

# Once Upon a Betrothal

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# CHRISTI CALDWELL



ONCE UPON A  
BETROTHAL

By  
Christi Caldwell

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## Once Upon a Betrothal

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## Dedication

To:

My hero, Doug.

My other hero, Rory.

My cheerleader, Reagan.

My comic relief, Riley.

My support-furbaby, Scarlet.

My assistant, Dee Foster.

Paul and the team at BB eBooks.

And last, but *\*definitely\** not least, to Jenn. I'd be lost without you.  
You are my heroes, my cheerleaders, my friends. Your support is a gift  
I will forever be grateful for.

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

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*Chapter 18*

Biography



## Chapter 1

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

***The joyless winter day***

***Let others fear, to me more dear***

***Than all the pride of May:***

***The tempest’s howl, it soothes my soul,***

***My grief it seems to join;***

***The leafless trees my fancy please,***

***Their fate resembles mine!***

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

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

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

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

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

The duchess wrested a leg from the cooked poultry on her di:  
adorable creature, is he not?” Her Grace said, around the large bite she

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

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

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

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

off. The guinea pig commenced chewing on the leg of Elyse's mahoga

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

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

which She had. Unlike Elyse's late sister, Evie, who had been a re  
wo that dreamer.

ness of *Oh, Evie.*

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

nt and "Elyse? Elyse?"

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

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

took. *What* had her aunt been talking about?

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

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

owned. The older woman’s wrinkled features brightened—for a moment they again grew troubled. “Perhaps I should make *you* Sir Lafitte’s legmistress?”

biggest, Elyse choked and promptly spewed water.

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

ny seat. As several footmen raced with napkins to tidy the mess, Elyse started to get her paroxysm under control. The last thing she wanted, or needed, in that matter, was a small ball of fur with sharp teeth, and a pench Elyse’s trouble.

“Taking offense at my choice of words,” Lady Hester muttered, pointing her fork Elyse’s way. “You and your generation, are ever more misplaced than mine ever was.”

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

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

*Little Sweetie* waddled over to the tableside offering quick support. Her corpulent, black-spotted frame would allow, plopped down, and proceeded

hat the nibble away.

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

So that was what her aunt had been on about.

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

ruggled When she’d swallowed her bite, Elyse dabbed her napkin at the cor  
ded for her mouth.

ant for “Aunt Hester, Sir Lancelot will make whomever the original re  
you’d decided upon, most fortunate. And,” she added, “given you wou  
ed. She share such a gift with someone very dear to you, you will also see t  
e strait-fellow in the future.”

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

e single With that sudden disclosure, Elyse’s aunt motioned to the serva  
it, little Elyse’s mind spun.

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

*Which is why I shall have you take him on with you for your y  
as his sister when you go...*

eded to

Elyse sat tight-lipped and unmoving.

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

Elyse had no interest in quitting her post and rushing off to sp  
; Elyse holidays with her family. It wasn't that she didn't love her family. S  
lid, she Very much so. In her time apart from them, however, she'd establishe  
d meanfor herself.

She followed a rigid and very predictable routine.

In the role she'd assumed as a companion, Elyse would rise bef  
sun even made its appearance in the eastern sky. After seeing to he  
rners of ablutions, she'd first partake in a cup of tepid tea. From there. Elyse  
make her way to Aunt Hester's noble and well-stuffed library wher  
recipientpull from the shelves the day's reading material and occupy herself  
uld onlybook of her own.

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

From there, Elyse's day ceased to be hers and instead belonged t  
Hester.

Most young women of marriageable age would have railed at t  
Elyse had taken on years earlier. As the daughter of a viscou  
businessviscountess, she should be joining in the Season, partaking in waltz  
outings through Hyde Park in the curricle of some dashing gentlen  
youngestvisiting famed French modistes to have extravagant wardrobes of s  
satin dresses and elaborate bonnets designed.

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

*Elyse* happened to be that sane young woman. Though, in fairness, near or about this very time every winter Hester came dangerously close to driving her mad.

When the table had been cleared, and dessert plates set down, the servants reclaimed their previous posts along the various corners of the table. *Elyse* laid her palms on either side of her dish. “As much as I would love to go daily” “You are going,” her aunt interrupted.

“To go,” *Elyse* continued. “However, I must really insist on *not*.” The old woman let loose a snort. “If you’d love to go, then why do you insist on ‘*not*’.”

*Touché.* “I enjoy being with you, Aunt Hester,” she said in tones meant to please. “And you don’t enjoy being with your parents and sisters?”

Aunt *Elyse*’s entire body went taut under that casually spoken retort. There wasn’t anyone she loved more than her sisters. The greatest role *Elyse* had ever known had come from being with them. *All of them* and *Evie*’s death, however, everything had changed. *Everything.*

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

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

for the     There it was again.

it?             Aunt Hester hadn't a mean bone in her well-meaning body, and y  
anyone sought to wound, that'd been just the barb to hurl.

The older woman's heavily wrinkled, surprisingly deft fingers  
r, Auntwith an impressive alacrity around the head of her gilt cane.

Aunt Hester thumped the bottom hard against the elmwood floorin  
and thebeen settled. You're going, my gel."

e room,     Elyse's desperation grew. "But...but...you know how much I love  
ve—" in the winter."

"*And* you'll love it still when you return after your visit. Furtherm  
Lake District is beautiful, gel."

r would     "Interestingly, you made the very same argument last year when  
summoned to Lundy Island," Elyse muttered.

The duchess bristled. "And didn't you come back with tales of t  
alacate. seals and dolphins you'd seen?"

"Or, Dartmoor, the year before?" Elyse asked, without taking her  
bait.

A telling flush splotched Aunt Hester's thin, weathered cheeks,  
test joy old woman didn't miss a beat. "Quite magical I'm told they are, with  
1. After purple flowers."

"Whoever told you of their magical quality was decidedly not r  
just be visited in the heart of winter, when everything was desolate and barren

Aunt Hester wrinkled her nose, but, otherwise, re  
i bite of uncharacteristically silenced.

Not squandering that advantage, Elyse continued, “Or Brecon B  
et, had the year before that.”

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

“In the freezing cold and damp,” Elyse finished the remainder  
ig. “It’s description she’d come back with for that particular leave. Yes, she’  
those long treks—even as the winter’s cold had been enough to cut t  
e Leeds her whole body. But she’d never admit as much; especially not now.

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

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

1 I was The aging duchess didn’t miss a beat. “If I’m not mistaken, I belie  
said there were breathtaking views.”

he grey Elyse gritted her teeth. For all the ways in which Aunt Hester hac  
to show signs of her advancing age, her memory remained sharp as a t

r aunt’s Looking over at her aunt serenely eating away at her dessert  
smoothed her palms upon her silk skirts.

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

all their Aunt Hester’s fork and knife scraped jarringly over her porcelain p  
Elyse tamped down at the smile fighting for a place on her lips.

ne who Aunt Hester pointed the empty spear of her fork Elyse’s way.

l.” “You almost have me with that one,” the duchess grouched. “I still  
mained believe your family gallivanted all the way to the *Highlands* :  
holidays.”



eacons, Elyse kept her lips firmly pressed together. Even as she us  
reminder of her travel to Scotland that year to help sway her aunt ‘r  
s of the the idea of Elyse remaining, the truth remained, that village alc  
Broadford Bay, with the snow-covered mountains vivid in the vast l  
of that had been the only place that she’d not wished to return from.

d loved For, in that remote, wild corner of Skye it’d been as though she’d c  
hrough in the corner of the world, transported back to distant times, and fa  
from everything she’d ever known...and everyone she missed.

n cake. *It is not everyone you miss...*

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

But Evie...

l begun Evie she could never see again. For Evie was gone...off to a bette  
ack. some had said.

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

late. “Oh, come now, gel,” her aunt drawled, thankfully bringing  
agonized remembrances to a screeching halt. “Don’t go turning into  
pot. It won’t help. I’ve made up my mind.”

It was not an unfamiliar disagreement, but one they had *every sing*  
cannot since Elyse arrived. Alas, every year her aunt became more determ  
for the send her away.

“But my place is here, Aunt Hester,” she spoke with a quiet ins  
Aunt Hester didn’t take well to *tearful* pleading; a detail Elyse had lea

ed that her first year serving as a companion to the duchess.

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

Frustration built.

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

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

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

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

“And as such, Elsie...”

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

*Elsie*. So very close to—

Elyse’s “Are you listening to me, *gel*?”

a water “Yes.” *No*.

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

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

urned in

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

Elyse could manage only a wan smile.

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

end the Just as she always did.

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

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

nly her More than content.

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

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

“Hmph. Who is *this* one?”

If her aunt knew who’d be in attendance, then maybe she’d spar  
al,” she from having to go. She pulled her most desperate, and also, most con  
card.

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

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

as you “He is of...a criminal background.”

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

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

Information she’d gathered, because when Elyse’s mother had come to make mention of the guests who’d be attending, she’d also spent a disproportionate number of sentences writing the praises of the one gentleman. One gentleman—she was most eager and excited for Elyse to meet.

He was dashing and wealthy and handsome and daring.

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

“Mr. Broden Burgess.”

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

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

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

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

erately Aunt Hester's surprisingly smooth brow, wrinkled in an instant by the arrival of the marquess's son who prefers to be known as a mere 'mister'?"

ays did. Frowning, the older woman gave her head a shake. "What manner are they letting amongst Polite Society these days?"

"The *criminal* sort," Elyse said, pressing her advantage.

riminal Relief and triumph, those two heady emotions when mixed together were potentially powerful. She'd done it! She'd—

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

ment an "Yet who else would I entrust Sir Lancelot's care, too? It's settled. You're going."

It was as settled as it was every year.

The duchess gathered her cane.

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

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

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

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

of men “Perk up, gel. It’s but a fortnight, and, with a marquess’s son wh criminal background and insists on being called ‘mister’, think of stories you’ll bring back for us to talk about.”

proved The duchess winked, and then with the *thump-thump-thump* of h marking her retreat, all the way from the dining room to the hall, and t more, Aunt Hester had gone, with her guinea pig waddling at a lil glanced behind her. escorting

ed, my Not: ‘Aunt Hester’s’ guinea pig, instead, Elyse’s younger sister, Er Releasing a huff of frustration, Elyse dropped back into her seat, g her fork, and jammed it into her untouched piece of cake.

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

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

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

all the But that was neither here nor there. They’d been directives, none at as a Be it as a girl of six or a woman of twenty-six, when it came to her p ions or summons, she still answered to them. s when

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

e...and It was a sad day, indeed. Elyse’s parents had such low expectati her they’d go out of their way to coordinate an arrangement between

ze, that and a man who'd been arrested, tried, impressed, and then who'd *retu*  
England, under dubious conditions that his powerful family had man  
o has a make go away.

all the Elyse steeled her jaw.

She'd go.

er cane She'd attend yet *another* house party where her parents went out  
hen, no way to push her at some wretched gentleman, in the market for a w  
ke-pace who'd one peccadillo or another that left him with few prospects othe  
spinster daughter.

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

menting

l they'd

l lad so

theless.

parents'

ons for

n Elyse

and a man who'd been arrested, tried, impressed, and then who'd *returned* to England, under dubious conditions that his powerful family had managed to make go away.

Elyse steeled her jaw.

She'd go.

She'd attend yet *another* house party where her parents went out of their way to push her at some wretched gentleman, in the market for a wife, but who'd one peccadillo or another that left him with few prospects other than a spinster daughter.

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



## Chapter 2

Lord Broden Burgess had sensed an impending storm.

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

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

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

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

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

The quick pace he'd set sent the tiniest puffs of white swirling in the morning air. He didn't break stride. The crunch of gravel, dirt, and rocks under his feet, sounded in the air, louder and more damning in the eerie quiet.

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

Thirty paces away.

Twenty-five paces.

He was there.

So close.

ly, hard  
Broden

Almost there.

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

Mayfair  
Oxford,

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

ces had  
sons of

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

nd why  
olted.

Some of the tension eased from Broden's shoulders. He wasn't, he  
so careless as to make such a misstep as returning to the main

out the

Clasping the iron handle of a monumental oak stable door, he slowly  
the panel open enough to slip through and let himself inside.

d broke  
ky; that

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

ght, and  
ing for

Darkness. His one weakness. His greatest of foes.

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

ne crisp  
ferocity

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

k under  
..

He closed his eyes.

His past, tangled with his present.

stables

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

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

*Trapped.*

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

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

*Hell and bloody hell.*

However, "What now?" His elder sibling spoke with a joviality better suited to a house. best friends meeting over drinks at White's or Brooke's. "No words favorably drew favorite brother?"

arkness None that were brotherly in nature. "Fancy meeting you here."

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

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

Not Broden.

costly. In fairness, there'd been a time Broden would have felt the proper respect both that telling gesture and his brother's words would have roused. I

was a lifetime ago. Back when his brother had been his best friend, it had been uncomplicated.

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

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

Broden Still nothing.

For, everything was different now. Absolutely everything.

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

Not when *everything* had happened.

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

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

"Business?" Alden scoffed. "At *this* hour?"

"Yes. At *this* hour."

"No, you don't."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Are you calling me a liar, Broden? Nature's Broden used that title his brother had; one Broden had only used when he'd been butting heads and Broden sought to needle him.

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

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

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

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

by least, Broden narrowed his eyes upon his brother’s easy expression. “M  
, but amen out for having their word questioned.”

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

He’d forgotten how obstinate his brother had been. In their tim  
only to Alden had become even more so.

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

“Because there *is* no business.”

stiffly. Damn him. Why wouldn’t he just go?

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

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

Broden found himself knocked briefly, off-kilter, by all tha  
ective?” *accurate*—information his brother was in possession of.

they’d Broden found his footing. “My solicitor—”

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

d when And Broden rather suspected he could.

Broden had been well and truly outmaneuvered.

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

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

“We are inside.”

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

“What is it you want, Alden?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, undoubtedly.”

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

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

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

*My dear boy,*

For, the

s. "You

actual

nily be

Alden lips.

led in

ie rose-

go back

e.

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

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

"How very generous of her," he said, raising another grin from his lips.

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

Broden's gaze froze on those words.

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

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

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

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

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

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

my      “Are you even reading, Broden? Or merely pretending to in the hope I will leave?” His brother folded his arms at his chest. “Because I know of

Alden's      mama is notorious for penning long notes and even longer *conversations* she's never written a missive *this* lengthy, and I'm not going anywhere

be      *Without you.*

en      It hung unfinished but clear in Alden's words.

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

en he'd      “*We love you. (Even if you are being a great lummoX and avoiding the world,*

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

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

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



r. Their Broden's entire body jerked.

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

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

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

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

ur dear The hell he didn't.

ons, but Traitor.

where."

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

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

*I more than understand why you may not wish to find a bride—n  
gentleman does...until he does.*

Broden paused.

js

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

so that

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

y,

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

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

*The Christmastide season has always been your favorite,*

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not talking about the damned grammar, Alden," he snapped speaking of the gall in thinking this noble family our parents are host had a *hard time of it.*"

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

"We have?" Broden worked his lips into a hard grin meant to correct his cynicism.

"Yes, Broden. We *all* did." His brother took an angry step closer, jabbed a finger at the ground as he approached. "We weren't taken in, and length it

the last of prison with you, but we were left behind to worry about. Not a day went by where our parents, Robin, *me*, did not cry for you.”

Unsettled by that show of emotion, Broden shifted his gaze to a picture of a young, innocent, above his brother’s head.

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

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

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

Alden frowned that big-brotherly disapproving frown that had always been harder and worse than their parents’ displeasure. “Furthermore, Broden, the pain of *that* happened to you was awful, absolutely awful. But you don’t have a monopoly on pain.”

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

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

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

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

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

*Given your appreciation for those of a self-reliant nature—(forgive me if this is untrue. As I’ve not seen you, I’m basing my assumptions on what I’ve heard.)*



“If you *truly* wanted me to be happy, you wouldn’t have spent the weeks following me all in an attempt to force me to do something I don’t want to do.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ese past     *On the other hand*, Alden was a man of his word; a man to whom  
I don'tmattered most.

It was why Broden knew with absolute certainty when Alden saw  
the boyremain in London and dog Broden's steps until Broden at last came  
ked out.the earl meant it.

e walls,     And it was also why Broden intended to make the journey to his n  
Christmastide festivities.

nd that.     Then, once and for all, he'd be free to live his own life back  
es whoEngland.

rm fall,  
a mask  
"This  
mother

l Father  
ep you  
ed that  
lo grant  
: you in

led the

of him  
dictate

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

Elyse would take whatever stay she could.

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

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

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

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

*What in blazes?*

Elyse rubbed her gloved palm over the frosted crystal windowpane. The carriage battered the walls of the carriage. The snow had begun to fall even here.



and formed almost a curtain of white before her, and blotted out any the old Roman roads they traveled—or any other part of their surround

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

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

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

The maid clutched at her throat. "Highwaymen, then," she whispered. "Joan," she said, soothingly. "There are no highwaymen out in—"

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

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

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

*Splendid.*

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

hint of “Miss Caldecott, I—” he called loudly. Whatever he’d been about  
lings. trailed off as he caught sight of the blubbering maid. “Has Miss F  
oor. been hurt?”

. In her “No,” Elyse made soothing sounds for Joan’s benefit. “She’s  
nce theabout the journey, is all.”

ity, and Kenneth doffed his snow-covered cap. “Can’t say I blame her.  
ick andfright out here.”

o taking Joan sobbed harder. Elyse rubbed the young woman’s arm.

Several brows wrinkled the driver’s high forehead. “My apologi  
n eyes.mouthed.

“It is fine,” she silently enunciated.

d made Kenneth cleared his throat. “I’m happy to say we’re not very fa  
Grange House, Miss Caldecott. I believe we can make it safely and d  
ed. the night’s end if I continue at this slower pace.”

This sent Joan into another fit.

k—one Even if there wasn’t the matter of delaying her meeting with her  
cry andJoan’s fear would have been reason enough to stop.

Sir Lancelot scrambled down her legs and made a beeline for th  
ige; theWith a sigh, she scooped the troublesome beastie up into her an  
lungs. deposited him back into his basket.

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

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

t to say That managed to penetrate Joan's blubbering.

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

worried Joan spread the palms covering her face apart, a fraction. "Truly, now I know you must be most eager to reach your family—"

'Tis a "Stopping is for the best," Elyse cut in, but stopping the other from completing that incorrect supposition did not ease her guilt for being relieved.

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

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

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

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

winter *Death.*

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

inn we

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

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

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

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

Elyse had nearly worn her voice out these past hours attempting to perch the maid. She'd since accepted that this was Joan's way of dealing with wish and anxiety. Had there been something Elyse could have done or something she could have said to assure her, she'd have done so long before now. She

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

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

Sir Lancelot popped out of the basket once more and found a spill. Elyse's lap. She kept one hand on her seat to keep herself from being about, and with her other, she held onto the guinea pig—only so he fall, of course.

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

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

ownness Kenneth managed to right the vehicle. His triumphant shout had shethrough even Joan's bawling. "Everything is fine. There is no need to v

"N-No need to w-worry?" Joan sputtered, and then tossing her a she looked at the ceiling of the carriage and began uttering the Lord's j narrow, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy k .ord forcome. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth..."

Elyse absently petted the guinea pig and returned her attention ;," Joanwindow.

ip's k- "Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as v have forgiven our debtors."

o assure God.

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

ing she Elyse's views of God and thoughts of His existence or presen person's life changed exponentially with her sister's passing.

; wildly After all, if the Heavenly Father were so benevolent, great, a powerful, how had He ignored Elyse's pleadings and prayers and a id hung Evie to perish? Why should Evie, who'd been only good and pure and been cut down so young?

ot upon She registered the carriage had stopped its slow, back-and-forth pitched Pushing aside those ponderous musings, Elyse drew the guinea pig did not against her belly, leaned forward, and looked out the window.

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

id hand The leather kidskin article landed on Sir Lancelot.

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

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

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

... “We’ve arrived, Joan,” she gently informed the still unbothered  
*we also* distraught maid Aunt Hester had insisted Elyse travel with for the cor-  
be had in the girl’s reliable presence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the lid. There came a knock, and then Kenneth drew the door open and g  
: dearie “Nearly died a half a dozen times out there, we did, but we—”

Joan began bawling again.

nd then *Oh, hell.*

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

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

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

artyard, “Joan,” she said, speaking this time in a commanding, no-nonsen  
nes and “We must get ourselves to the inn before we freeze—”

le sent Horror filled Joan’s pretty brown eyes.

pitiless “Before we freeze poor Sir Lancelot. He’s just a wee thing, aren’  
Elyse directed that happy, high-pitched purr to the little fellow’s ma  
crate.

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

With the other woman’s unsteadiness, were he entrusted to Joan  
Elyse’s the odds of Sir Lancelot making it out of the snow were far less than t  
mbling his being buried alive in a snowstorm.

than it Elyse handed her valise and small leather satchel to the maid. As  
Kenneth helped them each down, Elyse led her still-blubbering maid  
grinned. Mermaid Inn.

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

cap off.

ere was

fine.”

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se way.

t you?”

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hose of



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

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

## Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

Not at all surprised, but absolutely no less disgusted, Broden sipped his tankard and continued to watch on as the jovial innkeeper, with smile on his big, ruddy cheeks rushed over to welcome his new guest.

Before the older, shaggy-haired fellow could so much as speak, t clipped out a request for rooms. And between her crisp, King's Engl

cool, fortress-like demeanor, there could be no doubting a noblewoman moved among them.

“...as quickly...possible,” she was saying; her every other word moved into focus. “...tray readied...treacherous out...”

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

Yes, this one was a real princess, indeed.

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

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

In a coolly dismissive way, the lady skimmed her eyes over the faces of men scattered at various tables throughout, before her attention landed on Broden. Unlike the other men she’d disregarded, with an almost reluctant interest, her eyes remained locked on him.

They each took the other one in assessing, judging.

If he were a gentleman, he’d politely and respectfully look away. Instead, he hadn’t been a gentleman in what felt longer than he’d been one, and instead, he boldly and unapologetically took the lady in.

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

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

furiously Such a cool woman had no place having a soft, sensual mouth like a woman's lips. The high quality of her sapphire cloak, trimmed in white fur, along the neck, the openings of the garment and on the cuffs of her sleeves, put her trim, slender waist, and wide hips on perfect display. She possessed the marvelous and womanly figure that appealed to him as much as her mouth did...but her haughty, unconquerable coldness he'd always been all too happy to clear of.

At Broden's scrutiny, in the first hint of warmth to the lady's young visage, the color on her cheeks flamed into a deep, rosy, blush. Ah, the illustrious Ice Princess proved not so emotionally unmoving as a statue-all.

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

The innkeeper said something to her, and when whatever question he'd asked or question he'd put to her went unanswered, her timid maid spoke up. Broden quirked an eyebrow, and that served to break the connection between the other two speaking before her hadn't managed.

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

om the She followed his gesture and blinked impossibly big brown eyes.

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

hers. The lady paused; her small, gleaming black leather boot peeke  
ng both under the hem of her sapphire cloak and hovered there, suspended a s  
narrowwa moment before she set that slight, right heel down upon the old, oake  
mer of The depression of that ancient wood sent an exceedingly loud groan  
also the the near-silent tavern.

to steer Instead of continuing her ascent, however, she cast a glance o  
slender, defiant shoulder.

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

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

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

proud, Good. Let her be as unnerved as the poor maid she'd come in with  
y other night.

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

ke. What would the woman say if she'd gathered his identity? He in  
ion the the undoubtedly horrified reaction she'd have if she knew she shared  
with a former criminal who'd seen and done dark things that would h  
; burly her wilting.

lands.



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

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

The gentleman had been... staring at her.

Her heart thumped as funnily in her breast now as when she'd first gazed at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That dark, coldly mocking stranger had openly watched her.

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

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

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

Having gone straight from the school room to employment in Hester's household, Elyse had bypassed a London Season that would likely have opened her to those harsh sentiments. For lords and ladies were not the subject of if not, bored people, starving for sustenance and subsisting on a diet of

in the people's weaknesses—which the gossip pages alone indicated invariably found.

But she didn't *know* this gentleman.

In fact, with the exception of her father, brother, and the old, mostly slightly dead, Lord Truman, who gifted peculiar pets and other odd in, and Aunt Hester and their family, Elyse didn't know *any* gentleman.

"Miss?"

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

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

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

What had they been saying?

"We're here, miss," he happily announced.

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

"Your rooms, miss," Mr. Turvey clarified.

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

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



l, they already tall innkeeper grew an inch, until his wide shoulders went back to his spine stood perfectly erect. "I couldn't imagine a happier accident finding myself resting my head here for the evening."

re than Mr. Turvey beamed with a brightness to rival every last candle in the room. "The length of the corridor."

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

araway "I'd love that greatly, but I am on to visit my family for the holidays. Nor were those empty platitudes she offered. "But perhaps someday I'll be back at her: said, gently blunting her rejection, and restoring the innkeeper's joviality.

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

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

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

g about Against her maid's protestations, Elyse retrieved one of the bags and entered ahead of the pair. Mr. Turvey, taking his cue from her, took the other from the young maid's hands.

mile. "I "If you would be so good as to show my maid to her room, I'm afraid I'm a bit self lost, Turvey?"

oke, the "My rooms?" Joan gasped. "But miss, that is too costly. You must

ck, and Elyse continued over her loyal servant's continued objections  
nt than journey caused Miss Fenwick quite the fright," she explained, sett  
basket down near the hearth for Sir Lancelot's warmth, but not too clo  
running risk the little bundle's furry life.

She looked to Joan. "Given you are spending the holiday season  
h frock from your family all to join mine, at the very least I can provi  
1, miss. comfortable accommodations so that *you* may get yourself some prop  
o voice, Elyse turned to Mr. Turvey, once more. "Will you be so good as to d  
tray and proper bath to Miss Fenwick's rooms?"

lolidays." "Of course, miss," he piped in gaily, and set the floral tapestry va  
y," she still carried down beside Sir Lancelot's makeshift home.

grin. "Miss Caldecott," Joan rang her hands. "I cannot—"

:change "You can and you will," Elyse said, unequivocally. She crossed  
n Elyse maid and took her gently by the arm. "As my travels are the sole reas  
onjured were forced to make the perilous journey in the heart of winter and  
atter. holidays is because,"—*My unrelenting parents*—"of me," she substitu

r heard, "But—"

"No 'buts'."

cket, he "But miss—"

"Mm-Mm," Elyse cut off the rest of Joan's demurrals.

3s from Gently, Elyse guided the girl from her room, turning her over  
1 Elyse, Turvey's care. Before the young woman could stage further protests  
pressed the curved oak panel closed and turned the lock.

1s, Mr. At last, alone with the welcome quiet, Elyse drew in a deep bre  
rested her back against the solid door. Its steel studs and its steel irc  
1't—"

... “The reinforcements rattled under Elyse’s slight sagging.

ing her She took in the warm, welcoming fire that blazed in the crudely  
se as to hearth; set in brick and built into the room’s western wall, that light  
surprisingly soft glow onto the raw clay slab of the flooring, but did  
n away illuminate the dark, stone walls, the narrow, ebony closet door, and  
de you plaster and panel ceiling.

er rest.” How easy it was to imagine she’d been plucked from the now  
eliver a plucked down into the long-ago times Mr. Turvey had spoken of. ...

been so many moments after Evie’s passing where Elyse had dreamed  
alised herself shifting the clocks back; of reversing time to a time before the greatest  
awful thing that had destroyed her and left their family broken.

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

l at the A log shifted in the hearth, sending up a soothing crackle of snoring  
ted. hisses of the fire’s song. Elyse stared sadly at the orange and yellow  
dancing in the fireplace.

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

A forlorn whine split across Elyse’s melancholy musings, that  
to Mr. pitched moan more piercing for the stillness of the room.  
; Elyse

Instantly finding her feet, Elyse flew across the small room. “I  
me,” she crooned, falling to a knee alongside the basket, and lifting  
ath and “You have had quite the journey, *too*.”  
on band

Sir Lancelot instantly poked his brown, bewhiskered face out.

Murmuring, soothing, nonsensical words for the intrepid traveler carved gently scooped the guinea pig out and took care to set him on the floor to cast a from the fire. “Now, off you go,” she ordered.

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

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

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

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

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

The inky blackness swallowed her up.

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

The faint little whine that marked Sir Lancelot’s sounds and roudrous ed, the different and unwelcome rodent-like creatures.

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

the lid. And she wasn’t.

; Elyse She was, however, rightfully concerned about small, dark spaces p  
r, away inhabited by rats or mice and dark passageways, that...

Elyse stopped. "Do not end," she mouthed silently. Impossible. A  
his coat, not, when one considered the old inn had once been a notorious smu  
refuge. She stared at the hole in the place where a wall should have be  
ves and passageway had ended, into a fifteen-inch or so wide circular ent  
connected to the next rooms.

ed, she "Oh, hell," she whispered again and then immediately regret  
e. vocalization.

realizing She tensed and braced for the appearance of a pair of legs standi  
eye level or someone ducking down and looking into her now hidin  
for the offender creeping into their rooms.

Nothing happened.

ain. To *Stop panicking.*

ense of She'd never been the jittery sort and given her current circum  
er ears, such temerity wouldn't serve her now.

With her original panic now gone, Elyse sharpened her ears, in se  
not say, a hint of *any* sound, the groan of old, uneven wood floorboards. The r  
of voices. The snore of a slumbering traveler. Something to indicate i  
e could fool's errand to follow after Sir Lancelot.

he was Only the loud hum of silence greeted her.

I'm not Releasing her first sigh, Elyse laid flat on her stomach.

She tamped back a sharp hiss as the chill of the stone flooring pier  
fabric of her carriage dress. As she raised herself onto her elbows, t

possibly sleeves of her gown, and the satin trimmings did little to blunt the cold uneven rock cut sharply and unforgivingly into the bend of her arms.

and yet, Ignoring that pain, and with a futile hope, Elyse peered into the digger's at the end of the passageway, searching for Sir Lancelot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She could almost see herself as she would have been, creeping be  
e," she forth between the passageway, with greater ease and grace which s  
t in this moved as a grown woman.

It would have been Evie who invariably found her. She always had  
'cupied.     Her eldest sister had always been so fleet of foot, and silent as th  
'scorted—

door to     Elyse recoiled. Her musings hit her like a swift kick in the g  
briefly closed her eyes against the reminder of that greatest, most crus  
elbows, losses.

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

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

up into     Taking herself firmly in hand, Elyse gave her head a firm sha  
id arms forced aside those sorrowful thoughts.

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

She allowed herself a peek.

or Elyse The bed hadn't yet been fully made. Absent the embroidered  
ed hideblanket that covered her own mattress, and but for the crisp white be  
and a quilted throw at the bottom of the chaff-filled mattress, there  
ack andbeen a traveler who'd yet claimed this space. Nor for that matter, v  
he nowmissing bedding were the accommodations properly readied for  
Though at some point, a fire had been built, in both anticipation of a w  
l. welcome for the eventual guest who'd rest their head here this cold v  
e grave night.

Which could be any moment.

ut. She With that cool-headed reminder, Elyse let herself inside.  
hing of She made a faint clicking sound with her tongue. "Sir Lancelo  
whispered, scouring the floor for any hint of the vexatious fellow.

e to the A *dog*, she silently fumed as she started a walk about the room  
parentscouldn't her eccentric aunt and even more eccentric neighbor have  
all theEmmy a small dog who answered to his name and didn't scurry about  
all overrat racing around the kitchens, avoiding Cook's broom?

Suddenly, she stopped. Horror filled her breast and she looked a  
ng howthe previously unnoted items; ones that had remained outside the pu  
elf intoher view—*until now*.

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

e could Dread brought her creeping forward, around the bed fur-lined  
Elyse'sgreatcoat draped over the right corner of an oak armoire, indicated the  
belonged to a gentleman of means.



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

If one preferred the brooding sort, well, he'd be the man of some  
dreams. Elyse wasn't interested in marrying, ever. But if she was, that  
fellow would *never* be the manner of one she'd take as her husband. No  
man wouldn't want to spend forever with such a man. Or even a moment  
—

Elyse's pulse picked up its pace.

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

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

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

2. gifted Springing into action, she did a sweep of the dark rooms, illuminating  
it like a only the glow of the cozy fire crackling in the hearth.

*Where are you? Where are you?*

ghast at Dropping to her knees, she peered under the bed. Two tiny, beaming  
survey of met hers. Joy swelled in her breast and turned her lips up in a smile.

"There you are, you little hellion," she whispered.

with an With pure guinea pig apathy, Sir Lancelot scrunched his mouth shut  
gathered- snacked on his favorite snack of carrots, and not mere air.

l, wool Elyse inched under the low, dark oak bedframe.

3. rooms Sir Lancelot emitted a long, loud squeal.

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

who'd Groaning, Elyse immediately collapsed onto her stomach, and she raised her arms up, she rubbed at the throbbing knot that had already begun to form. The lady's Feeling a good deal more churlish, Elyse scowled at Sir Lancelot. "I'm angry didn't know better, I'd suspect you were attempting to kill me or lay, she caught." Two fates, that could also well go together, hand in hand. for that He continued to watch her with bored eyes.

Bored! "You have a lot of gall, you ball of fur," she grumbled. "Since I entered Aunt Hester's household you've been all too content to sneal upon my lap and steal pets and cuddles. But now, that you've snuck in secret someone else's accommodations, you'd avoid me like I'm Cook's accommodations mouser?" She tapped a finger against the oak floor. "Come here, *no*" whispered as if he could understand those human words.

