

**Title:** Those Qualities Upon Which Friendship Lives

**Summary:** Mary returns to Misselthwaite Manor from boarding school in London more of a lady than ever and Dickon sees her in a new light -- the problem is, so does Colin.

**Ship:** Mary/Dickon

**Author:** Mena aka Mena in the Garden aka Momodee

**Contact Info:** [secretsinthegarden@gmail.com](mailto:secretsinthegarden@gmail.com)

*Twitter:* LJMomo *Yahoo:* aquietconscience *AIM:* aquietconscience (Feel free to IM me when I'm on and introduce yourself!)

**Website:** <http://secretgardenfics.momodee.com/>

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Those Qualities Upon Which Friendship Lives

by Mena in the Garden

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Chapter One

Mary Lennox's return to Misselthwaite Manor was now imminent. All of the arrangements had been made and the occupants of the house awaited her arrival with bated breath. Colin Craven, Mary's first cousin, and Dickon Sowerby, Mary's close friend, wandered about the grounds, peering out to the horizon for a glimpse of her carriage. Colin threatened to mount his horse and ride out along the road while Dickon nodded silently, hanging back a bit and kicking at the earth with the toe of his shoe.

"She should be here already!" cried Colin, a whiny tinge in his voice. He'd always been an impatient boy and now he was an equally impatient young man. Once thought to be lame, Colin had been walking for eight years now and was quite a horseman to boot. He'd grown to a lanky six feet plus one inch and his once pallid skin now glowed robustly in the crisp morning air.

Dickon knew to remain silent when Colin was cranky, which was often. He didn't mind it at all, as his personality was more suited to quiet and tranquility, the essence of which he exuded in great quantities but that had little effect on Colin. Dickon had also reached his full height of six feet and the baby fat he used to carry had melted into muscle. Working in the Manor gardens with Ben Weatherstaff and tending to his animals on the moors had given him strength and resilience. He was also infinitely more able to stand a wait than Colin. Where Colin had taken to grabbing flower heads and picking them apart with gusto, Dickon simply leaned against a tree and breathed in the scent of the newly crushed petals.

Dickon's sister Martha still worked at Misselthwaite Manor. The stout Housekeeper Mrs. Medlock had taken her on as apprentice with the understanding that when she retired, Martha was to become head Housekeeper for the manor. Presently, Martha approached the young men

while wiping her hands on her apron. "I wondered where you'd got to," she said in a thick Yorkshire accent. "Cana wait for Miss Mary to come home, can yeh?" The smile she offered always punctuated her sentences but failed to placate Colin.

"Where is she? Didn't they say the carriage would be here at eight o'clock?" he whined.

"Ah!" laughed Martha. "'Tis only seven and forty, Master Colin," she said.

"Bother!" Colin said with a growl, stomping off into the house.

"Wha was that all about?" Martha addressed her brother.

"He's –" Dickon began but realized he didn't have an adequate adjective to insert. "Colin" he finished with a slight shrug. "Does tha' need any help inside, Martha?" he asked politely.

Martha rolled her eyes to the Heavens before answering. "Colin's too highly strung. I don't know if he'll drive poor Miss Mary back to her boarding school. She'd wish she'd never come back with the way he's carryin' on."

Dickon gave his sister a hearty grin. They'd both seen Colin at his worst and knew he was a high maintenance friend. Still in all, Dickon liked Colin's energy and found him somewhat amusing. At least Colin was no longer ill and could walk about as much and as often as he pleased.

Mary's absence had not boded well with her cousin; he'd thrown his first fit in two years when it had been announced that Mary would go to a boarding school when she turned thirteen. Archibald Craven didn't enjoy the idea of her leaving but saw that it was necessary for Mary to be educated properly and to learn to be a society woman. Thus she was sent to London for the duration of her schooling. She'd come back to Misselthwaite on for Easter and Christmas and her family of Archibald, Colin, Archie's brother Neville and his wife and children and of course the Sowerbys all gathered at the Manor to celebrate the holidays. Mary seemed to grow more and more mature as the years went by. She hadn't been able to come home at all in the past year, so no one had laid eyes on her for almost a year and a half. Colin expected her to be the same as always, but Dickon knew better. She was growing away from him, from them all.

So it was that Dickon took to the moors to think about how he'd react to seeing Mary again. Would she be very different? Would she have a beau in the city? Had she forgotten their garden? Dickon stopped and looked back at the house upon the hill, so formidable and dark. Only a ways away stood the stone walls of their secret garden, shrouded in ivy and cared for by Dickon himself over the years. Colin had helped at first but with Mary gone, the garden seemed to lose some of its magic for him. Dickon felt the garden was saturated with magic, much more than before, and Colin just couldn't see it. For Colin, Mary was his antidote, his savior. For Dickon, his peace would always come from nature and being surrounded by animals and earth. Mary was the person he'd most like to share those things with, but never told her. She was far away now and though she returned, Dickon did not expect the girl he once knew but his heart held onto a sliver of hope that the child she'd been would still be wick inside the body of a young woman. It is the child in us that keeps our hearts, his mother always said. He hoped Mary had not lost her

heart to the busy city and all it had to offer.

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The rumble of wheels churning on the road and the shrill whinny of a horse drew Dickon out of his reverie. A carriage appeared on the horizon and Dickon began to run toward the house to alert Colin, Martha and the servants. There were two miles between the park gate and the stone court of the Manor and the carriage had already traveled along the grounds for many a minute while Dickon was lost in thought. He reached the door just as the carriage pulled into the courtyard. Colin flew out and ran up to the carriage before it'd even stopped. Mrs. Medlock appeared at the door with a frown plastered on her withered face.

"I've told him a million times not to run like that, but he never listens!" she cried exasperatedly but with a smile. Her mood shifted abruptly as she looked upon the now stopped carriage as the footman opened the door. "Come now, she's home!" she said, disobeying her own rule about running and throwing herself toward the carriage.

Dickon hung back as Martha came out onto the step to watch the proceedings. He caught his sister's worried glance and returned it. They weren't the kind of folk inclined to be in anyone's face, preferring instead to wait until the excitement had died down and everyone was in their right minds to make inquiries.

Mary emerged from the carriage, clutching her skirts around her. She stepped down daintily, revealing for a moment her stocking covered ankle. Dickon took this in, noting that Colin would have missed it, being as close as he was to her. She looked radiant: her long dark blonde hair was pinned up under a fancy blue hat and only a few twisted tendrils hung about her rosy cheeks. Her dress of blue and eggshell had a laced collar and the equally laced hem hung all the way to her feet.

Dickon's silent inventory was interrupted by Colin, who grabbed Mary about the waist and hoisted her into his arms, spinning her around in circles in the courtyard. Mary giggled, trying to hold onto her hat while being spun.

"Colin Craven, release her immediately!" cried Mrs. Medlock, who tried to extricate the young man from Mary to no avail.

"I'm only having a bit of fun, Mrs. Medlock," Colin said as he finally set the flustered young woman down.

"You've been taught not to play roughly with young ladies, Master Colin! Whatever shall we do with you?"

"Tell my father, probably," he replied simply, used to being reported for his antics. "Though he won't be back for another month as it is so my punishment will just have to wait."

Mrs. Medlock sniffed at the young man and addressed Mary. "Mary, it is so good to have you

home!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Medlock. I'm very pleased to be back," Mary said, looking from Colin to Mrs. Medlock and back again. Turning away from them, she looked toward the garden. "Is the garden still wick?"

"We've been keeping it up for you, Mary," said Colin quickly, taking her arm. He guided her toward the house.

"I trust you have, Colin," she replied.

The entourage approached the step as the footman unloaded Mary's belongings and handed them off to the house staff. Colin still held Mary's arm yet she seemed to want to pull away from him. Dickon moved further away from the group so he could watch them all go inside and follow after.

"Welcome back, Miss Mary," said Martha with a full grin and curtsy. "I've made up tha's room just the way tha likes it."

"Thank you, Martha," said Mary, somewhat distractedly. She looked past Martha, into the house, then back at the carriage, and out toward the moors. She appeared to be searching for something or someone. Not finding it, Mary turned back to Martha. "Where's Dickon?" she asked.

"Why, he's right here," said Martha with a giggle, gesturing toward her brother who lurked about ten feet away and remained partially hidden behind a great potted plant. "He's hidin' in the bushes just there."

Dickon, having been found out, emerged from behind the foliage to face Mary.

"Dickon!" said Mary with considerable enthusiasm. She pulled away from Colin and walked to where Dickon stood. She had to look up to see his eyes. "My, you've grown so tall!"

"Aye," he said, looking into her large eyes and suddenly wondering if she thought his extra height was a good thing or not.

The group had stopped, hesitant to enter the house without their guest of honor who so stubbornly kept them waiting as she spoke to her childhood friend. Colin, who could stand no longer a wait than three seconds, boldly approached the couple and in an almost complaining tone asked her if she wouldn't like to come inside and have some tea or a piece of cake.

Mary pried her gaze from Dickon and looked at her cousin. "Yes, of course," she said. And to Dickon, "You'll be joining us, won't you, Dickon?"

The eagerness in her voice was not lost on him and he obligingly assured her he would indeed join the group.

"Come now, Mary Lennox, we haven't seen you in almost two years. We've much to talk to you about," said Mrs. Medlock, ushering Martha into the house and gesturing for Mary to follow.

Colin looked from Mary to Dickon and seemed to realize something had changed between them, but there lingered a confusion as to what it could be. Mary herself could not place the change and so, with Colin tugging at her sleeve like a toddler, she finally turned from Dickon and walked through the familiar old paneled oak doors and into the enormous hall.

Dickon entered after her and the manservant stationed at the door closed it behind them. The procession led to the drawing room, where tea and cakes were being set out for the guests. Martha flitted alongside Mary, whispering to her until Mrs. Medlock ordered the servant to take Mary's hat and make sure her belongings were being situated in her room. Martha curtsied and rushed out of the room obediently.

"Do sit down and rest yourself, Mary," ordered Mrs. Medlock in a matronly way.

Mary obliged, taking a seat near the hearth. Colin quickly claimed the seat next to her while Dickon again chose to lurk rather than make his presence too obvious. A seat nearer to the door and outside the circle of conversation was a good enough vantage point for him to continue his scrutiny of Mary Lennox. As she chatted gaily with Colin and Mrs. Medlock, Dickon's gaze traveled over her body from head to toe, absorbing the changes that had taken place in her. She was taller and more weight helped fill out her womanly curves. When he'd first set eyes on Mary as a child, she was weak, pallid, thin and sickly looking. The woman who sat before him balancing a cup of tea on a saucer in her gloved hands looked a far cry from that small, angry little girl of her youth. Dickon hadn't cared whether she liked him or not at the time, for he liked her anyway. Now it was all different, and it did matter. And when Colin leaned closer to Mary as she spoke to her, Dickon acknowledged that he did feel the first pangs of jealousy begin in his heart.

Colin grew up privileged while Dickon was just a common boy who loved the moors and working with his hands. Dickon had worked at Misselthwaite since Mary had gone, tending to her garden as promised. Although Colin had said he and Dickon took care of it, in truth the garden thrived due to Dickon's constant attention. Colin took the lush garden for granted and of late had not bothered to enter its stone walls.

Dickon had never been envious of the grandeur that surrounded Colin. He felt sorry for the younger boy having lost his mother as a baby and being ignored by his father for so long, but those times were past and now Colin was the apple of his father's eye, healthy and energetic if not still prone to tantrums. It was Mary who played the deciding factor in any rivalry that would arise between the boys. Dickon had always felt that Mary liked him just a bit more than she liked Colin, and this thought comforted him, though subconsciously, whenever Mary seemed to spend more time with Colin than himself. Her journey to school came as a shock – he was losing one of his best friends to a life he'd never be part of. Now that Mary had returned, Dickon knew Colin would try his best to fit himself into the plan for Mary's life. He was in a much better position to offer her a good life, but marrying a cousin was not as acceptable as it had been, which worked to Dickon's advantage.

"Dickon, come over here, don't hide away again," Mary said, beckoning him.

Shaken from his thoughts, Dickon shyly approached Mary and Colin and took a seat across from them. Mary kept her hands neatly folded in her lap, the cup of tea now sat on a tray on the low table before her. Dickon wasn't sure what to do with his hands so he clutched his cap and kneaded it with his fingers. He looked down at his hands and saw the soil still under his fingernails. Worried that Mary would see the dirt, Dickon curled his fingers into a fist and hid them behind the fabric of his hat. When he looked up at her, she wasn't looking at his hands at all. She was looking straight into his eyes questioningly. Dickon read the silent worry that lurked in her gaze and longed to answer it with reassurance but this was neither the time nor the place.

Martha appeared at the door and announced that Mary's room was ready.

"I'd best go upstairs then," said Mary, rising. "I have brought a few things from London for you Martha, Mrs. Medlock."

Colin immediately reached out to help escort Mary, but Mrs. Medlock chastised him loudly.

"Colin Craven, leave the girl ALONE! Stop your pawing and let her go upstairs. My word, you are an insufferable child!" Mrs. Medlock huffed and puffed, her face growing red with frustration.

Colin only laughed mischievously. "I'm much too large now to be called a child, Medlock," he said good-naturedly, dropping the "Mrs." from his speech and addressing the housekeeper as his father always did.

Martha rescued Mary by taking her from the room quickly, while Medlock and Colin were having their little quarrel. Mary again had trouble keeping her eyes off of Dickon, which he noticed with a feeling of pride. He'd have to try and catch her after dinner. Surely, she would want to see their garden again, and he wanted nothing more than to show her the flowers that had bloomed in her absence.

"Dickon," Colin called. "What say we go for a ride while Mistress Mary is being quite contrary up in her room?"

"Riding?" Dickon echoed.

"Yes, you know, on a horse?" Colin laughed again, a somewhat mocking laugh this time.

"I-I don't think I'm up for ridin' right now, Colin."

"Master Craven you will be the death of me," sighed Mrs. Medlock, clutching her breast. "Do find something to occupy yourself with until dinner is served. You have just over an hour, but remember be back on time."

"Yes, Mrs. Medlock," Colin said, rolling his eyes after the woman had quit the room. "What shall we do, Dickon? Mary's not likely to come down before dinner and Martha's probably talking her ears off up there."

"I'm going to tend to th' garden, Master Colin," said Dickon, rising and heading for the door.

"Ah, the garden. Of course. You're always there. Taking good care of it, I expect?"

"Aye," said Dickon quickly, not wanting to give Colin any excuse to invite himself along. "I'll be getting to it," he said, swiftly exiting the room and running out the large oak doors. Once outside, Dickon breathed freely. He'd never felt so uncomfortable at Misselthwaite Manor—it had become almost a second home to him in the years past. He wondered what other changes would come about because of Mary's return and how he would deal with them all. Looking over his shoulder as he walked to the garden, he saw a female figure in an upstairs window. Mary. She was looking out over the moor and caught sight of him as he became visible on the path. Dickon looked back at her for a moment, unsmiling. He then turned into the evening breeze and made his destination clear as he started on the path toward the garden. She would know where to find him if she wanted him.

## Chapter Two

Dickon stayed in the garden though it was now dinnertime. His rusty red fringe fell into his eyes as he worked the earth in the Secret Garden, pulling up weeds and making sure every flower had room to grow. The cooler weather had set in and in only a few weeks there would be a frost, which would send the flowers into a long slumber. The garden had lost a bit of its radiance before Mary had arrived and Dickon lamented the loss. She wouldn't get to see it in its glory this year, though some blossoms still remained.

Dickon had left the door to the garden closed and unlocked and presently the familiar rustle of ivy over the door alerted him to someone entering. He dared not look toward the person, lest it just be Ben Weatherstaff checking in or Colin come to bother him. It was neither. A soft voice filled the garden instead.

"Dickon," she said.

He waited a moment before standing to his full height and looking at Mary. She had closed the door behind her and held her blue wide brimmed hat in her still gloved hands. "Hey up, hullo there," he said.

"I've come to tell you to come in – we're preparing for dinner and of course you're most welcome to join us. I expected you to come in earlier but when you didn't come I grew worried."

Dickon's heart swelled with hearing that Mary worried about him and wanted him around. "I

was just here in th' garden," he replied, masking his true feelings.

Mary looked around, taking in the flowers and vines. "You've done a splendid job, Dickon. It looks as if we'd never left it."

"Colin and I—" he began.

"No, Colin didn't do this. I know him too well, Dickon. Don't try to make up for him. I know he hasn't been here in a long time. I can feel it."

"No sense lying to you, Miss Mary," he said with a small smile.

"No, there isn't," she said pointedly. "And Colin does lie quite a bit. I've grown accustomed to it and I mentally sift through all he tells me to find the truth." She paused. "Dickon, do call me Mary, won't you? We're not strangers."

"Aye. It's habit. That's what I'd called thee when I'd first met thee."

"Oh, Dickon. I fear I've lost my Yorkshire talk with all of that time in the city. You'll have to teach me all over again." She looked at him imploringly.

"If that is what thee wishes, I will be glad to help."

"You're a man of so few words," she said. She'd now taken to strolling around the garden, inspecting roses and lilies as she walked past them. "I don't think Colin has closed his mouth since I stepped off the carriage but you—" She stopped and looked at home from across the small pond in the center of the garden. "The boys in the city have so much to say; they can be braggarts at times. They're so proud of their small sports victories or the money their fathers have made. Everything is status and who knows who. They're not like us."

Dickon felt as if Mary were sharing a deep secret with him; the inclusiveness of "us" weighed upon his thoughts as he listened intently. Had she known many boys in London? Surely there would be some who fancied her, she was such a pretty thing even when angered. He wanted to know if she had a beau, but such a question was impossible to ask of a lady. He had to wait until she volunteered the information.

"You're so quiet. I don't remember you so silent before. Is it my imagination?" she asked. "It feels like I've been away only for an hour or even a day, but everything looks so different now."

Dickon's mind raced forward, tracking each word and holding it dear. Mary's concern was evident, her affection for him had not dwindled but seemed to have grown. "No," he replied shyly. "I just haven't seen thee for ages now. Tha's been in the city for so long I reckoned my simple thoughts would be no rival for tha's education."

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," she said, closing the distance between them quickly. "I want to hear your thoughts – all of them. And they're not simple! You're a very wise boy. Dare I

say man now, you're all grown up. You've taught me so much in our years together, more than any school could teach. Don't think on it anymore, just speak to me. Tell me everything; I do want to know." Mary looked deeply into Dickon's eyes and conveyed her message thoroughly.

"As it pleases thee," he said, his heart beating madly in his chest.

"We'd best get you inside and washed up for dinner," she said, reaching her hand out to him.

