“I am terribly sorry,” Eira said as soon as she walked into her cousin’s large foyer. The scent of evergreen immediately enveloped her, and her gaze rose to the nearby staircase, whose banister dripped with seasonal greenery.

“What Eira means to say is Happy Christmas.” Her mother gave Eira an annoyed glance. The journey from Wales had been long and taxing for them both.

“No need to apologize!” John said, embracing Eira and kissing her on both cheeks. “Eva and I are thrilled to host you.”

Eira glanced at her cousin’s wife, who wore a smile plastered on her face, and very much doubted that. Lady Dorsey was a renowned matchmaker, and she hosted a holiday house party every year in hopes of facilitating a merry match or two. This was the fifth year of her annual house party, and thus far she could lay claim to facilitating two marriages. She would not have her third betrothal this year, and that was very much Eira’s fault.

“I told her I did not want to come,” Eira whispered to her cousin.

“You could not exactly stay home alone!” her mother said. Eira always forgot how keen her mother’s hearing was.

“I am one and thirty, Mama.”

“Shh! Must you announce your age?”

Eira refrained from rolling her eyes. “I am a divorced woman, Mama. No one will be looking to court me.”

“I was thinking of myself, Eira. I only claim thirty years.”

John laughed. “So Eira must pretend to be—what?—fifteen?”

“It would be very much appreciated,” her mother said, giving her nephew a tired smile.

“Lady Rhuddlan, allow me to accompany you and Mrs. Shepherd to your chambers,” Lady Dorsey said. “Our other guests have all arrived and are changing for dinner.”

“Then you must ready yourself as well, dear Eva,” Mama said. “Your housekeeper may show us. We will change and come down directly.”

Eira sighed. She would have rather dined in her chamber tonight, but she supposed she might as well face the fire.

“Splendid,” Lady Dorsey said, bestowing a genuine smile on Lady Rhuddlan. “After dinner, there will be parlor games.”

“What fun!” her mother said.

Eira gritted her teeth. She hated parlor games. She hated dinner parties. She hated Christmas. Two years ago, on Christmas Eve, her beloved father had passed away. Even though her mother had written that Papa was very ill, Tom had not allowed Eira to go to him. She was well rid of the controlling lout.

But even a divorce would not bring her father back.

The housekeeper stepped forward and bobbed a curtsy. “I am Mrs. Cummings, my lady. Mrs. Shepherd. If you will please follow me.”

The housekeeper led them up the stairs and to the well-appointed guest chambers. Mama had been given a large chamber with a small sitting area near a roaring fire. Eira herself was given a smaller chamber directly across the corridor from her mother. The walls were painted a blush rose, and the furnishings were white and cream. Although Eira preferred bolder colors, she could not fault Lady Dorsey’s style or her hospitality. It might be December, but a vase of pink roses sat on the bedside table. Even though Eira knew her cousin had a conservatory, roses in winter seemed an impossible luxury.

When the housekeeper closed the door, Eira went to the window and looked down at the drive to Dorsey House. She had only been here once before, in the summer, and the lawn had been bright green, the trees full of leaves, and the flower beds bursting with blooms. Now the lawn was brown, the trees bare, and the flower beds nothing but turned earth. Eira wished she had not come. Yes, her mother had insisted, but Eira was capable of refusing her mother. Hadn’t she gone against Lady Rhuddlan’s wishes and married Tom Shepherd?

When Lord Dorsey had written to ask his aunt to come for the holidays, Eira had assumed her mother would decline. After all, she had a close circle of friends at home, several of them also widowed. They would have spent a cozy holiday together. There would have been some sadness as they remembered Eira’s father’s passing, but her mother would have her friends around her. Eira would have had no one.

Eira’s seclusion—necessitated by her status as a divorcée—seemed to be the matter that decided things for her mother. “It is not good for you to be alone so much,” she’d declared, sitting down to write to Lord Dorsey. “You should be around other young people.”

“Mama, I am happy here.”

“Well, I wish to see my nephew.”

Eira thought about refusing to accompany her mother, but while she might be the black sheep of the family, she was not such a miscreant as to allow her mother (who was thirty twice over) to travel hundreds of miles with only a handful of staff to accompany her. Eira's own invitation had been implied, but she knew Lady Dorsey would not want her there. As a divorced woman, Eira was not fit company for young ladies. Many Society matrons would also shun her. Even some of Mama's friends did not acknowledge her in public. Lady Rhuddlan's acceptance of the invitation meant Lady Dorsey's house party had to be carefully curated with only those guests who would not tarnish their reputations by being in the presence of Eira. Thus, no debutantes or eligible bachelors for Lady Dorsey to nudge together under the mistletoe.

She doubted her cousin's wife would ever forgive her.

