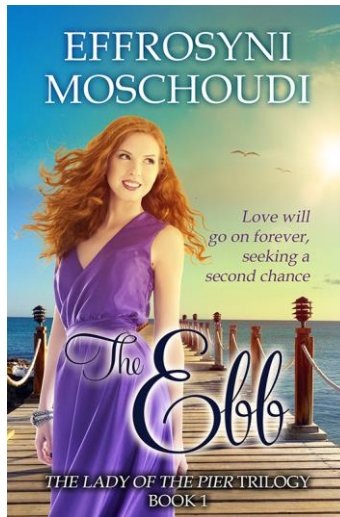


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Excerpt from *The Lady of the Pier – The Ebb*

Outside the tearoom, Meg said goodbye quickly to rush back to her post, leaving Laura behind to have a look around. Feeling the most carefree she'd felt in a long time, the young girl sauntered to the eastern landing stage in order to enjoy the sea view.

She sat on a bench and watched the world go by for a while. Generous views of the Hove and the open sea that stretched toward an indigo horizon made it a pleasure to be there, even though it was late afternoon. The remaining sunlight was fading fast. She stood up and walked to the railing, dreamily watching the sea horses breaking on the shore. The breeze had picked up in the past few minutes, and she was almost shivering now in her dress and woollen cardigan. She looked up to see clouds travelling to the west, growing darker and darker by the second as the feeble sunlight continued to be engulfed by the growing darkness.

"Excuse me," she heard a voice from behind her. She turned around to face a young man around her age. He didn't look older than twenty-two, twenty-four at most. He had

short dark hair and sparkling blue eyes. He wore a rather shabby-looking jacket, dark trousers, and a pair of worn out shoes that had seen better days. His choice of clothes would have been unworthy of notice had it not been for a thick, rusty-brown scarf that was tied snugly around his neck.

He stood smiling at her rather awkwardly, his thin lips twitching and all the while, his eyes seemed to speak to her through their amazing sparkle.

She felt drawn to them as if they were sending out signals she was meant to interpret. He was nervous; she was sure of that. It was evident in the way he had dug both his hands in his pockets, looking a bit lost for words. And yet, the look in his eyes seemed quite confident.

“Yes?” she asked, mystified by his body language.

“Hello miss, sorry to disturb,” he finally said, rather unsurely.

“Yes?” She asked again after another awkward pause.

“Um, I was wondering if you could do me a favour...” His voice trailed off as he scratched his head.

Laura gave him an encouraging nod. “How can I help you?”

He still looked hesitant as he stood before her, shifting his weight from foot to foot but then, he finally spoke. “Well, I was wondering if you could pretend that we’re friends.”

Laura knitted her brows. “I don’t understand.”

“Could you offer me a handshake please? Or smile and give me a hug or something?” The half-smile he flashed her then, could also be perceived as a rather cheeky smirk.

“What?” she protested. “What on earth for?”

“You see that chap behind me, sitting on the bench?” He motioned with a slight movement of his head, shifting his eyes to one side. “No! Please don’t stare! He mustn’t suspect anything!” he pleaded, his blue eyes huge.

“Why not? Who is he?” she asked even more intrigued now, as she darted her eyes surreptitiously to the young man on the bench once more. He wasn’t even looking, and

she wondered what the fuss was all about. Silently, she thought the whole thing was rather amusing, but she wasn't going to show that to the dashing lad before her. Instead, she fixed him with a stern stare that demanded an instant explanation.

"Look, I'm sorry, all right? It's just that I made a bet with him that I could prove that we're friends. He sort of said you're too beautiful for the likes of me, and I wanted to prove him wrong; that's all!"

"So you told him a lie about me and now you want me to help you confirm it?" she asked, trying to sound stern despite aching to dissolve into laughter by then.

"In essence, yes!" he answered, giving her a smile that this time, could definitely pass for a cheeky smirk.

"But how does this benefit me?" she retorted with a naughty look in her eyes.

He cocked his eye at her, startled. "Excuse me?"

"What is there for me to gain from helping you out?"

"I'll buy you a drink if you like!" he offered immediately, and she wondered if that had been his goal from the start.

"No thanks!" she answered sternly.

Instead of speaking again, the boy regarded her silently in response with sorrowful eyes. It was a sad look of such intensity that the thought that crossed her mind then was that he was doing it on purpose. In the end, she gave in anyway. He surely was heaven. She had to admit it. And he seemed harmless enough.

She took a step toward him and offered her hand to him. He took it gratefully and to his surprise, totally unprompted, she reached up then and left a kiss on his cheek.

"Thanks! It's more than I hoped for," he whispered.

Laura chuckled. "Now what?"

Without moving his head, the boy darted his eyes sideways in a comical way and spoke behind his teeth. "Is he still there?"

Laura tittered, but when she cast a glance at the bench behind him again, the smile on her face froze. The lad was no longer alone there. A young girl, barely older than sixteen, was sitting next to him now. They seemed lost in conversation together, oblivious to what was going on around them.

“You never spoke to that young man, did you? There is no bet, is there?” she put to him when realisation hit her. With her green eyes squinting at him, she placed a hand on her hip defensively, waiting, demanding the truth.

The boy smirked and gave a wink. “My dad always said, ‘never lie to a beautiful girl, unless you’re after her heart.’ So I took my dad’s advice. Is that so bad?” he asked mischievously, tilting his head, amused by the stunned expression on her face.

“Oh I see! So you were pretending to be nervous all this time. What an act! And for what?” she asked when she finally found her voice again.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I got a kiss on the cheek, didn’t I?”

“And?”

“You make it sound so trivial.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I beg to differ Miss... Miss... Sorry, I didn’t quite catch your name.”

“Huh! As if I’m going to tell you that! I’m not falling for another one of your tricks!” Laura turned around and started to walk away, but the spring in her step revealed that she was light-hearted.

“You’re wrong though.” His voice trailed behind her, and she turned to face him again.

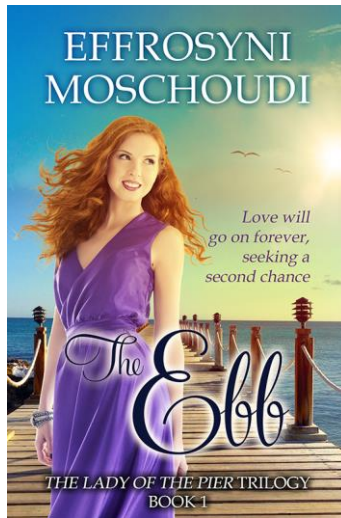
“Wrong about what?” she demanded, her chin jutting out, her emerald eyes twinkling at him, her red hair flowing in the breeze, rendering him speechless for a few moments.

“That the kiss you gave me was trivial. A kiss from a pretty girl like you will keep me warm after you go, all

through the night,” he said with a grin and a hand over his heart.

“Why don’t you get under a blanket to be sure,” she teased him and turned away.

The echo of his laughter hung in the air between them as she strode off along the deck, her hand over her luscious, red lips, stifling her giggle.



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