

# Chapter One

## Blythe

*Wrexford Park*  
*Early Summer 1812*

Growing up, becoming a functioning human being in an altogether relentless and trying world, is just as much a choice as it is a process. And the last time I saw Briggs Goswick, he was well on his way to becoming a certified man-child.

I can only assume that in the four years that have since passed, he has achieved that status. He must be someone unimaginably intolerable—certainly not the kind of gentleman who warrants my entire family contemplating what kind of pudding to serve at the sure-to-be-insufferable dinner party being held in his honor.

I have been sitting in Uncle Henry's lavender drawing room at Wrexford Park for thirty-three minutes—*thirty-three minutes*—listening to my uncle and cousin Charlotte debate the merits of chocolate or the downfalls of boysenberry. Briggs Goswick has been in London for several months, apparently, settling his late father's estate, and now we must celebrate his homecoming to Brumbury as the master of Mistlethrush Hall with nothing less than the perfect dinner party.

He arrives tomorrow.

Hooray.

Apparently, I am the only one dreading his return. My mother makes spirited menu suggestions to Charlotte from across the room. My sister, Amy, asks a multitude of questions about what Mr. Goswick has been up to since last we saw him. My other cousin, Julian, discusses the flower arrangements with Mrs. Sullivan, the housekeeper, and I can tell she's impressed with his ample knowledge of flora.

He offers me an exaggerated eye roll once Mrs. Sullivan turns her back, as if to suggest her taste in floral arrangements leaves much to be desired, but I know he loves coming to Wrexford Park more than Amy does, even. It's a pleasant distraction from everything that troubles us at home at Awendown House.

I wish that Papa would have joined us rather than stay behind worrying about the debts that accrue seemingly overnight.

"What about a trifle?" Charlotte suggests. The room all nods, murmuring their absolute delight at the prospect of trifle. But what flavor? What *indeed*?

I cannot indulge in this for one more second.

I rise slowly, so as not to draw attention to my eventual retreat, but the eyes of all my Barlow ancestors seem to *tsk-tsk* at me from their gilded frames.

*Eat a bad prawn, Great Aunt Frances?*

Charlotte turns to me. "Blythe, do you like trifle?"

“As much as I *love* trifle,” I reply, slowly backing toward the door and pretending to admire the many portraits of ancestors who have passed, “the real question you should be asking is whether or not Mr. *Goswick* likes trifle. Moreover, is he sick of trifle? What if all he’s had in London is trifle, and he wishes for a change of dessert as well as a change of scenery? Then what, I ask?”

“Oh, Blythe, you are so astute!” exclaims Charlotte, shaking her head. “Father, we never even considered Mr. Goswick’s preferences, and it’s his party. How thoughtless of us.”

“How will we know what he’s had in London?” Uncle Henry asks, a tinge of panic in his voice. “How will we ascertain that information? Is it too late? I told you we should have started to plan sooner, Charlotte. I knew this would all be in vain!”

I step backward, slowly, quietly, and reach my right hand out for my book on the sideboard. In the great hall, I make a dash across the black-and-white tile floor for the kitchens, sneak one of the apples that Cook planned to bake this evening, and with a quick whiff of cinnamon and sugar, I burst from the confines of Wrexford Park and out into the glorious summer sunshine. I close my eyes, grinning up at the clear blue summer sky. Freedom, finally.

Weaving my way through the paths of the formal gardens, I break from the pruned hedges, over the green hills, and through the horse pasture, my skirts becoming tangled in the tall, tall grass.

Several of Uncle Henry’s bays roam the fields, looking up briefly from their cropping of the grass and allowing me to make myself comfortable below the shade of the ancient oak. I open my book right to where I left off last night, spreading it across my lap, my back propped against the broad trunk of the tree, and read in blissful silence.

Charlotte suggested this book. Said she couldn’t put it down while on her trip to the seaside, and it is just the sort of read that Charlotte would find enthralling. Handsome knights on stallions, roaming over hill and moor on dark and stormy nights, all to avenge the honor of their fair maiden. Of course, I do love it, too, though I’d never admit that to my cousin. I’d never admit that to *anyone*, actually. While romance may have bloomed in me as a lovestruck adolescent, I’ve been pricked by its underlying thorns before. Better to read about romance in private than allow anyone to think I’m still enthralled by its appeal in real life.

I take a bite of my crisp apple and sigh. At least I have Sir Garrett to woo me for the afternoon, and he certainly comes with significantly fewer complications than any real gentleman I’ve ever met. Like the kind Briggs Goswick brings with him. Lord, I cannot believe that upon my first trip to Wrexford Park in almost a year, he of all people has to show up. But I cannot let his looming return ruin my day. I’ll deal with his presence when I’m forced to.

