

"Highly recommended!"—USA Today bestselling author COLLEEN COBLE

HEIRLOOM  
SECRETS

# The Dress Shop on King Street

A NOVEL

ASHLEY CLARK

HEIRLOOM  
SECRETS  
·ONE·

The  
Dress Shop  
on  
King Street

A NOVEL

ASHLEY CLARK



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Dress Shop on King Street • Ashley Clark  
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2020 used by permission

© 2020 by Ashley Clark

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Clark, Ashley, author.

Title: The dress shop on King Street / Ashley Clark.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker

Publishing Group, [2020] | Series: Heirloom secrets

Identifiers: LCCN 2020029410 | ISBN 9780764237607 (trade paperback) | ISBN  
9780764237904 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493428281 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3603.L35546 D74 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020029410>

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Kathleen Lynch / Black Kat Design  
Cover image by Shelley Richmond / Trevillion Images

Vintage floral wallpaper by Mary Carver / Alamy Stock Photo

Author is represented by Spencerhill Associates

20 21 22 23 24 25 26      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my family—

To my husband, Matthew,  
for always supporting my dreams  
in every possible way.

To our son, Nathanael,  
who brings joy to me every day.

And to my parents, Steve and Laurie,  
for teaching me to dream fearlessly.

“Every shut-eye ain’t sleep,  
and every good-bye ain’t gone.”

—Gullah Proverb



# PROLOGUE

*Charleston, South Carolina, 1860*

The candlelight sent a shadow of Rose up against the wooden wall. From the shadow, Rose looked taller. Stronger. Funny thing about shadows. They made even the smallest things into monsters or fairies or whatever folks wanted.

Even a caterpillar could have the wings of a butterfly.

Her daughter, Ashley, used to be scared of shadows when the girl woke to Rose fixin' their dresses by candlelight. Rose tried to teach her to find the familiar shapes of happy things—flowers or ribbons or the sea. But Ashley had never seen the sea. And sometimes she still woke up Rose when bad dreams made her kick her feet.

Rose pressed her own coarse hair back from her sweating forehead using her palm. She wrung her hands and paced the dirt floor of the little room where she and Ashley slept.

*Sold.* She could hardly think the word, much less speak it aloud.

Her daughter. *Her* daughter.

Only nine years old.

With all of life ahead of her, and none of it hers to live.

Rose swallowed back the bile in her throat. Her hands fisted,

and she squeezed so tightly her fingernails soon brought drops of blood to her palms. That wicked, wicked man. Even from the grave, he ruined her.

First, ten years ago—when Rose herself was a child. And now, with his wife . . . who'd finally connected the dots about the girl.

The slave girl whose father was a white man.

That's all she was to them. A slave.

But to Rose, Ashley was a daughter. *Her* daughter.

Careful not to wake the little girl, Rose took a small blade from the table. For the briefest moment, she considered using it for another purpose, but shook her head. If God thought her life worth living without her daughter, who was she to question His timing?

Rose held the dull knife to the tip of her own braid, then cut slowly through the hair. She would put the lock of hair, a token of memory, with the rest of her daughter's things.

Her hands began to tremble as she looked over at Ashley, the braid still in her hand. In that moment, Rose's daughter was a baby all over again. Those sweet, round eyes and the hushed rise and fall of her breath.

And Rose would do anything to keep her like this forever, because her baby girl knew nothing of tomorrow's horror.

Rose reached for the empty feed sack and set the braid of hair inside. She folded Ashley's best dress with care, then put it inside too, along with three handfuls of pecans.

The candle flickered, and the shadows grew along the wall, and Rose knew this still wasn't enough.

She looked around the room at their meager belongings, then down at her own dress. Of course. The butterfly buttons Ashley had always admired.

The one thing Rose owned of beauty.

Rose snapped the two buttons from the cuffs of her worn cotton dress and dropped them into the bag. She closed the sack tight and set it down on the table beside her sleeping daughter.

She crawled into bed and slipped her arm around Ashley as she'd done every night of the child's life.

"The sack ain't much, child," she whispered. "But it be filled with my love always."

Rose held her daughter until the morning sun rose—an eternity between the night and dawn, and yet an eternity that passed in a moment. She memorized the size of the little girl's hands and the way she pulled the blankets to her chin.

And as Ashley stirred, Rose smiled—not for any joy, but these might be their final moments, and she wanted her daughter to remember them warmly.

She smiled because she'd no tears left to cry.

"Mornin', baby." Rose brushed her daughter's hair from her eyes. "Momma's got somethin' to tell you 'bout."



# ONE

## *Downtown Charleston, 1946*

Millicent Middleton.

That's the name Mama told her to give if anyone asked. Half of it was honest, at least.

Millie supposed her mama was being overcautious like all folks do when they've got an aching spot in heart or body, but she didn't mind playing along. She, too, still grieved for her daddy from what she remembered of him and sometimes wondered . . . if only they'd been more careful, well maybe he wouldn't have died.

Millie straightened the red cloche pinned to her bob-cut curls and peered into the window of the dress shop on King Street. The grey-blue of her dress complemented the deep olive of her skin, and her skirt swooshed a bit as she stood on her tiptoes to get a better look inside.

