



The Pleasure in Persuasion (Darringtons in Love #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: For Lily Grayling, every day is much the same as the one before, which is precisely how she likes it.

After a broken engagement—and a broken heart—sent her running for the hills of Hampshire two years ago, she has settled well into her new life, making her home in the sleepy little village where she and her grandmother run their family inn.

Her days are organized, her life safe and structured until her dearest friend's charming brother rolls into town, bringing teasing smiles and tempting kisses that threaten to upend the balance Lily has worked so hard to find.

Frederick Darrington cannot deny that he is a bit of a rogue.

After all, it was an ill-advised—and ultimately unsatisfying—affair with a married woman that drove him out of London and into his sister's country home, his refuge until the scandal blows over.

He has every intention of spending this unexpected visit with his widowed sister and the nieces and nephews he barely knows, until a chance encounter with a gorgeous-but-grumpy innkeeper somehow leads to a faux engagement and long afternoons spent at Lily's inn.

Frederick and Lily, opposites in so many ways, should be completely wrong for each other.

Yet the more time they spend together, the harder it becomes to deny their attraction and their growing feelings.

But Lily has been hurt before, and Frederick is certain he has nothing to offer her.

Can he convince himself—and Lily—that theirs is a love worth risking it all?

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Frederick Darrington shifted on the carriage's plush burgundy velvet squabs and let out a groan of discomfort. Stretching his legs out, he propped his heels on the opposite seat and withdrew his pocket watch to consult the time.

Twenty minutes past three o'clock.

He should arrive at his sister's house in another half hour or so. Saints be praised . He'd done quite enough sitting for one day. His carriage was well-sprung and comfortably furnished, but still, his arse was going numb, and his legs were practically itching to move.

Returning his pocket watch to his coat, he turned once again to the window and gazed out at the passing countryside with its rolling green hills and towering oaks, the hazy azure sky festooned with wispy, white clouds.

The vista was an idyllic one, but after a four-hour carriage ride, even Hampshire's beauty began to lose its appeal. As did his own company.

Of course, he only had himself to blame for this little trip, as his older brother, Robert, the Viscount Darrington, had made abundantly clear when he'd suggested last week—rather forcefully—that Frederick should get out of London for a while until things began to settle down.

Things being the scandal.

Frederick let his head fall back against the squabs and blew out a sigh.

He truly was a first-rate idiot sometimes.

But when Lady Serena Garrison had approached him last month with an invitation to visit her bed, he'd accepted with enthusiasm.

Serena was a beautiful woman, auburn-haired, lushly curved. ..and married.

That she was unhappy in her marriage to a rich baron thirty years her senior had helped to ease his misgivings, but it did not lessen the sin and certainly hadn't made a damned bit of difference to her husband.

Lord Garrison was a man in his sixties, but he was by no means frail or feeble, and when he'd learned of his wife's affair with Frederick, he was not pleased.

Indeed, he was downright livid . So livid that there were whispers of promised revenge and pistols at dawn, until Frederick's brother intervened and saved his skin. Again.

Robert met with Garrison and petitioned him for mercy, and with the staunch assurances that Frederick would leave London for a time—and, of course, never speak to Lady Garrison again—the baron had eventually agreed.

Frederick heaved another sigh and rubbed a hand across his increasingly tight chest. He'd bedded another man's wife, something he'd never done before, and although he was far from perfect, he did have a conscience, and it was decidedly guilty.

Even so, he might have ignored it...if only his family hadn't found out.

He'd disappointed them, his mother most of all, and while he might be five-and-twenty, he still could not abide his mother's disappointment.

He should be inured to it by now, given all the practice he'd had.

He'd been disappointing his mother, his sisters, and his perfect older brother for years now.

Still, it stung. Not that he'd allowed Robert to see that, of course.

He'd spent far too much time and effort cultivating this facade of cavalier rascal to abandon it now, which was why he'd agreed to come to Hampshire, and done so with a smile.

Truth be told, he was rather looking forward to seeing Penelope again. She had always been his favorite sibling, ever since they were children, and even though he was the youngest and she was seven years his senior, she had never treated him like the pesky little brother he must surely have been.

Truthfully, she deserved a better brother than he'd been these last few years.

He was a selfish man, wrapped up in his own life, writing to her rarely, though she wrote to him faithfully every month, even over the course of the last year in the wake of her husband's sudden death after he was thrown from a horse and broke his neck.

Guilt washed over him, and he rubbed his chest again.

Penelope was a capital girl, and she deserved a lot better from him.

The reason behind this visit was...not ideal, but he meant to make good use of it and spend these next few weeks in Hampshire with his favorite sibling and the four nieces and nephews he barely knew.

He was looking forward to it. He hoped they were.

The carriage began to slow then, and Frederick turned toward the window, his brows dipping in confusion. They couldn't have reached his sister's house already, could they? He leaned his head out the window as the carriage slowed to a crawl, and his gaze caught on the reason for the disruption.

A dark-haired young woman in a plain gray gown stood at the edge of the road, tugging on a length of rope loosely looped around the neck of a small but stubborn Jersey cow.

Without a second thought, Frederick rapped his knuckles on the carriage roof and hopped out onto the dirt lane before the wheels had fully stopped.

"Excuse me, miss," he called out. "May I be of assistance?"

The woman did not answer him but continued to tug on the rope as she murmured words of encouragement to the cow, whose name was, apparently, Blythe.

Judging by the unperturbed expression on the animal's face, the name was an apt one.

Frederick tried again. "Miss?"

"What?"

The reply was snappish, but he supposed a little irritability was to be expected given the situation.

"May I be of assistance?" he repeated, keeping his tone friendly. "At the risk of sounding immodest, I do have a way with animals."

It was this remark that finally drew her gaze to his, and Frederick gave her his most charming smile, even as her loveliness struck him momentarily stupid.

Her hair was tucked back in a messy chignon, the tresses thick and black as a raven's wing, a stark contrast to her milk-white skin and striking blue-green eyes.

Eyes that narrowed on his smile as if it were a snake in the grass.

Assessing him now, she straightened to her full height, the top of her head barely reaching his shoulders, and as she brushed a stray strand of hair from her cheek, she left an endearing smudge of dirt in its place.

"Well, then," she said, offering him the length of rope. "By all means..."

Frederick stepped forward, ignoring the unmistakable skepticism in the young woman's eyes as he took the rope from her outstretched hand and turned to Blythe the cow.

"Good afternoon, Blythe," he crooned, slowly extending his free hand to stroke her neck, the short brown hair soft beneath his fingers. "My, you are a gorgeous girl, aren't you? With those big brown eyes and that beautiful, shiny coat. If I'm not careful, I'm liable to fall in love with you."

Blythe watched him carefully with said big brown eyes, baleful yet curious, and Frederick's smile widened.

"Come on, then," he continued. "Be a good girl and grant me the honor of escorting you home. Will you do that for me, love?"

Blythe emitted a long, deep low of acquiescence, and Frederick began to walk, his grip on the rope firm but forgiving as Blythe followed behind, her gait slow and relaxed.

The cow's owner fell into step beside him, and he ventured a glance her way,

grinning at the look of bemusement on her face. “You see?” he said. “Animals adore me.”

Full pink lips thinned into a severe line, and her only reply was a noncommittal hum, which told him nothing of her thoughts yet plucked at his curiosity and, irrationally, his pride. He’d never met a woman he could not charm.

Challenge accepted.

“Blythe is a beautiful animal,” he said over the sounds of clopping hooves and creaking carriage wheels. “Is she yours?”

“She is.”

“And do you often take her out for an afternoon walk?”

He slid her a teasing glance, hoping to elicit at least a glimmer of a smile, though whether her lips even worked that way still remained to be seen.

“Of course not,” she said stiffly, flicking him a look that seemed a far cry from charmed. “The barn gate was left open by mistake, and she wandered away.”

“I see.” He cleared his throat, casting about for another question to ask. “And do you two live nearby?” Christ above, Frederick, of course they live nearby. “That is, do you live on a nearby farm?”

Three beats of silence followed, as if in protest of his unwelcome curiosity, but finally she said, “No. I run the village inn with my grandmother.”

“An inn?” He could not keep the surprise from his voice. “That must keep your days rather interesting.”

“I suppose it must.”

She offered no more, and as he had grown weary of carrying the conversation by himself, he fell silent too, and the slow-moving motley crew continued its ambling trek up the lane.

Frederick kept his gaze on the empty stretch of road ahead, but his mind was on the quiet woman walking beside him. Who was she? What was her name?

And was she always this guarded or was he the cause of her reticence?

If he was, he had no idea why. She couldn't possibly be cross with him—he had come to her rescue, after all, delaying his own journey in the process, and he expected nothing in return from her, except perhaps a word or two of thanks.

No, she couldn't be unhappy with something he did, which meant she was unhappy over something else. Or perhaps she was simply an unhappy person.

Well, whatever the reason, it wasn't his concern. She wasn't his concern. She might be lovely to look at, but beauty only went so far. Frederick would take a plain, friendly woman with a ready smile over a grouchy goddess any day.

The remainder of the walk passed without incident or conversation, with the exception of an occasional word of encouragement for Blythe, and when The Weeping Whiskers Inn came into view, Frederick had to squelch a sigh of relief.

The inn was small and undeniably charming with its whitewashed brick and thatched roof; the windows trimmed a cheerful spring green in complement to the flowering bushes and potted ferns framing the oak door at the entrance.

Maples flanked either side of the inn, their changing leaves a gorgeous blend of

oranges, reds and yellows that only added to the property's charm.

"Thank you for your help, sir," Blythe's owner said briskly as she paused at the edge of the road and turned to face him. "Your kindness, though unsolicited, is appreciated, and I suppose you deserve a reward for it. May I offer you a mug of ale for your trouble?"

Frederick bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing, both amused by the begrudging offer and surprised she'd even made it.

"Why do you dislike me?" The query leaped from his tongue with child-like impulsiveness, and though he hadn't planned to ask it, he didn't regret doing so. He wanted to know.

"I—what?" Her jaw had slackened, and she stared at him, clearly caught off guard. "That is an odd question, sir. I do not even know you."

Frederick nodded. "I know. Yet you disliked me from the first moment we met. Rather unfair of you, don't you think?"

She pressed her lips together, and her turquoise eyes took on a speculative glint, as if an internal debate waged within her: Should she give this stranger a polite reply or an honest one?

Tipping her chin up, she met his gaze. "Do not take it personally," she said. "I dislike all handsome young men of means."

Well. Right. Evidently she'd decided on honesty. The obvious question begging to be asked was why she disliked handsome young men of means, but Frederick could not resist teasing her instead.

“You think I’m handsome?” he asked, arching one eyebrow.

She arched both, her lips twisting. “Not as handsome as you find yourself, I think.”

He smiled. “But you do find me handsome.”

A beat of silence followed and then she shrugged. “Yes, I suppose I do. But I assure you, that is no compliment. In my experience, handsome men think they can get away with anything. And they usually do.”

Again, Frederick wondered what had made her so cynical, but she was a stranger to him, and her past was none of his business, so he ignored his curiosity. “Thank you for the offer of ale, but I really must be on my way.”

The relief in her eyes amused him, even as it inspired the perverse desire to tell her he’d changed his mind, that he would have that drink, if only to see what she would do.

Alas, he was running late, and he would never hear the end of it if Penelope learned he’d dilly-dallied over a mug of ale.

“Thank you again, sir,” she replied, slipping the length of rope from his hand. “Blythe and I both wish you a good journey.”

She turned toward the inn, and Frederick watched her go, her strides economical yet elegant as she slowly guided Blythe the rest of the way home.

With astonishing reluctance, he headed for his carriage, and as they set off, still she lingered on his mind, this woman he’d just met, and he couldn’t make sense of it.

She was ungracious, unfriendly, and wholly uncharmable.

So why the devil was he so intrigued by her? And why did he regret that he had not learned her name?

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“You are a naughty, naughty cow,” Lily Grayling grumbled as she guided Blythe through the barn doors and into her stall before securing the latch with exaggerated care.

“I really am quite cross with you,” she went on, her voice stern even as she reached across the gate to give the sweet cow a scratch behind the ear.

“I thought we were friends, yet you refused to come home with me, and it was only when that man came along—a perfect stranger, mind you—that you finally decided to behave like a lady.”

Blythe gave her snout a slow swipe with her long black tongue, seeming somehow both contrite and embarrassed, although Lily was well aware of her own propensity for seeing what she wanted to see.

Still, she couldn't help but take pity on the dear girl.

“I know,” she said, patting Blythe's sinewy neck. “He was a handsome man, and handsome men can be difficult to resist.”

Blythe let out a mournful low, making Lily laugh. “Even so, next time you might want to remember who it is that feeds you, hm?”

With one last scratch behind Blythe's velvety ears, she left the barn and headed for the inn, her thoughts straying to the handsome stranger who had so gallantly come to her aid.

She hadn't asked for his help, and certainly hadn't welcomed it, but she had to admit she was glad he'd come along. If he hadn't, she and Blythe would likely be on the road right now, still playing tug-of-war with no end in sight.

Still, the encounter had left her feeling unaccountably peevish. His kindness, his charm, his handsome face and deliciously broad shoulders made a powerfully attractive package, and Lily had most definitely been attracted. Any woman would be.

With his glossy black hair, warm blue eyes, and roguish grin, he was an exemplar of the male sex, and he knew it. Worse, he knew she knew it, which was precisely why she hadn't bothered to deny it.

She hadn't been so attracted to a man in ages, and she didn't like it. Not one bit. Neither did she like the twinge of regret she felt that she had not learned his name.

Fortunately for her, he was long gone now, and she would never see him again.

Determined to put the encounter behind her, she shoved the stranger from her mind and made her way inside the inn.

She passed a quick glance over the almost-empty dining room, exchanging a nod of greeting with Roger Witherspoon, a kindly old farmer who stopped by the inn nearly every afternoon for a mug of ale and a bread-and-butter sandwich.

Lily headed for the kitchen and was greeted by the delicious scent of baking bread, which made her stomach growl. She paused in the doorway just as her diminutive, gray-haired grandmother glanced up from her place at the well-worn wooden table.

She did not pause in her work, her wrinkled hands, still strong and graceful, continuing to knead the ball of bread dough with the speedy confidence of one who

had done so a thousand times before.

“There you are,” Charlotte Grayling said, smashing the dough ball onto the table and sending a puff of flour into the air before continuing with her kneading. “You found Blythe then? Is the sweet, daft girl all right?”

Lily nodded. “She’s fine. She was in Mr. Richardson’s field again, happily munching his grass.”

She did not see the need to mention that she’d had help from a certain stranger. Telling her grandmother would serve no purpose, and Lily was supposed to be forgetting the man, anyway.

“She does love it there, doesn’t she?” Gran said with a chuckle, her deep brown eyes warm with affection. “We’ll have to find a way to keep that gate closed. We’ve been lucky so far, but next time Blythe could be hurt.”

“You’re right,” Lily replied. “I’ll take a look at it later today.”

But she would do no such thing, of course.

There was no need to. The gate was in perfect working order, as long as it was properly latched, but Lily didn’t have the heart to say so.

It was her grandmother who had milked Blythe this morning, as she did every morning, and it was she who had left the gate unlocked.

This was the third time in as many months that Gran had forgotten to latch the gate, and Lily worried that her forgetfulness was worsening.

She couldn’t bring herself to mention it, though, and risk hurting the one person in

the world who had always been there for her. So, instead, she pretended the problem didn't exist and hoped it would somehow correct itself on its own.

"By the way," Gran said, "your Mr. Carstairs asked after you on his way out. He was most disappointed to miss you."

Lily bit her tongue to keep from insisting—again—that he was not her Mr. Carstairs. "Did he?" she asked disinterestedly. "And what was it the gentleman needed?"

"He didn't need anything, Lily. He wanted to see you."

Lily wrinkled her nose. "I can't imagine why."

Gran gave her A Look. "Poppycock. You know why. The gentleman likes you."

"I can't imagine why," she repeated, this time with an edge of exasperation as she perched on a stool at the table. "I've given him no reason to like me. And no encouragement to continue doing so."

Her grandmother clucked her tongue, her hands still working the dough. "That is certainly true, though I don't know why you dislike him so. He is a respectable gentleman, and always so polite."

"He is a pompous dolt."

"He is our guest, Lily, and you should not speak that way about a guest," she scolded, though her lips wore a little smile. "Besides, he is only pompous around you, and that is because he's trying to impress you."

Lily harrumphed. "Well, I wish he would stop. In fact, it would impress me greatly if he would never do so again. And I would be positively overjoyed if he would leave

the inn altogether. Isn't his mother awaiting his arrival?"

Mr. Charles Carstairs had arrived at the inn three days ago, intending to stay only one night and leave the following morning for Glastonbury to stay with his mother. At least, that was the impression he'd given when he'd booked his room.

"I believe he wrote to her and told her he's been delayed," her grandmother said. "I don't think he has any intention of leaving until he's secured your hand in marriage."

Lily blanched. "Heaven forbid."

"Come, he isn't that bad," Gran said with an amused shake of her head.

Lily, however, wholeheartedly disagreed.

Charles Carstairs was bumptious, conceited and, worst of all, incapable of taking no for an answer.

He had only been here for a short time, but she'd already declined three invitations to walk with him into the village, and while the offers had seemed harmless enough, the gleam in his eyes had not.

She wrinkled her nose. Gran might believe Mr. Carstairs' intentions were honorable, but Lily did not.

He was their guest, though, and she had no wish to upset her grandmother, so all she said was, "Maybe he isn't. But he is not the man for me."

Gran sighed but said nothing in return, and Lily left the kitchen for the dining room, grabbing a damp rag on her way out.

Roger Witherspoon had gone, and Lily pocketed the coin he'd left beside his empty plate before moving the dishes to a neighboring table so she could wipe up the crumbs he'd left behind.

Her grandmother meant well, she knew, and only wanted her to be happy, but surely anyone could see that Charles Carstairs was not the man for her. Truth be told, she doubted there was anyone out there meant just for her, and she had no intention of searching for such a man, if he even existed.

There was a time—not two years ago, in fact—when she'd wanted to be a wife. She'd even fancied herself in love with her betrothed and had fostered dreams of creating a home and family with the man she'd given her heart to.

That fantasy was snuffed out, however, the day Stephen confessed that his affections—and his offer of marriage—had shifted to another woman. To Lily's sister, Rose.

The confession was devastating, and all she could think to do was run away.

She'd left London almost immediately, fleeing her feckless former-betrothed, her unapologetic sister and unsympathetic mother, for the sanctity of Little Bilberry where she'd thrown herself into the comforting busyness of running her grandparents' country inn.

These twenty-two months at The Weeping Whiskers had been precisely what her broken heart—and injured pride—had needed. Time had softened the wound left by Rose and Stephen's betrayal, but it had left a scar, and even now, it still ached on occasion.

After all, her betrothal with Stephen had been a long-standing one, formed by her parents and his when they were but children.

Most of her life was spent with the surety that she would be Stephen's wife, and the mother of his children, until that day when, seemingly out of nowhere, he'd confessed that he did not love her.

That, in fact, he loved her sister and wished to marry her instead.

The look of regret in his eyes had seemed sincere, and Lily knew he had no desire to cause her injury, but the fact remained that he had hurt her. He'd hurt her deeply.

But not as deeply as Rose had done.

Lily moved on to another table, and though it was already spotless, she ran the rag over it, scrubbing with unwarranted fervor.

She hadn't seen her sister since she'd left London almost two years ago. She hadn't written to her, either—and Rose had sent not a single note to her. What was there to say?

Lily hadn't attended the wedding, of course.

She still cared for her sister—Stephen, too, to some extent—and she did not wish them ill, but neither could she sit through their wedding ceremony, wearing the expected smile and pretending to be happy for them.

She wasn't strong enough for that nor a good enough actor.

According to her mother's letter, the ceremony was exceedingly lovely, as was the bride, and Rose and Stephen were now happily settled in his ancestral home in Sussex.

Lily's mother kept her abreast of the happy couple's comings and goings in the letters

she sent, one every month without fail, and Lily read every word faithfully.

She hadn't forgiven Rose yet, not entirely, and if she were being honest with herself, she wasn't sure she ever would. But she did sometimes miss her sister, and she would never stop caring for her, so she would go on reading her mother's letters, and would welcome every mention of Rose.

Satisfied that the dining room was clean and tidy again, Lily returned to the kitchen where her grandmother was pulling a loaf of bread out of the oven.

"I do wish you would at least consider giving Mr. Carstairs a chance," Gran said, apparently picking up the conversation as if Lily had never left the room. "He is a wealthy man, and I hear his property in Glastonbury is quite impressive. You could be mistress of it, Lily."

"But I don't want to be mistress of an impressive house," Lily replied, making her way to the wash basin. "I want to stay here, Gran. I'm happy here."

"Well, then, maybe Mr. Carstairs would agree to live here with us. Think how nice it would be to have a man around to help."

Lily scoffed as she began scrubbing the dishes clean. "Can you honestly see a man like Mr. Carstairs running an inn? Tending to the guests' needs? Making repairs?"

Her grandmother's silence was answer enough.

"Besides," Lily continued, "we don't need a man's help. We manage quite nicely, the two of us."

"And what about when there is only one of us left? What will you do when I'm too old to help? Or when I'm gone altogether?"

The thought sent a shard of panic through Lily's chest, and she turned to her grandmother as if to answer, though what reply she meant to give she did not know. In the end, it didn't matter, for Gran spoke before she could.

"I was married to your grandfather for fifty-one years," she said, a wistful smile touching the corners of her lips.

"And we took over the running of this inn nearly thirty years ago when his parents decided they no longer wished to work." Her misty brown eyes met Lily's.

"I've enjoyed running this place, but I wouldn't have liked it half so much if I hadn't had Henry by my side. "

Lily smiled, though her heart twisted at the thought of her grandfather and the hole he'd left behind when he died suddenly in his sleep just last April.

"Grandfather was an exceptional man," she said softly.

"Yes, he was," Gran replied. "He was kind and wise. Someone I could talk to and rely upon to help shoulder the burdens. I want that for you, Lily. A husband who will be your partner in every way."

Lily sighed and reached for a square of linen to dry her hands. "Grandfather was matchless in nearly every way, but even if another like him exists, it's unlikely I would meet him here in Little Bilberry."

"Unlikely, maybe, but not impossible."

"Nearly impossible."

"You don't know that."

“Yes, I do,” Lily said firmly. “Besides, I have no need for a husband.” She crossed to the table and wrapped an arm around her grandmother’s shoulders, bussing her cheek. “I have you, Gran. And I’ve decided that you are going to live forever.”

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“Your children certainly have grown since the last time I saw them,” Frederick said to his sister, Penelope, the following afternoon.

The two were seated on a bench beneath the shade of an oak tree in her well-tended garden, watching her three oldest children playing on the lawn, while her youngest, two-year-old Jasper, burred nonsense from her lap.

“They certainly have,” Penelope said. “Gretchen just turned ten this summer, and never have I met a more headstrong, opinionated girl.” An affectionate smile plumped her freckled cheeks, and her dark blue eyes twinkled with pride. “I have exceedingly high hopes for her.”

Frederick chuckled, gazing out at the children. “And what about Willie?” he asked, as his oldest nephew chased his sisters across the grass and through the hedgerows. “Is he as headstrong as Gretchen?”

