



Loved AND
Found

© *A Scandalous Affairs Novel* ©

CHRISTI
CALDWELL

Loved and Found

By
Christi Caldwell

Other Titles by Christi Caldwell

All the Duke's Sins

Along Came a Lady

Desperately Seeking a Duchess

All the Duke's Sin's Prequel Series

It Had to Be the Duke

One for My Baron

Scandalous Affairs

A Groom of Her Own

Taming of the Beast

My Fair Marchioness

It Happened One Winter

Loved and Found

Heart of a Duke

In Need of a Duke—Prequel Novella

For Love of the Duke

More than a Duke

The Love of a Rogue

Loved by a Duke

To Love a Lord

The Heart of a Scoundrel

To Wed His Christmas Lady

To Trust a Rogue

The Lure of a Rake

To Woo a Widow

To Redeem a Rake

One Winter with a Baron

To Enchant a Wicked Duke

Beguiled by a Baron

To Tempt a Scoundrel

To Hold a Lady's Secret

To Catch a Viscount

Defying the Duke

To Marry Her Marquess

The Devil and the Debutante

Devil by Daylight

The Heart of a Scandal

In Need of a Knight—Prequel Novella

Schooling the Duke

A Lady's Guide to a Gentleman's Heart

A Matchmaker for a Marquess

His Duchess for a Day

Five Days with a Duke

Lords of Honor

Seduced by a Lady's Heart

Captivated by a Lady's Charm

Rescued by a Lady's Love

Tempted by a Lady's Smile

Courting Poppy Tidemore

Scandalous Seasons

Forever Betrothed, Never the Bride

Never Courted, Suddenly Wed

Always Proper, Suddenly Scandalous

Always a Rogue, Forever Her Love

A Marquess for Christmas

Once a Wallflower, at Last His Love

Sinful Brides

The Rogue's Wager

The Scoundrel's Honor

The Lady's Guard

The Heiress's Deception

The Wicked Wallflowers

The Hellion

The Vixen

The Governess

The Bluestocking

The Spitfire

The Theodosia Sword

Only For His Lady

Only For Her Honor

Only For Their Love

Danby

A Season of Hope

Winning a Lady's Heart

The Brethren

The Spy Who Seduced Her

The Lady Who Loved Him

The Rogue Who Rescued Her

The Minx Who Met Her Match

The Spinster Who Saved a Scoundrel

Lost Lords of London

In Bed with the Earl

In the Dark with the Duke

Undressed with the Marquess

Brethren of the Lords

My Lady of Deception

Her Duke of Secrets

The Read Family Saga

A Winter Wish

Memoir: Non-Fiction

Uninterrupted Joy

Loved and Found

Copyright © 2022 by Christi Caldwell

Kindle Edition

All rights reserved. No part of this story may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means—except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews—without written permission.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of the author.

For more information about the author:

www.christicaldwellauthor.com

christicaldwellauthor@gmail.com

Twitter: [@ChristiCaldwell](https://twitter.com/ChristiCaldwell)

Or on Facebook at: [Christi Caldwell Author](https://www.facebook.com/ChristiCaldwellAuthor)

Author's Note and Dedication

I often say writing is a rather solitary venture. An author spends hundreds and hundreds of hours crafting a fictional world, typing away at the computer until the letters have been worn off the keyboard. (My apologies 'A', 'S', 'D', 'F', 'N', 'M', 'E', 'O', 'Shift', and 'Period.') Through the writing process, you laugh and cry with your characters. You fall in love with them and hope that when you bring your book out into the world, readers feel that same passion and love. All the while, you realize, not everyone will. In this way, one's fictional characters are like one's children. We love them and hope everyone will, but also recognize there will be people who do not connect in that same way.

As such, when an author launches a new title, it is this juxtaposition of great joy at finally sharing something that's only lived on your keyboard and in your mind, and terror at how the world will receive it.

Through the years, I've been so very blessed to find several readers, who the moment a book hits, will email me almost immediately upon completing their read, and share their thoughts on the book. These notes have become some of my favorite parts of release weeks, this great knowing that there is someone out there who looks forward to my stories and who connects.

To Holly Hughes whose playlists bring me such joy.

To Cathie B. whose reviews and words always make me smile.

To Marietta S. whose notes after reading are some of my favorites to receive.

Thaddeus and Edie's story is for you!

Table of Contents

[Other Titles by Christi Caldwell](#)

[Author's Note and Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Biography.](#)

Prologue

London, England

Years Earlier

The girl was hiding.

Or, ten-year-old, Thaddeus Phippen *thought* she was hiding. She kept sticking her auburn head out of the doorway and peering back and forth down the hall.

He knew, because at that precise moment, he was hiding, too.

If *she* was hiding, she was doing a deuced bad job of it.

If she wasn't...then Thaddeus had no idea what she was doing.

But then, girls were peculiar creatures.

And he said that, as someone with a sister of his own.

Just then, the girl ducked her head out for a fifth time and peeked about the double-glazed, robin's-egg blue, curved door panel.

Aye, if she was intent on hiding, whoever was searching was most certainly going to find her.

And Thaddeus, son of a bricklayer, and a worker under his father's employer, the builder, Mr. Webb, found himself...intrigued.

Because it was his first assignment working for Mr. Webb, and it was also the first time in the whole of his ten years of existence Thaddeus had ever *seen* a lady. At least up close, and this small.

With emerald-studded hair combs in her auburn hair, and a lacy white dress, she positively sparkled and shined like Thaddeus hadn't known a person could. She was certainly too grand to talk to, and yet Thaddeus couldn't make himself look away.

He certainly should.

Mr. Webb was conducting a meeting with the Duke and Duchess of Huntington on the upcoming renovations to their townhouse, and while he did, Thaddeus was supposed to be out in the barn.

And he'd surely be sacked if his employer—or if anyone—discovered him hiding in the household belonging to a duke. It was just that Thaddeus had never before seen a nobleman's home, and he'd been intrigued enough to sneak off and slip inside when his employer had been conducting business within.

And the house was nothing short of a palace, with each room large enough to fit fifteen or more single-room homes, not unlike that which he shared with his family of five.

The windows gleamed, letting bright slashes of golden rays come streaming through. Living with his family in their own hovel, in the toughest part of London, it was often cloaked in such thick, heavy fog, he'd not known sun was even a reality in England.

They had shiny porcelain statues of little people and sheep tucked upon various mahogany tables.

So many sheep.

Yet, with all that he'd found himself most intrigued, he was riveted by that little girl hiding.

Because he'd also not known that fine little ladies who belonged to a duke and duchess did something such as hide, like he did.

"Thaddeus?" That furious whisper came from somewhere in the corridor. "Thaddeus?" It grew more frantic, and frustrated.

His elder brother, Martin. The one who'd gotten him this job, and the one who took the work he did for Mr. Webb as seriously as if he himself were the builder.

Silently cursing, Thaddeus forgot his curiosity with the little lady and leaned back inside the parlor he'd taken refuge in.

He caught the faint tread of approaching footfalls.

“You’re going to get yourself sacked,” Martin whispered as he neared the place Thaddeus had shut himself away.

And for a moment, Thaddeus suspected he’d been found out, and by his elder brother, no less.

He held his breath, keeping the air trapped in his chest, until Martin’s footfalls grew closer and closer, and it became harder and harder to not exhale the breath he kept lodged inside.

And then those footfalls grew more and more faded, and then diminished altogether.

Thaddeus waited a moment more and then released the painful breath he’d been holding.

He scrunched up his mouth.

He should go.

He really *needed* to.

After all, it would hardly be fair to his father and brother were Thaddeus to be discovered lurking about the home of Mr. Webb’s client.

With a sigh, and unable to resist another look, Thaddeus stole a further quick peek out the doorway.

“Are you hiding, too?”

Thaddeus frowned, as those crisp, polished tones, belonging to a proper lady, echoed around the hall.

And then he found her.

She was still hiding in the room across the hall.

She stared back with the widest, biggest blue eyes he’d ever seen.

Curious eyes.

Except—Thaddeus frowned—she couldn’t be staring at him. He was hiding, and he was the best at it.

If there were any doubts, however, that he'd been found out, and by a little lady, no less, the answer was made clear a moment later, when the girl darted out from the room opposite his and raced headlong for Thaddeus and his hiding space.

The moment she reached him, she pushed the door closed; the hinges didn't so much as squeak, and the quiet click as she shut the panel, was the only telltale sound.

And up close, she was more magnificent than anything or anyone he'd ever seen in his whole ten years. And Thaddeus wasn't one to note girls. But this one...this one was unlike any one...any person he'd ever seen.

Her auburn curls kissed by streaks of gold were the same shade of that streaming sun that rarely made an appearance in London. Thaddeus widened his eyes. And her skin. Why, it was the finest, softest looking *anything* he'd ever seen, but she had freckles upon her rounded cheeks. Her skin had a faint bronzed color, like she played in the sun, and the gods had graced her with the same sheen as those golden statues the fancy toffs stuck in their households.

The girl cocked her head. "Can you talk?"

Of course, he could.

He opened his mouth to say as much.

But she'd tipped her head, and those curls bounced, and he found himself just as intrigued by those ringlets because he didn't know hair could curl that way. Like a perfect corkscrew.

So, he managed nothing more than a nod in answer to her question.

"Who are *you* hiding from?" The slight emphasis she placed on that particular word indicated he'd been right in his thinking. She was hiding.

"You knew?" he blurted.

She puzzled her little brow.

"That I was here," he said, reminding himself to speak in a complete sentence, and not to keep staring at her like a

dunderhead. It's just...he'd never seen a person like her this close, in his life.

"Since the moment you snuck in," she said, with a proud puff of her chest.

Thaddeus frowned.

And here he'd thought he was better than that. He was. He'd just been sloppy this day, and given where he was, and the work he did, it was perhaps the most dangerous time to be sloppy.

"You're hiding from my mother and father, too," she predicted.

"Who...are your mother and father?" he asked, dread pitting in his stomach; even as he asked, he knew. Because the girl before him could only be the daughter of a duke or prince, but with the way she shined, certainly nothing less.

"The duke and duchess," the girl muttered, with a regret to rival his own.

Thaddeus's gaze slipped over the top of her head, and he swallowed hard...and loudly.

Oh, trouble on Sunday.

Hiding with the duke's daughter, his employer's client's daughter? This was bad.

"You're hiding from them, too? Aren't you?" she asked a second time.

"In a way," he said gruffly, glancing at the doorway, that pit in his stomach, growing to the size of a boulder. If this girl had discovered him, it was certain anyone else could, too.

This would be bad.

Very bad, indeed.

For him and for Martin and their father and entire family who was dependent upon the wages they earned from Mr. Webb.

“They *always* find me,” the girl was saying, drawing his thoughts away from the panicky fear of discovery. Then a mischievous little glimmer lit her blue eyes. “Eventually,” she whispered.

With an equally impish smile, the girl skipped past him, heading over to the high window that sat ajar.

She skipped.

It was an odd detail to note when his entire future and his family’s security hung on the proverbial line...but it was one that held him...intrigued.

“Is this how you came in?” She directed that whispered question at the window, ducking out the crack and leaning down.

He nodded before recalling she could not see him.

“Hmm...a ladder. I suppose if I run away, a ladder outside would be just the way. But my chambers are too high.”

“You talk a lot,” he blurted.

The girl sank back on her heels. “I know.” She ducked back inside the room and blew back a curl that had fallen over her eye. “My mother says I really must stop the improper habit.”

Improper habit?

Talking.

These nobles sure were a peculiar lot.

“I like it,” he said sincerely, and he may as well have fetched her a star and presented it on his palm, for the way her eyes lit.

“You do?” she whispered. She didn’t await his answer, just prattled on. “Because my governess insists I not be so talkative and agrees with Mother that ladies aren’t garrulous, but I am, and Mother insists I stop being so loquacious...”

Well, he didn’t know what the word *garrulous* or *loquacious* meant, but he knew he liked the way she spoke: all quick, like she’d seen and heard exciting things and had to

share them fast out of fear she'd lose them but wanted to make sure that her secrets were passed on forever.

"Who are you hiding from?" she asked, when she'd finally let on about her mother's determination to elucidate the improper out of her—whatever that meant.

"Mr. Webb."

She cocked her head.

"My employer," he explained, and puffed his chest out. "He's the master builder."

Or it'll be "former employer," if you keep tarrying any longer with the duke's daughter.

Her eyes widened even further, in what he'd have thought was an impossible feat. "You *are*?"

And no one had ever looked at him the way she now did, as if he were someone of interest and intrigue, and not just any poor boy from the East of London.

He nodded.

The girl clasped her hands under her chin; her gaze grew dreamy and far off, the way his mom looked when she scrubbed their laundry early in the morn before he and Martin and Papa went off to work.

"Been working for him four years now," he said, because he really wanted that look in her eyes to last forever. "But this is my first time on assignment."

In the past, he'd merely been tasked with collecting bricks that were to be used for projects.

Only, whatever he'd said caused that spark to go out of her eyes, and her brow dipped. "Four years? How old are you?"

"Ten." He paused. "Almost eleven."

Her eyes grew round again. "You've been working since you were a small boy."

Boys in his side of England weren't ever small. The babes who managed to survive went on to become full-grown people

in a matter of moments, or else they perished.

She opened her mouth to say something more, when frantic footfalls echoed from the corridor.

“I saw her at the foyer, Your Grace...and then she just disappeared...”

“Girls do not just disappear.” Those cold, regal tones could belong to none other than Her Majesty herself, or someone close to it.

A duchess.

The duchess.

Thaddeus felt the blood leave his cheeks.

Oh, hell.

This was bad.

This was very, very, very bad.

A small hand slipped into his, and the girl gave his fingers a tug, bringing Thaddeus’s gaze whipping down to hers.

“Come,” she whispered, and then was pulling him back towards the window he’d climbed through, and—

He strangled on his own spit. “You can’t climb out the window,” he blurted.

Except, he spoke in vain. For the girl was already out and over the window jamb and several rungs down.

“You did,” she pointed out, looking down, and not up, and he remained frozen, once more, his jaw slack, because he’d never known a lady could climb a ladder, but this one did. And —

She glanced up. “And you should, too,” she whispered. “They’re going to find you.”

They were going to find him.

And then it would be all over...and not even just his employment. Likely his life.

Because it was one thing to go sneaking about his employer's client's household. It was another to be caught doing it with the employer's client's daughter.

Springing into motion, Thaddeus heaved himself outside, taking extra care to not jar the ladder and send it rocking so that he inadvertently sent the girl tumbling to the stones below.

Not that he needed to worry.

She, moving as quick as the fleetest London pickpocket, had already reached the bottom.

Planting her hands on her hips, she stared up at him. "Hurry," she whispered.

He wanted to tell her to hush, but he'd only bring more noise and further raise the risk of discovery.

And then he was down, beside her and free. Almost free.

Catching the ladder under his arm, he took off racing...

And he felt air brush him, and then widened his eyes, as the duke's daughter went racing with him.

Nay, not with him. Past him.

Goodness, she was quick.

For a girl.

And a princess, at that.

And even more, in skirts?

And Thaddeus had never been one to be impressed by little girls. But this one...did.

He quickened his strides, returning that ladder to where he'd found it, earning not so much as a look from the other men employed by Mr. Webb as they moved about the bustling courtyard, focused on their tasks for the latest assignment.

The little girl raced ahead to the barn, slipping inside, and he stared after her.

She'd not even said goodbye.

Of course, she hadn't.

She wasn't a friend.

She was almost royalty.

Almost royalty didn't play with the help.

They—

The girl ducked her head from the stables, and then gave a frantic wave, flicking her four fingers towards her chest, motioning. For him?

Thaddeus touched a finger to his chest.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, you," she mouthed, her voice silent, the meaning of her words clear.

He sprang into motion a second time, hastening after her, and then he joined her in the stables.

The scene of horses and hay surrounded him. And quiet.

It was so very quiet. A manner of quiet he'd never known existed in London.

"I checked," she whispered. "No one is here."

Thaddeus glanced about; some two dozen mounts all housed in generous spaces. Why, even the duke's horses had a grander home than his own.

He stopped beside one of the stalls, and catching the edges, he looked in.

The little girl drew herself up by her hands and dangled there beside Thaddeus.

"He is mine," she said proudly.

Thaddeus stared at the grey pony, its head down as he munched on hay.

"He's pretty splendid," he said quietly.

"Do you have a pony?"

Thaddeus shook his head. He barely had a house.

"You want to ride mine?"

It took a moment for her question to register.

He glanced over.

“Her name is Pixie,” the girl said. “You can ride her.”

Thaddeus grunted. “I can’t.” He’d be sacked for sure. And he also didn’t know how to ride.

“Ride?” she asked, all wide-eyed, and unlike before when he’d felt proud at her awe, now he felt the sting of shame and embarrassment.

Color flooded his cheeks.

The girl slipped her palm in his once more, twining their fingers. “Come with me.” Hers was a quiet command, and he found himself being pulled forward as she led him inside the stall.

“He likes to be petted here,” she said, scratching the pony. “This is his shoulder.”

Thaddeus cocked his head. “Doesn’t look like a shoulder.”

She giggled. “It’s a horse’s shoulder.”

Which apparently were *different* than human shoulders.

“You can pet him,” she offered.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t,” he said, his voice gruff. “I should get back to work.”

Her face fell. “But I don’t want you to go back to work. I want you to stay with me. I like you.”

Thaddeus opened his mouth to tell her she didn’t even know him, but something in her eyes called back the words that he knew would wound her; they were all wide and trusting and innocent.

“We can be friends,” she ventured hesitantly, and when he didn’t immediately respond, she glanced down at her slipped feet. “Most people aren’t my friends because my father is the duke,” she said. “And my brother Crispin, is busy with *his* own friends. He has a girl who is a friend, so I can have a boy who is one, too.”

He couldn't be her friend. His da was a bricklayer and Thaddeus had soot under his nails and a belly that was usually empty.

"My name is Thaddeus."

She considered that a moment. "I like that name."

He was glad one of them did.

He'd always thought it was too fancy for a boy like him.

"My name is Edith Rose."

Edith Rose.

She sighed. "I like Rose but *hate* Edith."

"Edie," he murmured. That suited her far more. It was a name of a girl who was approachable and real...just as she was.

Her face brightened, and she clasped her hands to her chest. "I quite like that." She took a step towards him. "Can we be friends?"

No.

Leave.

Run.

Go.

And yet, he couldn't make himself.

He didn't want to.

Thaddeus nodded. "Friends."

She smiled. "Forever!"

Friends, forever? That was...a bit much. As it was, they were already pressing it with this. "We can't be friends, forever, Edie," he said slowly. "You're a duke's daughter."

She scoffed. "That won't change anything. You'll see!"

And in the days and months that came, with him working for her family, and she stealing time away with him as he did,

and then when that work was done, and he sneaking off to visit her through the years, it almost felt that way.

As if nothing would change.

Until he fell in love with her...

And then everything did change.

Everything.

Chapter 1

North Yorkshire, England

Winter 1829

She was about to die.

Lady Edith Peregrine, the Marchioness of Bouchier, clung to the sides of the carriage, gripping it with all she had and for all she was worth, as it pitched and swayed and careened along the icy, snow-covered road.

A panicky laugh built in her throat: the irony not at all lost upon her.