For a few minutes, I take in the serenity of my current setting, the chirping birds darting from the oak tree above me to the forest line just a few yards away, the snuffle of the companionable horses, and the rustling of the leaves as the breeze sifts through the branches. All my concerns over the return of my nemesis and my father’s financial woes melt away as I find myself sucked into the story. If I didn’t know any better, I would swear I could hear the thundering of Sir Garrett’s noble steed.

I glance up at my equine companions, but they still munch peaceably on the grass, occasionally offering me a contented snort.

But still, the clamor of hooves grows closer. I place my book, face flat, on the ground beside me, then brush the dirt and dust off my skirts and shade my eyes with my hand to see more clearly. Becoming larger with every moment, a beautiful, dappled gray horse gallops toward the wooden slat fence that separates the pastures. Its rider is certain, leaning forward, calling out encouragingly, but once the creature reaches the divider, it skids to a sudden stop—and the rider goes flying over its head.

“Oh!” I cry, my heart pounding as I gather my skirts and race to where the gentleman lies sprawled out on my side of the fence. I kneel down beside him, skirts billowing in my haste. “Are you all right? Can you hear me?” I’m too afraid to touch him. What if he’s seriously hurt?

He doesn't move. His eyes are pressed closed, his full lips parted, and his chest heaves with exertion. He has serious brows and dramatic cheekbones, a determined chin, and the slope of his eyes is gentle and smooth. A single lock of thick, mahogany hair falls down along his forehead. Clothing, impeccable. Boots, tall and shiny.

He is, quite certainly, the most handsome gentleman I have ever seen in my entire life, and conversely, he is, quite certainly, Briggs Goswick.

## Chapter Two

### Blythe

**D**amn him. His effortless good looks are irritating even when unconscious.

Suddenly, Briggs Goswick's clear, green eyes pop open, staring up at the serenely blue sky above us.

"Are you all right?" I ask quietly, my hand on his shoulder.

"Damn that horse to hell," he spits, sitting upright and then launching from the grass as though he had simply dismounted the animal rather than fly ass over head to the ground. Of course, I know better, and I can't stop the smirk that has come to my lips. "No matter how many times we practice, it's no use. He won't jump." He approaches the fence where the horse whinnies amiably and then throws his hands in the air.

"That's because he's a hunter. Not a jumper," I inform him.

Briggs stands with his hands on his hips, still breathing quickly as he stares at me. "Excuse me," he says quietly. His eyes soften, and he clears his throat. "I have been most ungentlemanly. I'm Mr. Briggs Goswick of Mistlethrush Hall." He bows. "And you are?"

I must come up with the appropriate answer to this question. He clearly doesn't recognize me, and I would prefer to avoid what will undoubtedly be our caustic reunion for as long as possible. "Well, if you would really like to apologize for your ungentlemanly behavior, you might realize that we haven't been formally introduced." I curtsy briefly and then make my way back to the tree where I left my book.

"Certainly, out here in nature, formal introductions aren't quite as necessary," he says, and when I glance over my shoulder, he's following me. Because of course he is. He gestures to the general outdoor area, then runs a hand through his annoyingly thick, shiny hair. "After all, you must be staying nearby. We will likely run into one another again before the summer comes to a close."

“And when we do,” I say, bending down and retrieving my book and what’s left of my apple, “I will gladly have a mutual acquaintance introduce us. Besides, this can hardly be considered *real* nature; it’s a pasture.”

He stands right in front of me now, hands on his hips, grinning at my lack of cooperation. Because Briggs Goswick always gets his way, and rather than being dissuaded by my impertinence, he has the gall to seem entertained.

I shake myself from staring at the perfect bow of his mouth. “I must go.”

“Please don’t,” he says, reaching forward and touching my wrist. “I feel as though we’ve met before. Perhaps if you tell me with whom you’re staying, I could guess.” He grins again and then bites his lower lip. “I love a good game.”

The way he says this makes me blush, heat pooling low in my belly. *That’s quite enough of that, then.* “I really must be going,” I say, heading for the fence. Gathering my skirts with my free hand, I step onto the lower rung, then hoist one leg over. Before I can clear the top, however, Briggs appears at my side, and he supports my elbow. “Th-Thank you,” I say quietly, landing on the other side and pulling my chestnut hair over my shoulder and twisting it.

“Ah, now, I think I’ve discovered a way to learn your identity once and for all,” he says. “Look there. Mr. Fitzgibbons!” he calls.

Behind me, Mr. Fitzgibbons, my uncle’s gamekeeper, crosses the lower field. He waves when he sees Briggs. Lovely. It’s all over now.

“Mr. Fitzgibbons,” says Briggs once the man is in earshot. “Do you know this young lady?”

The gamekeeper regards me, someone he’s chased out of his horses’ stables since I was a little girl, his eyes darting between Briggs and me, ignoring the tiny shake of my head I try to hide and make obvious all at once. “I...cert’nly do, sir.”

