



LADY IN RUBY

ELIZABETH COLE

A SECRETS OF THE ZODIAC HOLIDAY NOVELLA

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by Elizabeth Cole

Once upon a December, best friends Caroline and Estelle brave the cold English winter and build a snowman in the woods. Caroline playfully shapes him into her ideal suitor, narrating all the qualities a man would require to catch her attention. Later that day, a stranger knocks on the door: Lord Snowdon, a dashing gentleman dressed in blue and white, bearing an invitation to the family's holiday festivities. The next day, Caroline walks back to where she built her snowman...only to discover that it's gone!

Is it Christmas magic at work, or is something less innocent going on? As guests gather for dinners, parties, and more, Caroline senses that Lord Snowdon is not exactly what he seems, and more than one guest has a hidden agenda. When vital documents are stolen from the house, it's crystal clear that someone is up to no good. Stealing kisses under the mistletoe is one thing, stealing government secrets is quite another! If it's Snowdon, it means a cold end to her Christmas wishes. Can Caroline uncover the plot threatening to ruin the holiday joy and keep her heart from breaking?



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Chapter 1

MISS CAROLINE GARLAND AND HER best friend, Estelle, were walking in a winter wonderland. Thanks to three days of continuous snowfall, the forest surrounding the home of Hollydell Manor had been transformed into a fairyland of white snow and crystal ice. Snow drifted against tree trunks and icicles hung from high branches, glimmering in the sun.

“It’s so marvelous to be out in the fresh air, especially after being in the laboratory all day yesterday!” Caroline said. Winter was her favorite season. She reveled in the purity of the frosty outdoors, glad to take a break from the work that had lately been consuming her—helping her father create a very particular, innovative chemical formula. Granted, she chose to do it, and granted, the poor weather during the last few days made it difficult to go outside anyway, but still...how nice it was to be free of the vapors and bubbling liquids of the lab for a while.

She wore a brand-new wool pelisse in a rich red, edged with fox fur at the neck. It certainly made the frigid weather more tolerable. She hazarded a glance at her friend, who didn’t have the advantage of fur lining or new, unblemished wool. Estelle’s cloak was in fact the very same cloak she wore at school when they both attended. It was a testament to Estelle’s careful handling of all garments that now, three years later, the cloak was still deep green and remarkably free of holes or stains. It was unspoken but understood by all parties that Estelle’s position as companion to Caroline was a way for the young lady to have a better life for at least as long as she lived

at Hollydell, where she experienced luxury far beyond anything in her childhood.

With a rush of guilt, Caroline asked, “Are you cold?” How thoughtless of her, dragging her friend through this weather!

“I’m fine, truly,” Estelle replied quickly. “I wanted to walk. It’s so pretty outside and it *is* lovely to breathe fresh air, isn’t it? Houses get so smoky in winter.”

Certainly Hollydell did. Every room possessed a fireplace, and Caroline’s father was fond of telling the servants to put more fuel on. After the holidays, Estelle would visit her own mother in the northern part of the county. That small cottage would be much colder, each log only put to the fire when its previous brethren had gone to embers.

When they reached a clearing, Caroline bent down and scooped up a handful of freshly fallen snow, assessing it with a critical eye for weight and density. “Oh, it’s perfect for a snowball fight!” she exclaimed as she experimentally molded it in her mittened hands.

Estelle wrinkled her delicate nose. “Caro, we shouldn’t! We’re not children anymore. What might someone think if we were seen?”

“Spoilsport,” Caroline accused her friend. “Besides, who will see us here? We’re well off the main road, and this is Papa’s property anyway.”

“But your aim is so much better,” Estelle noted with more honest apprehension, her green eyes wide.

“Fine, no warlike action! I suppose we ought not do that sort of thing anyway, so long as a real war is happening on the Continent. It would be in poor taste. But what shall we do with all this lovely snow? We can’t waste it!” Caroline said, flinging her arms wide.

Estelle smiled. “Is it not enough to admire it?”

“No! Oh, do you want to build a snowman?” Caroline asked eagerly. She dropped her newly formed snowball to the ground and began rolling it into a larger sphere before Estelle could even respond. “Let’s make the most marvelous snowman this forest has ever seen!”

“What will make him marvelous?” Estelle asked, stooping down and gamely sweeping snow into her mittened hands. “All the snowmen I’ve seen are not exactly Corinthians. Rather pudgy and rustic, in fact.”

“Estelle, you’re a genius! That’s just what we’ll make: a snow Corinthian. An ideal snowman!”

“You’ve got marriage in mind again, haven’t you?” Estelle teased, though with a wistful look.

Caroline just laughed, hoping to disrupt any sad thoughts in her friend’s mind. “Marriage is all Mama talks about for me, but I’m sick of suitors. They never want to talk about anything in the least bit interesting.” As an only child, Caroline would inherit the entire estate of Hollydell, which generated an income robust enough to catch the attention of all the local bachelors, and even make some gentlemen venture from the glitter of London all the way out into the country for the opportunity to court her. Caroline, however, was having none

of it. She knew her worth, and she was no naive miss. She would marry for love or not at all.

Estelle, on the other hand, had no dowry to speak of. She'd often expressed her gratitude to Caroline, who insisted on Estelle living at Hollydell until one of them got married. All of which was to say, for their own reasons both young ladies were happy to be in the woods, dealing with a man of icy but dignified demeanor...a man made of snow.

They quickly assembled the body, which was remarkably close to human proportions (both Caroline and Estelle excelled in school: Caroline in maths and natural philosophy, while Estelle favored arts and letters). Caroline tweaked the snowy substance of the middle part into an appearance of fine clothing, then used her hands to edge out features on the snowman's face.

"His mouth looks a little harsh," Estelle noted with a critical glance. "And the cheekbones are too angled. Not quite friendly."

"Once the sun comes out, the warmth will soften him up," Caroline said. "I'm doing the best I can with the tools I have." Inspired, she retrieved a small comb from her reticule, and pressed it into service as a sculptor's knife. She scraped it over one snowy cheek, smoothing the surface. "How's that?"

"Better," Estelle said in approval, walking a ways off to pluck some greenery from the nearby shrubs.

"There, he's coming along," Caroline said, smiling at her snowman. "A little on the pale side, but that's to be expected! I

think his eyes do have just a hint of blue, don't you? I love blue-eyed men best."

"It's just the angle of the light that make the eyes look blue," Estelle said, ever the artist. "Certainly, his hair is quite white for such a young man. Why, he's less than an hour old!" She giggled at her joke.

"He may be young," Caroline said, "but he's mature in attitude. He knows what he wants and he'll keep his cool. Until he meets me, of course. Then he'll melt! Oh, I rather wish he *could* be real!"

Estelle frowned as she stuck a sprig of winter holly into the snowy brim of the figures hat. "But you say you hate it when your suitors fall all over you and declare their admiration."

"I despise false declarations," Caroline clarified. "All the offers I've got so far have been for my land, not my heart. I want a gentleman who's not afraid to really love his wife. Those tales of gentlemen keeping mistresses chill my blood."

"So all he needs to be is sincere and loyal? In that case, why not get a dog?" Estelle asked.

"He must be much more than that! He must be well-read, and intelligent, and kind. He'd better like dogs and horses and cats, or I'll have nothing to do with him. And it would be very useful if he were both well-traveled and still wanted to travel, for I've never been anywhere and I want to see the whole world."

“Husbands like their wives to stay at home,” Estelle cautioned.

“*My* husband will want me to stay at his side.”

“Caro dear, I fear you are setting yourself up for a fall,” her friend said. “Women cannot afford to be so picky when it comes to marriage.”

“I can,” Caroline said before realizing how cruel her words sounded. “Oh, Estelle, forgive me. I didn’t mean to...”

“I know what you meant,” Estelle said, a gentle smile lighting her face. “There’s no reason to pretend that we have the same concerns. You have money, I have not. That’s just the way it is. I’m grateful that the sales of my paintings bring in a little income for Mama.”

“Estelle, if there’s justice in the world, a lord will fall in love with you and make you his bride.”

Her friend laughed softly, then murmured, “A lord? Goodness, Caroline. Why would a lord *ever* come to Hollydell?”

The two young ladies headed toward home. Estelle asked Caroline if she’d found any of the presents her parents meant to give her at the New Year—the Garlands long maintained a silly game of hiding and searching for presents before the day. It was part of their passion for the fun and games of the Yuletide season.

“Not yet,” Caroline admitted. “I’ve been busy.”

“You can hunt for some when we get back. Before the guests start arriving.”

Caroline nodded. Hearing some sound in the clearing, she glanced back at the icy snowman, that pillar of perfection they'd just crafted. It stood alone in the clearing, all white and blue. For the slightest moment, she fancied she saw it move. But no, it was just a shadow crossing the clearing. She shook her head, shivering in the sudden breeze. She was a creature of logic, and logic clearly dictated that snowmen did not come alive.

Chapter 2

AFTER CAROLINE AND ESTELLE RETURNED to the house, Estelle immediately went to lie down for a while, saying she needed to rest until she could feel her toes again. Estelle always looked fragile, with her light blonde hair and pale complexion, but after a day in the snowy forest, she looked decidedly arctic. Caroline promised that she'd send Maggie up with hot tea.

Since she was in no way tired, even after the morning's exertions, Caroline chose to sit in the parlor and read one of her notebooks, reviewing previous experiments she'd tried over the past several days. Her father was a noted natural philosopher focused on chemistry, and his current goal was to develop a substance that a person could take to counter the effects of extreme cold. He'd been inspired to discover such a formula after reading of the shocking death toll that occurred among the multiple armies fighting in Russia the previous winter.

Horrified by the reports, he'd said, "Imagine if our own army, or any of our allies, had to go through that again this winter. If we can save even one life, it's a worthy endeavor."

Naturally, Caroline wanted to help. She frequently carried out minor experiments and tests necessary for her father's more complex efforts. They started with known remedies, such as strong spirits and warming spices, trying to isolate what activated the effects while eliminating the drawbacks.

"Alcohol is dangerous because the warming effect actually introduces greater danger, in the form of slowed

mental acuity and the tendency to lose more heat—evidenced by the flushing of skin so often seen among heavy drinkers, you know,” he’d explained early on. “The spices show more promise, but their expense renders it impossible to afford for a whole host of soldiers on the march. We must distill their useful chemical components into a portable and *potable* form—while ensuring the cost does not exceed a reasonable amount. It is a great challenge.”

The challenge had gone on the better part of the whole year. Caroline was deep into her study when her mother suddenly hurried in. She said, “Caroline, please put your work away. A guest has arrived!”

“And?” Caroline asked, looking up blankly, her mind still lost in the problem of chemical combinations.

“And you must meet him!”

Him? Warning bells clanged in her head.

“This had better not be another suitor, Mama.”

“Goodness, no. I think he’s an associate of your father’s somehow.” Rarely was her mother so flustered. “Do come. Oh, Caro, are you still wearing your day dress?”

“Yes, as it’s still daytime.”

Her mother sighed. “Well, the color does look well on you. Come along.”

In the more formal west parlor, Caroline stepped across the threshold and immediately noticed the man standing by the window, looking out. The edges of the window were rimed with frost, and she knew for a fact that breezes often snuck in

between the panes. Wasn't he cold? Wouldn't he prefer to stand near the fireplace if he'd just arrived?

Then he turned around. Icy blue eyes met hers, and Caroline felt a bit faint.

This man was perhaps the most handsome she'd ever seen.

"Hurry along, Caroline," her mother urged, practically pushing Caroline into the room. "Lord Snowdon had a long journey! My lord, may I present my daughter, Miss Garland."

"Miss Garland, how do you do," the man said, bowing. His voice was cool and smooth, and oh so enchanting. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, a very proper greeting that nonetheless sent anticipatory chills down her spine.

"How do you do," she echoed, undone by the pale blue eyes gazing into her own. "Welcome to Hollydell."

"Delighted to be here. In fact, I'm glad I arrived when I did," he said. "The weather looks to be stormy further north."

"You keep track of such things?"

"I have to. I am an inveterate traveler, you see. I love to find new horizons, and see new sights, and meet new people."

Caroline felt a thrill of delight at his words: *inveterate traveler*. "How marvelous that sounds! Where are you off to next?"

"I'm going to the Highlands of Scotland after the holidays. Then I shall go to the Orkney Islands to visit my friend there." He smiled, and added, "If you haven't stood on

the western side of the Brough of Birsay to watch an incoming storm, you can't truly appreciate how wild the world can be."

Caught by the image, Caroline wished with all her heart that she could go too. Remembering her manners, she said, "Won't you sit, my lord? We'll call for tea and you can tell me of your travels until my father arrives. He's often a bit distracted by his work, but he'll be along soon."

"I am in no hurry." Lord Snowdon gave her another little smile, and said, "Shall we sit by the window? No, you'll prefer to be warm by the fire. Allow me." He gallantly led her to the chairs by the fire, though the distance was all of five steps. They sat opposite each other, Snowdon looking quite at home.

Her mother hurried to instruct the maids to deliver the finest tea that the kitchen could muster.

Meanwhile, a massive orange tabby cat stalked into the parlor, curious about the newcomer. Seeing the creature's arrival, Snowdon looked at the cat with a raised eyebrow. "Is this the master of the house? I should like to be presented to him."

"His name is Mittens," she said. He had white on each paw, hence the name. Though as he grew up, the moniker felt less and less appropriate. Dragon might have been closer.

Snowdon held out a hand, allowing the cat to sniff before he stroked the orange ears. Without warning, the cat jumped onto Snowdon's lap and began to purr.

She said, "In many ways he does rule the house. I continually have to lock him out of the laboratory, or he'd

smash all the glass in his hunt for mice.”

Snowdon smiled down at the cat in obvious admiration, but then looked back to Caroline. “Laboratory? Here? I would think that most ladies wouldn’t tolerate such an addition to the home.”

Caroline laughed. “To live with Papa is to live with chemicals! He does most of his work in London, but he maintains a lab here as well, just in case he’s got an idea while he’s home. And he always has an idea!”

“And you keep his domain secure from marauders?” He gestured to the cat.

“I do my best. I’m Papa’s assistant, you see. Not officially, of course,” she added, aware of how most men viewed the notion of a lady tinkering with anything remotely dangerous. “But he’s taught me all I know, and I like to help him in any way I can.”

“Very commendable, and I’m sure fascinating as well. What is he working on now?”

Caroline opened her mouth to reply, excited to share the plan to create a formula that could help soldiers endure harsh winter conditions without damaging their bodies. But just as the words touched her tongue, something stopped her. After all, her father often worked with the War Office, and much of his work was secret. No matter how charming Snowdon was, she shouldn’t pass along any sensitive information.

“It’s not—that is, I’m afraid I can’t say, exactly. It’s Papa’s place to decide that, not mine.”

“Of course, forgive me for asking. And after all, it’s the holiday season, and I expect that most people would prefer to discuss lighter topics.” His tone suggested that he did not care for light topics, but he was also clearly too well-bred to continue an awkward conversation.

Did he think *her* silly and only interested in light topics? Caroline’s mouth went unaccountably dry at the idea. But why should she worry what this man thought? And where was that tea?

“Oh, no!” Caroline’s mother cried as she returned to the parlor, followed by the maid Maggie bearing a massive tea tray. “Mittens! Down, you beast! Caroline, you must not allow that cat to assault guests!”

“Nonsense,” Snowdon said, stroking the cat gently, forestalling Mrs Garland’s approach. “I don’t mind in the least. I adore cats.”

“You do?” Caroline asked. Indeed, he seemed to enjoy Mittens’s presence on his lap, unlike some of her previous suitors, who avoided the cat.

“Of course. I don’t have a cat at present, but perhaps I should get one. They’re marvelous creatures. I like cats, dogs, horses...all animals, really, so long as they’re willing to put up with me.”

An inveterate traveler who likes animals? she thought. Snowdon was quite a man.

Before he could say anything else, Caroline’s father walked in. Although he was a brilliant scholar who could

practically recite whole textbooks of knowledge at the drop of a hat, Mr Garland had the air of a man who was always slightly surprised to find himself wherever he was. This was partly an affectation—he delighted in not seeming to hear his wife or daughter say something (“Eh? What’s that, darling? Did you say you want sauce on your sandwich?”), only to reveal a short while later that not only was he listening, he was formulating a witty comment in reply (“It’s for the soiree at the Standishes’!”). But it was also true that Garland did often have his head in the clouds, and could be easily startled if anyone interrupted him during a good think.

His physical appearance only heightened the effect of vague distraction. His wispy hair was already white, and his kind brown eyes were often fixed on some distant point. There was a better than half chance that he had a pencil stuck behind one ear, regardless of what outfit he was wearing, from a dressing robe to an evening jacket. Today, he was somewhere in the middle, togged out in dark pantaloons and a cream-colored shirt, over which he sported a waistcoat that was embroidered all over with ivy leaves. His brown linen jacket was draped over one arm, clearly forgotten before he’d managed to actually put it on.

“Greetings of the season!” he called out, beaming at Caroline and Lord Snowdon, and her mother in a further chair. “Guests arriving already? How wonderful!”

Lord Snowdon couldn’t stand, lest he disturb the blissful feline on his lap. But he gave a sort of sitting bow, and said, “Mr Garland, how do you do, sir. I am most grateful for your hospitality. I confess I did not expect an invitation.”

From some interior pocket of the light blue jacket, Snowdon produced the invitation itself. Caroline noted that the words upon it were smudged, as if the heavy paper had fallen into a snowbank or a puddle of water at an unfortunate moment. Snowdon's name, in particular, was indecipherable.

Mr Garland regarded the invitation and chuckled, for some reason. "And I did not expect you to respond. Yet I am very glad you're here...my lord."

Chapter 3

CAROLINE FROWNED AS SHE LISTENED to her father, wondering at his intonation. It seemed he said, *I'm very glad you're here*, as if he wanted Snowdon particularly. And the hesitation before *my lord* was odd too. Perhaps he didn't like having to entertain a lord over the Christmas holiday? But her father loved hosting this annual house party!

"Papa," she said quickly. "You've forgotten to put on your jacket. You're lucky we haven't received any female guests yet. You'll scandalize them!"

He laughed out loud at that joke, a full-bellied laugh that Caroline knew well. A happy laugh. "Goodness, we wouldn't want to court any scandal this season, would we?" He spoke generally, but his eyes lit upon Snowdon.

"No," Snowdon agreed quietly. "It is a season for truth and joy. And the giving of gifts, for those who deserve them."

That was not generally how Caroline described the season, though she supposed it was correct. She got the feeling that there was something she was missing.

"Time enough for all that," Mr Garland said, shrugging into his jacket at last. "Looks like nasty weather on the way again! I do hope the other guests arrive in time for dinner tonight. Judging by the smells as I passed the kitchen, it should be very grand."

"Who's chattering?" a crotchety voice demanded. Mr Garland stepped aside to reveal a tiny, wizened form, snow-

topped and robed in black. “It’s like a pack of magpies have descended upon the house.”

“Wait till everyone gets here, Aunt Juniper,” Caroline said, watching as her aunt (her father’s eldest sister) walked across the room toward her chair, which sat nearest the fire. Juniper paused to regard Lord Snowdon with a bit of surprise.