Here she was, a woman of thirty-two years, who'd endured more than twelve miserable years of marriage to an emotionless cur of a husband had finally found herself set free in his death: free to go where she wished without his oppressive thumb over her. Free to spend the winter away from London with her brother and his family in Oxfordshire.

Only to die in a carriage wreck just nine months after his passing.

Edith's driver's frantic shouts and pleas to the horses filled her ears.

If Stanbridge had moved to pleading with the team, they were, indeed, in trouble.

The team's hooves slipped and slid as they galloped; she felt it in the way the carriage slid forward.

Faster and faster.

Clenching her eyes shut, she prayed.

And she regretted that she'd not prayed in so long, and that those prayers were so rusty.

But God hadn't made it a point of answering her pleas before, and she'd gotten tired of asking and talking to him, and well, now she could really use his help.

And this moment, her death, was so very consistent with how her life had gone when she was living.

And then, suddenly, the carriage was careening sideways, sliding to the left and then right, zigzagging back and forth: crisscrossing in a way that brought her gaze colliding with the horses who were moving in an arc.

The driver cried out, and she joined in, and then screamed until her throat hurt and her lungs burned. Edith pitched sideways, and then flew forward.

She slammed hard against the opposite bench, expelling all the air from her lungs, leaving her too winded to do anything more than attempt to breathe.

But the carriage had stopped.

She'd survived.

She lay there, draped across the opposite bench, her skirts flipped over her knees, the way she'd used to hike them when she'd run about London, sneaking away from her family's townhouse, and racing about freely with *him*—Thaddeus.

Edith froze.

Yes, mayhap she was dead, after all.

Because she'd known in death, she would see him again.

Thaddeus Phippen.

The boy who'd been her friend, and then the young man who'd been her lover, and then the lover who had left.

Her chest ached, with a pain that had nothing to do with being tossed about the inside of her carriage. A pain so deep, as fresh as it had been when he'd stopped coming around, and just fallen out of her life.

Aye, this was no heaven after all.

Because she still hurt. And surely there wasn't hurting in the great beyond.

If there was even a great beyond?

The door was wrenched open, and a blast of cold filled the conveyance.

Her driver, Stanbridge, and Thomas, the groom traveling with them peered inside.

“Your Ladyship!” Thomas cried.

Stanbridge ran a frantic gaze over her. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she interrupted, hurrying to assure the loyal, crimson-clad servants. “Just fine.” She looked them over. “Have either of you been hurt?”

They spoke in unison.

“No, my lady.”

“Fit as a fiddle.”

Pushing herself upright, Edith let loose a gasp as her shoulder screamed in protest.

Thomas cried out again. “My lady!”

She bit her trembling lip. “Fine,” she lied, through her gritted teeth. Her shoulder throbbed and ached with the likes of a pain she’d never before known or felt.

That was a manner of vicious physical agony, different than the previous ache in her heart that hadn’t hurt any less than this misery.

“A-Are you both certain y-you are well?” she pressed them.

“Aye. Not so much as a scratch.” Stanbridge flinched and snatched his cap from his blond head and drew it against his chest. “Sadly, I’m not able to say the same for the carriage.”

Her stomach dropped, and she scooted herself along the bench, allowing Thomas to help her from the conveyance.

Her booted feet were immediately swallowed by several inches of snow, and she gasped: not from the bite of cold, wet snow as it penetrated the fabric of her skirts, but from the agony that jarring motion caused her shoulder.

Tears smarted her eyes, and she caught her elbow, bracing her arm to keep it as still as possible.

Both men took a step forward, but she fluttered four of the fingers that cradled her elbow.

“What do we do?” she asked the young driver, her voice strained to her own ears.

Worry creased his brow, and as the young man stared off into the distance, the concern deepened in his eyes. “Well,” he said slowly. “I...hope the other carriage realizes we are not following.”

The other carriage containing her maid and trunks.

“I’ve not caught sight of it for some time now,” Thomas reluctantly added.

Nor would they have. The other carriage had continued on at an earlier hour in hopes of arriving before Edith, so they might have the country residence readied.

Edith’s teeth chattered from the cold. “Wh-what now?” she managed between chattering teeth, the warm sough of her breath leaving a little puff of white in the night air.

“The nearest inn is some ways back, and...I’m not certain of how far forward...” the driver went on.

And then...it began to snow. Again.

A single snowflake fluttered and danced slowly down, before landing on her nose.

Edith’s eyes went cross as she stared at that blip of moisture.

That tiniest of flakes was soon followed by another and another.

“*I love the snow...!*” That long-ago, whispered avowal floated into her consciousness.

She and a little boy sprawled flat on their stomachs, in the dead of night, outside the entrance of the stables, their legs kicked up behind them.

He'd gathered up the untouched snow, gathering it into a small, perfectly formed ball.

"*Ices...*?" he'd whispered, offering her that snow-fresh treat, like he'd been handing her an ice from Gunter's, and it had been even more special than the confectionaries at that place in London, because it had been him, and—

"My lady?" Stanbridge's concerned query cut across those long-ago musings, and Edith gave her head a shake to dispel the past and focus on the more alarming present.

It'd been years since she'd let herself think of him. When she'd been miserable and lonely and longing for him, she'd sit with the memory of him and the times they'd shared.

This, however, was decidedly not the time for woolgathering.

"What do you pr-propose?" she asked, reflexively rubbing her gloved hands together to bring warmth to the digits, and then a hiss of pain slipped through her teeth as agony shot down her arm. Stars danced behind her eyes, and she sucked in an uneven breath.

"Lady Bouchier!" Thomas's cry cut through the night sky—the winter still, and quiet of the snowfall making it even louder.

"I'm f-fine," she lied again through her chattering teeth. "J-just cold." It was another falsehood. She was in pain from the blow to her arm and from the bite of the winter chill.

And yet, she was attired in fur-lined garments. She took in the devoted servants' respectable attire that would do little to protect them from the elements.

"We must f-find a place for all of us. You will both f-freeze."

They waved off her concern.

"We'll be just fine, my lady," Stanbridge said.

Thomas nodded. "It is you we should be worrying about."

Edith may have had a miserable marriage, but she'd been blessed with devoted, good-hearted servants. "Wh-what do you r-recommend?"

"There was a residence we passed a short while ago. Not so very far from here. We can go there and ask for their hospitality."

Ask for their hospitality? At this point, she'd have begged Satan for a hand on Sunday.

Edith looked to the pair of white mares. "Wh-what of the mounts?"

"I'll collect them. If there's a manor, there is sure to be stables," Thomas said.

While the groom set about unfastening the mounts, Stanbridge collected Edith's valise, and together, they went in search of shelter.

What was "not so very far from here" proved a long, slow, arduous walk. She in her serviceable boots, and Stanbridge in his buckled footwear. Another wave of remorse filled her and briefly distracted her from the misery of her hurting shoulder.

"S-Stanbridge, I v-vow, if we survive this, you will only ever again wear comfortable, sturdy b-boots."

The young driver laughed, and even through her discomfort, Edith managed a smile.

Their good humor ended shortly thereafter. The snowfall increased, the flakes swirled in the air around them, and Edith squinted, searching for any hint of the household they'd be begging for sanctuary from, and finding no sign of it.

She burrowed deeper into the folds of her fur-lined cloak in a bid to escape the frigid cold, silently crying at the pain that trembling wrought to her arm, each quaver as miserable as the steps that she took.

"Y-you are c-certain you saw a place where we might r-rest?" she asked, feeling tearful and hearing the fear in her own voice.

“N-Not much farther now,” Stanbridge promised for the sixth time since they’d set out.

And then, wonder of wonders, they stumbled upon it: the massive stone keep.

Edith stopped briefly in her tracks. The completely dark, massive stone keep...a great, big manor shrouded in complete darkness, without so much as a single candle flickering in the window, or smoke to signal a lit hearth.

Nothing.

Stanbridge doubled back and stopped beside her. Shielding a hand over his brow, he peered off into the distance. “I...do not think anyone is home.”

“No,” she said. “I-it...appears that way.”

Thomas, leading the pair of mounts, reached them.

Edith glanced over.

The groom’s cheeks were flushed red from the cold and his teeth chattered noisily. “I s-see stables! I’ll look after the horses and take sh-shelter there.”

As he hastened ahead, Edith motioned to Stanbridge. “Come,” she said. L-Let us go take sh-shelter inside.”

Forcing her chilled feet to keep moving, she set out once more; every step that brought her closer left a buoying lightness in her chest, her relief growing and growing and then promptly dissolving as she reached the foot of the mammoth household.

Stanbridge opened the door; the hinges groaned.

As Edith stepped through the old oak doorway, she blinked to adjust her eyes to the dim surroundings. Up close she understood why no one was home.

She touched her gaze upon the massive foyer. She took it all in. From the cracked flooring to the shattered window frames where lead or glass panes should be.

“So many shattered windowpanes,” she whispered.

Heavily damaged as to indicate a vacant household, but, the worktables, littered with sketchpads and drawings and tools proved, the home was no longer abandoned, merely under construction.

The builders and staff would have been given a leave for the holidays.

“Come,” Stanbridge urged. “I e-expect we can make a fire.”

Edith sighed. “I expect you are able to. I, on the other hand haven’t the first inclination of how to find us any warmth.”

“You’ve got skills enough of your own, my lady.”

Skills? “I daresay playing the pianoforte and embroidering aren’t going to do us much g-good,” she said dryly.

Never had she appreciated more just how useless the *skills* expected of ladies in fact, were.

Offering far more hearty protestations about her talents than Edith deserved, her driver led them deeper inside.

Abandoned. There was no hint of life, not so much as the squeak of an errant mouse. Why, those tiny creatures had likely also found somewhere far warmer to go than the current abode Edith and her driver had commandeered.

Her teeth clacked together noisily. “W-we should s-split up and see what we might f-find,” she said, and as he dropped a hasty bow, taking off in the opposite direction, Edith made a long, slow climb abovestairs.

The bottom of her skirts, damp from their trek through the snow, dragged slowly and heavily as she made her ascent.

As she walked, she peeked inside empty room after empty room...until she found an abandoned bedchamber.

She wandered inside and breathed a steadied sigh of relief as her gaze snagged upon a surprisingly soft-looking velvet covering, draped over the four-poster bed, at the center of the room.

Edith paused beside the fireplace. Still smoldering ashes sat in the hearth, indicating the occupants hadn't been gone too long from the residence.

She peered in the copper and brass kindling bucket and found some sticks, twigs, and a log inside.

Holding her left arm close to her chest, Edith collected the poker in her other hand, and turned the ashes over. Next, she added some of the twigs to keep the fire going until Stanbridge arrived.

The household had been abandoned for the holidays, and yet, there was enough to ensure she and the servants would be safe until they were able to resume travel. Relief filled her.

Straightening, Edith headed over to the mahogany bed frame. She stroked a hand over the faded but luxuriant coverlet. The fabric wore the chill of the night air, and yet...it was warm, and there was a stack of blankets, and she sent another prayer of thanks skyward.

Releasing the fabric, she did another cursory sweep of the room...and her eyes landed upon a tattered trunk, one that showed its age and wear.

Drawn over to the old, forgotten article, she unlatched the clasps, and lifted the lid.

Several rows of garments still lay neatly within, and she sifted through those things, searching for something belonging to the former owner that she might use for she and Stanbridge.

Her gaze landed on the contents inside and relief filled her.

The shirts were of fine quality: a soft lawn, the trousers a serviceable wool.

She awkwardly lifted a long, dark, heavy wool cloak.

Edith let the article fall, and with frantic movements, proceeded to unclasp her own wet cloak; it landed with a thump upon the floor.

Her arm throbbing, Edith awkwardly lifted the dry article as best as she was able.

“Stanbridge,” she called loudly, as she draped the garment around her shoulders. “I’ve found items!”

While she waited for her driver to arrive, Edith continued wading through the treasure trove of items she’d found. Excitement made her careless.

A hiss sailed through her teeth, and a curse along with it, that echoed off the walls, from the agony that movement caused her.

And she paused, taking in several slow, uneven breaths, until the pain abated, returning to that dull, aching throb.

With a greater carefulness to her motions, Edith drew the long wool cloak about her shoulders, awkwardly fiddling with the clasp at the throat...until she had it.

She turned to go...but a bright flash of red caught her eye, and she glanced down.

Her gaze alighted on that bright crimson jacket at the bottom. With a proper reverence and respect, she reached for, and carefully lifted, that military jacket in her right hand.

Brass gleamed upon the shoulders; medals adorned the front.

A soldier had once lived here.

Who had he been? And what’s more, what had happened that he’d left behind forgotten his—

“My lady?”

Edith gasped. The garment slipped from her hands as she spun about.

“Stanbridge,” she said, her heart pounding.

“My apologies,” he said, from the doorway, his arms laden with wood. “I too, found chambers filled with blankets at the end of the hall. There were remains of a fire.” He grinned and nodded to the logs he still held. “And this in the kitchens. I’ve a fire now going in the adjoining room.” His smile widened. “I’m happy to say they’d left the household well-stocked with kindling and wood and means to start a fire.”

And for the first time since she'd begun the trek from London, free of her dead husband and the constraints of that stifling place, she found herself smiling a real smile.

“We are going to be all right, after all, aren't we?”

He returned her grin. “I expect we are.”

Chapter 2

Something was amiss.

A problem, rather.

Former Lieutenant Thaddeus Phippen's ability to ferret out problems was a skill that had eluded him as a child, but fortunately found and honed during his years fighting in the King's Army.

The celebration of his brother, Martin's marriage to Lady Christina, was still in full swing.

The voices of the guests, who'd gathered at Lady Christina's sister's household for a scheduled winter house party, and who'd instead found themselves attending an impromptu wedding, filled the room in song.

Every member of the party present stomped and raised their voices, singing "In Sweet, Rejoicing." Over the tops of their heads, Thaddeus peered at the butler eyeing the collection of guests, his concerned focus still on Martin, his features strained. As if he needed to interrupt but regretted being the one to infringe upon the celebration.

A little hand tugged at his, and he glanced down at Lady Christina's young daughter, Luna. "You aren't singing, Uncle Thaddeus?"

Thaddeus leaned down and whispered, "I didn't want to drown out your angelic voice."

The little girl's eyes filled with happiness, and drawing in a deep breath, the daughter of the newly married young mother, erupted into an even louder, more boisterous song.

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the butler starting across the room. "Keep singing," he urged, heading for the servant, and intercepting him. "What is it?"

A palpable relief at being spared from bringing his problem to the bridegroom filled the servant's eyes. "There is...smoke across the way," the butler whispered. "At...the residence across the way, that is."

Thaddeus stiffened. “Smoke?”

“It appears a chimney was lit, and...one of the footmen spied it and thought it...odd.”

Odd because he and Martin had been welcomed as guests for the formal house party being thrown.

The residence across the way being the investment property he'd stumbled upon and purchased on behalf of his brother: London's premier builder. The properties had been in shambles, and needed extensive repairs, and yet Thaddeus had seen through all of that to the potential. Broken windows could be fixed, and walls plastered and painted.

It could not, however, recover with a same ease were it to be burnt to the ground.

From across the room, Martin snagged his gaze; concern lit his brother's eyes, but Thaddeus gave a slight wave of his hand, reassuring him all was fine.

“I'll see to it,” he said, already starting from the room.

The butler followed close at his heels. “I've had Mr. Phippen's mount saddled and sent along several servants to assess in the event of...fire.”

A short ride later, Thaddeus found himself dismounting outside the residence he'd purchased: one that would no longer be sold, and would now become home to Martin, his new wife, Christina, and her four children.

Having lived in the worst end of London, he'd witnessed all manner of disasters: oftentimes involving careless fires set in hopes of people finding warmth, but which had ultimately taken down entire streets of buildings and hovels serving as homes. That familiarity with the perils of fire had been further witnessed during his time fighting in the King's Army.

And yet, as Thaddeus handed the reins of his brother's horse to a waiting servant, he scoured the horizon.

The pungent, acrid scent of a raging fire did not hang in the night sky.

The earlier report had been incorrect. There'd been *two* fires set.

With a frown, Thaddeus climbed the uneven and cracked stone steps.

One of his new sister-in-law's servants, joined him in the foyer. Together, they took in the damp floor. Two pairs of shoes had tracked mud and water up the stairway.

"Appears there...is someone here, Mr. Phippen," the young man whispered. "Trespassers."

Trespassers.

Trespassers...

The cool, clipped tones of the young Englishman's words mingled and merged with different tones: those belonging to another, spoken in foreign tongues that Thaddeus had been forced to pick up or perish if he did not.

"Intrus, tirez..." *Trespassers, shoot...*

And as the servant spoke, his words continued to blend with the warnings of others. "Down several doors...Phippen."

Down, Phippen...get down...

Sweat beaded his brow.

The rapid echo of gunfire pinged in his mind, sucking him from the present and placing him in the past, and his breath grew shallow and rapid in his ears.

"Phippen, down!"

That warning came distinct over the din of gunfire and metal swords clashing. Thaddeus dropped to a knee, and the charging French soldier, collided into him, his bayonet sailed uselessly over Thaddeus's head, striking at empty air instead.

Thrown off-balance, the young man tumbled back, and landed on his stomach.

Finding his feet, Thaddeus drove his sword through the young man's chest.

Shock rounded out the boy's eyes. A spot of crimson appeared from his lips, and then like a bubbling fountain, he erupted, spewing blood.

Thaddeus stared in rapt horror at the dying soldier.

"Left, Phippen! Phippen!"

That person speaking his name, his tone grew more strident, more concerned, and Thaddeus slogged his way through the hell of the past.

"Mr. Phippen? Mr. Phippen?"

Mr. Phippen.

Not Lieutenant Phippen.

Think.

Why aren't they calling you "lieutenant."

Because you aren't there.

He was here.

Back in England.

Safe.

The present came whirring back, and Thaddeus blinked rapidly, the cobwebs lifting, and he stared at the servant.

The young footman looked back at him with concern-filled eyes.

A dull flush burned Thaddeus's neck, and he gave thanks for the cover of darkness provided by the dark foyer. "I'll check down this hall. You do a sweep of the other floor."

The young man bowed his head, and then hurried off.

Thaddeus directed his focus forward, and made the climb, concentrating his attentions on the task at hand and not the demons that were still with him: the ones that would always be with him.

As he approached his temporary bedchambers in this place, heat spilled out into the otherwise chilled corridors,

growing increasingly warm, until he reached the fourth door upon the right.

The room he'd taken in this place as his bedchambers.

His door hung slightly ajar, having been left open a crack.

Stiffening, Thaddeus clasped the handle, and slowly pushed the panel open, gradually, so as to not lend the hinges any further squeak.

An impressive fire blazed from the hearth.

He stepped into the room, doing a sweep as he went.

A slight snore rent the quiet, and Thaddeus wrenched his gaze over to the figure sprawled in the center of his bed.

Curled on his side, the tiny figure lay, with his legs drawn up and his diminutive form swallowed by a cloak.

Nay, not just any cloak. Thaddeus's cloak.

Pity tugged at his breast, as he moved closer towards the "trespasser."

But then, how many times had he himself been a "trespasser." Stepping foot on properties he'd not any right to be, but one he'd been hopeless to stay away from, and then not even because of the material possessions or warmth to be had there—though there'd been that, too.

