

ONCE UPON A *Christmas* STORM

A woman with her hair styled in an updo, wearing a long-sleeved, dark green dress with a gathered waist, stands with her back to the camera. She is looking out over a winter landscape covered in snow. In the background, there are bare trees, a frozen river, and several stone buildings, likely an inn, nestled in a valley. The sky is a pale, clear blue.

Christmas at
Northbury Inn

COURTNEY WILLIS

CHRISTMAS AT NORTHBURY INN



COURTNEY WILLIS

ONCE UPON A CHRISTMAS STORM SERIES

Copyright © 2023
Christmas at Northbury Inn by Courtney Willis

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form without written consent from the author.

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Locales or public names are sometimes used for historical accuracy. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or settings is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Blue Water Books

Content warnings: There is a parent death and a kidnapping involved.
No language or detailed violence, but there are some tense scenes.
No sex, just some swoony kisses.

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thanks for reading!](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

For anyone who feels lost or alone at Christmas.

I hope your Christmas season is blessed with peace and happiness, and that this humble offering will help you feel the light and love of the holidays.

We may all have seasons of difficulty, but it is not our destiny in the end.

PROLOGUE



CHRISTMAS EVE, 1799 - LEICESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND

*T*welve-year-old Christopher Booth looked up from the book he was reading and glared at the doorway. They may have been attending a Christmas Eve party with their neighbors, where all the merchants and tradesmen in the village were invited, but the adults were being entirely too loud. Though they were entitled to their revelry, the level of their enthusiasm was beginning to vex him. Normally, it was the children who were scolded for being too rambunctious, but it seemed the roles were reversed tonight. For the young adults were dancing to their hearts' content in the drawing room, parents and friends were having plenty of drink and laughter in the dining room, and the younger children were left to fend for themselves. When it was his own choice, Christopher would always choose the library as his solitude, and of course, Ellie had followed him.

Raucous laughter sounded again, and Ellie stirred in her sleep, drawing Christopher's eye down. Her green skirts hid her slippered feet, hands tucked beneath her chin, and blonde curls escaped their pins as she rested on the satin pillow against his leg. Her hair had been much lighter in her infancy; he even remembered the ringlets being almost a pale white. As she grew older,

the color of her locks had changed to the color of straw or honey. Even though they were the same age, his hair had not altered at all and remained the color of summer sunshine. But he did not mind the change in his friend. He found the color suited her, as did just about everything.

As the festivities grew late in the night, the two friends had decided to go find entertainment elsewhere. Their forgotten chess game remained incomplete as they had settled on a book to read, but Ellie could not keep her eyes open long before sleep claimed her. Christopher let her rest and continued reading on his own, appreciating the time away from the chaos of the dinner party. But the noise kept bleeding into his solitude.

A shouting man devolved into laughter, and it shook Ellie awake with a start.

“Don’t worry, it’s just your uncle,” Christopher said. He had only just met the man that evening, but it was easy to recognize him as a drunkard.

Her eyes drooped back down, and she pressed her face into the pillow again. “Must he be so loud all the time?” she mumbled.

“I wondered the same thing,” Christopher said, turning back to his book.

But it wasn’t long until he heard footsteps approaching in the corridor. “Where are those children?”

And then Mr. Grant appeared in the library doorway. Tall and slender, every bit a comforting father figure. “Come along, Ellie.”

Mr. Grant moved to pick up his sleepy daughter, but she seemed to awaken immediately and slithered right out of his grasp in protest. “No, Papa, not yet! What about presents?”

“We can exchange presents tomorrow after church. Right now, we need to get Uncle Isaac home. I think he’s had a touch too much to drink tonight.”

Ellie frowned, rubbing one of her eyes. “But I brought it especially for tonight. I want to see him open it.”

Christopher froze. Had she been talking about him?

Mr. Grant coughed into his hand, and then sighed. “Very well, we can do

it quickly. Run and fetch the gift.”

In a blur of green, she rushed out the door, and Mr. Grant smiled, putting his hands on his hips.

Christopher stood, putting his book on the settee, and cleared his throat. “Mr. Grant, if you no longer feel it’s proper...” On the brink of manhood, he had begun to understand the ways of adults, seeing that those who exchanged gifts were mostly married, engaged, or immediate family. He did not want to presume, despite how dear Ellie was to him.

Mr. Grant put an arm around him and patted Christopher on the shoulder. “Not to worry, lad. The two of you are always swapping trinkets, and I see no reason to stop now, not when it makes my girl so happy.”

Indeed, when Ellie came running back down the corridor, the sleep was gone from her eyes, and instead her entire face lit up with her smile. In her hands, a small, thin box was tied with a thick red ribbon, and once she stood by her father again, she held it out to him. Her gloves slid down her arm in her eagerness, revealing a glimpse of the birthmark on the inside of her wrist that would identify her anywhere.

“Ellie, you didn’t have to...” Christopher tried to say. It appeared more formal than any gift they had exchanged before.

“I made it myself,” she said, still grinning. “Hurry, open it!”

Christopher removed the ribbon and pulled off the box lid to reveal a simple folded handkerchief. But in the bottom corner, he saw why the present had been so dear to her. His initials had been stitched into it with black thread, sided by two orange flowers, his favorite color.

“You made this?” Christopher asked incredulously. The shocking bit came from knowing how much Ellie hated stitching and had an incredibly hard time sitting still. Not just that, but as Christopher traced a finger over the letters, he realized she had used “K. B.” for Kit Booth. She was the only one who called him Kit.

“Yes, and you’ll never know how many days it took me to finish, so I

hope you use it every day for the rest of your life.”

Christopher smiled. “I will.” Then he glanced up at Mr. Grant before proceeding. “I made you a gift too, Ellie, but it’s not finished yet. I should have it ready tomorrow, so be sure to come by after church.”

“Of course we will,” Mr. Grant said. “But for tonight, we need to get your uncle to bed. And I want to check in on your mother to say goodnight. I know she was sad to miss this occasion.”

“Very well,” Ellie said.

Mr. Grant put a hand on her shoulder to usher her out, but she pulled away again and rushed to Christopher’s side, this time placing a parting kiss on his cheek. “Merry Christmas, Kit!”

His face burned, and Christopher placed a hand to his heated cheek as she walked away.

“Merry Christmas, Ellie.”

He stood in the doorway as they left, and she turned to give him one final wave before disappearing down the corridor. Christopher then turned and hurried upstairs. He’d need to finish working on his present if he wanted it to be ready as her gift for tomorrow.

CHAPTER 1



THIRTEEN YEARS LATER – DECEMBER 1812

*A*s the mail coach jostled up and down, then from side to side, Christopher inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, wondering if he would make it to the next stop without losing the contents of his stomach. Something about their manner of travel had changed since the last stop to rest the horses, and it seemed to be more than the fierce winter winds or the divots in the road. There was almost a gliding effect now, as if the coach slid back and forth, quick jerking motions correcting the direction for safety, but all it did was drain the blood and rational thought from Christopher's head. He tried to continue breathing steadily and gave a reassuring smile to the mother and daughter sitting across from him, but they had decidedly scooted themselves into the opposite corner, likely hoping to find themselves out of the line of fire. It was probably wise of them.

“How much longer?” Christopher asked in a whispered breath.

“I can't imagine we would stay on the roads for long, sir. Not in this weather.” His valet, Mr. Patrick, gave an affirming nod.

Christopher drew up his gaze and rested his head against the cold glass of the window in defeat. Even with all the hours on the coach, Christopher had

hardly noticed how day had already become night. But in the cold darkness, he could still see the downpour that berated the countryside, which matched the soft patter on the roof of the coach. Of course, there would be weather. The one event he needed to be punctual for, the last chance he had to save his family situation, only to be delayed by incessant rain. Such was the life of an Englishman.

The passing landscape only made his vision spin and his stomach churn, so Christopher closed his eyes again as he let out a careful breath.

But the coach slowed as the driver called out an impending stop, and Christopher offered up a silent prayer of gratitude.

The doors opened and a cold rush of wind filled the coach. Patrick stepped out and offered his hand, but Christopher shook his head. “Ladies, please.”

The mother and daughter hurried quickly out the door, and Christopher did not blame them, for he could not guarantee their safety.

Christopher then made ready to stand, and he realized it was not rain that was slowing their travels, but snow. White specks collected in droves across Patrick’s shoulders, and somehow it seemed both peaceful and distressing at the same time. Christopher had always enjoyed the snow, but it reminded him of Christmases long ago, and such memories also pained him. Apart from that, he was going to be late for the Clark’s house party, and the amount of snow that came down would make all the difference on when he was able to arrive.

“Come, let’s get you seated inside,” Patrick said, and Christopher nodded. All he needed was a moment to rest without being in a state of constant movement.

“Apologies for the difficult travels.” The driver tipped his hat as the other passengers seated outside with him also disembarked. “We’ll be leaving within the hour, or you can wait for the next coach, which should be along in the morning.”

“Understood, thank you,” Patrick said, and Christopher was grateful, for he had little voice left to speak with how unsteady he felt. He was led, almost blindly, through the front doors of the inn, and they were met with a booming voice.

“Welcome to Northbury Inn.” The man who Christopher presumed to be the innkeeper was tall and stout, and he wore a confident smile. “My name is Roger Hill, and this is my establishment. Have no worries about your stay during the storm, sir. We are a small establishment, but we have plenty of food and drink, and warm rooms available if needed.”

Christopher tried not to think cynically, hoping this man wouldn’t con every spare cent out of his pocket and praying that the snow would pass so he could quickly be back on his way, but for the moment, he was just grateful to have a place to rest.

“Thank you, Mr. Hill,” Christopher said lightly. “I believe we’ll just take our rest in the parlor and sit in front of the fire for now.”

“Of course, of course. See yourself comfortable, sir.” Then he moved to speak with one of the men who appeared to be preparing to board the coach.

Christopher moved through the corridor and into a room that seemed small but fashionable, though it appeared old as the rest of England. Walking around tables and chairs, he noted the mother and daughter from the coach seated before the large fireplace. He eventually found a place to sit in a worn armchair, but once he sank down into the cushions, it was more than enough reprieve from the stiff coach seats he had endured the last few days.

“I’ll fetch you a drink,” Patrick said, and then he was gone.

How grateful he was for Patrick. The man was slightly older than Christopher himself, but in need of work, so Christopher had hired him on temporarily as his manservant for the house party. As the son of a carpenter, Christopher needed to appear as though he had some sort of dignity in the presence of wealth and status. Not that the Clarks didn’t already know his status, for they had hired Christopher’s father for a wood carving job in their

London house during the season. But their daughter, Jane, had taken a liking to Christopher, and she'd requested his company for Christmas in Newcastle. The invitation was more of an opportunity than he would ever have again in his life if she thought of him with marriage in mind. Not to mention it could also mean a more permanent position for Patrick as well. But while Miss Clark was beautiful and sweet, Kit felt no attachment to her beyond what their union could mean for Kit's family and his father's business.

Christopher let out a sigh, releasing the tension in his shoulders. He had forgotten about the rigors of traveling by coach and only recently learned that such a lengthy trip had the potential to make him so ill. It had been many years since he'd spent so much time or money on the luxury. He could not afford such trips, for every penny since his youth had gone toward paying off his grandfather's debts. Christopher had worked alongside his father for years, trying to help him establish a name in London, yet still they struggled. His parents told him to pursue his own happiness, but that was not something Christopher could do. He would do right by his parents, even if it meant a marriage of convenience. He only needed to escape the snow and make it to the house party first.

"A bowl of warm soup, sir?"

A sweet voice made Christopher open his eyes, and he looked up to see a maidservant in a pale blue dress and a white apron, with a white bonnet covering her dark brown hair.

"Yes, thank you. How much?"

She did not speak. She held a bowl of soup in each hand, and they seemed suddenly precarious as her eyes grew wide, her mouth dropping open.

Suddenly insecure in his appearance, Christopher dusted the melted snow from his sleeves. "I'm sorry, I suppose I do look a fright after the whole day traveling. Do forgive me." He had taken such great care with his dress, trying to avoid an inferior appearance, and felt immediately grateful he had not arrived at the house party so disheveled. What would Miss Clark think?

But still the maid did not speak, so Christopher gave her an apologetic smile. “Perhaps you can put it on my bill. Under the name Christopher Booth.”

She finally blinked and closed her mouth, setting a bowl of soup on the small table beside him. “Of course. Thank you, Mr. Booth.” Her voice slowed and lingered on his name, then she bobbed a curtsy and turned to hurry away.

Christopher sighed and closed his eyes again, the room spinning once more. The soup smelled like heaven, but his stomach was not yet ready to receive more occupants. And he would absolutely need to change clothes before arriving at the house party, if the maid’s reaction was any indication of his appearance. He could certainly manage that within the hour before the mail coach left, but the thought of returning to the jostling and jumbling of the road made him shake his head. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to delay one night, and he could show up at the house party recovered and well refreshed. He didn’t know how much longer the ride would be, or even where Northbury was on a map, but they had to be closer to Newcastle than not.

Another booming voice sounded suddenly, but it was not as warm and welcoming as the innkeeper’s.

“No, I asked for a meal. This vegetable slop is meant for the pigs. I intend to have a meal fit for a man. Where is the pot roast?”

Christopher shook his head. Of all the ridiculous and conceited notions...

“I understand, sir, but please, your hand—”

Christopher’s eyes flew open and he turned, sensing the immediacy of what was happening.

It was one of the travelers from on top of the coach, who should have taken his meal with grace and been grateful he had been permitted in the parlor at all. Instead, he was berating the maid and gripping her wrist with his massive hand in such a way that her face twisted with pain and fear. The mother and daughter from the mail coach were also watching, eyes shrouded

in concern.

Christopher hardly had the strength to challenge the man, but he could not let the injustice continue when they were the only ones in the room.

Standing and moving, perhaps a touch too quickly, he marched across the parlor and grabbed the man's arm.

"Unhand her at once."

The man looked up and narrowed his eyes. "Mind your business, lad."

But Christopher persisted. "One should never grab a lady by the arm like that. Are you any kind of gentleman at all?"

The man scoffed. "She's not a lady, she's a maid. A servant who isn't serving as she ought."

Christopher tightened his grip, enough to cut off the man's words and make him release the maid's wrist.

"She is a woman who offered you a meal, you ungrateful ruffian. And you'll not dare to touch her again."

Before Christopher could continue, loud steps sounded behind him, and Mr. Hill appeared.

"Out with you. I'll not have anyone mistreat the staff in my establishment," said Mr. Hill with a fierce glare. "You can wait in the barn with the animals if you're going to act like one. You can take a room at the hotel down the road, or you can sleep in the snow for all I care, but you won't be staying here another minute!"

The angered traveler protested, but Mr. Hill took up the man by the lapels and pulled him to his feet, then ushered him out of the parlor.

Christopher's head spun from the exertion, but he tried to steady himself as he turned to the maid. "Are you all right? Your hand..."

He motioned toward her wrist, but she pulled it back, bringing her sleeve down to cover her arm. "I am well enough."

"I apologize if my imposition was too forward," he said, but she shook her head.

“Not at all. I thank you for stepping in, sir. Many would not care about the wellbeing of a servant.”

Christopher took note of her accent and how very different it was from the innkeeper’s brogue. Her smooth tone actually put him in mind of home, and of his youth growing up in Leicestershire.

“Well, should you ever need assistance, please do not hesitate, Miss...?”

Her eyes shot up, a smile frozen on her lips. “Miss Liza, sir.”

Christopher gave her a small bow. “I’m at your service, Miss Liza.”

“Much obliged, sir.” Then she bobbed a curtsy as she had before and disappeared through a door that led to the kitchens.

He watched her go and felt a small flicker of curiosity. Something about the maid seemed familiar to him, though in his addled mind, he couldn’t quite place how. Taking a deep breath, he turned back to his chair and saw the mother and daughter eyeing him again.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

The mother nodded and smiled. “That was very chivalrous of you.”

Collapsing back into the chair, Christopher said, “It was nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing. He was in no condition to protect himself, let alone someone else. It was simply his nature to always strive to do the right thing, but he could not pursue that any further now. With his head still spinning and a violent vomiting feeling moments away, he wouldn’t be able to travel at all—not without first getting some rest.

CHAPTER 2



*F*inally in the safety of the warm kitchen, Eleanor leaned against the closed door and pressed a hand to her chest. The pounding heart inside served as a reminder of not only what had just happened, but also who she had met. Disgruntled guests she was accustomed to, especially after five years at the Northbury Inn. But the other man, the one who had stepped in to save her... she had been certain she would never see him again. She would never have had reason to. That life from before was a distant memory, filled with so much ache and longing. It helped not to even think of it.

How could he be here now?

Eleanor's mind raced as she stared across the kitchen, not seeing the chicken carcass ready for boiling or all the half-cut vegetables surrounding her. What did it mean? What had brought Kit Booth this far north? He clearly wasn't looking for her, because there had been no recognition in his eyes, at least not the way she had immediately recognized him. And he didn't flinch when she had given the false name of Liza.

So what the devil was he doing here?

She'd thought of him countless times over the years, wondering what had become of her favorite childhood friend—what kind of company he kept and how he occupied his time. Were his parents alive and well? Had he eventually married? Now she had him here, underneath the same roof, and

she couldn't get a single answer from him. If he didn't know who stood before him, she couldn't just volunteer that information. It would jeopardize her identity and the secret location that had kept her safe and secure for so many years. But that did not stop her from wondering.

The outer door to the kitchen opened, and Mrs. Hill hurried in with a bucket of water from the well. "It's a right blizzard brewing out there," she said, setting the bucket on the table before finally looking up. "Whatever's the matter, dear? You look as though you've seen a ghost."

Eleanor swallowed hard and nodded. "Perhaps I have."

Mrs. Hill, no more than ten years Eleanor's senior, came to stand beside her and took her by the shoulders. "What do you mean, love? Why is your face so pale?"

"I think my past has come back to haunt me."

"Who?" Mrs. Hill moved to the side and cracked the door open to peek into the parlor.

"The man in the chair by the fire."

A head taller than her friend, Eleanor glanced out too. The side of Kit's profile was clearly visible, and it still made her heart race that he was here. Her past and current life had collided, making all her thoughts and emotions jumbled and messy.

Mrs. Hill closed the door. "Well, with a face like that, he can haunt me all he likes."

Eleanor smiled. She could not deny that Kit had grown into quite the handsome gentleman.

"Ahem."

They both turned at the sound of a throat clearing, and Mrs. Hill had the decency to put on a sheepish face for her husband.

"The only handsome face you have to look at the rest of your days is this one," Mr. Hill said with a teasing smile.

"Yes, of course, dear," she obliged, leaning forward to press a quick kiss

to his lips.

Eleanor rolled her eyes, but even she could appreciate how nice it was to be accepted by such kind and loving people. The Hills had taken her in when she'd been on the run. They had offered her a room and employment without any references. They'd given her friendship and safety and support after she'd lost the only home and family she'd ever known. Her heart had been closed off to ever hope for a marriage or relationship as admirable as theirs, but it was still a blessing to see that such love existed.

"I've just secured Garvey's seat on the leaving coach. Hopefully that means he can make it home before his mother passes."

Eleanor frowned, silently praying their stable hand had better luck than she did.

Then Mr. Hill turned to Eleanor with a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"What happened?" his wife asked, her face immediately flipping to concern.

"I'm fine, just a grumpy customer who didn't want soup." He had been more forceful than she had anticipated, but she hadn't expected Kit to show up and intervene either.

"And that other gentleman?"

Eleanor's heart skipped a beat. "I recognized him as one of my childhood friends, but it seems I'm not in the least bit familiar to him." And how could she be? Years had passed since that fateful day when her life had changed. It wasn't just that her hair had changed from the blonde of her youth to a dark brown, or that she was the height of an adult now. Or that they were miles away from where they had been born and raised. It was surely the fact that, no matter how much he remembered or if he ever thought of her, Kit would never suspect that his childhood friend, a merchant's daughter, would be found masquerading as a maidservant. But this role was the only way she could stay safe.

“It’s just as well. His valet told me they’re heading out on the mail coach within the hour, so you won’t feel so haunted for long.”

Eleanor nodded, but the news still brought back a familiar ache in her heart. For a few brief moments, she hadn’t felt like Liza, the girl in hiding, stuck in the snow that she hated, made bitter from life with her uncle. She’d caught a glimpse of the girl she used to be, young Ellie, dearly besotted with her childhood friend. She’d wanted to linger in that moment with Kit, to remember her life before it had become so difficult and scary, before she’d become an orphan and alone in the world. And oh, how she wished things could have been different. She wondered what her life would have been like if it hadn’t fallen apart that fateful Christmas so many years ago, if she had been able to grow up with Kit by her side, if he would have loved her all her life instead of completely forgetting about her. How she wished it all could have played out how it should have.

But Mr. Hill was right. It was just as well.

There would be no future for her with Kit Booth.



“Final call for departure!”

The shout startled Christopher awake where he sat by the fire. The soup next to him now cold, his stomach seemed calm enough to attempt, but his head still spun too easily.

