



# Willow (Out on a Limb #4)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Willow, (Holly's not-identical twin), is the last unwed member of the Trease family. She missed the Christmas holiday with her family at Forest Grange, since an unexpected incident led to her caring for her old French mistress on the south coast. A sad ending leaves Willow with a promise she must honour, and in possession of a little cottage on the shore. To complicate matters, a large bundle dumped at her door turns out to be a man with a dangerous fever, not to mention a severely sprained ankle.

And she knows him.

When Harry Chalmers awakens to find his nurse is none other than Willow Trease, sister of his best friend, he's stunned, confused, and profoundly concerned, since his business is not something he can share with Willow. He's even more surprised when he learns of the creative way she has handled his presence. It's also a huge risk for both of them.

But he's helpless and completely reliant on her care, even though he knows he must return to London as soon as possible. After that business is concluded, he can turn his attention to repairing any damage Willow's hasty assertion may have caused.

**Total Pages (Source):** 14

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:43 am*

Cold grey clouds hung heavily over the waters of the English Channel, making a young woman sigh as she stared out of her window at them. The sight was nowhere near as lovely as the snow-covered forest would be, the familiar one surrounding her home, many miles away.

She missed it, especially over the past weeks, when she knew that Christmas celebrations would be ongoing, and the special glow of the season always seemed brighter when the family was together.

Viscount Trease and his wife, Lady Hazel, kept the joyous spirit of the holiday; the house would be filled with the scent of fir boughs, and the aroma of freshly baked mince pies would tempt the palate of anyone setting foot over the threshold.

It had been so for over two hundred years now, although nobody really knew how the first Viscount celebrated his Christmas. Because he had been elevated from the rank of stable hand within a matter of moments, he was probably a bit dazed, especially since the Royal he had rescued became King of the Realm not long after.

Gratitude, Hopper Trease must have thought, certainly came with advantages.

But he and his wife (a former milkmaid), wasted no time in having a suitable home built, and over the generations, the Viscounts had added to it, here and there. Which brings us to this moment, a lovely Christmas at Forest Grange, residence of the Trease family.

What with an engagement, a new Trease on the way, and the announcement that another little one would be joining the family in the coming year, the rafters rang with

laughter and all the traditions of Christmas were celebrated with gusto.

But there was one family member missing...

Miss Willow Trease, the not-identical twin of the newly affianced Miss Holly Trease, was not at Forest Grange. In fact, she wasn't even in the same county.

Willow, to her surprise, found herself on the South Coast of England, in a village called Little Witham.

And little it was, too, comprising a dozen or so houses, one or two shops for essentials, and a church a mile away that served the area. It was quiet, and once upon a time had hosted quite a few of the aristocracy during the summer months. But, as always, tastes had changed, and what was once regarded as a charming small fishing village became little more than a wharf and some dull lights on winter nights.

It had also attracted a couple of foreigners, probably because there was quite a bit of unpleasantness going on across the channel.

One of them, Madame Louise Lépine, had lived there since her retirement from the educational world, where she had tutored many a young lady in the French language. It had been a sheer coincidence that one of those young ladies, Miss Willow Trease, had crossed her path a few months ago. On her way back to Forest Grange, Willow had seen the accident that had almost killed Madame, and rescued her, ordering her coachman to take them both to Madame's home.

Once there, and once they'd recovered from the astonishing coincidence of their meeting, Willow had written to her parents explaining the situation, and stayed, since Madame lived alone and had no one else to care for her.

A small house, set back a little from the seafront, but still with a full view of it, had

become Willow's home-away-from-home as she tended to a woman who quickly left her role as teacher behind, and became a dear friend.

But the outcome had shattered Willow's heart; Madame never fully recovered from her injuries, and several days after Christmas, her heart had failed.

Alone, with Madame at peace now in the small graveyard behind the church, Willow stared from the window of the house that was, to her utter astonishment, now hers. Madame had made that clear in her last days, over Willow's protestations.

"It is all I have, chérie," she'd whispered. "And I have nobody to give it to, except you."

Sighing at the memory, Willow leaned her head against the cold glass and gazed at the rough grey sea, sadness choking her, and fighting the urge to go running home to her family. She had to wait for a while...it had been part of Madame's last wishes.

"Stay here, ma chérie, after I'm gone. Wait, I beg of you. Wait until you know it is the right time to leave."

"I don't understand..." Willow had held Madame's hand and frowned. "How will I know?"

"A message will come, and the messenger will tell you, Willow. He will know."

Even now, nearly a month after that inscrutable plea, Willow still did not understand. She'd had plenty of food and other supplies, thanks to Madame's foresightedness, but the waiting was getting irritating. Her gaze over the waves didn't help provide an answer.

The knocker sounded loudly through the quiet house, and she jumped at the noise, but

hurried to answer it, blinking at the large man who stood there.

“Yes?”

“Package fer yer. From the boat o’er there...” he jerked his head over his shoulder.  
“Says I gotta get this ‘ere. So...’ere.”

Willow staggered as the man pulled a very large bundle from the wall by the door and thrust it against her, then took off before she could recover enough to shout after him.

She kept her balance, but it wasn’t easy, and her breath deserted her as she realised she had a body wrapped up and pressing against her.

“Dear God.” She stumbled, trying to struggle with the weight and the front step at the same time. Through sheer determination, she dragged and manhandled it into the main room, ran back and slammed the door, then returned to see who could be in such dire straits.

Carefully unfolding the fabric, which turned out to be a man’s heavy cloak, she pushed it away and then unwrapped what looked like a filthy scarf from the muffled head. Gingerly, she pulled it aside, only to catch her breath on a choked gasp.

“Oh sweet heavens...Harry...”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:43 am*

### In Which Miss Willow Trease Hurriedly Invents a Husband

“Thank you, Mrs Smithers. I am so grateful for your kindness and your wisdom.”

“Oh, now, dearie, don’t you worry none. That husband of yours will be right as rain before too long. Just keep giving him a little of this tonic every day and if his fever starts up again, use the other powder like I showed you. And keep that ankle wrapped. All right??”

Willow nodded at the cheerful woman on her doorstep. “I will, I promise. Thank you again.”

She closed the door behind the kind-hearted neighbour and sighed with relief.

What a mess she was in.

Several days had passed since someone dumped Harry Chalmers on her doorstep, and he remained unconscious.

She’d known immediately that he had a fever. His forehead was burning hot, he was tossing and turning, and he was mumbling words she couldn’t make out, half in French and half in English. Or at least that what it sounded like.

However, there were no serious injuries, which was a relief. His ankle was swollen and bruised, but as near as she could tell, it wasn’t broken.

And then there was Mrs Smithers, who had seen the odd circumstances of Harry’s

arrival, and tapped on the door not long after, offering help if needed.

Willow, caught in a dilemma with little time to think, had said the first thing that came into her head. “It’s my husband. He’s not well, not well at all...”

That was all it took.

Mrs Smithers, a woman of considerable strength and determination, manhandled the barely conscious Harry into the bedroom at the rear of the house, stripped him naked (Willow averted her eyes, mostly) and tucked him under the covers, declaring she’d be right back with some willow bark tonic that would set him to rights in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.

“Nursed too many young men,” she said, boiling a kettle in the small kitchen. “War takes its toll, dearie.”

Willow got a mug. “You have relatives in the fighting?”

“I do,” she nodded soberly. “Lost some of ‘em, already. But a couple come back home with nasty wounds, and so I helped with their healing.”

“And how are they doing?”

“Well enough, I thank you, and one of ‘em, young Samuel, helps me with the herbs and such,” she smiled. “He’s got an eye for ‘em in the forest, so you don’t need to worry I’ll run short of anything.”

Silence fell for a few moments. “You’re a nice girl. I watched you with Madame. She didn’t let just anyone in here, so I guessed you’d be someone special.”

“You’re too kind,” Willow blushed. “Madame was indeed a very special friend.” She

swallowed. “I miss her most dreadfully.”

“Well, now your husband’s home. And I know enough not to ask where he’s been to get so sick.” She poured the water onto the tea and shook some of the willow bark powder into the cup. “I’ll put the poultice on him in a moment. Why don’t you add a lump of sugar to it, if you can spare it? Make it go down better.”

“Yes, ma’am. Right here.”

“He looks poorly, I know, but I reckon he’s just got a touch of influenza. It can be a killer, but he’s here, warm, and with a wife to look after him. And I’m guessing he’s usually healthy. I don’t see any signs of something lingering...”

“Oh no,” Willow blinked. “No, I think...I mean, he’s quite healthy normally.”

“There you go then. Couple of days he’ll be getting back to himself.” She grinned, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “And you’ll be getting on your back, I’ll wager. Pretty wife like you? Nothing like a bit of marital fun to help a man get better.”

“Ah.”

That somewhat embarrassing conversation had taken place a week ago, and even though Harry’s fever had all but disappeared, he still seemed weak and disoriented.

As for herself, she was tired, concerned for her patient, and spent more time than she should at his bedside, just watching him sleep.

The fever had finally disappeared, and he no longer tossed and turned, sweating into his sheets and groaning as he shivered. She’d washed the linens several times, thanking the heavens for providing some sunshine and a stiff breeze to dry them. So far, the weather had held, and the snow was mostly melted.



But spring was still a long way off, and the sea still roared ferociously now and again, a sound that Willow had become accustomed to during her tenure at Madame's.

Once again, she had to remind herself that it was now her house. Her home, should she wish to live here. What a series of unexpected events. She reminded herself to write to her parents; the roads should be clear enough to get a letter through to Forest Grange, and she certainly had more than enough news for them.

Sighing, she rose from her chair beside the bed, tucked her patient in more snugly, and smiled as he grunted a little at her touch. He should be feeling more comfortable, since the fever had gone, and the poultices had reduced the swelling around his ankle.

She couldn't help stroking his tousled brown hair, unkempt and somewhat grubby now. But she knew that when it was clean, and in the sunshine, it would reflect chestnut brown lights, a good match for those rich green eyes. A heritage from some Irish ancestor, Harry would say when asked about them. Although he'd never mentioned if he knew which one.

There was no question he was handsome. Women had been falling over themselves to spend time with him ever since Willow could remember. His family had owned Myrtle Manor for many years, but it wasn't until a few years ago that Harry had really taken it over.

He and Ashe were firm friends, of course, being of an age, and of similar interests. In other words, they were young men, and Willow couldn't help but smile at the memories of some of their escapades. She knew now that there probably had been many others kept from her delicate ears, but setting all that aside, Harry Chalmers was definitely a fine gentleman with one all-consuming focus.

Horses.

They were his passion, and she'd spent more than a few hours in the parlour at Forest Grange, listening to him extoll the virtues of one of his new mares, or the delight of seeing a brilliant future for a new foal. He kept some at Myrtle Manor, just a few of his favourites. The Chalmers Stables, however, were located a bit nearer London, and were thus more convenient for Tattersalls, and within a comfortable distance from the Surrey downs and the Epsom racecourse.

Harry had been so excited to enter one of his fillies into the Oaks, and the following year he'd had a colt in the Derby. Neither had won, but he did get a third-place finish in the Derby, which he felt was a reflection on all his horses and their jockeys.

Willow wished she could have been there to cheer for his horses, but young ladies of her tender age weren't encouraged to frequent racecourses. She had settled for an afternoon spent listening to him as he regaled her brother with a description of the event.

Tucked away in a large chair, they'd barely noticed her presence, which didn't bother her in the least. She was more than content to listen to the conversation, to hold her breath and try not to gasp as Harry took Ashe through the races, painting a picture of excitement, competition, and nerve-wracking close finishes.

She could almost smell the horses and hear the thunder of their hooves. It was difficult not applauding at the conclusion, but she didn't want the two gentlemen to amend their conversation because of her presence.

They'd forgotten her, which left her free to enjoy the vision Harry's words painted in her mind.

It was probably on that afternoon that Willow first felt a stirring, an odd ripple that disrupted her normal equanimity.

Since tea was about to be served, she'd risen from her chair just as Ashe and Harry were leaving the room. Harry had paused as she came up to the door and smiled at her. "I'd forgotten you were there, little Willow. I trust I was not indelicate at all in my enthusiasm?"

Willow shook her head. "Oh no, certainly not. I very much enjoyed listening. I felt I was at the track when you described the race, and I'm so glad your horse did well. A good course, a good rider, and a responsive mount." She paused. "Will you enter again?"

He nodded. "I think so. You should come by Myrtle Manor sometime soon. Take a look at my fillies. I'll wager you have a good eye for the ones that will run like the wind."

Her heart thumped at the sweet smile and the warmth in those glorious green eyes. "You are very kind. I would like that very much."

"In that case, it is a fait accompli." He chuckled and held out his arm. "May I have the honour of walking you into tea?"

"The honour is mine, Mr Chalmers."

He leaned down toward her as she laid her hand on his sleeve, and whispered, "Call me Harry, Willow?"

She glanced up into his eyes as he smiled once more.

"All right—Harry."

"That's my girl." He put his hand over hers and squeezed gently.

Three simple words, one wonderful smile, and young Willow Trease had tumbled headlong into love with Harry Chalmers.

Even though she had matured into a sensible young woman, one irrefutable fact remained.

She still was.

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Lord above, his head hurt.

The pain was excruciating, blinding, and if he'd had the energy, he would have howled at the intensity. But all he could manage was a whimper.

Then a soft hand stroked his forehead, and the throbbing eased.

"It's going to be all right," whispered a quiet voice. "Just breathe slowly. You're safe and will be well soon."

There was something familiar there, something he recognised, but he simply didn't have the strength to open his eyes, or the energy to pursue the notion. For the moment, sensing a presence at his bedside, and feeling the warmth of a hand against his skin, was enough.

He slept.

When he awoke once more, he had no idea where he was, what day it was, or—for that matter—who he was.

One thing was evident: he was cold. Shivering, in fact. He managed to open his eyes

a little, then shut them again, frowning at the light shining in from a window.

He curled into the blankets and mentally reviewed the situation.

Was this France? Was he still in the tiny village of Port-aux-Brumes? And where were his clothes? He seemed to be wearing some sort of thick cotton nightshirt, but it was very snug and far too short. His feet were definitely colder than the rest of him.

Thoughts chased themselves through his mind willy-nilly, memories of gunfire, the thunder of hooves, a rough ride through bad weather...yes...he'd been riding, pushing his mount for every inch of speed it could manage...

He groaned as the images faded, ran together, made no sense at all...

“Hush.”

Warmth suddenly encompassed him, and he let out a sigh of relief, managing to focus on the hands laying a thick quilt over his body.

“This will be better. I held it in front of the fire for a few minutes.”

“Th-th-thank you,” he croaked, feeling the heat penetrating his bones and the shivering easing as it did so.

A hand moved over his forehead, and he was suddenly reminded of his mother, who used to do the same thing whenever he was sick.

“Where am I?” The words were murmured and faint, but he hoped whoever was tending to him could hear them. “Where are my boots?”

“You are safe,” came the answer. “Safe in England, in Little Witham. It’s on the

coast of the Channel.”

He thought about that.

“Not France...”

“No, you are not in France. You’re in England. You’re home. You’ve been unwell.”

He tried to turn his head enough to see who was speaking. It was a woman, and somehow it seemed that he should know that voice.

But her face was a blur in the half light, shadowed and indistinct. “This isn’t my home, is it?”

