



Rivals and Roses (The Vaughns #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: What is Dr. Arthur Vaughn to do? When he moved to the country, he hadn't anticipated meeting an intriguing and intelligent lady who shares his love of medicine. Or losing his heart to her the very first day.

But how does one court a lady when one's tongue ties itself into knots whenever she is near?

What is Violet Templeton to do? Her family's finances are holding on by a thread, and when a rival doctor settles in the village, stealing away their patients, Violet knows she has to get rid of him. One way or another, she must protect her family.

But how does one destroy a sweet man, who treats her like an equal and not a domineering bluestocking?

Can two lonely hearts survive the war to come? Or will they both end as casualties?

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Oakham, Devon Summer 1813

A grown man of two and thirty did not gawk at something so pedestrian as the countryside. He most certainly did not press his nose against the carriage window to better see said view. Despite being quite guilty of the former, Arthur Vaughn contented himself that he hadn't reverted to the latter—though that was due to the audience inside the stagecoach rather than any self-restraint on his part.

Having spent his life in what many considered the epicenter of elevated living, Arthur had heard the upper echelons bemoan the vast wasteland beyond London's borders. Those wealthy enough to afford country houses did so out of an obligation to demonstrate their wealth and status and never because they harbored any affection for those desolate places.

And how wrong they were.

Hedgerows lined the road, forming a wall as sturdy and thick as stone; thankfully, the coach sat high enough that Arthur could peer over it into the fields beyond. Having read much about Devon, he hadn't expected so many trees in a county famous for its moors—but then, Arthur wasn't certain he could identify a moor if he saw it.

Clouds filled the sky overhead, but the gray didn't diminish its loveliness; he'd never seen so many shades of green. London boasted many fine parks and gardens, and not one could compete with the richness of this untamed beauty.

Despite the noise of the carriage, everything seemed far too quiet, as though the air was a vast void. Though that wasn't entirely true, for the breeze carried the scent of

grass and soil, and above the rattling of the coach and the clop of the hooves, Arthur caught the distant call of sheep and trill of songbirds, both as unfamiliar a sound to his ear as a foreign tongue.

Though Arthur didn't boast a broad knowledge of or affection for art, knowing people who claimed the creation or collection as favored pastimes had exposed him to paintings, and he'd seen his fair share of landscapes. However, artists were so overly generous in capturing the vibrancy of city life that he'd believed their depictions of the countryside were equally romanticized. Artists never captured the piles of muck in the streets left behind by both animals and humans, the grim fog blanketing the buildings, or the suffocating weight of people clogging the heart of the city. No, their paintbrushes depicted an idyllic version of city life, which was no more real than Camelot.

Never would he have imagined that the spark of life imbued in each landscape captured only a fraction of what nature possessed.

"Lovely, isn't it?"

Jerking from his thoughts, Arthur turned his gaze from the countryside to his traveling companions. "That it is, Mr. Bacon. Had I known how captivating the country was, I would've left London far sooner."

"I know precisely what you mean," said the older gentleman, settling back into the squabs, though his gaze was fixed to the window. "When I arrived here some five and twenty years ago from Manchester, I knew I wanted to make Devon my home, and I haven't been disappointed."

Though Arthur didn't wish to say it aloud, he couldn't help but feel as though he were standing on a precipice; a strong, unshakeable feeling that this step would bring about great changes in his life for the better. This was the direction he ought to take.

This was where he was supposed to be. The rightness of it settled into his heart—

“How happy we are that you’ve chosen to make Oakham your home,” added the gentleman’s daughter, jerking Arthur from his thoughts once again.

Clutching her shawl tight around her shoulders, Miss Bacon lifted her gaze from her lap to meet his, an inviting smile turning up the corners of her perfectly pink lips. Meticulously cultivated ringlets framed Miss Bacon’s face, their golden hue highlighting the rose in her cheek. Her skin flushed, but for all her shy affectations, she didn’t turn her gaze away from him, holding his eyes captive in hers as they begged him to speak.

Arthur tried to think of a response, but his tongue was determined to be a free agent unto itself. Clearing his throat, he rubbed his hands against his thighs and shifted in his seat. With a sharp tug, he pulled his hat firmer onto his head, and thankfully, he was saved from having to sort out an answer when her father replied.

“Yes, quite so, my dear,” said Mr. Bacon, his gaze still fixed on the passing landscape. “I think you’ll find Oakham a perfect town, Dr. Vaughn. A good place to call home.”

“And heaven knows we could use a proper physician,” added the young lady.

“Too right, my dear,” replied her father with a sigh in his tone.

Miss Bacon opened her mouth to speak, but the words were cut short by a shrill trumpet from the horses as the carriage jolted to a stop. As they’d been moving at a slow pace, it wasn’t too jarring, yet Miss Bacon shrieked, her arms flailing and knocking his hat from his head as she “fell” into Arthur’s lap .

“Good heavens! I do apologize,” she said whilst straightening—yet remaining

plastered to him. Her father kept his seat quite easily, but his attention was turned to the window, trying to spy the reason for the disruption, and not on his daughter.

As she turned her gaze up to meet Arthur's with a delicate blush on her cheeks, Miss Bacon's coquettish eyes widened in her first genuine display of emotion when her gaze fell on his bald head. Drawing in a sharp breath, Arthur reached for the displaced hat and shoved it down tight once more. With a brush of his hand, he had the remnant curls along the back of his neck in place, which gave the illusion that more blond locks resided beneath the felted wool.

"It appears there's been an accident up ahead," said Mr. Bacon, peeking through the door, as the window's catch was firmly stuck.

A few scant words, yet they jolted Arthur from his seat; he snatched his portmanteau and shouldered past Mr. Bacon, who was more concerned with gawking than being of use. As he stepped onto the road, Arthur's gaze fell to the overturned cart blocking the path. Hurrying forward, his mind took inventory of his medicines and tools at hand. His full surgical kit was packed in his trunk; if needed, the driver could fetch it, but Arthur always kept the necessities close at hand. He sent out a silent prayer that they would be enough.

Weaving around the agitated horses that the coachman and guard were attempting to calm, Arthur stopped before the overturned cart. It stretched across the road, and large metal cans lay upended on the ground around it, the milk spilling from the opened lids. The vehicle jerked as its horse fought to pull itself upright. Men leapt from the top of the coach and hurried to calm the beast and free it from its harness, but Arthur ignored the chaos and searched for the driver.

"Over here," shouted a woman, waving at him, and Arthur hurried to her side to find the poor fellow pinned beneath the edge of the cart. Taking stock of those about him, Arthur considered how best to free the fellow —

“Mr. Jenkins, here! And Mr. Abbott, there!” said the lady, pointing to a spot along the edge. With a few more shouts, she positioned the other gawkers along the vehicle. “You need to pull him free when the cart is lifted.”

Arthur stood there, blinking at her—and only just realized she’d meant him when she frowned.

“Sir, we require your assistance,” she repeated, which broke Arthur from his surprise.

Not bothering to dispute the lady’s plan, he set his valise aside and crouched beside her. The farmer groaned as the cart shifted again, and the lady fell to her knees beside the fellow, taking his hand in hers.

“We will have you free in no time, Mr. Evans. Hold tight,” she said. Then, casting her eyes to Arthur, she added, “Pull slowly at first. I need to ensure his foot isn’t caught before you drag him fully out, lest we cause more damage.”

And without waiting for Arthur to confirm that he understood, the lady relinquished her place at Mr. Evans’ head and lay down in the dirt, her face lowered to spy beneath the cart as she called to the men.

“Lift!” she cried. The cart shuddered and lifted, toppling over a remnant milk can as the men’s arms shook.

Giving Mr. Evans a careful tug, Arthur watched the lady for any sign, but she merely waved for him to continue, and Arthur dragged the farmer free. Before the cart was set back down, the lady leapt to her feet and ripped off her cloak.

“Over here, sir. We must get him off the ground,” said the lady as she placed the article on an open patch of road, beckoning for Arthur to follow. Another man came to his side, and together, they lifted poor Mr. Evans enough to get him atop the fabric.

From a first glance, Arthur couldn't tell if the leg was broken, which was a good sign in and of itself. No unnatural bends or protruding bones was a miracle, but a long gash ran down Mr. Evans' thigh, oozing far too much blood .

Snatching up his bag, Arthur knelt beside the lady and pressed his fingers to Mr. Evans' pulse. "We need to get him into town."

"Oakham is still some miles away by road. Our situation isn't ideal, but we need to stop the bleeding here and now, and though I appreciate your assistance, sir, I do not need more people mucking about," she said as she tugged a handkerchief from her sleeve and pressed it to the wound, though it did little good.

"He is a physician," said Mr. Bacon, who held his handkerchief to his nose whilst staring at the broken and bleeding man.

"That is well and good," replied the lady in a dry tone, "but as Mr. Evans isn't suffering from a cough or fever, there's little a physician can do at present. We require a surgeon."

Then, without hesitation, she lifted the edge of her skirt and pulled it back to reveal her petticoats. Some of the menfolk blanched at that as readily as they did the blood and turned away. The lady tugged at the linen, and when it held firm, she scowled.

"Fetch me a knife!" she called, which set the men moving once more.

"I am trained as a surgeon-apothecary as well," said Arthur.

The lady paused, and her gaze darted to Arthur. "You know what you're about, then?"

"I studied in London, alongside some of the greatest doctors in England," he replied,

flicking open the clasp to his bag and digging inside for the vial of laudanum and the leather case that held his suturing kit.

One of the gawkers stepped forward, handing the lady a knife. She nodded and began slicing at her petticoats. “You will forgive me, sir, if I do not instantly defer to your expertise. Plenty of inept people study at the feet of the greats, and I will not risk Mr. Evans’ future. If we do not get his wound cleaned and bound up quickly, he’ll die.”

Arthur’s brows rose at her dismissal, though the lady paid him no mind as she took a handful of the fabric and held it tightly to the wound. Their crowd was growing as another cart stopped because of the impediment, bringing with it more spectators, who watched with varying looks of horror and astonishment.

“We need to wash the wound. Does anyone have water?” she called to the crowd, which sent the others scurrying about. Arthur sat on his heels, staring at her.

Perhaps he ought to feel offended at her distrust, but he couldn’t help but acknowledge the wisdom in her statement. Simply because someone earned a degree, gained a title, or even spent a lifetime using his skills to earn his bread, it didn’t make him good at his work. There were many among his colleagues whom he wouldn’t trust to treat a living soul.

“I give you my word, madam, that I am a skilled doctor. I take my profession seriously and have done my utmost to excel at it,” he said, giving those words the weight they deserved. “I know what I’m about, and though I cannot guarantee Mr. Evans’ safety, I promise I will do everything in my power to heal him.”

The lady straightened, drawing in a sharp breath before nodding. “Then I defer to you, Doctor.”

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For all that the lady acquiesced, she did not move from her place beside Mr. Evans, and Arthur didn't question the obvious offer of assistance. Whatever her credentials, she clearly knew a thing or two about medicine, and he wouldn't turn aside any aid at this point.

Though he didn't know where they had magicked it from, a man came forward with a bucket of water, and with a nod of her head, the lady directed him to place it beside Arthur. Needing no further invitation, he set aside his hat and pulled off his jacket before rolling up his shirtsleeves.

The situation they found themselves in was far from ideal, but since finishing his studies, Arthur rarely had access to such perfection. Kneeling on the ground was hardly a comfortable position, but at least it allowed him a better vantage from which to view the wound—though his pulse spiked when the lady pulled back for him to examine it.

Dirt caked the laceration, with splinters and detritus peppering it, and though it wasn't deep, it was far too long for Arthur's peace of mind. Snatching up the knife the lady had abandoned, Arthur quickly sliced through Mr. Evans' trouser leg, pulling the mangled and bloody fabric free. He couldn't say with any certainty that the bone wasn't fractured, but with some prodding, he was confident it was whole. A miracle, indeed.

"Madam," said Arthur, drawing her gaze to him.

"Miss Templeton," she supplied.

“Dr. Vaughn,” he replied before nodding toward the vial beside his bag. Before he could give the lady any instructions, she abandoned her rags and lifted the bottle to the sky, gazing through the reddish-brown liquid. “It’s a strong mixture—”

Miss Templeton nodded, reaching over to his kit for the dropper. With quick movements, she opened the bottle and extracted a dose, giving it to Mr. Evans with the ease of one who knew her business. Though Arthur kept a close eye on how much she administered, it was entirely unnecessary, as she gave the exact amount he would’ve suggested.

Looking at Mr. Evans, Arthur held his gaze. “I can stitch you up in a trice once I have the wound cleaned of anything that might cause it to fester, but I cannot wait until the laudanum takes effect and run the risk of you bleeding to death before we can finish.”

Despite sounding as though he were asking permission, Arthur knew the poor fellow wasn’t in any condition to do so, but whether or not Mr. Evans comprehended, Arthur hoped the explanation granted the patient some relief. Without another word, Arthur poured a cup of water over the gash, and Mr. Evans howled and jerked away, forcing Miss Templeton to throw herself over him, putting all her weight on his chest to hold him still.

“Mr. Jenkins, take my place!” called Miss Templeton. Though the fellow hesitated a moment, the lady repeated her order and Mr. Jenkins did as commanded before she moved to hold Mr. Evans’ legs. They could use another body or two to hold him still, but the bystanders inched away as though afraid to be called upon. Sucking in a sharp breath, Mr. Jenkins held Mr. Evans in place but turned his face away as Arthur picked up his tweezers .

Having so many observers ought to make a man nervous, but a surgeon’s education was hardly a private matter. In many ways, it made Arthur feel more at ease, for he was used to working with a roomful of students and doctors watching his every

move; their classrooms were called operating theaters for a reason, and Arthur settled into the familiarity of the feeling.

Mr. Evans jerked with the first probes, and though Arthur half expected Miss Templeton to be knocked away, she flattened herself against his shins and feet, pinning his legs firmly to the ground. Moving as quickly as he dared, Arthur combed the laceration for any impurities, picking away the splinters and rocks that had made their way inside.

The patient moaned and sobbed, but the sound was naught but a distant thing compared to the pulse in Arthur's ears. Thankfully, the blood flow was not as bad as it might've been, but with each drop spilt, he was one heartbeat closer to losing Mr. Evans. Yet overlooking any foreign object would doom the fellow to a far slower and more painful death as his body rotted from the inside out. The chance of dying from infection was great even in the best of circumstances.

Before Arthur could reach for another cup, Miss Templeton freed her hand and twisted enough to dribble water across the flesh to wash away the impurities.

“Pa!”

Despite the ruckus that followed, Arthur's attention never drifted from his work as pounding footsteps accompanied the shout.

“We have him in hand, Johnny. Let Dr. Vaughn see to his business,” said Miss Templeton as a young man dropped onto the ground beside Mr. Evans.

“What can I do?” asked Johnny.

The question was directed to Arthur, but he couldn't divide his attention enough to give more than a shake of his head in response. Every time it looked as though the

cleaning was complete, he discovered yet another splinter. Lifting his arm, Arthur wiped his forehead across his bicep .

“Find us splints, Johnny,” said Miss Templeton, her words breaking as Mr. Evans kicked, jolting her. “Long enough for his leg.”

“Yes, of course.” And with that, the younger Mr. Evans hurried to the wreckage, calling others to help him pull off the boards and them of nails and splinters.

“Miss Bacon,” called Miss Templeton. “Will you cut bandages?”

“I haven’t any cloth on hand,” came the quiet reply.

“You have yards on your person and many more in your trunks.”

“But Miss Templeton, you cannot be suggesting I put my petticoats on display?” asked Miss Bacon.

“I am suggesting you do what you can to save a man’s life,” replied Miss Templeton.

“We need bandages to protect the wound and bind the splints. The more, the better.” When there was no reply, the lady sighed and added, “Please, Miss Bacon.”

“Yes. Of course.”

And with that, there was another flurry of activity behind Arthur as Miss Templeton gave instructions concerning the width and number of bandages required. Just as he was about to mention transportation for Mr. Evans after the operation, Miss Templeton set others hurrying to see to that task as well, leaving Arthur free to focus on his work. Yet he couldn’t quite ignore the lady at his right.

Others worked around them, hurrying to do Miss Templeton’s bidding while she kept

Mr. Evans' legs still, lying across them without a hint of timidity and all the poise of a lady enjoying tea in her parlor. And despite having to twist oddly to manage it, she was already ready with the water, cleansing the wound before Arthur could think to ask.

With one final irrigation, he straightened and put away his tweezers. For all that it felt as though an hour must've passed, it hadn't been more than a few minutes—not nearly enough time for the laudanum to come into full effect. But there was no helping matters. The wound needed to be closed before Mr. Evans bled to death. Bandaging it instead would do some good, but the fellow had lost too much blood already.

Quickly, Arthur threaded a needle, praying he had enough to do the job. For all that the gash was long, it was a clean cut, requiring far less effort on his part to bind together, which was another miracle. Plenty of surgeons at the hospital managed an entire amputation and sutures in a mere ten minutes, and though Arthur couldn't boast such quick work, he hadn't lied to Miss Templeton; he knew what he was about, and his fingers moved quickly, laying each stitch with neat efficiency even as his assistants did their best to keep Mr. Evans still.

A final tug and Arthur tied off the thread; his assistant had the scissors on hand, handing them over so he could cut off the excess.

“Bandages and splints, please,” called Miss Templeton, easing off of Mr. Evans' legs.

Someone rushed forward, and Arthur took the proffered bundle of rolled fabric. Without prompting, Miss Templeton moved to the patient's foot and lifted it whilst Arthur covered the sutures with a layer of muslin and then laid out several straps of linen on the ground beneath. Carefully, Miss Templeton lowered the leg atop them, and Arthur positioned the splints on either side before guiding Mr. Jenkins to hold the supports in place as they tied off the splints, holding them firmly in place.

Mr. Evans groaned with the final jerks as they knotted the fabric bindings, and Mr. Jenkins moved away from the fellow's head so Johnny could kneel beside his father, taking his hand in his as he murmured words of comfort.

With a heavy sigh, Arthur sat back on his heels. "We needn't move him until the laudanum takes effect, which should be within the next few minutes."

Rubbing his forehead with his bicep once more, Arthur rose to his feet and held out his hand to Miss Templeton. The lady stared at it for a long moment—which was when he realized how bloody it was. Yet before he could retract the hand, she took hold of it, and he helped the lady to her feet.

And her eyes were level with his.

The flurry of activity hadn't allowed Arthur's thoughts to register much about the lady, even if her larger size ought to have been obvious when she'd managed Mr. Evans' legs without being batted away. Despite his being tall for a man, Miss Templeton matched him, and though she was by no means plump, the lady was broad-shouldered. This was no delicate creature who might be tossed about by the winter winds. No, she was perfectly proportioned and as different from the likes of Miss Bacon as a majestic oak was to a delicate weeping willow.

The lady's dark tresses were pulled up in a simple style, but the natural curl gave it a texture that kept it from looking plain and bestowed a softness to Miss Templeton's features that no amount of curling papers or irons could manage. A few locks had fallen free of her hairpins, brushing softly against her cheek—

"Allow me, Dr. Vaughn," she said, lifting the edges of her skirts to wipe his hands and jerking him from his perusal.

But Arthur pulled away. "Stains on a surgeon's clothes are a mark of pride. After all,

the more stains, the better the surgeon. Or so they say. There's no need to ruin your dress as well."

Miss Templeton's lips pulled into a wry smile as she motioned downward. Though his clothes had been mostly spared, her skirts were beyond salvaging. Dirt and blood caked the pale muslin, and Arthur had spent enough time attempting to clean such things from his clothes to know the gown was a lost cause. To say nothing of the ragged bits of petticoats that peeked out from below the hem.

Before he could mount another argument, Miss Templeton poured a ladle of water over his hands and scrubbed at the skin with her skirt. And Arthur could do nothing but submit to the ministrations.

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“Will his leg mend?” asked Johnny as his father finally drifted into unconsciousness.

As Miss Templeton continued to clean his hands, Arthur studied the man on the ground. “I’ve done my best to clean the wound, but I cannot promise anything other than I’ve given him his best chance.”

With her job done, Miss Templeton turned away, drawing Arthur’s attention as she cast her gaze about. Spying an overturned basket on the side of the road, she knelt beside it and pulled out a reticule before scooping the rest into the container. Arthur didn’t know what she was about, but he couldn’t help watching whilst trying to answer young Mr. Evans’ questions.

“The bandages will need to be changed every three days or whenever they are sullied. I suggest having another set of bandages on hand so you can rotate washing them whilst always keeping the wound covered,” said Arthur as he unrolled his sleeves. “Pay close attention to the coloring of the skin when you do so. If it is swollen and red, you ought to have it examined again. Keep your home free of any foul odors and do not leave the wound uncovered, as he is in a fragile state and exposure to any miasmas would be dangerous. Keep a wary eye for fever...”

Returning to Arthur’s side, Miss Templeton pulled out a small brass notebook and pencil, scribbling notes as he detailed the steps for recovery, including a few herbs that might be of use. Cupping would be quite useful in this situation, but he didn’t know if the Evans had the funds for such a procedure—but surely, they could purchase or forage a few plants for a tisane.

“Here, Johnny,” she said, pulling the paper free. “I’ve written it all down, so you

needn't remember it on your own."

"My thanks, Miss Templeton—"

"And I have a lotion that might help as well," she added, pulling a pot from her reticule. "It's taken some experimentation, but I've found that this mixture does wonders for wounds. When you change the bandages, rub it carefully onto the stitches. It may sting a bit, but it will help to stave off infection."

Arthur's brows rose at that. "What is in it?"

Miss Templeton's dark eyes turned to him. "The base is beeswax with several astringents mixed in—dried meadowsweet, marshmallow plant, and a pinch of zinc sulfate."

Before Arthur could comment on that (though he wasn't certain if his first question would be concerning that intriguing combination, that she'd fashioned it herself, or that the prepared lady carried around a pot of it in her reticule), the crowd set to work moving the wreckage away and directing the cart to transport Mr. Evans home.

Again, Miss Templeton waded into the thick of things, helping guide and organize the helpers with ease. Several men sent him questioning looks as though expecting him to step forward, but Arthur drifted into the background, pleased to let the capable lady take control.

With his work done, his limbs felt weak and shaky, giving witness to just how anxious he'd been about his patient. Having performed numerous surgeries in his career, Arthur would've thought that such nerves would no longer plague him, but each time he took hold of his scalpel, the chances of success were far too questionable to ever be at ease .

Arthur had told Miss Templeton the truth—he'd studied amongst the best doctors in London, and he knew too well how uncertain the fellow's future was. Surviving the procedure was naught but the first hurdle to overcome. The number of patients that succumbed to infection during recovery was so high that Mr. Evans had only an even chance that he would heal. Now, it was up to time and his family's ministrations to see him through the rest.

Seeing them lifting Mr. Evans, Arthur hurried back into the fray and helped to guide the patient into a bed of straw Miss Templeton had requested for him.

"My deepest thanks, Dr. Vaughn," said Johnny, the first in a string of people all eager to shake his hand and offer their congratulations.

"I am glad to be of service," he replied, his gaze drifting to his makeshift operating theater. Miss Templeton scooped her ruined cloak from the ground and draped it over her arm as she readied her basket. The others paid her little mind, though Arthur couldn't help his eyes as they turned to her again and again.

Finally, the wagon moved on its way, taking Mr. Evans home to recover as the others drifted away, eager to be off now that the afternoon's entertainment was over. Yet Arthur found himself standing in place, watching Miss Templeton.

He ought to say something to her. Needed to. Longed to, in all actuality. There were so many words in the English language, and any number of them would do for just such a conversation. Yet Arthur was stuck in place, staring at her like a simpleton.

"I am grateful you did not exaggerate your skills, Dr. Vaughn," she said, glancing in his direction. "You do fine work."

"As do you. I can say with all honesty you are an excellent dresser. I don't know if I've ever had a better assistant," he managed to say in return, though there was far

more he wished to say. A few small words were hardly sufficient to express his gratitude .

But it was an honest declaration and no mere kindness. During his years of study at St. Thomas' and Guy's Hospital, he'd served both as a dresser and as the surgeon whom the dressers assisted, and there were plenty of his classmates who excelled at the position—yet Miss Templeton had done far better, having anticipated his needs before Arthur had time to give them a thought, let alone a voice.

“I would've made do, but I am glad we had a surgeon on hand to manage it,” added Miss Templeton.

“I am certain you would've made more than simply 'do,' Miss Templeton. You are more capable than many of the men I studied with,” he replied. “Where did you learn so much about medicine?”

“My father was the local physician and surgeon, and a lifetime around such things inspired me to make a study of it.” Miss Templeton gave him a rueful smile before adding, “Watching you work was easy enough, but I do not know if I could've laid the stitches myself without growing ill.”

“I am certain you do yourself a disservice, Miss Templeton. You have nerves of steel—”

“Come, Dr. Vaughn!” called the coachman, drawing their attention to him. “We need to be on our way.”

Though the carriage was tucked into a passing place, giving the others ample room to get by, the stagecoach had been delayed far too long already. Yet Arthur's feet didn't move.

“There is space for one more, Miss Templeton,” he said, turning his gaze to her once more. “After the service you performed, a ride into town is the least we can do.”

“That is kind of you, sir, but it is not far—”

“I would gladly pay the fare.”

“You are so generous, but I assure you, I prefer to walk. Cutting across the fields will be faster than going by carriage.” Glancing at herself, she winced. “And I am certain to make quite a mess of the other passengers. I wouldn’t wish to ruin Miss Bacon’s gown. There is no need for us both to be in such an unfit state. ”

Then, with another broad grin, Miss Templeton reached out and squeezed his forearm. “But my thanks for your kindness, Dr. Vaughn. I am so very grateful you arrived when you did. We are lucky such a talented surgeon was passing through Oakham when we needed him.”

Arthur was all too aware of her hand touching him. With his jacket still abandoned on the ground and her gloves nowhere to be seen, there was naught but the linen of his sleeve between his skin and hers. It ought to have sent a flush of embarrassment to be in such a state of dishabille, but the happy pitter-patter of his pulse overshadowed it.

And he rather wished he hadn’t been so dutiful in unrolling his sleeves after he’d finished.

Clearing his throat, Arthur managed to say, “In truth, I am not passing through. This is to be my new home.”

“It is?” asked Miss Templeton, her eyes widening in a manner that made Arthur’s heart stutter. It was too much to hope that there was eagerness in her expression, but his pulse refused to see logic.

His tongue felt as though it were made of stone, refusing to work. But he had to ask, “Do you live in the neighborhood as well?” Miss Templeton’s silence made Arthur’s throat tighten, and he hurried to add, “It is good to know that such a capable dresser is in town, should I ever require more assistance.”

“Yes, I live in Oakham, sir, but I fear I must be on my way,” she said, taking a few steps away. “I have an appointment, and I am already tardy.”

“Of course, Miss Templeton,” he said with a nod, bending down to snatch his jacket and hat from the ground. “But as we are to be neighbors, I do hope our paths will cross again in the future.”

“Oakham is a small village. It is inevitable,” she replied as she gripped her basket and turned down the road, her footsteps moving quickly away—leaving Arthur staring after her.

Ducking through an opening in the hedgerows, she slipped into a nearby field, and for all that she looked like she’d been dragged behind a carriage, Miss Templeton bore herself with the confidence of a queen.

“Come now, Dr. Vaughn!” called the coachman, jerking Arthur from his thoughts.

With cheeks blazing as he realized just how long he’d been standing about gathering wool whilst leering at a lady, Arthur turned on his heel and pulled on his jacket as he climbed into the waiting carriage. Miss Bacon smiled, though her eyes lingered on his hairline, and Arthur’s face flamed as he settled his hat firmly upon his head once more.

“Well, that was certainly quite exciting,” said Mr. Bacon, dabbing at his forehead with his handkerchief as his ashen complexion regained a little color.

“Oh, indeed, Papa,” said Miss Bacon with a nod that set her ringlets bobbing. “Dr. Vaughn, you were so very heroic. Heaven knows what would’ve happened had you not arrived.”

“Miss Templeton was quite capable, and I am certain she could’ve managed,” replied Arthur as he watched the very person he spoke of through the window. Her back was to him as she drifted into the distance, and he couldn’t take his eyes from her.

“Yes, our Mr. Templeton is quite certain of herself,” mumbled Miss Bacon, and her father cleared his throat, giving her a narrowed look before turning his attention back to Arthur.

“We are happy to have a proper doctor in town,” he said. “We’ve been without one for far too long.”

“And I am happy to be here,” said Arthur with a faint smile.

Yes, Oakham was just the place for him.

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O h, this was not good. Not at all.

The thick grass at her feet gave the impression that the ground was far more even than it was, and though sanity warned that she ought to slow her steps, Violet Templeton couldn't. Her pace quickened as she crested the hill, bringing with it a clear view of the village of Oakham. Her home.

Stone buildings were scattered along the road, nestled amongst trees and shrubs almost as though the homes and businesses sprouted up from nature itself. A bit of sun peeked through the clouds, bringing out the warm hues of the russet slate roofs and hints of brown in the gray stone and imbuing the surrounding greenery with a spark of life that drove away the murky cast of the day.

The sight had never failed to lighten Violet's soul. Until now.

But then, her thoughts were not on the lovely picture before her. They were stuck with the gentleman rolling along the road this very minute, determined to rip her life apart at the seams. A doctor in town. A surgeon, physician, and apothecary all rolled into one. And poor though it may be, Violet's education was extensive enough to know Dr. Vaughn was skilled at his profession.

It felt as though knitting needles were doing their best to knot her insides, and Violet's steps carried her along until gravity took over as she came down the other side of the hill. It was more luck than skill that kept her on her feet, but her thoughts were far too preoccupied to give her path any attention.

A proper physician in town! What were they to do?

Violet drew in a sharp breath and scowled at herself: that wasn't entirely fair of her. Papa had plied his trade well and trained his son with equal tenacity. Isaac lacked their father's work ethic, but with Violet assisting him, the town didn't lack "proper" medical attention.

Regardless, Oakham couldn't sustain two physicians.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, Violet marched forward, her eyes not on the passing buildings as she wove her way to the Gadds' home. And then she paused.

What if Dr. Vaughn was settling in Bentmoor? Being new to the area, he likely didn't know the difference between the two villages, and the other was of a size to warrant another physician; Bentmoor already boasted a pair of them, but the population was at a tipping point and a third might be feasible.

Or one of them might be leaving. Though Violet hadn't heard any such news, it was possible. With those far more reasonable possibilities settling in her thoughts, the tension in her chest released, allowing her to take a full breath.

What London-educated doctor would settle in a village like Oakham? Even Bentmoor was far too unimportant a place for such a thing. For all his skill, Papa had been like most country healers—home-taught and was a simple "Mister," not "Doctor." There was no call for the lofty learning found in London and Edinburgh. And even if such a distinguished doctor found himself wishing to settle in the quiet county of Devon, he'd choose Plymouth or Exeter. Certainly not their sparse corner.

Dr. Vaughn might be settling in the area, but Bentmoor was some eight miles away, and the vast majority of the villagers would still employ Isaac Templeton over traveling such a great distance. No matter how skilled the new doctor was.

With that, Violet was able to turn her feet back to their work once more, her steps

coming lighter than before, and when she arrived on the Gadds' doorstep, she gave a bright knock on the wood.

A moment later it swung open, and she swept inside, setting her basket on the table in the entryway. But when Violet turned to hand her cloak to the maid, she found the girl staring with eyes as wide as saucers before bursting into tears. Which was the precise moment that Violet recalled the state she was in.

Dr. Vaughn had entirely distracted her.

"Good gracious," she muttered to herself.

"What is the matter?" called Diana as she swept in from the parlor to find Sally babbling incoherently as tears ran down the girl's cheeks. "Saints above, Vi. What happened?"

Rubbing at her forehead, Violet drew in a deep breath. "Mr. Evans wounded his leg when his cart overturned, and I assisted in mending it. I ought to have returned home and changed, but apparently, my wits were addled by it all, and I came straight here because I was so very late. I look a fright."

"Not at all," replied Diana with all the generous dishonesty befitting a friend. "You can borrow one of my gowns..."

But that suggestion drifted off into silence as Violet's brows rose at that nonsense. Beyond being a full head shorter, Diana was equally thinner.

"I really should just return home..." said Violet with no conviction whatsoever. It wasn't far, but after having walked several miles to deliver Mrs. Johnson's medicines and the upset with Mr. Evans, she knew she wouldn't have the determination to return.

“Nonsense,” said Diana with a frown. “I know that expression, Vi, and if I allow you to escape, you shan’t return.”

And with that, she ushered her friend into a bedchamber. In quick succession, a pot of water appeared, and Violet washed away the remnant blood plastered to her skin, which did much to erase her discomfort, but when Diana procured an apron that covered the majority of her gown, Violet felt a semblance of normality; by the time she came down to the parlor, a sheet was laid across the sofa, protecting not only the fabric but her peace of mind.

“I do wish we could give your gown a soak,” said Diana as she ushered her friend to the seat.

“I fear it is a loss,” said Violet with a sigh. She only hoped the mess hadn’t soaked into her underthings, else she would have to replace everything, and the cost of a cloak, gown, and petticoats was dear enough. “But where is Felicity? Do not tell me she is even more tardy than I am.”

Setting herself to the task of pouring the tea, Diana gave a shake of her head. “She begged off. With her husband’s family descending on them soon, she is in a dither about preparing everything. In her delicate state, she is already worn to the bone, but with that added anxiety, I doubt we will see her much until after her lying-in.”

“The poor dear,” murmured Violet, taking the proffered cup.

Though she wasn’t happy with her tardiness, one blessing (beyond her helping Mr. Evans and Dr. Vaughn) was that the tea had cooled enough for her to enjoy it immediately. Violet hadn’t noticed until that very moment just how parched she was, and like the ill-mannered swine she was proving to be during this visit, she emptied the cup in one drink. Diana’s brows rose and a hint of a smirk twisted her lips as she poured another.

“This is heavenly,” said Violet after a genteel sip. “Is it lemon and elderflower? I can taste a hint of something else, though I cannot say what it is.”

“Apple,” supplied Diana before quickly rushing to add, “But enough of that. I want to know what happened. Tell me all.”

And in quick succession, Violet supplied the details, though so much of it felt like a jumble of actions and worries. As she spoke, her heart opened in a silent petition that Mr. Evans’ leg healed properly. Dr. Vaughn had done his work well, but the farmer and his family’s future rested on the hope that he would heal without complication—of which there was no guarantee. Though his sons were old enough to manage the farm on their own, to lose a leg would be a mighty blow to them all.

Or to lose him altogether.

“We were lucky that such a talented surgeon was on hand,” said Violet. “It seems he is settling in the area. Bentmoor, I believe.”

Diana’s cup lowered, hitting the saucer with an undignified clink of the china, but it was her friend’s ashen expression that had Violet straightening.

“What is it?” she asked, but Diana merely shook her head. “Out with it. What is the matter?”

“I haven’t wanted to say a word because I couldn’t believe the rumor. It seemed too ludicrous. Ridiculous, in fact. It is entirely insensible,” rambled Diana, her brows pulling tight together.

“Please say what you are thinking.” Violet set her cup down with more delicacy than her friend had demonstrated, though her nerves were strung tight because of the agitation vibrating from Diana.

“I heard a physician is moving to Oakham. He let the Roberts’ home and means to practice here.”

Ice ran down Violet’s spine as she clasped her hands tight in her lap.

“I know it is far from ideal, but I am certain all will be well,” said Diana, shifting closer to take her friend’s hands in hers. “Your brother is a fine physician.”

Yet the lady spoke with the same tone she’d employed to assure Violet that she didn’t look as though she’d been ravaged by a pack of wolves. Despite valuing honesty in their friendship, this was just the sort of moment when such gentle lies were needed—yet they did little to calm Violet’s churning insides .

“I do not understand what has come over him,” said Violet with a frown. “Isaac always struggled to apply himself to his studies, but he did well enough under Father’s tutelage. But since Papa’s passing, I feel like I must forever harp on Isaac to do anything.”

“No doubt he feels the loss keenly,” said Diana.

Violet did not respond to that, for it would do no good to point out that it had been four years, and the time for deep mourning had long passed. To say nothing of the fact that she had also suffered that loss and managed to do the work required to help her family survive and serve the people of Oakham. If not for Violet’s skill, which quite compensated for Isaac’s deficit, they all would be in dire straits.

“But regardless, there is no need to fret. Your family’s medicines are a wonder,” added Diana with a bright smile. “Father says he would rather purchase Templeton tablets and tinctures than any he finds in London or Bath. This Dr. Vaughn cannot compete with that.”

For all that her earlier statement had been born of kindness rather than truth, Diana's tone shifted, ringing with the conviction she felt, which helped to soothe Violet's troubled heart. Whatever else, she could be proud of that.

Yet it wouldn't be enough. Not if Dr. Vaughn truly were here to stay.

"And it is only a rumor," continued Diana. "I didn't say anything earlier because there is no reason to borrow trouble. Why would Dr. Vaughn settle in Oakham of all places? It is ridiculous."

"No doubt you are right, Diana," said Violet, offering up her own delicate deception. It was silly to speak the words aloud because neither party truly believed them, yet there was nothing to be done at present, so they embraced denial for a little while longer.

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When people tossed about the word “assembly,” it conjured all sorts of images. A spacious room with a flock of musicians stationed at one side and every living creature within several miles crushed together. Then there were the obligatory card and tea rooms, in which the older generations hid lest they be subjected to the exhausting country dances and reels, which were far less dignified than the stately minuets and cotillions of their youth.

The master of ceremonies always did his best to outdo his predecessor, ensuring he wrung every last farthing from the ticket fees and poured it into more candles, better musicians, and finer food, though the offerings always paled in comparison to the private balls the upper crust favored.

Yet all of Arthur’s experience was for naught when he stepped into Bentmoor’s assembly rooms. Or rather, its coaching inn. It was entirely logical that such a remote area wouldn’t boast a building set aside specifically for public functions, yet Arthur was still astonished to see such a lively party stuffed into such a small setting.

The dark wood walls gave the illusion that it was an even tighter fit, and though there were a handful of candles burning in the sconces, it wasn’t enough to combat the illusion. A few fellows sat to one side with a trio of stringed instruments and a flute, and though Arthur wasn’t certain how the music would carry above the crowd, it was probably for the best. They couldn’t fit much more inside, for there were dozens of people milling about. Perhaps a few of the rooms upstairs had been pressed into service for tea and cards, but Arthur couldn’t say for certain.

It was an odd sight. Jarring, really. When he’d been told of the assembly, his mind had summoned far different images than what stood before him. Yet Arthur couldn’t

say he disliked the foreign yet familiar feel to the gathering.

And despite all the differences between London and Bentmoor, one thing remained the same: the chaos. One would be forgiven for assuming a quiet country town would have a similarly quiet country dance, but in that regard, the assembly rivaled anything Town boasted. People shuffled about the room, carefully weaving between the circles of friends, and though Arthur was certain they would manage space enough for dancing, it was difficult to see how.

Bentmoor certainly boasted “a crush.” And Arthur was already exhausted.

“Stop looking so dour, Vaughn,” said Finch, glancing at the fellow from the corner of his eye. “From your expression, one might think you were facing an execution.”

“With the manner in which the ladies are eyeing me, it isn’t far from the truth,” said Arthur as yet another feminine gaze turned in his direction. There was a pointedness to the attention that made his throat tighten and his palms sweat in a most embarrassing fashion. Thank goodness for evening gloves.

“It is good for you to mix in society,” said Finch, nodding at the gathering. “As a new addition, you need to seize every opportunity to mix in good company. Many here are from Bentmoor and other nearby towns, but many of your potential patients will be in attendance as well. ”

Arthur’s heart sank like a stone at the statement. There was nothing more likely to set his stomach churning than the term “potential patients.” It was the rallying war cry of doctors before they ventured into battle, determined to carry off as many as they could and secure victory over all the other hapless doctors attempting to provide for themselves and their families. For all that medicine was a gentlemanly profession, they were as cutthroat as pirates and willing to stab their friends in the back if it meant securing a new patient.

“You are one to talk,” replied Arthur. “You look as pleased to be here as I am.”

Finch’s brow furrowed, and he slanted a look at the crowd. “I would be far more pleased if my family didn’t insist on monopolizing my wife’s time.”

Following the fellow’s gaze, Arthur spied Mrs. Felicity Finch at the far end of the room with several others gathered around her. With a broad grin, the lady led her sister-in-law around, introducing her to the neighborhood, and for all of Finch’s faux grumbling, there was a tenderness in his eyes as he watched his wife. And Arthur couldn’t help smiling in turn.

Though he hadn’t known Finch well when they’d both lived in London, their paths had crossed enough to know the gentleman hadn’t been searching for such felicity. Yet now, Finch was settled in the country with a wife and a child on the way.

Good for him.

Yet even as that thought settled in his mind, Arthur’s heart gave a pang. At two and thirty, he was hardly past his prime, yet with each passing year, he couldn’t help but wonder if Mrs. Vaughn would ever appear. Granted, in order for her to do so, he’d have to find a way to string comprehensible words together, which was far from a given, but surely, there was a lady in the world who fit the bill.

“My dear Jack,” called a gentleman as he sidled up beside Finch and threw an arm around his shoulder, jostling him in a manner that elder brothers everywhere employed to annoy their siblings. “This is a far finer evening than I’d imagined.”

“My name isn’t Jack,” said Finch with a frown .

The elder Mr. Finch’s expression dropped to match his brother’s before lightening in a smile once more. “Do not be so serious, Lewis. It’s only a nickname. A jest. That is

all. I meant no harm by it.”

“You are the only one who persists in using it, though the rest of the family honors my request,” replied Finch. “And only my wife calls me Lewis.”

“As ‘Finch’ is my name as well, you cannot expect me to use it,” replied his brother. “That is ridiculous.”

Despite several decades to their credit, the brothers continued to bicker back and forth. Perhaps not in the same manner as they had in their youth (as they didn’t resort to fisticuffs), but for all that people claimed to mature as they grew older, every heart hid a child just beneath the surface.

With two older brothers, Arthur was all too familiar with such matters. Though Franklin had followed in Father’s footsteps to become a respected surgeon and teacher in London, in private, such maturity evaporated when his younger brothers were on hand to tease and twit. Terrance had chosen to employ his skills in the navy, and despite having learned discipline in that profession, the ships were akin to schoolyards when the men were not engaged in battles. Whenever his brother returned home for a visit, Arthur was still subjected to pinches, punches, and comments that ended with “it’s only a jest.”

Arthur’s attention drifted from the brotherly spat, and his gaze roamed the room—though he was only slightly willing to admit that his eyes sought out a particular figure. With her height, it ought to be easy to spy Miss Templeton. He searched several times to no avail, but Arthur wouldn’t admit defeat.

“Do many people from Oakham attend?” he asked, the question coming before he could think better of it. “It is quite a distance for an assembly.”

Finch paused in his argument with his brother long enough to reply, “Oakham is too

small to warrant many such gatherings, and so those who can manage the journey do. Tonight, every carriage will be filled to bursting to bring as many as possible—”

“Why, Mr. Finch and Dr. Vaughn, how lovely to see you tonight,” said a young lady who threw herself in front of the gentlemen before sweeping into a curtsy. “Mama and I were hoping you wouldn’t be too fatigued to attend. With the journey from London, settling into your new home, and entertaining your callers, you must be exhausted.”

An older lady (presumably the aforementioned mother) joined her at her elbow, the pair beaming at Arthur as though he were a roast dinner after a particularly long Sabbath. Scouring his memory, he dredged through the various names he’d learned over the past week, straining to recall all the many Smiths, Thompsons, and Joneses that had called on him.

Rush? Rowe? It was something with an R.

“It is good to be here, Miss Roper,” replied Arthur, speaking the name just as it came to the tip of his tongue. In his mind, he repeated it several times, looking between mother and daughter to fix it in his memory.

For all that he was keen to start this new chapter of his life, he’d underestimated just how tiresome it was to be surrounded by strangers. His father’s reputation and status in the medical profession had provided Arthur with an easy entrance into society, and though there were always new acquaintances to make, one wasn’t engulfed in a sea of strangers. But then, this area was small enough that once Arthur managed this hurdle, there would be far fewer new names to learn, as the populace rarely changed.

In the meantime, he simply had to struggle along.

Though he recalled their names—which earned him beaming smiles from mother and

daughter—he couldn't say whether they were residents of Oakham, Bentmoor, or one of the other villages in the area. His home had seen a flood of visitors as people welcomed him into the neighborhood, and it was difficult enough keeping their names straight, let alone any other details .

“And how are you settling in?” asked Miss Roper with a smile and a tilt of her head that caused the ringlet framing her face to bounce. Her expression was so bright, her attention fully fixed on him as though his answer was of utmost importance as she batted at his arm.

Which was precisely when Arthur forgot how to form words.

Despite quite a good many flowing through his mind, his mouth refused to obey any commands. His cravat tightened around his neck, threatening to choke him as he stared at the young lady. A sensation that only grew when her eyes drifted to the top of his head. Her gaze was there and gone in a flash, but with no hat to hide behind tonight, there was no covering that deficiency.

Arthur may not have been grateful when his hair had begun thinning at the ripe old age of nineteen, but at present, he was quite glad to have grown accustomed to those glances and the slight strain of the smiles that accompanied them. Or accustomed enough that it didn't discompose him when Miss Roper's expression tightened. He had reasons enough to be discomposed and needn't add this to the list.

Before he could form a proper (though simple) response, another lady and chaperone approached with a gushing, “Why, there you are, Dr. Vaughn! How lovely to see you.”

For all that he'd been standing with Finch in peace, Miss Roper's arrival hailed a shift, for more began to gather around like bees to a flower—if the bees were giving each other narrowed looks and silent warnings to leave.

“I do hate to interrupt,” said Finch with a smile for the gathering crowd. “But I fear there is a gentleman I need to introduce Dr. Vaughn to. Please excuse us.”

And with that, the gentleman led Arthur away, not slowing when the ladies attempted to cling to the conversation. Meanwhile, Arthur drew in a breath and readied himself for another introduction. At least it was a gentleman, which was far easier to manage .

But when they stepped out the front door into the night air, Finch gave Arthur a slanted smile. “You looked in need of rescue.”

There was a hint of a question in his tone, and Arthur pretended not to notice; chatting with gentlemen about medicine, politics, sports, and the like was a vast deal different than conversing with a lady.

“I have to admit that I am a little astonished by my reception,” replied Arthur with a furrowed brow. “With their prestige and success, my older brothers are usually the center of attention.”

Crossing his arms, Finch leaned against the building and nodded to another gentleman as he passed. “You will find it vastly different here. With the war on the Continent still raging with no end in sight, many of the young eligible men have joined the army and navy in hopes of securing a fortune. You possess a good living and are suitably handsome, which will leave every unmarried lady from seventeen to seventy vying for your attention.”

Arthur’s brows shot upward, his cravat tightening instantly. Yet as he considered the possibility, the strain eased. Wasn’t this precisely what he wanted? In London, he was merely one of any number of gentlemen of decent family and income, and there always seemed to be someone “better suited” for the ladies he wished to court. In Devon, it seemed the tables had turned.

But was that for good or ill?

“You didn’t mention that when you wrote to me—” But Arthur’s words cut out abruptly when a voice called from behind him.

“There you are, Dr. Vaughn.”

Gliding to his side, Miss Bacon grinned broadly at him, a coy spark in her gaze—just before it flicked to the top of his head and back. Arthur’s expression tightened, and he drew in a deep breath as he tried to formulate a greeting .

“You promised me a dance, sir,” she said with a laugh as she brushed a hand across his lapel as though to rid him of some lint, and Arthur’s spine stiffened at that liberty, his throat growing dry.

Much had happened in the past fortnight since he’d begun his journey to Devon, and in that whirlwind, many details had been sadly overlooked or forgotten, but Arthur could say with all confidence that his asking Miss Bacon to dance hadn’t been among them. The young lady watched him with a glint of challenge to her gaze, as though wondering if he would call out the bald-faced lie for what it was.

There was no point in spitting in the face of an opportunity. Though Arthur’s hands began to sweat profusely beneath his gloves, he motioned to take hold of hers. Miss Bacon accepted the offer, her head held high as they strode back into the inn.

Now, he just had to sort out what to say to the lady.

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Arm in arm, Diana and Violet stepped through the door of the Three Crowns. Excitement buzzed through Violet as she gazed out upon the gathering. One might think that a lady with two and thirty years to her name would be well past the age when such entertainments held any pleasure, but her heart soared.

The Wolvertons had outdone themselves tonight. Where the innkeeper usually served his libations, the master of ceremonies had arrayed the counter with a variety of drinks and nibbles to keep the party watered and fed for the evening, though Violet had heard rumor that one of the private parlors upstairs had been converted into a tearoom, should they require a seat. There certainly was no space here.

Dancers lined the floor, moving through their figures carefully so as not to collide with the others. Onlookers stood shoulder to shoulder, as there wasn't room enough for them to gather in groups, the way they were wont to do in other circumstances. Thankfully, the Wolvertons were fond of long breaks between sets to allow for milling.

The music rang out, and Violet beamed at the quartet they'd procured. Thank the heavens. Last assembly, they'd made do with three, but it was beastly difficult to hear the tune with so much noise.

This was truly magnificent.

And most especially, Violet was eager to feel the wave of heat enveloping her. No doubt she would curse the sweltering temperatures later, but it would take some time before the gooseflesh on her arms faded. With summer well underway, one ought to manage with only a shawl, but fate was determined to mock her; the air outside was

bracing, and Violet hadn't the funds to replace her cloak yet.

Slipping between the pair, Osborn Gadd inserted himself in the middle of his sister and her friend, taking them both by the arms. When he touched Violet's arm, he grimaced.

"You would think an intelligent lady such as yourself would know how to properly clothe herself," he said with a raised brow. "Where is your cloak, madam? Even with my gloves on, I can feel that you are chilled to the bone."

Violet laughed and smirked. "Hush, dear sir, else you will bring attention to my plot. What better way to warm oneself than to find a gallant young man to hold me tight?"

Giving a choking squawk, Osborn chuckled. "Ah, I hadn't thought of that, Vi. Surely, you are a mastermind at luring in men."

"As is evident by my spinster status."

"What is evident is your good sense at not taking on any young fool who looks your way," he replied.

"Is that so," she said in a wry tone.

Diana leaned around her brother with concern twisting her brow. "But are you chilled? I do hope you do not catch cold."

"Nonsense. Our Vi is made of sterner stuff," said Osborn, but then his laughter faded, and his brow furrowed as he considered Violet. "Do you wish for a drink? I am certain they have something that will warm you up in a trice."

"Off with you now," said Violet, pulling free of him and pushing him toward the

dancers. “I see Miss Giles standing just there. Go plague her. ”

Osborn’s eyes brightened, and his spine straightened as all thoughts of his sister and her friend vanished, dismissing them as though they’d never existed. Without a word of farewell, he drifted off to chase the young lady who was so adeptly toying with his heart at present, and Violet’s exuberance dimmed at the all-too-familiar dismissal. It was ridiculous to feel even a spark of indignation or hurt, as experience had taught her well just how quickly a person could be forgotten when a prettier face appeared.

Scoffing at herself, she cast that silly thought aside.

Taking her by the arm once more, Diana let out a sigh as her brother wove through the crowd with eager determination. “My brother is a fool.”

“Yes, but we wouldn’t like him so very much if he were sensible,” replied Violet.

Diana considered that and nodded. “Too true. For all that he is older, one would think he was the younger sibling by some years.”

Violet held back a huff of laughter at the manner in which Diana said the word “older.” There was a hint of a shudder to it, as though to be past the age of thirty was ancient, indeed. But Violet paid it no mind, for Diana meant nothing by the slight, and she remembered what it was like to be on the earlier side of thirty when anything else felt ancient.

But Violet’s attention veered away from that when she spied another friendly face in the crowd. “I see Felicity.”

“Where?” asked Diana, for she couldn’t see past the crush of people, despite rising to her tiptoes.

It took some maneuvering for the ladies to wade through the crowd, and though having the set end might be viewed as a boon (as it allowed them to cut across the dance floor), it only added to the chaos as couples shifted about. But with effort, they drew up before their friend, and Diana quickly embraced Felicity, bussing her on the cheek.

“How good to see you both,” said Felicity before reaching back to a pair that stood just behind her. “And this is my sister-in-law, Mrs. Annette Finch, and her daughter, Miss Joan Finch. And my brother-in-law is somewhere in this mess, though I haven’t spied him or my husband in some time.”

“No doubt they are causing trouble at the card tables,” said Mrs. Finch with a hint of a laugh. “Just as my two youngest are likely plaguing their nursemaids at home.”

“It is so good to meet you, finally,” said Diana. “We’ve been eagerly anticipating your arrival.”

Violet managed to cover the smile that threatened to emerge at that statement, for innocuous though it sounded, the anticipation hadn’t been of the pleasant variety.

“Oh, we are equally eager to be here for such a happy time,” said Mrs. Finch as she smiled at her sister-in-law. Felicity echoed the expression, resting a hand upon the swell of her stomach, though her expression became strained when Mrs. Finch added, “Losing my father-in-law was such a shock to us all, and my husband is quite determined to honor his father’s legacy and do his best as the new head of the family—including welcoming the newest member. My father-in-law would expect no less.”

When the lady’s attention turned, Violet widened her eyes and met Felicity’s with an amused smirk, which her friend returned in spades. Despite having never met Mr. Darius Finch, Violet had heard her friend speak of her husband’s family often enough

to know that all had not been sunshine and laughter in the Finch household. But that was the nature of death. When one passed beyond this life, those left behind suffered fits of forgetfulness, ignoring any flaw or fault in order to paint the deceased as an angel or saint.