He did not take her gloved hand, noting that his own hands were covered in soil and would ruin the white of the pristine cloth. "I canna," he said. "My hands are dirty."

Without a word, Mary stripped the gloves from her hands and reached for him purposefully, not allowing him to make excuses. She took his hand and pulled him gently toward the door. The feel of her hand in his, her unashamed gesture of acceptance, and the underlying sensuality all served to make Dickon all the more hopeful. He allowed himself to be led to the house slowly, reluctant to reach the door and lose Mary's touch. She looked up at him a few times on the journey and all he could do was stare back. Perhaps she wanted him to speak, but he had nothing bright to say, and telling her how beautiful she looked might simply offend or scare her. He knew she wasn't a proper match for him – she'd never be able to accept his proposal, even if he did gather the courage to make one. They were destined to be only friends forever, and that would never be enough for Dickon.

### Chapter Three

Mary Lennox hadn't expected to feel so differently toward the boys when she came home. She meant for it to be like old times; even as they grew older she barely recognized the changes but here they were now in full force, daring her to try and overlook them. Dickon and Colin had become men. When had it happened? Did they look that way when she'd last visited? She couldn't remember. It all felt so sudden, as if the winds had shifted and time quickened its pace.

The girl's school she attended had been very careful about girls being taught properly. Each morning they were awakened at the same time and each night they obeyed the "lights out" and drifted to sleep on command. Classes in the disciplines followed breakfast and classes on deportment and beauty followed after. There was a prescribed way to do everything: how to handle a spoon, how to sit, walk, speak. She'd relearned all of manners, shucking off the habits of diversity and randomness that nature had taught her through the garden. Nature forced a bloom to grow in any available space, but society did not agree with its philosophy. Girls had to be trained, not allowed to grow or run wild. Mary missed the calm of an unordered day, a day wholly her own with no restrictions, no goals to meet.

Now she had her two boys, her two men: Colin, ever the slightly obnoxious, and Dickon, always the genuine and true. She loved them both but not equally. She'd had to admit to herself years ago that her heart tended to soften for one over the other but she'd never let it show. Colin would not tolerate it if he knew; he was a jealous sort, never wanting anyone else to have what he could

not. Mary suspected this fire inside him helped him finally get out of bed and walk so many years before. She'd spent so much time with Dickon then, just the two of them, tending to the garden day in and out. Sickly and weak, Colin stayed in bed, seething. He'd always be so angry when Mary came to visit – not happy to see her again but angry because she had left him to begin with.

This was precisely why she liked Dickon more than Colin. Dickon never showed jealousy or spite. He worked hard without complaint, offering to take on more if it meant easing another person's burden. He could almost read Mary's mind; on many an occasion he would show up at just the right moment: when she needed tools, he brought them. When she needed seeds or a watering can or advice, he provided. He spoke glowingly of her to his mother and siblings so that when word came back to Mary through either Martha or upon visits from their mother, Mary felt very warm inside. This contrasted with Colin, whose favorite person to speak glowingly of was always Colin.

Mary did not begrudge him his selfishness at first, for she had known what it was to be selfish and why. Colin had been a prisoner of fear for so many years; it was only natural that he needed to learn how to relate to other people. Now, so many years later, he had not seemed to have grown out of it as Mary had hoped.

And so she went on, secretly harboring a greater love for Dickon Sowerby, the boy who was as poor as any servant, who could never offer her the life of status and privilege that her education had sought to secure. She'd thought no one could tell; she thought her secret was buried so deep it was not to be found out, but she was wrong.

On the night after her arrival, Mary and Martha busied themselves in Mary's bedroom, putting away dresses and other clothing and toiletries. At Mary's insistence Martha tried on one of her gowns, a hazy white dress that reached to the floor.

"Oh Miss Mary, it's grand! I feel like a Princess!" Martha said as she spun around, admiring herself in the mirror.

"It suits you," said Mary cheerfully.

"Eh I've got no use for it, tho'," Martha said sadly. "'as tha been out in it? Do they take thee to great dances and balls?"

"I've been out on occasion but the school is very careful about such things. We're always watched." Mary said this in a somewhat whispered and mysterious voice. She knew Martha would be intrigued, and she was right.

"Ooh!" Martha all but squealed.

"They think they're preparing us for society but what I think is they want to marry us all off."

"Don' you want t' get married, Miss Mary?" asked Martha as she carefully changed back into

her own black and white maid's clothing.

"I don't know. It sounds all well and good but what if you don't love the man?"

"I wouldn't marry a man I didn't love – seems almost unnatural!"

"That's what I think about it, Martha. I don't think a man I should want to marry would be caught up in whether I could balance a book on my head or not."

"A book?" Martha asked, befuddled. "Why would tha' want to go 'round with a book on tha's head?"

Mary laughed. "It's meant to teach you to stand up very straight. Like this." Mary took one of her books from her trunk and walked across the room carefully, showing Martha how she was taught to stride without allowing the book to fall.

"Oh, it gives thee a regal air, it does," said Martha without a hint of mirth.

"Does it?" Mary sighed. "I suppose it has a point, but I don't want anyone who thinks of those things so seriously. It's fun to play, but I don't want a lifetime of it. I don't think I can balance a book for that long, anyway."

"Tha sounds like Dickon now," said Martha. "He doesn't care for such things. Give him a garden to tend – he's good with people as well."

At the mention of Dickon, Mary bristled. She didn't want Martha getting too close to her secret. Though she remained silent, Martha continued.

"I know he cares for thee as much as for his own family, Miss Mary. I can see it in his face whenever tha's around him. Canna you see it as well?" She did not wait for an answer. "When thee came back to us yesterday – I haven't seen him happier in months."

"Was he?" asked Mary, turning from Martha to hide her face, lest it give her away. "I hadn't noticed. He seemed the same old Dickon to me."

"Aye! Tha hadn't seen him before – when he heard thee would return to Misselthwaite, he worked that much harder in the garden to make sure it was ready for thee."

"And Colin? Did he help?"

"Dickon likes to say he does but I canna say I've seen Colin near the garden as of late. He takes riding lessons and occupies himself with rides into town. Dickon stays on the moors most of the time though he will run an errand or two for Mrs. Medlock when he's needed. He lives in a cottage now, did you know?"

Mary turned to face Martha, her brow furrowed. "What? Doesn't he live with your mother

anymore?”

“No, Miss Mary. He’s gone from us now – the children have all grown so there’s no room anymore. Your Uncle found a tiny cottage on the edge of Misselthwaite and gave it to Dickon in return for his work on the grounds with Ben Weatherstaff.”

“Where is this cottage? I never knew of it before.” Mary’s curiosity was piqued. She’d roamed the landscape of Misselthwaite over her tenure there as a child but had not romped upon any kind of cottage in any direction as far as she could see or walk.

“It’s quite far. Takes Dickon quite a while to come up here but he says he doesn’t mind it.”

“Which direction from the house?”

“Just northeast –no, northwest. There—“ Martha pointed north west and Mary went to the window to peer out over the grounds.

“I can’t see anything,” she said.

“Oh no, yeh canna see it from here at all.” Martha joined Mary at the window. “But see that tree there off on the ‘orizon? If tha walks to that tree and steady on for a good hour, it will come upon thee before thee knows it.”

“Is he there now?” Mary asked. She had an inkling to take a night trek just to satisfy her hunger of curiosity. There was no way she’d be allowed out what with Mrs. Medlock keeping a close eye on her and being so afraid of disasters (“Young ladies do not go out alone after dark, Mary Lennox! Who knows what could happen?”), but she yearned to go all the same.

“I suspect so,” answered Martha. “Did you want to have a walk?”

Mary thought she picked up on something in Martha’s voice – not accusing, but curious. “Me? Whatever for?” Covering her motives was not Mary’s strong point.

Martha gave her a look of playfulness. Then she winked. “I may not be the housekeeper yet,” she said. “But I do keep an eye on the house.”

“What does that mean?”

“I can keep a secret,” Martha said conspiratorially.

“I have no secrets, you know that. There’s nothing to confide.” Mary crossed the room, suddenly tired of being questioned. “I’m quite tired right now, Martha. Would you mind leaving me to retire? I will see you in the morning.”

Martha’s face fell. “’ave I offended thee, Miss? I didn’t mean to – I talk too much an’—“

“No, no,” Mary reassured her friend. “It’s not you. I’ve just had so much to think on of late. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yes, Miss Mary,” Martha replied, the hurt look still lingering in her eyes.

“None of that now, Martha. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Wouldst tha’ like help in dressing for bed?”

“No, I think I’ll manage, thank you.”

With that, Martha left the room and Mary again approached the window. The small dot of a tree on the horizon held her attention for quite some time as she tried to devise a way of getting out without being seen. No ideas came. Even if she could get out, what would she do when she arrived at the cottage? Simply knock on the door and tell Dickon she’d been out for a stroll in the black of night and had lost her way? Surely he’d insist on bringing her straight home to safety. Surely he wouldn’t invite her inside...

Fantasies swirled in Mary’s head, scenarios playing out vividly in her mind, all culminating with Dickon being glad to see her, inviting her inside. A delicious thrill of the forbidden rose in her and for the first time Mary let herself experience it without the usual fire of guilt serving as an anesthetic. She dared to let her mind skip ahead to what the cottage looked like, where Dickon slept, what he might be wearing. Would she catch him in his nightclothes? Would he have bathed and if so, would he have gone for a swim or would he have a wash basin or tub to fill with heated water? Silly thoughts of minute and meaningless details kept Mary’s mind occupied as she changed for bed and finally slid between the covers and lay her head down on the plush pillow. It was then that she began to think of what it would feel like to be in Dickon’s bed -- forbidden, indeed...and that was when sleep took her, melding away the fantasies and replacing them with mingling voices and shapes, random places and faces -- the inventory of dreams.

## Chapter Four

Dickon made the walk from his cottage to the Misselthwaite gardens in less than an hour. His feet seemed to step more lightly and the thought of seeing Mary again propelled him through the gorse and heather of the moor. He met with Ben Weatherstaff in one of the outer gardens where the older man was clipping a horse-shaped topiary.

“What’s this, Mr. Weatherstaff?” he asked cordially. He’d never seen the master gardener take on such an artistic endeavor.

“Master Colin wanted a “representation” of his horse. I says, ‘I canna do that, Master Colin,’ but he insists. Sends me a man who knows how to do these things – he’s just over there taking tea with Mrs. Medlock.” Ben pointed toward the house where indeed a small table and chairs was set up. A gray haired man dressed in a suit sat across from Mrs. Medlock. It appeared they had

struck up a friendship of some sort as Mrs. Medlock leaned over the table toward him every now and then and laughed uproariously whenever he spoke to her.

Dickon watched the spectacle for a moment. "Who is he?"

"He's sent here to help us with th' gardens," said Ben roughly as he snipped the delicate branches with sharp pruning shears. "Some help he is, too. Carted a half-done horse here and set it down, told me to finish it."

"He brought that here?"

"Says he grew it in his garden an' he'll teach me with it." The man's face took on a very sour expression and he shook his head. "Work without a point, lad."

"Aye," agreed Dickon. He was not accustomed to trying to craft flowers and trees into shapes unnatural to them.

"Tha'd best hurry and get to that garden before Medlock see yeh," said Ben. "Or she'll have thee carving an elephant for th' drive next! All their gardens will go to ruin but they will have a right green zoo to look upon!" He spat on the ground next to the "horse."

"I'll see you at noonday, Mr. Weatherstaff," said Dickon, and headed off to the locked garden. He alone had the key now as primary caretaker. Ben had left him to it in years past and Dickon had full run of the place. Now that Mary was home, Dickon wondered if she'd request the key again. It was she who found it those long years ago; it was only right for her to want it, but Dickon had grown protective of it and wasn't sure he wanted to give it up just yet. He decided to wait until it was requested; he would not offer it.

Dickon set about his work, every now and then stopping to see if Mary might be coming for a visit. There was no sign of her. Dickon kept watch over the house as he ate his lunch under the ivy near the door of the walled garden. Just after twelve, Mary and Colin appeared on the doorstep, dressed for riding. Dickon watched as Colin ordered his horse brought to him and in a few moments he was mounted upon a beautiful stallion. Mary waited by the door as Colin beckoned to her. She shook her head. Dickon ached to know what they were saying – did she not want to go riding with Colin? If not, why? Colin's voice was carried by the breeze to where Dickon hid; he must have been angry because his voice grew louder and louder until his words were finally distinguishable.

"Please yourself, Mary Lennox!" Colin spat angrily and sped off on his horse.

Mary looked toward the gardens again; there was no way she could see Dickon, he was too well hidden by the ivy. He held his breath as she walked toward him, down a footpath and into the brush. She was humming softly to herself, a tune Dickon did not recognize. He wondered whether he should make his presence known; in only a minute she might tread him him.

He was about to call to her when Mary spoke.

“You’re as contrary as ever, Mary Lennox...Please yourself! Humph! What does he know? He’s just a spoiled little—“

It was at this moment that Dickon shifted and Mary snapped her head to look in his direction.

“Dickon!”

Having been discovered, Dickon stood and straightened his clothing. “Good afternoon, Miss Mary,” he said politely.

“What were you doing there?”

“I was eating a bit before I get back to work.”

“Ah. You should come inside and have cook make you something; we have more than enough.”

“Thank you, Miss Mary,” he responded.

Mary’s attention turned to the garden. “Have you the key?”

“The key?”

“Yes, I’d like to go in.”

Dickon nodded. “Aye.”

Mary went to the door and waited. Dickon followed her and opened the door for her, allowing her to enter first. As she moved past him, Dickon could smell perfume on her hair. He followed slowly behind her, taking care not to seem too eager to be near. He watched as she surveyed the vines and flowers, stopping in front of the pink sweetheart roses that had just come into bloom.

“I don’t remember these,” she said, touching the petals gently. “Are they new?”

“Aye,” replied Dickon. “My mother thought they were fair the colour of the ‘blush on a young girl’s cheeks in spring’. She said thee would like them.”

“And I do. Thank her for me, will you? And thank you also for putting them in. They’re easily the most beautiful roses I’ve seen.” Mary walked further on to the crocus and lilies. “We did not tend to a garden in school. There’s very little space for such things in the crowded city. I think most of the girls could have used a bit of earth, though. It did wonders for me.”

Dickon listened to her muse aloud, almost to herself. Her face showed the intensity of thought as one has when recalling the past.

“Of course,” she said as she turned to face him. “I can’t say it was the entire garden by itself.

You and Colin and Martha – even Mrs. Medlock, Ben and the others all played a part.”

“And the Magic, Miss Mary,” reminded Dickon.

“Yes. That, too. It was ever so long ago. At least it seems that way now. We’re all grown up.” She sighed, plucking a blossom from one of the cornflowers that carpeted the north section of the secret garden.

Dickon couldn’t tell if Mary favored one person over another as she named them but took a bit of pride in that he was mentioned first – after the garden, of course. These little things stood as signs that perhaps she thought of him in a different light, or maybe she always did. He would not allow himself to reveal that he’d loved her for many years, though this confession lingered on the tip of his tongue and at times his heart felt it would burst with the revelation. Now, there was Colin to think about -- Colin who had status and money; Colin who could offer Mary so much more by way of material possessions and creature comforts.

The marriage of cousins was now more frowned upon but Dickon was not sure this would stop Mary and Colin if they were in love. Yet he had no evidence of such devotions; Mary seemed more annoyed with Colin than anything else.

Dickon abandoned this train of thought when Mary approached him. She stood just a foot away from him and looked into his eyes and Dickon thought he could be taken in by her gaze forever.

“Dickon, I wanted to tell you something,” she began.

At that moment, Colin’s voice could be heard over the stone walls and Mary started. She quickly stepped away from Dickon and looked expectantly toward the door where Colin appeared a moment later.

“Mary! I was wondering where you’d got to.” Colin entered the garden and nodded to Dickon, then turned back to Mary.

Dickon watched this interaction curiously; Colin, trying to impress her and Mary, inching away from him and toward the door.

“You should’ve come riding, Mary – you missed everything!” Colin rambled.

Mary looked to Dickon exasperatedly.

“Come on, now, let’s get inside and have some tea—“ Colin said, reaching for Mary’s hand which she pulled out of reach.

“I’ll be right in,” she said, dismissing Colin with a curt wave.

“Don’t dally around here, Medlock’s expecting us and I have so much to tell you about my horse – he was so spirited today I was nearly thrown. Of course I’m far too good a horseman for that to

happen but—“

“Yes, Colin. I’ll be right along.”

Colin nodded to Dickon again and turned on his heel, visibly agitated.

“I’ll talk to you later, Dickon, if that’s all right?” she asked.

Dickon smiled good naturedly as Mary exited the lush garden. What had she wanted to tell him? He’d almost cursed Colin in his mind when they were interrupted. He thrust his hand into his pocket and fingered the item still safe and sound in his possession. The key to the garden. Perhaps he held much more than just the brass key to a magic garden; he could only hope that he would one day hold Mary’s affection as well.

## Chapter Five

The days passed languidly with Dickon tending the gardens with Ben, Colin acting his usual cocky self, and Mary desperate to stay out of Colin’s ever reaching grasp. Whenever she had a moment of time, he seemed to be there, tugging at her sleeve like a little child, asking her to look at something he’d written or found. As a youngster, Mary had no qualms about putting her foot down and shouting at the insolent and selfish boy. The years at school gave her copious amounts of self control, but Colin tested her patience and will. She thought the war might have sobered him but soon found that even serving his country did not add a month of maturity to his life.

As for Dickon, he never volunteered information about the war, nor did Mary want to pry. It was over now, and the country was in the process of rebuilding. Dickon didn’t seem changed, though Mary suspected he just didn’t want to burden anyone else with such a difficult and sorrowful topic. It had always been his way to spare his loved ones, and Mary felt warm inside knowing that he counted her among them.

On a morning cooler than most, Mary lay in her bed surrounded by down pillows and a plush duvet, staring up the white ceiling. A gray specter of a cobweb wafted gently in the breeze just above the window and Mary made a mental note to mention it to Martha. She sat up in bed and stretched, then, throwing her legs over the side of the bed, climbed down and let the chill of the floor seep between her toes. Shivering slightly, Mary pulled a robe around herself and walked swiftly to the window to stand in a pool of sunlight. The rays were warm and delicious, weaving through the golden strands of her hair which was now loose and flowing halfway down her back in soft waves.

A horse whinnied out on the moor and Mary opened the window and leaned out to catch sight of Dickon arriving at the house. He looked up, right at her window without even having to search for it and Mary instinctively hid behind a protective drapery, peeking out from behind its brocade. Dickon stood still for a split second, a look of – was it shock? – on his face before a

smile washed it away. Mary stepped away from the window and into the room, her face flushed with excitement. Hurriedly she dressed and ran downstairs to see Martha.