“Would you mind introducing us, then? Because, you see, she is a lady, and I am nothing if not a gentleman.”

“Me?” Fitzgibbons asks, pointing at his own chest. “You wan’ *me* to introduce you?”

“If you would be so kind.”

Fitzgibbons shrugs, flummoxed but not unwilling. “Aye, sir, if’n it pleases ye. Mr. Briggs Goswick, this is Miss Blythe Rowley, niece of Mr. Barlow. She’s stayin’ at Wrexford Park.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fitzgibbons,” says Briggs quietly, his grin never faltering and his eyes steady upon me. “That will be all.”

“G’day, Mr. Goswick. Miss Rowley.” He touches the brim of his hat.

I raise my chin in the air in an attempt to exude whatever dignity I have left.

“Well, pluck my feathers and shove me in the oven,” Briggs says, one hand on his hip and the other gripping his riding crop. “Miss Blythe Rowley, all grown up. And not altogether difficult to look at.”

I cluck my tongue. “Oh, good, there you are. I was afraid you had gained manners and grace in my absence. Happy to see you’re as reliable as ever.”

A smug smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “I am most surely as gentlemanly as I’ve ever been—the gentleman I’ve been bred to be. You, on the other hand, are a most delightful surprise. Hardly any dirt encrusting your person, a pretty dress, your hair tamed and fashionable. You *almost* look like a lady.” He jumps the fence and circles behind me. “In fact, you sound like a lady, too. But does that a lady make?”

I arch an eyebrow, my cheeks heating at his slow perusal. *Lord, please don’t let me be blushing.* “You may look like a gentleman, and if I were so fooled by your appearance, I suppose you’d sound like one, too.”

He laughs.

“But you can’t ride a horse, obviously, and that’s a deal breaker, so I shall take my leave of you, Mr. Goswick.” I curtsy low and dramatically.

“So soon, Miss Rowley? But we were only just getting reacquainted.”

“I’m a busy girl,” I reply, tucking my book under my arm and taking a final bite of apple. “I’m needed back at Wrexford.”

“For how long will you be staying?” Briggs asks, appearing before me and trotting backward in order to keep up and be in my way all at once.

“Until the end of the week,” I reply.

“Not the summer?”

“Lord, no.”

“You don’t sound particularly enthusiastic.”

I pause. “Please don’t pretend to know my innermost thoughts, Mr. Goswick. It’s been quite some time since we met under less-than-ideal circumstances, and at least one of us has matured since then.”

“Sharp as ever, Miss Rowley.”

I skip down the slope of a hill, the clock copula adorning the arch at Wrexford coming into view. “You confuse rudeness with obligation. As I’ve told you, I’m needed back at Wrexford Park. There’s apparently a dinner being planned.”

“For me, naturally.”

“So it would seem.”

“So *you’re* planning my dinner? How very kind of you, Miss Rowley. I am honored.”

I pause at the boxwood hedges that separate the gardens from the fields, closing my eyes and allowing my shoulders to droop, even though I clench my teeth. “I am helping my cousin, who is planning your dinner.”

“As always, you thrive on being enigmatic.”

“Enigmatic!” I cry, that old familiar vexation bubbling in my chest again. Not five minutes in, and Briggs Goswick has already gotten on my last nerve. “I could not be any clearer, Mr. Goswick. I have told you time and again that my cousin needs me to help in preparation for your dinner. If you’ll excuse me.” I curtsy once again and leave him.

He’s silent as I take several paces, and at last, I think, I’ve left him behind me.

Not altogether the worst meeting with Briggs Goswick, actually. He was cocky, no doubt, but I’ve experienced worse.

Until he calls out, “Will you be serving pork, perhaps?”

Slowly, I turn, regarding him in the middle of the path, riding crop in one hand and hat in the other. He is so maddeningly handsome, I see red. I hurl the core of my apple, and it meets its target, right between his eyes.

“Ah,” says Briggs, offering me a slow blink. “Splendid. Right where we left off, then.”

## Chapter Three

Blythe

I weave my way through the hedgerows, determined not to give Briggs Goswick another second of my precious time. Though perhaps I was a bit childish. Throwing apples in rage is beneath me, and besides, now Mr. Goswick knows he can get the better of me rather easily.

Still, even the company of my family discussing pudding is more welcome than his.

But when I get inside, no one is left in the drawing room. I clutch Charlotte's book to my chest and retreat to the quiet confines of my bedchamber, whereupon I collapse backward onto my bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Our childhood rivalry started out innocently enough, I suppose. For me, anyway.

The Goswicks were hosting a garden party one summer while I was staying at Wrexford Park when I was ten years old, and I was walking with Amy and August Goswick under a flowered trellis absolutely inundated with bees.