As her mother's maid was no doubt occupied in Lady Rhuddlan's chamber, Eira unpacked her own things, washed quickly with a cloth and freezing water, and changed into a sapphire blue evening gown. Eira had bright red hair and found jewel tones looked best with her pale skin and ginger locks. Now, as she looked in the mirror, she pinched her cheeks, which were pale, and wished the smudges under her tired eyes would disappear. She'd brought a bit of rouge and some powder, but her appearance here would probably cause enough talk without the addition of cosmetics.

On the other hand, if everyone was talking about her anyway, why not? She quickly applied a bit of color to her cheeks and powder to her nose and under her eyes, and though she didn't see much difference, she felt better.

She heard the dinner gong sound and gathered her wrap. Peering out her chamber door, she ensured the corridor was empty before crossing and tapping on her mother's door.

"Eira? Come in. I am almost ready."

Eira blew out a breath. Of course her mother was not ready. They would be the last ones to arrive, and everyone would gawk at them. She entered the chamber to find her mother at the dressing table and Miss Evans behind her securing the last pins to her mother's silvery hair. Her mother had once had chestnut brown hair—Eira's red hair came from her father—and it had begun to turn a lovely shade of glossy gray in the last ten years. Her mother wore a deep red gown which looked lovely with her pale skin and brown eyes—Eira had the same brown eyes. Unfortunately, Eira couldn't wear any shades of red with her hair or she looked quite ghastly.

In the mirror, her mother's gaze met hers.

“You look lovely, Mama.”

“Are you wearing rouge?”

Eira smiled. “A lady never tells.”

“A lady does not wear cosmetics.”

“A lady over the age of thirty who has been ensconced in a carriage for six hours must, at times, take drastic measures.”

Instead of offering a reply, her mother rose, accepted her wrap from Miss Evans, and gestured to the door. “Shall we go down?”

“By all means,” Eira said. Then under her breath, “I’d prefer to have this over with.”

They descended the staircase, Eira behind her mother. As they neared the first floor, the sound of voices in the drawing room grew louder. Eira took a fortifying breath and pushed her shoulders back. A footman stood outside the closed drawing room doors and opened them as soon as Lady Rhuddlan approached. Eira followed, her appearance causing all conversation in the chamber to cease.

Eira would not allow herself to blush, and she forced herself to meet the eyes of every person in the drawing room. She could not let them see her mortification. Dorsey was by their side in a flash, taking her mother’s arm and greeting them both warmly and a bit too loudly. “Aunt, how lovely you look. Cousin, we are so happy you could join us. Do you remember my friend Mr. Swinton?”

Eira did in fact remember Mr. Swinton. Swinton had been John’s friend for as long as she could remember. She’d met him on several occasions as during their school years the two were inseparable. Swinton, dressed in evening clothes, bowed over her mother’s hand before taking Eira’s. “Mrs. Shepherd, how charming you look. It has been too long.”

“Indeed it has.”

Swinton took a glass of wine from a footman and offered it to her. Eira grasped the stem tightly and only just refrained from downing the contents in one gulp. The other guests had begun chatting again, but she could feel their eyes upon her.

“I believe the last time I saw you was at the christening of little Liza, was it not? Dorsey’s niece must be eight or nine now.”

Eira knew that was not the last time. In the first year of her marriage, she and Tom had attended her cousin’s annual Christmas house party. Swinton had been there, of course, and Tom

had made an absolute arse of himself. He'd tried to kiss a maid under the mistletoe, gotten so drunk he fell down the stairs, and publicly accused her of infidelity in the middle of the ball. Remembering it, Eira felt her cheeks color. "I believe we last saw each other—"

"Yes, it was that christening. I cannot remember seeing you after that," Swinton said. Eira knew what he was about, and she appreciated the gesture. She would have liked to pretend that house party had never happened as well.

Eira smiled. "Thank you."

"Whatever for?"

Dorsey touched her arm. "Eira, allow me to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Fenwick." Dorsey gestured toward her mother, who was already speaking with the elderly couple. Her cousin performed the introductions, and Eira made a curtsy to the husband and wife.

"This must be the scandalous divorcée," Mrs. Fenwick said.

Eira had encountered such bluntness before. Instead of behaving as though she were ashamed, she tossed her head. "Every house party needs a bit of scandal to liven things up, do you not think?"

"Oh, absolutely," Mrs. Fenwick agreed. "In my day, a house party was practically an orgy."

Dorsey had just taken a sip of wine and appeared to choke on it. Mr. Fenwick pounded him on the back.

"Why, at night, the gentlemen would nod to each other coming and going from each lady's bedchamber," Mrs. Fenwick continued.

"Oh, dear," her mother said.

