

JANE PORTER
NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



The
Christmas
Cottage

THE CHRISTMAS COTTAGE

A Love at Langley Park Romance

JANE PORTER



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TULE
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The Christmas Cottage
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Dedication

For Meghan,
10 years of Christmas stories
10 years of friendship
10 years of you being an absolute angel—
the gift I never expected

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CHAPTER ONE

AFTER A TWELVE-HOUR flight from Seattle to the United Kingdom, with a one-hour layover at Heathrow, Ella's final flight touched down at the Manchester airport and was taxiing to the gate.

Ella Roberts exhaled, relieved and excited to be on the ground in Manchester, her return flight not for two weeks. For the first time in years she was taking a proper vacation over the Christmas holidays. Soon, she would be reunited with her sister, Cara, whom she hadn't seen much since Cara came to the UK a year ago—with the exception of Cara's gorgeous, intimate August wedding in the San Juan Islands.

Ella was very much looking forward to spending her Christmas with Cara and her husband, Alec, at Langley Park, Alec's ancestral home. She'd be staying in the same stone cottage Cara had last year when she was with Alec, a successful, wealthy businessman who spent the majority of his time in London but did return to Derbyshire for the holidays.

Last December, Alec was Viscount Sherbourne, but with his untimely death during the late spring, he'd become the Earl of Sherbourne, making Cara a countess, which amused Ella to no end. Probably because Cara was the least pretentious person Ella knew. Cara was warm and kind. Graceful. She was someone who truly cared about the well-being of others and no doubt the reason why Alec fell in love with her, despite Cara being American and not a proper wife for an aristocrat. These differences sent Cara away from Langley Park heartbroken last December, but then Alec proved himself a true hero and appeared in Bellingham at the Roberts family home on Christmas Eve to win her back.

It had been a truly romantic gesture and, after a seven and a half month engagement, Alex and Cara married in a lovely American ceremony. They were now hosting a reception at Langley Park for all the friends and family who couldn't make the actual wedding. Ella had come to represent the Roberts family, as well as spend time with her much-loved big sister. Ella probably should have brought her computer with her and done some

But at the last moment, Ella left it home, determined to relax for the next few weeks. She hadn't felt relaxed in years, not since starting her graduate program. She was a half year away from earning her PhD and she had a heavy schedule of teaching and reading papers, never mind finishing her dissertation, but she didn't have to think about any of that, not until she returned to Bellingham.

in a two-
city

around in
1 year,
he'd be
moved

intimate

holiday

at home.

she met

his time

The bell chimed on the plane, alerting everyone the aircraft had arrived and the seatbelt light went off. Ella rose, gathered her carry-on luggage, and joined the passengers amassing in the aisle. Ella was too happy to be in Manchester. She was so looking forward to exploring the area with Cara, who had bought tickets for them to tour the great houses, Chatsworth and Haddon Hall, both beautifully decorated for Christmas.

moved

intimate

holiday

at home.

she met

his time

It was said that Chatsworth had been Jane Austen's inspiration for Elizabeth Darcy's Pemberley Hall, and as an English literature scholar specializing in nineteenth-century fiction, specifically gender roles in nineteenth-century fiction written by women, women such as Austen and Alcott, Ella could justify an Austen-focused holiday. Last year, she'd spent time in Boston, Concord Massachusetts where Alcott had lived and later died. It only seemed fair to devote equal time to Jane Austen.

father's

making

Cara was

rounded.

was no

American

a home

to be a

in New

month

ly, and

families

ent the

er. She

work.

Or, she rationalized as she packed some travel books for sightseeing that would work out. If not, the village of Bakewell, an easy walk from Langley Park, would prove to be diverting with all of the holiday decorations.

Cara was

rounded.

was no

American

a home

to be a

in New

month

ly, and

families

ent the

er. She

work.

As the queuing passengers slowly inched forward toward the plane, Ella turned her phone on, and checked for reception. Not yet. Cara had warned her it might take a while. Untroubled, Ella put her phone in her pocket, shouldered her backpack and changed hands on her carry-on suitcase. She'd need to collect her large, checked suitcase and then they'd be on their way. Manchester airport wasn't far from Langley Park, just an hour if there was no traffic, which meant they'd arrive at Langley Park just after noon and have all day to talk and explore the house and village.

month

ly, and

families

ent the

er. She

work.

Ella felt a bubble of happiness fill her. Her luggage appeared quickly as she'd cleared customs in Heathrow, it wasn't long until she made her way to arrivals, her gaze sweeping those who'd gathered outside security for Cara's shoulder length blonde hair, and there were blondes waiting, but no one that looked remotely like her sister.

er. She

work.

She walked more slowly through the throng, still looking for Cara.

ext two wondering if perhaps Alec had come instead. But no, she didn't see either.

And then she saw her name on a sign. Ella Roberts. Ella looking at her name, and her stomach fell. *Baird?*

Adrenaline rushed through her, making her legs weak. Baird Mac was the last person she'd expected to see at the airport. She suspected she would be included in the party Alec and Cara were throwing Saturday night, and that was still days away.

Heart thudding, she walked toward him, bags heavy, and getting her bearings. They'd had a thing in August, a very brief thing, at Cara and Ben Hall's wedding, culminating in the hottest kiss of her life. She'd heard about intoxicating kisses but had never experienced one, not until the go-around for Mr. sexy awful Scotsman had shown her just what a kiss should feel like.

Truly, it had been a kiss to end all kisses, the kind of kiss that can be compared to a glass of champagne on the most beautiful summer night. She hadn't known she could love with him—he'd made sure of that—but those twenty minutes in the boathouse, in the shadows and moonlight, had made her imagine a life with someone who'd passionately love her with marriage, babies—

And that was when he stepped away, and apologized. *Apologized.*

He'd made a mistake.

He asked for her forgiveness.

He'd forgotten himself.

And then worst of all. He wasn't exactly single. Not entirely.

One more apology and then he walked away, and she leaned against the wall, fighting tears and rage. How dare he kiss her like that when she wasn't available? How dare he make her feel so beautiful only to de-

She didn't see him the rest of the evening and when she woke up the next day, head aching, eyes gritty from lack of sleep, she discovered he'd left, and she had to take a taxi back to Seattle at dawn to make a flight home.

Ella was glad she wouldn't have to see him because she, who dated men and rarely felt anything, realized that she'd come awfully close to falling in love with the Scotsman.

"How was your flight?" Baird asked, closing the distance between them, but to take her two rolling bags from her.

e Alec, She nodded, forcing a polite smile. “Uneventful.”

“Is this everything?” he asked, gesturing to her suitcases.

l at the She nodded again, avoiding meeting his eyes because she felt fooli
her heart racing and her emotions swirling—so many emotions, une:
:Laurenemotions. She’d worked hard to block him from her mind and now
cted hehere, and she felt caught off guard in the worst sort of way. She did
lay, butfeeling so ... so everything.

“My car’s not far,” he said, walking. “But if you’d prefer for me to
avier. you at the curb?”

Alec’s “No,” she said quickly. “It will feel good to move and stretch my l

l about “It is a long flight,” he agreed.

rgeous, She fell into step walking next to him as he led them through the ci
the airport exit. She felt his gaze as they stepped outside and wish
ne aftercould think of something to say, something to fill the silence. She ne
’t fallenspeak.

behind “This is a surprise,” she said at length. “You picking me up,” she
e a lifemouth dry, voice low. “Because after the kiss they’d never spoken aga

r, a life “Alec is trapped in London and is hoping to sort it all out so he ca
home for Christmas. Mr. Trimble, who does a lot of the driving
family, has a touch of a bug, and is keeping away from everyone
others from coming down sick.”

“And Cara? She’d said she’d get me.”

He glanced at her as they crossed the parking lot. “She hasn’t told

Ella frowned. “Told me what?”

inst the “Nothing,” he said, unlocking the trunk of his car and placing her l
when hein it.

stroy it Ella wasn’t deterred. Once in the car, she buckled her seatbelt and
for Baird to get settled. “What’s wrong with her?”

he next “Nothing’s wrong. She’s just...” His voice faded and he sighed.
taken afind out when you get there.”

d often

lling in



ELLA TOOK A slow breath, trying to calm herself. There was no reas
n themshould feel so shaken. It was not as if she’d tumbled into bed with E

the wedding. They didn't get naked. There was nothing shameful about what happened. They'd kissed. Big deal. There shouldn't have been drama, but after he'd walked away from her, he'd completely disappeared. She'd looked for him now and then, confused, wondering how someone so lovely had left her feeling so awful. As the evening came to an end, she didn't like to go to her hotel room, her heart felt battered, and her self-esteem definitely bruised.

Why had she liked him? Why had she been so drawn to him? He wasn't as sophisticated as Cara's husband, nor was he dashing, but Baird was handsome in a rugged sort of way. His features were that of a man who had been in a fight or two. His nose, which had a strong bump in the bridge, made her think it had been broken more than once—which she found very sexy. She liked a man that looked like a man.

Baird was most definitely a man.

His features went with his very broad shoulders and his height. He had long legs. His smile was crooked, and barely there, but it still made her insides do a little curl of pleasure. Whenever he was near her, she felt a little lightheaded and breathless. Ella wasn't sure if he felt the sparks, but she found him watching her, almost as often as she watched him. She had to keep



you?" BAIRD HAD MOST definitely not volunteered to pick up Ella Roberts from the Manchester airport.

He'd actually done everything possible to get out of the favor his friend Alec Sherbourne had asked of him—short of offending Alec. They'd been friends for twenty years now, Baird didn't mind doing favors for his best friend as Alec was quick to help him whenever Baird needed something. "You'll be chauffeuring beautiful Ella Roberts from one place to another, Baird. It's something Baird could do. She'd proven to be seriously problematic. Baird at which only became stronger as the days passed. Baird didn't want to

When they'd been introduced at the wedding last August, there had been an immediate sparks between them, an awareness he rarely felt with anyone else. Baird hadn't been prepared for the intensity of the attraction, or the insistent pull of Baird at which only became stronger as the days passed. Baird didn't want to

ut whattemptation. His life was complicated at the moment, and he'd flowr
either. United States for Alec's wedding in need of some quiet and cal
ed, andstunning Ella with her long red hair, sea blue eyes, and expressive f
hing sonot exert a calming influence on him.

and she If she'd been simply gorgeous, he could have dismissed her, but s
m wasa brilliant scholar, one entering her final year of her PhD progra
dozens of published papers already part of her resume.

wasn't Baird liked smart women. He loved smart, strong women. But h
rd wascome out of a long relationship, and he wasn't looking to start anythin
/who hadHe certainly didn't need a one-stand affair with his best friend's young
ing herin-law, a woman Alec was already calling his sister.

xy. She So no, Ella was not for him. She was as off limits as they came. W
why he went to great lengths to avoid her. He'd never been rude. H
better than that. Instead, he played the role of the charming, chivalrou
and hisfrom Scotland, kind to all, but cordially distant with Ella. He'd w
ade herdown the aisle, pose for the requisite photos, check to see if she ne
: a littledrink before slipping away. That had been the goal—slip away. Mov
but sheStay away. And it had worked until Saturday night's reception w
discipline failed.

It would have been convenient to lay the blame on the g
champagne he'd had for the toast, but he hadn't been drunk, not even t

It wasn't champagne, it wasn't the warm breezy evening with th
rom thereflecting off the water. It wasn't the music or the scent of roses and l
was her, red curls spilling down her back, her lips curving, her smile
his bestat his heart, making his body warm, making him crave a taste of the l
Havingshone so brightly in her eyes. She was so expressive, so passionate, s
for hisHe wanted that, wanted her. His infamous control snapped, and tak
ething.hand he drew her into the shadows down by the dock and kissed her a
wasn'tlife depended on it. And for those few heady moments, it had.

atic in Ella cleared her throat. "Do you know why my sister isn't the one
me up?

ad been Ella's question pulled Baird back to the present. "Why don't you
one. Hewhen you see her?" he asked, barely glancing in her direction. He wo
: desire,be drawn back into her sphere. He was not going to be attracted to he
or needAugust was months ago. He was a changed man.

Ella's laugh was mocking. "Do you not know the answer? Or do y

1 to thenot want to tell me?”
 m. But “I just don’t think it’s my business to tell you.”
 ace did “So, you do know.”
 He shrugged. “Alec is my best friend.”
 she was She sighed heavily, clearly exasperated by him. “Is she sick?”
 m with “We’ll be there in less than an hour.”
 “So, she’s at least at Langley?”
 e’d just “Yes.”
 1g new. “See? That wasn’t so hard, Baird. I appreciate the straight answer.”
 3 sister- His brow lifted. “Do your friends enjoy your sarcasm?”
 “I think so.”
 /hich is He wanted to smile but he wouldn’t let himself. “Hmm. I wouldn
 e knewsure.”
 is guest “Do you even have friends?” she retorted a little too cheerfully. “I
 alk herAlec, I mean?”
 eeded a “I do, and I have a close family. We see each other often. An
 e away.questions?”
 hen his “A few.”
 “Let’s have them then, and once you’re satisfied, perhaps we can
 lass ofsilent.”
 ouzzed. Ella laughed. “You sound like an eighty-year-old man.”
 e moon She made him feel like it, too. “So, what are your questions, Ella?”
 lilies. It “Do you have brothers or sisters? Or are you an only child?”
 tugging “Three sisters. I’m the only lad.”
 life that “And what a lad you are.” Ella said before clearing her throat.
 o alive.being sarcastic, too. That wasn’t a compliment.”
 ing her “Oh, I knew that,” he assured her.
 as if his Silence followed. Ella had given up.

picking



ask herBAIRD DIDN’T SPEAK again until he began slowing down. “We’re almost
 ould nothe said, pointing to the line of thick trees bordering the road. “Th
 r again.Langley Park. The house is set back on the property. You can’t see
 the road. Those that rent the holiday cottages use this access road, bu
 ou just

go through the main gates.”

Ella didn't know what she'd expected, but not all these open fields and the clusters of oak and sycamore trees. She wondered if the land was good for crops. “Is this good farmland?” she asked.

“No. The Peak District lends itself more to sheep and cattle, and such as hay to feed the livestock. Some farmers have been successful with maize or some root crops, but it's not particularly arable. Most farms here are small.”

“So, this isn't farmland?” she asked, pointing to the fields behind the stone wall.

“No. It's just what we call parkland.”

Baird drove through huge gates and down a long driveway which offered quick views of an enormous red brick mansion, the center of the estate. Besides the main house, it was flanked by two red brick wings of different heights and styles.

“Wow,” Ella whispered.

“It never fails to impress me, too,” Baird said. “The central hall is Elizabethan and still has the original Tudor hall, but the exterior has been hidden by a Georgian façade.”

The staff were gathering on the front steps as Baird parked the car. An older woman came down the stairs to greet Ella, introducing herself as Mrs. Booth, the housekeeper, and sharing how pleased she was that Ella was here for Christmas and that her ladyship would be so happy to see her and stay in her room now, and if Ella was ready, she'd take her straight up to her sister.

“I was coming forward to be introduced. “I make sure no one goes hungry. Once you're settled with her ladyship, I will bring you a lunch tray. My sister did not want to eat until you'd arrived.”

Then before Ella could quite take in the grandeur of the house, she was shown a sweeping staircase that wrapped all three floors, or the glass dome at the top of the staircase, flooding the interior with light, Mrs. Booth was climbing the stairs, pointing out things as she went. “This is the new part of the house, but as all said, “and this is the formal entrance when guests arrive. The main room where the family gathers in is the green drawing room and that is the first room we'll enter, with the music room adjacent.”

They reached the second floor which was very high up due

fourteen-foot ceilings. “To our right is the family wing, and to the left is the guest wing. Your sister shares the master bedroom with his lordship—”

“Is that strange?” Ella asked, rather amazed that Mrs. Booth could carry a conversation without being the least bit breathless. Mrs. Booth stopped, expression thoughtful. “They are the first gentlemen to share a bedroom, but they are a modern couple. It’s a modern marriage.” She began walking again, hustling them down the hallway. “If there is anything you need, anything at all, just ask. We can be happier to have you with us.”

And then on reaching a closed door on the right, Mrs. Booth gave a knock and when Cara called, “Come in,” she walked away.

Ella opened the door and peeked in, discovering it was a huge bedroom with an equally huge four-poster bed. The walls were papered in a rich red with luxurious velvet curtains of the same hue framing each of the windows. Cara looked like a doll in the big bed with the white sheets crumpled around her.

“What is going on?” Ella hurried to her sister’s side and gave Cara a hug. “Everyone has me so worried.”

“What have you been told?” Cara answered, hugging Ella back.

“Virtually nothing, but for you to be in bed, something must be wrong here because you’re always busy, always planning something.” Ella drew a breath to examine her sister, but Cara didn’t look sick. If anything, she appeared happy.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Cara said, pushing herself up higher against an adjacent pillow to slip behind her back. “I’ve been counting down the days. I’m so bored and I want to hear everything ... unless you’re too tired.”

“Not too tired, but I do want to know what’s happened to you. You haven’t mentioned being unwell in any of our calls or texts.”

“I’m not unwell, I just have to be careful.”

“Careful of what?”

“I was going to wait until Alec was home, but he might not be home for a few days, so...” Cara smiled as she dragged out the suspense.

“Cara!”

“With twins.”

Ella sprang to her feet. “*Cara!*”

ft is the Cara laughed. “I know. I can hardly believe it myself. I thought T
” Kristine had twins because of Kristine, but maybe it’s our family
l fly upknows, but Alec and I haven’t shared the news as there were som
s. complications, but now that I’m in week twenty they’re resolving, a
erationrisk of miscarriage is much less than it was. The doctor is still keeping
with abedrest, though, just to play it safe. I should be up and about in t
he longyear.”

ouldn’t “I’m glad your doctor is being cautious.”

“We all are. Although I had hoped to be off bedrest by now. It’s h
e a firmme to not run around.”

“Which is probably why your doctor is keeping you on bedrest t
edroomJanuary.” Ella laughed. “Twins, Cara. I can’t believe it.”

h blue, “I couldn’t, either. We only found out I was pregnant late Septe
the tallfigured I was late due to the wedding and everything, but then I
sheetsfeeling well and bought a test. I was shocked. We were going to wa
couple of years, but apparently God had a different plan. We had c
a a hug.appointment with the obstetrician October ninth, and that’s when the
said there were two heartbeats. I’m lucky I was already lying down. I
would have fainted. I was beyond shocked. And Alec—his face! I
wrongnervous about one baby, but two?” Cara grinned. “It’s been quite an e
back tofew months. Certainly not the honeymoon phase we expected.”

ed rosy. “You weren’t on birth control?”

“Almost always using protection, but there was that time on the
nd usedisland. The yacht had dropped us off and—”

own the “I got the picture. No intimate details necessary.” But she was sm
tired?” big. “But Alec’s happy?”

u. You “Very happy,” Cara assured her. “He’s been so protective of me.
be up more, but he’s insisting I stay in bed and take it easy. There’s t
stress, he says.”

“So, you’ve cancelled your party this Saturday, then?”

ne for a Cara didn’t immediately answer. “Alec wanted to,” she confessed
e. “I’mtold him we need to have it. For his family. They’ve been waiting to ce
us—our marriage—and they always come here for Christmas anyway.

“That doesn’t mean you need to be throwing a party now, Car
until January. Wait until the babies are born. Then throw the party.”

“Alex said the same thing, but the Sherbourne family is so l

om and forward to being together again, and the neighbors are excited as well.
? Whowant to let any of them down. I can be social. I just can't be on my
e earlyvery long. Alec will carry me downstairs for the party and I'll s
and the comfortable chair and pretend I'm a queen and let everyone come
; me onwith me."

he new Ella no longer felt like smiling. Her sister could be so stubborn, a
was a perfect example of her refusing to be realistic. "I think this is a
idea. If Mom and Dad knew—"

ard for "But they don't. I'm telling them on Christmas. It's my gift to th
year, especially as I haven't been able to do the shopping I would n
hroughdo."

"So, when is the baby—*babies*—due?"

mber. I "May thirteenth, but as you know from Tom and Kristine, twin
wasn'tarrive early. My goal is to make it to week thirty-eight."

it for a "So, who knows?"

our first "You're the first person I've told," Cara said. "Alec has told Bai
: doctorthe staff here knows, but that's it. We've promised them to secrecy, to
think Ithey've been brilliant, waiting on me hand and foot, spoiling me rotten
He wasAlec's home, we'll share the news with his family. I'd hoped he'd b
:ventfulbefore they arrived but he's dealing with a lot at work and will only
back Friday after work."

"When does his family arrive?"

private "Friday, around noon."

"Friday, as in the day after tomorrow? The aunts and great uncle
iling sosaw Cara's nod and Ella felt a wave of indignation. "And they'll l
through Christmas, just like last year?"

I could Cara nodded a second time.

o be no Ella jumped up and paced the elegant master bedroom. "How
okay with this? You had to cater to them last year, do everything for th

"Only because the staff wasn't here, and then we had that huge sto
. "But Ithe staff is staying on for the holidays this year. Mrs. Booth's adult c
celebrateare coming here, they'll have rooms in the guest wing, and I've heard
" going to be a white Christmas, which is too bad for you."

a. Wait "Oh, Cara, I'm worried."

"Don't be. You met Mrs. Booth, our housekeeper and manage
lookingthings important. If you haven't yet met Mrs. Johnson, the cook and

I don't of the kitchen and all menu planning, you will. And then there's Mr. T feet for our head groundskeeper, who also plays chauffeur, as you've sit in a discovered. He's a lovely man, isn't he?"

to visit "I haven't met Mr. Trimble."

"But he picked you up—"

and this "No, he didn't. Baird picked me up."

terrible "Baird? Alec's Baird?"

"Yes," Ella answered flatly. "I wish someone had given me a head em this was caught off guard."

ormally "I didn't know. Mr. Trimble was supposed to get you. That was the

"Apparently, Mr. Trimble has the flu. He's been told to stay ho isolate so that he doesn't get anyone else here sick."

is often "Alec didn't tell me. I'm sorry." Cara leaned forward. "If I'd ki would have made alternate arrangements for your arrival. I know ho feel about him." Cara searched Ella's eyes. "How was the drive home?"

rd, and "Fine." Ella hesitated, some of the anger fading. She returned to o. And and sat down again. "It's not as if I hate him. It's nothing like th n. Once just ... uncomfortable."

oe back "I know." Cara reached for her hand, giving it a quick squeeze. " make it me, if I'd known I would have booked a driver for you. I'll speak to A

"No, don't. Baird is his best friend, and it was really nice of him the time to get me. I don't imagine he would normally be in Manches Wednesday."

?" Ella "No, he'd be at his office in Edinburgh."

be here "Is that far from here?"

Cara wrinkled her nose. "About a five-hour drive. If there's no traf

Ella's heart sank. Baird had gone to a great deal of effort to pick is Alec She would have to thank him—nicely—the next time she sav em—" Hopefully, that wouldn't be anytime soon.

rm. But A knock sounded on the door and then it opened. Mrs. Johnson children with a tray and carried it to the foot of the bed. "It's an indoor picni it's not said, setting the tray down.

Ella suddenly felt very hungry and was so happy to see her favorite grilled cheese and apple slices. There were also two glasses of milk an r of all of a fragrant spice cake that had to be right out of the oven.

keeper Ella eased off her shoes and sat cross-legged on the bed, happily

rimble, while asking Cara questions about everything from when was dinner already served, and were the holiday tours still taking place at Langley because she hadn't noticed any crowds or cars when she'd arrived today.

"Alec had them end early," Cara said. "He didn't want a lot of people and out of the house when I was alone here. Well, not alone, as you could say, but without him."

"Were you glad?"

"I was. It's a lot of noise and a lot of cars parking and coming and going. I think next year I might stay in London with Alec and the babies until the tours are over."

"Or maybe the tours can just take place on weekends, instead of every day from November until Christmas?"

Cara nodded thoughtfully "That's a good suggestion, and it usually goes that way. Maybe with young children we'll try that next year and see how it goes. It's not as if we can't try and see what works best for us as a family."

"I agree." Ella gathered all their empty dishes, stacking them on the table. "I'm going to take this downstairs with me and let you rest."

Cara smothered a yawn. "I am getting sleepy."

"Then sleep, and I'll be back for dinner. Do I come back upstairs?"

"If you don't mind."

"I don't mind." Ella gave her sister one last quick hug before taking the tray downstairs with her.

Mrs. Booth must have been waiting for her as she came downstairs immediately and relieved Ella of the tray. "Let me take this to the kitchen then I can drive you to the cottage. If you're ready. Usually, Mr. Booth would be here to drive you, but with him gone, we're all filling in."

"I'd be happy to walk," Ella said. "The more I move, the better I feel tonight."

"In that case, I will have one of the boys run your luggage down to the car. I promise you'll have them soon."

"If you're sure that won't put anyone out?"

"Not at all," Mrs. Booth assured her before giving Ella walking directions for the cottage.

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CHAPTER TWO

WITH THE WALKING directions fresh in her mind, Ella thanked the housekeeper and stepped out through the back door of the massive residence and into the late afternoon sunshine. The sun wasn't very warm, but at least it wasn't raining. The next few days were forecast to be cool and clear, which was a nice change since Bellingham had been raining when Ella got home yesterday.

She passed a series of buildings, one with a sign that read TICKET booth on the bottom window, and an area in the distance with chains, which must have been the tour parking lot.

She walked on and after a few minutes a two-story stone cottage came into view, the second floor marked by four windows, with four more on the ground floor. A fresh green wreath with a dark red ribbon hung on the front door. The front door was open and a small fire glowed in the hearth. The interior of the cottage was stone, the ceiling covered in dark beams. Bookshelves flanked the stone fireplace with comfortable furniture and a soft caramel brown, leather couch before the impressive hearth. She lightly ran a hand across the back of the upholstered chair by the fireplace. The chair was just perfect, the cushion slightly rounded, the cushion welcoming. She had a feeling she'd spend a lot of time in this chair, reading, relaxing, and just dreaming about a future where she was done with school because no one knew how much she'd been struggling with the career choice she'd made and the hours—and money—she'd invested in her studies.

She was still sitting by the impressive hearth, studying the old fireplace when the door opened and Baird entered carrying her two pieces of luggage.

"I was asked to bring these here," he said placing them on the floor. "I didn't ask why but should have. I think they've sent you to the cottage."

"But this is my cottage. Cara just confirmed it less than a half hour ago."

"That's not what Alec told me. He personally made arrangements for me to stay here."

to stay here, in this cottage, so I can work without being in the family' Baird gave her a significant look. "Not to be unkind, but I think including you in the family."

"I'm sorry, but you and Alec have it wrong. Ever since August who invited me to come for Christmas, I've been promised the cottage, the one she stayed in while she was here last year. Alec ma ed the forgotten the arrangements, but Cara certainly hasn't, and Mrs. Boot d brick as well as she was the one who gave me walking directions here."

"Perhaps she meant the dairy."

"Perhaps you're the one meant to be in the dairy," Ella flashed. "If out dry, so concerned, you can run up to the house and ask where you belong." Ella left

Baird crossed his arms. "I'm not about to return to the house and s in the scene."

"Neither am I." She matched his pose, arms folded every bit as def st have

"Since it appears that Alec and Cara are having communication i e came think its best if we sort this out ourselves, without needing to drag the on the this. We aren't children, after all."

"No indeed," she said stiffly, "and since you need a place to w th. The suggest Alec's study would be ideal for you. Or perhaps the library Sturdy house? Both must be available."

"Until Alec returns," Baird answered, "and I'm not going to m c of the things twice. I'm settled here already. I'm staying here. You're not unj rk blue You haven't moved in—" He broke off at the firm knock on the front c

Ella swept past him to open the door, revealing a young man in a ie back coat on the doorstep with a basket of glass bottles, jars, jams and nd a lot goods.

"From Mrs. Johnson," the young man said. "She thought you mig he was oney— something for tea later and said to just let her know if you need anythi to be comfortable."

Ella couldn't resist throwing a victorious look in Baird's direction l stone, she took the basket from the young man. "Please give Mrs. Johns ggage. sincere thanks," she said, smiling warmly. loor. "I

He nodded, closed the door behind him and Ella placed the ov wrong basket on the rustic dining room table. "You were saying?" she aske ago." sweetly.

He wasn't smiling, and his expression was anything but sweet for me

s way.”aren’t settled in yet, and your sister is in the house. Shouldn’t you l
he washer? Doesn’t it make you feel a tad bit guilty that she’s all alone in the
and you’re avoiding her here—”

en Cara “Not avoiding her, Mr. MacLauren, and the rooms in the famil
ge, *this* have all been assigned from what I understand. Cara is happy I’m here
ay have am I.” Ella’s chin rose. “And while you might think you’re entitlec
h knew cottage because you have work to do, I think being British, or We
whatever you are—”

“Scottish,” he ground out.

you’re She waved a hand carelessly, deliberately being obtuse just to ge
his skin. “Kind of all the same to me,” she said, suppressing a laugh l
make aof course they weren’t the same, but she wasn’t feeling nice, not after
heartache he’d given her. “The point is you live in the UK. You can cc
iantly. Alec any time. You do not need to be in the cottage, not this Christmas
ssues, II’m the guest, you can be a gentleman and clear out.”

m in to “No.”

“No? Are we to act like children instead, requiring Alec and Cara t
ork, I’dthis for us?”

at the “Again no.” Baird’s voice sounded low and hard. “We sett
ourselves. There’s no need to draw them into our drama.”

ove my “It shouldn’t be a drama.” Ella pulled a chair out at the table
packed down. “I’m twenty-five and you’re what? Forty?”

door. “Nearly thirty-five.” Baird’s jaw tightened, jutting, his light
a heavy brown eyes narrowing. “You can’t still be upset about August
l baked apologized.”

Her mouth fell open, and she had to force herself to snap it clos
ht need apologized for kissing her, which she didn’t ask for, or didn’t need
ing else enjoyed the kiss and then he’d ruined it with his apology.

“August?” Ella frowned, acting confused. “What happened
even as pretended to continue thinking hard. She shook her head. “I
son my remember.”

“So, you’re not just being difficult because I kissed you,” he said v
ersized toward her and yanking out a chair at the table. “Because I’d be ha
d Baird apologized again if it means—”

“That I leave?” She laughed. “No. Sorry, Charlie, I’m stayin
: “You whatever you think I’m upset about has nothing to do with me being

be with the cottage, excited to have a little place of my own for the next two weeks. I have a house share a house in Bellingham with two other grad students. I never have a quiet moment, and you have no idea how much I've looked forward to having a little bit of me time."

"and so "The main house is huge. You could have an entire wing to yourself. Plenty of me time." He paused for effect. "You also have the very special opportunity to experience Christmas in a great English country house."

"It is a grand house," she agreed, surprised by how much she was enjoying herself. She rarely debated anyone who wasn't an undergraduate student. "Maybe you were raised with lots of staff, but it's more comfortable here, having access to my own kitchen, not worrying that I'm in the way of all the putting anyone out."

"I was raised in a very middle-class family. We had no help. But I don't see the need for putting the Langley Park staff out. It's Mrs. Booth and Mrs. Johnson's job to take care of you."

"That is my whole point. I don't want them to take care of me, not to settle. Cara needs so much support right now, and with Alec's family and me, it's a bit of a Friday, and all three elderly, there is no need for me to be underfoot."

He shrugged delicately, pleased when his grim expression darkened further. "I really wasn't happy. Good. His glowering and growling made her happy."

and sat "Let's be honest," she said lightly, invigorated, and closing the door. "The last thing anyone needs is an American houseguest with jet lag waking up in the middle of the night, wandering through corridors trying to find the kitchen for a snack. That's asking for trouble, whether it's me falling down the stairs breaking my neck, or crashing into one of those medieval suits of armor on the landing, and breaking my neck—"

"She'd "That would only happen if you take the staircase in the old parlor house," he interrupted curtly. "Use the new staircase. Safer for all."

"?" She "Oh, the one from the early nineteenth century, not the fourteenth century? Much, much newer, yes."

He turned away and ran a hand over his face and she thought about shouting or throwing something, but when he looked at her a moment later, his lips twitched, amusement glinting in his eyes. "You're impossible."

For a moment, she wasn't charmed. She refused to be charmed. Finally, she gave up. And that lovely accent of his, and then she smiled, a very small smile, but she was here in it.

weeks. I “I’m simply trying to protect Alec from an accident waiting to happen. I need the space, Ella smoothed her hair back from her face thinking that when she last saw him in the mirror she looked like a hedgehog, but it couldn’t be helped. I can’t imagine he has great homeowners’ insurance—you’d have to with a house of that size—but there’s far less danger here in the cottage, to myself and the unique Sherbourne family antiques.” She hesitated. “You aren’t his lawyer, are you?”

he was “No. Thank heavens.”

graduate “You’re not corporate law?”

comfortable “I used to practice corporate law, but now I specialize in family law.”

way, or “What is that here?” she asked, thinking she should know it.

“Divorces. Child custody cases.”

“You’re not a divorce lawyer?” Ella wrinkled her nose in distaste. “I would hate that.”

Johnson’s “I do.”

“Then why work in that area of law?”

at when “I’m good at it.” He shrugged. “And it pays well.”

arriving “I would have thought corporate law paid better.”

it.” She “Generally speaking, yes, but I was spending more time in New York than Hong Kong than I was in the UK, and that grew old quickly.” His eyes creased and he glanced toward the small kitchen off the entry. “Did you want a cup of tea?”

g up in “Are you offering to make me a cup of tea in my kitchen?” she asked innocently.

g down “I moved in yesterday,” he reminded her. “My kitchen. But since the cottage means so much to you, you can stay. I won’t kick you out. There are four bedrooms upstairs. You are welcome to any of them, except the one I’ve taken.”

“I’d like to kick you out. I’m trying very hard to remove you from these premises.”

He flashed a grin, teeth white, and his sheer magnetism hit her again. “I know,” he said sympathetically, “but it won’t happen. You might be stubborn, but I’m more stubborn than you. I’ve been accused of being stubborn.”

Immoveable. And since I’m unpacked, settled, and happy here, I’m staying. He stood in the middle of the kitchen and gave her a quizzical look. “Thank you.”

he saw “Please.”

He smiled, a smile that did crazy things to her insides. She looked

appen.” horrified he was doing it again, already. Making her feel warm and looked Making her pulse race. Making her yearn for more in the most ridiculous way. “I way.

a home But this time would be different.

and the This time she would not fall for his charm. She didn’t have to be careful, by harsh, but she certainly couldn’t let down her guard, couldn’t go soft. “You absolutely certain you don’t want the guest wing? It’s really special.”

“Ah, yes, the original one, with unreliable plumbing and heating, a ghost, a Sherbourne ghost. Fortunately, I’m happy here. My bed is comfortable. The hot water takes a bit to heat, but the fireplace keeps things toasty downstairs. Of all, no ghostly apparitions, either.”

“None at all?” Ella asked, glancing up at the narrow staircase that led to the second floor.

“I haven’t experienced any, but who knows what might happen in the guest room. Your English adventure awaits.”

“I suppose I should get settled.” Ella picked up her luggage and carried it carefully up the steep narrow staircase, quite sure that it wasn’t up to modern building code. She opened the first door she came to, and it felt like a dark wood, and the light was already gone, leaving the room in shadows.

She opened the next door, and this was much brighter, and it felt like a main house. It wasn’t large, but the dark beams and square windows and thick stone walls felt cozy. A thick comforter covered the bed, the pillows were a dusty rose with dark green embroidery. The bed’s pillow shams were a soft pink and green while the curtains framing the windows were dark green. The only chair in the room was upholstered in a soft pink chintz fabric. A picture of a pretty landscape on the wall featured a little girl in a white dress and her arms wrapped around the neck of a red spaniel. The room was charming but feminine. No wonder Baird chose the other room.

Ella went back downstairs for hot tea, and Baird poured her a cup of tea. He put all over the teapot on the counter. A small plate of homemade scones and butter and jam were to be shared.

“Thank you,” she said, taking a sip of tea and then unable to say anything. “She felt just how close Baird was. They were practically elbow to elbow in the kitchen being so small and it felt just a little too intimate for a woman to sneak back upstairs and take a bath.”

“Remember it takes time for the water to warm. Wait to undress until you’re ready to get in.”

“Remember it takes time for the water to warm. Wait to undress until you’re ready to get in.”

“Remember it takes time for the water to warm. Wait to undress until you’re ready to get in.”

tingly. tub is half full, otherwise you could freeze to death. I learned the hard way yesterday.”

She pictured him standing naked impatiently waiting for the water to warm, and the picture in her head made her blush. “I’ll keep that in mind and she said, face hot. “Oh, and if you don’t see me up by six, could you call me?” “Are you awake? I’m supposed to join Cara for dinner.”

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“Will do.”
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WHILE ELLA SLEPT, Baird worked at the table, reading through his wife’s testimony. She was demanding full custody and financial support for her and both children, equal to what she’d enjoyed during their marriage. Her husband was cold and abusive, stating he had little involvement in their children’s lives, and when he was present, he was frequently irritated and always critical.

His client claimed he’d been a victim from the start. His wife accused him of being a master manipulator and had tricked him into marrying her, convincing her she was pregnant with his child. It wasn’t until the baby arrived early and looked nothing like him, that he suspected he’d been played. When he set in for a secret DNA test, the results were exactly as he suspected. He was not the father, and when she announced she was pregnant again, he didn’t care and wanted nothing to do with her or the children.

Baird flipped through the next few pages of testimony before closing the book and pushing the paperwork away. None of the testimony surprised him anymore. Thank goodness he was a fair judge, and he didn’t need to make the ruling. He just had to represent his client in court and let the system do the rest.

His phone vibrated on the table. It was Alec calling. Finally.