“Shall we head out, sir?” Patrick said from across the room.

Christopher turned and found him seated next to the mother, whose daughter was now asleep and resting with her head on her mother’s lap. He had a brief memory of his own dear friend many Christmases before, but muddled with the lingering illness, the thoughts quickly dissipated.

“Are you to be leaving on the coach, ma’am?” Christopher asked, standing and steadying himself with a hand on the chair.

The woman pursed her lips. “We only travel north looking for work. I do not mind the delay. Besides, if that man from before will be on board, I think I’d prefer to wait for the morning coach.”

“I share your thoughts exactly. Patrick, please fetch our belongings, and I’ll secure us a room for tonight.”

“Yes, of course.” Patrick stood, then paused. “Shall I retrieve your bags from the coach as well, Mrs. Brown?”

The woman smiled. “That’s very kind, thank you.”

Christopher moved toward the front desk, where a woman who was not the maidservant stood.

“Good evening, sir. What can I do for you?”

When he met her gaze, Christopher felt a twinge of sadness. Something about her reminded him of his mother’s friend, Mrs. Grant, who had died so many years ago. Not so much in appearance, but more in presence. Christopher shook his head, for he did not like to think back on those times.

“You’re Mrs. Hill, I believe? Your husband mentioned spare rooms, and I would like to secure one tonight, if you please.”

“Yes, sir. Just the one room?”

“With two beds, if you have one available. I’ll have my valet stay with me.” Christopher might not have much money to his name, but he could spare enough for one night at the inn.

“Of course, sir. Your name?” she asked.

“Christopher Booth.”

“Thank you, sir. A good strong name for a handsome lad like yourself.” She scribbled his name in the registry. “Are you traveling home to wife and children for the Christmas season?”

“No, I’ve no wife or children to speak of,” Christopher said with a shrug.

“Is that so?” Mrs. Hill raised an eyebrow. “That means perhaps one lucky young miss ‘round here might catch your eye?”

His stomach twisted with regret. He only needed to put off the house

party for one day, then he would continue on. But he ought to be mindful of their invitation so the Clarks did not feel slighted.

“Indeed. Might I borrow a quill and paper to send a message onward with the coach?”

“Of course, sir. Just there.” She pointed to another side table by the door.

Hurrying over, Christopher reached for the inkwell and a spare piece of paper, and quickly wrote with the finest penmanship he possessed:

Mr. Clark,

I write to inform you I've found myself ill on my journey and have paused to take rest at an inn for the night. I should be no more than a day delayed, though I do apologize for the interruption. Please pardon my absence, and thank you again for the kind invitation. I look forward to sharing the Christmas festivities with your family and the house party.

Sincerely,

Christopher Booth

Christopher read over the note, thinking it would have been nice to have his mother close by to review so he could send it with confidence. Alas, he had only his jumbled mind to confirm. Christopher wondered if Miss Clark's father would disregard him due to his tardiness, and with that, he folded the letter and quickly jotted down the direction on the outside.

“I've collected the luggage, sir,” Patrick said, entering the inn with his arms full of bags and boxes.

“Thank you. Mrs. Hill here should have the key to our room.” Then

Christopher rushed out the door into the cold. “Ho there, driver! Wait, please!”

The driver was just about to click the reins on the horses when he paused. “Your man said you weren’t coming.”

“Yes, we will stay here for the night, but I wondered if you could take this post with you. It’s only to inform those waiting for me in Newcastle of my delayed arrival for the holidays.” Christopher held out the folded letter tentatively.

Looking down at it, the driver said, “It depends on the snow. If the path is blocked, it would be out of the way for delivery to Newcastle.”

Christopher nodded. “I understand, but I would appreciate the attempt.”

The driver let out a sigh, then took the letter and tucked it into his coat pocket without another word.

“I thank you, sir. Your diligence will not be forgotten.” Then Christopher stepped back to allow them their departure. “And the next coach will be along in the morning?”

“As I said before, depends on the snow.” Then with the click of the reins, they took off into the night.

At least Christopher had done his due diligence. Now he needed to get out of the cold and into a warm bed. A good night’s rest would do him well, and he would be back on the road tomorrow.

CHAPTER 3



Eleanor kept her eye on the kitchen door, knowing full well who was on the other side. She tried to occupy her mind with preparing a breakfast for their six occupants: the Mrs. and Miss Brown, Kit Booth and his manservant, and an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Haversham, who had gone to bed after their arrival earlier the day before. All of them anxiously awaited the next mail coach, including Eleanor herself. That they had stayed instead of going the previous night left her feeling both worried and distracted, being lost in her thoughts to the extent that she'd almost burnt the bread. But now she had sausage, eggs, and porridge ready for eating. Then Kit would be leaving on the morning coach, and he would be gone from her life for good.

Young Frank Hill suddenly opened the outer door with a handful of firewood, his cap and shoulders covered in solid white.

"Gracious, son!" Mrs. Hill moved from her spot by the stove to dust off his coat. "Is it still snowing?"

The boy nodded. "Papa told me to get more firewood for the parlor."

"Then hurry on your way, lad," she replied, ushering him out.

Eleanor's heart strained, suddenly realizing that Frank was likely the same age as Kit had been when she'd last seen him. As Frank left the kitchen, she paused at the door, sneaking a peek into the parlor. Mr. Hill stood with Mr. Haversham by the windows that faced the main road to the village. The

snow had continued overnight and kept falling as the day began. She did not remember much snow in their village when she was young, nor had she seen much during her stay in London, but ever since living with the Hills in Northbury, she had seen more snow here than in her entire life. She had only gone out that morning for water from the well, but all the tree limbs sagged from the weight, and snow kept crawling up along the sides of the buildings.

“They’ll have just enough time to eat before the mail coach shows,” Mrs. Hill said, bringing Eleanor’s thoughts back to the present. “Though perhaps not with all this snow.” Then used her apron to retrieve the pot of porridge.

Eleanor pulled the door open and saw the parlor was full of hungry guests. Mrs. and Miss Brown sat close to the fire where Frank piled the firewood, and Kit had joined the gentlemen by the window, so Eleanor tried not to swallow her tongue as she passed them.

“Not to worry, son,” said Mr. Haversham. “I’m sure you’ll be on your way home in a jiffy.”

Kit gave an unsteady smile. “Not home, exactly. To a house party in Newcastle, but only if this weather allows. I sent word ahead so Miss Clark and her father don’t worry...”

Eleanor’s shoulders deflated, her arms immediately lowering with the weight of the pot. Of course he would be on his way to spend the holiday with another family, not looking for some penniless orphan in hiding. This Miss Clark was undoubtedly wealthy and beautiful, and Eleanor wished him success in his endeavors. She wished even more for the mail coach to come sooner and take him away, else she would find herself longing for something more.

Mrs. Hill placed the eggs and sausages and bread on the table spread, then turned with a smile. “Breakfast is served, eat up!”

The guests all looked over at the announcement, and Eleanor hadn’t realized she’d been staring at Kit until his eyes met hers. When he gave her a small smile, her broken and bitter heart leapt at the sight. She found his smile

still brought her the same sense of familiarity, comfort, and peace, and knowing he would only be shortly taken from her all over again was too much, more than she could bear.

Dropping her gaze to the floor, she bobbed a curtsy and hurried back to the safety of the kitchens.

It will not be, she told herself, standing before the hearth. She closed her eyes to stay the burn of tears and let out a long breath. Just seeing him continued to hurt, and yearning to change the past would do her no good. It just made her miserable.

“How now, my love?” Mrs. Hill sounded behind her, placing a gentle hand on her arm.

Eleanor blinked quickly before turning to face her. “I am well.”

The look in Mrs. Hill’s motherly eyes told Eleanor she did not believe her, but thankfully Mrs. Hill didn’t press her for more. “Then why don’t we gather our next ingredients? There will be no church services, I imagine, for all this snow. And we can start on our Christmas pudding.”

Nodding in response, Eleanor swallowed the leftover emotion in her throat. She would keep to the kitchen for now. Good hard labor would do wonders to clear her head.



Christopher stared out the parlor window, biting the nail of his thumb and watching as trickles of white still fell from the sky. How could it still be snowing?

Thankfully, he did not feel as miserable after a good night’s sleep. And though Mr. Hill had assured them the next mail coach would come, it never arrived. Nor did it seem like an appearance would happen the following day. There had been talk of taking the path down the street to church, but seeing that the snow continued, there was no path to be found. Were the roads of the

mail coach completely impassable coming from any other part of the country due to the weather?

This worried Christopher the most. He couldn't be stuck at an inn when he was expected in Newcastle. He needed to make his appearance to see what the future held for him and Miss Clark. She did not seem to care that he was poor, for she had more than enough money for the both of them. When Christopher and his father had been working on the Clark's London home, she had made comments about only wanting a handsome husband on her arm and hinted that he could be the man to fill that role. Christopher saw this as his chance to bring honor back to his family name that had been marred by his grandfather's gambling debts, and perhaps to increase his father's carpentry business as well. He felt it his responsibility to save his parents, even if it meant enduring loveless marriage, so he could not fail now, not at the doorstep of his salvation.

The sound of a woman's voice shook Christopher from his thoughts; he'd assumed he was alone in the parlor. It must have been the innkeeper's wife and the maid in the kitchen. They had been excessively kind to him and all those who had remained during the ongoing snow, making sure everyone was comfortable and all needs were met. He would certainly give them a lofty recommendation to anyone who would traipse up this far north, but he'd have to guard his money wisely if he were to see them properly paid upon his departure... whenever that would be.

Laughter erupted from the direction of the kitchen, only this time it wasn't just a woman's voice. It sounded like many people, but what could a gathering be for? Simply staying close to the hearth for warmth?

Pushing in the kitchen door, a soft, warm aroma welcomed him, and sure enough, he found everyone either seated or standing around the fire with smiles on their faces, even the children.

"What goes on here?" Christopher asked.

"Stir it up Sunday, lad!" Mrs. Hill called from the table. "Making the

Christmas pudding!”

Mr. Hill stood and threw an arm around Christopher’s shoulder, motioning for him to sit. “Come, you’re just in time to make a wish.”

Seeing the tradition of preparing pudding weeks in advance created a twinge of regret in Christopher’s chest. How he longed to be with his own mother, thinking back on all the years he had associated the smell of baking with her.

“I was hoping you hadn’t gone and gotten yourself lost in all that snow. Miss Liza was just asking where you were off to,” Mrs. Hill said over her shoulder. The maid turned pink and gave the woman a glare.

Christopher chuckled. “No, I wouldn’t brave going anywhere just yet.”

“Well, now we’re all here and the mixing can begin.” Miss Liza did not meet his gaze and instead turned to bring a big bowl to the table.

And then all the mixings went in—the flour and spices, the moist sugar and eggs, the suet and the fruits soaked in liquor. Then a large wooden spoon was presented.

“Mr. Hill, would you do the honors?” Mrs. Hill asked.

He stepped forward, clearing his throat and rolling up his sleeves. “Now which direction again? West to east?”

The room erupted in objection.

“Don’t you bring bad luck down on this house, Mr. Hill,” his wife warned. “It’s east to west.”

“Like the face of a clock,” said Miss Liza.

“Give it a good stir, Papa.” Frank appeared beside his father. “I want a try next.”

Once the stirring began, everyone had a turn, as was the tradition. Mrs. and Miss Brown, Mr. and Mrs. Haversham, and even Patrick took a turn. And in the midst of all the strangers, Christopher still felt happy and comfortable. Like he would have at his own home.

“This smell always reminds me of my mother,” Christopher said.

Dishes clattered behind him, where Miss Liza had been cleaning, and he looked back to catch a glimpse of her to make sure she was all right.

“I think it’s the same for all of us,” Mr. Hill spoke firmly, bringing his attention back to the bowl. “Tender memories from days gone by. Come along, lad, your turn.”

Christopher stood and moved to the table, where the fruity mixture was already well blended, but he wanted his turn to make a wish as well. For the last few years, his Christmas wish had remained the same. As he pulled the wooden spoon through the batter, he closed his eyes and offered a silent prayer. Wishing for his parents to find relief from their financial burdens in order to live the rest of their lives in peace, and wherever she was, that his dear childhood friend Eleanor was happy and safe. He thought of her every Christmas, which always made the holiday bittersweet. It was the last time he had ever seen her, and he had no hopes of ever seeing her again, but that didn’t stop him from wishing her the best.

“And is your mother well, Mr. Booth?”

It was Miss Liza’s voice that spoke next to him, but when he opened his eyes and turned to look at her, the sight made his heart skip a beat. Perhaps it was because Eleanor had been the one on his mind as he stirred and made his Christmas wish, but something about the woman before him seemed familiar, even stronger than before. The color of her eyes and the curve of her lips and the tone of her voice. Everything about her reminded him of his dear friend—but it was impossible, for she was a maid, and her hair was the completely wrong color.

And her name was not Eleanor, but Liza.

Christopher shook his head to clear the confusing thoughts. “My mother is well, spending the holidays with my father.”

Miss Liza seemed satisfied with his answer and then reached out for her turn with the mixing spoon. He held it out to her, and perhaps he imagined catching a glimpse of a birthmark on her wrist... but no, it was simply a

shadow from her sleeve. That, accompanied by his wishful thinking.

“What will you wish for?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head, suppressing a smile as her ears turned pink again. “I can’t very well tell you, now, can I? Or it won’t come true.”

When Christopher stepped back, it was only then he remembered they were not the only two in the room. Mr. and Mrs. Hill stood by the hearth, arms crossed and mouths pinched in anticipation. Everyone else also bore knowing smiles and had avoidant gazes, as if they had seen something they shouldn’t have.

Christopher cleared his throat. “Thank you all for inviting me to join. I will leave the rest to you and return to the parlor.”

He pushed through the doorway into the room and was grateful to find it much cooler without the fire from the hearth and the steam from the pudding pot. He took a stabilizing breath, but found his mind was still occupied with the pretty miss in the kitchen. His heart simmered with uncertainty, and he reminded himself they couldn’t be the same person. It was impossible that he would stumble across his dear childhood friend. She had no reason to be this far north, pretending to be a maidservant.

He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved the handkerchief from over a decade before. The fabric had worn thin from use over time, but the stitching of his initials was still tight, and the colors contrasted against the paled white. He traced his thumb over the threads but shook the thought from his head. He was just imagining things, the sweet scent of the pudding making him sentimental and nostalgic. It was ridiculous to consider something so outrageous.

CHAPTER 4



Eleanor went about her chores the next morning, sweeping the gathered debris in the foyer out the front door, then quickly shutting it to avoid letting in the chill. She found herself wanting to glance out the window longingly at the road, wishing the mail coach would appear and come take away one particular guest. The emotions constantly battled within her chest, so for the sake of her sanity, she needed Kit Booth gone.

She entered the parlor and found Mrs. and Miss Brown both seated in chairs by the bookshelf, silently reading after breakfast, so Eleanor bobbed a curtsy. “I’m continuing with my chores, ma’am.”

Mrs. Brown nodded. “Not to worry, dear. You won’t bother us one bit.”

The mantle and the picture frames would need to be dusted before Eleanor could sweep, so she grabbed her feather duster from the kitchen and opened the door again, only to have Frank pass through from behind her with arms full of firewood.

“You had better not track any snowy mess on these floors after I clean them,” she warned him teasingly.

“I’m just gathering the firewood like Papa said.” The boy spoke more boldly than normal, and Eleanor waved her hand with a dramatic flair so he could pass.

“Please, Your Grace, do carry on.”

He smirked, then continued on silently into the parlor. A motion from the corner of the room caught Eleanor's eye. She found Miss Brown with her head down in a book, but her eyes followed Frank as he walked in and put down the firewood by the hearth, and then as he walked out of the room. When she looked back at her book, a hesitant smile pinched her lips, and her cheeks took on an adorable pink hue.

Oh, the poor dear. Eleanor wanted to warn her from getting her hopes up on any kind of childhood romance, for surely such an attachment would be fleeting. The Browns would leave with the next passing coach, and Frank would remain at the inn. It would not be worth the emotional investment only to have one's heart ripped out upon leaving.

Eleanor was unable to remove the frown from her lips as she moved her rickety wooden step stool across the room. She needed it to reach the tops of each painting as she dusted around the parlor. She had become so lost in her thoughts and the bitter emotions that it made it easy to become mindless in her work.

"Pardon me."

The voice startled Eleanor, the teetering step stool wobbling beneath her. Unable to remain stable, her foot slipped, and she fell backward with a yelp. She closed her eyes to brace for the impact of meeting with the floor, but instead she collided against something warm and firm and completely safe.

Eleanor opened her eyes and found herself caught by Kit Booth, perfectly cradled in his arms. And suddenly the same pink that had claimed Miss Brown's face erupted over Eleanor's cheeks.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently, and Eleanor's traitorous heart skipped at his tenderness, his closeness.

"I am, thank you." She shifted uncomfortably until he put her down on her feet.

"I apologize for frightening you," he said. "I only wanted to ask if you knew where I might find Mr. Hill."

Eleanor swallowed hard through a tight throat in an attempt to steady her racing heart. “I believe he’s in the stable with your valet.”

Kit nodded, and before he left, he leaned over to pick up her feather duster from the floor. She reached out when he offered it to him, but only too late did she realize that her long sleeves were not long enough to cover her forearms when working.

His eyes immediately fell to the birthmark on her wrist.

Eleanor tried not to make her attempt to hide it obvious as she accepted the feather duster; she moved her arm to hang by her side, purposefully rotating it to hide the mark.

There was no recognition or change in his expression. He simply blinked twice and offered her a small bow before seeing himself out through the kitchen door.

Placing a hand over her racing heart, Eleanor let out a long breath, praying he did not say or do anything to confront her. They needed to continue on their separate paths, for she couldn’t dare let herself hope for anything different.

“I think that’s twice now that boy has saved you,” Mrs. Brown commented with a pleased smile. Eleanor gave a nervous laugh and a nod of acknowledgement before returning to her chores.

It was true Kit had come to her rescue. But if there was anything she knew for certain from being held, however temporarily, in those arms, it was that there was no boyishness about him. Kit Booth was all man.



Later that evening, Eleanor sat around the kitchen table with Mr. and Mrs. Hill, who were mostly silent as they worked—he with a pen knife and a fine smelling piece of wood, and she with her knitting needles. They would produce some lovely gifts for their guests, as the following day would be

December 6th, St. Nicholas Day. The Christmas season could not begin empty handed, even if they were all stranded in Northbury from the snow.

Eleanor did not have many talents to her name as other ladies might, due to her dramatic and tumultuous upbringing, but she had mastered stitching in her youth, so she continued to offer what she could: pretty initials on a handkerchief. She'd started working on one for the young Miss Brown, but it didn't stop her from thinking of a similar gift she had given many years before.

Their surroundings were a near perfect winter atmosphere: Mrs. Hill hummed a Christmas hymn as she worked, the dying fire crackled in the hearth, and the sound of Mr. Hill's knife scraped against the wood block, which created a pile of perfectly beautiful wood curls. Eleanor wanted to continue mindlessly stitching, but unfortunately, even the wood carving reminded her of Kit's father. She remembered multiple times visiting their house as a child to find him working on a project as a carpenter, with almost the exact same sound and smell. Eleanor let out a breath and shook her head. She would not let her thoughts get away from her this time.

"How are you feeling, my love?" Mrs. Hill asked, stirring Eleanor from her thoughts.

"Very well, thank you," Mr. Hill replied drily without looking up.

His wife laughed softly. "Not you. Liza."

Eleanor smiled. The Hills knew her true identity, knew her story, knew the truth. And they still protected her as one of their own, never slipping by using her real name.

"I am well enough."

"I'm glad to hear it. The last few days you've seemed a little unsettled." Mrs. Hill raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Eleanor took a deep breath. "It is unusual to have the same guests for so long. Though I worry about making sure we meet all their needs this time of year, I am glad for the company..."

“Except for one in particular?” Mr. Hill said.

She ignored the flushing in her cheeks. “Not necessarily, though at times I do feel unsure of how to proceed.”

“Has he given any indication...” Mrs. Hill asked gently, and Eleanor shook her head.

“It is best that he does not.” As the words left her mouth, Eleanor reminded herself that what she wanted and what was best for her did not always intersect. In fact, they often felt like two parallel paths, veering in opposite directions.

When the kitchen door suddenly pushed open, Eleanor pressed her lips together as the man who occupied her every waking thought appeared. His presence made her catch her breath, for his hair was left disheveled, his white night shirt hung untied and gaping at the top of his chest, and his trousers sat haphazardly on his hips.

“What troubles you, lad?” Mrs. Hill asked. “Something wrong with the room?”

“No, not at all.” Christopher put up his hands. “I only wondered if I might trouble you for a spot of tea. Simply feeling a bit restless and unsettled for some reason.”

Eleanor’s face flushed when Mr. Hill turned an obvious gaze in her direction. Thankfully, Mrs. Hill appeared to be a more proficient actress. “Of course, of course. Come have a seat and warm yourself by the fire.”