A slight chuckle answered his question. “It is for now, Harry. Just rest. Everything will sort itself out soon. All you have to do is get better.”

“All right, but I shall need my boots.” He sighed, warm now, turned his head into the pillow and did as he was told.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:43 am*

### In Which Harry Chalmers Discovers that He has Acquired a Wife

The next time Harry woke, it was dark.

The pain had receded, but he couldn't help wondering if he'd been run over by a gun carriage. Every bone in his body ached a little, and he knew he was as weak as a kitten.

He closed his eyes and let his ears tell him about his surroundings.

There was a fire crackling in a hearth, probably in another room. The door between them had to be open, or he'd not have heard the sound, so if he was in a bed, which he believed he was, then this was a small cottage perhaps, with living quarters on the first floor.

Beneath the pop and snap of the fire was another sound, a soft and rhythmic whisper that told a story all its own. He was near the sea. Those were the familiar sounds of the ocean washing against either a dock or a wall, or maybe a pier.

His mind darted back to the last thing he could recall...a boat. Safe.

In England.

He struggled to remember something, someone...he'd asked where he was, and he'd been told he was safe in England.

And it had been a woman's voice. Comforting? Familiar? Was he home at Myrtle

Grange?

No, because if he was, this would be his own room, he'd recognise it in an instant, and it wasn't anywhere near the shore. This one was small, and the scent was wrong.

Something soft and fresh, mint and lavender, perhaps. Or lily of the valley. Definitely a woman's fragrance.

So he was, if his conclusions were correct, in England, in a woman's chamber, in a small cottage by the sea, at night, and there was a fire burning in the next room. He silently applauded himself for his observations. Shifting slightly, he felt the taut cotton stretching over his arms. He was in a nightshirt, but one that belonged to a much smaller person.

Puzzled now, and feeling more the thing, he tentatively pushed himself upright, encouraged by the fact that the furniture stayed where it was supposed to be. His vision was steady, although his limbs were far weaker than they should be.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he held onto a bedpost for security, and gingerly placed his feet on the floor, encountering a carpet protecting his bare skin from cold flagstones.

He attempted to stand, but a sharp pain in one ankle made him gasp aloud and drop back onto the mattress.

What the devil? He reached down to the offending joint, only to find it swathed quite thickly in bandages. He'd done something to it, that was for sure, but was it broken? Wouldn't he be in a lot more pain if it was?

He sighed and shifted to the edge of the bed again, determined to explore the extent of his injury. To find out if he could actually walk.



“I wouldn’t, if I were you, Harry.”

He almost fell off the mattress at the sound of her voice, mildly amused, coming from the doorway behind him. “What...”

“Wait. Don’t move.”

Since he didn’t have too many other options, he obeyed, twisting around to try and see where she’d gone. Obviously not too far, since within seconds a lighted candle appeared, and she walked into the bedroom holding it aloft.

He stared, his eyes widening.

“Good God.” He sucked in a breath. “Willow Trease.”

“You remember me. I’m flattered,” she grinned. “Also very happy to see you restored to your senses.”

He made to move, forgetting his ankle, and winced, falling back once more to the safety of the mattress. “Ouch.”

“You have a badly sprained ankle. Nothing, as far as we can ascertain, was broken, but it must have been extremely painful when you injured it.”

“I...” He shook his head, still trying to come to terms with this somewhat surreal experience.

“You have also had a nasty fever for the last couple of days. Fortunately, you have a strong constitution, and we had some effective medicines. A combination that brought you through the worst of it.”

Setting the candle down on a small table, she poured water into a glass. “You’ll be thirsty, I expect. I’ll make tea in a bit if you think you could manage some but have this first. It will help wash away the last of the fever.”

“Thank you.” He took the glass and drank, then handed it back, feeling as if he had suddenly reverted to six years old, and his nurse was caring for him. “Where am I? How long have I been here? You can’t have been the only one looking after me?”

“All questions I will answer very soon. But first,” Willow pointed to the head of the bed, “there is a cane there, which you’ll need to use in order to reach the chamber pot behind the screen. Also, there is a very large and thick blanket on your bed, which can certainly act as a dressing gown, should you think you can move around enough to come and sit by the fire for a little while. It’s up to you...”

“I need to move,” he said quietly. “I feel as if I’ve been sleeping for a year. But I can tell I’m not up to my usual strength, so I will follow your instructions, Willow, if you’ll promise to tell me what on earth you’re doing here in this place at this moment in time.”

She nodded. “I promise. I could use a cup of tea, so I’ll make a pot. And in return, you can tell me how you ended up delivered like a sack of potatoes to the front door of my old French governess’s house.”

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Busying herself in the tiny kitchen, Willow took deep breaths, hoping to stop her heart thundering and her hands shaking. Her pretense of calm self-composure was a facade, but a necessary one if Harry was to take her seriously.

She had no doubt he’d been shocked to see her, since they hadn’t crossed paths in quite some time. To him, Willow Trease was probably still the young girl who had

curled up in a chair and listened to him talk about his horses.

It was time to acquaint him with the Willow Trease who was capable, cool-headed, and now a young woman who had left her childhood behind.

Also the Willow Trease who was posing as his wife. That might be a little more difficult to explain.

The kettle steamed noisily, and she picked up a cloth to take it off the fire, pouring the boiling water into the pot. There was milk, luckily, and some bread too, so she put together a small tray, knowing that if he could start eating, his healing would progress much more quickly.

A sound from the bedroom alerted her to the fact he was on his feet. She gulped down her nerves and kept her hands steady on the tray as she carried it into the little living room that had been her home for the last few days.

The couch was comfortable, the blankets warm, and all things considered, she hadn't really missed sleeping in her own bed. However, her rest had been disturbed, since she'd found herself waking when Harry made any noise.

And he did snore.

But hearing those sounds was more of a comfort than anything else. He was still alive, and that was all that counted.

“Willow?”

He leaned against the door jamb, pale and thin of face, his body wrapped in the blanket from the bed.

“Yes, come. Sit here.” She led him to the chair nearest the fire. “You’ll not be in any draughts, I think, and I’ve made tea if you can manage it? Oh, and to set your mind at ease, your boots are under the bed. You seemed concerned about them.”

He let her help him, leaning on her as he sat. “Thank you, this is very kind, and most welcome. And yes, I will certainly need my boots. When I can get dressed, of course.”

She had to chuckle as she dealt with the tea. “That was a formal speech from someone in a woman’s nightgown and a blanket.”

His eyes widened. “I’m in your nightgown?”

“Nooo,” the chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh. “You’d never fit. The one you have belonged to the woman who used to live here. Madame Lépine.”

He managed a weak smile. “Well, this is a first, then. I’ve not had the occasion to wear a nightgown at all.” He shifted a little. “That explains why the arms are tight and it stops a foot too short for me.”

“It was all I had.”

Silence fell after those words, and Harry looked around, obviously taking in the small house and the worn furnishings.

His gaze returned to her face. “What is going on, Willow? Why are you here? Does Sir Hawthorn know you’re here?”

Her chin rose. “Both my parents are aware of my situation, Harry. I spent most of December in this house, staying past Christmas, until Madame passed away.”

“I’m sorry...” he began. “Wait. Lépine.” His expression changed a little, and suddenly Willow realised she had no idea at all what he was thinking.

“Did you know Madame?”

“Wasn’t she your French tutor at some point? You and Holly took lessons from her, I believe.”

“We did,” nodded Willow. “I encountered her while returning to Forest Grange, right after she’d been in an unpleasant accident. She had no one.” A ragged breath made its way past her lips. “And she had been badly injured. I couldn’t leave her alone.”

“So you stayed here?”

“I did. With my parents’ full support, even though I was sad to miss Christmas with my family.”

“And you nursed Madame?”

“To the best of my ability, yes. Although, to be quite honest, it was more a matter of keeping her comfortable than anything else.”

Silence fell for a few moments, as Willow blinked away tears. “She passed peacefully. And the villagers were kind enough to arrange for a funeral. She rests now in the graveyard overlooking the sea.”

Harry was silent, his eyes on her face, intense and unblinking. “A tragedy indeed.”

“Yes.”

“Which leads to a question. Why are you still here, Willow?”

She gestured at the plate of bread and a pat of butter on the table. “Do you think you could manage to eat a few bites? It would be wonderful if you could, since you need to start regaining your strength.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, then smiled. “I will make a bargain with you. I will try to eat if you tell me what’s going on here.”

“There’s nothing going on,” she replied immediately, avoiding his gaze by buttering the bread.

“I know that expression,” he chuckled. “Something is definitely going on.”

For a few moments, he glanced around the room. “This is a tidy little house. I suppose cottage would suit it better.” He paused. “I have seen many like this, and they offer everything a small family would need in the way of comfort and protection.”

“Yes.” She was unsure of where his thoughts were leading.

“But you are not a family. In fact, you appear to be living here quite alone.” He paused. “Except for me.”

Willow cleared her throat. “That is, in essence, correct.”

He tilted his head to one side, and for a moment the flames from the fire danced in his green eyes, giving him a somewhat devilish appearance.

“So, tell me, dear girl, are we in the midst of a shocking scandal? You, me, and these four walls?”

“Not at all,” she sighed.

“Explain,” he ordered.

“Well...I was caught by surprise when you arrived, unconscious and clearly very ill. I did the only thing I could think of on the spur of the moment.”

He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“I told everyone you were my husband.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:43 am*

### In Which a Mystery Reveals Itself

“You did what?”

Harry managed to keep his voice relatively calm, although his brain felt as if it was on the verge of erupting like a volcano.

“Well, I should think it’s obvious.”

Willow’s chin went up, in that particular way that all the Trease women seemed to have. If the matter under discussion hadn’t been so serious, he might have grinned, but as he was still reeling from her revelation, he let it pass.

“Explain to me, if you would be so kind,” he breathed slowly, “how it is that you, a young woman of good birth and excellent family, should do something so bloody stupid as to risk your reputation by claiming to be my wife?” He blew out an angry breath. “For God’s sake, woman. Have you no sense at all?”

She glared at him. “It was either that, or let you die.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“I am not.” She rose and began to pace. “Madam had gone, but she asked me to promise her something before she died.”

“What did she ask?”



“She asked that I stay here until he arrived. Only then could I leave, and I would know when the time was right.”

“Well, that sounds utterly ridiculous...” he began.

“I know,” Willow continued. “And I’m still not sure exactly what or who she meant by it. I went through what few papers Madame had left, but there was no clue whatsoever as to the meaning of her request.”

“I see.”

“So, when an injured man was dumped at my doorstep, unconscious and clearly quite ill, I had no choice but to take him in. He turned out to be you.” She spun on her heel and returned to the table, sitting down forcefully. “Mrs Smithers, a wonderful woman who lives next door, saw the trouble I was in and has been helping ever since.” Her shoulders sagged. “What else could I say, Harry? You were lying there on the floor, and I truly had no idea if you were still alive. When she tapped on the door and offered her assistance, I had to accept. And the only thing it occurred to me to say was that you were my husband.”

“I see,” he said again, watching her face.

“I spun a neat tale about you having been travelling on business and professed my ignorance as to what had happened to your horse. And it all worked.”

Harry watched as she poured tea, noting the tiny tremor of her hands as the kettle clinked against the china mugs.

Pushing one across the table, she met his gaze at last. “My hope is that this...this...pretense will go no further than Little Witham. I see no reason why it should. And once you are recovered and on your way, I shall remain here for a little

while longer, announce that you have left on business, and that I will be able to join you once I've sold this house."

"Ah." He reached out for the mug and cradled it in his hands, staring now at the fire, his thoughts turning over what he'd been told. "You would sell, then? Or wait until this mysterious person arrives?"

"I cannot live here forever, Harry. Although this place has its charms, I miss Forest Grange and my family. Ashe and Florinda are due to have a baby soon, Cherry is married, and Holly announced her engagement just before Christmas." She sighed. "The family is doing what families do...marrying, settling into their own lives. When I do go home, it may well be to an empty house."

He managed a chuckle. "That will not happen, Willow. Your parents will always have family there, and it will always be a home to you all. Although 'tis good to hear that your brother and sisters are happily settled."

"You've been away for quite some time, but you must know you're a part of the Trease family, don't you?"

"After they learn what you've done, dear girl, I'm likely to be thrown out on my ear."

"Don't be stupid." She shot him an angry glare. "How will they know?"

"There's always someone who will discover something, some hint or whisper of impropriety. Someone's aunt or cousin who lives nearby and heard a rumour, and passed it to her third cousin twice removed who happens to be close to the young man walking out with Lady Jersey's seamstress..." He stared at her. "The name Trease is not unknown in London, Willow. And you know as well as I that there is always a thirst for the new and the scandalous."

“I don’t care.” She stared back at him. “Since my other option was to let you die, I think I made the right choice, even if I have to spend the rest of my life hidden away in a nunnery.”

Harry dropped his head and laughed, weakly, but with humour. “A bit Shakespearean, dear girl.”

“Oh be quiet and drink your tea. Eat something too.”

Obedying her command, he picked up some bread and butter, then took a bite, letting his gaze roam around the room as he did so. He was warm, felt almost human despite his blasted ankle, and in a way, strangely comfortable.

“Tell me about your Madame Lépine. She had an interest in art, apparently.” He narrowed his eyes at an impressive painting over the fireplace. A large canvas depicting ships, some with sails fully hoisted, against a turbulent sky. One looked as if it was firing a cannon, but perhaps it was a salute, since there was no hint of a battle.

“She was a wonderful lady,” Willow answered his question. “A splendid tutor, and someone who made sure that the lessons were interesting. She was very knowledgeable about many things, an astute politician, according to Papa, who had many lively discussions with her, and someone who—I believe—shared his distaste for Napoleon.” She shrugged. “How right she was.”

“Do you know who did that painting?” A casual question, no more, since Harry did not want to discuss the situation in France with Willow. It was too terrible for her tender ears.

“I believe it was a Dutch painter. Hendrik somebody or other.” She sipped her tea, unaware that Harry had stilled at the name. “Wait, I have it. Hendrik VanDerVries.

You can see his name scrawled in the lower corner, but it's barely legible. Madame told me who he was. A friend of her family from a long time ago, I believe."

"Ahh."

"You know his work?"

"No. No, I don't. But I will say I find it most pleasing." His thoughts whirled. "Willow? When do you think I'll be able to return home?"

She looked at him, her expression one of puzzlement at his rapid change of topic. "I...I would think you might be fit to travel within a few days if your ankle heals adequately. A carriage, of course. No riding for a while."

"I see."

"I shall have to stay here. I will honour my promise to Madame."

"There will be no need for that, dear girl."

"But..."

"Willow, you have kept your word." His voice was calm and steady. "It's time for you to leave."

"Wait. You mean..." Her face showed every thought that raced across her mind. "You? You are the person Madame was waiting for?"

He had no other choice but to tell her the truth. "Yes."

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Willow felt her jaw drop for a few moments, then collected herself and snapped it shut.

“I...” Words failed her as she struggled to understand the implications of his statement, whatever they were.

“It’s all right,” he soothed. “And it’s a very long story, so...” he winced a little. “If you don’t mind, I think I’d like to rest a bit more before we have that conversation.”

He was indeed pale, and she rose without thinking about it, going to place her hand on his forehead. “Well, no fever, thank God. But you do need to get your strength back.”

