

TRACIE PETERSON

Ladies of the Lake

*Waiting
on
Love*



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Chapter 1

Oswego, New York

Late June 1872

Elise Wright watched her sister, Caroline, as she greeted the wedding guests. Caroline was five years her junior, and Elise wanted to be happy for her but found it difficult. Caroline hadn't sought their father's advice, or even Elise's, about her marriage. Of course, her sister was so distanced from the family that when Mama died the year before, Caroline hardly even seemed upset. Elise had tried not to hate her for her callous attitude, but it required a great deal of prayer. Now Caroline wanted Elise and their father to be happy about her marrying into New York society to a man none of them really knew.

Still, Caroline seemed happy as she moved effortlessly in her ivory wedding gown of satin ruching and lace upon lace. The long train didn't seem to slow her in the least, nor did the trailing tulle veil. She was radiant and full of energy. Maybe she truly had married for love rather than money and position.

“She is beautiful, isn’t she?” their father whispered against Elise’s ear.

“She is. And she seems so happy. Nelson must be the right man for her.” They’d met Nelson Worthington only a few days ago.

Her father nodded. “I had my doubts, but your uncle James assured me he was from a good family. They’re in church every Sunday. Your mama would be happy to know that.”

“I don’t know that it would be enough. Mama used to say that Satan himself is in church every Sunday. The purpose in being there is what really matters.”

Her father smiled. “You’re so like her. How I miss her.” His joy seemed to fade.

“I do too, Papa.” She let him hug her close despite her very tight corset and uncomfortable clothes. She knew her father was just as miserable in the fancy suit that Uncle James let him borrow. As if reading her thoughts, Papa loosened his tie.

“It’s been a little more than a year, and yet it seems like she was here just yesterday,” her father whispered. “Other days it feels like she’s been gone forever.”

“I know, Papa. It’s that way for me too.”

He gazed out across the garden reception. “She would love seeing your sister get what she wanted for her wedding.”

“It would have been nice if Caroline had given more consideration to what you and Mama wanted.” Elise struggled with the anger she felt toward her sister. Caroline had hurt their parents so much with her choices. She never seemed to think of anyone but herself.

“We used to talk about you girls getting married. We worried about having enough money to give you a nice wedding. I regret that your uncle is paying for this. I offered him money—what

I could—but he said it was their delight to give this wedding to Caroline. What could I say?”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about giving me this kind of wedding. I can scarcely breathe, much less enjoy myself, in restrictive gowns like this.” She looked down at the lavender creation she wore. “I feel completely out of sorts. Especially with this bustle. Goodness, whoever created such a thing?” She glanced over her shoulder and then gave her father a smile. “Besides, I don’t intend to marry. I’m married to the *Mary Elise*,” she said, referencing their ship.

Her father roared with laughter, causing many of Oswego’s social elite to look their way. It would no doubt be a terrible embarrassment to Caroline, who hated that she was from a ship captain’s family and spoke very little of it. Elise had heard from her cousins that Caroline told people their father was quite wealthy and chose to captain a ship for pure pleasure. Elise herself had heard her sister say their father took to sailing because it was his favorite thing to do, and he was very eccentric.

The truth was, however, that Elise and her sister had both grown up on ships, and money was often scarce. When Uncle James got into the shipping business six years ago, he had helped Papa buy the *Mary Elise*—a three-masted schooner named after Elise and Caroline’s mother and grandmother. Elise loved life on the lakes and had helped their mother in the galley, but Caroline had enjoyed when they stayed with Uncle James and his family. She had taken to the life of a wealthy socialite and never wanted to return to their shipboard life. More than once, Caroline had made their mother cry, and Elise hated that Caroline had been so heartless. Her sister was only a child at the time, so Mama had encouraged everyone to be patient with her, but as the

years passed, the tantrums only increased. Caroline would cry for hours. She would take to her bed and swear that ship life was killing her. By the time she was fifteen, Mama and Papa had given up. They allowed her to live with Mama's wealthy brother and his family.

Uncle James had been Mama's support throughout the years. Even when she ran away to elope with Papa, he had been the one to make it possible. When he'd offered to let the girls come live with him and his family, it wasn't a surprise. He had told his sister that the girls would never get good husbands if they weren't trained properly. Mama and Papa left it up to Elise as to whether she wanted to join her sister. She didn't.

"Are you enjoying yourselves?" her cousin Louis asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"It's everything I expected it would be." Elise gave him a smile. "What about you?"

"I'd rather be anywhere else in the world," he answered, returning the smile.

"You mean you don't like dressing up in tight-fitting suits?" Papa asked.

"As much as any fellow ever has at these occasions. Being here just reminds every would-be bride that I'm eligible to marry." Even though he was three years younger than Elise, at twenty-two, Louis seemed to have a very stable outlook on life.

