



The Spring Promise (The Starlings of Starling Hall #1)

Author: *Sara Bennett*

Category: Historical

Description: The first novella in the Starling Hall series, set in the English village of Barton Lacey.

Will Starling and Molly Lacey have been best friends all their lives. Molly always believed they would marry, until Will set his sights on a pretty newcomer. Desperate to marry the flirtatious Celeste, he asks for Molly's help. When she demurs he makes her a promise.

She can have anything she wants from him.

All Molly wants is Will, but it seems he is lost to her. She agrees to distract Will's rival Mark Hunter. And then things begin to go very wrong.

Can they realise in time that their friendship has turned to love?

Total Pages (Source): 12

CHAPTER ONE

1838, Lacey Farm, Barton Lacey

Molly Lacey leaned over the gate as Will Starling rode past the lane that led to her family farm. It was a beautiful day, and she was wearing one of her better gowns—the green brought out the colour of her eyes—but although she hoped he might notice her, he didn't so much as give her a glance.

Her spirits sank lower and lower as he rode out of sight. He was going to the Morton house; she knew it. Everybody knew he had been dangling after Celeste Morton since the moment she arrived, and it was only a matter of time before he popped the question. And Celeste would say yes, of course she would! How could she not?

Molly sighed. Will had been her best friend since they were children but as they had grown into adults, she had begun to hope they could be more. Why couldn't they marry? Join their lives together? There was no one she wanted to spend the rest of her life with more than Will, and it seemed so obvious to her. Surely, he could see it too?

I love you, Will.

Sometimes it was on the tip of her tongue, but she had never spoken it out loud.

Then Celeste Morton had arrived to stay with her uncle and suddenly Will had forgotten all about Molly. He was in love, but it wasn't with her.

Tall and handsome Will with his auburn hair, blue eyes, and shy smile. Molly's heart

ached at the thought of him sitting next to Celeste in her modish gowns, fashionable dark hair and teasing glances. She was a flirt, and Will didn't seem to notice how wide she cast her net when it came to the gentlemen of Barton Lacey. He believed he was the one who would win her heart and hand and bring her home to Starling Hall.

Molly had to stop pining over him like—as her younger sister Grace put it—a moonstruck fool. There were plenty of other prospects in the district. The Lacey family might not be wealthy now, but they had been once. They had been the lords of the manor since the time of William the Conqueror, but as the centuries had passed, they had slipped lower on the social scale. Now they were farmers.

Although it was a very nice farm, and Molly reminded herself that they owned their land and did not pay rent. They may not have been county gentry, like the Mortons or the Starlings, or the Norris's who spent most of their year in London. But the Laceys were well liked and invited to all the local dances and suppers.

Will Starling's father was a baronet, and the title of 'Sir' would pass to his son, just as his wife would be known as 'Lady'. If anyone could be considered the squires of Barton Lacey, then it was the Starlings of Starling Hall.

Molly might be naïve—Grace often said that too—but she had always believed if you loved someone, then nothing else mattered. Lately she had begun to realise that for someone like Will, who would one day inherit Starling Hall and everything that went with it, he had to think carefully when it came to choosing a wife.

Wealth would be useful—there were a great many Starlings to feed and educate and launch into Barton Lacey society. It would also be useful to have a wife who would not pine for the excitement of the capital or want to gallivant about most of the time. The Starlings were the sort of family who believed in the importance of spending time together, and Will's future wife would need to enjoy domestic life.

Molly believed she could do that, especially if she had Will to herself at night in their bedchamber. Just the two of them discussing the future and laughing about the past. She was willing to help out with all of those Starling children if it meant the eldest son was hers.

But it wasn't up to her, and that was what had her in the doldrums.

She'd even turned down the rather handsome son of a local farmer because she had hoped that Will might still come to his senses. Well, it was too late and that farmer's son had gone on to marry someone else.

And now Will was going to marry Celeste—at least, that was what everyone said—and it was time for Molly to face facts. Will was lost to her.

Somehow, she would have to put her love for him aside and get on with her life.

CHAPTER TWO

What everyone was saying was true, Will Starling did have his sights set on Celeste Morton. From the moment first saw her, smiling at him from her uncle's carriage, he'd been determined to win her heart. However, every other single gentleman in Barton Lacey seemed to have the same aim. But Will's was unwavering, and once he set his mind on a thing, he did not give up until he had it.

He found Celeste fascinating in a way that kept him awake late at night. That little smile that curved at the corners of her pink lips, followed by a glance from under her lashes, as if she was checking to see whether he had noticed her. Which he had. Of course he had.

Abby, his elder sister, said he was infatuated. Sometimes she said he was besotted. She would shake her head at him and say, "Love takes time," with all the wisdom her two years of seniority allowed. "It doesn't strike like a bolt of lightning. That's just a nursery tale. You need to know someone properly before you can fall in love with them. Everything else is make believe."

Will didn't have time for Abby's cautious nonsense. If he didn't move quick, Celeste would be lost to him. Once they were wed, his whole family—his eight siblings and his parents—would have to admit he had been right all along. She was perfect. He imagined Celeste living in Starling Hall, seated at the long table, picking flowers from his mother's garden, and retiring with him to his bedchamber.

And if sometimes his imaginings felt more like wistful thinking than reality, and doubts tried to thrust their way into his bright and shiny dream, he pushed them aside

and refused to consider for a moment that he was wrong.

The Starlings were a large, warm-hearted family that supported one another and shared everything, but Will wanted something that was his and his alone. A love to sustain him through the years of toil that lay ahead, of always thinking of someone else—whether his younger brother Nigel needed new shoes or his sister Christine had piano lessons that day, or his other sister Breana was involved in another scrap. Will wanted to be seen for himself rather than just the Starling heir. He was dependable and trustworthy, but at times it seemed to him as if he had been forgotten.

That was why he needed Celeste to marry him. With her at his side, he would never fade into the background.

As he rode past the Lacey farm he almost stopped. He used to, the Lacey's farmhouse was like a second home to him, but he reminded himself he no longer had time to waste on social calls. Molly was his best friend, but he didn't think she would mind his neglect, not when he presented Celeste to her as his future wife. Molly would be happy for him, just as he would be pleased for her when she married.

When he reached the Morton house, he noticed a horse tethered outside. His expression fell as he recognised it as Mark Hunter's gelding. Hunter was an acknowledged ne'er-do-well, but for some reason Celeste seemed to like him. He had arrived in Barton Lacey shortly after Celeste and was living with an elderly grandparent. Word was he was rustivating here until some scandal or other back in London had died down.

Will didn't care what Hunter had done, he just wanted him to go away.

When Hunter first arrived, he had tried to warn Celeste off him. He believed he had done so reasonably, without causing offence, but Celeste had laughed at Will's well-intentioned efforts and called him 'stuffy'. Abby always said he tended to be old-

fashioned, and young women these days did not like to be told what to do.

He had not said anything to Celeste on the matter since. The thought of her seeing him as one of those stern, authoritarian husbands made him shudder. He was determined that his wife would live life at his side as an equal, and would never expect her to obey his every whim. Will needed only to look to his parents for a prime example of how a happy marriage was negotiated.

Not that Celeste would allow him to boss her around anyway. She was not a meek sort of girl.

Molly Lacey wasn't meek either, but Will had never been concerned that she was going to do something outrageous if he didn't correct her. She was easy company, comfortable in a way Celeste was not. Like a favourite slipper.

Well, that was a rather unflattering comparison. And why on earth was he suddenly thinking about Molly?

Will dismounted, prepared to put up with Hunter's company for the sake of Celeste. As he drew near, he could hear laughter from the large conservatory at the side of the house.

Sir Reginald Morton was a keen botanist and the conservatory's glassed interior was a jungle of greenery, and the scent of exotic blooms was far too heady for Will's sensitive sinuses. What on earth was wrong with plain old roses and violets? Why did everything in Sir Reginald's greenhouse have to be a rare treasure from a faraway land? Celeste loved the place, though, so Will pretended to like it, and put up with his subsequent headaches for her sake.

As he fought against the clinging tendrils of an overgrown vine, wondering if it was trying to strangle him, he finally spotted Celeste. She and Hunter were standing near

a table set with a pot of tea with cups, and a lump of cake on a tray. Probably that nasty seed cake Hunter liked and which was forever getting caught in Will's teeth. Last time he ate it, a seed had attached to his front tooth, which he hadn't discovered until he arrived home. It still made him squirm to think Celeste had seen him in such an embarrassing state. These days he tried to smile without showing his teeth at all.

Hunter looked up. "Ah, Starling." He always said the name in a way that irritated Will, as if he was thinking of a common bird. There were times when Will wished his family name was St. John or Montgomery or Marchmont, anything but Starling.

Will nodded politely. "Hunter. Miss Morton. I think we can finally say it is spring in Barton Lacey. I noticed some daffodils flowering in the garden at the hall."

Celeste dimpled at him, looking particularly fetching in a pale blue gown with a matching ribbon gathering up her dark curls. "Mr Starling. Have you seen the *Aristolochia Hyperborea* ? Uncle Reggie is very excited to see it in bloom. He is writing to the botanic gardens at Kew to tell them all about it."

Will looked past her at the specimen—a particularly ugly one, in his opinion—and tried not to roll his eyes. All the same, Hunter seemed to guess his feelings and smirked. "Not to your taste, Starling? I suppose you prefer daisies, eh?"

Will ignored him and spoke to Celeste. "I'm sure the gardeners at Kew will be happy to hear your uncle's news." But he sounded awkward and uninspiring, and he wasn't surprised when Celeste gave a disappointed sigh.

"You know, Mr Starling, you could try just a little harder to show your enthusiasm." She fussed with the teapot, but her displeasure was obvious.

Hunter cleared his throat. Will expected another dig, but it was worse than that.

“I have an announcement. I have started a small collection of my own. Of course, it is nothing as grand as Sir Reginald’s. He is the master and I am but a disciple.”

Will felt a growl rising up in his chest and struggled to contain it. The man was insufferable. And then he wondered why he hadn’t thought of that. Possibly because outlandish plants were not his strong suit. Now if they were talking about which crops grew best in dry or boggy soil, Will was your man.

Celeste smiled sweetly at them both, peeping up through her long lashes. “I cannot tell you how glad I am I came to stay in Barton Lacey,” she said excitedly. “It is such a shame I have to return home to Shropshire next month.”

Both Will and Hunter stared at her. “Return home ?” they said at once.

“But of course.” Celeste folded her hands primly. “I cannot stay here forever, now can I? I came to visit because Uncle Reggie has been all alone since my aunt died, and he needed someone to manage his household. But all that is done now—he has employed an excellent housekeeper—so there is no reason for me to stay on. Is there?”

Will blinked. Was she hinting... Was she asking... Did she need a proposal as a reason to stay?

He could see from the determined expression on Hunter’s face that the cad had come to the same conclusion. The two men exchanged a long, challenging look. Will needed to act as soon as possible if he was to cut Hunter out of the race and win Celeste’s hand.

