



New York Times Bestselling Author

COURTNEY
MILAN

the
Marquis
who Mustn't

THE MARQUIS WHO MUSTN'T

COURTNEY MILAN

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THE MARQUIS WHO MUSTN'T

The Wedgeford Trials, Book 2

Naomi & Kai

One good fraud deserves another...

Miss Naomi Kwan has spent years wanting to take an ambulance classes so that she can save lives. But when she tries to register, she's told she needs permission from the man in charge of her. It would be incredibly wrong to claim that the tall, taciturn Chinese nobleman she just met is her fiancé, but Naomi is desperate, and desperate times call for fake engagements. To her unending surprise, Liu Ji Kai goes along with her ruse.

It's not that Kai is nice. He's in Wedgeford to practice his family business, and there's no room for "nice" when you're out to steal a fortune. It's not that the engagement is convenient; a fake fiancée winding herself into his life and his heart is suboptimal when he plans to commit fraud and flee the country.

His reason is simple: Kai and Naomi were betrothed as children. He may have disappeared for twenty years, but their engagement isn't actually fake. It's the only truth he's telling.

There is a glossary available at the end of this book for anyone interested. If you want audio pronunciations, the audio glossary is at <http://cmil.co/tmwm-glossary/>.

Content notes are available at <https://www.courtneymilan.com/the-marquis-who-mustnt/#content>.

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For 石生タツさん

My grandmother passed away before my mother was old enough to remember her. In childhood stories, though, the woman who showed her a mother's love was always present.

Thank you, Mama-san.

Dover, Kent

England. 1892.

NAOMI KWAN WAS LATE, AND IT WAS ALL MR. PENG'S FAULT. She had never met him, but already she resented his ill-timing with a bitter, irrational passion.

"No," she muttered under her breath as she marched briskly down the Dover street, dodging passers-by and window-gawkers alike, wrapping her shawl tightly around her shoulders. "A bitter, *rational* passion. Get it right, Naomi."

Naomi had spent the early months of this winter running family errands in Dover precisely so that nobody would ask questions when the time arose. Questions led to intrusion; intrusion led to objection. And the *objections* were irrational. Not Naomi.

Last year, Naomi had made the mistake of asking for permission to take the ambulance class again. It had been the fourth year she'd asked, and the fourth time she was rebuffed.

"So," her mother had said, after she'd made the request, "how would this work? You would go into Dover, into a class of women—"

"The class," Naomi had been forced to tell her, "is coeducational."

Storm clouds had begun to gather. "You would spend hours in their company. They would talk to you alone?"

Naomi had made herself take a deep breath before continuing. “I work in an inn,” she had pointed out. “I speak with men every day. I am not a fancy lady in need of a chaperone.”

“Chaperones are not the worry,” her father had put in. “Protection is. When you are here, your family is always nearby. But we couldn’t spare anyone to go along with you.”

She had felt her dreams begin to fall apart. “It is a coeducational class,” she had argued. “There will be women and men present. It is held in broad daylight. Nobody is going to assault me with a dozen other people present.”

Her parents had exchanged glances that spoke of an entire conversation from which Naomi was excluded. Then her mother had shaken her head.

“I know you want this,” she had said slowly.

Want? It had felt like a need. Everything Naomi did was because of other people. She worked in the inn because her parents owned it. She was a good cook because people needed to be fed. She’d endured years of people telling her, in various tones of voice, how very much like her mother she was.

The older Naomi grew, and the more she watched her mother take fright over a course taught in Dover, the less like a compliment that comparison sounded.

The ambulance class was the first thing Naomi had wanted for no other reason than that *she* wanted it for *herself*.

“You wouldn’t want to disrupt all our schedules so close to the Trials, would you?” her father had asked.

“I wasn’t asking for that. I just want to take the course.”

“Maybe next year,” her mother had said.

It had been too many years of *next year* and *not now*. Naomi had grown from a young lady into an adult. That was the moment when she realized that age had nothing to do with their rejection. They simply did not want her to do it at all, at any age, for any reason.

They were neither the screaming sort of family nor the arguing sort of family. But that only meant that if Naomi let out the shriek that was building inside her, she would instantly lose the argument they were pretending not to have.

“Next year,” she had said in response. It had not been a surrender, although they had thought of it that way. It had been a promise to herself.

The memory of her parents’ relieved smiles when she gave way was seared into her being. She had learned her lesson. She would never again give them the chance to say no.

This year she had planned her approach with the precision of a military officer. She knew when to leave her home. She had scouted the way to the building a few weeks back. She’d mentioned not a word about the class to anyone except her best friend.

Instead, this morning, with the opening of registration upon her, she’d looked at the list they had on the door—salt, dried herring—and she’d offered to go into Dover, do the shopping, get a newspaper...

Her father had brightened.

“How perfect that you’re planning to go to Dover!” He held up a piece of paper. “A letter from Madame Lee arrived yesterday. Mr. Peng’s brother’s nephew’s uncle’s grandson...” He read all this off the paper, an amused look on his face. “Also apparently called Peng, but he uses a different character. He is coming on the Dover ferry this morning at ten. He speaks very little English. Since you’re going in, you can meet him at the docks and make sure he gets on the London train.”

Naomi had tried not to grimace. Registration for the class *also* began at ten, and the advertisement had been clear that spots were limited. What was Naomi to say? *I can’t do that; it interferes with my secret agenda?*

She’d given her father a normal smile, one that held not one hint of her deep annoyance. “Of course I’ll find him.”

Of course Mr. Peng’s distant relation had not been on the ten o’clock ferry. Naomi had waited with increasing anxiety,

hopping from foot to foot to stay warm in the winter winds off the sea as passengers disembarked. The throngs swelled around her, then thinned. Still there was no sign of anyone who could be Mr. Peng. She'd looked hastily around the docks in hopes that he'd somehow slipped by her. Meanwhile, with every passing minute, she wondered if the class slots had been filled. Would they be claimed all at once?

She had to believe the answer was no.

She had made her way from the docks to the train station, asking in every shop she passed if anyone had seen a confused man from China.

Nobody had. She'd searched the train platform. Passengers had been milling about, freshly arrived from London. For a second, she'd thought she caught a glimpse of an Asian face, but the man had walked away with a certainty to his stride, and she chalked it up to error.

The sun had been cold and bright. Clouds had blown past too swiftly to shade the streets for more than a minute or so. And over Naomi's increasingly desperate search, the silhouette of Dover Castle had loomed in grim reminder. Time was slipping away.

The last flurry of passengers found luggage. Porters disappeared, leaving the platform empty and smelling of coal dust. And that was the moment when Naomi had decided to do something very unkind: She had decided to give up on Mr. Peng.

Now, with the advertisement nervously clutched in her hand, she was walking as swiftly as she could to her destination, dodging dogs in the gutter and ice on the pavement. Curse young Mr. Peng. Curse his inability to get off a ferry! If the spots were filled by the time she arrived...

She had read the advertisement so many times that it was beginning to come apart at the folds. Not that it mattered; Naomi had the words memorized. *Ambulance classes taught by the esteemed Dr. Hobert from London, to be conducted once per month, three months in a row, from two to four p.m. on the third Thursday of every month beginning in February.*

Test and certification to follow. Payments will be received and enrollment allowed on personal application at 13 Bulwark St, from ten a.m. until two p.m., on the Tuesday one week prior to the start of the first class. Registration limited to the first fourteen applicants. No refunds will be allowed.

She was not being selfish, Naomi told herself as she marched down the street. She was simply not her mother, to constantly care about others at the expense of herself. This was the year when Naomi took control of her own destiny and became her own person.

She arrived at 13 Bulwark Street shortly after eleven and exhaled, squaring her shoulders.

But as she did, she caught sight of a man. He was coming out of a tailor's shop, of all things. He was tall and not particularly handsome, and whatever passable looks he had were ruined by a stern face scowling at the world.

But he was Chinese. It wasn't just the low bridge of his nose and the lids of his eyes that gave him away. It was his hair, dark and long, braided into the queue that signified obedience to the Emperor of China. He had also not been in China for many years. Instead of shaving the hair on his crown, the way men did in China, he'd grown it out. That, too, was common for Chinese men who wore a queue: that bald crown marked one out in a crowd.

There was a craggy look to him, like someone had stolen the face of a cliff and pretended it was a man. He was—she had already noted this about him, but it seemed overwhelming—tall. He was *so* tall it almost felt offensive.

Maybe Naomi was offended because this man was almost certainly the young, misdirected Mr. Peng, come to thwart Naomi from class registration one final time.

Their eyes met across an expanse of pavement. For a long, cold moment, they looked at each other as if mutually taken aback.

Perhaps she was imagining the surprise on his face due to the intensity of her own feelings. But Naomi had no time to

waste collecting hapless semi-relations of neighbors. Especially ones who lacked the sense to wait around the ferry dock to be collected like a reasonable person ought. Naomi had been pushed around, putting off her own desires for years.

She was done with it. If Mr. Peng needed her help, he could wait until after registration.

The man blew out a breath and approached her first, stopping a pace from her with a bow of his head that indicated the barest minimum of respect.

He could give her more than that. *She* was doing *him* a favor.

“Mr. Peng.” Naomi addressed him in Cantonese, and despite all her annoyance, tried to give him her brightest smile. “I’m so glad I found you. My father sent me to greet you at the ferry, but as I’m sure you’ve noticed, we missed one another there.”

“Mm.” He frowned at her.

“No need for apologies!” There was no time for them, either. “If you wouldn’t mind waiting, I must duck into this establishment. I’ll take you to Wedgeford after.”

His nose wrinkled. “There is some confusion.”

She didn’t have time for his confusion, but she was going to have to manage it nonetheless. He’d likely been lost in Dover, unable to read street signs or ask for directions. “If you’d rather not be left behind, come in with me. It’ll just be one short moment.”

“I believe—”

There was even less time for his beliefs. “Right, then!” Naomi smiled at him cheerily and hoped that would make up for the rudeness of her interruption. “In we go!” She turned her back on him and marched away, hoping that he would at least have the sense to follow.

The interior of the building was almost as cold as it was outside, and much mustier. Signs pointed the way toward registration.

Behind her, she heard footsteps. “Miss,” he called behind her in Cantonese, “please understand—”

“I will understand anything you like,” she called over her shoulder, “in a few moments. *After* I’m finished. Please.”

He let out an audible, frustrated sigh.

She held hers in. *She* was helping *him*. She’d take the time to apologize and coddle his affronted feelings *after* she registered for classes. Another paper sign pasted to the wall directed Naomi up a flight of stairs, down a corridor, then into a room where two men sat at a desk, conversing with one another.

She practically ran up to them. “Tell me I’m not too late! Are there still spots available for the ambulance class?”

The soft sound of Mr. Peng’s footsteps followed her into the room.

The two men looked up at her from their seats. There was a long, long pause, in which they studied her, before looking down at the paper in front of them.

Ambulance class registration rolls. A number proceeded each of the names on the list. There were twelve enrollees. Naomi almost sagged with relief. Good. She wasn’t too late.

“I...see.” The man bit his lip and squinted behind her. “*You’re* registering for the class?”

She glanced behind her to see Mr. Peng. He was now glowering at her, arms folded, his long frame leaned against the wall nearest the door. He could scowl all he liked.

She turned to smile brightly at the men. “Yes. I am.”

Once again, the two men exchanged glances.

“I think she’s from Wedgeford,” one man whispered to the other in a too-loud voice.

“Of course she’s from Wedgeford, you perambulating haystack,” the other replied. “She’s *Chinese*.”

Naomi was half-Japanese, half-Chinese, but she rarely enjoyed going into the finer details of her heritage with

strangers.

“I must tell you,” said the first man, whose pale, excessive hair did in fact resemble a haystack, “the course will be conducted entirely in English.”

“Excellent.” Naomi did her very best not to roll her eyes at the idea that she might have expected instruction in the southeast of England to be conducted in some other language. “That’s my native tongue. We speak it in Wedgeford.” Among other languages. “Please put me down as attendee number thirteen. I’m Miss Naomi Kwan. I’ll be happy to spell it for you.”

Behind her, she sensed Mr. Peng stirring. She did not react.

“Miss—Kwan, did you say?” The man in front of her pronounced it with a hard K and an exceptionally odd sounding vowel.

Now was not the time to quibble about details. “Yes.”

“Are you certain *you* want to take an ambulance class?”

Why did everyone ask that question?

“I’ve wanted to take one since I was seventeen.” She looked the man in the eye. “It started at the Wedgeford Trials. There are always so many visitors, and—”

“I know about the Trials.” He waved a hand.

“One woman gashed her arm open on a bit of unfinished metal. While she was bleeding, a man rushed in. He had a little bottle of carbolic acid and some bandages in his pocket. While everyone was screaming, he cleaned the wound, stopped the bleeding, and saved the day.”

Naomi had watched nearby, first in horror at the blood, and then with the sudden realization that *she* wanted to be like that man. She didn’t want to be the person who stood around watching and worrying; she wanted to be the one who took action, the person who knew what to do.

“When he’d finished, someone asked him how he acted so quickly. The man laughed and said, ‘well, if you want to know what to do with carbolic acid, you should take an ambulance

class.' That's me." Naomi put a hand to her chest. "I want to be a woman who knows what to do with carbolic acid."

There. That was her best pitch.

The two men exchanged looks as if she'd somehow missed the entire point.

"Miss K...G..." The haystack stopped as if he was trying to remember her name. It was one syllable, but he didn't seem like he could do it. "Miss," he finally said, "I meant it more like this. Ambulance classes aren't for *everyone*."

"They aren't? It's just to learn how to take care of people before a doctor arrives, isn't it?"

"Yes, but... Miss." He emphasized that syllable. "When it comes to unmarried women, we try to...ah, take a man's view on things. Not all men want a wife who has touched other people."

Naomi blinked. "Touched... You mean, touched, as in, to apply bandages?"

He tapped the dry end of his pen against his other wrist. "I say this for your own good. If a maiden is too eager for that sort of thing, it could hurt her prospects. And there's already the matter of your race to think of."

Naomi grimaced. "How does that play in?"

"All the more reason that people might think you fast," the man told her. "We take a 'first, do no harm' approach to these things. We couldn't possibly let you take this class without permission."

"Permission!" Naomi could feel the bottom of her stomach drop clear to the ground two flights of stairs below. "From whom?"

"Your father, I suppose," the man said with a shrug. "He's the one that will have you on his hands if you never do marry. Bring him back and we'll see about the registration."

Five years Naomi had been waiting. Five years, only to be thwarted by a bureaucrat who was worried about her chances at marriage? Even if she could return to Wedgeford—and it

was hours away by foot—and convince her father to come back, it would do no good. By the time she returned, the last two spots would be taken.

Naomi had spent years hearing aunties tut about the plainness of her features and her unfortunate resemblance to a dumpling. She'd long ago decided she was not going to be left on her father's hands like an unwanted package. She would be left to her *own* devices. *She* would want herself, even if nobody else did.

She was being denied the one thing she wanted for a reason that she knew from personal experience was entirely irrelevant.

Or it would be if she let them deny her. The entire point of taking ambulance classes was that Naomi refused to be the kind of person who just let bad things happen. She no longer intended to sit by and watch. When action was needed, she wanted to be the one to take it.

That meant she had to fight for the class.

“That’s all you need? Permission?”

“And payment, of course.”

She looked around the room, trying to figure out a solution. There had to be something she could say, something she could do. Maybe she could leave and forge a letter from her father? No, they knew she was from Wedgefords: if she came back in a few minutes with such a letter, they'd know she was lying.

Maybe...

Her eyes fell on the man who had accompanied her in. He was watching her with a strangely intense expression. No doubt he was annoyed by the entire thing. She couldn't blame him.

She hadn't introduced herself properly, hadn't asked him a thing about himself or his journey. She'd dragged him up two flights of stairs just so he could watch white men tell her no. Not that he would understand what they were saying, but body

language was hard to miss. She would be discontented if she were him, too.

“Right.” She swallowed. “Permission. You need permission.”

An idea coalesced in Naomi’s head. It was something she could scarcely even let herself think.

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

Mr. Peng the Miserable returned Naomi’s gaze as that awful, no-good thought presented itself. It was deceitful. It was *terrible*, and Naomi wasn’t usually a terrible person.

In the moment, though...it also made sense.

And so, the next words out of her mouth were this: “This man is my fiancé. *He’ll* give permission.”

She was shocked into silence at her own mendaciousness. She’d just *lied*. Brazenly. Without forethought. If anyone found out...

But who was going to find out? Young Mr. Peng spoke no English; he could hardly correct her.

The men turned to look at Mr. Peng; he simply blinked at them, looking back without a change of expression.

“You’re her fiancé?” one of the men questioned.

“Just nod,” she encouraged him in Cantonese. “They asked if you were originally from China.”

Naomi was going to be reincarnated as a toad. She was going to have to be extremely nice to poor Mr. Peng for using him in this egregious fashion—

“Yes,” the man said in an English that had a flat, strange accent, one she could not seem to place. He took a few steps to stand at her side. He held out his hand as if this were a business meeting. “Liu Ji Kai. I’m Naomi Kwan’s fiancé.”

For one infinite, stretching moment, Naomi had no idea what was happening. Then reality penetrated through her shock. The floor did not move. The walls did not shake. The

ceiling did not collapse. It only felt like all of those things happened, like Naomi was standing in the midst of rubble.

This man was *not* Mr. Peng. He did in fact speak English. He knew precisely what she had said.

And for some unaccountable reason, Mr. Liu was pretending to be engaged to a perfect stranger.

LIU JI KAI HAD COME TO ENGLAND WITH NO EXPECTATIONS OF the woman he was allegedly engaged to marry.

For one thing, his one-time fiancée had lived in Britain all her life. He had no idea what sort of culture she'd been raised in, but he strongly suspected that she might have been unwilling to respect a marriage arranged in her infancy. For another, there was the not-exactly-minor matter of Kai's twenty years of absence without a word to her family.

Those reasons alone would be compelling, but they were as nothing compared to the one that had hung over Kai's head his entire life: When their families had agreed to the betrothal, his father had been defrauding hers. Fraud was one of those things that tended to break engagements, even if the defrauded never had the opportunity to say "no, thank you, let's not have our children marry; you're the absolute epitome of evil, goodbye."

It was rather shocking to discover that the woman who had grabbed him off the street was his long-ago betrothed. It was even more shocking to hear her announce that they were engaged.

If Kai had been raised to be upstanding and moral, Miss Kwan's attempt to register for whateverthing "ambulance classes" were would have ended in that moment. Luckily for her, his upbringing had been the opposite.

The men in front of him exchanged careful glances before the closest man, the one with a sandy beard, gingerly took his

fingers and shook them.

“Mr. Kai,” said that man. “A...pleasure?”

“Mm,” Kai said, neither agreement nor disagreement. “The family name is Liu.”

The thing was, Kai had not really considered before agreeing with Miss Kwan’s assertion.

It wasn’t chivalry. It wasn’t even a plan on his part. It had been nothing but habit. Long drills with his father had engrained in him that when someone starts a fraud, you always publicly agree with what they said. In this case, her assertion had even been technically true. They had been engaged and had never been un-engaged.

But if she was running a fraud—and that little *he asked where you’re from nod your head yes* suggested that she was—she wasn’t very good at it. She’d not expected to have to lie, or she would have brought an actual accomplice instead of some man she’d met moments before on the street. Miss Kwan had called him Mr. Peng on the street. She’d offered him a translation, false as it had been. She seemed to have no idea who he was, and was probably as surprised by his agreement as he was in the moment.

What *was* her fraud? Nothing important. Kai had been trained in every aspect of lies. Miss Kwan was an unskilled amateur. That meant that Kai was going to have to see this encounter through to the end.

“Le...oh?” The man frowned. “And... What was the rest of the name again?”

Kai just concentrated on the men in front of him. “It’s probably easier for you to call me by my English name, which is Prometheus Liu.”

By his side, Miss Kwan made a choking sound.

“My father,” Kai said, talking over her noise of surprise, “was given to flights of fancy.”

Another basic violation of the code of lying; one never acted surprised at information one was already supposed to

know. A good thing for her that the men had decided that she was virtually invisible once a man had made claim to her, or she'd have given away the entire thing.

"Mr. Liu." The man twitched. "As you can see, we, ah, are running a respectable and moral establishment here."

"Of course you are," Kai replied amiably. "Why else would I bring my respectable and moral fiancée here?"

"I, ah." He glanced at Naomi. "But..."

"Ah." Kai smiled. "Are you not sure your coursework is of suitable moral content for my innocent betrothed?"

She huffed behind him. She really needed to learn to take her cue and *look* guileless when prompted to do so.

"Perhaps," Kai said, "what you are saying is that I should attend classes alongside her, to make sure that she is protected."

"Ah." The man looked hunted.

"I am a man of business," Kai said. "I know how the world works. You and I, of course, know how men can be. I appreciate your looking out for my dear Naomi's innocence."

They had clearly *not* been doing that.

"But rest assured—I am capable of doing that myself." Kai smiled at the two men. "Now, the registration?"

Miss Kwan at his side was staring at him in confusion.

The two men blinked in unison, mouths scrunching. "Right," one of them said slowly. "Really? *You're* her fiancé? Not to be rude, but..."

But he was going to be rude. Kai had dressed to play the part of a wealthy businessman. Impressions were important, after all, and he'd set the first part of his fraud in motion earlier in London. He was wearing traveling clothes in fine brown wool, perfectly tailored to his build. His shoes glistened. The stones that glinted at his cuffs weren't diamonds, but without a jeweler's loop, they'd never be able

to tell. And he had all the paperwork to prove this particular assertion.

For whatever reason, people tended to believe lies in writing over those spoken aloud.

The man with thinning hair seemed somewhat taken aback. “Why are you here?”

Kai glanced down at Miss Kwan. She stared up at him in appalled silence as if to ask the same question.

He folded his arms and frowned. “I’m here to make sure that my fiancée, the esteemed Miss Naomi Kwan, is able to register for her ambulance class. I’m sure you’ll be able to help me.”

“Uh.” The balding man cast a glance at Miss Kwan. “Mr. Liu. Just to be clear, *that* woman is *your* fiancée?” He pointed.

How rude. Kai let his frown deepen.

“It’s just that she, ah...” The man trailed off under Kai’s continued glare, and whatever aspersions he was going to cast on Miss Kwan dried up. “*You* know.”

Kai did know. Unlike Kai, Miss Kwan did *not* look wealthy. She was wearing a blouse of rough cotton that wrapped around her. Little fabric-covered buttons ran up the cuffs; one of the buttons did not match the others. A thick, wide belt clasped her waist; her skirt was more practical than pretentious. She was the kind of girl that most people would call *plain*. Her eyes were a bit too far apart. Her nose was a bit too flat.

And at those words, her expression had gone blank, as if she were wishing herself anywhere else.

Kai looked at the man. “My fiancée is the kind of woman who wants to save people’s lives. We do not speak of her with anything but the utmost respect.”

The man grimaced. “I, ah. That is...”

“My dear departed father affianced us when we were children,” Kai explained. “Are you implying that my esteemed elder made a mistake?”

“N-no. Of course not.”

“Not that your opinion is necessary on this point.” Kai turned and gave the woman standing next to him a small smile.

She looked back at him in confusion.

“After all, it’s really up to us. Isn’t it, Naomi?” He used her name deliberately.

She started. “Yes, it is.” She bit her lip. “Prometheus.”

He was going to have to make sure she never called him that again. “And what is it you want, darling?”

She looked into his eyes. For a moment, he saw hesitation. He could hardly blame her. Then her chin squared. “I want to register for ambulance classes.”

“There it is.” He turned back to the men. “Please.”

The two men looked at each other.

“Must I visit the embassy in London?” Kai did his best to sound bored. “I’d hate to lodge a complaint with my cousin.”

“Ah...” The man bit his lip. “I suppose I’ll have to allow it. It would be...ah, good for foreign relations?”

“England will thank you,” Miss Kwan muttered at his side.

If this had been a test of her lying abilities, he would have given her zero marks.

“Think of it.” The haystack dipped his pen in ink and started to fill out the lines on the roster. “A Chinese couple. We’ll be teaching the heathens proper medical technique. It’s our Christian duty, isn’t it?”

“So good of you,” Kai said, a touch more dryly.

Mr. Prometheus Leo, the bushy-haired man wrote. And then, beneath that, *Naomi Gwen*. They’d made mention of a certificate, and Kai was all too aware of the value of paperwork.

“It’s *Kwan*,” Kai said gently. “With a ‘k’ and an ‘a’. And *Liu*—Ell. Eye. You.”

The man paused, then looked up at Kai with annoyance.

There was a trick to getting your way. In the moment when someone protested, you just looked at them. Being tall helped. Looking rich helped. Being absolutely sure of yourself—even if you had nothing but lies and an empty belly—worked best of all.

After a short pause, the man surrendered and wrote their names correctly. Miss Kwan started to take out a coin purse; Kai set his hand atop hers and wished, with all his might, that she would understand.

They'll never believe we're engaged if I let you pay.

He handed over the coins himself and took the receipt.

“Come, then, dear,” Kai said. He met her eyes and held them. She looked back at him—scared, defiant, and confused—and he smiled at her, because that was what the situation demanded, and Kai had been trained to never get one word, one flicker of his expression, wrong. “Let’s get you back to Wedgeford.”

THE WAY OUT OF THE COOPERATIVE WAS MUCH LIKE THE WAY in, but for entirely different reasons. Instead of Naomi's heart pounding because she was in a hurry, her pulse beat because she had no idea what was happening. Instead of fearing that she would not be able to register, she feared she would not be able to attend.

She had just said she was engaged to a man she didn't know.

And he'd agreed. Now she was entangled with...a person. An entirely unknown person.

What did she know about him? His name: Liu Ji Kai. The family name was egregiously common. A businessman, he'd said, from China. He dressed the part, but what was a Chinese businessman doing in Dover? Shouldn't he be at the Chinese embassy with his claimed cousin?

None of this made sense. No; she couldn't believe anything he said, particularly since the one thing she knew for sure about him was that he was the kind of man who pretended to be engaged to a woman he'd never met. He was a liar.

So, technically, was she, but at least Naomi knew what parts of her own speech to believe.

If she were an ethical person, Naomi would go back to that room, tell them she'd changed her mind, and get his money back.

Except... *no refunds*, the paper had said.

That would mean no classes this year. And no more money, because she would have to pay Mr. Liu back. If the men remembered her at registration the next year—and after that, how could they forget?—it might mean no classes ever.

That meant she was going to have to work with Mr. Liu. And *that* meant she was going to have to cajole him.

Luckily, he was a man, and men always loved compliments.

“You’re a quick thinker,” Naomi said, the moment they crossed the threshold of the cooperative society’s door and stepped onto Bulwark Street. “I’m incredibly impressed by the ease with which you—”

“Don’t talk about it now.” Mr. Liu was ridiculously tall. When he leaned to murmur in her ear, he practically had to bend at the knees. “Not anywhere we could be overheard.”

“I was just complimenting—”

“Miss Kwan, we are by no means alone.” Mr. Liu’s voice was low and growly. He looked significantly down the street. The sun was high overhead, cold and white in a blustery sky. People were going in and out of shops, pausing on the streets to admire hats at the haberdasher’s window.

Naomi shook her head. “I only wanted to say thank you.”

He looked up with an expression just shy of a roll of his eyes. “Thank me by keeping your silence on the matter until we have absolute privacy. Do you understand?”

A man with a dog on a lead walked by. The dog sniffed Mr. Liu’s trousers, as if trying to ascertain what he was about, and then moved on.

Naomi thought about what had happened in the room—the classes, the fake-engagement, the fact that she didn’t know him.

She shook her head. “To be perfectly frank, no. I don’t understand a single thing that just happened.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Mine,” she muttered.

“I’m delighted that you admit it.” He did not sound delighted. “Accept responsibility by suffering in silent ignorance until it’s safe to talk.” He straightened, brushing the lapels of his coat back into place, and then reached out and placed her hand on the crook of his arm.

She pulled it back, as if stung. “What are you doing?”

“Walking arm-in-arm with my fiancée,” he told her. He smiled as he spoke, but his low tone was one of warning.

“Oh.” She looked up at him in alarm. “Are you using the situation to take liberties?”

“It’s your hand,” he countered, “not your virtue. But by all means, continue to comment on matters of a sexual nature on a public street. That won’t draw attention at all.”

That shut her up. But not talking made her more aware. Aware of how close she squeezed to him when they passed others on the street. Aware of the glances. Aware of the fact that her gloved fingers were on his jacket, that they were walking with an intimacy she’d never experienced before. She couldn’t really feel the warmth of him through all that fabric, but she could sense it, an electric feeling that put her instantly on edge.

They had been talking about...how had he put it? *Matters of a sexual nature*. He’d just come out and said it. Like *that*.

Technically, he was not talking about them at the moment. He was not talking at all. She glanced up at him. He was...tall. And craggy.

He gave her a smile that would have warmed her heart had they been courting. Perhaps even if they had known each other in the slightest.

Which they did not.

The shop fronts on the street seemed to close in on them. The passers-by all seemed to leer. Or maybe Naomi was imagining it because the touch of this stranger made her *feel* things.

Not lust, but something worse. It was a hollow feeling: As if there should have been space for intimacy and connection between them. When she was younger, she'd dreamed of being courted, of walking arm-in-arm with a sweetheart. Her imagined man would have seen her as Naomi. Not the inn's serving girl, but a person.

This man did not know her.

And she had to be grateful to him. Liu Ji Kai, however unfamiliar he was, had helped her do more to achieve her dreams than her own parents.

"Where are you going?" she whispered.

"The same place you are."

She had been afraid of that. He turned off the main thoroughfare in the direction that one would take if one were heading to Wedgeford. As they left the more crowded street, he began to walk faster. Naomi quickened her steps, feeling like a corgi trying to keep pace with a wolfhound. She could feel her face flush even in the cold. Little beads of sweat cooled at her hair line.

"As fiancés," he said, with no hint of exertion in his voice, "I enjoy that we are on good terms. We should show that by talking."

"But...you just told me not to say anything." She puffed this out as they turned up a wide street lined by residences.

"Not about *that*. I thought you seemed like the sort to talk about fripperies. Is there no weather in these parts?"

You seemed like the sort to talk about fripperies. Well. This was getting more dire by the moment. Naomi's fake fiancé was irritating, and it was all her fault. "Absolutely none," she replied solemnly. "We have no wind, no snow, and no rain."

"Meteorologically curious." He looked down at her and gave her a blinding smile. "If your report of the weather is correct, this region seems unlikely to sustain life. You'll have to explain how Wedgeford does it."

“We don’t. We are headed to our doom.” But that brought up the concept of Wedgeford, and coming back to the inn there, and... “Honestly, best to prepare for the apocalypse, since my parents...”

She had focused all her intention on getting registered for ambulance classes. Now she was going to have to go home and tell her parents. Naomi’s breath hissed through her teeth. She would also have to explain Mr. Liu. For one second, she imagined how that conversation would go. She had only to think of saying the words to conjure up the expressions of horror on her parents’ faces. Naomi viscerally recoiled.

No. Absolutely not. She would simply not tell them. That would have to be the way it was.

“By any chance...might you be *not* headed to Wedgeford?” A faint hope. Everyone Chinese who ended up south of London nearly always ended up in Wedgeford. Still, he had already proved the exception once. Why not twice?

“I had my luggage forwarded there. I must be there to greet the driver this evening.”

His luggage. Right. He was a businessman. “Are you planning to ride to Wedgeford, or take a carriage?”

“As you might surmise by the fact that I am currently walking, I was planning to walk.” His tone was incredibly dry.

“What sort of a businessman are you?”

“The frugal sort. The sort who likes walking. Speaking of which, you *will* pay me back for your half of the courses, by the way.”

She’d intended to offer, but it grated that he just threw it out in that manner. As if she would steal from a stranger!

“Have you any errands to finish while we’re here?”

She’d picked up the dried herring at the docks. “I need to get some salt, but the mill is at the edge of town anyway.”

“I know where the mill is,” he said annoyingly, and just as annoyingly, he turned in the correct direction once again.

The houses grew smaller and closer together the further out they went, shrinking into single-storied buildings that scarcely shaded the morning sun. She felt like she had to take three strides for every two of his; she could hear her steps laboring on the cobblestones—a swift *thump thump thump* in comparison to his stately *thud, thud*.

He was tall. He was disagreeable. She knew almost nothing else about him.

“Did you not bring your luggage on the train?” she asked.

“No.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because I have fourteen trunks and only two hands.”

She gestured down a narrower street just as he made the turn.

“Fourteen trunks.” Naomi furrowed her brow. “That sounds more like a wealthy businessman than anything else you’ve said.” She tried to make sense of it all. “That’s...so much. Fourteen trunks?”

“I never said I was wealthy. Half a trunk is reserved for personal items such as clothing. Tools and such take up another trunk and a half.” He glanced down at her and gave her an annoying, conceited smirk. “I’d be willing to wager that you cannot guess one item in the remaining twelve trunks. Go ahead and try.”

The narrow alley gave way to a dirt road. This time of year, the dirt was a fine, gray mud, one that got everywhere. Naomi could hear the burble of water and the creak of the mill’s water wheel.

“Let me think.” She stopped just outside the salt seller. “There are so many possibilities, but there is one thing I am *sure* is in at least one of those trunks in some quantity.”

“Go ahead.”

“Dirt,” Naomi said. “I wager there is dirt even in the trunks of a businessman of undisclosed wealth.”

He blinked at her, his self-satisfied smirk slowly giving way to a rueful smile. “Well, that’s what I get for being snippy. You are entirely correct.”

“You’re not even going to argue? I expected you to say that your trunks were packed with the utmost cleanliness.”

“Oh, they were.” He looked up at the sky. “I was extremely careful in packing. As it happens, I have twelve trunks filled with nothing but dirt.”

Naomi’s morning had not become more comprehensible. “Your pardon?”

He shook his head. “There’s nothing in there but dry dirt. I sifted it myself. I’ve been undone by logic.” He let out a harsh laugh. “You have intelligence, if not sense. That will make this easier.”

“Can we return to the part where you shipped twelve trunks of dirt?”

“Go buy your salt.” He gestured. “Once we get out there”—he pointed to the path that wound its way up a hill—“we will have ourselves a little chat.”

A little chat. She thought about that *little chat*—the part where she had to apologize for claiming him as fiancé, and then try to politely ask why he’d agreed. None of this made sense to her. She rang the bell, asked for coarse salt, and she thought and thought. She put the salt in her pack when she returned to him. He watched her do it, and even though there was fifteen pounds of it, he did not offer to help.

Not that she would have let him. But it told her something, that he didn’t offer. She now knew three things about her fake fiancé. He had a name. He told lies. His manners left much to be desired.

She kept thinking as they began to walk out of town.

She waited until they’d left the last house of Dover thirty yards behind before starting the conversation once again.

“Mr. Liu,” she said, “I know I owe you the most immense apology. We’ve never met before, and I claimed you were my

fiancé. I have no idea why you went along with it, but I'm grateful. I'm truly grateful. Just very confused."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Right. I see. You have no idea who I am?"

"I'm sorry." Was she supposed to? "I'm not particularly conversant in visiting Chinese businessmen."

He twitched. "That makes things worse. I hadn't wanted to explain. Liu Ji Kai—you've never heard the name?"

She shook her head.

"Liu Tang Li? Or maybe the business name of Liu Bai Li."

She shook her head again.

"The Marquis of Everlasting Beauty?"

"We don't generally get that sort of person in Wedgeford." She frowned. "Except during the Trials, sometimes. And Jeremy, of course, but he's such a...um, a *Jeremy* that he doesn't count. I'm sorry if I've offended you by never having heard of you. Are you very important?"

"No," he said. "Just very flabbergasted. I have been traveling a very, very long time. And I am...apparently engaged?" He gave her a searching glance.

Naomi winced. "That particular fabrication is absolutely my fault. I'm not normally so untruthful. It was just that I was so very desperate. I'm grateful to you for not exposing me as I deserved, but—"

"Don't worry, Miss Kwan." There was a mocking edge to his voice. "My opinion of your veracity is safe. I knew you weren't skilled at lying. It was painfully obvious."

The sun had inched higher as they walked. Naomi's shadow was even shorter than she was, but his had only a finger's breadth on hers. At least their shadows near noon became equal.

Naomi had delayed the inevitable for long enough. Time to throw herself on his mercy. "Please understand, I *needed* to take the class. If I don't take this one, it will be a year before

another one comes around. You must think I'm a horrible person."

The only answer was the whisper of wind through grass. That felt like its own form of condemnation.

"You would be right," she said in a wretched tone of voice. "I wasn't thinking. I really wasn't. I'm dreadfully sorry to have entangled you."

"Please don't do that bedraggled, wretched groveling thing." Mr. Liu gritted out. "I should have said something when we first met, but you spoke in Cantonese, and I have not slept in twenty-seven hours. I haven't spoken Cantonese in almost a dozen years, and I temporarily lost the language."

"Really?" She looked over at him in surprise.

"You are very enterprising and, despite your apparent lack of capacity at lying, reasonably intelligent. Let me make sure I understand correctly: you are not engaged to anyone at the moment?"

"Ha." She rolled her eyes. "Anyone who would have me is not someone I want in return."

"Well, that says something about Wedgeford men," he muttered to himself. "But..." He grimaced, as if aware he might be touching on a sore subject. "Did your parents not arrange a marriage for you?"

"What, among all the many available suitors? Ha." Naomi laughed. "Be serious. The elders in the village want their sons to marry women who know about China, who can speak the language well enough to teach their children. I know how to serve drinks in eighteen languages, but I'm half-Japanese and I can manage little more than polite conversation. So don't worry about upsetting a potential suitor. My only encumbrance is this false engagement."

"False engagement." He spoke with a hint of bemusement. "Right. Is that what this is?"

"That is the part I don't understand!" She turned to him. "Why would *you* agree to this? You're a businessman." She felt her nose twitch. "Maybe. You don't even *know* me." A

horrifying thought occurred to her. "Speaking of arranged marriages. You're probably already married."

"What a turn of events," he remarked to the grass around them. "I thought she would at least *know*. Why has gossip failed me now?"

"What am I supposed to know?"

"When you return to Wedgeford and say 'greetings, friends and family, I am engaged to Liu Ji Kai, son of Liu Tong Kee,' you will hear shrieks of horror."

Naomi had thought she had no expectations for this conversation. It turned out she was wrong. She had expected him to be at least a little affronted.

"Now why would I say that? It's just a little fake engagement for Dover. Why would I tell anyone in Wedgeford about it?"

They crested the hill in front of them.

Mr. Liu clicked his tongue. "Because that's not how lies work. If we are engaged in Dover, we must be engaged in Wedgeford."

Their shadows seemed reduced to vague blobs puddled at their feet, with the sun brighter still overhead. Winter-dead grasses rustled in the wind. It was far too cold for Naomi to have sunstroke. She turned to him. "I don't understand. You *want* me to tell *all of Wedgeford* that we're engaged?"

"I don't care what you tell people in Wedgeford," Mr. Liu said calmly. "If you don't want to be engaged, simply say so. We will not be. But if you want to be engaged to me in Dover for your ambulance classes, you will be engaged to me in Wedgeford and London and Edinburgh. That's the condition. Say anything you want; just be consistent about it. The choice is in your hands."

"This is not what I thought we'd be discussing."

She glanced over at him. The wind whipped his queue over his shoulder, stretching the long braid out, before he reached

and took hold of it. He did not seem interested in answering her.

“I thought there would be more berating me for my lack of truthfulness.”

“Ha.” He sounded amused by that. “No. It doesn’t particularly bother me that you lied about me and entangled me in your plans.”

“That makes no sense. Whyever not? You *should* be mad about that.”

“Because.” He bulled on, ignoring her indrawn breath. “I am an admittedly unfilial child, but I have family standards to uphold. Lies are inevitable. Poorly crafted lies are avoidable. If we are going to lie, there must not be one word wrong.”

He stepped over a stream, and then stopped, noticing that Naomi would have to slosh through it. He held out a hand; she took it hesitantly, and he swung her and her fifteen pounds of salt across as if she were a sack of wheat.

For one moment, they stood chest-to-chest. Technically, it was more like his chest to her chin. He smelled like sunshine, and she hadn’t known that sunshine had a smell. She looked up into the dark, fathomless eyes of her not-fiancé.

“You’re strong for a businessman.” She swallowed.

He let go of her immediately and stepped back. “I’m a businessman who represents a craftsman.”

“Oh? Which craftsmen?”

“Man, singular. Myself.”

Naomi squinted at him. “So... That works out to you being just a craftsman.”

He held up a finger. “Who does business.”

“You have a curious sense of ethics for a man who occasionally does business.”

“Don’t malign my ethical code,” he said in mild tones. “It’s very strict. My personal code requires me to live a life unencumbered by people who get angry at me if they find out

they've been deceived. There are enough such people as it is. This is merely rule two: Every lie has an outside and an inside. If you must tell a lie, you must tell the exact same story to everyone on the outside with no exception."

"The outside of what?"

"Of the lie," Mr. Liu said.

"Do lies have insides?"

"Of course." He sounded like a teacher carefully explaining the difference between two letters of the alphabet. "The inside of a lie contains those who have a personal stake in the outcome of the lie. Those are the ones who will keep it secret no matter what. In the case of our..." He seemed to be testing the phrase on his tongue before speaking. "In the case of our fake engagement, you are inside. I am inside. Everyone else? Outside."

"But why?"

"Because," he said, in the tone of voice that one might use to explain hot coals to a toddling child, "if you tell someone who does *not* have a personal stake, you no longer have a cozy, little lie. You have a credibility problem that will blow up in your face at the worst possible instant. Either tell a lie properly or don't tell a lie at all. That's the rule."

"I see." She did not.

"In any event, do you want me to lie with you?"

She could feel her face heating. She worked in an *inn*. She'd been propositioned before. But never before had she *imagined* it in a flash—of the two of them in a bed, twined together.

She didn't even know him.

"I don't think I intended *that* kind of fake engagement?" Her voice crept higher as the sentence went on. "We can keep ourselves quite separate!"

He looked at her for a long, confused moment before—all of a sudden—he flushed scarlet. "English. What a stupid

language.” He cleared his throat. “Let us imagine that I said this: Do you want us to tell falsehoods together?”

Mortification welled up in Naomi. “That is...very different. Yes. Just a rhetorical question, then.”

“If you want me to tell lies on your behalf, then we will do it my way. We are engaged in Wedgeford, or we are not engaged at all.”

“Couldn’t you bend the rules, just one tiny little bit? You see, if I have to tell my parents we’re engaged—”

“Ha!” He did not look amused in the slightest. “This would go so much easier if I were to explain it to you, but the fact of the matter is, I’ve been traveling for nine months. I’m exhausted. I could not get a bed in Bristol where my ship landed. This is not to complain about your situation, which I’m sure is dire, but I’ve already been pulled into one unplanned lie. At the moment, I don’t feel like explaining how terrible I am to the woman I’m engaged to.”

That made no sense. None of it, least of all his reluctance to complain about her.

Naomi pressed her lips and trudged on. Was she going to have to introduce him to her parents? What would they say? How would they react? No matter what scenario she envisioned, it always ended the same way: in disbelief and mockery.

Nobody would ever believe a man with fourteen trunks would look at her.

Finally, she turned to him.

“How on earth are we going to make Wedgeford believe that *you* asked *me* to marry you? And that I said yes?”

He snorted. “*That* won’t be a problem. Next question.”

“No, *not* next question. I assume, since you introduced yourself as some kind of businessman/craftsman combination, that you’ll insist you are at least one of the two. Lies, consistency, and all that.”

He gave her an unimpressed look. "I do, indeed, have business in Wedgeford. Twelve imported trunks of dirt worth."

"Why would a *businessman* agree to a fake engagement with an innkeeper's daughter?" she asked. "Why would a businessman ship twelve trunks of dirt? Why would *anyone* ship twelve trunks of dirt?"

"Nobody will wonder at all." He looked upward into the bright blue of the sky. "Except about the dirt. And I will tell you, but it's a secret."

"I thought you didn't tell outsiders secrets."

"No. That's lies. I'm only telling you this because you won't understand."

"I might."

He turned to her. "It's dirt from an orogenous zone."

Naomi found herself flushing again. "Should we be speaking of this?"

"An orogenous zone is a place where mountains form. And I imported it because it is necessary, and there are no mountains to speak of in England. What little humps of hills you have around here are far too old."

"That's your secret?"

"It's one of them. I am a man with twelve trunks of dirt to my name," Mr. Liu said. "I've spent the last eleven years as an apprentice doing manual labor. Good families don't like marrying their daughters to men with nothing but a skill or three and twelve trunks of dirt. And..." He looked upward. "Please believe me: nobody will wonder why I would want to be engaged to you. They will just be horrified by it."

"You can't make problems vanish by declaring that they don't exist."

"That's not what I'm doing. I'm refusing to discuss non-problems as if they are relevant."

Naomi shook her head. "Moving on: if we were to be engaged, how and when would we end our false engagement?"

I don't want to disappoint my parents."

"You still don't understand. Ending it will be the least of our problems. The difficulty will lie entirely in the other direction. It will be hard for you to maintain the engagement. You really should talk to your parents about me before you make any decisions."

Naomi winced. Her parents had always encouraged her to be wise about marrying.

"They will have questions," she reluctantly admitted.

He turned to look at her. "Your parents will throw a celebration when you proclaim you'll have nothing more to do with me."

She stared at him for a long moment. "Who *are* you?"

He thought for a moment, as if the question required consideration. "Tired, Miss Kwan. I am very tired."

That was...fair.

"Let me teach you a trick," Mr. Liu said. "You seem to need some way to fend off questions, and this works for just about everything." He paused, squinting at the horizon. "It won't work as well for you, because you're a woman and everyone will think they're entitled to know your business. But I think you're clever enough. Go ahead. Repeat the question you just asked me."

"Who *are* you?"

He gave her a cutting look—a sweep of his eyes from head to toe, as if he were a scythe, slashing her down. "My private situation is none of your business."

She staggered back.

He radiated triumph. "See? Easy enough."

"Easy for you," she muttered. "How do you expect me to use that at home? Have you no parents?"

"My private situation is none of your business," Mr. Liu replied icily.

“Ooh.” Naomi shivered. “It is shockingly effective.”

“Of course it is.” He transitioned from ice into affability. “The reason it works is that the best story is always the one that someone makes up for themselves. If *you* make up a story, they might not be convinced by it. Let *them* make up a story, and they’ll find the one most likely to convince themselves.”

She stared at him thoughtfully. “I still don’t understand why you’d agree to be engaged. This makes absolutely no sense to me. *You* make absolutely no sense to me. And I *despise* things that make no sense.”

Mr. Liu seemed to consider this, before nodding. “I suppose you deserve that much. I agreed that I was your fiancé for the same reason that I’m coming to Wedgeford. It’s rule minus two.”

“Rule *minus* two? You have negative rules? What is rule minus two?”

“If you have to violate rule zero, do whatever it takes to make things right.”

She stared at him in confusion. “What does that mean? What’s rule zero? Why do your rules go the wrong direction? Are you making all of these rules up?”

He just shrugged at this. “All rules are made up by *someone*. Why should I have no chance to take part in the fun?”

“When did you violate rule zero?”

He stared at her.

“Never mind,” she said with a sigh. “I know. Your private situation is none of my business.”

“On the contrary,” he said. “That particular experience isn’t private. You’ll hear all about it as soon as you mention my name in Wedgeford. You’ll hear about it at length.”

They came to the top of the last down. Before them, with the sun high overhead, lay Wedgeford: a collection of sparkling windows divided by a river that was swollen with winter rains. Muddy paths and fallow gardens looked small

from up here. Naomi could see the inn where she was going to have to confront her parents. The village green stretched beyond, trees ringing it.

Mr. Liu gave her an unfathomable look. “Come find me when you decide to break it off.”

“Wait. Where are you going?”

He pointed to a blob on the far side of the village. The place was across the valley, a ways up the hill, isolated from the rest of the town. A tiny cottage, one that had stood empty for years. Behind that stood a long ramshackle structure of brick, plaster, and rotting timber. It climbed the hill in what had once been a straight line, before one wall had collapsed. Now, it was almost hidden by weeds and young trees sprouting from it.

“That?” Her nose wrinkled. “The house is uninhabited, cold, and drafty. It’s so far from the town center. I’m sure it’s overrun by mice. If you’re going to stay in Wedgeford, we can find you somewhere better.”

“It must be there.”

“Everyone says the structure behind it is bad luck.”

“Everyone is right,” he said evenly. “But that’s why I’m staying there.”

“You don’t change your mind much, do you?”

“Rule five is to adapt your plan to circumstances exactly as much as necessary, and not one bit more.”

“Good heavens.” She shook her head. “I cannot make sense of any of this. You are the stodgiest, most rule-bound fellow on the planet. And yet, you are not.”

Mr. Liu just gazed at her impassively. “It’s not a mystery. You’ll find out soon enough. Let me know in some fashion when you decide we’re not engaged.”

THE INN WAS QUIET WHEN NAOMI RETURNED. IN A FEW HOURS, when dark fell, the place would be bustling. But now, in the quiet lull of the afternoon, things were slow. It was Naomi's favorite time. She could smell the soup as soon as she came in the back door, sweet and savory all at once. Then there was the more subtle scent of steaming rice, the tang of fermented soy.

She slipped into the kitchen. It was momentarily empty. Vegetables were prepared and chopped in bowls on the table.

This hour of the day always had a meditative, unhurried quality to it. Naomi had put on the soup to simmer before she left for Dover. She lifted the lid, got a spoon, and tasted it. The pumpkin in the last harvest had gone wild; she'd put the last of it from the cellar in the soup to simmer with onions and handfuls of herbs and greens from her cousin's cold frames. Now the ingredients were beginning to break down into a delightful orange broth.

She was adding soy sauce, bit by bit, when her mother came in.

"Nao-chan. You're back later than I expected. Was there a problem with the herring?"

Naomi could feel the bottoms of her feet prickle in cold anticipation. "Where's Papa? I have something to tell you both."

Her mother frowned, but before she had a chance to say more, her father poked his head in. "Ah, sorry about that, Naomi. Just after you left, we got another letter saying Mr.

Peng wasn't arriving after all. He found a berth on a ship out of Calais at the last moment. I hope you didn't delay too long at the dock."

"Right." Naomi took a deep breath. "About that." Where to begin? It didn't matter. Anywhere would start the havoc. "When I was in Dover, I signed up for an ambulance class. It's being taught by a London specialist who will come in once a month." She smiled at her parents. "Isn't that perfect? Right in the middle of the slow season for us. I'll be done the week before the Trials."

Silence stretched. Naomi could hear the slow simmer of the soup, little bubbles forming and popping on the surface. Her mother looked at her father; her father looked back at her mother. Neither of them looked at her.

"You didn't mention class registration when you were leaving," her mother said carefully. "And a class taught by a London specialist? That sounds expensive. Where did you get the money?"

"I earned it myself. Chloe paid me a commission on the sauce I sold at the Trials earlier this year." Silence stretched once again, and Naomi found herself talking through the discomfort. "Last year you said that I could make the decision later. It's been a year, and..."

Her parents were watching her with tense, still disbelief.

"And obviously," she said, trying not to quail, "it's later. So...I'm sure you have no...objections?" She said this with more hope than belief.

"You didn't mention the commission," her father said.

Her mother's fingers tapped against her arm. "If you were so sure we would have no objection, you would have told us before you did it."

That hit uncomfortably close to home. Naomi shifted from foot to foot. "Last time I asked, you said that I could do it if I were sure. Isn't that essentially permission? It's been a whole year."

“I said we could talk about it later,” her father put in mildly. “That’s not the same thing.”