Elise giggled. She had watched a bevy of frilly young ladies flock around her male cousins all day.

"Go ahead and laugh, but it's torment for me. At least Caroline and her young man seem happy. A father could hardly ask for more." Louis looked at Elise. "She did, however, step out of line and marry before her older sister."

“Oh, I am not finding her position enviable,” Elise replied, hugging her father’s arm. “Besides, being married hasn’t seemed harmful to your brother Randolph. He looks quite content.” She nodded toward the tall, handsome man who stood smiling into the face of his wife.

“They’re absolutely gone over each other. It’s so embarrassing, but our mother’s greatest triumph. Well, at least until now, with Caroline. Mother just loves pairing us all up.” Louis grinned. “If Elise sticks around, Mother is convinced she can get her married off as well. She loves having people to fuss over. I suppose they’re like china dolls to dress up and arrange.”

“Well, I’d just as soon Elise stay with me awhile longer,” her father declared. “After all, if she were gone, who would cook for the men on the *Mary Elise*?” He winked at her.

“Also,” Elise said, trying to keep her tone sweet, “I’m afraid I would make a very poor china doll. Besides, the *Mary Elise* is my life. I don’t intend to add a man to that equation.”

“You are a strange one, just as Mother said.” Louis bit his lip. “I didn’t mean to say that. It’s not exactly what Mother meant.”

“It’s all right. I know I’m not what passes for a normal female in her world.” Elise did her best not to reveal the hurt his words had caused. Why should her aunt call her strange just because she enjoyed life on the lakes with her parents? Since Mama died the year before, however, Aunt Martha had nagged Elise to come and live with them.

“It looks like that dashing Mr. Casper is coming our way,” her father whispered. “No doubt he wants to dance, Elise.”

“Oh, please send him away. He stepped on my foot three times in our first dance. I have no desire to repeat the performance, and I’m sick of dancing.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Louis declared. “I know Charlie. I’ll take him to see my new horse. He loves horses more than anything else on earth. Charlie! Wait until you see my new mare.” He headed off to intercept the man, whose face lit up as Louis explained his plan.

“What a sweetheart.” Elise would have to find a way to pay Louis back. “How much longer will this go on?”

Her father shrugged. “I have no idea. In my experience, the party’s over when the liquor runs out, but since these folks have enough money to keep that flow steady, I’m not sure what will bring things to an end.”

“Perhaps someone will announce it, as they do for dinner.” Elise smiled, imagining a well-dressed butler announcing that the party was over and everyone needed to vacate the property.

“They seem to have announcements for just about everything else. Why not the end of a party?” her father replied.

“Do you suppose if we just sneak off to our rooms to change, they will leave us to our rat-killing?” Elise asked with a grin. *Rat-killing* was her mother’s favorite phrase for any odd task that needed to be done. “We could slip upstairs when no one is looking.”

“I honestly don’t expect we’ll be missed. Not even by your sister.” There was an edge of regret in Papa’s voice. “Besides, I need to check on Joe and see what the doc said about his leg.”

Neither of them expected the news to be good. The *Mary Elise’s* first mate had injured his leg nearly a month ago, but no one had known about the wound until he started limping. By that time, the leg was putrid, and red streaks were moving up the thigh.

“Let’s just go, then. We can tell Caroline good-bye and pray with her on our way out the door.”

Elise pulled Papa in the direction of her sister. She didn’t want to give him a chance to refuse. He didn’t even try.

Elise waited for her sister to finish speaking to some guests before tapping her shoulder. “Caroline, we must be on our way.”

“But you can’t! Not until you help me change. I was already looking for an excuse. Nelson said we had to keep to our schedule.”

Elise looked at her father with a shrug. “I guess Caroline needs my help. I’ll be back as soon as possible, and then we can go.”

Caroline all but dragged Elise up the stairs. “Everything was beautiful, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Quite lovely.”

“The garden was perfect for the reception. I was so afraid there’d be no roses because of the cold spring, but they were in full bloom, and the gardeners were able to buy additional flowers to weave in.” Caroline opened the door to her bedroom suite.

Elise gazed around the large room. There was a sitting area by the fireplace, a dressing area, and, of course, a beautiful four-poster bed with elegant gossamer curtains draped from its frame. It was hard to imagine calling such a place home.

“Unfasten the buttons in back,” Caroline commanded as she removed her veil.

“What about *please*?”

“I’m used to servants, and you don’t say *please* or *thank you*. It’s their job.”

“But Mama always encouraged us to be polite, even to the lowliest servant.”

“Well, you aren’t Mama,” Caroline snapped.

“I’m also not a servant.”

