

Sea of Lost Love

Part 1

Cornwall, August 1958

As Father Miles Dalgliesh cycled up the drive towards the Montague family home, Pendrift Hall, he took pleasure from the golden sun that filtered through the lime trees, casting luminous spots of shimmering light on to the gravel and surrounding ferns, and swept his bespectacled eyes over lush fields of soft brown cows. A fresh breeze swept in off the sea and gulls wheeled beneath a cerulean sky. Father Dalgliesh was new in town. Old Father William Hancock had recently passed away to continue his work on the Other Side, leaving his young prodigy in the hot seat rather sooner than anticipated. Still, God had given him a challenge and he would rise to it with gladness in his heart.

Today he would meet the Montagues, the first family of Pendrift.

Pendrift Hall was a pale stone mansion adorned with wisteria, tall sash windows and frothy gardens that tumbled down to the sea. Pigeons cooed from the chimney-pots and every year a family of swallows made its nest in the porch. The house was large and somewhat shabby, like a child's favourite toy worn out by love. It had an air of contentment and Father Dalgliesh's spirits rose even higher when he saw it. He knew he'd like the family and he anticipated an enjoyable afternoon ahead.

He stopped cycling and dismounted. A sturdy, white-faced

Labrador bounded out of the front door, wagging his tail and barking excitedly. Father Dalgliesh bent to pat him and the dog stopped barking, sensing the young priest's gentle nature, and proceeded to sniff his shiny black shoes instead. The priest raised his eyes to the butler who now stood in the doorway, dressed in a black tailcoat and pressed white shirt. The man nodded respectfully.

'Good morning, Father. Mrs Montague is expecting you.'

Father Dalgliesh leaned his bicycle against the wall and followed the butler through a large stone hall dominated by a sleeping fireplace and a large set of antlers. The air in the house was sweet with the memory of winter fires, cinnamon and centuries of wear and tear. He noticed an open chest beneath the staircase, full of tennis rackets and balls, and an old grandfather clock that gently ticked against a wall like a somnolent footman. Classical music wafted from the drawing-room with the low hum of distant voices. He took a deep breath.

'Father Dalgliesh, Mrs Montague,' the butler announced solemnly, indicating with a gesture of his hand that Father Dalgliesh should enter the room.

'Thank you, Soames,' said Julia Montague, rising to greet him. 'Father, welcome to Pendrift.'

Father Dalgliesh shook her hand and was immediately put at ease by the warmth of her smile. She was voluptuous, with soft white skin, ash-blonde hair and an open, gentle face. Julia Montague radiated so brightly that when she was present it was always a party. Wearing large beaded necklaces in pale greens and blues to match her eyes, with a laugh so infectious no one was immune – not even that sour puss Soames – and a sense of humour that always made the best out of

the worst, Julia was like a colourful bird of paradise that had made her nest in the very heart of tweedy Cornwall.

‘The family are waiting to meet you on the terrace,’ she continued with a grin. ‘Can I get you a drink before I throw you to the wolves?’

Father Dalgliesh laughed and Julia thought how handsome he was for a priest. There was something charming in the lines around his mouth when he smiled and behind his glasses his eyes were deep set and intelligent. He was surprisingly young, too. He couldn’t have been more than thirty.

‘A glass of water would be fine, thank you,’ he replied.

‘We have some home-made elderflower cordial, why don’t you try some?’

‘Why not? That would be very nice.’

‘Soames, two glasses of elderflower on the terrace, please.’

Soames nodded and withdrew. Julia slipped her arm through the priest’s and led him through the French doors into the sunshine.

The terrace was a wide York stone patio with irregular steps descending to the garden. Between the stones wild strawberries grew and tiny blue forget-me-nots struggled to be seen.

Fat bees buzzed about large terracotta pots of arum lilies and freesias, and drank themselves dizzy in a thick border of lavender that grew against the balustrade lining the terrace. In the garden a gnarled weeping willow trailed her branches into a decorative pond where a pair of wild ducks had made their nest.

The family fell silent as Father Dalgliesh emerged with Julia. Archie Montague, Julia’s husband, was the first to step forward. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you,’ he exclaimed heartily, shaking the priest’s hand. ‘We were very sorry when Father Hancock died. He was an inspirational man.’

‘He was indeed. He has left me with the unenviable task of following in his footsteps.’

‘Which I’m sure you will do valiantly,’ added Archie kindly, running his fingers down the brown moustache that rested on his upper lip like a neatly thatched roof.

