

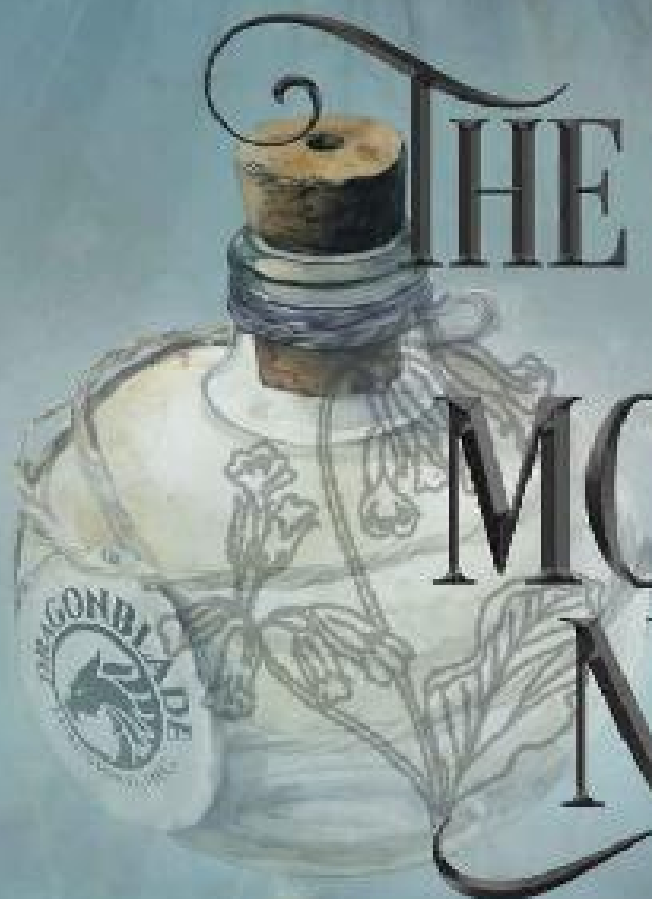
ELISA BRADEN

The
Oddflower
Series



Novella

THE SECRETS OF A MOONLIT NIGHT



D
R
A
G
O
N
B
R
A
N
D

THE SECRETS OF A MOONLIT NIGHT

**The Oddflower Series
Novella**

Elisa Braden



© Copyright 2023 by Elisa Braden

Text by Elisa Braden

Cover by Dar Albert

Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition September 2023

Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertising or promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

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

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may not be re-sold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not purchased for you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If this book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy and violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, exclusive excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more.

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[Sign Up Here](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing, we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us', so we sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorite authors along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Elisa Braden

The Oddflower Series

The Secrets of a Moonlit Night (Novella)

Rescued from Ruin Series

[Once Upon a Midnight Kiss \(Novella\)](#)

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Publisher's Note

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Elisa Braden

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

About the Author

CHAPTER ONE

October 30, 1839

Hadlington House

North Yorkshire, England

ELIZABETH ENJOYED DECEIVING children approximately as much as she enjoyed having a tooth extracted by a drunken barber. But much like bargain tooth extraction, sometimes lying was necessary.

Because sometimes children refused to follow instructions.

“Deep into the *deepest* depths of the night,” she said in a wavery whisper, “*long* past the hour when all children should be asleep, the Half-Faced Man rises from his rest to wander the darkened moors.” She raised the lantern beneath her chin and deepened her voice for dramatic effect. “He searches for something once lost. Lost! Lost in the mists of time.”

Three pairs of gray eyes, round and riveted, gazed up at her from a pile of blankets on the nursery’s carpet. They’d built a “camp” earlier, but their tents had collapsed shortly after construction. In fairness, the architects were eleven, eight, and six, and the oldest had been more concerned with decorative pillows than structural integrity.

“What does the Half-Faced Man search for, Miss Nightingale?” asked the eleven-year-old Miss Winnifred Hadlington. Winnie was the most gullible of the three.

“No one knows. But from the stroke of midnight until the sun rises over the sea, he rides in search of it. Any small creature he encounters will incur his *devilish* wrath—”

“Does he search for the privy?” asked a smirking Davy. “Sometimes I wake in the night to pee. It’s *devilish* urgent, too.”

Winnie rolled her eyes at her brother. “Ghosts don’t pee.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they don’t have a body. No body, no pee.”

Davy rocked up onto his knees, relishing the chance to expound on his favorite subject. “I heard the Half-Faced Man died slaying an army of Frenchmen with his flaming sword.” He mimicked withdrawing a blade from a scabbard and swinging it through the air above his sister’s head. Winnie tossed a decorative pillow at his face. He pretended to be felled and thrashed around on the blankets in a dramatic reenactment of a great hero’s demise. The final gasps were a tragedy.

Arthur frowned at his brother’s antics before turning to Elizabeth and adjusting his spectacles. For a boy of six, he looked remarkably like a solicitor bringing his client a matter of grave concern. “We’ll visit the poor Half-Faced Man tomorrow, won’t we, Miss Nightingale? We must help him find what he lost. Especially if it was his shoes.”

Elizabeth lowered the lantern and swallowed a curse. This was why she hated deceiving children. They were too innocent to be predictable. “No, darling. Ghosts are dreadfully inhospitable.”

“We could bring cakes. The little ones with icing.”

“Arthur—”

“I adore cakes.”

She sighed. “Yes. I know.” She’d cleaned his face after last night’s birthday celebration.

“I misplace my shoes all the time. We could bring cakes to his house and help him find what he lost. Perhaps then, he wouldn’t be inhos-pibble.”

Blast, this wasn’t working. Elizabeth had hoped her tall tale would satisfy their curiosity while also accomplishing her aim—namely, frightening three children into leaving their

neighbor in peace. Clearly, her deception skills were out of practice.

That very morning, she'd caught the boys peering through Northcliffe Abbey's outer gates. Davy had been daring little Arthur to squeeze through the bars and knock on the main house's door. Apart from the risks to their safety—the estate was still a decrepit old rubbish pile, despite the new owner's efforts to restore it—Elizabeth knew very little about the man who'd taken possession of the place last month. She'd seen him from a distance a few times. He liked to ride along the sea cliffs at first light. He'd appeared tall in the saddle and wore a lot of black. That was where her personal observations ended.

Everything else she knew from her employer's commentary and villagers' wild rumors. Some of the gossip was as fantastical as Davy's stories about flaming swords. Other reports were more credible. A Hadlington chambermaid had told Elizabeth what a mason working on the main house had said: that his employer's face was "ghastly scarred" on one side—a house fire in his youth, apparently.

Elizabeth reckoned a man contending with scars and a decrepit old pile of an estate wouldn't want three curious children underfoot, however adorable they might be.

"I should think a ghost would get lonely," said Winnie. "He might appreciate some company."

Elizabeth rubbed the headache forming beneath her right brow then settled her wire-rimmed spectacles back into their carefully crooked alignment. "We aren't visiting any ghosts. And you three shall keep your distance from Northcliffe Abbey. Understood?"

Davy's chin jutted. "I don't believe the Half-Faced Man is a ghost."

"No?" Disguising her smile of approval, she turned away to set the lantern on the table between the boys' beds. Davy was the more cynical of the three—a boy after her own heart.

She'd been trying to teach them all to think clearly and spot lies. He was the only one showing promise.

"The ghost is a girl."

Bloody hell.

"And I think she's frightened of horses." He warmed to his subject, shaking his sister's arm when she rolled her eyes. "No, listen! Winnie, listen. Last Sunday, I saw a lady, um, inside the carriage house. No, no. Inside the *stable*. She wore a black scarf on her head. She was holding her stomach like she'd eaten Cook's stewed turnips."

All the children groaned.

"Yes! She was sore sickly. She looked straight at me." Davy lowered his voice the way Elizabeth had done earlier and wiggled his fingers in the air. "Then, she *disappeared*."

Winnie cast her brother a narrow look. "What silly nonsense."

"Is not!"

"Why would she be frightened of horses?"

Davy threw his arms up in a wide shrug. "I don't know! But something chased her out of the stable. Must have been a horse. The mean ones bite, you know."

Winnie was unconvinced. "You said you saw her inside the stable, and then she disappeared."

"So?"

"Which one is it? Was she inside and ran out? Or did she disappear?"

"God, Winnie, why must you spoil everything!"

Elizabeth shook her head. The boy was trying, but his flimflammy needed work. Winnie, on the other hand, was doing better with her "spot the liar" lessons than she'd thought.

Arthur's sweet face scrunched up. "Miss Nightingale?"

“Yes, darling.”

“Can we ask Cook to make cakes for the lady ghost?”

She wanted to laugh, but she mustn't encourage him. If the boy ever acquired an ounce of guile, they'd all be doomed. She crossed her arms and arched a brow. “Are you asking because you want cakes for yourself?”

He thought for a moment. “Perhaps.”

“You can't eat cakes for every meal.”

“Why not?”

“Meat and vegetables will make you grow tall and strong.” She pictured their father and added a correction. “Well, strong, at least.”

He yawned and rubbed his eyes beneath his spectacles. A slow blink told her bedtime had finally arrived. “But I don't care for peas.”

She brushed a lock of sandy hair from his forehead. “Sometimes, we must choose what's best for us, even if the thing we want more is within reach.”

Another yawn. “Cakes taste better.”

She had no rebuttal for that excellent argument.

A short while later, after she'd put the children to bed and retired to her bedchamber near the nursery, she heard the first peals of thunder. Rain had been threatening since noon, and now it gusted in sheets. She left her reading chair and went to the window to look out toward the sea. Distant flashes followed by crackling booms lit up the pitch-dark landscape. The abbey's ancient priory church pierced the sky with its skeletal arches. Its stark ruin suited her mood.

She glanced at the letter her sister had forwarded from Dublin. It sat on the dressing table, dimly lit by the lantern. Evie hadn't broken the seal, but she'd noted it was the third letter bearing that particular crest.

Elizabeth plucked it up, broke the wax, studied the plea. Felt nothing. *I am now a widower; it read. I beg your forgiveness and entreat your return. Please, my darling Bess. No one shall stand between us this time. Come back to me.*

Never. She would never be swindled by a handsome face again. If that meant spending the rest of her life unmarried and caring for other people's children, then so be it. Better to be alone than played for a fool.

Besides, she couldn't leave the Hadlington children. One day, they would no longer need her, but for now, they did. Who else would protect them and teach them the truth about the world? Certainly not their parents.

Mr. and Mrs. Hadlington were as credulous as two lambs without a shepherd. They'd hired her based on a single forged reference. They'd never questioned why a woman from Cornwall had no discernible Cornish accent, or why she wore spectacles with plain glass and no correction.

In this world, there were two kinds of people: the swindlers and the gulls. She'd been both, and both were shite. If there was a third path, she meant to forge it. The world could go to the devil.

She tossed the unwanted letter into the fire and watched it burn to ash. Perhaps he'd take her lack of response as the answer it was.

Booming thunder rattled the house, closer and louder this time. She frowned as the sound became rhythmic pounding. It stopped. Repeated. *Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.* Quiet.

A loud shriek followed by a thunderous slam rang out from downstairs, jolting her into motion. She rushed to her dressing table to shove on her crooked spectacles and ruffled cap then dashed into the nursery. The children hadn't awakened, thankfully. Hurrying down two flights of stairs, she followed distressed sobbing sounds into the entrance hall.

There stood the housekeeper, Mrs. Fletcher, a stout, middle-aged woman cowering and crossing herself next to a

sallow maid holding a trembling lantern. Elizabeth glanced at the front door just as rhythmic banging sounded again.

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

“Who’s at the door?” she asked, bewildered by the two women’s fright. “Mrs. Fletcher? For pity’s sake, stop with the sign of the cross. This isn’t Sunday services, and you aren’t Catholic.”

The housekeeper’s hand stilled and pressed over her bosom as she focused on Elizabeth. “H-he’s monstrous, Miss Nightingale. I thought the lads were fibbing, but they spoke true. He’s come to have his vengeance!”

“Who?”

“The Half-Faced Man.”

The sallow maid nodded, her bony throat moving as she swallowed hard. “It’s true. He rides the moors on stormy nights, seekin’ to reunite with his lost love. When he doesn’t find her, he flies into a rage, attackin’ unwary servant girls. Livestock, too.”

Mrs. Fletcher nodded. “I hear he favors chickens.”

“No, it’s sheep.” The maid swallowed again. “There’s more of ’em.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and snatched the lantern from the girl’s hand. “Hester, go find your bed. Mrs. Fletcher, do you intend to answer the door?”

