



Once Upon a Betrotthal



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CHRISTI ALDWELL

ONCE UPON A
BETROTHAL

By
Christi Caldwell

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Once Upon a Betrothal

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Dedication

To:

My hero, Doug.

My other hero, Rory.

My cheerleader, Reagan.

My comic relief, Riley.

My support-furbaby, Scarlet.

My assistant, Dee Foster.

Paul and the team at BB eBooks.

And last, but **definitely** not least, to Jenn. I'd be lost without
you.

You are my heroes, my cheerleaders, my friends. Your support
is a gift that I will forever be grateful for.

Once Upon a Betrothal is for you. (You know why.)

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Biography

Chapter 1

“The sweeping blast, the sky o’ercast,”

The joyless winter day

Let others fear, to me more dear

Than all the pride of May:

The tempest’s howl, it soothes my soul,

My grief it seems to join;

The leafless trees my fancy please,

Their fate resembles mine!

He was going to gnaw the mahogany leg of the buffet, completely off.

Or she.

Miss Elyse Caldecott couldn’t say with any real certainty the gender of the creature making its *latest* meal of yet another piece of the Duchess of Hepplewhite’s furnishings.

At that precise moment, Elyse sat at the head of the dining table which brimmed with a feast better suited a table of twelve, than the table of two that Elyse and her elderly aunt *and* employer, Aunt Hester, Duchess of Hepplewhite, made up.

All the while her aunt devoured her meal like it was the first—and last—she’d ever take, Elyse, ignored her own plate of roasted pheasant and flummery jellies.

Instead, Elyse devoted her wary attention to the little beastie.

The duchess wrested a leg from the cooked poultry on her dish. "...adorable creature, is he not?" Her Grace said, around the large bite she took.

Elyse bit the inside of her cheek to keep from sharing she'd a greater affinity for the cooked creature on her plate. As it was, the vexatious *living* one had made a monster of himself since their neighbor's footman arrived earlier in the week with a covered basket, and the rat-like creature inside.

From over the bone she'd pulled nearly clean, Aunt Hester frowned. "Never tell me you don't find him a most adorable fellow?"

Said *adorable fellow* chose that moment to quit his meal of the buffet leg and waddle over to Elyse. He sank beside her and looked up with the biggest, cutest eyes and littlest nose.

She sighed. "Aww. You really are swee—"

The guinea pig commenced chewing on the leg of Elyse's mahogany seat.

Elyse narrowed her eyes. *A devil*, she silently amended.

Lady Hester gave a pleased little nod, took another, this time, smaller bite of her chicken. "I knew you'd come around." She waved her bone Elyse's way. "You've always been a sensible gel."

She had. Unlike Elyse's late sister, Evie, who had been a romantic dreamer.

Oh, Evie.

It didn't matter how much time went by. The gaping wound left by her sister's death wrenched open all over again.

"Elyse? Elyse?"

From the well of misery, Elyse rose up and found her aunt frowning once more.

"He would, wouldn't he, gel?" Lady Hester pressed.

What had her aunt been talking about?

In her time working with the duchess, Elyse had learned early that the wisest and best, and safest, course was concurrence—always concur.

"Oh, he most certainly would, Aunt Hester," she demurred, picking up a goblet of water, and taking a sip.

The older woman's wrinkled features brightened—for a moment before they again grew troubled. "Perhaps I should make *you* Sir Lancelot's mistress?"

Elyse choked and promptly spewed water.

So that was what she'd been talking about, the bothersome guinea pig that'd been delivered by one of Lady Hester's neighbors, Lord Quimby.

As several footmen raced with napkins to tidy the mess, Elyse struggled to get her paroxysm under control. The last thing she wanted, or needed for that matter, was a small ball of fur with sharp teeth, and a penchant for trouble.

"Taking offense at my choice of words," Lady Hester muttered. She pointed her fork Elyse's way. "You and your

generation, are ever more strait-laced than mine ever was.”

She looked down and Elyse followed the older woman’s stare over to the little ball of fluff and fur perched right next to Elyse’s chair.

Lady Hester’s face softened as it’d never softened for even one single person that Elyse could recall. “Yes, perhaps, the gel has the right of it, little sweetie. You need a mother, not some nasty master or mistress.” She carved a small piece of carrot and dropped it on the pale pink Aubusson carpet below.

Little Sweetie waddled over to the table side offering quick as his corpulent, black-spotted frame would allow, plopped down, and proceeded to nibble away.

“Lord Quimby is so right. Sir Lancelot will make the most splendid present,” Lady Hester mused, as she watched him.

So that was what her aunt had been on about.

This time, with her lesson just learned in speaking too quickly, Elyse made a show of taking a bite of her dinner and chewing. As she did, she carefully picked her words. To suggest her aunt keep the beastie would mean Elyse would be stuck not only sharing a household with the thing but looking after it, as well. However, to express even a smidgeon *too* much affection would see Elyse saddled with it, all the more.

When she’d swallowed her bite, Elyse dabbed her napkin at the corners of her mouth.

“Aunt Hester, Sir Lancelot will make whomever the original recipient you’d decided upon, most fortunate. And,” she added, “given you would only share such a gift with

someone very dear to you, you will also see the tiny fellow in the future.”

“You’re always right, my gel,” Lady Hester praised, her earlier melancholy lifted. “Which is why I shall have you take him on with you for your youngest sister when you go.”

With that sudden disclosure, Elyse’s aunt motioned to the servants and Elyse’s mind spun.

All around her the liveried footmen continued about the casual business of removing plates and clearing the spots.

Which is why I shall have you take him on with you for your youngest sister when you go...

Elyse sat tight-lipped and unmoving.

Her aunt expected an outburst and adamant declination. After all, that was how Elyse had met that same pronouncement, year after year after year.

Elyse had no interest in quitting her post and rushing off to spend the holidays with her family. It wasn’t that she didn’t love her family. She did. Very much so. In her time apart from them, however, she’d established a life for herself.

She followed a rigid and very predictable routine.

In the role she’d assumed as a companion, Elyse would rise before the sun even made its appearance in the eastern sky. After seeing to her daily ablutions, she’d first partake in a cup of tepid tea. From there. Elyse would make her way to Aunt Hester’s noble and well-stuffed library where she’d pull from the shelves the day’s reading material and occupy herself with a book of her own.

Then, the moment her aunt arose—also at the consistent and predictable time of five minutes past eight o’clock—Elyse joined the old, stout-hearted widow in the breakfast room.

From there, Elyse’s day ceased to be hers and instead belonged to Aunt Hester.

Most young women of marriageable age would have railed at the role Elyse had taken on years earlier. As the daughter of a viscount and viscountess, she should be joining in the Season, partaking in waltzes and outings through Hyde Park in the curricule of some dashing gentleman. Or visiting famed French modistes to have extravagant wardrobes of silk and satin dresses and elaborate bonnets designed.

What sane young woman would trade all that grandiosity for the unassuming role of companion to a, more often than not, crotchety aunt?

Elyse.

Elyse happened to be that sane young woman.

Though, in fairness, near or about this very time every winter, Aunt Hester came dangerously close to driving her mad.

When the table had been cleared, and dessert plates set down, and the servants reclaimed their previous posts along the various corners of the room, Elyse laid her palms on either side of her dish. “As much as I would love—”

“You are going,” her aunt interrupted.

“To go,” Elyse continued. “However, I must really insist on *not*.”

The old woman let loose a snort. “If you’d *love* to go, then why would you insist on ‘*not*’.”

Touché.

“I enjoy being with you, Aunt Hester,” she said in tones meant to placate.

“And you don’t enjoy being with your parents and sisters?”

Elyse’s entire body went taut under that casually spoken retort.

There wasn’t anyone she loved more than her sisters. The greatest joy Elyse had ever known had come from being with them. *All of them.* After Evie’s death, however, everything had changed. *Everything.*

She finally found the ability to speak. “Of course, I do. Can it not just be enough that I want to be with you?”

“With *me*?” The elder woman helped herself to a fork, knife, and a bite of her rum cake. “Instead of your own sisters?”

There it was again.

Aunt Hester hadn’t a mean bone in her well-meaning body, and yet, had anyone sought to wound, that’d been just the barb to hurl.

The older woman’s heavily wrinkled, surprisingly deft fingers closed with an impressive alacrity around the head of her gilt cane.

Aunt Hester thumped the bottom hard against the elmwood flooring. “It’s been settled. You’re going, my gel.”

Elyse’s desperation grew. “But...but...you know how much I love Leeds in the winter.”

“*And* you’ll love it still when you return after your visit. Furthermore, the Lake District is beautiful, gel.”

“Interestingly, you made the very same argument last year when I was summoned to Lundy Island,” Elyse muttered.

The duchess bristled. “And didn’t you come back with tales of the grey seals and dolphins you’d seen?”

“Or, Dartmoor, the year before?” Elyse asked, without taking her aunt’s bait.

A telling flush splotched Aunt Hester’s thin, weathered cheeks, but the old woman didn’t miss a beat. “Quite magical I’m told they are, with all their purple flowers.”

“Whomever told you of their magical quality was decidedly not me who visited in the heart of winter, when everything was desolate and barren.”

Aunt Hester wrinkled her nose, but, otherwise, remained uncharacteristically silenced.

Not squandering that advantage, Elyse continued, “Or Brecon Beacons, the year before that.”

Her aunt grunted. “If I’m not mistaken, you regaled me with stories of the long treks you took.”

“In the freezing cold and damp,” Elyse finished the remainder of that description she’d come back with for that

particular leave. Yes, she'd loved those long treks—even as the winter's cold had been enough to cut through her whole body. But she'd never admit as much; especially not now.

Her aunt slid the side of her fork through the delicate-looking rum cake. “Bah, all of England is grey-skied and wet.”

“And there was the time I was sent off to Anglesey.”

The aging duchess didn't miss a beat. “If I'm not mistaken, I believe you said there were breathtaking views.”

Elyse gritted her teeth. For all the ways in which Aunt Hester had begun to show signs of her advancing age, her memory remained sharp as a tack.

Looking over at her aunt serenely eating away at her dessert, Elyse smoothed her palms upon her silk skirts.

“What of the time they summoned me to Broadford?”

Aunt Hester's fork and knife scraped jarringly over her porcelain plate.

Elyse tamped down at the smile fighting for a place on her lips.

Aunt Hester pointed the empty spear of her fork Elyse's way.

“You almost have me with that one,” the duchess grouched. “I still cannot believe your family gallivanted all the way to the *Highlands* for the holidays.”

Elyse kept her lips firmly pressed together. Even as she used that reminder of her travel to Scotland that year to help sway her aunt 'round to the idea of Elyse remaining, the truth

remained, that village along the Broadford Bay, with the snow-covered mountains vivid in the vast horizon had been the only place that she'd not wished to return from.

For, in that remote, wild corner of Skye it'd been as though she'd dwelled in the corner of the world, transported back to distant times, and far away from everything she'd ever known...and everyone she missed.

It is not everyone you miss...

For there was one she missed more than all others. Her mother, father, brother, and two sisters were alive and well, and just knowing she could see them was enough.

But Evie...

Evie she could never see again. For Evie was gone...off to a better place, some had said.

A dull ache settled in Elyse's chest; a tightening that started at the center, and made it so her heart hurt, and the ability to draw a breath proved a painful task.

"Oh, come now, gel," her aunt drawled, thankfully bringing Elyse's agonized remembrances to a screeching halt. "Don't go turning into a water pot. It won't help. I've made up my mind."

It was not an unfamiliar disagreement, but one they had *every single year* since Elyse arrived. Alas, every year her aunt became more determined to send her away.

"But my place is here, Aunt Hester," she spoke with a quiet insistence. Aunt Hester didn't take well to *tearful*

pleading; a detail Elyse had learned in her first year serving as a companion to the duchess.

The silvery-haired matron grunted. “Yes, it is. But if I go, keeping you all to myself when my dear niece and her doting husband wish to see you, then they might decide to snatch you back.”

Frustration built.

“I’m a grown woman, Aunt Hester. They cannot *snatch* me, and I’m certainly old enough to make up my own mind on where and how I spend the holiday season. And I *choose* to spend it with *you*.”

An uncharacteristic tenderness filled the usually gruff duchess’s eyes. She laid a heavily wrinkled palm over Elyse’s.

“Touched as I am, gel, and true as it may be that you’re a grown woman, the fact also remains—you are employed by me.”

Desperation took the place of all Elyse’s earlier annoyance. She knew what was coming. It was no surprise.

“And as such, Elsie...”

Elyse’s gut clenched as it always did at that girlhood moniker only her aunt—and other family members—had used for her.

Elsie. So very close to—

“Are you listening to me, gel?”

“Yes.” *No*.

“There will be plenty of time for you to read to me and... maybe I can even persuade you to play your cello or my pianoforte.”

Another wave of panic hit her. “You said the cello is a scandal,” she reminded, managing to still speak in that calm way.

“Oh, it is.” A twinkle lit Her Grace’s rheumy eyes. “Haven’t you figured out by now, I’m not one to mind a little bit of wicked?” She waggled her slender, silver eyebrows.

Elyse could manage only a wan smile.

“You’ll have yourself a good time and then you’ll return. Just as you always do.”

Just as she always did.

Elyse, however, would rather just always ‘stay’. Here, with Aunt Hester, was comfortable. Here, Elyse very well-knew and understood her role. Here, she wasn’t faced with awkward, stilted conversations with her sisters, brother, and parents.

And whenever her mother jockeyed time alone with Elyse...which she invariably did, there inevitably came even more *uncomfortable* talks. Ones about marriage, and suitors, and having a London Season, and a family of her own. All things Elyse was quite content without.

More than content.

From the corner of her eye, and amidst Elyse’s galloping thoughts, she caught her aunt reaching for her cane.

“They’re trying to marry me off again,” she blurted, effectively keeping Aunt Hester from doing so. “My mother has been writing me letters about the gentleman and his family who’ll be spending the holidays with them.”

“Hmph. Who is *this* one?”

If her aunt knew who’d be in attendance, then maybe she’d spare Elyse from having to go. She pulled her most desperate, and also, most convincing card.

“From what I’ve ascertained...” She let a heavy pause linger, deliberately drawing her aunt in.

Aunt Hester proved as hopeless to resist that morsel as she always did. “Yes,” she urged, leaning in.

“He is of...a criminal background.”

Her Grace’s thin eyebrows climbed to her hairline. “Of criminal background?” she squawked.

Drawing out the moment, Elyse nodded slowly. “A criminal background,” she added, for even better measure.

Information she’d gathered, because when Elyse’s mother had *casually* made mention of the guests who’d be attending, she’d also spent an inordinate number of sentences writing the praises of the one guest—a gentleman—she was most eager and excited for Elyse to meet.

He was dashing and wealthy and handsome and daring.

The daring part had been the part to give Elyse pause, and lead to her research, which had turned up—

“Mr. Broden Burgess.”

“A *mister*?” Aunt Hester’s voice crept up an octave.

And for the horror underlining that query, that form of address may as well have been a greater offense than the earlier detail pertaining to the gentleman’s criminal background.

For a moment, Elyse thought to leave her aunt with that supposition.

“A marquess’s third son,” Elyse finally made herself concede. “Who goes by ‘Mister’.”

Aunt Hester’s surprisingly smooth brow, wrinkled in an instant. “A marquess’s son who prefers to be known as a mere ‘mister’?”

Frowning, the older woman gave her head a shake. “What manner of men are they letting amongst Polite Society these days?”

“The *criminal* sort,” Elyse said, pressing her advantage.

Relief and triumph, those two heady emotions when mixed proved potently powerful. She’d done it! She’d—

Elyse let out a squeal as something scurried over her feet. She glanced down and recalled too late, the beastie her aunt had tasked her with escorting to the Lakes.

“Yet who else would I entrust Sir Lancelot’s care, too? It’s settled, my gel. You’re going.”

It was as settled as it was every year.

The duchess gathered her cane.

A liveried footman took that familiar cue. Rushing over, he drew out the high-back dining chair and made to help the dignified woman to her feet.

Her Grace gave an impatient wave of her hand, brushing off that assistance.

Keeping her gaze stonily forward, Elyse climbed to her feet with all the reluctance of a petulant child. And she didn't care. She resented, that as a fully grown woman, she didn't have freedom over her own decisions or actions. That she could be ordered about as easily by her parents as when she'd been a girl. Only, this time, instead of issuing directives that pertained to lessons and behavior about the dinner table, they related to marriage...and potential husbands.

Aunt Hester settled a palm on her shoulder and gave a light squeeze, that forced Elyse to look at the older woman.

“Perk up, gel. It's but a fortnight, and, with a marquess's son who has a criminal background and insists on being called 'mister', think of all the stories you'll bring back for us to talk about.”

The duchess winked, and then with the *thump-thump-thump* of her cane marking her retreat, all the way from the dining room to the hall, and then, no more, Aunt Hester had gone, with her guinea pig waddling at a like-pace behind her.

Not: 'Aunt Hester's' guinea pig, instead, Elyse's younger sister, Emmy.

Releasing a huff of frustration, Elyse dropped back into her seat, grabbed her fork, and jammed it into her untouched

piece of cake.

She took an enormous bite, and as she chewed, she seethed.

How many times had she been ordered about by her mother and father? Work harder at this lesson. Do not conduct yourself in that manner.

Granted, she'd been a mischievous student who'd delighted in tormenting the stern governesses she and her sisters had been saddled with. And they'd been taking her to task for donning breeches and pretending to be a lad so that she could view a foal being born.

But that was neither here nor there. They'd been directives, nonetheless. Be it as a girl of six or a woman of twenty-six, when it came to her parents' summons, she still answered to them.

At that, they'd see her marry some long-toothed fellow.

It was a sad day, indeed. Elyse's parents had such low expectations for her they'd go out of their way to coordinate an arrangement between Elyse and a man who'd been arrested, tried, impressed, and then who'd *returned* to England, under dubious conditions that his powerful family had managed to make go away.

Elyse steeled her jaw.

She'd go.

She'd attend yet *another* house party where her parents went out of their way to push her at some wretched gentleman,

in the market for a wife, but who'd one peccadillo or another that left him with few prospects other than a spinster daughter.

And then, she'd do what she did after every brief union with her family, held in the form of one winter house party or another—she'd leave and return to her role as companion to her beloved aunt. For the fact remained, her parents might be desperate to see her married and with a family of her own, but Elyse was even more desperate to avoid that fate.

Chapter 2

Lord Broden Burgess had sensed an impending storm.

As a former convict who'd survived transportation to a penal colony, hard labor in Australia, and then a return trip across the Atlantic Ocean, Broden had become adept at predicting looming trouble.

Hurrying through the stone courtyard of the sprawling Mayfair townhouse, bequeathed to Broden by his late aunt, the Viscountess Oxford, Broden had but one thought—run.

His senses had served him well. They were ones his life experiences had sharpened and honed, and it was why Broden hadn't dismissed the frissons of unease that had brought him awake while the sky was still dark, and why he'd hastily pulled on garments—without the help of any valet—and bolted.

He'd made it all the way through his still-quiet household and out the back servant's entrance.

Broden lengthened his stride across the cobblestone courtyard and broke into a near run. The full moon still hung in the dark, clear, morning sky; that perfectly cylindrical orb cast a bright glow and guided Broden's flight, and left him vulnerable, exposed to whoever it was, whatever it was coming for him.

The quick pace he'd set sent the tiniest puffs of white swirling in the crisp morning air. He didn't break stride. The

crunch of gravel, dirt, and rock under his feet, sounded in the air, louder and more damning in the eerie quiet.

His focus and his path remained square on the vast, free-standing stables in the near distance.

Thirty paces away.

Twenty-five paces.

He was there.

So close.

Almost there.

Freedom. So close, he could almost taste it on the keen, crisp winter's air.

At last, Broden reached the front entrance of his stables. Having arrived at his destination without incident, he paused, with his fingers on the handle, and looked behind him, doing a sweep of the courtyard for a hint of an intruder.

Silence proved his only company—at that, a welcome company.

Some of the tension eased from Broden's shoulders. He wasn't, however, so careless as to make such a misstep as returning to the main house. Clasp the iron handle of a monumental oak stable door, he slowly drew the panel open enough to slip through and let himself inside.

The moment he closed the door, a near impenetrable black, inky darkness met him.

Darkness. His one weakness. His greatest of foes.

...he's in here, somewhere...find him...

Sweat slicked Broden's palms, and his belly churned with the same ferocity it had during his days aboard an equally dark prison hulk.

He closed his eyes.

His past, tangled with his present.

In the end, just like before, Broden's moment of weakness proved costly.

There came the soft *click* of the door closing.

Trapped.

Broden's eyes flew open and collided with the tall figure before him. Of a nearly identical height to his own six feet, two inches, but wiry where Broden had the weight of muscle on him. The hard, square jaw with cleft and sharp angular cheeks belonged to a face that may as well have been an identical image—but for the other man's blue eyes. They glittered with a mirth and lightness to match the easy, uncomplicated grin on his lips; all feats Broden was no longer capable of.

Alden Burgess, the Earl of Bective and future Marquess of Dalkeith sent a black eyebrow arcing up. "Hullo, little brother."

Hell and bloody hell.

"What now?" His elder sibling spoke with a joviality better suited to two best friends meeting over drinks at White's or Brooke's. "No words for your favorite brother?"

None that were brotherly in nature. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Yes,” the heir to the family marquise drawled. “Fancy that.” He flicked a piece of lint from his dark wool jacket. “I expect it would have made *more* sense to meet in your office or parlor or library or, for that matter, *any* other room in your household. Alas, it would have required you to, say, receive me whenever I called, one of those times being earlier this afternoon.”

Outside, the wind whistled, a mighty peal that rang with Mother Nature’s traitorous laughter at Alden’s levity.

Not Broden.

In fairness, there’d been a time Broden would have felt the proper shame both that telling gesture and his brother’s words would have roused. But that was a lifetime ago. Back when his brother had been his best friend, and life had been uncomplicated.

At Broden’s silence, Alden winged a dark eyebrow up.

“I’m disappointed,” Alden drawled. “And here I thought, at the *very least*, you’d offer up a: how lovely to see you! Or, ‘what a surprise, but a pleasurable one, finding *you* here’. But still, nothing?”

Still nothing.

For, everything was different now. Absolutely everything.

A man didn’t just get carted off to prison and lose years of his life, only to return as if nothing had happened.

Not when *everything* had happened.

“It was a pleasure meeting up here like this,” Broden said stiffly. “However, if you’ll excuse me, I have business to attend.”

He made to step around Alden’s like-tall frame. His brother instantly matched Broden’s movements, blocking his escape.

“Business?” Alden scoffed. “At *this* hour?”

“Yes. At *this* hour.”

“No, you don’t.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Are you calling me a liar, *Bective*?” Broden used that title his brother had; one Broden had only used when they’d been butting heads and Broden sought to needle him.

Alden revealed no outward indication of upset. If anything, his grin widened all the more.

But then, that tactic Broden just employed had been one he’d used when they’d been mere boys. Now, Alden went only by his title.

“Actually,” Alden said casually. “I am.”

A man—not even a brother—questioned another man’s honor as Alden did now.

Broden narrowed his eyes upon his brother’s easy expression. “Men call men out for having their word questioned.”

“Yes,” the earl allowed. “Big brothers, however, tend to call out younger brothers when they’re lying. Who is your meeting with?”

He’d forgotten how obstinate his brother had been. In their time apart, Alden had become even more so.

“It is not your business,” Broden said frostily.

“Because there *is* no business.”

Damn him. Why wouldn’t he just go?

“I’ve a meeting with my man-of-affairs, Bective. One that I’ll now be late to thanks to—”

“False,” Alden interrupted, with a widening smile. “You have a *woman*-of-affairs; a Mrs. Eve Dabney and she has since left for the countryside with her family to spend the holiday season with the Blacks.”

Broden found himself knocked briefly, off-kilter, by all that—*very accurate*—information his brother was in possession of.

Broden found his footing. “My solicitor—”

“*Also*, false. Your solicitor, Mr. Duncan Everleigh is currently attending a house party hosted by his brother and sister-in-law, the Baron and Baroness Pratt.” Alden stuck a foot out. “Come, I can do this all day.”

And Broden rather suspected he could.

Broden had been well and truly outmaneuvered.

“What is it you want?” he asked quietly, eager to get whatever it was that had sent Alden hounding his door this

past fortnight.

“What?” His elder brother winged a black eyebrow. “No invitation inside for your big brother?”

“We are inside.”

Alden glanced about; his pointed gaze took in the cobbled floor, the hayloft and plastered ceilings overhead, feed racks, and generous stalls. “You are not wrong. However, I did refer to a meeting inside say your *actual* residence.”

“What is it you want, Alden?”

“Oh, very well,” his brother murmured. “Hospitality between family be damned.”

Reaching inside the front of his double-breasted overcoat, Alden withdrew a folded and sealed envelope with Broden’s name scrawled in meticulous letters across the front.

When Broden made no move to take the note, Alden waved the rose-water-scented envelope his way.

“Come,” his brother scoffed. “Surely you don’t intend for me to go back and inform her that you wouldn’t even read her *missive*.”

Her. As in, their mother, the Marchioness of Dalkeith.

“I should have known,” Broden said under his breath.

“Not even some concern? Worry over our dear mama’s health?”

Broden snorted. “She’ll outlive us all.”

“Oh, undoubtedly.”

They shared a smile, the first kindred act between them in a lifetime.

So that was why he'd not been able to just go. Their mother, more determined than Boney had been to take over the world, and the ruthless capability of Attila to get the bloody job done.

Broden's grin faded. Muttering to himself, he yanked the note from his brother's hand, tore the seal, and began to read.

My dear boy,

*First, I love you. That aside, I am **not** happy with you.*

You cannot avoid me. Well, that is, you can, and have been. But you cannot do so forever. It being the holiday season, a time for family, forgiveness, and fresh starts, is upon us, I am willing to set aside my upset.

"How very generous of her," he said, raising another grin from Alden's lips.

With Christmastide nearly upon us, I'd urge you to please, come be with your family. Come be with us. We miss you. We love you. (Even if you are being a great lummoX and avoiding us.)

Broden's gaze froze on those words.

His mother was not wrong. Broden *had* been avoiding them. When he'd returned to London, in the company of his now closest friend in the world, Lord Hamish Brewster, a friend who Broden had made aboard that hellish ship, his first order of business had been to see his family.

He'd missed them and longed for the day he'd be reunited with his vexing brothers, with their big personalities, and his sister, with her even bigger spirit.

Only, when he'd at last joined his family, he'd felt like an outsider. Their smiles and their innocent merriment reminded him that he was no longer one of them.

They weren't the first ones you sought out; a ruthless voice silently reminded him. You went to find...her.

He expected if he still were capable of feeling anything beyond this peculiar numbness, the thought of the sweetheart he'd come back to find dead and buried would have left him crippled.

Alden released a sound of annoyance and Broden jerked his head up.

“Are you even reading, Broden? Or merely pretending to in the hopes I'll leave?” His brother folded his arms at his chest. “Because I know our dear mama is notorious for penning long notes and even longer *conversations*, but she's never written a missive *this* lengthy, and I'm not going anywhere.” *Without you.*

It hung unfinished but clear in Alden's words.

“Still reading,” Broden said, and returned his attention to the marchioness's letter. He skimmed previously read lines.

“We love you. (Even if you are being a great lummoX and avoiding us,)” Broden mouthed, finding his correct place in the note.

I hate that you've known the pain you did. We all do. I wish things had been different for you, but they weren't.

The marchioness wrote in the same blunt way she spoke, so much so that Broden could all but hear the words, aloud, that she'd written.

It is time to move forward. You need to allow yourself to be happy, once more. You need to find a good, loving woman.

Broden's entire body jerked.

There it was, then. The reason his brother had stalked him, and why his parents had sought him out.

"That bad?" Alden asked with a droll amusement.

Worse. A muscle rippled along Broden's jaw, and reining in the volatile emotion thrumming through him, he made himself look up. "Come, you'd have me believe you don't know the reason for this summons or the content of this missive."

A telling, and guilty flush mottled Alden's cheeks. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The hell he didn't.

Traitor.

But then, what loyalty should exist between them now? They were veritable strangers.

Giving his *brother* another harsh look, Broden lowered his gaze to the remainder of sentences there.

*I more than understand why you may not wish to find a
bride—no gentleman does...until he does.*

Broden paused.

That is what his mother believed? That he was just like any other nobleman's foolhardy son who'd rather carouse than settle down?

Nay, Broden had found his bride. The one and only woman for him, and she'd died.

Bitterness and resentment filled him; that anger, healthy for the strength it had given him...and continued to give him.

Forcing a detachedness, he didn't feel, Broden let himself read the last of his mother's missive.

*The Christmastide season has always been your
favorite,*

When, he'd been a boy, maybe. A lifetime had passed since his innocent, carefree days.

*We all miss you so very much. Come, celebrate with us.
Your brothers and sister will both be in attendance,
along with my dearest friends, the Caldecotts. The
Viscount and Viscountess have not had the easiest of
time of it. As such, your father and I feel it is only
fitting that our family share our joy this holiday season
with them."*

He glanced up at a still-silent Alden. "*Share our joy this holiday season?*"

Even his eldest brother could appreciate the ridiculousness of *that* statement.

Alden caught his chin in his hand. “Yes, well, I agree grammatically the sentence is a tad awkward, but the sentiment is lovely.”

“I’m not talking about the damned grammar, Alden,” he snapped. “I’m speaking of the gall in thinking this noble family our parents are hosting has had a *hard time of it*.”

Alden paused. “We have had a hard time of it,” he pointed out quietly.

“*We* have?” Broden worked his lips into a hard grin meant to convey all his cynicism.

“Yes, Broden. We *all* did.” His brother took an angry step closer and jabbed a finger at the ground as he approached. “We weren’t taken off to prison with you, but we were left behind to worry about. Not a day went by where our parents, Robin, *me*, did not cry for you.”

Unsettled by that show of emotion, Broden shifted his gaze to a point just above his brother’s head.

Alden didn’t speak again until Broden met his gaze.

“Do you really believe our mother’s statement is a ridiculous one, Broden? Are we not blessed? Mother has the gift of a loving husband, four healthy children—albeit, four unmarried children—but healthy.” Alden gave him a meaningful look. “And you are back, her with us.”

In body, yes. But in any and every other way? No.

Alden frowned that big-brotherly disapproving frown that had always hit harder and worse than their parents' displeasure. "Furthermore, Broden, what happened to you was awful, absolutely awful. But you don't have a monopoly on pain."

Is that what his brother thought? That he was a self-absorbed, self-pitying bastard? Biting his cheek before he said something he regretted, Broden resumed reading.

*Their eldest daughter, Miss Elyse Caldecott, they inform me is not only exceedingly lovely, but **quite** accomplished, as well.*

"Imagine that?" he said, letting all his sarcasm seep through.

Though, I do say, I've not had the pleasure of meeting her as she's never had a Come Out.

He choked. Good God, how old was the chit?

Given your appreciation for those of a self-reliant nature—(forgive me if this is untrue. As I've not seen you, I'm basing my assumption off what I read in the scandal sheets.)

Broden gave a wry grin. How neatly she'd slipped *that* rebuke in.

If the papers are in fact, correct, well, then I expect you'll admire Miss Caldecott as she has worked a number of years as a companion to her elderly aunt.

Really quite admirable, it is.

This time, Broden stopped reading, altogether. Laughing, he crumpled the page.

This was rich.

“Now, her insistence, and yours make sense,” he said, handing the note back.

His brother lifted his palms up, in a declination.

“She is worried about you,” Alden insisted. Holding Broden’s gaze, he clapped a hand firmly on his shoulder. “We are both concerned for you.”

“She is trying to marry me off,” Broden said, bluntly. “Which,” he continued, “given *you’re* still unmarried and apparently in no rush to find the next marchioness makes it very convenient for you, too.”

He’d be a damned fool to blame the deepening color on his brother’s cheeks for the winter’s chill; to blame it on anything except *guilt*.

“It has nothing to do with that,” Alden gritted out.

Broden forced a harsh, mocking laugh. “Doesn’t it?”

His brother’s cheeks grew a ruddier shade of red, and he took an angry step closer, grinding gravel about them, as he did. “Is it too much for you to believe I want you with the family for the holidays because I love you and I want you to be happy? Have I truly been such a terrible brother to you that you’d question my motives?”

“If you *truly* wanted me to be happy, you wouldn’t have spent these past weeks following me all in an attempt to force

me to do something I don't want to do.”

The stable opened, and a young groom stepped inside. Startled, the boy looked between the two brothers, dropped a bow, and then hastily backed out.

Both Broden and Alden waited a moment. Wind slapped the stable walls, rattling the doors.

It was Alden who spoke first. “You’re angry, Broden. I understand that. But we,” he thumped a fist against his own chest, “were not the ones who wronged you. We just want to be part of your life.” The earl let his arm fall, and his features which had previously revealed so much became a mask suited a powerful nobleman in full possession of his feelings. “This Christmastide season, this fall, you can continue to avoid us. But your mother—*our* mother—is determined and growing more so.”

Alden turned to go. When he reached the door, he turned back.

“Oh, and you should know, if you do not come join Mother and Father for the holidays, I intend to remain here in London and will keep you company.” He paused. “Whether you like it or not. *And*,” he dangled that lone word there, a moment, “you also, have my assurance that if you *do* grant Mama’s request and spend the holidays with us, I’ll see that we leave you in peace.’

With all the arrogance afforded him as the earl, Alden ended the conversation and let himself out.

After he'd gone, Broden contemplated that offer. A large part of him wanted to tell his brother to go to hell. Who was he to show up and dictate how Broden spend his time?

On the other hand, Alden was a man of his word; a man to whom honor mattered most.

It was why Broden knew with absolute certainty when Alden said he'd remain in London and dog Broden's steps until Broden at last came around, the earl meant it.

And it was also why Broden intended to make the journey to his mother's Christmastide festivities.

Then, once and for all, he'd be free to live his own life back here in England.

Chapter 3

Since she'd been a girl, Elyse had always loved the snow.

Whether they'd been at the family's Mayfair townhouse or one of Father's country seats, whenever snow fell, Elyse and her sisters would race outside.

There, they'd catch the first flakes upon their tongues, build imagined grooms from the snow, and engage in a spirited snowball fight.

Today, Elyse found herself loving it, for altogether *different* reasons—it allowed her a reprieve—albeit a temporary one—from the awkward annual reunion she'd be forced to endure.

Elyse would take whatever stay she could.

Her maid, Joan, on the other hand, did not share a comparable love for either snowstorms or the current conditions they found themselves in.

A loud wail—that was, *another* loud wail—split Aunt Hester's capacious barouche. "We're going to die." Joan, the lady's maid on loan from the duchess, cried into her kerchief.

"I promise you, we aren't, Joan," she said gently.

The young woman, however, sobbed too loud to ever hear Elyse's assurances. Then, with a frown, Elyse registered the barely moving carriage, had come to a complete stop.

What in blazes?

Elyse rubbed her gloved palm over the frosted crystal windowpane. Wind battered the walls of the carriage. The snow had begun to fall even heavier, and formed almost a curtain of white before her, and blotted out any hint of the old Roman roads they traveled—or any other part of their surroundings.

A moment later, there came a loud, strong knock on the carriage door.

Elyse reached over to open the panel, but Joan grabbed her hand. In her haste, the girl lost her hold on the basket she'd had a death grip on since the roads had grown more treacherous. Sir Lancelot seized the opportunity, and with his little head, he pushed the lid up. His beady eyes moved back and forth between Elyse and Joan, and the rat-like creature appeared to be taking in the racket around him.

“Please, don't, Miss Caldecott,” she pleaded, with terror-stricken eyes. “There be b-brigands out there.”

Elyse stole another glance out the small place her gloved hand had made on the icy window. Out there? “Brigands?” Elyse repeated.

The maid clutched at her throat. “Highwaymen, then,” she whispered.

“Joan,” she said, soothingly. “There are no highwaymen out in—”

Through the howling winter wind, there came another knock—one louder, more insistent. This time, she bypassed the hysterical girl's cry and opened the door.

A blast of cold, snow, and wind immediately swarmed the carriage; the elements so raw and so powerful, they sucked the breath from Elyse's lungs.

In a bid to escape the chill, Sir Lancelot bolted up the side of the bench and burrowed himself into Elyse's skirts.

Splendid.

The driver, Kenneth, a young, handsome fellow, new to Her Grace's employ, ducked his head in.

"Miss Caldecott, I—" he called loudly. Whatever he'd been about to say trailed off as he caught sight of the blubbing maid. "Has Miss Fenwick been hurt?"

"No," Elyse made soothing sounds for Joan's benefit. "She's worried about the journey, is all."

Kenneth doffed his snow-covered cap. "Can't say I blame her. 'Tis a fright out here."

Joan sobbed harder. Elyse rubbed the young woman's arm.

Several brows wrinkled the driver's high forehead. "My apologies," he mouthed.

"It is fine," she silently enunciated.

Kenneth cleared his throat. "I'm happy to say we're not very far from Grange House, Miss Caldecott. I believe we can make it safely and do so by the night's end if I continue at this slower pace."

This sent Joan into another fit.

Even if there wasn't the matter of delaying her meeting with her family, Joan's fear would have been reason enough to

stop.

Sir Lancelot scrambled down her legs and made a beeline for the door. With a sigh, she scooped the troublesome beastie up into her arms and deposited him back into his basket.

“Miss Caldecott?” Kenneth shouted over another loud wail of winter wind.

“The storm is worsening,” Elyse called to make herself heard over both the raging storm and Joan’s caterwauling. “We shall stop at the next inn we pass and spend the night.”

