



Miss Barton's Mysterious Husband (Mayfair Christmas Romance)

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Category: Historical

Description: A heartwarming Christmas reunion story from bestselling historical romance author Anna Campbell

The Un-Festive Season...

Sir Roland Destry finds no joy in Christmas. Since his beautiful, spirited wife left him during their honeymoon, he finds no joy in anything. But an unexpected encounter on Christmas Eve may just change the gallant baronet's luck and show him that the age of miracles has not yet passed.

The fire still burns...

Since fleeing back to her family after an unwise marriage, Charmian Barlow has reverted to her maiden name and kept her reckless elopement a secret. If only it was so easy to rise above heartache and regret. But when a rainy night brings her errant husband to her doorstep, as magnetic as ever, passion springs to blazing life and proves that this union is far from over.

A heartbreaking truth revealed.

Will shocking revelations of what really kept them apart divide them forever? Or can Charmian and Roland forgive the mistakes of the past for the sake of a love that never died?

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Puddlebrook, Yorkshire, Christmas Eve, 1818

By heaven, he loathed Yorkshire.

Sir Roland Destry especially loathed it on a freezing, dark afternoon, when the precipitation couldn't decide whether it was snow or rain. Whatever it was, it knew that it wanted to blight his journey. As another rivulet of icy water trickled down the back of his neck, he shivered and cursed beneath his breath.

Not for the first time, he regretted agreeing to spend the Festive Season with his friend, Sir Hugo Brinsmead, and his family. But as he encouraged his exhausted horse to plod through whatever this godforsaken village was called, he regretted it with particular savagery.

There was the whole Yorkshire thing, for a start. The county had never been lucky for him. It wasn't as if Christmas was his favorite time of year either. These days, he preferred to hole up at his club for most of December and pretend the rest of the world wasn't elsewhere, cuddling up together in cozy jollification.

But Hugo's invitation had arrived when he was feeling lower than usual. He'd replied in the affirmative, before he had a chance to think through what he committed to. Not thinking through the consequences of a fleeting impulse had caused him more than enough trouble already, damn it all to hell.

Disaster was all but assured.

Having said yes to Hugo, he was duty bound to attend, but lack of enthusiasm meant

he was late leaving London. Then the weather had turned on him – as it was wont to do at this time of year. Like Yorkshire and Christmas, winter was doing what it always did.

He probably should have brought his carriage. At least that would offer some shelter from the storm. But he'd looked forward to a good ride.

The journey had started out as a good ride. He'd taken his time, giving Titan plenty of rest along the way, and staying in luxurious hostelrys, where he had private rooms and no obligation to wish anyone the compliments of the season.

But for the last twenty miles, travel had become sheer misery. He should have stopped at an inn somewhere. God knew why he kept plodding his way northward. He could only blame the stubborn stupidity that seemed to mark most of his actions.

So here he was, a good forty miles from Hugo's estate. He was cold, wet, and exhausted. And the horrors of a family Christmas still awaited. Some days, a man wished that he'd never got out of bed.

The road through the village crossed a bridge. Through his grumbling, he was aware of a roaring in his ears, but he didn't pay much attention.

Only when Titan balked at advancing did Roland emerge from what even he recognized as a colossal sulk to realize that while the road might once have led to a bridge, the bridge was no longer there. Instead, a raging torrent of brown water threatened to break the high riverbanks.

It seemed that he wasn't going to spend Christmas Eve with Hugo after all. He was in such a funk, the news came as a relief.

"Nowt will get through that, sir," a rough voice insisted from behind him.

Roland turned his head to see a portly fellow in a bedraggled sheepskin coat splashing toward him. A farmer, he guessed. He'd been riding through soggy fields all day.

Roland raised his voice over the thundering water. "I wanted to make Halifax tonight." Hugo lived about ten miles past the city.

As the man approached, he kept his sodden hat pulled low against the tumbling rain. "Reckon the only place thou will make tonight is Puddlebrook."

"Where's Puddlebrook?"

The man gave a grunt of derisive amusement. "Thou art standing in it. Though tonight, it's more Noah's flood than Puddlebrook. Bridge went two hours ago."

That was another thing that Roland remembered without fondness about Yorkshire. The denizens liked to make grim jokes.

"There was a crossroads about five miles back."

"Flooding at Muckly Marsh, if thou goes that way. Flit in spate. Muckly Marsh goes underwater."

Muckly Marsh didn't sound appealing. "Then what in Jericho am I to do?"

"Reckon thou'd best hop down to the Spotted Fox and see if they've got a bed. Mind, we've had a few strangers through today, so it might well be a bench in the taproom."

"The Spotted Fox?"

One leather-gloved hand waved toward the village behind them. "Aye, the inn thou

passed on thy way. Did thou not mark it?"

Roland had been so sunk in a murk of misery and memories, he hadn't seen much. Now that he took the trouble to look, he noted that Puddlebrook was a substantial village, sure to have at least one hostelry.

He touched the dripping brim of his hat. "Thank you for your help. I'll take your advice."

What else could he do? Titan was close to done in. So was he.

"Aye, right canny. Big place on the left. Can't miss it. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Roland muttered, the words sticking in his throat.

The man waded off as Roland turned Titan back the way that they'd come. He bent forward to pat his mount's neck. "You'll be glad to get into a nice warm stable, old boy. I'm sorry I dragged you through all this."

Titan must have sensed shelter and food were on offer, because he kicked into a trot rather than the discouraged plod that he'd progressed at for most of the day.

Once Roland reached the Spotted Fox, he wondered how he'd missed it. It was the most substantial building in the hamlet and it blazed with light as night closed in.

A groom rushed out to take Titan. As Roland dismounted, he tossed the lad a shilling. "He's done good service today. Treat him right, and there's another shilling in it for you."

"Aye, my lord."

Tired, wet, grumpy, he trudged into the inn's wood-paneled hall. The place was noisy and bustling with activity. Clearly, he wasn't the only stranded traveler.

A maid emerged to take his wet greatcoat and hat. "Do you have a room available for the night?" he asked, tugging off his leather gloves.

"Sir, we're that full, I'd have to check with the mistress. We might be able to find you a place in the taproom."

"More guests, Milly?"

The woman's voice from further down the corridor turned Roland as motionless as a block of stone. Three years, yet he recognized it from the first word he heard.

"Just a single gentleman, mistress."

The woman who had spoken came up the hallway and stopped beside Milly.

The last time that Roland saw her, she'd worn a fashionable muslin gown in autumn shades of gold and russet. It irked him that he even remembered the sodding color.

Today, she sported a modest gray frock under a cream linen apron. Her rich red hair was confined in a single plait. Plain clothing didn't play down her extraordinary beauty. If anything, she blazed brighter in her simple garments.

He couldn't even pretend that he'd forgotten that beauty. It had haunted him every moment since they'd parted.

When her gaze settled on him, she went as still as he did. Deep green eyes widened in undisguised horror. No question that she remembered him, too.

“Roland...” she said in a choked whisper, as her hands clasped together in front of her.

“Good afternoon, Charmian.” An ironic smile twisted his lips, despite nothing about this situation striking him as funny. He mightn’t be amused, but somewhere a malicious fate was laughing its head off. “How obliging of Father Christmas to arrange for me to spend the holy festival with my wife.”

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Charmian didn't even pretend to smile. Once, long ago, she'd enjoyed Roland's wry sense of humor. But once, long ago, she'd thought that they'd be happy together for the rest of their lives.

How did that work out, Charmian Barton?

The maid glanced open-mouthed between the two of them. Milly chattered like a parrot. The news of Miss Barton's mysterious husband's arrival would be all over the inn before they started serving dinner. "M-Miss Barton?"

He gave Charmian a sardonic smile that she hadn't seen before. "Miss? You've been living under false pretenses, I see. Not to mention you've lost your wedding ring."

She hid a wince. The immediate numbing shock receded a little. The urge to run and hide faded, too. Stiffening her spine, she told herself that she could hold her own against Roland. She wasn't wide-eyed and innocent and nineteen anymore. If she was honest, most days she felt as old as the millennium.

Had he come looking for her? She hadn't had a word from him since they'd separated in York. But the marriage stood. They remained linked for life.

"It never meant much," she retorted, although she couldn't stop her fingers curling at her sides with a shame that she shouldn't feel.

"So I see," he responded, the line of his lips turning bitter. Bitterness had been alien to the man she thought she'd known. But then, she'd long ago understood that she hadn't known Roland Destry at all.

Seeing him stirred a storm of emotions. Shock. Confusion. Anger. Regret, her constant companion since they'd parted.

Anger emerged paramount.

A hundred furious words rushed to her lips, so it was perhaps lucky that her aunt appeared on the landing above. "Charmian, weren't you fetching hot water for the Whytes in room twelve?"

Charmian suddenly recollected that she was standing in the middle of a crowded inn during a natural disaster. She couldn't indulge in the luxury of a tantrum, much as she might want to. "Milly, please look after the Whytes."

Milly bobbed into a curtsy, although it was clear that she'd much rather stay and hear the gossip. "Aye, Miss.. Mrs..."

"Destry," Roland said in a low voice, without sparing the girl a glance.

He hadn't looked away from Charmian since he'd first seen her. She couldn't help wondering what he saw. Since their last meeting, she'd endured three hard years. These days, she approached the world warily, and she knew that showed on her face.

It was unforgivably vain to want him to think that she was still beautiful. If only for her pride's sake. She couldn't bear the idea of him feeling sorry for her.

With an incoherent murmur, Milly left as Aunt Janet marched down the steps. "What is it, love?"

Janet mustn't have heard Roland say Destry. With so many guests, the inn was in uproar.

Charmian gestured toward Roland. "Aunt, this is Sir Roland Destry. Roland, this is Janet Barton, my father's sister."

Her aunt was capable and formidable, ready to withstand any challenge that life presented. A woman running a country inn needed to hold her own with patrons and staff. Charmian had seen her face down a pack of drunk bullyboys and triumph purely through force of personality.

Charmian also knew the kind heart beneath the forbidding exterior. That kind heart had provided unfailing support through the last years.

Now she expected to see dislike or disdain on her aunt's face. How puzzling that Janet's first reaction seemed to be fear. She wouldn't have said that Aunt Janet was afraid of anyone.

"Sir Roland," Aunt Janet bit out, although Charmian couldn't help thinking that she was apprehensive under the frosty welcome.

Perhaps Roland's exalted rank overawed her, although her aunt was used to dealing with the upper classes. The Spotted Fox was the only decent public house for miles, so it received patronage from the local gentry as well as travelers and farmers and agricultural workers.

Aunt Janet performed a curtsy so sketchy, it hardly justified the name. Roland's bow was more elegant, but then, he'd always had perfect manners. No wonder Charmian felt like a complete bumpkin in his company. "Miss Barton. I'm hoping you can offer me a bed tonight."

"I'm afraid we have no room. If you go back to Sorby, you may find a place." This was the voice that Aunt Janet used when she threw drunken yokels out at closing time.

Under that tone, yokels turned as quiet as lambs. Roland was made of stouter stuff.

He'd been a charming young man with a sweet nature. Or at least so Charmian had thought until that last catastrophic quarrel. His reply now conveyed nothing sweet. "Sorby is five miles in the wrong direction. My horse is exhausted. It's a deluge out there. And I'm frozen to the bone."

Janet folded her arms over her substantial bosom. "Nonetheless, you must go."

Charmian sent her aunt a questioning look. "I'm sure we could fit Roland in the taproom, even if on a chair."

"Don't forget I'm family." His dry tone indicated that he didn't feel like family at all.

Janet's eyes narrowed. "The taproom's full."

The conversation paused while the barman passed them, balancing a tray piled with empty tankards. He threw them a curious glance, but didn't stop. It was all hands on deck tonight. John should have finished at five and gone back to his family for Christmas Eve.

"I'll take a blanket and sleep in the stables if I have to," Roland said with a snap of his straight white teeth. "I'm not putting my horse out into that weather again."

He'd always been kind to animals and children. He'd been kind to her – at least at first. It seemed that hadn't changed. When it came to animals anyway.

"We can't help you, Sir Roland."

Janet's uncompromising attitude confused Charmian. There were good reasons for her aunt to dislike Roland, but people died in storms like this. Sending Roland away

endangered his life. Charmian might have a few bones to pick with her husband, but she certainly didn't wish him dead.

She straightened, aware that she was about to make a mistake but unable to think of any alternative. "He can sleep in my room."

Her aunt paled, even as Roland tilted a doubtful eyebrow at Charmian.

"That's not suitable, Charmian." Now there was no mistaking the fear at the root of Aunt Janet's prickliness.

"It couldn't be more suitable." Charmian had had a long, tiring day. She'd had a long, tiring three years. She wasn't up to dealing with whatever was peeving her aunt. "We're married, after all."

"I thought you might have forgotten," Roland said with a snideness foreign to the lighthearted man she'd married in such haste.

"How could I forget? If I survived the plague, I'd remember the experience," she sniped back. When they'd wed, that nastiness wasn't in her vocabulary either. Clearly they'd both changed for the worse since their last meeting.

The door behind them opened, and a shivering family of four tumbled into the hallway. Two men emerged from the taproom on the right. "We're still waiting on our dinner," one of them said rudely.

Aunt Janet looked hunted, but she didn't respond to her customers. Sign enough that she was rattled. She prided herself on being an excellent landlady. "The taproom will be good enough for you," she told Roland in the voice that always summoned immediate obedience.

Roland's eyebrows rose in understandable annoyance. Not much obedience to be seen. "You said there was no room."

John emerged to deal with the new arrivals. He shot his employer another questioning glance, when he saw that she was still busy with Roland and Charmian.

"I'll make room," Janet said grimly.

Charmian frowned. They couldn't stand here, airing their dirty linen in public. "No, I want him with me."

"I'm overcome, wife," Roland said. "You do care after all."

She bit back the urge to say, "I don't." It wouldn't help. Anyway, despite everything, it wasn't true. "We need to talk."

"It took three years to reach that conclusion?"

"I haven't noticed you beating down my door, begging for a reconciliation," she snapped back. He acted as if all their problems were her fault.

"That's all very well," the man outside the taproom said. "But where's our dinner?"

Aunt Janet sucked in an irritated breath and squared her shoulders. She set a smile on her face – not an entirely convincing effort – and faced the man. "I'll check with the kitchen, Mr. Smith. I'm sorry you've been kept waiting." She turned to Charmian. "Can you look after the new arrivals and get John to bring another beer barrel up from the cellar?"

"I'll show Roland to my room first," she said.

“I’d rather you looked after our guests.”

Charmian frowned. It sounded like Janet tried to keep her away from Roland. Was she worried that he was a danger to her? Her aunt had always been protective of her only niece. “Roland won’t hurt me.”

