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WHAT
WOULD
YOU RISK
for the
ONE YOU
LOVE?

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ONE
NIGHT
in
HARTSWOOD

Emma Denny

MILLS & BOON

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Chapter One

Oxfordshire – 1360

Shafts of bright midday sun pierced through the canopy above, mottling Lord Griffin Barden's retinue with golden flecks of light. A detour through the forest brought an hour's relief for both horses and riders: it had been a long day, and the shade was a welcome reprieve from the blinding winter sun. Raff led his horse along the wide road, thankful for the cover.

Hartswood Forest had been but a dark smear on the horizon as the party approached from the north. Now it was transformed into something huge and imposing, the wide elms twisting above the road, penning them in. Even in early winter, the trees were packed so closely that it posed a near impassable barrier, despite so many of them lacking their leaves. The only way to their destination was on a road through the forest itself, picking around trees older than Raff's father – older than his father's father.

Raff found his mind wandering as he surveyed the area. His experience lay north, in his family's territory, and he pondered what he might be able to find this far south. The trees were pressed so closely together that the heart of the forest was utterly hidden, and he was keen to know what lay between those ancient trunks; what animals he may find here, hidden pools or startling southern wildflowers. The land was protected by royal law – owned by the

King and managed by the Earl their party was travelling towards – which meant it would be rich with game.

'Raff!'

His head snapped around at the intrusion to his thoughts.

'Save it till after Lily's wedding, at least.' His brother laughed.

Raff frowned. 'Save what?'

Ash shook his head at him. 'I love ale. Father loves chess. Lily loves brea—'

'Ash!' Lily warned, twisting in her saddle to glare at him.

'Loves *broad*swords, even though she shouldn't, as a noble lady,' he drawled towards their sister with a mock bow, 'and you, Raff, love your forests. A true hunter, through and through.'

Raff huffed. 'I love *peace*. The only place to find it is in the wilderness when I'm forced to travel beside you for days on end.'

'You wound me, brother.'

'Don't tempt me to make it fatal, *brother*.'

Ash laughed through his nose, the scar on his face pulling upwards.

'If you are intending to explore, you should make yourself useful,' he teased. 'You could catch a pair of rabbits. Lady Cecily,' he drawled, grandly, 'would you deign to wear a fur-lined wedding gown? It may suit, in this weather.'

Lily rolled her eyes at him, but said nothing.

'Maybe they like brides rabbit-furred this far south,' Ash continued. 'I wouldn't know.'

She snorted. 'There's hundreds of things you wouldn't know,' she said, 'both about the south *and* brides.'

Ash continued, unfazed. 'If not a rabbit, a bird, then, perhaps? A cirlet of feathers?'

Raff ignored him. He was growing tired of Ash's continual

mocking, already dreading the prospect of a days-long march back to Dunlyn Castle. He wondered how poorly his father and brother would react if he voiced his desire to remove himself from their party and travel elsewhere *now*, rather than waiting to tell them until after the wedding. The temptation to leave was growing stronger every day: the urge to seek his own path, if only for a short while.

It was news that could wait until afterwards, when tensions were less high.

‘When this is all over,’ Ash was saying, ‘we’ll be part of the family. Lily, you must ask your husband’s father to extend his royal licence to your brother, before he drives us mad with his sour moods.’

‘I’m not some hound in need of exercising,’ Raff mumbled bitterly, well aware that his brother wasn’t listening to him.

He sighed. He *did* crave the solitude of the forest. It would be a relief after so many days on the road, never able to grab more than an hour or so alone. It wasn’t the thrill of the track and the hunt he needed, but the peace of the trees, the susurrations of nature around him unmarred by the bark of dogs or the stamping of horses or the endless chattering of their party.

Yet these hours they had left were precious, and few. Soon, their family would be lessened by one. Raff could accept his own discomfort if it meant spending time by Lily’s side before sending her away to an uncertain future.

He’d stay with her now, and this evening. He’d stay with her through tomorrow’s ceremony, through the noise of the feast, and leave in the morning, their entourage burdened with one more ghost.