‘Let me introduce you to Archie’s sister, Penelope, and her daughters, Lotty and Melissa,’ said Julia, still holding on to Father Dalglish’s arm because she knew her husband’s family could be a little overwhelming. Penelope stepped forward and shook his hand. He winced as she squeezed the life out of it. Large-boned and stout with an arresting bosom and double chin, she reminded him of one of her brother’s Jersey cows.

‘Very nice to meet you, Father.’ Penelope’s voice was deep and fruity and she articulated the consonants of her words with relish as if each one were a pleasure to pronounce.

‘You’re a great deal younger than we expected.’

‘I hope my age does not disappoint,’ he replied.

‘To the contrary. Sometimes the old ones have had too many years listening to the sound of their own voices to be sensitive to the voices of others. I doubt you will fall into that trap.’ She turned and ushered her daughters over to meet him. ‘This is Lotty, my eldest, and Melissa, who has just turned twenty-five.’

She smiled at them proudly as they greeted the priest.

Dressed beautifully in floral summer frocks with their long hair pulled off their faces and clipped to the top of their heads, they were pleasant to look at and very presentable.

However, they were vapid girls, their heads full of frivolities, encouraged by their mother whose main concern was marrying them off to well-bred young men of means.

According to Penelope, they were two of the most eligible girls in London and nothing less than the very best would do. She scoffed at the idea of marrying for love. That was a highly impractical notion, not to mention foolish: one's heart could not be trusted to fall in love with the right man. She, herself, was a prime example of her theory. She had grown to love Milton Flint over time, though she secretly hoped her daughters would make better matches than she had made. She might have married a Flint, but she remained in her heart a Montague.

'This is Milton, Penelope's husband and David, their son,' continued Julia, leading the priest further on to the terrace. Milton was tall and athletic, with thick blond hair brushed back off a wide forehead and lively blue eyes.

'Good to meet you, Father. Do you play tennis?'

Father Dalglish looked embarrassed. 'I'm afraid not,' he replied.

'Dad's obsessed,' interjected David apologetically, 'though he does put the racket down for Mass!' David laughed and Father Dalglish was reassured by the presence of a young man of his own generation. Julia let go of his arm and sat down.

Father Dalglish took the seat beside her and crossed one leg over the other in an effort to look casual. He felt a little nervous. His conviction was as solid as rock, his knowledge of the scriptures and philosophy unsurpassed, his command of Latin exceptional. His Achilles heel, however, was people. Father William Hancock had once told him: *'It's no good being so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good. You have to learn how to relate to people, Miles, on their level, otherwise you might as well become a monk.'* He knew the old priest was right. The

Bishop had sent him out to be among the people to spread the word of God. He pushed his glasses up his nose, determined not to let him down.

‘Our young sons are out in the woods with their cousin, Harry, setting traps for vermin,’ said Julia. ‘The gamekeeper gives them sixpence a rat, if they bring it to him dead. They’re getting rather rich, I believe. My three-year-old son, nicknamed Bouncy because his feet are made of springs, is down on the beach with Nanny. They should be up soon, and Celestria, my niece . . .’ Julia looked around. ‘I don’t know where she is. Perhaps she’s with her mother, Pamela, who’s

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married to Archie and Penelope’s brother Monty. She’s in bed with a migraine. She suffers from them, I’m afraid. She might come down later. She’s American.’

Julia hesitated a moment for Pamela Bancroft Montague, as she liked to be called, was extremely pampered, often spending whole days in bed, complaining if the light was too bright, moaning when it was too dark, insisting on being left alone with Poochi, her powdered Pekinese, while at the same time demanding as much attention as possible from Celestria and Harry, and constantly ringing the bell to summon the staff. She doubted whether Father Dalglish would meet Pamela at all, as she wasn’t Catholic and abhorred the Church, which she thought a waste of time. ‘Monty arrives this evening on the train from London. He’s a wonderful character and I hope you’ll meet him. You’ll certainly meet Harry and Celestria, their children. Harry sings rather beautifully and is in the choir at school.’ Julia lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. Soames stepped through the doors with a

tray of drinks. When he handed Father Dalgliesh a glass of elderflower, Julia noticed that the young priest's hands were trembling.

It wasn't long before Wilfrid and Sam, Julia and Archie's elder sons, returned from the woods with Harry. Exuberant after a morning building camps and setting traps, they were ruddy cheeked and sparkly eyed. 'We found three dead rats!' exclaimed Wilfrid to his mother.

'How wonderful!' she replied. 'Darling, I'd like you to say hello to Father Dalgliesh.' The three boys fell silent at the sight of Father Dalgliesh's white Roman collar and held out their hands cautiously.

