

The Reluctant Heiress

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Dilly Court

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HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2021

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN:978-0-00-828790-0 (HB)

ISBN:978-0-00-828791-7 (B)

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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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Set in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk,
Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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*For Barbara Blisset whose wonderful book
on Walthamstow and her memories of living
there were inspirational.*

Chapter One

East India Docks, London 1858

Katherine Martin stood on the upper deck of the steamship *Aldebaran*. She took a deep breath of the none-too-clean London air, tainted by the stench of the river mud and the manufactories on the banks of the Thames. It was a cold and rainy February day and the monochrome tones of her surroundings were a complete contrast to the heat, dust and vibrant colours of India, but it was home, and freedom from the terrors she and her parents had encountered at the start of the uprising. They were some of the fortunate ones whose loyal servants had helped them to escape from Delhi moments before the rebel army attacked. Kate recalled with a shudder the night when they had left the luxurious home of her uncle Edgar, who held a senior position in the

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East India Company. It had been a long and terrifying journey, but somehow, and with the help and goodwill of many villagers along the way, they had arrived in Bombay. They had stayed at the home of Sir Robert Audley, Uncle Edgar's solicitor, and a letter of introduction to the manager of Uncle Edgar's bank had been enough to secure funds for their return to London, travelling first class, and the basic necessities of clothing.

'Don't just stand there, Kate. I've sent Fellowes to find a cab.' Sir Bartholomew Martin tapped the deck with his silver-headed malacca cane. He was not a patient man. How he had managed to hold on to the wretched stick throughout their hair-raising experiences was still a mystery to Kate. However, she was used to her father's bursts of ill temper and she brushed past him, heading to where her mother was waiting at the top of the companionway.

'Are you all right, Mama?' Kate asked anxiously. 'You look very pale.'

'It's the half-light, my dear. I'll be fine when we get home. I long for a comfortable bed and a hot bath, and especially a change of clothes. I will put everything we've been forced to wear for all these weeks in the missionary barrel at the church.'

'I don't know,' Kate said, smiling. 'Having only two or three choices does make dressing much less of a chore.'

'You see the bright side of every situation, Kate.' Arabella Martin sighed and glanced anxiously at

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her husband. 'Your papa looks angry. What has upset him now?'

'He's just miffed because Fellowes is taking his time.' Kate kept a straight face with difficulty. Her father, who had been a magistrate in Delhi for three years, was used to having his orders obeyed instantly and without question.

'Perhaps our luggage has been lost,' Arabella said anxiously. 'Maybe that's why Fellowes is taking so long.'

'We only have three cases and a carpet bag. I'm sure I could carry most of them on my own.' Kate leaned over the side and waved. 'There he is now, and I think he's found a carriage. We'd best hurry or someone else might snatch it, and I want to get you home as soon as possible, Mama.'

'Come along, ladies. What are you waiting for?' Sir Bartholomew shooed them down the steps to the next deck as if he were herding sheep.

Fellowes, Sir Bartholomew's valet, was guarding the hackney carriage as if it were made of solid gold, but there was considerable competition for its services. The former passengers of the *Aldebaran* staggered around with a rolling gait, as if the ship's deck were still beneath their feet, as they sought desperately for transport to take them to their final destination.

'Get in, Arabella,' Sir Bartholomew said testily. 'You, too, Katherine. Don't dawdle.'

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Kate faced him angrily. ‘Can’t you see that Mama is exhausted?’

‘Don’t use that tone with me, miss. You may be twenty-one, but you’re under my jurisdiction until you marry. Then some other man will have the task of keeping you in order.’

Fellowes raised an expressive eyebrow as he helped Kate into the cab, barely allowing Arabella time to settle her voluminous skirts around her.

‘Thank you, Fellowes,’ Kate said loudly. ‘You may sit next to me.’

‘Fellowes will sit up with the driver.’ Sir Bartholomew fixed his servant with a stern gaze.

‘Of course, sir.’ Fellowes closed the door.

Kate cast a worried glance at her mother, who had suffered from chronic malaise during their time in Delhi. The climate in India had not suited her, but perhaps now they were back in London her mother’s health would improve. Kate sat back, gazing out of the window at the mean streets that surrounded the docks as the cabby urged his horse to a brisk trot. When they had left England three years previously, they had sailed from Southampton. Although they had lived in the centre of London at the time, Kate had never been this far into the East End. It was quite shocking to see such poverty, with barefoot children running wild. Feral dogs and cats were slinking around in the shadows, snarling and fighting over the tiniest scrap of food. Kate had seen poverty in India, although she had never been

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allowed to go out and explore on her own. She suspected that care had been taken to avoid the poorest quarters of the cities she had visited, but she was appalled now to see small, ragged children and the elderly begging on street corners in such terrible weather.

