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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

THE BOUND HEART The Everstone Chronicles ~ Book Two

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PROLOGUE

The Cave

"All human happiness and misery take the form of action."

—Aristotle

June 19, 1885 • Mount Desert Island Bar Harbor, Maine

ome on, Meredyth," Vance Everstone urged with a

"Only if you go first," I called down as I sat upon a large boulder, positioned higher than his broad six-foot frame.

Vance suddenly seemed so grown up as he gazed at me with that crooked grin. In that moment, I had the first inkling of what it might be like to have Vance Everstone fall in love with me. I had loved him, had waited for him to love me—for years while I'd been at boarding school, and then as I'd suffered through my first season while he'd finished his last year at Harvard.

I wasn't truly afraid of going into the cave or of anything that might be inside those familiar caverns. They were accessible only during low tide along the coastline of my family's summer cottage on Mount Desert Island. However, Vance didn't know anything about my fears or the lack thereof. All he knew, as evidenced in his eyes, was that I had changed in the last year.

And I had changed. I would soon turn nineteen, and I'd finally grown up enough for Vance Everstone to notice me. I was finally more than just my brothers' little sister.

We'd known each other since the day I was born. Every summer, our families would sail from Boston to Bar Harbor to enjoy the cooler weather. And for as long as I could remember, the boys had ruled the summers: the three Everstone brothers, my three older brothers, and Lawry Hampton, whose family lived in the house between the Everstones and the Summercourts.

This left me with only Estella Everstone, who had just turned fifteen, and Ainsley Hampton, who was only twelve. It was apparent, at least to Vance, why I would want to seek out his company that day. He was the most intriguing person in the whole bunch, and he knew it well.

Vance's only response to my declaration was a hooded look, added to the assertive gaze he'd already been giving me. I knew he could see my wet and sandy bare feet, as well as my ankles. The very same ankles he'd seen above those bare feet my entire life.

Instead of tucking my feet beneath my petticoats, I lifted them an inch higher. I extended my right foot, moving it this way and that, and laughed. "What dirty feet I have!"

He took a step closer to the high rock I sat upon and grabbed my foot, gently brushing off the sand. Then he did the same for my left.

The touch of his hands on my skin made me uncomfortable, but instead of shying away from the feeling, I wanted more. It became almost addictive.

When he finished brushing off the caked-on sand, he placed his hands firmly upon my ankles and positioned my feet against his chest, particles of sand getting all over his white shirt. He stood there, holding my ankles, staring at me with a new look in his eyes. One I'd never seen before.

I didn't know what it meant, but I wanted to find out.

He suddenly let go of my ankles and stepped back. I wasn't prepared for this, and I slid down the gently sloped rock, landing upon my feet directly before him.

His deep brown eyes took me in, and he repeated his question: "I dare you to go into the cave, all the way to the back—where it's deepest and darkest."

It was the same request, the same exact phrase we'd always taunted each other with, ever since we were children, playing together on those very rocks. However, with no one else present, it sounded like a completely different kind of question.

With a brand-new, soaring self-confidence, I stood my ground. "I'm not going in there alone."

It took him a few seconds of deliberating to decide whether to remain standing only inches from me or to do as I'd requested.

"Mere." He almost choked on my name. He surprised me by taking my hand and leading me into the familiar crevice of the tall, mountainous rocks. It really wasn't that dark in the caves during the morning hours, and so we could see as we followed the rough, uneven floor of the cave until it narrowed—and that was where we stopped.

"When did you get so beautiful?" In the time it had taken for him to lead me to this place, my confidence had doubled, if not tripled. I loved the way I felt with his eyes on me.

Knowing that I'd produced that look created a new power within that I hadn't known I possessed until that moment. I stepped closer, testing it.

"I must say, this old dress makes you appear rather...uncivilized." Vance fingered the tattered ruffles of my torn-up, ratty dress and then my collarbone just above them. Emboldened, I took his other hand and placed it at my waist. Since I wore a corset under my dress, I really didn't think I would be that affected by this touch—but that was before both his hands were sliding up and down the material of the bodice.