I cannot remember a time in my life when I was not fascinated by bees. I began to explain that bees are attracted to particular flowers like the ones on the trellis, when Briggs Goswick appeared seemingly out of nowhere and rolled his eyes and offered a condescending, "No, Blythe, that's nonsense." Apparently, bees like flowers, any flower—they don't care what kind of flower it is. I tried (but not too hard) to be pleasant, but Briggs has always been irksome, and he told me he had been away at school, so naturally he would know better than any girl.

I took that as a challenge, obviously, and every opportunity I got, I made sure to correct Briggs. In front of his brother, in front of our families, even in front of friends when they were visiting. Admittedly, this was all a bit juvenile, but I was pushed into it by my pride. You know, as a *girl*.

And there were just *so many* occasions to correct him. Amy and I were often at Wrexford to stay with Charlotte, and Briggs Goswick was often painfully, foolishly wrong about so very many things.

Naturally, Briggs wasn't about to allow me to continue along this path, and I suppose, clever as I was, I should have anticipated his retaliation. Not with barbed remarks, because he was too obtuse for that sort of thing, but with pranks.

And I am woman enough to admit that I am not at all above a good lark. He started with frogs in a picnic basket, which upset Charlotte more than it did me. I retaliated by lining his bedsheets with rotting cabbage leaves. That sort of thing. Harmless, really. But they grew in scope. He once trained a cat to yowl every time I sat to play and sing at the pianoforte. I pretended to accidentally spill a glass of water in his lap so that when he stood at dinner, it looked as though he had wet himself.

I suppose it came to a head the Christmas I turned fourteen. We stayed at Wrexford for two weeks that year, and when Briggs came home from boarding school, I was ready with some sort of practical joke. I can't even remember what it was now.

But I recall when he walked through the door into the grand black-and-white tiled foyer of Wrexford Park. Taller, athletic. Handsome. He wore fashionable clothes that fit snugly over his broad shoulders. At sixteen, he was no longer the little boy who had participated in silly mischief with his neighbor's cousin. And at fourteen, I realized that those were no longer the kinds of games I wanted to play with Briggs. I wasn't sure what I wanted from him, but suddenly, every witty retort fell flat in my mouth. Words in general were difficult to produce in his presence, and as he stepped forward, my cheeks flushed hot. It was a most frustrating state of being.

He paused before me and Charlotte, his hands clasped behind his back, and that all-too-familiar smirk occupying his mouth, which I suddenly could not tear my eyes from. I waited for something, anything, but all he said was, "Miss Rowley," with an elegant bow.

Miss Rowley. *Miss Rowley*. He had never called me by my formal name before, and it felt like some unfortunate loss I couldn't quite put into words.

From that moment forward, my holiday was occupied by finding all the ways to gain Briggs Goswick's attention, and I thought I was doing rather well, actually. Whenever he happened to find me seated beside him

(randomly, of course) at dinner, he would smile, offer me whatever vegetable was closest. He applauded politely whenever I played for the company, and after a particularly rousing rendition of “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,” he even told me that I was the most accomplished young lady of his acquaintance. At fourteen! Truly, I was a marvel, and surely, Briggs was about to ask to court me in earnest.

Finally, it was to be the annual Christmas party at Mistlethrush Hall, and I had saved my finest dress for the occasion—a pretty, soft pink, silky material with ribbons at the elbow. Mama had made it herself, and as I got ready with Charlotte and Amy, I twirled in the mirror, admiring the way the fabric floated about me.

This was the night I would win Briggs Goswick’s heart. I was certain.

On the carriage ride to Mistlethrush, Charlotte grasped my hand and whispered, “You look *so* pretty tonight, Blythe.”

“Do you think so?” I could hardly breathe, and despite the frigid temperature and gently falling snowflakes, I was too warm with excitement.

The carriage slowed before Mistlethrush Hall, and when the door opened, we were greeted by a very merry Mr. Frank Goswick. Briggs’s father was always loud and welcoming, a handsome and refined man who made you feel at home immediately.

“Why, Miss Rowley,” he said as he helped me out of the carriage. “You look absolutely lovely this evening, my dear.”

“Thank you, Mr. Goswick,” I said, curtsying.

Inside Mistlethrush, it felt like something out of a fairy tale. Green garlands and bright red berries festooned the exposed beams of the drawing room, and a fire roared in the hearth. People from all over Brumbury gathered, sipping claret and laughing together. And there was Briggs with—to my surprise—a group of boys his age.

He was truly magnificent. My stomach fluttered as his eyes found mine, and I clasped my hands before me to keep them from fidgeting.

“We have some extra company this evening,” said Mr. Goswick from behind me and Charlotte. “Some of the boys from Briggs’s school have joined us.”

*No matter*, I assured myself. Nothing would keep me and Briggs apart tonight. It was like we were preordained.