With the new addition to the kitchen, Eleanor did not look up, but when Christopher came to sit directly in her line of sight, he gave her a warm smile and a nod. There was no avoiding him now.

“What is all this?” he asked, looking at all the different projects across the table. Eleanor lowered her stitching to her lap, as he would likely start drawing conclusions, if he hadn’t already. Especially after seeing her blasted birthmark.

“Gifts for St. Nicholas Day,” Mr. Hill explained. “You’ll have to act

surprised now.”

Christopher let out a laugh, and the sound snuck its way in to warm Eleanor’s cold heart. How had she lived so long without it? Even as a man, his laughter was still familiar to her.

“Of course,” he said, and then Mrs. Hill placed a cup of tea in front of him. “Thank you.”

“Are you missing your own family traditions, being away from home this time of year?” Mrs. Hill asked as she took her seat and retrieved her knitting.

He took a sip and nodded before speaking. “I suppose I am. Though our Christmastime traditions have changed over the years since I was a young boy.”

Eleanor couldn’t help wondering if those words were intended for her, remembering that terrible Christmas so many years ago. She dared a glance up at him and found his gaze on her, blue eyes warm and direct, which brought her heartbeat to a racing speed. Eleanor tried to give him a natural smile and appear composed, though it felt like the most unnatural thing in the world. “It does for us all, I suppose.”

He was the first to break eye contact, and Eleanor let out an unsteady breath as he turned his attention to Mr. Hill. “What are you making?”

“I thought the Havershams would enjoy some figurines.”

“Would you like some help?” Christopher offered. “I’m rather handy with a pen knife myself.”

“Are you, now?” Mr. Hill held out a folding knife to him. “Have at it, my boy.”

Suddenly Eleanor’s own fingers paused their stitching as she watched Christopher work, focusing intently as he too created long curls of wood. His hands were no longer those of a boy who used to move chess pieces on a board or turn the pages of a book. These hands belonged to a man, with sturdy muscles in his forearms that made each movement look like it required no effort at all.

Mrs. Hill gave Eleanor a light kick beneath the table, which pulled her out of the daze she'd fallen into and made her return to her stitching.

"Where did you learn to whittle?" Mrs. Hill asked.

"My father. He is a carpenter and a woodsmith, and he taught me when I was young."

Eleanor bit her lip, staving off the question to ask about his father. She had previously asked about his mother during the stirring of the Christmas puddings, when she really shouldn't have, but thankfully he hadn't seemed to notice the irregular question. From her memories, the elder Mr. Booth had always been such a soft and kind man, despite his difficult job of working with wood. All she wanted to know was if they were well, if they were happy.

"Then I have a great respect for your father, for this isn't easy work," Mr. Hill said. "Though I always enjoyed whittling as a boy."

"Have you always lived here in Northbury?" Christopher asked in return, and Eleanor found herself relaxing as the conversation took a comfortable turn.

Mr. Hill nodded. "For many generations now."

"And has it ever snowed this much?" Christopher asked, which sparked laughter in all of them.

"Not in recent memory," Mr. Hill said. "And if it doesn't warm up much before Christmas Day, I don't know that the roads will be clear enough for post, let alone for travel."

Christopher's knife paused, then he nodded. "I would hate to impose for so long, but I wouldn't mind staying if that ends up being the case."

Eleanor's mind reeled at the thought. Staying for the rest of the month until Christmas? She would not survive with her heart intact that way.

"So you don't mind the snow? Did it snow much where you were as a child?" Mrs. Hill asked.

Eleanor returned the kick to her friend discreetly under the table, but the

woman didn't budge and kept her eyes on her guest.

"Not at all. In Leicestershire, the snow is rare, but I find I do enjoy it here." He looked up with a smile, and just as she had dreaded, Christopher turned his gaze to Eleanor. "And what of you, Miss Liza? Did you have much snow where you grew up?"

Mr. and Mrs. Hill both slowed their workings and looked up at her with knowing glances.

Suddenly Eleanor's throat became very dry. "I... I traveled frequently, here and there, so it's hard to say."

"And how did you come to be in Northbury with the Hills?"

His request was innocent enough, but the answer to that question was impossible to explain. He couldn't know the painful realities she had endured to find the safety she now cherished, and she couldn't selfishly reveal it now.

Tucking her stitching into the pocket of her apron, she stood with a smile. "I think it's time I finish with my evening chores."

The Hills both knew well she did not have evening chores so late, for everything had already been prepared for the next morning, but they could easily recognize her need for escape.

"Have a good evening, Mr. Booth," she said, bobbing a quick curtsy before fleeing the room.

The chill of the parlor awakened her senses, and she paused there to take a deep calming breath.

"Have I offended her?" came Christopher's voice from the kitchen. "Should I..."

"Not to worry, lad. She'll be all right," Mrs. Hill reassured him.

But as Eleanor made her way to her bedchambers, she wasn't certain she *would* be all right.

CHAPTER 5



Christopher sat awake in his bed, head resting against the wall, as he watched morning light slowly begin to color the village of Northbury. Most of the rooftops were still covered in snow, but the pink and orange sky and the evergreen trees dusted in white were a welcome sight after so many gray, dreary days. Christopher had woken from a fitful sleep long before the sun, and he'd found his eyes fixed on the road that had delivered him to this very inn. There had been no mention of the mail coach, no sight or sound of what should come to deliver him where he needed to go. But the longer he stayed, the more he wondered if this was where he needed to be instead.

He thought on that Christmas morning years ago, and how much he hadn't understood as a young boy. The morning that had dawned cheery as any Christmas soon turned dire at the news that, not only had Mrs. Grant died, but also that young Ellie had gone missing. Christopher's heart broke with worry for his friend, his gift waiting for her remaining ungiven. As the years passed and he grew older, he still found himself looking around every crowded street, hoping to catch a glimpse of her face, to know if she was still alive somewhere.

But she hadn't been in London. She had been here.

Christopher was almost certain that Miss Liza was his Ellie. She may have lost the roundness in her cheeks from her youth, for her face had now

slimmed, no doubt a result of her struggles. He couldn't explain how she had ended up alone and so far north, but there were too many clues leaning toward a yes. Not just her appearance, but her reactions that left him suspicious. Her asking about his mother in the kitchen had been the first clue, and that moment had been a revelation to him. And such a birthmark on the arm could not be that common, could it? But when he'd asked about her past and she'd hurriedly left the room, he realized it must be true. Not everyone wanted to discuss their private lives with strangers; it was only normal, and he knew hers had a great deal of tumult. But they were not strangers, he could feel it. He only needed to confirm it.

The closing of a door sounded, pulling Christopher's attention from the front window to the back window across the room. He moved from the bed and tiptoed over, catching a glimpse of Miss Liza downstairs in the morning light. She was wrapped in a shawl and carrying a basket, headed toward the chicken coop behind the kitchen. His heart rate quickened, seeing an opportunity to talk with her alone and perhaps find out the truth that had tormented him for so long.

Dressing quickly and moving quietly to not wake Patrick, Christopher pulled on his trousers and boots, tucked in his shirt, and grabbed his long coat for the cold, then hurried downstairs. The inn was still quiet below, the parlor empty with a warm, roaring fire, but when he stepped into the kitchen, Mrs. Hill stood mixing a bowl at the table.

"Good morning, lad," she greeted him cheerily. "Breakfast will be ready shortly."

"Yes, thank you." His feet grew restless, uncertain of how to proceed. "Is Miss Liza about this morning?"

"She's just gone to fetch some eggs."

Christopher swallowed. "Would it be possible for me to have a word with her?"

Mrs. Hill paused her mixing. "A word?"

“It’s only that...” He looked to the floor, stumbling over what to say. How could he possibly explain such a connection? “I have reason to believe she may have information, that is... she might be someone very... important...”

“Go on, then,” Mrs. Hill said gently. He looked up as she motioned with her chin toward the back door. “Go have your word with her.”

Christopher nodded in thanks, pulse racing as he stepped outside into the cold. The frost clung to the air, the death of winter still prevalent all around him, but the world seemed more colorful today with the hope of what might be.

He pulled on the large barn door and found Miss Liza indeed with her hands in a coop, gently talking to the hens. She looked up in surprise and froze when she met his gaze.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Booth,” she said, dipping in a quick curtsy.

“Good morning,” he responded, trying to calm his racing heart.

“What brings you out so early today? I’m just gathering eggs for breakfast; it will all be ready soon.”

“Yes, I only wanted...” He nodded, shifting on his feet again. “First, I wanted to apologize. If anything I said last night made you uncomfortable, that was not my intent.”

Recognition dawned in her eyes. “You have nothing to apologize for, Mr. Booth,” she said stiffly.

He shook his head. “But I think I do. And I think you may know the reason I asked such a question.”

She met his gaze directly, and he wondered if she felt the same whirlwind of emotions that tightened in his chest. The air in the barn was cold and sweetened by the scent of hay, but it suddenly took on a dark uncertainty, and Christopher did not move, holding his breath until she offered a response.

Her grip tightened around the basket of eggs in her hand, and she lifted her chin. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mr. Booth. But I

do have to see to my chores, so if you don't mind..."

She stepped to move past him, but Christopher couldn't help reaching out to stop her.

"Wait. Please." He caught her hand, fingers touching barely enough to grasp. "If you're not who I think you are, then I promise to no longer bother you. I'll leave here when the snow clears, and you'll never have to see me again."

Three heavy heartbeats went by, and neither of them moved. She did not turn, and he did not press her. Then her fingers slowly curled around his hand in return, and Christopher thrilled at even the slightest acknowledgement.

He began slowly. "I don't know how you came to be here, Miss Liza, but I have reason to believe you might actually be someone else. A girl I used to know by the name of Eleanor Grant, who has been missing from Leicestershire for some time." He swallowed hard, unexpected emotion rising in his throat. "She's very dear to me, someone I've worried over for years and thought I had lost forever."

Still she did not turn, and Christopher couldn't help running his thumb over the back of her hand.

"Please tell me," he whispered. "It is you, isn't it?"

Her jaw clenched, and she took a deep breath before leaning over to set down the basket of eggs and finally turning to face him. Her beautiful brown eyes were filled with tears, but he also saw the fear, the hesitation, and he wanted nothing more than to remove those things from her life completely.

"Are you my little Ellie?" he asked.

The use of her old nickname must have broken down her wall of worry. Her brow softened and her lips parted into a smile. Then she nodded, squeezing his hand in return. "I am."

Christopher sighed, an incomparable relief settling over his shoulders. "It's really you?"

She nodded, taking a step forward. "I can't believe you found me after all

these years. I never would have imagined..." Her eyes took in his appearance. "My dear friend is all grown up to be a man."

In the same moment, they reached for each other, locking themselves in a fierce embrace. Her arms around his neck and his arms around her waist, they both found solace after so much time apart.

"You knew, didn't you?" he asked, and she huffed a laugh.

"Yes, from that first night."

He pulled back, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Why didn't you say anything?"

The apprehension returned to her eyes. "For many reasons. You were ill and supposed to be leaving. I couldn't just upend your life."

Christopher took in her words but then shook his head. "My life was upended when you were taken away. Having you back would put everything right again." His eyes carefully took in her appearance, and he touched a curl of hair by her face. "Your hair is significantly darker than I remember."

She smiled up at him. "And yours is exactly the same."

"But where have you been all these years?" he asked. "How is it that you're here?"

She sighed and looked away. "Well, my uncle... there's so much to explain."

"I'm sure there is." His hand found hers, and he led her to a seat by the stalls. "Why don't you tell me?"

Christopher was aware of the basket of eggs, and he knew that breakfast with Mrs. Hill would be delayed, but she had granted him permission to have this discussion, so he would have as much of it as he could.

The woman before him sighed. Miss Liza, Eleanor, Ellie... she leaned her head back, eyes glancing around the roof of the barn.

"After that terrible Christmas, I lived with Uncle Isaac. He moved us around a great deal, and not just in London, but in Bath and Brighton and all over. He was not kind or attentive, but he did not hurt me. Once I became of

age, he intended to marry me off for wealth and advantage, but I refused. So he kept me locked up in my bedchambers except for when suitors came for dinner, most of the time elderly gentlemen, and one named Mr. Fredricks in particular.”

Burning anger simmered in Christopher’s veins, but he remained silent.

“Then one night when he got roaring drunk, I ran away. I found what little money I could in his office, took the mail coach as far north as the money would allow, and I ended up here in Northbury.” She blinked and gave Christopher a sad smile. “I knew he would be out looking for me, so I was lucky to find such gracious people as the Hills, who took me in and took care of me, letting me hide here the last few years.”

Christopher shook his head with a clenched jaw. “How could he... I’m sorry you had to experience so much difficulty.”

“Well, not much can be done about it now,” she said flatly, seemingly uncomfortable with his sympathy.

But the rage continued in his chest. “Why did you not come back to us in Leicestershire? Were you worried your uncle would find you there?”

She shrugged. “The thought never occurred to me, actually. I didn’t want to be a burden to anyone if I had no family left, and I couldn’t expect someone to just take in an orphan.”

His heart sank. “An orphan?”

“I know I’m a grown woman, but isn’t that what you call someone with no parents? And without a cent to my name, I’d say I fit the bill.”

Christopher blinked. “Ellie, what happened that night? What do you remember before you went with your uncle?”

She looked up with a frown. “My parents died. My mother had been ill for so long, but she had worsened when we returned from your house, and I remember father being ill that night as well. Then my uncle woke me, saying both my parents had died and he had become my only guardian.”

“He said that?” Christopher now spoke through gritted teeth.

She nodded. “Yes, so we left that night.”

Taking a deep breath, Christopher knelt before her. His heart pounded with fury as he tried to explain. “That night did come with devastating loss. Your mother died and all our hearts were broken. But your uncle was not your guardian. He kidnapped you. Your father is still alive.”

CHAPTER 6



*T*hat devil bastard.

Eleanor stormed out of the barn in a blind rage, the basket of eggs completely forgotten. Heart racing, her face flushed with heat despite the chill clinging to the morning air. If she ever saw her uncle again, she would not rest until he paid for his crimes of entirely ruining her life. Not only her childhood, torn from her family and friends in the middle of her own loss, but also her potential future, leaving her either locked up as his tool for personal gain, or stuck in hiding to avoid being found again. She used to be such a joyful child, but she had turned into this bitter and hopeless creature because of that man. She had lived in fear because of his lies.

“Do you have the eggs, dear?” Mrs. Hill appeared in the kitchen door with the ever-present smile on her face, but when she saw Eleanor’s countenance, her expression fell. “What’s happened?”

Eleanor took a deep breath to stabilize herself, but it didn’t do much good. “That man...”

“Mr. Booth? Did he hurt you?”

“My uncle,” Eleanor corrected her, “lied to me and kidnapped me. He told me my parents were dead, but my father is still alive. That is what Mr. Booth revealed. That my life has been woven into mayhem because of him.”

Mrs. Hill gasped, her face turning pale.

Oh, how Eleanor's heart ached. She could have been with her father all these years! She could have been with him to mourn her mother, but instead he'd had to face all that sorrow alone, along with worrying about his missing daughter.

She could have had a normal childhood, a happy life. She would have grown up alongside Kit, and everything she'd always wondered about—what could have happened between them— would never have been in question.

But here she was, separated from her father in her own ignorance. She had only been a child then, and grieving no less, but she should have thought to ask to see her parents, even if they were dead—demanded some kind of proof that this man indeed was her guardian. Of course it made sense now, looking back, that her uncle had taken advantage of her weakened emotions and completely changed the trajectory of her life. That he had moved around so much merely to avoid being caught.

“Oh, my dear girl, I'm so sorry,” Mrs. Hill breathed.

“As am I.”

Kit appeared holding the basket of eggs, his expression as harrowed as Eleanor felt. He held it out to Mrs. Hill, then turned to Eleanor and spoke gently. “Though I am pleased to find you alive and well, I am sorry to be the bearer of such news. Had I known...” He shook his head. “I will leave you to ponder on the circumstances, but if you have any questions, I am available to you at any time.”

Eleanor nodded, turning away from him. She couldn't be mad at him, but looking at him now made the truth more painful, more real.

“I would never do anything to threaten Ellie's safety,” he began, “and only wish to keep her location and identity secure. But I would like to reach out to my parents in London to see if they know of her father's whereabouts.”

“Is he not back home in your village?” Mrs. Hill asked.

He shook his head with a frown. “I do not know. I remember he left and returned many times, but I'm not sure where he takes up residence, though I

believe my parents keep in touch.”

Mrs. Hill placed a hand on Eleanor’s shoulder. “Do you not think it wise?”

Further disappointment burned in her chest, but Eleanor simply nodded. “Very well. I will also write, to see if perhaps someone in the village has knowledge of him.”

Christopher gave a short bow, then disappeared into the kitchen.

Eleanor let out a sigh, which appeared as a puff of smoke before her eyes. It blurred her vision of the snow-covered trees and the iced-over stream behind the inn, but she didn’t see any of it. Her thoughts raced from the news, what it all meant, and what she needed to do next.

“Let me worry about breakfast today, hmm?” Mrs. Hill placed a calming hand on Eleanor’s arm. “Take some time to rest, my love.”

Once she was alone, Eleanor paced the familiar path in the snow from the kitchen door to the barn. She didn’t even feel the cold after some time, becoming so wrapped up in her thoughts. At first, the only thing on her mind was regret and revenge, mourning the life she could have had and making sure that her uncle received justice for his actions. But after the anger finally died down and her mind cleared, Eleanor realized she had little control over those things, and it would just make her more miserable to dwell on them. It was only easier to linger there because the thought of what to do next, what step to take and which direction to go, seemed all the more daunting and impossible to consider.

She couldn’t leave. Not yet. Everything was still covered in snow, and the roads were not yet safe. Not only that, but she couldn’t abandon the Hills, who had taken her in with such love and generosity. More importantly, she had no idea where to go. She didn’t know where her father was, or where her uncle was, for that matter. It wouldn’t make sense to run off without a plan only to find herself captured again.

And she couldn’t depend on Kit. It both delighted and devastated her to

have him here, more so now that they had spoken about their connection openly, but she couldn't ask him for more than he was able to give. He was still due to leave for a house party, most likely hosted by his future in-laws. He may have discovered her and helped her learn the truth about her past, but she couldn't ask him to hold any great part of her future. Her only goal now was to find her father. That would be enough for her.

Time passed until the sound of birds chirping in the tree and children playing in the snow brought Eleanor back to the present. The chill had slightly thawed, but she felt frozen and stiff down to the bone. Shaking her head, she squared her shoulders and cleared her throat, trying to put on a face that would help her make it through the day.

When she pushed open the door to the kitchen, Mrs. Hill stood at the center, piling fresh-folded sheets into Frank's arms. "Get all these added to the rooms once the guests come downstairs," she said, and her son nodded as he left.

"How are you?" she asked Eleanor once they were alone.

"Well enough, all considering," Eleanor mumbled.

"What have you been able to piece together from all this?"

Eleanor shook her head. "I hardly know. It was clear my uncle sought to marry me off for connections and wealth, but beyond that, I do not know his motives. Why he would tell such a lie and uproot me..." The surging anger stirred again in her chest and Eleanor shook her head. "It is unfathomable."

"Do not think on it any longer," Mrs. Hill said, patting her hand. "What will you do next?"

Eleanor sighed. "I'm not making any decisions right away. There is not much I can do. But I will start with the letter. I know the post isn't running right now, but the next mail coach that's headed south, I'll have a letter ready for Leicestershire. Maybe that will provide some information about my father's location."

"Very good." Mrs. Hill nodded, then slowly stepped closer. "You should

know that, while I am devastated for you, all that you had to endure and the difficulties that brought you here, I am still grateful that of all places, you ended up on our doorstep, and that we had you for as long as we did.”

When Eleanor glanced up, Mrs. Hill’s motherly eyes were sparkling with tears. “I knew we would not have you forever, and if you have a chance to be with your father again, I want you to take every opportunity for it. But you’re welcome to stay as long as you like, and I’ll have you back any time.”

Tears welled up in her own eyes as well, but Eleanor did not let them fall. Mrs. Hill pulled her into a hug, but a brief one, for they couldn’t be a weeping mess in the middle of the kitchen. Not when there was still work to be done.

“And that Mr. Booth?” she asked. “Is he a good man?”

Eleanor’s heart swelled rebelliously at the question. “The very best.”

Mrs. Hill took Eleanor’s hand gently. “He called you Ellie, didn’t he?” she whispered, and Eleanor nodded.

“That sounds like something more familiar than childhood friends. Was it... were you two childhood sweethearts?”

Eleanor’s lips pulled into a frown from the twinge in her heart. “Perhaps, but there’s nothing to be done about it now. He’s headed north to Newcastle for a house party. Some pretty miss there is expecting him, no doubt with an engagement in mind.”

Mrs. Hill listened, watching her carefully before nodding.

“And I will stay until I find the location of my father, but if he’s in Leicestershire or London, then I will be heading south. Mr. Booth and I will be going in opposite directions, likely never to see each other again.” The words broke her heart all over again, but she needed to focus on the truth and the future, not linger in the misery of the past that would never be.