Tea was taken in a subdued atmosphere, despite Celeste’s efforts to enliven the occasion. Afterwards, Celeste informed them she had another engagement to attend. “Mrs. Norris has asked me to discuss the latest fashions with her.”

Mrs. Norris had four sons of marriageable age. Will ground his teeth at the thought of them circling Celeste like hungry wolves, but he had no choice but to leave. At least Hunter had to leave as well.

As Will mounted his mare, he looked at Hunter, doing the same with his gelding. The two men glared at one another.

“You know what this means?” Hunter said testily.

“What does it mean?” Will retorted. “Are you planning to go to war with me?”

Hunter snorted. “I was going to say, ‘May the best man win,’ but I think it a foregone conclusion, Starling .”

And what did that mean? Will wanted to make some furious riposte, but Hunter had already set off down the driveway at a canter, which turned into a gallop once he reached the road.

Will rode home more slowly, deep in thought. He needed help. He was floundering when it came to wooing Celeste. For every smile he won from her when she was pleased with him, there was a frown for his failure to agree to one of her many ‘capital notions’. Hunter, however, never seemed to misstep. And now whatever time he did have to show her he was the best choice of husband was almost gone. Hunter would be busy trying to lure her away with his London wiles, and Will’s country upbringing could not compete with that, title or no. He needed someone to help gain him the advantage.

He was passing the Lacey farmhouse, and made an impulsive decision to turn his horse up the lane. Who better to help him in his quest to win Celeste than his oldest friend, Molly Lacey? Molly was always full of sensible advice, and she was a woman. Surely she would know how Will could secure the hand of the woman he

loved and wanted to marry?

Will felt a sense of tremendous relief. Molly would help. She would guide his next steps on his way to the altar.

CHAPTER THREE

“Molly? Will is here to see you.”

Grace widened her eyes as if asking her: What is he doing here? Molly frowned, silently telling her younger sister to be quiet. Then, after she had smoothed her skirts and tidied her hair, Molly went to see what he wanted.

Will had not visited for over a month, and that hadn't even been a private call. He had accompanied his mother to visit Molly's mother. The Starlings and the Laceys had been friends forever, and until Celeste Morton arrived on the scene, there had barely been a week when Will did not knock at her door. That he was here now seemed like a portent.

Had something happened with Celeste Morton? Perhaps she had turned him down and he needed her sympathy—Huh! Or he had changed his mind—Unlikely!

Molly entered the cluttered sitting room. Her mother had been sorting through old trunks of clothing, thinking it would be a thrifty idea to use some of the material to fashion new garments, and the contents were spread everywhere.

“Molly! There you are,” Will said as he edged around a stack of ancient petticoats. He was smiling, but it wasn't one of his real smiles. There was a tightness to his face, as if he was actually quite worried.

Despite all of her commands to herself about not becoming involved and vowing to set aside her love for Will, she immediately wanted to do whatever she could to make

that look go away.

“Will? What is it?”

His smile wavered. “I...” He bit his lip. She expected him to make more of an effort to ask after her or at least pretend this wasn’t a visit with a selfish end in mind, but he didn’t seem to have it in him. “I need your help, Molly.”

“Is one of your family ill?” she asked. She loved the Starling family almost as much as her own, and the thought of one of them suffering was unbearable to her.

“No, they are in good health,” he assured her. “Couldn’t be better, really.”

Ah. It was about the flirt then, just as she had feared. Molly waited for him to explain, hoping she didn’t look as dejected as she felt.

“It’s Miss Morton.” Will cleared his throat, not meeting her eyes. “I want to marry her, Molly. She is so...” His face lit up, but he held back from going into the detail. Just as well, Molly thought, because she was beginning to feel quite queasy. “I am in love with her, but there is someone else sniffing around her, and I am afraid she will be taken in by him. He is a rake from London and I need to save her, Molly.”

For a moment, Molly couldn’t find her voice. It was worse than she had feared. Will truly was lost to her. He seemed to think he was a hero in a romance novel, gallantly rescuing his lady love. What could she do with that? How could she compete? And the worse thing was Will didn’t even know she was in love with him. Molly decided then that she wasn’t going to weep or wail, and she pushed back her shoulders and assumed a stoic pose.

“Who?” she asked.

“His name is Mark Hunter.” Will’s face darkened. “He is a cad, but Celeste seems to fancy him.”

Although Molly had guessed it must be something like this that had brought him to her door, the revelation still hurt. To know the only reason he was bothering to visit her was to ask her to help him win another woman. Her eyes blurred with tears and she blinked them back. He probably wouldn’t have noticed anyway, his head being full of his wonderful Celeste.

“He is your rival,” she guessed quietly, thinking of herself as well as Will.

He nodded, and strode across the room and back again, narrowly avoiding more piles of old clothing. He was always like this when something was troubling him, unable to keep still while the thoughts raced through his head.

Molly tried not to admire how he looked today, the fit of his beige pantaloons, blue superfine jacket and polished boots. Will had become very fashionable of late, and Molly suspected that was down to Celeste as well. The Will Molly had known before hadn’t been concerned with what he wore, and only noticed a hole in his sleeve when someone pointed it out to him.

He was continuing with his rant and despite her growing boredom with the subject of it, Molly tried to pay attention.

“When Miss Morton is alone with me, I know she favours me. I feel it.” He thumped a fist to his chest, where his heart would be. “But when Hunter is there, she is swayed by his smarmy manners and tall tails of the life he leads in the city. I doubt he’s done half of the things he claims to have done. He is determined to have her. He admitted as much to me just now. What’s worse, Molly, is she will be leaving Barton Lacey soon, returning to Shropshire. I am worried that before she goes he will propose and she will say yes. I’m running out of time. I need her to see that I am the better man.”

“So you haven’t proposed to her yet?” Molly asked, despising herself for hoping his answer was ‘no’.

“I almost did this morning. I called on her with the express purpose of asking her to be my wife.” Again, his handsome face darkened. “ Hunter was there.”

She turned away to hide her tangled emotions. Not that he had noticed. Will was too full of his own passions and longings, oblivious to those of his childhood friend.

Molly’s heart was already aching, and if she helped him to marry someone else... No, she could not do that. Better to tell him now and send him on his way. Then she could have a good cry.

“I’m not sure how I can help you, Will,” she said slowly. “I barely know Celeste, and I am not acquainted with Mr Hunter. I am afraid you will have to sort this out yourself.”

Will looked shocked, and for the first time, actually met her eyes. “Don’t say that, Molly,” he begged her. He sat down beside her and took her hands. They were as limp as dead fish, as bereft of vitality as the rest of her, but he squeezed them as if trying to bring life back into them.

“We have been friends for as long as I can remember. You are the one person I can rely on. Always.”

He looked flushed yet hopeful, his blue eyes shining, and Molly felt more than just a little sick. She was sure her smile had gone seriously awry. But once again, he did not appear to notice.

“What do you want me to do?” she said reluctantly.

“I had hoped you could distract Hunter. You are pretty, and he is a terrible flirt. You would have no trouble capturing his attention. And then, when Celeste sees his affections are so easily turned, she will realise that I am the better prospect.”

It was a decent plan, she supposed. If only it didn't sting so much. Molly pulled a face, trying to tug her hands from his, but he held on tight.

“Please,” he begged, sounding desperate in a way she had never heard before. “Help me this once and I will...I will...” He chewed on his lip as he tried to think of a suitably tempting lure. “Please, I promise whatever you want from me will be yours! I swear it.”

Whatever I want from him? Except the only thing she wanted was the very thing he was about to give another woman. But she couldn't tell him that. He would stare at her in guilt and dismay, and then in pity. Bad enough he had been oblivious to her feelings for him for all these years, but she could not bear for him to feel sorry for her.

“How do you know Mr Hunter will find me to his taste?” she said at last.

Will laughed. “How can he not?” Then, with a sly grin, “So you will do it? Help me?”

What could she say?

No! She could say no . She should say no!

But Will had been her friend forever and explaining to him now that she didn't want any part of his plan because of her feelings for him would only break them apart. And then he would know about her feelings for him, and then he and Celeste would discuss it between them, and then they would shake their heads. The poor girl Molly.

What a pity. What a foolish little girl...

No, just no .

“I will help you, Will,” she said quietly.

He almost bounced up from his seat. “Thank you, thank you , dear girl! I am engaged for a picnic with Celeste and her uncle on Saturday.”

“A picnic?” she repeated. “The weather has been so uncertain this spring. What if it rains?”

“Ah, it is a picnic in the conservatory. Sir Reginald wants to show us some rare plant he’s found.” He grimaced. “Will you come with me? Abby will be there.”

Molly smiled. Will’s sister was almost as dear to her as Will was. If things went awry, then she could stay close to Abby and ignore everybody else.

“You’ll see, Molly. It won’t be so bad. You might even enjoy yourself. And thank you again, from the bottom of my heart.”

He went on about his plans, but Molly had stopped listening. She was considering what she would wear to the picnic. Making Mr Hunter become infatuated with her seemed unlikely, but if she played her part, then at least Will could see that she had tried.

While the man she loved wooed and proposed to Celeste Morton.

He had made a promise to Molly—anything she wanted. And though she could not ask for the one thing she truly wanted—his heart—she would always have his trust and friendship.

Perhaps that promise would come in handy one day.

CHAPTER FOUR

The day turned out to be dreary outdoors, but inside the conservatory it was almost cosy, though far too steamy for Will. The lush vegetation that surrounded them seemed as threatening as ever, and he eyed a particularly large plant with serrated leaves that he imagined was preparing to attack him. Meanwhile, the other guests cooed as they admired the array of botanical treasures that Sir Reginald had collected over many years.

Will tried to look interested. He even asked a question, and thought he was hiding his boredom and discomfort quite well. It would be different if he was in the kitchen garden at Starling Hall, where he could have named every vegetable and how it was best served. He also knew the names of all the roses in the walled garden and which ones had the sweetest perfume.

But this ... He found no pleasure in it at all. As much as he longed to become the person he needed to be for Celeste's sake, he struggled. It was as if he was trying to force himself into a shape he did not fit, and it frustrated him that no matter how he tried he could not seem to do it.

Molly was silently laughing at him. Will could see it in the malicious sparkle in her green eyes, so at odds with her polite expression. Just as well Abby wasn't here yet or they would both be teasing him. His sister was helping their mother with some last-minute household matter or other and had told Will to make her apologies to the Mortons.

"I will be late," she had said, "but I'm sure I won't be missed. Not by you , anyway."

“What do you mean?” Will had asked her with a frown.

“Well, you will have Miss Morton to gaze upon. I only hope Molly doesn’t go home before I get there.”

Will had felt like asking the same question again. Did she think Molly would be bored? Or that Celeste would send her home? But Abby had shaken her head at him and waved him off.

He glanced at Molly now, to see if she was bored. But her eyes were wide as she looked about at the abundance of greenery.

“I feel as if I might get lost,” she said.

“What a dreadful thought.” He had probably spoken louder than he should. Hunter had certainly heard him, judging by his smirk.

“Mr Hunter is very handsome,” Molly said.