Thaddeus reached the side of the white-painted sleigh bed and stopped.

He stared down at the pathetic little creature curled within the lumpy mattress, in desperate need of feathers or being replaced.

"Should we find a magistrate, Mr. Phippen?" the forgotten servant quietly called from across the room, and Thaddeus pulled his gaze briefly from the person and cast a glance over his shoulder to the young man waiting.

Waiting for the one word that would see him off to find the law.

One word that would alter the child's future and fate.

He shook his head. "I've got this," he said, dismissing the young man.

The servant bowed, and then hurriedly stepped from the rooms.

Bowing to him.

How quick a fellow's circumstances changed. A poor soldier, hired to work for his brother, a brother who'd, in turn, in less than ten days of arriving at this place, had met and married the widowed sister of a baron, and thereby elevating Thaddeus just by chance of their shared blood.

Giving his head a wry shake, Thaddeus turned his attentions back to the still-slumbering intruder.

The faded reddish-pink coverlets rustled, as the young boy stirred.

Nay, he'd never been one and never would be one to condemn a man outside the ranks of the peerage to a life of drudgery and hell, all because they'd sought to steal themselves such much-needed reprieve from the elements and the viciousness of the world. Not when he himself knew firsthand what it was to be at the mercy and kindness of an otherwise merciless world.

"Take these to your family, Thaddeus..." Those whispered words, spoken in a singsong voice, whispered forward from the deep corners of his mind.

Of her.

Edie.

Edie, with an armful of blankets and food for his family that she'd snuck from her family's household.

Memories of a woman he always kept pushed to the side, but they were always there, floating on the periphery.

It was hard not to think of her.

The one friend he'd had in London. The friend who'd then become a lover.

But also, the one friend who'd needed him to make more of himself, and whose parents had paid for his commission in the army at their daughter's behest, they'd said. The truth of it was, all they'd ever really wanted was Thaddeus gone. And while he'd went, attempting to make more of himself, and for them, so he could rise up in ranks and worth—feats he'd accomplished—she'd also done the same. For, upon his return, he'd discovered in his absence, she'd made that same climb herself—all the way up to the rank of marchioness.

His gut muscles seized and clenched.

Funny, that time didn't dull or blot the blow of past betrayals and losses and hurts.

Just then, the intruder in his bed groaned, and Thaddeus closed the remaining space between himself and the bed.

He knew the mind-numbing terror of sneaking into another person's household, and the fear of discovery that made it fully impossible to relax in peace.

He'd let the boy stay on for the night, and then advise him to go next door to the kitchens for food, a place to stay, and then he'd add him on to his and Martin's staff of workers, overseeing the reconstruction of this property.

Suddenly, the boy rolled onto his back, and the hood of his cloak slipped back, and a tumble of reddish-brown curls spilled out, a lion's mane of tangled tresses that covered the face and revealed but a dainty chin and—

Thaddeus froze.

For it also revealed his intruder was, in fact, not a boy, but rather, a woman.

A woman who just then pushed that jumble of hair back from her eyes, parting the curtain it had made, revealing a heart-shaped, freckled face.

His heart stopped beating.

For hers was a very familiar heart-shaped, freckled face.

And surely it was because he'd been thinking about her.

Surely it had been the intrusion of her memory moments earlier to account for his seeing her even now.

He blinked several times, trying to blot out the image of the woman before him and replace it with whomever the person was who'd stumbled across this stone keep.

Confusion filled the largest, most enormous blue eyes he'd ever seen.

Nay, he'd seen eyes that large before.

Thaddeus jammed his fingertips against his temples and tried to make any of this make sense. The past had intruded this night—first, in the form of his wartime memories and now *her*.

“Thaddeus,” she whispered, and his name echoed not around the chambers of his mind, but this very room.

Real. She is real. Nay, she was *always* real.

Here. She was here.

He gritted his teeth and fought this latest descent into madness. She couldn't be—

“Is it you?” she asked, her voice husky from sleep, similar to the way it had grown husky when they'd made love, with the stable floor hay as the only mattress under them. But then that was all he'd been good for.

Thaddeus narrowed his eyes.

For she, the intruder of his recent properties was not just any intruder. He curled his lips into a cold smile. “Well, well, well. If you aren't a regular old Red Riding Hood.”

Nay, the slumberous lady before him was none other, than Lady Edith—the woman who'd broken his heart.

Chapter 3

When Edie had been young, she'd dreamed of Thaddeus Phippen, often and always.

He'd been such a part of her waking and living thoughts, she'd not been able to separate what was real from the dreams of him—nay, of them—that lived within her head.

Those dreams had lasted only until the nightmares began.

The nightmare that had been her marriage to that mean, old leech.

In the earliest days of that torturous union, she'd clung to the memory of him still. When he'd gone to fight, her parents had used her love for Thaddeus against her. In order to keep his family safe and secure from her parents' threat to destroy them, Edith agreed to marry a cold-hearted marquess.

The day she'd found out Thaddeus had left, Edie had wept as though her soul had been crushed.

And that was how it had felt. As though with his leaving, all the joy, life, and light had been sucked from her body, leaving in its place, a vast, empty void of loss and loneliness.

She'd thought nothing could hurt more than his being gone. Until her parents had come to her.

Until they'd demanded she wed that decrepit, old marquess...and the failure to do so would see Thaddeus's family destitute. The brother whom he'd loved. The parents who'd had so little, that to lose even more would have consigned them to death.

And so, she'd married.

All the while she'd done so, she'd vowed that when he returned, she'd run away with him.

That they could go somewhere, together. Another country. Some place. Any place. Just as long as they two were together.

That dream had sustained her...and she'd waited until his return...waiting, waiting, and then seeking him out.

Only to find when she'd visited him, he'd proven a good deal less forgiving of her circumstances.

She'd done what she'd done...for him.

She had waited for his return, hoping desperate that they might leave together.

Only to be rejected by him.

Because he was an honorable man; and he'd not understood her desperation. She'd not revealed the depth of the cruelty she lived every day. But then, he'd not been willing to listen.

And she'd loved him so desperately that she could not have blamed him. Until...his visage had faded. Because it had been easier to let him go. She had put walls up around her heart, shutting away her feelings, wants, and desires for Thaddeus.

He'd not remained buried in her thoughts forever. At the oddest times, and in the oddest places, he'd crept back in.

It had been so long since she'd not thought of him, she'd believed all her hopes and dreams of him were gone.

It was why she was surely imagining him—*here*. Of all places.

Or she'd died.

Yes, that made more sense.

The wild carriage ride...and the accident, and then there'd come thoughts of him in those last moments.

She groaned. "I am dead."

It was better this way. He was here. Because in the worst days of her marriage, she'd imagined being united again with Thaddeus...even if it was one day when they both drew their last breaths.

A cold smile formed on his mouth. "Oh, no. You are very much alive, *Lady Edith*."

Her heart stuttered. Or mayhap she'd died and gone to hell. Because that was the only way she'd recalled this frosty, steel-eyed version of the man from her youth.

He narrowed his eyes. "Or should I say, Lady Bouchier now? Isn't it?"

A vise twisted her heart. She'd tried to tell him why...but he'd not wanted to hear her out, and in truth, she'd not truly been able to get all the words out. For even as she'd done what she had for Thaddeus and his family, she'd been ashamed for asking him to run away with her.

When he ordered her gone, she'd waited for him to cool his temper, and come to her.

But he'd never come.

He, this man, who she'd thought knew her so well. If only he had known her as she'd believed he had, he would have gathered she'd was miserable and come to her rescue as he'd vowed he would always do.

The same ache of regret struck painfully in her chest. "No, Thaddeus," she said softly. "Eddie will do. Just...Eddie. We"—we are friends, after all—"were friends, after all." She handed those words to him as an echo from a long-ago time, the same ones she'd once uttered.

He stared at her through stricken eyes.

What else did you expect when all he saw was that you'd married another?

"*Friends*," he echoed with a quiet wryness that went straight to her heart.

She pushed herself up onto her elbow and then bit her cheek to keep from crying out, as her arm screamed in protest. She stabilized her arm, and awkwardly scooted herself out from under the blankets. The moment she managed to shimmy out, she lay there: her skirts and his cloak hiked up, and her lower limbs exposed.

And she felt Thaddeus's gaze slip from her face and slide lower to her bared flesh.

And something shifted in the air: the anger evaporating under the presence of something that had always been more familiar with this man—desire.

Only, things had changed.

Everything had changed.

She had.

He had.

With hurried movements, she shoved her skirts back down into place, and then swung her legs over the side of the bed so that her skirts fluttered to the floor.

“What are you doing here, Edith?”

Edith.

God, how she hated that name. It was the one her parents insisted on using, and then the one her husband had called her, and then also one all of Polite Society did, too. Now, Thaddeus did.

That made her want to cry most of all.

“My carriage was...stalled by the snow,” she said, glancing down at her feet, and then she picked up her gaze. “Is it really you?” Her heart and mind struggled to understand seeing him again, and finding him here, of all places.

He quirked his lips in another harsh grin. “One and the same.”

“Why are *you* here?” she asked. “Were you also forced to stop because—”

Her words abruptly trailed off and her gaze slid to that trunk she’d been rifling through. The trunk she’d discovered hadn’t been abandoned, but rather, it belonged to *this* man, of all men—her former sweetheart, and only love.

Her eyes locked upon the crimson jacket she’d left partially draped over the edge, and now she saw those epaulets and metals in a new light.

He touched a hand to his brow as if in salute.

“You managed your dream,” she said, her voice wistful to her own ears. It was why she’d been unable to begrudge his leaving for the army. He’d deserved to escape.

“Yes. The *dream*.” Something in that latter word: harsh, cold, and hollow brought her gaze sliding back over to his.

She searched his face, but unlike the boy and then man whose every emotion she could read from his features, she could make no sense of anything. He may as well have been chiseled in granite.

A glorious granite. His features were still strikingly sharp angles: a chiseled nose, a cleft in that nobly squared jaw. He’d always been tall, several inches past six feet, and possessed corded muscles from a life of labor.

And she hated that her body should tremble at the remembrance of his embrace, and the ways in which he’d brought her to pleasure: gliding in and out of her, until she’d shattered in those glorious little deaths that only he had ever done.

“See something you like, my lady?” he asked in a whisper of whiskey and sin.

A cold, mocking glimmer glinted in his eyes. One that said he’d noted her study of him.

And she hated that her body should respond to him so, when he clearly only held her in antipathy.

It had been one thing knowing he’d sought a better future and gotten himself freedom that she’d so craved.

It was another knowing the time they’d spent together had mattered not at all.

Chapter 4

The dream, she'd called it.

And for a long while that was what it had been. He'd imagined a life in the military, rising to the ranks so that he might make more of himself...so that he could be more for her.

Back when she'd assured himself that she didn't need more. That he was enough.

Until her father had come to him with the truth.

The words Edith hadn't spoken but had instead been presented by the duke; of the need for him to go so that he could be worthy. Only to wait until he'd gone and then marry another. A man of the peerage, a man with a title and gads of wealth and influence, in short everything Thaddeus had not been, nor would ever be.

And yet, even with all the hurt of past betrayals, he couldn't stop himself from drinking in the sight of her.

She was as trim as ever: her waist nipped, her breasts a perfect size for a man's palm. And those auburn tresses, loose corkscrew curls as defiant as the lady herself, had fought free of her coiffure and hung down about her shoulders. Unbidden, an image slipped in: those same curls spanning the makeshift pillow he'd made of his discarded shirt, as she'd stretched her arms up towards him, pleading for his kiss, and his body, and his body cared naught for her defection, as a wave of desire bolted through him.

As if she felt the wicked direction his thoughts had traversed, a delicate blush stole across the high slashes of her cheekbones.

She blushed as easily as if she were the innocent girl who'd earned his heart.

And then, she tipped her chin up: defiance blazing in those enormous pools of her blue eyes. "See something you like,

Thaddeus?” she shot back, turning his own jeering words back upon him.

He held her gaze. “Aye,” he said, his voice husky with desire. “That I do, Edie.”

Her jaw slackened, and her lips parted, as surprise rounded out her eyes even more.

And he smirked at having managed to unsettle her.

Outrage glinted in her eyes, making them harder than he’d ever seen them, harder than he’d ever known this gaze to be. “You’re making light of me.” Fire flashed in those endless pools of blue.

He tipped the brim of his cap. “Aye, that I am.”

The fury was replaced so quick with a flash of hurt, and he felt like Johnny Trowber, the bully in East London who’d gone around kicking all the cats, and it made him feel as small and awful as when he’d been a child who’d tried—and failed—to stop that abuse.

“What did you think I should be—happy to see you, Edie?” he snapped. “Do you think I should have just forgotten that you”—sent me off to war—“married when I’d been gone?”

Her mouth turned down, and she held her mouth so tightly, little white lines appeared at the corners. “No,” she whispered. “I don’t think you’d...have forgotten that.”

And with that, another memory slid in...of the earliest days of his return, when he’d been in the new home, bigger than the hovel he’d left behind, struggling to find his way—through the nightmares, and back to a new norm—when she’d suddenly shown up, her eyes alight with joy, and urged him to run away with her. Run away...because she’d already been married.

His lips curled in a reflexive sneer. “What? That you’d come to me, ready to take me as your lover.”

But never her husband. She’d given that right to another. He took a step towards her. “That I wasn’t good enough for

you to marry, but certainly good enough for you to bed.”

She jerked like he'd struck her; her features went deathly white, and even as he knew she was deserving of his fury, he hated himself for hurting her. “It was never that way, Thaddeus,” she said, between gritted teeth.

“It was *always* that way, Edith,” he said, unable to keep the regret from creeping in. He'd never had a place even thinking he had a right to a woman as fine as a duke's daughter.

She opened her mouth, but a commotion sounded from downstairs, interrupting whatever it was she'd intended to say.

A moment later, a quartet of servants came stampeding down the hall. Two servants attired in the uniform of his sister-in-law's staff, chased after another two fellows wearing garments pilfered from Thaddeus's trunk.

One wiry fellow brandished a brass candelabra over his head the way he might a medieval sword, and the other hefted a rake he'd helped himself to from the stables.

Even as Thaddeus held a staying hand up for his sister-in-law's staff, he stepped between Edith and the other servants bearing down on them.

“My lady,” the two men cried in perfect unison.

Edith hurried out from behind Thaddeus. “Thomas. Stanbridge. It *is*—” her assurances ended on a slight hiss. She briefly closed her eyes. “Fine.”

Ignoring the loyal servants glaring daggers at him, Thaddeus sharpened his gaze on Edith.

Something was amiss. That was, something other than their chance run-in.

She drew in a slow, slightly unsteady breath. “You needn't worry,” she said to her servants. “I've not come to any harm. Lieutenant Phippen...was a friend from long ago.”

A friend from long ago.

Aye, they'd been that. And lovers.

“Mr. Phippen,” Thaddeus clipped out that form of address.

“Mr. Phippen,” she murmured. “Forgive me.” She returned her focus to the servants. “If you’ll collect my things, Stanbridge?”

The taller of the men gathered up her valise and made a slow, reluctant retreat.

Edith looked to the remaining servant. “Thomas I’ll be along shortly.”

Thomas’s eyes bulged. “But, my lady, the carr—”

Edie quelled the remainder of those words with a look.

The young man cleared his throat. “As you wish, my lady.” Reluctantly, with a last, long suspicious look for Thaddeus, Thomas hastened from the room.

Edie unfastened the clasp of his wool cloak she’d helped herself to and let that garment slide to the floor.

A hiss exploded from her lips, and she immediately caught her lower lip to keep that sound of suffering in.

It was too late, however.

The initial shock of seeing her now lifted, Thaddeus took in those other details he’d previously failed to note: Edie’s sodden cloak resting near the hearth. Her cornelian muslin gown bore discolored splotches from where it too had been wet. The lace hem hung tattered about her ankles.

And her flushed features were strained and stretched—not with the guilt he’d previously attributed her reaction to—but rather, *pain*. Even her eyes glittered with misery.

Thaddeus’s previous anger vanished, as all past hurts and resentment were instantly forgotten.

With a frown, he was immediately across the room and at her side. “You are hurt.”

“I’m fine, Thaddeus.”

Except, her protestations were subdued. Weak. Weak, when Edith had never been so. Not even that day she’d shown up, begging him to run away with her.

“How did you come to be here, Edith?” he asked quietly, infusing a gentleness into his tone, speaking to her the same way he had his mount just before battle.

She hesitated. “The carriage hit a patch of ice, and careened, and I happened to hit the opposite wall...but I’m fine,” she said, her tone, alarmingly frail.

His heart seized and spasmed as an image slipped in, of her being thrown about a carriage, her body broken and battered and—

As if the act of standing suddenly proved too much, Edith swayed on her feet.

With a curse, Thaddeus caught her gently by the waist, steadying her. “Edie!”

Her lashes fluttered. “Perhaps, I’m more tired from all the excitement than I thought.” Her assurance emerged faint and threadbare.

His panic doubled.

Thaddeus pressed a hand to her forehead. She was hot to the touch.

“Christ, Edie,” he whispered. “You’re burning up.”

“I would rather prefer that to the freezing cold I’m *actually* f-feeling.” She flashed a heartrending smile.

The knot in his belly only grew. “You cannot travel.”

His was a statement.

“I’m not staying, Thaddeus.” Edith made to step out of his arms, and then cried out. She brought her right palm up to cradle her left elbow.

Thaddeus’s terror grew. “Let me see, Edie,” he entreated.

She angled her opposite shoulder towards him. “I said I’m f-fine.”

“You always were a terrible liar,” he said, striving for absolute calm, while inside panic reigned.

He held her gaze. “May I?”

Edie hesitated; within the strains of suffering in her face, he saw the indecision there, too: a battle she fought with herself.

This prideful side of the woman before him was new. And he wondered at all the other changes which had befallen her in their time apart.

Finally, Edie gave a shaky nod.

More than half-afraid she'd change her mind, Thaddeus immediately searched his fingers along her arm, gently feeling her forearm and then the point of her shoulder. All the while, his fingers burned from the heat of her satiny soft skin. It was a body he'd touched before, but the awareness of her had never faded, and it never would.

This, however, was different. Now, he probed the delicate protrusion of her bones, in search of—

She sucked in a small breath, and his gut clenching, he stopped. Damn it to hell.

“I told you, it is fine, Th-Thaddeus.” Her breathing had grown slightly labored. Her teeth chattered.

“It is not fine. It is dislocated, Edie,” he said gently.

“Oh.” Edie sucked in another wobbly breath. “Well, again, thank you for allowing me the u-use of your rooms...I will not infringe upon your hospitality any more than I already h-ave.” With that, she bowed her head, and headed for the door.

Thaddeus's brows dipped.

She...actually believed he'd let her go out like this? Hurt and injured?

Marching over, his longer legs easily overtaking her smaller strides, he placed himself between her and the doorway.

Edie's shoulders slumped. She stretched her uninjured arm out and rested a palm against the doorjamb. “What are you doing?” Her eyes glittered with fever.

“I'm seeing to your arm.”

She drew that wounded appendage closer. “You most certainly are *n-not*.”

That rejection hit him square in the chest: the evidence that she’d rather suffer in silence and leave than allow him to help her.

But should you expect anything different? When you’ve been mocking and cold to her?

