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"Eloisa James
is extraordinary."
LISA KLEYPAS

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue, off-the-shoulder, long-sleeved gown with gold trim and a high slit, stands on a beach at night. She is looking to her left. The background shows the ocean with waves and a bright light reflecting on the water. A small, glowing blue object is visible in the water to the left.

Eloisa
James

A Kiss at Midnight

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 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Carol Bly. She didn't care too much for the genre of romance—or so she said. But she read my sister and me fairy tales over and over, enchanting us with princes who swept in on white chargers and princesses whose golden hair doubled as ladders. She gave me my first copies of *Anne of Green Gables*, *Little Women*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. In short, Mom, it's all your fault!

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Prologue

Once upon a time, not so very long ago . . .

This story begins with a carriage that was never a pumpkin, though it fled at midnight; a godmother who lost track of her charge, though she had no magic wand; and several so-called rats who secretly would have enjoyed wearing livery.

And, of course, there's a girl too, though she didn't know how to dance, nor did she want to marry a prince.

But it really begins with the rats.

They were out of control; everybody said so. Mrs. Swallow, the housekeeper, fretted about it regularly. "I can't abide the way those little varmints chew up a pair of shoes when a body's not looking," she told the butler, a comfortable soul by the name of Mr. Cherryderry.

"I know just what you're saying," he told her with an edge in his voice that she didn't hear often. "I can't abide them. Those sharp noses, and the yapping at night, and—"

"The way they eat!" Mrs. Swallow broke in. "From the table, from the very plates!"

"It is from the plates," Cherryderry told her. "I've seen it with my own eyes, Mrs. Swallow, that I have! By the hand of Mrs. Daltry herself!"

Mrs. Swallow's little shriek might have been heard all the way in the drawing room . . . except the rats were making such a racket that no one in that chamber could hear anything.

One

Yarrow House

The residence of Mrs. Mariana Daltry; her daughter, Victoria; and Miss Katherine Daltry

Miss Katherine Daltry, known to almost all as Kate, got down from her horse seething with rage.

It should be said that the condition wasn't unfamiliar to her. Before her father died seven years earlier, she found herself sometimes irritated with her new stepmother. But it wasn't until he was gone, and the new Mrs. Daltry—who had held that title for a matter of mere months—started ruling the roost, that Kate really learned the meaning of anger.

Anger was watching tenants on the estate be forced to pay double the rent or leave cottages where they'd lived their whole lives. Anger was watching the crops wilt and the hedges overgrow because her stepmother begrudged the money needed to maintain the estate. Anger was watching her father's money be poured into new gowns and bonnets and frilly things . . . so numerous that her stepmother and stepsister couldn't find days enough in the year to wear them all.

It was the pitying glances she had from acquaintances who never met her at dinner anymore. It was being relegated to a chamber in the attic, with faded furnishings that advertised her relative worth in the household. It was the self-loathing of someone who can't quite bring herself to leave home and have done with it. It was fueled by humiliation, and despair, and the absolute certainty that her father must be turning in his grave.

She stomped up the front steps girding her loins for battle, as her father

himself would have said. “Hello, Cherryderry,” she said, as their dear old butler opened the door. “Are you playing footman now?”

“Herself sent the footmen off to London to fetch a doctor,” Cherryderry said. “To be exact, two doctors.”

“Having a spell, is she?” Kate pulled her gloves off carefully, since the leather was separating from its lining around the wrist. Time was when she might have actually wondered if her stepmother (known to the household as Herself) was malingering, but no longer. Not after years of false alarms and voices screaming in the middle of the night about attacks . . . which generally turned out to be indigestion.

Though as Cherryderry had once commented, one can only hope.

“Not Herself, this time. It’s Miss Victoria’s face, I gather.”

“The bite?”

He nodded. “Dragging the lip down, so her maid told us this morning. There’s a swelling there as well.”

Sour as she felt, Kate felt a pulse of sympathy. Poor Victoria didn’t have much going for her outside of her pretty face and prettier frocks; it would break her stepsister’s heart if she were permanently disfigured.

“I have to talk to Herself about the vicar’s wife,” she said, handing her pelisse to Cherryderry. “Or rather, the former vicar’s wife. After his death, I moved the family to the far cottage.”

“Bad business,” the butler said. “Especially in a vicar. Seems that a vicar shouldn’t take his own life.”

“He left her with four children,” Kate said.

“Mind you, it’s not easy for a man to get over the loss of a limb.”

“Well, now his children have to get over the loss of him,” she said

unsympathetically. “Not to mention that my stepmother sent an eviction notice to his widow yesterday.”

Cherryderry frowned. “Herself says you’re to dine with them tonight.”

Kate stopped on her way up the stairs. “She said what?”

“You’re to dine with them tonight. And Lord Dimsdale is coming.”

“You must be joking.”

But the butler was shaking his head. “She said that. What’s more, she’s decided that Miss Victoria’s rats have to go, but for some reason she banished them to your chamber.”

Kate closed her eyes for a moment. A day that had started out badly was only getting worse. She disliked her stepsister’s pack of little dogs, affectionately, or not so affectionately, known to all as the rats. She also disliked Algernon Bennett, Lord Dimsdale, her stepsister’s betrothed. He smiled too easily. And she loathed even more the idea of sitting down to dinner *en famille*.

She generally managed to forget that she had once been mistress of the household. After all, her mother had been bedridden for years before she died, and sickly most of Kate’s life. Kate had grown up sitting opposite her father at the dining room table, going over the menus with Mrs. Swallow, the housekeeper . . . She had expected to debut, and marry, and raise children of her own in this very house.

But that was before her father died, and she turned into a maid-of-all-work, living in the garret.

And now she was to come to dinner, in a gown that was out-of-date, and endure the smirking pleasantries of Lord Dimsdale? Why?

She ran up the stairs with a sickening foreboding in her stomach. Kate’s stepmother was seated at her dressing table, examining her complexion. The