

THE MASQUERADE

A LEGACY OF LOVE NOVEL



MELANIE DOBSON

EMBER ROTH BOOKS

I have loved the stars too fondly
to be fearful of the night

Galileo Galilei

NOVEMBER 6, 1812

Where are you, Jonah?

Four days I've prayed day and night for your return. Four days I've listened for your whistle outside our windows, for the sound of your footsteps as you walk through the door. But everything has been quiet, terribly so.

The children and I, we haven't left the lighthouse. And we won't, not until I find out what happened to you. I burn the lamp at night for you, hoping you will see it and return in the darkness.

If only I knew where you went. If I only knew when you would come home.

Please God. Please send my husband home.

CHAPTER 1



JUNE 1894

Wind gusted over the bow of the *Manitou* and whistled under the canopy of her deck. Below the deck, a pipe organ entertained those women who wouldn't think of mussing their hair or wrinkling their beaded gowns as the steamer maneuvered through the Straits of Mackinac.

The deck was crowded with men smoking cigars and talking about whether or not their fine country would recover from the utter failure of the economy, but Elena Bissette wasn't talking with the men. She stood against the railing and clung to the organza band that encircled her new hat, trying to keep it from drowning in the choppy waters that marked the juncture of Lakes Michigan and Huron. Strands of light brown hair tangled around her face, and she tried unsuccessfully to secure them behind her ears with her gloved fingers. The breeze tugged at her hair like a child wanting to play, but she couldn't join in. Not until she was alone.

Jillian had pinned up Elena's hair an hour ago in an elegant French twist. Her hair would be a disaster by the time they reached Mackinac Island—and so would her mother, once she

saw Elena's hair. When her mother emerged on the deck, Elena knew exactly what she would say.

Elena Ingrid Bissette. Her fists would ball up against her wide hips. *You're not supposed to be outside in the wind. You're supposed to be in the stateroom until our arrival, waiting with your father and me.*

The admonitions raged louder in Elena's mind, drowning out the roar of the wind and waves.

What if he saw you like this, Elena? What would he do?

Mama would snap her fingers. *He'd move on to the next girl. Just like that. And there will be plenty of young ladies on Mackinac this summer, plenty of pretty girls.*

Tears would follow in perfect dramatic time, just a few of them to inspire the necessary dose of guilt. Then her mother would lean even closer.

Are you trying to ruin what's left of our lives?

Elena laughed in spite of herself. As if tangled hair could ruin the Bissette family name.

She batted the hair out of her eyes, trying to get a view of the island. Elena wasn't trying to ruin anyone's life—her mother was perfectly capable of doing that on her own.

Nor did she care what *he* thought of her, not one bit. In fact, she almost wanted him to see her like this, with disheveled hair and tangled pink ribbons. Then they wouldn't have to waste their time on all of the calling and courting. Once he got to know her, she was certain he wouldn't propose.

"I see the hotel," one of the gentlemen said on the crowded deck beside her. He held up his binoculars and pointed at the lump of an island on the port side. Neither he nor any of the men around her seemed the least bit concerned about their hair.

The white columns of the Grand Hotel's wide veranda came into view, perched up on the western bluff. The late morning sun glimmered against the endless rows of windows, beckoning the island's guests through its elegant doors.

Almost every June during Elena's nineteen years, the Bissette

family flocked to the island and Grand Hotel for its dances, banquets, and elaborate balls. They mingled with other members of the higher society in Chicago and Detroit as well as hundreds of people desperate to climb the ranks.

Her family had once held a high rung on this ladder, but their position had fallen with the collapse of the economy. Invitations to dinners and dances had tapered off in Chicago, and if her mother's plans didn't succeed, this would be her family's last year summering on the island. And probably their last year mingling with Chicago's elite.

A seagull dipped in front of the boat—if only she could grasp onto his wings and fly. She wasn't particular as to where they would go at the moment. Just someplace far away.

The steamer cruised past the hotel and toward the harbor at the southern tip of the island. Elena's long skirts swayed with the wind, rocking as the steamer bumped over the strait. A gentleman edged into the crowd beside her, leaning over the rail with his gray bowler hat in hand.

She felt his eyes upon her, and when she glanced over at the blue laughter in them, her own smile froze. Even in his silence, she knew Oliver Parker Randolph III was teasing her.

Parker grinned at her and pointed at the island with the hat. "She's a beaut, isn't she?"

Elena closed her eyes to him and the breeze. She'd managed to ignore him through the ship's dinner last night and then during the entertainment hour of music and magic afterward. If she pretended he wasn't here now, perhaps he would vanish like the toad in the magician's box.

But Parker didn't go away. When she felt him turn toward her, she scrunched her eyes even tighter, wishing for that magic box.

"You can't ignore me forever, Lanie."

Elena cringed at the name he'd picked for her a decade ago, but she refused to acknowledge him.