“To some, I suppose,” Will snapped.

“I can see why some ladies find him irresistible.”

“Do you now?”

“But you are just as handsome, Will. And you have a great deal more to offer.”

Will wasn’t sure what to say to that, though he felt himself puff up a little. If Molly thought that about him, then surely Celeste would see it too.

“Everyone! You must look at this!”

Will and Molly started at Sir Reginald Morton's loud exclamation. The gentleman was hurrying to the next row of plants. Will arrived with the others in time to see the cause of this excitement.

Another insanely ugly plant, and it loomed over them all from its great height. It also had a hideous flower blooming, and as he drew closer, Will became aware of the aroma of rotting flesh. He put his hand to his nose to try to keep the foul odour at bay.

"Amazing." Hunter sounded serious, but even he stayed well back from the pungent odour. Molly was at his side, and Will could tell she was struggling not to giggle.

"*Rafflesia arnoldii*," Sir Reginald declared, eyes bright. "It can take up to a decade to bloom!"

"Good-good heavens," Molly said faintly. She wrinkled her nose. "Why does it smell like that?"

"It attracts flies to pollinate it. Isn't it wonderful!"

Celeste looked at Will and grimaced. What a relief that they were finally in accord.

"Let's slip away to somewhere less smelly," she whispered to him, leaning closer. In contrast to the flower, her breath was warm and fragrant against his cheek, and gratefully, he followed her out of the conservatory.

"Tell me, how long have you known Miss Lacey?" Celeste asked, with a sideways glance at him.

"All my life. We are neighbours," he said blithely. "Molly's family has been in Barton Lacey forever."

“I see.”

She looked away with a little smile that wasn't quite genuine. Was she jealous? Will's heart pounded beneath his second best jacket. Was his plan working already? He was about to reassure Celeste that there was nothing between Molly and himself, but then thought better of it.

Why not allow Celeste to believe Molly loved him and would fight for him? That he was in demand by more than one attractive woman? Molly was attractive, after all. Some might even say she was beautiful, with her sparkling green eyes and fair hair, and she was always so kind and thoughtful. In fact, he had never known her to be out of sorts until the other day when he called on her to ask for her help.

Celeste interrupted his thoughts, which had been meandering down a very odd pathway. “Shall we take a stroll up to the roof? I love the view. Even when the weather is inclement, there is still so much of the countryside to see. Uncle Reggie says the house was built in Tudor times and when the king visited, he declared it the best vista he had ever seen.”

Will nodded. “Starling Hall was built last century,” he said conversationally. “Rather modern, I suppose, compared to this place, but it is quite comfortable. Even on the coldest day, it feels warm inside. One need not go outside at all because my grandfather had the water closets installed eighty years ago, and my father has modernised them since then.”

Celeste gave him one of her sideways looks, and said lightly, “How very interesting, Will.”

“It is, isn't it?” He felt the surge of enthusiasm he always felt when speaking about his home. “I can show you, if you'd like to visit. In fact...” He then rambled on, talking about his family and the Hall, and the many benefits to living there, all while

Celeste made encouraging noises.

Suddenly she interrupted and pointed at some narrow stairs leading upwards. “There! That’s the way to the roof.” She turned to him, and her face was alight. “Shall we?”

Will froze as he realised that they were going onto the roof. He wasn’t good with heights. As with strange plants, heights tended to make him uneasy. And sweat. He felt like he was going to fall, or worse, throw himself off because he knew he’d fall anyway. His fear of heights had a name, but he had forgotten what it was. Not that it mattered, as he was hardly going to tell Celeste, was he?

She watched him now with a puzzled expression. In a moment, she would begin to ask him questions, and soon she would understand he had a problem. Will couldn’t allow that. He wanted her to admire him, not pity him.

So instead of doing what he wanted to do, which was to refuse outright to follow her up those stairs, Will forced a smile onto his rigid face.

“Lead the way!” he said in a jovial voice that didn’t sound at all like his.

She smiled back, a question in her eyes, but soon dismissed the oddness, and set off up the stairs. Will followed her, trying to convince himself that it would be all right. He would be all right.

The view was stupendous, he had to agree with Celeste on that. She oohed and aahed as she made her way to the metal railing and leaned against it to gaze over the surrounding countryside. Will stood well back, but he could still see for miles and miles. If he stood where Celeste was standing and looked down—which he did not want to do—he was certain that the ground would be a very long way down.

He didn’t want to be here. Will preferred to have his feet firmly on solid ground, and

right now, this didn't seem very solid at all.

"Come on, Will!" Celeste sounded impatient. "You can't see properly from there. Come here to me."

Will approached as one who was going to the gallows. He reached out and clasped onto the railing, which felt rickety, and was the only thing between him and a fatal fall. His knuckles turned white and his palms felt damp.

Celeste pointed down. "Look! There is your sister! Yoohoo, Miss Starling! Up here!" She waved, making the whole railing shake. Will's head swirled, and he might have made a sound like a groan. Thankfully, Celeste did not hear it.

Abby looked up, and even from here he could see her eyes widen. She knew he hated heights and was probably wondering what on earth he was doing. A moment later, she disappeared inside.

Sweat trickled down the back of his neck and dampened his cravat. He had spent a long time tying that cravat this morning, trying to get it just right. Hunter's cravats were always so pristine, but Will suspected he had a valet who pressed them for him. Probably tied them too.

Meanwhile, whenever Will dressed, he had had to contend with his numerous younger siblings who would peer through the doorway and tease him. There were too many Starlings, that was the trouble, and never enough room. How on earth was he to fit a wife in, even if Celeste did him the great honour of marrying him?

He could imagine the look on her face if she ever paid a visit to the Hall. She was used to Sir Reginald's spacious manor, and had often spoken about her parents' home, which sounded equally grand. Not that Starling Hall wasn't just as nice, but there were so many of them inside it.

Will desperately clung to the railing and wondered what he had been thinking. Why would this wonderful woman want to marry him? He couldn't even admire the view with her without almost fainting.

"Will?" Celeste's head was tilted to one side, her eyes curious. Then she gave a little amused laugh. "Oh my. You do not enjoy heights!" she said in surprise. "You poor thing."

Before he could deny it, her arms were around him, and her face was so close to his, he could smell the soap and see the fine powder she used on her skin. And then she was kissing him. For a moment, he was too astounded to respond, but only for a moment. Then he caught her up in his arms and was kissing her back.

It was as if his dream had come true.

"Celeste," he said, although not very coherently. "I love you. Please, please marry me."

At that moment, he knew he'd made a misstep. She stiffened in his arms and then pulled back. She stared at him, a little dishevelled from their encounter, her lips red and swollen, but her wide blue eyes were full of dismay.

"Will, I don't... I'm not ready to marry anyone, truly I am not. I'm sorry if you thought I was."

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

She hurried on. "But if I did want to marry anyone, then I would certainly consider you."

She was being kind, and somehow that hurt more than if she had said he was the last

man in the world she would ever marry. He felt like a fool. He even thought he might have heard the tinkle as his heart cracked.

Time to regain what was left of his pride.

“My apologies,” he said, his demeanour stiff. “I misspoke. I fear I am not quite myself. I hope you can forgive my blunder, Miss Morton.”

She squeezed his arm. “Of course.” She said this in the same friendly voice she always used with him. “Think nothing of it! I receive proposals all the time, so this doesn’t concern me in the slightest. I just hope I haven’t hurt your feelings.”

There wasn’t much Will could say to that, but she didn’t seem to expect an answer. At least they were retreating from the roof now and he could breathe again.

As they descended, he tried to give himself some encouragement. Because if she refused everybody who proposed to her, she wasn’t likely to marry that cad, Hunter.

So, there was still a chance Will might be able to change her mind. And when Will was determined on something, there was very little that could dissuade him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Molly was finding the outing surprisingly enjoyable. She had expected to be miserable, watching Will woo his lady love, but she could see that Celeste wasn't paying any more attention to Will than she was to Mark Hunter. In fact, after watching Celeste for a time, Molly concluded that the other woman was not partial to either of them—she flirted with them equally, yes, but she had seen the woman give that same coy smile of hers to the footman who'd carried in the tea things. So yes, Molly was enjoying herself.

Then Celeste and Will disappeared together.

Molly grew annoyed, and worried, but she could hardly follow them. Not without making matters awkward. So she remained with the others and refused to think about what might be happening with Will and Celeste. Well, she tried, but her mind would not obey.

Were they holding hands and sharing secrets? Or worse, kisses? Was Will proposing to her at this moment, and she saying yes? Would they return all flushed and excited to share the news?

Sir Reginald waxed poetic about the various plants in his collection, where they had come from and what made each special, but Molly's spirits only sank lower. She wondered if she should make up some excuse and leave. Perhaps she could say she was feeling ill, and that was close enough to the truth.

Molly then realised that Mark Hunter had joined her. Not only that, he had spoken to

her and she hadn't heard a word.

"I'm sorry, I didn't?—"

"I asked if you were a keen botanist, Miss Lacey?" There was a smile in his brown eyes that she suspected held more than a hint of desperation. Hunter was also staring at the door, as if he also wondered what Will and Celeste were up to. It seemed Molly was in the company of a fellow sufferer, and it did help.

"I wouldn't call myself a botanist, Mr Hunter, but I like to sit in the garden and smell the roses. Although I do not know their names." She was about to add that Will did know their names but stopped herself. Instead, she inquired, "Are you interested in botany, Mr Hunter?"

Hunter cleared his throat, suddenly self-conscious. "I am, and no one is more surprised by that fact than me. I have even started my own collection in my grandmother's greenhouse."

Molly widened her eyes. "I am in awe."

He gave a soft laugh, his gaze fixed on hers, and she realised that he was a very attractive man. "Allow me to bore you with the particulars of some of my treasures," he offered, and proceeded to do just that.

He wasn't boring. Molly found the subject interesting. Or, more accurately, Mr Hunter made it so. The long lectures by Sir Reginald on the contents of his conservatory had bored her, but Mr Hunter's stories were amusing and interesting.

Then, just as Hunter had finished a story about the perils of importing exotic seeds, Abby Starling arrived—late as usual—and came to join them.

Will's sister looked flustered, and Molly wondered if she had forgotten to brush her hair. "I saw my brother and Miss Morton on the roof," Abby said.

Hunter did not seem to understand the significance of this, but Molly did. "Was he... Are you sure?" she said. "On the roof?"

Hunter looked from one to the other, curious. "There is a fine view from up there. It can get a little chilly. Is that a problem for your brother, Miss Starling?"

"Oh no. I mean yes," Abby stammered. "He has a delicate chest, you see."

Molly almost groaned aloud. Will had a cast iron constitution. He was never ill and was immensely proud of it. Abby made him sound like one of those invalids who were always coddling themselves with mustard plasters when everyone could see Will was a healthy young man. She wondered whether he would have preferred they share his fear of heights with his rival, rather than a 'delicate chest'. But then she told herself it was Will's fault they were in this position. Why had he gone up onto the roof anyway when he had such a morbid fear of heights? Was he that keen on Celeste? If anything could prove it, then it was this act of bravery on his part.