Mrs. Finch turned her attention back to her sister-in-law, and Felicity's smile faded into something genuine as they took each other by the arm. The faint tightness in Violet's chest eased at the sight. For all Felicity's fretting, it seemed as though the visit was a pleasant one. So far.

"You two look a picture," said Felicity, giving the pair an eager once-over .

Violet ran a hand down her skirts, which were far plainer than those of the ladies surrounding her. The Gadds were by no means in the same realm as the Finches—with their gowns of silk and lace—but they were wealthy enough to afford a carriage and six household servants (two of whom were manservants, no less), and Diana's gowns were the creations of a modiste in Bentmoor.

"I do love this gown," admitted Violet. Then, with a wry smile, she added, "Though Mama thinks the stripes are not becoming on a lady of my stature."

Felicity straightened. "She said that?"

"Not explicitly. She would never be so critical, but our tastes in fashion are vastly different, and though she never says a word against my choices, there is an expression that crosses her face that reveals her feelings. I've learned to interpret her subtle cues."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Finch, snapping open her fan to bat at herself as her gaze swept down the length of her. "Whilst I know most avoid stripes on such a tall figure, the thicker width of the pattern is quite becoming. Not something I would've chosen

but looks lovely on you, nonetheless. Especially with the contrasting swath of thin stripes that form your sleeves and the strip along your décolletage. Having them at an angle and different size is unique and eye-catching.”

Violet cursed her wayward tongue. She knew better than to say such a thing. When it came to fashion, Myra and Violet Templeton were quite content with a live-and-let-live philosophy, but others were unable to maintain such a sanguine attitude and always swept in to buoy up Violet’s supposed hurt feelings, never believing that Mama’s disapproval meant nothing more than a difference of opinion.

“And the pale blue is so flattering with your dark eyes,” said Diana. “Just the perfect shade for you.”

“To say nothing of your coiffure,” said Felicity with an envious glance at her curls. “Though my hair has just as much natural curl as yours, mine is more wild and unruly.”

Holding up her hands to hold them off, Violet shook her head. “I didn’t say such things to elicit compliments, ladies. It was an off-the-cuff remark. That is all. I adore my dress and am happy with my appearance. I was simply laughing to myself because Mama tries so very hard to hide her disapproval and fails miserably every time.”

And perhaps she had been a touch jealous of their finer gowns, but their enthusiastic praise banished the last of those thoughts. Less because of the compliments and more because they allowed her to recognize that insidious envy did nothing but sour a lovely night. Violet Templeton would never be as graceful as Felicity or petite like Diana, and wallowing in such unassailable and unalterable truths did no good.

“Mrs. Finch, you must explore Exmoor before the summer is over,” said Violet, grasping onto a change in subject. “And the coast, if you can manage it.”

“But you must make a trip there in August when the heather is blooming,” added Diana. “It is divine with all the moors covered in a purple haze.”

Violet nodded emphatically. “Quite so.”

“Oh, I had forgotten about the blooming heather,” said Felicity with a sigh and a wan smile. “It’s been so long since I last lived in Oakham that it slipped my mind. If I’d been thinking properly, I would’ve scheduled our wedding a month or two earlier so Lewis and I could’ve arrived in time to see it last year. I still have fond memories of picnicking on the moors as a child.”

As though summoned by magic, Violet’s mind flooded with memories of those times they’d shared before Felicity’s father passed, leaving her in the care of her uncle and taking her to far away Plymouth. The girl had left at the tender age of twelve, so many of Violet’s memories were hazy things, but a few remained as bright and happy as ever.

Violet felt a prick in her heart as she recalled the many times she’d visited Farleigh Manor, searching for news that Felicity and her uncle had returned for a visit—only to be disappointed again and again. Violet still couldn’t quite believe that the newly married Mrs. Felicity Finch had chosen to settle in Oakham, rather than in her house in Plymouth.

“Do you recall the time Father insisted on taking us all out on a fine summer’s day, but by the time we arrived, a deluge was pouring from the heavens?” asked Violet, her tone far more wistful than intended.

Felicity’s eyes widened, a laugh escaping as she glanced at her sister-in-law. “He’d made such a fuss about this perfect day that we were giddy by the time we arrived, and we couldn’t be stopped.”

But Mrs. Finch took that confession with wide eyes. “It is so like a man not to worry about giving you a chill.”

“Father always said it made no difference,” replied Violet. “Temperatures aren’t the culprits, rather miasmas in the air. People get sick as often on dry days as they do rainy ones.”

“I am certain that is not true,” replied Mrs. Finch with a frown. “If I get caught in a downpour, I always feel poorly afterward.”

“Perhaps, but I find that people often feel poorly when they expect to,” added a voice from behind Violet.

Turning, she spied Dr. Vaughn standing there, his hands tucked behind him, and her heart sank to her toes.

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“Are you claiming it is imagined, sir?” asked Mrs. Finch. “I assure you, my sore throat and pounding head are not feigned.”

“I would never dare to say so, madam,” replied Dr. Vaughn with a slight bow of his head. “I am merely stating what I have observed in my profession.”

“Isn’t that like a physician?” asked Mrs. Finch with a dismissive wave. “Each is convinced they hold the answers to life’s mysteries, yet it is near impossible to find two who agree. My doctor is convinced cold temperatures are deadly.”

Dr. Vaughn gave her a faint smile. “I understand your frustration, madam, and I assure you that despite the assertions of most medical practitioners, medicine provides few answers. Most of it is guesswork and supposition.”

Felicity’s brows rose at that. “Your colleagues would burn you at the stake as a heretic if you said as much to them.”

“My father would flog me,” he replied with a smile. Then, turning his attention to Violet, he added, “I wanted to tell you that I called on Mr. Evans this afternoon.”

Her muscles clenched as surprise jolted through her. There was only one reason a farmer’s family would send for a doctor. “Please tell me his leg is not infected. I called on him yesterday and all seemed well.”

Dr. Vaughn held up a calming hand. “Not at all. I visited to set my heart at ease, and I only wanted to assure you that he is healing nicely. I spied a little redness, but not a worrying amount, and if it grows any worse, I will bleed him, which should set him

to rights in a trice. They cannot afford to do so unless necessary, so I am hoping it will sort itself out on its own. And though I advised him to keep weight off his leg for a while longer, I do not believe the bone is fractured.”

Violet let out a gust of breath, her body relaxing once more. “Thank heavens. I feared the worst.”

“And how are you two acquainted?” asked Felicity with a frown, her gaze darting between the pair.

“You haven’t heard about the gallant Dr. Vaughn, who performed surgery in the middle of the road?” asked Diana with far more enthusiasm than Violet liked hearing when discussing the interloping physician.

“Between being ill and occupied with settling our visitors into Farleigh Manor, I fear I haven’t heard any of the tittle-tattle,” said Felicity. “Usually, there is little to miss, but I fear this was not a good time to be out of touch with the village rumor mill.”

In quick succession, Diana relayed that which was common knowledge (much of which was far more than Violet had recounted), and the Finch ladies took in the story with bated breath. Mrs. Finch even opened her fan as though the very mention of the surgery was causing her to grow faint, and her sister-in-law patted her hand.

“That is quite exciting,” said Mrs. Finch.

Felicity nodded. “Quite. How lucky that you were on hand, Dr. Vaughn.”

But the gentleman shook his head. “While I was quite happy to be of assistance, I assure you Miss Templeton was managing without me. ”

“You are too kind, sir,” replied Violet, her cheeks warming. “I assure you that your

work is what saved his leg.”

“And I assure you that is not so, Miss Templeton,” he replied with a frown. “It was you who thought to lay your cloak to keep him out of the dirt as much as possible and rallied the onlookers—who were more concerned with gawking than being of use. To say nothing of the fact that you were as good as three dressers. Time was of the essence, and because of your assistance, I was able to focus entirely on the surgery, which saved his leg and possibly his life.”

Dr. Vaughn spoke with absolute certainty, as though his words were more than mere opinion but hardened fact. Immovable and unassailable. And Violet felt as fidgety as a child at church. Whatever chill she might’ve felt a moment ago fled at the flood of warmth his compliment drew forth. It burned in her heart, spreading through her until it suffused her entire being.

“Then it is a blessing we were both there, sir,” said Violet.

Dr. Vaughn bowed in acquiescence, though there was a challenge in his eye that said he did not fully accept her statement. Which only made her fidget more. But when the conversation lapsed, the gentleman shifted in place, his implacable expression softening as his gaze darted between the ladies and his feet.

“I do apologize for having interrupted. I didn’t mean to... I had hoped to...” he mumbled.

With a furrowed brow, Violet stared at the fellow, wondering what had him so discomposed all of the sudden. But it was at that moment that Mrs. Finch straightened, her eyes following Dr. Vaughn’s gaze, though with a far more determined air.

“Are you enjoying the assembly, sir?” asked Mrs. Finch.

Dr. Vaughn shuffled in place, his gaze drifting to Violet's toes. "Quite."

Clearing his throat, he straightened his shoulders. "Might I... If it wouldn't be impertinent, that is—Miss Templeton, if you are not otherwise engaged..."

The fellow seemed disinclined to finish his statement, and Violet stared at him.

"I am certain she would be honored," said Mrs. Finch with a broad smile, drawing Violet's attention. The lady's own eyes seemed to be communicating something, though Violet couldn't fathom the meaning, and Dr. Vaughn seemed determined to hem and haw until dawn arrived. With a sharp jerk of her head, Mrs. Finch nodded toward the dance floor.

"Oh." Violet straightened, blinking at the rest of the group, who watched her with equal amounts of puzzlement. "Are you asking me to dance, Dr. Vaughn?"

Other ladies might've managed a coquettish tone to the question with a hint of flirtation in their smile, but honest confusion rang through Violet's words. And she wished she'd kept her mouth shut, for the gentleman's gaze rose to meet hers again with a flicker of disappointment as though her incredulity had been a dismissal.

"I apologize if that came out sounding sharper than intended. You simply surprised me," said Violet as she tried to gather her wits. "But yes, I would be honored."

Strain eased from his shoulders as he held out his hand to her, and she took it, allowing herself to be guided toward the area in which dancers were beginning to congregate. But when they arrived in the haphazard grouping, they stood there silently.

"It appears that the dancing isn't quite ready to begin," said Violet.

Dr. Vaughn's lips pinched together, and he nodded, his gaze darting around them but never settling fully on her for more than a heartbeat. Which left Violet free to examine the gentleman. Not two minutes ago, he had eagerly and animatedly spoken about their meeting, appearing entirely at ease. But now, he refused to talk.

"You are brave to attend an assembly so soon after arriving," said Violet. "Travel is so exhausting on its own, let alone settling into a new home. I wouldn't have bothered attending, as these events are bound to leave you even more fatigued. Though my friends would say I'm a spoilsport for saying such a thing."

Dr. Vaughn's lips twitched into a faint smile. "Then you do not care for assemblies?"

"I adore them." Canting her head to the side, Violet considered that. "But like most things, I prefer them in moderation. As it takes so many of us such a long time to travel to Bentmoor, they are loath to end it at a reasonable hour, and it grows less and less pleasant as the evening wears on whilst the guests tipple far too much punch, the room grows stifling, and the aroma becomes ever more pungent. To say nothing of the fact that I am reaching an age where the thought of dancing 'til dawn inspires more groans than glee."

That earned her a proper chuckle, and something in his posture eased. "I have never heard a dance described thusly, though it is accurate."

Violet shared in the laugh, but Dr. Vaughn did nothing to keep the silence from returning. The pair stood there, avoiding looking at each other, and Violet's wits fled her, leaving her with nothing more to say. As the silence dragged on, his brows furrowed, but Dr. Vaughn made no move to counter her question with one of his own.

Why had he invited her to dance if he didn't wish to? The question was odd, to be certain, and Violet tried to reconcile the calm gentleman she'd met on the road to Oakham with the fidgety fellow before her.

Dr. Vaughn was broadly built, yet he seemed to shrink into himself, giving the impression that he was shorter than her, though she knew him to be the same height. As he rubbed his hands on his thighs, his blue eyes darted around the gathering, never settling on her for long, and though he held fast to a smile, there was a pained edge to it that was entirely different from that which he'd employed while conversing a moment ago.

And in a flash, understanding settled on her—Dr. Vaughn was uncomfortable in society .

When discussing medicine and his profession, the gentleman could speak at length, but when faced with idle chatter, he couldn't string more than two words together. Having struggled with such anxiety herself, Violet's heart melted a touch for the gentleman. Even knowing that his presence in Oakham would cause her family trouble, she couldn't bear to see him struggle.

"You studied in London?" asked Violet.

Dr. Vaughn drew in a breath, the tenseness in his shoulders easing as an easy smile graced his lips. "I did. My father is not only an accomplished surgeon but taught at St. Thomas' Hospital as well, so I studied under his tutelage there and at Guy's."

"Both are illustrious institutions. Which did you prefer?"

"Guy's," he replied without hesitation.

"And why is that?"

Dr. Vaughn shuffled in place, a touch of his discomfort returning, though he gave a clear answer. "St. Thomas' focused more on anatomy and surgery, but I prefer the physician side of medicine. Most especially childbirth and the management of infants

and children.”

Violet’s brows rose at that, and Dr. Vaughn gave her a chagrined smile in return.

“Yes, I know that most doctors prefer far more prestigious studies, which is why I surrendered to my father’s insistence that I study surgery as well, but I found myself pulled back to that subject again and again. We’ve advanced in so many areas of medicine, yet it is still commonplace for mothers to lose their lives bringing their children into this world—a third of whom will not live to see their first birthday, and of those who do survive, a further one in ten will not reach five years of age. Surely, if we can gain a better understanding of how to help our most vulnerable, it will improve how we treat the rest of us as well.”

Blinking, she stared at him as he spoke forcefully, requiring little prodding as he expounded on that subject and medicine in general. Dr. Vaughn hardly seemed to notice when the lead couple called out the figures and the musicians struck the opening notes. For all his awkwardness before, he moved easily through the steps, attesting that though he did not care for society, he had the skills to navigate it, and Violet was rather jealous of his newfound ease.

From the corners of her eyes, she spied the ladies on either side of her, and she couldn’t help but feel like a galloping giant next to them as she attempted the dance. Being the same height as and even taller than the gentlemen opposite, weaving under arms required quite a lot of ducking on her part, and with her broad shoulders, it was impossible to slip between the dancers without jostling them. Clearly, the dancing masters who choreographed such travesties didn’t intend for ladies of great stature to dance.

Yet Dr. Vaughn seemed blind to it all, turning his whole attention on her as they lost themselves in conversation.

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Despite all the quick steps and fast-paced music, Arthur felt as though he could finally breathe. He was dancing with Miss Templeton. Speaking with her. Quite easily, in fact. If one ignored his bumbling attempt to ask her to dance. Which Arthur fully intended to do. Immediately.

Approaching a lady ought not to be a terrifying thing. Or so his family were fond of saying; only his youngest brother ever seemed to appreciate the nerves it produced, but then, Owen was a quiet soul as well. To their thinking, a rejection was of no consequence as another lady was bound to accept. That sounded so simple and easy, yet when faced with asking Miss Templeton to dance, Arthur's tongue had refused to see the logic in such a straightforward approach.

Yet now, they were speaking freely.

Granted, they were mostly speaking about doctoring, but this was the simplicity that his family promised him. And with each passing minute, Arthur found it easier to broach other subjects and venture into unknown territory, which Miss Templeton seemed just as eager to discuss. Beyond medicine and herbology, he couldn't claim a vast deal of their interests aligned, but it was equally fascinating to hear her expound on music and literature.

The more she spoke, the more animated Miss Templeton became, and Arthur couldn't help but match her enthusiasm. She was no silly, giggling young miss but a lady with intelligence and experience, and when the music ended, they hardly countenanced the shift, standing where the song left them as she described the latest novel to have captured her attention.

But realizing that their time was coming to a close had Arthur in a dither; there had to be some way to keep her by his side. To ask her to dance twice in a row would raise eyebrows, and no doubt she had a partner waiting to stand up with her, but perhaps he could linger near her friends, and when Miss Templeton was free once more, he could slip into the conversation as he had before.

“You do not ride?” asked Miss Templeton with such a level of surprise that one might’ve thought he’d said he enjoyed kicking puppies.

“There isn’t much use for it in London,” he said, his brows rising just a touch, though it had more to do with the easy manner in which he responded. Such a reaction ought to have left Arthur stumbling over an apology, yet he felt no need to do so. Miss Templeton’s expression was so open, and she spoke to him as though they weren’t new acquaintances but old friends, and Arthur found it more and more difficult to remain discomforted in her presence.

As long as he didn’t attempt to invite her on an outing. Which was precisely what he longed to do, yet his tongue glued itself to his palate every time he contemplated such a venture. Not that he’d know where to take her at any rate; Oakham didn’t boast many entertainments.

“I suppose that is true, but it seems excessively odd,” replied Miss Templeton. “I don’t know of a physician who doesn’t ride, else they’d spend more of their time traveling between patients than seeing to them. ”

“That is a valid point,” said Arthur with a frown. “As I am still getting settled, it hasn’t been an issue yet, but having seen how far away so many of the cottages are, I can well imagine that it is problematic. Do you ride?”

Miss Templeton broke into a broad smile. “Yes, though I cannot go as often as I like. It is a wonderful way to clear my thoughts, and it allows me to enjoy more scenery

than I can whilst walking.”

“Being born and bred in London, I cannot say I have ever been atop a horse before. I suppose I should learn to drive a gig as well,” said Arthur as his mind sped through the possibility.

Could he ask Miss Templeton to teach him? That was a prime excuse to secure more of her time if ever he saw one, and Arthur suspected he knew what her answer would be, for the lady seemed generous to her core.

But would she find it odd? Or distasteful that he required her assistance? Saints above, his peers at school would’ve mocked him mercilessly for asking a lady to teach him, and though it mattered not a jot to Arthur (especially as it had the added benefit of allowing him a reasonable excuse to be in her presence), he couldn’t help but wonder if she mightn’t think less of him.

Plenty of ladies longed for burly men without a dash of weakness to be found. Arthur knew that far too well, as the sight of his naked head was enough for most ladies to dismiss him out of hand. Those who didn’t seemed only to tolerate the deficiency, and nothing made a man feel more desired than having his physical flaws tolerated .

Miss Templeton’s behavior during the surgery suggested she didn’t tolerate fools. Yet neither did she blanch at accepting or giving assistance when required.

A gamble, to be certain. But surely, it was a worthy one. It would take some weeks for him to learn to ride or drive, and in the meantime, Arthur would be granted her company. Eventually, they might simply slip into courtship without him having to be so bold as to declare his intentions. Allow the lady to acclimate to the idea slowly first.

“Learning to handle a carriage or cart would be useful as well,” she added, jerking

him out of his musings. “In the country, you never know when you might require that skill, even if you do not own one.”

Brushing aside thoughts of future outings with Miss Templeton, Arthur forced himself to focus on the here and now. It wouldn’t do to rush matters when he could easily ruin his chances tonight. Simply ask Miss Templeton if he might accompany her for the evening. That was a small thing. Surely, he could manage that.

The telltale tightness in his throat had Arthur cursing himself, but drawing in a deep breath, he thought through the words.

“Might I join you tonight, Miss Templeton?”

Or perhaps, “It would be my honor if I could accompany you about the assembly.”

But that wasn’t a question. True though it may be, it was more of a statement than an invitation.

“Miss Templeton—” he began.

A gentleman appeared at the lady’s elbow. “There you are, you minx. Been hiding from me, have you?”

Miss Templeton laughed. “I am certain you’ve been too occupied to notice me.”

“Yes, but no evening is complete unless you stand up with me,” he replied with a roguish smile. Taking her by the hand, the gentleman waggled his brows. “Come now, Vi. Dance with me.”

With a sigh, she turned her attention to Arthur, a smile on her lips. “Dr. Vaughn, may I introduce Mr. Osborn Gadd. He’s an old friend of my family.”

The gentleman gasped like a prima donna. “You claim a family connection only? I am mortally wounded!”

“What you are is ridiculous,” she said with an exasperated—but amused—shake of her head. Shifting, she slid her arm through Mr. Gadd’s, holding it with a familiarity that knifed through Arthur’s chest. But as they moved to take their places, she stopped and looked at Arthur. “Thank you for the dance, Dr. Vaughn. It was delightful.”

A few little words, yet the warmth in her tone melted the chill that had taken hold of him. Miss Templeton’s eyes were a lovely shade of brown, so much richer and deeper than one often found, and they glowed as a smile graced her full lips.

“I—” Arthur swallowed, forcing down the lump that formed in his throat. “The honor was all mine, Miss Templeton.”

Another broad smile, and she turned away, breaking the spell. Arthur stood there watching as the pair joined the lines of dancers and remained there until a gentleman to his right pointedly cleared his throat. Glancing about, Arthur realized he was in the way and quickly moved to the side, though his gaze never strayed from Miss Templeton and Mr. Gadd as the pair laughed and grinned, looking every bit the courting couple.

She had a beau. That revelation was no surprise; a lady of Miss Templeton’s caliber was bound to have many.

Yet even as Arthur stood there, watching his hopes die a terrible death, his father’s voice came to his thoughts, doling out a piece of wisdom he’d often dispensed when his sons ventured into the courting arena.

“Unless she is married and beyond your grasp, do not surrender until she tells you

to.”

Mr. Gadd may be a suitor or simply a rival for her affection. Their friendly manners certainly testified that it was likely the former, but Arthur couldn’t ignore the possibility that matters weren’t settled between the pair, and there was a possibility—

“There you are, Arthur,” called Finch as he approached, slapping a hand on the fellow’s shoulder. “You snuck away there for a moment, but there are still many people you need to meet before the night is done.”

Arthur held back a sigh. Yes, this was part and parcel of having a profession; despite his mind feeling overly saturated with new names and faces, he needed to establish a presence in the area. Especially if he wished to remain and have an income healthy enough to provide for a family.

And that thought drew his attention back to Miss Templeton as Finch led him further down the room.

“Mr. and Mrs. Slater, may I present Dr. Arthur Vaughn—” he began, but the pair quickly cut the introduction short when Mrs. Slater burst into a grin.

“Oh, we know the good doctor,” she said, reaching forward to gently tap her fan against Arthur’s forearm. “He was a dear and looked after my megrim a few days ago. Finally gave me some relief.”

“I am pleased to hear you are on the mend,” replied Arthur.

“So much better, Doctor,” added Mr. Slater, reaching forward to shake his hand. “She’d been struggling with it for days, and it finally subsided. You are a godsend.”

Arthur couldn’t help but wonder if Miss Templeton had a remedy for megrims. If her

salve were any indication, it would likely be quite useful. Would she share her recipe? Perhaps show him how she made it? The salve was quite effective, and Arthur wouldn't go amiss if he kept a pot of it in his satchel.

His eyes drifted to where the lady danced alongside Mr. Gadd. Miss Templeton laughed at something he'd said, her attention so fixed on her partner that Arthur couldn't stop his chest from burning at the sight.

"Dr. Vaughn?" called Mr. Slater with a questioning tone.

Jerking himself back to the conversation, Arthur smiled and apologized. "I fear my wits are lagging. Do forgive me, but I am overcome with how welcoming everyone has been."

"We are so grateful to have a proper physician in our midst once more," said Mrs. Slater. "It has been too long."

"That it has," added Mr. Slater with a nod before the couple took their leave.

Finch continued to introduce him around, and Arthur ran out of ways to express his thanks for the effusive praise and enthusiasm displayed by every resident of Oakham he met. Patients were always grateful for the assistance he offered, but the villagers' eagerness was far beyond anything he'd anticipated receiving. In London, he was just one of many physicians and surgeons from whom the populace could pick, but here, they viewed him as a gift from On High.

Which was both thrilling and disconcerting all at once.

But no matter where they wandered, Arthur found his attention turning toward the stately lady. Surely, his overtures hadn't failed to catch her attention. A gentleman seeking out a specific lady for a dance couldn't help but be noticed, and Miss

Templeton had seemed pleased with their time together. Once his tongue had finally decided to obey its master, that is.

Was it too soon to seek her out once more? Finch seemed determined to parade him about the assembly, but the gentleman would be required to stand up a set or two himself, and that would allow Arthur the opportunity to sneak over to Miss Templeton again. Assuming she welcomed his company. If she didn't, he supposed that would be a clear enough sign of her feelings.

"I must say, Dr. Vaughn, I was impressed to hear of your efforts upon arriving in Oakham," said Mrs. Giles with raised brows. "How fortuitous that you were on hand when Mr. Evans required a surgeon. But I cannot imagine witnessing such a feat. Right there on the road? That is impressive, sir."

"It was certainly unexpected, but I am grateful to have been on hand," replied Arthur. "And that Miss Templeton was there as well. Without her quick thinking and expert assistance, I doubt it would've fared well for Mr. Evans."

Mrs. Giles' bright expression tightened, the edge of her smile growing tight as she and Mr. Bennington stared at him.

"That doesn't surprise me in the least," said Finch, who was the only one who seemed undisturbed by Arthur's statement. "Miss Templeton is excessively intelligent and capable."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Templeton is quite impressive," murmured Mr. Bennington in a snide voice so low that Arthur wasn't certain he'd heard properly, and without absolute clarity on the gentleman's comment, Arthur didn't feel confident in refuting the fellow. Though it didn't stop him from clenching his jaw.

"My dear Mr. Finch, you promised to stand up with me. The bachelors like Dr.

Vaughn only wish to dance with the pretty, young ladies, and the gentlemen of my age are determined to hide in the card room all night. You must take pity on me,” said Mrs. Giles, shifting the subject as the next tune was struck.

“I cannot believe I nearly forgot, madam,” said Finch with a curt bow before offering his hand to her. “If we may?”

In quick succession, the pair were off to their business, and though Arthur couldn’t confront Mr. Bennington, neither did he wish to spend another moment in the fellow’s company. Turning away, Arthur’s feet directed him toward Miss Templeton.

Only to see Mr. Gadd at her side once more.

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Arthur's pulse quickened with each step, and he mentally rehearsed what he might say. But he was no poet. Mr. Gadd seemed the sort to know precisely what to say to a lady to turn her head while Arthur was simply pleased if he managed anything intelligible. Actions spoke louder than words, as they were wont to say, and surely, there was some way to demonstrate his interest.

With another dance beginning in a moment, the answer was clear enough: asking for a second set with her was not something a casual acquaintance did. If Miss Templeton ignored the first dance as nothing more than a kindness, she couldn't possibly misunderstand the meaning behind a second.

And if she accepted? Surely, that meant something.

Didn't it?

Yet how to ask? Having never done so before, this was doubly more difficult than his first attempt. Before Arthur could settle on anything useful, he was standing behind her. One of her friends drew Miss Templeton's attention, and she turned to greet him; with her eyes on him, Arthur's heart skittered and the few fleeting thoughts in his head flew out of his grasp.

"Good evening, Miss Templeton," he managed .

"Dr. Vaughn," she replied, though her companions watched him with surprised expressions that did little to calm his flustered mind.

Arthur forced himself to smile, and the lady responded in kind, easing the tightness in

his chest the slightest bit and allowing one thought to worm its way back into his consciousness.

“Miss Templeton... Might I be so bold...” Arthur forced his throat to swallow, though there was no alleviating the dryness in his mouth. “Dance?”

Her dark brows drew together, her head shifting to the side. “Are you asking me to stand up with you again?”

Thank heavens. That was a simple question to answer. Arthur nodded and tried to ignore her friends, whose shock and curiosity could be read across their faces in a disconcerting mix.

“Certainly, Dr. Vaughn,” she said, taking his hand without hesitation. “That is very kind of you to ask.”

Kindness, nothing. The question was born of pure selfishness in wishing to monopolize her time, and it was she who demonstrated far more kindness by taking the time to decipher his muddled invitation. And to accept.

But as much as Arthur wanted to say such things, it was impossible with every eye in the room pointed at them; he felt their attention skittering across his skin and boring into his back. He knew it was only in his head, for he wasn’t so arrogant as to believe that he warranted such scrutiny, but he spied more than a few pairs pointed in their direction. The new doctor had asked Miss Templeton to dance twice!

They drew up to where the set would begin shortly, and Arthur stood there like the great lummo he was, feeling as fretful as when he’d first approached her. But then, this one meant so much more.

“Breathe, Dr. Vaughn,” she said with a faint smile. “I would think a doctor of your

caliber would understand the importance of employing one's lungs. ”

Arthur gave a halting chuckle, a grin on his lips. “True, but it is not always easy to do so.”

Lowering her voice, Miss Templeton held his gaze as warmth flowed from her. “Do not fret, sir. Despite what some believe, it is no great weakness to be anxious around strangers, and I’ve known many gentlemen who struggle with it. Gracious, I’ve known most of these people my entire life and still feel uneasy when I am forced to venture into society without a companion on hand.”

“I do not know if I can believe such a claim, Miss Templeton,” replied Arthur. “You seem quite at ease and comfortable with yourself.”

Letting out a sharp huff of air, the lady shook her head. “I have no natural talent for socializing, and I’ve spent years learning to overcome many of my fears.” With furrowed brows, she added, “And it has helped greatly that I am far more comfortable in my skin than I was in my youth. So much of my nerves came from uncertainties about myself.”

Miss Templeton spoke quietly and calmly, that aura of confidence leaching into Arthur and allowing him to breathe deeply once more.

“You asked me all about my medical education, and I have not asked about yours,” he said, the words slipping free without thought. “Beyond your salve, your dresser abilities made it clear you are far more familiar with medicine than one finds outside of the profession—even with a father inside it.”

“True, but I was always enamored with the subject, reading as much as I could about the subject. And Papa allowed me to observe his work from time to time.”

More than “time to time,” if Arthur were to guess. Why she chose to minimize her education on the matter was an oddity, but one did not show such proficiency without much training. Before their formal education, Arthur and his brothers had spent time learning at their father’s knee, yet Miss Templeton’s skill outmatched that which they’d gleaned. Her ability was more akin to their mother’s, who had served as Father’s assistant their entire married life.

The musicians struck up their starting notes, and Arthur realized he’d entirely missed the lead couple announcing the coming dance. Thankfully, the tune was a familiar one, and he knew the steps that accompanied it. With ease, they moved through the figures, and though Arthur couldn’t say he enjoyed dancing, he now understood the appeal as he brushed by Miss Templeton, his hands lingering in hers.

“Well, I am happy to hear that,” said Arthur. “Though small, a village the size of Oakham requires a physician, and I am glad to know it hasn’t been wholly without medical assistance since his passing. Especially as you show such an aptitude for it.”

*

Talking and dancing were difficult to manage. Though Violet knew the steps well enough that her feet moved of their own accord, maneuvering without colliding with others took far too much attention for her to easily do both. And at Dr. Vaughn’s pronouncement, she nearly collided with Mrs. Birks.

“Pardon?” she asked, but that earned her a puzzled expression in response.

“You are quite talented—”

But Violet shook her head as they came to rest for a moment, standing opposite one another. “What do you mean about Oakham requiring a physician?”

“Only that the village has been without one since your father passed,” replied Dr. Vaughn. “Though Bentmoor’s physicians are close enough to manage many of the ailments, Oakham has enough demand to warrant its own. It is the reason Mr. Finch’s request was so appealing.”

“Mr. Lewis Finch?” asked Violet, her spine stiffening.

Dr. Vaughn’s expression grew even more puzzled. “I met the gentleman in London. I wouldn’t say I know him well, but we were acquaintances, and he wrote to me about Oakham requiring a physician.”

“He did, did he?” Violet fought to keep her words from snapping at the poor fellow who didn’t deserve her ire. Of its own accord, her gaze swept across the room until it rested on the lanky gentleman in question. Being tall himself, Mr. Finch was easy enough to spy, and though his attention was not on her, he must’ve felt the heat burning into his skin, for his dark eyes turned to meet Violet’s.

The moment was fleeting—hardly more than a heartbeat, but Mr. Finch must’ve seen something in her expression, for his own shifted in response. Not fear or surprise, but rather resignation. Lewis Finch knew she knew and didn’t even have the decency to look ashamed.

Heat burned through her, making the sweltering room feel like a chilly spring day, and pain struck her chest, burrowing deep. It wasn’t as though Mr. Finch was a good friend. With Felicity having been gone from Oakham for so long, Violet couldn’t even claim a close relationship, but since their moving into the neighborhood last winter, she’d spent a fair amount of time in the Finches’ company. She’d thought they were friends of a sort.

Foolish creature. Violet wondered how long it took for lessons to truly take hold. She hadn’t thought herself pigheaded or dim-witted, yet her aching heart testified to the

truth. She had trusted them and had forgotten a cardinal rule—the only loyalty one could expect was from oneself. People were quick to shrug off the mantle of friendship, casting it aside with little thought.

“Have I upset you?” asked Dr. Vaughn.

Violet forced her expression to soften. Whatever his role in her current troubles, she refused to make him bear the brunt of her frustrations.

“Not you, Dr. Vaughn,” she replied, forcing a smile as her throat tightened to a painful degree. “You mentioned you do not read much, but are there any authors you enjoy?”

The gentleman watched her with furrowed brows, and Violet fought to keep her expression impassive.

“Since beginning my training, I’ve hardly had time for such luxuries,” he finally replied as they took each other by the hand and traveled along the line, releasing one another to pass behind another pair and return to facing each other on the line.

Violet continued to pepper him with questions until the gentleman was thoroughly distracted from their previous conversation. Thankfully, Dr. Vaughn soon relaxed into a discussion concerning the best herbs for sore throats, and though Violet still fumed, she quickly found herself preoccupied with Dr. Vaughn and not his devious friend or her witless self.

But when the set came to a close, she held only just enough composure to give him a quick farewell before turning away. The sensible part of her mind warned she was being inexcusably rude, but having heard Dr. Vaughn’s admission, Violet couldn’t bear to linger a moment longer than necessary. Turning on her heel, she crossed the room and swept through the front doors, into the cool night air.

Arms drawn tight around herself, Violet stared up at the night sky. Not a single cloud marred the perfect wall of stars above her, stretching out in every direction. Any other time, she would marvel at the beauty, for such a sight never failed to entrance her. But with thoughts of her family, their future in Oakham, and the Finches' betrayal, she could think of nothing else but the future stretching before her, vast and unknown.

Even her closest companions did not trust her family. Had everyone been laughing at them in private, whilst feigning friendship to their faces? Surely, Felicity hadn't known.

Had she?

Violet's heart twisted. This was her home. Her village. The people who had known her father and his father. Who had watched her grow from childhood. Did they all hold the Templetons in such low esteem?

“Miss Templeton?”

Having no clock on hand, Violet didn't know how much time had passed while she stood in front of the inn, but her hackles raised at the sound of Mr. Finch's voice.

“Won't you please allow me to explain?” he asked.

Violet winced at his volume, and she cast a look about at the few listening ears nearby, which were eagerly straining to gather any tittle-tattle to be found.

“What need is there to explain anything, Mr. Finch? Your actions have made your feelings clear,” she whispered before turning on her heel to join the party once more. With so many about, he would allow things to lie. What more was there to discuss? It wouldn't alter the past.

“Will you stand up with me, Miss Templeton?” he asked in a voice designed to carry to all the eavesdroppers.

The question pulled her to a stop. Though her pettiness knew no bounds within the confines of her thoughts, Violet couldn't bring herself to be so blatantly rude to anyone. Snubbing another—even one who had hurt her—never brought any joy. Even if the bouncer was only using the gesture to trap her into a conversation.

And foolish woman that she was, Violet couldn't help but hope this all stemmed from some easily resolved misunderstanding. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but at present, it was doing its best to pester her.

Scowling to herself, she took his offered hand and allowed him to lead her back into the coaching inn. The dancers were still milling about, and when Mr. Finch drew them to a stop on the edge of the dance floor, she turned her gaze from him, her arms crossed tight across her chest. Yes, Violet knew she looked petulant, but it was an honest reaction that she refused to moderate.

“I know you’re angry with me because of Dr. Vaughn,” said Mr. Finch in a low voice. He tucked his hands behind him, his posture relaxed, as though they were chatting about the weather or the fine evening they’d had.

“Is it true? Did you ask Dr. Vaughn to settle here?” she asked.

“Yes. Though I didn’t ask him as much as I told him about the opportunity.”

Violet’s muscles tightened. “So, you are simply going to confess that as though nothing is amiss?”

“Would you rather I lie?” he asked with raised brows.

“I would rather you not meddle with my family’s livelihood.”

The musicians trilled out the opening notes, and the dancers shifted into their lines. And to prove just how terrible Violet’s luck was, the chosen dance was as sedate as the ones their parents and grandparents had favored in their youth, allowing far too much time to talk.

Mr. Finch’s shoulders tightened, and he gave her a slow nod as his brows furrowed slightly. “I didn’t do so lightly, Miss Templeton. Out of respect for you, I held off. But with Felicity nearing her confinement, I could not allow things to remain as they were. How many illnesses sweep through the village every year, carrying off loved ones with ease?”

“That is not my brother’s fault. Every physician loses patients. Many, in fact—”

“True, but can you say that Mr. Evans would’ve fared better if your brother had been on hand instead of Dr. Vaughn?”

“He may not be the finest of surgeons, Mr. Finch, but he is not incompetent. Besides, I had matters well in hand, with or without Dr. Vaughn’s assistance—just as I have helped to manage the well-being of Oakham,” said Violet with a lift of her chin.

Mr. Finch sighed. “Felicity is soon to enter her confinement, Miss Templeton. Do you truly think I ought to entrust her and our child’s safety to your brother?”

“You speak as though Isaac is incapable or incompetent, sir. I assure you he can manage such things. He was taught by our father, who was highly skilled and ensured that his son learned all he needed.”

“I do not doubt it,” he replied. “And your brother is decent—when you can find him. He is forever disappearing or traveling from town. How are we to manage when he is unavailable?”

“As we always have,” replied Violet. “You speak as though the village is entirely helpless if my brother isn’t on hand, but we have medicines aplenty to help with any ailments, and if more assistance is required, Bentmoor is not far.”

“It takes four hours from when you send for them to arrive—assuming that they are available.” Mr. Finch shook his head. “You know all too well how much a difference four hours can make. Mr. Evans wouldn’t have survived that.”

Mr. Finch took her by the hand, and the pair wove around the other couples, their steps moving smoothly in time with the music, though Violet didn’t hear a single note as the gentleman continued.

“I cannot say for certain whether your brother is incompetent or lazy, but the manner in which he gouges his patients makes it clear I cannot trust him— ”

“Isaac would never!” Violet forced herself to breathe and to lower her tone, though her sharp words drew some attention.

“I am no physician, Miss Templeton, but Dr. Vaughn has expressed a concern about the number of medicines the townsfolk have been taking—the ones your brother gave them.”

Violet shook her head. “They are not being given too many medicines. To claim such a thing is to impugn my family’s honor—”

“I know you are the one who prescribes them—not him,” said Mr. Finch in little more than a whisper as they passed by one another.

Her brows shot up, her gaze darting about, though others were once more occupied with their own conversations. When she stood before him again, Violet studied him with wide eyes; swallowing past the lump in her throat, she wondered how he’d guessed the truth. The pair stood there in silence, watching each other as far too many ears were about, but then the couples on either side were set to their task, drawing their attention away from Violet and Mr. Finch.

“What do you mean? Everyone knows I assist my brother from time to time, but he is the physician.”

“It is an open secret, Miss Templeton,” replied Mr. Finch with a challenging raise of his brows. “Did you believe people wouldn’t notice that his supply of medicine never dwindles despite his long absences? That in emergencies you are always on hand to see to their injuries and illnesses? You’ve made a good show of working in the shadows, but it is impossible to keep your work hidden forever.”

Mr. Templeton. How long had the people called her that? As Violet had always been taller and broader than the other girls, she was well used to comments and stares, but that wretched nickname had come into existence long before she'd taken up the unofficial mantle of resident apothecary. Yet they'd begun using it more frequently since Papa's passing four years previous. Did it refer to more than her masculine build ?

But what other recourse did she have? Ought she to ignore her skills and knowledge and allow the people of Oakham to suffer? To permit her family's finances to dwindle as her brother squandered his time?

With another surge of frustration, she met Mr. Finch's eyes with a scowl. "If everyone knows this, then there isn't any reason for Dr. Vaughn to be here. Felicity asked me to attend her confinement, so you needn't fear for her sake. As for the town, Isaac may struggle in other areas, but he is a keen diagnoser, and from that, I prescribe and create the medicines required to treat them. This system has worked for years, and Oakham hasn't suffered because of our unorthodox approach. Are we now to be cast aside in favor of Dr. Vaughn?"

"I do not doubt your skills, Miss Templeton," replied Mr. Finch. "But I cannot share your confidence in the 'system,' as you call it. Do you trust your brother to give an honest account of the symptoms for you to address?"

Violet longed to shake her head. Her family's honor dictated that she do just that. But the very fact that his question gave her pause was answer enough. Did she trust Isaac to tell the truth? The more medicines they prescribed their patients, the more money made, and the fewer appointments he had to take.

Surely, it couldn't be.

Clearing her throat, Violet continued, "I will investigate the accusations against my

brother—and I assure you I am appalled by the thought that he would do such a thing—but I give you my word that his actions put no one in danger. Nothing I’ve prescribed would do harm as long it is taken as directed.”

Mr. Finch shook his head. “I cannot put any faith in your brother, and I refuse to gamble with my family’s well-being—”

“Your family isn’t in any danger. Do you think me so selfish that I would risk the lives of my friends and neighbors?” Violet fought to keep her voice even, though her volume rose a touch. “I promise they are being treated well. In fact, far better than most villages, who have only midwives and home remedies to see to their ailments.”

But Mr. Finch didn’t seem to listen. Or perhaps he simply ignored it. “I am truly sorry you will be impacted by it—”

“Impacted? We will be ruined. What about my mother? My sister-in-law?” asked Violet with a frown. “I will manage, but them? How could you harm their futures by bringing Dr. Vaughn here—”

“I didn’t bring him here. I knew Dr. Vaughn wished to leave London, and I told him about Oakham. Nothing more.” Taking her by the hand, Mr. Finch led her through the steps as silence fell between them. Other conversations rumbled around them as they promenaded down and back before weaving around the other couples.

“Do not pretend as though you are on the side of right, else why not warn us before dragging Dr. Vaughn here?” she asked, her chin lifting as she seized onto the first argument that popped into her thoughts.

“How, pray tell, do you suggest I ought to have broached that subject?” he asked with a grim frown. “Is there a polite manner in which to say such a thing?”

Drawing in a sharp breath, Violet sighed. Though she didn't wish to acknowledge that truth, she had to; there was no easy way to tell another that they were soon to lose everything.

There was a question she wanted to ask. Or hated to ask, rather. It pricked at her, demanding attention, yet she couldn't bring herself to voice it.

"Did Felicity know?"

"She knows Dr. Vaughn is an acquaintance of mine, and she has met him, but nothing beyond that."

Violet's muscles relaxed once more. That was something, she supposed. It did no good for her family, but she was pleased to know that her betrayal was not complete. Just partial.

"Pardon me, Mr. Finch, but I fear I am feeling a little faint." As these words were in the impossible realm of neither truth nor lie, Violet felt no guilt at having uttered them, for they allowed her to leave the dance. Taking her by the elbow, the gentleman led her to the side of the room, near one of the great windows, which was open to allow in the cool night air.

After giving a bow, Mr. Finch watched her a moment; his brows were knitted together, and there was a tightness to his jaw. "I do not wish to cause you pain, Miss Templeton. I admire you greatly, and I am grateful you've been such a good friend to my wife. I cannot bear the thought of having caused you concern, and for that, I am sorry."

Pausing, he straightened, his voice remaining quiet, though a thread of iron wove through his tone. "However, I will not apologize for seeing that my family is protected. I hope you do not think poorly of me, though I will not fault you if you

do.”

Violet’s chest ached as she studied the gentleman. She ought to be angry. In many ways, she was furious with him. Yet how could she fault him? Since Papa’s passing, her brother’s professional behavior had been lax at best, and it was all Isaac’s doing. Not Mr. Finch’s.

“However much I disagree with your assessment of the situation, I cannot blame you for seeing to your family’s well-being, sir,” she admitted. “Just as I hope you will not blame me for doing the same.”

Mr. Finch considered her a moment before bowing to her, giving the movement a bit more flourish than was entirely necessary. “Thank you for the dance, Miss Templeton.”

“You are welcome, Mr. Finch.”

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Mr. Finch turned away, and Violet felt like sagging in place. And perhaps she might've done just that or snuck away to enjoy the night air and a bit of quiet once more—but there was something else that required her attention. Turning her gaze to the gathering crowd, she scanned the faces, but Isaac wasn't there.

And why wasn't she surprised at that? Now was a perfect time for Isaac to strengthen his standing in the community by dancing and engaging with as many of the townsfolk as he could. Instead, he was likely haunting the card room, fixated more on his game than anything meaningful.

Violet made as direct a route across the room as possible with the crowd pressing in around her and climbed the stairs. The landing emptied the guests into two rooms, standing with their doors facing each other, and she ignored the tearoom and spied her brother with a group of ladies and gentlemen gathered around a table.

Thankfully, he wasn't playing at present, and Violet felt not the slightest bit conflicted in approaching him and herding him back out the door; she didn't go so far as to drag Isaac by the ear, but it was a near thing .

“Good heavens, woman, you look thunderous,” he said, dusting off his cuffs as he smiled at his elder sister. “Smile, it is a party—”

“Have you been inflating your patients' maladies so I prescribe them more medicines?” she asked in a sharp whisper.

Isaac's brows rose at that. “That is quite the accusation, Vi. Whatever put such a thought in your head?”

Violet placed her hands on her hips. “Are you saying it is untrue?”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs beneath them, and she shifted to allow the ladies to pass into the card room; Isaac moved to follow, but Violet grabbed his arm and pulled him back in place.

“Is it true?” she demanded. “Have you been misleading me?”

Isaac balked, his posture stiffening as he frowned at her. “Misleading? I am no liar, Vi.”

As much as those words ought to have calmed her, she didn’t miss the fact that her brother still had not yet given a definitive answer to the question at hand. Her stomach twisted itself into knots, and she stared at Isaac, uncertain what more to say.

With a sigh, he shrugged.

“I haven’t been lying. Perhaps overstating the issue at times. But only with those who won’t miss a few extra shillings, I promise. And nothing that might do them harm, of course.” Isaac rattled off his response as though it were a matter of course. A little nothing that was hardly noteworthy. Something that shouldn’t stab through Violet’s heart.

“They are your neighbors. Your patients, Isaac! They trust you to be honest with them—”

“I never lied. We need the money, so I simply stretched the truth a bit, and plenty of physicians do the same. Mr. Emerson is the fellow who put the idea in my head in the first place, and Bentmoor isn’t worse off for it. One could argue that it’s a time-honored tradition for medical men to inflate things a touch. ”

Violet drew in a deep breath, forcing it out through her nose as another trio slipped out of the tearoom and headed down the stairs to the dancing. When they were gone, she turned on him again.

“Whether or not anyone else does so, how can you think that is acceptable? What would Papa think of such behavior? You have damaged our reputation, Isaac. Do you not realize how precarious our situation is—especially now that Dr. Vaughn is in town?”

“Darlings,” called Mama, scurrying from her place amongst her friends in the tearoom to stand beside them with a bright smile affixed to her face. The lady’s gaze darted between her children and those who were watching from afar. “Is something the matter?”

“I discovered that Isaac has been overstating our patients’ illnesses so we can prescribe them more medicines than they require,” whispered Violet.

Mama’s gaze widened, her mouth gaping, though she quickly covered it and waved to her friends. “I will be a moment.” Turning back to her children, she frowned at her son. “Why would you do such a thing, Isaac? A physician’s reputation is paramount. Your father—”

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “Father would be disappointed, but I am married and am soon to be a father myself. Lilibet deserves a comfortable life.”

“Father had a wife and three children to provide for, and did so without resorting to falsehoods,” replied Violet with a shake of her head.

At that word, Mama straightened. “What Isaac did was wrong, but ‘falsehood’ is a tad harsh, don’t you think, Vi?”

“No. Else I wouldn’t have used it,” replied Violet. “You lied to me and your patients. Not only am I ashamed of your behavior, but it has come at a terrible time. You’ve undermined our reputation, and while we might’ve weathered that upset before, there is a new physician in town. ”

“You are such a worrywart,” said Isaac with a laugh as he nudged his sister. “The Templetons are a staple of Oakham. We will not be so easily undone.”

Mama gave a vigorous nod, drawing her arm through her son’s and patting it. “I am certain Isaac will manage everything just fine. With him attending to the business, we have nothing to fear. Your papa taught him well.”

Isaac’s shoulders tensed, though his grin remained warm, but before Violet could wonder at the odd reaction, he hurried to add, “That he did—including teaching me how important it is to be a dutiful husband. The Blythes are leaving early, and I ought to return with them. Lilibet may have demanded I escort you here despite being unwell herself, but the Gadds have taken good care of you, and she requires me more than you do.”

“While I cannot fault your dutifulness to your wife and child-to-be, I do wish you would stay,” said Violet. “It will do your family little good if Dr. Vaughn steals all your patients away, and the best course of action would be to remain here and cement your standing in society.”

Isaac’s shoulders slumped. “I suppose you are right, but I cannot help feeling that Lilibet needs me.”

“True,” added Mama, “but you see her every day. We so rarely have assemblies, and such occasions are important for your standing...”

Yet even as she spoke, her son’s expression fell further and further, causing Mama’s

words to falter and slow. Until she stopped altogether.

“I suppose it is not a terrible slight,” said Mama with a little wave toward the door. “You’ve done your duty. Now, go enjoy your evening with Lilibet.”

With a bright smile, Isaac leaned over to give her a firm kiss on the cheek, as though he were a lad of seven and not seven and twenty. “You are a dear.”

Mama shooed him away, and Isaac gave her a rascally wink before slipping off to find Mr. and Mrs. Blythe. When the lady turned to Violet, Mama’s brow puckered a moment before relaxing. “You fret too much, Vi.”

“You do not fret enough, Mama.”

“All will be fine. Isaac is a good boy, and he cares deeply about our family. He will sort it out.”

“Before we lose the shirts off our backs?” asked Violet.

Mama slanted a wry smile at her daughter. “You speak as though this is the end of us. But the Templetons have been the physicians in Oakham since before the profession was even called such. The people will not be so fickle as to throw us over for a new one.”

“It has only been a sennight since Dr. Vaughns arrived and we’ve already lost a patient or two to him, and now that people are discovering Isaac’s gouging, it is only a matter of time before the rest flee—”

“You needn’t worry so. I am certain Isaac will correct matters quickly and all will be well in the end,” said Mama with a kind smile. “You are such a good and attentive daughter and sister, and I do not know what we would do without you, but you are

forever concerned by things that may never happen, Vi. Borrowing trouble only makes one miserable.”

“But Dr. Vaughn—”

“Even if this new fellow is as good as everyone claims him to be,” said Mama with a tone steeped in incredulity, “we have history in Oakham. They will not abandon us simply because a new physician has swanned into town.”

The Templetons were a good lot. Silly, to be certain, but they weren’t wicked people. Despite their foolishness and flaws, they were her family, and Violet adored them, yet she could not comprehend their short-sightedness. Being the only physician in town had been a financially secure position, but it hadn’t left them wealthy by any means. Comfortable, to be certain, but not with money to burn or enough security to ignore the threat Dr. Vaughn posed.

Having kept the family’s ledgers for some time, Violet knew every penny that passed through the household, and even at his best, Papa’s income hadn’t been vast enough to sustain two households. Even if Dr. Vaughn stole only a quarter of their patients, their funds would be greatly depleted. How could the family not see such a clear and obvious truth?

There was another answer that lay within their grasp. A way to evolve with these changing times. It lingered in the back of her thoughts, begging to be brought up. To speak her mind wouldn’t do any good—Violet knew it wouldn’t—yet she couldn’t help but bring up the possibility once more.

“There is another possibility, Mama,” said Violet.

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Mama watched her with a puzzled frown for a heartbeat, but before Violet could explain, the lady threw up her hands and shook her head. “Not again, Vi. You know your father’s feelings on the matter, and I will not budge.”

“But if we were to open an apothecary shop in town, it could provide a steady income for us, regardless of what happens with Isaac’s medical practice. The townsfolk do not always call him for their medicines, choosing instead to travel all the way to Bentmoor’s apothecary—”

“I will not hear of it, Violet Templeton,” said Mama in a sharp tone before casting a look over her shoulder at those roundabout. Lowering her voice, she added, “We will not disgrace this family by lowering ourselves to become tradesmen and shopkeepers .”

She said the titles as though they were akin to “murderer” and “blasphemer.” Then, lifting her chin with a hint of pride, she added, “We are a physician’s family. Your father and Isaac may not have expensive credentials like Dr. Vaughn, but they are physicians . True gentlemen. It is bad enough that they’ve had to debase themselves with performing the duties of a common surgeon from time to time, but to surrender our standing by opening an apothecary shop? How could we face our friends and neighbors after we turn our home into a storefront? How can you even suggest such a thing?”

Violet’s shoulders sank. There was no need to press the issue, for she knew precisely how it would end. Even if she had the knowledge and funds to open a shop of her own, Violet required her family’s assistance to convert the front parlor into the shopfront; rent was too steep to let another building, even assuming she could sort out

how to let one.