Baird took his phone, grabbed his coat, and stepped outside. He had been waiting for Alec to call him all day.

Closing the cottage door behind him, Baird stiffened at the cold. It had grown dark in the past two hours, night coming early now that they were close to the winter solstice. Tucking the phone between his jaw and shoulder,

he snapped the buttons on his coat, a vintage jacket his dad had owned until the

word waypassed on to him when it no longer fit him. “How are you, Alec?”

“Still trying to figure out just how much has gone missing. The water tostaggering.”

mind,” “Has anyone found Phelps?”

“No. The police don’t think he’s left the country. His wife Helen told he’s at a business conference and will be home for Christmas.”

“Has no one told her the truth?”

“I haven’t. I have to speak to all our clients first.” Alec sighed. “Even the last one I would have ever suspected to embezzle client funds. James, my father’s protégé. Langley Investments’ second in command. Dad’s client’sJames more than anyone. More than me.”

Baird knew all about that. Alec’s dad had always been incredibly protective. Shehim. “What about the City Police? What are they doing?”

“They’re looking for Phelps, and Scotland Yard is following up on every cruelleads, but he isn’t using his phone anymore, not since I contacted him. I should have waited. I should have brought in the detectives before he was ahim.”

“But as you said yesterday, it never crossed your mind that James had access to all accounts.” Baird hesitated. “When do you think the news isn’t thewill go public?”

“Soon, which is why I’m calling all clients in the morning, letting them know what’s happened, and assuring them their accounts are safe, and hoping itwill get everything back.”

“Can you do that?”

“It won’t be easy, but I won’t let any of our clients suffer because he wasn’t paying attention.”

“You’re not responsible.”

“But I am.” Alec was silent a moment. “How is everything there? It’s beensettling in okay?”

“Yes.” Baird realized he’d need to wake her soon. “She’s happy. It hadhere and she’s having dinner with Cara tonight. Speaking of Cara, were you going to tell her what’s happened?”

“I don’t want to upset her. She doesn’t need the stress.”

“But it will be more upsetting for her to hear about it on the news, when everyone else does.”

“I know. Just hoping we can get through Christmas before the loss breaks. That would truly be a Christmas miracle.”

Baird felt for Alec. “Don’t worry about us, or anything here. Do what you have to do there. I’ve got everything under control here. Well, at least until the relatives and Uncle Frederick arrive. Then it’s game over.”

Alec’s laugh was raw. “They’re not that bad,” he protested. Then, in a moment, he added, “Well, maybe they are, but in a good way. They’ll keep you busy. Ella just needs to plan lots of games and activities. That’s what she did last year, and it worked like a charm.”

“We’ll do our best.”

“Thank you, Baird.”

“Glad I can be here.”

Back inside, Baird crossed to the fire blazing in the hearth, and tried to get on with some before it to chase away the chill. But the chill wasn’t just from the night air. He was concerned for Alec, and worried about Cara who had no idea what her calling husband was still in London, fighting to save the family firm. Unlike

the United States where companies had limited liability should the company go bankrupt, there was no such protection in the United Kingdom. And he was a business owner with unlimited personal liability when a company failed. Which was why Alec was scrambling to save what he could.

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ELLA WAS WOKEN to a brisk knock on the door. She opened her eyes, and her head ached.

Another knock sounded on the door. “Ella, it’s six. You asked me to wake you up so you could meet Cara for dinner.”

Yawning, Ella dragged herself into a sitting position. “Yes, thank you.”

“I can drive you up when you’re ready,” he replied.

Baird’s footsteps retreated, but she couldn’t make herself move. She’d been sleeping deeply, and her brain was groggy. Finally, she forced herself out of bed, into the hall to the shared bathroom. Pulling her long hair back with a scrunchie she splashed cold water on her face. The water wasn’t merely cold, it was frigid, and she gasped but it did the trick. She was waking up.

Five minutes later, Ella was downstairs dressed in jeans and a sweater with soft sheepskin lined ankle boots on to keep her feet warm. The boots had been her splurge before the trip, but as she and Baird stepped outside into the clear cold night, she was glad she'd bought them.

"I think I'd like to walk up to the house," she said, glancing at Baird. "I'd like to move a bit and I know the way. I can see the lights from here."

"I'll walk with you then."

"You don't have to."

His eyebrow lifted. "I know. But I'd enjoy the walk, too. Might help clear my head."

Interesting he'd say that. She'd thought he seemed troubled as she looked at him at the foot of the stairs.

"Something happen?" she asked, wrapping her scarf more snugly around her throat as they set off.

"Just business. But it'll get sorted. It's tough when there are problems in the time of year."

She glanced at his profile. "Problems are never fun, especially not leading up to Christmas. Hopefully, it won't ruin your holidays."

The corner of his mouth quirked but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Hopefully not."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, with the quiet suddenly broken by barking dogs, and then the labs came rushing to meet them, them sprinting, with the oldest hanging back, staying close to the front but shining next to the mudroom door.

Mrs. Booth had left for the night, but Mrs. Johnson was there in the kitchen, and she told Ella to go on up to Cara's room as dinner was ready. She'd be up shortly with their meal.

Ella glanced at Baird as he pulled out a kitchen stool and sat on it.

"You're not joining us?"

"No. Have your sister time. Mrs. Johnson and I have a football match. I'll be watching."

But it was Baird who appeared at the master bedroom door with a cold tray filled with covered dishes. He carried the tray to the bench at the foot of the huge four-poster bed. "I promised Mrs. Johnson I'd serve you," he said, lifting the silver domed lids revealing fragrant roast chicken, golden roasted potatoes and colorful root vegetables.

“No, no we can manage,” Cara said, shooing him away. “We don’t need a manservant, even one as handsome as you.”

Baird’s smiled, amused. “Handsome, am I?”

Ella rolled her eyes. “Cara said it, not me.”

He just laughed and exited the room.

As the door closed Cara turned to her. “What did happen between you two? You never said.”

Ella focused on organizing her sister’s dinner, picking up a linen cloth and handing the necessary cutlery. “Nothing important. We just ... didn’t get along.”

“And yet, that’s not my impression, seeing you two together.” Ella smoothed her covers over her lap. “You two are rather sparky—”

“Not so.”

“I’d go so far as to say there’s a definite *thing*.”

“You mean, *nothing*.” Ella glanced around looking for a proper tablecloth for Cara’s dinner. “What do you usually eat on?”

“I just balance on my lap.”

“But what if it’s hot? Or it spills?” Ella emptied the big tray, placed it across Cara’s lap and then put her dinner plate on the tray. “That’s better, thank you.”

“Thank you,” Cara said. “Now, as we were discussing Baird—”

“But we weren’t.” Ella sat down in a chair near Cara, balancing her dinner plate on her knee. “And we shouldn’t. I know he’s Alec’s best friend, but I didn’t get along at the wedding. We just rubbed each other the wrong way.”

“Mrs. Booth made it sound like you’re sharing the cottage with Baird.” Cara’s blue eyes were wide, her expression ingenuous. “Did I misunderstand anything?”

“No.”

“Isn’t that going to be problematic considering you *rub* each other the wrong way?”

Ella heard how her sister emphasized the word rub and wondered how Baird knew what happened between Ella and Baird at the reception, but if that was true, why wouldn’t Cara have mentioned it before? Cara had never been known to keep that a secret. Ella might not have a poker face, but Cara could. Ella counted on blurting things, particularly juicy things.

Ella took a bite of the roasted potatoes and chewed. They were delicious. Melt in your mouth delicious. “This is what happened, and there’s re-

It need a problem. You promised me the cottage. Alec promised Baird the cottage. Baird refused to move out, and I wasn't going to give in. I've been miserable about staying there since you invited me after the wedding. If Ella is miserable, he can stay in the guest wing here."

Cara just smiled. "So, what bedroom did you choose?"

"The second one that faces the house. The green and pink room."

"And Baird?"

"The bedroom at the end, that faces the same view. But I don't know what his room looks like, I haven't seen it." Ella stabbed another potato. "Carapota. "I need you to tell me the truth."

"Always."

"Were you hoping I would stay here, in the house, with you? Baird thought that Alec said I was supposed to. If you want me here, I'll come back. I never had that impression—"

"Because you're supposed to be in the cottage. And when Aunt Mary and Aunt Dorothy arrive on Friday, they'll be here on this floor, and I don't want to place it for them to share the bath, but I don't think it would be comfortable for three of you to share. There was another one but we're shifting things around trying to make room for the new elevator and so we don't have the space for our own facilities, we normally do. Hopefully by next Christmas, the elevator will be here, but he works."

"And the third bathroom?"

"Will be carved from one of the old dressing rooms." Cara looked at Ella. "I am anxious for Alec to return, though he was supposed to come home last weekend—he always returns on weekends—but he couldn't, not with work. I haven't seen him since the tenth, and so long for us."

"And you don't want to be in London with him?"

"It's better to be at Langley Park. I enjoy London when I can walk if Cara shop and explore, but stuck in bed? No, this is more comfortable, especially what was with the dogs."

Ella set her plate on the nightstand. "Are you really going through with this party? It seems so stressful just before Christmas."

"The staff are doing so much of the work. Mrs. Booth and Mrs. J. delicious have the cleaning and prep in hand. The aunts' bedrooms are ready to go. I'll share a suite just down the hall. Uncle Frederick's suite is on the ground floor."

cottage. off the mudroom. The mudroom is probably the door you use when you excited the house to go to the cottage, and then when you return. It's where even Baird hangs their coats and rubber boots, the dog leashes and more.

"I am familiar with it."

"I tried to order a few gifts online, but they haven't arrived yet and not come now until January. If the gifts aren't here by late Friday, would you be willing to do some shopping for me on Saturday?"

"I know. Before the party?"

"It would just mean popping into Bakewell. You could walk there and then take a cab home, or even arrange to have packages picked up. Even if you're in town knows Langley Park. Shops would be happy to deliver packages if you need be."

"They won't know me, though."

"They'll know you're my American sister. There won't be any problem." Emma Cara chewed her lip, suddenly pensive. "Did Baird mention anything about it's fine Alec's work?"

"Only that he's trying to wrap things up so he can come home."

"That's what Alec tells me, too."

"Do you not believe him?"

Cara sighed, troubled. "I'm not sure. Something feels off. I just don't know what it is."

cut her
ugh. He



weekends BUNDLED UP, ELLA walked briskly back to the cottage, the night cold which is crisp, making her cheeks sting. Opening the door to the cottage, she discovered Baird in a chair near the fire reading and making notes. He was wearing a black wool cardigan and wearing dark glasses and with his dark jaw and thick brown hair he reminded her of a sexy Scottish Clark Kent. "Hello," Cara greeted, sliding off her coat and hanging it by the door.

Baird glanced up and closed his book. "How is she?"

"Good." Ella approached the fire, tugging off her gloves. "She talked about Alec's family arriving and Saturday's party. She also mentioned they might need to do some shopping for her if gifts don't arrive by Friday. I'd floor

She leavedropped into the chair opposite his. "I don't mind a to-do list, but I don't like anyone that she's trying to oversee a party from her bedroom. Where is Alec? He isn't here? If he wants the party, he should be here managing everything, not leaving it to his bedridden wife."

"I don't think he wants the party." Baird pulled his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "But he knows she's looked forward to the party for ages and doesn't want to disappoint her."

"I think him not being here is what's disappointing her."

"Did she say that?"

"Not in those exact words, but shouldn't he be here? What is keeping him in London? How is work so important that he can't return to his wife who's trapped in bed and expecting a house full of elderly people on Friday?"

"It's not exactly a houseful. There are three relatives arriving, including aunts and Alec's great uncle Frederick, but I agree that hosting a party is the best plan right now. They can always have the party later."

"Yes, later. After the babies arrive. Have you talked to Alec about it?"

"He and I have talked, and he's dealing with a lot at the moment, leaving the decision to Cara. He knows she's isolated here, and she won't make friends, and get to know the neighbors. In her mind, this is her chance to make friends."

"Alec does not strike me as a party person," Ella said.

"He's not."

Ella fell silent as she watched the fire burn, the crackle and pop sound in a way she couldn't explain. "Are Alec and Cara doing okay?" She asked, her gaze locking with Baird's. "They're not having any marital issues, are they?"

"Not that I've heard, but Alec isn't the type to overshare. He's got that infamous stiff upper lip and all."

"Scottish people aren't like that?"

"We Scots like to gab more and drink more. Or so they say."

"Have you told Alec he just needs to put his foot down? Because Cara mostly does, that's it. Cara wouldn't go against him. She's too madly in love with him to upset him."

"He feels the same about her, which is why he hasn't put his foot down. Not that Alec would ever do that. He's a modern man, none of that old-fashioned stuff."

lo mind Neanderthal behavior from him.” Baird’s voice dropped, a silkiness
? Whytone that sent a shiver through her, reminding her of how intensely he’
ything, her feel last summer.

It had been instant chemistry ... at least on her part.

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“No?”

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regnant warlike, but Celts were, too, from what I remember.”

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She studied him and then nodded. “But it’s okay. I can handle you.

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It had been instant chemistry ... at least on her part.

“Unlike me.”

Another tiny tremor raced through her. “I wouldn’t call you a Neanderthal.”

“No?”

“You’re more civilized than that, more cultured. You have a lot of Celt in you.” She thought for a moment. “I know the Vikings were raiders and warlike, but Celts were, too, from what I remember.”

“Do I strike you as warlike?”

She studied him and then nodded. “But it’s okay. I can handle you.”

His gaze met hers and held, the air around them suddenly taut, electric. This was exactly what happened in August. This same heat, this same intensity. It took everything in her to turn away when her heart was racing and her head felt dizzy. “Seems like a good time to call it a night,” she said huskily, before climbing the stairs to her room.

CHAPTER THREE

UPSTAIRS IN HER room, Ella leaned against the door, pulse still throbbed, desire still flooding her.

For months, she'd managed to suppress the memory of how she'd reacted to him when they met in August.

She'd forgotten how intense her response to him had been. But now, face-to-face with the desire, the memories came flooding back. Meeting him had turned her inside out. Within minutes—seconds—of meeting Baird, it was done.

She was no longer the disciplined grad student who kept herself enthralled with her passion for literature, and the women who wrote books. She had dissolved into a breathless, hapless, painfully self-conscious creature, exactly the kind of woman Ella despised because women were meant to be strong, and self-sufficient. Women were meant to lead, not inspire, not melt around men. But Baird was not your run of the mill man. He wasn't American, or comfortable, or endearingly familiar. He was between Gerard Butler, a young Russell Crowe, with a hefty meal deal, and an *Outlander* star, Sam Heughan, thrown in. In short, Baird was perfect.

His effect on her was immediate and telling, and she didn't know if it was because he was tall—easily six-three—and muscular, like a rugby player, or if it was because he was articulate and confident, a man who'd attended the best schools in Britain and was rumored to be a ruthless attorney with more clients and cases than time.

Ella was not as worldly. A brainy book girl from Bellevue, Washington, she'd always loved books by female writers, stories that were told amongst women. She didn't really care if men read her favorite authors, and she didn't care if her favorite authors' books were heavy on marriage, and she liked that they featured happy endings, liked that romance had happy endings. She liked them so much she chose to study them as an undergrad and then as her PhD.

But Baird ... Baird knocked her out of her cozy female real

unfamiliar territory. She'd dated, she'd had boyfriends, but none were men like Baird.

The first night at the Friday Harbor resort had been just family wedding party—Cara, Alec, Ella the bridesmaid, and Alec's best man MacLauren.

Cara had mentioned Baird to Ella, saying he lived and worked in Edinburgh, and was an attorney. Cara failed to mention Baird was gay and had the sexiest accent. Ella tried to play it cool the first few weeks, but she was unwilling to smile too much in his direction, not wanting him to think she was flirting with him, and it seemed to work. They successfully avoided each other Thursday, too.

But Friday was the rehearsal and then the rehearsal dinner, two days when they would be together for, and Ella pretended to be oblivious of Ella's presence. More guests arrived and Alec introduced Baird to others. But when Ella looked for him at one point, she discovered he was watching her. She looked away, either. She couldn't. Something silent passed between them in that moment she couldn't articulate, but it was real and intense and unnerving.

That was the beginning, and the awareness only grew, heat and tension flaring, the energy palpable. They barely interacted until the wedding rehearsal, and it wasn't until the wedding planner instructed them to stand facing each other in the chapel and then meet in the middle of the aisle where Ella was to take his arm and they'd walk out together right behind the bride and groom.

"Closer, sister of the bride," the harried event planner called out to Ella. "Smile. This is a joyous occasion, not a funeral."

Everyone laughed but Ella didn't. Baird didn't, either. Instead, he gripped her hand more firmly in the crook of his arm. "I won't bite you, lass," he said quietly.

"I didn't think you would," she answered unsteadily, hoping he could tell how hard her heart was pounding. She didn't know why he did this. She didn't understand this connection.

"Then why so shy?" he asked as they exited the chapel into the bright afternoon sunlight.

She looked up into his face and their eyes met, the sun reflecting off his irises. His eyes weren't just light brown, they were brown with bits of blue and silver, but mostly gold, and Ella couldn't look away. She felt lost.

of them to herself.

“I should go help Cara,” she said, slipping her hand from his arm and the sure I’ll see you later.”

1, Baird She practically ran from him, desperate to escape, but as she hid in the hotel room trying to gather herself, she couldn’t shake the sensation that had kicked in was burning. His touch, just his hand on hers had made her tingling gorgeous pleasure still hummed in her. What on earth was happening?

5 days, Dinner that evening was even more problematic. She and Baird had to sit at the same table, and the table was small and crowded. Baird was close to her side. His shoulder periodically brushed hers, his hand frequently touched hers, his body emanating heat that seeped into her.

6 things All evening she tried to avoid looking into his eyes because they seemed to say so much about Baird as her. She sat feeling naked, exposed, yearning for things that Ella Roberts did not yearn for. Ella Roberts did not yearn, and yet...

7 she didn’t The tension ratcheted up all evening, and it was a relief to just go to bed. The wedding was the next day, and by the time she walked out of the ceremony, Baird’s arm, she was just so glad the wedding was over. She wanted to know how he kissed and if the kiss would deliver on the promise of the heat sizzling between them. She needed to face him to know. She almost hoped she’d be disappointed by the kiss, that when she felt nothing. That his mouth on hers just left her cold.

8 side and During the reception, they had to dance together, and when Baird pulled her in his arms and drew her against him, she shuddered and he felt it. “And eyes locking with hers, her body tingling from head to toe. When he settled in the small of her back she could barely breathe. Her body knew he was tucked. Her body recognized something in him, and she felt as if she was falling into him. They moved on the dance floor, the music all around them, but she heard nothing, saw nothing but Baird.

9 couldn’t Light gold eyes, dark thick hair, striking cheekbones and that firm smile. A mouth she wanted to kiss.

The dance ended and conversation swirled around her, but she couldn’t focus on it, not when Baird remained at her side, his hand light on her shoulder, his fingertips warm, stirring something deep inside of her, making her giggle in his making her his.

10 of gold Her parents came over and they were talking about the beautiful night, alien cake and wasn’t everything so wonderful?

She nodded and said something appropriate. Then Baird said something appropriate. Her parents moved on, and the next second Baird took her hand and led her from the ballroom. They walked outside into the night, the moon full, stars brilliant overhead. They passed guests, they turned a corner, and then another, walking down toward the water, and there, in the boathouse, his mouth found hers and it was everything she'd hoped for, everything she needed. Craved.

It had been him. She craved him.

She kissed him, and her arms slid around his neck, her fingers slipping into the coarse strands of hair at his nape, and she answered his kiss as if a woman desperate for love.

And maybe she was. She felt pushed to the edge of reason.

His kiss was everything. His kiss made her want a future with him, a future where she could always feel this real and alive, this sensitive, this physical. In his arms, she wasn't just a brain, wasn't a girl with intellectual thoughts, but a flesh and blood woman made of skin and nerves, here, now, in this chapel.

The chilly cottage bedroom forced Ella to action. Shivering, she would have run away from the door and stripped off her clothes before tugging on pajamas to kiss him. Her pajamas felt icy which cooled her heated skin. Her bed was cold, but she curled up in the stiff chilly sheets, cold from the bed, even as she remembered August again and how the hot, dizzying kiss always ended the same.

With him breaking away from her, with him saying, *This should not have happened. It was a mistake.* He was not free.

How that hurt. Remembering now, months later, still hurt.

It would have been better to have never kissed him, better not to have had him, how good his mouth felt, how good he felt then to experience pleasure, to be rejected.

It was why she hadn't wanted to see him again. He wasn't a bad person.

She didn't hate him. She could forgive him for the fierce hungry kiss, she could forgive him for making her body feel so beautiful. But she couldn't forgive him for what he'd done to her heart.

Maybe that wasn't right of her. Maybe she shouldn't hold it against him, but she'd kissed plenty of men and no one had ever threatened her self, no one had touched her heart. Her heart wasn't easily captured, either.

No, Ella wasn't one to fall in love. But Baird's kiss had almost done it.

nothing His kiss had almost done her in.

er hand

e white

corner,



at the BAIRD DIDN'T SLEEP well, waking repeatedly only to tell himself
ed and thinking and just sleep.

It wasn't easy to stop thinking when Ella was just down the narrow

He hadn't expected to be sharing the cottage with her. He'd been
ol thick she'd be in the house close to her sister. A wise man would move ou
owning cottage immediately, but Baird did not want to be in the house. He'd

Langley Park before and was always overwhelmed by the sheer size of
him, at the number of staff, and the grandeur of the interior. He'd grown u
ive and firmly middle-class family in Glasgow, as the youngest of four and t
elligent son.

part and After three daughters his parents were thrilled to have a boy and

never lacked for anything. His older sisters used to tease him that
pushed spoiled rotten, but even they doted on him. Yes, he was spoiled rott
ajamas knew every day how much he was loved. He never took their lo
oo, and granted, and he never asked for things he knew his parents couldn't aff

he was He wasn't supposed to go to Eton. His family didn't send the
ded the expensive private schools, never mind boarding school. Baird was h

the local school, but his teachers immediately recognized Baird's po
not have For years, they spoke of Baird's undeniable intellectual gifts. He

more than what they could offer him. He would flourish with a chal
curriculum. Baird's family explored options, but they were all so inc
o know expensive.

re only When he was twelve, his headmaster mentioned the King's Schola

Eton, sharing that it was an incredibly demanding exam, but if need
person award could cover everything—tuition, fees, room and board
ss. She headmaster believed Baird should try. Only fourteen scholarship
ouldn't awarded every year, but if Baird studied and prepared, who knew?

The last thing Baird wanted was to go away for school. He was
st him, with his family, happy with his sports, and his older sisters who conti
ense of spoil him rotten. But to appease his parents, who were truly good par
ther. studied for the exam, taking it the next May when he was thirteen.
done it.

It was an incredibly difficult exam, an exhausting exam that left him feeling empty. He was certain he hadn't done well. He knew some things, but some of the papers and subjects were beyond him. He did what he could best he could, and no one was more surprised than him when he won the coveted King's Scholarships for September.

He did not want to go but his parents were so proud—their son was now in the hall of fame. Baird, their baby—had succeeded in earning one of the awards, earned a certain place at Eton with the brightest and best in the United Kingdom. They would miss him, of course, miss him terribly, but what an opportunity.

Baird never told them how homesick he was. He never told them about the teasing he was mocked for his thick Glasgow accent, or what some of the other boys called his *rustic ways*, which infuriated him, because it wasn't as if he was only born under a rock. He was no more rustic than they, and at least he had proper manners and knew better than to bully other lads for things he could do. Baird couldn't help or change.

Some of the bullying eased when Baird picked up a hockey stick. He was a natural—his growth spurt was putting size on him, and he already had speed. The football he also excelled in rugby and rowing meant that he was just as strong in sports as he was in the classroom. It was during the Lenten season that the girls from Langley Park and Baird and Alec met. They were playing on different teams but knew each other. Baird and Alec were friends, and Alec was the one to approach Baird and introduce himself.

Baird didn't know what to think about Viscount Sherbourne. Why would the future earl want to be friends with him? Was it a joke? A prank? Or was someone putting Sherbourne up to it?

But no, Alec was just as miserable as Baird—for different reasons. Baird was homesick, but Alec was lonely. While Baird couldn't wait for school holidays to return home, Alec dreaded the visits to Langley Park. Alec had no one at home, and he missed the family, the excruciating returning. Baird loved his family, they were a proper family. Baird told Alec he was always welcome at the MacLaurens. They didn't have a big house. They didn't have a lot of money, but they had a lot of love.

Alec was going home with Baird for holidays, and over the years, they happily developed an unbreakable bond.

They stayed close at university and supported each other through the years. Baird went to Eton, then to university, and Alec went to university, then to work for his father's company, then to university. Baird became a lawyer, first earning his degree in Scots Law, and then studying for the tests that would allow him to practice

at Bairdlaw in England as well. Baird was hired immediately by one of the largest, but biggest firms and he spent the next five years representing international clients, traveling more than he was home. The money was excellent, and he sent as much as he could to his parents every month, allowing them to retire, and pay off their house, and buy a new car.

But Baird probably wouldn't have switched his focus to family law if not for his father's heart attack. Baird realized he was never home long enough to see his parents and there was an intriguing opportunity for him in Scotland that would allow him to split his time between Glasgow and Edinburgh. When he decided to change, and a lot less international travel, he took the position with a very prominent Scots firm, which proved to be a good decision, and he was financially successful. Switching to family law was even more lucrative than corporate law, allowing him to pay off his parents mortgage so his father could stay in the house. Baird had bought property himself, living in one and leasing out the other.

Because money had been such a concern when he was growing up, he was grateful it wasn't an issue anymore, but there were times when he felt like he'd sold his soul to the devil. There was no joy in learning all the wrong and hateful things people did to each other—said to each other—when marriage failed.

Baird didn't fall asleep until midnight. When he woke and saw that it was not even six o'clock, he tried to fall back asleep, but sleep wouldn't come. Perhaps the best thing to do was go for a run and work through his thoughts and the worries he never shared with others.

He was the one people went to with their problems. He didn't even want to be a burden. He didn't want others to feel pressured or troubled, and he kept everything inside, and for the most part, it worked.

This morning was different, but the run would clear his head. It was a good idea, and he did it.

He had a
e. Soon
the boys



ELLA WOKE TO the smell of coffee. There were few things she loved in their world as much as that first cup of coffee, and she threw back the cover and tugged on sweatpants over her pajama pants, adding a sweatshirt over a green insleept-shirt before going down to the kitchen to see if there was any coffee practice.

London's for her.

Baird was in the tiny kitchen standing before the tiny sink, in thick sweatpants looking out the kitchen window, so completely lost in them that Ella froze on the threshold unwilling to interrupt him. She also couldn't look away from him, either. From the dark hair curling at his nape to his strong slightly hooked nose, to the powerful width of his shoulders, he was an incredibly appealing man.

As if realizing she was there, Baird glanced her way. The corner of his mouth tugged into a smile. "Cara said you liked coffee."

Ella nodded, suddenly shy. She raked her fingers through her hair. "My brothers used to say I respond to coffee the way dogs do to treats."

Baird's smile widened. "I thought your brothers were nicer than that." "Ben is," she said. "But the other two, Tom and Mark, were trying to impress you."

"I thought Ben was your brother in Dubai."

"He is."

"Why is he the nicest?"

"He's a good listener, he's nonjudgmental and he's patient. I don't know how he ended up with so much patience. No one else in the family is."

"Was his advice good?"

"No. I hated it. It generally involved asking people for forgiveness and then doing good deeds to prove you'd grown and changed."

"Penance."

"More or less."

Baird's smile was lopsided. "So, why go to him?"

"Because he was a good person, and never made you feel dumb always making what was essentially dumb mistakes." She remembered some of the dumbest things she did, like sneaking out her freshman year of high school to meet Jay, her brother Mark's friend, but Jay didn't have her best interests in mind, and Ella had to call Ben to come save her from the situation. It wasn't exactly kind to Jay, but Ella thought Jay deserved the bloody nose.

"Sounds like you were close," Baird said.

"Cara and Ben were my favorites, not that you're supposed to have favorites, but I always felt protective of Cara, and Ben was always keeping an eye out for me." She hesitated. "I was really sad when he went to college. I had a feeling that once he moved away, he'd never move back."

was right. Even before he'd graduated, he was hired to work for a firm in the Middle East, and he's been there ever since—" She broke off. "Sorry, I thought I'd give you a lot of information before you've even had your coffee."

Baird removed the plastic top that rested on the ceramic mug. "I've had a cup already. This one was for you. I was going to take it to you upstairs, but your sister warned me it might be the only way to get you out of bed."

Ella grimaced. "She knows me so well."

"So, what are your plans today? I imagine you'll be spending most of the day with Cara."

"I imagine so. We didn't really talk about today, but it's probably going to be a lazy day." Ella sipped her coffee. It was hot and strong, just the way she liked it. "And you?"

"Just work," Baird answered. "Unless someone here at the house needs me to run an errand. I've offered my services to both Mrs. Booth and Mrs. Johnson."

"That's nice of you." She started to take her coffee and then remembered last night's soccer match. "So, who won the game?"

"Not my team," Baird said. "But my team's loss made Mrs. Johnson happy."

Ella grinned. "You sound like a good loser."

"I'm not. But I wasn't going to let Mrs. Johnson know I was upset because she'd only gloat."

"I haven't even been here a day, and I'm learning so much about everyone."

"Mrs. Johnson, fierce football fan. Baird MacLauren, poor loser."

Ella laughed. "I better go dress but thank you again for the coffee."

His eyes met hers. "My pleasure."

Heat filled her, heat and fizz, and she suddenly felt lightheaded. "I'll be up here in a few minutes. Rests incoming up to the house for breakfast?"

"No. I've already had some eggs. I'm good for now."

"Okay." Ella turned around and climbed the stairs, heart thumping, every step, hand trembling from too much adrenaline, making the coffee cup steady in her hand.

Baird MacLauren was still too handsome, too fascinating, a little bit physically appealing. Suddenly that mad passionate kiss last August came back, and it seemed so long ago.

n in the
that's a



e had a CARA WAS NOT in the best mood when Ella entered the bedroom. The
s. Your velvet curtains were only partially opened and Cara was sitting in a chair
in bed, a tea pot next to her, the cozy still on the pot, the teacup empty.

“What’s wrong?” Ella asked Cara, noting that the scones on Cara
ost of it hadn’t been touched, either.

“Alec’s not answering my calls.”

y going “Maybe he’s just busy.”

he way “No. He always calls me back and it’s been hours.”

“When was the last time you talked to him?”

e needs “Yesterday, early afternoon. It was just a brief call. He said he’d
nd Mrs. before bed. He always calls me before bed, but he didn’t last night,
hasn’t called this morning.” Cara glanced at her watch. “It’s almost t
mbered usually talk around seven. It’s our routine.”

“Do you think he’s sick? Could he have a bug?”

Johnson “He’d still call or text me. He’d say he felt terrible, or something
there’s been no communication at all. It’s not normal.” Her eyes fill
tears. “I keep wondering if I did something to make him angry—”

t. Then “I’m sure you haven’t,” Ella interrupted, kneeling in front of Cara’
“Maybe he’s just so busy getting ready to come home for the holiday
1 about he’s lost track of time.”

“Impossible. That would never happen, not with Alec. He’d never
irresponsible.”

“So, what do you think has happened?”

“I don’t know.” Cara’s voice broke. “What if he’s ... hurt. Or.
Are you reached up to wipe away a tear that was falling. “Or worse.”

“I’m sure nothing has happened to him. Someone would have alerted
The police, or a hospital.” Ella took Cara’s hand. “Have you asked
ng with Perhaps he’s heard something.”

wobble “I did. Baird said he spoke to Alec yesterday, just before dinner,
hasn’t heard anything today.”

nd too Ella was silent, processing. Maybe something had happened to
t didn’t Maybe there had been an accident. “Why don’t we ask Baird to call A

morning, and if Alec doesn't answer, you or Baird or someone could
office and check on Alec." Ella paused. "Maybe there has been some
stock market thing, maybe the market has crashed, or maybe
he bluesomething else demanding Alec's focus. Let's stay calm and let Bai
air, notfigure this out. Next to you, he's the one who knows Alec best. He can
the answers we need."

's plate "Go talk to him then. I need to know."

"You don't want breakfast? Some eggs or oatmeal?"

Cara shook her head. "I'm too upset to eat."

Ella walked quickly back to the cottage where she found Baird
simple dining table, computer out, papers spread around him.

"That was fast," he said, sitting back in his chair.

call me "She didn't want breakfast, couldn't eat. She's a mess." Ella pulle
and hechair and sat down at the table. "Cara said she hasn't talked to Ale
en. Weearly afternoon yesterday. She said they always talk every night, bef
go to bed, but he didn't call her last night, and he didn't answer wh
called him. She phoned again this morning and nothing." Ella lo

ng. ButBaird. "Have you talked to him today?"

ed with "Just briefly."

"So, he's alive?"

s chair. "Yes."

ays that "Not bloodied and lying in a ditch somewhere."

"No."

r be so "Why is he avoiding Cara then?"

"He's not avoiding Cara—"

"He's not speaking to her, Baird. Just you."

..” She "He's barely speaking to me as well. I just happen to know what'
on so I'm someone he can talk to."

ed you. Ella studied him for a long moment from across the table. "This
Baird?sound good."

"It's not good." He pushed up from the table. "I'm going to take tl
but hefor a walk. Want to go?"

"Now?"

o Alec. "That's why Alec called. He wanted to be sure the dogs were gett
lec thistwice a day, and I promised him I'd handle it." He reached for his co
can talk while we walk. It'll be easier than just sitting here."

call the Ella nodded, trying not to let her imagination run away with her. "I know, but I'm not ready when you are."

there's At the house, the dogs were thrilled to be leashed for a walk. Baird helped the young labs while Ella took Lady's leash. The morning was clear and crisp, the sky a lovely blue. They walked in silence for several minutes, but Ella bit her tongue, waiting for Baird to share what he knew. She didn't want to wait very long.

"There's something Cara needs to know that she does not know," Baird said after a minute. "It's not my place to tell her, and it's not your place to tell her, but there's a reason Alec isn't here and it's serious."

Ella swallowed around the lump filling her throat, anxiety knocking her off balance. "Is he having an affair?"

"No. No. Absolutely not. This is about business, his business," Baird said, exhaling, his gaze fixed on the gravel road winding before them. "Something has happened. It's why he's been in London, which is why he might not be here for the party, which is why I don't think there should be a party."

Ella looked at Baird. "And you can't tell me?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm trying to figure out. On one hand I could help explain Alec's absence, but I worry you'll tell Cara and that's just going to create drama no one needs."

"You can trust me. You're not the only one who can keep a secret."

His lips curved. "I do believe that was a direct hit."

Ella pushed a loose strand of hair back, tucking it behind her ear. "I don't want to say anything to Cara."

"Yes. This is Alec's business—literally his business—and whatever he wants Cara to know, he'll tell her. He just isn't in the right headspace right now."

"Is that why he's not talking to her?"

"I don't know about that. We haven't been talking in depth. He just gives me brief updates. All I know, with regards to Cara, is that he's not trying to hurt her. If anything, he's trying to protect her." Baird glanced at Ella, his brow furrowed. "He's afraid a shock with his situation will deeply upset her, causing a miscarriage. I don't think his news will jeopardize her pregnancy, but who am I to weigh in? I'm not a doctor. I'm not her husband. I'm just her father of the babies. Alec is trying to do his best and he needs our support."

r. “I’m Baird’s words filled Ella with foreboding. There was no light in his eyes, no levity in his voice. He looked somber, and so deeply troubled that she felt her gut cramp, as if she’d swallowed a handful of nails. “I promise I won’t say anything to Cara.”

es. Ella The younger dogs were frustrated by their slow pace, and Baird unhooked their leashes so they could go run, the estate being huge, the dogs could run about without getting into harm.

” Baird Lady was happy just walking at Ella’s side so Ella left Lady on her own. He came to tell “Is Alec in danger?”

“No, not that kind of danger. He won’t be arrested, either, but I’m worried about his firm. His firm is in trouble, and it’s a family firm, one that was started by his grandfather decades ago. He’s worried that it might end up in the hands of the wrong person. Baird and so he’s calling the clients that have been impacted, letting them know what’s happened and what he’s doing about it. He believes they deserve to know the facts—the truth—before anyone else.”

She suddenly felt like she’d heard this story before, felt as if it was something that played out wherever there was wealth and those who managed it. She thought “Has he lost their money?”

hen it’s “Not Alec, but one of the senior vice presidents at Langley Investments. One of the most senior vice presidents, has apparently embezzled millions of pounds. Not just from the clients, but from Alec as well. Alec discovered this a week ago, saw inconsistencies in some of the accounts, funds not matching up with records and began digging in more deeply, and that’s when he discovered his most trusted right hand had been stealing for the past several years.”

e at the “No,” Ella whispered.

Baird nodded. “It was never a lot at one point at one time. It was a few thousand here, fifty thousand there, but it added up and when Alec asked me to give a senior executive to help him investigate, not realizing that James Pheasant was the culprit, it gave James time to disappear, and he’s vanished.”

a, brow “With the money.”

set her, “With the money,” Baird’s agreed, voice deepening. “Alec is breaking the news to his clients today. He’s personally calling each and explaining the situation, hoping to speak to everyone before it’s headline news.”

port, all “I can’t believe it. Alec is so cautious, so careful, so conscientious.

“It is devastating. It impacts him, the firm, the family’s reputation.”

is eyes, “And you said Alec has also lost money?”

it made “A significant amount, yes.”