Raff was dreading the days of feasting for more than one reason. Lily’s loss would be a hard blow to them all, but with the wedding came the ever-present need to perform, to fulfil the role that was expected of him as the son of an earl. Twenty-seven years of training

had honed not just his skill with the blade, but his manners too, although he was painfully aware that he was poor with people. It was an act, and the performance exhausted him, leaving him feel inept.

He needed to maintain the ruse, just for a few days. He was not as charming as Lily, but at least he was a better showman than Ash, who had abandoned all attempts at civility some years ago. Ash was too familiar with the cut of steel to feel anything other than contempt for those who'd rather ignore the cost of war in favour of dancing and banquets.

Lily's match had been arranged in haste, and it appeared that his Lordship the Earl Marcus de Foucart hadn't gone to any great pains to announce who he was marrying his son to. It meant they travelled largely unnoticed. This may have been a deliberate choice on the Earl's part rather than an oversight: while the Barden family was an ancient one, well connected in the north, Raff's parents' marriage – a union between an English earl and Marion of Kerr, a laird's daughter – had been met with suspicion. Suspicion had matured into keen distrust, hardened over thirty years, twenty-five of which had been spent embroiled in war with the Scots.

They were known by name alone, too far north for the southern nobles to bother learning their faces. Yet Raff still suspected they were being scrutinised by those around them. The back of his neck prickled, and he realised quite suddenly that they really *were* being stared at.

He turned in the saddle. Two girls – a pair of servants no older than sixteen from the party they'd been travelling with since Tusmore – were watching them with close interest.

Raff gave the girls a curt, courtly nod, sending the elder of the two into fits of giggles. Ash's attention was caught by the noise, and he too peered down at the pair. He scowled at them, the expression

twisting his marred face into something more akin to a grimace. The girls paled, falling into a hushed silence.

Ash smirked, clearly pleased with himself.

He had always been terse, his wit more barbed than Raff's. After the ruinous battle that had left him richer only for a scar that snaked down his cheek to his throat, his spiked nature had honed into something with more of an edge.

Raff watched as his brother scanned the carts travelling ahead of them, his scowl deepening.

'I don't trust this match,' Ash said, finally.

'Why not?'

'I don't know enough about this Marcus de Foucart, or his son. I do not even know Lily's husband's *name*.'

'Which is entirely your own fault,' Lily interrupted. 'If you deigned to listen to Father, you'd know more.'

'And do *you* know so much about him?'

She twirled a strand of her long red hair around her finger as she thought. She had inherited her hair from their mother, while Raff and his brother had received their father's darker colouring. They made an odd trio, riding three abreast, the only tell that they shared blood the freckles they had all been blessed with.

'He is named *William*, to start,' she said, as Ash rolled his eyes at her. 'He's the third son.'

'There's at least one elder daughter too,' cut in Raff.

'Unmarried?'

Raff shrugged again. 'I believe so.'

'So why not arrange a marriage for *her*, then? The elder daughter should surely make a match before the younger son.'

Raff hesitated before speaking again. Ash was right: it was unusual.

'She may be infirm,' he mused. 'Perhaps promised to the church, or someone else . . .'

'A convenient excuse. What else?'

'The Earldom is newly established,' Raff said, trying to remember what their father had told him. 'By the King himself. They are close, apparently.'

'Impressive,' Ash intoned, dryly. 'How new is the position?'

'Newer than Father's.'

'That is not particularly difficult.'

Raff pursed his lips. That was true enough; the seat his father occupied had been held by the men in his family for longer than anyone could remember.

'So he's looking to barter favour by tying himself to an old title, is that it?' Ash continued.

'I cannot guess at his motives,' Raff said, 'for the union *or* marrying off the son first.'

Ash snorted. 'It doesn't sit right with me, Raff. It doesn't sit right with you either, and you damn well know it.'

Raff sighed. He'd always been attuned to Ash's moods, more so since his return, and knew there was no reasoning with him. In truth, he *had* heard rumours of the Earl's nature – none of which had been encouraging – but had no way of knowing how accurate they were. Agreeing with Ash would only encourage him, making him more likely to behave rashly.

'I hadn't known you were so keen to wed, Ash,' Raff said instead. 'As the eldest son, it's *you* she would be marrying.'

It was a low blow. Without another word, Ash spurred his horse and sped away towards their father at the front of their travelling party. Together, Raff and Lily rode in silence, the only sound the gentle huffing of their horses. After a while, she spoke, her voice quieter.

