



*The
Good
Fortune
of Miss
Robbins*

MELANIE
DICKERSON

New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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To Aaron.

I have found the one my heart loves.





*Part
One*



One

MARCH 1814

BEDFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND

Charlotte! A letter came for you!” Hattie Jacobs emerged from the back entrance of Mrs. Southey’s School for Young Ladies, waving something over her head.

I’d advertised months ago and received one reply from a Mrs. Merryweather, asking for letters of reference, which I’d supplied. Could the lady be writing to offer me a position?

I met Hattie in the middle of the garden and took the folded paper from her. It was the same address! In Berkshire, a Mrs. Merryweather of Lowndesbury House. It did not go unnoticed, either, that this letter had been franked by a peer of the realm.

“Well? Open it!” Hattie said.

I was already unfolding the paper. I skipped the initial polite greeting and read silently.

If Miss Charlotte Robbins remains unattached, we would like to offer the position of governess to her, with the salary of forty pounds per annum, for two young charges: seven-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. If this is agreeable, please respond . . .

I whooped and threw my hands in the air, clutching the letter.

“You have a position? Who is your employer? When do you start?” Hattie leaned her curly blond head closer.

I held the letter out so she could see it. She read aloud.

“If this is agreeable, please respond with a date when we might expect you at Lowndesbury House at the address on this letter. And do not bring too many possessions, as your quarters will be small and modest, but adequate. The last governess brought so many things there was not enough room to stow them. Respectfully, Mrs. Kathleen Merryweather, housekeeper to the Earl of Brookhaven.”

Hattie gasped and grabbed my arm. “You are the new governess for the Earl of Brookhaven’s siblings.” Her eyes were wide, her mouth forming an O.

“What? Is that bad?”

“Yes!” Hattie looked positively stricken. “I told you my cousin’s friend worked as the governess there, for the earl’s half-brother and sister. The earl pays a handsome salary, to be sure, but she was dismissed after only two weeks.”

“Maybe she did something wrong.”

“I forget the particulars, but it was a very small, piddling thing—not enough to dismiss someone for. She said he was horrid, scowling all the time, and never spoke a kind word to her. I would be terrified.” Hattie clapped a hand over her mouth, then said, “Forgive me. I don’t mean to frighten you.”

“I’m not frightened. I’ve never met an earl. It should be interesting, at the very least.”

“I should have known you would say something of that sort, Charlotte.” Hattie shook her head. “You’re not afraid of anything.”

I started to protest and say that I *was* afraid of a great many things. Presently, I was afraid of getting stuck at Mrs. Southey’s school for the rest of my life. But that wouldn’t have been very kind to say, since Hattie had no other ambition than to teach here. Hattie and I were

the same age, and she was like a beloved sister to me, but sometimes I felt as if she'd been born old.

I looked at my letter again, then clutched it to my chest. I was finally going out into the world. Adventure awaited me, I just knew it.

Inside, Hattie retrieved her box of newspaper gossip columns that she'd collected. She found two that contained gossip about the Earl of Brookhaven.

The young earl had once been engaged to be married, but his fiancée ran off with a marquess. His mother and father, according to the newspapers, had had numerous paramours.

When his wife died, the older earl married a much younger woman, who died giving birth to twins, then the earl passed away a year later, and the only son of his first wife became the new Earl of Brookhaven and inherited the house, the title, and the guardianship of the twins.

The young earl was also said to be quite handsome.

Fascinating people and places were in my future. And the most cherished dream of all—that I would fall in love, marry, and have a real family—drove me forward. Now that I was leaving this place, with its limited number of people and lack of exciting things to see or do, I'd finally have a chance to experience something new and different.

I went inside, wrote my letter to Mrs. Merryweather accepting the position, and walked a half mile and into the village to post it. Then I began the process of saying goodbye to everyone I knew.

Mrs. Southey gave me an intense look. "You have a place here if you decide to return. I can always use a good teacher."

"Thank you, Mrs. Southey."

She stroked my cheek with the back of her soft, wrinkled hand—as much affection as one could ever hope for from her. "Don't forget to write."

"I won't."

When I'd bid farewell to my pupils, a few of the younger ones cried, which made me cry and feel a bit guilty for leaving them—

especially for being happy about leaving. Then I said goodbye to Hattie and Susan, another fellow teacher and schoolmate, who'd also stayed on to teach.