I won’t “Just one more reason there can’t be a party here on Saturday. Th
could break Friday, or Saturday—”

hooked “Or tonight.”

ld dash “There’s no way we can put Alec through that. It would be excruc

Ella’s stomach churned, nauseous just thinking about it. No wonder
r leash.wasn’t home. She also understood now why Baird was here. Al

entrusting Baird to take care of his family until he could return. “We
re is incancel the party. There’s no excuse now, not when we know what
rted bydealing with.”

e news, “I agree. But your sister has been adamant.”

n know “That’s because she doesn’t know the truth, and if she knew th
serve toshe’d put a stop to the party immediately.” Ella stopped walking and
did, too. They faced each other beneath the dappled shade of the stat
vas onetrees.

money. “But as we’ve agreed,” Ella continued, “we can’t tell her, so we ju
to make the decisions that need to be made. We have to go back to th
tments,and talk with the staff. We need to enlist their help and get the
lions ofcancelled while we have time to get the word out.”

red it a They’d walked down a road and passed a number of cottages
atchingcoming to the end.

hen he “If you continue through the gates,” Baird said, pointing to wh
ast tworoad disappeared through tall gates, “you are just outside Bakewell. C
along the path that follows the road and you’ll be in town in no time.”

“No excuse for me to get lost then,” she answered.

Twenty “None at all.” Baird whistled, calling for Milo and Albert, and t
ked hiscame running. They turned around then and began the walk to the hous

lps was When the house came into view, Ella removed Lady’s leash, too,
three dogs went bounding up the sweeping drive toward the mudroo
before Lady stopped and turned to look at the humans.

king the In the mudroom, Baird hung up the leashes and washed his hand
ing thesmall bathroom.

” “Shall we gather the troops?” Ella asked, washing her hands next.
up with our battle plan?”

” He nodded. “I think so.”



ie news

ELLA AND BAIRD joined Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Booth in the kitchen. Mrs. Booth had made a pot of tea, and they sat on the counter stools around the oversized marble island to talk. “Alec is in a situation,” Ella said to her brother Alec. “Cara doesn’t know about it yet, but from what Baird shared, there is no way Alec and Cara can entertain neighbors on Saturday. Baird and I agree the party must be cancelled, or at the very least, postponed, but we don’t have Alec’s guest list and we’re unable to take the next steps without you.”

“Her ladyship shouldn’t be entertaining anyone,” Mrs. Booth said firmly. “I’ve been worried about hosting a party here, on top of the truth, Sherbourne’s family arriving.”

“Mrs. Booth and I can split the guest list,” Mrs. Johnson added. “If we’re to divide and conquer, we should have it done by noon.”

“We need to break the news to Cara,” Baird added. “And then maybe we can get her out, do something to help distract her. She hasn’t been downstairs since I arrived, and a change of scenery and fresh air would lift her spirits.” Ella nodded. “I bet she’d like that. I’ll go talk to her. I’ll tell her what we’ve decided—that I’ve decided—it’s not in her best interest to

entertain people, not when she’s supposed to be taking it easy. She won’t do it. Cara looks sweet but is incredibly stubborn. But I know how to make her listen.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll threaten to call Mom and Cara would hate that. She hates when I fuss over her.”

“And you don’t?”

Ella shrugged. “They never really fussed over me. I never caused any problems. I just did what I needed to do.”

“I can’t imagine Cara causing problems.”

“Not the way you think, but she had some struggles growing up. Her parents were slow getting her the help she needed. Once they understood the issue, everything changed, but they’ve felt guilty ever since, all their time spent fretting over her.”



LADY FOLLOWED ELLA up the beautiful curving Georgian staircase to the second floor but when Ella knocked on the bedroom door Lady went down the stairs.

bluntly. Cara was just returning to bed from the bathroom, and she smiled no way entered the room. “He called,” she said, relief in her voice. “We just that the Alec has a big project and he’s trying to get it done so he can get home have the “So, you two are okay?”

“Yes.” Cara sat down on the edge of her bed and pulled her robe over her bump. “I’m sorry I was so dramatic earlier. I’m becoming so emotional. I hate it.”

“Probably the pregnancy hormones, but no one minds.”
“If we “I do.”

“At least you feel better now.”
“be take Cara nodded. “Much better.”

rs once “Good, because we need to talk about this weekend.” Ella sat down to her sister on the bed. “I am worried about Saturday’s party. Baird and I have been discussing we agree this isn’t the time for you to be entertained. try to—”

n’t like “You and Baird agree on something?”
ake her Ella smiled ruefully. “Yes. Shocking, isn’t it?”

“Not really. You both have the hots for each other—”

“Okay, that’s not a conversation we’re having. But Baird and I discussed that in light of Alec having such a big ... project ... at work, he’s not going to want to come home and have to socialize for hours here. I remember saying that Christmas isn’t the easiest time of year for him, and considering everything you two have going on, please postpone the party. Wait until the new year. Maybe even until the babies arrive. Your neighbors and I would rather you have a healthy pregnancy than take risks now. Cara and my party. Or I will.”

ood the Cara’s smile faded. “You’re serious.”
talking “Yes, and you should be, too.” Ella paused, let her words sink in.

I have your permission to cancel the party? Because the sooner we get the word out, the better.”

“Fine. But no mention of my pregnancy, okay? Just in case...”

“I promise.” Ella paused. “And one more thing.”

to the
nt back

“What?” Cara asked darkly.

“Would you like to go out for a drive? Baird thought you’d like a change of scenery.”

as Ella
talked.
.”

Cara stood. “Yes, yes, please. I’d love that more than anything. say where we’d go?”

“Not yet.”

close to
ional. I

“While I get dressed, see what he thinks about driving to the Pe... love for you to see some of the National Park.”

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“Fine. But no mention of my pregnancy, okay? Just in case...”

“I promise.” Ella paused. “And one more thing.”

“What?” Cara asked darkly.

“Would you like to go out for a drive? Baird thought you’d enjoy a change of scenery.”

Cara stood. “Yes, yes, please. I’d love that more than anything. Did he say where we’d go?”

“Not yet.”

“While I get dressed, see what he thinks about driving to the Peaks. I’d love for you to see some of the National Park.”

CHAPTER FOUR

BAIRD CARRIED CARA down to his car, with her protesting the entire way, asking if he needed to stop and rest, or if his back was hurting.

Baird did groan once or twice for her benefit, which made her laugh. Even Ella was smiling, glad to see Cara's mood so vastly improved.

It was a perfect day for a drive, too. There were no clouds in the sky, and the bright winter sun painted the rolling hills and valleys shades of gold. Baird turned on music, a Scottish folk band, but he kept the volume low. They could talk, but no one seemed interested in talking. It was nice just to be out, soaking up the sun and the freedom of being away from the house.

Baird and Cara conferred about where to go and what to see, and after some discussion, Baird drove them through Wye Head and then on to the coast before heading north to Winnats Pass.

"Alec brought me here last year," Cara said, pointing to the turnoff where she wanted Baird to take. "There is the most gorgeous view of the park from the limestone gorge if you get out of the car and walk a little bit. I'm not going to get out, but I want you to see it, Ella."

After forty-five minutes in the car, Ella was happy to get out and stretch her legs. The air was fresh, cold, and the wind whistled through the park. The cold felt good, invigorating, and the rocky gorge was definitely worth the drive.

"I'm so glad you suggested this," Ella said to Baird as they walked to the overlook to take in the view. "Cara is already happier."

"I thought you might like a drive, too," Baird said, glancing at her. "I haven't seen much since you arrived."

"I wasn't expecting to be doing a lot of sightseeing. I just wanted to see Cara and make sure she's doing well, and except for the bedrest, she's doing great." Ella chewed the inside of her lip. "I just wonder how she'll react to Alec's news when he tells her."

"They're a good couple, and good for each other. My gut says they'll be fine."

Ella nodded, reassured by Baird's confidence.

"As you probably know, Alec has been through a lot," Baird added. "He was never the golden boy at Langley Investments. His dad was tough on him, but it didn't break Alec. It just made him stronger. Alec will get through this. He's good at weathering storms."

re way, she didn't let it get to her. She has a good head on her shoulders, and though, and wonderful heart. Once Alec tells her, it'll be better for him ... for them."

"I agree."

sky and of gold. Silence stretched, but it was strangely companionable. Ella liked not to feel adversarial with Baird.

low so st to be "Do we need to talk about what happened at the wedding?" Baird asked abruptly, looking at her, his gaze briefly holding hers.

id after His question caught her off guard. "Do we?"

Buxton "It seems like we should. If not now, soon. There are a few things to clear up."

out she talk about what happened at the wedding, but now hearing him say were things he wanted to clear up made her heart fall. Would he ask again? Would he bring up his girlfriend? Repeat how that kiss had been a terrible mistake. She shuddered inwardly, not ready for any of that.

stretch ss. The sure I need to hear anything, either. Maybe we just put it behind us." Ella's grateful her voice was firm.

d to the "Not trying to extract myself. I was there. You were there. And it was pretty ... intense ... kiss."

r. "You Her insides somersaulted. "I thought so too, until you mentioned your girlfriend." Ella steeled herself. "After kissing me senseless. That's not fair. But then, some men play by their own rules."

l to see "I do have my own rules, but they don't include taking advantage of anyone, much less my best friend's new sister-in-law. Because you're not supposed to handle that wouldn't be fair, or cool."

ey will She met his gaze. "Are there extenuating circumstances I'm not aware of? Are you going to blame your lapse on the romantic setting, the summer weather, or something much more basic? The fact that you simply got carried away"

“It was a romantic environment. It was a beautiful night. We l. “Aleccarried away. But I was not in a relationship at the time. I wasn’t chea on him, anyone. I wouldn’t do that. That’s crossing the line.”

he firm “But you said—”

“I said I wasn’t available,” he interrupted flatly. “And emotic ure, but wasn’t.”

re most “But physically you were?”

both of “Physically ... it was one intense kiss. We had chemistry, but it v much too soon. I wasn’t ready to pursue anything with you, which is said I was sorry. I was sorry for leading you on.”

it, glad “I wasn’t expecting you to get down on one knee and propose. I kiss, a kiss I quite enjoyed until you ruined it by making it all s d asked sordid.”

“Then I am sorry for that as well. It wasn’t my intention.”

Ella was so tired of his apologies. “Can we try never to discu I’d like again? You’ve successfully ruined that memory several times. Thank y

His lips twitched. “You are so angry.”

eded to “I am.” She faced him, temper blazing. “You are this gorgeous m y there handsome, with the most delicious accent I’ve ever heard. Every ti ologize talk, I melt a little bit, but then I listen to the things you’re saying : been amaddening. I want to throw rocks at you. Next time you kiss a wom

kiss her the way you kissed me, do not apologize. Do not say it I’m not mistake. Do not walk away leaving her alone, leaving her to feel ba lla was was mean, and you don’t strike me as someone who enjoys being mea

didn’t give him time to respond. She turned around and swiftly marche t was at to the car, wishing she hadn’t gotten so upset, wishing she hadn’t r just how badly he’d hurt her.

you had “What did you think?” Cara asked, as Ella opened the passenger wasn’t the backseat. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I’m so glad we drove up here.”

tage of “What happened to Baird?”

e right, “I think he’s taking some pictures,” Ella fibbed.

“But his phone is here.”

are of? Ella shrugged. “I don’t know what’s keeping him then.”

r night, way?”

did get
iting on



BAIRD WATCHED ELLA walk away, her long red hair in a single plait down
back, arms swinging at her sides with military precision. She was furious.
I wasn't sure what he felt—disappointment? Surprise?

Last August, he'd thought he was being a gentleman apologizing for a
lapse in control, wanting to make amends for behavior that was too
character for him.

Why I Baird didn't make out with women at parties. He didn't draw
women into the shadows and kiss them against boathouse walls,
trapping her so he could better take and taste her mouth.

... He certainly didn't seduce women related to Alec, and yet there were
hours after the wedding, making love to Alec's new sister-in-law,
things he never felt, wanting things he never craved, desire so strong
driven all rational thought from his head.

"In the end, it might have just been a moment, or maybe thirty minutes
who knew? But it would have gotten completely out of hand if he
heard a voice ask if anyone had seen Ella. Baird didn't care who asked
question, he just knew they couldn't be discovered like this, in the darkness
pressed to the wall, his hands in her hair, his mouth claiming hers.

Certain they were about to be seen, he stepped backward and tugged
his tie. Ella was still in the shadows.

"I'm sorry." His voice came out deep, rough. His blood was
humming through him, his body tight, hard.

What an extraordinary moment, more than a moment. Part of him
to scoop her up and take her to his room and finish what they'd begun
reason was stirring, and there was no way he'd ever be able to look
the eye if he did that.

No, it had to end here. He had to make this right.

"That was a mistake," he said gruffly. "It shouldn't have happened.
She made a sound. It confused him. Was she laughing? Or...

Flustered, he said something else, trying to smooth it all over, while
of him still felt drugged by the heat and need.

She'd been fire in his arms. Kissing her knocked him sideways and
stirred emotions he didn't think he had, and even standing five feet away

felt her, the desire a living breathing thing.

Kissing her, touching her, holding her had been life changing. It had been the most physical, carnal, powerful need. Like oxygen, he had to have her. But oxygen and fire were a deadly combination.

He walked away from her because he had to. If he stayed, he'd take her for his arms again and then it would be game over.

He returned to the party, and circulated for twenty minutes at the reception, speaking with friends of the Roberts, and then with Ben, Ella's brother. Ben had flown in from Dubai where he worked as an engineer, and Baird, who had clients in Dubai, found a lot in common with his brother. They talked about their experiences in the UAE, and a piece turned out they both knew, until Ben was called away to dance with his mother.

Baird deliberated if he should circle the reception again or just return to his room.

He returned to his room and once there he stripped out of his tuxedo, hadn't had a dress shirt and showered. With a towel wrapped around his hips, he booked the pack. He was going to leave in the morning, catch the late morning train back to Heathrow and then book a new connecting flight to Edinburgh.

Now, here they were together again, and it was every bit as complicated as it had been in August.

He'd never met anyone who stirred him the way Ella did. He'd never wanted anyone he wanted like Ella. But there was no logic in the desire, and there was nothing Baird could see to explain the attraction. What did they have in common? Nothing. What goals did they share? None.

Yes, she was beautiful and fiery, spirited and passionate, but they weren't traits he wanted in a partner. He wasn't looking for heat. He was interested in an intense physical connection. He wanted someone independent and successful, someone like Fiona, who had been content with him, content without a marriage certificate, content with their children, until the day she confessed, she wasn't.

then part



ys. She

part, he THE WINDOWS OF the car were beginning to steam up. Ella was fine with

didn't want to see Baird or be trapped in the car with him any longer. She had been watching for him compulsively. "He's returning now," she said happily.

Ella closed her eyes and pressed a fist to her forehead, wishing she were in her inwings and could just fly home.

She and Baird shouldn't have discussed the wedding. It would have been better to pretend the kiss never happened. After all, it was just a kiss. Cara and Baird truly didn't figure in her goals or future. She just had to find a way to remain detached. Distance was the key.

But as Baird opened the car door the very energy changed, charged with something molecules with something alive, something she couldn't define.

He might pretend to be calm and rational, but she knew better. He was the quiet logical man he presented to the world. Beneath his rugged exterior was a volcano—hot, dangerous, molten.

She shouldn't want it, or him, but stupidly, she did.

"Where to now?" Baird asked, starting the car.

"What if we continue the way we're going with a stop at Monsa's flight another of the most photographed spots in the Peak District? It should be that far from here, and near the car park there's a little place we could go for a drink and cake," Cara added. "It would be a nice break before returning home."

Besides, I would be thrilled to use the lavatory."

"Sounds good," Baird said, shifting into gear.

Before he backed out, his gaze went to the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of Ella's. Something passed between them ... an awareness, a knowing connection neither of them wanted but couldn't shake.

Ella swallowed hard and looked away, wondering if she'd imagined the intensity in his eyes, wondering if she'd imagined the fire in his steady gaze. Was she lost in a world of fiction? Was she making up things in her head now?

No. She wasn't. She couldn't be.

Baird was the mystery. Baird was the one who didn't want to feel. Ella was also the one who'd set her on fire.



it. She

ger, but THEY STOPPED AT the teahouse, and it was the perfect break before she returned to the car to head to Langley Park, which was only fifteen minutes away.

If Cara sensed any tension between Ella and Baird she ignored it, about all her favorite places Ella should see in the next two weeks, in the event of a train trip to Bath after Boxing Day, if she felt like making a day trip, and better yet, staying overnight if she could find an inexpensive place to stay since there was so much to see and do.

“Jane Austen lived in Bath,” Cara added, as if she needed to convince Ella to make the trip. “Last summer, before the wedding, Alec took me to Bath for the weekend. We stayed at the Royal Crescent Hotel and I hadn’t visited Jane Austen’s museum, the Pump House, the Upper Assembly Rooms. I loved it, and you’ve read all her books, while I’ve only seen the movies, so with your thesis and all, you’ll be in heaven.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Ella said, thinking a few days off on her own might just be what she needed, unless, of course, Baird would be departing Langley Park once Alec returned. She hoped he would. Wouldn’t be party cancelled, there was no reason for him to stay on. “Let’s see how long the train ride home takes, and if it works out, I’ll make the trip. It’s not terribly far, is it?”

“Four and a half, to five hours,” Baird said, “plus two to three train changes.”

The distance didn’t worry Ella, but two to three train changes sounded like a lot. “I’ll think about it,” she said.

“Or maybe Baird could take you,” Cara suggested. “If he has time.” “He doesn’t,” Ella said quickly, stomach doing a somersault. She avoided making eye contact as well, determined to avoid engaging. “He has a lot of headwork. He’s been focused every evening and morning at the cottage, and I’m not going to disrupt his work more than I already have.” She dabbed her mouth with her napkin, wiping away the delicious, clotted cream. “She’ll be home by then. But he’ll be back soon? I know how much you love your naps, Cara.”



RELIEF FLOODED ELLA as Baird pulled through Langley Park’s impressive

re they gates, and then traveled down the winding road with the border of minute trees. Here and there, the trees would give way, teasing views of the house. It wasn't until they drew close to the house, they could see a car talking driveway.

cluding "That's Aunt Emma's car," Cara said, leaning forward as Baird trip. Or and parked. "Which means Aunt Dorothy is also here."

to stay Baird turned the ignition off. "I didn't think they were to come tomorrow."

convince Cara smiled wryly. "They arrived early last year as well. I won't come to they'd show early this year, too. Fortunately, everything's ready. I can't see pa, and Alec was here, though."

sembly "I know you miss him," Ella said gently. "But he'll be home soon the weekend."

"He should have been home already." Cara's voice dropped and then she nodded firmly, "But you're right, it won't be long now, and it'll be wonderful being together after so much time apart."

With the Baird came around the car and opened the passenger door for Cara. She refused to be carried into the house, saying it was silly to be carried so far by such a short distance, and the last thing she wanted was to have Alec's questions or fuss.

As the train Ella walked next to Cara as they entered through the grand front door into the soaring entry with the curving staircase topped by the glass skylight. That sunlight warmed the marble floor, reflecting off the pale walls with the oil canvases. From the back of the house, they heard the dogs bark, and Mrs. Johnson shushed them.

Avoided The door to the drawing room was open and Cara entered first. The drawing room, also called the green room by staff, looked particularly distinguished at Christmas with the holly and green garlands hung above the doors, the mantle adorned with more of the same greenery and tall candles which would be lit at night.

The large, elegant room had two seating areas and Alec's great uncles and two aunts were at the end of the room with the magnificent Christmas tree having tea under the watchful eye of Mrs. Booth.

"Uncle Frederick!" Cara cried as they entered the room, walking over to his side and kissing his cheek. "This is a surprise. I didn't see you here."

ancient Alec's great Uncle Frederick had to be eighty, if not older, he greatattempted to rise to greet her, but Cara patted his arm. "Please don't get up," she said. "I am curious how you got there, though."

Frederick glanced at the aunts. "Emma offered to pick me up. I really didn't want to put her out—"

"So I picked him up anyway," Emma replied. "I will handle it until you can maneuvered."

Ella liked this group already. "I'm Ella," she said, stepping forward. "I'm Cara's sister. I've heard so much about all of you and am very happy to wish you here for Christmas."

Cara quickly introduced Alec's family. "Uncle Frederick, Aunt Anne, and her sister-in-law, Aunt Dorothy." She then turned to Baird. "I'm sure you all remember Baird MacLauren, Alec's best friend from Eton."

Then she turned to the aunts. There were greetings and handshakes between Baird and Frederick, and an extra handshake for Dorothy. Baird went to kiss both of the aunts on their cheeks.

Dorothy spoke for a moment, reminiscing about Christmas in Edinburgh, but her late husband had been from Scotland.

Seeing that everyone was settling in, Mrs. Booth rose. "I shall go to the kitchen to get the family about getting a fresh pot of tea and more refreshments, although I know Mrs. Johnson already has it all in hand."

She bustled out and Cara shifted seats, taking Mrs. Booth's chair. "I could better see everyone. So, what has everyone been discussing?" she asked, smiling at everyone. "What have I missed?"

"What do you think?" Uncle Frederick demanded. "Terrible news today. What has the world come to?"

Cara frowned, puzzled. "What has happened? I haven't been paying particular attention to the news. It's always so depressing."

"Frederick," Emma said under her breath. "We agreed."

"Yes, but maybe she can explain it to me. I don't understand," she said. Frederick's voice sharpened.

"That's not her concern," Emma retorted, her stern gaze locking on Frederick's. "Alec said. Surely you remember that?"

Cara glanced around the room, eyes clear, watchful. "What are you quickly hiding from me, Aunt Emma?" She looked at Dorothy and lifted her hand. "Aunt Dorothy, will you tell me?"

Dorothy held up her hands. "I know nothing."

and he “Someone knows something,” Cara said. “Will no one tell me?”
get up,” Mrs. Johnson appeared then, carrying a tray with more teacups,
teapot, and plates with small sandwiches and scones. Her arrival
fused. Idistractio and Ella was pleased to see one of the aunts, she was
which, take on hostess duties, pouring tea for everyone and passing
not bethe refreshments.

So, they knew, Ella thought, watching Alec’s elderly relatives. The
orward,have gotten a call from Alec this morning, and then all jumped in the
y to beraced here.

Poor Cara, she didn’t need this, but thankfully Emma was taking
Emmaand shutting down Frederick’s complaints. Hopefully, Alec would b
ure yousoon, and he’d explain everything to Cara.

“We had a lovely drive today,” Ella said, taking control
ederickconversation to prevent it swinging back around to Alec and wh
He andhappening at work. “Cara, where did we go again? Winnart’s Pass?”
urgh as “Winnat,” Emma corrected. “That’s a beautiful spot but it can b
Was the wind blowing terribly?”

go see “It was brisk,” Ella said. “But it felt good. I had no idea that B
suspectwas part of the Peak National Forest—”

“Not Forest,” Emma corrected again. “Park. And yes, Bakewell ar
so shea number of villages are in the Park.”

” Cara “You know Sheffield is in the Park, but not Buxton,” Frederic
“That’s because when the boundaries were drawn Buxton was conside
terriblebig, what with the quarries and all.”

The aunts and Frederick began to discuss Bakewell as they knew
payingthey were younger, and Ella relaxed, glad that Alec’s family had
something to discuss with so much energy. Ella glanced at her sister w
smiling but also beginning to look sleepy. Ella was so glad Baird ha
stand,” Cara out today. Cara had needed the outing and Ella was glad to see s
the places Cara had seen last Christmas.

ig with After twenty more minutes discussing the quarries and village
Frederick sat back in his chair. “I could use a short rest,” he anno
re you“before dinner.”

r brow. Dorothy nodded. “I think everyone could.” She smiled at
expression soft. “You look tuckered out, my dear.”

“Does she?” Emma turned her attention to Cara. “I think she has ex

color. I don't see any fatigue."

a fresh "Well, I wouldn't mind a nap," Cara said, blushing. "But only was amight be resting, too."

r't sure Dorothy's eyes narrowed and her lips curved. "I'm wondering if yo aroundnews for us."

Cara ducked her head, and Emma and Dorothy exchanged glances.
ey must "I can carry you up," Baird said, rising. "You're not supposed to car andmuch weight on your ankle for another day."

"What's wrong with your ankle?" Frederick asked.

charge "It's just a little sprain," Ella said, getting to her feet.

e home Dorothy looked concerned. "How will you manage at the Saturday?"

of the Cara rubbed her temple. "About the party—"

at was "It's been cancelled," Ella said quickly.

"Postponed," Cara said. "Until the new year."

oe cold. "Does this have to do with Phelps?" Uncle Frederick demanded, ca tapping the floor.

akewell Cara turned to Baird. "What about Phelps?"

"Nothing," Baird said, swinging her into his arms. "You're not id quiteAlec has done nothing wrong and everything right. Now let me heav demanding self up the stairs. It's a chore, but I've been refreshe k said.sandwiches and tea and am feeling up to the challenge, although a ch red tooit will be."

Cara smiled, happy to be diverted. "Not sure you have sufficient s it whenI think you ate only two of those cucumber sandwiches."

l found "You cast aspersions on this frame?" Baird said in mock outrage. who washave you know I am twice as strong as your husband, and tv d takenhandsome."

some of Cara laughed, just as Baird intended. They were still bantering ba forth as Baird carried her from the room and up the stairs.

growth, For a moment there was just silence and then Dorothy sighed, dis ounced, "She doesn't know, does she? About Phelps stealing from the clients?"

Ella shook her head. "I only know because Baird needed me : Cara,convince Cara that a party wasn't a good idea, not when Alec is through so much right now."

xcellent "She should know," Emma answered, setting her teacup down.

want to know.”

if you “I am sure Alec will tell her as soon as he returns,” Ella answered trying to protect her.”

ou have “He certainly didn’t try to protect us,” Frederick said. “But I s there is no easy way to break that kind of news. It’s distressing losing —”

put too “We’ve all lost money,” Emma cut him short. “Everyone in the has. All of Langley clients have. But that’s not why we’re he Christmas.”

“We should buoy Cara’s spirits,” Dorothy added. “And once Alec : partylift his as well. Cara is not responsible for what happened in Lond should not be made to feel uncomfortable.”

“I never said she was responsible,” Frederick snapped. “But I th would want to be part of the conversation.”

“She will want to be part of the conversation once Alec tells her ame tap-happened,” Ella said. “But Alec is shielding her from anything stressf now. It’s not good for her.”

“She’s pregnant, isn’t she?” Dorothy breathed.

to fret. Ella hesitated, trying to find the right words. “There might be som ve yourto share with you once Alec is back.”

ed with Frederick banged his cane again. “It seems as if there’s an awfu allengesecrets. Can’t say this. Don’t discuss that. For goodness’ sake, it’s alm the old days, when we couldn’t discuss anything in the family. I t strength.times had changed.”

Ella bit her lip to hide her smile. She rather liked Great Uncle Fre “I willeven if he was grumpy today. Cara had said he was a lovely older n vice asthey had grown quite close in the past year. “I am going to go check sister,” she said, getting to her feet, “but before I do, is there anythin ack andhelp with? Anything I can do to help you settle in?”

“No, no.” Emma waved her hand. “Frederick and I both grew u tressed.We know where everything is.”

to help
s going



BAIRD HAD DINNER with the aunts and Uncle Frederick while Ella ke
“She’d

company. Cara didn't want to be upstairs anymore, but she also didn't want to be carried. They ate dinner on trays in chairs in front of the pretty fireplace and then Ella picked up a book on the shelf and read while Cara supposed to take a shower, wanting to be available in case anything happened.

Fortunately, nothing happened, and Cara emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a huge towel, her hair in a messy knot on top of her head. "I've been reading about bedrest during pregnancy," Cara said. "A lot of doctors don't believe in it anymore, saying it doesn't help, and in fact, might make everything worse. You can't go through a whole pregnancy lying around. It's not healthy. You don't want a woman to give birth after losing too much muscle tone."

"But your doctor wants you on bedrest," Ella said calmly.

"Yes. I'm just thinking this is a bit extreme—me not doing anything but walking even down my own stairs. I understand not going on arduous activities like horseback riding, I can see why rock climbing is out, but stairs? That's a bit right on. This is absurd."

"You have cabin fever," Ella said as Cara disappeared back into the bathroom. "It will pass."

"It's not just boredom," Cara answered. "I'm used to being active. I like exercise. Time moves way too slowly when you're lying in bed."

"When do you see the doctor again?"

"Mid-January. The twelfth, I think." Cara emerged from the bathroom wearing her flannel pajamas, a hairbrush in her hand. She pulled the scrunchie out of her long hair and began to brush it. "There's no reason I can't go down the stairs here. It's just a single flight."

"Well, it's not a normal flight of stairs. Your single flight is equal to a normal flight anywhere else. It's what? Forty steps?" She stood up and motioned for Cara to take her place. "Come sit. I'll brush your hair. It's gotten long."

"I haven't had it cut in ages," Cara said, sitting down. She closed her eyes as Ella ran a hand down her hair, smoothing it. "You used to brush your hair when you were little."

Ella took the brush from her sister. Once Cara was settled, Ella lit up the long mass and brushed the ends. "Half the time I'd get the brush tangled in your hair." Ella laughed, remembering. "Then Mom would have to come save you from the brush. Remember that one time Mom couldn't get the brush out of your hair?"

She had to cut some of your hair. You were very calm. If I remember
marble was the one crying. I felt terrible.”

le Cara “It was just hair,” Cara said shrugging. “I didn’t really care.”

“I did.” Ella ran the brush from crown to the ends, glad to see Cara
ljoining relax. The last few weeks had to have been so stressful, and then with
of her gone on top of it, Cara needed some TLC. “I always wanted to have
, rifling hair. I didn’t know why I had to have red hair.”

ve in it “You don’t still feel that way, do you?” Cara asked.

worse. “No. Once I realized there were plenty of Disney princesses with r
y. You were good with it.”

Cara laughed. “You loved Disney princesses far more than I did.”

“I loved Merida from *Brave* best. Ariel was problematic for m
ing, not could one give up your voice for legs? Your voice is important. You
is hiked to be known, have to be heard.”

? Come “And Merida made herself known. She was wild.”

“She was strong.” Ella hugged Cara. “Like you. You’re strong.
nto the Always my hero.”

Cara hugged Cara back. “You’re brave, too.”

e. I like Ella drew back a little. “Am I?”

re stuck Cara nodded, expression serious, and yet there was mischief in her
“Oh yes. You’re sharing a cottage with that fierce Baird MacLaurei
knew you’d grow up to love Scottish men?”

room in Groaning in disgust, Ella pulled away. “I do not love Baird MacLe
ie from barely tolerate each other.”

up and “Always the first step to true love.”

“There’s no love between us.”

l to two “Something must have happened.

ned for “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.” Cara turned in her chair, looking up at Ella. “He’s Alec
ier eyes friend, and one of my good friends—”

ny hair “That’s good,” Ella interrupted. “That’s great. I’m not asking you
sides. There’s no need for that. I’m not close with him, but that’s oka
fted the Alec and your friend. He doesn’t need to be mine.”

ngled.”

our hair

sh out?

right, I

slowly
th Alec
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ed hair,

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Brave.

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y. He's

CHAPTER FIVE

LATE THE NEXT morning Mrs. Booth had one of the younger staff tables in the green room, one at one end and the other off to the side fireplace. At the small table closer to the fireplace Uncle Frederick and Emma were playing cards, and Dorothy was at the game table at the other end of the room working on a jigsaw puzzle. Ella wandered through the room noting a few small packages had appeared beneath the Christmas tree. She listened to Frederick and Emma laugh over a point won, before continuing to work on her puzzle table.

Dorothy looked up as Ella approached. “Mrs. Booth found a few puzzles in one of the closets. This is a puzzle I gave to William years ago. Hoping there are no missing pieces. It only takes one missing piece to complete the puzzle.”

Ella leaned over the table to take a look at the picture on the puzzle. Dorothy was only just beginning the puzzle and the pieces on the table were mostly green and reddish brown. The photo on the box was of two cow heads poking over a limestone wall.

“Highland cattle,” Dorothy said. “My late husband and I inherited the property from my grandmother’s property outside Edinburgh. It was a lovely little farm when we could, we’d spend holidays there. I became very attached to the cows. They’re huge but really the most lovely creatures.”

“Was your grandmother Scottish?” Ella asked, sitting down and sorting the puzzle pieces into different color piles.

“So, you and Emma aren’t sisters? Or are you half-sisters?”

“We’re sisters-in-law. My husband and her husband were brothers.” Dorothy leaned across the table her voice dropping. “I’ll tell you a little about Emma. When I first married Cedric, Emma and I did not get on. She can be a bit bossy, and having been raised as Lady Emma, she used to act as if she was better than me.”

“But you’re so close now.”

“Time and loss brought us together. We lost our husbands with

years of each other. My Cedric went first, and then her George.” I picked up a piece, turning it in her fingers. “We still weren’t close, began making an effort to see each other more often, at Christmas and such. It was when I lost my Michael—” Dorothy broke off, her voice quavering, and for a long moment she didn’t speak, and then she carefully set the puzzle piece down.

“She came to stay with me then,” Dorothy. “She arrived with a suitcase and didn’t leave for months. Instead, she moved in, and she grieved with me. She’d always been jealous that I had a child when she didn’t, but when Michael was gone, she apologized and we cried together. His death hurt both of our hearts.”

Ella blinked, her eyes burning with tears. “How old was your son when he died?”

“Twenty-seven. I had him late. Like Emma, I had trouble conceiving. And then at forty-one, I discovered I was pregnant, and it was a miracle. Cedric and I had given up, and just when I thought it would never happen, Michael arrived.”

Dorothy let out a little cry as she found a place for a puzzle edge, pressed it into place and then looked up at Ella and smiled. “I do love puzzles.”

Ella smiled back, hiding how much her chest ached with bitter emotion. “I do, too.”



BAIRD ENTERED THE green salon, his gaze sweeping the room. There she sat at a card table with Dorothy. Except for coffee this morning, Baird had little of Ella and he missed her. He wasn’t interested in analyzing emotion, he just wanted it the nagging empty feeling inside of him to go away.

Baird crossed the room and pulled out a chair at the puzzle table and sat down. “Need help?”

Ella lifted her head, her blue-green gaze meeting his. “I wouldn’t have thought you a puzzle fan,” she said to him.

“We did a lot of puzzles in my family,” he answered. “My dad was in four

Dorothy big fan of the telly, and limited it to a few hours a week, saying too but we would ruin our brains. So, on Saturday nights we'd have family game night with Easter Puzzles, cards, charades, board games. We still have game nights with our voice get together over the holidays."

fully set "Are they together now?"

"Yes, but in Australia. Allison, my oldest sister, lives in Melbourne. In October she had a new baby and they've all gone over to meet him." Ella said.

"Why didn't you go?" Ella asked.

"Alec had asked me to be here for the party." Ella's expression turned incredulous. "You turned down a party in Australia for a party here?"

He shrugged. "You came all the way from the Pacific Northwest for a party."

Her lips twitched as she fought a smile. "That's different."

"How so?"

"I'm Cara's sister."

"I'm Alec's best friend, and we're so close we might as well be brothers." Ella said.

"Are you two bickering?" Dorothy asked, glancing up with a smile. "Or is that a good thing?"

Ella looked up, alarmed. "Not flirting," Ella said decisively.

Baird couldn't hide his smile. "There might be a little flirting, but I won't admit it."

Ella shot him a fierce look. Baird ignored it, but he was amused. Ella found Ella vastly entertaining.

They all worked on the puzzle for a good fifteen minutes, conversation limited to searching for specific puzzle pieces. Progress was being made, but it was certainly slow. The thousand-piece puzzle was a challenging one. It depicted the entire center mostly the cows, with the gray stone wall below, green and green hills, and then just a sliver of blue sky.

Their focus was interrupted by Mrs. Johnson entering the drawing room with the afternoon tea tray. Excusing herself, Dorothy rose to go pour tea. Frederick and Emma leaving Baird and Ella alone.

Baird matched a gray piece to another cluster. "I hope you don't mind me wasn't helping with the puzzle," he said. "You two looked overwhelmed. I thought you'd appreciate help."

o much Ella's head slowly lifted. "You are desperate for attention today."

e night. "Why are you so out of sorts?"

hen we "I'm not. I was having a wonderful time working on the puzz
Dorothy. You're the problem."

"I'm sorry."

rne and "You're not," she snapped. "You enjoy being a nuisance." She loc
' at him then, her gaze bright, challenging. "Actually, nuisance isn't th
word. There are other adjectives better suited, like infuriating. Frus
Upsetting—"

trip to "So, you are still angry with me."

She took one of the brown pieces from his side of the table, diggin
for thefrom the gray ones and with a little cry found a spot for the piece sh
retrieved from his pile. "Why would I be angry?" she asked, already
in his pieces for another gray one.

"You've been upset ever since we went on the drive yesterda
conversation about the wedding reception upset you."

others." "It did, yes. It would have been better not to have discussed it. It
beforeup unpleasant memories." Ella successfully connected more
his how"Memories I had worked very hard to forget." She looked at him
eyebrows arching. "I hope we're not going to discuss *that* again. It
help yesterday and it won't help today."

out Ella "That being down by the boathouse."

She slammed a piece into the others using her fist. "That is what
sed. Heto do to your face."

She was impossible and outrageous which made him want to lau;
ersationtemper made him want to laugh. Her flashing eyes made him want to
ade but"So, we can't be friends," he said soberly to keep from laughing.

ne with She sighed loudly, exasperatedly. "No."

n grass "But I've made you coffee now, twice."

She flipped a long red curl over her shoulder. "It was good but
g roomgood."

'tea for Baird gave up holding the laughter in, and it rang out, a big belly

She glanced up, a light in her eyes that made him think she wanted to
mind mebut she wasn't going to let herself, because he knew she was determin
l and Iupset with him.