She shook her head adamantly, crossing herself once again.

“Very well, I’ll do it.” Elizabeth unlatched the door and swung it open just as the Half-Faced Man raised his gloved fist to pound again. She nearly gasped. He really was a sight.

Well over six feet tall, he wore black from head to toe—black hat on black hair, black greatcoat over broad shoulders, black breeches encasing muscular legs, and black boots

stained with rain and mud. But his height and color preferences were the last things one noticed.

The first thing was his face. Or, rather, his scars, sweeping from above his left brow down along his cheek, jaw, and chin. The skin was a puckered web of ridges, craters, and shiny smoothness that shouldn't be there.

None of it should be there.

Because the other half of his face was rather handsome, even with dark stubble and little flecks of mud. Oh, and the infuriated glower.

Delicately, she cleared her throat. "May I help you?"

His glare flickered over her shoulder toward Mrs. Fletcher, who squeaked, crossed herself twice, and fled toward the kitchen.

He swept a dismissive glare over Elizabeth's best blue gown then settled on her face. "I suppose you'll do." His voice was cool, cultured, and deep, like patient, distant thunder across a dark sea.

Heavens, the sound was ... extraordinary. Silvery shivers rippled over her skin. It felt like cool rain on a hot summer day, like dark chocolate sweetened by cream, like a warm whisper against her skin.

Who knew a man's voice could be that arousing?

"I must speak with Mr. Hadlington."

She stifled another round of pleasurable shivers. "I'm afraid Mr. and Mrs. Hadlington are away visiting Mrs. Hadlington's sister—"

"Right. Whom should I address about their children?"

She blinked. "Me, I suppose. I'm their governess."

"Your name?"

"Elizabeth Nightingale." She conjured a polite smile. "And yours?"

He retrieved something from inside his greatcoat—a white wooden doll with black eyes and a red mouth. It was dressed in embroidered linen with a red ribbon around its waist. “Thomas Warwick,” he said, low and forbidding. “Northcliffe Abbey is mine. I found this in my stable.”

His tone was an accusation. She eyed his scars and dripping hat. Even his lashes were dripping. Stepping back, she gestured for him to enter. “Would you care to come inside, Mr. Warwick?”

“No.”

She arched a brow at his rudeness. “Very well. I’ve never seen that doll before.”

“It’s a child’s toy. I certainly didn’t drop the thing.”

Scanning him from hat to knees, she murmured, “No, I expect not.” He was every inch a man, though he appeared younger than she’d assumed—mid-thirties, likely.

According to Mr. Hadlington, the abbey’s new owner was an architect of some renown who’d made a fortune purchasing distressed properties to renovate and sell at a profit. He’d also designed and managed projects for several powerful figures, including the Duke and Duchess of Blackmore. Given his accomplishments, Elizabeth had pictured Thomas Warwick as a genteel, artistic gentleman in his fifties.

She couldn’t remember ever being this wrong.

“Northcliffe Abbey isn’t a fit place for children, Miss Nightingale. Keep a closer watch on your charges.” He handed her the doll, which was still warm from the heat of his body. “And keep them off my property.” He turned to head into the dark.

“They’re just curious about you, you know,” she said before she could think better of it.

He halted, his back stiff. Slowly, he faced her again. “They shouldn’t be.”

“Children love the word ‘shouldn’t.’ It tells them precisely where to find trouble.” She smiled wryly. “Trouble is their favorite treat.”

He reentered the lantern’s light, which made his eyes glow hot. “As their governess, one would think you’d have remedies for their misbehavior.”

“Yes, one might assume so—if one has never dealt with children before. Have you none of your own, Mr. Warwick?”

“No.”

She took his measure, noting the simplicity of his clothing. Likely he wore one color out of convenience, avoiding the fuss of fashionable dressing. His hair was a bit long and, even when damp, showed signs of curling. Which meant he probably had no wife or valet. She’d wager Thomas Warwick spent every waking moment pursuing his ambitions.

Outside, a horse nickered. She lifted the lantern higher to view Mr. Warwick’s face. One brow was half missing. The other was set low over a direct gaze. He didn’t retreat or flinch away. Instead, he held very still and let her look her fill.

“Do you always pay visits in the dark?” she asked without thinking. “Or am I the special one?”

His intact brow lifted. His head tilted to a curious angle. Amber eyes flickered over her features, direct and hot. Suddenly, she felt like he was stripping her naked.

“Your spectacles are crooked, Miss Nightingale. They’re disturbing the symmetry of your face.” He paused. “Though I suspect you can see that well enough for yourself.”

She froze, pinned in place by a man she should not have provoked. Bloody hell, *why* had she provoked him? Because he fascinated her, that was why. The way he angled his head to lead with his scars rather than hide them. The way his eyes glowed like amber fire yet glared with penetrating cold. The sensual sorcery of his voice uttering lines written for a curmudgeon. Most men fit predictable patterns, but Thomas Warwick was one big contradiction.

From an early age, she'd been able to read people like a signpost. Her mother had taught her well. *Watch his mouth, Lizzy. The snarl of contempt when she speaks. There. Do you see it? Oh, he properly hates his wife, that one. But he'll never do anything about it. This gelded husband is going to feed us for a year, darling.*

Gelded husbands, elderly widowers, ambitious climbers. She'd cut her teeth on spotting their patterns. Not once had she found any of them more tempting than their bank notes. Her sister had made that mistake and paid a steep price for it. She'd warned Elizabeth to be wary. *A man will promise anything when he's wanting, Evie had lamented. He'll sell you bottled moonlight if you let him. By the time you realize there's nothing but smoke inside the glass, you've already paid too much.*

The moment Thomas Warwick had stirred Elizabeth's curiosity, her alarm bells should have been clanging. He wasn't like other men. Those eyes saw far too much, and the last thing she wanted was to be seen.

Carefully, she lowered the lantern and withdrew a step. "I shall instruct the children to stay away from Northcliffe Abbey," she said. "My apologies if they troubled you, sir."

He stared at her for a heart-thudding eternity. Finally, he inclined his head, tugged his hat's brim, and took his leave. Rain and darkness swallowed him up. She heard his horse's hoofbeats dissipate before she could bring herself to close the door and return to her bedchamber.

Strange heat and a racing heart made her movements jerky as she prepared for bed. After draping her gown and petticoat over the rack at the end of her bed, she unlaced her stays, unbound her bosom, and removed the padding around her waist with trembling fingers. Finally, she sat at the dressing table to take down her hair. In the looking glass, she watched herself remove her overlarge cap and crooked spectacles. With a dampened cloth, she wiped away the careful smudges of soot

from beneath her eyes. Then she removed her pins and let the glossy russet curls unwind down to her waist.

With a sigh, she glared at her reflection, hating every dainty feature—the small, straight nose, the feline eyes, the plump lower lip. Everything men promised the moon for. This face had brought her nothing but trouble.

A red ribbon caught her eye—the doll Mr. Warwick had ridden through a storm to deliver sat beside her lantern.

She closed her eyes and remembered the shivery pleasure of his voice, that amber gaze upon her. *Seeing* her. She slid a hand over her belly to stifle the flutter there. This excitement was dangerous. *He* was dangerous.

And therein lay the problem. She was tempted. For the first time in years, she wanted to open a bottle of moonlight and discover what all the fuss was about. She cursed her foolishness. Because, apparently, trouble was her favorite treat, too.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Elizabeth peered over Winnifred's shoulder at the atrocity being rendered by the girl's hand. "Exploded artichokes," she murmured before sipping her tea. "A bold choice, I must say."

Winnie frowned, her brush hovering above the atrocity. "It's meant to be shrubbery."

Elizabeth patted her shoulder and sat on the morning room's sofa. "Thankfully, nobody cares a whit about watercolors."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody."

"What about gentlemen? Don't they admire artistic skill?"

"No."

"No?"

"I haven't had enough sleep or enough tea to tolerate the repeating game, Winnifred."

Winnie nibbled her lip. "It says in the book that a young lady should have interests and accomplishments of her own."

Elizabeth sighed. "This again. I've told you not to waste time studying that book. It was written for young ladies seeking a husband."

The girl stiffened. Her brush dabbed her canvas. "I think it's very wise to prepare in advance."

"You're eleven. You don't even know who you are, let alone who you should ..." Elizabeth gave up halfway through the useless argument. Ever since she'd shown Winnie her volume of *Letters to an Oddflower in Anticipation of Her Debut, Or, A Guide to Matrimonial Felicity, Written by a Lady*

of Distinction, the girl had dedicated herself to its study and her own improvement.

“Perhaps I should try oils,” Winnie murmured, wincing at her artichokes.

“Finish your watercolor first.” Elizabeth waved a finger toward the carnage. “Add a bowl of peas. Arthur will appreciate the homage to vegetable destruction.”

Winnie laughed. The girl was already pretty with her dark blonde curls and wide-set gray eyes. Her beauty doubled when she smiled. In a few years, she’d have young men swarming her like honeybees on strawberry syrup.

Elizabeth had been tasked with preparing her for her debut, but the only instruction Winnie needed was how to choose a good husband from a swarm of liars and fools. The girl thought her singing skills mattered, for God’s sake. *Singing*. Ridiculous.

“What sort of husband would you want, Miss Nightingale?”

Nearly choking on her tea, Elizabeth replied, “The sort with deep pockets and an uncontrollable urge to spoil his wife.”

Winnie giggled and added several daubs of brown where the sky should be. “I should think kindness and honesty important, too.”

“Those are rare qualities in rich men with loose purses.”

“The Lady of Distinction says scofflers must trust their husbands implicitly if they wish to find true happiness.”

“First, I am not a scoffler. Second, it’s a ludicrous, fanciful term.”

“But it describes you quite aptly, I think.”

The author of the *Oddflower Guide* had felt it necessary to invent new words for various types of wallflowers. She’d combined “scoff” and “muffler” to describe ladies who

wrapped themselves in cynicism like a scarf around the neck to guard against a cruel and deceitful world.

Among her recommendations for scofflers were such absurdities as “seek out gentlemen who are plainspoken, even to the point of rudeness” and “practice trust as one might practice any skill, one small exercise at a time.” Elizabeth assumed the woman had never been duped before.

“Her mistake is that she views the scoffler’s guardedness as a problem,” Elizabeth clarified. “Utter nonsense. What does a thief do when you invite him into your house?”

Winnie sighed before reciting, “He robs you blind.”

“That’s right. And then?”

“He laughs with his mates about how you served him tea while he stole your valuables.”

“Precisely. Now, who serves a thief tea?”

“Gulls and simpletons.”

“And who will you refuse to be?”

“An easy robbery.”

Elizabeth nodded her approval. “Some may call that cynicism. I call it sensible.”

Mrs. Fletcher entered wearing a large cross around her neck. After glancing around the room, the housekeeper paused, looking confused. “Luncheon will be served soon,” she announced. “Will Master Davy and Master Arthur be joining?”

Elizabeth nodded. “After their riding lesson.”

“They completed their lesson an hour ago.” She gave Elizabeth a puzzled frown. “Mr. Browning said they’d headed back to the house to join you and Miss Hadlington. Are they in the nursery, perhaps?”

The hair on her nape lifted. She met Winnie’s rounded gaze.

The girl answered, “No. Miss Nightingale and I were just there collecting paint supplies.” Her eyes reflected Elizabeth’s own alarm. They both knew where the boys had gone.

With a silent curse, Elizabeth stood and left the morning room for her chamber. She must collect her cloak. She must find the boys and bring them home.

Bloody hell. Bloody, bloody hell.

“I want to come along,” said Winnie, dogging her heels.

“Stay here, Winnifred.”

“I shan’t be any trouble.”

“I know. You never are.” Elizabeth entered the nursery, confirming what she already knew—the boys were gone. Swiftly, she went to her bedchamber and plucked her cloak and bonnet from the wardrobe. As she donned both, she glanced toward the dressing table. The doll was gone. “Your brothers are trouble enough.”

“I can help search. Please, Miss Nightingale. I’m worried.”

She turned. Winnie was brushing away a tear. With a sigh, she cupped the girl’s cheek and kissed her forehead. “Very well. Fetch your cloak.”

Twenty minutes later, they approached the outer walls of Northcliffe Abbey. Yesterday’s storm had muddied the road running between Hadlington House’s hilltop woodlands and the walled estate perched on cliffs above the sea. Their walk, normally an easy downhill mile, was slowed by October cold and slick mud.

To the north, the River Gree gushed down from wooded hills, winding between the estate and the sleepy village of Abbotswick before emptying into a wide bay. The village and the hills and the land beneath Hadlington House—indeed, tens of thousands of surrounding acres—had once been part of the estate, but most of the land had been sold off over the centuries.