Watching Vance's face as he apparently enjoyed himself pushed my new feelings along and made me wonder, if he liked touching my feet and my waist, what else would he enjoy?

I soon found out. His fingers grazed my arms, traveling upward, past my collarbone again, then tunneled through my hair at the back of my neck, setting my long tresses free.

"Vance." His name upon my lips darkened the desire on his face. I had yet to touch him after years of wanting to, and I was deliriously happy to find I could now make him want me.

My hands were behind me, pressed against the rough wall, out of the way. For all my bold thoughts, I didn't know if he would welcome my doing the same things to him...or if I dared. This was all too new, and while he was enjoying my newfound beauty, which I had presented to him willingly, I wasn't sure if I had the courage to enjoy him in the same ways.

It was simply enough to enjoy him with my eyes.

"Meredyth, where are your hands?" he breathed.

I pulled them out from behind me, palms up, between us, splaying my fingers for him to see.

"What are you doing with them?"

"Nothing."

"I noticed," he said with a smile. He took hold of them and caressed my palms with his lips, then moved on to my wrists, which made my blood boil.

Without another thought, I put my arms around his neck, drew his face to mine, and kissed his lips. It was a tentative, almost innocent, first kiss, but when I realized how ardently he kissed me back, my boldness grew once again. I pressed myself to him, clutching his neck. I let him delve deeper and deeper into that kiss until it was all I knew.

Finally, Vance Everstone wanted me. Surely, he loved me.

I sank into the kiss, relishing the power of the emotions I'd evoked from him, kissing him back with equal desire. He pressed

me against the hard, jagged wall. The force of the rocks in my back, and his groping hands as he grabbed at my skirts, brought me to my senses.

"Vance." I pushed at him with my fists.

His ragged breath passed my ear as he kissed my neck, not slowing in his exploration of my skin.

The balance of control had suddenly shifted, and my confidence turned to distress.

I tried to break free from his kiss, from his ever-searching grasps of my skirt. "Vance!"

He didn't listen; he only continued to kiss me more urgently. I didn't know how to stop him. I'd set this in motion without having the power to stop it. Shame replaced my earlier courage as the course of my actions became all too clear. I'd led him to that cave—to me—never knowing where my actions were headed.

Until it was too late.

ONE

Lawry Hampton

"There is no surprise more magical than the surprise of being loved."

—Charles Langbridge Morgan

Wednesday, January 21, 1891 • Back Bay Boston, Massachusetts

o matter how well practiced I was, I couldn't help but stare.

There was something about Lawry Hampton that kept drawing my attention. The last time I'd seen him was at the park near the docks of Bar Harbor as my family and I had departed for Boston at the end of summer.

He'd seemed different when he'd returned from his hiatus to Washington State in February, almost a year ago. But who didn't change some in two years? However, it was the change that had occurred within the last four months that gave me pause. He seemed altered after spending so many months at his father's law firm in Bar Harbor again. He seemed far more determined to do something.

Everything about him seemed different, save for those reserved yet unyielding blue eyes that had a way of searching a person

through and through, those eyes that always seemed to discover the truth of any matter.

No matter how things seemed.

Before I knew it, dinner had come to a close, and Lawry stood from his seat at the other end of the room and walked directly toward my end of the table. Surely, he was crossing to speak with my brother, except that I realized Garrett had already made his way out to the hall with Lawry's youngest sister, Ainsley, on his arm, along with everyone else from the party.

That meant only one thing: Lawry wanted to see me and me only.

"Meredyth." He offered me his hand, his face lit by the familiar boyish grin I remembered so well.

I took his hand and stood. I didn't know why I hadn't until that moment. Everyone else had.

"Lawry." All I could do was smile.

"It's good—it's so very good to see you again," he said, as if struggling for words.

He appeared much taller, though it was impossible for him to have grown an inch above his height, which I knew to be at least six feet, at the age of nine and twenty. He had always towered over me. His famous Abernathy nose, with the slight bump along the bridge, was level with my eyes, just like always.

