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

THE CAPTIVE IMPOSTER THE EVERSTONE CHRONICLES ~ BOOK THREE

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ONE

Everston

"This is the forest primeval.

The murmuring pines and the hemlocks, bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight...."

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Evangeline

Sunday, September 6, 1891 - Portland, Maine

verston?" My voice cracked. It sounded very unladylike, which, I supposed, was allowable, considering the situation. Mrs. Macy and Mrs. Granton both turned to stare at me.

I suppose it was rather odd to them that I'd spoken. I hadn't said much in the three months they'd known me. It was generally my way, but the mention of Everston had sliced right through my otherwise resolved discreetness.

"Just think, being surrounded by all those green mountains, all that fresh air.... I think Mother will enjoy the cooler weather there. Don't you, Miss Stoneburner?" Mrs. Macy asked.

As if she valued my opinion.

She didn't, of course, so I remained silent. I was just the companion she'd hired for her elderly, recently widowed mother, Mrs. Myrtle Granton.

I was only Elle Stoneburner now.

What a shock it would be to Mrs. Macy if I revealed the truth. If only I could tell her that, more than being my reference, the formidable Bram Everstone was also my father, and that Everston—where she proposed sending us—one of his opulent mountain hotels.

I hadn't been to that particular hotel in thirteen years—ever since the summer before my mother had died. It wasn't that I thought anyone there might recognize me as Estella Everstone, for I'd been only eight at the time. No, the only person there who might recognize me was the last person on earth I never wanted to see again.

Jay.

Moments later, Mrs. Macy rose from her chair and looked down at me. "Then it's settled. You'll leave tomorrow."

I took in this information as silently as I normally would have, though what I really desired to do was argue that there were plenty of other, wonderfully situated hotels in the Appalachian Mountain region of central Maine that would suffice.

Please, God—anywhere but Everston.

Mrs. Macy walked toward the door to the hall, leaving her mother and me seated upon the sofa. She turned to add, "Miss Stoneburner, you don't have much to pack. But do help Mother, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am." I never hated two words more than those! Never in my life had so much been asked of me with nothing given in return. It wore at my reserves every hour of the day. I didn't know how I would survive the remainder of the summer.

But I really didn't have a choice.

"Cheer up, young lass." Mrs. Granton smiled with a sparkle in her eye. "Don't you know what kinds of adventures await? We will likely find you a fine young husband while we're there. I'm thinking you would much prefer the position of wife over companion to someone with one foot in the grave."

"No, Mrs. Granton. You're wonderful, but I—"

"Wouldn't you like a husband?"

Jay's chocolate brown eyes came to mind, as did his warm smile. I shook my head as if to dispel the image. "A husband is the last thing I'm concerned about finding at the moment, Mrs. Granton."

Finding a way to trust my heart again...that would have to come first.

Monday, September 7, 1891 · Central Maine

"Whoa! Slow down!"

The jostling stagecoach came to a sudden halt.

Tensing, I grabbed the leather handle beside me, trying in vain not to bump against the strangers sitting on the center bench in front of me.

"Mr. Blakeley!" the coachman yelled from his seat. "Your horse is lame? You need a ride?"

Crammed next to the back westward-facing window, I could see only a dog lumbering about. He had wiry gray fur and was absolutely the largest hound I'd ever laid eyes on.

The stagecoach was already packed to capacity; I didn't know how the coachman expected this Mr. Blakeley to fit. Perhaps there was an available seat on top, but I didn't think so. The route from Severville to Laurelton must have been a popular one, for so many people to cling to the coach for the long, bumpy ride. Had I known it would be so crowded and, for lack of a better word, pungent, I would have been more than happy to wait at the train depot for the stagecoach to come back around later that night.

"There's room for you and Wulfric inside," the coachman boomed from his seat. "I'm sure of it. And we're most of the ways to Laurelton, where some of the bodies'll be gettin' off."

How wonderful that the coachman considered us mere "bodies" to be lugged across the countryside.

"And we can take it slow for your Knightley—we'll rig 'im to the back."

Mr. Blakeley walked around the stagecoach to stand next to my window, his dog with the very fitting name beside him. Although the fading light of day was giving over to twilight, I could see him quite clearly, especially as I was seated nearest the door, pushed against the glass. I could do nothing but stare.

He wasn't extremely tall, but he carried himself with an air of confidence that fairly radiated off of him. He cut a rather striking figure, dressed in a white shirt with his sleeves rolled up, a black vest, and trousers. He carried his jacket over his arm and his hat in his hand as he neared the coach door. He was only inches from me, on the other side of the glass, as he whispered something to the coachman. I studied him as he continued the intense conversation in low, indefinable tones.