Reportedly, Mr. Warwick had repurchased a great deal of it and planned to restore the estate to the prosperous enterprise it had once been. He intended to employ villagers in farming, fishing, forestry, and even brewing.

The man was either overly ambitious or stark staring mad.

Inside high, castellated walls, the abbey was little more than a ruined skeleton, albeit a sprawling one. The last time she'd seen the buildings inside, several roofs had collapsed, many windows had been broken, and a section of wall had crumbled beneath the weight of a fallen tree. The entire place was a disaster.

Now, as she and Winnie approached the open gates, three burly workmen drove a cart through the high archway. With a hard pit in her stomach, Elizabeth waved to the fellow riding in the cart's bed, the only one of the three who had a jot of color in his face. "Good day, sir."

The man's eyes darted in her direction. "Ye shouldn't be here, miss. Neither of ye."

"We're looking for two boys. One wears spectacles. Have you seen them?"

He didn't answer.

She dashed alongside the cart to ask the other two men the same question. One snapped the reins. The other shook his head. "It ain't safe in there."

Her heart pounded. "What do you mean? Are they inside? Is Mr. Warwick here?"

"No. Place is empty. Ghosts don't want anybody around. Best ye leave now."

She halted as the cart sped away. *Ghosts?* Merely because a sea of gravestones dotted the churchyard? God, this superstitious rubbish was wearing on her temper.

She returned to the gate, gesturing for Winnie to follow. "The boys are probably inside making noises the men mistook

for phantoms. Stay close and watch your step. There's debris everywhere."

Beyond the gates, the road wound past the gatehouse, a simple, two-story structure with precisely one intact window and four broken ones. Old oaks and shaggy yews lined the inner walls and clustered around most of the buildings, but someone had trimmed them up considerably. The drive had been cleared, as well.

They passed several structures on the right—an old brewhouse, a barn, and three smaller sheds. Stopping at each one to search for the boys, she noted the collapsed roofing had been removed and several new rafters installed. Next, they passed a large, open garden that had been cleared and scythed.

Ahead, dominating the acres overlooking the sea, stood Northcliffe Hall and St. Hilde's Church. The main house was a gabled, H-shaped sprawl of brownstone. Diamond-paned windows, many of which remained intact, glimmered from two large bays anchoring the first two stories. The windows on the third were topped with pointed arches, echoing the much larger arches of the priory church. Those loomed large in the sky beyond the house's northern wing.

"It must have been grand once," Winnie murmured.

"Yes."

The girl shivered and hugged herself. "Papa says the new owner will abandon the estate as soon as he realizes everyone is too frightened to work here. Do you think the Half-Faced Man will ever find his lost love and finally be at peace?"

Elizabeth slowed to a stop. She rubbed the headache forming behind her eyes. "Winnifred."

"It's such a pity for a man to spend eternity alone, even if he has no body."

"He has a body." A rather compelling one, as she recalled.

The girl's eyes rounded. "Really?"

“The Half-Faced Man isn’t a ghost. He *is* the new owner, Mr. Warwick.”

Winnie’s mouth formed an O.

“He doesn’t devour chickens or assault innocent maids. There is no flaming sword or armies of Frenchmen. All these daft tales Davy and the other lads have been spreading are pure nonsense.”

“But how do you—”

“I spoke with him last night. He’s scarred and a bit disagreeable, but most certainly a man. Now, what have we discussed about believing nonsense?”

With a pursed look at the house, the sea of gravestones, and, finally, at Elizabeth, Winnie recited, “Don’t believe anything you haven’t seen with your own eyes or heard with your own ears.”

“Right. And?”

“Assume everyone is selling something and guard your purse accordingly.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Now, let’s find the boys and return home. It’s too cold out here for conversation.”

Behind the house’s southern wing was the old cloister, which had been converted into a carriage house and stables by some previous owner. As they rounded Northcliffe Hall, Elizabeth could see directly through the archway leading into the stable courtyard. It had been cleared.

The whole estate had been cleaned up, in fact. No more crumbled stone, shattered glass, wild grass, and overgrown shrubbery. The fallen trees and jagged bits of wood had been hauled away. Somehow, Mr. Warwick had done all this in the month since he’d taken possession.

It was ... impressive.

“I don’t see anyone about,” said Winnie. “Not even servants. Do you suppose Mr. Warwick has a wife?”

Elizabeth blew into her gloved hands, eyeing the blackbirds cawing from the stable's roof. "We didn't discuss it."

"Perhaps he could marry you."

She shot Winnie an exasperated glance. Lately, the girl was obsessed with matchmaking and other romantic rubbish.

"That way, you could live here, and I could visit every day and help decorate the nursery. I've several ideas for new pillow patterns."

"You're presuming a great deal." She adjusted her bonnet as rain started pattering the brim. "First and foremost, you'll be off to London in a few years and forget all about me. Secondly, one should not place too many decorative pillows around infants. They're a bit smothery at that age. Third, as your father suggested, it's doubtful Mr. Warwick will remain here. And even if he did, there's no reason to believe he'd wish to marry anyone, let alone father my children."

"I think he would."

"Five minutes ago, you thought he was a ghost."

"You'd be a splendid mother, Miss Nightingale."

Yet another sign the girl was delusional. Elizabeth wasn't even a very good governess.

"Don't you want a husband?"

"Right now, I want to find your brothers and get out of the rain. Perhaps you could concentrate on ..."

She trailed off after glimpsing a flicker of movement inside the stable. Immediately, she broke into a run, dashing across the courtyard and through the open door. Inside, the air was still, hushed, and cold. One horse occupied the last stall. Otherwise, the place appeared empty.

She paced from one end to the other, searching each stall thoroughly. The only thing she found was the doll the boys had taken from her room. She plucked it up, brushing the straw away before tucking it inside her cloak pocket.

Bloody hell. Where had they gone?

“Davy!” she called, hoping they were hiding within earshot. “I know you’re about! Arthur! I’m not angry with you, darling, but it’s too cold to stay here. Come along, now. Mrs. Fletcher has luncheon ready.”

Nothing.

Concern sharpened inside her gut. It wasn’t panic yet, but she had that jittery, wormy sensation she’d always felt when a swindle was about to go wrong. She returned to the courtyard, where Winnie huddled against the cold. “Did you see them come outside?”

Winnie shook her head. Her teeth began chattering.

Together, they searched the carriage house and tack room, but there were no further signs of the boys. No sign of anyone. Rain fell harder. Wind began to howl. Winnie shivered as they stood inside the carriage house doors looking out toward the courtyard. Elizabeth gathered her close, chafing her shoulders for warmth.

“The boys were curious about the main house,” she recalled. “We’ll search there next.” She’d prefer to avoid it. If Warwick was inside, she’d rather not have to explain how she’d lost track of her charges again. But there was no choice. She must find the boys before they got into any serious trouble. “Then I’m taking you home before you catch your death.” She kissed the girl’s forehead, which felt too cold for her liking.

Winnie laid her head on Elizabeth’s shoulder and nodded.

They dashed back to Northcliffe Hall’s front entrance. Elizabeth pressed her ear to the door, but she couldn’t hear anyone inside, only the rain’s whoosh and the sea’s rhythmic roar. Drawing a breath, she gripped the latch and pushed.

The door opened heavily but easily. Inside, the house was a cavernous hush. Like the rest of the estate, it had been cleared of debris, revealing the old bones of the structure—

dark woodwork, ornate arches, gray marble, and twenty-foot ceilings.

Winnie tapped Elizabeth's shoulder and pointed to the floor. Her heart skipped when she saw two sets of small, muddy footprints. Relief weakened her knees. They followed the tracks through an arched opening into the stair hall. They passed the carved, ancient oak staircase and entered a corridor. There, the mud trailed off. Elizabeth paused to listen at each of the closed doors. Behind the third one on the right, she heard Davy. Her heart and her stomach switched places.

Rushing inside, she spotted him near the bay window. He was talking rapidly to a tear-stained Arthur. At the creak of the door's hinges, his head came up and his eyes flared wide. "M-Miss Nightingale?" he squeaked. "I can explain."

She didn't care. Immediately, she charged toward her boys, knelt, and gathered them into her arms. "Don't ever do this again, do you hear?" she said. "I must *always* know where you are. Always."

Little Arthur's arms circled her neck while Davy patted her back in a comforting way. Arthur sniffled. "Are w-we in trouble, Miss Nightingale?"

No, but she was. Her lungs were tight, her throat was stinging, and, if she weren't careful, her heart might burst. She stroked his hair and kissed his wet cheek. "What happened to your spectacles, darling?"

"I lost 'em."

"Do you remember where?"

He shook his head and wiped his nose with his wrist. She used the corner of her cloak to clean his face then addressed Davy. "Explain what happened."

"We saw the Half-Faced Man."

Bloody hell. He was here?

"We were in the kitchen 'cause we were cold and the hearth was lit. I went to fetch some bread 'cause Arthur was

hungry. When I got near the scullery, the Half-Faced Man appeared.” Davy’s voice, steady until now, wobbled. “He was a giant, Miss Nightingale. A *giant*. But I wasn’t frightened.” His little chin went up. “Arthur’s still a baby, though. He ran off.”

“I’m not a baby!”

Elizabeth kissed Arthur’s babyish cheek again. “Of course not, darling. Where did you go?”

“I don’t remember. The monster scared me.”

Davy answered, “When I found him, he was on the stairs. He didn’t have his spectacles.”

“Did the Half-Faced Man notice either of you?” she asked.

Both boys shook their heads. “He was lifting something heavy,” Davy answered. “A box. It rattled like glass bottles. We stayed quiet, and he didn’t look our way.”

She stood and turned to Winnie. “I must find Arthur’s spectacles.” He was essentially blind without them, and now that she knew Warwick was here, she didn’t want the children helping her search. They were already frightened enough. “I need you to take the boys home,” she told Winnie. “You’ll all be soaked, so dress in dry clothing and have something to eat near the fire. Can you do that for me?”

Winnie nodded. “Will you be along soon, Miss Nightingale?”

“Don’t worry. I shouldn’t be more than an hour or two behind you.”

She walked the children to the front hall and watched them tromp through the rain toward the gatehouse. After closing the front door, she looked at the big, empty house and muttered, “I hope you’re very busy, Mr. Warwick. This may take a while.”

She started with the enormous oak staircase, which wound in an open square through the heart of the house. Searching each tread, she felt a stir of frustration by the time she reached

the first floor. That was when she saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye.

She glanced up—and jumped. There, near the end of the corridor, stood a woman wearing a black cloak, white apron, and oversized wool gown. Elizabeth pressed a hand over her pounding heart and chuckled. “Good heavens, you startled me.”

The woman looked equally startled to see her.

“I wasn’t aware Mr. Warwick had hired any household staff.” Elizabeth crossed the length of the corridor. As she neared the young woman, she noted the lovely features—soft, dark eyes, an oval face, a gentle expression. Her brown hair was trimmed much shorter than current fashion, making Elizabeth wonder if she might be foreign. Her brows were drawn in puzzlement, but a stranger’s sudden appearance could explain that.

Elizabeth introduced herself then apologized. “Forgive my intrusion. The children went exploring where I’d explicitly told them not to, and the youngest lost his spectacles.” She tapped the corner of her wire frames. “Have you seen them? They’re like mine, but tiny.”

The young woman blinked several times before shaking her head.

“Oh, well, perhaps you could help me search. I shouldn’t like to bother Mr. Warwick with such a trivial matter.” Or with anything, really.

The woman—housekeeper? maid?—opened her mouth twice before saying, “I miss having children about.”

Something about her voice was strange. What was it? Elizabeth thought it might be her accent, which sounded English yet still faintly foreign. The sound itself was also a bit thready and contorted. An illness, perhaps?

“Are you a governess, too?” She glanced at the woman’s waist, noting the swell beneath her voluminous gown. “Or a mother, perhaps?”

The woman spread a hand over her belly, glancing down with a tender expression. “A sister. And yes, a mother, too.” Her eyes lifted. “I am Mary.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mary.” Elizabeth assumed she was a maid, given that housekeepers were addressed as Mrs. “Might I beg your help in the spectacles hunt? You’re probably much more familiar with this place than I.”

Mary returned her smile. “Yes. Certainly. I know everything about the abbey.”

“Splendid! Perhaps you could educate me while we search.”

For the next half-hour, as they explored room after empty room, Mary grew increasingly talkative. More talkative, in fact, than Davy after four iced cakes and two cups of chocolate.

