

A
Desperate
HOPE

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN



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Prologue

Summer 1896

Alex Duval's first hint of trouble was when Eloise failed to appear at their hideaway. For the past two summers they had met behind the ruins of an old cider mill in an overgrown orchard every Monday and Thursday. Those were the only days her guardian left town on business and she could get away without fear of discovery.

He propped the math book atop his knee and tried to concentrate. His only prayer of getting into college was if Eloise helped him master algebra. She was two years younger but a genius at mathematics. In exchange, he taught Eloise about the world around them, for he'd never met a girl so impossibly sheltered before he took her under his wing.

He swatted at a gnat circling in the warm air, worried that she was more than an hour late. Her guardian was a mean brute of a man, though Eloise claimed Mr. Garrett had always been good to her. She didn't know him as well as the people in the village, who called him "the Bone-Crusher" behind his back.

A bird startled, and a squirrel raced through the underbrush

up on the hillside, which meant Eloise was probably on her way down. Alex scrambled to his feet and adjusted his collar. It was important to look respectable for her. He came from the finest family in the village, but that didn't compare to Eloise and her grandiose upbringing. He peered through the trees to catch a glimpse of her, but his brows lowered at the heavy tramp of footsteps.

It wasn't Eloise coming toward him.

He squatted back down behind the cider mill. If he was discovered, he'd need an excuse for being here that didn't involve Eloise. He peered over the rim of the stone wall but jerked down immediately. There were four men coming, all of them quarrymen who worked for Bruce Garrett.

"No use hiding, Duval," one of the men hollered. It was Jared Brimley, a stonecutter who was regularly thrown out of Alex's brother's tavern for rowdiness.

The worst thing Alex could do was act guilty. He affected a casual tone as he held the math book aloft. "I always hide when I have to study math. It's a terrifying subject."

The men didn't laugh. They just marched toward him without breaking stride.

Alex backed up a few steps. "What's going on?"

Jared didn't answer. He just hauled back a fist and swung.

Alex dived to the left. He wasn't very big, but he was fast. It was impossible to grow up with an older brother like Hercules Duval and not know how to fight. He sprang backward, both hands fisted to protect his face, but one of the men blocked him from behind while another punched him in the jaw, and he went down. The pain was bad, but he managed to brace a hand on the ground and push himself back up.

"Not so high and mighty now, are you, boy?"

Alex said nothing. With a last name like Duval, everyone knew he was from the founding family of Duval Springs. His

father had been the mayor until his death earlier that year, and his brother owned the famous Duval Tavern.

Alex continued backing up. “I don’t want any trouble,” he said, embarrassed by the tremble in his voice. There were four of them, all bigger and stronger than he was.

“Then you never should have touched that girl, should you?”

Alex sagged, his worst fear coming to life. He’d done a lot more than just touch Eloise. He and Eloise had done *everything* together. And since she hadn’t met him this morning, they’d probably already gotten to her.

“Where is she? What’s happened to her?” he asked. *Please, God, don’t let it be anything bad.* Eloise was his life. They were going to get married someday. Maybe they shouldn’t have jumped the gun by meeting in the woods all this time, but he loved her.

“That’s no concern of yours, boy,” the man growled, hauling off for another punch.

Alex ducked and charged him like a bull, tackling him and shoving them both to the ground. He scrambled up and tried to make a run for it, but someone slammed into him from behind, and he got a face full of dirt. A storm of booted feet kicked him, and he curled into a ball, trying to cover his head.

The men finally backed away, and Alex rolled to his side, struggling to draw a lungful of air. Maybe it would just be a hard and fast beating. He could deal with that. He probably deserved it.

Someone hauled him upright, locking both his elbows behind his back. It took several moments for his vision to clear, and when it did, he was facing the man with tobacco-stained teeth.

“We know where you live,” he said with a thick Irish brogue. “That nice place over the tavern where you bunk with your brother and his pretty wife and those three little kids. We can get to them too.”

“Leave them alone,” Alex said. “They didn’t do anything wrong.”

Hercules had done everything *right*. His brother had gotten married right out of school and was a good family man. The baby was only a month old. They didn’t need trouble like this, but Hercules wasn’t the sort to back away when threatened. He would fight fire with fire, and Alex couldn’t let that happen.

“You want us to leave them alone, then you need to get out of town. Right, boy-o? Never show your face here again.”

“Eloise . . .” Her name slipped out before he could call it back, and a fist landed on his jaw, filling his mouth with blood.

“Forget you ever heard her name,” the Irishman growled. “Forget you ever lived in this valley. We catch you showing your mug here again, we go after you, and then we go after your family. Is that clear?”

Alex was slammed against a tree, banging his head so hard he saw sparks. The rumors about Garrett were true. Bone-Crusher . . .

“I hear you,” he said, but his mouth was so swollen he could barely get the words out.

The Irishman stepped aside, and the biggest of the men took his place. A tiny sliver of pity was in his face as he made a fist.

“Where do you want it, boy? The face or the gut?”

The face would hurt more, but the gut could kill him. There wasn’t going to be any escape, so he’d better take it like a man.