“You can read the situation better than that, Nao-chan. You know we want you to be safe.”

That was it. That was *precisely* it. Naomi had wanted and planned and *yearned*, but that was not enough. No; she was supposed to do what her parents wanted, be who her parents expected. And when they put her off, she was just supposed to pack it all away and pretend she’d never cared. She hadn’t acted on a whim. She wanted to learn to save people’s *lives*. She wanted to know what to do when things went wrong, instead of retreating inside herself.

Why *should* she have to accept their edict, simply because they wouldn’t say no directly?

“Why am I the only one who has to read others?” she asked. “Can’t you read *me* for once? Can’t you see how much I want this?”

Her mother winced. “It’s not that, it’s...” She trailed off. “When you’re young, you always think nothing bad can happen. But...”

“But *I’m* the one making the choice. It’s the one thing I’ve asked to do. I am an adult woman. I am old enough to marry; I am old enough to have a child of my own. I should be old enough to make my own decisions without being interrogated like I’ve committed a crime.”

“Not so loud.” Her mother made a calming gesture with one hand. “Not so loud.”

Naomi hadn’t even raised her voice. She wrapped her arms around herself angrily.

“Naomi,” her father said. “You left this morning without telling us your plans. If you had to conceal your aim from us, do you think you did the right thing?”

“I tried not concealing it before.” She gave the soup an annoyed stir. “It didn’t work. I changed tactics.”

“But you didn’t even ask this time.”

Her heart beat faster. “Why do I have to explain every last detail? If you don’t think I’m acting reasonably, maybe you should try being someone I can reason with!”

“Naomi,” her father said, “listen—”

At that moment, a bell in the front rang. The three of them froze in place.

They hadn’t been yelling; yelling wasn’t how her family managed disagreement. Her parents were perfectly capable of shredding Naomi’s dreams in a restrained tone of voice, which just made it all the more annoying that she couldn’t scream in response.

As one, they tiptoed to the kitchen door and peered out into the main room.

“Hullo?” A man covered in dust was looking about. “Looking for directions here.”

Her father came out first, followed by her mother.

Naomi followed closely behind.

“Ah, there you are. You speak English?”

“Yes,” her father said drily.

“Driver from Bristol here. Got a wagon loaded with heavy trunks outside. The direction is to a...Liu residence?” He pronounced the name Lee-you, slow and exaggerated. “Point a man the right way?”

Naomi was a pace behind, and so could see her mother’s face when the cart driver said the name. Mangled as the word came out, her mother clearly recognized it. Her hands clutched her skirt and the color washed out of her face.

Naomi stood frozen for a different reason altogether. In the heat of the conversation, she’d forgot that she had a fake engagement.

“Liu? Liu, you said?” Her mother’s voice trembled. “What personal name?”

The man frowned and looked at the paper in his hand. “Ji Kai Liu, it says right here.”

Her father touched her mother's arm. "It's the son, not the father."

Her mother glanced behind her at Naomi. "That's worse," she breathed. "You see how that's worse, right? The Marquis of Everlasting Beauty has returned."

Mr. Liu had mentioned that title before. Naomi frowned.

"He was just a boy then."

"What does it matter? He *left* with that scoundrel. How could he have grown up honest?"

Mr. Liu had not been exaggerating his reception. Her parents clearly did not like the idea of him. Scoundrel, they'd called him. But didn't every story have two sides? And if he'd been a boy before... Who was to say he agreed with his parents? She could very much understand not having a choice in the people who raised you.

Her mother looked at Naomi, then up at her husband with pleading eyes. "What are we going to do?"

Her father took her hand.

Her parents almost never touched—that they did so now seemed to underscore how gravely her mother was upset.

"We'll just say no," her father murmured. "Take heart in this. At least our daughter is headstrong. She won't be ordered about."

Headstrong. Irresponsible. It had not been an afternoon for praising Naomi. Naomi knew she should think before speaking, but as if summoned, the headstrong part of her rose up.

"Right," Naomi said pleasantly. "Since we're family and we're supposed to tell each other important news, I should tell you this. I met Liu Ji Kai in Dover. I thought he was Mr. Peng at first."

Her mother's eyes widened. "What did he say?" She reached out and took Naomi's hands. "What did he say to you? What did he do?"

For someone who had strict rules about lying, he'd said a number of things, almost all of them true. He'd told her this would happen. And he was right about one additional thing: explaining her actions didn't help. Maybe she should take a page from his book.

"Congratulations to me," Naomi said with a smile. "I'm engaged to be married. I would have told you earlier, but we had to diverge into a discussion about how terrible I was for wanting to save people's lives."

"Absolutely not." Her mother moved her hands to Naomi's shoulders. "I don't care what he told you. You do not have to marry that man—you have no idea—we have no idea who he is, what he's done—"

"He helped me register for my ambulance class." In all this mess, that was the one true fact she knew about him. "He supports me in doing what I want. Why *wouldn't* I want someone like him to become my family, when *this* is the alternative?"

Naomi took off her apron.

"Where are you going?" her mother asked.

"This good man needs directions," Naomi said. "And I'm going to go see..." If they were going to be falsely engaged, she was going to have to act as if he were not a total stranger. "I'm going to see Kai. At least *someone* around here cares about what I want to do with my life."

"No, wait." Her father bit his lip. "Naomi, I have to tell you about him. We really must talk."

"Later." Her smile felt triumphant. She'd heard the word so often, and now it was her turn to use it. "Let's talk later."

FOR AS LONG AS NAOMI COULD REMEMBER, THIS LITTLE TWO-room cottage had stood empty, door battered and banging on rusting hinges. She'd thought nothing of it. Wedgeford had never been more than a village at its height, and its only real purpose—a waypoint on a stage route—had disappeared when the rail bypassed it completely. Houses often stood empty; it was why there had been room for the first Chinese families to settle here so many decades ago.

The walls of the cottage had been built from white chalk-encased rock, split open to show flint-black centers. It was the kind of home that would be passable in winter months—once the door was replaced—and sweltering on the hottest days of summer.

For now, winter sunshine filtered through the thick, uneven glass of the single front window, catching on the dust swirling in the air.

Mr. Liu stood in the center of the room, some kind of a cloth wrapped around the lower half of his face. He'd exchanged his jacket for an apron. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, revealing surprisingly thick forearms. He was sweeping.

Well that he was doing so. The floor was littered with rodent droppings.

“Mr. Liu?”

He stopped, broom bristles static against the floor, and turned to her. There was a quick moment when he looked at

her when it felt as if he were seeing through her—as if everything about her was revealed in the motes of dust hanging in the cold air. Then he smiled that fast, confident smirk of his.

“You’ve probably heard everything by now.” He set the broom against the wall. “Here to break off our fake engagement?”

“On the contrary.” She found her cheeks burning. “I know this will be a nuisance to you, but I told my parents we were engaged already. Will you mind horribly?”

He blinked. “Why would you do that? It’s been half an hour. I assume you’ve heard the truth about me by now.”

“No.” She wrinkled her nose mulishly. “We got in a fight about my registering for the ambulance classes instead.”

Mr. Liu frowned.

“Then the driver for your...um, trunks of dirt arrived.” She waved in the direction of the valley. “He’ll be here in a bit, but it’s slow getting up the hill. I told them we were engaged and stomped off. Really, how bad can this supposed real truth about you be?”

He let out a long sigh. “You seem like a nice girl. You’re no doubt thinking ‘there must be some kind of horrible misunderstanding’ or ‘surely there is some explanation.’”

That had in fact been what Naomi had thought. She nodded.

“You are correct. There is an explanation.” He sucked his teeth for a moment, before proceeding with a shake of his head. “The explanation does not make my family look good. Or even desirable. You can still tell them you found out about the past and you’re breaking this off.”

“If you truly don’t want to be engaged, just say so. It’s not as if I have a choice.”

“It’s not about what I want.” He gestured to the back door. “If we are to have a conversation that will last longer than a minute, let’s go outside. Nobody needs to talk about us, and

there's no reason for you to inhale mouse fluff while we converse."

Naomi gingerly sidestepped the little piles he'd made and went out the back door.

The door was missing three boards, and it squeaked ominously as she passed through. The cottage he'd claimed for himself stood on the far outskirts of Wedgeford, halfway up the hill. To one side, a broken-down fence marked off what had once been a garden. Now the beds sprouted dying weeds and the desiccated remains of wild lettuce that had gone to seed.

Something like a shed, all brick and mud, stood behind the garden. It was that long, chambered structure she'd seen from the top of the down earlier today. Up close, it looked even more dilapidated than from afar. On the left, the brick wall was punctuated by short, arched entrances. These were beginning to fall down. Rotting timbers had once supported a roof of slate shingles, suspended over the entire structure. Over the years, that, too, had collapsed into disarray.

Naomi had played in that structure a few times as a child before she was caught. She remembered a series of little rooms inside each arched entrance, scarcely large enough for a child to stretch out on a brick shelf. Grass and the starts of small trees had almost engulfed the structure.

It was unlucky, she had been told. The kind of place that attracted angry ghosts. Best to leave it alone.

"It's quiet here," she said.

"I lived here until I was six." He looked at her. "You've learned that much, haven't you?"

She shook her head. "Mostly my parents just looked horrified at your name."

He gave her a little quirk of a smile that lifted more at one side than the other. She'd given that smirk of his so many names in her head already—confident, amused, self-assured. Looking at it now, listening to his words, seeing the twitch of his fingers at his sides...

No, that wasn't confidence. It felt like the flex of muscle when a man was bracing for a blow.

"My parents recognized the name 'Liu'," she confessed. "My father said something about you being just a boy when you were here. My mother said that made it worse. Whatever *it* is."

He let out a long exhale. "Well." He could not seem to fix his gaze anywhere, looking up the downs, then over to the kiln. "That's..." He shook his head then looked at her. "They should have told you, but I suppose that's what I get for expecting others to do my dirty work."

"I'm...sorry?"

"Don't apologize. I hate unnecessary apologies." He considered for a moment. "If I had a fiancée, I would hope that she would be told the truth. It's not too late. You can always go back and say you've broken things off." He said those last words so quietly, his eyes holding hers.

A crinkle went up her spine. *I wish this were real*, she thought wistfully. Not that she wanted to be engaged to a man she barely knew, or one who horrified her parents. But wouldn't it be nice to have someone who would say those things about her? Who would stand up for her? Who would want her to know the truth, and demand that she be signed up for ambulance classes?

He would not be the one to do it. He was not actually betrothed to her; he was never truly going to care. Still, even though she knew better than to hope, the mere thought of it made her feel wistful.

"What I want is immaterial." She smoothed out her skirts, tucking her errant wants away. "What do *you* want?"

He let out a tired smile and stared at the structure. "Bricks," he said. "Not really relevant to our whole..." He made a gesture. "Thing."

"Bricks for the...shed-thing?"

"Shed?" He looked at her incredulously. "That's a dragon kiln."

“A kiln?” Naomi looked at the sad, ramshackle line of broken bricks. She’d seen kilns at the pottery-works in Dover. They didn’t look anything like this. “Are you going to be firing pottery? You said you had a craft.”

“What else would I need dirt for?” He said this as if this clarified everything. “But that’s hardly the craft you should be asking about. Everyone in Wedgeford already knows this, so you might as well hear it, too. My father was a liar and a cheat. Our fathers were friends.” He met her eyes. “Were, past tense.”

“I’m sorry to hear of your father’s passing.”

“So polite you are,” he said sardonically. “Don’t be sorry. If I had heard of his death, I would celebrate, and I wouldn’t be alone. My father *was* friends with everyone in Wedgeford. Perhaps he is still alive. His friendships?” Mr. Liu tsked. “He has a tremendous talent for turning friendship into filthy lucre.”

“My parents said you were young when you lived here.” She looked out over the village. The sun was beginning to sink closer to the horizon, tinging the hometown where she had grown up in orange. It was hard to imagine this tall, craggy fellow living here. It was hard to imagine him being small.

“I don’t remember where I was born. I vaguely remember my mother. My first clear memories, though, are here in Wedgeford, after she passed away. My father brought me here when I was young. I don’t really know why, but I think he had a nursemaid here. He would show up every six months and shower me with gifts. Then he’d go away again. I worshipped him.”

“That’s not horribly uncommon,” Naomi mused. “Although typically, when the husband is off working, he leaves his family in China.”

“Ha,” Mr. Liu said with no amusement. “Working. He never did that. Anyway, everyone believed my father was some form of Chinese nobility—the Marquis of Everlasting Beauty, he styled himself.”

Naomi felt uneasy. She had heard Chinese titles of nobility before, mostly in stories of battles and the like. Titles were often fanciful things: “the Duke of Deep-Thinking” or “the Earl of Conquering Seas.” The title often followed the act that ennobled them. That practice had always seemed more romantic than just naming the British practice, where the title always followed the land. It also made Mr. Liu seem infinitely more remote.

“Are you a lord? Should I be calling you something other than Mr. Liu?”

“Please don’t.” Mr. Liu put a hand over his face. “Don’t call me lord. And while we’re at it, please don’t call me Prometheus. I don’t like to get in fights. When I was five, Mrs. Lansing, the nursemaid, left to go somewhere else. And so my father stayed in Wedgeford with me. I was so happy.”

“I can imagine.”

“Everyone in town knew his purportedly noble past, but he never demanded any of the formalities. How could he ask for deference when bandits had taken his ancestral lands and the art that had earned his ancestors his title had been lost to time with only a single piece remaining?” He had put her in mind of a cliff face before; now, retelling this story, he seemed to be made of flint—hard, unchanging, and liable to spark.

“What kind of art?”

“Jian Zhan,” Mr. Liu said.

“What is that?”

“It’s an ancient technique from the Song dynasty of China. It fell out of favor there, and those who knew how to make it forgot. But once, it was the most prized glaze in the world. My father claimed that his ancestors had invented it, and that for their invention, they won a title. They would always present their most beautiful pieces to the Emperor of China.”

Naomi looked at him skeptically.

“My father had scrolls supposedly bequeathed to him by his ancestors describing the technique in elaborate code—‘blessed in the mouth of the dragon,’ that sort of thing. With

those, and perhaps a little money, he could restore the lost art and produce glaze so extraordinary that it would put alchemists to shame.”

“And people believed this claptrap?”

“He had a cup.” Mr. Liu demonstrated with his hands. “A tea bowl of blue and silver. It possessed the kind of unearthly beauty that would make the heavens stand still. Its existence defied all belief. Grown men who professed themselves skeptics would take one look and demand to know how they could help restore the art. My father’s answer was always money.”

“How much money?”

“You work in an inn. Surely you’ve known confidence men.” The bitterness in his voice seemed to grow. “The answer to how much is...all of it. He built this kiln.” Mr. Liu gestured at the misshapen pile. “Or, rather, he instructed others in how to build this kiln. *Everyone* invested in his success. How could they not? He promised to repay everyone who helped with an extraordinary rate of interest.”

“Oh.” Naomi winced. “Dear.”

“He fled in the middle of the night.” Mr. Liu said this with the same confident assurance that he had said everything this far—with not a hint of emotion. “Also, he left me behind. I waited five months for him to return. During the entirety of that absence, everyone was whispering behind my back that he’d cheated them, and I was no good. By the time my father returned in the dead of night to collect me, it was less whispers and more open criticism.”

Naomi stared at him. “How have I never heard any of this?”

“You were three at the time I left.” He glanced at her. “There are, I suspect, reasons they wanted you to forget my existence.”

“How old were you?”

“I was six when he left, seven by the time he returned.” He seemed even more prickly as he put that out.

“And this is *your* side of the story?”

“This story doesn’t have two sides.” Mr. Liu shrugged. “It happened in broad daylight, and I suspect the people who fell prey to his schemes have never forgotten. Rule six: never deny what everyone already knows.”

Naomi considered this. “You were a child. You weren’t at fault.”

“Imagine this: I *was* a child. A stupid little child. And I believed it all. I believed I was the son of a temporarily distressed Chinese marquis with a romantic-sounding title. I thought my family had invented a form of pottery that earned them a title in an ancient Chinese dynasty. I was certain my father would rediscover it, and we would be restored to glory. And you think I wasn’t at fault?”

“If you believed it, you weren’t lying to anyone.”

“I was a fool,” he said quietly. “Fools are always at fault. Especially the one who believes nonsense simply because it makes him feel special.”

“You were six. Now you’re a man, and—”

He held up a hand. “I don’t want your defense. My father came and spirited me away in the middle of the night, and—knowing at that time what he had done—I still went with him.”

“He was your father.”

“I was with him when he paid for passage to Boston for the both of us using Wedgeford’s money. I was by his side when he flashed that money and his supposed title at the elites there, trotting me out as the next generation of Chinese aristocracy, living on their hospitality and a gracious line of credit that he would never repay. He taught me all the rules for lying and I practiced them. I watched him defraud people again and again.” His tone grew harder as he spoke. “When I left him, he told me that I was deluding myself. We were thieves. We had always been thieves. I would be a thief until I died. And you know, Miss Kwan, he was not wrong.”

The sun was sinking slowly to the point where it almost touched the horizon. With it, the last hint of winter warmth was dying. The kiln near them was limned in red.

“You were a child when it started,” Naomi said. “Have you stolen since?”

“I lived on Wedgeford’s money for years. When he came for me, I knew who he was. I don’t *stop* being a thief because I’m no longer actively engaged in stealing.”

“What a harsh way of putting it.”

“That’s how everyone in Wedgeford will see it,” Mr. Liu said. “That’s why you should break off the engagement.”

“How do you see it?” She looked at him. “Why are *you* here in Wedgeford?”

“I’m here to make pottery.” Now, his face was being cast in shadows by the dying sun. “The difference between me and my father is something I will have to demonstrate over time. Which I will do by...” He let out a sigh. “Making pottery.”

“Are you going to be using the ancient Jian Zhan technique?”

He gave her a sardonic look. “If I claimed I was going to do that, here in Wedgeford, after all that has happened? I would be run out of town, and rightly so. I am making *pottery*. It’s a normal, everyday craft by which I will earn a living. I am never going to ask anyone for money or help or anything. *Ever.*” There was a quiet venom to his words. “And—I must tell you this—my plan is to leave in about half a year’s time. It will not bother me to be your fiancé while I am here. I will in fact benefit from our fake engagement, because people will pretend to tolerate me for your sake. And I am selfish enough to accept that.”

His father had hurt people.

Naomi let that sink in. She’d seen her parents’ reaction; it had not been favorable, to say the least. A magpie landed on the kiln behind him, twittering in the sunset as she contemplated.

Most of Wedgeford had little to lose. Naomi tried to imagine their anger if they were robbed. It was not hard.

“And you’ll promise me you’re not...doing fraud while you’re here?”

“Miss Kwan.” He shook his head back and forth, as if admonishing her. “How can I make that promise when I don’t yet know if I’ll be involved in a fake engagement?”

Naomi winced. “Right. I’m *hardly* one to talk.”

“But you don’t need my promise; just your wits.” He gestured at the landscape about them. “None of you have enough money to be worth coming halfway round the world to steal from. I’m not going to ask you to believe in my ethics, which are undoubtedly distorted by my upbringing.” He said this rather dryly. “But do believe in my intelligence.”

If Mr. Liu had left when he was six, he might not know about Jeremy. Naomi carefully refrained from glancing at the newest structure in town—a large house, two stories, almost as large as the inn itself. It was newly built, and two of her best friends lived there most of the time.

Jeremy was the Duke of Lansing, and he’d been coming here for the Trials since Naomi was young. Come to think of it, there were many wealthy folk who came for the Trials. It would be just as bad for Wedgeford if Mr. Liu put people off coming to the Trials.

“Nobody who comes here, either,” Mr. Liu said, as if he could read the direction of her thoughts. “My father made many mistakes, but the worst was this: He violated rule zero of the liar’s code.”

“What is rule zero?”

He didn’t answer. He looked out, up the downs, to the blue sky overhead. “When I’m done, you’ll understand. I give you my word: I will not harm you or anyone here, whether we are engaged or not.”

Naomi looked at him. “That’s all well and good, but there’s still something I don’t understand.”

“Good. You shouldn’t listen to me. You *should* be wary.”

“Why *did* you entangle yourself with me? Why announce we were to marry? Why not simply let me be disappointed?”

“Didn’t I just explain? It makes *sense* for me to not have to endure abuse for the months when I must be here. Why *not* integrate myself with a pillar of the community?”

That confused Naomi even more. “You knew who I was?”

“I left when I was six,” he said. “And my father left a book of accounts that named every person in town who had lent him money. I would never come to Wedgeford unprepared. I know you. I know your father, Kwan Long, and your mother, Kwan Sachiko, and your aunt, Katsumi Uchida. I am a great many things, Miss Kwan, but amongst them? I am extraordinarily prepared.”

“Are you prepared to be engaged to me, though? You’ll have to meet my parents. You’ll have to talk to them.” She folded her arms. “You’ll have to spend time with me and go with me to the ambulance classes in Dover. They happen once a month on Thursdays.”

He considered this. “How affectionate would you like us to be with one another?”

Affection. Naomi thought briefly of Chloe, her best friend, and Jeremy. They weren’t in Wedgeford at the moment—there was some business in London that had taken them away.

But even before they’d married, there had always been affection between them. When they weren’t touching, they looked at each other with smiles. Naomi wasn’t jealous of her friend. She was delighted in her happiness. But sometimes Naomi saw how Jeremy watched Chloe—as if she were the source of his every smile—and she had to remind herself that no one was ever, ever going to feel that way about her. Every time she thought that, it hurt.

She huffed. “Nobody would believe us if we were too sweet to each other. We only just met. We decided we would suit on the way home. It’s not like I have so many prospects.” She looked at him. “If what you are saying is true, you won’t

have many, either. We are simply getting to know one another. Slowly.”

“What kind of fiancé would you like to have?” He said this casually. “I can be distant, the sort of man who thinks that any woman will do, and you happen to be a woman. Or, if there’s some other fellow you need scared off, I could be a bit possessive.”

“What comes naturally to you?”

“Irrelevant. What comes naturally to *you*? Everyone here knows you, and so you should act as close to your personality as possible. I’ll adapt my behavior accordingly.”

“I think,” she said slowly, afraid to reveal her own heart, “that if I were actually engaged to a man, I would not want to be a woman like any other to him. I would want someone who cared about me personally.” She swallowed. “If I wanted an impersonal husband, I would already have one, after all. Plenty of men are happy to have someone to cook and clean for them, and...um, the other things. That married couples sometimes...” She felt herself blush, and so she cleared her throat, refusing to look in his direction. “Never mind that. I would want to care about a husband and be cared about in return. But I’m not going to ask for that. You shouldn’t have to pretend to care.”

“No, that’s simple enough.” He seemed unperturbed.

“Pretending to care?”

“Miss Kwan, my father literally left me behind as a child to face the wrath of an entire town. If I could pretend not to care about that, pretending to care for you will be nothing.”

How awful for him. She bit her lip.

He grimaced and shook his head. “Absolutely not. Look at you, feeling pity for me. Don’t *do* that. It makes me feel like bugs are crawling up my spine. I despise the concept of being in debt to another person, and so please understand that this is a simple exchange. You will provide some social protection for me while I’m here. I will make sure you attend your

ambulance classes. And as for affection..." He paused. "No. It must be said."

"What must be said?"

"It's a problem for me, and I'm a much better liar than you."

"Is there something that might give our pretense away?" She looked at him. "Should we...practice?" Her mouth felt dry as she imagined what that practice might involve. Hands touching. Maybe without gloves. Their lips... She looked up at him and felt her breath catch.

Craggy, she had thought him. Not particularly handsome. Tall. None of those things were wrong. But there was something about him, something interesting to look at.

"Practice what?" His tone suggested that he already knew what she meant. The look in his eyes, all-too-knowing, made her heart beat just a touch more swiftly.

"Practice affection." Her voice sounded tremulous. "To fool people."

He made an exasperated sound. "That's it. That's precisely the problem. *Bad* liars say something like 'we must practice kissing so that people will find our ruse believable.'"

Naomi covered her hand with her mouth. "Who mentioned kissing? Not I."

"No." He snorted. "You just *looked* it."

"On the cheek," Naomi muttered. "I was just thinking about on the cheek! Not on the lips."

He held up a finger. "What did I say? You're terrible at lying. You went from claiming total innocence on the concept of kissing altogether to contemplation of kisses on your face. Always keep to a consistent story, no matter how people badger you."

"Oh."

"Rule three," he added.

"Oh. Well. As long as it's rule three."

“But my original point was about rule eight.”

She straightened. “Eight is my favorite number. I’ll be good at rule eight. I’ll be so good at it. Tell me.”

“I won’t,” Mr. Liu sounded rueful. “I’m terrible at rule eight. In fact, I’ve never managed it yet. Rule eight can be put something like this: never have feelings about your lies.”

“Like shame?”

He scoffed. “That, and... My father could pretend to be anyone’s friend. He’d laugh and make them think he was the greatest fellow on earth. And then he’d leave and call that man a fool. He could pretend all day long and never care at all.”

“That sounds...” *Manipulative* was the word that came to mind. Cruel, perhaps. Inhuman.

“I never could,” Mr. Liu said. “I can’t *pretend* to be someone’s friend. I just *am*. I start liking them, and then I don’t want to hurt them. I can’t just douse emotions like a fire. I cannot *pretend* to be affectionate. For God’s sake, I can’t practice kissing your cheek. I know all the rules of lying, and yet I was never any good as a liar because I always felt real feelings. And *I’ve* had practice. You have not.”

Naomi could feel her heart thumping. He was looking at her with a quiet assurance, and...telling her that he was going to like her? To feel real affection?

Foolishness. That wouldn’t happen.

“Mr. Liu.”

“Kai,” he returned. “You’ll have to call me by my personal name, you know.”

“Kai.” She said his name and then bit her lip. “I have no illusions about myself. I am not pretty. I am headstrong. My mother is Japanese; my father is Chinese, and I therefore belong nowhere. The only reason anyone has ever wanted me is because women from the East are scarce in these parts and I’m a good worker.” She folded her hands together. “Trust me. You aren’t going to start having feelings for me. Nobody ever does.”

He let out the tiniest exhale. She could feel the weight of his calculation at those words.

Naomi raised her chin defiantly. “If I’m not allowed, *you’re* not allowed. Don’t give me that pitying look.”

“Have it your way, then.” He brushed his hands together, as if washing his hands of the conversation. “You’re unlikable, and I won’t like you. How very reassuring.”

He did not sound reassured. Maybe he was worried about *her* feelings. She had, after all, already thought of kissing him.

“But take it from me. Being inside a lie with someone else can be very intimate in unexpected ways. Lies go on the outside. Truth stays on the inside. Sharing confidences changes relationships.”

She could feel her skin warm at those words. *Sharing. Intimate. Unexpected. Relationships.*

“The nature of this lie will make it more intimate than most. Just be aware.”

The thought of confessing everything she was feeling made her stomach turn.

“I won’t make fun of you,” he promised. “Everything you said about yourself is true. You aren’t classically beautiful.”

“Truly an understatement.” She laughed over the sting of truth.

“But you’re interesting,” he said. “You want to do interesting things. And I want to protect that.”

Nobody had ever said things like that about her.

She nodded at him. “You’re different than anyone I’ve ever met. You’re arrogant and humble at the same time. I think it would be very believable to my family that I would take an interest in you.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s enough mutual respect to make this believable. Lies belong on the outside. Remember?”

That, perhaps, was what broke down the last of Naomi’s hesitation—the thought that they would be in this together.

That she knew what he wanted, and he knew what she wanted. It was an exchange, pure and simple, and if she'd harbored a few errant thoughts, if her mind seemed to flit to impossible things, like the way that sunlight was reflecting across the planes of his cheeks...

Well, that was normal, wasn't it? It was normal to have feelings when you were inside a lie with someone.

A loud knock sounded on the front door, and Naomi jumped.

"Liu?" It was the cart driver. His voice was muffled by the distance between them, but it was loud enough. "Delivery for Liu?" He still did not pronounce the name correctly.

"I'll leave you to unloading your dirt," Naomi said. "We'll talk later."

KAI'S LIST OF IMPORTANT ITEMS TO PURCHASE HAD GROWN TO include buckets, rags, cooking gear, a lamp, and—most importantly—food by the time he'd swept out his house, scrubbed the floors and walls, repaired the hinges on the doors as best as he could, and set up a bed roll.

The twelve trunks of dirt and various work tools had been moved to the back, where he could set up a work area. Everything else was here—every single one of his belongings.

The red rays of the dying sun were the only light in the back room, and they came crazily through the rotted slats on the back door.

Kai had known the first few days in Wedgeford would be difficult, that there would be privations. But thoughts of cold and dark did not compare with the vast, lonely reality of sitting alone on the cold floor in the middle of his childhood home, exhausted and hungry, knowing that just about everyone in the village was hoping he would leave.

Everyone, that was, except one person.

Naomi Kwan. He'd never expected that his childhood betrothed would end up like this: a curious combination of confidence and insecurity, of wanting and holding back. He'd seen the look on her face when she spoke about not being wanted.

That, too, was his fault.

What man wanted to marry his son to a woman formerly betrothed to a scoundrel? Her parents had obviously tried to

hush the matter, but the faint scent of bad luck no doubt clung to her after all these years.

“Hullo?” someone called. There was a knock on the door, a crash of hinges giving way, and then: “Oh, damn. Sorry about that!”

Kai stood. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Andrew.”

Kai had no idea who Andrew was. Warily, he padded toward the front room.

“Andrew Uchida.” Lamp light spilled across the floor of the front room in a shifting pattern made by the front door. It was now once again swinging by a single hinge at the top, cold air drafting in puffs across Kai’s skin. “When you were here, I went by Ryuichi. ‘Andrew’ got acquired later.”

“Ah.” Naomi’s cousin, then. Kai remembered him as an infant.

“Looks like you could use some screws,” said Andrew. “And another hinge.”

Kai squinted at his silhouette.

“Liu Ji Kai,” said Kai, because some sort of introduction seemed necessary.

“Oh, I know. Even if I’ve only just met you. *Everyone* is talking.”

Kai stopped coming closer. The man had said those words without much anger—not that he could detect—but one didn’t need to be angry to protect one’s loved ones. And Kai knew that Naomi needed protecting.

“It’s good to meet you.” He squinted into the beam of the light. “Not that I can see you like this.”

“Oh, right.” Mr. Uchida pushed the door open without invitation and set the lamp on the floor. “There. That’s better, isn’t it?”

For a moment, they stared at each other. Kai had known that Mr. Kwan had married a Japanese woman. He even

remembered the owners of the inns—two sisters, each with a child of her own. Andrew had been little more than a babbling annoyance when Kai left. This man, he supposed, was the annoyance all grown up. He was shorter than Kai, but taller than Naomi, which pretty much described the entirety of Wedgeford. His hair was a shock of dark brown, and his features looked a little dangerous in the shadows of lamplight.

As if to give lie to that danger, Mr. Uchida let out a deprecating laugh. “I guess I’m supposed to threaten to pummel you on behalf of Naomi or something? That’s what everyone is telling me down at the inn tonight.”

What a bother. Kai dropped his voice to his most menacing. “Do you think you can?”

Mr. Uchida looked him up and down. “Oooh. I’d say not with my bare hands. If I was going to try it, I’d hope to catch you unawares with an ax handle to the arse or something.”

“To the arse?” Kai let out a surprised laugh. “How would that help? I’d just turn around and come after you. At least go for the head or some kind of vital organ.”

“Now why would I do that?” Mr. Uchida seemed baffled. “If I hit you in the head, you might get concussed. That seems excessive, under the circumstances. All you’ve done is tell my cousin that she’s worthy of being married to.”

“Huh.” Kai stared at him. What an odd way to look at it.

“As for vital organs, I don’t know anatomy well enough to *not* accidentally rupture a kidney. We don’t want to do that. Kidneys are important.”

Kai stared at the man’s silhouette. “You don’t seem very tough.”

“I’m even less tough than I seem,” Mr. Uchida replied with good cheer. “I mean, the truth is, I could—I don’t know, what is it that violent people do? I could punch you in the face or something, but I’m not very good at punching, and Nao will just shake her finger at me. ‘Am I so little of a human being? Do I not get to make my own decisions?’” His voice went up

in imitation of his cousin. “And suchlike. You know how she is. I’d better not.”

“*Does* she not get to make her own decisions?” Kai repeated this in confusion.

“Mostly she does. Having met her long enough to get engaged to her, I’m sure you’ve noticed that already.”

Kai already knew where the conversation was heading. Violence wasn’t necessary; threats were deemed sufficient. He was about to be threatened.

“Anyway, Nao-chan’s decision-making is neither here nor there. What I’m here for is—” He paused. “Not to say that her decision-making isn’t important. I just realized I’m talking to her actual, literal fiancé. I wouldn’t want it getting back to her that I didn’t respect her choices.”

“I would never,” Kai said, which was a lie. He’d do anything if it benefited him. “Can we get to the part where you issue threats? It’s cold out here.”

“Oh!” Mr. Uchida startled a little. “Yes! Right. I was going to ask if you needed any seeds?”

Kai tried to figure out the threat in those words.

“For the garden out back?” Mr. Uchida prompted.

“I hadn’t given it any thought.”

“I’m rather the seed purveyor around here,” Mr. Uchida said with a hint of pride in his voice. “It’s taken me basically half my life, but I have all the *good* seeds. The winter here is relatively mild: cold, but not deadly. There’s some vegetables that can start indoors now to be planted in a month or so, if you know your way around a cold frame. Kale, for instance.”

“I really don’t think the dark of night is the time to sow a garden.”

Andrew didn’t seem to notice. “But I’ve got so much more than kale. You know. Squash, burdock, real aubergines, not just those little squat things people have hereabouts. A little dama for medicinal purposes, if that’s your thing. It’s early in

the season for a garden, but I've got some paper pots I can bring by to start indoors."

Kai stared at the man in shifting lamplight. "This is the worst threat I've ever heard in my life."

"Wrong," Andrew said. "I am *telling* you that I will jabber at you about gardening. You don't *think* that will make you want to beat your own head in to escape, but you haven't experienced it yet. It's not even a threat; it's already decided. You're my new victim. You're *engaged* to my *cousin*. You basically *have* to put up with me."

"Exactly. I'm engaged to your cousin."

"And she's already said that you'll help her take her ambulance classes. Why would I *threaten* you? That's a decent thing to do. I don't threaten decent fellows."

That was itself a threat. But it was also an offer. Kai had told Naomi that she would help him fit in. Apparently, he hadn't realized she might have already done so. It sounded almost pleasant—to be in Wedgeford, to get the kiln working, to fire the piece he needed, *without* having everyone treating him like a pariah?

Kai *wasn't* a decent fellow. Kai knew that about himself. He'd lied and he'd cheated, and he was going to lie and cheat again, because that was how things went. You either walked the path in front of you or you gave up, and Kai had never been the sort to surrender.

"So, you came here in all this darkness to offer me seeds?" Kai asked in confusion.

"Oh, for God's sake." Mr. Uchida smacked his forehead. "No. Of course not. I forgot."

Here it came: the direct threats.

Mr. Uchida gestured out the door. "I came to ask if you were coming to dinner."

THE INN WAS ALMOST AS KAI REMEMBERED IT: HEAVY WALLS of rock and plaster, brightly lit windows that faced the green. At the moment, the light from within cast pools of golden light, illuminating a section of the path. Everything else was shrouded in the freezing dark of night.

Andrew thrust the door open in front of Kai to warmth, light, noise, and the smell of baking apples.

Inside, long wooden tables and benches were filled with villagers; a merry fire flickered at the back of the room.

Kai had heard the sounds of laughter and conversation as he and Andrew came up to the structure, but the moment Kai stepped inside, it felt as if every eye turned to him. The comfortable noise of babble and amusement extinguished.

Everything was almost exactly as Kai remembered it. The one difference was size. In his memory, the inn's main room had been almost cavernously massive, an endless space of high rafters and infinite hiding spots behind barrels or under impossibly long wooden benches.

Now, he realized the public room was not large. It was not even medium-sized. It was properly cozy. Those long wooden benches were normal size, just long enough to sit four people abreast, five if they bumped elbows.

Naomi met him at the entrance to the inn, five steps in front of—

Memory supplied the answer.

Mr. Kwan and Mrs. Kwan, Naomi's parents. Mrs. Kwan's sister, Mrs. Uchida, stood shoulder to shoulder with them, as if they were a battalion facing down a common enemy.

And here Kai was, with no weapon but the sack he'd hastily packed before leaving with Andrew.

Andrew smiled cheerily at the three of them. "Well, here he is. I've brought him."

The sight of them was shocking. It wasn't the added age; he'd expected them to look older, but in fact, they'd scarcely changed. Maybe there were a few extra strands of gray,

perhaps an additional wrinkle or two, although he wouldn't even have bet on that. A memory blurred by so much time didn't recall details well enough to find differences.

No, the shock came from something much more fundamental.

He had not realized they were so *short*. He'd thought Naomi diminutive, but her mother and aunt were inches shorter than she was.

There was no time to react. Naomi gestured to him to stand by her, and so he did.

"Okaasan. Papa." She tilted her head toward him. "This is Liu Ji Kai, my fiancé."

Her father gave Kai a piercing glance. "We remember him."

"It's been a long time." Mrs. Kwan's over-stretched smile made those words seem something less than polite and friendly. "A very long time."

"Mr. Liu," Mr. Kwan said, "I believe we have some matters to discuss. Perhaps my office?" He glanced at Naomi. "Alone?"

"But Papa—" Naomi started.

"It's no bother," Kai told her.

"You know they're only going to interrogate you," she said.

"I would expect no less. I don't mind answering a few questions," Kai said. "Obviously, we have things we need to discuss."

Naomi seemed to give up on saving Kai from his inevitable fate. "Very well. Come find me afterward."

Kai walked behind the three adults. Not that he wasn't an adult himself. But the last time he was here, that was how he'd thought of the inn: three adults, and two babies. They'd seemed kind back then. Less hard.

When Kai's father had first disappeared—in the first few weeks—they'd fed him. As time stretched into months, and the months went on and on without a word from his father, they'd never intimated that they would *stop* feeding him.

But Kai had been constantly aware of the burden he was putting on people who were not related to him. Who, in fact, had lost more than they should at his own father's hand. He'd tried as hard as he could not to rely on kindness he didn't deserve.

He was led down one hallway and into a small storeroom, in which sat a desk, books of accounts, and a ledger.

Once he was inside, he turned to them and bowed. "Thank you for having me. I brought gifts." He opened the sack he was carrying and took out a smaller, slightly less heavy sack.

Mr. Kwan took it from him, opened it, and frowned. "Rice?" He sounded puzzled. "Thank you." It was a cursory thanks.

Mrs. Kwan took the sack from him. Her eyes widened at the markings on it. "Rice? No, it's not just rice." She fumbled the bag open. "It's kome."

Her sister turned to her, reaching into the sack and rubbing the grains. "Oh my." She sounded almost reverent. "It's *rice*."

"I'm sorry I couldn't bring more," Kai said. "It's short grain rice from Nagasaki. Knowing I would come here, I purchased some before I came to England."

"So, it's...rice?" Mr. Kwan looked between them.

"No, it's *rice*," Mrs. Kwan explained. "You don't understand, the rice here is never *right*."

"You've said."

"It's not *chewy* enough. You can't do anything with it. It's just not the same."

"Thank you, Mr. Liu," Mrs. Kwan said. "This is a very thoughtful gift." She looked almost annoyed at his thoughtfulness.

He had, in fact, planned his gifts carefully, one for every person in his father's account book. That was the start of his plan.

It wasn't the end. Kai took the last item from his pack and held it out to Mr. Kwan. "Mr. Kwan, without knowing your preferences, I dared to bring a bottle of baiju. It's nothing special. I hope it meets with your approval."

Mr. Kwan took the bottle and carefully removed the wax seal, before taking a sniff. "Ah." His eyes shut. "That does bring back memories."

"I know you all must have doubts about me," Kai said. "I would, too. If Naomi were my daughter, and I knew what you did of me, I wouldn't trust me either."

Mr. and Mrs. Kwan exchanged looks, before Mr. Kwan spoke. "It's more that we are uncertain, and not knowing raises questions about the future."

"Technically," Mrs. Uchida said in a dry tone of voice, "uncertainty is the definition of the English word doubt."

"Little sister." Mrs. Kwan glanced at her, her lips thinning. "This is not the time for technical definitions. Uncertainty is gentler than doubt. Let's use uncertainty."

"There's no need to be gentle with me," Kai told them. "I remember what my father did. If you didn't have doubts, I would worry that you were overkind. There is no reason for you to believe me, but I want you to know that I am *not* my father. My father was a liar and a cheat, devoid of redeeming skills or qualities."

"I wouldn't go that far," Mr. Kwan said.

"I've learned more about him in the years since I left," Kai said bluntly. "Unlike my father, I've spent the last decade learning a craft. I have some money to establish myself here. And I'm not my father. I don't want to take anything from anyone. Not so much as a single penny."

Mr. Kwan steepled his fingers and looked Kai in the eyes. He didn't say anything, though. The three of them waited.

It was an old trick: stay silent, and allow the other person to do the talking. Kai knew exactly what they were doing. It wasn't as if it would work. He was never going to put a single word wrong, least of all because three people looked at him in silence.

But why not let them think they'd succeeded?

He shuffled uncomfortably, as if the silence was compelling him to speak, and then pretended to break down. "When I marry, I would never leave my wife or a child to struggle on their own. I know these things are just words, and you are too intelligent to trust the words from a man connected to liars. Over the course of the next months, I will *show* you who I am. And I will not marry your daughter until you believe that I'm the right one for her."

Like the best lies, every word of it was true. They *would* see who he was, at the end of it all. They'd see that he was a fraud and a cheat, and they'd be glad they'd saved their daughter from him.

Mr. Kwan nodded. "You're being very reasonable."

Mrs. Uchida frowned. "One question, if you please, for those of us who hold doubts rather than uncertainties."

Kai would have been shocked if they didn't have more salient questions—things like *where did your father take you* and *will you ever pay us back?*

Mrs. Uchida tapped her lips. "How did you get her to agree to honor that old engagement?"

Ah. That. "I didn't tell her about the engagement."

Three pairs of eyes narrowed at him in suspicion.

"So," said Naomi's mother's slowly, "my daughter just agreed to marry you on an hour's acquaintance with no other inducement?"

"That doesn't sound like her," murmured Mrs. Uchida.

Kai met their eyes. "She has her reasons. We've talked about them."

“And those are?”

Kai looked at them. “My apologies. I will always respect and honor you as Naomi’s family. But I must put my future wife first. Her reasons are hers to tell.”

“Hmm.” Mr. Kwan rubbed his chin. “Can there really be secrets among family?”

Kai gave them all a bland smile. “Naomi didn’t seem to realize we had a long-standing engagement. It seems to me that there are already secrets.”

“So.” Mrs. Kwan folded her arms.

“I’m not blaming you,” Kai said. “I wouldn’t have told her either, were I you. You never expected me to return. And now that I have, I will take my guidance on the matter from you. Do you want her to know about the old engagement?”

“If she knows we agreed to it at one time,” Mrs. Kwan said slowly, in Japanese, “it might...” She glanced at Kai, as if remembering that it was rude to speak in a language he didn’t understand.

“By all means.” Kai gestured. “Talk amongst yourselves. I don’t mind.”

“If we tell her we wanted it at one point,” Mrs. Kwan said in rapid Japanese, “she’s headstrong enough that she might decide to give him up.”

Kai kept his face carefully blank. He had to concentrate to understand. Their words were informal and fast; Mrs. Kwan sounded like a Tokyo trader. He’d had some experience with those, thankfully.

Mr. Kwan spoke next. “But it proves we don’t understand what we are doing. Maybe.” He had a marked accent, and he spoke more slowly.

“Small reminder,” Mrs. Uchida put in. “We don’t.”

“But if *he* doesn’t tell her,” Mrs. Kwan said, “later, if matters haven’t resolved themselves, *we* can tell her. As proof that he was holding information back from the start.”

Kai stared at the wood grain of the desk and almost felt sorry for them. They were just barely figuring out how to construct a falsehood. He could lie circles around them. It was a good thing for them that he wasn't actually trying to marry their daughter.

"I don't like it," Mr. Kwan said, "but we have to remember. He is sneaking, too. Probably. And we must protect Naomi."

That was more than fair. Among other things, Kai was pretending not to understand them.

"What if he isn't?" Mrs. Uchida asked. "What if he is not what we think?"

"Unlikely," Mr. Kwan shot back. "But we can always just say nothing. If he turns out to be a good man."

All three of them looked at Kai. He looked back at them innocently.

"But he isn't," Mrs. Kwan said, giving him a friendly smile. "You may have doubts, little sister, but I am certain. He's trying too hard. He's hiding too much. His gifts are too thoughtful. I won't let him hurt my family." There was a flinty determination to her words, belied by the soft nod she gave Kai. "Never again."

"It's settled," Mrs. Uchida said in English.

Mrs. Kwan smiled gently at him, in total opposition to her words.

"You may court Naomi," Mr. Kwan said. "Under the circumstances, we want her to feel free to make her own choice. For that reason, we would appreciate it if she did not know of the prior betrothal. Please be kind to her."

"Thank you," Kai said. "Thank you for giving me a chance to prove myself."

"Thank you for the rice," Mrs. Kwan told him. "We will enjoy it immensely."

NAOMI CRANED HER NECK WHEN THE OFFICE DOOR OPENED, hoping for a hint as to how the questioning of Kai had gone. Her mother looked faintly satisfied, which was bad. Her father looked troubled, which was worse. Her aunt just looked unreadable.

But Kai seemed unperturbed. He smiled at her as if the conversation had exceeded all his expectations.

Given what he'd said of his expectations earlier, that was not saying much. It made her wonder all the more what had transpired.

"It's Tuesday," she told him. "Everyone our age gets together on Tuesday evenings."

"Do I count as your age? I'm almost four years older than you."

She grimaced. "Technically true, but it's not like Wedgeford has a vast quantity of young folks. You're not any older than Ming or Chloe. It would be odd if we were engaged and you didn't come to our evenings."

"Kam Ming?" Mr. Liu looked upward briefly. "Well, I'm sure he'll be happy to see me."

"Is that sarcasm?"

"Yes." He said it without a hint of sarcasm, and yet she could detect something slightly acerbic in that response.

"If we are to have a fake real engagement, we have to act like we're truly engaged." She dropped her voice and tilted her

head toward the back area. “That doesn’t only mean you coming to our gatherings. You should call me Naomi. Or Nao.”

He pondered this for a moment. “What about Ah Mi?”

Naomi wrinkled her nose. “That’s language mixing. It’s either Ah Mei or Nao-chan.”

“Isn’t Wedgeford a place for language mixing?”

“Not if you don’t want to start a shouting match with Kam Ming.”

“Naomi, then.”

It was the first time he’d said her actual personal name. Or—wait—maybe he’d said it during the ambulance class registration, but Naomi had been too panicked to pay attention then.

It was the first time he’d addressed her by her personal name since they’d agreed to be falsely engaged, and even knowing that it was a lie, there was something in his tone, something almost warm that smacked of affection.

She blushed and turned away to hide her reaction, drawing him toward the younger crowd. “You said it right. Everyone says it like it’s nay-OH-mee, like it’s the English name in the Bible, but it’s NAH-oh-mee.”

“Of course I said it right,” Kai said with a shrug. “We can’t have language mixing. But if your family name is Chinese and your personal name is Japanese, then—”

“Please.” Naomi shuddered. “Stop talking about that. Kam Ming is right there and he used to insist on calling me by the Cantonese reading of the characters of my name. ‘Zikmei’ is...not melodious. Don’t remind him that’s an option.”

He gave her a quick look. “I’m capable of answering an insult to my fiancée.”

She found herself flushing once more.

“But you’ve requested otherwise, and I’m also capable of listening. So, Naomi it is.”

Why did he say her name like that? Like it was a caress?

“And ‘Kai’—that’s right for you?”

“‘Ji’ is a generational name. Kai is fine. It’s a little too early for Ah Kai, I think, and it will shock me if you do it. I try not to be shocked in public.”

“Very well. Then let’s introduce you around.”

His eyes flicked briefly upward—the only sign that he wasn’t looking forward to it. But, “Why not?” was all he said.

She guided him over to the table near the back. “We’re low in numbers tonight. Everyone, this is Liu Ji Kai. He lived in Wedgeford when he was a child, and has only just come back.”

Kai nodded gravely.

“Kai, you already know Andrew. This is Kam Ming. The lovely lady beside him is Lisa, his wife.”

“Kai.” Ming looked at him. “I do remember you. Did your father return with you?” Ming asked the question casually, but his eyes narrowed.

Just as casually, Kai answered. “I left him at the age of fourteen. I haven’t seen him since.”

Ming considered this, then took a long draw from his beer. “Rough.”

What Ming meant by that, Naomi wasn’t sure, but Kai just shot back, “It would have been rougher if I’d stayed.”

The woman sitting next to Lisa leaned forward in interest. “Oh, there’s a story there.”

“Over here,” Naomi said, talking over this unfortunate request for explanation, “we have Marie Gigone and Kouwei Shang. They’ve just come back to Wedgeford. Over the summer, Eric works on a fishing boat in Dover and Marie teaches bathing to young ladies.”

Kai nodded gravely. “That sounds like a valuable occupation. I seem to recall that the English believe that the

taking of baths is unhealthful. Introducing them to the value of hygiene must be both fulfilling and useful.”

There was a pause. Naomi tried to choke back a giggle for a moment. She failed one moment before the rest of the table joined her in gales of laughter.

“My God,” Andrew said. “Absolutely savaging the entire British population, and not even intending to do so.”

“He was *so* polite about it, too,” Kouwei said. He gave his wife a fond smile. “This wretched isle is filled with filthy cretins. You’re doing God’s work, my dear.”

“He’s not even wrong.” Ming’s suspicious demeanor had faltered for a second.

Mrs. Gigone herself was giggling. “English is the worst, isn’t it? In this case, I’m referring to sea-bathing. You wouldn’t *believe* the number of people who think that the only thing women are allowed to do in water is drown. I teach ladies how to swim. I am *passionate* on the subject.”

Kai looked discomfited. The only sign of it was a tiny high spot of color on his cheeks.

“Well.” Kai straightened his shoulders. “That’s incredibly embarrassing. I suppose I’ve given myself away. The last time I spoke English regularly, I was living in America. They do odd things with normal words there.”

He’d said nothing about that earlier, and Naomi could not stop the startled, surprised glance she gave him. She caught herself quickly. He probably had a rule about facial expressions. She could imagine him lecturing her: *Rule four. Remember that we are engaged and you ought not look surprised at my life story.*

She smothered the smile that rose at that image.

“Usually there’s more of us.” Naomi spoke swiftly, hoping it covered her reaction. “But Lily is back in China and Grace hasn’t been coming since her father died.” She frowned. “We need to look into that. Finally, Chloe and Jeremy are away on business or pleasure. Or something. It’s complicated. You don’t know either of them; Chloe landed in Wedgeford years

after you left, and Jeremy... Well, never mind. You'll meet them in a few weeks."

"I look forward to it."

"Well, then." She smiled. "Sit down and I'll bring you something."

"Naomi, you're *getting* him his food instead of having him order at the bar?" Ming whistled. "Is there something we should all know?"

"Oh, shut up." Naomi felt her cheeks heat. "It's his first time here, that's all. But yes, we're engaged." She turned around and marched away before anyone had a chance to respond.

She could hear their responses following her. "You're what?"

"Congratulations!"

"When did that happen?"

She would let Kai answer those inquiries. He was better at lying anyway.

Congratulations. If everything that had happened today had been real—if she were truly engaged to man who had assisted her in registering for her classes—those congratulations would have felt reassuring and heartwarming.