“I understand. You go write your letter for now, and then come help me in the kitchen.” Mrs. Hill gave a firm nod. “Staying busy will keep your mind off things, but you should also enjoy his company while you can. And as he

said, go to him if you have questions. I think he wants to help more than you might expect.”

Eleanor nodded, uncertain of how she could spend time with Kit and still maintain control of her heart.

She made her way to her bedchamber, though she felt like a ghost. She sat at her small desk and stared at the blank piece of paper, wondering what she could possibly say. *Dear Father, I had no idea you were still alive until today, I'm sorry I stayed away so long. Is there any way I can still return to you?*

She had no way of knowing where he was or what he was doing. Had he remarried and started a new family? Kit had said he might not be in the village anymore, and that sounded like a man who could have moved on. Even if she would be interrupting whatever new life he'd been living, she still had to try.

Because for so long, she'd had nothing and no one. But this small semblance of hope meant she could have something.

CHAPTER 7



*D*ear Father and Mother,

I hope this letter finds you well. I apologize for the delay, as I intended to write once I arrived at the house party. The problem is, I have not yet arrived. I found myself ill along the way and stopped at an inn, only to be completely snowed in. There hasn't been a mail coach since; that was nearly a week ago now. The one incredible thing is that in being stuck, I've discovered a maidservant here who is none other than our little Ellie Grant. I am delighted to find her alive and well. I learned she had run away from her uncle and was here in hiding, but she had no idea her father was still living because her uncle had lied to her all those years ago. I'm not sure if you're still in touch with Mr. Grant, but I write in hopes that you can convey this information to him. We're at an inn in Northbury on the way to Newcastle, and I will do what I can to help her get to London or Leicestershire or wherever she can be reunited with her father. She had mentioned she stayed with her uncle for some time in London, and she was heavily pursued by a man named Mr. Fredricks, so I don't know if that will help piece the clues together in finding her

father. I will write again when I have any news, whether that be of the house party or of our Ellie. Please know that I miss you both and I hope you have a wonderful Christmas. The snow may delay this letter's delivery or any potential response, but I will hopefully see you again before Twelfth Night.

*Your son,
Christopher*

The letter almost didn't fit on the page. Christopher had not realized just how much information he was trying to include, and yet it still lacked some detail that he knew his mother would want to know—such as the status of his understanding with Miss Clark. He did not even know that for himself. So much depended on the weather and the roads. He couldn't very well take a carriage from the Hills to investigate, nor did he want to at the moment.

Everything newly revealed about Ellie only confirmed his need to stay at the inn. He knew he needed to marry well in order to bring his family out of poverty. But another part of him selfishly needed to be here with Ellie. Not for his parents, or even her father, but for himself. Perhaps that was why he'd never found real affection or sought marriage with anyone else—because his heart had always longed for her, without knowing where she was or even if she was still alive. If she needed him now, he was not about to give her up again so easily.

Christopher folded his paper and wrote the direction of his father's shop on the outside. Then he tapped the edge on his desk. Someday the mail coach would pass through again, but at the moment, he only cared about the one heading south. The house party would have to wait.

He made his way downstairs, where most of the guests were already

gathered for a midday meal. Christopher paused in the foyer to deposit his letter in the bag for the mail coach and prayed it would find delivery soon enough. He wanted answers, but more than that, Ellie needed answers. She needed her father.

Returning to the parlor, Christopher took a seat beside Patrick, who was talking with Mrs. Brown and her daughter. He realized he'd seen his valet spending a good deal of time with the widow and her daughter as of late, and he would have to ask him about it later, for there was certainly nothing of Christopher's own news he could share.

Mrs. Hill appeared from the kitchen; then Eleanor followed, each holding multiple bowls of something that steamed and smelled delicious. Christopher watched carefully, keeping an eye on Ellie to see how she fared. He wanted to avoid pressing her, but he was desperate to know her thoughts and feelings and if there was anything he could do to help.

The others at the table were served by Mrs. Hill. Then Eleanor appeared behind him, setting before him a stew of beef and potatoes. He almost did not care about the meal and instead looked up at her face. She appeared pale, but with squared shoulders, and avoided his gaze. But he must have seemed eager, for she gave him a tired smile and gently patted him twice on the back before she parted, as if to tell him she would be all right.

That was enough for now. She was still recovering from the news, and he would give her the space she needed. As long as she knew that she could depend on him, confide in him, so she wouldn't have to shoulder the burden alone.

The stew did smell delicious, and he found he was starving.



Days passed, and Eleanor eventually started feeling like herself again. Her life had changed completely after one conversation, and her future would

look very different than she expected, but she was coming to terms with the facts. If only she'd known before what she knew now, she wouldn't have avoided Kit for so long when he arrived.

Eleanor swept the kitchen debris out the back door, then moved to the parlor. She had expected the room to be empty, but there seated before the fire was Frank and young Miss Brown and a table covered with a chess board. Finding her previous suspicions correct did not pain her as it had before. In fact, now she couldn't help smiling at the sight. She poised the broom to continue her chores, but taking a look at them again, her heart swelled at a sudden memory.

How many days had Kit patiently taught her how to play chess as a child? Eleanor had never been any good back then, but she now recognized just how much time he'd spent helping her learn. She had expected to think back on those times with bitterness and was grateful that the memory filled her with sweet tenderness instead.

“Does this scene put you in mind of anything?”

Christopher's voice sounded gentle beside her, and when Eleanor looked up, she found it easy to give him a smile. “You must have had the patience of a saint back then. I was not a clever student.”

“You picked it up eventually,” he said with a chuckle.

“After how many times you let me win?” Eleanor bumped him with her elbow.

“Every student needs a little encouragement.”

They watched in silence as Miss Brown moved a pawn and took one of Frank's bishops, then smiled victoriously. At first, Frank appeared distraught, but as she turned her attention back to the board, he melted into a bashful smile. Eleanor no longer looked upon them with disdain; the something beautiful blossomed before her, and she instead found that her heart had been touched with a warmth she'd not felt in some time.

“How are you feeling?” Christopher asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

“Better.” She nodded firmly. “It’s taken some time to accept what I did not know, though I think we remain at a standstill until the post starts running again. I wrote a letter that will hopefully find its way to my father, though I suppose I may have to implement some of your divine patience,” she teased.

But his steady gaze lingered, and Eleanor looked back up at him. “What is it?”

“Just in case this wasn’t evident before, I want to make one thing clear.” He turned his body to face her. “You don’t have to bear this burden alone. I know our current paths may take us in different directions, but I intend to help you in any way I can. To evade your uncle, to reunite you with your father, with whatever money or power is within my control.” Christopher reached out and gently took one of her hands in his. “Having you back in my life is a joy I will not take for granted, and I intend to see that your happiness is secured as well.”

Emotion grew thick in Eleanor’s throat, leaving her surprised that her childish fondness for him had not disappeared even after all this time. But she managed to smile and squeeze his hand in return. She knew she would need to go south for her father, and Kit was still destined for the house party in Newcastle; she tried not to let that fact break her heart further. But his attention to her needs did not go unnoticed, and she would appreciate every moment she had with him. “We are lucky to have found each other again, aren’t we?”

He nodded. “Blessed, indeed. It is quite a Christmas miracle.”

CHAPTER 8



“Mail coach is coming!”

Christopher startled at the exclamation, to the extent that the book he had been reading tumbled to the floor as the kitchen door burst open. Mrs. Hill lifted her skirts and made a run for the front of the inn, stopping to grab the bag of outgoing post, and Christopher’s heart leapt in his chest. He had just risen to his feet when Eleanor appeared from the kitchen, her apron dusted in flour, holding a basket of baked goods.

“Is it true?” Christopher asked as he followed them toward the door.

Eleanor’s brown eyes sparkled with hope. “It’s come much sooner than I expected.”

Sure enough, even before they stepped outside, he heard the jingle of the horses’ harness and the announcement of the stopping coach.

Though the ground was still covered in snow, there hadn’t been any actual snowfall for days. The air had turned to a bitter cold, which made Christopher almost regret leaving his chair by the fire. But when he caught a glimpse of the red mail coach, a dark carriage pulled by two large horses, he felt a portion of the hope that had brightened Eleanor’s features.

“Bless you to be out in this cold!” Mrs. Hill said to the drivers as she handed them the satchel.

“We’ve some warm bread, or could we offer you a spot of tea?” Eleanor

asked.

“Thank you kindly for the bread, but we can’t stop for tea,” one driver said, and Eleanor set off quickly to distribute what she could to the men up front and traveling occupants inside. “We’ll find rest for the horses at the next stop.”

Christopher stepped forward as one of the men handed down the bag of mail intended for local delivery. “Are you come from Newcastle?” Christopher asked.

The man shook his head. “Gretna Green. The path to Newcastle is still impassable with snow. It may be another week or so before anyone can get through.”

The news should have been troubling, but Christopher couldn’t help feeling relief. His destination still waited for him on the other side of the snow, but he wasn’t ready to leave, not quite yet.

“Thank you for the delivery,” Eleanor called as they headed out. “And safe travels!”

Then, just as quickly as they’d arrived, the mail coach departed, headed south with two important letters.

“Come, my dears. Back inside by the fire,” Mrs. Hill said, rushing them in the door.

Christopher offered Mrs. Hill the bag of mail, then turned to Eleanor. “There’s some progress, at least. Not waiting on the coach anymore, just waiting for a response.”

She placed a hand on her stomach. “That’s almost worse.”

“Nothing from the house party for you?” Mrs. Hill asked, digging into the bag.

Christopher shook his head. “And it’s just as well. I had no intention of leaving yet anyway. Not until we can confirm where Miss Liza is headed.”

They all shared a secret smile, but Christopher paused. “Wouldn’t the Browns and the Havershams wish to be on that coach?”

Mrs. Hill shook her head. “They’re all heading north, same as you. Not sure when the next one heading that direction will be by.”

Christopher nodded, just as Frank burst into the entryway.

“Mama, can we go down to the river with the ice skates? Alice wanted to go, and I can share mine with her.”

“That’s Miss Brown, dear,” she corrected him.

Frank nodded impatiently. “Yes, Miss Brown and I.”

“You mean, you each have one skate on one foot?” Mr. Hill said, suddenly appearing behind his wife.

Frank rolled his eyes. “Of course not, we’ll just take turns.”

“That’s fine with me as long as her mother doesn’t object.” Mrs. Hill paused in sorting the mail to look up. “Mr. Booth, would you fancy a turn on the river?”

Christopher eyed Eleanor and fought off a flush. “I’m afraid I haven’t tried skating since I was a lad, and I wasn’t any good at it back then either.”

“You can take our skates,” Mr. Hill offered. “There are two pairs hanging out by the back door that should fit. And Miss Liza can hold your hand to make sure you don’t fall.”

Christopher turned, raising an eyebrow at Eleanor. “Can she be spared from the kitchen?”

“She can be spared very easily,” Mrs. Hill replied. “She slaved all morning making those breads, only to hand them out on the mail coach when she intended them for our guests.”

Eleanor flushed. “It was the first thing that came to mind, them being out in the cold. And delivering that mail, which is...”

Christopher could imagine how she wanted to complete the sentence: *Delicate. Important. Special.* She cast a quiet glance of desperation over her shoulder toward the door, and he mirrored her worries. Now everything was out of their hands, and it seemed both of their lives hung in the balance of what would come in response.

“Go on, then,” Mrs. Hill said, moving from behind the counter and pushing Eleanor toward him. “Both of you go enjoy yourselves on the river. And keep an eye on the children.”

Unable to keep from smiling, Christopher held out his hand. “Shall we, Miss Liza?”

Eleanor nodded, sliding her hand into his, and his chest was engulfed with warmth. Wrapping up in coats and scarves in the doorway, they grabbed the two sets of skates hanging outside the back door, just as Mr. Hill had said. With young Frank and Miss Brown leading the way down the path, Christopher and Eleanor fell into pace behind them, the snow crunching beneath each step.

“She is right, of course,” Eleanor said, her words disappearing into a puff of breath before her face. “This skating will be just the distraction I need, or I’ll think of nothing else but that letter, counting each second that ticks by until there’s a response.”

Christopher chuckled. “I feel the same. I included a letter to my parents, as well. Now we can only hope and pray.”

Eleanor looked up at him, her brown eyes warm. “Thank you for doing that, Kit.” Then she blinked, and her smile fell. “Though I should probably ask you, is it all right that I still call you Kit? We’re no longer children, after all, and I should never have just assumed... would you prefer I call you Christopher, or perhaps Mr. Booth?”

Before he could stop himself, he reached out and took hold of her gloved hand in an attempt to calm her fears. “Please do not worry over it. I haven’t heard that name in years, and you’re the only one who ever called me Kit, so it’s a joy to hear it once more. Especially coming from you, when I never expected to see you again.”

She squeezed his hand in return, a smile gracing her lips that matched his own contentment. His heart rate slowly increased as they continued to walk, and she did not drop his hand.

“How are your parents?” she asked.

All Christopher’s ease suddenly disappeared, and he flinched. He was hesitant to confess the truth, for he didn’t want pity making him feel any smaller than he already felt. But perhaps if she knew, it would make them a little more even in circumstance, and she wouldn’t feel so hopeless in her current situation.

“Are they well? I always had such fond memories of them,” she went on.

“I will say, Miss Liza, our years apart have been difficult. You with your lot, and us with ours.”

She flashed her brown eyes over to him again. “Are they not well?”

Christopher took a deep breath. “Some years ago, my grandfather in London had gambled away his living, so we moved from Leicestershire to go pay off his debts, and he died shortly thereafter.”

Eleanor frowned. “How dreadful.”

“My father had set up a shop in London, and I work there with him, but he’d never had quite the same success as before. In London, the priority is status and connection, and I think the previous debts had sullied his name, which hurt his business.”

“How very unfair, that such hardship should befall such good people,” she mumbled in response, her steps slowing to near dragging in the snow. But her shoulders straightened. “Then the young woman at the house party...”

Christopher heard the question in her voice and was hesitant to answer it, but he nodded. “She is the daughter of a wealthy gentleman in search of a husband. We had done some work on her house in London, and our fathers were on good terms, despite the status difference. I was invited to their home for Christmas, and I believe they wanted us to make a match of it, which would be a helpful connection. I had intended to secure that understanding, but with this snow...”

The walk fell quiet beyond the children’s laughter ahead of them, and Christopher grew desperate to know what Eleanor was thinking.

“For what it’s worth,” he went on, “I’m happy to have found you again, even with the delay to the house party. That is well worth the sacrifice, and I wouldn’t change it for anything.”

She gave him a halfhearted smile, but Christopher could tell she was still concerned. Perhaps he should not have told her. This trek out into the snow was to distract her from her worries, not to add another layer of them.

“Why don’t we ready these skates?” Christopher pulled one pair of the skates hanging from his shoulder and handed them to her as they approached the edge of the river. The children were already out, Frank slipping onto his backside, trying to hurry after Miss Brown, who wore their set of skates.

“Do you remember when we were like them?” he asked gently, dusting the snow from a fallen tree and taking a seat.

Finally Eleanor smiled. “That feels like so long ago.”

“You were always the better skater between the two of us, that much is certain.”

“But I haven’t had a single day of practice since then,” she protested as she wrapped the straps of the skate over her boot.

Christopher stood on wobbly feet and moved to her side, offering her his hand. “Then we shall use today to make up for all the days we missed.”

CHAPTER 9



*H*olding Kit's hand brought on an unfamiliar heat to Eleanor's chest—all this despite a multitude of interferences. There was the fabric of their gloves impeding any true contact. There was the chill in the air around them. There was still the unknown of their futures, his true destination lying north in Newcastle, and hers returning to the arms of her father somewhere farther south. And yet, having him close enough to touch, her hand snug and secure in his grasp, produced a feeling of calm, and her heart rushed at the realization. Being with Kit made her feel safe, something she had not felt since she was a little girl. Even being miles away from the place she was born, she felt at home in his presence, and the desire to cling to that feeling could have overcome her entirely.

But she would not miss the tenderness of this moment. They carefully staggered their way over frozen ground and dead grass toward the edge of the ice, and he gave her a slanted smile as he offered her his other hand.

“Here, I will steady you on the ice.”

“You steady me?” Eleanor teased. “Was it not you who admitted to having no talent as a boy?”

He smirked in response. “I might not skate well on the ice, but I can manage standing. If you need a sturdy arm to lean on, I will be there for you.”

Eleanor met his gaze, his smile melting her heart even further. Oh, how

she wished she could lean on him, depend on him! Trust that his arm would be there every day for the rest of her life...

Clearing her throat, she took his hand as he helped her step out onto the ice. The skates were not quite her size, and maneuvering an adult body was very different from how it used to feel as a child, but eventually Eleanor found her balance, and went gliding around the frozen river.

“Kit, look!” she called over her shoulder, watching him with both arms out, legs completely still. Biting her lip in amusement, she carefully curled around and skated back to his side.

“Give me one moment, if you please,” he said with a chuckle as she neared.

“Here, take my hand.” Eleanor reached out for his hands that were balancing in the air and started pulling him forward. “Just move your feet slowly.”

“I’ll have to depend on you now.” He tossed her a wink before returning his eyes to the ice, his feet struggling for every inch.

He eventually found his stride, despite his remaining uneasiness from being so tall, but she found it safe enough to let go of his hand so he could attempt on his own. He was not as confident or graceful as she was, but it was as he’d said: he could manage.

Eleanor couldn’t help teasing him further by skating a figure eight around him, which made him laugh. “What a show-off you are, Miss Liza!”

His words reminded her that they were not alone, as she caught a glimpse of Frank and Alice, who continued skating along the opposite riverbank. Even just the sight of the two youngsters together reminded her of her own childhood, and the cherished memories she had with Kit at that age. It was bittersweet, for she knew they would be separated as well. There was no hope for an inn-keeper’s son and a widow’s daughter. After the roads were cleared, it was very likely that they would never see each other again. Eleanor reminded herself that more often than not, one did not marry their childhood

sweetheart. It was more dependent upon wealth and status and parental influence...

She shook her head, the accumulating thoughts becoming too overwhelming. She did not want to feel so hopeless again. Without even thinking, she skated over to the side of the river to a tree and riverbank covered in snow. She gathered up a snowball, then aimed for Kit just before he looked up.

“Wait, no!” he shouted, but it was too late as the snow splattered on the shoulder of his coat.

“I believe you have issued a challenge, Miss Liza,” he said, carefully shuffling over gathering up some snow of his own.

And so the snowball fight began.

It was an afternoon of hilarity and high jinks, both of them ending up on their backsides and each of them having various victorious shots. But neither of them had noticed when it started to grow dark, until they heard Frank shouting from the other side.

“It looks like it’s going to snow,” he called. “We’re heading back home.”

“Very well. Come along then,” Eleanor said to Kit, skating over to his side.

But the ice became slick as she neared him, and suddenly unable to stop, she barreled into Kit, knocking the both of them off their feet and into a nearby snowbank.

She landed on top of him as he let out a grunt, his breath appearing in a puff before her face and his hands catching her by the waist.

“Oh no, are you all right?” she asked, her eyes dangerously close to his grimacing face.

He groaned, “We cannot keep doing this, me catching you all the time.”

“I’m so sorry, Kit,” she responded with a chuckle.

Even to her own ears, her voice sounded muffled from the pile of snow that now surrounded them. She pushed away, bracing herself on one hand,

and using the other to wipe the snow and stray strands of hair from his face. But she noticed he stiffened under her touch and eventually brought his eyes to meet hers. Their closeness was suddenly all-encompassing, and she knew she should back away, but she couldn't find the desire to move. As she looked down at him, her chest continued to rise and fall, nerves branching out across her entire body and making her breath uneasy.

“Say it again,” he muttered, his lips hardly moving.

Eleanor swallowed hard. “Say what?”

“My name.” His voice was low, bringing the tickle of snowflakes to life in her stomach.

With a soft smile, she gently brushed a finger over his cheek again. “Kit,” she said, unable to keep the adoring tone from her voice.

His eyes had a hypnotizing effect this close, the soft blue with strands of light and pockets of dark. She felt the pull to lean down and remove the distance between them, but she also felt an intrinsic resistance. Her mind couldn't fathom the reason why, as all mental clarity had been dismissed with the pounding of her heart in her chest. Or was that his heart?

“Eleanor...” He said her name, and she had never heard it with such tenderness before. His voice struggled, entangled with recognizable determination and desire. His hand pressed against her heated cheek, his fingers sliding behind the nape of her neck, and her heart could have stopped beating entirely. Breath caught in her throat, Eleanor knew she wanted this. She wanted him. She had no idea how she could have him, or even if it was possible, but this was what she wanted for the rest of her life. Kit Booth looking at her like this forever.

His thumb dragged along her jaw, urging her eyes to flutter closed and lean forward, but in a tender moment of sharing breath just before their lips would meet, a slosh of snow fell from above and landed on Kit's face.

“Oh no, are you all right?” she asked, unable to keep from laughing. She tried to clean his face again as he coughed and sputtered. “I think the snow

must have fallen from the tree branch.”