"You won't forget us, will you?" Hattie dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Of course not. How could I forget my family?" I touched Hattie's cheek with the back of my hand, the way Mrs. Southey did.

"We are your family," Susan said in her no-nonsense way. "We shall welcome a visit from you when you are able."

"Thank you, Susan." I appreciated the warm—for Susan—sentiment, but I sincerely hoped I would not be coming back. After I married, I would send for Hattie and Susan to come and visit *me*.

How that would happen to a governess, I did not know, but anything seemed possible now that I had a position.



I'd pictured myself setting out in a fine carriage on a warm, sunny day, the light shining around me as all the pupils and teachers from Mrs. Southey's School for Young Ladies waved to me. Instead, it was before dawn and quite dark when I stepped into the empty mail coach to start my journey. Only Hattie was there, and she clutched my hand tightly while saying, "I'll pray for your safe journey. Write me every detail as soon as you arrive."

Sweet Hattie. She preferred reading the gossip columns to almost anything else, but she had no longing for adventure. She did have a big, warm, childlike heart, and I loved her at least as much as I could love a blood sister. The people at Mrs. Southey's School for Young Ladies were the only family I'd ever known, and I felt a stab of fear that no one would ever love me again.

But as the sun began spreading light over the road, I drew in a deep breath of crisp spring air. Spring was surely the best time of the year—for Mrs. Southey's garden, for the wildflowers on the roadside, and for a new life.

I was five-and-twenty, and I'd never seen anything beyond the village of Milford in Bedfordshire.

Visions of ocean vistas, rides in carriages through London, castles and palaces, hills and lakes floated through my mind. I imagined the world as a wondrous place with rivers, waterfalls, and flowering trees, magnificent sunsets and vast rolling hills, and cliffs overlooking crashing waves of the vast blue sea.

I knew, of course, that most of England probably looked very much like the tame, ordered countryside around Milford, the village and the school that had been my home since I was five years old. But with all my heart, I wanted to see for myself all the places and things I'd only read about in books.

Other passengers entered the carriage at various stops on the road, and I had new people to observe. A rosy-cheeked woman with a chicken in a basket on her lap. A man wearing a top hat and a ragged coat. A blond lady wearing a smart bonnet with a pink ribbon and silk flowers.

Now I was a woman of the world, with a purpose and a position awaiting me at my destination. But I also felt small, a girl traveling alone, an orphan, acquainted with very few people outside of Mrs. Southey's School for Young Ladies.

For most of the trip, I watched out the window, my eyes wide so I could catch as many sights—forests, lakes, streams, hills, horses, and carriages—as possible. A person never knew when they might catch a glimpse of their future. And I could hardly wait to see the Earl of Brookhaven's manor, Lowndesbury House.

I had to change coaches two hours after sunrise, where I was crammed inside a carriage that smelled worse—much worse—than the woman's chicken in a basket. A man seated across from me held a handkerchief to his nose the whole time, but I was blessed to be seated next to a window and could hold my face into the springtime air filled with flowers and sunshine.

We stopped at an inn for my final change. I took the opportunity to tidy my hair before boarding a hired curricule that would take me

the last few miles. I climbed onto the seat, clutching my smaller bag while thinking of my other one, which had been stowed.

The driver was not a talkative man and sat hunched over, staring straight ahead every time I looked over at him, which was not often, as I was taken with the countryside. So green and lush! These were fortunate sheep grazing in such abundant grass, a small stream running through the middle of their pasture. I even saw a lamb jump up and kick its hind feet in the air, and my heart mimicked it.

I drew in deep, long draughts of the Berkshire air, squinting at the trees in the distance. And then I saw it on a hill a mile away, all sprawling gray stone, so magnificent, with towers that reminded me of the Milford church's bell tower, though this house was far larger and grander than the Milford church, or any other building I'd ever laid eyes on. It looked as if it had been built at least a century or two ago, which made it all the more exciting. Three towers rose above the rest of the house, and stone crenellations encircled the perimeter of the rooflines.

Lowndesbury House.

It was like a medieval castle from a storybook.

Oh, please let me explore every nook and cranny in the house. And let me find a secret room or two and a hidden staircase, please, Lord.