“Oh, my darling,” said Mama, her expression crumpling. “I didn’t mean to sound so harsh, but surely, you can see that it is impossible. I have no doubt you could make the venture a success, but do you truly wish to subject your family to such an affront? Lilibet’s family is of high standing in Stoneford; do you think they would appreciate their son-in-law and future grandson being in trade ? I wouldn’t be surprised if they cut all connection to us.”

“I would think that a banker—a profession that skirts the line of gentility—would appreciate doing what one must to provide for one’s family,” replied Violet.

“Oh, Vi. Always so fretful.” With a wry smile, she shook her head. “I do not know where this brooding nature of yours comes from. Heaven knows it is not from your father or me.”

A conundrum Violet had pondered many a time, for though her parents were kind and dear people, they hadn’t the ability to plan beyond the present.

“Your coiffure is lovely tonight. Suits you perfectly.” Mama’s gaze softened as she studied her daughter’s face in a manner that set Violet fidgeting: she knew what was to come next. With a sigh, Mama shook her head. “I do not know why the gentlemen of Oakham are so blind to your attractions, Vi. Any man would be blessed to have you as his wife. You do so much for the family and are so very pretty. ”

There was no point in arguing the fact, for Violet had a wealth of experience that told her whatever her mother saw (unreliable source that she was), gentlemen did not agree. So, she remained silent as Mama patted her on the cheek.

Then, with a tsk, Mama’s expression lightened as she ran a finger along the ends of the ribbon tied up in Violet’s hair. “Hair ribbons remind me of your father. He

purchased them by the bolt for you.”

Mama smiled at the memory, and Violet forced an echoing one without bothering to correct the lady. Though Papa certainly had adored such little presents, Violet hadn’t been the recipient.

“I do not recall having seen you wear this before,” said Mama with a hint of a frown.

Violet shifted in place, her smile faltering. “Martha gave it to me when she left Oakham. She has bolts of them, and I didn’t have any to match this gown.”

“That is so like your sister,” said Mama, her smile returning in force. Someone called to her, and the lady perked, her grin broadening as she waved a hand above her head. “Coming, Mrs. Atwell.”

Turning back to her daughter with a pitying look, Mama tutted. “Do not fret, my dear. We will manage. Your father and your brother have done all they can to provide for us, and we needn’t fear.”

And with that, she swept away as Violet’s heart sank. Sighing, she turned down the stairs and moved back to the dancing, as there was no use in standing there.

No matter how much faith Mama placed in those two, it wouldn’t alter the truth. The family was faltering, and ignoring reality would never solve matters. A dozen ideas drifted through her mind, and Violet shifted through each quickly, dismissing each as soon as it presented itself.

Relocation wasn’t a possibility; even if they could afford such a thing, Mama wouldn’t leave Isaac, and he didn’t wish to leave. To say nothing of the fact that they were unlikely to find another town that was so forgiving and patient with her brother’s professional shortcomings.

Another source of revenue wasn't presenting itself; with the household and Isaac's medicines to manage, Violet hadn't time to spare taking on additional work—to say nothing of the fact that unless she wished to be a scullery maid, there were no positions available for her in the village. Isaac certainly wouldn't take on additional work.

And it wasn't as though the household accounts were extravagant; Violet could think of a few areas in which they could trim the fat, but it wasn't enough to offset the damage Dr. Vaughn had (and would) do.

“Miss Templeton, how good to see you tonight.” Mrs. Wolverton drew up beside her with what Violet had come to think of as the lady's “hostess” expression. A bright—though demure—smile graced her lips, and she surveyed the room like a queen, treating the assembly as her personal court with the people of Bentmoor and Oakham there to amuse her.

“You have outdone yourself, madam,” replied Violet, motioning to the gathering. “Tonight has been a delight.”

“I saw you looking about. Are you hoping to secure a partner? I know of a few gentlemen who would be willing—”

Violet held up her hands to stop the lady, though she didn't bother to address Mrs. Wolverton's word choice, as Violet would never wish for a partner who was merely willing. “No, thank you. I—”

“Miss Templeton,” called Mrs. Lark, who rushed over with such enthusiasm that the flowers pinned to her turban looked ready to tumble free. “Is it true that you assisted Dr. Vaughn in his surgery?”

Mrs. Wolverton's brows rose at that, her eyes darting to Violet. “I heard about the

incident with Mr. Evans, but I didn't know you were tied to it."

Mrs. Lark nodded, dislodging a sprig that fell to the ground. "Dr. Vaughn has been speaking of the aid you offered. Is it true? Did you assist him in performing surgery on the road to Oakham?"

"Yes," said Violet.

Another idea struck her. One that she had been studiously ignoring since Dr. Vaughn's arrival. There was another course of action to take, but the thought made everything inside her clench, tightening each muscle until she felt strung as taut as a piano string.

Whatever Mr. Finch's concerns about the health and safety of the village, Violet knew she hadn't caused any damage. Though plenty flawed, she wasn't one to allow harm to befall others, and she would simply have to be more careful about trusting Isaac's recommendations. How she would do so was a mystery, but one that Violet would sort out.

Despite her broad knowledge of medicine, the rest of her education had been traditional enough that she could secure a position as a governess or teacher. Medicine would not be in her future, but she would survive. However, her family depended on this income.

Her coming niece or nephew needed a home. Money for food and clothes. If Isaac were to lose his position, what else could he do to provide for his wife and child? And Mama? Martha might be able to take her in, and Franklin seemed a good sort who wouldn't begrudge shouldering the burden of his mother-in-law. But the youngest Templeton had settled in Portsmouth, and Mama would have to leave her home. Abandon her friends and everything she knew.

All these thoughts flew through Violet's mind, making the stark reality clear in a heartbeat. Mrs. Lark had asked a simple question, but in it, she'd provided a possibility.

Refusing to question it further, Violet hurried to add, "And it is a good thing I was there, for Dr. Vaughn required much assistance."

Not a single word was untrue; she refused to allow a false word to slip past her tongue after having given her brother a lecture for his lies. Just a touch of emphasis placed on the final word. That was all. A little thing. Hardly noteworthy.

But both ladies perked at it.

Though far more well-intentioned than most, Mrs. Lark couldn't ignore such a juicy morsel. And though she called Bentmoor home, her reach extended far beyond its border.

"Is that so?" she asked, glancing at Mrs. Wolverton, whose only sign of surprise was a slight raise of her brows.

"Do you not think it odd that a man of his education would choose to settle in a village like Oakham?" asked Violet. "Even your Bentmoor, which is far larger and with far higher demand, has only locally trained physicians and surgeon-apothecaries, who learn at their father's or uncle's knees just as they've always done. Not one of them is a proper doctor."

Not a lie. Not a single falsehood. Every word Violet spoke was true and naught but the same questions she'd asked herself since having met him—even if she knew the reason wasn't incompetence.

Glancing between two of the most influential ladies of Bentmoor, she added, "Why

would a gentleman go to such effort and expense to earn a doctorate, only to move to an inconsequential village? Surely, of all the towns in our quiet corner of Devon, Bentmoor would be the more logical choice.”

The pair perked again at this mention, their minds whirling with that implication.

“That is odd, indeed,” said Mrs. Lark.

“I heard he hails from a very prestigious medical family in London. Surely, their connections could’ve secured him a better situation even if his skills were only mediocre,” added Mrs. Wolverton.

“And can we trust a physician who cannot even treat himself?” asked Mrs. Lark with a faint grimace. “Surely, if he were skilled at all, Dr. Vaughn would’ve cured his baldness. He is far too young to be afflicted with such a disease.”

Violet said nothing as the two discussed the peculiarity of Dr. Vaughn’s choice, allowing the ladies to take the insinuation from there. Soon, more of Bentmoor would be whispering, and it couldn’t fail to catch the attention of Oakham in time. Perhaps a few other well-placed whispers might help it along.

Pain spiked in the back of her throat, and Violet couldn’t ease the guilt that drove it. She hated to darken Dr. Vaughn’s reputation, but Oakham could not support two physicians, and Violet would do what she must to ensure the Templetons remained.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

Despite Miss Templeton's apt description of how bleak an assembly could be by the end, this had been one of the most enjoyable social outings Arthur had experienced in some time. Yes, the room was stifling—both from the heat and stench of the candles and guests. And his ears rang from the constant thrum of conversations. And his feet ached, longing for a chair. To say nothing of the bone-deep desire to cast off his frockcoat and tug off his cravat.

But those feelings were nothing out of the ordinary.

The assembly might've boasted numerous attendees, but it still felt like an intimate evening. And the townsfolk were so welcoming. In London, Arthur was merely another of the Vaughn boys but without Franklin's prestige or Terrance's swaggering appeal. A rather unimportant person in his own right.

Yet for all those blessings, he couldn't shake the feeling of unease as he followed the Finches in bidding farewell to the master of ceremonies.

His gaze drifted over the faces of those who remained, but no matter how many times he tried to conjure Miss Templeton, he had to admit that she had left already. Had he offended her by asking for a second set? He didn't think so, as she had willingly accepted and the vast majority of the dance had been utterly enjoyable with easy conversation and lively debate; Miss Templeton had spoken to him like an equal, sharing in the discussion with a matching eagerness.

But then, she'd run off when the music had ended. Perhaps she'd required a chamber pot. Heaven knew Arthur had been forced into abrupt departures before, for one did not always realize it was needed until after the dance began, and some of the sets

lasted an inordinate amount of time. To say nothing of the hopping and bouncing about that did nothing to improve matters.

Yet Miss Templeton hadn't looked happy when she'd stood up with Finch afterward, and though she'd been quite actively engaged in conversation the rest of the evening, there was something about the situation that gave Arthur an uneasy feeling. His thoughts drifted through the evening, bringing up every moment he'd shared with Miss Templeton. Surely, he hadn't done something to sour her feelings toward him. He hoped not.

Those thoughts drifted away as the party squeezed together into the carriage; though spacious, it wasn't designed for six. Thankfully, Finch and the ladies were of a slender build, which helped matters some, but a heavy feeling settled into the carriage that had nothing to do with the tightness of the confines and only added to the discomfort.

During the ride to Bentmoor, Finch's wife had happily cozied up to his side, but now, she sat with the other ladies, her arms crossed tight against her chest with her gaze turned to the window in a posture that signaled her displeasure far better than words. The rest of the Finches all feigned ignorance, attempting light conversation, though their fidgeting testified that they felt the tension as well.

"Felicity," whispered Finch, leaning forward, but his wife drew in a sharp breath.

"No," she snapped .

"Miss Templeton spoke to you," he muttered.

The elder Mr. Finch raised his voice to speak to his wife, and the pair engaged their daughter in conversation about the goings-on of the assembly and how their three sons would soon join them when the school term ended. Though it was polite to

ignore the spat between spouses, Arthur couldn't do so while pressed up against Finch's side. Or so he told himself, but the truth was that he found it impossible to ignore any mention of Miss Templeton.

"She didn't have to, Lewis. I was bound to discover the truth, so why didn't you tell me when you introduced us, instead of allowing me to think Dr. Vaughn was simply passing through Oakham for a visit?" asked Mrs. Finch shooting her husband a narrowed look.

"I never said that. You assumed that on your own, and I didn't correct you."

Mrs. Finch's brows rose, and Arthur longed to warn Finch that he was treading on dangerous ground, but doing so would place himself firmly in the lady's sights.

"And you did so because you knew I would be angry with you," she said with a scowl.

Finch huffed. "I did nothing wrong—"

"You'd best ask Dr. Vaughn his feelings on the matter before you claim such a thing, Lewis Finch."

At that, Arthur's gaze flew to his friend and the fractious wife sitting opposite. "What do I have to do with this?"

Mrs. Finch straightened and sent her husband a challenging raise of her brow. "Yes, Lewis. Tell Dr. Vaughn what you've done, as you didn't see fit to tell anyone it impacted."

"Out with it, Finch," said Arthur, and his friend tried to shift in place, though he only managed a slight movement before giving up.

“I did what I had to for my family,” replied Finch.

“What is going on?” demanded Arthur .

Drawing in a sharp breath, Finch didn’t look at Arthur as he said, “When I wrote that Oakham needed a physician, I neglected to tell you that there is one in town—”

“What?” said Arthur in a hard tone.

“We require a physician,” said Finch with a scowl. “Isaac Templeton is lazy through and through, and I wouldn’t trust him to care for my horses, let alone my family.”

The air fled from Arthur’s lungs as the last sennight snapped into place. It was as though he’d been working through a puzzle upside-down, and now the world had righted itself, allowing him to see that which he hadn’t been able to comprehend.

Lifting a hand, Arthur scrubbed at his face as he recalled their final conversation. No wonder Miss Templeton had left in a rush. He’d insulted her brother and her family without realizing it.

“What were you thinking, Lewis?” asked Mrs. Finch, throwing her arms wide (then instantly snapping them back in place when she hit her sister-in-law). “Vi is my friend, and she depends on her brother’s income. Whatever his faults, we all know she is the one managing things, and Vi is brilliant with medicines. Far better than Oakham deserves. To bring someone else here will ruin her.”

Turning her gaze to Arthur, Mrs. Finch’s brows pinched together. “I mean no disrespect to you, Dr. Vaughn. I am certain you are a wonderful doctor, but to know that my husband lured you here...”

“No offense taken, Mrs. Finch,” said Arthur with a dismissive shake of his head.

“Had I known, I would never have come. I wanted to find a place that required a doctor—”

“We do,” said Finch.

“And force the Templetons out?” asked Mrs. Finch with a scoff. “How can you be so heartless?”

“No.” Finch’s sharp voice caused his family to pause in their conversation and glance in his direction before studiously returning to their discussion. Silence descended upon the other three as Finch sat there, his eyes holding his wife’s firmly. “I will not allow any consideration for the Templetons to place you in harm’s way. Your family was killed whilst under the previous Mr. Templeton’s care—”

“It was smallpox,” said Mrs. Finch as her hand rose to brush along the edge of her jaw where the scars remained. “Even the best of physicians can do little against it.”

“True, but any formally trained physician would’ve inoculated you long before it struck the village,” said Finch. “Mr. Templeton, with his homespun ways, left you all without any protection against it. Even now, they have a vaccine that is proven to prevent it, but I would be willing to wager the Templetons have never heard of it, let alone know how to acquire and administer it.”

Arthur’s brows rose. Protecting against that insidious—and preventable—disease was such an accepted practice that it hadn’t occurred to him Oakham might not be protected. How much of the country remained vulnerable to it? Learning from one’s father was far more commonplace than attending a proper medical school, and until it was legally required, most physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries would be trained by other country practitioners, who were only as educated as the previous generation and their own experience.

“Most do not have access to such things, and we do not live in Plymouth or London or any place that warrants the best doctors, Lewis,” said his wife with a sigh. “The Templetons do a fine job at caring for the townsfolk. Would we repay that service by running them out of town?”

“I am truly and deeply sorry that she will be impacted by this, but I knew of a properly trained physician who wished to settle in a town like Oakham, and I wasn’t going to squander the opportunity. I will not risk you or my child simply to be polite,” said Finch, his voice rising in volume with each word.

A panicked edge tinged the words. For all that he was a gentleman of the world, he didn’t brush aside the emotion as he continued, “I only just found you, Felicity. I cannot bear to lose you. It will break me.”

For all that the conversation had been pertinent to him, Arthur now feigned deafness as he turned his attention away from his friend in his vulnerable moment. But he couldn’t ignore the pleading in Finch’s tone and the abject fear that tinged every syllable. It was the sound of love. Of need. Not in the physical sense that so many mistook for love, but a bone-deep longing for another’s heart and soul. To have them forever at one’s side.

Arthur’s own heart burned in empathy at the declaration, and though he didn’t dare look to see Mrs. Finch’s reaction to it, the weight in the air shifted, lightening enough that the others in the carriage relaxed into the squabs once more (or as much as was possible in the close confines).

“I didn’t know this scared you so, Lewis,” she whispered.

This time when her husband reached for her, Mrs. Finch took his hands in hers.

“I am still angry with you, though. You ought to have told me from the beginning,”

she added.

“I know, but I will say the same thing I said to Miss Templeton,” replied Finch. “There was no way to broach the subject without causing trouble, and I wasn’t going to leave it alone to placate anyone. I knew you would fight me on it, and I will not allow anyone to stand between me and what I must do to protect you and my child. Everyone knows Miss Templeton is the driving force behind her brother’s medical practice, and though she does her best, I want better for you.”

“And what of Dr. Vaughn?” asked Mrs. Finch, drawing him back into the conversation. Though it was dark in the carriage, the glimmer of the carriage lamp caught a few glimmers on her cheeks, which she brushed away.

“Though I understand your reasons, Finch, I cannot say that I forgive you for misleading me,” said Arthur. “I came here looking for a new start, and even if I do secure my position, it will be done at the cost of a family who has been a staple of this community. Miss Templeton’s skills serve Oakham’s needs, and it is cruel to force her and her family out.”

Arthur nearly stumbled at her name, for if he were to be entirely honest at that moment, it was she who occupied the majority of his concern.

“I didn’t mean to mislead you,” said Finch with a shake of his head. “I truly didn’t. I knew you wished to move to the country, but I hadn’t realized it was because you wished to avoid the competition in the city.”

Arthur’s brows rose. “I spoke to you about it.”

But Finch shook his head more firmly. “You never mentioned anything of the sort. You said you wanted a quieter life—”

“Without the cutthroat competition, Finch.”

“You do not—” began Finch, but his wife hushed him.

“Not now. He is angry, and he has every right to be,” she said. “Let it be.”

Which was far easier said than done, positioned as they were. If not for the fact that their destination was still miles away, Arthur would’ve preferred to walk. The only comfort to be found was that Mrs. Finch set about distracting the others from Arthur, allowing him to consider the problem.

His success meant harming Miss Templeton’s family. The thought made his stomach twist in a way that had him longing for a cup of ginger tea, even if he knew it would do little to help the situation. It may do wonders in settling a troubled stomach, but it couldn’t soothe the troubled heart that caused it.

To leave Oakham would mean losing Miss Templeton. To stay would make her hate him.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

The scent of damp soil, punctuated with notes of rosemary and mint, hung heavy in the air. With such wretched weather this summer, the plants were only just growing into a semblance of their usual size, with fuzzy stalks of meadowsweet and stringy bushes of chamomile finally taking shape. Despite the overcast sky, the enclosed garden pulsed with vibrancy; the bright orange and yellow of the marigolds and calendula sparkled amongst the vibrant green of the thyme and marshmallow leaves.

Kneeling on the ground, Violet bent over the planting beds, digging at the weeds that continued to sneak into the perfect rows of herbs and vegetables that supplied not only the medicines she produced but the family's meals. The carrots were looking rather spindly, and the impatient part of her longed to see how they were progressing, but young Violet had learned quickly that pulling them prematurely did no good. Though they did taste all the sweeter.

Sitting on her heels, she dragged a forearm across her forehead, batting away the sweat that had gathered despite the bite to the air. Humming to herself, Violet paused as she considered just how quiet the garden was .

A stone wall enclosed the garden, and four alcoves were built into the back side, large enough for the beehives to rest. The skeps were nearly silent, with hardly any movement from the residents inside. A few bees moved in and out of the opening at the bottom of the woven hive, but it was too few. The chill wasn't kind to them, either, and Violet prayed the skies would clear, else there wouldn't be enough honey or comb to harvest.

Despite those worries, Violet was grateful for the weather at present, for it was unbearable to maintain the garden in the heat of summer. Being hunched over in the

dirt was demanding enough on its own, but with the sun blazing down on her, it turned a chore into a torture. One never knew just how thoroughly one could sweat until such a moment.

“Vi?” called Lilibet from the garden gate.

Turning her head, Violet glanced at her sister-in-law, who waved at her without bothering to move toward her.

“I cannot find a basket,” she said with a frown. “I have looked all over, but Isaac and your mother don’t know where the servants keep them, and it’s Mrs. Stevens’ half-day and Peggy went to the shops.”

“I am almost finished here,” called Violet.

“I hate to press the issue, but it is urgent.” Lilibet’s tone echoed the apology etched in her cherubic features.

Straightening, Violet struggled to her feet as her back popped alarmingly. With the edge of her apron, she scrubbed at her hand, though it was difficult to find a patch unspoiled by mud and dirt. She cast a look at the work and smiled to herself. The pile of weeds on the ground beside her testified to just how much she’d accomplished, and though there was still more to be done, the beds were far cleaner than before.

The yarrow needed trimming, though there was little space in the herb garret to hang it. With the poor weather meddling with the plants, far too many were blooming at once, leaving all the drying hooks occupied.

“Vi?” called Lilibet, pulling her from her thoughts .

“Coming,” she replied, turning away to cross the garden and find her sister-in-law

with a teasing smile on her lips. And Violet knew precisely what she was thinking.

“Yes, my name is Violet, and I am in the garden,” she murmured, eliciting giggles from Lilibet. Why her parents had chosen a name that denoted delicacy and demureness, she didn’t know. She embodied more of her younger sister’s stalwart “Martha,” but the damage had been done long before either Mr. or Mrs. Templeton realized their mistake.

“I do apologize,” said Lilibet with a wrinkle of her nose. “Clearly, you have heard such things before.”

“Your husband used to mock me mercilessly about it,” replied Violet, but then added with a smirk, “though I think it is more because he was jealous that I was so much taller than him.”

Taking her sister-in-law by the arm, Lilibet shook her head. “Do not listen to that fool.”

“You married ‘that fool.’”

“Proving I am quite the fool myself, and making us a perfect match,” said Lilibet with a laugh that Violet couldn’t help but share. “But I am desperate for your assistance. I’ve been looking all over and cannot find an empty basket, though I know you must have stacks of them about.”

Leading Lilibet back into the house, Violet moved slowly so as not to cause any unpleasant turn of the lady’s stomach. While Lilibet was rarely bothered by illness in the afternoon, she was only just feeling herself after being laid low for several days.

“What size of basket do you require?” asked Violet as they stepped through the back door, which opened into the kitchen—only to discover Isaac ransacking the

cupboards.

“My dear husband is taking me on a picnic,” said Lilibet as she fairly flitted to the fellow’s side before taking his arm and lifting to her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek—though the rascal turned at the last minute, capturing her lips instead .

Clearing her throat before the couple decided to venture into uncomfortable territory, Violet drew her brother’s attention to her. “We have a delivery arriving today, Isaac.”

“Timms can manage it,” replied her brother as he tucked his bride into his side, his hand resting on her stomach, though there was little sign of the growing child there. “As she missed out on the assembly, I thought it was only fair that we do something together to make up for it now that she is feeling herself again. Besides, in a few months, we shan’t have the freedom to hie off on a picnic, and we ought to take advantage of it while we can.”

Lilibet’s hand joined his, her expression beaming as she gazed up at her husband.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but can it not be put off until tomorrow? The weather might be better,” said Violet.

“But I won’t be here tomorrow,” said Isaac with a puzzled frown. “I told you about my trip.”

Freezing in place, Violet stared at him with only her eyes widening the slightest bit. “No. You didn’t mention anything about a trip.”

Isaac cocked his head. “I know I mentioned it. There’s a prize fight in Portsmouth that I am desperate to attend. Martha has space for me to stay with her.”

“But this is not a good time for you to leave Oakham, Isaac,” said Violet, glancing at

both him and Lilibet, hoping the lady would rush to agree. Perhaps then the fellow might listen. “With Dr. Vaughn about, you need to remain here—”

“Nonsense. It’s the perfect time,” said Isaac. “Having a second physician in town will be a blessing. You cannot call on our patients, and now I shan’t leave them without some assistance. I can enjoy myself in Portsmouth without fretting.”

Violet gaped, not only because she couldn’t imagine her brother having spared a moment to fret about such things but because of his twisted logic that allowed him to call a spade a rake. Or a bucket. Violet tried to think of the opposite of a spade, but despite having just used the implement in the garden moments ago, her mind couldn’t supply anything that perfectly encapsulated her brother’s blindness.

But before she could think how to convince him, Isaac slanted a wry grin at his wife. “I am still hoping that I might persuade my lovely bride to join me so she can meet our sister, but she insists on remaining behind.”

Lilibet batted at his chest with the back of her hand and narrowed her eyes. “If you think I wish to traipse across Devon in my condition, then you are a bigger fool than I realize. Besides, the timing is perfect, as Mama has asked me to join them at home. My aunt and uncle are coming for a visit, and I haven’t seen them in an age. It’s too far to go back and forth from Stoneford every day.”

The girl straightened and turned wide eyes to Violet. “I do apologize for abandoning you and your mother.”

“Speaking of Mother,” interrupted Isaac as he glanced up from ransacking the cupboards, “she mentioned a cough this morning. I fear she might’ve caught something at the assembly, and you might want to give her some of your tisane. It works a treat.”

“Of course.” Violet’s brow creased as she thought back to the time they’d spent together today; Mama hadn’t mentioned a thing about it.

“And where is a basket?” asked Isaac, leaping back to the previous subject as though the rest had never happened. “I have selected the most delectable of treats, and I am determined to spirit my gorgeous wife away for the afternoon.”

A wicked part of Violet wanted to ignore the question and leave them to sort things out themselves, but her hand moved of its own accord, reaching into the cupboard beside the pantry.

“That is perfect,” said Lilibet, taking it from her as Isaac began scooping the food into the basket. She placed a few linen napkins in for good measure, and the pair swept out of the kitchen with a quick word of farewell whilst Violet remained there, frozen in place .

How long would Isaac be absent? She didn’t know, though she suspected it would be at least a fortnight. But whether it was two weeks or two months, now was a terrible time.

Her pulse spiked, piercing her temple, and Violet rubbed at the spot as she forced her feet to move. Making her way out of the kitchen, she recited her list of chores for the day, ticking each off as she moved through the corridor, which divided the two sides of the house, and turned into the room that served as the herb garret and office.

The scent of plants and spices wafted through the house, and when she stepped into the room the aroma was nearly overpowering. Long before she was born, the room had been a drawing room of sorts, but the shelves that had once housed heirlooms and art were now crowded with jars of every shape and size, holding various powders, plants, and pills, ready to be put to use. Bundles of plants hung from a rack fixed to the ceiling along the right side, and a large block table stood beneath with mortars

and pestles, weights and scales, jars and boxes cluttering the surface.

On the opposite side of the long room sat Papa's desk; Mr. Timms occupied the seat, his feet propped atop it, the heel of his shoe scuffing the polished surface.

"The shipment is to arrive any moment now," said Violet, though the apprentice didn't bother looking up from his magazine. "Mr. Timms!"

The young man finally tore his gaze from the illustrations and sighed.

"We have a large delivery coming today, and we need the worktable cleared for the crates and bags that are arriving," she repeated, motioning behind her.

Mr. Timms scoffed and straightened his magazine. "You aren't the Mr. Templeton I report to."

The pain in her head grew, and Violet turned away, her hand kneading the knot forming in her forehead as she turned on her heel and returned the way she'd come .

That lazy good-for-nothing. She would not allow him to spoil her day. Her list of chores was quickly being completed, and that made for an excellent afternoon. The household accounts had been checked, the bills paid, the post answered, and the garden weeded—

Pausing in the corridor, Violet drew in a sharp breath. The weeding. That was nearly done. Just a little more, and that, too, would be ticked off her list. Then she could get to work pruning.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

No matter how many times he strolled down the main thoroughfare of Oakham, Arthur couldn't believe the quaintness of it all. No press of people and deafening cacophony. A man could walk the street without having to keep his wits about him lest he be crushed beneath the wheels of a careless carriage or step into something unmentionable. Clothes hung on washing lines beside the cottages, unmarred by the tang of coal smoke that tainted everything it touched. People greeted each other as they passed.

Though the air still held hints of the malodorous scents of waste, it was more of a subtle note amongst the aroma of freshly turned soil and growing things. Gone was the London fog that enveloped the world in a putrid embrace. Even though the sky was overcast, one could see it and not a wall of fog so thick that the locals referred to it as pea soup.

Considering the picturesque setting, Arthur couldn't say he regretted the decision to leave London—though his heart still sat uneasily as he considered the issue of the Templetons. Holding fast to the bundle of yellow roses in his hand, he reconsidered the wisdom in bringing them, but he hadn't been able to resist the blooming bush .

A plan. That was all the situation required. It may not be a perfect solution, but it provided a possibility. Potential. It didn't guarantee that Miss Templeton would throw herself into his arms and declare her undying love for him. But then, the likelihood that she would do so without warning was very low.

And it wouldn't do to rush matters. Settle the trouble between them, and then court her. Simple.

But first, Arthur needed to talk to her, and while that was proving easier with every minute he spent in her delightful company, even the thought of broaching the issue of their financial rivalry was enough to make his throat close up tight and his tongue cement itself to the roof of his mouth. So many things might go wrong during this discussion.

Whilst his home sat in the heart of the village, theirs stood at the edge where the buildings boasted enough space for proper gardens. The front abutted the road with thick walls sprouting out the backside, enclosing a large area behind that was at least the same size as the house proper. The wooden gate stood open, and Arthur spied a familiar figure moving within the garden.

As she was the very person he wished to speak to, Arthur turned his feet toward the opening. A melody floated on the air as she worked, and the words of the song drifted in and out as she alternated between singing and humming. Arthur didn't know the tune, and Miss Templeton didn't voice enough of the lyrics for him to grasp the meaning, though it was a lilting ditty that flitted about in slow figures.

The garden was magnificent. In the city, there wasn't enough space to grow one's own herbs, and the Templetons had turned this patch of earth into an apothecary's dream. A variety of species were laid out together, thriving despite the cool summer, with some ready to be harvested and dried whilst many more silently awaited their turn to bloom.

The lady rose to her feet, brushing off her hands as she gazed at the beds before her.

“Miss Templeton— ”

But Arthur got no further, for she whipped about with a shriek, a basket spinning out of her hand and dumping its debris on the clean beds and his shoes. The pruning shears slipped from her grasp, flying at him, and Arthur leapt backward, the sudden

flailing knocking the hat from his head. Miss Templeton's hands flew to her mouth, her eyes wide as she stared at the shears now spearing the ground between his legs.

Mouth covered, Miss Templeton lifted her gaze to Arthur and the pair stared at each other for a long moment before he hazarded to speak.

"I only wanted to say 'hello.'"

"And apparently, you were nearly stabbed for your troubles," she said with a wince as she closed her eyes and rubbed at her brow.

"I believe it has to be in your hands to be considered a stabbing," replied Arthur.

Miss Templeton peeked at him. "Is that so?"

"Most assuredly," he said with a firm nod. And with utter seriousness, he added, "Impaled is more apt."

A burble of laughter broke past her horror, and Miss Templeton fought to repress it. And failed. Arthur's muscles relaxed at the sound, and a smile graced his lips.

"I do apologize, sir," she said when their laughter subsided. "Needless to say, you startled me."

"No apologies necessary," replied Arthur. "As you can see, there was no damage done. Which is more than I can say for your flowerbeds."

He frowned at the bits of weeds and leaves that now littered the previously pristine rows.

"Or your hat," added Miss Templeton, nodding at his feet, where the article had been

trampled beneath his shoe. Thankfully, the bouquet hadn't met a similar ending, and Arthur forced his hand to loosen around the stems.

"I saw these and thought you might enjoy them, though now that I see your garden..." His words drifted off as he considered the abundance of blossoms around them. Handing it to her, Arthur ducked his face away as he focused on picking up his crumpled hat; it was bad enough that he hadn't a cover for his head, and now he'd offered a useless token.

What a poor beau he made.

"I may have many plants on hand, but they're useful sorts," said Miss Templeton, lifting the bouquet to her nose and breathing deeply of their rich scent. "I haven't the time or space to cultivate ornamental ones. And I love roses. They are heavenly."

Drawing in a lungful, Arthur's throat threatened to stymie him, but he forced his speech out. "I came by to offer an apology, Miss Templeton, as I fear there's been a bit of a misunderstanding concerning my coming to Oakham. I was led to believe there was no other physician in town. I cannot claim that Mr. Finch and I were good friends, rather that we were close acquaintances whose social circles often overlapped, but I see I was wrong to put so much trust in him."

But Miss Templeton held up a staying hand. "I will admit I am furious with Mr. Finch in many respects—as his fears are unfounded—but I cannot fault him for desiring the best for his family."

"Forgive me, madam, but I must disagree. I fault him greatly for it, even if I understand the temptation. People always have reasons for why they do what they do, however ill-conceived or selfish. Mr. Finch made a choice that benefited himself at our expense."

Miss Templeton drew her arms before her, her brow creasing and her gaze dropping to the ground as silent thoughts seemed to whirl about her head. Arthur longed to ask her what they were, though he knew he hadn't the right.

"Having considered the situation we find ourselves in," he began, grasping for the words he'd planned—but they slipped from his grasp. "I wanted to discuss a matter with you. Of business. Concerning our work..."

Miss Templeton bent down, moving before Arthur knew her intention, and she snatched up the shears and the rest of her tools. He moved to scoop up the detritus that had fallen from her basket and helped to gather her things.

"I have it," said Miss Templeton, though she struggled to manage them and the bouquet.

"Allow me," he said, taking the tools and basket.

"You will dirty yourself," she said with a shake of her head. "I am already a mess, as you can see. There will be no damage done."

Arthur gave her face and figure a look, though he didn't know what she meant by "a mess." Certainly, she was smudged with dirt, but the little smears on her cheek were appealing. As were the locks that pulled free from her bandeau, draping down her neck in delicate curls. Her cheeks were flushed from her exertions, bringing a rosy glow to her complexion, which only enhanced what was already quite lovely.

"I insist," he said, scooping the mess and tools into the basket before she could mount another protest. He rescued his hat and placed it on his head; thankfully, only the rim had suffered any permanent damage, though the whole thing was far from pristine. If anyone looked a mess, it was he.

“Truly, Dr. Vaughn...”

But her protests faded away as he took it in hand and carried it into the house.

Arthur wanted to offer his arm to her, but if the lady protested so much over a little bit of assistance, he doubted she would easily accept any unnecessary gallantry, as the ground was even and the house sat only a few feet away.

“Were those beehives?” he asked, nodding back at the garden as she closed the gate behind them.

Miss Templeton nodded and led him toward the front of the house. “Honey does wonders for many ailments, and I prefer beeswax as a base for many lineaments and salves. To say nothing of the fact that the bees help the plants to flourish.”

Giving a hum of approval, Arthur shook his head at himself; the benefits to such a venture were obvious, yet he didn’t know of many apothecaries who bothered cultivating beehives .

“That is a magnificent garden,” he added as they moved to the front door. “In London, we don’t have the space to maintain our own. We must purchase all our supplies from local growers or importers. Though I do think you would enjoy visiting some of the physic gardens. There is one in Chelsea that is especially impressive, with one of the most extensive collections of medicinal plants I’ve ever seen.”

Miss Templeton’s brows rose at that. “I would like to see that. Sounds fascinating—”

But her words were cut short when a cart rolled up beside her.

“Here you are,” said Miss Templeton with a bright smile for the driver before giving Arthur an apologetic one. “Please excuse me, but I must see to our delivery.”

Shoving the bouquet into Arthur's free hand, she turned toward the cart, peering over the back to the crates and sacks inside.

Ought he to leave? Miss Templeton's tone was dismissive, yet she hadn't sent him away. And there was a little matter of the reason he'd come by. While the roses and discussing her garden were a pleasant diversion, they weren't the primary purpose of his visit, and Arthur couldn't bear the thought of putting it off now that he'd gathered his courage.

Shrugging to himself, he shifted the basket in his hands. The roses were too delicate to be placed inside, so he kept them in hand and turned to study the home.

At first glance, the Templetons' home was much the same as any of the cottages and houses lining the streets of Oakham with a stone exterior that seemed both gray and brown, depending on the light. The front door stood in the center with windows that flanked either side; on the farther one, Arthur spied an ordinary parlor, whilst those closest to him peered into what must be Mr. Templeton's office and workspace.

Jars and bottles of every shape lined the shelves along the window, filled with powders, herbs, and oils of every color. A long table stretched through most of the space, scuffed and dinged from much use, and standing in front of the windows was a desk, whose chair was occupied by a lad who was more interested in his magazine than his work.

Perhaps this was a younger Templeton sibling, though Arthur would swear there were only three: Mr. Templeton, Miss Templeton, and a daughter who married and moved to Plymouth. And years of experience had taught him to recognize the signs of a lazy apprentice; he couldn't quantify precisely what gave the impression, but he didn't dismiss the instinct.

Arthur couldn't help but wonder where Mr. Templeton was and why he'd left his

apprentice with nothing to do. During his years of study, Arthur had wanted nothing more than a few minutes to rest, but there were always more supplies to be readied, more texts to study, and more practice to be completed.

Frowning at the window, he turned away to see Miss Templeton open the front door before returning to the cart. The horse stood patiently awaiting the command from his master, whilst the fellow in question watched as Miss Templeton reached for a massive sack of Epsom salts. Before Arthur knew what she was about, the lady hefted it onto her shoulder with a grunt—whilst the driver simply stood there.

“What in the blazes are you doing?!” Arthur demanded.

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Arthur's voice rose of its own volition, drawing the attention of both the driver and the lady to him—and carrying through the house enough to tear the apprentice from his magazine. Miss Templeton's brows rose, and though Arthur was sorry for the language, he wouldn't apologize for the honest sentiment that drew it forth.

“Give that here,” said Arthur.

He knew he ought to moderate his tone but seeing her treated like a workhorse broke his hold on his emotions. Miss Templeton stared at him as he lifted the sack from her shoulder with one arm and thrust the flowers and basket at her before steadying his shoulder.

“Dr. Vaughn...” began Miss Templeton as a slew of objections rose to her lips.

“No,” was all the answer he was willing and able to give at the moment. Turning a gimlet eye on the driver, Arthur scowled. “Are you going to assist the lady or not?”

“Not when the ‘lady’ is a good deal larger than me,” he muttered. “She’s capable of managing on her own. ”

Being a rather quiet fellow, Arthur hadn't thought himself capable of a temper, but those words sparked a flame inside him that burned through his veins as never before.

“Whether or not she’s capable isn’t the issue, you ill-mannered lout.” Arthur's voice lowered as heat infused his words. “She is a lady in every sense of the word, and you will treat her as such. Now, start hauling in the supplies. Do not make me tell you again!”

And with that, Arthur turned on his heel, hauling the sack inside the shop with Miss Templeton following after; at least she wasn't protesting any longer. Stepping into the office, he spied the worktable, but the surface was cluttered with tools and paraphernalia. The desk was unoccupied, but he wouldn't dare damage it by putting the sack there, so he set it on the ground.

"What do you think you are doing?" Arthur demanded as he glared at the young man sitting at the desk.

The lad's mouth gaped, his brows rising. "I was just reading, sir."

"No, you are just lazing about, wasting your time reading frivolous garbage whilst your parents paid good money to secure you an apprenticeship. Shift yourself!" he barked, and the apprentice's feet flew from the table and drew him upright.

"Stop leaving Miss Templeton to do your work, and unload the cart. Be smart about it," ordered Arthur.

And with that, the young man scurried out the door. Miss Templeton stood to one side, her mouth agape as she stared at Arthur. Whether or not he was being domineering or rude, he didn't care in the slightest.

Nudging her toward the seat the apprentice had vacated, he said, "Sit."

Miss Templeton's mouth moved as though to object, though no words came forth as she stared at him for a moment before doing as bidden, setting the basket on the floor beside her and clutching the roses. In short order, the three men formed a chain and had the supplies pouring quickly into the workroom.

"That's linen for bandages," said Miss Templeton, rising from her seat, though she lowered herself again when Arthur leveled a warning look at her. Despite the mess on

the table, the office was neatly organized, and it was easy to see where others of its kind were kept.

She made a move to rise again (to which Arthur gave her another warning look), and she sank down again. “That is charcoal for—”

“Poultices,” he finished. “I know.”

“Of course,” she murmured, her hands holding tight to the flowers and her fingers fiddling with the velvety petals as he placed the item where the other poultice supplies were kept.

In short order, they had the cart emptied, and the driver scrambled into his seat, sending the horse down the road before Arthur could say another word. The apprentice stood just inside the door, his spine ramrod straight like a soldier reporting to a commanding officer. Though even a private wouldn’t be quaking so badly when facing a general.

“Do you know where the rest goes?” asked Arthur.

The apprentice nodded.

“Then get to it.” Glancing at the mess atop the worktable, Arthur nodded to it. “And clean the office, while you are at it. That worktable ought to have been cleared properly before the delivery. And everything glass and metal needs to be polished.”

With that, the young man scurried about the work, and Arthur snatched up the abandoned magazine, dumping it into Miss Templeton’s basket as he offered her a hand. This certainly hadn’t gone as he’d intended, but there was no helping matters. Just the thought of their rude treatment toward Miss Templeton had his pulse quickening once more, and Arthur fought to keep himself from berating the

apprentice; the lad certainly deserved it, but he'd already overstepped.

"Miss Templeton, I was hoping you might have some time this afternoon..." For all that Arthur's fury had been pushing him through the past few minutes, the moment he turned his mind toward the business that brought him to Miss Templeton's door, his nerves wrestled for control. Especially as the apprentice was standing within hearing, though the young man set to his work with a fervor.

"I am taking your advice," blurted Arthur.

Miss Templeton's brows rose. "Are you? What advice?"

"To purchase a horse, and I was hoping you might have some time this afternoon to teach me some of the finer points. I know the basics, but I fear I'm an abysmal rider." There. He'd managed the invitation. An outing together. If dancing with her twice hadn't conveyed his intentions well enough, surely, this would make it clear.

"I am glad you are so eager to learn, but as I ride sidesaddle, I fear I am a poor teacher for you," she said with a considering frown. "I am certain my brother would be willing if you do not wish to ask Mr. Finch."

Arthur held back a sigh. He didn't wish to ask any "Mr." for instruction, and he couldn't say for certain whether her objections were personal or merely practical. Drawing in a sharp breath, he decided to change tack.

"Thank you for the suggestion, Miss Templeton. I shall give it due consideration," he said, searching for the proper words. "Perhaps you might show me around town. If you have some time this afternoon. Your apprentice has this in hand." He paused with a significant tone and pointed toward the young man, who nodded vigorously.

"I will have it all cataloged and in its proper place before you return, Miss

Templeton,” added the lad.

Turning his attention back to Miss Templeton, Arthur gave as warm a smile as he could manage whilst his insides felt swarmed by angry bees. The lady stood for a moment, watching him in silence as she considered it.

“There’s hardly anything to show, Dr. Vaughn. If you have walked from your home to mine, you’ve seen the majority of Oakham,” she said with a frown. But she cut her words short, straightened her spine, and gave a self-deprecating shake of her head. “Oh, of course. You wished to discuss some business, didn’t you? In all the confusion, it slipped my mind. I do have more work to do this afternoon, but if we are not gone too long, I have time enough for anything you wish to discuss.”

In London, Arthur had witnessed more than a few hot air balloon ascensions; it was thrilling to see a person floating through the air like a bird. And the moment Miss Templeton spoke, he felt like one of the balloons, which had sprung a leak and plummeted to the ground. Thankfully, no one had been seriously injured then, but Arthur couldn’t say the same of his pride at having Miss Templeton misinterpret the meaning behind the invitation.

“If you will give me a moment to freshen up, I would be pleased to join you on a walk about town,” said Miss Templeton before turning and hurrying away.

She’d accepted. That was something to celebrate. Even if she didn’t understand the significance yet. As much as Arthur longed to tell her that all of it was naught but an excuse to secure time with her, surely, it wasn’t necessary to say aloud. Eventually, intentions had to be explicitly declared, but no courting beau approached a lady and simply said, “I wish to court you.”

No, there were dances and time together. Bouquets and tokens. Signs of one’s interest that conveyed as clearly as words. And Arthur simply had to be patient as he

reinforced his intentions with his actions.

Pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders, Violet tried to understand the strange turns her life had taken. If not for the fact that her dreams were never vivid enough to confuse with reality, she might've believed this day was naught but a fantasy her mind had conjured. Yet here she was, walking down the country lane with Dr. Vaughn at her side .

How had she arrived at this point? True, the gentleman had lured her out with promises of some mysterious “business” he wished to discuss, but it hadn't taken much to convince her to join him. Violet's heart burned as she replayed the image of his temper flaring as he took charge of the shipment. How sternly he'd insisted on not only carrying her tools in from the garden but that she sit as they managed the rest. The defense Dr. Vaughn had laid on her behalf.

“...She is a lady in every sense of the word, and you will treat her as such...”

Violet had been a large babe that had grown into a large lady, and for all that manners demanded men treat women with dignity and respect, her stature had always deemed her as not female in their eyes, as though such consideration was only reserved for those of delicate build—which Mr. Sprat had so thoroughly demonstrated when he'd scoffed at the thought of assisting someone larger than himself. Miss Violet Templeton was built like a man, not a woman. No matter that her figure clearly displayed female curves.

And then Dr. Vaughn had swooped in like a vengeful knight, there to defend her honor. The image played in her mind again and again, and Violet couldn't help the surge of warmth that swept through her and settled into her heart at the memory.

Shaking her head at herself, she shied away from such thoughts. They wouldn't help matters. Thinking of him kindly wouldn't alter the fact that he was her enemy, not her friend. No matter how considerate he was. For the good of her family, Violet had to drive him from town, and she mustn't forget it.

Yet that drew up memories of Dr. Vaughn's anger toward Mr. Finch, which made her insides wriggle. Shifting her shawl, she itched at her neck, but that did nothing to relieve the prickles that ran down her spine. Everyone was justified in their own minds. Mr. Finch had thought himself on the side of right when he'd misled Dr. Vaughn; could she now take similar actions to drive the fellow away ?

But what other answer was there?

Their present system of treating patients wasn't ideal, but it served Oakham's needs. Violet would swear before a magistrate that the survival rate hadn't declined in the years since Papa's passing. If the town deigned to allow a female to serve their medical needs, then Violet would manage it all on her own.

And Mama would suffer an apoplexy. If opening a shop was beneath them, having a daughter take up a man's work would eviscerate their reputation. No, it was only acceptable if they pretended Violet had little to do with it all.

Or if the townsfolk had no other options.

Now that one had presented itself, Violet knew Isaac's practice wouldn't survive long. He cared little for medicine, but it wasn't as though one could change professions willy-nilly. One could not secure a livelihood without money and connections, and Isaac was sorely lacking both. And though she was content to allow him to pay for his mistakes, it was his family who would suffer for them.

Besides, Dr. Vaughn was so capable. He could relocate to another town and do well

for himself. Easily. Not so for Isaac. That logic allowed a little of her stomach to settle, but not when the memory of his kindness continued to replay in her thoughts.

Clearing her throat, Violet nodded back to the buildings as they drifted past the edge of Oakham. “As you’ve seen the village, I thought I might show you some of the country roundabout.”

“That would be lovely,” said Dr. Vaughn with a smile that did nothing for her equilibrium.

So often, his expression was a tight thing that showed more wariness than warmth, but when relaxed, his face radiated with... Violet tried to put a finger on the sentiment, but she couldn’t quantify it beyond the fact that the sight made her feel lighter; as though his contentment and joy were contagious, but instead of traveling by miasmas and foul vapors, one need only see it to be infected. If he employed that more often, the unmarried ladies in the area would grow even more twitter-pated than they already were for the man.

But Violet Templeton couldn’t make friends with the doctor, so she forced her attention to the road ahead, pointing them toward a forest.

Clearing her throat again, she asked, “What is it that you wished to discuss with me?”

“As I said, I was ignorant about the situation before I arrived, but now that I’m here, there’s not much to be done,” he said with a frown. “My lease for the cottage is binding for the next two years, and though there are ways around that, it would be very difficult for me to relocate so soon after arriving in Oakham. And even if I could pack up and leave tomorrow, I gave my word that I would deliver Finch’s child.”

Drawing in a breath, Dr. Vaughn continued, “But I want to have peace between your family and me, and I think there might be a way for us all to coexist.”

The tightness in her chest eased, and Violet's heart rose at the thought. Though the world around them was still dim and dingy, it felt as though the sunshine peeked through the clouds, and her footsteps grew lighter as they reached the edge of the forest.

"I had wanted to speak to your brother about the matter," said Dr. Vaughn. "However, Mr. Finch assured me that you are the proper Templeton to speak to."

Violet's feet jerked to a halt, her eyes darting to Dr. Vaughn. "And no doubt by now, the village has told you what a hoyden I am, as I have the gall to do more than what is deemed appropriate work for a genteel lady, though they never have any suggestions about how I can meet those standards and provide for my family. Better we starve."

His brows rose at that. "If that makes you a hoyden, then it appears all the wives in my profession should be called such. My own mother is a hoyden of the highest degree. "

Gripping the edge of her shawl, Violet pulled it tighter around her as the gentleman watched her with a considering expression before motioning her forward.

"I see I shall have to convince you," he said with a slight laugh to his tone. Slanting her a look, Dr. Vaughn added, "I don't know of any medical man whose wife does not assist him in some fashion. My mother spent as much time mixing medicines as my father and often assisted in surgeries. Such things may be uncommon in the country, but I assure you that in the city, it is commonplace in my profession. It would be impossible for me to see all my patients and make the medicines they require without assistance."

Giving her a vague shrug as they delved deeper into the forest, he added, "But then, isn't that the nature of marriage? Unless a couple is blessed with an independent fortune that allows them to live in luxury, most wives do more than keep

house—though heaven knows that alone is an occupation in and of itself. Whether elevating their husband's social standing or participating in the work itself, I cannot think of any man who doesn't owe a significant portion of his success to his wife, even if no one but him sees the effort she puts forth.”

For all that Violet had learned long ago not to countenance the villagers' judgments, hearing Dr. Vaughn dismiss their criticism of hoyden ladies so thoroughly couldn't help but lighten her spirits. And she found herself wishing that the path ahead would stretch on indefinitely.

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The distant sound of water drew Violet's gaze from the ground to the surrounding forest, drifting over the swaths of greenery that enveloped them; for all that the skies were gray, the leaves sparked with life, bringing with them a dash of sunshine. The road cut a swath through the undergrowth, drawing them deeper in until they could no longer see the fields beyond, and the crisp scent of the river filled her nose before they arrived at the bend.

Dr. Vaughn stopped as they spied the Little Leigh River. The water was clear enough to see the rocks lining the bed, blending their brown hue with the reflection of the green leaves above. Despite being quite wide, the river in this part was shallow enough to ford, though long before anyone alive could recall, the townsfolk had built a clapper bridge across it.

Large boulders formed the piers that held the structure aloft, and thin slabs of slate were laid across the tops, allowing the water to flow freely beneath and providing a relatively smooth surface to cross. Despite having seen it many times before, Violet couldn't help but be impressed by the simple engineering that had managed to stand strong for so long .

Leading him to the water's edge, she ducked beneath the hanging branches that formed a green tunnel and stepped onto the stone walkway, making her way past the foliage's reach to sit on the center of the bridge. Her stone was quite long, some five or six feet, allowing enough space for them to sit side by side and look down at the water.

With how wet the summer had been, the river was swollen, and she kept a firm hand on her skirts so they wouldn't fall into the water, but it was still low enough that her

soles only occasionally skimmed the surface. In the far distance, children had their trousers and skirts hiked up as they splashed around the shallows, not caring in the slightest that it was far too cold for such antics. But then, Violet had done the same when she was small. Such things never mattered much then. They were far more focused on building their own river crossing, though it lacked the structure of a proper bridge and formed more of a dam.

“This is magnificent,” said Dr. Vaughn, his eyes drifting across the trees and water.

“They do not have sights like this in London?” she asked with a faint smile.

“There are some beautiful parts of the city, but nothing like this.”

Crossing her ankles, Violet drew in a deep breath and swung her feet, sending little ripples in the water when her soles skittered across the surface. “The river goes all the way to Harley Lake, near Bentmoor, but this is my favorite stretch.”

“I can see why.”

The pair sat silently with the trickle of water skipping over stones and children’s laughter carrying on the breeze. Though Violet knew there was business to discuss, she couldn’t help but enjoy the moment before drawing in a deep breath and turning her gaze to Dr. Vaughn.

“Now, what is this grand plan of yours that will allow us to live in peace? ”

The gentleman chuckled. “You make it sound as though we are at war, Miss Templeton.”

Violet feigned a smile as she ought, but a chill ran down her spine at the truth behind that description. “What is your proposition?”

Dr. Vaughn's gaze met hers, and she was struck by the sight. It wasn't as though she hadn't seen blue eyes before, but his were such a rich shade. Not the muddled blue-gray one often found, but almost like the blue of a hydrangea. He sat there for a long moment, merely holding her gaze, and Violet didn't know what he was thinking, nor did she feel inclined to rush his thoughts. The gentleman was not one to speak hastily, and she rather liked that about him. His words held meaning.

Clearing his throat, the gentleman turned his gaze to the water again. "I know Oakham is too small to require multiple physicians, but what if I were to commission you to make the medicines I prescribe?"

Violet's heart sank and her legs slackened, hanging limp from the bridge as she stared down into the water.

"I sense that your brother isn't wholly enamored with being a physician, so this would allow him to focus more on the manufacturing. With your skill guiding it, surely, it is quite profitable," he continued.

Truth was rarely a happy thing. Yes, it was imperative to a better life, but far too often, it did not coincide with that which one hoped to happen. Truth swooped in to ruin best-laid plans and the grand dreams of the future, and for all that Violet had longed for his plan to be the solution to their troubles, truth wouldn't allow it.

And some part of her didn't wish to dissuade Dr. Vaughn. His tone was so pleased and hopeful that it made her feel like a wretched beast for dashing them so thoroughly. Yet presenting him with the reality of their situation may be the easiest manner in which to convince him to leave as soon as the Finches' child was born .

