

Clara & Irving
A Love Story of Past Lives

A Novel

Donna M. Fisher-Jackson

CHAPTER ONE ~ DANIELLE

The Cemetery

September, 2008

After all these years, Danielle's grandmother was finally going to have her own headstone. Danielle couldn't believe that this day had finally arrived. She wondered how it would feel to see her grandmother's name – Clara Playse Saunders – carved into the stone. Would the memories rush back in, like a hidden door finally being opened?

Danielle and her boyfriend Bradley drove their rental car along Stillman Drive, a fitting name for the road leading to a cemetery. The Agawam Cemetery sat up high on a hill overlooking a saltwater pond, almost inviting on this early fall day on Cape Cod. The air smelled crisp with the scent of the ocean. High wispy clouds had been brush-stroked across the pale blue sky. An early September tropical storm had blown through the day before, littering the grass with fallen branches and leaves between the headstones.

As they drove through the wrought iron gate onto the gravel road they passed by crumbling gravestones from the 1800's. The stones leaned haphazardly, still half-embedded in the ground, looking forlorn as if no one had cared to visit their namesakes in a long time. As Danielle and Bradley rode up the hill, they arrived at the newer part of the cemetery that dated from the early 1900's to the present. The newer polished stones glistened in the sunlight and were adorned with sentimental pictures of Cape Cod scenes, including sailboats, lighthouses, and sand dunes.

Bradley parked their car near the top of the grassy hill, stopping in front of a fallen maple tree, its branches sprawled across the road. Danielle opened the car door, stepping onto leaves and twigs. A light breeze from nearby Little Harbor blew through the still leaf-covered trees. Looking up Danielle noticed seagulls circling high up in the sky. Her parents, Daniel and Marie, had already arrived, and stood next to her Uncle Sonny and Aunt Babe, all gazing down at the new gravestones. Her sisters, Mae and Emma, strolled towards the family from the other side of the cemetery where they had parked. As Danielle drew closer to her family, her father was pointing to his mother's gravestone, which had arrived that very morning. She held her breath as she looked down at the newly carved stone.

Her grandfather Irving Saunders' stone had been placed in the ground this past summer. Now, her grandmother Clara Saunders' simple granite stone sat next to his headstone with her name, her date of birth – September 20, 1899 – and the date she had been buried there – March 14, 1930. Danielle placed a pot of purple mums near the matching gravestones. The pungent smell of the mums clung to her hands, reminding her of fall days from the past. Danielle took a

deep breath staring at the words and dates on the stone. She bent down to trace her grandmother's name with her finger. She slid on her dark sunglasses covering her eyes in the bright sunshine of early afternoon.

As Bradley took pictures of the new gravestones, Danielle's thoughts drifted back to the past. She had never known her paternal grandparents because they had both died before she was born. All she remembered of them were the stories her father had told her of the early days in Onset when they all lived together as a family.

"Mother was in an unmarked grave for over seventy years, and now, she finally has a gravestone," said Daniel, reminding the family of the story of Clara's death, and how she had died suddenly in the early spring of 1930. Her husband, Irving and she had been visiting relatives when she passed away, then her body had been brought back by train to Massachusetts so she could be buried in Wareham. With the Great Depression moving in, Clara had been buried simply without a headstone. Until now.

Her Father added, "Thanks to Danielle who called the Town Hall of Wareham and found out where Clara had been buried, we now have a stone to remember her by." Daniel reached for his daughter's hand, squeezing it. Bradley took some more pictures of the family together around the gravestones. He encouraged the brothers, Sonny and Daniel to stand together for a picture. Sonny grumbled as his brother put an arm around his shoulders. They had never been that comfortable with showing affection. They must have missed having a mother around.

Daniel then recited the Bible verse from the Book of John, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

Behind her dark sunglasses, Danielle's eyes filled with tears. The words, "many mansions" reminded her of her dream in the spring about a large mansion filled with the paintings of different time periods, and how that nighttime dream had brought back a memory which forever changed her life. It had inspired her to continue her search for more answers about her past, and the part she had played in the family long ago.