“Martha?” she called into the kitchen.

“She’s gone out to fetch some herbs, Miss Mary,” said Cook. “What can I get for yeh?”

“Oh, I’m not hungry just yet. I’ll have a bite when I get back.” Mary left the room before Cook could ask her any questions. She ran down the hallway and straight into a person. A boy. Colin. For a moment Mary almost lost her balance, but Colin grabbed her and kept her upright. In her panic Mary had clutched his arm and now loosened her grip and pushed him away.

”What’re you doing running around like that?” he asked, obviously amused that she’d been forced to be in such close proximity to him.

“I was in a hurry, if you must know. What were YOU doing?”

He chuckled. “Just walking to the kitchen. I’m starving! Have you eaten breakfast yet?”

“No; I was about to step outside for a moment. You go on and ask Cook to set something for me and I will be back in just a minute.”

“Where are you going? I can—“

“No, no,” Mary waved her hand at him dismissively. “You’ve got to have my place set. I won’t be long.”

Colin looked at her with a strange expression. “Are you going to see Dickon?” he asked.

Mary felt a panic rise inside her at the mention of Dickon’s name. It’s not as if she should be ashamed to go see her friend, but Colin made it seem that there was something unsavory in her motives. Quickly, she truthfully informed him of whom she was going to meet.

“Ah, Martha. She’s with Dickon in the garden, I think.” He paused. “Come to breakfast, Mary.”

“I’ll be back in just a moment, Colin.”

“Would you like me to walk with you?”

“I think I know the way to our garden,” she said with a smile. “It hasn’t been that long.”

“Right.” Colin turned and brusquely walked away towards the dining area.

Once outside, Mary turned into the wind and headed for the garden, suddenly unsure of why she wanted to speak with Martha in the first place. Having Martha around would make being near Dickon easier – she could tell he suspected something by the way he’d looked at her last. She’d

tried to broach the subject of going into the city, but as usual Colin made his entrance. At first Mary thought it might be best to talk to Dickon in the garden, surrounded by the magic; maybe he'd understand her feelings toward him. She didn't want to end up intimidating him or making him think she expected his affection in return, but she hoped that the looks he gave her were a clue to what lay behind his eyes. She felt as if something were about to give, something that had been building and building for years.

The door of the garden opened and Martha stepped out with Dickon in tow. Both were laughing, their cheeks glowing. Drops of rain began to fall and the wind picked up as Martha grabbed her skirts about her and trudged toward the manor.

"Martha!" Mary called, and the girl turned to her.

"Mary! What is tha' doing out in this? Come on now, the storm's a comin', lass."

Martha took Mary's arm and led her back toward the house. Mary looked over her shoulder to see Dickon behind them, about to walk down the hill.

"Dickon!" she shouted. "Come with us!"

Mary felt Martha squeeze her arm momentarily and when she looked over at her, Dickon's sister gave her a wink.

"I'll be in the kitchen," she said, rushing up to the house and leaving Mary a few feet from the door.

Mary waited for Dickon to reach the house, then led him inside. "You weren't going to run away that easily, Dickon Sowerby!" she said with faux haughtiness. "You've been avoiding me since I arrived."

"Avoiding thee?" asked Dickon incredulously. "Nowt o'th soart!"

Giving him a smirk, Mary turned and walked down the hallway toward the dining area.

"Have you eaten yet?" she asked.

"Aye, early this morn, at dawn before I went out to tend my animals."

"You can have something here if you like. Colin's waiting for me to dine with him but you know how he can be. I'd rather like the company." Mary left this statement open ended, giving Dickon a hint or two. She knew he was sharp and would pick up on the message, but she also knew he was intensely private and wouldn't say anything about it outright. She liked playing her little game with him.

Mrs. Medlock appeared, rushing into the hallway and beckoning Mary and Dickon inside with a swift wave of her hand. "Mary, do come along, girl. Your Uncle is coming home and I want you

to meet Mr. Markham from Lincolnshire; he's come to help with our gardens a bit. Hurry now, eat your breakfast!"

Mary and Dickon seated themselves at the long mahogany table where Colin sat lazily playing with his food. He looked up momentarily when they came into the room but acted as if his eggs were far more interesting than anything that had been said by Medlock on the way into the room.

"Colin," Dickon said, greeting his friend.

Mary noted how Colin stiffened. He didn't seem himself. "What's the matter, Colin?" she asked plainly.

"Not a thing, Mary Lennox. I'll have you know I am quite fine, thank you. I've just been waiting here for ages all alone, my food has gone cold and only now you show up with –" he stopped.

"With?..." Mary urged. "With what?"

"Not with what," Colin snapped. "With whom."

Shooting a confused look to Dickon, Mary stammered, "I—I don't know what you mean, Colin. Aren't you glad to see Dickon? I've invited him to eat with us. I didn't think I needed to ask permission as we're all good friends..."

Colin chewed on his lip as his cheeks visibly colored yet he said nothing and would not raise his eyes to deign to look at Mary nor Dickon. Mary watched him, afraid he might launch into a tantrum just like the ones he'd had as a child. Won't he ever grow up? Mary thought.

"Colin," she began slowly. "You're not behaving like a gentleman."

"'Tis all right, Miss Mary, I'll go if Colin wants me to." Dickon rose from his seat just as Cook came out with a tray of food.

Mary bid him to sit down and glared at Colin. "Colin Craven you look at me when I speak to you!"

Colin appeared startled at Mary's tone and looked up at her. Mary held his gaze steadily. "We're all of us friends and I won't have you two carrying on this like. Whatever it is – I don't want to know about it but you had best resolve it. Your father is coming home and I am sure he won't want to see you acting this way to your friends. If you insult Dickon, you insult me." She took a deep breath and waited for his response.

Colin huffed slightly and looked heavenward for a brief moment, clearly exasperated. "I've no quarrel with you, Dickon." His voice rang flat in the vast room.

"Nor I with you," said Dickon.

Mary took pity on her cousin and softened a bit. “I’m sorry I kept you waiting, Colin. I thought I would make it back sooner.” She did not mention that she’d been gone only a couple of minutes and clearly Colin was exaggerating in a desperate ploy for attention. Silently she resolved never to agree to meet with Colin anywhere again, just to avoid such a conflict in future. She did not wish to be treated as a tennis ball in an ego match between the boys. Mary was not a prize to be won; her choice had been made long ago and it was only a matter of figuring out whether or not Dickon shared her feelings and how to go about it. And how to deal with Colin when he found out. Surely she would not be able to hide her affection and preference for Dickon; Colin already suspected, it was clear through his attitude.

Mary and Dickon ate in silence, punctuated now and then only with the clink of a spoon on china. Colin stood abruptly and left the room without a word.

“I’m so sorry,” Mary said.

“It isn’t your fault, Mary. Tha mustn’t think it. He’s just – he’s what me mother calls ‘ornery’ right now. He’ll be all right.”

“I can’t say I agree, Dickon. He was terribly vexed, didn’t you see? When his face gets all red like that I’m sure he’s going to simply pop right open. It’s frightening. He’s ever so much more than ten – I don’t think I could scream back at him if he took to it.”

“Tha’s changed; Colin – he’s still the same.”

Mary looked into Dickon’s eyes as he said this and found herself caught up. She felt as if there were something pulling her to him, something invisible and strong. She held his gaze just a moment too long so that the simple glance took on a new meaning. He didn’t look away but held her there as if he, too, recognized this new connection.

Mrs. Medlock again seemingly apparated into the room, excitedly trying in vain to enunciate. She pat herself on the sternum rapidly in a gesture of needing to catch her breath, and Mary broke eye contact with Dickon to stare at this new spectacle before her.

“What is it?” asked Mary, concerned for the woman’s health. “Are you all right, Mrs. Medlock? Do you need a doctor?”

“Lord Craven –“ was all Medlock could choke out.

“Is he here?” Mary coaxed, putting her linen napkin on the table next to her plate and stepping around from the table. She tried to interpret the older woman’s frantic gestures as Martha ran into the room.

“Lord Craven is outside!” she exclaimed happily, leading the group down the hall and out the front door to greet the master of the house.

Mary stood back on the step as Mrs. Medlock and Martha approached Lord Craven's carriage. Colin had already attacked the cab and babbled nonstop to his father about his horses and the new topiaries being installed. Dickon came up behind Mary, partially hidden from the group in the courtyard. The scent of earth permeated Mary's senses and she instinctively leaned back comfortably into Dickon's arms. "It is such a beautiful day," she said with a sigh.

"Aye," Dickon whispered, his mouth ever so close to Mary's ear.

A shiver ran through her body from head to foot and the tickle of Dickon's warm breath on her skin gave birth to new sensations and ideas. Mary closed her eyes for a delicious second and when she opened them she was met with the stony gaze of one young Colin Craven. Mary hastily stepped forward, bringing distance between herself and Dickon in an effort to camouflage an already lost situation.

"Welcome home, Uncle Archie!" she said, smiling cheerfully.

"Mary Lennox!" cried Lord Craven, taking her in a warm embrace. "Dear child, it has been so long. It's so good to see you again. I do hope they are treating you well at school," he said.

"Yes, Sir," said Mary, following the entourage into the house again. Her thoughts played back to a moment ago when Dickon had all but kissed her and a blush rose in her cheeks.

"You've gone all red, Mary," stated Colin with a nasty curl to his voice. "You'd best be careful out in the gardens. Don't spend too much time outside and wear yourself down."

Mary refused to look at him; his message was quite clear – and she had no intention of heeding his warning.

## Chapter Six

Dickon knew he shouldn't have stood so closely to Mary, but she seemed so inviting and when she leaned back on him he had to fight the urge to turn her around in his arms and kiss her feverishly. No, he couldn't do such a thing. She was his friend; she was in an upper class; they had been in public; Colin had been there. It would be terribly wrong and an insult to the Craven family who had treated Dickon and Martha with such generosity and kindness through the years.

He thought about that afternoon just three days before, unable to remove it from his mind. Mary had certainly acted comfortable near him and he dared to dream that perhaps she wouldn't have protested if he had been forward. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on his part; after all, what had he to offer the girl? A cottage. In the near future, even a horse. After Misselthwaite and a fine boarding school, Dickon was certain Mary would find his offerings paltry and insignificant. Still he took hope in the way she treated Colin. Although not his way to take any sort of pleasure in another person's suffering, he could not help but feel a sliver of satisfaction when Mary turned

Colin away. She had asked to come visit in the garden just the evening before and Dickon assured her that it was her own garden and she was to come and go as she pleased. He wondered now if he'd misinterpreted what she'd said, or whether he read too much into it in the first place. There was no doubt she wanted to be near him; just the previous morning she had come out for a walk, passing the tree where Dickon took his lunch. He watched her go by, neither saying a word. It was almost as if she were teasing him, beckoning him to follow or chase. He stayed rooted to the base of the tree and allowed her play the game.

This fine morn Dickon helped Ben with the hideous topiary which had now lost an ear in a shearing error. Dickon consoled the older man, who was visibly agitated and using blue language to describe his new tasks.

“Mr. Markham this, Mr. Markham that!” spat Ben, waving his pruning shears around haphazardly. His oversized gardener's hat tilted to one side of his head, making him look a bit like a street bum on a drunken rampage. “I've 'ad about enough of Medlock's jabbering about 'im.”

“I've never seen her so taken,” surmised Dickon, looking back toward the manor.

“Taken ain't the right word, lad,” said Ben disgustedly.

“We'd best not say the 'right word' aloud, then,” replied Dickon with a smirk. Ben could go on sometimes but Dickon took his attitude in stride.

“Oi, 'ere he comes again,” said Ben, peering toward the road leading up to the courtyard. “Tha'd best run off before that Markham fella gets ahold of thee as well.”

Dickon lingered for a second until Ben waved him away. He didn't like leaving the older man to deal with the new system of pruning Mr. Markham had been teaching but it was always best not to further agitate old Ben Weatherstaff. He liked having things his own way.

The sun shone down in between graying clouds that moved in stealthily from the west. The landscape intermittently darkened then lightened and so on until Dickon reached his cottage. The area had been described as desolate by Mrs. Medlock at one point, but Dickon called it comfortable and had always been the sort of person who enjoyed quiet and solitude. He could make himself comfortable in any setting if needed, but Dickon always preferred a soothing, languid pace if at all possible. The tiny abode and its surrounding area were in sharp contrast to what Dickon endured during the war. The garden had helped heal him of many a foul memory and spiritual scar as it had for his friends before him. Colin had been protected during the conflict and never saw action. Dickon surmised that Colin lived more on the surface than Mary did, conflict or not. The only things he could internalize were things entwined with his own fortune and feelings. So the garden had served its purpose in Colin's life and was now open to future visitors in need of its magic. Dickon hoped he would never forget or turn his back on it as Colin had.

The interior of the cottage was furnished and decorated modestly, its color provided by

wildflowers carefully placed in the few sunlight areas near the windows. The structure consisted of all of two rooms: the living area with hearth and kitchen adjacent, and the bedroom. Behind the cottage stood a small shed which had been built to house Dickon's tools and other supplies. A privy stood off in the distance. It was a far cry from the crowded home he once shared with his mother and siblings. The solitude could be stifling and it was at these times Dickon sought out the company of his many animal friends or trekked to the gardens and helped Ben Weatherstaff. He had no friends his own age save for Mary and Colin, and for the past few months Colin had grown away from him. Mary had been taken away. He mourned her loss for many weeks after and now it felt as if he had never ceased pining for her though he knew there were times when he was so occupied he could think of nothing but the task before him.

His task at the moment was to chop some firewood and arrange the shed before heading back to Misselthwaite. He accomplished these things before noon and arrived at the gardens just after. Martha found him and brought him a sandwich for lunch. An awkward silence descended between brother and sister as Dickon consumed his meal.

"Miss Mary's away," said Martha curtly.

Dickon's interest piqued. "Away?"

"Aye. Off to Leeds with Master Colin, Mrs. Medlock and Mr. Markham from the gardens."

"Why 'ave they gone?"

"Colin was in a terrible dither about getting' away from the 'ouse and takin' Miss Mary to see the sights of the city. Tha's what he said and Medlock didn't give a hint of protest! Taken with that fellow from Lincolnshire, she is. 'ead's right up in the clouds!"

"When will they return?"

"I don't know. Could be hours. I wanted to tell you because—Mary had asked for you earlier when you were away at your cottage."

Dickon nearly choked on a sliver of bread.

With a knowing look, Martha continued. "I don't mean to be a gossip but seeing as 'ow you're me brother and all I think it only right to say that the girl fancies thee as much as thee fancies her. Forgive me for saying it aloud, but there it is."

A blush rose in Dickon's cheeks and he lost the ability to speak as no words came to him for a few seconds. Gathering his wits, he replied, "I wish I could deny my feelings but I haven't been as—" He searched for the word.

"I know," Martha interjected. "It's been plain as day written all over thy face." She leaned in close and whispered, "an it is the cause for Colin's foul mood these past few days since Mary's return."

“Is that why he’s taken her to Leeds?”

“Aye...I think he’s green with envy, as green as the garden you’ve tended so well.”

“I should be more careful, then,” Dickon said almost to himself. “Tis not my place to interfere with Miss Mary and her suitors.”

“Not thy place?” Martha all but shrieked. “Master Colin may one day ‘ave this ‘ouse but I daresay he will never ‘ave her heart!”

“Tha shouldn’t say such things, Martha. We are but the help here, we are not in their league and we are not family. Tis a delicate matter and we mustn’t speak of it again. Promise me you will not mention this to her. She mustn’t know how I feel. I would be made a fool.”

Martha shook her head. “Does thee think she doesn’t know? She would have to be quite blind not to see the way your eyes light up whenever you lay them on her countenance! On the contrary, you make her a fool if you think she hasn’t already fallen in love with thee!”

“Martha!” Dickon admonished his sister. “Speaking of this is improper. I must leave you to your own devices if you insist on the subject.” Though he wanted nothing more than to hear of Mary’s affections for him, Dickon cautioned himself about propriety and the simple fact that because his sister said it was true did not make it so. Mary had not spoken, and Dickon himself resolved he would never take the liberty, either. Torment though it was, he had to endure.

“Please yourself,” Martha said, her voice registering hurt.

“Come, Martha, I don’t mean it like that,” Dickon assured her gently. “Tha knows I can not speak. I am in no position. I would not have us banished from this home and insult its Lord.”

Martha nodded. “I should have held my tongue. I’ve ruined it all,” she said, her head bowed in penitence.

“Tha mustn’t think on it. There has been no harm done. We mun go about as always. Not a word upon Miss Mary’s return. Not a word to any soul.”

Martha agreed and returned to the house, head hanging low and shoulders slumped. Dickon wished she’d never revealed such things to him, for now he could think of nothing else. Trapped in an in-between place of longing, lust, love; unable to reveal his feelings, unable to prevent Mary from being courted by others. He could only sit by and watch.

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“Mary, child, watch your skirts!” Mrs. Medlock cautioned. “There is mud from the recent rains!”

Mary Lennox gathered her skirts as she stepped from the carriage, taking Colin's waiting hand to help her down to the street. He steered her away from the small random puddles of water and guided her to the shop. Mary allowed it but hoped he would not read more into her simple display of manners – she worried that her cousin had taken a strong liking to her and had lapsed into a sort of courtship in which she had not willingly taken part. Upon entering the shop, Mary extricated herself from her cousin's arm and moved forward amidst the displays. To her chagrin, Colin kept pace beside her with precision.

“Quite a shop, isn't it, Mary?”

“It is lovely,” she replied politely, not admitting that she had seen shops of exceeding grandiosity in the city of London.

“I wish Father would have come with us, but he's just home so he is, I suppose, getting reacquainted with the place.”

“He had been gone for quite a while. I expect no less. He wants to relax.” She paused, treading carefully with her next statement. “We might have asked Dickon to join us; I am guessing he does not often come to the city.”

Colin's attitude darkened. “What would he do here? He certainly can not make purchases. He is a mere country boy, Mary. Why waste thought on him when we have the city at our feet?”

“Why do you speak about him that way? He is our closest friend!”

“Things have changed, Mary.”

“Only because you have made them so, Colin. If you wish to please me, you must never forget our dear friend Dickon and his family who gave us so much. Do you not recall his hand in your cure?”

“I was never ill to begin with!” Colin's voice rose and other patrons turned to look at the couple.

Mary pulled away from him and walked brusquely past Mrs. Medlock and Mr. Markham, both of whom were oblivious to the conversation that had just taken place between the cousins only a few feet away. The older couple was more than taken with each other and a few pieces of fine Waterford crystal laid out on a velvet cloth. Mary caught part of Markham's conversation as he explained the facets and cuts and costs of Irish crystal as Medlock beamed and sighed breathlessly. Stepping outside the shop, Mary felt a great relief. That relief was to last only a moment, for her cousin had followed her.