And the evening started off better than I could have imagined. Briggs sought me out and introduced me to his friends. He insisted I perform at the pianoforte after dinner, and whenever he noticed my glass was empty, he asked if he could fetch me a fresh one. Finally, I felt seen by Briggs Goswick. Worthy of Briggs Goswick. He recognized that not only was I his equal, but deserving of his attention and admiration.

At the end of the evening, Charlotte and I were sitting near the fire, discussing something that was surely of the utmost importance, when Briggs appeared.

“May I speak to you privately, Miss Rowley?” His striking green eyes sparkled in the firelight. This was it.

“Of course. Excuse me, Charlotte.”

Briggs led me to the door, glancing around as if to make sure no one was within earshot. “Forgive me if this is too forward, Miss Rowley—”

I stood taller, my chest constricting in anticipation.

“—but I just learned that one of our tenants’ dogs had a litter of puppies in the loft of their barn.”

“Oh,” I said, clasping my hands together in delight. What could be better than this? Briggs Goswick about to profess his undying love...*and* puppies? Absolutely nothing.

“I thought you might like to see them with me.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “I would.”

Briggs grinned in relief. “Wonderful. Let’s find your pelisse.”

“What, now?” I asked. I glanced over my shoulder. Mama and Papa were engaged in conversation with Mr. Goswick and Briggs’s uncle Richard. Uncle Henry was asleep by the fire, and Charlotte and Amy watched me with wide, eager gazes. I couldn’t back down now. Besides, I was certain that I would be able to slip out with Briggs unnoticed, play with the puppies for a bit, and then, if I were really lucky, have the most romantic, snow-flaked kiss in the history of all kisses.

Outside, the cold air was shocking, but Briggs grabbed my hand in his, the other holding a lantern, and led me across the fields behind Mistlethrush. A great stone barn stood in the distance, and we stopped at a ladder that was propped up at the opening to the hay loft.

“Wait here,” he said. “You can’t go up alone, not without me. I’ll go first because the mother knows me. I don’t want us to frighten her.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “Never without you.” He was so thoughtful and considerate.

Briggs climbed the ladder, disappearing into the hay loft while I waited down below, shivering in the dark night yet humming with warm anticipation. At last, he poked his head out. “Come on!” he called in a whisper. “Walk up slowly. There are five pups.”

I grinned, grasping the first rung of the ladder, and followed him into the loft. Inside, it was dark except for the limited light of Briggs’s lantern, and I could see that he was hunched behind a mountain of hay.

“Over here,” he said, glancing back at me. “But go slowly. We don’t want to frighten her.”

Gently, I took a few measured steps in his direction. “Are they sleeping?” I asked.

“They just woke up.”

I took another step.

“Wait right there,” said Briggs. “The mother seems a bit concerned.”

“All right,” I replied, stopping where I was.

And without any warning, the floor beneath me caved in, dropping me several feet below to the muddy, manure-laden hay of the pigsty. My mouth fell open as I inhaled deeply, dizziness overcoming me. It took several moments to even realize what was happening, and if it wasn’t for the squeal of the pig I apparently had woken from a very restful slumber, it might have taken me longer.

I couldn’t catch my breath. I was covered in manure. My beautiful pink dress, destroyed. I looked up into the hay loft where all of Briggs’s friends appeared, laughing hysterically. Briggs, of course, tried to maintain his composure, but his self-control was cracking the longer I sat there.

My limbs felt weak and tingly, and I grabbed a handful of muddy hay, launching it at Briggs, but that just made them laugh even harder.

“What is it, Miss Rowley?” one of them called down. “No witty retort for Goswick?”

His friends’ laughter became incoherent cackles.

There was no moment of disbelief, no time for that kind of denial. It was all vividly apparent: everything I thought, everything I had hoped for, had all been a charade. I was just a joke for him and his friends to laugh at. The silly girl who had the audacity to believe Briggs Goswick was in love with her. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes, and I buried the sob that formed behind every breath I took.

I marched back to Mistlethrush Hall in silence, my entire body vibrating with anger. I hardly even noticed that Briggs had clearly followed me.

“Blythe, wait,” he called.

I paused in the middle of the field, turning on him, my chin in the air. “You will address me as Miss Rowley.”

He stumbled to a stop, chest heaving from the exertion of trying to catch up to me. “Yes, Miss Rowley, of course.”

I burst into the drawing room of Mistlethrush, covered in mud and manure, and his father’s eyes roamed from me to just over my shoulder where Briggs lingered in the doorway.



“Briggs Goswick!” he shouted.

Briggs made no attempt to defend himself, and whatever his punishment was, I did not see him for the rest of my stay at Wrexford.