That managed to penetrate Joan’s blubbering.

With a quick bow, Kenneth returned his hat to his head and closed the door with a firm click.

Joan spread the palms covering her face apart, a fraction. “Truly, m-miss? I know you must be most eager to reach your fam—”

“Stopping is for the best,” Elyse cut in, but stopping the other woman from completing that incorrect supposition did not ease her guilt for feeling relieved.

There’d been a time when Elyse would have braved anything to be with her family. That was before her sister’s death. After that, everything had...changed. Now, being with them was awkward and...sad.

The carriage dipped as Kenneth climbed back atop the driver’s perch. Despite his earlier optimism, their travels grew increasingly sluggish and arduous as the storm continued to whip into a frenzy.

As the carriage rocked and swayed along the snow-covered roads, Joan wept and through her tears, prayed. She prayed to live long enough to have a family of her own. She prayed to live a long happy, healthy, joy-filled life. She prayed for the family she missed and did not wish to leave behind.

With the girl's prayerful ramblings, Elyse stared absently out at the slowly passing landscape, rendered indiscernible under the heavy snowfall.

Death.

How many people feared it? Elyse, having witnessed it firsthand when her sister at last succumbed to a sudden illness, expected she should fear of her own mortality.

In the immediacy of Evie's death, Elyse discovered a peculiar hollowness in herself. She didn't fear she'd die a young death like Evie did. Nor had she found herself in any circumstance where she prayed to avoid that fate.

She'd simply...existed. Existing, she reckoned, was far safer.

Maybe that was why she sat detached from the peril of traversing narrow, rutted, dangerous roads while Joan sobbed her fear and begged the Lord for more time on Earth.

"Please, Lord. I'll be a good girl. I'll not miss Sunday sermons," Joan rambled to herself. "I'll not sneak pastries from H-Her Ladyship's k-kitchens."

Elyse had nearly worn her voice out these past hours attempting to assure the maid. She'd since accepted that this was Joan's way of dealing with her anxiety. Had there been

something Elyse could have done or something she could have said to assure her, she'd have done so long before now. She—

The carriage hit a massive hole, and the carriage swayed, swinging wildly back and forth.

Elyse cursed and curled her hands onto the edge of her bench and hung on. Joan, on the other hand, screamed—and loudly.

Sir Lancelot popped out of the basket once more and found a spot upon Elyse's lap. She kept one hand on her seat to keep herself from being pitched about, and with her other, she held onto the guinea pig—only so he did not fall, of course.

Not because she cared about the beastie. *No.*

She couldn't very well show up with the creature's lifeless form and hand it over as a gift from Aunt Hester.

Kenneth managed to right the vehicle. His triumphant shout broke through even Joan's bawling. "Everything is fine. There is no need to worry."

"N-No need to w-worry?" Joan sputtered, and then tossing her arms up, she looked at the ceiling of the carriage and began uttering the Lord's prayer.

"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth..."

Elyse absently petted the guinea pig and returned her attention to the window.

“Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

God.

The iced window reflected back the wry, empty smile on her lips.

Elyse’s views of God and thoughts of His existence or presence in a person’s life changed exponentially with her sister’s passing.

After all, if the Heavenly Father were so benevolent, great, and all-powerful, how had He ignored Elyse’s pleadings and prayers and allowed Evie to perish? Why should Evie, who’d been only good and pure and loving, been cut down so young?

She registered the carriage had stopped its slow, back-and-forth sway. Pushing aside those ponderous musings, Elyse drew the guinea pig closer against her belly, leaned forward, and looked out the window.

Unable to make anything out past the frost, she tugged her glove off with her teeth, and let it fall.

The leather kidskin article landed on Sir Lancelot.

“My apologies,” Elyse murmured, as he wiggled out from under the slender slip of material.

Elyse carefully lowered Sir Lancelot into his basket and closed the lid. Next, she added a small blanket her aunt had packed to ‘keep the dearie warm’.

Elyse rubbed her warm palm over the slight ice-covered window and then scraped it with her nails.

“We’ve arrived, Joan,” she gently informed the still unboundedly distraught maid Aunt Hester had insisted Elyse travel with for the comfort to be had in the girl’s reliable presence.

The girl peeked out from between her hands. “W-We h-have?”

Elyse nodded. She dusted away the icy remnants and peered through the small viewing hole she’d made.

With the inn’s stone and stucco front, thatched roof, and deep courtyard, The Mermaid Inn, may as well have been plucked from Norman times and deposited in the now. The three brick fireplaces, tottering but ample sent large clouds of smoke up that in their ascent skyward, vied with the pitiless east wind.

“S-So sure I was that we were going to die, miss.”

“Well, you didn’t, and you shan’t. Certainly not anytime soon.” Elyse spoke more unmerited assurances in soothing tones.

No one knew how much time they had on this earth.

Maybe it was because they’d finally stopped for the night, but Elyse’s consoling managed to penetrate the girl’s worryment. Joan let her trembling palms drop to her lap and revealed the childlike smile on her lips.

“In fact,” Elyse went on, “I’d venture the ride simply felt worse than it actually was.”

There came a knock, and then Kenneth drew the door open and grinned. “Nearly died a half a dozen times out there, we

did, but we—”

Joan began bawling again.

Oh, hell.

Horror filled the driver’s attractive features, and he snatched his cap off. “My apologies, Miss Caldecott. Having now arrived, I didn’t think there was any harm in mentioning the danger we managed to avoid out th—”

With her spare hand, Elyse waved off his panicky ramblings. “It is fine.”

In times of crisis and suffering, Elyse knew how essential it was to take charge of the people falling apart around you, just as she knew Joan needed a distraction.

“Joan,” she said, speaking this time in a commanding, no-nonsense way. “We must get ourselves to the inn before we freeze—”

Horror filled Joan’s pretty brown eyes.

“Before we freeze poor Sir Lancelot. He’s just a wee thing, aren’t you?” Elyse directed that happy, high-pitched purr to the little fellow’s makeshift crate.

Joan stretched a hand out to relieve Elyse of the guinea pig’s care, but Elyse drew him closer. “I’ll carry his basket.”

With the other woman’s unsteadiness, were he entrusted to Joan’s care, the odds of Sir Lancelot making it out of the snow were far less than those of his being buried alive in a snowstorm.

Elyse handed her valise and small leather satchel to the maid. And after Kenneth helped them each down, Elyse led her still-blubbering maid to The Mermaid Inn.

She'd been granted a stay, and Elyse was all too happy to take it.

Chapter 4

As the third son of a marquess, Broden had been raised amidst the peerage. He'd moved amongst those self-serving lords and ladies and seen his noble parents host enough of them to know they were an avaricious lot.

Broden's low opinion of the *ton* had only been further cemented when he'd gone and fallen in love with a duchess's daughter who'd grander aspirations for her offspring than a mere third son. That imperious noblewoman, in collusion with her son, the duke, had coordinated Broden's transportation to Australia.

He didn't carry any grand illusions that the peerage was somehow better than the masses—not when they'd proven time and time again worse than them, in every way.

As such, seated in the corner, on the other side of the open log fireplace in the taproom, and taking in the arrival of the latest guests to seek shelter from the storm, he didn't find himself at all surprised by the stone-faced, lofty lady who came sweeping in with a small, manageable basket while her teary-eyed maid came with both hands full.

He sharpened his gaze on that pair, and in only a single up and down glance necessary, Broden assessed the well-dressed, haughty woman for exactly what she was.

Not at all surprised, but absolutely no less disgusted, Broden sipped from his tankard and continued to watch on as

the jovial innkeeper, with a big smile on his big, ruddy cheeks rushed over to welcome his new guest.

Before the older, shaggy-haired fellow could so much as speak, the lady clipped out a request for rooms. And between her crisp, King's English and cool, fortress-like demeanor, there could be no doubting a noblewoman now moved among them.

"...as quickly...possible," she was saying; her every other word coming into focus. "...tray readied...treacherous out..."

The innkeeper whipped his head up and down, in a seemingly furious attempt to keep up with the steady stream of requests flying from her lips.

Yes, this one was a real princess, indeed.

After his late sweetheart's mother, a duchess with too much power and influence had ruined his life to save her daughter from marrying a mere third son, Broden became more than somewhat adept at identifying those high and mighty sorts, with a ruthless bend. They were the ones to be watched most carefully, and the ones to be most afraid of.

Just then, as if she'd felt his disapproving gaze upon her, the young woman stiffened. She pushed her deep blue, fur-lined hood back revealing a face a touch too flawless in its angles that added an aloofness to her statue-perfect features.

In a coolly dismissive way, the lady skimmed her eyes over the handful of men scattered at various tables throughout, before her attention landed on Broden. Unlike the other men

she'd disregarded, with an almost reluctance, her eyes remained locked on him.

They each took the other one in assessing, judging.

If he were a gentleman, he'd politely and respectfully look away. But he hadn't been a gentleman in what felt longer than he'd been one, and as such, he boldly and unapologetically took the lady in.

Mayhap four or five inches past five feet, the lady may as well have stood all of six feet tall for the regal way in which she carried her proud person.

Her also perfectly formed, cupid's bow lips, turned crimson from the cold, possessed a fullness, that despite his antipathy for the nameless stranger, put him in mind of all manner of wonderful and wicked uses for that mouth.

Such a cool woman had no place having a soft, sensual mouth like hers.

The high quality of her sapphire cloak, trimmed in white fur, along both openings of the garment and on the cuffs of her sleeves, put her trim, narrow waist, and wide hips on perfect display. She possessed the manner of womanly figure that appealed to him as much as her mouth did...but also the haughty, unconquerable coldness he'd always been all too happy to steer clear of.

At Broden's scrutiny, in the first hint of warmth to the lady's proud visage, the color on her cheeks flamed into a deep, rosy, blush.

Ah, the illustrious Ice Princess proved not so emotionally unmoved, after all.

From over the top of the pewter tankard cradled between his scarred hands, Broden flashed an icy, jeering smile, lifted his drink in mocking salute, and took a drink of his ale. Though, he'd hand it to her; the proud, defiant beauty didn't lower her gaze or hastily look away as most any other woman would have from his steady, critical stare.

The innkeeper said something to her, and when whatever question he'd asked or question he'd put to her went unanswered, her timid maid spoke.

Broden quirked an eyebrow, and that served to break the connection the other two speaking before her hadn't managed.

She swiftly whipped her attention back to the innkeeper. The big, burly fellow pointed to the small, sage green, wicker basket she held in her hands.

She followed his gesture and blinked impossibly big brown eyes.

He made to take the burden from his newest patron, but with alacrity born of an apparent mistrust and disdain, she yanked that carrier closer to her person.

The lady paused; her small, gleaming black leather boot peeked from under the hem of her sapphire cloak and hovered there, suspended a sliver of a moment before she set that slight, right heel down upon the old, oaken stair. The depression of that ancient wood sent an exceedingly loud groan, filling the near-silent tavern.

Instead of continuing her ascent, however, she cast a glance over her slender, defiant shoulder.

Once more, the lady's sharp gaze found Broden.

This time, he didn't even favor her with a mocking grin. Instead, he met her curiosity with the coldness deserved of one who roused fear in her servants and treated good, honest innkeepers like criminals.

The long column of her throat moved in a big swallow, a tell-tale sign of her unease.

Good. Let her be as unnerved as the poor maid she'd come in with for the night.

She turned, and this time hurried off and out of sight. After she'd gone, Broden allowed himself another cool grin.

What would the woman say if she'd gathered his identity? He imagined the undoubtedly horrified reaction she'd have if she knew she shared a roof with a former criminal who'd seen and done dark things that would have left her wilting.



As Elyse and her taciturn maid were shown to their rooms by the happy innkeeper, Mr. Turvey, he prattled on about the grand history of The Mermaid Inn.

Any other time, she'd have been riveted by the fascinating account of the ancient inn whose roots went back to Norman times and whose tale included infamous smugglers in the 17th century. Now, she found herself grateful for the enormous void of silence Mr. Turvey filled as it allowed Elyse to her thoughts of Sir Broody, as she'd dubbed that man in the taproom.

The gentleman had been... staring at her.

Her heart thumped as funnily in her breast now as when she'd first felt his gaze.

And between the fine quality of his perfectly tailored black wool coat, and the neatly folded, white silk cravat there could be no doubting a nobleman of some sort dwelt amongst them for the night.

Steady and incisive, his intense watch had cut all the way across the taproom and straight through Elyse as she'd been meeting with the loquacious innkeeper.

Gentlemen didn't stare at her. Not in that way. Not really, in any way. That wasn't to say she wasn't accustomed to people looking at her in *other* ways.

After Evie's death, when Elyse and her younger sisters had finally begun venturing out, being gawked at had become an all-too-familiar state for them. Be it Hyde Park they'd traveled to, or Gunter's for Ices or quiet museums, invariably, she, Evelyn, Edith, and Emmy found themselves an object of society's morbid fascination.

The Poor Caldecott Family was how they'd been referred in the newspapers—who'd not even allowed them the veiled clandestinely of a mere 'C' and instead spelled out their surname, and *The Poor Caldecott Family* as they'd been spoken of in less than discreet whispers by passersby. Or *The Poor Caldecott Girls*, when it'd only been Elyse out and about with her sisters, searching for obscurity and diversion from their pain, and encountering only more stares and more whispers.

It was just one of the many reasons that when asked to join her elderly aunt in the country, Elyse had jumped at the opportunity and hied herself off to Leeds.

But this sinisterly handsome man in The Mermaid Inn, seated alongside the fire, and with a drink clasped in a lazy grip, his scrutiny...it had been *different*.

That dark, coldly mocking stranger had openly watched her.

Only in his keen eyes, there hadn't been the familiar—and exhaustive—pity or bald curiosity that came whenever someone saw a *poor* Caldecott about.

Nor for that matter, had the gentleman gazed at Elyse with—as Evie had called it—the ‘longing look’.

Nay, the man's steady, unblinking, dark gaze had contained a wealth of derision, the likes of which she'd never before seen or personally felt.

Having gone straight from the school room to employment in Aunt Hester's household, Elyse had bypassed a London Season that would have likely opened her to those harsh sentiments. For lords and ladies were nothing if not, bored people, starving for sustenance and subsisting on a diet of other people's weaknesses—which the gossip pages alone indicated, they invariably found.

But she didn't *know* this gentleman.

In fact, with the exception of her father, brother, and the old, more than slightly dead, Lord Truman, who gifted

peculiar pets and other oddities to Aunt Hester and their family, Elyse didn't know *any* gentleman.

“Miss?”

He, on the other hand, had looked at her like he knew her all-too-well.

“Miss?” Joan's voice, more insistent this time, cut across Elyse's faraway thoughts.

Blinking slowly, she looked at the maid and innkeeper staring back at her: Joan, concernedly, and Mr. Turvey, with his broad, blithe smile.

What had they been saying?

“We're here, miss,” he happily announced.

It was a moment before Elyse registered those words. Confusedly, she looked about. *What in blazes?*

“Your rooms, miss,” Mr. Turvey clarified.

Elyse gave her head a shake and dislodged the peculiar, unspoken exchange that had passed between her and Sir Broody. She was twenty-six years old. Not some young, impressionable miss caught woolgathering about any man and certainly not some sulky lord, whose likely greatest hardship had been the crude wooden chair he'd been forced to sit upon that night.

“Forgive me, Mr. Turvey,” Elyse said, returning the innkeeper's smile. “I was so enrapt by your telling of the history of this place, I found myself lost, imagining it from another century.” With each word of praise she spoke, the

already tall innkeeper grew an inch, until his wide shoulders went back, and his spine stood perfectly erect. “I couldn’t imagine a happier accident than finding myself resting my head here for the evening.”

Mr. Turvey beamed with a brightness to rival every last candle running the length of the corridor.

Catching the single lapels of his coarse and fraying knee-length frock coat, the proud innkeeper gave them a tug. “It is an honor to host you, miss. Perhaps you may even extend your stay?” Hope brought his deep voice, climbing an octave up.

“I’d love that greatly, but I am on to visit my family for the holidays.” Nor were those empty platitudes she offered. “But perhaps someday,” she said, gently blunting her rejection, and restoring the innkeeper’s jovial grin.

Alas... If the choice was visiting with her family for stilted exchange after stilted exchange which invariably ended in questions about when Elyse would at last return...and marry or remaining in this stone inn that conjured thoughts of yesteryear, Elyse would invariably, and happily, pick the latter.

A sigh escaped her, one the attentive, eager-to-please Mr. Turvey heard, and wrongly interpreted her disappointment for exhaustion.

“Must be properly hashed you are.” Fetching a key from his pocket, he placed it in the lock and pressing the handle, opened the door.

Against her maid’s protestations, Elyse retrieved one of the bags from Joan and entered ahead of the pair. Mr. Turvey,

taking his cue from Elyse, took the other from the young maid's hands.

“If you would be so good as to show my maid to her rooms, Mr. Turvey?”

“*My rooms?*” Joan gasped. “But miss, that is too costly. You mustn't—”

Elyse continued over her loyal servant's continued objections. “The journey caused Miss Fenwick quite the fright,” she explained, setting her basket down near the hearth for Sir Lancelot's warmth, but not too close as to risk the little bundle's furry life.

She looked to Joan. “Given you are spending the holiday season away from your family all to join mine, at the very least I can provide you comfortable accommodations so that *you* may get yourself some proper rest.” Elyse turned to Mr. Turvey, once more. “Will you be so good as to deliver a tray and proper bath to Miss Fenwick's rooms?”

“Of course, miss,” he piped in gaily, and set the floral tapestry valise he still carried down beside Sir Lancelot's makeshift home.

“Miss Caldecott,” Joan rang her hands. “I cannot—”

“You can and you will,” Elyse said, unequivocally. She crossed to her maid and took her gently by the arm. “As my travels are the sole reason you were forced to make the perilous journey in the heart of winter and at the holidays is because,”—*My unrelenting parents*—“of me,” she substituted.

“But—”

“No ‘buts’.”

“But miss—”

“Mm-Mm,” Elyse cut off the rest of Joan’s demurrals.

Gently, Elyse guided the girl from her room, turning her over to Mr. Turvey’s care. Before the young woman could stage further protests, Elyse pressed the curved oak panel closed and turned the lock.

At last, alone with the welcome quiet, Elyse drew in a deep breath and rested her back against the solid door. Its steel studs and its steel iron band reinforcements rattled under Elyse’s slight sagging.

She took in the warm, welcoming fire that blazed in the crudely carved hearth; set in brick and built into the room’s western wall, that light cast a surprisingly soft glow onto the raw clay slab of the flooring, but did less to illuminate the dark, stone walls, the narrow, ebony closet door, and low, plaster and panel ceiling.

How easy it was to imagine she’d been plucked from the now and plunked down into the long-ago times Mr. Turvey had spoken of. There’d been so many moments after Evie’s passing where Elyse had dreamed of shifting the clocks back; of reversing time to a time before the greatest, most awful thing that had destroyed her and left their family broken.

She’d come to learn the pain of losing her eldest sister and best friend, would forever remain, and to help dull the searing ache of that loss, Elyse forced herself to stop dredging up reminiscences of her beloved sister.

A log shifted in the hearth, sending up a soothing crackle of snaps and hisses of the fire's song. Elyse stared sadly at the orange and yellow flames dancing in the fireplace.

But sometimes, particularly the winter time, that magical and wondrous part of the year that Elyse and Evie and all their sisters so loved, the memories of Evie were greatest and reared themselves most.

A forlorn whine split across Elyse's melancholy musings, that high-pitched moan more piercing for the stillness of the room.

Instantly finding her feet, Elyse flew across the small room. "Forgive me," she crooned, falling to a knee alongside the basket, and lifting the lid. "You have had quite the journey, *too*."

Sir Lancelot instantly poked his brown, bewhiskered face out.

Murmuring, soothing, nonsensical words for the intrepid traveler, Elyse gently scooped the guinea pig out and took care to set him on the floor, away from the fire. "Now, off you go," she ordered.

The bundle of dark fur with a narrow white tuft along the side of his coat, however, had already waddled off, to explore his new surroundings.

Elyse came to her feet; as she did, she tugged off her leather gloves and tossed them down on a nearby serviceable, oak, worktable.

Her gaze went to that ancient-looking ebony closet, and compelled, she moved closer to it. She drew the panel open and peeked her head inside.

Something raced across her foot, and Elyse let out a squeal, realizing belatedly, Sir Lancelot had also come to investigate.

“Oh, hell,” she muttered, hurrying in after him.

The inky blackness swallowed her up.

Elyse closed her eyes tightly and then opened them. She tried again. To no avail. Only more of that thick, shroud of darkness met her. Her sense of sight failed by the conditions of the closet, Elyse sharpened her ears, listening. And then she heard it.

The faint little whine that marked Sir Lancelot’s sounds and not say, different and unwelcome rodent-like creatures.

Elyse dropped to the floor and hastened forward as quickly as she could in the tight passageway. “I’m not a child,” she mouthed, even if she was crawling on her hands and knees like one. “I’m not afraid of the dark. I’m not afraid of the dark.”

And she wasn’t.

She was, however, rightfully concerned about small, dark spaces possibly inhabited by rats or mice and dark passageways, that...

Elyse stopped. “Do not end,” she mouthed silently. Impossible. And yet, not, when one considered the old inn had once been a notorious smuggler’s refuge. She stared at the hole in the place where a wall should have been. The

passageway had ended, into a fifteen-inch or so wide circular entry that connected to the next rooms.

“Oh, hell,” she whispered again and then immediately regretted that vocalization.

She tensed and braced for the appearance of a pair of legs standing at her eye level or someone ducking down and looking into her now hiding place for the offender creeping into their rooms.

Nothing happened.

Stop panicking.

She'd never been the jittery sort and given her current circumstances, such temerity wouldn't serve her now.

With her original panic now gone, Elyse sharpened her ears, in search of a hint of *any* sound, the groan of old, uneven wood floorboards. The murmur of voices. The snore of a slumbering traveler. Something to indicate it'd be a fool's errand to follow after Sir Lancelot.

Only the loud hum of silence greeted her.

Releasing her first sigh, Elyse laid flat on her stomach.

She tamped back a sharp hiss as the chill of the stone flooring pierced the fabric of her carriage dress. As she raised herself onto her elbows, the long sleeves of her gown, and the satin trimmings did little to blunt the cold, hard, uneven rock cut sharply and unforgivingly into the bend of her arms.

Ignoring that pain, and with a futile hope, Elyse peered into the darkness at the end of the passageway, searching for

Sir Lancelot.

“Of course, you would go and get yourself into all this trouble,” she spoke mutedly, the faintest sound of her voice provided some comfort in this ancient access that connected her rooms to the ones next door.

Well, best get on with it while the accommodations remained unoccupied. The last thing she wanted or needed was to be caught as Mr. Turvey escorted another weary traveler, out of the cold and into the chambers next door to Elyse’s.

Prompted by that horrifying mental picture, and propelled on her elbows, Elyse inched herself forward through the low opening that led into the connecting room. Biting her lip against the sting left by the stone digging into her arms, she dragged herself the remaining way.

At long last, the narrow space widened and opened up so that Elyse found herself lying upon the oak slats which, at some point, had been laid across the bottom of the closet.

An *empty* closet, one without any dresses or cloaks or trousers hanging, and the absence of which spoke to an empty room.

Tremendous relief filled her, and in her elation, she pushed herself up into a seated position, too quickly. All the muscles in her back, neck, and arms instantly screamed in angry protest of their return from the unnaturally contorted posture she’d forced them into.

Despite that shooting pain, Elyse sat there, wistfully taking in her shadowy surroundings.

What an ideal location this corridor and closet would have made for Elyse and her siblings during their younger years, back when they'd played hide and seek.

She could almost see herself as she would have been, creeping back and forth between the passageway, with greater ease and grace which she now moved as a grown woman.

It would have been Evie who invariably found her. She always had.

Her eldest sister had always been so fleet of foot, and silent as the grave—

Elyse recoiled. Her musings hit her like a swift kick in the gut. She briefly closed her eyes against the reminder of that greatest, most crushing of losses.

Throughout the year, she did a good job of forcing thoughts of Evie to the furthest back recesses of her mind. And yet, every winter, when her parents summoned her, and she was forced to return to the Caldecott fold, all the memories slipped forward. The pain of losing her sister hit Elyse all over again, as fresh as it had been the day it happened.

Stop. You are stronger than this. Stop woolgathering and bemoaning how life turned out—and how it didn't turn out for Evie—and get yourself into that room, find Sir Lancelot, and get out, before someone comes.

Taking herself firmly in hand, Elyse gave her head a firm shake and forced aside those sorrowful thoughts.

The crude slab door sat partially open; cracked enough that she could make out some of the room. A brick hearth identical to the one in Elyse's accommodations sat directly opposite her line of vision.

She allowed herself a peek.

The bed hadn't yet been fully made. Absent the embroidered wool blanket that covered her own mattress, and but for the crisp white bedlinens and a quilted throw at the bottom of the chaff-filled mattress, there hadn't been a traveler who'd yet claimed this space. Nor for that matter, with its missing bedding were the accommodations properly readied for guests. Though at some point, a fire had been built, in both anticipation of a warming welcome for the eventual guest who'd rest their head here this cold winter's night.

Which could be any moment.

With that cool-headed reminder, Elyse let herself inside.

She made a faint clicking sound with her tongue. "Sir Lancelot?" she whispered, scouring the floor for any hint of the vexatious fellow.

A dog, she silently fumed as she started a walk about the room. Why couldn't her eccentric aunt and even more eccentric neighbor have gifted Emmy a small dog who answered to his name and didn't scurry about like a rat racing around the kitchens, avoiding Cook's broom?

Suddenly, she stopped. Horror filled her breast and she looked aghast at the previously unnoted items; ones that had remained outside the purvey of her view—*until now*.

Beside an ash and elm wheelback dining chair that had been fitted with an upholstered seat and repurposed as an armchair, sat open a weathered-looking, leather, oval portmanteau with handles and a carrying strap.

Dread brought her creeping forward, around the bed fur-lined, wool greatcoat draped over the right corner of an oak armoire, indicated the rooms belonged to a gentleman of means.

Unbidden, that image of the dark-eyed, dark-haired stranger who'd watched her under long, inky black lashes, slipped in, once more.

If one preferred the brooding sort, well, he'd be the man of some lady's dreams. Elyse wasn't interested in marrying, ever. But if she was, that angry fellow would *never* be the manner of one she'd take as her husband. Nay, she wouldn't want to spend forever with such a man. Or even a moment for that—

Elyse's pulse picked up its pace.

Oh, bloody hell. What if she'd invaded *his* rooms?

Stop. After all, what was the likelihood there'd not only been a secret passage joining her quarters to *these*, and that those same accommodations belonged to *him* of all people?

Either way, Elyse didn't intend to stick close and find out.

Springing into action, she did a sweep of the dark rooms, illuminated by only the glow of the cozy fire crackling in the hearth.

Where are you? Where are you?

Dropping to her knees, she peered under the bed. Two tiny, beady eyes met hers. Joy swelled in her breast and turned her lips up in a smile.

“There you are, you little hellion,” she whispered.

With pure guinea pig apathy, Sir Lancelot scrunched his mouth as if he snacked on his favorite snack of carrots, and not mere air.

Elyse inched under the low, dark oak bedframe.

Sir Lancelot emitted a long, loud squeal.

Startled by that damning noise, Elyse jumped up; the back of her head connected with a loud *thwack*.

Groaning, Elyse immediately collapsed onto her stomach, and sneaking her arms up, she rubbed at the throbbing knot that had already begun to form.

Feeling a good deal more churlish, Elyse scowled at Sir Lancelot. “If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect you were attempting to kill me or get me caught.” Two fates, that could also well go together, hand in hand.

He continued to watch her with bored eyes.

Bored! “You have a lot of gall, you ball of fur,” she grumbled. “Since you entered Aunt Hester’s household you’ve been all too content to sneak a nap upon my lap and steal pets and cuddles. But now, that you’ve snuck off into someone else’s accommodations, you’d avoid me like I’m Cook’s best mouser?” She tapped a finger against the oak floor. “Come here, *now*,” she whispered as if he could understand those human words.

The furry knight squealed again.

“Hush,” she chided, jerking her head up, inching closer to gather him up. “You’ll give us away. As it is, you’ve caused me enough trouble this day.”

The always amiable guinea pig chose this very moment to make himself even more of a bother. In what looked like a yawn, but what Elyse had also come to learn from Sir Lancelot’s almost altercation with a kitchen mouse, hinted at anger, the guinea pig began chattering.

Then, just as she’d anticipated with that vocalization, Sir Lancelot bared his teeth.

She gasped and nearly brought her head colliding for a second time with the underside of the bed slats. “You get over here, right now. This behavior is a behavior I will not tolerate. Do you understand me?”

Even as she uttered that hushed rebuke, she closed her eyes, and shook her head. “*Of course*, you don’t understand me. You have a brain the size of a pea.”

Suddenly, Sir Lancelot ceased his conspicuous chattering and waddled closer to Elyse.

Relief soared in her breast. She was—*they* were—going to get themselves out of being caught lurking in some stranger’s room.

“You, magnificent creature,” she cooed. Even as the guinea pig kept up his approach, Elyse crooked the four fingers on both her palms and beckoned him closer. “I was ever so wrong to say all those nasty—”

Sir Lancelot went scurrying just past her reach, and out from under the bed.

Elyse gasped, and jerked her head up again, so quickly she slammed it against the bed slats.

Ignoring the agony sluicing at her skull, she used her elbows to drag herself out...only to remember the scrapes she'd suffered from her entry through that blasted passageway.

With slower, more cautious movements, Elyse managed to get out from where she lay under the bed. As she came to her feet, she distractedly rubbed at the back of her aching head and did a frantic sweep of the room, searching for the source of all her woes this eve.

“Where are you, you little bugger?” Elyse mouthed. “Where are you?”

And contrary as he'd become, he didn't so much as offer a squeak to give his whereabouts away.

With the amount of time she'd spent rummaging through some gentleman's rooms, she likely found herself moments away from being discovered. Where before hope had briefly blossomed, now desperation took root.

Please. For all that is good and—

A low, chicken-like chitter rang from somewhere near the fireplace.

Elyse's gaze locked on the area that the sound now came from.

The chirping stopped.

She kept herself motionless, held her breath.

Where are you? Where are you?

Another warble went up; louder, and more distinct.

Elyse raced the short distance across the room, over to whatever hiding nook Sir Lancelot had made himself. In one fluid motion, she skidded to a stop and dropped down hard onto her already maltreated knees...right next to the worn leather satchel.

Sir Lancelot popped his head out the side of the bag and rooted his mouth.

She narrowed her eyes. When she finally wrestled herself out of this scrape the furry fellow had gotten them into, Elyse would have a whole series of choice words for him. But for now, she'd only one goal—escape.

Determined to grab the scamp, once and for all, and hustle his plump, furry body back through that damnable passageway, Elyse reached both hands inside the bundle to snatch him out. Only, as she delved into the pack, she gentled her movements so as not to terrify Sir Lancelot.

She sighed. Why couldn't she stay mad at the vexatious fellow?

Maybe he sensed the easement of her edginess. For, unlike before, the stout, small-bodied rodent made no attempt to evade her grip. Her fingers connected with the slight weight of his warm, furry frame. A triumphant smile brought her lips up at the corners.

Please, do not—

“Do *not* move.”

It took a moment before Elyse realized that completed thought belonged not to her silent inner thoughts, but rather, a stranger, more specifically a man, who spoke in cultured tones, and a deep baritone, made more sinister for its silky quality.

She remained motionless, with her hands still tucked damningly inside the gentleman’s rucksack. All the while, her nape burned with the heat of the gaze now boring into her person.

He had her alone, and from the moment a girl could walk, and all the way through womanhood she knew first and foremost to never be caught alone with a man who was not family. Not without risking being violated.

I’m alone. No one knows I’m here. Not Joan. Not Aunt Hester. Not Mr. Turvey. No one. I—

“Now,” that resonant voice penetrated her rapidly spiraling out-of-control thoughts, “remove your hands from the bag and place them in the air slowly.”

Click.

Elyse attempted to get a steady breath from her lungs—to no avail.

Oh, God. As a girl, she’d spied on her brother and his friends enough to have secretly observed them cleaning dueling pistols and caught that slight click as they’d cocked the weapon. Never, however, had a firearm been turned on Elyse. Though, in fairness, never had she given anyone reason *to* level a gun her way.

That reminder shook Elyse from her paralyzed state. This was all a misunderstanding. In fact, if he knew the reason she'd entered his rooms, they might even share a laugh about the circumstances that had brought her here.

"I-I know how this might look," she said.

"Do you?" he rejoined in a taunting purr.

Elyse wrinkled her nose and welcomed the rush of annoyance that further tempered her fear. She did, however, have mind enough to not greet his mockery with the censure she'd like to turn on him.

"Oh, yes. You see, it really is quite—"

"Your hands," he cut her off.

Elyse hesitated an instant more. Did the gentleman know how to string a full sentence together? That skillset seemed dubious at best.

With a last, reassuring stroke of Sir Lancelot's fur, she brought her palms up as ordered. "I can expl—"

"On your feet," he whispered in an icy directive that sent a fresh wave of chills racing along her spine.

Her heart hammering, Elyse stood on shaky legs.

"Now, turn...slowly."

Even with her arms in the air, the menacing stranger believed *she* was a threat? A nervous giggle bubbled past her lips. But Elyse brought herself around to face him, and her pulse picked up.

For, before her, with his towering, powerfully muscular frame between Elyse and the doorway out, and at that, with a pistol pointed directly at her heart, stood none other than the forbidding stranger from the taproom.

She'd been wrong. Her goal shouldn't have been to merely escape...but to do so without attracting notice.

He passed a contempt-filled gaze up and down her person, and she learned for the first time in her life what it was to be taken for wanting.

“Well, well, *well*,” he murmured. “Of all the people I'd expect to be scavenging through my rooms, the high and mighty Ice Princess with a penchant for spouting orders wasn't one of them.”

For a sliver of a moment, Elyse suspected the dangerous stranger spoke to someone else. Elyse looked around for the Ice Princess in question.

“You, my lady,” he jeered, recalling Elyse's attention. “I'm speaking about you.”

High and mighty? She puzzled her brow. A penchant for spouting orders? This surly lout was speaking about her?

Given she'd been caught snooping about his accommodations she really should bite her lip, and yet, a healthy, sobering, and steadying wave of annoyance rose up in place of her earlier dread.

“That is quite an *informed* opinion, *sir*.” Elyse glared his way. “Considering you don't even *know*...” He took a step

towards her, and she stumbled over her words, “you don’t even know...” Her sentence faded off.

Even languid, his long-legged stride, rapidly erased the already miniscule space between them.

He stopped, and Elyse found herself summarily trapped between the bed, the wall...and the man’s broad frame.

“What was it you intended to say?” he jeered.

For the life of me, I cannot recall.

“Were you going to point out I don’t even know you, *Ice Princess?*”

Somehow, Elyse managed to find her voice “Yes! You *don’t* know me.”

The hostile stranger sharpened his gaze on Elyse. “We agree on that, which begs the question of why someone who *doesn’t* know me is here now?”

In fairness, at this moment, she couldn’t recall.

She attempted to swallow, but that usually reflexive motion now required a herculean effort.

At her dumbstricken silence, he winged an eyebrow up. “Now, your name,” he barked.

Elyse remained silent. She’d sooner give him her heart than her name. Absolutely no one could learn she’d been caught alone at this inn. She shook her head.

“*Tsk. Tsk. Tsk.*” Sir Broody clicked his tongue in a disapproving way. “Even after finding you alone in my rooms,

you won't even share your name?" His harsh lips formed a perfectly sardonic grin.

Elyse clamped her lips even more tightly shut.

"I don't know you," he continued in that mellifluous baritone that really should have sent her belly fluttering in fear, and not whatever else this indefinable, unnamable sensation was. "Which begs the question of just what it is you're doing in my quarters?"

Still, she'd never been a coward, and she didn't intend to start being one now, because of this man.

Elyse tilted her head back to meet his gaze, and her breath caught. Whatever she'd intended to say flew straight out of her head. and her breath caught.

Between the harsh slash of his cheekbones and the firm line of his chiseled jaw, he possessed the almost perfect, untouchable look of a marble statue. The slight nicks and scars that marred his face, however, spoiled that illusion, and instead hinted at a nefarious man, with a sinister past.

No man had a right to be so handsome. And no sensible woman with a brain in her head had a right to note that detail when she found herself cornered with the cryptic stranger.

When in the taproom, she'd wondered at the color of those assessing eyes on her. Now, closer to him than she cared to be, Elyse knew.

A chilling glint iced his irises; eyes a shade of sapphire blues, sprinkled with specks of grey and cerulean blue that offset the frost.

Unnerved, she'd but one thought: *Run*.

From the corner of her eye, Elyse considered the bed that stood between her and escape. But as soon as the thought of fleeing slipped in, she pushed it aside. Quick and agile and stealth of foot as he was, he'd overtake her in a moment.

Nor do you want to find yourself caught underneath him, on a bed of all places.

"Don't even think about it," he warned, and she jerked her attention back.

The shrewd look he gave Elyse indicated he'd gathered her intentions.

She'd be damned, however, if she *admitted* her thoughts of running.

"Don't even think about giving you, my name?" Before he could answer, Elyse added, "Well, that is fine. As I'd indicated moments ago, I've no intention of doing so. Given that, we should make our goodbyes..."

Elyse attempted to make a dignified exit, but then stopped in her tracks.