'What did you do with the rats?' Father Dalgliesh asked, endeavouring to put the boys at their ease.

'We hung them on the door by their tails!' said Sam, screwing up his freckled nose with delight. 'They're enormous, the size of Poochi!' he added.

'You better not hang him up by *his* tail!' laughed David.

'You'd have to hang Aunt Pamela up with him,' added Archie with a smirk. 'She never lets him out of her sight.'

'Oh, you are wicked, darling!' said Julia, eyeing Harry. It was all too easy to make jokes about Pamela without considering her children.

'Where's Mama?' Harry asked.

'She's in bed with a migraine,' Julia replied.

'Not again!'

'I'm afraid she does suffer from them.'

'Not when Papa's home,' said Harry innocently. It was true.

When Monty was there, Pamela's migraines miraculously disappeared.

Amidst the idyll that was Pendrift, Monty came and went,

arriving on the 7.30pm train from London, in time for a whisky and a smoke and a set of tennis with Archie, Milton and David. He'd arrive smiling raffishly beneath the brim of his panama hat, his pale linen suit crumpled from the train, a newspaper clamped under one arm, carrying only his briefcase and all the cheerfulness in the world. Pamela's moods would lift like the grey mist that sometimes hung over Pendrift before the sun burned through, but she behaved as badly as ever, making demands, swinging the conversation around to herself at every opportunity. She was spoiled and self-centred, being the only daughter of wealthy American businessman Richard W. Bancroft II.

The boys took Purdy the Labrador down to the beach to play cricket, just as Nanny returned up the path with Bouncy and Celestria. Father Dalgliesh's lips parted in wonder as he watched the celestial figure of the beautiful young woman

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walking towards him. To his shame his heartbeat accelerated and the colour rose in his cheeks. He hoped it was the midday heat that had caused his sudden agitation. Celestria wore a short red and white polka dot skirt and a halter-neck top that exposed her midriff. Her blonde hair was loose, falling in waves over smooth brown shoulders and she walked as if she had not a care in the world. He could not see her eyes, which were hidden behind large, white-framed sunglasses.

'Ah, Celestria, come and meet Father Dalgliesh,' Julia called out as she approached. When Bouncy heard his mother's voice he let go of Nanny's hand and ran up the path, squealing with excitement.

'Mummy!' he cried.

‘Hello, darling!’ Julia replied. When the little boy realised he had an audience he put his hands on his hips and began a funny, jaunty walk, wiggling his bottom and grinning, peering up from under thick lashes. Everyone clapped and roared with laughter. Bouncy was the child who united them all. His mischievous smile, inherited from Julia, could melt an entire winter. He had thick sandy hair and soft brown eyes, the colour of home-made fudge. He loved to show off and was encouraged to do so, though it exasperated Nanny that he tore his clothes off at any opportunity and ran around naked. He spoke with a lisp which was irresistibly sweet. Julia and Pamela, who had little in common besides the fact that they had married brothers, had discovered a bridge in Bouncy. ‘Darling, you’re so adorable!’ enthused his mother, pulling him on to her knee and nuzzling him lovingly.

Celestria followed, still laughing and clapping her hands.

Father Dalgliesh stared at her as if bewitched.

‘This is my niece, Celestria. Harry’s elder sister,’ said Julia, without taking her eyes off her son. Celestria removed her sunglasses and hooked them into her cleavage, then extended her hand to the priest.

‘You’re much younger than I imagined. Father Hancock was as old as Nanny!’ she said.

‘Really, Celestria!’ Penelope exclaimed disapprovingly.

‘Nanny is as fit as a fiddle.’ As the priest’s colour deepened, Celestria’s haughty face broke into a warm smile.

‘You look like you could do with a swim, Father. The sea’s delicious this morning. Cold but refreshing.’

‘Do take off your jacket, Father,’ said Julia, suddenly noticing the poor man’s discomfort.

‘I’m fine, really,’ he replied. ‘I’m used to the heat, having

lived in Italy.’

‘There’s nothing like an English summer,’ said Archie. ‘Just when you think it’s going to be cold and grey the sun comes out and burns you. Unpredictable, that’s what it is.’

‘I’m going upstairs to see Mama and change out of my bathing suit,’ said Celestria, weaving nimbly through the chairs. Father Dalgliesh watched her go and found he was able to breathe again.

Celestria’s beauty was indeed remarkable. It wasn’t just her thick blonde hair that glistened like the cornfields around Pendrift, or her clear grey eyes that had never been marred by a single moment of unhappiness, or her generous mouth and fine bones that gave her face definition, but the way she held herself. Her poise was cool and confident and superior, nothing so brash as arrogant, simply that she was aware of her place in the world and confident of other people’s high regard for her.