Perhaps Will really was lost to her.

Just then, Will and Celeste returned.

Molly could not see any signs of an impending engagement upon their faces. In fact, they didn't look happy. Apart from being paler than usual—that would be because of the roof—Will wore his stern face, which he used whenever he was hiding his hurt feelings. As for Celeste, she was even more vivacious than before, but now it seemed like a performance for the sake of her guests.

Molly tried to catch Will's eye, but Mark Hunter began another amusing story about

his plant collection. One that turned out to be so amusing that she couldn't help but laugh. When next she had the opportunity to look at Will, she discovered he was frowning at her.

Well, that was odd. Wasn't she doing exactly as he had asked her to? Amusing Mark Hunter and allowing Will to be alone with Celeste?

Goodness, had Will and Celeste had a falling out?

Molly tried not to get her hopes up. Perhaps it was just a lovers' tiff, or Will was still recovering from his experience on the roof.

"It's snowing!" Celeste declared, surprising everyone.

Molly moved with the others to peer out of the windows, wiping away the fog on the glass. There really was snow falling! The younger Starlings liked nothing more than to play in the snow. The last time they had gone out tobogganing, and Molly and Will had taken turns to steer the little ones safely down the hill. They had all ended up happy but exhausted, and Will and Molly had sat together by the roaring fire in Starling Hall. They had taken off their shoes and stockings and wriggled their toes on the hearth.

Will had said they must do it again, and she had said she would love to.

It was one of her favourite memories.

Somewhere in her silly heart, she had hoped that he would pop the question back then. But no, it was not to be. Never to be. It would be Celeste who sat in front of the fire and wriggled her toes with Will. Which was sad, really, but Molly refused to be downcast. She was young, with many years before her, and she was sure she would grow to love Celeste, given time. Years, perhaps. Decades...

Well, honestly, probably never.

Molly blinked and tried to listen to Mr Hunter, who was still regaling her with his plant hobby. Abby was with Sir Reginald now, looking glassy eyed as she listened to another long-winded tale about a bulb he had traced all of the way to Australia and paid a king's ransom to have shipped home. Abby was too polite to make an excuse and escape—people were always taking advantage of her generous nature.

“It took months,” said Sir Reginald. “and yet it arrived in perfect condition. Truly remarkable.”

“Remarkable,” Abby murmured absently.

Molly bit back her smile, but Mark had been watching.

“You must think me a bore as well,” he said wryly. “At first, I believed Sir Reginald was very tedious, but now I understand his compulsion to share something so fascinating.”

Molly had to admire his self awareness. “Not boring at all,” she assured him. “It makes a change from listening to my sister's discussions on the latest style of bonnet or what colour is in vogue this season. For your information, it is greenish gold.”

“Perhaps, but I think we can agree the man could use a few lessons on public speaking.” He laughed. He had a nice laugh. In fact, he had turned out to be nothing at all like Will had described him.

“Was it snowing when you were on the roof?” Mark asked Celeste.

Molly could see from the expression on his face that he was trying to discover what happened up there. Had Will proposed and been accepted?

“Not that I noticed,” Celeste replied, with a glance at Will who was looking fashionably greenish.

Molly gave Mark a sympathetic smile. It seemed obvious that something had happened but neither Celeste nor Will were about to share the details.

“Do you think it is worth the climb?” Mark went on, maybe a little desperately.

“Oh yes,” Celeste assured him it was. “In fact, it will be even better now it is snowing. Shall we go up and see?”

With a nod of the head at Molly, Mark let her lead him away.

“Was it very high up?” Molly asked Will once they were gone.

“Extremely, with nothing but a flimsy railing between me and the hereafter.” He groaned. “Celeste could see I was petrified. Not my finest moment.”

Molly took his hand in hers. “Will, if you truly love someone, and they love you, then there should be no reason not to show them your true self. Pretending to be something you are not is unsustainable. Eventually, the truth will out.”

“Yes, but there is a time and a place for the truth,” he argued. His auburn hair, perfectly styled when he’d first arrived, was now messy, as if he had been running his hands through it.

“You mean you hope to win her over, marry her, and then show her your true self?” Molly said, with a humourless laugh. “That does not bode well for a long and happy life together.”

Will shook his head.

“I know about your fear of heights, and I don’t think less of you for it. It really is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But you’re...” He sought for words. “It isn’t the same, Molly. We grew up together. We had time to accept one another for who we are. Marriage is an altogether different proposition.”

Molly longed to say he was wrong, that she ‘loved’ him for all his strengths and faults and always would. But what was the use? She wasn’t the one he wanted. All the same, when he was startled by a long exotic leaf that brushed the back of his neck, she took his arm in hers.

“Let us find somewhere else to be, shall we?”

He laughed nervously. “You do know me well.”

It was an effort for Molly to smile back, but she managed it.

CHAPTER SIX

Will and Molly found an unoccupied sitting room and made themselves at home. There was a loud clock ticking on the mantel and a very small plant in a pot, which he stayed well away from.

Will had only spoken the truth. Molly did know him so well; his faults and his quirks as well as his good points. Why couldn't Celeste be more like Molly? She had been taken aback when she realised how afraid he was up on the tower. To make matters worse, she had taken Hunter up there and he was sure to put on a fearless display. He might even propose to Celeste as well, and despite her assurance to the contrary, this time, she might just say yes.

Despite Will's best efforts, nothing seemed to be going right.

To make matters more confusing, he had found himself perturbed by the sight of Molly and Hunter together just now. Yes, he had wanted her to be an attractive distraction, but they had seemed to be getting along far too well. He supposed he should not be surprised, Molly had the ability to get on with everyone, but he did feel rather uncomfortable at the sight. They had both been smiling, enjoying some little joke or story, and Hunter had been looking at Will's friend as if he was... interested.

Will felt a sinking in his stomach. He wasn't sure what that feeling was, but the thought of Molly and Hunter together made him even more queasy than the view from the roof.

Was Molly right? Should he be completely honest with Celeste? Perhaps. And yet he

suspected she wouldn't want to hear about his faults. That seemed hardly fair. She must have some flaws of her own. She wasn't completely perfect. Was she? No, now he thought about it, she most certainly was not!

When Will first set eyes on her, Celeste had seemed like the answer to his dreams. He still thought her beautiful, but he was beginning to wonder if they could be happy together. If they married, would she join him in the crowded Hall, with his parents and siblings, or would she want him to take up residence somewhere else? London, for instance?

But that was impossible for Will. As the eldest son and the Starling heir, he would one day take over the title and the Hall. He would become Sir William Starling. His siblings might tease him about his dedication to their land and the tenants who relied on him, but Will loved his life. His future lay here in Barton Lacey. The family was not immensely wealthy, but they were comfortable, and as long as he worked hard, they would continue to remain so.

Celeste was not wealthy either. She had once told him that her face was her fortune, which at the time he had thought charming, but now...

He sighed.

Molly squeezed his hand, which he only now realised she was still holding. "You sound as if you have the weight of the world on your shoulders," she said. "Really, Will, do cheer up. I am sure things will right themselves. If Celeste loves you, then she will accept you for who you are. Who cares if you find heights uncomfortable? Unless you are going to become the President of the Ballooning Club, it really doesn't matter. As for tropical plants, you're hardly likely to take a job with the Horticultural Society."

Molly was always good at making him laugh and shaking off his gloomy thoughts,

and this was no exception.

“If I decide to attempt either of those things, I hope you will stop me,” he teased her.

“You have my word.”

He gazed into her green eyes. There was something so comforting, so warm, about them, that Will did not want to stop.

Molly blinked, and then her cheeks coloured. She gave an uneasy laugh and looked away.

“I think we should find the others,” she said, and led the way out of the room and into the hall.

At that moment, Celeste and Hunter came down the stairs, faces flushed with laughter. Will felt that familiar sting of jealousy, but then Hunter turned his gaze away from Celeste to look at Molly. And at that moment, Will’s jealousy turned into something else. A squeeze in his chest that was quite painful, like someone pressing on a bruise.

Was Hunter in love with Molly? Impossible. They had only just met! And yet Abby had said the same thing to him about Celeste and he had argued that it had only taken one look for him to be head over heels. What if she...?

Will left shortly afterwards, making the excuse that he had business to attend to with one of his father’s tenant farmers.

“That sounds somewhat dull,” Celeste had replied, with a glance at Hunter as if to share her opinion, but Hunter and Molly were engaged in a conversation about the view from the roof, and Hunter was now offering to show it to her.

Will stormed off, and Celeste accompanied him to the door.

“Are you cross with me for refusing you?” she asked. “I am sorry, Will. I should have said I would consider your offer and then refused in a day or two, but I so hate subterfuge.”

“As do I,” Will said stoically. “It is always better to know where one stands, Miss Morton.”

She chewed her lip and gave him one of those little glances he used to find so charming. “Can we be friends, Will? Please?”

Celeste’s expression was serious for once, her blue eyes wide and guileless.

“I suppose so,” he said, and despite himself, hope rose in his chest.

Will’s horse was waiting outside. He set off, grateful to leave the Morton house far behind. He had much to think about where Celeste was concerned. He realised now that he had made an error on the roof. He should have asked his parents about their potential living situation before he had proposed.

Will tended to over think things, but believed Celeste might appreciate some clarity. Perhaps he could make a detailed sketch of the interior of the Hall? He could note the water closets too—she had seemed interested during his conversation about his father’s innovations. Molly always complimented them on such a modern convenience.

Now his mind drifted back to Molly. The way Hunter had looked at her, and how well they seemed to get on. What if Hunter proposed to Molly? What if that rake seduced Molly?

Will found his heart was beating hard and fast. His fists clenched on the horse's reins. Perhaps he should have stayed and kept watch over her? He hesitated, about to turn back, until it occurred to him that Molly was far too sensible to fall for Hunter's tricks.

Still full of questions and doubts, Will made his way home to Starling Hall. His low spirits lifted at the sight of his home. It may not be a Tudor manor like Sir Reginald's, or a Georgian palace like the Norris's, but he loved it. He belonged here. He knew every nook and cranny within its walls, and he could never imagine living anywhere else.

And he just knew that if Celeste married him, she would come to love it too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Molly hadn't seen Will for several days. She had assumed he was at the Morton's, but when Sir Reginald's parlourmaid, who was a friend of their dairymaid, had called yesterday, Molly had questioned her in a roundabout way. It seemed he had not visited the manor for some time. Celeste was still in residence, but there was talk of her returning to Shropshire.

It seemed strange that Will wasn't making the most of the time left to him to win her over.

Grace suggested that Will was probably busy. Spring was always a busy season in the country, what with crops to plant and animals having babies. Molly knew that as the heir to Starling Hall, Will never stinted his time when it came to his duties.

Will was serious and responsible, and Molly had always loved that about him.

She sighed, wondering what the point was of loving a man who was so determined to throw himself away on a pretty face.

