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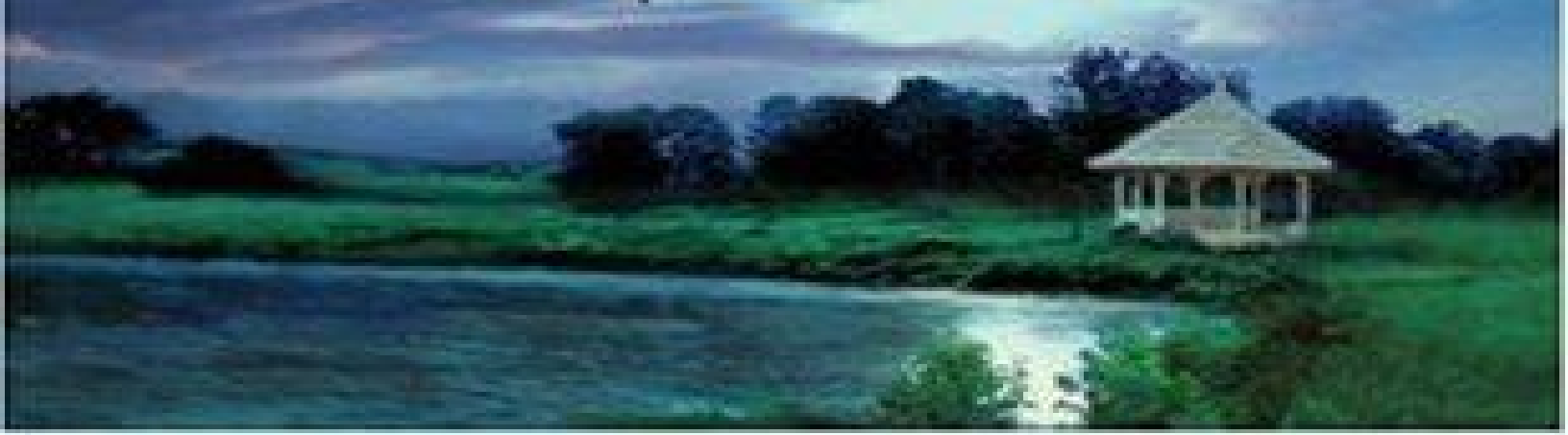
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LISA  
KLEYPAS

Author of *Again The Magic*

SECRETS OF  
A SUMMER  
NIGHT



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A SUMMER  
NIGHT

To Julie Murphy,  
for taking care of Griffin and Lindsay with such love, endless patience and  
skill...  
for lending your many talents to the business side of my career...  
for being a cherished member of our family...  
And most of all, for being you.

Love always,

L.K.

## CONTENTS

PROLOGUE Although Annabelle Peyton had been warned all her...

CHAPTER 1 A marriage-minded girl could overcome practically...

CHAPTER 2 Simon Hunt had learned at an early age that since...

CHAPTER 3 Having been returned to her town house by the...

CHAPTER 4 Two days before Annabelle and her mother left for...

CHAPTER 5 It was easy to see why the name of Hampshire was...

CHAPTER 6 Just before supper on the first evening of the party...

CHAPTER 7 When the after-supper visiting was concluded, most...

CHAPTER 8 Bedeviled by worry, Annabelle slept for a total of...

CHAPTER 9 Are we really going to do this?" Annabelle asked...

CHAPTER 10 Once Annabelle met Hunt's stunned gaze, she could...

CHAPTER 11 As the girls walked back to Stony Cross Manor...

CHAPTER 12 Too dizzy to notice what was happening around her...

CHAPTER 13 Barely two minutes had passed before Simon saw the...

CHAPTER 14 On the third morning after the adder bite, Annabelle...

CHAPTER 15 As Annabelle looked up, she saw Lord Hodgeham...

CHAPTER 16 When Annabelle rejoined the guests the next morning...

CHAPTER 17 After Annabelle had ?ed the music room, Simon...

CHAPTER 18 The trick is all in the timing," Lillian said, her...

CHAPTER 19 Railing at herself, Annabelle strode along the path...

CHAPTER 20 Philippa's reaction to the news was one of astonishing...

CHAPTER 21 During the two weeks of their honeymoon...

CHAPTER 22 As he had promised, Simon was a generous husband...

CHAPTER 23 Soon after Simon and Annabelle's return to England...

CHAPTER 24 As Annabelle had feared, the impetuous accusation...

CHAPTER 25 Annabelle had not asked Simon how Bertha and...

CHAPTER 26 If anyone had noticed that a woman was plunging...

EPILOGUE ". . . No, that's not the best part," Annabelle said animatedly...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Prologue

London, 1841

Although Annabelle Peyton had been warned all her life never to take money from strangers, she made an exception one day ...and quickly discovered why she should have heeded her mother's advice.