“Oh, no. Willie is my introspective child. He questions everything and will not rest until he finds the answer. And Cathy is my bookworm chatterbox. She can be quite shy, but once she knows you, she’ll talk both your ears off if you let her.”

Frederick nodded. “I experienced that for myself at breakfast. She taught me more than I thought there was to know about the classifications of rocks.”

Penelope laughed, her arms tightening around Jasper as her shoulders shook with mirth. “Welcome to my world, Freddy. Welcome to my world.”

He smiled, his gaze falling on his little nephew with the wispy brown curls and

dimpled cheeks. “Jasper looks a lot like your William, doesn’t he?”

Penelope had given the Darrington blue eyes and coal-black hair to all her children save Jasper, who had inherited his father’s green eyes and light brown locks.

“Yes, he does,” she said, looking down at her son. “He looks more like his father every day, it seems. Sometimes this look will come across his face, a stubborn look that reminds me of William whenever he was close to losing an argument.” Her smile faded a bit and her eyes grew misty.

“I’m sorry, Pen,” Frederick said, reaching over to lay a hand on her arm. “It isn’t fair, William leaving you like he did.”

It was an odd way of phrasing it, he knew, as if William’s absence was of his own doing, instead of an unfortunate accident involving his horse. But for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to say that William had died. It felt kinder, somehow, to say that he’d left.

Whether it was kinder to himself or to his sister, he didn’t know.

“It isn’t fair, no,” Penelope said with a sniffle. “It’s been over a year, though, Freddy. I feel as though my days of crying ought to have ended by now.”

Her gaze flitted to his, searching yet vulnerable, and Frederick knew what she wanted to hear.

“That’s silly, Pen. William was your husband, and you loved him.” He squeezed her arm. “You mourn for him as long as you need to, hm?”

A grateful smile turned her lips. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

She looked down at her son and kissed his cheek before bouncing him on her knee, which earned an ear-splitting peal of joyous baby giggles.

Frederick couldn't help but laugh, too.

"I've missed you, you know," she said a moment later, and though she was looking at Jasper, Frederick knew the words were for him. "I'm so glad you're here, even if there was an ulterior motive to your visit."

Frederick's stomach sank with dread, and he shifted uneasily in his seat. Penelope had granted him a reprieve yesterday, but apparently that reprieve had come to an end.

"A married woman, Freddy?" Her gaze met his, the weight of her stare cumbersome. "What on earth were you thinking?"

"An unhappily married woman," he said, though he knew it would make not a bit of difference to her, nor should it. Unhappy or not, Serena was married, and he knew trifling with her was wrong, but he'd done it anyway.

"Married is married," Penelope said firmly. "And you were raised to comport yourself with decency and honor."

He sighed. His sister always had known just how to twist the knife.

"I know that," he grumbled.

She raised one brow.

"I know, Pen," he repeated.

“Then why did you do it?”

Because I wanted to.

Because I could.

But all he said was, “I don’t know. It simply happened.”

Penelope snorted. “Twaddle. One doesn’t simply fall into an affair, Freddy. It requires active participation and subterfuge.”

She was right, of course, but the affair with Serena truly had required little effort on his part.

She’d been the pursuer, and she’d pursued him rather vigorously.

He was flattered by the attention, and rather bored with his life, so he’d thought, Why not?

He’d never bedded a married woman before, and Serena was a famed beauty, and rumored to be an enthusiastic bedmate—which proved to be true, by the by.

Of course, Penelope wouldn’t want to know that, nor did he care to tell her.

Indeed, he would rather fart in front of the Queen than talk about sex with his sister, favorite or not. The idea made him feel quite ill.

“I am aware you are something of a rogue, Freddy,” Penelope said quietly, “but even you must admit it was not well done of you. Mother wrote to me after the gossip reached her ears—did you know that? She blamed herself, and lamented her own behavior the whole letter through, asking where she went wrong with you. You’ve

disappointed her dreadfully. ”

“I know I have,” he said with a bite to his voice that Penelope did not deserve. “Robert already gave me this lecture, and I am well and truly contrite.”

His sister gave a disapproving sniff. “Are you?”

“I am.”

“And it won’t happen again?”

“It won’t,” he replied. “I promise.”

“Good. You are fortunate, you know, that you came away from this relatively unscathed. I should hate to think what might have happened if—”

“Mama! Mama! ”

A shrill little cry rent the air, interrupting Penelope’s lecture, and Frederick turned as Willie called for his mother again, his voice a squeak as he struggled to break free from his sister, whose skinny arms were wrapped around his neck.

“Gretchen! Release your brother at once!” Penelope called out.

“But, Mama, he called me a smelly toad!” Gretchen’s voice was hot with indignation.

“You are a smelly toad,” Willie grunted, perhaps unwisely considering his position.

“I am not ,” his sister argued, still holding onto his neck. “I do not smell, and if anyone resembles a toad, it’s you . With your toady eyes and fishy lips, it’s a wonder we haven’t released you back into the wild.”

Frederick had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing, though Penelope did not seem amused. Of course, as their mother, she undoubtedly bore witness to scenes like this every day, which must grow wearisome.

“Here,” Penelope said with a sigh as she handed Jasper to Frederick. “Do not drop him, please. I’ll be back in a moment.”

And off she went to mediate her older children, leaving Frederick alone with the chubby little drooler on his lap.

“Well,” he said, a bit awkwardly, “what shall we talk about, tiny man? Horses? Women? Politics?” He wrinkled his nose. “No. Not politics.”

Jasper blew a raspberry and reached his hands out to curl all ten of his undoubtedly sticky fingers around Frederick’s cravat. A beaming, gap-toothed smile plumped his round, rosy cheeks as he wrinkled the formerly-pristine white silk.

Frederick smiled, and he was not so hardened that he could not admit his heart melted a little. Jasper was an endearing little lad, and so were his siblings, as Frederick had discovered last night at dinner.

He’d spent very little time with his sister’s children over the years, a reality that was entirely of his own making.

He’d always been too busy to visit, too wrapped up in his own life—his self-gratifying lifestyle—to bother with visiting his family.

Somehow, he’d become this selfish, self-absorbed person he barely recognized, and he didn’t know if the change had been gradual, or if he’d always been this way and was only now seeing it.

Either way, he didn't much like the man he was now or the life he'd been leading these last few years. He was weary of it—bored of it—and he wanted to leave it all behind.

He would leave it all behind, only he had no idea what to do with himself if he did.

He sighed, and shoved the troubling thoughts away for another day, turning his attention to his nephew again, who was now chewing on his cravat with vigor.

Chuckling, he reached out to extricate the fine silk from Jasper's mouth but was distracted by the sudden appearance of his sister's butler, Higgins, who walked past him to speak with Penelope, his words too soft for Frederick to hear.

"Oh, yes, it's Tuesday, isn't it?" Penelope said. "I'd nearly forgotten. Please ask Miss Grayling to join us out here, Higgins, and take the children inside with you. Their playroom must be tidied up or there will be no dessert after dinner."

The butler bowed amidst the children's chorus of groans, but as Higgins headed back toward the house, Gretchen, Willie and Cathy dutifully followed.

"I hope you do not mind the interruption, Freddy," Penelope said, standing beside the bench with her eye on the house. "Miss Grayling is my dearest friend, and she comes every Tuesday to take tea with me."

"Of course I don't mind," he replied. "Shall I excuse myself early?"

"Only if you think there's a chance you'll misbehave."

Frederick's brows flicked up. "Why would I misbe-"

"Lily!" Penelope stepped toward the house, a warm smile on her lips. "How lovely to

see you. Come, join us.”

Etiquette dictated Frederick must stand, but he did so slowly, cradling his nephew firmly in his arms.

He turned to meet this Miss Grayling, only to discover his sister’s dearest friend was none other than the prickly innkeeper he’d met yesterday on the road. She wore another simple gown today, this one a muted green, and again no bonnet, her thick ebony braid coiled atop her head.

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“Thank you, Penelope,” she was saying to his sister, a small but genuine smile curving her pale pink lips as she and Penelope shared a brief embrace.

Miss Grayling—Lily, apparently—had not noticed him yet, and while he stood there, watching her and waiting, tingles of anticipation skittered up his spine.

“Lily,” Penelope said, “I would like to introduce you to my youngest brother, Mr. Frederick Darrington. Freddy, this is Miss Lily Grayling, my dearest friend in all the world.”

Miss Grayling’s gaze had met his halfway through the introductions and, save for an almost imperceptible stiffening of her spine, he might have believed she did not recognize him.

Her smile never slipped, and her expression revealed nothing. Frederick admired her self-containment. He himself had often been likened to an open book.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Darrington,” she murmured, dipping into a curtsy. “It is...lovely to meet you.”

Frederick bowed his head, carefully shifting Jasper from one arm to the other. “Miss Grayling. It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Again?” Penelope parroted, her gaze flicking back and forth between them. “Have you two met before?”

“Oh, yes,” Frederick said, smiling. “I met Miss Grayling and the lovely Blythe

yesterday on the road. Of course, I had no idea then that she was your friend. She was simply a lady in distress, so, naturally, I stopped and offered my assistance.”

He was speaking to his sister but looking at Miss Grayling, who was the picture of serenity, though Frederick would wager everything he owned that she was trying not to roll her eyes.

“Distress?” Penelope’s brows were deeply furrowed. “What distress? Did something happen? Lily, were you hurt?”

“No, no, it was nothing like that,” Miss Grayling said calmly, holding her hands up. “Blythe had escaped the barn again and I was trying to bring her home, but she did not wish to go. You know how stubborn she can be. I was not, however, in distress .”

Frederick challenged her with one raised brow. “But you will admit you needed my assistance.”

A beat of silence passed, and then, begrudgingly: “I will admit to accepting your assistance.”

The qualification made him smile. “And how is the fair lady Blythe today?”

“She is very well, thank you.”

It was quite possibly the prickliest reply he had ever heard. His smile deepened. “I am very glad to hear that.”

“Right. Well.” Penelope clapped her hands together. “Now that the introductions have been made, will you please excuse us, Freddy? Miss Grayling and I have...business to discuss.”

“Business?” Frederick arched his brows. “Then perhaps I ought to stay, Pen, in case Miss Grayling needs my assistance. Again.”

Miss Grayling parted her lips to reply, but a flicker of consternation lit her eyes and then her mouth snapped shut, as if she dearly wished to say more but couldn’t because there were children present.

“She won’t,” Penelope said firmly. “Goodbye, Freddy.”

Chuckling over the unsubtle hint, he transferred Jasper to his sister’s arms. “Goodbye, Penelope. And, Miss Grayling...” He bowed his head to her. “Until we meet again.”

And, with his sister shooting daggers with her eyes and Lily Grayling avoiding his gaze altogether, Frederick turned and headed for the house, smiling all the way there.

Lily did not watch Frederick Darrington exit the garden, though she certainly wanted to. He was just so delectable with all that tousled black hair, the chiseled jawline, those intelligent, teasing eyes. He quite literally made her belly clench.

And he was Penelope’s brother.

She had completely forgotten he was coming to Little Bilberry this week, so when she’d met the stranger on the road yesterday, it hadn’t occurred to her he might be a Darrington.

And it certainly hadn’t occurred to her that she would see him again, standing in Penelope’s garden with little Jasper in his arms, his silk cravat askew and drooping like sodden seaweed.

The cravat was likely damaged beyond repair, but Mr. Darrington didn’t seem to

mind a whit.

Her belly gave another unwelcome flutter.

Why, oh, why did the handsome stranger from yesterday have to be Penelope's brother? She'd hoped never to see him again, but now it seemed he would be in Little Bilberry for several days, and worse, staying in her dearest friend's house.

Curses. She did not want him here. He was too handsome, too charming, too tempting . And she did not want to be tempted.

"I apologize for my brother's behavior," Penelope said, claiming a seat on the bench and settling Jasper on her lap. "Freddy is a good enough sort, but he is a flirt, and a rather successful one at that. Please do not fall victim to his silver tongue."

Lily sat down beside Penelope and folded her hands primly in her lap. "There is no chance of that happening, I assure you. I have absolutely no interest in men, least of all silver-tongued rogues."

Frederick Darrington's broad shoulders and mischievous smile flashed through her mind.

Well, almost no interest.

"I suppose he is something of a rogue," Penelope said with a sigh. "I love him dearly, though. Of course, he drives me mad, as well. He's so clever, so capable, yet he wastes his life on parties and trysts and meaningless frivolities. I want more from him, more for him."

"He is still a young man," Lily pointed out.

“He’s five-and-twenty,” Penelope said flatly. “William and I were both twenty-one when we became betrothed. It is time Freddy grew up.”

“I do not disagree with you,” Lily said with a rueful smile, “but I will admit, a part of me envies men like your brother. I think I’d like more frivolity in my life.”

“Wouldn’t we all?” Penelope huffed out a laugh and then, as if feeling guilty over the remark, dropped a kiss on Jasper’s head.

“Not that I wish to change my life, of course,” Lily said. “I love running the inn with Gran, and I’m grateful for everything I have here, but...” She blew out a covetous sigh. “A little revelry would be lovely on occasion. I’d even settle for a little relaxation.”

“And you certainly deserve it,” Penelope said. “You work harder than anyone I know.”

Lily shrugged. “I enjoy it, mostly. But I wouldn’t mind being a little less busy every now and then.”

Penelope bussed Jasper’s cheek noisily, drawing a squeal of delight that made Lily smile, even as it tugged at her heart. She enjoyed spending time with Penelope and her children, but it could be painful, too, being this close to the kind of family she yearned for yet might never know herself.

“Have you considered hiring someone to help out at the inn?” Penelope asked as she fussed with the collar of Jasper’s white cotton frock.

“We cannot afford it.”

It wasn’t strictly true, but Lily would rather do the work herself and set aside the coin

she might have spent on wages in case of future hardships or unplanned repairs.

“Well, what about a husband then?” Penelope asked. “Some fit young man to warm your bed and help you run the inn?”

“You sound like my grandmother,” Lily said with a roll of her eyes. “But, no, our situation is not so dire that I must consider marriage.”

Penelope slid her an assessing look. “Does your situation need to be dire to compel you to take a husband?”

“Absolutely. Dire verging on destitute.”

Penelope laughed. “And if a dashing stranger should arrive at the inn, profess to you his undying love and beg you to be his wife, would you still refuse to marry?”

Lily snorted. “I would have a better chance at being besieged by Spanish pirates,” she said dryly. “But, yes, even if such an unlikely event should occur, I would probably refuse him.”

“Probably? Then there is a chance you would accept.”

Lily smiled at her friend’s triumphant tone. “A very small one. Miniscule, even.”

Penelope harrumphed but said nothing more on the subject.

Lily often wished she had her friend’s optimism, but if she were ever to agree to marry, her suitor must prove himself a constant and faithful man of honor, and Stephen’s betrayal had made it difficult to believe she would ever meet a man like that.

Even if she did—even if a faithful, constant, unmarried gentleman of honor should somehow find his way to Little Bilberry, he would then have to meet her, fall in love with her, and agree to spend the rest of his days running the inn with her.

Not even an eternal optimist would like those odds.

Which was precisely why she'd abandoned such dreams. Mostly.

“Do you think you will ever marry again?” Lily asked suddenly, and immediately regretted the words, fearing she might have upset her friend.

But Penelope didn't seem upset. She considered the question in silence as she bounced Jasper on her knee and then shrugged.

“Perhaps. Someday. If someone wonderful comes along. He would have to be kind like William—gentle, patient, with a warm smile and intelligent eyes. And, of course, he would have to like children.” She glanced at Lily with a sheepish smile.

“What do you suppose the chances are of my meeting a man like that here in Little Bilberry?”

“I'm not even certain a man like that exists,” Lily said mildly. “But if he does, I know he will find you wherever you might be.”

Penelope grinned, clearly pleased with the answer, and then the two fell silent as Annie the housemaid arrived bearing a tray with tea and cakes.

Lily was not an optimist—not anymore, at least—but she'd meant what she said.

If anyone deserved to be happy, to have everything she ever wanted, it was Penelope.

They had only known each other for two years, but Lily had never had a better friend.

Penelope truly was the best of women, and she had suffered a great deal when her husband died.

She deserved to find happiness again with a kind and decent man.

And perhaps there is one for you out there, as well, a voice whispered through her mind, though she hastily shoved it away. She supposed if a wonderful man came along and swept her off her feet, she might be persuaded to marry him.

But mostly she was happy with the way things were, and whenever she felt a little pang of longing, well, the feeling usually didn't last long, and she was much too busy to dwell on it, anyway.

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Seated at the sturdy oak escritoire in his sister's comfortably elegant drawing room, Frederick blew out an exasperated sigh, his breath rustling the blank sheet of foolscap that seemed to be staring back at him.

He'd been in Little Bilberry nearly five days now, and he still hadn't written to his mother to let her know he'd arrived. It was unlike him.

He was an imperfect man with many faults, yes, but when it came to his mother, he was a faithful correspondent. Usually.

The problem with this particular letter was that he had no blasted idea what to say to her. What to say for himself.

There was nothing he could say for himself.

His recent conduct had been a mistake, a blot on the Darrington name, and because of it, his mother was ashamed of him.

She'd spared barely a word for him these last few weeks since the end of his affair, and the morning he left London for Hampshire, all she gave him was a cool kiss on the cheek and an even cooler farewell.

He almost wished she'd shouted at him instead, or at least scolded him.

A quiet Adelaide Darrington was not a good thing.

Sitting back in the desk chair, Frederick pinched the bridge of his nose with his

thumb and forefinger, his shoulders tensing beneath his wool daycoat.

He truly did feel terrible for what he'd done, and he genuinely wanted to make amends with his mother.

He owed her an apology, but he had no idea what to say, or how to say it, and that was a foreign feeling for him. One he did not like.

"Frederick?" Penelope's voice called out from the hall. "Oh, here you are," she said, walking into the drawing room. "I think I—oh. Apologies, you're busy. I'll leave you to your letter."

"No," Frederick said quickly, dropping his pen into the inkwell before turning in his chair. "My letter can wait. Please, join me."

That was all the encouragement his sister needed. She dropped onto the chaise and propped her feet atop the rosewood sofa table, heaving an appreciative sigh as her eyes fell closed.

Frederick frowned. "Are you unwell, Pen? You look tired."

"I am tired," she said, smiling without opening her eyes. "Come to think of it, I'm always tired."

"Why don't you take a nap?"

"I wish I could, but I have too much to do this afternoon." Another sigh overtook her, and her eyes popped open.

"I must drop off a basket of goods for the widow Bates on my way to the village, where the children's new shoes are waiting to be retrieved.

Then I must head to the inn and pick up the bread and cheese Lily's grandmother sets aside for me every week.

"She gave a regretful hum. "A nap does sound lovely, though."

"Then why don't you let me complete those errands for you?" Frederick asked, the words slipping from his mouth nearly as fast as they'd entered his brain.

Penelope's eyes lit with surprise before narrowing to wary slits. "And why would you want to do that?"

He shrugged. "I could use the excuse to stretch my legs, and I'd like to do this for you. Your well-being is the reason for my visit, after all."

She raised her eyebrows, demanding honesty.

"One of the reasons," he amended.

Penelope considered his offer for an unflatteringly long moment before finally giving in. "Very well," she said. "But take the children with you. And if you should see Lily at the inn"—she gave him a hard look—"you will behave yourself."

"I shall not seduce Miss Grayling today, I promise." He held up a hand to emphasize the vow.

"That isn't funny, Freddy." Penelope frowned at him, her blue eyes somber, and Frederick let his hand fall to his lap.

"Lily is a dear girl and a wonderful friend," she went on. "She has been through much, and she works so hard with very little help. The last thing she needs is a—" She broke off. "Please do not trifle with her, Freddy. Promise me you won't."

Frederick stiffened, indignation surging through him, and it was on the tip of his tongue to object.

Only, he didn't. What right did he have to be offended?

He'd earned his sister's distrust, hadn't he?

He only had himself and his poor decisions to blame, and all he could do now was do better, and work to earn her trust again.

"I promise, Pen," he said quietly. And he meant it.

One hour later, Frederick set out from the house into the mild October weather with Gretchen, Willie and little Cathy in tow, all three children chattering excitedly at once.

It was a good day for a walk, with its mostly cloudless sky and calm, intermittent breeze. The happy brood stopped first at the widow's cottage, where the mother of four accepted their basket of goods with harried but grateful thanks.

The foursome then carried on down the scenic dirt lane and into the charming village square.

As instructed, they collected the children's new boots at the milliner's, and then Frederick surprised his nieces and nephew with a stop at the sweets shop where he purchased a peppermint stick for each of them.

And now, lastly, they were on their way to their final stop of the day: The Weeping Whiskers Inn.

Anticipation filled him at the thought of seeing Miss Grayling again.

The reaction was bemusing, to say the least, but he gave it a mental shrug.

Lily Grayling was an attractive woman, and he was a man with a keen interest in attractive women, especially one who was so determined not to be charmed by him.

Perversely, her determination to resist only made him more determined to keep trying.

“Uncle Frederick?”

He turned to find his nephew beside him, his short legs pumping, the half-finished peppermint stick bobbing in his hand.

The boy’s sisters trailed behind them, bickering over something, though Frederick couldn’t make out what they were discussing. It was probably just as well.

“Yes, Willie?” he asked with an encouraging smile, intentionally slowing his strides.

“Do you have... sisters?” Willie’s nose scrunched up as he said the word, as if it stunk of rotten eggs, and Frederick had to suppress a laugh.

“I have two, like you,” he said. “Your mother is my sister, and so is your Aunt Margaret.”

Willie’s frown cleared, surprise taking its place, as if he’d only just learned that sisters could also be aunts.

“Do you like them?” he asked, his tone of voice both curious and dubious.

“I do. Don’t you like yours?”

The boy's gaze dropped to his new boots, and he shrugged. "Sometimes. But Cathy is such a baby and she's always asking me to play baby games, and Gretchen thinks she can order me about just because she's older than me." He huffed out a sigh. "It's very annoying."

Frederick nodded. "I know exactly how you feel."

"You do?"

"I have two older sisters and an older brother. I used to have two older brothers, but George is—" He broke off and cleared his throat, attempting to dislodge the unexpected lump there.

"Dead?" Willie supplied, before giving his peppermint stick another lick.

A pang of regret speared Frederick's chest as George's face flashed through his mind, his ever-present smile wide with mischief.

It was a smile he hadn't seen in nearly ten years, since before George left to fight Boney in the war.

He died in battle in 1814, one of the many fallen soldiers who had spent their final moments on the battlefield at Toulouse.

"Yes," Frederick said softly. "He's dead."

Willie nodded. "My father died. He fell off his horse. I was only seven then."

"I know. That's..." He cleared his throat again. "I'm sure you miss him very much."

His nephew nodded again then went back to his peppermint stick, and Frederick

couldn't help but feel he'd let the boy down. He should have said more, something meaningful and wise. After all, he knew what it was to lose someone. He knew what it was to lose a father.

Frederick was only a few years older than Willie when his own father had unexpectedly died, and the loss had hit him hard. His father was his closest confidant, his idol, and suddenly he was gone.

He knew exactly what Willie was going through, and because of that, he felt a kinship with the boy, and a certain duty to him. He knew he should say more, but what? The right words eluded him, and his chest grew tight with regret and disappointment.

Useless. Good for nothing. Idiot.