Elizabeth almost regretted asking the maid for help.

Mary rambled on about the abbey’s lengthy history—how St. Hilde’s Church had been the site of countless marriages and christenings, including those of three dukes and a prince. How Northcliffe Hall had once been half its current size, and one of the yews in the churchyard had been planted over eight hundred years ago.

She explained that, during that time, the monks lived side by side with the nuns in their cloister, sharing their love of God and this magnificent land by the sea. She said the weather had been warmer then, and that grapes grew readily, allowing the monks to produce wine to sell as far away as London. She described how the nuns had cared for the ill and poor in the village, and whenever a death occurred, they would ring the bell in the nuns’ chapel and pray for the souls of the departed to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Elizabeth made the mistake of asking about the chapel. Mary spent several minutes complaining that it had been demolished to make way for Northcliffe Hall’s south wing. She said this would greatly displease the “eternally kind”

abbess, Edyth of Winslow, who had been a nobleman's widow before entering the convent and had taught all the novice nuns to read and write. Then she ranted for another ten minutes about the "abominable" destruction during the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century.

"So much was lost," Mary lamented. "Sacred things. Traditions which cannot be replaced. This act weighs upon the heart, a burden too heavy to bear."

By the time they reached the bedchambers in the south wing, Elizabeth had drawn two conclusions: Mary was devoutly Catholic, and she'd been starved for company for a long while.

"Since that dark time, many families have dwelt within these walls," Mary continued, gazing out a bedchamber window at the broken arches of St. Hilde's. "Some have made improvements. Some have desecrated this land. Some have fled." She stroked her belly and turned to look at Elizabeth. "None are such a blessing as the children born here." Mary's expression flickered rapidly from one emotion to another, making her difficult to read. "I have hope that the abbey will soon be filled again."

Mary was a little peculiar.

Elizabeth blew out a breath and propped her hands on her hips. "Yes, children are lovely." And vexing. She glanced around the empty room. "I don't think Arthur came this way. I suppose I should search the ground floor, now." She'd been putting it off, hoping to escape a confrontation with Thomas Warwick. "You've taken quite an interest in the abbey's history," Elizabeth said as she led the way back to the stair hall. "Will you stay on after Mr. Warwick sells the estate?"

"I think he shall remain here. This is where he belongs."

She wasn't sure why a maid would sound so certain about her employer's plans, but Elizabeth couldn't waste any more time on nonsense. She was freezing in her damp clothes and wanted to get home and hug the children a few dozen times.

As they descended the stairs, she said over her shoulder, “I haven’t seen you before around Abbotswick. Have you lived here long?”

No answer.

She glanced behind her. Mary was gone. “Mary?” Elizabeth called.

Distantly, she heard humming—a lullaby. Likely the maid had returned upstairs to attend to her cleaning duties. Good heavens, she was a strange one.

Elizabeth shrugged and made her way down to the ground floor. She had a sneaking suspicion Arthur had lost his spectacles somewhere between the kitchen and the room where she’d found the boys hiding.

Her abysmal luck for this abysmal day held true—she found her way to the kitchen and immediately spotted the glimmer of metal and thick glass near the hearth. Shaking her head, she bent to retrieve the tiny spectacles, which Arthur had likely removed for cleaning after his muddy misadventures.

“Do you always pay your visits in wet clothing, Miss Nightingale?” said a delicious, masculine voice behind her. “Or am I the special one?”

CHAPTER THREE

THE WOMAN WHO had plagued Thomas Warwick with erotic torment for the past fifteen hours bolted upright the moment he spoke.

A pity. Her backside could make angels weep.

She spun. Beneath her eyes were sooty streaks. Her useless spectacles were dappled with water spots, and her bonnet and cap were limp and wet. Her cloak looked heavy, dull, and damp, disguising the oddly disproportionate curves he'd noticed last night.

She was gut-wrenchingly beautiful.

"Mr. Warwick." She cleared her throat of its squeak.

He didn't know why she disguised herself. He only knew his body reacted to her like a compass pointing north, no doubt the result of long deprivation. Most women took one look at him and ran.

"You must be wondering why I'm here," she said.

He pivoted to set down the crate of wine he'd been hauling. "Not particularly."

"I was curious about your progress," she lied with perfect aplomb. "After our conversation last evening, I was concerned the children might sneak in and injure themselves on the broken glass and such. But you've done an admirable job clearing away the debris."

He crossed his arms. "So, you didn't come to retrieve the two boys I saw earlier?"

The only indication of her surprise was a swallow. Whatever Elizabeth Nightingale was hiding, she was a very good liar. If he hadn't been watching her every breath, he wouldn't have noticed the signs.

“Where did you stash them?” he asked.

She nibbled her plump, tempting lower lip. “I sent them home.”

“But *you* stayed.”

From behind her back, she produced a tiny pair of spectacles. “Arthur misplaced them. He does that sometimes.”

He nodded. “Warm yourself a bit before you leave.” He glanced at the kitchen’s high windows. “It’s pouring out there.”

With that, he turned back toward the passage to the cellars. Most people preferred not to look at him for very long, so he assumed she’d take the opportunity to depart.

He assumed wrong.

“I’m surprised at the progress you’ve made on the place,” she said, following him into the scullery. “The crew I saw outside the gates earlier seemed frightened out of their wits.”

He retrieved his lantern from a hook beside the cellar door. “Some of the locals are superstitious. I’ve had better luck bringing in men from Stockton.” He propped the door open by sliding a wine crate against it with his boot. These old doors could be fussy about wedging against their jambs when the weather was damp. He started down the steps.

“It’s an ambitious project,” she continued. “How long will it take to complete?”

He glanced over his shoulder to find her on his heels. Long and willowy, she stood two steps above him, which put her face level with his. Her eyes made several passes over his scars, and those soft lips parted in a little O. With a prickle of annoyance, he turned away and continued down into the cellars.

“I only ask because everyone is curious.” She followed him through the antechamber and into the primary wine cellar, which was lined from floor to arched ceiling with wood shelving, old bottles, and crates filled with straw.

“Does ‘everyone’ include you?”

“I’m the one asking,” she said dryly. “So yes, I suppose it does.”

He picked up his inventory list from the large cask in the center of the room and resumed examining bottles for signs of spoilage.

“Are you going to answer?”

“No.”

She released a huff. “Why not?”

“Because that’s not your real question.”

“Oh? And what is my *real* question, pray tell?”

He bent to place a bottle with a dry cork into the crate near his feet. “You want to know if I plan on staying.” He faced her, letting the lantern light the scars. “You’re weighing the odds that I’ll tell your employer you aren’t who you claim to be.”

Her lovely face flinched then grew rigid. Her flattened bosom panted faster. “You’re mistaken,” she breathed.

“No. I’m not.” He focused on marking his inventory list. “You wear spectacles you don’t need at an angle that obscures your beauty without drawing notice.”

“That’s ridic—”

“You wear padding around your waist and”—he waved his pencil toward her bosom—“binding where you shouldn’t bother.”

“Absolute nonsense—”

“You should dispense with the ash beneath your eyes, however. It’s caustic. And it runs in the rain.”

Immediately, her fingers came up to brush her cheeks. He noticed she didn’t blush—a valuable talent for a practiced liar.

“I’ve no plans to divulge your secrets, Miss Nightingale.” He pointed toward the stairs. “Go home to your charges and

rest easy. All I ask is that you keep them away from here until my work is done.”

She stared at him for a long while, looking bedraggled and lost. “I ... don’t understand you.”

“Have I lapsed into Latin?”

A swallow. A vulnerable crinkle. “I expected ...” Gradually, her expression hardened. A smile formed, twisting into cynicism. “No. You’ll want something eventually. There’s always a price. What will it be, Mr. Warwick? Are you lonely here on your own? Shall I become your mistress?”

The very thought sent bolting fire through him, centering in his groin. Between one pounding heartbeat and the next, he went hard as the cellar walls. Images of her laid out in his bed flashed through his mind’s eye. Naked and exquisite. His to pleasure. His to possess. It took a lifetime of hard discipline to answer coldly, “You should be on your way. Night falls earlier in a storm.”

Her smile faded into confusion. Slowly, she retreated into the antechamber and started up the stairs, pausing twice to glance back at him.

As he lost sight of her, he resumed his task, trying to ignore the pain in his body. He couldn’t recall it being quite this bad before. But then, he hadn’t lain with a woman in years, and the last time had been rather perfunctory.

A loud scraping sound caught his attention moments before a booming slam echoed through the cellar. A feminine yelp followed. Then, “Mr. Warwick!”

He tossed his list aside and bounded up the stairs to find her standing two steps below the cellar door.

The *closed* cellar door.

“I think ...” She shoved the door with her shoulder, grunting as it refused to budge. “I think it’s stuck.”

He climbed to stand behind her, reaching over her head to test the door. No give. “Right.” This close to her, the faintest

hint of violets reached his nose. He breathed in before he could stop himself. “Step aside,” he murmured.

In the lee of his body, she spun, her hands landing on his midsection. He stiffened in every conceivable way.

“Beg your pardon,” she breathed. “I’ll just ... This way, I think.” She ducked beneath his arm and slid her exquisite self across the width of him, letting her hands trail down his torso.

He gritted his teeth until she was a few steps behind him. Then he gathered his strength and pressed against the door. Again, no give. The thick, heavy oak didn’t even creak. Which was strange.

“I don’t know what happened,” she said. “It just ... flew closed! There wasn’t a draft or anything. What a ridiculous, *appalling* day this is.”

He gave it another try, shoving as hard as he could with his shoulder. Nothing.

She climbed up beside him, pounded a fist on the door, and bellowed, “Halloooo! We’re trapped in the cellar! Open the door!” *Pound, pound, pound.*

Gently, he clasped her wrist before she damaged her hand. “The cellars are underground, and this door is three inches of solid oak. Nobody will hear you.”

“Bloody hell, Mr. Warwick!” she said, riling herself into a lather. “Why do you have a cellar door that locks itself?”

He blinked at her vulgarity. “I don’t.”

She threw her arms wide and stomped down the stairs. “We’ll have to wait for someone to notice. This could take hours. Bloody, *bloody* hell!”

He eyed the latch. There was no lock. The only reason the door could be this firmly stuck was that moisture had caused the wood to swell. He tried to explain as much to Miss Nightingale, but she shouted at him to “keep your shite excuses to yourself! Bloody hell!”

She tore off her bonnet and cap, throwing both on the ground before picking through the nearest crate.

He followed her down into the main cellar. “What are you searching for?”

“A drink. I need a *bloody* drink!”

He handed her the corkscrew from atop the cask.

She straightened and blew a breath upward, fluttering the rich curls along her forehead. “Thank you.”

“Take care with the bottles you open. Most of these have gone off.” He pointed to another set of crates deeper inside the chamber. “Try those first.”

Once again, she gave his face a devouring sweep. He held still and let her look, but his temper strained. He knew what that look meant—she was repulsed and yet helplessly curious.

“Seen enough?” he asked.

Her eyes—an alluring union of blue and green—flared behind rain-spotted glass. “No, actually.”

“At least you’re honest.”

Her lips quirked. “Not always. But I’m trying.”

Before those lips could tempt him to do something foolish, he moved away to retrieve his mallet and pry bar and returned to the door.

He couldn’t be stuck down here with this woman. Already, his imagination was feeding him obscene fantasies involving her lying naked on a bed of straw while he drenched her in wine and licked away every last drop. Or her seated on a cask with her legs wrapped around his driving hips. Or her on all fours. Or her on her knees. Or her stroking his face with tenderness rather than revulsion.

With a vicious plunge, he wedged the pry bar between the door and its jamb. *Clank, clank, clank, clank, clank.* He drove it deeper and deeper along the seam.

He needed to get the door open. He needed her to leave.

Clank, clank, clank, clank, clank. Deeper and deeper. Was it deep enough? He wrenched hard until the iron bent then pushed in the opposite direction, rocking and driving, rocking and driving.

It should have worked. But it didn't.

He yanked the bar free and tried another spot. And another. And another.

He hammered and pried the opposite side, hoping to dislodge the hinges. For what seemed like hours, he hammered away until his shoulders burned and his back ran with sweat.

What the devil was behind this door? It felt as if the thing had been fastened with steel plates. He'd managed to chip away some of the oak, and the thing still wouldn't budge.

He smelled violets a moment before she spoke.

"You're *quite* impressive, Mr. Warwick. Impresh—impressive. Strong. And big. Has anyone ever told you that?"

He braced a hand against the door, pausing to catch his breath. "On rare occasions."