‘Raff . . .’

He peered at her. Her typical bravado had been softened, an uncertain tilt to her eyebrows. Raff could remember when she’d been a tiny thing, moulded by him and his brother in the way clay was moulded by a potter, bending into the shape it was best suited for, hardened by time. And now, with her steely reserve and strong sense of loyalty, her brittle shape was being forced to change. It was either that, or shatter.

‘Ash is paranoid,’ he said, answering the question she had failed to put to words. ‘No doubt there’s good reason for the daughter to be unwed.’

‘Marriage is a convenient way to remove an inconvenient child,’ she said, slowly. ‘He could be a scoundrel.’

‘Then you two will get along.’

She glanced at him, darkly. ‘Not quite in the way he hopes we will, I fear.’

‘Cecily . . .’

‘I know, I know.’ She rolled her shoulders. Her poise was sure, but her knuckles had turned white where she gripped the reins of her horse. ‘If he *is* a scoundrel, at least I’ve had plenty of practice with them.’

She laughed, but her hands were shaking around the worn leather. The impending marriage pained her, Raff knew, but she was locked into it by duty and expectation, by the respect she had for their father, and her trust that he’d never knowingly hurt her. She had no desire to be married to a stranger, a union with wholly political motivations, but neither would she refuse, even if she could.

Lily was braver than him, of that much he was certain.

He didn’t want to see her go, and their chilly home would be quieter without her. But neither of them had a choice, and with her

wed, there would come a chance for his own freedom too. He'd vowed to keep her safe until she left, and now that time was upon them.

After Ash had ridden to war, Raff had picked up the duties of the firstborn son, keen to ease the burden on his father's shoulders. Ash had returned a changed man years ago, yet Raff had still yet to restore those duties to his brother. The resentment prickled at them both: Raff for the years shackled to a role that was never made for him, and Ash for the responsibilities he didn't want. If Raff chose to leave, Ash would have no choice but to accept them.

Part of Raff hoped that the sudden accountability would soothe his brother's temperament. Ash could make a good earl: one who was *loved* rather than *tolerated*. But only he could make the choice as to which he would be.

As Raff continued to muse, the party finally broke through the southern border of the forest, the road bathed in light once more. He lifted his arm to shield his eyes, peering around at the pastures, the rows of fields and the enormous keep that loomed ahead of them. He couldn't help but wonder whether Lily's future father-in-law was loved, or merely tolerated.

It didn't matter, he tried to remind himself. An intolerable lord would not necessarily mean the son was similarly burdened. Lily could be correct in her assumption that the marriage could be to remove him from the familial home. That could be a blessing or a curse: he could be cruel, and forcing him into marriage was a neat way to impose him upon somebody else. Equally, he could be ill-suited for court, yet unfit for monastic life. That, too, could be concerning, but Raff would sleep easier knowing that his sister's husband was foolish instead of vicious.

There was another reason for an untraditional match, of course.

Raff considered his own position beneath his father's roof, and how precarious his perch would be under the rule of someone less tolerant than Lord Barden. Lily's wouldn't be the first marriage hastily arranged with a distant, unfamiliar family as a way to douse the fires of other, far less acceptable relations. Perhaps a servant. Perhaps another man.

Raff shook his head, trying to rid himself of the thought. Although, if it *did* transpire that William was indeed tolerable, but either too free or misplaced with his affections, such a union may yet work; one of necessity and mutual understanding rather than love. Lily could find happiness like that, and Raff would be able to let her go.

There was no way of knowing. That was the worst of it, for them all. The wedding feast was less than a day away, and all they could do was wait to see what sort of man fate had handed them.

The dark bird wheeled across the sky with a screech, barely moving its wings as it dived across the expanse of blue. It was a kite, the pointed tips of its forked tail swivelling as it directed itself against the barely-there breeze.

Penn watched, shielding his eyes from the sun, as the huge bird soared above before diving, ducking out of sight behind the towering outer wall. Perhaps it had found something to eat beyond the thick stone curtain. He wished he could get a closer look, to watch it pull the carrion apart and see it take off again once it had eaten its fill.

There was a shout from the gatehouse, breaking him from his thoughts. One of the guards was gesturing, then another, and then the doors were being heaved open, the portcullis beyond lifting.