I wanted to know everything, everyone who had ever lived there, the entire history of it. If only I could explore it for the rest of my life.

Well, that was a silly thought. But if I happened to marry the earl's steward, perhaps I would.

There were a few positions at the earl's manor house that would be suitable for me as possible husbands, and they were the earl's steward, the butler, and possibly even the chef, gamekeeper, or the head gardener, if they were more genteel than the average of their set.

In the time leading up to this journey, I'd imagined an entire novel in my head of meeting Lord Brookhaven's steward, exchanging glances with him, then conversations when I chanced to meet him in a corridor or at mealtimes. And then when the earl held a ball at Lowndesbury House, the steward would find me outside in

the garden, listening to the music, and ask me to dance. I'd finally be able to use my dancing skills with an eligible man! We would dance in the garden all night, and then, the next day, he would beg me to marry him.

Sometimes, instead of the steward, it would be the gamekeeper. Sometimes it was even the son of a baron or viscount who had his own wealth and would whisk me away to the Continent until society had forgotten that I was just a lowly orphan and governess, and we would return to England and host lovely parties, and the kindest and best women of society would become my dearest friends.

I shouldn't imagine myself marrying so high, for that might make it more difficult for my friends at Mrs. Southey's school to feel comfortable visiting me. But I supposed there was no harm in dreaming about it. I dreamed about many things when I was lonely and pondering how many children in the world had families who loved them, mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles who cared about them, while I had no one. And when I found myself ruminating on such gloomy thoughts, I would start making up stories in which I was the heroine. Some of these fanciful stories were short, but many of them were long and intricate, and always ended with me marrying a man who adored me and living happily ever after.

Now I was far from Milford, on my own, traveling to the largest and most elaborate grand home that I'd ever seen by far, and I would be meeting an earl, a peer of the realm, and teaching his two half-siblings.

It was as if one of my made-up stories was coming true.

Two

Hattie's newspapers said the young Lord Brookhaven was quite handsome. Now I could be the judge of that, as well as of his severity, which didn't frighten me as much as it might some, since I seemed to attract severe people. Like the old Lord Hampton, who was the patron of Milford's church and treated me almost as a granddaughter, and the senior teacher at Mrs. Southey's school, who most of the other teachers were afraid of, but who made me her friend and left me her life savings—ten pounds—when she died. It seemed that they were drawn by the fact that I wasn't frightened by them.

But it's not that I wasn't afraid of anything, as Hattie had said. I was frightened of the same things as anyone else. But I befriended ill-tempered people because I wanted to discover why they were so unhappy.

As the curricle went around the side of the main building and came to a halt at the servants' entrance, I blinked to dispel a light-headed feeling. I probably should have eaten more of my bread and cheese that I'd brought with me.

As soon as the curricle halted, I hurried to step down. A servant boy emerged from the house and helped the driver retrieve my stowed luggage. Then the driver was on his way again, the gravel crunching under the wheels and horse plodding forward.

The servant boy stared at me, holding my bag with both hands, his eyes questioning.

“I’m Charlotte Robbins, the new governess.” I smiled at him.

He said nothing.

“What’s your name?”

“John.”

A woman emerged from the house.

“You’re finally here. Come, come.” She stood in the doorway, her face scrunching as she looked at me. “John.” She motioned to the boy.

I followed the woman, John practically running behind me, as she moved quickly through the dimly lit hallways.

The walls and floors were made of stone, and I imagined I was in a castle, headed to my room in the tallest turret. When we started up some narrow, winding stairs, I imagined a princess, flanked in front and behind by guards, being led up this same staircase two hundred years ago, taken to the very top to be locked away until her father paid her ransom.

We did indeed keep climbing until I was sure we were on the top floor. We walked down the hallway to the last door, where Mrs. Merryweather stopped, rattled her keys, and unlocked it.

“This will be your room. I am sure you will find it sufficient.” She handed me the key.

There was a narrow bed, two slatted wooden chairs, and a washstand with a pitcher and basin. I liked the small window that let in some light. The room was not so different from the room I shared with Hattie at Mrs. Southey’s school.

John scuttled past us, placed my bag against the wall, then slipped out.