"Take a rest and have some wine," she slurred. "Someone will come along. Mary, perhaps. And the children will send someone when they mish me. Mish—miss me. Missss. That's a peculiar word."

"You're drunk."

"The first bottle was dreadful. But the second?" A quiet *glug, glug, glug.* "Much better."

He chanced a look at her and suffered instant regret.

Instant, raging, lust-ridden regret.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE'D LET HER hair down, allowing the shining mass of curls to tumble over her breasts like coppery brown silk. She'd removed her spectacles, revealing a face so exquisite, one might mistake her for a painter's nymph. She'd removed her cloak and gown—everything but her chemise, in fact—and draped herself in his greatcoat.

Which was hanging open while she tipped the bottle up to her lips.

His view was pure torment. Hard nipples and full, round breasts pressed outward beneath a sheer layer of linen. One russet curl teased the right nipple. The edge of his coat played with the left. Her lovely white throat rippled as she downed the last of her bottle. She wiped her mouth with her thumb, but a drop remained on that sumptuous lower lip. It glimmered in the lantern light, a flagrant taunt.

He gripped his tools hard enough to break. “Why are you wearing my coat?”

Sleepy cat's eyes blinked up at him then glanced down at the engulfing wool. “I was wet.”

God, he shouldn't have asked.

“It's been a hideous day. Don't be cross, Mr. Warwick. I'll return it, I promise.”

His heart pounded. His cock pounded. Everything around him pulsed.

Then she smiled, her eyes tilting magically. She looked like sunlight after a storm. “I'm not a thief any longer. I can't even lie properly to the children.” She clicked her tongue. “It's Arthur. The way he looks at me. The way they all do, really.”

“How is that?”

“Like I’m worth something.” She rubbed the bottle between her breasts. “Makes my heart hurt. Do you ever have that feeling, Mr. Warwick?”

He swallowed. *Yes. This very second, in fact.*

“Probably not,” she whispered. “You’re bloody perfect.”

“That you would utter such patent nonsense means you’re too sotted to be standing at the top of a staircase.”

She gave an owlish blink. “S’t true. You *are* perfect. And I’m only a bit tipsy.” She held her thumb and forefinger in front of her eye. “Just a little.”

Bracing himself for further torment, he laid his tools down and gently escorted her back to the main cellar. Next, he gathered up a hefty pile of straw, spread a dusty canvas sheet over it, and beckoned her closer.

She spent several seconds weaving in place before sliding her hand into his. He helped her sit and placed her empty bottle in a crate. “Stay there. The closer you are to solid ground, the better.”

Giggling, she collapsed back into the bed he’d made her, spreading her arms wide. “Oh, Thomas. May I call you Thomas?”

He gritted his teeth as she propped up on her elbows and arched her back, seemingly unconcerned that his coat covered none of the important bits. “No,” he answered, his voice reduced to a thread.

“Mr. Warwick is too dour and serious. Thomas serves me wine and makes me a feather bed to lie upon.”

“You chose the wine. You opened the wine. You drank the wine. I had minimal involvement.”

“It was lovely. And much needed. Thank you.”

“Additionally, the bed is straw, not feathers.”

She collapsed onto her straw bed and sighed sweetly. “That’s just what Thomas would say. He’s too modest.”

Why was he having this ludicrous conversation with a drunk woman?

She extended an arm and caressed his knee.

His *knee*. What the deuce? He jerked away.

Another round of giggles from his russet-haired nymph. “I’ve been wanting to touch you for soooo long.”

“We met last night.”

“Precisely. Such a long night.”

He released a breath, trying to look anywhere other than her breasts. No. Not there. Or there. Blast. Not there, either. The problem was that she was too beautiful *everywhere*. He was beginning to understand why she’d disguised herself. Within a highborn household, a governess dwelt awkwardly between the gentility of her employer and the servility of other staff. Beauty like hers could provoke lust and jealousy from both directions.

His lust was certainly provoked.

Ignoring the pain of it, he crouched beside her and drew the edges of his coat together over her tempting curves. Suddenly, she gripped his waistcoat in both fists and yanked herself upright until their noses touched. She smelled like wine and sweet purple flowers.

“Thomas?”

He steadied her with a hand behind her back. “Woman, you are utterly sotted.”

“Call me Lizzy. It’s been forever since anyone has. I miss it.” She stroked his scarred cheek, making him flinch. Not from pain—sensation was dulled there. All he felt was a delicate pressure and a bit of warmth. “Tell me how this happened,” she said softly. “Were you very young?”

He stiffened. Tried to withdraw.

She clung and refused to allow it. “I’d wager you were doing something heroic.”

“You’d lose that wager.”

“You’re bloody perfect.”

“Stop saying that.”

“I’ll stop if you tell me.”

He sighed, sitting beside her to ease the pressure on his groin. It still ached. “I was fourteen. My mother’s gown caught fire. Foolishly, I tried to extinguish it with my hands.” He held up his left one for her inspection. She clasped it almost greedily and examined every scar from his fingertips to his elbow. Strange woman.

“The fire was already raging around her,” he continued. “By the time I entered the kitchen, she’d been burned too badly to survive. But I couldn’t leave her there. I carried her out into the rain. That’s how my face was damaged. She died the same day.”

She cradled his hand between her breasts as though it were a wine bottle.

“Er, Miss Nightingale—”

“Lizzy. Call me Lizzy.”

“Lizzy, I’ll need that hand to open the door.”

She didn’t release him. “I’ve never done anything heroic,” she confessed in a whisper. “When *I* was fourteen, I was robbing men blind. Some of them were decent fellows.”

“But you’re not a thief any longer.”

She petted his arm like a favorite pup. “No. Not since Mama was transported to Australia. That’s been over ten years, now. Ten?” She splayed her fingers in front of her face. “I was fifteen. So, yes. Ten years.”

He frowned. It sounded like her mother had involved her in some illicit schemes. Transportation was better than hanging, but still, she’d lost her mother around the same age as he had. “Have you been on your own since then?”

“Mmm.” She rested her head against his shoulder. “I’ve an older sister. Evie became a mistress for a few years. We didn’t fare too badly. Though she sent me away from the house a great deal. Her Irishman was *quite* a randy lad.”

He huffed a chuckle. “Does she look like you?”

“Yes.”

“That explains it.”

She traced a series of circles in his palm before abruptly rolling away to pluck two more bottles from the nearest crate. She uncorked both and handed him one.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

She sniffed the bottle and hummed her approval before tipping it back for a long drink. “Mmm. Have I mentioned what a wretched day this has been?”

He sniffed his own wine and took a cautious sip. A bit musty, but not terrible. “When did you acquire the skills to become a governess?”

Abandoning all semblance of propriety, she plopped down directly beside him and snuggled temptingly close. “While my sister was getting hollowed out by her bloody worthless Irishman.”

A bit of wine caught in his throat. After a fit of coughing, he shot her a dubious look.

“S’true. Evie would send me out before he arrived, tell me to stay scarce until late. I didn’t mind. I’d spend those hours in music shops and circulating libraries. I made a study of the fine ladies in the park. ‘One day, I’ll be one of them,’ I thought. Not the daughter of the Sussex Swindler, but Elizabeth, Countess of Somewhere Important.” She laughed and took another drink. “What a foolish girl I was.”

Her mention of the Sussex Swindler gave him pause. He remembered reading about the infamous schemer who’d tried to force an elderly earl to the altar by convincing him that he’d impregnated her during a night of drunken debauchery.

Unfortunately for her, the earl's capacity for fathering offspring—or indulging in debauchery—had expired years earlier. Upon discovering her plan, the earl's family had pressed for criminal prosecution, and her lengthy history of fraud, blackmail, and theft became newspaper fodder all over England.

The drunken beauty plastered against his side was *that* woman's daughter? Extraordinary. "Your mother was a swindler—"

"The very *best* swindler. Legendary."

"—who was sentenced to transportation for her crimes."

"Seven years." She snorted. "The earl wanted hanging. Mama often said, 'If a woman's choices are down to pleading or persuasion, better it should be the latter. Either way, you're on your knees.'" She tipped the bottle for another swallow. "Those magistrates are probably still panting after her."

He eyed the delicate slope of her neck, the faint crinkle of pain between her brows. "You were a child when your mother involved you in her schemes."

A single nod.

"Yet you educated yourself in circulating libraries and music shops."

She narrowed her lovely cat's eyes up at him. "I believe I mentioned the Irishman was a randy short. Sort. Ssssort." She blinked. "I had ample time to read and play the pianoforte and practice my *dic-tion*. That's all any governess requires, really."

"Or any countess. Why not seek a husband?"

"Evie's Irishman didn't fancy her so much once her belly started growing. He cast her out, and me along with her. I found work as a maid, but Evie fell ill. For the final month of her pregnancy, she could scarcely leave her bed. The babe was born puny." She lapsed into silence, cradling the wine bottle against her heart. "We named her Moira. She's the same age as Arthur, now." She rocked subtly against his arm, back and

forth, back and forth. “Her lungs never worked quite right. She requires medicine to breathe properly. A maid’s wages weren’t enough to support all three of us. So, I . . . I had to lie a bit.”

He arched a brow. “A bit?”

“I didn’t want to.” She sighed. “I hate it.”

“Lying?”

“Mama thought deceiving men was such a lark. But nobody ever wins that game.”

He drew his coat back into position, covering her bosom. “What was your lie?”

“A letter of reference from an Irish nobleman who’d relocated to Boston.” Her lips twisted into a cynical smile. “The seal was my finest work.”

“The letter was necessary to obtain a governess position, I take it.” He noticed a silken lock had fallen over her eye, so he gently brushed it aside for her. She rested her cheek against his hand, warm and soft. “Sounds as though you did what had to be done for your family’s sake,” he said. “Did you perform honorably once you’d secured a position?”

She reclaimed his hand and drew his arm around her shoulders, molding her body into his. “Yes. For all the good it did me.” She described her first governess position with a family in Shropshire as “a daily gauntlet culminating in my preshipitous exit. Precipitous. SIP-itous. That’s a funny word.”

He had an idea of what her gauntlet had been, so it was no surprise when she revealed that, after three months’ tenure, her employer had declared his love and his intentions to marry Lizzy at a family dinner—much to his wife’s chagrin.

Nor was it a surprise to learn that a similar pattern repeated at the next position and the next. Thrice she’d been hired, and thrice she’d been forced to leave because her employer fell in love with her.

Thomas wasn’t surprised by her employers’ folly. But he was surprised by his own. Because, as she described her

scandalous departure from her last position, he experienced a peculiar strain of vexation. He wasn't, as a rule, an angry sort of man. Yet hot resentment began to stir inside him, aimed at a man he'd never met.

"William wasn't my employer, precisely," she explained. "He didn't even live there. He was my brother's sister. No, no. My charge's brother. The eldest. The *heir to the marquisate*." She rolled her eyes. "The Beasleys are a tediously dull lot. When they hired me to assist in their daughter's debut, I thought it perfect. I was there a year. Lord Hazelton didn't glance at me twice, and most of his sons were either married or away at university." She tapped her forehead with the bottle. "Then Twelfth Night happened. Bloody Twelfth Night."

He tipped his own bottle up and drank a third of its contents. Was irrational hatred of all men named William justifiable? Perhaps.

"William poured all sorts of brandy into the wassail bowl. Brandy and wine and more brandy. Everyone was shotted. Sotted. Drunk. Then he kissed me! Right there in the bloody music room!"

Irrational hatred? No. Rational. Perfectly rational. And certainly justified.

"I know, I know. He'd kissed me before." She waved dismissively. "Twice or six times. But that was in the garden and the wardrobe! And perhaps the larder once or two times. The carriage house, the conservatory. I can't remember all the places."

Thomas was not an angry sort of man. He was calm. Rational.

"The point is nobody saw us before!" She snorted. "Well, they saw us on Twelfth Night, that's for certain. His mother was appalled. *Appalled!* She dismissed me—*dismissed*—on the spot. Then he announces he wants to marry me. In front of his *mother*. Well, I needn't tell you, she wasn't best pleased.

I'm tossed out on my arse without a reference, and the next morning, William comes jaunting into my room at the inn—”

Thomas downed the remainder of his bottle and strongly considered opening another.

“—saying the Beasleys are coercing him to marry some Northfield girl, but he'll offer me the *new* position of his mishtress. *Misstresh*. Whore.”

“Lizzy.”

“Well, I'm not a whore! I don't purchase bottled moonlight. And if I did, it wouldn't be from some weaselly Beasley heir who kisses like a bloody squid!”

“Miss Nightingale.”

“That's not my name.”