“How do you do, ma’am,” he said, and made as if to remove the cat so he could greet her properly.

“Don’t you dare,” she warned him. “As if we would risk Mittens’s howling. Who are you, sir? *I’ve* never seen you before.”

“This is Lord Snowdon, Auntie. He’s a guest of Papa’s,” Caroline explained, hoping her aunt didn’t seem *horribly* rude (luckily, Snowdon seemed amused rather than affronted).

Juniper gave Snowdon a longer, harder stare. Mittens woke suddenly, with a startled *merp*. He gazed at Aunt Juniper with amber eyes, and after a moment Juniper said, to no one in particular, “Well, then. I suppose it could be worse.” And continued on to her chair, evidently done with her interview.

“She’s a bit eccentric,” Caroline whispered to Snowdon.

“It’s endemic to the species,” he replied with a sidelong glance that revealed a twinkle in his eyes.

Just then, there was another knock on the front door. Her father looked delighted, wondering aloud who it could be. Moments later, a slender young man stepped into the room. His tanned skin contrasted sharply with the starched white

collar of his shirt. His clothes were that of a clerk, though the fabric was clearly of very good quality.

“Mr Stockan,” the footman announced in a perfunctory manner, for Caroline’s father was already walking toward the man to embrace him.

“Timothy Stockan, you made the journey after all! Excellent, excellent.” He quickly introduced the slender, studious young man as his current assistant at the London laboratory.

Stockan bowed to both Caroline and her mother, and from his first few words, his American accent came out clearly. “I thank you for the opportunity to spend this holiday at your home, sir. Very kind.”

“Nonsense! You had nowhere else to spend the season, did you? Not with your family back in the States.”

Caroline welcomed him. “So you are working with my father while in London?” she asked, remembering the name Stockan being mentioned a few times.

“Yes, for a while at least,” he said. “My own father wishes me to learn all I can of how things are done in Britain.”

Just then Estelle walked in. “Aunt Juniper, I did find your blue wool shawl—” She stopped on seeing strangers, saying, “Oh! I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Nonsense, Estelle!” Caroline told her. “It’s just that some guests of Papa’s have arrived. This is Lord Snowdon...”

“Forgive me for not getting up,” Snowdon said. “I’ve got a cat.”

“So you have!” Estelle laughed prettily and forgave him. “We’re all under Mittens’s rule here.”

Caroline went on, “And here’s Papa’s colleague. Mr Stockan, please meet Miss Clement.”

Estelle curtsayed while he bowed, but as the two straightened up, they appeared to have nothing to say to each other. Caroline wondered at it, until she saw Estelle’s wide green eyes and rapt expression. She jumped at the chance to say, “Miss Clement is my dearest friend. She lives here with me at Hollydell...well, she will until she marries some lucky gentleman, though she could choose to live by herself. Of course I shall miss her greatly no matter what. You must miss your family very much, Mr Stockan. How did your wife take the news that you would be gone for so long?”

“I have no wife,” he said faintly, still looking at Estelle, who seemed rooted to the floor.

“Ah, how sad,” Caroline said, pleased to hear it. “Well, we hope you enjoy England for the holidays. There’s so much ___”

“Halloo!” a baritone voice called from the front walk, causing her to break off. Even as the footman hurried into the foyer, the door swung open and a large figure strolled in, accompanied by a little whirl of snowflakes.

“Mr Foster, sir,” the footman said, grabbing the door handle as if he’d actually done the honors. “The family is in the parlor.”

Caroline, however, got up and walked into the foyer to greet the new arrival. “Mr Foster! I didn’t know you were planning to come today.”

“Thought it a good idea, considering the rumors of a storm coming. Might not get through tomorrow! Don’t you look pretty, my dear girl.” He grinned as he shucked off his greatcoat and hat and let a maid take them away. “Who’s all here?”

Caroline led him into the parlor and introduced him to the new guests, telling him who they were and their connection to the family (though she realized that her father had yet to explain Snowdon’s reason for being there).

“Francis Foster,” he said in a hearty tone as he met Lord Snowdon, though a slightly annoyed expression crossed his face when he noticed Mittens. Caroline wasn’t surprised—Mittens was usually excited to see Francis.

To Mr Stockan, he gave an interested glance. “So you’re in the same sort of puttering as Mr Garland, are you? All the potions and pouring...always sounds like alchemy to me!”

“It’s extremely modern,” Caroline said defensively. “Alchemists attempted to turn base metals into gold. *We* are attempting to find formulas that will better all mankind!”

“You’re so easy to rile,” Francis said with a chuckle. “You should do whatever you like in life, and if it ends up helping people, so much the better. Haven’t I always said that, Caro?”

“So you have,” she allowed, even as she noticed Lord Snowdon’s eyebrow rise slightly on hearing Francis so

casually use her pet name in company.

Well, so what? They'd known each other for years. He was like a brother to her. Indeed, Francis was a firm supporter of her interests, even if he called it "puttering."

For no discernible reason, the conversation withered at that point. Caroline was feeling awkward about Francis's bluff manner in contrast to Snowdon's elegant calm. And then of course Estelle was doing no good at all to propel any talk, being tongue-tied.

"I'd better go see about dinner," her mother announced, suddenly hurrying from the room. So much for aid from that quarter!

The silence stretched onward, even more awkward than before.

"The thing about squirrels," Aunt Juniper announced into the void, "is that you can't trust them."

"Is that so, Aunt?" Caroline asked weakly.

"I've always said they're up to no good."

She had *never* said that, as far as Caroline knew, but she seized on the opportunity to change the subject. "Oh, of course. Very wise, Aunt Juniper. You know, I think it's time for your afternoon nap. Shall I take you to your room?"

She escorted her aunt out of the parlor, breathing a sigh of relief as she escaped the gazes of the men who remained there.

"Aunt Juniper, I think you sometimes *want* to cause a fuss. What's wrong with squirrels?" she asked in a low voice.

“They’re thieves,” her aunt said firmly. “Everyone thinks them cute and charming and harmless, but they’ll nip anything they like at the first chance!”

“I think they’re stocking up for winter.”

“Oh, they’re thieves year-round, my girl. Never forget that.”

“All right, Auntie. After I tuck you in, I’ll just tell Cook to lock up all the chestnuts and walnuts.”

“Chestnuts! Not worried about the chestnuts, girl.” Juniper groaned as she lowered herself into the bed. “But do tell Cook to save me one of those little berry tarts she makes. I want one for later.”

“I’ll do that, Aunt. Enjoy your nap, and we’ll see you at dinner.”

Caroline returned to the parlor, relieved to hear that the men were chatting now. Just before she reentered the room, she heard Francis say, “Where is your family seat, my lord? I confess I’m unfamiliar with your title.”

As she paused in the hallway, it crossed Caroline’s mind that Lord Snowdon hadn’t actually said his full title. She didn’t even know his rank.

“Cheshire,” Snowdon replied, “but the fact is that I spend most of my time in London. Or abroad. Though I’ve yet to see America. Mr Stockan, where would you recommend a traveler to go in the States?”

“I was born in Philadelphia, so I’m partial to it, of course,” Mr Stockan said. “But I think most people would tell

you to start in New York City, and from there wherever your heart desires, whether that be seashore, mountains, woods, or prairie.”

“Rough wilderness, you mean,” Francis said with a shudder.

“We’ve got plenty of that,” Stockan replied. “But for those who prefer the cultured life, a number of cities may suit you.”

“None of them are London,” said Francis, rather pugnaciously.

Stockan just chuckled, not taking the bait. “Not a single one is London, sir. You are correct there.”

“But you studied chemistry there in the States?” Snowdon said in a cool tone. “What university?”

“I attended the University of Pennsylvania, sir. But I came here to learn more under Mr Garland’s tutelage. I’m very lucky to have got the position, not being a native of these shores.”

Caroline thought her presence would be good for Estelle, who had remained silent through all this. She reentered the room and sat down next to her friend.

The conversation turned more general after that, and then the arrival of yet more guests provided more diversion. The latest included Caroline’s grandparents on her father’s side, and then the vicar and his wife, who were regular guests at the manor. Soon, the room was full of talk and tea. The poor

maids were quite done out as they hurried to and fro with trays of snacks and pots of hot water.

Eventually, her mother stood and announced that dinner would be served on the hour, which was the signal for everyone to retreat to their rooms and change into evening wear. Snowdon and Stockan were shown to their rooms. Francis said he'd idle in the parlor until the bell rang. As he spoke, he gazed out the window at the rapidly fading light. Mittens (now bereft of Snowdon's lap) took a look at Francis, but did not try to join the man. Instead the cat sniffed and sashayed out the door.

Then the two young ladies left the parlor and walked up the stairs to the upper floor to change for dinner. Estelle whispered, "Caroline, how could you? Asking Mr Stockan how *his wife* felt. You all but put me on the auction block!"

"His nonexistent wife! I clarified the situation to a young, eligible bachelor who is new to this part of the world. Why shouldn't he know that you're available?"

"But I'm *not*. My dowry is laughable. Clearly, you are set on courtship for everyone, not least yourself. You hung on Lord Snowdon's every word."

Caroline protested, "I was being polite."

"If any of the other gentlemen calling here got half so much of your attention, they would have leapt with joy."

"It doesn't matter," Caroline said. "After the holiday, Snowdon will leave, and neither of us will see him again."

That idea made her sad, which was odd, considering she'd only met the man a few hours ago.

Chapter 4

CAROLINE WAS ALMOST FINISHED DRESSING for dinner. She wore a burgundy silk gown with tiny cap sleeves, the high waist beaded with freshwater pearls that matched the pearl hair combs she'd tucked into her dark curls. She was just checking her hair in the mirror when Maggie knocked on the door, saying, "Your parents would like to see you before you go down to dinner."

Curious, Caroline went her parents' sitting room, which was adjacent their bedroom at the end of the hall. Both of them were standing near the white marble fireplace, in which flames happily snapped and leapt over a freshly laid log.

Her mother looked excited. "Caroline, you wore your red gown. I'm so glad."

"Why?" she asked, mystified.

"You will be twenty-one in January, but we didn't want to wait until then. We thought you'd enjoy this gift now, over the holiday when there's opportunity to wear it."

"Wear what?"

"Your inheritance." Her father handed her a flat, hinged box made of a lightweight, silky-grained wood.

Caroline lifted the lid, and gasped. Inside, against snowy white satin, red stones glowed with inner fire. It was a necklace of rubies, of various sizes arranged to resemble several teardrops hanging along the golden chain. Caroline remembered her mother wearing it on very special occasions, and every time she felt that the effect of the ruby necklace was

to make her already elegant mother look as grand and glorious as a queen. To imagine that this remarkable jewelry was now hers was almost too much to take in.

“For me? Truly?”

Caroline’s father smiled and gently took the necklace out, fastening it around her neck. “For you, dear child. Though you’ve grown up so much, you’ll always be our little girl.”

“Thank you, Papa,” she whispered. “The stones are so beautiful.”

“You enhance them, darling,” her mother declared, reaching out to straighten one of the drops. She turned Caroline so she could face the looking glass. Caroline scarcely recognized the glamorous figure in the mirror. The bloodred stones sparkled against her skin, and the red dress echoed the colors perfectly.

“Oh, Mama, are you certain I should wear them? I don’t know if I’m...worthy.”

“These stones have been in my family for generations,” her mother told her. “It was my grandmother who had them set into a necklace. Before that they’ve been seen as a brooch, a bracelet, even a crown...if family legend is to be believed. You are the next generation, Caroline. And you’re of age to wear these like a true lady, with pride in your family and the knowledge that you are worth far more in your own right.”

Caroline felt tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. Her mother was rarely so emotional, but she’d clearly prepared for this moment.

“Thank you, Mama. I’ll be very careful with it.”

“Of course you will,” her father said. “You’re always so precise about everything in the laboratory, and you do the same in life. Mind you, no wearing the necklace while doing experiments! You don’t want to drop it in something caustic!”

She laughed and said, “Certainly not! Though I can’t wait to get back to the lab and work on the latest version of the formula.”

“We’re *so* close,” her father said, excitement in his eyes. “Just a few more tweaks, and of course after thorough testing on our subjects to ensure there are no ill effects. Truly, I think that by the New Year, I can present the formula to—”

“Oh, no! That’s quite enough of such chatter!” her mother interrupted, with a playful wag of her finger. “It is Christmastide, and we should be thinking of the holiday, not working matters, no matter how fascinating. And I pray that you both remember that not all our guests wish to discuss chemicals and elements at the dinner table!”

“Yes, Mama,” Caroline said, kissing her on the cheek. “I’ll let you finish getting ready. See you downstairs!”

Holly and ivy were draped all along the banister, and she inhaled the sharp green scent of cut branches as she walked. She was conscious of how she usually tromped down the stairs, so she tried to glide down, with tiny steps in her evening slippers. Ugh, it took so long to get anywhere in a ladylike way!

At the bottom of the stairs, she encountered Aunt Juniper in the foyer, who was polishing off the last of a berry tart before a maid spirited the empty plate away to the kitchen. Caroline chuckled, and said, "I should have told Cook to save two." She looked around the room, sure that the heavy boughs of greenery had increased since that afternoon. Mistletoe hung at the apex of every doorway, and a bunch of it even hung from the chandelier in the center. "Goodness, we're practically in the forest, aren't we?"

"It's good luck," Juniper said. "And good sense too. Ah! Got the rubies, have you?" Aunt Juniper said, squinting at her neck. "Your mama wore those the very first time she hosted a party as Mrs Garland, you know! Talk of the village for months. Pretty little stones, for those who like that sort of thing."

"They're a family heirloom, Aunt," Caroline protested.

"They're rocks, at the end of the day. But they do look well on you, dear," she added with an indulgent smile. "Now, let's go into the parlor to await the others so we can go in to dinner properly. I'm starving!" She brushed the last few crumbs of tart from her lips.

That evening, Caroline was the center of attention. Everyone commented on the rubies she wore. Estelle quietly declared her to be prettier than a sunrise. "I'm going to paint your portrait, Caro."

Other guests complimented her appearance, while her family members all seemed to agree that such a ladylike look surely meant she was finally thinking about marriage.

After the meal, the men lingered for a smoke and some brandy, while the ladies preceded them into the drawing room, where candles glowed in every corner and a fire blazed in the hearth. Clove-studded oranges decked the mantel, lending a rich scent to the air. Caroline accepted a small glass of mulled wine from the maid who was pouring them out, and inhaled the sweet smell of spices and the pungent aroma of the ruby-red wine, watching as the steam curled upward like a little ghost. She smiled. She did love the holidays.

The men rejoined them shortly afterward, and Francis made straight for her.

“Caro, you must be having the time of your life tonight, with a fortune tied around your neck!” Francis said, reaching out to chuck her under the chin.

“Well, don’t say it like that,” Caroline retorted. “You make it sound like a noose!”

“Ha, criminals should be so lucky! Must be quite the occasion for your mama to lend such a trinket.”

“Not lent!” she said proudly. “They’re part of my inheritance, now that I’m turning twenty-one.”

He looked suitably impressed. “Is that so? Happy Christmas, indeed! Oh, look. Mistletoe! You know what that means.”

He leaned over to kiss her, but as he did so Snowdon happened to step back to allow a lady by, and he bumped into Francis and sent the man stumbling forward a few paces.

“What the devil!” Francis recovered himself and spun around angrily.

“Apologies,” Snowdon said in a smooth tone. “Rather more crowded here than I expected.”

“Watch where you’re going!”

“Excellent advice.” Snowdon seemed utterly calm, making Francis’s sputtering reaction all the more excessive.

“No one’s been harmed,” Caroline said. “And Lord Snowdon has already apologized. Unless you intend to call him out over the slight?” she teased.

“Of course not,” Francis said, still sulky.

“Then let’s forget about it. Perhaps you’d better get some of the mulled wine before it’s gone.”

He took his cue and sailed toward the drinks. Snowdon asked, “Is that typical?”

“Francis’s reaction? No, not at all.”

“Francis, is it,” he noted. “Do you have an understanding?”

She blushed. She should not be using Francis’s first name so freely. She said quickly, “Heavens, no. We practically grew up together. I suppose I’m just used to calling him what I called him when we were children.”

Snowdon nodded, but asked no more, and then the vicar and his wife came up and began to chat, until her grandmother appeared and shooed them away. (Caroline was quite certain that her grandmother could banish a ghost just by glaring at it.)

“You are certainly looking very mature,” her more cranky grandmother noted, looking hard at Caroline. “It’s a good thing those rubies bring out the color in your cheeks to prolong the last bit of bloom.”

“Oh, thank you for that,” Caroline replied wryly. “Shall I prop up my coffin in the corner so my posture is straight?”

“Don’t be impertinent,” her grandmother chided. “Such wit in the young is not endearing.” Annoyed, the old lady strode off in search of new prey.

Caroline sighed. This evening was *not* going well.

“The problem, as I see it,” Lord Snowdon said softly, “is that not everyone appreciates wit, which can be very endearing.”

Caroline was mollified by this, but she got swept away by Estelle before she could pursue the matter. Estelle stuck to her side for the rest of the evening, and resolutely did not even look at Mr Stockan, though Caroline could see him looking at Estelle. Perhaps she could engineer a moment where the two of them would have to stand under some mistletoe together. That could hasten a courtship along.

Thinking of courtship, she caught Lord Snowdon’s eye from across the room, where he was speaking with her father. Snowdon gave her a secret smile before he continued his conversation.

His smile quite melted her heart. For a lord, Snowdon was awfully approachable. And very charming. Really, he was everything a girl could wish for.

In fact, he was everything she *had* wished for.

Hmm. He loved animals and loved to travel. Blue eyes, with light blond hair. Tall and icy in demeanor.

“I don’t trust him,” she announced suddenly.

“What? Who?” Estelle asked, not being privy to Caroline’s thoughts.

“Come with me,” Caroline whispered, pulling Estelle along with her as she left the drawing room for the much cooler foyer. There she turned to Estelle and said, “Snowdon.”

“But...why? He seems like a perfect gentleman.”

“I know,” Caroline said. “He’s too perfect. That’s why I don’t trust him. There must be something dreadfully wrong with him. If you asked an artist to paint a perfect gentleman, they would paint Lord Snowdon.”

Estelle sighed in exasperation. “What are you suggesting, Caroline? That he’s a fraud? Your papa would never allow anyone suspicious near you, let alone permit him to stay as a guest in the house!”

“I’m not saying he’s a fraud,” Caroline clarified. “I’m just saying that it’s a bit strange...this gentleman arriving on my doorstep only hours after I made a snowman in much the same image.”

Estelle raised an eyebrow. “You are not serious. You believe the snowman *came to life*?” Her skepticism made Caroline’s cheeks burn. But she knew there was something off about the perfect gentleman in the next room.

“There’s only one way to be certain,” Caroline declared.
“I’m going back tomorrow morning to look!”

Which was exactly what she did. The next day dawned with rose and peach in the eastern sky, though heavy clouds were sweeping in from the west. Caroline dressed quickly, put on her cloak, and hurried out the side door of the house, avoiding the attention of her mother, who’d ask a lot of questions. Mothers were always full of questions!

Caroline walked quickly through the woods, along the same path she’d taken with Estelle yesterday. When she reached the clearing, she stopped in shock.