“You could probably do with a hot meal, but I thought you might like to make a brief appearance with the children in the schoolroom first. Lord Brookhaven has been giving them lessons since the last governess was dismissed.” She scrunched her face again, which I realized was her way of frowning.

“I should very much like to meet the children.”

I interpreted the new look that came over her wrinkled face as one of grudging approval, but it quickly vanished. “The master allows the governess to call them by their given names, Annabelle and Samuel.”

What else might I have been expected to call them? Then I reminded myself, when they grew older their position in society would be far above mine. But they were still children, and I was their governess.

I set my smaller bag on the bed and followed Mrs. Merryweather back along the hall and down more stairs in a different part of the house, trying to remember each turn so I could get back. But I got distracted by the views out of the windows—long vistas of sheep grazing among wildflowers, gently rolling hills, a few large oak trees. It was so lovely! But it made me forget to count the last turn. Or was it two turns?

One more hall and Mrs. Merryweather paused in a doorway, staring at me as I caught up. Then, with me peering around her shoulder, she turned to my young pupils. They were seated at a table, their little faces looking curiously at us.

“Children, this is your new governess, Miss Robbins. Greet her properly.” The housekeeper gave them a stern look.

“How do you do, Miss Robbins?” they replied in unison.

“Very well, I thank you.” I smiled at them. “May I ask what you’re working on?” I moved into the room to see.

“William wants us to read this book before he gets home.” The little girl, Annabelle, looked up with big, doleful eyes.

It was jarring to hear her using the earl’s given name. But then, he was her brother.

“Have you ever been a governess before?” Samuel asked, one corner of his mouth quirked up.

“That is an impertinent question.” Mrs. Merryweather’s frown was back.

Samuel gave her a blank stare.

I'd have to earn the respect of this one. Annabelle, on the other hand, had a slightly timid look of interest.

"Miss Robbins," Mrs. Merryweather said, "I can take you back to your room if you go right now. I have other duties to attend to."

"If I stay a little while, can the children show me the way to my room?"

"Certainly not." Her expression soured. "But when their nursemaid Hannah returns, she can escort you." Mrs. Merryweather darted away before I could say anything.

"How do you like the housekeeper?" Samuel gave a sly grin.

I tried to think how to answer. I settled for just raising my eyebrows at him. "Do you find your reading interesting? Would you prefer if I read to you?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Annabelle said.

I could see Annabelle was on page fifteen, while Samuel was on page three. I sat next to Samuel in one of the little chairs and slid his book between us.

"I shall start at the beginning, if that's all right."

Annabelle nodded and turned her book to the first page.

I began to read aloud. When I noticed Samuel fidgeting, I stopped. "How long have you been in the schoolroom?"

"Since this morning," Samuel said.

It was nearly five in the afternoon.

"It's a sunny day. If I read quickly, we should have time for a short walk before the evening meal. Will that suit?"

Samuel's eyes lit up. Annabelle smiled and nodded.

I read the rest of the book quickly. It was quite dry and dull for a child to have to listen to. If they made children's schoolbooks more appropriate to a child's mind and interests, children might behave better and learn more. It wasn't the first time I'd thought such a thing, nor was it the first time I vowed to write a book myself.

I'd finished the little book just as Hannah entered the room.

The children jumped up and went to fetch their outer clothing.

"I'm Charlotte Robbins, the new governess." I smiled at Hannah.

The nursemaid must have been around my age. She looked me in the eyes and dropped a quick curtsy. “Hannah,” she said.

“Pleased to meet you, Hannah. I promised the children I’d take them for a short walk. Is there a garden for walking?”

“Yes, miss, but the master doesn’t allow the young ones near the road.” Her mouth looked pinched.

“Very well. We won’t be long, and we won’t go near the road.”

I helped the children with their sturdier shoes, then they led me to the back door and out into the fresh air and sunshine. They ran as fast as they could through the garden, playing hide-and-seek and blindman’s buff and generally chasing each other around.

Although I was enjoying the formal garden, I longed to explore the park nearby, with its less formal, more wild appearance, the trees and bushes growing randomly instead of in strict rows according to some human plan.

I walked, stopping to examine a pretty flower or a particularly lovely corner of the garden, until I got dizzy and had to stop and blink.

“Come!” a voice called out.

I turned to see the nursemaid standing in the back doorway, motioning to the children. They came running while she glared at me. “You kept them out too long. They’ll be late for their supper.”