The furry knight squealed again.

ated by "Hush," she chided, jerking her head up, inching closer to gather information. "You'll give us away. As it is, you've caused me enough trouble this day."

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

as if he Then, just as she'd anticipated with that vocalization, Sir Lancelot showed his teeth.

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

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

neaking pea.”

o form. Suddenly, Sir Lancelot ceased his conspicuous chattering and v  
ot. “If I closer to Elyse.

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

“You, magnificent creature,” she cooed. Even as the guinea pig l  
nce you his approach, Elyse crooked the four fingers on both her palms and be  
k a nap him closer. “I was ever so wrong to say all those nasty—”

off into Sir Lancelot went scurrying just past her reach, and out from un  
’s best bed.

w,” she Elyse gasped, and jerked her head up again, so quickly she slan  
against the bed slats.

Ignoring the agony sluicing at her skull, she used her elbows  
him up herself out...only to remember the scrapes she’d suffered from he  
lay.” through that blasted passageway.

himself With slower, more cautious movements, Elyse managed to get o  
ad also where she lay under the bed. As she came to her feet, she distractedly  
mouse, at the back of her aching head and did a frantic sweep of the room, se  
for the source of all her woes this eve.

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

And contrary as he’d become, he didn’t so much as offer a squeak  
ne with his whereabouts away.

avior is With the amount of time she’d spent rummaging through  
gentleman’s rooms, she likely found herself moments away from

l shook

ize of a

discovered. Where before hope had briefly blossomed, now desperation  
vaddled<sup>root</sup>.

*Please. For all that is good and—*

mselves A low, chicken-like chitter rang from somewhere near the fireplace  
Elyse's gaze locked on the area that the sound now came from.

kept up The chirping stopped.

ckoned She kept herself motionless, held her breath.

*Where are you? Where are you?*

ider the Another warble went up; louder, and more distinct.

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

r entry Sir Lancelot popped his head out the side of the bag and roo  
mouth.

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

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

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

l being Maybe he sensed the easement of her edginess. For, unlike befo  
stout, small-bodied rodent made no attempt to evade her grip. Her

on took connected with the slight weight of his warm, furry frame. A triumphant smile brought her lips up at the corners.

*Please, do not—*

2. “Do not move.”

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

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

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

ted his *I’m alone. No one knows I’m here. Not Joan. Not Aunt Hester. I’m not Turvey. No one. I—*

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

*Click.*

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

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

fingers

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

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

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

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

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

"Your hands," he cut her off.

he way Elyse hesitated an instant more. Did the gentleman know how to put it alone full sentence together? That skillset seemed dubious at best.

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

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

lowly."

Her heart hammering, Elyse stood on shaky legs.

"Now, turn...slowly."

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

n been

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

is all a She'd been wrong. Her goal shouldn't have been to merely escape rooms, to do so without attracting notice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That is quite an *informed* opinion, *sir*.” Elyse glared him. “Considering you don't even *know*...” He took a step towards her, and stumbled over her words, “you don't even know...” Her sentence faded

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

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

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

7 at her *For the life of me, I cannot recall.*

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

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

and she The hostile stranger sharpened his gaze on Elyse. “We agree c

which begs the question of why someone who *doesn’t* know me  
t to know?”

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

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

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

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

e really “*Tsk. Tsk. Tsk.*” Sir Broody clicked his tongue in a disapprovin  
ave of “Even after finding you alone in my rooms, you won’t even shai  
name?” His harsh lips formed a perfectly sardonic grin.

s way. Elyse clamped her lips even more tightly shut.

and she “I don’t know you,” he continued in that mellifluous baritone tha  
d off. should have sent her belly fluttering in fear, and not whatever e  
iniscule; indefinable, unnamable sensation was. “Which begs the question of ju  
it is you’re doing in my quarters?”

he bed, Still, she’d never been a coward, and she didn’t intend to start be  
now, because of this man.

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



” caught.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Nor do you want to find yourself caught underneath him, on a bed in these places.*

“Don’t even think about it,” he warned, and she jerked her attention back to him.

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

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

“Don’t even think about giving you, my name?” Before he could say more, Elyse added, “Well, that is fine. As I’d indicated moments ago, I have no intention of doing so. Given that, we should make our goodbyes...”

Elyse attempted to make a dignified exit, but then stopped in her track. Unbidden, she looked over to that leather satchel the content little marblepig had apparently made his new home.

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

Elyse's stomach lurched.

*Oh, hell. I am in trouble now.*

crinkled

between

ished it

er in a

*d of all*

n back.

ons.

3.

answer,

I've no

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

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

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

Elyse's stomach lurched.

*Oh, hell. I am in trouble now.*

## Chapter 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

The young lady blinked her long, sooty lashes.

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

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

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

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

Momentarily baffled, Broden drew back.

Who the hell was *Aunt Hester*?

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

“I have a name,” she said crisply. “As I’ve told you, it is one I h n, he’d intention of sharing with *you*.”

He’d hand it to the minx, she didn’t reveal so much as a hint of th e which she should feel. Instead, she tipped the long, graceful column of h n. back, drawing his attention to the heart-shaped birthmark at the center peerage smooth flesh.

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

*What the hell is wrong with you?*

” This is undoubtedly the purpose she served.

Sobered by that stone-cold realization, Broden twisted his lips in ree of grin. “If you’ve come to use your,” he looked pointedly at her t of the “unremarkable wiles to snare me, you’re bound to be disappointed.”

The nameless lady followed his gaze to her bosom.

e would Understanding lit her expressive eyes, and with a gasp, she fol arms protectively at her chest like an offended debutante and not a w maybe twenty-five or so years who’d set out to deceive him.

A deep crimson blush spilled over her cheeks. “How dare you?” s in a furious whisper. “You surly, nasty, cod head.”

ask it a “Cod head?” Despite the earnestness of the situation, he’d found  
thrust into, a smile twitched at the corners of his lips. “Is that the l  
ave no insult you’ve got for me?”

The color on her cheeks deepened. “Paper-scul, shallo  
e terror ignoramus!”

er neck Broden could no longer fight a grin. “I suppose that is somewhat b  
of that “Beetle-headed, banish, bird-witted, buffle-headed, churlish,  
curmudgeon.”

of her He laughed. “If you’ve come to seduce me, you’re going to have  
ning of good deal better than your impressively inventive insults.”

ountiful The lass gawked at him. “You think *I* want to seduce *you*?”

tugging Given the convincingness of her emphatic rejoinder, he’d say de  
not.

“No,” he allowed. “I *do*, however, believe you’d do so as part of w  
arrangement you struck with the one who sent you here.”

a cruel “And to think we women are the ones accused of being overemot  
breasts, She directed her words at the ceiling above.

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

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

Keeping one eye on his intruder, he glanced sideways out the othe

---

himself His stomach heaved, and his mind went black as a swift unthinkin  
arshesttook hold. An enormous rat gnawed at the skirts of the immobile beaut

As paralyzed as the woman before him, Broden kept his gaze fixe  
w-pate,black and white rodent, with its enormous whiskers and pink nose.

Sweat coated Broden's palms and pebbled at his brow. "Do. Not. M  
ett—?" He'd encountered any number of terrors in his time as a convict  
*cakey*,the cruelty of a perverse, unpredictable gaoler, with a fondness for w  
prisoners. Being denied food and water for so long that madness had  
to do aon the edge of a waning consciousness.

During his time in gaol, Broden had shared *quarters* with rats an  
More often than not, those huge, ravenous beasts were hungrier tl  
cidedlyprisoners.

Through those years of hell, Broden and his fellow cellmates  
hateverthemselves at the mercy of merciless wardens. Those perverse men ha  
great pleasure watching edacious rodents feast on the prisoners in their

ional?" *Never again.* Never again would he let one of those gnawers near  
anyone else.

ave you With a booming shout, Broden charged the rest of the way and lun  
novels?the young woman to get her out of the way and to safety, and away fi  
n to—"creature now tangled in her skirts.

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

for that With her safely out of the way, he set his sights on the fat vermin  
waddled under the bed.

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

g dread     The unbothered rodent looked back with bored eyes. Bored was de  
y.     different than the evil beady ones that had sized him up as a tasty me  
l on the that it mattered. The thing needed to d—

Just then, Broden's *human* trespasser peeked her face out from ur  
love." bed.

d man:     Horror brought her perfectly formed eyebrows shooting up.

hipping     "What are you doing?" she asked on a terrified whisper, as if she  
danced Broden might run off the *rat*.

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

d mice.     She gasped. "You most certainly are *not* going to kill him."

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

d found     "Come now, dearest," she crooned. "Let us be done with this nast  
: care.     She proceeded to speak in soft, soothing sounds, speaking nons  
him or phrases, beckoning the thing over.

Confusion creased his brow.

ged for     *Nasty cur?*

rom the     "*I'm* the nasty cur?" he snapped. "Me, and not say, the fat rodent  
tried to gnaw your feet off?"

ess.

They glared at one another.

l who'd     "You are the one who is behaving like a gudgeon, Lord I  
Furthermore, he is not a rodent."

Broden sharpened his gaze on her. "What was that you said?"  
slipped and used his name.



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

Had he unsettled her enough that she’d been unable to hold her ton  
ider the “Or,” she continued, “the part about him not being a rodent  
Broody?”

The previously laconic, suddenly garrulous lady didn’t allow  
e feared much as a breath, let alone a word. “Very well. He *is* a rodent, b  
needn’t be so insulting by calling him a rat.”

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

ded his Where all previous attempts to chase the rodent from its hiding pl  
llowed, failed, Broden’s thunderous shout did the trick.

The fat, filthy beast waddled off as quickly as his big body allo  
ty cur.” dashed out from under the bedframe, and straight to the waiting a  
sensual Broden’s two-legged nighttime *visitor*.

In an instant, the woman scooped the thing up.

He and she jumped to their feet at the exact same moment. All the  
the lady held the rat close, like she embraced a small, lovable pup an  
: who’d disease-ridden murine.

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

’ She’d Broden saw red. “Put it down.”

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

up into “Fine,” he snapped. “Then, I’ll take the damned thing from you my

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

t, Lord The hell he wouldn’t.

“You’ll risk your damned life for a rat?” he gnarled and continued  
him so Fear-filled eyes darted about. “There is no rat. As I told you—  
out you stopped short.

The woman glanced down and followed Broden’s focus to the  
come a creature burrowed against her ample cleavage. When she again met B  
focus, a blend of understanding and disbelief showed in her coffee  
ace had eyes.

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

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

e while, He snorted. “I’ve seen plenty of rats without tails. They whip their  
id *not* predators and lose them in those battles.”

At last, this particular revelation gave her pause. For the first time  
—would run to rescue the beastie from Broden, doubt entered her eyes. The q  
h. He’d there was gone as quickly as it had come.

another “This, sir, is no rat.”

“Then it is an oversized mouse.”

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

Broden found himself hesitating the same way she had moments aq

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

“Sir Lancelot?” he repeated flatly.

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

—” She “You named that rat—”

“Guinea pig—”

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

She nodded. “I arrived, and well, you see, there’s a passageway  
-brown connecting our rooms; a passageway I’d no idea of,” she added in a rush.

Lancelot slipped into the closet, and I went in after him, only to find  
those entryway joining the two spaces.”

Broden said nothing for a long moment. “You expect me to believe  
and it show you came to be in my chambers?”

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

He snorted.

tails at “Really?” The termagant retorted. “*That’s* harder to believe than  
traveling the English countryside with a *rat* in my company?” She spoke  
e, she’d deadly serious tones that the best London stage actress would be hard-  
question to emulate.

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

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

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

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

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

She promptly went pale. "It is my maid," she whispered, hugg  
rodent-gift close. "I cannot be found with you."

ageway And he couldn't be found with her. Whoever the hell she was, a  
sh. "Sir of that nature would ruin her. In fact... "Is that why you're he  
ind the Princess?" he hissed. "To trap me."

2 that is "As I said, you've been availing yourself of far too many gothic r  
she flung back. "Now, if you would go out into the hall, and distract  
that I might get myself to my rooms, and avoid the possibility of u  
discovered, and *me* being ruined."

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

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

The moment he stepped outside, he was greeted by a sobbing mai  
her pale cheeks bright red and hair still wet from her travels. He gri  
oigs for teeth. No doubt she'd been made to ride atop the carriage box by the h

believes At that moment, the girl of indeterminate years spoke wildly w  
ne into innkeeper. As she spoke, her hands flew as frantic as the words raci  
her lips.

reason “May I help you?” Broden called.

dea the When he didn’t manage to penetrate the servant’s caterwauling,  
cupped his palms around his mouth and tried again. “May I help yo  
sted theshouted.

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

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

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

re, Ice Ah, so she feared earning her mistress’s wrath.

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

t her so A remarkably—and deceptively—sweet contralto pierced the holl  
s being “Is there a problem, Miss Fenwick?”

As one, Broden, the distraught maid, and ashen innkeeper looked c  
ppared

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

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

id, with At some point, since she’d made her escape from Broden’s roc  
tted his vixen’s hair had come undone. Now, the thick, lustrous strains—bl  
ellion. umber and dark chocolate—cascaded about her delicate, narrow shoul

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

His throat went dry, and a wave of unexpected hunger stirred within Broden. Maybe she was some mythical siren, for every unkind thought he carried about the nameless woman, fled his head. Broden stood, bewildered, and hopelessly mesmerized, as he gawked like the green lang, and earlier vowed he wasn't.

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

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

A high-pitched sob managed to penetrate that charged moment that buried him ensnared. "M-M-Miiiiissss!"

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

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

An identity which she continued to cling impressively tightly to.

The lady looked daggers at Broden.

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

The maid's tears stopped, and she whirled about to level a surprised, impressive black glare on Broden. "How dare you speak ill of my misters.

"You mean, the same mistress who insisted you carry all her baggage, those forced you to ride on the driver's bench in the middle of a winter storm, gentled his tone. "Quite easily."

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

!’d ever The mistress in question dropped a hand on her servant’s shoulder, said something quietly for the girl’s ears alone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anger flashed in her eyes.

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

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

m?” he A niggling of doubt crept in. When she put it that way...

And yet, he knew what his eyes had seen, and he also knew  
der and merited her shortness with both the girl and innkeeper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

it your Broden returned his attention to Lady No Name.

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

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

“Never tell me,” she began slowly. Absolute glee dripped from  
syllable that left her mouth. “*you*, found *me* icily disdainful to our inn  
out the *same* innkeeper whose name you do not know.” She laughed. “No  
is rich.”

ired on “I’m aware of his name,” he muttered. Granted he hadn’t unti  
ich you uttered it.

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

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



nothing A tense, heavy silence fell over the quartet.

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

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

“Come along, Joan,” she began with a gentleness Broden hadn’t seen from the lady, or for that matter believed her capable of.

“But he needs to—”

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

For Broden’s part, he may as well have been invisible to the party speaking about him.

The young maid gave a reluctant nod.

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

The pair disappeared inside but not before Joan snuck a final irate glance in each of Broden’s way.

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

“Is there anything you require, my lord?” the innkeeper asked. He glowed with a clear desire to leave and leave quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Broden hadn't returned the same.

But then, how could he?

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

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

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

With a sigh, he headed back for his room.

*Click.*

master He looked quickly as the door next to his opened.

ile he'd The odd anticipation that'd unknowingly crested in his chest, va  
ad kept the moment a small, plump figure stepped outside, and closed th  
behind her.

nded in Joan, the lady's maid.

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

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

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

The moment she reached him, Broden bowed his head.

ould now. It is too late for that."

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

actions "I'll have you know I was terrified of the carriage ride..."

Ah. "So, I wasn't wrong on that sc—"

his still She shoved a pointy digit into his chest.

nued to Broden grunted.

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

That properly silenced him.

“And when we arrived? She held onto that precious guinea pig s  
nished, been asked to deliver to her young sister for Christmas so he did not f  
ie door gave me the task of carrying two bags so I had a distraction from my f

*Well.*

With every revelation, Broden squirmed a little bit more.

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

ambers, “My mistress ordered me a warm bath, hot meal, and additional bl

How many ladies do *you* know who put their servant's comfort ahead  
nger atown?”

None. He didn't know a single one.

woman Stunned, he whipped his gaze over to that panel the lady re  
least he closeted behind.

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

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

ntleman “I...didn't know,” he said dumbly. Because really, what else co  
say?

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

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

She opened and closed her mouth several times before she regain  
in the voice.

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

And the lady, a woman who worked, had paid for separate suites she had girl? That costly gift was not one most lords and ladies would take on. all. She This lady deserved a name. Rather, he needed to know her identity ears.” “Miss Joan?” he called quietly over, just as the young woman r open her door.

She looked questioningly at him.

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

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

With that, she stomped off, and Broden found himself alone in t maintained once more, with only the memory of each disclosure that revealed bastard he’d been that night.

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ould he

o share

id prior

ned her

glance,

s.

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

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

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

She looked questioningly at him.

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

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

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

## Chapter 6

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

Sleep eluded her.

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

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

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

Elyse shivered; a faint tremble that moved up her person and down her spine, driven by fear. Dread was decidedly the reaction she should be consuming.

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

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

Undoubtedly, while she remained wide awake and alert, *he* should be blissful as a babe in the very room they'd tangled. Elyse angled her head towards the secret corridor that had brought that miserable man into the room and glared. "Sir Broody on the *other* hand," she muttered. "wouldn't you think of me and my unremarkable wiles so much as a single thought."

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

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

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

And here she'd thought taking sanctuary from the storm and delay  
winds yearly reunion with her family had been the best and safest option.  
at kept here with sleep out of reach only added to her frazzled nerves.

Abandoning her futile and already too-long attempt at sleep, Elyse  
her legs over the side of the bed. Her stockings muted some of the  
wasn't chill.

Hastening over to the dress she'd worn and discarded earlier, she p  
ertainly on over her chemise, and, reaching her arms awkwardly and painfully  
one lay her, she saw to the neat row of buttons there.

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

She let herself out; the well-oiled hinges didn't so much as w  
od helps squeal. The same, however, could not be said for the groaning ha  
l planes floors, and noisy stairs she descended.

The moment she reached the landing, she did a sweep of the tap  
lept as blazing fire still roared in the medieval hearth, radiating a surpr  
er head bountiful heat that managed to chase the nip left by the fierce winter  
her life The pale orange glow cast a soft light throughout the quaint, hospitable

The handful of patrons who'd previously filled the room had sinc  
taken themselves off to their respective accommodations or contin



ude, so their way, after sneaking a brief respite from the terrific storm.

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

ier face Just as she made to sit, Elyse froze. Her skin prickled, with the fe  
being watched. And then, she stopped. For the one whose penetratin  
ring her bore a hole into her soul was none other than...

Laying *Him.*

Of course.

swung Biting the inside of her cheek, Elyse made herself muster all the gr  
floor's aplomb she could and then sat as if she and he were strangers, and i  
people who'd butted heads from the moment she'd arrived at The M  
ulled it Inn.

behind Seated at the table in the furthest, rear left corner of the establishm  
Broody considered her from over the top of a pewter tankard. Unlike  
l to the however, his dangerously handsome features remained devoid of their  
scorn and curiously opaque.

hine or She tamped down a groan. The hell, however, if she'd let him run l  
rdwood Then, with slow, deliberate movements, he nodded his head.

Elyse wrinkled her brow.

oom. A Not that did he so in a condescending way.

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

e inn.

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

e either

ued on

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

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

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

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

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

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

The maid "Not at all," she said soothingly, so as to end the proud set of his shoulders and stop worrying. "In the midst of a wild winter storm, I always find myself excited to sleep."

Before, That usual smile found its way back onto Mr. Turvey's fleshy lips.

Earlier, Cupping a big hand around the side of his mouth, he spoke in a low, discreet whisper. "Always did fancy a good storm, myself."

Her off. "I knew I recognized good people in you, Mr. Turvey."

He beamed all the brighter and then tugged at his lapels. "May I get you some refreshments for you?"

"A tankard of your finest ale, if you would?"

Even... As further credit to the innkeeper, he didn't reveal so much as an expression of reaction to a lady requesting ale. He dropped a bow and hurried off, to return moments later with a pewter mug to match Sir Broody's and fill it to the brim.

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

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

mid-day      A long-ago memory resurrected from the buried recesses of her  
stirred to life—of Elyse tugging Evie by the hand into their family's ki  
long after the staff had taken themselves abed. This time, just as :  
ire, Mr.      every Christmastide Season, Elyse allowed those thoughts in.

ns with      *Elyse cajoled her big sister. "Come, Evie, we must try it."  
"Ladies do not—"*

ervant's      *"Oh, fiddle-faddle, Evie," she interrupted, leading to the kitche  
self too where sat a pitcher filled with ale. "Why is it fine for our dear  
Nicholas and Lord Gladwin to have all the fun?"*

Together, they sat and stared silently and big-eyed at the fo  
ss than      *beverage.*

*Elyse made the first move and reached for two tankards.*

Her sister instantly rested her fingers atop Elyse's, effectively halt  
I fetch      *movement. "I have something I must confess, Ellie—"*

*"Evie," Elyse said in hushed tones. "You may try to be a proper  
on the other hand, do not intend to allow life to pass me by  
experiencing all of it."*

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

only to      *Evie burst out laughing.*

illed to

*And then, through tears wrought by Elyse's fit, she peered with  
he was eyes at her big sister.*

*bite of Evie lifted her tankard in silent salute and then took a long, si-  
cularly impressively smooth swallow of her drink. One that indicated this  
been the first draught of ale she'd indulged in.*

*r mind, When she'd finished the entire contents of her glass, Evie dusted t  
itchens, of her hand across her mouth.*

*she did Elyse widened her eyes. "That is what you intended to tell me."*

*Evie grinned. "Sometimes it is important to throw caution to the w  
enjoy living a bit more."*

*Following that sage advice she doled out, Evie let loose a long, lo-  
n table better suited to their big brother, Nicholas, than a tiny lady.*

*brother Their joy-filled laughter reverberated like a distant echo, and  
squeezed her eyes shut tight, desperate, and aching to hold onto that m-  
r bidden to live in it that long-ago time where her sister still lived, and—*

*"I believe you are the first lady I've ever known who drinks ale."*

*That powerful baritone, now mellow, where before it had been  
ing that slashed across those happy thoughts, plucking Elyse from the past she  
to dwell forever in and depositing her, instead, right in the pain of the p  
lady. I, Jolted unpleasantly back, she peered dumbly up at the man toweri  
withouther table. Of course, he, the same man who'd accused Elyse of i  
would, in snatching away her remembrances of Evie, prove to be the g  
cruellest thief of all.*

*Then, through the shock of finding him here, of all places, the  
words he'd just spoken registered.*

*blurry* “I believe you are the first lady I’ve ever known who drinks ale.”

She seethed. This one sought to give *her* a lesson in propriety?

*ow, and* She’d be damned, however, if she let him get a rise out of her.

*hadn’t* Elyse smiled a deliberately false smile. “But *you* have heard it is perfectly fine for a gentleman to invite himself to speak to an unmarried lady *the back* not know, in a taproom?”

“Certainly not.” He smiled; it was the first time his hard lips had moved by anything but derision. This grin, however, was lazy and *ind anda* little rueful.

Elyse set her drink down hard. The ale swayed back and forth *w belchtankard* and sprinkled drops over the side of the rim. “Is that why you come to my table? To insult me by calling me unladylike?”

*l Elyse* “No!” An honest, boyish blush suffused his cheeks and briefly started *moment; thoughts* from Elyse’s head.

*He blushed? This man?*

It was a fact that would have been endearing...that was *if* the loud *biting* so unmannered and boorish.

*wished* “I didn’t come to insult you,” he said, earnestly.

*present.* “Then, why are you—?”

*ng over* “I came to apologize.” Even spoken in quiet, solemn *robbery* gentleman’s words carried in the quiet. “I came to apologize,” he repeated, *greatest,* her silence.

*earlier* It was a good thing she’d been sitting. She eyed him dubiously. “I believe it.”

“Aye, well, it appears there’s a good deal of that sentiment being this night, as I don’t believe how I conducted myself earlier.”

Aye. Her ear picked up on that Scottish word; a peculiar choice given the crisp, King’s English. Despite herself, Elyse found her curiosity piqued perfectly

He gestured to the open seat across from her. “May I join you?”

Incredulous, Elyse followed that sweep of his arm. “You want to sit

He nodded.

“Here? With me?”

“If you’ll allow it.”

If she’d allow it?

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him absolutely not; to take it off to his table, his rooms, or anywhere else that wasn’t here.

Simply speaking alone with a man was scandalous. Her granting permission to sit didn’t make his being here alone with her acceptable. He to join Elyse, who sat here without the benefit of a chaperon, was a manner of stuff that ruined a young lady’s reputation. weren’t

Taking her protracted silence as a declination, he bowed. “If excuse me? I shouldn’t have infringed. I will leave you to your company.”

As he *should*.

He turned to leave.

“...Sometimes it’s important to throw caution to the wind and enjoy a bit more...” Her sister’s words played again in Elyse’s mind.

“Wait!” Wait? Elyse dampened her lips. Had she *really* just asked stay?

shared The previously angry, now abashed stranger, turned back quickly.  
was hard to say who was more stunned by Elyse's request.

ven his But for the distant clattering of wood plates as Mr. Turvey worked.  
d. in the kitchens, silence filled the room. The handsome gentleman re-  
equanimous; letting Elyse determine whether or not she'd truly want  
t?" to stay.

She did a rapid search of the taproom and found every table  
unoccupied, and every seat empty. Just she and this enigmatic stranger  
remained.

*"...Sometimes it's important to throw caution to the wind and enjoy  
a bit more..."*

himself "You...may join me," she said softly.

ng him He slid into the curved oak dining chair, with the alacrity of one  
feared if she thought on it too much, she might rescind that offer.  
e. Were probably she would have.

was the Tankard in hand, the gentleman reclined in his seat.

you'll They sat in a surprisingly comfortable silence; each assessing the  
and occasionally sipping their ale.

ir own He finally spoke first. "We got off to a bad start."

"Yes." Elyse smiled wryly. "Though, given I broke into your room  
expect yours is a generous understatement."

y living "And I took you for a thief, with nefarious intentions."

"And we mustn't forget the quarrel over Sir Lancelot," she reminded

him to "Whom you *did* attempt to kill."

"Sir Lancelot who *might* be a rat."

..and it “Who is *decidedly* a guinea pig.”

He inclined his head. “Very well. A rodent, then. On that, we can concur?”

“We shan’t. However, I confess, when I learned I’d have to make the journey north but that I’d be forced to do so with Sir Lanc company, I was quite cross.”

“Where are you enroute to?”

And just like that, Elyse found herself slapped with the reminder to disconnect from the world and her family was approaching a rapid end

She released a sigh. “Where do we *all* travel at this time of year?”

They spoke at the same time. “Family.”

They exchanged another, this time, a commiserative smile.

“He is quite a cuddlesome, affectionate fellow.” She grimaced occasionally a troublemaker.”

Goodness, how things had changed. Here she sat defending the creature whose existence she’d first bemoaned.

“*That*, we can agree on then.” Her companion for the night lifted his glass, and she took that signal for what it was.

Hefting her tankard up, Elyse touched her rim to his, and they shared another drink...and a smile.

He considered her over the rim of his tankard. “Never tell me... I don’t want to not have the benefit of parents and find yourself at the mercy of a guardian with a love of rats and you’ve taken your favorite one and fled.”

Her lips twitched.

“I take that by the smile you’re hiding, I’m nearly on the mark?”



“I’m thinking you continue to show quite the gothic bend in story  
n likely that you couldn’t be further from the *mark*.”

Her unlikely companion gave her another long look.

ot only “Impoverished parents with four daughters—you being one inclu  
elot forthat number—and with there being no heir, you are expected to make a  
to save your beloved sisters?”

“Wrong again. Beloved parents, four...” She faltered. “four...”

hat this Only, there were no longer four Caldecott girls still living. The  
l. that loss would never, ever go away.

“Three sisters,” she managed to say, in a hoarse whisper. “Three si  
all.” With all the same agony and two very much alive parents.

Odd, Evie had been gone so long, and this was only the first tim  
ed. “If had uttered those words.

She felt his penetrating stare on her and looked up.

e same From under long, thick, black lashes, he carefully studied her. “I  
parents are so beloved, then why are they not here now?”

ited his “It is...complicated.”

“Complicated,” he repeated, sounding as if he hoped she’d say mor

n, they “Complicated,” she said again, and this time he let the matter rest  
that she was grateful.

You do Elyse raised her tankard and took a sip.

wicked “I expect this would be a good time for us to share our name  
d?” suggested.

Elyse snorted mid-swallow. Ale instantly burned her nostrils, a  
choked.

ies, and The mystifying gentleman instantly snapped out an exceptionally monogrammed kerchief, and handed it over.

With a muffled word of thanks, Elyse availed herself of that offered in went to blow into the elegant fabric when her gaze caught on the ir a match silver-blue threaded initials emblazoned there: “BBBB”

*BBBB*

That was a...lot of ‘B’s.

pain of Taking care to avoid that delicate needlework, Elyse exhaled for into the silk handkerchief, with such vigor that had her mother heard sters in would have subjected Elyse to a daylong lecture on what con appropriate, and *inappropriate* behavior, for a lady.

e Elyse Except, she didn’t give so much as a single thought about propr the impropriety of her current situation. Instead, she sat here, musin those four “B’s.” Nay, more aptly, Elyse found herself transfixed b initials.

If these

“I know what you are thinking,” he said, as Elyse delicately wipe nose.

re. Not in a thousand years could he ever. “If it’s that we should sh

and for Christian names, then *you’d* be far from the mark, *again*,” she drawled

“You are thinking it is a lot of B’s.”

Elyse started. Why, Mr. Mysterious, as she’d since silently chan name to, had probably *given* her his handkerchief because he’d *know es?*” he be tempted to share hers, all so she could figure out those four B’s.

*Oh, the Thingumabob.*

and she

white, Elyse found her voice. "I'm thinking the embroiderer must have  
mistake."

ng. She "She most certainly didn't and would be quite offended by  
intricate, assumption."

Her stomach of a sudden, became queasy. "You're married," she  
woodenly.

*Please, don't tell me I am sitting here with—*

carefully "It was my mother," he murmured. A shadow flickered across his  
face, but she "I'm not married." He glanced briefly down. "I never have been."

stituted Elyse didn't know how to account for the sweeping relief  
revelation. Unaccountably giddy, it took a moment before she  
noticed the more somber and sad set of *BBBB*'s features. All she wished to do was take  
it all over back to mere moments ago when their exchange had been playful and  
by those "Barnaby Bernard Brixton Brevard?" she piped in.

He stared confusedly at her.

and at her "Hmm." Feigning a deep pondering, she tapped the tip of her index  
finger against her chin. "Based on *that* reaction, I trust not a single one of  
our ventures on my part, were correct."

Elyse released an exaggerated sigh. "Imagine all those B's and I  
gotten a single one accurate?"

Understanding dawned in his eyes, and just like that, his lighthearted  
return she'd returned. "Not a one."

"Hmph." Elyse picked up her tankard. "Perhaps this is for the best  
should not divulge our identities to one another."

"You needn't give me yours," he said.

made a Elyse stopped with the rim of her glass at her lips. “That is fin  
waggled her eyebrows, “as I stated, I have no intention of—”

oy that “I already *have* a name for you.”

he said already *has* a name.” She stopped suddenly and frowned. “You cannot *name* someon

“Aye, but as you pointed out, you are in possession of it, and I am  
such, I’m forced to think of you by *something*, lass.”

is eyes. “Need you think of me at all?” she asked teasingly.

“I...can’t seem *not* to.” He sounded and looked as befuddled as  
at his mixed up over his tutor’s latest lessons.

ted the Elyse’s chest knocked funnily against her ribcage. Before, thou  
ce them their earlier exchange slapped her. “Unimpressive wiles.”

light. “What if I share mine?”

She wavered. Because she wanted his Christian name. She *desp*  
wished to know. But more importantly than her intrigue, she must k  
x finger identity secret. Elyse had no intention of marrying. She would be coi  
of those continue serving Aunt Hester for the rest of their lives. Elyse’s sisters  
other hand, all were of marriageable age and wished to eventually  
’ve not match. She couldn’t sully their surname.

“You’re thinking about it.”

ted grin “I am not.” Not at this particular moment, anyway.

He smirked. “You are a bad liar.”

t, as we “And you, yet again, appear to be sorely lacking on the rules of pi  
—”

“I am, and quite happily so.”

ie,” she Elyse rested her elbows on the table and cradled her tankard between hands. “You are a rebel, then.”

He—Mr. BBBB—mirrored her movements. “I prefer to think of me who as a free thinker.”

Elyse leaned closer to him. “Then, I must be the one to subject you not. As lecture.”

“I am read—”

“It is unpardonable to call someone a liar, Mr. BBBB. In fact, if I s a boy man, I would be required to call you out.”

A grim smile formed on his lips. “Then, let us be glad you are a v ghts of as I’ll be spared a ball to the chest, and you won’t end up in prison crime of murder.”

That cryptic glint darkened his blue eyes to a grim black. This tir orerately gleam was gone so quick it may as well have been a flicker cast fr eep her glow of the nearby fireplace, and her own imagining.

ntent to “Look me in the eye and tell me you weren’t wanting to know my , on the and even considering exchanging yours?” he challenged.

make a “I already said as much and see no need to repeat myself.”