“You haven’t seen him for a long time.”

Nobody was more aware of that than Charmian. She’d counted every minute of every hour of every day.

“This isn’t getting my dinner,” Mr. Smith barked.

A woman emerged from the parlor at the end of the hallway, clutching a screaming baby and Milly appeared from downstairs carrying two canisters of hot water. This corridor was busier than the Strand on a Monday morning. It wasn’t the place for any sort of meaningful conversation.

“Come with me,” Charmian said to Roland over the din. “I’ll have to come down and help, but upstairs you’ll have a bed and some privacy at least.” She reached to pick up his valise.

“My wife doesn’t need to play the servant,” he growled. “I’m capable of carrying my own bag.”

She flushed a painful red. Because for most of the time that they’d been apart, she’d helped her aunt in the inn. Playing the servant, as Roland put it. He must wonder what madness had led him to marry someone little better than a scullery maid. It was a question she’d asked herself in the depths of many a night during the long, lonely hours when the answers that she came up with were entirely depressing.

“Then please follow me,” she said tight-lipped.

“Charmian, Sir Roland will be better off in the taproom,” her aunt said with barely hidden desperation.

Aunt Janet definitely wanted to keep them apart. Did she fear that this reunion would distress her niece? Of course it did, but it was past time that she and Roland discussed their future. That was never going to be easy.

“No, Aunt. He’s coming with me.” She collected a lamp from a side table and mounted the steps, not needing to check if Roland fell in behind her. From the moment they’d met, she’d felt a preternatural awareness of his presence. That, it seemed, hadn’t changed, despite their estrangement.

“She doesn’t like me,” Roland said.

“No, she doesn’t. For good reason.” Her aunt had been devastated when Charmian returned home, brokenhearted after her reckless marriage.

They continued up past two floors containing guest rooms to the attics. Only when Charmian pushed the door open did she wonder what Roland would make of her quarters. He was a rich man with a large manor house in Northamptonshire. Not that she’d ever seen Leeder Hall. They’d been on their honeymoon in York when they parted.

As he shut the door behind him, she set the lamp on a chest of drawers and folded her arms in a gesture that even she recognized as defensive. “It’s not what you’re used to.”

His lips quirked with the self-mockery that once she’d found so attractive. She still did, plague take him. “No gilded halls and silk upholstery?”

Charmian didn't smile back. She was far too conscious of the fact that she and Roland hadn't shared a closed space in years and this was a minuscule room containing a bed. "No."

He set his bag on the floor and took off his coat, hanging it on a hook in the wall. He was a tall, lean man, and his head came near to brushing the low ceiling in the center of the room. He wouldn't be able to stand straight at the sides, where the ceiling followed the roofline.

This was her first chance to look at him properly. He'd been a handsome young man. Dark-haired. Dark-eyed. With a flashing smile that stole her silly heart from the first.

Three years of maturity had only built on his attractions. The harder lines of his face lent him character as well as charm.

"It's fine, Charmian. More than fine. I appreciate your generosity in sharing it. I'll do better here than I would in a taproom crammed with snoring brutes." He didn't sound as confrontational as he had downstairs. Instead, he sounded as tired as she did. "Unless you snore these days?"

He was trying to put her at her ease. She should appreciate it. Meeting an estranged spouse was always going to be awkward.

"How would I know?" she asked sharply, before she kicked herself. Roland was quick enough to pick up on the implication that she'd slept alone since they'd separated, and she wasn't ready to feed his vanity by revealing that she'd stayed faithful to her vows. "Did you come looking for me?"

"No, our meeting is a pleasant surprise." She hid a wince at his sarcasm. "I had no idea you were in Yorkshire. I was on my way to visit a friend."

Of course he hadn't come looking for her. He never had. Although it perplexed her that he'd been so startled to see her. After all, he must know that she worked at the Spotted Fox. Unless he'd never even read her letters. Which was a very depressing thought indeed.

"I meant it when I said that we need to talk," she said in a rush. "But the inn's packed to the rafters and I have to help Aunt Janet."

"You need to go downstairs."

"Yes." She gestured around the small room with its sloping roof and plain deal furniture. "It's not fancy, but you should be warm and comfortable here. I'll send John up with hot water. He'll do the fire, too."

Roland was removing his gray waistcoat. Only his loose shirt and buff breeches remained. He crossed the room to dip his hand in the jug of water standing by the unlit hearth. "He's already got plenty to do. He doesn't need to be hauling buckets of water up three flights of stairs for me. This will do for a quick wash, then I'll come down and lend a hand."

"That's—"

"Beneath my dignity?"

The astringent edge to his humor was new. The young man she'd married had taken a sunny view of life. Too sunny, as it turned out, at least where his marriage was concerned.

She'd been about to say something along those lines, but another pair of helping hands would be useful, so she went for a less adversarial response. "That's very kind of you."

The look he sent her said that he doubted her sincerity.

“No, I mean it. We’re run off our feet. Thank you.” And she’d prefer to have him out of this room. Thinking of him waiting for her here, sleeping in her bed, handling her things, would torment her.

“It’s the least I can do.”

“You need to change into some dry clothes.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “That almost sounds wifely.”

His sarcastic tone made her blush with chagrin. As if all the fault between them lay with her. Her voice hardened. “Then freeze, if you prefer. It’s your business. Not mine.”

His laugh was short and unamused. “Now you sound like you mean it.” He began to untie his neckcloth.

Charmian took a shocked second to realize that he meant to undress fully in front of her. Her cheeks heated, and she jerked her attention toward the window. “I’ll...I’ll see you downstairs.”

That evoked a derisive grunt. “Do you want me to save your maidenly blushes?”

“I’m not a maiden.” She braced her shoulders and glared at him. “Thanks to you.”

“I remember, but I wondered if you did, you’ve come over so coy. Don’t you remember what a naked man looks like?”

He tugged off his damp shirt to reveal a chest that had filled out from the slender man

she recalled. Roland Destry had become a much more substantial presence since their last meeting. She suspected that these days he made an implacable enemy. The insight wasn't welcome.

"I've tried to forget," she said through stiff lips. Which was true, just as it was true that she'd failed miserably. Memories of Roland's naked body had pursued her since their parting. When his hands lowered to the fastenings on his breeches, she pushed past him and out of the room, even if that gave him victory in their little war. "I'll see you soon."

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It was nearly two by the time Charmian trudged upstairs. All night, new arrivals had stumbled in out of the weather. There wasn't a spare inch in the taproom and while she'd saved Roland from sleeping in the stables, that fate had befallen several of the lone male travelers who showed up after midnight. Their guests would be with them for the festival. Goodness knew what her aunt would feed them all.

She was wrung-out and fed up and filthy. The fact that it had been Christmas for two hours already didn't chime with her sour mood at all.

She'd been in a sour mood for three years. No amount of Christmas cheer would change that.

Charmian pushed open the door to her room, fortifying herself for another thorny encounter with Roland. Given that her estranged husband was her Christmas gift this year, she couldn't help feeling that her lack of cheer was justified.

He'd come up about half an hour ago, after proving surprisingly helpful. Helpful, cooperative, and diligent. When he'd offered assistance, she'd expected him to retreat, once he discovered how much hard physical work was involved. But he'd hauled hot water and trays and coal and firewood without complaint. His lordly manner had even come in handy for solving disputes between the guests, inevitable in such crowded quarters.

She ought to be grateful, but it rankled to discover that her neglectful husband was as charming as ever.

Once everyone at last was settled, she'd stayed downstairs mopping the kitchen, until

she'd realized that she was just being a coward and avoiding Roland.

Her stomach tied itself in nervous knots as she surveyed the small room, but she needn't have worried. The lamp was lit and the fire burned merrily in the grate, but no far-too-observant gentleman awaited her. Her troublesome spouse collapsed across her bed, lost in sleep.

Very carefully, Charmian edged inside the room. They had to reach some conclusion about where they took their unwise union. But it was a relief to put off the discussion until tomorrow. Or later today, given the time.

She couldn't help lingering to study Roland. He looked dead-tired. Hardly surprising. He'd been riding all day in worsening weather, then he'd been run off his feet this evening. But now that she had a chance to examine his features without fearing those perceptive dark eyes, she saw that the tiredness seemed more ingrained than the mere result of a difficult twenty-four hours.

Even in slumber, his lips settled into an unhappy expression and deep lines ran between mouth and nose. They hadn't been there when she'd met him. The man she'd married had been carefree, funny, one of life's victors. This man sleeping so soundly on top of her bed – he hadn't even turned down the covers – knew the acrid taste of disappointment and failure.

While she'd spent most of the last three years fuming at Roland, it was hard to maintain her ire when she looked down at him. She'd imagined that she alone had suffered with their separation. But seeing him now, she knew that wasn't true.

As she stepped back, he stirred. Through one burning moment, dazed dark eyes settled on her. For once, there was no trace of wariness. Instead, warmth flooded his expression and the smile that curved his lips swept her back to those weeks when she'd loved Roland Destry and he'd loved her in return. The happiest days of her life,

when she'd been sure nothing could go wrong, now that she'd married this marvelous man.

Despite everything, she smiled back, even as her poor misused heart swelled against her ribs.

Then she remembered what had happened since. He must have, too. His smile faltered and disappeared, and his gaze turned watchful again.

Charmian wasn't quite so quick to return to the cold, unloved present. For a long moment, she gazed at the man she'd loved so passionately. Until she realized how revealing her expression must be and she looked away. "Go back to sleep. You've gone like the clappers all evening."

He didn't comply. Instead, he sat up and rubbed his eyes with unconcealed weariness. The fire warmed the small room to comfort, so he'd taken off his coat and boots. He was a long way from undressed, but having her husband sitting on her bed in shirtsleeves, breeches, and bare feet summoned unwelcome ghosts of former intimacy.

"Do you do that every day? If so, I take my hat off to you. I feel like I've fought Waterloo single-handed. And I only did it for a couple of hours."

Because he sounded genuinely admiring, she bit back a gibe about being a skivvy who worked for her living. "Most of our custom is local. We get a few paying guests, but nothing like this."

"You must be exhausted."

She was. And like him, not just because of the current emergency. "I'll live."

One did, didn't one? Even when there didn't seem much point and every heartbeat just counted out loss.

"I'm glad to hear it." He gestured toward the washstand. "I brought you up some hot water."

"Thank you. That was thoughtful." He'd been thoughtful as a young man, too. Which was why his behavior since had caught her so off guard.

Because it hurt to look at Roland, she surveyed the room. He'd been tidy, too. That hadn't changed. His coat and boots were neatly stowed. "And you brought up firewood. Thank you."

He rose, towering against the ceiling, and moved to place another log on the fire and freshen it up with the poker. "A husband comes in useful."

Once they'd teased each other, but those happy days were long past. She didn't smile. "I wouldn't know about that."

His eyes narrowed on her, but he didn't give her an acerbic answer. He'd always been slow to anger, but as she'd discovered when he lost his temper, he held a grudge. "Do you want to do this now when we're both tired or shall we wait for the morning?"

She'd reached that point of tiredness where she felt too high-strung to sleep. Anyway, how could she sleep when she shared a room with her long-lost spouse for the first time in years? "It is morning."

"Yes, it's Christmas." She'd never heard him use that flat tone before. "Happy Christmas, Charmian."

Something about that joyless greeting made her want to cry. She'd lived with regret

for so long. But it stabbed particularly deep tonight when Roland shared her room.

They'd missed out on so much. They'd never got to do any of the normal things that married couples did. Celebrate Christmas or birthdays. Set up a home together. Have children. In spite of everything, when she discovered that their fortnight of vigorous bed sport in York hadn't resulted in a pregnancy, she'd cried her eyes out.

At least a baby would have provided a focus for all the love that Roland didn't want.

It was too much. She either subsided into a sobbing mess – when she'd already cried more than enough over her disastrous marriage – or she fought. She'd only survived because she'd been angry. God save her, she was angry now.

She turned on the only man she'd ever loved and spoke with a voice as biting as acid. "Stop acting as if you're the one who's hard done by. Why didn't you answer any of my letters? You must have known we had to work out some way to go on. We were married, for pity's sake. You couldn't just sweep that fact under the carpet and go on your merry way, as if nothing had ever happened."

He whitened so fast that the shadows under his eyes stood out stark and purple. "Letters? What letters?"

She didn't have to try to keep up her anger now. Her hands clenched at her sides. "Don't pretend. I wrote you so many letters. It must have been hundreds. And not one word in reply. Not a single word."

His eyes were searching. "Is that true, Charmian?"

At this rate, she was going to clout him with the hot water canister. "I don't lie. Or have you forgotten that since we parted? I'm not surprised that you have. After all, you conveniently forgot you had a wife at all."

One emphatic gesture sliced the air. “I never forgot. Nor did I ever stop writing to you.”

Roland had never been a liar either. Something told her that he wasn’t lying now, mad as his claim might sound. “I don’t understand.” She’d stepped closer to Roland when someone knocked on the door.

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Roland bit back the urge to curse fit to raise the rafters. He and Charmian were finally about to sort out the trouble between them – and it was clear that there was some mystery to solve as well. After their years of no communication, he wasn't willing to lose this chance. She might go silent on him again. That had driven him to the brink of insanity. "Don't answer it."

Charmian didn't look any happier about the interruption. "There might be a problem."

"There is a problem. The fact that you left me three years ago and I haven't seen you since," he snapped.

She flinched as there was another knock. "I'm sorry. I have to..."

When she crossed to open the door, she revealed her aunt in the clothes she'd worn all evening. "Charmian, you're awake?"

Charmian didn't bother confirming what was visibly true. "Do you need me downstairs, Aunt Janet?"

Roland strained to hear some disturbance, but the inn was quiet, apart from the rumble of various snores and the distant roar of the river.

"No. No. Can I come in?"

Roland ground his teeth. He'd long ago realized that Charmian's family had interfered in his marriage. He only had to recall the stony reception that her mother

had given him at Holden House when he'd turned up, determined to get his wife back.

Charmian cast him a nervous glance. "It's late. Can't it wait until the morning?"

Janet Barton bore a strong resemblance to her niece. The same red hair and fine features and green eyes. Those eyes were worried right now. "No. I need to talk to you."

"Should I send Roland downstairs?" Charmian stepped back to let the woman in.

"Yes. No."

Charmian looked bewildered. Roland couldn't blame her. He'd only met Janet tonight, but he'd seen enough to recognize a woman of strong character. Her current uncertainty didn't fit with that.

"Which is it, Aunt?"

"I think Sir Roland needs to hear what I have to say."