Was she being unfair? She supposed she was, a little. Celeste was vivacious and charming, and she was very pretty. But after giving it due consideration, Molly concluded that Will married to Celeste would be miserable. Celeste would probably be miserable, too. She didn't seem the type to stick it out in the country for long. From what Molly had gathered from her conversation with Celeste, she was already dying to move on.

“Not that I haven’t enjoyed my stay,” she had added hastily, “because I have. Very much. But a cousin has asked me to visit her in London, and once one has seen one cow, one has seen them all.”

Molly had smiled dutifully but thought to herself, Poor Will . Unless he could convince Celeste of the joys of Starling Hall, or Celeste grew so in love with him she was willing to forego London, he was doomed to heartbreak.

Perhaps Molly should pay a visit to Starling Hall?

After all, it was what she would have done—before Celeste arrived. It was what any friend would do, and she hoped she and Will were still friends. She wondered if Will had already asked Celeste for her hand, and maybe the Starlings were celebrating, but somehow Molly did not believe that. Will could never keep such a thing to himself, and if he was tying the knot with Celeste Morton, everyone in Barton Lacey would know by now.

With a sigh, Molly changed into one of her better dresses, before she went to the stables and set off on her mare.

Once she reached the Hall, she could see that the children were involved in a game of croquet on the front lawn, while their governess tried to keep order. The rules appeared to have gone out of the window, with the younger children refusing to do as they were told. A couple of the boys were wrestling, and a dog ran barking in circles.

As soon as the children saw Molly, they all gathered around her, everyone speaking at once. Although Molly didn’t usually mind all this attention, she was relieved when Lady Meg Starling came to see what all the noise was about.

“Molly, my dear! It has been ages. We have missed you.”

Molly hastily blinked back tears. If Will succeeded in wooing Celeste her visits would be few indeed. The thought of seeing him with someone else would simply be too much to bear. She would have to stay away for a year or so. Maybe a decade.

Possibly forever.

“I am sorry, Lady Meg. I have been rather busy.”

Lady Meg raised her auburn eyebrows over her blue eyes, and suddenly looked very much like her eldest son. “Will seems to think you have an admirer.”

Molly stared. “An admirer?” She raised a hand to tuck back a strand of fair hair. “Then he knows more than I do. By chance, did he say who this admirer might be?”

“Mr Hunter, I am told.” Lady Meg watched her curiously. “Do you mean to say it is not true? Will seemed sure that it was.”

“I think I need to speak to Will,” Molly said with a forced smile. “But I assure you I have not seen Mr Hunter since that day at the Morton’s.”

Will’s mother looked a little confused, but said she would find her son. However, someone called to her from somewhere inside the hall, and she gave Molly a harried look. “I’m sorry, I must attend to this first.”

Molly smiled and said, “Don’t worry. I’ll find him.”

As expected, she found him in the barn. She had heard that one of their ewes had died, and Will had been bottle feeding it with limited success. But it seemed another ewe’s lamb had died, and he’d taken the opportunity to pair the two together. Both ewe and lamb were happy now.

Will looked up from the shadows of the stall, his blue eyes weary but relieved. “I was beginning to wonder if the poor thing would survive,” he said. “Or maybe I was wondering if I would survive, getting up at all hours to feed the creature.”

That was the thing about Will, he was practical, but also kind hearted. He could have had someone else to do the feeding for him, but he considered it his job.

Molly sat down on a hay bale beside him, watching as the lamb suckled. Will would make a good father someday. He would be stern when necessary, but also understanding. His siblings all loved him, though they teased him incessantly, and he took it in good part. She could imagine him surrounded by children, gazing up at him adoringly.

Molly felt her heart fill with sadness. Whatever Will did, she would not be a part of it.

“Has Hunter been to see you?”

She looked up, surprised. “Hunter? No, why?”

Will’s frown brought his auburn brows down over his blue eyes. “I was sure he would. He seemed very taken with you the other day.”

“Did he?” She smiled at the thought that a handsome London gentleman might find her interesting enough to call.

Will replaced some of the tools that had been left about. “You must have noticed.”

Molly’s smile was replaced by a glare. “I didn’t, and he hasn’t. Have you been to call on the Mortons?”

He picked some straw from his sleeve. “I thought if I stayed away, Celeste might

miss me. Come looking for me. So far it hasn't worked."

"So you asked her?" she said abruptly. "To marry you?"

"I did, yes."

"So if you're hoping she would come looking for you... oh my. Did she refuse you?"

Will's mouth closed hard and he gave a single nod. He muttered something that sounded like, "Not that it's any of your business."

"I am your friend, so it is my business," Molly snapped.

There was silence for a while. The lamb had finished feeding and was asleep with its new mother. Molly was beginning to wish she had not come when Will sighed. His shoulders slumped as he said, "Sorry, Molly. I am out of sorts. This business with Celeste... It has shaken me. I was always so sure I knew my place in the world, that I had a great deal to offer any woman, but she has me thinking it is not enough. That I am not enough."

"Oh Will." Molly took his hands in hers. His palms were calloused and a tad grimy from work, but Molly didn't care. "You are enough for any woman. Just because she does not see you as her perfect fit does not mean anything."

He shook his head and looked down at their clasped hands. "You're right, I know. But it still hurts that I offered myself to her only to be refused."

Molly wished she could shake Celeste until her teeth rattled for causing Will, the most confident man she knew, to doubt himself. "Of course it hurts. Love is like that. One moment you're up in the clouds and the next you're crashing to earth."

Will gave her a curious look. “You sound as if you know all about it. Who did you love, Molly?”

Molly gaped at him, her usually quick wits deserting her.

“Who do you love?” His expression darkened and his voice had risen. “It’s Hunter, isn’t it?”

“Will, please, that isn’t...”

Will stood up. “He would only make you miserable,” he said gruffly. “You are dazzled by his handsome face and clever manners, but the truth is the man is a cad. Why else is he rusticating here in the country?”

Molly felt a spark of anger. “I don’t think it is your place to offer me advice.”

Will wasn’t listening to her. “I know that I asked you to divert Hunter’s attention from Celeste, but I didn’t mean for you to fall in love with the man! I thought you had more sense than that.”

Molly stood up to face him. “You selfish, arrogant beast! You begged me to help you. You promised if I did, you would give me whatever I wanted! And I kept my end of the bargain.”

“Oh, is that all?” he said, his voice rising. “All that was simply to earn my favour? What do you want then? Tell me so I can pay my debt. I’d hate for you to think I had reneged.”

“I’ll tell you what I want!” Molly burst out, only to realise she couldn’t. Not if she wanted to retain her self-respect. Then she remembered what Will had asked of her, and without thinking she blurted out, “I want you to make Mark Hunter jealous.”

“You want what ?” Will shook himself. “Why would I want to do that?”

“This is not about what you want, is it?” Molly retorted. “I want you to pretend you are in love with me and make him jealous. There, I’ve said it. Now, I expect you to make good on your promise, Will Starling.”

For a moment, she was sure he would refuse. He sat heavily on the hay bale. “Is that what you really want?” he asked, confused.

“I’ve said so, haven’t I?”

He nodded slowly. “So you do desire him? I thought perhaps...” He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “Very well, then. I made the promise, so I will do as you ask. Together we will make Hunter green with jealousy.”

“Good,” said Molly.

Will’s lips twitched into a smile, as if he had suddenly become aware of the ridiculousness of the situation. “Do you have a plan? Knowing you, you will have several plans.”

“I do have a plan,” she said, refusing to smile back. “There is a ball at the Norris’s on Saturday, if I recall correctly. We can start there.”

Will looked at her in a curious way, as if he had never seen this side of her before. Indeed, she felt as if she was a stranger to herself. Perhaps she had lost her mind, but it was too late to back out now.

“Very well,” he said briskly. “Saturday it is.”

Molly nodded in a decisive way and walked out. What had been meant to be a visit to

check on a friend had turned into a ridiculous charade. It was Will's fault, of course. Everything was his fault. Except the bit where Molly loved him but she was too proud to tell him so. Because how could she do that when he was still in mourning for Celeste?

She should be happy. It appeared as though Will's hopes for marrying Celeste were dashed. Only now she was enmeshed in this absurd farce that seemed to have no end.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Will found evenings at the Norris's very stiff and formal, especially compared to the informality of Starling Hall. The Norris family lived most of the time in London but returned to their country home at least once a year. They consisted of Mr and Mrs. Norris and their four sons, who were aged between 18 and 25 years.

Will wasn't overly keen on any of them—they seemed to think their country neighbours were beneath them—but Molly had asked him to attend. His parents would be there, along with two of his sisters, Abby and Breana.

Breana had just turned 19 and was perhaps the prettiest of the Starling children, although they were all said to be good-looking if one liked red hair and blue eyes. Breana was named by Lady Starling's unconventional sister, who had come to stay during the birth. She was supposed to be there to help with the other two children, but had mostly caused chaos and uproar. She hadn't changed, and the thought of her still made Will shudder.

All the same, the name Breana was appropriate for someone so bright and bubbly, sometimes too bubbly, and who rarely sat still for long. People were drawn to her, and sometimes it was difficult to persuade them to leave.

Tonight, the Norris's had hired rather a large orchestra, who were in the ballroom playing their hearts out, and there was enough food in the supper room to feed an army. Will tried not to criticise, but when he thought of the tenant farmers who paid Mr Norris for their land, and the dreadful state of their cottages, it was hard not to point it out.

“Please don’t,” Abby sighed.

“You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“Yes, I do. You have that disapproving look on your face.”

Will suspected she was right. He tried to smile and lighten his mood, but it had been dark ever since Molly reminded him of his promise. He had a violent dislike for Mark Hunter. The man made his skin itch. Why didn’t the fellow go back to London where he belonged and leave him in peace?

Celeste would also be here tonight, and it was probably the last chance he had of seeing her before she left. On the one hand, it meant he would not have to be reminded of his broken heart whenever he saw her, but on the other, her departure would leave him confused and lonely.

He seemed to be confused a lot lately.

“There’s Molly!” Breana said in a loud voice. But instead of shushing her for making a disturbance, everybody around her smiled. Breana had that effect on people.

He followed his sister’s pointing finger and saw Molly and her sister Grace. Molly was wearing a dress the colour of the spring growth on the ash trees that ran along their southern border, and her hair was curled and bounced about her face as she turned this way and that, greeting people and smiling.

“Whatever is wrong with you, Will?” Abby said in a low, scolding voice. “You look as if you are going to the gallows.”

“You read too many romances,” Will countered, knowing that the novels were one of his eldest sister’s few vices, but he had no heart for a verbal sparring match today. “I

am going to speak to Molly.”

“Go then. And for goodness sake, cheer up!”

Abby reminded him of their mother sometimes. Although she was not much older than him, she was like a senior woman in so many ways. Because she was the eldest Starling, she hadn’t been allowed to be a child very long. Will was probably like that as well—sensible and dependable and all too aware of his responsibilities. Such character traits were good to have, but sometimes it did not make him amusing company in a social setting.

Molly looked up as he approached. There was a wary expression on her face he did not understand. He took her hand in his and bowed more formally than normal.

“You look beautiful tonight, Molly.”