She was twenty-one and, according to her mother, ‘balancing precariously on the edge of womanhood’. But Celestria didn’t feel at all precarious and, if Pamela only knew the half of it, how she had let Aidan Cooney slip his hand into her knickers and how she had felt the hard excitement through his trousers, she wouldn’t have entertained such silly ideas. She was already a famous beauty, well established on the London party scene having come out when she was eighteen. There was many a hopeful man who entertained ideas of marriage. Most looked at her intently and treated her like porcelain, which she found rather silly, except for Aidan Cooney, of course, whose eyes were filled with something darker than admiration.

But Celestria was more than an English beauty. She had

something of the exotic about her, which men found irresistible. Concerned for her safety, her mother had taken her to New York when war broke out. They had lived with Pamela's parents in a Park Avenue penthouse with ceilings so tall Celestria could barely see them and splendid views over Central Park. For six years she had been her grandfather's delight. He had long since lost his daughter to Monty and England so he relished having a little girl around the house and showered her with attention and presents that came in boxes, wrapped with tissue paper, smelling of new. He was the father she had lost to the war, the father she could embrace while hers was overseas and in wafer-thin envelopes that arrived sporadically to make her mother cry. Celestria learned to weave her charm and throw it over whole roomfuls of people like a fisherman setting his net, drawing it in little by little until she had ensnared each and every one. She learned to enchant and enthrall, understanding very early on what her grandfather expected of her. His applause was addictive and she drank his love and grew dizzy. She was shown off to guests before dinner, presented aged seven by her governess with her hair in ringlets, her dress pressed and her shoes shiny, and her grandfather's pride was as sweet as candy. She sang songs and blushed when they all clapped. It was easy to manipulate people. They thought she was too young to be aware of her charisma, but she knew how pretty she was and it didn't take long to realise that by mimicking adults she could win their admiration. 'What a funny child!' they'd coo. 'A clever little darling!' And the more precocious she became, the more everyone loved her. Amidst all the pretence her grandfather was never fooled. He knew her better than her own mother and understood her

more compassionately. He took an interest in every aspect of her life, inspiring in her a love of books by reading to her every night before bed, and later lending her the classics he had adored as a child. He was not a musical man, lamenting that he had never had the luxury of learning an instrument, but he had a deep appreciation which he nurtured with regular evenings at the opera. He took Celestria to the ballet when she was only five and personally supervised her piano lessons. No detail escaped him, however small. He encouraged her at school, praised her triumphs and showed his disappointment when she let herself down. But he never once let her forget how fiercely he loved her.

Pamela Bancroft Montague seemed incapable of loving anyone more than she loved herself. It wasn't her fault. The trouble was her parents had spoiled her. She had learned to be selfish, to believe she was the centre of the universe, so there wasn't much room for anyone else. She loved Celestria as an extension of herself; that was a love she instinctively understood. Her husband spoiled her, too. She shone like a jewel and he treasured her as one. She had a captivating beauty, the sort of beauty that struck fear into the hearts of both men and women. Men found such loveliness indomitable, and women knew their own beauty lost its lustre in the light of hers.

Celestria didn't miss her father in those early years. She had arrived in America as a two-year-old and returned to London when she was eight. She couldn't even remember what he looked like. She had missed her grandfather when she left New York, treasuring the week they spent every autumn at the fairytale castle he had bought in Scotland to shoot and stalk, and the annual holiday at the Bancroft family home on

the island of Nantucket. Like her mother, she learned to love herself more. When Monty tried to make up with presents for the years of estrangement, she accepted them gladly, manipulating him with little kisses and charming smiles of gratitude. Then he gave her mother a little boy: Harry. From the moment Harry was born, Pamela Bancroft Montague discovered that she could love someone more than she loved herself. Celestria didn't feel eclipsed by her new brother; she was still basking in the bright glare of her grandfather's love. When Celestria returned, wearing a simple white dress embroidered with daisies, the family were taking their seats for lunch at a long table beneath a big square sunshade. Father Dalgliesh was placed at the head, Archie at the foot. Julia put herself next to the priest, with Penelope on his other side.

Pamela's place was discreetly taken away by Soames. He found Mrs Bancroft Montague exceedingly tiresome. Cook's son, Warren, had already been up to her six times that morning, with trays of hot drinks and little bowls of food and water for her wretched dog. He had a good mind to muffle her bell so he couldn't hear it.