Silence hung heavy for a moment. Caroline gave a little huff.

“Would you please undo my buttons?”

Elise began the task of unfastening thirty-six pearl buttons.

“Why did you make that comment about Mama?”

“Well, ever since you and Papa arrived, you’ve done nothing but mother me. You’ve even talked to me like Mama. I’m sure you must feel the need to step into her shoes, and while that might be acceptable regarding cooking for Papa and the boys on the ship, it’s not for me. I’m perfectly capable of seeing to myself.”

“Including your back buttons?”

Caroline sighed. “Very well. Etta!” she called, not seeming to notice whether Elise continued with the buttons.

The uniformed maid appeared. “Ma’am.” She gave a curtsy.

“Bring my new traveling suit and help me dress.” Caroline glanced over her shoulder as Elise finished with the last of the buttons. “Please.”

Elise smiled and watched the maid hurry away. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Caroline rolled her eyes. She worked at undoing the buttons on her sleeves. “Etta can help me now. Why don’t you go downstairs and wait with the others? I know they plan to throw rice.”

Elise waited as Caroline finished with her buttons. Stepping close, she surprised Caroline with an embrace. “I just want you to know that I love you. I hope you have a wonderful trip . . . and marriage.”

Caroline hesitated, then finally returned Elise’s hug. “I’m

certain I will, so you can stop fretting.” She stiffened and gave a little push. “Now, let me get back to this.”

“We were close once.” Elise hadn’t meant to whisper the words aloud.

“We were children,” Caroline countered. “And we had no choice. There was no other person to confide in or play with. We had only each other.”

In that moment, Elise saw her sister not as a wealthy bride but as a little girl. “I liked it that way. We knew we could always count on each other to be there. Now you have other obligations. I will continue to miss you.”

“Oh, bother. Where is that girl?” Caroline went to the open door that led to her bathing room. “Etta?”

“Coming, ma’am.” Etta returned carrying a forest-green traveling suit. She placed the outfit carefully at the end of the bed, then went immediately to Caroline and helped rid her of the ivory gown.

Elise slipped from the room, knowing that neither woman needed her nor cared for her company. Her sister’s attitude only stirred her anger. How could she be so cold? Didn’t Caroline have any feelings of love toward her family? Maybe money and prestige were all she loved now.



An hour later, Elise waited in her uncle’s borrowed carriage outside of Joseph Brett’s apartment. Her father’s first mate lived in a modest part of town. Elise knew that despite Joe being a better-paid seaman who didn’t drink or gamble, he was still hard-pressed to keep his family fed and clothed, so the tiny duplex came as no surprise.

Joe had a family of five children and a wife who had once been quite pretty. Since Mrs. Brett had been on her way out the door when they'd pulled up to the curb, Elise had decided to wait outside and let her father and Joe visit privately. The two women had exchanged hellos, but then Joe's wife had to be on her way to retrieve her children from her sister's house.

Mrs. Brett had at least shared the news that Joe was doing better. The doctor had given him medication for his wound and strict orders for tending it. She was certain he'd be back on his feet soon.

It was good to hear. Joe had been her father's first mate for as long as Elise could remember. Papa relied on him heavily. It was hard enough to be without Mama on board, but losing Joe would be sheer misery. Her father would be relieved to hear the good news.

While she waited in the carriage, Elise fidgeted with the bodice of her gown. At least it wasn't as fancy as her wedding clothes, but it was just as snug. Probably much smaller than she usually wore, thanks to the tightly tied corset beneath it. She could scarcely draw breath, and given the day's heat and humidity, she worried she might faint dead away. How ridiculous! Why did women put themselves through such torment? A well-fitted corset tied in a reasonable manner was a useful thing, but the practice of securing them as tightly as possible was absurd.

There was some sort of commotion going on down the street, and Elise looked up just in time to see a freight wagon veering out of control. The horses pulling the wagon were driverless and headed straight for her. All she could do was brace herself for impact as her uncle's driver struggled to get the carriage out of the way.



“Miss. Miss, are you all right?”

Elise slowly opened her eyes and gazed straight up into the worried expression of a very handsome man. His face was freshly shaved, and the cologne he’d used had a pleasant aroma.

“What . . . what happened?” She was lying on her back, and her vision seemed blurred.

The man smiled. “Your carriage was hit by a freighter. It threw you to the street. You have a few scrapes on your chin. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“I don’t know.” Elise put her gloved hand to her chin.

“Are you able to sit?”

She tried with his help, but pain cut through her back. “Oh, I don’t think so.” She was grateful when he lowered her back to the ground.

“My father . . . he’s in number twelve-twenty-three.” How had she remembered the address? “He’s visiting Joseph Brett.”

“I know Joe,” another man said. “I’ll fetch her father.”