"You cannot sustain yourself on seeing patients alone," began Violet.

"I do not require much to sustain myself. I didn't come here looking for an

extravagant life. I just want peace and quiet.” Dr. Vaughn paused, drawing her gaze to him, and she spied a wistful smile. “No doubt others would laugh at me for wanting so little and would likely think I am settling for an inferior life, one where I am not living it to the fullest. But I spent far too much of my life amongst those focused on having more, and I would rather focus on contentment.”

The man exuded serenity as he spoke, drawing Violet in with an image of a life that seemed far better than the ones so many focused on. They wrung their hands about not having enough money, but their desire for “more” was the true culprit of their unhappiness, keeping them from appreciating the simple joy to be found in a simple life. One needn’t host parties, possess the finest things, or travel the world to find fulfillment, and plenty of those who spent their lives in a whirl of self-indulgence rarely found it.

A woman could be quite happy even when wearing home-sewn gowns and living without a carriage.

“That is admirable, Dr. Vaughn,” she said with a sigh. “But I know better than anyone just how much money there is to be made in Oakham. To split the work would be to split the income we have, and we could not survive on selling prescriptions alone—”

Violet snapped her mouth shut before the dreaded “unless” slipped out, for there was no point in admitting to the apothecary shop scheme she’d posed to her family. They would never countenance opening one, and Mama would rather quit Oakham altogether than be counted amongst the tradesmen.

For the briefest of moments, she considered whether or not they could reverse the division of labor and Dr. Vaughn could open the shop, but she brushed aside the idea just as quickly. It would be a waste of his skills and would ruin the successful balance she’d struck with her brother, to say nothing of the fact that it didn’t alter the fact that

a physician could not sustain a family in Oakham on visits alone.

Dr. Vaughn's brows lowered, his forehead furrowing as he considered that. "It is far from ideal, but surely, we can give it a chance. For now, at least. With time, we might settle on a better solution."

Violet smiled at him, as she knew he wanted her to, and nodded. Let him try if he wished. Dr. Vaughn wanted assurances, and Violet couldn't help but yearn to scoop them up and cling to the hope that everything would turn out well in the end. But truth was a stern mistress, and she had learned long ago not to ignore it. Dr. Vaughn was a wonderful man, but he needed to provide for himself just as she needed to provide for her family; their goals were contrary to one another, and there wasn't a resolution that would keep them both in town.

He needed to remain for a little time, but Dr. Vaughn's lease could be broken, and he could return to London, where he had patients aplenty and a family to assist him. If he hated Town so very much, the gentleman could find another situation. The country was full of towns that would welcome Dr. Vaughn into their fold. He didn't need Oakham. Not like the Templetons did.

"If I may be so bold, I will say that having such a talented apothecary on hand is quite a boon," said Dr. Vaughn, slanting a look at her that held a twinkle of mirth to it. "Much to my teachers' consternation, I never learned to enjoy that aspect of medicine. I may excel in many ways, but I cannot seem to get my tablets as uniform as yours, and it is entirely too irritating. Having you manage it for me would be a great blessing."

Violet couldn't help but smile at that admission. "For my part, I love mixing medicines. It makes me feel like a witch, brewing potions and spells. With a bit of eye of newt and wool of bat."

Jerking away from his gaze, she slapped a hand over her mouth as her cheeks pinked. Why she'd admitted such a thing was a mystery; even Felicity and Diana knew nothing of her propensity to cackle as she boiled ingredients over the fire or ground them down with mortar and pestle.

But Dr. Vaughn laughed. "I haven't thought of it in that manner, but I suppose with many of the ingredients, it does seem a bit like witchcraft."

"Do not tell the townsfolk," she said with a grimace. "I fear they may just burn me as a witch if I were to admit it as such."

"Ah, yes. Being the hoyden witch must be difficult in Oakham," said Dr. Vaughn with a serious air.

"Are you teasing me?" she asked with a frown.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Violet stared at his profile for a long time before turning her gaze back to the river, her feet swinging once more. She didn't want to think of rivalries or battles. For now, she simply wanted to enjoy this moment of peace and the beauty around her.

"You were right about Geoffrey Cavendish," he said, breaking through her thoughts.

"Pardon?"

"The Invisible Hand . It's quite a gripping tale," he said.

Violet's gaze swung to him, and she sat there, thinking through his words, trying to grasp the meaning.

“You recommended that I read it, and I found it quite entertaining,” he clarified.

Straightening, Violet considered the man at her side. “You read it already?”

“I finished it this morning.”

“We spoke of it two days ago,” she said with a frown.

“You were adamant that it was a gripping read, and as I am new to town, I still have more time on my hands than is good for me, so I went to Bentmoor and found a copy of it. I couldn’t put it down.” The gentleman spoke so matter-of-factly, as though it was entirely reasonable that he acted so quickly and thoroughly.

“I didn’t think you enjoyed reading,” she said .

Dr. Vaughn shook his head. “I haven’t read much, but it is more about opportunity than desire. My father pushed me to move quickly through my schooling and establish myself as a doctor, which didn’t leave me much time for such things. Dr. Floyd Vaughn values success above all else. Pastimes have their place, but not when one is still in his prime.”

Violet’s brows rose at that. “A strong work ethic is admirable, but surely, there is time for pleasure as well.”

Dr. Vaughn gave her a half-smile. “Not if you wish to live up to the family reputation as being amongst the best doctors in London.”

Giving a vague hum in reply, she turned her attention back to the water. “Well, I’ve never heard of Floyd Vaughn.”

And that drew forth a sharp laugh as Dr. Vaughn shook his head. “Never say so to my

father. It would decimate his pride.”

*

Arthur was quite certain this was the finest day he'd had in some time. Perhaps ever. Despite a few bumps along the way, here he sat in a beautiful location with an equally lovely lady at his side, all his attention fixed on her as they spoke of everything and nothing.

When he'd considered love and marriage, Arthur hadn't truly known that one could find it and friendship wrapped in one perfect package. Through his profession, he'd witnessed many private moments between spouses and families, and though many espoused beliefs of romance, such displays were superficial physical connections.

Here, more than mere attraction bound him to Miss Violet Templeton. Her ideas and opinions were as fascinating to him as the draw he felt to her hand that rested so close to his. If his fingers inched nearer along the stone, they would touch, yet Arthur couldn't bear to risk breaking the moment. Best not to press his suit too quickly.

But when a lull in the conversation drew her attention to him, Miss Templeton's eyes fixed on his, and Arthur felt their power pulling him in. There was a softness in her expression, and he longed to brush aside a curl that hung across her cheek, bouncing slightly in the breeze.

“I am sorry about your hat,” she said with a frown, reaching up to poke the rim. Nodding toward it, Miss Templeton held out her hand. “May I see it? I've mended enough of my brother's and father's clothes to have learned a thing or two about resurrecting hats.”

Arthur felt the familiar flush of heat creep across his cheeks, though he batted the embarrassment away.

“I promise I am not going to steal it,” she added with a hint of laughter.

Dropping his gaze away from her, Arthur struggled as his throat decided to be uncooperative once more. It wasn't as though Miss Templeton didn't know what lay hidden beneath, as she'd seen his bald head several times already, but it was easier to ignore such failings when they were hidden from sight. Surely, putting it on display wouldn't endear him to her. Yet there was no polite way to deny her.

Arthur lifted it from his head and handed it over. Miss Templeton took hold of it and turned the hat about, feeling the crumpled rim. Turning it this way and that, she considered it.

“With a bit of steaming, I believe it is salvageable. We haven't a milliner in town, but if you take it to Bentmoor, I am certain you could have it straightened in a trice. Though I know of a few women here who take in laundry and might manage it.”

Then, turning it between her hands, she plopped it on his head once more. “In the meantime, it gives you a bit of a roguish air. As though you've gone a few rounds of fisticuffs with ruffians.”

“When in fact, I was nearly impaled by a lady with gardening shears,” he replied, though it was a miracle the jest came out at all.

Miss Templeton chuckled, her dark eyes meeting his with a smile shining in their depths. Her hand rested against the slab once more, and her fingers were so close. A little movement and he could take hold of her hand. To lean in her direction would bring her close enough to steal a kiss. Either was far too forward at this stage, but holding her gaze, Arthur allowed his eyes to tell her the many things he was imagining.

Surely, she could feel the closeness and connection they shared, and in that moment,

Arthur knew that one way or another, he was going to find a solution to their problem. Having just found Miss Templeton, he wasn't going to allow a little thing like their livelihoods to run him from town. He needed time to explore the possibility that lay heavy between them.

There must be a way.

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“Letter for you, Mama,” said Violet, inching open the door to the lady’s bedchamber.

The curtains were still pulled tight against the light, and the air sat heavy with the scent of the sickroom; the fireplace cheerily burned, but the lady in the bed remained bundled beneath the mass of blankets. Mama gave no acknowledgment, and Violet crossed to her, sitting upon the corner of the mattress and pressing a hand to the lady’s forehead. The skin was clammy and warm still, though far from being worrisome.

Mama opened her eyes, and she gave a faint smile. “Is it from an admirer?”

“I would say so. It is from Isaac,” replied Violet.

With a smile, Mama shifted and leaned against the headboard before reaching out for the envelope. Violet handed it over and began gathering the many things that had been left out on the side table during the past few days; they were nearly through the stack of novels, so she would need to send Peggy into Bentmoor to fetch a few more from the lending library tomorrow once the maid was finished with the laundry .

“I apologize, but I will have to leave you to your knitting or sewing this afternoon,” said Violet. “I have several pressing prescriptions to fulfill.”

Mama waved that away and broke the seal, unfolding the letter. “Do not trouble yourself with me. I feel wretched, but it is nothing I cannot manage. You’ve sacrificed too much of your time entertaining me as it is.”

“It is not a sacrifice, Mama,” said Violet as she reached for the tea tray and piled the

dishes atop it.

“Oh.”

The quiet exhalation drew Violet up short, and she turned to see Mama staring at her son’s missive with a furrowed brow.

“What is it?” asked Violet.

“Nothing significant,” replied Mama with a sigh that revealed the true disappointment lingering beneath the words. “Isaac is having a lovely time in Portsmouth with Martha, and he’s decided to join Lilibet in Stoneford for the rest of her aunt and uncle’s visit. They won’t return home for another fortnight.” With a tsk, Mama set the letter aside. “I ought not to begrudge him the time apart. He is a grown man, after all. But I do miss him when he is away. This house is so empty without him here.”

Straightening, Violet drew in a sharp breath. Just a few words. Hardly anything significant. Yet there was no denying the longing in Mama’s tone, making it clear just how much more important Isaac’s presence was.

The lady’s eyes drifted to her daughter, and Mama straightened. “Oh, I didn’t mean to imply that I do not value your company, my darling.”

Reaching out a hand, she beckoned for Violet to join her on the bed. With a pained smile, Mama pressed her free hand to her head. “I fear this fever is making a muddle of my words. I love spending time with you. Of course, I do. I love you dearly, and I am so grateful for all the time you’ve spent at my bedside. You take such good care of me. Isaac simply has a way of enlivening my spirits. That is all. ”

Violet smiled as she knew she ought, but she couldn’t help but hear the implication—however unintentional—that she didn’t possess that skill.

“Oh, my sweet girl. I am so proud of you,” said Mama with a gentle smile. “You do know that don’t you? Your father and I were always amazed at how diligent and capable you are, though I do not know where it came from as it certainly wasn’t either of us.”

“Papa would’ve forgotten his head if it weren’t attached to his neck,” said Violet, offering up the familiar refrain the gentleman had said many times.

“Too true. You do so much for our family, and you always have. I do not know how you manage it all and all the ledgers and such, but you do it beautifully, and I am proud of you,” said Mama with a smile that was affection and joy blended together. “Whenever your father fretted about things, I always said that we needn’t worry because Vi will sort it out in a trice. And you always did.”

While the words were pleasant to hear, the genuine admiration in her tone resonated through Violet, lightening her heart and drawing with it a genuine smile. “Thank you, Mama.”

“No, thank you,” she echoed, though the words were broken when she yawned deeply. Shaking her head, Mama straightened and handed the letter to Violet. “Martha left a postscript for you.”

Violet glanced over the sheet and found only a scant line at the end; she flipped the sheet over but found nothing additional there. Just a few simple words, hastily scrawled at the end.

Tell Vi that I am well and send her my love.

“Is that all?” murmured Violet, drawing Mama’s attention.

“I am certain she means to write when she has time, but Martha’s very busy now that

she's a married lady."

Violet held back a grimace. How many times had she heard that excuse? During the courtship and early days of their marriage, ladies were quick to dismiss their friends in favor of their sweetheart, which was entirely understandable. Yet as the weeks turned to months, their justifications shifted to include all their new responsibilities as a "Mrs." Then children quickly followed, stealing away even more of their attention and making it impossible for them to spare even a passing thought for their former companions and confidants.

However, Violet couldn't help but notice how often those ladies were able to carve out time for their new friends amongst the matrons. She doubted Martha forewent social calls no matter how demanding her daily diary was.

"No doubt Martha has many demands on her time," said Violet. "But being married has nothing to do with it, as her husband is traveling the world aboard his ship and rarely at home."

Mama leveled a disapproving look at her daughter. "She has a household to manage now, which I assure you is quite the undertaking. To say nothing of having Isaac underfoot for a sennight. And I would be cautious about saying such things, Vi. It makes you sound bitter."

Turning her eyes heavenward, Violet hid the expression and gave her mother a smile as she knew was required of the moment, and in a grand show of goodness and humility, she did not bring to Mama's attention that her unmarried daughter was already managing much of the household and making all her brother's prescriptions yet still found time to write Martha. But to say such would likely make her sound even more "bitter."

Rising to her feet, Violet helped to settle Mama into the bed properly, tucking the

covers around her before turning back to the side table to finish stacking the remaining dishes atop the tea tray.

“Peggy is busy with the laundry today, and Mrs. Stevens is on her half-day, but I’ll leave the doors open so I should be able to hear if you call,” said Violet.

“Do you think Isaac was able to convince Martha to visit?” asked Mama, her brow furrowing as she stared at the ceiling. “I asked him to speak to her, but he didn’t say whether he was successful or not. I understand she wishes to live in Portsmouth, but surely, she could come to Oakham from time to time rather than insisting we always come to her.”

“You know Martha, Mama,” said Violet, snatching up the knitting bag and sewing box that had been abandoned on the far side of the room and setting them on the bedside table.

“That is the trouble,” murmured Mama in a wistful tone. “Papa was always her favorite. Inseparable, those two. I fear with him gone, she won’t bother coming home again.”

“She loves us.”

“Yes, of course she does,” replied Mama with a sigh.

Violet couldn’t help but turn the lady’s words against her. “And she is a married lady with a great many things requiring her attention.”

“But surely, she could find some time for us.”

With only the mightiest of efforts on her part, Violet managed to keep from laughing or warning Mama that she was sounding “bitter.” However unintentional, the lady

had slipped into an all-too-common position of the pot, and as the metaphorical kettle, Violet longed to tease her about the hypocrisy, but justification was a powerful tool that never allowed people to see the truth of their behavior—even when it slapped them in the face. So, there was no point in attempting it, and Violet chose to be amused by it.

Hefting the tray, she turned to the door. “I will keep an ear out for you, Mama—”

“Yes, yes,” she replied with a halting chuckle. “Go now. Get your work done.”

Needing no further prodding, Violet swept from the room.

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Hurrying down to the kitchens, Violet deposited the tea tray beside the sink. The large copper kettle boiled in the back corner and filled the room with steam despite the windows and door being thrown wide open; Peggy stood beside it, agitating the wash inside it as she nodded at her mistress.

In a trice, Violet was on her way once more, heading down the corridor and into the office. Summer saw the room filled to bursting with drying plants, and she ducked and wove between the bundles hanging from the ceilings. Perhaps it was time to invest in a proper herb shed; that was a happy thought, and Violet drifted around the room as she considered what it would look like and how she would organize it. The family couldn't afford to build such a thing, but it didn't stop her from imagining it all the same.

Reaching for the window, she flicked the catch and pushed the pane outward. A burst of chill breeze swept through the room, making the plants above sway and the papers on the side table flutter. Violet pulled it closed until there was only the slightest opening; she needed some fresh air, or the room would soon be stifling .

She grabbed her apron from an obliging peg beside the door and tied it about her as she examined the worktable. Everything was precisely where she'd laid it. For once. When Isaac had taken on an apprentice, Violet had cursed Mr. Timms whenever the young man went missing, but now she drew a grateful sigh at his absence. She didn't know where the lad had hidden himself, but she was grateful that no one was mucking about with her things or making messes she'd have to clean.

Sitting atop the table was the glass alembic, ready and waiting to distill whatever she put inside. The bulbous cucurbit hovered above a lantern, held in place by a brass

stand, and carefully, Violet measured water into the globe-like jar. With the brass scales, she weighed out the herbs, spooning each carefully through the narrow opening at the top, and swished them about with her glass stirring rod.

The cap was such a strange-looking piece, rather like an upside-down ladle with a tube for a handle. Violet fit the rounded bit over the top of the cucurbit, sealing the glass jar to keep the precious steam from escaping, and shifted the tubing until it pointed over the receiver, which would catch the condensation that gathered once the liquid was boiled.

Such a simple process, but powerful in its ability to strengthen the concentration of her medicines.

Once situated, Violet fetched a spill from the container on the mantelpiece and lit the roll of paper on a lantern Peggy had left burning in the back corner. With careful movements, she brought the spill to the table and lit the squat lantern beneath the belly of the alembic.

Though the distillation did require some attention, Violet was free to settle into the next task on her list. Mr. Wrigley needed more cathartics. She couldn't say making cachets was her favorite chore, and she didn't understand why he preferred them, but the gentleman was quite happy to pay extra for the special medicine.

In theory, the capsules did their job. Upon swallowing, saliva dissolved the rice paper exterior and released the powders held within, allowing one to take the medicine without having to taste it, but to Violet's thinking, it traded one discomfort for another, for swallowing the thick, disk-like cachets was an unpleasant experience. Being the size of a large coin, they did not go down easily, and the rice paper shell took time to disintegrate. Violet's throat ached with the memory of the one time she'd taken one; the thing lodged itself in her throat, refusing to move or soften until she downed a potful of tea.

Flipping through the pages of her recipe book, Violet stopped at her record of Dr. Vaughn's prescription and began grabbing the required jars. Just when she filled her arms to bursting, a knock on the side door sounded, meaning that a patient had come to call (else they would've gone to the front door). Quickly depositing the ingredients on the table, Violet hurried over and answered the door.

"Mrs. Durrant, Mrs. Rutherford, how good to see you today," she said with a nod of the head.

The pair deigned to look at her long enough so that she knew they had seen and heard her, but kept their faces turned slightly away.

"Dr. Vaughn informed me that you have my prescription," said Mrs. Durrant in a haughty tone that conveyed just how little she cared to be on such an errand, though Violet knew if she truly did not wish to be here, the lady would've sent a maid; people didn't deign to fetch such things themselves when they had a perfectly good servant on hand.

Mrs. Rutherford wrinkled her nose and glanced over Violet's shoulder, giving the office a disapproving look. "I cannot believe we are forced to patronize such a rustic establishment when we could purchase medicines from a properly educated London doctor."

"Dr. Vaughn is firm on that front, though it is so very disappointing," said Mrs. Durrant. "After how poorly Mr. Templeton treated my dear husband, I have half a mind to go to Bentmoor in the future. Can you believe he was prescribing tonics that did nothing? Robbing us so he can gallivant about, spending his time at sporting events and mooning over that new wife of his—rather than caring for the people of our village."

"It's disgraceful," added Mrs. Rutherford. "One expects money-grubbing and inflated

costs from the money-grubbing tradesmen , but not from a gentleman.”

Oh, there were so many retorts that sprang to Violet’s mind. That they would call anything disgraceful whilst behaving in such a blatantly rude fashion was ridiculous; these shrews were more bitter than the rhubarb in Mr. Wrigley’s powders, and Violet had a word or two she wished to say to them.

It was people like these who would cut the Templetons from their social circles if they dared to do anything so ill-mannered as open an apothecary shop, preferring that the family struggle rather than take gainful employment. People were quite content to laugh at the ungainly Mr. Templeton whilst ignoring that she had done much to ease their aches and pains.

Isaac’s behavior was disgusting—there was no debating that fact—but so was treating one’s neighbor like a blight on the village. Laughing at a lady simply because she had the ill fortune of being built differently from their petite frames. Cloaking oneself in outrage at being cheated whilst being known to default on bills, choosing to pay enough only to keep the debt collectors at bay but still purchasing more than one could afford.

The most difficult fees to collect were those owed by the wealthy. They clutched every last penny in their fists, refusing to pay the Templetons their due until several reminders were sent, and then it was only farthings at a time. In truth, if everyone paid in a timely fashion, the family wouldn’t be hovering on the brink. For goodness’ sake, Violet wagered that if everyone in Oakham paid what they owed, it would far outweigh anything Isaac had done!

But pride goeth before a fall. No amount of justification would wipe away her brother’s sins, and there was little good to be had in stirring up trouble .

Ignoring the pair, Violet moved to the side table where several prescriptions awaited

delivery and found the one intended for Mrs. Durrant. She paused and looked at the others all lined up—each for Dr. Vaughn’s patients—and when she turned, the cachet molds sat there, mocking her.

Mr. Wrigley was yet another defector. No matter how much more he was willing to pay for his luxury medicines, it didn’t make up for the loss of such a prime patient. Not only did he honor his bills (and in a timely fashion), but the gentleman was a veritable mess of ailments that plagued those with more money than good sense and lived indolent lifestyles bound to disturb the digestive system and flare the gout.

Violet rubbed her forehead and focused on the task at hand. Returning to the door, she handed over the tincture vial and a slip of paper with the dosage instructions. Holding firm to her self-control, she refused to be goaded by their behavior and demand payment; to do so would only embarrass the family further. It was gauche enough that they must deal with money, but the proper order was to send a bill—not demand coins in hand—and then pray the Durrants deigned to pay it.

With another smug lift of their chins, the pair swanned away, confident in their social and moral rectitude.

Shutting the door, Violet leaned against it, her eyes cast heavenward as though that might supply the answers to their troubles. The family had savings enough to weather temporary turmoil, but she felt it in her bones that this was more than a spring storm, destined to cause a little vexation before clearing to a beautiful summer.

What had she been thinking being so chatty with Dr. Vaughn? Whether or not he was a kind soul, his being here was causing her family’s finances to crumble around them. Violet may long to spend more afternoons by his side, enjoying the beauty of her home and his delightful company, but that was nothing more than Icarus yearning to fly closer to the sun.

It was one thing to treat him civilly, but to speak to him as though they were on friendly terms had been a mistake. With each illness, more and more villagers chose Dr. Vaughn over Isaac, leading to fewer prescriptions, as the new doctor was proving far more cautious in his diagnoses. Meanwhile, Violet was treating the fellow as though he were a friend. A confidant.

No matter how much Dr. Vaughn claimed he didn't wish to cause harm, he was doing so every day he remained at Oakham. And clearly, the suppositions she'd dropped in Mrs. Lark and Mrs. Wolverton's ears had made no impression, for the village was entirely enamored with the fellow.

What was she to do? Violet didn't have the answers, though she knew spending an afternoon gabbing with the gentleman didn't help. No matter how enticing a prospect it was.

Returning to her work, she began weighing out the various powders. Though not the recipe she would've chosen, it would do well enough for Mr. Wrigley's intestinal troubles, as little would truly improve until the gentleman altered his diet. Carefully, she placed a rice paper circle into each of the indents in the cachet mold and measured out the dosage into the center—and stared at the mixture.

Ingredients required careful dosages. Simply increase the powdered rhubarb, and it had the opposite effect. In fact, everything Dr. Vaughn had prescribed could easily compound Mr. Wrigley's ailments if measured improperly. A little shift. That was all it would take.

No one would know she hadn't followed Dr. Vaughn's instructions; even if anyone suspected foul play, it was impossible to prove. All Mr. Wrigley would see was a physician whose treatment failed to provide relief. How quickly would they all turn back to Isaac Templeton then? He may be unreliable in some respects, but his prescriptions worked.

No harm would be done. Just a touch of temporary discomfort.

Violet's pulse stuttered and realization flooded into her, causing her heart to thunder. Her stomach dropped to her toes, her face flushing as she jerked away from the table. Good gracious! Had she truly considered poisoning someone? Whether or not it would be a minor inconvenience to Mr. Wrigley, how could she contemplate doing something so vile?

Shuddering, she threw herself into the work, filling the rice paper with the proper powder and lining the opposite side of the hinged molds with the cachet tops. Carefully wetting the edges of the circles, she snapped the lid shut, which pressed the tops and bottoms together as the seal dried, cementing them into one disc-like capsule.

Violet's heart refused to settle as she turned her attention to the alembic and found the glass fogged over as the mixture inside simmered. The vapor drifted upward, where the condensation gathered and traveled down the long neck of the tube before depositing it in the receptacle. Then, reaching for the cachets, she popped out the finished circles that held individual doses of the powder, ready for consumption.

Bouncing between the two, she watched the distillation whilst preparing Mr. Wrigley's medication, and all the while her mind churned over what she'd nearly done, what was happening to her family, and what was to come. Her limbs felt like lead as she moved through the motions, and when a knock sounded at the side door once more, Violet nearly dropped the bowl of powders on the floor.

And the shock took hold of her tongue when she opened the door to find Dr. Vaughn standing there.

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“Good afternoon, Miss Templeton,” said Dr. Vaughn with a nod of the head and a smile that, despite glowing with pleasure, wasn’t warm enough to stave off the chill in Violet’s bones, and the impulse to slam the door in his face seized hold of her. Could he see the guilt eating at her?

“Good afternoon,” she murmured in return, her gaze darting away from him.

He drew his arm around and presented her with three large hydrangea blossoms, their colors a mixture of pinks, purples, and blues. They were a bright pop of color, drawing Violet’s gaze along the arm and up to Dr. Vaughn’s eyes that crinkled as he offered them up.

“Another of our neighbors has a plethora of blossoms, and I saw fit to abscond with a few of them,” he said. “I thought you might enjoy them, as you do not have any of your own.”

“That is very kind of you,” she said in a quiet voice.

“They are a bribe.”

Violet’s brows rose at that, and she couldn’t help the faint smile that twitched at the corner of her lips at his pronouncement. “Is that so?”

Dr. Vaughn nodded. “I was hoping I might steal away a bit of your time in which you can teach me how to make that incredible salve of yours.”

That compliment ought to have lightened her spirits, but it only made her heart sink

further. Why must he be so kind and generous? It would be so much easier to despise the gentleman if he had even the slightest ounce of arrogance or cruelty. But no, he swept into her life with all the affection of a brother.

More so, in fact, for Isaac was never as thoughtful.

“I fear today is not a good day, Dr. Vaughn,” she said without taking the flowers. “I haven’t a spare minute.”

“That is no bother,” he said, still holding the bouquet out to her. “What assistance do you require?”

Violet straightened at that. “Pardon?”

“What may I do to help you?” he repeated whilst glancing around the workspace with an assessing eye.

“Nothing, I assure you,” said Violet with a shake of her head, inching the door closed. “I am busy. That is all. I will manage.”

“I know you will,” he replied, still pushing the flowers toward her and effectively blocking her retreat (unless she wished to slam the door on his arm). “Your ability to ‘manage’ is not in question. If I left, you would get right back to work and have everything settled precisely as it ought to be, but that doesn’t negate my desire to be of service to you.”

Violet stared at the fellow. She knew what to do with the awkward gentleman incapable of stringing two words together, but this unshakeable and determined man was a puzzle. Those sorts of men were keen to treat her like a sister, and no matter how much she adored them, brothers were not reliable creatures. They certainly did not insist on helping when Violet was capable of managing without them.

“That is very kind of you, sir, but I assure you—”

“Are we back to ‘sir’ again?” he asked with a frown. “I thought we’d moved beyond such pretenses. ”

Violet sighed. “Perhaps if my wits hadn’t failed me entirely, I would know what you want from me, Dr. Vaughn, but at present, I simply wish to return to my work.”

“I only want to be of assistance, Miss Templeton,” he said with a frown, his hand with the bouquet finally lowering as he studied her with a puzzled brow. “I know your brother is not in town, I heard that your mother has fallen ill, and I know how many prescriptions need fulfilling at present. You have more to do than there are hours in the day. Though I am eager to get the recipe for your salve, that was an excuse more than a motivation for my being here.”

This was dangerous ground. Violet had already caused enough trouble for herself by being cordial to the gentleman; to accept such an offer would cross a crucial delineation between them. Acquaintances may dance together or go on a stroll, but to accept assistance—no matter how much she wished to—would fundamentally alter their relationship. Violet couldn’t enjoy Dr. Vaughn.

Yet was there any reason to debate the issue? Her heart softened every time they spoke. Could she continue to deny the fact that he was a friend, despite the disaster rife in such a distinction?

Violet’s head nodded of its own volition before freeing the words her heart yearned to speak. “I could use some help. Please.”

“Now, was that so very difficult?” he asked with a hint of a laugh, lifting the bouquet to her once more.

“More than you realize,” she whispered as she took the flowers. They didn’t have any fragrance, but that mattered little, for they lightened her spirits greatly.

Glancing about, Dr. Vaughn’s gaze fell to the molds. Carefully, he picked up one of the finished cachets. “I fear I never mastered these, though you certainly have a knack for them. I am forever breaking the rice paper or splitting the seals.”

“I have these in hand, as well as the distillation,” she said, waving to the alembic. Turning to the stairs, Violet gave him an apologetic smile. “In truth, what I would desperately love most is if you would sit with Mama. Besides requiring nursing, she is too weak to read on her own, and I would feel better if someone were with her, though I know that is a waste of your skills—”

Dr. Vaughn shook his head. “Not at all. I asked to help, and if that is what you require of me, I am glad to do it. As it happens, I have a copy of *The Misadventures of Mr. Fitzwilliam* in my coat pocket this very minute. I think she might enjoy it.”

“She adores Francis Thomas’s work, and I do not believe she has read it yet.”

Glancing at the alembic, Violet turned down the lamp’s flame, leaving only the barest flicker to wait for her return. Setting the bouquet on the table to see to afterward, she led Dr. Vaughn through the office and deeper into the cottage, taking the stairs up to Mama’s bedchamber. Though the lady was far from death’s door, it pained Violet to see her so worn; Mama’s eyes were open, but exhaustion dimmed their depths.

“You have a visitor,” said Violet as she moved to the window and pulled back the curtains. The light did little to dispel the mustiness, but the brightness helped to lift the spirits.

Shifting slightly, Mama glanced at the door with a furrowed brow, but Dr. Vaughn dragged the chair in the corner to her bedside.

“I fear I am a poor substitute for your children, but I understand you are feeling poorly and might need a bit of company,” he said as he took off his hat and settled in beside Mama, a welcoming smile on his lips.

“I am well enough,” said Mama with a weak wave of her hand. “Nothing to trouble yourself with.”

“Nonsense. The Finches’ concert is coming up next week, and I want to ensure you are in perfect health by that time. Will you be gracing us with a performance?” he asked with a lift of his brows. “I understand you have a lovely singing voice.”

For all that the lady was in her sixth decade of life, Mama blushed like a maiden making her first steps into society. “Where did you hear such nonsense? ”

“Are you saying it is untrue?” he asked.

“Performing at concerts is for the young ladies—” Her words broke as a cough wracked her. Mama held a handkerchief to her mouth, but it grew in strength, and before Violet could make a move, Dr. Vaughn reached for the teapot at the bedside and lifted the lid to sniff the contents.

Glancing over his shoulder, he looked at Violet. “Licorice root?”

“Mixed with elecampane and plantain,” she replied. “And I include a dash of laudanum in her nighttime brew as well. It does wonders for a cough—”

“I do not wish to sleep today,” said Mama between coughs. “I have been sleeping so much.”

Dr. Vaughn nodded and poured her a cup, and before Violet could assist, he had Mama propped up and drinking. Settling her down with the skill of one well used to

such actions, he said with a hint of disapproval, “I’ve found that London is vastly different than the country, but I cannot believe it is so entirely foreign that Oakham would frown upon people of any age and gender participating in a concert. I know for a fact that Mr. Lewis Finch is going to be playing the piano.”

“Is he?” asked Mama with a raise of her brows as her lungs settled once more.

“He adores playing, and he’s quite good, in fact. I know many young ladies use it as a way to parade their talents about, but surely, it would do them good to see a lady with your grace and experience perform.”

Violet paused at the door, watching the pair, though they seemed not to notice her, and she was struck by the sight, for she could hardly align this image of the man with the awkward and shy one that so often faced the world. At present, Dr. Vaughn didn’t struggle over his words—he was charming, even—and it made her smile to see them both settle into a comfortable conversation as he continued to minister to Mama .

Glancing over his shoulder when the lady wasn’t watching, Dr. Vaughn made a shooing motion, and Violet snapped from her thoughts and slipped from the room.

With a steady hand, Violet used a dropper to add ten minims to the mixture. The scent of the peppermint oil filled the room, blending with the spices permeating the air. The setting sun made it difficult to see properly despite the lamps lit around her, and she held up the vial to the light, swirling it about. It seemed the proper color, though she would have to check it again in the morning.

Turning back to the recipe book, she flipped through the pages, her eyes scanning the lines as she sought out the next instructions. There were a good many of these that she knew by memory, but regardless, Violet checked the exact measurements of the

analgesic; there was nothing dangerous in the pain powder, but the wrong combination would render it useless.

Which was when she recalled the pot simmering over the fire.

Rushing over to it, she wrapped her apron around her hand and snagged the handle, moving it to the table in a fluid motion. It smelled foul, and though Violet longed to add a few dashes of something aromatic to alleviate the stench, there was little point. Those who still ascribed to this quackery placed their faith in wretched scents and flavors.

“Good heavens,” said Dr. Vaughn with a grimace as he stepped into the room. “Are you making boil of earthworm?”

Turning her eyes to those very heavens, Violet nodded. “It takes little effort and cost to make it, and many people still swear by it.”

Dr. Vaughn huffed and gave her a half-smile. “I’ve never seen any evidence that rubbing crushed earthworms boiled in olive oil and red wine heals bruises. Then again, I have more than a few placebos I would rather not supply. The patients demand them because they’ve used them all their lives, and it makes them feel better, so I indulge them.”

The gentleman brought over several jars that had been readied and placed them beside the pot without asking, before snatching up the funnel and settling it into the mouth of the first. Violet quickly filled each and set the empty pot back on the table. As the main ingredient was olive oil, it needn’t be cleaned immediately, though she would need to see to it before long.

“Thank you for your assistance,” she said as she wiped her hands on her apron. “Having someone with Mama eased my worries.”

“I am happy to be of help, but from your tone, I fear you think I mean to leave,” he said with another of his warm smiles. “I came down to force you to have a rest and some dinner.”

“Dinner?”

Dr. Vaughn nodded. “It is a meal one takes in the evening. Though I am rather partial to pork pies, I had Peggy warm some roast beef and boiled potatoes, which she assures me is more to your liking.”

“It is.” Violet wished for something better to say, but those were the only words her lagging wits were able to supply at the moment. “You are staying?”

“Do you still require my help?” he asked with the same puzzled expression that was stamped on her face, though Dr. Vaughn’s was questioning her sanity.

“If you are willing.”

“Then I am staying.”

Violet swallowed past a sudden lump that had formed in her throat, and she nodded.

“But do you have a pencil and paper on hand?” he asked, glancing about for the objects. “If you don’t mind, might I have Peggy deliver a message for me?”

“Certainly,” she said, reaching into a nearby drawer for the articles. “I do hope nothing is amiss.”

Dr. Vaughn shook his head and began scribbling out words. “Not at all. The Finches invited me for dinner, and I must send word that I am unavailable.”

Violet straightened, her hands gripping her apron until it was thoroughly wrinkled. “You are canceling your plans for the evening?”

“It is nothing important.”

“But you are canceling your plans.”

Dr. Vaughn glanced up from his note, his brows creasing his forehead. “You have your hands quite full at present, and I can be of help. Why wouldn’t I cancel a silly dinner and evening of cards? This is more important.”

The gentleman spoke as though the answer was quite clear, and Violet couldn’t help but stare at him.

“Are you well?” asked Dr. Vaughn, moving to help her to a seat. “You look pale.”

But Violet shook the assistance away. “I am well. I am simply surprised. That is all. You are being so kind. I—”

The pressure filling her chest stole away her words for a moment, and she forced her throat to clear, gathering herself to say that which needed saying. Meeting his gaze, Violet filled her words with all the gratitude coursing through her.

“You are such a good friend to me, Dr. Vaughn. Thank you.”

“It is my pleasure,” he said, motioning her toward the corridor. “But we need to get you fed before you work yourself into the grave.”

*

Miracles came in many forms, and though small, the fact that Arthur spoke with such

ease was nothing short of miraculous. Pain struck his heart, and the weight of that word settled into his limbs, making it difficult to follow Miss Templeton as they headed toward the dining room.

A friend ? That was what she'd called him.

Only a friend.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

Being one of the finest houses in the neighborhood (and arguably the finest, even if one included Bentmoor), Farleigh Manor never failed to inspire awe. Violet suspected much of that was due to her limited experience and country eyes, and she couldn't help but wonder what Dr. Vaughn saw in the sprawling building. But then, the city favored terraced houses, didn't they? All crushed together until everyone lived atop one another? Perhaps even London did not have such magnificent manor homes.

Violet's gaze drifted through the concert room that was as much a hodgepodge as the exterior, which had been built up over generations, each adding their own style and tastes until it was a patchwork of eras, colors, and sensibilities. The interior was no less unique, though it had less to do with the previous owners expanding the home without regard for whether the new additions blended into the original facade. This was a bit of design genius.

Having no individual room large enough to allow such a large gathering, the architect had chosen instead to link rooms together with moveable partitions. When closed, they formed a gallery and drawing room, but when opened and the furniture was shifted about, it provided an expanse that could fit all of the neighborhood's high society.

However, the separate rooms each had unique decoration and coloring, giving the expanded space a disjointed appearance altogether. And Violet loved it. No doubt others thought it odd or disconcerting, but that is what made it unique.

"You are not listening to a single word I am saying," said Felicity as she gave Violet a mock glare.

“Do forgive me,” she replied with a shake of her head. “I was admiring your home. I love Farleigh Manor.”

Felicity’s expression melted into a smile. “After I lost the last of my family, it held far too many painful memories, and I was far happier remaining in Portsmouth. But since settling here with Lewis, it feels quite different. I remember all the things I adored about Oakham and Farleigh Manor, and I am quite happy this is to be our home once more. And to reconnect with old friends.”

The lady turned her bright grin to Violet, adding, “I always regretted losing contact with you, and I am glad to have another opportunity to renew our friendship.”

There was something in Felicity’s eyes that made her think she was expected to reply, though Violet couldn’t think what to say.

“It is understandable. You were a child and had just lost your brother and father before being uprooted to live with your uncle in a new city. I understand why you stopped writing me. No doubt, you never expected to see me again, as you had no interest at that time in returning to Oakham. Out of sight, out of mind, as they say.”

Violet forced her mouth closed, not allowing anything more to slip out. In her youth, she hadn’t possessed the empathy to accept why her friend had stopped responding to her letters, but with maturity, Violet gained perspective that allowed her to let go of that pain. It wasn’t Felicity’s fault that Violet Templeton was entirely forgettable, and nothing good came from wishing the world were different .

Felicity’s brow furrowed, but her focus shattered when Diana spoke.

“And how are you faring?” she asked with a wry smile. “Have your husband’s family destroyed the last of your sanity? I’ve had an ear out for the gossip, fully expecting to hear that you’ve been committed to Bedlam.”

With a halting chuckle, Felicity shook her head. “It is not as bad as all that. They’ve been quite pleasant in many ways, and Lewis is enjoying the time with his brother. The pair has spent countless hours touring the estate and discussing the improvements, and Phineas seems quite impressed with Lewis’s efforts—even going so far as to ask his opinion on instituting some of them in their family’s estate. However, my husband’s family knows how to try one’s patience.”

“Especially schoolboys on holidays,” added Diana.

Felicity’s eyes widened. “Good gracious, they are vexing. I hadn’t thought the boys’ arrival would cause such havoc, but they are forever getting into trouble. And I fear I may just slap my brother-in-law if he dares call my husband ‘Jack’ one more time.”

Diana’s brow furrowed. “I’ve heard the gentleman use the name, but I do not understand the jest.”

“It isn’t one,” said Felicity with a shake of her head. “Lewis’s family took to calling him that when he was younger, and though they do not mean it cruelly, it vexes him, and I cannot abide hearing it.”

With a dramatic sigh, Felicity hurried to add, “And my dear sister-in-law means well, but she is convinced that if I do so much as breathe too deeply, I will harm my child. If it were left to her, I would be wrapped in cotton and set in the cabinet next to the fine china, never to stir until well after my lie-in.”

Turning a frantic look at Violet, she added, “I will be relying on you to keep her at bay when the time comes. It is an anxious enough thing without her fretting at my bedside. There are still some weeks before that time, and I am afraid I might not make it with my sanity intact.”

“Could you not entice them to spend a week at the coast?” asked Violet.

Felicity straightened, her eyes brightening. “That is an idea. Even just a little time apart would do wonders—”

“Well, hello, ladies,” said Osborn, sliding in between his sister and Violet and drawing his arms around the pair. Giving him a gentle elbow to the ribs, Violet laughed at the impudent fellow, though he used his now free hand to snatch hers, bringing it to his lips. “My dear Vi, you look a picture.”

“You silver-tongued devil,” she said with a scoff before freeing her hand to slide it through his arm. Though this was her second favorite gown (the first having been worn at the assembly), neither offering was as fine as that which Diana or Felicity wore. The cotton frock was simplicity itself, though the fabric was of a fine quality. And she adored the little bits of ivy and greenery she’d stitched into the skirts; they complimented the rich cream of the cotton and looked quite fine if she did say so herself.

“Out with it,” added Violet, slanting him a look.

“Out with what?” asked Osborn with feigned innocence.

“You are especially complimentary when you are about to ask a favor.”

The gentleman let go of his sister and placed the hand on his chest with an anguished gasp. “You wound me.”

Violet merely smirked. “A palpable hit, I see.”

“Perhaps,” said Osborn with a pleading (though chagrined) smile. “I just learned that Miss Giles remained at home because she is troubled by that illness that is going around the village. I was hoping to bring her some of your tisane you make for coughs, as your mother said it helped her greatly.”

Holding up her hand, Violet nodded. “Say no more. I will have a pouch for you tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, you are the best,” said Osborn, lifting her hand to his lips once more before she could stop his silliness. “Absolutely the best.”

“That she is. ”

The voice from behind her startled Violet, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Dr. Vaughn standing there, but this was not the gentleman she’d come to know.

In public, he appeared flustered. When it came to medicine, he was confident and commanding. During their time together, he was still rather quiet, but it was more tranquil than shy, and though he was not one to tease and twit to Osborn’s absurd level, Dr. Vaughn possessed wit. This gentleman standing behind her had a hard look in his eyes and a sharp line to his brows—a muted display of that temper he’d directed at Mr. Sprat and Mr. Timms—though Violet didn’t know what had inspired such an expression.

Had she offended him somehow?

Violet’s muscles tensed, her mind flying to one possibility: Dr. Vaughn knew she’d spread doubts about his fitness to be the village doctor. Her throat tightened, and she tried to think of how to explain the issue, yet even as she fumbled about, she realized that Dr. Vaughn wasn’t looking at her as much as he was glaring at Osborn.

What had that silly gentleman done to earn such ire? Violet couldn’t answer that but knowing her secret remained safe allowed her muscles to relax once more and give Dr. Vaughn a smile, which he returned in full.

“Good evening, Dr. Vaughn,” said Violet, motioning for him to join them, and he

slipped onto her other side.

“And good evening to you, Miss Templeton,” he said with a bow of the head. “Might I say how fetching you look tonight?”

“Ah,” replied Violet with a laugh. “And what favor are you wishing to wheedle from me?”

Dr. Vaughn’s brows drew tight together in puzzlement. “Just your company.”

For all that she’d been teasing, his answer couldn’t help but make her heart burn. Clearing her throat, she affected an appropriately light tone. “Then you aren’t spouting nonsense to attain my good opinion? ”

Adding a significant tone, she gave Osborn another elbow to the ribs before slanting a narrowed look in his direction.

“I do wish for your good opinion, but I wasn’t speaking nonsense,” said Dr. Vaughn, his eyes darting between the pair. “You look lovely. I especially like the flowers in your hair.”

“You are a dear,” said Violet whilst attempting to stave off the blush, which was silly. As wonderful as those compliments were, she knew how many of her friends and family preferred honeyed words to truth.

“Doesn’t it suit her?” asked Felicity with a nod. “My curls are far too opinionated to gather up in such an elegant manner.”

Before the others could leap in with their own kindly meant flummery, Violet hurried to add, “Osborn sent the flowers over, and I thought I would put them to good use.”

“The ladies do adore a posey,” said the fellow in question, glancing between Violet and his sister, whose own hair was similarly decorated. But Osborn spoke with a distracted tone that she recognized all too well. Now that he’d asked his favor and flattered her a touch, he would drift off in search of his other friends.

“I see Mr. Henshaw has arrived,” murmured Osborn as he stretched his head to gaze across the room. “I must speak to him. Please excuse me.” Freeing his arm from Violet, he turned away, but paused to add, “I will be on your doorstep at ten o’clock tomorrow—if that is not too early for you.”

“For me? Goodness, no,” she replied. “Though I will be greatly surprised if you manage it.”

Osborn chuckled and gave her a slight bow before hurrying away. That rascal.

“I am so glad you decided to host a concert,” said Violet, turning her attention back to the others.

“I had thought of holding a dance, but I fear my sister-in-law would’ve fainted dead away should I have suggested such a strenuous activity,” said Felicity with a laugh. “Though I do appreciate any excuse to hear my husband play. He has such a way with music. ”

“Are we to hear you perform, Miss Templeton?” asked Dr. Vaughn.

“Goodness, no. You may have convinced my mother to participate, but I assure you I haven’t any musical skill worth displaying,” said Violet with wide eyes and a shake of her head. “My mother despaired over my lack of talent, but it isn’t my fault that my brother inherited all the musical abilities in the family.”

“Then might I be so bold as to ask if I might sit with you?” he asked.

“If you wish to,” she said with a smile.

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise—” But Dr. Vaughn’s words were cut short when Mr. Biddlesby called to him.

“There you are, sir. Been looking for you,” said the gentleman whilst motioning for Dr. Vaughn toward the other end of the gathering. “I am desperate for your opinion.”

Dr. Vaughn glanced at Violet. “I shall return before the performance begins.”

She nodded, though she didn’t understand the determined edge to his tone, as though he was expecting her to disappear. But whatever his reasons, he accepted her assurance and followed Mr. Biddlesby as the gentleman began describing the urgent matter concerning his wife’s health.

Once more, it was the three ladies, but when Violet’s attention turned to them, she found the pair watching her with raised brows and giddy smiles that were steeped in speculation.

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“I have to admit, I was ready to despise the interloper,” said Diana. “But I think he is rather sweet on you.”

“More than ‘rather,’ if I were to guess,” added Felicity with an impish gleam in her eyes. To which Violet couldn’t help but respond with a scoff that was far louder than intended and drew a few curious looks in her direction.

“Don’t be ridiculous. What man would have the slightest interest in courting a lady with two and thirty years to her name?”

“My husband did,” said Felicity with an arched brow.

Violet’s expression didn’t soften as she shook her head. “Yes, but you are adorable and have many fine qualities that are bound to attract a gentleman—even if most of them are too dense to look past an imperfect complexion.”

“My complexion is a good deal worse than ‘imperfect,’” replied Felicity in a dry tone. “And I have my garishly red hair as well.”

Shaking her head, Violet said, “Men only see me as a sister. Or a friend at the very most. I am a spinster through and through with no hope of that changing. ”

Diana placed her hands on her hips. “None of your spinster talk—”

“An unmarried lady of more than thirty years is by all accounts a spinster, so I see no reason to fear the label. Why not embrace the truth of my status for what it is?” replied Violet with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“Might I point out that almost all the princesses are unwed, and the youngest is nearly your age if I recall correctly, and I doubt anyone would dare call them spinsters,” said Diana with a scowl.

Violet took a deep breath. There was no point in arguing further, for she knew it was a battle her friend would not surrender. For all that they had many aspects in common, it was impossible for Diana to fully understand the importance of that distinction. At seven and twenty, she was only a little beyond the average age that many ladies married and still some years from spinsterhood. To Diana, the possibility of matrimony still existed.

There was peace in embracing what was rather than focusing on what one wished her life to be. Spinster was just a word. Though others mocked it and shuddered at the sound, being unmarried was simply her lot, and accepting it caused far less pain than continuing to hope for something that would never be.

Yet explaining that to the pair would do no good. However, Violet couldn't allow them to harbor fantasies regarding Dr. Vaughn.

“Diana, you have personally witnessed just how impossible it is that any gentleman—let alone someone like Dr. Vaughn—would wish to court me.”

“Don't be a ninny. You speak as though he is far above your reach, and frankly, it is quite the opposite,” said Diana with a dismissive wave. “I cannot imagine any lady desiring a man who hasn't even a sprig of hair atop his head.”

The lady cringed, her mouth pulled into an expression of utter disgust, and Violet gaped at her .

“Not that he doesn't have a lovely soul,” Diana hurried to add. “Everything I've heard speaks well of the gentleman, and though his smile is a bit odd, his features are

pleasant enough. But you must admit that any lady willing to accept his suit would do so despite his hair.”

“Just as Lewis married me despite my complexion and coloring?” asked Felicity with a raise of her brows.

Diana gaped. “Not at all! You are lovely.”

Violet met Felicity’s gaze, and the pair shared a silent sigh over the lady’s logic, which was as twisty as a hedge maze. But whether familial, platonic, or romantic, love wasn’t always logical.

“I think that anyone who values hair above character deserves the unhappy marriage they are bound to have, and it does you no justice to spout such nonsense, Diana,” said Violet with a frown. “But this has nothing to do with whether or not Dr. Vaughn is ‘above my reach’ or not. None of it alters the fact that in the eyes of men, I am not a viable prospect. You know my history. You witnessed much of it.”

“I know a thing or two about a bad history with men,” said Felicity with a frown. “Even if you run afoul of a few bounders, I assure you not all of them are.”

Violet gave a dry chuckle. “My troubles do not sprout from attracting the wrong men but from attracting none at all. I assure you that not a single man has ever regarded me as anything more than a friend or a sister.”

Diana gave a long-suffering sigh. “Now, Vi—”

“Mr. York,” said Violet in a monotone.

Her friend’s mouth snapped shut, and she drew in a sharp breath.

Turning an arched brow to Felicity, Violet explained, “When our vicar took up his post here, he was unmarried and drew quite a lot of female attention. To the astonishment of the entire parish, he spent his time in my company, forever spending his evenings with me until I was convinced that he harbored romantic intentions. Then one day, he gleefully declared his love—for a lady he’d been courting in Stoneford.”

Diana winced. “Yes, that was unfortunate, but—”

“Mr. Kempthorne,” added Violet.

That snapped her friend’s mouth shut once again.

“That gentleman acted so solicitous, being kind and generous to me as he was with no other lady. I was hesitant to expect anything, but my friends and family were certain he was going to ask Papa’s permission to court me.” Pausing, Violet gave the final sentence extra emphasis, “Until he announced his engagement to my friend, Miss Louisa Atwell.”

Glancing between the pair, Violet ticked off her fingers. “Then there was Mr. Wilson, Mr. Taylor, and Mr. Bradford. All of whom acted so flirtatious and affectionate that it would’ve made them honor-bound to marry me for raising expectations—except that no one but me or my well-intentioned family and friends could imagine those gentlemen would court a mannish woman.”

“You are not mannish,” said Felicity with a frown.

Violet didn’t bother correcting her. That was another argument she wouldn’t win, for though she was not viewed in such a light by those who valued her, it didn’t erase her vast experience that told her otherwise. It would be impossible to list everyone who had treated her thusly but, sufficeth to say, Mr. Sprat’s and Mr. Timms’ behavior

wasn't the least bit out of character. For some reason she could not comprehend, men did not see Violet Templeton as a woman.

For goodness' sake, the village called her Mr. Templeton for more reasons than her penchant for medicine.

Felicity opened her mouth again, and the moment she did, Violet knew what was going to come next. It was the same thing everyone always said during such discussions.

“Regardless of your low opinion of your outward attractions, you are talented and intelligent and would make any man a wonderful wife. He would be lucky to have you.”

Forcing her expression to remain placid, Violet refused to let those well-meaning sentiments dampen her spirits or resolve. Her worthiness wasn't in doubt, for it was immutable—regardless of anyone else's opinion or how many gentlemen rejected her. However, no matter how high a regard she held herself in, it didn't alter the fact that her experience taught her again and again that her “low opinion of her outward attractions” was no opinion. It was fact.

Gentlemen did not find her beautiful.

But that did not diminish Violet Templeton's value or talents. Not everyone could be lovely.

Holding up her hands in placation, Violet shook her head. “I do not wish to argue, but my own experience is vast on the subject, and I find it impossible to imagine capturing Dr. Vaughn's affection when I've never even secured a dance with a gentleman who was interested in pursuing me. In truth, I am merely honored that Dr. Vaughn views me as a friend. With everything that has happened, I am lucky to have

gained that much—”

Violet’s mouth snapped shut, and she drew in a sharp breath as words she hadn’t meant to say nearly slipped out. They didn’t need to know what effort she’d made to rid Oakham of Dr. Vaughn. No one need ever know. It had hardly been anything. Entirely unworthy of noting.