I’ve made a point of not seeing him for four years. I suppose my fury has only festered in the meanwhile, because now here I am. Exasperated once more by his very presence and wishing there was a puppy for me to cuddle.

Or a pig, even.

## Chapter Four

### Briggs

**M**y punishment for tricking Blythe Rowley and allowing her to fall into the pigsty was my father’s contempt.

It doesn’t sound like much, but I adored my father, and when he was angry with me, all I wanted was to make amends. And I had never seen my father so angry as when he spoke to me about Blythe Rowley.

“What were you thinking, Briggs?” he asked.

I stood in his study as he sat at his desk, a fire roaring in the hearth behind him as the last snowflakes from the previous night’s storm fell to the ground in the gardens outside his window.

“I swear, Father, I didn’t intend for any of that to happen to Miss Rowley. It was Jack Stirling, and he planned it without me—”

Father leaned back in his chair, thrumming the desk with his fingers. “If you didn’t intend for her to land in the pigsty, then what *did* you intend?”

My shoulders slouched when I realized I had to tell him the whole truth, and even then, that wouldn’t guarantee my ass being saved from a sound lashing.

“My friends and I had overheard Miss Rowley telling Miss Barlow that she hoped I would kiss her before I returned to school,” I murmured, shame pooling low in my gut. “But Father, she’s only fourteen. Still just a girl, really. So...I was going to let her *think* I was about to kiss her, and when she leaned in and closed her eyes, it would be a dog instead of me.”

Father’s nostrils flared. “You were going to use the knowledge of her affection for you in order to embarrass her? Who is truly the child in this scenario, son?”

I tried to find a way around that one, but no. He was right. That’s exactly what I was.

He stood, then, leaning over his desk, brows pinched together in a combination of disgust and disbelief that made me feel like I was a genuine troll. “I am embarrassed for you, Briggs, and shocked that your hatred of the girl could push you to act in such a way.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t hate Miss Rowley. Not truly. Pranks have always sort of been our...thing.”

Father sighed. “Briggs, she is a gentleman’s daughter, and I thought I was raising you to be a gentleman. When you respect a young lady, the last thing you shall ever do is betray her trust. Do you understand me?”

I nodded.

Father sat back down at his desk and waved me away. “Please go to your bedchamber, Briggs, and think over your actions.”

I retreated with my proverbial tail between my legs.

My father forgave me eventually.

Blythe Rowley, it seems, not so much.

But even with the apple to the middle of my face this afternoon, it was an unexpectedly pleasant distraction from my overall exasperating day.

I suppose there was a time in my life where meeting up with Blythe Rowley in the middle of a field armed with nothing more than my natural charm would be something I wouldn’t wish upon my worst enemy, but fate lately has a funny way of exploding in my face.

If I had ever ventured to imagine the moment I met up again with Blythe Rowley, I think an apology might have been included. I hope that’s the kind of gentleman I am—the kind my father would be proud of. But one look at her, and I unraveled. It had been easy to tease the old Blythe because she was so self-righteous and frightfully clever. But this Blythe? Well, she’s still self-righteous and frightfully clever, but now also...beautiful. Too beautiful. Like, I stared too long at the sun, *painfully* beautiful. And that’s three whole things to throw me off. Confidence, wit, *and* unparalleled beauty? I didn’t prepare for that kind of amalgamation, so I did what any self-respecting person would. I teased her.

Better that she hates me than ignores me, I suppose.

Reaching into the pocket of my coat, I gently touch the handkerchief that’s rested there for almost ten years. Despite our interaction this afternoon, it still provides me solace.

I lead my horse, Apollo, away from Wrexford Park, finding the worn lane between the fields, allowing his muzzle to nudge my shoulder every so often. I peel my coat from my body, draping it over his saddle, and stare numbly as the first roofline of Mistlethrush Hall comes into view. There’s no more avoiding it now. I’ve done a passably decent job of it, considering I arrived from London last night, my mother and brother none the wiser.

It wasn’t until Westley found me lingering in Brumbury village that I felt the obligation of this trip settle on my shoulders. I haven’t been home in six months, not since we buried my father. In the meantime, I’ve been staying with my uncle in London, trying to settle my late father’s finances.

Actually, that’s a lie. They were fairly easy to settle, as there were hardly any finances left. What occupied my time was uncovering where all my family’s money had gone and why I, the heir to Mistlethrush Hall, was left with only four hundred fifty-two pounds and a shilling. And the answer, as it turned out, was gambling—and my father’s mistress.

Two discoveries that I cannot bring myself to share with my family. I suppose I figured that the longer I stayed away, the easier it would be to eventually break it to them, but here I am. Standing in front of Mistlethrush Hall, home to every Goswick since 1584, searching for the words to explain why we’re going to have to sell it all while trying to avoid revealing my father’s duplicitousness.

Because I can’t do that. I could bear anything but that.

