



THE
ELUSIVE
TRUTH
OF
LILY
TEMPLE



a novel

JOANNA DAVIDSON
POLITANO



Praise for *The Elusive Truth of Lily Temple*

“Joanna Davidson Politano brings Edwardian England to life as she matches silent film star Lily Temple with handsome underground investigator Peter Driscoll. Readers will be captivated as they follow Lily and Peter’s journey to solve the mystery of the Briarwood Teardrop. Romance, mystery, and clever twists and turns will keep readers turning pages until they reach the very satisfying ending. Well-written and highly recommended!”

Carrie Turansky, bestselling author of *The Legacy of Longdale Manor*

Praise for *The Lost Melody*

“*The Lost Melody* serves a pitch-perfect blend of history, romance, mystery, and faith.”

Booklist starred review

“Joanna has masterfully given life to those who had no voice and has captured the essentials of the human soul. You will be inspired, encouraged, and moved to remember that God always has a plan, even when you are in the darkest of places.”

Interviews & Reviews

“Joanna Davidson Politano perfectly balances faith amongst the very dark backdrop of an asylum to write a beautiful tale full of struggle and triumph.”

Fresh Fiction

Praise for *A Midnight Dance*

“Politano writes beautifully, evoking the magic of ballet and the theater from the opening turns to the final curtain, leaving readers applauding for an encore.”

Booklist starred review

“*A Midnight Dance* is a beautiful ballet theatre story with hints of mystery woven in, just one more stunning masterpiece by the talented writer Joanna Davidson Politano.”

Life Is Story

“With mysterious fires, legendary figures, and an uncertain future intricately tied to the secrets of the past, Politano deftly weaves together beloved gothic literature tropes and original ideas with a generous sprinkling of luminous story magic.”

Christianity Today

BOOKS BY JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO

Lady Jayne Disappears

A Rumored Fortune

Finding Lady Enderly

The Love Note

A Midnight Dance

The Lost Melody

The Elusive Truth of Lily Temple

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To my children,
the unwitting recipients of a wealth of stories,
fables, and wild imaginings, as well as a great
many adventures. Thank you for humoring me.
You enrich my stories, and my life.



Life itself is the most wonderful fairy tale.

~HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

Whitestone Manor, Hove Seaside, 1903

I hadn't decided if I'd tell the whole truth or not, when the men arrived. Peter would have, because he's *Peter*. I, however, never let facts hinder the power of a good story. Like water, innocuous and common, a good tale rushes forward, carving its own path through rock and hill and sod, sculpting the earth into a bold new landscape before anyone knows what is happening. Where Peter used silence, patience, and unending *goodness*, the best weapon in my quiver was the pointed truth, driven home by the arrow of a well-told tale.

Truth has many facets, anyway.

Such as this place, for example. I sat back against the French provincial sofa, sipping orange blossom tea and appreciating the details of the well-appointed withdrawing room. It did not brag outright but held a subtle air of opulence, lace dripping like icicles off every surface, crystal accents hanging here

and there from lamps and curtains. Solid mahogany furniture from the earlier years of Queen Victoria presented a shabby yet comfortable air. A steady Mozart tempo crackled over the gramophone, and a thick blanket spread over my lap kept me quite warm, along with the fire popping in the hearth.

Yet what an unmitigated disaster the place was from the outside. The half-abandoned, old country estate rambled more than Aunt Agatha on a winter's eve, with crooked turrets hanging off jettisoned walls, crumbling facades, and a pile of bricks that had once served as steps. Whole sections of roof were missing in the closed-off wings.

Ah, the deception of it all. That was life, though—the stories you tell yourself, and the stories you present to onlookers. Rarely did the two match. We're all of us a combination of romance novels, humorous tales, and tragedies, depending on what angle we show the world.

Me, I preferred adventure stories. Tolerated a romance now and again.

Another sip, citrus flooding the senses, and the front door clattered open—the men were back. I clutched the cup handle.

It was time.

My scattered brain thought of Peter again, his steady, watchful look that penetrated the fluff and pomp of my stories, my silly misdirections, seeing the truth immediately. I shivered in my damp clothing. In a way, it was to his benefit that he was locked up just now, and he could not interrupt my story or correct it.

It was all for him, anyway. For wretched, foolish, overly principled, utterly irreplaceable Peter Driscoll. Not that he completely deserved it, mind you—this rescue attempt. The man might be guilty of a great many things—petty annoyances and

rude infractions and the like. Killing me, however, was not one of them.

The shucking of rain gear sounded, and the growl and tromp of a man in the corridor. I sipped. Waited. The parlor door banged open, and there stood the muddiest uniform I'd ever seen, worn by a giant of a man who looked mad as hops. "What . . . what . . . who *are* you?"

I dropped another sugar into my tea and gave it a good stir. "I'm Lily Temple, Mr. Mutton, and I'm here to help you."

He stood like a wide-eyed fool, dripping mud and rain upon the worn rug. "But you're in *my house!*"

"The most logical place to find you, sir."

In another twist still, the grand old conflicted mansion was, in fact, a prison. A temporary holding place for criminals of the Brighton and Hove areas while they awaited transportation to their own personal miscarriage of justice at London's Old Bailey.