She closed her eyes to shut out the unpleasant sights, casting her mind back to happier times when life seemed to be a round of parties and balls at the barracks. Kate turned her head away from her parents as tears seeped through her closed eyelids. She was transported back to the candlelit ballroom where she had first met Subedar-Major Ashok Patel, who had been assigned to ensure that she and her family had everything they needed during their time in Delhi. He had bowed over her hand, and when their eyes met she knew that she had found her destiny. Ash had held her hand as if he would never let her go, and at that moment she would have been prepared to follow him to the end of time. His dark eyes, lit by glints of pure gold, had kept her captive and his handsome face still haunted her dreams. They had danced every dance that magical evening, although it was against all the rules, and had caused heads to turn. A young lady of her class was not supposed to mix with the natives, which was something that her mother had drummed into her even before they had arrived in India. The divisions were there for a reason and must be obeyed. Despite the fact that Subedar-Major Patel had earned his promotion by his gallant

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actions in skirmishes on the North-West Frontier, he was, Sir Bartholomew had said at length, not a suitable companion for any daughter of his. Kate had been forbidden to see Ash again. However, the old saying ‘love laughs at locksmiths’ had proved true and they had managed to meet in secret. Ash told her later that his commanding officer had also warned him of the consequences of such a liaison, but the objections of their elders hardly seemed to matter.

Over a period of several months Kate had spent as much time with Ash as possible. She discovered that he was an Anglo-Indian. His mother, the daughter of an English employee of the East India Company, had died in childbirth. Ashok’s father, a captain in the cavalry, had been killed in action some years previously. His family were as much against mixed blood marriages as Ash’s maternal grandparents, and Ash had been sent to boarding school. Kate remembered comparing him to a cuckoo in the nest, and when she had explained the metaphor they had both laughed at the ridiculousness of the social mores that were affecting them even then.

Kate leaned her head against the cold window glass; recalling the good times only intensified the agony of their parting. It was Ash who had risked everything to help them get away that terrible night, but he had insisted that it was his duty as a soldier to return to his unit. The tenderness of their last embrace still burned upon Kate’s lips, and the salt tears that trickled down her cheeks now had the

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bitterness of gall. The long sea voyage had kept her in total ignorance of the progress of the rebellion and there was no way of knowing whether Ash was alive or dead. Kate was alone in her misery, for there was no one in whom she could confide. She knew she would get no sympathy from either of her parents.

The hackney carriage trundled onwards, rumbling over cobblestones, each turn of the wheel and every hoof beat taking Kate further away from the ship, which was her last connection with India and the man she loved. She shot a surreptitious glance at her parents, but her father was glaring into space and tapping his malacca cane impatiently on the floor of the cab, and her mother was lying back with her eyes closed. Kate dashed her tears away on the back of her hand and struggled to compose herself. Her heartbreak was hers to bear on her own, and she would have to find an alternative way of living her life. Marriage for her was out of the question. She could not imagine any man taking Ashok's place in her heart, but there must be something she could do that would give her a new purpose.

The carriage was slowing down and as she wiped the steamed-up glass she realised that they were pulling up outside her old home in Finsbury Square. Lights blazed from the windows on all floors and the front door opened to reveal a uniformed footman.

'Papa, we're home at last,' Kate said with a heart-felt sigh. 'Mama, wake up. We've arrived.'

Fellowes opened the cab door and Sir Bartholomew

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alighted first. He marched up the front steps, leaving Kate to help her mother from the carriage, while Fellowes paid the cabby. Henry, the footman who had served the family for many years, moved swiftly to assist them.

‘You’ll have to excuse the state of the house, my lady,’ he said earnestly. ‘We only got the letter informing us of your imminent arrival this morning. Mrs Marsh and the servants are in a real state.’

‘Oh dear.’ Arabella’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Well, never mind, Henry. All I want is my nice comfortable bed, a warm fire and a hot drink.’

‘I’m sure we can arrange that, Mama,’ Kate said softly. She tucked her mother’s limp hand through the crook of her arm. ‘We can manage, if you would help Fellowes with the luggage, please, Henry?’

‘Of course, Miss Katherine.’

‘You must be exhausted, Mama.’

‘I am perfectly capable of walking up the steps into my own home.’ Arabella teetered off, swaying slightly as she crossed the pavement and ascended the steps to the front door.