He batted back the self-recrimination, and nearly heaved a sigh of relief as The Weeping Whiskers Inn finally came into view.

"There it is!" Gretchen cried excitedly, as if they'd arrived at a unicorn sanctuary instead of a roadside inn.

The girl shot past Frederick, her two long braids flying behind her, and her siblings followed, Willie clearly determined to keep pace with his older sister while Cathy trailed after them, her gaze downcast, seemingly more interested in admiring her new boots than keeping up with her siblings.

The door to the inn opened as the foursome approached, and a small, gray-haired woman walked out onto the front step, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Mrs. Grayling! Mrs. Grayling!"

The children called out to the woman, who smiled as they ran up to her.

Ah, then this must be Miss Grayling's grandmother, Frederick thought, liking the warm smile on the older woman's face as she greeted them.

"Well, this is a delightful surprise!" she said. "And what are you three little monkeys up to today?"

"We're running errands for Mama," Gretchen said proudly.

"We have new boots! See?" Willie stuck one skinny leg out to show her.

"Very smart, indeed," Mrs. Grayling said with an approving nod. "And what's that you have there, Miss Cathy? Is that a peppermint stick?"

Cathy gave a shy nod before popping the peppermint into her mouth.

"Our uncle bought one for each of us," Gretchen explained.

"Well, and wasn't that generous of him? I do hope you all thanked him properly." Mrs. Grayling's friendly brown eyes met Frederick's.

"We did," Willie assured her.

"Good day to you, madam," Frederick said with a bow. "I am Frederick Darrington, Mrs. Marsh's brother."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Darrington. I am Charlotte Grayling. I run this inn with my granddaughter."

"Miss Lily." He nodded. "Yes, we've met."

Her gray brows rose. “Have you? I didn’t know that.”

It was no great surprise to Frederick that Miss Grayling had not mentioned him, but it still smarted, and more than he cared to admit.

“Please forgive the interruption,” he said. “I can see that you are very busy. My sister sent us here to collect the milk and cheese she says you will have set aside for her...?”

“Oh, yes. Of course. I have everything ready and waiting for you in the kitchen. My granddaughter should be inside, and she will be able to help you.” Mrs. Grayling turned to the children. “As for me, I was just on my way to milk Blythe. Perhaps the children would like to come and help me?”

All three of them shouted their enthusiastic agreement, even shy little Cathy, and Frederick shared a smile with Mrs. Grayling.

“Thank you, madam,” he said. “I think the children would like that.”

How much help they would prove to be was less certain, he thought, as he watched Mrs. Grayling usher the children toward the barn.

He was almost sorry to miss the event.

But as he turned and headed for the inn’s front door, anticipation quickened his steps, and he smiled.

Almost, but not quite.

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On the whole, Lily enjoyed helping her grandmother run the inn. She was not an idle person by nature, and she liked keeping her hands busy with making up the beds and sweeping the rooms.

What she wasn't so fond of was catering to the every whim of their guests.

Most of the people who walked through these doors were perfectly lovely, but occasionally they were visited by a guest who was a bit more...challenging than most, and it was serving those guests that tested her fortitude, not to mention her patience.

Of course, she never had been the most patient girl in the world and never would be.

With a silent sigh, Lily moved to the next table in the now-empty dining room and stacked another dirty plate on top of her growing pile before wiping the table clean with a rag.

Yes, life as an innkeeper was undoubtedly easier for those who were tolerant, sweet-natured, personable. But Lily was none of those things. She was reserved and prickly and proud, which made dealing with the demands of the rude and entitled especially onerous.

Still, she would rather put up with catering to the inn's guests than go back to the life she used to lead in London, nights filled with soireés and dinner parties, days spent butchering Mozart on the pianoforte and reading books she'd read a dozen times before.

Her life had changed so much since then, and she liked what it had become, even if her new circumstances meant tolerating the occasional annoying guest.

“Good afternoon, Miss Grayling,” a male voice said from behind her. “You are looking especially lovely today. That gown becomes you.”

Lily stiffened but did not turn around. “Thank you, Mr. Carstairs,” she replied coolly as she continued stacking plates. “And what can I do for you today, sir?”

“First of all,” he said in that condescending way that set her teeth on edge, “you can give me a smile. You have such a pretty smile, and I have not seen it yet today.”

Lily closed her eyes briefly. God give me strength.

Clutching the wash rag in both hands, she slowly turned to face him, and through gritted teeth, gave the toad the smile he’d asked for.

Satisfaction lit his light brown eyes, and he openly ogled her, as if it were not only appropriate but his due, while gripping the lapels of his well-tailored daycoat, which complemented his fawn breeches and crimson cravat.

With his thick blond hair, neatly-trimmed mustache, and slender build, Charles Carstairs might have been a handsome man—if he had an entirely different personality, of course.

“Secondly,” he went on in the same supercilious tone of voice, “I would like very much for you to accompany me on a stroll through the orchard. It is a lovely day out, and I think you would enjoy a little...conversation amongst the fresh autumn air.”

The inflection he gave the word made it clear he had much more than conversation in mind. Lily’s stomach turned, and she struggled to keep her smile in place. “Thank

you for the invitation, sir, but I'm afraid I must decline. I simply have too much to do today."

And I would rather waltz with a crocodile than walk with you anywhere, you odious lout.

"But surely your grandmother could take on one or two of your chores," he persisted. "I'm certain she would readily agree if she knew I was the reason for it."

He was probably right, but nothing on this earth could compel her to admit it.

"Perhaps she would," she said, "but she has her own duties which already keep her far busier than a woman her age ought to be."

He looked as though he might argue, but instead said, "Perhaps tomorrow, then?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I have even more to do tomorrow."

"Then you name the day." He stepped closer to her and wrapped his hands around her upper arms, his gaze on her mouth.

Lily took a hasty step backward, bumping into the table and rattling the dishes. "Mr. Carstairs—"

"Call me Charles."

The dratted man could not take a hint.

"Mr. Carstairs," she repeated, her temper beginning to flare. "I am very sorry, sir, but I must decline your invitation. Indefinitely."

His thick blond brows drew together, as if she'd said the words in a language long dead. "Decline?" he echoed as his arms dropped to his sides. "But why?"

"Because I...because..."

Because I don't like you, blast it all.

She wanted to scream the words at him, but she knew she must not. He was a guest, and she must treat him with respect, even if he did not deserve it.

She thought she'd made her disinterest perfectly clear in a perfectly nice way, but he either did not see it or did not care.

He'd obviously assumed he would get his way because he was their guest, and his sense of entitlement had left her no choice but to refuse him flat out.

Would he redouble his efforts now? Would he turn angry and retaliate in a violent way? Would he refuse to pay his bill?

Squaring her shoulders, she met his gaze, preparing to speak, but Mr. Carstairs beat her to it.

"I don't understand you, Miss Grayling," he said, his voice several degrees cooler now. "I am an important man with both property and means. You should be honored that a man such as myself would deign even to speak to you, and yet, you reject me."

Curses . She'd angered him. She had to fix this before it grew worse, but what could she say? What excuse could she give that would both soothe his injured pride and eliminate his pursuit of her? Surely there must be something she could say...

And then it came to her.

“I’m betrothed,” she blurted out, the words bursting from her lips like a cannonade. “That is why I cannot accept your invitation, sir. I am promised to another man.”

It was the coward’s way out, but she didn’t care. If a fictional betrothal was what it took to be rid of him while also keeping in his good graces, the deception would be worth the effort.

“Betrothed?” Mr. Carstairs hesitated, eyeing her with surprise and more than a hint of skepticism. “But you have made no mention of a betrothal before. Is it a recent event?”

Very recent , she thought dryly. But she shook her head. “No, it is a long-standing arrangement. I did not mention it before because I believe it is inappropriate to discuss such private matters with our guests.”

“I see,” he said slowly, though it was clear he was not convinced. “And is your betrothed a local gentleman or...?” He trailed off, leaving the question unfinished, though Lily knew what he was asking.

If she was betrothed as she claimed, why had he never laid eyes on her intended?

“No,” she said, twisting the wash rag in her hands. “No, he is not a local man. He lives in...”

She scrambled for a plausible story, a reason why she would be separated from the man she was to wed, and then the front door swung open, and Frederick Darrington stepped inside, his gaze sweeping over the room as he shut the door behind him.

“He lives in London,” Lily said slowly, her gaze fastened on Mr. Darrington’s face, “and—talk of the devil—here he is now.”

Pasting a smile to her lips, she swept past Mr. Carstairs and crossed the room toward her would-be savior, her throat suddenly very dry.

Mr. Darrington's eyes met hers and he smiled as she approached him, his lips parting as if he meant to speak.

Lily rushed forward and pressed a hand to his forearm, giving it a firm squeeze. His mouth snapped shut, confusion knitting his straight black brows.

"Good afternoon, darling," she said brightly before rising up on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek.

Then, as subtly as she could, she brought her lips to his ear and whispered, "He believes we are betrothed. Play along. Please."

Frederick had barely a moment to register Miss Grayling's words before she was looping her arm through his and tugging him deeper into the dining hall. That was when he noticed the fair-haired gentleman standing stiffly a few paces away, studying him with ill-concealed displeasure.

"Mr. Carstairs, this is my betrothed, Mr. Frederick Darrington." Miss Grayling gazed up at Frederick and the look in her eyes almost had him believing she was fond of him. "Darling, this is Mr. Charles Carstairs, one of our esteemed guests. I was just telling him about you when you arrived."

Frederick smiled. Darling? He had no idea how he had become involved in this farce, but he was not upset about it.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Carstairs," he said, bowing his head to the gentleman.

“Er, yes. Indeed.” Carstairs cleared his throat, his mustache twitching. “Forgive me. I am—I was not aware that Miss Grayling was to be married.”

And, from the looks of it, the news did not please him.

“That’s our Miss Grayling,” Frederick said, gazing down adoringly at his faux fiancée. “She is a woman of many secrets.”

Her cheeks flushed pink, and she cleared her throat, genuinely, adorably flustered. “Yes, well, I—we—” She cleared her throat again. “You must excuse us, Mr. Carstairs. As I said, I have a great deal of work to do today.”

Carstairs nodded, looking anything but happy as he gave a clipped bow. “Of course, Miss Grayling. Good day to you both.”

He hastened for the door, his expensive leather boots thumping noisily on the floorboards, and then he was gone, and Frederick was alone with only Miss Grayling and a very interesting silence.

He turned from the door to face the woman beside him, noting her still-pink cheeks and the bright turquoise eyes which seemed to be looking everywhere but at him.

Finally, she met his gaze, though she offered no comment, as if embarrassment had rendered her tongue temporarily lame.

Frederick arched his eyebrows, asking without words just what the devil was going on.

Miss Grayling pursed her lips, the same soft lips that had brushed his cheek only moments ago, managing somehow to look sheepish and prickly at the same time.

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“Thank you,” she finally said. “And I’m sorry. I did not like to use you in that way, but Mr. Carstairs was skeptical when I told him I was betrothed, and then there you were at the door and before I knew it...” She trailed off, letting her shrug finish for her.

“You claimed me,” Fredrick said with a smile.

She blinked at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Before you knew it, you had claimed me.”

“I claimed you were my betrothed,” she corrected, her gaze narrowing on his smile. “I was trying to get rid of Mr. Carstairs.”

The words snuffed out his amusement, and he frowned, anger roiling in his belly. “Has he been harassing you?” The thought had his hands curling into fists.

“He’s never behaved in an ungentlemanly way,” she said, “but he is persistently interested in me.”

“And you’re not interested in him.”

It was an unnecessary remark, but he made it anyway, and Miss Grayling nodded, twisting the rag she held in her hands before slipping it into her dress pocket.

“I tried to make him understand that without saying it, but he couldn’t seem to grasp my meaning.”

Or he didn't want to. And that made Frederick even angrier.

"So, after I declined another invitation to walk with him today and he began to grow angry," she continued, "I lied and told him the reason I could not go was because I was promised to another man."

"Why not simply tell him you're not interested?"

The look she shot him implied his question was terribly naive. "Because he is a paying guest."

Frederick could read between the lines, and he saw the uncomfortable truth of her situation.

Carstairs was a guest at her inn, and as with all guests, she must tread carefully or risk incurring an undesired, potentially harmful consequence.

The unfairness of it twisted his gut. Life could be bloody unjust sometimes, especially for women, and women like her, pretty and single, were forced to endure the attentions of men simply because they were guests at her inn.

As if that gave them the right to take liberties, to treat her unkindly and with no respect for her feelings or wishes.

"I see," he said, the words roughened. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged again, as if to say it was a woman's lot in life, which was absolute bollocks so far as he was concerned. But before he could say so, Miss Grayling spoke again.

"I am sorry for placing you in this position. It was not well done of me, no matter the

reason, and I think it would be best if you would stay away from the inn, at least until Mr. Carstairs' departure."

Frederick found himself nodding, even as another idea entered his brain and slipped from his lips. "Or I could do the opposite," he said. "I could visit the inn every day until he leaves."

She frowned. "For what purpose?"

"To keep him out of your hair. I didn't think he seemed totally convinced by our charade. But if he sees me here every day..." He spread his hands wide.

Miss Grayling eyed him for a long moment, long enough for Frederick to suspect she was scrutinizing more than just his offer.

"And what would you want in exchange for your services?" she finally asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Frederick couldn't help but smile. "Have you always been so cynical, Miss Grayling?"

She cocked one brow. "Then you don't want anything in return?"

"Actually, I do."

A knowing look crossed her face. "Which is?"

"I want you to let me help you out around the inn."

"Excuse me?" she asked, confusion knitting her brow.

“I want you to let me help you—”

“I heard what you said, Mr. Darrington,” she interrupted, holding up a hand. “What I don’t understand is why you would wish to do that.”

“I’ve never worked at an inn before,” he said with a lopsided grin. “I thought it might be a fun diversion.”

She stared at him as if he’d said he liked to eat worms.

“You may assign me whatever chores you wish,” he pressed on, “and I will do them all to the best of my ability.”

Still smiling, he returned her unflinching gaze, rather pleased with himself and his selfless offer.

“I do not need your help, Mr. Darrington. I am perfectly capable of managing the fun myself.” Her voice had turned decidedly frosty, but it was nothing to the ice in her turquoise eyes.

Bollocks. He’d offended her.

Frederick sighed inwardly. He wasn’t usually so clumsy with his words, but this woman seemed to upset his balance without even trying.

“I know you don’t need my help,” he assured her. “But wouldn’t it be nice to have it, if only for a few days? Surely your grandmother would accept an offer of free labor.”

Miss Grayling did not smile at the last remark like he’d hoped she would, but she did seem to be considering the idea, and that was something at least. He had no idea what had happened in her past to make her so distrusting, but whatever it was, it must have

cut her very deeply.

“I would like to see Gran rest more,” she mused softly. “And we could use an extra pair of hands in the apple orchard. The trees are brimming with apples.”

“And, of course,” Frederick offered, “the more I’m here at the inn, the less likely Mr. Carstairs will be.”

Miss Grayling nodded slowly, her eyes gleaming, the idea clearly attractive to her.

“All right, Mr. Darrington,” she said briskly. “I accept.”

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Frederick Darrington's smile was a dangerous thing, indeed. Like gazing into the sun for too long or drinking too many glasses of a delicious wine that sets one's head to spinning.

Realizing she was staring, Lily dropped her gaze to his dove gray cravat and sent up a silent prayer that her cheeks weren't as pink as she suspected they were.

Perhaps this arrangement wasn't such a good idea, after all. Perhaps she should put an end to it now, before it even began.

Perhaps—

"Excellent," Mr. Darrington said before she could say she'd changed her mind. "Then I shall return tomorrow morning. I would begin today, but I have my sister's children with me, and I should get them home soon before Penelope begins to wonder where we've got to."

Lily nodded calmly, though her stomach had swooped with relief. "Of course. Tomorrow will be fine."

They truly could use his help, so she would not decline his offer, but she was grateful for the extra time to prepare and hopefully grow more comfortable with the idea of seeing him every day around the inn.

"Excellent," he said again, that belly-fluttering smile still on full display. "Now, I understand you have some bread and cheese set aside for my sister?"

“Oh. Yes, of course. Come with me and I’ll gather it up for you.”

She led him through the dining room toward the kitchens, trying to ignore his nearness, his masculine scent, and the tingles scuttling up her spine, leaving gooseflesh in their wake.

“Where are the children, by the by?” she asked over her shoulder.

“With your grandmother, milking Blythe.”

She smiled. Penelope’s children adored Blythe, not only because she was a sweetheart but because she was a novelty, too. They must have leaped at the chance to help Gran with the milking.

Lily stepped into the kitchen and made her way to the table where Penelope’s goods were waiting. Mr. Darrington paused in the doorway, but she could feel his gaze on her as she began placing wedges of cheese into a burlap sack.

Was he watching her movements? Was he looking at her hands?

Self-consciousness washed over her. She worked hard and her hands showed it, the skin rough and red, her nails clipped short.

She was not a vain person, but her hands were an occasional source of displeasure for her.

She used to have lovely hands, before she came to live at the inn, but now, well, they were a long way from lovely now.

“That bread looks delicious,” Mr. Darrington said as she slipped a loaf into the sack.

“Did you bake it?”

“I did.” Pride swept through her, mingling with the pleasure his compliment had wrought.

“Do you enjoy baking?”

Lily disliked personal questions, but he seemed genuinely interested in her answer, and as they would be working together for the foreseeable future...

“I do, yes.” She tucked another loaf into the sack. “Which is still something of a surprise to me. I’d never baked so much as a biscuit before coming to live with my grandparents.”

She hadn’t given baking even a single thought before coming to the inn, but she’d taken to it with an ease that surprised her. And now, baking bread was one of her favorite chores.

“I just met your grandmother outside,” Mr. Darrington said, leaning against the door jamb. “She’s a charming woman.”

“Yes, she is. Everyone loves Gran.” Indeed, Lily suspected it was impossible not to love her.

“I haven’t met your grandfather yet,” he went on, and the comment held an unasked question.

“He died a year and half ago.” Her voice was even, though the words still made her chest ache.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his blue eyes somber. “He was a nice man?”

She smiled. Her grandfather, though a man of few words, was gentle and funny and

wise. She missed him, but she was grateful she'd had those six months here at the inn, working alongside him and getting to know him better before he was gone.

"He was," she said simply, before clearing her throat. "Well, here we are. This should be everything Penelope requested."

She carried the sack of goods to him and held it out for him to take, and as he slipped the bundle from her hands, their fingers tangled, and the shock of that touch, of his skin against hers, was enough to make her heart skip.

Heat swept through Lily's chest and up to her cheeks, but it wasn't only embarrassment she felt.

It was lust, as well. She might be a virgin, but she knew what it was to want a man, and she wanted this one.

She wanted his lips on hers, his body on hers, all naked limbs and gentle hands and sweet, sinful commands.

"Thank you," he said, his bright blue eyes smiling as he gave the sack a gentle tug, and Lily realized she'd been gaping at him like a simpleton.

Mortified, she released her grip on the burlap and took a hasty step back, bumping into the table with an audible oof.

"Goodbye, Mr. Darrington," she said stiffly, willing him to leave while she still possessed a shred of dignity. "I shall see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he agreed. "But, please, call me Frederick."

"Not Freddy?" For that was what Penelope called him, and apparently, where this

man was concerned, her curiosity would not be denied.

“Only my siblings call me Freddy, and only because they refuse to stop, no matter how often I ask them to.”

He was still smiling, but she caught the thread of frustration in his voice.

She nodded. “Frederick, then.”

He watched her from the doorway, his gaze expectant, and after a moment, he raised one eyebrow.

“And...you may call me Lily,” she said, against her better judgment.

His eyes seemed to deepen several shades, as if showing his pleasure, and then he bowed his head. “Goodbye, Lily. Until tomorrow.”

She watched him turn and walk away, his strides long and confident, the burlap sack swinging at his side.

Leaning a hip against the table, she blew out a frustrated breath. Curses . She could not be trusted around handsome men. Her body began to misbehave, yearning for contact, compromising her judgment. Just look at the silly reaction she’d had to a simple brush of Frederick’s fingers on hers.

Foolish.

And the most foolish part of all was that she was excited to see him again, to feel that shiver of awareness once more, the one that reminded her she was more than making beds and washing tables. She was a woman with needs, desires. Wants.

It did not matter that she couldn't act upon them. At least she knew they were there. Even if she also wished they weren't.

"Goodness me, Penelope's brother certainly is a charming man," Gran said as she walked into the kitchen carrying a pail full of fresh milk.

Lily took it from her and lifted it onto the table with a grunt. Penelope's brother was a bit too charming, in her opinion, but all she said was, "He paid you the exact same compliment."

"That I'm a charming man?" her grandmother teased as she crossed to the wash basin and began rolling up her sleeves.

"That you're charming," Lily said with a smile.

"Well, he must have found you charming, as well. He certainly was in here for a long while."

Lily's cheeks warmed. "Yes, well. That would be Mr. Carstairs' doing."

"Mr. Carstairs?" Gran turned to face her, drying her hands on a clean length of linen. "What did he do?"

Lily told her of the man's insistence and the impromptu and desperate measure she'd taken to get rid of him.

"Well, that was gallant of Mr. Darrington, wasn't it? Offering to go along with this farce until Mr. Carstairs leaves," Gran said, apparently impressed.

"I suppose it was, yes."

“And all he asked for in exchange was to help out around the inn?”

Lily nodded.

“Well, that is...interesting.”

Peculiar was more like it, at least to Lily’s mind. But he seemed genuine in his desire to help, and she could think of no logical reason to refuse. After all, it was free labor.

“I think he is the sort of man who likes to be active,” she said, “and this will give him something to do.”

“Hm.”

Lily did not miss the skepticism in her grandmother’s voice, though she wasn’t entirely sure of its meaning. She refused to ask, however, for she was fairly certain she would not approve of the answer.

Of course, Gran never had required an invitation to share her opinions. She gave them away freely and with much enthusiasm.

“I think it’s more than that,” she said firmly. “I think he wants to get to know you better.”

Lily eyed her. “Whatever happened to your petition to match me with Mr. Carstairs?”

Gran waved a dismissive hand. “That was before I knew how strongly you disliked the man.”

“And now that you do know, it’s on to the next eligible gentleman, is that it?”

“You say that as if you believe I would accept just any man for my granddaughter’s husband.”

Lily lifted her brows as if to say, wouldn’t you?

Gran gave an offended huff. “In any case, Mr. Darrington is not just any man. He is your dearest friend’s brother and the brother of a viscount.”

“Be that as it may,” Lily said, somehow resisting the urge to roll her eyes, “I told you already that I have no desire to marry. I’m happy with the way things are.”

“Whatever you say, dear.” Her grandmother huffed out another sigh. “It’s a pity, though. He is a mighty handsome man.”

“So was Stephen.” The words slipped from Lily’s lips, low and bitter. “Besides, Mr. Darrington is only here for a short visit. His life is in London, not in Little Bilberry.”

“Lives often change, Lily,” Gran said with a gentle smile before returning to her work.

Lily sighed. No one knew better than she did how changeable—how fickle—life could be. And that was precisely why she preferred the safety of sameness.

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The next morning at breakfast, the children were still talking about their adventure at the inn, gushing over the fun they'd all had milking Blythe the cow.