Unbidden, she looked over to that leather satchel the content little guinea pig had apparently made his new home.

Sir Broody dropped his broad, right shoulder against the uneven stone wall, blocking the path she'd considered taking. "It doesn't escape my notice," he whispered in steely tones, "you seem inordinately interested in my satchel."

Elyse's stomach lurched.

Oh, hell. I am in trouble now.

Chapter 5

Broden hadn't *always* been a leery, jaded fellow.

In fact, during his younger days, out of all the Burgess children, he'd been green as grass and the most trusting.

That dupability led him straight into a trap; the machinations of which were put into play by a mercenary duke, duchess, and their ruthless son.

Before that he'd never believed a respectable member of the peerage could or would arrange such a plot against anyone. He'd paid the price for that naïve misconception. It taught Broden men and women—regardless of station, wealth, or influence, and oftentimes age—were all capable of sinister acts.

It was why he didn't trust the winsome, slip of a beauty he'd caught rummaging through his satchel, as far as he could throw her.

Tired of her reticence, Broden's patience snapped. "Who sent you?"

The young lady blinked her long, sooty lashes.

"Who *sent* me?" she echoed, with an impressive degree of bewilderedness, and in a husky contralto that likely also proved part of the reason she'd been sent here.

Were he anyone else, he may have even believed her, and more, he would have been tempted by her.

Fury burned inside. "I trust it was the duchess."

The lady's eyes bulged. "You know *Aunt Hester*?"

Momentarily baffled, Broden drew back.

Who the hell was *Aunt Hester*?

He quickly found his footing and took a step nearer. "Let me ask it a different way, Miss Lady With No Name."

"I have a name," she said crisply. "As I've told you, it is one I have no intention of sharing with *you*."

He'd hand it to the minx, she didn't reveal so much as a hint of the terror she should feel. Instead, she tipped the long, graceful column of her neck back, drawing his attention to the heart-shaped birthmark at the center of that smooth flesh.

Instinctively, he shifted his focus lower; to the modest neckline of her emerald, green carriage dress—and he instantly regretted it. The fine lining of gold lace trim tempted a man to look closer, and when one did...the bountiful flesh on display urged him to keep on looking and fantasizing about tugging it free.

What the hell is wrong with you?

This is undoubtedly the purpose she served.

Sobered by that stone-cold realization, Broden twisted his lips in a cruel grin. "If you've come to use your," he looked pointedly at her breasts, "unremarkable wiles to snare me, you're bound to be disappointed."

The nameless lady followed his gaze to her bosom.

Understanding lit her expressive eyes, and with a gasp, she folded her arms protectively at her chest like an offended

debutante and not a woman of maybe twenty-five or so years who'd set out to deceive him.

A deep crimson blush spilled over her cheeks. "How dare you?" she said in a furious whisper. "You surly, nasty, cod head."

"Cod head?" Despite the earnestness of the situation, he'd found himself thrust into, a smile twitched at the corners of his lips. "Is that the harshest insult you've got for me?"

The color on her cheeks deepened. "Paper-scul, shallow-pate, ignoramus!"

Broden could no longer fight a grin. "I suppose that is somewhat bett—?"

"Beetle-headed, banish, bird-witted, buffle-headed, churlish, *cakey*, curmudgeon."

He laughed. "If you've come to seduce me, you're going to have to do a good deal better than your impressively inventive insults."

The lass gawked at him. "You think *I* want to seduce *you*?"

Given the convincingness of her emphatic rejoinder, he'd say decidedly not.

"No," he allowed. "I *do*, however, believe you'd do so as part of whatever arrangement you struck with the one who sent you here."

"And to think we women are the ones accused of being overemotional?" She directed her words at the ceiling above.

When she looked his way, she fixed a hostile glare on Broden. “Have you been attending too many stage shows? Reading too many gothic novels? Because that and only that could account for your outrageous reaction to—” She gasped and pressed a palm against her mouth.

Broden tensed. He wasn’t so much a fool now that he’d fall for that diversion.

Keeping one eye on his intruder, he glanced sideways out the other one at—

His stomach heaved, and his mind went black as a swift unthinking dread took hold. An enormous rat gnawed at the skirts of the immobile beauty.

As paralyzed as the woman before him, Broden kept his gaze fixed on the black and white rodent, with its enormous whiskers and pink nose.

Sweat coated Broden’s palms and pebbled at his brow. “Do. Not. Move.”

He’d encountered any number of terrors in his time as a convicted man: the cruelty of a perverse, unpredictable gaoler, with a fondness for whipping prisoners. Being denied food and water for so long that madness had danced on the edge of a waning consciousness.

During his time in gaol, Broden had shared *quarters* with rats and mice. More often than not, those huge, ravenous beasts were hungrier than the prisoners.

Through those years of hell, Broden and his fellow cellmates found themselves at the mercy of merciless wardens.

Those perverse men had found great pleasure watching edacious rodents feast on the prisoners in their *care*.

Never again. Never again would he let one of those gnawers near him or anyone else.

With a booming shout, Broden charged the rest of the way and lunged for the young woman to get her out of the way and to safety, and away from the creature now tangled in her skirts.

She gasped and dove sideways out of his reach, and onto the mattress.

With her safely out of the way, he set his sights on the fat vermin who'd waddled under the bed.

Broden dropped to the floor and peered under the low bed frame.

The unbothered rodent looked back with bored eyes. Bored was decidedly different than the evil beady ones that had sized him up as a tasty meal. Not that it mattered. The thing needed to d—

Just then, Broden's *human* trespasser peeked her face out from under the bed.

Horror brought her perfectly formed eyebrows shooting up.

“What are you doing?” she asked on a terrified whisper, as if she feared Broden might run off the *rat*.

“Killing it,” he clipped out. “Now shut up before you scare it—”

She gasped. “You most certainly are *not* going to kill him.”

With that, she did something that proved a madwoman had invaded his rooms, after all—she curled onto her side and as far as her long limb allowed, reached for the rat.

“Come now, dearest,” she crooned. “Let us be done with this nasty cur.” She proceeded to speak in soft, soothing sounds, speaking nonsensical phrases, beckoning the thing over.

Confusion creased his brow.

Nasty cur?

“*I’m the nasty cur?*” he snapped. “Me, and not say, the fat rodent who’d tried to gnaw your feet off?”

They glared at one another.

“You are the one who is behaving like a gudgeon, Lord Broody. Furthermore, he is not a rodent.”

Broden sharpened his gaze on her. “What was that you said?” She’d slipped and used his name.

“Which part?” she asked, making another attempt to gather the rat up into her bare hands. “That you’re behaving like a gudgeon?”

Had he unsettled her enough that she’d been unable to hold her tongue?

“Or,” she continued, “the part about him not being a rodent, Lord Broody?”

The previously laconic, suddenly garrulous lady didn’t allow him so much as a breath, let alone a word. “Very well.

He *is* a rodent, but you needn't be so insulting by calling him a rat.”

Broden, who since he'd been wrongly convicted of a crime had become a master of emotion, lost all hold of his self-control. “He *is* a rat!”

Where all previous attempts to chase the rodent from its hiding place had failed, Broden's thunderous shout did the trick.

The fat, filthy beast waddled off as quickly as his big body allowed. It dashed out from under the bedframe, and straight to the waiting arms of Broden's two-legged nighttime *visitor*.

In an instant, the woman scooped the thing up.

He and she jumped to their feet at the exact same moment. All the while, the lady held the rat close, like she embraced a small, lovable pup and *not* a disease-ridden murine.

All to evade Broden, the maddening minx—the two-legged one—would jeopardize her very life by handling that creature? He gnashed his teeth. He'd not, however, have her death on his hands. Carrying regret over another woman he'd been unable to save had proved unbearable enough.

Broden saw red. “Put it down.”

She seethed in return. “I most certainly will not.”

“Fine,” he snapped. “Then, I'll take the damned thing from you myself.”

She swiftly presented Broden with her left shoulder and kept the bloody rat from him. “Do not come a step closer,” she

cried.

The hell he wouldn't.

“You'll risk your damned life for a rat?” he gnarled and continued closer.

Fear-filled eyes darted about. “There is no rat. As I told you—” She stopped short.

The woman glanced down and followed Broden's focus to the fluffy creature burrowed against her ample cleavage. When she again met Broden's focus, a blend of understanding and disbelief showed in her coffee-brown eyes.

“You...you actually believe he's a rat.” As soon as she uttered those words aloud, she spared the rodent another glance.

With far too much care and concern, she gripped the thing around its middle and turned it about so that its rear end faced Broden. The lady gave the rodent a gentle little shake. “He has no tail.”

He snorted. “I've seen plenty of rats without tails. They whip their tails at predators and lose them in those battles.”

At last, this particular revelation gave her pause. For the first time, she'd run to rescue the beastie from Broden, doubt entered her eyes. The question there was gone as quickly as it had come.

“This, sir, is no rat.”

“Then it is an oversized mouse.”

She shook her head. “He is not that, either. He is a guinea pig.”

Broden found himself hesitating the same way she had moments ago.

“He is a gift,” she went on to explain. “My aunt’s dear friend and neighbor delivered Sir Lancelot to us—”

“Sir Lancelot?” he repeated flatly.

The minx nodded, dislodging a handful of loose curls that tumbled from her messy chignon and bounced at her shoulders.

“You named that rat—”

“Guinea pig—”

“Sir Lancelot?” he asked incredulously over her correction.

She nodded. “I arrived, and well, you see, there’s a passageway connecting our rooms; a passageway I’d no idea of,” she added in a rush. “Sir Lancelot slipped into the closet, and I went in after him, only to find the entryway joining the two spaces.”

Broden said nothing for a long moment. “You expect me to believe *that* is how you came to be in my chambers?”

She bobbed her head in one of those quick up-and-down nods.

He snorted.

“Really?” The termagant retorted. “*That’s* harder to believe than me traveling the English countryside with a *rat* in my

company?” She spoke in deadly serious tones that the best London stage actress would be hard-pressed to emulate.

He exhaled a slow whistle. “You’re mad.”

“Oh, yes. I’m mad. Definitely not you who’s confusing guinea pigs for rats and squealing like a child when you *think* you see one. And who believes there’s some master plot hatched by nefarious others that brought me into your—a stranger, and a dangerous one at that—bedroom.”

She didn’t know him from Adam. For if she did, she’d gather the reason for his suspicions. Nay, the miseries he’d suffered proved she had no idea the outrageous and awful fate one person could exact against another.

A sudden, piercing scream echoed from the corridors and interrupted the rest of their argument.

As one, Broden and his mystery woman looked to the door.

She promptly went pale. “It is my maid,” she whispered, hugging her rodent-gift close. “I cannot be found with you.”

And he couldn’t be found with her. Whoever the hell she was, a scandal of that nature would ruin her. In fact... “Is that why you’re here, Ice Princess?” he hissed. “To trap me.”

“As I said, you’ve been availing yourself of far too many gothic novels,” she flung back. “Now, if you would go out into the hall, and distract her so that I might get myself to my rooms, and avoid the possibility of *us* being discovered, and *me* being ruined.”

And by the speed with which she flew to his closet, and disappeared inside, he'd be hard-pressed to do anything but believe she too found herself equally horrified at the prospect of them being trapped in marriage.

With that, Broden hurried to the hall, drew the panel open, and went to offer cover for both of them.

The moment he stepped outside, he was greeted by a sobbing maid, with her pale cheeks bright red and hair still wet from her travels. He gritted his teeth. No doubt she'd been made to ride atop the carriage box by the hellion.

At that moment, the girl of indeterminate years spoke wildly with the innkeeper. As she spoke, her hands flew as frantic as the words racing past her lips.

“May I help you?” Broden called.

When he didn't manage to penetrate the servant's caterwauling, Broden cupped his palms around his mouth and tried again. “May I help you?” he shouted.

At last, the pair looked over. The blubbering maid stopped her crying, and blinking wildly, she looked at Broden. “M-My mistress.”

He narrowed his eyes. Aye, the tart-mouthed beauty would rouse terror in the hearts of her staff.

“H-Her bath was d-delivered. I made to tell her but...”

Ah, so she feared earning her mistress's wrath.

“I-I d-do not know what I will d-do.” With that, the young woman buried her face into her hands and sobbed all the

harder.

A remarkably—and deceptively—sweet contralto pierced the hollo-ballo. “Is there a problem, Miss Fenwick?”

As one, Broden, the distraught maid, and ashen innkeeper looked over.

The lady, even disheveled and thoroughly rumped and her chignon having come undone about her shoulders, stood, as regal as a queen, assessing the hubbub, she’d wrought.

And God help him, or more, forgive him, at the sight of her, Broden found himself knocked speechless.

At some point, since she’d made her escape from Broden’s room, the vixen’s hair had come undone. Now, the thick, lustrous strains—blends of umber and dark chocolate—cascaded about her delicate, narrow shoulders.

With every graceful step she took that brought her closer to Broden, those curls bounced loosely about the middle of her back.

His throat went dry, and a wave of unexpected hunger stirred within him.

Maybe she was some mythical siren, for every unkind thought he’d ever carried about the nameless woman, fled his head. Broden stood, besotted, bewitched, and hopelessly mesmerized, as he gawked like the green lad, he’d earlier vowed he wasn’t.

A little frown teased the corners of her lips. She gave Broden a questioning look.

What was she thinking? Or asking? Everything had become all scrambled in his head.

A high-pitched sob managed to penetrate that charged moment that held him ensnared. “M-M-Miiissss!”

The girl took flight, and at the suddenness of those quick steps, Broden resumed blinking, and the earth resumed spinning.

Vexed with himself, and by the lofty lady, he folded his arms at his chest. “Scaring your maids, I see, Miss—?” he asked derisively, still seeking her identity.

An identity which she continued to cling impressively tightly to.

The lady looked daggers at Broden.

Ultimately, however, it wasn't she who spoke up in defense of herself, but rather the unlikely part of the pair.

The maid's tears stopped, and she whirled about to level a surprisingly impressive black glare on Broden. “How dare you speak ill of my mistress?”

“You mean, the same mistress who insisted you carry all her bags and forced you to ride on the driver's bench in the middle of a winter storm?” he gentled his tone. “Quite easily.”

“You have no idea what you are talking about, sir,” she snapped.

The mistress in question dropped a hand on her servant's shoulder and said something quietly for the girl's ears alone.

In an unexpected show of defiance, the girl pursed her lips, shrugged off that touch, and proceeded to *enlighten* Broden.

“My mistress is kind and good and patient.” She jabbed an angry digit his way. “And I’ll not have you, a presumptuous, unmannerly *gentleman* speak about what you do not know.”

Here he’d taken the girl to be fragile and faint-hearted. It begged the question what else had he been wrong about this night?

Broden forced his focus back to the still-glowing servant.

“You may insist your travel arrangements were tolerable, but your appearance says otherwise.” He gave a pointed look at her reddened cheeks and still-damp hair.

“Are you always this rude?” Lady No Name snapped.

He snorted. “*I’m* the rude one? And not you, who entered this inn after reducing your servant to tears?”

Anger flashed in her eyes.

At that transparency, and not for the first time, sprung doubts about the first assumption he’d drawn about her appearance in his rooms.

The minx found her voice. “You know nothing about what transpired on our journey. You were a voyeur in a brief exchange, the details of which you aren’t even privy, and from that, you took me to be wanting?”

A niggling of doubt crept in. When she put it that way...

And yet, he knew what his eyes had seen, and he also knew nothing merited her shortness with both the girl and

innkeeper.

“And what of the innkeeper whom you treated with such disdain?”

She eyed him like he’d gone mad. “*Mr. Turvey?*”

He frowned. *Who in hell is Mr. Turvey?*

“Mr. Turvey,” she snapped. “You know, our benevolent, informed-about-the-history-of-this-fascinating-establishment, *innkeeper.*”

Broden looked over at the forgotten pair—servant and innkeeper—staring wide-eyed at Broden and the lady he quarreled with.

With his usual wide smile, the portly fellow flashed a sheepish smile and gave a little wave.

Broden returned his attention to Lady No Name.

Nay, No Name didn’t suit her. With her formidable spirit, strength, and mettle, she was a veritable Eleanor of Aquitaine.

A droll grin formed on her lush lips, which were even more commanding and tempting up close.

“Never tell me,” she began slowly. Absolute glee dripped from each syllable that left her mouth. “*you*, found *me* icily disdainful to our innkeeper, the *same* innkeeper whose name you do not know.” She laughed. “Now, *that* is rich.”

“I’m aware of his name,” he muttered. Granted he hadn’t until she’d uttered it.

The minx snorted. “You didn’t know it until I said it.”

Fair enough. But he'd sooner admit as much than adopt the rat she called a guinea pig as a pet of his own.

A tense, heavy silence fell over the quartet.

The innkeeper rang his big, callused hands, and appeared a moment's away from dissolving into the same tears that had riddled the now surprisingly stalwart maid.

The lady gave Broden one last, contempt-filled look, and then turned her attention to her maid.

"Come along, Joan," she began with a gentleness Broden hadn't heard from the lady, or for that matter believed her capable of.

"But he needs to—"

"It does not matter what he thinks, Joan," she assured her.

For Broden's part, he may as well have been invisible to the pair now speaking about him.

The young maid gave a reluctant nod.

With a warm parting greeting for Mr. Turvey and not so much as another glance Broden's way, Lady No Name headed to her rooms.

The pair disappeared inside but not before Joan snuck a final irate frown Broden's way.

The arched oak panel closed with a faint click, leaving Broden and Mr. Turvey alone.

"Is there anything you require, my lord?" the innkeeper asked. His eyes glowed with a clear desire to leave and leave quickly.

“No, that is all. Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Turvey.”

A palpably relieved Mr. Turvey dropped a bow and bolted off as if he feared Broden might change his mind and keep him here at the sight of the spectacular row.

Broden stood there alone, long after the older man had gone.

What in hell had overcome him? He'd prided himself on being a master of self-control. He didn't give in to displays of emotion. In fact, while he'd been imprisoned, exercising restraint over his words and feelings had kept him from vicious beatings and worse.

So, what was it about that miffy woman whom he'd caught red-handed in his rooms that had left him off-balance, and turned him into someone he didn't recognize?

After the initial shock and fury of discovering her there and witnessing her tenderly cradling that rodent that, in fact, hadn't been a rat, it'd been clear why she'd been there.

He'd never been a man to scare young ladies or treat them with anything but respect. She'd accused him of being mad, and she wasn't wrong on that score.

Broden hadn't returned the same.

But then, how could he?

What he'd witnessed, what he'd done... what he'd *lost*? All that would drive any person crazy. Along the way, he'd lost not only himself, but his way.

It was why he took care to avoid anything more than short interactions with his family. It was why he didn't attend *ton* gatherings.

It was why he'd not wanted to go to this damned winter party his still blithe parents had hosted since he'd been a boy, and, apparently, continued to host in his absence, and now upon Broden's return.

With a sigh, he headed back for his room.

Click.

He looked quickly as the door next to his opened.

The odd anticipation that'd unknowingly crested in his chest, vanished, the moment a small, plump figure stepped outside, and closed the door behind her.

Joan, the lady's maid.

Only this time it was Joan with fire in her eyes, and a warning glint that said clearer than words that if he thought to lock himself in his chambers, she'd break his door down.

That loyal, and more than a little bit terrifying maid, jabbed a finger at Broden. "You," she mouthed. "Don't. Move."

Given her mistress had cut short whatever castigation the young woman had intended to say, Joan very clearly wanted her piece said. And the least he could do as a gentleman was allow her to dress him down.

The moment she reached him, Broden bowed his head.

“Do not,” she stuck a finger up towards his face, “try to be a gentleman now. It is too late for that.”

He wasn't really a gentleman though. Not anymore.

“I'll have you know I was terrified of the carriage ride...”

Ah. “So, I wasn't wrong on that sc—”

She shoved a pointy digit into his chest.

Broden grunted.

“You sir, were wrong on *every* score. I sat beside my mistress in the carriage. She allowed me a blanket and a warming box and stopped for the night all because *I* was afraid. Not for her comfort.”

That properly silenced him.

“And when we arrived? She held onto that precious guinea pig she had been asked to deliver to her young sister for Christmas so he did not fall. She gave me the task of carrying two bags so I had a distraction from my fears.”

Well.

With every revelation, Broden squirmed a little bit more.

Joan wasn't done with him. Not by a long shot.

“My mistress ordered me a warm bath, hot meal, and additional blankets. How many ladies do *you* know who put their servant's comfort ahead of their own?”

None. He didn't know a single one.

Stunned, he whipped his gaze over to that panel the lady remained closeted behind.

“*And,*” Joan glared, “she used her own, hard-earned coin to do so.”

Her hard-earned coin? Which implied the lady...*worked*.

“I...didn’t know,” he said dumbly. Because really, what else could he say?

The loyal maid grunted. “Why would you? My mistress isn’t one to share her good deeds.”

“I...was in the wrong.” That managed to do what nothing else had prior—it silenced Joan.

She opened and closed her mouth several times before she regained her voice.

“You most certainly were.” With a last denigratory up and down glance, the young maid marched past Broden, and onto a different set of rooms.

And the lady, a woman who worked, had paid for separate suites for the girl? That costly gift was not one most lords and ladies would take on.

This lady deserved a name. Rather, he needed to know her identity.

“Miss Joan?” he called quietly over, just as the young woman made to open her door.

She looked questioningly at him.

“I would like to make my apologies to your mistress. Would you be so good as to share her name with me?”

Joan, Defender of the Wronged, an apt name for the maid, emitted another derisive snort. “As if I would share that

information with you, sir.”

With that, she stomped off, and Broden found himself alone in the hall once more, with only the memory of each disclosure that revealed what a bastard he’d been that night.

Chapter 6

Later that night, Elyse lay upon her slightly concave, but still comfortable mattress, and stared at the ceiling overhead.

Sleep eluded her.

Usually, this time of year left Elyse melancholy and gripped by thoughts of the sister she'd lost, and the family she no longer knew how to be around.

However, it was neither the bed, nor the relentless northern winds battering the lone window in her room, nor even thoughts of Evie that kept her from slumber.

This time, she lay in bed, focused on thoughts of *him*.

Elyse shivered; a faint tremble that moved up her person and wasn't driven by fear. Dread was decidedly the reaction she should be consumed by.

He'd been rude and surly and dangerous and condescending and certainly someone she should never again wish to cross paths with, let alone lay sleepless over, and with a peculiar fluttering in her belly at the mere memory of him.

He'd possessed a bulk of muscle in his arms and shoulders which had strained the high-quality black wool fabric of his frock coat. And God help her for having noticed—and worse—for continuing to recall the rigid planes of his features.

Undoubtedly, while she remained wide awake and alert, *he* slept as blissful as a babe in the very room they'd tangled. Elyse angled her head towards the secret corridor that had

brought that miserable man into her life and glared. “Sir Broody on the *other* hand,” she muttered. “wouldn’t spare me and my unremarkable wiles so much as a single thought.”

Which was fine. Why should she give a fig what a man so rude, so outrageous, and unkind thought about her?

So why in blazes did she lay here thinking about him?

Letting out a frustrated groan, Elyse flopped over and punched her pillow repeatedly. When that did little to ease her exasperation, she buried her face into that bolster and screamed into the fabric.

And here she’d thought taking sanctuary from the storm and delaying her yearly reunion with her family had been the best and safest option. Laying here with sleep out of reach only added to her frazzled nerves.

Abandoning her futile and already too-long attempt at sleep, Elyse swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her stockings muted some of the floor’s chill.

Hastening over to the dress she’d worn and discarded earlier, she pulled it on over her chemise, and, reaching her arms awkwardly and painfully behind her, she saw to the neat row of buttons there.

Once properly fastened, she donned a pair of slippers and headed to the front of the room.

She let herself out; the well-oiled hinges didn’t so much as whine or squeal. The same, however, could not be said for the groaning hardwood floors, and noisy stairs she descended.

The moment she reached the landing, she did a sweep of the taproom. A blazing fire still roared in the medieval hearth, radiating a surprisingly bountiful heat that managed to chase the nip left by the fierce winter winds. The pale orange glow cast a soft light throughout the quaint, hospitable inn.

The handful of patrons who'd previously filled the room had since either taken themselves off to their respective accommodations or continued on their way, after sneaking a brief respite from the terrific storm.

She went to claim the empty table closest to that welcoming fire and drew out the same chair that had been occupied earlier by a brooding stranger. The same brooding stranger who'd filled her thoughts and stolen her sleep.

Just as she made to sit, Elyse froze. Her skin prickled, with the feeling of being watched. And then, she stopped. For the one whose penetrating eyes bore a hole into her soul was none other than...

Him.

Of course.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Elyse made herself muster all the grace and aplomb she could and then sat as if she and he were strangers, and not two people who'd butted heads from the moment she'd arrived at The Mermaid Inn.

Seated at the table in the furthest, rear left corner of the establishment, Sir Broody considered her from over the top of a pewter tankard. Unlike before, however, his dangerously

handsome features remained devoid of their earlier scorn and curiously opaque.

She tamped down a groan. The hell, however, if she'd let him run her off.

Then, with slow, deliberate movements, he nodded his head.

Elyse wrinkled her brow.

Not that did he so in a condescending way.

Thrown off-balance by the lack of mockery in that silent, and even...respectful greeting, Elyse remained confused as to how to respond.

Just tip your head in cool greeting, and then look away.

Wait, no! He was rude beyond belief, and as such didn't deserve any acknowledgment on her part.

But I'm not petty, and I'm certainly the bigger person.

In the end, the decision on how to respond was made for her. A thickset figure stepped between Elyse and the baffling gentleman.

Mr. Turvey boomed in a voice both jovial and alert as if it was mid-day and not well past midnight. "Hullo, miss!"

She managed to muster a smile for the kindly innkeeper. "A pleasure, Mr. Turvey."

A sudden worry marred his heavy features. "Are there problems with your accommodations, miss? Is that why—?"

“Not at all,” she said soothingly, so as to end the proud servant’s worrying. “In the midst of a wild winter storm, I always find myself too excited to sleep.”

That usual smile found its way back onto Mr. Turvey’s fleshy lips.

Cupping a big hand around the side of his mouth, he spoke in a less than discreet whisper. “Always did fancy a good storm, myself.”

“I knew I recognized good people in you, Mr. Turvey.”

He beamed all the brighter and then tugged at his lapels. “May I fetch refreshments for you?”

“A tankard of your finest ale, if you would?”

As further credit to the innkeeper, he didn’t reveal so much as an outward reaction to a lady requesting ale. He dropped a bow and hurried off, only to return moments later with a pewter mug to match Sir Broody’s and filled to the brim.

With a word of thanks, Elyse cradled the drink in her hands.

Only when he’d taken himself off, back to the kitchens and she was alone, did Elyse sip at the stout, dark brew. She welcomed the warm bite of her drink, and, after she’d taken several more sips, stared into the particularly fine ale.

A long-ago memory resurrected from the buried recesses of her mind, stirred to life—of Elyse tugging Evie by the hand into their family’s kitchens, long after the staff had taken themselves abed. This time, just as she did every Christmastide Season, Elyse allowed those thoughts in.

Elyse cajoled her big sister. “Come, Evie, we must try it.”

“Ladies do not—”

“Oh, fiddle-faddle, Evie,” she interrupted, leading to the kitchen table where sat a pitcher filled with ale. “Why is it fine for our dear brother Nicholas and Lord Gladwin to have all the fun?”

Together, they sat and stared silently and big-eyed at the forbidden beverage.

Elyse made the first move and reached for two tankards.

Her sister instantly rested her fingers atop Elyse’s, effectively halting that movement. “I have something I must confess, Ellie—”

“Evie,” Elyse said in hushed tones. “You may try to be a proper lady. I, on the other hand, do not intend to allow life to pass me by without experiencing all of it.”

With that, Elyse took her first sip and promptly choked.

Evie burst out laughing.

And then, through tears wrought by Elyse’s fit, she peered with blurry eyes at her big sister.

Evie lifted her tankard in silent salute and then took a long, slow, and impressively smooth swallow of her drink. One that indicated this hadn’t been the first draught of ale she’d indulged in.

When she’d finished the entire contents of her glass, Evie dusted the back of her hand across her mouth.

Elyse widened her eyes. “That is what you intended to tell me.”

Evie grinned. “Sometimes it is important to throw caution to the wind and enjoy living a bit more.”

Following that sage advice she doled out, Evie let loose a long, low belch better suited to their big brother, Nicholas, than a tiny lady.

Their joy-filled laughter reverberated like a distant echo, and Elyse squeezed her eyes shut tight, desperate, and aching to hold onto that moment; to live in it that long-ago time where her sister still lived, and—

“I believe you are the first lady I’ve ever known who drinks ale.”

That powerful baritone, now mellow, where before it had been biting slashed across those happy thoughts, plucking Elyse from the past she wished to dwell forever in and depositing her, instead, right in the pain of the present.

Jolted unpleasantly back, she peered dumbly up at the man towering over her table. Of course, he, the same man who’d accused Elyse of robbery would, in snatching away her remembrances of Evie, prove to be the greatest, cruelest thief of all.

Then, through the shock of finding him here, of all places, the earlier words he’d just spoken registered.

“I believe you are the first lady I’ve ever known who drinks ale.”

She seethed. This one sought to give *her* a lesson in propriety?

She'd be damned, however, if she let him get a rise out of her.

Elyse smiled a deliberately false smile. "But *you* have heard it is perfectly fine for a gentleman to invite himself to speak to an unmarried lady he does not know, in a taproom?"

"Certainly not." He smiled; it was the first time his hard lips had been moved by anything but derision. This grin, however, was lazy and more than a little rueful.

Elyse set her drink down hard. The ale swayed back and forth in her tankard and sprinkled drops over the side of the rim. "Is that why you've come to my table? To insult me by calling me unladylike?"

"No!" An honest, boyish blush suffused his cheeks and briefly startled the thoughts from Elyse's head.

He blushed? This man?

It was a fact that would have been endearing...that was *if* the lout weren't so unmannered and boorish.

"I didn't come to insult you," he said, earnestly.

"Then, why are you—?"

"I came to apologize." Even spoken in quiet, solemn tones, the gentleman's words carried in the quiet. "I came to apologize," he repeated, at her silence.

It was a good thing she'd been sitting. She eyed him dubiously. "I don't believe it."

“Aye, well, it appears there’s a good deal of that sentiment being shared this night, as I don’t believe how I conducted myself earlier.”

Aye. Her ear picked up on that Scottish word; a peculiar choice given his crisp, King’s English. Despite herself, Elyse found her curiosity piqued.

He gestured to the open seat across from her. “May I join you?”

Incredulous, Elyse followed that sweep of his arm. “*You* want to sit?”

He nodded.

“*Here? With me?*”

“If you’ll allow it.”

If she’d allow it?

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him absolutely not; to take himself off to his table, his rooms, or anywhere else that wasn’t here.

Simply speaking alone with a man was scandalous. Her granting him permission to sit didn’t make his being here alone with her acceptable. Were he to join Elyse, who sat here without the benefit of a chaperon, was the manner of stuff that ruined a young lady’s reputation.

Taking her protracted silence as a declination, he bowed. “If you’ll excuse me? I shouldn’t have infringed. I will leave you to your own company.”

As he *should*.

He turned to leave.

“...*Sometimes it's important to throw caution to the wind and enjoy living a bit more...*” Her sister's words played again in Elyse's mind.

“Wait!” *Wait?* Elyse dampened her lips. Had she *really* just asked him to stay?

The previously angry, now abashed stranger, turned back quickly...and it was hard to say who was more stunned by Elyse's request.

But for the distant clattering of wood plates as Mr. Turvey worked back in the kitchens, silence filled the room. The handsome gentleman remained equanimous; letting Elyse determine whether or not she'd truly wanted him to stay.

She did a rapid search of the taproom and found every table still unoccupied, and every seat empty. Just she and this enigmatic stranger remained.

“...*Sometimes it's important to throw caution to the wind and enjoy living a bit more...*”

“You...may join me,” she said softly.

He slid into the curved oak dining chair, with the alacrity of one who feared if she thought on it too much, she might rescind that offer—and probably she would have.

Tankard in hand, the gentleman reclined in his seat.

They sat in a surprisingly comfortable silence; each assessing the other, and occasionally sipping their ale.

He finally spoke first. “We got off to a bad start.”

“Yes.” Elyse smiled wryly. “Though, given I broke into your rooms, I expect yours is a generous understatement.”

“And I took you for a thief, with nefarious intentions.”

“And we mustn’t forget the quarrel over Sir Lancelot,” she reminded him. “Whom you *did* attempt to kill.”

“Sir Lancelot who *might* be a rat.”

“Who is *decidedly* a guinea pig.”

He inclined his head. “Very well. A rodent, then. On that, we can likely concur?”

“We shan’t. However, I confess, when I learned I’d have to not only make the journey north but that I’d be forced to do so with Sir Lancelot for company, I was quite cross.”

“Where are you enroute to?”

And just like that, Elyse found herself slapped with the reminder that this disconnect from the world and her family was approaching a rapid end.

She released a sigh. “Where do we *all* travel at this time of year?”

They spoke at the same time. “Family.”

They exchanged another, this time, a commiserative smile.

“He is quite a cuddlesome, affectionate fellow.” She grimaced. “If occasionally a troublemaker.”

Goodness, how things had changed. Here she sat defending the same creature whose existence she’d first bemoaned.

“*That*, we can agree on then.” Her companion for the night lifted his glass, and she took that signal for what it was.

Hefting her tankard up, Elyse touched her rim to his, and then, they shared another drink...and a smile.

He considered her over the rim of his tankard. “Never tell me...You do not have the benefit of parents and find yourself at the mercy of a wicked guardian with a love of rats and you’ve taken your favorite one and fled?”

Her lips twitched.

“I take that by the smile you’re hiding, I’m nearly on the mark?”

“I’m thinking you continue to show quite the gothic bend in stories, and that you couldn’t be further from the *mark*.”

Her unlikely companion gave her another long look.

“Impoverished parents with four daughters—you being one included in that number—and with there being no heir, you are expected to make a match to save your beloved sisters?”

“Wrong again. Beloved parents, four...” She faltered. “four...”

Only, there were no longer four Caldecott girls still living. The pain of that loss would never, ever go away.

“Three sisters,” she managed to say, in a hoarse whisper. “Three sisters in all.” With all the same agony and two very much alive parents.

Odd, Evie had been gone so long, and this was only the first time Elyse had uttered those words.

She felt his penetrating stare on her and looked up.

From under long, thick, black lashes, he carefully studied her. “If these parents are so beloved, then why are they not here now?”

“It is...complicated.”

“Complicated,” he repeated, sounding as if he hoped she’d say more.

“Complicated,” she said again, and this time he let the matter rest and for that she was grateful.

Elyse raised her tankard and took a sip.

“I expect this would be a good time for us to share our names?” he suggested.

Elyse snorted mid-swallow. Ale instantly burned her nostrils, and she choked.

The mystifying gentleman instantly snapped out an exceptionally white, monogrammed kerchief, and handed it over.

With a muffled word of thanks, Elyse availed herself of that offering. She went to blow into the elegant fabric when her gaze caught on the intricate, silver-blue threaded initials emblazoned there: “BBBB”

BBBB

That was a...lot of ‘B’s.

Taking care to avoid that delicate needlework, Elyse exhaled forcefully into the silk handkerchief, with such vigor that had her mother heard it, she would have subjected Elyse to a daylong lecture on what constituted appropriate, and *inappropriate* behavior, for a lady.

Except, she didn't give so much as a single thought about propriety, or the impropriety of her current situation. Instead, she sat here, musing over those four "B's." Nay, more aptly, Elyse found herself transfixed by those initials.

"I know what you are thinking," he said, as Elyse delicately wiped at her nose.

Not in a thousand years could he ever. "If it's that we should share our Christian names, then *you'd* be far from the mark, *again*," she drawled.

"You are thinking it is a lot of B's."

Elyse started. Why, Mr. Mysterious, as she'd since silently changed his name to, had probably *given* her his handkerchief because he'd *known* she'd be tempted to share hers, all so she could figure out those four B's.

Oh, the Thingumabob.

Elyse found her voice. "I'm thinking the embroiderer must have made a mistake."

"She most certainly didn't and would be quite offended by that assumption."

Her stomach of a sudden, became queasy. "You're married," she said woodenly.

Please, don't tell me I am sitting here with—

“It was my mother,” he murmured. A shadow flickered across his eyes. “I’m not married.” He glanced briefly down. “I never have been.”

Elyse didn’t know how to account for the sweeping relief at his revelation. Unaccountably giddy, it took a moment before she noted the somber and sad set of *BBBB*’s features. All she wished to do was take them back to mere moments ago when their exchange had been playful and light.

“Barnaby Bernard Brixton Brevard?” she piped in.

He stared confusedly at her.

“Hmm.” Feigning a deep pondering, she tapped the tip of her index finger against her chin. “Based on *that* reaction, I trust not a single one of those ventures on my part, were correct.”

Elyse released an exaggerated sigh. “Imagine all those B’s and I’ve not gotten a single one accurate?”

Understanding dawned in his eyes, and just like that, his lighthearted grin returned. “Not a one.”

“Hmph.” Elyse picked up her tankard. “Perhaps this is for the best, as we should not divulge our identities to one another.”

“You needn’t give me yours,” he said.

Elyse stopped with the rim of her glass at her lips. “That is fine,” she wagged her eyebrows, “as I stated, I have no intention of—”

“I already *have* a name for you.”

She stopped suddenly and frowned. “You cannot *name* someone who already *has* a name.”

