

Dark Angels

by

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Chapter 1

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Facing white cliffs in a strait of ocean separating two kingdoms, a fleet of ships lay at anchor. It was the fleet of the kingdom of England, sent to escort precious cargo: a princess of England and France, the most famous princess in Christendom, in fact. A yacht with a rakish bow slashed through the water toward the best and greatest of these anchored ships; the king on board liked fast yachts, fast horses, fast women. The princess was his sister, and he and those with him could not wait to see her.

“Monmouth’s on the yacht!” said a young woman leaning over the side of the princess’s ship. She had stepped atop a huge coil of rope for this view, and a sailor, eyeing her satins and the single strand of fat pearls at her neck, had warned her to be careful, but she’d sent him off with a withering comment to mind his own business. She wasn’t one to suffer fools—or even those who weren’t fools—telling her what to do. The sight of King Charles’s yacht racing toward them was thrilling. She could see the crowd waiting on shore. The queen and her father and her best friend were among them. She was so glad to see England again, she wasn’t certain she’d be able to keep herself from kneeling on the beach and kissing the sand of it when she landed.

“And who else is there?” asked the friend with her, like her a maid of honor to the princess, and like her, excited to be witnesses to this, King Charles and his sister meeting again after so many years—ten if it was a day. Flags were flying from all the topmasts, whipping smartly in the breeze. The day was bright and clear. Everyone was dressed in their finest, felt high-spirited, mettlesome as horses, stirred and thrilled by this reunion.

“Climb up here and see for yourself!” Alice said.

“Don’t tease, Alice, and don’t fall—” Her friend, Louise Renée, grabbed Alice’s gown, for by now Alice was leaning over the edge at a dangerous angle, the feet in her dainty satin shoes on tiptoe.

“The Duke of York is with His Majesty and Prince Rupert—oh, they’re close enough to hear me—Rupert! Prince Rupert! Monmouth!” Shrieking the names, Alice waved a gauzy scarf back and forth with wild abandon and was rewarded with a hearty wave from the king’s cousin, a smile from the king’s son, and a startled

glance and then a grin from King Charles himself. Loud cheers had come up from hundreds of throats, the throats of the sailors manning the ships, the throats of the crowd on shore. They, too, were waving and clapping, cheering the king. Gulls, who'd idly settled among the rigging, rose like winged blessings into the sky.

"He hasn't changed a whit," Alice said.

"Who?"

"The king. I wonder who he'll be flirting with by midnight—"

"Mademoiselle Verney, get down from there at once! Mademoiselle de Keroualle! You will join the other maids immediately! The king is boarding—"

It was the keeper of the maids, Madame Dragon, Alice called her.

Alice and Renée ran across the deck to join the elite circle of young women around the princess, all in satin gowns, in dainty shoes with stiff gauze bows, their hair coaxed by servants into curling orderly disorder, fat strands of pearls around their slender necks, drops at their delectable ears. As young women, unmarried, their very youth was beautiful. As part of the household of the foremost princess in France, they were everything that was fashionable. There wasn't a woman on shore who wouldn't be biting her lip with vexation and determining to buy new gowns once theirs were seen. They couldn't wait.

Princesse Henriette—her formal title at the French court was Madame—glanced toward Alice and Renée as they slipped in among the other women, a slight arch in her brow, both questioning and condemning.

"Pretty behavior," sneered a lithe young man to Alice, one of a group of restless and handsome noblemen, but then the orchestra that had been sent to accompany the princess struck up a lively tune, and all about them another cheer began from sailors in the rigging, from those standing in order on the deck as the sardonic face of the king of England, Charles, the second of that name, appeared just above the brass of the ship's railing. In another moment he had leaped to the deck.

"Minette." He held out his arms, his face made handsome by joy, and his sister ran to him, and he hugged her close and then swung her around, her skirt swelling out like a bell. Men had followed him over the side, appearing one after the other, dressed almost as sumptuously as any woman, laces, blue ribbons, diamond pins, long, curling hair, false, a wig but magnificent nonetheless. The princess was immediately surrounded by them. Her other brother, the Duke of York, hugged and kissed her, and their cousin Prince Rupert elbowed York out of the way unceremoniously and said, "Little beauty. I thought we'd never pry you from the Frenchies' grasp." Unfortunately, he spoke in French and loudly, so everyone near heard him.

The Duke of Monmouth, King Charles's son, insisted on his hug, and the princess danced from one male relative to another, kissing their faces and wiping at tears running down her face.

"She's ruining her rouge." It was the same young man who spoke before, with the same sneering, spiteful tone.