“Lizzy, you are thoroughly sotted. And I must—”

She stole his bottle and sent both hers and his rolling across the stone floor. Then she rocked up onto her knees to brace his jaw firmly between her palms. “Thomas Warwick.”

“Yes?”

“Say something true. Something you think I won't like.”

He steadied her by gripping her waist. Baffling woman. “What sort of—”

“Perhaps you don't care for children. Or you think chess is good fun. Anything.”

His head was spinning. It might be the wine, but he thought not. She was on her knees, holding his face. The most exquisite creature he'd ever set eyes upon was near enough to kiss. Lightheadedness was to be expected.

“Very well,” he answered. “I don't care for watercolors. Ladies seem devoted to creating them, but I've never thought them worthy of displaying outside of an attic. I suspect women engage in many pursuits merely to pass the time until they find husbands.”

She released a tiny puff of a breath. "Tell me another."

He frowned. What was the purpose of this silly game? Perhaps it didn't matter. He liked how she touched him, and he loved holding her, so he searched for another tidbit she might find displeasing. "I don't mind children. My brother's three boys have been begging me to visit for the past month. I've been tutoring them in architectural sketching. But most children are frightened of me. Most women, too. I confess that I don't always mind that, either. My nature has long been solitary."

She drew a shuddering breath and gently stroked his worst scars with her thumb. "Another."

His breathing quickened as her sweet little tongue swept along her lower lip. He couldn't resist exploring her ribcage, measuring the dainty curve of her waist and hips. "I dreamt about you last night," he rasped. "I knew you were a liar, yet I couldn't help myself."

"Bloody hell, Thomas," she breathed, swaying in the circle of his hands. "One more."

His head felt thick with wine and lust. He considered several responses of an obscene nature but opted for one that didn't involve her. "Before I purchased Northcliffe Abbey, my last project was a renovation for the Duke of Blackmore. His Grace had lost a wager with the duchess, and her prize was the addition of a third library at Blackmore Hall. She thought it quite sensible, as her book collections had grown extensively in the last twenty years. His Grace balked at the expense, arguing that two libraries should be sufficient for any house and a new conservatory was a much wiser investment. Her Grace asked my opinion, and I told them the truth, which nearly cost me the project."

"What did you say?"

"That no number of libraries is too many when one has books to fill them."

Her breathing hitched. She swayed toward him, eyeing his mouth.

“Foolhardy of me to be so blunt about it, but that’s also in my nature. His Grace was quite displeased. Fortunately, the duchess won the argument. Given her happiness with the completed library, however, I expect the duke felt *he’d* been the true victor in the end.” He found himself smiling. “My mother would often say, ‘A gift to one’s wife is a gift to oneself.’”

Soft and dreamy, her eyes swept across his face with near adoration. He blamed the wine. “Thomas?” she queried sweetly.

“Yes?”

“Make love to me.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“YOU ARE OUT of your wine-addled wits,” her perfect man murmured.

Elizabeth begged to differ. She’d never had such clarity. “I’m going to kiss you, now.”

“That’s a very bad id—”

She kissed him. Her scarred, serious, honorable Thomas. Her lips slid against his with all the tenderness in her aching heart. She expected to have to warm to him a bit. They were strangers, and she hadn’t kissed a man in three years. But he held still, seemingly frozen, which allowed her to test the waters with soft nibbles and sliding caresses. The point was to convey how much she adored him—that voice, those eyes, the inky curl of his hair. How lovely it felt to be listened to. How honored she felt to be held so carefully. How beautiful she’d felt when he covered her breasts for the third or fourth time.

She expected to like his kiss because she *wanted* to like it.

She did not expect to ignite a tempest.

One moment, she was kissing him. The next, he was seizing her waist with a powerful arm and cupping her nape with his opposite palm. His mouth opened hers, and his tongue plunged inside, making her squeak in surprise. He yanked back. Eyes ablaze, he held her almost too tightly, his fingers spearing into her hair.

“Why did you kiss me?” he asked. “I didn’t ask you to.”

His arm squeezed at her back, forcing her breasts against his hard chest. This close, she felt the powerful strength of him, smelled the salt on his skin, saw the dark grain of his whiskers along a flexing jaw.

“I wanted to,” she said, reaching for her next breath.

Light danced in his eyes, an inferno of amber. “Curious about the monster, are you?” His words were hard, but his fingers stroked her scalp with pleasuring pulses.

Her nipples wanted similar stroking. She licked her lips. Stared at his. Wondered if he’d mind kissing her with his tongue again. “Thomas. If I offered to be yours, what would you say?”

“You already offered.”

“And you declined. But I think you want me.”

“Any man would want you. Every man does.”

She traced his damp lips with a fingertip. “Ask me what *I* want.”

He gripped her harder, his eyes dropping to her bosom, where her nipples pouted for his attention. “What you want is irrelevant. You’re not thinking clearly.” He scowled. “*I’m* not thinking clearly.”

She stroked his scarred cheek and thumbed his injured brow. She pictured this man as a boy of fourteen, carrying his mother out of a fire into the rain. She recalled watching him hammer relentlessly at the door, his muscles straining, his focus absolute. She imagined him facing down a powerful duke over the impracticality of a third library, telling the truth when it would least benefit him.

Leaning forward, she whispered in his ear, “I want to feel what it’s like to take you inside me, Thomas Warwick. I want to steal a taste of moonlight for once.”

With a low groan, he wrenched her forward onto his lap, where she had no choice but to straddle him. The position forced her chemise high along her thighs and wedged her needy folds along the impossibly hard shaft he’d been ignoring for the past several hours.

She couldn’t ignore it. Every time she’d glanced below his waist, the proof of his desire had ratcheted hers higher.

His movements tense and reluctant, he lowered his head to nuzzle her throat. His hot breath panted against her, his whiskers rough but his lips gentle. She caressed his neck and savored the cool softness of his hair. A deep, pained groan sounded inside his chest. He cinched his arm tighter around her waist. Tighter and tighter. His hips bucked against hers.

She gasped as his staff slid against her neediest spot. Tingling pleasure rippled out from their connection to her sensitized nipples and burning skin. She ached with need. Nothing would satisfy it but him.

“I can’t do this,” he growled, his hand a liar as it swept down to cup her breast. “You’re sotted. I’m half-sotted. This is madness.” His thumb stroked her nipple, and she arched into his touch with a gasping cry. He tipped her back onto the bed he’d made for her and shoved her chemise up past her waist. With ravenous eyes, he slowed down to draw the linen up further and further, seeming to savor the unveiling of her breasts. The linen slipped past her nipples, which were flushed, swollen, and so sensitive, she wanted to soothe them with her fingers.

He got there first. Propping himself above her, he took the right nipple in his mouth and suckled hard.

Pure, lustful fire burst through her like sparkling wine, both infuriating and intoxicating. She gripped his hair and arched her back. He answered her demand with the edge of his teeth and more pressure. He lifted the mound of her breast to trap her for his pleasure.

She writhed beneath him, working her hips and pleading. “Bloody hell, Thomas,” she panted. “You’re killing me. Please. Need you so much.”

His strong, scarred hand streaked down her belly, pausing to soothe her with little caresses of his thumb. Then he touched her—just *there*—the barest skim.

She shouted as her body jerked and spasmed.

A deep, long groan rumbled against her throat. “Dear God, Lizzy.” His fingers swirled around her swollen center. “You’re wet.”

“I told you I was.”

“I thought ...” Another groan as his finger delved deeper into her folds. “For me?”

“It will only get worse if you keep talking.”

“Worse?”

She gripped his hair and yanked his mouth back to hers. After a long, satisfying kiss, she thought the matter was settled. Then he took command, sliding his sleek tongue inside to play and pleasure. Meanwhile, she writhed against his hand, widening her thighs to ease his path.

He broke their kiss, gasping and growling her name.

She hadn’t thought she could love any sound more than his normal voice. But hearing his urgency, his control breaking in that deep, rumbly growl, nearly sent her body soaring. “Oh, God. Do that again.”

He moved his hand.

“No. I mean, yes. That, too.” She started to clarify, but he returned to her breasts, suckling the left nipple while he slid a long finger inside her sheath.

She moaned for mercy. He offered none.

“Tight,” he growled. “Wet and tight.”

She clawed at his shoulders and rained kisses down the whiskery side of his neck. “Want you now. Now. Now!”

His hand disappeared for too many seconds. He shifted. Then something hot, round, and blunt prodded at her opening. He settled on top of her, his eyes glowing hot enough to melt her bones.

Pressure grew as the intrusion began. She tried to relax, as Evie had told her to do. It would go easier, she’d said. Easier.

But not easy, apparently.

Red and straining, his face lowered to hang above hers as he pressed deeper. The pain was stretchy and sharp. “Ah, God. Lizzy.” He closed his eyes briefly as she tried to reposition her hips to take him inside more comfortably. She wriggled and grunted and tilted her hips. That was when she sensed a shift. A break in him.

His brow crumpled. Where before he’d been inching forward like a cautious cat, now he surged like a stallion out of a racing gate. The first deep, hard thrust shocked her senseless.

She cried out as he filled her all at once. Gasping and clawing at his shirt, she dug her fingernails into his hard muscles. “Bloody hell, Thomas!”

He didn’t seem to hear her. Instead, he gripped her thigh and pulled it higher alongside his hip. He took her mouth and kept thrusting. Long, driving plunges. Deep, forceful pressure. Rhythmic pounding.

And, unexpectedly, pleasure.

At first, it was lost amid the storm of fullness and friction and newness. Then she focused on his eyes, the curling lock of black hair falling across his brow, the gentleness of his scarred hand stroking her breast, and the odd tension winding tighter and tighter in her belly.

She shook. And it wasn’t merely his pounding rhythm or the novelty of having a man inside her. It was him. The smell of salt and wine. The taste of him on her tongue. His heat and weight. The way he watched her reactions and his desperate, straining movements—as though he’d been starving for her alone.

“Say something,” she whispered, caressing his cheek.

“Lizzy,” he said, low and mad.

She arched. “Yesss. More. Say more.”

“More.”

“Say something stern and forbidding.”

He looked her over and lowered his voice. “You’re in need of discipline, Miss Nightingale.”

She threw back her head and shivered in forbidden delight. He grinned a wicked grin. She squeezed. He groaned. His steady pace grew frantic. Then *she* groaned. That spiraling tightness burned into a fever. She clung to his neck and begged. Begged for more and more and more. Begged for release from the pressure.

He answered her demand with a deep, consuming plunge. Her body seized upon his with a suddenness that stole her breath. Bright, bursting pleasure rippled out in waves, driven to extraordinary heights by his pounding hips and thick, unmercifully hard cock.

In her final throes, he tensed above her, his eyes wild, veins swollen along his forehead. She caressed his face and kissed his lips. Just as she thought he’d take his own release, he slowed, cursing. She blinked. Why was he stopping?

He started to withdraw, his face wreathed in pain.

Bloody hell, why was he stopping? Perhaps the wine had muddled her mind, but she didn’t understand. All she knew was that she couldn’t allow him to leave her until he’d found the same pleasure. She locked her legs around his hips and deliberately tightened around his shaft.

A deep, tortured groan rumbled past his throat. He thrust back inside, pumping several times. A wash of heat surged inside her, and Thomas growled her name one final time. Pure, blissful relief washed over his face as he groaned his pleasure. Shuddering in its wake, he collapsed on top of her.

“Dear God, Lizzy,” he panted into her neck. “You ... should have ... stopped me.”

She held him close, feeling warm and languid. “Why would I stop you when I very much wanted you to finish?” Little shivers of quaking pleasure echoed for long minutes as

sleep beckoned. “Probably shouldn’t tell you this, Mr. Warwick, but your moonlight is priced too low.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Yes. That’s because you’re not selling smoke.”

Gently, he kissed her eyes, her lips, her hair. “Beautiful, drunken woman.” He rolled them both onto their sides and, with the tenderest care, withdrew. She winced. Another kiss. And another. After refastening his trousers and tugging her chemise back into place, he gathered her close.

She found a perfect pillow for her cheek against his chest. As he stroked her hair and slowed his breathing, she blinked once. Twice. Marveled that she’d lived an entire life without ever feeling this safe. Then she closed her eyes and drifted off in the shelter of his arms.



WHEN HE AWAKENED, Thomas didn’t know whether he’d slept for one hour or six. He had no ill effects from the wine. In fact, he hadn’t felt this refreshed in ... he couldn’t remember when.

Lizzy was still asleep, draped across him like a careless blanket. He eyed the willowy length of her, noting that his greatcoat failed to cover her legs properly. She wore stockings, but still. He didn’t want her to be cold.