Kate followed her parents into the elegant five-storey house that had been her childhood home. She could hear her mother’s querulous voice and the deeper responses from their housekeeper, Mrs Marsh. Housemaids were scurrying from room to room, their arms filled with holland covers. There was no sign of her father, and Kate felt safe in assuming that he had gone straight to his study.

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‘I have had a fire lit in your bedchamber, my lady.’ Mrs Marsh turned to Kate with a pained expression. ‘We only heard of your arrival this morning, Miss Katherine. I’ve had to hire maids and scrub women because we weren’t prepared.’

‘My mother is worn out,’ Kate said firmly. ‘We’ll have to employ a new lady’s maid as soon as possible, but in the meantime have you someone who could fill that position on a temporary basis?’

‘There’s my daughter, Jenny. She’s only sixteen but she worked for Lady Dalrymple for a few months, so she knows how things should be done.’ Mrs Marsh lowered her voice. ‘She only left because Sir Horace was rather free with his attentions, if you know what I mean?’

‘That must have been very disturbing for her. I do remember Jenny. She was a skinny little thing who was always singing.’

A reluctant smile deepened the creases on Mrs Marsh’s lined face. ‘That’s my Jenny. A ray of sunshine, if you’ll pardon the expression. Shall I send her up to my lady’s room?’

‘By all means, and she should take a pot of tea and some bread and butter. Cake would be nice, if you have any.’

‘Leave it with me, Miss Katherine. What about yourself and Sir Bartholomew?’

‘I expect my father will dine at his club, and I’ll be happy with a light supper.’

‘There’s a fire in the morning parlour. I didn’t

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know whether you'd get here today or tomorrow. We're all at sixes and sevens.'

Kate could see that Mrs Marsh was genuinely upset at the lack of preparations. 'That suits me very well. I'll be retiring to my room early – it's been a long journey and an equally tiring day.' She did not add that the emotional strain of leaving the man she loved and not knowing if he were alive or dead had affected her more than she would have thought possible.

'I'm sure we all understand, Miss Katherine. We've been reading about the terrible goings-on in that country in the newspapers. Thank the Lord you were all spared and have come home safe and sound.'

'Yes, indeed.' Kate realised that Mrs Marsh was eager to learn more of their escape, but she could not bring herself to talk about it now, or perhaps ever. Some things were best forgotten, if that were possible. 'I'd better let you get on, Mrs Marsh. It's good to be home.'

Mrs Marsh inclined her head and turned away slowly, but if she hoped that Kate would change her mind and pass on more information she was doomed to disappointment.

Kate set off towards the morning parlour. The house seemed too large, too echoing and too cold. She missed India and the privileged life she had led there: it was another world and a land of extremes. Until the uprising each day had been an adventure – now she had come back to reality. The smell of carbolic soap mingled with that of beeswax polish,

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and there was a hint of burning soot in the stuffy morning parlour.

An hour later, after a supper of soup followed by bread and cheese, eaten on her own, huddled by a desultory fire, Kate went upstairs to her bedroom. The curtains had not been drawn and she went over to the window, gazing down into the square. It was quite dark now and the trees in the residents' private garden had a fairy-like quality, shimmering in the gaslight. A few tender young leaves fluttered bravely against the chilly wind, and the first early tulips stood to attention like soldiers on parade in the well-kept flowerbeds. She drew the curtains and was relieved to find a nightgown laid out for her on the bed. She was about to undress when there was a timid knock on the door.

‘Come in.’

A young woman, barely more than a girl, rushed into the room and came to a halt by the bed. ‘Ma thought you might need a hand to get undressed, miss.’

‘You’ve changed quite a bit since I last saw you, Jenny,’ Kate said, smiling.

‘So have you – that’s if you don’t mind me saying so, miss?’

‘Not at all. We’ve both grown up a lot in three years. I believe you are going to be my mother’s maid, until she can find a replacement for Bennett.’

‘Yes, miss. That’s right. But I could be your maid, too, if you so wish.’

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Kate thought of the beautiful Mira, who had been assigned to her in Delhi. Mira had anticipated Kate's needs, fulfilling her duties with serene dignity and grace. There could be no comparison, of course, but there was something about Jenny's eagerness and simple honesty that was both warming and refreshing.

'I think that would be a very good idea, Jenny. You may start by bringing me a jug of warm water so that I can wash off some of the city dirt before I go to bed. In India my maid used to float rose petals in the washbowl.'