“I will, I’m sure.” He managed to stand, using the table for stability, and then accepted her shoulder, allowing her to support his slow limping progress back to bed.

She remained silent until he was tucked up once more.

“This is a mess, isn’t it?” She stared at him, trying to read his expression. “I can’t begin to imagine what sort of business you might have had with Madame, Harry. And now I’ve put you in a difficult position with my subterfuge. I am so sorry...”

He reached out and took her hand firmly. “Stop. We will find a solution. Trust me.” He sighed and let her go, wearily sinking back onto the bed. “But I must get back on my feet first.”

“I know. And now you’re well enough to get out of bed, we’ll work on that.” She straightened his pillow. “Tomorrow.”

Harry sighed. “What is the number of this house, Willow?”

She blinked. “Seven. It’s number seven, Sea Lane.”

To her surprise, he managed a weak grin. “Of course it is.” He turned his head toward her and sighed. “Life is very strange sometimes.”

She wholeheartedly agreed with that sentiment but simply nodded. “Go to sleep.”

“All right.”

Within a minute or so, his eyes had closed, and his breathing eased into a steady rhythm. She’d become accustomed to the sound, to his occasional snoring, and found it comforting. More so now that he was clearly on the road to recovery.

She left his room, partially closing the door, and went to stoke up the fire and finish her tea. The bread and butter would serve her as a meal for the night, since she wasn’t very hungry. Her mind wandered to food, and she planned a larger breakfast than usual; eggs, of which she still had several, perhaps some bacon—if he could eat it—would do him good...

Running through her habitual activities, tidying up dishes, putting things ready for the morning, Willow’s mind tried to make sense out of Harry’s dramatic announcement.

Obviously, there must have been some connection between him and Madame.

Or, given his odd question about the house number, perhaps he’d been told to find this building, rather than Madame herself?

Her tenure here in this place had been...emotional, to say the least. There’d barely been chance for her to recover from losing Madame before Harry arrived so unceremoniously. Tonight, she would take some time to breathe; her patient was on the road to recovery, the house business was settled, and all she had to do was put the

dishes away. Then she could think.

Her book was awaiting her by the fire, the one she'd begun a few days ago. A lovely tale that had intrigued her from the very beginning. But as she crossed to her chair, she realised she'd done little to clean out the few things that Madame had left.

The books she'd take with her, if she could. There weren't many, but they carried memories, and she felt responsible for them. The bookshelves themselves were simple, and now mostly empty. One or two small pottery pieces, for flowers perhaps, and an empty trinket box.

The only drawer that still contained anything was the one Madame had used to store her bills and other important paperwork. The deed to the house, now in Willow's name, was there. There were a few other sheets, some in their own leather folders. Perhaps it was time to take a closer look and see if any might be relevant to Harry's mysterious revelation.

Settling in her chair, the fire happily warming her toes, Willow put the pile of papers she'd retrieved on the table beside her and began to review them, wondering if she could have missed anything.

Most were routine.

A list of neighbours and comments about them, written in French. Probably quite wise, chuckled Willow as she read the sometimes-pithy observations. Madame had missed nothing from her spot on the wharf.

Mr Hardesty was, according to her, courting Mistress Donegan. And the lady was interested enough to allow him an overnight visit or two.

Well, well. Willow smiled in amusement. Since neither would see sixty again, it

probably wouldn't cause too much of a scandal.

Other notes marked the comings and goings of shipping. Madame had indeed enjoyed the sight of ships of all sizes sailing past her window, and she had encouraged Willow to join her in inventing cargoes and home ports, making a delightful game of it. They'd passed more than a few afternoons that way.

Most of the rest of the papers were accounts, bills paid, services received and also paid. John the Woodsman had made a recent delivery, which accounted for the healthy pile of logs by the back door. And he had been paid too.

Madame had been efficient, and financially responsible. Probably why she had been held in esteem by the villagers. Anyone who honoured their bills on time and in full...well, nobody cared where she was from. She was a good neighbour and customer. That was enough.

There was one small, folded card, and to Willow's delight, it contained a dried flower and a few scrawled words.

“Je t'aime pour toujours,” she read aloud. “I love you forever.”

What a tale must lie within that sentiment. Willow sighed, sad that she'd never know the story behind them, but pleased that someone had loved Madame at some point in her life.

The last envelope lay on the table, and as she reached for it a soft snore sounded from the bedroom. Satisfied that her charge was sleeping, she unfolded the paper and began to read the contents.

Puzzled, she held it up closer to the light.



“The 4th, 75 and more. Over 100 times four.”

And another line...

“Browns, one white, over 50 times four.”

Several more lines like these had Willow frowning, as did more notes that were just letters and numbers in a confusion of nonsense.

And the bottom line “C will lk 4 VDV. Approve.”

Was it a puzzle, perhaps? Had Madame idly scribbled a shopping list in terms known only to herself? Browns could be eggs, as could whites. But by no means of the imagination could Willow see anyone buying up two hundred eggs.

She put the paper carefully back in its little folder, then rested her head against the chair and stared into the fire, letting her mind roam freely over the strange words. Nothing fit, nothing matched anything she could put her finger on.

Restless now, she rose and began to put out the candles, knowing she had to get some sleep in case Harry woke and found himself worse. Of course, she prayed this would not happen, but one could never be certain when it came the human body.

Her gaze caught the painting he'd admired, and she neared it, appreciating the fine brushstrokes that gave movement and life to the sailing ship cresting the waves.

Perhaps Mr VanDerVries had been on a wharf like this one...

She stilled. VanDerVries.

VDV.

Rushing back to the note, she unfolded it and read it again. “C will lk 4 VDV. Approve.”

VDV. Could it be? It would be a very strong coincidence...and the C...

Good God. C for Chalmers.

Harry had come here and found that painting. He wasn't here by accident—he was here on purpose.

But why?

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

### In Which the Happily Unmarried Husband meets his Neighbour

Harry awoke early, just as the day was dawning, driven by a need to relieve himself.

“That damn tea,” he muttered, pushing back the linens. But it was a passing comment, rather than a complaint. This was the first morning he’d felt almost human. Sitting on the side of the bed, he tested his body, pleased to find that everything seemed to be working, if a bit weakly. His ankle was sore, and he was somewhat unwilling to place his full weight on it, but he could manage a respectable limp that got him to where he needed to be, and back again.

His clothes were neatly folded on top of the small bureau, clean and ready for him.

Willow, he thought, was indeed a rather well-organised “wife”.

The thought of dressing himself was enervating, but he knew damn well he was in serious need of a bath, so he crept from his room, using the cane that stood in readiness by the door.

Many of these houses lacked the space for an indoor bath but made up for it with a little outside nook where a shower of cold water would serve as a replacement.

As silently as possible, he slithered through the living room, where Willow slept curled up on the small sofa. The blankets tucked up beneath her chin, and her loosened hair, made her look like a child slumbering peacefully. She must be exhausted, he realised. Nursing a grown man wasn’t an easy chore, even with assistance.

But she'd done it, managed everything, and got him back on his feet.

He was alive, in all probability, thanks to her care. It was a debt he'd never be able to repay, and he knew it. Someday, he swore to himself, someday he'd be able to help her in return. Whatever she might need, he'd provide without question.

Reaching the kitchen without making a sound, he grabbed a cloth and cautiously lifted the bar across the door. There was a brief hit of cold air that made his toes curl, but then he was out, silently latching the door behind him.

And there was the little open nook. He prayed the water wasn't frozen in the pipe leading up to it. A chain pull hung loosely, and—shivering now—he stripped off his nightrobe and stepped inside.

How he managed not to scream when the ice-cold stream hit his head, he didn't know. But he'd always been able to tough things out, even when Ashe Trease had thrown him, naked, into a snowbank when they were young.

This was a horribly similar experience, but the refreshing, if brief, moments beneath the clean water made him feel human once more, and a brisk rubdown with the cloth finished the job.

He struggled back into his nightgown, blessing the thick cotton, and retraced his footsteps, closing the kitchen door behind him, and locking it.

He hoped Willow was still sleeping. He'd tell her about his impromptu bath, but since it would be a fait accompli, he might be able to avoid a scolding.

Walking back toward the living room, he eased the door open, only to stop short as he found himself confronted by an obviously angry young woman with her hands firmly on her hips.

“What the devil do you think you’re doing?”

His lips twitched. “God, you’re like your mother when you do that.” He grinned. “Lady Hazel is an amazing woman, of course, but truthfully, she could scare the life out of all of us from time to time.”

“And deservedly so,” snapped Willow. “Do you understand the stupid risk you took? If you had fallen and I’d not awoken yet...you’d have frozen to death out there or at least re-injured your ankle. How could you do something so foolish?”

“I needed to wash.” He shrugged. “I smelled like a goat, and that bothered me.”

“A goat is smarter than you,” she fired back. “A goat wouldn’t risk re-injuring his ankle just to get a wash, which you could have had indoors quite well, had you waited for me to wake up and get some water heated.”

He straightened. “Did it occur to you that I might have wanted to begin doing things for myself and not depend on you so much? To take the burden off your shoulders?” He frowned, taking a step closer. “You have, in all likelihood, saved my life, Willow. What kind of bounder would I be if I let you carry on waiting on me, hand and foot, when I should be starting to look after myself?”

“A sensible one.” She refused to retreat. “And a thoughtful person would at least have let me know you wanted a damn bath.”

“So that you could spend an hour heating water, dragging whatever tub might be around here into the living room, filling it, and then probably scrubbing my blasted back for me, as if I was a helpless twelve-year-old?”

“Yes, if that’s what it took.” Her chin went up.

They stared at each other, inches apart, and Harry couldn't help his gaze drifting to those ripe and lovely lips.

His body heated, reminding him that he was alive, male, and standing in front of a beautiful woman who was also clad in a nightgown.

"Willow," he breathed.

"I..." Colour rushed into her cheeks as she gazed into his eyes.

"I'm sorry." He raised a hand and touched her chin. "I won't do it again."

"I'm sorry too," she sighed. "I would probably have felt the same, had our roles been reversed."

It was a wrench, but he stepped back, widening the distance between them. "I will dress myself today..." he held up his hand, "and I promise to call you if I can't manage."

She nodded. "All right. Your clothes are..."

"I know, I saw them. Thank you." He tilted his head toward the bedroom. "We will have to leave as soon as we can, so it's time we find out what I am capable of, in the way of moving around, and possibly travelling."

"If you say so," Willow sighed. "I'll make breakfast. Decisions like these are best made on a full stomach."

Turning away, she walked to the stove, and he returned to his room, determined to dress himself in real clothes. He had a duty, and it was urgent. Yet there was something wistful in the realisation that this little sojourn, just the two of them in a

small cottage by the sea, was coming to an end.

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“This is the best breakfast I can recall having,” said Harry, leaning back in his chair. “I didn’t know you could cook, Willow.” He picked up his cup and sipped appreciatively.

“Why would you?” she answered, keeping her voice level and calm. “I can manage simple dishes. Mama insisted that we all learn, even Ashe. She said one never knew when such a skill might come in handy.”

“She was right,” he nodded. “And the tea is lovely, too. Thank you.”

She placed her own cup carefully on its saucer, and then rested her arms on the table, leaning forward a little. “So you are the man that Madame was waiting for. The painting...some sort of code, was it? The VDV to confirm you had the right place?”

He blinked. “You surprise me.”

“Why? Because I’m a woman and should be busily embroidering and simpering at eligible gentlemen?” Her snort was emphatic.

“Not at all,” he replied, a little grin curving his lips. “You are pure Trease, my dear. You have all the intelligence of your family, which is considerable. Every one of you is a damn sight smarter than you’d like people to think.”

“Since that is your opinion, and one with which I cannot but agree, you’ll have no difficulty explaining your current situation to me, will you?”

He rolled his eyes and sighed, then pushed his cup and saucer aside as he, too, leaned

his forearms on the table and met her gaze.

“Yes, this was indeed the house I was referred to after my return from France.”

She swallowed, expecting as much, but still concerned. “You were there? In the fighting?”

He shook his head. “No, not this time.” He paused. “There have been others, but they have no bearing on this conversation or this situation.”

“I see.” She didn’t, but could wait for an explanation.

“My trips to France have been in conjunction with the Duke’s need for cavalry horses.”

The Duke. Wellington ...

Willow managed not to gasp, but it was a close thing. “You’ve been provisioning the Duke himself?”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “You surprise me. Yes, that is exactly what I was doing.”

“But...”

She had so many questions that her mind blanked for a moment, unable to organise them sufficiently for speech.

“I’ve been across the channel several times on this matter,” he continued, “and I’m happy to think that my expertise has been of some use to our forces.”

“Did you buy horses here and transport them?”



“God no. That’s a job for the cavalry and its associated branches. That business is complicated and lengthy.” He shook his head. “I was asked to assess the worthiness of the stock Wellington was offered there, in France. Not everyone there is fully supporting the Emperor’s efforts to conquer the world, especially when their loved ones don’t come home.”

“I can understand that.”

“Anyway, it was decided that such business would be best accomplished quietly and without fanfare. Since I had acquired a reputation for knowing my horses, and could travel wherever I wanted on a whim, I was the perfect candidate to advise and recommend reliable beasts.”

“Hmm.”

“It makes sense,” he said, tilting his head to one side. “Horses are a necessary part of life, from the farm to the battlefield.”

“Oh yes,” she nodded, “it does indeed make perfect sense. Actually, it makes a little too much sense, Harry.”

His face was an amusing blend of puzzlement and curiosity. But Willow had studied him too closely for too many years to be diverted by it.

“You just regaled me with a smooth and sensible tale. And I’m sure there is enough truth in it for it to be accepted by most people. However, I am not most people.” She looked him straight in the eye. “You were spying, Harry Chalmers. Underneath the masquerade of horse trading, you were spying.”

Harry blinked and opened his mouth, but before he could respond, the sound of a loud knock on the front door made them both jump.

Willow sighed. “A moment. We will get back to this, you can be sure.”

Walking out of the kitchen to answer the door, she didn’t notice Harry’s face slip into a serious expression.

But she did see the exasperation that replaced it as she walked back into the room.

“Harry, dear, this is the wonderful lady who has saved your life.” She turned to the large, smiling woman standing behind her. “This is Mrs Smithers, who lives next door. Without her help, I doubt we’d be breakfasting this morning.”

He stood and walked to her. “Mrs Smithers. Ma’am. Words are insufficient to express the breadth of my gratitude.” He took her hand and bowed over it, raising it to his lips and dropping a light kiss on her knuckles.

“Oh my,” she blushed and giggled like a schoolgirl.

Willow rolled her eyes.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

### In Which Our Unmarried Couple Attempts to Appear Married

There was no doubt in Harry's mind that Mrs Smithers truly did have a heart of gold.

Certainly, she had it charmingly concealed within an abundance of femininity, and he easily believed that she could have carried him into the house single-handed, but her sweet affection for Willow was evident, as was her joy in seeing him well on his way to recovery.

"You must let me see your ankle, Mr Chalmers. I insist now, no evasion. 'Twas a serious sprain and I will not rest easy until I reassure myself that it is truly on the mend."

Since she was advancing on him with all the energetic enthusiasm of a team of healthy cart horses, he decided it was wisest to obey before she ran him over.