“Do go away, Colin. I do not wish to speak to you.”

“Come now, Mary. It's not as bad as that. You know what I meant – about Dickon. I meant no offense.”

“But you did offend!”

Instead of an expected apology, Colin offered a curled lip and furrowed brow. “Have at it, then,” he spat. “Live like a pauper in a tiny cottage with nothing to your name but a spade and pack of seeds!”

“I’d rather that than you and your sour disposition. I’d rather be penniless and marry for love than to be consigned to a life full of every kind of wealth and have to wake up to your face each morning and your heartless and empty words!” She hadn’t meant to be so candid, so cruel. Forgetting her schooling, she had brought to mind things that a woman should never suggest to a man. Waking up to see him every day? Surely he would be reminded of the possible activities that precede waking and sleep. She’d also almost told him outright that she loved Dickon.

At that moment, the door opened and out stepped Mrs. Medlock and Mr. Markham, ending Mary's attack on Colin and preempting his reply.

“Come now, girl, we’ve another shop to see! I am to find a suitable gown for you...” Medlock rambled.

Mary allowed herself to be shuttled from shop to shop for the next two hours, enduring Medlock's chastisement for her preoccupation of mind. She simply could not concentrate on anything but what had transpired between her and Colin. Would he tell Dickon upon their return? Though Mary suspected Dickon fancied her, he had never made his intentions plain, and so she was to presume there was no greater affection between them than that of good friends.

The drive back to Misselthwaite proved almost unbearable as Colin fumed and Medlock and Markham cast their manners to the wind and commented incessantly on every tree and rock they passed, critiquing each shop and its wares, each tiny town and passerby. Upon her return Mary ran to the sanctuary of her bedroom. She heard Colin stomp past her door, clearly disturbed. When she was called upon to come to dine, Mary refused. Martha brought her a tray later in the evening, and the two young ladies sat down together as they had so long ago.

“Martha,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper, as if the walls themselves could hear her and transport her message to the ears of Colin or worse, Dickon. “I have been harboring a secret all this time, and I wish to share it. You must promise me that you will never utter a word of it to anyone. Do you promise?”

Martha stared with wide eyes at her mistress. “I promise thee, Miss Mary,” she said. “Not a soul.”

Mary took a deep breath. “It concerns your family, Martha. I do hope you will not think I am taking liberties. You must know there is no understanding....I fear I am in love with Dickon.”

“Oh Miss Mary!” Martha said, her mouth pulled into a glorious smile. She clutched her hands together and bounced in her seat.

“Calm yourself, Martha! Please! No one must know!”

“But Dickon—“

“You mustn’t tell him – you promised!”

“No, no, Miss Mary I would never betray thy confidence. I am so happy, I can not hide it!”

“Nothing will come of it, dearest Martha. I simply needed to confide it, I did not mean for you to take an active part in these affairs. I don’t—.” Here she paused. “I do not expect anything from Dickon or you or your family, do know that. There. I’ve said it.”

Mary trusted Martha not to betray her secret, but something about the maid’s gleeful response prompted questions she did not dare ask. Could Dickon have feelings for her in return? Would Martha know this? Did Martha think them a suitable match?

“I know there is no hope,” Mary said before Martha could speak. “We are not suited to one another in terms of possessions and status. Medlock would not allow it, even if it were a mutual affection, which I do not presume to know. Why do you bite your lip so? You are about to bleed yourself!”

Martha could scarcely contain herself. “Oh Miss Mary, I’m not to say anything.”

“Should I take your unspoken news to be in harmony with the smile that creeps across your face?”

“Aye!” Martha grasped Mary’s hands across the table. “He’s in the garden, Miss.”

Mary stood and went to her window. Opening it, she looked out over the gardens as the first few drops of evening rain fell in to settle on her brow. A summer breeze stirred faintly as the sun began its descent behind the horizon.

Martha joined her at the casement. “He’ll be heading home soon, Miss Mary.”

Mary looked at her friend, then out over the land again. “He will have a long walk in the rain,” she thought aloud. “I could lend him my horse for the journey.” After a space, Mary asked Martha to fetch her overcoat and wait by the kitchen door out back. She did not want anyone within to see her leave the house, especially Colin, who would think only of scandal.

Sneaking through the house had not been necessary for many years but Mary found that memory served her well and she was able to reach the outside without incident. She left Martha in the kitchen and pulling her coat around her, set off to the secret garden as the weighty raindrops began their descent to the ground in earnest.

## Chapter Seven

Dickon felt the first cool drops of water fall from the Heavens as he completed his work for the evening. The garden was in fine array with full blossoms turning their thirsting faces to the sky to bathe in rainwater. Dickon, not wanting to join them in their evening bathe, pulled his brown woolen jacket on and put away his gardening tools. It would be a long walk to his cottage and starting home now might prevent him from being doused.

Stepping out of the garden, Dickon turned and locked the door. A branch rustled to his right, and when he turned to see which animal might have come to accompany him on his walk, he saw Mary Lennox standing before him.

“Lass! What is thee doin’ out in this rain? Tha’d best get back to tha house—“

“I was concerned about you getting home safely and wanted to offer you my horse for the journey,” she said, stepping closer to him and under an overhanging branch.

“That’s very kind of thee,” Dickon said. “But tha’d best get inside before you catch your death.”

“Are you going home straightaway or would you maybe...like to come inside for some tea? I can make it myself.”

Dickon watched her carefully and weighed his options. Surely the house would be dark and quiet and his presence might seem inappropriate or even an intrusion. Mary should have stayed inside where it was dry and warm, but here she was, offering her horse for his journey and a cup of tea to keep him warm for his travel.

“I don’t think it’d be right, coming inside at this hour without Lord Craven or Mrs. Medlock to permit me,” he said carefully.

Mary looked down at her feet. “I suppose it isn’t like when we were children, is it? I can’t even invite you for tea.”

“It’s not that, lass,” Dickon said quietly. Rain drops fell heavy upon them and he quickly pulled Mary over into the shelter of the doorway. Thick ivy still grew in tendrils all around it, shielding them from the elements. They stood together for a moment in the darkness, not speaking. Dickon took the opportunity to look down at her and admire her soft milky skin and rose red lips. She had grown into a fine young woman.

“What is it, then?” she asked, turning her face to him.

It was all Dickon could do not to kiss her – it was almost as if she were asking him to. He fought with himself, knowing all of the reasons why he shouldn’t do it, why they could never be together. And still, deep inside there spoke a small voice which urged him to take her in his arms and break the silent barrier between them. She would know then that he loved her, not as a friend

but as the cultured, educated and beautiful woman she'd become.

"It's..." his voice trailed off. Her eyes held such a pleading look, he knew he would be lost if he did not regain control of himself. With great effort, he broke from her wide-eyed stare. "It's..." There were no words, no reason to tell. He couldn't remember anymore.

"Dickon," she began.

"Mary," he said resignedly, "I need to tell thee something, but I'm afraid."

"What is it?" Her voice was soothing and gentle.

"I have been thinking of this for a time now and there's never been a moment to speak with thee without someone else hovering about. I fear it may cause you to be vexed with me but I can keep it from thee any longer." The words flowed from his lips, hesitant words filled with the feeling that he might be destroying everything between them. If Mary did not love him, he would look a fool to have poured out his soul. But no, his mother had taught him to be candid and search his own heart. It would not lead him astray. He hadn't been wrong about Mary at the start, and now should be no different. So he forged ahead, speaking the words that could either join them or divide them forever.

"Tell me, Dickon," she said, leaning into him as she had that day on the doorstep of the manor.

He closed his eyes and took a breath. "I have...feelings for thee -- very strong feelings that run deeper than kinship." He waited. The words hung in the air between them but he felt Mary push closer to him as he said them. "I know I dare not think thou would share those feelings, Mary, I don't expect it from thee. I had to tell thee before my heart burst from holding it back for so long."

Silence.

Mary had made no declaration. She stood perfectly still against him for a space, then turned her face to him. He gazed into her eyes, and then reached up to caress her cheek. When she did not pull away, he leaned toward her to touch her lips with the sweetest, softest of kisses. Her lips were cool, like the night, and moistened with the mist of the rains. When he pulled away to look at her again, her eyes were still closed and look of pure contentment graced her countenance.

"Dickon," she said at length.

"I love thee, Mary."

"I love you, too. I always have."

Wrapping his arms about her as he had done only in his dreams, Dickon allowed himself to push away every thought but those of Mary Lennox. These thoughts moved from facing Lord Craven, asking for Mary's hand, their wedding, their happiness. There would be the matter of gaining

permission and this was a source of worry, but Dickon forced it away. Right now all he wanted to think about was his beloved.

He twined his hands through her hair, and then held her face in his hands. She smiled at him so lovingly; he could not help but bend to take her mouth once more. This kiss lingered. It was a certain kiss: certain of its love and future, certain that it would be the first of many to come. When this second kiss ended, Dickon pulled the garden key from his pocket.

“Will you come into the garden with me? There’s something I need to ask you there.”

“Of course,” she replied.

With that, Dickon opened the door and guided Mary to the center of the garden. There he knelt on one knee and took her hand. The rain had dispersed into a mist for the time being, causing the garden to be shrouded in a peaceful blanket of quiet.

“I know I am from poor folk, living on the moors and not of noble blood or any kind of station, but I love thee and have since I first met thee so long ago. I love thee with all my heart and soul and though I have no ring to offer...no grand jewels or manor house, I offer myself to thee if thou will have me. I will love thee always, Mary Lennox.”

Dickon saw a tear appear in her eye and he moved to stand but Mary gently placed her free hand on his shoulder.

“Yes,” she said. “Oh Dickon, I wouldn’t care if you had not a penny to your name. It’s you I love, not what you own. And if we should over in a tiny cottage all of our days, I couldn’t be a more happy woman just to be yours.”

Dickon beamed with pride and pleasure at this, then stood and held Mary tightly. She smiled and laughed into his embrace, being silenced only when his mouth came in contact with hers for a third time. Again, it was different from the ones before. This kiss seared; Dickon pressed his lips to hers so hotly he thought he might burn away. His body began to respond to the softness pressing so tightly against him and as always, he allowed nature to be his guide. Deepening the kiss, Dickon tentatively and gently parted his lips and with the tip of his tongue sought entrance to the warmth of Mary’s mouth. Her hands gripped his arms tightly as she welcomed him, emitting a soft moan from her throat which served to heighten his arousal. How he wanted to be part of her then! His carnal urges could think only of removing their clothing, laying down in the grass and flowers and becoming one. He would have to wait – but he did not want to.

Mary responded to his kiss and his touch, opening for him, sliding her tongue along his, pulling him ever closer. Dickon kissed her face, then her neck. At this, Mary moaned in such a way as to cause a fire to blaze within him. He wanted to keep going...keep going...don’t stop...

Through the sensual haze, he heard her speak in a soft whisper against his hair.

“Don’t stop, Dickon...please don’t stop...”

He was a bit taken aback. Did she want...? No, he could not do that until they were married. Every cell in his body cried out for release, but he would not take her outside of a union before God. It had to be done properly. He could not deny that hearing her say it was intoxicating, and surmised that her feelings must be as strong as his to have been articulated. Perhaps she wanted him – stories of how women dreaded the sex act had caused the idea to become commonplace in society and expected. He hadn't thought that she would want him as earnestly as he wanted her and at the same base level. During the war, he'd listened to some of the tales his compatriots told about their escapades with ladies of the evening. No one seemed to have a word to say about wives if they had them. It seemed those women who wed found relations distasteful while women who were of easy virtue enjoyed it. Or perhaps, Dickon once thought, it was the money they thought of which made them appear so enthusiastic.

“We can't,” he said, pulling away. “We mun be married first.”

“Then I want to marry you right this instant!” she replied breathlessly, reaching for him again.

He took her hands in his. “We will be.”

“It will take so long – you have to ask Uncle Archie...oh how I dread telling Mrs. Medlock, I know she will be baubles and bells over it!”

Dickon laughed. “I reckon she will not be pleased – if Lord Craven allows it.”

“If?”

“I have nothing, Mary...”

“You are my choice. He must consent. Don't worry; I will talk to him if he should dare withhold his blessing.” She smiled warmly. “Nothing can keep me from you. Not now, after I've waited so long.”

\* \* \*

Daybreak found Martha up in Mary's chamber, eagerly leaning over the table to hear the full account of Mary's evening adventure. Mary was not about to tell her friend everything, but allowed small details just to appease the young lady. Martha's eyes shone with excitement and she took turns sighing and exclaiming alternately, “Oh my!” and “Ahhh!”

“He asked me to marry him, Martha. We shall be sisters!” Mary beamed.

“Oh, Miss Mary! It is too much good news to bear!” Martha dabbed at her eyes with her kerchief. “I knew it mun be so – the pair of you are too well suited.”

“Yes, but now it is a matter of Uncle Archie granting permission. No one knows yet, so please keep it a secret.”

“What happened after he asked you?” Martha inquired excitedly.

“He asked in the garden; he had to go back to the cottage and let me give him my horse. I insisted, you know. He can be stubborn, wanting to do things on his own. He walked me back to the house and saw me safely inside, and then he journeyed home. I expect he will be on the grounds this morning. Oh Martha! I confess I could not sleep a wink last night!”

“Ahh who would expect thee to? ‘Tis so exciting! You mun eat your breakfast, though. Are you coming down soon?”

“I will. You go on ahead.”

Martha left the room with a smile fixed on her face. Mary was sure she’d see that smile throughout the day; such was Martha’s joy at the news. With the dawn came practicalities that Mary did not want to admit: Colin – would he be upset or angry? Mrs. Medlock – would she advise that theirs was not a proper match? Uncle Archie, who’d barely spoken to her since he’d returned – would he think her choice unwise?

Mary had to face only one of those people on her way to breakfast and it was the one person she most wanted to avoid. Colin.

“Cousin Mary,” he said energetically. “Good morning!”

“Good morning, Colin,” she replied as warmly as she could.

“You look upset; what’s troubling you?”

“Not a thing; I don’t know what you mean. I had a bit of trouble sleeping due to the rains, but I am well now.” She noticed Colin was dressed for riding. “Where are you off to today?”

“Just a short ride; upon my return I wondered if you would like to come to Harrogate with Father and me – he says he is upset that he’s been neglecting us and so we’re off for a nice day out,” he said.

Mary walked with him down the grand staircase, wanting to accept his offer but knowing that in doing so she would be giving up time to spend with Dickon. “Is no one else coming to Harrogate, Colin?” she asked.

“Who else should come?” he asks somewhat suspiciously.

“I hadn’t meant to invite anyone unintended; it was mere curiosity. I should like to accompany you both – I’ve hardly had time to spend with you and Uncle Archie. I – have something I need to do first. I must find out if the trip would be feasible today. I’d made promises—“

“Of course, I understand,” he said cordially. “There is always tomorrow, though I am not sure what Father’s plans are. He is always so busy.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” she said wistfully.

Colin acted so kindly to her that Mary almost forgot she’d found him irritating only hours earlier. They breakfasted and Colin went out to the stables while Mary made her familiar jaunt to the garden. Dickon was within, tending a flowerbed. She stood and watched him for a few moments, enjoying the way he so carefully and gently worked the earth.

“Good morning,” she said as a bird twittered in a nearby tree.

“Mary!” Dickon rose and came to her, pulling her in a warm embrace.

“Careful now, they might see!” she said, pulling back but smiling broadly.

“Why shouldn’t ‘they’?” he asked.

“Oh you know how Colin would be...and the others. I—I’ve told Martha, though. I hope that’s all right.”

“Mary, tell who you want, I am not ashamed of loving thee.”

“No, it’s not shame, it’s...I don’t want them to spoil how I feel right now.”

“How does tha feel right now?” he asked mischievously.

Her jaw dropped and she wagged a finger at him half heartedly. “I’m happy. Truly, truly happy.”

Dickon returned her smile and bent over her for a kiss, but the rustle of leaves in the direction of the door made the lovers spring apart as if they had touched hot coals. Colin appeared in the doorway and walked down toward them.

“Mary, Father says we must leave in two minutes. He’s waiting in the carriage,” he said, eyeing his two friends.

“Just a moment, Colin,” she said and turned to Dickon. “They’re going to Harrogate...I wasn’t sure if I should—“

“Tha should go; it’s good to see new things. Tell me all about it when tha returns,” Dickon said encouragingly. For a moment, Mary worried that he was pushing her away. “Don’t worry about me, Mary, I have much work to do here and I mun help Ben with his new project. Medlock’s been after ‘im with that new man of ‘ers to carve up the bushes.”

“Are you sure you don’t need me here?” she asked somewhat hopefully. She wanted to be

wanted, but knew Dickon would not hold her back. If it had been any other time, she would have been more than eager to join her uncle and cousin, but today felt special because of what has transpired the night before. All she wanted to do was sit in the garden and watch over Dickon.

“Go on,” he said. “Enjoy thyself’. I will be here when thee returns home.”

Mary reluctantly left him and joined Colin.

“What’s the matter, Cousin?” asked Colin. “You don’t seem quite yourself today.”

“No, I suppose I don’t,” she replied as they approached the carriage waiting in the courtyard.

“Something wrong?” he prodded.

“No,” she said, allowing Colin to help her up into her seat. “Just something missing.” Or some **one**, she thought.

## Chapter Eight

The clap of the horses’ hooves against the road beat in rhythm as the carriage moved on toward the spa town of Harrogate. Travelers flocked to the location for its over eighty mineral springs that were said to have healing qualities, and it was a popular area for the well to do in society to spend their holiday.

Mary sat next to Colin, who chattered on as his father nodded now and then in the seat across from them. Watching the landscape roll by, Mary’s thoughts centered on Dickon, and questioning how long this little sojourn would take.

“Mary, did you know there are caves we can see here?”

“Caves?”

“Now, Colin, your cousin is a fine lady now and won’t like to go mucking about in dripping wet caves,” his father cautioned.

“Oh, Father,” Colin said. “I think she might like it. After all, she’s quite an adventurous sort – aren’t you, Mary?”

Mary turned to him and shrugged slightly. “At times, I suppose.” She picked at her white gloves and smoothed her skirts, causing Colin to give her a nudge.

“You’re not Miss Prim and Proper on us now, are you, Mary?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Colin.”

“Leave her, Colin,” Lord Craven commanded.

Colin changed his tack and began asking about their destination. If it wasn’t to be caves, he wanted to do something equally enthralling and exciting.