His chiseled, almost statuesque, face consisted of such sharp, drastic angles. Even his sideburns added to the harshness. He looked serious with his dark brows drawn low over his eyes. Those eyes were the worst offenders of all. Dark, hazel, and brooding, they seemed to cut into everything and everyone he turned his gaze upon.

How severe he looked.

And how wonderful it would be to sketch those eyes!

I couldn't turn away, though my cheeks burned with embarrassment at such a thought. Hiding was impossible.

He caught sight of me through the window, and with the tiniest parting of his lips, he drew my attention even further with a

glimpse at his straight teeth. The sight was quite unexpected. He didn't strike me as the type who smiled much.

At the appearance of the newcomer, one of the young men who'd been crowded into the stagecoach, and who clearly had not been paying attention, suddenly opened the door and climbed out. "Mr. Blakeley! Take my spot. I'll walk the rest of the way."

Mr. Blakeley didn't argue but waited for everyone else in the stagecoach to shuffle about so he could take the seat directly across from me. His giant dog occupied a significant amount of precious space on the floor at his feet.

As soon as he and his dog were situated, we were off again, only at a much slower pace than before.

A small, rather dirty boy sat on the bench in the middle of the stagecoach directly between the stranger and me, his small stature giving me another good look at the man, if I so desired to take one. The day's last light streamed in through the windows, blazing against his swarthy complexion. But I didn't wish to stare more than I already had. I didn't want him to think I desired his attention.

I gazed at the still-setting sun. Surely, he knew I'd been forced into the position—staring out the window—and that it had had nothing to do with his presence.

"I think we've found you an admirer already, Elle," Mrs. Granton breathed in my ear.

Glancing over the little boy's head, just for a moment, Mr. Blakeley, indeed, watching me, though not smiling. I turned back to the window.

I shouldn't have been surprised to find him staring. Anyone who took a closer look at me—no matter that I wore a very plain brown travel suit—surely, would be able to tell I was from a different class than everyone else in that stagecoach. Even Mrs. Granton, who was likely the wealthiest person in the vehicle, was not from my family's class of society.

Later, when we stopped in Laurelton, almost everyone spilled out of the stagecoach, leaving only Mrs. Granton, the gentleman, his dog, and myself. Finally, I could breathe again. An awkward silence permeated the coach as we waited for any passengers who might be boarding. Sometimes, being a companion had its uses. At least I wasn't expected to make conversation. No, I was free to focus my energy on not looking at the man across from me.

Just then the coachman appeared at the door. "You takin' Knightley to the liv'ry, or we makin' him walk the long haul?"

The gentleman nearly leaped from his seat and exited through the open door, leaving his wadded coat and his hat on the bench.

"Wulf, stay," he commanded his dog with a rough, authoritative voice. The huge beast sat back on his haunches and obeyed before his master had even closed the door.

The coachman returned to his high, creaky seat upon the stage, and we waited for the gentleman to return. It was almost ten minutes later when the stranger came back and reclaimed his seat directly opposite me. The dog stood for a moment—he must have been at least four feet tall when he did so—then hunched down against the bench with his muzzle resting on his master's left knee.

Dusk had fallen, leaving only a sliver of light streaking through the purple clouds. I hoped we would travel on in silence. I wasn't sure how much farther we had to go to reach Everston—it had been so long since I'd been there—but I would have much preferred to feign sleep than to let my gaze continually stray to the enigmatic man seated across from us.

After a few minutes of travel, Mrs. Granton nodded to the gentleman and then turned to me. "Elle, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Dexter Blakeley, the manager of Everston—"

"Is that so?" I couldn't help but be shocked. So, both names were his, as well as the title of manager...of my hotel.

"And one of the most sought-after bachelors in Piscataquis County, I'm to believe," Mrs. Granton said, as if I were meeting a prince. "Mr. Blakeley, this is my companion, Miss Elle Stoneburner."

"It's good to meet you, Miss Stoneburner." He nodded curtly, ignoring Mrs. Granton's comment about being so sought after. I really couldn't see why he would be; he seemed to have the demeanor of a wild boar.

"Likewise," I finally added, nodding back.

His only response to me was silence as he reached down to massage his dog's ears. Obviously, he appreciated having been dragged into the conversation as much as I did.

"It's so good to see you again," Mrs. Granton continued. "What has it been—three years? four?—since—"

"Four, I believe," he answered tersely. "Is Mr. Granton to join you soon?"

"Unfortunately, I lost my Mr. Granton earlier this year. However, I have Miss Stoneburner now—the most darling companion ever," Mrs. Granton persisted somewhat sadly. "Her last position was companion to Bram Everstone's elderly sister, Mrs. Miriam Bancroft, before she became ill early last winter."

Mr. Blakeley arched an eyebrow, as if not sure what to make of me. "I thought the youngest of the Everstone children had been companion to the aunt."