"Right then, let's see that foot."

"I do believe it is doing very well, Mrs Smithers," said Willow with a smile. "Your poultices have reduced the swelling to almost nothing, and even the bruising is fading."

"Hmm."

Harry sat and extended his leg, glad that he wasn't wearing boots, but loose slippers that Willow had found for him somewhere.

She watched the two of them. “I’ll make us a fresh pot of tea.”

“That would be lovely, dear,” replied Mrs Smithers, as she gently raised Harry’s foot and placed it on her knee.

To his surprise, she was quite thorough in her examination, bending his toes a little, moving it this way and that, and noting the moments when he managed to restrain a slight gasp of pain.

Finally, after several minutes of sensations that varied from pleasant to a bit uncomfortable, she put his foot back into his slipper and down to the floor.

“Well, that’s good then,” she said, relaxing with a satisfied smile.

Willow returned with the teapot and produced cups. “He is healing, isn’t he?”

“Yes, indeed. And more quickly than I’d expected, to be honest with you, dear.”

“It must be the magic of your tender attentions, Mrs Smithers,” Harry gave her his most charming smile.

“And the loving hands of your wife, too, young man.” She glanced pointedly at Willow. “You are fortunate indeed to have been in the care of this sweet girl. I’d never have expected one such as she to reveal such a strong desire to nurse anyone the way she did.”

“Now, really, you know all I had to do was follow your instructions...”

He was amused to see Willow’s cheeks colour at the compliments.

“I’m sure being told what to do helped. But doing it, well, that was another matter.”

Mrs Smithers turned to Harry. “Your wife bore the burden of ensuring your fever didn’t take a serious toll, lad. I’m not certain we’d be here now were it not for her care, day and night, through all those hours when you tossed and turned and shivered, or roasted...yes, you were in a sorry state indeed.”

“I am well aware that I am blessed with this woman, Ma’am. You need have no doubt on that score.” He beckoned to Willow. “I could not be happier to know that I was in such good hands, but I’m also saddened that I had to put her through such an experience.”

Mrs Smithers nodded and smiled as Willow tentatively accepted Harry’s hand and stood at his side.

“I have to suppose you were on the continent then,” she sighed. “Them nasty fevers seem to be even nastier when they’re brought over the channel.”

“Indeed, Ma’am, you’re quite right. There are more than a few folks suffering from a variety of ailments this winter. A sad thing.”

“Damned war,” she muttered. “Too many lads won’t be coming home before it’s over, mark my words.”

Harry felt Willow’s hand squeeze his and glanced up at her. “I have to admit I’m very relieved that he’s back with me,” she said quietly.

He watched her face, wondering at the emotions he could see in her eyes. “You couldn’t be any happier than I, my dearest.”

Mrs Smithers laughed. “Oh, there now, lad. You’ve made your wife blush.” She stood and straightened her skirts. “You two have not been married long, I’ll wager?”

“Er...”

“A mere few months,” Harry said, smoothly. “And I’m looking forward to many years of happiness.”

“Your tea...” Willow motioned at the table. “Come and have it before it gets cold.”

“Of course, dear. You’re such a kind girl.” Mrs Smithers settled her ample self on one of the chairs that Harry could have sworn let out a slight groan.

“Now that we’re all sitting up and comfortable, perhaps you could tell me how you two met? I haven’t wanted to press your lovely wife about such matters with you so sick, Mr Chalmers.”

“How kind you are,” he smiled. “When did we meet?” He glanced at Willow, noting the slight look of panic that crossed her face. “Oh goodness...years ago, wasn’t it? And quite naturally, as a matter of fact. Her parents’ estate and mine border each other.”

Harry sipped tea. And it was, indeed, damned good tea. “So you could say that our families were familiar with each other for many years before we arrived. Of course, not all of us were around at the same time, and as you probably can guess, the lads spent more time with each other, that with their sisters...”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” she laughed.

Willow nodded, a nervous smile on her lips, but apparently content to let her “husband” weave the story of their meeting.

“So our lives intersected more often than might otherwise have been expected, and that gave me the chance to watch Willow grow and bloom into the wonderful woman

she is today.”

“Um...Harry? I think you might still have a touch of fever...” Willow was staring at him, wide-eyed.

“Ahh, newlyweds. And escaping the family for a nice long holiday together down here on the coast, I would guess. Madame Lépine would have been so happy to have hosted the two of you, although I’ll admit I think this house is a bit snug for a honeymoon.” Mrs Smithers shook her head and finished her tea. “Of course, close quarters aren’t a problem, are they?”

Harry chuckled. “Indeed not, Ma’am.”

Willow blushed. Again.

“Well, I must be off and leave you two sweet things to enjoy your married life.” She stood. “Thank you for the tea, my dear. And ’tis fine to see you up and about, lad.” She paused at the doorway. “Now that you’re mending, I have to guess you’ll both be on your way soon?”

“I...” Harry paused, glancing at Willow.

She nodded. “We will, Mrs Smithers. Our families will grow anxious should we delay here for too long. And as you say, my...my husband’s ankle is improving daily. I’ll be sending a message home, and they’ll have a travelling carriage on its way to us as soon as they can, so we can make the journey without any difficulties.”

“As it should be,” she replied approvingly. “Remember, I’m next door if you need anything, and you’d best pop in and say goodbye before you leave...”

“We wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise,” smiled Harry. “And thank you again for all

your kindnesses, both to me and to my wife.”

Once more, he kissed her hand, making her chuckle. “Oh give over, lad. Save your kisses for the one who needs ‘em.” She tipped her head at Willow. “Enjoy your day.”

“We will,” Harry slipped an arm around Willow’s waist as they stood at the door watching Mrs Smithers make her way down the slippery cobblestones.

“She’s going to turn and look at us, you know,” he whispered.

Willow jumped a little as his breath dusted her ear. “I know. She always gives a little wave before going indoors.”

“Well then...” He pulled her close. “We’re newlyweds. Best we act like it.”

“I...”

He stopped her words with his mouth, kissing her tenderly, then more thoroughly, pulling her fully into his arms, and thrilled to find hers lifting to his shoulders and around his neck.

He didn’t know if she’d ever been kissed or not, but he hoped he might be the first. Hesitantly, she opened her parted her lips to him, murmuring low in her throat as his tongue plunged past her lips, tasting her, teasing her.

And before he knew it, Harry Chalmers was doing his very best to wrap himself around her, his arms banding her to his chest while her hands grasped his hair at the back of his head.

God, she tasted like nothing he’d ever imagined, and he couldn’t get enough. Apparently, he wasn’t alone in his delight, since Willow remained pressed against



him, leaning into his embrace, sighing into his mouth with pleasure.

But the cold air crept around both of them, and in a few moments they eased apart, aware that they were in a doorway, clearly visible to the rest of the world, including Mrs Smithers. She must have given up waiting for the kiss to end, since she'd vanished from sight, but there might have been others passing, and Harry wasn't keen on making too much of a stir in Little Witham.

He pushed the door closed as Willow eased herself away from him and cleared her throat.

“Well, that must surely have convinced her, and any passers-by, of our marital status,” she said calmly, walking back into the house. “Now, I think it's time we started to talk about how to get ourselves home, don't you?”

Harry, who was still waiting for his body to stop reacting to the most deliciously sensual kiss he'd ever experienced, just stared at her for a few moments, trying vainly to gather his scattered thoughts.

“Er, yes.”

A poor reply, but the best he could manage at that moment.

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How Willow kept her knees from buckling, she had no idea at all.

She wanted nothing more than to sink into the little couch and curl up quietly while she examined the myriad of sensations that were rattling her bones, her muscles and her brain.

But somehow, she retained her countenance and forced herself to begin clearing away the remains of their breakfast and all the dishes and teacups that went with it.

“Let me help.” Harry walked to the table.

“No, no. I can manage. You must rest.” She managed to look at him without blushing, which was quite a feat, since she had to force her gaze not to linger on the lips that had so recently claimed hers. “We should make our plans for leaving, and you are yet to be fully comfortable on that ankle. So best not to risk setting your recovery back by being silly.”

“Willow,” he began.

“Shush.” She stacked saucers noisily. “There are decisions to be made. We need our heads to be clear.”

And with that determined statement, she walked steadily from the room into the little kitchen, praying that her hands were capable of carrying the dishes without dropping them.

God...what had she done?

Filling a pot with water, she put it on the tiny stove, and waited for it to heat. But this was a casual, everyday chore that required little attention. A good thing, since she had yet to re-surface from the unbelievable pleasures of kissing Harry Chalmers.

“The water’s hot...”

His voice sounded behind her, making her jump and juggle a teacup. “Good heavens, don’t creep up on me like that, Harry,” she scolded. “Make yourself useful if you must, and pour the hot water into the bowl for me?”

He did as he was told, ensuring that the hot and the cold blended thoroughly. “There. Now where’s your soap?”

“No.” She put her hands on her hips and faced him. Heavens above, she wanted to throw herself into his arms and demand more kisses, more...something...

“No what?” He raised his chin and stared at her.

“Um...no, you’re not doing the dishes. Didn’t we just agree you should rest your ankle?”

“You agreed that, not I.”

She sighed. “All right. Here.” She showed him cloths and the little piece of soap. “I’ll dry them then.”

They worked in silence for a few moments, the splash of the water in the bowl and the clink of china the only sounds.

“We should talk, Willow.”

“Indeed we should. I have many questions about this entire matter. Madame Lépine, your business with her, why here in Little Witham? And most of all, what are you, Harry?”

He finished the last cup, carefully placed it on the board next to the bowl, and then turned to her.

“Right now, I’m confused.”

She blinked. “What?”

“I’m confused, Willow. Confused by you.”

“By me?” Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “Why on earth would I confuse you? I’m just me.”

He grinned. “I know you are. But you’re no longer the Willow Trease who would sneak out of the house at dawn with your sister to pick mushrooms. Nor are you the girl who thought nobody noticed when you curled up small in big chair and listened to conversations without making a sound.”

“I...”

“What you are now is a woman. A woman grown.” She saw his throat move as he swallowed. “And a woman I find very attractive. Not to mention the fact that you are also the woman who has probably saved my life.”

She gathered her wits. “That is a somewhat dramatic statement. A sprained ankle is not anything that might have posed a serious threat...”

“No, it’s not. But you took me in and nursed me through not only a bad ankle, but apparently a very rough fever. You let me stay, you made no fuss, nor attracted any attention. And for that, I am eternally grateful. Had you not behaved thus? I might not be alive today.”

A chill washed through her as she stared into his eyes. He was telling the truth—she could feel it in her bones.

“For God’s sake, Harry, who, or should I say what, are you?”

He took a breath. “I’m a courier.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

### In Which the Husband Regrets His Words, and the Wife Remains Determined

I should never have told her.

Harry castigated himself silently as he watched Willow absorb the implications of his dramatic announcement. She'd left the kitchen and dropped into a chair by the fireplace.

He took the one opposite. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I should not have told you that."

She pursed her lips in thought for a minute, and he could almost see the wheels turning in her head. Then she took a breath. "So, as a courier, you would be responsible for taking messages from one place to another?"

"I shouldn't have revealed it."

She managed a little snort of amusement. "No, you probably shouldn't. But it explains a few things."

"It does?"

"Of course." She folded her hands together and met his gaze. "You were delivered here, weren't you? You had Madame's address and somehow you conveyed it to whoever ferried you across the Channel."

He opened his mouth to answer, but she held up a hand.

“Wait...I’m still thinking. You said you were engaged in some sort of horse business with the cavalry. Which, when I think about it, is an ideal occupation for someone taking messages from one place to another. Nobody would ever suspect you were doing anything else.”

He had to appreciate the rapidity with which she put all the pieces together. “Something like that, yes.”

“And now you need to go to...Myrtle Manor? Or London directly?”

“I need to go to London. As soon as possible.”

“Then that is what we shall do.” She glanced at his foot. “It will have to be a carriage though, and that will be a lot slower than if we rode.”

“Er, Willow, I will be going to London. There is no need at all for you to be involved in this business any more than you already are.” He thought for a moment. “The best course of action would be for me to find a carriage somewhere around here and leave at once. You will write to your family, and I know they’d have someone here posthaste.”

“I see.” She raised an eyebrow, giving him a look so much like her mother’s that he wanted to laugh. “No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean just that. No. I am not letting you hare off to town without me. You are still recovering from a serious indisposition, Harry. And then there’s the matter of you being my temporary husband. If you up and leave me so soon, everyone will start talking. You know how small villages are? Would you condemn me to that sort of embarrassment?”

“A little far-fetched, my dear,” he replied, amused.

“But true, nonetheless.”

He sighed. “Willow, I cannot, in good conscience, take you on a trip that might prove to be dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“I have no way of knowing what the current situation is, as far as my mission is concerned. I don’t know if my arrival here was noticed, if anyone has been watching this house, or if word has been passed along to the wrong people that I might have something or know something of value.” He made his gaze as stern as he could. “These are matters I’ve become accustomed to. But it is completely unthinkable for me to allow you to participate, or even travel with me, under these circumstances. I won’t risk you, my dear. In any way.”

Willow stood, straightening her skirts as she did so.

“Well, Harry, that was a delightfully phrased speech. Congratulations. Now I believe I shall start packing, since we’ll be leaving soon. The business of obtaining a carriage has me slightly concerned, because I’m going to assume, from what you’ve told me, that speed will be important.”

She walked to the little bedroom door. “I’ll pack for us both, I think. Madame had some larger valises that should suffice. The journey to London will require one overnight stay, won’t it?”

Suggestions, ideas, solutions—all ran through his mind like lightning, but before he could put any of them into words, she looked at him with a smile that shot a jolt of lust through his body.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “You know you’ll most certainly lose any of the arguments you’re putting together at this moment.”

He dropped his head into his hands and groaned.

“Oh come now, it’s not that bad. Besides, what sort of wife would I be if I let my husband go off on a wild adventure while I stayed here and polished the teapot?”

“You’d be safe, at least,” muttered Harry.

“I’ll be every bit as safe with you,” she shot back. “So the matter is settled, and the subject closed.”

“Having a wife isn’t as much fun as I thought it would be,” he grumbled.

“I heard that.”

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I will not let him leave without me.

Willow’s mind revolved around that thought as she began to organise clothing and search for bags. Practical matters needed to be taken care of—things like the house itself, a message to her parents, and above all, where and how to procure a carriage.

That one would be the most difficult, and something she’d be happy to leave to Harry.

The journey itself wouldn’t be too terrible. She’d arrived at Little Witham in a carriage with no problems, and since it was a small port, there would be occasional conveyances coming and going, transporting passengers to and from boats in the



harbour. Perhaps they could prevail upon one of the drivers to take them north to London.

But it was a long trip, and as she'd already realised, an overnight stay would be necessary. Did Madame have a map amongst her papers, she wondered?

"Harry..."

"Yes?"

"Could you check in the bureau and see if there's a map there? It would help us choose our quickest route to London..."

A sort of snarling mumble was the response, and Willow chuckled to herself. If he thought he was going to drop her off anywhere, like a parcel to be delivered, he had better disabuse himself of that notion immediately.

He was hers.

Her hands stilled as the unexpected realisation popped into her head.

He was hers, and had been for so long she had no idea when it might have begun. But there it was. The hero-worship she'd experienced as a child had given way to a much deeper emotion as she'd grown into womanhood.