Beyond the metal bars, he could see half a dozen carts, flanked by servants and horses. The covered carriage that led the party had

a familiar coat of arms sewn into the fabric, one which Penn hadn't seen in over a year. There was a distant flurry of footsteps, and suddenly Johanna was at his side, tucking loose strands of long, dark hair back into her net.

'She's here?' his sister said, smoothing her skirts.

'She's here,' Penn replied. He watched as the cart entered the courtyard. 'I suppose that's all of us, then.'

'I suppose it is.' Jo reached out and took his hand. 'Are you all right?'

Penn gave her hand a perfunctory squeeze before pulling away.

'Why would I not be? Father has finally found a use for me.' He cocked his brow, staring forwards. 'Although I suspect he would have preferred this role was Henry's.'

'Penn—'

Before she could properly reprimand him, there was a shout, and the rosy face of their sister appeared from the back of the cart. With some difficulty, she clambered down the steps and into the yard as Penn and Jo rushed forwards to greet her.

'Ros!' Penn said, forcing himself to smile as she awkwardly embraced him. 'I hadn't expected you to make it, surely—'

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. 'My physician says I've at least four months left, and it's not so long a journey. I wouldn't miss your wedding for the *world*, William.'

He winced, but she missed the expression, continuing to talk.

'When I received Father's message, I was afraid I'd be too late. It's all happening so quickly!'

Penn gave a half-shrug, not trusting himself to say anything that didn't betray his feelings. Thankfully, Jo stepped in, looping a hand around Ros's arm.

'Penn and I were—'

‘Oh!’ Rosalind cut her off, turning back to Penn. ‘You’re *still* going by that name?’

He held his chin higher, a foolish attempt at defiance. ‘I am.’

‘And is that what your wife will address you as?’

‘If she’s willing . . .’

She laughed. ‘My sweetling, you’ve much to learn.’

He scowled at her, a retort already on his lips, but she just gave him another of those smiles, speaking before he could even choose his words.

‘I *am* glad to see you married, Will—’ she sighed, ‘Penn, if you insist. Truly, I am. It’s . . . well, it’s unlike anything else.’

She smiled again, the corners of her eyes crinkling as she did. Had she been Jo, Penn would have assumed she was teasing him, but Ros spoke so *genuinely*, like she really believed it. Perhaps she did: her marriage, by all accounts, was a complete success, even if her noble husband had been too busy to join them for his brother-in-law’s wedding.

When she’d gone to marry Lord Peter, it had felt like a loss. They’d never truly seen eye to eye, and time and distance had done nothing to solve those differences, but her absence gnawed at him regardless. He’d grown used to the three of them, bound by blood more than anything else, made close through the simple and sure knowledge that there was no one else to cling to.

Yet she had found someone else, and she had left.

The thought of his new wife and their impending marriage twisted bitterly around Penn’s grief. It was a cruel irony that the one person forced to stay by his side was a stranger to him. He was not so cynical to hate his sister’s happiness, but the resentment rubbed: he would never find that for himself.

‘Well,’ he said, trying to sound flippant, ‘I shall have to hope you are right, Ros. I cannot say I’m convinced.’

She laughed again, like it was just another joke, then took his arm as they crossed the yard towards the hall. The three of them were aligned once more, easily falling back into step. Even all these years later, he still felt the yawning gap where Leo and Henry should have been.

Rosalind nestled closer, as if reading his thoughts.

‘Soon you’ll realise how wrong you are,’ she said. ‘You need someone to love, Wi—

Penn.’

He placed his hand over hers. Her skin was warm, and soft. ‘Where’s Robin?’ he asked, attempting to move the conversation on. ‘You *did* bring him, didn’t you?’

Penn knew this was a low tactic, as Ros loved nothing more than to talk about his nephew, but it was fair if it made her forget the topic of his impending marriage. Penn listened to her chat, her fingers squeezing around his arm. For a moment, absorbed in her stories, he could forget it too.

‘I knew it!’

Raff sighed into his cup, already regretting not taking the evening for himself. ‘Ash,’ he said, attempting to keep his voice level, ‘there’s nothing to know. You’re paranoid.’

‘I’m *right*.’