“We will visit one of the tea-shops—“

“A tea-shop?” Colin complained.

“—and we will walk in The Stray and enjoy the gardens.”

“That sounds lovely, Uncle,” said Mary, flashing him a broad smile. She hadn’t meant to irritate Colin, but to express her pleasure at the itinerary. Nevertheless, Colin slumped in his seat and angrily took to the window, biting his lip tightly.

“I apologize for my son’s impertinent attitude, Mary,” said Archie.

“That’s quite all right, Uncle. I’m sure I can help tame him once again. It might not be as difficult the second time around, but I do think he’s worth the effort.” Mary gave a small laugh and Archie smiled while Colin continued to scowl.

“I’m impertinent?” he asked angrily. “You’re sitting here discussing me as if weren’t even present! That’s what I call impertinence!”

“Calm yourself, cousin, I was only joking,” Mary explained, taking his arm and patting it gently to try and soothe his wounded ego. Colin perked up at the gesture and settled back, his face losing its sour expression. How many times had Mary seen him paint that ugly picture on his face only to have it washed away by her kindness? She remembered Colin’s outbursts and how he thought he would never walk, never be loved. While pondering his attitude, a thought came to her that caused her a great deal of worry. What if Colin had been better when she was away in London? Had her presence caused him to revert to his old ways of childishness and jealousy? For a moment, Mary regretted coming back home. Then she recalled her experience with Dickon, and all regret vanished. Colin would have to accept that she had chosen Dickon. It didn’t mean that she loved Colin less, but he was sure to take it that way when her engagement was announced.

Mary turned her attention to her uncle, who sat straight and proud across from her. She studied the lines on his face, the deep creases created by years of sadness and strife. His eyes held weariness though he was wide awake. She imagined how he might look when informed of Dickon Sowerby’s intentions.

“You look so far away, child,” he said then, causing Mary to start.

“No,” she said, a bit flustered. “I’m fine.”

The carriage ground to a halt along Parliament Street and the travelers disengaged themselves from the hulking vehicle. Mary looked around, taking in the lush greenery and majestic hotels that surrounded her. This town was picturesque, unlike the more sooty and crowded London streets.

“Uncle, how is it that I have never been here before? It’s beautiful!” she exclaimed.

“I regret that I had not the opportunity to show you and Colin more of the beauty of Yorkshire, lass. I hoped today’s journey might make up for it in some small way. Shall we look in on the tea-shop?”

“Yes, please!” Mary said, eager to see all the town had to offer. Perhaps she could buy a small token for Martha in one of the shops; Martha had been so helpful to her of late, serving as confidant and friend.

“Oh, must we?” Colin all but whined.

“Come, Colin, you’ll enjoy it!” Mary again took her cousin’s arm and urged him along down the street. He seemed to give in more easily when she made some kind of physical contact. Deep inside, Mary felt a bit wicked for manipulating him like this, but it was the only way to keep the peace and be able to enjoy the day. She didn’t want Colin to have a fit like he used to. It was best to keep him as calm as possible and placate him.

“All right, all right,” he acquiesced.

They walked along, enjoying the fresh air and open space. Lord Craven ushered them into a tea-shop where they were served tea and teacakes. Conversation had languished and Mary fought to find something interesting to remark upon.

“So quiet, you two,” said Archie, surveying his charges.

Mary only smiled politely. Colin, however, impatiently drummed his fingertips on the table.

“I thought we could see the caves,” he said hopefully.

“Not this time, my dear boy,” said his father. “I shall bring you back here on a spelunking expedition soon, if you wish. Perhaps for your birthday.”

“You’ll enjoy that,” said Mary, encouragingly.

“But you won’t be here to share it, will you, Mary?” Colin became serious and wistful. “I shouldn’t like to see the caves without you.”

“I don’t know, Colin. It depends on many things.” She thought at first of school, but then remembered that she might be married by Colin’s birthday, if it were at all possible. Would

Colin even want to see her then? “We can talk about it later, at home. Right now I’d like to visit one of the little shops and see if I can’t find a little gift for Martha. She’s been so good to me since my return. Do you think that would be all right?” She looked from her uncle to her cousin, waiting for their decision.

“Yes, of course,” her uncle said, smiling.

Colin merely shrugged.

They left the tea shop and walked down Parliament, turning onto Oxford St, stopping in front of the Grand Opera House. The theatre had been built almost twenty years before and boasted a beautiful red marquee. It was also quite a popular attraction with the public.

Mary looked up at it admiringly. “I’d love to come to a show here one day,” she remarked. “I’ve never seen a show before, not even while I was away at school. I wish I’d been – there are many theatres in London but I just never had the time.”

“Then you shall,” said Archie. “What a splendid idea.”

“Would it be too much trouble, Uncle?”

“Not at all; I will inquire inside as to their schedule. I won’t be but a moment.” He disappeared within the building and left Mary with Colin outside.

“My father is so agreeable when you’re around, Mary. I wish you’d stay with us longer.”

“I’d like to stay longer as well, Colin. I love seeing you all again. You are my family, after all.”

“Yes, but – Father is always so busy, yet when you’re here he makes time for you. He’d never take me to see a show if I’d asked.”

“Had you ever asked?”

“No,” he said.

“Then how do you expect he knows you want to go to one?” She shook her head. “Colin, you’re terribly vexing sometimes.”

He thrust his hands in his pockets and put on an arrogant air. “Am I?”

“Not as bad as you once were, though,” she said, studying him.

“Why do you look at me like that?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Like what?” Mary grew a bit flustered.

“Like I’m a bug under a glass.”

“I do not look at you that way,” she said gently. “I was just thinking of how you’ve grown.”

“And do you think time has been kind to me?”

“Of course it has, silly!” she said, not wishing to address the question Colin seemed to be asking. “Not a white hair on your head,” she laughed, carefully tucking a strand of his golden hair behind his ear. This gesture caused a change in Colin, and Mary regretted being so forward. She’d forgotten her manners and that they were in public, not on the moors. She shouldn’t be touching men so affectionately on the streets; it was something ladies did not do. She pulled her hand back quickly.

A tension has arisen between them now, one that Mary couldn’t deny. Her cousin was indeed a handsome young man, and if she had not lost her heart to Dickon, she may have even considered Colin, if such a marriage were still allowed. Marrying one’s first cousin had not been common for years, but she doubted Colin would let convention stand in his way if they had wanted to marry.

He stood now with a pained expression on his face. “Mary,” he half sighed.

“Please, Colin,” she said pleadingly, unsure if he understood her meaning. Relationships could be such a cat-and-mouse game at times, and Mary hated playing with emotions. She longed to be able to tell him how she felt, but he would be hurt, and she was frightened of what he might do to himself or someone else in his anger. He was not a sadistic boy; he didn’t set out to hurt anyone, but then neither did Mary. She could see that they were not meant for each other, but plainly he was still holding onto his childhood crush. He needed to be set straight, but Mary doubted she had the wherewithal to deliver such a blow to her dear cousin. In gaining Dickon, she did not want to lose Colin. “We can talk about this at home. There’s much we need to discuss.”

Colin nodded slowly and they waited in silence until Archie reappeared.

“We are in luck, my dears,” he said jubilantly. “I have secured tickets for a performance taking place a fortnight hence.”

“Lovely! What are we to see?” Mary said excitedly.

“Romeo and Juliet,” said Archie, waving the tickets at Mary and Colin.

“Ahh, how romantic!” said Mary.

“That’s a bit of a sappy love story, isn’t it?” asked Colin.

“Sappy? It’s desperately tragic!” said Mary, surprised that he would look down upon Shakespeare. “It’s a classic.”

“I knew I’d waited too long to expose Colin to theatre,” said Archie. Mary heard a bit of sadness in his voice as he turned to his son and spoke. “I should have brought you here long ago. To London as well. I’m sorry I never brought you to visit with Mary.”

Colin remained silent and Mary wondered if he had nothing to say or if he just couldn’t think of anything that would be appropriate. The air between them grew thick with expectation, so Mary pushed it aside by taking her Uncle’s hand. “That’s all right, Uncle Archie. We’re together now and that’s what counts. We can still go to London one day, and it will be better without school looming over us like a dark cloud. I’m so glad to finally be free of it.”

Archie smiled down at her. “Yes, you’re right, Mary.”

Mary glanced over at Colin and could tell he was relieved to move on from the previous subject. The three continued their jaunt down the street, walking lazily in the sunlight. A fresh breeze weaved amidst the pedestrians, and Mary tilted her face to the sun to relish the moment. “It is such a beautiful day,” she mused. She wondered what Dickon might be doing back at Misselthwaite; in the garden tending the roses, or maybe working with Ben Weatherstaff on those topiaries for Colin?

Archie stopped to examine a shop window’s contents, so Mary took the opportunity to take her cousin’s hand and lead him a little ways further down the block. “Colin,” she asked, “What are you going to do with those strange plants Mr. Markham has Dickon and Ben working on?”

“Those? I thought it would be nice to have some art out in the gardens. Proper English gardens have symmetry, you know.”

“They’re not to go in...our garden?”

“No, of course not. Don’t worry about that. Do you not approve of them?”

“I thought they seemed a little out of place, but far be it from me to dictate.” She let go of Colin’s hand and he frowned slightly.

“One is to be a likeness of my horse,” he continued.

“Is it?”

“Aye,” he said.

Mary laughed at Colin’s dialect change. She hadn’t heard him use any broad Yorkshire for years. “You’ve still got a touch of Yorkshire in your blood, don’t you, Colin?”

“Just a bit. It comes and goes.” He looked a bit forlorn.

“Is something wrong?” Mary asked.

“I’ve had a lot on my mind lately,” he said. “I’m unsure of so many things.”

Surprised that he was speaking so candidly, Mary felt sorry for her cousin. Guilt crept in and gnawed at her conscience. Here she had just come home from being away for so long and all she could do was think of Dickon. Perhaps her cousin felt ignored? He was not one to handle not having an audience and being deprived of continual praise and affirmation. He had matured enough so that he didn’t immediately throw a tantrum when things didn’t go his way, but Mary could still see remnants of his younger self when he was under duress.

“Colin, when we arrive home, why don’t we have tea together and we can talk? I apologize for being so wrapped up in things around me. Everyone’s changed and I’m still growing used to seeing you all again. I am so happy to be home and to see you,” she said sincerely.

The shadow lifted from Colin’s face, though he did not register a smile. Nodding, he offered Mary his arm and the two continued down the street with Archie walking protectively behind them.

The group continued their outing and Mary successfully found a pretty tam for Martha, feeling the gift was partly deserved for keeping her confidence so well with the proposal. Mary’s thoughts kept finding their way back to the garden and to Dickon who waited for her within its walls. By the time they had settled in for the ride home, Mary was anxious to see Dickon again, though she chastised herself for telling Colin she’d spend time with him and then allowing Dickon to once again dominate her thoughts. How could she achieve a balance where both men would know she loved them dearly but that what she felt for each was unique?

The carriage stopped in front of the manor and Mary started, unaware that she had been silent for the entire trip.

“She awakens!” said Archie good-naturedly. Apparently, they’d thought she’s fallen asleep.

“Oh, Uncle Archie,” she said, embarrassed.

Mrs. Medlock came rushing out of the house at that moment, wringing her hands. “Lord Craven, there’s been an accident!” she cried.

Mary’s heart skipped a beat and her throat seemed to close. “What?” she said without thinking. Was it Dickon? “Who?”

“It’s Ben Weatherstaff – he’s cut himself right good working on the topiary for Master Colin!”

“Ben’s a master gardener, Medlock, I’m sure he knows how to use a pair of shears—“ started Archie, heading for the door.

“’Twas Mr. Markham, Sir. He’d been showing Mr. Weatherstaff some of his techniques and he fumbled with the shears and they stabbed Ben right in the foot! Oh, the blood!” She looked about to faint.

Mary suppressed a mischievous smirk. Of course it hadn't been Ben's fault; it was that dull Mr. Markham that Medlock thought so much of who'd caused the accident. But where was Dickon amidst all of this commotion? "Is Ben all right?" she asked.

"The doctor's tended to him and he's watching so that it doesn't get infected – oh, but a man Mr. Weatherstaff's age must be so careful!"

"Can he walk?" Archie asked, ushering everyone into the house. "Look here, Medlock, you seem a bit ill, will you sit down – I don't want your legs giving way."

Mrs. Medlock slumped into a brocade covered seat near the door. "Oh, it was terrible!"

Mary and Colin exchanged glances as the housekeeper put her hand up to her forehead and moaned pathetically. Colin rolled his eyes; Mary bit her lip and inched toward the entryway to the kitchens. Now that she knew Ben would recover, she wanted to go to the gardens and find Dickon.

Martha came up from the kitchens and glanced to Mary, who gave her a conspiratorial look. Taking Mary's hint, Martha hurried over to where Archie was trying to calm Mrs. Medlock and Colin was watching with disgust. Mary heard her ask Colin about the outing, and with that, Mary slipped beyond the door and down to the kitchens where she could easily escape the house and head for the gardens.

She did not make it far when an arm grabbed her about the waist and pulled her close to the warm body it was attached to. The familiar smell of fresh earth filled her nostrils and she looked up into Dickon's loving face. Before she could even utter a greeting, Dickon's mouth descended upon hers, stealing her very breath away. Immediate concerns of who might catch them disappeared and all that remained was a rekindling of the fire she felt inside for this man who loved her. She was enveloped in his warm embrace, as if he never wanted to let her go again.

When Dickon broke the kiss, Mary was almost dizzy with need.

"I missed you so, lass," he said huskily, something new and enticing lacing his voice.

"I missed you," she replied, holding onto the lapels of his brown woolen jacket. "Should we go to the garden?"

"I know we've got mun to speak about, to plan," he said, "but I'd like thee to come to my little cottage on the moor. I want thee to be sure tha could accept it – tis not mun, not good enough for thee," he said.

"Of course it's good enough!" she said, a little upset that he would think something like money and status would make her change her mind. "I've only been away for a few hours; nothing has swayed my decision. We've spoken of that before and I don't want us to speak of it ever again. I love you, not what you own. Believe that, Dickon Sowerby."

Seeing that she had assured him beyond doubt, Mary continued. "I should like to see your cottage. I'm sure 'tis lovely! It is a way off, though – we should take the horses. No arguments!" she insisted when Dickon opened his mouth to speak.

The couple walked swiftly to the stables where Mary asked the stable hand to saddle two horses for their ride. After a short wait, they mounted the great beasts and ducked behind the house to remain hidden from curious eyes within. Once set upon the moor, they galloped for a distance until it was certain they hadn't been followed. Mary felt quite the outlaw being so secretive, but she did have a secret and it would soon be told. She wanted to keep it as her own for a little while longer.

They slowed the horses to a canter, and rode alongside one another for the distance to the cottage. Dinner would be served in just a few hours time at Misselthwaite, and Mary had also agreed to tea with Colin. She'd have just enough time to spend a few precious, private moments with her intended, then they'd have to ride back to face society once again.

"There is it," said Dickon, pointing to the small structure. "We're almost home."

Home. Mary smiled.

## Chapter Nine

Dickon opened the door to the small cottage, worried about what Mary might think of his home. Much more humble than Misselthwaite. The house was but a dot on the vast land that Lord Craven owned. Outside, heather and gorse grew on the moor, and ivy stretched its way up the sides of the cottage, meeting the brown thatched roof. Garden tools and a small wheelbarrow lay in the front yard, covered with burlap.

Ushering Mary into the house, he watched her face carefully for a reaction. She seemed to be taking everything in, looking all around as if she wanted to memorize every detail. The cottage had just two rooms: a large, open area with a fireplace that served as a living room, and across from it in the same undivided area was the kitchen, outfitted with sink, stove and a table with two chairs. A closed door led beyond to Dickon's bedroom.

"It's lovely," said Mary, nodding her approval and giving Dickon a shy smile. "What's there?" She pointed to the door.

Dickon coughed. "Bedroom," he said quickly.

Mary immediately looked away, and Dickon could tell she was embarrassed. "I suppose I shall see that soon enough," she said softly.

He came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulder, gently turning her to face him. "Aye,"

he agreed. He looked down into her eyes and felt intoxicated by her proximity. She smelled so sweet and looked delicate, like a flower. He bent down to kiss her, for once not worried about being seen by intruding eyes, or feeling the pressure of a time limit calling him back to work. She was his, right here and now, all his. Her lips felt soft and smooth under his, and when he brought his arms around her and pulled her closer, she made the smallest sound of contentment. Embracing her fully, he caressed her face with one hand and held her to his body with the other. She seemed to melt into him, completely willing and trusting. It was this way she offered herself to him that drove his desire. He'd not permitted himself to partake of it fully, to spend time dwelling on the mysteries that lay beneath her skirts, lest it drive him mad with lust. He'd suppressed his carnal desires, but he was still just a man, and having Mary now within his grasp was too much to overcome with nobility. His lips played over hers, and he enjoyed the little moans she made because of his attentions. When at last he parted his lips slightly and introduced his tongue to her mouth, she responded tentatively, but did not pull away.

Dickon felt his desire grow as their kiss deepened. This was no longer a sweetheart's kiss or a gentle touch; they'd both allowed a primitive instinct to take over. He moved his lips to her cheek, then her neck, feeling Mary grip his arms tightly as she whispered his name.

"Mary," he said as his hands began to roam over her bodice. He could feel the warmth of her body, the softness of her breasts beneath the layers of lace and cloth, and could think only of how to remove those impediments. They'd known each other for years; they were the best of friends and the closest of hearts. Surely they were as married as any man and woman in love could be – surely it wouldn't be wrong not to wait for the official ceremony...

"Dickon, we shouldn't," she managed to say unconvincingly. "I know I didn't want to stop when we were in the garden, but --"

"I know," he said, coming back to claim her lips again. He moved so that Mary's back was to the wall, and he guided her until she stood against it, bearing the insistent weight of his body as he kissed her thoroughly. Pressing his hardness against her caused Mary to gasp and push him away.

"I'm sorry, Mary," he said, distraught that he'd offended her. "I love thee so and 'tis so difficult to wait..."

"But we must wait, Dickon," she said, catching her breath. "I want our wedding night to be special. I want to spend it here, with you, in your bed."

Her words caused Dickon's arousal to grow. "Tha munnot speak such things, Mary." He approached again and kissed her softly on the corner of her mouth. "I canna bear to let you go."

They stood in silence for a few moments, leaning against one another, each listening to the other's heartbeat. Mary reached up and stroked his cheek, already rough with the slight shadow of a beard.

"When did you become a man, Dickon? Just yesterday you were a boy," she said.

“And tha was just a wee lass,” he replied. “But tha has grown into a beautiful woman.”