As was often the case with siblings, however, the harmony did not last, and before Frederick was finished with his first cup of coffee, the discussion had devolved into a full-fledged argument over whose efforts had yielded the most milk.

"You are such a liar, Willie," Gretchen said, waving her fork at her brother from across the table. "I filled more than half the pail myself, and then Cathy took her turn, and then you took yours. You couldn't have filled half the pail yourself. It is a mathematical impossibility."

Hiding a smile behind the rim of his cup, Frederick looked at Penelope, who rolled her eyes with exasperated amusement.

"I did so fill half the pail!" Willie cried, his outrage audible, even with a mouthful of egg.

Gretchen snorted. "You did not."

"I did ."

"Liar."

"I am not a liar!" Willie shouted. " You're the liar!" And then he lobbed a crust of bread at his sister's head, missing by mere inches.

Gretchen gasped with great drama and raised her fork as if preparing to retaliate, but then Penelope shot to her feet, and a hush fell over the table.

“Gretchen, William,” she said firmly, “I want you both to apologize to your uncle for your appalling behavior, and then you will take your sister to the nursery, where you will remain until I decide you may leave.”

“Please, Mama, no!” Gretchen cried, but the warning look her mother gave her quickly put an end to her protests.

The two oldest children did as they were instructed, mumbling dejected apologies to Frederick before ushering poor Cathy, who had done nothing wrong, from the breakfast room for the confines of their temporary prison.

“Well,” Frederick said once they were gone, “this has certainly been a lively breakfast so far.”

Penelope dropped onto her chair, wearily brushing a strand of dark hair from her forehead. “Heavens above, those two can argue about anything. My apologies, Freddy. My children are usually better-behaved than that.”

Frederick smiled. “It was like sharing a table with you and Robert when we were young. You two couldn’t make it through a single meal without bickering over something or other.”

“Only because Robert insisted he was right even when he knew he was wrong.”

Frederick nodded. “He always was a know-all.”

“He still is,” Penelope harrumphed, though her eyes held a glint of fondness.

Frederick knew exactly how she felt. Robert had always been proper and responsible, an honorable man who never seemed to make a false step, and while this could sometimes cast him in a sanctimonious light, he did mean well. And he was usually right, not that Frederick would ever admit it to him.

“Thank goodness for George and his peacekeeping skills,” Penelope said, her gaze fixed on the cup of tea in her hands. “Without them, I probably would have murdered Robert.”

Frederick laughed. “Probably?”

“All right, definitely.” And then she was laughing, too.

For the next several minutes, the two siblings reminisced about their growing-up years and then, after finishing off the last of his coffee, Frederick said, “Thank you for another superior breakfast, Pen.”

He pushed his chair back and rose. “Now, if you have no objections, I think I’ll take a stroll through this charming little village of yours and perhaps visit the tavern for a mug of local ale.”

He felt guilty about lying to his favorite sister, but he’d given this arrangement with Lily a great deal of thought and he’d decided it would be best if Penelope didn’t know about it.

Even though his intentions were pure—well, mostly pure—he knew his sister wouldn’t want him around her friend, no matter the reason, and it would simply be better for everyone if she was kept in the dark.

“Of course I have no objections,” Penelope said with a smile. “And if you do stop in at the tavern, you might consider ordering a mug of Mr. MacGregor’s brown ale. It

was always William's favorite."

"I'll do that," Frederick said, feeling like an absolute rat as he pushed his chair in. "Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

"As a matter of fact, there is." She spooned orange marmalade onto a slice of bread and then met his gaze. "You can make me a promise that you will stay out of trouble today."

She took a dainty bite of toast and eyed him pointedly.

Frederick gave her a guileless smile. "What trouble could I possibly get into in Little Bilberry?"

"I don't know, but if anyone can find trouble here, it's you."

The words cut, although he knew there was some truth to them. Still, he couldn't help but say, "I don't look for trouble, you know."

His sister sighed. "I know you don't, Freddy. But neither do you run from it."

He'd had no response to that, no argument or deflection, and even now, as he made his way up the lane toward The Weeping Whiskers Inn, he could find no way to deny the charge. Penelope was right. He might not hunt for trouble, but it seemed to find him, anyway, didn't it?

Did that mean he secretly liked trouble, maybe even welcomed it?

He wasn't sure. In the end, he'd given Pen the promise she'd asked for, and he fully intended to keep it.

He might welcome trouble into his own life, but he did not wish to bring any of it to Lily's door.

He liked her, and her grandmother, and he was sincere in his desire to help them and maybe spend a bit of time with Lily before he returned to London.

Surely there was no harm in that?

Whistling a low, off-key tune, he strolled along the picturesque country lane, suddenly more cheerful than he'd felt since—well, he couldn't honestly remember the last time he was genuinely cheerful.

Oh, he played at being cheerful quite well, but it had been a long while since he'd felt anything more than mild contentment, and even that was usually accompanied by a healthy dose of boredom.

An entirely new experience—like helping out at an inn—was precisely what he needed right now.

The inn in question came into view a few minutes later, and as Frederick approached, still whistling badly, he spotted the elder Grayling woman out front, sweeping the walk in a dark brown dress, a red kerchief covering her short gray hair.

She looked up and paused when she saw him, gripping the broom with one hand and waving to him with the other.

He waved back, smiling as he drew up to her. "Mrs. Grayling, good afternoon," he said. "You are looking especially handsome today. The sunshine is clearly doing you well."

She laughed, deepening the lines framing her dark brown eyes, lines that suggested it

was something she did often. “You needn’t use those plentiful charms on me, Mr. Darrington. Though I will not be unhappy if you do.”

Frederick grinned. He liked this woman.

“Thank you, by the way, for offering your services,” Mrs. Grayling said, propping both hands on the broomstick. “Not only with the chores but also with deterring Mr. Carstairs.” Her nose wrinkled. “It isn’t always easy running this inn, especially for my Lily.”

Frederick nodded. “Does that sort of thing happen often with your male guests?”

She shrugged. “Lily is a pretty girl, unmarried, and with only her ancient grandmother to watch over her. There have been more than a few gentlemen who have shown an interest in her and, unfortunately, not always with marriage in mind.”

Anger surged through Frederick, anger and the impulse to protect, to stand sentry at the inn’s front door and force a promise from each male guest that he would bloody well leave Lily Grayling alone.

Not that Lily was easy prey, of course. He barely knew her, but he’d seen enough to know she could take care of herself.

Even so, he did not like that men came here thinking she was available to them, and that she’d apparently been propositioned for sexual favors as if her favors were freely given, and given away for free, with no expectations attached.

His jaw clenched. He did not like that at all.

The inn’s front door opened behind Mrs. Grayling and Frederick glanced up as Lily walked out, looking lovely in her simple green gown, despite the frown puckering her

brow, as if she knew they had been discussing her.

“Mr. Darrington, you’ve come,” she said, her tone serious, verging on officious.

“It’s Frederick,” he reminded her with a friendly smile. “And, yes, I have come and I’m ready to be put to work.”

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Grayling said brightly. “You can assist Lily in the orchard today. The apples are ripe and begging to be picked.”

He nodded and looked at Lily. “I’m ready when you are.”

“I’m ready,” she said, not returning his smile. She turned toward the house. “Will you please carry that ladder for me?”

He followed the direction of her gaze, and spotted the ladder propped against the wall. “Of course,” he said, before tossing Mrs. Grayling a farewell wink.

He followed after Lily, ladder in tow, toward the rear of the inn where, presumably, the orchard awaited them.

He had to admit he’d been relieved when Mrs. Grayling suggested apple-picking for his first job of the day.

He had volunteered his services readily enough, but, honestly, he wasn’t sure how much help he would be.

He’d done very little real work in his life, and he was a little nervous he would embarrass himself.

Picking apples should be easy, though. Surely anyone could pick apples. Even a

mostly useless sod like him.

In silence, Lily led the way up the dirt path and into the rear garden toward the small orchard of precisely thirteen apple trees.

She was a little surprised that Mr. Darrington—Frederick—had come today.

Yes, this arrangement had been his idea, and he had seemed sincere yesterday when he said he would see her this morning, but she'd learned long ago that promises were not always kept and therefore must be taken with a grain of salt.

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Still, she was grateful he was here, if a tad disappointed to find him just as handsome today as he'd been yesterday. She only hoped she did not embarrass herself.

"The ground here is rather uneven," Lily said as she drew up to the nearest tree, its branches loaded with ripe, red apples. "We'll have to take turns picking while the other holds the ladder steady."

"Right," Frederick said, propping the ladder against the trunk of the tree. "Shall I do the picking first?"

Lily shrugged. "As you wish."

He looked at her, a smile curving his lips as if he were happy to be here, and Lily could do nothing but stare, transfixed by his bright azure eyes and thick black hair, glinting like onyx beneath the late morning sun.

She tore her gaze away and cleared her throat, her skin flushing with a prickly sort of heated tingles that surely meant nothing good. "Basket," she said abruptly and rather too loudly. "We'll need a basket, won't we?"

She bustled away and returned a moment later with a large woven basket she kept stored in the barn.

Avoiding Frederick's gaze, she situated the basket beside the ladder, ensuring it was as balanced as it could be on the uneven patch of grassy ground.

"There," she said, rising again. "It's all ready for you."

She looked at him expectantly, and he took his cue, climbing up the ladder until the lowest branches were within his reach.

Lily did her best not to ogle him as he made his way up, but she was only human, after all, and he possessed a magnificent backside. His fawn-colored trousers fit him to perfection, worn-in but well-made, and well-suited to a day of labor, as were his blue cotton shirt and dove gray shortcoat.

Surprisingly, he seemed just as comfortable in these simpler garments as he did in his elegant Town attire.

He looked just as handsome, too, if not more so, and for one illogical moment she imagined what it would be like to spend a different sort of day with him beneath the shade of an apple tree.

A lazy day spent stretched out on a soft woolen blanket, trading teasing caresses and apple-flavored kisses.

The soft thud of an apple landing in the basket broke her from her improper reverie, and she swallowed hard.

Another apple landed in the basket, followed by a third, and then a fourth, and with each muted thud, the fantasy retreated, batted back by reality.

“Have you always lived here at the inn?” Frederick asked, and the sudden question startled her, making her jump.

She didn’t usually like to talk about herself, but if it kept her thoughts from straying to soft blankets and warm kisses, she would happily answer his questions. Within reason, of course.

“No,” she replied with a shake of her head, though of course he couldn’t see the gesture. “I lived in London before coming to live here about two years ago.”

“And what made you decide to leave London?”

Well, she certainly had no intention of answering that question, at least not honestly. Frederick Darrington was a nice enough man, and it was lovely of him to do this favor for her, but that did not mean she owed him her secrets.

“I...was ready for a change,” she finally said, and the hesitation made her grimace. She’d meant for the words to sound more believable than that, though thankfully he did not ask her to elaborate.

“How long has your family owned the inn?” he asked instead, before plucking another apple and adding it to the growing pile.

“My great-great-grandfather won it with a single hand of cards, and it’s been run by us Graylings ever since.”

“But it’s only you and your grandmother here,” he replied, the inference clear. Where is the rest of your family?

“My father died several years ago,” she said. “And my mother resides in London. She...is not suited for this life.”

The excess and frivolity of London living had never really suited Lily, but her mother reveled in it, as did her sister, Rose.

“What about siblings?” Frederick asked, as if reading her mind. “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“I have one sister.”

She did not offer anything more, hoping he would let the matter drop, but he did not oblige her this time.

“And is she in London with your parents?”

“Yes.” Her hands tightened around the ladder. And she’s married to the man who should have been mine.

“Is she—”

“You certainly do ask a lot of questions, Mr. Darrington,” she interrupted. “Are you always this inquisitive?”

His low chuckle grew louder as he descended the ladder, and Lily stepped back to clear the way, averting her gaze like a lady should, even in the face of temptation.

“It’s Frederick, remember?” he said, turning to face her. “And, to answer your question: no, I’m not. But there’s something about you that inspires my curiosity.”

Lily frowned at him, though she could not deny her heart had skipped a beat. “I can’t imagine what that could be. There is nothing especially interesting about me.”

Frederick arched a brow, his smile teasing as he leaned in to say, “And yet, I am interested.”

Her cheeks warmed, and her throat went dry, as if her entire body had felt those words and liked them far too much.

She swallowed, and because she simply could not help it, her gaze dropped to his

lips, and that affable, oh-so-alluring smile.

She wanted to press her lips to that smile, taste it for herself and caress it with her tongue until her curiosity was satisfied and neither of them could stand the torment a single moment longer. ..

Frederick leaned in further, and Lily's breath hitched, her heart racing as her gaze flew to his.

"Your Mr. Carstairs is watching us," he murmured low, his eyes locked on hers, and although she understood the reason for it, she shivered all the same when he brushed his knuckles across her cheek.

"Shall I kiss you?" he asked, the pad of his thumb tracing her jaw, her chin.

Lily blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Because begging his pardon was better than begging for his kiss.

"Mr. Carstairs," he repeated. "Your unwanted suitor? He's watching us through a window. I thought perhaps you might like to give him something worth seeing."

Lily was not a foolish person. She knew a bad idea when she saw one, and fake engagement or not, kissing Frederick Darrington was a very bad idea.

Still, even smart girls made mistakes. And some mistakes were worth making.

"Yes," she said, over her thundering heart. "All right."

Something akin to approval sparked in his gaze and then he nudged her chin up gently with his thumb, his fathomless eyes fixed on her lips.

He dipped his head with unhurried, focused intent, and Lily let her eyes slide closed, and the subtle scent of his spicy cologne enveloped her, heating her blood and fraying her nerves.

Her body seemed to have forgotten that this wasn't real, that it was nothing but a performance. Or perhaps her body simply didn't care.

Perhaps she didn't care.

Perhaps she simply wanted this kiss, no matter the reason for it.

Frederick's lips brushed over hers, a fleeting touch, soft and warm, and while he did not taste of apples, he was delicious all the same.

Maybe it was the thrill of playacting, or the fact that it had been a very long time since she'd enjoyed a man's kiss, but that brief brush of his lips on hers rocked her to her core and lit her up inside.

"Lily?"

Her eyes popped open, and she blinked, scrambling to gather her wits.

It was not a real kiss, Lily.

She repeated it twice then met Frederick's gaze. "Is Mr. Carstairs gone?"

He nodded, his eyes locked on hers, and the look on his face seemed almost tender, though surely that couldn't be right. Surely that was the effects of the kiss playing tricks on her mind.

She swallowed. "Right. Well, then, we'd best get back to work, hadn't we?"

“I suppose we had,” he replied, and his smile was back in place as if the kiss had never happened.

Of course, it hadn’t been much of a kiss, had it? A single tick of the clock and then it was over. Hardly a kiss worth losing one’s head over.

Shoving all thoughts of kisses to the back of her mind, she dragged the basket of apples, now half-full, to a new section of tree ready to be relieved of its fruit.

Frederick leaned the ladder against the trunk and then Lily climbed up and began picking apples and tossing them into the basket.

Neither of them spoke a word, and the silence between them seemed fraught and uncomfortable, but Lily had to admit the possibility this was her own projection, that it was only she who felt fraught and uncomfortable.

You are being silly , she scolded herself.

For goodness’ sake, she was fretting, and she was not the sort of girl who fretted. Especially over something so silly as a kiss that hadn’t even been real.

“Why aren’t you interested in Mr. Carstairs?”

Lily stilled in the process of tossing an apple into the basket, his question catching her by surprise.

“You’ve met him,” she answered, letting the apple drop. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I will admit, he does seem like a bit of a jackass, but then, most men are.”

She reached for another apple, and there was a bite to her voice as she said, “Meaning

what? That marriage to a 'bit of a jackass' is better than no marriage at all?"

A long moment of silence followed, as if he were debating the wisdom in answering, then finally he said, "It is only you and your grandmother running this inn. A husband would at least help to lighten the load."

Merciful heavens . She was sick to death of hearing that argument.

"Perhaps," she said. "Or he might bring a whole host of new problems with him."

"Perhaps," Frederick parroted. "But you wouldn't be alone."

Lily had considered that many times before.

Being alone wasn't the worst thing in the world, though.

She liked herself and her own company, and she was content with the way things were.

A husband could easily upset the balance, and she wasn't willing to take that risk, especially on a man who was a bit of a jackass.

"I don't mind being alone," she said, rising on her toes to snatch an apple that was just out of reach.

"Don't you? I do."

The confession surprised her, that he would admit to such a vulnerability, and admit it to her, a practical stranger.

"Why?" she asked, before tossing a rotten apple to the ground.

“Because...” He hesitated, or perhaps he was simply gathering his thoughts.
“Because I think too much when I’m alone.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

He was quiet again and she wished she could see his face. Then, in a voice so soft she barely caught the words, he said, “I think it is.”

Lily didn’t dare to ask, but she wondered what he meant by that, what thoughts were so terrible he dreaded being alone with them.

He was such a friendly, charming man that it was easy to assume he was uncomplicated, too.

But, apparently, he wasn’t. He was a man with hidden depths and secrets, and the realization made him all the more attractive to her.

She wanted to know those secrets, dash it all, but to what end? He was leaving soon. And allowing herself to get close to him, to care for him, would do her no good.

Indeed, it would be the height of foolishness.

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“Have you ever done this before?” Lily asked, trying to hide her apprehension as Frederick shifted the axe from hand to hand.

“No,” he replied, flexing his fingers around the wooden handle. “But how difficult can it possibly be for a young, strapping lad like myself?”

His smile was full of boyish confidence, and it was difficult to doubt him when he stood there looking like a Greek god come to life, his blue eyes bright and eager, his black hair falling across his determined brow.

“Be that as it may,” Lily said, battling a smile, “please promise you will be careful. Your sister would never forgive me if I returned you to her in pieces.”

He gave her a grin before turning toward the large stack of wood waiting to be chopped. “I’ll be careful, boss. I promise.”

Smiling to herself, Lily left him to his work and headed for the kitchen, her mind filled with thoughts of all he’d done these last three days.

After they’d finished with the apple trees, he’d spent the next two days washing the windows and clearing away the dust and spider webs from all the eaves and doorways.

No task was beneath him, no job too big or small.

He surprised her constantly with his kindness, his willingness to try, and how easily he’d settled in here, as if he had always been here. As if he intended to stay.

Which, of course, he did not.

Lily paused just outside the kitchen door and turned to glance back at Frederick. He'd removed his coat and was now rolling his shirtsleeves up to the elbow, showing off his strong, well-formed forearms.

The day was a warm one, and she couldn't help but wonder what he would look like with his shirt off altogether, her mind conjuring up a lean, muscled torso and broad, naked shoulders gleaming with perspiration beneath the afternoon sun.

"Lily-pad?"

She startled and her gaze shot guiltily to the now-open doorway, where her grandmother stood watching her with both brows raised high.

"Are you coming inside, or do you intend to stand there staring at Mr. Darrington all day?"

Cheeks burning, Lily followed her grandmother inside, and shut the door behind her, grumbling, "I wasn't staring at Mr. Darrington."

"Hogwash. Of course you were. He is a handsome man, and there is no shame in looking."

Except she hadn't simply been looking. She'd been ogling, and she'd been caught at it. By her grandmother, no less. Her cheeks flushed anew.

"After all, fair is fair," Gran continued as they entered the kitchen. "He stares at you, too."

"He does not," Lily argued, as if offended by the idea, even as a secret thrill

whispered up her spine.

“He does so,” Gran said. “Often.” A feline smile Lily had never seen before curled her grandmother’s lips. “The boy is smitten with you, dear.”

There was that thrill again, a bodily response she could not control, and one that spoke of secret longings she’d been trying to deny.

“Mr. Darrington is not smitten with me,” Lily said firmly, her voice revealing none of the regret the words inspired. “He is a charming man who is helping us temporarily before he returns to London. Any attention he might be paying me is only pretend.”

Her grandmother gave an indelicate snort. “I disagree. Mr. Darrington likes you, and I believe he could come to love you, if you would only encourage him.”

Lily sighed. “Gran—”

“If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for me. I’d like to spend my final days with a handsome young man to feast my eyes upon, preferably one with broad shoulders and firm thighs.”

Lily choked on a laugh. “Gran, please!”

But her grandmother only grinned. “I may be old, my dear, but I am not dead.”

“Even so, you shouldn’t say such things to your granddaughter,” Lily said, only half joking. “Besides, I thought we had decided you were going to live forever.”

Gran patted her arm. “No one lives forever, dear. Much as we might like them to.”

Frederick brought the axe down on another block of wood and smiled as it split in

two with a satisfying crack.

There was something gratifying in wielding an axe, using muscles he rarely had reason to exercise and watching the pile of wood grow because of his efforts. He liked the work and the feeling of accomplishment.

He'd grown more confident these last few days, no longer quite so wary of unfamiliar tasks, nor so certain he would embarrass himself while attempting them.

When he awoke this morning, he'd actually smiled as he thought of the day ahead, and wondered what sort of work the Grayling women would have for him.

After those first two days in which he'd picked what felt like a thousand apples, he'd scrubbed the exterior of the inn until it fairly sparkled, and yesterday, Mrs. Grayling had even allowed him to milk Blythe—supervised, of course.

He hadn't told his nieces and nephew yet, but his efforts had outdone theirs, far and above.

Chuckling to himself, he used his sleeve to mop his sweaty forehead before balancing another chunk of wood on the tree stump. Truth be told, he was having more fun working at the inn than he had in ages, and he would enjoy it while it lasted, however long that might be.

And the same goes for Lily's company.

The thought flickered through his mind, dimming his smile as he brought the axe down hard, splitting the wood in two.

He'd only known Lily for a matter of days, but the thought of leaving her tied his stomach in knots.

He'd lived in London all his life and had never been tempted to live anywhere else.

And yet, after less than a sennight, this place had begun to feel like home.

He liked it here. He liked the inn, and Little Bilberry.

And, most of all, he liked Lily.

He liked talking to her, and being with her, and he could sense that he was coming to care for her a great deal.

Of course, he was no angel. He desired her, too, and although their one kiss had been chaste and all-too-brief, he'd thought of it often. He'd thought of her lips, soft and sweet, and the expression on her face after it was over, so adorably befuddled, so gorgeously dazed.

He'd liked that, seeing her so discomposed, almost as much as he'd liked the kiss itself. And he'd liked that kiss a great deal.

He wanted another one, but next time—if there was a next time—he wanted a real kiss, a properly improper kiss, with no audience, no constraints, no thoughts of chores or unwanted suitors or what the future might hold.

But, as much as he wanted to kiss Lily again, he also knew it was a bad idea. He knew he should leave her be. Hell, he'd made Penelope a promise that he would do just that, and he'd intended to keep it.

The problem was, he didn't want to leave her be. He didn't even want to try.

“Lemonade, Frederick?”

His head came up and his heart skipped a beat at the sight of Lily walking toward him with a glass in each hand, her sage green skirts flitting about in the autumn breeze.

“How thoughtful,” he said, smiling at her as she handed him a glass.

He took a long drink of the deliciously cool lemonade, nearly finishing it off in one gulp, and then he gave a grateful sigh. “I needed that. Thank you, Lily.”

“Thank my grandmother,” she said, pursing her lips. “The lemonade was her idea.”

He had no clue what to make of that statement, or her rueful, exasperated tone of voice. “I...see.”