“Forgive me.” I started to say something about feeling half-starved myself, but she continued to stare coldly at me.

The children were pink-cheeked and bright-eyed. It made my heart lift to see the wan look gone from their faces.

A servant was descending some stairs, which I presumed led to the kitchen, from the savory smell that wafted from that direction.

“I shall make my way to the kitchen,” I said to Hannah.

She didn’t look back at me, and only said, “Just as you please.”

Mrs. Southey had warned me that the servants would shun me and refuse to be friendly, but I’d hoped that was an exaggeration. Perhaps it wasn’t.

My position as governess granted me a higher status as well as

a higher salary than the servants, and though I was considered too low to socialize with the family, the servants wouldn't socialize with me either. They would resent me for my higher salary and status, and they would assume I, with my education, would consider them beneath me.

Downstairs, the kitchen servants were bustling about, and the chef was barking orders while stirring a steaming pot. I tried to catch someone's eye, but everyone seemed too busy to notice me. I approached a young red-faced woman kneading bread dough as if she was angry with it.

"Pardon me, but I'm the new governess, Miss Robbins, and I was wondering if I might have a small—"

"Bessie!" the chef shouted.

The shout was so loud I jumped and knocked over a tin of salt or sugar, which spilled all over the table on which the woman was working.

"Oh!" She looked at me, tears starting to leak from the corners of her eyes.

"Please forgive me. Let me help." I righted the tin of salt, but the woman held up her hand.

"No. I have it."

"What are you doing in here?" The chef, a large man with wiry hair, had turned from the stove. His and every other pair of eyes in the room were on me.

"Forgive me, I—"

His voice was deep and hard-edged. "You can have your dinner when the family is served. Come back then. Meantime, there's some bread over there." He pointed to a basket on the counter.

"Thank you." My cheeks were burning, and my stomach felt sick.

The chef began talking to Bessie, the girl who had come running when her name was called. The rest of the women went back to what they were doing, mumbling or shaking their heads.

I snatched a roll from the basket and hurried out of the kitchen.

Such an embarrassing first meeting with the servants—and I felt I could rule out the chef as a potential husband.

I trudged up the stairs, woefully aware that I didn't know the way to my bedroom. I did manage to find the schoolroom. From outside the doorway, I heard Hannah instructing the children to wash their hands and scolding them for getting their shoes muddy.

Hannah was obviously busy, so I kept going, thinking I could surely find my way back to my room alone. I turned one corner and then another. I went up some stairs, but it was clearly not the right way, so I went back down again. I finally gave up even trying to find my way and just wandered around, looking into open doors at dimly lit rooms of dark wood and furnishings, windows covered by heavy red drapes, and many more closed doors. I was thoroughly lost, but I kept going down hallways and up and down stairs.

Near tears, I sat on the stairs and ate my roll. That made me feel less dizzy and sick, so I got up, took a deep breath, and said a whispered prayer that consisted solely of "Lord God, please help me." I continued up the staircase until I was at the very top, then I climbed out onto the roof.

Nighttime was fast approaching, with shadows stretching across the green lawn below. A boy with a stick was minding the small group of sheep that were no doubt meant to keep the grass cropped short. A man was leading a horse toward a stable. In the distance I could see a small village where I should be able to post my letters to Mrs. Southey's school.

As I stared across the expanse below, a weight seemed to settle on my shoulders. How I missed my friends and my home! I was so far away and didn't know when I'd see them again.

This was a wretched beginning. I'd imagined seeing wondrous sights, meeting interesting people, and exploring this old house like it was an exotic historical artifact with secrets waiting for me to discover. Instead, I felt small and alone. Anything that might be wondrous or worth discovering seemed out of my reach. I was

bothersome to the servants trying to do their work, and I was the governess whom no one wanted to know.

Had I made a terrible mistake in coming here, in leaving all my friends and the school where I felt safe? Would I prove true the old saying, “The harvest always looks greater in another man’s field”?

Tiny lights became visible in the windows of the houses in the village beyond the trees, and a single tear dribbled down my cheek. I stepped closer to the edge of the roof and stumbled over a broken branch, making a noise.

A shadow moved at the other end of the tower roof.

“Who’s there?” a deep voice said.