Roland stood. The room wasn't large. With three people inside, it was overcrowded. He noticed that the woman carried a leather satchel. His curiosity sparked. Janet looked as if she bore the weight of the world on her shoulders. She also looked unmistakably guilty. What the hell was going on?

Charmian now looked troubled rather than puzzled. "What's the matter?"

Janet looked guiltier than ever. "I..."

Instead of continuing, she slid the satchel from her shoulder and offered it to

Charmian. Whatever it held, there was a lot of it. The worn leather bulged.

Charmian took the bag, but didn't immediately open it. "What is it, Aunt Janet?"

Her aunt looked strained and pale. She licked her lips and wrung her hands. "I just ask you to remember the state you were in when you came back to us. Your mother and I believed we were doing the best thing. I'm still not convinced we were wrong. But..."

With shaking hands, Charmian opened the satchel. Roland felt sick, even before Charmian checked the contents. He had an idea of what was inside.

She shot her aunt a killing look. "L-letters?" she stammered. "I don't understand."

Janet squared her shoulders in a way Roland had seen her niece do a hundred times. "You should sit down."

Charmian's shock receded and she flushed with anger, as she looked again at the satchel then at her aunt. "I don't want to sit down. I want to know what all my letters to Roland and..." With a shaking hand, she sifted through the satchel's contents. "...and his letters to me are doing in your possession."

Her voice was like a whiplash, and it was clear that Janet felt the bite of the strike. Her eyes were glassy with tears, as she regarded her niece. Tears and love, much as Roland didn't want to recognize it. "We, your mother and I, were so worried about you when you came home from York and your disastrous mistake."

"Our marriage, you mean," Roland grated out.

Janet leveled tragic eyes on him, and he realized that she'd concentrated so hard on Charmian that he'd hardly registered in her awareness. "It was a mistake. Haven't

three years apart proven that?”

Charmian looked furious. Even worse, she looked devastated.

“Three years apart that you and my mother engineered.” Her voice was flat. He could tell that she struggled to control her tumultuous reaction.

Janet adopted a persecuted air. “We feared for your sanity when you came back to us. Don’t you remember? You couldn’t eat, you couldn’t sleep, you cried for a week, then you sank into a silence that was worse.”

Charmian directed a glower at him. She was a proud creature. She wouldn’t like him hearing this.

Roland didn’t like hearing it either. He hated to think of her suffering. All this time, he’d imagined her angry and disdainful. Her distress didn’t flatter his vanity. He’d always wanted the best for her. He still did.

“Perhaps because I missed the man I love,” she said, as if the words didn’t slice through him like a knife. Because he’d loved her, too, and losing her had come close to destroying him.

Roland didn’t place too much faith in her declaration of past love. He didn’t underestimate the changes that their separation had wrought.

Janet’s jaw took on a stubborn line familiar from his acquaintance with Charmian. “There’s no good to be had from mixing the classes. Someone always gets their heart broken, and it’s nearly always the woman. I told your father he was wrong when he sent you to that ridiculous school in Bath. He was asking for trouble. I was right, wasn’t I? The Bartons belong with the working people, however much money your father made. The gentry care for nobody but themselves.”

“You’ve always said that, Aunt, and I’ve never known why.”

Janet’s face tightened, as if she smelled something fetid. “Because it happened to me, just as it happened to you, my darling girl.”

Aghast, Charmian gaped at her aunt. “You married someone from the upper classes?”

Janet’s grunt expressed contempt. “There was no marriage, but I fell for the squire’s son’s pretty lies, convinced myself I was in love.” The bitterness in the word made even Roland wince. “Then he went off and married a rich baronet’s ugly daughter instead. I loathed that you went through the same thing.”

Roland made a dismissive gesture. “But Charmian didn’t go through the same thing. We married. We were set to be happy together.”

Janet looked at him as if she despised him. “Then why did she come home with her heart broken?”

“My heart was broken because I never saw Roland again,” Charmian said. “No wonder you and Mamma were in such a hurry to rush me off to Puddlebrook after that first week. Even if Roland came looking for me, he’d never find me here.”

“I did come looking for you. Over and over.” Memories of his grief and frustration threatened to choke him. “But your mother wouldn’t tell me where you’d gone. She said you didn’t want to see me again.”

The satchel dropped to the ground with a thud, as Charmian stared at him in astonishment. “You came looking for me?”

“Of course I did. You were – you are – my wife. I wanted you back.”

She looked unconvinced. “Even after that terrible fight?”

He shrugged, although he was as far from nonchalant about all this as it was possible to be. “We could have worked it out.” He cast a fulminating glare at Janet, and his voice hardened. “Given the chance. At least I thought so, although you clearly bore a grudge. But, Charmian, you know where I live. Why didn’t you come to Leeder Hall?”

Her hands twined at her waist in a gesture of distress that mirrored her aunt’s. “I wasn’t sure you wanted me to.”

Roland frowned. He’d already told her that he wanted her back. He wasn’t going to humble himself by admitting the devastation that she’d left behind after she abandoned him. Or not while her aunt remained to listen, anyway.

He was sure that his pride would be pulverized before they were done, whatever else happened. The question was whether he’d end up humiliated but still bereft, or whether this unplanned meeting offered a fresh beginning with his beautiful wife.

“Even so, we were married. That wasn’t going to disappear for the wishing.”

She flinched. “Did you want it to go away?”

“Did you?”

She made an apologetic gesture. “I thought of looking for you so often, but my mother and Aunt Janet said that if you loved me, you’d come for me. And you didn’t.”

“And you accepted what they said without question?”

Shame dulled her lovely green eyes. “I did for the first few months. Especially when you didn’t answer my letters. After a couple of days of feeling very sorry for myself, I wrote again and again, and there was only silence.”

Roland scowled at Janet. “And I wrote to you to receive the same silence in return.”

Janet looked even guiltier. “There was no future for the two of you. I’m still not sure there is.”

“But that’s not for you to say, is it?” Roland snapped.

Charmian regarded her aunt with confusion as well as anger. “You must have had a plan. What did you imagine was going to happen as the years went on? Neither Roland nor I could marry again while the other was alive.”

Janet looked hunted. “I don’t know, Charmian. Your mother and I were so worried about you. We just wanted to make sure you didn’t do anything stupid. We thought we’d wait until you were strong enough to make your own decisions. That’s why we kept the letters. Your mother sent on anything she received in Somerset, so if ever you were capable of making a choice, you could read them.”

“But how could I make my own decisions when you hid Roland’s letters and stole mine, and nobody told me that he’d come looking for me?”

“We acted in your best interests.” Janet’s hands twisted so tightly that her knuckles shone white. “We couldn’t bear seeing you so distraught.”

“And you’d already had your heart broken by a careless rake,” she said.

Janet had never married, Roland realized. Clearly that early experience had scarred her for life. It was a pity, but it wasn’t an excuse. “It wasn’t fair to tar me with the

same brush as your first love.”

Janet looked at him with genuine hatred. “Why not? It’s clear that you left my niece in pieces. You should never have met, let alone been foolish enough to marry. I told my brother that no matter how much money he made, he could never expect the gentry to treat him as anything except a trumped-up servant. The Bartons work for their living. You and your ilk sit around, drinking brandy and causing trouble. I wish to God her parents had never tried to raise Charmian as a lady. There’s no disgrace in earning your daily bread. There is disgrace in leading innocent girls on, then forsaking them.”

Roland was angry, an anger stemming from years of misery and loneliness and longing. It was difficult not to shout at the woman.

“You know nothing about me.” His voice might remain soft, but his tone was acid. “And Charmian isn’t you. What happened to you didn’t happen to Charmian.”

Janet looked stubborn. “I know what I saw.”

“I was going to come to Leeder Hall,” Charmain said, shooting a worried glance between her aunt and Roland. She must feel the rising temperature in the room.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Celia Hibberd wrote to say that you were taking the Grand Tour.”

He frowned. “Did she know we were married?”

“I didn’t tell her. I didn’t tell anyone except my family. It was just one of those gossipy letters between friends, you know. Did you tell her we eloped? If you did, she never mentioned it.”

“No, I didn’t tell anyone that I’d found a bride who left me within a fortnight,” he bit out.

“Your pride again.”

Charmian’s disdain stung. Yes, he’d been proud at the start. Too proud. But it hadn’t taken him long to realize that pride gave a man no comfort when his bed was empty and his heart ached for the woman he loved.

He wasn’t about to admit that. It seemed that his pride retained its sway. “Pride was all you left me with.”

She flinched at his answer. “If you were heading off on your travels, you weren’t suffering too badly.”

A protest died on his lips. After six months without a word from the bride he’d married with such joy, he’d been sick to the soul. England only held painful memories. He’d escaped to foreign climes, hoping that Italy or France might offer balm for his suffering. They didn’t.

His only chance to restore his spirits was seeing his wife again. Three wretched years hadn’t changed that. Even tonight when she was so prickly, she made him feel more alive than he had since she’d left.

“Once we heard that, we knew we’d made the right decision,” Janet said. “When you’re a rich aristocrat, it’s so easy to run away from your sorrows.”

He glowered at the woman. “Except I was only away a couple of months and I wrote over and over to Charmian the whole time. And I came to find her again, as soon as I returned to England.”

By then, he'd realized that there was no future for him without Charmian. Or no future that he wanted.

Janet went back to looking guilty, while Charmian stared at him out of devastated eyes. "Roland, I'm so sorry you went through all that. I promise I didn't know."

When he met that troubled green gaze, he asked the question that had tormented him every moment of every day since that stupid quarrel in York. "Would it have made any difference if you had?"

He'd waited so long for the answer. It seemed he had to wait some more.

Charmian shot a glare at her aunt. "Aunt Janet, you should leave us now."

"But—"

"You've already interfered enough, wouldn't you agree?" The question's sweetness was poisonous.

Janet whitened and looked stricken, but her tone indicated that she left under protest. "As you wish."

Charmian waited until the door closed behind her aunt before she faced Roland. "Well, husband, what happens now?"

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Charmian's mind reeled after the revelations of the last half hour. The churning mix of emotions in her stomach made her feel sick. Anger was there. And sorrow. And astonishment and guilt. Definitely guilt. Guilt as gnawing and powerful as a disease. She'd promised to trust Roland when she married him, yet she never had. And she'd been wrong.

Roland stepped forward to take her arm. "Sit down before you fall down."

It was the first time that he'd touched her since she'd left him. The contact slammed through her like gunfire, cut through her roiling confusion. She caught her breath, and her eyes fixed on his face. "How could they do that? It was so cruel."

Roland's lips flattened. "I suspect they thought they were protecting you."

"That's...that's a very generous view of their actions."

"Oh, I'm not feeling generous. I'm not feeling generous at all."

Charmian believed that. She heard the controlled rage in his voice.

Her gaze searched his features. She wanted to know what he was feeling. About their situation. About her. Did his anger extend to his wife? It had, she had no doubt. Had what they learned tonight changed that?

She'd been angry with him, too. Furious and resentful and hurt. Hurt to the depths of her soul. But now, now only one question mattered. "What do you want to do?"

A grim smile lengthened his lips. “Apart from push your aunt into a snowdrift?”

She shouldn’t laugh. Nothing about this debacle was funny. But a huff of bleak amusement escaped her nonetheless. “Can I help?”

His smile broadened, and for a charged moment, they stared at each other without animosity creating a wall between them. For a fleeting instant, she was the girl who had married him, who had adored the ground he walked on, who had been convinced that she’d found the other half of her soul.

Whether that was true or not, her soul had been in bleeding tatters since the day she’d left him.

The shutters fell back over his eyes. He couldn’t have said “keep out” any more clearly. “Sit down, Charmian.”

In a haze of misery, she let him settle her on the edge of the bed. His hand on her arm felt like the only warmth in the entire cosmos. As if to confirm that winter had conquered the world, a gust of wind rattled the windowpane.

When Roland released her, she wanted to howl like that icy wind. She’d been cold for three long years. She didn’t want to be cold any longer.

Instead of sitting beside her – it was humiliating quite how much she wanted him to stay – he crossed the small room and sank into the Windsor chair near the fire. Without speaking, he lowered his head and studied his linked hands. She stared at his untidy dark hair and wished with futile but piercing longing for a chance to do everything all over again and make different decisions this time.

Charmian prepared for him to rage at her, to blame her for the disaster that their marriage had become. Now that she knew the facts, she couldn’t help but think she

deserved it. Yes, her family had interfered. Unforgivably so. But she'd allowed it to happen. She'd gone along with her mother and her aunt's plans for her with no word of complaint. She just assumed that they were making the best decisions, when in fact their meddling had transformed a hiccup in a new marriage into three wretched years.

But when he spoke, his tone was gentle. He didn't look up at her which was something of a relief. Those dark eyes always saw too much.

"When I met you, I thought you were the most wonderful girl in the world."

She tried not to wince at his use of the word "were." What else did she expect? Whatever he'd done since they'd parted, and she couldn't imagine he'd slept alone every night like she had, it was clear that the estrangement with his wife had taken a toll on Roland, too. Contrary to her aunt's predictions.

"Everyone at Celia's house party admired you. All the girls wanted your attention. Heavens, even all the boys treated you like a hero. I couldn't believe you noticed me, let alone fell in love with me."

Slowly he raised his gaze, although she couldn't read his expression. Charmian supposed that he must be asking himself the same question. She was well aware that she looked a mess. She'd started work before dawn, and her dress was crumpled and stained. Not that it came anywhere near fashionable when it was clean. It certainly wasn't fit for a baronet's wife.

She looked, she was bitterly aware, like the peasant she was. And Roland would recognize that, which stung more than it should. After all, they had worse problems to sort out than her smarting vanity. But, oh, how she wished that he'd found her rosy-cheeked with health and wearing silks and satins and sipping tea in a salon. Instead of tired and worn and heartsick and wearing a frock marked by a day's physical labor.

Charmian struggled not to raise her hand to wipe her face or smooth her hair. She felt vulnerable enough already without revealing to Roland how her shabby appearance made her cringe.

So often, she'd fantasized about meeting him. The dreams that had hurt the most had him opening his arms and saying he'd always loved her and their separation was a tragic mistake. In other dreams, she was dressed to the nines and the toast of society, and he was crushed to realize what a glorious woman he'd lost.

None of her fantasies had involved her frazzled after a chaotic day and trying to make sense of a heinous betrayal from those closest to her.

His smile was reminiscent and surprisingly sweet. "How could I not fall in love with you? You were beautiful and vital and...real. All the other girls there were paper dolls in comparison."

The sadness in his answer undercut the compliments. The implication, Charmian was well aware, was that she was none of those things anymore. Too late to wish that she'd never left Roland at that inn in York. Too late to wish that she'd stayed and fought for her future. Too late – and pointless as well – to wish that she knew then what she knew now.