“No, you don’t.” Her nose scrunched and then she blew out a breath. “Gran is playing at matchmaking, I’m afraid. She thinks you have...” She grimaced. “She thinks you’ve developed a romantic interest in me.”

He took another drink of his lemonade, savoring it, as he savored the blush that had pinkened her cheeks, her freckled nose, her stubborn chin.

“Maybe I have,” he said lightly, smiling at her, though he and his racing heart both knew his words were no joke.

“It isn’t nice to tease,” she said, her gaze on her glass, and Frederick longed to touch her cheek, her hair, the graceful column of her throat.

“Maybe I’m not teasing, Lily.”

Her eyes flicked to his, surprised yet wary. “Maybe?”

He shook his head. “Definitely.”

Her smile was breathtaking, her eyes glowing with pleasure, and Frederick nearly kissed her then, so strong was the urge to show his regard; to illustrate with his lips and hands exactly how bloody interested he was in her.

“Freddy?”

Shock hit him, freezing his limbs, and he looked past Lily with growing dread to find his sister standing a few feet away, glaring daggers at him.

Bollocks .

“It’s true then,” Penelope said, stalking toward them, her mouth drawn into a fierce frown. “I didn’t want to believe it, and yet, here you are. With Lily.”

Frederick cleared his throat and forced his lips into a smile. “Penelope. This is a lovely surprise. What brings you to the inn today?”

With Penelope glowering and Frederick smiling, Lily’s head snapped back and forth between them, her confusion evident.

“I went into the village today,” Penelope said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I stopped in at the tavern to have an ale with my dearest brother, only to run into Mr. Charles Carstairs instead, who proceeded to tell me that he met my brother, Frederick, a few days ago, and how thrilled I must be over Frederick’s impending marriage”—her nostrils flared—“to my dearest friend, Miss Lily Grayling.”

“You didn’t tell her?” Lily demanded, her expression aghast.

Frederick winced and held up his palms. “It isn’t what you think, Pen. Let me explain—”

“It isn’t what I think?” She plunked her hands on her hips, all sisterly indignation. “I think I told you to stay away from Miss Grayling, and yet, you’ve apparently done exactly the opposite. Am I incorrect in my assessment?”

She wasn’t, and she had every right to be angry. Regret swamped him. He should have told her at the start.

“Penelope, please,” Lily said, her even voice intending to calm. “It truly isn’t what you think it is. If you will allow us to explain...?”

Penelope’s hands remained planted on her hips, and although she was still scowling, she did nod her assent. “Fine. You will explain,” she said to Lily. “And you”—she shot Frederick a glare—“will remain out here until we are done.”

“Penelope—” Lily started to protest, but Frederick stopped her.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I’ve earned my sister’s poor opinion of me. I will stay here and finish chopping the wood.” He held out his empty glass and gave Lily a small smile. “Thank you again for the lemonade.”

She eyed him curiously for the barest moment before taking the glass from him then heading toward the inn, his unhappy sister trailing behind her.

“Well, hell ,” Frederick muttered to himself. “That certainly could have gone better.”

But he supposed it could have gone worse, as well. At least Penelope hadn’t murdered him.

With a heavy sigh, he retrieved the axe then turned to face the still-large pile of wood, determined to finish the task before nightfall.

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“Would you like a glass of lemonade?” Lily asked Penelope as the two walked through the rear door and into the kitchen, where she set down the two empty lemonade glasses.

“No, thank you,” Penelope replied. “I’m fine.”

The words were clipped, and Lily slid her friend a surreptitious glance, as if her expression might reveal what she was thinking, and just why she was so furious with Frederick.

Alas, Penelope’s puckered brow revealed nothing more than Lily already knew, so she held her tongue until the two were safely ensconced in the empty private dining room, seated across from each other at the table.

“I’m sorry for upsetting you,” Lily said, folding her fidgety fingers in her lap. “I suppose I thought your brother had told you about our arrangement, but I should not have assumed. I should have made sure you knew.”

Penelope was quiet for a moment then she blew out a sigh. “What arrangement?”

Lily spent the next few minutes detailing everything that had transpired with Mr. Carstairs and Frederick’s subsequent offer of assistance.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen,” she said sheepishly.

“Mr. Carstairs was asking questions about the betrothal I had just invented, and then your brother appeared and suddenly I found myself introducing him as my betrothed.

It was...a moment of weakness. And your brother was kind enough to go along with it.”

Penelope had listened to the entire tale without uttering a word, and when she did finally speak, her voice was reflective. “And he did not ask for anything in return?”

Lily lifted a shoulder. “Only that he be permitted to help out around the inn.”

Penelope’s brow furrowed, as if the notion were difficult to believe. “Has he...behaved himself properly? Like a gentleman ought?”

“He has,” Lily said with no hesitation, though, of course, she had not forgotten their kiss. She simply chose not to mention it. Frederick had kissed her, yes, but only for Mr. Carstairs’ benefit, and only after he’d secured her permission. No one could call that ungentleman-like behavior.

“Is that why you were so upset?” Lily asked, leaning her elbows on the table. “You thought something improper was going on?”

Penelope sighed. “I told you before, my brother is a bit of a rogue, and because of that, I ordered him to stay away from you. When I learned about this betrothal today...” She pursed her lips. “I suppose I couldn’t help but assume the worst.”

Lily did not like to hear about Frederick’s past—or present—reputation with women, but she refused to allow herself to wallow in jealousy. What right did she have to feel jealous? How Frederick chose to spend his days and nights was absolutely no business of hers.

“I appreciate that you’re watching out for me, Pen,” she said gently, “but it isn’t necessary. Your brother is a nice man, and he’s been a great help these last few days, but there is nothing going on here besides chores.”

Penelope's blue eyes searched her face intently. "You're certain about that?"

"Yes. I'm certain."

Only, she wasn't—not even close—and her friend seemed to know it.

"It's only that I watched you two together today," Penelope said, "and it seemed there might be an attraction between you."

"Well, there isn't." Lily blurted the words out then immediately contradicted them with an embarrassed blush that burned its way up her throat and into her face.

Penelope's raised eyebrows suggested she'd noticed.

"And even if there was," Lily said, stubbornly pressing on, "I am not the innocent lamb you seem to think I am. I can look after myself." She gave her friend a small smile to soften the admonishment. "Please don't worry about me."

Penelope sighed. "You know I cannot help but worry. I don't want to see you hurt. Freddy is going back to London soon, and I don't know when he will visit again, but it likely won't be anytime soon."

"I know that," Lily said, "and I'm fine with it. Truly. I will admit, I enjoy being with your brother, but I have no expectations, or even hopes, where he is concerned. I will enjoy his company and his help around the inn while it lasts, and then when he leaves, life will return to normal."

Her heart squeezed at the thought, but she ignored it, shoving the feelings down deep where they belonged, and then she smiled, hoping to lighten the mood. "And hopefully by then Mr. Carstairs will be gone, off pestering someone else far, far away."

Penelope leaned her forearms on the table, her eyes filling with worry. “I had no idea Mr. Carstairs was bothering you. I hope I didn’t expose your ruse today at the tavern. I was so surprised by what he told me, I don’t remember what I said.”

Lily shrugged. “I knew there was a chance he would find out. It was hardly a fool-proof plan, so if you did expose it, I promise I will not hold it against you.”

“Well,” Penelope said, “perhaps I can do something to repair the damage. How would you and your grandmother like to have dinner with me and Freddy at the house later this week?”

“Dinner?” Lily sat back with a smile. “I’d like that. And I know Gran would, too.”

She would have to make arrangements for someone to watch over the inn while they were away, but it would be worth the trouble if it meant giving Gran a rare evening with friends and good food.

“Excellent,” Penelope said, clapping her hands together. “Shall we plan for Saturday evening?”

Lily nodded her agreement. That should give her plenty of time to find someone to watch the inn and plan what dress she would wear for the evening. Perhaps her green silk? Or maybe the blue organza?

She knew Frederick was going back to London soon, and that it would take more than a dress to compel him to stay, but she couldn’t help wanting to look pretty for him at least once before he left.

Maybe then it would be harder for him to forget her after he’d gone.

Penelope did not speak to Frederick before leaving the inn after her talk with Lily, so

when he returned to the house later that evening, he had no idea what sort of welcome he would receive.

He didn't have to wait long to find out, though. The moment he stepped into the entrance hall, his sister materialized in the drawing room doorway and asked to speak with him.

Frederick held back a weary sigh as he removed his dusty coat and handed it to his sister's butler. "I spent most of the day laboring under the hot sun, Pen. Can this not wait until after I've changed?"

But his stubborn sister shook her head. "Now, please. It will only take a moment."

He could see by the determined set to her jaw that there would be no winning this battle, so he handed his hat to Higgins with his thanks then followed Penelope into the drawing room.

She sat down on the sofa and patted the cushion next to hers, and although the officious gesture rankled, he did as he was instructed and sat down beside her.

"Listen, Pen, I know you're angry with me, but—"

She held up a hand, staying his words, and the look she gave him left no doubt that she was the one in charge of this meeting.

"I'm not angry with you, Freddy," she said. "I'm hurt."

Bollocks . That was even worse. Much worse.

"I'm hurt that you've been lying to me for days," she continued, her voice quiet, "and that you were sneaking around behind my back, keeping secrets from me."

Frederick dropped his head and stared at his hands clasped in his lap. “I’m sorry. Truly. I didn’t like hiding this from you, but I didn’t know how to tell you without upsetting you.”

A moment passed and then she sighed. “I suppose I can understand that. I don’t know that I would have taken the news any better than I did, even if you’d told me at the start.”

Frederick looked at her. “You know I hate lying to you, Pen. You’re my favorite sister, and my friend.”

A small smile softened her features, and her eyes had regained some of their usual warmth. “I know.”

“Then will you please end my misery and tell me I am forgiven?”

She patted his knee. “Yes, all right. You’re forgiven.” She speared him with a pointed look, her smile fading. “My original warning still stands, though, Freddy. Trifle with Lily and you will answer to me.”

He opened his mouth to make his assurances, but she held up her hand to stop him.

“Don’t bother with the wounded pout or passionate denials. I saw the way you were looking at her and, worse, the way she was looking at you. Even a muttonhead could see there was some feeling between you.”

Frederick drew in a deep breath, a heavy knot of confused emotion settling in his chest. Penelope’s words were not unpleasant—after all, what man wouldn’t want to hear that a woman like Lily esteemed him?

Still, in that knot with the pleasure and satisfaction were other, less pleasant

emotions, like discomfort. Guilt. Unworthiness. For what could a man like him offer a woman like Lily? He was the third-born son of a viscount with no goals, no occupation, no purpose in his life.

Lily deserved a better man than him.

“I won’t deny that there is an attraction between us,” he said, measuring his words, “but I have no intention of acting upon it, or of taking advantage of the situation. I care about Lily, and her grandmother, and I don’t want to do anything to hurt either of them.”

Penelope was silent for a long moment, her gaze downcast, and then she looked at him. “Sometimes we hurt people without meaning to, though.”

He had no response to that. He knew the words were true. And whether his sister was thinking of him, or the man from Lily’s past, he couldn’t say—but then, it didn’t really matter, did it? The meaning was the same.

“I know how exhilarating a new infatuation can be,” Penelope said, “and I’m concerned you might find the temptation too great to deny.”

His brow knit. “I’m not some randy goat, Pen. Nor am I the amoral scoundrel you apparently think I am. I do not bed every willing woman who crosses my path, and I certainly don’t seduce virgins.”

“I know you don’t, but...” She trailed off, clearly flustered. “I’m sorry if it seemed like that’s what I was saying. I know you are a good person. Only...please promise me you will tread carefully?”

“I will.”

She held his gaze for a long moment and then nodded, as if satisfied with what she saw there. “Good. Now you may go and change. And you might consider taking a bath before you do.” Her nose wrinkled. “You’re rather odiferous.”

With a wry smile, Frederick left the drawing room to do just that, and while he made his way to his bedchamber, he thought of Lily and his sister’s warning.

He’d meant every word he’d said: he was no randy goat controlled by his urges, nor was he a heartless rogue out to slake his lust on any willing woman who crossed his path.

Still, there was no denying he wanted Lily Grayling, more than he’d ever wanted any woman before.

And that was a troubling reality. Because even though he had no intention of hurting her—even though he would rather eat glass than hurt her—there was still that small chance that he might, just by being around her.

Penelope was right. Sometimes we hurt others without meaning to, and sometimes we hurt ourselves the most. He should keep his distance from Lily, not only for her welfare, but also for his own.

He should.

He just didn’t know if he could.

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Lily stepped down from the carriage and onto the gravel outside Penelope's stately Tudor home, her heart thudding with anticipation for the evening ahead.

She'd arranged for one of their neighbors, a kindly old widow named Mrs. Fairleigh, to watch over the inn tonight, and after she'd bathed, dressed her hair and donned her favorite green silk dress, she and Gran set off for Penelope's house in the carriage she'd sent to collect them.

"It seems rather silly to use a carriage for so short a distance," Gran said, as she stepped down from the vehicle with the help of a footman. "We could easily have walked here."

Lily smiled at her, admiring how well she looked in her burgundy velvet dress with the silk floral shawl she'd draped around her shoulders.

"Penelope is so fond of you, Gran," she said. "Let her spoil you tonight, hm?"

Looping arms, the pair headed for the front door, their steps crunching softly as Lily's pulse kicked up, her belly fluttering. She was looking forward to the evening, but she was nervous, too, although she wasn't sure why.

No, that wasn't true. She knew precisely why.

It was because of Frederick.

She had seen plenty of him these last two days at the inn, but they'd exchanged few words, though not for lack of trying on her part. Frederick was never cold or unkind,

but he was certainly keeping his distance from her, and she suspected Penelope was to blame for it.

At least, she hoped Penelope was to blame.

Her friend had made it clear she wanted Frederick to stay away from Lily, in some misguided attempt at saving her virtue or her heart or both, and it seemed that Frederick was trying to respect his sister's wishes.

But no one had bothered to ask her what she wanted. And what she wanted was to spend time with Frederick, get to know him better, enjoy as much of his company as she could before he left.

And she wanted to kiss him again. She wanted several more kisses, real kisses, thorough kisses.

Kisses that might lead to nudity.

The wicked thought sent heat through her body, and that was the moment the front door swung open.

"Here you are at last!" Penelope said, plopping a fist on one hip. "I was beginning to believe you were waylaid by highwaymen, but then I remembered this is Little Bilberry and nothing interesting ever happens here."

Lily laughed. "So sorry to have kept you waiting. I had no idea we were so late."

"You're not," a voice said from behind Penelope. "You're right on time, but my sister here is a worrier."

Frederick stepped into view then, his smile wry, and Lily's heart skipped a beat when

his eyes met hers.

It was a silly reaction, really, considering she'd seen him only a handful of hours ago, but it could not be helped.

Not with the way he looked in his dark blue tailcoat, slate gray trousers and silver waistcoat that set off his light eyes and dark hair to perfection.

He was breathtaking, and Lily tried her best not to stare as she followed her grandmother into the entrance hall, but she knew she was failing miserably.

She hadn't seen him dressed this way since her visit to Penelope's house last week, and as much as she enjoyed seeing him in workman's clothes, he looked positively gorgeous tonight in his elegant dinner attire.

"I am not a worrier, Freddy," Penelope protested with a swish of her peach chiffon skirts. "I was eager for our guests to arrive."

Lily bit back a smile. Penelope was most definitely a worrier.

"Well, your guests have arrived, and we are very glad to be here," Gran said. "Thank you for having us tonight."

The foursome filed into the drawing room for pre-dinner refreshments, and Lily stole another glance at Frederick, only to find him looking at her.

He smiled, lopsided and slightly abashed, as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. "You look beautiful," he said, his voice low, like they were sharing secrets.

"Thank you," she said, inordinately shy, though it was precisely what she'd hoped to hear. "So do you."

His smile widened and he looked to be on the verge of a reply, but then he noticed his sister watching them and whatever he'd been about to say went unuttered.

“You look lovely this evening, as well, Mrs. Grayling,” he said instead, as he waited for the women to sit before claiming the chair beside his sister's. “Is that a new shawl you're wearing?”

“Oh, no,” Gran said, smoothing her hands over the fringed floral silk. “It is positively ancient, but I suppose it still looks new because I seldom have cause to wear it.” A tender smile turned her lips. “It was a gift from my husband on our thirtieth wedding anniversary.”

“It's beautiful, Mrs. Grayling,” Penelope said with a smile.

“Thank you,” Gran replied. “And thank you for giving me a reason to wear it again. And an opportunity to spend the evening with your brother. He's been a great help around the inn these last few days, and I must admit, I've grown quite fond of him.”

As have I, Lily thought. As have I.

“The feeling is mutual, ma'am,” Frederick said with a grin, and Lily drank in the sight of that smile, and the sincere affection in it as he gazed at her grandmother.

She longed for him to look at her like that—to look at her at all—but he didn't, and the rest of the evening was spent much the same.

He wasn't ignoring her, precisely, but he was still keeping her at arm's length, and she didn't know what to do about it.

She tried to engage him in conversation at dinner, and while he answered all her questions and was unfailingly polite, his comments were brief and to the point and he

did not linger with her under the watchful eye of his sister.

Frustrated with him and Penelope both, Lily was almost grateful when her grandmother announced it was time for them to leave.

“It’s been a lovely evening,” Gran said, rising from the sofa in the drawing room, “but we really must get ourselves to bed. Mr. Darrington, may I impose upon you to walk us home?”

“Oh, Mrs. Grayling,” Penelope interjected, as the rest of the party stood, “do let me arrange for the carriage to take you home. It is much too late for walking—”

“Nonsense,” Gran interrupted with a wave of her hand. “It is a fine evening, and an after-dinner walk will do us all some good.”

Although she looked less than thrilled with the development, Penelope made no further arguments, and a few minutes later, after thank-yous had been expressed and farewells exchanged, Lily and her grandmother set off for home with Frederick as their escort.

The moon was bright and nearly full, the night air quiet save for the rustling of the trees and an occasional owl hooting for its supper.

There was a bit of a chill in the air, Lily observed, snuggling into her wool knit shawl, but Gran was right.

It was a fine evening for a walk. Especially with a handsome young man at one’s side.

“Thank you for escorting us home, Frederick,” she said in a low voice, her gaze on the dirt path stretched before them.

Gran had walked ahead, claiming she had talked quite enough for one evening, and for the first time all night, Lily finally found herself alone with Frederick.

“It’s my pleasure,” he said, and the words sounded genuine if a little subdued.

“It was a lovely evening.” She cleared her throat. “The meal was excellent.”

“It was. My sister’s cook is a culinary master.”

Lily bit her bottom lip, her stomach twisting at the apparent loss of comfortable conversation between them. She wished she knew what to say to get it back.

“Are you warm enough, Gran?” she called out. “Do you need my shawl?”

Her grandmother glanced back over her shoulder and gave Lily a smile, her gray hair shining silver beneath the moonlight. “No, thank you, dear. I’m feeling just fine.”

Lily watched Gran as she settled back into her solitary walk, all the while scouring her mind for something to say to draw Frederick from his silence.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to.

“Your grandmother is a jewel,” Frederick said softly, his gaze meeting hers as he clasped his hands at his back. “You’re lucky to have her.”

“I know,” Lily agreed, curling her fingers into her shawl. “I don’t know what I’ll do when she’s gone. She’s more like a mother to me than my real mother has ever been.”

Hyacinth Grayling might have brought her into this world, but she’d never been much of a mother to her. She was too frivolous, too self-involved to give the sort of attention and affection her daughters had yearned for when they were young.

Lily learned long ago that yearning for anything from Hyacinth Grayling was an exercise in futility.

With Gran, though, it was an entirely different story.

“She took me in without question,” she said, gazing ahead at her grandmother’s slight figure. “After life as I knew it fell completely apart, all I could think to do was run away. And Gran let me run to her.”

Frederick was watching her with frank curiosity, but he held silent, seemingly content to accept as much or as little as she chose to share with him. It was this that made her decide to share it all.

“I was betrothed, you see. It was a union arranged by our parents when we were children, but although I had no say in it, I was glad to be marrying Stephen.” She looked down at her dark green beaded slippers, still pretty, if a few years past fashionable.

“I suppose I had grown used to the idea, and I did genuinely care for him.” A mirthless smile curved her lips. “I even thought I loved him once.”

“But you didn’t?” Frederick’s words were low and sharp, and when she looked up, she found his gaze locked on her face.

“No, I didn’t. But that did not lessen the hurt I felt when he told me he couldn’t marry me because he was in love with my sister.”

Surprise flickered in his eyes, followed by sympathy, and Lily turned away from it, her skin suddenly tight, prickling with the discomfort of vulnerability.

A breeze kicked up, cooling her flushed cheeks, and she let her eyes fall closed for a

moment, focusing on the press of the packed dirt beneath her feet.

“I’m sorry, Lily. That could not have been easy for you.”

She tried for a casual shrug, but her lips were pinched, and she had to work to keep her voice even. “They were married last year. I...did not attend the wedding.”

His only response was a low hum with his throat, one Lily could not interpret. Was he simply at a loss for words, or did he censure her decision?

She’d certainly censured herself often enough. Why shouldn’t he?

“I cannot be happy for them,” she admitted. “I’ve tried, but I can’t do it. I suppose that makes me a terrible person.”

“No,” he said quietly. “Only human.”

It was exactly what she’d hoped he would say, even if she didn’t entirely believe it. True, she had suffered a great disappointment, and she knew the chances were low that she would ever have the loving husband and beautiful children she craved.

But two years had passed since that awful day, and Rose was her only sister. Wouldn’t anyone else have forgiven them by now? Wouldn’t anyone else want them to be happy?

Lily sighed, tugging at the ends of her shawl in frustration. “I don’t even want Stephen anymore. I don’t want the life I would have had with him, and yet, I’m still so angry with him. With them.”

She kicked a pebble with the toe of her slipper, sending it scrabbling up the path like a startled jack rabbit.

“That’s perfectly understandable, Lily. Of course you feel betrayed by them. They—”

“That isn’t it, though,” she interrupted. “I don’t feel betrayed. Not anymore. I feel... fleeced . Robbed of my one and only chance at having a family of my own.”

God above, had she just said that out loud? Had she just admitted her deepest, most painful secret to a man she’d only known for a sennight?

She was supposed to be enticing him to spend time with her, not frightening him away with talk of regrets and past mistakes.

“I’m sorry,” she said sheepishly. “You don’t want to hear any of this. Please forgive my wayward tongue.”

Frederick smiled at her and shook his head. “There is no need for apologies.”

But that was all he said, and then a pensive silence fell between them, as thick as fog. Lily pressed her lips together to keep from filling it and turned her gaze up to the moon above.

Fortunately, the torment lasted only another few minutes before they arrived at the inn and Mrs. Fairleigh met them at the front door.

“Thank you so much for watching the inn tonight,” Gran said to the woman. “Everything went well, I hope?”

“Oh, yes. No trouble whatsoever, and I enjoyed the change of scenery,” Mrs. Fairleigh said, a warm smile plumping her perpetually rosy cheeks.

A few minutes later, the woman left them, heading off in the direction of her cottage which was just up the road from the inn.

“Thank you again for walking us home, Mr. Darrington,” Gran said to Frederick. “I am going to bed now. Lily, will you lock up?”