But Naomi had realized she was never going to get married. It wasn't that she didn't believe in love. She did. She'd just seen enough of it to see that there were two versions of marriage. There was the kind where the man felt genuine love and affection for his bride of choice, and she returned those feelings. *That* was what Jeremy and Chloe had.

But there was also the kind of marriage where the couple used one other. It was painfully obvious to Naomi, with years of watching pairs interact in the common room, that the women in those marriages generally got used harder than the men.

And Naomi had no intention of being used.

Except in less than a day, Kai had pretended to be exactly the kind of man she'd hoped for. He asked her questions and listened to her responses. He registered her for ambulance classes. He told her the unvarnished truth without flinching—his version of his father's perfidy had been harsher than the tale her aunt had relayed when Naomi returned.

The one drawback? It was all pretend. By his own words, Kai was a liar. Liars told you what you wanted to hear. But...

He was just so good at *knowing* what she wanted. Nobody else had bothered. She'd heard two variants of "you're so good at cooking, so why don't you do it for me?"

By contrast, within minutes of meeting her, Kai had said, "my fiancée is the kind of woman who wants to save people's lives." He didn't know her at all, and he'd understood her better than either of the men who'd wanted a live-in cook, maid, and bedwarmer who they incidentally didn't have to pay.

Naomi put a fish on to fry, then dished out soup and rice.

He was lying, but in order to lie so well, he had to see her. At least a little bit. Even that tiny speck of recognition from him had made her feel...special.

Well, he'd warned her that pretending would be hard. She was just going to have to keep reminding herself. None of this was real. He wasn't her fiancé. He didn't care about her. And he had at least eight rules for lying. More, if you counted the negative ones.

That was honestly a little disturbing, if one thought about it. But did it matter? Not one bit, because none of this was real.

Still... Naomi bit her lip as the fish crackled in front of her.

His father had been a fraud and a thief.

Everyone assumed he would be one, too.

There were two sides to every story, and *his* side had been delivered without the slightest hint of explanation or excuse.

What would it do to a man if his father did *that*? If his entire life was a lie his father told, and you only found out when he abandoned you to fend for yourself for months?

Naomi stared at the fish sizzling in the pan. “Don’t do it, Naomi,” she whispered to it. “Don’t. He’s just like all the other men who wanted to be engaged to you: he’s using you. You’re using him. This is a relationship of utility, not affection. You don’t even know if he’s telling the truth about everything that happened.”

The fish hissed back at her.

“In fact,” she informed herself, “you know he isn’t telling the complete truth. He has rules about *lying*. Stop this foolishness instantly.”

Yet she knew what that slow flutter in her belly meant. She knew what it meant that she’d scraped the rice pot for the best, crunchy brown bits, that she’d picked through the fish for a nice, fat one before she put it on to fry.

She *liked* him. Already. She felt disgusted on her own behalf.

She flipped the fish with cooking chopsticks.

“Naomi?” She heard her mother come into the room.

“I’m nearly done,” Naomi said. “I’m just going to take this out.”

“One moment. I have something for you.”

Naomi straightened, her grip on the chopsticks tightening. Here it was: the criticism she knew had been coming.

“The way you’re looking at Liu’s son...”

Naomi shook her head. “There’s no need to worry. I’ll be careful.”

Her mother had never *needed* to worry; she just did it. At those words, she nodded as if to herself. “For you.” She held out a little charm. “Omamori.”

Naomi took it. The little cloth protection charm, a rectangle with two squared-off sides, had been carefully

embroidered from yellow satin scraps. She must have been working on it since Naomi had stormed off from their conversation early in the afternoon.

Naomi ran her thumb along the embroidery. “Protection from—I don’t know this character.”

“I try to learn from my mistakes.” Her mother rubbed her hands together. “Last time, I didn’t listen. I told her what to do. I should have made sure she could talk to me before it was too late.”

Naomi blinked. “What last time? Who is she?”

Her mother looked back into Naomi’s eyes and closed her hands around the protection charm. “Arguing with you isn’t protecting you. Forcing you to do what I think is right isn’t protecting you. I am...*trying*. I made this with all my love. Please be careful, Nao-chan.”

“Okaasan?”

Her mother nodded at her and left.

Naomi rubbed the embroidery once more. She’d been taught the basics of Chinese characters in the Wedgeford schools. Her mother and aunt had taught her the Japanese syllabaries, too. But she’d never read enough in either language to be particularly fluent in their use. Two characters had been embroidered in the charm. The last she recognized as just the character for protection. The first character, though, was unfamiliar, composed of three radicals: Horse. Door. Tome. It was one of those compound characters which could mean anything.

A charm to break bad engagements? Protection from ambulance classes?

Whatever it meant, her mother was worried. But if Naomi could avoid arguments by wearing this, it was the easiest way out.

Naomi attached it to her belt and left.

THE FOOD WAS PLACED GENTLY IN FRONT OF KAI, interrupting the conversation that flowed around him.

“This is all we had left,” Naomi said, sounding strangely apologetic. “It’s a little late for service.” She sat at the end of the bench next to him with a bright smile. “Can I get you some beer?”

The last thing Kai needed to do was drink. The cost of everything was listed on a signboard; that was a good enough reason.

Kai reached into the pouch at his belt and handed her two pennies. “Hot water is fine.”

She shook her head. “No, we invited you, we don’t expect —”

He held her eyes. “I am your fiancé,” he said slowly. “That is all the more reason to value the meal I have received and give fair compensation in return.”

“The beer would be on the house.”

“I don’t accept,” Kai said calmly. “It will be weeks, if not longer, until I begin to generate income. I must be frugal with my coin.”

“Things are a little looser in Wedgeford,” Andrew put in. “When we’re not in the Trials, there’s always food at the inn for anyone who needs it. Everyone makes it up in their own way.”

Kai had memories of the time after his father left with Wedgeford’s money. Of the eyes on him as he slunk into the common room, of wanting to sink into the wood of the benches.

“That’s a good rule for everyone else. But I don’t think *I* should be loose about such things.”

“Why?” Kam Ming asked. “Because your father robbed everyone else here?” The words echoed in the room, and Kai

found his grip on the chopsticks tightening.

Naomi turned on him, rising from her seat. “Ming!” she reprimanded.

Kai held up a hand, gesturing her back into place. “Yes,” he said simply. “Because of that. Precisely because of that.”

Kam Ming dropped his gaze. “Well. At least you admit it.”

“Why wouldn’t I admit it?” Not a day had gone by since the subject *hadn’t* haunted Kai. “I was there when it happened, too.”

“Kai,” Naomi said, “it’s your first day here. You’re just settling in. You must be exhausted. Allow us to be neighborly.”

He was tired to the marrow of his bone. “I promised your parents that I would show them what kind of man I am. Let me start here. I am not the kind to take anything from other people, no matter how trivial it may seem. You are a kind person, but you would not be doing me a kindness if you put me in your debt.”

She gave up. “Very well.” Her fingers closed on the coins.

“Wow.” Across the table, Andrew clapped. “That was masterful. I’ve never seen Naomi give way like that before. How did you get her to do that?”

“I did not.” Kai rubbed his temples. “I simply knew what she wanted—to be kind—and gave her an alternate way to express that sentiment that was in line with my preferences.”

“You don’t understand how stubborn she can be.” Andrew leaned in conspiratorially. “And, mate, listen—you’re going to need all the advice you can get when it comes to her.”

“Andrew.” Beside him, Naomi flushed pink. “Please remember that I don’t need someone to tell him all my childhood secrets.”

“And yet here I stand. Ready and willing. For instance, I notice that you’re not eating at this—”

Naomi covered her cousin's mouth. "Pay no attention to him!" she sang.

Kai glanced between the two of them, Naomi red and Andrew smug. Of course he wanted to know. She was his fiancée, even if she didn't realize how true that was.

All the more reason to be careful. Whatever it was? It was none of his business.

He picked up his chopsticks, adjusted them, then picked up his rice bowl. He frowned at it for a moment. It was heavy earthenware, the sort of western bowl that had a minuscule ring on the bottom masquerading as a foot.

"Mr. Uchida." Kai lifted a bite of rice. "I appreciate your offer but it's entirely unnecessary. You just said you've never changed her mind. *I've* already managed that. What good would your advice be?"

Mrs. Gigone let out a cackle.

"Plucked," Andrew said. "Plucked and roasted by my own cousin's fiancé within hours of meeting him. I can see how this will go." But he did not look angered at all. He just grinned and nudged Kai. "You'll fit right in, I see."

And so the conversation continued, bumping on from topic to topic as Kai made his way through soup, rice, a bit of fish, and some pickled greens.

It would have been easy to fall into the trap of believing himself welcome. They included him in the conversation. Naomi gave him whispered explanations on the inside jokes. They made sure to introduce him to the villagers who came in. But Kam Ming still watched him with careful eyes, even if he made no more comments. And when Kai glanced over at Andrew, he found the man watching with a considering gaze.

Kai felt balanced on the knife's edge of what should have been easy camaraderie. Their show of politeness showed that they could band together.

He remembered Wedgeford banding together all too well. Dreams of them at night, coming up to the cottage...

Kai forced the image from his mind. Every inch of stiffly mannered politeness was as much a fraud as his engagement. For Kai, it was real. He had no choice. For everyone else? He was here on their sufferance.

The kind, bright woman sitting next to him thought he was her fake fiancé. In the dim, flickering light of the fire, he could not see her features well. She'd told him that she did not inspire men to passion.

Rule zero, the first rule Kai had made for himself, was this: never hurt anyone who did not need hurting.

He had hurt Naomi. Not on purpose. But the course his life had run had left its mark on her. He should have been there for her, growing up with her, protecting her so that she never felt the sting of whatever hurt she'd been given that had been writ so plainly on her face.

For some reason, she made him think of kara-usu. He'd lived next to the machines for eleven years. Water flowed through a man-made channel until it cascaded onto one end of a wood beam, where a cavity had been carved. When the water in the cavity grew heavy enough, that end of the beam fell, lifting the striking arm high in the air. The water spilled out; the beam pivoted back, pounding the dry blocks of clay beneath into a fine, even texture.

Even now that he no longer slept near them, he still woke up in the middle of the night hearing the phantom creak of wooden timbers, the imagined splash of falling water, the thump of the arm grinding quarried clay into powder.

What were kara-usu but collections of weathered wood beams, unremarkable in any other context? Yet Kai could have watched them operate for hours. Pretty was, after all, just a point of view.

And this was his point of view: close enough to appreciate, but always, always far away.

As if to underscore that, when Kai glanced down, he saw a flash of gold fabric at her waist. That hadn't been there earlier in the day—he could still imagine her marching down the

corridor in front of him at the class registry. She'd not been wearing it then.

He knew what it was, of course. As for what it was for? Well, Kai was the only thing that had changed between this morning and now.

The conversation flowed to Mrs. Gigone's children. He tried to ignore the little protection charm at Naomi's waist. It was, he told himself, like overhearing a conversation not meant for his ears: listening would only let him know how much others hated him.

But Kai had already overheard one conversation today.

"Naomi," he spoke low.

"Hm?" She turned to him with a smile.

He nodded to the bit of yellow fabric at her waist. "That's new."

"Oh, this? My mother made it for me this afternoon."

"Can I see it?"

She hesitated before untucking it from her wide belt. It was attached by a little fabric cord, and she held it out, still tied to her waist, embroidered syllables tilted up at him.

Protection against frauds.

Despite knowing the truth about himself, despite knowing how Wedgeford saw him, despite having steeled himself against this for months, seeing those words still felt like a bucket of cold water. For a moment, Kai felt himself transported back to twenty years ago. In this inn, walking down the hallway quietly, feeling every bit like an intruder. Stopping when he heard voices in the kitchen.

He's a burden. Nobody will willingly be connected with him.

Up until that moment, with the innocence of childhood, Kai had believed the small jobs he'd been doing had made up for the meals he received in return. That moment had made him face reality: he was a burden, and anyone who offered him

assistance did so at their own peril. Nobody wanted anything to do with him. Nobody liked him, and why would they?

His father had stolen every penny he could and run away.

Kai could feel every bit of the shame he'd felt in the moment, made all the worse because it had been true, because there had been nothing he could have done, because he *was* a burden.

He hadn't even wanted to be connected with his family.

"No," Naomi said, tapping the characters with her finger, "I don't know what it says."

"Ah." Kai nodded. "I see."

Naomi just sighed. "It's probably something to guide wise decisions. I'll ask Aunt Katsumi."

For a moment, he wanted to tell her not to ask. He'd told her the bare truth of what had happened, but bare truth omitted the burning shame.

Nobody will willingly be connected with him. That's what she would find out when she asked around. Naomi's own mother had made a charm to protect her daughter from Kai. She'd already come up with a scheme to separate them. And he didn't blame her. She was protecting her daughter.

People had given his father more than metal coins. Every line in Kai's account book represented years of their life. They'd given up money earned with wounds and sweat and tears. They'd given their hopes over to him. Fifteen years ago, his father had stolen twelve pounds and thirteen pence. That money represented a child set up in a profession for life, a parent's medicine paid for, or a brother's marriage ensured. If you took from the rich, you took money. When you stole from the poorest, you stole dreams and futures.

If Naomi asked, they would tell her. And not just the pounds and pence of it. They'd tell her the pain.

Kai didn't want her to know.

He looked into her eyes. She looked back.

He didn't want her to know, but what did his wants have to do with it? He may have been a fraudster and a thief, but he wasn't here to rob her of the truth. Quite the opposite.

Miss Kwan was many things: dedicated, sharp, intelligent. Most of all, she was kind. Kai hadn't expected kindness in Wedgeford, and now that he'd found it, he found himself grasping to hold on to it.

He wasn't here in Wedgeford to take kindness from her. The fact that he *liked* her was irrelevant. That he found himself wistfully hopeful? Foolish. Immaterial. Unrealistic.

Nobody will willingly be connected with him.

And they shouldn't be. Kai had come to Wedgeford for the same reason his father had: He was going to commit a fraud of such extraordinary magnitude that Wedgeford would never again be the same.

The difference between them? Kai was going to pay back all those old debts. He was going to buy back every dream that had been stolen with interest. He was finally going to free himself from his father's name, his father's legacy, and his father's debts.

And once he was finally liberated from his past, he would disappear. Just like they had always wanted him to do.

Wanting something as ephemeral as his fake fiancée's regard? That was pure self-indulgence.

He let go of the protection charm and smiled at Naomi. "Keep wearing it," he told her. "I hope it works."

IT WAS JUST BEFORE NOON ON KAI'S FIRST FULL DAY IN Wedgeford, and his morning had already been filled with frustration that he'd brought entirely on himself. Still, he had plans for the remainder of his day. He made his way to the front step of the little house nearest him. It was high up the downs—almost halfway, not quite as far as Kai's cottage but close. A man was standing in front of the house now, and he was ringing a bell.

The loud clangs echoed—not just now, but in some long-hidden memory of Kai's. This was a thing he'd known about Wedgeford but had forgotten. If someone had told him up until this moment that bells rang regularly, he would have said they came from a chapel. Now, hearing the sound for the first time in twenty years, he remembered dimly: bells sounded in Wedgeford to mark the middle hours of the day.

He'd grown up with the noise, so common that it was scarcely worth remarking on. How strange that the memory of the bell had lived on in his flesh to be resurrected the moment he heard it again.

The bell was attached to the house wall, just under the hang of the eaves. And unlike the melodic sound of church bells, the resonant sound was more cantankerous.

The man ringing the bell looked up, saw Kai, and waved at him in excitement. "Ei!"

Kai remembered this man: face darkened by shadows at the head of a crowd, a far less welcoming expression on his

face.

“New person!” he called in Cantonese. “Welcome!”

Kai drew closer.

“Mm. Maybe...not so new? You look familiar.” The man squinted at Kai as if trying to place him. The man’s hair was clubbed back into a queue a little like Kai’s. It was longer, of course, and the hairs winding their way through his braid were going gray. Lines around his eyes and mouth spoke of hard experience.

Kai fingered the hard rectangle in his pocket. Some of those lines were no doubt due to the fraud detailed in the pages of his father’s account book.

Mr. Bei had been one of his father’s first investors. He’d always been willing to provide more when disaster (feigned disaster; this was Kai’s father, after all) struck. According to his father’s meticulous and misleading records, Mr. Bei had given everything he had saved in over a decade of labor. That sum was close to two pounds.

He’d lost everything the moment he handed it over; he’d discovered it when Kai’s father had absconded.

This was Kai’s fourth visit of the day. An inauspicious number as it was, and visits one to three had ranged from dubious to outright hostile. But Kai would not give up. When Kai had devised his plan for Wedgeford, he had written this man a letter. The contents of that letter had been impossible for a fourteen year old child to accomplish, but he kept that letter, old and faded, in the account book as a reminder of what he was trying to do.

“In fact,” Mr. Bei mused, staring at him, “You look *too* familiar. There’s something about that face... Ah! I have it. Wang Tu, is that you?” Another frown. “No, he’d be forty now, and unless you’ve discovered the elixir of immortality, you’re younger than that. Why, you’re barely an adult.”

“Grandfather.” Kai bowed respectfully. “I am twenty-six.”

“Too much respect! Is my hair that gray? Only my grandchildren can call me grandfather. *You* can call me uncle,

maybe. Don't tell me—you're Fang Mingso."

"No. This one is—"

"Not knowing who you are doesn't make me senile, you know. I never could remember names. You still don't get to call me grandfather. My mind is as sharp as a sword."

This was going well. "Mr. Bei, I'm—"

"Ah!" His eyes lit. "I know! You're that child! That one with the, ah—" He gritted his teeth. "Never mind. I shouldn't say it. He's your father."

Kai felt slightly sick to his stomach. "Your memory is good. I *was* once a child. And I *did* have a father."

Mr. Bei snapped his fingers. "Liu. Liu, family name, Ji, generational name, personal name—wait, I have it—Kang? No. Kai. That's it. Liu Ji Kai."

"How clever you are to identify me in so few guesses." Kai folded his hands behind his back, waiting for the explosion.

Instead, Mr. Bei burst into laughter. "You have a smart mouth again! You always did, back when you were younger. Then..." He inscribed circles in the air, as if to indicate the totality of fraud, robbery, theft, and disappearance. "You got quiet after that. Ah, your dad was a real mixed egg." He frowned. "Maybe I shouldn't say that to you."

"You can say it. It's true." Kai had already heard worse.

"I remember now. That time..." He shook his head. "We were all so angry." He seemed to look off over the village as if reminiscing. "That must have been absolute dog shit for you, wasn't it? Never mind. Are you here to help me ring the bell?"

Kai blinked. At the last three houses, he'd had one door slammed on him. Another man had called him names, and the last woman had just shaken her head and told him to forget everything, including her name.

"No."

"You always used to."

“I...did?”

“Back before,” Mr. Bei said, as if the thing it was *before* was a dividing line so stark that it did not need to be mentioned. And it had been, Kai supposed. “You always helped me ring the time.”

“Did I?” Kai frowned. “Why is there even a bell up here?”

“Back from the days when Wedgeford was a stop on the stage route,” Mr. Bei explained. “The person living up here could see coaches coming. They’d ring and let the town know to prepare.”

“And now you ring the time? You must have a...clock?”

“Ha!” Mr. Bei slapped his thigh. “You’re funny.”

Kai had not intended to be funny.

“I just make it up,” Mr. Bei explained.

“You make up the time?”

“Why not?” Mr. Bei shrugged. “Time is whatever we agree on anyway. It doesn’t have to be accurate. It just has to exist. But this isn’t the time for philosophy. Looks like you’ve turned out all right. What a polite young man you have become.”

“It’s true, grandfather,” Kai said. “Manners are all I have to offer you. That and...” He opened the sack on his shoulder and reached inside, taking out a packet tied in string and a bottle. “These.”

“Mm?” Mr. Bei untied the string. “Oh—that’s ginseng. And this...” He uncorked the bottle and sniffed. “Liniment. Like I was eighty years old! Are you telling me you returned to Wedgeford and showed up on my doorstep just to call me old?”

“I wouldn’t dare. But I remember that you had your limp since I was a child.” How had he remembered that and not the bell?

“True.” Mr. Bei recorked the liniment. “And I’ll welcome this. And you.”

“You’ll...welcome?” It was cold out, so why did Kai feel a flush of warmth at those words? Kai blinked at Mr. Bei. “Me?”

“Especially if you play Go,” Mr. Bei told him. “*Especially* if you play Go well, but not quite as well as me. That’s the perfect partner, right? Always a challenge, never a defeat.”

“I play Go indifferently.”

“Mm. I can’t figure out—you might be very clever; your father was. But you might also be stupid. You’ve come back here after all.”

Here it was. Here came the lecture, the insistence that Kai leave him alone.

“Ah well,” Mr. Bei said. “Can’t blame you. It is your home, after all.”

Home? The word fell into the conversation like a hungry void. What did home mean after all? A place where people knew you?

Home wasn’t any of the places Kai had lived since Wedgeford: not the dry mining town ringed in mountains, burning hot in summer and cold in winter. It wasn’t his master’s home with the scent of water and clay and the sound of timber squeaking as the kara-usu worked. An apprenticeship was always temporary. All Kai knew was that home wasn’t Wedgeford, could never be Wedgeford.

“Aren’t you going to ask me about the money you gave my father? Or where he is? Or what he’s doing?”

“What’s the saying? ‘Quickly come, quickly go.’” Mr. Bei made a little motion with his hand, as if imitating the flow of water.

“You can’t really mean that.”

“Ha!” Mr. Bei pointed at him. “You’re right. It never does come quickly, does it? The saying is only half-true: when money leaves, it flows like water. But what do your father’s debts have to do with you?”

Kai stared at him. “He was my *father*.”

Mr. Bei shook a finger at Kai. "He left us both behind without a word or a penny. Seems like something we have in common between us, not an item of contention."

The account book seemed heavy in Kai's pocket. "It's really not the same. For one, he came and got me."

"Not the same, no. You were a tiny thing, and I was an adult. That's a difference." Mr. Bei said this as if it were extremely important. "I always wished I'd thought through that better at the time, but my mind was clouded by what I'd hoped for. Thanks for the ginseng." He hefted the package. "Come by and see me sometime. My granddaughter's in China. I don't get to see the youth enough anymore." He started to close the door.

"Hey!" Kai stepped forward. "What's wrong with you? Aren't you worried I'm going to cheat you, just like my father did?"

Mr. Bei laughed. It wasn't a cruel laugh or a rueful one. Just one that suggested that Kai was being very, very funny. "Come by sometime and look around. What would you even steal?" He shut the door again.

Four people. Four separate reactions. Mr. Bei's was the kindest, but that was because he had little to lose.

The reason he had nothing to lose? Kai's father. The accounts his father had kept were beginning to show their age, the pages softening, the pencil markings beginning to fade. They could burn for all Kai cared. Kai had the amounts and numbers memorized, each one a burden pressing on his shoulders.

What do your father's debts have to do with you?

Too late to ask that question. When his father had first left Wedgeford, it had been a few hours in advance of a group of people coming to their cottage in a screaming mass, asking for their money back.

They'd demanded Kai produce it.

Kai had woken up from the first hours of sleep with no idea that his father had gone, to a crowd milling outside his

home, grumbling in discontent. He'd let them in to search. He still had nightmares about staring at account books in muzzy-headed confusion, trying to make sense of what had happened, not knowing, not believing.

He'd gone to the tin where his father stored spare coins and found six and a half pence and a note telling Kai to use this to buy food until he returned.

He hadn't returned for a very long time. Not that it mattered; Kai had given the money to the crowd to split, which had seemed like a reasonable plan to his confused, six-year-old self. In retrospect, it had likely landed as an insult.

"He says he'll be back," Kai had said, showing them the note through his tears. "I'm sure he'll come back. He'll explain everything then."

It hadn't been a lie. Kai had really believed it. He'd believed it with confidence, at first, then with the tremulous faith of a fool who thought that belief would make the impossible true.

Finally, he'd clung to it with desperation, because if his father was a swindler and a cheat, then who was Kai? Not the son of a disadvantaged marquis. Not someone with a glorious future ahead of him.

It had been worse when his father returned. He'd awoken Kai in the middle of the night. He'd waved his questions away and demanded silence. By the time they were out of town, his father was shaking with laughter.

They'd got away clean, he had said. Kai had never felt so dirty in his life.

"What do you mean, am I going to pay everyone back?" his father had guffawed. "Why would I do that?"

"But it's dishonest," Kai had said.

"Kai," his father had said, only a little unkindly, "you're old enough to learn the family trade now."

"Pottery?" Kai had asked in a high, quavering voice.

His father had laughed again. Kai remembered that about him—his laughter, when Kai already felt sick to his stomach about the money his father had taken. “Lies,” he’d responded. “Our business is lying.”

It had been a struggle. “You’re not the Marquis of Everlasting Beauty? Our ancient family history, our family scrolls?”

“Of *course* I am,” his father had rejoined. “Of course we have a glorious past. And with our ancestry, why *should* we labor like those peasants? Don’t feel like we’re doing anything wrong. We’re meant for greatness, you and I, and we’re setting the world right.”

Unlike his father, Kai had no grand illusions about himself. He was a swindler. He’d been born to a family of swindlers, and they’d done nothing but swindle for generations past.

He couldn’t change who he was. All he could change was how he did it.

What do your father’s debts have to do with you?

Everything.

Kai stared at the door of Mr. Bei’s cottage, at the bell that he didn’t remember ringing.

Wedgeford hated him, as they had every right to do. One or two people in Wedgeford *not* hating him?

It didn’t change a thing. Those entries in the account book were the chains that bound his soul. He hadn’t asked for them, but then, nobody asked for the inheritance they received.

“KACCHAN.” IT WAS MIDMORNING WHEN NAOMI FINALLY found time to be alone with her aunt. “What does this say?” She held out the omamori that her mother had given her, pointing to the characters.

Naomi had grown up with her aunt, father, and mother running the inn together as a tightly knit trio. How they

managed that so smoothly, Naomi would never know.

Her aunt and mother were both of a similar, diminutive build. They both had round faces and snub noses. They'd even both began graying at their temples in the same way.

There the similarities ended.

Naomi's mother was a quiet, comforting presence: the kind of person who always knew when someone needed something somewhere in Wedgeford. She would show up with rice and soup when people were sick. She'd listen quietly when women unloaded their burdens. She'd take people aside when they'd done wrong and gently, quietly, set them right.

But the thing about listening when everything went wrong was that her mother had learned from everyone else's mistakes. And she would never, ever, take a risk.

Aunt Katsumi, by contrast...

In some ways, she was Naomi's role model. She'd been the one who made the decision to leave Japan. She'd followed her heart and when her husband had passed away, she'd chosen to settle here in Wedgeford rather than to return to the place where the sisters had been born.

Katsumi was *brave*. Most of all, Naomi could talk to her aunt without wanting to scream in frustration. Katsumi at least understood her.

"What does what say?" Aunt Katsumi frowned, fished her spectacles out of her pocket, and pulled the charm toward her. "Hm." She frowned at the fabric, before looking up with a shrug. "Protection something? Sorry. Your mother was always the responsible one. I don't know that character."

Naomi tucked the charm away. "It's probably something about my engagement."

"Probably." Her tone was dry.

"Is that why she hasn't yelled at me anymore about the ambulance class?"

Her aunt simply shook her head. "Since when does my older sister yell?"

Naomi felt her nose wrinkle. “Technically correct. Emotionally false.”

“Second,” her Aunt Katsumi said, “your mother has an annoying but unerring capacity to be right in the exact moments when you wish she wouldn’t. As her younger sister, please trust me. I would not admit it if I had any choice in the matter. She thinks something is wrong with your engagement.”

Her mother was right, Naomi thought grimly, and it *was* annoying.

“So she’s decided to ignore the classes to focus on my husband-to-be?”

“They’re not unrelated.”

“It never made sense. She has no problem with me going to Dover to run errands, but a class? What was I going to do, come to know people?”

Her aunt clicked her tongue. “You know I don’t always agree with your mother.”

“But you do here.”

“Not...entirely. But you do understand...” She tapped a finger against her skirts almost nervously. “No matter what people say, it’s rarely the men you *don’t* know who hurt you. It’s the ones who do. They’re the ones who lure you into a false sense of security.”

“So am I never supposed to know anyone?”

Instead of laughing at Naomi’s exaggeration, though, her aunt bit her lip. “It’s not that. Hasty, ill-considered engagements are a bit of a sore subject in this family. We’re all touchy on the matter. Especially your mother.”

Oh.

Naomi hadn’t considered that. She knew the story about how her parents met. Her father had been a sailor on the ship that had taken her mother and aunt from Japan. Her father had proposed on the second day out from harbor; they’d been married that night.

Naomi loved both her parents, but once she'd grown old enough, she'd realized that they didn't love each other, not the way other couples seemed to do. It wasn't that they yelled. Nor did they argue. They were always civil, always considerate, because Naomi's mother would never, ever be anything else.

But—and it had taken Naomi years to understand this—they were just friends. That was *all* they were. It was not something they ever talked about, which was just as well, because Naomi would have died of embarrassment rather than listen to her mother tell her about sexual intercourse.

But her parents didn't share a room, let alone a bed. Her parents were “marry in haste, repent at leisure” in the flesh.

“You know,” her aunt pressed, “that you and your mother both want the same thing, right?”

“Years of being told not to register for ambulance classes suggest otherwise.”

“As a parent,” Katsumi said slowly, “the thing you most wish is that your children will not make the mistakes of prior generations. And Naomi, you cannot argue that your engagement was carefully considered. You barely knew the boy when you agreed to marry him.”

Back to the fake engagement again. “Man,” Naomi said, because it was the only correction she could make. “He's not the child you remember.”

“No, and that makes it worse. He was a sweet boy. Who knows what he might have become?”

“You admit you don't know.” Naomi spoke slowly. “He's not even been in Wedgeford a full day. Why not give him a chance?”

Katsumi shrugged. “Logic, really. I can't think of any reason why a man of good taste and moral sense in his position would come back to a place where he would be instantly hated.”

“So you agree with Haha.”

“Naomi, that man agreed to marry you within hours of meeting you. He doesn’t *sound* honest.”

That part had been all Naomi’s fault. Kai had come to Wedgeford to get a start. *She* was the one who had inveigled him in her plans. It was *her* fault he wasn’t going to get a fair shake.

Still... It wasn’t that Katsumi was entirely wrong. The second full sentence out of his mouth—*I’m Naomi Kwan’s fiancé*—had been a lie.

Nonetheless. The sheer emotion in his voice when he’d talked about being nothing like his father? Naomi had resonated to his words. She, too, knew what it was like to fight not to be her parent. She didn’t think Kai was lying about that. Some venom could not be faked.

“I know,” Katsumi said, interrupting her thoughts. “He’s charming and he tells you what he thinks you want to hear.” She reached out and held Naomi’s hand. “When someone tells you that you’re likable, that you’re desirable, you want to believe they’re honest.”

Naomi shook her head. “It’s not that. Or—rather—” She struggled for words. “Fine. Yes, he *does* tell me what I want to hear. But in order to do that, he has to *know* what I want to hear in the first place. Most people just tell me what they think someone like me should want to hear, and they get it very badly wrong.”

Katsumi went very still. “What nonsense has he been telling you?”

“That I should take ambulance classes.” Naomi clenched her hands together. “That my dreams are worth something. That I’m allowed to want things because *I* want them, not because I can prove to someone else that they deserve to be wanted.”

Her aunt looked at her with something close to pity in her eyes.

He understands, Naomi wanted to say. *He understands what it’s like to not want to be your parent.*

Instead she chose another tactic. “He’s not the kind of person to say that we’re engaged and so I have to do what *he* wants. We’re engaged, and he wants me to do what *I* want. That’s more than I can say for my own mother.” Naomi morosely lifted the protection charm. “*She* doesn’t even trust me.”

Her aunt raised her spectacles and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Please keep in mind that your mother loves you. That should be your starting point, not the thing you tack on at the end.”

Her mother had named her *Naomi*—two characters that translated roughly to “sincere beauty.” Naomi was neither. She was a seething mass of confusion, want, and anger.

“I know.” Naomi felt very small. “But I don’t always think that she *likes* me.”

Some days she felt like she was threading the eye of the tiniest needle of her parents’ expectations, with the thick, tangled thread of her own wants. She had never been any good at sewing.

Now Katsumi would tell Naomi what her mother liked about her, dividing her traits into neat little piles of good and bad, as if Naomi were divisible, as if you could separate out the part of her who took care of the inn from the part of her who wanted to know how to treat wounds.

Instead, Katsumi asked a different question. “What do you want her to like about you?”

For a moment, Naomi had no answer but the memory of old grief, the grief of a child on the cusp of adulthood realizing she would never be loved, that no one would ever care for her the way she yearned to be cared for.

That grief had been followed by Naomi’s path of determination: her decision to *not* be her mother, to *not* settle, to *not* just make do. Naomi knew she was the kind of girl who would only ever serve a use to someone else. And instead of accepting that, she’d had the temerity to forge her own path.

“Me,” she finally managed to say. It wasn’t an answer to her aunt’s question, but it was the only one that made sense of that long ago hurt. “I want her to like *me*. How can she do that, if she doesn’t see who I am?”

LIFE AS A MAKE-BELIEVE-ENGAGED WOMAN LURCHED ON rather the life Naomi had before her fake engagement. Time passed. She worked. And her fake fiancé was busy—so busy that days passed and they scarcely saw one another. Night by winter night, the sun sank early beneath the downs. Night by night, she brought trays laden with food to villagers seeking warmth and sustenance. On one day, light rains pattered against the roof. On the next, wind howled. The weather took a turn from cold to chilly to surprisingly temperate before jumping back again.

The only difference between now and the time before her false engagement was that she had a pretend fiancé.

Every few days or so in that first week, Kai would come to the inn for dinner.

He would always pay, would always refuse any additions like beer or sweets. They would talk for a few minutes, and then Naomi would be called off. By the time she was able to return, he would have left without trouble or mess, gathering up his own dishes and wiping down the bench where he sat.

Naomi had also gone to his cottage when she was free in the afternoon so that they could keep up the ruse that they were courting. She'd promised her parents to stay outside, in view of the entire village, so that tongues wouldn't wag.

But it was not as if he had idle time for chitchat. Her fake fiancé was *busy*. Everyone in town saw him working first

thing in the morning; everyone knew he didn't stop until the sun sank below the downs.

She helped him pull weeds out of the dilapidated structure climbing the hill that he claimed was a kiln. One by one, the trees that had grown through the roof were cut down. The crumbling roof was restored and resingled.

It wasn't really an activity that lent itself to talk. Worse, the winters in Wedgeford were mild enough that on warmer days, he shed his coat to work. The sight of his shirt, sweat-drenched and clinging to his back, had made Naomi go pull weeds on the other side where she wouldn't be tempted to look at the man who was, after all, only her fake fiancé.

Not that her thoughts would be cause for reproach. She thought only respectful things when she watched him stretch, muscles flexing against fabric.

"Please," was respectful, after all. He would roll his shoulders as he stood, and she would find herself thinking, "Um."

Once, when he stopped for a drink of water and spilled it down his front, she had her most polite thought yet. It was: "Excuse me, sir!"

When she'd first seen him, she'd thought that he wasn't handsome. And he wasn't, not in the normal sense of things. Still, he was compelling like a storm: a flash of light illuminating dark clouds, gone with a blink, followed by the low, rolling growl of thunder.

He made her want to kick off her shoes and get wet.

After that afternoon, she'd done her best to pull weeds with him out of eyesight.

She was trying not to think of her fake fiancé that evening as she entered the dining room laden with dishes.

But as she came up behind the Jay brothers, she caught the end of their conversation. "...and I heard he visited the Pengs, too. Bearing gifts. Did he bring *everyone* in Wedgeford a gift?"

“It’s suspicious, is what it is. Who does that? What’s he hiding? Where was he all this time?”

“Here you are!” Naomi announced. “Rice and soup.” She gave them all her very cheeriest smile. “The rest of the dishes to follow, once you stop gossiping about my fiancé.”

There was a long pause.

The three Jay brothers had arrived in Wedgeford fifteen years ago. The youngest was ten years Naomi’s elder.

Two years ago, Irwin had come in for dinner. “Now that Ma’s passed away,” he’d said when she brought him his meal, “we need a woman on the farm.”

It had taken several minutes of Naomi’s heartfelt commiseration on his mother’s death before she’d come to the horrifying realization that this was a marriage proposal: one that focused entirely on his needs, and her ability to meet them, and not at all on her as a human being with thoughts and desires of her own.

You’re so much like your mother, he’d said in praise, and that had guaranteed him an immediate rejection, notwithstanding his bereavement.

At least it had been better than her first proposal.

The brothers all probably knew about this, because they exchanged careful glances.

“Ah, Naomi,” said Edwin Jay, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck. “We were just saying.”

“I noticed.” Naomi placed hot water on the table. “You *were* saying things with your mouth. You don’t have to do that. You could keep your mouth free of such things.”

“If you’re so hard up to be married,” Irwin said slowly, “I’m still—”

“It’s still very much a no.” Naomi did her best to smile as she said this.

“Ah, I mean—we’ve just been listening to people talk. We don’t want you to get hurt. That’s all.”

The three of them nodded vigorously.

“That’s so sweet.” She set the rice bowls on the table. “But you *do* know I can take care of myself. Don’t you?”

“Naomi. His father—”

“I know about his father. But listen to me, you lot. Go tell everyone you’re talking with to stop this, now.” She put her hands on her hips. “This isn’t about Kai. This isn’t even about his father. It’s about *us*. ”

Irwin whined, “Naomi. You don’t understand.”

“I understand *perfectly*.” She glared at them. “Have I *ever* asked any of you where you’re from? Or why you’re here together, or where your father is, or why none of you look anything like brothers?”

“Ah.” Irwin winced. “Naomi—”

She cut off his pained explanation. “We don’t ask because nobody leaves a family and a hometown without a reason. Sometimes that reason is shame. Sometimes it’s grief. Sometimes, I’m sure, it’s robbery.” She glared at them. “We could interrogate everyone that came here, and rehash everyone’s secrets every time someone new arrives, or we could understand that everyone is here for a fresh start and simply allow them to have that.”

“Naomi,” Edwin started. “Listen—”

“I’m not done yet. You need to start giving Brother Liu the chance that everyone else has. The chance to leave his past behind, and to be judged on who he is in the here and now. And you need to go tell *everyone* that—”

“Naomi,” Irwin said urgently, “can you please look behind you?”

Naomi turned.

Kai was standing two feet behind her.

He looked like he had just washed: his hair was wet and still slicked back, his face clean, his nails scrubbed. And yet

there was a tiny streak of something that looked like drying mud on the long end of his queue.

Naomi found herself blushing. He'd heard all of that? "Um." It was too much like her thoughts when watching him work. "There you are. Um." She'd said it again. When had 'um' turned into a word with such a connotation?

His face was impassive and unmoving.

She slipped a cloth out from the strings of her apron. "Hold still." She wiped at his braid. "There. Got it."

"Ah." His hand reached up, as if unconsciously, and touched the rim of his ear. "My apologies about that. I don't have a mirror, and I've been mud wrestling."

That brought up an image, fueled by his bout with weeding—his clothes once again slicked to his body—

She shook her head, dispelling that. "With...pigs?" Her voice sounded a little too high.

"With mud," he said. "Just mud."

"Oh."

He glanced behind her at the Jay brothers, who were watching this in silent fascination.

"I wanted to talk to you about the first ambulance class. It's tomorrow, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Mind if we leave early? I need to put in for an order of bricks." He frowned thoughtfully. "Also, Scotch pine."

Alwin frowned at him. "What for?"

"None of your business," Naomi snapped.

"It's no trouble." Kai spoke over Naomi's objection. "I have a craft, you know."

Irwin sneered. "The *marquis's* son has a craft?"

"Don't call me that."

"Gentlemen," Naomi reprimanded.

“What kind of trade needs bricks and pine?” This was Edwin.

So much for gentle. Naomi slapped a hand on the table. “Is this who we are? Is this what we do?”

The three men stared at her for a moment, before the brothers dropped their eyes.

“Sorry, Naomi,” Edwin muttered.

“It’s no problem,” Kai told her. “I know as much as anyone who my father was.”

“It *is* a problem.” She looked at all of them, and then back at Kai. “Are we getting married?”

He looked away for just one second, before looking back to her with a searing, searching look. “Yes.” He drew the word out into almost a question.

She glared at him. “Am I having your children?”

They had not talked about this, in large part because there was no point in talking about the possibility of procreation when one did not intend to procreate.

In fact, Naomi realized, with heat running through her, it was probably best not to think about procreation, because, um...

Kai swallowed as if he, too, were thinking the unthinkable. He didn’t drop his eyes from hers. There was only one answer he could give, given their pretense. “Yes.”

She turned to the three Jays. “Then we’re stopping this right here. We judge people by what they do—not who their father is. When you claim that shame passes from father to child, those are *my* future children you’re talking about. So watch your mouths, if you want to put anything else in them.”

She glared at them, one by one, until their eyes dropped.

“Sorry, Naomi,” Irwin muttered. It was the apology of a man who knew he had no other choice.

“Who else are you going to apologize to?”

“Sorry, Liu-go.” Edwin gritted out. “We were...unkind.”

“There.” Naomi brushed her skirts out. “Now let me show my fiancé to a table, and I’ll get the rest of your dinner.”

She stomped off.

At the back bench, before she could go back to the kitchens, Kai caught hold of her sleeve. He didn’t touch her; he just looked at her for a long moment.

“No need to thank me,” she said.

“You don’t need to defend me.” His words were quiet. “It’s not needed.”

She stared at him. “Everyone deserves to be defended at some point.”

He was tall, so ridiculously tall. How was it that he somehow seemed to fold in on himself when she said that? “I don’t,” he told her. “I hardly even know what to do with it.”

Like a storm, she thought dazedly, if a storm could be vulnerable. She smiled at him, heart thumping.

“Oi! Naomi!” called someone from the other side of the room.

“I’ll be back,” she promised him, and then for the next thirty minutes, she was lost in the bustle of dinner. She saw Kai once, when she brought him his food—before the Jay brothers; she made a point of that. By the time she’d brought out the remainder of their meal, cleared the tables and made room for another handful of farmers, Kai had gone again, leaving nothing but two pennies behind him, and a short note.

Meet tomorrow morning for your ambulance class.

IT WAS JUST PAST SIX IN THE MORNING WHEN KAI SET OUT with Naomi toward Dover and her first ambulance class.

The air was cold and clammy, early mists shrouding the landscape in fog. Their footsteps, falling on dewy grass, felt

muted.

And still, despite the quiet, dampened world they walked through, every glance at Naomi felt like a scorching echo of the words she'd said the night before.

Am I having your children? she had asked, and he'd thought. And thought. And thought. He'd not been able to stop his thoughts.

"I know why you felt you had to say that yesterday," he said as they made their way down a hill, "but it was too much for me. Especially if I don't want to violate rule eight too much."

"I see that now." She bowed her head. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I am entirely at fault. You're doing me a favor, and I've repaid you ill."

"Not that." Kai grimaced. "You're not making me uncomfortable. You're making me comfortable."

"That's bad?"

He was silent a little longer, listening to the damp swish of their boots through the grass, trying to find words for the things he was feeling.

"I have wanted," he said slowly, "for a long time. I've wanted someone to know the truth about me and to..."

He trailed off.

"To not let your father's deeds overshadow the person you are?" she asked.

"Yes." He'd thought about it all night, thought about his reaction to her words—that first flush of joy, the dawning hope, the feeling that someone cared.

The crushing realization that followed when he realized she was pretending.

"It's too far on the pretending scale for my taste," he told her as sedately as he could. "Maybe you could be more suspicious of me. It will make the end easier, when it comes."

She bit her lip. "Can't you just pretend I'm not saying it?"

“No.”

“Because I’m not a very good liar,” she said earnestly. “I can’t pretend to blame you for what your father did, because I don’t.”

He blinked. “Ah. Well.”

That was worse. She meant it. It was going to be hard to keep himself from having feelings in response. No; it was impossible. He was already having feelings, and he didn’t want them.

“You see,” Naomi continued, unaware of his internal struggle, “everyone thinks I’m like my mother.”

He glanced over at her.

“And I’m *not* comparing my mother to your father.”

“Your mother is a good person.”

“One who would never abandon me for eight hours, let alone eight months.” She looked over at him. “But still, sometimes I think that being my mother is a...” She looked around, as if verifying they were alone walking through the mist. “I think my mother is a trap. And if even *my* mother feels that way to *me*, I am in enormous sympathy with you.”

A trap. That was precisely what his father felt like: a trap. An easy way forward, and if he didn’t fight against it with all his might, it would draw him in and snare him for life.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said instead.

She winced. “I’m a terrible daughter.”

“That’s not what I meant.” The sun was beginning to burn off the haze, growing warmer and brighter. “I am trying not to like you too much given our situation. To understand you does not help.”

“And?”

“And I do.” He looked straight ahead at the rise of the hill. “I know I shouldn’t like you, but I do.”

“Oh.” She glanced at him askance. “For being a terrible daughter?”

“Because most people try to do what’s easiest. It’s a rare person who takes the hard way through, just because she thinks it’s the right path.”

“Takes the hard way through,” Naomi mused. “That’s... exactly it. The explanation that I needed for myself. Is it like that for you?” She glanced at him. “You could have kept on going with your father, right?”

“No,” Kai said softly. “I *am* taking the easy way.”

“I’ve seen you work,” she said. Inexplicably, she blushed at that. “I don’t think *anyone* would say that you’re taking the easy way.”

“It’s the only way.” He shrugged. “By definition, that makes it the easiest.”

THE LECTURE STARTED WITH THE ESTEEMED INSTRUCTOR FROM London glaring out over the gathered students and bellowing, in an angry tone of voice, “Wounds!”

Kai had jumped, looking around, but nobody in the small, drafty room seemed to find it odd.

Thereafter, the instructor began talking at top volume and low speed about various kinds of wounds: contusions, which were not to be confused with punctures, which were—

Kai had not been able to keep up, but Naomi, next to him, had taken swift notes in her notebook, underlying words like *carbolic* and *dilute one-twentieth*. If he had not already found her charming, he would have been swayed by this: by her in a dark brown gown, hair up in a precise bun, biting her lip and writing as swiftly as she could, surrounded by the bandages and bottles of water that had been passed out to them as demonstration materials.

She asked questions, too: “What could we use if there were no carbolic acid around?” and “What would happen if we failed to dilute the carbolic acid?”

The man had given her a strange look as if each query were a bother. “With the concentration sold at the chemist? No permanent damage would be done, but if it got in the eyes or other mucus membranes, you’d cause excruciating pain. Never fail to dilute!” That was screamed out.

Kai had attended half a year of Chinese classes when he lived in America: screaming during lectures was not something he found odd. He was just used to having to repeat it back at the same volume.

By the time they got to the practical portion, Kai was practically vibrating off his seat with the need for silence. Once the other participants began to bandage each other, and the instructor stopped explaining what needed to be done, his ears finally got a rest. He’d been grateful when Naomi let him do the bandage first, and he’d sped through the process, slapping gauze on her arm and lashing it to her with the provided linen.

This had been a mistake. It had left her more time to do *his* bandage, and that meant that—with their conversation on the walk still fresh on his mind—he had nothing to do but sit and watch her touch his arm.

She sat in front of him, biting her lip, carefully diluting the water that was being used as a pretend carbolic acid with more water, following the instructions that Kai hadn’t been paying attention to with an exacting sense of detail. He could feel the faint waft of her breath as she leaned down to examine his arm. The hairs on his arm rose under her attention.

“This will sting a little,” she told him gravely.

“No, it won’t. It’s just a test solution. It’s water.”

“Hush.” She frowned up at him. “I’m practicing what to say. It’s crucial that I get it right.” She carefully dabbed his pretend wound with the solution of water diluted with water, then frowned. “There. That should do it.”

She was not the kind of woman that most would call pretty, but he kept noticing things about her. Things like the shine of her hair, coiled in some complicated bun and held in place by a single stick, one end carved into little leaves. He wondered who had given it to her, and then felt annoyed at himself for caring.

But he couldn't stop looking. The curve of her eyelashes fluttered as she settled in to provide care to his non-existent wound. Her lips set in determination as she treated his unblemished skin as if a grave accident had befallen him.

Kai had a problem: he liked her. He liked her far too much, for someone he'd barely begun to know. He liked that she wanted to take the class. He liked the careful notation of her writing in her notebook. He liked the touch of her fingers against his wrist.

"There," she said, speaking to herself. "Now I suppose I... press." She pushed her palms into his arm and looked down at him.

It was too much. *It's medicinal*, he reminded himself, but there was nothing medicinal about the meeting of their eyes.

There was gauze between them. Her fingers were cold and damp. Clinical though it should have been, this was a process of caretaking, and that brought up old wants.

Kai was used to all manner of wants. He'd often felt this way during his apprenticeship. His master hadn't been the kind to talk, but he showed care in other ways: by teaching, by correcting, by recognizing when Kai was frustrated and giving him an outlet for that frustration. By caretaking in general.

"Hold still," she murmured. "You're shifting. We need to stop the bleeding."

It was not as if Kai had anything else to do but feel her hands on him. His life had been devoid of touch for far too long.

It had been by choice. He'd known what he had to do; how could he ask anyone to share the path he had to walk into his final fraud, when doing so would mean sharing the danger of

being caught? How could he ask an honest woman to walk beside him, when he himself was so deeply dishonest?

She kept her palm against his wrist as she reached for the linen.

His master had no sons, which was part of the reason why he'd taken Kai on. Eleven years working with him, learning from him, living with him... There were times Kai had lain awake at night and imagined a world in which he'd been born to the right father.

But *why can't I be someone else's son* always had answers. He couldn't allow himself to be part of his master's family because he had always been lying about his aim. He would never be able to forget Wedgeford. His family was liars and frauds, and if Kai let himself pretend he was just a normal man, he'd be no better than his father.

He'd yearned to belong somewhere, anywhere. He'd known that he never would, not until he broke free. He recited the reminder like a litany.

He would not belong to this fierce woman, biting her lip as she tied the bandage together. He would not belong to his master's family. He would not become part of Wedgeford; he would not belong to anyone at all.

Not until he stopped belonging to his father.

"There." Naomi patted the bandage. "All done."

He looked at the neat gauze, the strips of cloth tacking it firmly, but gently in place. "You did better than me."

"That's hardly a compliment. You bandaged me like I was a wolf about to savage you."

"How curious, when the reverse is true."

She flicked her finger lightly against his forehead. "So very dramatic."

"Right, everyone!" The instructor called from the front. "We'll be coming around and inspecting your work."

“Here.” Naomi pointed at her bandage. “Tighten this part so you can pass the section.”

He did.

“This is so exciting!” She could hardly hold still long enough for him to fix his shoddy work. “Next, it’s unguents. I *love* unguents.”

She grinned up at him, and he couldn’t help himself: he smiled back. It *was* exciting, seeing her take such a genuine interest.

“If you might pardon me.” The man a bit over from them came over. “I was listening to you two talk, and you speak English with one another.”

“Yes?” Kai gave him his most repressing frown.

The man didn’t take the warning. “I hear tell you’re a Chinese businessman. What sort of business do you do?”

“Pottery.” Kai said the word repressively.

“Ohhh.” The man sat back. “It’s different there, isn’t it?”

There was nothing much to say to that, so Kai didn’t say anything.

“You must be a master potter, to be sent here.”

That brought back thoughts of Kai’s actual master. “Just a humble one.”

“Ah, that’s the thing people from the Orient do, isn’t it? Bowing? Humility?”

Kai fixed him with a look. “I didn’t bow.”