"We're in England now, d'Effiat. You'd best watch your tongue," Alice told him.

"Oh, I am afraid," he mocked her, and the others with him laughed maliciously, even Beuvron, who was her friend.

Alice turned her back on them. The day was too happy to spoil with quarreling. There had been enough of that in France. This was adventure, huge adventure, and

she was home at long last, about to see her best friend in the world, and the queen she so loved, and her father, and there was nothing d'Effiat or Beuvron or any of them could say to ruin a single moment.

Her eyes met Prince Rupert's, and he winked, then made her a bow.

Renée pointed to the king's son Monmouth. "He's handsome." She wasn't the only woman who'd noticed Monmouth.

"Yes, and he knows it, so beware."

Protocol, dear to French hearts, was being ignored. Everything was becoming very confused. The maids of honor had broken rank in spite of the Dragon's frowns, lured by Monmouth's smiles, by Rupert's twinkling boisterousness, by King Charles's laughter, by the sense of froth and frivolity that seemed to have climbed right on board with him.

Those who accompanied the princess from France, a *duc* here, a *vicomte* there, a priest or two, the captain of her household guard, tried to push past the clustered maids of honor, past the princess's tall brother and cousin, to introduce themselves over the noise of the orchestra and the bellows of that cousin, who seemed to be ordering something from above in the rigging.

He was. A great willow basket was being lowered from a pulley. Squeals from the maids of honor added to the growing melee as they rushed here and there to be out of its way. Once the basket was on deck, Prince Rupert patted it fondly, fell on one knee before his princess cousin, and made a motion for her to climb in, using his knee as step.

"I'm not to go overboard in this?" Princesse Henriette cried, delighted and horrified. She spoke in French because she'd lived in France all her life, and her English was small. "I haven't introduced—"

King Charles swept her up in his arms. "Introductions aren't necessary. We'll do what's proper on shore. But for now, I claim my sister as a prize of the sea. She's in English waters, and she's mine." With that, he placed her into the basket, giving one and all a glimpse of her stockings—vivid green—the princess laughing so hard, she couldn't speak.

"This is highly irregular—" began the French ambassador.

"Pay me a formal call to complain," said King Charles. His eyes, a rogue's eyes, swept over the maids of honor. "One beautiful woman isn't enough. My sister must have escort."

Young women everywhere held their breath, dropped into giggling, graceful curtsies as his eyes touched, considered, and admired each of them. The captain of the household guard cleared his throat. The Dragon hovered, fluttering, not certain what to do. No one knew at this point.

King Charles's eyes found Louise Renée de Keroualle, the most beautiful among them.

"Why am I not surprised?" Rupert said to his cousin York.

In a heartbeat, Renée stepped up on Rupert's knee and over into the basket. For a moment, her stockings showed, and they were the same green as the princess's. It was shocking and exciting.

King Charles's eyes found Alice. She had dropped as gracefully as a flower drooping. A gliding, natural grace of movement was one of her beauties. He walked over and stood before her, looking down at her bent head, the riot of curls there.

"My dear Verney."

"Sir."

“Her Majesty has missed you dreadfully.”

“And I her.” Her heart was beating very fast. He was her liege, her lord, her king. She’d known him since she was a child and he a penniless, beggar sovereign without a kingdom. This was a great and powerful moment.

“Did you behave yourself in France?”

“No, sir. And I am happy to say I have acquired the most beautiful gowns in the world.”

“The better to finally find a husband with?”

A child of court, her skills polished to high gloss by going to France, she met his eyes. “That was my plan, sir.”

“Lord Colefax was a fool. I do believe we’ve missed you.” He held out his hand to help her rise, a signal honor. Enormously proud, Alice walked to the basket, cutting her eyes in a deliberate, provocative challenge to the group of sneering, fashionable young Frenchmen, impressed in spite of themselves. She stepped up onto Rupert’s knee.

“Are your stockings green, also?” asked Prince Rupert.

It was all she could do not to kiss him on the cheek and add to the complete breakdown of decorum. She could see how shocked the French around her were. She bunched her skirts to climb into the basket, and the answer was evident. Sailors began to cheer, but whether it was for the glimpse of stocking or the jerking rise of the basket was unclear. There was an immediate bustle as the king, his brother, his cousin, and his son climbed over the side of the ship and down the rope ladder to the yacht, as nimble, as quick as any man in the rigging.

People from the French court ran to the ship’s side. Everything was happening so fast! No one had been properly introduced! Nothing was going as planned! Other boats, yachts, wherries, rowboats, bobbed like corks some distance away—clearly those boats would bring them to shore, but they’d thought to have a reception on board, a long dinner. Speeches were planned!