“Of course, Gran. Sleep well, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

She watched her grandmother slip inside and then turned to Frederick with a smile. “Well,” she said brightly. “Good night. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Lily. Good night.”

He turned to leave, and Lily settled on the bench beside the door, reluctant to turn in just yet and see the evening draw to an end.

“You’re not going inside?”

She looked up to find Frederick still there, watching her, and she shook her head. “Not just yet. I think I’ll sit here and enjoy the night air a little while longer.”

He stood there, utterly still, his expression serious, as if he was looking at every angle of a thoroughly tricky problem.

And then he took a step towards her. “May I join you?”

Surprised, she cocked her head to one side. “Your sister will wonder where you are.”

He nodded. “Yes. She will.”

Lily hesitated, holding his gaze, enjoying the subtle shift of power. She’d wanted more time with him, yes, but she couldn’t resist the urge to make him squirm a bit.

Childish?

Absolutely.

But she'd never claimed to be perfect, and even good girls had their pride.

Finally, silently, she extended a hand toward the empty seat beside her.

He shouldn't stay.

Frederick knew he shouldn't stay. Just as he knew it was inevitable that he would.

Wordlessly, he joined Lily on the bench and settled back against the smooth oak slats, his body keenly aware of the warm, gorgeous woman sitting beside him.

"It's nice out here," he said, curling his hand around the cool iron armrest.

Lily hummed her agreement. "I sit here nearly every night when the weather lets me. I like the quiet."

Personally, he had no interest in sitting on a bench alone with his own thoughts, but if Lily was with him, he would happily do this every night.

"The Weeping Whiskers," he murmured, gazing up at the sign hanging above the front door. "How did the inn come to acquire such an unusual name?"

An affectionate smile curved her lips, and her eyes slid to his, glinting with mischief. "Legend has it there once was a tomcat named Whiskers who made his home here in Little Bilberry. He spent his days napping and begging for scraps, coming and going as if he owned all of Hampshire."

She leaned in close, as if imparting a secret, and when her shoulder brushed his arm, he felt the contact everywhere.

"Some say, when the moon is full," she whispered, "the spirit of old Whiskers can be

heard prowling the village, crying out for the life he once had.”

Frederick smiled, charmed by the story. “And have you ever heard old Whiskers’ ghost?”

She shook her head. “But don’t think I haven’t been listening.”

Her smile was the loveliest thing he’d ever seen, and her eyes, usually the color of tropical seas, had darkened in the night to azure.

The air between them seemed to crackle with expectation as they stared into each other’s eyes, until Lily cleared her throat and sat back in the bench.

“I haven’t said this to you yet,” she said briskly, tucking her shawl around her shoulders, “but I think it’s lovely that you’ve come to stay with your sister. She’s had such a difficult time since her husband died. I know seeing you has cheered her immeasurably.”

Frederick looked away from her, away from the gratitude and admiration on her face, neither of which he deserved. He shifted on the bench, his mind scrambling for something to say, something that wouldn’t be a lie, and wouldn’t make him feel worse about himself.

The only something that sprang to mind was the truth.

He didn’t want to tell her why he was really here, and yet, somehow, he did. For better or worse, he wanted to be honest with her. He wanted no secrets between them.

He cleared his throat, his heart thudding in his chest as he began to speak. “I’m glad to be spending this time with Penelope, of course, but I can’t accept your compliment. There’s another reason I came to Little Bilberry. A much less savory

one.”

He told her about the affair with Serena, about Serena’s angry husband and Robert’s subsequent, none-too-gentle suggestion that he vacate London until the scandal had cooled.

After he’d finished, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, loosely lacing his fingers together.

He had avoided looking at Lily during the whole of his confession, but he forced himself to meet her gaze now, bracing for the disgust and disappointment he was certain to find on her face.

But all he saw was confusion in her eyes, and a thoughtful pursing of her lips.

“Did you not realize she was married?” she asked a moment later.

Frederick looked down at his clasped hands. “I knew. That was part of the appeal, I think. I had never bedded a married woman before.”

“Oh.”

Silence, thick as fleece, settled between them, and Frederick wondered what Lily was thinking, then admonished himself for his stupidity.

You know damn well what she’s thinking . She was thinking exactly what everyone else thought about him, that he was a scoundrel and a rogue and an irresponsible rat only concerned with satisfying his base needs.

And, much as he hated to admit it, there was some truth in that. There must be, or he wouldn’t have bedded a married woman, would he?

Lily's low voice cut into his thoughts. "Were you— are you—in love with her?"

The question surprised him, and his denial was instant. "No. I didn't love her," he said. "I loved that she wanted me, that she chose me, even though I am—" He broke off, the words catching in his throat, words he'd thought often but never voiced aloud.

"Even though you are what?" Lily prodded gently. And maybe it was her quiet voice, or her understanding tone, or simply the fact that she was Lily and he was mad about her, but whatever the reason, he found himself sharing with her more than he'd ever shared with anyone.

"Has Penelope ever told you about our brother George?" he asked, sitting back in the bench.

She blinked, clearly caught off guard by the unexpected question. "He...died several years ago. During the war."

Frederick nodded, the ache of loss swelling in his chest as it did every time he thought of his brother and those awful months after the death notice came, telling them George was never coming home.

"He was an artist—a painter—and his talent was enormous, though George would never say so, of course." Frederick smiled.

"He was far too modest for that, but we all knew he was a genius, and that he would do great things with his art. He had so many plans, places to go, scenes he wished to paint. He had so much—" He swallowed, his throat aching.

"He had so much to offer the world, and he's gone. And I'm still here."

It should have been me.

The words whispered through his mind, words he'd thought before and knew he shouldn't. George wouldn't want him to think that way.

But he couldn't help that it was the truth.

"I'm glad," Lily said softly, drawing Frederick's gaze. "I hate that your brother is gone, but I'm glad you're here, and so are Penelope and my grandmother and Blythe." She smiled. "You know how much that cow fancies you."

A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips, but he couldn't quite find the words to agree with her. He wasn't sure he did.

"You have a lot to offer this world, too, Frederick," she went on, serious once again. "You are kind and warm and you make people smile. Even surly people like me."

A soft chuckle escaped him. "You're not surly. You're...occasionally prickly."

"I'm a churlish beast and you know it," she shot back with a laugh. "But even though I was beastly to you that day we first met, you still helped me with Blythe, and then with Mr. Carstairs. Because you're a kind man."

She laid a hand on his forearm, and the simple touch eased his tension nearly as much as her words.

"We all make mistakes, Frederick. But that doesn't mean you're a bad person, or that you're unworthy of this life. You're a good man, and you have as much right to be here as any of us."

Her unwavering, earnest gaze told him she believed every word of it, and although

Frederick had only known Lily for a handful of days, her opinion had come to mean something to him. Maybe even everything.

“Thank you,” he said gruffly, his chest tight with emotion.

She was still grasping his forearm, the warmth of her touch seeping through his sleeve, and he covered her hand with his, intending to emphasize his gratitude.

The moment he touched her soft, bare skin, however, awareness sparked to life, humming along his spine.

She swallowed, her gaze flicking to his mouth, and he was certain she had felt the same jolt of attraction he had.

Gently, he clasped her fingers with his own then raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. Lily watched him, as still as the night, her eyes glimmering with awakened desire.

He brushed his lips across her knuckles again then turned her hand palm up and bent his head, intending to kiss her there, too.

“Don’t.”

The word froze him, and he lifted his head to look at her just as she slipped her hand from his grasp.

“My hands are not pretty,” she said, her voice low, her fingers fidgeting. “They used to be, but now they are callused and ugly and I...” Her gaze fell to her lap. “I am embarrassed of them. I am embarrassed for you to touch them.”

Avoiding Frederick’s gaze, Lily stared at her callused worker’s hands, her cheeks

flushed hot with embarrassment and vulnerability—and a healthy dose of irritation. Irritation with herself, and with the dratted insecurity that had slithered into the moment and sunk its teeth in deep.

She was proud of the work she did, and the help she gave her grandmother. She liked the self-sufficient person she'd become, and the confidence she'd earned by learning to rely on herself instead of her family or a husband.

Still, no matter how ideal, every situation had its drawbacks, and Lily's situation had given her callused hands, bruised knees and a blister on her left foot that could not seem to heal.

She'd earned these scrapes and flaws through hard work, and she was proud of that, but it did make it difficult to feel pretty. And she wanted to feel pretty now.

"Lily."

She looked up and met Frederick's gaze, her lips parting with the impulse to speak, to apologize, but the words caught in her throat when he reached out and took her hands in his again.

Surprise froze her, and she watched, motionless, as his gaze dipped, his long lashes casting shadows on his cheeks. His hands were warm and strong, and as he swept his thumbs over her palms, calluses and all, his touch was so sweet, so good, she forgot her embarrassment.

"There is nothing ugly about your hands," he said softly. "They're strong and capable, like you." His gaze rose to hers, deep blue and frankly admiring. "They're beautiful, Lily. Because they're yours."

He raised her hands to his lips and pressed a tender kiss to first one palm and then the

other, and Lily's breath caught moments before she surged forward and stole a kiss for her lips.

He stilled, as if caught by surprise, and then he was moving, his hands stroking her wrists, his mouth meeting hers. He tasted like wine, rich and spicy, and his lips were firm yet gentle, each touch a spark to her growing need for more.

She leaned into him further, clutching his forearms, kissing him harder, no longer interested in gentle caresses. She wanted to let go, give in, lose herself in his arms, and she wanted the same from him.

She wanted him unbound.

"Frederick," she whispered against his lips. "Kiss me. Please." Her voice was taut with frustration and need, and she swept eager hands up his arms to clutch his shoulders.

"I thought I was," Frederick replied with a smile in his voice before he brushed another gentle kiss to her mouth.

"Kiss me harder," Lily demanded, burrowing her fingers in his thick, black hair. "Kiss me more."

She covered his lips with hers, showing him what she wanted, asking for it with a gentle tug on his hair.

Frederick's arms clamped around her waist as a low groan rumbled from his throat, and finally, at last, he succumbed to her wishes. His mouth closed over hers, his tongue sweeping deep, and Lily gave a whimper of pure, unadulterated need.

She pressed into him, tangling her tongue with his as she curved her arms around his

neck, her shawl falling from her shoulders to the bench.

His hands found the small of her back, his bare palms warming her skin even through her corset and gown. He swept his hands up her back then down again, circling her hips, his touch hungry, his kiss hungrier.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” he murmured between kisses. “I promised my sister I wouldn’t trifle with you.”

“You’re not.” She nipped his bottom lip with her teeth. “I’m trifling with you.”

A throaty groan escaped his lips just before she kissed him again, and she could feel the pounding of his heart beneath her hands where they rested on his chest.

She slid her palms under his jacket to caress the sleek silk of his waistcoat, and the intimacy of that touch made her own heart hammer.

She never knew kissing a man could feel like this. She never knew it could make her body ache and her skin burn until every inch of her craved to be touched, stroked, claimed.

“Lily...” Frederick’s rough voice held a warning, or perhaps a plea, but whatever it was, she knew what it signaled.

“No,” she whispered, kissing his cheek, the ridge of his jaw. “Don’t stop. Please. Not unless you want to.” She drew back so she could see his face in the moonlight, uncertainty tensing every muscle in her body.

Frederick’s throat worked, indecision sparking in his eyes. “I don’t want to take advantage of you, Lily. I want you to trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

His mouth twisted. “Maybe you shouldn’t.”

“Nonsense,” she said bluntly, irritated now as she slipped her hands from his chest and sat back with a frown. “Your sister told you to stay away from me. She’s trying to protect me because she thinks I’ll be hurt again.”

Frederick’s silence confirmed the charge, and Lily blew out a frustrated breath.

“As I have already told Penelope, I can look after myself. I don’t need to be coddled by her, or you.”

“I know that, Lily.”

“But?”

Again, he said nothing.

“You agree with her, don’t you?” Her voice was an angry rasp. “You think I’m in danger of losing my heart to you.”

“No,” he said quietly, a wry smile curling his lips. “But I do think I’m in danger of losing my heart to you.”

And with that stunning confession, he rose to his feet, bid her a good night and left.

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Even before last night's wondrous encounter, Lily had begun to suspect she might be developing feelings for Frederick.

This morning, however, she was absolutely certain of it...and she had absolutely no idea what to do about it.

Pausing in her sweeping of the inn's front walkway, she cast another glance out at the lane, but it was still empty. No sign of Frederick.

She heaved a disappointed sigh, then sighed again, this time in exasperation. She was being silly, behaving like this, like some young girl in the throes of first love.

Still, she couldn't seem to help it. He was all she had thought of when she went to bed last night, and when she awoke this morning, he was still on her mind, as if he'd been there all night, in her dreams.

And who could fault her for that? He was an extraordinary man, and she loved being with him, but she knew she was growing to care for him too much. He was leaving soon, and she could not afford to let his kisses or the lovely things he said go to her head.

I think I'm in danger of losing my heart to you.

Those eleven words had thrilled her to the tips of her toes, but she could not forget that she had just met him, and his words, though lovely, had held no promises.

She would not give her heart away to a man she didn't trust, and while her instincts

told her Frederick was a good and honorable man, the life he apparently led in London did make her uneasy.

He seemed to regret his recent affair with the married woman, but then, he had been caught, and his actions had incurred very real, very unpleasant consequences. Who wouldn't regret that?

He said it was the first affair he'd had with a married woman, and she believed him. Still, his own sister had called him a rogue, which meant he'd had his share of dalliances, likely with widows and courtesans. Perhaps even a spinster or two, like herself.

Was that what he wanted from her? A meaningless affair?

Was that what his time at the inn had been, the diligent efforts of a rogue sniffing after his next liaison?

Perhaps she was being naïve, but she didn't think that was his intent. She couldn't believe it had all been an act, that he hadn't meant the things he'd said to her, that the tenderness in his kiss wasn't real.

I think I'm in danger of losing my heart to you.

His words ran through her mind again, and she could not forget the look in his eyes as he'd said them. How rueful he'd appeared, almost bashful, as if the admission had been uncomfortable for him.

As if he'd only just realized the truth of it himself.

No, she couldn't believe he was using her for a brief, meaningless dalliance.

If he'd wanted to slake his lust with her body, he could have done so last night.

She was not ashamed to admit that she'd wanted him desperately and probably would have given herself to him if he'd let her.

But he'd been the one to end the encounter.

And then he'd told her he was losing his heart to her before saying goodbye and heading for home.

She didn't know what any of it meant, but somehow, she knew she could trust him not to mislead her, just as she knew she couldn't wait to see him again. Which was why she was out here now, waiting for him, and sweeping a walkway that didn't need to be swept.

She drew in a breath and turned for the door, intending to go inside while she still possessed a speck of pride. She would not look for him again. She would return to the kitchen and finish some real work, and Frederick would arrive when he arrived.

She absolutely would not look for him again.

"Good morning, Lily."

Whirling around, she found Frederick walking toward her and nearly dropped her broom at the sight of his handsome smile.

He wore simple clothes again today, his easy strides displaying his strong legs and lean hips, and as he drew near, a mild breeze played with his thick, black locks.

Stephen's hair was blonde, she mused, and so was Phillip's, the neighbor boy she'd fancied years ago when she was just a slip of a girl. She'd never been smitten with a

dark-haired man before.

She was certainly smitten with this one.

“Frederick,” she said, trying for a serene smile, though undoubtedly failing. “Good morning to you.”

She’d worried she would feel awkward when she met him again, but she didn’t. She felt only happiness. And the strong desire to kiss him.

“How are you today?” he asked, his warm blue eyes roving over her face.

“I’m very well, thank you,” she replied, stacking her hands atop the broomstick. “And how are you?”

He pressed his lips together, though his eyes were twinkling. “Not so good, I’m afraid. A beautiful, fascinating woman kept me up late last night, and I slept barely a wink for thinking about her.”

Delight bloomed throughout Lily’s body, but she tamped it down and gave her head a sorrowful shake. “I am very sorry to hear that,” she said, though of course she wasn’t sorry at all.

Frederick gave her a lopsided smile. “Yes, I can see you feel dreadful about it.”

“Oh, I do,” she said, nearly overwhelmed by the sudden desire to kiss that smile, and anything else her lips could reach. She cleared her throat. “I thought today you could see to some repairs in the barn, if that is amenable to you.”

“Repairs?” His brow crinkled.

“Nothing too complicated,” she assured him. “A broken fence and damaged shutters. Come, I’ll show you.”

After propping the broom up beside the door, she led him to the barn, and as they walked inside, Blythe let out a long low from her pen and bobbed her head in excitement.

“Someone is certainly happy to see you,” Lily said to Frederick, who was all smiles as he walked up to greet the happy cow.

Lily followed, watching him while he crooned to Blythe, and gave her head a good scratch over the gate.

Her belly fluttered as she studied his profile.

He was a handsome man, an unequivocal pleasure to look at, but he was so much more than just his good looks.

He was kind and warm, gentle and compassionate.

Yet, he did not see it. How was that so? How could such a man, who brought so much to the world, believe he did not deserve to be in it?

How could he believe his brother should be here on this earth instead of him?

Lily’s heart thudded painfully, her chest aching with the desire to wrap her arms around him tight and hold on until he understood what he meant to her. What it would mean if she lost him.

“Lily, I—” Frederick turned to look at her, his words stalling when his gaze found hers. “Is something the matter?” he asked, turning to face her, his brow knitting.

Lily shook her head. “No. Nothing.” She swallowed, clutching her skirts between her fingers, the urge to leap into his arms and kiss him nearly overwhelming her. “I’m perfectly well.”

She was perfectly besotted , and the thought, the feeling, sent embarrassed heat spreading through her limbs.

For pity’s sake, Lily. Have some pride.

“I do have a lot of work to do, though,” she said, taking a step backward, “so I really must leave you now. You will find the tools you need for the repairs just over there”—she pointed to the table in the corner—“and if you need anything else, I will be working in the garden.”

She turned to leave—flee, really—but the brush of his hand, his fingers tangling with hers, froze her in her tracks.

“Don’t go,” he said softly, giving her hand a gentle tug. “Not just yet.”

“But I have so much to do...” The protest was weak, even to her own ears, and her resolve faltered further at the gentle pleading in his cobalt eyes.

“I know,” he said, grasping both her hands in his. “But I need to speak with you alone, and this might be my only chance today.”

“Speak to me about what?” she asked warily.

“About last night.”

Oh. Lily swallowed. What could he wish to discuss about last night? Would he apologize for kissing her, or for the things he’d said to her? Did he intend to take

them back?

“I’m sorry, Lily,” he said, and her heart clenched. “I’m sorry for leaving like I did. It was not—” He paused, his forehead creasing. “I want you to know that it was nothing you did.”

Relief was swift, although the words were not what she’d expected to hear. “You’ve been trying to respect your sister’s wishes. I understand.”

He nodded, and the smile he offered was slightly abashed. “I’ve been trying to keep away from you because that’s what Penelope wants me to do, but it isn’t what I want, Lily. And I don’t think it’s what you want, either.” He gave her a searching look. “Is it?”

He had to know it wasn’t. After last night, after she’d kissed him and practically begged him not to stop, he had to know her feelings.

Still, he seemed to want her answer. She shook her head. “No. It isn’t.”

The unease and regret in his eyes disappeared, and pleasure sparked to life in its place. “Good,” he said softly. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

He drew closer until the tips of his boots grazed hers, and then his hands began to move, skating up her forearms as his gaze fell to her mouth. “Lily,” he said, his voice deep and rough. “May I kiss you?”

Slowly, she tipped her head back, trying not to appear too eager, though she knew if Frederick could hear the beating of her heart, he would know precisely how eager she was.

His mouth brushed hers, exquisitely soft, and she clasped her hands together to keep

from grabbing his shirt and hauling him in like some sort of brute.

She could not control her lips, however, and she met his kiss with unrestrained enthusiasm, fitting her mouth to his, and laving his bottom lip with her tongue.

“Touch me, Lily,” Frederick demanded, his voice gruff as his own hands swept down her back and gripped her waist.

The command excited her, and she obeyed with alacrity, skating her palms up his chest to his shoulders, feeling the heat, the muscle, through his rough cotton shirt.

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His breathing seemed rough, too, as if her touch aroused him, and he kissed her harder, held her tighter, tangling his tongue with hers.

He urged her back against a smooth wooden post, pressing his body into hers, and Lily snaked her arms around his neck, holding him to her, deepening the kiss with a strangled groan.

She felt him everywhere, her breasts, her thighs, the tingling in her belly blossoming into a potent ache begging for relief.

“Frederick, my God...” She gasped the words into his mouth, and he grunted his agreement before taking her lips again, gliding his hands down her back to cup her buttocks.

He trapped her against him, and a whimper escaped Lily’s lips at the contact, the press of his lower body an exquisite torment. She squirmed, rubbing her aching flesh against the hard ridge of his erection, intensifying both the ache and the pleasure.

She was losing all semblance of control, over this moment, over her body, and she gloried in the loss. She reveled in it. And she never wanted it to end.

“Lily, dear? Where have you disappeared to?”

Gran’s voice intruded from outside the barn, penetrating the haze of lust clouding Lily’s mind—and judgment. She slid her arms from around Frederick’s neck and blew out a slow breath to calm her heart and cool her flushed cheeks.

“Well,” she said, her voice unsteady, “as much as I would love to stay here with you all day...” Or forever. “...we really must get to work. There is much to do today.”

Frederick, looking thoroughly ravished with his mussed hair and boyish half-smile, nodded and said, “Yes, boss.”

Lily sidestepped out of his arms and in the direction of the door. “If you need me, I’ll be in the vegetable garden.”

“Yes, boss.”

Battling a smile, she tore her gaze from his and turned to leave, but then Frederick’s strong arms snaked around her waist and eased her back against his chest. He nuzzled her neck, his warm lips sending shivers of pleasure prickling across her skin.

“Frederick,” she said with a gasping laugh, “you have to let me go.”

He nipped her earlobe gently with his teeth, making her gasp again, and then he whispered, “Yes, boss.”

His arms slipped from her waist as he stepped away, taking his delicious warmth with him, and Lily was certain this was the only time she had ever been disappointed to see an order obeyed.

She turned to face him, and he smiled at her, looking so devilishly handsome she couldn’t keep from popping up on her toes and pressing a kiss to his smiling lips.

“You are incorrigible,” she scolded with a smile.

And then she scurried out of the barn before he could tempt her to stay again.

“There you are,” Gran said as Lily stepped into the inn’s front hall, where her grandmother was sweeping. “I thought you had disappeared on me.”

“I’m sorry, Gran,” Lily said, shutting the door behind her. “Frederick is here, and I was showing him what needs repairing in the barn.”

“Ah. Well, that explains the long absence, and that dreamy smile on your face.”

Lily blushed. “What dreamy smile?”

Gran sent her a chiding look. “It won’t do, dear. I know a young woman in love when I see one. Especially when she happens to be my favorite granddaughter.”

Lily’s lips parted, partly to reply but mostly out of pure, paralyzing shock.

A young woman in love?

She was willing to admit she was smitten with Frederick, but... love?

No. No . She could not be in love with him. Loving him would be far too complicated, far too stupid, and she was too responsible to have allowed that to happen.

For heaven’s sake, he was leaving soon. What kind of fool would she be if she fell for a man she knew would leave her?