“Yes,” Naomi said dryly, cutting across the other man. “He’s very humble. I’m his fiancée. I should know.”

“Fancy that.” The man drew back, turning to his friend. “A Chinese master potter. Here in Dover. Who would have thought?”

Kai blew out his breath. “Please,” he muttered. “Bring out the unguents.”

“YOU’RE ACTUALLY GOING TO EAT WITH HIM.”

Naomi looked at the tray on the counter and then up into her cousin’s knowing, mocking face. Too mocking.

In the week and a half since she had met and faked an engagement with Kai, she had in fact been avoiding eating with him.

But it was self-preservation that reversed her decision tonight.

“He was very nice today,” she said. “He accompanied me to my ambulance class. Don’t all good fiancés get a reward?”

“I’m not sure this counts as a reward for him,” Andrew said with a wink.

Naomi liked Kai. A little liking wasn’t a problem; they had to spend time in each others’ company, after all, and it would be more believable if they were not visibly at odds.

But any more than mild appreciation was dangerous. When Kai had told Naomi that rule eight was not to attach feelings to lies, she’d scoffed. But he’d been right. A week and a half in, and here she was: appreciating how considerate her fiancé was.

How...tall. His height had seemed grossly excessive when she first met him; now it seemed comforting, as if he could block anything that might come her way. And the little things he did—steady her elbow when her footing was uncertain

crossing a stream on the way to class, or opening a door for her...

These things were normal, she reminded herself. They were the very least a woman should expect from a man who was courting her.

Sadly, no man had ever met even this pathetically minimum standard. Even knowing that all Kai's efforts were fake, it made her ache inside. It wasn't that she liked him specifically. She just appreciated what he was doing a little too much.

Naomi had resolved to put a stop to the unwanted glow of appreciation that she felt. All she had to do was prove to herself that he was just like everyone else: when she was at her worst, he would be just like every other man. She was going to stop liking him even if the embarrassment slayed her.

"You're actually going to eat with him," Andrew repeated in a much more annoying tone of voice.

She set her thumb against Andrew's forehead and pushed him away. "How on earth did you figure that out?" She added four pieces of table linen to her tray. "Was it the two bowls of rice? Was it the two soups? Or—no—don't tell me. It was the two teacups."

"It's just that ever since he's arrived, I've noticed you don't." He raised an eyebrow at her. "I suppose this means the engagement has run its course and now you want to drive him away."

This was far too close to the truth for Naomi to acknowledge. "Until today," Naomi lied, "it would have been impossible. I've been so set on making sure I manage my duties alongside the ambulance class that I had no time."

"Right." Andrew rolled his eyes. "Of course."

"It's normal. Stop looking at me like that."

"Very normal." Andrew grinned at her. "Speaking of normal, you haven't explained why you're marrying him. Is it wrong of me to find the whole affair suspicious? You always said you would never just marry because."

How very like Andrew to drop a serious topic like Naomi's fake engagement in the middle of teasing. "I'm not marrying just because."

Andrew leaned in. "Are you being blackmailed into it or some other unsavory thing? Every time I bring it up, you give a non-answer, as you did just now. I'm *worried* about you."

It was one thing for Naomi's mother to worry about her. That was what her mother did best. It was another if Andrew did. He—and Chloe—were the ones most likely to figure out that the engagement was spectacularly fake. Chloe would be returning soon, and once the two of them combined their powers of observation (Chloe) and irritation (Andrew), they might start peeling away the layers of Naomi's lies.

For the time it took to heft her laden tray, Naomi considered telling him the truth. Then she remembered that however exhausting Andrew might be now, it would only grow worse if he knew.

Andrew was exactly the kind of person to needle her about her behavior until she broke down and admitted the truth. But—and this was the deciding point against telling him anything—he was also the kind of person to needle her in front of other people if she were foolish enough to divulge the facts of the situation. Naomi would trust Andrew with her life, but her secrets?

Never. This called for misdirection. She started toward the main room. Andrew followed.

"Have you heard what happened with Kai's father?"

"In detail. Repeatedly. Everyone wants to make sure I know so that I can tell you."

"Don't tell me who." Naomi wrinkled her nose. "I'd rather not know. But this just exemplifies why I'm not explaining. If I do, people are just going to tell me I'm wrong. It's going to make me angry, and that's going to make me even more stubborn. The truth is..."

She paused as she passed into the main room. She hadn't been lying about how much work she had to do. In the darker

months, people came to the inn earlier. That meant less time to prepare, and more time serving. Now, Naomi looked out over the tables, searching faces until she found Kai. He sat alone at a far table. He was already watching her with a steady gaze.

That attention made something crackle in Naomi's belly. She smiled at him. He nodded back at her, and then, as she watched, the corners of his eyes lifted.

It wasn't a smile; it just felt like one. His whole face seemed to light up at the sight of her.

That was a problem. Even now, laden with a heavy tray and worried about what lie to tell her cousin, his expression made a little spark zing up her spine.

"The truth?" Andrew prompted.

"I just had this *feeling* within the first five minutes of meeting him."

To be exact, her feeling had been panic. But nonetheless: a feeling.

"Naomi." He said this gently, but in those three syllables, she could hear all his concern.

"You don't have to tell me. I know I'm being foolish. It's *just* a feeling. I wonder to myself all the time. What if I'm wrong? What if he *isn't* who I think? It's my whole life, after all. I don't *need* anyone to tell me that. That's why I'm insisting on a long engagement. If I'm wrong, well." She pressed her lips together grimly. "I'll find out."

"Do you love him?"

She should say yes. But looking into her cousin's face, she knew that would only make him more concerned. "It hasn't been long enough," she admitted. "I *like* him."

"Gross," said Andrew.

"You asked!" She glared at him. "I've never felt like I fit with anyone the way I have with him."

So far, she hadn't told a single lie. She'd only laid a fine path of misdirection.

For a long moment, Andrew contemplated her. “Well, I hope that everything works out the way you deserve.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Good things.” He grinned at her. “Only good things.”

“Well, thank you.” She bumped his shoulder with hers and started to make her way over to Kai.

Apparently, that had been enough serious talk from Andrew because his grin cracked open. “Ha! I wasn’t talking about the *engagement*! I meant your eating with him. Finally.”

She could feel her cheeks flush. “Why are you still talking about this when you know how busy I’ve been?”

“Truly an amazing excuse.” His eyes twinkled at her. “I saw you grabbing a bite in the kitchen one day while he was *here*. But you’re right. If you intend to marry him, he’s going to have to see you eat eventually.”

What was it about family knowing all the things that embarrassed you about yourself? Truly, she would heave Andrew off a cliff if she didn’t love him so much.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Why would I be worried?”

“Oh, we’ll see.” He took the tray from her in a smooth motion before she knew what was happening. “Allow me to serve you, my dear cousin.”

She forced a grin through gritted teeth. “There’s absolutely no need to be so kind.”

“There’s every need.” He started walking, and she took off after him. “You should enjoy a nice, romantic dinner with your husband-to-be, all alone with the flickering fire.”

“Alone?” She looked around. The room wasn’t as crowded as it had been, but it certainly wasn’t empty.

“Alone but for the thirteen other people in this room, and only twelve of them will gossip about you. No need to mention your mostly invisible cousin.”

“Don’t you dare.” She reached for the tray. He backed away from her in a swift motion, dodging her with the talent of a man who’d carried heavier trays through far more boisterous crowds.

“Andy!”

He did not look back. Naomi let out a sigh and tromped after him. She hoped he was pleased with himself.

Naomi loved her cousin. He was a few months older than her, and that meant that he was strong and protective when she needed it. He would have taken on anyone who annoyed her.

Annoying her, after all, was his own prerogative.

She followed him to where he was laying dishes on the section of the wooden table in front of Kai. Annoyingly, he set their places side-by-side as if they were lovers who might surreptitiously hold hands under the table. He placed one of the linens next to Kai, and the other three in the empty spot next to Naomi’s rice bowl. He laid the chopsticks in front on rests.

She glared at him as she sat down. Her stupid cousin suppressed a smile.

Naomi folded one of the linens and set it next to the plate. “Thank you for waiting table, my dear cousin.” She gave him her most innocent smile. “You are now dismissed.”

Andrew ignored her. “It’s good to see you once again, Brother Liu. I shall be your very normal waitstaff for tonight’s very normal dinner. You’ll be eating with my baby cousin, who is also mostly normal at dinner time.” He gave Kai a look. “We do not speak of her failures at normalcy.”

Naomi smiled and said sweetly—in Japanese so that Kai wouldn’t know what she was saying—“May pigs devour your body.”

Andrew coughed heavily. Kai paused and turned to her, the hint of question on his face.

Naomi smoothed a second linen over her skirt. “It’s a thing we say in Japanese before we eat.”

“Exactly,” Andrew said, because he still hadn’t left. “Itadakimasu. That’s what we say before we eat. Enjoy the food.”

Kai tilted his head. Whether one spoke Japanese or not, what Naomi had said was very different from what Andrew said.

“I used the...um...honorific form.” She smiled even more brightly and imagined kicking her cousin in the shins. “That’s why it sounded different.”

“I see.” Kai picked up his soup bowl. “Thank you for the food, then.”

Naomi tucked the final linen into her neckline and raised a spoonful of soup to her lips.

“You should teach me how to say that,” Kai said just as the soup went into Naomi’s mouth. “The honorific form. So I can use it with your parents.”

There was a fraction of a second in which Naomi understood that things were about to go very wrong. But foreknowledge just meant the moment slowed to a crawl. Her mouth was full of soup, and there was no holding it back. Naomi let out a horrified laugh, choking on liquid, and then sneezed, spraying it everywhere. It took three hacking coughs to dot the rice, the tray, and the table with finely atomized miso.

Behind Kai, Andrew doubled over in silent laughter.

“Down the wrong pipe. Good thing I have an emergency linen!” Naomi picked up the linen she’d folded next to her chopsticks and carefully cleaned up. “One moment.” She let out another wheeze into the cloth, as she attempted to expel soup out of her lungs as discreetly as possible.

This was it: the moment when Kai discovered the truth about Naomi. She was a clumsy eater. She’d spent any number of hours moving dried beans and grains of rice from one bowl to another with chopsticks. It was all to no avail. Something always went horribly wrong. She had eventually given up on herself in despair.

“Are you all right?” Kai looked perturbed.

Apparently, discretion was incompatible with not dying of soup inhalation. “Just fine!” She held up a hand. “Excuse me.” There was nothing for it. She hacked up the remaining soup.

“She’ll teach you that particular phrase later,” Andrew said, having regained his composure first.

She shot her cousin a look. “*Much* later.”

Luckily, Andrew took that as his cue to leave, and she was able to finish her soup without further incident. She asked Kai about his work; he told her that the brick he’d ordered would come in a handful of days. The final kiln repairs would wait until that arrived; until then, he was setting up a work area outside the cottage. She told him about how laundry day had gone. All very normal conversations for couples pretending to be engaged.

She was just relaxing and picking up her rice bowl when Andrew returned with another piece of linen.

“A refresh of the emergency linen for my dear cousin,” he said.

“How sweet you are.” She gave him a tight-lipped smile and went back to ignoring him. It was easy enough to concentrate on her food. The bowl, warm and ungainly, filled her hand. She reached out with chopsticks and picked up some peppers, which she put in Kai’s bowl, alongside a strip of pork.

A nice piece of familiarity. She’d seen doting wives spoil their husbands in that way. *That* would make them look as if they were truly betrothed.

Kai returned the favor, finding a piece of meat with nice caramelization and putting it in her bowl, alongside sesame-dotted spinach and pickled radish.

Naomi took the pork and rice and raised it to her mouth. Unfortunately—

“Excellent work, cousin!” Andrew clapped her on the back. “You didn’t even drop—oh dear.”

She in fact dropped everything when he whacked her shoulder. The pork fell, dripping sauce on the linen. But the rice? Somehow, it fell just above her neckline. And when Naomi reached to brush it off, she managed to lodge those tiny grains under the linen, right into the tiny crevice left by her corset.

She turned to look at her cousin. “Go away,” she said in Japanese with the sweetest smile possible.

She could feel the rice falling further as she turned, rubbing into her sternum. The combined weight of her chemise and corset was smashing it into her skin. There was no getting it out without indecency. There was no leaving it without feeling it, cold and sticky, against her chest.

“Don’t worry,” Andrew said, leaning down to Kai in conspiratorial fashion. “She’s not always this uncoordinated.”

Perhaps, in some abstract sense, it was funny. But in Naomi’s head, long ago words echoed. *Clumsy, plain girls don’t get a choice.*

“She’s usually worse,” Andrew whispered, loud enough for half the room to hear.

Andrew wasn’t trying to hurt her feelings. He was just teasing. And this had been the *point* of eating with Kai. Give him the opportunity to see who she really was—*clumsy*, that voice whispered, and *plain*—and he would stop making her feel special. Once he started treating Naomi the way everyone else did, she could go back to *pretending* to like him, instead of actually doing so.

Still, somehow, now that the time had arrived... She didn’t want it to happen.

She glared at her cousin. “Damare.” It came out a hiss.

“Sometimes,” Andrew says, “she doesn’t just drop the rice. She drops the whole bowl.”

“Oh, for the love of—” She cut herself off. This was the *point*. He was *supposed* to join in. He was *supposed* to make fun of her.

Kai looked between them just once. Then he reached out and took her rice bowl from her hand. She was so surprised she didn't protest. The bowl was smaller in his hands; he hefted it, turning it around, before handing it back to her.

"Occidental bowls," he said with the dire expression of a farmer who had just discovered that blight had taken his entire crop. "When your parents bought the inn, it came with these bowls, didn't it?"

"I think so?" Andrew looked puzzled. "I was a baby then."

"If your cousin is less than graceful, it's because of these." He handed Naomi her bowl back.

"Western bowls?" Andrew frowned. "Now you sound like my aunt. 'It's the bowls, not me.' Naomi's just clumsy."

"She's not clumsy at anything else." Kai turned to her. "The bowls are too big for her hands. Among other things."

"It's true," Andrew said. "Naomi is excessively diminutive."

Oh, good. Another thing she was conscious about. Naomi smiled at her cousin through her teeth. "Black is my favorite color," she informed him in Japanese. "When you disappear without a trace, I'll flaunt it, Western fashion."

"She is exactly the right size," Kai said, ignoring Naomi's hissed remark. "Western dishes aren't meant to be held. They sit on a table as decoration. They're a shield for the tablecloth." He frowned. "Maybe a sanitary measure. They're either too heavy"—here, he tilted his head at the bowl in front of him—"or they're too dainty, unable to hold hot foods without burning your hand if you lift it. This is a British soup dish." He nodded at Naomi's rice bowls. "It's the wrong thing. A rice bowl is a *utensil*. It's not just a dish."

Andrew stared at Kai in surprise. "Do tell."

"Naomi doesn't have a clumsiness problem. She has a pottery problem."

Andrew frowned. "I'm not sure I understand."

“Of course not. You’ve lived with these since you were a baby. How would you know what it’s supposed to be like?” He was warming to the conversation.

Kai was so serious and so steady, without a hint of performance to his words. She had to remember that about him, that he could act as if he were defending her, without even a trace of awkwardness. “I may be a newcomer, but I’ve seen her with bandages and unguents. She’s very good with her hands. She just doesn’t have the right tools.”

“Too sweet,” Andrew muttered in Japanese.

Naomi smiled brightly. “Isn’t my fiancé the best?”

Behind Kai, Andrew rolled his eyes. “That’s why I worry. Fraud is often sweet.” He was still speaking Japanese.

It didn’t matter that Kai didn’t understand. It was one thing for them to taunt each *other* in a language that her fake fiancé couldn’t understand. It was quite another to taunt *him*. She’d promised to protect Kai, and she was going to do it.

She shook her head at her cousin fiercely. “Not allowed.”

Andrew let out a long breath. “Naomi.”

Andrew was trying to protect her, trying to remind her that Kai could be a liar. But Naomi already knew that.

“I mean it,” Naomi said in Japanese. “That’s a line we don’t cross. You want to talk about *me* in Japanese, fine. But don’t be rude to him.”

Their eyes met. Kai looked back and forth between them, as if wondering what he’d done wrong.

“Understood.” Andrew saluted her. “Enjoy your dinner.”

She nodded at him. “I’m glad we agree.”

WITHOUT ANDREW AROUND, THE MEAL PROCEEDED WITH... well, Naomi could not say it proceeded with more grace. She

still dropped spinach (this time on the linen) and a piece of pork. But it proceeded with more fluidity.

“Thank you for saying that just now,” Naomi said as they finished the last of the bean sprouts. “It wasn’t necessary.” In fact, it had been counterproductive. “My cousin and I love each other. We needle each other all the time. I suppose he thought it would be fun to tease me in front of you. But I didn’t need such a vigorous defense.”

He looked blankly at her.

“Truly,” Naomi said, “you don’t need to play the protective fiancé quite so well. I can handle myself.” *Clumsy*, she thought, *clumsy and plain and odd. Say it and I’ll stop.*

He let out a sigh and pitched his voice low. “We don’t know much about each other, so you probably haven’t learned this yet. I don’t need an excuse to talk about pottery. In fact, you are not capable of *stopping* me from having opinions about pottery.”

“Oh.” Her heart thumped. “You...meant what you said?”

“I won’t say that I never lie about pottery. But I wouldn’t do it casually.” He picked up a piece of pork and frowned at her. “Does it bother you, that the bowl is ungainly?”

The *bowl* was ungainly? Not her? Naomi didn’t know how to think about that.

“I guess you’d find out that I was clumsy at meals sooner rather than later.” She made herself laugh and give his shoulder a friendly nudge. “Besides, it’s not like I have to impress you anyway.”

“I wasn’t asking if you minded that I knew. I was asking if it bothered you that your cousin thinks you’re clumsy.”

“Everyone *knows* I’m clumsy.” Naomi set down the bowl. “It’s just the truth.”

He steepled his fingers and looked at her. There was nothing skeptical in his expression, and still it felt that he could *see* her, that he could see her thoughts—*clumsy, plain*—writ in her eyes.

“It used to when I was younger,” she found herself saying. “Once, someone made a truly unkind comment about it. It stung a little, but of course it no longer bothers me.” She gave him her sunniest impression of a woman who definitely did not remember harsh things that had been said once. “But it hardly matters. I’m not the sort of person who would let a pointed remark rankle for six and a half years.”

He still did not look skeptical. Nonetheless there was something in his expression that reminded him of their first conversation, when he’d told her she was awful at lying. Perhaps remembering the exact number of years that had passed was not the sort of detail she should have included?

“What did this person say?” he asked mildly.

“Oh, you know.” It truly didn’t bother Naomi again. It didn’t. “Just that I was plain and clumsy and I shouldn’t expect anyone to ever love me. Just like my mother.”

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

“It’s not as if I took those words to heart or any such foolish thing!” Naomi laughed. She seemed to be laughing quite a bit in this conversation. It all sounded painfully flat to her ears.

Still Kai didn’t call her a liar. He also didn’t rush to comfort her with false platitudes. No, Naomi, you’re not plain. You’re not clumsy. She wouldn’t have believed him if he’d said those words. And they would make her feel worse, because those things *were* true. She knew it.

Instead he sat there, unspeaking, letting her feel those feelings without telling her how she should feel.

It *did* hurt, but it hurt the way an old fracture might ache with an oncoming storm. She’d accepted those truths.

Still, Kai didn’t say anything. Instead, he reached over and gently touched her shoulder with his fingertips. It was a quick, quiet touch—almost nothing. Still, she felt it in a thrill that raced all the way down to her toes.

If Naomi ever married, this was what she would want. Someone who listened, who let Naomi lie when her pride

demanded it, someone who gave her simple comfort and...

Oh. No. Bad thoughts.

Naomi pulled away. "Well. That was a mistake."

He gave her a questioning look.

"Maybe we shouldn't know more about each other," she said. "Maybe we should try very hard not to know one another. We should talk about nothing."

"Zero," he replied gravely.

"Nill."

He picked up his rice bowl. "We'll just engage in lengthy conversations to fool other people. They'll never know that our words will be filled with a complete absence of content."

"Precisely! Well—" She cut herself off, then put her head in her hand. "Useless. It's useless. I like you even when you're saying nothing."

Then she found herself blushing. There it was. She'd stepped in it now. Now Kai would remind her this was fake. *Now* he would put her in her place.

"That seems fair," he said slowly. "I like you even when you're lying atrociously."

His eyes were dark—so dark—yet looking into them, she could see so many colors. Flecks of amber, dark velvet, the brown of tea. Her mouth felt dry.

She'd once read a book that talked about disappearing into a man's eyes. She'd always wondered: why? Why would anyone want that? Did not women disappear enough?

By contrast, she could almost see her reflection in miniature in his eyes—not disappearing, but staying there, steady as she herself was.

"We need to stop," she heard herself murmur. "I am trying very hard not to like you."

"Why?" His voice was low as velvet.

"It will hurt when this ends."

He lowered his voice. “That’s all right. Lies are supposed to hurt.”

She looked over at him. “One of your rules?”

“Rule minus one. Rule eight never was possible for me, as you may recall. I *always* have feelings. This is what I came up with instead: If you aren’t willing to be hurt by your own lie, you shouldn’t tell it.”

She took this in. “I didn’t realize lying had ethics.”

“It should,” Kai said quietly. “I think we continue on just like this. We like each other. Nothing will come of it. And yes, when this ends, we’ll both hurt a little bit. What else is there to do?”

ON THE TUESDAY AFTER THE FIRST AMBULANCE CLASS, KAI made his way to the inn. He had had been invited—if telling him repeatedly in an expectant tone of voice was an “invitation”—to come when the younger members of Wedgeford met.

Now he was here, standing in the inn’s main room. The other young people looked cozy and friendly sitting together. And Kai felt rather like an intruder standing near the door to the inn, probably because he was one.

“No need for carbolic acid,” Kai heard Naomi murmur, holding another woman’s hand. “It didn’t break the skin.”

Sally Kam gave Naomi a pointed look. She sat across the bench from Naomi, stripped of her gloves, her fingers spread wide.

“Yes,” Mrs. Kam said slowly. “I dropped a piece of wood on my hand from a height of one foot. It’s barely even red.”

“A little bruising, perhaps?” Naomi’s reply should not have sounded so hopeful. “So I think perhaps I should apply —”

“Could it be?” Andrew interrupted.

“No.” Sally shook her head. “Not that.”

“Hold very still, darling,” Kam Ming laughed. “It’s time for—”

“An unguent!” All three proclaimed in concert.

Naomi made an annoyed face. “You’re all very funny.”

“Lock up your cuts and contusions,” Andrew replied. “Naomi is here, and she *will* see to your wounds.”

Naomi gave him an unamused look. “Even the smallest wound can fester. It’s no joking matter.”

“I had the world’s tiniest splinter,” Mrs. Gigone said next to them. “Now look what fate has befallen me.” She held up a hand, revealing a trim, white bandage.

Naomi sniffed. “And now you have no splinter. You can thank me when you don’t lose your hand to putrefaction.”

“Yes, yes,” Kouwei said, “we’re all grateful for the continued use of our limbs. Chloe’s coming back tomorrow, I hear. Perhaps she’ll have a papercut.”

Everyone laughed at that, and Naomi huffed. She saw Kai standing several yards away and her expression lifted into a smile. He couldn’t help but feel it wash over him like a spill of sunshine.

“What are you doing over there?” She motioned. “Come. Sit.”

Everyone turned to him. Kai could feel the temperature in the room change. Andrew tensed slightly. Kam Ming shifted closer to Sally, with a protective air. Kouwei and Marie froze for a moment.

This was why Kai hadn’t wanted to come. He hated that horrific, awkward split second where everyone’s true feelings about him shone through for a moment.

Andrew came back to himself first.

“Liu-go.” Being called *brother* was warm and affectionate, and still it seemed forced. Andrew grinned a little too broadly. “You are precisely what this situation calls for: a new victim. Have you perhaps lightly scraped yourself with a brick today? Do you have a wound for our dear Naomi to treat?”

“No lesion too small,” Kam Ming intoned. “That’s our motto here.”

“Yes,” Naomi said with a little sigh. “I am unaccountably intolerant of gangrene in my friends and fiancés.”

She looked at Kai, her eyes moving slowly down, then up. If he didn’t know she was searching him for damage, that slow gaze, coupled with the pinking of her cheeks and the shortening of her breath would have felt almost intimate.

“My apologies,” Kai said. “I’ve been mixing clay all day. There’s no possibility of abrasions, bumps, or dislocations.”

“We haven’t covered dislocations yet,” she said with a sigh. Still she stood up, slipped out from behind the bench, and took his hand.

His breath stopped. In front of everyone?

She took off his glove with short, practiced tugs at the fingertips, and brought his fingers up to her face. “As I thought. You are incorrect.” She tapped his palm.

Kai stared at his unblemished skin. She was holding his hand. In front of everyone. Her touch was light and warm and admittedly medical, and still he couldn’t stop staring at her.

“I don’t see anything.”

She raised an eyebrow and pointed at his hand. “Your skin,” she said in accusatory tones, “is drying.”

“I’m working with clay. Of course it is.”

“Dry skin can crack,” Naomi replied. Mercifully—horribly—she let go of his hand. “Cracked skin can infect. And you know what *that* means.”

Kai shook his head, then realized he was still standing with his hand held out like a puppy eager to shake. He dropped it hastily.

“Liu-go,” Ming said, “you are engaged to our Naomi. How can you *not* know?”

“You need—” Andrew started.

“An unguent!” Everyone else finished in unison.

“No.” Naomi folded her arms. “You’re all so quick to make fun, but you’re wrong. He needs a salve.”

This was met with a long moment of silence.

Then: “You are having us on,” Kouwei said. “Those are the exact same thing.”

“Unguents have therapeutic effect,” Kai heard himself recite. “Salves are for soothing.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“I attend the class, too,” Kai said. “Don’t look so shocked.”

“And you’re paying attention?” Andrew asked. “I think I would simply lose consciousness at the point where they distinguished unguents from salves, balms, and ointments.”

To be fair, Kai only remembered it because he’d been so charmed watching Naomi take notes. She’d made a little chart as the doctor had spoken.

“I’ve only tried my salves on family,” Naomi said, ignoring everything. “Ooh, I know! I’ll bring them all down. This is excellent.” She left skipping.

Sally looked at Kai. “You don’t mind her touching other men?”

“It’s medicinal.”

“It’s touching, though.” That came from Ming.

“You sound as bad as the bureaucrats at the class registration.” Kai rolled his eyes. “She enjoys it. It’s not as if I’m well-versed in the standards for female behavior, but if the standards don’t include my fiancée being happy, what good are the standards?”

Everyone at the table exchanged unreadable glances.

“I have them!” Naomi said. She came back into the room at a near run.

The people here in Wedgefords were never going to like Kai, and it didn’t matter because he was leaving. What did

matter was—

“Also,” Kai said, low enough for Naomi to not catch his words as she approached, “stop making fun of her because she’s excited about what she’s doing.”

“Huh.” Kam Ming stared at Kai. “Given the amount of time that passed between your meeting and your betrothal, I had not pegged you for the...ah, how do I say this? *That* kind of husband.”

What kind of horrible husbands had Naomi’s friends imagined for her? He was a fake, and he was already annoyed by their low standards.

“If I don’t protect her happiness, what’s the point of us marrying?”

There was no chance for anyone to respond. Naomi bounded up to the table and unloaded a rag-tag collection of metal and glass containers onto the surface.

“Salves!” she exclaimed with delight. “You have choices. Lavender, calendula, lemon balm, and sage. Choose one.”

“You choose.”

“Ooh.” She picked up a metal tin, then put it down, then picked up a glass jar, before reaching back for the metal tin. “Can I do one hand in each of these? Just to see if there’s a perceptible difference?”

“Well...” What was he going to say to that. No? She *was* happy. There was almost a glow to her.

Plain, she’d told him, and *clumsy*, and *not the kind of woman men lost their heads about*.

Anyone who thought her plain had not seen her aglow like this.

“If you do one hand in each,” he said slowly, “I won’t be able to rub it in myself without contaminating the experiment.”

“Oh.” Hesitantly, she considers this. “I...can do that for you.”

“I, ah.” He had just said her touch was medicinal. He couldn’t object. He didn’t even want to.

So, she sat on the bench next to him and took his hand. The smell of lavender infused the room when she opened the tin.

“I made these myself,” she said, taking his hand. “They’re a little gritty. My apologies.”

“No grittier than clay.”

She got a dollop of salve and set it on his lifeline.

Kai tried not to let any expression show. He could feel the salve melting where she placed it. Then she set her fingertips on him. That light touch shivered up his senses. There was nothing affectionate about it, but still the intimacy of it ached. He willed his muscles to release, willed his face to show nothing. That left no will to order his heart around. Left to its own devices, it beat at a rabbit’s pace.

Naomi would have been his wife if his father hadn’t...been his father.

“Should we leave you to it?” Kam Ming said. Maybe he wasn’t joking.

“Don’t be so odd,” Naomi said, rubbing the salve between his fingers. “This is normal. I’d do it for anyone.”

This could have been normal. Her fingers traveling over his palm seemed a reminder of everything he wouldn’t have. Sweetness. Softness. Solace.

All of it was a sham.

“Hands are *important*,” Naomi said in a vexed tone of voice. “You have to take better care of yourself.”

“I’ve got by so far.”

“All good luck comes to an end. Stop ignoring your needs.”

Kai made a skeptical noise. It was all he could manage. The light brush of her salve-coated fingers...

Sometimes, when his apprenticeship had been difficult and he'd wanted to surrender, he'd reminded himself of his dreams. A regular life. An honest trade. A family who cared for him.

All of that had seemed impossible to a boy raised on lies. Now, Naomi's care sunk into his skin alongside the salve.

Finally, she tapped his hand to signal that she'd finished, before putting away the salve in the glass jar and replacing it with a tin imprinted with the fading painting of a woman's face surrounded by pink roses. She opened this up to an astringent herbal smell.

"Other hand." She took it before he could respond.

For years, Kai had thought his real life would start once he was finally able to fix what had happened in Wedgeford. Time had passed, long stretches of just getting by without feeling as if he were present in his own skin. *Once I'm done*, he had promised himself. *Once I'm done, then I can have something real.*

He'd met Naomi five months too early, and she lived in the one place he could never stay.

All of Wedgeford took her for granted. She was here every day, listening to everyone's complaints, bringing them food and drink, removing their splinters. Nobody ever noticed when their limb *didn't* putrefy. They just took their continued health for granted.

Everything between them was fake—their engagement, the quick dart of her eyes to his. Everything between them was real. If things had been different, she would have been his. What they were stood in some liminal twilight between truth and lies.

For a moment, Kai grappled with it all—what he was, who he was supposed to be. And then he realized that it was simple after all.

Kai had come to Wedgeford determined to never accept a single thing without compensation. He was a liar and a fraud,

but he was no leech who would accept her care without giving his own in return.

If he was only ever going to be her fake fiancé, he would be the best fake fiancé he could. He didn't know much about relationships. Truthfully, he knew little about anything except lying and pottery.

But here, with her hand on his, he could take the measure of her. He knew her kindness.

Most importantly of all, he could ascertain the precise span of her hand, from the joint of her thumb to the top of her pinky.

Kai had come to Wedgeford to build one final lie out of clay. But thinking about Naomi, about who she was and what she deserved, he realized he wanted something more.

Maybe, just maybe, he could also use his pottery to tell the truth.

UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, WHEN NAOMI HEARD THAT her best friend in the entire world had returned to Wedgeford after a months-long trip, she would have gone over at the first possible opportunity to hear every detail that hadn't arrived by letter. That meant that under these decidedly strange and lopsided circumstances, Naomi had to go over at the first possible opportunity so she could pretend that nothing had changed.

Naomi had managed to fool her cousin. She'd managed to fool her parents. Surely Chloe Fong would be as simple.

All Naomi had to do was imagine everything that she would do if she were *not* lying to her best friend and do exactly that.

"Oh, good," Chloe said, as she opened the door to Naomi's knock. A scene of chaos reigned behind her. Chests, plural, stood open in the front room of her huge home. Various colored heaps of fabric were scattered about. "You came at the right time. This means I can mark you off my list."

"What's next on your list? I can help."

"Unpacking my trunks." Chloe looked beleaguered by this simple task. "I had to have *gowns* made. So many gowns. I left most of them in London—what use do I have for them here?—but in case some of Jeremy's fancy guests arrive..." She gestured behind her. "Apparently, I'm supposed to hire a maid here? It feels odd to tell a childhood friend to serve me for money. And Miranda, my maid in London, thought I would

need..." She gestured. "All of this. For *Wedgeford*. I'm overwhelmed."

"Then let's manage." Naomi smiled at her. "Where's Jeremy?"

"London still," Chloe said with a sigh. "Some political thing about calling for a general election? I was there for part of it. I had to host. It was awful. I told him no more and decamped. Am I bad for that?"

"You agreed," Naomi said. "He knew what he was getting, and he loves it, too. So no. You are not."

To Wedgeford, Jeremy was the child who had started coming to the Trials years ago. He'd been obviously wealthy and even more obviously half-Chinese. He'd been polite and overly conscious of himself and desperately, desperately interested in everything to do with the village. Naomi's parents had talked about him sometime in those earlier years: it was obvious that whoever was raising him didn't know anything of his culture.

If Jeremy had wanted to pretend to not be himself in order to learn what he should have known as a birthright, well, Wedgeford wasn't going to stop him.

Naomi had never begrudged her friend her fairytale love, in part because having a husband who was a half-Chinese duke meant enduring a combination of jealousy, flattery, and back-handed compliments everywhere other than Wedgeford.

"Sooo," Chloe said, after they'd taken the first trunk upstairs. "Anything interesting going on?" The way she asked the question itself was casual. Suspiciously casual. Chloe shook out a purple silk gown and held it up, as if to screen her expression from view.

Naomi hung the shawl she took from the trunk on a hook, before crossing to the table and picking up the list that Chloe had started for the day.

"Four," she read aloud. "Interrogate Naomi about her engagement. Really, Chloe. At least *try* to be subtle."

Chloe let out a little laugh. “Caught by my own list! Well. I heard it from Mr. Bei when he brought me in last night. He’s friendly with your fiancé.”

“That old man. What a gossip.”

“Mmm.” Chloe was obviously trying to sound sympathetic. “He was trying so hard not to look like he was pressing me for information. Then Mrs. Tottenham stopped me two steps after I got out of the cart and put me through an *inquisition*. I had no idea what to say that wouldn’t upset...ah, whatever could be upset.”

Naomi felt her nose wrinkling.

Chloe grabbed her hand. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m genuinely happy for you if you’re happy for yourself. It’s just that you swore you would never get married. I’m gone for a month and the first thing I hear when I return is that even though I’ve had three letters from you, you’re engaged to a man I didn’t know existed. More than that, you’re telling everyone it’s real and including him in things and something something about his father and fraud? It’s a lot. You know how Mrs. Tottenham is. ‘Surely you can tell me the *real* truth.’”

Even Naomi’s desire to hide from questioning could not overwhelm her curiosity. “What did you say to Mrs. Tottenham?”

“I looked at her like *this*.” Chloe took her spectacles from her pocket and set them low on her nose, squinting over the edge. “And I said, ‘Are you implying that Naomi Kwan is *prevaricating*?’”

Naomi smiled.

“It’s none of their business. You don’t owe anyone the *real* truth. Except me, that is. Me, you have to tell. Who is this man? How did you get engaged? What’s he like?”

“It’s complicated,” Naomi started.

“Perfect. We have a great deal to do. I love complicated.”

Naomi tried to imagine explaining it. The first part would be easy—embarrassing, yes, but easy. *So, I took him along to*

registration because I believed he did not speak English, and then when I needed to invent a fiancé, he was right there.

But if she told Chloe the truth, Chloe would be suspicious of Kai. And the *next* time the Mrs. Tottenhams of Wedgeford confronted her, she might not be so direct in her answer.

Kai's rules were right. If she told anyone the engagement was a lie, Kai *would* have a credibility problem.

"Right." Naomi winced. "So. I haven't told anyone the full story because, to be frank, it doesn't make me look good. Please don't repeat a word."

Chloe smiled. "You have my utmost assurances of silence." She took out another gown, this one white with gold thread embroidery. "Look at this. Jeremy promised me I wouldn't have to do anything I didn't want. One visit to the modiste, though, under the auspices of his aunt, and *this* happened."

"It's pretty," Naomi said dubiously. It would be. For someone else.

"When would I *wear* it? It makes me think of a gaudy shroud. And can you imagine how sauce would stain this?" Chloe shook her head and shoved it in the back of the wardrobe. "There. Problem solved for now. Please continue."

"So you know I registered for my ambulance classes."

Chloe nodded, her eyes bright.

"I ran into Kai in Dover entirely on accident. I demanded he come along. I didn't realize he spoke English." Naomi found her whole face flushing. "They put up some kind of nonsense objection about me needing a man, so I told them he was my fiancé."

Chloe's eyes rounded. "So the engagement's not real?"

"Oh no. It is." Naomi had to start with the truth, or she'd never make the lies believable. "Mr. I-Thought-He-Didn't-Speak-English answered them. Fluently. I was kind of in a panic on the way home, trying to figure out the whole falsely

affianced thing, and he just asked me why it shouldn't be real."

"Bold of him." Chloe blew out a breath. "I understand why he would—it's not like Chinese women are in such enormous supply out here—but Naomi, you deserve to be wooed. Courted. Just a little bit, you know. I thought you believed that."

"He did." Naomi said the words slowly.

"Oh?"

Here it became tricky—lying to her friend by telling her as much of the truth as she dared. "He told me about his father, who robbed Wedgeford blind when Kai was a child. Everyone judged him for it then, and they still do now. And you'd think he would be bitter or angry, but he's not. He's very, very kind."

"Mmm." Chloe sounded doubtful. "Is he not like his father, then?"

"Is it so much to believe that a person would not grow into their parent? That we can be different, that we don't have to make their mistakes?" Her throat felt hoarse just saying those words.

Chloe looked at Naomi. She didn't say anything, not for a long moment. She didn't have to.

It wasn't often that Naomi talked about her deepest fears. But Chloe knew what made Naomi flinch, and *well, aren't you just so much like your mother* was one of those compliments that always reduced Naomi to a puddle of despair.

"I can see how you would, ah..." Chloe bit her lip. "How you might find yourself...in sympathy with him." Her pauses said everything.

"It's not that."

Chloe just gazed at her.

"Have it your way. It *is* that. But it's more than that. He's the first person who has ever wanted to marry me who saw *me*. Who saw what *I* wanted, who thought of what he could do for

me and not just what I could do for him.” Naomi swiped at her eyes. “I *know* I’m not going to have someone fall madly in love with me at a glance. Isn’t it enough that someone sees me well enough to like me?”

“Naomi.” Chloe looked at her with sad eyes.

“Stop.” Naomi sniffled. “Stop pitying me. I told him we were going to have a long engagement. I told him that he was going to have to court me. That we would have to see if we suited. I’m not going to be stupid about this. I *am* rational. But I *like* him.”

She was doing too good a job of convincing Chloe that their engagement was real. She’d felt it, when she said that she liked him—felt a warm, intense feeling in her chest, something that usually signaled that her words were not merely truthful but meant from her heart.

And they were. She’d known how she felt for days, but somehow, telling her best friend about it gave her feelings solidity. She liked Kai. Not just as a person. Not as a co-conspirator. She *liked* him. He said everything she needed, and when had any man seen her as a person with needs of her own instead of someone put on earth to meet his requirements?

She liked him, and she wanted him to like her back.

Chloe reached out and gently took her hands. “What is that horrified face for?”

Naomi shook her head. “I just want him to like me as much as I like him.”

“And you think he doesn’t?”

How could he? He’d said something to that effect, but they were faking, and he had rules for lying. Naomi shut her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“Have you tried asking him?”

“*Please.*” Naomi winced. “As if I were *twelve*? ‘Do you like me?’ No. I could never.”

“Is open and honest communication the sole province of twelve-year-olds?”

“Not like *that*.”

“You have to communicate if you’re married, you know,” Chloe lectured. “You can’t just sit there and stew in your feelings without saying anything.”

That made it worse. Naomi *had* said something. She regretted every word. And she couldn’t say that now.

“You would know.” The words were snippier than Naomi intended. “How many years did Jeremy come to Wedgeford without expressing himself?”

“I would know for precisely that reason,” Chloe told her, without missing a beat. “What are friends for, if not to learn from each other’s mistakes?”

The concept sounded awful. Just terrible. Telling him? With words? She’d said she liked him, but she hadn’t said that she *liked* him. The difference in emphasis was everything.

What if he laughed at her? What if he said he would never like a plain, clumsy thing like her in that way? Their entire engagement was an illusion. Why would she want to dispel it?

“If you are so set on open and honest communication, will you tell Jeremy to have his aunt restrain herself at the modiste?”

“Your point is taken. Yes, I will. It’s partially my fault. I didn’t want to spend time *thinking* about what to order. I had no idea what to ask for, so I left it up to her. But this?” She shook the seventh gown she had to hang. “All of this deeply impractical clothing is absolutely ridiculous.”

“Speaking of marriage and Jeremy!” Naomi forced herself to smile. “This last month was the first time since you married that your father *hasn’t* been present in your household.” She wagged her eyebrows. “How did that go? Did you get much practice?”

Chloe’s cheeks turned bright red. “Why would we need practice? We’ve had practically a year to do so. At this point, we’re practically experts...” She stopped, perhaps realizing what she had just said.

Naomi felt absolutely scandalized by this revelation. “But you haven’t been married even close to a year!”

“I said nothing!” Chloe clapped her hands over her mouth as if to emphasize this.

“Chloe! You naughty, naughty girl! I’m so proud of you. By how much did you anticipate the wedding?”

Chloe hunched over and hid her face. “Four months?”

“Four months! But you had that *ridiculous* gown made. What if it hadn’t fit?”

“Oh, believe me, I worried about it. Especially because the first few times we were not as careful as we could have been.”

“Fascinating. You’re always so proper. Please do tell.”

Chloe looked up, peering through her fingers. “I went to Madame Lee in a panic in June because my courses were late.”

“Did she fix you up again?”

“It was just nerves, she said. I didn’t need medicine. But she did berate me. Nothing herbal she could give me was safe or truly effective at releasing menses.”

“And so after that, you waited?”

“Ah.” Chloe squeezed her eyes shut. “Not really? She told us to utilize condoms.”

“What are those?”

Chloe sat up straight. “That’s what I said! Nobody ever tells women *anything* they need to know. Condoms are these rubber things that fit over the end of a man’s...” Chloe made a hand gesture that bordered on the obscene. “They catch, um, male emissions.”

Naomi blinked at her. “You’re telling me that you can have intercourse and *not* get pregnant?”

“It’s not perfectly effective either. But it’s safe, and it’s a *lot* more effective than pennyroyal. In any event, we had a *lot* of practice.”

“I see.”

Naomi must have said that with the exact wrong emphasis, because Chloe leaned closer. “Let me know if you need any information.”

Naomi had tried very, very hard not to think of anything like *that* involving her fake fiancé. She knew he was leaving, and she didn’t want to be left with child.

“No,” she said slowly. “Not...yet.”

But...maybe... If there was an option...

This was bad information. Very bad information.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Chloe whispered.

“Hush.” Naomi shut her eyes. “I’m not thinking it. I’m not.”

“Of course you aren’t,” Chloe said, in a tone that said she was humoring Naomi. “You’re a good girl.”

“Precisely,” Naomi reminded herself.

“Just like me,” Chloe added with a laugh.

THE GO BOARD WAS SET UP BETWEEN KAI AND MR. BEI. Flickering lamplight cast shifting shadows on the white and black stones.

It had been weeks since Kai had come to Wedgeford. His days had been filled with labor: patching holes in the wall of the climbing kiln, fixing the roof above it that provided the brick some shelter from the elements. He had set up his potter’s wheel and a system to manage clay and pots behind his house, and had started to mix clay to a glossy, even slip before letting it dry enough to work it.

During all of this, Mr. Bei—who was apparently one of those kinds who liked to take walks for the primary purpose of gossiping—had come by several times and harrumphed Kai’s

efforts. He'd also badgered Kai to come by for a game three times.

Kai's Go skills were passable. When he was younger, he'd had the sort of innate feel for the game that meant he usually defeated other children back when he'd been one himself. Lacking any real desire to master the game, however, he'd never really improved beyond those first childish victories.

Mr. Bei had received him kindly this afternoon. He'd put water on to boil, served him a cup once the kettle was whistling, and gleefully laid out the board. He had then proceeded to wallop Kai.

This wasn't the kind of match where Kai could defend himself by saying he put up a good fight; it was the kind where every move, no matter how carefully he thought about it, ended up being exactly the thing that his opponent wanted.

Mr. Bei laughed in delight as he placed a white stone, surrounding Kai's last stand of sad blacks. "You're losing so much. I love it."

"I think I might have done better if I had resigned at the first move."

"Mm." It was a sound of glee, rather than commiseration. "I think I'm going to spot you four stones for the next game."

"That's embarrassing."

"Ha! It is! You should be ashamed of how bad you are." Mr. Bei grinned and stroked his chin. "This is how I know you aren't your father."

Kai's heart gave a wild thump.

"He would never admit to being embarrassed. When I beat him at Go, he would always try and change the subject to something that would make me angry."

"Such as?"

"You know the sort of thing. Insulting my limp or my home or my face or my mustache." Mr. Bei said this as if it were normal.

“Ah.” Kai remembered that all too well. “He did have an uncanny ability to get people upset about the wrong thing. They would forget they had a real reason to be worked up.”

“Right. We’d have a terrible row, we’d make up, and the next thing I knew, I’d realize we never got around to finishing the game. I didn’t realize he was doing it on purpose until, ah —” He glanced up at Kai. “There I go again. Maybe I’m as bad as he was. I’m insulting your family.”

“Truth is not an insult.”

“Wrong.” Mr. Bei pressed his palm against the table with such force that the stones shook. “Truth is the *ultimate* insult. There’s nothing that riles people up like reminding them of something they’re trying to ignore.”

Kai picked up the mug of hot water that Mr. Bei had poured for him when he first sat down. “It won’t work on me.” He took a sip, then wrinkled his nose. The edge of the cup—but no, now was not the time for that.

“No? There has to be something that makes you angry.”

Kai was not about to defend his father. “I’m a simple fellow. There’s not much to me except a kiln and some clay.” Kai took another sip of hot water. “But if I were going to insult you, it would be about this.” He tapped the cup.

“The water?” Mr. Bei looked surprised. “I always thought the Wedgeford water was good.”

“The cup.” He held it out. “Whoever made it had no idea what they were doing. You have to think about a vessel’s purpose, about the person who’s holding it. But this is too big to fit in my hand, let alone yours. The walls of the cup and the base are thin throughout, but it’s intended to hold a hot drink. You’ll scorch your hand with a cup like this. And the lip angles just so, so when you drink from it, the water dribbles around the edge. And I haven’t begun to speak of the glazing—unevenly applied, not fired long enough—” Kai broke off. “It’s a bad cup. I hate it. Whoever made it should be barred from a pottery wheel for life in punishment.”

Mr. Bei clicked his tongue. “Don’t you know who made it?”

“Don’t tell me.” Kai drained the last of his water and flipped the cup upside down, revealing the maker’s stamp on the bottom.

Liu Bai Li, it read.

It was surprising that after all this time, Kai could find a new way to be angry at his father. But there it was. His father’s business name, scratched into the bottom of a cup that was a half-step above beginner’s work. How had anyone believed that this man could rediscover the art of Jian Zhan? Any potter would have known him for a fraud immediately.

“Of course. Of *course*. He’s not even competent at making a basic drinking vessel.” Kai set the cup back on the edge of the board.

Mr. Bei watched him. “And you are?”

“I have some small amount of skill. More than *this*.” Kai put his thoughts in order. “Enough to have trained properly. First you make ordinary household goods. Then you make ordinary household goods without flaw. Finally, you make ordinary household goods perfectly every time you make them. That’s how you *learn*. Anything else is just rubbish.”

“You’re very particular.” Mr. Bei eyed him with something that bordered on amusement.

“If something’s going to be done, it should be done *properly*. What is the use going around the world making slapdash goods? What are you even *doing* with your life, if you don’t produce at least one perfect thing in your time here?”

Mr. Bei just shook his head. “It must be hard being a youth these days. Those are rigorous standards.”

Kai looked up from the cup to glare at the man. “I hope you don’t feel sorry for me.”

“Why would I? It was hard for me, too, you know. My grandfather was a farmer. My father was a farmer. I was going

to be a farmer. I complained about it. Constantly. When I was your age, I did not want to be a farmer! I wanted *anything* except that. Then, peng! A war happened, armies were everywhere, bandits were everywhere. And I no longer had the choice to be a farmer. I could choose ten thousand other things, but farmer? No.”

“I suppose you’ll say that turned out to be a stroke of luck.”

“No,” Mr. Bei said simply. “Choice is nice when you’re choosing between two things you want. But choosing which soul-grinding way you’ll destroy your body in order to live? If you’re a farmer because that’s all you can be, you can curse fate. But if you had a choice? That’s worse.” He shook his head. “With a choice, it’s always your fault. You chose the wrong door out of the five hundred offered to you. And until you start talking to people who have gone through those other doors, you never see that the choice was a lie. All the doors have the same outcome. Choice just means it’s your fault.”

Kai had often wondered what it would be like to be able to choose his path. To be able to decide what he was doing with his life, instead of having his future mapped out for him, a single impossible path.

What would he have done?

For a second, he imagined himself growing up in Wedgeford. No shame. No burning pit of hatred for what his father had made of their family name. Just...choice.

Without the burning drive to change, he might have held this inferior cup and believed it satisfactory. Kai never pretended to be concerned with right and wrong, but he’d devoted himself assiduously to the practice of beauty. Would he even have known it, if he’d not been pushed into it?

If he’d just been a regular fellow in Wedgeford, Kai would have grown up knowing that he would marry Naomi.

She was not pretty at first glance. If he had thought her his without any effort, would he have valued her as she deserved, or resented what he *had* to do?

He didn't have her. All he possessed was an echo of what they might have been, a fraud made where a marriage might instead have bloomed. But with the not-having came an appreciation of what he could otherwise have missed.

He'd felt it the first time they'd met, seeing the fire in her as she tried to register for classes she needed.

Respect. He respected her on a deep, almost desperate level. Nobody here could see what she did, who she was, because nobody here had gone *without* the way Kai did.

To him, his fake engagement with Naomi felt like the moment when he pushed a cone of clay on the wheel into his hands, imperfect bumps flowing into perfect, centered symmetry. That moment always felt like some kind of perfection. It was the point when clay stood in transition between mud and masterpiece.

So simple, and yet without that initial perfect harmony, a wheel was just a tool for misshapen lumps. He was going to have to scrape this clay off the wheel without making anything of it, but he could steel feel the pull of possibility.

Would Kai have understood that Naomi was a treasure if he'd thought her a sure thing? He wasn't sure he would have. Kai might have had Naomi, and Kai might never have valued her.

Instead, the one perfect thing Kai planned to make of his life was a fraud. A perfect fraud, a beautiful fraud, one so stunningly audacious that he could only dream that it would come off as he'd hoped.

Everything and everyone else? Those were just reminders of what he couldn't have.

Still, he turned the cup around in his hands. "You should have better things," he muttered.

"I'll tell my sons the next time they visit." Mr. Bei gestured at the board. "It's your turn."

"What does it matter? I'm going to lose anyway."

“Of course you are. But if you manage to stay around for...oh, let’s say five more turns? I’ll tell everyone you beat me.”

“You will?”

Mr. Bei let out a cackle. “No, of course not. You can’t last more than four, but it’ll be fun to see you try.”