He gave her a knowing look. “Mm-*Hm*.”

Before Elyse could stop herself, she shot her slippered foot c delivered a playful kick to his shins.

They both froze.

ropriety His slightly curved eyebrows climbed a fraction. “Did you...*kick n*

“No?” The stridency in her voice, however, managed to creep tha into a question.

een her “‘No’. or, ‘No?’?”

Regardless of the light direction their conversation had taken, she myself were still strangers. And strangers—most definitely not ladies—did about kicking people.

ou to a “I’ll have you know, Mr. BBBB, I was not lying. In fact, I’m also for being a very skilled Brag player.”

He snorted. “You certainly *did* kick me. And based on your le were a convincing ‘no’, I find it very hard to believe you’re skilled in a games.” He continued over her gasp. “So much so, I’d be willing to d woman, on *that* charge.”

for the Elyse laughed, and, as if her amusement had been contagious, he in.

ne, that After their mirth had faded, they sat in a congenial silence and r om the partaking in their refreshments.

Or Elyse did. As she drank, she sensed his gaze upon her. Neither name, said anything, however. It was a moment before she realized she’d f the rest of her ale.

A soft and welcome warmth filled Elyse; it left her all languid a inside. Maybe it was because they’d gotten on so well during this i taproom exchange, or perhaps it was the fortifying effects of the spirit out and consumed, but Elyse lifted her eyes.

Her breath stuck in her chest.

He—this man with no name—stared intently back at *her*. His blu ie?” dark and hypnotic, moved lightly over her face.  
t denial

“You may call me, Bran,” he murmured, the deep, rich, resonant and hebaritone drew her more deeply under whatever spell this was he’d cast not go His...name. He’d shared with her, his name.

“Bran,” she repeated, testing the feel and sound of it. Elyse smiled known “It suits you.” It fit this man who’d blushed and revealed a boyish side

“It’s not my real...or maybe, *full* name, rather. And it’s quite dress thank know. My younger sister saddled me with it when she first learned to s ry card “I think it is adorable.”

He chuckled. “My days of ‘adorable’ have long passed.”

She begged to disagree—silently, of course. She’d not very well a : joined this surprising exchange he’d proven unexpectedly humble and endear

“And what have you named me?” she asked, unsure where that q resumed came from, and more, why she should care. And yet, she did.

“Ah-ah. Not unless you tell me—at least part of your name, as I di of them

“What if I guess?” finished

He dropped an elbow on the table and leaned closer. “You are ind soft try.”

“Bertha?” intimate

“Not beautiful enough for you.” is she’d

Caught off-guard, Elyse drew back. *He thinks I’m beautiful?*

Surely not. Surely, he spoke with a glib tongue. Elyse knew *that* ie eyes, woman’s logic but couldn’t stop butterflies from dancing and flutterin her belly and breast.

No one had ever called her beautiful.

e of his     Though, in fairness neither had he.

·             The memory of his first and honest opinion of her cut through the compliment he'd almost given.

l softly.     *If you've come to use your...unremarkable wiles to snare me, bound to be disappointed...*

adful, I     That reminder had a sobering effect that killed the playfulness ;peak." moment.

              "It is late," he murmured.

              "Yes." She should have certainly supplied him with an answer long admit in     Bran stared at her. Then, she comprehended the actual meaning ing.     those three words. He'd not been saying her guess had been late. i question suggesting they part ways.

              "Oh," she blurted. A painful blush burned her cheeks, and she pra d."     mistook that color for a product of the fire's glow.

              Well, if that didn't quite shore up his actual thoughts on her b free to possession of any real beauty.

              Elyse pushed her chair back and stood quickly. "Yes. It is late."

              Bran jumped to his feet.

              They both hovered there; frozen, neither of them moved.

              Only one of them, she knew, wished this exchange to continue. T : with a however, that the other one of them did not, was what managed to spr g about into movement.

              Elyse stretched her arm across the scarred tabletop and held her h to Bran. He stared a moment, and then folded his fingers around h



palm dwarfed hers, those long digits swallowed hers up in a surprising almost tender hold.

They drew back at the same time.

“Bran,” she murmured.

“Eleanor,” he returned in equally solemn tones.

She blinked, puzzledly. *Elean—*

*Her name!* That was the made-up one he’d given her.

“Eleanor,” she repeated back, testing it the same way she had long ago. nickname.

“After Eleanor of Aquitaine.”

Elyse suddenly wished she’d paid more attention to her history lessons. What was more, she wished she could remain here in this taproom with Bran and ask him all about the legends around that long-ago queen.

“Farewell, Bran.”

“Eleanor.”

Hearing a goodbye in that elegant name he’d provided her with, Elyse quit the table and headed for the stairs leading to the rooms above. While, she felt his gaze upon her, burning into her retreating form.

Elyse reached the stone steps, and, to keep from turning back to him once more, she rested her fingertips on the railing, and gripped it tightly. The front door flew open. The bang of the panel striking together with the gust of wind, brought Elyse whipping around.

A pair of big, burly men, whose cheeks had gone red from their entry; his entered. As they did, they howled with laughter. Between their dam-

risingly and long, threadbare overcoats, they left large puddles of dampness  
small foyer.

Before Elyse could take herself off, they noted her.

One of the men, doffed his hat, revealing a bald pate. He fla  
yellow, nearly toothless grin.

“What a happy sight, on this dreary, winter’s night,” he declared  
she, Barnaby?”

ad his Barnaby, with a few more teeth than his friend, sized her up like s  
the cooked Christmas goose. “Pretty enough, she be, Bernard.”

Bernard? Barnaby? If nervousness hadn’t begun to take root, she  
have laughed.

lessons.

ith him “If you’ll excuse me,” she said stiffly and made to go.

Before Elyse could retreat, Bernard clapped a hand around her ar  
automatically tensed and attempted to tug free.

“Good evening, *gentlemen*.” The silken softness of that interjectio  
as a whisper, but forceful as a shot in the night. “Is there something *I c*  
l, Elyse you with?”

All the

As one, Elyse and the two strangers looked to the owner of tha  
greeting.

look at

ard. Bran.

e wall, Bernard blanched and yanked his offending hand belatedly from  
arm. And with good reason. For tall as they were, Bran still easily po  
four inches over the men who were his lesser in every way.

ie cold,

p boots At that, he wasn’t as she’d left him moments ago trading jests and  
and teasing. Rather, this version was the one he’d been during the

in the encounter: dark, menacing, dangerous.

Elyse's heart raced madly.

At the protracted silence, Bran looked between the two, quaking and asked, "Is there a problem here?"

Like a pair of doltish twins, Barnaby and Bernard shook their heads. "Isn't it wild? Their enormous Adam's apples at a like point in their throats, even more erratically.

she was "N-No, Your Lordship." Barnaby's deeper voice climbed impressively high tenor.

He would Bernard swallowed loudly. "D-Didn't know she was yours, m'lord."

If looks could kill, both men would have been smote where they stood under the lethality of Bran's unforgiving stare.

m. She "Women *don't* belong to anyone. They are the keeper of themselves."

Oh, God, help her. For Elyse had no intention of falling in love. But if she were capable of freeing herself to experience that emotion, she'd have had her hands and feet over her head in love with him.

"Now," Bran said to the strangers, whom she'd already all but smothered with lethal about, "may I suggest strongly, that you both take yourself off to another inn to frequent? N—"

That suggestion had no sooner left Bran's mouth when Barnaby and Elyse's Bernard scrambled, tripping over themselves to open the door and slipped through it.

Elyse watched as they scurried off. Yes, she'd agree that the smiling man outside was a good deal less threatening than the formidable gentlemanly air first glared at them.

The moment they'd gone, Bran pushed the door closed behind them so that he and Elyse were alone together.

men. "Is She dampened her lips. "Thank—"

He swiftly cut off the rest of that requital. "You needn't thank me for my headsaid. "Just as you shouldn't have to deal with loutish behavior from jumpedmen." Bran swept his arm out, and she followed his gesture to the stairs.

"May I escort you to your rooms?"

to an She'd been on her own so long. Serving as a companion to her Hester, it'd been Elyse always looking after someone else. And it felt very nice that he...that anyone, cared about her well-being. The powerful unfamiliar emotion proved so powerful and so terror-inducing that she stood attempted to add some levity to their exchange.

as." "You might find it both unbelievable and hilarious, but those two happened to be named Barnaby and Bernard."

it if she He ground his teeth so mightily, Elyse detected the click as bone l  
re gone bone.

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by and She gave him the only thing he seemed to want—her silence.  
squeeze

tempest  
an who

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## Chapter 7

Broden escorted the strong-willed lady to her rooms, in silence.

With him following just behind her, they made the slow climb darkened stairwell. All the while, he wished she'd cheerfully prattled and jested as they walked. Her gaiety was like some sort of elixir that man stamp out darkness.

Instead, Broden found only his dark, ugly thoughts for company. He fought to get a grapple on the mindless rage which had consumed him in that moment those bloody bastards confronted her. And when that tall, toxic bastard dared to wrap his fleshy fingers about her slim, delicate arm?

A blackened fury descended over his vision, and briefly blinded him over again.

The sight of that loathsome fellow with his hand upon her had transformed Broden into the killer he'd been previously—and was now accused of being.

Panic knocked around his chest.

What accounted for these uncontrollable affectivities? What was it about *this* particular woman that roused him to every imaginable sentiment and emotion, which after all he'd endured, he'd believed himself incapable of feeling?

*Stop. It's merely that you first mistook her for a beautiful thief.*

Broden wasn't capable of loving anymore, but that didn't mean he was completely dead in *other* ways. He was still a flesh and blood man, with a desire for spirited, voluptuous, women. Having largely locked himself

since his return, it was simply that he hadn't been around many other v  
Or he was certain he'd respond the very same way.

And as for his fury at those bumbling fools, Broden would have f  
up the *same* rage had they touched any woman the way they'd dared grab...E  
led and And that was *another* thing! He didn't even know her damned  
aged to Some fellow, maybe a spotless, nescient do-gooder might have go  
twisted up over the brief interludes he had experienced this night,  
ny. Hewoman he'd literally only just met.

him the Broden, however, was decidedly *not* that man. For that matter, he'  
bothless been that man. Not even when he'd fallen in love with Arabella had  
lost all hold of logic. He hadn't been then, and he certainly wasn't  
him all know of grand emotions.

"Bran?"

l nearly That name, spoken in a remarkably, sweet contralto pulled him  
ngly—present.

He glanced confusedly about.

His gaze collided with *Eleanor's* concerned one.

it about "We've arrived," she whispered.

ment—  
able of *Arrived?*

Then, it hit him.

Shaking his head once and hard, he dropped a bow. "Eleanor."

he was "Bran," she said his name in a near soundless voice, so light he ne  
who felt strain in order to hear. In a clear worry that someone had or might con  
lf away them, Eleanor stole a furtive gaze about. "Good night and goodbye."

women. Did he hear a trace of regret in that latest parting? Surely, he could  
what could *possibly* account for that penchant?

felt that “Good night and goodbye, Eleanor,” he said mutedly.

Eleanor. The threatening encounter she’d had just minutes ago proved that  
neither she nor the lady could be assured of her safety until she was tucked  
into all her rooms, with the door shut, and the lock firmly in place.

with a Their eyes caught, and both went motionless; she ceased the search  
for her key.

and never Her gaze moved over Broden’s face and he found himself doing  
Broden an unwitting search of her flawless Grecian features.

capable How could this woman—how could *any* woman—travel with  
benefit of a proper escort or a companion?

Any harm could have befallen her. And real harm almost had. For  
if it had been his, it was a certainty, he’d have ensured she was safe and not sent  
into the rooms belonging to a stranger. Had it been any other man,  
the outcome could have, and likely would have been, very different for her.

A guttural, instinctual growl rumbled in his chest.

“You needn’t w—”

In crisp tones, Broden interrupted her. “I’d ensure you are  
ensconced in your room.”

Eleanor pulled back, and then swung her attention forward. With  
small movements, she plucked her key from her pocket. When she attempted to  
insert the slim, cast-iron skeleton key, her fingers shook so badly, it was  
no otherwise simple task, onerous.

Her key slipped and hit the wood floor with a resounding clatter.



lid. For And then, realization *hit* him.

Broden reeled. *She is afraid of me.* She actually thought he'd hurt her  
*just as you were reminding yourself before, she doesn't know you, and*  
neither *than you know her.*

away in Furthermore, as a lady, traveling unaccompanied, exercising  
circumspection would serve her well. So why, then, even knowing the  
arch for the sudden onset of her unease, rankle?

They sank to the floor at the same time to retrieve her key.

; a like, "You needn't bother," she spoke with the same crispness she'd  
their first meeting in his rooms.

out the "I am not bothered."

"As I told you, I assure you, I'm quite fine."

if she'd As fine as she'd been when confronted down below a short while  
leaking Broden withheld the urge to hurl that question at her. To speak that  
an, the aloud, was the same as to blame her for the oafish behavior of the dolt  
r.

Recognizing the importance of asserting some sense of control  
herself and her situation, Broden allowed her to collect her key. He let  
the first to rise, and only then did he make to stand.

safely Then he stopped.

Kneeling as he was beside her, his gaze should have likely lingered  
hurried her ample derriere. Instead, as she inserted the key this time, with success  
pted to lady's elbow, tightened the high-quality fabric of her sleeve.

made an His eyes instantly honed in on the tear in material that he'd pre-  
failed to note. The fabric gaped enough that it revealed the scrape  
sustained on not one, but both of her arms.

*Click.*

er. *But* Broden didn't know if he was annoyed with her for failing to r  
y *moreshe'd* been injured, or that she took a step into her room, without  
goodbye or so much as a glance back.

ig that In fairness, that would mark their third farewell in the past quarter  
hat, didhour, but...

"You are injured," he snapped, as she turned to go.

Confused, the proud beauty looked at him.

used at He motioned to the back of her satin sleeves.

Frowning, she angled her head and stole a glance at the torn and sh  
fabric. Her fingers went to that injured flesh, and the moment they con  
she winced.

le ago? "The passageway?" he ventured.

t query "The passageway," she muttered. "The source of all my miseries."

s. The source of all her miseries? Which meant, Broden himse  
ol overincluded amongst those burdens. *The hell he was.* Or the hell he'd rem  
t her be<sub>w</sub>ay.

She made to step inside, but he put a palm up and stayed her.

"May I help you?" he asked quietly.

ered on Perplexed, His Eleanor cocked her head. "Help me?"

ess, the "Clean your wounds." Broden inclined his head. "I have some exp  
viously tending injuries. And, I should hope given our surprisingly p  
s she'd encounters in such a short while, you may trust, you'll come to no har  
me?"



Elyse eyed the man before her—that was, *Bran*. This mercurial stranger asked to enter her rooms, and...help tend her wound.

He assured her she'd come to no harm.

Her first run-in with this black-clad, dark-haired gentleman had been ignominious at best, and pernicious at worst. Never, however, had she known anyone who vacillated so quickly between emotions.

*Nay, that isn't true.* In the immediacy of Evie's death, Elyse, her mother, and each one of her surviving siblings had been erratic in their disposition. Often and at all different times, the Caldecott's moved between weeping and withdrawing into themselves. There'd been explosions of anger. There had been either a hint of lightness or a dash of levity.

This man, Bran, had his secrets and sorrows. He wore them on the chiseled planes of his masked features. Another person would have found them note-worthy. Not Elyse, who'd experienced firsthand sorrow and suffering.

*So why don't you dash into your room, put a door and a lock behind you? Why do you stand here, still, contemplating his offer, and, in so doing, risking being discovered alone with him, and having your reputation destroyed?*

What was it that compelled her to remain?

"I understand your reservations," he murmured.

He couldn't know half of the thoughts now whirring in her head. His experience proved the least of them.

A nearby sconce sent a flicker of shadow across his face. "You needn't be so silent from my expression, and I scared you."

*That was what he'd thought.* Relief filled her.

nger; he “I don’t fear anyone or anything, Bran.” In order to know fear, a  
would have to let someone close. She excelled in keeping the world av

With that familiar deep, probing glint in his eyes, he contemplated  
id been a long while. Then, a ghost of a smile teased the right corner of his  
known bringing his lips up into a crooked, boyish grin. “I believe we’ve  
ascertained you are a terrible liar.”

parents, She folded her arms at her waist. “We did no such thing.”

sitions. “We will agree to disagree.”

ping, to “Again,” she chimed in quickly.

hadn’t Bran inclined his head. “Again.”

They shared another smile, and then, long after their mirth faded  
on the and Bran remained rooted to the corridor floor.

ailed to Elyse warred with herself.

ig. “Tell me to go, and I’ll leave,” he said in hushed tones.

etween *Do it. Send him on his way as you did moments ago.*

tanding At a gradual pace, Bran reached behind his back, and pulled out—

utation Gaspings, Elyse stumbled over herself to put distance between him  
pistol he’d drawn.

Making a soothing sound, Bran held his spare hand up, staying  
Fear of slowly sank to his haunches. Never breaking eye contact, with un  
movements, he set the gun down and then lifted his palms.

ted my “If it will make you feel better,” he murmured. “Take that.”

Elyse hesitated a moment, and then keeping an eye on him, picked  
weapon by its smooth mahogany stock. Heavy in her hand, the int  
designed gun possessed a decorative etching within the metalwo

woman superiority of the pistol fell in line with the quality of the gentlemanly garments.

l Elyse, “It is a double-barrel flintlock pistol,” he said, bringing her attention to his. “You have two shots, Eleanor. Let me tend your wound.”

already Those five words contained a wealth of power and command that should have taken as overbearing—which is what they were. Instead, almost-primal dominance that steeled his order, made her legs weak.

And not with fear.

She took a tremulous breath.

l, Elyse *Let him in*, a voice whispered in her ear. It came faint, sweet, and whispery soft like the tender words of a kindly ghost.

*...Sometimes it's important to throw caution to the wind and enjoy a bit more...*

Elyse started. Her sister, Evie's voice sounded so clear in her mind she may as well have been standing beside her now, doling out big advice.

“Eleanor?”

and the The earlier imperiousness in Bran's silken baritone had been replaced with a tender solicitude.

her. He hurried “You may,” she blurted.

Bran opened his mouth, but Elyse beat him to whatever he intended to say.

l up the panel. *As if there are other accommodations in question, you lummock.*

rk; the

eman's He inched away and ducked slightly left in a surprisingly stealthy  
for one so tall and broad.

on back “My gun. That is, *your* gun.” Her words slipped out fast and  
together even more rapidly. To demonstrate as much, Elyse held it t  
it Elysehim.

ad, the Bran angled his body right.

Then she realized the reason he bobbed about. “I am pointing my  
—pistol at you.”

“I see that,” he said dryly. “Might I suggest you lower it to your side  
et, and “Of course.” She brought her arm back to her side. A sudden tiri  
took hold. “You may come...in,” she finished, unable to make  
*y living*complete the whole scandalous thought aloud.

The moment she heard her offer spoken aloud, however, heat exploded  
nd, thather cheeks. “To help with my arm,” she squeaked. “You may help w  
sisterlyarm. Though it’s not really my arm, as much as my elbow. He  
technically, my elbow is *part* of my arm.”

“That is true,” he granted.

eplaced They lingered; neither of them made the first move.

Her heart ran amok in her chest.

*Dear Lord, in heaven, where has all my good common sense gone*  
nded towas allowing a devastatingly handsome—a mysterious stranger, wh  
happened to carry a gun tucked in the back of his trousers—in  
l at thebedchambers.

Bran cleared his throat. “May I also suggest, we adjourn to your  
so we might avoid being discovered together.”

y move “Yes!” she exclaimed. The moment that full-throated admission ex  
from her, Elyse clamped a hand over her mouth.

l rolled This was both a terrible idea *and* dangerous. What was it about th  
owards that got her all tongue-tied and confused her senses?

At his bemused look, Elyse hurried into her temporary abode, wi  
following close behind.

r—your As it was, that no one had come upon them in the midst of the  
conversation in the hall, proved a remarkable feat, indeed.

le?” The moment he stepped inside, Bran shut the door behind them.

idness *Click.*

herself The decisive sound of that lock being turned brought a finality  
decision.

oded on They were now alone.

with my The already modest space shrunk under the power of Bran’s bu  
owever, Elyse and her room felt smaller.

They remained motionless, just as they’d been in the hall.

*I should be nervous.*

*Why aren’t I, then?*

Instead, a peculiar, unidentifiable emotion rippled in her chest.

? Elyse

They spoke at the same time.

ho also

“I’ll need—?”

to her

“What should—?”

rooms,

Bran and Elyse stopped.

She motioned for him to go first.

Exploded “I’ll need a pitcher of water and linens.”

As Elyse headed over to the basin and clean towels which had been laid out by a maid upon her arrival, Bran gathered a chair from the opposite corner, and brought it near those requested items. He gestured for her to sit, and just as she made to do so, Bran’s impossibly long lashes dipped, then arched and centered on a point just beyond her shoulder.

“We meet *again*.”

A low, vocalizing met Bran’s murmuring.

Elyse followed his focus over to the little bundle of fluff that had been tucked into the basket currently serving as his makeshift home. Her sister’s guidance had instead made a more permanent dwelling upon Elyse’s bed.

Sir Lancelot continued to vibrate, that steady sound somewhere between the purr of a cat and the grumble of a dog.

“He is a gift,” she explained.

“A *gift*?”

She swatted his arm, with a familiarity better suited a man she’d known her entire life, and not the disjointed hour or so they’d spent in the past night. “Oh, hush. You must admit, he grows on you.”

Bran bowed his head in a teasing deference. “Given I’ve been kicked and punched, I know better than to protest.”

“That wasn’t a punch, Bran.” Balling her palm and keeping her thumb tucked to the outside of her fist as her brother had instructed, Elyse gave him a light wallop. “*That* was a punch.”

They laughed in tandem.



And just like that, the tension between them ebbed, and as she settled between the wicker folds of the chair, she found herself as comfortable as when she had been chatting in the taproom.

“I do confess, I had the same reaction as you when I first met him,” she admitted, while Bran readied a workstation of sorts.

He snorted. “I find that hard to believe,” he said, rolling up his sleeve.

“Oh, it is, t-true,” she stuttered.

*Look away.*

*Look away.*

*They’re just arms.*

At various points in her life, she’d come upon Hutch’s friends while bare-chested. But none of those men had looked a thing like a pig. *Bran.*

Elyse’s mouth went dry, and her tongue grew heavy.

“Where will his new home be?” he asked, his back turned towards her.

“He will go to my youngest sister.” And Elyse thanked the heavens. She focused on his task at hand as she couldn’t fight the temptation of even had the earth’s rotation relied on it.

Then, he collected the simple, blue-glazed, porcelain pitcher in his hand. His muscles flexed and bunched. *God, gentlemen were not built like this.*

Riveted by his bare forearms, sinewy and strong and with sprinklings of black hair, he embodied a statue of the all-powerful Zeus.

led into life. She proved as sinful and weak as Eve. She also understood  
they'd first time, why that first woman had taken that great fall.

And then...he was reaching for her hand.

n," she Without hesitation, she placed her palm in his. Bran angled her a  
way that it both rested comfortably on the table and allowed him to e  
ves. the light injuries there. With an aching tenderness, he lightly probed t  
exposed by Elyse's shorn material.

His touch, firmly gentle, set her belly aflutter. The pads of his palm  
callused like no gentleman's hands were, and the raw, masculinity c  
left her aroused.

Elyse's exhalations became short and her inhalations deep, and  
boxing close as they were, with no space between them, he felt her body qui  
nuissant heard her breath shake. For she could breathe in the very scent of his  
masculine fragrance flooded her senses; the smoky hint of tobac  
cedarwood filled her nostrils and left her slightly dizzy.

slightly Suddenly, his intimate touch, their nearness, became too much.

Elyse drew her arm back quickly.

vens he Concern emanated from his usually veiled gaze. "I hurt you."

staring, "No!" she said on a rush. "It isn't that." *I cannot tell you what i  
was...or is. "It's...just..."*

is right Bran stared patiently back.

lt as he "They are only small scrapes. I will be fine."

h light "Small wounds can become big wounds." He put a swift end to the  
is come her dismissive avowal. He spoke as one who knew. "Others *and* my o  
murmured, following Elyse's focus as well as her thoughts.

for the Unbidden, her gaze slid to the white scars marring his flesh, and questions reared themselves about this man, and how that beautiful had come to be so marred. Surely they accounted for the mysterious darkness that surrounded him.

examine She glanced up to find him watching her, watching him.

he skin “They’re from all the time I spent in prison,” he said, with a waggled eyebrows.

ns were Shame threatened to set her cheeks afire.

of them Bran’s joking repartee also forced her to remember the p  
bridegroom waiting for her even now; a *gentleman* who’d *actually* spe  
surely, in prison.

ver and That man would never do something as considerate as tendering  
n. That care to some stranger he’d caught snooping in his rooms. She knew  
co and the details surrounding his past crimes, but she knew enough to know  
possessed a sinister past.

“I scared you,” Bran murmured, snapping her out of her latest  
glumness.

“No!” she exclaimed. “That is, I know you were jesting. I...”

*t really* He looked at her funnily.

“I...” Elyse took a breath. “Forgive me.” She tried again. “I was  
*Staring*. Only she had been and felt as bad lying to him as she felt about  
for gawking.

rest of Bran chuckled. “As I said, lying isn’t your strongest skill.” T  
wn,” he winked.

Just like that, he broke the tension; Elyse laughed.

d more “In fairness,” she said. “Is lying *truly* a skill one wishes to canvaspossession of?”

ry and His expression darkened as quickly as it had gone warm. “It is,” he replied cryptically, and then returned to caring after her injuries.

As he cleaned first one slight wound, Elyse found herself left alone with her thoughts and silence for company. Honorable men valued honesty; in fact, they’d be willing to lie down their lives to defend their word.

It wasn’t really a statement that should have left her with questions. A man who freely admitted to the essential duplicity of his nature allowed into her rooms, a man who freely admitted to the essential duplicity of his nature.

Nothing about this night made sense. In fact, nothing about her present awareness of him *did*. Why...why, it was as mad as her parents’ sudden and upcoming efforts to create a match between her and a convicted criminal. Elyse’s belly churned, and her entire body tensed.

How funny the prospect of being foisted off on some dissolute scoundrel, or whatever born son he was, somehow induced a greater dread of being alone with a gentleman whom she knew only as *Bran*.

Somehow, she preferred to remain here, in this world, with her family removed from her family and the expectations they had for her as a friend’s felonious son.

shamed “I’ve finished.”

Elyse squinted.

hen he Bran motioned to her arm, and she followed that gesture. Her hand came up reflexively to cradle one of the spots he motioned to.

be in     At some point, while she'd been woolgathering, he'd concluded  
efforts. His touch had been so soothing, his butterfly soft caress had  
he said, her away.

          It meant he must go. It also meant this would be the last time she  
ne with him.

y to the     She found herself gripped by an overwhelming urge to cry.

          “You *are* hurt,” he repeated, his concern-filled tone slightly accusa

i. She'd     “No. I'm...n-not.” However, she didn't know *what* she was. Sor  
ality of blurred her eyes. Something that felt a good deal like...tears.

          “Sad, then,” he said so very tenderly that one of those drops fell,  
powerful be followed by another. Worry deepened in his eyes. “What is it?”

mmons     “It is n-nothing.” Only, no, it wasn't *nothing*. “No. No it is very  
iminal. *something.*”

          And then, the words came tumbling forth, and Elyse didn't stop  
cond or She let them fly and flow, without a regard for what she said.

ad than     “My parents, they would have me marry a man I've never before n

          A bestial rage transformed his features.

i Bran,     Yes! Finally, someone who understood and shared in her annoyanc  
id their

          “I know something of that,” he confided.

          “That is hard to believe.” Elyse continued before he could interje  
your parents, each year, with a regularity and absolute certainty dre  
some *potential* candidate as your future spouse?”

fingers     “Not...every year, but I've been travel—”

          Elyse stormed to her feet so quickly, Bran nearly toppled back,  
managed to right himself just in time.

led his “That is just it, Bran!” She didn’t allow him a word edgewise. “You  
carried are a man. You are free to travel. I, on the other hand? Even w  
advanced age—”

he saw “You cannot be more than twenty-six.”

That guess brought her up short. He’d accurately guessed her age.

Giving her head a shake, she resumed her rant. “Even as a  
tory. woman,” she substituted, “a woman who is fully employed and no  
nothing lives with her parents, I am not afforded the opportunity to make de  
for myself.”

only to It felt ever so good to vent, especially to someone who didn’t kn  
and who knew nothing about her or her family.

y much But Elyse discovered in this moment, that it was something mo  
that. It wasn’t solely the feeling of being anonymous to him.

o them. It was this glorious wonder of being...*with* him.

ret.”

e.

ct. “Do  
dige up

but he

“That is just it, Bran!” She didn’t allow him a word edgewise. “You? You are a man. You are free to travel. I, on the other hand? Even with my advanced age—”

“You cannot be more than twenty-six.”

That guess brought her up short. He’d accurately guessed her age.

Giving her head a shake, she resumed her rant. “Even as a grown woman,” she substituted, “a woman who is fully employed and no longer lives with her parents, I am not afforded the opportunity to make decisions for myself.”

It felt ever so good to vent, especially to someone who didn’t know her and who knew nothing about her or her family.

But Elyse discovered in this moment, that it was something more than that. It wasn’t solely the feeling of being anonymous to him.

It was this glorious wonder of being...*with* him.

## Chapter 8

The lady's parents had selected a husband for her.

Broden shouldn't be surprised. It was the way of the world. Arranged matches between respectable families—which of a certain she belonged to—coordinated by parents was the standard amongst the *ton*.

Knowing that, however, did nothing to assuage the primitive fury in his chest. It was only because in a short time, he'd come to respect a woman of spirit, strength, and intelligence. Such a lady should not be expected to make a cold, impersonal match. Instead, she should be trusted to herself select the man whom she'd spend the rest of her life with.

Those assurances didn't help.

Rather, they only served to deepen the fiery rage which threatened to consume him.

Who was the *man*?

Of a certainty, even without knowing the bastard's identity, Broden would stake his life the gentleman wasn't deserving of her.

God, how he despised all of this: his volatile emotions. A lack of self-control.

What the hell had he been thinking?

Why had he sought her out in the taproom? Nay, he knew why. Given his behavior toward her, he'd been in the wrong and owed her an apology for the way in which he'd conducted himself.

Granted her being in his rooms had been suspicious, but he had logic. He should have put together all the puzzle pieces.



The better question, the more accurate question, was: why had he s  
her and then joined her in her rooms? Because now he knew things ab  
that he'd rather not think about or know about.

When he spoke, Broden managed to keep his voice unwavering. “  
ed to—suit?”

“My *parents* believe we do.” She grimaced.

Aye, he shared her revulsion. “And what of you?” he pressed.

The proud woman caught her lower lip between her teeth. “You  
ever be first one who has asked that question.”

“It occurs to me you didn’t answer mine.”

She didn’t speak; she just gave Broden a lengthy look that said fa  
than any words could.

“That bad?” he drawled in an attempt to chase away some of the g  
in her troubled features.

His efforts proved successful.

She managed a small smile. “*Worse.*”

A loose curl slipped over her regal brow, and she blew at the lo  
recalcitrant strand fluttered right back into its previous place. This ti  
aggravated lady didn’t bother attempting to push it back.

When she volunteered nothing more, Broden pressed her for detail  
her potential bridegroom. “Is he near in age?”

“To me?” She pursed her mouth. “From the letter I received des  
him, the gentleman has had a very long, *difficult* life.”

Her parents would marry her off to an old codger. Broden’s loath  
the abominable parents in question grew.

sat with “And is he an old *reprobate*?” Because God spare both the lady’s  
out her and her prospective bridegroom, for Broden would hunt the pair do  
commit that darkest of sins he’d been wrongly convicted of.

Do you She wrinkled her nose. “He is *worse* than a rogue. He is malevolent  
scapegrace, a brutish fiend whose influential parents paid to make his  
disappear.”

Broden, himself only having been victim a short while ago to one  
inventive list of insults, would have felt bad for another. *This* man, he  
he’d heap a host of far blacker words; ones that would have caused even  
bold, brave woman before him to wilt and blush.

“*These* are the same beloved parents you spoke of?” he seethed.

More of that mind-numbing rage brought Broden’s hands into tight  
He clenched and unclenched them, and when that didn’t help, he tried  
—still to no avail.

“It is likely less of a statement about their regard for me, and more  
indication of their fear and desperation that I will remain a spinster.”

“They deserve neither your devotion nor your defense.”

“It...is complicated.”

It wasn’t. Not the way Broden saw it.

She placed a delicate palm gently on his arm, and he looked at her.

“I am being selfish.”

His nostrils flared. “You think you are being selfish and not—”

“As you rightly pointed out, you find yourself in a similar circumstance

“It isn’t the same, though. Not really. What you said earlier was  
My parents also want me to wed someone I have absolutely no interest

s father marrying. She's a spinster who has no other marital prospects  
wn and desperate enough to agree to a marriage with me, a man whom she'  
before met."

olent, a "She is long in the tooth, then."

crimes "I do not care if she is Athena or Cleopatra resurrected from l  
tomb. For that matter, I barely recall the woman's name. What I do  
e of her however, is that I loved before and *lost* before, and I have no inter  
o however, marrying."

ven this This marked the first time he'd stated his truths aloud, and he  
surprisingly good for freeing that declaration.

ht fists. She drew back. Sorrow and shock seeped from her expressive eyes  
"Oh," she whispered. "I am so sorry."

d again Broden grunted. "It was a long time ago."

re of an It was a long, long time ago. So much so, that the memory of Alv  
faded to the point it was a struggle to draw forth in clear detail her l  
visage. And he loathed himself for that. Just as he hated those  
destroyed her—and his—life.