Jenny wrinkled her nose. 'Funny habits them foreigners have. I wouldn't fancy washing my face with all them greenfly swishing around in the water, not to mention the odd bug.' She left the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind her.

Kate laughed for the first time since she had left Delhi, and then she began to cry. The tears that she had shed since parting with Ash were nothing compared to the heart-broken sobs that now shook her whole body. She collapsed on the bed, unable to control her pent-up emotions for a moment longer, but the storm of crying had passed by the time Jenny reappeared with the water. She set the jug down on the washstand and moved to the side of the bed.

'You're tired out, miss. Upsadaisy, now. Let's get you washed and into your nightie. I was just the same as you after I come back from Lady Dalrymple's place. Run all the way, I did, and when I come home I didn't know if I was to get a clip round the ear

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or a cuddle. Got both, as it happened, but Ma never made me go back there.' Jenny helped Kate to her feet and undressed her, talking all the time so that there was no need for Kate to respond other than a nod every now and then.

When Kate was settled in bed, propped up by a soft bank of pillows, Jenny stood back with a nod of approval. 'That's better. I'll fetch you a nice hot cup of chocolate, shall I? I knows that Ma has some in because I was sent out special to fetch some when she got the letter to say you was arriving today. Your ma just drank a cup and she lay back in bed and was asleep afore I got to the door.' She left the room without waiting to see if her suggestion had been accepted.

Kate sighed and closed her eyes. Sometimes it was nice to be treated like a child again. Tomorrow she would organise herself and start a new life back in London. She would put all thoughts of Ash, India and the events she had witnessed from her mind. It would all be forgotten – it must be forgotten, or she would go mad with grief. She drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

There was a strained atmosphere next morning at breakfast. Sir Bartholomew was hidden behind the pages of *The Times*, lowering it only to ask someone to pass the butter or marmalade. Arabella looked pale with dark shadows under her eyes, and Kate was concerned.

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‘Did you sleep well, Mama?’

‘Yes, although I think I was overtired.’

Sir Bartholomew rattled the crisp pages of the newspaper. ‘Might we take breakfast in silence? I have only a few minutes to study current affairs before I have to leave for my chambers.’

‘You are not returning to work today, are you, my dear?’ Arabella asked wearily. ‘Surely you will allow yourself one day of rest after the long journey.’

‘Nonsense. Of course I must. I’m not a gentleman of leisure, Arabella. Thanks to the rebellion my position with the East India Company is no longer tenable, and I need to re-establish myself in my old practice. Heaven knows what state it’s in financially after leaving Harte in charge for three years.’

Kate toyed with the buttered eggs on her plate. She was not hungry, but she knew it would cause a fuss if she did not eat.

‘I thought you trusted Peregrine Harte, Papa.’

Sir Bartholomew shot her a warning glance. ‘This has nothing to do with you, Katherine.’

‘But he’s such a nice young man,’ Arabella said timidly. ‘You always spoke highly of him, my dear.’

‘Niceness doesn’t necessary equate with efficiency, Arabella. But I wouldn’t expect either of you to understand anything about business. That’s my prerogative, and I intend to go to Lincoln’s Inn this morning and surprise Harte and the rest of those who work for me. They will have to account for themselves if I’m not satisfied with their performance.’ Sir Bartholomew

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folded his newspaper and laid it on the table as he rose from his seat. 'Don't allow the servants to dispose of this – I'll study it later, after dinner. By the way, I have a fancy for lamb collops – tell Cook – and apple pie with custard. I want proper English food again.'

'Yes, dear. I'll speak to Cook this morning.'

Kate waited until her father had left the dining room. 'Why do you let him speak to you like that, Mama?'

'It's just his way.' Arabella turned away to dab her lips on her white damask table napkin, but not before Kate had seen her mother's eyes redden with unshed tears.

'You have allowed him to bully you, and now he does it all the time.'

'He is the head of the household, Kate, dear. You will have to give in to your husband when you marry. It's how things are done.'

Kate pushed her plate away. 'Not by me, Mama. If a man tried to dominate me like that I would not put up with it.'

A wan smile curved Arabella's lips. 'So you say now, but it's different once you have a wedding ring on your finger. Your husband will own you and all that you possess, and any children you may be lucky enough to have will belong to him. That's the law, and I don't think it will ever change, because men make up the rules and we women have to abide by them.'

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Kate had a sudden vision of the fighting she had witnessed outside her uncle's palatial residence in Delhi, and she shuddered. 'Then it's time women stood up for themselves.'

'Don't let your father hear you saying things like that, Kate. He would be most displeased.'