NAOMI'S MORNING DAWNED COLD AND BLUSTERY. MARCH HAD arrived, and with it, early rains. The Wedgeford Trials—a cross between a fair and a competition—would follow in the next month, and Naomi had much to do.

The next ambulance class was tomorrow. The inn's stores needed to be examined. Time could not be wasted.

Yet she found herself daydreaming as she mixed egg into her rice, watching the yolk swirl and dissolve, coating each grain.

Thoughts of Kai's hands kept intruding on her breakfast.

Which was *her* fault, because *she'd* come up with the clever idea of putting salve on his hands. Regularly.

She thought he'd been working hard when he was rebuilding the kiln. Now that he'd started producing pottery, though, she had to slip away in the afternoon just to find him to apply her salve. Which she still did, for the purpose of scientific inquiry.

She would walk up and sit in his outside work area for a few minutes, waiting for him to finish.

It turned out that watching a man at work did something to her. Something soft and yearning had taken residence alongside her vital organs.

The first time she'd watched him at the wheel, he'd silently pushed the clay up, up, into a smooth, round, peaked mountain, then somehow taken the head of it in his hand and

pushed the length of it down once more. Her mouth had dried. She'd thought of Chloe and the rubbers she'd mentioned. She'd thought of Kai's expert handling of what appeared to be a pillar of dark clay, raising it up and then doing *something* with his hands, pushing it down. There was something about a man handling a long, thick length of dark brown clay that made her itch from the inside. He was just so...proficient. With his hands. With his whole body, really—kicking the wheel to spin, leaning in, thighs and arms steady, his entire core solid as he made the clay do his bidding. It truly was not fair how utterly arresting the sight was.

Chloe and her stupid comment about condoms had not left Naomi's mind.

Kai would see her arrive, nod, bring his work to a finish, then rinse his hands and equipment in a barrel. Washing clay off was a messy business, but Naomi was a medical professional. She could apply salve without thinking impure thoughts.

Except... She was more medically adjacent than actually medical. And she was not really a professional. Maybe semi-professional. Professional-ish. If professionals had taken one three-hour class, with two more on the way.

At no time in that single course had anyone told her how to not feel things about her false fiancé's hands.

Naomi had thought things would get easier when he started to fire his work in the kiln. But *that* involved him moving great quantities of brick, plastering up the entrance, and stoking fires. When the fire burned out, the brick came down and the pots were removed. Kai examined the work that came out with care. Sometimes, when one didn't pass muster, he'd toss them with a great crack in a pile of rejects. The ones that survived this culling were dipped in a pot of thick, dark red liquid. He held them carefully, swirling them around with a practiced flick of his wrist. It was less suggestive.

A little bit. She couldn't help but notice the control in his hands, the steadiness. The size of them.

There was something about the practiced twist as he shook the glaze off that gave her the same feeling as the time a concert violinist had come to the Trials.

Three years ago, that virtuoso had taken out an instrument in the inn. Even before he played, he'd held it between chin and shoulder like an old lover. The quick movements of his hand as he tuned it before the fire had a certainty to them. Naomi had the sense that she was in the presence of a master, and she was about to hear something astonishing.

She hadn't seen a single completed work from Kai, and yet he reminded her of that violinist. Already she suspected that he was far, far better than the humble potter he claimed to be.

"Naomi?" her mother called. Naomi jumped in front of her cooling breakfast. Her mother came into the room.

"Why are you letting your rice get cold?"

"Wandering thoughts."

Her mother wrinkled a nose and pressed the back of her hand to the tea kettle. "Your water is cold, too. And why aren't you wearing a scarf? There's a draft."

The wind had the front door banging on its hinges. Through the windows, Naomi could see clouds scudding across the sky. Even the sun had a bite through the windowpanes. She was freezing, and she hadn't noticed because she'd been daydreaming about Kai's extremely capable hands.

She truly was ridiculous.

"Sorry, Haha." She stood up. "I wasn't paying attention. I'll go get...um...something."

"Arara." Her mother shook her head in dismay. "Take care of yourself." She put the kettle on again as Naomi went to the back to find a warm shrug and scarf.

Things had been...not exactly tense between them. They'd been distant, a little formal.

When Naomi returned, the kettle was going and Kai was standing at the entrance to the kitchen, a large wooden box in

his hands. And the air in the room felt even more restrained.

“Good morning, Naomi,” Kai said. The dark hair of his queue looked damp, as if he’d recently washed and rebraided it. He was wearing a dark shirt and trousers, very different from his typical brown working clothing. He had obviously gone to a great deal of effort to appear neat and tidy.

“You’re here very early.”

His hands flexed on the box. He shifted from foot to foot, as if unsure of his welcome.

Naomi smiled. “We don’t normally serve breakfast in the inn, but I can bring you some tea or water if you’d like. I’m sure there’s more rice.”

“Mr. Liu.” Her mother bowed her head at him. “We are just starting our day here. Naomi will be busy for another handful of hours.” There was a hint of warning in her voice.

Kai set the box on the floor, showing that it was full of... lumps of burlap?

Kai picked up one of those lumps. “I’ve come to ask a favor with regard to the inn.”

Her mother’s face underwent a transition from wary to what Naomi knew to be hostile. “Well, it’s not just *my* inn. I couldn’t make decisions on my own. Naomi, go get my sister.” There was a sharpness in her tone.

Naomi found her aunt in the storage room mending sheets.

“Kai is here. He wants to talk to you and Haha.”

Her aunt folded the sheet she was working on and came. Naomi caught the tail end of a conversation as she and her aunt came back in.

“—don’t expect to simply be granted your trust, Mrs. Kwan. I intend to earn it,” Kai was saying. “And—”

Naomi cleared her throat. “We’re here. Haha, please stop bullying my fiancé.”

“Your mother has reasonable concerns.” Kai shifted on his feet. “Reminding me of them is not bullying. But that’s neither

here nor there. Mrs. Kwan. Mrs. Uchida. Thank you for your attention. I have a favor to ask of you, and I apologize for my forwardness.”

“Now it comes,” her mother said in a low voice in Japanese.

Naomi gave her a look that she hoped communicated *stop being rude*.

Kai went on as if nothing had been said.

“I have spent the last weeks running some tests on the kiln. As a result, I have a vast quantity of excess pottery, and it would pose immense difficulty if I had to dispose of it on my own. It is presumptuous to offer you my humble attempts, but I noticed that your inn has only Western dishware. Perhaps you might make use of it.”

“Dishes in the Eastern style are very dear here,” her aunt murmured.

Kai acted as if he had not heard her. “It would be a great favor to me if you were to take these.” So saying, he unwrapped the burlap.

Inside sat a small, simple rice bowl. “They’re hard to break,” he said, “but they’re designed to be held. By mere chance, the glaze on this should match your Occidental dishes, while still appearing to be of different character.” He handed over the bowl to her mother with another bow. “If my poor tests would be of some small use to you, you would do me a great favor in removing them from my hands.”

Aunt Katsumi knelt by the box, taking out another dish. This one was soup sized. She ran her finger around the rim before turning it over, shaking her head.

“Ah, neechan, look. It has a proper foot.” She said this in Japanese.

Naomi’s mother took it with a dark expression, turning it, shaking her head, before passing it to Naomi.

Naomi had thought that when Kai made that comment a few weeks ago about the dishes being too big for her, he was

being kind. The moment she held it, though, she understood what he meant. The bowl felt like it belonged in her hand. The roundness of the dish settled into the curve of her palm. The foot at the bottom wasn't just a little indentation; it was maybe half an inch deep, precisely the depth of the first joint of a finger, making a little round handle at the bottom.

Naomi's mother unwrapped another piece, a wider serving bowl. "Mr. Liu, you speak with too much humility. Your bowls are perfectly matched in size. The glaze itself is perfection. I know that pottery has been a..." She glanced at her sister. "Let's just say, I was worried when you said you were working the kiln because of the past. But you're obviously extremely skilled. What price are you asking?"

He shook his head vigorously. "These are mere test pieces. It would be unethical for me to ask for payment."

"Six perfectly matched sets of..." Aunt Katsumi counted. "Five items each? Plus the serving bowls?"

Kai looked over her shoulder into the fire. "It's thirty sets. There are more in the cart outside. Along with a few other items of little consequence."

The two women looked at each other. Katsumi shook her head. Her mother pressed her lips together. Whatever silent communication they had, they finally turned to Kai as one.

Her mother bowed. "I couldn't possibly accept so valuable a gift. Not without some form of payment."

He looked at her with steely eyes. "Why not? It will just go to waste otherwise."

For some reason, that made both women freeze in place. Naomi's mother let out a long, long sigh. "Scamp." It was the first word she'd spoken to Kai since he arrived that lacked even a hint of ice.

Katsumi shook her head. "How long have you been planning this?"

Kai's lip twitched in the beginning of a smile. "How could I plan what is mere happenstance? Allow me to fetch the rest, if you please."

“I can help,” Naomi offered.

“No need,” Kai said. “It’s very cold, and I’ll have them all in by the time you find your coat.”

“Very well. But no more tests,” Aunt Katsumi told him. “I mean it. This is the only time we’ll allow it. You have your pride, I am sure, but we have ours, too.”

“As you say.” He bowed. “If I have anything else I must give you, I’ll use another excuse.” He left the main room in another gust of freezing wind.

“I’m missing something here.” Naomi watched him pull the latch shut against the wind. “What was that, when he said it would just go to waste otherwise?”

“He’s talking about the time when his father left,” Katsumi said. “We used to have to browbeat him to come have dinner. He was all by himself and he couldn’t pay. He was so, so stubborn and so prideful.”

“Oh.”

“Apparently,” her mother said, “that hasn’t changed. We used to make extra just so we could tell him that it would go to waste if he didn’t eat. We told him he was doing us a favor by disposing of unwanted rubbish.” Naomi’s mother let out a short, high-pitched laugh. “And it has grated his pride all these years, and this is his way of paying us back.”

“So, you admit he’s not—”

The door opened again, cutting off their conversation. Kai came over and set down another wooden box. “Just a few more,” he said, before turning around and leaving.

“Haha,” Naomi asked, looking at him. “Do you still worry that he’s going to harm me?”

It was the wrong question. Her mother froze in place, her face fixed.

“Look at him. He’s trying so hard. And you said it yourself. He’s so proud. Too proud to commit fraud the way his father did.”

“His father took eighteen months to unfold his plan. How can I trust—”

The door opened again. Another box joined its fellows on the floor. Kai gave them all a polite nod and went out again.

“He *is* trying too hard,” her mother said softly. “Why is he trying so hard?”

“Because we’re engaged?” Naomi asked. “Because you will be his family once we marry? Because you’re so hostile? Because if he does nothing, you’re suspicious, and if he does *something*, you’re—”

Another box brought in; another interruption in the conversation before the door opened to let him out on a puff of cold air yet again.

“Naomi,” her mother said once he was gone, “I am your mother. I know all your best qualities. And this man knew you for less than an hour before proposing. He does not have to try *this* hard, and he’s smart enough to know it.”

That hurt. It hurt something deep inside Naomi, something that had been bruised for a very long time.

“Can’t you believe—” She shut her mouth as Kai came in again. She was holding back something cold and tremulous in her breast, until he once again left.

“Why can’t you believe that I am worth trying for?” she finally said. “That he might value my affection?”

Her mother did not answer immediately, which was itself the worst sort of response. Naomi felt tears prick at her eyes.

She knew her mother was right. She *wasn’t* the kind of woman that men tried for. But wasn’t a mother supposed to be irrational about her own children? Shouldn’t her *own mother* extol her virtues? Was it so hard to believe that Naomi could be attractive to a man?

Kai came in and set his box down. “Last one.” He gave them a small smile. “This one contains a set that is not part of the test batch. If you don’t mind, I’d like to deliver this to their owner personally.”

“By all means,” Katsumi said, but while she took three steps away, her mother stayed rooted in place.

Katsumi turned back and took her mother’s hand. “Neechan, it’s a common room,” she said in Japanese. “Nothing is going to happen. Let them have some privacy.”

Her mother allowed herself to be led away, glancing warily over her shoulder as she left.

Kai had taken out another burlap-wrapped package. He set this on the table without looking at Naomi. Carefully, he unwrapped the rough cloth.

It contained several sets of dishes in a deep black so glossy that it seemed almost like a mirror. Naomi picked up one of the bowls and held it. She had thought the other bowl felt good in her hands, but this one was just a little smaller. Where the other bowl had fit the cup of her hand, this one nestled into it. It almost sang to her, as if it had been crafted for her personally.

Probably because it had been.

She looked up at Kai, then down at the bowl. The light of the window fell on the glaze.

Calling it *black* was a mistake. The color refracted light in blues and purples and golds as she slowly turned it.

“Kai, this is amazing.”

“I thought it suited you.”

“Black is my favorite color, and nobody *ever* gets me anything in black.”

“What lucky happenstance.” Kai’s tone was just a little dry. “My test glaze using the dirt I brought produces the purest color of black.”

“This is a beautiful black.” She turned the bowl in the light again. “I’m so impressed.”

“I wanted to make something that suited you.” His voice was soft. “The size of your hands. But also, black is a color that most people think is plain.”

Naomi sucked in a breath.

“Most people are wrong.” He spoke firmly. “They don’t take the time to see what can be seen. I wanted to make something for you, because—” He stopped himself.

He looked into her eyes, holding back whatever it was he had been going to say. For a moment, Naomi felt like all her own longing was laid bare. That he was seeing her.

This was a *fake* engagement.

But.

A few weeks ago, she’d told him that she thought she was plain and clumsy. He’d listened intently. He hadn’t said “no” or “stop feeling such foolish things.” Instead of arguing, he’d crafted a rebuttal that made her feel—it made her feel—

“Kai.” Naomi took a step forward.

He looked almost embarrassed.

“I must go,” he said, and stepped out of the door.

THE ROOM WAS STILL COLD FROM THE DRAFT OF THE DOOR behind Kai when her mother came back.

“Oh,” she said. “More dishes.”

Dishes.

“A special present in your favorite color.” Her mother looked as if he’d done something distasteful. “Be careful, Naomi. It’s so much.”

Naomi’s hurt had been bubbling inside her so long that she had perhaps believed that nothing could bring it out. But somehow, this final comment felt like a jab at her own worth. It broke something inside her.

“You are judging him because of his father, who he has not seen in over a decade,” Naomi hissed. “What’s worse, you are

judging him because he treats *me* well. Is it so hard to imagine that he might care about me?"

"It's not hard to imagine he could be untruthful," her mother said.

Naomi could feel the hurt of that as if it were six years ago being told she would never be loved. She snapped out, "Just because nobody ever loved *you* doesn't mean it will be the same for *me*."

Her mother froze, eyes wide. In that moment. Naomi knew she'd gone too far.

Or maybe—maybe, the last years of being told she was plain and unlovable had finally become too much for her to bear.

"What do you mean?"

"You and Papa," Naomi said. "You married so quickly. You don't even sleep together. Even your husband doesn't want you, but you just accept it. Well, I don't have to be the same way."

"Naomi." Her mother frowned. "Don't talk to me like that."

"Fine." Naomi set down her bowl. "I won't. I don't need to talk to you at all." She turned.

"Where are you going?"

Naomi had not even known what her body was doing when she turned away; the *where* and the *why* felt imperative, but she could not have explained any of the reasons.

Kai could be one of two people—a liar whispering sweet words to win her over, or a man who understood her and truly cared for her.

And—this was not logical, but she had too many feelings in the moment for logic—he *had* to understand her. He had to care about her. Because otherwise, everyone would be right, and she *wouldn't* be lovable.

“I’m going to say thank you to the man I’m going to marry.” Naomi’s hand clenched into a fist at her side. “At least *he* likes me.”

“Take a coat!” her mother called.

There was no time for that. Time to get a coat was two minutes for her mother to argue Naomi into smallness. Her emotions felt on the verge of rupture.

She knew she’d regret what she’d already said. She just needed to get out before *all* her ugliest feelings came out of her mouth, not just some of them.

“I’ll be back,” she said. “I just—I can’t—”

There was no finishing that sentence, and so she didn’t.

KAI HAD RETURNED THE DONKEY AND CART THAT HE HAD borrowed for his delivery to Mr. Bei and was trudging up the hill in a cold wind, when he heard someone running behind him.

“Kai!”

He turned to see Naomi tearing up the hill. She had a scarf but no gloves, no hat. Her hair was slipping out of its bun, falling down her nape in a messy, uncoiling lump. Her gown, a patterned gold, fluttered in the too-icy wind. She came up to him panting. “Kai!”

“You’re going to freeze.”

“I don’t care. I had to—” Her face underwent a half-dozen expressions in the time it took him to tilt his head in confusion. “Thank you,” she finally settled on. “I had to thank you.”

“You’re...welcome?”

“You left so abruptly. It would be strange if you just walked away after delivering a gift. We’re...pretending to be engaged?”

Why was that a question? Her eyes were so big and brown, looking up at him, and those words sent a shiver down his spine. “So, I should thank you at greater length. Right?” She rubbed her hands together for warmth.

He couldn’t keep looking at her. It made him want to wrap her in his coat and make sure she had something hot to drink.

“You said thanks. That was enough. You should go back before you catch your death.”

“I’m not sure I *did* thank you. I’d better do it properly.” She pulled the stick from her hair and rewound her bun, stabbing it almost angrily into place.

“Just now. You said thank you. Or something that conveyed the same approximate feelings. You’re shivering.”

She shook her head. “Impossible. I just had a fight with my mother. I’m too angry to be cold.”

He couldn’t stand it. He took off his coat. She tried to thwart him putting it over her shoulders for a few seconds. She didn’t succeed.

“Now *you’ll* get cold. You can’t—ooh.” That last was said as he dropped the weight of it on her shoulders. “That’s so warm. How do you have so much body heat?”

“Your teeth are chattering.” He looked around. “How much will people talk if you come into my house?”

“A great deal.” She gave him an apologetic look. “I already told my parents I would be careful. I can’t do that.”

“Then come with me.” Kai took her by the hand. Her fingers were cold; he tried to engulf them in his own, rubbing them, while he guided her to Mr. Bei’s house. He rapped on the door.

“Uncle,” he said once the door opened. “Miss Kwan is cold. Can we get her something hot to drink?”

Mr. Bei looked from Kai to Naomi and then back with a questioning look.

“I can’t take her in my cottage,” Kai explained. “People will talk.”

“I suppose I can assist young love.” Mr. Bei stepped aside. “Come in.”

Kai ducked his head to avoid the lintel as he stepped into the room. Mr. Bei’s house was small, but it had been well

sealed against drafts. A little stove in the corner radiated heat and cheer.

“Good morning, Mr. Bei,” Naomi said politely through chattering teeth.

“Warm up here.” Kai gestured. “I’ll go back and get your coat.”

“At least make sure she has something to drink,” Mr. Bei said with a shake of his head. “I have two wives who hate me. I haven’t seen either one in a decade. And even *I* know better than to walk off at a moment like this.”

Kai hesitated.

“Listen to your elders!” Mr. Bei thumped him on the chest.

There was nothing to do but fetch a cup and fill it with water from the kettle. He handed it to Naomi and turned to go.

“What a nice cup, Mr. Bei,” Naomi said.

Kai froze in place.

“Ohoho.” Mr. Bei’s laugh wasn’t even sneaky. “Isn’t it? I wonder where it came from.”

“I’ll be off now.”

“Wait. Kai. I just wanted to say thank you,” Naomi said.

“You have already done so.”

Mr. Bei’s head turned between them as they talked, long queue flicking behind him like the tail of a cat.

“Barely! You just handed me the bowls and *vanished*—”

“He did that to you, too?” Mr. Bei interrupted.

Naomi turned.

“Just stopped by unannounced with new cups and the like?”

“Yes,” Naomi breathed. “Good heavens.”

Together, they turned to look at him. The collective weight of their gaze—judging, not in a harsh way, but in an almost kind way—was too much. Kai felt his shoulders hunching.

“What are you?” Mr. Bei said, glaring at Kai. “The pottery... Oh, who is it that Christians say comes out around these times? Saint something something.”

“Nicholas?” Naomi asked.

“Hmph. No wonder I never remember the name. Never mind.” He turned back to Kai. “Are you trying to be some kind of a pottery delivery saint?”

This was not the accusation that Kai had expected to have to defend himself from in Wedgeford. “You do know that we’re months past Christmas.”

Mr. Bei did not seem to care. “Do you know what you have to *do* to be a Christian saint?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant here.”

“You have to die,” Mr. Bei proclaimed dramatically. “Do you want to die?”

“None of this logically follows,” Kai said, “or a lot more gift-givers would drop dead.”

“I’m fairly certain you have to be Christian, too,” Naomi put in.

“See,” Mr. Bei said, turning to her, “I’m not *saying* you don’t know how to have a good argument, but you’re supposed to go from bad to worse. Being dead is worse than being Christian.”

“Never worry, uncle,” Kai said dryly. “I don’t think I’ll qualify for sainthood on any grounds.”

Mr. Bei frowned at him. “Then let people thank you!”

“That’s...” The whole idea made Kai’s head hurt. “That’s not why I—see, here’s the thing. I don’t want to impose.”

Naomi’s eyes widened. “You don’t want to impose?”

“Look at him!” Mr. Bei let out a cackle. “Imposing by—what was it again?—giving people valuable gifts. Child, you’re such a fool.”

Kai pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re getting it all wrong. You know what I mean. My father would give people gifts and then remind them that he’d done so, thus guiltning them to respond in kind. I don’t want to impose my feelings on...” He considered. “Anyone.”

“Oh, right.” Mr. Bei did not seem to be talking to either of them; his remark was to the corner of one room. “I forgot. The boy’s broken.”

“Mr. Bei!” Naomi admonished.

“What is the other explanation?” Mr. Bei shook his head. ““Oh, no, I might make people feel things.”” He put a hand to his mouth in pretend shock, before shaking his finger at Kai. “Listen, you. Of course you make people feel things by living! That’s not imposing. It’s not manipulating. It’s called being part of a society.”

“I...” Kai felt flummoxed. “I didn’t think I was? A part of...here?”

That had been no part of his plan. Go to Wedgeford. Do his fraud. Repay everyone. Disappear. At no point had he expected to be a part of anything.

Both Naomi and Mr. Bei looked at each other.

“Hmph.” Mr. Bei stood slowly. “This one’s beyond me. Little Kwan girl, I hope you’re up for it.”

“I. Um.” She glanced at Kai nervously.

“Of course,” Mr. Bei said, patting Kai on the shoulder, “I understand you brought your fiancée here because you didn’t want people talking about the two of you being alone in your house.” Mr. Bei slowly crossed the floor. “And it’s just as well you did. I’m keeping my eye on you two. The whole time!” He stepped through a doorway. “Even when I’m shutting the door in the pantry. Don’t get up to any shenanigans!”

The door closed behind him.

Kai looked at Naomi. “Did he just close himself in a storage closet?”

“I think so?”

“Do you understand what is happening?”

Naomi whispered, “I’m supposed to talk some sense into you.”

“No need. I have enough sense.”

Naomi took a step forward. “You didn’t just give me a dish set. You took the ugliest version of myself—the one that haunts me—and you made pottery that showed it was a lie. You made me something that redefined what *clumsy* and *plain* meant. You made me feel more...” She paused. When she spoke again, her voice quavered. “There is a lump in my throat at this thought, a lump in the shape of a word I have never been able to associate with myself. For one moment, your pottery made me feel more lovable than I have ever believed.”

“I was just being truthful.”

“And I did not know that could be the truth.” She took a step forward. “And you think I won’t feel anything about it? You dolt. You ridiculous fool. How could I *not* feel something?”

“Right. Gratitude.” Kai straightened. “You’re very welcome. Are we done?”

“Gratitude?” Naomi shook her head. “That’s not what I’m talking about. I *like* you.”

He stared at her. She’d said that before. He knew that they got along well enough. She couldn’t mean...

She kept on talking, cutting through his growing confusion. “I like you so much. I liked you before you gave me a set of dishes. I like the way you talk. I like the way you treat me. I like the way you make bowls. I like how good you are with your hands.” She took a step toward him. “I can’t stop thinking of them on me.”

“Naomi.” A shaky, wanting breath escaped him at that unbidden image: of being able to put his hands on her, draw her to him... “Naomi, not so loud, Mr. Bei is—”

“I’m not listening!” Mr. Bei shouted unconvincingly.

“Tell me. How could you possibly impose upon me?”

Kai wasn't thinking. He couldn't—not after that confession, not with his ears ringing and his whole being thrilling at words he didn't deserve to hear. Perhaps it was because he didn't want Mr. Bei to hear any more things she might say. Perhaps it was because *he* didn't want to hear them. He leaned down, tilted her face up, and pressed his lips to hers.

It was the softest kiss, like the opening of clouds to sunshine. Her mouth was cold against his, but after a moment, her lips warmed. She felt like the beginning of summer. For one second, he let himself luxuriate in the sigh of their mingling breath, the brush of their lips. He wanted so much more. He made himself pull back after that single, brief touch.

“That,” he whispered. “*That's* what I could impose on you.”

She looked up at him with wide, impossible eyes. “I want you to,” she breathed. “I want it so much.”

He pulled her against him, pulled her up and leaned down until their lips met again, this time on the verge of bruising. He'd worked so hard to hold back everything he was feeling, but it all came tumbling out in their kiss. All of Kai's nights of wanting and all his mornings wishing seemed to coalesce in one single, fervent appeal: *I wish we were real*.

He sighed his entreaty into her mouth and pulled her to him.

The room was warm around them. She gasped and opened up, and she tasted like tea and salt. “Naomi,” he murmured into her mouth.

“Kai.” She buried her hands into his coat.

It all felt so real: the weight of her, resting lightly against him, the heat of her, the cold of the wind, the press of her fingers. He wanted it to be real with every fiber of his being.

But he wasn't going to marry her. He wasn't really a part of Wedgefords society. This was just a fantasy.

A fantasy? No. That was a fancy word for what this really was. It was a lie.

He pulled back. “Naomi. We can’t.” He lowered his voice and whispered in her ear, “This isn’t real.”

Her face underwent a series of transformations: stunned, then a flash of something that looked very much like hurt, swiftly replaced by a wrinkling of her nose.

“No,” she said. “It’s—that is—” Uncertainty flickered. “I know it’s not, but—but—”

Kai’s hands trembled with the force of his desire. He wanted to reach out to her and hold her close. He wanted to pull her in and kiss her a third time.

“This is not real,” he repeated for himself.

“But the dishes. What you said.” She looked up at him. “The way you seem to know the very thing that has most hurt me, and are trying to make it better. That much is real. Isn’t it?”

“Naomi.” He wanted to agree. Wanted to tell her that this was real. Wanted to just pretend. But saying it would make it a lie.

Instead, he took a step back. “I wouldn’t know a real feeling if I had one.”

“Oh.” Her voice seemed very small.

Kai took another step back. “Mr. Bei,” he called. “I’m going to get her coat from the inn. Keep her warm until I come back, will you?”

AN HOUR AFTER SHE'D STORMED OUT OF THE INN, NAOMI slipped through the back door. She carefully, quietly stepped out of her shoes, then froze at the sight of her mother. Her mother knelt in the small space near the ascending stairs, in front of their shrine. She looked up as Naomi came in as if she had been waiting for her.

Likely she had been.

The heat of Naomi's anger had faded. Now she felt a complex lump of embarrassment and regret. What she had said to her mother before storming out...

"Thank you for giving Kai my coat." It was a form of apology, the kind that set her up for a reprimand like *I told you to bring it*. After that would follow more recrimination.

But her mother didn't take the obvious bait. She stood slowly, looking at Naomi, and that brought to mind the hateful, hateful words that Naomi had thrown at her an hour before.

Just because nobody loves you—

What an awful thing for Naomi to say. It seemed *more* than awful with her emotions cooled. It had been hateful and cruel.

Her mother held out a hand to Naomi as if she were a child who might lose her way.

"Haha, I..." She didn't know how to finish her sentence.

"Come," her mother said.

And maybe Naomi *was* lost, because she took her mother's hand the way she had when she was little, back in the day when her mother had seemed more of a beacon than a warning.

Her mother guided her up the back steps to the family living area, then ushered Naomi into her room. She took both of Naomi's hands as she pulled her to sit next to her on the mattress.

She still didn't say anything. She just sat next to Naomi, holding her hand. The stillness seemed fraught with Naomi's harsh words. Some kind of apology was necessary.

"Haha, I'm sorry I left like that."

"Don't be sorry for leaving. It was too heated. We both needed to calm down."

"What I said." Naomi looked over at her mother. "It was disrespectful and unkind."

"So." Her mother nodded. "Why did you say it?"

"A fit of anger." Naomi bowed her head. "I lost my temper. I should never have done it."

"No, no." Her mother took Naomi's hand in hers again. "I already knew what made you blurt out your feelings. I meant: why did you say those words? Where did you get the idea that I was unloved?"

Naomi could remember the exact moment it had happened. She'd been sitting in the inn with Ma Wing. He worked odd jobs in London; he sometimes came out to Wedgeford, but the village had been—how had he put it? Too pastoral for him.

She'd used to think him very sophisticated for that.

And then he had asked her to marry him.

She could feel that cold pit in her stomach as his proposal had gone on. She still felt a flush of pain remembering. How could she possibly tell her mother about that? It would be even worse than what she'd said in the heat of anger.

Her mother patted her knee. "Don't be troubled. Tell me."

“Ma Wing,” Naomi said slowly. “When he asked me to marry him years ago. He told me I was...” She paused to inhale. His words were seared into her brain. “Just like you,” she finally said. “Plain and clumsy. I didn’t speak Cantonese well enough to teach any children, and so only someone as forward-thinking as him would want me anyway. He said I was perfect because I must have learned from you. And you knew better than to expect anyone would love you.”

Naomi had been sixteen at the time. She’d known she was plain and clumsy, that she was half-Chinese. But until he’d woven those facts together and made her see the whole of herself, she hadn’t realized what they implied for her future.

“Ah.” Her mother let out something that was less a response than a pained exhalation. Her hand tightened on Naomi’s knee, squeezing almost to the point of pain before she let go and pressed her fingers against the corners of her eyes.

She was crying. Naomi had made her mother cry. “Haha, I ___”

Her mother shook her head. “This morning, after you left, I thought—my own child despises me. That’s bitter. But this?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Her mother wiped welling tears away. “My own daughter despises *herself*. That’s worse.”

“Haha, no. I don’t.”

And then Naomi saw it. The hot embarrassment of the moment with Ma Wing. The lump of shame she’d carried in her stomach at being told that she should know better than to expect to be loved. The absolute determination she’d felt thereafter to never be like her mother. The visceral flinch she had when people remarked how similar they were.

Naomi had been carrying her burden for so long that she’d forgotten how much it hurt. Suddenly, she could feel the spiked weight of those awful words as if they’d only just been spoken. The knowledge that she wasn’t good enough, that she could *never* be the kind of person who was truly cared for.

She'd thought it a form of strength to make herself into someone who cared for herself instead.

And it was, in a way. It was. But being told she was unlovable didn't stop hurting just because Naomi had made a plan in response.

"Oh." She exhaled. "Oh. I..."

Naomi buried her face in her mother's skirts and wept. She could feel her mother's hand through her hair, her whispers, her strength. She'd said that hateful, horrible thing, and still her mother had listened and heard the hurt behind the accusation.

Eventually, her tears trailed off. She sniffled.

"Let me tell you a story," her mother said quietly, as she had when Naomi was a child. "I have never told this before, because it is very private."

Naomi nodded into her mother's skirts.

"Mukashi mukashi," her mother whispered, as if she were starting a fairy tale, "there was a young woman who got on a ship at Yokohama to leave her home. She had never left her hometown, but now she was leaving Japan. She realized very quickly that a woman alone on a long journey would have problems. She would need to marry."

Naomi turned to look up at her mother. She had always known her mother married on the voyage from Japan. She'd never heard the story told quite like this.

"She was not the kind of woman who thought much about marriage. Children would be nice. But a husband? Her heart had never so much as fluttered. She had never wondered. When other girls whispered about that one thing in hushed tones, she always wanted to sigh and turn away."

Naomi nodded.

"But now she needed to do it. Two of the sailors onboard made offers. They were both Chinese. One was a little wicked, whispering to her what they might do together. The other was quieter. He just said he would be a good husband. This woman

did not enjoy whispers of wicked things; they sounded boring. So, she chose the second man. The captain of the ship married them. They had a wedding night.”

Her mother looked across the room steadily. She was still stroking Naomi’s hair. “That was enough to get her pregnant.”

Naomi nodded.

“To simplify many long months into a few sentences: it turned out that the thing that had never excited the young woman in theory did no better in practice. But more wonderously, it turned out that she was not alone. One day, the two came to a conclusion: What if this is a thing that neither of us have a taste for? What if that is just the way things are, and what if we are allowed to be that way?”

Naomi watched her mother’s face.

“And that is when the woman learned that it was, in fact, a great fortune that those two found each other in the middle of the sea? Two people who don’t want the one thing that everyone else in the world seems to obsess about? What were the odds that they would find one another?”

In the face of her mother’s own certainty, Naomi felt everything she had known about her parents—about what love required—rearrange.

“So you see,” her mother said, “it is not true that I am unloved. I am brave enough to believe that my love is no less fierce because it takes a different form.” She leaned over and patted Naomi’s hand. “Your Papa snores. That’s why we sleep apart. But... You should not judge whether I am loved by that. Even the most vigorous couples spend most of their time *not* doing that.”

After Naomi’s tears came a form of clarity: the feeling that Naomi had never seen her mother until this moment. She’d seen her smallness without noticing her steadiness. She’d noted her features—plain, so much like Naomi’s own—without seeing her fortitude. She’d taken the best parts of her mother for granted. She’d let an outsider write the story of her own family.

Naomi wiped her face. “Thank you for telling me.” Naomi looked up at her.

“You were right, too,” her mother pattered her hand. “About Kai. I have let myself hold a grudge that is not his fault.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Her mother nodded. “I will not promise to overlook his flaws. I will not sit by if he harms you. But I will try to know him for who he is. For your sake, as well as his.”

“Thank you, Haha.”

“Then let’s go back to the kitchen. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you never finished your breakfast.”

IT WAS ALMOST EIGHT IN THE EVENING. WHEN KAI STEPPED inside the inn, the atmosphere felt strange.

It was not that the space felt unwelcoming; he’d never expected a welcome in Wedgefurd. It was not that it was cold; the room had warmed since that morning, when he’d delivered his dishes.

Maybe the feeling that pricked the hairs up on the back of his neck had to do with the tense introduction to Naomi’s best friend. Chloe Wentworth—“do not call me a duchess,” she had said, “or I will be annoyed. Duke is my husband’s occupation, not his personality. If you’re going to marry Naomi, you’d best call me Chloe”—had come to sit by him, all smiles and introduction until she’d taken out a piece of wood, to which several sheets of paper had been affixed via some metal contraptions. She had peered at it through spectacles, and then started volleying questions at him.

Questions like, “What is your favorite thing about Naomi?”

“Her determination,” Kai answered.

She made a notation on the paper. "I would personally have chosen her kindness, but that is a good quality of hers. You do well to notice it. I'll accept it."

"Am I in school? Is this an examination?"

She smiled at him. "Just a friendly chat." Her smile belied her words.

"Ah. I see."

"What do you think Naomi most wants out of life?" she had asked next. Kai did his best to answer, but the environment seemed charged with a particular feel. Mrs. Wentworth seemed to notice it, too. It was something else, something that lay between him and Naomi, some quality that had changed. The way Naomi looked as she seated him, the way she talked to her mother... It all felt different.

The third time he turned around, frowning, she'd leaned in.

"It's not just me, then. Something feels..." She waved her hand in the air.

He nodded.

"I haven't talked to her in two days," Mrs. Wentworth murmured, "but I heard you're to thank for..." She tapped the bowl in front of her.

Kai put on his blankest expression. "Why would you thank me for the inn's tableware?"

She looked up at him, but before she could say anything more, the door to the inn was thrown open.

"Ho the inn!" The new entrant bellowed.

Conversation cut off, and everyone turned to stare.

Finally. Someone other than Kai was making people uncomfortable.

The newcomer continued to stand in the doorway, shaking his head and letting all the cold air in. He peered around the room with narrowed eyes. That was about all Kai could see of him; the rest of his face was obscured by a scarf wrapped around his head.

Andrew came up to him, ushering him in with the gentlest touch, and shutting the door before any more heat could escape.

The man unwound what appeared to be the world's longest scarf, talking and gesticulating at what appeared to be top speed and volume.

"Master potter," Kai heard him say clear from the other side of the room. And "beg you" and "introduction."

Perfect. Kai tried not to beat his head against the table. Just when he'd thought someone else would create a problem and there would be a new cause for gossip, it turned out to be him. Again.

Andrew met Kai's eyes across the room. Kai made a subtle sign—*no, not me, I'm not here*.

Andrew's head tilted in something like confusion.

So much for subtle signs. Kai made an X with his forearms and vigorously shook his head.

"He's right over here," Andrew said cheerily.

Wonderful. On the way over, the man shed his heavy coat and a thick pair of gloves. He plopped these on the table, before coming to stand next to Kai.

"Here he is," Andrew said. "Wedgeford's resident Chinese master potter."

"Sir!" The man held out a hand. "All of Dover is talking about you!"

"Me?" Kai stared at him. "Why?"

The man kept holding his hand out, and belatedly, Kai realized he expected a handshake. The man seemed to come to a different realization at the same time.

"Oh!" He pulled his hand back. "It's bows for greeting, isn't it?"

He swept Kai a lugubrious bow, complete with a hand flourish.

“Why on earth would all of Dover be talking about me?” Kai asked. “Isn’t Dover...rather large?”

“Technically speaking, it’s just the pottery parts,” the man amended. “Mr. Humphries—he owns a shop—said his brother—*he’s* a tanner—had a cousin, and I don’t know what *he* is. But he met you at the ambulance class. He said you make work so inescapably beautiful that angels would weep.”

“Someone in that long chain of conversation is having you on,” Kai said. “In this story, were angels present, and was someone monitoring them for tears? Was I bringing my masterwork to an ambulance class? For what reason? To hold the bandages?”

“Ah.” The man looked flummoxed. “He didn’t say any of that. Those are good questions. What *were* you bringing your masterwork to an ambulance class for?”

Well. This was going poorly. “I didn’t bring any works at all.”

“Ah.”

“I think your Mr. Humphries’s brother-in-law’s cousin was embellishing. I’m a normal potter. Celestial beings have never shed tears in or near my presence.”

“But.” The man stroked his chin in contemplation. “You’re Chinese.”

Kai raised an eyebrow.

“You can’t be normal.”

Kai raised his other eyebrow.

“And...” The man inhaled, then spoke in a great rush. “I need you to show me how to make the finest porcelain in the Chinese style! I’ve been stuck making stupid earthenware for ten years. It is my dream—my life’s hope—to fashion porcelain so thin you can see a light through it. *That’s* where the pay is at.”

Porcelain. Kai felt his lip curl involuntarily. Now was not the time to get in an argument about pottery. Just because a man had a wrong opinion didn’t mean he had to be corrected.

“You have the wrong person,” Kai said. “I couldn’t possibly teach you what you want to know.”

The man stared at him blankly, before he hit his head. “Where are my manners? Of course. I’m Uriah Bottoms. I know how important ceremony is to you people, and I’m already flubbing it. Uri, you’re an idiot.”

Before Kai could respond to any of that, the man fumbled for a coin purse. “Barmaid!” he called loudly. “You! Barmaid!”

Naomi came from across the way. “Two beers, barmaid,” Mr. Bottoms said with an air of importance. “One for me, one for the esteemed master potter here. And be quick about it.”

Naomi looked at the both of them skeptically.

“It’s really not necessary,” Kai said.

“But of course it is. Even if you won’t teach me a thing, I need to...” He trailed off.

Kai almost felt sorry for him. Here he was, desperate to manipulate Kai into doing something Kai was never going to do, and Kai had been raised by a manipulator that far exceeded his capacity.

“You need to ingratiate yourself to me so you can guilt me into doing the thing I’ve already refused to do?” Kai asked.

“Uh.” The man stared at Kai. “I mean, of course not. Who would do that?”

Naomi brought back the beers.

“Thank you,” Kai said, and slid the glass she’d given him across the table to Mr. Bottoms.

“No, no!” Mr. Bottoms slid it back to him. “Drink it. Or is it not to your liking? I should have asked. I’ll get the barmaid to bring you something more to your liking. Whiskey? Ale?” He turned and opened his mouth to yell.

Mr. Bottoms could not have found a more effective threat. Kai was not about to allow him to bother Naomi. Besides, it

had been years since he'd tried drinking alcohol. Maybe his reaction had improved.

He reached out and picked up the glass. "This will be fine."

Mr. Bottoms raised his glass and drained it. "Bottoms up!" he said with a laugh. "A little play on my name."

How bad could it be? Beer had less alcohol than other spirits.

Kai took a drink from his glass. It was bitter and sour. Disgusting. He hoped that would be enough to satisfy the man.

Mr. Bottoms was watching his reaction. "Don't like it? Let me order—"

"No, no." Kai tried to wipe the grimace from his face. "It's fine." He took another mouthful.

Oh. This was going to be a mistake. He could already feel the effect of the alcohol—the hot flush on his cheeks. The rising muzziness in his mind.

Mr. Bottoms stared at him with hope. "A month of apprenticeship," he bargained. "One month for you, one lifetime for me. Teach me everything you know about porcelain."

"That won't take a month," Kai shot back dryly.

"Right," Mr. Bottoms mused. "Of course it must be the work of years, if not decades. I'd hate to waste your time. What about a week? You can give me pointers, and then at least I can say I trained with a Chinese porcelain master."

"No." Kai's head was beginning to spin dizzily from the drink. Idly, he contemplated taking another mouthful. Just as idly, he decided against it.

"One day," Mr. Bottoms wheedled. "No instruction at all. I'll just sit and watch you throw."

"No!"

"One piece!" Mr. Bottoms begged. "Just one single, solitary piece! That's all I want to see you throw! I'll do

anything! I'll give you my first-born child!"

Kai felt himself blinking rapidly. "What am I going to do with a child? The constables would arrest me the moment they saw me with a white man's baby."

"Ah." Mr. Bottoms winced. "It's a figure of speech. Actually...I'm a confirmed bachelor. Just Bob and me in our little room together. So it's not like there's a chance of a first born to offer. I meant it metaphorically: I would offer anything of similar value in order to be educated by one of your caliber."

Kai could feel the beer loosening his tongue. He leaned across the table. "There is nothing you could offer that could ever make me agree to teach you porcelain."

"But why not?"

"Because," Kai growled, "I don't make trash."

"Trash." Mr. Bottoms' voice wavered. "What do you mean, *trash*?"

Kai had some idea that he'd decided earlier not to yell about people who held wrong opinions about pottery. That made sense. People were entitled to their wrong opinions.

On the other hand, they were so *very* wrong. "Trash," Kai repeated. "The thing you call 'fine china' is rubbish."

Mr. Bottoms straightened, eyes widening. "Are you telling me that there's something more beautiful, more translucent, more delicate? Please, sir, I'm begging you. I prostrate myself before your expertise. Teach me that!"

"Delicate, pah." Kai felt disgusted. "The entire concept of delicacy in pottery offends me. Take a china tea bowl for instance—"

"A dainty, beautiful tea bowl." Mr. Bottoms let out a great, gusting sigh. "I've seen them. I've yearned to make them."

"A useless lump of inert ceramics," Kai returned. "All you English care about is how something *looks*. But tea in a cup isn't about looking *pretty*."

“What else could there be?”

“There’s the feel of it in your hand: if it’s formed right, it fits perfectly into the curve of your palm. The clay is dark and iron-rich; it holds the heat of the tea in, yet allows enough warmth to seep through so you can feel what you’re drinking. It is no mere vessel, unchanged by the process. It is a conduit for the tea, an extension of the work that went into the tea leaves.”

“Ah.” Mr. Bottoms frowned. “What does that even mean? Don’t you just dry those?”

“A well-crafted teapot absorbs the flavor of the tea that is steeped in it. An old pot holds the memory of every tea that has touched its walls, and every time you drink tea from it, you’ll remember the past and water the future. The edge of the cup perfectly fits the lip of the drinker, and tea pours in perfect proportions when the cup is tipped so that not one drop is spilled.”

He thumped his hand against the table to emphasize each of these points.

“And the ceramics of porcelain are all wrong. It’s hard and impenetrable. A good glaze is supposed to soften the flavor of the tea. Tea is supposed to be an experience, and pottery is the vessel that makes it happen. All you British idiots want is bone china so fine you can’t hold it without burning yourself, ceramics so hard that your teapots have no memory. Can you imagine having a fork so ornate that it couldn’t fit in your mouth?”

Mr. Bottoms shook his head.

“Of course not,” Kai went on, “because a utensil is meant to be used, and no matter how beautiful it is, if you can’t pick it up and put it to use, it’s rubbish. That’s all you lot want—flat disks painted with pictures that lay on the table like corpses, soup bowls that aren’t even designed to be held, teacups so flimsy that you need to add handles so you don’t burn yourself.”

A soft thunk landed on the table. Kai looked; it was a mug of water. Someone was still holding it. He followed the hand to a cuff, the cuff to a sleeve, then to an elbow...

Ah. Naomi.

He smiled at her. "Naomi!"

"Are you drunk?" she asked.

"Me?" He paused and assessed himself. Face overheated. Inhibitions lowered. Yelling about the philosophy of pottery.

"Yes," Kai said. "I believe I am."

"You barely had half a glass of beer."

"It hits me like that," he confided in her.

The smile she gave him seemed fond. "Yell about pottery a great deal when you're drunk, do you?" For some reason she seemed amused by this.

"It's very important." He considered this. "But no. No, I don't. Sometimes, I..." He remembered the last time he'd had alcohol. "Wait. That was about pottery." The time before that, he'd just... "Mm. That was also about pottery." But surely the time before that... "Wait, that one too." He looked up at her with a smile. "You were right! Three times I yelled about pottery. That's all the times I got drunk. Except...this one."

"Mr. Bottoms," Naomi said, "I'm going to put Master Potter Liu in a guest room, because he's drunk on half a glass of beer, which is extremely funny."

"But he hasn't agreed to teach me anything!"

"Normally," Naomi said, "I would send him home, but I'm not sure I can trust him not to trip on his shoes."

"Ridiculous. I'm as graceful as a gazelle."

"He might also engage random strangers in unintentional shouting matches about pottery. And we do try to prevent pottery-related brawls."

"Ah." Kai nodded. "That does seem to be a more likely scenario."

“Come on. Stand up.” Naomi gestured.

Kai stood, swaying on his feet.

“But I haven’t got an answer yet,” Mr. Bottoms whined.

Kai looked down at him. “Yes, you have. You just didn’t like it.”

“I’m willing to learn!”

“And you already have,” Kai told him, “if only you took into account what I said.”

“But surely there is something—”

“Stop lusting after filth,” Kai told him. And then because he felt warm and happy, he held up a finger. “And you can watch me throw one piece sometime in the next few weeks. No more.”

Mr. Bottoms’s face transformed into one of delight. “Thank you, master potter. Thank you!”

Naomi took hold of his arm. “This way,” she said. “Come on.”

“COME ON,” NAOMI MURMURED, GUIDING KAI UP THE MAIN stairs that led to the guest rooms. She’d seen people in substantially worse straits than his goofy grinning. She’d never seen them like this after half a glass.

It was almost endearing. He was so much taller than her; she’d have thought he could put away five times what he had without showing a sign of intoxication.

“I can make it back to my cottage.”

“Of course you could.” She held onto his arm to steady him after he tripped on a stair. “But the ambulance class is tomorrow, and I need to be sure you’re up and ready to go.”

“Right.” He looked thoughtful. “The ambulance class.”

“At least now I know why you don’t often drink. And here I thought you were just frugal.”

“Oh, I am,” Kai said. “But I *also* can’t hold my liquor. Any amount. That is definitely a thing that is true about me.”

It took a while to navigate the staircase to the guest rooms. Naomi unlocked a door with the key ring at her waist.

“Can you make your way to the bed?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll see you later.”

Kai reached out and set a hand on her arm. “It’s bad.” He looked in her eyes.

“What’s bad?”

“That people are talking about me. In pottery places. That means word is spreading. I didn’t want anyone to know. That might end up a problem.”

Naomi shook a finger at him. “Then you probably shouldn’t have made dishes for the inn.”

“I couldn’t *not* do that.” He frowned. “The pottery wasn’t right. I care about things being *right*.”

No. She suspected he couldn’t. Different people became different kinds of drunks. Some people were funny. Some became violent. Others became increasingly quiet.

She’d already known that Kai loved what he did. It was evident in his every movement at the wheel. But it was more than that. Pottery that did not meet his standards wasn’t just worthy of criticism; it *offended* him on a personal and moral level.

“Something is different about you today.” He tapped her forehead. “It’s in your eyes. And the rest of you. I can see it.”

She’d had no time to think of what had happened today. He’d kissed her. And then she’d had that conversation with her mother.

“Just a little upending of my entire world.” She smiled. “Go to sleep, Kai.”

“Was it bad?” He put a hand on her shoulder. “The upending.”

“You pretend to be so tough,” Naomi said softly. “But deep down, I think you’re a sensitive soul. One who wants to make the world a better place.”

Kai nodded slowly. “It’s true. All I want is to make *one*.”

“One? One what?”

“One perfect thing.” He held her eyes. “Just one. In my life. Do you know how *hard* perfection is?”

“Given how dedicated you are to your craft? I think you’ll manage it.”

He shut his eyes. “Crafts.”

“Mm?”

“I’m dedicated to my *crafts*,” he told her. “Both of them. And my plans for perfection...it’s not the pottery, although perfection would help with that. It’s the fraud.”

He said it so nonchalantly that for a moment, the word he used didn’t even register. And then it did. Slowly, her world upended for the second time. Something cold slithered down her spine. “The fraud?”

“The fraud.” He said it as if it were something they both understood. “It’s the *fraud* that I have to make perfect.” His smile turned sad. “I only wish that my perfect thing could have been you.”

NAOMI SHUT THE DOOR TO THE GUEST ROOM WHERE KAI WAS staying. Her heart jittered in her chest. Her head rang with his words.

It's the fraud.

The fraud. She had considered the possibility that Kai was here in Wedgeford for dishonest purposes. How could she not, when half the village reminded her that his father was awful on a daily basis?

But she'd been utterly convinced that the torment of his childhood had left a mark on his soul. She'd thought that meant he would be honest.

And yes, there were signs to the contrary—he had rules for lying—but those were because of the way he'd been raised. She'd heard the certain ring of truth in his voice when he spoke about his distaste for what his father had done. Had she been so incredibly wrong?

It's the fraud.

Maybe it was just the alcohol speaking.

She wanted to believe it. But that first doubt was a crack in a glass. One never thought about how fragile a vessel was until it was falling to pieces. Once it was on the verge of breaking apart, though, that was all you could notice.

And now that she was harboring doubts, she had questions.

If Kai had wanted to establish himself as a master potter, why had he come to Wedgeford of all places? He'd brought in

twelve trunks of dirt, with origins stamped from the Orient. She hadn't understood his entire explanation as to why, but she'd understood that he was bringing in *special* dirt, related somehow to the work that he was doing.

Why would Kai not set up shop in a place where his special dirt didn't need to be imported at great expense? People hated him here in Wedgeford—she knew it, he knew it—and Kai wasn't the sort of person who gave no thought to being hated. So...why here?

She had wanted to believe him. She'd wanted it desperately. For the first time in her life, he'd made her believe she could be liked for herself. He'd made her a dish set. He'd looked at her. She'd felt almost precious, even though she knew it was fake.