‘Lily is with Father,’ he said, ‘she’ll be fine.’

‘Don’t you care that they’re refusing us boarding? We’re her brothers!’

Raff shrugged. ‘I’ve no desire to be beholden to de Foucart any more than we already are.’

‘So you’ll leave her there? Alone?’

‘She’s not *alone*. Father—’

'Father arranged this! She needs someone with her, someone who understands. If one of us could just—'

Raff was struck with the image of Ash forcing his way into the keep and demanding hospitality and a place at her side. He could imagine the reception such a demand would have, and the repercussions.

'I will not have you ruin this.'

'What is there to ruin? You know this isn't right for her.'

'And *you* know how precarious our position is in the south.'

'I'd rather be ruined than do as they ask us.'

'Then ruin *yourself*. Do not do what she hasn't asked of you.'

Ash's rage, fuelling him onwards, was a double-edged blade. It forced him to act for what he believed was right, but always came chased by consequences beyond his control. He gave in so *easily*, while Raff was forced to keep a tight rein over himself, always aware of how much could go wrong.

He tried to keep his face impassive. 'There's nothing we can do.'

'We could go in there and get her.'

'We can't.'

'Why not?'

Raff wished he had a better answer. He wished he didn't have to battle against what he wanted and what he knew they had to do.

'We *cannot*. And you know it.'

There was a prolonged silence before Ash spoke again.

'Do you even care, Raff? Or are you so ready to be free of her that you'd rather sit here and do nothing?'

The fury inside him boiled over, his self-control spent. In that hot, sparking second he considered taking a swing at Ash, knocking him to the ground, throwing him down.

But he didn't. He clenched his fists at his side, taking a long breath.

'I care,' he spat. 'I *care*. I'm done with this argument.'

'Then—'

'I'm *done*.'

Raff turned on his heel, pushing past Ash and out of the tent before he could do something he'd regret. Ash shouted after him, but he ignored him, trudging onwards through their camp and towards Hartswood Forest.

Penn spent much of the afternoon with his sisters, or playing with Robin, amazed at how much he'd grown in so short a time. His intended, he learned, had arrived a few hours after Rosalind, but despite his requests his father had refused a meeting between them.

'There'll be time for that tomorrow,' he'd said, waving an impatient hand.

Usually, Penn would have argued. For once, he hadn't had the energy.

When Ros had married, there had been feasting for days. He could still remember the music they'd played on the eve of the wedding, the ever-moving troupe dancing around the room, the palpable sense of energy that had settled over them all, even his father.

He could remember the way Ros had stared at her betrothed across the hall, as well. She'd been enamoured from the start. Penn knew he wouldn't have such a moment with his own intended, given that his inclinations had only ever been towards men, but he hoped at least to meet her. Yet it was not to be, and that evening he'd found himself hunched at the long table picking at an uneventful meal with the remainder of his family: his sisters and nephew, his father's second wife Isabelle and their two children, Ellis and Ingrid.

No one had mentioned his father's absence, or the fact that Penn

still hadn't met his soon-to-be wife, and the meal passed quickly, their echoing voices the only sounds in the huge chamber.

Penn returned to his rooms in a daze. He pulled off his tunic then washed and shaved his face, just for something to do, staring at himself in the mirror above the basin. He didn't recognise his reflection. He hadn't slept properly in a week, and the face in the metal betrayed that. There were dark bags beneath his eyes, and his curly hair was a wild tangle where he'd run his hands through it so many times.

Instead of retiring to bed, he took the opportunity to pack the remainder of his things, ready to be moved into the small manor that would be his new home.

Most of his meagre possessions had been packed already. In the process of arranging his things into chests, Penn had come to realise exactly how little of what he'd come to think of as *his* he actually owned. All the furniture in his chambers belonged to the house, and therefore his father. His effects amounted to little more than his clothes and shoes, the few trinkets he'd salvaged after his mother had died, and his books.

He hoped his wife, whoever she was, liked books. He hoped she liked *him*, what little of him there was to like. He had no desire to rule with a fist like his father, casting a shadow larger than himself over their home.

Penn didn't even know what she looked like. When he'd expressed a similar sentiment to his father, his steward had barked a harsh, ringing laugh towards him across the expansive wooden table.