“Aye, but as you pointed out, you are in possession of it, and I am not. As such, I’m forced to think of you by *something*, lass.”

“Need you think of me at all?” she asked teasingly.

“I...can’t seem *not* to.” He sounded and looked as befuddled as a boy mixed up over his tutor’s latest lessons.

Elyse’s chest knocked funnily against her ribcage. Before, thoughts of their earlier exchange slapped her. “Unimpressive wiles.”

“What if I share mine?”

She wavered. Because she wanted his Christian name. She *desperately* wished to know. But more importantly than her intrigue, she must keep her identity secret. Elyse had no intention of marrying. She would be content to continue serving Aunt Hester for the rest of their lives. Elyse’s sisters, on the other hand, all were of marriageable age and wished to eventually make a match. She couldn’t sully their surname.

“You’re thinking about it.”

“I am not.” Not at this particular moment, anyway.

He smirked. “You are a bad liar.”

“And you, yet again, appear to be sorely lacking on the rules of propriety—”

“I am, and quite happily so.”

Elyse rested her elbows on the table and cradled her tankard between her hands. “You are a rebel, then.”

He—Mr. BBBB—mirrored her movements. “I prefer to think of myself as a free thinker.”

Elyse leaned closer to him. “Then, I must be the one to subject you to a lecture.”

“I am read—”

“It is unpardonable to call someone a liar, Mr. *BBBB*. In fact, if I were a man, I would be required to call you out.”

A grim smile formed on his lips. “Then, let us be glad you are a woman, as I’ll be spared a ball to the chest, and you won’t end up in prison for the crime of murder.”

That cryptic glint darkened his blue eyes to a grim black. This time, that gleam was gone so quick it may as well have been a flicker cast from the glow of the nearby fireplace, and her own imagining.

“Look me in the eye and tell me you weren’t wanting to know my name, and even considering exchanging yours?” he challenged.

“I already said as much and see no need to repeat myself.”

He gave her a knowing look. “*Mm-Hm.*”

Before Elyse could stop herself, she shot her slippered foot out and delivered a playful kick to his shins.

They both froze.

His slightly curved eyebrows climbed a fraction. “Did you...*kick* me?”

“No?” The stridency in her voice, however, managed to creep that denial into a question.

“‘No’. or, ‘No?’?”

Regardless of the light direction their conversation had taken, she and he were still strangers. And strangers—most definitely not ladies—did not go about kicking people.

“I’ll have you know, Mr. BBBB, I was not lying. In fact, I’m also known for being a very skilled Brag player.”

He snorted. “You certainly *did* kick me. And based on your less than convincing ‘no’, I find it very hard to believe you’re skilled in any card games.” He continued over her gasp. “So much so, I’d be willing to duel you on *that* charge.”

Elyse laughed, and, as if her amusement had been contagious, he joined in.

After their mirth had faded, they sat in a congenial silence and resumed partaking in their refreshments.

Or Elyse did. As she drank, she sensed his gaze upon her. Neither of them said anything, however. It was a moment before she realized she’d finished the rest of her ale.

A soft and welcome warmth filled Elyse; it left her all languid and soft inside. Maybe it was because they’d gotten on so well during this intimate taproom exchange, or perhaps it was the fortifying effects of the spirits she’d consumed, but Elyse lifted her eyes.

Her breath stuck in her chest.

He—this man with no name—stared intently back at *her*. His blue eyes, dark and hypnotic, moved lightly over her face.

“You may call me, Bran,” he murmured, the deep, rich, resonance of his baritone drew her more deeply under whatever spell this was he’d cast.

His...name. He’d shared with her, his name.

“Bran,” she repeated, testing the feel and sound of it. Elyse smiled softly. “It suits you.” It fit this man who’d blushed and revealed a boyish side.

“It’s not my real...or maybe, *full* name, rather. And it’s quite dreadful, I know. My younger sister saddled me with it when she first learned to speak.”

“I think it is adorable.”

He chuckled. “My days of ‘adorable’ have long passed.”

She begged to disagree—silently, of course. She’d not very well admit in this surprising exchange he’d proven unexpectedly humble and endearing.

“And what have you named me?” she asked, unsure where that question came from, and more, why she should care. And yet, she did.

“Ah-ah. Not unless you tell me—at least part of your name, as I did.”

“What if I guess?”

He dropped an elbow on the table and leaned closer. “You are free to try.”

“Bertha?”

“Not beautiful enough for you.”

Caught off-guard, Elyse drew back. *He thinks I'm beautiful?*

Surely not. Surely, he spoke with a glib tongue. Elyse knew *that* with a woman's logic but couldn't stop butterflies from dancing and fluttering about her belly and breast.

No one had ever called her beautiful.

Though, in fairness neither had he.

The memory of his first and honest opinion of her cut through the almost compliment he'd almost given.

If you've come to use your...unremarkable wiles to snare me, you're bound to be disappointed...

That reminder had a sobering effect that killed the playfulness of the moment.

“It is late,” he murmured.

“Yes.” She should have certainly supplied him with an answer long ago.

Bran stared at her. Then, she comprehended the actual meaning behind those three words. He'd not been saying her guess had been late. *He* was suggesting they part ways.

“Oh,” she blurted. A painful blush burned her cheeks, and she prayed he mistook that color for a product of the fire's glow.

Well, if that didn't quite shore up his actual thoughts on her being in possession of any real beauty.

Elyse pushed her chair back and stood quickly. “Yes. It is late.”

Bran jumped to his feet.

They both hovered there; frozen, neither of them moved.

Only one of them, she knew, wished this exchange to continue. The fact, however, that the other one of them did not, was what managed to spring her into movement.

Elyse stretched her arm across the scarred tabletop and held her hand out to Bran. He stared a moment, and then folded his fingers around hers; his palm dwarfed hers, those long digits swallowed hers up in a surprisingly tender hold.

They drew back at the same time.

“Bran,” she murmured.

“Eleanor,” he returned in equally solemn tones.

She blinked, puzzledly. *Elean—*

Her name! That was the made-up one he’d given her.

“Eleanor,” she repeated back, testing it the same way she had his nickname.

“After Eleanor of Aquitaine.”

Elyse suddenly wished she’d paid more attention to her history lessons. What was more, she wished she could remain here in this taproom with him and ask him all about the legends around that long-ago queen.

“Farewell, Bran.”

“Eleanor.”

Hearing a goodbye in that elegant name he'd provided her with, Elyse quit the table and headed for the stairs leading to the rooms above. All the while, she felt his gaze upon her, burning into her retreating form.

Elyse reached the stone steps, and, to keep from turning back to look at him once more, she rested her fingertips on the railing, and gripped it hard.

The front door flew open. The bang of the panel striking the wall, together with the gust of wind, brought Elyse whipping around.

A pair of big, burly men, whose cheeks had gone red from the cold, entered. As they did, they howled with laughter. Between their damp boots and long, threadbare overcoats, they left large puddles of dampness in the small foyer.

Before Elyse could take herself off, they noted her.

One of the men, doffed his hat, revealing a bald pate. He flashed a yellow, nearly toothless grin.

“What a happy sight, on this dreary, winter’s night,” he declared. “Isn’t she, Barnaby?”

Barnaby, with a few more teeth than his friend, sized her up like she was the cooked Christmas goose. “Pretty enough, she be, Bernard.”

Bernard? Barnaby? If nervousness hadn’t begun to take root, she would have laughed.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said stiffly and made to go.

Before Elyse could retreat, Bernard clapped a hand around her arm. She automatically tensed and attempted to tug free.

“Good evening, *gentlemen*.” The silken softness of that interjection, quiet as a whisper, but forceful as a shot in the night. “Is there something *I* can help you with?”

As one, Elyse and the two strangers looked to the owner of that lethal greeting.

Bran.

Bernard blanched and yanked his offending hand belatedly from Elyse’s arm. And with good reason. For tall as they were, Bran still easily possessed four inches over the men who were his lesser in every way.

At that, he wasn’t as she’d left him moments ago trading jests and smiling and teasing. Rather, this version was the one he’d been during their first encounter: dark, menacing, dangerous.

Elyse’s heart raced madly.

At the protracted silence, Bran looked between the two, quaking men. “Is there a problem here?”

Like a pair of doltish twins, Barnaby and Bernard shook their heads wildly. Their enormous Adam’s apples at a like point in their throats jumped even more erratically.

“N-No, Your Lordship.” Barnaby’s deeper voice climbed to an impressively high tenor.

Bernard swallowed loudly. “D-Didn’t know she was yours, m’lord.”

If looks could kill, both men would have been smote where they stood under the lethality of Bran's unforgiving stare.

"Women *don't* belong to anyone. They are the keeper of themselves."

Oh, God, help her. For Elyse had no intention of falling in love. But if she were capable of freeing herself to experience that emotion, she'd have gone and fallen heels over head in love with him.

"Now," Bran said to the strangers, whom she'd already all but forgot about, "may I suggest strongly, that you both take yourself off and find another inn to frequent? N—"

That suggestion had no sooner left Bran's mouth when Barnaby and Bernard scrambled, tripping over themselves to open the door and squeeze through it.

Elyse watched as they scurried off. Yes, she'd agree that the tempest outside was a good deal less threatening than the formidable gentleman who glared at them.

The moment they'd gone, Bran pushed the door closed behind them so that he and Elyse were alone together.

She dampened her lips. "Thank—"

He swiftly cut off the rest of that requital. "You needn't thank me," he said. "Just as you shouldn't have to deal with loutish behavior from brassy men." Bran swept his arm out, and she followed his gesture to the stairway. "May I escort you to your rooms?"

She'd been on her own so long. Serving as a companion to her Aunt Hester, it'd been Elyse always looking after someone

else. And it felt...so very nice that he...that anyone, cared about her well-being. The power of this unfamiliar emotion proved so powerful and so terror-inducing that she attempted to add some levity to their exchange.

“You might find it both unbelievable and hilarious, but those two fiends happened to be named Barnaby and Bernard.”

He ground his teeth so mightily, Elyse detected the click as bone brushed bone.

“I find nothing about this situation hilarious,” he hissed.

Unable to move words past the sudden lump in her throat, Elyse nodded, and allowed him to accompany her above stairs and to her room.

She gave him the only thing he seemed to want—her silence.

Chapter 7

Broden escorted the strong-willed lady to her rooms, in silence.

With him following just behind her, they made the slow climb up the darkened stairwell. All the while, he wished she'd cheerfully prattled and jested as they walked. Her gaiety was like some sort of elixir that managed to stamp out darkness.

Instead, Broden found only his dark, ugly thoughts for company. He fought to get a grapple on the mindless rage which had consumed him the moment those bloody bastards confronted her. And when that tall, toothless bastard dared to wrap his fleshy fingers about her slim, delicate arm?

A blackened fury descended over his vision, and briefly blinded him all over again.

The sight of that loathsome fellow with his hand upon her had nearly transformed Broden into the killer he'd been previously—and wrongly—accused of being.

Panic knocked around his chest.

What accounted for these uncontrollable affectivities? What was it about *this* particular woman that roused him to every imaginable sentiment—emotions, which after all he'd endured, he'd believed himself incapable of feeling?

Stop. It's merely that you first mistook her for a beautiful thief.

Broden wasn't capable of loving anymore, but that didn't mean he was completely dead in *other* ways. He was still a flesh and blood man, who felt desire for spirited, voluptuous, women. Having largely locked himself away since his return, it was simply that he hadn't been around many other women. Or he was certain he'd respond the very same way.

And as for his fury at those bumbling fools, Broden would have felt that *same* rage had they touched any woman the way they'd dared grab...Eleanor.

And that was *another* thing! He didn't even know her damned name. Some fellow, maybe a spotless, nescient do-gooder might have gotten all twisted up over the brief interludes he had experienced this night, with a woman he'd literally only just met.

Broden, however, was decidedly *not* that man. For that matter, he'd *never* been that man. Not even when he'd fallen in love with Arabella had Broden lost all hold of logic. He hadn't been then, and he certainly wasn't capable now of grand emotions.

"Bran?"

That name, spoken in a remarkably, sweet contralto pulled him to the present.

He glanced confusedly about.

His gaze collided with *Eleanor's* concerned one.

"We've arrived," she whispered.

Arrived?

Then, it hit him.

Shaking his head once and hard, he dropped a bow.
“Eleanor.”

“Bran,” she said his name in a near soundless voice, so light he needed to strain in order to hear. In a clear worry that someone had or might come upon them, Eleanor stole a furtive gaze about. “Good night and goodbye.”

Did he hear a trace of regret in that latest parting? Surely, he did. For what could *possibly* account for that penchant?

“Good night and goodbye, Eleanor,” he said mutedly.

The threatening encounter she’d had just minutes ago proved that neither he nor the lady could be assured of her safety until she was tucked away in her rooms, with the door shut, and the lock firmly in place.

Their eyes caught, and both went motionless; she ceased the search for her key.

Her gaze moved over Broden’s face and he found himself doing a like, unwitting search of her flawless Grecian features.

How could this woman—how could *any* woman—travel without the benefit of a proper escort or a companion?

Any harm could have befallen her. And real harm almost had. For if she’d been his, it was a certainty, he’d have ensured she was safe and not sneaking into the rooms belonging to a stranger. Had it been any other man, the outcome could have, and likely would have been, very different for her.

A guttural, instinctual growl rumbled in his chest.

“You needn’t w—”

In crisp tones, Broden interrupted her. “I’d ensure you are safely ensconced in your room.”

Eleanor pulled back, and then swung her attention forward. With hurried movements, she plucked her key from her pocket. When she attempted to insert the slim, cast-iron skeleton key, her fingers shook so badly, it made an otherwise simple task, onerous.

Her key slipped and hit the wood floor with a resounding clatter.

And then, realization *hit* him.

Broden reeled. *She is afraid of me. She actually thought he’d hurt her. But just as you were reminding yourself before, she doesn’t know you, any more than you know her.*

Furthermore, as a lady, traveling unaccompanied, exercising that circumspection would serve her well. So why, then, even knowing that, did the sudden onset of her unease, rankle?

They sank to the floor at the same time to retrieve her key.

“You needn’t bother,” she spoke with the same crispness she’d used at their first meeting in his rooms.

“I am not bothered.”

“As I told you, I assure you, I’m quite fine.”

As fine as she’d been when confronted down below a short while ago? Broden withheld the urge to hurl that question at

her. To speak that query aloud, was the same as to blame her for the oafish behavior of the dolts.

Recognizing the importance of asserting some sense of control over herself and her situation, Broden allowed her to collect her key. He let her be the first to rise, and only then did he make to stand.

Then he stopped.

Kneeling as he was beside her, his gaze should have likely lingered on her ample derriere. Instead, as she inserted the key this time, with success, the lady's elbow, tightened the high-quality fabric of her sleeve.

His eyes instantly honed in on the tear in material that he'd previously failed to note. The fabric gaped enough that it revealed the scrapes she'd sustained on not one, but both of her arms.

Click.

Broden didn't know if he was annoyed with her for failing to mention she'd been injured, or that she took a step into her room, without another goodbye or so much as a glance back.

In fairness, that would mark their third farewell in the past quarter of an hour, but...

"You are injured," he snapped, as she turned to go.

Confused, the proud beauty looked at him.

He motioned to the back of her satin sleeves.

Frowning, she angled her head and stole a glance at the torn and shredded fabric. Her fingers went to that injured

flesh, and the moment they connected, she winced.

“The passageway?” he ventured.

“The passageway,” she muttered. “The source of all my miseries.”

The source of all her miseries? Which meant, Broden himself was included amongst those burdens. *The hell he was.* Or the hell he’d remain that way.

She made to step inside, but he put a palm up and stayed her.

“May I help you?” he asked quietly.

Perplexed, His Eleanor cocked her head. “Help me?”

“Clean your wounds.” Broden inclined his head. “I have some experience tending injuries. And, I should hope given our surprisingly plentiful encounters in such a short while, you may trust, you’ll come to no harm from me?”



Elyse eyed the man before her—that was, *Bran*. This mercurial stranger; he asked to enter her rooms, and...help tend her wound.

He assured her she’d come to no harm.

Her first run-in with this black-clad, dark-haired gentleman had been ignominious at best, and pernicious at worst. Never, however, had she known anyone who vacillated so quickly between emotions.

Nay, that isn’t true. In the immediacy of Evie’s death, Elyse, her parents, and each one of her surviving siblings had

been erratic in their dispositions. Often and at all different times, the Caldecott's moved between weeping, to withdrawing into themselves. There'd been explosions of anger. There hadn't been either a hint of lightness or a dash of levity.

This man, Bran, had his secrets and sorrows. He wore them on the chiseled planes of his masked features. Another person would have failed to note them. Not Elyse, who'd experienced firsthand sorrow and suffering.

So why don't you dash into your room, put a door and a lock between you? Why do you stand here, still, contemplating his offer, and, in standing here, risking being discovered alone with him, and having your reputation destroyed?

What was it that compelled her to remain?

"I understand your reservations," he murmured.

He couldn't know half of the thoughts now whirring in her head. Fear of him proved the least of them.

A nearby sconce sent a flicker of shadow across his face. "You noted my expression, and I scared you."

That was what he'd thought. Relief filled her.

"I don't fear anyone or anything, Bran." In order to know fear, a woman would have to let someone close. She excelled in keeping the world away.

With that familiar deep, probing glint in his eyes, he contemplated Elyse, a long while. Then, a ghost of a smile teased the right corner of his mouth, bringing his lips up into a

crooked, boyish grin. “I believe we’ve already ascertained you are a terrible liar.”

She folded her arms at her waist. “*We* did no such thing.”

“We will agree to disagree.”

“Again,” she chimed in quickly.

Bran inclined his head. “Again.”

They shared another smile, and then, long after their mirth faded, Elyse and Bran remained rooted to the corridor floor.

Elyse warred with herself.

“Tell me to go, and I’ll leave,” he said in hushed tones.

Do it. Send him on his way as you did moments ago.

At a gradual pace, Bran reached behind his back, and pulled out—

Gasping, Elyse stumbled over herself to put distance between him and the pistol he’d drawn.

Making a soothing sound, Bran held his spare hand up, staying her. He slowly sank to his haunches. Never breaking eye contact, with unhurried movements, he set the gun down and then lifted his palms.

“If it will make you feel better,” he murmured. “Take that.”

Elyse hesitated a moment, and then keeping an eye on him, picked up the weapon by its smooth mahogany stock. Heavy in her hand, the intricately designed gun possessed a decorative etching within the metalwork; the superiority of the pistol fell in line with the quality of the gentleman’s garments.

“It is a double-barrel flintlock pistol,” he said, bringing her attention back to his. “You have two shots, Eleanor. Let me tend your wound.”

Those five words contained a wealth of power and command that Elyse should have taken as overbearing—which is what they were. Instead, the almost-primal dominance that steeled his order, made her legs weak.

And not with fear.

She took a tremulous breath.

Let him in, a voice whispered in her ear. It came faint, sweet, and whispery soft like the tender words of a kindly ghost.

...Sometimes it's important to throw caution to the wind and enjoy living a bit more...

Elyse started. Her sister, Evie's voice sounded so clear in her mind, that she may as well have been standing beside her now, doling out big-sisterly advice.

“Eleanor?”

The earlier imperiousness in Bran's silken baritone had been replaced with a tender solicitude.

“You may,” she blurted.

Bran opened his mouth, but Elyse beat him to whatever he intended to say.

“My rooms.” She pointed her arm, waving the head of the pistol at the panel. *As if there are other accommodations in question, you lummox.*

He inched away and ducked slightly left in a surprisingly stealthy move for one so tall and broad.

“My gun. That is, *your* gun.” Her words slipped out fast and rolled together even more rapidly. To demonstrate as much, Elyse held it towards him.

Bran angled his body right.

Then she realized the reason he bobbed about. “I am pointing my—your—pistol at you.”

“I see that,” he said dryly. “Might I suggest you lower it to your side?”

“Of course.” She brought her arm back to her side. A sudden timidity took hold. “You may come...in,” she finished, unable to make herself complete the whole scandalous thought aloud.

The moment she heard her offer spoken aloud, however, heat exploded on her cheeks. “To help with my arm,” she squeaked. “You may help with my arm. Though it’s not really my arm, as much as my elbow. However, technically, my elbow is *part* of my arm.”

“That is true,” he granted.

They lingered; neither of them made the first move.

Her heart ran amok in her chest.

Dear Lord, in heaven, where has all my good common sense gone? Elyse was allowing a devastatingly handsome—a mysterious stranger, who also happened to carry a gun tucked in the back of his trousers—into her bedchambers.

Bran cleared his throat. “May I also suggest, we adjourn to your rooms, so we might avoid being discovered together.”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. The moment that full-throated admission exploded from her, Elyse clamped a hand over her mouth.

This was both a terrible idea *and* dangerous. What was it about this man that got her all tongue-tied and confused her senses?

At his bemused look, Elyse hurried into her temporary abode, with Bran following close behind.

As it was, that no one had come upon them in the midst of their long conversation in the hall, proved a remarkable feat, indeed.

The moment he stepped inside, Bran shut the door behind them.

Click.

The decisive sound of that lock being turned brought a finality to her decision.

They were now alone.

The already modest space shrunk under the power of Bran’s build and Elyse and her room felt smaller.

They remained motionless, just as they’d been in the hall.

I should be nervous.

Why aren’t I, then?

Instead, a peculiar, unidentifiable emotion rippled in her chest.

They spoke at the same time.

“I’ll need—?”

“What should—?”

Bran and Elyse stopped.

She motioned for him to go first.

“I’ll need a pitcher of water and linens.”

As Elyse headed over to the basin and clean towels which had been set out by a maid upon her arrival, Bran gathered a chair from the opposite corner, and brought it near those requested items. He gestured for her to sit—and just as she made to do so, Bran’s impossibly long lashes dipped, thinned, and centered on a point just beyond her shoulder.

“We meet *again*.”

A low, vocalizing met Bran’s murmuring.

Elyse followed his focus over to the little bundle of fluff that had escaped the basket currently serving as his makeshift home. Her sister’s guinea pig had instead made a more permanent dwelling upon Elyse’s bed.

Sir Lancelot continued to vibrate, that steady sound somewhere between the purr of a cat and the grumble of a dog.

“He is a gift,” she explained.

“A *gift*?”

She swatted his arm, with a familiarity better suited a man she'd known her entire life, and not the disjointed hour or so they'd spent in total this night. "Oh, hush. You must admit, he grows on you."

Bran bowed his head in a teasing deference. "Given I've been kicked and punched, I know better than to protest."

"That wasn't a punch, Bran." Balling her palm and keeping her thumb on the outside of her fist as her brother had instructed, Elyse gave him a light wallop. "*That* was a punch."

They laughed in tandem.

And just like that, the tension between them ebbed, and as she settled into the wicker folds of the chair, she found herself as comfortable as when they'd been chatting in the taproom.

"I do confess, I had the same reaction as you when I first met him," she admitted, while Bran readied a workstation of sorts.

He snorted. "I find that hard to believe," he said, rolling up his sleeves.

"Oh, it is, t-true," she stuttered.

Look away.

Look away.

They're just arms.

At various points in her life, she'd come upon Hutch's friends boxing while bare-chested. But none of those men had looked a thing like a puissant *Bran*.

Elyse's mouth went dry, and her tongue grew heavy.

“Where will his new home be?” he asked, his back turned slightly towards her.

“He will go to my youngest sister.” And Elyse thanked the heavens he focused on his task at hand as she couldn’t fight the temptation of staring, even had the earth’s rotation relied on it.

Then, he collected the simple, blue-glazed, porcelain pitcher in his right hand. His muscles flexed and bunched. *God, gentlemen were not built as he was.*

Riveted by his bare forearms, sinewy and strong and with light sprinklings of black hair, he embodied a statue of the all-powerful Zeus come to life. She proved as sinful and weak as Eve. She also understood for the first time, why that first woman had taken that great fall.

And then...he was reaching for her hand.

Without hesitation, she placed her palm in his. Bran angled her arm in a way that it both rested comfortably on the table and allowed him to examine the light injuries there. With an aching tenderness, he lightly probed the skin exposed by Elyse’s shorn material.

His touch, firmly gentle, set her belly aflutter. The pads of his palms were callused like no gentleman’s hands were, and the raw, masculinity of them left her aroused.

Elyse’s exhalations became short and her inhalations deep, and surely, close as they were, with no space between them, he felt her body quiver and heard her breath shake. For she could breathe in the very scent of him. That masculine fragrance

flooded her senses; the smoky hint of tobacco and cedarwood filled her nostrils and left her slightly dizzy.

Suddenly, his intimate touch, their nearness, became too much.

Elyse drew her arm back quickly.

Concern emanated from his usually veiled gaze. “I hurt you.”

“No!” she said on a rush. “It isn’t that.” *I cannot tell you what it really was...or is.* “It’s...just...”

Bran stared patiently back.

“They are only small scrapes. I will be fine.”

“Small wounds can become big wounds.” He put a swift end to the rest of her dismissive avowal. He spoke as one who knew. “Others *and* my own,” he murmured, following Elyse’s focus as well as her thoughts.

Unbidden, her gaze slid to the white scars marring his flesh, and more questions reared themselves about this man, and how that beautiful canvas had come to be so marred. Surely they accounted for the mystery and darkness that surrounded him.

She glanced up to find him watching her, watching him.

“They’re from all the time I spent in prison,” he said, with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Shame threatened to set her cheeks afire.

Bran’s joking repartee also forced her to remember the potential bridegroom waiting for her even now; a *gentleman*

who'd *actually* spent time in prison.

That man would never do something as considerate as tendering gentle care to some stranger he'd caught snooping in his rooms. She knew little of the details surrounding his past crimes, but she knew enough to know he possessed a sinister past.

"I scared you," Bran murmured, snapping her out of her latest bout of glumness.

"No!" she exclaimed. "That is, I know you were jesting. I..."

He looked at her funnily.

"I..." Elyse took a breath. "Forgive me." She tried again. "I wasn't—" *Staring*. Only she had been and felt as bad lying to him as she felt ashamed for gawking.

Bran chuckled. "As I said, lying isn't your strongest skill." Then he winked.

Just like that, he broke the tension; Elyse laughed.

"In fairness," she said. "Is lying *truly* a skill one wishes to be in possession of?"

His expression darkened as quickly as it had gone warm. "It is," he said, cryptically, and then returned to caring after her injuries.

As he cleaned first one slight wound, Elyse found herself left alone with her thoughts and silence for company. Honorable men valued honesty to the point they'd be willing to lie down their lives to defend their word.

It wasn't really a statement that should have left her with questions. She'd allowed into her rooms, a man who freely admitted to the essentiality of duplicitousness.

Nothing about this night made sense. In fact, nothing about her powerful awareness of him *did*. Why...why, it was as mad as her parents' summons and upcoming efforts to create a match between her and a convicted criminal.

Elyse's belly churned, and her entire body tensed.

How funny the prospect of being foisted off on some dissolute second or third, or whatever born son he was, somehow induced a greater dread than being alone with a gentleman whom she knew only as *Bran*.

Somehow, she preferred to remain here, in this world, with Bran, removed from her family and the expectations they had for her and their friend's felonious son.

"I've finished."

Elyse squinted.

Bran motioned to her arm, and she followed that gesture. Her fingers came up reflexively to cradle one of the spots he motioned to.

At some point, while she'd been woolgathering, he'd concluded his efforts. His touch had been so soothing, his butterfly soft caress had carried her away.

It meant he must go. It also meant this would be the last time she saw him.

She found herself gripped by an overwhelming urge to cry.

“You *are* hurt,” he repeated, his concern-filled tone slightly accusatory.

“No. I’m...n-not.” However, she didn’t know *what* she was. Something blurred her eyes. Something that felt a good deal like...tears.

“Sad, then,” he said so very tenderly that one of those drops fell, only to be followed by another. Worry deepened in his eyes. “What is it?”

“It is n-nothing.” Only, no, it wasn’t *nothing*. “No. No it is very much *something*.”

And then, the words came tumbling forth, and Elyse didn’t stop them. She let them fly and flow, without a regard for what she said.

“My parents, they would have me marry a man I’ve never before met.”

A bestial rage transformed his features.

Yes! Finally, someone who understood and shared in her annoyance.

“I know something of that,” he confided.

“That is hard to believe.” Elyse continued before he could interject. “Do your parents, each year, with a regularity and absolute certainty dredge up some *potential* candidate as your future spouse?”

“Not...every year, but I’ve been travel—”

Elyse stormed to her feet so quickly, Bran nearly toppled back, but he managed to right himself just in time.

“That is just it, Bran!” She didn’t allow him a word edgewise. “You? You are a man. You are free to travel. I, on the other hand? Even with my advanced age—”

“You cannot be more than twenty-six.”

That guess brought her up short. He’d accurately guessed her age.

Giving her head a shake, she resumed her rant. “Even as a grown woman,” she substituted, “a woman who is fully employed and no longer lives with her parents, I am not afforded the opportunity to make decisions for myself.”

It felt ever so good to vent, especially to someone who didn’t know her and who knew nothing about her or her family.

But Elyse discovered in this moment, that it was something more than that. It wasn’t solely the feeling of being anonymous to him.

It was this glorious wonder of being...*with* him.

Chapter 8

The lady's parents had selected a husband for her.

Broden shouldn't be surprised. It was the way of the world. Arranged matches between respectable families—which of a certain she belonged to—coordinated by parents was the standard amongst the *ton*.

Knowing that, however, did nothing to assuage the primitive fury roiling in his chest. It was only because in a short time, he'd come to respect her as a woman of spirit, strength, and intelligence. Such a lady should never be expected to make a cold, impersonal match. Instead, she should be trusted to herself select the man whom she'd spend the rest of her life with.

Those assurances didn't help.

Rather, they only served to deepen the fiery rage which threatened to consume him.

Who was the *man*?

Of a certainty, even without knowing the bastard's identity, Broden would stake his life the gentleman wasn't deserving of her.

God, how he despised all of this: his volatile emotions. A lack of self-control.

What the hell had he been thinking?

Why had he sought her out in the taproom? Nay, he knew why. Given his behavior toward her, he'd been in the wrong

and owed her an apology for the way in which he'd conducted himself.

Granted her being in his rooms had been suspicious, but he had enough logic. He should have put together all the puzzle pieces.

The better question, the more accurate question, was: why had he sat with her and then joined her in her rooms? Because now he knew things about her that he'd rather not think about or know about.

When he spoke, Broden managed to keep his voice unwavering. "Do you suit?"

"My *parents* believe we do." She grimaced.

Aye, he shared her revulsion. "And what of you?" he pressed.

The proud woman caught her lower lip between her teeth. "You are the first one who has asked that question."

"It occurs to me you didn't answer mine."

She didn't speak; she just gave Broden a lengthy look that said far more than any words could.

"That bad?" he drawled in an attempt to chase away some of the grimness in her troubled features.

His efforts proved successful.

She managed a small smile. "*Worse.*"

A loose curl slipped over her regal brow, and she blew at the lock. The recalcitrant strand fluttered right back into its

previous place. This time, the aggravated lady didn't bother attempting to push it back.

When she volunteered nothing more, Broden pressed her for details about her potential bridegroom. "Is he near in age?"

"To me?" She pursed her mouth. "From the letter I received describing him, the gentleman has had a very long, *difficult* life."

Her parents would marry her off to an old codger. Broden's loathing for the abominable parents in question grew.

"And is he an old *reprobate*?" Because God spare both the lady's father and her prospective bridegroom, for Broden would hunt the pair down and commit that darkest of sins he'd been wrongly convicted of.

She wrinkled her nose. "He is *worse* than a rogue. He is malevolent, a scapegrace, a brutish fiend whose influential parents paid to make his crimes disappear."

Broden, himself only having been victim a short while ago to one of her inventive list of insults, would have felt bad for another. *This* man, however, he'd heap a host of far blacker words; ones that would have caused even this bold, brave woman before him to wilt and blush.

"*These* are the same beloved parents you spoke of?" he seethed.

More of that mind-numbing rage brought Broden's hands into tight fists. He clenched and unclenched them, and when that didn't help, he tried again—still to no avail.

“It is likely less of a statement about their regard for me, and more of an indication of their fear and desperation that I will remain a spinster.”

“They deserve neither your devotion nor your defense.”

“It...is complicated.”

It wasn't. Not the way Broden saw it.

She placed a delicate palm gently on his arm, and he looked at her.

“I am being selfish.”

His nostrils flared. “You think you are being selfish and not—”

“As you rightly pointed out, you find yourself in a similar circumstance.”

“It isn't the same, though. Not really. What you said earlier was correct. My parents also want me to wed someone I have absolutely no interest in marrying. She's a spinster who has no other marital prospects and is desperate enough to agree to a marriage with me, a man whom she's never before met.”

“She is long in the tooth, then.”

“I do not care if she is Athena or Cleopatra resurrected from her lost tomb. For that matter, I barely recall the woman's name. What I do know, however, is that I loved before and *lost* before, and I have no intention of marrying.”

This marked the first time he'd stated his truths aloud, and he felt...surprisingly good for freeing that declaration.

She drew back. Sorrow and shock seeped from her expressive eyes.

“Oh,” she whispered. “I am so sorry.”

Broden grunted. “It was a long time ago.”

It *was* a long, long time ago. So much so, that the memory of Alvina had faded to the point it was a struggle to draw forth in clear detail her beloved visage. And he loathed himself for that. Just as he hated those who’d destroyed her—and his—life.

Eleanor—because, in this instant, he desperately needed her to be a real woman with a real name—placed her palm upon his bicep in a solicitous touch. Even modest though that offering may be, Broden’s muscles jumped reflexively with a masculine awareness of her whisper-soft touch.

“It matters not *when* one loved and lost. It just matters that one did, Bran.”

Through the haze of Broden’s desire, the significance of her murmuring rang clear—this woman understood loss.

In thinking, only a person who’d *suffered* either a broken heart or the death of a beloved one could speak with such accuracy. It certainly would explain what accounted for the sorrowful look she had about her. The one she had worn before they’d begun conversing and sharing parts of themselves.

A log shifted in the hearth, and the fire crackled. The air suddenly pulsed with a voltaic current. That same blaze cast a slight, luminescent glow about her; it illuminated each

stunning feature. Perhaps it was merely this night, and this moment, but he found himself entranced.

He dipped his head a smitch, and she picked hers up the tiniest amount.

They hovered there, a breath away from kissing.

It would be the first time since he'd been imprisoned. And he wanted this embrace. He wanted this woman's kiss. There'd be enough reason to worry about and wonder why, after. For now, her luscious, crimson-hued lips proved more potent than a siren's song.

His mystery lady closed her eyes.

Kiss her.

Take what she is offering and give her what she seeks.

Except...Broden froze.

Why couldn't he truly be the dishonorable cur the entire bloody world took him for?

He backed away. "I should go."

Her eyes flew open; confusion and then understanding dawned in their depths.

"Yes," she said, her voice pitched an octave up.

So why didn't he leave? Why did he remain longer here? There was, after all, nothing left to say.

Broden turned to go, and then abruptly stopped mid-stride. For, before he went, there was a great deal that ought to be said.

“I have...enjoyed myself...” He tried to find the right words, only he wasn’t altogether sure, there were any. “More than I ever believed I could any longer.” For, in the quick span of the time spent with this nameless beauty, he’d been able to forget his past and his present and live only in the now.

She smiled. “Yes, well, the surefire way to form a friendship is through a good, old-fashioned break-in and the threat of doing someone bodily harm.”

“And don’t forget the creative insults.”

“Oh, I thought that didn’t need mentioning as it was understood.”

He laughed; that thunderous explosion of mirth burst past all the layers of despondency and hate. And this joviality? It was a state he’d never again thought to know, and definitely not one he’d expected to have on the journey to his family’s annual house party.

His amusement faded and she proved more in control than he.

Her lips returned to a more somber set; ultimately, she was the one who, once and for all, put an end to their exchange. With bold, confident steps, she made her way across the room. When she reached the door, she turned the lock, ducked her head out, and angled a look first left, and then right.

She returned an instant later and pressed the panel quietly behind her. “There is no one.”

It is time to go.

Apparently, Sir Lancelot was of a like opinion. The guinea pig scampered down the side of the bed. Letting out a soft, unladylike—and endearing for it—curse, Eleanor bolted for the mischievous rodent, and scooped him close.

Once she'd safely secured her precious bundle, Broden took his leave. As he went, from the corner of his eye, he caught her cradling the guinea pig close. Would a single woman amongst all the *ton* dare go to so much trouble for the creature? She'd risked life and limb—her very reputation—and suffered injuries which she'd not complained once about, all to save that gift for her sister.

He wasn't the marrying sort. He wasn't even the care-for-anyone sort. But if he had been, she possessed a strength of spirit that was hard to deny.

Broden clasped the door handle and had just stepped outside when there came the patter of her distinct footfalls.

His engaging nighttime companion called out, "Elyse!"

He whipped around.

Suddenly timid, when she'd been nothing but brave and bold all night, the lady remained half-hidden behind the half-open door, while in the arm visible to Broden, she hugged her guinea pig closer.

"Elyse?" he repeated.

She nodded.

There was something familiar about that name she'd mentioned. What—?

“Elyse Caldecott,” she murmured.

Then, the reason for the familiarity of that name hit Broden square in the solar plexus.

How did she know about the woman his parents had picked for his bride? He hadn't mentioned...

He hadn't mentioned...

All the muscles in Broden's body went whipcord straight and his thoughts raced.

It can't be. It is impossible. It is...

“My name,” she repeated and took a deep breath. “My name is Elyse Caldecott.”

With that unknowing revelation on her part, Elyse Caldecott, the woman whom his parents expected him to wed, shut the door.