My Peter being one of them.

"I'm not one for trekking over field and farrow to chase a man down, especially in a storm." I straightened on the horse-hair sofa, shoving aside the lap blanket and tucking my booted feet beneath the sofa. Anchoring myself. "I've come to speak with you about a prisoner, if you could spare a moment. Maybe two or three, since the weather will keep you inside anyway. Come and sit, I've made a fire."

Still, he stood and dripped. "How in blazes did you get in here?"

"The door." I paused for a sip, and it warmed my insides. "I'd have to break a window otherwise, and I didn't cotton to the idea of shredding a new shirtwaist on the shards."

His gaze swiveled to the window as if to assure himself that

rain did indeed patter on the thick glass panes, then back to me. “That door was locked.”

“Indeed it was. Oh, how uncouth of me—there now, let me fetch you some too. Have you another cup?” I sprang up and walked to the cabinet where I’d found mine. “Do you take sugar?”

He took four steps in my direction, wood squeaking under his heavy boots, eyes narrowing in a rocky old face as his gravelly voice rumbled in my ear. “Get out, ye fool woman. *Now.*”

My hands closed around a cup, and I paused, breathing deeply of stale air. “After you’ve heard me out.”

He wouldn’t agree to it, though. I could tell by the look on his face.

He’d live to regret it. Lily Temple did have a few more aces up her sleeve.

The man yanked the empty cup from my hand and hurled it to the floor, stalking away. “Who the dickens do you think you are?”

“I told you. I’m Lily Temple, and it’s in your best interest to hear me out.”

His eyes went wide at the name that was only now registering. “You’re . . . you’re . . .”

“Stubborn?” I strode right up to him, the clicks of my boots resounding through the emptiness. “One hundred percent. And there’s something you must know about Peter Driscoll. He isn’t guilty and it’s terribly vile, you holding him here this way.”

He stared, pale and wide-eyed, then snapped back to composure. “I’ll not be convinced of *nothing*, ye hear? They pay me too well to keep them locked up, and I won’t ruin that to release ’em. Not even one. They’re a dangerous lot, these prisoners.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help myself. Perhaps it was everything at stake, my taut nerves . . . or the idea of Peter Driscoll being

called *dangerous*. “They pay you in what, lodging?” I glanced about the dusty old manor house—turned-prison.

He scowled over his shoulder. “Driscoll killed a woman—did you know that?”

“Did he, though?”

He looked down, then back up at me, quite obviously confused. Scrambling to understand. Or deciding whether or not to believe the name I’d given him. “Exactly sixteen different witnesses say he did. And he stole a priceless gem from her. The Briarwood Teardrop, no less. No magistrate in London will let him off. Not unless he dies before he reaches the gallows, God guard ’is poor soul. Mark my words, the man’ll swing for it.”

I dropped my teacup, which shattered on the floor.

Boots pounded by the front door. “What was that?” Then yells, echoing through the empty halls. “Here. It was in here.”

Oh good, an audience.

Mutton thrust me toward the door. “Out, out, *out!* I’ll not be caught with some little chit on my hands, all kinds of trouble to pay. Go on, out with you.”

“But my story. You haven’t heard it yet.” My voice echoed in the narrow hall. “It’s rather a good one.”

He lunged with a growl, grabbing for me. He struck a three-foot vase instead.

Crashhhhh.

I froze. He froze. Wings flapped somewhere above in the roofless towers. Water trickled in distant places.

Voices . . . then stomping. Six or seven men poured through the doorway, including a red-faced Constable Willis, trench coat flapping. “What’s this about, Mutton?” The towering bearded giant looked me up and down. “The deal was, *no women*. You’re on your last warning, man.”

And wait—who was that behind him? A rather dukeish-looking gent, with a very familiar golden crest upon the breast of his overcoat. It must be one of the infamous Marlborough House set, the fast-living social circle of no less than King Edward himself. The *king*. I tingled to my fingertips.

Audience, indeed. This would be *perfect*.

Poor Mutton still blubbered behind me. “She ain’t—she’s . . . she’s leaving.” He shoved me down the hall, palms rough against my shoulder blades, and I dug in my heels, stumbling as he pushed.

As if sheer force ever derailed the locomotive that was my plans. I ducked and twisted toward the men. “Check his pockets.”

He shoved harder. “Out, you fool—”

“Wait a moment. What was that, miss?” The constable stepped toward me, shoving his open palm toward poor Mutton to silence him.

“I said . . . check his pockets.” I stood arrow-straight, arms folded.

The guard’s face was darker than the storm outside. With a low growl that made my hair stand on end, he kept his eyes on me and reached into his right trouser pocket, then his left. Pulled out the fabric lining of both.

“The other pocket, luv.” I pointed at his chest.

He jammed a hand into his frayed waistcoat and lifted a long, dangling necklace by its chain. Upon sight, he flung that thing like a hot coal and stumbled back, colliding with the other men.

There it lay, the setting of that legendary Briarwood Tear-drop on the worn carpet, six men hulking in a stunned half circle around the ancient gold piece, the swirls and leaves that were so recognizable now. Only, the large blue stone was prominently missing.