That had been before, however. Before he’d known she was hurt.

And despite whatever betrayals she was guilty of, he’d have sooner lopped off his own arm and handed it to her than see her suffer in any way.

“Edie,” he said begged. “Please, let me help you.”

She continued to eye him with that same palpable indecision, warring with herself. “F-Fine,” she said between her chattering teeth. “But the moment you are done, I’ll leave.”

Absolutely she would not. Old hurt and pride aside, there was no way he was sending her out with her arm injured, and in that godforsaken weather.

But his wartime experience had shown him there was a time and place for every battle, and this, her finally having capitulated and allowing him to tend her injury, was decidedly not that moment.

Thaddeus motioned to the bed she’d previously commandeered.

Edie hesitated a moment, and then tilting her chin up, glided gracefully across the room, and sailed onto the edge of the mattress.

Nay, not just any mattress.

His mattress.

And as he went and joined her, his hands trembled, and he shook inside at that reminder of the place she now occupied.

For it was a place he'd always wanted her, in his bed. But that would have never been enough. He'd wanted her in every way: in his life, as his wife, the mother of his babes.

Thaddeus forced himself to thrust those futile longings and lamentations of the past away.

He again gently probed the area of her shoulder, praying his earlier assessment had been wrong—she moaned softly—and finding he hadn't.

“Edie,” he said, using the same measured, calm tones he'd adopted with the men who'd answered to him in the army. “Your arm is dislocated. I need to put the bone back in place. It”—*oh, God*—“is going to hurt.”

She offered a sad smile. “I'm not afraid of pain, Thaddeus.” I've been hurt before...

So in tune with her thoughts, even all these years later, he heard the words she did not speak.

Who had hurt her? The man she'd married?

She came to you when you returned.

But after she'd shared the news of her marriage in his absence, begged him to run away with her, as his lover, he'd not heard her out beyond that. What if there'd been more she'd had to say? What if the bastard had hurt her?

His gut muscles clenched and twisted, and he forced himself to clear his mind, and focus on Edie. She needed him now.

Thaddeus made himself take in a slow, steadying breath. “Lay on the side of the bed,” he urged, guiding her down onto her back, so that she rested with her injured arm at the edge of the mattress. “I'll be a moment.” Concentrating on the task at hand, and not the clamor of questions roiling in his mind, Thaddeus rushed downstairs to collect a flask and a piece of kindling. He hurried back upstairs, more than half-afraid she'd left. Even more afraid he'd merely dreamed she was back in his life.

Instead, he found her precisely as he'd left her, with her gaze on the ceiling.

The moment he returned, she turned her eyes onto him.

They were more serious, and sadder than he'd ever recalled them, and that change which had befallen her ravaged his heart, made a mockery of his earlier coldness towards her.

"Here," he said gruffly, sitting at the head of the four-poster bed, he helped her up. "You're going to want to drink this."

She protested the moment he put the flask to her mouth. "I don't drink spirits, Thaddeus."

"You need this, Edie," he insisted, pressing it closer.

"I—"

"Trust me."

Edie stiffened, and then relented. "Very well." She took the silver flask in her right hand, tipped it back—

"Slow—"

It was too late. She promptly choked on her swallow, spraying spirits at his garments and the floor.

He laughed, even harder when she glared at him.

"You're trying to kill me," she accused.

"Anything but. You need the liquid resolve."

"I don't," she shot back. "I'd rather deal with the pain than the misery of drinking this rot."

"Edie...drink...but slowly."

She eyed him through suspicion-laden eyes, and then lifted the flask to her lips, and took another drink—this time, as he advised, more slowly.

Her features pulled with distaste. "I'll have you know the second sip was as miserable as the first."

"How about the third and fourth?" he asked after she'd taken several more pulls from the flask.

“A good deal less pleasant.”

He sat watching her as she drank. “How was the tenth and eleventh?”

“Very smooth.” The slight slur indicated the spirits were having their intended effect, which meant it was time to get started.

He’d helped any number of fellow soldiers who’d suffered falls from horses, running across battlefields, and dislocated limbs, into which he’d had to pop those joints back. But never before had he needed to inflict that same suffering upon...this woman.

His hands shook, and to steady them, he helped himself to the flask, collecting it from Edie’s fingers.

“Heyyy,” she protested, her cheeks flush from too much drink.

He took a swig, searching for the strength to do this thing. “Here,” he said, handing the bottle back over. “Now, I’m going to need to reset your arm, Edie. Do you know what that means?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head; a curl tumbled endearingly over her brow, and he reached out and brushed it back, tucking the loose tress behind her ear.

Thaddeus went on to explain what he’d be doing. When he finished, Edie stared back with wide eyes. She blinked several times, sweeping those long, reddish-gold lashes down and then up.

“I trust yooooou,” she said, a slight slur contained within that avowal.

And his gut clenched again.

He was going to hurt her. He needed to help her, but in so doing, he’d bring her pain, only to find all these years spent hating her, that he’d rather cut himself than make her hurt in any way.

Trying to tunnel his thoughts on what he needed to do, and not how much it would gut him inside, when in his quest to

help care for her, he'd ultimately hurt Edie instead, Thaddeus fetched the short twig he'd collected from the corner of the room.

"You're going to want to bite on this," he said, holding the thick twig out to her.

Edie giggled, but made no move to take it; instead, she availed herself to another long swallow of whiskey. This time, she didn't grimace. "Th-that is silly." She wiped the back of her right hand over her mouth.

"Edith," he said, with a gentle insistence.

"Oh, verrry well." She sighed, and then opened her mouth.

The moment Thaddeus placed it there, her teeth closed around it, and she giggled. "Thiffissilfy, she said around the stick.

"This is necessary." Thaddeus grunted. "It is going to hurt, Edie."

"I'mgoodat handlingpain."

At that revealing admission, freely handed out, no doubt a courtesy of the spirits she'd quickly consumed, his chest again constricted.

Don't think about it...you need your wits about you.

Because of what he was about to do, and because of how he'd been hurt by loving this woman as much as he had...

"I need you to lie on your back, Edie."

She flung herself backwards; that jarring motion sent the mattress bouncing; it jarred her arm, and Edie spit the stick out.

Oh, God. She'd hurt herself even more. Thaddeus took a quick step forward. "You've got to move slowly when you have this type of inj—"

"You called me Edie," she whispered; her voice quiet, and the most steady it had been since before she'd drank the spirits.

“I’ve called you Edie before now,” he said gruffly.

“But not like you meant it.” Her lower lip trembled, and she rolled herself up onto her left hip so she was seated partially upright. “I missed being ‘Edie,’” she said, as she collected the flask. Then, with a noisy snuffle, she tipped back the silver drink decanter, and downed another—very long—swallow.

As she lay there drinking away, Thaddeus contemplated her.

She’d missed being “Edie.” As a marchioness, and the daughter of a duke, since he’d gone to war and she’d gone on to marry, she’d likely never had anyone who’d shortened her name the way he had.

It had felt natural to do so.

Edie had been his special name for her.

A moniker reserved for a young girl, and then young woman, who was approachable and warm, and not the stiff, pompous peers whom he’d invariably begun working for, with his brother, Martin.

A stiff, pompous peerage amongst which Edith now belonged.

Nay, she always belonged to it.

That silent reminder steadied him, dragging him back from musings of anything they’d shared before. With the passage of time, he’d not known her more years than he had. She was a lofty stranger, certainly beyond the reach of someone like him.

“I believe that is enough,” he said, his tones clipped, as he relieved her of that flask.

She pouted. “You were never onnnne to killlll fun.”

“I was one to work,” he said flatly, even as he knew trading volleys with a woman nearly three sheets to the wind was futile. “Now, lay, down,” he urged for a second time.

This time, heeding his earlier advice, Edith slowly, albeit awkwardly, lowered herself back down onto the mattress.

She lay there: her auburn tresses a cascading waterfall about her shoulders, fanned his pillow, and he swallowed hard, as unbidden the images of her conjured different long-ago ones.

Those brownish-red strands falling like a silken curtain about her shoulders as she'd lain, draped over him, taking him deep, and riding him, while he'd gripped her hips, urging her —

Edie widened her eyes, and heat instantly rushed from his neck on up to his cheeks at being caught boldly watching her.

She shot a finger up. “The twigggggg.”

He cocked his head as she reached out, fishing around the blankets, and retrieving that stick.

Edie jammed it between her teeth. “I'mreaffffy.”

Thaddeus gave his head another slight, hard shake. What in hell was he doing, lusting after her like this? Especially an injured Edie Ferguson.

Except, she's not Edie Ferguson, a voice taunted, jibing him with that reminder. She now possesses a new surname, and a title which she acquired when she married another man.

Sobered by that reminder, Thaddeus firmed his jaw, and fixed on the task at hand. The sooner he saw to her injury, the sooner he could get himself away from her, and the memories of all they'd shared, and build back up those high walls about his heart with which he'd used to protect himself.

“Now, lie back down, my lady.”

“Hate when you callfmemylaffee,” she muttered around that stick.

He'd never called her “my lady.”

Ever.

Until now.

“I'm going to take your wrist with both hands,” he explained, ignoring that personal observation she'd made. The moment he folded his larger hand around her smaller one, he

froze. Despite himself. Despite his focus, and every reason he knew why he had to focus, he remained unable to fix on anything other than the feel of her palm in his. Satiny soft where his was rough and callused. Smooth and unblemished where his bore scars from his time fighting.

Eddie smoothed her thumb along that place between his thumb and forefinger. “Whohurrrt you,” she slurred, her voice hushed. “Telllllmeand I’ll make them payyyy.”

You did.

The agony of her betrayal far greater than any mark left by his enemies in war.

“You need to keep your arm straight, my lady.” He spoke in clipped, no-nonsense tones as he disentangled his hand from hers. “And keep it level with your body. Let your forearm and hand face downwards. Good,” he praised when she had herself in the requisite position. “I’m going to begin with your arm at your side, then I’ll slowly move your arm towards your head. As I do, I’ll bring it around in a small circular motion.” Even as he gave those directives, Thaddeus was already bringing her arm up into the requisite position.

Her teeth clicked noisily upon the stick.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the white lines that formed at the corner of her tense mouth, and the pain bleeding from her eyes.

Oh, God.

Don’t look at her. Focus on what you need to do. Otherwise he wouldn’t be able to see this through...

That in mind, Thaddeus made a firm pumping motion, up, several inches...down several inches. He continued that until her injured arm was at the height of his shoulder.

A little moan, stifled by the stick but not silenced, filtered around the room, ramming him straight through his heart.

Do it...do it...do what you need to...

That much-needed mantra roiled in his head, as he found the resolve to continue moving her arm until it rested at a

ninety-degree angle with her body.

He paused. “Are you doing all right?” he asked, glancing down at her. And then promptly wishing he hadn’t. Tears glittered in her eyes, turning the blues of her irises into shimmering pools of misery.

Teeth tight around the twig, Edie nodded her head, in an apparent lie, and despite himself, despite his vow to hate her, he found an admiration stir deep down inside for the strength she evinced.

“I’m going to continue,” he murmured.

She nodded once, and then slowly, he began rotating the limb...over and over...repeating that movement.

Thaddeus guided her arm up, closer to Edie’s head. He paused, with that injured limb extended high up, and then he rotated—

Edie cried out, the tortured sound of her misery echoing sharply from the walls and ceiling and in his ears: a sound he knew he’d forever carry into his mind. One more torturous remembrance that would never be buried, added to the chest of miseries he’d brought back with him from his time in the army.

Oh, God. It was a prayer inside his head.

Through pain-filled eyes, Edie stared accusingly at him. “You’re trying to hurt me.”

She may as well have cut him open with the bayonet he’d marched on the fields of Europe with. “Never,” he whispered.

“Yessss you are. You said you hoped I’d be missserable.”

Long ago, he’d said that and a whole host of other nasty things he hadn’t truly meant. The agony of losing her had made him careless with his tongue.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said, his throat moving up and down painfully. “I’d never want to see you suffer.”

“Thasssa lie,” she said, her words all rolling together, but clear to him, all the same: each word a lash upon a heart that,

against all better judgment, damned well still beat for her.

“I’ve finished,” he promised. “You should drink more.” Reaching for the flask, he helped guide her up a bit, so she might consume more of those spirits.

This time, unlike before, Edie didn’t resist. The swallow she took this time was generous and didn’t end in the same grimace that had accompanied her first sips.

“They are not so bad, after all,” she slurred, her eyes and voice equally dreamy.

“What’s that, love?”

“Spirrrrits. They are quite niiiice, you knowwww.” As he carefully wound her arm, until it was settled into a neat little sling, she giggled. “Of course, you know. You toold me to trink it. That was silly of me, wasn’t it, Thaddeus.”

He found his lips twitching. “Very silly, Edie,” he said gently.

Suddenly, her eyes went wide, and her mouth tremulous. “Love.”

He stared blankly at her.

“You called me...loooooove.” She sighed, and then motioned him closer.

He put his ear close to her mouth.

“I still dream of that, you knowww, Thaddeus.” You calling me love and maaaking love. We were so good together. Werenf we?”

“The best,” he said hoarsely.

Suddenly, tears filled her eyes, and the sight of those crystalline drops hit him like a ball to the chest. “But I know it’s just a dream, because you h-hate me.” She sniffed.

“I don’t hate you.” And in the ease with which that assurance slipped out, he realized...he meant that. It wasn’t a lie. In this moment, faced with the sight of her suffering, he realized even resenting her as he had, and hating her for giving herself to another, he loved her still. He always would.

“I did it for you, you know. *Marrryhim.*” Her eyes grew heavy, and her voice faded. “It was all for you.”

He stiffened. “What are you saying?”

Alas, it was a question that would remain unanswered.

A little snore escaped Edie’s lips, and he sat there for a moment, studying her slumbering form. Then, ever so carefully, Thaddeus drew the coverlet back into place.

Chapter 5

Edith moved in and out of an unconscious state, existing in a place somewhere where dreams began, and present pain ruled.

A freezing cold had invaded every corner of her being, it managed to penetrate even the thick, black void she found herself sucked into. Edith's own whimpers and moans filled her ears and added a vicious layer of misery to her already pounding head.

She thrashed to escape the agony threatening to swallow her. Her weak cries spilled from her lips as each twist and turn of her body wrought a fiery pain.

And through her suffering, Thaddeus was there. Memories of the times they'd spent together, mingled with her present.

"I shall race you to the top of the hill, Thaddeus Phippen..."

"I will follow you anywhere, Edie-love..."

The echo of her and Thaddeus's laughter as they went racing and chasing after one another filled her aching head. Even as she yearned to live in that memory of them together and hold onto that joy-filled time forever, Edith wanted to escape the excruciating throbbing at her temples.

The memories continued coming.

"...let us run away...together. We can be together, Thaddeus..."

"...Not like that, Edie...That possibility ended when you married..."

Edith wept. "Nooooo," she cried, thrashing her head back and forth.

And through the worst of those darkest times, Thaddeus was there, strong and steady and loving as he'd always been. He whispered words of comfort, and stroked her brow, and smoothed her hair. That touch, the dream of that touch proved

so calming it managed to briefly drive away the devil inside, bent on punishing her.

It was how she knew she merely dreamed. Because Thaddeus was no longer in her life. At least, not as the tender, gentle man who'd loved her so dearly.

And Edie found herself weeping from a different, more agonizing pain. She needed even this dream version of Thaddeus to know.

"Th-Thaddeus," she sobbed. "I am s-so..."

Sorry.

"L-L-..." *Loved* "you..."

"Shh, I know," he murmured, stroking her wet cheek.

I love you. Edie wept. She'd never stopped.

And this time, no words came. No returned declaration. Nothing.



The minute Thaddeus carried Edie's shivering, fever-ridden form to guest chambers in his sister-in-law's sister's home, he'd shouted for a bath, a pitcher with water, and linens.

Only when a team of servants had come forward to help her bathe and change into warm garments had he stepped out of the rooms. After they'd gone, Thaddeus had rushed inside, dragged the blue velvet upholstered armchair to Edie's bedside, and set up vigil at her side.

And he'd been there the three days since.

Perched on the edge of the chair, his fingers steeped over them, Thaddeus stared at Edie's still frame. The fire's glow and the candle on the nightstand beside them sent shadows playing off her wan, sweat-slickened brow.

Reaching for the stack of white linens, he took one of the small rags, dipped it in the bowl of water.

Ever so gently, he wiped at Edie's forehead.

She whimpered and burrowed into the mattress.

His gut clenched. “Shh,” he whispered, his heart aching at being the one to cause her pain. “I’m here.”

It was as though the sound of his voice or mayhap that assurance, proved calming. Edie went still—until he pressed another compress to her cheek.

Immediately, she began to thrash. Moaning, she tossed her head back and forth.

His voice hoarsened from days without rest, and made more graveled from terror, Thaddeus began to sing, softly.

*“O fare you well, I must be gone
And leave you for a while:
But wherever I go, I will return,
If I go ten thousand miles, my dear,
If I go ten thousand miles.*

Instantly, she ceased writhing about, and Thaddeus continued.

*“Ten thousand miles it is so far
To leave me here alone,
Whilst I may lie, lament and cry,
And you will not hear my moan, my dear,
And you will not hear my moan.”*

Thaddeus closed his eyes. How many times when they’d been together had she sung that old ballad? With her laughter-filled voice and cheeks ringed red from happiness, she’d managed to transform the melancholic folksong into a joy-filled one.

*“O don’t you see that milk-white dove
A-sitting on yonder tree,
Lamenting for her own true love,
As I lament for thee, my dear,
As I lament for thee.”*

How many years had he spent hating her? How many times had he resented her, and hoped she'd known a sliver of the pain she'd caused him when she'd married. Only, with her so very still and pale before him, he realized the truth—he'd rather gnaw off both arms than see her suffer.

*“The river never will run dry,
Nor the rocks melt with the sun;
And I'll never prove false to the girl I love
Till all these things be done, my dear,
Till all these things be done.”*

The song faded from his lips.

Edie's breathing grew more even. Thaddeus settled back in his chair. The springs groaned.

“How is she?”

That hushed voice jolted Thaddeus forward, and he jumped to his feet.

Martin drew the door shut quietly behind them. “Forgive me,” he whispered. “I thought you heard me enter.”

No. Aside from Edie, he'd heard and seen nothing.

“She is...unchanged,” Thaddeus murmured, reclaiming his seat.

His brother joined him at the bedside. “You should rest, Thad—”

“No.”

“The doctor is here. You were present for his evaluation of the lady as such, you can attest to the fact he's beyond competent. Her Ladyship will be well-looked after and you'll be summoned if there is any ch—”

“I said, no,” Thaddeus said, infusing steel into that quiet declination.

Martin inclined his head.

Instead of leaving, however, his elder brother grabbed a mahogany side-chair and perched himself next to Thaddeus.

Neither brother spoke for a long while. The hearth crackled in the background, while the Sellwood lantern clock, ticked away the passing seconds.

“I don’t think I ever heard you sing,” Martin remarked, and as it wasn’t a question, Thaddeus kept silent.

His brother continued. “But then, I suspect there are a good many things I don’t know about you.”

Thaddeus stiffened.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Martin asked.

Thaddeus leveled a glare on him. “Talk about ‘what’?”