Mary grew quiet once more. Dickon grew concerned when she wouldn't look up at him, but trained her eyes on the buttons of his shirt.

“I do want to stay with you, Dickon,” she all but whispered. “I want you more than anything, but we must wait. Please don't be angry with me.”

“No, lass, I am not angry with thee! Not a whit!” He held her tightly. “If tha wants to wait, we shall wait. And I shall think of thee every moment until we are to come back here as man and wife.”

Mary looked up at him and smiled softly. There were tears in her eyes. “Oh, Dickon, I don't want to go back there again. I'd promised Colin I'd have tea – and we still have to talk to Uncle Archie. How I dread it!”

“'Tis best to get it over and done with; I will ask him tomorrow morning – now don't look so vexed...it will be all right.”

Dickon assured himself that all would be well and the match would be approved, but a nagging feeling of worry plagued him. Lord Craven could withhold his blessing. This might not stop the wedding, but it might make it impossible to stay on the Misselthwaite land, even after Lord Craven had granted Dickon the cottage. Relations would be strained at best. The other problem was Colin; this dilemma remained whether Lord Craven agreed to the union or not. Colin would be estranged from them. How could they be together and retain Colin's friendship and trust?

“Dickon, I'd best get back. I wanted to stay here longer, but I think...I think it would be better for me to go. If I stay, I shan't want to leave for a very long while.” With that, Mary turned to the door.

Dickon understood her meaning and grew a bit warm under his collar. She didn't even say anything saucy, yet she'd acknowledged she wanted to be with him intimately, and that was enough to make him more than a little uncomfortable down below. He immediately grabbed the door and opened it for Mary, and she stepped outside once more. They hadn't been at the cottage more than a few minutes, and already she had to leave.

He helped her up onto her horse, and then mounted his own to lead her back to the manor. They had the horses canter and trot, not wanting to part too quickly. Surely it was tea time and Colin would be waiting – probably agitated that Mary was late. Dickon thought of his good friend and at once felt a bit of annoyance toward him for being the reason Mary was going back to the manor. If only she could have stayed longer...

“You look far away,” observed Mary. “What's wrong?”

Dickon shook his head.

“Come now, Dickon Sowerby. I know when something’s on your mind.”

“I wanted thee to stay, is all.”

“I know. But it is best this way. You must get a good night’s sleep; I’ll be expecting you at the Manor tomorrow to speak with Uncle Archie.”

Dickon cast Mary a worried look.

“None of that, now,” she cautioned.

They arrived at the house and took the horses to the stable where the stable hand set about putting away the saddles and bridles. Dickon walked Mary to the kitchen door and stood silent for a moment, unsure whether he should try to kiss her goodbye when they could be so easily discovered. Mary seemed to sense his apprehension, and leaned toward him slightly. He took the opportunity and kissed her, lingering for as long as she would allow. Then she stepped back and with a smile disappeared into the kitchen, gently closing the door behind her.

## Chapter Ten

Mary awakened earlier than usual, anxious about Dickon’s visit and the question he’d be asking her Uncle. Today everything would fall into place, or so she hoped. Colin had been quite irritated that she’d been on the moor without him and spent a good fifteen minutes lecturing her on manners. Somehow she’d survived the tea, noting how jealous Colin had acted. He couldn’t have known she was with Dickon but of course he did. What else could he think? That she was pruning weeds with Ben Weatherstaff? Martha had been indoors all day, so Colin knew Mary wasn’t with her.

Mary felt a bit irritated herself at being made to feel guilty for being with Dickon. She’d only spent the entire morning with Colin and her Uncle. Wasn’t that enough? What more did Colin want? He demanded to be entertained just like he was a little boy again. If he started any of that on this day, Mary resolved to give him a piece of her mind. Nothing would ruin her day and the prospect of finally being able to move on with the wedding plans.

The secret garden was of course the only place she could ever imagine getting married, but she knew her Uncle would insist on a proper church wedding. It would be difficult to convince him, but her mind was settled on the matter.

A knock sounded at the door, and Mary went to open it. Martha stood before her, beaming.

“Oh, Miss Mary! Tha looks so beautiful!”

“Good morning, Martha. You seem happy today. What’s the cause?”

“I just canna wait for thee to be part of the family, is all.” Her face grew grave. “Colin’s mighty upset, Miss.”

“I know. I just don’t really know what about. He can’t know about “

“Oh no, Miss. I’d never tell! I’ve not told a soul.”

“I trust you, Martha. I think I ought to spend some time with Colin today, though I’d rather not when he’s acting this way. Still I think it may be the only way to calm him.”

“Would you like to have breakfast downstairs or shall I bring it to your room?”

“Downstairs would be fine, thank you, Martha. I’ll just finish getting dressed and go see Colin. I’ll be down in a few minutes. Could you help me with this dress for a moment?”

Mary could never seem to get certain dresses closed properly. The long lacy cream colored one and the blue one with velvet trim had a mass of buttons down the back that she could never reach.

Once she was properly attired, she dismissed Martha and headed to Colin’s bedroom door. She heard him bustling about inside, and raised her hand to knock when the door flew open and she came face to face with the agitated young man.

“Oh! Colin! I didn’t realize you were coming out,” she said, stepping back to allow him room to pass.

“What? She speaks to me?” he mocked.

“Come now, Colin. Do be nice,” Mary coaxed, taking his arm gently. “Let’s have our breakfast together and things can be as they once were. Don’t be cross with me,” she said.

“You missed our tea yesterday,” he said pointedly. “Where were you?”

“I was—“ Mary fumbled, trying to think up a good enough lie to tell him. “—in the kitchen.” It wasn’t a lie; she’d come in the kitchen door and Martha practically ambushed her with questions. They’d gone up to her room and prepared for dinner, with Mary completely forgetting tea with Colin in her excitement.

“You were in the kitchen for an hour?” Colin shook his head, disbelieving.

“No, not the whole time. I was upstairs with Martha, if you must know.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Mary. You agreed to have tea with me – I am the one who has been slighted, not you.”

Mary furrowed her brow. Colin was right; she’d broken her promise to him and he had every right to be upset with her behavior. “You’re right, Colin. I was rude and thoughtless. Please forgive me?”

Colin looked at her for a space, then turned away and trudged down the stairs. “You know I can’t say no to you, Mary,” he said as she followed him downstairs. He stopped midway and turned to

her. “What say we spend some time together today? Just the two of us. I haven’t seen you for so long and here you are running about and I’ve hardly had a moment to enjoy your company. Don’t deny me this small pleasure yet again.”

Mary took pity on him, the way he looked at her so desperately. Dickon was due to arrive and ask for her hand, and surely she could not be out and away while that happened in the house. At the same time, she was not keen on being around when Colin found out about her engagement. Perhaps just a few hours with him would help him understand that he was still loved and that realization might bring back some of the old Colin she used to know.

“Shall we go to the garden?” she asked. “After breakfast?”

“No, I don’t want to go there today,” he said, surprising her.

“Why ever not?” she asked. “You’ve always loved it there.”

“I just don’t want to be in there today. There are many places we can go. Misselthwaite has dozens of gardens, as well, if you fancy a walk in one. Or we can play tennis on the south lawn if you prefer, or we can go to my room again like when we were young and played with games and puzzles—“

Mrs. Medlock passed the staircase and noticed the cousins upon it, talking. She stopped and coughed, drawing attention from their conversation. “You both had best hurry and get your breakfast, it’s about to be served!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Medlock. Come on, Colin, we shall talk about this later.”

Medlock shot Mary a disapproving look and Mary wondered what the matter could be. Nothing inappropriate had been said. Ah! Colin inviting a young lady to his bedroom was of course something that Mrs Medlock would find very wrong, indeed. Mary stifled a giggle as she moved to the dining area and took a seat.

“Why are you laughing?” Colin asked, oblivious to his faux pas on the stairs.

“Mrs. Medlock! You’d invited me to your room,” Mary said, leaning toward him and speaking conspiratorially. “She looked as if she might faint!”

Colin smiled and his entire face lit up brightly. “I hadn’t even – what she must think!”

”You must be careful around her, Colin. You’re like to give her an attack or something with your rude suggestions,” Mary said, her laughter bubbling over and escaping at the end of her sentence.

“Oh yes, that’s me, terribly and horribly rude. Such a cad and a bounder,” Colin replied smugly, setting his napkin in his lap. “My evil plan was to get you into my bedroom where I’d then—“

A loud cough interrupted Colin as Archibald Craven entered the room and took a seat at the head

of the table. "Enough, Colin," he commanded firmly.

Mary's eyes widened. Her uncle did not seem in good spirits on this fine morning; perhaps it was not too late to tell Dickon to wait on their talk. She ate as quickly as she could, not speaking to either Colin or her uncle the entire time. The three ate in silence and when Mary was finished, she excused herself and left the table. Colin lingered a moment, then excused himself and followed her. She'd headed straight to the front door and pried it open to face the day. Once outside, Colin walked up beside her and took her elbow gently.

"I didn't mean to offend you, Mary," he said. "I was just having a spot of fun."

"I'm not upset with you, Colin," she reassured him. "Everyone is just so tightly wound today, I'm afraid they will all break like a bad spring and go flying about the house in little pieces." She sighed. "I would not mind going to your room to play games as we once did, but I think those times are over for us now, Colin. No one else sees us the way we see each other."

"How do we see each other?" Colin asked tentatively.

Mary looked into his clear eyes. "I see you as a very good friend, Colin. You're my cousin, you're a good man, and we've been through a lot together. I care for you very much, as I also care for Dickon."

"Why does he always have to come between us?" Colin said, suddenly angry.

"He isn't between us, Colin," she said, trying to make him understand. He'd started to walk away, but Mary stopped him. "Is he why you don't want to go into the garden anymore?"

"The garden is his place, not mine," Colin said stiffly. He looked out over the moors and put on a resolute expression.

"That's not true."

"I see the way he looks at you...and you look back at him."

Mary fought with herself as to whether she should simply tell Colin everything and bear his wrath, or allow him to find out later, when she could easily hide away. She'd never been the type of girl to run away from a challenge, but dealing with the feelings of young men was quite a different story. She did not want to juggle hearts or lead anyone on. She loved Dickon and could not help that fact. It simply was. And she could not love Colin in the same way. It was something he would have to accept, and nothing she did would be able to ease the burden or soften the blow.

"Colin, I do love Dickon. I love you, too, but it's a different kind of love."

Colin began to walk again, and Mary followed. His direction seemed aimless, not heading toward the stable, garden, or anywhere in particular. "Mary, I have a feeling I know what you're going to say and I will tell you right now that I am not of the right mind to hear it. I simply can

not.”

What could Mary say to this revelation? Colin knew himself better than she did at this point, but she didn't want to give up so easily. She tried to approach her cousin, but he waved her away. When he spoke again, his voice cracked slightly, as if he were holding back tears.

“When you came here, I wanted you to go away. I was sure I'd die in my bed and never see the sun again. But you were the one who believed in me and defied my doctors and Medlock and even my father because you thought I was worth that effort even when I did not. And everything was grand – we had the garden, we had each other, and I was going to live forever and ever. Do you remember me saying that in the garden?”

Mary nodded. “Yes,” she said. “As if it were yesterday.”

“While you've been hidden away at school, Dickon and I became involved in the war effort and though I don't know what his experiences were like, I was taught that people do not live forever and ever, and some of them die quite young and in the prime of their lives. And so I promised myself that if ever I saw you again, if ever you returned, I would make you mine. Because we belonged together, Mary,” Colin said, his voice now pleading. “Or so I thought.”

“Please, Colin, don't—“

“I know this is terribly hard for you to hear, but it must be said. I love you. I have loved you for years, since our times in the garden, since you screamed at me that night when I was sure I'd die and you were the devil himself come to snatch me away. And I thought – foolishly – I thought that perhaps I could offer you more than he could. He has nothing – no money or status, education, opportunity -- nothing at all. I could entice you with things galore, surely. But no, not my Mary. You always see through the things of the world and you look right into the heart. And since the war, dear Mary, I fear my heart is black and cold and shriveled beyond repair, beyond even the help of magic.”

Mary didn't know what to say. She absorbed his words and ruminated on them, wanting to reach out and hold him and tell him he was not the person he described, but that Colin – her Colin— lived on inside him, well as the day he proclaimed he would indeed grow up to be a man.

“What can I do?” Mary asked aloud, partly to herself, partly to God in His Heaven.

“I know you love him,” Colin continued. “There's no denying it. Lord knows I tried to. You ignored me, Mary. I was right here all this time, and you always looked past me.”

Guilt settled in around Mary's shoulders, causing her to feel the world and its heavy weight bearing down on her. Colin had spent years pining for her, and she had overlooked him in favor of Dickon. But how could that have been wrong when it was Dickon who stoked the fires in her heart? She had been called to Dickon as if he'd been part of her from the beginning of her existence. He was the missing element that her soul longed for each day and night, and she'd been lucky enough to have found him as a child when some people never find the one who was

made just for them. And while Colin had spent all this time looking for her, perhaps he'd already overlooked one who might be right for him. There was no explaining it now, not with Colin in such a state.

"I'm so sorry, Colin," she said. "I never meant to hurt you. I know that is no consolation, but know that I do love you and you are the world to me and I do long for your happiness. I just – I just can not change my feelings for Dickon. Surely you knew in the garden so long ago that this would come to pass? It was forged then, right before your eyes. I never kept my feelings secret from either of you."

Mary watched as Colin took a deep breath and hung his head low. He brought his hand up to his forehead and held it there a moment, then pushed his light fringe back. "Just leave me be, Mary."

"I can't do that," Mary said.

"I can't have you, and to see you just rips my heart in two. Just go back to the house, or go see your garden...or Dickon. I can't bear to look at you."

"Please don't say that, Colin!"

"Go!"

"No! You won't make me leave you; I am not a child you can admonish so easily or bend to your will!" Mary grew angry at the way Colin treated her. He was not yet master of the house and had no right to say such things to her.

A voice rang out across the lawn, calling to both Mary and Colin. A figure approached, and Mary stood rooted to the spot as she recognized Dickon walking up the small slope of a hill to see his friends. She watched Colin glance toward Dickon, then he stalked away down the south side of the hill, leaving Mary alone at the top.

"Colin!" Dickon called, to no avail. He reached Mary, who immediately threw herself into his waiting arms and sobbed uncontrollably.

"Eh, lass, what's the matter with thee?" Dickon tried to speak to her, but Mary was beyond comforting. She simply wanted to run away from Misselthwaite, from broken hearts and dreams, from the matters of money and war and hate and even love. As a child she was always ready to blame her parents for every little thing she perceived as wrong or selfish or cold; she never knew being a grownup could hurt so much or be so very confusing.

## Chapter Eleven

Dickon walked purposefully from his cottage, intent on making it all the way to Misselthwaite to speak with Lord Craven about the matter of Mary's hand. He'd barely been able to sleep the

night before, tossing and turning and waking every few minutes with apprehension and excitement about the day's plans. Though confident he would not be denied his request, Dickon knew it might be awkward for Lord Craven to grant such a thing to a poor servant of his household, and braced himself against a possible rejection. He could still marry Mary, but he did not want her to be an outcast or estrange her from her family.

The entire matter lay heavily upon Dickon into the wee hours of morning and finally, unable to bear the wait any longer, he arose. After washing thoroughly, Dickon put on his Sunday best and left his cottage without even eating breakfast. For the first time since he'd lived there, his chores went undone before his journey to the house. He'd never been one to shirk his responsibilities, but today was special and he suffered under the duress of intense distraction. How could he attend to domestic problems and duties when his future shone so brightly on the hill?

A thought arose to dampen his spirits: Colin. Dickon had been conspicuously avoiding his old friend, and he was sure Colin knew it was purposeful. In the past, they'd often taken time to talk or tend the garden, but in the time since they'd returned from the war their relationship had been strained. Dickon suspected Colin resented having to be involved in the thing at all. They'd both seen good men, young men, die horribly painful deaths. They'd seen the suffering in the hospitals and in the field. They'd lost new acquaintances – those boys who might have become friends if they had all met under different circumstances. Dickon, understanding nature so much better than most people could, accepted that these things did happen. He had his share of nightmares and fears because of it, but he preferred to dwell on the woman who had finally come back to him. Colin had no such person in his life who could mirror whatever love he had left in his heart, and so his heart seemed to harden against the world. The world was a scary place that stole from him and destroyed things he loved, and now all Dickon could guess was that Colin had felt he'd lost the one last true love in his life: Mary.

Dickon felt a pang of guilt and hurt as he approached the house, knowing that his relationship with Colin would suffer yet another blow and could perhaps be destroyed by its force. How much could one young man withstand, after he'd already seen so much? For Dickon knew that admirable as Colin could be, the two of them were not cut from the same cloth. Perhaps that is what pulled Mary to him instead of to Colin. They were two distinctly different young men, and for all the riches Colin had or would inherit from his father and family line, he had not been able to acquire Mary Lennox.

Taking a deep breath, Dickon stood outside the front door of Misselthwaite and rapped on it. A few moments later, the door opened and he was face to face with Mrs. Medlock, her eyes rimmed red with weeping. Immediately, Dickon worried for Mary.

“Mrs. Medlock! What's wrong? Has something happened?”

Mrs. Medlock held a handkerchief up to dab at the corners of her eyes as she beckoned Dickon into the front hall.

“I'm afraid Mr. Markham has returned to Lincolnshire,” she sobbed.

“Mr. Markham? Th’ gardener?”

“Yes,” she said, drawing out the word into a half whine. She sniffled pitifully.

Dickon breathed a sigh of relief. “Not to worry, Mrs. Medlock, I’m sure he’ll be back...won’t he?”

“No, he wont! The topiaries are done, or they are as done as they will be since Ben Weatherstaff refuses to continue work on them.”

“The ones for Colin?” he asked, remembering the horse shapes Ben had tried to fashion in the garden.

“Yes, exactly,” she said. “Now, what were you here for? Is it time for your wages again?”

“No, Ma’am, I have come to speak with Lord Craven,” Dickon said, standing straight and tall.

“He’s in his study. Wait in the drawing room, will you? I think your sister is about here somewhere...Martha!” Medlock called through the hallways for Martha as Dickon seated himself in the very familiar drawing room nearby. He, Mary and Colin used to explore the house once Lord Craven had opened it up again after Colin’s miracle in the garden. There were no wings locked and no curtains drawn to keep secrets in darkened corners. Dickon knew this house well.

Martha came running into the drawing room, her face bright and cheeks flushed from the exertion. “He’s coming!” she said excitedly. “Are yeh goin’ to ask ‘im?”

“Aye,” said Dickon.

“Oh! I canna wait to hear the good news!” Martha said, beaming.