Eleanor—because, in this instant, he desperately needed her to be  
woman with a real name—placed her palm upon his bicep in a so  
touch. Even modest though that offering may be, Broden's muscles  
reflexively with a masculine awareness of her whisper-soft touch.

ance." "It matters not *when* one loved and lost. It just matters that o  
Bran."

correct. Through the haze of Broden's desire, the significance of her mur  
erest in rang clear—this woman understood loss.

and is In thinking, only a person who'd *suffered* either a broken heart  
s never death of a beloved one could speak with such accuracy. It certainly  
explain what accounted for the sorrowful look she had about her. The  
had worn before they'd begun conversing and sharing parts of themsel  
ner lost A log shifted in the hearth, and the fire crackled. The air suddenly  
know, with a voltaic current. That same blaze cast a slight, luminescent glow  
tion of her; it illuminated each stunning feature. Perhaps it was merely this  
and this moment, but he found himself entranced.

e felt... He dipped his head a smitch, and she picked hers up the tiniest am  
They hovered there, a breath away from kissing.

It would be the first time since he'd been imprisoned. And he wan  
embrace. He wanted this woman's kiss. There'd be enough reason to  
about and wonder why, after. For now, her luscious, crimson-hu  
proved more potent than a siren's song.

His mystery lady closed her eyes.

who'd *Kiss her.*

*Take what she is offering and give her what she seeks.*

e a real Except... Broden froze.

licitous Why couldn't he truly be the dishonorable cur the entire bloody  
jumped took him for?

He backed away. "I should go."

ne did, Her eyes flew open; confusion and then understanding dawned  
depths.

muring "Yes," she said, her voice pitched an octave up.

For the So why didn't he leave? Why did he remain longer here? There would be nothing left to say.

one she Broden turned to go, and then abruptly stopped mid-stride. For, before she went, there was a great deal that ought to be said.

He pulsed "I have...enjoyed myself..." He tried to find the right words, but wasn't altogether sure, there were any. "More than I ever believed any longer." For, in the quick span of the time spent with this beautiful beauty, he'd been able to forget his past and his present and live only in the present now.

She smiled. "Yes, well, the surefire way to form a friendship is through a good, old-fashioned break-in and the threat of doing someone bodily harm."

He worried "And don't forget the creative insults."

She smiled "Oh, I thought that didn't need mentioning as it was understood."

He laughed; that thunderous explosion of mirth burst past all the despair, despondency and hate. And this joviality? It was a state he'd never thought to know, and definitely not one he'd expected to have on the way to his family's annual house party.

His amusement faded and she proved more in control than he.

Her world Her lips returned to a more somber set; ultimately, she was the one who once and for all, put an end to their exchange. With bold, confident steps she made her way across the room. When she reached the door, she turned the lock, ducked her head out, and angled a look first left, and then right.

in their She returned an instant later and pressed the panel quietly behind her.  
"There is no one."

*It is time to go.*

as, after Apparently, Sir Lancelot was of a like opinion. The guinea pig scampered down the side of the bed. Letting out a soft, unladylike—and endearing—before he—curse, Eleanor bolted for the mischievous rodent, and scooped him close.

Once she'd safely secured her precious bundle, Broden took his leave. Only he he went, from the corner of his eye, he caught her cradling the guinea pig close. Would a single woman amongst all the *ton* dare go to so much trouble for the creature? She'd risked life and limb—her very reputation—in the suffered injuries which she'd not complained once about, all to save time for her sister.

rough a He wasn't the marrying sort. He wasn't even the care-for-anyone arm." But if he had been, she possessed a strength of spirit that was hard to deny.

Broden clasped the door handle and had just stepped outside when she came the patter of her distinct footfalls.

ayers of His engaging nighttime companion called out, "Elyse!"

r again He whipped around.

journey Suddenly timid, when she'd been nothing but brave and bold all night, the lady remained half-hidden behind the half-open door, while in the arms of Broden, she hugged her guinea pig closer.

ie who, "Elyse?" he repeated.

aps, she She nodded.

ned the There was something familiar about that name she'd mentioned. Was it?

"Elyse Caldecott," she murmured.

nd her. Then, the reason for the familiarity of that name hit Broden squarely in the solar plexus.

mpered     How did she know about the woman his parents had picked for his  
ig for itHe hadn't mentioned...

lose.     *He hadn't mentioned...*

ave. As     All the muscles in Broden's body went whipcord straight and his tl  
nea pigraced.

trouble     *It can't be. It is impossible. It is...*

n—and     "My name," she repeated and took a deep breath. "My name i  
hat gift     Caldecott."

ne sort.     With that unknowing revelation on her part, Elyse Caldecott, the  
eny.     whom his parents expected him to wed, shut the door.

m there

ght, the  
. visible

hat—?

e in the

How did she know about the woman his parents had picked for his bride?  
He hadn't mentioned...

*He hadn't mentioned...*

All the muscles in Broden's body went whipcord straight and his thoughts raced.

*It can't be. It is impossible. It is...*

"My name," she repeated and took a deep breath. "My name is Elyse Caldecott."

With that unknowing revelation on her part, Elyse Caldecott, the woman whom his parents expected him to wed, shut the door.



## Chapter 9

As Aunt Hester's carriage bounced along the uneven roads, carrying on the last leg of her journey, Elyse stared out her window at the clear, sun-filled, blue sky. The sun had long succeeded in thawing the ice from the panes. Beads of water, tiny, leftover remnants of the winter storm, pecked at the glass.

Resting her chin upon her hand, Elyse followed the zig-zag path as the crystal drops took.

Where she'd been joined a day earlier by her maid, who'd been banished by terror, Joan had now opted to ride on the box with Kenneth, and Elyse found herself alone.

Alone but for her solitary thoughts; thoughts which were intermittently interrupted by the combined laughter, boisterous and almost childlike, of the driver and lady's maid.

Between that levity and the vibrant glare of the rays nearly blindingly gleamed off the windows and the flawless azure sky that extended as far as her eye could see, Elyse could almost believe summer had arrived and that everything that'd transpired late last evening had merely been the stuff of dreams.

It was, however, when she glanced down at the roads and not up at the distant horizon, she had confirmation there'd been no dream, only a real encounter between herself and some stranger.

"You can keep calling him a stranger," she muttered under her breath. "But you shared more with that *stranger* than you have with your sister's parents, Aunt Hester—"

Kenneth's booming laugh interrupted the rest of Elyse's sentence.

"Yes, it *is* farcical. I agree."

g Elyse  
oudless,  
rom the  
eppered

This time, Joan joined in with a rollicking laugh of her own.

With a groan, Elyse sank deeper and deeper into the folds of her  
"Don't think about it. Don't think about it." She beat that mantra in  
head—to no avail.

h those  
Season was to whatever *good* friends had invited the Caldecott brood  
year. That was why she'd welcomed the snowstorm that stalled her tra  
esieged

And The Mermaid Inn? That medieval structure built a lifetime a  
d Elyse  
been her salvation.

That was, until the mortifying second where she'd believed Bran in  
tittently  
e of her  
to kiss her, and she'd closed her eyes and stretched up on tiptoes and r  
kiss him in return.

ding as  
You silly ninny. Did you truly believe he intended to kiss you?

d as far  
When he'd pounced on her in his chambers and taken her for a thi  
d. And  
spoken quite plainly and shared his truths. She didn't possess the ma  
stuff of  
beauty to tempt him.

She'd never been anything more than passably pretty. She'd no  
o at the  
cared one way or another about her looks since she didn't wish to marri

real-life  
And if she ever *did* change her mind on the matter? Well, she c  
wouldn't tie herself to some vacuous fellow who cared about her appea

breath.  
Elyse stilled; the passing snowscape became a blur before her, as i  
s, your  
herself in the recent exchange that continued to bedevil.

*...I do not care if she is Athena or Cleopatra resurrected from her tomb. For that matter, I barely recall the woman's name. What I do care, however, is that I loved before and lost before, and I have absolute intention of marrying...*

er seat.

Bran's incisive avowal whispered around her mind and Elyse drew a shaky breath.

mastide

Nay, if she ever had a reversal on thoughts of marriage, then only thought as Bran would decidedly be the type of gentleman, she'd entrusted her heart to.

vels.

*If she had a reversal on marriage?*

go, had

*Bran would be the type of gentleman she'd entrust her heart to?*

ntended

Saints on Sunday! Elyse balked. What harum-scarum thoughts were galloping unchecked through her head? She'd never give her heart to a man. Ever. No one, absolutely no one was worth risking her sanity, heart, and life over.

ef, he'd

current state of delirium.

anner of

They'd been two ships, passing in the night and that was all.

t much

Confused, Elyse looked about.

y.

"We've arrived, miss."

ertainly

It took a moment for that announcement to compute but as she glanced around her. Kenneth's voice registered, so too did the fact the carriage had come to a stop.

she lost

She'd arrived.

Elyse sighed.

her lost At least she'd been so preoccupied by her humiliating end with  
to know, she'd not spent any time thinking about her impending visit with her  
tely no Alas, she couldn't now say with any real certainty which fate proved  
more awkward one: stilted family reunion or mortifying meeting with  
ew in a who'd been repulsed by her.

*Knock-Knock—*

ne who "I am ready, Kenneth."

rust her *I'm lying, Kenneth.*

Aunt Hester's strapping driver drew the door open and helped her  
down.

Joan rushed over to meet her.

re these That seemed to spark movement from the marquess and marching  
anyone. servants. All seven of the footmen in wait, came swarming through the  
nd soul door and down the limestone steps, which at some point had been cleared  
snow.

from a The minute those servants clad in crimson uniforms with gold embroidery  
upon the high-shouldered stopped beside Elyse's carriage, Kenneth stepped  
back inside and withdrew her valise. A handsome, bewigged footman  
immediately took the embroidered back and hastened up the steps. Another  
servant stepped forward to take the other servant's place.

soon as Kenneth passed her other satchel onto the next footmen in line. They  
to a full reached for the wicker basket which had fast become so beloved to her.  
Her driver started to hand Sir Lancelot to another servant—

*Sir Lancelot!*

1 Bran, “I’ll take him!” she cried, and even with her legs unsteady from a bumpy, jouncing ride, she raced over and put herself between Kenneth, Sir Lancelot, and Lord Dalkeith’s efficient servants.

1 a man With the tiny creature once again in her care, some of the tens of thousands of people in the crowd turned to Elyse. “I have it,” she repeated, but this time in more modulated tones.

They stood there, the lot of them: Elyse, Kenneth, Joan, and Lord Dalkeith, along with the many footmen who stared confusedly at the basket Elyse insisted on carrying herself.

and her The befuddled servants looked back and forth between one another, each strained for a glance inside Aunt Hester’s carriage.

Understanding dawned. Elyse inclined her head. “Thank you for your assistance, but that is all the belongings I have traveled with.”

1e front Their gazes became all the more mystified.

aned of Ah, yes. The master and mistress of this palatial estate would be accustomed to guests arriving with but three small pieces of baggage.

paulets It was no wonder a lord and lady in possession of such wealth, power, and influence thought they could—and as a matter of fact, *had*—prevent their son’s crimes.

Another The five remaining footmen sank into identical, deep, respectful bows, and Elyse began a slow, dreaded march to this latest reunion spot where she had summoned her to.

1 Elyse. As she walked, she kept a firm grip on Sir Lancelot and directed her attention forward.

Beyond question, Elyse knew exactly how each moment would play out. She’d step inside some black-and-white paved, ornate, rococo inspired

om the There, she'd find her parents waiting. Mother would have her  
ancelot, clasped at her breast, and wear a smile that, given the great anguish  
suffered as a mother, could only ever be false. Father would sta  
ion left slightly behind his wife like he were some avenging protector.

Her sisters would be wearing those tremendous, Caldecott grins.  
ord and the petty and horrible older sister that Evie's passing had left her,  
t Elyse return that expression of happiness, all the while, resentful that they sn  
freely and easily, a feat Elyse hadn't managed since she'd lost her bi  
er, then and closest friend.

That is, she hadn't smiled freely—until yesterday, with *him*.

or your And funny, the minute she reached the stately landing, and an  
black-clad drew the double doors open to grant her entry, Elyse reali  
discomfiture had shifted from this impending overblown meeting, to...

dn't be At least, he'd momentarily distracted her from all this.

For her well-intentioned family's benefit, Elyse took time to an  
power, smile—one that felt stiff to her facial muscles—and stepped inside.

aid off Frowning, she glanced about. But for the cavernous, domed, hex  
vestibule, she'd been...wrong about everything else. There stood no  
l bows, Caldecotts; no sisters, nor parents, nor smiles, nor the chatter of her fa  
parents talking over one another.

Instead, quiet, made all the more voluminous, for the cavernous pl  
ted her now stood, proved the only one to welcome her.

A girlish voice sounded through the silence and exploded in a ce  
lay out. echo. "They aren't here."

, foyer. Elyse whipped her gaze up and found her youngest sister. Emmy s  
her legs through the white-painted wooden posts, and her legs d

palms down.

Even in that childlike pose, Elyse was struck by how much and just Emmy's limbs were and how, in one year apart from the youngest Ca how much pudg Emmy had lost in her always-chubby cheeks, an . Elyse, how much her baby sister...*changed*.

So much time had passed. A surprisingly small and painful lump formed in her throat. Her sister was...growing up.

*And you are missing it.*

Emmy flashed a big, cheeky grin that revealed those bottom middle slightly eschew teeth and stuck an arm through the slat to wave at Elyse. "Not even a hello for your baby sister," Emmy shouted down.

*"Perhaps closing yourself off from anyone else's love, will not leave you better off. It will just leave you lonely..."*

Elyse started, as the echo of words she'd spoken to Broden reverberated in her mind.

"I'll take that as a no, then!" Emmy's teasing voice brought Elyse back to the present.

She waved up at the only family member who'd come to greet her. It really was. Elyse didn't enjoy the big shows that always marked her arrival.

Did she?

"Hello, Emmy," she shouted up.

At that moment, the footmen arrived. With Elyse's small collection of valises in hand, the two men marched up the stairs.

“Mm-hm.” Her younger sister gave her head big back and forth longer which set her impressively rounded ringlets bouncing at her shoulders. “I decott, cross with you.”

d...just Elyse stole a peek at the marquess and marchioness’s servants sc off.

“It isn’t polite to speak about personal matters in—”

er baby “Mm-hm,” Emmy interrupted that gentle chastisement. “You do to disappear and return but once a year and dole out big sister gu You’ve forfeited big sister privileges.”

lle two, Heat blushed her cheeks. Emmy had been but a small girl who e. died, and Elyse left. Had her sister always been this...forthright and sn

Thankfully Emmy brought them back to a safely safer topic. “V ive you bets of when you’d arrive.”

“Ah. I’m taking it this has something to do with your crossness wit

berated “Among other things, yes.”

Elyse drew back. Among other things. Goodness, Mother and rushing would have their hands full with this one.”

“You lost?” Elyse ventured, her question boomed in the empt . It was more, three-story foyer.

net her “By a *heap!*”

A wistful smile teased the corners of her lips.

“Oh, I’m glad you find this amusing, Elyse.”

“Forgive me.” Elyse promptly schooled her features. “I did not r tion of give this exchange anything other than the proper solemnity it deserve:

“Damned straight you didn’t.”



A laugh exploded from Elyse's lips. Funny, she'd not realized how she'd missed bantering—until she met an enigmatic stranger named Br

“Who won?” Elyse asked before her sister could take her to task any more for her amusement.

“Papa wagered you'd arrive yesterday.”

“Amidst the storm?” she asked incredulously.

“Precisely.” Emmy rolled her eyes. “As if you ever went out of your way to rush to be with us.”

Her sister spoke only truths, that left arrows lodged in Elyse's heart. She wanted to say: *it is not that I don't want to be with you. It's that I'm afraid of you.*

*Does the reason really matter when the outcome is the same, Emmy?* she whispered at the back of her mind.

“Edith said you wouldn't come at all,” Emmy continued. “Hutch isn't here because of Father's doing,” through the rungs, she fluttered a hand about, “*whatever* does.”

“Important men-stuff, I assume,” Elyse murmured, giving that nod of proper due seriousness.

“Oh, the *most* important.”

They shared a smile.

“I take it Mother was the winner?”

“Mama said you feel uncomfortable coming around, so you'd delay for most a day, and that you *really* wanted to be with us, so you'd be here *today*.”

so much Today it was.

ran. *Talk about a mother knowing her child.*

ask once On the heel of that, another thought entered. Her mother had  
without a doubt when Elyse would arrive, and yet...she'd not come to  
her?

our way “They’re gathering up boughs and holly and greenery for the  
making event the marchioness has planned for tomorrow,” Emmy exp  
and in that, proved unerringly accurate in just how close she’d read  
thoughts.

t. “And you didn’t go?” Emotion filled Elyse’s throat, making it diff  
that, I’m get the rest of her question out. “You waited here for me?”

a voice Emmy stuck her tongue out. “Only so I could yell at you wh  
arrived.”

inson,” This time, Elyse didn’t attempt to hide her smile. “I don’t suppos  
because persuade you to come downstairs and see me?”

it is he In reply, Emmy set her mouth and tipped her chin up at a defiant an

reply its With a fake sigh, Elyse set her basket down and knelt beside it. “  
unfortunate,” she paused for effect, “especially as Aunt Hester asked  
personally deliver a gift to you.”

With that, Elyse reached inside and withdrew Sir Lancelot. Ca  
cradling him with both hands, held him against her cheek. “Isn’t he th  
precious creature you’ve ever seen?” She rubbed her cheek against the  
pig who’d become so very precious to her, and in him, she’d foreve  
ly by at that chance meeting at The Mermaid Inn.

be here “Is she mine?” Emmy whispered.

Elyse lowered Sir Lancelot and brought him close to her chest. “going to be but in order to hand him over to your care, you’d have to known down and see me. And you’ve been very clear that—”

to greet Emmy let loose a happy shriek. “He’s miiiine!”

In her excitement, the younger girl struggled to disentangle her leg wreath-between the posts. When she did, she bolted down the stairs with a speed plained, sent Elyse’s heart scrambling into her throat.

Elyse’s The moment Emmy reached the landing, she skidded across the bl white marble, checkered floor. For all the ways Emmy had shown her difficult to a child were coming to an end, there still remained some time before became a grown woman.

en you A bright-eyed Emmy stumbled to a stop before Elyse and held her up.

se I can Elyse made to hand Sir Lancelot over to the girl’s tender care stopped. The guinea pig scrunched his nose, wiggled his whisker angle. looked at Elyse with big, soulful eyes.

‘That is *We shared a lot in a short amount of time, little fellow. The Merm* l me to *Bran.*

A question lit dark brown eyes nearly identical to Elyse’s.

arefully Emmy’s outstretched hands wavered.

re most “Here you are,” Elyse murmured and turned her precious Sir L guinea over to Emmy’s good care.

r recall Emmy’s still plump, heavily freckled cheeks went soft. “C goodness. I love you.”

He was Elyse, an outsider, watched as girl and guinea pig cuddled and to come “He is very easy to love,” she murmured.

Elyse’s youngest sibling must have heard a note in her voice but Emmy looked up and understanding dawned in her eyes.

gs from “You love him. You must keep him.” Emmy attempted to hand him  
eed that Instantly, Elyse put her hands up, denying that most magnanimous gifts. “No! He—Sir Lancelot—is yours.”

ack and Emmy faltered. “You’re certain?” she asked, hope bringing her voice days as decibel.

the girl “More than certain.”

r palms “Sir Lancelot,” Emmy murmured. “I like that.” She wrinkled her and mouth, matching the guinea pig. “You are a very handsome fellow

re—but Elyse ruffled the top of Emmy’s curls; that instinctive gesture came effortlessly as it had when Emmy had been but the tiniest of little cherubs, and

“Oh, Elyse. Thank you.”

aid Inn. “You must thank Aunt Hester, Emmy. Sir Lancelot is a gift from her; he has merely been his companion.” And he, hers.

“Yes, well Aunt Hester never comes ‘round, and, as such, Sir Lancelot would not be here if it weren’t for you.”

ancelot Elyse bit her cheek to keep from saying that with the trouble Sir Lancelot had landed himself in their journey, he almost hadn’t been here.

Another wistful smile formed on her lips.

Oh, my “Elyse, would you mind terribly if I took Sir Lancelot to my room that we may get better acquainted?”

ounded. Elyse looped an arm about her sister's shoulders and drew her in for a quick side hug. "I cannot think of a better idea. You'll need his basket because said, and fetching the item in question, Elyse handed it over.

With reverent care, Emmy returned Sir Lancelot to his travel crate and looked about for a servant hovering in the shadows—there were dozens of servants hovering in the shadows.

A pretty, young maid with frizzed red hair came rushing over.

"Hullo," Elyse greeted, as the young woman sank into a curtsy. "I'm wondering if you would be so gracious as to help my sister gather up provisions for her new friend?"

Elyse went on to provide an enumeration of what Emmy would need. After she'd finished, the maid dipped another curtsy and then hurried to gather up the necessities now needed for the new—albeit temporary—addition to the Burgess's household.

After she'd gone, Elyse turned to Emmy and proceeded to offer an accounting of how she should and would need to take care of the guinea pig. "Then, just like that, Emmy left, and Elyse looked about.

With her family out and about, taking part in the marchioness's festivities and Emmy and Sir Lancelot getting acquainted with her guest chambers, Elyse found herself...alone.

Which is what she preferred.

That reminder, however, rang hollow.

Her stomach grumbled; that noisy rumbling made all the louder the absolute stillness around her and only overemphasized the fact that there were no people about. No noisy chatter. No...any chatter.

n for a *Nothing*.

et,” she And with a sigh, Elyse went to change her attire, and once done  
break her fast. For hopefully then, everyone else would have already  
e. Elysetheir morning meal and Elyse would be free to sit alone...with thou  
alwaysBran as her only company.

“I was  
arrange

d need.  
d off to  
orary—

r a full  
a pig.

ss and  
nted in

by the  
at there

*Nothing.*

And with a sigh, Elyse went to change her attire, and once done, she'd break her fast. For hopefully then, everyone else would have already taken their morning meal and Elyse would be free to sit alone...with thoughts of Bran as her only company.

## Chapter 10

For the first time since he'd been sent off to prison and returned, Broden sat in the same George III, green upholstered dining chair he'd always occupied at his family's breakfast table.

All his kin were engaged with one another in various conversations, each pairing spoke loudly to make themselves heard over the din of general laughter and booming voices of the other Burgesses around them.

Absently, Broden picked up his cup of hot, milky coffee and swirled its contents in a reverse circle.

Once upon a lifetime ago, he had kept up so very easily with the fire banter. Before he'd always been right in the middle of the fray, laughing the loudest and the one cracking the most jokes.

Another swell of laughter rang out around the breakfast room. Broden, a voyeur to his own family, glanced around each of them, like an...outsider.

In his absence, their lives had carried on, and he'd...survived. He didn't know how to be with his family. Aye, there'd been Hamish; a prisoner whose friendship had gotten Broden through hell. The other, however, was now married and...*happy*.

And though Broden would have given his soul to have Hamish's peace, the fact remained, Broden remained the lone of their previous who didn't know how to be with anyone.

*That isn't true.*

In fact, he'd sat in the same place through three different groups of people who'd come—and then went—for breakfast, in wait for one woman w



had finally felt normal around.

Broden smiled into his drink; grateful his family proved ot  
den sat occupied with their conversations. Distracted so he could focus on h  
ccupied thoughts—ones, since yesterday, that had remained fixed, locke  
centered on—*Elyse Caldecott*.

is; each Poetical and graceful, the name suited her, far more than even Elea  
irrulous *And she'll be here soon.*

And for the first time in so long, he felt...something that wasn't  
rled the anger, sadness, or annoyance but rather, an overwhelming excitement.

Broden stole yet another glance at the empty doorway.

When he'd left The Mermaid Inn, he knew Elyse's carriage had n  
e rapid- usually far behind him.

He'd rode at a clip that kept him close enough to be at hand sho  
m, and require any assistance or come to any harm. But what if...somethi  
feeling happened to her?

Broden tensed and glanced over to find Bellamy carefully studyin  
But he There came the tinkling of metal touching glass, which put an end  
fellow brothers' unspoken exchange.

Broden followed the source of that delicate tapping to, none other t

Alden.

Alden looked about, verifying all eyes were on him—that'd alway  
sh find the future marquess's way. Broden had a good old time ribbing his  
us duo, brother for it.

Their lone sister, Robin—or Rob—as the brothers affectionately  
f guests the only girl sibling in their midst tired first of the over-exaggerated  
hom he

“Oh, will you just say what it is you want to say, Aldi?”

herwise “Very well.” Alden sank his elbows onto the edge of the table so th  
his ownframed his porcelain plate. “At what point are we going to discuss the  
d, andfor mother and father’s summ—*oww*.”

Alden scowled at their mother. “Did you kick m—*oww*?”

nor. “I most certainly did, and it is the least you deserve.”

As mother and son launched into an all-out quarrel, with the m  
regret,attempting—in vain—to play the role of peacemaker—Broden still  
found himself transported to another room, and another lady, and  
kick.

ot been “*Did you...kick me?*”

“*No?*”

uld she “*No. Or, ‘No?’?*”

ng had “*I’ll have you know, Mr. BBBB, I was not lying. In fact, I’m also  
for being a very skilled Brag player...*”

ng him. That recent memory of his and Elyse’s playful banter and r  
l to thelaughter played all over again in Broden’s mind, and he smiled.

han— “Please, please.” Bellamy, the middle one of the Burgess boys, thu  
palm upon the table, pulling Broden back to the present, and silencing  
of their family.

ys been Everyone looked to the middle brother.

s eldest “You’re going to scare him away,” he stated. Long the most st  
serious of their lot—that was, until Broden’s return—his chasti  
namedsucceeded in temporarily silencing the Burgesses.

silence.

“Broden can’t be scared away by anyone,” Robin shot back. “I’m not afraid of *anything*.”

There it was again. When Broden left England, Robin had been a girl, with an oversized adoration for Broden. It appeared some things had changed.

Broden’s fingers curled reflexively about his coffee cup. What if Robin say if she knew he’d returned with so many fears and insecurities. He no longer knew how to function in society?

His face prickled at the feel of being watched. He glanced up to find the marquess had lifted a hand, which he’d only ever done when imparting guidance amongst his children.

“No one is without fear,” Broden’s father, ever the voice of reason and logic amongst his headstrong children, added. “Regardless of whether you are a grown man, a grown woman, a babe, or a child, there is something that is *known* brings each of us trepidation.”

He took care to look at each child, before settling his focus squarely on Broden’s face. Strong, deep, and sincere emotion emanated from his eyes. “Do you understand?”

Broden struggled to swallow. He understood. That question went to the rest of the table, but truly was directed at him.

Murmurs of ascent went up around the table.

His father, however, could never fathom just how changed Broden’s social and experience had left him.

The marchioness cleared her throat. “If I may?” She laid out her right hand and stretched her left one atop it, so those limbs pointed directly at Broden.

He isn't "There is no reason we wanted Broden to come, other than we want him here with us."

young Robin snorted, and all eyes went her way.

had not Their father sent his daughter a disapproving look. "And just what that, my girl?"

would His black hair may have gone silver, and wrinkles formed at the  
ities he of his eyes, but the marquess remained a devoted spouse and protector  
marchioness, against all friends and foes—including their very own children

find the Robin waved the tip of her fork about. "I thought it would be clear  
he was a snort."

"Are you calling your mother a liar?"

son and "Given my mother penned a note to Broden about a prospective bride,  
r one is clearly stated her intentions of arranging a match between them, then why  
ng that

Odd, but a short time had passed since Broden read that missive from  
mother. When had he forgotten his earlier rage at her intentions?

rely on "Please," Mother implored. "We have guests. This is not a discussion  
father's be had here, in this way."

t to all, "No," Robin said, expressionless. "Ambushing your son is definitely  
lesser sin here."

"Robin," Bellamy and Alden castigated.

roden's Assertive as she'd ever been, Robin dismissed them outright and  
to Broden. "You have endured so much."

ght arm Their mother gasped. "Robin!"

roden. "No! I would say my piece. I would say what *should* be said." She  
arch look the way of her other brothers. "As I'm the only one who

simply willing to do so.”

The marquess looked across the room to the footmen doing an impressive job of blending into the walls. At that single glance, one uniformed servant closest to the door, took his cue and drew the door closed.

Robin picked up where she'd left off with Broden. “I know no one to talk about what happened to you. Everyone wants to pretend it happened, and have you find a wife and move on.”

She thumped a fist against her breast. “I want that for you, too, Broden. That is why, I won't see you go about marrying an icy, aloof spinster if one else wants!”

His frown deepened. It didn't matter that he'd had the same impression as Robin. He'd learned right quickly the wrongness in rushing to judgment. But hearing his sister's disapproval of Elyse, and to know from his father all been talking about her, lit a spark of rage within.

In a sign he'd been preparing for the role of marquess for the whole of his existence, Alden raised his voice, and cut into the noise. “Brother, have anything to say on the matter?”

The room fell silent.

All gazes swung to Broden.

“I want you all to stop deciding what I need and what I don't need,” Broden said coolly.

Footfalls sounded in the hall. There came a knock, and then, Mr. Pendergast, the butler—a younger fellow, new to their employ—Broden only just sent away that morn, entered the room.

He appears

And where he'd only been disappointed before that Elyse hadn't been rather one to appear. This time, she was the last person he'd subject to his care of the kin.

"Miss Elyse Caldecott," Mr. Paulson announced.

Anticipation brought Broden flying to his feet before the ladies wished stepped through the entryway. Following behind him, Broden's family

And then, at long last, Elyse appeared.

The emerald, green gown he'd forever associate with their first man. And was nothing more than a memory. In its place, she'd donned an azure who no satin dress, a shade to match the cloudless sky. Her olive-hued skin though an illusion of tanned skin, gleamed.

The marchioness was the first to speak. "Miss Caldecott."

He'd been so focused on seeing Elyse, that he'd not considered until they'd how awkward a public meeting would be for her.

Oh, hell.

And while introductions were made, and greetings went up, attempted to make himself invisible. He inched back and edged away flashed a frown in Broden's direction, which sent every single set directly to Broden.

The prettiest, and now the most confused set of the lot—Elyse's.

She loomed there; frozen, unblinking. Her mouth moved, no however, emerged.

Broden should have anticipated this reunion wouldn't go the way he learned thought—or hoped—it would. *I should have sought her out.*

Alas, it was too late—

een the      With a sudden and stark inhalation, Elyse recoiled like she'd s  
aviling upon the horned Krampus, punisher of naughty children. She clawed  
throat. "You," she breathed.

Broden, however, would be the only one to hear the accusation th  
y even not a condemnation. Well, at least, not the condemnation he was  
stood. deserving of.

Gasps went up around the table.

neeting      Robin took a lunging step Elyse's way, but Bellamy caught her  
re blue arm and kept her in her place, but couldn't stop her words. "How d  
at gave enter this household and speak to him so?"

*Oh, hell.*

"Robin, don't," Broden barked at his well-meaning, but complet  
til now the-mark sister.

Elyse's focus on Broden wavered. She vacillated between Broden  
fuming sister.

Broden      "I do not care who her family is or that she's a guest, or if she's  
. Alden Mother of Jesus herself," Robin hissed. "I will not allow her to di  
of eyes you, let alone marry you."

Blinking rapidly, Elyse looked to the assembled Burgesses, an  
Robin had said seemed to poke through her confused state.

words,      "No," Elyse whispered. "That isn't what I—I..."

"It seemed very clear that is precisely what you were—"

ay he'd      "Enough," Broden shouted.

"Perhaps you can explain what it is you *did* mean, Miss Caldecot  
marquess put that question to Elyse.

et eyes Every gaze centered on Elyse once more.

l at her The hell he'd allow this to carry on any further. "I'll not allow the  
a public inquisition of Miss Caldecott," Broden warned, adding a l  
ere andsteel to that warning.

in fact, His voice seemed to free her from her frozen state.

Elyse bolted.

The Burgesses exchanged stunned looks and then began quarrelli  
by the one another. The only reaction that mattered to Broden, however, belo  
are you the woman who'd torn out of the breakfast room like a bat out of hell.

He dragged a shaky hand through his hair.

She'd not wanted to come to his family's house party any mo  
ely off-Broden himself had. And to both know his kin had so wrongly, so thoi  
misinterpreted the reason for her reaction to him, and that she, the  
and hiswoman he'd ever known had fled like a frightened doe sent a weight c  
down on his chest.

s Mary, With a curse, Broden set off in pursuit and in so doing, he mar  
sparageonce seemingly impossible feat—he silenced his family.

d what

t?" The



Every gaze centered on Elyse once more.

The hell he'd allow this to carry on any further. "I'll not allow there to be a public inquisition of Miss Caldecott," Broden warned, adding a layer of steel to that warning.

His voice seemed to free her from her frozen state.

Elyse bolted.