Martin chuckled. “Oh, I don’t know. I was going to say your familiarity with the lady discovered at our new properties, and then your subsequent placement next to her. But is there, perchance, something odder than even that which I’ve missed that we *would* be talking about?”

Heat climbed up Thaddeus’s neck. “She’s just someone I... know... from a long time ago.”

“Yes, we *both* knew her,” his brother remarked. “Did you think I could forget the man who secured your commission?”

Martin had fought Thaddeus on accepting that commission, too. He’d insisted that Thaddeus not join, and yet, Thaddeus had also known if he’d remained, and never risen up from his status, he could have never had a future with Edie.

The irony of that didn’t escape him all these years later—in the end, Thaddeus had lost her anyway.

Thaddeus didn’t take his gaze from Edie. “Did you... happen to see,” *Her*. “the duke and duchess after I’d gone?” he asked his brother, wishing Martin could fill in the void of all that happened when he’d been away fighting.

“They were kind to our family after you left,” he murmured, and then proceeded to share the ways in which

Edie's father had provided for the Phippens.

When he finished, Martin hesitated. "Of course, I always...wondered what really accounted for that magnanimity on the duke's part."

There was a question there.

Suddenly, the years of secrets he'd kept from all, proved too much.

The fight went out of Thaddeus. "I met her when you and I were doing work for Mr. Webb," he said. "I was sneaking about, trying to steal a look inside a duke's household, and she...Edie was hiding, and..." He drew in a shaky breath. "And we remained friends, and then...became more."

"More?" A question underscored that single word.

Thaddeus nodded. *Lovers*. They'd been lovers who'd talked of marriage and imagined a future together.

His brother settled an arm on his shoulder and squeezed, and then it all came flooding out, a torrent set free. Thaddeus went on to speak the words aloud that he'd never shared with anyone. The secrets he'd kept about himself and Edith. The dreams he'd carried, a man who'd seen and suffered the world now knew they could have never existed as anything more than mere dreams. She may as well have been a princess to his pauper, each of them born on other sides of the universe.

"After I returned, she sought me out. She asked me to run away with her. She wanted me as her,"—he struggled to form the word—"lover."

All the acrid bitterness and resentment and shame of her offer, crept in. "I was good enough to bed but not marry. I wanted more than she was willing, or, at that point, able to give me."

Thaddeus stared at her slumbering form. Until he drew his last breath, he'd forever see her stricken eyes, and agonized features at his rejection. "Letting her go was the hardest thing I've ever done," he murmured, more to himself.

When he'd finished, Martin remained silent for a long while.

Finally, he spoke. "So, she was not in love with her husband."

Coming back to the present, Thaddeus shook his head. "I..."

Her long-ago pleadings danced in his mind.

"I've only ever loved you. I will only love you, Thaddeus. You must know that."

Those echoes merged with the words she'd cried out, while unconscious in her sickbed, and he felt a weakening somewhere deep inside.

God help him, he'd always been a fool where Edie was concerned.

Thaddeus steeled his jaw. "She chose—"

"Another," Martin interrupted. "Yeah, I heard all of that. The thing of it is," his brother went on, in more careful, measured tones, "when I came here, not even that long ago, and I'd first heard Christina was on the market for a husband, I judged her, and I judged her mightily." He paused. "At first. But then, she reminded me, Thaddeus, that, well, the world isn't always so fair to women. Christina had children and didn't have the money or means to care for them. She was reliant on the generosity of her family's charity or marriage."

"Edith came from an affluent, powerful family." He grunted. "It isn't the same."

"No," Martin agreed. "I expect being the daughter of a damned duke is a good deal more...and worse."

His brother leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Do you *really* think the marchioness had more freedoms than a lady born outside the peerage?"

Something dark and insidious swirled in his belly.

Only, Martin wasn't done with him.

“If you loved the lady as you said you did, I expect you would have questions for why she married...”

With that, his brother gave Thaddeus’s shoulder another squeeze, and left Thaddeus alone not with only questions, but his own thoughts...and regrets.

Chapter 6

As Edith struggled to open her aching heavy eyelids, she had confirmation of a sad truth—she had died after all.

She'd not survived the carriage ride.

All of it, from the blow she'd taken to her shoulder, to Thaddeus's unexpected arrival at a foreign keep, caring for her injury and then tenderly carrying her to a place warm and so very comfortable proved to be nothing more than a dream she'd carried with her into the afterlife.

But it had felt real, and it had been so very glorious being reunited with him, even if it was only for a short while. Even if he'd been as angry, in her imagining of him, as he'd been the last time she'd seen him in the living.

Except...he'd not been at all angry this time.

This time, he'd cared for her.

And put her back together, and—

“You're awake.”

That hoarse, disbelieving pronouncement, drew her attention across the room.

Her heart thudded wildly against the walls of her chest and with some effort, she turned her head towards him—a man she'd not imagined in death, after all.

He remained frozen, on a knee, beside the hearth. His cheeks were covered with several days' worth of growth, his eyes were bloodshot, and he'd the look of a man who'd seen a ghost. If he hated her, wouldn't he rejoice in her misery?

But no, Thaddeus had always been so very honorable, so very good. It was why even before she'd gone to him and begged him to leave with her, she'd known in her heart of hearts that he'd reject her.

“Thaddeus,” she tried to make her lips move, to speak his name, but her tongue was heavy and her throat dry.

Suddenly, he jumped up and rushed to the door. Yanking the panel open, he spoke quickly and quietly to someone in the hall, and then after he closed the door, he hastened over to Edie's side.

She attempted to push herself up onto her elbows.

"No!" he said quickly.

She gasped, and tears stung her eyes at the agony induced by that effort.

"You were in an accident," he spoke in soothing tones, gentle ones that were a balm upon her aching soul. "You hurt your arm. I set it. You also came down with fever."

That was right. There'd been spirits, and a stick to bite upon, and then the effects of the spirits.

Her sluggish thoughts sought to assemble the disjointed words from their last exchange, and then slowly, bits and pieces of those remembrances slipped in.

"You called me your love..."

"I don't hate you..."

"...dream of making love with you..."

Edie recoiled, as that particular statement whispered forward. Good God, what had she said? Nay, what else had she said?

She groaned and then promptly winced as her head throbbled all the more.

"Take it slow," he urged in those calming tones, mistaking that groan as one of pain and not pained mortification, and she let him keep to the erroneous conclusion.

"With a few days more of rest, the pain will be greatly improved. I expect it should heal completely."

Edie ran her gaze over his beloved features: those sharp, angular plains; his aquiline nose, and honey-brown eyes, which had always danced with love and laughter...until they hadn't. Until anger and hate had been all that shone in their depths.

Not now. Now, there was a worry and warmth in his gaze.

“You fixed my arm,” she murmured, her voice ragged. “You’ve acquired even more skills in our time apart, Thaddeus.”

“A man picks up all manner of useful skills in the military,” he said, and his eyes slid away from hers, shifting to a point over the top of her head.

But not before she caught the sea of tumult in those revealing irises.

No doubt, because of what he’d seen, a voice needled. War had changed him, and it had changed him because her parents had coordinated his going away.

It was just one more reminder of why she and he could never again be...all they’d been to one another.

It had been foolish and selfish for her to think as much when she’d gone to him after his return from fighting. Lord help her, though, knowing it had been a sin to do so, and knowing the outcome, she would have done it all again. Just for the sliver of a moment in time where at least, the possibility of the two of them together, lived.

Agony brought her eyes closed.

“Rest,” Thaddeus said quickly. “Just rest.”

And she proved the worst sort of coward, for she kept her eyes shut, and allowed sleep to claim her once more.



One day later

Edie opened her eyes, and promptly wished she hadn’t.

A blindingly bright, cheerful sunshine beamed through the windows. She instantly closed her eyes. Her tongue felt heavy and her mind thick.

Years ago, at her wedding breakfast, she’d drunk a shameful amount of spirits to dull the pain of what she’d been forced to do, and to help herself get through that first night with her husband. She’d indulged to the point where she’d not

been able to clearly think, and when she'd awakened in the morning, she'd felt a good deal like she did now.

"It is so good to see you awake, once more, my lady."

That happy declaration brought Edie's gaze flying to the doorway.

A tall, slender gentleman with warm eyes, and an even warmer demeanor rushed forward. He spoke to a young maid Edie had failed to note in the corner.

The girl went rushing off.

"Who are you?" Edith asked, her tongue heavy, her temples aching, her mouth dry, and her voice as thick as her head at the moment.

"I expect you have a very many questions," he said, and reaching for a pretty porcelain pitcher, he poured her a glass of water. "My name is Dr. Crawford. It was at the behest of the Phippens that I was summoned."

Humming softly to himself, the doctor picked up a bag from the floor and proceeded to sift through its contents.

Then, it all came rushing back: the storm. The carriage lurching and sliding, and then the moment where she'd been thrown against the wall of the conveyance. There'd been her long trek through the snow, with Stanbridge and Thomas.

And then, Edith's reunion with Thaddeus. His palpable anger...and then concern, when he'd realized she'd in fact, been hurt.

Edie briefly closed her eyes. He'd been there when she'd awakened. Why would he have done that if he didn't at least in some way still care for—

Suddenly, her mind still dulled from slumber and the previous fever, registered another detail the doctor had shared.

The Phippens?

Edith didn't want to know. Not really and not at all, and yet, she needed to know.

Edith dampened her mouth. “Mr. *and* Mrs. Phippen,” she said hesitantly.

The doctor glanced up from his bag and blinked slowly. “Yes. Mrs. Phippen, as well. In fact, it was she who had Mrs. Gray summon me.”

Based on the way in which he freely tossed around those names, he’d come to the incorrect conclusion that Edith was more familiar with her unlikely hosts and hostesses.

At some point, Thaddeus had married. Why wouldn’t he have taken a wife? And yet knowing it for certain, and not only that, being brought to recuperate in the happy couple’s home.

Oh, God. This she could not bear.

She had to leave, to flee the agony of this, and yet, she was trapped, witness to the tableau of a happily married Thaddeus. Did they have children? He’d always been so very good with them. Something she could have never given him, anyway, which was mayhap what the universe had known when he’d returned...why it had been for the best that he’d rejected her.

Edie felt a panicky laugh build somewhere inside. The Lord was punishing her. There could be no other accounting for her current arrangement.

There came a quick knock on the door.

A moment later, the panel opened, and a pretty, dark-haired woman swept inside with a tray of broth. “I have received word Her Ladyship’s has awakened.”

“I’m most pleased to confirm that is the case, Mrs. Phippen,” the doctor said. “And that she remains fever-free.”

Mrs. Phippen—Thaddeus’s wife—smiled widely. “How lovely!”

How lovely? The lady could not possibly know about the history between Edith and Thaddeus. Unless, she *did*, and she was just so very assured of his love.

The kind-eyed woman looked to Edith. “How do you feel, my lady.”

She felt like she'd been run over by a carriage and then had her heart broken all over again. Ladies, however, were expected to never say as much.

“Much improved,” she managed to say, her voice still hoarse from her ordeal. “And please, call me, Edith.”

The doctor was already there with a glass of water.

This time, taking care to avoid her previously injured arm, Edith pushed herself up onto her elbows and accepted that offering.

“Edith, then,” Thaddeus's wife murmured. “And you must call me Christina.”

The lady had a graceful, musical name that perfectly suited her.

Yet, there were surely unwritten rules against being on a Christian name basis with one's former lover?

Rap-Rap-Rap

That light knocking at the door cut across her panicky thoughts.

“Enter!” Mrs. Phippen called.

A moment later, the door opened, and a small army of servants, came pouring in, bearing a tub and buckets of steaming water.

While they proceeded to draw her bath, Dr. Crawford resumed his evaluation. He touched his stethoscope to various points on Edith's back, and paused occasionally, to gently ask her to take a breath.

All the while, Edith took in the pair of emerald leaf hair combs affixed to Christina Phippen's hair. Had those jewels been a gift from Thaddeus? And an unwanted and agonizing image slipped in—of Thaddeus tucking those delicate combs within her dark tresses.

A vicious agony more painful than the injury she'd sustained lanced through her. Edith would not survive this. She'd been widowed only to find him now married.

Once the bath had been readied, all but two young maids, took their leave.

Dr. Crawford smiled. "I am pleased to say, with a day or two of rest, you should be as fit as a fiddle, my lady."

Edith murmured her thanks, and then looked to Mrs. Phippen. "I am grateful for all the kindness you and Thad— Mr. Phippen," she swiftly substituted. "Have shown me but I've infringed enough upon your family's hospitality."

The young woman waved a hand. "Do not be silly. You've been no imposition at all."

"Given the state of my carriage and the unlikelihood of finding someone who is capable of making the necessary repairs, Mrs. Phippen—"

"Thaddeus is seeing to the task himself. It will take some time.

Edith's heart spasmed. If there'd ever been a doubt just how eager he was to be rid of her, the fact he'd personally overtaken the task quashed it.

"How kind of Mr. Phippen," Edith managed to say. "I would, however, humbly request the use of a carriage so that I might continue on."

Mrs. Phippen's lips formed their first frown. "You cannot possibly be thinking of departing so soon?"

"I must." She needed to leave. Immediately. There was no choice. Staying here would break her in ways her marriage hadn't.

The pretty woman's lips moved, but no sound came out. She looked to Dr. Crawford. "What say you?"

"Lest she risk a relapse, I would advise against Her Ladyship leaving so hastily," he murmured.

Thaddeus's wife pointed at the doctor. "There you have it, Edith. The doctor says you must stay and stay you shall."

"I'm certain Thaddeus," Edith recoiled, fatigue making her careless. "That is, Mr. Phippen," she managed to whisper.

“Would find it best if I resume my travels.”

“That is prepost...” The other woman’s words trailed off into silence, and then, her eyebrows climbed slowly up into her hairline. “You believe I’m Thaddeus’s *wife*?”

Eddie stared at her. “You’re...not?”

The young woman’s smile was restored in an instant. “I am Mrs. *Martin* Phippen. Thaddeus is my *brother-in-law*.” A twinkle lit her eyes. “And he is not married.

Chapter 7

Thaddeus climbed the stairs which led to the guest chambers still occupied by Edie.

It'd been four days since she'd opened her eyes. Three days since her fever had broken. Until he took his last breath, he'd forever recall the moment she opened exhausted but lucid eyes. That profound relief, so powerful it had nearly brought him to his knees.

And it had been three days since he'd seen her.

He'd told himself that distance was for the best. Edie needed to recuperate, and while she did, to pass the hours, he'd first gone and checked on the two servants who'd clearly been devoted to their mistress—that fealty also an indication as to how Edie treated and valued those on her staff.

After verifying they were well, he'd personally inspected and started to repair Edie's carriage. That way, he could ensure when she did take her leave, she did so safely. That work had fueled him. It had given him purpose. He'd thrown himself completely into that task, losing track of time, but the thoughts of her stayed with him still.

This time, he'd not fought the memories they shared but let each one come sweeping in.

The days they'd spent under the stars, staring up at the night sky. All the while Edie had pointed out the different constellations.

The dreams they'd spoken of.

The babes they'd imagined as part of their future. He'd been adamant they'd have a dozen girls, all exactly like their spirited, strong, clever mama. She insistent that they'd have a dozen boys with their papa's big heart and skill with sketching and building.

It was on the fourth day, when he'd caught the hint of Edie's laugh mingled with Christina's, however, that he'd

begun to suspect it wasn't just that Edie was recovering—she was actively avoiding Thaddeus.

Thaddeus reached the main landing and nearly collided with a pair of big footmen, carrying a trunk between them.

Making his apologies, Thaddeus hastily stepped out of their way, and then turned. He narrowed his eyes on that exquisite wooden trunk, with its brass buckles and ornate etchings.

He quickened his stride. “What the hell?” he muttered to himself.

“The lady is leaving,” a voice called from behind him.

Thaddeus whipped around.

His sister-in-law came forward, wearing a big smile. “I understand the carriage has been repaired. Edith will be very happy to—”

“What?” he growled.

Christina blinked wildly. “I...Edith will be happy?”

“The other part,” he said tersely.

“You fixed the carriage—?”

“I know I'm repairing the carriage,” he exclaimed, exasperated.

“Oh, do you mean the part about Edith leaving?”

“Yes,” he said brusquely. “That...”

He registered the glimmer in her entirely too-innocent eyes.

A dull flush heated his neck, and he resisted the urge to tug at his serviceable cravat.

Her revealing eyes grew serious. “I've been unable to convince the lady to remain. Perhaps you might be able to persuade her?” she murmured, and as one, they looked to Edie's door.

After Edie's accident and fraught health, she actually thought she was leaving? Over his dead, ice cold body.

Another growl climbed up his chest. "I'll speak with her," he ground out, stomping the rest of the way to Edie's chambers.

"Do be more pleasant about it, won't you, Thaddeus," Christina called after him.

Thaddeus lifted his hand to knock hard when the door suddenly opened.

And the words died on his lips.

And all the breath lodged in his lungs at the sight of her: her lithe frame draped in a rose-colored satin gown, adorned with gold lace accents. She was a siren: tempting and bewitching, and he ran his gaze over her, too weak to keep himself from committing this new sight of her to memory for all time.

"Th-Thaddeus," she whispered, and unlike the whispers of these recent days past, her voice wasn't weak from illness.

And the sound of it brought him safely back from his previously dazed state.

"A word, my lady."

Edie's eyes grew big and sorrowful. For only a moment.

She brought her shoulders back, and her chin a notch to go along with it.

"If it is all the same to you, Mr. Phippen, your brother and his wife were gracious enough to loan me one of their carriages, and it has already been loaded. As such—"

Another growl climbed his throat. "It isn't *all the same to me.*"

"Oh, and just why is that?"

"I'd have a word, my lady?" he repeated, enunciating each of the six syllables.

Edie hesitated. Then ducking her head out into the hall, she looked both ways.

“Very well,” she said, and with all the regal bearing of a queen, stepped aside.

The moment he entered, she shut the door behind them, and folded her arms at her chest.

“What is it you wish to speak with me about, Mr. Phippen?”

Her continual use of his surname set his teeth on edge.

“You’re not leaving,” he said flatly.

Edie’s lips parted. She found her voice. “I *beg* your pardon?”

He was making a muddle of all this.

Taking in a slow breath through his nose, Thaddeus tried again. “You are unwell.”

She frowned and glanced down at her person. “Why, thank you,” she said dryly. “You’ll turn my head.”

God, she was as obstinate as she’d always been. Before, he’d found it endearing. Now, with her willing to disregard her own well-being it was all he could do to rip his hair out.

“I’m not trying to turn your head, Edith. I’m trying to keep you safe. The repairs on your carriage are not complete.”

“Well, I do thank you for your concern—overbearing, thought it may be—”

“Overbearing,” he mouthed.

“However, Dr. Crawford confirmed I am in fine health, and strong enough to resume my travels. I’ve been assured the carriage is in excellent working order.

Bloody Dr. Crawford. Where did he get off allowing Edie to put herself in harm’s way?

Or mayhap it’s more that Edie is eager to get back to her husband? A curtain of red fell over his vision, briefly blinding Thaddeus.

“What the hell does Crawford know?” he snapped.

“Given he’s a doctor, and one trusted by your family, I trust he’s equipped to make such a determination,” she drawled.

And knowing her as he once did, he appealed to that which kept her here.