Charmian had met Sir Roland Destry at a house party at Lord Hibberd's Yorkshire estate. Her father had made a fortune as a brewer in Bristol and had ambitions to move up in the world. Ambitions that both his wife and his sister had derided, Charmian now recalled. After all, her aunt's favorite saying was "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Nonetheless Harry Barton had bought himself a pretty little manor near Wells and set up as a gentleman. He'd raised Charmian, his only child, to be a lady and sent her away to an expensive school near Bath, where the gentry educated their daughters.

There she and Lady Celia Hibberd, whose father had hosted that fateful house party three years ago, had become friends.

The rambling old house in the Dales had been crammed to the rafters with eligible young people. Charmian mightn't be as blue-blooded as her friends, but she was her late father's heiress. When it came to marriage prospects, all that gold made up for any shady origins in trade.

But the moment that she met Sir Roland Destry, those other gentlemen might as well not have existed. He was four years older than her nineteen and had the polish of Cambridge and a couple of London seasons. More than that, he'd been sweet and funny and kind. And handsome enough to make any girl dream of winning his heart.

For Charmian, the dream had become reality because he'd fallen in love with her just as swiftly as she fell in love with him.

She hadn't thought back to those first golden weeks with Roland in years. The pain of comparing that euphoric idyll with the loneliness of life since was too excruciating. But seeing him again – still handsome – brought back a tidal wave of memories.

Within a week they'd decided to marry. Within another week, they'd hatched a plan to elope together in secret after the house party finished.

“Why did we run off together? We could have called the banns.”

A bleak smile twisted his lips as he shifted in the wooden chair. “By heaven, you really have forgotten. I was mad for you, and we'd come very close to losing control a couple of times. Lord Hibberd wasn't much of a chaperone. You and I managed to spend a lot of time alone.”

She hadn't blushed in ages. Roland's reappearance in her life seemed to have her

blushing every five minutes. “The summerhouse.”

“And the boatshed, and the woods near the lake.”

“And that little room off the dining room.”

“You were lucky you came to the wedding a virgin.”

And, oh, that first night together after their dash to the Scottish border and their quick wedding, conducted by the village blacksmith at Gretna.

After all their naughty escapades on the Hibberd estate, Charmian hadn't been afraid, but she'd certainly been nervous. Roland had been careful and patient with her, and soon she'd been flying among the stars.

To her shame, when she left him, she hadn't just missed him, she'd missed having a man in her bed. Roland had awoken a volcanic passion inside her, shown her a dazzling new world of sensual pleasure. Then that glorious discovery was snatched away from her with agonizing abruptness.

Self-disgust flattened her lips. “I couldn't keep my hands off you.”

“That's nothing to be ashamed of. I couldn't get enough of you either, if you recall.”

She could most definitely recall. She'd recalled for three desolate, solitary years.

“We were in love,” he said. More of that heartbreaking past tense.

She stood and sent him a direct look. “Then we had that terrible fight.”

His expression was stark. “And you went away.”

She made an apologetic gesture. “The things we said...”

“We could have come through.”

“If I’d stayed and hadn’t been such a coward,” she said in a dull voice. “I ran for home faster than a rabbit runs for its burrow.”

He didn’t smile. “I should have followed straightaway. I was a fool, too bullheaded to know what I was losing.”

“I thought you would come after me,” she mumbled, looking down at her hands performing a distressed dance at her waist.

She couldn’t endure looking at Roland. She’d spent all this time convinced that he hadn’t suffered. Sometimes she’d been convinced that he didn’t spare her a thought. How else to explain the long silence? In her imagination, he transformed into an unfeeling monster who had forgotten their marriage as easily as he’d forget a rainy day a year ago.

But much as she’d liked believing that she was in the right during their long separation, it was impossible when she looked into his face and read the marks of weariness and remorse and misery. The same things that she saw in her own eyes when she could bear to look in a mirror.

“I did,” he said grimly.

Yes, he had, after her mother sent her away to work at the Spotted Fox. “I was in such a taking, my mother said I needed something to keep me busy. She was sick of me staring out the window all day or curling up on my bed and crying.”

“Charmian...”

Hearing about her grief upset him. He turned waxen, and those deep lines between his nose and mouth sharpened, making him look suddenly older.

She made a helpless gesture, wondering where her pride had gone, but not missing it. “I couldn’t eat and I couldn’t sleep. I was in tatters after we parted. My mother was genuinely afraid that I might do something desperate.”

“I’m sorry.” She couldn’t doubt that he meant it.

“So am I. Especially when—”

“The cause of the argument was so petty.”

She straightened and sent him a direct look. “No, it touched on something important, something we needed to sort out.”

“You wanted to travel south to see your family before we settled at Leeder Hall. I could have agreed.”

She shook her head, as her hands twined together. “Yes, you could. But the fight was really about how fully I was committed to you.”

“It seemed to me—”

“That I put my loyalty to my family ahead of my loyalty to you.”

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. The familiar gesture made her heart squeeze in painful longing. “I should have been kinder. You were very young and an only child.”

He was trying to ease the load of blame on her, when he really shouldn’t. Both she

and Roland had been wronged. She hadn't forgotten that. She never would. But she was sickly aware that the sin lay heaviest on her, not on her intrusive family. "We were both young, but that was no excuse. You told me I needed to grow up and decide I was a wife before I was a daughter."

He winced. "I told you a lot of things that I've had time to repent since."

"You were right. I'd pledged myself to you and our marriage. That should have come first. I wanted to be Lady Destry, but I also wanted to be pampered, spoiled Charmian Barton. Our separation is mostly my fault."

He looked devastated. "You're being too harsh with yourself. We could have sorted things out."

"If I hadn't run home to Mamma, like the stupid little girl I remained at heart. I can't blame you for hating me."

In a fit of temper, she'd hired a chaise from the inn at York and paid a maid to accompany her for the sake of appearances. She'd rushed back to Somerset and a useless attempt to retreat to her childhood. She'd cried the whole way.

"I don't hate you," he said in a dull voice.

"You should." She felt so weighted with guilt, she feared that she was likely to sink through the floor.

"No, I shouldn't. I should have put my pride aside and begged you to stay."

"But you did chase after me."

A bitter smile twisted his lips. "I was so desperate for a kind word from you. I was

ready to crawl over broken glass for your forgiveness. But your mother treated me with such coldness.”

“I should have realized that there was something in the wind. She was utterly appalled that I’d fallen into a seducer’s clutches. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so angry. It took me forever to convince her that we really were married. Then she was sure that I’d fallen prey to a ruthless fortune hunter. She was so relieved when there was no baby.”

Sorrow weighted his gaze. “I’d hoped there might be. I thought if you carried my child, you might come back to me.”

“You have no idea how I grieved when I discovered that I wasn’t pregnant. It was as if I’d lost all my links to you.”

His smile didn’t reach his eyes, but at least it was a smile. “Don’t be a goose, Charmian. Didn’t you listen to the words of the marriage ceremony? We’re united until death do us part. Even if I never saw you again, you’d be my wife.”

The warmth of his voice when he called her a goose swept her straight back to their first meetings. He’d been the kind of lover who teased the object of his affections with silly nicknames and absurdly extravagant compliments. Every time that he said something ridiculous, she’d melted. She still did. A shaft of agonizing regret sliced through her as she realized anew what she’d tossed away.

“You could have involved the law. You had a right to get me back. You had a right to claim my fortune.”

He shook his ruffled dark head and gripped the arms of the chair. “I couldn’t do that without the risk of alienating you forever. How would you have felt if I’d hauled your mother up in front of the magistrates? I might be a fool, but I’m not such a fool as

that. I wanted the girl who loved me to come back. I wanted us to build on the joy that we'd already found."

More past tense. How she detested it. "So you were content to let things drift?"

Her dismissive tone made anger flare in his eyes. "I kept writing."

She gestured toward the stuffed satchel. "So did I. Little good it did me."

"When I didn't receive a reply, I thought you wanted nothing to do with me."

"And I thought you felt the same." The enormity of her family's wrongs against her staggered her. She had an inkling that when she came to terms with what her mother and aunt had done, she'd be even more livid than she was now. "We should be grateful that chance brought us together to sort things out."

His hands opened and closed on his thighs. "I didn't expect to find my wife working as a skivvy in an obscure country inn."

"You must have been appalled," she said, starting to bristle. "I was never good enough for the noble Sir Roland Destry."

A decisive wave of his hand swept aside her remark. "Stop it, Charmian. You were perfect. Then and now. Seeing you so strong and capable makes me want to cheer – and weep like a lost child, because you always had that strength inside you, but it took unhappiness to bring it out. I'd give my right arm to have seen you come into your own."

She missed most of his explanation. Her longing heart had snagged on one word. Her hands drifted to her sides and she stared at him, as she struggled not to make too much of what he said.

Yet her voice cracked as she spoke. “Perfect, Roland?”

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Roland stared at this beautiful, spirited woman he'd married in such haste and wondered how she could even ask the question.

"Yes, perfect," he said, standing.

He wondered if he set himself up as a target. Pride alone had kept him going since she'd left. Although pride, he'd discovered, couldn't compare as a companion to the woman he'd wed. If she shot him down, he'd crash so hard that he feared he'd never rise again. But if making himself vulnerable meant that Charmian came back, he'd take the risk any day.

"I've made you so miserable." She went back to wringing her hands. "You should hate me."

A wry smile twisted his lips. He felt like he'd smiled more in this last hour than he had in the previous three years. "I could never hate you."

She looked unconvinced. "You must have cursed me."

One hand cut through the air. "I did that, all right. You hurt me."

He waited for her to defend herself, but instead her lips turned down. "I did. And I'm so sorry. I'll sound like a witch, but I wanted you to suffer without me. Now I've seen you, I can't forgive myself for what I did."

He didn't even need to consider his reply. "I forgive you."

“That’s very magnanimous.”

“It’s the only way forward. That is...” He swallowed to shift the great lump of trepidation that jammed his throat. “That is if you want to go forward with me.”

She regarded him with an uncertainty that reminded him of the untried girl he’d married. Painful emotion cramped his heart. He’d missed that girl like the devil. He could already tell that the woman Charmian had become could do even more damage, if she decided she wanted nothing to do with him.

“I’m your wife.” She spoke in a hesitant voice, as if unsure of the facts.

He smiled again. “Yes, you are, but we could arrange a formal separation if that’s what you want.”

She looked unimpressed. “As a follow-up to our informal separation?”

He shrugged, although he didn’t feel casual about any of this. “If you like.”

That troubled green gaze remained fixed on his face. “Is that what you want, Roland?”

He reached out to grab the plain mantelpiece and summoned all his courage to answer. If she turned him away now, she’d annihilate him. “I want you to be happy, Charmian.”

It was true, as far as it went. But of course, he wanted so much more than that.

Her intense expression didn’t ease. She didn’t answer the question but continued with one of her own. “Do you want us to separate?”

“We’ve been separated for three bloody years,” he said with a hint of bitterness.

“Yes. But do you want to make that official?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want, Roland?”

He swallowed again. Speaking was so damned difficult. More difficult at this moment, when he had to lay his cards on the table and sacrifice all the protection of his pride.

“I want you back. I’ve always wanted you back. Never, not even one day during all these endless months and years, have I woken without wishing you were in my arms again.” He waved toward the satchel. “If you doubt me, there’s proof. I don’t know what you wrote in those letters, but mine are nothing but a plea for you to see me, to speak to me, to live with me again.”

She was so white that her rich red hair formed a shocking contrast to her translucent skin. “Some of mine are pleas. Some of mine are angry. I was hurt, too. You were always a better person than I was.”

“If you thought I’d made no effort to get you back, you were entitled to hate me.”

She bit her lip and sent him a questioning look. “I never hated you either. But I feared that you’d stopped loving me.”

“Never,” he vowed, before he could remind himself that it might be more tactical to play those cards a little closer to his chest.

A light sparked in her eyes, a light that he’d last seen the morning she left him. The

morning before they had that horrible, destructive argument. Roland's aching heart surged, as he waited for Charmian to say that she loved him. Then dipped again when she subjected him to a lingering scrutiny. "There was a reason why I got so upset when I thought you didn't love me anymore."

"Because we were tied together for life?"

She shook her head and stepped closer. "No, because I never stopped loving you. The idea that you'd forgotten me broke my heart."

There had been too much misery for him to greet her declaration with unconditional happiness, but something black and sour and festering in the depths of his soul faded away. He felt lighter, as if someone had lifted a heavy stone that had been crushing him into oblivion.

Roland couldn't resist touching her, although he was aware that this reconciliation was too new to support the weight of desire. He felt like he coaxed a wild bird to accept food from his hand. One false move and she'd flutter away up to the sky and he'd never find her again.

He held his hands out, not surprised to notice that they shook. The second it took her to reach out for him seemed to last an eon. Then for the first time since she'd turned his life to endless frost, Charmian touched him of her own free will.

As her fingers curled around his, her breath caught. Her touch felt frantic, as if she, too, feared that this reconciliation might shatter if mishandled.

He stared into her eyes, seeking the truth of her avowal. She'd once regarded him like a hero who could do no wrong. He couldn't expect that again. He didn't even want that. If they'd been a little older and wiser when they'd married, they'd have known enough to recognize that they were meant for each other, whatever temporary friction

might trouble their match.

Although he'd always known that she was the only woman for him, hadn't he? He just hadn't known enough to plead with her to stay before she left him.

"Roland," she said in a thick voice. "If you don't kiss me in the next minute, I might just explode."

His grip on her hands tightened, as he stared at her in shock. The heart that he'd feared dead expanded with a piercing emotion that could only be hope. When hope had been a stranger for so long. "Kiss you?"

Her smile was shaky, and her eyes shone with longing. "Don't you want to?"

"Hell, Charmian, I've waited to kiss you ever since you went away."

Tears choked her laugh. "Then I don't think you should wait another second."

"My darling..." He released her hands and caught her face, tilting her up toward him.

He read a similar fragile hope in her eyes. Her lips parted as she snatched a breath. He'd thought that if ever he had the chance to touch her again, he'd fall on her like a ravenous lion. But so much depended on this tremulous moment that he needed to be careful. He'd frightened her away once. He couldn't bear the thought of frightening her away again.

Because that was the problem with hope. It could lift a man up so high that if he fell, the drop was likely to prove fatal.

So he didn't grab her up against him in a fury of possession. His head started a slow descent toward hers. He paused a breath away from touching her lips with his.

She closed her eyes and strained upward. “Please,” she whispered. “Don’t make me wait. I’ve waited so long already.”