The Burgesses exchanged stunned looks and then began quarreling with one another. The only reaction that mattered to Broden, however, belonged to the woman who'd torn out of the breakfast room like a bat out of hell.

He dragged a shaky hand through his hair.

She'd not wanted to come to his family's house party any more than Broden himself had. And to both know his kin had so wrongly, so thoroughly misinterpreted the reason for her reaction to him, and that she, the bravest woman he'd ever known had fled like a frightened doe sent a weight crushing down on his chest.

With a curse, Broden set off in pursuit and in so doing, he managed a once seemingly impossible feat—he silenced his family.

## Chapter 11

With the entire Burgess family glaring daggers at her and now knowing the tender man who'd bewitched her at The Mermaid Inn was none other than Broden Burgess, Elyse did the only thing she could.

She ran.

She bolted from the breakfast room, leaving in her wake a chaotic explosion of shouts and tense discussion among the Burgesses behind her.

And even after she'd placed several corridors between herself and Broden, and all of his kin, she kept on sprinting through Lord and Lady Dalkeith's sprawling country estate.

Her breath came in harsh, loud, heaving gasps.

Elyse raced to get the hell away from him, her family, this household of it.

At last, she reached a closed end.

Gasping, she staggered to a stop, and hunched over in an attempt to draw precious air into her strained lungs. Sweat slicked her brow and marred her palms, and the heat of humiliation proved more unrelenting than the summer sun.

She couldn't face him. She couldn't face any of them.

*Not now. Not ever.*

It'd been a mistake to come here.

Elyse pressed the handle of the nearest door leading to the terrace, outside, and then took off running.

Alas, haste, along with a poor choice of footwear made for a faulty

Elyse skidded, slid, and then came down hard on her knees at the end of the one-hundred-foot or so terrace. The cold pavement driving the unforgivingly into her knees, and she welcomed the distracting pain.

er than It was too much.

*Oh, God.*

Elyse's shoulders sagged and humiliation kept her frozen to the sudden floor. She shivered and shook, and the cold that hung in the air sliced through her garments and stung her skin.

Bran— And she could run no more from any of it.

d Lady Last night, she'd sat in an empty taproom, bonding and sharing in parts about herself. She'd talked about the gentleman her parents wished to marry. Elyse cringed. All the while that *same* man had been seated across the table, all across from her.

Dazed, embarrassed, and panicked, Elyse couldn't sort through the timeline of each jeering pronouncement he'd uttered, or the order of things they'd talked about and argued about. She tried in vain to put her order to them but was too overwrought to get anything to line up.

hottest Her teeth chattered wildly, uncontrollably—from the frost in the air to the discovery she'd only just made, and Elyse wrapped her arms tight around her waist to confer warmth and steady herself.

It didn't help.

Every last word she'd said to him played over and over again in her mind, slipping and tumbling and rolling together into a giant snowball of mortification: the question he'd asked about her prospective bridegroom.

stride. “*That bad?*”

eastern “Worse.”

stabbed And the sarcastic tone she’d taken when she’d unknowingly spoke  
him.

“...*The gentleman has had a very long, difficult life...*”

And the lengthy list of insults she’d used to *describe* him.

terrace “*He is malevolent, a scapegrace, a brutish fiend whose inf*  
through *parents paid to make his crimes disappear.*”

Elyse balked.

And then there were the things *he’d* said about *her*.

intimate “*If you’ve come to use your...unremarkable wiles to snare me,*  
hed her *bound to be disappointed.*”  
directly

The echo of his derisive comments kept coming.

ugh the “*My parents also wish for me to wed someone I have absolu*  
all the *interest in marrying...*”

it some *She’s a spinster who has no other marital prospects...*

r or the *Desperate enough to agree to a marriage with me, a man who*  
*never before met.*”

und her Elyse slapped her hands over her face, but it did little to muff  
mortified moan.

She went still as an even uglier prospect hit her.

er mind “Oh, G-God,” she whispered, her breath left a soft cloud of whi  
of whenthe winter air.

How *long* had he known?

Of course, now so much of it made sense. He'd spoken his hatef  
n about also honest—opinions about Elyse. At some point, he'd realized wh  
been speaking with. From then on, he'd begun showing her kindn  
acting like an entirely different person than the man who'd found he  
rooms—he'd pieced together her identity.

Her mind raced.  
luciential

Yes, it was also why he'd sought to make his apologies, and why l  
with her in the taproom, and intervened on her behalf, or escorted he  
rooms and cared for her injury.

All the time she'd believe she and Bran were two strangers in th  
you're who'd shared a stolen moment in time.

It made so much sense now.

A strong, gusty wind rolled over the patio; that biting winter air w  
tely no her skirts about and sent the dusting of snow that still coated the pa  
dancing in the air like they were new fallen flakes.

Elyse rubbed vigorously at her arms.  
n she's

*Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

She'd leave. That was what she'd do. That's what she was best at.  
ffle her

She'd hand-delivered Emmy's gift, and in making the journey  
Marquess and Marchioness of Dalkeith's, she'd also technically do  
Aunt Hester's bidding and visited Elyse's family.

She wouldn't have to see Bran—*Broden's*, furious family.  
te upon

Her teeth continued chattering from the cold. Suddenly energized  
pushed herself up into a standing and made to turn.

She felt him before she heard him.

ul—but “Elyse,” he murmured in that same sonorous baritone that had tho  
10 he’d bewitched her.

ess and The devil.

r in his Elyse swallowed hard and continued to present her back to hi  
didn’t wish to see Mr. Broden Burgess with two other b’s in his name.

He proved anything but accommodating.

ae’d sat “Elyse,” he said her name again, this time closer indicating he’d m  
r to her

Elyse hugged her arms to her chest, and with all the dignity sh  
muster, she faced him.

ie night And promptly wished she hadn’t.

Attired in black trousers, a black wool overcoat, and a black and s  
blue striped cravat, Broden stood some three paces away.

hipped She bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to taste the metallic t  
vement blood. Why did he have to be a glorious specimen of manhood: i  
primal, and more handsome than the damned David.

“Hello, Bran. Or should I say, Lord Broden Burgess.” His name fe  
her lips like the epithet it was. “If you’ll excuse me? It wouldn’t do fo  
be discovered here alone.”

to the Imagine the disaster that would be if they found themselves traj  
one her marriage.

She made to step around him, but Lord Broden quickly slid into h  
blocking her retreat.

l, Elyse Elyse glared up at him.

“I am sorry,” he said with such gravity and solemn eyes, she could  
believe he wasn’t the bastard who’d taken some perverse delight

roughly humiliation.

“If you’re s-sorry, then step out of my w-way.” God how she hated steady his voice was in the cold, even when she stood here shivering m. She him.

“You are angry.”

The laugh she spewed sounded bitter to her own ears. “M perceptively you are, my lord. Perhaps that was why you were able to my identity while I remained hopelessly ignorant of yours, “*Bran, M B’s and...*”

Her eyes slid shut. *Now she knew two of those names.* Just a known that fierce young woman who’d hurled so much vitriol Elyse apphire had, in fact, been the younger sister who’d gifted Bran—Broden, v nickname.

With that, she hastened past him.

Lord Broden lengthened his stride and easily overtook her so that walked at a brisk clip, side by side.

“I would speak with you,” he said with an urgency in his tone she or us to believe for a moment.

Elyse stopped in her tracks, and between his breadth of muscle and pped in momentum, he went sailing past her.

Lord Broden double backed and bowed his head.

“Broden Bowen Benedict Burgess.” His hushed, solemn tones l her eyes flying open. “Now you know all four of them, but I’d have y me Broden.”

almost  
in her

She'd not be moved that he'd accurately read her thoughts before he wouldn't. "Must you be here?"

before "My family summoned—"

"Not here," she cut him off. Elyse slashed a palm angrily about.

*With me.*"

ly how A shadow flickered across his eyes.

gather She hadn't hurt him. Surely not. That would have to mean he cared for her in some way, which he decidedly did. Not when he'd lied to her and made a fool of her and—

she'd Tears stung her eyes. Elyse looked away and blinked furiously to keep those drops from falling and giving her away.

with his Just as he'd done before, Broden yanked a handkerchief from the pocket in his pocket and offered it to Elyse. Angry with herself for having shown that weakness, she snatched it from his fingers.

at they "You must leave is what you—"

Broden shrugged out of his fur-lined velvet long coat.

he didn't "What are you doing?" Elyse's question faded on her lips.

id rapid He draped that exquisitely crafted garment about her shoulders and enveloped her in a welcome warmth.

Still, she resisted. "I don't want your jacket," she gritted out. She didn't want any considerate showing from him.

brought "Well, that is fine, as I intend for you to keep it, anyway."

you call God, his tone modulated as smooth and effortless as if they chatted on a seasonably comfortable summer's day.

Broden brought his palms up. "Hear me out. *Please.*"



re. She *Please.*

Elyse closed her eyes. Why must he have issued that one word or  
Or lowered his jacket around her shoulders in that protective way?

“Here. Couldn’t he be smug and cool and commanding as his lofty p  
allowed? For then, it would be vastly easier to continue marching p  
and forget the time they’d shared together.

d about But he, this big, proud, cynical man said ‘please’, and he’d done sc  
ner and imploring way.

Huddled in Broden’s coat, absorbing the warmth his body had le  
to keep the fabric, she opened her eyes.

“What?” she asked, her voice again, even.

front of “I know what you’re thinking.”

wn him Elyse sent an eyebrow arcing up. “Do you?”

Broden’s chiseled cheeks already red from the cold went a shade  
under one of those blushes she recognized all too well.

“You knew my identity,” she whispered furiously. “You knew, and  
while you kept *yours* secret.”

ders; it “No! I didn’t. I didn’t know until the moment you shared your  
Elyse, and then when you did, I was in shock a moment, because  
e didn’t dragged a hand through his unfashionably long, wind-tossed black ha  
you were already gone, and I couldn’t very well go knocking on yo  
—” He stopped and moved a gaze over her face. “You don’t believe m

ed on a Elyse bit her lower lip hard. She wanted to remain angry. She *sh*  
furious. And yet, at their first meeting had he not arrived at an err

assumption about her? He'd been big enough to take ownership  
treaty? previous assumptions.

Was this latest exchange between them any different, only with the  
position reversed this time?

ast him His expression went flat. "I see," he said in deadened tones, and th  
a finality in those two syllables that indicated he'd accepted her reject  
in that intended to honor her wishes and leave.

He'd mistaken the reason for her silence!

ft upon Elyse opened her mouth to speak but he cut her off.

"With your reticence, Miss Caldecott, you've called into quest  
honor. As such, there's but one thing to do."

Elyse eyed him warily. "What is that?"

"I have it on the authority of a very sage person it is unpardonable  
deeper someone a liar. In fact, because I am a man, I am required to call you c  
said, in deadly serious tones.

l all the Elyse's brow went shooting up. *Why...why, he's using my words!*

His eyes twinkled. "As I said," he murmured. "A *very* sage person  
name, that, he dropped to his haunches and gathered a small pile of heavy we

..." He Puzzling her brow, she followed his quick movements as he  
ir. "But perfect snowball.

ur door Then, with all the grace and dignity of a courtier handing the crow  
ie." to his liege, Broden proffered that cylindrical missile Elyse's way.

ould be *I don't want to smile. I don't want to smile.* Only, the muscles of  
oneous mouth made a liar of her.

Unnerved, she rolled her eyes. "This is ridiculous," she exclaimed.

of his “Ah, but I didn’t create the rule, Miss Caldecott.” Broden wagged his black eyebrows. “You were the wise one who enlightened me.” He held his snowball in his palm out towards her.

Muttering to herself, she swiped her dueling weapon from him. The sleeves of his jacket fell all the way down, obscuring her arms.

The moment she had her snowball in hand, Broden set to constructing his own projectile.

“I’m at a disadvantage you know,” she drawled.

He paused mid-build and glanced up from his task, with a question in his eyes.

Elyse waved her arms up and down and displayed the impediment of her oversized sleeves.

Broden scoffed. “Hogwash.” Then, a spark of understanding dawned in his devastating blue eyes, thoroughly mixing up her senses.

“What?” she asked, her breath leaving little clouds of white as she

“Never tell me you are making excuses in preparation of your loss.

” With a laugh burst from her lips. “If we weren’t already dueling, my lord would

“If we are using one another’s formal names, then it is, *Mr. Burgess*.” That was right, from what she’d learned about him in advance of their meeting, he opted to be referred to as Mr. Burgess.

“And,” he continued, “at the end of the duel, the winner shall decide whether we may refer to one another by our Christian names.”

Elyse’s “I would call you out all over again—”

Broden lifted a finger. “It wouldn’t be again. I am the one who call you out.”

gled his “—for suggesting I’m making excuses. You try dueling in skirts  
held the jacket that is too large.”

“I don’t make the rules.”

he long She laughed hard and loud and Broden’s deeper expression o  
milled with hers.

o work Elyse shook a finger at him. “I’m beginning to think your offer  
your jacket was motivated by something other than gentlemanly inter  
she said.

n in his As quick as his amusement came, his usual solemnity returned. “Y  
me yet another reason to duel you.” In an instant, he popped back up o  
t of her feet.

As they moved to take their places, Elyse shrugged out of his jack  
vned in let it slide to the pavement.

He gave her a look. “Back-to-back, Miss Caldecott and then we co  
spoke. paces,” he instructed, already getting himself into position. “Let us  
,” done quickly so that you don’t catch your chill before I defeat you in a

d—” Elyse rested her back against his. “Oh, you are destined  
disappointed, then, Lord–Mr. Burgess.”  
is.”

“Ohh.” He laughed. “You *minx*! Commence counting.” His voice b  
of their throughout the courtyard. “One. Two.”

With every step, that took her away from Broden, and closer  
le if we *battle*, Elyse’s breath came fast, and her heart raced with the t  
anticipation.

“Three!”

led you She tensed.

s and a “Four!”

And spun.

“Fi—”

f mirth Elyse launched her snowball, catching Broden square in the back.

Her well-packed missile exploded upon the fabric of his white law  
ing me and instantly dampened the material.

otions,” Broden whirled around. Shock stamped his features. He clasped hi  
back like he’d taken a bullet there and not a snowball.

ou give “Miss...Miss...Caldecott,” He staggered forward, and she let out a  
nto his a cross between a laugh and a squeal. Then, he sank to his knees and  
forward. He continued to grip his back with one hand, while his othe  
et, and sank and dug into the snow-covered patio.

Laughing, Elyse cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled o  
unt ten will take more than that to trick me, *my lord*.” All the while she co  
get this retreating.

duel.” He glanced up, and somehow, even with the cold, Broden’s chee  
to be gone white. His chest heaved up and down in painful looking bursts.

Some twelve paces away, Elyse stopped in her tracks.

oomed He’d not moved.

As if he’d sensed her unease, he flashed a strained smile. “Wor  
to their When I was sent to Australia, I suffered a slight back injury.” Broden  
hills of fell to the pavement. “It comes and g-goes, Elyse,” his voice emerg  
raspy pant that barely met her ears.

*Elyse?*

She wavered.

He'd dropped that teasing Miss Caldecott business. And he'd me his prison sentence.

He...wasn't jesting.

Fear sent her heart climbing into her throat.

on shirt, Elyse rushed back to his side. "Are you all—?"

Broden slowly lifted his head.

s lower *Oh, hell.*

Elyse skidded to a stop just two paces away.

a sound He wore a devilish grin, the widest she'd ever seen on his cheeks.

sagged "Oh, hell," she muttered.

r palm, "Oh, yes."

ver. "It Broden hadn't even finished that gleeful announcement and Ely  
ntinued racing off in the opposite direction, once more. His snowball hit her  
between the shoulder blades; that compact ball sent bits of snow  
spraying about her shoulders.

eks had Elyse wheeled to face him. He continued to wear that scamp's smi  
unexpected level he'd been going to go in the name of winning doubt  
over in laughter. Unable to breathe from the force of her amuseme  
patted the ground with her hand to make the mirth stop.

rry not. "It hurts," she squealed, between her fits of hilarity She laughed  
l's gaze and harder and longer than she'd laughed maybe...ever.

ed as a "Uh-uh." Broden rocked on his heels. "Unlike you, I shan't fall  
trick, Elyse."

Her mirth faded, and she shook her head. "Oh, you scoundre  
muttered.

mentioned “I’m the scoundrel? Me, and not you who cheated at a duel?”

She smoothed her features and bowed your head.

“You are c-correct.” The cold brought her teeth banging together, a how strange as she didn’t feel chilled. “My actions today were unpard-

Whipping her arm from out behind her back, Elyse tossed the s she’d secretly built while in the midst of her earlier display of merrime

This wintry missile caught Broden right in the middle of his forehe

“*Oomph.*” Wincing, he dusted the remnants of her handiwork fr eyes.

When he’d cleared them enough to open them, Elyse gave a triu toss of her head.

“Now that our mandatory duel is concluded, do you venture we agree to Christian names and friendship, Broden?”

He placed his hand out. “Christian names and friendship, Elyse,” murmured.

Without hesitation, she placed her fingers in his.

Broden instantly folded his palm around hers, in a delicate har that...in this moment, with only the two of them here together, someh like...more.

louder

for that

l,” she

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## Chapter 12

How funny, in the span of several hours Elyse had gone from dreading and Lady Dalkeith's house party to an unexpected elation after her sword duel with Broden.

Only to fall right square back again in the lap of misery.

At present, Elyse sat in the marchioness's prized nursery with other ladies.

As part of the latest planned event, the marchioness had encouraged guests to determine whether one wished to design a wreath, or fill an urn, or work together to decorate the long, lengths of garland that would be hung over mantels and arches.

Elyse always enjoyed creating centerpieces. She'd especially enjoyed making floral arrangements with her sisters—extravagant ones for the dining room. Cascading ones for the center table in the foyer.

Emmy had been too young at the time, but Elyse, Evie, and Edith would sit around the long rectangular, plant table in the nursery, and sing, tell stories, and talk about their hopes and dreams of their future husbands.

Her absolute favorite project of all the projects, however, had undoubtedly been the holly-sprigged wreaths, garland, and boughs she'd made for the Christmastide Season. Today, lush green branches from various evergreens had also been set out for the guests who'd come to take part in the festivities.

The elaborate, oak worktable, fairly brimmed to overflowing with ribbons organized by every conceivable color and settled into neat piles were ribbons of greens, golds, silvers, and blues in more lengths and widths than Elyse had previously known existed. Or, if one wished to intersperse

bit more glimmer and shine, strings of beads, pearls, and crystals lay  
end of the table.

ing Lord Given all that, this latest festive activity planned by Lady Dalkeith  
rowball should have found at least *some* joy in this.

She didn't. She was deuced miserable.

Although, she did suppose sitting alone at one end of the table  
all the every other guest—including Elyse's mother and sisters—gathered  
would have that effect on *any* person.

ed each Elyse assessed an evergreen branch she planned on using and snip  
urn, or end that was a hair too long.

draped In fairness, it wasn't so much as being alone that bothered her. W  
way Aunt Hester napped and slept most of the day away, Elyse had l  
enjoyed very comfortable with having only herself for company.

e dining The fiery glares being cast her way by Broden's sister? Now, th  
even too much for Elyse's thick hide.

i would That same menacing look had followed Elyse all day yesterday  
ll jests, luncheon meal. At dinner. During the parlor games. The black stare h  
particularly nasty during the game of Blindman's Bluff as Elyse and  
ailinglly who'd sat out on the night's fun and instead found themselves a  
at the corner to chat.

rgreens Oh, Elyse knew exactly what opinion Broden's sister had reached  
ivities. her. She'd heard Elyse's stunned 'you' and taken it for a disavowal  
vibrant brother. And even as she admired the younger woman for her fierce de  
i. There that hasty opinion she'd formed about Elyse rankled.

widths Another bevy of giggles and laughter filtered down the table i  
perse a Elyse's ears and strengthening her feeling of loneliness. Amongst that

at oneshe recognized that of Edith, Emmy, and their mother.

*They* were having a good time, and that brought Elyse all the ha  
1, Elyseshe needed. The rest of the guests? They could go to hell.

Feeling that stare upon her once more, Elyse glared daggers at  
and willow branches that lay as bare as they'd been when she'd rel  
, whilejoined her mother, sisters, and the other female guests.

l close, Elyse grabbed a boxwood branch and proceeded to wind it ab  
wood frame that would be her kissing ball.

oped an Delicate hands settled upon her shoulders.

Elyse started and lost her grip on her supplies.

With the “You’ve come!”

become “Mother,” she greeted.

Wonder of wonders, she’d come to visit Elyse at the opposite end  
at was table.

“I am so happy you are here, dearest,” the viscountess murmured  
: at the Elyse’s ear.

ad been And to her surprise, Elyse found herself petty as a child, for it was  
Brodén tip of her tongue to say it hardly seemed that way.  
private

Not when the viscountess had smiled and waved as Elyse walked  
d about room, but otherwise carried on with her arrangement and the friends  
of her her.

evotion, “Are you having a wonderful time?”

“Oh, the most wonderful,” Elyse drawled. “I especially enjoy  
neeting death stares directed my way.”

t levity, Mother frowned. “Hush. No one is directing—”

There came a sharp bang, and Elyse and the viscountess looked at the source of that noise.

Lady Robin, per her usual, glowered at Elyse. Only this time, when she did so, she had her fingers wrapped around the metal scissors she'd slammed onto the surface of the oak table.

"Robin," Lady Dalkeith scolded.

"What?" the young woman asked defensively. "I am done with my project." She sent a meaningful glance Elyse's way. "And everyone else is well."

That message reached Elyse and was perfectly received—only her project sat unfinished, which didn't matter as Lady Robin didn't see her as part of the group.

*Do not let her get a rise out of you...*

And yet, it was hard. Elyse had never been one to back down and certainly not do so now because Broden's irascible sister had found her wanting.

"You were saying?" Elyse asked dryly.

Mother angled her body in a way that concealed her mouth. "Yes, no one will accuse her of being the merriest Burgess." She winked.

"She makes a London rainstorm seem sunny," Elyse said, moving her lips.

"Now, now, dear."

"But you—"

"I was more subtle, Elyse."

l to the “You believe *I’m* the one in need of a scolding here and not.  
slanted a glance Lady Robin’s way.

ile she “She’s not mine to scold, Ellie.” Mother patted Elyse’s arm. “Bu  
ammedwere, I’d tell her the same thing I’m about to tell you—you catch me  
with honey than vinegar.”

Scowling, Elyse added another branch to her arrangement.

ith my “Elsie.” Her sister, Emmy’s cheer-filled voice piped throughout the  
se is, as “That branch did nothing to you.”

The chatter of Lady Dalkeith’s boisterous guests came to a scrub  
Elyse’s halt.

er, nor At the sudden scrutiny put Elyse’s way, her feet which rested  
bottom rung of her stool, went curling into the wood.

Of course, everyone knew Elyse to be the aloof, now unli  
d she’dunlaughable sister. What had already been a miserable experience bec  
ind herthe more dismal.

“Emmy.” The viscountess’s hushed scolding echoed in the nursery  
meant, absolutely every single guest present, also heard that chastisem

s, well, Emmy frowned. “Why can the rest of us tease one another, but no  
allowed to—”

without “Emmy, that is enough,” their mother said, this time more sharply.

There was another long, awkward silence, and then as if attempt  
cover the awkwardness of the moment, the marchioness cleared her  
“May I suggest we adjourn to the music room to prepare for the recital

She could suggest it, but Elyse had no intention of going.

..” She     Bowing her head, she went back to work on her arrangement.  
          guests proceeded to file from the room, the viscountess took sever  
t if shebefore realizing Elyse remained behind.

re flies     “Elyse?”

          “As much as it pains me to miss recitals, as you know how I c  
          them,” she lied, “I’m going to stay here and finish up my arrangement.  
e room.     She abhorred recitals with the fire of a thousand suns. She’d onl  
          them because she’d loved more being with her sisters than she ha  
eechingawkwardness of being on display—especially as she couldn’t play  
          worth a fig.

on the     “You’re cer—”

          “I’m certain.”

ikeable,     Still, her mother lingered.

ame all     “Go, Mother,” she gently urged. “I am fine.”

          “You’re—”

, which     “Very certain,” Elyse interrupted. “I am enjoying myself imme  
ent.         And with everyone gone, well now she actually might.

o one is     However, a short while after everyone had gone, Elyse remained u  
          the otherwise quiet room, the solitary snipping sound made by her  
even had a sadness to it.

oting to     *Is this the future you’ve built for yourself? Is this truly what you*  
throat.     Not so very long ago, she would have answered in the affirmati  
?”         *?”*  
          emphatically so.

          Elyse paused, staring sightlessly down at the viridian green branch

          Now, she wasn’t so very sure. What had changed? Why—?

As the “What?” Broden’s husky baritone stretched across the room and t al stepsplace of that melancholy silence. “Not one for afternoon song?”

With a gasp, Elyse glanced up from her partially completed bouç strand of boxwood leaves slipped through her fingers.

do love Her heart skipped a beat.

” *It is only because he caught off-guard.*

ly done The sudden dizzying sensation that took hold had absolutely not ted the do with Broden, leaning a broad shoulder against the doorjamb in or singrepose.

Elyse swallowed hard.

*He’s right. You are a deuced awful liar.*

From where he still lounged, Broden called out. “May I join you?”

“As you can clearly see, I’m busy with other guests, Broden. I another time?” She winked in a bid to convey her joke.

Instead of a smile, Broden frowned.

nsely.” She preferred him smiling.

He headed over to join her. When he reached Elyse, she made to r pset. In he’d already dragged a nearby stool close and slid onto the seat. Nea shears was, she could better see the hard set of his mouth that matched th glint in his eyes.

o want? Elyse considered her partially completed bough a moment and fr ve and “It isn’t really all that bad. In fact, I thought it was coming along nicely.”

His dark eyebrows came together.

Elyse pointed at her arrangement.





“You joined the other ladies in making arrangements.”

ember? Yes, she had.

not for Elyse glanced down, and then suddenly; *all* the words just came tu  
out. “I debated not coming to the nursery. I almost didn’t, but I felt of  
another to do so, because I thought my mother and sisters expected me to come

Broden opened his mouth, but Elyse couldn’t stop.

“Only, they were perfectly content and more than half-finished  
l with a finally got here, and when I *did* arrive, my mother had materials broug  
for me.” She pointed a finger downwards. “And everyone else sat *ther*  
shifted her index finger towards the opposite end of the table. “I thou  
be happy about that, but then I felt...” How to explain it?

“Left out?” he gravelly filled in.

She nodded but couldn’t bring herself to admit as much in the f  
words.

and left  
,” “The other guests look at me the way you first did, Broden.”

He lifted his right palm. “In my defense, I believed you w  
intruder...and in fact, you were.”

“Yes, well, *they* looked at me that same way, too, only I’m  
intruder.” She paused. “*This* time.” She placed her tongue between l  
Elyse to and blew.

th that, Broden brushed his fingers under her chin and guided her gaze l  
’as. his. “What of my sister and mother? Did they show you kindness?”

at you, Uh-oh. Elyse treaded carefully. “Your mother is most gracious  
invited me to join the festivities, did she not?”

h?

“She would have done you a greater kindness if she’d spared you coming,” he said dryly.

Elyse laughed and swatted him. “I don’t believe for an instant you’re obligated that.”

“Oh, trust me, I do. You’re the only spot of sunshine here.”

*Spot of sunshine?* His comparison sent a heat greater than the rays of the hottest summer sun washing over her.

Broden leaned down so close, the sough of his breath, tinged with coffee, mint, and honey caressed her face. He peered closely at her.

Another laugh escaped her. “What are you *doing*?”

“What of my sister, Elyse?”

He was unrelenting. But that, she’d gathered that from their first meeting alone.

“What if I say I don’t *want* to talk about her?”

“I’d say you don’t *want* to discuss the matter because, even though you won’t admit as much aloud, you know you’re a terrible prevaricator and you know you won’t tell me if my sister mistreated you.”

Elyse sighed. He knew his sister *very* well. She would not, however, be a source of contention between he and his family. “She did not mistreat me.”

Broden eyed her dubiously.

“What I do know about your sister, Broden, is she loves you very much. She is a fierce defender, and you should be grateful for her devotion to you. She gets angry when she turns her wrath on someone whom she believes wronged you.”

“You did not wrong me,” he said curtly.

u from “Yes. I know that and you know that, but Broden, we cannot ve  
say, ‘Oh, that shock on Elyse’s part yesterday—’”

believe “It would definitely earn more questions if I referred to you as *Elyse*  
not Miss Caldecott.”

She continued over his teasing. “That merely stemmed from the f  
s of the on our way here, we spent a night alone at an inn.” Heat instantly bur  
her cheeks. “Not alone, like *that*.”

the hint His features formed a smooth, inscrutable mask. “Like what?”

She went a dozen shades warmer. “You’re insufferable.”

A question filled his eyes. Broden moved his gaze intently over her  
“Only with you,” he spoke haltingly as if talking himself through  
neeting discovery.

Elyse resumed working on her kissing ball.

Broden handed an evergreen branch to her.

gh you She added the foliage to her arrangement.

ust as I “As I see it, we’re both in a similar situation, Elyse.”

“Oh, and what situation is that?” she asked, not picking her head u  
er, be a her task.  
me.”

He tendered a winterberry branch this time.

“Neither of us feels comfortable, even with our families here.”

7 much. “*Especially* with our families here.” She crooked her fingers bec  
and not for a branch.  
7ronged

Following that unspoken request, Broden handed it over. “Precis  
such, we should pledge to attend all the same events as one another.”

ry well She paused.

“That way,” he said quickly, “we’ll be spared the discomfort o  
yse and where we don’t wish to be. And,” he added.

“There’s *more*?” she asked, a smile twitching at her lips.

act that “Oh, there’s more.” He gave one of those darling waggles  
st upon eyebrows. “The uncomfortable and unspoken topic neither of  
discussed?”

“And what is that, Broden?” Elyse angled her head, assessi  
growingly full and proportionate Christmas decoration, and then coll  
r face. pinecone.

1 a new “The whole reason each of our respective parents summoned  
make a match.”

The woodsy ornament fell from her fingers.

Broden plucked it up and handed it over. “As long as you an  
together, we will be spared uncomfortable exchanges with our parents  
they less than subtly try to maneuver us together.”

ip from Why did his palpable excitement chafe?

Wordlessly, Elyse retrieved that forgotten pinecone he still held  
her.

Broden took her silence for hesitation of a different sort. “It would  
pretend courtship if that is what you’re worrying about.”

ckoning It wasn’t.

ely. As “There’d be no need for us to pretend we’re at all romantic.”

“Thank goodness for that,” she said, deadpan.

He grinned. “Precisely. It will be enough that we spent time together then when we say to them that we do not suit, they’ll have no choice but to let the matter rest.”

How proud he looked in his plan. How energized he’d become, not of his idea of them spending time together, but at evading their plans and machinations.

His lips dipped into a frown. “Elyse?”

To save face, she forced herself to smile. “I think it is a splendid idea. For, it was.

*Just, please, she silently implored, stop speaking of it.*

And of all the small wonders, he did, and the sense of dejection that plagued her the moment he’d concocted the perfect reason for them to be together, faded some.

They remained that way, working side by side, in a pleasant room, where Broden would hold up a sprig of holly or an evergreen branch. Elyse would point. He’d give her selection over. They worked splendidly together.

And then, at last, it was done.

Elyse sat back contentedly and admired their work—the once barren branch now sported a full, lush, cluster of branches. Accented in only pinecones and red berries there was an understated elegance to their ball.

With a pleased smile, Elyse reached for the strip of gold ribbon. At the exact same moment Broden made to fetch it for her. Their fingers touched and tingles radiated from where those digits kissed.

Neither of them drew back. Elyse couldn’t make herself if the room were ablaze.

er, and Then, he folded his four center fingers over the tops of her four  
e but to fingers.

Elyse cocked her head and studied them. “They are so different  
at them murmured. “Yours are powerful and mine—”

parents’ Broden caught her by the wrist and drew her hand to the center  
chest.

Under her palm, she felt the solid, frantic galloping beat of his  
ea.” “Never doubt your power, love.”

*Love.* He’d called her love. It was surely just a casual endearment  
she was certainly not the sort looking to love or be loved, and still, somehow  
she melted inside and from nothing more than a syllable alone.

1 that’d  
n to be “I want to kiss you, love,” he said hoarsely.

There it is. *Again.*

silence. *Is he asking? Is he telling me?*

3 would Elyse decided to not wait for him to articulate. “I want you to kiss me.”

His breath hitched.

“Oh, dear.” She sank her teeth into her lower lip. “That was too beautiful.”

e twigs “Too perfect,” he said hoarsely. “It was too perfect. Just as you are.”

ies, and “I’m really not. I’m deeply flawed and as you pointed out, my weaknesses  
not enough to tempt you.”

, at the He drew back, aghast. “Why would you say that?”

ouched “*You* said that.”

m were Broden frozen. “*I* did?”

Elyse nodded. “At the inn.”

center Broden frowned, and then understanding lit his eyes. “When you burglar?”

it,” she “I wasn’t a burglar.”

“When I *thought* you were robbing me?”

of his She gave another nod. “That time.”

He growled. “Nothing counts before the robbery.”

s heart. “It wasn’t a—*EEK*.”