It was one of her brother Jeremy's rare holidays from school, and as was their habit, he and Annabelle had gone to see the latest panorama show in Leicester Square. It had taken two weeks of household economy to save the money necessary to pay for the tickets. As the only surviving offspring of the Peyton family, Annabelle and her younger brother had always been unusually close despite the ten-year difference in their ages. Childhood illnesses had taken the two infants who had been born after Annabelle, neither of them having lived to see their first birthday.

"Annabelle," Jeremy said as he returned from the panorama ticket stand, "do you have any more money?"

She shook her head and gave him a quizzical glance. "I'm afraid not. Why?"

Sighing shortly, Jeremy pushed back a swath of honey-colored hair that had fallen over his forehead. "They've doubled the price for this show— apparently it's far more expensive than their usual production."

"The advertisement in the paper said nothing about higher prices," Annabelle said indignantly. Lowering her voice, she muttered, "Hell's bells," as she opened her drawstring purse in the hopes of finding an overlooked coin.

The twelve-year-old Jeremy cast a grim glance at the huge banner that had been hung over the columned entrance of the panorama theater.... THE FALL OF THEROMAN EMPIRE: A SHOW OF MAXIMUM ILLUSION WITH DIORAMIC VIEWS. Since its opening a fortnight earlier, the show had been crammed with visitors who had been impatient to experience the

wonders of the Roman Empire and its tragic fall—“like going back in time”—people raved afterward. The usual sort of panorama consisted of a canvas hung in a circular room, surrounding viewers with an intricately painted scene. Sometimes music and special lighting were used to make the view even more entertaining, while a lecturer moved around the circle to describe faraway places or famous battles.

According to the Times, however, this new production was a “dioramic” view, which meant that the painted canvas was made of transparent oiled calico, illuminated from the front and sometimes from the back, with special filtered lights. Three hundred and fifty viewers stood on a roundabout in the center, which was operated by two men, so that the entire audience was slowly rotated during the show. The interplay of light, silvered glass, filters, and actors hired to play the part of beleaguered Romans, resulted in an effect that was labeled an “animated exhibition.” From what Annabelle had read, the final climactic moments of simulated erupting volcanoes was so realistic that some of the women in the audience had screamed and fainted.

Taking the purse from Annabelle’s busy hands, Jeremy pulled the drawstring and handed it back to Annabelle. “We have enough for one ticket,” he said in a matter-of-fact manner. “You go inside. I didn’t want to see the show anyway.”

Knowing that he was lying for her benefit, Annabelle shook her head. “Absolutely not. You go in. I can see a panorama anytime I want—you’re the one who’s always away at school. And the show is only a quarter hour long. I will visit one of the nearby shops while you’re inside.”

“Shopping with no money?” Jeremy asked, his blue eyes frankly skeptical. “Oh, that sounds like loads of fun.”

“The point of shopping is to look at things, not to buy.”

Jeremy snorted. “That’s something that poor people say to console themselves while they’re walking along Bond Street. Besides, I’m not going to let you go anywhere alone—you’ll have every male in the vicinity pouncing on you.”

“Don’t be silly,” Annabelle muttered.

Her brother grinned suddenly. His gaze swept over her fine-boned face, her blue eyes, and the swath of pinned-up curls that gleamed brown and gold beneath the tidy brim of her hat. “Don’t bother with false modesty. You’re well aware of your effect on men, and, to my knowledge, you don’t hesitate to make use of it.”

Annabelle reacted to his teasing with a pretend-frown. “To your knowledge? Ha! What do you know of my interactions with men, when you’re away at school most of the time?”

Jeremy’s expression sobered. “That’s going to change,” he said. “I’m not going back to school this time—I can help you and Mama a damn sight more by getting a job.”

Her eyes widened. “Jeremy, you’ll do no such thing. It would break Mama’s heart, and if Papa were alive—”

“Annabelle,” he interrupted in a low voice, “we have no money. We can’t even scrape up five extra shillings for a panorama ticket—”

“And a fine job you would get,” Annabelle said sardonically, “with no education, and no advantageous connections. Unless you’re hoping to become a street sweeper or an errand boy, you had better stay in school until you’re fit for decent employment. Meanwhile, I’m going to find some rich gentleman to marry, then everything will be all right.”

“A fine husband you’ll catch with no dowry,” Jeremy retorted.

They frowned at each other until the doors were opened and the crowd surged past them to enter the rotunda. Sliding a protective arm around Annabelle, Jeremy eased her away from the crush. “Forget the panorama,” he said flatly. “We’ll do something else instead—something fun that doesn’t cost anything.”

“Such as?”

A thoughtful moment passed. When it became apparent that neither of them could come up with a single suggestion, they both burst into laughter.

“Master Jeremy,” came a deep voice from behind them.