Parker tapped her hand, and she snapped it back. But even as she hid her hand in her skirts, she knew it was useless. No matter how hard she tried, ignoring Parker Randolph would only make him more determined to get her attention.

Her eyes still closed, she spoke to the wind. "You're not supposed to be talking to me."

"Says who?"

"Your mother, and probably your father as well."

"Ah." Parker paused, and for a moment, she thought he had left. She stole a glance to her left, but he was still there, watching her. "They're being ridiculous."

"It doesn't matter."

He rested his elbows on the railing. "We are going to be friends again this summer, Lanie. Wait and see."

Elena turned her face from Parker and scanned the harbor and village beyond. It had taken her mother mere days to concoct a new plan for the summer, one that no longer involved Parker Randolph or his family. Mama had set her sights on someone much wealthier and more powerful than the Randolphs. Someone with far better connections.

White-winged yachts and sailing boats were moored on both sides of the pier. On the hill above the harbor, a stone wall surrounded the imposing Fort Mackinac. To the right of the fort, settled among the cedar and pine trees of the eastern bluff, was a row of summer cottages.

The word *cottage* usually implied a small bungalow of sorts, but there was nothing small about the cottages on Mackinac Island. Owners took great pride in their palatial cottaged mansions, designing each house a little bigger than the last so theirs would stand out among the others. Some houses had massive white columns that made them look as if they had been imported from the Greek isles. Others were layered with porches and towers and ornate designs on the eaves. Some were stained dark while others were painted white or yellow. Papa

had named their cottage Castle Pines, and she could see its white turret towering above the trees.

The wind eased as they drew closer to the pier. She eyed the dozens of men in blue dress uniforms below them. “Where are the soldiers going?”

Parker turned around, placing his bowler hat on his head. “Now don’t you worry, there will be plenty of men left on the island.”

“I wasn’t worried—”

A gunshot blasted through the sound of wind, and Elena hopped away from the railing. Even after all her summers on Mackinac, she still jumped at the cannon salute that greeted them at the pier.

Parker leaned back on the railing, his elbows resting on the wood. “You think the British are shooting at us?”

She straightened her hat. Parker knew very well that the British hadn’t occupied the island since 1815, when the second war of independence ended. “I don’t think any such thing.”

He winked at her, and she wanted to push him overboard. He knew the gunshots frightened her, but he also knew as well as she did the importance of minding one’s tongue. People in their circle didn’t dare show a hint of weakness or insecurity.

As she straightened her skewed hat, Elena checked her silver hatpins to make sure they were still in place. Often she felt like an actress, living each hour on a stage for everyone to see. Every moment of the Bissette script was like a scene from a play, except that there was no final act, no standing ovation. The curtain rarely came down on the theater of her life.

For the next two months, she’d be paraded like a show horse while attending teas and dances and social events. But in the midst of all the socializing, she would escape for a few nights to her own refuge hidden away on the island, a place where she could step off the stage.

The gun blasted two more times.

Parker moved even closer to her. “There’s nothing to be nervous about, Lanie.”

She nudged her nose a bit higher in the air. “I told you, I’m not worried.”

The steamer slowed beside the pier, and the first mate roped a post, pulling the boat close. A bell rang out, and a few of the soldiers waved up at them. Elena waved back, more to ignore the man next to her than anything else.

She almost wished she could stow away on the boat and return to Chicago.

“There you are!”

Elena turned to watch Mama’s stately eyes constrict at the sight of Elena’s tousled hair around her shoulders. Mama’s mouth dropped ever so slightly.

A stranger might not notice the sag in her mother’s jaw or the lines forming around her eyes, but Elena prepared herself for the inquisition. Mama saw Parker beside her and reached for Elena’s hand, pulling her to her side as if she were rescuing her daughter from a dragon.

Parker tilted his hat. “A good morning to you, Mrs. Bissette.”

Mama didn’t reply, retreating toward the stairway with her daughter, but Elena heard her father reply with a “good morning” in return. Her chest swelled a bit with pride at her father, at his being kind even when the Randolph family had sought to destroy him and his business. She glanced over her shoulder, and her father flashed a brief smile at her. She grinned back at him.

When they reached the second floor, Mama stopped for a moment in the corridor. Her dark brown hair was covered by the wide brim on her new hat—a design of ivory tulle and mauve ostrich feathers—and her mauve parasol matched the accents on her traveling gown. She set her parasol against a stateroom door and tried to improve the condition of Elena’s

hair by brushing the loose strands over her ears and back up under her hat before they made their entrance on Mackinac.

Then she pinched Elena's cheeks.

"Mama." Elena groaned, pushing her hands away.

She reached for Elena's cheeks again. "Mr. Darrington might have arrived before us."

Elena took a step back. "If he did, I don't want him to see my mother pinching my face."