Harry's occasional visits to Forest Grange had become times of delight for her, and she vaguely accepted that she had a strong fondness for his company. But it wasn't until he'd arrived here, in Madame's little house, that the sense of possession had grown from a tiny seed to a full-blown commitment.

She'd nursed him. Cared for his injuries and eased his fevers. She'd seen his body, a

necessary part of nursing a sick man. And she'd seen his heart in his eyes as he'd come to accept her ministrations.

Then he'd kissed her.

And that put the seal on the entire business. They belonged together without question. Whether he knew it or not, didn't concern her, because there was time yet for him to come to the same conclusion. And a little knowing smile curved her lips as she folded her nightgown. Perhaps there might be chance for more kisses. And maybe she would touch his bare skin again, but this time he'd be awake and perhaps returning the favour...

Her pulse raced at the thought, and she had to pause for a moment to catch her breath.

"Are you all right?" Harry was in the doorway with a paper.

"Uh, yes, of course." She put the folded nightgown into a valise. "Almost done with my things. I'll start on yours next. You have very little, so it won't take long."

"My boots, Willow. Where are my boots? I'm going to need at least one of them, and hopefully both, if I can squeeze my ankle into it." He looked down. "It really seems to be much recovered. Hardly any swelling at all."

"Under the bed," she replied. "When the room is this small, one has to make practical decisions."

He smiled, nodded, and bent down, leaning on the bed, and grunting a bit as he extricated his footwear from the darkness beneath the mattress.

"Got 'em."

“It should only take me another twenty minutes or so in here.” She thought for a moment. “You know, I think I’ll put our foodstuffs into a basket and give them to Mrs Smithers. I won’t leave food here, since we don’t know what will happen to this house, and with nobody residing here for a while, whatever was here would go off.”

Harry nodded. “Why don’t you do that while I finish up here? I can fold the few things I have, and most everything I’m going to be wearing, anyway.”

“All right. The nightshirt is there, and there are some spare socks in the top drawer of the bureau.”

Harry looked at her, his eyebrow raised in question.

“Mrs Smithers, bless her. Apparently, the dear departed Mr Smithers’ clothing was still in her possession.”

“Obviously, he didn’t wear a nightshirt,” commented Harry, holding up the gown he’d worn during his illness.

Willow had to laugh. “A valid point. We could probably leave that here.”

“I agree.” He folded it neatly and put it in the drawer, then removed the socks and put them in the bag.

She blinked, realising she was staring at his hands.

“I...I’ll go and see to the basket of food.”

“All right.”

Scurrying from the room into the kitchen, she busied herself with her task, putting

bread and her little pot of butter carefully into a basket, along with the other meagre supplies she'd accumulated. It didn't take long, so she slipped her cloak over her shoulders and called to Harry.

"I'm going to take the basket to Mrs Smithers. I shouldn't be more than a moment or two."

Harry emerged with their valises. "I think I'm about done here."

Before they could say any more, there was a firm knock on the front door. Willow opened it and smiled as she saw Mrs Smithers standing there.

"What a wonderful coincidence, Ma'am. I was just about to bring you this basket of food. Since we don't know how long we'll be away, we thought you could make use of it?"

"How kind," beamed the older woman. "And in return, I have a surprise for the both of you..."

"You do?" Willow stared at her in astonishment as Harry came to her side.

"I do indeed." She took a breath. "I've found you a carriage."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

### In Which Our Unmarried Couple Hurriedly Depart the Coast for London

Harry settled himself into the carriage in the seat opposite Willow. The carriage was not new, that was certain, and the cushions could have used extra padding, but it was serviceable, the driver seemed to know his way, and it was—in Harry’s opinion—a gift from the gods.

Or goddesses, if one were inclined to endow Mrs Smithers with those attributes.

“We should make good time,” Willow said, grasping the handle nearest to her as the rutted roads made their presence known.

“I hope so,” answered Harry. “But not unless these roads get better.” He looked out the window, seeing little but wet hedgerows.

“At least we’re on our way. And in relative comfort, too.” She sighed. “Mrs Smithers has a good heart. I do, however, have to wonder why she had a town-coach at hand. She said it belongs to friends who had arrived a day or so ago, and that it had to go back to town anyway, so why not take us with it?”

“It seems plausible?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Willow leaned back and shifted a little in an effort to get more comfortable. “I expect that you, with your talk of spies and such things, has set my mind on a slightly different course.”

He grinned. “You can’t imagine Mrs Smithers being an agent for a foreign power?”

“Lord, no,” she laughed back. “And one should never look a gift horse in the mouth. So I will simply remind myself to write to her when we arrive and thank her again. After all, she is going to look after the house, as well as helping us travel.”

“A very good-natured lady, I would say.”

Willow nodded. “Although slightly overpowering.”

“I can agree with that.”

Silence fell for a little while, broken only by the sound of the horses’ hooves, and the occasional thud and rattle as they hit potholes and puddles.

He closed his eyes for a few moments, leaning his head back and letting his thoughts flow through his mind as they willed. There was much to do when he reached London.

First and foremost, he had to pay a visit to a quiet house just on the outskirts of St. James Square. Discreetly tucked into a row of identical houses, few knew of the activities that took place behind its quite ordinary frontage, or the decisions made behind those unremarkable bow windows.

Inside, he would meet with several gentlemen, share a brandy, and sit around a table in front of the fire, just as one would expect of a party of friends.

Except that these men were more than just casual acquaintances, and they would expect more from Harry than the social niceties.

He sighed. He had everything he needed, all the information required, and a little more. He hoped it would be enough.

“You are quite sombre. Is anything troubling you?” Willow was watching him, her head tipped slightly to one side.

He managed a smile. “I apologise. I am dreadful company.”

She snorted. “Harry, you’ve been dreadful company for quite some time. Now that you’re recovered, however, I would hope for a little livelier conversation?”

“Very well.” He straightened a little in his seat. “How is your family, Miss Trease?”

She sighed. “You probably need to practice saying Mrs Chalmers, don’t you think?”

“Willow, you know that was a mere pretence. We cannot...”

“We have to.” Her voice was firm as she interrupted him. “The most important thing right now is to get you to your destination in London. Would you not agree?”

“Of course.” She had him there.

“And, since we’ve established our marital status on the coast, it would be sheer folly to try to un-establish it as soon as we start inland.”

“That argument is as full of holes as a fisherman’s net, Willow, and you know it.”

“Sometimes, the best pretences are established for the most important reasons.” She eyed him cautiously. “You’ve given me to understand that arriving at wherever it is we’re going in town is of the utmost importance, to the exclusion of everything else. Including a possible diversion from this journey to dispose of me back at Forest Grange.”

Harry gritted his teeth. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Oh good grief.” She threw up her hands. “The Lord spare me from absurdly thick-headed men.”

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They made fairly good time for the first part of the journey, given the state of the roads. Waterlogged and sometimes partially blocked by fallen branches, they showed the results of the winter storms that had ripped through the forests.

Harry had decided to make their first stop at a small posting house, where they could stretch their legs, give the horses a rest, and perhaps have something to eat. It sounded quite sensible to Willow, so she looked out the window, busy with her own thoughts.

Prime amongst which was the matter of their supposed ‘marriage’.

It had been a most convenient charade, of course. She’d been able to take care of her husband, whereas if the truth had come to light? She’d have been shunned as a fallen woman.

How stupid people were.

Although she’d not spent time in London, or attended crowded balls and elegant soirées, she was wise enough to know that few of the aristocracy lived up to the rules they set for their daughters. And she was also wise enough to know that a titled gentleman would prefer his firstborn son—who would inherit his estate—be the fruit of his own loins, not someone else’s.



But given all that, it was still quite silly to assume that any young woman who spent time alone with a gentleman, especially overnight, was seriously compromised and in deep trouble. Would it have mattered in Little Witham? In all fairness, probably not very much, since small villages were mostly concerned with the day-to-day issues of simply living a comfortable life.

But people talk. And talk travelled faster than a storm sometimes. Willow would never want unpleasant rumours to reach her family. She didn't give two farthings for the Ton, but she did worry that her impetuous declaration might get back to her family and worry them.

They knew Harry, of course. Did they like him? She glanced across the carriage to where he was also gazing from his window, lost in his own thoughts.

Yes, they liked him. Her Mama had always welcomed him with a smile, Ashe had called him friend since they were both very young, and he'd pretty much made Forest Grange his second home. So this entire matter of their pretend marriage might cause some concern, but they'd understand how vital it had been in order to save Harry's life.

She crossed her fingers, just in case.

"You're very quiet."

His words jerked her from her thoughts. "Am I? I apologise."

"No need. It surprised me, that's all."

Willow raised an eyebrow. "Really? Why?"

He chuckled. "In my experience, most young ladies find an endless flow of chatter to

be most pleasing.”

She snorted. “You have been associating with the wrong young ladies, then. I know more than a few who enjoy a lively discussion, but also aren’t afraid of silence.”

“You’ll have to introduce me, then.” He grinned.

Willow didn’t. “I don’t think I’ll be able to do that,” she answered with a sigh. “We must settle our business first, before we think about re-entering our ordinary world.”

“It’s been a long time since I even thought about that world,” he mused. “To be honest? I do not miss much of it at all.”

“What has your world been like, then, Harry?”

He shook his head. “Challenging. Difficult a lot of the time, and yes, dangerous once or twice.” He crossed his legs and frowned as he tried to get more comfortable.

Willow pulled one of the cushions from the back of the carriage and put it next to her. “Here. Rest your foot and ankle. Just for a few moments.”

“Ahhh...” he sighed with relief as he followed her suggestion. “Thank you.”

“You were telling me of your world...” she reminded him.

“Was I?” He glanced at her with a smile. “Very different to yours, Willow, I can assure you.”

“But there were horses...?”

“Oh yes. There were almost always horses. The French have some lovely breeds, I

must say. Were the times a little different, I might have bought one or two for my own stable. I'll wager they'd breed some amazing racers."

The carriage bumped, making him wince as his foot rose and fell.

"I would guess we might be at our first stop?" She leaned forward to peer from the window. "I see what looks like a few buildings ahead."

"Good. I think I'm about ready to admit I'd like to sit in a chair that doesn't move for a few minutes."

"We'll make sure that happens, don't worry."

"I won't. I have every confidence that my wife will arrange everything to my liking." A teasing smile settled around his lips as he spoke.

Willow's heart gave a little ping, but she managed to return his smile with one of her own. Even though, at that moment, she understood that she might well have created a mess from which she would not escape unscathed.

The inn was small but clean and efficient, and their driver reassured Harry that he had his directions and could easily change horses when necessary.

Willow wondered at that, but when they set off again after their brief stop, he seemed to sense her curiosity.

"Mrs Smithers is an astounding woman," he chuckled. "Not only does the driver know the way to town, but he has some sort of paperwork that gets us a fresh team if and when we need it."

"Good heavens," Willow remarked. "I wonder how she managed that?"

“I don’t know, and the driver didn’t, either.”

“You asked him?”

“Of course I asked him,” frowned Harry.

“Well, I wondered, that’s all. No need to snap at me.”

“I’m sorry, I did not mean to snap, as you put it. It’s just...” he sighed and shook his head as he stared out of the window.”

Saying anything at that point would be irrelevant, decided Willow, so she too watched the countryside pass by their carriage. Once or twice they passed similar vehicles travelling in the opposite direction, and a couple of riders, well-wrapped against the weather, galloped along the same road, often with a shout to their driver.

But overall, their journey was proving to be uneventful, quiet, and actually a bit boring.

Willow closed her eyes and tried not to wish Harry was beside her, holding her, saying nice things...

### In Which a Country Inn Offers Respite to our Weary Travellers

Since neither Harry nor Willow had much in the way of appetite, the carriage was able to make good time to their destination, arriving just before the gloom of winter darkness fell.

The Blue Fox offered a few tables, several rooms, and—to Harry’s surprise—an excellent beverage. Chillendale ale had been his favoured tippie for quite some time, but it was often hard to come by.

“I hope this’ll do you and yer husband, Ma’am,” said the wife of the innkeeper, who introduced herself as Mrs Marsh. “We don’t get a lot of London visitors, o’ course. They take the other roads. But we’ll do our best to get yer comfortable. And get yer man off his feet.” She looked at Harry as he spoke with the driver just outside the inn.

“Had a tumble, did he? Limpin’ like that...”

“Yes,” answered Willow with a smile, throwing Harry to the wolves. “He fell off his horse a couple of weeks ago.”

And he would be utterly furious at the thought.

“Men,” sighed the other woman.

“Indeed,” agreed Willow.

The room to which she was shown was surprisingly well-appointed, with a couple of

chairs, hooks for their clothing and a large ewer and pitcher. There were candles, barely used, and the linens were soft, clean, and smelled of lavender. In addition, there was a good fire already burning to keep the room warm overnight.

“This will be wonderful, thank you, Mrs Marsh.”

“I hope yer’ll be comfy, Ma’am. Yer let me know if yer need anything at all.”

“We will. Thank you.”

Harry arrived at the door with the bags. “This looks very nice,” he approved, winning himself a broad smile from Mrs Marsh.

“I reckon you’ll sleep well enough. But yer best come down soon. Stew’s almost ready and I can smell the bread bakin’.”

Willow sniffed. “Oh, so can I. We will be there in short order, Ma’am.”

Grinning at them both, the woman left, closing the door behind her.

“Well then.” Harry looked at the bed. “I would say that is probably quite comfortable.”

Willow cleared her throat. “Indeed.”

“Where shall I put our bags? Do you need to unpack...um...things?”

“Things?”

“Yes, you know...” he waved his hands, “female things.”

She sighed. “Harry. There is so much wrong with that statement, I scarcely know where to begin correcting you.”

He grinned, put the bags down on the bed, then sat in one of the chairs and crossed his legs. “Well, by all means, go ahead.”

“All right.” She opened her bag. “In the first place, I have stopped being a girl. I actually stopped being a girl when I discovered that I had no taste for fripperies and preferred learning to giggling.”

“Good thing you’re a Trease,” he nodded. “Some families would have gasped at your temerity. But Lady Hazel and Lord Hawthorn were always open to education, reading, and all manner of ways to broaden one’s knowledge, be you male or female.” He laughed. “I remember losing a very fierce argument with Holly over something scientific. Can’t recall what it was about now, but she certainly walked away triumphant.”

“I’m glad you said that, because now I no longer need to explain why I don’t have girl things in my bag.” She removed her nightgown. “What I do have are the necessary items of clothing for this journey.” A pair of stockings joined the nightgown. “So please refrain from describing the my belongings in such a detrimental fashion.

A hairbrush and comb joined the items on the bed.

“All right then. I’m going to put these on the other chair. You may put your man’s things on the chair you’re sitting in.”

He was still grinning at her, and once again that odd sensation within her body tingled, bringing heat to her cheeks. She looked away, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

But she should have known he was far too observant to miss it, and wasn't too surprised when he stood up and made his way to her side. "Since my man things are few, I'll leave 'em in the bag."

"Very well." She busied herself straightening out her stockings.

"It's a good thing this room is nice and warm, Willow, otherwise I'd almost think you're blushing." His finger touched her cheek gently. "I like it."

"I'll sleep in the chair," she declared, trying not to lean into his hand.