Ever since she first saw her mama's buttons, Millie had been fascinated by dresses and the stories of the women who wore them.

Mama collected buttons—said each had a hole to match—but there were two butterfly buttons in particular that she kept a close eye on and never saw fit to use.

Senseless, really. Buttons with that kind of beauty just lyin' around. Maybe they were waiting for just the right garment.

Inside the shop, a blond woman reached for a peach silk number

on display. What Millie would give to go inside the store and let her own fingers graze the fabric of that gown.

Layers of peach silk draped down the back of the dress, then fell into a line of buttons along the fitted waistline and hips. The whole gown was like a summer dream.

Millie sighed.

*Maybe someday.*

Just as she was swooning, a young man tripped down the sidewalk and bumped into her arm. He righted her elbow immediately, and the two locked eyes.

He was handsome—Millie immediately noticed it—and he looked like just the sort who might’ve returned from war with Germany.

His blue eyes glimmered, his blond hair shone, and his pin-striped vest accentuated broad shoulders.

Millie smiled at him.

He returned her grin.

Her heart fluttered with all the possibilities of having been noticed.

“Looking for a wedding dress?” he asked, a glimmer in his eye. “My father owns the place, you know.”

“Yes . . . I mean . . . oh no.” Millie waved her hand, trying to clarify her meaning. “I’m looking, but no intent to buy.” She held up her left hand for his inspection. “What I mean to say is I was daydreaming about the dresses. The fabrics. Sewing gowns like these.”

He laughed at the response and seemed flattered to have flustered her. Then he took her hand in his own as if inspecting it more closely. “Now, you tell me—why does a woman as beautiful as yourself have such a lonesome ring finger?”

He was probably all talk, and Millie knew it, but she didn’t care. She’d never experienced such blatant flattery from a boy before, and she was going to enjoy it while she could.

Millie pulled her hand from his, not wanting to draw attention

to herself and this stranger, despite how she'd secretly enjoyed his touch.

She rubbed the sleeve of her dress where it scratched her wrist, and for a moment she wondered . . . didn't he know? Could he not tell what was different about her?

But it wasn't the sort of thing someone said. Not aloud, anyway.

And what did it really matter? It wasn't as if she planned to marry him.

"I'm Harry." The boy rocked back on the heels of his loafers. "Harry Calhoun. And you?"

"Millicent Middleton."

Harry nodded once. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Millie." He glanced down the street and gestured his head toward the soda fountain on the corner. "Don't suppose you'd want to get an ice cream, or maybe a Coca-Cola with me? My treat."

Millie gulped back the panic that began rising in her throat.

Speaking with this boy was one thing, but brazenly walking into the pharmacy with him? For all eyes to see? That was another.

She straightened the cloche on her head, though it didn't need straightening. "I appreciate the invitation, but I . . ."

Harry ducked down several inches to catch her gaze once more. "Aw, c'mon. It's just some ice cream."

She did love ice cream. And she hadn't tasted any in ages. Folks on the radio were always talking about the economic depression and the war and the country's recovery; but for Millie's family, growin' up in the decades prior hadn't exactly been rolled in luxury.

Actually, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a sundae. Maybe a year? Her last birthday?

She could almost taste the chocolate fudge sauce dripping over the vanilla ice cream.

Millie sighed. She was set to meet Mama at five o'clock on the dot. So long as Mama and Harry didn't meet, maybe . . .

"Sure." The word left her lips before she had a chance to reconsider.

“Excellent.” Harry sounded as if he’d never expected any other answer from her. His smile caught gleams of sunlight.

He started down the sidewalk and glanced over his shoulder, clearly expecting her to follow. “Have you ever been to this soda fountain?”

It was safe to say she hadn’t.

Millie hesitated. “I don’t think so.”

“They make a great sundae. I always get coconut shavings on mine.”

An automobile puffed a cloud of exhaust as it rumbled down the cobblestones of King Street. Harry waited for it, then checked both ways before crossing. Millie stayed close by his side, the skirt of her dress bouncing with each step.

Moments later, they’d reached the pharmacy. Harry held open the door for her, and Millie stepped through.

She’d never been on the other side of the glass before. A jukebox played a cheery tune from the corner, and patrons sat atop stools around the bar. It was everything she’d always envisioned, except alive. Real. And it smelled absolutely delicious.

Millie smiled.

This was going to be a good afternoon. For a few moments, she could live a different kind of reality.

“Welcome, kids. Have a seat.” The man behind the counter scooped heaps of ice cream into fancy glass bowls and poured flavored syrups over them.

Harry chose a seat near the center of the bar, and Millie gladly slid onto the stool beside him.

Hand-painted signs for soda, chocolate milk, and ice cream hung on the wall behind the bar, and the checkered black-and-white tile floor brought an air of whimsy.

Millie swiveled right and left on her stool.

“What can I get you?” The man at the counter pulled a pen from behind his ear and a pad of paper from his apron.

“I’ll have a sundae with chocolate fudge on top.” Millie tried

not to sound as enthusiastic as she felt—for she knew she was Cinderella in this dream, and she didn't want it ending a second sooner than it must. The last thing she needed was Harry thinking she didn't belong in a place like this.