“I cannot claim to know Mr. Darrington’s heart as well as yours,” Gran said softly, “but anyone can see he cares for you. Has he talked to you? Has he declared his intentions?”

Lily swept past her and began tidying the already-tidy desk, exorcising her agitation

with actions instead of words. “Of course he hasn’t,” she said evenly. “And I don’t want him to. Nothing has changed, Gran. I have no wish to marry.”

It was a lie, of course, and they both knew it. She wasn’t ready to admit it, though, not to her grandmother and not to herself.

But neither could she deny it.

Frederick entered his bedchamber that evening, bone-tired, with aching shoulders, throbbing feet and a blister the size of a pea on his right thumb. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so satisfied.

Easing into the Chesterfield armchair before the fire crackling cozily in the hearth, he set about removing his boots, eager for a long, hot bath.

Physical labor was good for a man’s soul; he was convinced of it. He enjoyed the work, and the way it made him feel at the end of the day—like he’d accomplished something. Like he’d done some good.

Of course, any day was a good day with Lily close by. She was good for his soul, too. She made everything better, just by being there, and he couldn’t seem to get enough of her eloquent, incandescent eyes or the sly smiles and sardonic remarks that continually kept him on his toes.

He was beginning to suspect he might be addicted to her.

Kicking off his second boot, Frederick sat back in his chair and stretched his legs out toward the fire just as a knock sounded at the door.

Rather than leave the comfort of his chair, he called out for the visitor to enter.

The door opened and his sister's voice followed. "Freddy?"

"Over here, Pen." He raised an arm above his head. "I'm not late for dinner, am I?"

"No, no," Penelope said, over the soft click of the door shutting closed. "Dinner isn't for another hour. I just thought I'd ask about your day and find out what has put you in such a cheerful mood."

She joined him at the fire, dropping onto the chair beside his, and Frederick turned his head to look at her.

"What makes you think I'm in a cheerful mood?"

He was, of course, but why should she know that?

Penelope met his gaze and smiled. "I could hear you whistling from the other end of the corridor."

"Ah." His cheeks warmed. Had he been whistling? Christ, he hadn't even noticed.

"Well?" his sister prodded with undisguised curiosity. "Did something good happen to you today?"

Lily's teasing eyes and kiss-plumped lips flashed through his mind, but that particular something good was none of his sister's business. She would have to settle for half the truth.

"It was a good day," he said. "I spent most of it swinging a hammer." He stuck out his thumb to show off his new blister, smiling like a young lad who'd just caught his first trout.

Pen arched a single brow, eyeing his thumb with something akin to disbelief. “A...hammer.”

He nodded. “There were some repairs to be done in the barn. Broken fencing and rotting shutters. Nothing significant.”

Penelope blinked at him. “I had no idea you knew how to use a hammer.”

“I didn’t,” he admitted. “But I learned by doing and, strange as it may sound, I rather enjoyed the work.”

She was silent for a long beat, staring at him as if she hardly recognized him, and then she said, “Do you know, I think you mean that. I think you truly did enjoy it.”

He had to laugh at the utter astonishment in her voice. “And I only smashed my thumb with the hammer once, which I think is rather good for a beginner, don’t you?”

But she did not smile at his jest, instead chewing on her lower lip, her thoughts clearly elsewhere. “Oh, Freddy. I’m so sorry.”

Now it was Frederick’s turn to stare. Penelope was a kind woman with a loving heart, but she did not go around handing out apologies willy-nilly.

“Sorry for what?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

“For misjudging you and underestimating you.” She sighed. “I should not have distrusted your intentions at the inn.”

He blinked in surprise then sat back in his chair, a grim smile curving his lips. “Yes, you should have.”

“No, I shouldn’t,” she argued. “I wrongly assumed you’d orchestrated these visits to get close to Lily, but you truly are helping her and her grandmother.”

“I am,” he said quietly. “But you were right to question my intentions. They were not entirely pure.”

Not that they’d ever been nefarious, of course, but he had made the offer to work at the inn in the hopes it would lead to more time with Lily.

“I see,” Penelope said slowly, her brow knit, as if she wasn’t sure what to make of the admission. “And are your intentions pure now?”

Frederick leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees, staring into the fire as he considered how to answer.

“No,” he finally admitted. “Not entirely. I enjoy working at the inn more than I expected to, but I wouldn’t be nearly so keen if Lily weren’t there. I know you warned me to stay away from her, Pen, but I don’t want to. In fact, I never want to be apart from her.”

The words slipped out, smooth and wily, as if they’d been perched on the tip of his tongue, waiting for just the right moment to leap.

He fell back in his chair, stunned by the revelation. Stunned, too, by how good it sounded, how right it felt, the prospect of spending his life with Lily. Even the thought made the future seem brighter.

“I had no idea you felt that way, Freddy,” Penelope said softly, her own surprise evident in her voice. “Does Lily feel the same for you?”

He raked a hand through his hair, uncertainty rolling over him in waves. “I think so.

Maybe.” Bollocks . “I don’t know.”

“Well, you have to ask her, of course. You cannot leave Little Bilberry without knowing how she feels.”

Despite his roiling emotions, a sardonic smile curled his lips. “You’ve certainly changed your tune. Not so very long ago, you threatened to maim me if I went anywhere near Lily.”

“That was last week,” she said, waving his words away with a flick of her hand. “I see now how much you care for her, and how happy you two could be together.”

Frederick’s smile dimmed. “She might refuse me,” he pointed out, the thought sending a bolt of panic through his chest.

“And she might not,” Penelope shot back. “She may very well accept you.”

But were the odds in his favor or were they against him? Lily seemed to enjoy being with him and he thought she cared for him, but would she marry him? Would she—could she—let him into her carefully cultivated life?

He honestly couldn’t say, which meant his sister was right, and there was only one way he would know for certain.

He would have to talk to Lily.

If he was brave enough to do it.

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The question of Frederick's intentions—as well as his courage—was still unanswered when he made his way to the inn the following afternoon.

He'd spent most of last night and all of this morning going over the conversation he'd had with Penelope, his time spent with Lily, his feelings for Lily and how she might feel about him, and still he had no idea what he would do.

He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to marry her and spend his life with her.

He wanted her heart.

The problem was, he wasn't entirely sure he deserved it. He wasn't worth much, and that was one of the reasons behind his reluctance to ask for her hand, despite how much he wanted to win it, and her.

He was afraid she would realize what a bad bargain he was—assuming she hadn't already come to that conclusion herself. If she had, there was every chance she would reject him.

Unless he could convince her to take a chance on him instead.

But how?

His shoulders tightened and he kicked at a rock in the lane, watching as it skipped ahead several feet before skittering to a stop.

Penelope seemed to think Lily returned his regard, and he wanted to believe she was

right. He knew Lily was fond of him, and enjoyed their time together as he did, but that did not mean she had fallen in love with him.

Even if she had, he knew better than to assume she would wish to be his wife.

She'd cared for a man before, and had intended to marry him, and then he'd betrayed her.

It would come as no surprise if she said she did not wish to risk her heart again, especially on a man like him, with a flawed past and directionless future.

Blowing out a heavy sigh, Frederick kicked at another rock with the toe of his boot, then did it again, and again, distracting his troubled mind with the game as he walked the rest of the way to the inn.

When he finally reached the courtyard, an elegant black carriage passed him by on its way out, two large trunks strapped to the roof and a single occupant inside.

Frederick stomped his boots on the straw mat at the front door before he let himself inside. Mrs. Grayling greeted him with a smile at the foot of the stairs, her arms overflowing with freshly-laundered bedding.

"Here, let me help you with that, Mrs. Grayling," Frederick said, brooking no argument as he took the load from her—not that she gave one.

"Thank you, Mr. Darrington," she said gratefully. "You are a dear."

He shifted the bedding in his arms and asked, "Was that Mr. Carstairs' carriage I just saw leaving?"

She nodded. "He has apparently finished with the business that brought him here, and

now he is going home.”

Frederick worked his jaw, the news inspiring a slew of contradictory emotions. “Lily must be relieved,” he said, and Mrs. Grayling chuckled.

“Undoubtedly,” she said. “And speaking of Lily, she’s waiting upstairs for me to bring her this bedding. I’d best take it up to her before she comes looking for it.”

She reached out as if to take the bedclothes from him, but Frederick ignored her. “I’d be happy to do it for you, ma’am.”

“Oh, would you?” she asked, relief in her voice. “I don’t mind admitting that my knees have had quite enough of those stairs today.”

“Then I will agree to take this up for you, if you will agree to sit and rest for a while.”

She smiled. “You are a bossy boy, but very sweet.” She gave his forearm a squeeze. “I agree.”

Still smiling over being called a ‘bossy boy’, Frederick climbed the stairs with his pile of bedding then ventured up the carpeted corridor, passing three closed doors until he finally reached an open one.

He paused in the doorway and peered inside where he found Lily standing at the bed, grumbling to herself and fluffing a down pillow with unnecessary vigor.

“Have I come at a bad time?” he asked from the safety of the doorway.

Lily jumped, nearly dropping the pillow. “You startled me,” she sniped, leveling him with a glare.

Frederick pressed his lips together, unprepared for the grumpy greeting. "I'm sorry," he said, keeping his voice light. "Your grandmother sent me up with fresh bedding. Where would you like me to put it?"

"On the bed." She shoved a lock of dark hair off her forehead then huffed out a sigh. "Please. And thank you."

He crossed to the bed and dumped the pile onto the middle of the mattress. "I saw Mr. Carstairs leaving as I arrived," he said, searching Lily's face for clues which might explain her ill temper.

She grunted, her eyes downcast as she began separating the linens. "Yes, thank heavens," she muttered. "He's finally going home to Glastonbury."

"Is that the reason for your less-than-cheerful mood?" he teased. "Already missing your ardent admirer?"

The smile he'd hoped for did not appear. "I am not in the mood for jokes today, Frederick. If you have no intention of helping me make up this bed, please leave me to it."

His humor faded, and he frowned, only now noticing the troubled look in her eyes. Something had upset her, and it wasn't Mr. Carstairs' departure.

"Lily, what's wrong?" he asked gently.

"I'm upset," she said, shaking out a pillowcase with a sharp snap. "That's what's wrong."

"And why are you upset?"

She did not answer him straightaway, but he did not press her, and his quiet patience seemed to ease her agitation. She drew in a deep breath, expelling it as she said, “A letter came for me today. From my sister.”

Ah. The sister she hadn’t talked to since she left London. The one who’d stolen her betrothed away. No wonder she was upset.

“What did the letter say?” he asked, leaning a shoulder against the bedpost.

“She’s coming to the inn,” she said, her eyes flashing with panic.

“And she’s bringing Stephen with her. They plan to stay for a whole week.

” She tossed the pillowcase onto the bed and crossed her arms over her chest. “I haven’t seen them in two years.

We haven’t exchanged even a single letter since I came to Little Bilberry.

Why are they coming? What do they want?”

“Maybe your sister wants to make amends. Maybe she misses you.”

Lily shook her head, clearly skeptical. “Maybe. But whatever the reason, I wish I’d had more time to prepare for their visit. The letter was delayed. They arrive today.” She pressed her palms to her eyes. “I need more time. I don’t know how I should behave, or what to say to them, or...”

She sank onto the settee by the window, and Frederick joined her, drawing her hands in his, offering comfort the only way he knew how. “I wish I had the right answer,” he said. “Would it help if your betrothed was there alongside you tonight?”

A small smile touched her lips. "I appreciate the offer, but Mr. Carstairs is gone now, and our arrangement has ended."

"We could begin a new arrangement."

She shook her head. "No, Frederick. Thank you, truly, but I could not ask you to go on pretending."

Frederick stilled, as if struck by a bolt of lightning. Pretending . Yes, he was through with pretending, wasn't he?

He wanted a new arrangement with Lily, but this time, he wanted it to be real. And permanent.

He knew he wasn't worth much, but just being around this woman made him feel that he could be. That if he worked at it hard enough, if he could earn Lily's love, maybe he might be worth something after all.

"What if we weren't pretending, Lily?" The words were rasping, his heart in his throat. "What if we were betrothed for real?"

Lily was staring. She knew she was staring, even through the haze of shock and bewilderment, and Frederick was staring right back at her, awaiting her answer.

She half-expected him to take the words back, or at the very least, crack a smile to reveal he was only teasing.

But he did not smile, and he did not speak, even to take it back. He simply sat there, still holding her hands, his eyes impossibly blue and unflinchingly patient.

"Betrothed for real?" she parroted. "I told you already I am not in the mood for

jokes.”

He shook his head. “You know I’m not joking.”

“Then you’re being impulsive. You haven’t thought this through, Frederick.”

“I assure you, I have.” His response was immediate, his voice so calm, so assured, it pricked at her already-frayed temper.

“When?” she demanded, surging to her feet.

“Over the last two minutes? That is hardly a thorough consideration.” She stalked to the bed and picked up the now-wrinkled pillowcase, only to toss it back onto the bed.

“Marrying me would mean running this inn with me, working and toiling, every day for the rest of your life.”

“I know that, Lily.”

She turned to face him and crossed her arms over her chest. “It isn’t an easy life. And not everyone is suited to it.”

“You’re right,” he said, rising to his feet. “But I think I am. I love it here. I love the work. I’ve never known what it was to be useful, to be doing something that matters, that contributes to a joint endeavor. I like it, and I don’t want to give it up.”

She had seen his enthusiasm these last two weeks, his eagerness to learn, his willingness to try.

But was it a fleeting feeling? Would it last longer than a month? A year? Or would the feeling fade along with the newness of it?

“What about London?” she asked. “Won’t you miss the city? The opera? The affairs with married ladies ?”

It was a low blow, she knew, but now was not the time for mincing words. Now was the time for honesty, no matter how brutal.

“There was only one affair with a married lady,” Frederick said, his voice somber, “and one was more than enough for me. I’ve had my fill of affairs, and of city life. London has grown too dirty, too crowded.”

“But London is not dull,” she reminded him. “And life in Little Bilberry can be very dull.”

“Not with you around,” he said, and there was tenderness in the words, and in his eyes. “You are many things, Lily Grayling, but you are never dull.”

He walked toward her then, his hands outstretched, pleading his case, and Lily felt herself softening. Melting, even.

And then he took her hands in his and said, “I want to marry you, and run this inn with you. I want to spend my life with you. Wherever you might be.”

The man seemed to have an answer for everything. A good answer. And Lily wanted to believe him, to believe in him, even as logic cautioned her to proceed with care.

“Frederick...” She drew in a deep breath, attempting to gather her wits in the face of temptation. “You know I have come to care for you a great deal, and of course I’ve enjoyed this time we’ve spent together, but... marriage? We’ve only known each other for two weeks.”

“I know. But it only took me one to fall in love with you.”

Lily stared at him, rendered mute by the maelstrom of feelings crashing through her body.

Love?

Frederick was in love with her?

The admission was stunning, thrilling, and unbelievable all at once. She had no words. Her brain was mush.

The silence was broken by a horse's faint whinny, followed by the distinct crunch of gravel under wheels, announcing the arrival of a carriage.

Visitors.

Slipping her hands from Frederick's grasp, she strode to the window and peered down at the courtyard just as a liveried servant pulled the carriage door open and handed down one of its passengers, an elegant brunette in a mint green gown. Rose.

Lily turned from the window, anxiety sweeping through her already shocked brain. "My sister has arrived," she said evenly, though her thoughts and pulse were anything but calm.

"I'll go," Frederick said. "But let me say one last thing before I do. I know for you it seems too soon for talk of marriage, but I've been waiting all my life to find you, Lily.

I just didn't know it until I met you. Surely you can see why I want to make you mine, and why I don't want to wait even one more day. "

Lily's heart swooned and she probably would have dashed across the room and

launched herself into his arms, but then her grandmother appeared, popping her head around the doorframe.

“Lily,” she whispered urgently, “your sister has arrived.”

“Right. Thank you, Gran.”

Her grandmother slipped away, and then Lily turned to Frederick with an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. I must go.”

He nodded before heading for the doorway, where he paused and turned to look at her.

“Good luck with your sister,” he said. “And do try to remember to give my offer some consideration.”

The smile he gave her was equal parts wry and teasing, and then he was gone, leaving her to wonder how, even with her sister here, she could possibly forget even a single word he’d said today.

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If anyone were to ask how the evening was coming along, Lily would likely say it was going just fine, but that would be a lie.

The evening was awkward. Excruciating. Seemingly unending.

And dinner was only half-over.

Reaching for her sherry, Lily took a healthy gulp while Rose answered yet another of Gran's questions about her life in London as a married woman.

Stephen sat beside his wife, doing more eating than speaking, as Rose and Gran did their best to fill the silence, but no amount of cheerful chatter could drown out the tension in the room.

Rose seemed to have grown even more beautiful these last two years, and tonight she was the image of elegance in a satin gown the same shade as her emerald eyes.

Ever since she was a little girl, Rose had always looked perfectly put together, never mussed, never a chestnut lock of hair out of place.

Unlike Lily, who gave up on being elegant long ago, even before she came to Little Bilberry. Fortunately, life here did not require elegance.

Nevertheless, looking across the dinner table at her sister, Lily couldn't help but wish she were wearing a prettier dress than this blue organza two seasons out of fashion. Alas, it was one of her best, and it would have to do.

Rose, for her part, had lied very prettily when they greeted each other in the courtyard earlier, spouting off some nonsense about how lovely Lily looked in her gown.

Rose had even embraced her, as if everything was as it used to be. As if all had been forgiven.

Stephen wasn't much better. He did have the grace to look a little embarrassed to be here, but mostly he was exactly as she remembered him.

Or, more accurately, exactly as she'd allowed herself to forget.

A bit pompous, a bit too serious. A dandy, with pomade in his curly blonde hair and a cravat trimmed in lace.

She couldn't see him chopping wood or picking apples.

Even so, it was evident that he adored her sister, and that Rose adored him.

They were still in love, and Lily was surprised to discover there was no jealousy in her heart.

In fact, she was relieved to see their feelings were the same, even two years later.

The alternative would have been so much worse.

"By the way, Lily," Rose said, daintily patting her mouth with her napkin. "Mother sends you her best wishes. And, of course, she sends her concerns, as well. She cannot understand why you're not married yet, and she wishes you would return to London so she can find you a husband."

Lily took a generous sip of sherry before deigning to reply. "Then I hope you

reminded her that I would have been married years ago if all had gone according to plan.” She kept her voice even, as one should at the dinner table, and tried not to lob a dinner roll at her sister’s gorgeous head.

“That was two years ago,” Rose said with a dismissive wave. “And you’ve had more than enough time since then to find a husband.”

Her sister, younger than her by six years, apparently thought being a married woman gave her the authority to spout off unsolicited matrimonial advice.

“Your sister’s right, Lily, you should be married by now,” Stephen said, and because he was busy sawing at his beef, he missed the look of caution Lily sent his way.

Gran, although she undoubtedly agreed with them, wisely said nothing and kept her gaze on her plate.

“I’ve been far too busy running the inn to even think about hunting for a husband,” Lily said, before beheading a spear of asparagus with her teeth and chewing it as if it had offended her honor.

“Nonsense,” Rose said. “I know for a fact there have been at least three perfectly lovely gentlemen who would have married you in a heartbeat, but you turned them all away.”

“How—” Lily stopped, her gaze flicking to Gran, who gave her an unapologetic shrug before turning back to her meal. Traitor .

“Not that it’s anybody’s business but my own,” Lily said, “but I turned those gentlemen down because I didn’t need any of them. Nor did I love any of them. And I have decided that if I do marry, I will only marry a man who loves me even more than I love him. A man who proves his worth.”

She did not look directly at Stephen as she said it, but the weighty silence that fell over the room seemed to confirm her message had been received.

“Well, I hope you find what you’re looking for, Lily,” Rose said quietly. “You deserve to be happy. And loved.”

Their gazes met across the table, and the determined cheerfulness in her sister’s eyes was gone, replaced by a sincerity that brought a lump to Lily’s throat. She reached for her glass of sherry and drank, trying to wash the lump away as if it were food instead of feeling.

Gran cleared her throat, and said with forced cheer, “A neighbor of ours who has recently returned from London saw a performance of The Magic Flute while she was there, and said it was absolutely marvelous. Have you been to see it, Rose?”

Her sister answered that she had then launched into a gushing review of the opera. Lily listened with half an ear as she ate another bite of asparagus, determined to keep her mouth full for the remainder of the meal.

If she had food in her mouth, she could not speak.

She had said too much tonight, letting her temper flare, behaving no better than a petulant child.

She supposed she should afford herself a little grace—after all, her sister was here in her home, at her table, asking her why she wasn’t married yet while the man who was supposed to have married Lily sat beside her, married to her instead.

A person could only withstand so much.

Even so, Lily expected better of herself, and was determined not to say another word

until she was certain she could do so like a civilized person.

Fortunately, the remainder of the evening passed without further argument, though there was no shortage of awkward pauses and stilted conversation.

By the time the torment finally ended, and everyone parted for their bedchambers, Lily was overcome with exhaustion, both physical and emotional.

As she entered her bedroom and began her nighttime ablutions, the day's events swirled through her mind, and it struck her again just how bizarre the day had been.

Her brain was overwhelmed with the effects of the evening meal, of seeing her sister again, and the man who was her former betrothed now brother-in-law.

Then, of course, there was Frederick's proposal. She couldn't possibly forget about that, although her sister's arrival had permitted no time to ponder it, or even fully process that it had happened.

But it had happened.

Frederick wanted to marry her. He'd said he loved her and wished to spend his life with her here at the inn.

Was it all too good to be true?

Or was it possible Frederick was exactly what she'd been waiting for?

Lily climbed into bed and stared up at the ceiling, wondering how on earth she would ever get to sleep after the day she'd had.

The moment she closed her eyes, however, her thoughts fell away, and she drifted off

into an exhausted sleep.

Lily awoke bright and early the following morning, feeling well-rested but no less uncertain.

Which was why, after quickly dressing and securing her hair in a tidy bun, she scurried down the stairs and went straight into the kitchen.

She needed to be doing something, and nothing calmed her so well as baking.

Baking was safe, precise, ordered. Baking made her feel sane, and after yesterday, she needed a bit of sanity in her life.

Contentedly, she flitted around the kitchen, removing the necessary ingredients from their cupboards and drawers and setting them on the table, lined up before her in two tidy rows.

She mixed flour and eggs in a bowl and threw in the remainder of the ingredients, and it was only when she began placing the dough balls on the baking sheet that she realized she was making scones.

Scones with strawberry preserves had always been Rose's favorite food, ever since she was old enough to have teeth to chew with.

She hadn't come into the kitchen intending to make a treat for her sister, but now that she was doing it, it felt right. She'd behaved badly last night, and she wanted to do something nice for Rose—not as an olive branch, but perhaps as the first step toward reconciliation.

Her sister had hurt her deeply, yes, but if she were being honest with herself, she had grown weary of her anger and bitterness. It served no purpose, and could not change

the past, so what was she holding onto it for?

Besides, it was clear now that Rose had done her a favor by stealing Stephen away. If Lily had married him, she never would have come to live at The Weeping Whiskers, and she loved the inn and Little Bilberry far more than she'd ever loved Stephen.

"Good morning, Lily."

She looked up to find Rose standing in the doorway, hands clasped behind her back, a tentative smile on her lips.

"Good morning," she replied politely, kneading the dough in her hands. "How did you sleep?"