The snowman—*her* snowman, the one she built so lovingly and made into her ideal—was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 5

CAROLINE FELT AS IF THE breath had been knocked clean out of her. This wasn't possible! The snowman couldn't have melted. It was even colder today than yesterday. Furthermore, there were no signs of melting where the snowman had stood, no circle of ice that would have been the result of any sudden change from frozen to liquid to frozen again.

In fact, there wasn't even the flurry of footprints she and Estelle had made as they pranced and circled around the figure as they decorated it. The clearing was weirdly pristine.

So what had happened? She paced around again, looking for some clue to indicate the snowman's fate. She tried to be logical about it (disregarding the eminently nonlogical premise). Very well. If her snowman hadn't melted, then it must have been knocked over, for it couldn't possibly have just disappeared...or been transformed into a living, breathing human. But then where was the detritus? The pile of snow that had been its body? The holly sprig that Estelle had tucked into the snowy hat?

Could someone have *moved* it all, just to mystify her?

"It must be a prank," she murmured, frowning. But who would think that such a mean-spirited trick would be funny? And how did they even know she meant to come back and look? This was a lonely spot in the woods, not one of the many trails used by the family or by neighbors who crossed the land on their way to the village or elsewhere.

Was it local boys from the boarding school in the village? It was a long way to walk to carry out a random prank. Or perhaps some bored laborer passing through the woods happened to see the snowman and decided to kick it over for fun. But then why was there no toppled snow?

Caroline's mood darkened as she ran through increasingly implausible scenarios. Finally, she shook her head. She would discuss it with Estelle. Her friend would no doubt have a theory that would shine a light on the matter.

She started to trudge back to the house, head lowered against the colder bite in the air as she walked into the wind. The early sunlight had fled, and now leaden grey clouds packed the sky, heralding another snowstorm before long.

But before she got very far at all, she ran into none other than Lord Snowdon himself — quite literally.

“Ooof!” Caroline huffed as she barreled into something solid in her path. She blinked, reaching out to steady herself. Her fingers grazed something warm, but all she saw was white.

“Miss Garland, are you all right?” The rich, low voice of the man wrapped itself around her. “I’m afraid I was looking everywhere but where I was going.”

“How did I miss you?” she wondered, though it soon became obvious. He was wearing a white wool coat with white fur trim, an outfit that all but disappeared against the snowy landscape. “Oh, I see. It’s because you’re camouflaged better than a hare in winter.”

He allowed the point with a faint smile. “I suppose I am. And here I just thought the coat looked warm.”

Caroline didn’t refute him, but there was no way on earth that anyone could think such a coat was a basic article. It was a luxury item, heralding Snowdon’s exalted station. Wool bleached so white was a rare thing, and the gorgeous white trim was likely ermine. To say nothing of the exquisite cut of the coat. Greatcoats were often bulky things, but this one hugged Snowdon’s form very well. Caroline’s fingers itched with the desire to touch the coat again. And not just the coat, but the man beneath...

She noticed his pale blue gaze and looked away with an embarrassed blush. “I should apologize too. I was rushing home to get Estelle—Miss Clement, and I was not paying attention.”

“Why rush? Are you cold?” He made as if to shrug the coat off.

Oh, don’t tempt me, she thought. Aloud she said, “I’m quite warm, thank you! It’s just that I came across something odd, and I wanted to...well, find a witness.”

“A witness?” His eyebrows rose. “Intriguing. Let me be your witness, Miss Garland.”

Caroline paused. There was something extremely confounding about asking the man who she suspected might once have been made of snow to witness the very spot of his transformation. But to explain exactly why he wouldn’t be an *unbiased* witness was much more embarrassing. She was not a child, after all. She did not believe in fairy tales or magic.

“You’ll probably think me silly to be concerned,” she said. “It’s just a phenomenon of melting and refreezing. No doubt a common occurrence in winter.”

“Come now, Miss Garland. You’re not going to convince me that you’re rushing homeward due to a scientific discovery. You looked far too alarmed for that. Now, tell me exactly what you saw.”

“It’s rather what I didn’t see. I made a snowman yesterday...and today it’s disappeared.” She tried to say it lightly, but the fact remained that she was perturbed by the event.

Snowdon looked surprised.

“I am not overwrought or mad with frostbite-induced brain fever,” she went on. “A thing was there yesterday, and it’s gone today. I want to know why.”

He paused, then said, “Well, I can understand that impulse, Miss Garland. Very well, let’s go see it.”

“Excellent,” she said.

Moments later, they stood together at the center of the clearing. Caroline pointed to the empty spot. “It was right here, I promise. And now...it isn’t.”

“Hmm. Your friend Miss Clement would have been the better witness after all, since she would know what had been here before.”

“I told you that’s why I was on the way to get her! But I think it’s too late now. All the evidence will be erased by the

new snow. I mean, the lack of evidence. Even our footprints are gone. It's very strange."

"Evidence, Miss Garland? Do you consider the snowman's disappearance to be a crime?"

She made a face at him. "I know he wasn't murdered."

"Could have been," Snowdon suggested with a raised eyebrow. "Cold-hearted individual like that would have made enemies."

She said, "You are mocking me, sir."

He shook his head. "Nonsense. I admire your commitment to discovering the truth of your chilly neighbor's disappearance."

Caroline snapped back, "Oh, you think he was stabbed to death with an icicle?"

"And it melted before anyone found it, thus preventing a murder weapon from being discussed during the inquest."

He looked totally serious, and she tried to match his expression, but when he raised one eyebrow, she couldn't hold back a laugh. "Oh, this is silly."

He paused, then answered, with every appearance of thoughtfulness, "I don't ever think it is silly to wonder when something strange happens. And what you've described *is* rather strange."

"It's cruel, is what it is."

"Also that. If it was a deliberate act of violence."

It occurred to Caroline that he was taking the matter seriously. “You believe me.”

“You don’t seem like the type of person who makes things up. But I also believe that you should go back home where it’s warm. Come, I’ll escort you.”

Caroline allowed him to do so, curling her gloved hand into the crook of his offered arm, and they began to walk. She realized that he wasn’t nearly as tall as she’d assumed—their strides were almost equal. It was just that he projected such an air of authority that he seemed physically taller as well. She wondered just for a moment what brought a lord out so early into the cold and snowy woods.

She was afraid to ask, considering her own dubious reasons for being outside. And Snowdon looked forbidding in that moment. He was looking ahead, and she covertly observed his face in profile. His brow was a bit furrowed, either in deep thought or some unpleasant emotion. Combined with the aquiline nose and a strong jaw, the overall effect was that of a man not to be crossed. Tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and then at the mouth, seemed to be less the product of age (for he could not be that old), but rather an excess of care, as if he was a person weighted with some great matters. Perhaps that was linked to his rank? Caroline always thought of the aristocracy as being without care, but she didn’t actually know any lords or ladies. Maybe their very titles brought burdens she couldn’t imagine. She said softly, “I wonder...”

He turned to look at her. “What is it?”

“I was just wondering...you look quite preoccupied, my lord. I had meant to ask you what was on your mind, but that is presumptuous of me. We hardly know each other.”

“How long do you have to know someone to wish to know their mind?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I do know that it sometimes takes only a very short acquaintance to learn that you *never* want to know a certain person’s mind.”

His laugh was as sudden and bright as a beam of light cutting through clouds. “True!”

Caroline was dazzled by his smile. It transformed him from untouchably distant to warm and human.

“I was puzzling over your snowman,” he said. “No obvious solution is coming to me. Or even a nonobvious one. But I do have to say that at least it’s a novel problem. Much better than my usual.”

“What is your usual?” she asked curiously.

He opened his mouth to reply, then hesitated. “I’m sorry, but I really can’t say. The issues are often of a...sensitive nature.”

“Oh. Forgive me for asking.”

“There is no harm in asking. I wish I *could* tell you some of them. You’re obviously quite good at solving problems.”

Previous suitors had praised Caroline’s hair, eyes, figure, bloodline, and (once) her taste in Welsh cheeses. No one had ever called her a problem-solver.

Maybe that was why she suddenly flushed with pleasure and felt faint.

One foot in front of the other, she told herself. *Solve the problem of getting home before you fall over Lord Snowdon and embarrass yourself.*

Fortunately, not many people were stirring when Snowdon walked Caroline up to the front door of Hollydell. However, she didn't want to risk an awkward conversation, so she said impulsively, "I think we should use the side entrance."

He raised an eyebrow (he seemed to do that a lot). Caroline bit her lip. Of course a lord didn't use a side entrance!

"I mean, *you* can use the front door, of course. I just preferred to be..."

"Discreet?"

Discreet implied that she had something to hide...such as a unsupervised stroll with a maddeningly attractive man. She said, "Er, subtle."

"Ah." The distinction seemed to please him. "By all means, let's be subtle. Lead on."

She pointed to the left, and they followed a side path around the house, which eventually led to the kitchen entrance.

"Do you often find a need to be subtle, Miss Garland?" he asked as they went.

“Honestly, no. But if my mama sees me out and about, she’ll want to know why....”

“And with whom,” he added with a little smirk.

“Well, yes, but mostly I don’t want to explain the snowman situation. Not till I’ve had time to think about it.”

“It really worries you, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“I don’t like it when things are unexplained. Everything in nature has a cause. But I can’t identify the cause of that snowman disappearing. And until I do, it will bother me.”

“I understand completely,” he assured her. “Perhaps we can discuss the issue later...if you’d like.”

“Yes, please.” Then Caroline added hastily, “I mean, after I get a chance to speak to Estelle. Then we can all talk. Not alone.”

“Of course.” He opened the door that led into the servants’ hall and then into the kitchen. “In you go.”

Caroline stepped inside. “Aren’t you coming in too?”

“In a minute. After all, we’re being subtle, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” She nodded, and was about to turn when she noticed his gaze was still on her, and his blue eyes were so intent.

“What is it?” she asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you’re an interesting young lady.” He smiled, then said, “Go.”

Caroline hurried into the house, moving quietly to avoid attracting attention from either the servants or any errant family members (alas, the holidays meant that there were far more than usual).

She had just walked silently up the stairs and felt that her goal was achieved when she heard Aunt Juniper call out from her bedroom.

“Caroline? Get in here!”

Caroline winced, but went in, hoping to stave off more noise. Juniper was wide awake, sitting by the window...the window that overlooked the side of the house where Caroline and Lord Snowdon had walked up. *Oh, dear.* “Yes, Aunt?”

“What are you up to, girl? Taking a turn with a gentleman is all well and good, but at this hour?”

“I went out alone, Aunt. I just happened to meet him in the woods. He escorted me back. He was a perfect gentleman.”

“So he didn’t try to kiss you?”

“No!”

“Humph. Men today have no gumption.”

“It’s called chivalry!”

“You call it whatever you want, girl. Now, what took you out of the house so early? That’s not like you.”

Caroline explained about making the snowman and its subsequent vanishing. She even mentioned her momentary fancy that Snowdon’s arrival was linked to it in some mystical way. She decided that a woman who railed against the ethics

of squirrels wouldn't have any particular issue with snowmen coming to life.

“Mittens wouldn't tolerate anyone made of ice,” Juniper declared. “He seemed quite content using the gentleman for a bed yesterday, and that means he's warm, which means he's as human as the rest of us.”

It was sound logic, and Caroline nodded.

“As for where the actual snowman got to, that is a mystery,” Juniper went on. “What we are looking for is a culprit with evil in their heart, and that means you must proceed carefully. In fact, you'd better leave it to me.”

“You?” she asked, surprised. After all, Aunt Juniper scarcely left the house.

“Yes. You've got more important things to worry about. Such as changing out of your boots and getting a proper day dress on before your mother sees you. Now scoot!”

“Very well.” Caroline went to the door, then turned. “I love you, Aunt Juniper.”

“I know. I love you too, my pet.”

Chapter 6

BREAKFAST WENT WELL, IN THE sense that no one remarked on Caroline's early-morning walk, or demanded to know why she'd been alone with Snowdon. The gentleman himself was the soul of discretion, greeting her near the coffeepot as if he hadn't spent an hour with her previously.

Her hunger sharpened by activity, Caroline enjoyed a liberal helping of the ham, the eggs, the sausage, and the whipped potatoes, not to mention a few slices of Cook's cinnamon bread, toasted by the fire until butter dripped into the flames, causing them to flare up.

She then huddled with Estelle by the window, discussing in low tones all that she'd learned.

"But where would it go?" Estelle repeated several times with a perplexed expression. "Who steals a snowman?"

By midmorning, the heavy clouds started to drop plush white flakes upon the world, and that meant most of the guests remained indoors until the snow stopped and the paths could be cleared. Caroline spent a few hours in the laboratory with her father, running numerous tests on the latest version of the formula to measure its strength and potency.

At last, her father said, "You ought to take a rest, darling. You're young and shouldn't be cooped up here all day. Your mother would expect you to spend time with our guests as well."

"But I'm more useful here. We are very close, aren't we?"

“Indeed! However, I can manage on my own for a bit. This last round will be just waiting until I can measure the temperature of all the solutions. Do run along.”

“Very well, Papa.” Caroline tidied up her part of the work surface and then swung her cloak around her shoulders before going outside.

On the snowy path, she stopped in surprise. Francis stood there, looking up at the roof of the small outbuilding that served as the laboratory (her mother drew the line at having “those concoctions” in the main house).

Caroline said cheerfully, “Francis, you braved the snow after all. I thought you said you might stay at home today. Did you want to speak to Papa? He’s quite busy with an experiment now, but he’ll come to the house for lunch.”

“Hmm, experimenting? Making people drink all manner of potions, I expect.”

“Don’t be absurd. He doesn’t use people to test,” she reminded him. “He uses pigs.”

“Is that why the sideboard is always so well supplied with bacon?” Francis said with a laugh.

Caroline cringed slightly at the joke. “Francis, please.”

“Only kidding you, Caro. No, I don’t want to talk to him. I want to talk to you. Let’s take a little stroll.”

She thought he meant a stroll around the gardens, which was something they did quite often when he visited. Even in winter, the paths were cleared so that the family could enjoy a brisk walk past the snow-bedecked shrubs and bare trees,

which were beautiful in their own way. Francis had offered his arm, which Caroline felt was a little formal compared to their usual pattern, when they simply walked side by side. But perhaps he was concerned about her slipping on hidden ice.

“I’m glad we’ve got a chance to be alone,” he said once they’d passed the garden closest to the house.

“Papa did tell me I ought to enjoy the day more. He’s worried I spend too much time in the lab. But not half so much as he does!”

“You are a lucky girl,” he said. “Your father indulges your hobbies, and your mother gives you her finest rubies. I’m sure all the other ladies in the shire are jealous, especially of the jewels.”

“Surely not.” Caroline supposed some women would covet the necklace, but it wasn’t as if she were living an extravagant life.

“You really are beautiful, Caro. You know that, don’t you?”

She laughed, though an odd little shiver ran through her as she caught an unfamiliar glint in Francis’s eyes. “It’s kind of you to say, but please don’t say it again. I shouldn’t wish to have compliments go to my head. Why I’d be like that young lady a few years ago—what was her name?—the one who was sure that all of London would fall at her feet just because she won the Queen of the May one year at the fair.”

“You’d win if you wanted to. Such a beautiful young lady ought to be courted. It’s a crime to let you rattle around this

house on your own.”

“I’m not on my own. I’ve got my whole family. And Estelle. Not to mention everyone nearby and in the village.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. You ought to be a wife. My wife.”

She was so surprised she almost stumbled. “What?”

“Why not? It’s rather perfect, really. Come, kiss me, Caro.”

“Francis, I really would rather not!”

He just chuckled. “So prim and proper. Fine, I shall kiss you.”

He took her, his hands gripping her upper arms, preventing her from stepping away. She turned her head to the side, still protesting that he was acting mad.

“Don’t be coy, Caro. You surely have been kissed before.”

“Not by you!”

“All the more reason to correct the—”

He broke off at the sound of approaching footsteps and a male voice humming a tune. After a second, Caroline recognized it as “The Holly and the Ivy.” Then Snowdon rounded the corner, past a large yew that was so thickly covered in snow that it served as a solid wall.

On seeing them, he stopped. “Oh, didn’t know anyone was out here. Excuse me.”

“No, it’s perfectly fine!” Caroline said in a rush, so relieved by the presence of another person, which would mean an end to Francis’s attentions. “How nice that you’re here. I mean, that you’re enjoying the gardens. Here. Now.”

Snowdon took a few more steps toward them. Though he couldn’t have known the nature of what had just been going on, Caroline’s manner must reveal that she was not exactly at ease.

“Miss Garland? What’s the matter?” Snowdon walked toward her, wearing his blue wool jacket over a snowy white shirt and cravat. Why did he not have anything more substantial on today, especially when he owned the fine greatcoat she saw before?

“Oh! Nothing! I say, aren’t you cold?” Caroline asked to cover her confusion.

“Cold never bothers me,” Snowdon said. “Actually, I was hoping I might find a guide. I’d love to see a bit more of your woods. Everything here is so beautiful in the winter.”

“Oh, I’d be happy to show you around,” she said, leaping at the chance to remove herself from the awkward situation with Francis. “There’s a very pretty pond we use for skating.”

“Excellent.” He offered his arm, and she took it.

Francis reached out and took her other arm. “A moment, sir! We were discussing a private matter.”

“But we were finished!” Caroline added, “And Mama would expect me to show a guest around. Excuse me, please.”

Francis didn't remove his hand, and Caroline couldn't step away, not without plowing directly into Snowdon's side.

Then Snowdon reached over, lifted Francis's hand up, and slowly moved it away. He didn't say anything, but there was a sudden sense of icy menace in the air. Francis's jaw flexed hard, but he held his temper, barely.

"I'll see you at luncheon, Caro."

"Of course." She kept on a fatuous smile and hoped that some extremely precise snowstorm might bury her and hide her embarrassment.

Snowdon led her away, his free hand resting on her fingertips in some silent reassurance. After a few moments, when they could not be overheard, he paused.

"What was that?" he asked bluntly. His tone was low, but concern rippled through his words.

"Nothing, my lord."

"It was something. You looked quite uncomfortable. I thought you said he was your friend."

"He was! He is. It's just that...he was acting as if he wanted something more. Which is not like him at all." In fact, Francis had been behaving strangely since yesterday, when all the guests arrived at the house. Was it something about the holiday?

"Did he say something he shouldn't have?" Snowdon asked.

“He tried to kiss me,” Caroline admitted, shamefaced. “I mean, we were alone out here, and he kept saying how I looked beautiful, and I didn’t know what do. Some would say I invited it.”

“You did nothing of the kind,” he told her, his eyes flat grey ice. “To be beautiful is not an invitation. And if any other man attempts to take advantage of you that way, friend or not, I will personally ensure that he’s unable to do it again.”

The fierceness in his tone made her blink. “You are an unlikely champion, my lord.”

“Why?”

“Well...you’ll be gone from here in a few days. I don’t expect I’ll ever see you again after that.”

Something flickered in his eyes, but it was gone before she could tell what it was.

“Let’s simply agree that whatever happened was a momentary madness,” she suggested. “No one is at fault. And we certainly don’t need to ever refer to it again.”