He couldn’t say who closed the final distance. When their lips met, Roland felt the contact like the blow of an ax. Heat shuddered through him, and a roaring cascade of sensory impressions. He thought that he’d remembered every detail of their time together. Reliving each second over and over had been both pleasure and torture. But this was like kissing his wife for the first time.

Her scent was rich in his nostrils. Her skin was warm and smooth beneath his palms. For a breathless moment, he sipped delight from her lips. She made an incoherent sound. Protest? Encouragement? Surrender? Perhaps all three at once.

She stretched up to deepen the contact and sucked his lower lip into her mouth. Desire shuddered through him as he opened his mouth over hers. She let him in and for the first time in years, he tasted the sweetness that he remembered. Except that Charmian seemed in many ways a stranger. A beguiling stranger. A gift from a capricious fate.

His hands firmed on her cheeks, as he pulled back to tease her with a rain of quick kisses. Tender kisses that verged on innocent. With a wordless complaint, she nipped at his lips in a silent plea for more.

He kissed her nose and her forehead and her closed eyes and the sweet space between her eyebrows. Another of those incendiary little murmurs brought him back to her lips. This time, he plundered their wonders. Using teeth and tongue, until her tongue ventured out to meet his. She shifted closer and threaded her arms around his waist. He angled her head and kissed her fully, glorying in the hot honey taste of her mouth.

When he’d first kissed her, she seemed uncertain, as if she hadn’t kissed a man in a long time. She’d already admitted that she’d taken no other lover, but even if she

hadn't told him, her kiss revealed that she'd waited for him.

The knowledge was glorious. He'd tormented himself so often, imagining other men touching her, kissing her, possessing that lissom body. But no longer. When they met, he'd trusted her immediately. This was an honest woman. Now, when he didn't deserve such good fortune, he realized that she'd stayed true.

He already loved her so much, he was near sick with it. Discovering that she'd kept faith wiped away an ocean of rancid misery seething inside him.

That first hesitancy melted under the blazing kiss. She met him with rising passion, digging her fingers into his waist. He drowned in the joy of having her in his arms once again. For the first time since she left, Roland felt whole.

His hands slid back to tangle in her mass of russet hair. That vivid shade had haunted his dreams. It was unusual, but not unique, so every time he caught a glimpse of a woman with deep red hair, his heart leaped with the hope that it was Charmian.

But it never was, and he was left more disconsolate than ever. Worse because of the fleeting surge of hope. Since he'd lost her, he'd learned to despise hope and its lying promises. But it was impossible not to hope when the wife he loved was kissing him as if the world would end if she stopped.

He wanted to kiss her all night. Hell, he wanted to kiss her to the crack of doomsday. But sensual heat burgeoned between them and tenderness had long ago flared into desire.

While he wanted her like blazes, he didn't mean to rush her. So he pulled back and returned to little kisses. The way that he'd started what seemed like a century ago.

They were both panting when they finally drew apart. She stared up at him out of

dark, yearning eyes. Her hands kneaded his waist. Her lips were red and swollen, and his hands had made a tangle of her severe hairstyle.

“That was...” she began, lifting a hand to those tempting lips.

“A beginning?” With the greatest difficulty, he made himself release her and he stepped back. The powerful urge gripped him to carry her across to that chaste single bed and bury himself inside her, to take the kiss to its ordained end. After losing her for so long, his natural impulse was to snatch and seize and capture. Make sure that she never went away again.

But all this time without her had taught him caution. He sought a lifetime with this woman, not just a quick tumble to satisfy years of frustration. Still, it nearly killed him to take another step away.

“It’s late.” His voice was gruff with reaction to that wild kiss and the effort it took to behave like a civilized man. “I’ll go down to the kitchens and fetch you some more hot water. The water I brought up earlier will be cold now.”

He shouldn’t be pleased to see disappointment in her eyes. She’d gone up like a column of flame in his arms. The passion between them hadn’t faded, he was grateful to note. Grateful and relieved.

But passion had never been their problem. From the moment that they met, they’d been voracious for each other. Throughout their hectic courtship, she’d brimmed with innocent ardor. His memories of their brief weeks together were tinged scarlet with the heat that they’d generated when they finally shared a bed.

“You don’t have to. I can go. Or wash in cold water.”

He smiled at her. “Let me look after you, Charmian. You’ll sleep better after a decent

wash.”

Although she still looked puzzled, she nodded. “Then thank you.”

He went to the door and opened it, desperate to get out before he did something drastic to scare her away again. A Christmas miracle on a stormy night had brought them together. He couldn’t allow himself to shatter the frail bond of trust forming between them.

Losing Charmian once had nearly killed him. The prospect of losing her twice was too agonizing to contemplate.

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Charmian lay in her narrow bed and stared into the darkness. The rain continued, slamming against the window and pounding against the tiled roof. But that wasn't what kept her awake.

Since the weather turned bad this morning, she'd been rushed off her feet. She should have fallen into bed and gone straight to sleep. But here she lay open-eyed, feeling like the storm outside raged inside her as well.

The reason for that wasn't hard to fathom. The reason lay on the floor in front of the fire wrapped in a blanket.

When her mother and aunt had cooked up the plan to get her away from home, they'd hoped to rescue her from the despair where she'd languished since leaving Roland. Or so they said. At the time, she should have guessed that some plot was afoot, but she'd been so heartsore that she hadn't thought to question their decision to send her to help Aunt Janet.

They'd schemed to keep her out of a ruthless seducer's clutches. Tonight the ruthless seducer lay silent on the far side of the room, with no designs on his wife's body, damn it.

She hadn't shared a room with a man since she'd run away from Roland. That was enough to make her restless. That, and those spectacular kisses that made her feel alive for the first time since they parted.

He'd kissed her as if he'd starved for her, then stepped away and acted like her brother. The passionate lover had given her grounds for optimism. The polite stranger

made her feel like howling in denial.

Not to mention that those kisses had woken parts of her she'd done her best to ignore since coming to the Spotted Fox. There was a pulsing weight in the pit of her stomach and her blood raced with carnal desire.

Carnal desire that clearly she experienced alone.

Because instead of ripping her clothes off and uniting his body with hers, Roland had been kind and contained and considerate. He'd brought her hot water. He'd stepped outside while she washed and changed into her sensible white flannel nightdress. He'd hardly looked at her when he came back in to wish her good night and stretch out on the rag rug in front of the fire.

Charmian shifted again. She'd been doing a lot of that. She couldn't seem to find a comfortable spot. Mad to say that the bed seemed too big, when it was small even for one person. But that was how it felt.

Roland hadn't moved since lying down. He'd looked exhausted when he arrived at the inn. Then Janet had put him to work running up and down stairs and fetching and carrying. Charmian should be all wifely and be glad that he got some rest.

She was feeling wifely, but not about letting her husband sleep off his weariness. He'd said that he wanted her back. He'd said that he loved her. For pity's sake, he'd kissed her into next Wednesday.

How dare he leave her lonely, while he slumbered in front of the fire?

She shifted again and told herself that she had no right to be annoyed. Instead, she should be grateful and hopeful and happy. She and Roland had a chance to make up for the past's mistakes. She'd prayed for that to happen since she'd left him.

And it was Christmas Day. Surely that alone was cause for joy. A time for fresh starts and new plans.

As she lay yearning and stirred up and confused, Charmian didn't feel joyful. She felt frustrated.

Sexual frustration was a familiar companion. But it verged on unbearable when the object of her interest was mere feet away, rather than kicking up his heels in the fleshpots.

She sighed and turned onto her side to face the wall. Perhaps if she couldn't see him, she could pretend that her long-lost spouse wasn't within reach. She tucked one hand under her cheek and blinked away stinging moisture. For pity's sake, she'd already cried enough tears to fill an ocean. There shouldn't be a drop of saltwater left inside her.

"Are you all right, Charmian?"

"Did I wake you?" She didn't want to lie to him, but nor did she want to answer.

"I haven't been asleep."

He'd been so quiet, that surprised her. "I haven't either. You don't have to stay on the floor. There's the chair, or if we squeeze in, we could share the bed."

She thought that she heard a faint groan. Or perhaps a log shifted in the fireplace. "It's a very narrow bed."

She continued to stare at the wall. The view was misty. "Big enough for one."

"I'm better where I am," he said with a hint of grimness that she didn't understand.

“Are you crying?”

“No.” The choked denial proved her falsehood.

“I thought I heard you.”

“I just caught my breath.”

He wasn’t persuaded. She didn’t blame him. “I apologise for upsetting you.”

“It’s been...an overwhelming day.” Now you don’t want me, and I don’t know why.

“Yes, it has. I’m not sorry, though.”

“That you made me cry?”

He exhaled audibly. “No, of course not. I’m not sorry that we met and we’ve had the chance to talk.”

Talk. Yes, they’d done that. And needed to do more. But talk wasn’t what she wanted. At this moment, she wanted his arms around her. She wanted his spicy masculine scent in her nostrils and his warmth to banish the chill inside her. She wanted the hard thrust of his body and that moment of perfect intimacy when he filled the aching emptiness at her core.

Then she wanted the inexorable climb to ecstasy, the blast of sensual lightning at the peak, and the gentle drift back to earth afterward.

She wanted him to treat her the way that a man treated a woman he wanted.

It had been three long years since Roland had used her body. But she’d forgotten

nothing. She was in a fever for him. Why on earth was he so far away?

“Charmian?” he asked when she didn’t reply. “Aren’t you glad we’ve reconciled?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “We couldn’t have gone on as we were. We had to make some decisions.”

“Yes.”

She wondered if she was wrong to hear a hint of disappointment in the single word.

“Some certainty about our future will be helpful.” She struggled to sound pragmatic.

“Yes.”

A silence fell. She wondered if he’d gone to sleep, but some vibration in the air told her that he was as alert to her as she was to him. She swallowed another sob, although why she bothered, she couldn’t say. Roland knew she was upset.

She heard him roll over. This small room offered a kind of intimacy, even if not the intimacy that she wanted. “If you’re happy we’re together again, why are you crying?”

What could she say to that? She summoned all her courage and decided to be honest. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

Wondering why he was so slow to understand, she licked dry lips. “I missed...what we did in bed.”

She heard him move again. When she turned, she saw him sit up. Against the firelight, he was a black shape, but she caught the glitter of his eyes.

“Are you asking me to join you, Charmian?” His tone was neutral, but in the flickering glow, the line of his head and shoulders was stiff with tension.

She sucked in a shaky breath, and all her secret places softened at the prospect of Roland joining his body with hers. “You’re my husband.”

He sighed. “I am. But I don’t want to take anything for granted. This is too important.”

“Would you...would you like to sleep with me?”

During their few euphoric weeks together, she’d never had to ask. One come-hither look was all it took to lure him into bed sport. It seemed that she needed to work a little harder these days.

“I want what you want.”

A hiss of frustration escaped her. “That’s no answer.”

“If I come to you now, I want you to be very sure that you’re coming back to me.” His tone became resolute. “I couldn’t bear losing you twice. Not after you take me to heaven again.”

That dratted annoying lump in her throat was back. She swallowed to shift it, but her voice emerged as a croak. “Is that how it felt to you back then?”

“You know it did.”

She swallowed once more. It didn't help. "I've had long enough to question whether I knew anything at all when we were together."

His hiss expressed contempt for that statement. "Come on, Charmian. Whatever else went wrong between us, we were always a perfect match in bed."

"Then why are you all the way over there?" Her voice was scratchy.

He didn't immediately respond. Her heart shriveled into a tiny, aching lump. He'd kissed her as if he wanted her, but she was out of practice with a husband. Perhaps she'd misunderstood.

Roland sounded on edge when he answered. "Because I don't want to frighten you away with how much I want you."

The tightness in her chest eased. She hadn't mistaken his desire. Something told her that they needed to come together as lovers before they could heal the breach between them. Anyway, she was desperate for him. Just the sight of him made her feel like she was a woman again, after three vile years of feeling like a ghost haunting her own life. His admission that he wanted her in return set the wanton blood rushing through her veins.

"I'm not frightened anymore." Which wasn't entirely true. Roland wasn't the only one who feared that this chance reconciliation mightn't last.

He made a convulsive movement in her direction before he pulled back to resume that constant watchfulness. She felt like he counted her every breath. "Convince me."

Charmian supposed that she owed him that. After all, she was the one who had left him in York. "I...I kissed you."

“Yes, you did.”

“I’ve told you I love you.”

“Yes.” A single word, but it didn’t sound quite so uncompromising.

“You say you still love me.”

“You don’t seem sure.”

She wasn’t. Not to the depths of her soul. “It’s been a long time, Roland.”

“It has.”

She sat up and put her feet on the floor, wishing she hadn’t extinguished the lamp. If he wanted her to strip her soul bare, it would be easier if she could gauge his expression.

Ever since she’d left him, she’d tormented herself. A vivid imagination could be a curse. She curled her fingers into the mattress underneath her and steeled herself to ask a question that she wasn’t sure she had the right to pose.

Her voice shook with nerves. “Were there...were there a lot?”

Although she couldn’t see his face, she knew his brows drew together in a frown. “A lot of what?”

Roland, don’t lie to me. Not now. Not when it’s so important. If we can’t start out with honesty, what use is this new beginning?

“A lot of women.”

“Charmian...”

One unsteady hand made a sweeping gesture. “You don’t have to tell me about them. But it’s driven me nearly mad, thinking of you with other lovers. I need to know.”

“You’re my wife.”

She made a contemptuous sound. “Yes, I am, and you already know you’re the only man who’s shared my bed. I realize that it’s different for men.”

“Why is it different for men?”

The edge in his voice made her flinch. “Well, different for you. I’ve been stuck in the backwaters of Yorkshire. You’ve been out in the wider world. You can’t tell me you had no chance to bed other women. For pity’s sake, you traveled around Europe’s pleasure spots. Anyway, I know you, Roland. I know how...insatiable you are. Celibacy would drive you out of your mind.”

“So you’ve tortured yourself this whole time.”

She’d gone past the point where she had any hope of preserving her pride. “Of course I have.”

“I didn’t think you’d care.”

“Because I didn’t answer your letters.”

“Or come back to me.”

“You were wrong.”

“Yes, I was wrong. But I only discovered that tonight.”

She raised her chin and told herself that she could endure this. If she’d lived through his absence, she could live through learning that he’d been unfaithful. “The uncertainty is the worst. Tell me. I’ll forgive you, then we can move on.”

“So what would be acceptable when it comes to adultery? One lover? Three? Twenty? A hundred?” His question held a sardonic tone that she didn’t understand. Shouldn’t he be grateful? Hadn’t she said that she’d overlook his sins? And she’d almost meant it, by God.

“I wouldn’t like it if it was one.” Because that indicated a stronger connection than the urge to relieve a physical itch. No, she wouldn’t like that at all.