Broden tugged her off the stool and into his arms, and Elyse went  
nt, and and willingly, and oh, so eagerly.  
nehow,

Their lips met as one in a fierce explosion of two people; Elyse, a  
who’d never known passion or tasted desire, and Broden? He kissed her  
he’d been a man without too long.

She moaned, and he slipped his tongue inside.

Elyse touched the tip of hers to Broden’s, tentatively at first.

me.” He cupped his palm about her nape, angled her head, and then showed  
the way. He schooled her in the erotic movements of his kiss the same  
ld.” he might have guided Elyse through the forbidden steps of the waltz.

.” Glide, thrust, parry.

iles are Parry, thrust, glide.

They continued the motions of that dance over and over, and unlike  
that had a conclusion this one went on forever so that Elyse found  
caught in a dizzying eddy of desire.

Had she truly teased her sisters over their longing for romance?

were a Elyse discovered how very wrong she'd been. She *yearned* for an embrace to go on forever. She wanted to drown in his kiss. And he seemed too happy to fulfill Elyse's unspoken wish.

Broden deepened the kiss, and the lash of their tongues took on an almost violent clash until Elyse no longer knew where his kiss ended and where hers began. In a futile attempt to do so, she gripped the lapels of Broden's jacket, hard and pressed herself against him. She wanted to be inside him and retain this feeling of closeness she'd found with him happily. Frustration mounted at her inability to do so, and she climbed to her feet.

Broden scooped her buttocks and perched her on the edge of the table. That slight elevation gave her more of that closeness she'd been craving as if for. He swirled his tongue around hers, and she returned that delicate touch.

They went on that way so that desire tunneled out any other thought, emotion, or sensation that lived outside this moment. Broden came over her, and she arched her back.

Nothing could shatter this hold. Noth—

A loud *bang* slashed in the moment, making the biggest liar of Elyse and Broden wrenched away from one another.

Her heart thundered in her chest and ears and parts of her body she had previously known her heart *could* pound.

They looked at the toppled stool; the foe who'd ended the most important moment in Elyse's life to this point.

She didn't want to look at Broden. She didn't want to see horror. She wanted to let herself believe he'd wanted this embrace as much as she.

"Elyse," he began hoarsely.



for this “It is f-fine,” she said tightly, cutting him off before he could exp  
med all regrets. “You do not need to apologize.”

To give her quaking hands a task, to avoid meeting his eyes, to av  
frantic, moment altogether, Elyse turned to pick up the stool.

ed, and Broden caught her firmly by the shoulders and brought her around  
pels of him.

o climb *Why must he do this?*

h him. “Look at me,” he commanded.  
et.

e table, But apparently, he was determined to put her through this.

longing As she’d told him from the beginning, she was no coward, and  
caress. forced herself to meet his gaze.

feeling, Her breath hitched.

d Elyse In his eyes, there was no re—

“I don’t have any regrets about kissing you,” he said bluntly, a  
heart quickened. “Other than one.”

lyse, as That elation proved so very fleeting.

“My regret is...that I...cannot be the man you deserve.” He ga  
ie’d not shoulders a light squeeze, as if willing her to understand.

And Elyse did.

magical He couldn’t give her more than this, which was fine.

This was all she needed.

She just

had.

“It is f-fine,” she said tightly, cutting him off before he could express his regrets. “You do not need to apologize.”

To give her quaking hands a task, to avoid meeting his eyes, to avoid this moment altogether, Elyse turned to pick up the stool.

Broden caught her firmly by the shoulders and brought her around to face him.

*Why must he do this?*

“Look at me,” he commanded.

But apparently, he was determined to put her through this.

As she’d told him from the beginning, she was no coward, and so she forced herself to meet his gaze.

Her breath hitched.

In his eyes, there was no re—

“I don’t have any regrets about kissing you,” he said bluntly, and her heart quickened. “Other than one.”

That elation proved so very fleeting.

“My regret is...that I...cannot be the man you deserve.” He gave her shoulders a light squeeze, as if willing her to understand.

And Elyse did.

He couldn’t give her more than this, which was fine.

This was all she needed.

## Chapter 13

Broden had kissed Elyse Caldecott.

He'd kissed her with all the passion and longing that'd plagued him since he'd discovered her in his bedroom at The Mermaid Inn.

*Then*, he'd attributed that all-consuming lust to the fact he'd never had a woman in his bed in more than a dozen years, and instead, had only the *pleasure* brought by his own hand.

Now, after his embrace with Elyse, Broden wasn't altogether sure.

He hung around the far-left corner of the drawing room; flanked on both sides *not* by the dozen or so guests loitering about in preparation for the log celebration, but by the gilded frames containing portraits of the previous Marquess and Marchioness of Dalkeith.

Lust. It was a mindless, fleshly, earthly carnal emotion, easy to indulge in for the purely physical urgings attached. It didn't invite thoughts about a person beyond thoughts sexual in nature. It certainly didn't involve looking at the person out to talk with or learn about.

And it unnerved the hell out of him.

However, it didn't unsettle him *quite* enough that he stayed away.

*It is only a short time you'll have to spend with her.*

And he'd already determined that being with her was a good deal safer, and more comfortable than interacting with his family.

*That is all it is.*

Giving himself that much-needed—and most logical—assurance, Broden again glanced at the entryway in anticipation of her arrival. And he

she'd be here. That'd been the agreement they'd reached in the nursery

From the corner of his eye, he caught the flicker of a shadow and  
Disappointment marking him the worst sibling in England, filled him.

m since "Robin," he greeted his sister.

In each hand, she held two glasses of mulled cider.

t had a "You've always been my most clever brother," she declared, offeri  
known that drink, which he took. "But do not tell the others or I shall deny it."

"Would you have me not tell them because then we'll all discover  
pledged the same to each of us?"

on both Her eyes twinkled. "Maybe."

he yule "I thought so," he mumbled and took a sip.

revious "If it is any consolation," she said after she'd taken a drink of he  
identify "at this particular moment, I *do* find you the brightest of all my brother

out the Broden pressed his spare hand to his chest. "I'm honored. Th  
seeking confess, I wonder what I've done that merits such accolades."

"I have two words for you."

"That is six."

"Like I said, the cleverest," Robin said, not missing a beat.

"And the two words, Rob?" he drawled.

l better, "Miss Caldecott."

Heart hammering, Broden whipped his gaze about in search of—

"Rest easy. She is not here."

Broden Rest easy? Broden furrowed his brow. "Is *that* what you think  
e knew I'm...glad at her absence?" And here, he'd always believed his sis

7. clever for words.

turned. “Relieved, then.” Robin patted his hand. “You have always been an honorable gentleman, and I know that is why you’ll not say as much as I’d like about her not being here. No words are necessary.”

Based on that erroneous conclusion she’d drawn, Broden ventured that no words were necessary.

Robin sighed.

“Brother, you are hiding,” she said gently, “in the corner and you’ve been each day.”

“Do you think if I were truly hiding, I’d select a place so obvious and unhindered as the corner of a room? Or do you think it’d be an area where I selected to deter other guests from approaching me while awaiting the company of a person whose presence I *did* invite?”

“Who? The only lady I’ve seen you—?” She stopped. “Not Caldecott?” she whispered furiously.

He let his silence serve as his answer.

“You...do not despise her?”

“No.”

She frowned, and then taking him by the arm, she angled Broden back toward the gathered guests, and only she could make out the words she spoke. “But the morning she arrived—”

“We had... met before.”

Robin’s eyes bulged. “You met—?” Her voice climbed.

“That’s all. Shh.”

His baby sister complied and dropped her voice, but not her question. “You *met* her before.” Robin shook her head. “What does that *mean*?”

“It means just what it sounds like. When we were traveling. We were, however, aware of one another’s identity when we...spoke.”

Robin leaned up and in so quickly, deep crimson drops of her hair splashed over the sides. “You *spoke*?”

“Will you stop repeating everything I say,” he whispered furiously. With a quiet curse, Broden relieved his youngest sibling of the refreshment which had swiftly become a liability to the both of them. He glanced about and, finding a waist-length white marble column nearby, deposited his and her drinks upon the makeshift table.

Robin gripped her head as if she were trying to keep each new discovery clear in her head. “I am sorry. I am just...” She stopped and dusted her mouth. “Oh, dear. You like her.”

“Yes, I like her.”

Then, Robin’s meaning became clear.

“As a friend,” he clarified. “Only as a friend.” *One whose mouth you dream about kissing.*

“Men and women can’t be friends.” She spoke in a rote way, like a girl repeating a daily lesson to her governess. “A lady is only permitted friendship with her brothers and other male relatives.”

He scowled. “Who told you *that* rubbish?” Because of a certain, Elyse got on fabulously.

“You.”

Broden didn’t blink. “*Me*?”

tioning. Robin nodded.

“Well, that was shite advice because it is possible and that is p  
ere not, what I’ve formed with Miss Caldecott.”

Happiness filled Robin’s somewhat sharp features. “Oh  
r drink magnificent.”

Heat climbed his neck, and Broden grunted. “You’re making mo  
. than there—”

of that His sister clasped her hands at her chest. “All along, I’ve thought  
em. Henot and should not be friends with gentlemen, but the ladies have been  
rby, hedeuced boring or rude.”

Oh, hell. Broden knew where this was going.

covery, “But knowing I *am* able to extend my friendship to men—”

a hand “No.”

“But—”

“I said *no*.”

’ou still “Yes, well, just now you did, but before you advised—”

“I was wrong,” he snapped. “Forget anything and everything I sai  
men and women being friends.”

a young “But I am confused, Broden, by your own admission, you are frien  
itted a Miss Caldecott.”

he and Aye, but, it was different. He opened his mouth to say as much, (,  
he wasn’t sure he could explain as much...when he caught the  
glimmer in her eyes.

He narrowed his eyes. “I know what you are doing.”

“Doing?” She batted her lashes. “I’m not *doing* anything.”

precisely He bristled. “*Saying*, then.”

Robin crossed her arms before her. “Oh, and what is that, my mother, howbrother?” She didn’t wait for his response; rather, she seemed all too happy to answer on her own. “You think, I’m the one...”

re of it Suddenly, Broden went still.

A warm energy coursed through him. The din made by happy guests, the clink of crystal glasses touching the silver trays circulated about the room, but either by uniformed servants, faded to a distant hum in his head.

With his sister prattling on, her words as lost to him as everyone else in the drawing room, he turned and found her standing there.

Elyse hovered at the entryway.

Gowned in a rich, satin evening dress in luminescent shades of white and deep red, an observer could see any number of pink, orange, and red highlights.

In Broden’s time away from England, much—everything—had altered in some way: fashion having been one of those absent observations he’d made upon his return.

d about However, standing in this drawing room and gazing enraptured at Caldecott, Broden acknowledged he’d not been properly appreciative of the glorious good that had come with those changes to lady’s fashion.

even as shrewd Elyse’s dress had been cut low off her shoulders, putting that delicate expanse of her sun-kissed skin on display, and leaving Broden to imagine the hours she’d spent laying under a summer sky, to have attained and revealed that golden-brown skin. Gold patterning work had been embroidered



crisscross upon the bodice of her gown, which only further drew the eye.

Broden drank in the sight of her, and possessively did a sweep of the room for any bastard who'd also noted her, because surely they had, and he wanted to know so that he could bloody them...

Broden narrowed his eyes. There were, in fact, two gentlemen, one on each side, currently sizing Elyse up.

While Broden's sister rambled on next to him, a bestial rumble of hunger in his belly and settled in his chest.

Broden's brothers.

And never had he wanted to pulverize either of them, not the way he did now. How dare they ogle her in that way?

He started. What in blazes?

The only reason he cared one way or another was because Elyse had been his friend. He wanted to become a friend to him.

*If she is a friend, and you know either of your brothers would make a decent match, then why do you have this overwhelming hunger to pour your eyes on her unscarred, affable faces?*

For her part, Elyse remained oblivious, and rooted to her spot at the far end of the room. As Broden took a step to join her there, the lady's parents were rushing to meet her.

Disappointed swarmed him.

Robin raised her voice to be heard over his tumultuous thoughts. "That is why, I call for the overthrow of King William."

The—?

ie male Broden blinked in abject confusion and his gaze went to his sister  
shrewd look she gave him.

of the She winked, and then with a smile, she gathered up her glass of ci  
and he stared openly at Elyse. “Why isn’t she entering the room?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps because some people—my family in  
side by have treated her less than kindly.”

Guilty patches of color formed perfect circles upon Robin’s pale  
built in “Did she say that?”

“No. What she did say, on the other hand, is that my family loves r  
much and that you, my sister, are a fierce defender, and I should be  
r he did for your devotion and not angry whether you turn it upon someone wh  
believe has wronged me.”

Robin pressed a hand against her mouth. “She said that?”

se had “*That*, she said,” Broden confirmed.

“We have been the worst,” she whispered.

ie her a Broden collected his glass and toasted his sister. “Speak for yourse

nd their A low groan escaped Robin. “You really *are* the cleverest of  
siblings.”

ie front “Aye. Now, you know with a certainty, though.”

ts came Robin sighed.

Together, they turned and directed their attention on Elyse who’d f  
speaking with her mother and father, and with them having gone, s  
s. “And eyed the path behind her.

The hell she’d leave...

Setting aside his drink once more, Broden went to meet Elyse.

and the Robin stayed him. "If I may?"

Though, hers wasn't really as a question as she'd already started and determined clip across the crowded room, weaving in and out of each who made the foolhardy attempt to stop her and exchange included, pleasantries.

Broden stared on as Robin made her way over to Elyse.

cheeks. Elyse had been correct when she'd all but said Broden's sister was to a fault. But Broden also happened to know that loyalty was not necessarily for kin, but rather extended to those who were loyal and good grateful Burgesses. Going forward, Robin would be a needed—and hoped for—welcome—friend to Elyse.

The instant Robin reached Elyse, Elyse eyed the other young woman with a deserved caution. He watched that exchange intently, and he knew in that moment it would be all right. Robin said something, and whatever he said drew a merry, infectious laugh from Elyse. Some of the tension left. There would be a friendship, after all.

If." And what did it say about his rotted soul that he found himself so all the wanting Elyse and her company all to himself?

inished

he now

Robin stayed him. “If I may?”

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And what did it say about his rotted soul that he found himself selfishly wanting Elyse and her company all to himself?

## Chapter 14

Later that night, while the household slept, and the fires crackled and oak boards continued to settle, Elyse sat on the floor of the Marquis Marchioness of Dalkeith's music room.

With her back pressed against the wood-paneled walls and her legs close, Elyse dropped her chin atop the makeshift table made by her knees.

Her gaze remained locked on the gilded ormolu clock. The ornament stood in stark juxtaposition to the simplicity of the white-painted fireplace with its fluted jambs and friezes.

*"Days,"* she whispered.

It'd been days since she'd thought about and mourned Evie.

Nay, more specifically, since Elyse met Broden, thoughts about her sister had begun to fade.

Now, Elyse spent her time smiling and laughing and finding more happiness than she ought.

For why should Elyse be happy? Why, when her eldest sister didn't enjoy those same gifts?

And yet, this latest night spent with Broden, his family and her friends felt...right and beautiful and she hadn't wanted it to end.

Squeezing her eyes shut tight, she knocked the back of her head against the wall, softly, silently, rhythmically.

*What have I done?*

She'd had a taste of what it was like to live fully again, amidst family and friends, and now she wanted to partake in the whole feast.

The floorboards groaned, and she glanced up, unhurriedly, knowing who was there.

the old *Broden.* But Broden with his jacket and cravat since discarded  
ess and nothing more than his tight-fitting trousers and untucked white lawn shirt

Her breath caught and her mouth went dry.

is drawn He drew the door closed behind him, and moved with slow, measured  
ees. steps over to where Elyse sat. She couldn't muster a greeting, and his  
e piece presence alone brought forth a warm, welcome solace.

replace Wordlessly, Broden slid onto the floor and mirrored her pose, so that  
side by side, shoulder to shoulder. They remained that way, comfortable  
content in one another's quietness.

Broden spoke first. "Unable to sleep?" His hushed voice tangled with  
her big hum of silence.

She nodded.

is more "Has my sister done something—?"

"You know she was perfectly gracious and friendly and warm  
't get to slanted a look up at him. "Which was a sudden and unexpected—"

"But pleasant?"

rs, had "But a pleasant," she allowed. "change."

He grunted.

against "I take it you spoke to her."

"I told her you were my friend and deserving of only kindness."

aily and *His friend.*

already She wanted that status he'd assigned their relationship to be enough  
it wasn't. She had friendships with her sisters. What she had with E  
and in *This was not that.*

virt. Drawing in a shaky breath, Elyse attempted to divert herself away  
that heartbreaking realization.

measured "You're unable to sleep, as well?" Even though she already knew  
yet, his answer. After all, his being here now at this late hour was proof enough

"I never sleep." Broden directed that quiet murmur at the same fire  
they sat that had earned Elyse's earlier scrutiny. "And you?"

ble and "Sometimes I sleep," she admitted, and when she managed to do  
prayed there'd be a reunion in her dreams of her sister.

with the "What steals your rest?"

Elyse shrugged. "Any number of things."

"Tell me some of them."

She lifted her gaze to his "Will you tell me *yours*?" she asked, but  
1." She she wanted to know, all the while knowing he wouldn't—

He bowed his head. "Do you want that?"

Did she *want* that? She wanted to know everything there was to  
about him. What pain he'd known, and the happiness, too. All of it.

*Oh, God, help me—for she could deny it no longer—I've fallen  
with him.*

Somehow, somehow, in just a brief interlude of time, all the careful  
plans she'd had to protect herself from loss had crumbled as quickly as  
castles of sand she and her sisters used to build at Chesil Beach. *A*

gh...but enormity of what he offered—when her question had been more a rh  
broden? or an attempt at teasing lightness, struck her.

“I want that,” she said softly.

ly from “Are you sure? Because my story is not a pretty one. It’s dark and  
and ugly and not fit for anyone to hear, let alone, you, a—”

ew the She took his hand and pressed it between her two palms. “I want to  
h. Broden.” With reverent care, she trailed a fingertip along a small, r  
replace scar that, at some point, had faded to white.

Pain pierced her heart at the thought of his suffering.

so, she Elyse lifted her gaze from those old injuries marring his flesh and  
him in the eye. “I want to know about the wounds you carry in your he  
in your mind.” She applied a gentle pressure to his fingers.

Seated as close as they were, she could see it all: the turbulent em  
his shadowed eyes. The way his throat moved up and down, as if swa  
had suddenly become a struggle.  
because

Broden drew in a slow breath through his nose and then exhaled it  
past his lips.

o know “Very well. I’ll go first. I was in love. Her name was Alvina.”

Broden’s gaze grew far away, and it was the moment Elyse kne  
ceased to see her, and in his mind, only he and Alvina now existed.  
in love

She’d known that was a core part of his story and the nature  
heartbreak. Hearing him declare those abiding feelings and know  
name of the woman who’d been so very lucky to have his love, ca  
is those vicious, ugly, and bitter jealousy inside.  
And the



etorical And it didn't matter that Elyse *knew* she was petty and small for e  
his departed sweetheart for the gift she'd possessed; Elyse was help  
stymie those terrible sentiments.

d awful "She was shy. Timid. Soft-spoken. A delicate lady; so fragile-look  
fair, I'd wondered that a wind could not hurt her, and wanted to protec

o know, In short, Alvina had been everything Elyse wasn't and never would

circular *Stop! This isn't about you...this is about Broden.*

And he mattered far more to her.

"She and her family were new neighbors," he explained. "Her fat  
looked been a member of the gentry and only through the death of a distant r  
part and did he inherit the dukedom and lands." His mouth tightened. "They we  
conscious of their previous station and were determined that their c  
otion in should only make the best matches. The first time I met her, I was ridi  
llowing my brothers, and we came upon her. She'd been walking and turn  
ankle. Because she feared horses, I carried her back in my arms."

slowly Elyse sighed. Even hopelessly in love with him as she was,  
couldn't help but feel the thrill of that young romance.

"When we arrived, her mother and father were elated...that my  
w he'd brother was there."

Frowning, Elyse shifted her entire body around, so they sat wi  
of his knees touching. "But...but *you* are a marquess's son."

ing the "Aye. A future marquess would do nicely but never a marquess  
used a son."

"That's horrid," she muttered, furious for him and Alvina.

envying “Alvina did not possess the strength we think of when it comes to strength, but where it came to us, she defied her parents and her brother.”

*That was because a man such as Broden was worth fighting for and once more, Elyse felt a kindred connection to Broden’s late sweetheart.* Broden carried on with his telling. “They could not make their deal be. I can’t give me up, but they could make me go away.”

A horrible, haunted look contorted his features; it twisted them into an unrecognizable mask of grief, terror, and frustration, and Elyse yearned to take him in her arms but feared if she did so, he’d stop sharing... her had needed to release these ugly memories to someone else with whom he could lean upon. relative, she was very

children She would be that person.

ng with In a subtle show of support, Elyse took his hand and cradled it once between her own. “What did they do?”

A muscle at the left corner of his eye ticked. “They falsely accused me, Elyse murdering Alvina’s younger brother.”

She gasped.

7 eldest “If I’d intended to kill one of them, it would have decidedly been the white of an eldest brother. Either way, I was tried, found guilty, and then they boarded a prison ship to Australia where...I managed to survive.”

*Oh, God.* Everything hurt inside. Every part of her. Every fiber of her being comprised her being. And yet, she knew by that vague, hurried conclusion of his story that there was more, and he wished to protect her, as he’d wished to care for Alvina.

“They hurt you,” she murmured. “Your jailers.”

mes to He gave a terse nod. “They whipped us. Starved us. Denied us  
r.” When they wished to have some,” his lips twisted in a macabre g  
r. And harkened back to their very first exchange, “fun with us, they would  
: hungry rats into our cells. Those vile creatures would attempt to gnaw  
daughter feet and in the case of less fortunate men, they succeeded in doing so.”

Bile surged in her throat. *I’m going to throw up.* Elyse swa  
into an frantically to keep from casting the contents of her stomach on th  
rned to before him. *He* deserved to take strength from someone else.

and he Now, his irrational terror at The Mermaid Inn made complete  
e could “That is why you were going to kill Sir Lancelot.”

“In fairness, he is a guinea pig.” In a clear bid for levity, Broden fl  
crooked grin. It faded quickly, and he rushed through the rest of his  
e more, “As you can tell, I returned. When I did, I went to seek out Alvi  
discovered in my absence, she’d died.”

d me of There was a note of finality that indicated that was the last he inte  
say about what had been done to him and what he’d endured.

Her heart broke. The story of his struggle, the wrongs done to hi  
the fate he’d suffered and survived could have been a tragedy written  
een her Great Bard himself.

nd sent *Be strong for him.* She wanted to. *Desperately.*

er that Her lower lip trembled.

ision of “Oh, Broden,” she whispered, linking her fingers with his, and sq  
shed to them. “I am the worst fool. No wonder you responded so whe  
discovered me in your room at The Mermaid Inn.” Her eyes slid close  
she’d mocked him for being hysterical.

water. “How could you have suspected anything like that, Elyse?” he  
rin that admonished, entirely too forgiving. He motioned to the previous space  
release occupied, urging her to return.

off our In her nightshift and wrapper, she crawled back to his side. This  
Broden wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. She  
allowed against him, burrowing deep the way Sir Lancelot did when contented.

ie floor “Now, your turn, Elyse,” Broden’s rumbling murmur, cut through  
silence. “What keeps you awake this evening?”

sense. Elyse chewed at her lower lip. Of a certain, he’d been vastly brave  
freedom with which he’d shared. She, on the other hand, couldn’t f  
ashed a start.

telling. “I enjoyed myself tonight.”

na, and Broden didn’t say anything for several moments. “And...is  
problem in that?”

ned to There shouldn’t be and for other people who’d not lost a sister or  
one, there wasn’t guilt in happiness. But from everything she’d learned  
him, and him and everything he’d just shared, she knew that grief was something  
by the could understand.

Elyse took a steadying breath. “My sister died.”

Against her, she felt Broden’s body go completely motionless. “I  
know,” he murmured. “I am sorry you’ve known that loss.”

eezing She didn’t want to look at him and see the all-too-familiar pain  
n he’d followed people’s discovery of that fact. She didn’t want him to see the  
ed. And thing that happened to her and her family. Only, when she at last  
herself cast a glance up—his eyes were not pitying, but rather blazing  
the sympathy that came from one who’d also loved and lost.

gently And he had.

it she'd "She was my best friend. My big sister. We did everything together was vibrant and light and all that was good. She loved to play the violin is time, cello, and she was so awful." A half-sob, half-laugh slipped out. Elyse nestled it belatedly in a fist. "We all were. It was hard to say which Caldecott was the worst. But I knew she and Edith so loved performing together. I'd rather humiliate myself beside them."

Elyse fell silent; remembering her sister fully, all the memories that Elyse had only previously allowed to let out in trickles, flowed forth in the present. She didn't want to bury all the thoughts she carried of Evie and her family as they'd been. She didn't want to shut out her family any more and...it was like a weight lifted, and a lightness suffused her.

there a "She wanted to fall in love and longed for a family," Elyse shared. "And I..." She smiled. For the first time, there came not pain, but happiness at the moments they had shared. "I would tease her mercilessly for being so romantic, and she swore I'd fall in love, and when I did, she would tease me right back for the rest of our days."

A tear slipped out. Followed by another. These tears, cathartic; healing. Broden brushed several fingers over Elyse's cheek, wiping away the drops. I didn't

She rested her cheek against him. "Evie was about to have her wedding and... one afternoon she fell ill. Just like that, she was gone," she whispered.

e worst "Do you believe your sister would want you to spend your life cloistered from everyone and denying yourself happiness?"  
ng with

Elyse clamped down hard on her inner cheek. “No. Evie would hate that.” She took a fortifying breath. “And what of you?” she asked him hesitantly, needing to know how he’d handled his grief. “You don’t feel guilty for being happy when...when...”

“When Alvina is not here?”

Elyse managed a nod.

“I haven’t been happy until you,” Broden confided matter-of-factly.

Elyse’s breath hitched.

The air sparked like the flames dancing in the fireplace.

Broden brushed his knuckles under Elyse’s chin. Her lashes slid over more, and she leaned up.

This time, their lips met in a tender exchange; she and Broden were souls who’d come together and helped free one another of the crushing weight of sorrow that had consumed them for too long.

Or, that was what Broden and this moment were to Elyse. She knew what she was to him. But for now, this was enough.

With that, she surrendered herself completely.

Elyse parted her lips, and he swept inside, kissing her as she’d longed for him to do again. Their breaths came quickly, in noisy little spurts, and the silence lent an eroticism to those sounds of their desire.

“I have never felt like this,” he rasped against her mouth. He nipped at her lower lip, and then drew that flesh into his mouth and sucked off.

“Broden,” she moaned, biting him in kind.

He grunted his approval.

ld have A sharp ache built between her legs. Elyse squirmed in a bid to find  
entured relief. Broden however, knew what she needed. He drew her onto his  
eel anyshe sat sprawled with her legs draped across his thighs, and her thi  
core pressed against his flat, muscled stomach. Of their own volition, h  
began to move.

“Aye, love,” he crooned that husky praise. “Just like that.”

7. He gripped her buttocks and guided her movements.

“Broden,” she moaned into his mouth, unable to formulate the  
needed to beg him to assuage whatever this sensation was that h  
between pain and pleasure.  
closed,

With an animalistic growl of approval, Broden drew the neckline  
nightshift down. Cool air, a product of the winter wind howling o  
ere two wafted over her exposed skin.  
rushing

Elyse shivered.

didn't “Poor, princess,” he crooned. “You're cold.”

“I—”

He filled his palms with her breasts.

ged for Elyse released a sharp exhale.

and the “Yes?” Broden urged. He smoothed the pads of his thumb over th  
of her breast and Elyse bit her lower lip hard.

ged and She had never been the swooning or fainting sort. In fact, she'd ro  
cked. eyes at those who did. Now, she understood. Heaven's how she unders

Broden continued to play with that pebbled flesh, rolling them b  
his thumbs and forefingers. “You were saying?” he teased.

and some     *Saying?* “Was I s-saying s-something?” How had she even managed to formulate those words?

robbing     “You don’t recall my question?” He flicked the tip of his tongue over her hips nipple, and a hiss exploded from between her clenched teeth.

“N-No.”

Nothing. She recalled nothing. Not even her own name. And she knew that. Just as she knew he was playing some kind of hedonistic game with her—one she found herself all too happy to join in.

hovered     Broden raised one of her breasts higher towards his mouth. She was bracing for the next magic to come. Only, he remained with his lips a hair’s breadth from her erect nipple.

outside,     Her center throbbed and ached.

“I asked if you were cold, love.” Each word he spoke brought a shiver brushing against that tip in an accidental caress.

Nay, there was nothing accidental in this. Broden knew *precisely* the havoc he wrought over Elyse’s body and senses.

“N-Not cold,” she panted. She’d never be cold again.

Broden closed his eyes and lowered his lips. She whimpered, closing her eyes in return and—

“Are you warm, then?” he ventured.

lled her     “Hot,” she rasped. “I am so hot.”

stood.     He smiled a wicked, scoundrel’s grin, and then, at last, he took the scorching crest of her right breast deep into his mouth.

Elyse cried out softly, catching herself too late. That shrill, thin cry reverberated around the music room. She should stop. *They* should



aged to Anyone could happen by. She'd be ruined. And he didn't want to  
and...

over her Everything was all mixed up at the moment. She'd sort it all out.

Later.

Broden stopped, and she clamped her lower lip between her teeth  
new he from screaming her frustration to the rafters. He continued to cra  
c gamebreasts in his palms and rubbed his thumbs down the sides of them.

“Do you want to stop, love?”

tensed, “I am angry you *have*, Broden.”

lips a “I must remedy that.” His lips formed a painful-looking, half-  
know better than to cross you.”

And Broden closed his mouth around the peak of her right breast fi  
his lips Elyse hissed between her teeth and tipped her hips up. That re  
movement brought the painful place between her legs flush with th  
ely the muscles of his flat belly.

As if knowing precisely what she sought, what she needed, he cup  
buttocks, and drew that part of her that throbbed, closer. He guided l  
sed her slow back-and-forth motion. Over. And over. Again.

Elyse found the rhythm he taught her.

Sweat beaded at her brow, as she pumped her hips.

There was something she needed. She needed—

t whole Broden slipped a hand between them and palmed her center.

Elyse gasped. Words failed. Her heart threatened to explode. Sh  
ty wait into his touch.

d stop.

to marry “Please,” she begged, uncertain of what it was exactly she asked for. Simply knowing he was the only one who could ease this ache.

Broden slipped a long finger in her hot, sodden channel. “Is this what you want?”

to keep She whimpered.

to feel her “Tell me you want my touch.” His husky demand contained a touch of roughness that only further fueled the fire in her.

Elyse shoved her hips into that lone digit buried inside her, as she pressed him with her body just how badly she needed him.

to grin. “I “Uh-Uh,” he scolded and pulled his finger from her drenched sheath.

to first. At that loss, she cried out, but the sound of it was immediately swallowed by Broden’s kiss.

to reflexive “We have to be quiet,” he whispered against her mouth. “Now, be hard with your words that you want my touch.”

“I want your touch,” she whispered.

to ped her “What do you want and where do you want it?” Broden paused. She pressed her in another finger into her tight channel. “Here, perhaps?” he asked casually.

Elyse gasped and managed a jittery nod. “Th-There.”

“All your words, Elyse.” His eyes darkened and he made to withdraw.

“I want your finger, inside of me.”

“Good girl,” he whispered.

If she weren’t mad with desire, Elyse would have laughed at the way he lifted and preened with masculine satisfaction over her admission.

“I want it,” she moaned.

him for. Elyse buried her head against his shoulder and bit Broden hard  
crook of his arm.

hat you “You are a delicious little wanton, aren’t you?” he crooned.

That naughty adulation sent another rush of dampness to that fo  
place he continued to worship with his touch.

ouch of He laughed quietly. “You like hearing it too, don’t you, min  
praised.

showed Then again reaching down, this time, Broden released himself fr  
trousers.

th. He guided her hand to his length, and with the intuition of Eve  
allowed wrapped her fingers about him. The feel of his length, hard as steel a  
as satin against her dripping thatch brought her head falling back.

tell me Only, this time, as he taught her the rhythm he liked, and she strok  
Broden who’d all the words for both of them before, now managed  
more than guttural grunts and raspy incoherent words. And she und  
the heady, power of having this pull over him.

He slid “Is this what you want, Broden?” she whispered against his lips.  
ly.

Broden’s eyes flew open wide. Shock filled those desire filled dept

aw. Elyse stopped.

“Elyse,” he begged.

“Uh-uh. I want your words. Say it, Broden.”

way he “I want your touch, Elyse.”

She smiled and resumed stroking him. When suddenly, he shot  
out.

, in the Questioningly, Elyse looked at Broden's strained features. "Did something wr—"

His low, pained groan cut off the rest of her question. "You've done everything right."

She made to resume caressing his thick shaft, but again, Broden said "No?" he

"Elyse, I don't...that is...I do not want..."

Oh, no. She cringed with humiliation. "You don't want me." Elyse tried to pull away.

"No!" Broden exclaimed, drawing her close before she could move. "I do not want you to make love with me."

"How could I regret this, Broden?" she asked softly and caressed his cheek that glistened with sweat.

He looked at her meaningfully.

*Oh. Because he will not marry you.*

That message came clear, with no words necessary.