“The truth is that he behaves no differently than your brother,” added Violet, nodding in the direction Osborn had taken. “And you would never claim he views me as a sweetheart.”

Diana drew in a deep breath and nodded, though Felicity didn’t look as convinced. But then, it was to be expected. The lady had only newly returned to the area and hadn’t witnessed Violet’s disastrous attempts at catching a beau. And now that she’d surrendered all hope of doing so, Felicity would never see Violet’s ridiculousness. Thankfully .

How many times had she taken a harmless compliment like that which Dr. Vaughn had offered and inferred far more meaning from it? His little bouquets were no more romantic tokens than Osborn’s or any of the other gentlemen whose intentions had been so entirely platonic that it never crossed their minds that she might interpret their actions as romantic. Never once had they considered Violet a possibility.

Twelve years later, Violet’s heart still sank at the memory of Mr. Bradford’s shock when someone had mentioned his marked attentions toward her. One moment, they’d been laughing and jesting as they always were; then, one innocent comment from an observer and he’d looked as stricken as if they’d said his mother had passed. Though he’d tried to hide his initial reaction, it had been clear for her to see, proclaiming to all and sundry how much he despised the prospect. As did the fact that he never spoke another word to her or even looked in her direction again.

Violet drew in a breath and forced herself to breathe. Such things didn't matter any longer. Their opinions, though painful, didn't define Violet Templeton. Her worth was far greater than any silly title. Spinster no longer frightened her, and she would not allow herself to devolve to the time when it had.

"Perhaps, but Dr. Vaughn seems too timid a gentleman to be so forward in addressing you," said Felicity with a furrowed brow.

"Doesn't that only serve to prove the point?" replied Violet. "Surely, if he had grand designs, he would be even more awkward in my presence. Not less. And I assure you that though he was slightly timid during our introduction, he seems at ease around me now. You recall how much he stammered and stuttered through his attempts to ask me to dance, yet now, he faltered not one bit when asking to sit beside me for the concert."

Felicity opened her mouth once more, but Violet was saved from more lectures when Mrs. Birks appeared at her elbow and spoke softly to their hostess .

"Do excuse me, but I am needed elsewhere," said Felicity, though her furrowed brow didn't ease as she cast one more look at Violet. Her mouth opened as though to speak, but the lady seemed to dismiss it, following after Mrs. Birks without another word.

Thank the heavens.

"Say what you will, but I am not convinced," said Diana, flicking open her fan.

Dash it all. Violet didn't want to keep revisiting the subject.

"I hated the man on sight because of what he meant for your family, but the more I hear of him, the more I like him." Diana's significant tone fairly begged Violet to ask what she'd heard, but as it was quite likely that his movements and their time together

had been remarked upon, it took little imagination to surmise what the lady had “heard.”

“Do not close your heart to the possibility, Vi. Whatever the past, this time may be different.”

But Violet was saved from more of a lecture when Miss Quinn appeared at Diana’s elbow with a bright smile.

Without preamble, the young lady burst into the conversation with, “I have it on good authority that your family is planning a trip to Bath in the autumn.”

Diana’s eyes darted to Violet and then back again. “We’ve visited a few times before, but Dr. Vaughn suggested Mama might benefit from taking the waters.”

“My aunt lives there and has invited me to spend a month or two with them.”

“Oh, that is delightful!”

And with that, Diana took the young lady by the arm and began waxing poetic about what she knew of the city and its society. Miss Quinn beamed, and the pair drifted away without noticing that Violet hadn’t followed.

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Wandering to the far side of the room, Violet stood before a painting, pretending to study the canvas; the subject was not particularly inspiring, as it was like any number she'd seen of men sitting astride a horse, but being turned away from the gathering allowed her a moment's peace.

Her family and friends meant well, but the key to Violet's happiness was sloughing off fantasies; one could not be happy if one constantly clung to dreams that would never be fulfilled. Reaching that dreaded age of thirty without a single prospect had nearly broken her heart in two, and venturing into society with the ever-present hope that perhaps—just perhaps—today's foray would prove victorious had only served to crush those remnants into powder.

No, better to embrace truth rather than kindly-meant poppycock.

How many hours had she spent crying over her dashed hopes? Violet was certain that the total likely equaled months if not years of her life. A husband and a family. A home to call her own. She had dreamt of such things from a young age, and despite all the evidence to the contrary, she hadn't been able to stop herself from believing that somehow a man would see past her surface flaws and long to take her as his own. To spend their lives together. To cleave unto one another.

But then, many of the gentlemen in her past had known her beyond the Mr. Templeton facade, spending weeks and months in her company, and still, they'd chosen others for their brides. So, it wasn't merely a matter of surface attractions. Oh, no. Her personality was severely lacking as well.

Despite having spent many an hour contemplating what it was that others found so

repellant, Violet was no closer to an answer. Many laughed at her behind her back (or directly in her face), but she was capable of forming friendships. However fleeting they were. People flitted in and out of her life, rarely caring to linger for more than a year or two before moving on to those they deemed more deserving of their affection.

Diana and Miss Quinn's conversation settled in her thoughts, and Violet wondered what it would be like to go to an entirely new place where her reputation wasn't dictated by the unchangeable past. To have a clean slate. A fresh start. Could things be different? Or was it some immutable characteristic inside her that made her friendship so easy to dismiss?

Drawing in a sharp breath, Violet frowned at the painting. This was why it was better not to think of beaux and romance. It was impossible not to grow maudlin when faced with heartbreaking and unanswerable questions. Silly lady that she was.

Turning to face the gathering, Violet gazed out at the people. Despite being far larger than before with the partitions drawn back and the furniture swept away, the room was quite full. To the far side sat the makeshift stage with a piano and several large floral arrangements stood sentinel beside it while rows upon rows of chairs stretched out in the opposite direction.

Where did they get all the chairs? Did the Finches simply have them on hand whenever they required them? If so, where did they store them all? Farleigh Manor certainly was a large property, but this was a large number of seats .

Casting her gaze about the crowd, Violet searched for a friendly face. Felicity was otherwise occupied. Diana, though a sweetheart, was not the sort of company she required at present. To say nothing of the fact that her friend was ensconced by several ladies who were bound to further sour Violet's mood.

A few ladies from Bentmoor stood not ten paces from her with a space just large

enough for her to slip into without being overt, and with a nod of her head to the others, Violet stepped into the group, her eyes bouncing around the ladies as she tried to grasp the subject of their conversation.

“Mr. Eastman is beyond delighted,” said Jean—now Mrs. Eastman—as she placed a covert hand on her middle.

“The first is always such an exciting and anxious time,” said Mrs. Doddington with a nod and warm smile. “Thank goodness we are heading into the cooler months. It will be a relief not to be expecting during the summer.”

“Not that it makes much difference this year,” said Violet with a smile. “I cannot recall a colder July.”

Mrs. Doddington’s eyes widened, and she gave a vigorous nod. “I am chilled to the bone, and I live in terror that the children will catch this influenza that is sweeping through the area.”

“Has it reached Bentmoor?” asked Violet.

“Unfortunately, though it does seem to be rather mild,” said Mrs. Fernsby. “I fear the children are going mad being cooped up all the time, but I cannot bear to have them out in the cold and rain, lest they catch it.”

The other ladies all nodded and launched into a heated discussion concerning the state of their children and their respective health, which (though not pertinent to Violet directly) was interesting. Just as she was gathering the courage to ask what their physicians had done to treat the varying coughs and maladies, Mrs. Eastman turned to Violet.

“Have you met our dear Miss Brooks?”

Hiding her frown, Violet nodded. "I've had the pleasure. "

She immediately sent out a silent petition for forgiveness, as it was a tiny lie to spare the feelings of another. Miss Brooks was not horrid, but knowing her had been anything but pleasurable. In the years since earning the title of "spinster," Violet had spent time amongst that set and couldn't bear the company of such dour creatures. Forever fixated on their unmarried state, they allowed their unfulfilled dreams to define them and color their world in shades of dingy gray, leeching any possible contentment or purpose from them.

"Oh, that is wonderful. I know she is to attend, and I am certain you two would enjoy the evening together," said Mrs. Eastman, turning away from her friends to search the crowd.

Miss Doddington nodded and beamed at Violet. "Too true. You have much in common."

From what Violet knew of the lady, the only thing they had in common was a lack of a husband, living or dead.

"There she is," said Mrs. Eastman, pointing to one side of the gathering. "Come, I am certain you will enjoy her company."

"I am enjoying your company at present," said Violet.

"Don't be coy," said Mrs. Eastman with a grin that held a hint of condescension. "I hear she is organizing sewing parties for the..." she paused, fumbling for some word, other than the dreaded one that began with S, "...mature, unmarried ladies in the area. I have no doubt it would be quite diverting for you."

With a curtsy, Violet excused herself. There was no need to admit that she had no

intention of seeking out Miss Brooks, for they would not care to hear the truth; it was inconceivable that marital status did not determine friendships. Too many matrons assumed spinsters would have nothing to add to their conversation, and too many spinsters fled from the matrons, believing the same lies.

Wandering to the side of the gathering, Violet watched the people milling about, and she supposed it was simply human nature to categorize and label; few looked beyond those surface details to see the heart beneath. Never mind that one's marital status was but one facet of a person.

"Miss Templeton," called Mrs. Serena Seymour, raising her fan with a wave as she wove around the guests. In an instant, Violet's heart lightened, and she didn't have to feign a smile as the lady approached.

"How good to see you tonight," said the lady as they exchanged greetings. "I heard your mother was ill, and I was afraid your family wouldn't make it."

"She was, but thankfully, she is on the mend now and has even agreed to sing tonight," said Violet with a smile. "She so rarely performs anymore, and we are quite looking forward to it. My brother and his wife made the journey from Stoneford for the occasion."

"How wonderful. I would've hated to miss it," said Mrs. Seymour, batting her fan. "How lucky that Dr. Vaughn is such a skilled physician. Quite a miracle worker."

"Pardon?"

But the lady snapped her fan closed with a vague wave of her hand. "Well, Dr. Vaughn was the one who treated your mother, wasn't he? I thought your brother had been absent of late."

Violet's throat tightened, but she managed a faint smile. "I do not know what you've heard, Mrs. Seymour, but I assure you I was capable of tending to my mother's ailment. My brother wasn't necessary—though I am quite happy he is here tonight. I believe Mother has even pressed him into a duet with her, and their voices sound lovely together."

Flicking that away with a swipe of her fan, Mrs. Seymour tsked, "Oh, I am certain it will be lovely, and I am certain you did much to ease your mother's discomfort, but Dr. Vaughn spent an entire day tending to her. The whole village is talking about how he's the Templetons' physician now. "

"He was kind enough to watch over her when I was otherwise occupied, but I assure you that all the treatments given were prescribed and made by a Templeton."

"Whilst your brother was absent from home?" she asked with a puzzled expression that was too earnest to be genuine.

Violet forced a smile on her face. "Thankfully, we have a large store of medicines on hand, and I assure you she was not seriously ill, else my brother would've arrived home in a trice."

"Of course. What son would've done differently?" asked Mrs. Seymour. "It is simply lucky that Dr. Vaughn was on hand to be of assistance. I heard a few ladies from Bentmoor spreading the strangest suppositions about our dear doctor, but any doubts people may have had before have entirely disappeared. What with him having gained your family's approval."

With a few more "pleasantries," the lady bobbed and took her leave. Violet didn't care if that sour-faced shrew had come to gloat or sniff out more gossip. It mattered not in the slightest, for the damage was done.

The village believed that even the local physician was relying on Dr. Vaughn?

When she had accepted his assistance, Violet hadn't anticipated it causing further harm to their already tenuous position, but as she considered it, this past week had seen more and more of their patients flocking to Dr. Vaughn's care. She'd tried to tell herself that with an illness abroad and Isaac conspicuously absent, it was entirely natural (though people usually approached her for assistance when he was away). But had Dr. Vaughn's assistance validated the decision to leave the Templetons' care?

Such a short time since his arrival, and it wasn't as though people required a physician's constant care. Especially in the summertime when illnesses were far fewer. Surely, a slight dip in people asking for Isaac held no significance. Yet with Dr. Vaughn relying on her to make his medicines, her schedule was as busy as ever; clearly, the people were calling for a physician.

Glancing about the gathering, Violet ticked the names off as she truly considered each one and whether or not they were patronizing Isaac or Dr. Vaughn. Having done so many times over the past weeks, it was easy enough to see the shifting tides, as more and more had chosen the latter over the former.

They must do something to stem the tide. Immediately.

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Rubbing her forehead, Violet stepped from the outskirts of the gathering and ventured into the fray once more. Her eyes fell to her brother, who was speaking animatedly with a circle of people on the far side of the room. Hopefully, his being seen publicly would be a boon. Even if he was returning to Stoneford for another sennight.

“Good evening, Mrs. Campbell,” said Violet, grasping onto the first lady who crossed her path. A little goodwill certainly wouldn’t go amiss. “How is little Toliver?”

The lady batted her fan. “He is faring well.”

“Oh, I am glad to hear it,” said Violet with a smile. “What with the sickness that is plaguing so many of us, I have been concerned about his lungs.”

“As are we,” said Mrs. Campbell, whose own expression displayed a measure of warmth, though there was a stiffness to it that had Violet’s muscles tightening.

“I do hope the medicines are helping,” she said.

Mrs. Campbell nodded but sighed. “When he deigns to take it. He battles the nursemaid every time he has to, and I fear she isn’t able to get a full dose in him. ”

“That is worrisome,” said Violet with a furrow of her brow. “Most medicines taste irredeemably foul, which can be difficult for children.”

Silence followed that for a beat, and Mrs. Campbell began to study the back of her fan. “I hear tell that Dr. Vaughn is quite good with the little ones.”

Violet's hands clenched her skirts, and she forced them to loosen, lest she leave behind a mark that everyone would notice for the rest of the evening. In a fit of desperation, she said, "I know Isaac has been considering new ways to administer medicine to children, and I am certain it will be palatable the next time Toliver requires his prescription."

Mrs. Campbell's brows rose, a genuine ease entering her expression. "That would be wonderful. Heavens, I would love such a thing for adults if possible. Mr. Campbell may not fight me, but he grumbles every bit as loudly as his son when it is time to take a tonic."

Giving Violet a nod of dismissal, Mrs. Campbell swept away as reality crashed down once more. Had she truly promised a pleasant and effective medicine? If Violet were able to deliver such a miracle, she could make a fortune.

Cachets had been invented to address this very issue, but they were almost too large for even an adult to swallow, let alone a child. Adding sugar, honey, or flavored extracts provided some relief, but Violet had added as much as was possible whilst still maintaining the proper concentration. Even if she were to make it in tablet form, it did little to help; no matter how quickly one swallowed, the briefest of touches on the tongue was wretched, and Toliver would have to swallow several to get the same effect.

The medicine must be ingested, but how to make it palatable? Despite having a few ideas of how to improve the taste, any experimentation would cost time and money—neither of which she had an abundance of at present.

Violet stood there, her thoughts far from the party as she considered the problem from new angles. Or rather, dragged forth the same solutions she'd considered and rejected all the other times she'd attempted to resolve the issue. It was lunacy to attempt previous experiments and hope for success when all others had failed. Yet

surely, there must be a solution.

Frowning to herself, Violet felt that old and familiar frustration bubble to the surface. So much about healing and medicine felt more lucky than intentional, as though fate did more to pull people from the brink of death than anything she concocted in her office. Though she knew her remedies provided relief and healing, it felt as though better answers lay just beyond her grasp.

“Miss Templeton?”

Jerking herself from her musings, she turned to find Dr. Vaughn standing there. She stared at him for a long moment, uncertain as to why his tone and expression were so expectant.

“The concert is about to begin,” he said, nodding toward the front of the room, where the others were choosing their seats.

“Oh, yes,” she said, taking his proffered hand. Her thoughts were too convoluted for her to care where they sat, so she followed Dr. Vaughn’s lead, giving it no thought when he chose the far back corner.

What could she do? The question haunted her, forever stirring up her fears and never providing any answers. Or none that she liked.

Even if she managed to solve the issue with Toliver Campbell, it didn’t change the fact that they could hardly afford the supplies to make the medicines that were keeping them from being entirely bankrupt. Violet couldn’t snap her fingers and double Oakham’s population. They certainly couldn’t make more of them ill (not that Violet would wish such a thing if they could). Mama would never agree to leave, and even if they did, Violet couldn’t imagine how Isaac would secure another position.

Mr. Finch and Felicity stood at the front, welcoming them to the evening's entertainment, but Violet's attention wasn't on their hosts any more than it was on the people around them. The troubles at her doorstep and the gentleman at her side occupied all her thoughts as she rested on the same solution once more.

No matter how much she enjoyed Dr. Vaughn's company, how kind the gentleman was, and how much he did not deserve it, she had to get him to leave Oakham after the birth.

Violet's eyes fell to her hands, which lay knitted together in her lap, and her shoulders bowed beneath the knowledge. Pain throbbed in the back of her throat, pulsing outward as her ribs constricted, and she tried once more to set the world to rights. To allow both the Templetons and Vaughns to coexist. To turn time back to before he arrived. Yet the thought of having never met him made her heart twist like a well-used dishrag before it was hung up to dry. Which only made the pain and pressure build within her.

What sort of person was she? To simultaneously wish Dr. Vaughn miles away yet mourn the loss?

Friend though he may be, they never lasted; one day he would marry and erase her from his life without a second thought, so why did the thought of doing the same hurt so very much? To choose between her family's survival and his—no matter how good and wonderful a friend he was—was no choice at all. Was it?

Fate had dropped her into an impossible solution, and no matter how she tried to work out a way for everyone to be happy and provided for, Violet knew she was powerless to protect everyone from this pain. One gentleman's temporary comfort or the long-term well-being of her mother, sister-in-law, and niece or nephew.

Violet forced her gaze to the front as the performers took their turns, filling the room

with a myriad of melodies, though her thoughts were far from the concert. Even when Mama took her turn, Violet could hardly enjoy it, though the lady was quite in her element as she shared her love of country tunes with each note .

Having enough presence of thought, Violet applauded alongside the others before Isaac moved to join their mother on the stage. Her heart stuttered in her chest as the pair began a duet, their voices blending perfectly together as Mama beamed at having her son at her side.

What sort of person was she? The sort who both delighted in and hated seeing her loved ones so happy.

Apparently, it was a night of contradictions for Violet Templeton.

Not that she begrudged their connection. Her mother loved her. She did. But Violet couldn't help but notice how much more she enjoyed Isaac. Just as Papa had preferred Martha. But why was it that no one preferred Violet's company best? Even Diana and Felicity, both of whom adored her as much as any friends could, had others they turned to first.

Was it selfish to want someone to desire her as much as she desired them? To be another's priority? To have them love her as deeply as she loved them?

Brushing those thoughts aside, for they were not helpful at present, Violet considered the trouble with their finances but was left as frustrated and directionless as before. What was she to do?

And that was the moment Lewis Finch took the stage, sitting before the pianoforte with the air of one who knew his business. Violet perked as the first notes rang out, and she grasped onto the distraction he presented, but a mournful tune echoed through the room, ringing out with the desperate sorrow that already choked her

heart. The notes felt ripped from deep inside her, their agitation growing to a tumultuous crescendo as they gave voice to the feelings churning through her.

Violet embraced the sound as though the composer had written it solely for her, perfectly articulating the sea of troubles that threatened to drown her in their depths. And her eyes began to sting.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

For all of his two and thirty years, Arthur Vaughn hadn't realized it was possible to feel both elated and frustrated simultaneously. Surely, such incongruous emotions ought to be experienced separately in entirely different circumstances, yet he couldn't deny that both were present in great abundance.

Just the thought of that Gadd fellow cozied up to Miss Templeton made Arthur's pulse quicken, his hands clenching into fists. Kissing her hand in such a public place? And the easy signs of affection that had passed between the pair? To say nothing of the flowers—though he had to concede that such a thing was not untoward between a gentleman and the lady he was courting, they irritated him nonetheless. That Gadd was a cad to be certain. And Miss Templeton was clearly taken with his charms.

Yet she sat beside Arthur. The chairs were close enough that he was quite cozily situated, with her leg brushing his when she shifted in her seat. Miss Templeton had accepted his invitation. Surely, that was significant.

But Arthur had to wonder why Gadd, with his obvious interest in the lady, hadn't bothered to do so first. He'd had ample opportunity .

He wished he could simply ask Miss Templeton about the nature of their relationship. Of course, there was nothing simple about posing such a question. Assuming his tongue allowed him (which was not guaranteed), to state it so boldly would demand an answer that Miss Templeton might not be ready to give. Her affections might be split, and to press the issue would only drive her into Gadd's arms. Or sour her opinion of Arthur before he'd had a proper chance to demonstrate his charms. Few though they were.

If he could only get her to consider him as more than a friend. Actions spoke louder than words, or so said the adage, which had been passed down for countless generations. It wasn't as though Arthur's attempts to woo Miss Templeton had been subtle. Whether or not she considered him a friend at present (a distinction that might be shifting even at this very moment!), the lady couldn't fail to see his overtures for the romantic proposition they were. If Miss Templeton still welcomed his company, despite Gadd's pursuit, then surely, there was still a chance for Arthur to win her heart.

Do not surrender! Simply formulate another plan of attack.

Arthur tried to turn his attention to the performers, as was their due, but it was difficult with Miss Templeton so near. Most ladies employed soaps and perfumes that held hints of flowers or citrus, but Miss Templeton smelled distinctly of her work; a blend of herbs and oils that might make one think of a medicine chest but perfectly encapsulated her. Drawing in a deep breath, he caught hints of mint and sage, though his nose was not so good as to distinguish between the other earthy aromas that enveloped her.

With each breath, her arms moved, brushing against his sleeve and drawing his attention back to her regardless of how he tried to give his full attention to the musicians. His gaze kept drifting to her. Thankfully, their being in the back meant no one noticed his divided attention.

Miss Templeton's own was fixed to the performers, and her expression lightened when her mother took the stage. The lady did a fine job, but more than that, it was clear from her expression how much she adored performing, and Arthur's smile grew in response at the sight of her pleasure.

Only to fall when Mr. Templeton joined his mother on the stage: the fellow hadn't bothered to return home to help his sister, but apparently, he was quite eager to return

to sing for a concert. The jackanapes. Miss Templeton may adore her brother, but the more Arthur knew about him, the less he liked Mr. Isaac Templeton.

Then Finch took the stage, and Arthur perked. The offerings tonight had been finer than he'd anticipated for a country affair, but he'd heard Finch play a time or two, and Arthur knew well enough that this performance was well worth giving one's full attention. And the gentleman didn't disappoint.

Though it started soft and simple, the notes built with each measure, turning it into a piece that no one else in the audience could master. But then, it was more than merely the notes he played; it was the emotion Finch put into each press of the keys.

Glancing at his companion, Arthur felt his pulse stutter as he spied tears filling Miss Templeton's eyes. They did not fall, but neither did she brush them away as her gaze remained riveted to Finch. Though Arthur couldn't say what gave the impression, he felt a weightiness to her soul that was far more than merely the music. Sorrow and resignation emanated in such a palpable manner that he longed to lift a hand and brush it away.

Arthur wished they were back at the bridge and enveloped by the forest, when their conversation had flowed as freely as the water beneath their feet. With each passing day, he felt more and more at peace with her, his ever-reticent tongue loosening as it never had before with anyone, man or woman. And with that newfound strength, he longed to ask her what melancholy had gripped her.

Yet there was a distance in her gaze. Or a wall, more like. Something that did not invite him to step into that uncharted territory .

Giving in to the instinct that seized hold of him, Arthur took her hand in his. Miss Templeton's eyes jerked away from Finch and met his, the unshed tears glimmering in the candlelight. And Arthur's heart ceased beating at the sight of her trembling

chin.

Though it was entirely untoward to do so, Arthur rested her hand on his thigh so he could wrap both of his around hers. If anyone bothered to look down the row, they might glimpse the tenderness, but the audience's attention was riveted to Finch's playing, leaving the pair in relative seclusion. Arthur didn't have the words, but he held her hand and her gaze, hoping his touch and expression could convey far better than his stuttering words how much he longed to comfort her.

He cursed the gloves that kept him from feeling her truly, skin to skin. But the tightness with which she clung to him set his pulse racing, and each heartbeat sent strength coursing through him.

*

Such a little thing. A touch of hands, which was hardly anything as both were encased in gloves, yet Violet felt the offer of comfort to her very toes. The concern in Dr. Vaughn's gaze wrapped around her, buoying her as nothing else could. In that quiet moment, she felt the uncertainty and confusion fade away, leaving her calm.

But then, Dr. Vaughn always seemed to wield that power over her. Whenever it was just the two of them, it felt like she stood on solid ground. That the future was not so shaky. That her troubles were surmountable if she but held fast to him.

At the same moment, her insides began to churn as she realized that she was once more taking from this gentleman when all she'd given in return was betrayal. No matter how necessary, it wasn't right for her to lean on him. No doubt he would hate her if he knew the extent of what she'd done. And what she still needed to do .

Yet she couldn't release his hand and surrender the one source of comfort she'd found. For once, someone noticed her. Truly saw her. And wanted to help. What

person could reject such an offer?

Someone better than Violet Templeton.

Applause thundered, breaking the spell cast over the pair, and she tugged her hand free to clap, glancing about (though no one appeared to have noticed their tender moment). Reality dropped back into place, reminding her of the reason she'd been emotional: whether or not he realized it, Dr. Vaughn may be the truest friend she'd ever had, but she had to drive him from Oakham.

Ludicrous. Friends were fleeting things, and he would abandon her like all the rest. Yet Violet's heart stuttered at that, uncertain whether or not she truly believed it.

"Might I fetch you some refreshment?" asked Dr. Vaughn as he helped her to her feet.

"That is kind of you, but no," she whispered in return, struggling to get the words past her knotted throat.

His brows pulled low as he studied her. "What—"

"Dr. Vaughn, I thought that was you," said a gentleman from the row ahead, who turned with an outstretched hand. "I had hoped to introduce you to my wife."

They moved through the appropriate introductions, though Violet couldn't spare a passing thought for what was being said. Shrinking back, she tried to appear unobtrusive as the others spoke, though Dr. Vaughn's gaze darted to her as she tried to fade into the milling crowd. Dr. Vaughn moved as though to speak to her, but a touch to her elbow drew Violet's attention away from him to find Miss Bacon standing just to the side.

“Good evening, Miss Templeton. How wonderful to see you tonight,” said the lady with a brighter smile than warranted as they were little more than acquaintances .

“And you, Miss Bacon,” replied Violet, struggling to think of something to say. “Your performance was lovely. I wish I played as well as you.”

“That is kind of you, but we both know mine was hardly the best offering tonight,” she replied, chagrin touching her expression. “But that isn’t important, as it was an opportunity to share the music I love.”

As the young lady spoke, Miss Bacon gently nudged her away from Dr. Vaughn, and Violet was all too happy to oblige, though the gentleman’s brow furrowed all the more as they distanced themselves. Miss Bacon continued to expound on the delights of the evening, including Mama and Isaac’s offering, and Violet nodded, though her attention turned back to the question at hand.

What could she do to secure her family’s position? Dr. Vaughn was too skilled for the doubts she’d planted to take root, and Violet couldn’t bring herself to outright lie about him or meddle with his prescriptions. But what else might she do?

“I couldn’t help but notice that you and Dr. Vaughn are quite friendly,” said Miss Bacon. “I’ve heard you are often found together.”

Violet couldn’t think what to say to such a thing. It was true, but to verify it might serve as another endorsement of Dr. Vaughn’s skills.

Miss Bacon’s gaze darted about as though looking for eavesdroppers, and she leaned closer. “I was hoping that as his friend and a woman, you might be able to give the slightest hint as to whether or not Dr. Vaughn has shown a preference for any of the ladies in town.”

This was a familiar position. One that Violet had been in so many times that it ought not to have surprised her, but she found herself blinking at Miss Bacon.

And clarity struck her, clear and solid.

The answer.

“Oh, most assuredly,” said Violet, the words blurting out before she could reconsider. With an insinuating tone that was thicker than clotted cream and jam smothered on a scone, she added, “But though he is very capable in many ways, I fear the gentleman is timid when it comes to tender matters. Dr. Vaughn struggles to express himself, but if a certain lady were to help matters along...”

Miss Bacon perked, her fan snapping shut. “Say no more, Miss Templeton. I grasp your meaning.”

For all that not a single lie had crossed her lips—Dr. Vaughn had indeed shown a preference for Violet (even if it was platonic), and he was exceptionally shy except when she’d done her best to help the conversation along—her insides churned as she watched the young lady turn and make her way to Dr. Vaughn’s side.

Glancing out at the gathering, Violet spied other gazes (both of the maidenly and widowed variety) all turning to the doctor with varying degrees of curiosity and avarice, and she knew this was precisely the solution for which she’d been searching. Passing over the tenderhearted, who were less apt to believe that Dr. Vaughn nursed a secret tendre for them or be crushed when they discovered the truth, Violet set her sights on three of the more cunning ladies in attendance.

A few well-placed insinuations were all it would take, and in a matter of weeks, those ladies would be convinced Dr. Vaughn was madly in love with each. Not only would the overt attentions discomfort him and make Oakham far less palatable, but once that

idea took hold, there would be no saving his reputation. Even if he settled on one of them, the others and their allies would cry out for blood, and nothing caused chaos like ladies fighting over a beau they each thought ought to be theirs.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and Dr. Vaughn was going to be the most hated man in Oakham.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

Birdsong was a magical thing, and a veritable chorus followed Arthur along as he strolled through the heart of Oakham. His medical bag bounced against his thigh, tapping in time with the trilling notes that filled the air. For perhaps the first time this season, the sun chose to make an appearance; with the summer having delivered so many gloomy days in a row, the breeze still had a nip to it, but Arthur wasn't going to complain. Just having the golden light surrounding him was enough to warm his spirits.

Though much of that had to do with his destination.

Conversation with Miss Templeton was far easier than he'd ever thought to find, yet he'd be a fool if he trusted his tongue, so he thought through his explanation for appearing on her doorstep. Stocking his medical bag was a ready excuse, but he sorted through the exact wording.

Miss Templeton had allowed him to hold her hand. And she had gripped him as tightly as he did her. Even Gadd hadn't done that much. That was something worth celebrating. As long as Arthur ignored that she allowed the blackguard the liberty of kissing her knuckles and addressing her informally. And Arthur was going to do just that .

Gadd may be flashy in his overtures, but none of his actions had felt as intimate as the moment Arthur had shared with Miss Templeton.

Of course, she might've allowed Arthur to do so simply because she'd been overwrought. He hadn't thought the lady capable of being defeated, yet he hadn't imagined the tears in her eyes, even if she hadn't allowed them to fall. And try as he

might, Arthur couldn't help but feel he was the source of her pain.

Surely, things were not so dire as all that. His schedule had been so full of late that despite nearly a sennight passing since the concert, Arthur was only finding time just now to pay a call. Clearly, there was demand enough for two physicians.

Yet even as he told himself that, he knew it was a rosy view of the situation. Being uncomfortable astride meant he walked to his appointments, stealing away much of his time, and when the influenza plaguing the village moved on (as it inevitably would), Arthur wasn't certain there was enough day-to-day need to keep both himself and her brother actively employed.

But all hope was not lost.

Arthur's gaze drifted over the cottages as he passed, and he breathed deeply of the air, which bore the scent of the crops growing in the fields beyond. He could follow Mr. Templeton's example and take on an apprentice; the fees they paid wouldn't make up the difference entirely, but it would supplement his income. However, he was an abysmal teacher.

Bentmoor was a possibility. With a few doctors and apothecaries already established, settling there wouldn't be the peaceful situation he'd hoped to find, but he could remain close to Miss Templeton—an attraction that no other town could boast. The distance was troublesome, as it was some two hours by carriage, and in winter or bad weather the travel would take even longer, which was hardly ideal. But surely, they might have this courtship limbo sorted out before the snow fell.

Arthur longed to tell the lady of his efforts to resolve matters, but only a fool rushed ahead with grand promises before he knew if he could deliver upon them. It wasn't as though any decision needed to be made posthaste. With the Templetons producing the town's medicines and Arthur's frugal lifestyle, they all could remain afloat for

some months. There was still time.

A burst of color drew his gaze, and he found himself staring at a magnificent rose bush climbing over the stone fence lining the lane. The blossoms were open wide, their petals catching the sunlight and bringing the palest of pinks to the white petals; they were pristine, looking their absolute best and spilling their sweet fragrance into the air.

Arthur couldn't help but cross the road whilst reaching into his frock coat pocket for his pen knife. That tool was something every physician ought to have on hand, though he usually kept it in his medical bag; but then, before meeting Miss Templeton, he'd only ever used it for sharpening quills and pencils and never considered employing it to cut bouquets.

The wall wasn't tall, and Arthur glanced at the cottage on the other side as he carefully selected the loveliest blooms. Despite having been told that no one begrudged a few pilfered blossoms (assuming one took care not to strip the bush bare), Arthur still felt a little like a kid sneaking a biscuit from the pantry as he examined the bush for a few more offerings. But then, flowers in the city were a luxury, and his former peers and patients wouldn't have thanked him for taking them.

The door to the cottage opened, and Mrs. Morris poked her head through with a wave. "Dr. Vaughn. I thought that was you."

Drawing in a sharp breath, Arthur paused and forced himself to relax as the lady flitted down the path to stand on the other side of the wall from him. "I—I do hope you are not offended—I...purloined a few of your flowers."

"That depends on what you intend to do with them," said the widow, ducking her face away from him with a coy blush. Arthur drew in a sharp breath and tensed, his muscles tightening as he tried to understand the heavy insinuation in her tone .

“I...” Arthur didn’t know what to say, and that single vowel stretched out for far longer than was comfortable.

Mrs. Morris straightened, her brows drawing together as her lips formed a pout. “I was only teasing, Dr. Vaughn. I only wish you had come to the door first.”

“Oh.” Arthur’s hands dropped from the foliage as he shifted in place and his tongue twisted in on itself, refusing to be of much assistance as he attempted to speak. “I—I apologize. I hadn’t meant to be impertinent—”

“Don’t be a goose. I meant so that we could visit.” Mrs. Morris laughed and caressed his forearm, and Arthur jolted at the contact, nearly striking her with the flowers. But then she straightened, her eyes brightening. “Unless you were intending to bring me a bouquet, and I have spoiled the surprise.”

Without waiting for an answer, Mrs. Morris took the roses from his hand and brought them to her nose as Arthur stared at her. Despite having a strong intellect, he could not comprehend what was happening or why the widow was being so very... Arthur wasn’t certain how to categorize her behavior, but it sent a shudder down his spine.

“That tonic you prescribed did the trick,” she said, her voice lowering as though revealing a secret as she reached for him. Mrs. Morris didn’t bother with a brief touch this time; she rested her hand upon his arm, her thumb rubbing it as she stared into his eyes.

“How...nice.” Arthur glanced about, though there were no other people about on this quiet stretch of road. Pulling from her reach, he tried to mumble an excuse whilst turning away, but the movement drew him in front of the gateway, and Mrs. Morris appeared there, stepping close enough for her skirts tangled with his legs.

“Might I entice you to enjoy a cup of tea with me?” she asked with a bat of her

eyelashes. Motioning behind her to where a few garden chairs sat, Mrs. Morris added, “I purchased a lovely variety from India. Or I have several delicious tisanes if you prefer. ”

Mrs. Morris gave him a bright smile, her eyes echoing the invitation as she gazed up at him, and her free hand reached up to ostensibly brush aside a bit of lint—though Arthur was certain there’d been nothing there.

“That—” This time his tongue wasn’t the trouble, for Arthur hadn’t the slightest notion how to complete that statement in any way that wasn’t outright rude. “My thanks...but I have business to attend to. Important business. That needs doing. At this exact moment. Now.”

That pout came out in full force once more, and Arthur blinked at it and the lady; the expression was hardly endearing on a child, let alone a woman.

“I suppose I understand,” she said with a heavy sigh before she met his gaze with a glint that was likely meant to be inviting but made Arthur’s throat knot. “Only if you promise to come again soon.”

Arthur’s mouth opened, but the only sound that came out was another undignified, “I...”

Giving the lady a quick bow, he turned away and hurried down the street with far more haste than grace, abandoning both Miss Templeton’s bouquet and his dignity. He didn’t dare look back because he felt Mrs. Morris’s attention on him as he fled.

Finch had warned him the ladies in the area were bound to be eager in welcoming a new bachelor to the area, but Arthur hadn’t anticipated such a brazen attempt. Something that seemed to be growing more commonplace of late as that attention grew more and more pointed. And discomforting.

Even if Miss Templeton hadn't taken up residence in his heart, Arthur didn't know what to do with a lady who draped herself about him like Mrs. Morris. Or Miss Lipman, who had fairly thrown herself in his path the day before. Or Miss Roper, who had followed him about after the concert, blocking him from speaking with Miss Templeton again.

A part of his heart couldn't help but feel the slightest bit flattered by the attention. After having spent so many years watching from his brothers' shadows, Arthur wouldn't be human if he didn't revel in it. Yet the larger part—the aspect that had him fleeing Mrs. Morris—didn't know what to do with such overt affections. Or the fact that the ladies were indiscriminate in their pursuit; as Finch had warned, eligible bachelors weren't plentiful in Oakham, and any husband with steady income was a prize.

“Dr. Vaughn!” called Mr. Bacon, pulling Arthur from his thoughts to see the gentleman approaching with a bright grin and a nod of the head. They smiled so very much in the country. “Well met, sir. I see you are enjoying the lovely day we’re having.”

“It is fine weather,” said Arthur with a nod. “Though I cannot say that I’ve been able to enjoy it much, as I’ve been occupied of late. Until this influenza runs its course, I will hardly have a moment to myself.”

Mr. Bacon nodded, though his expression dimmed a touch. “Then I suppose you will not have time to stop by Bradley Court soon.”

Arthur straightened. “Does your family require a doctor?”

“Not in the slightest. I wanted to discuss your intentions with my daughter, of course.”

Standing there like some harebrained statue made by an apprentice sculptor, Arthur stared at Mr. Bacon, attempting to take the seemingly random words and rearrange them to make sense.

“Pardon?” he asked, for it was the only thing his capricious tongue was willing to say.

“My daughter,” repeated the gentleman with a narrowed look. “Do not tell me you are trifling with her affections?”

“I—I—” Mind screaming for him to say something, Arthur struggled to form anything more coherent, but whatever eloquence he’d possessed in strained situations (which was to say none at all) fled him as he gaped like a carp.

Miss Bacon? He hardly knew the young lady. Beyond the carriage they’d shared into Oakham, Arthur had done little more than nod at her when they passed in the street, and he’d hardly said anything coherent during their journey. And she was pretty enough, but not nearly as appealing as Miss Templeton.

Despite those words streaming through his thoughts, Arthur couldn’t manage to form a single one of them whilst staring into her red-faced father—though it was likely for the best, as his tongue would mangle it into something insulting, no doubt.

Straightening, Mr. Bacon glared at Arthur. “I don’t know how things are handled in London, my boy, but in Oakham, we do not tolerate bounders who go about raising and dashing a lady’s expectations on a whim. In my day, a father would be well within his rights to call the cad out.”

Arthur held up his free hand in placation. “I apologize—this is so odd—I hardly—would never—”

The more he tried to force the words free, the more his tongue mangled them, fighting his every effort. And matters weren't helped by the fact that with each attempt, Mr. Bacon's complexion grew more florid. The gentleman's eyes narrowed, and he turned on his heel, marching away with sharp steps.

Staring after the gentleman, Arthur considered his behavior, reviewing everything that had passed between him and Miss Bacon. His intention had never been to raise her expectations; had there been anything he'd done to misconstrue his interest? Or lack thereof?

His throat tightened, and his palms dampened, requiring him to wipe them thoroughly on his trousers as he considered the situation. But try as he might, Arthur couldn't think of a single thing he'd done or said to have given the lady that impression.

Surely, it was a misunderstanding on her part. Yet...

That insidious word entered his thoughts, plaguing him as Arthur forced his feet forward. Could he be certain? It wasn't as though he boasted a grand understanding of women nor possessed the skills to interact with them. If not for having the comfortable common ground of medicine to ease the way, Arthur doubted he would've ever gotten the courage to speak to Miss Templeton.

No matter how he tried, he couldn't reconcile Miss Bacon's expectations and his behavior. They did not align. Yet Arthur didn't doubt that her father was quite firm in his belief that some mischief was about.

How could a man barely able to converse with a lady raise her expectations?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

“G ood heavens, Dr. Vaughn,” said Mrs. Templeton, setting aside her sewing and rising from the sofa. “You do look like you’ve seen a ghost. What is the matter?”

Arthur fought back a wince. He’d thought his expression innocuous, but with Mr. Bacon’s accusation resting heavily on his shoulders, it was impossible to rid himself of the cloud hanging over him. Exchanging greetings with the lady, he took the offered seat on the sofa beside her and set his bag on the ground at his feet.

“An odd conversation on the way here—two, in fact—that is all,” said Arthur, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Nothing too terrible, I hope,” said Mrs. Templeton, as she eyed him. “Would you care for some refreshments? Violet has an excellent selection of tisanes, as you can well imagine.”

The lady in question perched on her armchair, her attention fixed entirely on mending a ragged hem. Not once did she look at Arthur, which did nothing to help his equilibrium. Had Miss Templeton heard rumors about Miss Bacon? Just the thought had his pulse quickening, and Arthur rubbed his palms discreetly against his thighs.

“Thank you for the offer, but I haven’t much time,” he said, glancing between the pair, though his gaze lingered longer on Miss Templeton. “I was hoping to get my bag refilled, as my stock is growing low at the moment.”

“Yes, of course.” And with that, Miss Templeton rose from her seat, sweeping over to snatch up the valise and slip away before Arthur could say a word to her—and all without looking at him.

“You look done in.” Mrs. Templeton’s brows knitted together. “Please allow me to get you something to eat and drink. I know how you bachelors neglect yourselves, and I am certain it would do you a world of good.”

Arthur nodded, though he knew it wouldn’t.

*

Clutching the bag to her stomach, Violet scurried from the room as her cheeks blazed as hot as the Sahara Desert. A few vague statements. That was all she’d done. Just insinuations. Nothing more. If the ladies inferred more, then it was their doing and not hers. Yet no matter how much she repeated that in her mind (which had happened continually in the week since the concert), Violet couldn’t shake the weight pressing down on her shoulders. Whatever justifications she gave, it didn’t alter the fact that she’d thrown a good man to the wolves.

Scurrying through the corridor, she made her way to the herb garret and dropped the valise on the table. One hand on her hip and the other rubbing at her forehead, she paced the room, though there was little space to do so.

Dr. Vaughn would recover from this. The ladies would grow angry and vindictive; their family and friends would return to the Templetons, who had overseen their health successfully for years. Even if his reputation was bruised a touch, it was merely an inconvenience. That was all. As skilled as he was and without ties to the community, he could easily rebuild somewhere else. With a father and brother as well-respected as he, Dr. Vaughn couldn’t fail to thrive, regardless of what happened in Oakham.

Though none of those assurances eased the knots forming in her shoulders, they allowed Violet to breathe once more.

The door creaked open, and she whirled about to see Isaac slip into the room.

“Here you are. Can you tell me why Mother is treating Dr. Vaughn like family?” he asked with a frown.

“Because he was here when you were not!” snapped Violet. “He spent hours with her when she was ill, and you were nowhere to be seen.”

Isaac stiffened, his brows shooting upward as Violet’s eyes widened, her hand sliding from her forehead to pinch the bridge of her nose. Drawing in a deep breath, she tried to rein in her temper, but her nerves were strung too tight.

“Mother didn’t require a physician,” he said with a frown. “Else I would’ve returned home immediately.”

“He didn’t do it as her physician, Isaac. He did it because I was trying to see to her, the household, and your practice all at the same time, whilst you were enjoying yourself in Portsmouth. You left me all alone to manage without any assistance when everything is falling to pieces around us.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Isaac let it out in a sigh. “It’s not as bad as all that—”

“Do not tell me how bad it is! I am the one who manages the accounts. I am the one who makes the medicines and keeps records of your visits. I know precisely how much money we are making and how many patients you aren’t seeing.”

Violet turned away and stared out the window, unable to say whether she was angrier with herself or her brother. He vexed her greatly at present, but Isaac wasn’t the one who had befriended Dr. Vaughn and then betrayed his many kindnesses. Held his hand, even while plotting to destroy him. Basked in his comfort whilst working to ruin him.

What sort of person was she? The more Violet asked that question, the less confident she was that the answer was good .

“I am certain all will turn out right in the end,” said Isaac.

“How?” she demanded, turning around to stare at her brother. “How precisely is everything going to ‘turn out right in the end’ when you are gallivanting about England without a care in the world? When they had no other option, the villagers tolerated my recommendations and assistance, but with Dr. Vaughn on hand, they needn’t do so any longer. Our patients are abandoning us in droves!”

Drawing in a sharp breath, she let it out in a long sigh, her strength ebbing as she stared at him. “I do not understand, Isaac. Under Papa’s guidance, you fared well enough, but with each passing year, you are growing lazier and lazier. We rely on you, and we need you to provide, but Dr. Vaughn has already over the majority of the village—”

Mama’s voice cut through her tirade, drawing Violet up short as the lady called to her daughter. Giving her brother a narrowed look, Violet swept from the room. Holding fast to the little control she had left, she stepped into the parlor and smiled at her mother.

“I was just working on Dr. Vaughn’s supplies,” she said.

“Yes, and I do apologize for tearing you away, but I couldn’t recall the name of the novel you just finished that you enjoyed so thoroughly. I just began reading it, but I cannot recall the title,” said Mama with a furrowed brow.

“ The Whispering Catacombs by Clara Blackwood,” said Violet before turning back to the door.

Dr. Vaughn shifted and moved to rise. “Might I be of assistance—”

“Nonsense,” said Mama, waving him back to his seat. “She’ll be done in a trice...”

Not waiting for another interruption, Violet turned away from the pair and escaped once more whilst cursing herself again and again. Why had she ever allowed Dr. Vaughn in this house? She ought to have given him the cut direct and sent him on his way. No, Violet Templeton was the fool that had allowed him a portion of her heart, and one did not treat a friend as she had. Not after everything he’d done.

Sagging against the corridor wall, she covered her face. What had she been thinking? That question was so broad and encompassed so many situations in her life at present that no single response existed.

But that wasn’t true.

Almost everything fell under the umbrella of family. Everyone else in the village had abandoned or dismissed her, and they were the only constant in her life. The Templetons were far from perfect, but they cared for her, and surely, protecting them was justification enough. Wasn’t it? Yet even as she considered that yet again, the souring of her stomach testified to her uncertainty.

Violet forced herself to straighten; she needed to see to Dr. Vaughn’s bag and send him on his way. Any thought beyond that was entirely unhelpful at present.

With quick steps, she returned to the herb garret, but when she opened the door, Isaac leapt away from the table, causing the bottles in Dr. Vaughn’s valise to rattle. The latch stood wide open, and Isaac held a stopper in one hand.

“What are you doing?” demanded Violet, hurrying to his side.

“What I must,” replied Isaac, stuffing the cork back into place. “If Dr. Vaughn is gone from Oakham, everything will go back to how it was, and the easiest way to do so is to make him look like a quack.”

“So you meddled with his medicines?” Violet’s eyes widened, and she instantly lifted the bottles, each of which had labels affixed to the side.

Unstopping the first, she sniffed, but even as familiar as she was with each of her tonics, it was difficult to tell the blend of herbs and oils from one another once they were distilled and processed so thoroughly. Was it balsam of horehound? Violet rather thought so, though she couldn’t be certain .

“I did what was required to protect my family,” said Isaac with a frown. “Surely, you can see the logic in it. Prescribing the wrong medicines will make him look incompetent—”

“Yes, Isaac,” she snapped. “I am well aware of what it will do to him, but didn’t you think about what it might do to his patients? Our neighbors and friends?”

“There’s nothing all that harmful in there,” said Isaac with a dismissive wave of his hand before stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“As you struggle to tell the difference between comfrey and belladonna, you will forgive me if I do not place much stock in your opinion on the matter,” she snapped.

Isaac scowled. “I may not be as skilled as you, Violet, but I am not brainless. Nothing I did will do any serious damage to anything except Dr. Vaughn’s reputation.”

Staring at the bag, she began lifting the bottles out; she was going to have to dump the contents, clean the vials thoroughly, and refill them properly. “You know the body well, but you’ve never cared for the apothecary side of medicine. Even harmless

things can be poisonous in the wrong combination, Isaac—”

The door opened, and Dr. Vaughn poked his head inside. “I know your mother said you could manage on your own, but I wanted to keep you company.”

Holding one of the bottles in her hand, Violet froze in place. Good heavens. What was she to do? She couldn’t very well empty out his entire bag without questions being raised—

Isaac snatched the vial from her hand and slipped it and its brothers back into the case, snapping it shut. “No need, she’s finished.”

Dr. Vaughn’s brow pulled low as he studied her, and Violet could only stare back. Her heart pounded in her chest, threatening to break her very ribs if it didn’t quiet soon, and the very air around her thinned, leaving her lightheaded as Isaac herded Dr. Vaughn to the door.

Violet’s eyes fixed on the bag .

Just let it be. It wasn’t her doing. Isaac’s actions were his own. Yet those bottles could cause more than tension between Dr. Vaughn and the townsfolk. Remaining silent might place his patients in danger. The townsfolk may have turned their backs on the Templetons, but that didn’t excuse the pain those medicines might inflict.

But this was for her family.

Violet’s insides raged, pushing and pulling at her until she felt ready to split into two. Dr. Vaughn gave them a nod in farewell, his concerned gaze still fixed on her as Isaac nudged him through the doorway.

“Stop!” she shouted.

*

Miss Templeton's voice sliced through the air, giving Arthur a start as he stared at the lady, whose eyes were clamped shut. Placing one hand on her hip and rubbing her forehead with the other, she seemed stuck in place, unable to speak, though there were plenty of words bubbling beneath the silent surface.

"Miss Templeton?"

But before Arthur could inquire further, she started speaking, the sentences streaming out of her with all the rapidity and care of a waterfall. At first, all he could surmise was that it had something to do with his bag, though it took some time before Miss Templeton stammered her way into a semblance of coherency.

"Isaac switched your vials about, and I cannot say for certain which is which medicine," she said in a rush. "I shouldn't have left it alone, and I apologize for not watching over it better—"

"That isn't—" But Arthur's objection was ignored as she continued to talk .

"I didn't want it to come to this. I never wanted it to be like this. I cannot bear the thought of anyone getting hurt—especially someone as wonderful as you. All this time, you've been so kind to me, and I am ashamed of what I've done..."

Arthur straightened and stared at her, though Miss Templeton continued to ramble, saying nothing and everything all at once in a way that only she could comprehend.

"You deserve better, and I've been so terrible," she said, shaking her head, and once more he was ignored when he tried to interrupt. "You are so kind, and you do not deserve this. I only wanted to protect my family. That is all. I didn't want you to suffer, but I didn't know what else to do..."

With a frown, Arthur said, “But it was Isaac—”

Miss Templeton shook her head, her expression crumpling. “I have done everything I can to get you to leave Oakham. I tried spreading rumors, trying to make people lose confidence in you, but it didn’t work. So I told some of the ladies in town that you fancy them, knowing that either it would paint you as a bounder or their attentions would make you so uncomfortable that you’d leave of your own volition.”

It felt as though the world beneath his feet shifted, throwing Arthur off his balance, and he couldn’t recover. Setting his bag down on the workbench, he leaned against the wood and took a deep breath. Or tried to. His whole body was tied in knots, his thoughts spinning about until they were hopelessly tangled. Frozen in place, he stared at the lady, her words now entirely lost to him as she continued to ramble.

Miss Templeton had been trying to get rid of him?

And here he’d thought his greatest obstacle to happiness was Mr. Gadd.

Drawing near, the lady finally met his eyes for the first time that day, and they pleaded with him. “I am so sorry. You have been so good to me and my family, and we’ve repaid that kindness with betrayal, but I cannot allow this to continue any longer. I am so very sorry. ”

There was no mistaking her meaning. No misinterpreting the truth standing before him. Everything Arthur had believed about the lady had been false. As he stared at her, his stomach churned, and what little strength he had seeped right into the floorboards. Brother and sister watched him, and Arthur felt as though the whole of Oakham were gaping, silently watching the fool that had settled amongst them. Gaze falling to the floor, he clenched his jaw, trying to stave off the pain as his heart crumpled.

Then without a word, he turned on his heel and strode away.

*

Drawing in a sharp breath, Violet winced as the door shut quietly behind Dr. Vaughn. He didn't slam it or storm away. Not a single hard word escaped his lips. No, he simply slipped from her life.

A tremor took hold of her, leaching her strength from her legs, and she only just managed to drop onto a stool before gravity pulled her to the floor. Covering her face, she groaned at herself. Her heart throbbed, sending out spikes of pain that nestled into her head, piercing her with each pulse—but she deserved far worse.

Violet didn't think there were punishments enough for what she'd done. All the excuses she'd clung to fled her grasp, leaving her empty and alone.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

A world of difference lay between wisdom and knowledge. For all that schools, tutors, and governesses did their utmost to instill the latter, the former was only gained with experience. A lifetime of education granted a person an understanding of facts and figures with rote memorization, but that was not the same as true comprehension.