Daniel had placed near the new gravestones a couple of black and white photos of his parents, Clara and Irving, in a round silver frame. They were probably dating, or in the early days of their marriage. Looking young and relaxed, they climbed over the rocks by the ocean. In another photo, Clara and Irving sat side by side holding hands with a Victorian house in the background.

As Danielle weaved her way through the nearby gravestones, she plucked fallen leaves off the faces of the stones, thinking about Clara's life: born in Maine at the turn of the century, losing her mother as a young girl, and then sent all the way to Massachusetts to live with relatives while her father remained in Maine with her brothers. How did Clara feel leaving her home behind at age five? Danielle imagined she must have felt like an orphan being shipped off to a new land.

CHAPTER THREE ~ CLARA

Orpheum Theatre

April - September, 1920

That Saturday, Clara and Marie boarded the train for New Bedford to shop and catch a picture show at the Orpheum Theatre. They couldn't wait to see Gloria Swanson's new film – *Why Change Your Wife?* All the young women envied her elaborate wardrobe ornamented with beads, jewels and feathers. She made smoking cigarettes in those long-stemmed black holders fashionable. Clara hadn't picked up the smoking habit, but she loved those movie star dresses.

After shopping, Marie and she dashed over to the theatre on Water Street. They rushed into the lobby of the Orpheum holding their shopping bags. They stood in line at the box office window to buy their tickets for the show. That's when they first spied Frederick in a dark blue suit, greeting patrons as they entered the theatre.

Clara and Marie lined up at the door. Frederick caught their eye. "Good afternoon ladies, I'm Frederick, the theatre manager here at the Orpheum. I can see you two ladies have been busy shopping. Would you like to leave your shopping bags in the main office?"

Marie's eyes widened as she sized up the handsome manager. "That would be swell."

"After the show, come over to the office," said Frederick, as he pointed to a door across the hall from the box office. "I'll have your bags for you. I can put your names on them."

Marie reached out her hand. "I'm Marie, and this is Clara. Thanks so much."

Clara stole a glance at him, and he smiled back. "Nice to meet you both. Hope you enjoy Gloria's new film."

An usher guided them to an aisle seat. The newsreels had just begun so Clara stood up to go find the powder room. As she exited the dark auditorium, she almost stumbled into Frederick who came out of the main office.

Caught off guard, Clara stuttered, "Could you...tell me...which way to the powder room?" It had been a while since she'd seen such a handsome man. Who would have known they could be found at a theatre?

Taking her by the elbow, Frederick guided her through the matinee crowd to the ladies lounge. Clara nodded. "Thank you." She ran some cool water in the sink, splashing her neck and bodice. With her cheeks flushed, she powdered her face and neck.

As she came back through the lobby, Frederick strolled up to her. “Clara, how would you and your friend like to have some cake and punch at intermission? I can have refreshments waiting for you at the bar.”

Clara didn’t quite know what to say. She wondered if he offered this special treatment to many patrons of the theatre. If Marie was here, she would know what to say next. Clara took a breath. “Thank you...that sounds lovely. I’ll let my friend Marie know.”

Frederick grinned. “I’ll see you at intermission.” As Clara walked back into the darkened theatre, she felt his gaze upon her.

The new film with Gloria Swanson was stunning, but Clara kept thinking about Frederick. Definitely spiffy – tall with dark brown hair, and brown eyes with glints of green, so smooth-talking, but also a gentleman. She tried to steer her thoughts back to the film because he was probably more interested in Marie than her. At intermission, Clara and Marie sashayed out into the lobby. Frederick met them at the end of the lobby bar. He waved them over. The three of them stood at the bar, sipping fruit punch and chatting about the new movie and the theatre. He told them he was from Boston and had recently moved down to New Bedford to manage the Orpheum. The theatre had opened on the eve of April 14, 1912 – the same night as the Titanic steamed towards its tragic ending. The theatre had thrived for several years with the popularity of vaudeville, and had recently begun showing silent films as well.