Chapter 9

As Aunt Hester's carriage bounced along the uneven roads, carrying Elyse on the last leg of her journey, Elyse stared out her window at the cloudless, sun-filled, blue sky. The sun had long succeeded in thawing the ice from the panes. Beads of water, tiny, leftover remnants of the winter storm, peppered the glass.

Resting her chin upon her hand, Elyse followed the zig-zag path those crystal drops took.

Where she'd been joined a day earlier by her maid, who'd been besieged by terror, Joan had now opted to ride on the box with Kenneth, and Elyse found herself alone.

Alone but for her solitary thoughts; thoughts which were intermittently interrupted by the combined laughter, boisterous and almost childlike of her driver and lady's maid.

Between that levity and the vibrant glare of the rays nearly blinding as they gleamed off the windows and the flawless azure sky that extended as far as her eye could see, Elyse could almost believe summer had arrived. And that everything that'd transpired late last evening had merely been the stuff of dreams.

It was, however, when she glanced down at the roads and not up at the distant horizon, she had confirmation there'd been no dream, only a real-life encounter between herself and some stranger.

“You can keep calling him a stranger,” she muttered under her breath. “But you shared more with that *stranger* than you have your sisters, your parents, Aunt Hester—”

Kenneth’s booming laugh interrupted the rest of Elyse’s sentence.

“Yes, it *is* farcical. I agree.”

This time, Joan joined in with a rollicking laugh of her own.

With a groan, Elyse sank deeper and deeper into the folds of her seat. “Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.” She beat that mantra into her head—to no avail.

Elyse had sworn the last place she’d wished to journey this Christmastide Season was to whatever *good* friends had invited the Caldecott brood to *this* year. That was why she’d welcomed the snowstorm that stalled her travels.

And The Mermaid Inn? That medieval structure built a lifetime ago, had been her salvation.

That was, until the mortifying second where she’d believed Bran intended to kiss her, and she’d closed her eyes and stretched up on tiptoes and made to kiss him in return.

You silly ninny. Did you truly believe he intended to kiss you?

When he’d pounced on her in his chambers and taken her for a thief, he’d spoken quite plainly and shared his truths. She didn’t possess the manner of beauty to tempt him.

She'd never been anything more than passably pretty. She'd not much cared one way or another about her looks since she didn't wish to marry.

And if she ever *did* change her mind on the matter? Well, she certainly wouldn't tie herself to some vacuous fellow who cared about her appearance.

Elyse stilled; the passing snowscape became a blur before her, as she lost herself in the recent exchange that continued to bedevil.

...I do not care if she is Athena or Cleopatra resurrected from her lost tomb. For that matter, I barely recall the woman's name. What I do know, however, is that I loved before and lost before, and I have absolutely no intention of marrying...

Bran's incisive avowal whispered around her mind and Elyse drew in a shaky breath.

Nay, if she ever had a reversal on thoughts of marriage, then one who thought as Bran would decidedly be the type of gentleman, she'd entrust her heart to.

If she had a reversal on marriage?

Bran would be the type of gentleman she'd entrust her heart to?

Saints on Sunday! Elyse balked. What harum-scarum thoughts were *these* galloping unchecked through her head? She'd never give her heart to anyone. *Ever*. No one, absolutely no one was worth risking her sanity, heart, and soul over.

She gave her head a hard, dizzying shake, to dislodge herself from a current state of delirium.

They'd been two ships, passing in the night and that was all.

Confused, Elyse looked about.

“We've arrived, miss.”

It took a moment for that announcement to compute but as soon as Kenneth's voice registered, so too did the fact the carriage had come to a full stop.

She'd arrived.

Elyse sighed.

At least she'd been so preoccupied by her humiliating end with Bran, she'd not spent any time thinking about her impending visit with her family. Alas, she couldn't now say with any real certainty which fate proved the more awkward one: stilted family reunion or mortifying meeting with a man who'd been repulsed by her.

Knock-Knock—

“I am ready, Kenneth.”

I'm lying, Kenneth.

Aunt Hester's strapping driver drew the door open and helped hand her down.

Joan rushed over to meet her.

That seemed to spark movement from the marquess and marchioness's servants. All seven of the footmen in wait, came

swarming through the front door and down the limestone steps, which at some point had been cleaned of snow.

The minute those servants clad in crimson uniforms with gold epaulets upon the high-shouldered stopped beside Elyse's carriage, Kenneth reached back inside and withdrew her valise. A handsome, bewigged footman immediately took the embroidered back and hastened up the steps. Another servant stepped forward to take the other servant's place.

Kenneth passed her other satchel onto the next footmen in line. Then, he reached for the wicker basket which had fast become so beloved to Elyse. Her driver started to hand Sir Lancelot to another serva—.

Sir Lancelot!

“I'll take him!” she cried, and even with her legs unsteady from the jouncing ride, she raced over and put herself between Kenneth, Sir Lancelot, and Lord Dalkeith's efficient servants.

With the tiny creature once again in her care, some of the tension left Elyse. “I have it,” she repeated, but this time in more modulated tones.

They stood there, the lot of them: Elyse, Kenneth, Joan, and Lord and Lady Dalkeiths's many footmen who stared confusedly at the basket Elyse insisted on carrying herself.

The befuddled servants looked back and forth between one another, then strained for a glance inside Aunt Hester's carriage.

Understanding dawned. Elyse inclined her head. “Thank you for your assistance, but that is all the belongings I have

traveled with.”

Their gazes became all the more mystified.

Ah, yes. The master and mistress of this palatial estate wouldn't be accustomed to guests arriving with but three small pieces of baggage.

It was no wonder a lord and lady in possession of such wealth, power, and influence thought they could—and as a matter of fact, *had*—paid off their son's crimes.

The five remaining footmen sank into identical, deep, respectful bows, and Elyse began a slow, dreaded march to this latest reunion spot her parents had summoned her to.

As she walked, she kept a firm grip on Sir Lancelot and directed her attention forward.

Beyond question, Elyse knew exactly how each moment would play out. She'd step inside some black-and-white paved, ornate, rococo inspired, foyer.

There, she'd find her parents waiting. Mother would have her palms clasped at her breast, and wear a smile that, given the great anguish she'd suffered as a mother, could only ever be false. Father would stand just slightly behind his wife like he were some avenging protector.

Her sisters would be wearing those tremendous, Caldecott grins. Elyse, the petty and horrible older sister that Evie's passing had left her, would return that expression of happiness, all the while, resentful that they smiled so freely and easily, a feat Elyse hadn't managed since she'd lost her big sister and closest friend.

That is, she hadn't smiled freely—until yesterday, with *him*.

And funny, the minute she reached the stately landing, and an elderly black-clad drew the double doors open to grant her entry, Elyse realized her discomfiture had shifted from this impending overblown meeting, to...Bran.

At least, he'd momentarily distracted her from all this.

For her well-intentioned family's benefit, Elyse took time to arrange a smile—one that felt stiff to her facial muscles—and stepped inside.

Frowning, she glanced about. But for the cavernous, domed, hexagonal vestibule, she'd been...wrong about everything else. There stood no line of Caldecotts; no sisters, nor parents, nor smiles, nor the chatter of her family all talking over one another.

Instead, quiet, made all the more voluminous, for the cavernous place she now stood, proved the only one to welcome her.

A girlish voice sounded through the silence and exploded in a ceaseless echo. "They aren't here."

Elyse whipped her gaze up and found her youngest sister. Emmy sat with her legs through the white-painted wooden posts, and her legs dangling down.

Even in that childlike pose, Elyse was struck by how much longer Emmy's limbs were and how, in one year apart from the youngest Caldecott, how much pudgery Emmy had lost in

her always-chubby cheeks, and...just how much her baby sister...*changed*.

So much time had passed.

A surprisingly small and painful lump formed in her throat. Her baby sister was...growing up.

And you are missing it.

Emmy flashed a big, cheeky grin that revealed those bottom middle two, slightly eschew teeth and stuck an arm through the slat to wave at Elyse.

“Not even a hello for your baby sister,” Emmy shouted down.

“Perhaps closing yourself off from anyone else’s love, will not leave you better off. It will just leave you lonely...”

Elyse started, as the echo of words she’d spoken to Broden reverberated in her mind.

“I’ll take that as a no, then!” Emmy’s teasing voice brought Elyse rushing back to the present.

She waved up at the only family member who’d come to greet her. It was fine. It really was. Elyse didn’t enjoy the big shows that always met her arrival.

Did she?

“Hello, Emmy,” she shouted up.

At that moment, the footmen arrived. With Elyse’s small collection of valises in hand, the two men marched up the stairs.

“Mm-hm.” Her younger sister gave her head big back and forth shake which set her impressively rounded ringlets bouncing at her shoulders. “I am cross with you.”

Elyse stole a peek at the marquess and marchioness’s servants scattering off.

“It isn’t polite to speak about personal matters in—”

“Mm-hm,” Emmy interrupted that gentle chastisement. “You do not get to disappear and return but once a year and dole out big sister guidance. You’ve forfeited big sister privileges.”

Heat blushed her cheeks. Emmy had been but a small girl when Evie died, and Elyse left. Had her sister always been this... forthright and snappy?

Thankfully Emmy brought them back to a safely safer topic. “We took bets of when you’d arrive.”

“Ah. I’m taking it this has something to do with your crossness with me?”

“Among other things, yes.”

Elyse drew back. Among other things. Goodness, Mother and Father would have their hands full with this one.”

“You lost?” Elyse ventured, her question boomed in the empty once more, three-story foyer.

“By a *heap!*”

A wistful smile teased the corners of her lips.

“Oh, I’m glad you find this amusing, Elyse.”

“Forgive me.” Elyse promptly schooled her features. “I did not mean to give this exchange anything other than the proper solemnity it deserves.”

“Damned straight you didn’t.”

A laugh exploded from Elyse’s lips. Funny, she’d not realized how much she’d missed bantering—until she met an enigmatic stranger named Bran.

“Who won?” Elyse asked before her sister could take her to task once more for her amusement.

“Papa wagered you’d arrive yesterday.”

“Amidst the storm?” she asked incredulously.

“Precisely.” Emmy rolled her eyes. “As if you ever went out of your way to rush to be with us.”

Her sister spoke only truths, that left arrows lodged in Elyse’s heart.

She wanted to say: *it is not that I don’t want to be with you. It’s that, I’m afraid of you.*

Does the reason really matter when the outcome is the same, a voice whispered at the back of her mind.

“Edith said you wouldn’t come at all,” Emmy continued. “Hutchinson,” at the mention of their only brother, Emmy pulled a face, “isn’t here because he’s doing,” through the rungs, she fluttered a hand about, “*whatever* it is he does.”

“Important men-stuff, I assume,” Elyse murmured, giving that reply its proper due seriousness.

“Oh, the *most* important.”

They shared a smile.

“I take it Mother was the winner?”

“Mama said you feel uncomfortable coming around, so you’d delay by at most a day, and that you *realllly* wanted to be with us, so you’d be here *today*.”

Today it was.

Talk about a mother knowing her child.

On the heel of that, another thought entered. Her mother had known without a doubt when Elyse would arrive, and yet...she’d not come to greet her?

“They’re gathering up boughs and holly and greenery for the wreath-making event the marchioness has planned for tomorrow,” Emmy explained, and in that, proved unerringly accurate in just how close she’d read Elyse’s thoughts.

“And you didn’t go?” Emotion filled Elyse’s throat, making it difficult to get the rest of her question out. “You waited here for me?”

Emmy stuck her tongue out. “Only so I could yell at you when you arrived.”

This time, Elyse didn’t attempt to hide her smile. “I don’t suppose I can persuade you to come downstairs and see me?”

In reply, Emmy set her mouth and tipped her chin up at a defiant angle.

With a fake sigh, Elyse set her basket down and knelt beside it. “That is unfortunate,” she paused for effect,

“especially as Aunt Hester asked me to personally deliver a gift to you.”

With that, Elyse reached inside and withdrew Sir Lancelot. Carefully cradling him with both hands, held him against her cheek. “Isn’t he the most precious creature you’ve ever seen?” She rubbed her cheek against the guinea pig who’d become so very precious to her, and in him, she’d forever recall that chance meeting at The Mermaid Inn.

“Is she mine?” Emmy whispered.

Elyse lowered Sir Lancelot and brought him close to her chest. “*He* was going to be but in order to hand him over to your care, you’d have to come down and see me. And you’ve been very clear that—”

Emmy let loose a happy shriek. “He’s miiiiine!”

In her excitement, the younger girl struggled to disentangle her legs from between the posts. When she did, she bolted down the stairs with a speed that sent Elyse’s heart scrambling into her throat.

The moment Emmy reached the landing, she skidded across the black and white marble, checkered floor. For all the ways Emmy had shown her days as a child were coming to an end, there still remained some time before the girl became a grown woman.

A bright-eyed Emmy stumbled to a stop before Elyse and held her palms up.

Elyse made to hand Sir Lancelot over to the girl’s tender care—but stopped. The guinea pig scrunched his nose,

wiggled his whiskers, and looked at Elyse with big, soulful eyes.

We shared a lot in a short amount of time, little fellow. The Mermaid Inn. Bran.

A question lit dark brown eyes nearly identical to Elyse's.

Emmy's outstretched hands wavered.

"Here you are," Elyse murmured and turned her precious Sir Lancelot over to Emmy's good care.

Emmy's still plump, heavily freckled cheeks went soft. "Oh, my goodness. I love you."

Elyse, an outsider, watched as girl and guinea pig cuddled and bonded. "He is very easy to love," she murmured.

Elyse's youngest sibling must have heard a note in her voice because Emmy looked up and understanding dawned in her eyes.

"*You* love him. You must keep him." Emmy attempted to hand him over.

Instantly, Elyse put her hands up, denying that most magnanimous of gifts. "No! He—Sir Lancelot—is yours."

Emmy faltered. "You're certain?" she asked, hope bringing her voice up a decibel.

"More than certain."

"Sir Lancelot," Emmy murmured. "I like that." She wrinkled her nose and mouth, matching the guinea pig. "You are a very handsome fellow."

Elyse ruffled the top of Emmy's curls; that instinctive gesture coming as effortlessly as it had when Emmy had been but the tiniest of little cherubs.

"Oh, Elyse. Thank you."

"You must thank Aunt Hester, Emmy. Sir Lancelot is a gift from her. I've merely been his companion." And he, hers.

"Yes, well Aunt Hester never comes 'round, and, as such, Sir Lancelot would not be here if it weren't for you."

Elyse bit her cheek to keep from saying that with the trouble Sir Lancelot had landed himself in their journey, he almost hadn't been here.

Another wistful smile formed on her lips.

"Elyse, would you mind terribly if I took Sir Lancelot to my rooms so that we may get better acquainted?"

Elyse looped an arm about her sister's shoulders and drew her in for a quick side hug. "I cannot think of a better idea. You'll need his basket," she said, and fetching the item in question, Elyse handed it over.

With reverent care, Emmy returned Sir Lancelot to his travel crate. Elyse looked about for a servant hovering in the shadows—there were always servants hovering in the shadows.

A pretty, young maid with frizzed red hair came rushing over.

"Hullo," Elyse greeted, as the young woman sank into a curtsy. "I was wondering if you would be so gracious as to

help my sister arrange provisions for her new friend?”

Elyse went on to provide an enumeration of what Emmy would need. After she'd finished, the maid dipped another curtsy and then hurried off to gather up the necessities now needed for the new—albeit temporary—addition to the Burgess's household.

After she'd gone, Elyse turned to Emmy and proceeded to offer a full accounting of how she should and would need to take care of the guinea pig.

Then, just like that, Emmy left, and Elyse looked about.

With her family out and about, taking part in the marquess and marchioness's festivities and Emmy and Sir Lancelot getting acquainted in her guest chambers, Elyse found herself...alone.

Which is what she preferred.

That reminder, however, rang hollow.

Her stomach grumbled; that noisy rumbling made all the louder by the absolute stillness around her and only overemphasized the fact that there were no people about. No noisy chatter. No...any chatter.

Nothing.

And with a sigh, Elyse went to change her attire, and once done, she'd break her fast. For hopefully then, everyone else would have already taken their morning meal and Elyse would be free to sit alone...with thoughts of Bran as her only company.

Chapter 10

For the first time since he'd been sent off to prison and returned, Broden sat in the same George III, green upholstered dining chair he'd always occupied at his family's breakfast table.

All his kin were engaged with one another in various conversations; each pairing spoke loudly to make themselves heard over the din of garrulous laughter and booming voices of the other Burgesses around them.

Absently, Broden picked up his cup of hot, milky coffee and swirled the contents in a reverse circle.

Once upon a lifetime ago, he had kept up so very easily with the rapid-fire banter. Before he'd always been right in the middle of the fray, usually laughing the loudest and the one cracking the most jokes.

Another swell of laughter rang out around the breakfast room, and Broden, a voyeur to his own family, glanced around each of them, feeling like an...outsider.

In his absence, their lives had carried on, and he'd...survived. But he didn't know how to be with his family. Aye, there'd been Hamish; a fellow prisoner whose friendship had gotten Broden through hell. The other man, however, was now married and...*happy*.

And though Broden would have given his soul to have Hamish find peace, the fact remained, Broden remained the

lone of their previous duo, who didn't know how to be with anyone.

That isn't true.

In fact, he'd sat in the same place through three different groups of guests who'd come—and then went—for breakfast, in wait for one woman whom he had finally felt normal around.

Broden smiled into his drink; grateful his family proved otherwise occupied with their conversations. Distracted so he could focus on his *own* thoughts—ones, since yesterday, that had remained fixed, locked, and centered on—*Elyse Caldecott*.

Poetical and graceful, the name suited her, far more than even Eleanor.

And she'll be here soon.

And for the first time in so long, he felt...something that wasn't regret, anger, sadness, or annoyance but rather, an overwhelming excitement.

Broden stole yet another glance at the empty doorway.

When he'd left The Mermaid Inn, he knew Elyse's carriage had not been far behind him.

He'd rode at a clip that kept him close enough to be at hand should she require any assistance or come to any harm. But what if...something had happened to her?

Broden tensed and glanced over to find Bellamy carefully studying him. There came the tinkling of metal touching glass,

which put an end to the brothers' unspoken exchange.

Broden followed the source of that delicate tapping to, none other than—

Alden.

Alden looked about, verifying all eyes were on him—that'd always been the future marquess's way. Broden had a good old time ribbing his eldest brother for it.

Their lone sister, Robin—or Rob—as the brothers affectionately named the only girl sibling in their midst tired first of the over-exaggerated silence. “Oh, will you just say what it is you want to say, Aldi?”

“Very well.” Alden sank his elbows onto the edge of the table so that they framed his porcelain plate. “At what point are we going to discuss the reason for mother and father's summ—*oww*.”

Alden scowled at their mother. “Did you kick m—*oww*?”

“I most certainly did, and it is the least you deserve.”

As mother and son launched into an all-out quarrel, with the marquess attempting—in vain—to play the role of peacemaker—Broden stilled. He found himself transported to another room, and another lady, and another kick.

“Did you...kick me?”

“No?”

“No. Or, ‘No?’?”

“I'll have you know, Mr. BBBB, I was not lying. In fact, I'm also known for being a very skilled Brag player...”

That recent memory of his and Elyse's playful banter and mingled laughter played all over again in Broden's mind, and he smiled.

"Please, please." Bellamy, the middle one of the Burgess boys, thumped a palm upon the table, pulling Broden back to the present, and silencing the rest of their family.

Everyone looked to the middle brother.

"You're going to scare him away," he stated. Long the most stoic and serious of their lot—that was, until Broden's return—his chastisement succeeded in temporarily silencing the Burgesses.

"Broden can't be scared away by anyone," Robin shot back. "He isn't afraid of *anything*."

There it was again. When Broden left England, Robin had been a young girl, with an oversized adoration for Broden. It appeared some things had not changed.

Broden's fingers curled reflexively about his coffee cup. What would Robin say if she knew he'd returned with so many fears and insecurities he no longer knew how to function in society?

His face prickled at the feel of being watched. He glanced up to find the marquess had lifted a hand, which he'd only ever done when he was imparting guidance amongst his children.

"No one is without fear," Broden's father, ever the voice of reason and logic amongst his headstrong children, added. "Regardless of whether one is a grown man, a grown woman,

a babe, or a child, there is something that brings each of us trepidation.”

He took care to look at each child, before settling his focus squarely on Broden’s face. Strong, deep, and sincere emotion emanated from his father’s eyes. “Do you understand?”

Broden struggled to swallow. He understood. That question went to all, but truly was directed at him.

Murmurs of ascent went up around the table.

His father, however, could never fathom just how changed Broden’s experience had left him.

The marchioness cleared her throat. “If I may?” She laid out her right arm and stretched her left one atop it, so those limbs pointed directly at Broden.

“There is no reason we wanted Broden to come, other than we simply want him here with us.”

Robin snorted, and all eyes went her way.

Their father sent his daughter a disapproving look. “And just what was that, my girl?”

His black hair may have gone silver, and wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes, but the marquess remained a devoted spouse and protector of the marchioness, against all friends and foes—including their very own children.

Robin waved the tip of her fork about. “I thought it would be clear. It was a snort.”

“Are you calling your mother a liar?”

“Given my mother penned a note to Broden about a prospective bride and clearly stated her intentions of arranging a match between them, then yes.”

Odd, but a short time had passed since Broden read that missive from his mother. When had he forgotten his earlier rage at her intentions?

“Please,” Mother implored. “We have guests. This is not a discussion to be had here, in this way.”

“No,” Robin said, expressionless. “Ambushing your son is definitely the lesser sin here.”

“Robin,” Bellamy and Alden castigated.

Assertive as she’d ever been, Robin dismissed them outright and looked to Broden. “You have endured so much.”

Their mother gasped. “Robin!”

“No! I would say my piece. I would say what *should* be said.” She sent an arch look the way of her other brothers. “As I’m the only one who appears willing to do so.”

The marquess looked across the room to the footmen doing a rather impressive job of blending into the walls. At that single glance, one of the uniformed servants closest to the door, took his cue and drew the panel closed.

Robin picked up where she’d left off with Broden. “I know no one wishes to talk about what happened to you. Everyone wants to pretend it never happened, and have you find a wife and move on.”

She thumped a fist against her breast. “I want that for you, too, Bran. And that is why, I won’t see you go about marrying an icy, aloof spinster who no one else wants!”

His frown deepened. It didn’t matter that he’d had the same first impression as Robin. He’d learned right quickly the wrongness in rushing to judgment. But hearing his sister’s disapproval of Elyse, and to know they’d all been talking about her, lit a spark of rage within.

In a sign he’d been preparing for the role of marquess for the whole of his existence, Alden raised his voice, and cut into the noise. “Brother, do you have anything to say on the matter?”

The room fell silent.

All gazes swung to Broden.

“I want you all to stop deciding what I need and what I don’t need,” he said coolly.

Footfalls sounded in the hall. There came a knock, and then, Mr. Paulson, the butler—a younger fellow, new to their employ—Broden only just learned that morn, entered the room.

And where he’d only been disappointed before that Elyse hadn’t been the one to appear. This time, she was the last person he’d subject to his caviling kin.

“Miss Elyse Caldecott,” Mr. Paulson announced.

Anticipation brought Broden flying to his feet before the lady even stepped through the entryway. Following behind him, Broden’s family stood.

And then, at long last, Elyse appeared.

The emerald, green gown he'd forever associate with their first meeting was nothing more than a memory. In its place, she'd donned an azure blue satin dress, a shade to match the cloudless sky. Her olive-hued skin that gave an illusion of tanned skin, gleamed.

The marchioness was the first to speak. "Miss Caldecott."

He'd been so focused on seeing Elyse, that he'd not considered until now how awkward a public meeting would be for her.

Oh, hell.

And while introductions were made, and greetings went up, Broden attempted to make himself invisible. He inched back and edged away. Alden flashed a frown in Broden's direction, which sent every single set of eyes directly to Broden.

The prettiest, and now the most confused set of the lot—Elyse's.

She loomed there; frozen, unblinking. Her mouth moved, no words, however, emerged.

Broden should have anticipated this reunion wouldn't go the way he'd thought—or hoped—it would. *I should have sought her out.*

Alas, it was too la—

With a sudden and stark inhalation, Elyse recoiled like she'd set eyes upon the horned Krampus, punisher of naughty

children. She clawed at her throat. “*You*,” she breathed.

Broden, however, would be the only one to hear the accusation there and not a condemnation. Well, at least, not the condemnation he was in fact, deserving of.

Gasps went up around the table.

Robin took a lunging step Elyse’s way, but Bellamy caught her by the arm and kept her in her place, but couldn’t stop her words. “How dare you enter this household and speak to him so?”

Oh, hell.

“Robin, don’t,” Broden barked at his well-meaning, but completely off-the-mark sister.

Elyse’s focus on Broden wavered. She vacillated between Broden and his fuming sister.

“I do not care who her family is or that she’s a guest, or if she’s Mary, Mother of Jesus herself,” Robin hissed. “I will not allow her to disparage you, let alone marry you.”

Blinking rapidly, Elyse looked to the assembled Burgesses, and what Robin had said seemed to poke through her confused state.

“No,” Elyse whispered. “That isn’t what I—I...”

“It seemed very clear that is precisely what you were—”

“Enough,” Broden shouted.

“Perhaps you can explain what it is you *did* mean, Miss Caldecott?” The marquess put that question to Elyse.

Every gaze centered on Elyse once more.

The hell he'd allow this to carry on any further. "I'll not allow there to be a public inquisition of Miss Caldecott," Broden warned, adding a layer of steel to that warning.

His voice seemed to free her from her frozen state.

Elyse bolted.

The Burgesses exchanged stunned looks and then began quarreling with one another. The only reaction that mattered to Broden, however, belonged to the woman who'd torn out of the breakfast room like a bat out of hell.

He dragged a shaky hand through his hair.

She'd not wanted to come to his family's house party any more than Broden himself had. And to both know his kin had so wrongly, so thoroughly misinterpreted the reason for her reaction to him, and that she, the bravest woman he'd ever known had fled like a frightened doe sent a weight crushing down on his chest.

With a curse, Broden set off in pursuit and in so doing, he managed a once seemingly impossible feat—he silenced his family.

Chapter 11

With the entire Burgess family glaring daggers at her and now knowing the tender man who'd bewitched her at The Mermaid Inn was none other than Broden Burgess, Elyse did the only thing she could.

She ran.

She bolted from the breakfast room, leaving in her wake a sudden explosion of shouts and tense discussion among the Burgesses behind her.

And even after she'd placed several corridors between herself and Bran—Broden, and all of his kin, she kept on sprinting through Lord and Lady Dalkeith's sprawling country estate.

Her breath came in harsh, loud, heaving gasps.

Elyse raced to get the hell away from him, her family, this household, all of it.

At last, she reached a closed end.

Gasping, she staggered to a stop, and hunched over in an attempt to get precious air into her strained lungs. Sweat slicked her brow and marred her palms, and the heat of humiliation proved more unrelenting than the hottest summer sun.

She couldn't face him. She couldn't face any of them.

Not now. Not ever.

It'd been a mistake to come here.

Elyse pressed the handle of the nearest door leading to the terrace, slipped outside, and then took off running.

Alas, haste, along with a poor choice of footwear made for a faulty stride.

Elyse skidded, slid, and then came down hard on her knees at the eastern end of the one-hundred-feet or so terrace. The cold pavement stabbed unforgivingly into her knees, and she welcomed the distracting pain.

It was too much.

Oh, God.

Elyse's shoulders sagged and humiliation kept her frozen to the terrace floor. She shivered and shook, and the cold that hung in the air sliced through her garments and stung her skin.

And she could run no more from any of it.

Last night, she'd sat in an empty taproom, bonding and sharing intimate parts about herself. She'd talked about the gentleman her parents wished her to marry. Elyse cringed. All the while that *same* man had been seated directly across from her.

Dazed, embarrassed, and panicked, Elyse couldn't sort through the timeline of each jeering pronouncement he'd uttered, or the order of all the things they'd talked about and argued about. She tried in vain to put some order to them but was too overwrought to get anything to line up.

Her teeth chattered wildly, uncontrollably—from the frost in the air or the discovery she'd only just made, and Elyse

wrapped her arms tight around her waist to confer warmth and steady herself.

It didn't help.

Every last word she'd said to him played over and over again in her mind tumbling and rolling together into a giant snowball of mortification: of when he'd asked about her prospective bridegroom.

"That bad?"

"Worse."

And the sarcastic tone she'd taken when she'd unknowingly spoken about *him*.

"...The gentleman has had a very long, difficult life..."

And the lengthy list of insults she'd used to *describe* him.

"He is malevolent, a scapegrace, a brutish fiend whose influential parents paid to make his crimes disappear."

Elyse balked.

And then there were the things *he'd* said about *her*.

"If you've come to use your...unremarkable wiles to snare me, you're bound to be disappointed."

The echo of his derisive comments kept coming.

"My parents also wish for me to wed someone I have absolutely no interest in marrying..."

She's a spinster who has no other marital prospects...

Desperate enough to agree to a marriage with me, a man whom she's never before met."

Elyse slapped her hands over her face, but it did little to muffle her mortified moan.

She went still as an even uglier prospect hit her.

“Oh, G-God,” she whispered, her breath left a soft cloud of white upon the winter air.

How *long* had he known?

Of course, now so much of it made sense. He’d spoken his hateful—but also honest—opinions about Elyse. At some point, he’d realized who he’d been speaking with. From then on, he’d begun showing her kindness and acting like an entirely different person than the man who’d found her in his rooms—he’d pieced together her identity.

Her mind raced.

Yes, it was also why he’d sought to make his apologies, and why he’d sat with her in the taproom, and intervened on her behalf, or escorted her to her rooms and cared for her injury.

All the time she’d believe she and Bran were two strangers in the night who’d shared a stolen moment in time.

It made so much sense now.

A strong, gusty wind rolled over the patio; that biting winter air whipped her skirts about and sent the dusting of snow that still coated the pavement dancing in the air like they were new fallen flakes.

Elyse rubbed vigorously at her arms.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

She'd leave. That was what she'd do. That's what she was best at.

She'd hand-delivered Emmy's gift, and in making the journey to the Marquess and Marchioness of Dalkeith's, she'd also technically done her Aunt Hester's bidding and visited Elyse's family.

She wouldn't have to see Bran—*Broden's*, furious family.

Her teeth continued chattering from the cold. Suddenly energized, Elyse pushed herself up into a standing and made to turn.

She felt him before she heard him.

"Elyse," he murmured in that same sonorous baritone that had thoroughly bewitched her.

The devil.

Elyse swallowed hard and continued to present her back to him. She didn't wish to see Mr. Broden Burgess with two other b's in his name.

He proved anything but accommodating.

"Elyse," he said her name again, this time closer indicating he'd moved.

Elyse hugged her arms to her chest, and with all the dignity she could muster, she faced him.

And promptly wished she hadn't.

Attired in black trousers, a black wool overcoat, and a black and sapphire blue striped cravat, Broden stood some three paces away.

She bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to taste the metallic tinge of blood. Why did he have to be a glorious specimen of manhood: rugged, primal, and more handsome than the damned David.

“Hello, Bran. Or should I say, Lord Broden Burgess.” His name fell from her lips like the epithet it was. “If you’ll excuse me? It wouldn’t do for us to be discovered here alone.”

Imagine the disaster that would be if they found themselves trapped in marriage.

She made to step around him, but Lord Broden quickly slid into her path, blocking her retreat.

Elyse glared up at him.

“I am sorry,” he said with such gravity and solemn eyes, she could almost believe he wasn’t the bastard who’d taken some perverse delight in her humiliation.

“If you’re s-sorry, then step out of my w-way.” God how she hated how steady his voice was in the cold, even when she stood here shivering before him.

“You are angry.”

The laugh she spewed sounded bitter to her own ears. “My how perceptive you are, my lord. Perhaps that was why you were able to gather my identity while I remained hopelessly ignorant of yours, “*Bran*, Mr. Four B’s and...”

Her eyes slid shut. *Now she knew two of those names.* Just as she’d known that fierce young woman who’d hurled so much vitriol Elyse’s way had, in fact, been the younger sister who’d gifted Bran—Broden, with his nickname.

With that, she hastened past him.

Lord Broden lengthened his stride and easily overtook her so that they walked at a brisk clip, side by side.

“I would speak with you,” he said with an urgency in his tone she didn’t believe for a moment.

Elyse stopped in her tracks, and between his breadth of muscle and rapid momentum, he went sailing past her.

Lord Broden double backed and bowed his head.

“Broden Bowen Benedict Burgess.” His hushed, solemn tones brought her eyes flying open. “Now you know all four of them, but I’d have you call me Broden.”

She’d not be moved that he’d accurately read her thoughts before. She wouldn’t. “Must you be here?”

“My family summoned—”

“Not here,” she cut him off. Elyse slashed a palm angrily about. “Here. *With me.*”

A shadow flickered across his eyes.

She hadn’t hurt him. Surely not. That would have to mean he cared about her in some way, which he decidedly did. Not when he’d lied to her and made a fool of her and—

Tears stung her eyes. Elyse looked away and blinked furiously to keep those drops from falling and giving her away.

Just as he’d done before, Broden yanked a handkerchief from the front of his pocket and offered it to Elyse. Angry with herself for having shown him that weakness, she snatched it from his fingers.

“You must l-leave is what y-you—”

Broden shrugged out of his fur-lined velvet long coat.

“What are you d—?” Elyse’s question faded on her lips.

He draped that exquisitely crafted garment about her shoulders; it enveloped her in a welcome warmth.

Still, she resisted. “I don’t want your j-jacket,” she gritted out. She didn’t want any considerate showing from him.

“Well, that is fine, as I intend for you to keep it, anyway.”

God, his tone modulated as smooth and effortless as if they chatted on a seasonably comfortable summer’s day.

Broden brought his palms up. “Hear me out. *Please.*”

Please.

Elyse closed her eyes. Why must he have issued that one word entreaty? Or lowered his jacket around her shoulders in that protective way?

Couldn’t he be smug and cool and commanding as his lofty position allowed? For then, it would be vastly easier to continue marching past him and forget the time they’d shared together.

But he, this big, proud, cynical man said ‘please’, and he’d done so in that imploring way.

Huddled in Broden’s coat, absorbing the warmth his body had left upon the fabric, she opened her eyes.

“What?” she asked, her voice again, even.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

Elyse sent an eyebrow arcing up. “Do you?”

Broden’s chiseled cheeks already red from the cold went a shade deeper under one of those blushes she recognized all too well.

“You knew my identity,” she whispered furiously. “You knew, and all the while you kept *yours* secret.”

“No! I didn’t. I didn’t know until the moment you shared your name, Elyse, and then when you did, I was in shock a moment, because...” He dragged a hand through his unfashionably long, wind-tossed black hair. “But you were already gone, and I couldn’t very well go knocking on your door—” He stopped and moved a gaze over her face. “You don’t believe me.”

Elyse bit her lower lip hard. She wanted to remain angry. She *should be* furious. And yet, at their first meeting had he not arrived at an erroneous assumption about her? He’d been big enough to take ownership of his previous assumptions.

Was this latest exchange between them any different, only with their roles reversed this time?

His expression went flat. “I see,” he said in deadened tones, and there was a finality in those two syllables that indicated he’d accepted her rejection and intended to honor her wishes and leave.

He’d mistaken the reason for her silence!

Elyse opened her mouth to speak but he cut her off.

“With your reticence, Miss Caldecott, you’ve called into question my honor. As such, there’s but one thing to do.”

Elyse eyed him warily. “What is that?”

“I have it on the authority of a very sage person it is unpardonable to call someone a liar. In fact, because I am a man, I am required to call you out,” he said, in deadly serious tones.

Elyse’s brow went shooting up. *Why...why, he’s using my words!*

His eyes twinkled. “As I said,” he murmured. “A *very* sage person.” With that, he dropped to his haunches and gathered a small pile of heavy wet snow.

Puzzling her brow, she followed his quick movements as he built a perfect snowball.

Then, with all the grace and dignity of a courtier handing the crown over to his liege, Broden proffered that cylindrical missile Elyse’s way.

I don’t want to smile. I don’t want to smile. Only, the muscles of Elyse’s mouth made a liar of her.

Unnerved, she rolled her eyes. “This is ridiculous,” she exclaimed.

“Ah, but I didn’t create the rule, Miss Caldecott.” Broden wagged his black eyebrows. “*You* were the wise one who enlightened me.” He held the snowball in his palm out towards her.

Muttering to herself, she swiped her dueling weapon from him. The long sleeves of his jacket fell all the way down, obscuring her arms.

The moment she had her snowball in hand, Broden set to work constructing his own projectile.

“I’m at a disadvantage you know,” she drawled.

He paused mid-build and glanced up from his task, with a question in his eyes.

Elyse waved her arms up and down and displayed the impediment of her oversized sleeves.

Broden scoffed. “Hogwash.” Then, a spark of understanding dawned in devastating blue eyes, thoroughly mixing up her senses.

“What?” she asked, her breath leaving little clouds of white as she spoke.

“Never tell me you are making excuses in preparation of your loss.”

A laugh burst from her lips. “If we weren’t already dueling, my lord—”

“If we are using one another’s formal names, then it is, *Mr.* Burgess.”

That was right, from what she’d learned about him in advance of their meeting, he opted to be referred to as Mr. Burgess.

“And,” he continued, “at the end of the duel, the winner shall decide if we may refer to one another by our Christian names.”

“I would call you out all over again—”

Broden lifted a finger. “It wouldn’t be again. I am the one who called you out.”