Our solicitor informed me that we’ve enough money to last until the autumn, then we would have to consider the sale of our home. If not for our finances, then for the sake of the many tenants who rely on the

land to feed their families. If I can somehow find a way to preserve Mistlethrush in the Goswick name by then, I won't have to worry about selling. I suppose I must start being clever in the meanwhile.

One of the stable boys takes Apollo's reins from my hand, and I rub at the spot between my eyes, as though Blythe's apple had only just landed.

"Briggs!" comes my mother's voice. She appears in the doorway of the eastern drawing room, and as she sweeps through the garden, the scents of honeysuckle and bluebells follow after her. Before I can even reply, she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses my cheeks incessantly. "Look at you! You look so handsome and grown up. My sweet boy."

The guilt bubbles in my chest again. Part of me, the part that will always be her sweet boy, wants to tell her everything. Confide in her, have her assure me that everything will be fine. But I'm not that boy anymore. I cannot be. I'm the master of Mistlethrush Hall, and now my family depends on me. "Hello, Mother." I squeeze her in a hug, hoping I can hide the burden in my voice, but she's highly skilled in detecting even the smallest deviations in tone.

She hooks her arm through my elbow and leads me inside. "I figured you would be close behind Westley, and once he arrived yesterday afternoon, he explained that you had been delayed with your horse's sore hoof."

Bless Westley and his well-crafted lies. There's a reason he's been my best friend since boarding school.

"And do you know, he's brought his stepsister with him," my mother continues. She leads us down the path to the entrance of the drawing room. "Miss Sabrina Dixon. Have you met her already?"

"I haven't," I admit.

Mother leans her head in, whispering, "She's quite beautiful, though rather reserved."

My mother loves gossip and believes her matchmaking skills are unsurpassed. It's only natural that she should extend her talents to me, but the last thing my mind could possibly comprehend right now is courting.

I open the door, allowing my mother to step in first, and am greeted with the sight of my younger brother, August, sitting at the window, his nose in a book, Westley standing near his stepsister, his teacup halfway to his mouth, and the lady I imagine to be Miss Sabrina Dixon seated on the sofa.

Admittedly, she is pretty. Impeccably dressed, her long hair the color of straw pulled back in a fashionable style, she greets me with wide blue eyes.

"Ah, there you are, Briggs. I hope your horse is on the mend?" says Westley in greeting.

"Yes, thank you. Doing better by the day."

Miss Dixon rises from her seat and then lowers herself in a shallow curtsy.

Westley clears his throat. "Allow me to introduce my stepsister, Miss Sabrina Dixon."

I bow before her. "Miss Dixon, a pleasure."

A small smile flicks across her lips, but she reclaims her seat and folds her hands neatly in her lap without uttering a word.

A lady with nothing to say? Refreshing considering the events of my afternoon, but not exactly my style.

"Well then." I move on. "August," I add, addressing my brother.

He's slouched in his chair, but his eyes dart from the page of his book to meet mine. "Briggs."

And that's the best I can expect of him after interrupting his reading.

Westley gestures behind the sofa at the table of tea and refreshments, and wordlessly, I join him there. Like he's the owner of Mistlethrush, and I'm simply his guest. I suppose I should become better acquainted with that particular sensation if my newly acquired lack of finances has anything to do with it.

"Everything all right?" he asks, handing me a cup and saucer.

I lift the beverage to my mouth, allow my thoughts to flutter back to the fields, on my back, the world swimming around me after being thrown from my horse, only to open my eyes and find Blythe Rowley looming over me. It feels silly, letting myself be so consumed by an admittedly pretty face—when it isn't scowling, at least—when there is so much more that should be occupying my thoughts.

Instead of replying, I go with distraction. "Your stepsister is a little..."

"Reserved?" Westley provides for me.

"She doesn't seem particularly thrilled to be here. Why did she join you?"

"Said she needed a change of scenery from Brompton Place. That my father and her mother were far too preoccupied with their newly wedded bliss to be bothered with her."

"Not a girl prone to swooning, eh?"

Snorting in amusement, Westley observes Sabrina as my mother tells her all about the milliner's shop in town. "She is not. She has told me multiple times that she is not the marrying kind, and she doesn't care if she remains a spinster all her life."

I take a sip of tea. I can respect that.

"That her dowry of fifty thousand pounds shall never belong to anyone but herself."

My cup clanks back into its saucer as I choke on my drink, wheezing. Westley slaps my back, which only makes things worse and draws the attention of my mother, August, and Sabrina. I wave to signal that I'm fine, even though my eyes are watering and my lungs are burning.

"Are you all right?" Westley asks once everyone has returned their attention to their previous occupations.

"Did you say f-fifty thousand?" I manage to ask.

"I did."

"Westley, that's a lot of money for one rather wordless girl."