"We should be friends," he said matter of factly "I like you. I thi

like me. Just a little. But a little is better than not at all.”

Ella leaned across the table and lowered her voice. “What makes you think I like you? Even just a little bit?”

He leaned toward her, so they were quite close to each other’s faces. His gaze dropped to her rosy mouth, her lips full and soft, and looked up terribly tempting. “Because you like this between us. It’s tense, it’s a little right, it’s uncomfortable. It’s unpredictable.” He looked back up into her eyes, his irises darker, the color deepening with emotion. “It’s also exciting.”

She was silent a long time, staring into his eyes, searching. “I don’t know if you hurt me. You really hurt me.”

He swallowed hard, caught off guard. He hadn’t expected something like that. She sounded so vulnerable. “I’m sorry. I’m digging you out.”

“I know you’re not much for apologies,” he said quietly. “Enjoy your life. Our mine, but Eloise, I did not want to hurt you. That’s a promise. I enjoy you, but I’m not teasing now.”

She leaned away, and she glanced around the room before looking back at him. “Why did you call me Eloise?”

“It’s your name.”

“Yes, but no one calls me Eloise, not even my parents.”

“Why not?”

“They don’t like it.”

“They gave you a name they don’t like?”

“Yes. I’d like to think they’d been drinking but they weren’t. They couldn’t agree on a name, and had been arguing about it for days, and it was an impasse. So, my dad suggested they rip up a baby book with girl names, crumple them up, put them in a hat. Whatever name Mom drew that was my name.”

“Now you’re pulling my leg.”

Her smile deepened and she shook her head. “No. And Eloise was neither of them liked the name all that much so it quickly became Ella. I’ve been Ella ever since.”

“But Eloise is a perfectly nice name.”

“It is, if you’re a German warrior.”

Baird found her smile impossibly infectious. “Well, I like it. And if you meant German cheese, I’d still like it.”

Ella shook her head, but she was smiling, and in that moment, it was as if she had given everything to Baird.

“Do you think we should join them?” Ella asked, nodding at them. And having tea together.

“Probably. I’m hoping there might be some shortbread today.”

“Shall we go check out the tea tray?”

They crossed to the couch where everyone was sitting and pushed the chairs. Dorothy poured tea for both of them, and Emma asked Ella a question that allowed Baird to just listen and watch.

Ella was wearing a pale pink blouse, the shade almost the same as the bridesmaid dress she wore for the wedding. He’d liked her in blue at the cocktail party, but pink was her color. She looked ethereal, like a water fairy in the gauzy dress with wisps of fabric at her shoulders, the delicate neckline setting off her pale skin and delicate shoulders. With her long, teasing hair, the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her small, straight nose, and that mouth of hers—his imagination ran riot, picturing all the things he wanted, and all the things he shouldn’t want. She was Alec’s sister—she was young, she lived on a different continent ... but that didn’t matter.

He’d done his best to avoid her during the weekend. He’d been at the wedding when circumstances required him to be present, but otherwise he’d done everything within his power to avoid her, hoping she’d lose some of that magic, that sparkle and vivacity that made him think she was from another world. But the magic didn’t fade. The sparkle deepened, becoming a soft glow around her, golden light illuminating her. And when she looked at him, her vivid sea blue eyes finding his, holding his, he felt as if he’d been there forever.

Was it possible he’d known her in a past life? Were there such things as past lives? The awareness and familiarity baffled him. He’d never had such a strong bond with a stranger.

But desire was a funny thing, it had no rules, no reason, no answer—just was.

Baird’s control snapped during the reception. He’d been on the dance floor one minute and then he was leading her out of the ballroom through the crowd. Even if neither of them spoke as he drew her into the shadows of the bar, he was kissing her, forgetting everything but her.

It meant Baird set his teacup down, harder than he intended. The cup against the saucer and all eyes were on him.

He three “What’s wrong?” Ella said, her smile faintly teasing. “Miss shortbread?”

His pulse felt heavy. His body felt strange. If there weren’t elderl and an uncle watching, he might pull her onto his lap and kiss her, jus lled up if kissing her here would be as intense, and as consuming as it had bee uestionsummer.

“I don’t think Mrs. Johnson makes a lot of shortbread,” Dorothy pink as “But I can bake some later. I am very fond of my grandmother’s recip e at the glanced around the room. “I made it last year with Emma and Cara. I odlandlast long. I could double the recipe this year.”

deep v- “I’d love to help if I could,” Ella said. “I’ve never had hon ong redshortbread and it would be fun to see how it’s made.”

it nose, Dorothy nodded, pleased by Ella’s offer. “I’ll ask Mrs. Johnson if ings hea good time we could use her kitchen.”

-in-law, “And maybe some American fudge,” Frederick suggested. “Or a seem to only one who enjoyed Cara’s fudge last year?”

Emma frowned. “No, it was excellent, but we can’t very well ask nder sidewhip up a batch, can we?”

he did “I can make fudge. Cara and I use the same family recipe.”

of her Emma nodded, satisfied with the solution. “Well, then, we’ll all another into the kitchen later and do some holiday baking.” She looked at a glow, “Will you be helping, or only eating?”

oked at Baird knew they were all looking at him, waiting expectantly known answer, and no one appeared more interested in his answer than Ella

lend a hand,” he said gruffly. “Crack eggs, measure, stir things. If that ings as be useful.”

l such a Ella’s gaze met his, amusement in her lovely eyes. “A useful m wonderful thing.”

wers. It And that settled that, Baird thought. He would be useful if it killed

e dance



ie next.

ithouse, LATE THAT AFTERNOON with Emma’s peppermint creams, Dorothy’s sho

rattled and Ella's American fudge cooling, everyone independently decided quiet time was in order. The aunts went one way, Ella checked in on the one who was napping, and Baird disappeared in another way.

Ella had far too much sugar and tea to nap, and she felt way too guilty about her aunts' feelings to just sit still. Having been given permission by both Mrs. Baird and Cara to explore the house, she decided she would see what she could find in these ten years.

Taking the stairs to the second floor she went left at the landing instead of right. Everything on this side of the house was different, the hallway narrower, the materials heavier, tapestries and old gold framed oil paintings. She didn't walk until she reached a back staircase and went up a floor where there were more bedrooms, and found yet one more narrow curving staircase. She went to what proved to be attic bedrooms, probably once used for servants' quarters as she imagined. It was freezing up there and the windows were small and there's no light. Ella went back down a floor and opened one of the closed doors. It was a small bedroom with dark paneling covering the walls and a lowered ceiling. She went in with the paneling, too. The ornate four-poster bed even featured a jewel-toned top, the wood heavy and intricately carved. Dark red brocade curtains hung over the narrow diamond paned windows, the bed's coverlet a red and gold pattern with a thick red border. She was most definitely in the old part of the house, and although it was chilly with no fire laid, it was a stunning room.

Ella closed the door, and then tried another closed door just two doors down. It was another bedroom, the paneling similar but only on two walls, the other wall a stone partially obscured by an enormous medieval tapestry. The colors were gold and blue in this bedroom, the blue a rich royal, and the gold a deep blue with heavy gold fringe. A small stained-glass picture depicting a coat of arms being held by a standing leopard and a unicorn was inset in the diamond paned windows.

"A leopard and a unicorn?"

"Or was it a lioness and a dragon?"

Ella moved closer to the circular stained-glass art and couldn't decide what the creatures were, but the colors were stunning, and she could only imagine how beautiful it would look with the sun shining through the glass.

Leaving the bedroom, she continued down the hall, discovering another bedroom, turned sharply right into another corridor, also long and narrow with no visible windows except for light coming in at the far end. She walked

d
on Caranarrow circular stairs. She suspected from the lack of ornamentation
probably another servant staircase, but she took the stairs down, th
o manywalls cool, the stairwell quite chilly. Pushing open a door, she discove
. Boothwas back on the ground floor, in an elegant corridor with higher c
hadn'tmodern light fixtures, and large framed landscapes on the wall.

Ella paused before one, realizing it was a picture of Langley P
stead offrom hundreds of years ago. The house itself had the same shape a
allwaysnow, but the outside was different, with fountains and formal gardens
ls. Sheweren't many trees, at least not from this angle. It fascinated her to s
re there the house had evolved over the centuries.

ase that "There you are," Baird's voice sounded from behind her. "Mrs.
servants,thought we'd lost you."

d high. Ella jumped, and then laughed, startled. "I've had an adventure," s
it was a "What an incredible house."

ceiling "It is."

paneled "I take it this is the old wing, at least upstairs."

framed "Yes. Right around the corner is the original hall."

old silk, "I haven't made it that far. I went up the new staircase but turn
house,instead of right, as I'd go to Cara's room. There are so many rooms
many hallways and staircases."

o doors "It's a remarkable house. But I wouldn't want to be responsible for
o walls,maintenance never ends."

apestry. "Even on a normal house." Ella gestured to the painting she was s
curtainsin front of. "Where are the trees here? The parkland? Or has the artist
g whatit out?"

orn was "There was a period of time when the trees weren't wanted. Like o
old estates, the woods were cleared to better show off the house, a
Intricate gardens were in, natural landscapes were out."

"But the house looks so naked here."

t really "And yet it's more imposing, isn't it? You can also appreciate t
e couldlegant Georgian exterior, emphasizing symmetry and classical lines."

l. His tone was slightly mocking, and she knew he was teasing her. '
; that itI prefer the Elizabethan design over the pretty Georgian era."

with no "As do I."

l all the Ella flashed him a smile. "Be careful. We might end up thinking

set into get along, and then where will the fun be in that?"

It was "You prefer a little excitement," he said, his gaze holding hers.

Just like that her heart fluttered, her traitorous pulse quickening. She thought, she preferred him, especially when they had fun together, and she'd been a fun afternoon. Baird hadn't just survived all two hours in the kitchen; he'd known how to measure and stir things while telling amusing stories and doing wonderful accents and impersonations. He had the aunts and the boys howling with laughter, and Dorothy was quick to laugh, too. There Emma.

"You had mad skills with the kitchen timer," she said. "We're not doing anything, which pleased Emma greatly."

Baird shrugged modestly. "I'm glad I was able to impress you. It requires a tremendous amount of concentration, and dexterity, getting that little bit of timing around and then set to the right time. I would have preferred using the timer on my phone, but as you heard, Emma didn't trust it."

"And it's cheating," Ella added. "There's no place for fancy technology in traditional baking."

"I think you've been listening to Emma too much."

She grinned. "You're good with them, all of them. Older ladies like me and so I have an Aunt Kate I practice on. I've learned I have to smile and agree with everything if possible, and let them think every good thing is theirs."

"I could be wrong," Ella said, still smiling, liking this Baird very much. "but that sounds like a winning combination for women of all ages. I just love to be told I'm right—every time. Why don't you do that with me?"

"Because you're not a frail senior citizen, and I can't afford to give up that much power. As it is, you're hard to manage."

"What a lovely thing to say." Ella laughed. "You are truly a cunning, tongue-tongued devil."

They exited the hall and made their way back to the formal entrance. She then went down the corridor to the kitchen and mudroom. Ella popped back into the kitchen and snuck a shortbread from the tin on the counter, handed it to Baird and then took one for herself.

As they left the house, they collected their coats and headed back to the cottage.

"I spoke with Alec," Baird said, "just before I found you. He's

er so he “I think he’s in shock, but it’s a good shock. There’s joy and fear, l
a determination to protect her from stress and keep her safe.”

Ella thought for a moment. “His news will upset her, when he s
with her, especially if its someone Alec trusted.”

Baird’s jaw tightened, his expression hardening. “I hope the poli
case hehim.”

id want “He’d be arrested, wouldn’t he?”

eeep her “Yes, and with any luck, put away for a very long time.”

you can



nd Mrs.

re bothELLA WALKED TO the house for dinner with Cara, shivering a l
if theytemperatures were dropping and it was getting colder, cold enough th
suspected any rain in the forecast would turn to snow. She wouldn’t
icy shelittle snow, provided they didn’t get snowed in like Cara and Alec
ristmasyear. They’d had a huge storm and had been trapped for days.

is back. Leaving her coat and warm boots in the mudroom, Ella gave p
d aboutscratches to the three dogs who came to see her and then continued
stairs. But once Ella joined Cara in the bedroom, Cara was distract
re whatfrustrated that the gifts she’d ordered hadn’t arrived.

ow that “They should have been here. They were supposed to have be
days ago,” Cara said, studying delivery information on her phone
smokedelivery date has now been pushed to January fifth. How does that wor

w how “I already told you I’d go shopping for you,” Ella answered, pl
’ down on the bed next to her sister. “Don’t be upset. We have a plan.”

e it and “Yes, but I was hoping a couple more gifts would arrive and you
ent to aonly have to buy one thing instead of four things.”

asked. “I have no plans for tomorrow. Surely, I can buy four gifts in one
e pokerhour day.”

d away Cara reluctantly smiled. “I hate it when you’re all practic
ords atreasonable. Makes me feel extra unreasonable.”

through “Listen, I’d be bonkers if I’d spent almost two weeks up here! Go
l familyCara, I only come for brief visits and get restless to move. I don’t kno
you’ve handled it as well as you have.”

about “It’ll be easier when Alec is back. I just miss him.”

out also “I know. He’s going to be home soon, too, so I think we need a girls’ night in tonight. It might be our last chance. I suggest lots of snuggles and Christmas movies. What do you think?”

“What about Baird? What’s he doing?”

ice find “I don’t know. He might be having dinner with the senior crowd.”

“Should we invite him to join us?”

Ella tossed a pillow at her sister. “No. He’s not a girl.”

Cara laughed and tossed the pillow right back. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. I mean, he’s big for a girl, not just in height, but in shoulders ... not feminine in any way.”

Cara leaned forward. “Something happened between you two at the wedding, didn’t it? I was sure you hooked up, but Alec said no way. That Ella Baird doesn’t do casual hookups. He’s not that kind of guy.”

mind a Ella shifted her arm to better block her sister’s smiling face. “So you did last when this is all over you can tell your husband that you were right, because he was wrong. Because Baird does do casual hookups.”

ets and “Where? When? Who’s room?”

up the “No, not like that. It was during the reception, down by the boat deck. We just kissed. A lot.”

“A good kiss? Or a bad kiss?”

en here Ella flopped onto her back and put an arm across her eyes. “Best life. “Themys life.”

rk?” Cara said nothing and Ella’s heart thudded hard. “And then he left the next morning,” Ella added softly.

“Did you know he was leaving early?”

1 might “No. But I knew right away he regretted kissing me.”

Cara gently combed her fingers through Ella’s hair. “How?”

e eight- “He told me. I’m standing there, all warm and mushy and stupidly and he announces in that gorgeous accent, that it was a mistake. It should have happened.”

“Why?”

odness, Ella shook her head. “He wasn’t free. He was in a relationship with someone.”

“No. That’s not so. He and Fiona had broken up at the beginning of the summer. Originally, she was supposed to come to the wedding with him, but he told us in July that he would be going on his own.”

proper Ella shouldn't ask about Fiona. She shouldn't care about Baird's p
cks and her curiosity was too strong. She removed her arm and looked up a
"Who is Fiona?"

"His girlfriend. They'd been together for years. Alec doesn't kno
they broke up. Baird never said, but Alec was pretty sure they were g
marry. They were very committed, very serious." Cara's hand still
palm on Ella's forehead. "But the breakup was two months bef
wedding. Can't imagine why Baird wasn't free."

it those "I don't know. It doesn't matter," Ella said, soothed by Cara's
"We're doing our best to navigate a tricky past so that we can keep the
at the down around you and Alec. We're not children. There's no need fo
, never have friction or tension."

"That's very mature of you." Cara leaned over Ella and smiled i
omeday eyes. "My little sister is growing up so fast!"

and he Ella laughed and rolled into a sitting position. "And you're going
mom!

A knock sounded on the door and Cara called to come in. Mrs. J
thou.se entered the with a tray laden with soup and sandwiches, along with a
cookies and sweets. "Everyone downstairs has been fed, and I'm goin
going soon, but thought you girls might need something to snack on
kiss of you plot to take over the world."

The cook positioned the tray on the foot of the bed. "Is there any
ft early can do before I go?"

Cara happily eyed the tray. "This is perfect, Mrs. Johnson You
know exactly what I'm craving."

"Alright then. Sleep well and I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night," Cara said. "And thank you so much."

happy, There was a chorus of goodnights and after the door closed beh
ouldn't cook, Cara reached for the television's remote control. "Do you
classic Christmas movie, or should we look for a romance?"

ip with "Not a romance," Ella said, making a face. "I can do anything but t
"Okay, let's see what we can find then."

Ella focused on a quarter sandwich while Cara scrolled throu
g of the channels, and then paused on the 2019 version of *Little Women*
im, but Emma Watson and Florence Pugh.

"What about this one?" Cara asked. "Or does being a Louisa May

ast, but expert ruin the movies for you?"

it Cara. "I haven't seen it since it came out in the theater. Would love to v
again."

ow why "You were exasperated by it the first time," Cara reminded her. "I
going to want you to get exasperated tonight."

ed, her "I won't. I'm prepared for disappointment."

ore the Cara laughed and pressed start on the movie before positioning pil
they could sit side by side against the headboard. As the music swelle
touch, smiled happily at Ella. "This is fun."

e drama Ella smiled back. "It's exactly what I hoped we'd do."

or us to



nto her

BAIRD HAD HIS work spread around him on the cottage table, files for
to be acases coming up, depositions to be reviewed. There was never a slow
in his field. If anything, the holidays only heightened discord, and
Johnson January there was an uptick in cases. More divorces, more acrin
plate of settlements, more custody battles. He used to find the sheer nun
ig to be clients, along with their unhappiness, depressing. Now, he merely saw
n while a fact of life, and a job he was paid well to do. It was a lucrative profe
you could keep the stories of betrayal and hostility from getting und
/thing Iskin.

For the most part, Baird was good at separating work and his ho
always He didn't take work home, and he never discussed his clients or cases.

But he'd be lying if his work hadn't influenced him. Damaged v
word Fiona liked to use during their last month together. Practicing
law had damaged him, making him cynical, and bitter, unable to love.

ind the Yes, he'd become cynical, but he could still love. He could f
want adesired. He didn't desire marriage, though. He wasn't interested in
children. It wasn't a game, or a ploy; it wasn't his attempt to keep
hat." away. He just knew himself, and knew he'd be happier not marrying.

He'd always thought Fiona felt that way. They'd met each other w
igh the was in med school, and he was in law school. They were both ambitio
starrings shared similar values, and over the years as their friendship grew, the
closer, until one day they shifted from friends to lovers.

7 Alcott

Because they both worked long hours, they understood the demands of each other's career. While Fiona was locked down at the hospital as a surgeon, his law practice had him traveling all over the world. He told her, 'I don't interested in other women. Fiona was beautiful and brilliant, and the perfect companion. She never asked for too much, and he never expected anything from her—expectations always lead to disappointment and conflict. They worked for them. They were happy.

Until the day Fiona asked about the future, their future, and how his life was playing out.

Playing out? The question surprised Baird. What was wrong with them as they were? They were a popular power couple in Edinburgh, which was close to where Fiona was from. He hadn't minded moving from Glasgow. He hadn't objected to sharing her place—how could he—it was a great place with clients, a three-bedroom flat with enormous bay windows and lots of natural light. It was a necessity in a city like Edinburgh.

Who knew that Fiona's innocent question would unravel everything? It did, quickly. Fiona felt the pressure of her ticking biological clock. She, who'd never expressed desire for children, now longed for them. 'I want it was them. And begged Baird to start a family with her.

But Baird had no plans to marry. He had no desire to be a father. He thought Fiona understood that. He thought he and Fiona were both being childless. They were partners, even without the piece of paper. It was a good life, a fulfilling life. They had each other and work they loved. What more could one want?

Apparently, a great deal.

Fiona wanted to be a mother. She wanted to marry. She didn't know she couldn't be a surgeon, Baird's wife, and mother to his children. They were happy together, good together, weren't they?

Baird tried to explain his position. If things were good, why did women want anything?

If they were happy, why not continue as they were?

But Fiona was no longer happy. She didn't shout or throw things around. She retreated somewhere inside of herself, her eyes enormous with grief. She focused on the fact that he wouldn't marry *her*, that he wouldn't have children with *her*, not caring that he didn't want to marry anyone. Couldn't she see that it wasn't personal? C

ands ofshe see that nothing had changed?

al as a But it had.

wasn't As the months warmed, spring creeping closer to summer
ie idealconsumed them, but the ties that had always been there between them
nythingunraveling, the trust broken.

flict. It In late May, they agreed to take a break. Baird, who'd bought a bu
mile away, would move into one of the flats which was becoming av
e saw itJune first. Living apart would give them time and space, hopefully a
them to come to a consensus.

1 things Fiona agreed. Yes, to time and space. Maybe being apart would
ich wasBaird remember what he'd loved about her.

ow. He But the time apart didn't heal, and Fiona realized Baird would
orgeouschange his mind, and she wasn't going to give up her dreams just t
light, ahim happy. Just like that, four years with Fiona was over.

Baird missed her. You didn't just stop loving someone overnight.
ng? Butwas also relieved. He couldn't give Fiona what she wanted. It was be
k. She,way. She could meet someone new, someone who would want a fami
Wantedhe could focus again on work.

It was in this reflective mindset that Baird arrived in Seattle
her. Hewedding. It had been a revelation traveling by ferry, so much beauty
t happyPuget Sound, so much warmth and sunshine.

It was a Baird had needed this trip, needed to get away. It felt good
l. Whatsomewhere new. For the first time in months he could breathe.

Arriving at the resort, he checked into his room, a stunning suite v
equally stunning view of the water and the harbor, then showered and
ow whyfor the welcome cocktail party. With fifteen minutes before the party
1. Theyhe pushed open his sliding glass door and stepped out onto his b
savoring the scent of pine and golden rays of light.

change That's when he saw her, an angelic vision with long red hair, dre
the palest shade of blue, her long full skirt swirling around her legs.

Her profile was so much like Cara's—her build was so much like
, rather—he knew immediately who she was. Ella, the younger sister, the l
rief andscholar who graduated from high school at sixteen, and was flying t
ouldn'tgraduate school, soon to be a full-fledged professor in her own right.

one, or Baird watched her, intrigued. He'd heard a lot about her. And for t
ouldn'ttime in months, he didn't feel dead.

Watching her greet two guests, affectionately hugging first the wife then the husband, Baird knew Ella was different, special. His body knew, work too, tightening with awareness, hardening with desire. He couldn't remember where the last time he'd felt such intense desire. He didn't even know Ella because she'd already changed his world, knocking him off balance, taking his mind away.

He couldn't wait to meet her and yet he could.

He wasn't ready for someone like Ella, wasn't ready to want a woman who wasn't ready to live again.

And yet as the breeze caught her long hair and pale blue skin, it reminded him of the tiny ballerina in his sister Maisie's jewelry box. It was never a ballerina so delicate and beautiful in its tiny white tutu it almost hurt to touch. He wanted to make her twirl, one pirouette after another.

He felt that same bittersweet awe now. Ella was glorious and important. But she wasn't of this world, and if he wasn't careful, she would disappear. He had to protect her from this everything.

Absolutely everything.

And she did.

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and in the



ELLA HAD FALLEN asleep with Cara watching one movie after the other, relaxing. She only woke when the TV turned off and she opened her eyes to discover Alec there, setting his luggage down by the door.

He put a finger to his lips. "Go back to sleep. I'll crash in the next room." She began, Ella shook her head and climbed from the bed.

Yawning, she pulled Alec out of the room and into the dimly lit hallway. "I'm not taking your bed. Cara will be so happy to wake up and find me here. Let me just get my shoes and I'll let myself out."

"Where are you going?"

"The cottage. I'm staying—" She broke off, frowning. Did Alec and Baird were sharing the cottage? "I'm staying at the cottage through Cara stayed last Christmas."

"But isn't Baird staying there?"

"Yes. I wish I could say it's an interesting story but it's not. We're

life and very stubborn, and we both thought we should have it, so there we are. I knew it, smiled at her brother-in-law, genuinely happy to see him. "I'm good to go, remember back so let me grab my shoes and phone and I'll see you in the morning yet, but—" "I'm not letting you walk back by yourself. Get your things and I'll be breathy you."

Ella knew better to argue, and in the mudroom, she retrieved her coat and tucked her arms into the jacket and zipped it up. Alec opened the door and she gasped at the gust of wind.

"Wow. That's cold," she said.

"The weather is changing."

"Does that mean snow for Christmas?" she asked hopefully as he held the passenger door open for her.

"Probably not for Christmas, but maybe for New Year's."

"Too bad."

He smiled faintly. "You're just as bad as your sister."

And suddenly Ella remembered how awful Alec's past few days had been, and how heartsick and guilty he must have felt calling all those people, letting them know the terrible news.

She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a fierce hug. "It's good to see you," she said. "I hope you know how much I love you."

For a second, Alec was still, and then he hugged her back. "Thank you. Shehe said gruffly.

She let him go and climbed into the car, glad he couldn't see her blinking back tears. This was so not the Christmas she'd expected, but it was better. She was here to help, here available, to do anything and everything, whether it was clear the table or give hugs. Sometimes you needed to be surrounded by love.

It was a very quick drive to the cottage. Ella thanked Alec and got out from the car after he'd pulled up in front of the cottage door.

Entering the dark cottage, Ella was grateful Baird had left a light on the stairs. She hung up her coat, eased off her shoes and tiptoed up the staircase, avoiding the steps that tended to creak. The last thing she wanted to do was wake him. But just as she was reaching for her doorknob, the door opened.

"Who drove you here?" Baird asked from the shadows enveloping the room.

e.” She She couldn’t see him well, but he appeared to be wrapped in some
to walkenormous robe, reminding her of a Viking on a midwinter’s night. Ex
g.” wasn’t a Viking, he was a Celt.

’ll take “Alec did,” she said. “He’s just returned home.”

“Cara must be glad.”

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and sheAlec when she wakes up.”

“How did he seem?” Baird asked.

“Good. Tired. But typically Alec, impossibly polite.”

“I’m glad he’s back.”

ield the Ella reached for her doorknob. “Thank you for leaving the light
me.”

“Of course.”

“I am sorry I woke you, though.”

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“If I’d known, I would have texted you—”

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“Me, too.”

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She couldn't see him well, but he appeared to be wrapped in some kind of enormous robe, reminding her of a Viking on a midwinter's night. Except he wasn't a Viking, he was a Celt.

"Alec did," she said. "He's just returned home."

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"Cara was fast asleep when we left. But yes, she'll be so happy to see Alec when she wakes up."

"How did he seem?" Baird asked.

"Good. Tired. But typically Alec, impossibly polite."

"I'm glad he's back."

Ella reached for her doorknob. "Thank you for leaving the light on for me."

"Of course."

"I am sorry I woke you, though."

"I wasn't asleep. I'd stayed up in case you needed someone to walk you back."

A hot wash of emotion flooded Ella, making the air bottle in her lungs. "If I'd known, I would have texted you—"

"It's okay. I'm glad you had a nice night with Cara."

"Me, too."

CHAPTER SIX

ALEC AND CARA were seated in the lovely sunlit breakfast room when they walked up to the house the next morning. The aunts were there as well. Uncle Frederick was having a lazy morning, and Mrs. Johnson had taken time to go and toast to him in his room.

“I hope he’s feeling okay,” Ella said, grateful to see Mrs. Johnson at the coffee pot.

“He’s slowing down,” Emma said, “and likes his morning routine. I think he’s otherwise quite well.”

Ella glanced at Alec and Cara who were seated next to each other. Cara was holding Alec’s hand and Ella knew from her sister’s expression that she had shared his news with her about the employee stealing funds. Cara looked a little weepy, but her expression was somber.

Neither of the aunts mentioned anything about the calls they’d received or asked about London or Langley Investments. Breakfast proceeded as if everything was normal, except somewhat quieter with less frivolous chatter.

Baird arrived as the plates were being cleared. He’d gone for a run with Milo and Albert with him, and had showered and changed before breakfast. Mrs. Johnson asked if she could make him some eggs, but he said he’d already had something at the cottage, but he wouldn’t turn down coffee.

With coffees refreshed, and sunlight shining through the tall windows, Cara looked at Alec and gave him a small smile. “What do you think about sharing our news?” she asked him. “I know we were going to wait until Christmas Eve, but it might be a good time now.”

“You don’t want to wait until Uncle Frederick is here?” Alec asked.

“You and I could go to his room after and share the news with him. It might make him feel special.”

Alec glanced toward Emma and Dorothy. “Although, I suspect they might suspect something. What with all the carrying you up and down the stairs.”

Ella couldn’t hide her smile. “Cara’s ankle is healing nicely. When the aunts were gone, Baird has been very conscientious about keeping her off her feet.”

or at least as much as she will allow.”

“We think we know,” Dorothy said. “Emma and I have discussed we didn’t want to get our hopes up.”

“Let’s hear what you think our news is,” Alec said, lifting Cara’s lips and pressing a kiss to the back of her fingers.

Emma hesitated as she carefully replaced her cup in the saucer. “hoping that there will soon be a new generation of Sherbournes.” She at Alec and Cara. “That would be truly wonderful news.”

Cara blushed, her happiness evident. “You tell them, sweetheart. since you had to give them bad news two days ago, it should be y gives them good news now.”

“We are expecting,” he said, voice pitched low. “With a May due c Dorothy clapped her hands. “I knew it, I knew it. I’m so glad this.”

“I don’t suppose you know what you’re having?” Emma asked. “C you found out? I’m not sure when you can find out.”

Cara shook her head. “We haven’t found out. But during one of th ultrasounds, we had a surprise.” She paused for dramatic effect. “We having just one baby. There are two.”

“Twins?” Dorothy gasped.

“Fraternal twins,” Alec clarified. “So, there could be two boys, tw one of each. We don’t know. But everything looks healthy. Cara just r not overexert herself, give the babies a chance to mature, and eve should be okay.”

“Were things not okay, Alec?” Dorothy asked.

“There were some challenges early on,” he answered. “There period of time where we were told she could lose one or both. Her d leading obstetrician, with a lot of experience with multiples, recom

Cara spend as much time off of her feet as possible. And she’s done th looked at everyone gathered at the table. “Now we just have to k quietly entertained until the doctor gives the all clear.”

“With that in mind, Ella has promised to take care of some of n ct *they* minute Christmas shopping,” Cara said.

“I have some things I’d like to buy, too, so this is perfect,” Ella an finishing her coffee and folding her napkin and placing it next to her p.

“I don’t suppose you could drive Ella to town, Baird?” Cara her feet

hopefully. “I know it’s going to be crowded, and parking might be a nightmare, but I always think having a car to put packages in the trunk makes shopping easier.”

“Oh, count me in. I’d love to go Christmas shopping,” Baird answered with a playful light in his warm brown eyes. “Especially on the busiest shopping day of the year.”

Everyone laughed and Cara promised to send Ella her shopping list. Baird and Cara returned to the cottage to get ready for their day out. Ella changed into warmer clothes and shoes that would be warm, and good for work. Dressed, she drew her hair into a ponytail and slicked on some lipstick before grabbing an additional sweater from the foot of her bed and heading downstairs.

Baird was outside at the car already, cleaning off the windshield and knocking away fallen leaves.

He looked so industrious buffing off his windshield, making her think of a warrior preparing his sword for battle, that she laughed out loud.

He glanced up and caught her smile. “What are you giggling about?”
“You’re doing an excellent job cleaning the glass. I’m impressed.”
“I don’t think that was why you were laughing.”

“Okay, I was actually picturing you in a kilt cleaning your sword. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“I do have a kilt, but sadly, no sword.”

“Every warrior should have a sword.”

“Or a bow and arrow.”

“Would you have preferred a bow and arrow?” she asked, climbing into the passenger seat after he’d opened the door for her.

“Why does it have to be one or the other?” he answered, closing the door firmly behind her.

Ella just smiled, and she kept smiling because she was looking forward to spending the morning with Baird, not at the house, not with all the errands, but just being out and doing something different, and feeling free.

As Baird started the car, Ella glanced at Cara’s list. Cara wanted a blue cardigan for Dorothy, a cashmere shawl in brown and gold for Emma, and for Uncle Frederick dark brown driving gloves, fur-lined if possible. Cara had written down sizes, with the note that UK sizes were different than US sizes. Ella noticed that Cara hadn’t put anything down

it be a Alec, but maybe that was because she'd already purchased something makes before being put on bedrest.

Christmas shopping in an English village was nothing like shopping here, at home with the American big malls and chain retailers. The shops in Bakewell were small and each unique. The town itself was teeming with people and cars. Everything had been decorated and exuded so much holiday spirit. Ella was practically bouncing in her seat, eager to be outside and part of the festive atmosphere.

Cars were clogging the narrow roads, everyone competing for a parking spot, but Baird found one when Ella was sure they'd never get luck finding one. He parked in the tiny spot with enviable ease and then out of the car, leading Ella's arm and navigated the crowded streets as if he was an intrepid New Yorker.

"I can tell you've lived in big cities," Ella said, as he straightened up. She nearly ran into her. "You know how to clear a path."

"It helps when you're bigger than most," he answered, keeping her close now?" to his side.

Ella liked how protective he was and felt warm and wonderfully safe with her hand in his arm, and his big frame sheltering her from pedestrians, but she was busy talking and eating to realize their strollers and shopping baskets bumping into everyone else.

They crossed the street, and ahead a trio of musicians played on a corner while a magician performed on another, hoping to earn a few pence. Bakewell looked like something from a movie with all the wreaths hanging into and windows, and the greenery and candles in other shop windows. One shop had a particularly long line, and Ella was fascinated by the sign. *The Christmas Bakewell Tart*. She didn't know what a Bakewell tart was, but it sounded delicious and, from the line forming out the door and onto the street, it was certainly popular.

"Have you ever had one?" she asked Baird who had assigned him the job of carrying packages once she'd begun to make purchases.

"I have, but not here. Mrs. Johnson makes an excellent Bakewell tart for I've only had hers."

Baird had used his phone to look up clothing stores in Bakewell, and they went from one to another with Ella popping inside each store to see what she had carried cardigans or women's shawls. There were some lovely

for him goods in the second, but nothing like the items on Cara's shopping list. He left the shop and went outside to where Baird was waiting for her, leaning against the building, his big shoulder resting on weathered stone. Wearing a well-worn vintage leather coat, and dark navy plaid scarf carelessly tied around his neck and throat, he was drawing admiring looks from women walking by. She tried to ignore them, but she couldn't help but feel a little irritated that they blamed them. She was rather smitten, too.

"Well?" he asked, straightening.

She shook her head. "Nothing. They did have a pretty cardigan in a parking pink color, but I don't think that's what Cara is wanting. I think we'll keep looking. He keeps looking."

"There are two more shops on the other side of town. We'll go there and see if we can't find what you need, we'll head to the next town. It's only a short drive, we could always just go straight to Sheffield. They've got everything there. It's a proper city."

"You mean a big city?"

"Half a million, so not big by American standards."

"I do prefer the villages though. I'd rather try a few other small ones first if we could."

"I'd be good with that," Baird said, leading the way down the streets around the corner. They walked several blocks and then came to a clothing store, with another across the street. "They might have the men's gloves in that one." Baird gestured to the shop across the street. "I'll check that one out. If they carry any and you check that shop and maybe one of us will get lucky."

Baird found a pair of dark brown leather driving gloves, beautifully made, and paid for them, assuring Ella that she could give him Cara's money.

Ella didn't find the sweater or shawl Cara wanted, and with the money tucked into Baird's coat pocket, they headed back to the car. It was Chesterfield, which was only eleven miles away, and while not a big town,

it was bigger than the local villages and would offer more stores and shops. Ella was immediately charmed by Chesterfield, another market town with

a two-thousand-year-old history, dating back to its founding as a Roman market, and thanks to the development of roads, Chesterfield became a prominent

market town during the Middle Ages and the city still boasted an impressive historic square with ancient churches and period buildings anchored on all sides. A towering Christmas tree dominated the center and shoppers and carolers filled the square.

ist. Ella It took almost an hour, but Ella found a shawl she thought Cara leaning approve of and a lovely soft cardigan in silver gray which would be a

In his foil for Dorothy's silver white hair.

and his They had a break for a light snack to keep their energy up, but no e didn't the shopping done, and twilight several hours away, Baird suggested stop by Bolsover Castle to have a look, if Ella liked castles.

"How can one not like castles?" she asked, returning to Baird's c a lovely him.

have to "I don't know, but you Americans are a strange lot."

"Ha!"

ere now He laughed. "I'm only teasing you. I was going to drag you to B u don't whether you wanted to go or not."

re have It was a fifteen-minute drive to Bolsover, and even though it wa day before Christmas Eve, the parking lot was full, and there were do families coming and going, their children adorably dressed in their finest.

l towns "I wonder if Father Christmas is here," Baird said, parking.

"Or maybe a holiday concert?" she asked, charmed by a little g eet and cherry-red coat with matching ribbon in her hair.

othing "Perhaps," he agreed.

driving But as they approached the ticket booth, they saw the sign that l see if Stories with Father Christmas had sold out, and Father Christmas icky." return next year.

y lined, "You were right," Ella said. "Santa is here."

later. The woman selling tickets said that admission was fourteen pounc gloves and even though Father Christmas was booked for the day, the V to try carolers were walking the castle grounds and would be performing ig city, next hour.

ps. Ella took a pamphlet on the history of Bolsover, reading the o wn with history aloud to Baird, sharing that it dated back to 1068 but was aba an fort. in the 1300s. Three hundred years later a Sir Charles Cavendish rebu sperous of the ruins into a smaller castle, making it his principal seat, and for t oressive thousand years it went like that—construction, destruction, const ing the disrepair. By the early 1920s, the castle was little more than romanti ers and the massive limestone bedrock showing huge cracks which threaten remaining castle's stability. If it wasn't for the British Ministry of

It would stepping in at the end of WWII, the castle wouldn't be open to the perfect today.