"Ainsley and I have become marvelous friends since she's come to stay with your aunt Claudine." I gripped his arm possessively. "I can tell you, Lawry, I like her a hundred times more than all the other debutantes who came out this year."

He guided me down the hall toward the drawing room, where most of our party was already congregated. Garrett and Ainsley walked ahead of us. I remained silent, trying to catch what they said to each other, but I couldn't make it out. I gave up trying when they entered the drawing room. Ainsley Hampton proved difficult to read, at least when it came to Garrett.

Lawry held me back while the rest of the party settled in to listen to Ainsley's friend Hazel Detlefsen play the old box grand piano at the far end of the room.

"Meredyth, have you ever wondered just what I was doing in Washington those two years I was away with Nathan?"

I thought his question rather odd, until I realized that neither he nor Nathan had ever actually explained the reasons the two of them had been gone.

"Washington? I don't even know what you've been doing in Bar Harbor for the last few months. You're away so often, it seems. I feel I hardly know you anymore."

He stared at me with those rich, ocean-blue eyes. I could tell they were taking in every unspoken cue. "Yes, that's my fault, I admit."

"Weren't you and Nathan simply exploring the West Coast?" I looked into the drawing room from where we stood in the hall and noticed that Garrett no longer sat next to Ainsley. "Or were you doing research for a case for your father?"

I turned back to him to find he'd glanced away, down the hall. "Research. Yes, that was why I initially went west. But I did more than that."

I feared what he planned to tell me. He seemed reluctant, almost apprehensive. Was he really that anxious to tell me what he'd been doing? Was it something terrible he was afraid to admit? I couldn't believe it of him. Not Lawry Hampton.

"What did you do?" I dared to ask.

"I founded an orphanage...in Seattle."

"Lawrence Edward Hampton!" I tried to whisper, but it still came out a little louder than it should have. "Are you serious? Is that the truth?"

He laughed. "I know it's odd, isn't it?" His gaze found mine again and held it. "I don't even know what made me do such a

thing. Somehow, I was compelled to act, and it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"A good idea? You must have changed countless lives!" I squeezed his arm with mine. "Are there many orphans in Seattle?"

"As many as are here in Boston." The hard muscles of his upper arm flexed under my fingers. "Especially after the fire that obliterated much of downtown the summer before last, their parents either are deceased or simply cannot afford to feed them. In any case, there are many children running wild, looking for food, and whatever else they can find."

"Wild orphaned children...." The thought appalled me, but I tried to conceal my shock. The orphans I knew weren't at all wild but rather were well-behaved little girls. "And now they have somewhere to go, somewhere to live, someone to feed them, to care for them...all because of you."

"Yes." He turned from me, his handsome face flushed with color. His profile was still striking, even as he neared the age of thirty.

I had a hard time dragging my eyes away, even though I dreaded the thought of him seeing my admiration and the sudden attraction I felt toward him. But he didn't end up turning back my way at all. It was almost as if he were too embarrassed to face me again.

"Lawry?" With the slightest of movements, I reached for his clean-shaven jaw and gently drew his face toward me. His eyes immediately sought mine, and I was struck by the seriousness of his countenance.

"Am I the only one you've told...besides Nathan?"

"I've wanted to tell you, Meredyth, for the longest time. I knew you'd understand."

He pricked my heart with his words, and I wished I deserved them.

"I'm glad you told me, Lawry. Especially since it means so much to you."

Lawry Hampton, Master of Surprises. Had I ever really known him at all?

"I'll see if I can sneak you back to the study a little later to show you the photographs I took before I left. I've hidden the ones of the orphanage all this time. You know, so I wouldn't have to answer everyone's questions."

"You baffle me." I met his eyes again. The look he gave me told me that I baffled him just as much, although the reason why was beyond me. Anyone else would have been just as surprised at his news. I felt incredibly honored that he'd chosen me to entrust with such information. Was his long-held secret the reason he'd acted peculiar all spring, and why he seemed different now?

"How long have you really wanted to tell me these things?"