My pulse staggered. How well did this man know my family? "Was Estella Everstone in residence while you were there?" Mrs. Granton asked.

"Yes. She lived with her great-aunt, as well...at least until her aunt became ill," I stated truthfully. "Estella was usually very busy socializing and such."

"I'd always gathered—from her brothers—that she was rather quiet, not very social, and usually wanted to stay out of sight," Mr. Blakeley put in.

I could feel his gaze on me, even in the dimming light of dusk. "But I suppose, since Estella Everstone is worth four million," he continued severely, "she can very well do whatever she wants with her time."

To hear such contempt concerning my financial worth—especially from the shrewd Mr. Blakeley—was rather disconcerting. Was that how most people viewed me—as a spoiled heiress who cared for nothing but her substantial inheritance and for living out her days being pampered and waited upon?

He leaned back against the leather seat and crossed his arms over his chest. "She's actually the only member of the Everstone family I've never had the pleasure of meeting, at least as an adult. So, really, whatever I might say about her doesn't have much merit."

My stomach twisted. He'd met me as a child? When? Why did I not remember a Dexter Blakeley? Would he have been the same age as my brother Nathan? I wondered if he had been at Everston one of the summers we'd spent there. Would he recognize me when he saw me in the light?

"Estella is such a beautiful name, don't you agree?" Mrs. Granton placed a hand at my elbow. Could she tell I wasn't comfortable with this particular topic of conversation? It made me wonder how much of the truth my father had told her. She was a longtime acquaintance of his, but I was fairly certain she did not know my true identity.

"I heard her mother decided upon the name after reading Dickens' *Great Expectations*," she continued. "Though, the young lady she was named after was a cat of a girl, leading poor Pip on for all those years. I never could tell if Estella Havisham loved him and simply wouldn't allow herself to have him, or if she was just as coldhearted as the elder Miss Havisham. What did you think of the two endings Dickens wrote, Elle? Do you think Pip took her back?"

I'd read the book once, and had a very firm opinion about the antagonist, which I couldn't help but share: "I think, by the end of the story, Pip finally understood Estella, even if he hadn't throughout all those pages that detailed his falling in love with her. And I do believe he took her back. What else could he have done?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know. What do you think, Mr. Blakeley?" Mrs. Granton asked.

"I agree with Miss Stoneburner." His manners were so abrupt, so stilted—as if participating in a conversation about a novel grated his nerves. But then he added, "I believe the young lady's heart had been so manipulated over the years, it required someone like Pip, and his delusional love for her, to make her see what she'd become—to make her realize that everything she'd done with her life up to that point was utterly meaningless and self-destructive."

Although his words were touching, and a bit surprising, I could think only of my own longtime, delusional love for Jay and how it had tragically eaten up the last five years of my life. Was that how Pip had felt? Maybe Pip hadn't taken Estella Havisham back, after all.

"I had no idea you were such a lover of novels, Mr. Blakeley," Mrs. Granton remarked.

He stroked the scruff of his dog's neck. "I'm not. Dickens is a favorite of my sister's. I don't know how many times she's made us sit and listen to her read that particular book over the years. She even named her horse Pip."

It sounded to me as if my employer and this Miss Blakeley would have been a very fine match, for reading aloud was about all that Mrs. Granton required of me as her companion.

"My daughter, Mrs. Caroline Macy"—Mrs. Granton glanced my way for a moment—"planned to name her daughter Estella, but then she decided on Ursula. Miss Everstone was born earlier that same winter, you see, and Caroline didn't want to give the impression of imitating the Everstone family." I smoothed a wrinkle from my skirt, not knowing how to respond. I had nothing to feel guilty about, yet I had the sudden urge to apologize. Mrs. Granton fell silent, and even the indomitable Mr. Blakeley took to staring at his dog. Finally, he filled the quiet with a polite inquiry: "Have you ever been to Everston before, Miss Stoneburner?"

I forced my attention from the bleakness outside my window back to him. He was now only a shadow in the darkness, a deep voice asking an innocent question.

Only the question wasn't innocent to me.

I knew I needed to twist the truth even more than I already had. For how would someone of the social standing of my persona ever have been to a hotel like Everston before, other than as an employee?

Really, I didn't know much about the past of my assumed persona—nothing beyond the fact that she had a glowing reference from Bram Everstone. I never thought I'd have to explain myself so thoroughly to a stranger.

I quickly realized that all Mrs. Granton and Mr. Blakeley—and anyone else at Everston besides Jay—would ever know of me would be lies. And if the lies were to be believable, I needed to spend time formulating a past. Time I suddenly didn't have.

"Perhaps once, but I don't remember." I looked to Mrs. Granton's form beside me in the dimness. A quiet snore rumbled between us. The dear lady had fallen asleep.