Ella closed the pamphlet. "That's a lot of history. I always thought houses with 1700s are old."

"It is. Just not if you're a castle or a Roman fort."

She pocketed the pamphlet and kept her hands inside her coat, wanting to warm them. "I thought Alec looked good this morning. Better than I expected."

"I'm glad he's back home. It's where he needs to be now." Baird was about to add something when suddenly the Victorian carolers were over them, singing "The Holly and the Ivy."

The castle walls created outstanding acoustics. Other castles just circled around, everyone hushed and savoring the old English carols. The carolers sang two more songs before moving on, and Ella watched the holiday move. A lump filled her throat and her heart felt tender. "That's beautiful."

Baird glanced at her. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

She blinked, smiling through a sheen of tears. "It feels like Christmas. It's almost here, isn't it?"

She nodded and he gave her a hug. "Who knew you were such a sentimental little thing," he said playfully, his tone kind and his hug was warm.

Baird's unexpected thoughtfulness made the lump in her throat just go away.

She didn't even know she'd needed this—the outing, the carolers, the holiday, but she did. "Thank you for bringing me here. This is my favorite day of the year."

"If you like this, you must come to Edinburgh for the Military Tattoo every year. It's a Victorian tradition that takes my parents and Aunt Kate every August, and it never fails to make me proud of my country and my heritage."

"What is the Military Tattoo?"

"The most splendid concert imaginable, featuring the very best military bands from all over the world, performing in the center of the castle. It's held there, where Bolsover is outside the town, Edinburgh Castle is in the heart of the old city, rising up from Castle Rock."

"Sounds wonderful. I'd love to see it one day."

"You'd like Edinburgh. But I suggest visiting the first time in summer. The winter can be harsh."

Ella was intrigued. "Do you have a house or an apartment? Do you

public alone or have a roommate?"

"No roommate," he said as they turned at the turret and began thinking the back. "I have a building in the old part of town and rent out the two floors—one is a two-bedroom apartment and the other is a three bedroom live on the top floor, the third floor. It's well situated, a corner building with huge windows in each of the front living rooms. The building needed extensive repairs when I first bought it, but if it weren't in such poor shape probably couldn't have afforded it."

Baird was "Does your apartment have a garden or balcony?"

Ella upon "No. But there are city parks in every direction should I crave outdoor space."

visitors As they emerged from the tower and out into the center quad, a bell tolled, alerting them that the castle would be closing soon.

them go, "It's going to be dark soon," Ella said. "I can't believe how quickly today went."

"We haven't even had a proper meal," Baird said, pushing open the door, allowing Ella to exit before he followed. "We could eat when we reach Langley Park as we're only a half hour away, or we could stop somewhere for a bite on the way. What would you prefer?"

sensitive "I'd love to stop at a pub or restaurant. I'm up for experiencing everything I can while I'm here."

it grow.

hug—

so far."



hattoo. BAIRD HAD ENJOYED the day. He wasn't even going to pretend that it had made him bother taking Ella shopping. While he wasn't a fan of crowds, and the place they went was ridiculously crowded, he couldn't think of any other way to rather navigate crowds with.

military Ella made him smile. She also frustrated him, making him want things he shouldn't want, not with her, Alec's sister-in-law.

middle But every time he looked at her, at that full upper lip and her voluptuous bottom lip, he remembered kissing her, remembered how he'd come home hungry, voracious.

summer. He still wanted her. He still fought the attraction but now suppressed it, knowing just how explosive it was between them, and how quickly they would live

consumed them. The sheer heat in their kiss, in that wild desperate
he walkblew him away. He'd never experienced anything like that, he'd ne
o lowerneed that was so elemental and consuming. It had shocked him. Ur
room. Ihim.

ig, with Baird, who valued logic and reason, couldn't make sense of the p
neededHe wasn't a man who physically needed anyone, or anything. Until Ell
shape, I He didn't like it, though. He liked her, but not the intense emotion
didn't fit in his world. They didn't line up with his values. He liked
ordered. He was a man who kept to his rules. There was no reason
e somerisks, never mind lose control.

In the car, Baird called one of his and Alec's favorite restaur
ll rang,Bakewell to see if they had any reservations available for two that ever

"We've just had a cancellation for half six," the host said. "Can yo
kly thethat?"

"We can."

ie gate, "We'll only be able to hold the table for ten minutes," the host add

eturn to "No problem. We'll be there."

ewhere They made it back to Bakewell with five minutes to spare. Parkin
restaurant was far easier than it had been earlier today. He went arc
iencingopen the door for Ella who gave him such a dazzling smile that for a r
he forgot why he couldn't have her, and then as she stepped out, putt
hand in his, he felt the spark between them, that stunning electric aw
he'd never felt with anyone else, and knew why he had to keep her a
length.

ad been This. This heat. These sparks. They weren't logical. There was
d everysafe in desire. It would have been different if they'd been brought toge
ne he'dwork, or shared values, but heat? Sex?

No. That was no basis for a real relationship.

ings he At the restaurant, he gave his name, and they were immediately e
to a table against the wall. A few heads turned as they walked to thei
ery fullBaird held her chair and then sat down across from her.

e alive, She leaned across the table, lips curving. "You draw attention ever
you go," she said. "Women love you."

essed it He looked at her, bemused. "What women?"

7 desire "The women who watch you with hungry eyes." She grinned. "Th
as if they're starving, Baird. How can you not notice?"

hunger, “You’re mistaken. Heads turn because of you,” he answered. “
ver feltstunning.”

nerved



passion.

la. SHE LOVED THE way he said stunning, in his gorgeous accent, the s
s. Theyrolling off his tongue. “I think you have it wrong, but I’m too happ
his lifehere to argue with you. Perhaps tomorrow we can become adversaries
to take “And why should we become adversaries? I’d rather be on goo
with you.”

ants in She couldn’t help smiling at him. “You’ve lost that stern look
ing.” MacLauren. You almost look ... kind.”

u make “I am kind.” His lips curved faintly. “Sometimes.”

“Can I ask you something? About you know. August.”

ed. His expression turned wary. “I thought you decided it was best
avoided all mentions and conversation of that particular event.”

“I did. And we probably shouldn’t discuss, but I have this little v
g at they head, and it won’t be quiet, and it won’t leave me alone.”

ound to “That sounds very serious.”

noment “It is. Which is why I would like a serious answer from you.”

ing her “I’ll do my best, Eloise.”

areness She grimaced. “Now you just want to fight.”

it arm’s “I don’t. I promise. What is your question?”

Ella’s courage nearly deserted her. She wasn’t sure why she thou
nothingwould be good dinner table conversation.

ther by “Come on,” he urged. “Out with it. You can’t leave me hangin
anticipating something big.”

“Okay. Here it is.” She leaned toward him a little and dropped he
scorted “If we kissed now, what do you think would happen?”

ir table. Baird just stared at her, his gold eyes narrowing, a tiny muscle pu
his cheek.

ywhere “I’m not being provocative,” she hastened to add. “I genuinely
know. Would the kiss still be all sparky and hot, or would we realize
just the setting, what with the moonlight and all.”

ey look His gaze skimmed her face, sweeping over her eyes, her chee

'You're mouth until his attention was focused only there, on her lips.

He hadn't even said a word and yet her mouth began to pulse sensitive, so sensitive.

"What makes you ask?" he said at length, his voice pitched so low rumbled through her, making her feel as if there was no space between syllables. He might as well have his hands in her hair, tipping her head back to y to be her mouth, her lips, her tongue.

again." She swallowed hard. "Because I thought if ... if ... the magic would terms we'd be safe. You know, you and me together. I thought maybe with heat we could be friends. Good friends."

, Baird "Let me have your hand," he said, extending his to her.

She looked down at his open palm, his hand large, his fingers stro could see each of the lines across his palm, the smaller lines on his Nervous, she hesitated and then she carefully put her palm on his, flat that we his, palm to palm, skin to skin. His hand was warm, steady. For a moment nothing happened. For a moment, she thought she was free.

voice in And then he slowly slid his palm beneath hers, slipping it across her and it was like striking a match. Heat flared and exquisite sensation spread through her, the pleasure so intense it made her dizzy.

She jerked her head up and looked into his eyes. His gold eyes smiled His firm lips pressed together and yet she could feel them, how touched her in August. On her mouth, on her neck, on the pulse just her ear.

ght this Heart racing, Ella pulled her hand back, burying it in her lap.

"Well?" he drawled. "Are we safe?"

ng. I'm "Sure," Ella lied, voice quavering as she reached for her menu. "Probably safe. How about you?"

r voice. "Probably as safe as you."

lling in

want to

e it was

ks, her

mouth until his attention was focused only there, on her lips.

He hadn't even said a word and yet her mouth began to pulse, hot, sensitive, so sensitive.

"What makes you ask?" he said at length, his voice pitched so low that it rumbled through her, making her feel as if there was no space between them. He might as well have his hands in her hair, tipping her head back to claim her mouth, her lips, her tongue.

She swallowed hard. "Because I thought if ... if ... the magic was gone, we'd be safe. You know, you and me together. I thought maybe without the heat we could be friends. Good friends."

"Let me have your hand," he said, extending his to her.

She looked down at his open palm, his hand large, his fingers strong. She could see each of the lines across his palm, the smaller lines on his fingers. Nervous, she hesitated and then she carefully put her palm on his, flat against his, palm to palm, skin to skin. His hand was warm, steady. For a moment, nothing happened. For a moment, she thought she was free.

And then he slowly slid his palm beneath hers, slipping it across her own and it was like striking a match. Heat flared and exquisite sensation streaked through her, the pleasure so intense it made her dizzy.

She jerked her head up and looked into his eyes. His gold eyes smoldered. His firm lips pressed together and yet she could feel them, how they'd touched her in August. On her mouth, on her neck, on the pulse just below her ear.

Heart racing, Ella pulled her hand back, burying it in her lap.

"Well?" he drawled. "Are we safe?"

"Sure," Ella lied, voice quavering as she reached for her menu. "Perfectly safe. How about you?"

"Probably as safe as you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHE LOVED FIRE, Baird thought, forcing himself to eat even though he was hungry for food. And being Ella, she had to test the attraction. She had to make sure it was real.

It was real.

And now the heat was back, and the desire hummed, and it was not to be easy to just pretend to be friends when he wanted her. But Baird had nothing if not competitive, and if she wanted to eat dinner as if nothing had happened, then he'd play the game, bite for bite.

But as dinner progressed, she began struggling with her pretense, longer to chew, longer to swallow, longer to lift her fork to her mouth since the food arrived, they'd been quiet, but she'd look at him every now and then, a question in her eyes, searching his, looking for something he'd wonder if she even knew what she was looking for.

She was looking at him now, her eyes like the North Sea, a deep blue with a hint of green. He lifted a brow, hoping to encourage her.

"What do you think they're having for dinner at Langley Park?" she asked, voice unsteady.

He fought an urge to laugh. That wasn't what was on her mind, but he'd give her points for trying. "I can't imagine it's steak frites," he said, waving his hand at what they were both having. Who knew steak frites was Ella's favorite? It had always been one of his.

"Mrs. Johnson is a good cook, though."

"Yes," he agreed gravely trying to match her tone.

What he wanted to do was laugh and pull her out of her chair and come over and lap and kiss her the way she wanted to be kissed. He could feel the yearning in her. Whatever string bound them, it was tight, pulling them in, holding them so close that every time she took a breath, he could feel it.

Finally, he put down his fork, unwilling to continue the game all night. "So, what do we do now? Do we go back to the cottage and start where we began last summer?"

Her eyes widened and her lips parted but no sound came out.

“Or do we just keep pretending nothing is there and we’re both happy and fine,” he added. “Would love to know what we’re supposed to do.”

Ella set her fork down now and it clattered against her plate. “But both happy and fine.” She didn’t look at him as she pushed her plate

wasn’t “Aren’t we?”

had to “If we were fifteen, sure. But we’re adults. Sneaking kisses as an appetizer, it’s not a meal. As a man, I’d be lying if I find it completely satisfying.”

it going Her head lifted, her eyes briefly meeting his before just as swiftly disappearing away. “Did... do ... you want more?”

bird was He shouldn’t torment her, but she had it coming. She started this.

ing had He’d only been with one woman in the past four years, and she

, taking Fiona was nice, and life with her had been good, but it had never been remotely like this. “Don’t you?” he countered, studying Ella so intensely

h. Ever she had to look up, had to gaze back, had to see just what he was feeling

ry now “Why didn’t you marry Fiona?” Ella asked abruptly. “Cara and Al

ing. He sure you were going to be together, always.”

ep blue. Nothing could have cooled his ardor like mentioning Fiona and marriage in the same sentence. “What do you know of Fiona?” he asked.

?” she “Only that you were together a long time. You were happy together until you weren’t.”

ut he’d “But isn’t that the way of relationships? They work until they don’t

which is “If you were that serious, if you’d been together that many years, could you work through your differences?” Ella persisted. “Wasn’t the relationship worth saving?”

e meal? He did not want to be drawn into this. “I couldn’t give her what she wanted.”

“Didn’t you love her?”

onto his He was being drawn into this. Baird smashed his irritation. “I did. I wanted to marry, and we’d agreed years before that I wasn’t going to

pulling and she knew, she’d agreed. I thought we were both content, and

dinner. discovered I was wrong. She loved me, but the need to have a family was stronger, and we agreed she’d be happier with someone who could give

what we what she wanted.”

“That’s why you broke up?” Ella whispered, stunned.

“Did you think there was something more nefarious? That one of my copy and done the other wrong?”

Ella gave her head a slight shake. She seemed confused and terribly
we are “You don’t need to feel bad for Fi. She’s already met a wonderful
e away, who loves her madly and is eager to marry her. The wedding is in Fe
It’s happening soon.”

is an Ella’s forehead creased. “And that doesn’t bother you?”

pletely “Of course not. It’s good. It’s great. A relief.”

“A *relief*?”

looking “Her clock was ticking and all that.”

Ella looked away, but not before he saw disappointment in her eye
felt her disappointment in him. He didn’t understand it. Why did she
ex with much about Fiona? What business was it of hers?

ver felt “You’re never going to marry ... not anyone?” she persisted.

tly that “No. Marriage is not in my future. It’s not something I want.”

ig. “Not even if you met the right person?”

ec were “If I’d wanted marriage, I would have married Fi. But I didn’t
marriage. It’s as simple as that.”

marriage Baird rarely explained himself to anyone, and he didn’t owe
explanation, either, but her bewilderment touched him. She truly
ther ... understand.

“I’ve seen what people do to each other,” he said. “I’ve seen too n
t?” the ugliness that happens when a marriage sours. I’ve seen what it doe
ouldn’t children. I don’t want that. I don’t ever want anything like that.”

ionship “What makes you think you would have such a toxic relationshi
every marriage ends in divorce.”

hat she “Enough do that it’s not logical for me to take that next step.”

“I don’t believe love is logical.”

“Even more reason to avoid it.”

But she Her brow arched. “You really mean that?”

marry, “I do.”

then I “But you seem so ... well-adjusted.”

ily was He nearly laughed. “I’d like to think I am, and just because I don
give her to get married or have kids—”

“You don’t want kids, either?”

“Before you ask if I don’t like kids, it’s not that. I love kids. I l

us hadnieces and nephews, and I can't wait to be a godfather to the twins. I
be in their lives. I look forward to being there for them. But no, I
y sad. planning on starting a family, and have no desire to put children in the
l doctor of something that could be contentious, turning them into pawns in so
bruary. else's game for vengeance—”

“That’s so harsh, Baird.”

“But it’s real. I see it on a daily basis. A good marriage can be won
A bad marriage can be vile. I’ve seen those vile marriages in action.
last thing I’d want. It’s the last thing I could accept.”

“What makes you think you’d be that husband or that father?”

res, and “A marriage is made up of two people. I can only control me, and
care so want to be.

I don’t get to control or make choices for my partner. Nor would
to. But over time, people become disillusioned in their mate. They fall
love. They feel hurt, or neglected. They realize they made a mistake
isn’t good. Finances are tight. The person you thought you knew sup
’t want politician you detest. Once the disillusionment sets in, it’s very diff
recover from. Which is where I come in.”

Ella an “It’s a miracle anyone makes it,” Ella said under her breath.

didn’t “I heard that,” he said, completely serious. “And I agree.”

nuch of
s to the



THEY LEFT THE restaurant and instead of returning straight to the car,
ip? Not walk around Bakewell, enjoying the lights and the brightly illu
Christmas tree in the center of town. Ella was glad to be out, movin
couldn’t stop replaying their dinner conversation over and over in he
and the replays didn’t help. The replays just made her feel worse.

“What’s on your mind?” Baird asked as they walked along the rive

She shook her head. “Nothing and everything.” She looked up
“All at the same time.”

He plucked a strand of hair from her eyelashes. “That’s a lot.”

’t want “It is. It’s too much.”

“Maybe stop thinking for a bit. You don’t have to have all the a
tonight. You can just relax. Be.”

ove my

want to “Easy for you to say,” she muttered.
I’m not “How so?”
middle “I can’t think straight, not around you, Baird. Why is that?”
someone “I don’t know, but if it’s any consolation, it’s mutual.”
She looked up, into his eyes. “Is it?”
“Yeah.”

nderful. He wasn’t classically handsome and yet she thought he was th
It’s the beautiful man in the world. His eyes, his nose, his mouth. But of ever
she had a special fondness for his nose, with that bump. “How did y
that?” she asked, reaching up to lightly touch his nose.

l who I “Broke it in a fight.”
“Do you fight much?”

. I want “Try not to.”
l out of “So, you’re a peaceful man.”

ke. Sex “Peaceful enough,” Baird said, drawing her closer. “I don’t start f
ports a just finish them.”

icult to She felt fizzy and dizzy all at the same time. “Are you good wit
fists?”

Baird lifted one hand, clenching it. “I can handle myself, and ot
need be.”

“Impressive.”

Baird smiled, amused. “Are you a bloodthirsty wench?”

“I do find a strong man sexy.” Her face grew warm. “But please
took a I’m not flirting. I’m just being truthful.”

minated He suddenly flexed, his bicep bunching. “Have I shown you my r
ng. She lately?”

r head, “You have never shown me your muscles.”

“What about at the wedding?”

r bank. “You were wearing the tuxedo jacket.”

at him. “A shame.”

Then he kissed her, a slow, sweet melting kiss that made her si
lean into him. Just as quickly as the kiss began, it was over. Ella whi
in protest.

answers Baird ran his thumb across her soft, sensitive lower lip. “You di
mad, Eloise.”

“Not Eloise.”

“Eloise to me.”

She rolled her eyes but also laughed. “You are impossible. impossible. I thought we were fighting the attraction.”

“We are,” he said solemnly. “We’re not giving in.”

“What was that kiss then?”

“A reminder that we must remain on guard, vigilant to threats the most dangerous.”

Nothing, Ella slowly shook her head, aware that she’d already lost that war you get had snared her heart and she doubted he’d ever give it back.

Pulling up to the cottage a half hour later, things looked vastly different from how they’d left the cottage this morning. White fairy lights strung from inside the cottage. A fresh fragrant wreath hung on the front door. Ella glanced at Baird as he turned the engine off, but he seemed as surprised as she did.

“What’s happened?” she asked a slight catch in her voice, surprised by the confusion.

“Somebody’s been here,” he said.

Somebody had been there. Entering the cottage, they discovered that the interior had been transformed into the most charming Christmas wonderland with a lush tabletop tree covered in little lights and delicate ornaments. Greenery adorned the mantle, boughs dotted with white votive candles were all glowing. More greenery hung above the kitchen window. Ella knew, greenery decorated with dried slices of oranges and lemons and checked green plaid bows.

Ella looked around and then at Baird, completely in awe. “Who did this?”

“I don’t know. Your sister maybe?”

“She couldn’t have done it herself.”

“Maybe with Alec’s then?” he answered, entering the kitchen and moving to the stove where a copper pot sat on the burner. He removed the lid and cinnamon and spice filled the air. “Mulled wine.” He glanced at her. “Do you think we have a cup?”

“I think we must.” Ella laughed. “Mulled wine, in England, by the way. How can it get any better than this?”

“We could be having mulled wine in Scotland by the fire.”

They stayed up late talking—chatting, really—about nothing and everything and with a blanket wrapped around her and the fire crackling.

popping Ella felt good, relieved to have things comfortable between . This is Baird again. She learned a lot that evening about Christmas in the Kingdom, not realizing how different countries had such different customs. She hadn't known that Christmas in Scotland had been banned for hundreds of years, and baking Yule bread had been a criminal act. Christmas celebrations even became a recognized holiday until the 1950s, which was why Hogmanay was such a special occasion in Scotland. Since the 17th century Baird couldn't celebrate Christmas, New Year's became incredibly important.

Finally, it was time to go to bed and Ella helped blow out the candles. She lingered for a moment by the tree, not yet wanting to unplug the lights. "It was the best surprise," she said. "Can't wait to thank Alec and Cara for it." In bed, Ella sent a quick text to her sister. Thank you for the surprise. It was a wonderful surprise. I love it all. It's absolutely magical!

Cara didn't answer, but Ella wasn't surprised. Cara was going to be busy these days and when she woke up, she'd see the text.



the rustic

Baird was out for his early morning run, frost glittering everywhere. It was a beautiful morning, the air cold, the sky blue. There was no snow in the forecast, but the frost was just as beautiful, turning everything a soft white.

He heard dogs barking and turned to see Otis and Milo running towards him, with Alec not far behind.

"Look at you, laddie," Baird said, greeting Alec as he joined him. "I realize you could still run with those arthritic hips and knees."

"I have no arthritis, old boy, and if you remember, I could always challenge you. I'm sure I still can."

"Are you challenging me to a race?"

"I can't. I'd hate to show you up on Christmas."

"It's not Christmas until tomorrow. Let's see who is the faster man on the fire." Baird took off, at a full sprint, and then Alec came charging, dashing ahead of them, and they ran hard, running until they were breathless and laughing and because Baird never took chances, and he didn't let go, Baird ran sideways into Alec, knocking him hard to his feet to the ground.

her and Alec couldn't win.

United Alec howled in outrage. The dogs danced around barking. Baird c
ustoms.to the frosty ground next to Alec laughing hard. "Oh, that was fun. Sho
ndredsdo it again?"

s didn't Alec glowered at Baird. "Only if you want me to send you flying."
is why "I'd like to see you try."

people Alec threw himself on top of Baird and they were wrestling
t. crunchy grass as if boys again. They'd always been evenly matched i
les, butof strength and Alec, despite the stressful past few weeks, held h
e lights.against Baird, who outweighed him by a stone or more. Neither
i." completely defeat the other. They took turns getting the upper hand
e mostlose it again. Finally, they were both worn out, and they lay back
ground staring up at the blue sky.

to bed "You're a good friend," Baird said to Alec.

"No, you're the good friend," Alec returned. "Thank you for taki
of things here while I was in London."

"Anything, anytime," Baird answered sitting up and brushing th
twigs and leaves from his shoulders and back.

It was a "Did Ella like the surprise last night when you got home
in theChesterfield?" Alec asked, sitting up, too.

glittery "She did. Thank you so much for arranging that. We'd had a
conversation at the restaurant and then we came home to the de
towardcottage and it helped."

Alec eyed him as he got to his feet. "It was your idea."

"Didn't Baird rose, too. "I couldn't have pulled it off without help. Who
the work? I want to take care of them."

outrun "Mrs. Booth's kids and, Darren, Mr. Trimble's assistant, did most
drove Cara down so she could see." Alec shook his head. "You made l
She was so touched that you'd plan a surprise like that for Ella."

"But Ella isn't to know. This isn't about me. It's about mak
1." AndChristmas here special."

g, dogs "Understood. We're keeping your secret. Our lips are sealed."

pathless Baird returned to the cottage to shower and found Ella sitting
like tocottage next to the Christmas tree. She had made herself coffee and l
ensureat him when he entered.

"Isn't this just so lovely?" she said happily, reaching out to lightl

one of the tree branches. “I don’t even want to go up to the house now.
dropped “Your sister would be disappointed.”

ould we “I know. But you have to admit this is adorable. A cottage Christn
just perfect.”

Baird smiled at her. “I have to shower, but let me know when
ready to go to the house, and I’ll go with you.”

on the She nodded, and he paused to take one last look at her curled up
n terms chair gently touching the tree, her fingertip brushing the needles.

is own It felt good to have made her happy.

r could

only to

on the



ELLA SAT ON the top step in the shadows of the upper landing, liste
Baird sing in the shower. She’d never heard him even hum before,
ng care hear him in the bathroom, singing the most achingly beautiful song, m
creep up the stairs to listen.

ie dried He had a gorgeous voice. Who knew? It was deep and textured,
sang with emotion, so much emotion. It wasn’t a song she’d heard
e from and she didn’t know if it was a hymn or a carol, but her eyes teared li
to him. She didn’t want him to stop.

strange Last night had been intense, and then they’d returned to the bea
corated decorated cottage, and she hadn’t known what to think or fee
decorations had been lovely, and it had been such a sweet surprise fro
and Cara, but Baird signing this particular melody completely undid he

did all How to be angry with him?

How to wish he was someone else?

of it. I How to wish he’d make different choices?

her cry. She didn’t want to change him. She didn’t want him to be anyo
himself, but it hurt knowing they weren’t going to be more than wh
ing her were.

King of Kings, most Holy One, God the Son, Eternal One...

Her eyes teared and she held her breath, overwhelmed by the
in the beauty of the song, the season, and the reverence in Baird’s voice.

beamed He might say he was hard and bad. He might say he was selfish
terrible partner, but she didn’t believe it, she couldn’t believe it. How
y touch

.” he be so hard and bad, so selfish and terrible when he sang like he be to a heavenly choir?

was. It’s She heard the water turn off and Ella scrambled back down the stairs wanting to be caught outside the bathroom listening. She drew a blank you’re her lap, her eyes still burning, her heart aching.

She loved him. She’d loved him from the moment she laid eyes on him in the But it didn’t mean they were meant to be together. It just meant she’d be his friend, always his fan, always in his corner, even if that meant Bellingham.

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he be so hard and bad, so selfish and terrible when he sang like he belonged to a heavenly choir?

She heard the water turn off and Ella scrambled back down the stairs, not wanting to be caught outside the bathroom listening. She drew a blanket over her lap, her eyes still burning, her heart aching.

She loved him. She'd loved him from the moment she laid eyes on him. But it didn't mean they were meant to be together. It just meant she'd always be his friend, always his fan, always in his corner, even if that meant from Bellingham.

CHAPTER EIGHT

UP AT THE house, everyone had something to do to get ready for Christmas tomorrow, everyone but Uncle Frederick who was taking an extended break at the library in front of the television. Earlier that morning, Ella and Baird had brought the Christmas presents Cara wanted to the house and then stayed for breakfast.

Ella, not being needed for a couple of hours, snuck out and walked to Bakewell to attend the eleven a.m. service at the nearest church. She didn't attend church often at home anymore, but it felt good to take a break this morning. She welcomed the calm, and the opportunity to be quiet, to pray, sing, and listen to the sermon.

You don't have to have all the answers, she reminded herself.

You don't have to know everything today.

Ella slipped away as soon as the service ended and walked to Langleigh Park. Hanging up her coat in the mudroom and easing off her shoes, she padded down the hall and peeked in to the kitchen where she saw Alec and Baird in flour covered aprons, apparently making something—something—from the bowls of freshly washed berries to the flour and sugar in the cannisters, along with an impressive number of measuring cups.

Alec spotted her in the doorway and shooed her away. “You will wait until later to see,” he said. “It’s a secret.”

“And this secret is for tonight?” she asked.

“No spoilers,” Baird answered. “Please continue on your way. It’s men’s work.”

Apparently, men’s work involved lots of spills, and a dozen dishes, bowls and pans. “I’m just looking for Cara. Do either of you know where she happened to disappear to?” she asked.

“The wrapping room,” Alec said, briefly glancing up. “It’s the first door on the left, once you’ve taken a right to the family wing.”

“So, the same floor as your bedroom, only this is the first door down the hallway, on the left-hand side.”

Baird and Alex exchanged glances. “Isn’t that what I said?” Alex Baird.

Baird shrugged. “I understood it.”

Ella rolled her eyes and left, returning to the center hall where she climbed the grand curving staircase to the second floor. Opening the door on her left—once she’d turned left at the top of the stairs, not right—she found Cara seated at a long table with wrapping paper, ribbons and scissors spread out in every direction.

“So, this is the wrapping room,” Ella said, closing the door behind her because the hallway was much colder than the room, which had a little heater in it to keep Cara warm.

“It’s my personal sitting room,” Cara answered, “but I rarely use it. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with a personal sitting room. In the past, the Countess Sherbourne might have gathered with friends or female members. She might have worked on embroidery or practiced painting watercolors. I do none of that, so the room is usually neglected, but it can make a wonderful space to write Christmas cards or wrap gifts.”

“If this was my room, I’d fill that wall with books,” Ella said, going around and seeing open space for bookshelves. “I’d put a chaise longue by the window for reading, and maybe a desk for some writing. And I wouldn’t let anyone come in. It would be my private domain.”

“Poor Ella, the youngest of five, never had any privacy.” Cara finished the bow on the package and set it aside. “There is already a library in the house. If you were the countess here, wouldn’t you want to add your books to the library?”

Ella sat down in a chair not far from where Cara was working. “I don’t want my books in a room that was mine, and then I’d decorate it the way I liked it. The house I share with my roommates came furnished, and my favorite books are in boxes in Mom and Dad’s garage. Someday, I’ll go to pull them out and put them on display.”

“Soon,” Cara reminded her. “So, where have you been? Were you sitting down at the cottage with your own decorations?”

“No. I went to church in the village. It was really lovely. I feel better now.”

Cara set down the scissors. “Are you upset about anything? Has anything been done—”

asked “No. This isn’t about Baird. He’s fine. Really. We’re not fighting much as we were.” Ella glanced around the room, which was very formal with a gold framed mirror over the marble hearth, light blue toile wallpaper, a quickly blue floral embroidered fire screen, and a half dozen gold framed portraits on the first wall. “Does it ever seem strange that you live here now?”

—she “Every day.” Cara looked up and smiled. “But I’d never tell Alec and bows would hurt his feelings. My happiness is so important to him.”

“Maybe you just need a room you can fix up your way? Make it more formal, less impersonal. Like this room. It’s frozen in time, trapped in the nineteenth century.”

“I don’t mind. I rarely come in here.”

“But would you enjoy it more if it was your style?”

—she “I’d rather focus on the nursery. That’s a huge space. The family hasn’t had anything done to it since before Alec was born.”

—she “Where is the nursery?”

—she “It’s up another floor, and then down the hall, around a corner, near the servants stairs which are ridiculously steep.” Cara reached for another gift to wrap. “The old nursery was placed as far from the parents as possible so they wouldn’t be inconvenienced.”

—she “That’s not going to work for you.”

—she “No, definitely not. I do have plans to make things comfortable, and I’d like to convert the countess’s suite into a nursery. It’s on this floor, near the wing. The bedroom is huge with lots of lovely natural light. I think it’s the ideal for the children, especially when just babies.”

“Does Alec have any objection?”

—she “I haven’t spoken to him about it. I thought I’d wait until we got to the way the holidays and have our checkup with the doctor in mid-January. If most of everything is good then, I’ll bring it up, and if he approves, we will have the renovations started.”

“You think he’ll approve?”

—she “Absolutely. He wants the children near us, especially during the holidays. He didn’t have access to his parents as a young child and he’s going to be a very different parent than his father. By the way, have you seen the gift?”

—she “Oh, yes. They are in the kitchen making a huge mess. I think it’s something we’re supposed to eat later.”

ting as Cara grinned. “Did it happen to have strawberries?”
formal “I did see quite a few berries, as well as berry juice, and smashed
paper, on the side of a bowl, and a strawberry on the floor.”
raits on “They’re making Eton mess for us tonight. It’s a first for both of t
this should be fun.”
that. It “Mess as in mess?”

“Yes, and Eton as in school.” Cara turned the wrapped gift over
it lessreaching for a narrow dark green ribbon. “It’s a popular summer desse
l in thefruit is plentiful, but it’s quite festive for Christmas. I’m rather fond o
then, I’ve only ever had Mrs. Johnson’s, and everything she m
delicious.”

“I’m looking forward to their mess,” Ella answered, rising. “And
ace andit’s dreadful, I will say nice things. As a good sister-in-law should.”



ar a set
her boxELLA HELPED MRS. Booth set the table for Christmas Eve dinner, aw:
sible soMrs. Booth was joining her children that evening for a special pre-
dinner at a restaurant in Bakewell that was highly regarded. Mrs.
would then have the next four days off, and Mrs. Johnson had been in
too. I’djoin the Trimbles for dinner tomorrow at their house, and they’d push
in thisdinner time back so that Mrs. Johnson could plate the Sherbournes Ch
t woulddinner first.

Ella had not yet eaten in the formal dining room and was awed
soaring ceiling and the enormous fireplaces at either end of the lofty
throughMrs. Booth had already spread a long red cloth on the table and w
ary. Ifadding the silverware.

get the “Cara told us that you have a big dinner in the United Sta
Christmas Eve and Christmas Day,” Mrs. Booth said, quickly buffing
the flatware before she set it down. “That must be a lot of cooking f
e night.mother to do.”

to be a “It is,” Ella agreed, adding the crystal goblets to the table, happy
guys?”something useful to do. “Fortunately, my mother has three sisters and
them live close, so we always spend holidays with family, and Mom
ink it’ssisters in the kitchen helping cook. But now that Mom and my au

getting older, they're wanting to simplify, especially as my brothers
berries aren't wanting to take on the responsibility of feeding everyone."

"How many gather at your house for Christmas dinner?"

hem, so Ella counted in her head, remembering how last year Cara wasn't
"It varies, but usually between nineteen and twenty-four, which was
easy to seat here, but we usually have to put up additional tables in the
before room and then a children's table in the family room."

rt when "And what do you eat for Christmas?"

f it, but "My father prefers prime rib, but my mother likes turkey, so we do
akes it every year."

"The Sherbournes have turkey on Christmas Day and then prime
even if Yorkshire puddings for New Year's."

"Do you know what we're having tonight?"

"Duck and roasted vegetables. Potatoes—Lord Sherbourne likes
potatoes—and then the special dessert."

"The mess."

are that Mrs. Booth laughed out loud. "The Eton mess, yes, and I saw the list
holiday So did Mrs. Johnson, but she's happy to have Lord Sherbourne host.
Booth didn't mind the fuss...or the mess." She winked at Ella before glancing
vited to at the table, counting the place settings. "I think we are short a place
ed their Do you mind bringing in another plate and stemware from the
ristmas downstairs? I confess, my legs are tired today."

"I don't mind at all. You should have put me to work sooner!"

by the
/ room.
as now



THE TOWERING CHRISTMAS tree in the green drawing room was lit, and
ites for of pretty packages nestled at the base. Candles flickered on the mantel
each of Emma was at the piano in the music room playing lovely traditional carols
or your Uncle Frederick, Aunt Dorothy, Cara, and Alex had gathered
Music Room to enjoy the impromptu concert while Mrs. Johnson
to have finishing touches to her Christmas Eve dinner. Ella was still enjoying
two of use and was assisting Mrs. Johnson with putting last-minute things
has her table now that Mrs. Booth had gone to dinner.

ints are After placing the bottles of opened red wine on the table, Ella a

’ wivesthe fragrant Christmas centerpiece she’d helped Mrs. Booth create made from fresh pine branches, pine cones, and small oranges studded with whole cloves. Three tall dark red candles rose from the middle of the centerpiece, their soft light created a beautiful glow, captured by the gold bestemware and fine China.

The sound of the doorbell caught her by surprise. Was she expected? Or maybe it was a late delivery, perhaps with some of the things Cara had ordered. With Mrs. Johnson in the kitchen and Mrs. Booth in the parlor, Ella went to the door and opened it. A middle-aged man stood on the threshold in a winter coat, a driving cap in his hands.

“Is Alec available?” he asked, his English accent different from Mr. Baird’s and even different from Alec’s.

“Yes,” she said. “May I tell him whose here?”

He hesitated briefly. “James Phelps.”

Her stomach knotted and her heart fell. She recognized the man from the kitchen door. Footsteps sounded in the entry hall. Baird had come to see who was at the door.

“A James Phelps is here,” Ella said to Baird.

She wanted to ask Baird if it was the same man who took money from Alec’s firm, but she didn’t have to. Baird’s hard expression revealed his displeasure.

“Would you like to come in?” Ella asked, turning back to Mr. Phelps. “Perhaps you’d like to sit while I get Alec.”

“He’s fine where he is,” Baird said quietly. “I’ll go get Alec.”

Ella closed the door behind Mr. Phelps. She didn’t know what to say to him, and she didn’t think he would speak to her and then he suddenly spoke. “Are you Lady Sherbourne’s sister?”

Ella nodded.

“You’ve come from America,” he added.

Ella nodded again. “Just for the holidays.”

“I heard she hasn’t been well.”

Ella lifted her head and gave the man an incredulous look. “Then why are you here—” But she broke off and pressed her lips together.

For a long minute, she just stood in the entry looking at Mr. Phelps. He stared at the floor.

Finally, Baird was returning with Alec, and Ella slipped away.

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ed with
of the



elegant BAIRD REMAINED. THERE was no way he was going to leave Alec with the
of society. He was so angry he wanted to grab James and pin him to the wall
someone and then throttle him until he cried like a baby.

he gifts “Good evening, James,” Alec said coolly. “This is a surprise.”

h gone, “I imagine it is.”

on the “Would you like to sit down? The drawing room is far warmer than
in the hall.”