"Hmm." He was quiet for a moment. "Let's go down and eat. I can smell the bread myself, and I'm sure you're as hungry as I."

Willow nodded. Indeed, she was hungry. But oddly enough, she couldn't be sure that a hearty meal of fresh bread and stew would suffice to quell the strangely new appetites rising within her.

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The bread was every bit as good as it had smelled, although Harry admitted that he'd probably have devoured it had it been half-baked and soggy.

The scent of the stew was also enticing, and he was happy to see Willow tucking in. She even sampled a sip or two of his Chillendale ale, declaring it surprisingly tasty, and asking for a glass of her own. He couldn't deny her that pleasure, and knew that with the meal safely devoured, a small amount of ale wouldn't do any damage.

Harry had taken great care to conceal his supply of coins around his body in various places few would think to look. So he didn't worry about paying their shot in the morning, and told Willow so when the reality of their situation hit her as she leaned



back in her chair and toyed with her mug of ale.

“I suppose I am quite the idiot,” she muttered. “I am not used to travelling alone, or in anything other than our family’s carriages. Payment for these services never crossed my mind.”

He shrugged. “Fortunately, that is where my experience and wisdom come into the business, since I will be able to pay our bill when we leave in the morning.”

They were sitting on one side of the enormous fireplace, where it was warm and very comfortable. Few other diners were abroad, so they almost had the room to themselves.

“All right,” Willow nodded. “I’ll admit to a horrid naivete when it comes to that sort of thing.” She sighed. “I just never had to use my own coins for anything like this.” She sipped her ale. “I bought ribbons, of course. Gloves, too, and a hat, I think, on one of my few trips to town.”

“You’re not in London much? I’m surprised.”

“Why?” She cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Well, you are young, beautiful, of excellent lineage, and possessed of what is probably a very comfortable dowry. That said, you fulfil all the qualifications of a woman ready to be snapped up by someone reputable. Maybe a title or something. And that, my girl, is best found in London.”

“Hah,” she snorted. “Nothing could be further from my mind.” Her chin went up. “My not-identical-twin and I feel the same way about all that nonsense. We are not horses to be viewed as breeding stock for anyone eager to sire an heir.”

“Well, yes, I seem to recall Holly being quite verbose on that topic during one of my visits, and that was when the two of you were still young.” He caught himself up. “Not that you’re old now, of course...”

She shot him a look that spoke volumes. “Thank you.”

“However, marriage must be in your future at some point.”

Willow smiled sweetly. “Why, darling, have you forgotten our wedding so soon?”

“Oh, a veritable hit.” Harry retired from the argument, mortally wounded.

After that exchange, they kept their conversation to unremarkable topics, until Willow declared herself quite replete, and finished the last of her ale.

Harry nodded, unable to stop thinking about that big comfortable bed upstairs.

She haunted him, this young woman he’d known for so long. Her laugh, her moods, her rapier-like wit, all appealed to him on a level he’d not experienced before.

He’d experienced desire, passion, arousal, and had engaged in more than his fair share of intimate encounters. But this was different. This was a want, a need, for a woman who had shown herself to be gentle and caring, but with a will of iron that matched her courage.

He’d never known anyone like her, nor could he have guessed what she would become when he’d met her in the past. Now, grown into someone who possessed just about every quality he found appealing, he was caught in a delicate dilemma.

He wanted her. There was no question in his mind that he wanted her badly; she fit in his arms, her lips... well, he could still recall their taste. And he yearned for more.

But there were so many things to consider, so many obstacles his rational brain kept raising, all of which he knew were valid and appropriate to the situation.

So he turned his mind to making a sensible plan as he pushed his chair back from the table a little and finished the last of his ale.

Somehow, he would manage to eliminate any discussion of a 'marriage' between them when they reached London. And he would return her to Forest Grange and her family, with nary a mention of her prevarication, but many profuse thanks for her kindness and concern for his injuries.

Nor would he say anything about kissing, or how he had been stunned by the taste of her lips, and the sensation of her body against his.

It would be simple, straightforward, and with luck, accepted as the truth. One more tale to add to those of the Trease family.

And if fortune favoured him, nobody would realise that everything he'd just decided was a complete and utter lie.

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

In Which our Unmarried Couple find Themselves Behaving Like a Married Couple

Both Willow and Harry were silent as they climbed the stairs. Willow couldn't begin to guess Harry's thoughts, but she found her own more than enough to deal with.

They were about to spend the night together. Alone. In a room with a nice bed.

Of course they'd spent plenty of time alone together in Little Witham, but the even the snug confines of a small seaside cottage could not compare to a single chamber in an inn.

He reached past her to open the door and allow her to precede him. "Oh good, the fire's still burning."

She nearly laughed at that. He had no idea how close to the truth that was. Her personal fire was burning very nicely indeed, although she admitted to some concern that she might come out of this adventure slightly...singed. Indeed, right at this moment, she swore she could feel the heat of his body on her back.

It didn't get any cooler when the two of them walked into the room, and Harry closed the door behind them with a solid thunk.

Willow stared at the bed. "I will sleep in the chair."

"Don't be silly. I'll take the chair. I can pull the other one close and it'll be almost as good as a bed." He sounded coolly confident.

She shook her head. “Your ankle won’t like it.” Turning, she touched her finger to his lips as he opened his mouth to argue with her. “Look, we’re adults, Harry. I see no reason why we can’t share the bed. I will stay on my side, and you on yours. The coverlet looks warm enough, and I don’t want to spend all night getting up to put more wood on the fire.”

He sighed. “You can trust me, you know.”

It’s not you I can’t trust, it’s myself...

The thought flashed through her mind as she turned to him. “Of course I know that. I would not have suggested we share otherwise.”

“In that case...”

Harry unfastened his jacket and tossed it onto one of the chairs, then sat on the side of the bed to remove his boots.

Willow echoed his moves on the other side, sitting and removing her shoes and stockings. Her practical gown fastened at the front, and she wore a warm chemise beneath, so she had no real concerns about slipping off the heavy fabric and sleeping in the lighter cotton.

“How’s your ankle?” She managed to keep her voice steady, even though her heart was threatening to jump into her throat and choke her.

“Better without the boots,” he sighed, drawing the last one off. “But no swelling at all. Just a bit achy.” He chuckled. “Whatever Mrs Smithers put into her poultice certainly worked.”

“Probably the arnica,” murmured Willow, sliding under the covers and lying on the

very edge of the bed.

She felt it dip as Harry did the same.

It wasn't quite as firm as it looked, and she slid toward the middle as his weight settled. Clinging to the edge of the mattress with her fingertips, she sighed.

"Let go, Willow. I told you that you could trust me."

After a battle with her conscience that lasted all of ten seconds, she obeyed, and found herself sliding easily up against Harry's warmth.

"Much better," he said, pulling her back up against his front.

"Oh," she murmured. "You're nice and warm."

"You're not...hang on." He shifted slightly, bringing his thighs to rest alongside her own. It was as if she sat on his lap, only lying down.

It was, not to put too fine a point on it, one of the most delightful experiences she could imagine.

"Better?" He wrapped his arm around her waist and held her tightly.

"Mmm." She nodded, uncertain of how to respond. This was all so...so...unexpected.

"It's funny," he murmured. "I never imagined I'd be in this situation with you."

"Neither did I," she answered.

"And yet it seems as if destiny or the Fates had other plans for us." He moved a little,

and she felt a soft kiss on her bare neck.

“Harry...” It was a whisper, a plea, and a murmur of pleasure, all wrapped up in one word.

“Willow,” he murmured back. “I like touching you, holding you, feeling your warmth.”

She caught her breath as he tightened his grip, bringing their bodies firmly against each other. This wasn't a time for lies or maidenly modesty.

“I like it too.” A mere whisper, but he heard her.

“Good, because I'm going to be touching you a lot.”

“You are?”

“Yes. But I'll not frighten you or do anything you don't want. Do you understand? You tell me to stop and I'll stop.”

“Your word on that?”

His arm moved, and she felt his hand sliding the strap of her chemise off her shoulder. And there...once again, the touch of his lips. “You have my word. All you have to say is stop...”

Willow took a breath, surrendered to her own yearnings, and snuggled her back as close to him as she could. Waves of desire swept all other thoughts aside. “All right, Harry. All right. If you'll do one thing for me?”

“Name it.”

“Unfasten your shirt. I want to feel my skin against yours.”

\*~\*~\*~\*

He was hard as granite, and her words didn't help. But to hear them touched not only his desire, but his heart. This young woman was trusting him after nursing him and caring for his injuries. Now she wanted a new experience with him...

He wasn't really surprised; Willow was intelligent, inquiring, and determined. Traits she shared with the rest of her family.

So there was no reason at all for her not to be curious, even though it would push his self-control to its limit. But in the back of his mind lurked the knowledge that he didn't want anyone else touching her like this. Ever. And that made this night unique.

Baring his chest, Harry snugged Willow against him, making sure her back was bare as well. Since this required pushing her chemise down, he did so, slowly and carefully, letting her relish the sensation of a man's hand gliding over her shoulder and down her arm.

“Ohhh...” She sighed as her back met his front. “Oh, Harry...”

“Do you like that?”

“It's...it's...wonderful.” She wriggled a little, as if trying to get even closer. “I had no idea how extraordinary it feels...”

“It's just a small part of the pleasures to be had between a man and a woman, Willow.”

He could almost hear the wheels turning in her mind, so he wasn't too surprised when



she turned her head toward him. “Show me more?”

He took a breath, trying to clear the fog of desire from his brain, and focus on her needs. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Oh yes, I’m sure. I want—I don’t know what I want...just something...”

He bent his head and kissed her bare shoulder, then lifted his arm from her waist. “All right,” he murmured. “I think you might enjoy this...”

His hand moved upward and found the soft fullness of her breast, and her gasp of surprise made him grin. Her nipple was already hard, so he toyed with it, gentle teasing touches, loving the movements against him she probably didn’t know she was making.

“God,” she whispered, “This is...making me feel things...”

“That’s good,” he whispered back, “because you might like this even more.”

He found the edge of her chemise and gently pulled it down toward her waist. Now her breast was bare, and he was free to play unhindered.

Her wriggles, gasps, and moans were a symphony of pleasure to his ears. She responded to his touches in a way that filled his heart and his brain, never moving away from him, but turning a little more to give him access. Her body flowered, her womanly scent rich and rising around them, and it was no hardship to involve both her breasts in his play.

That brought a moan from her throat. “What...how...” she muttered. “Harry...” Her fingers dug into his thigh as he moved himself, allowing her to roll more onto her

back, and thus presenting two delightfully ripe nipples, both of which he proceeded to enjoy with fingers and tongue.

Willow writhed now, fully engaged in their play, her hands exploring his chest, his shoulders, and then drifting down to his waist...

“No, sweetheart. No further. I’m just a man, Willow. And I’d like to be the one to give you pleasure tonight. This is for you.”

“Harry,” she whispered. “I want... I ache...” Her hips moved, an involuntary movement she probably didn’t know she was making.

He nodded, then lay down beside her. “I know. I can take away that ache...” Even though I’ll have to live with mine for a bit.

“Please,” she begged, “please...”

“Relax for me, Willow. And let me touch you where you want...”

“All right.”

Without a second thought, this well-bred young woman dragged the hem of her chemise up to her waist, baring herself brazenly to the man lying beside her. “Show me, Harry. Show me what will ease this feeling I have...”

So he did.

Slowly, carefully, he used every sensual skill he’d accumulated over the years, touching her gently at first, playing his fingers over her woman’s hair, teasing what lay beneath.

She hummed with pleasure as his touch strengthened, and parted her thighs without a second thought, opening all that she was to his eyes and his hand.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured, sliding his fingertips down, down into the slick wet flesh and gently moving them in a slow but steady rhythm.

He felt her breathing change, saw the muscles of her thighs tighten, and found himself amazed at her response to his actions. “That’s it, Willow. Feel it inside you...let it happen...”

She moaned, her mouth gasping for air as every muscle in her body tensed and she thrust herself into his hand.

He slid a finger into her heat, and gently stroked her silken flesh, then moved faster, learning her sensitive spots and focusing his attention on them.

She was arching off the bed as he continued his sensual assault, gasping, writhing, until finally she erupted around him with a muted squeal. For long moments he felt her muscles spasming against his fingers and marvelled at the sight of his Willow enjoying her first release.

Gritting his teeth, Harry stayed with her, watching, feeling a little overwhelmed at what he had just done. “Willow,” he whispered. “Willow, are you all right?”

Sucking in a gulp of air, she opened her eyes and smiled at him. “Oh yes, Harry. I’m all right. In fact, it would be fair to say I’ve never been better.” She yawned. “But oddly enough, I’m rather tired.”

He smiled. “Go to sleep, sweetheart.” Tugging her clothing back into place and settling himself down again behind her, he almost missed her whispered reply.

“All right, Harry. I love you.”

Her whole body eased against him and within seconds he knew she slept. Exhausted, sated, and not even realising she was experiencing the after-effects of a magnificent climax.

He sighed. She would now, doubtless, enjoy a long and deep sleep, and wake refreshed in the morning.

I wish I could do the same , he thought, as he put his head on the pillow beside hers. He knew he was going to be rather uncomfortable for some time. But it had been worth it, and he'd survive.

Because he'd discovered that Willow Trease loved him.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

### In Which a Thief Interferes With the Journey to London

Willow awoke first, opening her eyes slowly, unwilling to move from the delicious warmth that seemed to surround her.

She took a few moments to enjoy it, then—as her mind rose above the tranquillity of sleep—the feeling of arms around her, legs tangled with hers, and a warm, firm body plastered against her spine made themselves known.

Heavens above. She was curled into Harry's arms like a kitten against its mother.

And it was the most wonderfully pleasurable sensation she could imagine. As she awoke further, she realised that thought wasn't quite true. Last night, here in this bed, she'd experienced pleasure that far surpassed anything she could have described.

Lying still, relishing the newness of her position, she tried to clear her mind and evaluate the situation.

They had to get to London as soon as they could, so making sure the carriage was ready would be the first thing for them to see to.

She had to wash and dress as best she could, as did Harry.

Breakfast? Probably just a quick bit before they left the inn. She'd have to let him pay their bill, but he'd said he had enough coin to take care of them on the journey.

All of which was practical, appropriate, and necessary.

What wasn't any of those things was the reluctance she was experiencing, the unwillingness to move at all away from the utterly blissful sensation of a man's body hold hers.

Never could she have thought such a thing so pleasurable. She realised she'd never actually thought about it at all. Not until Harry.

He'd fallen into her life and permanently fixed himself in her heart. Would she ever feel this way about another man? She couldn't even imagine it.

He stirred, and she felt him waken, murmuring a little as he snuggled close. "Hello."

"Good morning to you too," she replied, loving the simple delight of a dawn cuddle.

"I suppose we should rise," he said, sighing.

"If we want to get to London today, yes." She sighed too. Then she turned her head, looked at him, and couldn't help her laugh. "We are in quite a mess, aren't we?"

He chuckled. "We'll get out of it." He glanced at the light beginning to shine through the window. "But I must get my business finished first. And that means it's time for us to be on the road."

To her great regret, he untangled himself, then dropped a quick kiss on her shoulder. "You are an amazing woman, Willow."