A lie has an inside and an outside, he had said, and she'd listened because it made sense in the moment.

She hadn't asked what lies she might be outside. With a little grimace to herself in the hall, Naomi admitted the truth. She'd tried not to ask any of those questions because it would have been inconvenient if she couldn't trust the person who was helping her get what she wanted.

Now that she had opened the floodgates to her disbelief, she could feel all the questions she'd not asked rising around her. Kai had told her he was leaving Wedgeford. Why had he put so much work, so much *money* into fixing a kiln when he planned to leave?

He had to think her the most naïve, gullible little fool to simply accept the story he'd told. It was obvious now, so obvious. There *was* another lie, and she was outside it.

He was a liar, just like his father, and thankfully, she'd discovered it before he could do more than kiss her. She was lucky to have done so.

So why did she feel like crying?

The noise of the gathering downstairs was fading. Her father was likely sending everyone home.

Naomi pulled her arms around herself and started down the stairs. But halfway down, at the midpoint landing, she found her mother sitting there. She looked up at Naomi with wide eyes.

Chaperoning? She started to think, before she remembered that everything was different.

It had been just this morning when they'd spoken. Her mother had taken Naomi's hand and coaxed her pain from her. It hadn't fixed anything; it had just changed her view, and that had changed the landscape. She was still adjusting to a new conception of her mother.

Habits of annoyance ran hard, but Naomi didn't need to make assumptions. Instead, she sat on the step next to her mother.

"Yes," her mother said, as if tracing her thoughts. "I wanted to make sure you were unharmed."

"That's what I thought."

"I know." Her mother nodded. "You told me I wasn't being fair. And I wasn't. Still." She shook her head. "It's the first time he's been drunk. A person drunk is not always the same person sober. I thought I would wait here..."

"Just in case?"

"Just so."

Naomi leaned her head against her mother's shoulder.

Her mother had been right. Naomi had been wrong. Kai was hiding something. There *was* a fraud. And yet somehow, nothing felt simple.

Because if Naomi were indulging in questions, there was also this one: Wouldn't a fraud have taken more advantage?

"Haha, what would you do if someone said something while drunk that was hurtful?" she asked carefully.

This could have been the moment her mother had been waiting for: Naomi's admission that her feelings for Kai had a crack in them.

“It would depend,” her mother said after a long pause.

“On how bad it was?”

Her mother tilted her head back and forth uncertainly. “Good people say hurtful things. But hurt comes from hurt. If you don’t think, and just respond, you’ll hurt them in return, trading pain back and forth until there’s nothing left of what could have been.”

Naomi nodded.

“So, the best thing is to stop and look past the words and understand where the hurt is coming from.”

That was what had happened earlier this morning. Naomi had felt hurt. She’d said hurtful things. And instead of poking back and forth, her mother had asked and listened and interrupted the anger that could have ricocheted back and forth between them.

“But it’s dangerous,” her mother continued, “because some people don’t care about *your* pain. Just about what they can get from you.”

“And...Kai?” She heard her voice quivering. “Do you think he’s one of those?”

Her mother tapped her lips, considering before speaking. “We spoke with Mr. Bei this afternoon, your father and I.”

“Oh. Did you?” Oh. No. The *kiss*. Naomi felt her whole being shrivel at the thought of what her mother might say about that.

“He said what happened in Wedgeford when Kai was a child was wrong. Everyone going to his house at once and yelling? Terrifying him, simply because he was there and his father wasn’t? He was six. Six-year-old children owe nobody for their parents’ faults.”

It seemed so simple when it was said like that. How had anyone thought otherwise? Anger must have made people unreasonable.

Her mother seemed to struggle with the next sentence. “Mr. Bei is...not wrong. We lost money. Kai lost things as

well. His family, his faith in his father, his pride. And that's just before he left Wedgeford. No matter what kind of person he is, your Kai has held a lot of hurt."

"I know," Naomi whispered. "I know he's been hurt more than I have."

Her mother put a hand on her knee. "It doesn't matter whose pain is greater. You care about his. The question is, if he hurt you, does he care about yours?"

A few days ago, Naomi had thought her mother soft and cowardly. She had never realized how strong her mother's softness could be.

Because strength was what this was. Saying hurtful things, avoiding all conversation about her feelings—she *had* been a coward there. She'd been too afraid to say how she felt.

"Oh." She sat up. "When Ma Wing told me I was plain and clumsy, he didn't care about my hurt."

"He probably wanted it," her mother said dryly. "If you thought ill of yourself, you'd be more grateful that he chose you. He wanted you to feel small."

Plain and clumsy, he'd said, and nobody will ever love you, just like your mother.

Those words had hurt for so long. Plain, Naomi suspected, would sting for a long time. Nobody will ever love you? That, too.

But she no longer felt even a twinge at the thought of *just like your mother*.

"I thought you wanted me to end my engagement to Kai."

"You know the real reason for that?"

Naomi shook her head.

"I don't think he plans to stay in Wedgeford." Her mother folded her hands. "I don't know why I think that. Maybe because he is not making ties in the village. I think he's going to marry you." She dropped her voice. "I think you will leave with him. And I think when that happens, I will never, ever see

you again. So I don't want to like him. I don't *want* him to be a good person."

"Haha." Naomi put her arm around her.

"I apologize, too," her mother said. "For this morning. Deep down, I want him to be awful. I want you to see it because I want you to stay."

They sat together for a minute longer. Fraud, he'd said.

Perhaps this was naïveté on her part, but the concept of Kai as a man set on fleecing Wedgeford did not make sense. Would he not—for instance—have tried to get her parents to pay a price for the dishes he'd made that morning? Would he not have taken advantage of any of her many offers to not pay for dinner? He had an almost palpable distaste to being given anything: not a favor, not a dinner. How would that make *sense*, if he were defrauding everyone?

More importantly, how would it make *money*?

He had not said just fraud, after all. He had said: *one perfect fraud*. What did a perfect fraud mean to a man who had ethics about the lies he told?

She sat in silence, contemplating all of that. She could lose her head to hurt and anger over whatever she imagined, or she could...not.

Naomi owed Kai what her mother had given her: she owed him a chance to explain.

THROUGH THE WALK TO DOVER THE NEXT MORNING WITH Naomi, Kai nursed an alcohol-induced headache, one that meant he managed little more than a few grunts as he and Naomi started walking in the early morning. So, it took him almost half an hour to realize that Naomi was *also* horribly quiet. She usually spoke about anything and everything. But she'd asked him only a few questions about how he was feeling. Now, she walked beside him, eyes fixed forward, expression sober.

“Is everything all right?” he asked several miles in.

“Do you want to hear the truth?”

He gave her a look. “Yes, if for no other reason than you’re bad at lying.”

“Then no. Everything is not all right.”

“What is wrong?”

“I have spent years trying not to be my mother,” Naomi replied. “And now I’m realizing that may have been something of a mistake.”

That didn’t bode well. Mrs. Kwan was not fond of Kai.

“I’m sorry,” she said instantly. “I’m *thinking*. There’s something I have to do, but I don’t know what it is yet. And I’m thinking.”

She didn’t say anything else for the remainder of their walk.

During the class, she took notes, but they were less detailed than the time before. She made no charts to differentiate between fracture, strain, and dislocation. She doodled a little flower in the margin. When it came time for the practical portion, he tried to catch her eye. Maybe he was too successful, because she made a sling for his arm that practically immobilized him. He sat in the classroom as she looked off into the distance and wondered what had changed.

It was only when they were halfway back to Wedgeford that she finally spoke. “Last night,” she said tentatively, “when you were inebriated...”

“Oh no.” Kai felt his blood freeze. “I said something, didn’t I?”

She nodded.

“And that’s why you’ve been like this.”

She nodded again.

“I mostly remember ranting about pottery.” Pottery was a horrifically dangerous subject. There were so many things he

could have said that would have made her so pensive. She watched him steadily.

What had he revealed? He remembered something about how fine china was trash. How a bowl was supposed to fit in a hand. He had a vague memory of talking about porcelain. It was hardly a step from there to telling her about his highest aspirations.

Kai suddenly felt cold.

Had he talked about what he planned to make?

Disaster. He'd just managed to get some of the people in Wedgeford to think that he might not be a charlatan.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't tell people about it," he said after a moment. "It would make for some awkward conversations."

"I haven't told anyone yet," Naomi said. "I'm trying to figure out what the right response would be."

"It won't hurt them not to know," Kai said.

Her frown deepened. Apparently, that had been the wrong thing to say.

"I'm not withholding the information forever," he went on. "But you have to understand. My father waltzed into Wedgeford with his claims of ancient pottery techniques. If I do the same, nobody will believe me. How would it go over if I started by telling everyone that I know the secret behind Jian Zhan glaze? It wouldn't matter that I *do*. They would just think that it was all happening again. And I know it may seem dishonest to keep that to myself, but..."

He trailed off. Naomi had come to a standstill on the dusty track. She stared at him with a shocked expression.

"*You* know the secret of Jian Zhan glaze?"

His stomach dropped. "I didn't tell you that last night?"

She shook her head.

"Well. Ah." He looked up. "Damn."

“You *know* the technique that creates pottery so incredibly valuable that a single serving bowl can sell for who knows how much money?” She sounded absolutely shocked.

Even when sober, bad opinions about pottery rankled. “That,” Kai said through gritted teeth, “was my father’s lie. I know the technique well enough to know that you can’t make a serving bowl with it.”

She tilted her head at him.

“The heat,” he said, “the required thickness of the vessels to retain heat after the glaze firing, the thermal shock—never mind the details. A tea bowl is about as large as I can predictably fire using this method.”

“I was not wrong about *that*,” Naomi said, almost to herself. “If you were English, you’d wear spectacles and a tweed coat and you’d hold a series of lectures about pottery for all and sundry. You’d get invited to Sunday dinners with all the stuffy, wealthy people who wanted to hear your genius. And then you’d talk so much about pottery that eventually you’d be banished to the parlor.”

Kai thought this over. “I would not wear tweed.”

“And you can make tea bowls that will sell for pounds and pounds.”

“Mm.” Kai grimaced. “The pricing is a bit off.”

“Nevertheless, *one* pound would be extraordinary. You could *still* make a fortune. I just don’t understand.” Her voice grew smaller as she spoke. “Last night you told me that you wanted to make one perfect fraud.”

Oh. Oh *no*. When had he said that?

She turned to him. “Please don’t lie to me, Kai.”

He didn’t know how not to lie. His whole life had been a lie, and the thought of telling someone the plans he’d made ten years ago made him feel something akin to panic. It flooded through him now, freezing him in place.

“I don’t know what to do,” she continued. “Who’s the target? Me? My parents? Mr. Bei? That’s the problem. Even if

you assure me that what you're doing won't harm someone I know, how can I believe you? You're going to commit *fraud*. Why didn't you tell me that you were going to commit fraud?"

He could not formulate how to respond. The truth felt heavy and sharp inside him.

"No, never mind. What a stupid question. You're very intelligent. Obviously you're not going to walk into town and announce that you're committing fraud to the girl you're falsely engaged to. I just thought..." Her voice grew very small. "I thought you were a good person." Her voice broke. "I think you might still be one. Am I foolish?"

"Ah, sweetheart." Kai took a step forward, then clenched his fists at his side. "Don't cry over me. It will break my heart."

"I thought I knew who you were. How can I trust you about anything, then? What if the only reason you kissed me was to turn my head so I wouldn't think about what you were doing?"

"No," Kai said in horror. "Naomi. Absolutely not."

"How can I *know*?"

That was the moment when the tears she'd been holding back came out in a rush. She raised her hands to her eyes and sobbed. Kai stood there, helpless, thinking about what she'd told him, that men didn't lose their heads about women like her.

"Would it help if I held you?" he asked quietly.

"Probably." She sobbed into her hands. "It shouldn't."

He took a step forward.

"It will also make it worse."

He stopped.

"But yes. You should do that."

So, he folded his arms around her and let her cry in the cold air. He felt the shake of her shoulders. Her hands came to touch his arms, her fists clenching in the fabric of his coat. He

patted her gently on the back and felt his own eyes water in sympathy. Really, what could he say to her?

I'm not a scoundrel. Lies. I'm not defrauding anyone. Also a lie. All he could offer her were true things that he couldn't prove, and those weren't enough.

She shook her head in his arms. "I'm so stupid. I like you so much."

"You're not stupid."

"I thought you would defend yourself."

"There's nothing to defend. I am planning to commit fraud. But it would very much defeat the purpose if I hurt you doing it."

"The purpose is not to hurt me?"

"The purpose is not to hurt anyone in Wedgeford." He was here to repay debts, not to incur more of them.

Strangely, she nodded. "I figured that out for myself. What could you get from us? Maybe ten pounds, if you were really, really thorough. More, if you deceived Jeremy, but Chloe would—never mind. After what you've spent on transportation and materials, it would hardly be worth it." She sniffled. "So that wouldn't make any sense. And whatever you're doing, I'm *positive* it has to make sense."

"It would also make me feel awful," Kai murmured into her hair. "So, there's that."

She looked up at him. "You don't feel awful about your fraud?"

He looked up. "I realize this will not endear me to you, but no. I am positively *delighted*."

"Oh." Her chest heaved. "That makes me feel better. If you were trying to lie to me, you would pretend harder."

He gave her a strange look. "I *am* lying to you."

"About Wedgeford. So tell me more about this fraud."

Kai shook his head. “Absolutely not. You’re not inside this lie; it would not benefit you to be so. Stay out there.”

“That almost sounds like you’re trying to protect me.”

He huffed. “Don’t make me sound sweet. We are talking about fraud. It will involve lying, deceit, and—if I manage to make it work—a great deal of money.”

“Who else is inside this lie?”

“Just me.”

“And how long has it been going on?”

“Ten years?” He looked upward. “No, eleven, if you count travel time. Twelve, really. If you count the moment it started, before I knew the form it would take.”

“Can you tell me how it started?”

He shouldn’t. He absolutely shouldn’t. To tell her was to expose himself—the truth of himself—and she would never look at him the same way again.

That was what decided him. He liked her. She liked the part of him that he’d let her see. She’d never know all of him—he couldn’t let her—but if she knew that Kai, at his core, was just enough his father’s child...

“After I left Wedgeford with my father,” Kai said slowly, “we...gallivanted, for lack of a better word. He took me to the United States—this was back before it closed to Chinese people. We went to New York, Boston. He played up the Chinese marquis thing, got us invited to the right places. You can live well if you’re offered infinite hospitality, and we were something like a two-person traveling curiosity.”

She made a disgusted face at that.

“I was enrolled in an expensive school for a few years. He disappeared while I was there, then reappeared with a charming explanation about the payment—hadn’t it arrived? A bank error, he was sure. Every time I *didn’t* see him, I tried to convince myself that what happened in Wedgeford was an error or an exaggeration. But when he spirited me away from

the school at the age of nine, bills still unpaid, he told me it was time to start learning the family trade.

“I was old enough, he said, to be trusted with the inside of the lie. For a few years, in Switzerland, we trained. We would go to another village for a day and pretend to be someone we were not. He would make up a story, and I would have to follow along. And if I got something wrong...” Kai somehow could not make himself finish the sentence.

Naomi must have seen something in his expression because she put a hand over his. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged off her gesture. “Don’t look at me like that. He never even beat me. The punishment was always the same: kneeling in the street at night and reciting ‘not one word wrong’ ten thousand times.”

Some days, Kai could still feel the moonlight on the back of his neck, the pressure of the cobblestones against his knees.

“After he was satisfied with my performance, we made our way to a place he’d discovered while I’d been in school. It was a tired little mining town in the dry mountains of the American West. A number of poor Chinamen had made a home of sorts. In some ways, it was a little like Wedgeford—almost half Chinese. In others, it differed. It was larger, for one—several thousands of people, which meant there was more to be gained. And my father started to do what he’d done in Wedgeford.”

“Oh dear.”

“This time,” Kai said, feeling his stomach churn in memory, “I was old enough to assist him. ‘Make friends,’ my father said. ‘Convince them you’re a good person who wants to help.’ Everyone there was trying to save enough to return to China. Work six years, and with the right luck, you could go home and live for the rest of your life in comfort. The people there were ripe for the plucking. My father and I, we were going to be the pluckers.

“He took out all the old accoutrements he used in Wedgeford—the cup, the ancient scroll, the coded

explanations. And we went to work.”

Kai could still feel the bile rise in him. For over a year, he’d played along. He’d never taken anyone’s money directly, but he’d helped.

“I was very good at lying. I could follow every rule except one.”

“This is the one you mentioned before. Not caring about the lie?”

“I gave you the kind version.” Kai could hear his father telling him this one in a sonorous voice. “The real one goes like this: ‘Chickens are meant to be plucked. Rejoice when they are used for their intended purpose.’”

She looked as disgusted as he felt.

“And yes,” Kai said, “I tried. I tried to think of people as chickens. I tried for a full year, and I could not. There were men who had children they’d never seen, because they labored with hope for their future. There were boys my age who thought this was their only hope of marriage and a family. There were people who longed to be able to care for parents in their old age. I could never make myself indifferent. But... I tried. I knew what happened to Wedgeford and I tried.”

“I hate to interrupt,” Naomi said quietly, “but to clarify. You left Wedgeford as a very young child and spent some time in school and some more with your father in training. How old were you at this time?”

“Fourteen,” Kai said. “Old enough to know right from wrong. I knew how wrong it was every day. I tried to convince my father not to take everything—just a little, leave them something. After months of trying, my father told me I needed to accept who I was. He was a man who plucked chickens. His father plucked chickens. My grandfathers plucked chickens. Every one of my ancestors would guide my hand toward riches if I just accepted their gifts. I was meant to be a thief, and I would *be* a thief. The only question was if I would be a good one.”

“Kai.” His name had never been spoken with so much sympathy.

“It took me months after that to understand that I was not blessed by my ancestors. Every so-called chicken they had plucked had been a person with dreams of their own. When those dreams were stolen, they cursed the one who had harmed them. We did not have a gift: we had a family curse. We had no home and no family. We would never really love. They cursed us to have chickens instead of friends. It was already too late for me—”

Naomi made a noise of protest.

“But I could bring it all to an end.”

“How?” Naomi asked.

“At first it didn’t seem possible,” Kai said. “But the answer lay in the problem. Theft and lies and fraud—if I did those right, I could undo the things my father had done. It started in that town. While my father slept, I took everything. I took his ancient documents, his account books, the cup he showed everyone as proof. I took the money he’d collected and hidden away.”

Naomi’s eyes were on him, intently listening.

“I brought the money and the account book to a friend who I’d never been able to think of as a chicken. I told him the truth and asked him to give everyone back their share. Before I left town, I sent my father a letter, telling him that if I was a thief and a fraud, I was going to start in the right place: by stealing from him.”

He looked down to see tears tracking down Naomi’s face.

“Naomi?”

“No friends?” she asked in a choked voice. “Never belonging anywhere? Being stuck alone inside a lie for how many years? Kai, you must be so lonesome.”

Years of planning, years of not telling the truth—or telling only portions of the truth. Years of being the only person

inside the biggest lie he'd ever constructed. He shouldn't get sympathy. He didn't deserve it.

And yet—"Terribly," he whispered. "It's in the rules, you know. Rule seven: Never stay after the fraud has been done. No matter how safe you think you are, you are always safer moving on."

She took this in. "And is that why you've always told me you would be leaving?"

He nodded. "It wouldn't be safe to stay. That's the choice I must make: the fraud, or you."

She tilted her head up. Tracks of tears glistened down the side of her face. "I'm so sorry."

"Why are you comforting me? *I'm* the one that's doing fraud."

"A perfect fraud," she said. "I don't even know what that means—but it doesn't involve chickens, does it?"

"Only ones who believe themselves to be pluckers."

"Of course," Naomi said with such heartfelt sincerity that he wanted to hold her. "It wouldn't be perfect if you hurt the wrong people."

"Wait just a moment." He turned to her. "I was trying to convince you that I was inescapably wrong. That you were supposed to want nothing to do with me."

"You failed at that," she said simply.

He stared at her. "I failed."

"You failed at driving me away," she repeated. "I have been thinking of nothing but this ever since you said the word 'fraud.' I panicked at first and thought you were intent on hurting everyone here. I thought I had made a horrible mistake. But once I got my wits about me, I knew there had to be an explanation."

"I haven't even given you one yet."

"Yes, you have. You've explained who you are, and that was what I needed to know."

And then she pushed up. Without thinking, he leaned down to meet her. Her lips met his, and the darkness of Kai's memories seemed to recede. She tasted like all the things he couldn't allow himself to dream about: care, vulnerability, and a life unencumbered by what his father had done.

If there was any proof that Kai still had his father in him, it was this: that he knew it was wrong to kiss her, and he did it anyway. That he knew it was hopeless to want her, and he did it anyway. He wanted her to be his, and she would never be.

He pulled away. "Naomi. We can't. We have to remember that our engagement is fake."

She looked at him for a long moment. Then her chin squared in determination. "I don't think our engagement is fake."

He exhaled shakily. She knew. She knew he'd lied about something so fundamental. She knew about the betrothal—

"When I think of engagement, I imagine someone who likes me best. Someone who I like best. Tell me, Kai. How is this fake?"

"I am leaving."

"That makes it temporary. It doesn't make it fake."

He had to keep hold of his rationality. "How does that make sense? What is the difference between a temporary engagement and a fake one?"

She stood her ground, unmoving, her hand still on his chest. "A temporary engagement means you're not alone. It means you're not pretending. It means I can tell you the things I feel and you can do the same. It means you belong in my life as long as you need to be here. You are not inhabiting a space that doesn't belong to you."

He wanted it. He wanted it so much.

"It means our connection is real, and what we are to each other is real. It means I am truly the woman who cares for you, if you will be..." She stopped. "But I don't want to get ahead of myself."

“Naomi.” He couldn’t keep himself from pulling her close. “I care for you so much.”

“Good,” she muttered into his chest.

He wrapped his hands around her and squeezed her tightly. He was going to have to let go someday—but not today. Not yet.

She held him back, fiercely, her breath against his chest.

Aeons seemed to pass. The sun lifted high overhead; the wind rustled against them. Finally, he let her go, but only to arm’s length. Only so he could look down at her.

Without conscious thought, he found his thumb stroking from her shoulder, down the white piping at her neckline, to touch the warm skin at the edge of her collar.

Her mouth opened a fraction. “Kai.”

He stilled his hand. “I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t. I *mustn’t*.” His fingers yearned to trace her jaw.

“I wasn’t going to stop you.” She picked up his hand and moved it back to her collarbone. “I wanted to encourage you. You should. You must.”

And so he did. He leaned down and kissed her again, and because the bare touch of his lips on hers was nowhere near enough, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up against him.

Kai had been alone inside the lie he had decided to tell since he was fourteen. Even though Naomi didn’t know the particulars, she knew the lie existed. And here she was. Still with him.

“I never thought,” he whispered against her lips, “that anyone could know the ugly truth of me and want me anyway.”

Naomi shook her head. “Your truth,” she said, “is beautiful.”

BACK AT HOME, NAOMI PUT ON HER APRON AND BEGAN helping out—wiping water spots off the glasses, cleaning the floor, and—most of all—thinking.

She caught glimpses of her parents as she worked. They talked quietly. They worked together in a synchrony born of decades spent together. Once, she saw them laughing quietly about something in the kitchen.

It was something she'd seen so often—the two of them whispering. How had she decided her mother was unloved?

Naomi had never seen her mother clearly before. Yes, she was short and what many might call plain. She was soft and giving. Naomi had thought that softness was the same thing as weakness. It hadn't been.

And yet there had been that reluctance to allow her to take the ambulance class. There had been the flash of fear in her mother's eyes.

She joined her aunt and mother in the kitchen washing rice. The grains swirled through their hands. She watched for a moment before speaking.

“Haha, why didn't you want me to take the ambulance class?”

It took her mother a moment to answer. “At first,” her mother said, “it was because you were sixteen.”

Reluctantly, Naomi had to agree that she might have been too young to spend time among grown men.

“Then...” Her mother said before pausing and looking over at her sister. Naomi’s aunt was decanting water white with starch.

“What is it?” Naomi asked.

Her aunt looked up, then set the basin of rice down. “It’s probably best.” Katsumi clicked her tongue. “We probably should have told her before now.”

“Told me what?”

“The story of how we left,” Katsumi said. “We told you a simplified version when you were younger.”

“It would have been hard for a child,” her mother said softly. “We didn’t want you to worry.”

“It’s hard for an adult,” Katsumi said dryly. “When I was sixteen, a Western man swept me off my feet. I agreed to marry him within weeks of us meeting.”

“I didn’t approve,” her mother said flatly, arms folded. “You had no business being beyond the kannen anyway.”

“No, I didn’t.” Her aunt laughed. “It was forbidden. I should never have met him, let alone spoken with him. But *I* didn’t believe that. I was at the age where I thought I knew everything.”

“This age has never entirely stopped,” her mother said with a smile.

“Westerners seemed fascinating and powerful. There was an emperor, and he had just announced that Japan would open itself to knowledge from around the world. I had already been fascinated; I’d been learning Dutch from some of the interpreters. Now, everything was changing.”

“It was.” Her mother nodded in memory. “It felt like it came so fast, between one month and the next.”

“The man I met when I snuck into the western section of Yokohama was older than me. He showered me with gifts and compliments. He promised to marry me and take me home to his parents. They would adore me, he promised. It all seemed so beautiful and romantic.”

“I hated everything about him when she finally told me,” her mother said in much the same tone of voice. “I thought he would not treat her well. And *our* parents agreed with me. We told her she couldn’t marry him, and if she did, we would never see her again.”

“*He* told me that my family was foolish, that they simply didn’t understand the world.”

Naomi’s mother snorted. “*You* told me that I was as weak and simple-minded as our mother.”

“And *you* told me that I was the stupidest of all of us.” Katsumi relayed this with a smile that almost seemed fond.

It was almost impossible for Naomi to imagine her aunt and mother speaking to each other in that fashion. She’d never heard them say an unkind word to each other. Least of all words like these.

“So that’s how I left Japan,” Katsumi said. “With a hasty wedding and the sure knowledge that my family was lost to me. I didn’t even think I cared.” She paused. “Except when I wept on the ship.”

“A few weeks later,” Naomi’s mother said, “I realized that there were two options. One, I was wrong, and my little sister’s husband was a good man. If so, I had just made sure that I would never see my beloved sister again. I would never meet her children.”

“How awful,” Naomi breathed.

“Two? I was right. He was not going to treat her well. Her whole family had just pushed her away. If anything went wrong, she would have nobody to turn to.” Her mother looked down. “Either possibility was unbearable. So I followed her to the Netherlands.”

“Alone,” Naomi said softly. She’d always imagined her mother being dragged on the journey by her sister, reluctant to her core. Slowly, Naomi adjusted her mental image of her mother to someone brave and determined—someone who would cross the world on her own. Someone who would do anything for a little sister who had called her names.

“She was right.” Aunt Katsumi looked down. “My husband was not who I thought. And when I really needed her, my sister was there.”

So many little things in Naomi’s life suddenly fell into place. Of course her parents would not have told her everything when she was a child; she would have been too young to comprehend it. But now she could see how her mother and aunt’s unknown past had shaped her life nonetheless, in ways that Naomi had poorly understood. Her aunt’s comment about hasty marriages being a sore subject—she hadn’t been talking about Naomi’s mother; she’d been speaking about *herself*.

The way her mother had stopped arguing, and started instantly *fretting*, when Naomi announced her engagement to Kai—that, too, spoke of a history that Naomi hadn’t understood.

“When I first met your Kai,” her mother said, “he put me off. His gifts seemed excessive. I thought ‘oh, he’s one of those kinds of men.’ There was so much, so quickly.”

“I don’t think he is,” Naomi murmured.

“It took you telling me for me to pay attention. Your Kai doesn’t give gifts because he wants to turn your head. It’s because he can’t imagine anyone liking him any other way.”

“Oh.” What a way to think of it. Naomi could see it more clearly than her mother. Kai didn’t expect people to care for him.

“And then there was your ambulance course.” Her mother sighed. “It wasn’t that I didn’t want you to have knowledge. It was just the thought of you there...” She looked over at Naomi. “You look so much my sister at that age. You have so much of her fearlessness, so much of her spirit. I did not fear the unknown; I feared the thing I had watched happen with my own eyes.”

Her mother had opened up so much of her inner self to Naomi; it was only fair that Naomi do the same. “I wanted to take the course because I remember when Ma Wing spoke to

me. I felt frozen, unable to defend myself. I hated the feeling of just standing there.” She folded her arms and looked down. “I wanted to know what to *do*. So that nobody would ever be wounded that way again, not without someone there to stop it. Not while I was there.”

Her mother and aunt came up to her. She wasn’t sure who started it, but before she could understand what was happening, their arms came around each other, holding one another. She could feel the shake of her mother’s shoulders, the pressure of her aunt’s embrace.

Aunt Katsumi let out a sigh and stood. “Enough reminiscing,” she said. “There’s work to be done.”

Silently, they dispersed.

Naomi went about her day in a daze. She picked up the discarded rinse from the rice and brought it out to the back garden, tipping its contents into the irrigation furrows near the fruit trees. It seeped into the ground.

It was too cold for the first seedlings to be planted, but even though the trees were still bare, the water would nourish them.

Her mother had the courage to leave her home and follow after a sister who had cut her off. The enormity of that staggered her.

How had Naomi ever thought her mother *passive*, when she was the one who always took it upon herself to do what needed to be done? It took her a moment to understand. It had not just been Ma Wing who spoke of her mother that way. People saw kindness as weakness. They saw her service as stupidity. And Naomi had agreed.

Ma Wing had told her that her mother knew better than to expect love. Of all the things he had said, this was the one that now seemed the cruelest.

Naomi’s mother had never been weak. She had never been cowardly. And least of all, she had never been unloved. He had tried to make Naomi hate the strength she had inside her—

the strength she now saw she'd inherited directly from her haha.

He had almost succeeded.

And Kai... Kai had understood what it meant to have someone rob her of her sense of self, because he had experienced it so abruptly and painfully. He'd felt it from the people in Wedgeford, who insisted he couldn't be honest; he'd learned it from his father, who told him the exact same thing. Perhaps the reason they had understood each other so well was that they had both had a core in them, one that had always refused to believe that the world was *right* about what they said.

Never again, she thought, watching the water sink into the ground. She was never again letting someone make her think herself weak.

THERE WAS, NAOMI REALIZED, A CYCLE TO THE MAKING OF pottery, and now, with Kai's first load of pottery finished, it started again. Kai went back to throwing. Last time, Naomi had watched him handle large lumps of clay, forming thick cones, then pushing the clay down. She'd watched with impure thoughts.

Now, she watched him knowing that impure actions would follow. Every afternoon, after the soup was simmering, she'd go up and watch him work.

Somedays, he would make teacup after teacup, laying them out in a neat little row. When he was done, he'd wash his hands.

Then they would kiss, and he would put his hands on her. He was strong—there was no doubt about it—but there was a precision and a delicacy to his movements. He seemed to know where his hands were at any moment—precisely how close he came to laying his thumb over her nipple, how to press just enough to make her gasp.

There was never time to do much more. A short interlude was all they could manage, because the cups he'd thrown earlier in the day had to be trimmed. He used a small, black piece of metal, bent at a right angle and sharpened at the edge, to peel off leather-like strips of clay. Naomi would watch, marveling at the precision in his touch, before she would have to return home to help with dinner service.

On the third day since the ambulance class, she arrived to see that Kai had company. Mr. Bottoms, the potter from Dover, was there.

"It's so dark," he was saying, tossing a ball of clay from hand to hand. "You don't prefer lighter clays?"

Kai had rolled his sleeves up, and he was slapping a lump of dark brown clay as tall as his forearm into a semblance of roundness. "I'm letting you watch," he said. "I work with what I work with."

"What is that, fifteen pounds of clay?"

"Twenty-ish."

Mr. Bottoms sat next to him. "And you'll be throwing off the hump?"

"I don't know what that means." Kai let the clay fall onto the wheel in front of him, then slapped it, turning the wheel as he did. Finally, he kicked the wheel and let it spin.

Mr. Bottoms let out a little high-pitched scream. "What! What are you—oh, are you by chance left-handed?"

Kai dipped his hands in the bowl of water. "No."

"It's going backward. Your wheel is going *backward*. And how do you not get clay everywhere? Don't you have some kind of a splash guard?"

Kai looked heavenward briefly but didn't say anything. Instead, he dipped his hands lightly in the water, and pressed his hands into the clay. It rose, conical, before he pressed it down. He scraped the liquid that clung to his hands on the edge of the bowl, wet his hands again briefly, and then did it again.

“But you’re not using hardly any water. How do you—that’s—I don’t...”

Kai placed his thumbs in the center of the mass, then pulled them out simultaneously, opening the top into a bowl.

Mr. Bottoms let out another shriek. “No, no, no.” He seemed to be moaning to himself. “That’s not how it’s done at all. You don’t start with a cylinder?”

Without responding, Kai reached by his side and picked up a piece of wood. It looked like a long tongue of wood, curved on one end and flat at the other.

“Is that a rib?” Mr. Bottoms asked.

“I don’t know what it’s called in English.”

He gathered some of the wet clay he’d scraped on the bowl and coated the tool, before setting this in the middle of the depression he’d made.

“Not exactly a rib,” Mr. Bottoms mused. “A throwing stick, maybe?”

Kai set the edge of his hand against the clay. It seemed to rise of its own accord along the flat tongue of the tool. Naomi had watched him do this all too many times, and every time she’d never understood what was happening. One minute, it was clay spinning; the next, it was a bowl.

“Christ.” Mr. Bottoms stared. “That’s just ridiculous, is what it is. I feel like an absolute novice.”

Kai didn’t say anything, just wet his hands again, rubbed them together, and returned his hands to the bottom of the bowl. He did some magic with his forefinger, and when he raised that again, the bowl was six inches taller. From there on, Mr. Bottoms subsided into near silence, punctuated only by indistinct mutters as Kai finished the piece into a massive serving bowl.

“How can you be backward and inside out and still do it perfectly? Nobody else does it like that. And yet...” He trailed off.

“Maybe the person who is doing it perfectly isn’t doing it backward,” Naomi suggested.

Mr. Bottoms frowned, considering this, then shook his head. “I want to know about that rib thing you used. What is it? Where do you get one?”

“I made this one,” Kai said. “As for what it’s called, cow’s... Sorry. I don’t know what the English word is?”

Kai scraped his hands against the bowl of water, then rinsed them.

“It’s ridiculous.” Mr. Bottoms gestured to the bowl. “All my life, I’ve been telling myself I’ll learn how to use porcelain. I’ve made contacts. I know people who would *buy* such things, if only I had it to sell. And I think you’ve just convinced me that there’s nothing for it. I could never do it, not unless I relearned everything I know.”

To Naomi’s mind, Kai just looked pensive. “Were you interested in it for the money, or for the beauty?”

“Aren’t we all in it for the beauty?” Mr. Bottoms looked wistful for one moment. “But no. It was absolutely the money. It was a good dream while it lasted.”

“Tell me,” Kai said, “since you have all the contacts and a burning desire for money. Do they have any interest in pottery made in the Eastern style? And what sort of finder’s fee would you want for introducing us?”

Mr. Bottoms looked over at him, and very, very slowly, he brightened. “I know *exactly* who we should talk to.”

THE TEMPERATURE HAD CHANGED IN WEDGEFORD ONCE AGAIN.

It wasn't just the start of spring, heralded by blossoms on trees and now, green leaves. Little by little, people had become almost friendly.

Villagers who had slammed their doors in Kai's face now greeted him when they saw him. Married couples sometimes winked at Kai when he was with Naomi, by way of encouragement. An elderly woman, who had lived in Wedgeford before even Mr. Bei arrived, brought Kai a rug she had made for his floor in exchange for the bowls he had made her. She was not alone; he started acquiring every thing from tulip bulbs to chairs, and before long, the barren rooms containing only his bedroll began to feel closer to...home.

One day, weeks after he and Naomi talked, when Kai's garden—sown with seeds from Andrew—was beginning to sprout true leaves, Kai came into the inn only to see a large—large for Wedgeford, which meant almost thirty people—gathering.

“What's going on?” he whispered to Naomi, when he found her.

“Jeremy's back!” she said excitedly. “Chloe's husband?”

Ah. The duke. He'd heard a bit about him. If his father had known there was a half-Chinese duke, he would have been slavering at the chance.

That fact alone meant that Kai wanted to stay away.

“Here,” Andrew was saying to the man, “we need to introduce you to our newest arrival. Liu Ji Kai, this is Jeremy Wentworth. Jeremy, this is Kai.”

“I’ve heard of you,” said the man everyone seemed to call “Jeremy” when he was actually a duke. That sentence sounded somewhat ominous.

“I’ve heard of you, too,” Kai said cautiously. “You’re the one who built that house.”

“It’s so big,” Chloe lamented at Jeremy’s side. “Why?”

“You’re the one making the pottery,” Jeremy said with a grin. “It’s different than what I saw in Guangzhou. Where did you study again?”

“North of there.”

The duke waited a beat for more information. When none came, he smiled easily. “There’s an elegance to it. I thought I might commission some for my London home.”

“How very kind of you,” Kai said. “When I open commissions, I’ll let you know.”

Then the duke’s attention was sought elsewhere, and the crowd—thankfully—moved on.

Kai tried to find a quiet corner to eat, but after a few minutes, the others settled near him. It was, of course, the corner for young people; he should have realized it would happen. Kai tried to keep silent.

At one point, the duke asked for the soy sauce. “Your Grace.” Kai handed over the little earthenware bottle.

“No, no,” the man said. “Jeremy. If you must be formal, Wentworth. I realize I’m purportedly a duke, but I try not to be one here.”

Kam Ming, who had settled on one side, laughed. “Liu-go has the same problem.”

“Oh, is he a duke, too?”

“Close.” Kam Ming grinned. “He’s a marquis.”

This had to be nipped in the bud. “No,” Kai said.

It was too late. The duke—Wentworth—Jeremy—whatever his name was leaned in, interest sparking in his eyes. “Please. Now I must hear the story.”

Lovely. Now Kai had to tell it. “My father’s past is not a secret in Wedgeford. He claimed to be a Chinese marquis. The title was supposedly created in the Song dynasty. He had paperwork to prove it and everything.”

“Was the title granted in perpetuity?” Jeremy asked.

“Ah?” Kai frowned.

“Because many Chinese titles extinguished naturally after some generations. I can’t imagine that a Song dynasty title would still be around unless it was perpetual.”

Kai shook his head. “You know more about the matter than I. If you had asked him, I’m sure he would have claimed it was in perpetuity. As soon as he knew he was supposed to claim such a thing. But of all the false things he believed...he did truly think he was a marquis. He also thought this made me one, too.”

“When he died, you mean,” Andrew put in.

“It’s complicated,” Jeremy said. “I mean, one would think that England’s nobility *looks* complicated. But no. Chinese nobility? They invented complexity. My mother tried to explain it to me when I was there a few years ago. You have not seen rankings and hierarchies until you’ve seen Chinese nobility. Add in that there are so many dynasties, and every one of them handles it a little differently.”

“You seem to understand more than I do,” Kai said.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Jeremy said. “Do go on.”

“There’s not much to go on about. What do *you* think?” Kai asked. “Were my hallowed ancestors who deceived others for a living also of noble lineage? Or did they tell a lie that even their own descendants believed?”

Andrew squinted. “What’s the difference?”

Kai scoffed. “Immense. You can’t just declare yourself a marquis.”

“Of course you can,” Andrew said decisively. “That’s the only way any of this nobility blather ever happens. It’s all just words until someone believes it. They don’t mean anything.” He glanced over at Wentworth. “No offense, Jeremy.”

“None taken. It’s all an entirely fake system. The only reason it’s so complicated is so that nobody notices how ridiculous it is.”

“Fake? Don’t you run the country?” Kai asked.

“Well, really!” Jeremy huffed. “Only a little bit! There’s all of Parliament, you see. You have to get everyone else to agree, and the only thing they’ll agree on is that rules that make you all very very wealthy at the expense of everyone else are good. It is a little fake, but it’s also real. I just wish I could just say that I wasn’t a duke, and then...poof. I wouldn’t be one.”

“You could,” Andrew said. “You literally could.”

“It’s hereditary,” Jeremy said. “It wouldn’t work. People know me and they would object.”

“So they *claim*,” Andrew suggested with a sly wink, “but I wager half the ones who think they know you wouldn’t be able to tell if I dressed up in your clothes. If they went up to you and said, ‘it’s you, you’re the half-Chinese duke!’ you could simply say, ‘no, no, you’ve confused me for another half-Chinese person’ and they would all walk away thinking what a bother it was that so many Chinamen looked alike.”

“That’s a good point,” Jeremy slumped. “Too bad it would be a crime.”

“One moment,” Kai interjected. “You’re a duke. You can’t commit crimes.”

“Technically false. I can commit them. I just won’t be charged with them. Probably.”

“What’s the difference? Either you’re a duke impersonating a non-duke—in which case you can’t be tried—or you’re a non-duke who isn’t impersonating anyone.”

Andrew sat back. “You see.” He spoke in a tone of great satisfaction. “Jeremy, this is what I was telling you about this fellow. This is the kind of thinking Wedgeford needs. The next century will dawn in a handful of years, and we must do our best to adapt to modern times. All we need is for you, Jeremy, to commit the crime, and for you, Kai, to figure out how to get away with it. Then we’ll all profit.”

Andrew was joking, Kai thought, about the commission of crime. He was probably joking. Still, the conversation seemed particularly fraught, given Kai’s background.

“If I figure things out and he does all the work,” Kai said, “then what do you do?”

Andrew beamed sunnily. “Stay at home and collect all the profits, of course.”

Jeremy squinted at Andrew. “Are you sure you’re not a duke? Because that’s a *very* ducal attitude.”

Andrew just gave a slow smile. “I could be,” he said. “Maybe you better all bow.”

This was met with groans, and the general pelting of Andrew with epithets.

In the disarray that followed, Kai escaped.

KAI HAD NOT GONE FAR—JUST OUT THE DOOR—WHERE HE WAS met by Naomi’s parents. Mr. and Mrs. Kwan had obviously been waiting for him to leave, because they moved to intercept him with alacrity.

Kai found himself conducted into the back office where they’d once met a month and a half ago.

“Mr. Kwan,” Kai said. “Mrs. Kwan. How can I help?”

“You are going to marry my daughter,” Mr. Kwan said. “But we have not spoken much.”

Ah. The more serious he and Naomi appeared to be, the more he should have expected this talk. This was the talk where they threatened bodily harm if he should hurt Naomi in any way.

“I will do my best to take care of you daughter,” Kai said. And he would. The worst thing he could do was marry her. He intended to leave her at the first opportunity.

Mr. Kwan just shook his head. “This is long overdue. Liu Ji Kai, I apologize for my treatment of you when you were last in Wedgeford.”

Kai tilted his head in confusion.

By his side, Mrs. Kwan nodded. “I also apologize.”

“You’re apologizing to *me*,” Kai said blankly. “About what happened back *then*.”

“You were a child betrothed to my daughter,” Mr. Kwan said. “I should have treated you like my son. I failed to protect you. I apologize.”

Kai felt like the entire world had flipped upside down. The notion that someone would apologize to him about what had happened in Wedgeford when he was a child? He had no idea why they would do that. His father had been robbing *them*. Were they supposed to have been kind about it?

“That’s entirely unnecessary,” he managed to get out. His head was echoing with question marks.

“I mean it,” Mr. Kwan said. “And it is necessary.”

“Not just because it is owed,” Mrs. Kwan put in. “Because I have been thinking. I see how you and Naomi look at each other.”

“I’m sorry,” Kai said.

She just shook her head. “That wasn’t a reprimand, and you shouldn’t apologize for it. You deserved better from the moment you arrived this winter,” Mrs. Kwan said. “You were met with suspicion, even though we knew nothing of you as an adult. Now we have had a chance to see you for who you are. You work hard. You treat Naomi well. I had anger and I had

pride, and I didn't want to admit the truth for far too long. But you are a good man."

Kai felt his throat go dry. "This is too kind."

"And my daughter cares for you," Mrs. Kwan said. "I must confess an additional wrong we did to you: I did not want to tell Naomi about the childhood betrothal because I thought that withholding it would turn her against you, if we needed it."

Kai had known that. He'd heard them plotting. It had not bothered him, because he had never believed that he would have her.

"I will tell her," her mother said. "I will take the blame for the silence. It will not harm you."

He looked away. The village green was dark, but for the light spilling from the windows of the inn. Kai's entire future seemed murky in the moment. "Everything Naomi has done so far," he said slowly, "has been because *she* wants to do it. In a place where I thought nobody would choose me, she has chosen me. I am afraid to lose that."

He could feel their scrutiny. His reasons felt foolish and insubstantial.

"We all know the betrothal didn't mean anything. She is not held to it. There's no need to tell her about something so meaningless at all."

Mr. Kwan chuckled, then shook his head, a motion barely visible in the night. "I'm not laughing at what you're saying. But when you first came here, I tried to make you speak by forcing silence, and it didn't work. You must have been so uneasy, but still, everything you said was so controlled. If only I had realized that being kind to you would be much more effective."

"Oh." Kai swallowed. "Um."

"What is the real reason?" Mrs. Kwan asked.

Kai let out a breath. "The childhood engagement came from my father. I think about it often—how in a sea of wrong-

doing, he did this one thing *right*. It is so right for me, even if entirely by accident. I don't want to acknowledge my father between us. I don't want to have his shadow where it doesn't belong. I want to pretend, just for a little longer, that I don't have a father."

"You do," Mr. Kwan said quietly.

Kai shook his head vehemently.

"I don't mean the man who sired you," Mr. Kwan said. "I mean that the role of father can be played by many people. Friends. Other family members. But most of the time, as you grow older, it's yourself."

The very conception of *father* made Kai's palms feel cold and clammy.

"Especially when yours have passed away, like mine," Mr. Kwan said quietly. "I am fifty-three years old, and I can still hear them in my head, like the voice of authority. The one that makes me look at you and think: 'Kwan, I expected better of you. Go apologize to that boy and stop dawdling on what to say.'" He paused, considering those words. "Man, I mean."

Kai had met suspicion with equanimity. He'd accepted harsh words and slammed doors without more than a sigh. But kindness? That was too much. He'd steeled himself to endure Wedgeford at its worst. He didn't know what to do with acceptance.

They were watching him, both worried, as if his response mattered. As if all he had to do was say what he needed, and they would do it.

"There's no need to be so kind," he finally told them. "I, too, have a voice of authority in my head. It says 'Liu, you've done nothing to deserve this kindness.' I appreciate your words. They are unnecessary."

"Your words don't match," Mrs. Kwan said slowly.

Kai felt a fear run through him, an echo that whispered *not one word wrong*. He'd made a mistake. He'd been caught.

“You say that you don’t want your father to have anything to do with you, but now you say that you don’t deserve fairness from those who would become family. Whose voice are you hearing inside your head?”

He did not need to be told. It was his father’s.

It was also his own. His own voice recited rules ten thousand times, over and over. His own voice had said *not one word wrong* again and again, kneeling on a cobblestone alley late at night until those words drowned out his own thoughts. Kai hadn’t just learned his family rules to recite them. He’d had them pressed into his knees. He’d made them into his breath, until the act of living was lying.

That voice in his head, the one that never stopped... Kai was here in Wedgeford to free himself from it.

He was close to firing the piece he needed. He’d learned what the kiln needed from the last months here. Soon, he would have what he needed. Soon, he’d have the material for his final fraud: enough to pay back the debts in his father’s account book, enough to extinguish his father’s voice.

And with it, he would extinguish his troth with Naomi. It had only ever been false twice: false when formed by his father. False when they agreed to it again in Dover. Kai’s engagement had only ever been real in his wishes.

“Let me tell her,” he said softly. “I will tell her the truth before we marry. I will tell her everything. But...” He could feel his voice cracking. “Until I absolutely have to bring my father into this... Let me have her to myself. For just a little longer.”

KAI LAID OUT SALT, WATER, RICE, AND BOUGHS OF GREEN holly—the only green material he could find—in dishes and a little vase at the bottom of the kiln. From here, the kiln radiated heat. He'd stoked the fire as hot as it would go.

Kai bowed deeply.

"I've done my best," he murmured to it. "Please take care of the pottery from here."

In China, it was called a dragon kiln for its long shape, rising with the hill. It might be inert brick, but glaze firing was always a bit of a surprise. Showing respect and good manners to whomever decided the outcome only made sense.

He straightened from his bow.

"Is that an offering?" Naomi asked behind him.

He turned. "Yes."

"Hm." She took a step forward. "It's only—that's how my mother and aunt do it. Rice, salt, branches, water. I've never seen anyone else in Wedgeford do it that way."

For a moment, Kai imagined telling her the reason it seemed so similar. But the truth? No. He wasn't going to do that. "That's the way I was taught to show respect to the kiln. Who knows where it actually comes from?"

"Who knows." She smiled at him. "So, you're firing today? I suppose that means there's not much for me to watch."

By the calendar, this was what passed for spring in Wedgeford. A hint of a breeze ruffled her skirts. It was warm enough today that she wore only a light wrap.

It wasn't just the temperature. Kai looked down at the buildings. He hadn't imagined the difference in his reception since he'd first arrived. A week ago, he'd laughed with Jeremy and Andrew as if he'd belonged. Naomi's parents had apologized, which still made no sense to him.

It was as if Wedgeford had come to know him and decided he could stay. If they knew, of course, they wouldn't... They wouldn't...

Wouldn't they?

"Kai?" Naomi asked next to him.

He could stay. He was beginning to realize that. He could spend the rest of his life making excellent pottery for daily use. He could marry Naomi and have a family and friends.

He wanted that peaceful, pastoral future more than almost anything he had ever wanted in his life. The desire for it rose up in him like a fever. Couldn't he just stay?

He turned to Naomi. She'd become dear to him. She was extraordinary. Brave. Brilliant. She'd seen so much of him, and still she liked him. Every line of her was beautiful to him.

What if he kept her?

She looked up at him with wide, innocent eyes. "No work to be done this afternoon?" she said. "Whatever shall we do?"

Whatever would he do? The thought seemed to fill him. Kai took her hand as she drew abreast of him and led her to the top of the kiln. From here, they could see Wedgeford below them: the inn, the gardens, the streams and irrigation ditches, the houses, the little alleys between them. Two cows and more goats grazed on the common ground.

Kai pushed her against the wall of the kiln. The fire had just been lit; the stone here was ever so slightly warm to the touch. Here, pressed close, they'd be invisible to the houses below.

“Kai?” She looked at him with wide, hopeful eyes.

“I think we should talk about what it means to be temporary fiancés.”

“Talk?” she asked, her voice a little high.

He kissed her. Their kisses were more practiced now. Their mouths melded together. She made a little sound of pleasure and oh, he was incandescent with want.

He needed to hear every noise she could make. He wanted it to be because of *him*. He’d never belonged anywhere, but he wanted to belong to Wedgeford, to her family, to *her*. He kissed her, hands caging her body against the brick of the kiln, kissed her until he felt the rock begin to warm beneath his palms from the heat of their bodies.

He kissed her until smoke trailed from the chimney, flitting over Wedgeford.

A small pile of brick, leftover from when he’d fixed the chimney, stood next to them. Carefully he guided her to sit down.

He knelt in front of her and said again, “We should talk.” His hand landed on her knee. “About what it means that we are temporarily engaged.”

“You know.” Naomi set her hand on his shoulder. Her fingers caressed his neck. “I have it on the best of authority that engaged couples often flout...certain rules.”

His throat was dry. There was a reason they weren’t supposed to do this.

“What kind of rules? Do they misspell words together?” he teased. “Do they use bad grammar?”