Startled, she blurted out, “Have we begun already?”

Will’s shoulders shook with contained laughter—he couldn’t help it. He wasn’t sure whether he was amused or had reached the limits of his sanity. “Do you want me to go outside and come in again?”

Colour flooded Molly’s face. “Be quiet. You never say those sorts of things to me, so how was I to know?”

Didn’t he? Will often thought them, but perhaps she was right and he rarely spoke the thoughts aloud. He wasn’t a verbose sort of person, and certainly wasn’t a sophisticated London gentleman like Hunter. After his failure with Celeste, he had given up pretending to be someone other than what he was. Plain, ordinary Will Starling, but with an added sting of sarcasm.

The orchestra began to play one of the more popular tunes of the day, and Will held out his hand again. “Shall we?” he asked, his gaze on hers.

She nodded and took his hand and allowed him to lead her out onto the floor to join several other couples. Breana was there, dancing with one of the Norris boys—to him they all looked the same—and he hoped she behaved herself. One never knew what might come out of her mouth when she was overexcited.

Next he saw his parents, who were watching him dance with Molly. They were smiling from the edge of the dance floor, as if the sight pleased them, which he supposed made sense. They had known Molly since the day she was born, and they all loved her.

After another turn around the room, he spotted Celeste and Sir Reginald, along with Mark Hunter. At least the cad wasn’t dancing with her.

“Ouch, you are squeezing my hand,” Molly whispered irritably. “Whatever is the matter with you?”

Will eased his grip. “Sorry. Hunter is over there. You wish to make the man jealous. Should I circle in front of him and show off my superb dancing skills?”

“Better not.” He could hear the warm amusement in her voice. “Wait a while, and then you can flirt with me where he can see us.”

Will thought for a moment. “How do I flirt? If my luck with Celeste is any measure, I’m not very good at it.”

Molly sighed. “No, I suppose you aren’t. Well, first of all, you smile and make promises with your eyes, Will.”

Make promises with his eyes? He tried to imagine what that even meant as they danced. It seemed Molly had caught quite a bit of male attention from the crowd, apart from Hunter, who was still speaking to Celeste and her uncle. Probably boasting about more of their ugly plants.

“That isn’t kind, Will,” Molly scolded him. Only then did he realise he had spoken aloud. “Just because they are not vegetables doesn’t mean they are not important. In a hundred years’ time, people will applaud Sir Reginald for his work.”

“In a hundred years’ time, my descendants will applaud mine,” he retorted. “I plan to make some great innovations in crop management next year, and the breeding program for my sheep is going very well.”

Her eyes were alight with laughter, and a smile trembled on her lips. Just for a moment, his mind went completely blank. He had called her beautiful before, and he realised she was—she put everyone else in the room to shame.

“Will, are you all right?” Molly sounded concerned and had a strange frown on her face. “Don’t worry, we don’t have to do this for long. Just a little flirting and you can consider yourself released from your promise.”

He nodded, swallowed, and found his voice. The dancing had stopped and it was time to enact their plan. “Of course,” he said. “Let us flirt.”

She giggled as he led her over to the Mortons and Hunter, who looked up at them in surprise. Hunter smiled at Molly and gave a practised bow.

“Miss Lacey! I was just telling Sir Reginald and Miss Morton about my latest acquisition.”

“A man eating cactus, is it?” Will asked.

Celeste frowned and Molly dug her elbow into his side.

“Not quite,” Hunter laughed politely. “A *Dendrobium densiflorum* . It is a type of orchid from the Dutch East Indies, and very rare. I was lucky to hear about it from a botanist in Edinburgh.”

“Indeed you were, my boy,” Sir Reginald put in, eying Will with disfavour. “ Very lucky. I think you should write to the gardens at Kew about it. They might want a look.”

“Assuming it doesn’t eat them,” Will said, not quite under his breath.

Hunter ignored him. “I might do that,” he said, but it seemed he couldn’t take his eyes off Molly. “Perhaps you would like to see it, Miss Lacey? My grandmother has reminded me to invite my friends to afternoon tea, and I have been remiss in not doing so before now.”

“We could all come,” Celeste said quickly. “I would certainly like to see this specimen.”

“Of course,” Hunter said, but Will thought he was perhaps less enthusiastic than before. “And what about you, Starling?”

Will began to roll his eyes, but another dig in his ribs reminded him of his promise. “Thank you. It would be my pleasure.” He turned to Molly. “We could go together, could we not? The two of us.”

Celeste made a choking sound.

Molly smiled. “I would like that, Will.”

CHAPTER NINE

Molly wasn't sure what to make of this new Will. He wasn't the polite, reserved young man she grew up with, not in company anyway. He seemed determined to make his presence felt for all the wrong reasons, and people were certainly taking notice.

The music struck up again. Mark was still discussing his grandmother's afternoon tea date, and they decided upon a morning in two days' time. Sir Reginald rubbed his hands at the prospect of seeing Hunter's rare plant, and Celeste eyed Will as if she wasn't certain she recognised the stolid farmer who had proposed to her. There was a glint of interest in her blue eyes, and Molly wasn't sure what to make of that. Was Celeste partial to the company of gentlemen with certain reputations like Mark Hunter? Perhaps now that Will was misbehaving, she liked him better?

But Molly preferred the old Will. The man she knew and loved, the man who would sit up at night to bottle feed a young lamb that others might have allowed to die.

The dancing was fun, and Will was still a good dancer, if a little stiff. Molly kept them on the floor as long as possible, but after three dances Mark had grown impatient waiting for a turn and cut in. Will frowned and for a moment, Molly thought he might refuse. She wasn't sure whether to be amused or horrified by the tension between them.

"Will," Molly said with a hint of warning.

Will smirked and stepped aside to allow Mark to take Molly in his arms.

Hunter gave her a wicked smile as they moved away from Will's glowering presence. "It seems our friend is not happy. Am I treading on his toes? Metaphorically speaking, of course."

Molly made a sound that could have been assent or denial, because she really didn't know what to say. Although she had wanted Will to believe she was in love with Mark, she did not want Mark to realise she was in love with Will.

"So, you will come to tea at my grandmother's? I apologise that my private invitation was commandeered by the Mortons."

Molly looked up into his eyes. They were watchful and curious, but he seemed to be genuine in his wish to see her. "I don't mind who else comes. I'm sure we will all enjoy ourselves. Your plant sounds interesting." She smiled brightly.

He snorted a laugh but did not comment on her lie. For a moment, they danced in silence. "I will be returning to London soon," he said at last.

"You must be looking forward to it."

He hesitated. "I am, of course. But the thing is, I never expected to enjoy my stay in Barton Lacey so much. It was meant to be a punishment by my father and instead... Well, it has given me so much to think about."

"Such as a new botanical hobby," she teased.

He laughed. "Indeed. My friends will think I have run mad. Perhaps I shall not tell them just yet."

"You shouldn't let other people's opinions of you rule your life," said Molly.

They circled the floor once more. The dance was coming to an end.

“You are very forthright, Miss Lacey,” Mark said and then added quickly when she went to defer, “I like that in a woman. It is an unusual quality in my circles. I like you. If I thought you would welcome my attentions then I might have a proposal for you.”

“A proposal?” Molly’s voice rose an octave.

“Yes. I might offer to marry you. I need a wife. I think my father would be more inclined to loosen his purse strings if I had a wife, and you are just the thing.”

Molly stared. She forgot to move, and he had to do all the work if they were not to run into another couple. Then the music finished and before she could think of a reply, he stepped back and bowed low.

“I have succeeded in making you speechless,” he said with a smile. “That’s a start. You probably do not think me genuine, but I am. I have much to offer, and I want you to think about what I have said. We will meet again at my grandmother’s house, and I hope...” He bit his lip, but his eyes were teasing. “Well, I will be interested to hear what you think.”

He escorted her back to familiar faces. Grace was staring, dying to know why Molly looked like, as she put it, ‘a stuffed fish.’ Celeste was clinging to Will’s arm, chattering away, but he wasn’t paying attention to her. He was staring at Molly.

Molly had never been asked to marry anyone before, but she wasn’t about to accept Mark’s offer. And if she was somehow manoeuvred into such a position and made to marry him, then, well it would be all Will’s fault. Everything was his fault. She would never have embarked on this silliness if it wasn’t for him and his infatuation with Celeste. What a mess!

“You look alarmed,” Sir Reginald said, uncharacteristically observant for once and just when she would have preferred him not to be. “Did our friend say something you did not like?”

They all looked at Mark, who had left for the supper table and was chatting with another group.

“Not at all,” Molly said firmly, though she was definitely not going to discuss what was said. “It is just a little close in here. I might get some fresh air.”

“I will accompany you,” Will said quickly.

Celeste pouted. “I thought we were going to dance.”

Will looked torn. Molly gave an inner sigh. If Will still harboured feelings for Celeste, it would be unfair to take him away from the dance. And if Will accompanied her, he would want to know what Mark said, and that would become awkward.

She forced a smile and said, “I will manage. The two of you go and enjoy your dance.”

She made her way through the crush toward the doors that led to the Norris’s garden before Will could protest.

She was soon enjoying the heady scent of perfumed flowers, and the coloured light of lanterns strung among the trees. It was very pretty, and she wondered if she could manage something similar at Lacey Farm. Probably not. Their garden was too small and the farm animals were always getting into it. She imagined their milking cow with lanterns tangled about its horns and giggled to herself.

“Molly?”

Molly gasped, and her hand rose to her chest. Abby was seated in a rotunda, the structure barely visible among some lilacs. “What are you doing out here?” Molly asked, moving to join her. “Are you well?”

Abby took a deep breath. “I am. I’m just not particularly comfortable in there.” She grimaced. “You know I am not a social creature, Molly. I prefer my own company, or at least my own home.”

Abby, the eldest of the Starlings, was much loved by her siblings, who often came to her when there was a problem among them, but she was also uncomfortable in mixed company, especially among those she did not know well. This was exactly the sort of event Abby would prefer to avoid.

“I wouldn’t have come at all if it wasn’t for Breana,” Abby went on. “Someone needs to keep an eye on her.”

“And I see you’re doing an outstanding job of it.”

Abby chuckled. “Yes, well, I reasoned that if she were to get into any serious mischief, she would have done so by now.”

That was true enough. Breana was apt to behave thoughtlessly. What might have been considered charming when she was a child was more concerning in a nineteen-year-old girl. But tonight she had been reasonably well behaved.

“If I’d known you were out here, I would have joined you earlier,” Molly said. “I much prefer your company.”

Abby raised a doubtful eyebrow. “I don’t think I believe you. Before I left the

ballroom, I saw both Will and Mr Hunter on the dance floor trying to secure you for the next dance.” Her blue eyes twinkled and Molly gave an uncomfortable laugh.

“It was a little ridiculous. And do you know the worst part? Mr Hunter made me an offer, though I’m still not sure if he meant it or not. Perhaps it was in jest? He says his father would like me and that seems to be all that matters to him. Anyway, I am to think about it and let him know my answer in two days’ time.”