Still smiling, Jeremy turned to face the stranger. “Mr. Hunt,” he said heartily, extending his hand. “I’m surprised that you remember me.”

“So am I—you’ve grown a head taller since I saw you last.” The man shook hands with him. “On leave from school, are you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Seeing Annabelle’s confusion, Jeremy murmured in her ear, while the tall stranger motioned his friends to enter the rotunda without him. “Mr. Hunt—the butcher’s son,” Jeremy whispered. “I’ve met him a time or two at the shop, when Mama sent me to fetch an order. Be nice to him—he’s a capital fellow.”

Bemused, Annabelle couldn’t help thinking that Mr. Hunt was unusually well dressed for a butcher’s son. He wore a smart black coat and the new style of more loosely tailored trousers that somehow didn’t disguise the lean, powerful lines of the body beneath. Like most of the other men entering the theater, he had already removed his hat, uncovering a head of dark, slightly wavy hair. He was a tall, big-boned man who looked to be about thirty, with strong features, a long blade of a nose, a wide mouth, and eyes so black that one couldn’t distinguish the irises from the pupils. His was an utterly masculine face, with a sardonic humor lurking about the eyes and mouth that owed nothing to frivolity. It was clear to even an undiscerning viewer that this man was rarely idle, his body and his nature patterned by hard work and keen ambition.

“My sister, Miss Annabelle Peyton,” Jeremy said. “This is Mr. Simon Hunt.”

“A pleasure,” Hunt murmured, with a bow.

Even though his manner was perfectly polite, there was a glint in his eyes that imparted a strange flutter just beneath Annabelle’s ribs. Without knowing why, she shrank back into the shelter of her young brother’s arm even as she nodded to him. To her discomfort, she couldn’t seem to tear her gaze from his. It seemed as if some subtle current of recognition had passed between them...not as if they had met before...but as if they had come close several times until finally an impatient Fate had forced their paths to intersect. A strange fancy, but one she couldn’t seem to dismiss. Unnerved, she remained a helpless captive of his intent stare, until her cheeks were infused with hot, unwelcome color.

Hunt spoke to Jeremy, even as he continued to stare at Annabelle. “May I accompany you into the rotunda?”

A moment of awkward silence ensued before Jeremy replied, with studied nonchalance, “Thank you, but we’ve decided not to see the show.”

One of Hunt’s dark brows arched. “Are you certain? It promises to be a good one.” His intuitive gaze moved from Annabelle’s face to Jeremy’s, reading the signs that betrayed their discomfort. His voice softened as he spoke to Jeremy. “No doubt there’s a rule that one should never discuss these matters in front of a lady. However, I can’t help wondering...is it possible, young Jeremy, that you were caught unaware by the increase in ticket prices? If so, I would be happy to advance you the extra coins—”

“No, thank you,” Annabelle said quickly, her elbow digging hard into her brother’s side.

Wincing, Jeremy stared up into the man’s unreadable face. “I appreciate the offer, Mr. Hunt, but my sister is unwilling—”

“I don’t want to see the show,” Annabelle interrupted coolly. “I’ve heard that some of the effects are quite violent, and distressing to women. I would much prefer a peaceful walk in the park.”

Hunt looked back at her, his deep-set eyes containing a gleam of mockery. “Are you so timid, Miss Peyton?”

Annoyed by the subtle challenge, Annabelle took Jeremy’s arm and tugged insistently. “It’s time to leave, Jeremy. Let us not delay Mr. Hunt any longer, as I’m certain that he wishes to see the show—”

“I’m afraid it will be quite ruined for me,” Hunt assured them gravely, “if you do not attend also.” He gave Jeremy an encouraging glance. “I should hate for a matter of mere shillings to deprive you and your sister of an afternoon’s entertainment.”

Sensing that her brother was weakening, Annabelle whispered sharply in his ear, “Don’t you dare let him pay for our tickets, Jeremy!”

Ignoring her, Jeremy replied candidly to Hunt. “Sir, if I did accept your offer of a loan, I’m not certain when I would be able to reimburse you.”

Annabelle closed her eyes and let out a faint, mortified groan. She tried so desperately never to let anyone know of their straitened circumstances ...and for this man to know that every shilling was so dear was more than she could bear.

“There’s no hurry,” she heard Hunt say easily. “Come by my father’s shop on your next visit from school and leave the money with him.”

“All right then,” Jeremy said with patent satisfaction, and they shook hands on the deal. “Thank you, Mr. Hunt.”

“Jeremy—” Annabelle began, in a soft but murderous tone.

“Wait right there,” Hunt said over his shoulder, already striding to the ticket stand.

“Jeremy, you know how wrong it is to take money from him!” Annabelle glared into her brother’s unrepentant face. “Oh, how could you? It’s not proper— and the thought of being indebted to that kind of man is