'Yes, Mama, I know.' Kate bit back the harsh words that sprang to her lips. She was tired of seeing her mother browbeaten and bullied without uttering a word of reproach, but she also knew that nothing she could do or say would change either of her parents. 'Is there anything I can do to help today? You really should rest.'

'If you would speak to Cook and tell her what your papa has requested for dinner tonight that would be an enormous weight off my mind. I think I might go to my room and rest for a while longer. I'm sure Mrs Marsh can handle things perfectly well without me.'

'Yes, of course.' Kate stood up, leaving her food barely touched. 'I'll go now.'

'You need not worry unduly about money, my dear,' Arabella said hastily. 'Despite what your papa said about his chambers' finances, we still have an income from your late grandfather's estate, although, of course, your uncle Edgar inherited the bulk of the fortune.'

'That's a comfort, Mama. At least I know that you will be looked after, no matter what.' Kate left the room and headed along the corridor to the green

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baize door that separated the family above stairs from the servants' quarters and kitchens.

A burst of steam enveloped her as she entered the large room in the basement. Cook was sprawled in a chair by the range while a young kitchen maid struggled to knead a large mound of bread dough.

'Don't tickle it, you stupid girl. Pummel the dough, pretend it is your worst enemy—' Cook broke off as she spotted Kate standing in the doorway. She heaved herself to her feet. 'Excuse me, Miss Kate. I didn't see you there.'

There was a sudden awkward silence, and a young slavey emerged from the steamy scullery, wiping her hands on her already wet apron. Kate held up her hand. 'Please don't stop on my account. I've come to give you the order for dinner tonight, Mrs Pugh.'

Cook swallowed convulsively and the colour deepened on her red cheeks. 'I've already started boiling the ox head, Miss Kate. I haven't had time to order meat from the butcher.'

'My father has requested lamb collops followed by apple pie and custard. I'm sure that isn't beyond the bounds of possibility.'

'But the stew is already simmering on the hob, miss. We wasn't expecting you until tomorrow and I got no one to send to market to get what I need to make such a meal.'

'If you give me a list I'll go,' Kate said firmly. 'I have nothing else to do.'

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‘But you can’t go to market on your own, miss. It just ain’t done.’

‘I can do anything I want, Mrs Pugh.’

‘I’ll go with Miss Kate.’ Jenny bustled into the kitchen. ‘I’ve just helped Lady Martin upstairs to her room, so I’m not needed for a while.’

‘You’re getting above yourself, Jenny Marsh. You ain’t officially a lady’s maid, you know.’

‘Yes, she is, Mrs Pugh,’ Kate said firmly. ‘Jenny is my mother’s personal maid and mine as well. I will go to market, and Jenny will show me the way. She can help me to carry the items you require. Jenny, please make a list while I get ready to go out.’

It was a bright morning, still very chilly by Kate’s standards, but the sun was shining and it was good to be out of the house. Jenny knew all the backstreets and she suggested that they should walk rather than take a cab to the market. The route took Kate through areas she had not known until now, and when they finally cut through Lincoln’s Inn on their way to Clare Market, Kate was shocked to see the poverty of the surrounding narrow streets and alleyways. The stark contrast between the sedate environs of Lincoln’s Inn and the narrow, poverty-stricken streets took her breath away. Jenny, however, seemed quite at home and unafraid of the men who gathered together, huddled over burning braziers, calling out in a way that would have caused Kate’s mother to faint with horror. Jenny merely laughed as she steered

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Kate to the butcher's shop that she said Cook preferred, and having purchased the meat they bought vegetables and apples from one of the many costermongers' stalls.

Jenny knew the pieman who walked amongst the crowd selling his wares, and she persuaded Kate to buy one and see if she agreed that it was the best she had ever eaten. In the end they shared a pie with a glistening golden crust, stuffed with tasty beef and onions. Kate tried to ignore the hollow-eyed stare of the ragged, barefoot children who followed them like hungry birds ready to swoop on fallen crumbs. She bought a bag of buns from a passing vendor and tossed it to the nearest child, who was lost beneath a sea of flailing arms and legs as the others fell on him in an attempt to steal the food.

'Best walk on, miss,' Jenny said in a low voice. 'Don't stop for nothing.'

They had reached the comparative safety of Lincoln's Inn when a stern voice called Kate's name.

'Oh, my goodness,' she said with her mouth full of pie. 'That's my papa. What shall I do now, Jenny? He'll have a fit if he knows I've been to the market.'

'Run,' Jenny said, laughing. 'Run as fast as you can.'