"Oh, I don't know. Since boarding the train in Washington last February." He smiled ever so slightly.

At the sight of his crooked smirk, something in my chest warmed, and I had an overwhelming desire to weep. I forced myself to think of Vance Everstone...and my *almost* engagement.

"Almost a year, then? Why have you waited until now?" I pressed.

"Go ahead. Call me a coward."

Lawry Hampton was a lot of things, but a coward was not one of them.

"You still baffle me," I said instead.

"Good." And with that little word, he stepped into the drawing room and escorted me to the seat next to his sister.

True to his word, Lawry finagled a way for the two of us to escape the drawing room while Ainsley played a piece on the piano for the rest of the guests.

I followed him down the hall and into the immaculate two-level study. "Did my brother explain to you why he's decided to stay stateside this spring instead of joining Anton Partenheimer on his trip to Europe?" I asked. "Garrett has spoken for years about going with him."

"I have a feeling it has something to do with Ainsley. He seemed rather enthralled with her at dinner, but don't tell her that. I don't want her to know." Lawry walked to the opposite side of the room.

"Truly? Little Ainsley?" I walked around the large library table and strolled through the room, browsing the shelves of old books I'd seen a million times before. I'd spent a lot of time in that room over the years with Lawry and his closest friends, Nathan Everstone, Jayson Crawford Castleman, and my three older brothers. "Why wouldn't you want her to know? This is Garrett we're speaking of."

"Exactly. Everyone knows your brothers would rather play with hearts than settle down." Lawry walked the perimeter of the room and met me where I stood in front of my favorite section of books.

I studied him, still trying to figure out what it was about him that was so different. I'd always known Lawry was a *good* man, but how had I failed to grasp just how attractive he was? His tall, lean physique was cut to perfection in his formal evening wear.

I glanced at my cream-colored silk gown. Did he like how I looked? How my dress complemented my bright ginger hair? Did he appreciate anything about my appearance? I really was much too tall and too thin. "Willowy" was the word my mother always used to describe me—willowy, like my father.

After perusing the bookcases—while I perused him—Lawry selected a book from an upper shelf and cocked an eyebrow when he caught my lingering stare. I really couldn't tell if it was because of something I'd said or done...or something to do with Ainsley.

"I don't think she likes his attention," he said.

"But who wouldn't want Garrett's attention?" I took the small book from him, running my hand over the rough brown leather cover.

"She simply doesn't seem like the type of girl who would keep his interest for very long. She's so young and inexperienced. You know how your brothers like to flirt." Lawry stood before me, as if waiting for me to open the book.

"I believe Garrett has matured over the years, and perhaps he doesn't know what's hit him yet." My eyes met his again as I said the words, and a strange swirling sensation coiled about my stomach.

"Perhaps you're right." Lawry's blue eyes sparked. "It's always interesting when something like that happens between friends."

I swallowed. "I think they would be a perfect match."

"I, for one, think Ainsley's perfect all on her own."

"Of course you do. She's your baby sister." Jealousy welled in my chest. How many times had I wished my brothers were more like Lawry Hampton?

"And you're Garrett's baby sister. Which means you're perfect, as well, I suppose." He cocked his head, his intense gaze lingering on my face.

"At the age of four and twenty, I can hardly be considered a baby," I insisted.

"Oh, I don't consider you a baby, believe me. What I should have said is, you're Garrett's beautiful younger sister, who is quite perfect in almost every way possible." He gave me a teasing smile that made his eyes glimmer.

"Yes, that is precisely what you should have said." I cracked the book's binding, intent on finding out just what title he'd wanted me to see so badly.

Lawry cleared his throat and stepped away. "Let me find those photographs for you." He crossed the room to the wall, opened a hidden door in the elaborate dark wood wainscoting, and brought out a small wooden chest.

In all the years I'd been snooping around that room, I'd never known the hidden door existed. Lawry was far more secretive and mysterious than I'd ever imagined.

He opened the chest and took out a pile of photographs.