Odd, how amidst this very greatest pleasure she'd ever known should also be such a vicious pain cleaving at her insides.

"I'm a grown woman, Broden. I want this." If this is all he was willing to give, then she would be all too happy to take it. With that, they came together once more.

All reservations, all questions, doubts, words altogether faded into oblivion. Their harsh exhalations and inhalations and keening moans replaced all the communication they needed in this moment.

id I do    And as Broden slipped his length inside of her and claimed her  
closed her eyes and took the one gift he did freely offer.

ne only

stopped

e made

e. "It is  
egret...

a palm

1, there

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ogether

ed into  
became

And as Broden slipped his length inside of her and claimed her, Elyse closed her eyes and took the one gift he did freely offer.

## Chapter 15

**B**roden couldn't step foot in the music room.

Given the impending recital he'd promised Elyse he'd attend, Broden's sudden inertia certainly proved a problem.

Instead, with his mother's guests enjoying the latest round of festivities, Broden hurried inside his father's office, drew the door closed behind him, and lay his back against the sturdy mahogany panel.

Restless, Broden headed over to his father's well-stocked, Italian-style sideboard, and grabbed the nearest bottle of brandy and a snifter. He took a swig, stopped off with his teeth and spit it out onto the floor. Then, he continued pouring until the topaz contents touched the brim.

Then he stared at his reflection in the gilt overmantel mirror.

What had he done?

No, he knew precisely what he'd done. In the dead of night, with a whisper of moon shining through the music room windows, and a soft crackling in the heart, he'd made love to Elyse Caldecott.

On the floor, no less. All the while knowing very well, he could not have her more, and it didn't matter that she acted as if it was enough, she did not care more. She deserved an honorable gentleman, one able and willing to own his name.

And Broden? Broden was none of those things.

He briefly closed his eyes and then, he picked up his glass and took a long, deep, swallow. It wasn't every day a man admitted he did not like himself. He didn't like himself at all.

And yet, Broden, who'd done horrible, unconscionable, sinful things in the name of survival had thought there couldn't be another sin blackening the marks already upon his soul.

Broden's He'd been wrong. He'd been so wrong.

When half of the contents of his snifter failed to help dull his feelings, he drank down the rest. Then he grimaced and welcomed the searing brandy and him, liquid left down his throat.

As soon as he finished, Broden promptly poured himself another. He took a more measured sip this time. Followed by another. Funny, a wadded warmth filled his veins, and yet, it failed to drive away the self-loathing he'd poured regret and—

“There you are. Mother has been asking...”

Fucking fabulous. His big brother—that was, the biggest of his brothers.

“What are you doing here?” Alden demanded.

If Broden had been searching for the perfect person with which to vent his frustration out on, his interfering, always-smiling, more now than big brother, Alden, was in fact the person.

Broden turned and toasted the frowning earl. As Alden was, standing at the front of the room and his arms folded at his broad chest, he resembled more their dear father than the boy whom Broden had, in fact, shared his brandy with.

Like one auditioning for that very role, Alden took one look at the empty glass in Broden's hand, and his lips turned down in a disappointed frown. “Are you getting *foxed*?” he whispered, stomping over to the bottle nearest Broden's fingers.



ings all Broden grabbed it before he could and held it out of reach. “I  
er than getting fooxed. I don’t get foxed. I haven’t since I was a lad at Oxford.

“Well, by the sounds of your slurring, you’re not *getting* foxed  
already are.” Then, suspicion filled Alden’s eyes. “Are you meeting so  
ings, he here?” he asked on a furious whisper. Alden didn’t wait for an answer  
urn the did a sweep of the room, and then started toward the door.

“More like hiding,” Broden mumbled.

He took Alden wheeled around and doubled back. “What did you say?”  
elcome “I’m here waiting for a good chiiding,” Broden substituted instead.  
ing and Alden’s scowl deepened. “That isn’t what you said.”

*No, it wasn’t.* “If you knew, you shouldn’t have asked.”

thers. “Yes, well, you shouldn’t be here, but rather,” he did a quick  
down sweep of Broden, “making yourself presentable for the recital w  
beginning soon.” Alden swiped a hand Broden’s way. “Yet here we are

to take Here they were, indeed.

bleman Broden took another long, long drink. When he’d finished, he wi  
back of his hand over his mouth.

iding at His brother remained there watching him.

embled Broden cursed. “*Stilllll* you.”

his first “*Still* me.”

re half- Alden stared at Broden for a long while, and then sighed. “Le  
proving about it.”

ake the “Dun wanna talk,” Broden muttered. He scratched at his suddenly  
head. “’bout her.”

'm n-ot Alden sharpened his gaze on Broden's face.

” Broden resisted the urge to squirm. Why was he looking at him like

ed, you “About her,” his brother repeated slowly.

omeone He stared at him dumbly. “Wuut?” *What in hell was he on about?*  
ver. He to clear his mind, Broden took another drink.

His brother gave him a look; one that said clearer than words h  
been born yesterday. “You said ‘I don’t want to talk about her’...or  
more like, ‘dun wan talk ‘bout her.” Alden waved his hand. “But the n  
was the same.”

What the hell was his brother carrying on about? That last sip  
helped. If anything, Broden’s head had grown fuzzier.

up and “It’s her,” Alden breathed.

which is Broden looked about for the ‘her’ in question. “*Whooo?*”

e.” “The woman you don’t want to speak about,” Alden said so quick  
words all rolled together, making it nearly impossible for Broden to  
ped the sense of what he was talking about.

“Miss Caldecott.”

That name his brother spoke did, however, manage to break thro  
confusion. Clear-headed in an instant, Broden narrowed his eyes. “W  
you on about?”

t’s talk “Robin came to me.”

cloudy Broden cursed roundly and blackly. He knew precisely where th  
going, and it was the absolute last place Broden wished to travel.

“She made more of it than there iss,” he said curtly.

Alden's lips twitched up in an infuriatingly knowing, big-brotherly  
e that? "It behooves me to point out that I did not speak to you what Robin did  
with me."

In a bid Broden blinked slowly. "Oh."

A solemnness fell over the earl's features. "I, on the other hand,  
e'd not need any opinions from Robin, as I've witnessed you with Miss Calder

it was Broden stiffened. "I don't know what you're talking about,"  
message slowly, but he didn't slur.

"I came upon you having, I believe, a snowball fight."

hadn't Rage went snaking through him. "You had no business spying  
hissed. To know Alden had been witness to that intimate moment b  
Elyse and Broden?

With a sound of disgust, Broden stomped to that doorway which  
kly, his partially open, inviting him through.

o make Alden raced after Broden. He caught him by the shoulder and forc  
to stop.

"I left the moment I realized I'd intruded on...something I should  
ugh the intruding on," the earl said in earnest tones. "But, Broden," he said, lo  
hat are his arm to his side, "it was not just that. I've seen you two cloistered to  
speaking in the corners, giggling and laughing like young lovers."

*Young lovers.*

his was Broden hadn't been a young in far too long, but he had been a  
again, last night. The memory of Elyse in his arms, draped over him,  
undone, sent a wave of lust bolting through him.

er smile. “It is all right to love again,” Alden said haltingly, bringing Broden  
scussed from those wicked and wonderful thoughts he’d carry until the mor  
took his last breath. “You do know that, don’t you, Broden?”

*Love again?*

, didn’t Broden’s skin went hot and then cold. Sweat slicked his skin and  
cott.” churned in his gut. Why couldn’t his family relent? His pare  
he said understood. But his brother? His once best friend in the world truly co  
to press this point, over and over.

“Why are you doing *thiis*?” Broden implored.

ig,” he Alden met that pleading with an entreaty of his own. “Because I w  
etween to be happy and you *are* happy with her.”

“I already gave my heart.” Broden spoke through gritted teeth. “  
h stood someone. A woman who is not Elyse Caldecott. Her name was  
Ackley,” he made himself say for Alden as much as himself.

ed him Because time had made the clarity of his late sweetheart’s face,  
memory of the moments they’d shared, fade. Now, in his mind’s eye,  
only Elyse.

l not be No. He wouldn’t be so foolhardy as to—

ogether, “What I felt for Alvina?” he burst out. “I’ll *never* feel that way aga

*Haven’t you felt that very rapture?* a voice silently jeered. *Have  
laughed more, and felt more joy and lightness than longer than y  
a lover, recall?*

coming “Are you sure you *don’t* feel that way now...with Elyse?” Alder  
quietly as if he’d followed Broden’s frantic cogitations.

en back “I won’t,” he rasped. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. And not because  
nent heshe was, but because of what it would mean to open himself to the  
anguish of losing her.

“No, you’re right,” Alden murmured. “You will not love anyone  
nauseaHe held Broden’s gaze “That is, you won’t. Unless you let yourself.”  
nts, he “Unless I *let* myself?” A harsh, bitter laugh exploded from Broden  
ntinuedvery *simple* you make it sound.”

“Maybe it *can* be?” Alden persisted, with an optimism that cou  
come from his never having known the level of loss and su  
ant youexperienced by Broden.

Frustration, fear, and fury broiled in his chest. He’d loved and lo  
I lovedloss of Alvina? That had begun as a long separation, and a reunion v  
Alvinahad been something that got him through. Her death? It’d been one h  
witnessed or been present for, but the grief was still there.

and the But to love Elyse and live with her and then lose her to the cruel h  
he sawfate? That would destroy him in the ways his imprisonment and the c  
his late sweetheart hadn’t managed to do.

In the same older-brotherly way as when he’d pressed Brod  
in.” coming to this godforsaken house party, Alden settled a palm on B  
shoulder.

n’t you  
ou can “As I said, you may deny it all you want, I’ve witnessed you wi  
Caldecott,” Alden said, when Broden finally looked at him. “I’ve s  
way you look at her.”

1 asked  
The way he looked at her.

With his brother’s every spoken word, dread twisted about B  
chest; tightening it into a thousand panicky knots.

of who “She is witty and clever and unafraid to go toe-to-toe with—”

greatest Angrily, Broden angrily shrugged off his uncorrupted brother’s gri

again.” “If you find Miss Caldecott such an ideal match, then perhap  
yourself, should wed her,” he jeered. The reverberations of Broden’s

echoed damningly from the rafters of the high-ceilinged room; and

. “How struck him in a self-inflicted wound, in the place where his heart did,  
still beat.

ld only Pensively, Alden ran a hand across his mouth, and stopped, fram

ffering chin between a thumb and forefinger. “Miss Caldecott *would* r

wonderful marchioness.”

st. The A pestiferous image slithered forward of Elyse and Alden. Anc

with her mind, the moments Broden had spent with her, played out in a differe

ie’d not In it, he saw Elyse and Alden assembling a kissing ball. Or tossing sn

at one another, like two jubilant, carefree children.

ands of With every imagined thought of Elyse and his brother that sprung

leath of thick, black blanket of rage descended like a curtain over Broden’s

blinding him. The tortured conjuring’s continued, relentless.

en into This time, of Alden drawing Elyse astride him and sliding his

roden’s inside her as only Broden had done.

Elyse moaning and whimpering her hunger for more of the other

th Miss kiss.

een the An unrelenting black rage assailed him.

“You’ve gone quiet, little brother?” Alden drawled, drolly m

“Should I take your silence to mean you want me to marry Miss Calde

roden’s

A feral groan built in Broden's belly and begged to be set free, as need to grind his fist into Alden's smug f—

Broden let the harsh words he'd intended to hurl die on his lips as you, registered the knowing glitter in Alden's eyes. *He is baiting me. Trying to charge me to show my feelings for Elyse.* As if uttering aloud the feeling a spear, developed for her in any way changed Broden or the possibility of a in fact, with her.

"I don't care what the hell you do with your life. You, on the other side of the fence, are all too happy to interfere in mine."

Alden recoiled; his gaze slid away from Broden, and then returned to him quickly, their like-blue eyes brimming with horror. But silence followed a harsh explosion; more charged than the fiery blaze dancing angrily on the hearth.

Alden inclined his head. "I see. You are free to stay here and stay as long as you wish. I will, on the other hand, be returning to the recital. If you'll excuse me."

Broden didn't so much as say goodbye. He remained with his spine straight, until Alden had gone, and then slowly sank to the floor and buried his head in his hands, more lost than he'd ever been.

man's

locking.

cott?"

A feral groan built in Broden's belly and begged to be set free, as did the need to grind his fist into Alden's smug f—

Broden let the harsh words he'd intended to hurl die on his lips, as he registered the knowing glitter in Alden's eyes. *He is baiting me. Trying to get me to show my feelings for Elyse.* As if uttering aloud the feelings he'd developed for her in any way changed Broden or the possibility of a future with her.

"I don't care what the hell you do with your life. You, on the other hand, are all too happy to interfere in mine."

Alden recoiled; his gaze slid away from Broden, and then returned all too quickly, their like-blue eyes brimming with horror. But silence followed that harsh explosion; more charged than the fiery blaze dancing angrily in the hearth.

Alden inclined his head. "I see. You are free to stay here and sulk and dwell in your own self-denial, all you wish. I will, on the other hand, be returning to the recital. If you'll excuse me."

Broden didn't so much as say goodbye. He remained with his spine stiffly erect, until Alden had gone, and then slowly sank to the floor and buried his head in his hands, more lost than he'd ever been.



## Chapter 16

Elyse hadn't meant to eavesdrop.

She'd merely meant to find Broden and tug him along to the recital.

She'd looked everywhere—and finally found him.

Elyse stood motionless in the cheerfully decorated parlor directly across from Lord Dalkeith's office in tense conversation with the earl.

She yearned to remain frozen, suspended in time, upon this ivory Aubusson carpet. That way, Elyse didn't have to hear, over and over and over again, the agonizing repeat, in her mind the words Broden had spoken...about her.

Nay, not just about her.

Her gut clenched, and anguish brought her eyes sliding shut. Broden *also* spoken about his great and only love; his departed sweetheart, died too soon and took his heart with her when she'd left.

It was certainly a black mark upon Elyse's soul, but God forgive her, she had found herself crippled with a bitter and unsupportable jealousy for the deceased young woman. To be the recipient of Broden's ardent and unrequited love.

A dash of wet, warmth slipped down Elyse's cheek. Followed by another and another. And it was a moment before Elyse realized...

*I'm crying...*

She wiped that moisture from her face, but more drops fell to tal place.

This was rich. Just rich. In fact, the irony of *all* this was not lost on

Oh, only if Evie were here. Her whimsical, romantic sister would have found the greatest hilarity that Elyse of all people, who'd teased Evie of her older girl's fancifulness and dreams of falling in love, and who'd considered herself the most logical of the Caldecott ladies, had gone and had fallen hopelessly, helplessly and utterly in love with a man who loved another

Elyse cringed inside and out.

*At that*, Broden, who'd been all too happy to offer her up like a truly white Christmas goose to his brother, the marquess—

“Miss Caldecott.”

*The earl!*

Surprise brought Elyse's head jerking up so quickly, she wrenched her muscles all down the right side of her neck, and that excruciating pain was a welcome distraction from the worst sort of anguish eating up her heart.

*Oh, God, and hers was a prayer. What is next, Lord? What humiliation or pain could you possibly serve me?*

Sneaking a hand up as discreetly as she could, Elyse wiped her kindling over her damp cheeks. For a moment, she thought of taking the coward's path and not answering the earl; pretending instead as if she'd not heard her mother, that he left her alone with her ignominy.

She prayed to hear the shift of a floorboard, indicating he'd gone.

Alas, he didn't.

Instead, he allowed Elyse the time she needed to compose herself and face him.

Taking a slow, steadying breath in through her lips, she exhaled and bringing her shoulders back, she faced Broden's eldest brother.

ld have     With his hands clasped behind him, Lord Alden stood at the entry  
over the the parlor. Tall, and dark, and sharp-featured as Broden, but not as  
sidered muscled or scarred as the younger man, he still possessed a startling  
l fallento the one who, by his own admission, could never and *would* never lo  
r.

          A fresh wave of agony sluiced at her breast, made all the worse  
          pity emanating from those eyes a shade lighter than the dark blue-  
ssed-up Broden's.

          With all the dignity she could muster, Elyse sank into a stiff,  
          curtsy. "Lord Alden," she returned that belated greeting, even as she  
          longing look at the hall behind him.

hed the     He inclined his head a fraction. "No need to curtsy, Miss Caldecott.  
n was a     There's no curtsy among friends."

          Among friends? She suspected her status as tossed-over lover  
t other     brother, hardly constituted 'friend' material. She repressed  
          overwrought giggle.

nuckles     "I expect *you* dipping a curtsy to *me* might not be all the thing for a  
l's way     variety of reasons," she said, in a weak attempt at humor. Because, as  
him so     they were speaking about curtsies and bows and pleasantries and form  
          they were not speaking about—

          "I saw you earlier, Miss Caldecott."

          And there it was.

elf and     Her surprisingly still-beating heart dropped to her stomach. "Oh  
          what else was there to say? *Of course*, the earl had seen her.

. Then,     During his private exchange with Broden, the earl had looked away  
          Broden and over to the front of the room. She'd registered from the  
          reflected in his eyes he'd noted her presence.

away of Elyse watched, with her pride in tatters, as the earl reached behind her and drew the exquisitely carved, Louis XV panels shut.

likeness Splendid. Absolutely, unequivocally, positively splendid. This was the moment he'd take her to task for intruding on his private exchange with Broden.

grey of Clasp her hands before her to steady those digits, Elyse awaited the earl's agonizingly slow, measured approach. He stopped on the outside of the carpet Elyse remained fixed to.

stole a More of that stilted, miserable silence swelled between them.

And here she'd thought there could be no greater pain and shame than hearing the man Elyse loved hurling his absolute disregard for her having been caught eavesdropping by Broden's brother, well that quiet to his biscuit.

another "I trust you heard some of mine and my brother's exchange."

*All of it.*

a whole His was barely a question, and as such, she considered a moment long as speaking. Alas...  
realities,

"I heard...*some*," she lied, unable to meet the earl's gaze squarely. She had heard the entire exchange between Broden and his brother and learned the lesson and well why ladies were warned to stay away from cracked door keyholes.

1." For, Elyse tensed; bracing for the deserved upbraiding that would cover her shame.

ay from The earl sighed. "I am so sorry you stumbled upon that, Miss Caldwell."  
horror

nd him Not a castigation then. And here to discover she'd prefer  
lambasting to charity.

was no "If you've come to apologize, you needn't," she said. "I had n  
:changelistening in on a private discussion between you and Bro—your brothe

A wry smile formed on his lips. "Well, I'd be hard-pressed to  
ited the single person who'd hear their name being spoken of and *not* stop to li

e fringe "Perhaps." She didn't know and didn't care how anyone else wou

handled themselves were they in the position she'd found herself. "I

excuse me?" She made to drop another curtsy but recalled his earlier c  
ne than about that gesture, and to avoid any further discourse, sustained fron  
er. But<sup>SO</sup>.

ite took "If you would?" he asked, as she made to go.

Elyse followed his arm-sweep over to the French gilt, two-seat  
Would he not let her be? Must he torture her?

"Please," the earl added with a humbleness she expected most no  
ent not didn't possess.

Feeling like one of those poor people being cruelly marched  
. She'd gallows, Elyse walked the remaining few steps to the white and so  
d good upholstered sofa, and stiffly lowered herself onto the edge.

ors and The earl dragged a chair over; he positioned it near Elyse  
specifically, between her and the exit she desperately wished to make.

omplete "What my brother said," he began in quiet, somber tones, "the wo  
overheard him speak, they were unforgivable. I'd preface all of this by  
ecott." he was not in the right frame of mind, that he had..." Color flared  
cheeks. "He has been *overindulging*."

a solid Is this why he'd sought her out? To make gentlemanly regrets on  
of Broden? "Yes, well, my father always said, an overindulgence of  
o place loosens the truth from one's lips."

r." "Miss Caldecott, I am—"

name a Deciding to spare both herself and Lord Alden his unnecessary a  
sten." she cut him off. "Lord Alden, you needn't apologize on your brother's  
ld have You were not the offender. Nor was your brother. He...he..."

f you'll *Oh, Heaven, help me. I cannot do this. I can't think of those*  
ffering *Broden had spoken.*

n doing She took in another shaky breath. "Your brother," she repeated, th  
her voice now somehow steadied. "He merely spoke the truth."

With alacrity that sent her reeling back, Lord Alden grabb  
settee. underside of his chair and scooted closer. "But, you see, that is the  
Miss Caldecott. My brother cares very deeply for you."

blemen This time, she made no attempt to suppress the laugh that explode  
her lips. "Oh, yes," she said drolly. "Encouraging one's brother to r  
to the lady is a sure sign of the other man's affections."

ft-blue, Ruddy color climbed the earl's cheeks. "You heard *all* of it, then."

"All of it," she confirmed, and this time unapologetically. Bette  
, moreupfront with the earl, so this meeting could be over, than to skirt truth  
attempt to 'save' an already unsalvageable pride.

rds you Broden's brother wiped a hand over his face. When he let that pa  
r sayingback to his lap, his sharp features were schooled once more.

l in his "My brother loved another woman deeply and when he learned  
died, that loss wounded him gravely."

on behalf of spirits much. She knew that. Broden had told her as much, and she'd overheard. And yet, somehow, each time, that same admission continued to unleash an almost brand-new hurt. "I know all that."

The earl winced.

Her cheeks tingled with warmth. "That is, *aside* from the exclusive overheard," she clarified. "I know about his love for her and their relationship and the sorrows that greeted him upon his return."

Surprise lit the earl's eyes.

"Broden told me about Alvina," she explained.

Of a sudden, the earl grabbed his chair again and dragged it so close that his knees almost touched hers. "That's it!"

Elyse wrinkled her brow in confusion.

"You see, Miss Caldecott, my brother? He does not talk about Alvina. In fact, he doesn't talk to anyone. That is aside from Lord Hamish, a friend I found during his years as an imprisoned man. I had to beg him to come on the holidays with our family." A laugh erupted from his lips. "No, I don't threaten him. But you? *You*," he repeated, placing even more emphasis on that identifier, "you he speaks to and laughs with and...and it is just, I think, his so great, that it's making him afraid and turned him into an idiot in a dunderhead."

From the seeds of despair in her breast, sprung flowers of hope...

Ones that promptly withered and died like the blooms struck by the frost.

Elyse managed a gentle, and grateful smile. For, she was grateful that he meant so very much that he saw her as a woman worthy of his brother.

heard as She swallowed painfully, and even so, when she spoke, her words  
rueful. "I know something of loss. I know what it is to build up and  
keep yourself safe from the pain of losing again."

Only that wasn't altogether correct.

"I didn't realize that I'd pushed my family and the whole world  
until Broden opened my eyes to what I'd subconsciously done. I  
showed me that a person who suffered the loss of a loved one, has to be  
to open themselves to love and the possibility of further hurt that comes  
that risk. And Broden?" She shook her head. "He is not there."

"But he *could* be," Lord Alden persisted.

"Yes, he could. Someday." Elyse favored him with a sad smile. "I  
day? It is not the one. And me? I-I am not the woman."

Tears threatened and to salvage some of her pride, she looked away.  
gaze caught on the evergreen kissing ball that dangled from the  
doorjamb; those crimson berries and pinecones Broden had given her  
she'd in turn twined amidst their vibrant green leaves.

And that joyous memory hurt as much as it healed.

"I understand you care deeply for your brother," she said when  
obtuse trusted herself to speak. "But your wishing I was the woman to help her  
brother's broken heart, doesn't make it so."

Lord Alden attempted to speak, but she raised her voice to make  
himself heard over him.

"I thank you for speaking with me, and for your every kindness  
to my brother. I love him more than I believed possible. I love him more  
I'd ever promised myself I would love anyone after my sister's death."



ls came yet...B-Broden?" Her voice caught. "He is *not* an obtuse dunderhead  
walls to brave and strong and courageous. He is a man who knows his heart."

Sorrow threatened to swallow her up. Elyse pressed her eye  
desperately trying to keep more tears from falling, fighting to keep  
d away from splintering apart before this man.

He also She looked briefly down at her lap.

e ready When Elyse again composed herself sufficiently enough, she look  
es with more at the earl.

"Broden knows *what* he wants and who he loves. And, Lord Alde  
*not* that woman," she said it another way, so as to disabuse him once  
But this all of the conclusion he'd drawn.

"I disagree."

ay. Her "You can want him to love me. But if all it took was wanting? T  
he oak would be as in love with me as I am with h-him." Her voice caught  
er, that "Would you be so gracious as to a-allow me the use of your carriage? .

like to return so my aunt is not alone for the holidays b-but I sent m  
and driver back to Leeds to be with *their* families."

en she Resignation settled into every line of his face. "If that is what yo  
al your—"

"It is." *Not*. But to continue sharing a residence with Broden all th  
herself knowing how little she meant to him, and when she was hopelessly  
with him. It would break her in ways her sister's loss hadn't.

. I love He bowed his head. "My carriage, along with anything else you re  
re than at your disposal."

th. And

l. He is “I am forever in your debt.” Not allowing him a chance to launch  
assailment, Elyse sailed to her feet. Her green silk skirts fell in a soft  
s shut; about her ankles. “If you’ll excuse me, Lord Alden?” This time, she c  
herself a question on her words. She completed a curtsy, one intended to resu  
formality between them, and then headed for the door.

She made it as far as placing her fingers on the ornate gilt handle  
ed once Lord Alden stopped her.

“Elyse?” he called, taking command of her name in a way that rea  
n? I am that offer of friendship he’d extended.

and for She turned back.

Lord Alden folded his hands behind him. “He will ask where  
gone.”

Then he “He might. But neither does that mean he’ll care that I’ve left,” sl  
t again. matter-of-factly. Why could the earl not get that through his brain?

I would Lord Alden chuckled. “If you think he *won’t* both ask after you  
y maid rocked by your leaving, then you don’t know Broden as well as you  
you do.”

ou wish Elyse caught the flesh of her inner cheek between her teeth, an  
another attempt at escape, when he called out again.

e while “He’ll discover I allowed you the use of the carriage and wi  
in love questions for me, Miss Caldecott. Do you understand what I’m saying’

This time, she remained with her back to him; her heart t  
quire is uncomfortably against her ribcage. His meaning couldn’t be clea  
intended to tell Broden the reason she’d gone, which would also  
Broden would learn she’d done the most foolish thing as to have fi

another love with him. And then there'd be more unwanted sympathy, only that it rustle worse for it would be Broden pitying Elyse.

lid tack Panic mounted inside.

irect all Elyse whipped around. "I'd ask you not to say...not to share. I struggled to even speak the words aloud, but her dread at Broden I before she'd heard his conversation, proved greater. "Please, do not tell him."

She didn't care that she pleaded. For she'd rather humble and humbled herself before this man than Broden.

Compassion brimmed from his eyes. "Miss Caldecott, he is my brother."

In other words, he could not withhold that information, not even to you've Elyse further shame. Nor, for that matter, should Elyse have asked the of him.

he said, She scrunched her toes up so tight in the soles of her slippers, that muscles in her feet ached, and she welcomed that alternate pain.

and be "Forgive me." She wiped shaky palms along the front of her skirts believe was insupportable. I would not presume to come between you and brother. I—" *Was just desperate.*

d made "You needn't apologize," he cut off the rest of her penitence. "I have my word; I will *only* share with Broden if he questions to me. If I ll have not, I shall keep your every confidence."

?" Elyse's shoulders sagged under the immense weight of relief huddled benevolent offer. "Thank you."

rer. He "And certainly, do not thank me, Miss Caldecott," he said so gently mean with such empathy, tears again welled in her eyes.

allen in She brushed them back.

his time “We will, however, find out, which of us, you or I, prove correct  
my brother is concerned.” Lord Alden followed that light attempt at  
with a wink.

..” She Elyse managed a smile for his benefit. How much easier it would  
earning been to fall in love with a gentleman so uncomplicated as the earl. At  
the strife and hardship Broden had known had shaped him into the man  
familiar fallen in love with for being.

“Lord Alden,” she murmured, and taking her leave of him, Elyse  
gathered up her belongings. Consumed with the anguish of a different, but  
painful loss, she somehow managed to put one foot in front of the other  
headed through Lord Dalkeith’s long, expansive corridors.

She took in shuddery after shuddery breath.

She loved him. She loved him more than she’d ever believed  
possible to love a man, or, for that matter, any person.

She loved him for his resilience. She loved him for his ability to  
and laugh—even with everything he’d gone through.

And oh, how she wished he could love her with that same, overwhelming  
desperation of one who could not live without her.

After hearing Broden in his own words emphatically deny having  
romantic feelings for her, how had she not already splintered and  
apart into a hundred million tiny pieces of wretchedness?

And then, as if she’d willed it to be, Elyse staggered. She pressed  
her palms against the wall to keep herself upright.

*Why did you put him in my world?* she silently cried to the God  
who had been so absent, so long in her life. *Why?*

t where If not for her to find the one man who'd made her willing to humor, giving her heart away, then, what was the purpose of *any* of this?

The top of her head tingled from the feeling of being watched.

ld have Elyse slowly lifted her head.

nd yet, Her gaze collided with a gladsome group of Burgess's memorial n she'd they'd been some time ago, and where they now lived on in the gilded frozen in a carefree moment. She straightened, let her arms fall to h went to and stared up at the big family. The marquess and marchioness flanked no less side of their four children.

her and Elyse's regard, however, centered on the likeness of Broden years

He and the earl rested almost lazily against one another. The dark young men wore matching crooked grins. The portraitist had p it was captured not only the fraternal jocundity between the gentlemen but a close bond they shared.

o smile With her eyes, Elyse traced the beloved planes of his face.

*Oh, how I will miss you.*

ielming *Because this is not the time for that,* the most fragile, delicate whi air brushed over Elyse.

ng any Elyse went absolutely motionless.

broken Maybe *that* was why Broden had come into her life...

sed her Yes, she'd lost her heart, soul, and every piece of herself to Burgess but perhaps the only reason he'd been placed in Elyse's path that she might at last see the pain and pointlessness that came from l who'd out one's family.

trust in Keeping oneself closed off from the world, also prevented one from living.

Elyse had built a fortress to keep herself safe, but in so doing, she looked out on so much. There'd been years and years of memories she'd not shared with the parents and siblings who remained here on Earth. And if she had been with any one of them, would Elyse have felt as if she'd been better off? Or would she have lamented and mourned all the time they'd not had together?

In this moment, she could at last, clearly see—she would have recognized those defenses she'd mounted, and all her cowardice cost her.

In such a short time, Broden had helped Elyse dismantle the wall she'd erected.

Oh, but how she wanted him in her life, forever. How she...

*Do not think about the loss. Think about the others you love; think about who can help you heal...*

A glorious, beautiful lightness filled Elyse, leaving her buoyant. The exhilarating sensation muted the sorrow, dulling it to a bittersweet ache.

Elyse wasn't so much a fool that she believed it'd always be this way. She'd been something else called, urged for peace, tranquility, and grace—grace for herself, for the hurt she'd inadvertently wrought her family who had also suffered just as greatly when Evie died.

Enlivened by hope, she let it fuel her and take the temporary place of her newest most aching loss she'd suffered. There was something she had not done before she left and it required her to bury the pain cleaving at her insides. She'd focus on the good that *had* come from this.

Elyse sprung into motion. With every step that took her deeper and deeper into the marquess and marchioness's household, a volatile

It truly hummed into her veins; it fueled her movements and sent her into a run...and then, she broke out into a full sprint; away from anguish and toward the happiness that was available to her—and always had been.

It made Her skirts twisted and whipped about her ankles as she went. He'd threatened to explode from the exertions of the pace she'd set for herself. At last, she reached the room she sought.

Elyse staggered into the music room and caught herself against the doorjamb to keep from flying forward. She sucked in great, gasping breaths of air, and locked her gaze on the unaware group gathered at the doorway as she'd entered the room.

The two parents lovingly surrounded the young women practicing for their upcoming recital. Laughter and smiles and chattering abounded. The two girls were so lost in one another that Elyse remained a voyeur at the entry, an outsider looking in at the happiest of tableaux.

That She couldn't look away. She couldn't so much as blink. From that moment there was not one, but two women missing—Elyse...and Evie.

It was; but All this time since she'd lost her best friend and big sister, Elyse had been hurting alone and in silence.

She had Somewhere along the way, her family had found the ability to heal again. They'd helped one another heal. No, they'd never be completely the same after losing one of theirs, but they could—and in her family's eyes, they should—continue to build new memories with those who remained.

And Tears dampened Elyse's cheeks and she pressed the backs of her hands on each hand over that warmth.

Her and As if she'd at last sensed Elyse standing there, her mother looked at her. Surprise filled her pretty blue eyes, and then concern.

a near sh, and r lungs lf. nst the

With a gasping breath, Elyse flew across the room.

“*Elyse*,” her mother exclaimed. Worry deepened in the new lines wrought upon the viscountess’s still regal face. “Whatever is the—?”

Just as she’d done when she’d been a small girl, hurting or happy, she launched herself at her mother. And just as her mother had always done, the viscountess folded Elyse close and hung onto her in the tightest, warmest embrace.

heaves front ofbe parents’ embrace.

She sobbed against her mother’s breast. And how very good it felt to be held in her mother’s arms. Everything had always felt better in her parents’ embrace.

for the ay were vay; an

Elyse didn’t attempt to stem her tears. “I’m s-sorry,” she wept. “S-sorry.”

“*Shh.*” Her mother made calm, soothing sounds, and stroked the top of Elyse’s head. “There is nothing to be sorry for.”