Abby stared in amazement. “Goodness me!”

“I had been enjoying his company, too. Now I will have to avoid him.”

Abby thought a moment. “So he wants to marry you because his father would approve of you?”

“I think his father keeps him on a tight rein. Money-wise I mean. Marrying me would make him believe his son had changed his ways, or something like that.”

Abby gave her a curious look. “So you intend to think about his offer? His family is supposed to be quite wealthy. A catch, if one ignores his reputation.”

Molly was surprised. “Do you think I should?”

“No, of course not. Not if it’s just to satisfy his father. Though, I must admit, some days I am not sure if I would say no if a handsome man offered to whisk me away, regardless of his motives.”

Molly wasn’t sure what to say to that. Abby was not her usual self tonight. She knew Will’s sister did more than her fair share when it came to managing the Hall—she was so capable her mother left a great deal to her discretion. But Molly had not thought of Abby as unhappy with her life. Most of the time she seemed content. Had

she missed something?

Before she could broach the subject, Abby said, "Never mind me. I am feeling a little low. No, I do not think you should agree to Mr Hunter's offer."

"I won't," Molly spoke decisively. "I don't want to live in London, anyway. I couldn't imagine leaving Barton Lacey. Besides, I love..." She stopped herself.

"You love Will," Abby said quietly. Then, impatiently, "What a fool my brother is!"

Molly shrugged. "I don't suppose he can help it. Miss Morton is very pretty, and Will isn't the only one dangling after her."

"Being pretty is all very well. I don't know much about that," Abby declared. This surprised Molly because she had always thought Will's sister very pretty indeed. It was just that she rarely bothered to dress up, and her hair was usually untidy.

"Can you imagine the two of them at Starling Hall," Abby went on. "With all of us gathered about the table, talking over each other and squabbling over the last serving of potato? I am very sure Celeste would take off before a month had gone by, to London, or back to Sir Reginald. She was not brought up for the simple life, while Will would be miserable anywhere else. You are far more suited to my brother, Molly. There, I've said what everyone in my family is thinking!"

Despite the truth of her words, Molly felt obliged to object. "Will and I are friends. We have been friends since we were children," Molly insisted. "He doesn't see me in any other way."

Abby put her chin on her hand. "It is perfectly plain to me that you love Will. The shame is he is too foolish to know he loves you."

Molly felt her shoulders sag. It was all very well for Abby to say such things, but what was the point? Will did not love her and she must accept it. Not that that meant she wanted to run off with Mark Hunter.

“He is very handsome,” Abby said, staring back toward the house, where they could see the dancers against the soft lighting.

“Will?” Molly asked.

“No, I meant Mr Hunter,” Abby said, and then got up. “I should go back and keep an eye on Breana again. I think it is time we went home. I need to be up early tomorrow. Wash day, you know.”

Molly stood and tucked her hand around her friend’s arm. “I don’t know how you manage it all,” she said.

“I have to. We don’t have enough servants, and the children are always getting their clothing dirty. I tell myself it isn’t forever. One day, they will be grown up and go their own ways, and I will have time to myself. Of course, by then, I shall be an old maid.”

But Molly wondered what Abby would do with her time then. Would she remain at the Hall to care for her parents, or perhaps Will and Celeste’s children? Women like Abby were often taken advantage of and taken for granted. It didn’t seem fair. Abby should have a life of her own, a home of her own. Molly loved the Starlings dearly, but in this they were being selfish when it came to their eldest daughter.

Once inside, Molly found that Grace was also ready to leave, and the two girls set off in their gig. They did not have anything as grand as a carriage, but they didn’t have far to go. Grace was quiet during the trip, but that suited Molly fine, because she did not feel like speaking.

Her silly plan had not changed anything when it came to Will. He might dislike Mark's attentions to her, but that was just the sort of thing a brother would do, and Will had always thought of himself as her brother.

It was no use wishing for the moon. She would just have to learn to live in darkness.

"Molly?" It seemed Grace had found her tongue, and the look on her face was one of determination. "You'd better tell me what the matter is. You know I won't stop pestering you until you do."

CHAPTER TEN

Will arrived at Lacey Farm in good time to accompany Molly to afternoon tea at Hunter's grandmother's house.

Molly was almost ready, her sister told him as he kicked his heels in their parlour. Mrs. Lacey was busy baking in the kitchen, and the delicious smells made Will's stomach rumble. He'd have preferred to have remained here, he thought grumpily. He wasn't looking forward to spending time with Hunter. And now, even Celeste had begun to irritate him.

After Molly had left the Norris's ball Celeste had insisted on dancing with Will several times, no doubt causing raised eyebrows and gossip. Barton Lacey may be far from London, but the social niceties were still observed, and dancing so many times with Celeste would have tongues wagging, whereas his dances with Molly would not. Everyone knew they had been friends from childhood, so no one thought anything of it. Whereas Celeste...

Will wasn't sure why that worried him. A few weeks ago, he would have been happy to have his name linked to Celeste. He wanted to marry her and spend his life with her. And now...

He didn't.

It was as simple and yet as complicated as that.

He wasn't sure whether he had fallen out of love with her, or whether he had never

been in love with her in the first place. It was as if he had been under a spell and now that it had broken, he could see clearly again. He didn't blame Celeste for clouding his mind and his eyes. That had been his own doing. A madness that had come and gone like a fever, and now he was well again.

Grace leaned closer to Will. "Are you listening?" she whispered. "You have a faraway look on your face."

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"I said," Grace looked behind her as if afraid Molly might be hovering. "Mr Hunter made Molly an offer of marriage at the ball. What do you think of that?"

Will was speechless. He stood up and then sat down again. "He asked her..."

"Yes. He said to think about it. She didn't want to tell me, but of course I made her," Grace said. "I could see she was big with news when we drove home."

Will hardly heard her. He was still dumbfounded.

"If she marries him, I would like to go and stay with her," Grace said dreamily. "Life is so boring in Barton Lacey."

Part of him wanted to call Hunter out. Although swords or pistols were far too civilised for what he wanted to do to Hunter. How dare he presume to ask Molly to marry him! Molly was not Hunter's and would never be Hunter's. Molly was...

The truth hit him and he felt like the bad tempered bull in the west paddock at Starling Hall. Roaring and stamping and shaking its massive head. He felt exactly like that right now because Molly was his .

But she wasn't, was she? Molly saw him as her brother and could never love him in that way. Just because he realised now that he loved her and couldn't live without her, and wanted to marry her and take her home to Starling Hall and be with her forever. Well, that didn't mean Molly was the least bit interested in it ever happening.

Will stood up again. Oh God, was she going to accept? Was she going to go off with Hunter? And Will had thrown her into his arms as a distraction as he pursued Celeste. What a fool he had been! Abby was right. He was an idiot.

Open your eyes, you idiot.

His sister had said those words to him just this morning as he was about to set out to Lacey Farm. It had seemed puzzling and a little extreme at the time, but now he understood. He had opened his eyes, and it was too late.

Or was it? Could he turn things around. Could he somehow salvage this situation? Will had warned her of the man's reputation. Perhaps he had cushioned his words too much? Inadvertently made the cad sound appealing like in one of those blasted gothic novels his sister Abby read. Think, think! Don't panic.

Will was a practical man, and he must approach this in a practical, commonsense manner. The direct approach, then. He would tell Molly he did not love Celeste after all and that he loved her. He would ask her not to go off with the cad Hunter because he wasn't good enough for her. And Molly would...

He almost groaned aloud. Molly would laugh at him or she would be cross with him, because he had made all of this happen. If it hadn't been for his obsession with another woman and the promise he had wrung out of Molly, then none of this drama would have happened. He would have woken up one morning and thought: I am going to ask Molly to marry me, and Molly would have said yes, and they would have lived happily ever after.

Or perhaps he would never have realised he loved her if this hadn't happened? Perhaps he had needed his whole world to be tipped upside down so that he could see the truth that was right before his eyes.

“Will?”

He turned, startled. Molly stood inside the door, looking at him, puzzled. Grace scuttled out of the room, and Molly's frown grew. She turned back to Will. “Come on,” she said, “or we will be late.”

Once in the carriage he had brought for the occasion, she didn't waste time.

“Grace told you, didn't she?” Her eyes flashed. “She swore she wouldn't. I will have words with her when we get back.”

“I'm glad she told me,” Will said, struggling to be calm. “You can't possibly... That is, are you really considering Hunter's proposal?”

Molly turned to face the road before them. It was a pleasant day, and her straw bonnet shaded her fair skin, while a gold locket rested about her throat, and he could see the pulse there beating fast. She might look calm and neat and well turned out, but inside was surely another matter.

“That is none of your business, William,” she replied evenly, “and I won't discuss it with you.”

“I told you about Celeste!”

Her green eyes narrowed as she turned them on him. “That was your decision. I didn't want to hear about her. I would have preferred you kept it to yourself.”

He floundered. “But I thought we were friends?”

“I have decided there should be a limit to our friendship.”

This did not bode well for his plan to ask Molly to marry him, or at least to confess his love for her. He considered again explaining himself in a clear and concise manner, but he could see by the set of her jaw and her hands clenched in her lap that she would not be receptive. And yet, what other option was there left to him?

This indecision lasted until they arrived at the Hunter residence. He had not been there before, but knew the widow Hunter by sight. Hunter and his grandmother greeted them cheerfully, and Will struggled not to glare. He suspected Hunter understood why he was barely able to speak, and it seemed to amuse him.

Sir Reginald and Celeste had already arrived and were ensconced in a pleasantly decorated drawing room. The widow Hunter—he must stop calling her that in his head—was an artist and was keen to show off some of her work. Will’s mother was also an amateur artist when she had time, and he found what he saw here to be rather good. The elderly woman pointed out to Molly where some of the landscapes had been painted.

“I find Barton Lacey an infinite source of inspiration,” she said.

“It is a beautiful place,” Molly agreed enthusiastically.

“And yet you are young, my dear. You may move away once you marry.”

Molly shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. And then, as if afraid she had said something she shouldn’t have, cast a glance toward Hunter.

She need not have worried. Hunter and Sir Reginald were deep in discussion about

their plant collections. Will tried to eavesdrop on more of Molly's conversation, but Celeste had taken his arm and was chattering to him about all the things she hoped to do when she was home. "I am going to stay with my cousin in London," she said breathlessly, as if it was the most wonderful thing she could think of.

"Won't you miss any of this?" Will asked, waving a hand vaguely around them.

"Oh. Of course," Celeste said hastily. "I will miss you, Mr Starling. Perhaps you could visit me while I am there? You would be most welcome. Mr Hunter intends to call, although he tells me he is always very busy."

She pouted and Will decided he would need to be direct.

"I am afraid I am very busy as well," he said. "The estate keeps me very busy, and I do not have time to gallivant in London, Miss Morton."

Celeste blinked at him in surprise. "Oh, that is too bad," she said rather sharply. "But I believe if one does not venture outside of one's comfortable little world, then one will become very boring. That is why I will treasure my time here, and the people I have met."