It wasn't quite what she wanted to hear, but she decided it would suffice for the moment, and rose, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Thank you," she answered quietly. "Now go away somewhere. I must dress."

Harry grabbed his shirt and boots. "As my lady wills," he bowed theatrically. "I will

meet you downstairs. Bring your bag. I'll take mine."

She nodded, and somewhat wistfully watched him vanish through the door with his clothing clasped to that rather delightful chest.

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Leaving Willow in that room was one of the hardest things Harry had ever done.

She looked delightfully rumped, warm, and relaxed, and had their situation been different, he'd have very much enjoyed staying right there with her. Playing with her, making her sob with pleasure, loving her...

He nearly tripped going down the stairs as that thought hit his mind with all the force of a landslide off the very top of a mountain.

Good Lord. He grasped the bannister firmly as the impact of what he'd just imagined rocked him back on his heels.

She'd said she loved him, and now—unexpectedly—his brain had told him that her feelings were returned.

He managed to make it down the stairs without stumbling, but it was a near thing, and he sat down hard on the bottom step to put on his boots.

But before he could do much of anything else, the innkeeper rushed into the hall.

"Oh, Mr Chalmers," he wrung his hands. "It's terrible, awful, that's what it is..."

Harry frowned as Mr Marsh hurried to his side. "What is it? What's happened?"

“Your coachman, sir.”

“What about him?”

“Set upon, sir. A dastardly attack in the darkest depths of the night...”

Blinking, Harry wondered for a moment if Marsh was a member of some local theatrical group, so dramatic was his statement, accompanied as it was by the wringing of hands.

“I’m not following you...”

“Come, come and see, sir...”

The innkeeper all but dragged him into a small room off the hall. And in there, on a chair, with a wet cloth being held to his head by Mrs Marsh, was their driver.

“Good God, man...” Harry rushed to his side. “Are you all right? What on earth happened?”

“Knocked him clean out, they did,” snarled the angry woman. “I found him on the doorstep when I went to let the cat out this morning.”

“I’m that sorry, sir,” said the injured driver.

“Stop, please. Clearly, this wasn’t your fault. Can you tell me what occurred?” He glanced at Mrs Marsh. “Is he going to be all right?”

She nodded. “Nasty bump, took a bit of skin, but it’s clean enough.” She removed the cloth. “Lucky he’s got a hard head.”



“Thank you, Ma’am,” the coachman said, then turned to Harry. “They took the carriage, sir. It’s gone. I asked Mr Marsh to check when I came around. And...it’s gone.”

Harry’s heart sank at the words and mentally he cursed long and fluently.

“I’m glad you’re not badly hurt,” he said, managing to keep the worst of his thoughts to himself.

“Who’s been hurt?” Willow came down the stairs quickly, holding the bags.

“Here now, Ma’am. Let me take them for you...” Marsh was up the steps and relieving Willow of her burden in a trice.

“Thank you,” she frowned. “Harry?”

“A problem,” he sighed. “Apparently, sometime early this morning, our coachman here was set upon and knocked unconscious, and our coach was stolen.”

Willow sucked in a breath, her gaze meeting his and reflecting his own distress. “That is quite terrible.”

“Indeed it is, Ma’am. Nothing like that has happened round here in as long as I can remember.”

“Poor man,” Willow went to the coachman. “How are you feeling?”

“Got a bit of a headache, I’ll admit, Ma’am.”

“I’m sure you do, and I am very sorry that you were injured on our account. Although who would want to take the risk of stealing a carriage, I don’t know.”

“The horses too?” Harry looked at Marsh.

“Fraid so, sir.”

He bit back the oath that trembled on the tip of his tongue. “All right. Is there anywhere around here we could rent a couple of horses, d’you think?” He paused. “Actually, I’m not sure where we are, to be honest. I left all that to you...”

The driver nodded. “As well you should, sir. I can tell you we’re near Abbington Run...”

“Ah.” Harry glanced at Willow. “I have a friend close by then.” He turned to the innkeeper. “Would you know of Sir Roger Franklin?”

“Aye, sir, that I do. Lives not three miles down the lane from here.”

“Excellent.” He looked at Willow. “Here’s my plan. I will go to Roger and borrow a horse, which will get me to town quite quickly, if he is still possessed of a very good stable.”

“I see,” she said, her voice expressionless.

“And the minute I reach town, I’ll have a carriage sent for you, my dear.”

“I see.” She said again.

He sighed. “Should I bother arguing the point?”

She shook her head. “Not unless you want to waste time and your breath, both of which would be best saved.” She turned to the Marshes. “We are very grateful for all you’ve done for us, and sorry that we brought trouble to your door.”

“Not your fault, Ma’am,” said Mrs Marsh. “And don’t you worry none about this lad. We’ll have him up and around in no time at all.”

The ‘lad’, who was at least as old as Mrs Marsh herself, shot Harry a look that clearly said “help”. However, it was of no use. “You’ll be better here, under Mrs Marsh’s care, and you know it.”

“Aye, sir,” he sighed. “I’ll try to get back down south then, shall I?”

“Or London. Whichever is most useful to you. And thank you again.”

Turning to the Marshes, Willow managed a smile. “Well, in spite of this nasty incident, I must say we spent a delightful night here, Mrs Marsh. Your accommodations are most comfortable indeed. But now we must be on our way, since we have an important meeting in London, and we still have a distance to go yet. If you would hold our bags for us until we return for them, that would be of great help.”

The Marshes agreed immediately and promised to take good care of their belongings.

Thus Willow managed to end the conversation most effectively, and get them both on the road to Abbington Run in less than the half hour Harry had estimated it would take to leave the inn. Coinage had changed hands, and they were waved on their way quite enthusiastically.

“The sun should be rising soon,” he commented as they reached the lane in the half light of dawn. “We keep straight for a mile or so, most likely, and if we can see Abbington Run at that point, we can cut through the forest and save some time.”

Willow nodded. “And your ankle? Will it hold up?”

“It’ll damn well have to,” said Harry, voice determined. “This is too important to risk delaying any longer.”

“All right then,” she replied, squaring her shoulders. “Let’s be off.”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

### In Which Our Unmarried Couple makes Slow Progress toward London

She had remained calm thus far, but this morning had not exactly turned out the way she'd expected. Part of her had hoped for a carriage ride with Harry, a private time for just the two of them, when they could sort out their current situation.

But Willow soon realised that a fast walk along a country lane was not going to produce a similar chance for conversation.

Harry set a good pace, and she kept up, determined not to slow him down. But every now and again, he would stop and peer between the trees in the forests lining their lane.

"Can you see it yet?" She had to ask the third time he paused.

"Not yet, but we must be near." He glanced at her. "Are you all right so far?"

"Of course," she nodded. "I am more worried about your ankle than my feet."

"I am managing." He sighed. "Not something I'd like to do on a regular basis, but there's not a lot of pain, thank goodness."

They walked on, and Willow decided this was as good an opportunity as any to ask the question that had plagued her ever since their hasty departure from the inn.

"Who would have done such a thing, Harry? And do you think it has anything to do with your reason for going to London, or could it be just random thieves?" She

frowned. "After all, who knew we were making this trip?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Very astute of you, Willow. I was actually just wondering the same thing myself."

She couldn't decide whether to be offended or amused, but he spoke again before she could settle on a response.

"I cannot, for the life of me, think of anyone who knew our direction. Certainly not anyone who would be aware of what I was carrying or where I was going..."

"Neither can I," she answered. "Perhaps our coachman told someone?"

"It's possible."

"Or..." she paused. "Oh no, that would be too horrid."

"What?"

"Mrs Smithers," sighed Willow. "She knew. She found us the carriage. She also knew our destination was London. Goodness, she even provided the means for us to get there. So, without a doubt, she knew every detail of this journey, with the possible exception of exactly where you were going when we got there."

Harry was quiet for a few minutes, enough time for her to know he was weighing her statement carefully. "I hate to think that. But I've learned that people are not always what they seem, Willow. And when you think about it, was it just coincidence that she happened to live next door to Madame Lépine?"

"Good grief."

“Exactly.”

They walked on in silence for a while, both busy with their thoughts, then—on one of his pauses to look through the trees—he beckoned to Willow. “Look. Through there. I am certain that’s Roger’s house. Franklin Chase. I came down for a shooting party a long time ago.”

She stood next to him, looking at a very pretty country home. “Can we cut through here? The trees are bare, and the ground is probably muddy, but at this point we can’t afford to waste time, can we?”

Harry shook his head. “No, we can’t. I must reach London before tonight. I’m well over a week late now, and if I can’t get there today...well, the consequences might be...”

“It’s all right. I understand if you can’t tell me. It’s probably better I don’t know.” Which was a mixture of the truth and a lie, since it wasn’t all right at all, and she would very much have liked to know what messages, if any, he carried. But indeed, the truth was that it was most likely to be better she didn’t know.

To her surprise, Harry hugged her close. “You are quite astonishing, Willow.”

She blinked. “I am?”

“Yes.” He took her hand. “Now come on, we are about to get ourselves quite muddy.”

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Mud notwithstanding, the shortcut through the woods was a blessing, and the two of them emerged on Franklin Chase’s back lawn no more than fifteen minutes after

leaving the lane.

And as they hurried to the nearest door, it opened on a very astonished young footman.

“Ho, lad,” said Harry, “Is Sir Roger here?”

“Um...” the surprised footman blinked. “Er...”

“Good heavens, Mr Chalmers,” said a stern voice. “What on earth are you doing on our lawn?”

“Barton,” breathed Harry. “Thank God. Is Sir Roger here?”

“No, sir, he is in town and will be for a few days. Was he expecting you and the...er... young lady?” Moving away from the door, he beckoned them inside. “May I offer tea? Dry clothing?”

“There isn’t time, I’m afraid.” Harry tugged Willow along with him into the hallway. “We need horses, Barton. My...my wife and I had our carriage stolen last night, not far from here, and when I found out that the Run was so near, I thought of Roger.”

“How dreadful.” Barton frowned, his massive eyebrows drawing together. “Of course, we’ll be happy to provide mounts for you and your lovely wife.” He bowed low to Willow.

“Jeremy, go to the stables at once. Have Mr Thomas saddle two horses and make one a side-saddle.”

“You are both gracious and kind, Mr Barton,” Willow smiled at him. “Sir Roger is blessed in his staff, I can tell.”



A little spot of colour appeared in the butler's cheeks as he turned back to them. "A lovely compliment, Mrs Chalmers. If you'll come this way, I believe I can find something a little warmer for your ride."

"That would be most gratefully appreciated," said Harry, as they walked down a passageway and into a large hall. "Please also pass our thanks along to Roger? I shall most definitely be seeing him soon to thank him in person, I know."

"Of course, sir." Barton opened a cupboard door and produced a couple of warm woollen coats. "I believe these should fit. You and Sir Roger are close to the same size, I think...and for you, Ma'am, I have this jacket with a cloak attached. Sir Roger's mother had it made for when she was riding."

"Oh, how clever." Willow smiled and accepted the garment. "You are so kind." She slipped into it with a smile, clearly relishing the warmth of the fine wool and the convenience of the large cape, which would settle easily over a horse's rump.

Harry nodded approvingly. "I know better than to ask if you'll be comfortable in a side-saddle for a few hours."

She shot him a quick glance. "Good. We've not ridden together, but I've not lost my taste for a good gallop."

"I would encourage caution," offered Mr Barton. "These local roads are not the smoothest, and it will be a couple of miles before you reach the main road to London."

"We understand. And I cannot thank you enough for your assistance." His face sobered as he looked at the butler. "Such gracious and immediate aid is extraordinary, and rest assured, Roger will know about this as soon as we get to town and finish our business."

Barton nodded and returned his sober look with one of his own. “We here at Franklin Chase understand that sometimes haste is of the greatest necessity. Your horses are outside, so you must depart immediately, I imagine.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, then nodded. “Very good. Come, Willow.” He held out his hand and the two of them left Franklin Chase on what turned out to be very nicely paced and fresh mounts.

“Interesting,” said Harry as they took the first mile or so slowly, accustoming themselves to the horses and the rough lane.

“What was??” Willow glanced at him, finding herself more comfortable than she’d expected in the saddle.

“Barton. He had everything we needed ready in extremely short order, without questions or anything that might have delayed us.”

“He did indeed. A very efficient butler. Sir Roger is a lucky man.”

“I think Sir Roger might also be friends with some of the people I know.”

Willow was quiet for a few minutes, and Harry knew her mind was turning over the implications of his comment.

Then she took a breath. “Well, goodness. One does indeed learn something new every day.”

They rode as fast as they dared, and when they reached the firmer surface of the road, Harry darted a quick look at her. “Ready for a bit of a gallop?”

She grinned. “Yes indeed.”

With a click of his heels, Harry spurred on his horse and noted that Willow did the same beside him. He kept the pace steady, so as not to wind the beasts too soon, but as the sun emerged from the clouds, he pushed his worries aside and simply enjoyed the sensation of a good horse, a clear road, a sunny morning, and the woman he loved by his side.

A fiery kind of joy billowed up through his heart as he admitted the truth to himself, and settled into the knowledge that somehow he was going to marry Miss Willow Trease, and make their informal union as formal as it could get.

Shooting a quick glance at her, he smiled at her expression of delight; she stayed beside him, her hair blowing around her face, leaning forward just a little as she urged the horse onward. What a woman she was. And how lucky he'd realised that before some other chap snatched her up.

His mind wandered over a variety of topics as they rode, staying together and slowing now and then to rest the horses and let them drink from nearby streams. At least two hours had passed, by his calculations, when they finally reached the outskirts of town, and Harry reined in.

"We have made excellent time," he smiled. "Not far to go now, but we'll have to slow down. There will be carriages and wagons ahead."

Willow nodded. "I think the horses will appreciate going a bit slower," she patted the neck of her mount. "Do you know the way from here? Through London?"

He gave a quick nod. "We'll head for the Westminster Bridge, cross the river there, and after that, it's a short jaunt past Green Park to our destination."

"And that is?"

“A private home, Willow. We will quietly ride around to the back, and there our horses will be taken and cared for. I expect there’ll be a maid or two for you as well.”

She straightened. “I see. Your wife and your mounts are tended to, while you go on and do your incredibly important business elsewhere.”

“That is correct.”

“And will I ever be allowed to know the nature of that business?”

“Were it my decision, yes. But it’s not. Please understand that.”

She thought about that. “All right. But at some point in the future, when it is safe to do so, will you tell me the truth?”

“Perhaps,” he smiled. “And that’s the best I can do for now. Let’s move on and put an end to this ride.” And this business.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

### In Which Important Matters are Concluded with a Surprise Revelation

Willow hated to admit she was tired, but in reality she knew she was exhausted. So when Harry finally led them to a modest home on Audley Street, and they rode down the mews beside it, she could only heave a sigh of relief.

At one doorway, two men stood ready, and although they took the horses, and rendered assistance to both herself and Harry as they dismounted, it was pretty clear that neither were stable hands.

However, she kept her thoughts to herself and simply thanked them as she found her footing on the bricks that paved the yard.

“Come along.” Harry held out his hand. “I know you’re tired. So am I. But soon we’ll be done here.”

She nodded and instead of his hand, took his arm. “We’re in London. Best we observe the proprieties.”

He led them both into the house.