Suspended over the water, Alice felt her heart rise like a lark. The sun was high and bright, the wind strong. The crowd on shore waved hats and large handkerchiefs, calling, hurraing. The sea near the shore sent in wave after wave of little white frills, as if hundreds of serving maids had dropped caps in the water to celebrate this day. At the top of the sheer cliffs, the huge fortress of Dover Castle awaited them. She could see people standing on the parapets. Flags flapped at the corner turrets. The basket lurched toward one side. Princesse Henriette and Renée screamed. Alice took her scarf, held it over the side, where the wind clutched at it. The scarf was long, gauzy, made of spiderweb and forbidden Dutch lace by nimble nuns’ fingers. Good-bye to quarreling, good-bye to meanness, and here’s to my good fortune in England, she thought, and she let it go and screamed herself as the basket lurched straight downward, to the sound of a high, shrill trill of laughter from the princess.

On board the yacht, the king’s Life Guards settled the basket, and one of them stepped forward to help the women out. Alice had the sensation of falling as she met his eyes.

“I know you,” she said in English. “You’re Robin Saylor, aren’t you?”

“Richard, Lieutenant Richard Saylor, at your service.”

He signaled for the basket to rise, led Princesse Henriette to a bench covered with cushions as the rest of royal family stepped one by one from the ladder. Another Life Guard quickly pulled up the anchor, the Duke of York took the tiller, Monmouth unfurled the sails, and the yacht was moving away from the ship.

"Mission performed admirably," said King Charles. "I didn't have to listen to a single speech. Rupert, you owe me twenty guineas." He smiled upon his sister. "As you can see, we are not as formal as King Louis."

Princesse Henriette leaned back against cushions, raised her face to the sun. "I don't know when I've laughed so much." She still spoke in French, but half the English court knew the language. So many had lived abroad during England's civil war.

"Are all your ladies wearing green stockings?"

"Only the pretty ones." Roses and lilies, mint and balm, lay on the floor of the deck like a carpet. She picked up a rose. "Is all this for me?"

"Everything is for you. By the by, Buckingham has tried to fast himself into the shape you last saw him wearing, but in truth, he resembles nothing so much as a pregnant sheep these days, doesn't he, Lieutenant Saylor? Tell her."

The Life Guard King Charles addressed smiled but was silent.

"Lieutenant Saylor has the gift of diplomacy."

The yacht had come in very fast to the shore, but it was large enough that it had to stop yards out. There was a harbor built, but it was dangerously silted with sand and shingle from the cliffs.

"I see my father. I'm certain of it," Alice said to Renée. She pointed to the group standing under a canopy with the queen. Alice felt as if her heart were going to fly out of her chest. "And there's Barbara."

She stood to wave her arms. "Barbara!"

Efficiently, expertly, the Life Guards dropped the sails and the anchor, and the yacht stopped as obediently as a docile mare. The water was choppy and deep. Other young officers from the king's Life Guards standing on the shore walked into the water, then swam to the yacht. A rowboat was clumsily maneuvered close to its side.

"Your carriage awaits," said King Charles to his sister. "The harbor is silted up. This is the only way I can land you without wetting you." He was over the side and into the rowboat, followed by his brother and his cousin and his son. Those who'd rowed it forward slipped into the water like seals to make room for the king and his family. From the rowboat, Monmouth, smiling, held out his arms to the princess.

"I'll catch you," he told her.

The princess stepped up on the railing of the yacht, and even though a Life Guard held her arm to help her balance, when she dropped into Monmouth's arms he staggered back, and they would have fallen overboard if it hadn't been for Prince Rupert, who blocked the fall but in the doing so, fell overboard himself. The rowboat rocked furiously, dangerously, and the king's brother, the Duke of York, fell forward onto his hands and knees and cursed. King Charles went down on one knee, but the Life Guards in the water steadied the boat so that Monmouth remained upright, the princess safe and dry in his arms. Rupert spat out sea, then floated on his back like a whale. His fashionable hat and great wig went floating by.

King Charles began to laugh, one hand slapping the wooden seat near which he knelt. That made his brother laugh, and then everyone was laughing except the princess. Monmouth set her to her feet, and she wiped at her eyes.

The smile on King Charles's face faded. "Why are you weeping, dear one?"

"He would have been so furious at all of this. It is so wonderful to laugh instead." The princess leaned on the side of the rowboat and held out her hand to Prince Rupert. "Come, sweet cousin. The least I can do is help you aboard again."

"You can't pull me in, gal. I'm as fat as Buckingham."