The man who’d tried to help her sit up glanced around. “I think I’d best lift you rather than leave you lying here in the street.”

“Yes. Thank you.” With a jolt of fear, she asked, “How’s the driver?”

“He jumped free at the last minute. He’s just fine and busy trying to calm the horses.”

The stranger put one arm behind her back and another under her legs. He was so very gentle.

“What is your name?” she asked.

He smiled. “Nicodemus Clark, but most call me Nick.”

“Nick. Thank you again.”

He frowned. “You might want to wait to thank me. This will probably hurt.”

“I know.” She drew a deep breath. “Go ahead.” She gritted her teeth, determined not to cry out.

“Elise!” Her father appeared. “Bring her in the house. I’m sure Joe won’t mind.” He instructed Nick where to go and turned back to Elise. “They said a freight wagon hit you. How do you feel, darlin’?”

“Confused, dizzy, and in pain.” She smiled. “How are you?”

Her father chuckled. “Much the same without the aid of a freight wagon.”

Nick carried her into the house and placed her on the empty kitchen table. The pain wasn’t quite as bad as before.

“I’m a doctor,” a man said, pushing past several of the bystanders who’d followed them inside. “If you aren’t related to this young woman or live here, then I want you to leave.” Several people filed outside.

Elise’s father grabbed her hand. The look on his face nearly broke her heart. He looked at the doctor. “Can you tell if her back is broken?”

“My back isn’t broken,” Elise assured him. “It hurts, but look—I can move my legs and arms, and with a little help I can sit up.” She looked to the right and found the same man who had helped her earlier. “Would you lend me a hand?”

“It’s best you don’t stress your body at this time, miss,” the doctor declared. “I’ve already sent a man to bring ’round the ambulance.”

“That was hardly necessary.” Elise knew her protest fell on deaf ears.

“The carriage was totally demolished, Elise,” her father added. “We’ll need some form of transport for you. The young man who helped you has no wagon either. We can’t very well expect him to carry you home.”

Elise tried to swallow her embarrassment. She shrugged, and it hurt from the base of her neck down the back of her legs. She didn’t so much as grimace, however. Papa was already worried, and she didn’t want to give him something else to worry about.

The doctor forced a large spoonful of medicine into her mouth. “Take this. It will help with the pain.”

She swallowed the bitter medicine and couldn’t hide her displeasure. “I don’t know what that was, but I believe the pain was less difficult to bear. That tastes terrible.”

Her father laughed. “Good medicine often tastes bad.”

“It will make the ambulance ride more bearable,” the doctor said.

She felt a wave of dizziness. “Well, I’ve never ridden in an ambulance. I suppose there are first times for everything.” She forced a smile and looked at the man who’d helped her. “What did you say your name was?” The medicine was making her sleepy.

“Nick.”

She fought to keep her focus. “Yes. Nicodemus. Such a wonderful name.” She closed her eyes. “Thank you for helping me.”

“I would say it was my pleasure, but I’m not sure that’s exactly the right word.”

She smiled. “Nor would I. But I appreciate no longer lying in the middle of the road.”

“The ambulance is here,” someone called from the open door.

Elise wasn't sure how long she'd been unconscious in the street, but now she felt like falling asleep for a good long time. Two men with a stretcher appeared. They spoke to the doctor, then maneuvered the stretcher beneath her without any apparent concern for her comfort and lifted her from the table. She couldn't help but moan.

Her father gave them Uncle James's address, then followed them. She had no chance to bid good-bye to the man who'd rescued her. And he'd been so nice.



After her aunt's personal maid undressed her and cleaned her up, Elise was again examined by the doctor as she faded in and out of sleep. Finally she heard the doctor tell her aunt to bring in her father.

"I do not see nor feel anything that indicates her back is broken, but I believe she should remain bedfast for at least two weeks. I will come tomorrow and check on her. There's a great deal of swelling, no doubt. After fourteen days, we can expect the swelling to go down, and then we can reassess the situation."

"But we planned to leave tomorrow," she murmured, looking at her father.

"Well, you clearly cannot go." Papa's voice was firm, and even in her stupor, Elise knew there would be no arguing with him.

"She will remain with us," Uncle James said from the open bedroom doorway.

"But Papa needs me to cook on the *Mary Elise*." She tried her best to ignore the pain.

"We'll get by, girl. We can take turns cooking for ourselves.

I'll lay in more cheese, fruit, and bread," her father declared. "I'm just happy to know you aren't permanently injured. Or worse yet. You could have been killed."

"Indeed," her aunt said, shaking her head.

Elise knew by the expressions on everyone's faces that she wasn't going anywhere. She tried to sit up, but the pain was too much, and she fell back. Maybe they were right.