Only, there was. There was everything to be sorry for. Elyse only could cry, the harder.

ad been thought...if I shut y-you out th-that I wouldn’t hurt, the way it hurt when Evie died. Because it hurt so bad,” Elyse wailed.

“I d-didn’t realize what I was d-doing, M-Mama. Or...wh-what I’d been thinking...if I shut y-you out th-that I wouldn’t hurt, the way it hurt when Evie died. Because it hurt so bad,” Elyse wailed.

tely the case— tears flow freely.

“Oh, *dearest*,” her mother crooned. The viscountess cupped the sides of Elyse’s head and drew her head to lay upon her shoulder, and Elyse’s tears flow freely.

nuckles A solid hand came to rest on Elyse’s shoulder.

ked up take comfort from the other parent whom she so loved. She inhaled deeply.

“P-Papa,” she whispered and surrendered her mother so that she could take comfort from the other parent whom she so loved. She inhaled deeply.



the bergamot scent he'd always worn—and still did.

me had “My girl, my girl,” he said, his deep voice, sonorous harkened back to the songs he'd once sang in the nursery before Elyse and her sisters had fallen asleep.

one, the How splendid it was to take comfort and strength from another. Broden had helped her see that. He'd brought her to this moment.

warmest Broden had helped her see that. He'd brought her to this moment. And that, even broken apart inside that he'd never be hers, she would never regret meeting him and loving him. Except, with the thought of what she would never be with Broden, Elyse sobbed a renewed set of tears. She wanted his wife and his partner in life. She wanted to have a dozen boys all of whom looked like their father and possessed his same wit and strength.

top of Elyse cried all the more. She continued to weep until there was absolutely not another drop within her to be shed.

ried all When suddenly, through those healing crystalline drops, a cozy and pervading warmth enveloped Elyse, and her family, and the entire room. It wrapped around her like a warm, protective hug, and she stayed there, absorbing all the light, and all the love. All the while knowing, Elyse thought, “I thought I was alone with them now.”

t when She drew back.

back of Her sisters stared at Elyse with like expressions of love and happiness. Elyse touched her gaze upon each cherished face. As the eldest brother, Hutchinson had oft been gone at Eton, then Oxford, and then traveling the world, then living a life of his own. All the Caldecott girls, however, had been together. Just as they were now.

e could Emmy, Edith, Elyse...and Evie. Evie and the memory of her and the deep of they'd shared, that would never die, instead it lived on in all of them.

Elyse stared lovingly at the assembled Caldecotts and dashed to the moisture from her cheeks. A shuddery little sigh escaped her.

Like one afraid to hope, Edith asked tentatively, "Will you come with us?"

Elyse drew a deep breath. "I will."

Her sisters' excited squeals drowned out the last of that syllable.

She looked to her parents. "I must first go, give my thanks to Hester, and make my goodbyes."

Her mother stroked the side of Elyse's head. "I think that is a wonderful idea. We will be waiting for you."

"I left and lost so much," she said aching.

With a soft, tender laugh, her mother took Elyse's hands in her own. "You are here *now*, my dearest girl. You are here *now*." She gave a gentle, firm squeeze. "And that, Ellie, is all that matters."

As one, the Caldecott girls came together in a triumvirate embrace. Elyse welcomed being home, at last.

The following morning, Elyse left.

happiness.

brother,

ng, and

always

he love

Elyse stared lovingly at the assembled Caldecotts and dashed the moisture from her cheeks. A shuddery little sigh escaped her.

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Elyse drew a deep breath. “I will.”

Her sisters’ excited squeals drowned out the last of that syllable.

She looked to her parents. “I must first go, give my thanks to Aunt Hester, and make my goodbyes.”

Her mother stroked the side of Elyse’s head. “I think that is a wonderful idea. We will be waiting for you.”

“I left and lost so much,” she said achingly.

With a soft, tender laugh, her mother took Elyse’s hands in her own. “But you are here *now*, my dearest girl. You are here *now*.” She gave a gentle but firm squeeze. “And that, Ellie, is all that matters.”

As one, the Caldecott girls came together in a triumvirate embrace and Elyse welcomed being home, at last.

The following morning, Elyse left.

## Chapter 17

It was somewhere around ten o'clock the next morning when I bathed, shaved, and properly attired, realized—*I am not dying*.

He just *felt* like he was.

Which, given his sulky, sullen show last evening, was no less deserved. He'd gotten himself foxed enough to toss up the contents of his stomach all morning, but not inebriated enough to forget the entire exchange he'd had with Alden.

Standing at the long crystal windows that gave a full view of the grounds below and overlooked the same terrace where he and Ely dueled, Broden stared out at the thick clouded, grey sky.

In the light of a brand-new morn, with his head clear, and drink from his system, he finally let himself admit the truth—*I love her*.

And...it was safe to love her, because if he lost her tomorrow, the days he did have with her, and the laughter they shared, and the happiness they'd found, would have all been worth it, just to have known her.

He'd loved her from the minute she'd jumped between him and a ridiculous guinea pig, risking her very life, to save Sir Lancelot's lesser rodent one.

He loved her wit and spirit.

He loved that she'd known Mr. Turvey's name, and her dignified smugness in having shown Broden that he hadn't been so very foolish towards the proud innkeeper as he'd credited, and certainly not as Ely had been.

He loved the wallop she could pack with a snowball, and how she'd opened herself to him.

Broden, He loved everything about her.

He waited for the swell of terror that realization should bring. ( didn't. There existed only an absolute feeling of rightness and calm.

than he Light replaced the darkness inside him. The lightly frosted wind  
; of his reflected the big, goofy grin on his lips—a *smile*, she'd taught him to  
damned again.

Alden. Damn the man, for always being so bloody right about ever  
e south There'd be time enough later for admitting to his eldest broth  
rse had Broden had been wrong about so much.

At the moment, Broden had more pressing matters to attend.  
purged Enlivened as he'd never been, Broden quit his rooms and went in  
of Elyse. He hummed to himself as he moved jauntily through the  
hen the halls. By now, she'd broken her fast, no doubt. She did so at nearly a  
ppiness past eight o'clock every single morning. Then, regardless of the temp  
she took a brisk walk outside and usually returned by ten o'clock.

nd that His steps slowed, and he frowned. He'd not joined her yesterday  
-worthy morning. She would be wondering where he'd been. And worse, h  
seen her since they'd made love.

His gut muscles clenched. What must she think?

eserved Oh, God, what an enormous arse he'd been.

kindly I *want to call me out*.

yse had *Find her. Talk to her. Explain you love her and that scared the  
hell out of you.* While it didn't pardon his behavior, perhaps it explaine

freely With even more urgency, Broden hustled off.

Room after room. Music Room. Great Room. Red Parlor. Pink Gold Parlor. Every damned parlor. Breakfast room, because maybe s  
Only, it eaten later than usual, in hopes that they might meet as they always d  
that he deserved that.

owpane The breakfast room proved empty but for a lone maid dusting th  
y smile, cleared sideboard. Broden backed out of the room...

Restlessness took hold. Where in hell *was* she?

othing. And then, it hit him.

ier that *Of course!*

Broden took off running. There was but one place she'd be. On  
he'd not checked and should have checked first.

search The pace he'd set, combined with the anticipation of seeing her  
empty and telling her everything he carried in his heart, by the time Broden i  
quarter the nursery he found himself winded, and gasping for air.

erature, He skidded to a stop just outside the double doors leading to the  
greenroom.

nor this When he'd managed to get his breathing under control, he gripp  
e'd not handle, smiled, and let himself inside. "Hull—"

Broden stopped mid-greeting. For he'd been correct. Someone wa  
Just not *the* someone he sought out or wished to see.

Perched on the edge of the table where Elyse and Broden had ma  
kissing ball, and with his legs outstretched on the same wood stool El  
*bloody* occupied, sat...

nd it. "Alden?" he asked dumbly.

His eldest brother lowered the morning newspaper he currently held in his hands in the parlor. "Brother!" he greeted and tossed his gossip sheet aside. "Good morning to you, Broden." "Good morning." Broden glanced over his shoulder, intending to let his brother know he was not alone. "It is so good to see you are alive and well."

He was alive, but definitely not well. He'd sooner cut a limb off than admit as much to his all-knowing brother.

"Are you looking for someone?" he called out as Broden started to leave. "No," he lied through his teeth.

"Oh." Alden reached for his coffee cup and took a slow sip. "I'm sorry to hear that. I was unfortunate, as I thought I might be able to provide my big brother with some of the best services in the area." A twinkle glimmered in Alden's blue-grey eyes.

God, he was insufferable.

"No, brotherly services necessary." Alden smiled widely.

*Too widely.*

Instantly suspiciously, Broden took the bait he'd fought and appreciated the earl. "Why are you so happy?"

Alden arched an indignant brow. "Should I *not* be?"

"No. No. Of course, you should be. I was...I just..." He glanced at Broden. "If you'll excuse me."

Then, it hit Broden: the reason for his brother's grin—a knowing smile that Alden knew he was looking for Elyse, and his smug smile also told him the earl knew where she was.

"All right." For her Broden would swallow his pride. "Where is she?"

y read. “Who?” Alden spoke that syllable with such a slowness he’d the s  
g!” an owl to him. “I’m afraid you must be very specific.”

ave. God, how were they, both grown men in their thirtieth years, still  
games? “*Must I be?*”

ff than “Actually, you must. Those were the terms set.”

Terms set? For a moment Broden began to think it’d been his  
leave, who’d been doing the heavy drinking last evening. “Whose terms?”

Alden sighed. “You are getting further away.”

That is *Oh, this was quite enough.* “Elyse!” he shouted, exasperated. “Wh  
otherly hell is Miss Caldecott?”

The earl briefly closed his eyes. “Thank God,” he muttered. “Bloo  
you did not make this easy.”

“Make *what* easy?”

“I pledged I would not say anything to you unless you asked after I

Broden stilled. An odd feeling settled around his chest. “Say a  
roached about what?” And just like that, all the earlier teasing and levity vani  
be replaced with regret and sorrow that caused a trembling in his limbs

Because...that look. He knew that look.

l about. *I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know.*

But he needed to. “What is it?” Broden asked thickly.

grin, at With a sigh, Alden stood. “I am afraid Miss Caldecott is gone.”

o meant “Gone?” Broden repeated dumbly.

“Gone.”

e?”



ound of Muddled, Broden looked around the nursery. “Where...did she go?  
understanding hit him along with a powerful wave of relief. “Mott  
playing planned an outing today,” he breathed. “Of course. Sleigh rides to t  
and then ice skating.”

“Broden,” Alden motioned to the stool.

brother “I don’t want a bloody seat.”

Alden dug in. “I need you to sit.”

Setting his jaw at a mutinous angle, Broden dragged a chair ov  
ere the plopped himself down. “Must you always be in control?”

“It isn’t about control,” Alden said quietly. “I am worried about yo  
dy hell, There it was again. “Why are you worried?”

“Because despite your protestations to the contrary last evening, I  
you care very much about Miss Caldecott, and when you arrived  
ner.” frantic, I was sure you were looking for her so that you might profe  
nything love and hence my smile but then—”

shed to “Will you just say whatever the hell it is—?”

is. “She left. The estate.” Had Alden shouted it, that admission couldn  
been more explosive than his hushed murmuring. “Departed this morn

An odd buzzing filled his ears, like that of a thousand humming l  
clustered as one. And his brother proved right, yet again. If Broden  
been seated, his legs would have gone out from under him, and he’  
crumpled to the floor.

He couldn’t make sense of it. “But...but why...?”

Except, he knew.

?” Then *You made love to her on the floor, like she was some strumpet  
er hadstreet, and then didn’t so much as offer your name.*

he lake Alden dusted a hand down his face. “Broden, do you rememl  
conversation last evening?”

He winced. “I do.” He *wished* he didn’t.

“Miss Caldecott, she came searching for you.”

The earth’s spin slowed to a crawl. *No.* “When?” he implored, w  
ver andnot to be what he already knew it was. “*When, Alden?*”

The earl gave him a sad look. “I am so sorry, brother.”

u.” Broden sucked in a jagged breath. “No.”

“She came looking for you last evening, before the recital, and I an  
suspectto say she overheard—”

in here “Nooo,” he keened.

ss your “Our discussion.”

All right. He could fix this. He had. To do so, he needed to know  
what she’d heard.

i’t have “How much did she hear?” he asked his grim-faced brother.  
ing.”

Alden hesitated.

bees all Broden grabbed him by the arms and shook him. “*How much!*”  
hadn’t

’d have “She heard our exchange in its entirety,” he said with a calm con  
Broden’s panic.

Gasping, Broden recoiled. He yanked his hands back.

*No. Oh, God, no.*

on the He closed his eyes and made himself dredge forth every lie he'd  
last night to Alden.

ber our "I already gave my heart...I loved someone. A woman who is no  
Caldecott. Her name was Alvina Ackley..."

"What I felt for Alvina? I'll never feel that way again."

"Are you sure you don't feel that way now...with Elyse?" Alden as

illing it "I won't," he rasped. "If you find Miss Caldecott such an ideal  
then perhaps you, yourself should wed her..."

I'm going to be sick... "I didn't mean it," he whispered.

n afraid "I told her you didn't." Alden grimaced. "As you can expect, it  
have quite the same effect hearing it from me than...say, you."

On the heel of that, a voice in his head taunted him with the re  
Broden had made love to Elyse and then, she'd overheard Broden re  
her to his brother.

exactly Broden pressed his palms over his face. "No. No. No," he keened.

After the hell that had been his life, somehow, someway, he'd fo  
effervescent light. He'd been given a chance to love and live again.  
the worst possible manner, he'd thrown it all away.

Something dampened his hands. He lifted his head and glanced  
palms.

trary to Tears. *I am crying.*

"Heyyy, little brother," Alden spoke in that same quietly supporti  
he'd always used when Broden had struggled with something.

Alden dragged him to his feet and folded him in his arms. "This  
over. That woman loves you."

uttered "Not after this."

"She does not resent you. I can tell you that most definitely."

*At Elyse* A bitter laugh exploded painfully from his lungs.

"She doesn't," Alden insisted. "She said she could not hold you for loving another and she understood she is not that—"

*iked.* Broden moaned. "But she *is* that woman!"

*match,* *And she is gone.*

Agony threatened to cleave him in two.

While he'd been sleeping off a night of too much drink, she'd *it didn't* boarded a carriage to take her back.

"Yes," Alden conceded. "But there is *some* good news."

*minder:* A raw, half-mad laugh ripped from his lungs. "What could *poss*  
*buffing* good about any of this?" he cried, swiping the air with his hand.

"I have it on authority Father's carriage was going to have problem  
a wheel, sometime around..." Alden consulted his timepiece. "  
*ound an* minutes from now."

*And in* Broden stilled. What was his brother saying? Surely, he hadn't.

*l at his* "I suspect there will be an inn along the way where Miss Caldec  
*be* waylaid."

His heart thumped wildly. "You arranged this?" Broden whispered

*ve tone* Alden winked. "Can we *finally* agree I'm the cleverest brother?"

Broden grabbed his big brother by the arms, dragged him in, and  
*him.*

*s is not*

Alden laughed. "I could have done without that." His brother gripped him by the shoulders and looked him in the eye. "There is, however, *someone* who should be kissing."

at fault He gave Broden a firm shake. "Go after Miss Caldecott and tell her exactly how you feel."

Broden managed to nod, and then once he started, he couldn't stop. He continued bobbing his head. "Yes. All right. You are right—"

Alden laughed. "Go," he urged, giving Broden a push towards the door. "Your mount has been readied."

already Of course, he had. Alden thought of everything. Whether Broden knew or not, he truly always *had* known Broden better than Broden knew himself. And Broden loved him for it.

ibly be Broden halted. "There is one thing I must do—"

"There is *nothing* you must do. Get the hell out of here, Bran."

ns with Hope filled him. He needed to reach her. He would. And when  
Twenty he'd beg her to hear him out, profess his love, and then beg her to devote the rest of his life to her happiness.

Alden laughed. "Go," he repeated.

ott will "You have been right about everything up *until now*. There is one thing I must do." Broden grinned, and then, breaking into an all-out laugh, he thundered for two people—his mother...and a different Miss Caldecott.

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“There is *nothing* you must do. Get the hell out of here, Bran.”

Hope filled him. He needed to reach her. He would. And when he did, he’d beg her to hear him out, profess his love, and then beg her to let him devote the rest of his life to her happiness.

Alden laughed. “Go,” he repeated.

“You have been right about everything up *until now*. There is one quick thing I must do.” Broden grinned, and then, breaking into an all-out run, he thundered for two people—his mother...and a different Miss Caldecott.

## Chapter 18

Trudging along the old Roman road, beside Mr. Robertson, the Marquess of Dalkeith's rotund driver, Elyse wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

The irony wouldn't be lost on anyone that she found herself less than a quarter of a mile from the same inn where her life had been transformed.

Elyse was being punished mightily.

There was no other way to account for this.

"I am so sorry, Miss Caldecott," the Marquess of Dalkeith's driver said for the dozenth time since they'd begun their walk, nearly a quarter of a mile back.

Elyse attempted a smile. "You needn't apologize, Mr. Robertson," she said in return for also the dozenth time. "It is not as though you *per se* damaged the wheel, Mr. Robertson."

It was the wrong thing to say.

Poor Mr. Robertson's eyes filled and then began to leak tears.

*No. I know I am terrible and selfish and bad, but I cannot take responsibility for another's misery. I just want to wallow in my own.*

"Please, Mr. Robertson," she pleaded. "You have my promise, I will hold you at fault."

That assurance had the opposite effect.

This time, Mr. Robertson launched into a wave blubbing that Elyse's maid, Joan, on their journey here.

Elyse and Lord Dalkeith's driver continued the remainder of the v  
last, after ceaseless apologies and even more worrying the storybc  
guess of appeared on the horizon.

Relief, along with a yearning to have time in her own rooms, sent l  
; than aa near run.

forever Mr. Robertson, carrying the one valise she'd hastily packed last e  
hurried to keep up.

Elyse reached The Mermaid Inn first. She didn't wait for the mar  
driver to open the door. Rather, she let herself inside and then held tl  
er said for Skittish Mr. Robertson.

f a mile Wistful, Elyse looked about the quiet, empty inn. Not a single  
occupied the tidy tables.

n," she Within the powerful silence, Elyse heard the strains of a  
sonally conversation that had taken place in this very taproom.

*"We got off to a bad start."*

*"Yes." Elyse smiled. "Though, given I broke into your rooms, I  
yours is a generous understatement."*

anyone *"And I took you for a thief, with nefarious intentions."*

*"And we mustn't forget the quarrel over Sir Lancelot," she re  
do nothim. "Whom you did attempt to kill."*

*"Sir Lancelot who might be a rat."*

*"Who is decidedly a guinea pig."*

o rival He inclined his head. *"Very well. A rodent, then. On that, we ca  
concur?"*

*"You've returned, miss!"*



way. At That deep, merry welcome brought Elyse crashing to.

ook inn “Mr. Turvey! A joy to see you.” And it was. There was a bittersw  
in her reunion with this place and the hospitable servant who ran it.

her into The innkeeper hurried to take Elyse’s cloak. “Back right quick, y  
miss.”

vening, “I promised I would,” she reminded, the innkeeper.

He preened like a proud peacock. “You certainly did.”

quess’s No need to mention that carriage problems were what really acc  
he door for her presence. That admission would only disappoint Mr. Turvey  
off a fresh set of tears in Mr. Robertson.

patron “I’m happy to say the inn is far less busy than the last time you we  
I’ve got my finer, more spacious rooms available, and will give you t  
teasingbest—”

“No!” she exclaimed, stopping him mid-sentence.

Mr. Turvey furrowed his wrinkled brow.

expect Elyse coughed softly into her fist. “Forgive me...that is...I enjoy  
accommodations so much last time, and the memory of,” *him*, “my tir  
is so g-great...that if the original rooms I stayed i-in a-are still availa  
*mind*edthen...” Tears burned her eyes. “I would...”

The brave show and smile she’d forced suddenly proved an imp  
task. A towering wave of sorrow threatened to drag Elyse under.

Mr. Turvey fumbled about the front of his pocket and withdrew a  
*n likely*kerchief. “Never had a patron moved to tears by the superiority  
establishment,” he said, in wide-eyed wonder.

And as Elyse gladly took the small, folded scrap he offered; she immediately recalled another man. One who, in this very establishment had gifted her a handkerchief. A gentleman with four B's. And whom she knew not only whom she loved so very desperately—Broden Bowen Benedict Burges.

Unbidden, her eyes wandered to that table where they'd sat alone, and teasing one another.

Pain ripped her apart all over again.

*I won't survive this. I cannot survive this.*

Mr. Turvey's usual smile disappeared under a concerned frown.

*Just get yourself above stairs, Elyse. Pull yourself together long enough so that you can return to whatever room Mr. Turvey has available.*

Then, she could have herself a good cry...

Somehow, from a place she knew not where, Elyse found the strength to dredge up another smile for the innkeeper's benefit.

"Forgive me," she murmured. "I fear all the traveling I've done has tired me out."

Relief flashed in Mr. Turvey's rheumy eyes. "Doubtlessly. Allow me to show you to your rooms posthaste." With that, he picked up the lead.

Elyse had arrived with and started up the stairs.

He walked a slow, careful pace and Elyse followed sedately along behind him.

In the shadowy darkness of the winding, dimly lit stairwell, she saw the reflection of herself and Broden making this same climb.

*"You needn't thank me...Just as you shouldn't have to deal with my behavior from brassy men...May I escort you to your rooms...?"*

stantly The vicious vise hadn't yet finished the job and crushed her completely. That night, he'd been a protector and gentleman who'd shown her how wonderful it had felt to have someone look after her. And how very much she had come to want him to be talking to always do so; just as she'd longed to be his partner in life.

He hadn't wanted that. At least, not from her. The woman he loved to be a ghost, but Broden remained devoted to her and only her.

Elyse and Mr. Turvey reached the end of their march, and she just stood at the door; one that was no stranger to her.

*enough I am going to come undone. Please, please, let me just hold together a moment more, and then once I'm in my room I can say there's no more tears for me to shed.*

The innkeeper inserted that same rusted brass key into its hole.  
Click.

“Here we are,” the innkeeper piped in, with a lightheartedness that contrasted with the tumult that threatened to bring her down.

He opened the door.

This time, she couldn't muster a proper word of thanks. Giving Mr. Turvey another wan smile, she collected her meager belongings and slipped behind her room.

After the faithful and humble servant had gone, Elyse found herself staring at the door—again.

Silence rang so loud in her ears she wanted to clamp her palms over her ears and drown out that incessant ringing.  
loutish

er heart     Was this *really* what she'd thought she wanted? It'd taken Broden insisted show her how empty and heartrending a solitary existence, in fact, was

omeone     Hanging on by a fraying thread, Elyse stood immobile; unb the one unmoving. She whimpered and hugged her arms tight around herself lonely and painful embrace.

d might     *Close your eyes.*

t stared     Elyse followed that silent order from her subconscious and so them shut. A violent tremor racked her fingers, and she gripped the handle her valise. The ivory handles pressed smoothly into her palm.

myself     Breathing became a laborious chore. Each inhalation and exhalation b until uneven.

*Do not look. Do not see that chair you occupied when Broden told you to care for your scrapes.*

*Do not look at the washbasin he'd used.*

at odds     *Do not look at the closet with its secret passageway that led you to*

This time, she couldn't fight that silent order to herself.

ng Mr.     Elyse opened her eyes and found that old doorway. Like a woman trance, she wandered over to that closet.

entered     Whereas when she'd first stayed here and the panel had been left ajar for Sir Lancelot to scurry his way inside, now the door remained lf alone shut.

er them     If that wasn't a fitting declaration sent by the Lord himself—it was Elyse gave Broden up, and the all-too-brief dream she'd allowed herself future with him.

broden to     What if, the night of storm, the closet door hadn't been left ajar?  
is.            have never had those stolen moments when she'd fallen in love with him  
linking,     And the thing of it was? Even ripped apart inside as she was, Elyse  
elf in adidn't regret meeting Broden. In every way, she was better off for knowing  
              him.

              Elyse's valise slipped from her fingers and hit the floor with a  
              muffled resounding *thump*.

              Strangling on a sob, Elyse jammed a fist against her mouth in  
              attempt to contain her misery.

              Suddenly, it was too much.

              Elyse's entire body sagged. Standing became a chore, and she  
              enderly and slipped over herself on the short trip she made to the bed. The  
              she reached the wooden frame, her legs finally failed her, and she  
              headlong onto the mattress.

              In this instance, she no longer fought the grief begging to be let free  
              time, she turned herself over to it.

              Elyse wept; copious and bitter tears spilled from her eyes and  
              an in a upon her cheeks. She surrendered herself to the abyss of heartache.

              She cried for all she'd lost, and now all she'd never know.

              She cried for having run from her family when togetherness and  
              l firmly love for one another had been what they'd needed to get themselves  
              as time point past the debilitating pain wrought by Evie's passing.

              Elyse sobbed against the soft quilt, soaking it through with the well  
              elf of a grief.

They'd She was pathetic. Pitiabile. And aching. She was falling apart, bit  
im. inside.

yse still Biting her lower lip, she rolled onto her side, and stared vacantly  
nowing closet door.

*Only...*

lull but Of a sudden, there came a soft chirping.

Of course.

a vain Irony was not dead. And if Elyse had the energy to laugh, this si  
would have merited it.

A bloody rat.

umbled Only, that resurrected the memory Broden had shared—and the pa  
noment endured, and his justifiable and crippling fear of those diseased car  
she fell pestilent and plagues.

æ. This Filled with a purpose, Elyse stormed to her feet. Keeping her eye  
closet door, she inched toward her valise. When it was within arm's  
she slowly squatted to the floor and withdrew the pistol Broden had  
fell hot her. Then, coming to her feet, she leveled her gun at the floor, and sq  
one eye, waited, and waited, and—

The miserable creature scurried out quick.

id their Elyse froze.

es to a *I am seeing things.* There was no other accounting for it. The  
certainly no way of explaining it.

l of her “Sir...*Lancelot?*” she whispered, staying absolutely motionless.

Sure enough, the little beastie chattered as only Sir Lancelot  
moment later, something else, came crawling, on all fours, through the

by bit,     Nay, not something. *Someone.*

*Broden?*

at that     *I'm imagining him. I want him to be here...but why would he be?*

He'd been clear in his feelings of her, or rather, his lack thereof.

Ever so slowly, Broden picked his head up, and flashed sheepish  
will confess, that space is a good deal tighter than I expected."

"It is, isn't it?" she whispered in return. *Dear Lord, she was con  
ituationwith an apparition.*

He cleared his throat. "If you would?"

If she would, what?

in he'd     She followed Broden's gaze to the gun she still pointed near him.  
riers of     gasp, she set the weapon down quickly.

"I also confess," he said as he climbed gracefully to his feet. "I in  
on the     to follow behind after Sir Lancelot, here, but I did find myself caught  
s reach,     passageway and it took several moments for me to wiggle myself free.

l gifted     He brushed dust from his coat. Particles hung in the air, tickling h  
quinting     —and his.

He sneezed.

Not an apparition. *He was real! He was here!*

re was     see. "How are you here?"

"I believe my brother anticipated you'd have, uh, trouble wit  
carriage." Broden gave a tug at his cravat.

did. A     "How did he...?" At once, it hit Elyse. "The wheel is not broken, t  
door.

“No. The wheel is fine.”

Ah, which explained why poor Mr. Robertson had been so overw  
He’d been shedding tears of guilt. The poor fellow. He’d merely been  
his master’s bidding.

grin. “I What was not clear, however...

“W-Why are you here?” she asked, her voice breaking.

versing “There was one more confession I needed to make,” he murmure  
when I sought you out this morning, I learned you’d gone.”

“Oh.” *He was here because of guilt.*

“Those things I said, those terrible, ugly *lies* you heard—”

With a “Broden, don’t,” she pleaded, pressing a finger against his mouth  
not want you to feel—”

ntended “I love you,” he blurted, cutting off the rest of what she’d been a  
t in the<sup>say</sup>.

” *What had she been about to say?*

er nose Her head whirred. “I don’t...”

“I was so bloody scared of being hurt again, Elyse. The prospect  
leaving me too, it was not something I could bear.”

Tears built in her eyes, blurring him. “I-I understand that.”

did *not* He caressed his right palm along her cheek, and she closed he  
leaning into him.

h your “We understand one another,” he murmured.

She wanted to believe this, and him, and yet, fear held her in its h  
hen?” you are here, because...we made love...” she whispered.



“Only a small part because of that.” A rogue’s grin dusted his lips. “I brought you here not for the reason you’re thinking. After we parted ways that night, I thought about you only of you and how right you felt in my arms, and how I want to spend the rest of my life loving you and making love to you.”

Elyse blinked wildly “Oh.”

“And that, Elyse is why I fought myself. I wanted to shut you out, but I couldn’t from the start. I couldn’t imagine losing anyone again. But when I awoke this morning, do you know what I realized?”

Incapable of words, she shook her head.

“That it was safe for me to love, because if I lost you tomorrow, the time we *did* have with one another, and the laughter we shared, and the happiness we’d found, would have all been worth it, just to have you.”

Her breath caught.

“Oh, Elyse,” he whispered, stroking her cheek, once more. “I have loved you from the minute you jumped between me and that ridiculous guinea pig.”

She laughed; her first real laugh that night.

“I love you for your intelligence and humor.” He brushed his mouth against hers in a fleeting kiss. “I love how kind and generous you are to any of your servants.” He kissed her gently once more. “I adore that you can play with your eyes, snowball fights.”

Elyse giggled, but he touched his lips to hers again.

He drew back. “Oh, Elyse.” His gaze moved over her face, and he smiled. “If only I could have the tenderness that threatened to undo her. “I love everything about you.”

s. “But And for the first time since she’d found him in her rooms, thoughtwavered. “If you cannot forgive those lies, ones I told out of nothing but frustration with myself, or, if you ...cannot love me, then—”

Elyse threw her arms around his neck. “I love you,” she cried. “I love you. I love you. I love you.” She kept saying it. The words kept tumbling out but over and over until she was laughing and crying and out of breath.

when I “Elyse.” The somberness of Broden’s voice penetrated her joy.

“Yes?”

“There is something I would ask you...” He dropped to a knee.

hen the Elyse slapped a hand over her mouth. He was going to...

and the “Come here.”

known Confused, Elyse took a step closer.

“Not you.”

e loved She glanced about.

a pig.” “Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. I said, come here.”

At last, Sir Lancelot came waddling over, and, close as they now stood, she noted a detail she’d not previously noted.

and all “A collar!” she exclaimed, as Broden fiddled with that tiniest of details. “With his antics, that is a splendid idea and a way to be certain not to—

“I enlisted your sister’s help with this. Emmy assured me he’d be cooperative, but I should have known better,” he muttered to himself.

with a “Help with—?”

Broden opened his palm, revealing a diamond, sapphire, emerald, and ruby ring; those exquisite stones were cut and pieced together to

Broden double heart.

g more She gasped. "I...it is...I don't understand."

"It is...*was* my mother's," he explained. "When each of her children was born, my father commissioned a ring, that was to go to each of us when we found the one we wish to spend the rest of our lives with." Tears welled in Broden's eyes. "Marry me, Elyse. Please. Let me spend every day with you laughing and lifting you up. I'd ask that you be my partner in life and death—"

"Yes," she whispered, her voice catching.

Broden slid that symbol of his commitment upon her finger. Her tears fell freely, unchecked. These drops both healing and joyous.

Elyse made to launch herself at Broden, just as Sir Lancelot chose the precise moment to scramble across Broden's toes. He scowled at the troublesome beastie.

"You know we'd be better off with a dog," he muttered.

Elyse laughed. "Might we have both?"

if we were, "I will build you an entire menagerie and an Ark to keep them on their own. So ask it, love."

circlets. "I don't need a menagerie, Broden," she said, her voice thick. "I need you."

ie'd be They joined hands, twining their fingers together. "That is perfect because all I need is you."

ld, and Together, they set fear aside, and embraced the days to come and the future awaiting them.

form a

*The End*

If you enjoyed *Once Upon a Betrothal*, be sure and check out the rest of the books in the Scandalous Seasons Series!

When we

glazed

making

I do the

years fell

those that

at the

, if you

“I only

it, love,

the life

### Scandalous Seasons

*Forever Betrothed, Never the Bride*

*Never Courted, Suddenly Wed*

*Always Proper, Suddenly Scandalous*

*Always a Rogue, Forever Her Love*

*A Marquess for Christmas*

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## Biography

**Christi Caldwell** is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Sinful series and the Heart of a Duke series. She blames novelist Judith Mc for luring her into the world of historical romance. When Christi was at the University of Connecticut, she began writing her own tales of love where even the most perfect heroes and heroines had imperfections. She learned to enjoy torturing her couples before they earned their well-deserved happily ever after. Christi lives in the Piedmont region of North Carolina where she spends her time writing, baking, and being a mommy to three inspiring little boys and empathetic, spirited girls who, with their mischievous twin antics, offer an endless source of story ideas!

Visit [www.christicaldwellauthor.com](http://www.christicaldwellauthor.com) to learn more about what Christi is currently working on, or join her on Facebook at [Christi Caldwell Author](#), and Twitter at [Christi Caldwell Author](#).

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## Cover for Once Upon a Betrothal