“If that’s your wish.” He took a deep breath. “Tell me about your home.”

That was a safe topic, and she appreciated that he was willing to put aside the previous one. She looked around the estate, saying, “I’ve lived at Hollydell my whole life. It’s been in Papa’s family for such a long time, I can’t remember since what king. In fact, the tradition is that Hollydell is actually a corruption of *Holy Dell*, because there’s that natural spring in the dell nearby, and pilgrims would come there and say they

were healed at the fountain that came up from the ground. Legend has it that the water always flows there—no matter how hot and dry in summer or how cold the winter—because it was blessed by a saint... Am I telling you too much?" she asked, anxious. She always forgot that people rarely cared about the history of her home as much as she did.

"You are telling me not enough, for I've got questions. Have you seen this fountain?"

"Of course! It's deeper in the woods, and you've got to go through a combe and then you've got to ford a stream—well, not in winter, it's frozen—and then you get to the fountain. You can tell when you're close because there are often clouds of mist rising up. The water can get quite warm. Papa says it's an entirely natural feature, but all the tales say that the saint called upon Mary for help hiding her from a suitor who wished to marry her against her will. Mary sent the mist to cloak the saint, and the suitor couldn't find her and he eventually gave up and left." She inhaled sharply as she considered the sudden parallels to her own situation a few moments earlier. She'd have taken a veil of mist if it had been offered. Of course, the arrival of Snowdon had been just as effective.

"I'd like to see it. Could we go? Not alone, of course," he added.

"Oh, I think that would be lovely. We can't go now, not with luncheon so soon. But perhaps this afternoon."

"Maybe not," he said, looking up at the sky, where the clouds were once again gathering grey and heavy, threatening

snow. “In fact, I should take you back to the house. Where you’ll have more people about.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him.

“I know you will be.” He gave her a smile and walked her back to Hollydell.

They returned in time for lunch, which was laid out in a much more formal manner than breakfast. The centerpiece—literally—was a massive roast pig with an apple in its mouth and a wreath of roasted potatoes all around.

The guests set upon the meal as if they were all starving (instead of nicely fed from earlier), and the conversation was loud and cheerful. Caroline caught Francis’s eye across the table, but all he did was wink and mouth the word *Experiment?* while pointing to the pig.

She shook her head, laughing. That was much more typical of Francis. She was so glad he was back to normal.

Snowdon had been seated next to Estelle for this meal, and he was doing a fine job of drawing words from the normally shy young lady. Estelle seemed to be explaining something to him, probably about art. He was listening intently, and Caroline thought that it would be grand if the poor Estelle could marry a nobleman like Snowdon.

But not Snowdon himself! a little voice inside her objected.

Caroline sat still for a moment. Why should she be jealous of Estelle getting attention from Snowdon? It wasn’t as if Caroline wanted him for herself...did she?

Oh, no. Caroline, who'd so recently protested that she needed no suitor, and that she'd settle for nothing less than the perfect gentleman, now confronted the fact that she may have found him. But he might not find her the perfect lady.

Estelle, however. She was blonde and willowy, and soft-voiced and always polite...the sort of lady a man of the aristocracy might feel would look very well as the mistress of the house. And while she was born poor, she led an exemplary life and her family never suffered a hint of scandal. There would be little impediment to a well-off lord taking her for a wife.

For some reason, she glanced at Timothy Stockan, who was watching the same scene with an expression of defeat. He must have had many of the same ideas Caroline did, and agreed that if Snowdon did decide he wanted to court Estelle, there was nothing to prevent him from doing so. Caroline also saw how pained he was by the thought.

My goodness, Mr Stockan has fallen in love with Estelle! The idea roused her from her stillness. True, the young man had fallen for Estelle in a twinkling, but Caroline didn't doubt how genuine his feelings were. They practically burned through the air. How could Estelle not know of his affection? She appeared completely oblivious.

Must everything be so tangled? Estelle appeared to have two men interested in her, while Caroline had to fend off attention from a man she'd never once considered as a marriage partner. She looked up, and noticed the little sprigs of mistletoe hanging from the chandeliers. She grimaced. The

whole house appeared set up to encourage romance, and she was beginning to think it was all a mockery.

* * * *

After luncheon, still in a dour mood, Caroline went upstairs in search of the book she'd been reading. She found it only after an exhaustive search of her room—how *did* it end up behind the headboard?

Closing her door again, Caroline walked down the corridor, but stopped when she noticed the distinctive blue jacket of Lord Snowdon further down. Something just slightly odd in his manner kept her from speaking. Instead, she stepped back into a bedroom and peeked out.

Snowdon stood at the door of her parents' bedroom. He knocked twice. Caroline happened to know that her father was out to the village and her mother was in the parlor, but before she could go out and tell him so, Snowdon's hand fell to the doorknob and he pushed the door open.

She blinked in surprise. *What* was he doing? Such an invasion of privacy was unthinkable, all the more so because she couldn't dream of why he'd do it at all.

Snowdon was in the room for only a few moments. Caroline heard a little bit of rustling and the scrape of a drawer being opened and closed again.

Then Snowdon returned to the hall. With one hand he pulled the door shut once more. His other hand was holding something awkwardly under his jacket. He turned toward her

and Caroline pulled back, praying he hadn't seen her leaning out into the hall.

He moved swiftly to his own room and went in, shutting the door tight. Caroline heard the metallic sound of a key twisting. He'd locked the door shut!

She frowned. Was this man a thief? No. He was a *lord*. He was well-dressed and he had all the manners of a gentleman. But what did that mean, after all? He could be anybody! Caroline steeled herself, then strode forward and rapped on his door.

"Lord Snowdon?" she called, just as she put her hand on the knob, intending to try it despite knowing the door was locked.

To her astonishment, the door swung open easily, sending her stumbling into the room...and into his arms.

Chapter 7

CAROLINE GASPED AS SHE WAS enveloped into Snowdon's embrace, his strong arms holding her upright against the momentum that would have sent her tumbling to the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked in a growl. His icy blue eyes were locked on her face, his expression darkening when she didn't respond.

How could she respond? Caroline was overwhelmed by the presence of him, the intense maleness of his body next to hers. He'd taken his jacket off, so she could feel the hard planes of muscle in his arms and his chest. It was shocking how her curves melted against him, filling in the tiniest spaces, molding her body to his. Only the thin layer of her gown and the fabric of his shirt separated them, and that wasn't nearly enough for her sanity. She inhaled and smelled his scent: apples and woodsmoke and something musky and dark underneath the rest. She'd never smelled anything quite like it, and she was conscious of a desire to put her face closer, to breathe in deeply and let the aroma wash over her, to revel in the novelty and the allure of it.

“Caroline, you shouldn't be here,” he said in a softer tone.

“I know,” she breathed, dizzy from the heat rising off his body. A man made of snow? Not now. He seemed to hold a banked fire inside. “But I saw you, and—”

Before she could go on, they heard heavier footsteps out in the hall. Caroline froze. To be caught in a man's room

would mean social ruin, no matter her reasons for pursuing him there.

Snowdon obviously realized it too. He relocked the door and then held a finger to his lips. She nodded, already glancing around the room in case she needed to hide somewhere.

Nothing presented itself. There was no closet, only a tall clothespress that held shelves inside, making it impossible for her to fit in. Behind the door? That would work only if no one stepped all the way in.

The doorknob began to turn slightly.

Snowdon's eyes narrowed and his mouth was set in a thin line. He lowered his head to her ear and breathed, "Under the bed."

She moved as fast as she dared to the large four-poster bed. She flipped up the bedspread and dropped to her knees. Peering underneath, she saw that the floor was perfectly clean (Maggie would need to be given a raise in wages at the New Year), and that Snowdon's traveling cases had been slid under the bed on the far side, making it less likely a person would see her if they looked from that angle. She quickly flattened herself out and rolled into the dark space.

She took a careful breath, but then gasped as Snowdon *followed her*, pulling the bedspread back into place as he went. His long form lay next to hers, face-to-face.

"What are you doing? You don't have to hide, it's your room—"

“Hush,” he ordered, his voice low, the command clear. “If you’re seen, it would be bad.”

She snapped her mouth shut, wondering what she’d got herself into. She heard a scraping sound, as if from a key that didn’t quite fit the lock. Snowdon barely seemed to breathe, he was listening so intently. It took Caroline a moment to realize he’d put an arm around her shoulders in a protective embrace.

Then the door swung open. She shook as footsteps reverberated along the floorboards. Quiet as the person was trying to be, the sounds felt like thunder to Caroline.

The person began walking around the room. She heard the rustle of items being moved on the small desk, and of clothing being lifted, rifled, and dropped back down.

Ugh, how long did they intend to take? Her body was uncomfortably squashed into the space, her muscles protesting the position. The side of her head was pressed to the floor. Snowdon noticed her discomfort and shook his head once, warning her against any movement that could give them away. She nodded. She certainly didn’t want to get caught in such an embarrassing situation.

She strained her ears, wondering what was happening. A maid might come into a room to straighten up or lay the fire. But she’d never unlock a door to do so! And these were not the innocent sounds of a servant about their daily chores. The furtiveness and the frustration was altogether different.

Someone was searching his room.

Caroline bit her lip, thinking hard. Why would someone search his room? Had she not been the only person to see him smuggle something away from its rightful place? Was Snowdon some sort of imposter? And why did he smell so good?

She heard the doors of the clothespress being opened, and the desk drawers, one by one. The person began to mutter, and Caroline was now certain it was a man. She looked at Snowdon's face, and saw no anger, just concentration, almost as if he expected this.

Then bedspread flipped up on the far side, and someone yanked out the traveling case, the edges scraping loudly as it went. Caroline's heart heaved against her ribs, and Snowdon pulled her closer, tucking her head into his chest.

"Still," he murmured, his breath hot against her ear. From the way he inhaled, he seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he kept silent. She felt his hand cupping the back of her head, as if he could shield her from sight that way.

The searcher popped open the traveling case and muttered a low curse, evidently because it was empty. The second case was yanked out too, with the same result. Then both were shoved back underneath. The corner of one struck the small of Caroline's back, and she bit her lip to muffle her startled yelp of pain. Luckily, the noise of the case scraping the floor seemed to cover her small sound. Snowdon was staring hard at the gap between the fabric and the floor.

The bed ropes sagged as whoever it was sat down heavily on the corner of the mattress. “Nothing,” a voice muttered. “God damn.”

There was a distant sound from somewhere else in the house. The man got up and moved swiftly to the door, no longer bothering to be quiet. He paused, then walked out, pulling the door shut again. Footsteps stomped away down the corridor toward the stairs.

Caroline exhaled, starting to shift her limbs.

“Wait,” Snowdon whispered. “Let’s be sure he’s not coming back.”

“Why would he come back?” she hissed, her anger taking over her fear.

“Later.”

“I demand to know what—”

He silenced her with a kiss.

His lips slid against hers, and she opened her mouth in a gasp. Caroline’s heartbeat trebled as heat surged through her, and she pressed her mouth to his.

He made a sound low in his throat, something guttural and primitive and wildly arousing. He pulled her even closer, his mouth hot on hers, tasting her with abandon. The icy Lord Snowdon never gave a hint that such a heat raged inside him, and yet now Caroline was being seared by it, and loving it.

When his teeth tugged at her lower lip, she moaned at the unexpected jolt through her body. Heat began to pool in her

belly, and she curved her hand around his neck, encouraging him to continue.

He broke the kiss and pulled away to look at her. Fingers of one hand threaded through her hair, and with the other hand, he ran his thumb along her jaw, then paused at the point of her throat where her pulse thrummed, revealing just how excited she was. He smiled slowly, and kissed her again. This time, his lips brushed against hers as gently as a snowfall, and she closed her eyes, reveling in the sensations coursing through her.

She was being kissed so sweetly, no mistletoe needed.

And the man kissing her was a stranger with more secrets than she could imagine.

Caroline's eyes flew open, and she put the flat of her hand against his chest, pushing into him.

He broke the kiss immediately, his eyes dark as he took in her new expression.

"I don't think anyone is coming back," she said.

"Probably not." Abruptly, he rolled out from under the bed and flipped up the bedcovers once more. He stood and then unexpectedly reached down to offer a hand to help her out. Caroline took it and scrambled up to her feet.

She immediately glanced in the mirror. She was a mess. Her hair was falling out of its knot and her gown was wrinkled, with little snags in the top skirt where the rough floorboards caught at the fabric. "Oh, what am I going to do if anyone sees me?"

“I’ll look out, and when the hallway is empty, you’ll go to your room. You can change and fix your hair then. It’s three doors down, you’ll make it.”

“You are well acquainted with the layout of the house, sir,” she said, glaring at him in the mirror.

“I notice things,” he said shortly.

“I notice things too. Such as you taking something out of my parents’ room.”

His jaw tightened. He swallowed hard, but then said, “You’re mistaken.”

“Oh, am I? How about the person who just searched your room? Was he looking for the same thing?”

“I doubt it,” Snowdon said, a wry, bitter smile pulling at one side of his mouth.

“And why did you hide under the bed as well? No one would think it odd for you to be in your room. You just had to hide me.” She was getting more upset by the second, partly because he remained so calm.

“I had my reasons. And your reputation is preserved, so what do you care?”

“I care because it’s Christmas and everything is getting so strange! But I’m glad I didn’t get forced into marrying you because we were caught in some compromising position. Now you’re safe. You can continue your pursuit of Estelle,” she added, anger making her petty.

“What?” he asked sharply.

“Estelle. You’re interested in her.”

He looked at Caroline as if she’d grown another head.

“Why the hell would you think that?”

“You were talking to her over lunch.”

“How is that significant? I was seated next to her. Talking to a woman over lunch is not the same as kissing one under a bed.”

She protested, “You just wanted to keep me quiet.”

“I wanted to know what you tasted like.”

Oh.

“What do I taste like?” she whispered.

His gaze was hot, lingering on her mouth before flickering up to her eyes. “Like something I shouldn’t have.”

“Would you kiss me again if you had the chance?”

His chest rose and fell sharply, but his expression went icy once more. “Don’t ask me that.”

“I didn’t mean to…” She paused, unsure what she didn’t mean to do. “I just wanted to know…”

“You already know too much,” he said, his eyes a deeper blue than before. “You need to leave this room, Caroline. Now. It’s dangerous for you here.”

“*You* kissed *me*,” she said, defensiveness rising in her.

“It was a mistake. Forget it ever happened. Forget everything that just happened.”

He reached for the now-unlocked door, twisted the knob, and wrenched it open. He leaned out. "It's clear. Go." He sent her through to the hallway just before he shut it again.

She heard the key twist in the lock, and she stepped back. *What* had just happened? Had Lord Snowdon really just kissed her? Had she let him? And what would he think of her now?

Wait! She had more immediate problems. Caroline rushed to her own room and shut the door before anyone could see her and notice her disheveled appearance or remark on the fact that she'd just left Snowdon's room. She was sure the whole house could hear her heartbeat, still thrumming as fast as it had been when she was in his arms. Part of her wasn't even sure it really happened. It was almost a dream, so sudden and inexplicable. One moment she was pursuing a thief, and the next, she was lost in a cloud of pleasure, only to be abruptly pushed away without warning.

She caught her reflection in her looking glass. Her hair was mussed, her cheeks pink, and her lips shockingly plumped. She looked like...a woman.

Caroline raised a finger to her lips, touching the skin in wonder. His mouth had just been there. A wave of embarrassment rolled over her. What lady asked that of a gentleman? Was that why he stopped and pushed her away?

She hadn't meant to throw herself at him. All she wanted to know was why he'd taken something from her parents' room...

Caroline's eyes narrowed. Had it all been a trick to distract her? Was that what he was warning her to forget about,

or else he'd reveal how wantonly she'd behaved?

One thing was certain—something wrong was happening at Hollydell. There were strange tensions in the spiced air, and she decided that she *would* find out what was going on. More than anything, she felt the need to protect her family from any possible trouble. Snowdon meant trouble. Perhaps Francis meant trouble in his own way. The presence of Timothy Stockan could mean trouble for Estelle, if his intentions were less honorable than they seemed. So Caroline would learn *everyone's* secrets...starting with the mysterious, too-perfect Lord Snowdon.

Chapter 8

CAROLINE FOUND HER FATHER BACK in his laboratory, having returned from his errand to the village.

“Papa, I saw something rather odd today,” Caroline said, starting obliquely, so as to not shock her father with wild accusations.

“Eh? What was that, darling?” Her father lifted his gaze from his worktable, his expression distracted, though he tried to focus on her words.

“It’s about Lord Snowdon.”

“Snowdon?” *Now* he was paying attention. “What about him?”

“Well, I thought I saw him take something from your bedchamber.”

“Take?” her father repeated.

“Yes. Something small. I didn’t see what. He had it tucked under his jacket, you know.”

Her father poked his spectacles up on his nose, frowning. “Are you quite sure, darling? Gentlemen are not in the habit of walking off with other people’s belongings.”

“Well, I didn’t see any particular object,” she admitted. “Just that he had something under his jacket.”

“And what did he say about it?”

“Er, I didn’t ask.” First there was the whole matter of avoiding a compromising scene, and then their mouths had

been otherwise occupied.

“Hmm, I expect it was an innocent misinterpretation,” he said. “Perhaps you saw him retrieve a fresh cloth from the linen cupboard. That door is next to our bedchamber, you know.”

“Maybe,” she said, though she’d been sure she saw Snowdon pull the bedchamber door shut. Not to mention that someone else had been looking for something in *his* room a moment later. “But I would feel better if you checked your room tonight, just to be certain.”

Her father smiled and nodded. “Very sensible. I’ll do just that.”

“Thank you, Papa. I’m sorry I bothered you while you’re working. Any progress on the new formula?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Perhaps. I think this latest iteration will work, but I hesitate to test it until I’m completely sure. The risks of a mistake are significant. Any error could result in the death of the test subject...” Whenever one of his pigs died, he felt the loss keenly, valuing animal life to a degree not common among his colleagues.

“I can help tomorrow,” she offered.

“Don’t you have that skating party tomorrow? I want you away from the lab...I mean, a young lady ought to be enjoying herself with others her own age. Not puttering around here with me.”

“I love puttering with you,” she said, giving him an impulsive hug. “And I’m so proud of what you’ve

accomplished. This formula will help so many people!”

“If we can perfect it,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “Now run along, darling. I’ll be done here in a moment and we’ll all enjoy dinner together. Your mother said it will be grand. Don’t know why everything has to be so fancy. The first Christmas wasn’t fancy. I suspect anyone staying the night in a stable behind an inn would be quite happy with a shepherd’s pie.”

Caroline left her father muttering about the fripperies of modern celebrations, and returned to the house to see if her mother needed assistance. But everything was in hand, thanks to impeccable planning and reliable servants...who’d somehow managed to add yet more evergreen boughs and mistletoe inside, decking every conceivable surface.

“Maggie, there’s no more room in the house for greenery,” Caroline said, encountering the maid with her arms full of pine branches.

“Oh, miss, we’ve got to replace the old greens!” Maggie explained, rather breathlessly. “Wouldn’t do to let them get dry. House is a tinderbox then!”