I sat in the middle of the long, deep leather sofa in front of the roaring fireplace. When Lawry walked over, I expected him to sit beside me, but instead he shuffled the photographs in his hand as he paced between the sofa and the fireplace.

"What's the matter, Lawry?"

"I don't know. It's just...I'm not used to feeling like I have secrets. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"You mean, as benefactor of an orphanage?"

"I wasn't going to come home, Meredyth. I was set on staying there forever. I had a well-put-together plan, a life. I even considered marrying and settling down. Life is different in Seattle. It has a way of bringing out what's truly important to a person."

"You were going to stay there indefinitely?" It sounded selfish of him, but then, I remembered why he'd considered staying. He was so...giving. "Who were you going to marry? And what changed your mind?"

"As I mentioned, the fire destroyed every last belonging of many people, leaving them with nothing...especially children." He glanced from me to the photos in his hand, then returned his gaze to me. "I can tell by the look in your eyes that it doesn't make sense to you, and I don't know that it makes any more sense to me." He suddenly seemed guarded, as if afraid of what I might think of him. "I felt it was the right thing to do, that it was what God wanted me to do." He finally sat beside me, resting his elbows on his knees, still clutching the photographs. "Meredyth, I've wanted to show these to you more than anyone."

"Why?"

"Because you're one of my best friends...and you mean a great deal to me, Merit."

I grinned bashfully at the use of his old nickname for me.

"Even though we've hardly seen each other for the last few years—save for the few months we both spent in Boston last spring—no matter how long it's been, I can always count on you to welcome me back into your life with open arms."

Lawry Hampton still thought so much of me?

"But I need you to keep this a secret for now. I'm not certain how my family would take this news."

"Not even your parents know? In all the months you've been staying in Bar Harbor with them?"

"I doubt they'll understand. Life is very different outside of Bar Harbor, outside of Back Bay and Boston, even New England. There's less money, but more need of it." He handed me the small pile of photos, which I situated atop the leather-bound book.

There were maybe a dozen of them. The one on top showed what seemed to be a mansion built in the Queen Anne style, set high on a hill, with rows of weary-looking children standing in front of the wide covered porch. Flanking the children stood two women—one of them middle-aged, the other a pretty young lady—dressed in dark clothing.

"Who are these women?"

"The older one is Mrs. Flanagan. She followed her husband out to Washington, only to find he'd died from diphtheria days before her arrival. And the younger woman is Amelia Grendahl. She moved out west from Chicago years ago with her husband, who worked as a doctor in the area until succumbing to pneumonia just three weeks after she lost their first child." Lawry's eyebrows were scrunched together in frustration.

Never in my life had I heard of such misery. Those poor people—Mrs. Flanagan, Amelia, and all those orphaned children.

"Mrs. Flanagan and Amelia had both been working at a hotel in a nearby town when the establishment was sold to a man who intended to make the hotel into a saloon and a brothel. There would have been only one way for either of them to keep their job." Lawry didn't seem quite his usual free-and-easy self. I hardly recognized this side of him. "At least I was able to hire them in time to save their dignity."

I sat back against the sofa. His words stunned me into silence. Brothel. Keeping their jobs.

I knew very well what it meant, although theoretically, I wasn't supposed to. It surprised me that Lawry would speak of such things in my presence, but I was glad. It meant he considered me his equal, which was how I'd always regarded our relationship.

I was happy that Lawry had been able to found that orphanage in faraway Seattle so that these two women could keep their self-respect. Was Amelia Grendahl the young woman Lawry had considered marrying? Her appearance was the very opposite of mine. My willowy height and red hair were a complete contrast to her petite figure and light blonde curls.

I shuffled quickly through the rest of the photographs, hoping to find another picture that offered a clearer view of Amelia, but there weren't any more. Just that one.

The rest of the photos were clips of life inside the Queen Anne house. I kept going back to the first one of Mrs. Flanagan, Amelia, and all the children.

"How many orphans live there?" I asked while attempting to mentally count the heads in the photograph. When he didn't answer, I looked up.