“—for suggesting I’m making excuses. You try dueling in skirts and a jacket that is too large.”

“I don’t make the rules.”

She laughed hard and loud and Broden’s deeper expression of mirth milled with hers.

Elyse shook a finger at him. “I’m beginning to think your offering me your jacket was motivated by something other than gentlemanly intentions,” she said.

As quick as his amusement came, his usual solemnity returned. “You give me yet another reason to duel you.” In an instant, he popped back up onto his feet.

As they moved to take their places, Elyse shrugged out of his jacket, and let it slide to the pavement.

He gave her a look. “Back-to-back, Miss Caldecott and then we count ten paces,” he instructed, already getting himself into position. “Let us get this done quickly so that you don’t catch your chill before I defeat you in a duel.”

Elyse rested her back against his. “Oh, you are destined to be disappointed, then, Lord–Mr. Burgess.”

“Ohh.” He laughed. “You *minx*! Commence counting.” His voice boomed throughout the courtyard. “One. Two.”

With every step, that took her away from Broden, and closer to their *battle*, Elyse’s breath came fast, and her heart raced with the thrill of anticipation.

“Three!”

She tensed.

“Four!”

And spun.

“Fi—”

Elyse launched her snowball, catching Broden square in the back.

Her well-packed missile exploded upon the fabric of his white lawn shirt, and instantly dampened the material.

Broden whirled around. Shock stamped his features. He clasped his lower back like he'd taken a bullet there and not a snowball.

“Miss...Miss...Caldecott,” He staggered forward, and she let out a sound a cross between a laugh and a squeal. Then, he sank to his knees and sagged forward. He continued to grip his back with one hand, while his other palm, sank and dug into the snow-covered patio.

Laughing, Elyse cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled over. “It will take more than that to trick me, *my lord*.” All the while she continued retreating.

He glanced up, and somehow, even with the cold, Broden's cheeks had gone white. His chest heaved up and down in painful looking bursts.

Some twelve paces away, Elyse stopped in her tracks.

He'd not moved.

As if he'd sensed her unease, he flashed a strained smile. "Worry not. When I was sent to Australia, I suffered a slight back injury." Broden's gaze fell to the pavement. "It comes and g-goes, Elyse," his voice emerged as a raspy pant that barely met her ears.

Elyse?

She wavered.

He'd dropped that teasing Miss Caldecott business. And he'd mentioned his prison sentence.

He...wasn't jesting.

Fear sent her heart climbing into her throat.

Elyse rushed back to his side. "Are you all—?"

Broden slowly lifted his head.

Oh, hell.

Elyse skidded to a stop just two paces away.

He wore a devilish grin, the widest she'd ever seen on his cheeks.

"Oh, hell," she muttered.

"Oh, yes."

Broden hadn't even finished that gleeful announcement and Elyse was racing off in the opposite direction, once more. His snowball hit her square between the shoulder blades; that compact ball sent bits of snow and ice spraying about her shoulders.

Elyse wheeled to face him. He continued to wear that scamp's smile. The unexpected level he'd been going to go in the name of winning doubled her over in laughter. Unable to breathe from the force of her amusement, she patted the ground with her hand to make the mirth stop.

"It hurts," she squealed, between her fits of hilarity. She laughed louder and harder and longer than she'd laughed maybe...ever.

"Uh-uh." Broden rocked on his heels. "Unlike you, I shan't fall for that trick, Elyse."

Her mirth faded, and she shook her head. "Oh, you scoundrel," she muttered.

"I'm the scoundrel? Me, and not you who cheated at a duel?"

She smoothed her features and bowed your head.

"You are c-correct." The cold brought her teeth banging together, and yet, how strange as she didn't feel chilled. "My actions today were unpard—"

Whipping her arm from out behind her back, Elyse tossed the snowball she'd secretly built while in the midst of her earlier display of merriment.

This wintry missile caught Broden right in the middle of his forehead.

"*Oomph.*" Wincing, he dusted the remnants of her handiwork from his eyes.

When he'd cleared them enough to open them, Elyse gave a triumphant toss of her head.

“Now that our mandatory duel is concluded, do you venture we should agree to Christian names and friendship, Broden?”

He placed his hand out. “Christian names and friendship, Elyse,” Broden murmured.

Without hesitation, she placed her fingers in his.

Broden instantly folded his palm around hers, in a delicate handshake that...in this moment, with only the two of them here together, somehow felt like...more.

Chapter 12

How funny, in the span of several hours Elyse had gone from dreading Lord and Lady Dalkeith's house party to an unexpected elation after her snowball duel with Broden.

Only to fall right square back again in the lap of misery.

At present, Elyse sat in the marchioness's prized nursery with all the other ladies.

As part of the latest planned event, the marchioness had encouraged each guest to determine whether one wished to design a wreath, or fill an urn, or work together to decorate the long, lengths of garland that would be draped over mantels and arches.

Elyse always enjoyed creating centerpieces. She'd especially enjoyed making floral arrangements with her sisters—extravagant ones for the dining room. Cascading ones for the center table in the foyer.

Emmy had been too young at the time, but Elyse, Evie, and Edith would sit around the long rectangular, plant table in the nursery, and sing, tell jests, and talk about their hopes and dreams of their future husbands.

Her absolute favorite project of all the projects, however, had unfailingly been the holly-sprigged wreaths, garland, and boughs she'd made at the Christmastide Season. Today, lush green branches from various evergreens had also been set out for the guests who'd come to take part in the festivities.

The elaborate, oak worktable, fairly brimmed to overflowing with vibrant bows organized by every conceivable color and settled into neat piles. There were ribbons of greens, golds, silvers, and blues in more lengths and widths than Elyse had previously known existed. Or, if one wished to intersperse a bit more glimmer and shine, strings of beads, pearls, and crystals lay at one end of the table.

Given all that, this latest festive activity planned by Lady Dalkeith, Elyse should have found at least *some* joy in this.

She didn't. She was deuced miserable.

Although, she did suppose sitting alone at one end of the table, while every other guest—including Elyse's mother and sisters—gathered close, would have that effect on *any* person.

Elyse assessed an evergreen branch she planned on using and snipped an end that was a hair too long.

In fairness, it wasn't so much as being alone that bothered her. With the way Aunt Hester napped and slept most of the day away, Elyse had become *very* comfortable with having only herself for company.

The fiery glares being cast her way by Broden's sister? Now, that was even too much for Elyse's thick hide.

That same menacing look had followed Elyse all day yesterday: at the luncheon meal. At dinner. During the parlor games. The black stare had been particularly nasty during the game of Blindman's Bluff as Elyse and Broden who'd sat out on the night's fun and instead found themselves a private corner to chat.

Oh, Elyse knew exactly what opinion Broden's sister had reached about her. She'd heard Elyse's stunned 'you' and taken it for a disavowal of her brother. And even as she admired the younger woman for her fierce devotion, that hasty opinion she'd formed about Elyse rankled.

Another bevy of giggles and laughter filtered down the table meeting Elyse's ears and strengthening her feeling of loneliness. Amongst that levity, she recognized that of Edith, Emmy, and their mother.

They were having a good time, and that brought Elyse all the happiness she needed. The rest of the guests? They could go to hell.

Feeling that stare upon her once more, Elyse glared daggers at her ash and willow branches that lay as bare as they'd been when she'd reluctantly joined her mother, sisters, and the other female guests.

Elyse grabbed a boxwood branch and proceeded to wind it about the wood frame that would be her kissing ball.

Delicate hands settled upon her shoulders.

Elyse started and lost her grip on her supplies.

"You've come!"

"Mother," she greeted.

Wonder of wonders, she'd come to visit Elyse at the opposite end of the table.

"I am so happy you are here, dearest," the viscountess murmured close to Elyse's ear.

And to her surprise, Elyse found herself petty as a child, for it was on the tip of her tongue to say it hardly seemed that way.

Not when the viscountess had smiled and waved as Elyse walked in the room, but otherwise carried on with her arrangement and the friends around her.

“Are you having a wonderful time?”

“Oh, the most wonderful,” Elyse drawled. “I especially enjoy having death stares directed my way.”

Mother frowned. “Hush. No one is directing—”

There came a sharp bang, and Elyse and the viscountess looked to the source of that noise.

Lady Robin, per her usual, glowered at Elyse. Only this time, while she did so, she had her fingers wrapped around the metal scissors she’d slammed onto the surface of the oak table.

“Robin,” Lady Dalkeith scolded.

“What?” the young woman asked defensively. “I am done with my project.” She sent a meaningful glance Elyse’s way. “And everyone else is, as well.”

That message reached Elyse and was perfectly received—only Elyse’s project sat unfinished, which didn’t matter as Lady Robin didn’t see her, nor want her, as part of the group.

Do not let her get a rise out of you...

And yet, it was hard. Elyse had never been one to back down and she’d certainly not do so now because Broden’s irascible sister had found her wanting.

“You were saying?” Elyse asked dryly.

Mother angled her body in a way that concealed her mouth. “Yes, well, no one will accuse her of being the merriest Burgess.” She winked.

“She makes a London rainstorm seem sunny,” Elyse said, without moving her lips.

“Now, now, dear.”

“But you—”

“I was more subtle, Elyse.”

“You believe *I’m* the one in need of a scolding here and not...” She slanted a glance Lady Robin’s way.

“She’s not mine to scold, Ellie.” Mother patted Elyse’s arm. “But if she were, I’d tell her the same thing I’m about to tell you—you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

Scowling, Elyse added another branch to her arrangement.

“Elsie.” Her sister, Emmy’s cheer-filled voice piped throughout the room. “That branch did nothing to you.”

The chatter of Lady Dalkeith’s boisterous guests came to a screeching halt.

At the sudden scrutiny put Elyse’s way, her feet which rested on the bottom rung of her stool, went curling into the wood.

Of course, everyone knew Elyse to be the aloof, now unlikeable, unlaughable sister. What had already been a miserable experience became all the more dismal.

“Emmy.” The viscountess’s hushed scolding echoed in the nursery, which meant, absolutely every single guest present, also heard that chastisement.

Emmy frowned. “Why can the rest of us tease one another, but no one is allowed to—”

“Emmy, that is enough,” their mother said, this time more sharply.

There was another long, awkward silence, and then as if attempting to cover the awkwardness of the moment, the marchioness cleared her throat. “May I suggest we adjourn to the music room to prepare for the recital?”

She could suggest it, but Elyse had no intention of going.

Bowing her head, she went back to work on her arrangement. As the guests proceeded to file from the room, the viscountess took several steps before realizing Elyse remained behind.

“Elyse?”

“As much as it pains me to miss recitals, as you know how I *do* love them,” she lied, “I’m going to stay here and finish up my arrangement.”

She abhorred recitals with the fire of a thousand suns. She’d only done them because she’d loved more being with her sisters than she hated the awkwardness of being on display—especially as she couldn’t play or sing worth a fig.

“You’re cer—”

“I’m certain.”

Still, her mother lingered.

“Go, Mother,” she gently urged. “I am fine.”

“You’re—”

“*Very* certain,” Elyse interrupted. “I am enjoying myself immensely.” And with everyone gone, well now she actually might.

However, a short while after everyone had gone, Elyse remained upset. In the otherwise quiet room, the solitary snipping sound made by her shears even had a sadness to it.

Is this the future you’ve built for yourself? Is this truly what you want? Not so very long ago, she would have answered in the affirmative and emphatically so.

Elyse paused, staring sightlessly down at the viridian green branch.

Now, she wasn’t so very sure. What had changed? Why—?

“What?” Broden’s husky baritone stretched across the room and took the place of that melancholy silence. “Not one for afternoon song?”

With a gasp, Elyse glanced up from her partially completed bough. The strand of boxwood leaves slipped through her fingers.

Her heart skipped a beat.

It is only because he caught off-guard.

The sudden dizzying sensation that took hold had absolutely nothing to do with Broden, leaning a broad shoulder against the doorjamb in a lazy repose.

Elyse swallowed hard.

He's right. You are a deuced awful liar.

From where he still lounged, Broden called out. "May I join you?"

"As you can clearly see, I'm busy with other guests, Broden. Perhaps another time?" She winked in a bid to convey her joke.

Instead of a smile, Broden frowned.

She preferred him smiling.

He headed over to join her. When he reached Elyse, she made to rise, but he'd already dragged a nearby stool close and slid onto the seat. Near as he was, she could better see the hard set of his mouth that matched the harsh glint in his eyes.

Elyse considered her partially completed bough a moment and frowned. "It isn't really all that bad. In fact, I thought it was coming along quite nicely."

His dark eyebrows came together.

Elyse pointed at her arrangement.

He didn't so much as steal a glance. "Why are you alone?"

She brought her shoulders up in a quick shrug. "Don't you remember? Like you, I did not wish to join the house party. Grand gatherings are not for me."

Elyse looked down at the materials before her. She reached for another branch, but Broden covered her hand with his, stopping her.

“You didn’t answer my question, Elyse,” he murmured.

“Why aren’t you at this afternoon’s caroling event?” she countered with a question of her own.

“I went.”

“Oh. Well, as you can see, I did n—”

“I went to look for you.”

Elyse’s jaw slipped a fraction.

“And when you *weren’t* there,” he continued. “I turned around and left because I didn’t want to be with *those* guests. I wanted to be with *you*.”

She fluttered a hand about her breast. “*Me?*”

“You.”

“Oh,” she whispered.

No one sought her out. In fairness, her parents once tried to get Elyse to return from Aunt Hester’s. They’d eventually stopped. But even with that, they’d not been looking for her—not in this way. Whatever way *this* was.

Broden trailed an index finger lightly along her jawline. “But you, Elyse...”

How could her entire body tremble at such a quick, innocuous touch?

“You joined the other ladies in making arrangements.”

Yes, she had.

Elyse glanced down, and then suddenly; *all* the words just came tumbling out. “I debated not coming to the nursery. I

almost didn't, but I felt obligated to do so, because I thought my mother and sisters expected me to come."

Broden opened his mouth, but Elyse couldn't stop.

"Only, they were perfectly content and more than half-finished when I finally got here, and when I *did* arrive, my mother had materials brought *here* for me." She pointed a finger downwards. "And everyone else sat *there*." She shifted her index finger towards the opposite end of the table. "I thought I'd be happy about that, but then I felt..." How to explain it?

"Left out?" he gravelly filled in.

She nodded but couldn't bring herself to admit as much in the form of words.

"The other guests look at me the way you first did, Broden."

He lifted his right palm. "In my defense, I believed you were an intruder...and in fact, you were."

"Yes, well, *they* looked at me that same way, too, only I'm *not* an intruder." She paused. "*This* time." She placed her tongue between her lips and blew.

Broden brushed his fingers under her chin and guided her gaze back to his. "What of my sister and mother? Did they show you kindness?"

Uh-oh. Elyse treaded carefully. "Your mother is most gracious. She invited me to join the festivities, did she not?"

“She would have done you a greater kindness if she’d spared you from coming,” he said dryly.

Elyse laughed and swatted him. “I don’t believe for an instant you believe that.”

“Oh, trust me, I do. You’re the only spot of sunshine here.”

Spot of sunshine? His comparison sent a heat greater than the rays of the hottest summer sun washing over her.

Broden leaned down so close, the sough of his breath, tinged with the hint of coffee, mint, and honey caressed her face. He peered closely at her.

Another laugh escaped her. “What are you *doing?*”

“What of my sister, Elyse?”

He was unrelenting. But that, she’d gathered that from their first meeting alone.

“What if I say I don’t *want* to talk about her?”

“I’d say you don’t *want* to discuss the matter because, even though you won’t admit as much aloud, you know you’re a terrible prevaricator just as I know you won’t tell me if my sister mistreated you.”

Elyse sighed. He knew his sister *very* well. She would not, however, be a source of contention between he and his family. “She did not mistreat me.”

Broden eyed her dubiously.

“What I do know about your sister, Broden, is she loves you very much. She is a fierce defender, and you should be

grateful for her devotion and not angry when she turns her wrath on someone whom she believes wronged you.”

“You did not wrong me,” he said curtly.

“Yes. I know that and you know that, but Broden, we cannot very well say, ‘Oh, that shock on Elyse’s part yesterday —’”

“It would definitely earn more questions if I referred to you as *Elyse* and not Miss Caldecott.”

She continued over his teasing. “That merely stemmed from the fact that on our way here, we spent a night alone at an inn.” Heat instantly burst upon her cheeks. “Not alone, like *that*.”

His features formed a smooth, inscrutable mask. “Like what?”

She went a dozen shades warmer. “You’re insufferable.”

A question filled his eyes. Broden moved his gaze intently over her face.

“Only with you,” he spoke haltingly as if talking himself through a new discovery.

Elyse resumed working on her kissing ball.

Broden handed an evergreen branch to her.

She added the foliage to her arrangement.

“As I see it, we’re both in a similar situation, Elyse.”

“Oh, and what situation is that?” she asked, not picking her head up from her task.

He tendered a winterberry branch this time.

“Neither of us feels comfortable, even with our families here.”

“*Especially* with our families here.” She crooked her fingers beckoning for a branch.

Following that unspoken request, Broden handed it over. “Precisely. As such, we should pledge to attend all the same events as one another.”

She paused.

“That way,” he said quickly, “we’ll be spared the discomfort of being where we don’t wish to be. And,” he added.

“There’s *more*?” she asked, a smile twitching at her lips.

“Oh, there’s more.” He gave one of those darling waggles of his eyebrows. “The uncomfortable and unspoken topic neither of us has discussed?”

“And what is that, Broden?” Elyse angled her head, assessing her growingly full and proportionate Christmas decoration, and then collected a pinecone.

“The whole reason each of our respective parents summoned us—to make a match.”

The woodsy ornament fell from her fingers.

Broden plucked it up and handed it over. “As long as you and I are together, we will be spared uncomfortable exchanges with our parents, where they less than subtly try to maneuver us together.”

Why did his palpable excitement chafe?

Wordlessly, Elyse retrieved that forgotten pinecone he still held out to her.

Broden took her silence for hesitation of a different sort. “It wouldn’t be a pretend courtship if that is what you’re worrying about.”

It wasn’t.

“There’d be no need for us to pretend we’re at all romantic.”

“Thank goodness for that,” she said, deadpan.

He grinned. “Precisely. It will be enough that we spent time together, and then when we say to them that we do not suit, they’ll have no choice but to let the matter rest.”

How proud he looked in his plan. How energized he’d become, not at the idea of them spending time together, but at evading their parents’ machinations.

His lips dipped into a frown. “Elyse?”

To save face, she forced herself to smile. “I think it is a splendid idea.”

For, it was.

Just, please, she silently implored, stop speaking of it.

And of all the small wonders, he did, and the sense of dejection that’d plagued her the moment he’d concocted the perfect reason for them to be together, faded some.

They remained that way, working side by side, in a pleasant silence. Broden would hold up a sprig of holly or an evergreen branch. Elyse would point. He'd give her selection over. They worked splendidly together...

And then, at last, it was done.

Elyse sat back contentedly and admired their work—the once bare twigs now sported a full, lush, cluster of branches. Accented in only pinecones, and red berries there was an understated elegance to their ball.

With a pleased smile, Elyse reached for the strip of gold ribbon, at the exact same moment Broden made to fetch it for her. Their fingers touched and tingles radiated from where those digits kissed.

Neither of them drew back. Elyse couldn't make herself if the room were ablaze.

Then, he folded his four center fingers over the tops of her four center fingers.

Elyse cocked her head and studied them. "They are so different," she murmured. "Yours are powerful and mine—"

Broden caught her by the wrist and drew her hand to the center of his chest.

Under her palm, she felt the solid, frantic galloping beat of his heart. "Never doubt your power, love."

Love. He'd called her love. It was surely just a casual endearment, and she was certainly not the sort looking to love or be loved, and still, somehow, she melted inside and from nothing more than a syllable alone.

“I want to kiss you, love,” he said hoarsely.

There it is. *Again.*

Is he asking? Is he telling me?

Elyse decided to not wait for him to articulate. “I want you to kiss me.”

His breath hitched.

“Oh, dear.” She sank her teeth into her lower lip. “That was too bold.”

“Too perfect,” he said hoarsely. “It was too perfect. Just as you are.”

“I’m really not. I’m deeply flawed and as you pointed out, my wiles are not enough to tempt you.”

He drew back, aghast. “Why would you say that?”

“*You* said that.”

Broden frozen. “*I* did?”

Elyse nodded. “At the inn.”

Broden frowned, and then understanding lit his eyes. “When you were a burglar?”

“I wasn’t a burglar.”

“When I *thought* you were robbing me?”

She gave another nod. “That time.”

He growled. “Nothing counts before the robbery.”

“It wasn’t a—*EEK.*”

Broden tugged her off the stool and into his arms, and Elyse went happily and willingly, and oh, so eagerly.

Their lips met as one in a fierce explosion of two people; Elyse, a woman who'd never known passion or tasted desire, and Broden? He kissed her as if he'd been a man without too long.

She moaned, and he slipped his tongue inside.

Elyse touched the tip of hers to Broden's, tentatively at first.

He cupped his palm about her nape, angled her head, and then showed her the way. He schooled her in the erotic movements of his kiss the same way he might have guided Elyse through the forbidden steps of the waltz.

Glide, thrust, parry.

Parry, thrust, glide.

They continued the motions of that dance over and over, and unlike a set that had a conclusion this one went on forever so that Elyse found herself caught in a dizzying eddy of desire.

Had she truly teased her sisters over their longing for romance?

Elyse discovered how very wrong she'd been. She *yearned* for this embrace to go on forever. She wanted to drown in his kiss. And he seemed all too happy to fulfill Elyse's unspoken wish.

Broden deepened the kiss, and the lash of their tongues took on a frantic, almost violent clash until Elyse no longer

knew where his kiss ended, and where hers began. In a futile attempt to do so, she gripped the lapels of Broden's jacket, hard and pressed herself against him. She wanted to climb inside him and retain this feeling of closeness she'd found with him. Frustration mounted at her inability to do so, and she climbed to her feet.

Broden scooped her buttocks and perched her on the edge of the table, and that slight elevation gave her more of that closeness she'd been longing for. He swirled his tongue around hers, and she returned that delicate caress. They went on that way so that desire tunneled out any other thought, feeling, or sensation that lived outside this moment. Broden came over her, and Elyse arched her back.

Nothing could shatter this hold. Noth—

A loud *bang* slashed in the moment, making the biggest liar of Elyse, as she and Broden wrenched away from one another.

Her heart thundered in her chest and ears and parts of her body she'd not previously known her heart *could* pound.

They looked at the toppled stool; the foe who'd ended the most magical moment in Elyse's life to this point.

She didn't want to look at Broden. She didn't want to see horror. She just wanted to let herself believe he'd wanted this embrace as much as she had.

"Elyse," he began hoarsely.

"It is f-fine," she said tightly, cutting him off before he could express his regrets. "You do not need to apologize."

To give her quaking hands a task, to avoid meeting his eyes, to avoid this moment altogether, Elyse turned to pick up the stool.

Broden caught her firmly by the shoulders and brought her around to face him.

Why must he do this?

“Look at me,” he commanded.

But apparently, he was determined to put her through this.

As she’d told him from the beginning, she was no coward, and so she forced herself to meet his gaze.

Her breath hitched.

In his eyes, there was no re—

“I don’t have any regrets about kissing you,” he said bluntly, and her heart quickened. “Other than one.”

That elation proved so very fleeting.

“My regret is...that I...cannot be the man you deserve.” He gave her shoulders a light squeeze, as if willing her to understand.

And Elyse did.

He couldn’t give her more than this, which was fine.

This was all she needed.

Chapter 13

Broden had kissed Elyse Caldecott.

He'd kissed her with all the passion and longing that'd plagued him since he'd discovered her in his bedroom at The Mermaid Inn.

Then, he'd attributed that all-consuming lust to the fact he'd not had a woman in his bed in more than a dozen years, and instead, had only known the *pleasure* brought by his own hand.

Now, after his embrace with Elyse, Broden wasn't altogether sure.

He hung around the far-left corner of the drawing room; flanked on both sides *not* by the dozen or so guests loitering about in preparation for the yule log celebration, but by the gilded frames containing portraits of the previous Marquess and Marchioness of Dalkeith.

Lust. It was a mindless, fleshly, earthly carnal emotion, easy to identify for the purely physical urgings attached. It didn't invite thoughts about the person beyond thoughts sexual in nature. It certainly didn't involve seeking the person out to talk with or learn about.

And it unnerved the hell out of him.

However, it didn't unsettle him *quite* enough that he stayed away.

It is only a short time you'll have to spend with her.

And he'd already determined that being with her was a good deal better, safer, and more comfortable than interacting with his family.

That is all it is.

Giving himself that much-needed—and most logical—assurance, Broden again glanced at the entryway in anticipation of her arrival. And he knew she'd be here. That'd been the agreement they'd reached in the nursery.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the flicker of a shadow and turned. Disappointment marking him the worst sibling in England, filled him.

“Robin,” he greeted his sister.

In each hand, she held two glasses of mulled cider.

“You've always been my most clever brother,” she declared, offering him that drink, which he took. “But do not tell the others or I shall deny it.”

“Would you have me not tell them because then we'll all discover you've pledged the same to each of us?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Maybe.”

“I thought so,” he mumbled and took a sip.

“If it is any consolation,” she said after she'd taken a drink of her cider, “at this particular moment, I *do* find you the brightest of all my brothers.”

Broden pressed his spare hand to his chest. “I'm honored. Though I confess, I wonder what I've done that merits such accolades.”

“I have two words for you.”

“That is six.”

“Like I said, the cleverest,” Robin said, not missing a beat.

“And the two words, Rob?” he drawled.

“Miss Caldecott.”

Heart hammering, Broden whipped his gaze about in search of—

“Rest easy. She is not here.”

Rest easy? Broden furrowed his brow. “Is *that* what you think? That I’m...glad at her absence?” And here, he’d always believed his sister too clever for words.

“Relieved, then.” Robin patted his hand. “You have always been an honorable gentleman, and I know that is why you’ll not say as much about her not being here. No words are necessary.”

Based on that erroneous conclusion she’d drawn, Broden ventured a *lot* of words were necessary.

Robin sighed.

“Brother, you are hiding,” she said gently, “in the corner and you have been each day.”

“Do you think if I were truly hiding, I’d select a place so obvious and unhindered as the corner of a room? Or do you think it’d be an area of the room I selected to deter other guests from approaching me while awaiting the company of a person whose presence I *did* invite?”

“Who? The only lady I’ve seen you—?” She stopped. “Not—Miss *Caldecott*?” she whispered furiously.

He let his silence serve as his answer.

“You...do not despise her?”

“*No.*”

She frowned, and then taking him by the arm, she angled Broden so his back was to the gathered guests, and only she could make out the words he spoke. “But the morning she arrived—”

“We had... met before.”

Robin’s eyes bulged. “You met—?” Her voice climbed.

“*Shh.*”

His baby sister complied and dropped her voice, but not her questioning. “You *met* her before.” Robin shook her head. “What does that *mean*?”

“It means just what it sounds like. When we were traveling. We were not, however, aware of one another’s identity when we...spoke.”

Robin leaned up and in so quickly, deep crimson drops of her drink sloshed over the sides. “You *spoke*?”

“Will you stop repeating everything I say,” he whispered furiously.

With a quiet curse, Broden relieved his youngest sibling of that refreshment which had swiftly become a liability to the both of them. He glanced about and, finding a waist-length

white marble column nearby, he deposited his and her drinks upon the makeshift table.

Robin gripped her head as if she were trying to keep each new discovery, clear in her head. “I am sorry. I am just...” She stopped and dusted a hand over her mouth. “Oh, dear. You like her.”

“Yes, I like her.”

Then, Robin’s meaning became clear.

“As a friend,” he clarified. “Only as a friend.” *One whose mouth you still dream about kissing.*

“Men and women can’t be friends.” She spoke in a rote way, like a young girl repeating a daily lesson to her governess. “A lady is only permitted a friendship with her brothers and other male relatives.”

He scowled. “Who told you *that* rubbish?” Because of a certain, he and Elyse got on fabulously.

“You.”

Broden didn’t blink. “*Me?*”

Robin nodded.

“Well, that was shite advice because it is possible and that is precisely what I’ve formed with Miss Caldecott.”

Happiness filled Robin’s somewhat sharp features. “Oh, how magnificent.”

Heat climbed his neck, and Broden grunted. “You’re making more of it than there—”

His sister clasped her hands at her chest. “All along, I’ve thought I could not and should not be friends with gentlemen, but the ladies have been either deuced boring or rude.”

Oh, hell. Broden knew where this was going.

“But knowing I *am* able to extend my friendship to men —”

“*No.*”

“But—”

“I said *no.*”

“Yes, well, just now you did, but before you advised—”

“I was wrong,” he snapped. “Forget anything and everything I said about men and women being friends.”

“But I am confused, Broden, by your own admission, you are friends with Miss Caldecott.”

Aye, but, it was different. He opened his mouth to say as much, even as he wasn’t sure he could explain as much... when he caught the shrewd glimmer in her eyes.

He narrowed his eyes. “I know what you are doing.”

“Doing?” She batted her lashes. “I’m not *doing* anything.”

He bristled. “*Saying*, then.”

Robin crossed her arms before her. “Oh, and what is that, my most clever brother?” She didn’t wait for his response; rather, she seemed all too happy to answer on her own. “You think, I’m the one...”

Suddenly, Broden went still.

A warm energy coursed through him. The din made by happy guests and the clink of crystal glasses touching the silver trays circulated about the room by uniformed servants, faded to a distant hum in his head.

With his sister prattling on, her words as lost to him as everyone else's in the drawing room, he turned and found her standing there.

Elyse hovered at the entryway.

Gowned in a rich, satin evening dress in luminescent shades of white and deep red, an observer could see any number of pink, orange, and red hues.

In Broden's time away from England, much—everything—had been altered in some way: fashion having been one of those absent observations he'd made upon his return.

However, standing in this drawing room and gazing enrapt at Elyse Caldecott, Broden acknowledged he'd not been properly appreciative of the glorious good that had come with those changes to lady's fashion.

Elyse's dress had been cut low off her shoulders, putting that delectable expanse of her sun-kissed skin on display, and leaving Broden to imagine the hours she'd spent laying under a summer sky, to have attained and retained that golden-brown skin. Gold patterning work had been embroidered in a crisscross upon the bodice of her gown, which only further drew the male eye.

Broden drank in the sight of her, and possessively did a sweep of the room for any bastard who'd also noted her,

because surely they had, and he wanted to know so that he could bloody them...

Broden narrowed his eyes. There were, in fact, two gentlemen, side by side, currently sizing Elyse up.

While Broden's sister rambled on next to him, a bestial rumble built in his belly and settled in his chest.

Broden's brothers.

And never had he wanted to pulverize either of them, not the way he did now. How dare they ogle her in that way?

He started. What in blazes?

The only reason he cared one way or another was because Elyse had become a friend to him.

If she is a friend, and you know either of your brothers would make her a decent match, then why do you have this overwhelming hunger to pound their unscarred, affable faces?

For her part, Elyse remained oblivious, and rooted to her spot at the front of the room. As Broden took a step to join her there, the lady's parents came rushing to meet her.

Disappointed swarmed him.

Robin raised her voice to be heard over his tumultuous thoughts. "And that is why, I call for the overthrow of King William."

The—?

Broden blinked in abject confusion and his gaze went to his sister and the shrewd look she gave him.

She winked, and then with a smile, she gathered up her glass of cider and stared openly at Elyse. “Why isn’t she entering the room?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps because some people—my family included, have treated her less than kindly.”

Guilty patches of color formed perfect circles upon Robin’s pale cheeks. “Did she say that?”

“No. What she did say, on the other hand, is that my family loves me very much and that you, my sister, are a fierce defender, and I should be grateful for your devotion and not angry whether you turn it upon someone whom you believe has wronged me.”

Robin pressed a hand against her mouth. “She said that?”

“*That*, she said,” Broden confirmed.

“We have been the worst,” she whispered.

Broden collected his glass and toasted his sister. “Speak for yourself.”

A low groan escaped Robin. “You really *are* the cleverest of all the siblings.”

“Aye. Now, you know with a certainty, though.”

Robin sighed.

Together, they turned and directed their attention on Elyse who’d finished speaking with her mother and father, and with them having gone, she now eyed the path behind her.

The hell she’d leave...

Setting aside his drink once more, Broden went to meet Elyse.

Robin stayed him. “If I may?”

Though, hers wasn’t really as a question as she’d already started at a determined clip across the crowded room, weaving in and out of each guest who made the foolhardy attempt to stop her and exchange mindless pleasantries.

Broden stared on as Robin made her way over to Elyse.

Elyse had been correct when she’d all but said Broden’s sister was loyal to a fault. But Broden also happened to know that loyalty was not reserved for kin, but rather extended to those who were loyal and good to the Burgesses. Going forward, Robin would be a needed—and hopefully, welcome—friend to Elyse.

The instant Robin reached Elyse, Elyse eyed the other young woman with a deserved caution. He watched that exchange intently, and he knew the moment it would be all right. Robin said something, and whatever it was drew a merry, infectious laugh from Elyse. Some of the tension left him. There would be a friendship, after all.

And what did it say about his rotted soul that he found himself selfishly wanting Elyse and her company all to himself?

Chapter 14

Later that night, while the household slept, and the fires crackled and the old oak boards continued to settle, Elyse sat on the floor of the Marquess and Marchioness of Dalkeith's music room.

With her back pressed against the wood-paneled walls and her legs drawn close, Elyse dropped her chin atop the makeshift table made by her knees.

Her gaze remained locked on the gilded ormolus clock. The ornate piece stood in stark juxtaposition to the simplicity of the white-painted fireplace with its fluted jambs and friezes.

"Days," she whispered.

It'd been days since she'd thought about and mourned Evie.

Nay, more specifically, since Elyse met Broden, thoughts about her big sister had begun to fade.

Now, Elyse spent her time smiling and laughing and finding more happiness than she ought.

For why should Elyse be happy? Why, when her eldest sister didn't get to enjoy those same gifts?

And yet, this latest night spent with Broden, his family and hers, had felt...right and beautiful and she hadn't wanted it to end.

Squeezing her eyes shut tight, she knocked the back of her head against the wall, softly, silently, rhythmically.

What have I done?

She'd had a taste of what it was like to live fully again, amidst family and friends, and now she wanted to partake in the whole feast.

The floorboards groaned, and she glanced up, unhurriedly, already knowing who was there.

Broden. But Broden with his jacket and cravat since discarded and in nothing more than his tight-fitting trousers and untucked white lawn shirt.

Her breath caught and her mouth went dry.

He drew the door closed behind him, and moved with slow, measured steps over to where Elyse sat. She couldn't muster a greeting, and yet, his presence alone brought forth a warm, welcome solace.

Wordlessly, Broden slid onto the floor and mirrored her pose, so they sat side by side, shoulder to shoulder. They remained that way, comfortable and content in one another's quietness.

Broden spoke first. "Unable to sleep?" His hushed voice tangled with the hum of silence.

She nodded.

"Has my sister done something—?"

"You know she was perfectly gracious and friendly and warm." She slanted a look up at him. "Which was a sudden and unexpected—"

"But pleasant?"

“But a pleasant,” she allowed. “change.”

He grunted.

“I take it you spoke to her.”

“I told her you were my friend and deserving of only kindness.”

His friend.

She wanted that status he'd assigned their relationship to be enough...but it wasn't. She had friendships with her sisters. What she had with Broden? *This* was not *that*.

Drawing in a shaky breath, Elyse attempted to divert herself away from that heartbreaking realization.

“You're unable to sleep, as well?” Even though she already knew the answer. After all, his being here now at this late hour was proof enough.

“I never sleep.” Broden directed that quiet murmur at the same fireplace that had earned Elyse's earlier scrutiny. “And you?”

“Sometimes I sleep,” she admitted, and when she managed to do so, she prayed there'd be a reunion in her dreams of her sister.

“What steals your rest?”

Elyse shrugged. “Any number of things.”

“Tell me some of them.”

She lifted her gaze to his “Will you tell me *yours*?” she asked, because she wanted to know, all the while knowing he

wouldn't—

He bowed his head. “Do you want that?”

Did she *want* that? She wanted to know everything there was to know about him. What pain he'd known, and the happiness, too. All of it.

*Oh, God, help me—*for she could deny it no longer—*I've fallen in love with him.*

Somehow, somehow, in just a brief interlude of time, all the carefully laid plans she'd had to protect herself from loss had crumbled as quickly as those castles of sand she and her sisters used to build at Chesil Beach. And the enormity of what he offered—when her question had been more a rhetorical or an attempt at teasing lightness, struck her.

“I want that,” she said softly.

“Are you sure? Because my story is not a pretty one. It's dark and awful and ugly and not fit for anyone to hear, let alone, you, a—”

She took his hand and pressed it between her two palms. “I *want* to know, Broden.” With reverent care, she trailed a fingertip along a small, circular scar that, at some point, had faded to white.

Pain pierced her heart at the thought of his suffering.

Elyse lifted her gaze from those old injuries marring his flesh and looked him in the eye. “I want to know about the wounds you carry in your heart and in your mind.” She applied a gentle pressure to his fingers.

Seated as close as they were, she could see it all: the turbulent emotion in his shadowed eyes. The way his throat moved up and down, as if swallowing had suddenly become a struggle.

Broden drew in a slow breath through his nose and then exhaled it slowly past his lips.

“Very well. I’ll go first. I was in love. Her name was Alvina.”