“If you’ll not think of yourself, Edie, then think of those two servants who are endlessly loyal to you and would risk life and limb if you simply asked it. Even *if* the roads were safe to travel, which they aren’t, as the one repairing your carriage, I can tell you that your conveyance is decidedly not.”

Edie briefly closed her eyes. “Oh, blast.” She released a beleaguered sigh. “One would think you want me about, Thaddeus.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

Edie’s gaze slid beyond his shoulder, and her cheeks went a fiery red. She cleared her throat.

“Not that I’m under any such illusions given our last meeting, Mr. Phippen,” she said, quickly. Her words ushered him back to that long ago day when she’d shown up, asking for him to be her lover...but only after she’d pressed herself against him, and he’d had her mouth under his.

Tension crackled and sizzled with a force greater than the fire snapping in the hearth.

“What illusion is that, Edie?” he murmured. “My want for you was never in doubt.”

Her love on the other hand?

Despite himself, he found himself weaker than he’d been before, as his gaze slid to her mouth.

Edie moved her eyes in a like way over his and even as he lowered his head a fraction, she lifted ever so slightly.

Suddenly, the temptation proved too great. He wrapped an arm lightly about her waist, drawing her loosely against him, and she went, melting in his embrace.

Thaddeus lowered his mouth to take hers as he yearned to, as he'd hungered to all the years, they'd been apart.

Her golden-red lashes fluttered.

Somehow, Thaddeus managed to stop.

"Do you want my kiss still, sweet Edie?" he asked hoarsely. "I'd have you say the words," he said, so that they both knew what they were saying yes to.

Her lush lips trembled, and she gave a slight, tight nod of ascent. "Yes," she sighed and with a growl, he kissed her.

He kissed her as he'd dreamed of doing, and she moaned, parting her lips, and letting him in, and he went...sweeping his tongue inside. Desire burgeoned within, as he drank of her. The delicate pink flesh of her tongue toyed with his in return, as he and Edie dueled, in a familiar dance they'd shared in the past.

In the past.

Before her betrayal.

With a curse, Thaddeus wrenched away, and took a quick step back.

What have I done? Do I have no honor?

Dazed, Edie blinked her wide eyes rapidly, even as she touched a trembling hand to her mouth. "Why did you stop?" she asked, with such an aching regret bleeding from that question, it was all he could do to keep from taking her in his arms once more.

"I trust Lord Bouchier would take offense to his wife kissing another man," he said frostily, his voice surprisingly steady given the fire that still raged within.

Edie dampened her mouth, that flesh, swollen from his kiss.

"Lord Bouchier died six months ago, and I'm a widow." She paused. "Nor would he have cared either way." She added that last part, as more an afterthought for herself.

Thaddeus reeled. She was no longer tied to another. It shouldn't matter. Only, if that was the case, how to account for the sudden lightness in his chest.

“You're a...widow?”

Eddie nodded. “Ye—”

Footfalls echoed in the hall, and dumbly, Thaddeus wrenched his gaze from her. They took a hasty step away from one another, just as a maid opened the door.

“Your Ladyship,” The young woman dropped a curtsy. “The servants have—” her words trailed off as she caught sight of Thaddeus.

The young woman hastily dropped her gaze to the floor. “Readied the carriage, my lady.”

Eddie looked from the servant to Thaddeus, and then back again to the maid.

Eddie warred with herself. He saw the battle reflected back in her expressive eyes. “Ruth, I am sorry to create additional work for you and the staff,” she finally said. “But if it's not too great an imposition, I think it best if I remain, at least until the roads are more passable.”

“Not at all, my lady.”

As the girl dropped a curtsy and hastened from the room, an undeniable wave of relief washed through Thaddeus, and even as he told himself the only reason for that sentiment was because he worried about Eddie's health should she depart so soon, it felt like an unconvincing lie.

Chapter 8

The following evening Edith sat at the dining table with the enormous, happy Gray family and their guests.

Conversation flew wildly about the room, and Edith struggled to take it all in. Her dazed state had nothing to do with her previous illness, but rather the happy commotion of the family members as they chatted and joked.

In a moment of weakness wrought by the Gray family invitation and Thaddeus's demands that she remain at the house party, Edith had convinced herself setting out would be a far greater danger to her.

Edith acknowledged the greatest peril to her had in fact been staying and witnessing Thaddeus amongst his new nieces and nephews.

Martin and Christina Phippen's daughter, Luna tugged at his sleeve. "Please, Thaddeus. Pleaaaase," she begged.

"How am I to say no to such pleading?" he asked, and then with a trick of his hand at her ear withdrew a Prince of Wales biscuit from behind.

The girl clapped happily and snatched that confectionary treat from his fingers.

"Thanff you," Luna said around a big mouthful.

"Not while you're chewing," her brother, Logan chastised.

"Sorrfee," Luna said, around the remainder of her bite, earning more laughter from the adults.

Thaddeus tweaked his niece's button nose in return, and at that tender gesture, something moved in Edie's breast.

She'd loved Thaddeus for a good many reasons: how he made her smile. The kindness he showed everyone. The enormity of his heart and courage. The stunning talent he had to build something with his bare hands.

Now, seeing him, so very good with the children before him—she fell in love with him all over again.

Just then, he said something that made the girl Luna erupt into a flurry of giggles. Even the girl's older, more serious brothers, joined in laughing.

Her heart ached, making it hard for her get proper breath into her lungs.

All these years, she'd resented her father for coercing her into marriage to the marquess. Perhaps that sacrifice had been the best, after all. Had Edith not married Lord Bouchier, then Thaddeus's brother would have never established the connections he had.

She looked to the newly married Martin Phippen and his wife, Christina, along with Christina's warmhearted sisters, Claire and Faye. Each woman sat beside their respective besotted spouse. How very happy those couples all were. It was so very easy to imagine that life had somehow turned out different for she and Thaddeus. They'd have been here not as *friends who'd known one another in the past*, but rather, as partners in life and in love.

Her gaze drifted back to where he sat, embroiled in a pretend game of seated swordplay with the boy Logan.

"He's very good with them, is he not?"

Edith blinked and looked to her hostess, Mrs. Claire Gray.

Her pretty, dark-haired hostess motioned to Thaddeus.

"I..." Edith curled her toes tightly in her slippers. It'd been so very obvious that she'd been watching him. "Yes," she finally said. "He is."

"Not all men are good with children."

"No, they aren't," Edith murmured. The other woman spoke as someone who knew.

"Too many are proper lords wanting proper little children who'll grow up and breed—"

"More proper children," Edith finished for her.

They shared a smile, as a kindred connection sprung from a like knowing.

Only...not all women were capable of bearing children.

Edith's lips froze in a painful rendering of a smile, and she was grateful when Mrs. Gray's attention was called away by her younger sister.

Unbidden, she looked to where Thaddeus spoke again with his niece.

The little girl stared up at him as if he were proffering all life's greatest secrets.

Perhaps fate had known Edith wouldn't be able to give him children and had spared them both that pain.

As if he felt her stare, Thaddeus glanced across the table, and their eyes met.

He grinned, that crooked half-smile she recalled so very well. It'd been so very infectious, she'd simply see that tilt of his lips, and it chased away whatever troubled her. This moment proved no exception, as Edie felt herself smiling in return.

"I trust you must find our family a boisterous lot, Lady Edith," Mrs. Faye Wylie called from across the table.

All eyes instantly went to Edith. "I find your family perfectly delightful. My own family was far more...staid." She cupped a hand around her mouth and said in a deliberate whisper. "And a good deal less fun."

"Most families are," Tynan Wylie said, toasting the room.

"My mama and papa said you were a friend of Uncle Thaddeus," Luna piped in, directing that bold statement Edith's way.

Said mama and papa instantly blushed.

Christina Phippen leaned over to whisper something into her daughter's ear, but Edith brushed her off. "Please, it is fine, really."

She looked to Luna once more and spoke at the same time as Thaddeus. "We were—"

"We are," he said.

An uncomfortable silence fell.

Edith cleared her throat. “That is, we were friends long ago,” she said softly. “And we were only recently reunited.”

Lachlan sat forward. “Mother said your arm was hurt but Uncle Thaddeus put you back together.”

Edith moved her gaze back over to Thaddeus. “Your uncle was good enough to help me.”

“Uncle Thaddeus is ever so good at so many things,” Luna praised, smiling adoringly up at Thaddeus.

“He is, indeed,” Edith murmured.

Apparently that consensus was not enough, as the little girl proceeded to prattle on about a list of his many accomplishments. “He’s incredibly good at charades.”

She’d *not* known that. It seemed given all they’d shared, she should.

“He’s also wonderful at making animal noises. And he is *most* excellent in snowball fights.”

A wistful smile formed on her lips as long-ago memories danced in of she and he racing throughout the streets in London just outside her family’s townhouse, tossing snowballs at one another. “Indeed, he is.”

“Have *you* played snowballs with him?” Logan asked, curiosity in his voice.

“We did,” she said softly.

Edith felt Thaddeus’s gaze upon her, but this time, she was too much a coward to look at him.

“Annnnd,” Luna added. “Uncle Thaddeus picked a castle out, and he’s fixing it up.”

This time, Edith looked at Thaddeus. “Are you?” she asked.

He nodded. “It is, was, an investment for my brother, but it is now going to be their home.”

Luna clapped excitedly, her chubby cheeks flush with happy color, and in that instant, for all the pain, regret, and suffering, there came a flash of joy.

It was just one more reminder. It hadn't all been for naught.

He worked with his brother, and both were successful and happy in their careers.

“Are you going to stay longer?” Luna asked. “It promises to be great fun, especially now that my grandmother has gone. You can join the snowball fights, and—”

“I'm afraid I cannot,” Edith interrupted.

“But there's *games*,” Luna exclaimed, clasping her hands together, and bringing them against her chest.

“Yes, you mustn't leave so very soon,” Logan added his appeal for her to remain.

“Uncle Thaddeus, tell Lady Edith she must stay,” Luna exclaimed. “She is *your* friend. I want her to play games with us.”

Edith's eyes caught with Thaddeus's.

He spoke quietly. “It would bring...”

Edith's heart lifted.

“Many great joy if you remained,” he finished, and that foolish organ that would forever beat for him, plummeted.

What did you expect he'd say? That it would bring him great joy being with you? He'd been very clear all those years ago precisely what he thought of her.

“Very well. If it is no imposition,” she said. “I will st—”

Cheers erupted from the children and their parents, and it was the first time in the whole of her life since Thaddeus anyone had expressed such joy in her company, and as the family happily continued their discussion about the upcoming festivities, Edith found herself wishing that could be enough.

Chapter 9

Ultimately, had Edith opted to continue the journey to her estate, departure would have proven impossible. A winter storm had rolled across the North Yorkshire countryside, making the roads impassable and lengthened her stay even more.

As such, nearly a week had passed, and in that time, Edith went out of her way to avoid being alone with him. Oh, she joined every meal and sat for the rounds of charades after, always smiling and clapping at the appropriate time.

But whenever there was the hint of a possibility of their being alone, she fled.

Which was why, at that precise moment, Thaddeus stood halfway down the hall of her guest chambers. And waited.

Arms folded at his chest, his foot kicked up, braced against the wall...and continued to wait.

When she'd been injured and intoxicated, she'd said too much for them to not again speak of it. Granted, she'd been three sheets to the wind, but he'd oft found that was when too many men were most truthful...and as such, they needed to speak. He'd not pressed her. Instead, allowing her to recover and mend.

"If you're looking for her...you won't find her in her bedchambers. She's outside with the children."

Thaddeus dropped his foot and turned.

His brother grinned.

He'd missed her already. When the hell had she gone out?

"I'm glad you're amused by all of this," Thaddeus muttered.

His brother went instantly serious. "I'm not amused. I see two people who are performing more mincing steps around one another than a damned ballroom of prancing lords and ladies."

“She doesn’t want to talk to me,” he said, and slashed his palm in the direction of Edie’s door. “As you can clearly tell.”

“Why do you think that is, Thaddeus?”

He frowned. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m not suggesting anything. I’m *saying* it. You get your hackles up when speaking about the lady to me. Am I to expect you haven’t been short *with* her?”

Thaddeus’s ears went hot. He’d been worse than short. At times, he’d been downright rude.

“She has to know I care about her still. I kept vigil at her side,” he said, his voice lacking conviction to his own ears.

“While she was largely unconscious.”

Martin held his gaze. “Thaddeus, if you want her to be able to speak to you about the past, you have to show her you’re capable of listening.”

With those words of advice ringing behind him, Martin left.

Thaddeus stared at him after he’d gone.

His brother was right. He’d been a bloody, obstinate arse. He’d been hurt beyond measure by her marrying, and yet... he’d never stopped loving her or caring about her. He missed speaking with her and having her speak freely with him.

He needed to see her.

Pausing only long enough to collect his cloak and hat, Thaddeus headed to the terrace.

All the guests’ children had gathered, with their parents and respective nursemaids and governesses as well, watching on as the girls and boys played.

Through the swirl of falling snowflakes, Thaddeus searched for Edith amongst the gathering of adults, and frowned.

Where in blazes was she?

He—

Laughter filled the air, bell-like and clear, ringing with the same joyousness that he'd carried with him in his memories when he'd gone to fight, and pulled out when the torture of what he'd witnessed, done, and suffered haunted him.

Turning slowly, Thaddeus found the owner of that mirth-filled laugh, and the air froze in his lungs, and he just stared.

She danced playfully about the terrace, launching snowballs at the children, pausing only long enough to replenish her missiles before going after the boys and girls, alternately pelting her and one another.

Just then, Luna sprinted over, and slipped her hand so very naturally into Edith's, and the pair of them raced off: Edie adjusting her strides so they were smaller so the younger girl might keep up. The two of them took sanctuary behind a Doric column.

Edie ducked out and assessed their opponents, who'd lost them when they'd been attempting to replenish their pile of snowballs.

She glanced down at Luna and touched a fingertip to her lips, and Luna matched that gesture.

And God help him. With that bloom on her cheeks, and light in her eyes, Thaddeus's heart swelled with renewed love for Edie.

He'd loved her even when she'd come to him and shared that she'd wed another. He'd loved her even as he'd rejected her appeal to be her lover. And he loved her all the more now watching her engage in a snowball fight with children whom she'd only just recently met. He'd love her until all the stars in the sky went completely dark.

"Uncle Thaddeus!" Luna cried and motioned for him. "You must come help me and Edith."

He felt Edie's gaze, saw the way her smile wavered, dipped, and then fell.

And he trotted over, his boots kicking up snow as he went.

The moment he joined them at the pillar, he spoke: “Never tell me it is you two against all of them.”

“And me.” A tiny voice piped in, and he glanced down at Lord and Lady Bolingbroke’s small daughter, Ruby, hiding there.

“We’ve been hiding her,” Luna explained, and as if letting him in on their secret and on their team. Edie touched a fingertip to her lips, compelling him to silence.

A smile returned to Edie’s lips, as if she were happy to see him, and lightness suffused his chest.

“We absolutely shan’t give Ruby’s place away,” he vowed, his breath leaving a little cloud of white upon the winter air.

Edith’s smile widened, dimpling both her cheeks as they’d always done when she’d been most happy.

Bending down, Thaddeus proceeded to create for them an arsenal.

Edith dropped to her haunches beside him. “You should be having a care with your arm,” he murmured, as she joined him in gathering up snowballs.

“It is much better,” she promised; she paused, lifting her gaze, sparkling with merriment and mischief. “And you know I was never one to resist a good snowball fight.”

And he felt a silly grin form on his lips. “Nay, I didn’t forget.”

She dipped her gaze, almost shyly, back to the ground and her efforts.

Making his features into a suitably solemn mask, Thaddeus straightened, and rested his back against the column.

“They’re over there!” Logan cried.

Ruby’s lower lip quivered. “They’ll find me.”

“Worry not!” Thaddeus whispered.

“Thaddeus will keep you safe. Just you see,” Edie whispered and flung an arm around the girl’s shoulders, and

the sight of her and the small child together filled every corner of him with warmth and light. It filled his mind with images of Edie and bright-eyed, dimple-cheeked daughters of her own.

“Uncle Thaddeus,” Luna whispered, tugging frantically at his leg, bringing him whirring back to the present. “They’re coming.”

“Here,” Edie whispered, handing him several snowballs.

Refocusing his efforts on the battle at hand, Thaddeus took those missiles from Edie, and then darted out from behind the column, with a playful roar.

Edie’s laughter melded with the younger girls’ excited squeals as Thaddeus turned loose his snowballs on the boys.

The boys erupted into matching shouts of mirth as they threw their snowballs at Thaddeus.

He dipped and swayed, left and right, evading several of those shots from the unruly boys. Two of those projectiles slammed into his lower legs, spraying his black coat with white; he took blow after blow until their opponents were empty-handed and gleeful.

With a cry, Edie popped out, and charged forward, followed closely by Ruby and Luna. The girls proceeded to launch a volley back at the celebratory boys, silencing those triumphant shouts, and driving them back.

With Edie close at their heels, the boys raced back towards the cover of the adults at the opposite end of the terrace, watching on.

Gathering up snowballs as he went, Thaddeus set off in pursuit, hammering the boys with hastily made missiles as he went. Luna and Ruby clapped, cheering him and Edie on.

“Heyyyyy,” Lachlan cried, even as he laughed, breathless from amusement.

The party staggered to a stop before the small gathering of parents.

Christina folded her arm around Lachlan’s shoulder, with Martin matching that gesture with Logan. “It is time to return

inside,” his brother’s new wife called out, and the children let out similar groans and protestations. “But I have it on authority from my sister that there is hot chocolates and ciders and pastries waiting.”

The terrace immediately swelled with an eruption of cheers, and as the collection of adults trailed after the stream of children.

Until only Thaddeus and Edie were alone. The chilled air hung with a heavier silence, made all the more powerful by the absence of the children’s laughter that no longer rang in the air.

He mourned the loss of the carefree woman she’d been moments ago. He wanted to bring her back to the point where laughter had spilled from her lips, and her cheeks had bloomed red, not just from the cold winter’s air, but from joy and mirth as well.

Instead, the walls had come up, and she avoided his gaze.

She lingered there a moment more, before taking a step forward.

“You still throw as impressive a snowball as you ever did,” Thaddeus murmured, rubbing his hands together, and watching her as they continued at a more sedate pace. “You’ve had practice over the years.”

“Not often,” she said softly. “Just the times I visited my brother and his family.”

She didn’t have children of her own, then. A different pang struck. Even as he loathed with every fiber of his person the thought of her laying with another man, she’d deserved babes. She would have been so very good with them.

The only glimpse he’d had into her marriage had been that afterthought statement she’d recently made when Thaddeus had been about to kiss her.

“Lord Bouchier died six months ago, and I’m a widow... Nor would he have cared either way.”

But how could that be true? What man would have not been mad with jealousy and fight to keep Edie for his own?

“And...what of your husband?” he asked before he could call the question back.

“Did I have snowball fights with my husband?” a humorless laugh spilled from her lips and, chilled him far more than the cold of the North Yorkshire winter snow piled around them. “My husband was three decades my senior and wouldn’t have done anything as outrageous as throw a snowball.”

It was the first she’d spoken of her husband...outside from the fact that she’d shared his title, a fact she told him when she’d come to him all those years earlier.