Mama studied her for a moment, seeming to contemplate what to do. But before she replied, Elena's father ducked under the staircase to join them in the corridor.

"There's no time to dillydally, ladies," he said. "Our landau is waiting."

Mama's gloves retreated to the folds of her skirt as Papa passed them, one hand on his cane and the other steadying himself against the banister. She glanced at Elena's cheeks one more time, as if she might not be able to resist adding color to them. Elena quickly scooted around her father in a very unlady-like manner.

The captain directed them toward the gangplank, and Elena paused to straighten the puffy sleeves on her shoulders and take a long breath before they stepped onto the pier. Her mother looped her arm through Elena's and fixed a composed, staged smile on her face for their walk across the wooden plank. Everyone knew that a good entrance almost guaranteed a successful dance, dinner, or, in this case, entire summer.

Elena picked up her skirts and stepped onto the pier, soldiers and vacationers alike crowding both sides of her. Smells of tobacco and manure and the faint scent of lilac clung to the humid air.

Carriages and hansom cabs lined up at the end of the pier, and in the chaos, someone bumped her mother's arm.

"Good heavens," Mama murmured, clutching her parasol with both hands. "Why are all these people here?"

One of the soldiers lifted his dark blue cap with a wide smile on his lips. "We're going home, ma'am."

"But—" Mama's voice lowered and she turned toward Elena. "Why are they leaving now?"

"They're probably running away from us," Papa replied a little too loudly.

Mama shot a look across the pale pink ribbons on Elena's shoulders to silence him. Then, in a blink, that placid smile returned to her mother's face. It was an art, really.

A low breeze emanated from the lake and across the crowd, and Elena reached up with her free arm to secure her hat.

"Stop clutching it," Mama whispered, the smile perfectly intact.

Elena didn't let go. "But the wind."

"Jillian pinned it, didn't she?"

"I suppose, but—"

"You look like a laundress carrying a basket on your head."

Elena slowly released the brim of her hat, her hand falling to her side.

"Head up," Mama instructed.

Elena sighed inwardly, even as she nudged her chin a bit higher. Then she smiled as pleasantly as possible into the crowd of strangers.

No one was looking at them, or so it seemed. Though Mama would say that everyone of importance was keenly aware of who was on the pier and what each of the other important people were doing.

As their family stepped through the crowd away from the boat, another swift gust of wind rustled over the pier. It skipped and danced across Elena's face, whispering to her again.

Come. Play.

But she couldn't run with it, nor could she play.

Her eyes focused straight in front of her, her hands at her side. She tried to ignore the wind as she had before. This time it

refused her the pleasure. Like a naughty child, it snagged the hat from her head and dangled it above her just beyond her reach.

Mama gasped as the organza ribbons on the hat flapped like a sail, the feathers fluttering and struggling in the wind's grasp. Elena leaped toward her hat, trying to recover it, but the wind taunted her and tossed it toward the water. She pushed through the crowd, scrambling to catch it.

She tried, really tried, to retrieve it, but the hat succumbed to the whims of the wind and slipped over the water, hovering for a moment over the surface. Elena teetered on the heels of her boots at the edge of the pier, watching it bobble for several seconds until a wave crashed over it. Then it disappeared under the water.

Elena's heels teetered again, and she began to slip. Her skirts wrapped around her legs as she slid on the wet planks. Grasping for a hand, any hand, she found one among the crowd and clung to it. As she tried to right herself, she heard her mother's groan rumble across the pier.

So much for a graceful entrance onto the island.

She steadied herself against the arm of her rescuer. Once she stood upright, the soldier slowly released his grasp, and she glanced into the concerned eyes of a man not much older than herself. Her tongue seemed glued to her mouth, so she thanked him with a nod.

She tried to smile, but her lips struggled to respond.

When she turned, her first sight was of Parker smirking. If she'd had her parasol in hand, she would have clocked him.

Papa stood a few steps in front of Parker, trying unsuccessfully to hide his grin as his lips curled up with his mustache. She didn't want to hit her father. Instead, she wished she could run into his thick arms and hide.

Papa winked at her, and she tried to smile again.

The woman next to her father wasn't smiling at all. Flames seemed to erupt in Mama's eyes, and like lava bubbling at the

mouth of a volcano, it was only a matter of time before it flowed from her lips.

Instinctively Elena patted her hair, the remaining pins poking her fingers. She twisted and pulled at the strands, trying to tame them, but it was of no use. Her hair was beyond fixing.

Even if every thread of her dignity had been captured by the wind, she could still hold her head high and pretend that her wavy hair was neatly tucked and rolled. Perhaps no one else had noticed her fall.

Mama glared at the young soldier as if he'd tripped Elena. "Riffraff," she muttered.

Elena tried again to whisper her thanks to him, but the words never came.

"Come." Mama grabbed her wrist, escorting her hatless daughter away from her rescuer. The breeze danced through her hair again, but this time she didn't care.