Broden’s gaze grew far away, and it was the moment Elyse knew he’d ceased to see her, and in his mind, only he and Alvina now existed.

She’d known that was a core part of his story and the nature of his heartbreak. Hearing him declare those abiding feelings and knowing the name of the woman who’d been so very lucky to have his love, caused a vicious, ugly, and bitter jealousy inside.

And it didn’t matter that Elyse *knew* she was petty and small for envying his departed sweetheart for the gift she’d possessed; Elyse was helpless to stymie those terrible sentiments.

“She was shy. Timid. Soft-spoken. A delicate lady; so fragile-looking and fair, I’d wondered that a wind could not hurt her, and wanted to protect her.”

In short, Alvina had been everything Elyse wasn’t and never would be.

Stop! This isn’t about you...this is about Broden.

And he mattered far more to her.

“She and her family were new neighbors,” he explained. “Her father had been a member of the gentry and only through the death of a distant relative, did he inherit the dukedom and lands.” His mouth tightened. “They were very conscious of their previous station and were determined that their children should only make the best matches. The first time I met her, I was riding with my brothers, and we came upon her. She’d been walking and turned her ankle. Because she feared horses, I carried her back in my arms.”

Elyse sighed. Even hopelessly in love with him as she was, Elyse couldn’t help but feel the thrill of that young romance.

“When we arrived, her mother and father were elated... that my *eldest* brother was there.”

Frowning, Elyse shifted her entire body around, so they sat with their knees touching. “But...but *you* are a marquess’s son.”

“Aye. A future marquess would do nicely but never a marquess’s third son.”

“That’s horrid,” she muttered, furious for him and Alvina.

“Alvina did not possess the strength we think of when it comes to strength, but where it came to us, she defied her parents and her brother.”

That was because a man such as Broden was worth fighting for. And once more, Elyse felt a kindred connection to Broden’s late sweetheart.

Broden carried on with his telling. “They could not make their daughter give me up, but they could make me go away.”

A horrible, haunted look contorted his features; it twisted them into an unrecognizable mask of grief, terror, and frustration, and Elyse yearned to take him in her arms but feared if she did so, he'd stop sharing...and he needed to release these ugly memories to someone else with whom he could lean upon.

She would be that person.

In a subtle show of support, Elyse took his hand and cradled it once more, between her own. "What did they do?"

A muscle at the left corner of his eye ticked. "They falsely accused me of murdering Alvina's younger brother."

She gasped.

"If I'd intended to kill one of them, it would have decidedly been her shite of an eldest brother. Either way, I was tried, found guilty, and sent aboard a prison ship to Australia where...I managed to survive."

Oh, God. Everything hurt inside. Every part of her. Every fiber that comprised her being. And yet, she knew by that vague, hurried conclusion of his story that there was more, and he wished to protect her, as he'd wished to care for Alvina.

"They hurt you," she murmured. "Your jailers."

He gave a terse nod. "They whipped us. Starved us. Denied us water. When they wished to have some," his lips twisted in a macabre grin that harkened back to their very first exchange, "fun with us, they would release hungry rats into our cells. Those vile creatures would attempt to gnaw off our

feet and in the case of less fortunate men, they succeeded in doing so.”

Bile surged in her throat. *I'm going to throw up.* Elyse swallowed frantically to keep from casting the contents of her stomach on the floor before him. *He* deserved to take strength from someone else.

Now, his irrational terror at The Mermaid Inn made complete sense. “That is why you were going to kill Sir Lancelot.”

“In fairness, he is a guinea pig.” In a clear bid for levity, Broden flashed a crooked grin. It faded quickly, and he rushed through the rest of his telling. “As you can tell, I returned. When I did, I went to seek out Alvina, and discovered in my absence, she’d died.”

There was a note of finality that indicated that was the last he intended to say about what had been done to him and what he’d endured.

Her heart broke. The story of his struggle, the wrongs done to him, and the fate he’d suffered and survived could have been a tragedy written by the Great Bard himself.

Be strong for him. She wanted to. *Desperately.*

Her lower lip trembled.

“Oh, Broden,” she whispered, linking her fingers with his, and squeezing them. “I am the worst fool. No wonder you responded so when he’d discovered me in your room at The Mermaid Inn.” Her eyes slid closed. And she’d mocked him for being hysterical.

“How could you have suspected anything like that, Elyse?” he gently admonished, entirely too forgiving. He motioned to the previous spot she’d occupied, urging her to return.

In her nightshift and wrapper, she crawled back to his side. This time, Broden wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. She nestled against him, burrowing deep the way Sir Lancelot did when contented.

“Now, your turn, Elyse,” Broden’s rumbling murmur, cut through the silence. “What keeps you awake this evening?”

Elyse chewed at her lower lip. Of a certain, he’d been vastly braver in the freedom with which he’d shared. She, on the other hand, couldn’t find the start.

“I enjoyed myself tonight.”

Broden didn’t say anything for several moments. “And...is there a problem in that?”

There shouldn’t be and for other people who’d not lost a sister or loved one, there wasn’t guilt in happiness. But from everything she’d learned about him and everything he’d just shared, she knew that grief was something he could understand.

Elyse took a steadying breath. “My sister died.”

Against her, she felt Broden’s body go completely motionless. “I didn’t know,” he murmured. “I am sorry you’ve known that loss.”

She didn’t want to look at him and see the all-too-familiar pity that followed people’s discovery of that fact. She didn’t want him to see the worst thing that happened to her and her

family. Only, when she at last made herself cast a glance up—his eyes were not pitying, but rather blazing with the sympathy that came from one who'd also loved and lost.

And he had.

“She was my best friend. My big sister. We did everything together. She was vibrant and light and all that was good. She loved to play the violin and cello, and she was so awful.” A half-sob, half-laugh slipped out. Elyse caught it belatedly in a fist. “We all were. It was hard to say which Caldecott girl was the worst. But I knew she and Edith so loved performing that I'd humiliate myself beside them.”

Elyse fell silent; remembering her sister fully, all the memories of Evie that Elyse had only previously allowed to let out in trickles, flowed forth.

She didn't want to bury all the thoughts she carried of Evie and their family as they'd been. She didn't want to shut out her family any more, and...it was like a weight lifted, and a lightness suffused her.

“She wanted to fall in love and longed for a family,” Elyse shared softly. “And I...” She smiled. For the first time, there came not pain, but happiness at the moments they had shared. “I would tease her mercifully for being a romantic, and she swore I'd fall in love, and when I did, she would be there to tease me right back for the rest of our days.”

A tear slipped out. Followed by another. These tears, cathartic; healing.

Broden brushed several fingers over Elyse's cheek, wiping away those drops.

She rested her cheek against him. "Evie was about to have her debut, and... one afternoon she fell ill. Just like that, she was gone," she whispered.

"Do you believe your sister would want you to spend your life closed off from everyone and denying yourself happiness?"

Elyse clamped down hard on her inner cheek. "No. Evie would have hated that." She took a fortifying breath. "And what of you?" she ventured hesitantly, needing to know how he'd handled his grief. "You don't feel any guilt for being happy when...when..."

"When Alvina is not here?"

Elyse managed a nod.

"I haven't been happy until you," Broden confided matter-of-factly.

Elyse's breath hitched.

The air sparked like the flames dancing in the fireplace.

Broden brushed his knuckles under Elyse's chin. Her lashes slid closed, and she leaned up.

This time, their lips met in a tender exchange; she and Broden were two souls who'd come together and helped free one another of the crushing weight of sorrow that had consumed them for too long.

Or, that was what Broden and this moment were to Elyse. She didn't know what she was to him. But for now, this was enough.

With that, she surrendered herself completely.

Elyse parted her lips, and he swept inside, kissing her as she'd longed for him to do again. Their breaths came quickly, in noisy little spurts, and the silence lent an eroticism to those sounds of their desire.

"I have never felt like this," he rasped against her mouth. He nipped and nibbled at her lower lip, and then drew that flesh into his mouth and sucked.

"Broden," she moaned, biting him in kind.

He grunted his approval.

A sharp ache built between her legs. Elyse squirmed in a bid to find some relief. Broden however, knew what she needed. He drew her onto his lap, so she sat sprawled with her legs draped across his thighs, and her throbbing core pressed against his flat, muscled stomach. Of their own volition, her hips began to move.

"Aye, love," he crooned that husky praise. "Just like that."

He gripped her buttocks and guided her movements.

"Broden," she moaned into his mouth, unable to formulate the words needed to beg him to assuage whatever this sensation was that hovered between pain and pleasure.

With an animalistic growl of approval, Broden drew the neckline of her nightshift down. Cool air, a product of the

winter wind howling outside, wafted over her exposed skin.

Elyse shivered.

“Poor, princess,” he crooned. “You’re cold.”

“I—”

He filled his palms with her breasts.

Elyse released a sharp exhale.

“Yes?” Broden urged. He smoothed the pads of his thumb over the peaks of her breast and Elyse bit her lower lip hard.

She had never been the swooning or fainting sort. In fact, she’d rolled her eyes at those who did. Now, she understood. Heaven’s how she understood.

Broden continued to play with that pebbled flesh, rolling them between his thumbs and forefingers. “You were saying?” he teased.

Saying? “Was I s-saying s-something?” How had she even managed to formulate those words?

“You don’t recall my question?” He flicked the tip of his tongue over her nipple, and a hiss exploded from between her clenched teeth.

“N-No.”

Nothing. She recalled nothing. Not even her own name. And she knew he knew that. Just as she knew he was playing some kind of hedonistic game with her—one she found herself all too happy to join in.

Broden raised one of her breasts higher towards his mouth. She tensed, bracing for the next magic to come. Only, he remained with his lips a hairsbreadth from her erect nipple.

Her center throbbed and ached.

“I asked if you were cold, love.” Each word he spoke brought his lips brushing against that tip in an accidental caress.

Nay, there was nothing accidental in this. Broden knew *precisely* the havoc he wrought over Elyse’s body and senses.

“N-Not cold,” she panted. She’d never be cold again.

Broden closed his eyes and lowered his lips. She whimpered, closed her eyes in return and—

“Are you warm, then?” he ventured.

“Hot,” she rasped. “I am so hot.”

He smiled a wicked, scoundrel’s grin, and then, at last, he took that whole aching crest of her right breast deep into his mouth.

Elyse cried out softly, catching herself too late. That shrill, thirsty wait reverberated around the music room. She should stop. *They* should stop. Anyone could happen by. She’d be ruined. And he didn’t want to marry and...

Everything was all mixed up at the moment. She’d sort it all out.

Later.

Broden stopped, and she clamped her lower lip between her teeth to keep from screaming her frustration to the rafters.

He continued to cradle her breasts in his palms and rubbed his thumbs down the sides of them.

“Do you want to stop, love?”

“I am angry you *have*, Broden.”

“I must remedy that.” His lips formed a painful-looking, half-grin. “I know better than to cross you.”

And Broden closed his mouth around the peak of her right breast first.

Elyse hissed between her teeth and tipped her hips up. That reflexive movement brought the painful place between her legs flush with the hard muscles of his flat belly.

As if knowing precisely what she sought, what she needed, he cupped her buttocks, and drew that part of her that throbbed, closer. He guided her in a slow back-and-forth motion. Over. And over. Again.

Elyse found the rhythm he taught her.

Sweat beaded at her brow, as she pumped her hips.

There was something she needed. She needed—

Broden slipped a hand between them and palmed her center.

Elyse gasped. Words failed. Her heart threatened to explode. She lifted into his touch.

“Please,” she begged, uncertain of what it was exactly she asked him for. Simply knowing he was the only one who could ease this ache.

Broden slipped a long finger in her hot, sodden channel.
“Is this what you want?”

She whimpered.

“Tell me you want my touch.” His husky demand contained a touch of roughness that only further fueled the fire in her.

Elyse shoved her hips into that lone digit buried inside her, as she showed him with her body just how badly she needed him.

“Uh-Uh,” he scolded and pulled his finger from her drenched sheath.

At that loss, she cried out, but the sound of it was immediately swallowed by Broden’s kiss.

“We have to be quiet,” he whispered against her mouth.
“Now, tell me with your words that you want my touch.”

“I want your touch,” she whispered.

“What do you want and where do you want it?” Broden paused. He slid another finger into her tight channel. “Here, perhaps?” he asked casually.

Elyse gasped and managed a jittery nod. “Th-There.”

“All your words, Elyse.” His eyes darkened and he made to withdraw.

“I want your finger, inside of me.”

“Good girl,” he whispered.

If she weren't mad with desire, Elyse would have laughed at the way he preened with masculine satisfaction over her admission.

"I want it," she moaned.

Elyse buried her head against his shoulder and bit Broden hard, in the crook of his arm.

"You are a delicious little wanton, aren't you?" he crooned.

That naughty adulation sent another rush of dampness to that forbidden place he continued to worship with his touch.

He laughed quietly. "You like hearing it too, don't you, minx?" he praised.

Then again reaching down, this time, Broden released himself from his trousers.

He guided her hand to his length, and with the intuition of Eve, Elyse wrapped her fingers about him. The feel of his length, hard as steel and soft as satin against her dripping thatch brought her head falling back.

Only, this time, as he taught her the rhythm he liked, and she stroked him, Broden who'd all the words for both of them before, now managed nothing more than guttural grunts and raspy incoherent words. And she understood the heady, power of having this pull over him.

"Is this what you want, Broden?" she whispered against his lips.

Broden's eyes flew open wide. Shock filled those desire filled depths.

Elyse stopped.

“Elyse,” he begged.

“Uh-uh. I want your words. Say it, Broden.”

“I want your touch, Elyse.”

She smiled and resumed stroking him. When suddenly, he shot a hand out.

Questioningly, Elyse looked at Broden’s strained features. “Did I do something wr—”

His low, pained groan cut off the rest of her question. “You’ve done only everything right.”

She made to resume caressing his thick shaft, but again, Broden stopped her.

“Elyse, I don’t...that is...I do not want...”

Oh, no. She cringed with humiliation. “You don’t want me.” Elyse made to pull away.

“No!” Broden exclaimed, drawing her close before she could move. “It is just...” His serious gaze locked with hers. “I do not want you to regret...making love with me.”

“How could I regret this, Broden?” she asked softly and caressed a palm over his cheek that glistened with sweat.

He looked at her meaningfully.

Oh. Because he will not marry you.

That message came clear, with no words necessary.

Odd, how amidst this very greatest pleasure she’d ever known, there should also be such a vicious pain cleaving at her

insides.

“I’m a grown woman, Broden. I want this.” If this is all he was willing to give, then she would be all too happy to take it. With that, they came together once more.

All reservations, all questions, doubts, words altogether faded into oblivion. Their harsh exhalations and inhalations and keening moans became all the communication they needed in this moment.

And as Broden slipped his length inside of her and claimed her, Elyse closed her eyes and took the one gift he did freely offer.

Chapter 15

Broden couldn't step foot in the music room.

Given the impending recital he'd promised Elyse he'd attend, Broden's sudden inertia certainly proved a problem.

Instead, with his mother's guests enjoying the latest round of festivities, Broden hurried inside his father's office, drew the door closed behind him, and lay his back against the sturdy mahogany panel.

Restless, Broden headed over to his father's well-stocked, Italian-painted sideboard, and grabbed the nearest bottle of brandy and a snifter. He tugged the stopper off with his teeth and spit it out onto the floor. Then, he poured and continued pouring until topaz contents touched the brim.

Then he stared at his reflection in the gilt overmantel mirror.

What had he done?

No, he knew precisely what he'd done. In the dead of night, with the whisper of moon shining through the music room windows, and a soft fire crackling in the hearth, he'd made love to Elyse Caldecott.

On the floor, no less. All the while knowing very well, he could not offer her more, and it didn't matter that she acted as if it was enough, she deserved more. She deserved an honorable gentleman, one able and willing to offer his name.

And Broden? Broden was none of those things.

He briefly closed his eyes and then, he picked up his glass and took a long, deep, swallow. It wasn't every day a man admitted he didn't like himself. He didn't like himself at all.

And yet, Broden, who'd done horrible, unconscionable, sinful things all in the name of survival had thought there couldn't be another sin blacker than the marks already upon his soul.

He'd been wrong. He'd been so wrong.

When half of the contents of his snifter failed to help dull his feelings, he drank down the rest. Then he grimaced and welcomed the searing burn the liquid left down his throat.

As soon as he finished, Broden promptly poured himself another. He took a more measured sip this time. Followed by another. Funny, a welcome warmth filled his veins, and yet, it failed to drive away the self-loathing and regret and—

“There you are. Mother has been asking...”

Fucking fabulous. His big brother—that was, the biggest of his brothers.

“What are you doing here?” Alden demanded.

If Broden had been searching for the perfect person with which to take out his frustration out on, his interfering, always-smiling, more nobleman now than big brother, Alden, was in fact the person.

Broden turned and toasted the frowning earl. As Alden was, standing at the front of the room and his arms folded at his broad chest, he resembled more their dear father than the boy whom Broden had, in fact, shared his first brandy with.

Like one auditioning for that very role, Alden took one look at the half-empty glass in Broden's hand, and his lips turned down in a disapproving frown. "Are you getting *foxed*?" he whispered, stomping over to take the bottle nearest Broden's fingers.

Broden grabbed it before he could and held it out of reach. "I'm n-ot getting foomed. I don't get foxed. I haven't since I was a lad at Oxford."

"Well, by the sounds of your slurring, you're not *getting* foxed, you already are." Then, suspicion filled Alden's eyes. "Are you meeting someone here?" he asked on a furious whisper. Alden didn't wait for an answer. He did a sweep of the room, and then started toward the door.

"More like hiding," Broden mumbled.

Alden wheeled around and doubled back. "What did you say?"

"I'm here waiting for a good chiiding," Broden substituted instead.

Alden's scowl deepened. "That isn't what you said."

No, it wasn't. "If you knew, you shouldn't have asked."

"Yes, well, you shouldn't be here, but rather," he did a quick up and down sweep of Broden, "making yourself presentable for the recital which is beginning soon." Alden swiped a hand Broden's way. "Yet here we are."

Here they were, indeed.

Broden took another long, long drink. When he'd finished, he wiped the back of his hand over his mouth.

His brother remained there watching him.

Broden cursed. "*Stllll* you."

"*Still* me."

Alden stared at Broden for a long while, and then sighed. "Let's talk about it."

"Dun wanna talk," Broden muttered. He scratched at his suddenly cloudy head. "'bout her."

Alden sharpened his gaze on Broden's face.

Broden resisted the urge to squirm. Why was he looking at him like that?

"About her," his brother repeated slowly.

He stared at him dumbly. "Wuut?" *What in hell was he on about?* In a bid to clear his mind, Broden took another drink.

His brother gave him a look; one that said clearer than words he'd not been born yesterday. "You said 'I don't want to talk about her'...or it was more like, 'dun wan talk 'bout her.'" Alden waved his hand. "But the message was the same."

What the hell was his brother carrying on about? That last sip hadn't helped. If anything, Broden's head had grown fuzzier.

"It's her," Alden breathed.

Broden looked about for the 'her' in question. "*Whooo?*"

“The woman you don’t want to speak about,” Alden said so quickly, his words all rolled together, making it nearly impossible for Broden to make sense of what he was talking about.

“Miss Caldecott.”

That name his brother spoke did, however, manage to break through the confusion. Clear-headed in an instant, Broden narrowed his eyes. “What are you on about?”

“Robin came to me.”

Broden cursed roundly and blackly. He knew precisely where this was going, and it was the absolute last place Broden wished to travel.

“She made more of it than there iss,” he said curtly.

Alden’s lips twitched up in an infuriatingly knowing, big-brotherly smile. “It behooves me to point out that I did not speak to you what Robin discussed with me.”

Broden blinked slowly. “Oh.”

A solemnness fell over the earl’s features. “I, on the other hand, didn’t need any opinions from Robin, as I’ve witnessed you with Miss Caldecott.”

Broden stiffened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said slowly, but he didn’t slur.

“I came upon you having, I believe, a snowball fight.”

Rage went snaking through him. “You had no business spying,” he hissed. To know Alden had been witness to that intimate moment between Elyse and Broden?

With a sound of disgust, Broden stomped to that doorway which stood partially open, inviting him through.

Alden raced after Broden. He caught him by the shoulder and forced him to stop.

“I left the moment I realized I’d intruded on...something I should not be intruding on,” the earl said in earnest tones. “But, Broden,” he said, lowering his arm to his side, “it was not just that. I’ve seen you two cloistered together, speaking in the corners, giggling and laughing like young lovers.”

Young lovers.

Broden hadn’t been a young in far too long, but he had been a lover, again, last night. The memory of Elyse in his arms, draped over him, coming undone, sent a wave of lust bolting through him.

“It is all right to love again,” Alden said haltingly, bringing Broden back from those wicked and wonderful thoughts he’d carry until the moment he took his last breath. “You do know that, don’t you, Broden?”

Love again?

Broden’s skin went hot and then cold. Sweat slicked his skin and nausea churned in his gut. Why couldn’t his family relent? His parents, he understood. But his brother? His once best friend in the world truly continued to press this point, over and over.

“Why are you doing *thiis*?” Broden implored.

Alden met that pleading with an entreaty of his own. “Because I want you to be happy and you *are* happy with her.”

“I already gave my heart.” Broden spoke through gritted teeth. “I loved someone. A woman who is not Elyse Caldecott. Her name was Alvina Ackley,” he made himself say for Alden as much as himself.

Because time had made the clarity of his late sweetheart’s face, and the memory of the moments they’d shared, fade. Now, in his mind’s eye, he saw only Elyse.

No. He wouldn’t be so foolhardy as to—

“What I felt for Alvina?” he burst out. “I’ll *never* feel that way again.”

Haven’t you felt that very rapture? a voice silently jeered. Haven’t you laughed more, and felt more joy and lightness than longer than you can recall?

“Are you sure you *don’t* feel that way now...with Elyse?” Alden asked quietly as if he’d followed Broden’s frantic cogitations.

“I won’t,” he rasped. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. And not because of who she was, but because of what it would mean to open himself to the greatest anguish of losing her.

“No, you’re right,” Alden murmured. “You will not love anyone again.” He held Broden’s gaze “That is, you won’t. Unless you let yourself.”

“Unless I *let* myself?” A harsh, bitter laugh exploded from Broden. “How very *simple* you make it sound.”

“Maybe it *can* be?” Alden persisted, with an optimism that could only come from his never having known the level of loss and suffering experienced by Broden.

Frustration, fear, and fury broiled in his chest. He'd loved and lost. The loss of Alvina? That had begun as a long separation, and a reunion with her had been something that got him through. Her death? It'd been one he'd not witnessed or been present for, but the grief was still there.

But to love Elyse and live with her and then lose her to the cruel hands of fate? That would destroy him in the ways his imprisonment and the death of his late sweetheart hadn't managed to do.

In the same older-brotherly way as when he'd pressed Broden into coming to this godforsaken house party, Alden settled a palm on Broden's shoulder.

"As I said, you may deny it all you want, I've witnessed you with Miss Caldecott," Alden said, when Broden finally looked at him. "I've *seen* the way you look at her."

The way he looked at her.

With his brother's every spoken word, dread twisted about Broden's chest; tightening it into a thousand panicky knots.

"She is witty and clever and unafraid to go toe-to-toe with ___"

Angrily, Broden angrily shrugged off his uncorrupted brother's grip.

"If you find Miss Caldecott such an ideal match, then perhaps you, yourself, should wed her," he jeered. The reverberations of Broden's charge echoed damningly from the rafters of the high-ceilinged room; and a spear struck him in a

self-inflicted wound, in the place where his heart did, in fact, still beat.

Pensively, Alden ran a hand across his mouth, and stopped, framing his chin between a thumb and forefinger. “Miss Caldecott *would* make a wonderful marchioness.”

A pestiferous image slithered forward of Elyse and Alden. And in his mind, the moments Broden had spent with her, played out in a different way. In it, he saw Elyse and Alden assembling a kissing ball. Or tossing snowballs at one another, like two jubilant, carefree children.

With every imagined thought of Elyse and his brother that sprung forth a thick, black blanket of rage descended like a curtain over Broden’s vision; blinding him. The tortured conjuring’s continued, relentless.

This time, of Alden drawing Elyse astride him and sliding his length inside her as only Broden had done.

Elyse moaning and whimpering her hunger for more of the other man’s kiss.

An unrelenting black rage assailed him.

“You’ve gone quiet, little brother?” Alden drawled, drolly mocking. “Should I take your silence to mean you want me to marry Miss Caldecott?”

A feral groan built in Broden’s belly and begged to be set free, as did the need to grind his fist into Alden’s smug f—

Broden let the harsh words he’d intended to hurl die on his lips, as he registered the knowing glitter in Alden’s eyes. *He is baiting me. Trying to get me to show my feelings for Elyse. As*

if uttering aloud the feelings he'd developed for her in any way changed Broden or the possibility of a future with her.

“I don't care what the hell you do with your life. You, on the other hand, are all too happy to interfere in mine.”

Alden recoiled; his gaze slid away from Broden, and then returned all too quickly, their like-blue eyes brimming with horror. But silence followed that harsh explosion; more charged than the fiery blaze dancing angrily in the hearth.

Alden inclined his head. “I see. You are free to stay here and sulk and dwell in your own self-denial, all you wish. I will, on the other hand, be returning to the recital. If you'll excuse me.”

Broden didn't so much as say goodbye. He remained with his spine stiffly erect, until Alden had gone, and then slowly sank to the floor and buried his head in his hands, more lost than he'd ever been.

Chapter 16

Elyse hadn't meant to eavesdrop.

She'd merely meant to find Broden and tug him along to the recital.

She'd looked everywhere—and finally found him.

Elyse stood motionless in the cheerfully decorated parlor directly adjacent Lord Dalkeith's office in tense conversation with the earl.

She yearned to remain frozen, suspended in time, upon this ivory-white Aubusson carpet. That way, Elyse didn't have to hear, over and over, in agonizing repeat, in her mind the words Broden had spoken...about her.

Nay, not just about her.

Her gut clenched, and anguish brought her eyes sliding shut. Broden had *also* spoken about his great and only love; his departed sweetheart, who'd died too soon and took his heart with her when she'd left.

It was certainly a black mark upon Elyse's soul, but God forgive her, she found herself crippled with a bitter and unsupportable jealousy for the poor, deceased young woman. To be the recipient of Broden's ardent and undying love.

A dash of wet, warmth slipped down Elyse's cheek. Followed by another, and another. And it was a moment before Elyse realized...

I'm crying...

She wiped that moisture from her face, but more drops fell to take their place.

This was rich. Just rich. In fact, the irony of *all* this was not lost on Elyse.

Oh, only if Evie were here. Her whimsical, romantic sister would have found the greatest hilarity that Elyse of all people, who'd teased Evie over the older girl's fancifulness and dreams of falling in love, and who'd considered herself the most logical of the Caldecott ladies, had gone and had fallen hopelessly, helplessly and utterly in love with a man who loved another.

Elyse cringed inside and out.

At that, Broden, who'd been all too happy to offer her up like a trussed-up Christmas goose to his brother, the marquess

—

“Miss Caldecott.”

The earl!

Surprise brought Elyse's head jerking up so quickly, she wrenched the muscles all down the right side of her neck, and that excruciating pain was a welcome distraction from the worst sort of anguish eating up her heart.

Oh, God, and hers was a prayer. *What is next, Lord? What other humiliation or pain could you possibly serve me?*

Sneaking a hand up as discreetly as she could, Elyse wiped her knuckles over her damp cheeks. For a moment, she thought of taking the coward's way and not answering the earl;

pretending instead as if she'd not heard him so that he left her alone with her ignominy.

She prayed to hear the shift of a floorboard, indicating he'd gone.

Alas, he didn't.

Instead, he allowed Elyse the time she needed to compose herself and face him.

Taking a slow, steady breath in through her lips, she exhaled. Then, bringing her shoulders back, she faced Broden's eldest brother.

With his hands clasped behind him, Lord Alden stood at the entryway of the parlor. Tall, and dark, and sharp-featured as Broden, but not as broadly muscled or scarred as the younger man, he still possessed a startling likeness to the one who, by his own admission, could never and *would* never love her.

A fresh wave of agony sluiced at her breast, made all the worse by the pity emanating from those eyes a shade lighter than the dark blue-grey of Broden's.

With all the dignity she could muster, Elyse sank into a stiff, formal curtsy. "Lord Alden," she returned that belated greeting, even as she stole a longing look at the hall behind him.

He inclined his head a fraction. "No need to curtsy, Miss Caldecott. There's no curtsying among friends."

Among friends? She suspected her status as tossed-over lover to his brother, hardly constituted 'friend' material. She

repressed another overwrought giggle.

“I expect *you* dipping a curtsy to *me* might not be all the thing for a whole variety of reasons,” she said, in a weak attempt at humor. Because, as long as they were speaking about curtsies and bows and pleasantries and formalities, they were not speaking about—

“I saw you earlier, Miss Caldecott.”

And there it was.

Her surprisingly still-beating heart dropped to her stomach. “Oh.” For, what else was there to say? *Of course*, the earl had seen her.

During his private exchange with Broden, the earl had looked away from Broden and over to the front of the room. She’d registered from the horror reflected in his eyes he’d noted her presence.

Elyse watched, with her pride in tatters, as the earl reached behind him and drew the exquisitely carved, Louis XV panels shut.

Splendid. Absolutely, unequivocally, positively splendid. This was no doubt the moment he’d take her to task for intruding on his private exchange with Broden.

Clasping her hands before her to steady those digits, Elyse awaited the earl’s agonizingly slow, measured approach. He stopped on the outside fringe of the carpet Elyse remained fixed to.

More of that stilted, miserable silence swelled between them.

And here she'd thought there could be no greater pain and shame than hearing the man Elyse loved hurling his absolute disregard for her. But having been caught eavesdropping by Broden's brother, well that quite took the biscuit.

"I trust you heard some of mine and my brother's exchange."

All of it.

His was barely a question, and as such, she considered a moment not speaking. Alas...

"I heard...*some*," she lied, unable to meet the earl's gaze squarely. She'd heard the entire exchange between Broden and his brother and learned good and well why ladies were warned to stay away from cracked doors and keyholes.

Elyse tensed; bracing for the deserved upbraiding that would complete her shame.

The earl sighed. "I am so sorry you stumbled upon that, Miss Caldecott."

Not a castigation then. And here to discover she'd prefer a solid lambasting to charity.

"If you've come to apologize, you needn't," she said. "I had no place listening in on a private discussion between you and Bro—your brother."

A wry smile formed on his lips. "Well, I'd be hard-pressed to name a single person who'd hear their name being spoken of and *not* stop to listen."

“Perhaps.” She didn’t know and didn’t care how anyone else would have handled themselves were they in the position she’d found herself. “If you’ll excuse me?” She made to drop another curtsy but recalled his earlier offering about that gesture, and to avoid any further discourse, sustained from doing so.

“If you would?” he asked, as she made to go.

Elyse followed his arm-sweep over to the French gilt, two-seat settee. Would he not let her be? Must he torture her?

“Please,” the earl added with a humbleness she expected most noblemen didn’t possess.

Feeling like one of those poor people being cruelly marched to the gallows, Elyse walked the remaining few steps to the white and soft-blue, upholstered sofa, and stiffly lowered herself onto the edge.

The earl dragged a chair over; he positioned it near Elyse, more specifically, between her and the exit she desperately wished to make.

“What my brother said,” he began in quiet, somber tones, “the words you overheard him speak, they were unforgivable. I’d preface all of this by saying he was not in the right frame of mind, that he had...” Color flared in his cheeks. “He has been *overindulging*.”

Is this why he’d sought her out? To make gentlemanly regrets on behalf of Broden? “Yes, well, my father always said, an overindulgence of spirits loosens the truth from one’s lips.”

“Miss Caldecott, I am—”

Deciding to spare both herself and Lord Alden his unnecessary apology, she cut him off. “Lord Alden, you needn’t apologize on your brother’s behalf. You were not the offender. Nor was your brother. He...he...”

Oh, Heaven, help me. I cannot do this. I can’t think of those words Broden had spoken.

She took in another shaky breath. “Your brother,” she repeated, this time, her voice now somehow steadied. “He merely spoke the truth.”

With alacrity that sent her reeling back, Lord Alden grabbed the underside of his chair and scooted closer. “But, you see, that is the thing, Miss Caldecott. My brother cares very deeply for you.”

This time, she made no attempt to suppress the laugh that exploded from her lips. “Oh, yes,” she said drolly. “Encouraging one’s brother to marry a lady is a sure sign of the other man’s affections.”

Ruddy color climbed the earl’s cheeks. “You heard *all* of it, then.”

“All of it,” she confirmed, and this time unapologetically. Better to be upfront with the earl, so this meeting could be over, than to skirt truths in an attempt to ‘save’ an already unsalvageable pride.

Broden’s brother wiped a hand over his face. When he let that palm fall back to his lap, his sharp features were schooled once more.

“My brother loved another woman deeply and when he learned she’d died, that loss wounded him gravely.”

She knew that. Broden had told her as much, and she’d overheard as much. And yet, somehow, each time, that same admission continued to unleash an almost brand-new hurt. “I know all that.”

The earl winced.

Her cheeks tingled with warmth. “That is, *aside* from the exchange I overheard,” she clarified. “I know about his love for her and their relationship and the sorrows that greeted him upon his return.”

Surprise lit the earl’s eyes.

“Broden told me about Alvina,” she explained.

Of a sudden, the earl grabbed his chair again and dragged it so close his knees almost touched hers. “That’s it!”

Elyse wrinkled her brow in confusion.

“You see, Miss Caldecott, my brother? He does not talk about Alvina. In fact, he doesn’t talk to anyone. That is aside from Lord Hamish, a friend he found during his years as an imprisoned man. I had to beg him to come spend the holidays with our family.” A laugh erupted from his lips. “No, I had to threaten him. But you? *You*,” he repeated, placing even more emphasis on that identifier, “you he speaks to and laughs with and...and it is just, his pain is so great, that it’s making him afraid and turned him into an obtuse dunderhead.”

From the seeds of despair in her breast, sprung flowers of hope...

Ones that promptly withered and died like the blooms struck by their first frost.

Elyse managed a gentle, and grateful smile. For, she was grateful. It meant so very much that he saw her as a woman worthy of his brother.

She swallowed painfully, and even so, when she spoke, her words came out thick. “I know something of loss. I know what it is to build up walls to keep yourself safe from the pain of losing again.”

Only that wasn’t altogether correct.

“I didn’t realize that I’d pushed my family and the whole world away until *Broden* opened my eyes to what I’d subconsciously done. He also showed me that a person who suffered the loss of a loved one, has to be ready to open themselves to love and the possibility of further hurt that comes with that risk. And Broden?” She shook her head. “He is not there.”

“But he *could* be,” Lord Alden persisted.

“Yes, he could. Someday.” Elyse favored him with a sad smile. “But this day? It is not the one. And me? I-I am not the woman.”

Tears threatened and to salvage some of her pride, she looked away. Her gaze caught on the evergreen kissing ball that dangled from the oak doorjamb; those crimson berries and pinecones Broden had given her, that she’d in turn twined amidst their vibrant green leaves.

And that joyous memory hurt as much as it healed.

“I understand you care deeply for your brother,” she said when she trusted herself to speak. “But you wishing I was the woman to help heal your brother’s broken heart, doesn’t make it so.”

Lord Alden attempted to speak, but she raised her voice to make herself heard over him.

“I thank you for speaking with me, and for your every kindness. I love your brother. I love him more than I believed possible. I love him more than I’d ever promised myself I would love anyone after my sister’s death. And yet...B-Broden?” Her voice caught. “He is *not* an obtuse dunderhead. He is brave and strong and courageous. He is a man who knows his heart.”

Sorrow threatened to swallow her up. Elyse pressed her eyes shut; desperately trying to keep more tears from falling, fighting to keep herself from splintering apart before this man.

She looked briefly down at her lap.

When Elyse again composed herself sufficiently enough, she looked once more at the earl.

“Broden knows *what* he wants and who he loves. And, Lord Alden? I am *not* that woman,” she said it another way, so as to disabuse him once and for all of the conclusion he’d drawn.

“I disagree.”

“You can want him to love me. But if all it took was wanting? Then he would be as in love with me as I am with him.” Her voice caught again. “Would you be so gracious as to

a-allow me the use of your carriage? I would like to return so my aunt is not alone for the holidays b-but I sent my maid and driver back to Leeds to be with *their* families.”

Resignation settled into every line of his face. “If that is what you wish—”

“It is.” *Not*. But to continue sharing a residence with Broden all the while knowing how little she meant to him, and when she was hopelessly in love with him. It would break her in ways her sister’s loss hadn’t.

He bowed his head. “My carriage, along with anything else you require is at your disposal.”

“I am forever in your debt.” Not allowing him a chance to launch another assailment, Elyse sailed to her feet. Her green silk skirts fell in a soft rustle about her ankles. “If you’ll excuse me, Lord Alden?” This time, she did tack a question on her words. She completed a curtsy, one intended to resurrect all formality between them, and then headed for the door.

She made it as far as placing her fingers on the ornate gilt handle before Lord Alden stopped her.

“Elyse?” he called, taking command of her name in a way that reasserted that offer of friendship he’d extended.

She turned back.

Lord Alden folded his hands behind him. “He will ask where you’ve gone.”

“He might. But neither does that mean he’ll care that I’ve left,” she said, matter-of-factly. Why could the earl not get that through his brain?

Lord Alden chuckled. “If you think he *won't* both ask after you and be rocked by your leaving, then you don't know Broden as well as you believe you do.”