“Conscience is a thousand witnesses.”

“There is no peace for the wicked.”

“Conscience is a horse that runs away with me.”

In Violet’s mind lay a dozen quotes and proverbs she’d learned concerning the price one paid for evildoing, yet she hadn’t truly understood their full meaning until now. For all that she’d read Macbeth many times before, never had Lady Macbeth’s final moments struck so powerfully; Violet felt a kinship with the woman who lamented that her hands would never be clean from the sins she’d committed, and the lady’s final words repeated in Violet’s thoughts: “What’s done cannot be undone.”

Hard-won wisdom, indeed.

Confession was good for the soul, so it was said, and though Violet was glad not to bear the weight of her silence any longer, it didn’t relieve her from the guilt of her actions. It was done and over with, and there was no turning back the clocks no matter how much she wished for it. Experience was a stern taskmistress.

Violet’s feet trudged along the lane, and she focused on putting one before the other,

her gaze fixed on the ground as she watched each passing pebble and rut. No doubt with time the pain would ease. She couldn't expect such a terrible burden to be lifted in only three days, but she wondered if it would ever fully leave her. Thoughts of Dr. Vaughn plagued her dreams, making it impossible to rest. His phantom followed her about the day, reminding her of all the kindness he'd bestowed. And so, she trudged along, her eyelids struggling to remain open.

Droplets struck her nose and cheeks, and Violet glanced up at the sodden sky. Thick clouds stretched above, blocking the sky and enough of the sun that it felt more like dusk than afternoon, and several more raindrops struck her face.

With a groan, Violet looked for a place to set the basket and bag so she might drape her shawl over them, but she couldn't do so without them ending up muddy. There was nothing to be done about it. Pulling her arms closer, she hunched over her bundles, wincing as bottles clinked together. The basket and bag were packed well enough that the glass would be protected, but it would serve her right for something to break or upend and ruin her work.

The droplets gathered into a proper torrent, and in a trice, her clothes were soaked through. As she was still unable to afford a replacement for her soiled cloak, the shawl was the best covering she owned, yet the thin fabric did little to protect anything from the onslaught. Scurrying as best she could whilst still protecting the basket and bag, Violet hurried along the lane, pausing only when she spied Dr. Vaughn's front door.

Clinging to the bundles, she stared at it. Was he home? At this time of day, it was highly unlikely, and the sinking in her stomach testified that she felt something, though she couldn't say if it was disappointment or relief. How could she both long and loathe to see him? But her feet felt no confusion, for the minute she passed through the gate, they tiptoed along the path, silently darting to the door without drawing attention.

Violet set the basket and valise on the doorstep. Great vines crawled up the sides of the cottage, providing a bit of shelter from the rain, but she pulled a large square of waxed paper from her pocket and draped it over the bag, tucking the edges beneath the bottom. The straw stuffed between the bottles in the basket was bound to make a bit of a sodden mess, but the vials were naturally protected from the rain, and anything else was wrapped firmly in waxed paper as well; they should be safe. She hoped.

Turning, she slipped away as quickly and quietly as she'd come, not slowing until she was certain she was out of sight. Despite having her arms free now, the walk home was just as difficult as before. The bleakness of her situation had been an ever-present companion since Dr. Vaughn's arrival, and for all that Violet had considered the situation from many different positions before, she hadn't anticipated that matters could grow worse.

Her family's position was still threatened, and all Violet had succeeded in doing during the past weeks was hurt a good man.

With her gaze fixed on the ground once more and her attention drifting through all that had occurred and that which was yet to come, Violet's feet moved of their own accord, pulling her through town. Draping her shawl over her head, she hid her face from the world—though there was little point, as she was the only one out and about in the downpour.

When she arrived home once more, Violet threw open the door and cast off her sodden shawl. Gooseflesh rose on her arms, and she knew she ought to feel it, but the shivers seemed like they belonged to someone else.

"There you are, miss," said Peggy, who watched her with wide eyes. "My, you are soaked to the bone, but you have a visitor. "

Violet's muscles clenched, her breath catching as she wondered—and hoped—who it was.

“Mrs. Finch is here to see you.”

Violet's lungs collapsed, her muscles relaxing, though once more, she didn't know whether the sentiment seizing control of her body was good or bad. No, she hadn't truly expected it to be Dr. Vaughn, and having any sort of visitor was not welcome at present, but she couldn't deny her disappointment on both counts. Despite having just done her utmost to avoid the gentleman.

“Tell her I am unwell,” whispered Violet. “I must go and change before I catch my death—”

“I thought you believed one cannot grow ill from being wet and cold,” said Felicity, appearing in the doorway. But even as the lady frowned at her friend, a snap of shock drew her brows upward as she studied Violet. “You are sopping! Peggy, please fetch her a blanket.”

With a bob, the maid scurried away.

“I should change my dress—” began Violet.

“You are going to join me in the parlor this very minute and stop avoiding me,” said Felicity with a frown, pointing to the room behind her with a militant glare.

“I saw you at church on Sunday, and we spoke at the concert not long before that,” said Violet. “That is hardly avoiding you.”

But Felicity ignored her, striding into the parlor and sitting on the sofa with the confidence and bearing as though it were her domain. With Violet's own will so worn

from exhaustion and guilt, she was unable to withstand the command and took the seat opposite. A fire burned happily, and a pot of tisane steeped on the table with an array of cakes on a platter beside it. Despite these being some of her favorite treats, Violet's stomach soured at the sight.

"You look terrible," said Felicity with a frown .

"Then I look the same as I always do," replied Violet in a tone she'd meant to be dry but held an unmistakable bitter edge to it.

"Why were you tromping about in the rain?" she asked.

Violet shifted her skirts, straightening them, though the wet fabric clung to her skin. "Dr. Vaughn left his medical bag, so I was delivering it and some additional medicines."

"Attempting to bribe your way out of the mess you've made?" Felicity's tone was flat, her eyes narrowing on Violet. "I admit I was upset when I discovered Lewis's deception, but what you've done is so much worse. What were you thinking—"

"I wanted to save my family," said Violet, her voice rising of its own accord. "Everything I did was to save them."

"Do not use them as an excuse—"

The parlor door opened, and Peggy stepped inside with the blanket to drape it over Violet's lap, though she didn't feel the chill anymore. The young woman adjusted the plates and treats a touch, and the two ladies watched in heavy silence. Giving a bob, Peggy left the way she came, and though Felicity's mouth opened the moment the parlor door shut behind the maid, Violet spoke first.

“It is not an excuse, Felicity. I know what I’ve done. I know that it was my choice and that it was the wrong one, but I truly felt like I had no other recourse,” she said with a shake of her head. “I was a fool, but it doesn’t change the fact that Dr. Vaughn is unencumbered. He’s a skilled practitioner and could establish himself anywhere he wishes—my family cannot.”

Violet drew in a shaky breath, and she drew the blanket tighter around her, though it wasn’t her body that felt the chill. “My mother won’t leave Oakham. It is her home. My brother refuses to see how dire things are, and if he loses the practice, they will have nothing between them and penury. They would lose everything.”

“Do you think I would’ve allowed that?” Felicity huffed and shook her head. “Good heavens, Vi. Do you think I would’ve stood by and done nothing while you starve?”

Throwing her arms wide, Violet scoffed. “And why not? No one else in this village—the people I have known my whole life—cares one jot what happens to us. When Diana finds a beau, she will forget me, and when your child is born, you will always have more important things to do than stir yourself on my behalf.”

Felicity opened her mouth, but Violet refused to let her argue the point.

“Do not deny it,” she said, holding up a warning finger. “I have seen it time and time again. People enjoy me in the moment but forget me the next, enjoying the pleasant diversion I present until something better arrives. So, I did what I felt I had to—however flawed that logic was. As much as I like Dr. Vaughn and value his friendship, I couldn’t choose him over my family or rely on anyone else to save us from Isaac’s poor choices.”

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Violet forced the words out. “I chastised my brother for ruining our reputation and lying to our customers but then did far worse because I knew my actions were wicked. I am sorry for that, and I am trying to make

amends the only ways I know how.”

She clutched the blanket. “Dr. Vaughn wrote to say he would be fulfilling his prescriptions and didn’t want any previous orders, but I had already purchased the ingredients. There was no need to waste them, so I delivered them to his doorstep after having made a groveling tour of Oakham, visiting every lady whom I led to believe Dr. Vaughn fancied and confessing the truth.”

Straightening, Violet dared to look at Felicity, her jaw tight, though her chin was doing its best to tremble. “If you must know, you are sharing tea with the most hated woman in Oakham. I assure you that none of the ladies reined in their tongues, and I know precisely how low their opinion is of me.”

Her throat clamped shut, and she struggled with the words as the memories of that day played again through her mind. So much anger and hatred, but every bit of it was earned .

Forging ahead, Violet added in a voice that was far too weak for her peace of mind, “Isaac may have caused our family trouble before, but now, I am equally to blame for our failing business. If we have a single patient in a week’s time, I will be greatly surprised.”

“Truly?” Felicity’s brows rose, and her eyes widened, but Violet could hardly see or hear the lady. Her vision blurred, and she forced the tears back; it was one thing to fall to pieces in private, but she wouldn’t embarrass herself further by doing so with an audience.

“People refuse to pay their bills, and most of our savings are tied up in the supplies I purchased to fulfill prescriptions we are no longer trusted to make,” said Violet, her voice catching. “If we find a physician or apothecary willing to purchase them, we will recoup only a fraction of the cost—not that we could deliver the items, as we

haven't a cart or carriage and hiring one would deplete those earnings even further. Within a few months, we'll have not a penny to our name—"

Her voice broke, and Violet drew in a sharp but shaky breath. "I don't know what will happen to my family, but there is nothing more I can do to save them. I know you are angry with me. Everyone is. And I do not blame you all, but—"

Closing her eyes, Violet tried to compose herself, but exhaustion ate away at her reserve, and she knew this was yet another battle she would lose.

"Please, excuse me," she mumbled as she jerked upright, the blanket falling away as she hurried from the parlor, not stopping until she was safely hidden in her bedchamber.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

Whilst many cursed the influenza spreading through the village, Arthur couldn't help but see the miracle it was. For all that it kept him busy, there had yet to be any deaths, and though a few patients had required special attention, most were seen through the ordeal with a few home remedies. In London, such a thing was unthinkable. Even the simplest of sicknesses ravaged the populace, taking at least a few with it.

But then, the city was such a putrid mess of miasmas that it was a miracle anyone remained in good health. How could one when one never breathed proper air?

And so, Arthur counted his blessings, choosing to focus on the good to be found amid his exhaustion, though even his most optimistic of thoughts struggled to fight against the bone-deep weariness that plagued his every step. Stopping, he rubbed his neck and stretched his back, but he knew it was a mistake the moment he made it. Getting his feet moving once more was infinitely more difficult than ignoring his aches and pains, and even that short pause was enough to test the limits of his fortitude .

The Slaters were both resting easy, their lungs clear enough that his ministrations were no longer required, and he could finally seek his bed. If he didn't collapse on the way.

Oakham was still. Only the sound of his footsteps (muted though they were) broke the silence, and Arthur couldn't believe how calm the world could be. Even if London slowed at this time of night, it never quieted entirely. Animals calling, carriage wheels clattering against the cobblestones, people going about their business, street vendors hawking their wares, the city was a tumult of noise that one could not entirely escape—even inside one's own home.

Standing on the main thoroughfare of this village, it felt as though he were the only person stirring. Every living creature from the livestock to their masters was snug in their bed, lost in their dreams.

Darkness was so much stronger in the country. Arthur hadn't thought anything about traveling at night before, but in the city, one could rely on streetlamps to light the way even if the houses snuffed their own. Oakham boasted no such amenities, and the cottages were few and far between on the edge of the village, so even when the lanterns were lit, they helped little.

Only the moonlight above guided him home, and Arthur added a lamp to the list of supplies he required as a country physician. He supposed it wasn't an easy thing to haul around on a daily basis, so perhaps not. Or perhaps he might be able to store it in a saddle bag—when he finally mastered riding.

Thankfully, the skies were clear tonight, and the moon and stars above provided quite the sight. It wasn't as though the city was entirely devoid of such nighttime displays, but it felt as though Arthur saw through the entire vastness of space, glimpsing every star in the universe; so many that one couldn't say the sky was black but rather a swirl of gray.

Drawing in a breath, Arthur turned his gaze to the road ahead and focused on the journey home—only to see light blazing from a window ahead. He suspected the source long before he was close enough to see the Templetons' home clearly, and though he knew he ought to ignore it, his eyes moved to the windows of their own accord.

To one side of the front door, the parlor was dark with the shutters closed tight, but on the other, the office fire blazed, casting the room in a bright orange glow, and Miss Templeton stood before it, shifting a pan above the flames. Some of her curls tumbled free of their bindings, sticking to her neck and cheeks as she frowned at her

work. It was impossible to tell if it was a trick of the light or the truth, but even from the road, Miss Templeton looked liable to collapse.

Arthur's own body throbbed, reminding him of his waiting bed, but he couldn't turn away from the sight. Keeping a tight hold on his heart, he refused the urge to join her as he had so often done over the last few weeks. Miss Templeton had made her feelings clear, and he wasn't going to waste precious time fostering a false friendship and an unrequited love. Better to simply forget her and look to other possibilities.

But try as he might, Arthur couldn't help but feel an echo of the defeat that had her shoulders slumping.

In London, rivals came and went, their names and faces blurring together with little meaning. A physician might retreat, but there wasn't any true surrender, for there were always other patients to claim and a never-ending supply of sickness and injuries to treat. Oakham was supposed to be a haven away from that competition, and instead, Arthur found himself locked in a far more bloody and brutal battle where his victory wasn't a mere inconvenience to another.

That weight settled heavily in his chest, and as much as he wanted to curse Miss Templeton and say she deserved whatever fate came next, Arthur couldn't dismiss his part in this debacle because he had threatened her livelihood. However unintentionally.

Whatever their feelings now, her partnership with her brother served the needs of the town. Mr. Templeton's penchant for over-diagnosing had only harmed a few purses. And though their education lacked the latest theories and medical breakthroughs, Miss Templeton's skill with medicines outmatched and outweighed that deficiency.

If he hadn't arrived in Oakham, the townsfolk wouldn't have thought twice about the level of care they were given, as the Templetons were far better off than most. But

when presented with the opportunity to patronize a “proper” doctor, suddenly the Templetons were labeled charlatans and crooks.

Which, if he were to be honest, was somewhat fitting. Mr. Templeton had tricked a few of his patients out of a few coins. However, though Arthur found it an abhorrent practice, such gouging was commonplace enough that few physicians were entirely honest with the patients who could afford to pay more. Heaven knew that most apothecaries made significant money from placebos and cure-alls, but in those cases, they often did more harm than merely cheating the patient.

Standing there like the fool he was, Arthur couldn’t say what he thought about the circumstances in which he found himself or his feelings for Miss Templeton, for he was no closer to understanding his heart than when she’d confessed. He was simply so very, very tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of success coming at others’ expense. Tired of having his heart tossed aside. Tired of returning to an empty home.

So, Arthur did as he’d done whenever such thoughts arose over the past few days: he walked away. He only hoped sleep would provide an equally easy escape when he climbed into bed; he didn’t think he could manage another night of staring at the ceiling. Perhaps exhaustion would finally give way to oblivion, rather than memories of a haunting pair of brown eyes.

“Dr. Vaughn?” called a quiet voice from just behind, and Arthur turned to see Mr. Grant standing on his doorstep, a lantern held high.

The fellow laughed and lowered the light. “‘Tis you. My misses swore she saw The Gray Man traipsing about the road, although he’s only ever haunted the fields. It’s awfully late for you to be out and about. ”

“I am returning from the Slaters’ home,” said Arthur, nodding back the way he’d come. “They are resting peacefully now, which means I am free to do so as well.”

“It’s lucky my wife spied you when she did,” said Mr. Grant. “She’s getting that cough, and I was hoping you might have some of the tisane on you. I’ve heard that it works a treat.”

“Unfortunately, I used up the last of mine,” said Arthur, glancing at the makeshift bag he’d been using of late. It wasn’t large enough to carry all the medicines he required, and the instruments inside were the inferior ones he’d used during his student days, but as he wasn’t ready to face the Templetons and rescue the valise he’d left behind, it would have to do. “I will mix some tomorrow morning, and if I have time or happen to pass by, I’ll bring it by. Though I fear it might be a day or two before I’m out this way.”

Mr. Grant’s expression fell. “She’s struggling to sleep. I’d sure welcome some tonight.”

Arthur nodded down the road, drawing the fellow’s attention toward the light still burning bright in the Templetons’ home. “It was Miss Templeton’s recipe, and I know she is still awake. If it is a dire need, then I have no doubt she would be willing to supply you with some this minute.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Mr. Grant sighed. “No doubt she would, but when I dropped by this afternoon, I was informed that they’ve raised their prices. The apothecary shop in Bentmoor doesn’t charge so much, even if it is less convenient.”

“Larger suppliers can afford to sell their wares for less, but I guarantee their products aren’t as fine a quality as Miss Templeton’s.”

“That may be, but medicines are already so dear. I suppose I shall have to wait until tomorrow and buy it from you or make the trip to Bentmoor,” said Mr. Grant. “Now, off to bed with you, Dr. Vaughn. Morning will come quickly.”

“That it will,” replied Arthur, forcing his feet to continue down the lane .

Heaven help him, why did he feel the need to defend her? Mr. Grant’s decision had no bearing on him, yet Arthur couldn’t help the words. Miss Templeton’s actions may not have been honorable, but he couldn’t entirely blame her with so much at stake. Especially as it was clear that his hope for a peaceful coexistence had been flawed from the start.

And if the Templetons’ rising prices drove their patients to him or Bentmoor, then what would be left for them to live on?

That problem was not Arthur’s to solve. Miss Templeton’s lies and manipulations were unacceptable. She’d used his feelings against him. Betrayed his trust in such fundamental ways. And understanding the context of her choice didn’t alleviate that guilt.

Arthur drew in a deep breath, his gaze falling to the ground, but try as he might, he couldn’t rid himself of the hope she’d presented and the possibility that had laid within her smile. He rolled his eyes at himself and slipped through his front gate. Relief settled on his shoulders as he considered the soft bed that awaited him—only to find two bundles on the doorstep.

It was difficult to discern what they were precisely, for they were shrouded in shadow and wrapped in so much waxed paper that it would take a veritable tempest to get past the protections. Opening the door, he put his bag inside and picked up the two bundles, bringing them to the console table just inside the parlor.

The maid-of-all-work had banked the fire, and Arthur retrieved a spill from the mantelpiece and lit the twist of paper on the coals. As he lit the waiting candle on the table, his eyes burned at the sudden brightness, little though it may be; as they adjusted, Arthur examined the basket and what appeared to be his proper medical bag

beneath the waxed paper.

Lifting it, he drew it closer to the light and found polished leather gleaming back at him; all scuffs and signs of age were gone as though it were new. Opening it, he found the bottles arranged perfectly, filled, and newly labeled with script far finer than his .

Turning to the basket, Arthur found a wealth of vials and jars, each nestled amongst enough straw that it would take a fair bit of mishandling for them to break, and the boxes were individually wrapped snugly with more waxed paper, ensuring that not one had been ruined by the rain. Tucked between them was a small letter with his name on the front.

Inside were just a few little words.

I am sorry. —V.

No desperate pleadings for forgiveness. No excuses or explanations. Arthur didn't know how such a little thing could have such an impact, but then, when taken as a whole, the offering wasn't small. Any other delivery she'd made had included a bill for her labor, but there was none in sight. The medicines in his bag and the basket were worth a tidy sum, something her family desperately needed. To say nothing of the hours poured into the gesture that went far beyond simply supplying him with the medicines he required.

Leaning back, Arthur sat on the back of the sofa and stared at the gift. He wanted to hold onto his anger. He certainly tried to nurse the hurt, but with each passing day, it grew more difficult to see her as the villain he wished her to be.

At this very moment, Miss Violet Templeton slaved away whilst everyone else slept. Though Arthur didn't know what the lady was doing precisely, there was no

mistaking the effort she expended, and whatever else he doubted about her, he couldn't deny that Miss Templeton was industrious. And usually on another's behalf.

And where did that certainty come from? With everything that had passed between them, Arthur didn't know why he thought kindly of her. Perhaps his heart was simply too weak, but with well over a decade of experience with courtship (pitiful though his history was in that regard), he knew better than to blindly cling to unrequited love.

Yet the image of her working away, alone and exhausted, hovered in his thoughts. Regardless of Arthur's desire for sleep, he knew he wouldn't get a wink whilst knowing she still toiled. Especially when the reason for her harried determination was due to his presence in town.

A glutton for punishment? Perhaps. A fool? Most certainly. But for all that he bore the elevated title of "doctor," Arthur Vaughn never claimed the lofty intelligence that so many of his peers did.

Blowing out the candle, Arthur left the bags and basket on the table and strode back out the door, following the lane to the Templetons' home. No doubt the structure had some quaint name to its credit, as all the homes were named for the local plants and animals—Primrose Place, Ivy Grove, or his own Heathfield Cottage—but Arthur had never heard it referred to as anything but "the Templetons'."

And as he stood once more before it, he found Miss Templeton still at the fireplace, sweat beading upon her forehead as she stirred something within a large copper pan. The massive slab of a worktable had been shunted to the side to make room for her work, and it was piled with bundles of herbs that had been pulled from their drying hooks so as not to get in the way.

Arthur spied no food at hand, and he knew it was likely Miss Templeton hadn't eaten in some time. Only a small stool sat beside the fire to see to her comfort, though the

lady wasn't using it. When lost in her work, Miss Templeton seemed blind to all else, focused entirely on her task and unable to recall the needs of her body nor the ticking of the clock.

For all his determination to come here, Arthur didn't know what he ought to do. He still wasn't certain why he was there as his exhausted mind struggled to keep his thoughts organized. What could he do for her? What ought he to do? Arthur didn't owe the lady anything. Yet his feet dragged him to the side door, and he watched her through the adjacent window.

Miss Templeton's brows knitted together as she stared into the mixture; her lips tightened, her expression falling as she examined her work. The lady's chin trembled, and she dropped the pan onto a corner of the worktable and collapsed onto the stool. Spine sagging, her eyes turned to the windows, and Arthur stiffened when he thought that she spied him, but her gaze was unfocused and empty; with the darkness enfolding him, he was shrouded from her view.

Then, with a shuddering breath, Miss Templeton burst into tears. Not little teardrops that slithered down her cheeks, but the sort of hopeless cries of one pushed beyond her breaking point.

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Even with the doors and windows closed, Arthur heard her gasping sobs, though she held her hands over her mouth to stifle them, and whatever aloofness and confusion he felt standing there disappeared at the sight of that indomitable lady crumbling. Arthur knocked on the door, and Miss Templeton jerked and drew in a sharp breath.

Wiping her apron across her face, she erased all evidence of that weak moment and straightened, her spine stiffening as though nothing untoward had happened. And when she opened the door, Arthur would never have known that anything was amiss, as the darkness muted even the redness in her eyes.

“Dr. Vaughn?” The mild curiosity fell from her expression, her brows rising as she gripped the side of the door. “What are you doing here at this hour?”

But before he could think how to answer that, Miss Templeton’s surprise vanished and her eyes widened as she hurried to say, “You have no reason to believe me, sir, but I promise I did nothing to adulterate your medicines. I know you said you did not require them any longer, but after everything that has happened...I thought...and I needed to return your bag as well... And...”

The lady stumbled over her words, her brows twisting together once more as her gaze pleaded with him to believe her.

“I promise, Dr. Vaughn—”

Arthur held up a staying hand, and her mouth snapped shut as she drew in a sharp breath, watching him as though awaiting a verdict.

“Had you wished to cause me such troubles, you wouldn’t have warned me about your brother’s mischief. As much as it pained me to break our business agreement, I cannot use your services because I cannot trust that he hasn’t meddled with them—”

“I give you my word—assuming you can believe it—that he was never in the same room with the medicines I delivered today. I guarded them zealously,” she said with a hint of desperation in her tone.

“I believe you.” And for all that it might sound like placation, Arthur realized it was true. Though Miss Templeton had employed some underhanded tactics, he couldn’t help but trust her in everything but her affection. “I was passing by and saw you working. It is late, and I thought you might require some assistance.”

Miss Templeton drew in a sharp breath, her muscles tightening as she stared at him, and Arthur wasn’t certain, but it looked as though her chin trembled once more.

“Of course you did,” she whispered in a quivering tone.

“What are you doing?”

“I am experimenting with palatable medicines for children. I’ve tried so many different ways, and nothing has worked,” she said with a shaky sigh. “I thought that perhaps I might be able to turn pills into comfits. They cannot hold as much medicine as powders, but if they were sugar-coated candies—”

“Then you could get children to swallow as many as necessary,” concluded Arthur with a nod. “That is an intriguing idea.”

Miss Templeton’s lips began to quiver as well whilst her posture stiffened. “I knew it would be difficult, as making comfits takes days and requires working with melted sugar—which is contrarian at the best of times—but the Campbells are the only

genteel family that still use our services, and if I cannot come up with a way to help Toliver take his medicines, I know we will lose them as well. But it isn't working, no matter what I do. I finally had a batch that survived the first two days of sugar coating, only to have it burn tonight because I had to do the wretched things over the fire here rather than the kitchen so I wouldn't disturb Peggy as she has enough to do without me keeping her up all night long. And I have ruined so many batches already. The cost of the staghorn alone is exorbitant, but I do not know what else to do..."

Words flooded forth, tripping over themselves as the torrent spilled out in a manner that reminded Arthur very much of her overwrought confession the other day. Everything Miss Templeton had buried came to life, pulling with it the tears she fought so hard to keep under control. Soon, her lungs were shuddering as she fought her own gasping breaths, the tears pouring down her cheeks as she wiped at them with frustrated swipes.

What could he say to such a swell of emotion? Having had a hand in some of those troubles, what could he do for her? Arthur's chest ached as Miss Templeton fought so hard to gain control, and all the while it slipped further and further from her grasp. But then, he suspected that she needed the release as much as she'd needed to tell him all her wrongdoings during her confession.

This lady held so much in her heart, and Arthur couldn't help but wonder if anyone else bothered to help bear the burden. He didn't need to ask after her brother or the apprentice—one of whom ought to be at her side—for he knew they would be useless.

The Vaughns may prize worldly success and believe his retiring to the country a waste, but regardless, if Arthur were to reach out to them for assistance, his family would arrive on his doorstep in a trice, willing to aid and assist in any way necessary. Having family meant one needn't face the troubles of the world alone, yet who propped up Miss Templeton in her hour of need?

Stepping through the door, Arthur led her to the chair tucked behind the desk and sat her down as she struggled to get her breathing under control. Though he doubted anyone else was around to witness the scene, he moved to the shutters she'd overlooked and closed them. Grabbing the stool from beside the fire, he dragged it to her side, and his knees bumped hers as he sat, though Miss Templeton seemed not to notice as she fought to fill her lungs.

“Breathe, Miss Templeton.”

Arthur leaned forward, taking her hands in his. Holding her gaze, he drew a lungful in through his nose and let it out in one fluid movement. He murmured other calming words, his thumbs rubbing against her skin, and she tried to follow his prompts, though the lady struggled against each hitch in her lungs. As Miss Templeton's ragged breaths slowed, her muscles slackened and her gaze fell to the ground, her brows knitting together.

The tremble in her chin hadn't left her, but she managed to ask, “Why are you so kind to me? After everything I've done, I do not deserve it.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, Arthur tried to explain the feelings he didn't understand himself. “I will admit I am angry and very hurt, and I will not excuse what you did, but I understand your reasoning. You've worked hard to make up for your brother's deficiencies, oversee the health of your village, and provide for your family. Whether or not your brother is undeserving of your efforts, three ladies in this household will be made to suffer if his income dwindles. Your future has been in jeopardy from the moment I stepped foot in Oakham—”

“No,” she said, shaking her head as her gaze snapped to him, her eyes pleading as that panicked emotion settled into her voice again. “I didn't do this for myself. Please do not think that. For years, I've known I would need to make my way in the world one day. I even began searching for a position as a governess before Papa passed

away, and then I knew I couldn't leave because they needed me. If Isaac loses all, I will simply move ahead with that plan. But Mama and Lilibet are not so fortunate, and my salary wouldn't provide for them."

Arthur's ribs tightened, squeezing his heart at the dismissive manner in which Miss Templeton discussed the prospect. Life was not easy for a governess. With a good family, she would be treated fairly enough, but never well, and far too many were trapped in situations where they had no protection or security. It was a precarious position, and the thought of Miss Templeton blithely stepping into it did unpleasant things to his equilibrium.

Clarity surged forward, striking Arthur as he considered all that he knew of the lady, and he found it more and more difficult to hold onto his resentment.

"So, am I to despise you forever because you wished to protect your mother and sister-in-law?" he asked.

"I hate myself," she murmured as the bleakness returned to her gaze.

"And that makes it even more difficult for me to do the same," he murmured. "For all that you behaved poorly, you are an honest person. To a fault, one might argue."

Miss Templeton straightened, though she didn't pull her hands from his. Her brows arched up, asking far better than words for him to explain.

"Your warning me about the medicines could be dismissed as simple human decency. You know full well that he might've caused great harm, and you are not selfish or stupid enough to attempt it—"

"I considered it," Miss Templeton whispered, as though the admission might very well destroy the last of his goodwill, but Arthur couldn't help but smile at yet another

example of her honesty.

“Many people consider terrible ideas when afraid and desperate, but there is a vast difference between considering a thing and acting upon it. And I would hazard to say that you dismissed the idea almost as soon as you thought it.”

The lady didn't respond, but her hands tightened around his, and Arthur's heart warmed at the confirmation.

“But you will not convince me that your soul is black, Miss Templeton, for you didn't need to confess to more than your brother's misdeeds,” he said with a slight smile. “Had you remained silent, I likely would never have discovered your part in my predicament, even when I was drawn and quartered by the ladies of Oakham.”

Miss Templeton's gaze lifted from her lap, her eyes pleading anew as though hardly daring to believe his words whilst also begging for them to be true.

“And when I consider it, Miss Templeton,” he said with a considering frown, “I cannot say that you did any great harm. Most of your efforts to undermine me were halfhearted at best. I can think of several physicians in London who did far worse to steal patients from me, and had you even an ounce of their ambition, you could've easily eviscerated my reputation.”

“You made it impossible to demonize you,” she murmured with the barest hint of humor. “It was hard to do anything without feeling wretched. You are such a good man and didn't deserve to be tormented.”

Arthur drew in a deep breath as he considered her tone. It held a depth of emotion, but it sounded eerily similar to when Miss Templeton had called him her “friend.” And it hurt just as deeply.

“In truth, Miss Templeton, what pained me the most was the pretense. That you claimed my friendship and still set about to ruin my reputation.”

The calm she'd gathered fled at that, and Miss Templeton's eyes grew misty once more. “I do not know what I might say or do to right that wrong, Dr. Vaughn. I do not think I have the right to ask your forgiveness, nor do I expect even your good heart to extend that far, but I am sorry. I... ”

Miss Templeton shook her head, lowering her gaze once more as the strength seeped from her. Their hands remained clasped, and she clung to them as though afraid to let go.

“You may not ask for it, but I do forgive you,” he whispered, and her eyes darted to his as they widened, the disbelief stamped on every inch of her expression and bated breath.

“You do?”

The question was so soft that Arthur wasn't certain she'd spoken, but she stared at him with such anticipation that he couldn't help but nod his head. Miss Templeton let out a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and a cough, and her chin trembled anew. With a heaving breath, she threw her arms around him as she spouted more incoherent words that rang with gratitude (though Arthur couldn't say for certain what they were).

Granted, Arthur couldn't focus on much more than the feel of Miss Templeton in his arms. The sentiments he'd buried beneath layers of betrayal and frustration surged to life with renewed vigor, testifying with absolute certainty that his heart was not done with the lady. Not yet.

“I have missed you,” she whispered, and Arthur couldn't reply; his throat was

conspicuously tight as her scent filled his nose and his hands rubbed along her back of their own volition. He was well and truly caught in her spell.

*

Curse her wretched hide! Violet's cheeks heated as more tears spilled out, pulling free of her control with unrelenting force. Her heart was too full to be subdued by her fatigued mind. Especially when wrapped in such a tender embrace.

The world defined strength and peace as polar opposites, yet in Dr. Vaughn, Violet found equal measures of both working in perfect harmony. The gentleman was no warrior of old with fists ready to prove his power through physical might; his strength was not woven in his limbs and muscles but in his heart. Those arms now wrapped around her were mighty enough to hold her together, and the world slid from Violet's thoughts, allowing her to revel in the serenity enveloping Dr. Vaughn like the cinnamon in his cologne.

She wasn't alone. For now. And held so tightly, Violet could almost believe that everything would turn out well in the end.

Leaning back, she wiped her cheeks again with a shake of her head at herself. Plenty of situations did not end with happy endings all wrapped up neatly in a bow, and it did little good to sit about believing this one would.

Reaching into his pocket, Dr. Vaughn retrieved a handkerchief and handed it to her.

"I could spend the rest of my life expounding on my gratitude, and I fear I would never be able to fully compensate you for your kindnesses," she said with a weak smile as she wiped at her cheeks. With a sigh, Violet shook her head. "I—"

"None of that, Miss Templeton," he replied whilst taking her free hand once more.

She sighed at the touch, for it was nearly as good as nestling into his arms. “I think it would be best if we move beyond stumbling apologies and exuberant declarations of gratitude. Perhaps we could simply rebuild our...friendship.”

Dropping her hand with the handkerchief from her face, Violet straightened.

“Do you still wish to be friends? After everything...” But her voice drifted off as Dr. Vaughn gave her a warning look.

He drew in a deep breath, a faint smile played at the corner of his lips. “Believe it or not, Miss Templeton, but I missed your company as well.”

Violet cursed her wretched face, for at that very moment, it threatened to turn into a watering pot once more as the telltale quiver began taking hold of her chin and lips, but Dr. Vaughn’s eyes narrowed, and he squeezed her hand.

“None of that now, Miss Templeton. There is work to be done. What do you need me to do? ”

A smile graced her lips, and the exhaustion weighing down her limbs eased, allowing her to straighten. Violet felt like embracing the gentleman once more, but the hours were slipping away, and there was no time for dallying. With a few instructions, the pair set themselves to the task at hand.

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Holidays are supposed to be happy things. Celebrations. And one cannot mark those festive occasions without a modicum of joy. It was written into the very name, after all. Festivities. It was impossible to speak the word without a frisson of anticipation. It evoked thoughts of games and food, dancing and music, and laughter and revelries that lightened the spirits of the entire village.

Yet it was difficult to muster excitement for the first harvest celebration this year. Though there were still some weeks before autumn would fully arrive, Lammas ushered in the end of a summer that had been far too fleeting. Too insubstantial. As much as she adored flurries of snow and ice, Violet wasn't ready for winter to arrive.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath and clung to the little pleasures of the day. The church smelled like a bakery, and the air was thick with notes of honey and wheat, which evoked vivid memories of other Lammas celebrations and promised a grand feast once the service ended. Her stomach gurgled, and her eyes snapped open as she pressed a hand to it; thankfully, hers was not the only one rumbling at the sight of the altar laden with loaves of every size and shape, awaiting the vicar's blessings on the first fruits of the harvest.

The vicar's wife and her helpers had done their utmost to bedeck the interior with wheat and other symbols of harvest time, though the poor weather had guaranteed a poor crop. Large sheaves stood sentinel on either side of the bounty, whilst the pews were adorned with garlands of autumnal greenery and the occasional apple, pumpkin, or squash serving as accents.

With the final blessing, the parish rose to their feet and shuffled toward the churchyard as the ladies who'd organized the festivities hurried to move the loaves

from the altar to the tables outside whilst the sharp-eyed bakers kept a close watch; it wouldn't do to have one's loaf ruined by a rival before the competition was to begin.

The children rushed forward, slipping none-too-carefully through the crowd to the waiting games whilst their parents began splintering off to enjoy the entertainments the festival had to offer. Alongside the bread, the feasting table was laden with donations of every sort; large pots of cider sat ready to be enjoyed alongside the bread, jams, fruits, and cheese. None of which were particularly grand, but they were beloved all the same.

Some children gathered to one side for races, whilst others sat at tables to weave wheat stalks into dolls, figurines, or whatever else delighted them. Several ladies worked amongst them, demonstrating the intricacies of the craft whilst creating grand sculptures with nothing more than a bit of twisted wheat. Despite having tried her hand at them, Violet had never been able to manage much more than the simplest of shapes, but she found it fascinating to watch the women's fingers fly through the movements.

The gentility never deigned to enter the baking competition, but quite a few hovered nearby to watch whilst their servants' loaves were judged on taste or appearance, eagerly awaiting the results as though their household's honor were at stake. The audience clapped at the sight of the carefully sculpted loaves, some of which bore the likenesses of animals, foods, and plants.

The shift from somber to spirited happened in the blink of an eye, and the congregation threw themselves into the festivities with fervor. But Violet stood to one side, glancing about for any friendly face. When her eyes caught Miss Wrigley's, Violet raised a hand in greeting, but the lady's expression tightened before turning away in a pointed dismissal.

Like a pack of marauding Vikings, Violet's confession had torn through the village,

pillaging and razing everything in its path before the sun had set that day. In the sennight and a half since, the gossip had likely spread to Bentmoor as well, giving the busybodies a wealth of fodder—the likes of which they hadn't seen since Mrs. Payne's mysterious "trip" last year when she'd disappeared for several months and returned home with an infant in tow.

It was foolish to hope the turmoil would dissipate in less than a fortnight, and Violet knew she simply needed to accept her punishment. It was of her own making, after all. Drawing in a deep breath, she let it out in a long sigh, though she didn't allow her disappointment to touch her posture. Shoulders back, spine straight. There was no need to broadcast just how much it bothered her to be standing alone.

At the far side of the gathering, Violet spied Diana and decided to throw herself on her friend's mercy. Even standing silently with the ladies would be an improvement. Forcing a smile that was neither too broad (for that marked her as arrogant and unrepentant) nor too self-effacing (for going about in sackcloth and ashes was gaudy and insincere), Violet strode through the crowd.

"Good afternoon," she said to Diana. The other ladies watched Violet with varying degrees of antagonism and apathy, and she nodded in their direction before sidling up beside her friend. "Did you and your mama assist Mrs. York with the decorations? The pews looked like they had benefited from your touch. "

Diana smiled, though there was a touch of confusion to it. "You know we do so every year."

"Are you implying that the rest of the decorations were neglected without Miss Gadd's assistance? I assure you Mrs. York and the others did marvelous work," said Miss Orton with a narrowed gaze. Violet refused to allow her shoulders to fall, though she cursed her silly eyes for not ensuring that none of Diana's companions were closely tied to the trouble Violet had stirred up—and Miss Orton couldn't be

any closer to her particular friend, Miss Bacon.

“That isn’t what she meant,” said Diana with a scoff.

“It sounded that way to me,” said Miss Orton with a lift of her chin.

“She is known to say outrageous things,” added Mrs. Ryan as her gaze swept over Violet with a slight curl to her lips.

“Yes, Mr. Templeton is quite bold. Never knows when to keep her own counsel,” added Miss Edgeworth with a slight smile, which Violet thought a rather ridiculous thing to say as the lady was doing that very thing at that moment.

“Ladies,” said Diana with a scolding tone. “Miss Templeton made a mistake, but we ought not to judge too harshly.”

“Miss Edgeworth meant no disrespect,” said Miss Orton with a tittering laugh. “She simply called her what was more appropriate. It’s not as though her name suits her.”

Violet huffed at that as her eyelids lowered and her gaze drifted between the ladies, and she hid the smile that threatened to turn up the corner of her lips. Not that their words were amusing, but the trio all watched her with the sharp gazes of predators on the hunt, and Violet knew just the sorts of things they were going to say. The same sorts of things she’d heard her entire life, and they hadn’t been particularly original the first time.

“Her parents were so very hopeful to name her after something so delicate and lovely,” said Miss Orton, her gaze raking over Violet’s tall and sturdy frame in the same dismissive manner many others had done before .

“Miss Orton!” said Diana with a scowl. “Miss Templeton behaved badly, but there is

no need for you to do the same. She is my friend, and I will not listen to you castigate her for something that has nothing to do with you.”

Violet’s insides churned when Diana glanced in her direction; though her words were supportive and earnest, disappointment sat heavy in her eyes and expression. Violet deserved it. She did. What she’d done was wrong, but seeing that castigation in Diana’s gaze broke something inside her.

“Everyone is so quick to judge me, aren’t they?” said Violet in a low voice, and all four ladies stared at her.

“You—” began Miss Orton.

“I am ashamed of what I did. I make no secret of my guilt, and I have unequivocally apologized to the offended parties and done my utmost to atone for the damage I caused. Whether or not they accept my apology is entirely up to them—but none of that is your business,” said Violet, her brows knitting together as she glared at the ladies.

“They are our friends. They are our business,” said Miss Orton, crossing her arms and glaring.

Violet nodded in concession but added, “And my family have been your friends and neighbors for generations. I would think that might afford me a little grace, but that seems to be in short supply in Oakham.”

Turning away from the group, she strode toward her former spot of ostracism but paused and added, “Everyone has opinions about my behavior and is quick to punish me for my sins, but not one of you has any advice on how to keep my family from the poorhouse. We’ve served this community for decades, yet you abandoned us without a second thought, not caring what happens to us. I do not excuse my behavior, but I

have to wonder what you would have done to save those you love from penury.”

Not bothering to see (or care) if her statement struck its intended target, Violet turned away as Diana continued to scold them for their callousness—though the lady didn’t follow after or call for Violet to return. But she couldn’t blame Diana for it. The lady enjoyed the social thrust too much to stand apart, just the two of them.

Glancing about, Violet couldn’t think of anything else she’d like to do, and the welcoming faces in the crowd were outnumbered by the scolding looks of disapproval. With a deep breath, she embraced the world for what it was. Remaining here was not enjoyable in the slightest: this wasn’t a traveling circus, and she wasn’t a sideshow to be gawked at.

Best to leave.

Violet pointed her feet to the front gate as a niggling thought poked at her; she didn’t want to give it a voice, yet it refused to leave her alone. She couldn’t help but wonder if the time had finally arrived to leave Oakham. It had always been in her future. Though there were a few families in the area that employed governesses, it was unlikely she would find employment here, and taking a position far from here would allow her a new start. A new life.

Or perhaps she could try her hand at an apothecary shop in London. Dr. Vaughn did say women helped their husbands with such things, and perhaps she might find someone amenable to taking on female staff—but she cast aside that thought the moment it popped into her mind. Not only was there a vast difference between accepting assistance from family and formal employment, but Violet couldn’t level yet another scandal upon her family.

If she were to take any sort of “employment,” it would need to be of the genteel variety. Leaving her with only one possibility: governess.

The sky above was a patchwork of white, gray, and blue, but the damp in the air made it decidedly chilly, and Violet tugged her shawl tighter about her shoulders. Her reticule dangled on her wrist, bumping her and reminding her of its contents.

Tugging it open, she pulled out Dr. Vaughn's handkerchief, now cleaned and ready to be returned to him. Her fingers ran over the bold monogram in the corner, though her gloves kept her from feeling the silky thread. Violet couldn't stop a faint smile as she considered the gentleman and the gesture that had landed this in her care. A blush stole across her cheeks as she recalled her tears that night, but his kindness had brought with it such warmth that any embarrassment she felt over her lack of control was burned away with appreciation.

As she'd forgotten to give this to him any number of times in the past sennight and a half, Violet knew she ought to do so today, else she would likely forget for some time. Turning on her heel, she glanced about the gathering. With their hats firmly atop their heads and their dark frockcoats, the gentlemen all looked too similar to tell one from the other, but being tall gave her a vantage that allowed her to see more clearly through the crowd—especially when her quarry's head also peeked above the others.

Spying the good doctor, Violet turned in his direction but only made it two steps before recognizing his companions. Her cheeks burned hot like coals when she spied Felicity at her husband's side, and Violet considered just how urgent it was to return Dr. Vaughn's handkerchief. He had plenty, surely. Another sennight or two wouldn't make a difference.

Coward. She ought to speak to Felicity. But what was to be said? Caught up in her guilt and exhaustion, she'd spoken harshly to the lady and confessed far more than she'd intended to say. How could she look Felicity in the face? Best not.

"There you are," said Osborn Gadd, appearing at her side just as Violet turned to

make her escape. “You aren’t leaving already, are you? The fun has only just begun.”

“I think it’s for the best,” she murmured, glancing at the gate.

“Nonsense,” said Osborn, waving that away. “The gossip will fade far quicker if you don’t hide away like some criminal. Hold your head up, Vi, and enjoy the afternoon.”

Not waiting for her to agree, Osborn pulled her arms through his. Violet knew better than to fight the gentleman once he got an idea in his head, but she couldn’t help considering whether or not gnawing off her limb might be the better course.

“Things have been rough of late,” she said. “I do not know if I can simply forget it all and ‘enjoy the afternoon,’ as you so blithely put it.”

“You fret too much, Vi,” he said with a shake of the head. “Those are troubles for another day. Enjoy yourself!”

Gritting her teeth, Violet forced a smile but didn’t fight the gentleman as he forced her back into the fray.

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Why was the most acute torture that which one inflicted upon oneself? Arthur knew he ought to look away, but seeing Miss Templeton traipse off with Mr. Gadd made his heart constrict. Doubly so when he considered that she'd been attempting to sneak away without a word. Granted, there was the issue of her cold reception amongst the townsfolk. And Arthur had seen her nearly every day of late, so she likely didn't feel the need to seek him out, but he had hoped that she wouldn't leave without greeting him at the very least.

Arthur tried not to curse his friends. The Finches were good people, and the more he came to know the pair, the more he liked them. But unknowingly or not, they were holding him captive.

"I didn't realize there were so many ways to arrange a nursery," said Mrs. Felicity Finch with a slight growl to her tone. "But Annette is determined to identify every variety, never mind that there is hardly a difference from one to the other, and the first option was quite serviceable."

"My sister means well," said Finch in an attempt at comfort, but the fellow needed to do a better job at hiding his amusement for he was dangerously close to laughing at his wife's predicament (something even a seasoned bachelor like Arthur Vaughn knew was perilous).

Mrs. Finch's eyes narrowed, her gaze boring into her husband. "Of course, she means well. Most people do not set out to be cruel, but good intentions don't erase the irritation they cause."

"I read recently of a corpulent gentleman traveling in the north..." began Finch in a

tone filled with mischief.

“I read that to you from the latest edition of the Covent Garden Jester . Do not try to distract me with puns, Lewis Finch,” said Mrs. Finch with an expression that was intended to be scolding but failed utterly.

“But I do so enjoy distracting you,” replied Finch in a low voice that was likely not meant to carry. Thankfully, discovering that Mrs. Finch read such an absurd periodical was distracting enough that Arthur didn’t hear the lady’s reply.

His gaze tracked Miss Templeton and Mr. Gadd as they strolled about the gathering, and Arthur took heart from the fact that the lady didn’t seem to be enjoying the fellow’s company. Though he had to admit that her discomfort, in part, likely came from all the grim expressions turned in her direction. Arthur simply hoped Miss Templeton’s displeasure had more to do with the former and not the latter.

“She is avoiding me,” said Mrs. Finch, and Arthur gave a start, his gaze turning to her. There was a hint of speculation in the lady’s eyes as she studied him, though her attention swiftly shifted back to Miss Templeton. “I’ve tried calling on her several times, but our last conversation was a touch...uncomfortable.”

“I do not think Miss Templeton trusts easily,” said Arthur, offering up an insight that didn’t break a confidence, as anyone who knew the lady must have guessed as much.

Mrs. Finch’s brow furrowed as she studied the lady from afar. “I believe you are correct. As I consider all our conversations since my return to Oakham, I do not think any of them were truly personal or revealing—except our last conversation, and she only said as much as she did because she was overwrought. The girl I knew was eager and open, and I fear experience has taught her to guard herself.”

She glanced at her husband and held his arm tighter. “I fear far too many of us are

forced to learn that lesson.”

“Too true,” murmured Arthur, tucking his hands behind him.

“Dr. Vaughn, there you are.”

Despite being new to the area, that was a voice he recognized. One that sent a shiver down his spine. Miss Bacon had a particular way of speaking that conveyed sunshine and roses yet never failed to raise his hackles and paralyze his tongue. Though that had as much to do with the way she examined him like a cut of beef as it did her saccharine manners.

“Miss Bacon,” he said with a proper bow whilst carefully casting his eyes about for an escape.

“Might I have a word with you? Privately?” she asked with a smile that was far more genuine than any she’d given in the past.

Manners almost made him accept, but with her father’s angry visage still haunting his dreams, Arthur didn’t dare allow that concession. He tried to think of a way in which to word his reply, but they jumbled in his head, allowing only the smallest of answers to come out.

“No. Thank you.”

Miss Bacon’s lips tightened as her gaze lowered to the ground, and in a low voice, she said, “I understand, and I do not blame you. It seems I owe you an apology, and though I didn’t feel it necessary at first, I fear my conscience will not allow me to ignore it. It has come to my attention that my father was a bit hasty in speaking with you about a certain...misunderstanding.”

As the gentleman had looked ready to call Arthur out right there in the street, he would say it was more than “speaking,” but that was neither here nor there.

“I wanted to apologize for that,” said Miss Bacon as a hint of pink colored her cheeks. “I should’ve been more circumspect before telling anyone, but had Miss Templeton not been so wicked as to suggest it, I would never have been so bold as to do so. Or should I say Mr. Templeton since she walks about so bold as brass with no thought as to how her actions affect the rest of us. As though a mere apology would compensate for the harm she’s done—”

“I assure you Miss Templeton is quite aware of her actions and the harm she’s done,” said Arthur. “And there is nothing ‘mere’ about the apology she made. There are plenty of people in my life who ought to acknowledge the harm they’ve done to me, but their pride will not allow them. The apology she offered me was the most heartfelt and sincere one I will likely ever receive, and Miss Templeton chose to give it of her own free will.”

Miss Bacon straightened. “Simply acknowledging her wrong isn’t enough.”

“Should we place her in a pillory? Force her to flog herself in front of the congregation? Or ought we to transport her for her crimes?” asked Arthur with a frown. “How much should she be punished to compensate for the harm she’s done? As far as I can see, all she did was bruise your pride, Miss Bacon, and if I—who stood to lose much more from her actions—can forgive her, what right do you have to be angry?”

“Mr. Templeton lied to me—”

Arthur considered that. “Or did Miss Templeton simply imply something vague, knowing you would infer the meaning you wished?”

“You are defending her?” asked Miss Bacon, gaping.

“And if I am, are you going to turn Oakham against me? Punish me by running me out of town like you are doing to the Templetons? You will forgive me if I hold little value in your village’s good opinion, for you all were far too eager to cast aside a family who were your friends and neighbors for generations. And I may be more skilled at my profession than her brother, but Miss Templeton is one of the finest apothecaries I’ve ever seen, and none of you value her, choosing instead to mock her ability and belittle her achievements. ”

Arthur scoffed, shaking his head at her. “Miss Templeton helped me to save Mr. Evans’ leg and life, and no matter how much I objected, no one gave her any of the credit she deserved. She has served this community to the best of her ability, and you dubbed her ‘Mr.’ Templeton as though she is unworthy of common decency. I do not know why Oakham is determined to hate her, but I refuse to be party to it, and I will not listen to anyone disparage or disrespect her ever again.”

Miss Bacon stared at him for one long moment before turning around with a delicate huff. Arthur watched as she flounced away like the bubble-headed ninny she was, and he drew in a deep breath to calm the frustration boiling inside him. Before coming to Oakham, Arthur hadn’t thought himself a man with a temper, but it seemed he’d been incorrect.

At least when it came to a particular subject.

When his gaze turned back to his companions, Arthur wasn’t surprised to find them watching him closely. He hadn’t wished for privacy with Miss Bacon, after all. What he hadn’t anticipated was the level of speculation that blazed in their eyes as the pair watched him. He decided that ignoring it was best, so he turned his attention away from them once more and waited for them to return to their previous subject.

But he felt their interest sharpen when his eyes (of their own accord) moved immediately to Miss Templeton.

“I’ve never heard you string so many words together unless it has to do with medicine,” said Finch with raised brows.

“Did you expect me to stand there and ignore Miss Bacon’s aspersions against Miss Templeton?” asked Arthur.

“Of course not, but that was...” Finch’s words drifted away, but his smile grew when his wife supplied one.

“Thorough.”

Arthur gave a vague hum that was neither acceptance nor denial of that fact. The word was apt enough, but Mrs. Finch’s insinuating tone was another thing altogether.

“All in all, I feel as though I owe her a great debt,” said Arthur .

“How so?” asked Finch with an astonished chuckle.

“Miss Templeton wasn’t haphazard when she planted the ideas. The ladies she targeted were the ones who plagued me the most with their determined advances, and they were so easily convinced that I was enamored with them that they told anyone who would listen,” said Arthur. “Now, their pride is too wounded for them to make another attempt. In one fell swoop, Miss Templeton rid me of some very unwanted attention.”

Finch frowned. “But I thought you were looking to marry.”

“Not to someone who views me as a prize to win,” replied Arthur.

“Amen, Dr. Vaughn,” said Mrs. Finch with a nod. “Do not settle for anything less than someone who values you for your sake.”