“Face,” Alex choked out. The blow came fast and hard, breaking his nose.

“We’re taking you to Kingston and putting you on a train,” the Irishman said. “And you’re never coming back to this valley, and you’re going to forget that girl’s name. You’re going to forget what she looks like, where she lives, or that she even exists. You got that?”

Alex nodded.

The next few hours were a blur. He leaned against the window of the train while passing in and out of consciousness. He had no idea where the train was headed and had nothing but the clothes on his back, but he couldn't go back into town. Hercules had warned him against carrying on with Bruce Garrett's ward, and now Alex was paying the price. He wouldn't foist his problems on Hercules or the children.

He had failed Eloise. Instead of being her hero, he'd brought her to shame. He didn't even know what had happened to her. Tears pooled in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Eloise," he whispered. "May God bless and watch over you always."



Chapter
ONE

Twelve Years Later
New York City, August 1908

*P*lease, Eloise, I need your help.”
Eloise Drake glanced up from her tax schedules. She’d only been an accountant for the State Water Board for two months, but her coworkers already depended on her, and it felt good to be needed.

“What can I do for you, Leon?”

Leon glanced nervously around the office. Almost a hundred architects, engineers, and accountants worked on this floor, and privacy was nonexistent. He hunkered beside her desk and leaned in close to whisper. “I forgot to calculate the abatement for the sewers into the operating expenses. Can you lend a hand?”

It was a damaging error that could skew an entire budget, but Leon’s wife had just given birth to their third child, so maybe the oversight was understandable. Besides, Eloise was proud of her ability to grind through endless columns of numbers and spot the errors.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said, and Leon sagged in relief.

“Thanks, Eloise. You’re the best,” he said before darting away to collect the paperwork.

Her desk was already decorated with tokens of gratitude. The tin of peppermints came from the last time she had bailed Leon out. The paperweight of a green turtle was a gift from Mr. Trent when she stayed late to help complete payroll duties.

She twisted the whimsical paperweight to see it better. Bruce would grouse that she was letting people walk all over her. “*Men take advantage of women whenever they can,*” he’d growl in the voice that terrified her as a child. But he was her guardian and had always been overprotective.

And she loved working here, even if she wasn’t quite part of the team. The other accountants often laughed and joked with one another, but as the only woman in the office, she was rarely invited to join in. It wasn’t their fault. Being an outsider was normal for Eloise. She had always lacked that nameless ability to fit in and was grateful for the chance to be here at all.

Most people considered accounting a dull profession filled with endless columns of numbers, but when Eloise looked at those same columns, she saw stories. Those numbers spoke of financial gambles, triumphs, danger, and dreams coming true or being shattered. America was built on a foundation of finance, and without accountants to keep it all organized, business and innovation would grind to a halt. The people in this office were transforming New York City into a world of skyscrapers, subways, water tunnels, and bridges, and she got to be a part of that team.

It didn’t take long to amend Leon’s mistake, and then she returned to her own work. The latest expense report for the Duval Springs project was due by the end of the week. She opened a file to examine the statement submitted by the town for reimbursement, and her gaze zeroed in on the signature at the bottom of the page.

Alex Duval.

He was now the mayor of Duval Springs, and she routinely saw his name on official reports. It never failed to crack a tiny bit of her composure. She hadn't set eyes on him in twelve years. She and Alex had been harshly punished after Bruce discovered their clandestine meetings, but it appeared Alex had outgrown his reckless, daredevil ways. She didn't make a habit of following his career, but her job involved paying the state's bills for a lawsuit Alex had launched against their office. He'd been the mayor for five years and had clearly recovered from the damage Bruce inflicted.

For herself, she had received her accounting license and was flourishing in the most vibrant city in the world, the image of prim respectability. Each morning she smoothed her red hair into an elegant coiffure, then tugged on a smartly tailored jacket to project the air of unflappable confidence that had gotten her this far in the world.

It hadn't always been this way. As a girl, she'd been so madly in love with Alex Duval that she would have done anything for him. If he'd suggested they run away to join the gypsies, she'd have done it. Buy a boat and sail toward the sunrise? Flee to an attic apartment in Paris to live like bohemians? They had discussed all those glorious, improbable dreams. In the end, the only thing they'd done was lie in the grass behind the old cider mill. Bruce had been right. Young men wanted only one thing from a girl, and she'd stupidly given it away and asked for nothing in return but the chance to wallow in Alex's beaming attention.

Not anymore. Today she was governed by rules and respectability.

When the office clerk delivered the mail, she processed each form, putting the documents into her well-ordered files to be addressed in order of priority.

The last document in the mail contained a message that

robbed the breath from her lungs. It was an order from Mr. Jones, her supervisor. Normally she handled anything he sent her immediately and without question, but she could no more carry out this request than she could fly to the moon. There was a limit to her abilities, and it had just landed on her desk.

Fletcher Jones was the Commissioner of Finance for the State Water Board. Although he was as straightlaced as his lofty title implied, two weeks ago he had insisted she call him by his first name.

“There are three people with the last name Jones in this office,” he had said. “Calling me Fletcher will avoid confusion.”