“Stop bletherin’ lass, and get thee away before the Master of the House catches thee chatting up the guests,” Dickon joked, waving his hands at her in an effort to shoo her from the room.

Martha smiled again and scuttled off, a mess of giggles.

Archibald entered the room and immediately greeted Dickon as he would a son, putting his hand on the young man’s shoulder and smiling kindly.

“Dickon Sowerby, what can I do for you today?” asked Archibald, taking a seat opposite Dickon, who had stood when his elder entered the room. “Do sit down, boy.”

Dickon lowered himself back into his chair and wrenched his cap in his hands nervously. “I’ve come to thee on account of Mary Lennox,” he began. “I ‘ave summat to ask thee concerning...”

“Concerning?” Archie inquired, steeping his fingers.

“’Tis about Mary’s hand, Sir,” said Dickon, staring into the older man’s eyes with determination. “I’ve come to ask thee if tha would give a blessing—“

“Are you asking to marry Mary Lennox?” Archie leaned forward in his chair, his face blank and his voice strong.

“Aye, Sir.”

“And you’ve asked her?”

“Aye.”

“And she has accepted you?”

“Aye.”

“Colin – have you told him? Does he know of your intentions?”

“He knows nowt, Sir.” Dickon grew uncomfortable with Lord Craven’s questions. He could not tell if the man was angry or concerned or happy – or all three.

“I know tha would like Mary to be cared for good ‘n’ proper by a young gentleman, but I promise thee that I do love her and I would do my very best by her always,” Dickon said, hoping to swap Archibald’s decision in case it was not in his favor to begin with.

“Yes, I am concerned about her welfare, but that isn’t a problem as I have written her into my will and made sure that she will not be destitute. Gone are the days when young girls were left under the thumb of the first born heir. No. Mary shall be provided for, that is not a significant worry. And you are a hard worker, are you not? I have evidence enough of that. Still –“

Dickon bristled. Even though Lord Craven seemed on the verge of giving his blessing, something held him back.

“I know how Colin feels about Mary. This will be a terrible blow to him.” Lord Craven sat back in his chair, silently pondering as Dickon waited patiently across from him. “I don’t see how I can deny Mary what she wants. I promised to be her guardian and she has grown into a fine young lady.” He stood and paced the room slowly. “There are concerns, yes, but I can not justify imposing my will on Mary. I fear, though, that this may bring pain and ruination upon Colin. He just isn’t as he was...I’m sure you know that. None of us are the same now.” He stopped speaking and stood by the window, gazing out over the front grounds. “When do you plan on being married?”

“We have not spoken on a date yet, Sir,” replied Dickon.

“Right,” said Archie, with a faraway look in his eyes. “You will need time to discuss these

matters, of course. I can hire people to help in the preparations, etcetera. Next spring, perhaps?"

"It does seem a long way off," Dickon said, thinking of the months in between which he would have to spend alone in his cottage.

"Yes, yes it is. Well, we will see," said Archie. "I think you and Mary need to speak to Colin about this; I don't think it would be proper for him to hear it from me – or worse, from one of the servants."

"Aye, Sir. Mary and I will do that," Dickon assured him. He was not looking forward to that conversation, but Colin would find out sooner or later, and sooner was always better and gave Colin more time to recover.

"There's no need to say this, Dickon, but welcome to the family," Archie said, and reached out his hand for Dickon to shake.

Dickon stood and Archie clapped him on the back in a brotherly fashion as he shook his hand.

"Thank you, Sir," Dickon said, smiling for the first time since he'd entered the room.

"You look as I did on the day Lily and I married. It is like the feeling of Christmas morning when all your life is awaiting you and there is fresh and unmarred snow outside to record your first steps into the world together and the greatest gift has just been given to you. I remember it so well..." Archie trailed off, and then sighed. "You'd best find your intended and work out some of those details, now."

Dickon nodded, still smiling, and thanked Lord Craven once more before exiting the room. He was so excited that he stood outside the door for a few minutes, not knowing whether to find Mary or Martha, or if he should go home and tell his own mother the good news first. The answer was made for him as Mary appeared in the hallway, her face lit up with a broad smile.

"Dickon!" she cried, running the last few steps into his arms.

Dickon held her tightly.

"What did he say? Though I think I can tell from the smile on your face that he's assented," she said coyly.

"Th'art right, lass," he said.

Mrs. Medlock entered the hall and coughed loudly. "Mary! Whatever are you doing with that boy? This is most..." She could not seem to squeeze the words out, but her face was a look of horror and shock.

"It's all right, Mrs. Medlock," Mary reassured the woman. "We're to be married! Isn't it wonderful?"

“I-I don’t know what to say,” Mrs. Medlock stammered. “Has your Uncle given his approval?”

“Yes, I have, Mrs. Medlock. And I would like you all to come with me into my office for a moment if you please.” Lord Craven led the way as the fray followed him. They passed Martha, who was hiding on the stair, and Lord Craven beckoned to her as well. “Come along, Martha.”

Once they were all safely inside the room, Lord Craven closed the door and spoke quietly. “You all know that I have given my blessing to Dickon and Mary, but I want to be sure that none of you aside from Dickon and Mary tell Colin about this. Do not breathe a word of it to anyone else inside or outside this house. These children are the best of friends and I want their relationship to stay that way. You all know how easily feelings can be hurt.”

“Of course, Lord Craven, I wouldn’t dream of—“

“None of that, Mrs. Medlock,” Archie said sternly. “I don’t want platitudes and excuses. Just do what I ask of you. That is all.”

Mary walked over to her Uncle and hugged him. “OH, Uncle Archie, I’m so very happy. Thank you! Thank you!”

Archie pulled back and cradled Mary’s face in his hands. “Is this what your heart desires, child?” he asked.

“More than anything,” she replied.

“Then I am happy for you,” he said, holding her close once again. “I cannot believe that you are now grown, and getting married. I thought perhaps, long ago, that Colin might—“

“He will be all right, Uncle. I shall talk to him. Everything will be put to rights. We must pray, as well.”

“Yes, of course.” Archie nodded. “I do every day.”

“I think he’s been hurt by the war – he’s been hurt badly and he doesn’t know how to fix it. And...I’m not sure I can help him, but I will try.”

“You did it once, my dear girl. You and Dickon together, and the garden.”

Mary smiled and parted from her uncle to stand beside Dickon. Martha stood nearby, her face aglow.

“Oh, Martha, you look like you will simply burst!” Mary laughed and held out her arms. Martha flew to her, bouncing up and down and doing a little jig, she was so happy.

“Oh Miss Mary! We shall be sisters! I couldn’t be more happy!”

Once the party had dispersed, Mary turned to Dickon. “We must find Colin and speak with him at once.”

“Aye,” Dickon agreed, taking Mary’s hand. “We mun look for him – the others don’t know owt about where he may be hidin’. I think tis best to check the garden.”

“I doubt he’ll be there, but let’s have a look. I really want to speak with him today. Letting this go on will just be a torture that I don’t want him to go through.”

“Does tha think he would still be friends with us?” asked Dickon seriously.

“I should hope so, but it will take time for him to heal. I do care for him, Dickon. I feel so guilty that I just can’t love him the way he wants me to, or the way he loves me. I wish I could make everything better and I want him to be happy.”

“Ah, he knows that, lass. Colin’s not fighting thee – he’s fightin’ hissel’. Tha mun know how he does like thee to be happy since tha has shown him the way, but he has faced the world beyond Misselthwaite an faced it unprepared.” Dickon walked beside Mary toward the garden, careful not to make any overt gestures showing that they were anything more than friends, though he knew Colin was not a fool and would surely know already what had transpired. He felt apprehensive about confronting Colin, but it had to be done.

They found Colin in the secret garden, sitting near the small pool of water where the birds so liked to bathe and play.

“Colin,” Mary said, approaching him.

Colin looked up and upon seeing his friends, immediately stood. “Hello,” he said without emotion. “I suppose you’ve come to tell me the good news?”

Mary was taken aback for a moment. “Good news?”

Colin shook his head slightly. “There’s no use in playing games, I already know. You said as much when we last spoke.” He turned to Dickon. “You’ve asked her, then?”

“Aye, if tha means what I think tha means,” Dickon replied tentatively.

“Well then, there’s nothing more to say. Of course, I could say I’m happy for you both, but you know I’m far too selfish for that. Good show, Dickon,” he said, reaching out his hand in congratulations. “To the victor go the spoils.”

Dickon eyed Colin’s outstretched hand and slowly reached out to clasp it in a firm shake. “Colin,” he said. “I never set out to take owt from thee; we fought on th’ same side, you and me.”

“Not in THIS war,” replied Colin. He turned on his heel and walked straight out of the garden and out of sight.

## Chapter Twelve

The strain at Misselthwaite grew throughout the following days, until Mary no longer felt any joy at the prospect of being married. Colin took to leaving the manor early in the morning and coming home late at night, sometimes drunk. She knew what usually became of men who turned to the bottle, and did not want to see Colin come to a dreadful end. Again and again she tried to speak with him, but he would wave her away or ignore her presence. Mary wondered where he went all day when he rode out on horseback towards town. Late one evening, Martha informed her of Colin's new and secret life.

Candlelight flickered on Mary's wall as she tried to concentrate on the novel she was reading. She fidgeted restlessly, moving this way and that in her bed, unable to find a comfortable position that still afforded enough light for her pages.

A soft knock sounded on the door, a special rapping that signaled Martha had come with news.

"Come in, come in," Mary said, ushering the girl inside and taking the lamp from her hands to set it on a nearby table. "Have you found him?"

"Aye, Miss Mary," said Martha. "I'm afraid you may not want to know what he's been up to in the city. My dear sister, she lives just outside of town having been married last year and all, and she says that her husband's seen Colin at a pub--"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that. People go to pubs all the time," said Mary.

"Oh, but that's not all! He's been seen with a woman there, a woman my sister was like to call a 'tart' but I don't want to be so unkind."

"Oh my! Is he sure it was our Colin?"

"Aye, Miss. He even spoke to 'im once. I thought you'd want to know."

"Yes, Martha, thank you." Mary sat down and chewed on her fingernail. "But what shall we do now?" she asked.

"You munnot blame yourself for his behavior. He's done this on his own, to be sure."

"I've had something to do with it, though. I do feel guilty, Martha. I just don't feel the same way about him -- I love him dearly of course, but he is like a brother to me, like my own flesh and blood. I had no idea he would react in such a drastic manner to the news of my engagement. I fear we shall never be friends again."

The older girl put her hand on Mary's shoulder and patted her gently. "There, Miss. It's not as bad as all that, I'm sure."

"I'm supposed to be happy -- happy with Dickon, but I feel this tremendous guilt for destroying my friend."

"Maybe it was the war that did it," said Martha. "When Dickon and Colin came home, they were different. You can't always see it, but sometimes it comes out of them like they're holding something so big inside that it just bursts out. Dickon took to the moors more than ever and when I saw him, his eyes would be red. I'd ask if any of his animals had died and he'd tell me no, they were all fine. But Colin, he'd go ridin' and huntin' and take to kicking the dogs. He's so angry, Colin is."

Mary did not wish to know the detail of the horrors Dickon and Colin had witnessed or even took part in -- she could not bear to know that the two people she loved most might have been forced to kill or maim, especially Dickon, who couldn't hurt a fly much less attack a man. She'd never thought Colin capable of violence, but now Mary wasn't as sure. Something had happened, and the whole business with Dickon and marriage had pushed Colin to a breaking point. She'd lived in a dream while away at school, always looking forward to coming home and seeing everyone again, but existing in a protected bubble of society. Mary had not been face to face with death and poverty or violence since her parents died of cholera so many years before. All of that faded with time and the once sharp edges of remembrance melted into the dull ache of regret and longing. She pushed it aside, unwilling to give those memories any credence. If all of those things were buried, she wouldn't have to live them again. Now Colin had unearthed his own nightmare and walked in it alone. All because of her.

"Uncle told me that Colin wasn't on the front lines during the war -- I thought that meant he hadn't had to -- shoot anyone."

"I don't know, Miss. I never asked either of them in any detail as like it would surely upset them. Lord Craven did his best to keep Colin safe, that's all I know about it."

"Who is this woman Colin sees? Can you find out for me?"

"I'll try, if that is what you wish."

"Perhaps we might not think the worst of her; a girl spending late nights at a pub isn't usually in society, but there is a chance she is not lost."

"Will you still marry my brother?" asked Martha after a pause.

Mary hesitated for a split-second. "Of course."

"Maybe this girl Colin's found will be good for him in the end. He wouldn't worry so much about you and Dickon if he has his own lass to care for," Martha said.

Mary hoped what her friend said was true, but did not put much hope into the idea. "Had Colin courted anyone while I was away?"

"Not that I knew of, Miss," replied Martha. "He's met a fair share of young ladies at parties and such but I think he was waiting for you."

"I wish I'd known. Rather, I wish he'd just gone and courted one of them instead of putting such a burden on me." Mary resented the way Colin seemed to have expected her to return his affections when she'd come back to the manor. "Did he think no one would have wanted to court me in London?"

"Did you have a beau there?" Martha's voice betrayed an excited lilt.

"Not a beau, but I did have a couple of boys who liked me and whenever we had dances they would come in from their school and made sure to dance with me. My school was very strict about such things so I didn't get to know them well at all, but it was nice to have the attention."

Martha smiled dreamily. "I've never been to a dance. Not as a guest, I mean."

"We should have an engagement party, I expect. You will of course be invited as a proper guest! Your whole family should come and bring friends as well. I want the whole affair to be more like Dickon, more Sowerby than Lennox or Craven. I don't care what anyone says anymore."

"Oh Miss, that would be lovely! Mother hasn't been to a party in years and the little ones, I know they'd behave!"

Mary brightened at the thought of a good party with friends and family. And if Colin did not want to attend, he would be the one missing out. She would speak with Uncle Archie about the entire matter and keep her mind off Colin and his life. He'd have to learn to be his own man sooner or later, and if he wanted to spend time with tarts, she'd let him. He would not be allowed to steal her joy, and Mary decided that she was not responsible for providing him happiness.

"Martha, come with me into town. I've a mind to purchase a gift for you!" Mary took her friend's hand and pulling her along, strode purposefully out the door.

\* \* \*

The next week passed quickly with plans for the party being made, invitations written and sent out, a new dress for Martha purchased from one of the very best clothiers in Yorkshire, and the hiring of a few new and temporary servants to complete the tasks of decorating and preparing the house, grounds and ballroom for the festive event. Mary and Dickon saw each other only briefly for the first half of the week, as Mary had taken Martha into town to shop for clothing and as a result also ended up taking her sisters the next day. Lord Craven had made an allowance for the Sowerby's at Mary's request, though Mrs. Sowerby was quite embarrassed to accept such charity.

Mary would have no arguments -- it was her party and she wanted everyone to be happy. She knew the Sowerby's had no money and would not feel comfortable at a society party unless they were dressed well. For Mary, it was a gesture of taking care of one's family, those she loved most.

Colin was another story. He'd avoided Mary for days, but she was determined to confront him and forbid him to try and ruin her day. Cornering him in the upstairs hallway, Mary did not hide her disgust at the way he'd been behaving.

"Colin, we have to talk."

"No, we don't. I have nothing whatsoever to say to you, Mary Lennox."

"Well, I have something to say to you, Colin Craven. I have tried to extend my kindness to you out of love for my family -- "

At this, Colin rolled his eyes.

"--yes, I know you don't think I love you, and I don't love how you've been acting lately but that's not the same. I wanted us to continue our friendship but it seems you have left me no choice but to simply tell you that I am disappointed in your drinking and carousing in the dark of night with women of questionable morals."

"How do you know where I've been or who I've been with?" he asked.

Mary was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"Are you having me followed? I am a man of legal age and I am allowed into pubs and I am certainly allowed to choose my own company, am I not? Why is it you're spying on me?"

Mary had no answer for him and realized that what he said was true. She had been prying into his life. She'd told herself that she wanted him to just disappear, but her interest in his private activities proved too strong and destroyed any hope of excuse she could conjure. "I told you before. I care about you."

"If you care so much about me, why do you talk about me instead of TO me? I am not deaf, Mary. I hear Cook talking in the kitchens, I know you confide in Martha -- even Medlock can't remain silent on these personal subjects. They all know I love you and how you humiliated and rejected me. You think you are the victim in this, having to tolerate me and my lasting affection for you, nay my adoration of you since childhood. You, having to tolerate love as if it disgusted you. You want him, you have always wanted him and I have known it and yes, I was a fool for hoping things would be different. Is this punishment not sufficient for you?"

"I'm sorry, I--" Mary had no words. She stood rooted to the spot, trying to understand Colin's feelings. She'd always painted herself the victim, but as she thought about what he'd said, she knew that she had not been very sensitive to his plight.

"If you must marry him, then I will try to be happy for you, Mary. I should have known this was never meant to be. Us, I mean. I don't hate you. But I cannot bear to continue loving you, either."

"Colin, you can't just ruin your life over this. I see you have been drinking and your reputation will suffer. Not only that, but your father -- he cares for you. You're hurting all of us. Is there no way I can help you?"

"I'd like to bring someone to the party, if that's agreeable."

"Who?"

"A woman I've been seeing."

Mary's stomach felt a bit queasy. "She's not a--"

Colin raised his eyebrow questioningly. Mary let her unfinished sentence hang in the air, hoping he would be able to finish it for her in his mind.

"She won't cause a problem, if that's what you mean."

"What's her name?"

"Catherine."

Mary hesitated, and then gave in. "All right, Colin. I will have an invitation drawn up for her. Just give me the information I need and we'll set it straight."

"May I go now?" Colin gestured toward the stairs. "Catherine is waiting for me."

A pang of jealousy hit Mary, seemingly from nowhere. She had no good reason to feel this way just because Colin had found someone. He didn't belong to her like property; she had no say over him. Wasn't it just a few days before she'd been wishing he would find someone to devote his attentions to? Mary thought about her feelings on and off throughout the day, finally coming to the conclusion that she didn't love Colin in a husbandly way, but she did feel somewhat possessive of him. She'd been the one to help cure him, she'd been the one to make him realize he wasn't going to get a hump on his back; she was instrumental in one of his most critical fundamental years. This did not equate to a sexual attraction, but she had a hard time letting him grow and move on and away from her. She had had too much power over him, even in her absence, and now that he was finally moving beyond her hold, she was angry with him. He had not only kept her in mind and heart during their separation, but Mary too had held him in a similar fashion. Now it was time to move into the next phase of their lives, and Mary needed to focus on her husband-to-be.