Baird’s, “I’m not staying long,” James answered, turning his hat once, and
again. “I’ve just come to apologize. I had to do it in person. I
apologize so you could hear how sorry I am.” He lifted his head
looked into Alec’s eyes. “I’d like to say I don’t know why I took the
name, but I do.”

s at the Silence followed, and Baird could tell Phelps was nervous, but
certain it was all an act. He certainly felt no sympathy for the man.

James took a breath. “I made some bad decisions financially, and I
y from a tough position, short of funds, and I thought I’ll just borrow a little
led his pay it back as soon as I can. It didn’t work out that way, though. I c
pay it back, and I was still in the hole, and so I borrowed more, and
Phelps some more, and by the time I realized just how much I’d taken, I k
ruined myself, and maybe you. Every day, I wanted to tell you. Every
vowed I’d come to you and confess what I’d done. But when I saw yo
o say to office, you reminded me so much of your father, and he was so very
asked me. He believed in me when no one else did. And instead of admitting
truth, I just pretended it wasn’t me. Why did it have to be me?”

“Because it was you,” Baird said harshly, unable to keep his silence.

He’d known James Phelps a very long time. Phelps had been a frequent
visitor here when the old earl was alive. And the earl had given
tremendous support and encouragement, encouragement he didn’t see
why on Alec. Alec was constantly having to prove himself, and even if
shrugged it off, it bothered Baird.

s while “I know,” James said. “I’m not trying to justify my behavior, either
I’ve done is terrible, truly terrible. I don’t have the means to pay it a

Most of it is gone to cover those gambling debts, and the rest is in the bank, being saved for Helen to help take care of her and the children when she's no longer around."

"Does Helen know?" Alec asked.

James shook his head. "I'm heading home tonight to tell her. She'll be here. I've been on a business trip."

"I talked to her, you know. She said she didn't know where you were."

"I know." Ruddy color washed through James's face. "I said I was here interviewing and didn't want you to know."

"So many lies," Baird said. "You had to know they would catch up to you and then you?"

For a moment, James didn't speak and then when he did, his head cracked. "I don't feel bad for me, but I feel terrible for Helen and the children. They don't deserve this. It will be hard for them when the truth comes out."

Baird shook his head. "You should have thought of that before."

Alec gestured to the green drawing room. "Let's go sit by the fire. It's cold, James. There's no reason to have you standing here shivering."

Alec and James took seats in the armchairs and Baird stood by the fireplace, needing to keep his distance. He was so angry on Alec's behalf. James had put Alec through hell the past week. And to just show up on Christmas Eve and act as if an apology could make everything right?

"So, you're gambling again, James," Alec said quietly.

James lifted his head, looked at Alec and then down again. "You know about your dad helping me out before?"

"My father never told me, but I saw it in the personal ledger my father kept for his personal accounts. He took care of your debts five or six years ago."

"Seven," James said. "And I promised him I'd never gamble again. I didn't go near the horses, didn't place bets, not until last spring when I really had a good feeling about a horse, and I thought one bet won't hurt, and how sure the horse would win."

"The horse didn't?"

James made a rough sound. "No, he did. And it's such a high when you win. What a win, it feels so good, and I thought whatever I win will be for Helen. I'll bring her on a proper vacation, and maybe get Jimmy a car for uni. And I will win more, but then I began to lose. I should have stopped then. Instead, you

the bank, your luck will change, and it only takes one good win and you'll be I'm no again."

Alec rose and walked to the sideboard with the tray of bottles and . He poured a splash of sherry into three glasses and carried one to Ba e thinksthen handed another to James and kept the third for himself. "I w would have just told me," he said. "I would have helped you."

ere." "I know. I was too ashamed."

was job Silence stretched and the only sound was the fire crackling. "Wl you tell Helen when you get home?" Alec asked.

up with "The truth." James shrugged. "I need to tell them, and then I myself in. I don't want to hide anymore. I don't want to live li s voice anymore. I know I owe you a great deal of money, but I will do my ie kids. pay you back, even if it takes me the rest of my life."

out." Alec studied the man who had been at his side every day for t twelve years. "You need therapy not prison."

You're "I embezzled funds. Not just from you, but others. It's a crime and be held accountable."

at the "My father loved you like a son."

behalf. James looked away, a sheen in his eyes. "I'm glad he's not a here on witness this."

"So, the money isn't all gone?"

"More than half of it is."

u know "You need to pay back the clients first, and then my aunts and i won't ask you to pay me back. I doubt that you can, and I don't want 7 fatherspend the rest of your life struggling with that burden. Instead, I want x yearsget help, proper help. You can decide how much or how little you tel about the missing funds. But she must know you need professional l

l. And Iyour demons will eat you alive, and that's not fair for her, or your child

I had a "I didn't come here to be exonerated, Alec. You should press c d I wasAlec. Make a lesson out of me so others don't think—"

"That's not who I am. And I can't forget how much you meant father. I will not inflict on you or your family more pain. I want to ke ien youbetween us, and not let any of this become public. There's no reaso l'd takeyour family through that kind of media circus. I like Helen and your ki on onceI don't want them to suffer or be ashamed. I don't want them ashamed u thinkeither."

on top James put his sherry down, untouched. "I have to tell them."

"Then that's up to you. But think about your family, James, put your glasses first, not last."

A light step sounded in the hall and Cara was there, on the threshold between the music room and green room. "Happy Christmas, James," she said, entering the drawing room and approaching the men.

She stood next to Alec, her hands clasped in front of her. "Mrs. Jekyll has been keeping dinner warm, but she can't keep warming it all night long. I looked at James and smiled. "Stay for dinner, James. And before you go, my sister has already added a place for you at the table. It's Christmas, James. You shouldn't be alone."

James rose and dipped his head. "Thank you for the invitation, but I must be heading home tonight. I'll have something to eat when I get there."

"I'm sure that won't be for hours," Cara protested. "At least have a bite with us. You'll feel better driving."

Alec's dark head inclined. "Cara is right. Join us, in the true spirit of Christmas. You don't have to stay for all the courses. Have some soup and take off when you're ready."

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CHAPTER NINE

BAIRD DIDN'T THINK he'd had a less enjoyable Christmas Eve in ye was angry, so angry he knew he didn't belong here.

James Phelps should not have been invited to stay for dinner. Phelps didn't deserve such compassion. Baird couldn't imagine how he forgave him and brought him into his home on Christmas Eve.

The world was filled with problems, problems humans created and inflicted on each other—and the planet, from the earth to the animals and the seas filled with poisons and plastic. Humans needed to take responsibility and do better, and while Baird was glad James had come to Langley and confessed what he'd done, that didn't mean the crime hadn't been committed and James should still be held accountable.

Baird wasn't good at forgiving, and he was even worse at forgetting.

He had faith, but it wasn't the kind that rewarded those who stole and hurt, who committed crimes. A criminal needed to be punished, and that was the case, serve time. Just apologizing wasn't good enough. An apology couldn't make everything right.

Sitting at the table with Alec's family and interloper James, Baird was in a rage. He couldn't even look in James's direction. He could barely sit around the table, too afraid the others would see just how upset he was.

It was a relief when James rose and said he had to be on the road, his family was home expecting him.

Alec walked James out, and Ella cleared the dinner dishes from the table. Baird brought in the platters and serving bowls.

"You're upset," Ella said to him as he placed the bowls and platters on the counter.

"Seething might be a more accurate word," he said tightly, running his hand over his face and jaw. "I wanted to reach across the table and shake him all dinner. I wanted to make him suffer."

Ella began scraping a plate into the trash bin. "But you didn't."

"Out of respect for Cara."

“Which was very considerate of you.” Ella scraped another, placing it in a stack in the sink.

“I can’t believe Alec is just going to let Phelps off the hook. It’s wrong to believe in showing compassion for those in need, but Phelps was the vice president of Langley Investments, his salary in the hundreds of thousands of pounds each year. He has great benefits, a loving family, and more to the point, has been saved from ruin once before by Alec’s help. And despite all of that, he still embezzled money from his Langley company and the Sherbourne family? Unforgivable.”

Ella rinsed her hands and turned to Baird. “You’re surprised that he handled it this way?”

“Stunned.” Baird shook his head. “Alec wouldn’t have been this way a year ago. He would have taken legal measures against Phelps, he would have exposed him, he would have pressed charges. But marrying Cara has changed Alec. Love has made him soft—”

Ella’s eyes widened. “How dare you! What an awful thing to say to anyone, much less your best friend.” She looked at Baird, appalled. “You’ve forgotten, it’s Alec’s firm. He is entitled to make the decision that he thinks best, and I don’t think his decisions are because he’s married. You should be ashamed of yourself,” she said and walked past him to return to the dining room.

Baird growled in frustration in the empty kitchen. He put some leftovers into containers for the refrigerator, not yet wanting to join everyone in the dining room. He was still tidying the kitchen when Alec entered the kitchen.

“It’s been an interesting evening,” Alec said.

Baird could see the fatigue in Alec’s expression. Tonight clearly hadn’t been easy for him, either.

“You can’t just let him walk free,” Baird said quietly.

“It’s what my father would have wanted.”

“Alec, if you hadn’t caught on last week, he would have kept stealing. He didn’t stop because he felt guilty. He only stopped because you found him and instead of coming clean then, he went into hiding.”

“If I press charges, it all becomes public knowledge. I’m trying to protect my clients and the company.”

“And who protects you, Alec?”

ing them Alec smiled wearily at his childhood friend. “You do, Baird.” He took a deep breath and straightened, squaring his shoulders. “Is it too late to change the pudding?”

the senior Baird and Alec retrieved the tray of bowls from the big refrigerator and carried the bowls of Eton mess to the dining table.

ily, and Everyone exclaimed over the scarlet berries, whipping cream, and father.meringue confection, and with the tiny mint leaf and sugared cranberry clients?top of each—the garnishes courtesy Mrs. Johnson—it was a most festive and delicious Christmas pudding.

at Alec After dinner, the first part of the evening was spent in the green conservatory room playing cards, and then when Cara couldn’t stop yawning, Alessandra went upstairs and stayed with her there. Ella, Frederick, and the aunts could have to watch a Christmas movie in the library. Uncle Frederick fell asleep and changed away, snoring softly in his armchair, only waking when the movie ended.

Ella was aware that Baird had disappeared when Alec and Cara left, but she hadn’t expected him to return for the movie. He never did.

In case Now at ten, the candles were being blown out and the house lights were going off. The aunts were upstairs. Frederick was in his bed. Ella went to her room and had mudroom to get her jacket and discovered Baird was already there, sitting on the sofa, the dogs ready for one last walk.

Baird looked at her and she looked at him, not knowing what to say. She was still upset at him, still in disbelief that he’d say such a thing—not to her, but to anyone.

red the “Will an apology help?” Baird asked her stiffly, not looking or sounding in the least remorseful.

“Do you dislike Cara so much?” Ella asked grimly.

hadn’t “This isn’t about Cara. It’s about relationships and marriage. If you don’t yet know, I’m quite cynical about relationships and do my best to avoid attending weddings—I find them farcical.”

“Oh, come on!”

ing. He “Forty percent of marriages in the UK end in divorce. Even high divorce rates, second marriages.”

“But you were Alec’s best man.”

protect Baird made a rough sound. “Because he’s my best friend. I might be a cynical bastard, but he’s like a brother to me, and I’ll always be there for him in good times and bad.”

drew a “Marriage being bad for him.”
me for Baird opened the mudroom door. “Are you coming?”
tor and She yanked her coat on. “Only because I need to end up at the cott
hair.” His lips compressed. “And I wondered if your temper matched y
n, and “And now you know,” she flashed.
erry on The dogs bounded out into the night and Ella shut the door behi
ive and “What is it like going through life so cynical?”
drawing “Good. I generally win. In and out of the courtroom.”
ec took “Lucky you.”
decidedmy clients, and I fight for my friends.”
p right “Does that include Cara?”
ended. “Of course. But in the beginning, I was skeptical about how quick
it she’dfell in love with her. Everything happened very quickly between
They’d known each other only a few weeks before Alec proposed.”
; turned “And Cara was an American, and not from a similar background.”
to the Baird shrugged. “I did wonder if she was a gold digger.”
getting Ella didn’t like that description at all. “When did you realize she w
ay. She mattered. Alec was smitten. He wasn’t going to lose her. All I had to
t just todraw up the prenuptial agreement—”
ounding “He made her sign a prenup?” Ella interrupted horrified.
“Cara didn’t mind. She understood that Langley Park and the
Sherbourne estates had to remain in the family—”
u don’t “And you put together the prenup? This was your doing?”
o avoidto protect the family.”
“Cara was becoming his family!”
He shook his head, exasperated. “I should have never mention
her forthought you were reasonable, and you’d understand the legal ramifi
for both of them, and how they both needed to be protected, which is
prenuptial agreement does.”
ht be a “And yet you’ve already said you are Alec’s friend and you’re l
or him,him.”
“I brought in an attorney to meet with Cara and explain everything

There was no intimidation, no coercion. You are the one making it sordid.”

age.” “Because it is sordid! A prenup assumes that the marriage won’t v
our redmigh as well be a curse.”

“That is dramatic and inaccurate. A prenup protects everyone, in
future children. No one wants a family torn apart, much less dragged t
nd her.court.”

“I suppose a lawyer would look at it that way.” She shook her h
aggravated she couldn’t think straight. “I can’t do this, not tonight,
Christmas Eve. I’m going to go to bed and hopefully in the morning t
ight for all just a bad dream.”

“I’m not the villain, Ella.”

“Maybe not, but you’re certainly not the hero, Baird.”

ly Alec

1 them.



BAIRD WAS STILL awake in his cottage bedroom when he received a lat
call from his dad in Melbourne saying Aunt Kate, his dad’s sister, was
asn’t?” a hard time and was there any way Baird could pop in and see her?
t’t havespend Christmas Day with her?

do was The last thing Baird wanted to do at eleven was begin a five hou
but he had a soft spot for his Aunt Kate, a recent widow, whose onl
moved to America fifteen years ago.

various “I’ll be there tomorrow,” Baird told his father. “Don’t say anyt
her,” he added. “I’ll surprise her in the morning.”

After hanging up, Baird quickly dressed and packed his travel t
o it. It’s glanced around his now empty room, making sure he had everything
descending the stairs and heading outside to start the drive home.

He hadn’t planned on leaving in the night, but once he was
ed it. Ifreeway, which was virtually empty at midnight, he rolled his window
ications and drove fast, letting the cold air clear his head.

what a This was the right thing to do, go home. Extract himself from I
Park. And Ella. He didn’t want to battle her, and he didn’t agree with h
oyal to no matter how mad she got at him, it wasn’t going to change him, or h
of view.

g to her.

t sound



work. It ELLA WOKE UP and stretched, sleepy but rested. Had she finally kicked j

Lying in her warm bed, she listened, aware of the stillness. cluding Christmas. Christmas morning. She listened again, wondering if may through could hear Baird singing, wanting to hear his lovely voice again,

another haunting hymn, but the cottage was quiet, and then she reme read, so how she'd gone to bed mad at Baird and guilt filled her. She'd been not on harsh, but he'd been impossible. Who could hate marriage that much?

his was Did he owe her an apology, or did she owe him one? It was confus also disappointing. She didn't like fighting with him and last night quarreled twice. With someone else she wouldn't have even bother would have bit her tongue and continued on, but Baird wasn't just and she couldn't believe he'd be so negative ... so pessimistic.

How to reconcile someone who sang like an angel with a ma couldn't yield or bend?

te-night She closed her eyes, refusing to even think about the prenup. Tl having made her see red, but it was Christmas, and a new day. Forgiveness Maybe important, and so was compassion. Maybe she could forgive Baird fo difficult and unreasonable. She smiled faintly, knowing he thought it r drive, other way around, that she was emotional and unreasonable. She v ly child problem.

They were a pair, weren't they? Ella smiled a little bigger. hing to apologize when she saw him. She'd do her best to keep her million o to herself.

bag. He Ella bundled up in a big sweater and peeked downstairs. It was cc ; before everything was dark. The little tree hadn't been plugged in. There v candles lit and the fire in the hearth had burned out. The kitchen was on the dark, and no coffee brewing.

v down Ella glanced to the front door. Baird's coat was not hanging the coffee cup he'd used the past several days wasn't on the counter or Langley sink. There were no papers or books anywhere. Downstairs was spotle

er, and Worried, she went back upstairs, walking down the hall to Baird's is point and lightly rapped on the door. There was no answer. She opened tl and peeked in. His bed had not been slept in. Or if he'd slept in it, he'

it up and removed all of his things. There was no sign of him anymore, no clothes, no suitcase, nothing on the nightstand, nothing anywhere. What had happened? Gone.

It was Ella who went to his window and looked out, her gaze going to the horizon. Maybe she'd see the gravel driveway curious if she could see Baird's car, but a tree blocked part of the driveway, and then the old stablemaster's house which had been used as an office for the Christmas tours, with the second floor becoming a little Johnson's home.

He wasn't here anymore. Ella didn't know how she knew, but she knew. He'd left, just as he had last August, the morning after the wedding. Instead of attending the wedding, he'd instead of saying goodbye, he woke up early and returned to the airport. And now he was gone again. One more abrupt departure that she saw coming, least of all her.

Ella took a quick breath, her chest tight, pins and needles in her midsection. It hurt, the way he just left, but this was who he was, and she'd seen those colors—twice. She should be relieved he'd left.

She was relieved, she silently insisted. And she wasn't going to cry. Not now. Not here. Not in front of anyone. Not while he was still here.



CHRISTMAS MORNING AT the house was nice—mature and a little civilized. She'd seen the house before. No small children tearing packages open. No stockings overflowing. No crumbs and half eaten cinnamon rolls left on holiday.

Cara smiled at Ella from across the drawing room, and Ella smiled back. It was her fake brave smile, the big bright one when she didn't want to know how she felt on the inside. It was a smile she used sometimes when teaching. It was a smile she wore when listening to her advisor defend her dissertation telling her it wasn't strong enough, she wasn't digging deep enough.

She had that smile on her face today because she wasn't miserable. She wasn't tortured. She wasn't in a bad place. But she did feel a little sad. A little regretful.

"We are down to our last gift," Alec said, picking up a white box and checking the gold stars and checking the nametag. "Ella, it's for you."

ore. No Ella rose and took the gift from Alec and sat down again. She He was recognize the handwriting. It wasn't Alec's handwriting, and it wasn't

It wasn't the aunts or uncle, either as she had already opened small gift use and them.

locked Tearing the wrapping paper away from the box, she saw it was becomesilver clothing box. She carefully lifted the lid off and pulled the tissue Mrs.back revealing a folded pink cardigan, the edges finished in a dark crochet trim. It was a very delicate little trim. It also happened to sweater she had seen two days ago in Bakewell when shopping with Baird e'd left a sweater for Dorothy.

brunch, Lifting the cardigan from the box she gave it a little shake, admiring Seattlethe fabric buttons were the same pink as the jacket.

no one "What a pretty sweater," Cara said from her seat on the couch. "Where from?"

iddle. It "Baird," Ella said softly, carefully folding the sweater and placing his truein the box.

A knot filled her throat, and she smoothed the sweater, stunned. 7. hadn't expected anything from him, never mind the lovely hand-knit sweater she'd admired in a Bakewell shop he hadn't even gone into with her. How had he known? How had he managed it?

Cara looked at Alec. "What did Baird give you, honey?"

lull but "Nothing," Alec answered. "What did he give you, darling?"

ockings Ella flushed, knowing exactly what they were doing. "I don't know plates. he gave the sweater to me. I didn't give him anything."

d back. "What a beautiful cardigan, and in your favorite color," Dorothy said

anyone "Oh, you should put it on," Emma said.

is when But Ella looked at Dorothy. "How do you know I love pink?"

roy her Dorothy smiled kindly at her. "It's what you wear whenever you're happy."

le. She
l, and a



CHRISTMAS DINNER WAS served midafternoon right after the Royal Christmas Message, which they all watched on the library television. Uncle Frank looked a little emotional at the end, acknowledging that he missed the

She didn'tHer Royal Majesty had served them well for so many years, and Cara's forever grateful to her.

As Mrs. Johnson had watched the message on the kitchen TV and, as it was over, began to serve dinner as she knew everyone was moving to a dining room. The turkey was perfect, as were the roast potatoes, cranberries, the winter squash and other sides. Everyone was in good luck and there was a great deal of discussion about how well the King looked. He was a good speech he gave, yet how could they forget the late Queen. In the middle of the meal, Mrs. Johnson appeared with the Christmas pudding in brandy, and carried the burning cake into the dining room to everyone's admiration.

Aunt Emma insisted on slicing the cake, and then Dorothy poured a generous serving of brandy cream over each slice before it was served.

It was Ella's first Christmas pudding and it was good, but very rich. She was glad that Mrs. Johnson's recipe—which was an upgraded version of the old Sherbourne family recipe—had no nuts, and not an excessive amount of candied peel which neither Cara nor Ella was fond of. But otherwise, how pudding was traditional and decadent, with spices and dried fruit and a lovely brandy cream, which made Ella think of Dickens and Victorian Christmas traditions, originating from Queen Victoria's marriage to her beloved German husband, Albert.

The family scattered after the dinner, some to nap, some to watch television, and in Alec's case, to read by the fire in the green drawing room. He liked the drawing room in the afternoon, the winter sun creating good reading conditions, but he could also keep an eye on Cara who was reclining on the couch, talking to Ella.

"You've been so quiet today," Cara said. "Is this about Baird leaving?" Ella's chest ached. She didn't want to think about him, and yet he was on her mind all day. "I hate that he leaves and doesn't say goodbye."

"He sent a text, explaining that his aunt needed him."

"You believe him?"

"Yes." Cara frowned. "Why wouldn't you believe him?"

Ella glanced away, looking at the Christmas tree and then the Queen's portrait hanging on red ribbon in each of the tall drawing room windows. "I don't know what to say." "Some words."

he was Cara pushed up into a sitting position. “Why?”

“He said the most outrageous things, ridiculous things, and he m soon asmad.”

g to the “That’s not necessarily hard to do. You are a bit of a hot head.”

es and “Not really.”

l spirits Cara gave her a look, and Ella sighed and scooted lower in her ch ed, andvoice dropping as she definitely didn’t want Alec to overhear. “He ? At themarriage made Alec soft,” Ella said, nearly spitting the words out. “A dousedsupposed to be Alec’s best friend.”

lots of Cara didn’t seem bothered. “They’ve known each other since the boys. He’s entitled to think what he wants ... that is the best i ured aprerogative, wouldn’t you agree?”

passed “He hates marriage.”

ch. Shemarriage is the answer to everything.”

1 of the Ella was just getting more upset. “He’s so cynical.”

ount of “He is,” Cara agreed. She hesitated a moment, picking her wor ise, thecare. “Why does that bother you so much?”

nd that Ella sat forward, closing the distance between her and Cara. “ ictorianreally make you sign a prenup?”

to her Cara blinked, surprised. “Is that why you’re so upset?”

“One of the reasons.” Ella felt terribly close to tears. “So, he c watchmade you.”

g room. “No, Ella, no.” Cara put her hand on Ella’s knee. “No one made g idealanything. I chose to sign the agreement to protect Alec and the Sher as halflegacy. If our marriage ended, I would never want to take any of his property. Alec didn’t buy Langley Park. It’s been in the family for hu ng?” of years. It must stay in the family.”

’d been “So, if your marriage ended, Alec keeps everything, and you wal with nothing?”

Ella’s voice must have risen because suddenly Alec’s head lifted glanced over at them, brow creasing.

Cara lowered her voice. “This isn’t the best time or place to discu wreathElla, but I have been well provided for. I would not be a poor wo We hadwouldn’t be on the streets. And in light of the fact that I am pregn. children would always be shared by us. I did agree to raise them he

then once they reach the age to attend university, they could choose for themselves if they wanted to go to college here, or study in the States. Cara's gaze searched Ella's. "I'm disappointed in Baird for sharing with you that we signed a prenuptial, but I'm even more disappointed that you made this a point of contention between the two of you. It's really not fair, her business but Alec's and mine."

Ella thinks
and he's



By the time Christmas Day had come to a close and Ella was about to return to her friend's cottage with her little pile of Christmas gifts when Alec said he was going to walk the dogs. Did Ella want to join him?

She hesitated and then said yes, provided they could pass the cottages. She believed she could leave her gifts there and collect her cap and gloves.

The dogs were elated to be out walking with Alec, dashing ahead and then returning. Lady didn't dash much, but she kept close to Alec's heels, looking up at him with adoring eyes.

At the cottage, Alec waited outside while Ella went in, turning on the lights. It was already dark, leaving the gifts on the dining table and going up to her room for warmer things. Coming back down the stairs, she glanced around the dimly lit living area and the dark kitchen. The heat was welcome. She had been cold all day. She missed the fire Baird had kept going, the warm glow of the light, the comforting crackling sound. She missed seeing Baird's coat hanging on the doorknob by the door.

She missed Baird in a chair by the fire, his long legs stretched in front of him as he poured over documents from work.

She missed him, and it was that simple and that complicated. Was it her fault he'd gone? Had she been too harsh?

Her chest felt painfully tender as she snapped her coat up and tucked her hands into her mittens. She missed Baird and this missing was different than the one she had felt last August. This missing wasn't about heat or passion. It wasn't from a lack of a kiss but the abrupt loss of his company. They'd grown closer during the last five days and their day spent Christmas shopping and visiting the cottage. A Chesterfield had been special. Dinner had almost felt like a date. She had missed him, the feelings for him. So problematic, she admitted, stepping outside and looking at the snow, and

ose for the cottage door behind her.

States.” She didn’t even realize she’d sighed until Alec asked her if she was

with you Ella looked up at him and managed a faint smile. “Yes. Why?”

ou have “You’ve been on the quiet side all day,” he said as they started walking in the direction of the village.

“Maybe today just seems anticlimactic after dinner last night,” she glanced at him. “If I was shocked by the appearance of Mr. Phelps, I can imagine how you felt.”

Alec didn’t immediately respond. They walked through a cluster of ancient trees, branches bare, and yet beautifully sculptural in the moonlight. “So, you know who he is, and what’s happened,” Alec said eventually.

“Baird told me, and then when your relatives arrived, there was a long discussion. Cara didn’t know what had happened, not until you came along. Baird made sure of that.”

“He’s a good friend,” Alec said simply.

They walked in silence, passing cottages glowing with light, all parked out front. Some even had some Christmas decorations. But even a few of the cottages on this side of the manor had been booked for the holidays.

“Do you want to ask me anything about the prenuptial agreement?” she asked, as they neared the edge of his property. If they crossed the street, it would have been just a few minutes’ walk from downtown Bakewell.

Ella flushed, uncomfortable and embarrassed. “Not really.”

“I don’t mind if you do. It’s probably a shock for you. I’ve been married for seventy-five years, every Sherbourne marriage has required the agreement protecting the house and land, as well as other legacy properties. If the marriage fails, both parties will receive assets—the nonfamily partner receives a sizable cash settlement, and the Sherbourne with the estate.”

“My children will have the same agreements when they are missing. But I can assure you, Ella, that I love your sister with all my heart, and I can imagine my future without her. You do not have to worry for her.”

Ella’s eyes had filled with tears as he spoke, his voice so low and steady, and it moved her, making her feel so many things at so many different times. Cara was lucky to have him. Ella wished she hadn’t been quite so hard on Baird. She wished she and Baird were better at communicating.

She reached up, brushing away tears with the tips of her gloves.

said one other thing.” Her voice cracked. “He said marriage had ma
s okay. soft.” She wiped away another tear. “I was so mad at him for sayin
You aren’t weak. You are strong, you are kind, and you are the best h
lking inin the world.”

Alec suddenly brought Ella in for a swift hug. “You shouldn’t
t.” She beastly friend get under your skin. He’s tough, but he’s very loyal, no
I can’t me, but to Cara, too.” He released Ella but kept a hand on her arm. ‘
imagine any friend more protective.”

ister of “He hates marriage.”

light. Alec smiled, amused. “That’s because he’s never been in love
ally. whistled for Milo and Albert who’d nearly run beyond the estate gate
is more immediately returned, racing at full speed.

e home, “What about Fiona?” Ella said.

“He loved Fiona, but he wasn’t in love with her. They were
compatible couple, but there was no passion, no excitement, no frict
ith carsemotional or intellectual challenge. It was easy between them, and the
ery onehappy until Fiona asked for more and Baird refused.”

ays. “Fiona must have been heartbroken.”

?” Alec “I think she was fine with it. The relationship had run its cou
, they’d served its purpose.”

“And what purpose was that?”

“Companionship without risk. It was easy. There was no need to g
1 raisedchange.” His lips curved, crookedly. “Love—real love—requires grov
the lastchange. It also means you fight for that person. You fight for the relati
ement, You don’t just open the door and wave goodbye.”

If the “Baird will never fight for love. It’s not *logical*.”

member Alec laughed. “The first thing to know about Baird is that he isn’t
es.” Helogical. He just likes to think he is.”

r marry. She kicked at a branch on the road and then kicked it again. “I hat
l I can’t fell for him at your wedding. I don’t even know why I fell for hir
really annoying. So frustrating.”

earnest, Alec checked his smile. “That bad, hmm?”

: levels. Ella suddenly realized she was spilling her heart to Baird’s best
sh with “You won’t tell him this, will you? It would only horrify him.”

“No, it wouldn’t. I suspect he feels the same.”

“Baird “No offense, Alec. You’re a wonderful brother-in-law, but in this

ide youthink you're wrong. Baird thinks it's just ... chemistry ... and it's ...
ng that,going to let it be. But that's not enough for me. I either want his whole
usbandor I want nothing."

let my
t just to



"I can'tIF ALEC HAD thought his conversation with Ella would help, he was
Ella went to bed Christmas night nauseous, her stomach heavy and l
She felt heartsick. Just awful. While she didn't exactly cry, her eyes
." Alecdry and gritty. A painful lump filled her throat making it hard to swall
s. They She regretted talking to Alec. She regretted talking to Cara. She re
coming to England. She regretted falling for Baird.

She punched her pillow and then turned it over and punched it agai
a very What else could she regret?

ion, no Oh, that was easy.

ey were Earning a PhD when she could have earned a masters. Stay
Bellingham for college instead of going away and learning to b
independent sooner.

rse and And falling in love with the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen.

Tears seeped from beneath her lashes, and she pressed her face i
pillow to cover the sound of her crying. *Stop thinking, Ella. Sleep. Plea*

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think you're wrong. Baird thinks it's just ... chemistry ... and it's all he's going to let it be. But that's not enough for me. I either want his whole heart, or I want nothing."



IF ALEC HAD thought his conversation with Ella would help, he was wrong. Ella went to bed Christmas night nauseous, her stomach heavy and knotted. She felt heartsick. Just awful. While she didn't exactly cry, her eyes burned dry and gritty. A painful lump filled her throat making it hard to swallow.

She regretted talking to Alec. She regretted talking to Cara. She regretted coming to England. She regretted falling for Baird.

She punched her pillow and then turned it over and punched it again.

What else could she regret?

Oh, that was easy.

Earning a PhD when she could have earned a masters. Staying in Bellingham for college instead of going away and learning to be more independent sooner.

And falling in love with the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen.

Tears seeped from beneath her lashes, and she pressed her face into the pillow to cover the sound of her crying. *Stop thinking, Ella. Sleep. Please.*

CHAPTER TEN

BAIRD TOOK HIS Aunt Kate out for Christmas dinner. Reservation impossible at such a late date. But remembering his chef client with profile restaurant in Portobello, Baird texted him and apologetically asked if there was any way to get two in for Christmas dinner. His client, ever grateful that Baird actually saved his marriage, said yes, if they could be there at eight.

Aunt Kate was thrilled to be taken to such a lovely restaurant in the elegant seaside neighborhood. Portobello, established in the 1700s, was a town in its own right but was now officially a suburb of Edinburgh, five miles east of the city center. Portobello faced the Firth of Forth, marked by a lovely long sandy beach and beautiful old architecture. In the early 1900s, Portobello became a popular holiday destination with bathing machines and then later at the turn of the century, a bath house, but now was Edinburgh's posher neighborhoods.

As he and Aunt Kate walked along the promenade, the icy wind gusting, she periodically patted his arm, telling him how happy he had made her.

"When are you going to get married?" she asked as they turned right and began to retrace their steps to his car. "You are too lovely of a man to remain single forever. You're almost thirty-five. It's time, isn't it?"

"Marriage isn't for everyone, Aunt Kate," he said, smiling down at her. "If I was married, I might not have been free to spend Christmas with you. Perhaps keeping your only nephew single would be a benefit to you."

She wagged a gloved finger at him. "That is not an acceptable excuse. I am sure any lass you married would be happy to drop in with you for Christmas, too."

Baird suddenly pictured Ella and thought Ella wouldn't mind. But Fiona wouldn't have minded, either. Only he'd never been inclined to visit Fiona home or create holiday traditions with her. He'd never really thought about it until now.

How had he and Fiona celebrated Christmas? Who had they spent it with?

Did they go to her family, or did they usually just spend it to Frowning he tried to remember and then he realized why there were memories. She often worked Christmas. She tended to volunteer Christmas shifts so those with children could be home.

Fiona was a good woman, a loving woman, and a very knowledgeable surgeon. He couldn't find fault in her. He'd never felt their relationship was missing anything. And when she finally expressed what she wanted more, he'd loved her enough to realize that if she wanted to have children, then he needed to let her go. She deserved to be happy. After driving his aunt back to her home, Baird walked her to the door, made sure she was safely inside, promising her he'd return and join her for lunch tomorrow, before driving back to his place.

Once in his own home, in his most comfortable lounging around in a cozy sweater, and thick wool socks, Baird found it hard to unwind, though the presence of Fiona surprisingly intrusive.

He loved Fiona, he did. But in all fairness, he'd never surprised her with a Christmas gift. He'd bought a frivolous gift simply to make her happy.

He'd never stayed awake at night replaying conversations in his head, angry and resentful. Her words had never hurt him. Her words had never moved him, either. They'd been calm and steady. Settled and familiar. They'd been too busy for romance.

Whereas Ella... Ella made him want to try, even if it wasn't comfortable or natural. She made him want to surprise her if only to see her eyes widen and that smile of hers that always did something to his chest, making it tight, and acknowledging emotions he barely recognized.

Around her, he barely recognized himself. He wondered now what she thought of the sweater. Was it the right one? Would she like it? He hoped so. His only regret was that he hadn't been there this morning to see her eyes and smile.



ELLA WOKE UP to a nagging restless feeling. Boxing Day was a

gether?holiday, and everyone would be gathering in the drawing room or lit so fewspend more time together, but Ella felt trapped, and longed to takesomething ... go somewhere ... explore.

After lunch, she joined her sister who was planning to watch a skillful,movie in the library with the aunts while Uncle Frederick and Alec telt as ifAlec's study playing a game of chess. The movie, a romantic comed sed sheEngland, was filled with a cast of superstar actors, but it was too sw) marrycharming for Ella's mood.

py. The last thing she wanted to watch was a half dozen people fall oor andwhile she was trying to come to grips with how much she was missing her forAfter the movie ended, Aunt Emma and Dorothy went to put a t together since Mrs. Johnson had the day off, and Ella sat down next l pants,on the leather couch. "I'm going crazy," she said lowly.

thoughts "I can tell," Cara answered, putting her arm around Ella's should drawing her close. "What can I do? How can I help?"

"Would you hate me if I wanted to go away for a few days?"

tree, or Cara turned a little to look Ella in the face. "You want to leave?"

"I was thinking about our earlier conversation and your suggesti s head,maybe I should take the train to Bath, just for the day. What do you th d nevergo this week?"

ocused. "I think it's a great idea. You'd love to see the Jane Austen musei why don't you stay for a night or two? Take one of those city tou walking tour, because there is a lot to see."

al. Ella "I don't want to abandon you though, Cara."

mile of "You're not. I've got Alec here and I'd love for you to immerse y he within the world of Jane."

Ella nodded, feeling a weight lift from her shoulders. She was ex go explore Bath, and see all the places Jane wrote about in her books. ht size?back way before New Year's Eve," she said.

en there "Do you know where you'd stay?"

"I don't. I'll look online this evening. I'm not sure if Alec has a town he thinks I should stay in. I won't have a car so obviously walking everywhere."

"Bath is a very walkable city, and if you stayed in the City Center rationaleasily be able to see everything. You'd also have time to do some sh have tea at the museum or in the café at the Assembly Rooms—"

rary to “Or tea at both places.”

to do “Even better.” Cara smiled fondly at her sister. “I wish I could g
you.

holiday “Next time,” Ella assured her. “We’ll take the twins—”

were in “Or leave them with Alec and we’ll sneak away.”

y set in Alec entered the library just then. “What plans are you making th
eet and include me?”

Cara extended her arm to him, and he crossed the room and to
in lovehand.

Baird. “Ella wants to go to Bath tomorrow,” Cara explained. “I was lam
ea traycouldn’t go, and we’ve agreed next time we’ll make it a girls’ trip
to Caracouldn’t leave you.

“I wasn’t worried,” Alec said, lifting Cara’s hand to his mou
ers and pressing a kiss to her palm before sitting down on the arm of the
couch. “What advice have you given her?”