A smile crossed his lips, and once more, Arthur’s gaze fell to the lady who seemed to fit that requirement more and more. Mr. Gadd gave her one of those irritating grins, babbling some nonsense that Miss Templeton pretended to find amusing (how could he not see the tension in her shoulders?) before the gentleman wandered over to queue for the cider.

“She’s alone now,” murmured Finch, but he was silenced when his wife gave him a sharp elbow to the ribs.

Arthur ignored them both. Though he’d heard tell of Lammas, London wasn’t one to celebrate the beginning of the harvest season, as the heart of the city had no harvest to speak of, and though the entertainments here were far less extravagant or awe-inspiring than the offerings found in Town, the quaintness of the traditions more than made up for the simplicity with which they celebrated.

He longed to steal an afternoon with Miss Templeton as they enjoyed the festivities. To have a drink or two as they listened to the country tunes played by the tiny band of musicians and indulged in some of the finest bread and cheese he’d ever tasted. A perfect way to pass a few hours.

But curiosity had been eating at him for some weeks, and Arthur couldn’t help but seize the moment to satiate it .

“Please excuse me,” he said with a vague nod toward the Finches. He strode over to where the popinjay stood alone (for once), waiting for cider.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Vaughn,” said Mr. Gadd with a nod. “How are you enjoying yourself?”

“It’s delightful,” said Arthur. “How is your mother faring?”

“She’s doing much better and singing your praises,” said Mr. Gadd as they arrived at the front of the line, taking up two mugs of cider. Arthur ignored the drinks and followed the gentleman as he moved to return to his sweetheart’s side.

“You have Miss Templeton to thank for that. Her tisane worked wonders for this influenza,” said Arthur, watching the gentleman closely.

“Vi is incredible,” said Mr. Gadd with a nod. “She’s brilliant at so many things. Quite an impressive lady.”

“Have you known her for a long time?”

“Our whole lives, of course. We both grew up here.” Mr. Gadd paused in place and considered that. “I cannot say we knew each other well, as we had little in common as children, but she became friends with my sister a few years back, so our paths started crossing quite regularly. It’s hard to believe we were ever just distant acquaintances. I adore her.”

Those three words made his heart sink; Mr. Gadd spoke them with such obvious affection that one couldn’t doubt the truth of the sentiment. Enough so that Arthur nearly turned away. Yet he couldn’t allow the valuable opportunity to pass. Even if he had no idea how to phrase the next question.

“Is that when you two began courting?” Not the best way to ask it, but Arthur was glad to finally have it out. After all, the question ought not to be surprising after such a blatant declaration.

No, what was shocking was Mr. Gadd’s reaction.

Gaping, he stared at Arthur for a long moment before bursting into laughter. “Courting? Are you mad?”

Mr. Gadd could hardly speak through his guffaws. Though Arthur didn’t care for the reaction and what it said about the gentleman’s feelings toward the lady, his temper remained dormant, as Mr. Gadd’s tone was one of genuine bewilderment and not mocking.

For the briefest of moments, understanding dawned bright, filling his world with light and colors as Arthur considered the implications. They weren’t courting, and Mr. Gadd was no rival. Blessed news.

But the elation lasted only a heartbeat, for the next moment Mr. Gadd got himself under control and called to Miss Templeton. Arthur’s muscles tensed, and his skin flushed as heat swept over him; his mind frantically fought to find a way out of this coming conversation, but his wits always failed him in such moments, leaving him standing about like a gaping trout.

“Vi, you are going to love this,” said Mr. Gadd, handing her a drink before throwing an arm around the lady—something that would’ve had Arthur’s blood boiling mere moments ago. “Dr. Vaughn thought I was courting you.”

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Before Arthur could think what to say (not that his mind or tongue supplied anything useful), Mr. Gadd laughed, jostling Miss Templeton with an expression that begged her to join in the fun. The lady obliged, which made Mr. Gadd's grin broaden, but Arthur's brow furrowed at the clear sign of her discomfort. Miss Templeton held herself stiffly, though she made a valiant effort to seem unaffected.

"How odd would that be? Like courting my sister." Another boisterous laugh before Mr. Gadd took a drink from his cider, though he struggled not to choke on it. And Arthur rather hoped he would.

"You are a fantastic lady and all, but I could never imagine courting a lady taller than myself," said Mr. Gadd, glancing up to the top of her head before nudging her with his shoulder. "And if I am not mistaken, you are older as well."

"By only a few months," she murmured with a smile as brittle as glass.

"Still," said Mr. Gadd with a mock shudder. "Neither of us would ever dream of such a horrid pairing. Could you imagine yourself with a gentleman shorter than yourself? What lady would fancy such a thing? Ridiculous. What a laugh! "

The gentleman's words were wretched on their own, but the more he spoke, the more his tone held a note of disgust, as though no one with an ounce of sense or decency would disagree with him and any who dared ought to be bound for prison or an asylum.

Heat flickered in Arthur's chest, but before he opened his mouth, Miss Templeton spoke first.

“Yes, Mr. Gadd, I can imagine myself marrying a man shorter than myself,” she said, raising her chin in a slight challenge. “I cannot fathom—nor do I wish to—why anyone would judge another person’s suitability on an arbitrary standard of beauty. What does it matter in the slightest? A good heart is worth far more than aesthetics.”

Arthur’s breath caught. Though it had been clear to him from the beginning that Miss Templeton put little stock in outward appearances and did not judge him for his deficiencies, hearing her vehemently cast aside such a commonplace belief set his heart burning even more. But for more pleasant reasons.

Mr. Gadd frowned, his brows pulling low. “Come, now. Surely, you wish to be attracted to your spouse. Or would you prefer a loveless marriage?”

Miss Templeton’s brow arched, her gaze narrowing on the fellow. “Firstly, attraction is not love nor is love attraction. Though most people do not seem to see the difference, I have seen enough supposed ‘love matches’ fail to know that you can feel desire without any genuine affection—”

“One cannot love without attraction,” said Mr. Gadd.

“Are you attracted to your sister?” she retorted. The gentleman’s expression of horror gave his answer readily enough, and Arthur almost felt like laughing at it.

But with a shake of his head, he scoffed. “That is not the same, and you know it.”

“What I know is that people use the word ‘love’ without understanding it. They attribute it to the foolish ideals set about in plays, novels, and poetry, as though love is something one stumbles in and out of without warning, but that is nothing more than superficial desire. Love—real love—is based on more than appearances. It involves friendship and respect, choice and sacrifice. Even a mother’s love can grow cold if neglected.”

Miss Templeton spoke with a tone that brooked no refusal, her expression daring him to argue with her, and fool that he was, Mr. Gadd seemed not to realize it wasn't a battle he would win. Arthur silently cheered her on as she eviscerated her foe.

"You are saying you would happily marry a man you only consider a chum?" he asked with a tone of utter disbelief.

"I am saying that desire is the ficklest part of a romantic relationship. It comes and goes on a whim, and I've rarely seen 'love at first sight' last after the marriage vows are spoken. The happiest and most loving marriages I've witnessed are ones where attraction came because of the affection they developed for one another, rather than existing on its own."

Mr. Gadd moved as though to argue, but Miss Templeton held up a warning finger and continued.

"Do you think only the empirically beautiful have loving marriages filled with that passion you prize so highly? Or that every homely husband or wife is bound to a partner who feels no stirrings for them? Or that every love is bound to grow cold and die when age robs their bodies of their allure and vitality?" she asked.

Not waiting for his response, she continued, "I will not ever believe such a wretched thing. I have seen it with my own eyes. Most couples do not feel that spark of awareness the moment they meet; they come to know and respect one another, and from that grows affection. If nurtured, it can blossom into a love far stronger and longer-lasting than anything 'love at first sight' can produce."

Drawing in a sharp breath, Miss Templeton straightened. "So, no. I do not care in the slightest what my beau looks like because I know that what is attractive to my eyes may not be what others deem lovely. And what I once considered unappealing can become something achingly beautiful if I do not cling to the arbitrary and ever-

changing standards the world sets. ”

If Arthur had been uncertain in his feelings for the lady, there were no such doubts now. Miss Templeton spoke with such passion, not holding back her feelings in the slightest as she defended her idea of love without flinching. She believed every word of it, and Arthur couldn't help but wonder if she might come to think his unremarkable features and bald head were not merely deficiencies to overlook but breathtaking.

Was it too much to hope?

Mr. Gadd shook his head with a sigh and a slight smile, his gaze turning to the crowds around them. “You are an odd one, Vi.”

Miss Templeton stood there for a long moment, watching him with steely eyes before casting off his arm. Shoving her mug at him, she said, “I must take my leave. I hadn't intended to stay this long, and I should be on my way.”

The anger in her expression was clear for everyone to see, but as the lady turned away (ignoring Mr. Gadd's weak apologies and pleadings for her to stay), Arthur saw another emotion hovering beneath the strong exterior. Her eyes shone with the pain of Mr. Gadd's thoughtless words as they sank into her heart, carving a path of destruction that Arthur knew would linger for some time.

Not even the strongest could bear to hear another laugh so openly about courting them without feeling the sting.

“She is so defensive at times. Such a hot temper,” said Mr. Gadd with a sigh as she strode away with her head held high as though the conversation hadn't bothered her in the slightest.

Arthur stared after the fellow. Had he not seen it? Though he didn't doubt the flare of temper was genuine, it was a clear byproduct of her aching heart. But it was little wonder when the gentleman had so blatantly and rudely labeled her unmarriageable to the vast majority of men, for few in the company were taller than Miss Templeton.

Glancing between the lady and Mr. Gadd, who took the opportunity to stroll off the opposite way, Arthur found himself torn between wanting to chase after the former and to plant a facer in the latter. Mr. Gadd deserved a good setting down, and though Miss Templeton had delivered a firmly worded one, the gentleman required a more thorough lesson about how to treat a lady—even “a sister” deserved more respect.

“Miss Templeton,” he called, following after—though she didn't slow.

*

Of any person she knew, Dr. Vaughn was the only one Violet would tolerate seeing at present, but even his sweetness of temper wasn't what she required. With Osborn's words bouncing about her mind, Violet wanted nothing more than to disappear into her home and nurse the wounds infecting her heart.

It was one thing to cast off the catty remarks of angry ladies, none of whom she knew beyond a nodding acquaintance. It was another thing altogether to hear a friend laugh at the very thought of courting her. Violet had known since the beginning that Osborn had not the slightest inkling of interest in her and hadn't nursed any secret tendre for him, but even the thick walls she'd placed around her heart couldn't withstand his tone, his words, and his expression.

Men wanted dainty ladies. Someone who could gaze adoringly up at them. Who was light enough to scoop up into their arms and carry them about like a doll. No man in his right mind would ever choose a woman who, at best, could be described as “sturdy.”

Just the thought of courting her was so hilarious that Osborn could hardly speak. A jest too good not to share. And Violet Templeton was a sensible creature who knew she possessed no attractions to catch a gentleman's eye. She wouldn't find it offensive or disheartening to hear her deficiencies bandied about so openly. No, she would find it amusing.

Violet rubbed at her forehead as her feet carried her out of the churchyard, but even above the noise of conversation, laughter, and music, she heard Dr. Vaughn calling after her as his footsteps followed. His hand brushed her arm, and though she longed to ignore it, Violet couldn't ignore him.

"Gadd is a fool," said Dr. Vaughn as he came to a stop before her.

"Yes, but even a fool can be right at times," she replied in a tone that was far more bitter than she'd meant. Drawing in a deep breath, Violet pasted on a smile and added, "In truth, I knew he felt that way about me. His delivery left much to be desired, but nothing he said was a surprise or untrue."

"Don't be ridiculous—" The gentleman's words halted, and when she glanced at him, she found Dr. Vaughn's brow scrunched as he fought to find the proper words. "He...doesn't speak... Not every man... He's a fool..."

Despite all the frustration bubbling through her, tenderness caressed her heart with gentle touches as Violet watched him struggle for words. It had been so long since Dr. Vaughn had fought his timidity in her presence, but clearly, the sentiment returned in full force as he strained to find the proper consolations to offer.

"That is kind of you, but you needn't puff up my vanity," she said with a wan smile. Of their own volition, her eyes lowered to the ground, and Violet forced her head up again. "I am not a fragile flower to wilt from a few careless words. I know who I am, and I learned long ago not to look to others to validate my worth."

Just saying the words aloud helped to rejuvenate her. With each, the strength of her convictions flowed through her, bringing with it the memories of a dozen hard-won lessons; each built one atop the other, helping to build the foundation upon which she stood. Violet Templeton was not lacking simply because she was not a gentleman's ideal.

Dr. Vaughn watched her with a gaze that pierced through her walls, delving far deeper into her than she cared to have him see. More and more, he seemed to look beyond the surface she presented, and Violet didn't know whether to be flattered or fearful of such a pointed look .

"I do not require marriage or romance to be content," she said, clinging tightly to that truth. One could be quite happy even when one did not get everything one desired, after all. "Things have been trying of late, but I have done my best to create an enjoyable life rather than waiting for something or someone to appear and be the source of my contentment—and I will continue to do so regardless of what anyone thinks of me or what comes next."

Drawing in a deep breath, Violet allowed that certainty to wrap around her, settling into her heart to help wipe away the last of the sting Osborn's dismissal had left.

"I can manage wonderfully on my own," she continued, "and I do not need the approval of the likes of Osborn Gadd. For all that people think my spinster state pitiable, I am happy, and their opinions will not alter that one jot."

The pain in her heart eased away. Violet Templeton would not allow this to break her, and she refused to be like so many other ladies she knew who judged their success in life by things outside their control. One could not make another love them. One could not guarantee marriage. One could not ensure that children followed, and even if they did arrive, they had minds and wills of their own and would make of their lives what they would.

Violet wasn't content to allow outside factors to dictate her joy in this life. For years, she'd mourned what was not to be, and though those disappointments still lay buried in her heart, they needn't snuff out the light to be found even in a spinster's life.

As she considered that, her muscles relaxed, the smile on her face growing more genuine as she looked at Dr. Vaughn.

"You do not wish to marry?" he asked with a faint frown.

Oh, wasn't that a weighty question? What did wishes have to do with it? Marriage had rejected her long ago, and nothing she could do would alter that fact.

Lifting her head, Violet embraced the only truth she had to offer. "Thank you for your concern, but I assure you, I am and will continue to be happy on my own."

Reaching forward, she squeezed his forearm, hoping it would punctuate the calm that swept through her. With head held high, she turned her feet toward home. She may not be a man's ideal, and the ladies may snub her, but she was Violet Templeton—and she was a woman of worth.

*

Arthur stood where Miss Templeton left him and watched as she strode away. Though he longed to follow and bask in the strength and courage resonating from her very core, his feet refused to move as the meaning in her words settled in his heart like a chunk of ice.

Miss Templeton hadn't minced words. There was no mistaking the meaning, for she spoke clearly and succinctly. Arthur longed to dismiss it as her pride lashing out after receiving such a blow, but he'd seen the truth in her eyes. It glowed there with a certainty that brooked no refusal.

She was quite content to soldier on in her life alone. No need for a beau or a husband.

In all honesty, Arthur didn't know anyone more capable of doing so. Even now, the thought of a life without her pressed down like on him a dresser securing a patient as the surgeon cut away the broken bits. The best chance for survival came from such efforts, yet so many operations only prolonged the death, leaving the patient no better than before.

Despite all the hopes he'd harbored for her, Arthur's heart trembled as he realized the time had come to let them go.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

Months of preparation and planning. Expectations had been set and choices had been made long ago, and thus, one might think it strange to hesitate. Yet so much had altered of late, leaving Violet uncertain what to do. Sitting at her dressing table, she felt a swirl of anticipation and anxiety flood her as she stared at the note, but no matter how many times she reread the words, they remained the same.

Felicity had taken to her bed.

Too many unknowns surrounded the birthing process for there to be confidence in the outcome, yet it was impossible not to feel a frisson of excitement at the prospect that after all this time of waiting, the day had arrived. And Violet ought to know what to do, but the note wasn't written in Felicity's hand—which wasn't surprising, as the lady was occupied with more pressing matters—yet Violet didn't know what to make of it. A single sentence stating the pains had begun, but there was no information beyond that.

Sending word implied she ought to come, didn't it? Yet all the reasons she'd been asked to attend were moot. Dr. Vaughn was quite capable of managing on his own, and Violet couldn't even say with any certainty that Felicity counted her among her friends. Perhaps someone had sent word on Felicity's behalf without realizing her desires had altered. And the note was merely informative. No doubt the Finches were sending word across town, as so many were eagerly awaiting the arrival.

With a sigh, Violet rested her hand and the letter on the table surface and turned her gaze out the window.

Dropping the missive, she rose to her feet. Waiting was a dreadful thing, and it would

be best if she threw herself into her chores. Of course, it did little good. Distractions worked for a few minutes, but Violet's thoughts turned back to Felicity again and again; it was impossible to erase the worry that creased her brow or the frantic fidgeting of her fingers whenever she stood still for more than a heartbeat.

"Miss?" Peggy knocked on the office door but remained firmly in the corridor. Though she tried to hide her nerves, the maid fidgeted and inched further away from the threshold, and Violet held back a self-directed wince.

"Come in, Peggy. I said I do not want people in this room when I am not present. I am here, so do not fret."

"Yes, miss," said the maid with a bob (though without stepping inside). "There's another letter from Farleigh Manor."

The basket Violet had been holding fell to the tabletop, and she hurried over with an outstretched hand. As she broke the seal, Peggy added, "And the Finches' coach is waiting for you."

"It is?" she asked, glancing through the window—only to spy the back end of a carriage.

"The groom said they aren't leaving unless you are inside."

Violet's pulse raced as she considered that and opened the missive to find Felicity's handwriting staring back at her.

Stop being stubborn and come . — F

“Fetch my cloak, Peggy,” said Violet as she glanced about the workroom. Without knowing what the trouble was, she couldn’t say for certain what was required, so she filled a basket with anything that might prove useful. Thankfully, she’d stocked many of her favorite tonics and tisanes for childbirth.

In a trice, Peggy had her bundled up and in the carriage, and Violet considered the letter. Perhaps the trouble wasn’t medical. Dr. Vaughn knew what he was about; surely, he didn’t require her. Unless something truly was amiss, and he needed an assistant.

Violet shook that thought away. Most likely Mr. Finch’s family was plaguing her. Should Felicity require an armed guard to muscle her sister-in-law out of the lying-in chamber, Violet was quite up to the task. Mrs. Annette Finch was a twig compared to Violet Templeton, and it would be easy enough; gentlemen were never comfortable tossing a lady out on her ear, but Violet had no such qualms.

Such thoughts followed her as they made their way to Farleigh Manor. Leaning toward the window, she watched as the house came into view. Trees framed the drive, opening up to reveal the building, which was a patchwork of various styles and colors. Having been expanded and built over generations, Farleigh Manor had an oddly unique appearance, and though Violet adored the vista, she felt like shouting for the driver to move faster.

Springing out before the carriage came to a stop, she hurried to the door, which opened without bidding, and the manservant took her things before ushering her up the sweeping staircase and into his mistress’s lying-in chamber. The adjacent drawing room hosted a wealth of Finches as the family waited together, and in the far corner sat a piano occupied by Mr. Finch, but Violet passed by with barely a glance.

They’d repurposed a sitting room next door for Felicity’s use, with the birthing cot placed in the middle so her attendants could easily move about, and the mother-to-be

was propped up by a mound of pillows, looking as calm and collected as though she was enjoying an afternoon coze.

“There you are,” said Mrs. Finch as Dr. Vaughn popped up from his seat. “We were just speculating if Felicity’s note was adequately provoking.”

Violet’s gaze darted between the people. “Is everything progressing well?”

“Perfectly,” said Felicity, crossing her arms before whispering something to Mrs. Finch, who ushered Dr. Vaughn toward the door. “Go keep Lewis company, else he will force his way back in. Do not allow him to do so until it is time.”

“As you wish,” said Dr. Vaughn with a curt bow before the pair swept out of the room and shut the door behind them, leaving Felicity alone with Violet.

Violet could hardly think what to say; her pulse still raced, and though Felicity motioned her toward an empty seat, it took a few moments before Violet was calm enough to do so.

“I thought something was amiss,” said Violet, setting her basket on the ground beside her. “That Mrs. Finch was being contrary, or Dr. Vaughn required assistance.”

“I am healthy and hale, all things considered, and Lewis’s family is less a problem than the man himself. He frets with each pain, making me more anxious, but Phineas has set himself to distracting and corralling Lewis for now whilst Annette sees to my every whim.”

Felicity paused, her brows rising. “But is that the only reason you think I would wish for you to be in attendance? To distract my family and play nurse to me?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Violet nodded, her gaze drifting away. “You have Dr.

Vaughn now, and with everything that has happened of late, I wasn't entirely certain I was wanted—”

Violet's words were cut short when Felicity drew in a sharp breath and winced, before bending forward with a groan. Leaning closer, Violet took the lady's hand, and Felicity squeezed it with all her might as she struggled against the growing pain .

“You are doing beautifully,” she whispered, rubbing Felicity's hand between hers. Silently, Violet counted off the seconds as the contraction lingered. “Just another moment.”

As Felicity's muscles relaxed once more, she dropped back onto the pillows with a sigh as new beads of sweat gathered at her temple. Violet leaned away, but Felicity's hold was tight and refused to let her put distance between them.

“The note I had Lewis send you wasn't sign enough?” she asked when she had the breath to do so.

“He only wrote that you had taken to your bed, not that you wished me to come.”

Pinching her nose, Felicity gave a halting chuckle. “That man is truly abysmal at expressing himself.” Lowering her hand once more, the lady studied Violet, though she couldn't bear to meet Felicity's gaze. “Believe it or not, Violet Templeton, I wanted you at my side because I wanted your company. I haven't any mother, and though Annette is a dear, she is little more than a stranger. You are my closest friend in Devon.”

Felicity sighed, her expression falling. “I know I was a terrible correspondent, and though you've said you understand why, I feel as though you are angry with me.”

“I am not angry with you,” said Violet with a shake of her head.

“Then why are you keeping me at a distance? Goodness knows that the years apart have made us very different people from back then, but I feel as though we could be as good of friends as ever.”

Most decisions have little impact on one’s life. Choices were an everyday occurrence, after all. And even significant ones often felt unimportant in the moment, leaving one unable to truly comprehend the gravity of that decision until the consequences made themselves known. But Violet recognized this moment for what it was and knew silence would protect her from further pain, allowing her to keep her fears and flaws carefully hidden from view—and leaving Violet isolated and alone .

Yet to place her trust in someone who had already abandoned her? To risk her heart again?

“Do you truly think I will forget you when the baby is born?” asked Felicity.

Violet straightened and yanked her hand away. “Pardon?”

“You mentioned it the last time we spoke.”

Cheeks heating, Violet tried to recall the entire conversation, but it was a jumbled mess of emotions. Her words had come without thinking, drawing forth more confessions than she’d intended. Or remembered.

“Do you truly wish to discuss this at this very moment?” But any hope Violet had that Felicity might drop the subject died when the lady nodded.

“And why not?” replied Felicity, running a hand along her stomach. “This child is determined to take her time.”

Another pain seized hold of her, and Violet did her best to help her friend through it;

her own muscles strained in sympathy as Felicity fought through it and collapsed again, her breaths coming in heavy pants. No wonder her husband was barred from the room. Despite having assisted in other births, it was never easy to stand by whilst others suffered.

“I would say your child is coming quite quickly,” said Violet with a frown. “Especially for a firstborn.”

Felicity slanted a wry smile at her. “The pains began long before I told Lewis. Annette suggested keeping it to ourselves until it progressed to the point where I had to take to my bed. Else he would’ve insisted I do so long before she makes her debut.”

“‘She’? You think it a girl?” asked Violet.

A slight smile graced her lips. “One can never know for certain, but I just feel it is. Lewis does as well.”

“What names—”

But Felicity leveled a narrowed look at her. “Do not think to distract me, Violet Templeton. If you do not wish to discuss it, then tell me. I will take that as my answer. But despite our different situations in life, can we not be friends? ”

“It’s not about our differences,” said Violet, her gaze falling to her lap.

The crossroads stood before her, and Violet had to take a step in one direction or the other. To do nothing would choose for her, forcing Felicity to remain at arm’s length.

Remain silent? Or allow Felicity another chance? That she was even debating the thing only proved just how silly a person Violet Templeton was. How many times

must one suffer the consequences before one learned the lesson? And it wasn't as though Felicity would understand. The explanation sounded petty, even in Violet's own head. There was no point in trying.

Yet no one had ever wished to understand before. Nor cared enough to press the issue. People were content with the friendly distance she maintained, never questioning it or attempting to breach it.

Drawing in a deep breath, Violet forced the words out before she thought better of it. "They say parents don't have favorites. But mine do."

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Felicity's brow furrowed, though whether it was in confusion about the confession itself or its connection to their conversation, Violet couldn't say. It didn't matter. The bandage had been pulled off the wound, and it would do no good to simply seal it over once more. Time to cleanse the putrid flesh beneath.

"I didn't realize it when I was younger because my parents love me—they do," she continued. "They are proud of me and are thrilled to see me succeed. Yet at the end of the day, they prefer my siblings. Mama talks to Isaac about everything, and when he is gone, she waits with bated breath for every scrap of news and is never content until he returns. She rarely seeks out my company."

"But I recall you spending endless hours with your father in his office," said Felicity, her gaze growing unfocused as she cast her thoughts to the past. "You were always with him."

"Not because he asked me there," said Violet with a shake of her head. "He accepted my company, but he never spent time teaching me about medicine. I observed him and pored over his books, and even though he praised my skills, I cannot recall any time he invited me into his world. Many believed me to be his darling daughter because of our mutual love of medicine and overlooked how much he spoiled his youngest."

With a bitter chuckle, Violet added, "If his preference hadn't been clear from all the ribbons and gowns he lavished upon Martha, Papa left me in no doubt of his feelings after his passing. Neither of our dowries was worthy of notice, but hers was much greater than mine."

Violet squeezed her hands together and tried to meet Felicity's eyes, though it was far too difficult. "And the same is true of my friends. They treat me well and enjoy my company, only to forget me the moment someone more worthy of their attention appears. Gentlemen are affectionate and doting until a lady worthy of their love crosses their path. Then I am tossed aside without a second thought."

Though she opened her mouth with a look that said she wished to argue, Felicity softened her expression as she considered that. "Having only just married recently at the age of two and thirty, I am all too aware of how difficult it is to maintain friendships after marriage. Our priorities shift—"

Violet held up a staying hand. "I understand how selfish it sounds. A person's first responsibility is to their spouse and their children. Of course, their family ought to be a priority and the topmost consideration. But it is more than that. Everyone is quite pleased to return my love with tepid affection, and it leaves me feeling like an understudy they tolerate until their leading lady arrives. I would rather surround myself with people like the Gadds, who are amusing but superficial. Then it will not hurt so very much when they decide I am no longer worthy of their time."

Despite having already confessed so much, Violet couldn't bring herself to voice the deepest longing in her heart. One that she'd dismissed long ago, for it did no good to dwell on the impossible. But considering the situation at hand, she couldn't stop the question from resurfacing.

What would it be like to have someone who valued her company above all others? A certain someone with deep blue eyes and arms that fit so snugly around her? Who always kept a calm head when her world was falling apart? Except when it came to defending her honor—

Shoving those thoughts aside, Violet cleared her throat. "For a while, I altered myself to fit their ideal, hoping it might endear me, but it never did. I work myself to the

bone to take care of my mother, and she will always turn to Isaac for conversation or company and will always look to him as though he is the salvation of the family.”

“Oh, Vi,” began Felicity.

“Please do not call me that. I hate that name! It was given to me by people who thought ‘Violet’ too delicate and feminine a name for me.” The reaction was so visceral and instantaneous that Violet spoke without thinking, giving voice to a long-buried sentiment that she’d ignored and dismissed for far too long. “And I do not want pity or false assurances. It is not self-doubt that colors my opinion, nor is it merely a matter of me granting them grace and understanding. I know my family well and how they feel about me.”

“I—” But Felicity strained again, her cheeks flushing as she struggled beneath another pain. Taking her former post, Violet didn’t hesitate to seize hold of Felicity’s hands once more, murmuring the sorts of reassuring words that seemed to help in that moment. They may not be helpful in Violet’s situation, but they certainly did some good for Felicity.

When she relaxed once more, the lady lay in silence for a moment before turning her dark eyes to her friend.

“I wasn’t going to give you false assurances, Violet,” said Felicity, giving the name a gentle emphasis. “Have you considered that you cannot change them and that constantly trying to do so is the source of your discontent? Whilst I will say I cannot imagine treating my children thusly and it saddens me that it has hurt you, your pain comes from fixating on the aspects of your relationships you wish were different, rather than reveling in all the good. They are who they are, and you cannot claim you care for your family whilst growing angry every time they do not behave as you desire.”

“I wouldn’t say I have done that,” said Violet, shifting in her seat.

“You have said again and again that they are kind and loving, and from what you’ve shared, I would hazard a guess that if not for the preferential treatment they granted your brother and sister, you would have no complaints about how your parents treated you?”

Violet’s shoulders tightened. “That is true.”

“Again, I am sorry that they have hurt you, but why are you allowing it to damage what is otherwise a happy relationship? I do not always enjoy my husband’s family, but I realized my misery came from focusing on their flaws at the expense of all the things I adore about them. They are not bad people, nor are they purposefully cruel. They are imperfect and obtuse—as we all can be—and I was too busy wishing they would behave a certain way to fully appreciate the joy they can be.”

Hand still clasping Violet’s, Felicity gave her a squeeze and a faint smile. “I am glad that they do not live in Oakham, I doubt I will ever count them amongst my closest friends, and I will always defend my husband from being the object of their jests, but I look forward to exchanging letters with Annette and to annual visits. And I do not want to see your feelings for your family sour because you are doing what I have done.”

“I know,” whispered Violet, her eyes downturned. “In my heart of hearts, I know that I ought to leave things be. It is not as though I am unloved. I just wish—”

A knock on the door had Violet straightening and turning her eyes away from the intruder, though there were no true outward signs of her distress. Drawing in a deep breath, she gathered her strength as Felicity called for Dr. Vaughn to enter.

“I am certain that Miss Templeton is managing everything perfectly, but your fretful

husband would feel better if I checked as well.” Glancing between the ladies as he stepped toward the birthing cot, Dr. Vaughn paused and frowned. “Miss Templeton? Is something the matter?”

With the discussion still lingering in her thoughts, that question made Violet’s heart burn, and she struggled to force air into her lungs as she held fast to her composure. How had he known? Violet knew how to school her features, and she would’ve staked her reputation that none of her troubles peeked through.

Giving him an inviting smile and nodding for him to go about his work, she said, “We were discussing something serious. That is all.”

Dr. Vaughn didn’t move as he studied her for a moment longer before reluctantly going to Felicity’s bedside. Without bidding, Violet shifted the blankets so he could reach Felicity’s belly. Placing his hands on the womb, he furrowed his brow as he felt about before reaching for her wrist and feeling her pulse.

Turning his eyes to Violet, he asked, “How often?”

“I do not have a clock on hand, so I cannot say for certain,” replied Violet. “Though I would estimate every three minutes or so. The contractions last for around fifty seconds.”

Dr. Vaughn turned his gaze to Felicity. “And the pain?”

“Bearable,” she replied. “Though I fear my dear nurse is taking the brunt, as I have been ruthlessly crushing her hand.”

A faint smile took hold as Violet huffed. “Nonsense.”

Glancing between the pair, Dr. Vaughn nodded. “With the assistance of a rather

brilliant apothecary, I have a few tinctures and lineaments that should provide some relief if needed. I would prefer trying those rather than cupping. It may help with the pain, though I have my doubts that it will do much good in these circumstances.”

“I would prefer not to as well,” said Felicity with a vehement shake of her head.

“As you wish,” said Dr. Vaughn with a nod. “The child is in the proper position, and your pains are coming at regular intervals. Everything is proceeding as it should, and I fear it is merely a matter of waiting now. ”

Digging into his waistcoat, he retrieved a pocket watch and handed it to Violet. “To help you keep time.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you,” she replied, laying it carefully on her lap.

Dr. Vaughn remained there for a moment, his eyes still watching her carefully enough that Violet found herself shifting in her seat—though she couldn’t say if she was more pleased or discomforted by the attention.

The gentleman nodded and turned back to the door. “I will go reassure Mr. Finch, and I will check from time to time, but with Miss Templeton at your side, you are in good hands, Mrs. Finch.”

And with that, he slipped out of the room.

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Violet fiddled with the pocket watch, which bore Dr. Vaughn's initials engraved on the cover. Shifting through her thoughts, she tried to think of something to say that might divert Felicity's attention away from the previous conversation.

But the lady acted quicker.

"I understand your feelings, I do," said Felicity while squeezing Violet's hand. "But I wish you would stop slaving away to save your brother from himself."

"It's not for his sake. The consequences of his actions will not fall only on his head."

"True, but neither is your staying doing any good." Felicity frowned. "The more you save your brother from his poor decisions, the more he will make them."

"I know," said Violet with a heavy sigh. "Which is why I've been searching for a position."

Felicity straightened, her brows rising. "Pardon?"

"I've known for some time that our income will eventually dwindle to nothing. If we were to open a proper apothecary shop, we might stay solvent, but Mama refuses to 'lower ourselves.' As they are determined to carry on as they always have, the only good I can do now is to remove myself from the household. The money can go further without me there—"

"Do you think they will survive without you?" asked Felicity.

Violet sighed. “Likely not, but we are doomed to fail regardless. I can only hope that without me around to manage everything, perhaps my brother and mother will rise to the occasion. And I shan’t be a burden on the household expenses any longer.”

“You are not a burden,” said Felicity with a frown, her expression growing pensive as she considered the situation. “But I do think it wise to secure yourself an income independent of your family.”

Another pain drew their attention, and Violet glanced at the pocket watch, noting the time as she did her best to comfort Felicity through the moment. Reaching for a rag on the table beside her, Violet offered it to the lady as she once more dropped onto the cushions with a sigh.

Felicity groaned as she regained her breath and shifted. “My back aches.”

Carefully, Violet helped the lady to sit up and turn so her legs hung over the side of the cot. Felicity moaned as Violet massaged there, kneading out the knots that had formed.

“That is heavenly. You are a dear,” she sighed. But when she shifted to rise to her feet and pace the room, Felicity gave Violet a speculative look. “I have considered taking on a companion—”

Violet huffed. “Do not think me a fool, Felicity Finch. No such thought crossed your mind until this moment.”

Felicity lifted her chin and responded with a challenging arch of her brow as she rested her hand atop the swell of her stomach. “If you must know, I have been thinking of it quite a lot over the past few weeks.”

“You mean since Dr. Vaughn arrived in Oakham, guaranteeing I would soon be

without an income?" asked Violet with an equally challenging raise of the brow .

Pausing, Felicity opened her mouth, though no answer came out as her eyes turned heavenward as though searching for an answer. With a sigh, she added, "Perhaps."

Violet's throat tightened, and she forced a breath in through her nose. Felicity drew near, her brows twisting together.

"I know that I haven't always been the friend you required, but regardless of the mistakes of the past, I do wish to be your friend now, Violet. It breaks my heart to think you have been struggling alone for so long, and I have the means of assisting you. Please, allow me to do so. Not every friend will abandon you. I promise I will not."

It felt as though a vise were fixed around her chest, squeezing it with each of Felicity's assurances. Violet didn't know what to say. She wasn't certain she could form words.

When she was sure she could speak, she said, "I cannot accept your charity, Felicity. I cannot. But..." Her words faltered, and she forged ahead. "But I cannot tell you how much it touches me to know that you have been thinking of me. That you are concerned about my well-being."

Felicity's arms fell to her sides, her brows pulling together. "You are my friend. Of course, I worry about your future."

Dropping her gaze to the floor, Violet shifted in her seat and tried to think what to say to such a thing. The trouble with being so self-reliant was that everyone believed her incapable of requiring assistance or support. Even her father hadn't bothered with more than a pittance for her dowry, and even that had been deemed unnecessary when she reached spinsterhood and was reabsorbed into the family's coffers.

“That is kind of you, but I need to secure a proper position for myself. I knew long ago I was bound to be a governess,” said Violet, holding back the sigh that longed to be released. “I have the education to do so, and I’ve made inquiries, but I would welcome some assistance in securing a situation.”

“My family requires a governess,” she replied with a smile, placing a hand on her womb .

“And I will gladly accept the position when it is time ,” said Violet, emphasizing the latter part. Drawing in a breath, she let it out, her gaze drifting toward the window. “Besides, I feel it is best if I leave Oakham for now. There is too much history here.”

Felicity watched her with raised brows as she moved back to the cot and sat. “What about Dr. Vaughn?”

Of all the questions or concerns Violet had anticipated, she hadn’t expected that one, and for all that Felicity spoke as though her meaning was clear, it was lost on Violet.

“What about him?”

Perched on the bed, Felicity studied her. “Would you wish to leave him?”

Violet was about to toss out a quick answer, for she didn’t wish to leave her friend any more than she wished to leave her childhood home, but something in Felicity’s tone had her considering the question.

“I have wondered about your relationship,” said Felicity as she settled back into her bed. Violet moved on instinct, helping to adjust the pillows and blankets as the lady quickly added, “You are often seen in each other’s company, he danced with you twice at the assembly, and he calls on you regularly—often with flowers. Despite your troubles, I had thought that something was growing between you.”

Clutching one of the pillows to her chest, Violet stared at her. “Pardon?”

“He’s sweet on you—”

“Please do not say that!” said Violet, casting a look around as though someone might overhear, though she spied no one in the corridor beyond. “He is a good man who has already had his reputation damaged by such speculations, but I give you my word that there is nothing between us but friendship. I will admit that I admire him greatly, but do not assume anything more, Felicity. Please.”

“I know you’ve claimed it was impossible, but you two are often in each other’s company. Spending hours together. Surely, that is significant. ”

Violet’s stomach churned, the bile seeming to burn through her. Not again! Not another rumor for Dr. Vaughn to bear. He didn’t deserve to be the object of speculation. With silent words, she sent a plea heavenward that she could quash it before the lies ran rampant; Violet may not be worthy of divine intervention, but surely, that good man had suffered enough because of her.

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Eavesdropping was beneath a gentleman, and until that moment, Arthur hadn’t thought himself capable of such underhanded behavior. Yet the conversation that had followed him into the corridor had seized his attention so thoroughly that he couldn’t force his feet from the spot as he considered the possibility that Miss Templeton might leave Oakham in pursuit of a position.

For all that being a governess would grant her an income, it was a difficult life. Forever separated from both the gentry and the servants, it left one in a state of unenviable loneliness. To say nothing of the powerlessness of the position if one’s mistress and master were cruel or dishonorable. The income gave the lady a

semblance of freedom, but it was naught but a gilded cage in which she was at the mercy of a world that rarely treated vulnerable people kindly.

His staying here was driving her into that precarious situation. Miss Templeton labeled herself selfish for attempting to force him from town, but what did that say about him that he was doing the same to her? True, it wasn't purposeful at first, but now that he knew the full extent of his actions, would he stay the course?

Forcing his feet to move, Arthur fully intended to leave his hiding place—when the sound of his name forced him to a stop.

“What about Dr. Vaughn?”

Mrs. Finch's question was so pointed, with an insinuation so rife in the tone, that Arthur's cheeks (though they were unseen to both) burned red—doubly so when the lady began discussing his attempts to woo Miss Templeton.

“Please do not say that!”

Five words, and they drove deep into Arthur's heart, filling him with far more pain than any words ought. But he supposed it was as much the sound of horror in her voice as it was the actual statement. Forcing himself away, he strode down the corridor and into the adjacent room that served as the family's waiting room.

Sofas and armchairs had been brought in to provide enough seating for the horde, but in the far corner sat a piano, which occupied Finch's attention. A decently merry tune sprang from the keys, and two twin girls spun about in circles as they cheered for their uncle to play faster. But the notes came to a sudden end when Finch's eyes lifted to spy Arthur.

The gentleman's face grew ashen, and he leapt from the piano seat. The rest of the

family all halted in place, staring at Arthur like statues.

“Is something the matter? Felicity—” asked Finch, rushing to the doorway.

Arthur forced his expression to clear and raised a staying hand. “She is well. I assure you. The baby is in the proper position, and her pains are coming steadily. Mrs. Finch is doing beautifully.”

Finch’s shoulders sagged, and he let out a ragged breath. “Heavens, man. You looked as though she was on death’s door.”

“I apologize. I was thinking of other things,” he replied, shaking his head at himself at having such a slip; one of the first things a doctor learned was to school his expression.

Even without the music, the children returned to their dancing and the others continued with their conversation; Mr. and Mrs. Phinneas Finch enjoyed some tea and cakes with their eldest daughter, whilst the three lads now down from school sat in varying poses of boredom .

But Finch remained standing before Arthur, his gaze turning speculative as he asked, “Does this have anything to do with Miss Templeton?”

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There was no hiding the responding blush, as Arthur was already feeling entirely too discomposd to rein in the emotion.

One of the young girls, who looked to be around six or seven, came to her uncle's side and tugged his frockcoat. "Will you play for us again?"

Finch glanced at Arthur with a look rife with speculation and then shook his head. "Not right now, Ginny. Perhaps Joan will play for you."

That was all the suggestion it took for her to spin about and grab her twin by the hand before accosting their eldest sister with pleas for music. Before Arthur could take his previous seat, Finch nodded toward the far end of the room, where a few armchairs sat forlornly. The pianoforte began playing once more, accompanied by the giggles of the two young girls, which made it easy enough for Arthur and Finch to have a modicum of privacy.

"Now, what has you looking so sour?" asked Finch with a frown.

"I overheard your wife and Miss Templeton speaking," said Arthur as they took their seats. The lady's words rested heavily in his heart and mind, making it impossible for him to think of anything else. And for once, his tongue loosened. "She's leaving Oakham. It seems I am driving her from her home."

"That is sad, to be certain, but you've known that was a possibility for some time," said Finch with a knowing glint in his eye. "Why is it troubling you now?"

"I... She..." Apparently, his loosened tongue still had its limits for Arthur struggled

with what to say. Fighting through it, he settled on, “I like her.”

“Of course you do,” said Finch with a chuckle. “It’s clear to anyone who bothers to look. I’m surprised Miss Templeton was able to convince any of the ladies in town you were enamored with them when your heart is already lost.”

Though the words were meant to comfort or even tease, Arthur’s chest constricted at that thought. Beyond the obligatory discomfort that caused a flush to steal over him and his palms to sweat, the pain of Miss Templeton’s exclamation rang anew through him.

“Please do not say that!”

That had been her reaction when faced with speculation about the pair of them, yet was it any wonder that Miss Templeton’s feelings were so very adamant when she’d declared her disinterest in marriage altogether? Was it Arthur Vaughn who was so abhorrent? Or marriage in general? Did it matter? If the lady did not desire a husband, the question was moot.

Arthur was no stranger to pining from afar. The entirety of his experience with ladies consisted of longing and inaction. Yet it was different with Miss Templeton. Of course, he’d never come to know any of the others so well as he did her, but he felt a profound disparity between those flirtations and this.

Miss Templeton was capable and lovely. She possessed a temper and a sharp tongue at times, but she was kind to the core, and though her behavior of late carried many black marks against her, he couldn’t blame the lady for being out of sorts, as his appearance in town had thrown her world into a tizzy .

Thinking back to their first meeting—before she’d labeled him an enemy to her family’s security—Arthur knew that was the true Miss Templeton.

The lady who offered her cloak without a second thought to provide an injured man with protection from the ground. Clothes were a pricy commodity, and if Arthur hazarded to guess, he would wager she'd ruined all her clothes that day. In fact, he hadn't seen her with a cloak since then, though the weather was chilly enough to warrant one.

The lady who'd thrown herself into assisting him, going so far as to protect her patient from inferior hands. Intelligent and thoughtful, doing as much as she could to ensure that Mr. Evans was provided his best chance to survive, and his family was prepared to aid in his recovery. Giving him medicines without hesitation or demanding compensation.

All without a second thought. And while the onlookers sneered at "Mr." Templeton.

Then there was the lady at the assembly. Who, despite knowing him to be her enemy, did her best to set him at ease amongst the strangers, engaging him in conversation and even offering advice simply because she could not help helping.

And those actions matched those of the Miss Templeton of late, who was not content to merely give over a wealth of medicines in recompense but repaired his medical bag. Who admitted her mistakes openly and did what she could to make amends. Arthur doubted he would've been strong enough to openly apologize to the likes of Miss Bacon.

This incredible woman had captured his heart without desiring his in return.

"I like her for you. You need someone with fire," said Finch, though he stopped short as he scrutinized Arthur. "So, what is the trouble?"

"Beyond the fact that my very existence here is harming her family?" he replied in a dry tone.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Arthur sighed, his shoulders falling. “I’ve spent weeks mulling it over, but no solution has presented itself that allows both myself and the Templetons to remain in Oakham together. I’ve looked at other towns in the area, but it’s impossible to expand into other locations, as they have neither the population nor easy access to a town of Bentmoor’s size. I can forage or grow many of the herbs I require, but there are many ingredients I have to order, and without a market town on hand, my supply costs will rise, making it difficult to remain solvent.”

“But even if you leave, it will not fix matters for the Templetons,” said Finch with a frown. “They are a good family, but we require a proper physician—”

“Can you not leave things be?” asked Arthur, leaning forward. “Though Mr. Templeton is lazy and has a penchant for gouging his patients—something that is so commonplace in London that no one would think twice of what he’s done, I might add—he is a decent physician when he applies himself. And with Miss Templeton managing the apothecary side, Oakham’s access to medicine is a far sight better than many places.”

“But I am not content with a ‘far sight better,’” replied Finch with a frown.

“I think you put too high a store in medicine.”

The gentleman’s brows rose. “So says the doctor.”

Arthur nodded. “I know my profession well, and I know how much of our work is guesswork. At times, it seems as though there is no rhyme or reason to why certain treatments work in one case and not in another. We speak as though we know, but the more I study it, the more I fear we are stumbling around in the dark.”

“That is not comforting to hear when my wife is in a crisis,” said Finch with a bleak frown.

“I do not mean to worry you, but the truth is that I think your fears over the health and safety of the town are perceived more than real,” said Arthur. “If Mr. Templeton were a quack, I would have no qualms running him from town, but between him and his sister, the town is thriving. I do not think you need someone ‘better.’ In many ways, her work is more important than his, and I doubt you will find anyone willing to settle here who would outstrip Miss Templeton’s skill. Few men of my training and skill would deign to settle in such a quiet place.”

With a heavy sigh, Finch said, “I appreciate your opinion on the matter. I do. And perhaps you are right, but I do not want to hand my family over to someone I cannot implicitly trust.”

Arthur sagged back into his seat as his gaze rose to the ceiling, his eyes tracing the plaster scrollwork. “Then lure another physician to Oakham, but I will not be the cause of the Templetons’ ruination. I cannot. I came to establish a life, not to destroy another’s.”

The conversation lapsed, though there was a fair amount of noise in the room to keep it from being silent. The eldest Finch daughter continued to play tune after tune whilst her sisters laughed and danced about before pressing their brothers into service (though the eldest boy was of an age that no amount of pleas could entice him to besmirch his manhood with such foolishness).

“So, you are leaving?” asked Finch, drawing Arthur’s attention back.

“I gave my word I would deliver your child. I will stay a little longer to ensure your wife and the babe are faring well, but I think I ought to return to London. I can work with my father and brother for a bit whilst I look for a new situation.”

Finch replied with a contemplative hum, and Arthur ignored the speculative look the gentleman settled on him.

“You’re going to leave her ?” The question was stated with all the delicate care of one wishing to insinuate whilst having very little faith that his meaning would be understood.

Giving a mirthless chuckle, Arthur shook his head. “You and your wife are a pair of busybodies, determined to muck about in others’ courtships.”

Finch straightened. “Are you two courting?”

Arthur sank lower into his seat. “I just overheard your wife asking Miss Templeton the same thing. It seems that to help her family, she is taking a position as a governess, which will take her far from Oakham.”

“I can think of another position she could take that would serve the same purpose,” said Finch with another of his subtle tones. But to ensure Arthur comprehended the meaning, he added, “A physician could use a wife who knows about medicine.”

“No doubt a physician would welcome such a perfectly suited wife, but not when the lady is opposed to marriage.” Though he tried to hide it, his words were steeped in the disappointment weighing down his heart. Arthur had hoped speaking might provide some solace, but voicing it only allowed that hopelessness to spread throughout him.

“She said that?” asked Finch.

“We were speaking the other day, and she was very adamant about not requiring romance or marriage. She was emphatic about it,” said Arthur with a frown. “And just now she seemed especially appalled at your wife’s speculations about the pair of us.”

“Is it any wonder after all the troubles you’ve had because of people gossiping about

your romantic life?”

Arthur paused and considered that. “I didn’t hear the whole of their conversation, though she might’ve mentioned something of that nature. But it doesn’t negate the fact that I asked her if she ever wished to marry, and she dismissed the idea.”

Finch gave another ponderous sound, his eyes roving the group as he considered the situation, though Arthur didn’t know what there was to consider. The course was laid before him, and whether or not he wished it differently, he would soldier on. Miss Templeton had taught him to be more comfortable around ladies, which meant he might be able to talk to one in the future.

A snide laugh echoed in his thoughts: nothing had truly changed. Miss Templeton was an anomaly, and he was no better at speaking with the fairer sex than before .

“Have you spoken with her about your feelings?” asked Finch.

Even now, heat flowed through him, making it difficult to speak—even to a friend whom he trusted not to reveal this conversation to anyone else. But Finch didn’t seem to require an answer.

“You ought to.” Finch gave him an apologetic smile and added, “Heaven knows I am not a prime example of laying myself bare to my sweetheart, but when it comes to love, I fear it’s the only way to win the day. You cannot hope to secure a lady’s heart if you hide yours.”

“What good would it do if she’s made up her mind about matrimony?” Arthur couldn’t help the bleakness in his tone.

Shifting in his seat, Finch leaned closer to Arthur, his eyes full of empathy. “You knew me before my marriage. Did I seem the slightest bit interested in settling

down?”

“Not at all,” said Arthur, rubbing at his forehead. “You think finding the right person might change Miss Templeton’s mind as it did yours?”

“There was no mind to change.” With a sigh, Finch settled back into his seat as his forehead creased. “Though it’s not fashionable for young men to claim, I wanted to marry and have a family. However, I didn’t think it possible since I was living off a pittance with no hope of providing for them. The only way for me to bear the sadness of that unfulfilled dream was to banish it from my thoughts. To feign indifference. To fixate on it would’ve only made my life a misery.”

Now it was Arthur’s turn to hum as he considered that.

“When I met Felicity, I didn’t think we could be together because I had nothing to offer her. Even after I discovered she was an heiress, I didn’t think myself worthy of her.” Finch’s eyes fell to the ground, and in a quiet voice that Arthur didn’t think he was intended to hear, the gentleman added, “I still am not certain I am.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Finch turned his gaze back to his friend and added, “People often say things they don’t truly mean to hide their vulnerabilities. And you won’t know the full truth until you speak to her. It isn’t easy, but even if she were to reject you, would you feel any worse than you do now?”

Those words settled in Arthur’s mind as he considered that. While there was a vast difference between suspecting a thing and hearing it outright, was there any true risk involved in speaking to her? He already felt wretched, but if there was a possibility that her opinions were based on a misunderstanding, then all hope may not be lost.

“Do not decide for her, Arthur.”

With that final advice, Finch rose to his feet and joined the rest of his family. All that had happened and all that may happen settled into Arthur's thoughts as he considered the advice. He'd be a fool to allow Miss Templeton to slip through his fingers. Yet wouldn't he be a fool to approach a lady who had already stated that she wasn't interested in marriage or him?

Those questions swirled about his mind, churning up the possibilities of what may occur with either decision, and Arthur didn't know how long he sat there before Miss Templeton hurried into the room.

"I think it is time," she said before spinning around and going back to the lying-in chamber with Arthur and Finch fast on her heels.

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Wiping her hands on a rag, Violet stood just beyond Felicity's birthing cot. Mr. Finch was seated beside his wife, his gaze roving over his son's face with an expression of utter awe as he held the babe's hand in his. Now cleaned and swaddled, the child still had the squashed appearance of the newborn, his features pinched and swollen in ways that made it impossible to tell one baby from the next, though all in attendance swore he was the most beautiful ever born.

With Violet's assistance, Felicity was cleaned as well as she could be, and despite the physical toll, her friend's expression glowed with pleasure; her wayward curls had pulled free of her plait, sticking to her temple and neck, but her eyes drank in the child bundled in her arms.

Was there ever a more moving sight? Such utter and unrestrained joy and relief all wrapped together as snugly as the linen tucked around the babe. Violet's heart throbbed in her chest, threatening to beat straight through it. Everything had gone perfectly, and though the babe was now dozing, little George's lungs had been strong when he greeted the world.

"It's magnificent, isn't it?" whispered Dr. Vaughn as he appeared at her side .

Violet nodded, unable to form the words as she watched the trio together. Then, with a silent nod toward the door, the pair slipped away: their work was done. Soon the rest of the Finches flooded the chamber, surrounding the newest member with congratulations and affection.

Standing in the corridor, Violet stopped a passing maid and asked her to prepare the carriage before Dr. Vaughn led her to the drawing room.

“It does make me feel ever so fancy to ask for the carriage to be brought round,” said Violet with a laugh as she collapsed onto the sofa.

“You wish to leave so soon?” asked Dr. Vaughn before glancing at the tea service. “Would you like a cup while you wait?”