Father Dalgliesh made the sign of the cross then, with his head bowed and his hands folded, he said Grace. 'Benedict, domine, nos et haec tua dona quae de tua largitate sumus sumpturi.' As his hands made the sign of the cross for the second time, Celestria raised her eyes and caught those of the priest. He reminded her of a startled fox. She was about to smile at him with encouragement, when Archie invited everyone to sit down with the words: 'Let battle commence!' Celestria was placed between Lotty and David, but she was aware of the priest's attention even though he made an

effort not to look at her again. It came as no surprise. Most men found her alluring. It was quite fun catching the eye of a priest and almost tempting to lead him astray for sport. She had had few rivals, but never one as powerful as God. The concept of celibacy fascinated her, especially in a man so good looking. He had intelligent brown eyes, an angular face with chiselled cheek-bones and a strong jaw line. In fact, if he took off those glasses he'd be quite dishy.

'Father Dalgliesh,' she said, concealing a smirk. 'What called you to serve the Church?' He looked shocked for a moment and pushed his glasses up his nose, appalled at the effect this young woman had on him. Hadn't his faith and dedication built a resistance to this sort of thing?

'I had a dream as a little boy,' he replied.

'Really? Do tell,' she encouraged.

He raised his eyes and looked at her steadily. 'An angelic being came to me and in the clearest voice told me that my future was in the Catholic Church. It was a vision, a light so powerful it left me in no doubt that God was calling me to serve Him. Since then I have only ever wanted to be a priest. I have never forgotten that vision and during moments of doubt, I remember it.'

'Like the light on the road to Damascus,' said Archie, chewing on a sausage.

'How miraculous,' exclaimed Penelope, her voice fruitier than ever.

'And how wonderful that miracles happen in the modern world,' added Julia.

'Yes, it is, isn't it,' replied Father Dalgliesh.

'Do you suffer doubts, Father?' Celestria asked to a sharp intake of breath from her Aunt Penelope.

Father Dalgliesh struggled with the impertinence of her question. 'We are, all of us, human beings,' he said carefully. 'And it would be wrong to assume myself super-human because of a vision and a calling. God has given me a challenge and, at times, it seems great. Just because I'm a priest, doesn't mean I am immune or even excluded from life's obstacles and pitfalls. I have weaknesses like everyone else. But my faith gives me strength. I have never doubted it or my conviction, only my own aptitude.'

As he spoke, he grew in stature. He seemed older than his years, as if he had a maturity gained over decades of experience and yet, somewhere in the darkest corner of his heart, a menacing little seed was sown.

Later, back at the presbytery that stood next door to the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Miss Hoddel brought Father Dalgliesh his tea on a tray. He sat in silence in the sitting-room, his eyes far away from the book that rested on his knee. She looked about her, at the piles of papers and books squeezed into the bookshelves and heaped on to every available surface, and wondered where to put the tray. With an impatient snort she shuffled over to the coffee table and placed it on top of a tower of letters. Father Dalgliesh was shaken out of his trance and rushed to help her.

'I can't clean this place if it's always in a mess, Father,' she said, rubbing her hands up and down her wide hips as if to clean off the dust.

Father Dalgliesh shrugged apologetically. 'I'm afraid even this house isn't big enough for all my books,' he replied.

'Can't you sell some of them?'

He looked appalled. 'Absolutely not, Miss Hoddel.'

She sighed heavily and shook her head. 'Well, I've left you

and Father Brock some cold ham in the larder and a little salad for your dinner.’

‘Thank you,’ he replied, bending to pour the tea.

‘I’m taking your vestments home to mend. I’ve got my trusty Singer, you see, so I can do the job properly. We can’t have you looking shabby in church, can we, Father?’ Again, he thanked her. ‘I’ll be going then. See you tomorrow, bright and early to tackle all that dust. I’ll just have to clean around your clutter. It’s not ideal but what can I do?’

He watched her go, closing the panelled wooden door behind her. He breathed a sigh of relief. Miss Hoddel was a godly woman, of that he had no doubt. The trouble was her ill humour: there was nothing godly about that. Still, no one was perfect, not even him. A spinster in her late sixties, Miss Hodder was dedicated to serving the Church, happy to look after him and Father Howel Brock for very little. People like her were a blessing. He asked God for patience. He also asked God for strength and forgiveness. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Celestria Montague since the moment he had seen her walking up the garden in her polka dot swimming dress. Once again he pulled his rosary out of his pocket and began to move the beads slowly through his fingers, mumbling, in a low voice, ten Hail Marys.