"And where are you from?" he asked. I was surprised he cared.

"Bar Harbor." I cringed as the name escaped my lips. I'd thought for a moment that it was a safe answer, but really it wasn't.

"What does your family do there?"

"They...we worked at The Grand Everstone Hotel." That was a little less of a lie, at least, and it gave me a connection to my own family, since they were my only reference.

"So, you've probably seen much of the Everstone family, aside from working for the great-aunt?"

"You could say that."

"I worked for Bram Everstone for close to eight years, managing his Bailey Hill Hotel on Nahant Island, until about a year and a half ago." No wonder this Mr. Blakeley seemed to care so much about my connection to the Everstones.

I had the feeling he was watching me, waiting for me to add something more to the conversation, so I did. "And now you're at Everston? You must be very proficient at what you do." Mr. Blakeley had to have been one of the youngest hotel managers Father had ever employed if he'd been overseeing Bailey Hill for all those years. He couldn't have been much older than thirty.

"Attaining Everston has been my goal for a very long time."

"You must love Everston as much as Bram Everstone does."

"You could say that." It didn't escape my notice that he'd used the same line I'd given him while trying not to lie. "Do you still have relatives in Bar Harbor?"

"No." None of them was actually in Bar Harbor anymore, not since Will had been killed at the beginning of June.

"May I ask what your position was at The Grand Everstone Hotel?"

"I worked at the front desk." It wasn't an outright lie. When I was a little girl, my father would take me there to visit, and I would play receptionist.

"Indeed."

"Yes...indeed."

Did he believe me? Or did he perceive the falseness of my words? Had Father telephoned to ask Mr. Blakeley to watch over me? Or would he have telephoned Jay to do that? I wished I knew. I'd sent my sister Natalia a telegram from the train station, and I was sure she would write to me as soon as possible, under the guise of being a friend. Until then, I wouldn't know anything for certain.

Mrs. Granton moaned, and a short snore escaped her lips as she wriggled next to me in an apparent effort to find a more comfortable position. I didn't like that she'd basically left me alone with Mr. Blakeley. It felt shamelessly scandalous to speak with him as I was, shrouded in the darkness of the stagecoach, hardly able to remember what he looked like, besides that he was mildly attractive.

At least when he wasn't glowering.

I focused on the bumps of the gravel road, which jostled my insides almost as much as the conversation had. The coach took a sharp turn, prompting Mr. Blakeley's dog to stand to his feet. I looked out my window and saw the stone pillars and walls that flanked the wrought-iron gates, as if they hid a secret world inside.

Once we drove past the open gate, a large, shadowy silhouette caught my gaze. A towering building protruded from the dark shadows of the mountains. That was also when I noticed the waters of Half Moon Lake glittering outside my window.

Before too long, the stage jolted to a halt at the gas lit entrance of the hotel, and Mrs. Granton made a rather embarrassing noise in her sleep. Heat rushed to my cheeks as Mr. Blakeley opened the door. Wulfric climbed out first. His master immediately followed, then turned around to offer me his assistance. He took my gloved hand and carefully helped me down.

As I stood before him, with the glow of the gaslights upon us, I had my first good look at Mr. Blakeley since I'd met him at twilight. "Mildly attractive" was hardly an adequate description. I took in his straight dark hair, which was brushed off to the side; his greenish-brown hazel eyes; his dark brows and lashes.

No, there was no "mildly" about it.

"Welcome to my hotel, Miss Stoneburner." Pride laced his every word, and I could hear the smile in his voice, even though his lips adamantly refused to comply. "Now that you're here, do you recall ever visiting Everston?"

"Perhaps, but...I don't know. Probably not." My first real, straight-to-the-core lie to him. Not that it should have mattered.

"You probably haven't if you can't remember. Everston's not a place that's easily forgotten."

I wrenched my gaze from his as he let go of my hand and turned his attention to the coach and my employer, still asleep inside. Wulfric pranced about, obviously happy to be home.

I looked to the front of the hotel and remembered with fondness the stunning door of hand-carved wood and beveled glass that led into the lobby. The bellmen came to collect our luggage, finally waking Mrs. Granton. Mr. Blakeley helped her down, then guided us up the flagstone path to the enormous front steps of the wide veranda.

In the dim light, I drank in the sight of Everston, nestled amid miles and miles of pine trees and mountains, with an expanse of stars shining brightly above. Out of nowhere, a sense of longing hit me so hard, my knees nearly buckled. How had I not realized how badly I missed this place?

I searched the night sky, the sight bringing back a flood of warm memories from my childhood. I hadn't been home in weeks. But as I walked up the path, it felt more like years.

Thirteen, in fact.

Oh, no, Mr. Blakeley. I hadn't forgotten.