Eleanor moved off him so he could sit up, and he now looked bedraggled, hair stuck in snowy tips pointing in every direction.

“We better get a move on before it tries such a thing again,” he chuckled, leaning forward to remove the skates from his boots. Eleanor crouched down to do the same, heart still racing from what had nearly happened. Kit took her skates, slinging them over his shoulder, then he reached out for her hand.

She took it and they walked back in silence, and no awkwardness. Eleanor found herself content in a way she hadn’t been for some time. And yet, she felt the need to tamp down that sense of satisfaction. She’d almost let her heart run away with itself, something she had cautioned herself from doing for years. But somehow, being around Kit again, brought down all her inhibitions and made her want to hope again.

Mrs. Hill stood at the back door waiting for them. “Well, I’m surprised you’re not frozen through. I’ve already drawn your hot water to soak upstairs, Mr. Booth.”

“Thank you kindly,” he said, nodding with sincerity. He snuck a glance at Eleanor, and said, “And thank you for the afternoon, Miss Liza.” Then he disappeared through the kitchen door.

“I’m heating up some water just now for you, love. It should only be a few moments.” Mrs. Hill wrapped a blanket around Eleanor’s shoulders. “Not that you need it, the way your eyes are glowing for that boy.”

“What?” Eleanor’s hand rushed to her heated cheek. It was still cold out, but she certainly felt warm from within.

“Did he say anything to you? Or offer himself to you?” Mrs. Hill rubbed the blanket on Eleanor’s shoulders, her own face alight with anticipation.

“Well, no, he said...” Eleanor’s mind flittered over her conversation with Kit from the day. He’d said many sweet things, and she was certain he’d been about to kiss her before the snow interfered. But he hadn’t made any decisions or promises about the future. She hadn’t expected him to, and he

wasn't at liberty to, was he? Eleanor swallowed hard as her contentment threatened to flutter away. "No, he didn't."

"That's what I was afraid of. I sent you two off hoping to give you some time to talk and come to terms, but if he's still settled on Newcastle..."

Eleanor's heart dropped. He had said something about an understanding, hadn't he? Even if she did feel comfortable with him and happy to have her friend back, that didn't mean he was hers to keep. She was a fool to hope for anything from him.

Mrs. Hill moved to stand in front of her, hands on either side of Eleanor's shoulders. "Listen to me, love. I'm not trying to dishearten you, no need to look so forlorn. Mr. Booth seems like a good lad, and I'm happy you've been reunited with him. But for now, let's focus on getting back to your father first. And I'll do all I can to help you with that. Mmm?"

Eleanor nodded and tried to give her a reassuring smile, but deep down, she was utterly deflated. It was a fun afternoon, reliving times from her childhood with Kit, but they couldn't go back to those days. The future was going to be completely different, regardless of what they wanted.

CHAPTER 10



Christopher sat alone in his room, staring into the fire as the flames danced against the brick. He repeated that moment in the snow over and over again in his mind, his heart pounding with every thought. Eleanor in his arms, surrounded by the chill of snow, but her presence warmed him, her eyes content, her voice lulling him into her grasp. She did not seem repulsed by his advances, in fact, she seemed to welcome them. But there in lied the problem, which is why his emotions were not just euphoric, but a tumult instead.

There was no denying his feelings for Eleanor. It was a miracle that they had been reunited and he was desperate to keep her in his life this time. But there were still obstacles; she still needed to find her father, and Christopher had nothing to offer her. Not only that, but if he did pursue her, he'd be giving up on Miss Clark in Newcastle, who would be a winning connection for his father's business. He knew what his parents would say, and encourage him to seek out his own happiness, but how could he be happy knowing his parents were suffering?

A knock sounded at the door, and Patrick appeared. "Mr. Hill sent me to fetch you. Said you have a visitor."

"A visitor? Here?" Christopher stood.

Patrick nodded. "Someone from the estate in Newcastle."

Christopher's stomach dropped. "Ah, I see." He quickly shrugged on a coat, hoping he looked presentable enough. Was the road clear? Had Mr. Clark come all this way to retrieve him?

But as he followed the valet downstairs, Mr. Hill stood in the foyer with a simple rider, dressed for the weather with a letter in his hand.

"What's this?" Christopher asked.

"Are you Mr. Booth?" the rider asked, and Christopher nodded.

The man handed him a folded letter. "My mistress sent me to deliver this."

Swallowing hard, Christopher took the letter, looking down at it as a bad omen. He slowly unfolded it, and read quickly:

Mr. Booth,

We received your letter about the delay, and I am so sorry to hear of your illness. It is my understanding the roads are now clear, so we are ready to receive you at your earliest convenience. My Jane has been anxious for your arrival, and our other guests look forward to meeting you. Please send word with my footman as soon as you're able.

Sincerely,

Mr. George Clark

Christopher read the letter multiple times over, the dread in his stomach sinking further. It did not seem terribly personal or urgent, but the fact that they sent correspondence at all, that she was waiting for him, left him

unsettled.

“Will you be coming with me then?” the rider asked.

“I, um...” Christopher felt the pressure from the eyes of both Patrick and Mr. Hill, and he cleared his throat. “Not at this time, no. Please thank the Clarks for their concern and inform them I will come as soon as I am able.”

The footman nodded, and then saw himself out the front door of the inn.

“What an abrupt fellow,” Patrick muttered.

“If you’re worried about traveling,” Mr. Hill said, “I have a pair of horses I’m able to lend you if needed. They’re not intended for any mail coach, so if you have a party waiting, I don’t wish for you to feel stranded here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hill, but it’s not that.” Christopher pressed the letter back and forth between his fingers. “It’s actually... I want to do the right thing, and I’m not sure what that is yet.” He took a deep breath before lifting his eyes to the man. “But should I need the horses, I will let you know.”

Mr. Hill nodded, clapping him on the back as they returned to the stairwell. But Christopher paused, finding Eleanor sitting alone in the parlor, and his heart constricted.

“Why the delay, sir? I thought you’d be wanting to leave in a hurry,” Patrick said gently, following his gaze. “Is it the maid? Have you found yourself growing fond of her?”

Christopher wanted to laugh. *Growing fond* was an understatement. He’d been more than fond of her for years. “Perhaps.”

“That could be quite a scandal, sir. I’ve only heard about such matches, but never witnessed it before. Giving up a gentleman’s daughter for a servant?”

Little did he know that Miss Liza was actually a merchant’s daughter, and Christopher did not deserve her either.

“I’m sorry to keep you cooped up in an inn for longer than expected, Patrick,” Christopher said. “Hopefully we’ll be on the road again soon.” But even as he said the words, he found himself dreading going the rest of the

way to Newcastle, whether by horse or mail coach.

“Not to worry, sir. I’m growing quite fond of the company here myself.”

Christopher counted that as one less thing he needed to feel guilty about, then excused himself as he walked into the parlor.

“Good evening,” he said, and Eleanor turned around in her chair. She smiled, but it did not seem a true smile, as he’d seen out on the ice before. “What brings you out here all alone? Are you unwell?” he asked, noticing her pale cheeks.

She shook her head. “I think the cold took more out of me than I anticipated.”

“Then come join me by the fire, and we can try a round of chess. See if the years apart have made all that much of a difference.” Christopher’s words bore a teasing tone, but he held his hand out, hoping to ease whatever tension currently worried her.

Eleanor nodded and let him lead her to a parlor table closer to the fireplace. Chess pieces stood in an unfinished game, likely remaining from something Frank and Alice had played, and it felt apropos, how they kept mimicking each other.

Christopher started lining up the white chess pieces across the black and white design, and he looked up at Eleanor across the table through his lashes. With each pawn presented, he wanted to talk about that last Christmas they had shared together as children, about that near kiss the day before that had been cut devastatingly short, about her thoughts on if they could possibly have a future together. But he didn’t want to press more if she was already weary, so he simply prepared his side of the board in silence.

“How much longer do you think it will be?” she asked, placing the last piece on her side.

“I’m ready, you can... or I suppose I’ll make the first move.” He gave her a wink, and she smirked in return.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I was referring to your departure.”

Christopher's hand fumbled as he moved a pawn forward, so he corrected the fallen pieces and tried again. Swallowing hard, he clenched his jaw.

"Keen to be rid of me already?" he teased. "I don't think I'll be leaving until we hear word from your father. I would like to ensure first that you have a destination to be reunited." He would at least see his duty done to his dearest friend before thinking of moving on. But even then, there was still more to ask, more to know.

"But your path is known," Eleanor said. "I could end up anywhere, and there's no guarantee we'll even hear news from the village. We could be waiting in vain." She moved her first piece.

"It would not be in vain to me," Christopher said, taking his turn in the game. "I'm still waiting for word back from my parents as well. And even if we can't locate your father, I know they are two who would love you as their own, and they would want me to help you while I can."

Tentatively reaching across the table, Christopher placed his hand gently over hers. She did not pull away, nor did she meet his gaze. She kept her eyes on their united hands, until her fingers curled up into his touch.

Then she smiled. "Very well. But don't think for one second that sweet talking will win your way out of this game, Kit Booth." She narrowed her eyes at him playfully. "Much has changed in the years that have passed. I'm not that little girl who didn't know how to play chess anymore, so I won't be going easy on you."

"So the student has become the master?" he teased in return.

"Only time will tell." Then she released his hand and moved her bishop to take his pawn, the first casualty of the match.

"Well done, Miss Liza," he said, with a teasing wink, but then turned thoughtful. "I'm sure you're anxious to be done with hiding, to return to your true identity, your real home."

Eleanor remained quiet for a moment, examining the board and likely her own emotions as well, before making her move and claiming another piece.

“It has taken much time for me to come to terms with the changes. For so long, I had assumed I would be living my life as someone else in order to hide from my uncle. So the knowledge that my father may be alive, that I might be able to return home and live normally, is all still quite a shock. But yes, once I know for certain that I won’t be held in my uncle’s clutches anymore, I will shed off the role of a maidservant with ease. Though I will miss the Hills. They’ve been such a loving family and have provided a haven, a home for me.”

Christopher moved his rook to claim her bishop, and she gasped. “I am glad you had them all these years, and that you were not alone.” Then proceeding with caution in his words, he went on. “What is the normal life you wish to pursue?”

Finally she looked up at him and a smile brightened her face. “I should very much like to have a proper season. You’ll remember I spoke of nothing else as a child, and it’s something I always wanted to experience.”

“To what end?” Christopher asked as she moved her knight in the L formation, claiming another of his pawns.

“Having a season? To pursue courtship, of course. To find a husband.”

Christopher’s fingers knotted together in his lap, wringing themselves tightly until they hurt. Of course that would make sense. She likely expected he would be married to Miss Clark, and Eleanor would not just sit around once reunited with her father. She would be proactive about having her season, finding herself a husband. He would never have expected anything less.

But his stomach soured, his chest twisting at the future she presented. Christopher knew his boyhood self would be devastated by her marrying anyone else but him. And there was no way to reconcile it. He’d only accepted the notion of Miss Clark because he needed the money to help his parents, and because Eleanor had disappeared. But now that she was back in his life, that changed everything.

“I believe it’s your turn, Kit,” she urged, the name rolling from her lips with a natural ease.

He mindlessly moved his next piece, stuck in his dire thoughts.

“Check!” she cried victoriously, folding her arms across her chest. “Last chance.”

Christopher blinked himself back into the present, eyeing the board in desperation. She had cornered him without even knowing it, on the board and in the reality of their situation.

He moved one piece to block her incoming queen; how had he completely missed the advance? He’d been entirely too distracted with his own thoughts about how to find a way to be with her, but he didn’t even know if that thought had crossed her mind.

Her queen conquered his last attempt to protect the king, and now he was defenseless. “Checkmate! Did I win?” she asked, leaning over the table to inspect the board more closely. “You didn’t let me win, did you?”

Christopher chuckled. “No, you won on your own. You didn’t need me to help you.”

She looked up with a wide grin, and any former melancholy had all but disappeared. Perhaps it had all somehow been transferred over to him, for he tried to smile and celebrate her win, being a good sport, but his own words were now attacking him.

She didn’t need him. But oh, how he needed her.

CHAPTER 11



Eleanor could scarcely believe the month of December had passed so quickly, but Christmas Eve was around the corner. Their guests had stayed for over two weeks now, and before she would have wished them gone, but now she was happy they had stayed. She had risen early on the morning of the 21st to prepare the meat pies for St. Thomas Day, to feed any of the poor or widows or ragamuffin children who would come by. The Hills didn't have much money to spare, but they did prepare food every year for the less fortunate. And yet, instead of thinking of the needy, Eleanor continued to only think of herself.

She was stuck, and not just in a cycle of self-pity. She was stuck in her circumstances, as she'd always been, but even more so now that Kit had been reintroduced back into her life. She could have gone on for the rest of her days ignorant to the fact that her father was alive, that she could have a chance at some normalcy after all. And she never had dared to hope or dream that she would ever see her childhood love again, that she and Kit would ever cross paths. But the heavens had graced the front steps of the inn with his presence, so how could she not give thanks for such a blessing?

Because she could not have him. It was a touch too painful to see him again after all these years and then be expected to hand him off to another woman. How could she do it? And without any promise of returning to her

father. All because of her Uncle Isaac, the odious, terrible man. How could he have been so selfish and conniving, to not only rob her of her childhood, but also to create such a miserable and lonely future for her? She knew he had been pushing her to marry some kind of wealthy suitor, but had it only been about the money? Surely there must have been some other motive.

Eleanor removed the full apron she wore that was covered with flour and grease, and placed a small towel over the basket filled with satchels of meat pies. The day was mostly gone, and it was about time that the poor souls would come Thomasing soon. So she paused to make herself presentable before heading up to the front of the inn.

She caught a glimpse of Kit in the parlor, playing a game of chess with Frank, and it tugged at her heartstrings, the many ways Frank and Kit mirrored each other. But perhaps she was clinging to that too harshly, and it was blocking all the potential good she could see in the future.

A knock sounded at the door, and Eleanor moved to answer it in the foyer. Two elderly widows stood out in the cold, bundled up in thin coats and ragged scarves. But they had their own baskets as well, collecting items from door to door from anyone willing and able to help the less fortunate. As Eleanor offered them the satchels of meat pies and bid them a merry Christmas, she reminded herself to be grateful that she was not a penniless widow. She had a safe home and a make-shift family. She had food and shelter everyday thanks to the Hills. She should be content with that.

But Eleanor found herself wanting more. She wanted Kit, and she wanted her father back. She was a selfish girl, she was coming to realize. Perhaps she always had been, even as a child.

Before she could close the door, a gaggle of children ran up the walkway. Eleanor knew most of them to be poor, but there were also a few without parents, without homes. She remembered what that felt like, being on the run from her uncle before she came to Northbury. As she handed them satchels and watched them run away, she knew that if given the opportunity, they

would do everything they could to find their parents. So why shouldn't she?

Eleanor took a seat by the window with a sigh and watched the world outside. The air was cold, but the sky was blue, reminding her there was always something to be thankful for.

The sound of a jingle filled the air, and Eleanor froze. Standing from her seat, she saw the red mail coach approaching and coming to a stop before the inn.

Meat pies forgotten, she grabbed the bag of outgoing mail on the front table, and rushed out the door.

"Good day," she called to the driver.

The man gave her a wordless nod, then retrieved the delivery this time, which was smaller than normal: a handful of letters tied together with twine. She accepted it with a racing heart, and gave him a polite smile.

"I believe we have some guests heading north, and I can get the innkeeper to tend to your horses," she began, but he shook his head.

"There's no room. They'll have to wait for the next one," said the driver before he clicked the reins and carried on down the road.

Eleanor took a deep breath and nodded. It was just as well. She didn't have the heart to tell everyone it could be time to leave. Especially not Kit. Not when their solution could be in her very hands.

All the blood drained from her face, and she suddenly felt lightheaded and weak, the letters now precarious in her grasp. One of them could hold the fate of her future. It could hold the answer to her many questions and help her take her next steps. She desperately wanted to know, but it likewise terrified her. Beyond this day, her life perhaps would not remain the same. It had been a tumult since Kit arrived on the doorstep of the inn, and today she may have a direction that could take her away from him forever.

Eleanor blindly moved back inside the inn, practically stumbling through the door, as her trembling hands attempted to untie the twine. Her eyes raced over every name on each letter, some clearly penned and others carelessly

scrawled, but all addressed to people in the village of Northbury for Mr. Hill to deliver.

Until halfway through the stack, she read her name: Miss Eleanor Grant.

It was a small letter, folded nearly half the size of the rest of them, but then, perhaps her father only had a short message that he would come for her. Or that she should meet him somewhere. This letter had traveled from Leicestershire; how long had it been since she sent her letter to him? A week? A fortnight? It hardly mattered now.

A knock sounded at the door, and Eleanor knew there were more folks coming Thomasing, but she couldn't be bothered with that now. She left the letters in twine in the foyer and rushed through the parlor before pushing into the kitchen.

"There's someone at the door," she announced to Mrs. Hill, making her way to the back door.

"Thank you, but what..."

Eleanor did not stop to hear her. She needed to be alone before opening the letter. She needed space to breathe and think and plan for whatever it held.

The cold air tickled her lungs, but then once within the barn, she closed the door and let out a deep breath. The soft scent of hay calmed her nerves, and the eyes of two horses and a cow watched her curiously, making her laugh riddled with nerves. "I don't know what I'm doing in here either," she whispered.

Holding up the letter again, Eleanor bit her lip, then used her finger to break the seal, a stamp in the wax that was unfamiliar. As expected, the letter was brief, and heartbreakingly, it was not in her father's hand.

Miss Grant,

I am sorry to inform you that Mr. Walter Grant is no longer living at this residence. He sold us the property some years ago, and we've not heard from him since. I have asked my solicitor if he left us forwarding contact information, but he does not have anything listed. My condolences and best wishes in your search.

Signed,

Mrs. Henrietta Smith

Eleanor found little strength left in her legs. She leaned against the horse's stall for support, dropping her arm to her side as she sank to the ground. Her chest felt hollow now, void of any hope.

Her father wasn't there. Leicestershire was a dead end.

Perhaps he was in London, but how the devil could she get there? She had no money for such a trip, not with the pennies she'd saved. And even if she could get there, she still had no way of finding him.

The thought crossed her mind to seek out Kit for help, for she knew he'd be willing, but what could he do? He didn't have money either. In fact, his livelihood and the wellbeing of his parents depended on him marrying someone else for money.

She couldn't have Kit.

She couldn't have her father.

The overwhelming helplessness brought tears to her eyes, tears she had avoided for years. It did no good to cry, for it did not help to change the situation. But the grief bursting in her chest needed an outlet, and she could not go on without its release, so she let the tears trickle down her cheeks, let the sobs come in waves. Until there was nothing left within her.

She didn't know how much time had passed when the barn door creaked

open, revealing Kit's face. She turned away from the light, wiping at her cheeks, which were undoubtedly tear stained.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently as he stepped inside. "Mrs. Hill asked me to come check on you because you did not look well."

The muscles in Eleanor's lips pulled into a frown, threatening more tears. She would not keep anything a secret from Kit, but she found it difficult to say the words. "My father is not in Leicestershire."

His eyes grew wide as she held the letter out to him. He took it carefully, unbelievably. "Where did you get this?"

"The mail coach just passed through not long ago."

She watched him read over the letter's contents, and the same disappointment filled his eyes as he sighed. "And there was no other letter addressed to me? I was expecting word from my parents to see if they might know where he is."

Eleanor shook her head and slowly stood. "I only saw letters for the village."

Kit let out a breath and ran a hand through his perfectly combed hair of sunshine gold. "Don't fret, Eleanor. This was just a first attempt. There are other ways we can locate him."

She turned to face him. "And how would we manage that? With what money? Please correct me if I'm mistaken, but neither of us have much to our names. In fact, you're long overdue for your venture to acquire money, so you can be on your way. You need not bother yourself with this any longer."

Kit set his jaw and lifted his chin. "You don't have to handle this alone, you know. This wasn't your fault."

"Of course it's not my fault. This is that devil bastard's fault." Even the thought of her Uncle Isaac sparked a fiery rage in her chest, and it made her pace around the barn. "I hope to never see that man again, but if I do, he will pay for how he's ruined my life."

"I know you're upset, and you have every right to be, but I don't think

revenge is the answer. And don't worry about the money for now. We'll think of something. I can help you—"

"No, Kit. You can't." Her voice went stone cold. She had to put her foot down. "You have your own life to live, and I have my pride. I don't want your pity, and I don't want to go from being a burden here to a burden with you." Her thoughts were all jumbled, and she couldn't stop the words from coming. "It would have been better if you had never come at all. For then I would not have dared to hope, and I wouldn't have to suffer the disappointment and heartbreak all over again." Tears welled in her eyes as she turned toward the door.

"Now wait just one minute," Kit said, taking her by the wrist.

Eleanor whirled around, wrenching against his grasp. "Never grab a lady by the arm like that," she said through gritted teeth.