Lawry studied me for a moment before speaking. "We'd convinced about two dozen to come live with us by the time I left last February, but there are always more. They're everywhere, living in the streets, growing up without any direction, without education, without anything, really, but the clothes on their backs."

I leaned toward Lawry and handed him the photographs.

"Meredyth, you understand, don't you?" He set them aside and covered my hand with his. "How I feel...? How this is—"

"Understand...that you want to go back?" I hoped I was wrong. I didn't like the thought of never seeing Lawry's handsome face again, of missing the camaraderie we'd always shared, and, of course, of losing him forever to some widowed stranger named Amelia Grendahl.

"And that there's more to the world than this glittering, gilded cage of wealth and society in which we've been raised. There are people suffering from more than just poverty and disease. They're living in a realm of darkness and sin—even in our own Boston."

"Then...then you're going to stay?" I asked hopefully.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. But to be honest with you, Meredyth...." His eyes searched my face as he placed his left arm at the back of the sofa beside me. Without another word, he moved in and enveloped me in his strong hold.

He held me pressed against his chest for some moments before the shock dissipated, and I relaxed into the comfort of him: my good, safe friend, Lawry.

As I melted into his warm embrace, I lifted my chin just a fraction of an inch in an effort to look up and smile. However, as my nose grazed his jaw, he leaned forward ever so slightly and pressed his lips to mine, infusing my mouth with the taste of peppermint. His arms tightened around my shoulders, but almost cautiously, as if he wasn't quite sure what he was doing.

I wasn't at all sure, myself.

Suddenly, I was having such a difficult time keeping my senses straight. All I could think was of how undeniably secure I felt because of his gentleness—and how very odd that seemed—while he kissed me.

His sculpted nose bumped into mine as he deepened the kiss; his hands were at my shoulders, his fingers lightly searching, caressing the skin from my spine to my collarbone and back again, until they were tunneled through my loosely pinned-up hair. I allowed him to continue to kiss me, all the while struggling to not seem too untoward, for I'd learned my lesson once before, and all too well.

But this kiss from Lawry seemed so very different.

"Mere—" his lips begged against mine between lingering kisses. "Meredyth, I...."

I let go of the book crushed between us, allowing my fingers to creep up his chest until my arms were around his neck, savoring the connection more than anything I could remember. He let out a heavy sigh when he realized I wasn't interested in stopping him.

The shock that this was my oldest, most favored friend leaning over me, kissing me eagerly, soon gave over to the fact that I was enjoying it very much. I never would have thought it possible that I could incite such passions from the even-keeled, levelheaded Lawry Hampton.

Before such eye-opening revelations were even finished forming in my mind, Lawry let go of me and stood to his feet, his treasured photographs scattering all over the floor between us. The safety and warmth of his embrace were quickly replaced by nothingness.

Raking his fingers through his disheveled hair, Lawry again paced before the fireplace. "I'm sorry, Meredyth. I have no idea why I allowed—" He looked disgusted with himself, and my only coherent thought was that I probably should have been disgusted with him, too.

What was it that made men want me and hate me at the same time?

First Vance. And now Lawry.

Lawry's kiss hadn't been expected, and it certainly hadn't been sought. Never in my life had the thought of kissing Lawry Hampton crossed my mind. But it had happened. It was done. And now what? Contrary to my long-held expectations, the kiss hadn't repulsed me. Quite the opposite, actually. There was a strange new sensation that came over me: that, perhaps, we were meant for each other, Lawry Hampton and I.

But as the thought registered in my mind, I couldn't help rejecting it as preposterous. What was I thinking?

Noticing again the photographs at my feet, I took up the leather-bound book and stood from the sofa, now quite angry with myself...and with him, for making me forget myself—who I was, and what I needed to do.

I couldn't have him. I could never marry Lawry.

That much was certain.

I had to think of me—of my future.

Vance Everstone.

And my atonement.

Lawry still paced between the sofa and the fireplace. When he saw that I was also standing, he walked up to me and placed his hands on my shoulders. Oh, for all that is good and holy, was he going to kiss me again?