“I said she should talk to you.” Cara smiled at Alec, her exp
absolutely adoring. “You’d be able to advise her far better than me, al
on thatI do think she’d want to stay in Bath’s City Center, don’t you think?”

ink if I “Yes. You’ll also want the eight twenty train in the morning,” Al
turning to Ella. “That should get you the best connection and you’ll a
um, butBath around one. I’ll run you down the Bakewell station after breakfas

rs, or a “That would be wonderful,” Ella said. “I’m looking forward to this

“I’ll find you a hotel,” Alec added. “Some place convenient with
restaurant so you don’t have to go out at night if you don’t want to.”

yourself “Thank you,” Ella said warmly. She smiled from Alec to Cara
married a really good man, Cara. If I haven’t said it before, I approve.’

cited to Cara laughed. “I did, didn’t I?” And then she lifted her face for a k
“I’d beAlec obliged.



part of

I’ll beBAIRD SPENT THE afternoon at his aunt’s house, playing the longest g
Scrabble of his life. He was glad when Kate finally won so he could t
; you’dleave. But once back in his flat, he paced around, and then poured hi
opping,drink. But the whiskey didn’t do the trick.

He was restless. Aggravated. He was happy he'd made his aunt go without anything in his world felt settled or right.

Should he call Ella? Wish her a Happy Christmas?

Or should he wait and see if she would reach out to him?

Why had everything become so complicated?

He forced himself to sit in his leather armchair, legs on the ottoman, slowly sip his whiskey while he watched the fire. But the fire made him think of Ella, and he wondered if she was building a fire in the cottage heart today, or if it had burned out and she'd left it cold.

He wondered if she was plugging in the lights on the little tree.

He wondered if she was happy. He wasn't happy. One of them should be happy, and if he had to choose, it should be her.

Baird glared at the fire, the whiskey doing nothing to mellow him. He hated the leatherhated feeling feelings. He hated them more than anything. This was why Fiona had been a good fit. He was calm with her. He was disciplined. He was no longer felt rational.

Baird was still glowering at the fire when his phone rang. It was Alec calling to ask about Baird's plans for New Year's. Was Baird going to Edinburgh, or was he planning on staying in Edinburgh?

"I'm not sure," Baird answered. "I haven't accomplished much this week. I should stay here and try to get caught up."

"If you're sure, then I won't try to talk you out of it," Alec said. "If you'd like to return before, Ella won't be here. She's taking the train in the morning and will be spending a few days there, returning for New Year's, so if you came now, you'd have the cottage all to yourself."

Baird set down his glass. "Who is she going with?"

"No one. She's traveling on her own. I've booked her a room in the Abbey. It's a nice place, and she'll be safe there. I put a call in to the concierge and the staff will be keeping an eye on her."

"What train is she taking?"

"The one that leaves just after eight arriving around one." Alec said. "You're not thinking of meeting her in Bath, are you?"

Baird frowned at the phone. What a question. No, he wasn't thinking of meeting Ella in Bath.

He hesitated, his frown deepening, his frustration ratcheting.

Or maybe he was.

happy, “Which hotel?” Baird asked, swearing he could feel Alex’s smile across the line.

Alec gave him the hotel’s name and address. “If you do go, and if getting along, could you drive her home for New Year’s? She’s not confident about taking the train and I’d prefer Cara not to worry too much and I’d prefer you to think after her.”

“This is why you called me,” Baird said. “You called knowing I would think after her.”

“I know you’re attracted to her. I’ve known since the wedding. I know what happened to you two at the wedding, but something did whatever it was—is—it’s still here. Maybe just face the facts—”

“Feelings are not facts.”

“Okay, fine. But Baird, she would be good for you. You need someone out. Helike Ella, someone that makes you feel alive.”

“I don’t.”

“You do. Baird, you’re in danger of becoming a crotchety old man.”

“Sounds like you’ve been talking to my Aunt Kate,” Baird said as he changed up on Alec.

He was not becoming a crotchety old man. And he wasn’t cynical. People just needed to leave him alone.

his past



“But if

to Bath NOT REALIZING HOW close the train station was to her hotel, Ella took a corner Newthen on arriving was glad because she’d overpacked even if it was a quick trip. She wasn’t a smart packer. She had a tendency to always pack a little more—one more blouse, one more pair of shoes—just in case.

After checking in, Ella headed out for a walk and late lunch then afterward she’d rest, not because she was down, but she wasn’t really tired. Perhaps she was just tired after a few nights of not sleeping. Perhaps reading might help, and some good chocolate. Chocolate and good food improved everything.

She smiled at the doorman as he opened the door to her hotel and she walked toward the front desk and then the elevators.

Wait. What? Was that ... Baird ... in the lobby reading a newspaper? Ella froze, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. It could

g smile him. Had to be a doppelganger. He was in Edinburgh, miles from Bath

She started walking toward him, not sure what she felt, but it felt like you're indifference.

not very much. He lowered his paper as she reached his side. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

could go It was Baird, all Baird. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I asked first," he said, folding his paper and rising. He kissed her forehead. "You look well, though."

id, and "I'm in shock. How... When..."

"Just arrived," he said. "And you?"

"A couple hours ago, on the train." She just kept looking at him, wondering how someone could believe he was really, truly here. "But what brought you to Bath?"

"I came to see it."

It was the most ridiculous answer and yet his lovely deep voice, and the gorgeous accent of his, filled her with warmth. "You have a very interesting relationship with Bath then?"

"Not at all. I have no relationship with Bath, but that doesn't mean I can't remediate that. It's never too late to become a Bath aficionado."

She smiled, her first real smile in days. Everything had been dark and cold, but suddenly it was as if the sun was peeking out. She'd missed him so much. "Well, I'm glad you decided to develop a relationship with Bath. It's exciting that you decided to do it while I'm here. Perhaps we can share a little bit of the city together." She looked at him hard, studying him in a way she just couldn't. "That is, if we're still friends."

She added a "If I can be friends with Bath, there's no reason I can't be friends with you." He held out his arm to her and she walked into the embrace. He winked and dipped, and he placed a kiss on her forehead. "You didn't like the cardigan? The cardigan was too old fashioned for you?"

g well. Ella wrapped her arm around his lean waist. Without all the bulk of books and sweaters, he was deliciously fit. Solid, hard, warm. And he smelled like heaven. "I love the pink cardigan. Pink is my favorite color. How could you pull that off?"

"I have my sources."

er? She laughed and held him tighter before reluctantly letting him go.

didn't be "It's actually not that complicated," he admitted, as she stepped back. She called the shop, asked about a pink cardigan, and they had one, just one.

l. thought I'd take a chance. I gave them my credit card and then I wasn't courier to run it up to the house."

"I should have texted you, thanked you."

g here?" "Or called." His expression was impossible to read. "I didn't because of you. I sent Alec a text. I thought he'd tell you—"

"He did."

r cheek. "My Aunt Kate needed someone to spend Christmas with, and so I did a midnight run to Edinburgh."

Which was exactly what Alec and Cara had told her, but Ella believed them. "I'm sorry for our argument on Christmas Eve."

able to "It's behind us," he said.

"Cara explained about the prenup to me. I understand it better now," he said. Ella looked up at him, her gaze locking with his. "It doesn't mean I like you, but I can understand it."

y close "A prenup is not romantic," he agreed.

"I'm not romantic," Ella protested.

I can't Baird grimaced. "I'm not going to touch that one now. I've only just arrived."

ark and "Probably smart," she agreed, glancing around the lobby and then at Baird who had no luggage with him. "Are you staying here? Do you have a room?"

explore "I am, and I'm all checked in. I've just been hanging out here waiting for you."

"You could have texted." She couldn't risk poking him a little more. "I called."

his head "Yes, we have access to modern technology."

ie pink She looked up at him, and she smiled into his eyes, and she saw the warmth in his gaze that it filled her with hope. Maybe...

y coats Maybe.

led like But she wouldn't let herself go there. It was too much too soon to let it happen. There could be a relationship. Baby steps were needed. First, a friendship, then trust, and then perhaps deeper feelings could develop that would help them find a way.

ack. "I know, so I



paid a BAIRD WAITED DOWNSTAIRS while Ella went to her room to put on warm comfortable boots and to collect a knit cap and gloves. She didn't wait long. She was back down in just a few minutes and, while she left to leave up, they discussed what they should do.

"What have you seen?" he asked.

Ella tugged her sage green knit cap on, pulling it down to her brows. "I made train station. The outside of the Abbey. The front of the Pump House. I go inside anywhere. I was just trying to get my bearings."

hadn't "What would you like to do first?"

"I was studying my map, and the Royal Crescent isn't far. It's a twenty-minute walk from here. What if we go there first, and then on to the river." She back we could stop at the Bath Assembly Rooms and the Jane Austen Museum, but it, but I Museum?"

It was good to see her, he thought. Really good to see her.

Baird had felt off the entire time he was home in Edinburgh, but he hadn't known why. But the heavy empty feeling was gone. He no longer felt lonely. It was amazing how just seeing her again lifted him, making the part and the sun shine, despite the cold front moving in. "A sound plan back to She grinned and drew on her gloves. "I don't believe I've asked if you have an Austen fan."

"In the spirit of full disclosure, I wouldn't say I'm a fan, but I'm familiar with her work. My mother and sisters watched all the Austen productions, and there were spirited conversations at home about Jane Austen. "Or versus Charlotte Bronte—"

"So, you know that Charlotte was not a fan of Jane Austen?"

"I do. My sister Allison, she's youngest of my three sisters, works in English at a secondary school in Melbourne."

"That's who your parents are visiting?"

He nodded. "She'd love talking to you about books, but she'd probably be a little intimidated. Allison has a diploma in education, and she's very bright, and on her masters, so she's more than qualified to teach, but she doesn't really help your education."

"You don't have to have a lot of degrees to be passionate about reading." She followed him to the hotel entrance.

One of the doormen rushed to open the front door for them. Ella thanked the doorman as they stepped outside.

er more “Who do you like to read?” she asked Baird.

ike him “I don’t do much pleasure reading. I read so much for work that
bundledisn’t my favorite way to relax.”

“If you were to read to relax, who would you read?”

“Plato or Aristotle. Maybe Thomas Aquinas. Francis Bacon.”

v. “The “Philosophers?”

I didn’t “Philosophy of law. I’m always intrigued by the relationship between
and morality. We lawyers are focused on how law applies to a particular
issue in a particular jurisdiction, but sometimes it’s necessary to step
back and remember the features of law shared across time, place, and culture.
Maybe
he way “No wonder you don’t enjoy reading anymore,” she teased.

Austen “I actually enjoy reading philosophy. I just don’t make time to
perhaps because I don’t have much free time.”

“Do you ever want more free time?”

and he That was an interesting question, and he didn’t immediately answer
year ago, I would have said no, but now ... maybe.”

clouds They had passed the Abbey and the crowded Roman Bath entrance.
.” Baird talked, Ella gestured for them to continue on Monmouth Place
you are needing to interrupt the conversation. But as they approached the
Theatre, Ella paused, touching Baird’s arm.

familiar “Oh, how could I have forgotten about the Royal Theatre?” Ella
BBCstepping back to look up at the façade. “It’s not the Theatre Royal, that
Austenwas built to replace that one, but both theaters were significant in
Austen’s life, and society. The theater was one of the few places where
women could socialize. It was also one of the few places the different
teachescould mix. Jane would have been able to mingle and observe the artists
at the theater—” She broke off and laughed self-consciously. “But, of
you know all of that. You’re British and this is your history. I’m sure
robablywere an excellent student, too.”

working “I held my own.”

it have “Just like in a fight?”

He smiled at her. “You *are* bloodthirsty.”

authors “I just like learning things about you. Tell me something I don’t
What was your favorite subject in school?”

smiled “I was very strong in math, but I liked history best.”

“Really?”

He nodded. "And science. Literature. I like literature."

reading "You've pretty much covered all the subjects."
"I did well in school."
"How well?"
He should be modest. He wasn't. "Very well. I was a King's Scholar."
"What is that?"

een law "It's one of fourteen awards granted each year at Eton. It's a significant award, covering all tuition and expenses, which is what allowed me to go back there. We didn't have that kind of money, and I didn't come from that family. No one in my family went to private schools, much less a school like Eton."

o read, Ella heard the way he said Eton, as if it was a foreign thing, an unfamiliar, painful thing, and she realized she knew nothing about Baird, his past, his work, his dreams. She'd always focused on that heat between them, the spark which defined so much of their interactions, but he was so much more than a ruggedly beautiful man. He had a life she knew nothing about and a future she'd never know.

without But no, she wouldn't think that. She couldn't. She had to leave Royalhope. "How did you win the award?"
"I took incredibly difficult tests. I'd never seen anything like it. I was nervous, I cried, I'd failed."

his one She put her arm around him, giving him a squeeze. "But you didn't?"
in Jane "I didn't," he agreed.
men and "And that's where you met Alec."
classes "And now you know the rest of the story."
tocracy But it wasn't the rest of the story. There was so much story, and she'd wanted to know it all. Absolutely everything. Bittersweet emotion poured through her. There never was enough time for everything, was there?
t know. "I do wish I'd planned my trip better." She glanced at the theater, wishing wistfully. "I would have loved to have come here to see a play, a backstage tour. But I wasn't thinking about Bath. I wasn't thinking about anything when I bought my ticket to come. All I did was work until it was time to fly out and then I packed some clothes and got on the plane. I regret not being more organized."

"It sounds as if someone else just works and works and works," Ella said, taking her hand as they began to walk again.

“Touché.”

“If you had more free time, what would you do?” he asked.

She thought about the question before answering, liking how it felt in his hand. She felt warm, secure. “I’d travel. I’d read. I’d come see the babies and make sure the babies knew me. I’d want to be part of their lives, not a stranger. But it is going to be hard with so much distance between us.”

“Have you thought about looking for a teaching job in England?”

She hadn’t. Ever. “I can’t imagine a British university would want an American professor instructing students on British literature.”

He shrugged. “But your dissertation isn’t just on English authors.

You’re an expert on female authors of the eighteenth century, American as almost English. Cara has talked about your extensive research on Louisa May Alcott, and how you spent the summer before last at Harvard studying the manuscripts, that papers. You had access to her original works and letters.”

“I immersed myself in her world for months and I would have found it perfectly happy being left there at the Houghton Library, with regular access to visit The Orchard House in Concord.” She sighed, remembering her time with her favorite authors and books. It’s always been my happy place.”

“Even after all these years?”

“The more I study, the more I appreciate how influential these novelists were, and the changes they wrought on society. Their stories were so entertaining, but they reflected society, and the woman’s place within it. They also shared the inner world, and a woman’s hopes and dreams, and her intellectual capacity. Are there important female writers writing about Jane? Yes. But most of them were writing on spiritual matters, and other matters, or stories with morals, focused on human failings resulting in tragedy. You couldn’t escape human failings in Jane’s work, but she wrote stories that were hopeful, where love triumphs. Where happiness is essential. In the eighteenth century, women had such limited choices. They were not free to choose for themselves. They were utterly dependent on their fathers, their brothers, their guardians, and their future husbands—”

“Where have I heard that before? I could have sworn it was from an Austen movie, spoken by an Austen heroine.”

“Probably Fanny Price. Mansfield Park.” Ella stopped walking. “MP is maybe my favorite Austen novel—”

“MP?”

“Mansfield Park,” she clarified. “Obviously, I love them all, but she’s a fascinating heroine. A lot of Austen fans don’t like Fanny, but I love her. Shy, timid, raised in a horribly dysfunctional home, she’s sent to her aunt’s in Bath where she’s surrounded by people who do not love her, and cannot be verbally abuse her. And considering what a harsh upbringing she had, she’s still able to stand up to her uncle when he pressures her to accept his proposal. The fact that she can stand up to him, the fact that she does, is a testament to her growth and her inner strength. I find it remarkable that she can do that, and it’s yet another reason why I respect Austen so much. Her heroines aren’t perfect. They’re complex and nuanced and as the reader, you want them redeemed. You want them to find their place in the world, but I love Jane Austen as Alcott, as a wife and mother, as a woman who is loved and respected. Value Jane Austen as Alcott’s gift.”

Ella exhaled hard, her heart thumping, pulse racing, her emotions running wild. “Oh dear, I’ve done it again. I’m a little too passionate about my work.” She broke off, her face flushed. Baird smiled at her, his expression doing crazy things to her heart. “I do know very few people who are truly passionate about their work. I like that about you.”

“We should do what we feel strongly about. We should live with passion. *Gusto*—” She broke off to add, “Those are writer Ray Bradbury’s words, not mine. He always said a writer should write with zest and gusto. But believe people should live with zest and gusto. Life is short and precious. All well a gift and not to be wasted.”

“You live by your heart.”

“And you live by your head,” she said.

“I do.”

“So, I’m an oddity, all my zest and gusto.”

“No. It’s refreshing. I’m not sure how I’d feel about zest and gusto. They’re a bit firm, but when it comes to music and art, literature and science, then their zest and gusto the better.”

She laughed, her emotions bubbling up, filling her with light and joy. Impulsively she gave his hand a squeeze. “I’m glad you are here, Baird. I’m glad you took the time to meet me. I was happy enough being in Bath, but you have made it all so much better.”

Fanny,
but I do.



uncle's BAIRD LOOKED DOWN at Ella, her expression so alive, life and excitement radiating her. He'd never known anyone like her. Saying goodbye to her, she'd find it would be hard.

Henry's "I can call the theater later," he said, the vast gleaming Royal Circus now visible. "See if there are any backstage tours this week, and if any are available."

heroines She sucked in a breath, blue eyes huge. "You don't mind?"
do you want It was the expression he'd wanted to see on Christmas, and he felt not just in his chest, tender and tight all at the same time. "Of course not," he said. That gruffly. Especially not when she looked at him as if he were the greatest man alive, and he wished he could be that for her. He wished he was that stirred man.

But the years had changed Baird and his knowledge of the world had hardened him, making him callous, ruthless, selfish. Or so Fiona had convinced him. But not

Was it true?

Was he really that much of a heartless bastard?

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Was it true?

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT REALLY HAD been the most wonderful day. A tremendous day, Ella took drawing a deep breath, so appreciative of it all.

They'd walked miles and toured museums—sometimes very because Ella, who had to read everything, poured over each museum brochure. They had tea twice, just because Ella loved it so much, and after a late afternoon rest, they'd finally found a little place for dinner that hadn't been easy getting in somewhere and so they finally went to the one that could get them in soonest, which proved to be a mistake.

It wasn't the best food, and it was terrible service, the waiter forgot to take their order, and then forgetting to bring drinks, and then getting the order wrong, and then disappearing in the middle of their meal without bringing the condiments Baird had requested for his potato.

But instead of ruining the night, their awful experience just made them laugh and compare their most memorable dining experiences, meaning the bad ones.

From horrendous dining, they segued into religion and faith. Ella told Baird she had faith. She was raised Methodist. Baird was raised in the Church of Scotland. Neither of them attended church regularly, although Ella did go more than Baird. She shared that she'd gone to a service on Sunday and Baird said, "I didn't know that." She shared that she'd gone to a service on Sunday Christmas Eve morning.

"I didn't know that," he said.

"You were at the house making your Eton Mess."

"It was a bit of a mess," he admitted.

"It was delicious."

"And the service on Sunday? Was it good?"

"It was. I needed it. I'm sure it won't surprise you, but you have trouble with tangling me up in knots, and I needed some calm and perspective. I don't know if I got a lot of perspective, but I left calm."

"That's something."

"I agree."

The waiter finally materialized with the bill, even though he'd forgotten to bring the dessert. Baird pointed to the missing dessert on the bill and asked to have it removed. The waiter didn't even apologize but he did disappear and get it corrected.

"Maybe we should get a recommendation from the hotel concierge where we have dinner tomorrow night," Baird said.

Ella nodded emphatically. "That's a good idea."

"How about a drink at our hotel? They have a nice bar on the top floor." "Nice."

It was a short walk back to the hotel and then a quick ride in the elevator. As the gleaming elevator doors opened, she could see across the dimly lit lobby to the huge windows with an extraordinary view of Bath at night.

They found a low deep upholstered sofa near one of the windows sitting down. "What a view," Ella marveled, unable to look away from the St. Andrew's Abbey and the Roman Baths, illuminated by yellow light.

"The Pulteney Bridge," Baird added, gesturing to the covered walkway which had been inspired by Venice's Rialto Bridge. "I'll get drinks, what would you like?"

"What are you having?" she asked.

"Something I can sip."

Ella suddenly remembered how his mouth felt on hers, and it stirred an old longing. He had sipped her, tasted her, and she'd loved every minute of it. "I'll have the same."

He arched a dark eyebrow. "I'm having a whiskey. Get something I really want."

"I'm terrible at this. Order for me if you don't mind. Something you'd like."

His gold brown eyes met hers, held. "Challenge accepted."

"Wonderful. I've put myself in your hands."

If she hadn't been looking at him so closely, she would have missed the flare of heat in his eyes. But she had been looking and she saw the flicker of the desire reassured her. He wasn't indifferent to her. That spark between them, that powerful chemistry that drew them together in August, was still there. He might call it lust, but for her it was more. And maybe one day she could be more for him, too.

Baird returned to their table with a port for her and a whiskey for h

forgotten “No ice?” she asked, nodding to his drink as he sat down on the
d asked next to her.

appear to He sat close, sitting the way a lover would. She liked it. And him
much.

e about “No. A whiskey nightcap should be neat, especially on a cold night
“Does it taste different when it’s cold?”

“It’s not as bold and fiery. The ice reduces the heat, so it’s a cooler
floor.” controlled flavor.”

“And you like the heat?”

levator. Once again something sparked in his eyes. “Depends on the heat
y lit bar lifted his tumbler in a toast, his lips curving faintly, creases fanning
golden eyes, so much like the color of his whiskey. “But I don’t think
and sat big surprise.”

tunning Her heart thumped, and her pulse raced. Her hand shook as she lit
glass and sipped the port, pleased by the full, round sweet flavor and
bridgewarmed her all the way down.

” Baird She held his hand as they enjoyed their nightcap. They didn’t talk
just sat close, no words necessary. Baird went for a second round and
he returned, he stretched his arm around her shoulders, bringing her
his chest.

red the She wished time would just stop.

ite of it. If only time could freeze right now with her feeling so good and se
only there were more of these perfect moments in life.

ng you Eventually, they had to call it a night. Baird walked her to her room
both stood there, neither speaking, the air heavy.

ou think “Don’t look at me that way,” she whispered, drawing her key from
wallet.

“What way?”

“*That* way.” It was hard to breathe, her pulse drumming, her
sed the ridiculously weak. “It’s the way you looked at me in August, the way
ire, and looked at me earlier. It’s not going to work. Not this time. I know you
between You shouldn’t even bother.”

was still

day it’d



im.

HE SIMPLY SMILED. He also knew her now. "If that's the case, m
shouldn't bother you."

n. Very "But you know what you do to me. It's not fair."

t." "All day, I've wanted you. All night, I've wanted you. Even if
happens here, that doesn't change the fact that I want you."

"You want sex, and I want more."

r, more "That is the worst oversimplification I have ever heard. I don't wa
want *you*. And you say you want more, which I translate as you wa
from me, not just sex."

at." He "You have correctly interrupted everything."

g at his She was maddening and yet he couldn't get enough of her. "Our
that's aren't as different as you think. I want you. You want me. You want
know how to love."

fted her "Love me, or... Love pasta? Love whiskey? This is so frustrating
how I hate futility."

He laughed.

k. They She glared at him. "Do *not* laugh."

l, when "I just thought it was cute, the way you said you hate futility. M
against wonder if there are people who enjoy futility."

"Please stop being so frustrating."

"What am I doing now?" he asked, voice dropping, expression war

cure. If "You're talking to me. You're looking at me. You're making me q
everything, and I don't want to question anything. It's exhausting, a

n. They late."

"It is late, and I don't want you feeling so frustrated and co
om her There's no need for confusion. What we have here isn't going to go
and whether I come in your room or don't, tomorrow morning I w
want you as much as I do now. There's no getting you out of my syste
er legstoo late for that."

ay you "But if you come in. If we get ... closer ... I'll lose, not just my he
ou now. my self-esteem, and I can't have that. I can't do life, or love, your
can't just be squeezed into a corner of your life. I'd want so much m
need so much more. I'd need ... everything."



ly look HE SAID NOTHING, and she hurt on the inside, everything tender and raw. She wanted to launch herself at him and shake him or launch herself at him and kiss him until he broke and wanted her. Until he needed her. Closing the distance between them, Ella grabbed Baird by his coat lapels and stepped on her tiptoe to kiss him. The minute her lips touched his she felt a jolt of electricity. Heat flared, a lick of fire that brought everything fiercely to life. It was sex. This was what she had been waiting for, this was what she had wanted. It was love wanting.

His mouth felt achingly familiar, the pleasure just as intense as it had been in August. Kissing him was a relief. It took her out of her head and put her desire for him firmly in her body. She loved the pressure of his body, the firmness of his love. His mouth, the scent of his skin, the hunger in his kiss.

He felt like home, felt like everything she loved and needed. But now she was gone, and she'd found him, how was she just supposed to let him go? How was she supposed to forget his mouth, his taste, his kiss?

Ella ended the kiss and stepped back, crossing her arms tightly over her chest, trembling from head to toe. She shouldn't have done that, she should have thrown caution to the wind. Every touch, every kiss, only added to the potential heartbreak. "I hope you're satisfied."

"You don't sound satisfied," he answered.
"I shouldn't have kissed you. It was a mistake."
"Why do those words sound familiar?"
"I hoped that by kissing you I would get you out of my system."
"Did it work?"
"No. It just makes me more frustrated with you."
"We can't have that," he answered reaching out to bring her close to him, his arms wrapping around her, holding her firmly to his chest. "A frustrated Ella is very unhappy Ella."

She wanted to cry. There was no reason to cry. Nothing had changed, but the world was exactly the same. "It's your fault. You are not supposed to be so attractive, not to me, not anymore."

His head dipped, his lips brushed her temple, between the arch of her eyebrow and her hairline. "I find you equally maddening," he said, bringing her to another kiss across her cheekbone. "All Christmas I thought of you, every Christmas I wished I was with you. I wasn't thinking of you naked, I wasn't thinking about sex. I was thinking about you, and how much I

“You care for me, and how hard it will be when you leave.”
Ella closed her eyes as his lips traveled along the jaw and then under her jaw. She sighed. “So, you care for a little bit for me.”
“I do.”
“And you’ll miss me.”
“Very much.”
If that was supposed to make her feel better, it didn’t. She took a breath, and gently eased away, trying to control the wild beating of her heart.
“Will I see you in the morning?”
“Why wouldn’t you?”
“I don’t know. Sometimes you’re just gone when I wake up.”
His features tightened. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be here in morning that was she



BAIRD DIDN’T SLEEP right away. It bothered him that she’d think he wouldn’t leave her, as if he was someone who routinely abandoned people. Baird never abandoned people. He’d never abandoned anyone. It surprised him that he didn’t know that, or that she couldn’t tell he was solid, he was dependable, trustworthy. He made a point of sticking with the truth, lying destroyed trust. He learned early from his father, who was the most man Baird knew, that a promise had to be a promise kept. He didn’t want shame, or ridicule.

Baird switched to family law thinking he’d be able to help people, he’d be able to protect children and minimize trauma to families. It worked that way. Yes, there were cases where he could make a difference but most of the time, the dissolution of a marriage involved pain, anger, and grief.

All of this weighed on him, and stayed with him, still very much on his mind as he met Ella for breakfast in the hotel restaurant. He must have heard a sound as they were seated because Ella looked troubled. “That was a heavy sigh, even for you,” she said.

“Sorry. I’ve been thinking about work and the meetings waiting for me after the holidays.”

“Tell me about your work.”
“I missed

He allowed a small smile. “You know what I do.”

erneath “You handle divorce cases.”

“Amongst other things.”

“Who are your clients?”

“Usually, high-profile people with a lot to lose.”

“And they come to you?” she persisted.

a deep “Yes. They come to me to protect their interests, and I do.”

r heart. “Are they very wealthy then?”

“Most of them.”

Her brows pulled. “And this is lucrative for you?”

“It can be. I’m expensive, and some of these cases drag on for months.”

“If it is so lucrative, why do you hate it?”

So, she’d remembered what he’d said. He’d hoped that that conversation wouldn’t stick, but it did. Baird thought of giving a non-answer, something superficial and easy, but for some reason he didn’t have his guard as firmly in place as he should have. “Because there’s a joy in representing people at the lowest point in their lives. They’re vulnerable, they’re bitter, and they’re ready to inflict the most damage possible on anyone, regardless if it’s a spouse or child.”

ethical “How horrendous,” she said softly.

t bully, “It can be. Not all of the time, but there are cases I just want over. I never want to see again.”

le, that She was silent a moment. “How do you keep it from impacting you?”

hadn’t Baird was relieved to see the waiter approaching. “I’m not sure I have the authority to refer to Pemberley, but I can refer to the house in Derbyshire, which is a very nice house, and I think it would be a good change.”

ference,

ger, and



on his AFTER BREAKFAST, BAIRD arranged to have his car brought around to the hotel entrance. He’d asked the hotel concierge for some recommendations for a very nice house in Derbyshire and Baird thought a morning excursion to Dyrham Park, a stunning late seventeenth-century house surrounded by formal gardens and ancient parkland, would be a good change.

“It’s not Pemberley,” Baird said as he parked, referencing Chatsworth House which had been Jane Austen’s inspiration for Mr. Darcy’s home.

the hotel concierge assured me Dyrham Park is worth a visit.”

Ella knew Jane had visited Chatsworth in 1811 and stayed in Bath while writing *Pride and Prejudice*, and still hoped to see Chatsworth when she returned home. “Is Dyrham Park open today, or just the gardens?”

“It’s all open today and tickets won’t be a problem.”

Because it was early and still quite cold, they toured the house first and then went outside. A few people wandered around the formal gardens, but the day was relatively quiet. Ella was happy to have escaped the crowds. She stood at Baird’s side, content to just be silent. After the intense conversation of the night, Ella still felt unsettled this morning.

Months, if not years, ago. “I don’t know what you’ve been told about Fiona, but you are not like her,” Baird said after a few minutes, the morning sun casting long shadows and a pool of light through the woods. “In the beginning, I thought it was a problem, but I realize it’s a good thing. Fiona and I probably weren’t the best match, but she didn’t have the connection you and I have. I didn’t think it mattered because I didn’t think we needed more chemistry. We needed stronger feelings.” She hadn’t expected him to admit that. “If the feelings had been strong enough, would you still be together?”

“Probably.”

Another surprise. Ella processed this for a moment. “Would you have married her?”

“No.” His voice was firm. “I still don’t think marriage is right for everyone, and certainly not right for me.”

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t get married, you can’t get divorced.”

“Oh, Baird! How terribly simplistic.”

“But true.”

She looked at him, troubled. “I realize this is a huge leap, but I need to know the answer. And this isn’t about Fiona anymore. This isn’t about any other woman or a hypothetical situation. This is about me. You and me. You’re certain, even if one day you fell in love with me, you’d never marry me.” She reached out a hand to stop him, as if he was going to interrupt. “I realize that’s a jump ahead a few steps, but it’s something I need to know, before I kiss you or sleep with you, or anything else with you.”

“That is a jump forward.” He hesitated, seeming to struggle with the answer. “You can’t see a future with me without a wedding ring?”

“It’s not just a wedding ring. It’s my dream to have a family, a care
akewellchildren. I can have both, and I want both.”

before He nodded slowly. “I understand.”

They were at an impasse. She could feel it. He would not marry
didn’t want children. It wasn’t something he wanted or needed.

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ronger,for embezzlement. A lawyer from my firm just texted. It’s all over the

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“It’s not just a wedding ring. It’s my dream to have a family, a career, and children. I can have both, and I want both.”

He nodded slowly. “I understand.”

They were at an impasse. She could feel it. He would not marry her. He didn’t want children. It wasn’t something he wanted or needed.

Ella swallowed hard, flattened but also strangely relieved. She’d known that would be his answer, but she had to ask him, just in case. “I’m glad we talked,” she said huskily. “Thank you for being honest with me.”

Baird’s phone pinged with a text. He ignored it, but it pinged again almost immediately.

“It might be important,” she said, wanting a moment to gather her composure.

Baird drew his phone from his pocket and checked the messages. He exhaled hard.

“What is it?” Ella asked.

He glanced from the phone to her. “James Phelps has just been arrested for embezzlement. A lawyer from my firm just texted. It’s all over the news.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THEY RETURNED TO the hotel to pack their bags and head for Langle. They were silent for much of the drive to Bakewell, both concerned finding it easier not to speak.

As they neared the Peak District, Baird cleared his throat. “In light news, I’m going to stay at the house tonight. Alec needs to have representation in the event media shows up.”

She nodded. “That’s wise. I’m glad you’re there for him. He’s got you for a best friend.”

Baird shot her a swift glance, surprised. “I didn’t think you appreciated how I’ve handled things.”

“I didn’t love the prenup, but I understand better now. Does it mean it? No. Does it mean I’ll ever sign one? No. But you did what needed to be done.” She exhaled, hating the butterflies flitting in her middle. “The more we get to the house the more nervous I get.”

“It’s unsettling,” Baird agreed. “But we’ll feel better once we’re home. Has Cara reached out to you?”

Ella smoothed the woolen fabric of her trousers over one knee. “I haven’t heard from Alec.”

“Nothing.”

“Why do I feel like they’re trying to protect us from this?”

“Alec does like to handle things on his own, his way, but this is getting bigger before it fades away. But it will eventually fade away. News is always dependent on fresh stories. Fortunately for Alec, sooner or later something scandalous will happen somewhere and the attention shall shift.” She reached over and took her hand, holding it firmly in his. “Don’t be worried. Alec isn’t in trouble. He’s going to be fine. Everything will be fine. I promise.”

Ella nodded and held on to his hand tightly, grateful for his steady comfort.



ARRIVING AT LANGLEY Park, Baird drove straight to the house and parked in the mudroom. Entering the house, they saw Mrs. Johnson in the kitchen.

“You’ll find them in the library,” the cook said.

At Langley Park, Ella followed Baird through the house to the library, where it was empty. She found Alec and Cara. The aunts and Uncle Frederick returned home yesterday, both even though no one said it, Ella thought it had to be a bit of a relief that the older family members weren’t present now.

“You’re back early,” Cara said, as Baird greeted Alec and then turned over to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Bath was rather boring,” Ella teased, taking a chair close to her spot on the couch. “Especially in light of what might be happening. Have any rude paparazzi shown up? Any calls I can help handle?”

“There have been a few calls,” Cara said, smiling faintly, “but Mrs. Johnson is handling them. She doesn’t tolerate any nonsense.”

Mrs. Johnson entered with a tea tray then. “No, she doesn’t,” she said firmly. “I will not have my family pestered. Most of what’s online is click bait anyway.”

Ella and Cara exchanged amused glances.

“I see you’ve made some of my favorite egg and cress sandwiches.”

“No. I didn’t.” Baird said.

“There are a few steak sandwiches in the mix as well,” Mrs. Johnson said. “I didn’t know if you’d had time for lunch, so hopefully this will hold over to dinner.”

Ella hadn’t felt hungry earlier but was starving now. “Thank you so much. I’m glad to be back.” She looked at her sister and Alec. “I was worried about you two.”

Alec shook his head. “There’s no need to worry. There’s nothing to be done. The word is out and whatever will happen will happen.” He smiled, but it was strained. He looked tired but resolved. “We will get through this. We always do.”

They all sat at the table and



ELLA WAS AT the cottage, curled up next to the fire and looking at the fire when she saw a sweep of headlights and then the headlights went off, she heard voices and then the voices faded away. Whoever it was must have been to the house.

A few minutes later, another car parked and more voices before people too were gone.

Cars kept arriving, and finally, Ella threw on her pink sweater over her blouse and jeans, combed her hair, added a jacket and hurried up to the door to see what was going on.

A party was going on.

Ella stood in the doorway of the green drawing room, shocked to see her sister's friends.

"What is happening?" she asked, seeing Cara in an armchair with several men circled around her and Alec by the fireplace speaking with several men.

"These are neighbors," Baird said. "They've come to lend support."

The neighbors kept arriving, too, car after car, the doorbell ringing constantly. No sooner had the door closed than someone else was knocking and Baird was there to open the door, pointing Alec's neighbors and friends into the green drawing room where everyone was gathering.

Ella had no idea who arranged the gathering, but someone had organized it, because everyone came with something—food, drink, flowers.

They'd come to be there for Alec and Cara. They'd come to show support.

Ella could see from Alec's expression as he moved around the drawing room that he was touched, and overwhelmed, by the display of

friendship and solidarity. Perhaps Langley Investments would take a big hit being in the news, but Alec would make sure the company would not

worry. Alec wasn't egotistical. Alec never put business before friends or family. He valued relationships and this gathering at his house was proof that

the community valued him every bit as much.

The gathering touched Ella's heart. Cara had wanted a party to show goodwill with the neighbors, but she hadn't needed to worry. The gathering was there. Even better, Ella didn't hear one guest ask about Phelps's

embezzlement. There was no mention of Langley Investments or bankruptcy. But it didn't take the neighbors and friends long to see that Cara was

expecting and, again, no one mentioned it until Alec stood by Cara, with his hand on her shoulder, shared the news. The neighbors came

he treecelebrating the announcement as good neighbors and friends do.
and she Ella was still smiling as the guests departed. Everyone was gone
ve goneand after shoosing Alec and Cara off, sending them to bed, Ella went
collecting glasses and plates, crumpled napkins, tidying things so Mrs
e thousand Mrs. Johnson wouldn't have to tomorrow.

Ella was quite happy to be in the kitchen on her own. The plates ha
ver herscraped and were soaking in hot soapy water. The crystal had been rin
e housewas waiting to be washed next. She spread dishtowels all over the
counter and then began to wash, enjoying the ritual of washing, rinsi
setting on the towel to drain and dry.

l. Baird Baird entered the kitchen. He'd changed into sweatpants and a thic
"I've come to work," he said, pushing up his shirt sleeves.

women "There's nothing for you to do," she answered. "I've got this al
1. control."