"She could certainly have her pick of husbands if she so chose." Westley lowers his voice. "She could have *you*."

I rest my teacup back in its saucer. "Come again?"

Westley turns so that his back faces our present company and only I can hear what he has to say. "She could have you. You just finished telling me all about the dire financial circumstances you've put yourself in, and Sabrina could be the girl to solve all that."

I peer over Westley's shoulder at the mouse of a girl on the sofa. She stares off at something, Lord knows what, as though no one else in the room exists. She's like a rich little ghost.

"It could work," Westley insists. "As long as you don't squander away all of *her* money, too."

I grimace at him but fail to defend myself. I couldn't admit to Westley that it was my father who was the squanderer and not me, so now I must accept his look of complete and utter contempt whenever he mentions it.

"Me," I repeat.

"You," Westley confirms.

She could have me, and I her, and it would solve all of the financial woes my father has thrust upon my family. We wouldn't have to sell Mistlethrush at the end of the summer or let down our tenants. I wouldn't have to displace my loved ones. My mother and brother would never need to know about the woman my father kept in London. And maybe I could forget that the man who raised me, the man I have tried so hard to emulate, who always pointed out to me the difference between right and wrong, let me down in every possible way before he left us all.

It doesn't sit right with me, but this isn't about me. I step closer to the sofa. The least I could do is strike up a conversation with her. Conversation might be useful if I'm contemplating attaching myself to a stranger for the rest of my life.

I eye the small amount of space between Miss Dixon and the collection of pillows that I could possibly squeeze into. Almost as though she can read my mind, she raises her gaze to mine, and if my eyebrows ask her a question, her body's response is to take up what little room was left on the sofa.

An excellent start.

"Do you know who's visiting with Mr. Barlow, Briggs?" comes my mother's voice.

*Christ in Heaven, Mother, yes, I know who's visiting with the Barlows, and she is the last lady on the planet who I wish to discuss right now, not when I have a different lady who is sitting on J50,000 in my very drawing room.*

"Miss Blythe Rowley!" she continues anyway. "It's been over a year since the Rowleys have spent any time at Wrexford Park, apparently. Sir Anthony and Lady Rowley seem rather preoccupied with Awendown House of late, but I'm glad to see them, nevertheless. I suppose that means she'll be attending your dinner. You'll have to be introduced, Miss Dixon."

Sabrina smiles and nods lightly. But she doesn't actually say anything. *Still.*

"Briggs, do you remember how you and Miss Rowley used to torment each other as children?"

I take a deep breath. "Mother, I don't think—"

"Oh, you two *despised* each other. Always playing a prank or a jape to irritate the other. But I spoke with her after church the other day, and she has grown to be quite a beauty. Don't you think so, August?"

August flips a page. "All right."

Mother settles more deeply into her seat, takes a sip of her tea, and then says, "You seemed rather taken with her on Sunday, I daresay."

This prompts August to slam his book shut. "I wasn't taken with her, Mother. We were discussing business."

"Business?" I ask.

"Miss Rowley is quite an expert when it comes to honeybees, apparently," August clarifies, "and I have engaged her business to build an apiary here at Mistlethrush."

His words actually make me feel a little faint as expense ledgers flash before my eyes, and despite the fact that she's made sitting all the more difficult, I plop myself down next to Sabrina Dixon, causing her to jump and cling to her arm of the sofa.

"You've what?" I ask.

Clearly confused, August repeats himself. "I've asked Miss Rowley to build an apiary here at Mistlethrush. She's knowledgeable, and her rate was more than reasonable."

"Unless she's charging nothing, then it's not reasonable."

August pinches his brows, scowling.

"What's gotten into you, Briggs?" Mother asks.

"Nothing," I assure her. "Nothing. It's just that I wish my younger brother wouldn't go about securing people's services for a house that isn't his. He didn't even run it by me."

"I didn't realize I needed to ask your permission for every little expenditure," says August.

I lurch from the sofa. "Well, you do! In case you've forgotten, Father is gone. That means I'm now the master of Mistlethrush Hall, and it all falls on me. If you would like to shoulder this burden yourself, be my guest."

August's chest heaves, and he grabs his book, wordlessly exiting the drawing room.

Placing her cup and saucer on the table beside her, Mother stands, inviting Miss Dixon to do the same. "Why don't I show you the gardens, my dear? Allow Mr. Goswick to gather himself."

"I would like that," Sabrina replies.

I pinch the bridge of my nose as the ladies leave Westley and me to ourselves.

"All right, then," says Westley. "I see there are issues churning beneath the surface. I offer you the space to discuss them with me or, by all means, keep them to yourself."

I flop back onto the sofa. "Keep them to myself."

Best to keep at least one person of my acquaintance on my side, at least until my thoughts sort themselves out.

*If they sort themselves out.*