Caroline winced at the idea of Hollydell Manor going up in flames as the result of a dry holly bough dipping too close to a candle. “Goodness, *please* trim back anything by a fireplace. I’m going up to get dressed for dinner.”

* * * *

Night came swiftly at this time of the year, and by five o’clock the windows showed only darkness and stars outside.

The guests had once again gathered in the parlor prior to dinner being announced. Caroline wore her rubies once more, this time with a lovely white silk gown that contrasted nicely with the stones. Long white gloves and a woolen wrap in a pink paisley pattern completed the look. She sat near the fire, opposite Aunt Juniper, looking sprightly despite her black gown. Perhaps it was the white lace mantle she wore. Or perhaps it was the way her eyes sparkled in the candlelight, like she could see all Christmases past in the flames.

Francis said, “Would be a shame to let a roast get cold. Why don’t they ring?”

“Papa is not here,” Caroline explained. No meal would be served without the master of the house.

Just then, her father came in, dressed for dinner but in a state of nervous abstraction. “Caroline, did you take anything from the lab today?”

“No,” she said. “Why?”

“I can’t account for it. The notes for my formula are missing!”

Snowdon overheard the exchange and looked up sharply, but didn’t say anything. Francis also heard and immediately moved over to Caroline. He said, “What’s this? Something’s gone? How do you know?”

“I know because it’s not there,” her father explained with more patience than Caroline would have. “All my notes about the details of my latest formula are gone.”

“Are there not notes in the London laboratory, Mr Garland? We could write and have them sent up by coach.” That advice came from Timothy Stockan, who had also come over now. His expression was concerned, though not unduly so.

“The notes from London are now outdated,” her father said. “I’m afraid there would no point in retrieving them to bring here.”

Snowdon joined the group. He said, “Those notes may not be of use to *you*, but someone else could still want them. It could save months or years of research.”

“Oh.” Mr Garland’s expression was chagrined. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Are the notes in London secure?” Snowdon went on.

Caroline didn’t like the lord’s tone, as if he were chastising her father for negligence. “Papa is always very careful! I’m sure he didn’t leave them lying around.”

“Like the notes in this laboratory?” Snowdon asked, giving her a level look.

I can’t believe I kissed him, she thought, anger rising.

“We don’t know what happened yet,” she shot back.

“We know they’re missing,” he said coolly.

Francis cleared his throat. “Don’t like to say it, but our American lad seems the most likely suspect. He may be an agent of their government, out to steal any secrets he can.”

“Francis!” Caroline gasped.

Timothy looked stricken, but said to her father, “I am quite willing to have someone search my room, sir. They will find nothing that doesn’t belong to me.”

“That’s not necessary, Stockan,” her father said, raising his hands up to stop the very idea.

“But the notes have gone somewhere,” Snowdon pointed out. “Papers don’t vanish on their own.”

Neither do snowmen, Caroline couldn’t stop from thinking. She said, “Don’t be absurd. Mr Stockan had access to the London lab for months. Why wait till Christmas, at a house party, to take something?”

Snowdon said quietly, “By your father’s own words, the other notes are less useful now than the more recent ones from the house.”

“No one can accuse anyone of theft without evidence!” Caroline insisted hotly. “We have no justification for calling Mr Stockan a thief, or anyone else, for that matter.”

“Perhaps it was a mistake,” Estelle offered, her expression nervous and her voice shaking. “Mr Garland is, after all, sometimes a little absent-minded. Maybe the papers simply got mislaid and will turn up.”

“Certainly...in an American laboratory,” Francis muttered.

“Francis!” Caroline hissed. “*Stop it.*”

Her mother stepped in. “There’s little we can do about it now, and our guests are hungry. Come, let’s have dinner. You

gentlemen can discuss the matter later, after the ladies go to the drawing room.”

And the dinner gong was rung.

“What did I tell you, girl?” Aunt Juniper whispered as Caroline helped her to her feet. “Those squirrels! Stealing anything they like.”

“I don’t think the squirrels are to blame, Auntie,” Caroline said, pressing her forehead with the back of her hand. Lord, what a mess.

* * * *

All through dinner, her thoughts ran around and around in her head. She scarcely responded to Francis’s many little jokes—how could he joke at a time like this? All she could think about was the fact that she had seen Snowdon leave her parents’ room with something under his jacket. What if her father had left his notes in the bedchamber? It had happened before—he tended to carry around papers in case he wanted to jot down a thought. Snowdon might easily have slipped the notes into his jacket. But why? Why, why, why...

“Don’t worry overmuch, Caro,” Francis said, leaning closer to her. “Those notes will turn up. Or they won’t! Nothing you can do about it. Unless you’ve got more notes on the formula your father is working on?”

“No,” she said dully. “Papa’s the genius. I’m still learning. My notes would be worthless.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” he said cheerfully.

Caroline turned to look at him. “Why?”

“Because no one will try to steal them from you, sweetheart!” He chuckled, biting into another forkful of roast beef. He seemed to not have a care in the world.

The dessert course was a flaming pudding. The blue light of the brandy-fueled fire cast strange shadows on the diners’ faces, and Caroline thought again of the formula—would drinking it be like drinking fire? Would they ever be truly sure it was ready for human use if no human could safely try it?

She normally loved Christmas pudding, but she ate her portion mechanically, hardly tasting the cinnamon, nutmeg, and rich treacle in each bite. She also couldn’t even look over at Lord Snowdon without feeling the simultaneous hits of remembered passion (which made her flush) and resentment at his high-handed manner about the missing notes (which made her want to scream).

It was a relief to rise from the table and retreat to the drawing room with the other ladies. Caroline procured a cup of mulled wine and moved to the fireplace to stare sulkily into the flames.

Estelle joined her, not speaking for a while, clearly lost in her own thoughts. At last she said, “Will Mr Stockan get into trouble, do you think?”

“Papa won’t let him get blamed for anything, unless it could be proved he did something wrong.”

“I can’t imagine him doing such a thing,” Estelle said, the defense arising from a newfound partisanship rather than any facts. “Why would he? He had access for months. He could just as easily copied them out and left the originals.”

Caroline turned to look at her friend, impressed by her reasoning. “I hadn’t thought of that, but you’re right. It’s a point in Mr Stockan’s favor.”

“Are the notes very important, Caro?” Estelle’s brow was wrinkled. “You know so much more about chemistry and your father’s experiments.”

“Yes, I think they could be very important. Don’t tell anyone else this, Estelle, but he’s been in communication with the War Department. The formula might someday be used by the army.”

Estelle’s eyes went wide. “Would Mr Stockan be aware of that?”

“Maybe. But maybe not. Papa has been quite circumspect throughout the whole process.”

“I’m going to find out.” Estelle put aside her cup, and prepared to stand.

“How?”

“I’ll ask Mr Stockan some questions.”

“You must be subtle!” Caroline warned.

Estelle nodded and got up, making her way toward Timothy Stockan, who stood by the windows. From his expression as she approached, he’d tell her anything she asked. Caroline sighed. If Estelle and Timothy did have feelings for each other, she’d hate for it to be revealed that he *was* involved in the theft.

Then Snowdon approached her, putting one hand on the fireplace mantel as if he just intended to get warm. Without looking at her, he said, “May I speak with you, Miss Caroline?”

“You already are,” she pointed out.

A wry smile flashed across his face. “I owe you an apology. My behavior earlier...upstairs. It was inexcusable.”

Caroline swallowed hard at the memory of what came over them both. “I was told to forget anything happened,” she said softly, so as not to be overheard by anyone nearby.

“I will not forget it,” he said, the words quiet but searing. “But I promise that I didn’t intend to do it. It was damned foolish of me, especially because...” He trailed off.

“Because I’m the daughter of your host?” she suggested. *Or because you may have stolen secret documents and the kiss was a distraction?*

“Because you deserve to be treated with respect,” he said bluntly.

“I...oh.” Caroline felt more affected by that than nearly anything else he might have said. If only she hadn’t seen him take something from her parents’ room! “My lord—” she began to say.

“Yes?”

“The notes from my father’s lab.”

He went still, his manner suddenly wary. “What about them?”

“Did you have anything to do with it?”

Snowdon inhaled. He looked at her directly, his eyes narrowed. “You think me the thief?”

“I wish I didn’t.”

“I also wish that, Miss Garland. I think it best that I not bother you any longer.” He seemed to be having difficulty controlling his expression as he bowed slightly and walked away.

Caroline watched him go toward another clutch of gaily dressed, happily chattering guests.

She barely knew him. She certainly didn’t care for him. So why did it feel as though her heart had been pierced?

Chapter 9

THE NEXT DAY, THE FESTIVITIES continued, though the spirit at Hollydell wasn't exactly joyful. But the skating party had been planned, and canceling it was not an option. Several young people from the neighboring homes and the village were coming to the house, and then the whole group would walk through the snowy woods to a pond about a mile away.

The issue of the missing documents had little effect on the guests who meant to enjoy their holiday, most of whom weren't even present when the loss was revealed. Only Caroline felt uneasy about leaving the house to go gallivanting in the winter woods. Estelle seemed confident that the whole situation was an accident and the notes would soon be found in some odd location. According to her, the previous evening Mr Stockan had admitted he was troubled by the fact that they were missing, but added, "After all, Mr Garland has all the information in his head, and he can re-create the notes if need be."

Caroline was reassured by this fact, so she tried to put the matter aside for the day. She dressed warmly for the party. She wore a gown of bright red wool over her white cotton shift, with sturdy stockings to keep her legs warm while out in the snowy woods. Her black leather boots were quite waterproof, thanks to beeswax. She'd tie on her metal skate blades when she reached the pond.

Estelle knocked and came in. She was also dressed snugly in a brown-and-white-striped wool, with her evergreen cloak

over the top, and a mink fur hat (which had once belonged to Caroline). “Are you ready?” Estelle asked.

“Almost.” On impulse, she reached for the rubies and put them on.

“Caroline!” Estelle whispered, sounding shocked. “Are you wearing the necklace? To go *skating*?”

“I know it’s silly,” she admitted. “No one will even see them, not with my scarf and the cloak over my outfit. But, Estelle, it feels so grand to wear them! To have this weight of gold and ruby and to know they’re mine...I’m sure I’ll grow used to them and I’ll be proper about it. But I’ve just got them, and it means I’m...” She paused, trying to put the emotion into words. “It’s means I’m a woman. Not a child, not a little girl playing at being grown up. I’m really grown up now, and I can do what I like!”

“A grown up woman would leave such jewels under lock and key when she wasn’t putting them on for an evening,” Estelle pointed out.

“You’re no fun,” Caroline said with a false pout. “Tell you what. You will wear them tomorrow for dinner.”

Estelle looked appalled at the thought. “I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“You should dream of it. Dream tonight! And tomorrow you’ll know the reality of it, and we can compare notes. Oh, I don’t mean to be shallow, but honestly jewels are great fun!”

Estelle just shook her head. “Come along. We should meet the others or we’ll be late.”

They went down, and Caroline encountered Lord Snowdon in the foyer. He was wearing the same pale blue jacket as from the first day he arrived, over a snowy white linen shirt—however, he was not wearing anything for the out of doors.

“My lord, you are not coming to the skating party?” she asked, hoping that a simple conversation would not prove utterly awkward...considering she’d all but accused him of robbery the evening before.

“I have something to attend to,” he said coldly.

“Oh.” Caroline didn’t know why his dismissal should hurt her so, but it stung.

He seemed to realized that his tone was unduly harsh, because he added, “Perhaps I can join the group later. I assume someone in the household can direct me to the pond.”

“Any of the family or the servants will tell you how to get there. The path will be well trampled too. There’s a dozen people coming so far.”

“Then you will hardly miss me.”

“Everyone is invited,” she said stiffly. “But of course, it is your choice.”

“Caroline! Come along!” Francis called from the front walk, where the main group had gathered, everyone chattering like a herd of geese.

“Goodbye,” she said.

His only response was a bow.

She went outside, and was soon swept into the middle of the crowd as they made their merry way down the path. A few footmen proceeded them with a load of blankets and folding chairs to be placed at the pond, and a few maids followed them, bearing hampers of food and bottles of various beverages.

Caroline had been looking forward to the skating party, though Snowdon's absence made the whole woodland a little dimmer. Was she so dazzled by the man, even with all her doubts about him? Catching Estelle's questioning gaze, Caroline put on a smile and tried to summon all her holiday cheer. After all, she was more or less the hostess here.

"Come along, everyone!" she said, catching sight of the pond at last. "Let's put the hampers down on the rocks there. Cook's sent far more than we need, and I know all the food will be delicious. Just the thing after skating." She had no fear of the food getting cold. The maids always slid slabs of clay that had been heated in the oven into the bottom of all the baskets. They'd keep the food toasty warm for some time.

Those in the group who had skates tied them onto their feet. A few ladies chose to sit delicately on chairs, unwilling to risk a torn hem in the pursuit of frivolity. Estelle tottered on the ice, testing out her skates.

"Our hostess ought to go first," Francis said with a fligid bow.

Caroline skated forward, spinning around after a few paces. "Welcome to the ice, one and all!" she cried, to general shouts and laughter.

Francis followed and swept her around half the pond. He kept an arm firmly about her waist, “to steady you,” he assured her, though Caroline had been skating her whole life and felt quite confident on her blades.

She caught him looking at her sidelong. “What is it?” she asked.

“Just saw a flash of red by your neck,” he said.

“Oh!” She looked down and saw that the ruby necklace was now partially visible after she’d flipped some of the cloak over her shoulders. “Just my jewelry.”

“Queen Caro, indeed. Rubies for ice skating!” he chuckled and looked to the shoreline.

As they passed the main group again, Caroline saw Timothy bow to Estelle. “Miss Clement, may I take you for a turn about the pond?”

Estelle smiled in delight, and said, “Why, that would be wonderful.”

The pair of them pushed off on their skates, going very slowly around the edge of ice nearest the shore. Timothy held lightly on to Estelle’s elbow as they went, and his face was turned toward hers, while she focused on the challenge of skating without tripping.

Caroline smiled to herself—there was hope for Estelle yet.

Francis noticed her gaze, and asked, “What’s going on over there? Miss Clement needs a minder to go out on the ice?”

“I think Mr Stockan is happy to take on the role, whether it’s needed or not,” she replied.

Francis chuckled. “So that’s how it is! Well, let’s give the novices their space. Come on! We’ve got a whole pond to conquer.”

“Keep from the far edge. There’s a warm spring there and it sometimes takes longer to fully freeze,” she warned.

“I know the pond,” he countered. “Didn’t I grow up here too?”

The party dispersed over the area of the pond, some couples splitting off, and a few brave individuals attempting tricks like skating backward or with closed eyes. As time went on, Caroline began to relax and enjoy herself. She coaxed some of her neighbors into at least stepping onto the ice, and cheered when Estelle lay down in the snow at the side of the pond to make a snow angel.

Francis swept her along, pushing their pace. A few curls had slipped loose from under her bonnet, and now they hit her cheeks as the wind whipped across her face. She laughed out loud, enjoying the sheer joy of gliding over the ice. It was probably as close as she’d ever get to flying!

Francis moved to one side, away from her. He looked intent, and said, “Race you to the far edge.”

“I’ll wait for you there!” she replied cheekily. Digging into the ice with one blade, she shot off across the pond. Caroline was naturally athletic, and she soon found a rhythm, but Francis’s slight head start and long legs made it difficult to

catch up. She just came abreast of him as they approached the other end, where the wind had blown the snow into ridges and left some the ice clear, the surface almost black in the dull light of the cloudy day.

“I’m going to pass you!” she called.

Francis looked back, and suddenly veered to the right, as if he meant to avoid her colliding into him. He reached out his left arm as he shouted, “Caroline!” at the same time she heard a sickening crack.

The ice was breaking.

* * * *

It happened so quickly that Caroline didn’t even have a chance to scream before she plunged into dark, icy water. Her limbs went numb instantly, and her lungs seemed to compress as the fearful cold surrounded her, denying her precious air. She thrashed her legs and arms, which felt like wielding wooden sticks on a puppet—she knew the body parts were moving, but she felt nothing. And something was dragging her down...her cloak, suddenly dangerously heavy.

She tugged frantically at the ties, finally loosening the garment to drift down in the water. Finally, she broke the surface and inhaled the sweet but frigid air. Which way was she even facing? All she saw was white. The shouts of others made her look over, and oh, no, why were they all so far away and so much higher up?

Swim, you fool! she told herself. She tried to move toward the jagged ledge of ice in front of her, but the moment she

reached out and seized it, a chunk of it cracked and collapsed into the water.

Caroline was alone in the icy water...but where was Francis? Had he fallen in too? No, she'd see him...hear him splashing...God in Heaven, it was so cold...

Near the other shore, Timothy Stockan shouted at the others to keep off the ice. "Everyone stay on land. The ice can't support all the weight anymore!"

"But we have to get her out!" Estelle cried, looking around for some way to reach Caroline. She seized upon a long branch that had fallen and been pushed up near the shore of the pond. Timothy helped her yank it free of the ice, though Estelle refused to relinquish it to him. Together, Timothy and Estelle skated over, moving gingerly at every sharp crack.

"Stop!" Caroline cried, terrified for her friend.

"She's right. Lie down on the ice," Timothy added. "Spread your weight over as much area as you can." He also dropped to the surface, demonstrating. The couple managed to stretch out enough to get close to the hole, with Timothy holding Estelle's ankle as she stretched forward and held the branch out to Caroline.

She grabbed at it, unsure if her frozen fingers even grasped it. Black spots appeared before her eyes, and she could hear her heart thudding ever more slowly in her ears. But then Estelle's hand clamped over her own. Somehow, the others had pulled her out of the water.

"Where's Francis?" she mumbled.

“Shh, I don’t know. He must have gone for help. Never mind him,” Estelle said. Timothy reached over to Caroline and helped pull her upright, apologizing for taking the liberty of touching her.

Cold air hit her then, and she started to shiver violently. Estelle flung herself over Caroline, holding her close in an attempt to warm her. Estelle’s own thin cape fluttered about them like a great green bird.

“I need a dry cloak,” Estelle cried. “Hers is gone!”

Gone? Caroline had a hazy memory of the heavy wool dragging her down, the ties at the neck yanking hard against her throat as she fell...she must have managed to undo the ribbon and free herself, or else she’d surely have drowned.

Timothy laid his greatcoat over the two women and said, “Here, it will be all right.” But Caroline saw only worry in his face. He looked around, and then said, “The food baskets! There are hot rocks in them, aren’t there?”

“Yes, go get them!” Estelle said.

“I’ll b-b-b-b—” She tried to speak, but her teeth were chattering and her whole body was starting to convulse.

Estelle gave a cry of alarm. “The rocks won’t be enough, I’m afraid. She needs to get home!”

But home was a mile away, and Caroline couldn’t walk. The mere idea of standing up and rising into that awful, ice-strewn air made her faint.

“S-S-S-Stelle, I can’t,” she gasped out.

“We’ll get you home,” Estelle said. “*Where* did Mr Foster go? He could have carried you. There must be some way to get you—wait!”

Caroline couldn’t turn her head, and there was a pounding in her ears...but no, there was another counterpoint...horse’s hooves.