She leaned even farther out, coaxing, and Monmouth moved swiftly to grab the back of her skirts, which made King Charles laugh again.

Prince Rupert swam forward. She kissed him on the mouth, and with Monmouth's hand still fastened to the back of her skirt because the rowboat was tipping back and forth again, she went to King Charles and kissed him on the mouth and then raised her brother, the Duke of York, from his knees and kissed him, too. Then she turned to face the shore, and putting her hands to her mouth—the jewels in her bracelets gleaming a moment in the sun—she threw a kiss to the shore, where people erupted in applause, and courtiers, certain wild men of King Charles's court, dropped their great fashionable hats and their great fashionable wigs and began to walk into the water, one after another like lemmings, to meet her.

"We're not formal, but we do have our own style," drawled the king, highly amused and therefore pleased at the way his landing was unfolding.

Laughing, feeling outrageous, and not to be outdone, Alice took off her beautiful shoes, stood on the railing of the yacht with bunched skirts, her green-stockinged feet sure and certain, and balanced there a long moment like an acrobat at some common fair.

"Don't touch me," she snapped to Lieutenant Saylor, who did not know she was the best dancer at court.

"Well done. Now jump," called Rupert, who did, from the water.

"Your Grace, if you please," she said.

The Life Guards, primed now, held the rowboat steady as Monmouth stepped forward, gave his hand, and she leaped into the rowboat in a neat, clean movement. Only Renée was left, and it was clear that she was afraid and that she was ashamed because she felt her fear was spoiling the fun.

Lieutenant Saylor stepped forward and said in flawless French, "Mademoiselle, take my hand. I promise that I will die before I let you fall in the water."

"Push the rowboat against the yacht and keep it there. Jemmy, you and Jamie man the oars." King Charles touched the side of the yacht, held a hand up to Renée. "Just sit on the railing, mademoiselle, and trust the lieutenant and me."

By now courtiers had waded to the rowboat, were introducing themselves to Princesse Henriette. It was as if it were the most natural thing in the world for them to be wigless, bobbing in water wearing satin coats. In another moment, Renée was on board, and York and Monmouth began to row the party ashore.

On shore, officers of the Life Guards walked forward to help beach the rowboat. The king's orchestra, greatly excited, began to play. The musicians played violins, of course, for that was the fashion from France, and whatever France created, in art, in dress, in music, in war, in policies, others mirrored. King Charles and his brother and son stepped out onto the wet sand, but that would not do for their precious cargo. Princesse Henriette was carried by the king himself to dry beach, the waiting queen hurrying out from under her canopy into the sun to embrace her sister-in-law, still in the king's arms. York followed with Renée. Wet and

bedraggled, Prince Rupert walked out of the waves. "You grab Alice," he told Monmouth. "I'd do it, but I'm wet through."

Monmouth held out his arms to Alice. Just before she let him lift her up, she looked back, to the ships, at rest like great swans, their sails, instead of wings, folded in, to the people climbing down ladders, the rowboats and wherries filled with the French court. In her ears was the sound of wave and hurrah and violin. It was May, England's happy, Druid festival of a month when hawthorn bloomed and roses opened wide and fish leapt out of green reeds in the river and folk danced around the Maypole to begin the month and pinned oak leaves to their hats to end it. It was her birthday month. She felt ruck with excitement, felt aware of time and place in some keen, sharp way. I'll never forget this, she thought, never.

"Out of my way."

She turned. It was her father. He'd left the crowd of courtiers under the canopy to come for her. And with him was Barbara, her dearest friend. "You made quite a spectacle of yourself on that yacht, missy. Green stockings indeed. What's next? Rouge?"

"Well, I had to do something to remind you I was home."

"My dear, dear girl," her father said. They embraced, she in the rowboat, he out of it. He held her tightly. "I've missed you so, poppet."

She began to cry. So did he.

It was mayhem. There was no point even to fight it. The French were arriving, some of them so determined that they waded ashore in the splashing waves, others bleating like sheep, refusing to wet gowns or shoes, waiting for soldiers to carry them to dry sand. The princess had brought a large retinue with her, ladies, gentlemen, servants, priests, officials. People milled about the beach as the king's household guards tried to bring order and direct people to the carriages and wagons that would take them up the cliff to Dover Castle.

The princess remained under the canopy surrounded by the important ladies of court, Monmouth's and York's wives and the Duchess of Cleveland, who was the king's mistress. Members of the high council crowded around, too, as did various children, some belonging to the king, some to York, some to important noblemen. The king's spaniels were there, growling and barking and generally getting underfoot. Beyond the canopy were carriages, wagons, horses, servants, the royal pages chasing and shoving one another like the boys they were.