"Meredyth, please, you can't hold this against me." He closed his eyes. He sounded almost desperate. "I didn't mean for that to happen—"

"Yes. What were you thinking?"

He opened his eyes. He seemed agitated, very different from the Lawry I'd known for the duration of my life. "I didn't realize I was going to kiss you...and then, you—please, Meredyth, I need you to not turn on me now. I'm sorry I kissed you, but with Nathan and Amaryllis in Washington, you're the only one I have left here to understand what I'm going through."

His words reminded me of the reason we'd gone to the study in the first place.

The photographs. The orphanage.

Yes, I understood his problems. And I understood how conflicted he felt about his family's expectations of him. I even understood his bewilderment concerning me...and that kiss.

But Lawry Hampton had nothing to do with what I needed to accomplish with my life.

Vance Everstone—he was the one I needed to focus on, even if he was roaming about aimlessly on the other side of the world doing only God knew what. Marrying Vance was the only way I could make up for my gravest mistake.

I didn't need Lawry Hampton inadvertently leading me down the same path of destruction...or my leading him, which was probably a likelier scenario.

Lawry didn't deserve that.

And, more important, I didn't deserve him.

I stalked out of the room and down the hall to the drawing room. Claudine Abernathy, Garrett, and my parents were playing cards around a table, while Ainsley and Hazel were situated on a settee in the far corner of the room with their heads drawn close to each other, giggling at something.

"What have you and Lawry been doing, dear?" Mother never looked up from her cards.

Heat crept up my back as I reflected on the truth. "Lawry was telling me about his—Seattle."

"And where is he now?" Garrett shot a glance in my direction, then took a second, more thorough, look. "Is he coming back to join us?"

"I have no idea what he's doing," I replied, meaning the words in my heart so differently than anyone could have guessed.

I couldn't sleep that night. Kissing Lawry had brought back all the shame from the first time a man had wanted me so much.

Vance.

I fought the memory of Lawry's kiss and what that single act had done to weaken what had been, up until then, my well-maintained and self-composed determination to marry Vance Everstone.

I hated that I felt so bound to Vance, that there seemed to be some invisible, unbreakable thread stitching us together against our wills.

That it was against Vance's will to be bound to me was something I'd learned to accept over the years. He hadn't wanted me. Not forever, at least. And I'd tried to convince him, to persuade him, to reconsider, more times than I could count.

The sudden realization that I was tied to him against my own will was altogether new to me.

I sat up, keeping my long auburn hair spread about my shoulders as a layer of warmth, and, for a long while, stared at the shadows cast by moonlight upon the floor of my bedchamber. Then I remembered the book Lawry had handed to me in the study, before things between us had become so altered.

I'd taken it into the drawing room without a thought, and it was a wonder no one had mentioned it as I carried it all the way home.

It was only as I was walking up to my room that I had opened the cover of the book and read the title: *Leçons de Grammaire*.

I tossed back the warm, comfortable coverlet and threw my legs over the side of the bed. The cool night air didn't bother me half as much as everything sifting through my mind. I lit the small lamp on my bedside table, pulled my dressing gown about my shoulders, and stood.

Where had I thrown the book in my hurry to undress and hide under my covers, unwilling to speak to anyone for fear of bursting into tears? My reading chaise, of course. Hilda, my maid, would have placed it there, thinking I meant to read it.

How wrong she was.

I didn't want to read it. I didn't want to look at it, let alone open it.

But those things hardly mattered when I found myself standing before the plush gray velvet chaise longue, reaching down, and placing my cold fingers around the equally chilly binding.

I wouldn't open it. I wouldn't read a word. I didn't need to. It was a long-forgotten memory that haunted the book more than anything.

Lawry and I had been in the study at Hilldreth, practicing my French, using this ancient lesson book I'd happened upon. It had to have been over five years since then; right before...something else had happened.

"Lesson four." Lawry's resolute blue eyes had found mine as he'd turned the page and pointed to the first phrase at the top—meaningful and quite telling—and uttered the words with just a whisper. "Je t'aime...Meredyth."