From her vantage point lying on the snow, Caroline saw a huge white horse trot up. Snowdon, dressed in that white greatcoat, looked like the soul of winter.

Estelle wasted no time. She turned and called, “My Lord Snowdon! Caroline fell into the water! She needs help! Can you get her back to the manor before...”

Before it’s too late. Caroline heard the words her friend couldn’t say.

Snowdon had already dismounted and now rushed to her side. He took one look and picked her sodden figure up in his arms. He said nothing as he strode to the horse. He lifted her onto the saddle and mounted up behind her, holding her tightly against him. Estelle ran up to them, pushing Timothy’s greatcoat into Snowdon’s hand.

He nodded as he took it and settled it over Caroline, tucking it around her head—her hair was sopping wet and already starting to freeze solid at the ends.

“Hurry!” Estelle said. “She needs warmth above all. Let her father know the *moment* you get to the house. He’ll know what to do. We’ll follow!”

Snowdon kicked his heels into the horse's flanks, setting off at a gallop. In his arms, Caroline shivered and shook uncontrollably.

"Not far," he told her, cradling her head to his chest. "You'll be warm soon."

But despite his easy words, she sensed a tension in his voice that was far more dire. The shock of falling into the water might stop her heart if she wasn't treated in time. She couldn't stop the violent shivers from racking her body. She tried to grasp the edge of the coat covering her, and couldn't even feel her fingers.

"I'm sorry," she got out. "Ruined-d-d-d your c-c-c-coat."

"I don't care about the coat. Are you comfortable?"

"I d-d-don't know. I c-c-c-can't feel anything," she whispered.

"Hush," he ordered harshly. "As my superior officer would say, you're not allowed to die."

He pushed the horse even faster.

As unconsciousness swept over Caroline, she wondered when Snowdon had ever been in the army.

Then Snowdon squeezed her to him, saying urgently, "Stay awake, Caroline. You mustn't fall asleep when you're cold like this, it's dangerous."

"I know, that's why we made the formula," she answered, her voice slurring.

"Tell me more," he said. "Talk and stay awake."

“It’s meant to warm a person up. Papa got the idea after all those soldiers died on the Russian campaign. Didn’t want more soldiers to die...the army...I mean our army...the War Department...can’t remember who...”

“Never mind who, just keep talking. How does it work?”

“It’s a chemical compound that keeps the blood moving, and stimulates nerves so one doesn’t go numb. The pigs who we tested it on stay more active in the cold, when the...con... control...”

“The control group, yes,” he said. “They didn’t remain active in the cold, but the group that got the formula did?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. Lord, she was tired. “But one of the pigs who got the formula died, and Papa said it wasn’t ready. We have to make sure it’s safe...my lord, why are your eyes so blue?” Caroline was having trouble focusing. Only his eyes seemed to be clear and easy to look at.

“I was born that way,” he said, glancing down at her.

“When were you born?”

“I’ll be twenty-eight in February. Why?”

“I just wanted to make sure you weren’t born...yesterday. Not yesterday. The day you came to the house.”

“I assure you I’m not too young for you,” he said, laughing.

“Thought...I might have made you. From snow. Your name is Snow.”

“Snowdon,” he corrected, looking worried. “Caroline. You’re drifting. Please stay with me.”

“I built the snowman, you see. And I made him perfect. A Cor-Corinthin-thian. And then you showed up and the snowman was gone.”

He inhaled, as if to speak, but then he just held her tighter, kissing her forehead. “We’re almost there,” he said.

But Caroline’s eyes were closing, and the world was going dark.

Chapter 10

CAROLINE CAME TO AND BLINKED as voices echoed around her. She was still cold—so, so cold—but she was no longer out of doors. However, she seemed to be moving? Her mother’s voice instructed servants to heat water and bring it up. Snowdon was saying something in a low tone, and her father sounded frantic.

The yowls of Mittens echoed down the hall, the cat made alert and anxious by the scene.

“Mama, I need a bath,” Caroline said, half dreaming.

“Yes, my darling,” her mother’s voice came in comfortably close, warm and protective. “You’ll be in a warm bath very soon. A lukewarm bath first though. We can’t shock you. Right in here, thank you, my lord.”

Snowdon didn’t reply, but he lowered Caroline in her sodden gown onto the bed. *He carried me to my room, she thought hazily. He got me all the way through the woods. And after I accused him of being a thief.*

Snowdon immediately left, and not a moment too soon. Her mother and the maids stripped her of her gown. Red dye dripped from the half-frozen folds of fabric. Her thin shift clung to her limbs, somehow making her even colder.

“Cut it away,” her mother ordered Maggie. “She needs to be put in the bath now.”

Caroline was led, stumbling, to the bathtub. She put one foot in but cried out, “It’s burning!”

“It’s lukewarm, my love. You’re so cold that we dare not put you in a hot bath. Now get in!”

She endured the supposedly lukewarm bath for a while, her body still convulsing, making the water ripple like a miniature ocean. The numbness of her limbs gave way to a burning sensation. She reached up to touch her neck. Why did it feel especially tender there?

The maids started dumping hot water into the bath, filling it to the brim. Mittens paced around the tub, mewing at her, but unwilling to brave the water to explore further.

“I’ll be out soon,” she told the cat. “I don’t want to be wet any more than you do.”

Caroline sat in the steaming bath for half an hour, and then she was toweled off, swaddled into a woolen nightshift, and tucked into bed, where hot stones wrapped in cloth had already been placed near her feet. Mittens leapt on the bed and stretched across her over the puffy coverlet.

And yet, she still shivered. Somehow the ice had got into her core. And she wasn’t feeling sharp mentally either. All she wanted was to sleep.

Her father came in so quietly, Caroline hardly noticed. “How is she?” he asked his wife.

“She’s not improving!” her mother said in a tone Caroline wasn’t meant to hear. “It’s like she’s been frozen all the way through. The bath and the blankets and the hot stones are only getting to the surface.”

This was how those soldiers in the winter campaign died, she thought. The cold outside seeped into their bodies and never let go. There was only one way out of this, unless...

“Papa,” Caroline gasped through chattering teeth. “The new formula. Use it. On me.”

Her father looked stricken. “My daughter! I can’t risk it, not with the formula still untested!”

“Papa, *please!*”

He groaned and nodded. “Give me one moment.”

Her father returned a little later with a small bottle. He measured out a few drops of bright ruby liquid into a silver spoon by Caroline’s bedside. He leaned over her, bringing the spoon to her mouth. Then he hesitated. “I can’t. What if it harms you?”

“You made it to save people,” she got out. “Let me be the first.”

He nodded once and gave her the dose. A myriad of tastes hit her tongue: cassia, pepper, a deep bitter note, and all of it riding upon the taste of alcohol so strong as to practically evaporate on her tongue. She nearly choked in surprise at the flavors and the effect of imbibing the concoction.

“How do you feel?” her father asked anxiously.

“Like a rag on wash day,” she gasped. “I could breathe fire after drinking that.”

“Well, such an effect would mean your belly’s warm,” he said wryly. “Relax, child. And tell me the moment you feel

anything, good or bad.”

She lay back. Warmth was spreading out from her stomach, waves of it rippling over taut and tired muscles clenched too long as her body attempted to defend itself against an enemy it could not fight. Now she didn't have to fight—the cold retreated under the influence of the formula, releasing Caroline from its grip. She gave a huge sigh, and her mother heard it first, somehow recognizing that it meant the worst of the danger was over.

“I'm warming up,” she told her parents. “At last.”

She was also waking up, her mind becoming alert and supple once more. She remembered the few moments before crashing into the ice, when she was flying along the surface of the pond, and Francis was just ahead of her, until he veered to the right...

“Where's Francis?” she asked. “Did he come to tell you what happened? To get help?”

Her parents looked at each other, puzzled.

“I don't believe so,” her mother said at last. “The first we knew of the accident was when Snowdon rode up on his horse, carrying you. My heavens, Caroline. I thought you had died! You were so limp and lifeless in his arms. But he said it wasn't too late...”

“And he was right,” her father added. “Caroline, how do you feel now? Any changes?”

“Very warm now,” she said, pushing the blanket down. “And as awake as if I'd had fresh coffee. The numbness is all

gone, and the burning of the skin too. Except around my neck...”

“Your cloak ties were probably pulling there,” her father said. “Wool resists water for a while, but when it does penetrate, the fabric becomes fearsomely heavy. Strong men have been known to drown simply because their clothes weigh them down.”

“I shall not go swimming in armor, then,” Caroline quipped.

Her father beamed at her. “Aha, that’s my girl! Able to joke—always a good sign.”

With the danger apparently past, Caroline was instructed to rest in bed for the rest of the day and evening. Various attendants, including Mittens, made sure she was never unsupervised. Maggie sat with her, then her mother, then her father. One of the maids brought up her supper: beef broth and warm crusty bread, with a little dish of warmed, spiced applesauce. And of course a pot of herbal tea.

“Everything hot!” Caroline said in mock surprise.

“Your parents are taking no chances,” the maid informed her.

After eating, Caroline sat in the armchair in front of the small fireplace in her bedroom. She wore a large wool blanket wrapped around her like a cape. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of heat seeping into her very bones. In normal circumstances, her mother would be horrified that Caroline wasn’t making use of the fire screen standing nearby. She

always worried about heat marring Caroline's complexion. But tonight Caroline was coddled and cared for, and there would be no suggestion that she could possibly be too warm. Mittens lay curled on her lap, purring with contentment.

Estelle came in with a tray. "I thought I would come sit with you," she said. "Do you need more tea?"

"No thank you, I could launch a ship upon all the tea I've had today," she replied with a chuckle.

Estelle poured a cup for herself before sitting down in the other chair. "I've never been so scared in all my life," she confessed. "Lord Snowdon was a hero, riding up at just the right moment and then racing back to the house with you. He saved your life."

"*You* saved my life," Caroline retorted, petting Mittens gently as they talked. "As if I will ever forget how you pulled me out of the pond before Snowdon even arrived."

Estelle looked downward. "I could never have done it alone. Timothy—I mean, Mr Stockan—was the one who made sure I didn't also fall in."

"All thanks to Timothy's—I mean, Mr Stockan's—strong arms?"

"Goodness, Caroline, that dark icy water must have been terrifying."

"It was, but don't think that mentioning it will distract me from your blush. You're quite taken with Mr Stockan, aren't you?"

Estelle's blush deepened to beet. "I've never met anyone like him. He's so very kind. And clever. And his eyes are *very* beautiful...." She trailed off then, not used to confessions of this nature.

But her few words revealed more than enough to Caroline, who felt a childlike delight in knowing her friend truly had been struck by Cupid's arrow.

"I knew it!" she said, not knowing that as she spoke, her face and attitude became as vibrant and animated as her old self for the first time since the accident at the pond. "Oh, Estelle, how romantic! Has he said anything of his...future plans?"

"No, not beyond the fact that he intends to return to America at some point after he's learned what he can of business." Estelle sounded so sad at that.

"Then he may be here for some time," Caroline said.

Estelle gave a sigh, though a sadness lingered in her eyes. "Then we shall talk no more about it. I am well aware of my likely future and marriage is not part of it." She suddenly busied herself with pouring more tea, despite having a nearly full cup.

Caroline held her tongue, staring into the fire as she pretended not to notice Estelle wiping her eyes. Caroline's lips curved upward just a touch. She wasn't a matchmaker by nature, but she had a vested interest in her friend's happiness.

Estelle remained with her for a while, and the girls talked of lighter matters: local gatherings for the holiday, what gifts

remained to be made or purchased, and whether Cook might be persuaded to make another batch of her special current scones in time for Christmas Eve.

Caroline kept rubbing at her neck. Estelle noticed, and then gasped.

“What is it?” Caroline asked.

“I’ve just remembered! It’s that...you were wearing the ruby necklace when you went through the ice. And I *don’t* remember seeing it after we pulled you out.”

Caroline halted, seeing the whole horrible scene again, but as if from outside her own body. True, she had been wearing the necklace under her heavy cloak. And no one had taken it off her after she got back home. It certainly would have been remarked on.

Oh, Lord. It was clear enough what happened. In the chaos of her fall through the broken ice, her thrashing about and the pull of freezing water on her garments had snagged the necklace and pulled it off along with her cloak.

The priceless rubies that she’d so recently received, and so blithely promised to protect for the next generations, now lay at the bottom of the pond.

Caroline was wrecked by this realization, and sobbed in a way that she hadn’t over her own danger. How could she have been so thoughtless? Wearing the necklace had been a lark, a silly thing to make her feel special. And this was the price.

“Oh, it will be all right!” Estelle said, trying to soothe her. “I’m sure they can be recovered somehow. Oh, I’ve undone

everything. You were feeling better and now it's terrible again."

"It's not your fault, Estelle. You tried to warn me..."

"Please don't cry! I'd rather have you alive than a pile of rubies. Caroline, it will be all right!"

But tears flowed hot and salty down her face. Mittens woke up and looked at her, concern in his feline eyes.

"What's this?" a new voice said from the door. Francis stood there, a bouquet of hothouse flowers in his hand. "Why are you crying, darling? Are you unwell?"

"Francis, where *were* you?" Caroline asked through her tears. Estelle stood and backed up to the fire, looking rather trapped. She could not in good conscience leave Caroline alone with a man, but she clearly wished to fade into invisibility.

Luckily, Francis scarcely noticed Estelle. He all but flung himself at Caroline's feet, offering her the flowers. His gesture startled Mittens, who hissed and jumped off her lap, stalking out of the room.

"I don't know what I was thinking, Caro. I must have run the wrong way. I meant to go to Hollydell, but I was out of my mind with worry for you. I found myself by the saint's fountain, if you can believe it. When I finally made my way back here, your father told me you were being cared for and every treatment imaginable was being tried. Oh, Caro, if you died I don't know what I'd do." He took her hand and kissed it passionately.

Caroline tugged it free. "I'm fine, truly."

"Then why the tears?"

"I...I..." She couldn't tell him about the lost rubies, not yet. It was too raw a truth. "Nerves, I expect. All the events kept my emotions bottled up, and now it's all coming out."

"Poor Caro. If there is anything I can do, I am at your command. You know I'd die for you."

"There's no need for such a sacrifice," she told him, growing rather alarmed at his attitude.

"Caroline must rest now," Estelle said, stepping forward again. From her expression, she also was upset by Francis's theatrics.

"Of course, of course." Francis got to his feet and bowed to Caroline. "I'll see you tomorrow, darling. Put the flowers in water for her, won't you, Estelle? Good girl."

He walked out, pulling the door shut behind him. Estelle regarded the flowers with an oddly disdainful look. "Hmph. He said he'd die for you, but when you were at risk of actually dying, he was nowhere to be found!"

"He apologized."

"He didn't, in fact. And he should, for he was the one right next to you on the pond. It might have been his weight that made the ice crack."

"Estelle! It was an accident."

"I suppose I'll find a vase for these. And then go to bed. Unless you want me to stay here with you?" she asked.

Caroline smiled, thinking of the many times they'd shared a bedroom, giggling long into the night. But she said, "It's probably best for you to get to your own bed, Estelle. I may toss and turn tonight—after taking just a little of that formula, I'm still feeling wakeful."

Estelle told her to call if she needed anything, and left with the bouquet.

Caroline *had* been feeling alert, but as she sat there in solitude, a drowsiness pulled her eyelids downward. She really ought to go to bed, but it was so comfortable here. A log snapped, revealing glowing embers.

An echoing sound from behind her made her look over her shoulder. There it was again, a short knock.

"Yes? Estelle, is that you again?"

But when the door opened, it was Snowdon on the other side.

Chapter 11

CAROLINE BREATHED IN DEEP, WATCHING him stand in the doorway. He took up a lot of it, and his presence seemed to fill the room before he even entered it.

Mittens used the open door to return to the bedroom, twining his tail around Snowdon's leg as he passed.

The man did not enter yet. Blue eyes surveyed her, a trace of anxiety in them that stirred a warmth in her belly.

"You'd better come in," she said, discarding all the warnings her upbringing as a lady taught her.

He stepped forward, drawing the door closed behind him. "Miss Garland, I realize I shouldn't be here, but I wasn't able to see you earlier. How do you feel?"

"Warm," she said. "Which for a while felt like an impossibility."

"I'm glad. May I?" He gestured to the chair Estelle occupied before.

She nodded, and he sat down. "I've been worried. You were in a bad state when we arrived back at the house. You were delirious."

Of course he'd think that. She'd told him she thought he was a snowman come to life.

"Please ignore anything I said before. I'm much better now," she said quickly.

"Yes, a remarkable recovery," he said, reaching down to rub the cat's ears, a gesture that was met with heartfelt

approval.

“The formula *is* remarkable—” She halted, realizing that she shouldn’t have said that. The only thing her father had mentioned was his laboratory notes, which could be for anything. “That is, never mind. Please ignore anything I said now as well.”

“As you wish.” He didn’t seem to notice her flustered state. But from what she knew, Snowdon noticed everything.

Mittens looked at Caroline, but then hopped up onto Snowdon’s lap, where he immediately made himself quite comfortable.

Snowdon stroked the cat, and Caroline noticed how finely made his hands were, strong but not clumsy. He wore no rings at all, somewhat unusually for a man of his stature. Jewelry was so important to the aristocracy.

That thought made her remember the loss of her own jewelry, and her breath caught as the shame of it hit her again.

He heard and thought it a physical pain. “What’s wrong?” he asked, leaning forward to see her face in the dim light. “Do you need me to call someone for you?”

“It’s nothing like that. It’s just...I lost the rubies,” she confessed.

“What?”

“I was wearing them at the pond...I know, it was stupid. I just...wanted to feel special.”

“You don’t need rubies for that.”

“They’re at the bottom of the pond now,” she went on, not even hearing him. “The pond that is freezing cold and covered in ice that’s getting thicker every day. By the time spring comes and the water will be—barely!—warm enough to swim in, the rubies will be covered in silt and decomposed leaves and sand and no one will ever find them. I have lost my family’s legacy all because I wanted to feel fancy at a skating party. I lost the rubies my mother gave me because she thought I was grown up enough to have them. Clearly I wasn’t.”

“Caroline, they’re stones, that’s all. What matters is that you’re safe. You survived.”

“You don’t understand. You’re a lord, you can probably buy a dozen ruby necklaces without stopping at the bank.”

“Definitely not true,” he said. He scooped up Mittens and deposited the protesting cat near the fireplace, then moved to kneel before Caroline. He surveyed her, his eyes shadowed blue, with a tender cast. She felt her heart responding to that look with an ache that felt strangely good. He gently reached out his hands to take hers. “You are worth more than any jewels. I could tell that the moment I met you.” He raised one hand to his lips and turned it up, kissing her palm.

Caroline’s breath hitched when his lips brushed against the sensitive skin, and pleasure rippled through her limbs all the way to the tips of her fingers and toes. No danger of losing sensation anymore. She could sense her whole body reacting to Snowdon’s presence.

He caught her gaze, and gave her a tiny grin. “I’ve been waiting all day to do that.”

“You have?”

“Not just that.” He dropped his hands and leaned in, appeal in his eyes. “If you permit me.”

“You didn’t ask permission before, under the bed.”

“I was a little preoccupied then. But let me kiss you now.”

“I thought you said the previous kiss was a mistake,” she protested, but without any spirit.