Elyse caught the flesh of her inner cheek between her teeth, and made another attempt at escape, when he called out again.

“He'll discover I allowed you the use of the carriage and will have questions for me, Miss Caldecott. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

This time, she remained with her back to him; her heart thudded uncomfortably against her ribcage. His meaning couldn't be clearer. He intended to tell Broden the reason she'd gone, which would also mean Broden would learn she'd done the most foolish thing as to have fallen in love with him. And then there'd be more unwanted sympathy, only this time worse for it would be Broden pitying Elyse.

Panic mounted inside.

Elyse whipped around. “I'd ask you not to say...not to share...” She struggled to even speak the words aloud, but her dread at Broden learning she'd heard his conversation, proved greater. “Please, do not tell him.”

She didn't care that she pleaded. For she'd rather humble and humiliate herself before this man than Broden.

Compassion brimmed from his eyes. “Miss Caldecott, he is my brother.”

In other words, he could not withhold that information, not even to spare Elyse further shame. Nor, for that matter, should

Elyse have asked that boon of him.

She scrunched her toes up so tight in the soles of her slippers, that the muscles in her feet ached, and she welcomed that alternate pain.

“Forgive me.” She wiped shaky palms along the front of her skirts. “That was insupportable. I would not presume to come between you and your brother. I—” *Was just desperate.*

“You needn’t apologize,” he cut off the rest of her penitence. “You do have my word; I will *only* share with Broden if he questions to me. If he does not, I shall keep your every confidence.”

Elyse’s shoulders sagged under the immense weight of relief at his benevolent offer. “Thank you.”

“And certainly, do not thank me, Miss Caldecott,” he said so gently, and with such empathy, tears again welled in her eyes.

She brushed them back.

“We will, however, find out, which of us, you or I, prove correct where my brother is concerned.” Lord Alden followed that light attempt at humor, with a wink.

Elyse managed a smile for his benefit. How much easier it would have been to fall in love with a gentleman so uncomplicated as the earl. And yet, the strife and hardship Broden had known had shaped him into the man she’d fallen in love with for being.

“Lord Alden,” she murmured, and taking her leave of him, Elyse went to pack her belongings. Consumed with the

anguish of a different, but no less painful loss, she somehow managed to put one foot in front of the other and headed through Lord Dalkeith's long, expansive corridors.

She took in shuddery after shuddery breath.

She loved him. She loved him more than she'd ever believed it was possible to love a man, or, for that matter, any person.

She loved him for his resilience. She loved him for his ability to smile and laugh—even with everything he'd gone through.

And oh, how she wished he could love her with that same, overwhelming desperation of one who could not live without her.

After hearing Broden in his own words emphatically deny having any romantic feelings for her, how had she not already splintered and broken apart into a hundred million tiny pieces of wretchedness?

And then, as if she'd willed it to be, Elyse staggered. She pressed her palms against the wall to keep herself upright.

Why did you put him in my world? she silently cried to the God who'd been so absent, so long in her life. *Why?*

If not for her to find the one man who'd made her willing to trust in giving her heart away, then, what was the purpose of *any* of this?

The top of her head tingled from the feeling of being watched.

Elyse slowly lifted her head.

Her gaze collided with a gladsome group of Burgess's memorialized as they'd been some time ago, and where they now lived on in the gilded frame, frozen in a carefree moment. She straightened, let her arms fall to her side, and stared up at the big family. The marquess and marchioness flanked either side of their four children.

Elyse's regard, however, centered on the likeness of Broden years earlier.

He and the earl rested almost lazily against one another. The dark-haired young men wore matching crooked grins. The portraitist had perfectly captured not only the fraternal jocundity between the gentlemen but also the close bond they shared.

With her eyes, Elyse traced the beloved planes of his face.

Oh, how I will miss you.

Because this is not the time for that, the most fragile, delicate whisper of air brushed over Elyse.

Elyse went absolutely motionless.

Maybe *that* was why Broden had come into her life...

Yes, she'd lost her heart, soul, and every piece of herself to Broden Burgess but perhaps the only reason he'd been placed in Elyse's path was so that she might at last see the pain and pointlessness that came from cutting out one's family.

Keeping oneself closed off from the world, also prevented one from truly living.

Elyse had built a fortress to keep herself safe, but in so doing, she had lost out on so much. There'd been years and years of memories she'd not made with the parents and siblings who remained here on Earth. And if she'd lost any one of them, would Elyse have felt as if she'd been better off? *Or* would she have lamented and mourned all the time they'd not had together?

In this moment, she could at last, clearly see—she would have regretted those defenses she'd mounted, and all her cowardice cost her.

In such a short time, Broden had helped Elyse dismantle the walls she'd erected.

Oh, but how she wanted him in her life, forever. How she...

Do not think about the loss. Think about the others you love; the ones who can help you heal...

A glorious, beautiful lightness filled Elyse, leaving her buoyant. That exhilarating sensation muted the sorrow, dulling it to a bittersweet ache.

Elyse wasn't so much a fool that she believed it'd always be this way; but something else called, urged for peace, tranquility, and grace—grace with herself, for the hurt she'd inadvertently wrought her family who too had suffered just as greatly when Evie died.

Enlivened by hope, she let it fuel her and take the temporary place of this newest most aching loss she'd suffered. There was something she had to do before she left

and it required her to bury the pain cleaving at her insides and focus on the good that *had* come from this.

Elyse sprung into motion. With every step that took her deeper and deeper into the marquess and marchioness's household, a volatile energy hummed into her veins; it fueled her movements and sent her into a near run...and then, she broke out into a full sprint; away from anguish, and toward the happiness that was available to her—and always had been.

Her skirts twisted and whipped about her ankles as she went. Her lungs threatened to explode from the exertions of the pace she'd set for herself.

At last, she reached the room she sought.

Elyse staggered into the music room and caught herself against the doorjamb to keep from flying forward. She sucked in great, gasping heaves of breath, and locked her gaze on the unaware group gathered at the front of the room.

The two parents lovingly surrounded the young women practicing for the upcoming recital. Laughter and smiles and chattering abounded. They were so lost in one another that Elyse remained a voyeur at the entryway; an outsider looking in at the happiest of tableaux.

She couldn't look away. She couldn't so much as blink. From that group, there was not one, but two women missing—Elyse...and Evie.

All this time since she'd lost her best friend and big sister, Elyse had been hurting alone and in silence.

Somewhere along the way, her family had found the ability to laugh again. They'd helped one another heal. No, they'd never be completely the same after losing one of theirs, but they could—and in her family's case—continue to build new memories with those who remained.

Tears dampened Elyse's cheeks and she pressed the backs of her knuckles on each hand over that warmth.

As if she'd at last sensed Elyse standing there, her mother looked up. Surprise filled her pretty blue eyes, and then concern.

With a gasping breath, Elyse flew across the room.

"*Elyse*," her mother exclaimed. Worry deepened in the new lines time had wrought upon the viscountess's still regal face. "Whatever is the—?"

Just as she'd done when she'd been a small girl, hurting or happy, Elyse launched herself at her mother. And just as her mother had always done, the viscountess folded Elyse close and hung onto her in the tightest, warmest embrace.

She sobbed against her mother's breast. And how very good it felt to just be held in her mother's arms. Everything had always felt better in her parents' embrace.

Elyse didn't attempt to stem her tears. "I'm s-sorry," she wept. "S-so—"

"*Shh*." Her mother made calm, soothing sounds, and stroked the top of Elyse's head. "There is nothing to be sorry for."

Only, there was. There was everything to be sorry for. Elyse only cried all the harder.

“I d-didn’t realize what I was d-doing, M-Mama. Or...wh-what I’d done. I r-ran away, a-and I th-thought,” she tried to get all the words out, “I th-thought...if I shut y-you out th-that I wouldn’t hurt, the way it hurt when Evie died. Because it hurt so bad,” Elyse wailed.

“Oh, *dearest*,” her mother crooned. The viscountess cupped the back of Elyse’s head and drew her head to lay upon her shoulder, and Elyse let her tears flow freely.

A solid hand came to rest on Elyse’s shoulder.

“P-Papa,” she whispered and surrendered her mother so that she could take comfort from the other parent whom she so loved. She inhaled deep of the bergamot scent he’d always worn—and still did.

“My girl, my girl,” he said, his deep voice, sonorous harkened back to the songs he’d once sang in the nursery before Elyse and her sisters had fallen asleep.

How splendidous it was to take comfort and strength from another.

Broden had helped her see that. He’d brought her to this moment. And for that, even broken apart inside that he’d never be hers, she would never, ever regret meeting him and loving him. Except, with the thought of what would never be with Broden, Elyse sobbed a renewed set of tears. She wanted to be his wife and his partner in life. She wanted to have a dozen

boys all of whom looked like their father and possessed his same wit and strength.

Elyse cried all the more. She continued to weep until there was absolutely not another drop within her to be shed.

When suddenly, through those healing crystalline drops, a cozy and all-pervading warmth enveloped Elyse, and her family, and the entire music room. It wrapped around her like a warm, protective hug, and she stayed that way, absorbing all the light, and all the love. All the while knowing, Evie was with them now.

She drew back.

Her sisters stared at Elyse with like expressions of love and happiness. Elyse touched her gaze upon each cherished face. As the eldest brother, Hutchinson had oft been gone at Eton, then Oxford, and then traveling, and then living a life of his own. All the Caldecott girls, however, had always been together. Just as they were now.

Emmy, Edith, Elyse...and Evie. Evie and the memory of her and the love they'd shared, that would never die, instead it lived on in all of them.

Elyse stared lovingly at the assembled Caldecotts and dashed the moisture from her cheeks. A shuddery little sigh escaped her.

Like one afraid to hope, Edith asked tentatively, "Will you come home with us?"

Elyse drew a deep breath. "I will."

Her sisters' excited squeals drowned out the last of that syllable.

She looked to her parents. "I must first go, give my thanks to Aunt Hester, and make my goodbyes."

Her mother stroked the side of Elyse's head. "I think that is a wonderful idea. We will be waiting for you."

"I left and lost so much," she said achingly.

With a soft, tender laugh, her mother took Elyse's hands in her own. "But you are here *now*, my dearest girl. You are here *now*." She gave a gentle but firm squeeze. "And that, Ellie, is all that matters."

As one, the Caldecott girls came together in a triumvirate embrace and Elyse welcomed being home, at last.

The following morning, Elyse left.

Chapter 17

It was somewhere around ten o'clock the next morning when Broden, bathed, shaved, and properly attired, realized—*I am not dying.*

He just *felt* like he was.

Which, given his sulky, sullen show last evening, was no less than he deserved. He'd gotten himself foxed enough to toss up the contents of his stomach all morning, but not inebriated enough to forget the entire damned exchange he'd had with Alden.

Standing at the long crystal windows that gave a full view of the south grounds below and overlooked the same terrace where he and Elyse had dueled, Broden stared out at the thick clouded, grey sky.

In the light of a brand-new morn, with his head clear, and drink purged from his system, he finally let himself admit the truth—*I love her.*

And...it was safe to love her, because if he lost her tomorrow, then the days he did have with her, and the laughter they shared, and the happiness they'd found, would have all been worth it, just to have known her.

He'd loved her from the minute she'd jumped between him and that ridiculous guinea pig, risking her very life, to save Sir Lancelot's less-worthy rodent one.

He loved her wit and spirit.

He loved that she'd known Mr. Turvey's name, and her deserved smugness in having shown Broden that he hadn't been so very kindly towards the proud innkeeper as he'd credited, and certainly not as Elyse had been.

He loved the wallop she could pack with a snowball, and how freely she'd opened herself to him.

He loved everything about her.

He waited for the swell of terror that realization should bring. Only, it didn't. There existed only an absolute feeling of rightness and calm.

Light replaced the darkness inside him. The lightly frosted windowpane reflected the big, goofy grin on his lips—*a smile*, she'd taught him to smile, again.

Alden. Damn the man, for always being so bloody right about everything.

There'd be time enough later for admitting to his eldest brother that Broden had been wrong about so much.

At the moment, Broden had more pressing matters to attend.

Enlivened as he'd never been, Broden quit his rooms and went in search of Elyse. He hummed to himself as he moved jauntily through the empty halls. By now, she'd broken her fast, no doubt. She did so at nearly a quarter past eight o'clock every single morning. Then, regardless of the temperature, she took a brisk walk outside and usually returned by ten o'clock.

His steps slowed, and he frowned. He'd not joined her yesterday nor this morning. She would be wondering where

he'd been. And worse, he'd not seen her since they'd made love.

His gut muscles clenched. What must she think?

Oh, God, what an enormous arse he'd been.

I want to call me out.

Find her. Talk to her. Explain you love her and that scared the bloody hell out of you. While it didn't pardon his behavior, perhaps it explained it.

With even more urgency, Broden hustled off.

Room after room. Music Room. Great Room. Red Parlor. Pink Parlor. Gold Parlor. Every damned parlor. Breakfast room, because maybe she had eaten later than usual, in hopes that they might meet as they always did. Not that he deserved that.

The breakfast room proved empty but for a lone maid dusting the long-cleared sideboard. Broden backed out of the room...

Restlessness took hold. Where in hell *was* she?

And then, it hit him.

Of course!

Broden took off running. There was but one place she'd be. One place he'd not checked and should have checked first.

The pace he'd set, combined with the anticipation of seeing her again, and telling her everything he carried in his heart, by the time Broden reached the nursery he found himself winded, and gasping for air.

He skidded to a stop just outside the double doors leading to the crystal greenroom.

When he'd managed to get his breathing under control, he gripped the handle, smiled, and let himself inside. "Hull—"

Broden stopped mid-greeting. For he'd been correct. Someone was here. Just not *the* someone he sought out or wished to see.

Perched on the edge of the table where Elyse and Broden had made that kissing ball, and with his legs outstretched on the same wood stool Elyse had occupied, sat...

"Alden?" he asked dumbly.

His eldest brother lowered the morning newspaper he currently read. "Brother!" he greeted and tossed his gossip sheet aside. "Good morning!"

"Good morning." Broden glanced over his shoulder, intending to leave.

"It is so good to see you are alive and well."

He was alive, but definitely not well. He'd sooner cut a limb off than admit as much to his all-knowing brother.

"Are you looking for someone?" he called out as Broden started to leave.

"No," he lied through his teeth.

"Oh." Alden reached for his coffee cup and took a slow sip. "That is unfortunate, as I thought I might be able to provide my big brotherly services." A twinkle glimmered in Alden's blue-grey eyes.

God, he was insufferable.

“No, brotherly services necessary.”

Alden smiled widely.

Too widely.

Instantly suspiciously, Broden took the bait he'd fought and approached the earl. “Why are you so happy?”

Alden arched an indignant brow. “Should I *not* be?”

“No. No. Of course, you should be. I was...I just...” He glanced about. “If you'll excuse me.”

Then, it hit Broden: the reason for his brother's grin—a knowing grin, at that. Alden knew he was looking for Elyse, and his smug smile also meant the lout knew where she was.

“All right.” For her Broden would swallow his pride. “Where is she?”

“Who?” Alden spoke that syllable with such a slowness he'd the sound of an owl to him. “I'm afraid you must be very specific.”

God, how were they, both grown men in their thirtieth years, still playing games? “*Must* I be?”

“Actually, you must. Those were the terms set.”

Terms set? For a moment Broden began to think it'd been his brother who'd been doing the heavy drinking last evening. “Whose terms?”

Alden sighed. “You are getting further away.”

Oh, this was quite enough. “Elyse!” he shouted, exasperated. “Where the hell is Miss Caldecott?”

The earl briefly closed his eyes. “Thank God,” he muttered. “Bloody hell, you did not make this easy.”

“Make *what* easy?”

“I pledged I would not say anything to you unless you asked after her.”

Broden stilled. An odd feeling settled around his chest. “Say anything about what?” And just like that, all the earlier teasing and levity vanished to be replaced with regret and sorrow that caused a trembling in his limbs.

Because...that look. He knew that look.

I don't want to know. I don't want to know.

But he needed to. “What is it?” Broden asked thickly.

With a sigh, Alden stood. “I am afraid Miss Caldecott is gone.”

“Gone?” Broden repeated dumbly.

“Gone.”

Muddled, Broden looked around the nursery. “Where...did she *go*?” Then understanding hit him along with a powerful wave of relief. “Mother had planned an outing today,” he breathed. “Of course. Sleigh rides to the lake and then ice skating.”

“Broden,” Alden motioned to the stool.

“I don't want a bloody seat.”

Alden dug in. "I need you to sit."

Setting his jaw at a mutinous angle, Broden dragged a chair over and plopped himself down. "Must you always be in control?"

"It isn't about control," Alden said quietly. "I am worried about you."

There it was again. "Why are you worried?"

"Because despite your protestations to the contrary last evening, I suspect you care very much about Miss Caldecott, and when you arrived in here frantic, I was sure you were looking for her so that you might profess your love and hence my smile but then—"

"Will you just say whatever the hell it is—?"

"She left. The estate." Had Alden shouted it, that admission couldn't have been more explosive than his hushed murmuring. "Departed this morning."

An odd buzzing filled his ears, like that of a thousand humming bees all clustered as one. And his brother proved right, yet again. If Broden hadn't been seated, his legs would have gone out from under him, and he'd have crumpled to the floor.

He couldn't make sense of it. "But...but why...?"

Except, he knew.

You made love to her on the floor, like she was some strumpet on the street, and then didn't so much as offer your name.

Alden dusted a hand down his face. “Broden, do you remember our conversation last evening?”

He winced. “I do.” He *wished* he didn’t.

“Miss Caldecott, she came searching for you.”

The earth’s spin slowed to a crawl. *No*. “When?” he implored, willing it not to be what he already knew it was. “*When*, Alden?”

The earl gave him a sad look. “I am so sorry, brother.”

Broden sucked in a jagged breath. “No.”

“She came looking for you last evening, before the recital, and I am afraid to say she overheard—”

“Nooo,” he keened.

“Our discussion.”

All right. He could fix this. He had. To do so, he needed to know exactly what she’d heard.

“How much did she hear?” he asked his grim-faced brother.

Alden hesitated.

Broden grabbed him by the arms and shook him. “*How much!*”

“She heard our exchange in its entirety,” he said with a calm contrary to Broden’s panic.

Gasping, Broden recoiled. He yanked his hands back.

No. Oh, God, no.

He closed his eyes and made himself dredge forth every lie he'd uttered last night to Alden.

"I already gave my heart...I loved someone. A woman who is not Elyse Caldecott. Her name was Alvina Ackley..."

"What I felt for Alvina? I'll never feel that way again."

"Are you sure you don't feel that way now...with Elyse?"
Alden asked.

"I won't," he rasped. "If you find Miss Caldecott such an ideal match, then perhaps you, yourself should wed her..."

I'm going to be sick... "I didn't mean it," he whispered.

"I told her you didn't." Alden grimaced. "As you can expect, it didn't have quite the same effect hearing it from me than...say, you."

On the heel of that, a voice in his head taunted him with the reminder: Broden had made love to Elyse and then, she'd overheard Broden rebuffing her to his brother.

Broden pressed his palms over his face. *"No. No. No,"* he keened.

After the hell that had been his life, somehow, someway, he'd found an effervescent light. He'd been given a chance to love and live again. And in the worst possible manner, he'd thrown it all away.

Something dampened his hands. He lifted his head and glanced at his palms.

Tears. *I am crying.*

“Heyyy, little brother,” Alden spoke in that same quietly supportive tone he’d always used when Broden had struggled with something.

Alden dragged him to his feet and folded him in his arms. “This is not over. That woman loves you.”

“Not after this.”

“She does not resent you. I can tell you that most definitely.”

A bitter laugh exploded painfully from his lungs.

“She doesn’t,” Alden insisted. “She said she could not hold you at fault for loving another and she understood she is not that—”

Broden moaned. “But she *is* that woman!”

And she is gone.

Agony threatened to cleave him in two.

While he’d been sleeping off a night of too much drink, she’d already boarded a carriage to take her back.

“Yes,” Alden conceded. “But there is *some* good news.”

A raw, half-mad laugh ripped from his lungs. “What could *possibly* be good about any of this?” he cried, swiping the air with his hand.

“I have it on authority Father’s carriage was going to have problems with a wheel, sometime around...” Alden consulted his timepiece. “Twenty minutes from now.”

Broden stilled. What was his brother saying? Surely, he hadn't.

“I suspect there will be an inn along the way where Miss Caldecott will be waylaid.”

His heart thumped wildly. “You arranged this?” Broden whispered.

Alden winked. “Can we *finally* agree I'm the cleverest brother?”

Broden grabbed his big brother by the arms, dragged him in, and kissed him.

Alden laughed. “I could have done without that.” His brother gripped him by the shoulders and looked him in the eye. “There is, however, *someone* you should be kissing.”

He gave Broden a firm shake. “Go after Miss Caldecott and tell her exactly how you feel.”

Broden managed to nod, and then once he started, he couldn't stop. He continued bobbing his head. “Yes. All right. You are right—”

Alden laughed. “Go,” he urged, giving Broden a push towards the door. “Your mount has been readied.”

Of course, he had. Alden thought of everything. Whether Broden liked it or not, he truly always *had* known Broden better than Broden knew himself. And Broden loved him for it.

Broden halted. “There is one thing I must do—”

“There is *nothing* you must do. Get the hell out of here, Bran.”

Hope filled him. He needed to reach her. He would. And when he did, he’d beg her to hear him out, profess his love, and then beg her to let him devote the rest of his life to her happiness.

Alden laughed. “*Go*,” he repeated.

“You have been right about everything up *until now*. There *is* one quick thing I must do.” Broden grinned, and then, breaking into an all-out run, he thundered for two people—his mother...and a different Miss Caldecott.

Chapter 18

Trudging along the old Roman road, beside Mr. Robertson, the Marquess of Dalkeith's rotund driver, Elyse wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

The irony wouldn't be lost on anyone that she found herself less than a quarter of a mile from the same inn where her life had been forever transformed.

Elyse was being punished mightily.

There was no other way to account for this.

"I am so sorry, Miss Caldecott," the Marquess of Dalkeith's driver said for the dozenth time since they'd begun their walk, nearly a quarter of a mile back.

Elyse attempted a smile. "You needn't apologize, Mr. Robertson," she said in return for also the dozenth time. "It is not as though you *personally* damaged the wheel, Mr. Robertson."

It was the wrong thing to say.

Poor Mr. Robertson's eyes filled and then began to leak tears.

No. I know I am terrible and selfish and bad, but I cannot take anyone else's misery. I just want to wallow in my own.

"Please, Mr. Robertson," she pleaded. "You have my promise, I do not hold you at fault."

That assurance had the opposite effect.

This time, Mr. Robertson launched into a wave blubbering to rival Elyse's maid, Joan, on their journey here.

Elyse and Lord Dalkeith's driver continued the remainder of the way. At last, after ceaseless apologies and even more worrying the storybook inn appeared on the horizon.

Relief, along with a yearning to have time in her own rooms, sent her into a near run.

Mr. Robertson, carrying the one valise she'd hastily packed last evening, hurried to keep up.

Elyse reached The Mermaid Inn first. She didn't wait for the marquess's driver to open the door. Rather, she let herself inside and then held the door for Skittish Mr. Robertson.

Wistful, Elyse looked about the quiet, empty inn. Not a single patron occupied the tidy tables.

Within the powerful silence, Elyse heard the strains of a teasing conversation that had taken place in this very taproom.

"We got off to a bad start."

"Yes." Elyse smiled. "Though, given I broke into your rooms, I expect yours is a generous understatement."

"And I took you for a thief, with nefarious intentions."

"And we mustn't forget the quarrel over Sir Lancelot," she reminded him. "Whom you did attempt to kill."

"Sir Lancelot who might be a rat."

"Who is decidedly a guinea pig."

He inclined his head. "Very well. A rodent, then. On that, we can likely concur?"

"You've returned, miss!"

That deep, merry welcome brought Elyse crashing to.

"Mr. Turvey! A joy to see you." And it was. There was a bittersweetness in her reunion with this place and the hospitable servant who ran it.

The innkeeper hurried to take Elyse's cloak. "Back right quick, you are, miss."

"I promised I would," she reminded, the innkeeper.

He preened like a proud peacock. "You certainly did."

No need to mention that carriage problems were what really accounted for her presence. That admission would only disappoint Mr. Turvey and set off a fresh set of tears in Mr. Robertson.

"I'm happy to say the inn is far less busy than the last time you were here. I've got my finer, more spacious rooms available, and will give you the very best—"

"No!" she exclaimed, stopping him mid-sentence.

Mr. Turvey furrowed his wrinkled brow.

Elyse coughed softly into her fist. "Forgive me...that is...I enjoyed my accommodations so much last time, and the memory of," *him*, "my time here is so g-great...that if the original rooms I stayed i-in a-are still available, th-then..." Tears burned her eyes. "I would..."

The brave show and smile she'd forced suddenly proved an impossible task. A towering wave of sorrow threatened to drag Elyse under.

Mr. Turvey fumbled about the front of his pocket and withdrew an ivory kerchief. "Never had a patron moved to tears by the superiority of my establishment," he said, in wide-eyed wonder.

And as Elyse gladly took the small, folded scrap he offered; she instantly recalled another man. One who, in this very establishment had gifted her *his* handkerchief. A gentleman with four B's. And whom she knew now and whom she loved so very desperately—Broden Bowen Benedict Burgess.

Unbidden, her eyes wandered to that table where they'd sat alone, talking and teasing one another.

Pain ripped her apart all over again.

I won't survive this. I cannot survive this.

Mr. Turvey's usual smile disappeared under a concerned frown.

Just get yourself above stairs, Elyse. Pull yourself together long enough so that you can return to whatever room Mr. Turvey has available.

Then, she could have herself a good cry...

Somehow, from a place she knew not where, Elyse found the strength to dredge up another smile for the innkeeper's benefit.

“Forgive me,” she murmured. “I fear all the traveling I’ve done has left me fatigued.”

Relief flashed in Mr. Turvey’s rheumy eyes. “Doubtlessly. Allow me to show you to your rooms posthaste.” With that, he picked up the lone bag Elyse had arrived with and started up the stairs.

He walked a slow, careful pace and Elyse followed sedately along behind him.

In the shadowy darkness of the winding, dimly lit stairwell, she saw herself and Broden making this same climb.

“You needn’t thank me...Just as you shouldn’t have to deal with loutish behavior from brassy men...May I escort you to your rooms...?”

The vicious vise hadn’t yet finished the job and crushed her heart completely. That night, he’d been a protector and gentleman who’d insisted on seeing her safely in her rooms. How wonderful it had felt to have someone look after her. And how very much she had come to want him to be the one to always do so; just as she’d longed to be his partner in life.

He hadn’t wanted that. At least, not from her. The woman he loved might be a ghost, but Broden remained devoted to her and only her.

Elyse and Mr. Turvey reached the end of their march, and she just stared at the door; one that was no stranger to her.

I am going to come undone. Please, please, let me just hold myself together a moment more, and then once I’m in my room I can sob until there’s no more tears for me to shed.

The innkeeper inserted that same rusted brass key into its hole.

Click.

“Here we are,” the innkeeper piped in, with a lightheartedness at odds with the tumult that threatened to bring her down.

He opened the door.

This time, she couldn’t muster a proper word of thanks. Giving Mr. Turvey another wan smile, she collected her meager belongings and entered her room.

After the faithful and humble servant had gone, Elyse found herself alone—*again*.

Silence rang so loud in her ears she wanted to clamp her palms over them and drown out that incessant ringing.

Was this *really* what she’d thought she wanted? It’d taken Broden to show her how empty and heartrending a solitary existence, in fact, was.

Hanging on by a fraying thread, Elyse stood immobile; unblinking, unmoving. She whimpered and hugged her arms tight around herself in a lonely and painful embrace.

Close your eyes.

Elyse followed that silent order from her subconscious and squeezed them shut. A violent tremor racked her fingers, and she gripped the handle of her valise. The ivory handles pressed smoothly into her palm.

Breathing became a laborious chore. Each inhalation and exhalation came uneven.

Do not look. Do not see that chair you occupied when Broden tenderly cared for your scrapes.

Do not look at the washbasin he'd used.

Do not look at the closet with its secret passageway that led you to him.

This time, she couldn't fight that silent order to herself.

Elyse opened her eyes and found that old doorway. Like a woman in a trance, she wandered over to that closet.

Whereas when she'd first stayed here and the panel had been left slightly ajar for Sir Lancelot to scurry his way inside, now the door remained firmly shut.

If that wasn't a fitting declaration sent by the Lord himself—it was time Elyse gave Broden up, and the all-too-brief dream she'd allowed herself of a future with him.

What if, the night of storm, the closet door hadn't been left ajar? They'd have never had those stolen moments when she'd fallen in love with him.

And the thing of it was? Even ripped apart inside as she was, Elyse still didn't regret meeting Broden. In every way, she was better off for knowing him.

Elyse's valise slipped from her fingers and hit the floor with a dull but resounding *thump*.

Strangling on a sob, Elyse jammed a fist against her mouth in a vain attempt to contain her misery.

Suddenly, it was too much.

Elyse's entire body sagged. Standing became a chore, and she stumbled and slipped over herself on the short trip she made to the bed. The moment she reached the wooden frame, her legs finally failed her, and she fell headlong onto the mattress.

In this instance, she no longer fought the grief begging to be let free. This time, she turned herself over to it.

Elyse wept; copious and bitter tears spilled from her eyes and fell hot upon her cheeks. She surrendered herself to the abyss of heartache.

She cried for all she'd lost, and now all she'd never know.

She cried for having run from her family when togetherness and their love for one another had been what they'd needed to get themselves to a point past the debilitating pain wrought by Evie's passing.

Elyse sobbed against the soft quilt, soaking it through with the well of her grief.

She was pathetic. Pitiably. And aching. She was falling apart, bit by bit, inside.

Biting her lower lip, she rolled onto her side, and stared vacantly at that closet door.

Only...

Of a sudden, there came a soft chirping.

Of course.

Irony was not dead. And if Elyse had the energy to laugh, this situation would have merited it.

A bloody rat.

Only, that resurrected the memory Broden had shared—and the pain he'd endured, and his justifiable and crippling fear of those diseased carriers of pestilent and plagues.

Filled with a purpose, Elyse stormed to her feet. Keeping her eye on the closet door, she inched toward her valise. When it was within arm's reach, she slowly squatted to the floor and withdrew the pistol Broden had gifted her. Then, coming to her feet, she leveled her gun at the floor, and squinting one eye, waited, and waited, and—

The miserable creature scurried out quick.

Elyse froze.

I am seeing things. There was no other accounting for it. There was certainly no way of explaining it.

“Sir...*Lancelot?*” she whispered, staying absolutely motionless.

Sure enough, the little beastie chattered as only Sir Lancelot did. A moment later, something else, came crawling, on all fours, through the door.

Nay, not something. *Someone.*

Broden?

I'm imagining him. I want him to be here...but why would he be?

He'd been clear in his feelings of her, or rather, his lack thereof.

Ever so slowly, Broden picked his head up, and flashed sheepish grin. "I will confess, that space is a good deal tighter than I expected."

"It is, isn't it?" she whispered in return. *Dear Lord, she was conversing with an apparition.*

He cleared his throat. "If you would?"

If she would, what?

She followed Broden's gaze to the gun she still pointed near him. With a gasp, she set the weapon down quickly.

"I also confess," he said as he climbed gracefully to his feet. "I intended to follow behind after Sir Lancelot, here, but I did find myself caught in the passageway and it took several moments for me to wiggle myself free."

He brushed dust from his coat. Particles hung in the air, tickling her nose—and his.

He sneezed.

Not an apparition. *He was real! He was here!*

"I...see?" Her voice inched up into a question because she really did *not* see. "How are you here?"

"I believe my brother anticipated you'd have, uh, trouble with your carriage." Broden gave a tug at his cravat.

"How did he...?" At once, it hit Elyse. "The wheel is not broken, then?"

“No. The wheel is fine.”

Ah, which explained why poor Mr. Robertson had been so overwrought. He'd been shedding tears of guilt. The poor fellow. He'd merely been doing his master's bidding.

What was not clear, however...

“W-Why are you here?” she asked, her voice breaking.

“There was one more confession I needed to make,” he murmured, “but when I sought you out this morning, I learned you'd gone.”

“Oh.” *He was here because of guilt.*

“Those things I said, those terrible, ugly *lies* you heard—”

“Brodin, don't,” she pleaded, pressing a finger against his mouth. “I do not want you to feel—”

“I love you,” he blurted, cutting off the rest of what she'd been about to say.

What had she been about to say?

Her head whirred. “I don't...”

“I was so bloody scared of being hurt again, Elyse. The prospect of your leaving me too, it was not something I could bear.”

Tears built in her eyes, blurring him. “I-I understand that.”

He caressed his right palm along her cheek, and she closed her eyes, leaning into him.

“We understand one another,” he murmured.

She wanted to believe this, and him, and yet, fear held her in its hold. “If you are here, because...we made love...” she whispered.

“Only a small part because of that.” A rogue’s grin dusted his lips. “But not for the reason you’re thinking. After we parted ways that night, I thought only of you and how right you felt in my arms, and how I want to spend the rest of my life loving you and making love to you.”

Elyse blinked wildly “Oh.”

“And that, Elyse is why I fought myself. I wanted to shut you out but couldn’t from the start. I couldn’t imagine losing anyone again. But when I awoke this morning, do you know what I realized?”

Incapable of words, she shook her head.

“That it was safe for me to love, because if I lost you tomorrow, then the time we *did* have with one another, and the laughter we shared, and the happiness we’d found, would have all been worth it, just to have known you.”

Her breath caught.

“Oh, Elyse,” he whispered, stroking her cheek, once more. “I have loved you from the minute you jumped between me and that ridiculous guinea pig.”

She laughed; her first real laugh that night.

“I love you for your intelligence and humor.” He brushed his mouth over hers in a fleeting kiss. “I love how kind and generous you are to any and all servants.” He kissed her gently once more. “I adore that you cheat at snowball fights.”

Elyse giggled, but he touched his lips to hers again.

He drew back. “Oh, Elyse.” His gaze moved over her face, with a tenderness that threatened to undo her. “I love everything about you.”

And for the first time since she’d found him in her rooms, Broden wavered. “If you cannot forgive those lies, ones I told out of nothing more than frustration with myself, or, if you ... cannot love me, then—”

Elyse threw her arms around his neck. “I love you,” she cried. “I love you. I love you. I love you.” She kept saying it. The words kept tumbling out over and over until she was laughing and crying and out of breath.

“Elyse.” The somberness of Broden’s voice penetrated her joy.

“Yes?”

“There is something I would ask you...” He dropped to a knee.

Elyse slapped a hand over her mouth. He was going to...

“Come here.”

Confused, Elyse took a step closer.

“Not you.”

She glanced about.

“Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. I said, come here.”

At last, Sir Lancelot came waddling over, and, close as they now were, she noted a detail she’d not previously noted.

“A collar!” she exclaimed, as Broden fiddled with that tiniest of circlets. “With his antics, that is a splendid idea and a way to be certain not to—”

“I enlisted your sister’s help with this. Emmy assured me he’d be cooperative, but I should have known better,” he muttered to himself.

“Help with—?”

Broden opened his palm, revealing a diamond, sapphire, emerald, and ruby ring; those exquisite stones were cut and pieced together to form a double heart.

She gasped. “I...it is...I don’t understand.”

“It is...*was* my mother’s,” he explained. “When each of her children were born, my father commissioned a ring, that was to go to each of us when we found the one we wish to spend the rest of our lives with.” Tears glazed Broden’s eyes. “Marry me, Elyse. Please. Let me spend every day making you laugh and lifting you up. I’d ask that you be my partner in life and do the same—”

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice catching.

Broden slid that symbol of his commitment upon her finger. Her tears fell freely, unchecked. These drops both healing and joyous.

Elyse made to launch herself at Broden, just as Sir Lancelot chose that precise moment to scramble across Broden’s toes. He scowled at the troublesome beastie.

“You know we’d be better off with a dog,” he muttered.

Elyse laughed. “Might we have both?”

“I will build you an entire menagerie and an Ark to keep them on, if you so ask it, love.”

“I don’t need a menagerie, Broden,” she said, her voice thick. “I only need you.”

They joined hands, twining their fingers together. “That is perfect, love, because all I need is you.”

Together, they set fear aside, and embraced the days to come and the life and future awaiting them.

The End

If you enjoyed *Once Upon a Betrothal*, be sure and check out the rest of the books in the Scandalous Seasons Series!

Scandalous Seasons

Forever Betrothed, Never the Bride

Never Courted, Suddenly Wed

Always Proper, Suddenly Scandalous

Always a Rogue, Forever Her Love

A Marquess for Christmas

Once a Wallflower, at Last His Love

Endlessly Courted, Finally Loved

Once a Rake, Suddenly a Suitor

Once Upon a Betrothal

Biography

Christi Caldwell is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Sinful Brides series and the Heart of a Duke series. She blames novelist Judith McNaught for luring her into the world of historical romance. When Christi was at the University of Connecticut, she began writing her own tales of love—ones where even the most perfect heroes and heroines had imperfections. She learned to enjoy torturing her couples before they earned their well-deserved happily ever after. Christi lives in the Piedmont region of North Carolina where she spends her time writing, baking, and being a mommy to the most inspiring little boy and empathetic, spirited girls who, with their mischievous twin antics, offer an endless source of story ideas!

Visit www.christicaldwellauthor.com to learn more about what Christi is working on, or join her on Facebook at [Christi Caldwell Author](#), and Twitter.



Cover for Once Upon a Betrothal