Three decades her senior? That would have meant when she’d been a girl of eighteen, her husband had been nearing his fiftieth year.

In those earliest days, after she’d come to him, wanting to run away, he’d found his way outside their palatial household. Finer than any homes he’d worked on or in, and grander than he’d ever set foot within, except for the dukes. He’d caught sight of the marquess as he’d been riding out.

He’d had silver streaks at his temples: a distinguished-looking chap. And Thaddeus had despised him at first sight. No, Thaddeus had been *so* focused on his own misery, however, that he’d never realized just how much older the man was than Edie.

At the time he’d been filled with a bitter resentment over the fact that Edith had traded an uncertain life with him for a comfortable one with a fine lord such as her husband.

The wind knocked Edie’s hood back, and her auburn curls stood out like a flash of fire upon the stark white canvas made by the storm around them.

“Here,” Thaddeus murmured, drawing that fur-lined hood up, back into place.

“Th-thank you,” she murmured, stammering. From the cold? Their bodies were so close, that the fabric of their

garments nearly kissed.

“I expect there was a reason ...” His brother’s murmurings from long ago danced to the surface.

“You said you did it for me...” he began.

She stiffened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” With that lie, Edie stalked off, making a beeline for the terrace doors.

With his gaze, he followed after her as she made a quick, proud march, the red fabric of her cloak whipped furiously about her ankles.

She’d always been a terrible liar.

Thaddeus set off in quick pursuit, his longer legs and strides rapidly eating up the distance she’d built between them.

He arrived at the door before her; clasp the handle, he drew it open.

She paused. “Thank you,” she said tightly, sailing inside, and continuing her swift retreat.

Like bloody hell she would.

They’d been apart longer than they’d been together. And the pain of losing her would always be the greatest blow and loss he’d ever suffered. But he’d known all these years of clear-headedness that he could hear her out. And he needed to.

“Edie,” he said quietly, catching her lightly by her uninjured arm.

She ground her feet to a stop and glared up at him.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“There’s everything to talk about.”

“There was everything to talk about when I came to you, Thaddeus,” she cried, her voice pinging off the stone walls and ceilings of their host’s ancient keep; that charge echoed and lingered, and Edie’s eyes immediately went wide, and she glanced frantically about in search of any nearby guests. When she verified they were alone still, she looked back at him, and

this time when she spoke, she lowered her voice. “I tried to speak with you,” she said in a more measured way.

And he’d not listened. “I’m listening now,” he said quietly.

Her rosebud-red mouth quivered, that plump flesh he’d dreamed of and longed for, trembled: not with joy but with pain, and the sight of that suffering cleaved his chest in two. “Please, don’t, Thaddeus,” she entreated, and he’d rather don his uniform and march off to those hellish battlefields of yesteryear than be the cause of her pain now. Or ever.

But he needed to know more.

“You said you did it all for me, Edie?” he repeated. “What did you mean?”

Chapter 10

Edith's heart hammered; it thumped away between her ears, a slow and steady throbbing, and she pressed four fingers against her right temple to rid herself of that query he continued to put to her.

Why was he asking these questions now?

Why should he care now when he hadn't cared then?

Why, when it was too late for them?

Too late for different reasons.

The irony was not lost on her; years ago, all that had stood between her and Thaddeus had been her marriage to another man. Now that cruel, heartless bastard was gone, and she could no longer have Thaddeus for altogether different reasons.

She closed her eyes, willing back the memory of him playing with Ruby and Luna and the other children. How very good he was with them. He was a man who deserved to be a father. And she was a woman who could never, ever give him those children.

The fact that not once in her marriage had she ever given her husband a single son or daughter was proof of that.

Feeling Thaddeus's penetrating gaze like a physical touch, she looked away, training her eyes to a place beyond her shoulder, staring at the stone walls of varying shades of grey.

But he needed to know. And then, mayhap he could finally understand, and they could be free of the chains that bound them.

"My parents intended to marry me off," she began quietly, recalling those long-ago moments, the panic that had threaded through her, and the desperation to make them understand why she couldn't. "They...found out about you."

"They offered me my commission."

They'd paid to send him off to war, and she'd cried until she'd thought there weren't any tears left to be shed.

"You said you wanted to go," she explained. "You saw it as—"

"A way to make more of myself," he murmured, those familiar words he'd whispered when they'd lain there in a tangle of arms in one of the horses' stables.

"I hated the idea of you fighting."

"I remember," he said quietly. "Your father came to me." There'd even been a letter from Edith given him by the duke. "He said you told him I wished to carve a life for myself in the military. There was a note you yourself wrote."

"Because my parents knew you would have never believed those words if they'd come only from my father. Your going into the military was the *last* thing I wanted for you." She spoke those words before he'd even finished concluding his.

"And I didn't want you to be anything more than who you were, Thaddeus," she said. "You were perfect to me, in every way. I didn't give my parents the idea, to present you with a commission. They had that all on their own." Hatred and resentment soured her tongue like so much vinegar being splashed upon that flesh.

Her parents had hated the idea of her and a commoner like Thaddeus, that they would have only sent him away in the hopes that he'd perish on the battlefield. Only, he hadn't died. He'd survived, against all odds. Against all dangers he'd faced.

She hugged her arms tightly around her middle, the satin crunching noisily.

"I cried when you left," she said, her voice a pained whisper, and she closed her eyes, returning herself to those days, the agony of loss. Back when she'd imagined there could be no greater agony. "I shut myself away in my rooms and refused to attend any events. I told them I'd wait for y-you." Her lower lip trembled, making it hard to form words that were steady, a quiver that turned everything into a stammer. "I

t-told them there w-was nothing they could do to compel me to marry. Not when I loved you. Not when I only wished to be with y-you.” Her voice broke on a sob, and she sucked in a quavering breath. Oh, God. How was it possible for the pain to be as fresh and as raw as it had been all those years ago? *Because you love him: even now as you did then. You never stopped. You never will.*

Thaddeus was the other half of her soul.

A pained-sounding groan slipped from Thaddeus, and he was immediately there, when he hadn't been in so long. He gathered Edie up into his arms, and the tears fell freely because it had been so very long since he'd held her, and she'd never imagined knowing the feel of them around her.

In his embrace, she'd always felt safe and warm and wonderful, as though all the constraints the world had placed upon them didn't matter, and that they could do anything and be anything...as long as they were together.

But that isn't true.

She knew it now.

Even so, Edith let him hold her that way, stealing the bliss of being in his arms, this way...anyway.

They remained like that, with Thaddeus lightly stroking her back, in smooth, small, soothing circles that he traced upon her, and then reversed. Back and forth. And she found herself steadied enough to step out of his arms.

This time, when she spoke, her voice was again steadied: hollow and empty to her own ears. “I was so very certain there was nothing they could make me do to betray you because I loved only you.” She steeled her jaw, her teeth coming sharply together, clenching and unclenching until her temples ached, and she welcomed that sobering pain. “But my parents, Thaddeus, they were ruthless. They are people who were never told no, and I was so very certain that with you gone, they couldn't do anything more to hurt me...or you.” She slid her gaze to his, making herself look at him. “I was wrong,” she whispered. “So very wrong.”



Thaddeus's heart thudded with a dull, slow, thickening thump against the walls of his chest.

Her eyes reflected an agony so raw and so real, he wanted to run from it.

He who'd faced down thousands of men, in countless battles, upon so many fields, with guns blazing and the fog of smoke hanging in the air, wanted to escape from the torture there.

"What did they do?" he asked quietly.

She continued to scrabble with her lower lip, her teeth worrying away at that tea-rose-red flesh, she hugged herself in a sad, little, uneven embrace.

"They threatened to destroy your family," she said in haunting tones.

A chill crept into the room, descending like a blanket of ice over him, that sucked out all warmth, and threatened to leave him frozen forever.

"What?" he repeated dumbly.

And then the words came, falling fast from her lips, each one marching through his mind, pounding away with every viciously evil and ugly and agonizing part of the missing-until-now story. *It was only missing because you let it be. You turned her away. You rejected her and refused to hear her out.*

"They were going to have your family turned out of their home, and your father and brother removed from their posts, and I knew they wouldn't survive, Thaddeus," she implored, as if begging him to understand why she'd done what she'd done...whereas, all the while, she'd *only* done what she had for him, and his family.

A groan, low and tortured, rumbled in his chest, trapped there by the pain of it.

"My parents thought they were the only ones in control." Edie's eyes hardened, and it was a hardness that had been absent in their youth but had been wrought by betrayal and hurt, and he wanted to rail and weep at that change: one

brought about because of him and his family. “But I would be damned ten times to Sunday if they had all the power. I knew your brother’s ability. I knew what he could do as a builder, and I vowed the only way I’d see the marriage they wished for me was if they moved your family to a new home, and if they secured work amongst their powerful friends.”

He froze.

Martin’s entire career, his livelihood that had resulted in his vision, a fortune, and connections...but it would have never come to be if it hadn’t been for this woman. “Edie,” he said, her name emerging as ragged as his soul. “I...” *I’m sorry. I never deserved you.*

She drew in a steadier, more measured breath between her teeth, and shook her head. “Now you know,” she said.

Now, he knew.

And he would never, ever be the same.

She turned to go.

Only, he’d been a coward and the worst sort of dastard and bastard for turning her away. “What of your husband?” he asked, freezing her in her tracks.

“My husband?” she asked, as she wheeled slowly back around. She cocked her head. “What of him?”

“Were you...?” Happy. He needed to know there was some happiness after Thaddeus had rejected her pleas to run away together. “Happy?” he managed to get the word out.

“Happy?” She flared her eyes slightly, and a little, mirthless laugh slipped out. “My husband had an affinity for bedding any woman who walked past. The only reason I was spared his attentions was after five years of cruel efforts, he failed to get a child on me.”

His breathing grew shallower at the dark images that slithered forward, the punishing imagery of Edie on her back, while some monster, who’d never deserved her, rutted between her legs.

Closing his eyes, Thaddeus groaned; agony threatened to double him over, and he hunched to escape it.

“But...there did come some good from my marriage,” Edie murmured, and he forced his eyes open.

“What?” he implored, taking a step towards her. “What?” he repeated, desperate to know. Desperate to know there’d been something good, anything good because she deserved only joy and had suffered so much.

Because of me.

Because she was doing it to protect you and your family...

Every stark reminder rolling in his head was another lash upon his heart.

“I always wanted to be with you,” she said. “I wanted us to have children together.”

“Yes,” he rasped. “Yes, I wanted that, too.”

Her eyes grew sad. “And I would have never discovered I could not give you...give us...those children had it not been for my marriage.” A sob slipped out, and she caught it behind her fist, stifling the sound of her misery.

He stared at her, stricken. “I don’t care about that,” he whispered, ravaged by her suffering and her assumption. “I only want you.”

“But *I* care about that,” she said, ignoring that latter assertion. Edie drew in another slow breath through her lips and took one more glance about.

“Edie,” he implored, stretching a palm towards her.

Blinking so very slowly, she stared at his outstretched fingers, and his hand ached, empty, longing for hers.

“I...I feel better now that you know,” she said, making no attempt to touch him, and he dropped his arm to his side. He deserved that rejection. “Thank you for listening.”

She’d thank him for listening?

And with that, Edie lifted her skirts a fraction, gathering up her damp hems, and marched off.

Immobile, Thaddeus stared after her, wanting to go to her. But unsure how to.

Because he did not deserve her.

He never had.

He'd always known he'd been unworthy of her, only to find it hadn't been his birthright that'd been what made him undeserving but who he had been as a man: because of his failure to listen and to hear her out, and to believe in her.

Thaddeus groaned: the crushing weight of pain and loss and shame were too much, and he crumpled under it.

He collapsed to his haunches.

Now that he'd heard this...he could not unhear it. Nor did he deserve that. Nor did she.

As the implications of what she'd done—nay, of what she'd had to do—threatened to suck him into an eddy of despair.

She'd married another man—a cruel one—to save Thaddeus's family: his powerless family, without any influence, who'd have been quashed as easily as a bothersome insect.

Instead, she'd sacrificed herself, seen them moved to a better home, and his brother allowed to rise and thrive as a builder. What Martin had managed to accomplish would have never been had it not been for Edie's sacrifice.

Herself. She sacrificed herself.

His breathing grew shallow and ragged and raspy in his ears.

And she came to you; she came to you to escape. To flee a cruel husband and a miserable marriage, and you turned her away. You rejected her. Because of your damned pride and your own honor.

He hadn't wanted to sully her with being a mistress and not a wife.

Shame and grief and regret brought his eyes weighted shut, and sinking his chin against his chest, he gave in to the crushing ponderousness of grief and despair.

He sobbed until his eyes burned and his chest and side ached.

And he continued crying until there was not another drop within him.

He loved her.

He always had.

And despite the fact he'd no right to her, he wanted her: in his life and in his arms and in his bed—forever.

He wanted to spend the rest of his days attempting to make her smile and bring her joy and atone for all the ways he'd failed.

Even as he knew deep in his soul...there was no atoning.

There was no forgiveness he was deserving of.

Chapter 11

That night, sleep eluded him as it so often did.

Only, this time it wasn't the demons of war that kept rest at bay, or the sins he'd committed all in the name of survival.

Rather, it was a different sin, and an even greater transgression. An unforgivable one...against the one woman—and only woman—whom he'd ever loved and would ever love again.

“This is for the best, Mr. Phippen, and we trust someday you will understand that.”

At the time, he'd been so blinded by grief and hurt and betrayal that he'd not heard what her parents had truly been saying.

Until now.

Nay, not until now.

Until Edie had revealed the truth.

And he'd realized that of the two of them...she'd been the only one wronged.

He'd believed the absolute worst of her, when he should have only trusted in her, and gone to her with that note and words her parents had thrown at him. And he should have fought for her.

For them.

He sucked in a shaky, agonized breath, and rolling onto his back, he squeezed his eyes shut.

He'd been wrong.

He'd been wrong about so much, where she was concerned.

When she'd come to him upon his return, he'd been so damned proud, resentful, and jealous, he'd turned her away and sent her back to a miserable marriage.

Everything within him hurt all over again: a vicious ache that robbed him of breath and hurt from the inside out.

He felt her before he heard her.

And lying in his bed, Thaddeus waited, holding his breath with the same anticipation he had as a young man, yearning for her. Wanting for her to come. Knowing she deserved more than a quick coupling, but assuring himself that he'd give her more, some day.

That someday had never come.

Not because of her.

But because of him.

Click.

But she was here now.

A slight flicker of light from the sconces in the hall filtered into the room, and then was swallowed a moment later as she shut the door behind her.

Nay, behind them.

Laying on his side, he stared at her wearing a satin, pearl-encrusted night wrapper; the fabric shimmered and gleamed as she started forward.

He lay there, watching her under hooded lashes, waiting for her to make the move. Needing her to make it. Needing her still, all these years later. Even as he didn't deserve her. He never had.

Only, it wasn't because of his birthright, but because he'd failed to believe in her.

He saw that now.

Thaddeus shoved himself up into a seated position, and he squinted in the dark, damning the shroud over the room that obscured her features. Or mayhap it was better. Because he was too much a coward to see what she was surely thinking about him.

Hello, love. My heart, my soul.

That had been the greeting they'd always offered one another. A lifetime ago. It sat on his tongue, wanting to be spoken. But he'd surely lost that right to her.

Eddie picked her way across the room, and then she reached the side of his bed, standing over him. He ran his gaze over her face, attempting to make sense of what she was thinking.

His throat worked painfully. "Ah, Eddie," he said hoarsely. "I am so so—"

"Shh," she whispered, touching a finger to his lips, and stifling that useless apology.

And yet, even as she climbed into the bed, he slid an arm around her waist, and drew her down upon him.

"Thaddeus," she whispered, his name a breathless exhalation, and he swallowed the last remnants of it with his kiss. Covering her mouth with his.

And there was nothing chaste or quick in this kiss.

Years of hungering and longing came together, consuming him with a fire of want, and he devoured her lips. Slanting his over that flesh, again and again. And she parted her mouth, letting him in, and he swept inside, tasting of her.

She sighed, and brought her hands up, pressing her palms against the naked wall of his chest.

"I have missed you," she moaned, between kisses.

And he'd missed her, too.

"Oh, God, I've missed you, too," he rasped, leaving himself bare and vulnerable. "So damned much." And it had been all his fault.

In one fluid motion, he caught her by the waist, and rolled her under him.

He slid her night wrapper open, and pushed the bodice of her nightshift down, baring her breasts.

His desire climbed, as he drank in the sight of her: generous breasts, rose-tipped, and with a groan, he closed his mouth over one of those pebbled peaks.

She gasped, as he suckled the sensitive flesh as she'd so loved.

"You still like that," he breathed against her chest. Even as he already knew the answer. Felt it in the way she trembled in his arms, and in the way her heart raced near his lips.

She bit her lower lip and nodded. "Only because of you, Thaddeus. Only when you kiss me."

It was a reminder that another man had known her, and he wanted to rail and mourn and lash out that someone had done so, and yet it was only his own fault. Had he remained and fought a different war, a battle for her heart and their future, then she'd only have ever belonged to him.

Instead, he'd consigned her to hell and misery and—

"Stop," she entreated. "I don't want him here. It is just us, Thaddeus. You and I."

"Just us," he whispered, catching her wrist and dragging it to his mouth, he kissed the place where her hand met her arm. "Just as it was meant to be."

Ordained by time and fate and love.

He didn't want either ghosts or that bastard here in this moment. Thrusting aside so much regret, Thaddeus returned his attention to her breasts: licking the crest, swirling his tongue around it, until Edie was moaning and panting incoherently in his arms, so that the only words he could make out were desperate pleas for more.

He needed to feel more of her.

Reaching between them, Thaddeus found that soft thatch of auburn curls, damp from her desire, and as he slipped a finger inside her sodden channel, he groaned. "You are so wet," he praised, teasing and toying with her nub.

She bit her lower lip, and lifted her hips, arching into his touch.

And he gave her what she sought. Slowly at first. And then he added a second finger, stroking her, in and out. In a slow,

deliberate, rhythmic pattern that mimicked the motions he denied himself.

Because he wanted this moment to last forever. Because he wanted to take his time with her, when in the past they'd always had to hurry.

"Please, Thaddeus," she begged, not wanting that same slowness. She arched and twisted upon the silken sheets, arching her hips frantically.

And he'd always been wont to deny her anything.

Thaddeus shifted, covering her body with his, and in one smooth stroke, slid himself deep inside her.

They cried out with a reciprocal relief.

Sweat beaded his brow, and in an instant, he was reduced to the green boy he'd once been with her, wanting to move, needing to.

"Make love to me," she panted, lifting her hips up, making the decision for him, and setting him free.

Gripping her hips hard, he leveraged himself, pushing himself deep, and then retreating.

She moaned just one word: his name, over and over again.

They moved in perfect tandem. Edie lifting and him lunging forward.

There grew a franticness to their movements: their bodies growing slick with perspiration, and he sank his fingers into the soft curve of her hip. He'd yearned for this moment so long. Ached for it. It had been the stuff of dreams that he'd pull out when the nightmares had been worst, and the longing for her had been so very great. He couldn't wait much longer. "Come for me," he begged.