"All very well, Miss Morton, but I am not a man of leisure like Mr Hunter. One day Starling Hall will be mine and I intend to run it as efficiently as possible, without compromising the wellbeing of my tenants or my animals."

There, he had said what needed to be said in the sort of plain language he preferred. And Celeste seemed bewildered by his frankness.

"Will," she said quietly, "we would not suit at all, would we? Why did you ask me to marry you?"

“If I am being honest, I was bewitched by you. Your-your beauty and your kindness. I have never met anyone like you in my life. You sparkle like the brightest star. Barton Lacey will be the poorer for your going, Miss Morton. But there is more to marriage than that. As you have pointed out, we would not suit at all. But I too will treasure the time I have spent with you.”

Celeste seemed very moved by that. It wasn't entirely the truth, but Will thought it was close enough, and he didn't want to hurt the girl.

“Oh Will,” she whispered, and blinked back tears. “Thank you. I will never forget you.”

Will gave her a bow and walked away. He felt lighter, as if he had shed a heavy weight. Now he wanted to find Molly. But neither Molly nor Hunter were in the room. A sense of foreboding washed over him. Was he already too late?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“And this is where I slept when I was a child,” Mark said, opening the door with a flourish. “My parents travelled a great deal, so I was left with my grandparents whenever they were away. This room is part of the old tower, and I thought it very exciting. If you stand outside on the balcony, you can see down into what was once the moat.”

Molly peered into the room from the corridor. It looked dusty and there were large patches of damp on the walls. She didn’t want to be here with him and she wasn’t all that keen to see his old bedchamber. When Mrs. Hunter had been called away to attend to some domestic matter, Mark had insisted he show her around the house. If she hadn’t been so desperate to escape Will and Celeste’s whisperings, she would have said no.

Really, all she wanted was to go home and throw herself on her bed and weep. It seemed as good a solution as any. Celeste seemed more infatuated with Will than ever.

Mark pointed out some of his toys, each one with a story all its own. It was quite charming, actually, and if she had ever thought about marrying him in another life, she might have been swayed to say yes. But she hadn’t, and it was becoming more and more of an effort to be agreeable because she knew she had to give him an answer. And there was really only one answer she could give.

“Come and see the view,” Mark led her to the narrow window. He swung the frame open with an effort—the hinges groaned with disuse—before leaning out to show her

the small balcony with its metal railing.

“Oh, it is further down than I expected,” she said.

“I used to pretend I was a valiant knight of old, watching for my enemies,” he said with a self-conscious laugh. “Give me your hand and I will help you step out.”

Molly didn’t want to step out. The balcony didn’t look very safe at all. But Mark had already gripped her hand and was helping her through the low window. The next thing she knew, her feet were on the narrow balcony. Looking up, she could see Starling Hall in the distance, though she really didn’t want to think about the Starlings right now.

Celeste’s voice came from outside the door. “Mr Hunter?”

A moment later, she appeared in the doorway. She came toward them with a cry of excitement. “Oh, can I join you, Miss Lacey?”

Mark turned away, perhaps to warn her there was only room for one, and that was when it happened.

Molly felt the balcony floor give way. She fell, and it was by sheer luck that she managed to catch hold of the windowsill.

It all happened so quickly. There was a crash as the remains of the balcony fell against the tower and then slithered down to the ground far below. Molly’s feet dangled helplessly as she tried to find something to stand on, but there was nothing but fresh air. She had hold of the windowsill but that was rotten too and began to pull away from the frame.

She screamed as she began to fall. “Will!” she cried out instinctively.

It was Hunter who grabbed her arm. He cursed as he leant through the window and some slivers of broken wood jabbed him from the broken sill. “I don’t know how long I can hold you,” he panted. A droplet of blood fell from his injured wrist onto her cheek.

And then Celeste, her voice high with terror, “Will, is that you? Oh, thank God! Help! Hurry!”

Hunter’s hold on her was slipping, and he was in obvious pain.

“I am going to fall!” Molly cried, her voice filled with despair.

Just as Will appeared in the window above her, and clasped her arm in a strong grip. Hunter let go, clutching his wrist and stumbling out of sight, but Will’s hold was sure.

His eyes were locked on hers, as if she was the most important thing in his world. As if at that moment, the height, the dizzying drop to the ground, none of it mattered to him. The only thing that mattered was not letting Molly go.

“Molly,” he said urgently. “Don’t move!”

“I’m hardly likely too,” she managed, but it was a poor effort at a retort. “I am going to fall. Will! I am going to fall!”

“No, you are not.” And it was true as, slowly, he managed to lift her to safety. She was trembling and trying to catch her breath. Once she was over the sill, Will released her and Celeste was there to hold her tight.

Just then, Sir Reginald arrived, wide eyed and asking if everyone was all right. Mark was leaning against the wall, cupping his hurt wrist with his other hand, but now he began apologising to Molly. Celeste bustled over to him, taking his wrist gently in her

hands, and examined the wound.

“You were so brave to hang on for so long,” Celeste said softly.

“I was a damned fool for putting her out there without testing the boards first.”

“My dear Miss Lacey,” said Sir Reginald. “What a relief.”

“Are you hurt?” Will asked Molly. His gaze moved over her, searching for any damage.

“I don’t think so,” she managed to say. Her arms ached, and she had a cut on her leg from the fall, but she was alive. “Thank you, Will. You saved my life.”

Molly could see the turmoil in Will’s eyes. Before he could answer, Mrs Hunter arrived, terribly shocked by the incident, and hustled Molly and her grandson away, to tend to their injuries.

She did not see Will again that day. Mark took her home. After he had apologised again, and they had travelled a little way in silence, he began, “About my proposal.”

“Mr Hunter, I?—”

Mark shook his head. “When I was holding onto you, you did not cry out my name. I think we both know who your heart truly belongs to. I know my offer was a bit unconventional, but I would never expect you to marry me when you are in love with another man.”

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. Will is a lucky man. The only question is whether he realises it or not.”

That was the question, and Molly feared that she knew the answer. If she had to lose Will to Celeste, then she would bear it. At least he was still her friend, and she would be forever grateful to him for saving her. It seemed all the more remarkable when she knew how afraid he must have been.

And yet he had conquered that fear. For her .

Molly knew she would love Will forever, and perhaps that would be enough.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:42 am

Sir Stephen and Lady Meg Starling had come to visit Lacey Farm, expressing their gratitude that Molly was unharmed.

“Will was very brave,” she told them, because it was the truth. “Where is he? Will, I mean?” Molly asked, unable to help herself.

“He has been busy,” Lady Meg said. She patted Molly’s hand, an odd smile on her face. “You know Will. He likes to organise everything exhaustively before he acts.”

Molly wasn’t sure what that meant. “And Celeste Morton?” she said, forcing herself to sound pleasant. “Is she still with her uncle?”

“Oh, she left some days ago,” Sir Stephen Starling replied. “She came by to say goodbye.” He looked at his wife and laughed. “I don’t think she was overly impressed with Starling Hall.”

“Too many of us there for her taste, I expect,” Lady Meg said. “I think she’ll be happier in London.”

“And so, life in Barton Lacey is back to normal,” Sir Stephen said comfortably.

In a way, it was. Mark Hunter had left as well, and she had no expectation of seeing him again.

After the Starlings had returned home, Molly leaned upon the gate that led to the lane and wondered if, despite what they said, Will was nursing a broken heart. She would have thought he might need a friend at such a time, but he evidently didn’t need

Molly.

She continued to dwell on her hurt a bit longer, but then she noticed a horseman approaching down the lane. There was no mistaking his identity.

Will!

As he drew closer, she saw he carried a bunch of flowers, and that seemed odd—when had Will ever brought her a bouquet? Her heart gave a little jump, but she told it to behave, that it meant nothing. He probably thought flowers were appropriate for someone who had so nearly died.

Will dismounted before he reached the gate and walked up to her. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back, and looked at her. Really looked at her with the same focus he'd had when he saved her. It was as if he was seeing every bit of her. Inside and out.

“My parents tell me you are well,” he said.

“I am, thank you. And you? You were very brave the other day, Will. I know how you are about heights.”

He shook his head. “I do fear heights, but I discovered if it comes to my fear and your life, there is no contest. I would have died to save you, Molly.”

She caught her breath. Then, regaining her common sense, she said, “That would be a very silly thing to do. Besides, neither of us died. We are both here. Alive.”

“Yes.” He seemed to remember the flowers he carried and handed them to her. “I thought you'd prefer roses to something odd, smelly, or liable to strangle you.”

“I would indeed.” Molly buried her face in the petals and spent a moment enjoying

their scent, wondering what on earth was happening right now.

Will carried on. "I have been very foolish. I cannot excuse my behaviour, but I am hoping you will forgive me."

"Oh, you mean about Celeste? Why do I need to forgive you?"

"I think I was mad for a time, but I have since recovered. I promise it will never happen again. I don't love her, and certainly don't want to marry her. What a dreadful mistake that would have been. You should have seen her face when she came to say goodbye." He grinned at the memory.

"I can imagine," Molly said, and finally set the flowers aside. "Your parents said you have been busy with some plan or other for Starling Hall?"

"Ah, yes. I want to build a new wing onto the existing building and once I explained it to them, they agreed. That's why I haven't come to you before now, Molly. I wanted to make sure everything was in order before I came. I knew I would not be able to stay silent once I saw you and the thought of us crowded in with the rest of them...."

"Stay silent? Will, for a sensible man, you aren't making much sense."

He took a deep breath. "The new wing at the Hall is for us. Because I do not wish for us to be overrun by my brothers and sisters, as much as I love them. I want us to have a place we can be alone in, because I love you, and though we have been friends forever, I am hoping that perhaps you love me as well. Not as a friend, but as something more. I want to marry you, and I hope you will say yes."

"Oh." Suddenly, she was filled with the most overwhelming sense of joy. "You do?"

"Yes. Do you love me?" he asked, looking worried.

Molly tried to contain her excitement. She wanted to say everything that needed to be said so that it was out of the way and they could move on. “I do love you, Will. I always have.”

Will blinked. “Always?”

Molly nodded. “You hurt me when you asked me to help you win Celeste. I had thought that you were going to propose to me before she arrived.”

“I... I had no idea,” said Will.

“That was why I pretended I needed your help when it came to Mark Hunter. I could not bear the thought of watching you be happy while—while I would be here all alone.”

Will reached out and took her hands through the bars of the gate. “I can’t say I am completely sorry for how things turned out,” he said. “If it hadn’t happened the way it had, it might have taken me longer to come to my senses. Perhaps I should make another promise, to always speak the truth within my heart. You too.”

“Yes.” She smiled, wondering what was next, but Will knew. He leaned over the gate and took her face in his calloused fingers and kissed her. And he kept kissing her.

It was warm and exciting, the most wonderful sensation, and yet it felt right. She loved him, and he loved her, and there was nothing more to be said.

Molly smiled, opened the gate and, taking Will’s hand in hers, walked them toward Lacey Farm.

She was so deliriously happy. Surely the feeling would last for a year?

Or a decade.

Forever.

* * *