“But . . . where’s the sapphire?”

They looked from the delicate gold piece to the man who’d dropped it, and back again as the thing wove its spell in the air. Distant thunder rumbled across the sky and rain tormented against the old walls. The clock ticked forward the awkward silence. Who would make the first move?

After thirteen ticks, I decided it must be me.

Always a woman who did the doing, wasn’t it?

“I suppose you’d like to hear about this, since you are about to transport the man who supposedly murdered me and stole it.”

“You?” Constable Willis blurted out the word, then slowed his stride toward me, looking me up and down. “You. You are . . .”

I stepped closer, feeling the power shift directly onto me. I quieted my voice, for it did not need to be loud now. I would be heard. “The roads are nigh on impassible just now, especially for a prison wagon. I’m surprised your horses have gotten you here. I should think a good story might pass the time. If Mr. Mutton can spare a few moments to hear it now.”

Silence. Then the constable invited me back to the sitting room with a single jerk of his head.

I swept past the men and collected cups from the corner cupboard, kicked aside the broken shards, and poured plenty of tea.

The men filtered in, new arrivals silently boxing in the resident guard who was now tangled up in the gem mess.

Poor man glared. Snarled. “I know what you’re about, and I’ll not be manipulated. I don’t believe you’re Lily Temple, and the prisoner will *not* be released.” He shifted, leather holster creaking. “There were witnesses. Plenty of witnesses. He had a gun. And a motive. He had a way in, and he knew how to get it. And you don’t look a thing like Lily Temple.”

“Every story has its layers. You’d do well to remember that. Sugar?” I dropped in two cubes before he could answer and handed it over.

He took it and I settled myself on the edge of a springy old chair, gripping the arms for all I was worth. I was an actress, a professional storyteller, here at the holding cell of a condemned man, armed with naught but a story. And hopefully the wits to use it well.

The dukeish-looking gent downed his drink as one who knew how to do it, then leaned across the table, elbows planted in the middle. “So, Miss . . .”

“Temple.”

“Miss Temple. Right, then.” He scanned my face as if to confirm or deny my identity. His narrowed eyes indicated he’d aired on the side of doubt. Surely I didn’t look that different, did I, without the grease paint and costumes?

Yet he made no move to release Peter of the murder charges. Or even pose a few questions to his supposed victim.

“I’m interested in hearing what you have to say about the sapphire everyone in the world would like to lay hands on. The one that belongs with that necklace.” He jerked his head toward the other room. “Where is it now?”

“Well, now. That would be giving away the end of the story.” I poured him more tea and moved the sugar toward him. “Shall we have a listen?”

Mutton collapsed back onto an ancient chair. “You’ll not listen to a fool *woman*, will you? With no less than sixteen witnesses—”

“And this?” I lifted a large blue stone from my purse, and the room hushed at the sight of it. Again I felt the power of that sapphire.

“Is it—?” the magistrate began, but I let the wondering hang in the air.

They looked back and forth at one another, as if debating whether or not I was actually parading a priceless gem before them. The stone flashed and sparkled with brilliant reflections of light, a deep azure color that looked like it had indeed been ripped from the sky, as the legends claimed.

I smiled at the blustery fellow. “He who has all the answers will never ask questions.” I held it up between two fingers. “And he who doesn’t ask the questions forfeits a wealth of knowledge.” I covered the stone with my other hand, and with a flick of the wrist it was gone. I held out both empty palms. “Because even your eyes deceive you, and the truth is rarely obvious. But stories . . .” With a smile, I leaned forward and plucked the stone from Mutton’s collar, holding it out to the watchers. “They tell us the truth our eyes miss.”

“You put on a fine show, Miss Temple,” said the crested, duke-like man calmly as he accepted the blue stone, inspecting it critically. “But you’ll need more proof.”

“You keep it.” I jerked my head toward the blue stone. “A fine imitation, don’t you think? Enough to catch a man’s attention for a moment. Worth about two quid. I’ll take my prisoner, though, seeing as I’m not dead.”

“That isn’t possible, Miss Temple. We simply haven’t the proper authority to invalidate an arrest once it’s made. You’ll have to bring your proof to the authorities and let justice take its course.”

“But I’m—”

“Nothing you could say will convince us to break the law and release him this moment, to risk our positions and reputations, so you’d best not waste your time.”

“Don’t be so certain. You haven’t heard my story yet.” I settled back in the chair, looking over their dubious expressions. “Now, then. The mud will keep us here awhile more, I’m afraid, and you are all curious, even if you’re not admitting it. I trust I may proceed.”

I took their silence as consent and drew in a breath, settled in, and peeled open the memories. “It began in the spring, when George Smith was setting off hot-air balloons and musical nights at St. Anne’s Well Gardens, and Peter Driscoll happened upon me by accident. Or, so I thought.”

It was easy to slip back into the story of him—the story of us. In some ways, my life hinged on that moment, and everything that had happened since. Even if I never again saw Peter Driscoll’s face, if he was never released and—God forbid, perished in Newgate—I’d never in a million moons be the same woman I had been that night in the well gardens.