'They all look the same under the sheets, boy,' he'd chuckled, as if espousing some brilliant philosophy.

Penn hadn't even been *thinking* about that. He didn't care if she was beautiful or not; to do so would make him a hypocrite once

they were sharing a bed and she saw all of him. He'd just wanted to imagine her face.

Now, standing in the centre of what was going to be his bedroom for one more night, he could only imagine a blur. He gripped the book he'd been packing more tightly, his fingers trembling.

He peered out of the window and across his father's land. The de Foucart keep itself was nestled on the edge of Hartswood Forest – the expansive kingswood that his father managed but didn't truly care for, named for the red deer found within it. Beyond that he could see the rolling fields of farmland, bare for the winter, illuminated by the growing moon and the golden dash across the horizon where the sun was sinking. A whipping breeze danced across the pastures, making the treetops shudder. It buffeted through the window, barely touching the heavy curtains but ruffling Penn's hair, bringing with it the smell of pine and smoke.

It was late, and his father had no further need of him. He could allow himself one last indulgence before shackling his life to another.

He threw the book onto the bed, then heaved open the closest chest and pulled out an old tunic. It had been Leo's, once, passed onto Penn despite its age. The fabric was thick and dark, if a little worn, ideal for riding or hunting.

He tugged the garment on, followed by his cloak, then headed for the door.

It was locked.

Penn pushed harder. Panic coiled in his chest. The last time he'd found himself in this position had only been two months or so past, after . . .

After he'd been caught. It had only been once, but it had been enough. Arthur had been removed from his role in the stables – his safety traded for his silence – and Penn had remained, trapped.

He'd hoped, foolishly, that with the impending marriage his father would have trusted him. He'd been wrong. Wrong *again*.

He pressed his head against the wood, allowing himself a moment to breathe – a moment to hold the hot little ember of anger that flared in his chest. When his breathing had calmed and his fingers stopped shaking, he turned away from the door and towards the opposite wall.

As he ran his fingertips over the tapestry that hung from floor to ceiling, he couldn't help but acknowledge that his father was correct not to trust him.

The narrow door behind the thick wool opened easily, and he quickly slipped behind the drapery and through onto the tightly winding staircase beyond.

Penn wasn't sure what this passage's original purpose had been. After a childhood devouring tales of courtly romance, he'd hoped it was for romantic trysts and daring escapes. As he grew older, the more he realised that it was probably a disused servants' passage, built when the room belonged to someone more important. In any case, the stairs let out into the vaulted undercroft beside the kitchens, so unless his ancestors were fumbling amongst filthy linens and vegetable peelings, it was likely a passage for practicality rather than pleasure.

He'd taken this route hundreds of times since discovering the hidden door when he was only seven years old. It was a useful shortcut, even when his door *wasn't* barred, the quickest and easiest way from the keep without being spotted.

This evening he would have to be cautious. He dashed down the stairs, and paused on the third step from the bottom, listening for footsteps. The hallway below apparently empty, he scurried on.

Thankfully, it was still quiet. No doubt the servants were still

making preparations for tomorrow. He ducked through another door and out into the shadowy courtyard beyond, a wide space between the outer wall of the keep and the side of the kitchens.

This was a servant's space, and laundry hung on strings, slowly drying in the winter breeze. Soon, the linens would be collected by the laundress and her girls and placed beside the kitchen hearth. Penn wove his way between the sheets, hurrying as he heard voices approaching, then finally out through the door built into the outer wall.

This wasn't an entrance: simply a quick way for the laundress to dispose of spent water. He sidestepped the worst of the mud, glanced around to make sure no guards had spotted him, then dashed towards the forest.

He knew what he was feeling was borne of panic, the shock of being caged. All he needed was time.

He remembered Leo, and the expression on his brother's face the last time Penn had seen him. He wished, desperately, that he was with him. Leo would have known what to do. His advice would have been the sort that Penn wanted to hear, not Jo's platitudes or Ros's assertions that *everything would be fine*.

But he had neither time nor his brother. He had the fistful of hours before dawn, and the impenetrable dark of Hartswood Forest. It would have to be enough. Tomorrow he'd wake to a new day, and a new life.

Penn tugged his cloak tight, set his shoulders, and slipped between the trees.