“And you believed me?”

Caroline leaned forward, bringing her mouth to his. Unlike the first time, it began gently. But now Caroline was the one in charge, and he seemed quite content to let her lead. She tentatively nibbled his lower lip, remembering he’d done that to her. His response was a sudden intake of breath, and his hands rose to cup her face, encouraging her to go on.

She opened her mouth, not entirely sure what prompted the urge. But when his tongue darted in and slid along her lips, she realized that her body knew far more than she did. Every glide and slip was a revelation. Her nerves tingled with anticipation of more, and he delivered more. His mouth tasted hers a dozen times, and then he moved his attention to her cheek, her ear, her neck.

A soft moan escaped her, and then she was encircled in strong arms, held firmly as he continued to kiss his way over the skin bared above the neckline of her loose night rail.

“My lord,” she whispered. “Is it wise to continue this... this... I don’t know what to call this.”

“Not everything needs to be named,” he said, his voice rich and low in her ear. He followed that with a kiss just below her ear, a place that she was finding so sensitive that it stirred feelings in entirely different parts of her body. It would be an interesting thing to examine...if she could put two thoughts together. Unfortunately, her mind was far too consumed with the pursuit of these new pleasures in the arms of a man she barely knew.

His embrace warmed her far more than the formula ever had. Caroline closed her eyes, and let all the lovely, flickering feelings pour over her. Perhaps someday she'd find kisses to be unexciting, the novelty over. But not now. Now she wanted to revel in every detail so she could recall it later...after he was gone.

The intrusion of reality soured the sweetness of the kiss. She pulled away, frowning. “You’re leaving here soon.”

“That’s true, sadly. Why? Would you like me to return?” His smile set her heart fluttering.

“I think that before I answer that, I need to know why you’re here in the first place.”

“Hmm. I suppose that I can’t just say it’s because I can’t resist you.” He kissed her again, his mouth brushing against hers in a way that sent her thoughts flying away like leaves in a storm.

Caroline was lost for another long, delicious moment. But then she pulled away again. “You didn’t know anything about me when you arrived. So there was nothing to resist.”

“Not then.” He ran a finger along the underside of her chin, as if deciding where he wanted to kiss her next.

She pulled his hand away, only to find her fingers twining with his as if of their own accord. Holding his hand was an entirely different kind of wonderful. *What if this was a thing I could have every day?* The thought blazed up in her mind. She tamped it down, for the moment.

“My lord, why is it that whenever I have doubts about what you’re here for, you find it expedient to kiss me?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never had my kisses described as *expedient*. I’m a little insulted, to be honest.”

“How about you focus on being honest rather than insulted. You took something from my parents’ room, and not long afterward, my father reported his notes missing. Yes, he thought they were in the lab, but it’s quite possible they’d been taken into the bedchamber by accident, where you found them, because you were searching.”

“No.”

“No? You’re still pretending that you weren’t in the room? That you didn’t take something?”

He looked up at the ceiling, then, surprisingly, smiled.

“It’s not funny,” she said. “The papers are missing.”

“So they are. But that’s not what I took from the room.”

“What did you take?”

“Presents.”

Caroline blinked. “What?”

“Your father requested me to carry out a few small presents that had been wrapped up and put on his bureau. Apparently, your family has a bit of a tradition of trying to find gifts before the New Year, when they’re meant to be exchanged?”

“Well, yes, but...” In fact, the Garlands did exactly that, but this year’s holidays had been so hectic and strange that Caroline hadn’t found the time to engage in the usual hunt. “You took *my* presents?”

“One for you, one for Miss Clement. A couple others I think meant for your aunt Juniper. I was to hide them in my own room, since your father supposed that was the one place you’d never dare to look.”

“Why would he trust you with that? You’d never met him before you arrived!”

“In fact, that’s not quite accurate. I met him once in London. He was keen for me to come here to Hollydell, and we decided that the house party would be a good opportunity.”

“For what?”

“To discover exactly who was after his formula.”

“Wait. You already knew about the formula? He told me never to tell anyone.”

“And he was right to do so. Your father is a very clever man, and not just in the laboratory. He knew that his formula would be sought after by certain...interests. And while he kept it as quiet as he could, such innovations can’t be kept totally secret. He conferred with other colleagues in early stages, and

he's had assistants come and go. Word got out. And though he's been careful to keep all the information about the latest versions here, certain parties must have guessed that he was making considerable progress. He suspected that someone would try to steal the notes or the formula itself from his lab at Hollydell. I came here to help him."

"But notes were stolen anyway."

"Yes," Snowden said. "It's not quite as dire as you might think...I'll let your father explain why. But the theft changed some circumstances around here, and might allow me to apprehend the culprit."

"You know who it is?"

"Almost the instant after it happened. But I needed proof. And so I waited for most of the household and guests to be gone...which happened during the excursion to go skating at the pond."

"What did you do?"

"On your father's instructions, I searched all the rooms," he said. "That was what occupied me most of the day and why I couldn't see you earlier. In fact, I hadn't really intended to go to that skating party at all. But I wanted to survey everyone there just to be sure I wasn't missing anything. I rode the horse to save time. And it turned out to be a fortunate choice."

She sighed. Yes, it was a choice that saved her life. Then she thought about the rest of his explanation. "Did you find the notes?"

“I didn’t find the notes. But a person intent on stealing papers has many places to hide them if they plan carefully. I am no closer to proving who’s behind the theft.”

“But you have your suspicions.”

“I’m absolutely certain of it.”

“Who?”

“Francis Foster.”

Chapter 12

“No.” CAROLINE SAID IT REFLEXIVELY. “He’s a friend of the family. I’ve known him my whole life.”

“It’s easy to think you know someone. I’m sure you feel strongly about him. But when my room was being searched and we had to hide under the bed—”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I saw the feet of the man searching, and later that day I confirmed that the boots were those of Mr Foster. Furthermore, when he pulled out the traveling case from under the bed, I saw his hands—you were facing away, you didn’t have the chance. He wore a gold signet ring on his right middle finger. A lion.”

“Yes, Francis always wears it...oh, no.” Caroline winced as she realized she’d just confirmed Snowdon’s theory. Then she thought of something else. “Wait. If Francis was the thief, why was he searching *your* room?”

“He’s suspicious of me,” Snowdon said simply. “At first, I thought it merely protectiveness, or a male rival angry when another enters his territory. But when he searched my room, I knew it was more than that. Your father was deeply concerned that the formula would be taken. He never told you, but his laboratory in London had been broken into twice. Luckily, he’s a crafty man. He stored false papers in the safe there, old notes that looked quite plausible to anyone interested in the formula, but not anything that would help an enemy create the later versions of the formula that were actually effective. He also

made sure that the vials of the formula were dummies. He kept the real stuff in an icebox in the kitchen of the next flat. The tenant was paid to not mention it—he probably thought your father was concealing illicit drink from a wife.”

“Papa *is* very smart,” Caroline said smugly. “But what about here? If he did the same diversion here, the notes that got stolen wouldn’t be worth anything either.”

“He didn’t do it at the lab in Hollydell. He thought that everything would be safe here—it’s much harder to get out to the countryside and sneak into a private residence filled with people. But after the London break-ins, he grew concerned and sought help.”

“From you.”

“Well, a group I’m associated with. My superior sent me along to deal with the matter.”

“You have a superior? And what group is this?”

He took a deep breath. “I can’t tell you.”

“I think you had better. Or I’ll scream and people will come running and they’ll find you here with me, and I’ll be compromised and you’ll have to marry me and you’ll hate me for it and we’ll both be miserable till we die.”

He blinked. “You don’t hold back.”

“Not when it comes to my family,” Caroline said. “My father needed help and you showed up. Explain how.”

He sighed, rubbing his temples for a moment. “All right. But you can’t repeat this. Ever. Or you won’t have the luxury

of a miserable life. You'll just vanish one day. And I won't be able to do a thing to stop it."

"I can keep a secret," she said, shaken by the implied threat, but still intent on knowing what happened.

"I'll need your word on that, Caroline Garland. To break it will risk not just your life, but your father's and your mother's as well."

She inhaled, then nodded. "I give you my word. I'll never say or write or whisper anything you tell me now."

"Very well. I belong to an organization—a very small group, really—that exists for the sole purpose of protecting Britain from foreign threats, specifically those that happen in secret, without official sanction."

"You mean...intelligence?"

"Yes. The project that your father has been working on has immense potential value to nearly every country in Europe, and beyond. We cannot risk it getting into the hands of Napoleon. But it appears that word of it has leaked out, and someone is trying to take it, probably because they are in the employ of the French army already, or because they hope to sell what they have to the French...or whoever the highest bidder happens to be."

"And this someone is none other than Francis Foster, my neighbor who I've known for twenty years."

"The man who stole the notes is probably very different from the friend you remember. He's heavily in debt," Snowden said. "I've made inquiries about him, among others."

Apparently, over the past few years, he's been drawn into gambling, and his frequent visits to the various gaming hells of London have not gone in his favor. He's borrowed as much as he can on his own expectations, and he still needs more."

"But stealing Papa's notes? To sell to a foreign power? That's not just desperate, that's the act of a traitor. Surely he had other options!"

"I believe he did try one way—marriage to a young woman due to inherit a considerable sum."

"Who? Oh, Lord, *me*. He *was* oddly romantic over the past few days, but I tried to ignore it. I've never thought of him that way."

"And he may never have thought of you that way, but he was happy to make the attempt if it got his creditors off his back. After this, I would suggest that your parents consult a solicitor to make your inheritance more protected, if possible. They can at least make it so that a husband can't control all of it."

"He wouldn't now. All the jewels and chattel go to me directly."

"Like the rubies?" he asked.

The missing rubies. "Yes. Please don't tell me to take better care of my things. I've learned that lesson."

"I will not tell you to do anything, Caroline. It's not my place. But do you believe me?"

"It sounds plausible, but a man who does what you do is probably very good at spinning plausible stories."

“So skeptical,” he murmured. “I like that.” He kissed her hand, his lips trailing over the backs of her fingers.

Caroline bit her lip, and took much too long a moment to enjoy the sensation before she recalled herself. “Stop that. You are not allowed to argue and kiss me at the same time.”

“But it would make arguing so much less upsetting if we could intersperse a few more agreeable moments.” His smile was enticing enough to make her nod, and allow him to lean in and brush his lips gently over hers.

“You do not play fair, sir,” she whispered.

“I’m not playing,” he answered, his words soft but clear.

“I want to believe you. But I can’t accept your story fully without some confirmation.”

“What do you need?” he asked, moving back to watch her face.

“I need to hear my father confirm what you told me.”

He nodded at once, which reassured her more than anything else would have. He said, “It’s not even midnight. He may be awake still. Shall I go and find out, and bring him back here?”

“Yes.”

Snowdon left, and Caroline stood up. Mittens leapt into the abandoned seat, curling up immediately. She paced in front of the fire, going over everything Snowdon had said. Could it possibly be the truth? Or was there some flaw in his reasoning, some way he was wrong? She tried to think logically about it,

putting all the facts together one by one. Oh, there were too many gaps. She needed her father to explain what he knew.

Where was he? Caroline glanced at the clock on her mantel and saw that a quarter hour had passed. How long did it take to find her father and bring him back?

Unless Snowdon never went to her father. Caroline paused, struck by the idea that he was the thief all along and now he was running away in the darkness just before he got caught.

“Then why come to my room and give a whole mad story?” she asked herself.

Well, perhaps to enjoy a few kisses before heading out into the freezing night.

No. He might be wrong on some points, but he couldn't have made the story from whole cloth. She refused to believe that she could give her heart to a liar.

Unwilling to wait in ignorance, she yanked open her door and went out into the corridor. The house was eerily quiet. She walked to her parents' room and listened. There was nothing. No light under the bottom of the door either. She looked back to Snowdon's room, and noticed it was also dark, the door slightly open.

She frowned, then moved to the window at the end of the hall, which overlooked the courtyard. There she had a clear view of the outbuilding where the laboratory was, and saw the uncurtained windows glowing with light. Of course! Her father had gone to the lab and Snowdon must have gone there

as well. For just a moment, Caroline saw her father's figure pass by a window.

No question of waiting now. She'd join the men in the laboratory and they'd all talk there. She wore only flimsy slippers, her nightgown, and her wrapper over it, but it would take just a moment to cross the courtyard, and she didn't mean to waste time dressing.

She descended the stairs on silent feet, and eased the front door open so as not to wake any of the servants.

Clear, cold air nearly took her breath away. She took a step out onto the porch, and inhaled, preparing to run across the flat stones, now lightly coated with a sheen of crystalline snow, so lightly fallen that she could still see the stone beneath.

Just as she stepped forward, something, someone, moved up behind her and locked her in a rough embrace. Before she could shout or scream, a hand clapped a folded cloth over her mouth, and a familiar sickly chemical smell hit her nose. She knew that smell; it was used for anesthesia....

And that was the last thing Caroline knew for a long while.

Chapter 13

CAROLINE SHIVERED, BLINKING AS SHE woke up. She raised her head, only to find that it was dark all around, with only the faintly luminous glow of a winter night. She heard the bubbling of water nearby. The saint's spring! She tried to get up, but discovered that her wrists were tied behind her back, and her ankles were crossed and bound together. Even if she could manage to stand up, she couldn't walk.

"Hello?" she called out. Her voice was shaky at first, so she called again, hoping someone would hear her.

"Hello, Caro." Francis stepped into view. He was dressed in a bulky black greatcoat and wore black hessian-style boots, so his figure was mostly a cut-out against the mist billowing up from the well.

"Francis! What are you doing? Let me go!"

"Can't do that, Caro darling. Would defeat the purpose of taking you in the first place."

"What do you want?"

"The formula, of course."

"Don't you already have the notes?" she asked.

"Yes, but I'll get far more if I can supply a sample of the actual solution."

"What?"

"I need to raise the price. Ever since the Russian campaign, Napoleon has been desperate to find some way to prevent it from happening again. After all, you can't lose

hundreds of thousands of soldiers every winter! It starts to hamper recruitment. So when the French got wind of your father's experiments, they very much wanted to share in the bounty."

"But...you're not French! You were born ten miles from here."

"True, but I do have some debts to be paid, and French gold will do just as well as British."

"Francis, you can't do this. It's wrong. If you need money, you can borrow—"

"No reputable lender will extend me anything now, Caro. And the less reputable ones...you don't want to know."

"Everyone will come after me!"

"By everyone, do you mean your icy lordling? I assure you, he's sound asleep—I gave him the same treatment as you when he came to the laboratory door. Left him in the snow there. Ha! Very appropriate, since you made a snowman that practically looked just like him."

"Wait, what? How did you know Estelle and I made a snowman?"

"Oh, I saw it all. I'd been following you, hoping to get you alone for a short time—I really did hope to persuade you to consider marriage. But Estelle never left your side. So I hid in the trees, and I heard your list of demands for the perfect gentleman." His voice grew bitter. "Didn't sound much like me, I'll admit. I just wanted to...obliterate that thing. And then, when I met Snowdon at the house, all I could think was

that he showed up after you made your idol. So the idol would have to be destroyed. While you were dressing for dinner, I walked back to the clearing and dismantled the whole snowman. But carefully! I removed it bit by bit, carrying the snow into the trees and spreading it around. Then I took a pine bough and swept the whole clearing, in case anyone might see my boot prints and point the finger to me. I didn't want to lose your opinion of me, Caro. But in the end, I lost you anyway."

"I never belonged to you, Francis. A fact you still have to learn, for you stole me just now, and brought me all the way out here. Why? It's so cold." She wrapped her arms around her body.

"The spring should keep you alive until they get here. And then we'll negotiate." He pulled out a silvery pistol.

"Francis, please think of what you're doing. It's not too late to stop—"

The sound of muffled hoofbeats made him look away. "Damn, they're here already? I thought Snowdon would be out longer than that. Why are there so many of them?"

Caroline grinned, even as she huddled against the dubious warmth of the wellspring. Snowdon must have gathered everyone in the house and stormed after them. Francis had evidently done a very poor job of hiding the horse's tracks.

Mist puffed up into the winter night, joined by the steaming breath of a half dozen horses and more people running up behind, the two more athletic footmen in the lead.

Snowdon dismounted first, then assisted Mrs Garland down from her grey. Timothy sprang off a roan as if he did it every day, and then helped Estelle down, who'd been riding with him. Mr Garland remained astride, surveying the whole scene with worry, until he saw Caroline huddled in nothing more than her nightclothes.

"What in Heaven's name is this? Caroline is going to freeze!" he declared with more anger than she'd ever heard.

"I'll get her, sir," Snowdon said. He strode toward the spring.

Francis pointed the pistol at Snowdon, who stopped short. "Stop right there, my lord. You may have Caroline and the rest of the household eating out of your hand, but that doesn't matter now."

"Let me take off my coat. For her. I'll toss it over, I won't come closer."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, my lord." Francis sighted along the barrel. "Or I'll take great pleasure in shooting your head off."

Snowdon seemed unruffled by the threat. "Think of Caroline. Christ, she already survived one ordeal by freezing today. She shouldn't be out in the cold at all, let alone without warm clothing and shoes."

"I know that!" Francis spat. "I *planned* that. I could have given her my coat, you know. But there's a reason I haven't. If her family wants her back before she freezes to death, they'll need to hand over the formula. Now."

“Papa, d-don’t,” Caroline called, a message that would have been more forceful if her teeth hadn’t been chattering.

Estelle wrung her hands. “Mr Foster, please think of what you’re doing.”

“Estelle hates f-fighting,” Caroline told him, more loudly. “Just the other day, she refused to even have a snowball fight with me!” Her gaze slid to Estelle as she spoke, and Estelle’s eyes widened.

“No one has to fight if they just do what I say,” Francis retorted, sounding exasperated. “I want the formula here, now.”

Estelle collapsed to her knees, her hands plunging into the snow as she made a sobbing sound. Timothy, now attuned to her moods, did the same, murmuring to her.

Francis ignored them. “Where’s the formula? I know one of you has it—I searched the lab and the house and I never found it! I’ll give Caroline a dose to keep her alive, and then we’ll be taking a horse and leaving here.”

“*We* will?” Caroline asked suddenly, fear cutting through the numbing cold.

“I’ll let you go when it’s safe for me,” he said. “I don’t trust your lordling here not to try to follow me. Or send a mob after me.”

“You can’t steal my daughter as well,” her mother said in exactly the sort of tone that she used when they were children. “Have you no shame, Francis?”

“No, ma’am. Nor money, hence my predicament. But I have something you all seem to want, and she’s getting colder all the time.”

Snowdon instinctively moved toward her.

Francis refocused on him, and his finger went to the trigger of the gun.

“Wait! I’ll marry you!” she shouted.

Francis looked over at her. “What?”

“Let me go, and don’t hurt anyone, and I’ll marry you,” she told him. “My dowry will surely cover your debts.”

Estelle gasped. “Caroline, no!”

“Hush,” she warned her friend. To Francis, she gave a wobbly smile. “After all, why shouldn’t we get married?”

“You didn’t want me. You’re chasing after this lordling.”

“I hardly know him!” Caroline said, not risking even a glance at Snowdon. “I couldn’t even tell you his given name. But we’ve known each other such a long time. It would be very natural, wouldn’t it?”