“I think...they explore.” She looked up at him with clear eyes. “Not that you have to! Not if you don’t want to.”

“I want to. But Naomi...”

“I know you’re not staying here,” she said. “Isn’t that all the more reason for us to not waste the time we have?”

Kai had never thought himself a particularly upright individual. He needed only the barest excuse to lean into her and kiss her again.

“Tell me if I’m taking too many liberties,” he murmured.

“Take them,” she replied. “I’ve been hoping you would. I’ve wanted and wanted. Please don’t stop.”

This close, he could scent her, sweet like heather on the wind. She took his hand, lifted her skirts a few inches. His throat dried. He could see her stockinged ankles, her shoes. Then she put his hand on her inner calf.

Her limbs were warm to the touch, and he could not help himself. His hands slid up, up to the crook of her knee.

“You’re shaking,” she said.

“I know.” He swallowed. “I want this. Very much.”

“Kai?”

He felt hot all over—not just his head, but his hands on her. He was hardening swiftly, the jut of his cock pressing against his trousers. His whole life seemed to have caught fire.

“Kai?” Her voice went higher.

Keep me, he wanted to say. Let us stay like this forever. He couldn’t get the words out of his mouth.

He wanted to know her in every possible way. He moved forward, sliding his hands up her inner thighs. He could no more keep his hands still on her skin than he could have turned into a bird and flew away. Instead, he took. He took in the heave of her breast. The intake of air as he caressed the curve of her thigh. He could feel where her stockings ended, where fabric gave way to flesh. He slipped his fingers along the transition between ribbon and bare skin.

She gasped.

He needed to know how she would sound.

There was more. So much more, and she looked up at him with open, trusting eyes.

God. He wanted this so much. He'd been wanting it since the first week he'd known her. But if he allowed himself to have more, if he allowed himself to think of her as his... Would he be able to do what he needed to do?

He'd dreamed of being liberated from the curse of his ancestors. This was the first moment that the method of liberation he had chosen for himself felt like a prison.

He leaned in and kissed her with greater force. Her legs spread; their bodies pressed together.

He'd always craved human connection. Now he wanted not just a warm body; he wanted Naomi. Naomi, with her lovely smile. Naomi, who kissed him like she wanted him. Naomi, who had heard most of the truth about Kai and wanted him.

Temporarily, yes, but that was more want than he was used to. They were even closer together now, hips aligning, pressing in movements that were beginning to go from urgent to desperate.

His want was building to some kind of crescendo. He could feel it rising in him—the need to push her down, to press into her, to take and take.

That was what stopped him. He didn't want to take. He wanted to give.

"Kai?" She lifted his chin, looking at him with wide eyes.

"You can't be comfortable." His hands twitched, yearning to hold on to her. "We should stop."

"But I am comfortable."

He pulled away. "*I* can't be comfortable." He could feel the power of his desire smashing like a great wave against the force of his resolve. "I can't be this selfish."

"Why not?"

He thought he could detect a hint of hurt in her voice—and of course it would hurt her if he pushed her away after kissing her like that. Everything in him yearned to comfort her.

If he let himself forget what he needed to do, he was going to talk himself into staying in Wedgeford. There would be no final fraud, and that meant there would be no repayment.

Just debts growing and growing, year by year.

“Kai?” Naomi’s voice was small.

All of that was *his* problem. Not hers. Of all the things Naomi didn’t deserve, least of all did she deserve to be hurt by him.

“I want too much,” he told her. “I can’t have this. But...” His throat hurt. “But can I hold you for a while?”

She nodded and melted into his embrace. He could feel her breath on his neck. Her heart beat into his chest. He could feel the trust she gave him like a palpable thing. He wasn’t sure what to do with it.

“There are too many things I have to do right,” he finally said. “Mr. Bottoms is arranging a meeting with a buyer. After these pieces are fired, I will have to manage that.”

And there was still the matter of his fraud.

“Poor Kai.” She reached up and ran her hand through his hair, down his queue. She picked up the end and kissed it. “You must be so horribly busy.”

Busy. That was as good an explanation as any for the feeling that he had. He nodded.

“Then don’t worry about me,” she said. “We’re coming up on the Trials soon. I’ve plenty to do. In the meantime, you can take care of your business.” She looked at him with a smile that seemed to reach into his soul, but she just touched a finger to his lips. “Take some time to think about what you want. Until then... Let me know if I can help in any way.”

He would never do that. “Thank you,” he said against her finger, and he held her close for now. For only now.

MUCH LATER IN THE DAY, THE LIGHT OF NAOMI'S LAMP reflected dimly in the mirror over her chest of drawers. The surface was milky with age, the edges pocked with black spots. She'd been going through her evening routine—combing her hair, changing for sleep—but her gaze caught on her reflection.

For years and years, this mirror had been a tool for Naomi to catch errors: hair that slipped out of her bun, fabric that didn't fall properly. She'd tried not to look at herself. Even the clouded reflection she saw had never been enough. But over the course of the last month, it felt as if everything she knew about herself—about her mother, her aunt, her family—had become clear.

Her mother had been as invisible to her as a join in the furniture: the one who held everything together. Naomi had never heard the chair squeak, and she'd thought the lack of complaint was a sign of her mother's weakness, rather than a mark of the excellence of the craft.

Plain, they had called her, and clumsy. *Like your mother.*

But Naomi's mother had traveled thousands of miles, alone, lit by the fire of her determination. She had chosen her life for herself. She had staked out her own happiness and found the kind of love she needed.

Naomi hadn't noticed. She'd seen her own wide, flat nose—so much like her mother's—and she'd hated it. She'd seen the square of her jaw, the opposite of the slim lines that were favored. She'd winced at the wide set of her eyes.

But now, in the mirror, she could finally see those things for what they were: her mother's features. It was her mother's jaw she had, one that spoke of unquenchable determination. It was her mother's nose, pointed unerringly forward to her destination. She had her mother's eyes as well: eyes that claimed a place for herself, no matter what anyone said.

Now Naomi reached out and touched her fingers to her own face in the mirror. Those were her mother's cheeks, her mother's forehead. Her mother's lips.

Her mother's strength of character was the reason Naomi's pockets were filled with bandages and salves and a tiny bottle of carbolic acid. Because like her mother, when something needed to be done, Naomi wanted to be the one doing it.

If men were too stupid to love that about her? They didn't deserve her.

It didn't matter what anyone else in the world thought. To herself, she could be beautiful.

"I am not clumsy," she whispered. "I was just using the wrong tool. I am not plain; I was just looking through the wrong lens." That left the last one. "I am lovable."

She had tried to tell herself again and again that she didn't mind, that the truth could not hurt.

But it had hurt, and it had never been the truth.

Naomi wanted to be loved, and she could be.

"I am lovable." She touched her lips in the mirror. "I *am* lovable."

She thought of Kai. Of the kiss they'd shared against the kiln. Of his body against hers, of the way he'd pulled away. She'd felt lovable even after he pulled away. He hadn't kissed her as if he were merely satisfying his own gratifications. He'd kissed her like she was precious.

She'd never expected such tenderness from a fake engagement. And yet now that it was here, she wanted it. No matter what she'd told herself about truth and reality, she had never stopped yearning for someone to truly love her.

Kai, Naomi suspected, wanted the same thing. He accepted a fake engagement because everything in his life had always been false. She knew what he would say. He would point out he was committing fraud. He would think that she could not truly care beyond a temporary lust.

But... He was wrong.

Looking in the mirror, she saw the determination in her own jaw.

“I am done not fighting,” she said aloud to the room. “I don’t just have to accept that this is all I will have. I want more. I deserve more. I am going to have more.” That didn’t seem enough. “I am going to have *everything*,” she promised herself.

She pulled away from the mirror and went to her window. The night was dark. By light of the stars and a far crescent of the moon, she could pick out roofs and paths.

Kai lived so far up the path that she couldn’t see his little cottage from her window.

It didn’t matter.

Naomi was going to have to talk to Chloe. Those things she had mentioned when they spoke earlier... Well, she was going to need them.

He’d convinced himself that her feelings weren’t real. He was likely very persuasive at telling himself lies.

Too bad for him. She was Naomi Kwan, and she was going to seduce him into the truth.

ALL OF WEDGEFORD KNEW THE DAY THAT KAI SOLD HIS FIRST load of pottery. The dealer came to Wedgeford from London. Kai met him in the inn in the morning, his pieces set up on the tables in the common room. The man had walked in accompanied by Mr. Bottoms, clearly prepared to haggle and humph about the quality of the merchandise.

Alas. He’d been unable to contain his delight when he’d seen what Kai had made.

Kai’s work was simple. But it was simplicity trained in excellence, and the likes of what he made was not produced in this hemisphere. The man had become more and more animated as he walked around the room.

Half of Wedgeford had found a reason to duck in and out of the inn while the appraisal went on. Mr. Bei had “business”

with Mr. Kwan; he'd winked at Kai on his way out. Kam Ming slipped into the kitchen to negotiate an order of mutton for the Trials. And Jeremy and Chloe had visited Naomi with several boxes of sauce jars, carefully not gawking as they went past.

After a substantial period of haggling, Kai had sold fifty pieces for ten pounds and change.

It took an hour for that news to get around the entire village. Up until now, Kai had thought that Wedgeford was thawing to him, but the reaction to the sale felt like the abrupt arrival of summer after a long, hard freeze. Here it was: proof that Kai was engaged in an honest trade.

This proof, as misguided and incorrect as it was, melted the last of Wedgeford's reservations.

That night, the inn was crowded and Kai found himself at the center of everyone's attention.

"A toast," suggested Mr. Lee, who had closed the door on Kai's face his first day in Wedgeford. "A toast to Wedgeford's newest tradesman."

"Well?" called someone else. "When's the wedding?"

"You shut your mouth, Kam Ming," Naomi called, and people laughed.

Andrew came up to Kai and hooked his arm around his neck. "You'll fix that cottage up properly before you make my cousin live in it, won't you?"

"I would never make Naomi live anywhere substandard," Kai replied.

Andrew took this for agreement, and he grinned and punched him in the shoulder. "See to it."

The good wishes—the slightly off-color jokes—flew thick in the air, and Kai found himself struggling to keep up. Of course he'd treat Naomi well. The date of the ceremony would be at her discretion. No, he *wasn't* interested in Mrs. Florian's daughter; he already had one fiancée, and he wanted no other. No, he wasn't going to reveal his profit margin—the cost of setting up the kiln had been substantial. He wouldn't feel

settled for a year. No, he didn't want a drink. He didn't want a clap on the back. If he could please be excused?

He had to repeat that last one to six different people before he finally managed his escape and ducked out the back door of the inn.

It was too much. He'd steeled himself for months of cold welcomes and sneering remarks. He'd not imagined acceptance. Now, knowing that he was closer than ever to his final fraud, the friendly congratulations felt fake around him.

How had his father managed it? How had he joked and made friends and *engaged his own son* to these people while he was robbing them blind? Kai could hardly manage a single evening of lying by implication.

A noise to the right caught his attention. He glanced over to see Naomi's mother crouched on her heels, tears streaking down her face.

Their eyes caught.

"Mrs. Kwan?"

"I know." She carefully wiped her face with her apron. "You are going to tell me that you will treat her well. You will say that I won't lose my daughter. Thank you for your reassurances. Don't think of my foolishness."

Kai squatted next to her. "I knew my father. I can't blame you for not trusting anyone related to him. I can't even trust myself."

Mrs. Kwan sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Have I given you any reason to believe I don't trust you?"

"You gave Naomi the...um." He fumbled for the word in English. "The...protection charm?"

"Ah." She looked at him.

"You don't pray for your daughter to be protected against fraud because you trust her fiancé."

Mrs. Kwan rubbed her temples. "I forget, sometimes. You are your father's son."

The words felt like a lash, all the more vicious for the truth in them. Kai had been shaped into the next Marquis of Everlasting Beauty, a fraudulent charlatan who would travel the globe ridding fools of their money.

“I am trying not to be.” He choked the words out. “I am trying with everything I have.”

“But it is hard for you,” she said softly. “Your father would twist and turn. He was so good at it. Everyone would twist with him, until none of us knew up from down or right from wrong.”

“I’m sorry. I truly am trying.”

She frowned. “Why are you apologizing? It took me years to truly understand what he’d done, and *I* was an adult when it happened. I did not mean that you were your father. I meant that you were his son.”

Kai shook his head. “What’s the difference? It almost sounds as if...”

It sounded like she wasn’t blaming him, but he couldn’t speak that out loud. It couldn’t be true. Kai had come to Wedgeford with a plan of deception, a plan of freedom.

After, Kai told himself. The promise of *after*—of the life he would build once he broke free from what his father had done—had pulled him along, year after year. It had seemed like a bright, blinding light, a beacon shining in the night.

But now the future was close enough that it no longer flooded his vision. He could finally make out his destination.

The rules he’d learned were pressed on his soul, binding him in place. To never speak the truth meant to never trust; to never trust meant he could have no home or real family.

What would his life truly look like after he had done what he’d come to do? During the years of Kai’s apprenticeship, he’d always imagined the suspicious Wedgeford residents reading the letters he planned to leave and counting their coins when he was finished. He’d taken a grim satisfaction in telling himself that they would finally understand how wrong they had been about him.

He had never imagined any of them saying that while he was still here. His vision of what *after* looked like had slowly, subtly shifted. *After Wedgeford* had stopped motivating him. He yearned for *now*.

The door behind them opened again. They turned as one; Naomi stood there, a sliver of light from the room washing over them, before she stepped into the moonlight.

“Haha? Kai?”

There was no way Kai could hold onto this now. He had told too many lies already, and there was no way to undo them.

“We were talking,” Mrs. Kwan said in Japanese.

“Well, don’t exclude him now,” Naomi responded with a smile. “Speak English.”

Lies had an inside and an outside. In that moment, with a sliver of the moon spilling pale light down on them amongst barren tree branches, Kai felt the shell of his lie insulating him from these women. He wanted a real life *now*. He wanted to be part of a family *now*. He wanted to be trusted *now*.

And he couldn’t have it. Even in the midst of this heartfelt conversation, he was lying by implication. He’d been lying every time he eavesdropped without letting them know the truth.

Lies were their own form of a curse. As impossible as repaying all of Wedgeford had once seemed, Kai now saw that was too easy. A curse of lies could only be broken with the truth.

If he wanted to be free, he had to learn to speak.

You aren’t excluding me, he needed to say. *I speak Japanese*.

That was all he had to say. He was going to say it. He inhaled to speak.

Kai had often thought of his dishonest ancestors as a curse. But at this moment, he felt its true power. He could feel his vocal cords locking up. The words he wanted to say seemed to

collide with a physical barrier: the barrier of rules impressed upon him until they seemed a part of his flesh. He could feel cobblestones pressing against his knees, could feel the bite of cold night as if his father still stood in front of him. He felt small and insubstantial, the world narrowing to the bite of the wind, the sound of his own voice whispering *not one word wrong*.

“In any event.” Naomi brushed her hands against her skirt. “That’s neither here nor there. I saw Kai leave and wanted to...” She paused. “Kai?”

The moon had been almost full the first night Kaid had knelt. *Not one word wrong. Not one word wrong. Not one word wrong.*

It would be wrong to give so much as a hint about his intent. He’d never mentioned that he spoke Japanese simply because it gave rise to questions: questions like “why apprentice yourself to a Japanese potter?” Questions that would have started to unravel the facade Kai presented.

He could feel that command beating in his heart. He had thought he could lie, commit fraud, repay Wedgeford, and then vanish into a new place where he could start afresh. But there was no such start if Kai could not say what he needed to now.

He had not come this far to fail. The moon tonight was a crescent, not full. He was standing, not on his knees. And that voice he heard in his head, that voice of authority demanding that he get not one single word wrong in his lie—that was his father. Kai had carried him around long enough.

“I am not being excluded,” Kai said in Japanese. His voice felt hoarse.

Tree branches waved in the wind, young leaves rustling. Kai could hear the faint burble of water, the muted sounds from the inn.

“You what?” Naomi said in disbelief.

“I speak Japanese. I lived in Japan for eleven years, studying under a Japanese potter. Your accent is different.” He

felt his heart racing. "I don't always understand what you say. But I get the gist."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I have not told anyone about my master." He hadn't wanted to answer questions about what he'd learned. He looked over at Mrs. Kwan. "I'm sorry. I eavesdropped on your conversations."

She rubbed her temples. "I already guessed it."

"You guessed? How did you guess that?"

"You knew that Japanese rice is different than Chinese, and that my sister and I would miss it. When you arrived, your trunks were marked from Nagasaki. Your bowls have a foot that does not seem Chinese. The reasons go on and on."

"You must be angry." Kai felt his hands curl into fists at his side. "I can't blame you."

"I'm not angry." She shook her head. "Trust and trustworthiness go together. We were suspicious. You were guarded. You cannot expect openness when you slam the door in someone's face."

"That's too easy. You *should* be angry."

"I was crying when you found me," Mrs. Kwan said, "because Wedgeford had not been trustworthy to you. I thought that Wedgeford might never be your home. But home is where you can tell the truth." She reached up and patted his shoulder. "I think you are finding your place here. Thank you."

ALMOST A WEEK HAD PASSED SINCE KAI HAD LAST HAD TIME with Naomi in the afternoon. He'd been busy preparing for his meeting with the buyer. With the Trials coming up, Naomi had grown busier, visiting neighboring villages and arranging deliveries.

It had been far too long since he'd had time with her in private. Finally, this afternoon, Kai looked up from where he was stoking the fire to see Naomi walking over to him. The grass was still wet from a mid-morning drizzle, and the dampness made her skirts cling to her ankles just a little. He stared for a moment, distracted.

"It's been so long," she said. "You've thrown a whole load of pottery while I've been busy. Now you're firing."

"A glaze firing," he said. "And to be technical, I'm building back the fire because—" He caught himself before he fell into the trap of excessive pottery facts. "Because it's necessary." He wiped sweat off his brow. "Last time, it cooled off too quickly. I'm happy to see you."

She smiled. "And I you. I've been thinking as I've been going about. Might I ask you some questions?"

Kai felt a hint of uneasiness. "Of course."

"Why Japan?"

It was the question Kai had wanted to avoid most of all. "It is true," he said, "that the art of making Jian Zhan fell out of favor in China. *In China* is the important part. During its time of prominence, it was taught to others."

Naomi nodded.

“I told you I knew the secret of Jian Zhan. I learned it from a Japanese master, one whose family had kept the art alive for centuries. I traded him my story about my family—minus the title—and the scroll I stole from my father in exchange for an apprenticeship.”

“Ah. *That’s* why you didn’t want to tell anyone.”

“Not the only reason. Telling the truth isn’t easy for me.” He said this in a tone that suggested it was an understatement. “You said you had questions. What were the others?”

She came abreast of him. “What was it like, living in Japan?”

“Hard.” He shook his head. “Not because of anyone else. Everyone around me was kind. But I never felt like I belonged. Even when I became more proficient with the language, I never quite fit. I’d lived all my life in the West. I didn’t feel Chinese. I wasn’t English. I wasn’t American. I wasn’t anything at all. There were lots of unspoken rules, and I never learned any of them.”

She nodded. “That sounds difficult.”

“Also.” He fidgeted. “I held myself back from everyone. I had been taught to never show my true self, and I never did. Even when I maybe should have, when someone had been kind to me. I have been thinking about what your mother said, that trust requires trustworthiness.”

Kai didn’t even know what he needed, but those words had felt like a bell ringing all around him. As if everything he’d known had been rearranged, as if the light he had been searching for had landed on an object and he had realized: there. That. That was what he was aiming for.

“She wasn’t blaming you.”

“I know.” It didn’t stop Kai from blaming himself. Whose fault was the inside of his head except his own? More importantly... “Whether I am at fault has nothing to do with whether I am responsible. Nobody but me can fix this.”

“Mm.” She looked skeptical. “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“My father used to tell me that people were stupid for trusting him, that they deserved everything they got for their foolishness, and that we were teaching them a valuable lesson. I grew up believing that trust was the opposite of intelligence. But I am beginning to think that this was wrong.”

She set a hand on his elbow.

“I want to trust.” He could hear his voice shaking. “*I want* to be trusted.”

“I trust you.”

“Why would you do that? I’m leaving. I have to.”

“I know.” Her voice dropped, and her fingers clenched around his arm. She leaned her forehead against his shoulder. “You have always told me that. You have never whispered honeyed words to convince me to ignore my own senses. That is why I trust you. I will always trust you because I know how good you are.”

He could not restrain his noise of derision.

“There you are,” she said, “thinking that trust is foolish. But you are good in a way I will never be. *I* never had to try to be good. It is easy to be honest when you have an honest family and an honest place in the world where you’ll always have enough to eat and no real fears for the future. *You* had to build your goodness on your own, piece by piece. You are not a bad person trying to be good. You are already good.”

The kiln was growing hot. Kai could feel sweat dripping down his shoulders. He closed the firebox and stepped away. “I’m not. A good person doesn’t have the kind of thoughts I have about you.”

Instead of flinching away, her fingers convulsed on his elbow. “Kai.” His name sounded like a plea on her lips. “Tell me about them, then. I’ll tell you how wicked they are.”

“I’m selfish. I’m lustful.”

If anything, her eyes shone more brightly. “Please be more specific?”

“You want me to just...say what I’m thinking?”

“Or you could show me.” She said this with a prim air. “And I’ll tell you how good you are.”

“Naomi.”

“I’ll go first.” She stepped forward. “You seem warm. Stoking the fire must be very difficult work.” She reached up. He almost thought she was going to touch his chest. He could feel his skin prickling in electric anticipation of her palms on him.

Instead, her fingers landed on the top button of his shirt. Carefully, she undid it. Then she looked over at him, dark eyes ablaze.

Kai’s exhale was shaky. “Naomi?”

She undid another button. “You’re wearing an undershirt.” She sounded almost disappointed.

He reached out and caught her hand in his. “Naomi.” With his hand on her fingers, he could feel her pulse beating. The erratic thump made a crazed counterpoint to the almost serene expression on her face. “What do you think is going to happen if you keep doing this?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was quiet, and yet it seemed to fill the space around them. “I can only hope.”

“Hope?”

“Kai.” She looked down briefly. Then her chin rose, setting in a firm line. “All my life I’ve believed that nobody would ever really want me. I think you could, if you let yourself. But you keep holding yourself back. If you *don’t* want me, I’ll understand. But if you do... Don’t hold back.”

His grip on her fingers tightened involuntarily. The idea that he could *not* want her seemed intolerable. “You have no idea.” His voice shook. “You have no idea how much—how deeply—how *selfishly*—I want you. You have no idea what I am holding in check.”

She pulled her hand from his grip and touched it to his cheek. "Stop holding it."

He let out a pained noise and pulled her to the far side of the kiln, before leaning down and taking her lips again. He let all his want come to the forefront, opening his mouth, and tasting her like the first course of a banquet, pressing her against the kiln with the force of his desire. He wanted her. He *needed* her. He needed her kiss, the feeling of her tongue against his. He needed the feel of her slight curves against him, the boning of her corset pressed against his chest.

If home was where one found trust, she was home. He wanted to move in and leave his mark. To make her as much his as he was hers.

He dropped to his knees in front of her.

"Kai?"

"Tell me to stop if you don't like it," he said, before spreading her legs and lifting her gown and shift. With the fabric of her skirt hiked to her thighs, he could see linen drawers, simple and unadorned.

It was Kai's literal job to have steady hands. Why were they shaking as he slid up her inner thighs? He couldn't see anything but fabric, but the cloth molded itself to her form. He caressed her, letting his palms come to a standstill against her flesh, feeling the warmth of her legs.

"God, you're beautiful."

She made a noise.

"Don't argue." He leaned down and placed a kiss where his hand lay, inches from the juncture of her thighs. Then he moved his hands up.

Her flesh grew warmer. Her breath came in gasps.

More than anything, Kai wanted. He wanted the life he had built up as a pretense. He wanted to be a simple potter. He wanted the simplest future: to work hard, to find some comfort, to love his wife.

God, he wanted to let himself love her.

He found the edge of her drawers, and slipped them down, down her thighs, past her knees, to pool at her ankles. Finally, he could see her—the golden tone of her skin, the curve of her legs, the dark hair between her thighs. She was right there, so close to his nose.

“Tell me to stop,” he said.

“No.” She set a hand on top of his head. “Never. But... what are you doing?”

Slowly, slowly, he slid his hands back up her thighs. She bit her lip as he spread her lips open, revealing dark, moist flesh.

“This.” He leaned in and placed a kiss there. “I’m doing what I want.”

She made a startled noise. “Kai.”

He moved in, nestling between her legs, licking into the slick folds of her.

“Oh. That’s—that’s—” Her thighs pressed against him. “There. Kai, right there.”

He caressed the bud between her legs with his tongue. He could feel her response against his lips. Her hands came on top of his, and he could gauge her pleasure in the tension with which they gripped him. He felt almost feral with need for her—the need to make her lose herself, to tie that feeling of abandon to him forever, so she wouldn’t forget.

“Kai, oh my god, Kai, what are you doing?”

He lifted his mouth. “I dream about doing this.” He licked into her again, tasting the salty-sweet of her slick. “I dream about taking care of your every need. And I know I’ve left you needing. Please let me.”

She let him, relaxing against him, then guiding his head, pushing up against him, her breath coming shorter and shorter. Her legs squeezed against him, tighter and tighter and tighter, until finally she let out a cry, pressing against him.

After she stopped shuddering, he pulled away.

She was looking at him. If only he could keep that starry-eyed look on her face. If only he could keep her.

She sat up, slowly, then reached forward, reaching for the buttons on his trousers. His cock was a hot bar against the fabric, and he gasped at the touch.

“Kai, let me help.”

“I can take care of it myself.”

She frowned at him. “But I *want* to. You wouldn’t deny me, would you?”

He needed to say no. He couldn’t. Instead, he found himself helping her unbutton his trousers. He fumbled with fabric. She helped him loose smallclothes, and then her fingers were on his length, pulling him out, exposing him to the air. He gritted his teeth as she ran her hands around the reddened foreskin of his cock, rubbing the drop of moisture collected there. He couldn’t keep himself from thrusting into her hands, and Naomi, quick as always, picked up the rhythm where he had left off.

The entire time he looked into her face. He didn’t hide his want. He couldn’t have done so.

God, he wanted her. He wanted *this*. He wanted to be able to have everything. He wanted to keep her.

He couldn’t.

At the last instant, he placed his hands over the head of his cock, catching his seed in his fist. He could feel her hand on him as he pulsed, could feel liquid squelching between his fingers.

Their eyes met. She was breathing hard. She was so beautiful, with her hair slipping from her bun, her cheeks pink with exertion, her legs warm around him. How had anyone ever thought her anything but beautiful?

She smiled at him. “Is that the most depraved thing you want to do with me? Or do you want more?”

His hands clenched on her thighs. He wanted *everything*. He wanted her entire future. He exhaled—one hot breath, then

another. He could have this. Easily. All he had to do was... Forget.

He straightened. Took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands before refastening his trousers. Standing tall, he could see around the brick of the kiln. Wedgeford was nothing more than stands of miniature houses beneath him.

He had to remember what he could not see: the men who had never been able to rejoin their wives. The families that had been separated in perpetuity. The sons who had returned home penniless to starving parents. These things had happened here.

All Kai had to do to stay was forget that he owed a debt. To be just like his father—to take what he wanted, and never mind anyone else in the world.

He looked at Naomi, flushed and happy, slowly smoothing her skirts back into place. For the first time in his life, he understood his father, and that scared him. He wanted to do nothing but please himself and have her.

And that was it, wasn't it? He could finish the fraud he had planned, pay Wedgeford back, and leave this hemisphere before his lie was uncovered, or he could have her. How could he be so selfish as to not pay the debts that were owed?

Slowly, painfully, Kai made his aching heart give up its most fervent wish.

"That's as much as I'm allowed to want." He breathed out. "I can't have more."

"Why not?"

"Rule zero." He said it thickly.

She clambered to her feet and reached out for his wrist. "Your father's rules again? Still? Kai."

"No. This one is mine. It's the rule we should have had. The rule that keeps all the other rules in order. Rule zero: Never hurt anyone who doesn't need hurting."

"That's what this is about? How?"

“I might leave you with a child,” he said. “I might ruin your life, your reputation. Naomi.” He shook his head. “Even if you could bear it, to know I had risked harming you... It would destroy me.”

“Kai.” For a moment, he could see the thought working through her—the reminder that he was leaving. She looked to the side, off and away, over the downs.

Then she looked back at him, and her chin set in determination once more. “What if there was a way?”

“I can’t stay.”

“Not even that, yet. I’m thinking about what you said about risk.”

What did she mean, *yet*?

“Chloe told me,” Naomi said, “about something I could get from an apothecary in Dover. What if I wanted *everything* with you?” Her hand gripped the fabric of his coat more tightly. “What if you were the only person I could imagine having this with? Would you...want me?”

He shuddered. He should say no. He knew it.

“Everything.” He couldn’t stop himself. He leaned forward, his forehead against hers. “Naomi. I want everything.”

“Then next week, when we go to the ambulance class...”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

THE DAYS UNTIL THE FINAL AMBULANCE CLASS SLIPPED BY, one by one. Naomi’s duties grew. The Trials loomed, and soon thousands of people would descend on their village, staying for a day of festivities and competition before leaving.

Now, Naomi didn’t merely have to manage the unloading of barrels of cider and beer, or spend hours helping to erect booths and tents on the village green. Now, when one of the

cart drivers fell and dislocated his shoulder, she was the one everyone looked to for assistance. She was the one cleaning cuts and examining burns. She got so good at it that she could unscrew the lid off the carbolic acid with one hand while she measured the water to dilute it with in the other.

She had never felt so necessary to Wedgeford. And every time someone mentioned that—"Naomi, what would we do without you?"—they had begun to look up in the direction of Kai's kiln. Kai had come to be included in that *you*.

Kai still spent time at work. He threw with a constant, steady hand. Naomi no longer had time to watch; instead, when his afternoon was free, he would come down and join the men on the green to help move barrels.

The only time they had together was in the evenings, when they sometimes caught a few moments to speak at dinner before he returned to his cottage and Naomi passed out in exhaustion.

"I never thought I would say this," Mrs. Lee told Naomi early one evening as they picked early greens, "but I think your fiancé belongs in Wedgeford."

Naomi met this with a pained smile. He was leaving. Kai had never once wavered on this point.

But...what if he didn't? She tried not to hope.

The good weather held. Bakers arrived from nearby villages and began to produce bread and pies.

Finally, the day before the ambulance class, Naomi had enough spare time to visit.

It had been days and days since they'd been able to do so much as to steal a kiss. Naomi ached to spend time with him, to go behind the kiln and... Well, everything. Anything.

But when she arrived, he looked pensive.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"Everything is right." And yet he seemed...muted. "Everything is finally right."

“It doesn’t seem that way.”

He met her eyes. “Wait here and I’ll show you how right it is.”

She wandered around his work area. It seemed somehow spare, and for a few moments she couldn’t understand why. Then she realized that while all the big pieces, like his wheel and stool were present, the boards where he set his pieces to dry stood empty. There was no new clay being mixed. His tools were nowhere to be seen.

Naomi’s stomach dropped.

The sun was high and bright overhead with the cool warmth of spring. Naomi sat on the back step and raised her head to the rays against her skin. He wasn’t working any longer. He was leaving.

She could feel a lump in her throat. She had known he was going. The part of her that wanted to believe he wouldn’t was a fool. She had thought that she would be upset when she learned his time had come. Instead, the knowledge felt like spring sunshine, cool and warm at the same time. It was going to rain eventually, but for now, he was...

“Here.”

She opened her eyes and turned. He squatted down beside her, unwrapping a small object folded in black velvet.

The sun hit the side of the object and the pottery glittered, blinding her so that for a second, she could not even see what it was. He set the cloth aside, then handed it to her.

There was no air in her lungs. Kai had handed her a teacup in form much like the teacups he’d made for the inn. Yet this cup was completely different. Where the dishes he had made for Naomi had hinted at a rainbow of color, this cup was no mere hint. The rim was gold, reflecting the daylight.

“Oh.” It was all she could manage to get out. Light refracted off it in pinks and greens and purples as she moved the tea bowl in sunlight.

The glaze itself was a bluish-black that shimmered like the night sky. The light of the sun reflected on it, making a thousand tiny stars. Gold dusted the rim and streaked across the sides and down into the bowl like the tears of gods.

“This is extraordinary.” Her mouth was dry. “It’s not pottery. It’s a masterpiece. However did you come up with this pattern?”

Kai shook his head. “I didn’t. It’s the only form of working alchemy man has ever known: turning iron into gold. This isn’t painted. It’s a reaction of fire and dirt and serendipity in the mouth of the dragon’s kiln. The hand of man could never.”

“But...” She stared at it.

“In ancient times, maybe one out of tens of thousands of pieces fired would come out like this. There is no way to make one of these except to never give up and to pray.”

Years ago, Naomi had seen a lunar eclipse. She’d watched as the moon went from round to a sliver before finally disappearing. It had given her a sense she could hardly explain.

She had felt infinitesimal in a cosmos so vast that she almost disappeared. And yet the knowledge of her insignificance hadn’t made her feel unimportant. It had made her aware that this was a universe of majesty, and that she was a part of it.

That was how she felt looking at Kai’s tea bowl: creation was extraordinary, and she was a part of it.

“Is this like the cup your father had? No wonder he was able to lead people astray.”

Kai shook his head. “My father’s was nothing particularly special. Just a blue and silver partridge feather pattern.”

“And this is what you needed?” she asked quietly.

“This is it,” Kai responded. “This is my fraud.”

“Why? Why fraud, when you could sell this?” It seemed almost blasphemous to call this star-kissed item of beauty a fraud. How was he even going to commit fraud with it? Why?

“Because.” Kai’s voice was low. “It’s the only way I can break free.”

“I see.” She did not. She stared at his kiln, eyes wide, refusing to cry. “And you’re going through with it? You’re really...” *Leaving*, she couldn’t say, not without crying. “Doing fraud?”

“I can’t think of any other way. I have everything in place and an appointment four weeks from now.”

“Four weeks. You’ll be gone in just four weeks?”

She heard him gently set the bowl next to them. Then he took her hand in his.

“Sooner,” he said. “If I stay much longer, I’m not sure I’ll be able to bring myself to go. Naomi...”

“Yes?”

“I never thought I would miss Wedgeford.” Kai’s hand squeezed hers. “It is tearing me apart. But there is a reason I must do this. It is necessary for my soul. I have thought and thought, and I can either be the man who deserves you, or the man who has you.”

THE MORNING AFTER KAI SHOWED HER THE TEACUP, HE AND Naomi walked to Dover. The final session of their ambulance class seemed to go by in no time. It should not have felt so bittersweet for Kai to watch Naomi take detailed notes on such sentimental topics as choking, seizure, and drowning.

There was a short ceremony after everything was over.

“Well,” Naomi said, “that’s it. Our reason for the engagement is finished.” She fiddled with the edge of the certificate. “Thank you for helping me.”

She did not say anything about ending their temporary engagement. Instead, she blushed and looked down. “I was thinking that I would go to the apothecary. Would you like to come?”

“No.”

He saw the look of disappointment in her eyes.

“I meant, no, you shouldn’t go.”

“Of course not.” Her voice seemed smaller, and he hated hearing her that way. “Not if you don’t want.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. You’re an unmarried woman. Someone might see you making the purchase. You’re going to remain in Kent the rest of your life, and people might talk.”

She bit her lip. “What are you saying? I’m very confused.”

“While I’m still your temporary fiancé, let me protect you. I don’t want you to come with me. I want to go alone. And we can use it or not, as you choose.”

Still, he didn’t leave. He couldn’t bring himself to walk away, even knowing that every second he froze, yearning for her, was one in which she might ask him to stay and be her actual husband. One in which he might become weak and agree.

Instead, she lofted her certificate a few inches. “You have helped me to be the best Naomi I could be. Leaving, you seem to think, will help you be the Kai you need to be.”

“Yes.” He sounded hoarse.

“I want you to stay.” Her eyes glittered. “But I will never stop you from that. Just know that until you go...” She raised her shoulders as if gathering strength. “I will consider you my temporary fiancé for as long as I can.”

IN THE FINAL DAYS BEFORE THE TRIALS STARTED, BUSINESS IN Wedgeford sped to a frenzy. The kegs of beer and cider that had been delivered were brought to basements. Deliveries of new spring vegetables and newly slaughtered meat arrived every day.

Everyone was so busy that they never noticed Kai making arrangements to leave. He sent a telegram and received a response, confirming the appointment he needed. Arrangements were made by mail for the stay he would need. He shipped three trunks back via a delivery driver.

He spent the rest of his time with Naomi. He wished that time could have been spent more pleasurably, but there was no time. Instead, he assisted in laundering sheets, stomping on them in the tub with suds at his feet, before rinsing them and setting them on lines to dry.

Naomi and her aunt baked large quantities of treats. They weren't often available in the inn during the rest of the year. But with people from around Britain coming to Wedgeford, little apple hand-pies and squares of crunchy oat and caramel started to appear. She brought them out to him to try as he split and stacked wood—too-sweet morsels that they would split between them.

As the Trials loomed before them, Kai joined the rest of the men behind the village in setting up tents behind the inn to accommodate the coming crowds. Kai threw himself into the work. After the Trials, he was leaving. If Kai was remembered as someone who helped when needed, that would be nice. More likely, he'd be recalled as the scoundrel who pretended to love Naomi. Fitting, that even at the end, they would get him so wrong.

On the morning before the Trials, with the first rays of the sun touching the horizon and the knowledge that in a few hours, the place would be impossibly crowded, Kai found himself chopping carrots with Mrs. Kwan in the kitchen.

The motion was repetitive and calming—chop, turn, chop, turn, chop, as she kept an eagle eye on the evenness of his cut.

“You're a good son-in-law,” she said.

Kai wasn't sure what to say to that. “Thank you.”

The soup she was making was simmering. She tasted it and made a disappointed face. “It never tastes quite right here. Here, stir this for a moment.”

Without waiting for an answer, she passed him the wooden stick and he took her place. She disappeared for a moment. He could hear her footsteps pattering upstairs, and then coming down quickly thereafter. She took the spoon from him wordlessly with one hand. She held out the other. "For you."

It was a piece of sewn yellow silk much like the one he had seen at Naomi's waist months before. On it was embroidered: *Protection from frauds*.

"What is this for?"

She frowned. "Why ask? You know what it says."

"That wasn't what I was asking." He looked at her. "Why are you giving this to me?"

"My thinking when you first arrived was..." She sighed. "It was different from what I have learned about you. At first, I remembered only how your father's fraud had hurt us. But I have realized that your father's fraud has hurt you more than anyone else."

Kai turned back to the carrots. "It's nothing."

"How is it nothing," she said slowly, "when he is still hurting you?"

He froze in place for one moment, before he found a smile once more. "It's nothing I'm not used to."

She just huffed. "That is why I made you that. To protect your heart, because you won't do it yourself."

When he'd come to Wedgeford, Kai had imagined that he'd work for months in something like isolated, suspicious silence. He had expected to endure scornful looks and angry asides. Leaving was so much harder now that people were being kind to him.

"Mrs. Kwan." Kai set down his knife. "Listen. I need to tell you something that Naomi knows."

"You're going to leave."

"How did you know?" Kai stared at her.

“I know my daughter. She doesn’t look like someone who is planning a wedding that by all rights should be happening in the next few months. She looks like someone convincing her heart not to break.”

Ah. Kai knew that feeling.

She tilted her head. “That’s why I gave that to you. You said earlier that you felt like you’d never escape your father. That what he did was pulling you still. This is so that when he pulls, you pull back. Because you deserve protection, too.”

It was a good thing Kai wasn’t the sort to cry. He inhaled slowly so that he wouldn’t. “Why? If you know I’m leaving...?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she set down her spoon and walked over to him. “Here. It ties to you like this.” Her fingers worked and she frowned as she fastened it to the loop of his belt. “There. That’s right. Just remember, it would break my daughter’s heart if anything happened to you. So.” She patted it and let go. “You have promised me you would try not to hurt her. Just wear it, ne?”

THE NEXT TWO DAYS PASSED IN A WHIRL. KAI DIDN'T participate in the Trials; he heard what people were saying as they stopped by the inn to replenish themselves with food and drink, but he lost himself working alongside the in-laws who would never be his, immersed in the work of seeing to the needs of hundreds of people.

Andrew was in and out—supposedly, he was mentoring a boy with an unpronounceable name who had come to town the year before. Newcomers were assigned to teams and given roles, and the morning of the Trials dawned.

Kai remembered the Trials as a great, confusing rush. Working at the inn just made it more so. Even more bafflingly, people had come to Wedgeford specifically to seek him out. A woman told him that she'd heard of his work, and expressed dismay that he didn't have it available for purchase. A storeowner from Edinburgh had seen his pottery on sale in London and wanted to arrange something between them for future sales. He left Kai a card. They didn't know his name, but they didn't need to. The story of "Wedgeford's potter" was beginning to spread around the country.

People knowing about him? That was bad. It was past time for Kai to leave.

Later, he thought, as he served soup and stews. *Later*.

Night came. The kegs of beer that had been brought in were opened, and the town celebrated.

The time to leave for good, Kai judged, was after clean up—when the visitors had left and everyone was exhausted. He'd do his part and then he would slip away.

By midafternoon on the day after the Trials, the bulk of the visitors had left. Rather than think about his looming conversation with Naomi, Kai joined a group of women who stalked the paths of the town on foot in search of rubbish left by the tourists. By the time the sun tipped close to the edge of the horizon, Kai was exhausted and Wedgeford was free of debris.

Kai's conscience? Not so much. Tomorrow morning, he would walk away from this town before the sun rose.

The inn itself had been scrubbed from floor to ceiling—a thing he knew was literally true, because as he entered, Andrew was just coming off a ladder, with a bucket filled with dirty water and a brush.

He greeted Kai with a raised hand. "Naomi will be down soon. She said she'll meet you for dinner in the usual corner."

Indeed, a place had been set for the two of them next to the fire with bowls and chopsticks on rests.

Kai sat uneasily. Maybe he would leave tomorrow; maybe it would be the week after. Whatever he decided to do, he needed to tell her. But how? *Naomi, I will never care for anyone the way I do you. But—* Not the way to start. Not the way to tell a woman you cared for her, either.

We have always known this was going to end. There was the problem. Words were one thing, but no matter what he said, he'd not been acting like a man who intended to leave.

And then—

"There he is!" Kai heard the voice cutting through his reverie, and for a moment, he refused to believe it. *That* voice, deep and gravelly? No. It had to be someone else. It felt like ice, that voice, freezing him slowly from the inside out.

"Ah Kai!"

Only one person had ever called him that. Kai hunched his shoulders, but it was impossible to evade detection. He *knew* that voice. He knew that man. He saw a figure coming toward him as if in a nightmare.

The man had aged a bit. There was more white in his hair and a slight limp to his walk. But that was Kai's *father*. Everything he'd been contemplating saying to Naomi turned to ice. *No, no, no.*

"Ah Kai, my boy!" His father had always been so gregarious, so friendly. "What a start you've made! Just like we planned. 'Wedgeford's Potter'—I heard about you all the way down in Cornwall." He came up before Kai could realize that the parent he'd hoped to never see again was standing right in front of him.

Before Kai could say anything, his father sat in the seat intended for Naomi. He picked up Naomi's bowl, turning it round and round. As he did, the residents of Wedgeford began to drift over, suspicion in their eyes.

"Put that down," Kai said sharply.

His father didn't listen. Instead, he let out a hum of approval. "Beautiful, beautiful. We made the right decision, didn't we, my boy? To have you come here first to establish yourself."

He could hear the whispers of dismay around him. Could feel the trust he'd barely begun to establish going up in flames like so much kindling.

"*We?*" Kai's mouth felt as if it were stuffed with cotton. "*We* haven't done anything together."

They'd begun to attract people. Mr. Bei had come over, and he was frowning at the both of them. Kai remembered the lines in the account book, the growing tally—shilling after shilling that Mr. Bei couldn't spare.

Next to Mr. Bei, for a second, he saw Mrs. Kwan. She took in the scene with dark eyes before turning and leaving. She had come to trust him after all. She was no doubt bitterly disappointed.

“Is that what we say?” His father’s words were quiet. That brought back the visceral memory of a long night, the feeling of stone against his knees. *Not one word wrong*, he thought.

His lungs seemed to fill with water. His vision blurred at the edges. Why had Kai thought he could be trusted? With his father present in the flesh, his training seemed to rise up and grab him by the throat.

Kai’s father gestured widely. “There we are. You all see it. Didn’t I *tell* you all it was just a matter of time and faith? I’ve rediscovered the secret of Jian Zhan, just as I promised I would. And Kai has shown you what we can do when we’re *not* trying.”

It took Kai a moment to understand that this was a lie: that his father didn’t know he’d learned the secret over the last decade of his life. As always, he’d started with *we* before swiftly transitioning to *I*. Kai’s father had always been a master at spinning tales, and now Kai was struggling for words.

How had his father known to come here? Right. *Wedgeford’s potter*. Kai had known that word was spreading. Why had he not realized word of his presence could spread to his father?

His father clapped a hand on Kai’s back. “Of course, we’ll be selling shares to the company.”

It was the first time his father had touched him in twelve years. Kai shook his hand off and stood, pushing his chair away so swiftly that it fell in a clatter.

“Never.” It was all he could manage to say.

“Ah Kai.” His father looked at him, a pleasant smile. “What are you talking about? This is what we agreed on when we decided you would return to Wedgeford.”

Not one word wrong, insisted the voice in Kai’s head, and even had that persistent thrum not been present, Kai wouldn’t know the right words to say. Seeing his father in the flesh... The light in the room was fading, the scene around him

dilating into pinpricks. He shook his head futilely. He could already imagine the people around him shaking their heads.

There would be no trust here for him anymore. Not that it mattered. All he had to do was...leave.

Leave them. Leave his father. Leave this place. Did it matter if they thought him a liar?

It did. If he executed his fraud now—if he did what he had always intended, and paid Wedgeford back—might it open the path for his father to return here?

His father was talking in a sonorous voice, extolling a future that Kai wanted no part of. His words were like knife slashes through all of Kai's hard work, through his friendships, his relationships. Through everything. He had to say something.

Not for himself. He didn't know what to do with himself. But if he didn't, his father would steal from people who had little to lose. Again. And it would be Kai's fault. *Again.*

"Now that our ancestral knowledge has been restored to us —" his father was saying.

"There is no us." Kai made himself say the words.

He wasn't loud enough. The crowd was too large and his father had taken center stage.

"Our family will take its rightful place as creators of everlasting beauty." His father's voice rang out. He scarcely looked at Kai. "We will commence taking orders. From here on out—"

"There *is* no here on out." Kai forced the sentence out on a shout. His hands shook against his trousers. He could hear the tremor in his own voice. "You don't know how to do anything except lie and steal from others. You can't just walk back into my life after all this time and take charge—"

"Ah Kai." His father patted his shoulder gently. "I'm your father. Where is your filial nature that I know so well?"

Not one word wrong, clamored the voice in Kai's head.

“You are *not*,” Kai snarled. “What kind of father uses his son like this? Here you are, inserting yourself, scheming and lying once again about how to take what’s not yours.”

“Son—” Kai’s father reached out.

Kai backed away. “I am not your son. I renounce it. *Strangers* have been more of a father to me than you. I had to be my own father. You abandoned me here when I was *six*, and only returned months later. What sort of father does that?” He could feel his throat scratching. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two women pushing through the crowd.

Naomi. Her mother. The last two people he wanted to see him like this.

“I will forgive your ingratitude,” his father said reasonably. His tone was always reasonable. “I taught you everything you know. I spurred you on to take the ultimate step.”

Then Naomi stepped forward. “What’s going on here? How dare you talk to Kai that way?”

His father tilted his head and looked at Naomi. Kai’s skin crawled at the thought of the man so much as resting his gaze on her. She was his everything. He had to keep her safe.

“And who are you, that you speak so familiarly of my son?” His words were unctuous.

“Miss Naomi Kwan.” She folded her arms and faced him down. “I’m Kai’s fiancée.”

An expression crossed his father’s face—a hint of glee, then triumph.

“I see!” His voice was laden with mirth. “Kai, Kai, Kai. You can pretend that we’ve nothing to do with each other, but you are on the path I set for you. You even have the fiancée I arranged for you.”

In the months that had passed, Kai had almost forgotten that one thing: that Naomi was his childhood betrothed. That he’d agreed they were engaged because they *were*.

But he had never told her that.

Still. He could see the look on Naomi's face: the way the color left her. The way she stood stock still.

"Your pardon?" She almost whispered those words.

"You know," he said jovially. "The childhood engagement?" He raised a hand, beckoning. "Kwan, old friend. You do remember our agreement, don't you? That our children would marry?"

Mr. Kwan looked haunted. "Liu. That agreement holds no force."

"Of course it does." Mr. Liu turned a snide look to Naomi, taking her in from head to toe. "You don't think that *my* son, my heir, would agree to marry a woman like *this* because he *wanted* her, do you?"

He could hear Naomi's pained intake of breath even as the crowd murmured around them. He knew her so well, knew how much that accusation would hurt.

Kai's attempt to defend himself had felt like he was trying to tie a stream of honey into a bow. It had seemed impossible in the face of his father's volubility.

But hurting Naomi?

How *dare* he. Kai stepped in front of Naomi—or at least, he tried to do so. But as he did, her hand caught his, holding him in place.

And *she* stepped in front of *him*.

MANY YEARS AGO, SEATED NEAR THIS SPOT IN THE INN, A MAN had made Naomi feel very small. He had made her think that she was unlovable. That nobody would ever want her.

He had planted a seed that had grown deep, painful roots, ones that had cracked her sense of worth into pieces. Then Kai had come. Where once there had been a girl who let herself believe she was unlovable, now there stood a woman who knew the opposite.

“Why,” Naomi said, looking up at the man who looked like an older version of Kai, “is it always like this?”

A flicker of uncertainty passed over the elder Mr. Liu’s face.

“Anytime someone wants to quiet a man, they shower him with praise. Anytime someone wants to quiet a woman, they insult her.”

Mr. Liu frowned and opened his mouth.

Naomi let go of Kai’s arm and took a step forward. “You cannot insult me with Kai’s love. I know how true it is.”

She could hear Kai’s breath rasp behind her.

“You cannot insult me with myself. I know who I am. You come in here and imply that your own son has been lying to us for months? You expose yourself as a doer of wrong with that alone. We all know the truth, and it has nothing to do with you. We see you for who you are: a charlatan who doesn’t even have the decency to care about his son.”

Mr. Liu glared at Naomi. She looked back at him impassively. Around her, she could feel the crowd close in, could hear the villagers speaking.

“She’s right, you know.”

“What kind of father does that to his son?”

“When has Kai ever been anything but honest?”

“Why would we believe the man who robbed us twenty years ago?”

The ring around Mr. Liu tightened, and Naomi held his gaze.

“Get out,” Naomi said. “We want nothing to do with you.”

Mr. Liu’s lip curled up in the first ugly expression that Naomi had seen on him.

“You know who you are?” His voice dripped sarcasm. “Well, so do I. You’re a spineless woman who knows nothing.”

He stepped forward, towering over her, and for one moment, Naomi almost flinched.

Then Kai moved between them. He was tall, impossibly tall. He felt like both shield and sword, blocking her in that moment.

“Step aside, boy.”

Kai did not. He did not need to. Before the impasse could stretch longer than a second, Andrew turned Mr. Liu to face him. Without hesitating, Andrew punched Mr. Liu in the face. It wasn’t a light blow, either—he stepped into it, his entire weight going into the strike. A sickening crunch echoed, and Mr. Liu collapsed to the floor, curling in on himself.