She hadn't intended to, but the familiar words mimicked his own from the snowy night he'd arrived. The recognition flashed in his eyes, along with the hurt of the accusation, as he slowly released her arm.

Her heart thudded with a tumult of emotions in her chest, her mind spinning in confusion. So she snatched the letter from his hand and stormed out of the barn.

Eleanor needed to be alone.

CHAPTER 12



The setting sun cast the sky in a golden glow, sunshine flickering through the trees as all the guests at the inn walked through the woods. Christopher knew the general traditions of collecting holly and ivy, and the women were out collecting sprigs of greenery to decorate the inn for Christmas Eve. As for the men and the children, they tramped through the melting snow to find something worthy of being their Yule log. Frank and Alice played tag around the trees, Mr. Haversham and Mr. Hill deliberated over which tree would be the best match, but Christopher couldn't help looking over his shoulder, hoping to catch a glimpse of the women. Of Eleanor.

It had been days since they'd spoken, and Christopher was growing desperate. He wanted to give her space to think things through properly, for he truly hadn't intended to hurt her or offend her. And he didn't have all the answers yet, but he did want to help. He just didn't know how to if she wouldn't speak to him. Any time they ended up in the same place, or he attempted to approach her, she would lower her eyes and duck out of the room. But surely she wouldn't keep her distance from him on Christmas, would she? Not when it was that fateful Christmas Eve so many years ago that he'd last seen her. They should create new holiday memories this year, happier ones.

But Eleanor was still nowhere to be found. Even as Mr. Hill tied ropes around the heavy Yule log to drag it back to the inn, the ladies perhaps had walked deeper into the nearby forest. He considered going after them to ensure their safety, but he'd likely only get himself lost. They were more familiar with the area than he was, so he'd have to be patient. Perhaps tonight he could find a moment to reconcile with Eleanor.

Once returning to the inn and the ladies filtered through the door, Christopher watched as Eleanor unlatched her coat and removed her scarf but did not meet his gaze. They went about the house as the Christmas traditions commenced. The sprigs of ivy and holly were dispersed throughout the entryway and the parlor, and Christopher made a mental note of where Mr. Hill had installed a kissing bough of mistletoe near the stairwell. A candle was lit on the hearth to disperse the gloom of the winter season, and then the Yule log set to blaze in the parlor fireplace.

Eventually a hearty dinner was served, each of the inn's guests seated at the large table. Eleanor brought out plate after plate of steaming dishes – a roasted goose with vegetables, mincemeat pies, and bread and preserves. The Hills did not run an inn of luxury, nor were they poor as church mice, but the meal was a sight to see. It was clear they had made an effort for their snowed in guests, and everyone cheered as it was presented.

Only Eleanor did not look up at Christopher once. She would disappear back into the kitchen, only to return and hurry about to see that everyone else was happy and fed, while avoiding his side of the table. Christopher was pleased with the food, but he'd been hoping to share the evening with her.

After the meal had ended, and the parlor had turned to games, Christopher looked around again for Eleanor, but she was nowhere to be found.

When Mrs. Hill approached him, he almost asked her about Eleanor, but his words paused when he noticed a letter in her hand.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Booth,” she said.

“What’s this?” Christopher’s voice was a whisper.

“Mr. Hill found it before going to distribute the post in the village. It must have come in on the last mail coach, but our girl likely missed it for being so distracted with her own letter.”

Christopher swallowed hard. He easily recognized the penmanship in his mother’s hand, and his stomach swirled with the possibilities of what the letter contained. Would it change anything?

And yet, his thoughts remained with Eleanor. “Will she not join us?”

Her face took on an apologetic look. “I believe she wasn’t feeling well and has retired early.”

“Has she?” Christopher frowned. What more could he do?

“You know, lad,” she continued in a lower voice, “I think that letter about her father left her feeling disheartened all over again. She hasn’t had much to hope for over the years.”

“Yes, I believe so. Only I wanted to...” Wanted to what? Make promises he couldn’t keep? Give her hope when he still had no answers himself?

“She said she went upstairs to write some letters; I think she intends to reach out to other neighbors from when she was a girl. She hasn’t given up yet, so I imagine she’ll be improved tomorrow.”

“One can only hope for Christmas day,” Christopher said with a smile.

Mrs. Hill patted his arm but said nothing more.

Suddenly feeling tired himself, he decided to turn in. With his own letter in hand, Christopher made his way to the stairwell, but a motion in the foyer made him pause. Another couple was making use of the kissing bough, but who hadn’t been in the parlor? Blinking hard, it turned out to be Patrick and Mrs. Brown, locked in a passionate embrace.

So Christopher wasn’t the only one who’d had his heart stolen during their time being snowed in at Northbury Inn.

He tiptoed his way up the stairs to his room, and once settled on his bed, Christopher let out a deep breath and opened the letter.

My darling Christopher,

Thank you for your letter. I am sorry to hear of the weather delay and your illness, though we are thrilled at your discovery of our dear Ellie. How we have worried and prayed for her over the years! Unfortunately, we do not have contact with her father. He does visit us at times, but because he has constantly been on the move in search of her, he rarely stays in one spot for long, and tends to write us from different locations. I do have the direction for his solicitor in London, which I've included here for you.

Now I've discussed this with your father, and I hope you will not take offense, but I feel the need to mention one thing. You have always been such a respectful boy, and grown into an honorable young man. I know you have always striven to help us in our situation after your grandfather passed, and I am proud of the person you have become. But I hope that given the new circumstances, that you will take your own happiness into consideration when it comes to selecting your bride. You were never the same after Ellie was taken, and I know you had resigned yourself to marrying for wealth, thus seeking out Miss Clark and pursuing the house party. But please do not sacrifice your life on our account. Your father and I are happy, even in our reduced circumstances, because we have each other. And we only want the same for you, especially if that means bringing Ellie home. Please send word when you can, and we look forward to your return.

Your mother,

Sally Booth

The words caused Christopher's heart to burn. Just as expected, his mother always knew the right thing to say, providing him with the mental clarity he had been missing.

All this time, he'd had a misplaced sense of duty when it came to relieving his parents from their poverty. They'd always told him not to worry about them, and he'd never believed them, thinking it was his responsibility as their son to keep their future secure. But they were happy as long as they could be together, regardless of the circumstances. He hadn't seen it before because Ellie had never been part of the equation.

Now he understood, that the same was true for him. No amount of money would ever be enough to justify a life without Ellie. He would gladly sacrifice the security that came with marrying a gentleman's daughter if that meant he could have a chance to win the heart of the merchant's daughter.

All he needed to find out was if she felt the same.

He had the key to her solution in his hands. He would help her find her father, no matter if she returned his feelings. But after that, would she be willing to settle for a humble carpenter's son?

Christopher shook his head. He needed to handle one thing at a time. First, he would write a letter to Mr. Clark, and tomorrow, he would give Ellie the best possible Christmas gift.

CHAPTER 13



Christmas morning dawned on Eleanor alone in the parlor. The Yule log had all but burned down to coals, so she roused it back into a dancing flame, ready for celebrations of the day. She wasn't sure if *she* was ready, but that had never stopped her before. The work at the inn would always be needed, especially on a day like today.

"Good morning," a voice sounded behind her, and she whirled around.

Kit stood in the doorway with a tentative smile on his face and dressed in his Sunday best, which was not extravagant in the least, but it looked very fine on him. "Merry Christmas," he said.

Countless emotions tumbled together in her chest at the sight of him. The desire to grin and weep and shout all at once, accompanied by guilt and stress, but the need for peace won out, and she finally managed to respond. "Merry Christmas, Kit."

"May we call a truce?" he asked quietly as he stepped toward her. "I do not wish to quarrel with you, not over Christmas."

She sighed, her shoulders sagging. "Nor do I."

Kit held out his hand, which she took with a half-smile, and he gently tugged her into his embrace. "Then why stay away?"

His voice so close to her ear caused a skipping of her heartbeat, so she swallowed and attempted to find her voice. "Mostly to my shame. I know I

did not react well and none of this is your fault. You were simply present to bear the brunt of my frustrations.” She pulled back and looked up at him, actively trying not to become lost in his eyes. “I did not mean everything I said, for I do not regret seeing you again, though I am still bitterly discouraged. There is not much hope left in my life, but that is not your fault.” She gave a forced smile. “Forgive me?”

He looked down at her in a way that made her shiver, as his eyes bore the look of sheer adoration. He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear as he said, “Of course. I do not blame you for needing time. It is a severe disappointment to not know where your father is.”

Eleanor nodded, the dark sadness over that fact threatening to overwhelm. But he tipped her chin up with his finger.

“Though I will say this. I do not mean to belittle your difficulties and struggles the years we have been apart, for I know they have been many and heavy to bear. But I do not think that even if we are dealt a difficult hand at times, it means that the same fate is guaranteed in the long run. I think we always have room for the hope of better things to come.”

His words were such a contrast compared to her own life experience, against all the resentment that had lingered in her heart. But she wanted to believe the things he spoke of, so she simply nodded.

“And I want to apologize for taking your arm as I did,” he continued. “It was not my intention to harm you or frighten you, or to put you in mind of your uncle. I only hoped to remind you that you are not alone. You have the Hills, who only want the best for you, but you also have me. I do not pity you, nor are you a burden. You are a treasure,” he emphasized that word with a squeeze of her hands, “long lost and precious. I could never abandon you.”

His words fought against the darkness in her chest, pushing through to replace it with some semblance of the light of hope. Emotions threatened to pool in her eyes, but she swallowed hard, squeezing his hands in return. “Thank you, Kit.”

She retreated toward the kitchen, needing an escape from his touch, but stopped in her tracks, unable to suppress her curiosity. “Will you be staying for breakfast?”

Kit gave her a quizzical look. “Of course. Where else would I go?”

“I thought with today being Christmas, you would be keen to continue on to the house party.”

He chuckled. “Considering how sick the mail coach left me, I do not look forward to traveling any time soon.”

“But it seems the roads have cleared enough, and travel would be easy with the horses. And they will be expecting you. There is still some holiday cheer left before Twelfth Night.”

Kit shook his head, and looked up at her, taking a long pause before speaking. “I’ve long given up on Mr. Clark and the house party. In fact, I just wrote a letter last night, explaining that I won’t be coming after all. I am certain she will find a better match, someone better suited who will not depend on her money. I explained that I had business calling me elsewhere, and I do, for I would much rather be by your side.”

Eleanor’s heart took off at a galloping speed as she met the blue of his steady gaze. “How do you mean?” she whispered.

Kit responded with a chuckle. His hand moved to cup the side of her face, just as he had when they’d tumbled into the snow, and she held her breath at the intimate touch. His finger brushed across her cheek, and he tilted his head to one side as he said, “Don’t you know, Ellie? I’ve loved you my whole life, from the day we met, and every day since.”

Emotion swelled in Eleanor’s throat, and her lips pulled down as tears filled her vision. She had been on her own for so long, the love from her past something she thought she would never have again. But hearing those words, hearing him say her name, they warmed her thoroughly from head to toe, providing a sense of home and hope she hadn’t felt in years.

She couldn’t help stepping into his embrace, leaning her head on his chest

to hide her tears. “Truly?” she asked, clinging to the back of his coat.

Kit nodded, his chin moving against the top of her head as his arms wrapped around her waist. “Truly. And I won’t leave you alone ever again, not if I can help it.”

Eleanor pulled back, happier in that moment perhaps than she’d ever been in her life. She hoped he could see the love shining in her eyes, because the emotion emanating from her chest simply wanted to spill out.

Unable to restrain herself any further, she took him by the lapels, stood up on tiptoes, and brought her lips to his. She paused there, sealing their devotion in a way she’d only dreamed of, before pulling back with hesitation. Kit’s eyes fluttered open, filled with stars that seemed to match her own as he gently pulled her close again.

His lips moved fervently against hers, warm and sweet. Eleanor was in awe of something so beautiful, but she also wanted to return his earnestness. Her arms slid up his shoulders and wound around his neck, trying to eliminate every inch between them. Then his hands tightened around her waist, and he used the new proximity to match every angle of her lips, to capture her every breath.

When Kit deepened the kiss, Eleanor found herself sighing, falling, wanting to drown in this affection. Her mind was dizzy and her heart raced, but the kiss was everything she could have asked for or ever wanted. It was a victory, a celebration, Eleanor’s own way to finally say, *Yes! I am yours and you are mine. We will find a way to be together, like this forever, how we always should have been...*

The sound of a closing door upstairs brought her eyes open, making her realize what a compromising situation they’d created, and they both pulled back in the same breath.

“Perhaps we should not be discovered so entangled,” Kit whispered with a chuckle, and Eleanor’s face burned hot as she wrenched herself from his grasp.

“Please do not think ill of me for being so bold as to...”

But Kit took her quickly by the waist again, pulling her close. “Never apologize for a kiss, not with me.” As if forgetting his previous statement, he lowered his lips again, kissing her tenderly, slowly, repeatedly, until her previous concerns had melted away entirely.

She couldn’t know how many minutes passed before he reluctantly pulled back and let out a deep breath. “But we must think about this rationally, mustn’t we?” He spoke the words, but his eyes rested on her lips, and still bore a bedazzled gaze that revealed any rationale was not the forefront of his mind. “I have—”

Footsteps sounded in the stairwell, and she knew they didn’t have long before the guests would descend, and the holiday festivities would commence.

“I have a surprise for you,” he whispered, a dashing smile on his lips as he took a seat at the table. “It is not the one from years ago I was never able to give you, but something even better.”

“A surprise?” Her heart sank. “But I do not have anything for you in return.”

He shook his head, sincerity in his eyes. “You are more than enough.”

CHAPTER 14



Christopher held Eleanor's hand lingeringly as she walked back toward the kitchen and disappeared. And it was just as well, because Patrick appeared around the corner, taking a seat beside him at the table.

"Good morning, sir," he said cheerfully, and Christopher nodded in return. "Apologies for not rising earlier. I think the drink last night got to my head."

"Not at all, Patrick. We are not at the house party, and I'm quite used to dressing on my own."

Patrick nodded slowly. "Actually, sir, I have been meaning to ask you something, though I hope you will not find me impertinent."

Christopher shook his head. "Please, I do not mind at all."

The valet straightened his shoulders. "Am I correct in the assumption that, with the holidays coming to an end, you will not be continuing on to Newcastle?"

The words caught Christopher by surprise. Of course, the man would be interested in his employer's next steps. But in an attempt to keep Eleanor's identity secure, he hadn't even thought to convey his plans to the man he'd employed for this very event.

"Yes, you are correct. And I am sorry I had not communicated this to you before. I'm certain now that the roads are clear, so you're eager to return

home to your family, and to receive your pay.”

Patrick ducked his head. “Well, you needn’t pay me the whole sum, for I didn’t serve you quite as much as expected due to not arriving. And I’ve no family to return to, sir. In fact, I think I should very much like to stay.”

Christopher blinked. “Stay? In Northbury?”

“Yes. I’ve already spoken to Mr. Hill, and it seems his stable hand is not returning from home, so he could use help around the inn.” Patrick smiled bashfully. “And if you intended to ride off with the maid after all, perhaps Mrs. Brown would have a reason to stay and fill the position. I did have my sights on courting her somehow.”

“Well, well, Patrick. That is quite a transition,” Christopher said, clapping him on the back. “But I cannot object to such a fine plan. I wish you the very best.”

Patrick beamed. “Thank you, sir. You needn’t release me right away if my services are still necessary, but I wanted to inform you that I would not require the pay for the return ride to London on the mail coach.”

Ah, that did change things. Christopher nodded thoughtfully as the other guests entered the parlor and took their seats for breakfast.

When planning his trip for the house party, Christopher had only brought a specific amount of money for paying the valet and for travel. There hadn’t been much preparation for a lengthy stay at an inn, but he had to settle his accounts with the Hills and pay Patrick for his time. Could he also afford Eleanor’s return to London?

Eleanor and Mrs. Hill came out of the kitchen, arms full of dishes for a beautiful Christmas morning feast. Now when Ellie met his gaze, her countenance was full of joy, and Christopher made certain not to take such a luxury for granted. He had seen so much pain and concern in those eyes since arriving in Northbury, so this smile that met her eyes and sparkled with hope was rare. He needed to secure that same peace and happiness for her. But how?

He would have to find her alone later. To give her the news of his letter, and to talk about what their next steps would be. Would she want to travel immediately to London? Would she want to marry before finding her father?

Did she even know that he wanted to marry her? He hoped that kiss was an assurance of that much, at least.

Perhaps they had more to discuss than he thought.



From the front window of the inn, Eleanor stood watching the sun set over the tops of the trees on Christmas Day. Everything had been wonderful; a heartwarming church service, humble presents exchanged between the guests, holiday activities with some of the townsfolk who had come to call, and a hearty dinner in the parlor that finished with the flaming Christmas pudding they had all contributed to weeks before. By all accounts, it was a lovely day.

But she had the bad habit of feeling sorry for herself this time of year, and she needed the reminder that maybe Kit was right, and things were not as terrible as they seemed. Yes, she was still stuck in Northbury with hardly a penny to her name. But unlike all the years before, she had knowledge that her father was possibly still alive.

And she now had Kit by her side, which was the most incredible blessing of all.

“Good evening, Miss Liza.” Kit’s low voice sounded behind her, and she turned to him with a smile.

She held out her hand with the intention of pulling him close, but instead he brought her hand to his lips, making her heart skip a beat.

“What finds you sitting here all alone?” he asked.

“I tend to come watch the sunset on Christmas each year, just for a few moments. I always remember that last Christmas with my family, and I

would mostly count another year gone by without them. But I've also tried to remind myself to be grateful I was no longer in my uncle's clutches, that I have a home with the Hills. Only this year, I have a great deal to be thankful for." Eleanor squeezed his hand in hers, and he nodded, brushing his finger over the birthmark in return.

"I feel the same," he said in a low gravelly tone. "But there is actually even more than you know."

"More?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

Kit reached in his pocket and pulled out a folded paper. "This is a letter from my mother."

Eleanor's heart skipped a beat and she gasped.

"She does not know where your father is, but they have been in touch, and she gave me the direction of his solicitor in London."

Hot tears burned in her eyes. "We found him?"

Kit nodded. "We found him."

Eleanor's pursed her lips, unable to stay the wave of emotions that overwhelmed her. She leaned into Kit's arms as tears streamed down her cheeks, his hand warm and firm against her back. All her desperate longing and pleading, daring to hope, had resulted in this last glowing piece of information. They might not have him yet, but almost. Almost.

Once she had calmed, Kit led her to sit in a chair and took the seat next to her.

"I can't believe it," she whispered, refusing to let go of his hand.

"Now the question is, what do you want to do now?" he asked gently.

"I hardly know. My first inclination is to run to him immediately, but that seems unreasonable," she said with a light chuckle, wiping at her eyes.

"You could write to him, but we have been stuck waiting on quite a few letters recently."

She nodded. "I have not yet been able to send the ones I intended for Leicestershire, but perhaps they're no longer needed."

“I think it would be best to go to him. Would you want to take the next southbound mail coach?”

“Well, perhaps not the next one. Maybe after the new year. I should like to have a proper goodbye with the Hills.”

He nodded. “Very well. We’ll put you on the first mail coach in the new year.”

Eleanor froze. “Me? Alone? What of you?”

Kit gave her a sad smile. “It is not wise for us to travel together as we are, for propriety’s sake. And right now, I think I only have enough money for one passenger. I need to make sure I can pay what is owed to my valet and to the Hills.”

She cringed, knowing he was right. “Couldn’t you just send them the funds after you arrive in London?”

He shook his head. “I cannot ask them to make such a sacrifice. It is more important that you be reunited with your father, and I will come to you when I can.”

“But I do not want to be parted from you.” Eleanor did not want to think of being in London without him, not knowing her uncle could be around any corner.

“Nor I you,” he said, looking down at their intertwined hands. “There is one other option.” His voice was hesitant, and Eleanor waited on bated breath. “It would be that we marry here in Northbury.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Marry here?” Eleanor blinked repeatedly, pressing a hand to her stomach against the butterflies that had burst into life. She swallowed the lump in her throat. “What are you... do you mean, right now?”

Kit chuckled. “Do not fret, my dear. This is not a proposal of marriage, only the promise of one. Someday soon.” He leaned toward her, his eyes bearing the happiest sparkle. “For I do wish to marry you, Eleanor.”

Her lips parted in the smallest gasp, heart racing as she met his direct

gaze, becoming lost in the hazy blue of his eyes. His words, his intent, and the sound of her name, all settled over her, confirming her desire to spend the rest of her life with him.

Unable to keep from grinning, she nodded emphatically for him to continue.

“However, I am certain you would want your father to be present for your wedding.”

She swallowed hard, accepting the reality of his words. “Of course. You are right.”

Loud chatter sounded in the parlor, which meant the guests would be readying for bed.

Kit stood and pulled Eleanor to her feet. “Then we are in agreement. I would very much like to secure your father’s approval beforehand as well. Just to ensure there’s no misunderstanding.”

“What could be misunderstood?”