Taking care not to wake her, he extricated himself, adjusted his greatcoat so it covered her more fully, and rolled to his feet. While she slept, he found a bucket and placed it behind one of the wine racks in the antechamber. If he had to relieve himself, then Lizzy would surely have the same need. He wanted her to have privacy. He also wanted her to be warm and comfortable for however long they were stuck down here. Somewhere in this place, there must be a blanket or two.

He took up one of the lanterns and ventured deeper into the main cellar, past the last racks of wine, past the long rows of shelving. Along the back wall was a passage to another, older chamber—the old chapel’s crypt. The passage stepped down in

several places before he reached the arched stone entrance. The crypt opened wide once he passed through, but it was cluttered on all sides with crates, chests, and boxes filled with a motley assortment of items, most of which needed to be burned or hauled away. He hadn't had a chance to inventory it just yet. In his experience, these old places often had treasure hidden among the rubbish.

He started searching inside the first two chests, which looked newer than those deeper inside the chamber. They were filled with crumbled books, leather goods, and half a dozen powdered wigs. Next, he searched several crates, finding only a set of corroded farm implements. Finally, he ventured to the larger trunks and boxes stacked near the burial vaults. The workmen had refused to come back this far, so they weren't arranged neatly. He hefted three heavy boxes out of the way before he could reach the first trunk. Inside, he found gilt candelabra, pink brocade draperies in a rococo style, a tricorne hat, leather cuffs, a woman's silk stays, and a suspicious number of riding crops.

He shook his head. People were deuced odd.

Thinking the draperies might do as a blanket substitute, he pulled the trunk forward to give himself more room. Something thudded and clattered like stone striking stone.

He frowned. Behind where the trunk had been sitting, a large stone plaque had come loose. It now sat on the floor beside a massive old bell. Moving the trunk must have jostled it loose.

Behind him, lantern light shifted and brightened. He glanced over his shoulder. Lizzy stood in the crypt's entrance, looking particularly fetching with her hair tumbling down to her waist.

"What is this place?" she asked, wandering inside.

"The old crypt. It once lay beneath the nuns' chapel."

She swallowed. "Are there ... remains ... in here?"

“No. Those were transferred to the churchyard centuries ago when the chapel was dismantled.” He gestured to the open trunk sitting between them. “It’s used for storage, now.”

Pacing closer, she peered into the trunk and frowned. “Why would anyone need so many riding crops?”

He cleared his throat and changed the subject. “How are you feeling?”

Her eyes flew to his, widened, then shifted away. He suspected if she had any blushing left in her, her cheeks would be rose red. “Surprisingly well. No headache.”

“Any other pain?” He didn’t think he’d hurt her too badly, but he hadn’t taken as much care with her as he might have. He’d been reeling from overwhelming lust and genuine surprise.

She shook her head shyly and wandered past him to examine the boxes stacked near the back wall. “What were you looking for?”

“Blankets. I thought I’d let you sleep a bit longer before I take on the door again.”

She shot him a coy glance over her shoulder. “That’s very considerate of you.”

He should probably reply, but his thoughts had all been whisked away. She was unbearably beautiful in this state—her hair disheveled, her eyes sensually sleepy, her lips swollen from their kisses. He wanted to carry her back to their straw bed. He wanted to spend the next month or two exploring her like an undiscovered treasure vault.

She hugged his coat around her, eyeing their surroundings with curiosity. “What made you want to acquire this place?”

“Originally, I was looking at a property farther south, but in researching that one, I found an account of the abbey’s history compiled by a previous owner.”

She smiled. “And you were intrigued.”

“Yes. I realize how mad it seems.”

She shook her head. “Not so mad.”

“The place was abandoned for thirty years and neglected long before that. Everywhere you look, you’ll find ruin.”

“And beauty,” she said. “The view of the sea, the old church, the staircase. This could be turned into one of the finest estates in Yorkshire.” Running a finger over the curve of the ancient bell sitting in the corner, she asked, “Was this part of the chapel, too?”

He nodded, inching closer to her. He bent and plucked up the stone plaque, blowing away the dust.

She peered at the Latin text etched beneath a stylized cross. “What does it say?”

He did a quick translation. “Something to the effect of ‘We lift our voices to usher all souls into the kingdom of heaven.’”

“Hmm.” She gave the bell a little tap. Then her finger moved to the large crack in its side. “Damaged.”

He inched closer. “Yes.”

“I imagine you viewed this place as a bargain—repair the damage, restore the beauty, sell for a profit. Is that why you chose it? The potential fortune?”

He sensed she was fishing for something, but he wasn’t sure what it might be. “It’s true the abbey has the makings of a grand estate. It has beauty in its bones. But many places do. I suppose I chose it because no one else saw what I see so clearly.”

“And what’s that?”

“The worth of a thing lies not in its perfection but in its scars.”

She blinked and stared up at him for a long, silent moment. Her brow took on that vulnerable crinkle that made his heart ache. “Thomas?” she whispered.

“Yes?”

“I think I might have ... inadvertently ... entirely by accident, that is ...” She appeared to swallow whatever she’d been about to say. Her eyes slid away. “Never mind.” She hugged herself tighter. “I should get dressed. There’ll be gossip enough when the Hadlington staff sends someone to find me. That is, if your maid doesn’t find us first.”

He frowned. “My maid?”

“I assume she arrives early to tend the hearth. Do you suppose she’ll hear us from the kitchen?”

Shaking his head, he replied, “Lizzy, I don’t have a maid.”

She gave an impatient click of her tongue. “Your housekeeper, then.”

“I don’t have any household staff. As I told you, the locals are a bit superstitious. They refuse to work here.”

“Then who the devil is Mary?”

He frowned at the curious question. Perhaps Lizzy was still suffering the effects of too much wine. She’d gone awfully pale in the past few seconds. “I’m afraid I have no idea.”

CHAPTER SIX

HOW COULD SHE have been so bloody stupid?

Elizabeth charged back into the main cellar and stripped off Thomas's greatcoat. She wound it up and threw it violently on the floor before stomping the wool for good measure.

Rage buzzed beneath her skin. It rang inside her ears. It flashed through her middle in a sickening wave.

Evie had warned her. And now, Elizabeth had been swindled by one of the best—herself.

Who had wanted to taste moonlight? She had. Who had encountered a pregnant, pretty young woman in a man's empty house and assumed she was his *maid*? She had. Who had downed two bottles of wine then seduced him into taking her virginity like an absolute simpleton? She had.

No man was perfect. Not Evie's Irishman, not the squid-kissing William, and, most crushing of all, not Thomas Warwick.

"Lizzy?"

"Do *not* speak to me!" Her movements were jerky as she sorted through her folded pile of damp clothes and started dressing.

"You seem angry."

"How perceptive of you." She fastened her corset, donned her petticoat, and drew her gown over her head. Her cloak would have to do for warmth. The wool was cold and clammy, but not as wet as it had been.

"Am I meant to understand this sudden fit of temper? Because I don't."

She finger-combed her hair into a sloppy coil and began stabbing the mess with pins. “Of course not. You’re a wealthy man. Why have one mistress when you can afford two?”

“I don’t follow.”

“I assume that’s your child in her belly.”

His hand wrapped around her elbow and drew her close, forcing her to look at him. Those amber eyes were blazing hot. “I’ll say this one last time: I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

Her stomach lurched. Her throat tightened. “Mary.”

“Who is Mary?”

“The woman I spent an hour talking to upstairs. Cropped hair, black cloak, strange accent.” She felt like she was choking. “You know, your *mistress*.”

Oddly, his expression remained unchanged. No spark of surprise or guilt. No shift to understanding. Just a baffled scowl edged with masculine exasperation. “I don’t have a mistress.”

“Who is she, then?”

“I have no earthly idea.”

“She knew everything about the abbey. Wouldn’t stop nattering about its history. And she seemed quite familiar with you. Are you telling me some random woman wandered into your house of her own accord?”

His brow lifted. “You did.”

She paused, examining his face. He appeared genuinely perplexed. Could he be telling the truth? The cynic in her shouted that moonlight always turned out to be smoke in the end, and only gulls and simpletons believed otherwise. But he hadn’t lied to her before now, even when it would have benefitted him to do so.

“You said she knew the abbey’s history,” he said.

She nodded.

“Perhaps she entered the house out of curiosity or to view the renovation’s progress. I would have preferred she ask permission, but the abbey was abandoned for a long time. She might have assumed no one would mind if she had a look about.”

Slowly, the fire in her belly began to cool. She breathed and considered his argument—his very reasonable argument. Everyone was curious about the place, including the Hadlington children. All of them showing up here at the same time was strange, but then, so was Mary.

“I suppose it’s possible,” she said.

His mouth quirked up on the uninjured side. “More possible than my keeping a pregnant mistress in an empty ruin of a house, I assure you.”

She recalled the way he’d cared for her—the straw bed, the greatcoat, the blanket search, the gentle way he was holding her now. Would he do any less for the mother of his child? “Perhaps I was a bit ... hasty in my conclusions,” she conceded.

“Perhaps.”

She took his hand in hers and focused on tracing the scars. “Mary seemed to think you would keep the estate as your home. That you might endeavor to fill it with children.”

“I might.” He gathered her close and kissed her forehead. “So long as my wife agrees.”

She stiffened. “You have a wife?”

He chuckled, the sound sending silvery shivers down her spine. “Not yet. But I’m hoping to acquire one shockingly soon. The lady might take some convincing. Perhaps I could ply her with a few more bottles of wine.”

Her heart stopped then started again at twice the speed. She gripped his hand like a tether. Everything inside her shook. “Thomas?”

“Yes?”

She swallowed hard and considered the odds that she was wrong. He might be selling smoke. She might be a gullible fool. But moonlight—even the real stuff—came with a price. She summoned her courage and paid it, letting her secret slip free. “I think I accidentally ... unintentionally ... The truth is that I’ve ... fallen in love with you.”

In typical Thomas fashion, he didn’t react immediately. He had discipline, her Thomas. Control. But those eyes lit up like a sky at sunset, fiery amber and gold. His hand cupped her nape, and he lowered his forehead against hers. “Bloody hell, Lizzy,” he whispered fiercely.

She caressed his cheek, her throat tightening. Burning. “I tried not to. But you’re perfect. How could my heart resist?”

He seized hold of her waist, lifting her feet off the floor and plopping her backside on top of a cask. Then he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her with all the fury of a man possessed.

Which was fitting. She was possessed, too.

He crushed her against him, wedging his hips between her legs. She panted against his mouth, sliding her tongue alongside his and clutching his hair with desperate fingers. She couldn’t get close enough. She needed him inside her again.

He was frantically shoving at her skirts, and she was desperately clawing at his neck, when they heard the sound.

The grinding creak of a door opening.

Together, they froze. Waited.

Thomas drew away slowly, sliding her skirts down over her knees before lifting her down. He cupped her cheek and stroked her brow with his thumb. After a gentle kiss, he took her hand, retrieved a lantern, and led her to the stairs.

The door stood wide open, but no one was there.

As they entered the scullery, Thomas paused briefly to examine the gouges he'd made in the door's jamb. He glanced at the crate that had been propping the door open. It was perhaps eight feet away from its original position.

The hair lifted on the back of her neck. She brushed at the sensation and followed Thomas into the kitchen. The house was dark, quiet, and still. She'd thought morning had come while they slept, but the only light through the windows was the blue glow of the moon. The rain had stopped, and the wind had calmed.

"Who opened the door?" she whispered.

"I don't know." He placed the lantern on the kitchen table and stirred the coals in the hearth until flames flickered back to life.

"What time do you think it is?"

He angled his head to peer through the upper windows. "Not long until daybreak." He set a kettle on to boil and dragged a chair closer to the fire, inviting her to sit. "Warm yourself. I'm going to have another look at that door."

She grabbed his hand. "Can't you stay with me?"

He leaned down to kiss her. "I won't be long."

Minutes passed. She heard him opening and closing the door multiple times. "Don't get yourself trapped in there again!" she warned him.

"Is the tea ready yet?"

The kettle sang. She sighed and busied herself preparing a pot.

More hinge-creaking and door-closing from the scullery. "There's nothing wrong with the latch," he called.

She lit some candles, poured two cups of tea, and sat drumming her fingers against the table. "Come have some tea, Thomas. The door's mysteries can wait to be solved until we have more daylight."

Just as she lowered her cup to the table, a flicker of movement caught her attention. It didn't come from the scullery passage. It came from the opposite end of the kitchen.