Edie sank her teeth into her lower lip and suddenly, her eyes went wide, and she flung her arms wide. "Yessss," she screamed, coming, her channel gripping his length. "I love you, Thaddeus."

And with that avowal ringing in his ears, he groaned and pushed deep inside the warmest, wettest place, a place he needed to be.

It was so damned good.

So fucking good.

He buried his head against her shoulder, as a pleasure the likes of which he'd never known consumed him, and he continued to drive himself deep inside her, wanting this moment to go on forever, wanting to be swallowed whole in their desire for one another.

With one final thrust, he spent himself completely, and then on a sharp rasp, he collapsed, catching himself by his elbows to keep from crushing her.

Eddie brought her arms up, and wrapped him in a tender embrace, and held him: held him as she'd once done, but then those embraces had been all too brief as the fear of discovery had stolen those blessed moments after they'd made love.

Their breaths grew less ragged, less rapid, and settled into a smooth, even cadence.

Withdrawing from her body, Thaddeus rolled onto his side, and drew her close.

"I love you," she whispered.

Thaddeus tightened his embrace about her. "I love you, Eddie. I always have." His throat worked painfully. "I never stopped." He never would. His soul had been tied with hers long, long ago.

A happy smile danced on her lips. "Am I dreaming this?"

"If so, we're having the same dream, love," he teased, taking her lips under his once more, and this time it was a gentle, tender meeting.

This time, however, there was no fear of her parents, or some servants, discovering them. This time, unlike before, they didn't answer to anyone.

And for the first time, since he'd gone off to war, he closed his eyes, and with a smile, Thaddeus slept.



Twelve hours later.

Whistling a merry tune under his breath, freshly bathed, and more well-rested than he'd been in...well, ever, Thaddeus headed for the breakfast room...in search of Edie.

She'd managed to slip off before he'd awakened.

Of course, she couldn't have stayed. Not without having brought scandal, or gossip.

And she deserved more than that.

But he didn't want them to be sneaking about.

And soon, they wouldn't have to.

Soon—if she'd have him—they'd marry, and that would mark the end of their days hiding their love of one another.

“I love you, Thaddeus.”

He came to a stop.

She'd cried out those glorious words at the height of her passion.

She loved him.

She loved him, still.

All these years later.

She always had.

He wasn't deserving of that, but he was grateful for that gift, and he didn't intend to squander it.

He caught sight of his visage in the looking glass and the silly smile he wore.

Springing into step once more, he resumed whistling, and headed for the breakfast room.

Thaddeus stopped in the doorway and frowned.

The empty breakfast room.

He consulted his timepiece.

Of course, it was late. He'd slept several hours past when breakfast was served.

Turning on his heel, he went in search of her.

And after checking room after room, he was still searching.

Unease stirred low in his gut, that same ominous warning to proceed the darkest moments he'd faced on the battlefield... and he fought back those memories, and that sensation, because it didn't have any place in his life with Edie. Those demons were different. She was all that was light, and good, and—

"Thaddeus," that quiet greeting brought him spinning on his heel.

A quiet greeting belonging to a different woman.

"Mrs. Gray," he said, dropping a quick bow for his hostess, his brother's new sister-in-law.

She waved off that formality. "We are family now."

It was a generous extension granted him...a bricklayer's son. He'd always seen his worth intrinsically tied to his birthright. Only to find that he'd been attempting to be more, not for Edie, but because he'd accepted himself as not worthy. It was why it had been so easy to believe the lie her parents had fed him.

"You are...looking for someone."

Hers wasn't a question.

"Lady Edith," she ventured, and he felt his cheeks go hot. He'd been so very obvious. But then he'd always been hopeless at keeping his love for her secret.

Only, he didn't want to keep his love for her secret any longer. He wanted them to be free with their relationship...one that he wanted to include marriage.

"Aye," he said gruffly.

Something flashed in her eyes, an emotion that looked very much like...pity. "I...am sorry to say that Lady Edith left."

It took a moment for those words to penetrate.

He saw Claire's lips moving, and heard the words she spoke, and yet, they did not...penetrate. Because he could not let them penetrate.

He shook his head dumbly.

"Left...where?" he asked, his voice garbled.

"The house party," she said, and there was a gentleness to that admission: one that hit him like the musket ball he'd taken to the shoulder when he'd been away fighting, and it had the same agonizing feel of it, too.

He sucked in a shuddery breath.

She left.

Claire nodded, confirming that he'd spoken aloud, and this time, he saw the lady's lips move, but her words came all muffled in his ears, like he was swimming underwater, struggling to make sense of what was being said above the surface.

She'd gone.

Why had she gone?

Because why should she want you after you failed to believe in her? That voice taunted. She was true, and you were content to believe she betrayed you, when you knew what her soul was.

Oh, God.

He'd not survive this.

"When?" he rasped, and Claire stopped mid-sentence of whatever she'd been saying.

"Before first light. Somewhere around five o'clock."

Five o'clock.

His gaze shot to the hall clock.

Seven damned hours.

She had seven damned hours on him.

He froze.

And what was more...he'd no bloody idea where she was going. Pain rippled through his entire being, and his shoulders sagged under the crushing weight of this loss of her a second time.

A small hand touched his shoulder, and he blinked... coming to the moment. Forgetting he wasn't alone.

“She asked permission to use one of my carriages, as hers is still not repaired.”

He hadn't finished the repairs as he didn't want her to leave.

His entire body sagged, and his eyes slid shut.

The ache in his chest burned and throbbed, and he rubbed ineffectually at a pain that would never quit.

“I, of course, granted her the use of the carriage.”

Of course, she had. It would have been rude not to, and the woman before him was nothing, if not gracious and kind.

Claire cleared her throat. “I also took the liberty of asking where she was going.”

He froze.

“Her brother's estates are not far from here,” she explained. “The Duke of Huntington's properties in Kirkbymoorside. Though, it has begun to snow heavily a—”

He was already on his heel, and racing for the stables.

He had to get to her.

He had to tell her everything he carried in his heart and pray it would be enough to keep her.

A short while later, in the midst of the latest onslaught of snow, Thaddeus was on his way to Kirkbymoorside.

Chapter 12

Kirbymoorside, England

Edie had left Thaddeus's side before he'd awakened, and before first light.

One day and a handful of hours ago.

She'd known even before she'd entered Thaddeus's rooms to make love to him that she would not stay.

She'd known the moment she'd seen him with Christina Phippen's children that she could not stay. That she could not have a future with him.

Because he deserved those babes, who'd grow to be small children.

Because he was so very good with them.

And because she could not give him that.

She'd been gone not even two full days, and the pain of losing him a second time had not lessened.

Tears smarted her eyes.

She always loved spending time with her brother, Crispin, and his family.

Because she loved children and had always wanted a passel of babes of her own.

Because she loved that her brother had found happiness with his wife...even if there'd been times she'd envied him that happiness.

And yet, seeing them in their joy, all three of their small children racing about, so happy, cleaved her heart: reminded her all over again of what she and Thaddeus would not have, because of what she could not give him.

It was why she'd retired to a different parlor, and opted for a seat at the window, staring out at the snow-covered hills. The storm that had come on and off these past days had abated,

leaving in place of the grey-white storm clouds, a crisp, cheerful blue sky.

A figure appeared in the lead windowpane, and she glanced back. “Crispin,” she greeted her brother. Somber as he’d not been in so long. Not since he’d married his wife, whom he loved, and not since the pair had welcomed their two precocious children. A sinful envy sluiced away at her. “Never tell me you fell out of the hoop-rolling first?” Usually played outside, only her brother and his wife had thought to convert the ballroom to a makeshift space to play that game in the winter, too. “You who were always the best in our family.”

A small smile formed on his mouth. “Alas, I’ve reared three little ones who are even better than I. May I join you?” he asked, motioning to the place on the window seat beside her.

“Of course.” She wanted to be alone. She wanted to sit with her regrets and her misery and wallow until she was all wallowed out. Even as she knew there was no end to the pain of losing Thaddeus a second time.

Crispin settled himself onto the corner of the floral upholstered portion of the window bench.

“You are quiet,” her brother remarked.

She’d been miserable company. She should have stayed in London. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize for it, Edith,” he gently rebuked. “You aren’t happy.”

His wasn’t a question. Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them back.

“You haven’t been happy for a long while,” he murmured.

“N-no,” she said, her voice trembling. Not since Thaddeus had joined the King’s Army. Oh, there’d been brief interludes here and there where she’d smiled or felt fleeting moments of happiness, but there’d never been the joy like she’d known with him.

In the reflective ice-flaked windows, she caught the way his throat bobbed. “I should have never let you marry Bouchier. I was so damned self-absorbed in my own misery: missing my wife, and too miserable to see that my own sister was hurting.”

“Crispin, please, don’t,” she begged. He didn’t bear the responsibility for her suffering. It had been their parents.

Drawing in an uneven breath, her brother dragged a hand through his hair. “Do you know the story of my marriage to Elizabeth?”

She hesitated, and then shook her head. She’d known of her brother’s hasty marriage, and then Elizabeth had run off. But she’d never known the circumstances behind the split that had come before they’d found their way back together.

“I fell in love with her the moment I met her,” he said wistfully. “Oh, I didn’t realize until I was sixteen or so. Mother disapproved, but Father was unable to deny our mother anything.”

“Of course he was,” she said, not even bothering to conceal the disdain for the parents who’d separated her from Thaddeus. They’d both been guilty parties.

“Even after Elizabeth and I married, Mother sought to dissolve the union. She”—his eyes darkened—“orchestrated a meeting between Father and I. Elizabeth heard things I said... words I did not mean, meant to assuage our parents, and”—he grimaced and gave his head a shake—“they sent her away. They threatened to strip me of my fellowship at Oxford if she did not go.”

Her heart twisted for the very pain she knew all too well. “Oh, Crispin.” They’d both been manipulated by their parents. Before the dowager duchess had died, she’d begged Edie’s forgiveness. She’d not been able to extend the same grace her brother had over the years to their mother.

“I never knew you had suffered in the same way, been manipulated by Mother.” He paused. “Until earlier this afternoon.”

Edie cocked her head. “I don’t...”

“Someone has called on you,” he said quietly, and looked to the entranceway of the parlor.

She followed his focus, and her breath caught on a soft gasp.

Thaddeus, alongside her sister-in-law, Elizabeth. Twisting a black hat in his hands, his dark hair tousled and windswept, his cheeks rough with a day’s worth of stubble from not shaving.

She sat motionless. Afraid to move. Afraid to breathe. Afraid that if she did, he’d go, and this dream of him would leave her, too.

“Edie,” he said thickly.

Only...he spoke, proving he was very much real, his being here. All of this.

All of this.

And then came rushing back...the reasons they could not be together.

She dimly registered Thaddeus stepping aside, and her brother moving past him, to join Elizabeth.

Crispin and Elizabeth closed the door behind them.

Edie found her legs and her voice. “Th-Thaddeus,” she greeted, sailing to her feet.

“You left,” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

She took in a long, shaky breath. “Yes. It seemed for the best.”

“It seemed for the best?” he echoed, and in one swift movement, he was across the room and before her, stopping a pace apart. “How could it be for the best when I love you as I do,”

“Thaddeus,” she begged. “Please, don’t do this.”

“Do you love me?” he asked bluntly. “Because if you don’t, I understand why. I certainly don’t deserve your love for

doubting you as I did.” He dropped his voice. “But that night, before you left, you told me you loved me, and it made me hope that you might somehow, despite me being an enormous arse and undeserving bastard, love me still.” Desperation bled from his eyes.

She bit her lip hard. Lie to him. Because that lie, hurting him this way, would be hurting him in the other way that would see them together, and him without the babes he should have. Only, she couldn’t. There’d been enough misunderstandings between them. “Of course, I love you, Thaddeus,” she whispered, her voice catching.

He closed his eyes, the small knob of his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“But—”

“I don’t care about any babes we might or might not ever have.”

“We *won’t*,” she said, needing to be clear that he understood. “I cannot g-give you those children.”

“There are other ways for us to have children in our lives, Edie,” he said, stretching his fingers towards hers. “There are so many boys and girls in London, struggling on the streets, cold and without homes or families of their own. In need of parents.” Children who’d lived a harsh life in East London, as Thaddeus and his family had. “But if you don’t want that, and don’t want any child, then I’m fine with that, too. I just want *you*,” he begged, adding several syllables to that word. “All of you. Only you.”

Tears welled in her eyes.

He closed the rest of the space between them, and she had to tip her neck back to meet his gaze, blinking back the glimmering drops that blurred his face.

“I don’t deserve you,” he said, his voice husky with tears. “But I want you anyway. I want to spend every day pulling smiles and laughter from your lips.” Edie caught a sob against her fist, and he caught a teardrop with the pad of his thumb,

dusting that winding drop away. “I ask you to just take a chance on me and a new beginning together.”

All these years she’d believed her chance at love and happiness gone.

Only to have Thaddeus here, before her now, offering her everything she’d ever wanted. All of it.

Accepting her as she was and offering her the decision on whether there’d be babes.

His face fell, and his quivering arm dropped to his side.

“Yes,” she rasped.

Hope lit his eyes.

Edie threw her arms about him.

Bracing his legs to keep from toppling back, Thaddeus immediately brought his arms up, too, folding them around her, holding her close. “I want that,” she managed between tears. “I want those children, and I want a life with you, forever.”

“Oh, God, Edie.” He dropped a kiss hard against her temple. “I love you so much.”

“And I love you.” She continued to weep. “And I never, ever want to be apart from you again.” They’d lost so much time together. So much.

Thaddeus drew her closer. “And you won’t. I was lost.”

“We were lost.”

“And now we’re found,” he finished.

And tipping her head back, she welcomed his kiss, and the future to come.

Together.

Epilogue

Two years later

North Yorkshire, England

Oh, God. Edie was dying and Thaddeus wanted to.

He frantically paced before her bedchamber doors. Another one of her cries went up, peeling into the hall. The agony reverberating in that scream ripped all the way across his soul.

Thaddeus dragged a hand through his disheveled hair. It'd been seven hours. How long could a woman endure such excruciating pain?

“This is normal,” Martin assured him.

Thaddeus didn't pause in his back-and-forth march. He glared at his eldest brother standing, sans jacket, arms folded, so very cool and collected.

“It is easy enough for you to say,” he hissed. “It is not your wife in there.”

“Not this time,” Martin acknowledged.

“As I recall, you were a bloody wreck both times Christina was laboring to bring your children into this world.”

“And you were the voice of reason and calm assuring me that everything would be fine.”

“Well, I was a deuced stupid arse who didn't know shite about what I was talking about then,” Thaddeus snapped.

There came the muffled shouts of encouragement from the midwife and maids attending Edie. Christina would have been there too if she had not just recently delivered her babe too.

“This is nor—”

Thaddeus cut his well-intentioned brother off. “Nothing about this is normal.”

Including his not being in that bloody room with her.

“To hell with propriety,” he muttered. Marching over to the door, Thaddeus wrenched the panel open.

The midwife and servants looked over with startled eyes. “Sir, you shouldn’t be—”

“Not a word,” he growled, stalking over to the bed.

Edith lay sprawled in the center, propped against a dozen or so pillows, and her white nightshift lay up around her waist. Her face glistened with sweat, as did the wisps of red-brown curls that had escaped her plait. A glimmer of joy radiated past her pain-glazed eyes.

His chest hitched.

“Thaddeus, you’re here,” she whispered.

She’d never been more beautiful, and he’d never hated himself more.

“I’m here,” he said, sinking onto the edge of the mattress beside her.

He took one of her hands in his, wishing he could confer his strength to her. “You’re my wife. This is where I should be and want to be.”

Edie lifted her mouth to his. “I love you.”

“I love you. I love you so much,” he said hoarsely, kissing her.

Her body tensed, and she wrenched her lips away. “Ahhhhh,” she wailed.

Another spasm wracked her frame, and Thaddeus cast a desperate look at the midwife. “Do something,” he begged.

The strong, sturdy woman grunted. “She has to push.”

Thaddeus yanked his gaze back to his wife. “Did you hear that, Edie?” he begged. “You’re never doing this again, Edie. You’re all I want. Only you. You have to push.”

Edie squeezed her eyes shut, her entire face went red from the strain, and a shout built quiet at first, and then she screamed to the rafters.

“I see the babe’s head, my lady. Push, my lady. Push!” the midwife urged.

And as though that hint of how very close she was to holding their babe gave her the will to continue.

Edie bore herself down on her elbows, breathing hard, and then, she collapsed.

“Edie!” Thaddeus cried.

A tiny but gusty wail filled the chambers.

“It is a boy, Mr. Phippen!” the midwife called out. “A big, strong boy.”

Those words and the fact she passed the babe over to the waiting maid’s hands only distantly penetrated his terror.

With a hand that shook, Thaddeus wiped the damp strands of hair from her brow. “Edie,” he said hoarsely.

A soft, tired smile played at her lips.

“You’re all right?” he pleaded, needing to hear as much from her.

“I am better than all right, husband.”

Needing confirmation of that, he looked to the midwife who’d resumed her care of Edie. “She’s a strong lass. She’ll be just fine.”

Another smile played at her crimson lips. “Did you hear that, husband? I’m a strong lass.”

The maid came forward and placed their babe in Edie’s arms.

The tiny, plump babe—their son—instantly quieted. He blinked, staring up at them with glazed eyes.

“Hullo, sweet boy.” Edie stroked a finger over his cream white cheek. “I am your mama and this is your papa.”

“Hello, my son.” He’d a son. He and Edie together had a child.

“Oh, Thaddeus. Look at him,” she whispered, reverent awe in her voice.

He stared at the sight of his wife and child. So much love, greater than he'd ever known and more than he'd ever believed possible filled him.

“He is perfect. *You* are perfect.”

Edie pulled her gaze from their babe. “He needs a sibling.”

“No.”

“You promised me eleven more,” she teased.

“I promise you forever, Edie Phippen,” he said, moving to claim her lips again.

Edie drew back slightly. “Are you trying to change the subject, husband?”

“I may be.”

“I’ll allow it...” She paused. A twinkle glimmered in her eyes. “For now.”

And as their quiet laughter melded, Thaddeus looked eagerly forward to the future to come with he, and Edie, and their son.

The End

Enjoyed Loved and Found? Be sure and check out Christi Caldwell’s latest Amazon Exclusive, The Duke Alone!

For an abandoned lady and an unsociable duke, the winter season brings a swirl of romance—and danger—in a bracing novel by *USA Today* bestselling author Christi Caldwell.



[The Duke Alone](#)

Or, if you haven't read Christina and Martin Phippen's book, *It Happened One Winter*, you can read it today!



[It Happened One Winter](#)

Biography

Christi Caldwell is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Sinful Brides series and the Heart of a Duke series. She blames novelist Judith McNaught for luring her into the world of historical romance. When Christi was at the University of Connecticut, she began writing her own tales of love—ones where even the most perfect heroes and heroines had imperfections. She learned to enjoy torturing her couples before they earned their well-deserved happily ever after. Christi lives in North Carolina where she spends her time writing, baking, and being a mommy to the most inspiring little boy and empathetic, spirited girls who, with their mischievous twin antics, offer an endless source of story ideas!

Visit www.christicaldwellauthor.com to learn more about what Christi is working on, or join her on Facebook at [Christi Caldwell Author](#), and Twitter [@ChristiCaldwell](#)!