Kit gave a forced smile. “Once the two of you are reunited, there is the possibility that your father may have someone else in mind for you. That he would prefer you not shackle yourself to a lowly carpenter. And for that I would not blame him. I should not even be offering myself to you at all in my current situation.”

The offensive notion was immediately dismissed as Eleanor reached out, placing her hand gently on his cheek. “Just as you spoke to me about your parents, let me reassure you,” Eleanor said. “My father loves you, Kit. I’m certain of it. He would only ever want the both of us to be happy.”

He reached up for her hand, moving it to his lips, where he kissed the flat of her palm, making her heart flutter. The setting sun was now all but gone, leaving a single candle flickering between them, the only light left in the foyer.

“I know our situations are bleak, but we will find a way, won’t we? Please do not lose heart,” she whispered.

“I lost my heart many years ago, and only recently has it been restored to me.” Kit squeezed her hand. “Hopefully never to be lost again.”

Eleanor nodded, wrapping her arms around his sturdy frame to nestle her face against his chest. He held her tightly, taking a deep breath before kissing the top of her head. After so many years of uncertainty, she was surprised to find that, even in the face of more unknown in the future, she could feel such peace and calm with one person, only she should not have been surprised that it was him.

She pulled back to look up at him, heart pounding as his eyes flittered over her face. Her instincts told her not to be so bold and forthcoming, but she could no keep the truth from him any longer. “I don’t think I said so before, but I want you to know so there is no doubt.” She did not feel the same cowering as before, somehow buoyed by his own words. “I love you, Kit. So fiercely, almost more than anything in this life.”

He smiled softly in return, pressing his hand to her cheek. “I love you, Ellie.” Then he lowered his mouth to cover hers.

Immediately, her breath was stolen away, and Eleanor welcomed the feeling. She slid her arms into his coat, around the back of his shirt, melting against him. His kiss was becoming blissfully familiar, and not just the scent or taste of him, but the feel of his lips. It amazed her that just this simple connection could help her to feel that calm and peace and joy and hope he had spoken of, even without the answers she desired. She had him by her side, and he would help her, no matter what.

CHAPTER 15



Sitting around the fire on the last day of the year, Eleanor's heart felt near to bursting. The mail coach was expected tomorrow, and she was enjoying the last bit of her life in Northbury. Eleanor had been hesitant, but accepted the fact that she would go to London first, and Kit would follow soon after. The Hills had been informed of her departure, and Mrs. Hill had already been tearful multiple times that day, but gave them both her blessing.

Now all the guests had gathered to celebrate the close of the year by singing songs, telling stories, playing games, and eating delicious food. Frank and Alice, despite their best efforts, had fallen asleep together before the large roaring fire, long before the clock would strike midnight. Mr. Haversham had taken in a bit too much punch, so he, too, had fallen asleep in the corner, but the rest of them lingered through the night, having a jolly time. Eleanor took it all in, watching carefully to commit everything to memory. She didn't know just how her life would change in the coming days and weeks, and she didn't want to forget any of her life in Northbury. Especially not the last of it, the happiest bit.

Just before the grandfather clock would strike, Eleanor rushed around the inn with Mrs. Hill, grabbing all the old cloths and rags, anything ruined, to rid the house of bad luck carrying on from the year before. And Eleanor was ready for a clean start, more than ever before.

“Come along,” Mr. Hill called. “Out the front door!”

Everyone cheered with handfuls of items no longer needed as they marched from the parlor to the foyer. With eyes on the clock, they all counted down the last few seconds. Then Mr. Hill whipped the door open, and all the guests of the inn threw out the mess from the year before. The grandfather clock chimed midnight, and everyone hugged and cheered. Eleanor looked around for Kit, and when he met her gaze, he gave her a cheeky wink.

“What the devil is all this?” a shout came from the doorstep.

Eleanor’s hand shot to her mouth, then turning around, she realized there were two gentlemen standing out in the cold.

One man, covered in the torn rags and dirty cloths, had shaggy blond hair and a fierce frown. The man behind him, with dark hair and a beard covering his face, seemed to be stifling laughter.

“Oh, do forgive me, sir,” Mr. Hill immediately turned apologetic. “We were simply celebrating the new year. Out with the old, and in with the new, as they say.”

The grumpy man ripped the items from his sleeve and off his head. “I did not travel all this way to be berated with rubbish and excuses. I’ve come for a room and a good night’s sleep with peace and quiet.”

“Yes, of course. Please come in, sir.” Mr. Hill stepped back to allow the gentlemen in, and all the guests tiptoed back into the parlor. “Do you have any carriage or horses needing tending to?”

Eleanor’s throat tightened. She was not ready to leave yet.

“My transportation is none of your concern,” the man snapped, and Mr. Hill gave him a hesitant eye before proceeding with his new guest.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” the bearded man said to Eleanor. “It seems the many days of travel did not agree with him.”

“Yes, of course, I understand.” She remembered well the many days traveling from London, and it could not be called pleasant by any means.

“It’s the first footing,” Eleanor heard Mrs. Haversham whisper from the

parlor. “They say if the first guest to step into the house in the new year is a darkhaired man, then he brings good luck. But if it’s a fair gentleman, then it’s bad luck. Who came through the door first?”

“I’m afraid I did not have a good look,” Mrs. Brown whispered back, and Eleanor couldn’t help smiling.

“Will you need one room or two?” Mr. Hill asked the gentlemen.

“Just one room with two beds, and be quick about it,” the grouchy one barked.

“Of course, sir. You’ll leave your payment with Mrs. Hill here and I’ll see your luggage upstairs to your room.” Then he turned to Eleanor. “Miss Liza, why don’t you come with me to ready their room?”

The bearded man gave her a smile. “Thank you kindly, Miss Liza.”

Eleanor dipped in a curtsy, then followed Mr. Hill up the stairs. She didn’t much care for the blond gentlemen, but the bearded man seemed pleasant enough, even if his beard was not very fashionable.

By the time they had gotten their new guests settled, everyone else had already gone to bed, but it was just as well. The new year would start fresh and new and beautiful tomorrow.



Eleanor had never taken herself as one to be superstitious or to follow traditions exactly, but on the morning of the first day of the year, there was one thing she especially wanted to do. Ever since arriving in Northbury, Mrs. Hill had always encouraged Eleanor to go “cream the well,” or be the first to draw water from the well on the first day of the year. It was believed that whichever young woman could secure the water and have her true love drink it, that marriage would surely follow. Well, Eleanor never had a true love to drink the water before, but she did now. And it might be a silly tradition, but she wanted Kit to drink the chilly well water anyway.

With the sky barely lighting with creamy whites and oranges of morning, Eleanor smiled as she walked through the trodden-down snow of the main street in the village, thinking of what her future would hold. She would be reunited with her father soon, but at the expense of being parted from Kit for a time, and his heart-stopping kisses. She would have to get one final kiss before the mail coach departed.

Eleanor arrived at the well close to the center of the village, which was entirely still and quiet in the early morning. The stones of the well were frigid cold but thankfully not covered in new snow. Moving the latch, she rolled the bucket down the well.

“Would you look who it is?” A man’s voice sounded behind her, making Eleanor jump, and the well shaft slipped from her hands.

But as she turned, the well was forgotten entirely. For the two guests from the night before stood leaning beside the front door of the village hotel. A carriage was poised just by the entrance; one she had hoped never to see again.

And her Uncle Isaac stepped out.

“No,” Eleanor breathed, blackest dread settling in her stomach.

“Is this where you’ve been hiding, girl?” the old man barked. “Dressed as a maid, working at an inn, of all places?”

“I knew it was her!” the bearded man laughed. “She’s going by the name Miss Liza now, but I never forget her face.”

Eleanor looked again at the bearded man, furious at his betrayal. How did he know her? Was he from Leicestershire? The beard hid his true identity as she sifted through memories of her childhood. Had he been a footman or a stable hand on her father’s property?

“You ridiculous girl!” Uncle Isaac shouted, marching up to her. “All this time, you’ve slaved away in this blasted north, when Mr. Fredricks had already offered for you? That would have secured you a wealthy future in his fine house with servants of your own.”

“I would rather die a servant than marry a lecher of a man like him,” Eleanor spat, taking a step back as he approached.

“Well, you’ll die married to a lecher, and I’ll see his fortune safely tucked into my pocket. Now, come along.”

Eleanor tried to avoid him, but Uncle Isaac was a large man, and his hand claimed her wrist with ease, pulling her toward the carriage.

“Take your hand off me!” Eleanor struggled against him, but it was no good. The man’s grip was a vice. “You should never grab a lady by the arm like that.”

She said the familiar words to give herself strength, but Uncle Isaac threw his head back in coarse laughter. “Well, good thing you’re not a lady, are you? You’re nothing more than a little brat who should have known better than to run off all those years ago. Not to worry, foolish girl. I’ll still see you married off if it’s the last thing I do.”

Any hope she’d previously harbored disappeared and in its place was immediately filled with the darkest fear.

CHAPTER 16



Christopher laid back with one hand behind his head, unable to clear the smile from his face. How his life had changed for the better since arriving in Northbury could baffle anyone, nor would they believe him. He had written off any chance of a wealthy marriage or helping his parents improve their status. He was stuck in a small northern village without much money to his name. And yet, he felt the luckiest man alive. He had the promise of the woman who loved him, and though she would be leaving soon, it was only a matter of time before he would rejoin her in London.

He dressed quickly, leaving Patrick to continue sleeping, and hurried downstairs. The parlor smelled of breakfast, but the room was still empty, so he ventured into the kitchen, only to find Mrs. Hill alone. “Good morning.”

She looked up and grinned. “Happy new year to you, Mr. Booth. Are you looking for Miss Liza?”

Christopher flushed. “Am I too obvious?”

“Only to me,” she said with a wink. “She’s gone to the well to fetch some water. Though I expected her back by now.”

“Shall I go fetch her instead? Where is the well?”

“Farther into the village up the main road, close to the Northbury Hotel.”

Christopher walked through the inn and out the front door. He saw the well Mrs. Hill spoke of, but not a soul stood nearby. The village was still

quiet with sleep, only a few candles dancing in the windows, so he returned to the kitchen.

“I cannot see her from here. Has she not returned?”

Mrs. Hill looked around the kitchen. “She normally brings me the bucket right away.” She looked out onto the empty back steps. “Frank, will you run and see if Miss Liza is in her room, dear?” The boy gladly took a break from cleaning and exited the kitchen.

“She’s not normally one to go walking around on her own. She stays close to the inn, as you might imagine.”

“Of course,” Christopher said, but that didn’t settle the worry in his stomach. He didn’t want to think the worst, but where could she have gone?

“She’s not upstairs, Mama,” Frank said when he returned.

“Who’s not upstairs?” asked Mr. Hill as he came in from the barn.

“Have you seen Miss Liza this morning?” his wife asked, and the man shook his head.

“Oh, dear. I think she might be missing.” Then she turned to Christopher. “She wouldn’t take off on her own, would she? Would she have left on the mail coach already?”

Christopher shook his head. “I hadn’t heard anything arrive yet.”

Mrs. Hill turned to her husband. “Why do you make such a face?”

His lips were pursed, jaw clenched. “Those two men who came in last night checked out early this morning, even before dawn. I asked if they wanted to wait for the mail coach, and they said they had their own affairs. Very tight-lipped pair, they were. Rather suspicious, now that I think back on it.”

Christopher’s heart sank. “What should we do?”

Mrs. Hill rushed to pat her husband’s arm. “The well is right in front of the hotel. Go ask Amos if he saw anything suspicious this morning.”

“The hotel owner?” Christopher asked.

Mr. Hill nodded, and Christopher quickly followed him out the front

door.

They hurried down the quiet snow-ridden street, and when they arrived before Northbury Hotel, Christopher couldn't help examining every nearby alley as Mr. Hill knocked on the door.

An elderly gentleman opened the door. "Ah, good morning, Roger."

"Amos, I think our maid Liza is missing. Have you seen her this morning? Or did you notice any unscrupulous figures lingering around the well?"

The poor man's features fell. "Oh, I think I did. Well, I had one new guest arrive last night. He was terrible company. Tried to leave this morning without paying, shouting about some kind of mistreatment, but when I threatened to get the constable, he paid up and left."

Christopher's stomach twisted with worry. He didn't like the sound of that at all.

"And you didn't see El... Miss Liza?"

Amos shook his head. "I heard some commotion outside by the well after he left and saw him enter a private carriage with two other men, neither looking very respectable, but did not catch any glimpse of Miss Liza."

"What was the man's name?" Christopher asked, terrified of the answer.

"Well, I remember more the patron he kept shouting about, how a Mr. Fredricks would hear about his mistreatment, but let me check the ledger here..."

The name tickled a memory, but Christopher couldn't quite place it.

"Ah, here it is," Amos said. "It was an Isaac Oldfield."

Christopher winced and groaned in defeat. He closed his eyes, wanting to sink to his knees in the snow. How had the dastardly man discovered her location? In their attempts to locate her father, had their letters somehow betrayed Eleanor's secret?

"Her uncle?" Mr. Hill asked in a whisper, and Christopher nodded with a frown.

Mr. Hill let out a slew of words not fit for the first day of the year, which should have been full of hope and promise. Instead, the day was filled with uncertainty and dread.

“If any of those fellows return, Amos, you rouse the constable immediately. They’re miscreants of the worst sort.”

“I’m sorry, if I had only known...”

Mr. Hill shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

Christopher looked to the well, not wanting to imagine how they must have abducted her all over again. How frightened she must have been.

“How long ago did they leave?” he asked.

Amos shrugged. “Less than an hour, I believe.”

A rush of urgency filled Christopher’s chest. “Then they can still be caught.”

He turned and ran to the inn, hurrying up the stairs to his room without a word to the anxious Mrs. Hill. Christopher blindly packed his few belongings in his travel bag, rushing until he opened the desk drawer, for he paused over the wallet that held his few remaining coins and banknotes.

“What the devil are you doing?” Patrick asked, sitting upright in his bed.

Christopher hesitated, already frazzled and unable to explain. “Miss Liza has been kidnapped and I must go after her.” He pulled out one bank note and placed it on the desk. “The payment for your services. I’m sorry it cannot be more, but I wish you the best of luck.” Then grabbing his traveling coat from the hook, he ran back down stairs, where both the Hills were waiting.

“You must go after her,” Mrs. Hill wept openly, a handkerchief clutched to her chest.

“Of course.” Christopher nodded firmly. “You still have a horse I can use?”

Mr. Hill nodded, leading him toward the barn.

The wallet’s existence was now heavy in Christopher’s hand. Again, he was conflicted about how to do the right thing. If Eleanor had been taken,

there was no longer a need to pay for her passage, and he could leave Northbury with a clean slate. This couple deserved everything for the many years of caring for Eleanor. He couldn't leave them empty handed now.

"Here." He put a hand on Mr. Hill's shoulder and held out the wallet.

The man narrowed his brow. "No, lad."

"It won't cover every night I've stayed, but it's all I have, and I'll send the rest when I can. I cannot leave without paying for—"

Mrs. Hill swatted at his hand, refusing his offer. "You'll need that money until you find her. And don't you dare let them get away."

"Do not worry over such things now." Mr. Hill tucked the wallet back into Christopher's coat pocket. "It's hardly your fault getting snowed in here, and I cannot help but be grateful it was you who came, helping our girl have a chance to get her father back."

Christopher nodded in acceptance as Mr. Hill quickly saddled a horse. Mrs. Hill returned from the kitchen and tied on a saddle bag, likely filled with whatever food could be spared.

"When you reach the next village," Mr. Hill explained, "The inn there should have a horse you can change out. I just hope you'll catch up to them before long."

Mrs. Hill placed a hand on Christopher's arm, her eyes filled with tears as she tied a scarf around his neck. "I can't ask you to bring her back to us, but please see that she's safe. And write to us with word as soon as you can."

"I will, I promise." Christopher offered her a brief hug of comfort, and he shook Mr. Hill's hand, then seated himself on the saddle.

"Don't give up," Mr. Hill said through clenched teeth. "She needs you now more than ever."

Christopher squared his shoulders in determination. "I already lost her once. I can't lose her again."

Then once the barn doors opened, he led the horse to the main road and took off into the cold January air. He had been robbed of starting the year

with the woman he loved, and he wasn't going to stop until she was back in his arms for good.

CHAPTER 17



*E*leanor had cried and screamed all she could for days, but now there was no strength left in her. She sat on the floor of a bedroom, staring at the cream walls and floral bedding, and leaned against the wall in defeat. She had been confined to a room that was clean and comfortable, in the townhouse that her uncle had secured in the heart of London, but she could not escape. She could barely see the light of day out of her window. Food was delivered to her door every so often, so she was not living in lack of anything, except for freedom. She was imprisoned, just as she had been before.

When she had been so close to finding her father.

She closed her eyes against the burn of tears, turning her head away from the thought. It hurt to linger on such possibilities now. She hated to think that Christopher had been wrong after all. About hope and fate, and how difficulties were not guaranteed... maybe not in his life, but most certainly in hers. She had allowed herself to hope, to dream of being free, and now she was paying the price for that optimism. Her heart broke all over again from being separated. Kit would have no way to find her, and she had no way to reach him or anyone else. Even if he did come back to London, it would be too late.

A knock sounded at the door, and her uncle appeared holding a tray of food. "Eat. You'll need your strength for the Twelfth Night masque this

evening.”

Eleanor shook her head lightly. “I will not.”

Uncle Isaac all but dropped the tray on the side table by the doorway. “You have no choice in the matter. The maid will come up to help you dress at four o’clock, and you will not be difficult about it. You must be seen with Mr. Fredricks in public, then we will announce your engagement and start the reading of the banns on Sunday.”

She did not respond or stand or move.

“You will do as I say. I cannot help what occurred after you ran away, but I am doing this for your own good. I am still your legal guardian.”

“Ha! You are doing this for *your* own good, to see your own pockets lined with Mr. Fredrick’s wealth when the old man dies.” Eleanor stood, shaking her head in derision at him. “And I dare you to show me the legalities of your guardianship.”

He had the decency to flush, but he stood his ground. “The man’s wealth will do us both good. He’s taken a fancy to you. Why do you not just accept that luck is on your side?”

“Why do *you* not just leave me alone? I was on the verge of being happy for once! I would have been happier in poverty than I would be married to the likes of him.” Eleanor folded her arms. “But no, instead I have to be a pawn in your search for vanity and wealth. It is not luck or money I want, but peace. Away from you.”

“These are mighty words coming from an orphan, spoken to the man who looked after you for years and found you an exceptional match.”

“Exceptional meaning money and connections, which is all you care about. And why don’t you admit the truth? I’m not an orphan.”

His eyes grew large, but Eleanor continued on.

“You stole a girl away from her only family while her father was still yet living. And why? Because you’re a selfish coward.”

Uncle Isaac glowered, raising the flat of his hand in the air. Eleanor

closed her eyes and braced herself for the blow, but it never came.

“I’ll not harm you on account of my sister, but you have her cheek, which was one of her more disappointing attributes.”

Eleanor prided herself to know she took after her mother in such a way, and it made her brave. She leveled her gaze at him. “How could you do it? Separating me from my only family?”

He raised his chin in defiance. “I told my sister she could do better than your merchant father, but she married for love, like the fool she was. And he always said they would someday rise in status and connection, promised her a life of wealth in the future, but she died in the slums by his side.”

“Our village in Leicestershire can hardly be considered the slums,” Eleanor countered, but he just waved her off.

“So if he wasn’t going to bring wealth and status to our family, then it was up to me. Yes, I took you from your father, but only to give you a better life. To bring some semblance of honor to our family, and see you married to a proper gentleman.”

“But why go to such desperate measures?” Eleanor dropped her hands in exasperation. “Why bring me into it at all? You could just marry a wealthy woman yourself and let me be!”

“You think I haven’t already attempted that?” he growled. “No woman wants an old man with no money. It’s much easier to find a match for a young beauty like you.”

Eleanor shivered, thinking of the decrepit Mr. Fredricks. “How did you even find me again after all this time? Was it that bearded man’s doing?”

“It hardly matters now.”

“It matters to me!” she said with a raised voice. She needed the whole truth. “Tell me.”

Uncle Isaac sighed. “His father was the gardener of your father’s house. I paid him to tell me of any changes on the property. After the house was sold, and after you ran away, I told him to stay, to keep open eyes and ears on any

news. And the new owner must have gossiped about your letter, making it easy for me to track you down.”

Eleanor placed a hand on her stomach in an attempt to stay the sickening swirl. “You’re a despicable man. I cannot bear the sight of you.”

“You’ll think differently when you’re a married woman living in luxury. Now eat. And be ready when the maid comes.” He stormed to the door but paused before leaving. Turning to her with a glare in his eyes, he said, “Do not fight me, Eleanor, or there will be consequences.”



Eleanor did eat, only because her stomach grumbled at the sight of the food, and she knew she would not survive the night without it. And she did not fight the maid, for it was not the poor girl’s fault. She had merely been doing her job. But it didn’t make Eleanor any more willing to participate in what would come after.