Hot liquid sloshed onto her hand. She yelped. Flew to her feet. Her chair skittered across stone. "Bloody hell," she gasped, blinking in disbelief. "M-Mary?"

It was and it ... wasn't. An eerie form in white, blue, and black stood just inside the entrance to the corridor. Her face was both there and not there, solid and not solid. She seemed to be flickering. Floating.

"Dear God," Elizabeth whispered, frozen in place. Behind her, she heard Thomas's footsteps pounding with urgency.

"Lizzy, what hap—" The footsteps halted. In an instant, she was thrust behind him, and he was bellowing at the apparition, "Who the devil are you?"

"It's ... That's ... Mary," Elizabeth muttered. "She was more talkative yesterday." And more human.

"This property is mine," he said with enviable authority. "You don't belong here."

A voice like Mary's sounded all around them. The words made no sense, but several kept repeating: *tintinnabulum* and *regnum caelorum*. The voice grew louder, becoming layered like a choir's hymn. Soon, the sound was deafening.

The apparition moved toward them. Thomas reached behind his back to clutch Elizabeth tighter against him, then he began backing them both toward the only escape—the garden door in the scullery.

The song shifted and became her name. *Elizabeth*. She dug her hands into Thomas's waist. He stopped, turning his head with a questioning glower.

Swallowing her terror, she inched her head around his shoulder to look at Mary. The apparition had halted at the opposite end of the kitchen table. It seemed to be waiting for her to speak. She cleared her throat. "Mary?"

Elizabeth.

“You’re looking a bit ... thin.”

A pause.

She steadied her hands against Thomas’s back and tightened her muscles against the urge to scream. Or run. Or scream then run. “You know, spending too much time alone could drive anyone mad.”

“Careful, Lizzy,” Thomas said.

She steadied her trembling by leaning into his strength. “Having a family living here again would offer lovely company for you.”

Silence.

“When we spoke yesterday, you mentioned being a sister. Were you a nun?”

The apparition nodded.

“Then you’ve been here a very long time, indeed.”

A blast of mournful, incoherent sound filled the room in a deafening roar. Thomas and Elizabeth covered their ears. Her heart pounded harder and harder until she could scarcely breathe. The blast seemed never-ending. Gradually, the wailing receded.

When Elizabeth glanced up, the apparition was cradling its belly with both arms. It flickered twice, appearing more solid and showing Mary’s face for a split second. Mary’s wretched, grieving face.

“Thomas is right,” Elizabeth said, her voice shaking. She drew a steadying breath and clutched him harder. “You don’t belong here any longer. But he does. You said so yourself. You’d be leaving the abbey in good hands.” She clasped his scarred one in hers. “The very best.”

The apparition floated closer. Thomas tried to back them both into the scullery passage, but Elizabeth murmured, “Let her come. I think she wants to tell me something.”

He tensed in place, clutching her waist hard and scowling at Mary. “If you harm her,” he said, “I will summon every priest and every demon in hell to destroy you.”

Good heavens, her Thomas was ... impressive.

Apparently, Mary thought so, too. The apparition first reached out a translucent hand to touch Thomas’s scarred cheek. *Tintinnabulum*, she said.

Elizabeth watched gooseflesh rise on his nape. “Are you all right, Thomas?”

He nodded.

“Do you understand what she said?”

Another nod. “Bell.”

Mary glided around to his side and reached a hand toward Elizabeth as though begging for something.

Confusion swirling, Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t know what you want.”

Mary’s face flickered solid again, looking unfathomably sad. The hand slid inside Elizabeth’s cloak like a frost-covered vine. Elizabeth shivered and clung to Thomas’s back. Mary withdrew. In that ghostly hand was the doll both Thomas and Elizabeth had found inside the stable.

Mary cradled the thing close, traced a finger over its red ribbon, then met Elizabeth’s eyes. Hers were endless, despairing black.

An instant later, Mary and the doll vanished, leaving only moonlight and the faint *drip-drip-drip* of tea spilling onto stone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

December 21, 1839

Northcliffe Abbey

ELIZABETH WARWICK ENJOYED being nauseated approximately as much as she enjoyed having her toes repeatedly struck with a hammer. But when one was growing a babe in one's belly, a bit of nausea was to be expected.

Tea helped, she supposed.

She placed a cup near her husband's writing hand and rested her chin on his shoulder. "Have you found the entry?"

Thomas's desk was piled high with old scrolls and leather-bound tomes. Currently, he was studying the accounts of Edyth of Winslow, the abbess Mary had mentioned by name. Edyth had kept exceptionally detailed records of every minute occurrence at the abbey. Every. Single. One. It made for an arduous read.

Thomas sighed and turned his head for a kiss. "No. But thank you for the tea."

In the weeks since their encounter with Mary, the apparition hadn't made a reappearance. But Elizabeth couldn't put the nun's misery out of her mind. They must find a way to free her.

She'd made inquiries with clergymen throughout Yorkshire, but they'd been frustratingly reluctant to discuss the matter. Her only helpful correspondent had been a Catholic priest in Leeds. Father Carrel had offered some insight into the nuns' practice of ringing the chapel bell at the hour of death. He was due to pay a visit this morning, which had prompted Thomas to search Edyth's lengthy records for hints about

Mary's identity. Evidently, having a full name for the deceased was helpful when urging them on to the hereafter.

Elizabeth would do whatever was necessary. Mary had brought her and Thomas together, and Elizabeth strongly suspected the matchmaking had been deliberate. Which meant she must blame a ghost for her current happiness.

That was a debt she could not ignore.

Two weeks after their night in the cellar, Elizabeth and Thomas had married in the only intact part of St. Hilde's Church—the chancel. In attendance were his brother, sister-in-law, and three nephews, who had journeyed from Lincolnshire, as well as the Hadlington family. Winnie had recorded the day in a poorly executed watercolor, sighing over the romance of it all. Thomas had arranged for Elizabeth's sister and niece to travel from Dublin, surprising her with Evie and Moira's arrival the day before the wedding. She'd wept like a blubbering infant. She blamed her pregnancy.

Arthur and Davy had taken to Thomas the way a bur took to wool stockings. Their initial fright at his scars had slowly turned to fascination the longer Thomas conversed with them. Now, they were pestering him to teach them about castle construction and take them along on his morning rides. She blamed his voice. It was bloody mesmerizing.

Presently, she wrapped her arms around her mesmerizing man and nuzzled his ear. "Oh, dear, Mr. Warwick," she teased in a whisper. "I think the library door may be locked."

He chuckled, the sound low and shiver-inducing. "However could that have happened?"

"It's a mystery. Perhaps you should search for the key. Start with my corset. Things keep slipping inside for some reason."

In a quick motion, he turned and tumbled her into his lap. "Now then, Mrs. Warwick. I've forgotten the shape of this key. Remind me." His hand slid inside her bodice to squeeze her nipple. "Is this it?"

She groaned. “That’s a fine guess, Mr. Warwick. But you don’t quite have it. Try again.”

He squeezed her other nipple, this time a little harder.

She panted. “You’re getting closer. My stockings might offer more clues.”

Dutifully, he moved his hand beneath her skirts to caress the spot where her stockings met her thighs. “I must have missed something.” He tipped her head back for a kiss as his fingers slid higher. And higher. His thumb lightly circled the swollen nub inside her folds while two fingers sank into her sheath. “I should be thorough,” he murmured against her open mouth.

She tightened and tightened. Moaned his name and begged him for release. He pulsed his fingers inside her, firmed his thumb’s pressure, and said in his sternest voice, “Whatever secrets you’re hiding, Mrs. Warwick, I shall expose every one.” He nibbled her ear. “No matter how long it takes.”

It didn’t take long. His next stroke sent her soaring into ecstasy. After letting those endless waves of pleasure ebb, she repositioned herself to sit astride him. By the time his cock was buried to the hilt inside her, neither of them had any secrets left. But she still managed to remind him of one she’d already confessed.

“I love you,” she whispered against his mouth, cupping his face and rolling her hips the way he loved best.

“My exquisite woman.” He stroked her hair with that reverent touch that made her heart hurt. “Nothing can describe my love for you. It’s as vast as the sea.”

“I prefer to think of it as moonlight,” she said. “It’s limitless, luminous, and helps me find my way in the dark.”

He huffed as she sank down for a particularly deep stroke. “Bloody hell, Lizzy.”

“I’m greedy for what you’re selling. And I’ll tell you another secret, my darling husband.” She leaned in close. “I’m

not above robbing you blind.”

He surged inside her, straining and groaning.

She grinned. Kissed him. And sent him soaring to meet her in the stars.



THEY FOUND MARY’S name an hour before the priest arrived. Thomas had been diligently aiding Elizabeth in restoring her stockings to their proper placement when her foot caught the edge of a scroll.

The scroll rolled. Fell. Unfurled.

Thomas picked it up and then stilled. Stared. Looked at Elizabeth. “I think I’ve found her, Lizzy.”

Mary had been Mary of Winslow, daughter of Edyth, and a novice at Northcliffe Abbey. She’d followed her mother into the nunnery after her betrothed instead married a Frenchwoman. According to her mother, Mary’s time at the abbey had been marked by piety and contentment until Mary broke her vows of chastity. Nuns and monks alike had been aghast. They’d pressed her to confess her lover’s name, but she steadfastly refused, protecting him until her dying breath. Her mother had recorded many details about her pregnancy, including Mary’s growing love for her unborn babe and her despondency over the prospect of leaving the abbey. Her mother had suspected Mary’s misery stemmed from an attachment to one of the monks, though she couldn’t coax the truth from her daughter.

Mary had died in her sixth month of pregnancy following a wave of feverish illness in Abbotswick. The babe had perished with her. Neither had been granted the rites of her faith, though her mother had secretly arranged for her to be buried in the churchyard among those who’d perished from the fever. The monk Edyth suspected of being Mary’s lover had been one of the fever’s last victims, dying three months after Mary.

The day Thomas and Elizabeth sent Mary home, a light snowfall created a cool hush between the house and the sea. They followed a cart hauling the old chapel bell toward the churchyard. Accompanying them were Father Carrel, the three Hadlington children, and a rather persistent trio of gulls.

When they reached a grave shadowed by the arches of St. Hilde's, Winnie led Arthur and Davy to lay flowers beside the unmarked cross. The children came to stand beside Elizabeth. She kissed all their precious heads in turn as Father Carrel read aloud in Latin. Upon his signal, Thomas took up a makeshift clapper—a fire iron from the kitchen—and struck the bell thrice. The sound didn't carry as well as it might have done had the bell been intact and hanging properly, but it still produced a lovely resonance.

The priest was just finishing his final prayers when the gulls began their swooping. The first bird flew low over the grave, the second over Elizabeth, and the third over Thomas, nearly knocking his hat off.

Snow began to flurry and swirl. Somehow, the motions of the crystalline tufts and the white-and-gray gulls blended with the sea's silvery ripple and the clouds' white light in a dazzling display. Elizabeth found it blinding, as if she'd been staring at the sun. She blinked several times when she spotted the fourth gull. She glanced at Thomas. Had he seen it, too? His smile said he had.

Amid the flurry of white and gray was a tiny scrap of red—a bright ribbon clutched inside the fourth gull's beak. The bird landed on the cross, looked toward Elizabeth and Thomas, then took wing and disappeared into the snowfall.

She clasped her husband's hand, leaning upon his strength.

Little Arthur pushed his spectacles higher on his nose. "Mrs. Warwick, is it over?"

She smiled and brushed a snowflake off his nose. "Yes, darling."

"So, it's time for cake?"

“Probably. But you mustn’t eat too much.”

“But too much is my favorite treat.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “What a coincidence, Arthur.” She bent to kiss his forehead then gave Thomas a saucy wink. “Mine, too.”

The End

About the Author

Reading romance novels came easily to Elisa Braden. Writing them? That took a little longer. After graduating with degrees in creative writing and history, Elisa spent entirely too many years in “real” jobs writing T-shirt copy ... and other people’s resumes ... and articles about giftware displays. But that was before she woke up and started dreaming about the very unreal job of being a romance novelist. Better late than never.

Elisa lives in the gorgeous Pacific Northwest, where you’re constitutionally required to like the colors green and gray. Good thing she does. Other items on the “like” list include cute dogs, strong coffee, and epic movies. Of course, her favorite thing of all is hearing from readers who love her characters as much as she does.

If you’re one of those, get in touch on Facebook ([@authorelisabraden](#)), Twitter ([@trueelisabraden](#)), or [elisabraden.com](#). Better yet, sign up for her FREE newsletter ([bit.ly/ElisaBradenNewsletter](#)) so you never miss a single new release.