Frederick asked, “Can I get you ladies any more punch, or maybe coffee?” Marie had eaten her piece of white cake, but Clara had just nibbled at her slice.

Marie said, “Coffee would be swell...as sweet as you can make it...cream and sugar.”

Frederick called over the bar staff who went off to fetch Marie’s coffee. The lobby lights flickered soon after her coffee arrived. They needed to go back into the theatre. Frederick touched Clara’s arm. “I hope you’ll come back to the theatre again soon,” and he slipped her one of his calling cards.

Clara tucked the card into her coat pocket. “I’ll see you after the show.” Clara found it hard to concentrate on the rest of the movie, daydreaming about Frederick. As the show ended, they raised the lights while Clara and Marie let the other theatregoers leave first. Clara told Marie that Frederick had given her his card.

Marie squeezed her arm. “He would be quite a catch.” They filed out into the lobby where Frederick waited for them. He ushered them into the main office and showed them his private office as well. As promised, he returned their shopping bags.

Marie snuck out to go to the powder room, leaving Clara alone with Frederick. She unbuttoned the collar of her light wool coat.

“Would you like to sit?” He helped her take off her coat. As he slipped the coat off her arms, his hand brushed the sleeve of her silky dress. A tingle of electricity shot through her arm. Flustered, she slipped into the chair near his desk. He leaned back in his desk chair. “Have you ever done any modeling or acting?”

Clara’s cheeks turned hot pink. “No, I’m actually a school teacher.”

Frederick leaned forward. “You’re very pretty. I could see you on the stage.”

Clara laughed at the thought. “Standing in front of a roomful of school children is enough of a stage for me.”

Frederick stared intensely at her. Clara blushed some more. He touched her cheek. “It’s very becoming on you, the blushing that is.” He sat back in his chair. “Next weekend, the new film *Pollyanna* is being released with Mary Pickford. I’d be happy to set aside tickets for the matinee for you and your friend. Maybe we could catch an early supper afterwards.”

“Let’s check with Marie. I’d love to see the film. Mary certainly has created quite a scandal with her marriage to Douglas Fairbanks after their lefthand arrangement.” They had both been married to other people when they first met, and carried on an affair.

“Those starlets can get away with a lot more than us common folk,” said Frederick as Marie walked back into the office.

With a flip of her curly red hair, Marie said, “Don’t you two look cozy!”

Frederick sat up straighter in his chair. “We’re making plans for next weekend. How’d you like to come back next Saturday, and see the new Mary Pickford film, and catch an early supper?”

“Sounds like a grand idea, but right now, Clara and I have to catch the next train to Onset. Can’t wait to see you again,” said Marie as she held out her hand to Frederick.

Frederick clasped Marie’s hand, giving her an exaggerated bow. “I look forward to seeing you both next weekend.” He glanced at Clara. He grazed her arm again as he helped her on with her coat. Her pulse quickened.

She and Marie just made the 5 o’clock train. They giggled and gossiped about the film and Frederick, all the way back to Onset. Marie more forward than Clara, said, “I wouldn’t blame you one bit for being smitten with that handsome fella. Maybe, he has a friend for me?”

“That’d be perfect. We could go on a double date.” Clara couldn’t wait for the week to fly by so she could meet up with Frederick again.

Clara hadn’t met a man like Frederick in a while. He reminded her of some of the college boys she knew at Bridgewater Normal. There were mainly girls in her classes, but she would see the boys about campus and at the school dances. The boys she met there were more worldly and sophisticated than the boys from her high school. She thrived in the stimulating atmosphere of college, and wished she could have continued her education at a women’s college in Boston. But her family didn’t have that kind of money for college. Her Aunt and Uncle discouraged her from going any further with her education. They told her there was no real need for a woman to go onto a four-year college. For most women, the dream was to get married and raise a family, but Clara had always had other dreams. She imagined herself as an independent woman living in Boston and meeting all kinds of people from around the world. She dreamed of traveling around Europe, visiting London, Paris, Rome and Venice. She knew that there was more to life than living in a small town. When she met Frederick, she felt like he would understand those kinds of dreams.