Eloise hadn’t pointed out that no one else in the office had been invited to use his first name, but she would be naïve not to sense the attraction humming between them. And Eloise hadn’t been naïve since she was sixteen years old. Beneath Fletcher’s carefully groomed exterior, he seemed to return her reluctant attraction, though he had never once made an improper comment or glance. Maybe he found romantic overtures difficult to grapple with too. She ought to be relieved he could awaken feelings she thought had been cauterized long ago, because she didn’t want to be alone forever.

She stood and adjusted the hem of her jacket. She didn’t have an appointment, and Fletcher’s secretary made her wait twenty minutes before she was allowed into his private office.

He didn’t even look up from his paperwork when she entered. “Our meeting isn’t until tomorrow afternoon.”

She didn’t let the typically chilly greeting bother her as she set the note on his desk. “When I accepted this position, it was with the understanding that it would be in Manhattan.”

“Yes. And now it’s in Duval Springs.”

She couldn’t do it. If he asked her to go to Timbuktu, she’d find a way to get there and complete the job on time and under budget. But Duval Springs? No. It wasn’t possible.

“Why me?” she asked calmly. “There are a dozen other employees with more experience on this project.”

He finally looked up. With his neatly groomed blond hair and fine blue eyes, Fletcher had a patrician air that was easy to admire. “No one wants the Duval Springs assignment. It’s a remote town without plumbing or electricity, the residents are hostile, and the assignment lasts four months. It’s going to the lowest man on the totem pole, and that’s you.”

Duval Springs had just lost a five-year battle against the state. New York City needed water, and it was having to go far afield to find it. Duval Springs was almost a hundred miles north of Manhattan, but it was about to be wiped off the map so that the state could flood the valley and build a reservoir to serve the four million residents of New York City.

“Why can’t I continue working on the account from here?” she pressed.

“In the interest of fiscal responsibility, I am combining the accounting work with appraisal duties. And property appraisals can’t be handled from the city.”

Eloise was taken aback. “I don’t know anything about property appraisals.”

“Can you count?”

The question was so absurd that the only response it deserved was the lift of a single eyebrow.

“Then you can do this job,” he replied. “We’ve already had people in the valley demand unrealistically high valuations for their property, so I developed a simple formula to expedite the process.” He presented her with a two-page chart, and as he outlined the technique, she warmed in admiration.

“Who designed this system?” she asked.

“I did.”

It was a miracle of simplicity, so logical and efficient that her respect for him climbed higher. Although she’d never written a

property appraisal in her life, this chart boiled the task down to clear, easy-to-understand principles, and the formulas removed all sentimentality from an inherently volatile situation.

“I like the way you think,” she said simply.

He seemed surprised, but only for a moment. “You do? Most people find me horrible.”

“Everything you just said makes perfect sense. I admire the straightforward rationality of it.”

She thought she glimpsed a flash of pleasure, but he quickly retreated behind his austere demeanor. “But can you apply it?”

Her confidence surged. She’d already memorized the chart of simple mathematical equations and gave it back to him before scanning the interior of his office. She noted the wood paneling, the number of electrical outlets, and the arrangement of windows. It took less than a minute to apply the formula and perform the math in her head.

“The value of your office, stripped of furniture and moveable equipment, is \$435.”

That took him aback. He stood and glanced around the room, mental calculations going on behind his cool features. She hid a smile when he had to peck out a few numbers on his adding machine.

A look of admiration crossed his face. “The assignment is yours.”

“I respectfully decline.”

Fletcher leaned back in his chair, flummoxed by her refusal. “Are you . . . do you perhaps have mixed loyalties?”

Her eyes widened, but she kept her voice calm. “Why should I have mixed loyalties?” *He can’t possibly know.*

“I gather you grew up not far from Duval Springs, correct?”

“Close. The house where I lived was at the top of the valley, but I’ve never actually set foot in Duval Springs.”

She and Alex had met in an abandoned apple orchard halfway

between the mansion and the village. At the time, those summers had been magic, but now the memory brought only hurt and embarrassment. The years that followed had been brutally hard, but she'd survived. Her shattered heart had mended, and she covered it with a layer of smooth professionalism, but coming face to face with Alex might crack that hard-won veneer.

"I'm an accountant," she reminded Fletcher. "We do our work from an office."

"All the other accountants in the office work too closely with the engineers for me to send them upstate. You are the only person I can afford to send. Eloise, I need you."

They were the three words she was powerless to refuse. Some women might crave wealth or beauty or popularity. Eloise craved being needed, even if it meant she'd have to endure seeing Alex Duval again. Fletcher needed her, and she wouldn't let a disastrous, long-ago love affair interfere with her responsibilities.

"Then of course I shall go." Just saying the words made her cringe inside.

"Excellent. Please join the team for a meeting tomorrow afternoon to discuss logistics. Brace yourself. Claude Fitzgerald will supervise the team, and he doesn't like women. Figure out a way to cope with it."

She rose, smoothing her face into a look of cool composure. "I shall join the team tomorrow afternoon."

She just hoped she would be able to survive the next four months, for it would be a test unlike any she'd ever endured.