\* \* \*

Amidst the plans for their engagement party, Mary and Dickon found a few moments to steal away from the hustle and bustle in the manor. They had been separated with the trips into the city with Lord Craven and Mrs. Medlock and even Martha, while Dickon continued his work duties and also helped out the rest of his family as he'd always done. He also had his animals to tend to, and after a few days Mary found herself jealous of them having the chance to spend time with him when she'd been pulled in so many directions. The bulk of wedding plans lay on the bride and her family as tradition dictated, and the Sowerby's did not have the means to arrange any such parties even in the best of their circumstances.

Mary had yearned to visit Dickon's cottage again, but had cautioned herself not to put herself in temptation's path. They had gone out for a walk on the moor just before twilight, and Mary was glad for the first time to venture beyond the garden's high walls and old memories. Dickon held her hand once they were away from the house and could not be spied upon.

"Are you still so shy you cannot hold my hand in front of them?" Mary asked playfully.

Dickon remained silent but stole an affectionate glance to her and squeezed her hand.

They walked along the path leisurely as if neither one had a destination. Mary knew that after they'd walked the path long enough, they'd end up at Dickon's place, and she felt more and more excited with each step. Silently praying that Dickon would not suggest they return to the manor, Mary tried to keep his attention diverted.

"Oh, I do love walking! I've energy to spare this evening; I don't know what has got into me. Happiness, maybe," she said.

"Aye," Dickon agreed. "The whole family are fettlin' about the place thinking on the wedding. Is Colin still mardy feelin' about us?"

"I thought I might have been a little unkind to him of late. We spoke and it didn't end exactly well. He makes me feel bad. Am I terribly selfish to not want to think on him right now?"

"No, lass. I don't think tha need worry on Colin tonight at the least."

Dickon pulled Mary close and they walked closely and in silence for a while. The sun traveled down to the horizon and they talked about the animals and the moors, places Mary had visited and places Dickon yearned to see one day. Before long they'd reached the small cottage. Mary thought it had not felt like over an hour's journey at all. She didn't even feel tuckered, but her shoes had started to pinch slightly.

Dickon paused outside the door and looked at Mary in what was left of the sunlight which had now turned into a blue haze.

"Shouldn't we go inside?" she asked. "Have some tea, maybe?"

He smiled, then opened the door and waited for Mary to enter. She removed her shawl and

placed it on the nearest chair. All of the furniture was plain, unembellished wood. Dickon set about starting a fire to warm the room while Mary seated herself in a large and soft chair big enough to suit two or three people. Set in the corners of the seat were pillows stitched with Bible verses.

"Did you mother make these?" Mary asked as she admired the neat stitch work.

"Aye, and my sisters," Dickon said as he stoked the fire. He took off his brown coat and set it in the second room, his bedroom, then went to get water for tea. When he returned, he set the kettle above the fire. Standing in the middle of the room, the firelight flickered on his face and on the walls, bathing everything in an orange glow.

"Come sit with me, Dickon," Mary said, patting the seat next to her.

He hesitated, and then joined her, sitting at the far end of the lounge and leaving the space of one person between them. Mary scooted over a little, and though Dickon seemed slightly uncomfortable, he didn't get up or complain.

"You look worried." Mary leaned toward him. "Is everything all right?"

Dickon's face looked pained for a moment, like he was struggling with something and losing. "I shouldn't 'ave brought you here, Mary. It isn't right -- we shouldn't be alone together yet."

Mary didn't know what to say. She felt they'd been thinking the same things, of all the possibilities of things that could happen in that cottage with his bed so near and a nice warm fire, a night with no interruptions and no duties to tend to.

"I've hardly seen you this week; it's been agony," Mary said. "There's been so much to do, we haven't had any peace. Would it be so wrong to stay here tonight, together?"

"I've already sinned in my heart against thee, Mary. I dare not trust mysel' alone here with thee. We mun stay true."

Frustration and a tinge of anger rose in Mary's heart. She wanted to be good, to have a special honeymoon night, but Dickon was so close and the danger of temptation loomed large. Dickon seemed to understand exactly what she was feeling because he took grasped her hand. Before she had a chance to say anything, Dickon had risen to fetch teacups and was soon pouring the boiling water into a humble porcelain cup. They sipped their tea in silence, watching the fire crackle and jump.

Stealing glances at Dickon over the rim of her cup, Mary smiled each time he caught her looking. She'd grown more comfortable with him; the anxiety she used to feel whenever he was around her had lessened and she could hold his gaze without looking away.

"I can't wait to be your wife," she whispered.

Dickon nodded. "Soon, Mary," he assured her. "We'll come here again and we need not stay in this room."

Mary felt a thrill go through her body as he said this, hinting at the time when they would finally share his bed. Soon. Mary held onto that one word through the night as she slept in Dickon's bed alone while he gallantly slept in the other room. Having him so near but yet so far brought strange ideas into Mary's head -- images of them running away to be married in secret, forgetting about family and friends and everyone and forgoing the parties and society rules and etiquette. Soon there would be nothing to keep them apart, and Mary felt she couldn't be married fast enough.

### Chapter Thirteen

The cold harsh light of dawn streamed through the window of the cottage, rousing Mary from sleep. Opening her eyes, Mary started. Where? – Ahh yes, Dickon's bedroom. The momentary confusion cleared and Mary sat up in bed, listening for any sounds of activity beyond the closed door. Hearing nothing, she got out of bed and dressed herself. Smoothing her skirts, she approached the door and listened again. Wondering if Dickon could still be asleep, she carefully opened the door and peered into the adjacent room. The couch where they had sat having tea the night before stood empty. A fire crackled in the hearth but just barely.

Mary stepped into the kitchen and retrieved the kettle to warm some water for morning tea. Before the kettle set to boil, Dickon entered the room.

"Good morning," said Mary. She smiled brightly.

"Good mornin', lass. I didn't want to wake thee," he said.

"I didn't even know you'd gone," she replied. "Would you like some tea? It's almost ready."

Dickon held his hat in his hands a moment and looked upon Mary.

"What is it?" she asked. "You're looking at me strangely."

"I just love thee is all," he said. "Fixin' me tea just like we were married." He hung up his hat on the nearby rack and embraced her.

"This is what it will be like," she said. A little knot clenched in her stomach, and Mary ignored it. It was probably just nerves at the prospect of such a life changing decision. She would be a wife and have new responsibilities; no more life in a looming manor, but happiness in a tiny cottage. The knot came back a bit stronger, threatening her jovial mood. Again she pushed it down. She would have to give it its due later, when she was alone. Right now Dickon's strong arms enveloped her and she breathed in the scent of heather and gorse from the moors.

“Sleep well?” asked Dickon.

“Yes, quite well. Your bed is so soft, it’s like sleeping on a cloud,” said Mary. “There was only one thing missing, though.”

Dickon smiled. “None of that now, Miss Mary,” he said, squeezing her tighter.

“Do let me have my fun,” she said.

“I’d best get thee home. They’ll be wondering where you’d got to.”

“I know Martha will, especially.”

“Aye, that she will,” he said. “Our Martha is pleased as can be.”

“She’ll have another sister,” Mary said. “And I’ll have one. I think it will be wonderful having a sister.”

“You two can do all your talkin’ when we get thee home,” he said. Dickon pulled away and looked around the room. “Is there anything tha’s missing?”

Mary gathered up her things and the two set off back to the manor. As they walked, they discussed the engagement party, and Dickon confided that he shied away from such things and better enjoyed staying in the background.

“But we are the guests of honor so you must stand up with me, of course!” said Mary. She knew how hard it was for Dickon to feel comfortable among upper society, but he would have to try for her sake. His reluctance to be part of the world in which she had been brought up was both refreshing and disturbing. They would have to tread carefully between those worlds, something not easily done under even the best of circumstances. Social hierarchies had their way of separating people. Mary knew one of her biggest responsibilities would be as a bridge to allow their families to become one.

As Mary thought about her family and how she had lost her parents so many years before, she felt grateful for her Uncle Archibald’s kindness in allowing her to come live at Misselthwaite. She’d had no one, no family or friends in the world, and he had given her so many precious gifts. Without coming to England she never would have met Dickon or have ever set foot in the secret garden.

Even knowing her cousin Colin had been a blessing, though their relationship had start out on rocky terrain. Watching him grow from a fearful and bedridden boy into a strong and healthy young man had been part of the Magic they all shared. Now Colin posed a problem, and Mary wished she could make things right again. She loved Colin very much, and at one point thought perhaps she could love him as more than just family. Through her time at school there was only ever one person she truly pined for in her heart, and that was her beloved Dickon. It was a crushing thing to realize, since she knew Colin had favored her for so long. How could she break

his heart? Now he'd taken up with some woman Mary didn't know, and she worried for Colin yet again. She had to find out who this Catherine person was, and if the match was something true or just as a way to get back at her for her announcement. Her heart could accept it if Colin actually cared for this woman, but Mary suspected he was simply using her and it would all end very badly.

She held Dickon's hand tightly.

"Tha looks so serious," Dickon said.

"It's nothing," Mary said. "I don't really want to go back, that's all."

Dickon gave Mary's hand a squeeze and he smiled knowingly. "We mun face the day," he said. Mary nodded and they continued their walk in silence all the way to the manor.

Dickon and Mary were greeted by Martha, who was outside sweeping the entryway.

"Oh, tha's 'ere!" she said, beaming. "I'm so excited about the party, Miss Mary. I can 'ardly wait! The Master's at home and wanted to see you when you came back."

Mary looked at Dickon. "I'd better go. I shall see you for lunch in the garden?"

"Aye," said Dickon. He smiled but did not attempt to kiss her goodbye in front of his sister. With a slight hesitation, he turned and went outside, leaving the ladies to speak alone.

"Dickon looks so happy," said Martha. "He's always been good natured but I've never seen him smiling so much before."

"Yes," Mary said, looking out the door toward the garden. "We're both very happy. If only..." she stopped short, not wanting to talk about Colin too much.

Martha seemed to understand and dropped the conversation, excusing herself to finish her cleaning while Mary went to see her uncle. She approached the heavy door and heard nothing within, so she knocked loudly.

"Come in," she heard Uncle Archie say.

"You wanted to see me, Uncle Archie?"

"Yes, child." He paused. "I don't think I should call you that anymore, as you're soon to be a married woman. It is so hard a habit to break, thinking of you as you were years ago. We have missed you while you were away at school, though I was glad to have you safely 'stored away'

as the headmistress put it. Well worth the money.”

“Is anything wrong?” Mary asked. Uncle Archie seemed more melancholy than usual. Perhaps the strain of the past week’s events were too much for him. Perhaps he had been reminded of his own marriage and subsequent loss.

“I’m worried for Colin, though I don’t want to burden you with it.”

“How could I not be, though?” Mary said factually. “He’d been my close friend for years and now he will hardly look me in the eye. It’s as if he hates me, and I never meant for that to happen.”

“I know, my dear. Colin still has some growing up to do, and I don’t know if the garden’s magic can help him now.”

“I’d like to think it could, Sir.”

Archie nodded. “Yes. I would, as well.”

“Did he speak to you about his new lady-friend, Catherine?”

“He had mentioned her, yes. I didn’t want to bring the matter to you as of course I find it inappropriate for him to try and cast a shadow on your days.”

“I don’t know if he’s doing it deliberately to hurt me,” Mary said. “I think he’s just...hurt. I could try and talk to him again, but he has been avoiding me, I’m afraid.”

“We will do our best, won’t we, Mary?” Uncle Archie seemed to be asking for a favor of sorts.

“I will of course always be his friend.”

Archibald ran his fingers through his hair. His face seemed weary and strained. “I shouldn’t have let him get involved in the war.”

“It was not something you could control, Uncle Archie.”

His face lightened a little, and Mary pressed on.

“It was his duty, and I think he would have rather gone into it than not. He can be proud of his service and bravery.”

“So young yet so wise,” Archie said. He smiled. “Again, you are right.”

“Don’t worry, Uncle Archie. We’re all going to be fine. You’ll see. Colin will come around.”

“I will?” Colin’s voice sounded in the room, starting both occupants.

“Colin!” Mary said, turning around to find him standing in the doorway. “I’m glad to see you.”

“Are you?” he said sarcastically.

“Give Mary a chance, son,” said Archie.

“Yes, give Mary a chance. Fine.”

“Must you be so sour, Colin?” asked Mary. She didn’t like the look on his face; he looked angry and fierce.

“Shall we go for a walk, cousin?” he said, turning and walking into the hallway.

Mary glanced at her uncle, who nodded to her. Sighing, she followed Colin out of the manor and into the fields behind the great house.

“Colin, what’s wrong?” She wished she could take it back the moment she’d said it. Such a stupid thing to say to him, of course she already knew what was wrong.

“So where is your beloved? Working in the garden again?” Colin’s voice sounded snide.

“He’s your friend, too. You shouldn’t speak that way about him. Nothing’s changed!”

He stopped and whirled around to face her. “Everything has changed!”

“Don’t you have a woman in your life now? Don’t you care about her?”

“She’s just a whore, Mary.”

Mary gasped. Colin had never used such language in her presence before. Thoughts swirled in her head of Colin with this woman. Disgust overcame her and her mouth gaped open.

“What, you’ve never heard of one before, Mary? What did they teach you in your fancy school, how to pour the perfect cup of tea? This is real life. Things aren’t as pretty and lovely and easy as all that.”

Mary thought she heard the hint of a quaver in his voice as he said this, but she couldn’t be certain. They stood together on the hill, with the house just below them and the multiple manicured gardens to the east. A breeze picked up and rustled through Mary’s hair, bringing with it the scent of heather.

Colin continued walking away from the house and Mary followed him. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“I just want to get away from the house and everyone in it. We used to take walks together, remember? We’d comb the moors, you and me. When Dickon went home to his family and it

was Martha's day off, we would come out here to get away from Mrs. Medlock and Ben and all the servants. We explored that house from top to bottom, and then we took to walking. It was our time together, Mary. I grew to love you more and more every time, with every step."

"I've always loved you, Colin. It's just not the same as with Dickon."

"If he hadn't been here, you would be marrying me."

"If Dickon hadn't been here, you may never have walked. You may never have gotten out of that bed and out of the house. It was Dickon who helped me plant the garden and I so wanted you to see it. I couldn't have done it by myself. Don't downplay how he helped you just because you're jealous." Mary stated all of this boldly, though Colin's demeanor frightened her. She wouldn't let him know it, though. Anger did strange things to people, as did envy. Mary remembered her parents, how they would argue about trivial matters almost just for the sake of being angry. Her father had never struck her mother that she'd witnessed, but a great many expensive items had suffered at their hands during some of the more raucous fights. It was at those moments Mary would run to her Ayah and try to hide in her skirts and sari. She was little enough then, but there was nowhere to hide now.

Colin remained silent, looking Mary over. She shivered although the air was warm with the sun rising to its peak overhead.

"I won't give up, Mary."

"Can't you just be happy for me?"

"My heart is empty without you, you don't understand."

"So you try to fill it with the Catherine's of the world? Is that really you, Colin? I don't think so," said Mary. She kept her voice soft and tried to evoke the concern she felt for her dear friend. Their friendship was dangling over a precipice, and Mary wasn't sure she knew how to bring it back to safety.

Colin approached her, but Mary didn't move away. She feared he might strike her in his anger, but instead he placed his hand against her cheek and caressed her face gently. "Mary," he whispered. His blue eyes were pleading, and Mary stood rooted to the ground. She held her breath as Colin leaned in closer. Before she could think to react, Colin's lips were upon hers and he pulled her close to him in a tight embrace. Mary was too stunned to know what to do, but her wits returned after a few awkward seconds and she pushed Colin away more forcefully than she'd intended.

"What are you doing, Colin?" she asked.

His cheeks were flushed and his breathing heavy. "I need you, Mary."

"This isn't right. Don't ever do that again!" Mary turned to go back to the house.

“Please, Mary.” Colin sounded wounded.

Mary stopped and turned around. “Colin, I love you and always will, but I am not in love with you as I am with Dickon. I will be your friend – we both will. We will always be here for you, but I cannot return your affection. I just can’t. I want you to be happy for me. I want you to find someone you can love – not these sad excuses for “love” you’ve been spending your days and nights with, but someone who can love you as you deserve. Please be happy for me, Colin. You and Dickon are my best friends and I don’t want to lose you.”

“Mary, it’s not that easy for me.”

“It’s not easy for me, either.” She paused. “If you love me...if you truly love me...do this for me, Colin.”

Colin looked as if he might start to cry. Mary had seen Colin in his rage but nothing he’d said or done was as frightening as the look he gave her now. The angry young man had disappeared and in his place stood a boy defeated.

## Chapter Fourteen

Dickon left the manor and headed out to the gardens to start his work for the day. Just as he reached the garden wall, he remembered that he’d neglected to feed his menagerie of animals back at the cottage. Since Mary had been at the cottage, she was all he could think about. Silently scolding himself, Dickon set his gardening tools down by the wall and wiped his hands on his trousers. Even though he’d soon be entering into what was known as “polite society” through his union with Mary Lennox, the birds, labs and other creatures he cared for couldn’t be left to their own devices. He’d continue tending to them, getting his hands dirty and caring for the gardens to earn his keep.

He headed back toward the cottage, hoping to make it there and back before Mary came to find him at lunchtime. Walking in the dewy field behind the manor, Dickon looked down at his well worn shoes and noted that they needed replacing. Much of his clothing had been mended time and again, and Dickon’s embarrassment at his lowly means hit him full force. He wondered if perhaps he wasn’t the best choice for a husband for Mary. Surely she could do far better with her education, ability and manners. She was accepted and acceptable, where Dickon felt he belonged in the background. Conflicting thoughts swirling in his mind; he loved Mary, she loved him, but was their match wise?

Stomping his foot down to rid his shoe of a bit of mud, Dickon’s happy dreams faded and were replaced with a good dose of reality. If he loved Mary so much, why bring her down? Why offer her a cottage when she could have an estate? Why just one small garden when she could own dozens? And all the animals around, she’d think she lived in a zoo rather than a home.

Then there were the problems stemming from his time serving in the war that he never spoke of to anyone. How he sometimes bolted awake at night in a cold sweat, how he had developed a sadness that swept through him as it never had before. It was a fight just to retain his own self in those moments, to recognize that war had changed him but hadn't taken away his identity. He saw the same effects in Colin when they'd returned. No one else seemed to notice; they may have thought he'd simply regressed to his old childish ways, but Dickon knew better.

Each of them had to deal with their experience, and each did so in a different way. Dickon had seen young men simply give up on life, become non-functioning after the war. He vowed to never allow his grief to overwhelm him to that point. There had been so much bitterness, and he had never been bitter in his life. The war was over, and he wanted to leave it in its place. He'd done his duty and now intended to live a peaceful life once again.

(to be continued...)