“It wasn’t one.”

She sucked in a relieved breath. Although she shouldn’t find too much comfort in the admission. She didn’t want him making an emotional link with some faceless woman, but nor did she want him seducing any female who took his fancy.

Face it, Charmian, you want him to be all yours. Despite your long estrangement and his masculine needs. Despite you leaving him.

It wasn’t a reasonable attitude, but then, love wasn’t always reasonable.

“How many, then? More than ten?”

“No.”

So somewhere between one and ten. How many could she survive hearing about? Two? Seven? “Stop tormenting me. How many, Roland?”

He shifted as if he'd like to avoid the question. She supposed that it couldn't be easy to own up to breaking his marriage vows. "You're so sure I did the wrong thing."

Her lips tightened. "Did you?"

Charmian heard him draw a breath, and she braced for the confession. She could bear it. She could. If she could bear living without him for so long, she could bear knowing that other women had enjoyed that lean, elegant body.

"No, I damn well didn't." As he rose to his feet, she felt his glare.

"But—"

"There wasn't one. There weren't five. There weren't a thousand. There was only one woman for me and I'd married her, whatever woe that might have brought me."

His temper slid off her like water slid off the pitched slate roof above them. Wide-eyed, Charmian stared at him, while the glorious news slowly made itself real. He hadn't betrayed her. There had been no other women. She knew immediately that he spoke the truth. His impatience was more convincing than any attempt to cajole her into believing him.

"But...but you must have wanted..."

He raked one hand through his already messy hair. "Wanted a woman. No, I didn't want a woman. I wanted you. I'd made promises to you."

"But I'd left you."

He gave a low growl. "Yes, you had, But I hadn't given up all hope of you coming back. I hadn't given up all hope of us making a life together one day. I never stopped

loving you. Even though I felt like the world's greatest fool when I told myself that somewhere, somehow you'd remember that you loved me, too."

Charmian was ecstatic to know that so much of what she'd feared had lived only in her mind. So it made no sense that the tears that had come and gone all night now poured down her face. With clumsy hands, she dashed at her wet cheeks.

"I remembered," she said in a thick voice. "I hoped we'd have another chance, too."

He sounded more composed when he spoke, although deep emotion still roughened his musical baritone. "How could I come back to you and beg you to live with me again if I'd betrayed you with other women?"

"I'm glad you didn't," she said, knowing the words were inadequate.

He must have felt the same because his "good" was a little grumpy.

She gave a muffled giggle, even if one clogged with tears. "All right, I'm in alt. I'm elated. I couldn't be happier to know you were faithful to me." She stood. "It's just that you were so...energetic during our honeymoon."

"Meaning I'd run off like a wild beast and leap on the first available woman? You do me an injustice, Charmian. By heaven you do."

"I know. And I'm sorry." She swallowed, but the tears didn't stop. "I'm sorry for everything. Please don't be angry."

"I'm not angry with you, now I know the truth about what kept us apart. I'm just heartsick at the thought of all we've missed, my darling."

The my darling was the clincher. "Then let's move on together now and not miss any

more, Roland.”

With shaking hands, she caught her loose nightdress and tugged it over her head. She heard the hitch in his breath, as she dropped the voluminous garment to the floor. Beneath her night rail, she was naked.

Roland made an unsteady movement in her direction then stopped. “Swear to me that you’ll never go away again. I’ve barely survived your absence. You’ll destroy me if you leave me now.”

She managed another sketchy smile and stepped out of his shadow so that the firelight revealed her body. “I’ll never leave you while I live, Roland. I give you my solemn oath.”

That glittering black gaze remained fixed on her. He breathed in audible gusts. She couldn’t doubt that her nakedness aroused him.

Charmian ought to feel shy, especially when unhappiness and hard work meant that she was no longer the voluptuous armful Roland had wed. But strange to say, she didn’t feel at all self-conscious.

It was time to offer herself to her husband without subterfuge. He said that he loved her, and that he’d always loved her. She believed him. The man who had stayed true to her wouldn’t care if there were a few more angles on the woman she’d become.

She was close enough now to read what lay in his eyes. Love. Familiar from so long ago, but never forgotten. A love that she now knew had never wavered. Desire. And a trace of uncertainty, as if he had difficulty believing that after all their trials, they might find mutual understanding at last.

He reached toward her breasts but didn’t yet touch her. “What’s that?” he asked

hoarsely.

She glanced down to see him pointing at the chain that she wore around her neck. She'd forgotten it was there. It was always hidden under her clothes. "You know what that is."

"Your wedding ring? You wear it?"

"Every day." Presenting herself as Janet Barton's unmarried niece had seemed easier than trying to explain why she wore a wedding ring, yet had no husband.

"Charmian..."

When she met his gaze, her heart cramped at the fierce emotion that she saw there. "It kept me close to you."

She shivered as his fingers brushed her skin. She'd dreamed for so long of this moment when they came together again. He caught the chain and very gently lifted it over her head so it didn't tangle in her plait.

His trembling hands fiddled with the clasp. As if he handled something holy, he drew the ring off its chain and held it in his palm. "May I put this on your finger?"

"For pity's sake, will I ever stop crying?" she mumbled, extending her hand in his direction. It was as shaky as his.

"It's a significant moment." He shoved the chain into his pocket. "I'm feeling a little misty-eyed myself."

With that, she regained what she'd lost. Laughter had marked their days as a married couple. Laughter had been yet another loss to her over the years. Yet now Roland

returned it to her. Graciously. Generously. Without a hint of acrimony.

“I love you, Roland,” she said, as he slid the elegant gold band onto her ring finger.

He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a fervent kiss to her knuckles. She could see that this moment when he reclaimed her as his wife left him profoundly moved, too.

“And I love you.” He ripped at the fastenings on his breeches and shucked them down his narrow hips. He was so desperate, his usual aristocratic grace was utterly absent. “Now I mean to show you how much.”

She loved that overmastering desire made him clumsy. She loved him.

So when he was naked and sweeping her into his arms, she kissed him and held on tight in preparation for the splendors ahead.

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Roland's arms enclosed his wife, and he kissed her back with all the aching hunger that had tormented him ever since she'd left.

More than hunger compelled him. Love was the driver. So much love.

So he didn't fall on her like the ravening beast that he'd likened himself to earlier. Instead, his touch turned tender. He kissed her face and her neck and her shoulders and her breasts. Little touches to confirm that she really was here and not a figment of his lonely imagination, as she'd been so often during their agonizing years apart.

She laced her hands around his neck, pulling him closer. Her breath caught with each contact of his lips and enchanting murmurs of pleasure escaped her. Dear Lord above, the memory of Charmian's fervent responses had haunted him.

Appetite strained like an unbroken horse against the rein. He'd hardened the moment she took off her nightgown, and he grew harder with every second. But he wanted this first mating after so long to express care and reverence and gratitude. They'd have time for the fierce tides of passion later.

Later...

A magic word to a man who had believed that he'd lost all chance of a future with his beautiful wife. Who stroked his neck and back and ran her hands through his hair. Who was warm and willing in his arms.

Who became impatient with teasing, he could tell. She clung nearer, and her hands curved around his buttocks in a shameless appeal for more than glancing kisses.

Despite having dreamed of her for so long, he was surprised at how familiar everything felt. The inn supplied lemon soap, so her scent held a citrus tinge, whereas the girl he'd wed had preferred a rose perfume. But beneath that, she smelled like Charmian. Smoky and musky and womanly. His nostrils flared to catch the earthy essence of her arousal. That hadn't changed.

When they'd met, she'd been plump and pretty and as luscious as a chocolate éclair. This woman was slender, and her body was lithe with muscle. Proof of how she'd worked since leaving him. But her skin was as smooth and creamy as he remembered, and her lips were just as soft and eager.

Lips he could no longer resist.

He kissed her with all the wild joy he felt. She gave a low hum of approval and used her tongue to whip him into a frenzy of desire. Her fingers dug into his buttocks. Need shuddered through him like an earthquake.

This was every fantasy come true. Charmian aroused and desperate in his arms. The promise of uniting their bodies in the most profound act he knew. Without his wife, his life had been intolerably impoverished.

One thing alone remained before the picture was perfect. He withdrew from the kiss and studied her with his eyes and with his longing heart. "Take your hair down."

She stood on tiptoe to land a couple of kisses on the corners of his mouth. "My hair?"

He found himself smiling at her. The sort of smile that came straight from the soul. The sort of smile absent since she'd abandoned him. "You have no idea how often red hair features in my dreams. I reached a point where I couldn't abide seeing a red-haired woman, because the sight only made me ache for you."

Her gaze softened. Already she stepped back and started to undo the thick auburn plait that snaked down across her bare breasts with their tight, rose-pink nipples. He bit back a groan and closed his eyes.

“Roland, are you all right?” she asked.

He opened his eyes and gave her a wry smile. “Your bosom might have featured in those dreams, too.”

Charmian released a huff of laughter and glanced down, even as her fingers worked on the plait. “You’re welcome to touch.”

“Oh, yes.” When he cupped her breasts, she gasped. He caressed the curves and brushed his thumbs across pert nipples.

“I’m...smaller than I was.”

The hint of apology made him lift his gaze from the delicious curves. “My love, you’re exquisite from head to toe.”

Her lips turned down. “I’m not the same as the girl you married.”

Roland kissed her with overflowing thankfulness. “No, you’ve grown up. I love the woman you’ve become. I love you, Charmian.”

The trouble faded from her lovely green eyes. “Have we learned to be wise, do you think?”

“I hope so. I’ll never take love for granted again. We received a precious gift, yet we were careless enough to cast it aside.”

“I pray that you’re right. The world has been such a sharp, cold place since we parted.”

“Nothing was right for me without you, my darling.”

She touched his cheek with a loving caress that he felt all the way to the soles of his feet. “Then let’s make it right tonight. It’s Christmas. The time for second chances and new beginnings. I love you, too.”

She ran her fingers through her hair, loosening it until it flowed over her shoulders. His heart slammed against his chest at the glorious sight. His wife was clothed in firelight and hair the color of flame.

Words had brought them this far. Actions would knit them together forever. Still gentle, he swung her around and brought her down onto the bed, cradling her in his arms as she sank into the thin mattress.

When he straddled her, she stretched out beneath him and circled his dick with eager fingers. Roland exhaled on a hiss, as a blast of heat threatened to incinerate him.

“Next time.” He caught her hand. “I’m too close to the edge, and I want to do you justice tonight.”

The hint of wickedness in her smile reminded him of the ardent girl he’d wed. “Do you remember our first night?”

He gave a short laugh. “How could I forget?”

The wicked smile deepened. “And it was even better the next day.”

He stroked her thighs, trailing his hands toward the russet curls that hid her sex.

“After that, I couldn’t keep away from you.”

One finger traced a line down his chest, stopping on the way to tease his nipple with a fingernail. A shudder of response made him gasp. He thought that he was already as hot up as he could get, but it seemed there was more.

“I loved how much you wanted me. It made me feel like a queen.”

He kissed the pale slope of her breast and slid his hand between her legs. She moved under his caresses and sucked in an audible breath. He smiled against her skin when he discovered that she was slick and hot already. “I still want you like the very devil.”

“And I want you,” she murmured. “We’ve wasted so much time.”

He kissed the hint of sadness from her eyes, as he stroked her cleft. “Then let’s not waste any more.”

With a sigh of surrender, she bumped her hips higher. “Take me, Roland. I don’t want to be lonely anymore.”

Finding the site of her pleasure, he teased her until she writhed. He held back from taking her to her limit. That was a moment he meant to share with her.

He raised his head and shifted back. “Open your legs for me, my love.”

The intensity between them reached such a pitch that it almost felt like a reprieve when everything turned to a disorderly scuffle. On such a narrow bed, trying to position their bodies almost knocked him to the floor. They were both breathless and laughing by the time she cradled his hips between her thighs.

She shifted up on the pillows. “Please don’t break your neck, now I’ve got you back

at last.”

Kissing her again, he poised above her. The path to paradise lay open before him. After so long, he wasn't sure whether they would come together like strangers, but he slid into her as smooth as honey. She closed hard around him, claiming him in return.

Roland rose on his elbows to survey her. Her eyes were the color of wet moss and heavy with desire. Her lips were swollen and parted to give him a glimpse of small white teeth.

Her beauty sliced through him like a saber. It always had, but seeing her like this, lost in their connection, the feeling was overwhelming.

Roland was home after a long and arduous journey. The half of his soul that had been missing was finally returned to him. For the first time since Charmian left, he trusted in tomorrow.

He felt an invincible urge to lose himself in the passion flaring between them. But first, despite his fierce animal urges, he needed to bask in this closeness that had been stolen from him. A closeness that made his life worth living.

Charmian stroked the straining muscles of his arms before tracing the line of his back. As he stared into her eyes, he believed at last that their love was strong enough to recover from their separation. In so many ways that mattered, their marriage started tonight.

They'd both suffered. They'd both learned the value of what they shared. They were both strong enough to fight for their love.

She bowed up, brushing her breasts against his chest. The change of angle made his balls contract in needy craving.

“I wanted to have your baby. I wanted it so much,” she whispered.

“Let me give you a baby now. I want us to be a family.” Poignant emotion thundered through him. He pushed deeper in preparation for the sensual storm ahead. “I want this for the rest of our lives.”

“Oh, yes, Roland, yes.”

The stillness had been transcendent. Now he thirsted to give her everything he had. “Let me take you to the stars, my love.”

For three hard years, Charmian had felt empty and lost. Having Roland back to fill all those longing parts of her felt like a miracle. Muscles that she hadn’t used since she’d left him surged to throbbing life, as her body adjusted to a man again.

When he pulled back with a slow power that thrilled her, she sighed her pleasure and lifted her hips. How strange that she’d relived this act over and over since their parting, yet it turned out she hadn’t remembered it at all. She’d forgotten how every part of her melted with desire. She’d forgotten the ferocious thunder of her blood. She’d forgotten the sheer animal pleasure of having Roland deep inside her.

She’d forgotten how love turned his physical possession to pure gold, so she felt as if they existed in a glowing bubble of light.

Charmian caught the glint of firelight on her wedding ring, worn for the first time since she’d run home to her mother in such a taking. Silly, thoughtless, careless little girl she’d been.

She was no longer that brainless ninny – although at least she’d been smart enough to

fall in love with Roland. She'd grown into a woman who knew enough to cherish their love as the precious, unique treasure it was.

As he shifted forward, her frantic hands closed around his arms. She thought that he'd gone as deep as possible, but now he seemed to touch her womb.

"Oh, yes," she sighed, tightening around him.

"That's so good, beloved." Awe rasped in his voice. She wasn't alone in finding this an experience of the soul as well as the flesh.