Even though she didn't.

"You got it." The man tapped his fingers against the bar. "And you?"

Harry ordered the same, plus coconut shavings. As the man readied their orders, Harry turned to Millie with that dangerous grin again.

"So, if you aren't planning a wedding of your own, do tell me, Millie Middleton, what were you doing peering into a bridal shop? Spying on somebody?"

Millie laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Then what?" Harry asked again. The man set both sundaes on the counter, and Harry plunged his spoon into the ice cream.

"You'll think it's silly." Millie felt her cheeks warming and wondered how much color might show. Not that she was embarrassed of it in the least, but she also wouldn't give Harry the satisfaction.

"Maybe," he said with a raise of his eyebrows. "But you never know until you say it out loud."

Millie took her first bite of ice cream. The vanilla melted sweetly on her tongue. Her dream was just as sweet—but also as much of a luxury.

"I want to own my own dress shop someday." Millie found boldness as she said the words aloud. "I want to be a seamstress."

Harry crossed his arms. "I don't see what's so silly about that."

*No . . . you wouldn't, would you?*

"Is it because you're a woman?" he asked.

Millie looked down at her sundae.

"Because no doubt, with a name like Middleton and a smile like yours, you'll marry well. I'm sure you'll find a man who will make it happen for you."

“What if I told you I want to make it happen for myself?” Her racing pulse defied the sass of her words.

Harry chuckled, then locked eyes with her. “Oh, you were serious.”

“I was, and I am.”

“Then I would say I admire your ambition.” He hesitated a long moment. “But I would remind you that such idealism is precisely why we can’t have women prancing around, running businesses. The idea may be alluring, but it will never happen in American society.”

Millie clenched her teeth but managed a tight-lipped smile. Should’ve known better than to test him. She was normally not so foolish. Long ago, her mama explained why certain dreams and certain people were just not worth her time.

Millie took another bite of her ice cream, then mixed the chocolate fudge into the melting vanilla with her spoon. Blending the two together like a milkshake was her favorite part of a sundae—the hot and the cool, the rich and the sweet. Opposites blended deliciously.

“Tell me more about yourself. What brings you here this afternoon?”

Harry swept his blond hair back with his hand. “I’m studying at the College of Charleston so I can take on the family business someday. But with the pleasant weather today, I skipped class and took a walk down King Street. Perhaps it was fate that led to us meeting.” He took a bite of his ice cream. “Do you live nearby?” he asked.

“Radcliffeborough.”

“Really?” Harry sat up straighter.

“You sound surprised.” Millie swallowed another bite of her sundae, determined not to let one drop go to waste. She ran her thumb beneath her lower lip to remove any traces of chocolate.

“I am, to be honest.” Harry pivoted his stool to face her more

directly. “I guess I just assumed you lived on Middleton Plantation or South of Broad. I’m surprised to hear you live uptown.”

*Oh, Millie. Why did you have to go and rattle that off?*

“Despite that”—Harry inched ever so slightly closer—“I’d really like to see you again. Can I take you to dinner sometime?”

Millie frowned. “Did you just say *despite that?*”

“Did you not hear me say I’d like to take you to dinner?”

Millie simply stared at him. The clock had struck midnight, and it was time for Cinderella to leave.

“Thank you for the sundaes, Harry.” Millie stood from the stool and brushed the hem of her dress back into place.

“I . . . I don’t understand.” Harry dropped coins on the counter for the sundaes. In an instant, he was standing beside her, grabbing her arm, and turning her to face him. “I thought things were going well. Was I wrong?”

Heels planted firmly against the checkered tile, Millie raised her chin. “If you don’t like persons from uptown, and you don’t believe a woman can run a business, then I can tell you truthfully, Harry, you are *not* going to like me. Because you don’t know the half of it if you find those things off-putting.”

The ceiling fan above them pushed the air into a swirl.

“What does that mean, Millie?” Harry shook his head. “Are you trying to keep me guessing?”

Millie reached toward the door, but Harry wouldn’t let go.

“Please, just tell me.”

Millie’s gaze scanned the pharmacy—the girls wearing beautiful dresses and the boys trying to impress them and the artwork that just moments ago, she’d studied so intently.

She’d never come here again. So what was the point of keeping it a secret, anyway?

She lowered her voice so as not to cause a scene. At least now, she might let go of the breath she’d been holding.

“Middleton was my great-grandmother’s name. She was born a slave and had no other surname.”

Harry blinked. Millie watched as realization slowly changed his expression from pleasantry to disgust.

He let go of his hold on her arm then, wiping his hand on the leg of his trousers. “Get away from me, you filthy girl,” he hissed.

No one was watching them. No one was listening. Millie had made sure of it.

So no one saw when he pushed her on his way out the door, or when she righted her balance with her foot to keep from falling down onto the tile.

No one saw the tear on her sleeve from Harry’s grip, the turmoil in her heart, or the resolve on her face as she left the pharmacy a wiser woman than when she’d come.

But most of all, no one knew Millie was a Black girl pretending to be white.