"It meant a lot to Alec, seeing everyone show up here," Baird said
, almosta dish towel from a drawer and helping her anyway. "I think it was g
ocking,him to see how much he matters to people."

friends "I was thinking the same thing. He looked happy, didn't he?"

Baird nodded. "Cara looked happy as well."

ganized Ella picked up a dish towel and began buffing the crystal stemwa
, gifts."I hadn't expected the baby announcement tonight. But Cara can't h
ort. bump anymore."

e green "I think it was a good thing. It will just make the community eve
play ofprotective of them."

. hit for "Were you the one who suggested Alec share the news?"

recover. Baird reached for another dessert plate. "No. I would have co
ily. Heagainst it. But in the end, I think it was fine."

hat his "Why would you have recommended against it?"

"I don't like children being in the middle of things. I hate to se
) createexposed to social media. I hate it when adults make money off of the
oodwillexploitive."

, or the Ella paused and looked at him, really looked at him. "You're goir
usiness.a wonderful godfather to the twins."

ra was He looked embarrassed and said nothing. But once the dishes we
nd withand the counters had been wiped down and dish towels hung up to
heered, filled the kettle with water. "Will you have a cup with me?"

She nodded and pulled out a counter stool and sat down, watching by ten, Baird set out a teapot and two teacups. He opened one of Mrs. Jol around baking tins, filling a dessert plate with ginger cookies and shortbread. Booth the water boiled, he let it sit for a little bit before he poured the hot water over the loose tea leaves. While the tea steeped, he carried the sugar and cream to the counter, along with spoons and a tea strainer.

Once everything was ready, he brought the teapot and teacups to the marble counter and then sat down next to Ella.

They drank their tea and said not much of anything and then the cookies disappeared and their tea was almost gone, Baird moved his checkered shirt and looked at her. "I've already told Alec that I'm heading back to Edinburgh in the morning, so I'll be back home for New Year's Eve."

She should have expected it, should have been prepared, but she didn't. He was leaving again? "When tomorrow?"

"Probably early."

She said nothing. She dropped her head and fought a wave of emotion—sadness and disappointment and regret.

He put a hand out and covered her knee. "I don't live here, Ella. This is my home, and I've never spent this much time at Langley Park. I need you here. I need you dry."

"It will probably be quiet here, but it'll be good for everyone. You and Cara will be able to spend some quality time together, too."

Ella again nodded, and blinked, fighting to hold back the emotions that were sweeping through her. She would miss him. She didn't know when she'd see him again. She'd dreaded the goodbye, but it was coming sooner than she'd imagined.

"You have plans for New Year's," she said, trying to make her voice strong but she still didn't know where to focus, afraid that if she looked into his eyes, she'd lose her composure entirely.

"There are always plans for New Year's, but you're only here until the end of next week and then you're back to Washington and your work there. I've hesitated. "I hope we're parting on good terms. It was difficult last year and hard on both of us."

"Was it hard on you?" She glanced up into his face and his was as dry as hers.

"Very hard. You know I care about you."

hing as “Even then?”

hanson’s “Yes, Ella,” he said, taking her hand. “Even then. I’ve never left y
. Whenthought oh, great, this is a good thing. That’s not how I feel, and th
ter overhow it works.”

milk to She searched his eyes. “If I didn’t want a family, would you want r

“Ella, I want you now. But knowing how important having a fami
to theyou, I can’t in good conscience pursue a relationship with you. The
future for us.”

as the She loved the feel of his hand against hers, his skin so warm, h
up backslightly calloused. “Well, there is a future, but it sounds awfully
inburghbecause at some point we’d be fighting and saying goodbye.”

“Precisely.” His fingers curled around hers. “It’s hard enough
wasn’t, goodbye to you now. I can’t imagine how it’d feel in six months, or si
I don’t know that I could do it.”

“So, we cut the cord while we can.” Ella drew her hand from
intenseforced a smile, but her insides burned raw, as raw as if she’d
something sharp.

his isn’t “Do you have a better solution?”

to go.” “We go with it. We try it. We see how we feel.”

He sighed. “Where’s the logic in that?”

ou and “Love isn’t logical, but it’s real, and its important and it shoul
thrown away just because we might want different things in the futu
ons thatfuture isn’t here. The future you’re afraid of might never come.”

v when “And what future would that be?” he asked, getting off his stoc
o muchlean against a counter, arms folded across his chest.

“It’s just so ... obvious ... you’re operating from a place of fe
r voiceconfidence. If you were confident, Baird, you wouldn’t need to be a
ed intorelationships, or falling in love.”

“I’m not afraid of falling in love.”

il early “You’re afraid of being hurt, of being left, and so you end things
re.” Heothers can, because you expect to be hurt—”

summer “I’ve never been hurt,” he interrupted. “Fi never hurt me. We didr
that kind of relationship. It wasn’t dramatic. It certainly wasn’t l
m goldunpredictable. We were very close.”

“Then how could you possibly let her go?” Ella looked at him, exp
fierce. “Either you didn’t love her deeply, or you were afraid to risk

her more, and so rather than marry and truly commit, you let her go.”
you and He growled impatiently. “In case you’ve forgotten, you’re earning
at’s not in eighteenth-century literature, not psychology. I’ve never been crush
relationship, nor have I had my heart broken. I’m glad you find
ne?” fascinating, but your theories aren’t based in reality.”

ily is to “In that case, I feel better. I’m glad you weren’t hurt, because it s
re’s no feels awful. And I’m glad you’re not using all the divorce cases you ha
reinforcement. I’m glad that every time you feel strongly, you don’t
is palmyourself that love becomes a weapon, and you protect yourself fro
painfuldanger by not falling in love and not letting others get too close to you

His brow furrowed deeply. “I’m glad you are glad,” he said grimly
saying “Me, too. I’m glad you come from a family without divorces. I’n
x years.come from a family without divorces. I’m glad you have proof t
everyone ends up divorced and cruelly fighting over assets and childr
his andglad you also know you use excuses to protect yourself, no matter how
scrapedit hurts others. As long as you’re not having to take any risks or
yourself to pain, you’re in good shape.”

“I’ve never liked your sarcasm. Have I told you that before?”

“A couple times.”

He pushed off from the counter. “I think it’s time we said good ni
dn’t begoodbye before this turns ugly.

re. The Ella slid off her stool, hands on her hips, blocking his path. “It’s
ugly, Baird. I’m livid. Livid with you.”

il to go “I know you’re disappointed—”

“Yes. Disappointed, furious, heartbroken, disgusted. You show
ear, noteveryone but you. You put everyone else’s needs before your own—”

fraid of “That’s not true. We’ve just established I’m selfish and putting my
first.”

“You aren’t selfish. You are always there for Alec. You are there f
; beforefamily—you drove home at midnight on Christmas Eve for your Aur

You are there for your firm, you are there for your clients, but when
i’t havethere for yourself?”

loud or He tried to step around her, but Ella just blocked him again.

“How am I not there for myself?”

ression “You’ve created a lot of rules about love and commitment, rules f
: lovingfuture, and these rules are to protect you, so you don’t get hurt, and yo

have to take risks, rules that ultimately give you the upper hand in a PhD relationship. In short, you work very hard to maintain control, and a control means you don't get to really feel. Or love. Or be loved in return. Baird was not smiling. "You're upset because I've decided not to have a relationship with you."

"Because it's the easiest thing to do. It's easy walking away from a relationship. The hard thing is sticking around and showing up and learning how to love and life work. You and I could make it work, but it's a choice, and that choice we'd have to make every day."

He said nothing, his expression shuttered closed.

"By the way," she added, taking a step toward him and pointing at his chest, "I looked up UK divorce statistics and Scotland has a higher divorce rate than England, and it crossed my mind that the divorces I'm handling, those divorces which had made such a big impression on you, were much the norm but more representative of the very wealthy who love and expose their things more than other people." Her chin jerked up. "Maybe the divorce is due more to a personality type than the population in general."

"So, now I've become your research paper."

"No, but I am trying to make sense of it. To make sense of you and I don't understand why someone like you, someone who is successful and apparently well-adjusted, would be so incredibly negative about me and my family, the very thing that brings most people meaning and joy."

"Stop analyzing me. Stop overthinking. It's not helping, and you're going to ruin whatever is left of us. Stop while we have some good memories left for—"

She laughed. "I have a feeling you said the same thing to Fiona. You need to take a step back and then another one. I imagine you were very cautious and centered. Mr. Mature letting his love of many years go. Did you open your door for her, or just close it after she was gone?"

"I'm not going to do this." Baird stepped around her, avoiding any contact with her. "I'm sorry you're upset. I'm sorry you're disappointed. I appreciate that you're passionate and emotional, but it's a little unhinged."

"Unhinged?" she cried. "I'm not allowed to feel deeply? To grieve something that could be wonderful is ending?"

"Feelings this strong can't be good. Not for me."

"Did none of your sisters ever cry? Did they never have a broken heart?"

and inDid you treat them scornfully then?”

but the “You’re tired. It’s late.”

rn.” “Do not, Baird, do not patronize me. Do not mansplain love
pursueespecially when you don’t know what love is.”

He stepped into her space, towering over her. “I know what love
people.this ... this isn’t love. This is...” He shook his head, voice drifting
o make“This isn’t right. This isn’t healthy, or mature love. Fiona and I had a
id it’s arelationship—”

“Please. Don’t say that you had a mature relationship. It doesn’t
mature, it sounds empty and cold. I would never be satisfied with
a fingermature relationship. I want mad-crazy passion.”

a lower “Obviously. It fits the mad-crazy part of you.”

es you “You’re right. I’m mad crazy right now. I’m mad crazy for you. I
s, aren’tcrazy fighting for you. I refuse to let you go without a fight. I refuse
protectwave you off and act as if you don’t mean more to me than any oth
iglinessI’ve ever met.”

He said nothing and she knew her mad crazy had just scared him
he hadn’t already been done, he was certainly over it—and her—now.
i. I just She sniffled, holding tears back. “I think love should be passio
nd kindthink desire should be strong. Which is why I’m glad Fiona gave
arriageultimatum, and I’m glad you set her free. Fiona deserved more from y
deserved all of your heart. She deserved to be swept off her feet, and
’re justyou make her feel like the most wonderful woman in the world, and
emoriescouldn’t do that, you were the wrong man for her.”

“We’ve already agreed on that.”

a.” She “Then let’s also agree that love should be a positive. Love should
ilm andand inspiring, full of hope and wonder, as well as courage and con
pen theYou should love someone so much that you will spend the rest of y
fighting to protect that love, and fighting for the best for the pers
makinglove.” She moved close, put her hand on his chest, her palm pressed c
ointed.heart. “Baird, if it’s your work in family law that has made you r
ged—”people, then you should get a different job. If your work has ma
ve thatcynical, your work is terrible for you. No matter how much you earn.”

Ella dropped her hand and took several steps back, shoving her hair
her jean pockets to keep from touching him again. “I’m glad we l
a heart?tonight. I’m glad you told me you were leaving. And as brutal as it w

glad we had this talk. I understand everything so much better, and we can't care for me—"

to me, "I *do* care for you," he snapped.

"But not enough. Not that way I want to be loved. And if I'd known this back in August, I wouldn't have hurt as much. I would have realized you weren't the one for me. I would have realized that while kissing you was mature you're not good for my heart, and you're not good for my head."

She took another step back, her voice cracking. "The next time I fall in love, it's going to be someone who will let me be me, full of mistakes and quiet love. And I hope for you that you find your perfect woman and you love her, and once you love her, she breaks your heart just a little bit."

"Why?" he demanded.

"Not all the way. Just enough for you to realize that love is precious and life is short, and we can never take either for granted."

her man



1 off. If

ELLA NEEDED AIR. She needed space.

mate. I She walked quickly to the mudroom and grabbed her coat on the way to the door.

ou. She It had begun to snow. She stopped and just looked up. The snow was falling silently, thickly, large white flakes tumbling from the sky.

l if you It was beautiful, it was painful. She'd been wanting snow since she was a child, and now it was here. Snow falling, covering everything in white.

Her heart hurt. She hurt. She couldn't do this with Baird anymore.

l be big She couldn't try anymore, hope anymore, give anymore. She couldn't want him when he didn't need her love. She couldn't need him when he didn't love her in return.

on you She walked and then stopped, fighting tears. How magical it all was. The woods dusted in white, snow piling on branches, frosting the ground.

nistrust Everything about Langley Park was a fairytale, except for the part where you get your heart broken. She held out a bare hand, caught snow, and watched it cling to her fingertips before it began to melt.

ids into Ella blinked back tears. She wasn't going to fall apart. She wasn't going to cry. There was no point in crying. It was time to let go. No more tears, I'm

Why you and wishing. It was just too painful. She walked toward the cottage, but snow from her face. Instead of stopping at the cottage, she kept walking on to the dairy, which had been turned into an event venue. It had all been booked out for New Year's Eve but would be booked next Saturday for a wedding. Ella circled the dairy, and then walked back to the cottage. It was fun, Frozen.

Don't think.

I love *Don't think.*

and-crazy *Don't feel.*

love her



But Baird was angry when Ella walked out. He was angry and raging inside because she didn't know him. She didn't know who he was or what he wanted and for her to think her wildly arrogant lecture was a sign of maturity, she was wrong.

So wrong.

But Baird hadn't even made it up a flight of stairs before he felt a way out and guilty. She'd been the one to turn everything upside down and inside out but he cared about her enough not to want her returning to the cottage now and upset. He wasn't rejecting her. He wasn't punishing her, and he didn't like to think of her being alone in the cottage, crying. Normally, tears would move him, but it was different when Ella cried.

When her eyes welled up, they looked even more like the sea, and it was the Ella at the reception, the one he hadn't met, the one who reminded him of a woodland fairy—beautiful and bright and impossibly alive.

Suppressing a groan, he turned on the staircase and went back down. He didn't chase jobs, he didn't chase people, he didn't chase women, but he was going after Ella. Not to have the last word, but to make sure she was happy and not crying her eyes out.

Stepping outside though, he discovered it was snowing and the snow was a huge surprise.

The wind was blowing, too, making the snow swirl and vision dim. Baird had been coming here for years so he knew his way, but then in those moments he had to pause and make sure he was still heading the right way.

rushing Baird reached the cottage and knocked the snow off his shoes going, opening the door and going inside. But the downstairs was dark, and there hadn't been any lights on anywhere. He climbed the stairs and checked her room. The bed was empty, the bed made. She wasn't here.

He stood in the upstairs hall, trying to figure out his next move. He decided to check the dairy. Perhaps she'd gotten lost and ended up there. It would have been easier if there had been footsteps to follow but the snow had covered them up.

Baird returned outside, walked down the white road, his footprints the only ones he could see. The dairy doors were locked. He walked all the way around the brick building. No sign of Ella.

Baird checked his watch. It was midnight and cold. He tried to think of where Ella might have gone, but he was coming up blank. Had Ella returned to the house? But wouldn't Baird have seen her?

Baird didn't want to alarm Cara, but Alec needed to know. It was freezing outside, and Ella couldn't be out wandering around on her own, not in a snowstorm, not anytime. She had to be found, and she had to be found

Alec answered Baird's call immediately.

Baird wasted no time. "Ella left the house tonight upset, I went to tell her so she didn't hurt her, but she isn't in the cabin and it's snowing. I can't find her."

"Where are you now?" Alec asked.

"Back up at the house, outside, going around to check all the doors in case."

"I'll meet you downstairs."

They spent the next thirty minutes walking, searching, shining flashlights across the woods, the vast front lawn, and down toward the cottages. They checked every door and front steps.

"She wouldn't have gone to Bakewell," Alec said. "She's got to be somewhere. Maybe we just missed her somehow."

Baird nodded but said nothing. He felt sick, heartsick. He didn't know how this was his fault, but he did know he was afraid for her, and he'd never felt like this for anyone before.

He didn't know why she'd take off in the snow. It made no sense and even if she was a hothead, she wasn't irresponsible, and she'd never put her safety to prove a point. She was missing because something happened, and that something filled him with fear.

before At the house, they checked all the downstairs rooms, from the
d there drawing room to Alec's personal study. While Alec checked the famil
oom. It Baird went back to the kitchen, the walk-in pantry, and Uncle Frec
suite.

He'd go Alec returned downstairs. "Let's head back out, and if we can't f
ld have soon, I'm going to call the police and ask for help."

already "Let's go back to the cottage once more," Baird said. "See if her
are all there, or if she's packed or taken anything. I can't imagine wher
eps the go at this time of night, but we have to find her. I will find her."

he way The cottage was still dark. The downstairs was cold. Upstairs,
room was still empty, her bed still made. Alec checked the first b
picture then. Baird checked the next.

maybe And then Alec said quietly, "Baird, she's here."
"Where?"

freezing "Here. Isn't this your old room?"

not in a Baird squeezed past Alec to look into his room, and yes, she wa
now. curled up in his bed, the covers tucked beneath her chin.

Relief flooded Baird, relief and gratitude and something else so de
o check profound that he couldn't even articulate it. "Why is she in here and
room?" he asked, voice low.

Alec clapped Baird on the should. "I'm going back to the hous
rs. Just gave Baird a look. "I'm not going to tell you what to do, but it wou
great deal easier on my marriage if you do not have to break Ella's hea

"The last thing I want to do is break her heart," Baird said, voice re
shlights He didn't want to hurt her. He loved her. He wanted more time w
s where If it was possible, he wanted forever with her. He didn't want Ella
forever with anyone else. He didn't want someone wooing her and v
e at the her and making all her dreams come true. That was his job. That was v
wanted to do.

know if "I'll see you in the morning," Baird said.

ver felt Alec paused at the end of the hallway. "I thought you were leaving
"It doesn't make sense to rush out early now. But thank you for coi
to him, help me find her. I appreciate it."

ver risk "You did the right thing calling me. I'm just glad she is safe
ng had night."

Alec left, and Baird stood in the doorway several long minutes w

greenElla sleep.

He didn't know why she climbed into his bed, in his room. He hadn't thought to look for her here but at least she wasn't outside in the cold, lost, scared, ranting about mad-crazy love.

His jaw eased and he smiled faintly. He'd fallen for the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. He didn't know what would happen next, but he knew leaving her wasn't the right decision. Letting her go wasn't an option either.

He'd never fought for a relationship before because he didn't think he should, Ella's was supposed to fight for a relationship. It either worked or it didn't. Bedrooms supposed to be clear and simple. Straightforward as well.

But maybe when you met the right person your perspective shifted and you were willing to consider things you'd never considered before.

He wasn't ready for marriage and children—far from that—but he realized he had to see that his hard, fast rules were problematic. Love meant opening yourself up there, not just your heart.

Baird slid his coat off and placed it across the chair in the corner. He sat down on the foot of the bed and eased his boots off.

Maybe you knew you'd met the right person when you suddenly realized you were a little mad crazy yourself. When your emotions weren't tidy and controlled." He controlled.

Maybe you knew it was love because you realized that you would never be able to live without it. Not if you could help it. Not if you could fight for it.

Baird eased his wool sweater off, drawing it over his head and removed his heavy belt before climbing onto the bed, and lying close to her, finding one arm around her waist, to keep her safe.

She smelled like cinnamon and snow and love. He held her a little tighter than he had before. No one had ever gone toe-to-toe with him before. No woman had ever

looked at him like that, much less said the things Ella said to him tonight. But he would do it, she did, and he was glad he'd been angry, or he wouldn't have gone all the way and he wouldn't have realized how much he loved her and refused to let her go.

Until the moment when she seemed lost, he'd been focused on his own anger, but once he couldn't find her anywhere, his anger shifted into something entirely different, into something that was nothing to do with him, but something that was hers.

She had to be safe. She had to be okay. She had to be found. He couldn't bear the thought that she was hurt, or in pain, or lost somewhere in the

And he would find her. He had to find her. She was his and he lo
ertainly and every thing in him was focused on finding her, saving her, and
e snow, her. Forever. Baird had never had such clarity. He had one purpose a
purpose only—bring her home.

llogical Ella murmured something and he kissed the top of her head and
he just his eyes. It was late. He was exhausted. But for the first time in mor
t right, felt peace. That clarity during the search had give him insight into hi

He did love, and he loved his Ella immensely. He could lose everyth
ink one her.

. It was They were going to work this out. They could work this out. The
no way he'd let the best thing that had ever happened to him just go w
ed, and fight.

e could
ir mind



ELLA WOKE WARM, a little too warm. She stretched and bumped into sor
He then very big and solid next to her. Opening her eyes, she discovered Baird
with her. He was still dressed, but he was under the covers, sound
y felt a looking a little bit like an angel, which wasn't fair considering how he
easily anything but an angel last night.

But he was here, and that was good.

ere not Very good.

for it. She was glad he hadn't gone yet. She'd fallen asleep hating hersel
nd then the things she'd said to him. She'd been hard and harsh, and she had
to Ella, back. She'd been like a street fighter, throwing everything at him, givi
everything she had. Okay, she'd been a little unhinged, but she was p
tighter, and desperate and couldn't bear losing him.

r gotten She'd been certain she'd said far too much.

was glad She'd been certain she'd made him hate her—Baird intensely c
fter her, strong emotions—but somehow, through some miracle, he was her
to lose her, holding her as if he'd never let her go.

s anger, She realized he'd opened his eyes and was looking at her. He did
nethings sleepy or confused.

her. “Hi,” she said, insides fluttering because he really was the most b
ouldn't man she'd ever known. “What are you doing here? You were supp
snow.

ved her stay at the house and then leave early.”

loving “I know, but I was worried about you last night. So I went to find you and then I couldn’t find you and I called Alec and after quite a long search discovered you in here, safe in this bed.” Baird’s expression was rueful. “I’ve never thought to check this room. It probably would’ve saved a lot of time, hewalking in the snow.”

his heart. “You didn’t have to come after me. I wasn’t very ... sensitive about it last night.”

He smiled crookedly. “No, you weren’t. But then I think we both know you’re a bloodthirsty wench.” He paused. “I mean that in the nicest way possible without a hint of sarcasm.” She tried to smile but couldn’t. “What time are you leaving?” she asked, reaching out to touch his jaw.

“I don’t know. We’ll have to talk about that later, after we sleep a bit more.”

Ella snuggled closer. “Deal.”

nothing

l in bed

asleep,

’d beenA PHONE RANG at ten and Baird groped around the bed trying to find it.

“It’s me,” Ella said sleepily, finding her phone on the nightstand. “It’s Cara. No, everything’s good. Just, um, sleeping in. Don’t apologize. Everything’s good. Thank you. Bye.” She said goodbye and hung up. She yawned, pressed her cheek to Baird’s chest.

’t held “Mrs. Johnson is sending a hot breakfast down to us since we’re having breakfast at the house.”

snickered “Does that mean we have to get up?” Baird asked, rolling onto his side and dragging a hand through his thick hair, disheveling it further.

“You only have to get up to make me coffee and then you can go back to bed,” Ella said, leaning over him to kiss him.

He caught the back of her head and brought her mouth back down to his.

He kissed her hard. “You scared me to death last night. I thought you weren’t looking at me.”

She looked down into his eyes, and his normally gold eyes were deep and beautiful shadowed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d come looking for me and I was used to trying to hide from you.”



“Why were you in here and not your room?”

She hesitated before whispering, “I wanted to feel close to you.”

Baird wrapped his arms around her and held her to him tightly. “Wow, a lot to discuss, but how about some coffee first?”

“I would very much appreciate that.”

The second pour-over coffee was nearly done when one of the estate’s staff members showed up with a hot breakfast in a dozen different dishes. Baird immediately serving the breakfast, and it was one of those huge, hearty breakfasts with eggs, bacon, mushrooms, tomatoes, beans, and piles of toast.

They ate facing each other at the rustic table, the Christmas lights twinkled, the tree plugged in, and the fire crackling in the hearth. They focused on their conversation until they started slowing down. Finally, Ella stopped eating and concentrated on her coffee.

“I have a thought,” Baird said, spreading some of Mrs. Jolene’s homemade marmalade on another triangle of toast. “What if we take the rules—my rules—and your expectations. What if we decide we’re not going to make any big decisions until you’re done with your PhD, and this summer we can figure out what’s best for us, whether that’s me going back to the States, or you coming to the UK?”

Ella’s hand wobbled as she set her coffee down. “I’m a little lost,” she apologized, voice catching. “Last night—”

“Was an enormous wake-up call. I was so afraid we weren’t going to make it, you and it scared me, Ella. It made me physically sick. I can’t picture a future without you. I don’t want a future without you. I want what Alec and I have. I want you. I want love. I want us.”

Ella sat there gaping at him, speechless. She couldn’t think of a particularly intelligent thing to say.

“I realize I can be a little black and white,” Baird added. “So, I propose a little bit of gray. I propose we not make decisions we don’t have to make. Perhaps we just like each other, and enjoy each other, and see where I’d lost takes us.”

“What if we discover we still like each other? What if we’re both a little bit deliriously happy? Won’t that be a problem?”

“Not if we’re happy,” he said.

She wasn’t satisfied with that. “Baird, if I love you the way I want to, you, I will want everything with you. I’ll want little MacLaurens with

I'll want noise and chaos. I'll want all the things you don't."

"What do you think I want?"

"A clean, tidy ultra-organized home without the pitter-patter of lit and the sound of children fighting."

"You are so dramatic, Ella. Why would you think I want an ultra-organized home? Couldn't an organized home be good enough?"

"You know what I'm saying. I'm intense and passionate, and that's not English for you."

"I think I was wrong. I think I must crave a little intensity, because on the night when I couldn't find you after searching the woods, and checking the meadow, and going to each of the cottages, searching for footsteps, searching for just any sign of you, I realized I'm not going to live without you. It's not an option. I want you. I want to be with you. And if we can make this work, why not try?"

"Baird, I can be happy with you without a marriage license. It's not like we're not getting married. I want you. But being a mom? That is important to me and my family. I love the closeness and the traditions and just feeling as if I'm a part of something bigger than me, something more important than me. I continue to love you, I will want all of that with you."

"I understand. I do. Which is why I propose we don't make hard and fast decisions today. Why not just give us time? Why not just ... be happy together and see where that takes us?"

For a moment, neither said anything and then Ella slowly turned to Cara.

"Happy with you is something I can do." She smiled, eyes watering. "I agree there is no reason to make hard and fast decisions today. Let's just be happy together today."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He reached across the table for her hand. "Want to come to Edinburgh with me for New Year's? I'd love to show you my city and where I live."

Ella started smiling, and her smile just got bigger. "Really, seriously?"

He laced his fingers between hers. "I know you have school starting in a couple of weeks, but June will be here before we know it, and we can have fun and explore our options, realizing we can do whatever we want to, whenever we want to."

The air caught in her throat and for a moment Ella couldn't breathe. Then she rose up and leaned across the table to kiss Baird, and once she

kissing him, she couldn't quit. But then she had to if only to tell him how much she loved him. "I'm crazy about you."

"I know. I saw the crazy last night," he teased and then he came to the table and scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the ultra-room where he sat down on the couch with her on his lap. "But I'm not because you were right. I have been afraid. I don't want to risk even if it's not and then be hurt."

She traced his lovely cheekbone and then his jaw. "I won't hurt you." "But even if that happens, it's worth the risk. You have no idea how much I love you, and how much I want you. I discovered just how hard it is to believe in us."

She clasped his face between her hands and smiled into his eyes. "I believe in us, too. I believe we are going to have the most wonderful life together—with kids, without kids. The point is that we will find a way to be together, and together we become a family."

He held her against him. "Together we're home."

Ella didn't think she'd ever heard anything so lovely in all her life. And if then another thought came, and she sat back up, excited. "So, when do you want to go to Edinburgh?"

He smoothed her hair back from her brow. "When do you want to go?" "Today?"

Baird kissed her until she couldn't think straight, and then, and then he nodded. "Today it is."

"And I can't wait. Happy everything, Baird."

"Happy everything, my Eloise."

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kissing him, she couldn't quit. But then she had to if only to tell him how much she loved him. "I'm crazy about you."

"I know. I saw the crazy last night," he teased and then he came around the table and scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the living room where he sat down on the couch with her on his lap. "But I'm glad because you were right. I have been afraid. I don't want to risk everything and then be hurt."

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He smoothed her hair back from her brow. "When do you want to go?"

"Today?"

Baird kissed her until she couldn't think straight, and then, and only then, he lifted his head. "Today it is."

She grinned at him. "I can't wait. Happy everything, Baird."

"Happy everything, my Eloise."

EPILOGUE

EVERYONE THAT COULD come, did, traveling in for the late July christening of baby Viscount William Frederick Sherbourne, and his twin, Lady Eloise Sherbourne, younger by two minutes, but twice as feisty as her naturally natured older brother.

Baird was selected to be the godfather for little William, and Ella was asked to be Emma's godmother, as she was also her—partial—namesake.

The three month old babies were healthy and active, and besotted with each other, always reaching out to take the other twin's hand or to press their mouths on each other's faces and head. William had a few wisps of brown hair but Lady Emma was completely bald with the palest skin and the roundest head. Some of the Roberts family were already speculating if the delicate Emma might end up a redhead, but regardless of her coloring, William and Ella were adorable together, and never lacked attention, always there to scoop them up and take them for walks, even if it was just around the house on a stormy day.

Baird was one of those constantly carrying the babies, humming to them or crooning a Gaelic ballad which inevitably made Ella's eyes sting and her nose up. There was nothing she loved more than to hear him sing, which meant catching him when he was alone because he was too shy to sing in front of an audience. But Baird was happy, happier than she'd ever known him. He'd left family law and was focusing on corporate law again but with a focus on corporate ethics and morality, specifically the role corporations play in society and their responsibility to society. He was earning substantial money but believed in what he was doing, and felt as if he was finally giving his father a way that made him proud.

She was proud of him, so pleased that he'd arrived in Derbyshire after the babies arrived to meet them, sending Ella and the Roberts endless videos and photos of the new arrivals and Cara who looked at them with her tiny bundles of joy. While Ella hated not being there herself, she was nearing the end of the teaching semester, and finishing her dissertation.

but the moment she was done, she flew out of Seattle into Edinburgh.

After spending a few days with Baird they drove down to Langley to meet the newest Sherbournes. The rest of the Roberts family that manage time off and the flights, arrived in July to spend a week at I Park and be present for the baptism and the summer party Alec and Cara hosting today on the lawn.

ning of
Emma
er good
Ella sat with Cara now in the shade of a tree and watched the game of them holding a baby while Baird and Alec taught the visiting Americans how to play cricket.

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ke.
adjusting little Emma in her arms. “Are you and Alec making any plans like.”

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Cara glanced down at William, his small mouth pressed to her forehead. “We’ll probably have dinner here, just a small celebration for us. Johnson promised to make something special because she knows I don’t go anywhere, and Alec won’t. He doesn’t want to let the children out of sight. There are so many nights I wake up and find him in the nursery keeping watch.” Her lips curved. “He’s such an amazing father. Lucky.”

“You are,” Ella agreed, even as she looked out to the lawn where William was showing Ethan, one of her brother Tom’s boys, how to hold the baby.

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She felt lucky, too, lucky to have found a man she loved completely, with all her heart, a man who loved her just the same. With a degree behind her, and the future ahead, she felt excitement but also relief. She and Baird had found each other and it worked. All the pieces flashed back to Christmas and the puzzle they’d worked on in the drawing room, the one of the Highland cows looking over the stone wall.

Sometimes life was like a jig saw puzzle. It didn’t always come together easily, and sometimes breaks were needed, and sometimes pieces were missing and sometimes you tried to force a piece into the wrong place and it didn’t work. But with patience and humor, determination, optimism and hard work the puzzle filled in and the pieces eventually came together and the effort was rewarded.

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rtation,
Ella and Baird had been rewarded.

Ella had a secret and she hadn’t shared it with anyone yet, wanting to hear it first. She made Baird swear not to tell Alec until Ella brought the news to her sister.

Carefully shifting sleeping Emma to the other arm, Ella reached into her pocket on the front of her jeans, and slipped the diamond onto her left hand, and then as casually as possible, she extended her hand to Cara. “What do you think?” she said, showing the ring off. “Do you approve?”

Cara grabbed her sister’s hand, and held it tightly. “You’re engaged?” “You’re the only one that knows.” Ella smiled at Cara. “Baird is American, but I wanted to share with you first. None of this would have happened without you and that cottage.” Her eyes filled with tears. “Cara, you’re the best sister and friend. And now I’ll just be living on the highway...four and a half hours. Not far at all.”

Still cradling William, Cara jumped to her feet, and did a mad little dance. Mrs. Everyone playing cricket turned to look. Ella saw Baird watching, but she raised her left arm in the air, showing off her ring hand. Baird must have explained to Alec and the others because suddenly everyone was all rushing toward them.

“When is the wedding?” Cara cried, as the family swarmed them.

Alec took his tiny daughter and Ella moved into Baird’s arms. “When is the wedding?” she asked him, rising on tiptoe to kiss him.

He kissed her back and then looked around at everyone. “Wedding, thinking a Christmas wedding.”

“Yes! Oh, a Christmas wedding at Langley Park,” Cara breathed, holding William to Alec, filling his arms. “It’d be gorgeous. We’d bring in a Christmas tree and could open up the ballroom. It’s a huge space—three rooms—with a green room for a dance floor and tables—”

“Darling, it’s their wedding,” Alec interrupted gently, but he was smiling. “But do consider the offer. You’re family and we’d love to have you married at Langley Park, but obviously we will be wherever you tell us to be.”

Baird and Ella exchanged glances. “We’d love to be married here if that’s all right,” Baird said.

“If it didn’t add too much chaos,” Baird added. “We know December is already really busy here.”

“Nothing would give us more happiness than to celebrate your love here,” Cara said firmly. “And if you sweet talk me a little bit, I’ll persuade you to put you in the cottage for your wedding night. Honeymoon at the Cottage.”

into the Everyone laughed and baby Emma stirred and began to cry. V
r fourthopened his eyes but just looked around at everyone, so calm, so wis
ded herEmma Eloise reminded everyone she was not going to be ignored.

Do you Cara took Emma from Alec. Ella rose up to kiss Baird. The ma
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THE END

Everyone laughed and baby Emma stirred and began to cry. William opened his eyes but just looked around at everyone, so calm, so wise while Emma Eloise reminded everyone she was not going to be ignored.

Cara took Emma from Alec. Ella rose up to kiss Baird. The magic was real. Love at Langley Park.

THE END

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Aunt Dorothy's Shortbread Cookies

Ingredients:

10 tbsp unsalted butter (if using salted butter, remove additional salt)

½ cup powder sugar

½ tsp pure vanilla extract

1 ½ cups all-purpose flour

½ tsp salt

Directions:

1. Beat the butter and sugar until creamed. Add vanilla extract and salt until blended. Scrape the bowl down and add flour while beating. Scrape the bowl once more and mix until combined.
2. Shape the dough into a small flat loaf (rectangle), wrap in plastic until firm.
3. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Use a sharp knife to cut half-inch thick slices, spaced at least an inch apart, onto a greased baking sheet. Use a fork to indent a pattern into the cookies.
4. Bake for about 10 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and cool.

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Directions:

1. Beat the butter and sugar until creamed. Add vanilla extract and salt; beat until blended. Scrape the bowl down and add flour while beating on low. Scrape the bowl once more and mix until combined.
2. Shape the dough into a small flat loaf (rectangle), wrap in plastic and chill until firm.
3. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Use a sharp knife to cut half-inch thick slices. Place slices, spaced at least an inch apart, onto a greased baking sheet. Use a fork to indent a pattern into the cookies.
4. Bake for about 10 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and cool.

The Eton Mess

Ingredients:

- 3 ½ – 4 cups strawberries, quartered, plus extra to serve
- ½ cup white granulated sugar or caster sugar
- 1 cup heavy whipping cream, lightly whisked
- ½ c crème fraiche (can skip and increase whipping cream by ½ c)
- ½ cup powdered sugar, sieved
- ½ tsp vanilla
- ½ – ¾ cup raspberries

Meringues

- 3 large egg whites
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup powdered sugar, sieved
- 1 TBL corn flour

Directions:

1. For meringues, preheat oven to 250 F. Whisk egg white and a pinch of salt in an electric mixer until firm peaks form (3-4 minutes). With mixer running, gradually add granulated sugar and whisk until thick and glossy (2-3 minutes). Sieve powdered sugar and corn flour over, fold to combine, then spoon 3-4 inch mounds onto oven trays lined with parchment paper. Bake until meringues lift easily from trays and are crisp but still colored (45-50 minutes), then turn off the oven and cool completely in the oven.
2. Meanwhile, toss strawberries and granulated sugar in a large bowl to combine, then set aside until juices begin to seep (20 minutes).
3. Whisk cream, crème fraîche, powdered sugar, and vanilla in a separate large bowl until soft peaks form. Scatter a quarter of the strawberries on the base of a pretty large serving bowl, spread with a quarter of the cream mixture, and coarsely crumble a quarter of the meringue over the top. Repeat layering with the remaining ingredients.

4. Scatter Eton mess with raspberries, extra strawberries and serve!

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4. Scatter Eton mess with raspberries, extra strawberries and serve!

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About the Author



New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of 70 romance fiction titles, **Jane Porter** has been a finalist for the prestigious RITA six times and won in 2014 for Best Novella with her story, *Take Me, C* from Tule Publishing. Today, Jane has over 13 million copies in print including her wildly successful, *Flirting With Forty*, which was made Lifetime movie starring Heather Locklear, as well as *The Tycoon's Kiss* and *A Christmas Miracle for Daisy*, two Tule books which have been turned into holiday films for the GAC Family network. A mother of three sons, holds an MA in Writing from the University of San Francisco and makes her home in sunny San Clemente, CA with her surfer husband and three

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