But flesh had its own demands, demands that they'd both resisted for too long. That need could no longer be denied.

He rose on his elbows and began to move in hard, determined thrusts. The rise to climax was swift. All the pent-up desire rushed through her to charge her response to every touch. She welcomed him as he plunged inside her. Her fingers digging into his arms, she strove for that rapturous peak.

When he scraped his teeth over a sensitive nerve in her neck, Charmian shuddered into ecstasy. Rivers of fire. White light. Heat. Muscles clenching in helpless delight. She lashed her arms around him, clinging as she rode out the irresistible storm.

As she convulsed, she cried out. Through her fiery crisis, she heard him groan. He jerked in her arms, and the liquid heat of his seed flooded her.

Roland slumped against her and buried his face in her shoulder. She heard his hoarse breathing. He was heavy, but she didn't mind. The press of his body confirmed that he really was here. Ripples of ultimate pleasure ran through her, soothed the sharp edges of her long unhappiness.

After a few seconds, Roland shifted to the side, stretching out against the plaster wall. She stared at him, noting that he was no longer the troubled man who had arrived at the inn. He looked younger, easier, more like the carefree gentleman she'd married.

She shifted closer to kiss him with all the gratitude in her heart. "I'd forgotten how magnificent you could make me feel. Thank you."

His smile held no trace of his earlier bitterness. "I love you, Charmian."

"And I love you."

His expression expressed a wry fondness. "And you're still crying."

As he brushed at the tears trickling down her cheeks, she gave a waterlogged giggle. "I'm just so happy. I thought this would never happen. I was terrified that I'd lost your love forever."

"Impossible." He kissed her with such tenderness that her tears spurted anew. "I'm so grateful we found our way back to each other. You're my reason for living."

She studied his face, as she struggled to control her wayward emotions. "I don't want to go to sleep. I'm afraid this might be a dream."

A laugh escaped him. "On my solemn oath, I'm here, and I'll be here when you wake up."

"That makes me happy, too. You make me happy, Roland. Don't go away again."

"Never." The word sounded like another vow. After so much heartache, they'd found each other. The magnitude of the gift was almost beyond understanding.

She cupped his jaw in her hand, feeling the faint prickle of whiskers. “I can’t believe we’ve been so lucky.”

Eyes alight with adoration studied her features. “You’ll start taking it all for granted in twenty years or so.”

She gave another watery huff of amusement. “What a lovely idea.”

He kissed her with all the love that she read in his face. Love and weariness. They’d both had an arduous day, and they’d had to wend their way through a tangle of harrowing emotions before that perfect, passionate conclusion.

“Sleep now, Charmian. Sleep safe in my arms, as you’ll sleep safe in my arms from this day forward.”

“Roland...” Emotion welled up inside her, although she didn’t want to cry anymore. She’d spent far too long crying. So she swallowed the lump in her throat and responded in a wry tone. “I hope the beds are bigger at Leeder Hall.”

A brief laugh. “No risk of falling on the floor there.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.”

“Roll over on your side, and we’ll manage very well.”

It turned out that he was right. She shifted around to fit her back against his chest. Lying close like this, there was plenty of room.

He slipped his arms around her and curled one hand over her breast. The gesture was so laden with tenderness, those dratted tears rose again. Mistily, she stared into the firelit darkness and said a fervent prayer of gratitude for second chances and steadfast

love.

Roland's familiar scent surrounded her and the warmth of his long, powerful body. Her heart settled into a steady beat, as she finally accepted that her long ordeal was over. She and Roland were together and would stay that way.

Roland's embrace tightened. He dropped a kiss on her naked shoulder. "Happy Christmas, my dearest wife," he murmured, his voice gruff with tiredness.

"Happy Christmas, my love," Charmain whispered, closing her eyes. For the first time since she'd left him, she felt at peace.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:21 am

It was still dark when Charmian stirred. Roland's arms encircled her, and she was pressed close to his naked body. She was warm inside and out in a way that she hadn't been since that devastating quarrel in York.

She needed a moment to realize that the silence meant that at last the rain had stopped. Perhaps some of the inn's guests might manage to make it home for Christmas after all.

Very carefully, she shifted in Roland's arms. She had no idea what time they'd gone to sleep, but the weariness weighing down her body told her that it wasn't long ago. Strangely, given that she probably hadn't managed much more than an hour of sleep, she felt more rested than she had in years. Discovering that she hadn't loved in vain and that she and her husband were reunited had done wonders.

Her lips curved in a smile, as she gingerly perched on the edge of the narrow bed where she'd found such rapture. The chance to salve her sexual frustration contributed to her wellbeing. Although it would take more than a single tumble to satisfy her physical craving for the man she loved.

She glanced back at him. By heaven, he was handsome. The fire had died down a little, but it provided enough light for her to make out his chiseled features.

Her unruly heart did a little jig of joy. Even better, he was all hers, when she'd been so sure that he was lost to her forever.

The world couldn't have given her a better Christmas gift.

The urge rose to lie down again, to nestle back in his arms and let Puddlebrook go on its merry way without her. It was an effort to stand and collect her clothes ready to go downstairs. As she stood, muscles that she hadn't used in ages twinged, reminding her of that passionate swiving.

At least the water Roland had brought her last night was still lukewarm. Proof enough of how little time she'd slept. As quietly as she could, she sponged the traces of their lovemaking from her body. Pink marks on her skin where Roland's whiskers had chafed her provided another reminder of what they'd done.

"Good morning, my love," a sleepy voice said from the bed.

Charmian found Roland regarding her with such unconcealed appreciation that she shivered with desire. The traitorous urge to crawl back into bed strengthened. "I didn't want to wake you."

He shifted to sit on the edge of the bed and rub his eyes. With his rumpled dark hair and bare body, he was beguilingly disheveled. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going down to help my aunt. The inn is bulging at the seams. She'll need another pair of hands, especially when everyone starts demanding breakfast."

The lazy delight faded from his eyes. "After what she did, she deserves to rot."

Charmian sighed. "I know. But she's still family and anyway, it's not just her. It's John and Milly and everyone else here. I don't want to let them down. We have so much. We can afford to be generous."

His lips turned down in wry acceptance. "And it's Christmas."

To her relief, she saw that he wasn't angry. She slipped her shift over her head and

reached for her stays. “And it’s Christmas.”

He yawned and scratched his chest. With another ripple of pleasure, she remembered that curling hair rubbing against her breasts last night when they’d joined together. “Can I help you to dress?”

“Thank you, but I can manage.” Since coming to the Spotted Fox, she hadn’t had a maid. Everything she owned these days fastened at the front.

“Stop it,” she muttered, as she fumbled with the hooks.

Roland tried and failed to look innocent. “Stop what?”

“Watching me like a cat watches a mousehole.”

He laughed. “You can’t blame me for enjoying the show, when a beautiful woman gets dressed in front of me.”

She blushed. “I’m so glad you think I’m beautiful.”

“You’ll be beautiful when you’re eighty, my darling.”

Her hands stilled, and she stared at him, lost in a fog of love. “You make it so difficult to go when you say things like that.”

He gestured to the bed. “We could start the day in a much better way than you running off to wear your fingers to the bone.”

Charmian almost yielded to temptation. Then she remembered her responsibilities, and she went back to dressing. “Don’t tease me.”

His expression turned serious. "I'd like to take you away from here as soon as the roads are passable. You're not saying you intend to stay on at Puddlebrook as your aunt's dogsbody, are you?"

This was an uncomfortable reminder of their quarrel in York. She eyed him, but she saw no belligerence. He was asking her, not telling her. "I'm ready to go. The lure of a proper bed is too strong for me to stay here."

His brief laugh was proof that this was a man who had learned cooperation and compromise during their separation. "I'm glad to hear it."

She stood in front of the mirror and picked up her hairbrush. Her hair was a disaster this morning, but she did her best to confine it in its usual plait. She met Roland's stare in the reflection. "Thank you."

He lowered his head in ironic acknowledgment. "You're welcome."

She smiled and tied the end of her braid with a ribbon before she turned to him. "As soon as the crisis is over, we can leave. I'm dying to see Leeder Hall."

"I'm dying to show it to you. Haven't you forgotten something?"

She frowned, checking her plain frock, brown today. Despite the distraction of a splendid naked man observing her every movement, she seemed to be adequately clad. She wore stockings and shoes, and all her buttons were done up. "What is it?"

His lips curled in that seductive smile that had stolen her heart when she'd been a giddy girl of nineteen. "Doesn't your long-lost husband merit a kiss to start his day?" Unashamed of his nakedness, he stood and opened his arms. "Fie, Lady Destry, and it's Christmas, too."

She rushed across the room and threw herself at him. The kiss was intoxicating and threatened to continue far too long and lead to more than kissing.

Only with the greatest reluctance did she pull away. “Stay here and get some sleep. You have an insatiable spouse to take care of tonight.”

He laughed and kissed her with the teasing fondness that always touched her heart. “Now that’s what I call a Christmas present for a red-blooded Englishman.”

Charmian rose on her toes to kiss him again. Briefly because if she lingered, she wouldn’t go at all.

She drew away with painful reluctance. After so long without him, the impulse was to cling, never to let him out of her sight. She was clever enough to know that was no way to proceed. “I must go.”

Roland watched her with a troubled light in his dark eyes. “Make sure you come back.”

A rift opened in her heart as she realized that they’d both suffered too much to accept that everything from here would be smooth sailing. “I promise, my love. I promise on my soul.”

This kiss was longer, but she did eventually manage to get out the door.

As she crept downstairs, the inn around her was quiet. It was too early for the guests to be about. Most days, the work of a country hostelry started well before dawn.

She realized with a shock that the pattern of her life was about to change forever. Lady Destry could lie in bed while the servants did the household work. Lady Destry didn’t need to bake and clean and launder and lug endless canisters of hot water. Her

days of drudgery were done.

On such a chilly morning, she was grateful to reach the kitchens which were always warm. Her aunt stood at the oven with some loaves ready for baking.

“Good morning, Aunt Janet,” Charmian said in a neutral voice. “Merry Christmas.”

Janet swung around so fast that the tray tilted. She only just managed to save the bread from sliding to the flagstone floor. “Charmian!”

Her aunt continued to look sick with guilt. So she should. She might have meant well, but her actions had caused Charmian untold grief.

The deception angered Charmian, too. Her mother and her aunt had told her a lot of lies, if mainly lies of omission.

She and Janet had an enormous number of issues to negotiate. But first they needed to deal with an inn jam-packed with guests needing to eat and wash and decide where they went next. Not to mention that John and Milly would arrive soon, looking for orders from their employer.

Charmian focused on practicalities. As befitted a well-run inn like the Spotted Fox, they always put everything away the night before. But yesterday had been so chaotic that the usually pristine kitchen remained piled high with detritus. Gladys, the cook, had been preparing meals until past midnight. “Shall I wash up, or would you prefer for me to start putting breakfast together?”

Janet clumsily shoved the loaves into the oven and slammed the heavy iron door. “Perhaps bring in the breakfast things. Once everyone moves on, we’ll have time to clean up properly.”

Without shifting, Charmian sent her aunt a direct look. “Roland and I are leaving as soon as the roads are passable.”

Her aunt twined her hands at her waist. It was a nervous gesture Charmian used, too. An unwelcome reminder that they were family, despite betrayals and wrongs. “You’re going with him, then?”

She tilted her chin in defiance. “He’s my husband. My place is with him.”

Her aunt looked stricken. “You hate me for keeping you apart.”

Charmian felt such a roiling mixture of emotions that she couldn’t say exactly what she felt. She was angry. And hurt. But there was regret, too. And much as she didn’t want to admit it, love. Aunt Janet had unarguably done the wrong thing. But she’d acted out of affection, however misguided.

Last night, when Charmian had learned the truth, she’d been livid and ready to banish her aunt from her life. Since then, she’d spent a blissful interval in her beloved husband’s arms and she’d discovered that he still loved her. It was difficult to maintain quite that level of white-hot fury when waves of sexual satisfaction swirled through her.

“I don’t hate you,” she said, sure of that at least.

Her aunt didn’t look reassured. “Perhaps you should. You love him.”

“Yes, I always did.”

“And he loves you. I...I didn’t expect that.”

“No, you thought I’d fallen victim to a fortune hunter.”

“I realized last night what sins your mother and I committed against you. I can only say I’m sorry, Charmian. I know it’s not enough, but it’s all I’ve got to give you.”

The apology shouldn’t make any difference. After all, it couldn’t compensate for the misery her aunt had caused. Not just for her, but for Roland, too. Neither of them had deserved to suffer through that purgatory.

Charmian sucked in a breath and surveyed the kitchen. It was a relief to avoid her aunt’s despairing gaze. She could tell that Janet was eaten up with remorse and that she was frantic for forgiveness. She also saw that her aunt was realist enough to recognize that forgiveness wouldn’t come easily, if at all. “You’ve been busy.”

The long oak table groaned under trays ready for baking. Now she took the time to check, she could see that Janet had made a good start on tidying up after last night, too.

Her aunt looked like she wanted to push their awkward conversation further along the road of excuses and apologies, so it took her a few seconds to turn her attention to their surroundings. “I...I couldn’t sleep.”

Janet looked worn and older than her years. She’d also been crying.

Her aunt was the most indomitable woman she knew. Charmian had never seen her shed a tear. She shouldn’t feel responsible for Janet’s turmoil. After all, the woman ought to stew. But that would be easier to say if she didn’t have a lifetime of kindnesses to recall, aside from that one huge, egregious act of treachery.

Janet pointed to a pot on top of the range. “There’s coffee made if you’d like some.”

The scent had teased Charmian since she’d arrived. For the last hours, her emotional troubles had occupied her attention. But standing here, she was aware that she’d had a

huge day yesterday, followed by very little sleep. A hot cup of coffee would be welcome. “Thank you. Would you like some?”

“I’m awash with the stuff,” Janet said.

“Yes, but would you like another cup?” Janet’s never-ending fondness for coffee had become a family joke.

Janet’s lips formed a shaky smile before they crumpled. Collapsing into a chair, she covered her face with trembling hands. She started to cry as if her heart was broken.

Stricken, Charmian stared at her aunt. She’d come in here feeling self-righteous and ill-used. It was more difficult to remain convinced of her moral superiority when her aunt sobbed in distress in front of her.

She and her aunt had always been close. Once her brother made his enormous fortune, Janet could have lived a life of luxury. Instead she’d chosen to maintain her independence as a country landlady. Hearing of her youthful romantic disappointment, Charmian couldn’t help wondering if a mistrust of all males lay behind her aunt’s stubborn dedication to going her own way.