Her father ahead of her, Alice walked arm in arm with Barbara toward the canopy.

"Is he here?" she whispered, not wanting her father to hear.

"Yes."

"Is she?"

"No." Barbara stopped. "I may as well tell you this now. Their son died last month."

Before Alice could respond, young women came running toward her from under the silk canopy, her friends, maids of honor to Queen Catherine of England. They hugged and kissed her, walking her forward to the canopy, their conversation and questions as clamorous as magpies' chatter.

"Those green stockings. Everyone is talking of them. I want some!"

“Oh, Alice, I can’t believe you’re home. You have to tell us everything, everything. We hear that the beautiful La Vallière is in disgrace. Is it true?”

“Colefax is here. He’s been pacing up and down—I think he’s still in love with you!”

“What did you bring us? Did you bring us anything?”

A very slender man no taller than Alice planted himself in front of her. “I saw your exhibition on the railing of that yacht. Excellent balance, and the leap was perfect. I want to know everything you’ve learned at Madame’s, and I want to know it now. Never mind these rattlepates. None of them practice as they should, and they’re all clumsy as cows.”

She stepped into his arms for a hug. It was Fletcher, the queen’s dancing master.

“It’s about time you were home,” he said softly, then in another tone entirely: “Move along, cows, there’s talk of leaving for the castle now. Alice, we are packed like straight pins into the smallest space found in this fortress. I am in a barn sharing space with horses—horses, I tell you—and glad for it.”

“It’s only thirteen days,” said one of Queen Catherine’s maids of honor, a willowy beauty named Gracen. “Do stop complaining.”

Thirteen days, thought Alice. Not enough time, and yet it must do. She walked in under the canopy. Princesse Henriette was hidden by the bulk of men surrounding her, men in long coats that came to their knees and the great curling wigs King Louis of France had just taken to wearing. Their shoes had high heels, lacquered red, so that they towered even taller than they were. The king and his brother, York, were like giants.

There was Colefax, the black armband for his dead child around his sleeve. Alice turned so that she wouldn’t meet him. Gracen grabbed her hand.

“Queen Catherine is asking for you.”

The queen of England was tiny and dark haired and birdlike. Alice swept into a low curtsy for her, but Queen Catherine took her hands and raised her up to kiss both her cheeks. She was flushed with excitement, looking almost pretty, as she could sometimes.

“The princess is leaving. Hurry!” It was her father.

“Majesty, with your permission?” Alice said to Queen Catherine.

“Of course. Go at once.”

“We’ll meet later!” Alice called to Barbara and Gracen and her other friends among the maids of honor.

King Charles’s gentlemen of the household were directing people to carriages. Grooms brought forward horses for those who’d come down to the beach on horseback, but King Charles’s yapping spaniels made the beasts nervous, and they were pulling at the reins, attempting to rear. Children cried, musicians wandered about searching for some transport back to the castle, people speaking French demanded carriages, but no one was listening. Alice saw the princess climb into a carriage with the king, then someone called her name. It was one of the royal pages, her favorite.

“Where have you been? What carriage am I to ride in?” she asked him.

But he ran off without answering, and she saw that Queen Catherine and her ladies were leaving. She felt a hand on her arm.

“This way. You’re to ride in this carriage.” It was Lieutenant Saylor. “I told you I wouldn’t let you drop,” he said to Renée as he helped her inside, smiling. It was a

dazzling smile. Alice caught her breath and then took Saylor's hand to be helped inside herself. The carriage was crammed with other maids of honor from the Duchess of York's household. They nodded coolly to Alice aware that she served the French princess, that she had served the queen, that she was, so to speak, above them.

"You great clumsy oaf, you've stepped on my gown and torn it."

The voice was unmistakable. Alice poked her head out the window of the carriage. It was the Duchess of Cleveland, the king's mistress, and she was glaring at Prince Rupert, wigless still and drenched.

"Bloody cow," he said to her.

"Stupid ox."

Beyond them was Colefax, frowning, looking around as if he were searching for someone. He saw Alice. She pulled her head back inside the carriage, bumping it on the edge of the opening in her haste.

The carriage jerked forward. Nothing changes, she thought, thinking of the Duchess of Cleveland and Prince Rupert, of other quarrels that kept this court unsettled. But then it was no different in the household of Madame, as Princesse Henriette must be called in France, and Monsieur, her husband.

And then there was Colefax, with the band of black around his arm and sadness in his eyes. Nothing changes and everything does.