She had been dressed in elegance with a dark purple gown, long gloves, and a glittering crown set atop her brown curls. The message could not be missed, for when midnight struck and masks were removed, everyone would believe that this penniless girl was a woman of wealth and substance. Announcing an engagement to Mr. Fredricks would not appear out of place.

The thought made her want to retch.

When Mr. Fredricks sent his carriage to deliver her and Uncle Isaac to the masquerade, Eleanor went silently, without meeting his eyes or answering his questions. She greeted Mr. Fredricks when he entered, but could not offer more than that, even with his lingering gaze and flowery praise. She only wanted the night to be over so she could return to her solitude and misery.

They arrived at the Argyll Rooms long after the sun had set, and they were already full nearly to the brim with guests. Men and women were all well-dressed and masked, some with full face coverings, some half covered,

and some with feather masks that did nothing to hide their identity. The decorations included low hanging chandeliers and hot-box flowers adorning the walls, accompanied by cheery music coming from an orchestra at the head of the room. A sea of masked guests filled the room with dancing and frivolity, but Eleanor sought for none of it.

For some reason, Eleanor continuously felt a pair of eyes on her, as if someone was watching her. She was certain she did not stand out, for anyone would appear the same as the next. But any time she turned, all the guests seemed otherwise occupied with each other. Except in one instance, one man stood by an upstairs pillar, dressed in all black, including a domino mask. She careened her neck to get a better look at him, but just as the man disappeared into the crowd, Uncle Isaac grasped her wrist.

“Do not disappear, my dear,” he said, and Eleanor was once again filled with hatred for him.

“Might we find some refreshment?” she asked in a light tone. “I’m feeling rather parched.”

“Yes, indeed,” Mr. Fredricks agreed. “Come, let us find some drinks.”

They pushed through the crowd toward a table with a punch bowl and a large cake at the center, and Eleanor did not care for any of it, she simply took a sip of her drink.

“How dare you!”

The booming sound of a man’s voice made Eleanor turn as the room turned quiet. Even the orchestra fiddled to a stop as the man in black stepped forward, accompanied by a younger gentleman in a simple mask. Eleanor’s heart skittered to a stop, for she would recognize those eyes, that jawline, anywhere.

Was this her Kit? Had he found her again? But then who was the man beside him?

Taking a closer look, Eleanor realized the man in black was older, tall and slender, and still held a familiar presence that filled her with a rush of

immediate relief.

“Father?” she whispered, her eyes burning with tears.

He pulled the mask from his face, and Eleanor’s hands rushed to her mouth as her father stepped forward, grabbing Uncle Isaac by the lapels.

“I do say, unhand me, sir!” Uncle Isaac sputtered, pushing against him. But when he looked up in recognition, his protests froze. “Walter...”

Eleanor took a step toward him, but Mr. Fredrick’s cold hands grasped her wrist.

“You despicable lout,” Father said, drawing back to punch Uncle Isaac in the face.

A forming crowd gasped as Uncle Isaac fell to the ground with a grunt. He put a hand to his face and tried to stand. “Walter, wait, please. You must let me explain.”

“I must do nothing.” Mr. Grant whispered fiercely. “And you can explain to the magistrate how you stole my daughter from me the very night my wife died.”

Gasps of shock and outrage filled the room.

“But it was... you were grieving and not in your right mind—” Uncle Isaac sputtered.

“Were you in your right mind when you tried to marry off my daughter while telling her I was dead? Her actual father?”

The *oohs* and *ahhs* from the crowd made it seem like they could have been at the theater, and perhaps they all thought this part of some of the evening’s entertainment, but it was very real.

Father ripped off Uncle Isaac’s mask, throwing it on the ground. “You are a thief and a fraud, and you have ruined years of my life, along with hers.” Again he picked him up by the lapels, just as a pair of policemen appeared behind him. “The Bow Street Runners can take you away, and may you rot in prison for all you’ve done.”

Uncle Isaac said nothing else, simply hung his head as the crowd parted

for his retreat, and the authorities escorted him away.

Eleanor moved toward her father, but Mr. Fredricks stopped her again. “You belong to me,” he spat.

In an instant, Kit appeared by her side, taking him by the arm. “How dare you grab a lady by the arm like that. Are you any kind of gentleman at all?”

Mr. Fredrick’s glowered at him but did not release her.

Until Father stepped forward, taking her by the other hand. “Sir, any agreement you have with him is null and void, as he has no legal guardianship over my daughter, for I am very much living. You will release her hand, or I will send you out with that bag of filth. Should you like an escort as well?”

Mr. Fredrick’s growled, and upon releasing her hand, Eleanor nearly leapt toward her father.

“My girl,” Father said, his hands securely on her shoulders. “Let me look at you.”

Eleanor removed her mask, emotions thick in her throat as she stepped toward him. He had grown more wrinkled and tired with age, but the love in his eyes had not changed, even after all their years apart. His familiar touch cradled her face, and he gave her a broken smile.

“I never gave up,” he said, tears openly streaming down his face. “I never stopped looking for you.”

“Oh, Father,” she said, throwing herself into his fierce embrace.

She wept against his chest, a bittersweet release of all she had endured over the years, and the relief of her struggles and difficulties finally coming to an end.

There was a light applause around the room before the orchestra roused their instruments again. Remembering where they stood, Eleanor pulled back and wiped at her eyes. “But how did you find me? How did you know I’d be here?”

“It was Christopher...” Father whirled around. “Where has that boy

gone?”

Eleanor stiffened, urgently searching around the room for Kit. But the crowd had dispersed and the dancing reconvened. Had he gone after Mr. Fredricks?

“It’s all because of him. He followed you from Northbury after you’d been taken, then he found my solicitor’s office, and refused to leave until I arrived. It was simultaneously the most devastating and delightful news I had ever received; that you had been taken again, but that you were alive. Tracking your uncle had always been difficult but following Mr. Fredricks made it easy to find you.” Father placed a hand on her shoulder. “How grateful I am that Christopher found you first.”

Eleanor’s chin wavered, for she was also eternally grateful. She had her father back because of Kit. But where had he gone? She needed him too.

“Come, let me take you home,” Father said. “And don’t worry, I’ll get that boy back. I’ll never be able to repay him for restoring you to me.”

CHAPTER 18



Eleanor looked at her reflection, the woman there nearly unrecognizable. Her new maid had come in and helped her dress in a lovely dark green gown, done up her hair in a simple coif, and placed dainty jewelry around her neck. Eleanor looked nothing like Miss Liza, nor was she the exaggerated princess that Uncle Isaac had created either. Instead, she looked just like a gentleman's daughter. It was every bit the woman she thought she'd never have the chance to be, and yet, she had accomplished it. Finding her father again had been the most joyous reunion, and seeing her uncle receive justice filled her with innate satisfaction. Everything was as it should be.

Except for one thing.

She had settled into her father's home, which was much finer than Uncle Isaac's townhouse. She had learned of his successful investments and expanded business since she'd been gone, making him the wealthy merchant he had always hoped to become. She was grateful that, even though the years apart had been emotionally difficult, at least he had not struggled financially.

The day after the masque, her first priority had been to send word to the Hills so they would know she was all right. And she could not help worrying about Kit, but her father had already sent requests to find him, so she did not wish to bombard him.

There was light snow falling outside on the streets of London. It seemed like nothing in comparison to the snow that fell in Northbury, and yet somehow it left her feeling that much more depressed. The more she examined her thoughts, she realized she was still scared to hope. She had finally been delivered, and she didn't dare to dream for anything more than she already had for fear of what might happen.

A knock sounded at her bedroom door, and this time, she was not filled with dread. "Yes?"

The door opened and her father appeared, tall and handsome and gray, but happiness filled his eyes as he set his eyes on her. "I shall never tire of seeing you on the other side of the door, my dear."

Eleanor could not stop her grin. "I agree, I'm always happy to see you." She stood and linked her arm with his. "Are we ready for dinner?"

"Indeed, we are. Though I have a surprise for you."

"Is it raspberry tart?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

He laughed, and the sound warmed Eleanor's heart. "No, it's a little more than that."

Once they reached the top of the stairs, she looked down into the foyer, expecting it to be empty, but instead she was greeted by three different smiles. Mr. and Mrs. Booth, who had both grown older in the years she'd been gone, still had nothing but love in their eyes as they looked up at her. And then in a moment that stole her breath away, her beloved Kit stood behind them, dressed in a fine suit and cravat, hands folded in front of him, as if waiting patiently for her.

Eleanor's legs felt weak as she descended the stairs, wrapping each of his parents in a warm embrace. And when it came time to greet Kit, she suddenly felt shaky and nervous, as if he were nothing more than a figment of her imagination.

"Are you real?" she asked in a wavering voice, pressing her gloved hand to his cheek. "Are you truly here?"

Kit nodded, taking her hand, and kissing the back of it. "I am."

An overwhelming relief settled over her, and she leaned into him, melting against his chest. "I thought I had lost you."

His arms wrapped securely around her back for a brief moment, and she relished the warmth, the knowledge of having him close again. "No, you will always have me," he whispered.

The sound of Mr. Booth clearing his throat reminded Eleanor it was just not she and Kit alone in the world, and she broke away with a bashful smile. "What an excellent surprise, Father. I never would have imagined... what a joyous occasion that we are all together again."

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, though she knew it was simply love overpouring from her heart. Kit held out a handkerchief to her. She thanked him and pressed it to her eyes tenderly, but something about the stitching felt familiar in her hand. She pulled it back and gasped, immediately recognizing the orange flowers and handstitched initials in the thin fabric.

"Is this...?" she asked looking up at Kit.

He nodded with a small smile. "You did tell me to use it every day, didn't you?"

Eleanor laughed with delight, and unable maintain her tears any longer, she let them spill over her cheeks. "Please forgive me. It's only... I am just so pleased all of you are here, and I have not felt such happiness for a very long time."

"Come, let us eat before the food gets cold," Father said, ushering his guests into the dining room.

Without releasing Kit's hand, Eleanor took her seat and ensured he was seated next to her. The first course of soup was served, and a delightful dinner conversation took over. Eleanor smiled and tried to join in the discussion, but she wasn't hungry. How could she eat when the love of her life had been returned to her side? There was one question still burning in Eleanor's mind, one that only Kit could answer.

The dinner continued in a pleasant and delicious fashion, until they all retired to the drawing room around the fireplace. The January weather had grown relentless, but somehow surrounded by her father and friends, she did not feel the cold or the dreariness of winter anymore.

Eleanor sat by Kit on the sofa, sidling up next to him as close as she could without drawing attention, but their parents occupied armchairs to carry on their conversation and did not pay them any mind.

“Will you tell me everything?” she asked, linking her arm in his. “All that happened since that first day of the year.”

Kit nodded with a sigh. “I will tell you everything, but first, let me look at you.” He leaned back a bit and brought up his hand to brush his fingers over her cheek. “How I have missed this face. This woman.”

Eleanor’s heart skipped a beat at his words. She understood that feeling well. “I worried about you so. What you must have thought, what you had done. We had discussed such plans, only for me to disappear all over again.”

“No need to think more on it,” he said in a low voice. “The time apart is over, and that man can never take you again. Never hurt you again. You’ve been reunited with your father once and for all.”

“Because of you. You saved me again, just as you always have.” She reached for his hand. “Only why did you leave?”

Kit sighed, looking up at her with desperate love in his eyes. “I wanted you to have time with your father. The two of you had been needlessly separated for so long, and you deserved time together alone.”

Eleanor’s heart raced. “Then you have not given me up?”

“Oh, Ellie.” Kit ran his fingers through his hair, then stood, taking her hand and leading her to the side of the room for some privacy. “I will never give up on you. You are all I have ever wanted.”

He paused, and she waited for the rest of what he would say.

“But you know I am still a carpenter, near penniless. I have nothing to offer you, and you deserve better than me. I know that. Your father knows

that. And he just barely got you back. I cannot take you away from him so soon.”

Eleanor clenched her jaw and watched as Kit’s face shifted from conflict to understanding to resolve, and she hoped whatever conclusion he reached would include her in it.

“But I will ask for his blessing, though it may take some time. And I will ask you first—”

Unable to wait a second longer, she closed the distance between them and pressed her lips to his. She lingered there, relishing finally having him close enough to touch, and determined not to let him go again.

She pulled back, her eyes fluttering open with a dreamy sigh, and she whispered, “Yes.”

Kit chuckled. “I haven’t even asked yet.”

“Then ask!”

His thumb brushed across her cheek as he smiled. “Will you marry me, Ellie?”

“Yes!” It came out in a squeak, and perhaps louder than she’d intended, but they both laughed, and sealed their promise with another kiss, unable to maintain their happiness.

“Now what goes on here?”

Father’s voice behind them immediately brought them apart. He didn’t bear a look of anger or concern, but more of amusement.

Eleanor was certain she heard Kit gulp as he straightened his shoulders. “Mr. Grant, I know she was only just returned to you, so I don’t intend to... right away, but when the time comes, I should like to ask you a question.”

“Don’t fret so, my boy. Of course, I approve.” Father patted a hand firmly on Kit’s shoulder. “Having restored my daughter to me does come with a reward for your efforts. Ellie needn’t ask for my permission, for you already have it. You have my blessing, my home should you need it, her dowry which was secured long ago, and my daughter, whom I love more than my

own life. You have always been the one thing to make her happy, ever since you were children, and I cannot stand in the way of that now.”

Eleanor swallowed a lump of emotion in her throat. “Thank you, Father.”

Then nearly bursting with joy, she wrapped her arms around Kit’s neck, without any intention of ever letting go.

EPILOGUE



CHRISTMAS EVE, 1813

*R*aucous laughter filled the drawing room, but this time, Christopher welcomed it. Once again settled in Leicestershire, the Christmas Eve party was at the new estate that Mr. Grant had purchased, only this time it included a new guest, that being Mrs. Henrietta Smith, the kind woman who had taken the time to respond to Eleanor's letter. Upon returning to the village, she had contacted them immediately and informed them she had fired the scoundrel who had snooped in her belongings, but it had been too late to be of any help. She had become a dear friend of the family. Her laughter could almost be compared to the sound a happy dog made, but it did not grate on his nerves. Indeed, he was beyond grateful for anyone who contributed to finding an answer for Eleanor and helped them be together.

With dinner already finished, it was time for games and conversation. But Christopher and Eleanor were once again the youngest at the party. And just as before, he wanted to pull her away into the library, though this time for an entirely different reason.

"What's on your mind?" Eleanor whispered, leaning in from beside him on the settee.

“I think I have something I’d like to give you,” he said, eyes lingering dangerously on her lips. “But it’s unfortunately in another room.”

“Ah, it’s just as well. I also have something I’d like to give you. Should we see ourselves out?” Her brown eyes sparkled with a lovely adoration, and he hoped it never went away.

Standing and clearing his throat, he announced, “If you’ll excuse us, I need to kidnap my wife for just a moment.”

They were waved off without much fuss, and Eleanor hooked her hand in his arm. “Though I so love being called your wife, I think you could have chosen a different term aside from kidnapping.”

Christopher laughed. “Very well. I just need to borrow my wife.”

They walked through the dimly lit corridor until they arrived at the library doors. Christopher pulled them open and bowed graciously as Eleanor entered before shutting the doors behind them.

This library had become one of Christopher’s favorite rooms on the estate. Mr. Grant had hired Christopher’s father to do some carving and woodwork to repair the older elements, like the shelves and cabinet doors. Once word had traveled about the incredible talent of the carpenter, it had restored his good name, and saved his business, much to everyone’s joy. But that wasn’t what Christopher was going to show her.

“Now, what was it you wanted to give me?” he asked, leaning close to her lips.

She grinned but shook her head. “Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

He did as instructed. “Very well, though you know I’m a very impatient man.”

Before another moment had passed, something as light as a feather had been placed in his hands. “What’s this?”

“You can open your eyes now.”

When he did, he found a new handkerchief with fresh stitching of his

initials and flowers.

“I think that old handkerchief has survived long past its expected lifespan, don’t you agree?”

Christopher chuckled. “Thank you for such a beautiful replacement, dear wife. Now this one will be ready for my everyday use.” He tucked it quickly into his coat pocket and took hold of her hands.

This time, Eleanor leaned forward, brushing her nose against his. “Now what did you want to give me?”

Without a word, Christopher turned her around and covered her eyes with his hands. “It’s a surprise, here in this very room. Come, let me show you.”

He moved her around the chairs and bookshelves in the library until he stopped her just before a table and pulled his hands from her eyes.

She looked around the room before finally looking down at the table and gasped. “What is this? A chess set?”

“Yes, but not just any chess set.” He picked up one piece and held it out to her. “Do you remember the night you gave me the handkerchief when we were younger?”

Eleanor nodded. “Of course.”

“This is the present I had intended to give you. I made these chess pieces.”

“You what?” Her eyes grew wide as she took the piece he offered.

All those years ago, his father had taught him to whittle for this specific reason. He had carved every pawn, every knight, down to the king and queen. Each piece had been sanded and smoothed and painted, but they weren’t quite finished by that Christmas Eve. That year she had been taken, so the gift remained ungiven, and Christopher made sure every piece remained safe, just in case. This year, it was finally delivered to its true owner.

Eleanor inspected the pieces, and a rush of self-consciousness washed over Christopher. “They might look a tad rudimentary, so you’ll have to withhold judgment, as they were made by twelve-year-old hands, and it’s

been some fourteen years since then.”

She looked up at him with tears gleaming in her eyes and gently put the piece down. Taking his face in her hands, she spoke in earnest. “I loved that twelve-year-old boy, and now I love the man he has become.” She pressed a solid kiss to his lips. “Thank you for the gift. For holding on to it all these years, and for never giving up on me. For helping me find joy and hope and happiness again.”

Christopher leaned in and kissed her again, offering a silent prayer of gratitude for the very same thing. “You’re welcome, my love. Now I believe the housekeeper had a kissing bough placed somewhere in this house, and we’re going to find it.”

“Is that so?” Eleanor asked with raised eyebrows.

“Indeed. Last year, you and I were deprived of a mistletoe kiss, so we won’t miss out on one this year.”

She grinned, clinging to his arm. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”



Thanks for reading! If you want notifications about future book releases, be sure to sign up for the email newsletter!

[Join Courtney's mailing list](#)

And be sure to check out the other books in this series:

A Snowbound Courtship by Holli Jo Monroe
Snowflakes and Shenanigans by Audra Wells
Secrets in the Snowstorm by Miranda D Nelson
Mischievous for Christmas by Michelle Angus

[Grab them on Amazon!](#)



OTHER BOOKS BY COURTNEY WILLIS

Reluctantly in Love Series - Regency Romance

0 – [Mr. Harrison's Heart](#)

1 – [The Undesirable Duke](#)

2 – [Playing the Scoundrel](#)

3 – [A Gentleman's Wife](#)

[Her Sister's Suitor – novella](#)

Little Creek Series - Western Romance

(This series is on hold until further notice)

- 0 – The Miner's Bride
- 1 – The Cowboy's Girl
- 2 – The Widow's Hope

Stand Alone Titles

The Fisherman's Heart

A Bride for Matthias – The Proxy Bride Series

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Just to touch on a couple historical components, researching for writing Regency novels is always such an exciting and daunting experience. I love learning and sharing all the little details, but I also want to make sure I present a story as accurately as possible. Some of the Christmas details, like making the Christmas pudding, makes me want to try to make one in real life! And some of the other elements are just little tidbits of what the Christmas season used to look like, even if the days do not match up exactly for that year.

For the sake of the story, I did force the travel time of letters in the post. As for the weather component, it was my understanding that such great levels of snow were rare during this time period, even in the northern region, so I hope you were able to read with just a little suspension of disbelief and still able to enjoy the book. Thanks for reading!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This story would not have come about without a slew of helpful people:

Thanks to Holli Jo, Audra, Michelle, and Miranda and for having me in this awesome group. We each had our own struggles pulling together the stories in this series, but it was worth it.

Thanks to my editor Raneé, who helped fix my very messy first draft on a time crunch.

Thanks to my early readers Rachel, Laura, Amanda, and Heidi, all your feedback was invaluable.

Thanks to my ARC team for taking this on last minute, you're all rock stars.

Thanks to my readers, who were always encouraging and patiently waiting for the next book while I took some time off to refill my creative well. I hope there's much more to come after this!

Thanks to my Savior Jesus Christ for supporting me through some difficult months this year, and to my Heavenly Father for allowing me to produce this story on time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Courtney has wanted to be an author since she was young. She loved learning about history and exploring the world, and fell in love with love stories, making it a goal to write romantic adventures for the rest of her life.

She has a degree in Creative Writing and has lived all over the US. She found inspiration for her westerns in the mountains of Utah, and wrote her first Regency after a study abroad in the UK. Today she lives in her home state of sunny Florida.

When she's not writing, Courtney enjoys traveling, baking, reading, being with friends and family, and spending as much time on the beach as possible. More recently, she can be found watching Korean dramas with her chaotic kitty, Stitch.

Courtney loves hearing from fans! You can find her here:

www.courtneywillisbooks.com

info@courtneywillisbooks.com