Francis had half turned, captivated by this new way out. “We need to get married quickly.”

“Certainly. Can Estelle be my bridesmaid?” she asked brightly.

“Whatever you want, I don’t care.”

“Perhaps you should care,” Caroline whispered.

“What?”

That was when the first snowball hit him. And the next, and the next. Estelle and Timothy had formed a pile of them, and were now throwing them like cannonballs.

Francis instantly ducked, bringing his arm up to protect his head. The move meant that he was no longer aiming the gun at anyone.

Snowdon took the opportunity to lunge toward Francis, but the man was preternaturally edgy and must have sensed the attack, because he moved to the side, evading Snowdon's arms.

Timothy and Estelle were still hurling snowballs at Francis, the shy Estelle shouting curses that would have done a sailor proud. Timothy proved to have wickedly good aim, and one projectile smacked Foster in the arm so hard that he dropped the pistol. The heavy weapon fell into the white blanket at his feet. He bent down to retrieve it, and got hit again with another snowball that exploded all over his face.

"Christ, who did that?" he sputtered.

"I did!" Estelle cried. "And I'm not sorry! You deserve far worse for hurting Caroline! And being a traitor! And...a very bad friend!"

Caroline wondered how Francis simply didn't shrivel into nothingness after that condemnation.

"I am not," he said quietly, childishly. Only Caroline heard him.

"You are," she told him. "You'd better run, if you want any chance at all."

He looked at her, and then swung around, preparing to flee.

He took half a step and ran smack into Snowdon in his white coat. Snowdon grabbed him and flung him down into the snow.

“Someone kindly keep him there,” he ordered, stepping over Francis to get to Caroline.

He was already pulling off his coat and swinging it around her when he knelt down by her. “I’m tied up,” she whispered.

“Not for long.”

A thin silver blade produced from nowhere made quick work of the ropes. Snowdon held her close, lending her his warmth.

Her parents rushed up, her father pulling a tiny vial out of his pocket. “I need something to dilute it,” he said frantically.

“The saint’s spring,” her sensible mother said, scooping some up in her slender hands.

He dripped a few ruby-red spots into her hands. Then her mother offered it to Caroline, who drank it as if it were a rare wine. Moments later, she felt warmth rushing along her veins. “It’s working.”

“Thank God,” her father said. “But I don’t want you making this a habit, child. We’ve not tested repeated exposure.”

“Yes, Papa.” She felt herself laughing, the absurdity of it all suddenly hitting her.

“Come,” Snowdon said. “We need to get some answers out of Foster while we can.”

The quartet walked to where Francis still lay facedown in the snow, with Timothy’s knee digging into his back. Estelle remained nearby, another snowball in her mittened grip.

“Don’t move,” the young man warned. “I’m sure all of us would just love an excuse to beat the tar out of you.”

Caroline wasn’t familiar with the American phrase, but she guessed everyone agreed with Timothy.

“Flip him over,” Snowdon said. Timothy and the two footmen did so, holding tight to his arms to prevent any surprises.

Snowdon reached over and began to pat him down. He pulled a packet of folded paper from a pocket.

“Papa’s notes,” Caroline said.

“There’s more.” Snowdon reached out again. Francis tried to twist away, but Snowdon held him firmly by one shoulder.

He pulled a long and glittering strand from some hidden place, like a magician.

Caroline gasped. “My necklace! How did you know it would be in his pocket?”

“I didn’t know,” Snowdon said. “It was a hunch.”

“But...it fell off when I crashed through the ice!”

“No. Francis was glad you assumed that’s what happened. But in fact, he probably snatched it off you as he pushed you into the damaged spot...which he’d prepared ahead of time.”

“What!” Caroline spun toward Francis, looking in horror at the man she so recently called a brother.

“It’s true,” Snowdon went on. “After I got you to the house, I returned to the pond to find out why you, a woman who knew the pond very well and would have known about any natural warm springs or thin ice, fell through the ice when Foster didn’t.”

Francis refused to look at her. He mumbled, “I thought I might need the rubies, if I couldn’t sell the formula quickly. I didn’t plan to steal them—that was impulse.”

“But you did weaken the ice in that spot.”

“You wouldn’t have been hurt, not really,” he defended himself. “There were so many people about. And I needed someone to be cold enough to spur your father to try the formula on them.”

“On me, you mean. Oh, Francis, how could you do that?”

“Take him away,” Snowdon ordered quietly.

Francis was led off by Timothy and three grim-faced footmen.

Snowdon handed Caroline the necklace, who took it in one trembling hand.

“I never thought I would see this again,” she whispered. “I don’t deserve to have them, after wearing them when I

shouldn't have."

"He led you into a trap and then stole them from you when he sprang it," Snowdon said, his tone rough. "You were the victim twice over."

"You got the rubies back for me," she said. "Thank you."

"It was a pleasure, Miss Garland."

"Oh, goodness, Caroline!" Estelle flung herself at her friend and embraced her fiercely. "I was so scared. You can't leave the house again for the rest of winter, do you hear?"

"A fine idea," Mrs Garland said. "And now, we should all get back to the house. Mr Foster can spend the rest of the evening locked in the root cellar, and in the morning a magistrate can be called."

"Tomorrow is Christmas," Mr Garland reminded her. "No magistrate will come."

"I'll arrange for someone to take him off your hands," Snowdon said. "But let's get Caroline where it's warm." Snowdon lifted her onto his horse and mounted up behind her. He put his arms close around her shoulders, and she felt the cold ebbing away.

She cast a look back at the saint's fountain, the water bubbling up from the rock, and the clouds of mist clinging to the surface of the water, until further away from the spring's warmth, it turned to frost and then dripping icicles. The whole scene was eerie in the moonlight, more like a dream than anything, elusive and soon to be forgotten when the dreamer woke.

But Caroline was wide awake now, and she'd never forget what happened.

Chapter 14

IT WAS A VERY STRANGE Christmas morning at Hollydell Manor. One man was a prisoner in the root cellar, jailed alongside the perfectly innocent potatoes and onions. Another rose early to carry a message to a posting inn, a message addressed to someone named Chattan, a message that couldn't wait until after Christmas.

Caroline and Estelle woke together in Caroline's bed, with Mittens stretched across both of them, luxuriating in the heat of two bodies. (Estelle had been adamant that Caroline could not be left alone.)

"Happy Christmas," Estelle said, sitting up. "I think."

"We'll make it a happy Christmas, and after all, what's left to make us unhappy?" Caroline replied, moving the protesting feline to the foot of the bed.

Estelle said she wanted to write a letter to her mother before breakfast, and that the best light would be in the east parlor. She dressed and went down, bringing paper and pen with her.

Caroline got up as well, still feeling as if she were in a bit of a dream. She put on a soft ivory day dress over her shift, and tied a green ribbon at the high waist. She then walked softly down the stairs. At the threshold of the east parlor, she halted, hearing two voices within.

"Miss Estelle," Timothy Stockan was saying, "I've no right to presume, but I have to tell you that I am most profoundly affected by your charm and your beauty."

“Please don’t flatter me, sir,” Estelle said, sounding flustered.

“But I *want* to flatter you. I assure you, you are most enchanting, all the more because your charm is not common.”

“Sir, you must stop. This talk is far too familiar. If anyone overheard it, they would think you were courting me.”

“That is exactly what I wish to do, Miss Estelle.”

“I would like that...but you ought not to! In truth, I have nothing except my name.”

“Does that bother you, that I should bring the bulk of our income?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Miss Estelle, I have an income of several thousand dollars a year. I don’t know quite how much that would be in pounds, but I assure you it would be sufficient to keep a wife and children in comfort. I’m due to inherit my father’s farm as well, which is a thousand acres.”

Caroline’s eyebrows shot up as she heard this from her hidden spot. Evidently, Estelle was equally stunned, since she did not respond.

“Yes,” he said. “I chose not to air it about, but the fact is that I am quite well off. And I do not care a pin that a wife should bring a dowry, so long as she brings her whole heart to me, for that is far more valuable, and much more rare. Please, Miss Estelle. Say you will marry me.”

“And...you will take me to America?” she asked.

“I dearly hope so. There’s little point in finding the perfect wife and then leaving her behind. I’m not rushing back though. I still have a lot to learn while I’m here. That should give us plenty of time to make arrangements.”

The next few sounds suggested that the matter was being settled to the satisfaction of both parties.

Caroline tactfully moved to the breakfast room. Her parents were already there, along with Snowdon.

“Come in, Caro,” her father said. “We were just speaking of Foster’s activities. Hard to believe that our friend and neighbor was driven to such terrible deeds. But money—or the lack of it—sometimes works on people’s brains in dark ways.”

Caroline shook her head. “I never would have thought he could be so changed from the boy I once knew. I wish—”

But before she could voice any wish, Timothy and Estelle entered the room, beaming and bright. They shared the news that they intended to marry at some time in the next year, before leaving for America.

“Excellent news!” Caroline said, not mentioning that she already knew. She was overjoyed that Timothy wanted to marry Estelle. It meant she’d be well cared for no matter what.

Full of this good news, they ate a hearty breakfast in the brilliant sunlight streaming through the windows. Nearly every servant found a reason to come in and speak to Caroline that morning, most of them leaving humble gifts in their wake: an embroidered handkerchief from Maggie, a set of buttons carved from bone by the footmen, a green glass bottle of

dandelion wine from Cook. Caroline was practically in tears at the end of it. She had always loved her home, but she hadn't quite realized how much her home loved her back.

Then Timothy asked Estelle if she would like to take a short walk around the gardens, and she accepted the offer as if he'd handed her summer in a jar.

After they left, Snowdon said, "There is one more thing." He walked over to the table and picked out a box gaily wrapped in blue-and-white-striped fabric. He offered it to Mr Garland. "Not exactly a gift, sir, since it's yours already."

Mr Garland opened the box and pulled out...his lab notes.

"Wait, what?" Caroline asked. "Foster stole those."

"He stole the notes he was meant to steal," Snowdon explained. "When I first got here, your father handed me the real notes to keep safe."

"Which you did to perfection, my good man. You hid the real notes in a present!" Mr Garland beamed at him.

"The best way to hide something is among other things just like it. I suspected my room would be searched, and it was. But no one would think to open all the gifts meant for exchanging later. They were out in the open, obvious, and ordinary."

"Brilliant," said Caroline. "I wonder who taught you to think like that."

Snowdon gave her a glance. "Maybe someday you can meet them."

“Ahem,” Mr Garland said quickly. “I really ought to go to my lab. Just to check on things.”

“And I must have a word with the housekeeper,” Mrs Garland added.

Caroline’s parents could never be accused of not understanding the needs of others.

When they were alone, Snowdon said, “In fact, I do have a present for you.”

He retrieved another item from the table, and she pulled off the white cloth to reveal a wooden box with a brass lock. Carved into the top of the dense mahogany were the initials NGS.

“The box is actually mine,” he said. “I always bring it along when I might have important papers to keep safe from prying eyes. But now you can use it to keep your rubies in. They ought be kept safe.”

“And the initials?”

“They stand for Nicholas George Snowdon. That’s my name. No lord—that was a bit of armor to help prevent anyone from being too quick to challenge me. I’m just plain Mr Snowdon.”

“But your name really is Snowdon! How funny. I never *really* thought you were a snowman come to life,” she added.

“I may have played into that accidentally,” he said. “I got the idea for my appearance from overhearing you and Miss Clement as you built the snowman in the woods earlier that day. I’d arrived well in advance so I could scout out the area

and learn what I could of the property and the surrounding land, just in case I would need the information later on. As, indeed, proved to be the case.”

“So when you heard me list all the qualities for an ideal suitor...”

“I did my best to appear to be exactly that. I thought it would be the best way to distract everyone else from my real reason for being at Hollydell. No one questions it when a gentleman seems eager to court a young lady.”

“Seems,” she echoed. Was that all it was? All the conversations as they walked through the snow? The stolen kisses, and the way his smile made her heart pound? Was that all part of his pretense? “So your attentions toward me were only an excuse.”

“It started that way,” he admitted, his eyes the soft blue of a winter morning. “I never intended to hurt you. And I knew that I would only be here a short time. It seemed quite harmless...except that I quickly realized that when I was pretending to court you, I wasn’t pretending at all. I found myself looking for every excuse to see you again, to talk to you again. To make you smile...you have the most enchanting smile,” he added.

She was finding it difficult to breathe.

He went on, “I’d also like to point out that by your own rules, you are free to marry now, since it won’t mean you have to deny your friend’s position as companion to you.”

“Well, that’s not the only reason I haven’t wanted to marry,” she protested. “I’ve never found a suitor who I felt really wanted *me*.”

“You have now,” Snowdon said, his expression making her heart race. “Caroline, it might be too early to say that I love you, but I know that I *do* love you. I don’t need more time. But I am very willing to wait until you decide you love me. I think that would be the best reason to ask you to marry me...and not a moment earlier.”

“I might not need that long to know, my lord,” she whispered, overthrown. “Oh, no, I’m still calling you that!”

He laughed softly, tilting his head back against the wall. “Nicholas. My family calls me Nick.”

“Nick,” she said softly. “I must tell you that after considering all the requirements I have set for my ideal man... you fulfill every one. I wonder if I could persuade you to continue to court me for a little while, even without the added incentive of saving the realm from enemy spies.”

“I will be at your doorstep every day.”

“Hmm. I think I shall have to test that. You probably have a lot of secret missions that will keep you from visiting me regularly, and then you’ll meet a ravishing foreign agent or get kidnapped or have to go into hiding as a traveling player. Or whatever it is you do for your secret organization.”

“All of those sound less appealing than taking a walk through the woods with you. In fact, would you like to build a snowman?”

“In a moment, Mr Snowdon—”

“Nick.”

“Nick. There is one more thing I must say.”

“What is that?”

She glanced up. “Once again, we are standing under a bunch of mistletoe.”

He followed her gaze. “Ah. Then we’ve no choice but to follow tradition. I’d hate to anger the spirits by ignoring such a sacred ritual.”

The kiss they shared quickly became many kisses, and absolutely no one could accuse them of ignoring the mistletoe.

Being otherwise occupied, neither noticed a door close softly.

* * * *

“Yes, ma’am,” the maid Maggie whispered to Aunt Juniper, who was sitting in the next room. Mittens was on her lap, looking highly pleased with himself. “They’re kissing, just as you hoped.” She poured out some port into a tiny crystal glass and placed it on the table next to Juniper.

“Excellent,” the old lady said, her face wrinkling into a smile. “Mittens, we’ve managed the thing after all.”

The cat meowed in evident agreement.

“The good news is that no one has to go out and gather more of that stuff from the woods,” Aunt Juniper went on. “I dare say you and the other servants are sick of hanging it everywhere every day.”

“We shall be glad when it’s the New Year,” Maggie allowed. At Juniper’s nod, she poured a small glass for herself—an acknowledgment that today was a holiday, with the usual rules put aside.

“Well, it was worth it,” Juniper went on. “If I hadn’t taken a hand, who knows what would have happened? Probably nothing. Young people today don’t have any sense. They’ll look back and think it a Christmas miracle. But it was really me. And you, with the mistletoe.”

“Yes, ma’am. Happy Christmas, ma’am.”

“Happy Christmas to you, Maggie.”

The two of them raised their glasses of ruby-red port to each other, and drank to a job well done.

The End

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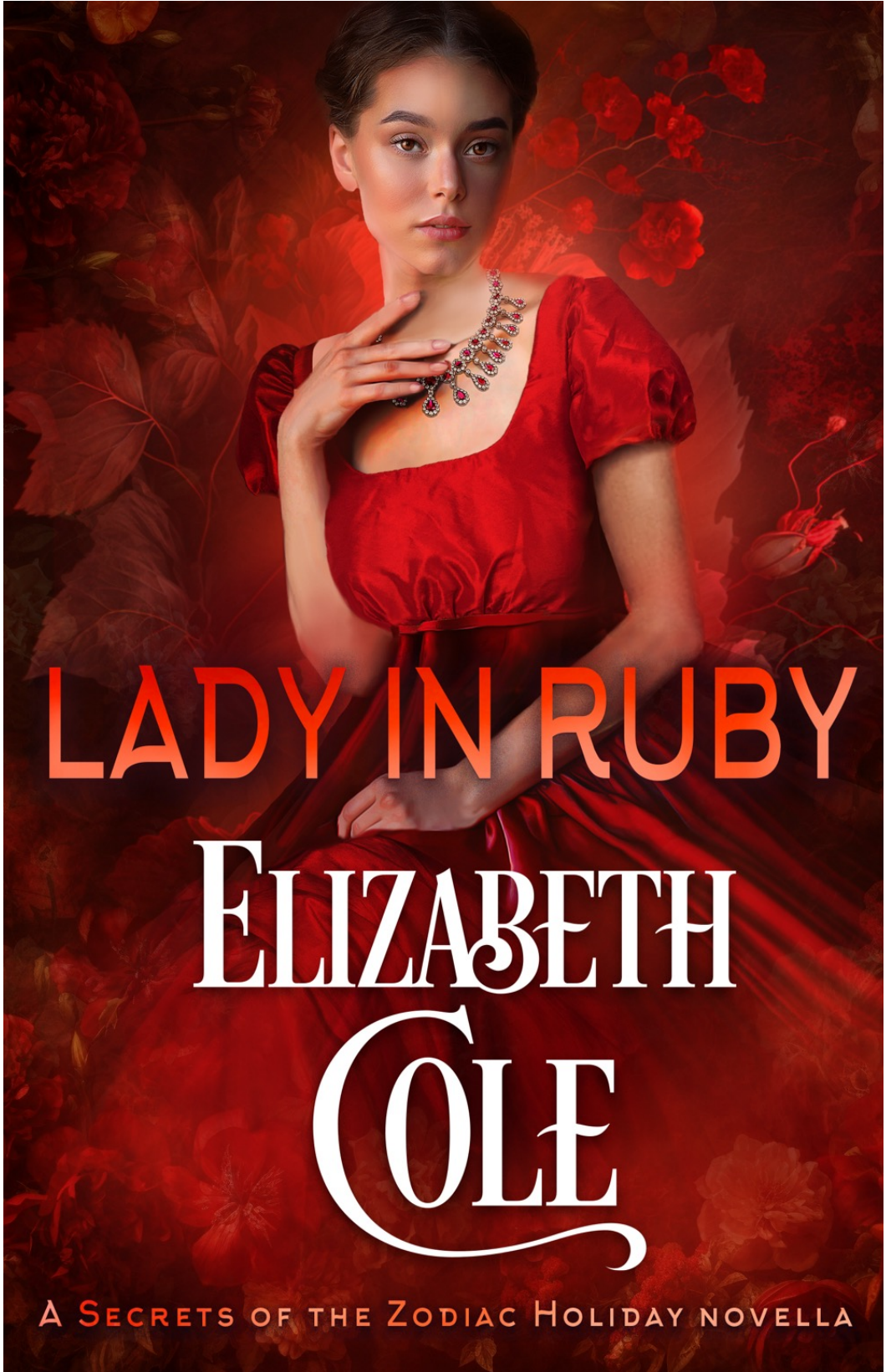
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