It was a safe question, one she might have asked any guest of the inn, but at least it was cordial.

"I slept well, thank you. The bed is very comfortable." Rose cleared her throat, her gaze skating over the mess on the table. "It smells wonderful in here. What are you baking?"

"Scones."

Rose's eyes met hers. "I love scones."

"I know."

Lily drew in a deep breath and set the dough on the table before nervously wiping her hands on her apron. "Rose, I owe you an apology. My behavior last night was loathsome. I was petulant and rude, and you did not deserve it."

Rose stepped further into the room, shaking her head vigorously.

“You’re angry with me, and you have every right to be.

I hurt you. I did not intend to; I did not set out to steal Stephen away from you, but we fell in love and.

..” She trailed off with a shrug of her shoulders, as if to say, what else were we to do?

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And she was right. Stephen marrying Rose had been the right thing to do, even for Lily. She just hadn't known it back then.

"Are you happy, Rosie?" she asked, the pet name slipping out as naturally as it used to.

She suspected she already knew what her sister's answer would be, but she wanted to hear it, anyway. Just to be sure.

"I am," Rose said softly, before a wry little smile caught her lips. "Though I do have to admit, marriage requires more effort than I thought it would, and Stephen does love his horses a little more than I'd like. But, yes, we are happy."

Lily nodded. "I'm glad."

She had forgotten how horse-mad Stephen could be, and it likely would have been worse if he'd married a woman he did not love. He probably would have spent more time with his horses than with Lily.

She couldn't see Frederick behaving that way. Not this man who worked so hard to help her, to make her happy, and who apparently wanted to marry her and share his life with her. Share this life with her, here at the inn, as her partner.

"Lily," Rose said, drawing her back to the conversation.

"I came to the inn because I wanted to apologize to you, and I wanted to do so in person, not in a letter." She took another step forward, her gaze frank and imploring.

“I am so very sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. You’re my sister, and I love you, and I miss you so much. ”

Tears misted Lily’s eyes, and she crossed the kitchen and wrapped her sister up in a fierce hug. “I’ve missed you too, Rosie.”

Rose drew back a moment later, her green eyes bright with emotion. “There is another reason for my visit,” she said, a pleased little smile curving her mouth. “I’m going to have a baby in the spring, and I want my little one to know its Auntie Lily.”

Surprise gave way to joy, and Lily clasped her sister’s hands in hers. “Oh, Rose, that is wonderful news. I’m so happy for you.”

They embraced again, both sniffing and laughing, and Rose whispered, “Thank you, Lily.”

And she knew her sister was thanking her for more than her congratulations. She was thanking her for her forgiveness, too.

With one last squeeze, Lily drew back and said, “I’d best get on with these scones or breakfast is going to be unforgivably late.”

“Can I help?” Rose asked as she swiped at the front of her gown, trying to clear away the flour from Lily’s apron, to no avail.

“You can take the first batch of scones out of the oven,” Lily said. “And put that extra apron on first.” She pointed towards the door, where another apron hung from a hook on the wall.

The sisters spent the next several minutes in companionable silence, working side by side as comfortably as if they had done so a thousand times, and the last two years

seemed to melt away along with the last remnants of bitterness and anger.

“Gran tells me you’ve had a gentleman helping out around the inn for the last fortnight,” Rose said as she rolled a ball of dough between her palms.

Lily’s shoulders tensed but she did not pause in her work, and answered nonchalantly, “Yes. He’s the brother of a friend of mine who lives here in Little Bilberry.”

Rose nodded. “Frederick Darrington.”

“Do you know him?” Lily asked, flicking her a sidelong glance.

“I’ve met him. And, of course, I am aware of his reputation. He is exceedingly popular with the ladies.”

Lily’s lips thinned into an unhappy line at the mention of Frederick’s reputation, but all she said was, “He is a charming man. Gran likes him a lot.”

Rose hummed thoughtfully. “Gran said the same of you.”

“As I said, he’s a charming man.”

“Yes, he is. He’s charmed his way into many ladies’ beds, or so I hear.” A pregnant pause followed, and then, “Has he charmed his way into yours?”

The ball of dough Lily was handling dropped to the table with a thud, and she turned to stare at her sister in abject shock. “Of course not! And neither has he tried.”

“But you have kissed,” Rose said, raising a sticky forefinger. “Don’t bother denying it. Your blush gives you away.”

“We have kissed, yes.” They’d done more than kiss, of course, but that was neither here nor there. “Frederick has not pressed for more.”

“Not yet, you mean.”

Lily shot her sister a frown. “He is more than his reputation, Rose. He’s a good man.” Her gaze dropped to the table. “He...says he loves me. He wants to marry me.”

Rose gasped. “Have you accepted him? Are you betrothed?”

She shook her head. “He asked me just yesterday, moments before you arrived. There was no time to answer him, and honestly, I was so stunned, I have no idea what I would have said. And then your carriage arrived, and he left.”

Do try to remember to give my offer some consideration.

I’ve been waiting all my life to find you, Lily.

I want to spend my life with you. Wherever you might be.

His words rushed through her brain again, as they’d done a hundred times since he’d said them, and pleasure pulsed through her, intertwined with a thread of uncertainty she had been unable to shake.

“Have you decided yet what you will say?” Rose asked.

Lily turned and leaned her back against the table, crossing her arms over her chest. “Frederick is...” She pursed her lips. “I’ve never met anyone like him. He is charming, but he’s also artless and caring and kind. He’s so much more than he appears to be. And he makes me smile.”

Rose leaned against the table beside her, and bumped Lily's shoulder with hers. "Sounds to me like you love him, too," she said softly.

Lily nodded. "I think I might. But I thought I loved Stephen, and I thought he loved me, and look what happened. He chose someone else." She swallowed hard and met her sister's gaze.

"What if that happens again, Rose? He's younger than I am, and he's used to life in London.

What if he regrets marrying me? What if he ends up wishing he'd married someone younger and prettier, someone who doesn't run a country inn? "

Rose was silent for a long moment, considering her response, and then she simply said, "Do you believe he would do that?"

Lily sighed. "My heart says he wouldn't, but what is that worth? My heart has been wrong before. How do I know it will steer me true this time?"

"You don't. You either take a chance and choose to trust it or"—she shrugged—"you choose not to."

A frown furrowed Lily's brow. "That is supremely unhelpful."

"I'm sorry," Rose said with a small smile. "I wish I knew what you should do."

"That makes two of us."

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Frederick was in an agony of suspense. It had only been twenty-six hours since he'd asked for Lily's hand, but every minute seemed like an eternity, and all the waiting had tied his stomach up in knots.

He couldn't seem to sit still longer than a few seconds before he was up again, pacing the floor, wearing thin every rug in his sister's house.

Finally, when he could not stand being indoors a single moment longer, he ventured out into the crisp morning air, wonderfully fresh and cool and ripe with the scents of wood smoke and autumn leaves.

He walked with purpose, though he had none, except to show mercy on Penelope's rugs, and try to escape his obsessive thoughts.

Still, even as he marched briskly up the lane, arms slicing, boots crunching, with the scenic Hampshire countryside all around, his mind was on Lily and the question he'd asked her.

What would her answer be? Would she accept his proposal, or would she turn him down?

He'd had very little time to plead his case, much less than a moment like that deserved, but he'd done his best with what he'd been given. He only hoped his best was good enough, if not to have won her hand, then at least to have earned himself a second chance at winning it.

There was so much more he wanted to tell her, so much still left to say, and he prayed

she would give him the chance to say it.

He drew in a deep breath and intentionally slowed his pace. He'd hoped a walk would clear his mind, but he could see now that it had been a fool's errand. There would be no outrunning his thoughts, or his worry.

What if Lily wouldn't have him? What if she turned him away?

Her heart had been injured once before, and he was asking her to risk it again, to put her faith in him, and trust that he would not fail her. What if she decided he wasn't worth the risk?

No. He couldn't think that way. He loved her, damn it, and he wanted to share his life with her. He had no desire to return to London. There was nothing for him there, nothing but frivolous parties and meaningless affairs, neither of which held a thread of interest for him now.

He wanted to stay here in Little Bilberry and run The Weeping Whiskers with Lily at his side, as his wife, his partner.

And all he could do now was wait and hope she would tell him she wanted that, too.

Tipping his head back, Frederick closed his eyes and drew in another deep breath as he let the sun warm his face. He focused on the solid earth beneath his boots, the swell of his chest as oxygen filled his lungs, the sonorous lowing of a cow in the distance.

His eyes popped open, and he stopped in his tracks to sweep his gaze across the expanse of open field beside him.

There, a short distance off, was Blythe, happily munching away on the wild grass.

Frederick chuckled to himself. It seemed the sweet girl had escaped her stall again. Making his way into the field, he tromped through the grass toward the grazing cow and had nearly reached her when a voice called out Blythe's name.

Lily's voice.

Heart thudding, he turned toward the road and spotted her just as she came into view, her gray skirts snapping with each brisk stride.

She noticed Blythe first and headed into the field after her. Frederick parted his lips to call out to her, but then, as if sensing his presence, her steps faltered, and her gaze shot to his.

Frederick raised a hand in greeting, and Lily, her expression unreadable, returned the gesture before continuing on toward Blythe. Frederick followed suit, and the two came together beside the still-grazing cow.

"Blythe, you naughty girl," Lily murmured, giving the fugitive a scratch behind one ear. "You know very well you're not supposed to be in Mr. Richardson's field."

Frederick's gaze was fixed on Lily's face, combing for clues, but her expression revealed nothing of her thoughts, or her intentions.

"Come," she said to Blythe. "Let's get you home."

"I'll walk with you," Frederick said hopefully. "If you and Blythe have no objections, of course."

Finally her eyes met his, her small smile uncertain but not unwelcoming. "I can't speak for Blythe," she said, "but I have no objections."

Relief swept over him as they set off slowly toward the lane, Lily at his side, leading a cooperative Blythe by the rope around her neck.

The impulse to ask if she had made her decision was almost ungovernable, but he held it back. He would not pressure her. He'd asked her to consider his proposal, and he would allow her to do just that, in her own time, no matter how desperately he wanted her answer now.

Clearing his throat, he glanced over at Lily, whose gaze was on the grass at her feet, the morning sunbathing her in its golden glow and glinting off her sable hair.

"How are you getting on with your sister?" he asked, before he started spouting off odes to her beauty.

"Surprisingly well," she said with a small smile. "Dinner last night was a little awkward, but Rose and I talked this morning, and I think we're friends again. Or, at least, on our way to being friends."

"I'm glad to hear that, Lily."

She nodded. "I've missed her."

"And your brother-in-law?" he asked, in a shameless and obvious attempt to root out her feelings for her former betrothed.

"I have not missed him," she replied promptly but without malice.

Blythe gave a soft low, as if expressing her approval, and Frederick huffed out a laugh, even as relief lightened his heart.

"He would not have made me happy," Lily said quietly, as if speaking to herself.

“But he and my sister seem happy together. They’re going to have a baby.”

“Ah. Well. A baby is always good news.”

“Rose is more excited than I’ve ever seen her.” She smiled. “I’m happy for them. And a little relieved, too.”

“Relieved?” Frederick asked, unsure of her meaning.

“I wasn’t sure I would ever forgive them, let alone be happy for them.” She drew in a breath, her gaze lifting to the sky. “It feels good. I feel good.”

The contentment in her voice brought a smile to his lips. “That’s wonderful, Lily,” he said, clasping his hands behind his back to keep from tugging her to him.

She deserved to feel good, and he wanted to hear those words from her lips every day for the rest of his life.

It was on the tip of his tongue to say so; to plead his case and list his good points and all the reasons she would be a fool not to marry him.

And if that didn’t work, fall to his knees and beg.

But Lily’s soft voice speaking his name restrained him and drew his gaze to hers.

“Yes, Lily?”

“Were you in earnest?” Her brow was furrowed, her cheeks flushed pink. “About wanting to marry me? About...loving me?”

His heart stuttered, and when she slowed to a stop and turned to face him, he did the

same, his pulse galloping under the scrutiny of her blue-green eyes.

“I was,” he said, the words rough. “I am , Lily. I am in earnest.”

He did not make a habit of proposing marriage or making avowals of love he did not mean. Lily was the first woman he’d ever loved and, he hoped, the last and only.

“Do you want children?”

Frederick blinked. The abruptness of the question caught him off guard, but it was a reasonable query.

Being a father wasn’t something he’d thought much about, but he’d always liked children, and these last several days with his nieces and nephews made him think he might enjoy raising a brood of his own.

With Lily, of course.

“Yes, I would like to be a father,” he said simply.

“Then before we go any further with this discussion, there is something I must confess.” She swallowed nervously, her gaze on Blythe as she scratched the cow’s chin, avoiding his gaze. “I cannot in good conscience accept your proposal until I’ve been completely honest with you.”

She looked at him then, her expression gravely serious. “I am not in the first blush of youth, Frederick. I will be thirty in December.”

Frederick couldn’t help it. He smiled. “As old as that?”

Her frown told him she did not appreciate his teasing. “Older than you,” she said.

“Five years older.”

“Not even four and half,” he corrected. “And I don’t care a whit about your age.”

“Perhaps you should,” she shot back, folding her arms over her chest. “A younger wife might give you more children.”

Frederick shook his head slowly. “I don’t care about that,” he said again. “I want you , Lily. I love you. And I would rather have no children with the woman I love than ten with anyone else.”

She stared up at him for a torturously long moment, the breeze rustling the dark, wispy curls framing her soft pink cheeks.

“Right,” she finally said, unfolding her arms to clasp her hands at her front. “In that case, yes. I will marry you, Frederick.”

Her words were brisk and dispassionate, and it took more than a moment for their meaning to sink in.

“You will...” He trailed off, staring at her, his heart pounding in his ears. “Are you certain?”

Her lips parted and she blinked up at him. “That is not the response I was expecting to receive.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, rubbing at his cheek. “I think I was caught off guard by your acceptance.”

She cocked her head to one side. “You expected me to refuse?”

“No. Not exactly. But I think I was hoping for a warmer acceptance. Perhaps a summation of the many reasons you want me for your husband? Or, better yet, a declaration of your undying love?”

He tried for a teasing tone, but Lily seemed to see right through him, her gaze softening before falling to his chest. “There are...conditions I must discuss with you first.”

“Conditions?” He had not expected her to have conditions.

“Well, only one, really,” she said, toeing the grass with one boot. Then she drew in a breath and looked at him. “I want a long betrothal, Frederick. I want to be sure we’re suited to each other, and that our feelings are not fleeting. I want you to be sure this is truly the life you want.”

Frederick suppressed the urge to take her hands in his. “It is , Lily. I’m already sure.”

She nodded. “And I believe you. I do. But you cannot deny the fact that we’ve known each other for a very short time. Marriage is a lifelong commitment. There can be no harm in waiting a little while. Just to be certain.”

Her eyes searched his, questioning, hopeful, and Frederick’s heart squeezed.

He was already certain, more certain than he’d ever been about anything, but he could understand her need to be careful. She’d been hurt before. She’d been certain before and her trust was betrayed. It was not surprising that she would wish to prevent that from happening again.

And so, even though there was no doubt in either his mind or his heart, he would give in to her wishes.

“You’re right,” he said. “There is no harm in waiting.”

Lily’s entire face lit up, and he knew he’d made the right decision. “Truly?” she asked. “You don’t mind?”

A wry smile curved his lips. “I admit, I’m not thrilled. I’d marry you today if you’d let me, but I do understand why you wish to be cautious. And I’m more than willing to wait for you, Lily. However long you need me to.”

She took his hands in hers, her eyes shining. “You are a decent man, Frederick Darrington. Your decency is just one of the reasons I want you for my husband. Your kind and giving heart is another. But it was your smile that made me fall in love with you.”

The words washed over him, lighting him up inside, and a smile slowly spread across his face.

Lily surged up on her toes and brushed his lips with hers. “I love your smile.” She kissed him again. “I love you .”

Frederick’s arms closed around her and he dragged her into him, pressing his face in her soft hair. “I love you. God, I love you. With all that I am and all that I hope to be. I am yours, Lily. Always.”

The heavy weight of worry lifted from Lily’s shoulders and a warm, joyful glow grew in its place, spreading through her body until she feared she might burst with it.

Frederick loved her and he wanted to marry her, and he was willing to wait until she was ready. Surely she was the luckiest girl in England.

Either that, or she was dreaming.

Rather than pinch herself, she kissed her betrothed again, delighting in the sweet press of Frederick's lips, the hungry caress of his hands at her back.

No. This was no dream.

"How am I so lucky?" Lily whispered, gazing up at Frederick with something akin to wonder.

"I'm the lucky one," he said huskily, cradling her face in his hands. "When I think back over everything I did to get here—every sin I committed, every mistake I made—I understand now that all of it was necessary. Because all of it led me to you."

Tears welled in Lily's eyes, and she laughed sheepishly. "Now look what you've made me do," she whispered. "I'm crying. I hate crying."

"Forgive me," Frederick said, wrapping her in his arms, his smile so tender it made her want to cry more.

He kissed her brow, her nose, her mouth, lingering there, and the sweet, gentle press of his lips on hers deepened, intensified, until Lily was weak in the knees, and tingling all over.

"Tell me," he said several moments later, "exactly how long will this long engagement be? One week? Two?" His teeth grazed her earlobe, making her shiver.

"I thought, perhaps, three months?"

"Three months." She could hear his throat working as he swallowed. "Is that number negotiable?"

Lily leaned back and arched a brow. "You said you would wait. However long I need

you to.”

“You’re right. I did.” He swallowed again. “It is only that I want you so badly. I want to be with you. But, of course, I will wait for as long—”

Lily kissed him, cutting off his words. “I only said I want to wait three months before we marry. I said nothing about waiting for anything else.”

Frederick’s eyes darkened and his mouth captured hers, as surely as he’d captured her heart. They kissed in Mr. Richardson’s field to the sweet scent of wild grass beneath the soft haze of a late-October sky.

“Oh, dear,” Lily said sometime later, scanning the empty field around them. “Blythe is gone. We’ll have to find her again.”

Chuckling, Frederick touched his forehead to hers. “Remind me to give that gorgeous cow an extra carrot when we get her back to the inn.”

“Whatever for?” she asked with a smile.

“For bringing us together, of course.”

Lily eased back to gaze into his eyes, her heart brimming with so much love it ached. “For that, I think she deserves two extra carrots, don’t you?”

“Two extra carrots,” he agreed with a smile. “Every single day for the rest of her hopefully very long life.”

And after stealing one more kiss from her husband-to-be, Lily slipped her hand in his and, not for the last time, the two set off in search of their wayward bovine matchmaker.

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“What precisely do you think you’re doing, wife?” Frederick called out as he strode into the garden and up to the vegetable patch, his arms crossed sternly over his chest.

Lily, who was on her knees in the dirt, turned to give him an incredulous look. “I’m picking turnips,” she replied, motioning toward the half-filled handbasket sitting beside her. “I should think that was rather obvious, husband .”

Frederick frowned, allowed himself a moment to admire his wife’s deliciously rounded bottom, then said, “In case you’ve forgotten, you are carrying our baby. You should be resting.”

“Oh, tosh.” She began to rise, and Frederick rushed forward to help her to her feet, which earned him another exasperated look from his wife. “I am not a delicate flower, Frederick, and I do wish you would cease treating me like one.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, taking her dirt-stained hands in his. “You know I can’t help but worry about you.”

And despite all her protests, he would not be able to cease his worrying, not until the baby came. And probably not even then.

“I know.” An indulgent smile curled her lips, drawing his attention to a smudge of dirt on her left cheek.

“You had a spot of dirt exactly here the first day I met you,” he said, smiling at the memory as he used his thumb to wipe the soil away.

“I must have made a wonderful first impression,” she said wryly, rubbing her cheek with the sleeve of her gown.

“I thought you were beautiful. And I think you’re even more beautiful now.”

Lily rolled her eyes, though he noticed the smile still lingered on her lips, even as she said, “I’m as big as a house and I smell like turnips.”

Frederick wrapped his arms around her waist, the press of her growing belly filling him with pride and wonderment. He nuzzled her neck, breathing her in, then hummed his approval. “Turnips put wicked thoughts in my head.”

She laughed. “I don’t think that’s the turnips, you scoundrel.”

“You’re right. It’s you. Sweet, spicy”—he nibbled her earlobe gently with his teeth—“and thoroughly delicious.”

Lily shivered and looped her arms around his neck, drawing him in for a deep, lingering kiss.

“Do you know what day it is today?” Frederick asked a moment later, before pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“It’s Monday.”

He shook his head, and Lily drew back so she could frown up at him. “Yesterday was Sunday, Frederick, so today must be Monday.”

Smiling, he tucked a stray lock of ebony hair behind her ear and shook his head again. “Today is the eighteenth of October, my love. On this day, one year ago, you agreed to marry me.”

Lily had insisted on a three-month betrothal, but with patience, diligence and ardent wooing, Frederick had whittled away at her resistance until finally, on day seventy-four, nearly one week after Christmas, they stood before their friends and family in the parish church and promised to honor and love each other until death do they part.

All of Frederick's family had attended—his mother, his three siblings and their spouses, and every single one of his nieces and nephews. All thirteen of them.

Another nephew had joined the family since, but at the time of the wedding, Rose was round and glowing, and father-to-be Stephen never left her side. Their little boy was born in the spring, and his parents promised he would make his first trip to the inn very soon.

“One year ago,” Lily said softly, her turquoise eyes taking on a dreamy glow. “In Richardson's field. The same field where you later made love to me for the very first time.”

An interesting mix of fondness and lust shot through Frederick at the memory of that day. “I thought we might commemorate both occasions with a reproduction.” He ran his hands up and down her back. “What do you think?”

“We can't,” she said, the hitch in her voice belying the protest. “We're having dinner at your sister's house tonight.”

“Surely there will be time for both. And Penelope won't mind if we're a few minutes late.”

Lily huffed out an incredulous laugh. “That is lust addling your brain. Your sister will mind very much if we are late.”

“Well, I won't mind if she minds,” Frederick said, his jaw beginning to set with stubborn tenacity.

“Only five minutes ago you said you wanted me to rest,” she countered, brows arched.

“And I do.” He tugged her closer, his hands skimming her hips. “I’m perfectly happy to do all the work.”

She shook her head, her eyes sparkling. “You are a terrible influence on me.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Have I ever told you no? ”

“There’s a first time for everything,” he said, battling a grin and losing.

Lily swatted his arm, fighting a smile of her own, and Frederick swooped down to give his wife’s irresistible lips a long, thorough kiss.

“Frederick!”

Gran’s voice shot through the garden like a missile, startling them both.

“If you can tear yourself away from my granddaughter’s lips for a moment,” she said, “I require your assistance in the dining room, please.”

“I’ll be right there, Gran,” he called back, and Lily began to laugh, which made him laugh, as it always did.

“You had better do as she says,” she teased, “or you’ll be sent to your room without supper tonight.”

“Fortunately for me, my room is also your room.”

Still smiling, she gave his chest a gentle nudge toward the kitchen door. “Go on. And I’ll meet you in Richardson’s field in one hour.”

Frederick grinned. “I love you, Lily.”

“I know.”

“And do you love me?”

She pursed her lips, pretending to give the question some thought, and then she cupped his jaw with both hands.

“Yes,” his wife whispered. “Yes. Yes. Yes .”