Unlike a regular home, there were no servants waiting in the entryway to relieve them of their coats. That didn’t happen until they had climbed a set of stairs and ended up in the formal foyer, where another footman nodded and took their outerwear.

His silence and efficiency made her a tiny bit uncomfortable, and she stood uneasily by as Harry shed his coat and straightened his jacket.

A door opened and an older gentleman emerged.

“Harry, m’boy. Good to see you. Heard you had a spot of bother down south?”

“I did, sir. Which is why I’m so damned late...”

“You have it, though?”

“I do.”

“Go on in then, he’s waiting.” The man turned to Willow. “You too, young lady.”

“But I...” she blinked.

“He wants to see you both.”

“Very well, sir. Come, Willow.” Harry nodded at her, his face calm.

She wished she was as calm as he appeared to be, because her insides were tumbling over themselves.

But she dipped her head in acknowledgement, dredged up a smile for the gentlemen looking at them, and went to his side.

“This way,” Harry walked them both through the open door, and Willow heard it shut behind them.

A pleasant room, she thought, as her feet sank into rich carpeting. Very much a man’s surroundings, with a fire burning and large leather chairs on either side of it. Opposite was a desk. The biggest desk Willow had ever seen, covered with books and papers.

Behind it sat a gentleman, with another man standing beside him, reading something.

“Ah, Chalmers.” The seated man rose. “And a charming guest as well, I hear.”

“Were it not for her, Sir Sydney, I would not be here.”

Willow’s mind screeched to a halt. Sir Sydney. Could it be Sir Sydney Hadley, the man alleged to be behind the largest spy network England had ever seen? The man who had an extraordinary gift for codes and cyphers?

“In that case,” he said, smiling at Willow, “I, and in fact, all of England, are in your debt, Ma’am.” He turned back to Harry. “You have it?”

She couldn’t miss the focus and intensity of that question, and neither could Harry.

“I do, Sir. A moment please.” He crossed the room to one of the chairs, seated himself, and then—to her astonishment—leaned down and removed the heel of his boot. Apparently, it was hollow, because he extracted a curl of paper, and then slipped the heel back into place.

“Here sir. Still in one piece.”

Sir Sydney accepted it with a nod, and walked back to his chair, seating himself and unfurling the paper, spreading it carefully on the desk. Then he pulled two other sheets and a pen near, and silence fell, broken only by the scratch of his writing as he worked.

Willow felt as if the entire room was holding its breath. What was going on? What was on that piece of paper Harry had stuck in his heel? She’d never noticed anything like that when he was sick, and she’d removed his clothes. But then again, getting him well had been her first objective, not looking for mysterious hiding places in his

boots.

After what seemed like an hour, but was probably only a few minutes, Sir Sydney leaned back in his chair. Then he looked at Harry, and a smile creased his lips. "It worked. It's done."

Harry's chest rose and fell as he took a deep breath and released it on a sigh. "Thank God."

"Take these, Edgar. Make sure it gets where it needs to be."

The other man bowed, accepted the papers, and left the room.

"Well now," Sir Sydney leaned back and looked at Willow. "This must have been quite confusing for you, my dear. But please know that there are many in your debt for keeping this rascal alive."

"I..." she swallowed. "I'm not sure what to say, sir. I'm very happy I was able to help Harry with...um...whatever it is he does. And I'm glad it all worked out for the best."

"As am I, sir," added Harry. "It could have failed dismally though, were it not for Willow and some good luck." He walked to her side. "We are both curious as to who could have delayed our passage here. I could have arrived much earlier if our carriage hadn't been stolen."

"Yes, I just heard about that," frowned Sir Sydney. "You have no idea who might have been behind it?"

"Well, hardly anyone knew we planned on leaving when we did." Harry's voice was level, but she could hear an undercurrent of anger. "And neither Willow nor I can



think of someone who would be interested in us or know exactly where and how we were travelling. Except for one person...”

He glanced at Willow, and she nodded. “Sir Sydney,” she said quietly, “the one person who knew our plans, who in fact facilitated them, was...”

Before she could finish, a door opened at the other end of the room, and someone walked in. Both Willow and Harry gasped.

“Mrs Smithers?”

“What the...” Harry choked.

“But...but...” Willow stuttered in shock.

Sir Sydney rose, a surprisingly large grin on his face. “How opportune.” He held out his hand to the woman. “Darling, do come in and let me introduce you to two very helpful and adventurous friends.” He turned to Harry and Willow. “You must allow me to present my wife, Lady Amelia Sydney.”

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Laughter rang out in the elegant parlour as three people sat around a small tea table and helped themselves to food.

“So, I persuaded my husband to let me go down to the coast,” said the woman they’d known as Mrs Smithers. “With the way things are, the more eyes down there, the better. And truthfully, I wanted a little time away from London. Just some peace and quiet.”

“But all by yourself?” Willow’s eyes were wide with curiosity.

“It would not have helped my image as a poor widow had I brought servants with me,” she answered. “Besides, I must confess I rather enjoyed my tenure on Sea Lane. My neighbours were fascinating.” She chuckled.

“You knew Madame Lépine then,” ventured Harry, as he reached for another tart.

“I did. And she knew me.” Lady Amelia sighed. “We had many lively conversations, since we could share our secrets with each other. It was a sad day when we lost her.” She put her hand over Willow’s. “But you made her last days much happier, my dear. Fortune could not have brought her a better companion.”

“I hope so.”

“So, if I may ask, what happens now? To Sea Lane?” Harry touched a napkin to his lips and brushed a crumb or two from his jacket.

“I believe my husband may already have new tenants in mind,” she answered. “You may not realise it, but a great deal of helpful information is brought across the channel to small villages on the coast, to wend its way to where it will help most.”

“And Harry’s piece of paper helped too?” Willow glanced at Harry, her eyebrows raised.

“Oh yes, my dear. If I understand matters fully, that little scrap helped my husband finish breaking a set of cyphers.” She leaned toward Willow. “He’s awfully good at that sort of thing, you know.”

“I see,” nodded Willow. A thought crossed her mind. “Cyphers. Of course...that’s why Madame had some strange ones amongst her papers.”

“She was very good at them,” answered Lady Amelia. “More than a few of her

suggestions made their way here, and thus to where they were needed most.” She nodded as if to a thought she’d rather not share. “Anyway, I believe there will be some activity soon that will please all of us. And much of it will be due to the two of you.”

Harry sighed. “That is very good news indeed, Ma’am. And well worth all the trouble we went through to get it here.”

“You weren’t supposed to get yourself into trouble in France, you know, young man.” Lady Amelia fixed him with a stern gaze. “Quiet and unobtrusive. Those were your orders, were they not?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Harry looked shamefaced. “But I really had no idea I had caught a fever until I stumbled on the docks and damn near broke my ankle. For a few moments, I couldn’t move, and when I did? I knew something was wrong.”

“Well, you made it in one piece, and I couldn’t be happier that Willow was there to look after you.”

“You know, it’s only now I find myself understanding why you weren’t surprised or stunned when Harry was dropped onto my doorstep.” Tilting her head to one side, Willow smiled at Lady Amelia. “You should have been horrified, or at least shocked, but you came right in and helped me deal with him, and I never questioned it.”

“Someone had to. I wasn’t sure at first if it was the courier we were expecting, but it didn’t take long to work out that he was indeed the right man, and he needed some help. Luckily, you were there, my dear. Such a sensitive matter would have been very difficult to handle otherwise.” She patted Willow’s hand. “And you are an excellent nurse.”

“I agree,” Harry smiled at the woman next to him. “I cannot thank her enough.”

“One last thing if I may, my Lady...Harry and I have been trying to think of anyone who knew of our trip to London and who might have stolen the coach... Have you any idea? It has to be someone from Little Witham, doesn't it?”

Lady Amelia leaned back in her chair and pushed her plate aside with a sigh. “I'm afraid you're right, dear girl. My husband has sent a couple of his men down there to investigate further, but I would wager that they will find young Samuel to be the culprit.”

“The lad who brought you your herbs?”

“Indeed, yes. Such a pleasant young fellow, too. I was quite pleased with him until I noticed he tended to lurk around the docks much too often for a boy who was supposed to live in the forest. I kept an eye on him, of course, but until your departure, I had nothing to verify my suspicions. He was indeed the only one who knew of your trip. Besides myself.” She chuckled. “I'll wager you thought it was me, didn't you?”

Harry felt his cheeks warming under that stern gaze. “Of course not, Ma'am. How could we ever come to that conclusion?”

“Well, we'll not worry about that now. And just to reassure you, my husband has passed along young Samuel's name to some people near Little Witham, so that they can verify our assumption. If it's proved to be true, I doubt he'll be doing any more business along those lines for quite some time to come.” She wiped her hands on a napkin in dismissal. “But there is something else we do need to concern ourselves with.”

“There is?” Willow frowned.

“Yes, most certainly. Would you both come with me?”

Lady Amelia rose, as did Harry and Willow, who shot a quick glance at each other, then followed their hostess from the room as she led them back across the hall and into a very extensive library.

They both gasped at the number of fully laden shelves.

“Oh, I could live in here,” sighed Willow, as she walked to the obviously comfortable chairs arranged for the convenience of readers.

“I feel like that sometimes too,” Lady Amelia agreed. “But I brought you both here for another reason.”

She crossed the room to a small writing table and withdrew a document from one of the drawers. “I have had this prepared especially for this moment,” she announced.

“Oh. Um...” Harry cleared his throat. “How kind of you...”

Willow simply blinked in confusion.

“This, young man,” Lady Amelia waved the paper in the air, “is a legal marriage document certifying that Mr Harry Chalmers of Myrtle Manor and Miss Willow Trease of Forest Grange, were married three days ago in the presence of the Right Reverend George Snow, and that the occasion was properly witnessed by Lady Amelia Sydney. The small ceremony took place at number nine, Sea Lane, Little Witham, and the formal recognition of said marriage will be placed into the register of the local church, St. Brendan’s, upon my direction.”

“I don’t...I can’t think...” Willow sputtered helplessly.

“How? What...” Harry wasn’t much use either.

“Oh dear,” sighed Lady Amelia. “Right then. Harry Chalmers.” She stared at him.

“Ma’am?”

“This young woman has shown extraordinary courage in rescuing you, caring for you, and accompanying you on a hazardous journey.”

She turned to Willow. “And you, young lady. You unhesitatingly took on the job of nursing this man back to health, no matter the cost to your person or your reputation. And after that, you chose to accompany him on the aforementioned hazardous journey.”

“Uh...well, yes...I suppose...”

“Therefore, there is no doubt in my mind at all that you two are meant for each other. In fact, you declared yourselves married, not only in my presence but also in the inn where you spent the night alone together.”

Willow blushed.

“So, I offer you both this document as a reward for all of the above. It will remove any stain on your reputation, Willow, and allow Harry here to get his hands on you with the blessing of the church, which I think he will appreciate most heartily.” Lady Amelia’s grin was infectious. “However, one must observe the legalities, so if you’ll follow my butler, he will take you to our little ballroom, where my personal chaplain awaits you both with a special licence. He will perform an abbreviated ceremony that will legitimise your union, along with everything I just told you.” She paused. “If you want to wed, of course...”

Harry looked at Willow, who stared back at him.

Then he moved to stand in front of her. “Marry me, Willow. I can’t imagine life without you at my side.”

Willow’s eyes filled, but she smiled and nodded. “Oh yes , I’ll marry you. I really want to marry you. I think I’ve wanted to for as long as I can remember...”

“Then let’s do it. Right now.”

So they did.

(And it must be noted that Lady Amelia, despite her calm and collected demeanour, shed a few tears as the bride and groom exchanged a rather passionate kiss that made the chaplain blush.)

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:44 am*

A few days later, Forest Grange

“I can’t believe it,” Lady Hazel Trease stared once again at Harry and Willow as they sat close to each other, holding hands, on the couch in the Trease parlour. “Married. To each other...”

“That’s usually the way it works, Mama,” grinned Ashe. “And it shows that what I have said all along, that Harry is a smart chap.”

Holly, Willow’s un-identical twin, simply smiled. “It was inevitable, sister. You were absolutely devoted to Harry almost before you let your skirts down.”

“Nonsense,” scoffed Willow.

“Hah. I know what I know,” teased Holly. “We are twins. We see what others might miss.”

Willow’s eyes narrowed. “Hmm. You may be right.” She looked steadily at Holly. “Don’t forget that.”

“But married,” sighed Lady Trease. “And I was so looking forward to this last wedding, wasn’t I, dearest?”

Lord Hawthorn Trease, who had remained silent during most of the conversation simply because he couldn’t get a word in edgewise, blinked as if surprised he was actually expected to say something.



Then he smiled at Willow. "I'm not sure whether we need another ceremony, but I do think we need a really fine party in honour of the marriage of my last child."

"Papa," she sniffled, "what a lovely idea."

Before the room could fill with a variety of suggestions, a maid came running in. "My Lady, Sir, please could Mr Ashe come quick? It's Mrs Florinda..."

The colour fled from Ashe's cheeks. "Oh God. It's time...Mama..." He looked helplessly at his parent.

"Go, darling. I'll be there if I'm needed..."

Ashe ran from the room as if all the devils in hell were after him, and Lady Hazel sighed. "Florinda has been ready for at least ten days, which is why she wasn't here to welcome you home, Willow."

"She's having the baby now?" Harry's eyebrows rose. "Er...should I leave? Should we leave? I don't know...what should we do?"

"Absolutely nothing, dear boy," Lord Hawthorn replied calmly. "Trust in nature, say a wee prayer to the Lord, and let the wonder of childbirth proceed. It's what I've done four times, and you can see how well it worked." He waved his hand expansively around the room, encompassing Willow and Holly.

"Are Cherry and Garrett coming soon?" Willow asked.

Holly shook her head. "I don't think so. She's increasing, you know. And poor thing has been suffering quite a bit of unpleasantness, I've heard. Anyway, Garrett says as soon as she feels well enough, they'll make the journey."

"Well." She turned to her twin. "Where's Richard? Writing another law book? Or

more likely reading one?”

“Probably,” laughed Holly. “He’s quite brilliant, you know.”

“I know,” Willow dug her elbow into her sister. “So married life isn’t so bad then, is it?”

“I like it.” Holly glanced at Willow. “What about you?”

“Haven’t really had time to get used to it yet. But thus far?” She gave a gusty sigh. “It’s just wonderful .”

“We did quite nicely for ourselves, didn’t we?”

“Especially when you think how we were adamant we’d never wed...”

The twins laughed together, and the family passed the rest of this eventful morning discussing plans for Willow and Harry’s celebratory party.

It wasn’t until quite late in the afternoon, when everyone gathered for tea, that silence fell as the door to the parlour opened, and Ashe walked in.

He carried a large bundle against his chest and had a rather odd look on his face.

“Ahem.” He cleared his throat. “I’d like to introduce you all to...” he separated the bundle, “Master Alder Trease, and...” he held up the other half, “Miss Magnolia Trease.”

There is little need to describe the joy, the tears, the noise, the chaos, and the excitement this announcement brought to the Forest Grange household.

And since the present generation has now settled into joyous marriages of their own

choosing, it is a good time to leave them to their celebrations and bid them farewell, while wishing them all the happiness in the world.

(One does have to wonder, however, what they'll name future generations, if they exhaust the supply of trees...)