraries and the bars were closed and those people who were one half of a couple would seek out and snuggle up to the other part of themselves, sharing an affectionate or passionate embrace, coming together in those brief hours to become whole at last.

Lisa was thirty-three; gorgeous, American, and single. From the perspective of an undergraduate she was kind of old to be studying at Cambridge, but these days no university is deemed truly inclusive unless it admits undergraduate and postgraduate students from every religious and geographical denomination. Even so, she was lucky to get in.

Cambridge doesn't take many Visiting Students, and Magdalene College, pronounced 'maudlin', didn't accept women at all until 1988. Yes, that's right, 1988, not 1888. This was quite a surprise to Lisa, too, when she heard it, and not much surprised her. Whilst doing her research and deciding whether to go to Oxford or Cambridge she learned that historically Cambridge was an important trading centre, popularised by the Romans who built a garrison fort here. They also built one of the first wooden bridges which crossed the river right in the centre of town, just in the place where today the old iron bridge sits by the Quayside.

Lisa was fascinated to think that Cambridge University was established in the town in the thirteenth century, with 'town and gown' rivalries still common even until the middle of the last century. Now, the University comprises thirty-one different colleges with Peterhouse being the oldest, founded in 1284, and Robinson the youngest as it was only established in 1981. Magdalene was founded in 1542, so it took more than four hundred years for Magdalene to allow women scholars through its portals. Sometimes change happens slowly in England. Lisa loved the thought that by studying in Cambridge she would become a part of living history. Her link to the past was something that she felt passionate about. After all, if it wasn't for the past she wouldn't have come here at all.

So now here she was, at one of the most breathtakingly beautiful places in England, doing postgraduate research in the sociology and psychology of relationships, trying to understand and untangle the dynamics of the things that make us who we are.

At an age that would once have been considered middle-aged, Lisa had done her fair share of travelling and as she would readily admit to her friends, had successfully lurched from one bad relationship to another. Unlike Greta Garbo, she hadn't wanted to be alone and being with someone she even half fancied had seemed somehow preferable to being single.

Boy, what a mistake that had been; trying to become the perfect girlfriend and morphing into someone else's expectations of herself, rather than finding out who she really was and what she really wanted out of life. So now she had decided to spend some time getting to know herself before she invested any more time in getting to know someone else. Thinking about it, she reckoned that she'd avoided getting to know the real Lisa for a long time. She'd been scared that there was something wrong with her, scared that she was somehow rotten at the core, so she ran away from herself. She'd been frightened that she wouldn't like the person she was inside, terrified that underneath her layers of coping strategies, which kept her safe and warm like so many jumpers from a charity shop, that she really was as worthless as she sometimes felt.

But both her history and her future had brought her here to Cambridge, trying to learn more about herself and the legacy of madness that her family have given her; her final attempt to unravel and understand the past like a kitten chasing a ball of wool.

Not exactly black, but not exactly white either, Lisa knew what it's like to be displaced, living some kind of half-life; not fitting in with the rest of society and yet somehow having to find her place within it. A curious combination of being on the outside looking in and yet also being on the inside looking out at the same time. The paradox of multiple perspectives. She had often been told that she resembled her great, great, great grandmother; that they shared the same green eyes and pale coffee latte colouring. According to one of her aunts she had the same long limbs and dancer's body. Lithe, taught and strong. A lucky inheritance. Although not everything that Lisa had inherited from her was quite so fortunate.

Does every family have its secrets? Stories told in hushed voices that are whispered down the generations through the gossamer curtain of time. Lisa had first heard her family story sitting on her grandmother's knee years before she learned to read. The 'family secret'. The skeleton in the closet shared only between the women: the mothers, daughters and sisters, aunts and cousins. A story passed down to each of them as a warning.

The tale you are about to hear is one of passion and intrigue, of greed and guilt, of cold-blooded murder and of utter ruthlessness. It is a story of grief and survival, of forbidden love and of the darkness of revenge. But it is also a love story. A tale of compassion and forgiveness, and ultimately, of triumph over adversity. It is a story of hope, of a journey to find someone with whom you can truly be yourself. If you want an uplifting tale of tenderness and of the healing power of love and touch you will find it here. If you want to know that love really can conquer all, you will also find that lesson here. If you are looking for something but you are not quite sure what, or if you are looking for someone but you are not quite sure who, read on.

"Reader, I married him", said Jane Eyre in one of the most famous lines of English romantic literature. Yes Jane, indeed you did marry him. But someone else got there before you, and she was Lisa's great, great, great, great grandmother.

This is the story of the first Mrs Rochester. The real story. Not the convenient version that Charlotte Brontë wrote for *Jane Eyre*, but the story of what really happened. Everyone, probably you included, believes that Mr Rochester's first wife was mad. But the real story is very different. Very different indeed. Lisa only had one picture of her. A miniature portrait commissioned for her wedding day. That fateful union with Mr Edward Fairfax Rochester. She seems happy enough behind the glass, dewy eyed in love with no hint of fear or the insanity that was to come. According to family history there were no portraits after that time. It wouldn't have been advisable. She was meant to be dead after all.