“Yes, and yes,” she replied. “My work is completed. Though the excitement of meeting her son has reinvigorated Felicity, it is only temporary. Soon, she will collapse and sleep for a good long while. The nursemaid is on hand if they require any assistance, and it is getting rather late.”

Dr. Vaughn nodded as he readied a cup. Violet doubted it was fresh, but she didn’t care in the slightest, as her throat was parched. She watched as the gentleman moved through the steps with as much ease and skill as a highborn society matron.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a man make me a cup of tea,” she mused.

“It sounds as if those men weren’t worth knowing,” said Dr. Vaughn with his characteristic softness, though the words themselves were far more biting than she expected of him.

With a smile, Violet accepted the cup. “Perhaps not.”

Settling into the sofa, Dr. Vaughn sat beside her as they enjoyed their drinks. Even if the servants hurried, it would be some time before the carriage and horses were ready, and now that she was seated, exhaustion settled into her bones. Glancing at the window, she saw that it was black as pitch outside, though she didn’t think it was quite bedtime yet .

Dr. Vaughn’s arm brushed hers as he reached for the biscuits, setting a pair on each of their saucers, and Violet felt a calm settle over her like a blanket. Uncertainty lay

just beyond these walls, yet here and now, she was at peace. It was as though that stalwart soul of his simply radiated the sentiment, allowing her to revel in the quiet that he brought to her world.

There were no troubles or difficulties ahead. Simply peace.

*

Perched on the edge of the seat, Arthur tried to relax into the sofa after placing the biscuits on Miss Templeton's saucer, but his muscles refused to cooperate. There wasn't a better time than now, and the carriage would be ready before they knew it.

"I love seeing a new family together," he said, casting his mind back to the image in the adjacent room. "So much happiness in a moment. Makes me rather jealous. It's the reason I wanted to settle in the country."

"Is it?" asked Miss Templeton, her gaze turning from her refreshments. "I may be wrong, but I had thought it possible to have a family in London."

There was a slight tease in her tone, and Arthur smiled, though his stomach remained twisted in knots. The opportunity had been laid out for him, so there was no reason to retreat.

"True," he replied. "But the city is an entirely different way of living, and for a long time I have dreamt of something better than living amongst chaos and competition, where everything centers on prestige and position."

"You make the country sound like a utopia, but I warn you that we have plenty of pomp and circumstance, where people obsess over that 'prestige and position' you do not care for," she said, setting down her cup.

“Not to the same degree,” he said, his brow furrowing as he tried to think how to describe it. “I was raised in the heart of it, where the focus of one’s life is grand accomplishments and making a name for oneself. Except for me and my youngest brother, the rest of the family is intent on building up a legacy for the sake of having a legacy. Their joy comes from acclaim, and that seems to me a hollow way to live.”

Miss Templeton shifted in her seat, turning her full attention on him. “And what is it that you wish for your life?”

A smile drew up the corner of his lips as Arthur’s mind filled with the image. “A cottage. With a garden. Before seeing yours, my dreams had been far more simplistic in that regard, but now, I imagine my home looking something like the one you’ve cultivated. Green all around. A wife and a large family with more children than we have space for, but it matters little because we spend our days exploring the countryside roundabout. And in the evenings, we read aloud in front of the fireplace.”

For all that the image burned brightly in his mind, Arthur wished he had the words to describe it. Though he knew there was an idyllic tint to the dream that was impossible to attain in this flawed world, it was less about the details as much as it was about the feel of the thing. So, he focused on that.

“I want a quiet life. Where I can do good with my skills but still focus on my family.” He shifted in place and cleared his throat as he tried to understand Miss Templeton’s silence. “No doubt it seems silly and simplistic, but I’ve already spent so many years watching my family chase after prestige, and I don’t think it’s made them any happier than the plain life of a country physician.”

Hazarding a look at Miss Templeton, Arthur found her watching him with a soft expression that the worried parts of his mind wanted to label as pitying, but the gentle glimmer in her gaze hinted at some warmer sentiment.

“I don’t think that sounds silly at all, Dr. Vaughn,” she murmured. “It sounds splendid.”

A jolt of joy shot through him, and Arthur fought to keep his voice calm. “You said not long ago that you didn’t need marriage to be happy.”

Miss Templeton straightened. “I did?”

“I recall it quite clearly. ”

With a huff of a laugh, she shook her head. “That sounds familiar. But yes, I do not need marriage to be happy, but then, matrimony is contingent on more than my own choices, and one shouldn’t require something that is beyond one’s control to be happy. Thus, I do not need it. But that doesn’t mean I do not want it.”

Arthur’s breath caught as he stared at her. “Then, you wish to marry? I asked you that question not long ago, and you dismissed the thought offhand.”

Miss Templeton’s smile grew wan. “It is difficult to remain happy when we fixate on that which we do not have, so I’ve worked hard to bury those desires. It is easier that way, else I would become like the other spinsters, whose entire life is defined by that loss. Every conversation and every thought revolves around what they long to have but cannot. I do not want to be like that.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she let the words out slowly, as though pulling them out from the deepest recesses of her heart. “But yes, I do want to marry. Very much so.”

And then, in a rush of words, she added, “Please do not breathe a word to anyone about my feelings. People already pity me for being a spinster. Should I ever admit that I yearn for a loving marriage, it would only make people pity me all the more.”

Pausing, Miss Templeton amended that with a dry tone, “Or they’d throw themselves into finding me a husband, and it is impossible to hold onto my joy when I am being tossed at hapless men, only to be rejected again and again. It is impossible to maintain one’s equilibrium in the face of disappointment. Better to embrace my life as it is. So, please do not breathe a word to anyone.”

“I promise. But surely, you cannot give up hope—”

Huffing, Miss Templeton shook her head. “Oh, believe me, Dr. Vaughn. I held out hope far longer than I ought to have. Gentlemen do not want a wife like me.”

“Rubbish,” spat Arthur, his brows pulling low .

But she held up a staying hand. “Please do not pander to me. I have had so many friends and family tell me over the years that I am lovely and all that nonsense, but it doesn’t alter the fact that I am too tall for any man to desire.”

“Don’t listen to that fool, Gadd,” said Arthur with a scowl. “From the moment I met him, I knew he was a half-wit. You are a perfect size.”

Miss Templeton laughed, her eyes alighting with pleasure as she gazed at him. “You are kind.”

“Kind nothing. You are an incredible woman. Intelligent and more capable than anyone I know. Thoughtful and generous—willing to take the very clothes off your back to help another. You make me feel comfortable and accepted as no one else ever has. And if all that was not enough, you are beautiful, with a smile that warms me to my core and the finest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

Her gaze fell away as he spoke, and as the words poured forth, her cheeks reddened, though her smile grew. That little sign of pleasure spurred him on, and Arthur drew in

a deep breath, infusing his words with all the strength of his conviction.

“Any man with an ounce of sense would be lucky to have you as his wife.”

Miss Templeton stiffened, and her eyes snapped to his, her brows drawing tight together as she stared at him. A heaviness gathered in the air around them, whispering to Arthur that now was the time. He’d made his feelings known, and only one step remained.

That wretched tongue of his wanted to flee, but he held firm, demanding it obey him. He was master here, and he would not allow it to ruin things—

A knock on the door drew their attention, and the maid entered with a bob. “The carriage is ready for you, madam.”

“My thanks, Jane. I will be down shortly.” Miss Templeton rose to her feet, and Arthur’s pulse stuttered.

The moment was slipping away .

Grabbing her by the hand before she turned away, he blurted, “Would you join me on a picnic tomorrow? On our bridge?”

Miss Templeton turned back to look at him with a faint smile on her lips. “Of course.”

“You would?”

“You needn’t sound so surprised, Dr. Vaughn.” The lady’s tone held a hint of a laugh. “If you haven’t noticed of late, I enjoy your company and am always glad for a reason to secure it.”

Were there sweeter words? Arthur couldn't think of any as he still held her hand in his. But his own fell short as he tried to think of how to convey the pleasure that coursed through him, weaving into his bones and sinew until he felt as though he were an entirely new man. Lifting her hand to his lips, Arthur pressed a kiss to her knuckles, his gaze holding hers as she blushed all the more.

"Are you available at one?" he whispered.

"Yes."

"Then until tomorrow, Miss Templeton."

Drawing in a deep breath, Violet reveled in the scent of the summer air that wafted through the carriage window and the chill that helped to cool her cheeks. With Dr. Vaughn's words still coursing through her, there was no helping the heat that consumed her.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the handkerchief. Despite having taken to carrying it around at all times, she'd still forgotten to return it to him. It was nearly black in the carriage with only faint moonlight coming through the windows, but she didn't need a lamp to see the image of his monogram. Her fingers had traced over the threads again and again, memorizing the pattern .

How many times had she heard ladies discuss in awed tones the idea of a gentleman reciting poetry? Lines about love and beauty were the romantic ideal—the pinnacle of every young lady's fantasy. However, Violet couldn't think of anything more wonderful than hearing a gentleman pour out his soul, describing with such longing his dreams for a family.

Dr. Vaughn was no orator. He never would be. Yet his heart had been in every syllable as he described a paradise, his passion lending it more strength than if he possessed Shakespeare's talent with words. But then, Dr. Vaughn certainly knew how to craft a compliment. His words played through her mind, and she closed her eyes, lifting her hand and pressing the place he'd kissed to her cheek.

She jerked her hand down, her eyes popping open.

No.

That was dangerous ground. Whether or not the feel of his lips made her pulse quicken and her skin flush, it mattered little. Violet didn't love Arthur Vaughn. She couldn't. Refusing to examine the palpitations that had taken hold of her heart, she shoved those thoughts and feelings deep into the darkness. Never to be seen again. Violet was mistress of her heart, and she wouldn't allow it to dictate to her anymore.

"Any man with an ounce of sense would be lucky to have you as his wife."

A compliment and a cut all wrapped into one. How many times would she build castles in the sky only to have the gentleman take a pickaxe to it with that little phrase? They were the words friends and family slathered on her whenever her heart suffered another wound, plying her with that bitter salve as they assured her she was a prize for any man. Some other man, that is.

Friendship was one thing. Love was another. And no amount of honeyed words would alter that. Or the fact that Violet hadn't the means to provide Dr. Vaughn with his dream. At her age, a large family was not in her future .

Drawing in a sharp breath, she forced the air out, shoving back those insidious thoughts that threatened to upend her equilibrium. How many times must she repeat this heartache before she learned? How many friendships needed to crumble beneath

her expectations before she accepted she was a chum and not a sweetheart?

Felicity's words came back to her, swooping in with startling clarity. Would she allow herself to poison a perfectly good friendship simply because Dr. Vaughn couldn't meet her romantic ideals?

Violet tucked the handkerchief back in her pocket. Best return it tomorrow during their picnic. Dr. Vaughn needed his handkerchief, and Violet needed to get her head out of the clouds and stop hauling it about like some silly love token.

Dr. Vaughn was her friend. That was a blessing in and of itself. What better friend could she ask for than him? He deserved to see his dream fulfilled, and as his friend, Violet would do everything she could to help him along.

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A small patch of blue hung above Arthur's head, and he focused on it rather than the charcoal smudge of clouds that loomed on the horizon. The weather would hold out. It had to. A jaunty tune entered his thoughts, and his footsteps fell in time with the rhythm. It was only with the greatest show of self-restraint that he didn't simply start dancing on the spot.

But he couldn't stop grinning like a fool.

With the bout of influenza now receding and the Finches' baby delivered, Arthur's day was free. Thankfully. Though he'd never thought himself impetuous, he'd set a time for the picnic without giving a thought to his responsibilities. For once, fate was kind and aligned with his plans.

The picnic basket bounced against his leg as he strolled down the lane. Thank goodness his maid had packed it thick with straw for it was so laden down with food that Arthur couldn't keep it from swinging haphazardly, and he was liable to break the bottles of lemonade. There was enough to feed a family for a week, but as he didn't know what Miss Templeton preferred, he didn't feel safe leaving anything out, and the entirety of his pantry was stuffed inside .

Arthur frowned at the posy of wildflowers in his right hand. While there was heather aplenty to be found, he'd not had time to trek out to the areas where they bloomed, and the readily available offerings were rather lacking. But there wasn't time enough to send to Bentmoor for flowers, and Arthur had learned his lesson—no more pilfering from others' gardens. With leggy stems and scraggly blossoms, this posy was pitiful compared to his previous bouquets, and he couldn't help but mourn the loss. Though the wildflowers would have to do.

Pausing, he tried to shift the knapsack on his back without using his hands (which were both occupied), but it continued to dig into his right shoulder. With a shrug to himself, he continued on his journey. It wasn't far to the Templetons' cottage, and he wasn't going to abandon the blanket contained within. For all that the weather was somewhat cooperative, there was a bite to the air, and Arthur wouldn't risk a chill cutting their outing short.

In quick succession, he went through his list of items again, ensuring that he had everything, and as the Templetons' home came into view, Arthur steeled himself with a deep breath. The familiar feeling that always left his tongue uncooperative surged to the surface. This wasn't some mere flirtation or casual meeting. He was paying a call on his sweetheart.

Or at least Arthur thought of her thusly. They were going on an outing together alone, so surely, that earned her that all-important distinction.

That thought distracted him for only a heartbeat before reality snapped back into place. With Arthur's heart well and truly besotted, far more was at stake now, yet nothing was set in stone. Despite his success of late, he was just as likely to ruin it all, and that knowledge settled deep into his wayward tongue.

Forcing in a breath, he stood on the doorstep and closed his eyes. She'd accepted his invitation and the kiss on her hand: she wasn't apathetic. And this was Miss Templeton. His friend. Not some mysterious creature that he'd watched from afar. Arthur knew her. Knew how easy conversation could be between them .

Yes, he could do this.

Rapping his knuckles against the door, he waited for Peggy to answer and usher him in. His breath caught as he crossed the parlor's threshold, his eyes landing on Miss Templeton as she rose to greet him. And then the air fled him in a sharp exhale when

Miss Diana Gadd stood as well.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Vaughn,” said Miss Templeton with a broad smile that set his mind at ease once more, though there was a strain in her eyes that had his shoulders tightening. “I was speaking with Miss Gadd and mentioned our picnic, and I thought it would be wonderful to invite her along. I hope you do not mind.”

Arthur’s mind ground to a halt as he stared at the two ladies, both of whom were dressed to venture out into nature and gazing at him expectantly.

That was when he realized a very important piece he’d forgotten. A chaperone. Despite a lifetime in London, the relaxed country manners had lulled him into complacency. Though he could equally blame that on his lack of courting experience; despite knowing that a lady required a chaperone when venturing out with a gentleman, Arthur had never dealt with such matters before.

Yet he’d never heard of an unmarried lady performing the task unless she was of mature years.

And he’d spied Mr. Gadd driving about with Miss Giles alone in his gig. Perhaps a picnic required a chaperone? If that were so, Arthur vowed to learn to drive starting tomorrow morning.

With those questions bouncing about his head, Arthur missed the discussion passing between the ladies and forced himself to focus on the task at hand.

“Shall we go?” he asked, glancing between the pair.

Miss Templeton placed a hand to her temple. “I fear I am feeling a little poorly.”

Arthur abandoned the basket on the ground and shoved the bouquet into her hand

before taking her other wrist in his hand, measuring her pulse as he felt Miss Templeton's forehead. Though quickened, her heartbeat was steady enough, and there was no sign of fever.

"Have you been coughing? Or any chills?" he asked, rattling off the more common warning signs of the influenza that had been plaguing the village.

"No," said Miss Templeton, gently nudging his hands away with an apologetic grimace. "I fear after the exhausting day we had yesterday, I've developed a bit of a megrim. I shouldn't go out, lest it worsen."

"Yes, of course," said Arthur with a nod. "Best to sequester yourself in your bedchamber. Pull the curtains tight and sit with a hot rag on your forehead. If needed, take a tisane with willow bark and pennyroyal..."

A hint of a smile tugged at Miss Templeton's lips as he spoke, and Arthur paused.

"I suppose I needn't tell you how to make a tisane for megrims," he replied with a wry grin. "But you must take care of yourself. If you are feeling better in the next day or two, we can try again."

Miss Templeton shook her head, glancing between the pair. "Nonsense, there is no reason you two ought to cancel. I am certain you will have a grand time together."

Arthur's brows twisted together, and he glanced at Miss Gadd, who looked equally perplexed.

"That is kind of you, but I would prefer to wait for you," he said.

"Don't be silly," she said, herding them to the door and handing Miss Gadd her bouquet. Arthur's eyes followed the flowers, his brows tightening even more.

“Might I have a word, Miss Templeton?” he asked.

The lady glanced between him and Miss Gadd with a smile too strained to be genuine. “I don’t think you two should waste your time here. The weather might change at any moment. ”

But Arthur stepped aside and drew her along. In a low voice, he whispered, “What is happening? I thought we were to picnic together. Alone.”

Miss Templeton nodded and waved a vague hand about as though searching for her words. “Yes, but I cannot come, and it would be a shame to waste the day. I am certain you would enjoy it more if Miss Gadd accompanied you.”

“I am certain I would not.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Miss Templeton sighed. “I know you are uncomfortable around strangers, but if you give her a chance, I promise you will adore her company. Yes, she is a little silly at times, but it is only because she is still young and needs a little more time to mature. She is happy, optimistic, and very good with people. I think she could be a boon to you.”

Arthur stared at her, and the lady swallowed deeply before adding, “She would make a good wife.”

All the lightness of his spirit came crashing down, collapsing atop him as though the very roof above him had crumbled. He stared at Miss Templeton, though she did her utmost to avoid his eyes as she continued to rattle off Miss Gadd’s good qualities.

Arthur couldn’t speak. He couldn’t think what to say, even if he could. His tongue was no longer the problem; his heart crumpled, taking with it all sense. Not that Miss Templeton allowed him to interject as she shepherded the pair through the front door

with determination. Standing on the doorstep (after the picnic basket mysteriously appeared in his hand), Arthur stared at Miss Gadd, who held Miss Templeton's bouquet.

Miss Templeton didn't want him. Arthur's lungs froze in place, refusing to draw in breath as the truth of that statement settled hard on his shoulders, making them bow beneath the weight. His mind replayed their conversation again and again, speeding through it all as time stretched around him, and he couldn't see how there was any mistaking his intention.

He'd kissed her hand. Had asked her to join him on an outing. Had spoken of marriage. Had complimented her so brashly—that alone ought to have been enough to make his feelings clear.

And after all that, Miss Templeton threw her friend in his path.

Miss Gadd cleared her throat. "I suppose we ought to be on our way. Else we'll waste the afternoon away."

Arthur's gaze focused on the lady before him, but he couldn't think of what to say. He hadn't any words.

Sliding the hive knife between the slabs of honeycomb, Violet worked it free from the skep. The bees buzzed lazily around her, and the scent of smoke hung heavily in the air as she pulled the last of the comb free and set to cleaning the interior walls. Setting the last of the comb into the basket, she rose to her feet and returned the now empty skep to its alcove in the wall.

And she did not think about Dr. Vaughn and Miss Gadd.

With a rake in hand, she scattered the burn pile that had been used to subdue the bees before pouring water atop. Grabbing the baskets in hand, she pushed back the veil that covered her straw hat and carried her load into the house.

All while not thinking about the pair of them spending the day together.

Bringing the basket into the workroom, Violet placed the honeycomb in an empty pot. Several others held their golden bounty, ready to be strained and processed into honey and beeswax, though that was work for another day. Setting her hat aside, she ticked that chore from her mental list and considered the rest.

No doubt Dr. Vaughn was fumbling and awkward at first, but Diana was such a talkative soul and lacked Miss Bacon's assertiveness that set the fellow's nerves on edge, so he would be at ease in no time. Violet's first conversation with him hadn't been all ease and amusement, after all. Diana was a good sort, and she'd be patient with his reticent manners.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Violet moved to the workbench and began trimming the stems of the herbs she'd harvested that morning. August was a busy time, and she'd ensured all her drying hooks were empty and ready to be used, though it was likely unnecessary, as this year's crop was far smaller than usual.

A yawn tugged at her mouth, forcing it wide open despite her protests, and she rubbed at her forehead. The megrim had been an excuse yesterday, and it seemed as though fate was going to punish her for that little fib by cursing her with one today. But that was to be expected when her body refused to sleep.

Had they gone to the bridge? Dr. Vaughn had said that was his plan, but he'd called it "our" bridge, and Violet couldn't help but think of it in those terms. Which was ridiculous, as friends did not share such things. That sort of thing was reserved for sweethearts.

Regardless, she hoped it had been enjoyable. Dr. Vaughn deserved to have his dream fulfilled, and though she didn't know if Diana were a perfect match for him, the lady would suit. A physician needed a wife who was skilled with social politics (especially when he struggled with them), and Diana had a sizable dowry to help them get established.

A knock sounded at the workroom door, and Violet called out.

Peggy poked her head through and said, "Miss Gadd to see you, miss."

Violet's ribs constricted, but she smiled and nodded. "Please, come in."

Then, to carry to her friend, she called, "I do hope you don't mind if I get some work done. I've been harvesting all day, and I have so many things that need tending."

Sweeping in like the whirlwind she was, Diana hardly paused long enough to give her friend a buss on the cheek in greeting before she stood at Violet's worktable, a scowl pulling at her features. "Do whatever you need to do—as long as you tell me why you none-too-subtly forced me on an excursion with Dr. Vaughn yesterday."

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Violet turned her gaze to the bundle of lavender in her hand and focused on tying it up with twine. “I thought you two might suit.”

Lifting it, she hung the herb on the hook and set her sights on the next bundle, picking up the shears to clean off the stems.

“I assure you we do not,” said Diana with a vehement shake of her head. “That was the most awkward and unfortunate afternoon I’ve ever been made to suffer. Good heavens, the man hardly spoke two words the entire time. I know you enjoy his company, and you are welcome to him, but I shan’t be attempting it again on my own.”

Violet huffed and shook her head. “That’s just how he is at first. Dr. Vaughn requires time before he is comfortable around others, and you shouldn’t dismiss him until you give him a proper chance.”

“Believe me, I have no interest in attempting it again. I don’t know why he bothered with the picnic when it was clear he didn’t wish to be there. It was almost as though he had no interest in anything that didn’t include you,” said Diana with a knowing tone .

“Don’t you start as well,” replied Violet with a frown. “We’ve discussed this. My history—”

“Yes, I know all about your history,” said Diana, her brows pulling together. “I can’t help but wonder if—”

“No,” said Violet, punctuating the word by pointing sharply with the shears. “Do not start with that. You simply must give him a chance. Dr. Vaughn is such a dear, and I think you might suit each other.”

“Whether or not that is true is immaterial,” said Diana, picking up a stem of chamomile and taking a sniff before quickly tossing the flower back onto the pile. “Dr. Vaughn is leaving Oakham for London.”

Violet stiffened, her eyes widening as she stared at her friend. “Pardon?”

“The only thing he managed to say during our outing was at the end,” she said with an airy wave. “He thanked me for my time and apologized that we wouldn’t be able to do so again, as he’s leaving for London.”

Gaping, Violet set down her tools and flowers and clutched the edge of the table. “That cannot be.”

“He didn’t elaborate beyond that, but he was quite firm about his leaving,” said Diana as she examined the pile of chamomile.

A sharp breath filled her lungs, and Violet straightened as she stared at her friend. Clearly, Diana believed him, and she couldn’t imagine Dr. Vaughn saying such a thing if it wasn’t true.

That fool!

Standing amidst the chaos that was his parlor, Arthur studied the crates surrounding him. Thankfully, he hadn’t gathered many new possessions in the two and a half months since arriving and wouldn’t need a great many things sent to London, but

he'd brought mounds of books and medical equipment that all needed to be carefully packed back in straw before they could be carted back.

He rubbed his forehead as he examined the mess. It was the way of such things that everything grew messier before they righted themselves in the end, but when trapped in the disorder, it was difficult to see one's way past it. Hands on his hips, Arthur examined the bottles and glassware that were key to making medicines. In truth, he needn't pack it all away immediately, but now that the plan was set in motion, there was no need to put it off. None of this was needed in the interim.

A sharp rap on the door drew his attention, and Arthur moved toward it to find Miss Templeton on his doorstep. But before he could ask her what she was doing here, the lady pushed past him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I think I should be asking that question," said Arthur with a frown. "My knowledge of country manners may be lacking, but I doubt it is acceptable even here for a lady to call on a bachelor. It isn't as though you require a physician, and we do not share any professional overlap any longer to excuse such behavior."

"I do not care in the slightest," she said with a frown. "What is this about you leaving Oakham?"

"How are you surprised by this?" Arthur asked with a sigh as he perched on the back of his sofa.

"But this is your dream." The lady looked so genuinely angry and desperate, her eyes pleading with him to change his mind and readily accept her position.

"I am going to remain for a fortnight or so, to ensure Mrs. Finch and her babe are

thriving, but need I remind you that your brother and I cannot both practice medicine here?" asked Arthur with a raised eyebrow. "You were quite insistent about it for a long time, and though I have been foolishly optimistic on that score, I now realize you are correct. "

Miss Templeton scowled at that. "Isaac has chosen his path, and if not you, then someone else will settle here and run him out of business. But if you remain at least something good will come from it. I want you to be happy. To have your dream—"

"You think I could be happy at your expense?" he asked, folding his arms.

The lady had the gall to scoff at that. "Don't be a fool. I always knew being a governess would be my path eventually, so it is nothing to mourn. With Felicity's assistance, I am bound to find a good position somewhere, so there is no need to take me into account. I will not allow you to surrender your dream and return to London!"

"Dream?" The word came out louder than he meant, but Arthur couldn't hold back the temper that was now rising inside him. Disappointments and heartache surfaced, blending until he couldn't say what he felt beyond exhaustion. The last of his composure slipped from his grasp, leaving him unable to consider the brashness of his actions and freeing his tongue entirely.

"What happiness do you think I could find here in Oakham? Do you think I could enjoy life here, surrounded by the memory of your rejection? To be forever tormented by having that dream within my grasp—only to have the lady I love choose servitude rather than accept my suit?"

Miss Templeton stared at him, and Arthur let out a frustrated breath, allowing it all to seep away from him. Though there was a kernel of truth in that final question, he knew he had no reason to be angry. Miss Templeton was free to shape her life as she saw fit, and though he couldn't erase the pain accompanying that choice, there was no

reason for his temper.

Yet his heart throbbed at that realization. For the first time in his life, a lady had crossed his path who enjoyed his company and made him feel at ease, and Miss Templeton preferred toiling away as a governess. What was so very wrong with him? Was he entirely unlovable? Arthur didn't think his appearance had anything to do with the situation, but old wounds pulsed in time with his heartbeat, making their insidious selves known.

Forcing his focus away from her, Arthur stood once more and set about his work, forcing the glass into the piles of straw with more haste than care. And with it, he tried to take strength from what Miss Templeton had shared at the Finches': stuff his hopes deep down and bury them out of sight so they couldn't plague him any longer.

*

Dr. Vaughn had been correct. Being in his home was unacceptable, yet Violet couldn't feel even a niggling of apprehension standing there—or from seeing the gentleman standing there without his frockcoat, his sleeves rolled up to display his forearms. But then, she couldn't feel anything at all in that moment. The gentleman returned to his work, and she stood there mute and staring as Dr. Vaughn seemed not to realize that the very ground beneath her feet was trembling.

“Pardon?” she whispered, though her throat was so dry and her muscles so weak that she barely formed the word. But even when she repeated herself, Dr. Vaughn did not look in her direction.

“The lady you love?” she said, forcing the question out loud enough for him to hear.

Violet was certain her ears were in perfect working order, yet she could not believe they'd heard him properly. Surely, not. A slip of the tongue perhaps? Had Dr.

Vaughn's wits fled him? Or was he feverish, finally succumbing to the influenza in town? Any number of possibilities lurked in her mind, insistent that they were the clear answer to her question.

Violet stood silent, staring at his back, willing him to answer, but the gentleman only gave a vague grunt. The glassware he was packing clattered ominously as he shoved it into the straw.

Coming closer, she grabbed his arm and repeated, "The lady you love? "

Dr. Vaughn's gaze fell to her touch, his expression falling as his muscles sagged.

"What do you mean, 'love'?" she asked, her fingers gripping his forearm tightly. "Surely, you do not mean 'love.' Or the lady you speak of is someone else? You cannot mean you love me."

He drew in a sharp breath, his features hardening. "Do not mock me, Miss Templeton. You are free to reject my suit, but you needn't laugh—"

"I am not laughing!" she said with a vehement shake of her head.

But the gentleman didn't seem to hear her and continued, "I know it was foolish of me to have presumed, but it seems I am bound to be forever a fool when it comes to love."

Violet's eyes widened. "You keep using that word, but there must be a mistake. You cannot love me."

Dr. Vaughn's blue eyes met her gaze, a frown marring his features. "Because I am not good enough? What is it about me that is so egregious?"

“You cannot be in earnest,” she said with another sharp shake of her head. “I am not the sort of woman a man loves.”

Stiffening, Dr. Vaughn’s head jerked back, his eyes boring into her with an expression of utter shock, studying every facet of her expression. Violet squirmed beneath his regard, longing to look away, but she was caught in his gaze, unable to move. The silence dragged out, and with each passing second, his features softened, his muscles slackening as his brow furrowed.

“You honestly believe that?” he asked. “After everything I have done and said—”

She pulled away from him, stepping back as she wrapped her arms around her middle. “You said any man would be lucky to have me. Men say such things when they are placating bruised feelings, but all it means is that some other man would be lucky to have me.”

Dr. Vaughn’s frown grew more pronounced. “Since when?”

“Always,” she said, throwing out her arms as though to take in the entire span of the world. “You saw with your own eyes how hard Mr. Gadd laughed at the thought of courting me. Men act sweet and affectionate, but in truth, they always think I am the perfect wife for someone else . Never them. No one ever wants me. They want someone delicate and lovely. A social butterfly who is charming and witty and demure.”

Despite having said such things before, the pain of saying them at this moment made Violet’s heart split open, bringing with it all the pain of her past. All the effort she’d made to keep those feelings buried was swept away, allowing them to surge to the surface in a wave of anguish.

And she desperately longed to hide away from it all.

*

Demure she was not. Miss Templeton was like one of the fabled Amazonian warriors or how the Greeks and Romans imagined Artemis and Diana, the great goddesses of the hunt. Stately and regal. A fighter. Someone with steel woven into her very core. The lady stood where she ought not to be, facing a conversation that Arthur had fled from so many times.

Yet there was such fragility in her gaze. Not daring to hope yet unwilling to back away.

Saints above, Miss Templeton truly believed her words. Doubt shone in her gaze, as though fully expecting him to laugh like that fool, Gadd. And as he considered the gentleman's behavior anew, Arthur's heartache receded, allowing him to see the situation as he hadn't whilst in the midst of it.

Had she not understood the intent of their picnic? Despite how clear he thought he'd been, did she even now not comprehend the depth of his feelings for her? Arthur didn't need to ask. The truth was stamped clearly on her face. For all that he had attempted to distinguish his behavior from that of men like Mr. Gadd, he had fallen short. Unwittingly so, but that did not alter the situation standing before him.

The only path ahead was verbal, which was far from Arthur's strong suit, and his usual fears surged to the forefront—but then, he'd already declared his feelings, and unless he wished to lie and retract them, there wasn't any reason to hide any longer—and there was every reason to be clear.

“It seems subtlety and nuance have done us no favors, Miss Templeton, so I will be blunt,” he said, drawing himself up to face her fully. Finch had been right; if she rejected him again, it couldn't feel any worse. “From the very first, I have admired you, and, bungling though I have been, I have spent the past two and a half months

courting you.”

Arthur paused and amended, “Or attempting to, rather.”

Miss Templeton’s eyes widened, her mouth gaping for a long moment before she said, “I do not believe in love at first sight—”

“And neither do I,” said Arthur with a hint of a smile. “It wasn’t the sight of you that intrigued me. The entire situation with Mr. Evans showed me how capable, kind, and intelligent you were. I’ve never met anyone as strong as you, and I was in awe from the very first.”

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How did one go about reshaping the truths one knew? Lessons hard earned through years of repetition and reinforcement balked at the words flowing from Dr. Vaughn's lips, and Violet stood there, staring at the fellow, unable to truly comprehend that which flew in the face of what she knew to be fact.

Brows pinched together, she whispered in an unsteady voice, "I am not the sort of lady who inspires love."

Dr. Vaughn sighed, a hint of sorrow dimming the rich blue of his eyes, though they gazed upon her as tenderly as any man ever had gazed upon a lady. They pierced straight through her, reaching past her defenses to wrap around her heart.

"I cannot speak for any other man, Miss Templeton but I am certain about what I feel. I love you."

Those three words sent shivers down her spine, settling into her chest before rippling outward in a wave of heat. Though Violet knew she couldn't trust herself entirely to interpret a man's actions, it was impossible to deny that bold statement and the certainty that echoed in his expression. Despite her best attempts, she couldn't think of another way to interpret Dr. Vaughn's feelings other than love .

Could it be true?

That one thought unlocked the chains that she'd settled firmly around her hopes, releasing the feelings she'd refused to acknowledge from the moment he'd appeared at the house with flowers in hand and a warrior's soul, demanding that Mr. Timms and Mr. Sprat treat her with respect. Violet hadn't wanted to acknowledge it then or

any of the other times Dr. Vaughn had swept into her world with that sweetness of temper that lifted her spirits—but that hadn't stopped her feelings from cultivating in the shadows, hidden and out of sight.

Now unbridled, yearning swept through her like a forest fire, drawing with it a sheen of tears that she fought against, but the emotions surging through her could not be contained any further.

“I love you.” Violet's eyes widened, her muscles tightening as she realized that the words had forced themselves out.

Dr. Vaughn's brows shot up, his posture mirroring hers as he stared back at her. “You do?”

Her heart crumpled at the sight of her vulnerabilities and doubts echoed in him. Violet knew enough of his history to suspect there were a great many wounds he nursed, and her heart throbbed at the thought that such an incredible person would have reason to question whether she loved him.

“Of course I do, how could I not?” The question burst out of her as a shout, and before she could do a thing about it, tears flooded her vision and coursed down her cheeks. Ninny! She hated that her emotions broke free of their dam once more, and most especially that he was to witness yet another surge. Could she never speak to him of sensitive subjects and not fall to pieces? But now that it had begun, she couldn't stop.

“You are wonderful—and kind—and patient—and forgiving—and—and—and—” Her breaths grew ragged as she struggled to list all the reasons why any woman with an ounce of sense would count herself lucky to win his heart.

And then arms came around her, drawing her into him. That blend of herbs and

cinnamon filled her nose, calming her as his hands rubbed at her back; his voice was a low rumble, murmuring to her as Violet tried to calm herself. Drawing her arms around his neck, she leaned her head against his as her breaths fought to steady.

“I am such a blubbering fool,” she whispered.

His voice was low, but it vibrated through her as his hands continued to rub gentle circles along her back. “No, Violet. You are someone who carries a mighty load and rarely has anyone willing to help you bear it up.”

Jerking backward, she looked into his eyes, her brows twisting together. “What did you call me?”

Had she not been so close, she might not have noticed the slight pinkening in his cheeks. “I apologize for taking such a liberty—”

Violet shook her head. “No. You called me Violet. No one calls me Violet.”

“Do you prefer Vi?” he asked with a furrowed brow. “I know everyone else calls you such, but I like Violet. It is a beautiful name and is far better suited for you.”

Her lungs sucked in a sharp breath, and her chin trembled anew. “You think so?”

One hand left her back, rising to her cheek to brush a thumb there. His gaze studied her features with such intensity, as though every inch was deserving of such scrutiny, and though Violet could hardly believe it, the gentleman leaned closer as his eyes fell to her lips. Everything inside her stuttered, and the seconds slowed as he drew nearer.

At the last moment, Violet jerked back with a wince, closing her eyes. When she opened them again, she met Arthur’s gaze.

“Do you truly mean this?” she whispered, knowing full well that the fear that pulsed through her shone in her eyes and tone. “I cannot bear...My heart—I—”

The words stuck in her throat, but Arthur’s gaze softened once more, his thumb caressing her cheek as his lips drew into the sort of smile she had always longed to see. He knew. He understood. Violet felt it in her bones .

“I love you, Violet,” he whispered before leaning in to capture her lips in a kiss.

*

A grown man of two and thirty ought to know precisely how to kiss a lady, imbuing each touch with all the fervor of his heart. When approaching his lady love, a gentleman didn’t quiver or quake; no, he embraced the moment—and his sweetheart—showing her the depth of his affection with ease. But then, Arthur was beginning to realize that so much of his life did not align with what it “ought” to be.

Holding Violet in his arms, he gently brought his lips to hers, hoping that some instinct would surge to the forefront and guide his actions. He felt her matching tentativeness in her touches, and though his nerves begged him to retreat before he made a fool of himself, he couldn’t help but revel in the wonder that was her lips.

The movements were awkward at first, but Arthur refused to listen to the voice that criticized each one, and all thought vanished when her fingers brushed along the edge of his collar, tickling the back of his neck; awareness struck as her touch drifted into his thinning hair, and Arthur stiffened—only to relax as she hummed with pleasure. Heat surged through his veins, and he surrendered to the feeling, casting everything else aside as he reveled in the feel of Violet in his arms.

Whether unpracticed or ungainly, the kiss meant far more than the mere act itself. After weeks of stumbling about, they were together now. No more misunderstandings

or mistakes. Simply Arthur and Violet. Sweethearts.

Arthur forced himself to pull away, his breaths coming quickly as his hands rested on her hips. Violet stood flush to him, her eyes almost dazed as a dreamy smile lifted her lips. No, she was not some tiny creature who gazed up at him or rested her head against his chest, and Arthur didn't know why any gentleman would wish for such a thing. Violet filled his arms, melding together with him perfectly .

Surprise flashed in her eyes, and she straightened, her brows knitting together as her tears gathered once more. Arthur stiffened, but before he could say anything, she waved it away.

“Don't mind me. I am just being silly,” she whispered.

“What about?”

A self-deprecating smile brightened the shimmers in her eyes. “I just realized that I have waited so many years to be courted, and I didn't even recognize what was happening. I missed it all, went straight from spinster to engaged.”

Arthur's arms clamped tightly around her, and he fought to keep his expression clear, though her statement sent a shock of cold washing through him.

Engaged? He hadn't proposed. Or he hadn't thought so. Scouring his memories of the past few minutes, he tried to sort through his words, but he couldn't think of anything he'd said to imply marriage at this juncture. Yes, he loved her. That was true. But whatever his feelings, they'd known each other for such a short time, and it was far too soon to make an irrevocable choice.

Wasn't it?

Laughing to herself, Violet leaned in once more, nestling her head into the crook of his shoulder with a sigh that tickled his jaw, and Arthur tightened his arms around her.

What more did he need to know about her? He'd seen her at her best and worst. Yes, Violet was flawed, but were any of those failings great enough for him to cast her aside? Having been on the receiving end of those shortcomings over the past weeks, Arthur could say for certain that they weren't. At times, her actions hurt him deeply, yet they hadn't altered his feelings for her.

Violet shared his dream and was willing to sacrifice for it. For him. And from the way his heart had been paining him of late, it was clear that he didn't believe another lady would ever suit him as well.

So, what did it matter ?

Arthur's brows rose at that, and he smiled to himself. He'd begun courting her without her realizing it, and they got engaged without his knowing it. Rather fitting.

*

Holding him so tightly, Violet felt Arthur's laughter more than she heard it, and she smiled to herself. The feeling spread through her, bringing more silly tears to her eyes, but she couldn't help them any more than she could help the ones before.

Arthur's voice rang in her thoughts again. "You are someone who carries a mighty load and rarely has anyone willing to help you bear it up." Despite having a lot of practice at guarding her emotions, Violet couldn't hold back her tears any longer. Not with Arthur.

"Do you wish to delay the engagement so you can enjoy a proper courtship?" His

voice was a deep rumble in her ear, drawing a larger grin from her.

For the briefest of moments, Violet wondered if he was asking because he wished to delay it. A wave of doubt swept through her, but she batted it away. A gentleman didn't kiss a lady in that manner or call her by her given name if he didn't intend to marry her, and with those assurances clearing her thoughts, she acknowledged that his tone was merely curious.

“Of course not,” she said with a huff before straightening enough to look him in the eyes. With one arm hooked around his neck, Violet rested her other hand on his waistcoat as her fingers traced the edges of his cravat. “I am being silly, that is all. I had such fantasies about what it would be like to be courted, but I would much rather marry you tomorrow than delay it for my vanity.”

“It isn't vanity, Violet,” he said, and her heart fluttered in her chest at the sound of her name—her proper name—being spoken with such sweetness. And he thought the name suited her .

Turning her gaze to his chest, she felt her eyes prickle again, and she let out a sharp huff and shook them off. His hand nudged her chin to meet his gaze, and she gave herself a derisive scoff once more.

“Do not mind me. Being in love has made me a silly woman who is constantly overcome by anything remotely tender.”

Arthur's brows rose at that, and his lips turned into a pleased grin. “Is that so? Well then, I must tell you that you haven't missed out on anything, Violet Templeton, for I plan to woo you for the rest of our lives.”

Violet forced herself to remain strong against that, though her heart was doing its best to wrestle out of her control, and warmth spread through her with such fervor that she

was certain she might just turn into a jelly in his arms.

“Is that so?” she echoed, though it was far less saucy than intended.

“Yes, indeed,” he said, drawing so close that his lips brushed hers.

At that moment, a doubt niggled its way into her thoughts, demanding that she say something. Violet shrugged it aside. It wasn’t important. It wasn’t. Yet Arthur’s dream resurfaced in her mind as vibrant as reality, and she knew just how important it was to him.

“Are you certain you want me?” she asked, forcing the question she didn’t wish to ask. Arthur stared at her, and Violet forged ahead. “In your dream, you want a large family. I am too—” Her throat clamped shut, and she winced, drawing in a deep breath before wrestling the words out. “I am two and thirty, Arthur. I am too old to give you what you want.”

“I want you more,” he whispered as his hand rose to caress her cheek again, and Violet melted into the touch.

Seizing hold of the urge, she leaned into him, capturing his lips in a kiss with a confidence she never realized she possessed, but with Arthur’s assurances ringing through her, Violet felt the last of her reservations melting away. Though she knew they were unlikely to vanish entirely after a lifetime in her heart, she refused to let them have free rein any longer.

Arthur was hers, and she wasn’t going to let her foolishness stand in the way of their happiness.

When they parted, Violet’s heart twittered in her chest at the satisfied expression on her husband-to-be’s face. Arthur looked as though this was the greatest joy possible

for a man to achieve, and she supposed it was true in his eyes, but she couldn't help but think that no woman in the world was as lucky as she for having secured his heart.

"I suppose we ought to unpack your things," she said with a chuckle, but Arthur's expression sobered.

"Nothing has changed, Violet. If I remain, your family will be beggared." He paused, his eyes dropping from her as the signs of his nerves resurfaced again, pulling at his lips. The sight pained her, and Violet longed to wipe them away. "I—"

Taking his face in her hands, she lifted his gaze to hers. "Tell me, Arthur."

"But I do not want to take you away from your home, Violet."

"I want you more," she said as her hands settled around his neck once more.

Considering the entirety of all that had happened of late, Violet's heart lightened at the thought that she might be free of the history that clung to every corner of Oakham. "Besides, I wish to leave. This doesn't feel like my home anymore, and with everything that has happened of late, I long to try someplace new where I am known not for my family's sake but my own."

Arthur's brows rose. "Then we will go together?"

Pressing a quick kiss to his lips, Violet leaned close, holding fast to him as she whispered, "We will start a new life in a cottage in a quiet village, that desperately needs your skills—"

"And yours," he whispered.

“And mine.” Violet’s grin broadened. “With a large garden.”

“And beehives. ”

Violet laughed and did the only thing one could do when in the grip of such happiness. Straightening, she held his gaze whilst leaning close to him, reveling in the eager light that entered his eyes as she pressed her lips to his.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:44 am

Thornsby, Yorkshire 8 Months Later

A grown man of three and thirty did not gawk at something so pedestrian as the countryside. And certainly, he did not press his nose against the carriage window to better see said view. With no one but his wife to see, Arthur supposed it didn't matter in the slightest, but had the carriage been stuffed beyond capacity, he couldn't have resisted the urge when she was doing precisely the same.

Violet's eyes were bright as they followed the rolling dales. "I love the moors. It reminds me of home."

Drawing in a deep breath, Arthur smiled. "We can finally breathe again."

"London was not as bad as all that," said Violet as she settled into the crook of his arm. "I must have an entire trunk full of books Mr. Motley suggested."

"To say nothing of your tools," he added with a wry smile. The old apothecary who lived around the corner from his family had taken quite a liking to her, and Arthur wouldn't be surprised if the fellow sent her a steady stream of periodicals and tomes on herbology and medicines along with the latest gadgets to be found in London hospitals and apothecaries.

Violet hummed with pleasure before reaching into her valise to retrieve her book. Pulling out the missive that served as her marker, she shook her head. "I still find it difficult to accept Lilibet's letter. Despite knowing that things would need to change, I hadn't anticipated Isaac leaving medicine altogether."

“It is a bit surprising, I suppose, but I would hazard a guess he will be a better banker than a physician. Assuming his father-in-law is patient and knows how to keep him on task.”

Stuffing the letter further back into the book, she sighed and settled once more. “But Isaac detests sums and figures, and Lilibet has yet to specify what he is to be doing in this new position her father offered him.”

“With his social skills, Isaac would be a dab hand with investors. There is so much speculation flying about nowadays, and most schemes have a handsome face and a ready smile at the forefront of the venture to lure in more funds,” said Arthur, bringing his arm around her shoulders. “And more than anything, some people simply do not excel at being their own master. Isaac’s flaw was laziness, not ability or intelligence. From what you’ve said, he thrived under your father, and I would hazard a guess that he might do so under his father-in-law’s guidance.”

“I—” But Violet snapped her mouth shut as her complexion grew ashen.

Arthur moved his hand to the door latch, ready to open it the moment it was needed, but she drew in a deep breath and seemed to settle again. Tugging off his glove, he felt her forehead and pulse.

“We are almost there, dearest.”

Violet waved it off. “Serves me right for trying to read in the carriage.”

Arthur held back a smile, not allowing it to show even the barest hint in his expression. He didn’t know how long she would insist on clinging to the charade, but he wasn’t going to press the issue. Not yet.

Settling back once more, their eyes turned to the landscape, and Arthur pressed a kiss to his wife’s head. Her hand rested on his chest, and her fingers fiddled with the

lapels of his jacket in a way that never failed to send warm pulses through him. Seven months of marriage, and he still hadn't grown used to the feeling.

In the distance, they spied the first signs of the village, and the guard blasted his horn, announcing their arrival to all and sundry. Leaning forward once more, the pair watched as Thornsby came into sight. The main thoroughfare cut a path through the cottages and buildings that were pressed up to the roadway, their signs swinging with the breeze. More buildings spanned outward; in the distance, they spied the church spire, and a distant boom of the bell marked the passing hour.

"It looks so much like Oakham, yet it feels entirely different," she said.

Arthur nodded, though he couldn't put his finger on precisely why that was. The door opened, and he stepped down, offering his hand to Violet. Eight months since their engagement, yet she still glanced at it as though uncertain what to do with the gentlemanly overture, and once more, Arthur cursed the gentlemen of Devon who hadn't seen fit to make such little kindnesses commonplace for her.

Violet slid her hand through his arm, and they examined the street. Just ahead, they spied what looked to be a village square, though the bend in the road hid it from view. Arthur tossed a few coins to a manservant at the coaching inn with instructions to watch over their trunks before leading her back the way they'd come.

"All will be well," she said, squeezing his forearm, and Arthur relaxed the muscles he hadn't known were tensed.

"I seem to recall a lady who detests when others say that to her," he said with a narrowed look and a hint of a smile that softened the hard edges of the expression.

"Yes, but this isn't an empty platitude. We did our research, considered our options, and I am certain this will be wonderful," she said whilst leaning into his side.

Arthur drew in a deep breath and hoped for the best. Their time in London had allowed them to replenish their coffers and not rush such an important decision, but having never seen their new town or home, it was impossible not to feel the strain of uncertainty. To which he reminded himself that Oakham may not have been the paradise he'd searched for, but his time there had ended well for him. And his wife.

"Even if it isn't, we will simply return to London," she said, repeating the decision they'd made long before making this step. Of course, relocating yet again wouldn't be so simple, but Violet's calm helped him to calm himself as well.

"Usually, it is me who is assuring you."

Violet drew in a deep breath and let it out, beaming at the world around her. "I just feel it in my bones, Arthur. This is the place. I know it."

Having read Mr. Rothschild's letter a dozen times, he knew the directions well enough, though the carriage had been passing the houses too quickly to tell which was theirs. Violet's attention drifted all about, but Arthur's gaze was fixed forward as he led her to the far end of town. Counting the buildings, he stopped in front of one that was set back from the road a little, and the sign affixed to the gate read "Hawthorne House."

The cottage retained the old timber look, though it had been well-maintained over the years. The plaster between the beams was bright and unmarred, and the stonework that decorated along the bottom few feet looked as though it had been scrubbed clean. Ivy wound along the corners, and the first flowers of spring were just making themselves known, bringing forth bright bursts of yellows, pinks, and oranges. Climbing roses outlined the doorway, and in summer, the blossoms would likely fill the entire house with their fragrance.

Peace swept over him with such force that Arthur could barely breathe. Violet had been correct. This was the place they'd been looking for, and the last of his nerves

swept away in the rightness of their being here. This was their home. Their dream.

Pushing the front gate open, he motioned for Violet to enter, and her face split into a grin. Lifting her skirts, she hurried round the side and examined the gardens behind.

“It is enormous!” she said, nearly dancing on her tiptoes as she beamed at him. “Magnificent!”

But Arthur’s attention never wavered from Violet. Light shone from within her eyes, brightening the whole of her. Tendrils of her hair had escaped their pins, framing her face as they bobbed on the breeze. And though she beckoned him to come, Arthur couldn’t move at the sight of her.

His wife. His Violet.

Arthur didn’t understand the blindness of men, but he sent a prayer of thanks heavenward that he was reaping the reward of their short-sightedness. Never was a man more blessed than he.

*

Running had been a mistake. Violet realized it the moment she’d begun, but the damage was done, and she couldn’t wait to see the gardens Mr. Rothschild had promised were everything she longed for. And they didn’t disappoint. Neat beds were sectioned off with a few bare patches for her to place the seeds she’d brought from the physic garden in Chelsea, but most beds were already planted and awaiting her tender ministrations.

Now, she simply had to avoid casting up her accounts atop them.

Pressing a hand to her stomach, Violet gazed back at her husband. Good gracious, Arthur Vaughn cut a fine figure, made all the finer when he looked at her with such

admiration. And despite so many months of receiving such expressions, her cheeks heated as though this were the first time.

They were finally here. And she could finally tell him her secret. In all the effort leading to this moment, she'd nearly missed the signs, but she was certain now, and there wasn't a better time to share it.

"Look here," said Arthur, pressing his nose to the front windows. "Mr. Rothschild's workroom is perfect."

Violet drew in a sharp breath and hurried to his side, where they peered through the windows like sneak thieves. It was just as magnificent as the gardens. The old physician was clearly a meticulous man who took pride in his work, and the offices were everything she'd hoped for; Violet couldn't wait and tried the door handle—only to sigh at finding it locked.

Her husband drew closer, folding his arms around her. "Patience, my love. The solicitor should be here before long with the keys, and then we can explore properly."

"I suppose we will just have to bide our time," she said, settling her arms around his neck.

"I suppose we will," he said with a grin whilst leaning closer, though Arthur paused just short of kissing her.

"I have a secret to tell you," she whispered with a coy smile.

"Do you?" he said with a raise of his brows.

Violet nodded, her eyes brightening as she gazed into his. "It is a little surprise right now, and we will have to wait for some months until it arrives."

Arthur's brow furrowed. "Is it a seedling?"

"Of a sort," she replied with a tone heavy with insinuation.

With a considering hum, he paused before asking, "Did you bring a cutting from Mrs. Finch's roses?"

"No, dearheart." Violet straightened and stared at him. How did he not realize what she was referring to? It wasn't as though her hints were subtle. "I expect you will be very pleased about it."

Arthur pondered it another moment before shaking his head. "Is it a horse? I know we need to purchase one—"

"Not a horse, Arthur," she said, pushing away from him with a frown. "Why would I be so excited about a horse? "

Grabbing her hand, Arthur pressed a kiss to her palm. "Peace, dearest. I am guessing that this gift will arrive in about six months."

Violet's brows rose at that as she fitted herself in his arms once more. "You know?"

Arthur's chuckle vibrated through them both. "Wife, I am a physician, and I would be a poor one, indeed, if I didn't recognize the signs."

Heart falling to her toes, Violet gaped at him. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because you wanted to surprise me. Unfortunately, I am not good at acting, else I would've put on a better show of being astonished," he said as his hands rubbed at her back, and whatever hurt she might've felt (which was little at best) melted away.

Violet had wanted some grand shout of excitement or some other overdone display of

emotion, but she ought to have known better. It wasn't in Arthur's nature. But her husband's eyes glowed with such pleasure, and her heart flushed with it.

He held her fast, his eyes growing misty and his lips trembling slightly as he whispered, "Our dream is coming true."

Violet's breath caught, and her pulse quickened. "That it is, my love."

But she couldn't say anything else, for Arthur swept her up in a kiss that erased all thought from her mind .