"Come now, Lady Rhuddlan." Mrs. Fenwick tutted. "You've lived a full life. Surely you had a few secret assignations."

"I shall not answer that," her mother said, but Eira noted the small smile on her mother's face and began to wonder.

"My dear," Mr. Fenwick said. "Do not monopolize Mrs. Shepherd. She will certainly want to be introduced to Lord Arrington. That man looks like he knows a thing or two." He winked.

Eira pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. She took her leave, and John offered his arm. "How mortifying," he whispered.

"Why should *you* be mortified?" she whispered back.

“Because now I am picturing Mrs. Fenwick in bed with a rotating cast of men. Ah, Lord Arrington.”

While her cousin introduced her, Eira appraised the viscount. He was very handsome with light brown hair and deep brown eyes. They were of a similar height, she being on the tall side and he appearing a bit shorter than the average man. But he gave her a charming smile, and she knew immediately he was the sort of man ladies instantly fell in love with. And, of course, if he was strictly respectable, he would not be here with her.

He kissed her gloved hand. “Mrs. Shepherd, a pleasure to finally meet you. I have heard so much about you.”

“All good things I hope,” she said with a smile.

“Of course. Your cousin here sings your praises. Dorsey told me you are quite the artist.”

Eira glanced at John with surprise. “I draw a little, yes.”

“I told you she was modest,” Dorsey said.

“As I understand it, your illustrations decorated the pages of Mr. Shelley’s poems,” Lord Arrington said.

Eira inclined her head. Shelley’s publisher had purchased several of her charcoals for inclusion in a new volume. She’d been grateful for the income as her divorce had been costly. She was even more grateful to be working again as Tom had claimed he loved her art before they wed and then forced her to stop creating after their marriage. She’d missed the sense of accomplishment and peace she felt after a few hours drawing.

“Is this your first time at my cousin’s annual house party?” she asked, changing the subject.

“It is. From my brief conversation with Lady Dorsey, it appears we will be busy with all sorts of festive activities.”

“I’m afraid I am not one for games.” Eira enjoyed society, but there was a limit to her patience with silly party frivolities. She’d rather spend an evening alone with a book or her pencils than playing charades or blind man’s bluff.

“Neither am I,” Arrington commented. “Perhaps we can amuse each other.”

Eira was saved from replying when the butler opened the door and announced that the table was ready.

Lady Dorsey approached to take her husband’s arm. “My lord, would you lead the way?”

The rest of the party followed, with those of higher rank in the lead. Arrington escorted Lady Rhuddlan while Mr. Swinton escorted Eira. Mr. and Mrs. Fenwick came next, followed by an elderly lady and her companion.

At the table, Eira was between Arrington and Swinton and across from the elderly lady, who she soon learned was a Mrs. Coburn. Her companion was a Miss Jones, and she had to repeat everything anyone said into a horn Mrs. Coburn held to her ear. This became particularly embarrassing when, just as the first course was served, Mrs. Coburn asked Eira if she was the divorced woman.

"Yes, I am," Eira said in the sudden silence that befell the table.

"What did she say?" Mrs. Coburn asked her companion.

"She said, *yes, I am,* madam."

"Yes, I am?" Mrs. Coburn frowned. "You are what?"

"Not me, madam. Mrs. Shepherd."

"What about her?"

"She is divorced!" Miss Jones yelled in the horn.

"Well, I already knew that," Mrs. Coburn said.

Eira lifted her spoon and dipped into her soup. Only six more courses before she could escape to her room and hide under her bed.

Lady Dorsey spoke up then, and Eira was glad she was such a skilled hostess. She smoothly changed the subject, inquiring as to who had traveled the farthest to attend. Mrs. Coburn and the Fenwicks both lived within a few hours' drive. Lord Arrington had come from London. Swinton had come up from Hampshire.

"I believe Mrs. Shepherd and I are the clear winners then," her mother said. "We have come all the way from Denbighshire in Wales."

"Not so fast," said a male voice Eira didn't recognize. She turned, as did the others at the table, to look at the dining room door. An arm pushed both doors fully open, revealing a man and his two companions. Several women gasped, but Eira merely caught her breath.

The man in the doorway was very tall, well over six feet, with shoulders so broad they almost filled the doorway. He had thick black hair brushed back from his face, bright blue eyes, and skin so tan his teeth looked impossibly white when he smiled. He was dressed in a gentleman's coat, linen shirt, and cravat, but his boots were up to his thigh and scuffed. Instead of a waistcoat

he wore a scarlet sash at his waist. Tucked in that sash was a long cutlass sheathed in gleaming black.

She wasn't the one who said the word aloud, but she'd been thinking it when one of the other ladies screeched, "Pirates!"