“Aunt Janet...” She ventured closer, remembering that she was angry, but unable to bear her aunt’s tears. “Please don’t take on so.”

Her aunt just kept crying, bundling up her loose apron and pressing it to her eyes as she swayed from side to side in an uncontrollable eruption of sorrow.

Charmian wanted to stand on her dignity, but it was impossible when faced with her usually unflappable aunt’s grief. Without making a conscious decision, she found herself on her knees beside the chair with her arm curled around the older woman’s heaving shoulders. “Aunt Janet, it’s all right. It’s all right. Please don’t cry anymore.

Please.”

Janet hefted in a shuddering breath and cast Charmian a woebegone glance. “I can’t bear that I’ve done you such harm. I can’t bear that you never want to see me again.”

“I didn’t say that,” Charmian protested, firming her embrace. “We can work everything out.”

Her aunt didn’t seem to hear her. Instead she laid her hand on Charmian’s cheek. “You’ve always been the daughter I never had. It would break my heart if you never forgave me.”

“She forgives you,” Roland said behind her. “Of course she does.”

“Roland...” Charmian turned her head to see him standing in the doorway, his face full of concern as he surveyed the scene before him. “Can you please pour my aunt a cup of coffee? The pot’s on the stove. Just plain black.”

While he prepared her aunt’s drink, Charmian returned her attention to Janet who to her relief wasn’t weeping anymore. She passed her a handkerchief. “Here.”

Janet struggled free of Charmian’s arms. “Oh, dear, I can’t let John and Milly and Gladys see me like this,” she said in a constricted voice. “What will they think?”

Roland carried the steaming cup over to her. “Here’s your coffee, Miss Barton.”

Her aunt wiped her face and blew her nose and stuffed the handkerchief into her pocket. When she took the coffee, her hand shook so badly that Roland had to reach out to help her.

His assistance upset her again, and she caught her breath on another sob. “You

mustn't be kind. I don't deserve it."

He smiled at her, a gentle smile that surprised Charmian. She hadn't mistaken how outraged he'd been when he discovered that Janet had hidden his letters. "It's Christmas. It's a time for getting things we don't deserve."

"You..." Janet stared at him as if he'd sprouted wings.

"Aunt, why don't you go up to your room? John and Milly and I can manage. Especially as you did so much overnight." Janet would loathe the servants knowing she'd lost control of herself.

"And me. I came down to lend a hand." Roland set the brimming cup of coffee on the table and took Janet's elbow to help her up. Charmian waited for her to shake him off, but she accepted his aid.

Charmian met his eyes. "I'll take her upstairs. Can you stoke up the stove? We'll have to start breakfast soon. John should be here any moment. He'll tell you what else needs doing."

When Roland smiled at her, she read the steadfast love in his eyes. How had she lived without him all this time? One thing was certain. She'd never willingly do without him again. She swore that on everything she held dear.

"Perhaps...perhaps that's a good idea," Janet said, leaning heavily on Charmian and letting her niece lead her toward the stairs.

As they left, Charmian looked back to see her aristocratic husband pick up the coal scuttle and head outside to perform one of life's dirtier jobs.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:21 am

Roland slumped into a padded armchair in the mercifully and recently emptied taproom. It was late afternoon, and he'd been on the run all day. He was filthy and exhausted, and his admiration for his wife had multiplied by a thousand.

Through eyes cloudy with weariness, he observed the room. To his surprise, he realized that it was decorated for the season with holly and mistletoe and other greenery. He'd been too busy and too distracted by the guests' demands to notice before.

A few guests remained, but the vast majority had moved on, eager to spend at least some of Christmas Day with their families. To everyone's relief, the weather had fined up. The sky even showed patches of blue before the early twilight. The bridge would remain out for weeks, even months, but most of the travelers had plans to take longer routes to avoid the flooding.

Janet had emerged before breakfast, showing few signs of her emotional collapse. She had, however, been notably less frosty with him, which left him with mixed feelings. She'd done an unspeakable wrong, keeping him from his wife. But he'd hated seeing her proud spirit humbled. Worse, he'd hated to witness Charmian's distress at her aunt's emotional disintegration.

"What a Christmas it's been," Charmian said from the doorway.

He looked up with a tired smile and held out his hand. "I got the only present I wanted."

The love in her eyes as she darted across the oak floor to curl up in his lap banished

his exhaustion. His heart soared with happiness, as he enfolded her against him. A salty hint of female sweat tinged the clean lemon scent of her soap. Even after her exertions, she still smelled like paradise to him. He loved the earthy reality of having his wife in his arms after a long day.

When the chair creaked under their weight, Charmian gave a husky giggle. "I hope we don't end up on the floor."

"As long as I'm with you, I don't care where I am. Even flat on my arse."

"Ah, you sweet-tongued devil," she said with the affectionate mockery that he'd once believed he'd never hear again.

"Speaking of sweet tongues..."

The kiss was long and passionate and, yes, sweet. It spoke of love given and received. Love that had proven its strength. Love that would only deepen in the years to come.

He buried his face in the silky mass of her hair and said a silent prayer of gratitude that she was with him at last. At this rate, he might even stop hating Yorkshire.

"I do beg your pardon." Janet was turning away and shutting the door, when Charmian pulled away from Roland's kisses and called after her.

"No, Aunt. Wait."

Roland saw Janet's shoulders stiffen, but she was a brave woman, if one who had been tragically mistaken. She closed the door before she faced them. The rigidity of her stance hinted that she expected Charmian to berate her once again for keeping her from Roland.

Charmian scrambled off his knee, leaving him free to stand as politeness demanded. “Please, Miss Barton, sit down.”

Janet Barton was an attractive woman who bore a marked resemblance to her lovely niece, especially when they were both blushing as they were now.

Janet linked her hands at her waist the way that Charmian did when she fretted. He found it harder and harder to maintain his anger. This woman had set out to do him ruinous harm, but she hadn’t succeeded. He suspected that her conscience would provide adequate punishment without him reviling her. Nor could he forget her utter devastation this morning.

Janet remained standing. “I wanted to thank you both for helping today. I don’t know how we’d have managed without you. Especially when...”

Charmian made a dismissive gesture. “I wasn’t going to leave you flat. We’re still family, whatever else has happened.”

The generous response eased the tightness around Janet’s eyes and mouth. “That’s...that’s more than I deserve.” She directed a glance at Roland. “Sir Roland, I’m far too aware that I misjudged you. I apologise.”

He bowed his head. “Thank you.”

An awkward silence descended, before Janet crossed to sit on the settle near the inglenook. “You said this morning that you’re going back to Northamptonshire as soon as you can. Are you moving on tonight?”

Charmian took Roland’s hand. She didn’t have to say anything. He already knew what she wanted.

“It’s late and we’re both tired,” he said. “If you’ll permit us to stay, I’d be very grateful.”

Janet almost managed a smile. “I’d be delighted if you’d stay. I kept back a few choice morsels with the hope of having a small celebration of the season, now that the crisis is over. Milly can look after our remaining guests. John’s gone home to his family. It would be just us. Or you can eat in a private parlor, if you’d prefer your own company.”

Charmian’s expression said that she found the answer in his face. He wanted to start as he meant to go on. That wasn’t with setting up barriers between Charmian and her family.

She turned to Janet. “That sounds lovely, Aunt. It would be nice to do something to mark Christmas Day. We’d love to have dinner with you. Then we’ll leave tomorrow morning bright and early.”

The last of Janet’s wary stiffness drained away. The gaze she leveled on them was misty. She stood and brushed down her dark blue skirts with trembling hands. “I’m so glad. Thank you. I’ll go and get things sorted out in the kitchen.”

“I’ll help,” Charmian said, but her aunt shook her head with something approaching fond indulgence.

“No, I can manage, and you’ve both been my drudges for long enough today. You deserve some time to yourselves.”

They did. Roland was desperate to hold his wife close and bask in the fact that they were together again. “Thank you, Miss Barton.”

“Please call me Aunt Janet. As Charmian said, we’re family.”

He wasn't completely convinced of his welcome, even now, but for the sake of future harmony, he said, "Aunt Janet."

And was rewarded with an approving smile from his wife.

"It's nearly five now," Janet said. "Shall we say eight for our dinner?"

"It's going to take me that long to wash the day's dirt away," Charmian said, which brought a smile to her aunt's face. An almost natural smile.

"I asked John to bring your things down to the front chamber on the first floor. Your bedroom in the attics isn't big enough for two."

Charmian's blush had ebbed as the discussion proceeded. Now it blossomed into pink again, which made Roland want to kiss her.

But then, he always wanted to kiss her.

"That's very thoughtful of you," he said.

"It's the least I can do. I'll see you both in the south parlor in a couple of hours."

As she left, Janet looked happier than she had when she arrived. Roland found his wife regarding him as if he'd set the stars alight in the night sky. "What?"

"I love you, Roland Destry."

He frowned in puzzlement. While he appreciated her feelings, she spoke the words with a particular emphasis that left him confused. "And I love you."

She smiled. "Even if I hadn't loved you before, I'd love you now."

“Because I was nice to your aunt?”

“Yes. When anyone even a fraction less generous would have ripped into her for what she’d done to us.”

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “She feels bad enough already. Anyway, I don’t want to cause a rift between you and your family, whatever they might have done. We have the children to think of after all.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Children, is it?”

Roland caught her in his arms for a ravenous kiss. He felt like he hadn’t kissed her for a month. After a faint huff of surprise, she joined in with commendable enthusiasm.

He raised his head and stared down at this woman he adored. “It’s time we got to work on the next generation.”

Her delicious gurgle of amusement reminded him of the peach of a girl he’d married. Although that girl, beguiling as she was, couldn’t compare with the array of complex delights she presented now.

“Do you indeed? Oof!”

He’d swung her high into his arms and marched toward the door. For a few topsy-turvy seconds, he juggled her as he opened the door. “I do. Especially if the front chamber on the first floor has a full-size bed.”

“It does.” Charmian twined one hand around his neck.

He smiled down at her with all the happiness filling his heart. This was going to be the best Christmas ever. He couldn’t help remembering his grim predictions for the

day when he'd ridden into Puddlebrook. How wrong he'd been. "Then what are we waiting for?"

As he carried his wife across the empty foyer and up the wooden staircase, he could swear he heard angels singing alleluias. Or perhaps that was just what happened when a man was madly in love with the woman he'd married.

Love and joy had returned to Roland's life, along with the wife he worshipped. He was blessed indeed.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:21 am

Leeder Hall, Northamptonshire, Christmas Night, 1823

Charmian, Lady Destry, gave a contented sigh as she entered the candlelit bedroom and moved toward her dressing table.

“Tired, my darling?” Roland asked from where he sprawled before the blazing fire in a brocade-upholstered armchair. He’d come upstairs before her and had already changed out of his formal wear into a royal blue dressing gown.

Outside it was snowing. Here, inside their beautiful bedchamber, all was comfort and warmth.

She gave him a radiant smile. “It’s always a big job, hosting everyone for Christmas.”

“Especially this year.”

Her hand lowered to her midriff, over the place where a new baby grew. “Especially this year.”

They hadn’t yet told the family that they expected their second child in the summer. Their firstborn, a rumbunctious boy called Alfred, slept upstairs in the nursery under the loving care of Milly, who had taken up a place as nursemaid at Leeder Hall. He’d been born nine months to the day after their reunion, so Charmian and Roland had indeed made a baby during that ecstatic night of emotion and revelation.

On Boxing Day, they’d left the Spotted Fox in one of the inn’s carriages for hire. Two days later, they’d reached Leeder Hall, but by mutual consent, they waited until

New Year's Day to read their lost letters. It had been an occasion for tears and regrets and, most of all, a revelation that on both their sides, love had never faltered.

The five years since that rainy Christmas had seen the permanent healing of the wounds left from their separation. Charmian and Roland had established a life full of joy and purpose on their thriving estate, with yearly visits to London for the season to add a touch of excitement to their country routine.

Now Roland rose and prowled across to stand behind his wife. "We don't have to do a big Christmas every year."

She met his eyes in the mirror. It always struck her how right they looked together. He remained breathtakingly handsome, but these days, the first thing she noticed was that he looked like a man at peace with himself and his world. "I know we don't, but it's a nice way of getting the family together."

The annual winter house party mixed Charmian's aunt and mother with Roland's relatives. His sisters and their families, and his cousins and aunts and uncles.

"You enjoy it." He undid the clasp on her extravagant diamond necklace and laid it in a glittering pile on the dressing table.

It was a Christmas gift from her doting husband. He'd presented it to her during a private moment before dawn. She smiled now to remember the cool weight of diamonds on her bare skin and the passionate interlude that had ensued.

"I do. And I like that Mamma and Aunt Janet think you're the icing on the cake these days."

The first year, relations with the Bartons had been strained, largely because her mother and aunt were wallowing in a morass of guilt. But Roland's refusal to bear a grudge and Charmian's desire not to break off the connection had gradually eased the

tension. Alfred's arrival that September had forged the final link in creating a loving family.

"I think you're the icing on the cake and the cherry on top as well," he said with a faint smile, as he started to unhook the back of her spectacular vermilion gown. It should clash horribly with her red hair, but the minute her London modiste had produced the patterned silk for her approval, Charmian had been avid to wear it.

"You're the icing on the cake and the cherry on top and the stars in the sky."

He gave a low laugh and placed a kiss on the pale shoulder bared under the sagging dress. "You win."

Sensual pleasure flooded her. She turned and laced her hands around his neck. "We've both won. I love you so much, Roland. Now kiss me."

He caught her hips in a firm grip as his lips explored hers. The sensual charge between them was as strong as ever. Charmian gave herself up to delight.

Delight that ended too abruptly when Roland pulled away to stare down at her with love glowing in his dark eyes.

She pouted with disappointment. "Why did you stop? I was enjoying that."

"You're tired."

She shaped her hand to his jaw and directed a meaningful glance at the large bed behind them. "Not that tired, my love."

He laughed with such elation, her heart melted all over again. He'd been right all those years ago in Puddlebrook when he said that their agonizing separation had taught them never to take love for granted. "You're going to give me a Christmas

gift?”

It was her turn to laugh. “Another Christmas gift. Or have you forgotten what we did this morning?”

Roland kissed her on the lips, then whirled her away from the dressing table. A gentle push sent her tumbling back onto the bed in a froth of red silk. “Remind me, sweetheart.”

Charmian caught his hand and tugged him down over her. “With the utmost pleasure, my superb and most beloved husband.”

Thank you for picking up Miss Barton’s Mysterious Husband, which is a prequel to my forthcoming Cinderellas of Mayfair series which launches in 2025. If you enjoyed this Christmas story, why not check out Four Christmas Kisses, a Mayfair romance which has become a firm reader favorite since it came out?