Good, Naomi thought. It was a vicious thought—no less vicious than he deserved.

Mr. Liu touched his face. His fingers came away bloody.

“Is that the logic that you apply here?” he asked.

Naomi’s hand slipped into her apron pocket. There she felt the things she always carried: a roll of bandages, a tin of salve. There. There was the thing she was looking for: a small glass jar of undiluted carbolic acid.

Naomi had always wanted to know what to do in situations like this.

“Shut up,” Andrew said. “Shut your lying mouth. How dare *you*? Get out. Get out *now*, or I’ll give you worse than that. This inn doesn’t serve pathetic worms.”

“I can take another punch,” Mr. Liu said scornfully.

Naomi’s fingers found the metal lid on the jar. Slowly, she righted the jar in her pocket. Even more slowly, she twisted the cap off.

“I’m sure you can,” Naomi said. “But you won’t have to.”

Mr. Liu looked up for one moment, confusion in his eyes.

“You have misidentified me.” She withdrew her hand from her pocket, cradling the glass jar. “I’m not a woman who knows nothing. I have taken an ambulance class.”

“What are you going on about?”

“I am a woman who knows what to do with carbolic acid: you use it to avoid festering. And you never, ever fail.”

So saying, she dashed the contents of the jar in his face. The liquid splashed. He screamed, grabbing at his eyes, his nose.

Naomi clenched her hands into fists. “Get out,” she said. “Get out. There is no place for you here.”

Andrew took another menacing step forward. He was joined by Jeremy, then Chloe, then Mr. Kwan.

Jeremy somehow managed to look menacing. “We know who Kai is, and that tells me who you are. If Kai says you’re not wanted here, you’ll get out.”

Kai’s father scrambled backward—one step, then another, then he got to his feet and fled. The door rattled behind him.

Andrew shook out his hand. “Damn. That hurt.”

Beside her, Kai made a noise of confusion. “I thought you didn’t know how to punch. You said that the night we first met.”

Andrew gave him a slow, sidelong glance. “I work in an *inn*. Of course I know how to handle people who need handling.”

“But...”

“Of course I *said* that.” Andrew shrugged. “If I had to punch the lights out of you, I didn’t want you to *expect* it.”

Kai let out a low laugh.

“How are you?” Naomi took his hand in hers. His palm was cold and clammy, and there was a tremor to his fingers. Kai turned to look at her, confusion writ on his features.

“Didn’t any of you believe him?” His voice sounded so small.

“Not for one moment,” Naomi said. “Not one of us.”

Mr. Bei came forward and patted him on the shoulder. “We believed him too long to be fooled by his prattling now. And we’ve known you these last months. You’re not him. You will never be him.”

Kai’s expression flickered through emotions, too fast for Naomi to catalog them.

“Sit down,” Naomi finally said. “Let me get you something warm to drink.”

And so, in his confusion, Kai allowed himself to be comforted.

IT WAS PAST TEN AT NIGHT, AND KAI HAD FINISHED PACKING everything except his bedroll, a small wooden box, and a quick letter of explanation.

The day had left him weary and drained. Tomorrow, he would tell Naomi. By noon, he would be gone. He laid down and was about to snuff the guttering stub of candle when he heard a knock on the door.

He sat up, disoriented.

“Kai?” a soft voice called.

“Naomi?” He stood and went to the door.

Naomi’s small frame was bracketed by the doorway. She’d wrapped a shawl around herself. He could see the concern on her features in the moonlight.

“Naomi.” Her name felt precious on his lips.

“I came away as soon as I could. There was still cleaning to do, and preparation for tomorrow’s meals, and...” She trailed off. “I thought that maybe you would want company tonight.”

She couldn’t mean that the way he thought.

“You promised your parents you would stay outside my cottage.”

“Technically that only pertained to visiting you in the afternoons, to prevent my emotions from carrying me away.

But I said nothing about creeping into your bed at night on purpose.”

It was dark, but the moon filtered into the room, enough that he could see her silhouette. She stopped in the middle of removing her shoes in the entrance, then turned around, frowning at the empty room.

“Oh.” Her voice became very small. “You really are leaving. So soon?”

“I told you I would.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, then she turned to him. “If you’re leaving...”

“Then you should go. I understand.”

She put a hand on his arm. “Then I definitely want to stay.”

“Naomi. I’m leaving.”

“You have said. All the more reason.” She took a step closer to him. “When will I have the chance to be with the man I love?”

“Naomi. I...” *Can’t*, he didn’t say. Because he could. He could imagine everything with her. Kissing her. Disrobing her. Having her body. He wanted to feel her around him, feel her pleasure rising, feel them come together. He didn’t stop wanting there, though—not after they’d reached their pleasure. He wanted to wake up next to her. He wanted to eat meals with her. He wanted to talk to her about laundry day and show her the pieces he’d thrown. He wanted to have her with him for the rest of his life.

His want was too enormous for one night. If he ever had her as he desired, he might never be able to let go.

“Naomi, I lied to you,” he said instead. “From the beginning, I have lied to you.”

“How so?”

“We were engaged from the moment we met. And I never told you.” He threw it out as a last, desperate attempt to push

her away.

“Yes,” she said evenly. “That is a thing that I just learned today. And you are right: you should have told me before. It would have been something we could have laughed at together. But am I supposed to let that change my entire view of you as a person? I have always known you weren’t telling me everything. And still I want you to know how much I care for you.” She paused, then with a wrinkle of her nose, she looked up. “No. That is inadequate. I *love* you. I don’t think you hear that enough. I love you.”

He could not remember the last time someone had used that word with him.

Everything had seemed unreal until now—black and white in the dark of night, drained of emotion. That one word, though, snapped him into the reality of the moment. Of Naomi looking up at him, eyes dark and beautiful.

“I should say no.”

“You should do no such thing.”

He put his fingers on hers. The touch was cold at first, but he could feel her skin warming to his. “I used to hope you would forget me.”

“Why would *I* want that?” She met his eyes implacably. “To forget the person who cared for me so well that I found my own strength? To forfeit the memory of someone as dear as my own heart? What an incredible loss you hoped me to have.”

“Now that the time has come to go?” He slid his hand down her palm, caressing her wrist. “I know that I never wanted that, either. I’ve always wanted you to remember me the way I will remember you.”

“How will you remember me?” Her voice was steady.

“With all the love I have.” He leaned in and kissed her. It should have felt sad. It should have felt like a farewell. Instead, her kiss felt like the dawning of a morning, like a homecoming to a man who had never had a home. He

wrapped his arms and drew her to him, the embrace all the more precious for the short length of time they had left.

He kissed her until he was insensible to anything but her taste. Until her breath grew shaky and her body warm in his.

Then he pulled away, just far enough to take off her shawl. He slipped the knit fabric off her shoulders. They looked at each other. Then, with shaking hands, Naomi began to undo the buttons of her gown. He reached out and brushed her hands away, doing it himself.

The fastenings were small and fiddly, but he could feel the warmth of her near him. They'd already done so much. He'd had his mouth on her. He had felt her orgasm before. Yet somehow this simple act of undressing felt like the most intimate act they'd engaged in. This was what a husband would do.

This was what Kai would have done, if only everything had been different.

He peeled back the gown, pressing a kiss to her collarbone. She exhaled, tilting her head so he could kiss her neck. She smelled like soap and some kind of citrus, her skin warming under his touch as he gave open-mouthed kisses down, down, down to the edge of her shift poking out from under her corset. This, too, he unlaced.

The corset came away, and that left Naomi in the moonlight, the cotton chemise molded to her form. He ran his hand down her side, feeling the fabric slide against her skin.

"Kai." She mouthed the word.

He cupped her breast, feeling her nipple pebble at his touch through the cotton. Swiftly, she turned to him and began unbuttoning his shirt. Button by button, and as she undid each one, he could feel the patch of cold air against his chest grow. That contrast—the cold against his skin, the heat of her breast against his palm—had him hardening with want. The cool air touched his own nipples, then his abdomen. She looked so vulnerable, so strong, in his embrace. He wanted to care for her, and he never wanted to stop. But all he had was the bare

motions of the present. He shrugged off the shirt. She undid his belt buckle. He could feel her fingers brushing his growing erection as she undid the buttons of his trousers. He bit back a hiss.

“Here.” She bent and lifted her shift, pulling it over her head. It caught on the stick holding her bun together for one second before she pulled out the carved wood, letting her tresses fall loose. They unwound in a cloud that fell to her hips. The light from the window touched the curve of her breast, the point of her bare nipple. Her skin curved to her waist. Her navel was a flat divot, disappearing into her drawers.

“Naomi.” He let his hand rise worshipfully to caress the soft silk of her hair.

She undid the tie of his smallclothes and let those drop.

Her gaze lowered. Her attention felt like a palpable touch on his bare skin, his lengthening member. His hands curled into tight fists; his breath felt heavy in his chest.

He wanted her so much.

“Kai.” She reached out and set a finger above his navel. Slowly, she drew it down in a hot line. Sensation sparked in the wake of her touch. His blood pulsed, making him harder, harder. She stopped just short of the hair at his thighs.

“Help me?”

He stared at her in confusion.

“My drawers.” She swallowed. “Take them off.”

His fingers didn’t seem to work. The tie at her waist seemed too tight. His hands fumbled. He kept going until finally, he loosened the knot and was able to pull the fabric away from her skin. He caught a glimpse of her through the gap between her drawers and her belly. Curved thighs. Dark hair. He found himself holding his breath in wonder as he let her underclothing fall, revealing her to him.

Beautiful. She was beautiful. From the dusky color of her areolas down to her toes. She was beautiful, and he wished she

could stay his.

She tapped his shoulders, pushing him to sit on the edge of the bedroll. Before he could think about what happened next, she climbed on top of him.

Sensation overwhelmed him. Her bare skin pressed against his. Her body trapped his cock, pressing it between them. Her nipples were close to his face. In this position, her face was just a little higher than his. Perfect for kissing.

And so he did. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

If there was the opposite of a wedding night, it was this: one night spent not to join two lives, but to break them apart. If there was the opposite of a wedding kiss, it was this: a thing so tremulous and impossible that he was afraid at first that it would shatter.

But it did not, and neither did they. They kissed in the moonlight as if there were no hurry, as if tomorrow would come and they would still be together.

He could feel her growing slick against him, could feel her start to move against him in little up-and-down motions. He kissed her once again.

“I have it.” He breathed into her neck. “From the apothecary. We don’t have to do this, but I want you. All of you. Everything about you.”

She smiled at him. “You have me.”

Kai reached for his trousers and came up with the packet from the apothecary.

“Here.” She gestured him closer. “If you’ll allow me.”

“Anything,” he breathed, and then her fingers were on his length. If he had been hard before, he felt like rock now. The feel of her fitting the rubber cap was beyond anything he’d experienced. He gritted his teeth as she gently stroked the material down, covering him.

Then she met his eyes, a question in them.

Kai moved in, nestling close to her. “Let me help ease the way.”

She was wet between her legs. When he opened her labia, she let out a little breath. When he stroked her opening lightly, she let out another. Slowly, ever so slowly, he slipped a finger in, dipping it in the moisture that collected, spreading it wide, until she was gasping. He could feel her walls clenching around him.

“Relax.” He kissed her. “Let me take care of you.”

Like I never will be able to again. The words stayed unspoken. Slowly, he circled his hand, waiting until she relaxed, until she was wet all over, before trying a second finger.

“You’re tensing again.” He kissed her. “Breathe out. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She nodded, and after a moment, he could feel her relax again, easing his way. He started to move. He searched for what she liked, finding just how much pressure to let glance off the nub between her legs. He had to discover what would make her gasp and give way. And once he knew by her breath that he’d found it, he drove her close, close to the edge.

“Kai.” Her breath was ragged. “Kai. Please. I need you.”

Kai pulled his fingers out and stroked himself, wetting his cock with her moisture before lining up to her entrance. “Tell me if it’s too much.”

She nodded. He kissed her then, slow, until he felt her body relax against him. Then he pushed in. She was hot and wet, and the feel of her passage clamping around him was the most extraordinary experience of his life.

He rested his head against her forehead, fighting for control. “Naomi?”

“It’s...not bad? Keep going.”

He pulled out a bit and pushed back in. *Not bad* was not his aim at the moment. He did that again, and again, until her

breath timed itself to his thrusts, until she tilted her head back with the pleasure of it. Then he pushed deeper, halfway in.

“Keep going.” Her voice caught. “Please don’t stop.”

And so he pushed in again, until finally he was seated deep inside her.

“Is that all right, darling?”

“It’s so right that it feels like it must be a mistake.” She closed her eyes. He could see tears through her lashes. “To experience this and to know that you’re going to leave.”

His heart twinged. He bowed his head so that their foreheads touched. “For you, I’m sure it is a mistake. For me?”

She opened her eyes to look at him.

“My entire existence is in error,” he whispered to her. “My life *is* the mistake. But you? You are the only part of my world that is correct.”

She sniffed. “That is probably the sweetest thing that anyone will ever say to me.” She cupped his cheek with her hand. “It’s also completely wrong. You are not a mistake.” She clenched around him, and he groaned. “You are not an error. You are wonderful. I love you.”

It *should* have been a mistake, tasting her the way he didn’t deserve to. He’d stolen this illicit moment. But he couldn’t regret it. He couldn’t see it as a lapse. He couldn’t see it as anything except what should have been.

So he took her apart, thrusting deep into her, watching her face and finding the angle that made her almost cry out. She brought one hand to her face and bit it, making little moaning noises. He pulled it away.

“Let me hear you. Darling. Let me hear all of you.”

The heat of her built around him. The slick slide of their thrusts, the rise of her hips to meet him, stoked that flame. He brought her closer and closer. Finally, he brought his hand between them, pressing between her legs, finding the spot that would bring her all the way there.

She clenched around him in hard waves, her breath harsh. Kai let go, emptying himself inside her in hot pleasure.

In the aftermath, their breath remained in tune, in and out, chest to chest. For this one last moment, they were still one.

Then Kai pulled away. A pitcher on a dresser yielded water; he found a cloth and wet it and came back to bed, wiping her clean.

She was crying.

“Naomi.”

“It’s all right.” She didn’t stop crying. “Please don’t think I regret any of this. I’m just sorry you’re leaving.”

He came to sit next to her on the thin bedroll, holding her, feeling her body rack with sobs. He caressed her hair and pressed kisses to her forehead.

“There, there.” He didn’t want to let go. “There is a life where I stay,” he told her, as soothing as he could in the quiet of the night. “There is a life where we are together. Where we are happy.”

“There is?” Her shudders were slowly subsiding.

“It’s just not this one.” He kissed her again. “But it’s close enough that we were gifted the chance to see what might have been. I will treasure that.”

“I’m glad we had it.”

He held her until she grew still. Until her breathing evened, long and slow, into the rhythm of sleep.

Then, slowly, carefully, he let her go and dressed himself.

He had readied everything in preparation for leaving. In the event that he was unable to see her before he left, he had written her a letter. He set this next to her, so that it would be the first thing she saw on waking.

He meant to slip away. He had thought to leave Wedgefords like this, before anything more could happen to test his resolve.

But watching Naomi in the dim light of his cottage, watching her breath go up and down...

Tied to his coat, he found the omamori her mother had made. He could feel the embroidery against his fingers, a loving protection against his own very nature.

Leave, his mind whispered. Leave. Leave. You must leave, if you want to be anything. Leave, and break the curse.

He sat on the floor next to Naomi and watched her sleep. What had Mr. Kwan called that voice in his head? Ah—that was it. The voice of authority.

This voice telling him to leave was the parent he had built for himself when his own was so inadequate. It was the parent that had constructed negative rules to balance out his father's crimes.

But why, exactly, did Kai think that he needed to leave? Why had he thought to slip away with a note and a promise? Why did Kai think that, after a night where they professed their love, where she gave him her trust and her body, she deserved to wake up to cold silence?

I have to, he thought to himself, in order to break the curse. He had to pay his father's debts back; that demanded fraud. And—he knew it well—when one committed a fraud, one left. That was the rule.

He swallowed, and contemplated that rule.

Many years ago, in this very cottage, Kai's father had left him a cursory note before disappearing.

Maybe, Kai realized slowly, the voice of authority in Kai's head still had too much of his father in it.

Those words had been instilled into him through long nights kneeling. *Not one word wrong. Not one action wrong. No mistakes. Never stay after the fraud has been done.*

He had wanted to break free of his family's curse, but he'd not let himself question what he had been taught. One day, Kai wanted to be a father. He wanted his children to grow up in a

way he had not. To know no rules but the rules that every honest person knew. He wanted to be a kind and loving parent.

Kai sat in the dark with that thought.

The voice of authority in his head, he realized, fingering the silk embroidery, was not a loving parent. If he wanted to break the hold his father had on him, it had to start here: with rewriting what that voice would say.

It would not say *leave*. It would not say *not one word wrong*. A loving parent would never say *don't look back*.

A loving parent would say...

Kai slowly reached out a hand and laid a finger on Naomi's shoulder. A loving parent would say this, perhaps.

You do not need to be alone.

NAOMI WOKE. THERE WAS A BIT OF A DRAFT, BUT THE AIR WAS not too cold. The quality of the light against her eyelids suggested that it was early, the kind of waking that would normally have her turning over in her bed and falling back asleep.

There was just one problem: she was not in her bed.

That made her open her eyes with a shock. She sat up in Kai's bedroll. The light was gray and insubstantial, with the barest threat of morning coming. Her hair was loose around her shoulders. She wore nothing but a chemise—she had vague memories of Kai cleaning her off and slipping the fabric over her while she drowsed off. She was sore in places she'd never understood, and Kai was—Kai was—

She found him on the other side of the room. He was waiting patiently, sitting on his heels.

"Good morning." His voice was low.

"Kai." She gasped his name in relief.

“I had initially meant to leave you this.” He held up a letter. “But that is the coward’s way out, and I don’t believe I should be a coward any longer.”

He stood and handed the paper to her. In the dimness she could make out her own name.

“Oh, Kai.” Naomi felt her throat close up. She reached for the paper and unfolded it.

“Here.” Kai struck a match and lit a thumb-tall nub of candle. Light flared and flickered, and she could focus on the words.

Dearest Naomi, she read. Farewell.

Suddenly she couldn’t breathe. He’d *said* he was leaving, and yet still it came as a shock to her that he planned to do so. She dropped the paper as if it were poison and pressed her shaking hands against her thighs.

A breath in. A breath out. The letter still lay there, ink-blue words swimming around her vision.

“Read it,” he said quietly. “We will rewrite these words. I only wanted you to know how close I came, so that you would know who I am, and who I am trying to be.”

With an exhale, she started again.

Dearest Naomi,

Farewell.

Of all the lies I have ever told, you were the one that was always true. As my father said, we were betrothed as children. My father was eager to ingratiate himself with yours, and I was the tool he had to hand.

Discovering my fiancée in Dover was a shock to me. Realizing in the weeks that followed that you were perfect for me? That has been the greatest honor of my life.

If I can love you this much, someday someone else will, too.

She looked up from the letter. “But I don’t want anyone else.”

“I know.”

She read the final salutation.

All my love,

Liu Ji Kai

She'd known this moment was coming since the very beginning. One day she would wake up, and Kai would no longer be in Wedgeford. She'd known it when she came to like him, then to love him. No amount of love would change the fact that he was leaving, and she was not.

She had chosen to experience love in all its forms, knowing their relationship would end. She had chosen this.

She had *chosen* this: she had chosen to feel her own heart break, knowing that it would mean that Kai would know he was loved. Every bit of him.

In that moment, though, she did not feel her heart break. She felt her heart come together.

She was Naomi Kwan. She was lovable, and she was loved.

“Kai,” she said gently, “I know you are going to commit your one perfect fraud. But—”

He shook his head. “I have been thinking of it for hours. How perfect can it be if I must leave you for it?”

She stared at him.

“I am trying,” he said thickly. “I need you to know how close I came to walking away. Because it was the plan. Because I still don't know how to do anything else. I have been inside a lie for what feels like my entire life.” He raised red-rimmed eyes to her. “I need help to break out.”

In the entire time that Naomi had known Kai, she had never known him to ask for anything. He'd been insistent that he not take so much as a penny. He'd crafted an entire complement of dishes for the inn, and had not even let her family assist in bringing them in. He was stubborn past a fault. He never, ever asked.

He was asking.

“Naomi.” He took her hand in his. “I need you.”

KAI ENTERED THE COMMON ROOM OF THE INN A FEW HOURS later, followed by Mr. Bei. Naomi had helped him gather the rest of those they cared about the most.

Andrew and Mr. and Mrs. Kwan were already waiting. Across from them at the table sat Jeremy and Chloe.

“Come,” Mrs. Kwan said. “Sit. Have something to eat.”

“But—”

She frowned at him. “The more important it is, the more important that you eat.”

Mrs. Kwan gestured, and they all came to join her at the table. For a few moments, there was no noise but the slurp of soup in bowls, the clink of chopsticks.

“I have something to tell you all,” Kai said quietly, as the meal drew to an end.

“Before you apologize for your father’s behavior yesterday afternoon, please know that we all got together and decided you were swell.” Jeremy set down a bowl. “Sorry we didn’t tell you. We, ah, thought you might have figured it out from context.”

Kai tried to comprehend that. “You got together...just now?”

“Oh no. That was shortly after I first returned, I believe.”

Kai took a sip of the tea. “You lot have terrible judgment, did you know that? You are completely wrong about me.”

“Of course we were,” Andrew said with a roll of his eyes. “You refuse all offers of help. Oooh. I’m scared.” He did not sound scared.

“I tried to make myself into the most foolish of marks,” Jeremy told him. “I literally told you to take advantage of me by offering to include your wares in my house. You never even *tried*.”

“You keep leaving new dishes in my house,” Mr. Bei said, “as if I wouldn’t notice that my crockery is slowly being replaced.”

“You wouldn’t even let me make you dinner without paying for it,” Naomi reminded him.

“Oh.” Kai’s head swam. “You noticed all that?”

“As I said,” Jeremy said, and tapped his forehead. “Context.”

“Also you saying you would never take so much as a penny,” Mr. Kwan added dryly. “And then doing exactly that.”

“But—”

“There, there.” Mr. Bei waved a hand. “I’m sure you have your reasons for doubting yourself.”

“Unlike me,” Andrew put in. “My mind is free and clear of all such encumbrances.”

Naomi turned to her cousin. “Your mind is free of a *lot* of things, Andy. Like thoughts.”

“Tact,” Mr. Bei offered.

Andrew huffed, but fell silent.

Naomi punched her cousin lightly in the arm. “The conversation wasn’t about you.”

“In any event,” Jeremy continued, with a loud clearing of his throat, “not to get too far ahead of myself here. But there were two logical possibilities. One, you were swindling us, but were so bad at it that you missed the opportunities we gave you to do so. Repeatedly.”

Kai's nose wrinkled.

"Two," Chloe said, "you weren't swindling at all. That's where we landed. That's why it was so easy for us to know your father was a liar."

Kai took another sip of tea. The idea of letting people know the full extent of what he'd been doing sent shivers down his spine. His whole being screamed not to let people inside this lie. But if he didn't...

He let out a long sigh. "Three," he said. "I'm a much better swindler than any of you imagined, and none of you have the experience to recognize it."

"Right." Jeremy rolled his eyes. "That's it. That's the one. And as an expert swindler, obviously you'll tell us everything right now, because that's what swindlers do, isn't it?"

"I have an extensive family history of swindling. My father stands out not because he swindled so much, but because he did it so *badly*."

Jeremy reached over and patted Kai's hand. "I'm sure that's right. You have a grand scheme to bilk us all. We suspect nothing."

"Will you please stop interrupting? I am trying to tell you that I came to Wedgeford to perpetrate a fraud. I am on the verge of doing so."

Mrs. Kwan gasped. "No."

"Absolutely," Kai returned. "You're wondering what kind of fraud." He reached into the satchel he'd brought and took out a wooden box. "*This* kind of fraud. I know how to make Jian Zhan."

Mrs. Kwan flinched. Mr. Kwan stiffened. Mr. Bei tilted his head.

Kai untied the red cord from around the box. "I don't mean that I have plans to do so. I don't mean that I will need assistance or funds to complete the task. I mean that it is already finished, and I have it right here."

He took out the cup wrapped in velvet and slowly revealed it. It glistened even in the indoor light, and Mrs. Kwan's breath caught.

"It's not as easy as my father pretended, nor would it be wildly lucrative if we were to start a kiln to produce nothing but these." He handed the cup to Andrew. "I fired almost a thousand teacups to make just this one."

Andrew took the cup from his hands. He examined it with a whistle before handing it off to Mr. Bei.

"So, you're saying there is some truth to your old family's stories, and...that's why we should disbelieve you?" That was Jeremy.

Kai huffed in frustration. "Let me *say* what I'm saying, and then you'll know what I'm saying instead of making it up for yourself."

"Sorry."

"I have an appointment a little less than a month from now in Amsterdam. When I arrive, the Marquis of Everlasting Beauty has a singularly beautiful piece to offer to a group of continental nobility. According to the documentation that I have, that piece"—Kai gestured to the cup that Mr. Kwan was now turning around in wonder—"is six hundred years old, dating from the Song Dynasty. It is a Chinese national treasure. My family rescued it from the Summer Palace hours before it was sacked by the British in the second Opium War."

Andrew's eyes lit.

"Imagine what I'll be able to get for an ancient imperial treasure. *That* was my plan: to craft the forgery of a piece supposedly from the Song Dynasty and to sell it for what it wasn't worth."

He got all that out in a rush of breath.

"Really!" Jeremy sounded impressed. "That's been your plan? This whole time?"

"It is almost the perfect swindle," Kai explained. "They can't read any of the aging documentation I will give them."

The actual item *is* rare and valuable. I'll get enough money to..." He looked upward. "Well, we'll get to that later. Most importantly, I have my..." He glanced at Naomi. "My own code of ethics. I never want to hurt anyone who can't afford it. But most of all, anyone willing to buy another country's stolen national treasure in so secretive fashion deserves to be defrauded."

The people around the table just looked at him.

"Honestly?" Jeremy tapped a finger against the table. "It's not legal, but on a moral level? It sounds mostly unobjectionable."

"Unobjectionable?" Andrew scoffed. "It sounds *magnificent*. I *wish* I'd thought of it. Amazing."

"Andrew." That admonition came from his mother.

"It's true!" Andrew said.

"Is this the 'I'm so terrible, I'm such a bad person, you should beware' scam that has had you tied up in knots the entire time you've been here?" Naomi was staring at him. "I'm not one to encourage criminal behavior, but this is..."

"It's still wrong," Mrs. Kwan said primly. "But..."

"But it's also very funny," Mr. Kwan finished.

Kai felt his fingers curling in on themselves, pressing into his palm. His whole body contracted. "It's also only half of the plan. You see, I'm doing this because I need the money. I wrote a letter some years after I left Wedgeford. I needed to lay out the path I intended to take. To remind myself that when things were difficult, I must persevere."

He reached into his pocket and took out a faded sheet of paper.

"Here." He handed it to Mr. Bei. "You can see what it says for yourself."

Mr. Bei unfolded the letter, squinted at the fading ink. Then he waved the paper back in Kai's direction. "Rude. Do I look like I'm literate? Someone else read it to me."

Mrs. Kwan took the paper. ““To our esteemed Mr. Bei—””

“Do you always write your letters so formally?” Mr. Bei complained. “How many times do I have to tell you? ‘Uncle’ is fine.”

“I wrote it before I’d even come back to Wedgeford! Of course I was going to be formal.”

Mrs. Kwan smiled. “Mr. Bei, please don’t interrupt.”

“Oh, right. Go on.”

““Twenty years ago, you invested one pound, seventeen shillings in Lucky Liu Industries. For that, you were promised a return of twenty percent per annum, to be paid on the commencement of sale of the first Jian Zhan produced in Wedgeford. As this eventuality has come to pass...” Mrs. Kwan stopped and stared at the page.

“Go on,” Kai said.

““As this eventuality has come to pass, I hereby remit to you what is owed: seventy pounds, eighteen shillings, and five pence?”” Her tone rose as she finished the letter.

“That’s what you expect to make off this endeavor?” Andrew said. “More than seventy pounds?”

“Of course not.” Kai met Andrew’s gaze with a flinty certainty. “I made almost twenty pounds selling my father’s cup. That was not nearly as beautiful, nor did it have this ‘history.’ That’s how I had the funds to make this happen in the first place. There were many other investors in Wedgeford. I intend to repay everyone.”

““The first Jian Zhan produced in Wedgeford,”” Naomi said wonderingly. “You brought in so many trunks of dirt. You said it was because you needed dirt from...um, a specific place.”

“An orogenous zone. A place where mountains are being formed.”

“This whole time, I’ve been wondering: Why come to Wedgeford at all? You thought everyone here would hate you, and yet you came. You brought dirt from halfway round the

world. Every time I thought about it, I could never understand why you didn't just make your pieces where the dirt came from."

"Precisely," Kai said. "My plan was always to fulfill the terms of my father's debts. I needed to produce Jian Zhan in Wedgeford. And I needed close to four hundred pounds to repay everything."

"Amazing," Mr. Bei spoke in a low voice. "Quickly come, quickly go."

"Nothing has come yet." Kai braced himself. "I'm planning to lie to the most powerful people in the Western hemisphere. After I do that, the only way to make my fraud perfect would be to leave this part of the world for good. It never seemed like a problem, but..."

He could not help but look helplessly at Naomi.

"Well, that's stupid," Andrew said. "You can't hurt my cousin. Simply do something other than that."

"And yet the risk of discovery..." Kai could feel his heart pounding in his chest. "I thought that I might ask. For advice. And help."

Mr. Bei looked at him, and then cracked a smile. "Look at you! Asking! I'm so proud."

"Please don't laugh."

"Truthfully," Jeremy said slowly, "I think the risk of discovery is low."

"But people are already talking of 'Wedgeford's potter.' I know what I have made to sell is very different, but if someone started to suspect a fraud, they could look to me first."

Andrew steeped his fingers. "I'm not so sure of that. But if you are worried about being recognized, you should send someone else to Amsterdam."

"Yes," Jeremy said, "but who would do? If he's pretending to be a Chinese marquis, it would have to be someone who wears a queue."

Mr. Bei straightened in his seat and touched his own braid.

“It needs to be someone with gravitas,” Jeremy said. “Someone who can carry himself with a sense of importance. Maybe someone older.”

Mr. Bei snorted. “Not *that* much older.”

“Right.” Jeremy nodded. “It’s settled. Send Mr. Bei. Nobody will ever suspect him of being a secret pottery genius.”

“But...!” Kai looked around at them.

“And,” Andrew said, “do something particularly memorable on the day of the auction. That way, on the off chance that someone one day has suspicions, there will be people who can remember what you were doing and can vouch that you were clearly here in England.”

“Maybe another class in Dover?” Mrs. Kwan put in. “Perhaps there could be one of those?”

“A town festival,” Andrew said.

“So soon after the Trials? Perhaps I should hold some kind of party,” Jeremy put in. Then everyone was talking, throwing in their own ideas.

Kai met Naomi’s eyes across the table, and slowly, slowly, he allowed himself to consider his own idea. The two of them hadn’t talked about it—he didn’t know, not for sure, but—

Her eyes were lighting with their own spark, though.

“Naomi,” he whispered, leaning in. “I know our engagement is only temporary. I don’t want to assume anything, but...”

“You do realize,” she responded in a soft voice, “that there’s no such thing as a permanent engagement?”

He stared at her in confusion.

“Engagements are *always* a provisional status. A temporary engagement is actually the normal kind.”

Kai felt his world swirl dizzily around him, rearranging itself into a form he could not quite let himself believe. “Are you telling me that...”

“Correct.” She beamed at him. The delight shining in her eyes was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. “I bamboozled you. Our fake engagement was truly real. And I’m very proud of myself for doing so while you, the master fraudster with all of your rules, never noticed.”

“Huh.” He sat back. “I thought I was the only one who knew we were faking the fakeness of our engagement.”

“Never. We have always been in this together.” She nodded. “Go ahead. *Tell* them.”

Kai spoke loudly into a lull. “What about a wedding?” His voice sounded loud in the room. “What would be better proof that I was in Wedgeford than a piece of paper signed by witnesses?”

“Yes,” Naomi replied before he could finish speaking. “I say yes.” She didn’t just say the words; she glowed them out. And that was it for Kai. Up until now, he’d had one mission: to repay Wedgeford.

But in that moment, it changed.

For the rest of my life, he thought, I want her to look like that.

THE WEEKS UNTIL THE WEDDING SLIPPED BY IN A HAZE. Naomi’s parents took charge of outfitting Kai’s cottage so she would have somewhere suitable to live; Chloe took charge of Naomi’s trousseau.

Andrew managed the decorations, and Kai spent his time preparing Mr. Bei for the journey to Amsterdam and for what to say when he was there.

(“As little as possible,” Kai told him. “I know how difficult that will be for for you.”)

“Are you saying I speak too much?” Mr. Bei demanded.

Kai, wisely, did not say anything in response.)

On Kai and Naomi’s encouragement, everyone in Wedgeford recklessly invited everyone else they knew. The tiny chapel was overflowing with guests by the time Naomi made her way inside. Not just people from Wedgeford; people from London, and people from Dover. Mr. Bottoms had come to pay his respects along with several of his friends. Everyone was there.

Everyone, that was, except Mr. Bei. She wished it could be any other way. But when she’d told him that Kai cared for him, that he would miss her, he’d just smiled. “I will be around for every day of his marriage. And even if I am not present, every time he remembers the ceremony, he will remember me. What else could I want?”

Somehow, Naomi realized, as she looked down the aisle of a church packed to its rafters, her fake engagement had brought her *here*. To a wedding.

To a man who had loved her even when it made no sense, who had cherished her even when she did not know what it meant to be cherished. Who had seen the person she was, even when she had not.

She straightened the red silk of her gown, took her father’s arm, and walked up to meet him.

FRESHLY LAUNDERED CURTAINS HUNG OVER THE WINDOWS OF Kai’s cottage. His bed roll had been replaced with a mattress; his blankets had been swapped for heavy quilts.

But the most glorious change he’d ever seen was Naomi in resplendent red spread out before him, with the din of Wedgeford’s celebration muted below.

“I received a telegram from Mr. Bei just before we retired,” he murmured to her.

“Oh?”

“The auction has occurred.” He took a breath. “The winner paid seven hundred pounds.”

Naomi gasped. “Seven hundred!”

Kai leaned in and rested his forehead against Naomi’s shoulder. “Mr. Bei has already obtained the funds from his bank. It’s all done but the distribution.”

“That should cover everything, shouldn’t it?”

He’d memorized the accounts. He knew the exact amount owed, and still Kai had checked twice before being certain. “And then some. I don’t want to keep anything from it; it doesn’t seem right. Perhaps I’ll give what’s left after we’ve paid everyone to Mr. Bei as an executor’s fee.”

“Perhaps. If he’ll accept it.” She reached out and set her hand against the frogs of his jacket. “Does this mean the curse is broken?”

He leaned in and kissed her. The kiss lingered, her lips soft under his, her skin warming against him. His fingers found the fasteners of her gown, and slowly, he undid them.

“For so many years,” he told her, pulling away slightly, “the curse felt like a physical thing. I could *feel* it on my tongue, robbing me of the ability to choose my own path.”

“Mm.” Naomi wound herself around him, undoing the buttons of his shirt, and Kai paused to kiss her again. Their mouths met more deeply, as if he could reach into her and have everything; his hands slipped under her gown, only to encounter lace.

He paused and lifted the fabric. Underneath the silk red of her gown, he found the edges of lace on her drawers. He fingered it.

“This is lovely.”

“It’s a gift from Chloe.”

“For me? How lucky.”

“For us.” So saying, Naomi slipped off her gown, followed by her corset. This left her wearing nothing but the red lace drawers and the red chemise. The fabric clung to her skin, so sheer that he could see the circles of her nipples through it, the curve of her waist.

“Definitely for me.” He put his hands on her. “This is definitely for me.”

He ran his hands up her chest, brushing against a nipple, and smiled as she gasped.

“I was stuck inside a lie,” Kai told her, idly running his thumb around the hardening nub. “Unable to break out. And then I met you.”

She smiled tremulously at him.

“Within days, I knew that only the luckiest, most deserving man could have you.”

“Stop! Please!”

Kai let his hands fall to his lap. “Of course.”

“Not *that*.” She smiled at him. “Keep doing *that*. I just can’t hear so many compliments.”

He leaned over her. “That’s going to be a problem. You’re married to me now. It’s too late. You’ll just have to take them.”

“Kai.” Her hands went to the button of his trousers.

“There is no way around it,” Kai said. “You will simply have to spend all your days hearing how deeply I adore you. This is the fate you have consigned yourself to.”

“Well, if we are to be that way.” Slowly, she eased his trousers off. “You will have to know how much I love and care for you.”

He kissed her then, because he *did* know, because this fake engagement had always been real. Because he had always meant it, from the very beginning. He kissed her, and then when he could kiss her no more, he let his hands bring them closer, until all the inconvenient fabric of his shirt and her chemise were gone, and they were bare, skin to skin.

His hands were hungry for her, but she was hungrier still. She clambered on top of him.

It was bliss entering her. Bliss feeling the tight heat of her passage, bliss feeling the friction as they moved together.

It was bliss feeling her orgasm take over her, vibrating around him in waves as he brought her to pleasure.

And it was perfect when he followed shortly after, letting all of his pent-up want release.

After, when they were sated in each other's arms, he kissed her hand. "I always believed that if I were lucky, I might have one perfect thing in my life. I thought it would be the fraud."

"Hmm?"

"I was wrong." He kissed her forehead. "I think it will be this. *Us*."

EPILOGUE

1954. LONDON.

“Grandma!” Loud steps rang out in the stillness of the museum.

Naomi reached out and took her granddaughter’s hand. “No running,” she informed her.

“But *grandma*.”

Next to her, Kai took Nina’s other hand. “We’re here to pay respects,” he said. “Let’s take a look.”

Naomi and Kai had taken their grandchildren to a temporary exhibit on Chinese ceramics. This particular exhibit was composed partially of items in the British Museum’s archives and partially of temporary donations from private individuals. There were early pots from the Tang Dynasty, vases from the Ming Dynasty.

And there, with a little electric light illuminating it, in a box made of glass on a cushion of dark velvet, sat a cup. The color was a radiant blue-green, glistening with iridescent purples and pinks. Gold streaked the sides. It was a tiny, perfect jewel.

Tea bowl, the placard read, In the style known as Tenmoku or Jian Zhan. Dating from the Song Dynasty. Once a part of the Imperial Chinese collection and considered a national treasure of China. It was obtained during the sacking of the Summer Palace during the Second Opium War. On loan from the personal collection of the Earl of Buffingford.

Kai's hand tightened around hers. "Well." He sounded bemused. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"Indeed." Naomi looked at it—at the perfection of the colors, the refraction off the glistening surface. "It's extraordinary."

He'd talked so much about the other ceramics they'd seen, explaining to Nina precisely how one made a vase or how one fired a pot to get that particular sheen.

This one, he just looked.

"Grandpa," Nina asked. "How do you get that? Is it paint?"

Kai shook his head wordlessly. "It's glaze. It's all in how it's fired."

Nina stared. "It's beautiful. Can you show me how to do it one day?"

For a long time, Kai looked at it.

He'd been a potter for many long decades now, through two wars and longer stretches of peace, through the coming of electricity and running water. The world had changed more than he could possibly imagine. But unlike other potters, Kai had never really had to worry about increased industrialization cutting into their profits; the sum in the bank account that he and Naomi shared had swelled.

Someday, Naomi thought, when they passed on, their children would be very surprised by the amount they inherited.

Their daughters had chosen other paths; it wasn't until Nina, their third grandchild, that any of their progeny had expressed an interest in learning Kai's art.

In all that time, Kai had never made Jian Zhan again.

"Yes," Kai finally said. "I think you should learn. Maybe it's time that I teach you our family's craft."

THE RULES FOR LYING

Rule minus two

If you have to violate rule zero,
do whatever it takes to make things right.

Rule minus one

If you aren't willing to be hurt by your own lie,
you shouldn't tell it.

Rule zero

Never hurt anyone who does not need hurting.

Rule one

Never get one single word wrong.

Rule two

Every lie has an outside and an inside.
If you must tell a lie,
you must tell the exact same story
to everyone on the outside with no exception.

Rule three

Always keep to a consistent story,
no matter how people badger you.

Rule four

Lies are your profession;
do not tell falsehoods when there is no money at stake.

Rule five

Adapt your plan to circumstances
exactly as much as necessary,
and not one bit more.

Rule six

Never deny what everyone already knows.
Likewise, never affirmatively claim as true the thing that
everyone believes to be false.

Rule seven

Never stay after the fraud has been done.

No matter how safe you think you are, you are always safer
moving on.

Rule eight

Chickens are meant to be plucked.

Rejoice when they are used for their intended purpose.

THANK YOU!

Thanks for reading *The Marquis who Mustn't*. I hope you enjoyed it!

- *The Marquis who Mustn't* is the second book in the Wedgeford Trial series. If you missed the first one, Chloe and Jeremy's story is in [The Duke Who Didn't](#), and you can read it now.
- I send out a weekly tea newsletter which is about... tea, and sometimes books, and often the process of existing in the world that is not always holding together while possessing a brain that also does not always hold together. If you'd like to read the old archives, or sign up, please visit <https://www.courtneymilan.com/courtneys-weekly-tea/>
- Reviews help other readers find books. I appreciate all reviews!
- Finally, if you would like to know when my next book comes out, you can sign up for my new release mailing list at <https://www.courtneymilan.com/new-release-notification/>, follow me on twitter at [@courtneymilan](#), on Blue Sky at [courtneymilan.bsky.social](#), or like my author page on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/courtneymilanauthor/>.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book has brought me down some of the most delightful and amazing research paths that I have ever been on.

First, at the point when I decided Kai was going to be a potter, I watched a handful of YouTube videos on pottery to figure out what that was all about. I came to the initial conclusion that in fact pottery was magic because where the heck did all those pots come from?

However, “it’s just magic” is not a thing that you can put in a book where a character is a potter. So I took a pottery class. And then I took another. And then...uh, five or six more, during which time I realized that all pottery is not the same. Once I knew the basics, I started watching pottery-making videos from Japanese artists and I got tools from Japan and I flipped my wheel to go the other way round and took off my splash pan, which was terrifying but, if you are throwing properly with slip, not as messy as you would think.

This brings me to Jian Zhan. It is real. It is an actual method from the Song dynasty. It was actually produced in China for a few centuries. The craft was then brought to Japan by monks. The ware there is known there as tenmoku, so-called after a Japanese transliteration of the name of a Chinese place. For you potters out there, you may be familiar with a glaze called “temmoku”—this is a different transliteration of the same word, but generally refers to an iron-rich glaze. The art never died out in China, but it did grow substantially more scarce over the years. The fraud that Kai’s family perpetrated was not, in fact, accurate. This was because it was (small

reminder here) a fraud. China is large and this kind of fact-checking, particularly among diaspora communities that were largely composed of laborers who were not always literate and six months away from any letter, would pose substantial difficulties.

The extraordinary pattern and color in Jian Zhan come about from a number of things: a glaze that is close to super-saturated in iron, a kiln process that (accidentally, at first) took a long time to cool down, giving the proper chemical reaction time to occur, and ash spit up from the firing process. The production of these pieces were famously fickle: maybe one out of every 30,000 pieces fired ended up being presentation quality.

The pricing for Kai's final piece of Jian Zhan may sound outrageous, but it was based roughly on the sale of one of the Yohen Tenmoku in 1918. The Yohen Tenmoku tea bowls are three of the most extraordinary pieces of Jian Zhan ever made. They were fired in China, but brought to Japan, and are now considered Japanese national treasures. In 1918, one of the bowls was sold for approximately \$1500 (in Japanese yen), not adjusted for inflation. The current worth of that same tea bowl is estimated to be close to \$15 million now.

English language sources on the creation of tenmoku are sparse and often incorrect. As an example: early on in the process of writing this book, I got what people said was *The Definitive Book of Ash Glazes* and it turns out that this was absolutely useless on the topic of how to make tenmoku, and in fact, didn't even seem to know what tenmoku *was* beyond a brownish glaze that they maybe people pressed straw and/or leaves into when hot. (Also true: just nowhere near complete).

Much of what I know about the making of tenmoku comes from watching videos of Chinese and Japanese craftsmen who have been working in this field.

Do I know how to make tenmoku now? No. I do not. I have watched about seven separate documentaries in Japanese, and read several books, and listened to this amazing interview with the man who has been working on recreating the Yohen pieces. I have been unable to find this video to link it to you

here, which is really annoying for both of us. But he said (based on my notes) that in making tenmoku, you needed to understand that the ancients were in fact inexact and messy. They did not have electric mixers; they did not have gas-fired kilns. Most of what creates the exquisite patterns in tenmoku are what we would think of as mistakes, and so the trick is to understand what mistakes give rise to what patterns, and then to duplicate them. The most important thing, he said, was to use clay from an orogenous zone.

There are, in fact, tea bowls that you can buy for semi-reasonable amounts of money (\$30-\$50) that are marked as tenmoku. It is my belief, after watching videos from Nagae Soukichi, discussing tenmoku fakes, that those cups are not “proper” tenmoku: that is, their patterns and markings probably result from the use of spinel pigments to add the color seen, rather than having it come about naturally in the kiln.

My description of methods and machines used in pottery making are based on a visit to Onta Pottery Village in Kyushu Prefecture in Japan. In this village, pottery is made using ancient Edo period techniques, including incredible uses of water to power otherwise labor intensive tasks like crushing stone into dirt that will then be turned into clay. The kara-usu that Kai describes in this book are from that time.

This is where I got to see a dragon kiln in person, and was able to watch pottery being made. To the extent that I got anything right about how Kai would make pottery in a period that precedes electricity, it is because of this amazing village that opens their workshops to the public so that everyone can learn how the past works. (To the extent that I got anything wrong, that’s on me.)

Finally, a note on the tool Kai uses that he doesn’t translate: it’s called a gyubera in Japanese. He wouldn’t have wanted to use the word in front of Naomi, because the word would give away the origin. This often gets translated as “cow’s tongue” in pottery circles, but the “hera” from which the “bera” comes is used in the pottery context to mean something closer to spatula or an artist’s palette.

Okay, so let's talk about that town in the United States that Kai mentions that his father takes him to after he leaves Wedgeford. The town, in the middle of the mountains? In the American mountain west? The town that reminds him of Wedgeford because it's almost half-Chinese?

Some of you were probably thinking, "oh there goes Courtney, inventing *another* half-Chinese village in the middle of nowhere." But I did not invent this one. I just didn't give the name because I thought it would throw people out of the story if I did.

The town is Boise, Idaho. According to the U.S. Census, in 1870, Boise was 45.6% Chinese. Most people do not hear the name "Boise" and say, "wow, that sounds like a bastion of racial diversity, just like Idaho." But it was.

There were quite a few Chinese people in the West of the United States, and specifically in the intermountain West due to the construction of the intercontinental railroad. After the railroad was finished, many of the Chinese workers participated in the gold rushes that followed. Before the rise of the anti-Chinese sentiment that gave birth to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the intermountain west had a large number of Chinese inhabitants.

Compare that with where we are now. From the North American territory first claimed by the first colonists of the United States, down to the last inch of land annexed... This land under colonial rule has never been a bastion of racial uniformity. Uniformity, to the extent it exists now, only exists because it was created.

While we're talking about how labor forces created a half-Asian Boise in the nineteenth century, a quick note on how labor forces would have shaped Wedgeford. I allude to this

issue with Mr. Peng in the beginning, and have vaguely mentioned it in various people's backstories. But the presence of increasing numbers of Asian people were in fact mandated by British law.

Under British law, when a British vessel left England, it had to be manned by labor composed of at least 80% British subjects. What this means in practice is that, as the vessel travels around the world—and the sailors they came in with die, are injured, or simply leave—the vessel would often hire local laborers to take their place.

Upon return to Britain, though, the ships that had brought them there would have to hire British subjects for their berths before leaving. By law and necessity, the number of non-British sailors coming in was greater than the number going out. The end result is that the British trading machine regularly stranded people of color in England.

Those people often worked hard to be able to afford passage home; periodically, someone would notice communities cropping up, and would occasionally deport them. My invention in Wedgeford is not that Asian people were *there*. The invention is that in one tiny corner, they were allowed to stay.

Just to be clear: Kai's views on porcelain are his views. They are shared by some: there are definitely a lot of schools of thought as to what pottery "should" be and clearly, not everyone agrees.

Kai is a potter who feels very strongly about his craft, and the views he espouses in this book are not representative of Asia as a whole. Literally nothing could ever be representative of an entire continent filled with cultural and ethnic diversity.

Kai also does not metabolize alcohol well. This is sometimes known as “Asian flush,” although it’s not limited to Asians. Typically this happens because the person lacks the enzyme to properly digest alcohol, meaning that the effects strike quickly, linger for a long time, and are annoying at the back end.

You may be wondering how it is possible for a grown man to get drunk on two mouthfuls of beer. I have done extensive research on this, specifically using the research subject of myself. I have none, zero, zilch alcohol tolerance.

I have to explain to waiters that kombucha is only a *legally* nonalcoholic drink, but it’s not *actually* nonalcoholic. (Side note: if sobriety is important to anyone you care about, please do not serve them kombucha.) If I’m ever with friends and I want to get tipsy, I will have about a shot glass of kombucha. If I want to get drunk, I’ll drink half a can.

I love that I finally get to share the experience of my alcohol tolerance with you.

Finally, Kai gives two names for his father: Liu Tang Li and Liu Bai Li. The latter is his father’s business name. It was fairly common around the turn of the century to use different names in different contexts; my grandfather had several.

It was a joy to write this book. I hope it was a joy to read.

GLOSSARY

This glossary is available on my website at <http://cmil.co/tmwm-glossary/> with audio pronunciations. The glossary there includes the names used in the book, as well as the rendering in Chinese/Japanese (which are not included here because they do not render properly on all e-readers).

Ah - affectionate prefix added to names / relationships

Arara -

Dama - hemp

Damare -

Go -

Haha - Mama, relatively informal

Itadakimasu - Basically, “let’s eat”

Kannen

Kara-usu - no English equivalent, but I have videos of their operation at

Katsumi, Kacchan: Kacchan is a shortened form of Katsumi with an affectionate prefix

Kome: Japanese word for rice.

Mukashi, mukashi:

Naomi, Nao-chan:

Neechan

Okaasan - Mother, relatively formal

Omamori

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Special shout out to Joshua Margolis at Out of Step Clay for teaching me how to throw and also for being excited about me bringing eastern tools into class. Extra special shout out to Taku Kiyama whose amazingly ASMR [YouTube channel](#) helped me figure out how to throw in a non-Western style. Extra extra special shout out to the Onta Pottery Village in Hita, Japan for giving me an idea what has changed in the last two hundred years.

ALSO BY COURTNEY MILAN

The Wedgeford Trials

The Duke Who Didn't

The Marquis who Mustn't

The Worth Saga

Once Upon a Marquess

Her Every Wish

After the Wedding

The Pursuit Of...

Mrs. Martin's Incomparable Adventure

The Devil Comes Courting

The Brothers Sinister Series

The Governess Affair

The Duchess War

A Kiss for Midwinter

The Heiress Effect

The Countess Conspiracy

The Suffragette Scandal

Talk Sweetly to Me

The Turner Series

Unveiled

Unlocked

Unclaimed

Unraveled

The Cyclone Series

Trade Me

Hold Me

Not in any series

A Right Honorable Gentleman

What Happened at Midnight

The Lady Always Wins