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said, he would have passed out long before he drank enough to kill himself. And there was no sign of anyone there drinking with him, so unlikely that anyone poured more down his gullet." The french door opened and Jeremy's houseman stepped through onto the terrace interrupting whatever he was going to add. "Yes Digby,"

"I was wondering if you had decided where you and Mrs. Hamstead were to dine. Mrs. Hensman tells me that we will be able to serve up in twenty minutes," the man said with stiff formality.

"Hilda, I don't believe I introduced Digby to you when he served our drinks, so may I present Digby Hensman, my man of all work and long suffering guardian. Flora Hensman, his wife, is my cook. Digby has been with me for thirty years and knows all my faults."

"How do you do Mr. Hensman," Hilda responded.

"Digby... just Digby, if you will ma'am,"

"I am pleased that someone has been looking after him all these years," Hilda smiled.

"Now then, Hilda, where would you like to dine? ...the dining room? ...the breakfast room? ...here on the terrace?" Jeremy invited.

"Here on the terrace would be very nice, if it's not too much trouble?"

"Done then. While you are getting things in readiness, Mrs. Hamstead and I will just take a stroll." Jeremy stood and offering Hilda his arm, took her off to look at the gardens.

As they walked slowly between the formal flower beds along the bricked pathways, Hilda found herself saying, "How can you thin of getting married, with the Hensmans caring for your every need?"

"Not my every need, as you put it. Aside from the obvious one," he pointed out, chuckling at Hilda's blush of chagrin. "Although they have been with me a long time, they are not my confidants. I would like someone with whom to share my thoughts and concerns. Someone to look forward to seeing each day as I wake, or when I come home from work. Someone to share my life, who would share theirs

with me." He paused and turned her to face him. "You are the only person I have ever considered in that role."

Hilda met his gaze. "You flatter me Jeremy. It is strange isn't it... you are the one person who has seemed to have always been there. All my life you have been somewhere on the edge of my consciousness, even when I was married to George. I remember looking for you as I walked down the aisle on my wedding day and being pleased you had accepted our invitation." She paused as she tried to read the expression in his eyes. Was that sadness she saw? She hurried on. "Were I ever to consider marrying again, it would be to you... but I am content as I am."

"Was there something about George that put you off marriage?" he asked gently.

"Our marriage as marriages go, was very happy. We were friends as well as husband and wife. When we had no children, I thought George would be terribly disappointed, but he always said they would be a distraction, and that he enjoyed having me to himself. No, our marriage was happy. We were happy together sharing our lives."

"Oh well. I did say I wouldn't pressure you, and I meant it. But I am going to break down your defenses," he challenged as he led her on to show her the next flower bed.

Dinner at the Thorns, was turning into a mild disaster. Amy found herself trying to include her father in conversation, getting him to address Edward or even to reply to a question of Edward's. Instead her father did nothing but make innocent sounding comments about each course of the meal as she served it. Because each reference he made, although sounding benign and at times complimentary, inferred a comparison with either her mother's or Hilda's cooking, Amy found little to congratulate herself about the meal and even less to recommend her father's conduct throughout it. They had reached the coffee stage of the evening, without her dumping a plate of dessert over his head.

"Would you gentlemen like your coffee on the patio? I can serve you there, and clear away the dinner

things while you are having it."

"That would be nice..." and "I'd like mine in the study." were the replies from Edward and her father respectively.

"In that case, why don't you take your father's to him in his study, and I'll start clearing away the last of these dishes. We can have our coffee when we're through cleaning up," Edward suggested.

Realizing his mistake too late, Mr. Thorn could do little but take himself off to his study, leaving the field clear for Edward. He did so with little grace and no attempt to excuse himself from their guest.

"Your father is a bit out of sorts this evening," Edward observed casually, when Amy returned from taking that gentleman his coffee.

"He's annoyed with Hilda I suspect. He invited her to dinner, but she had already accepted an invitation from Dr. Fegan." She began to place the dirty dishes into the dish washer. "I suppose he resents Dr. Fegan usurping Hilda's time, as he thought he had a monopoly on it."

"He may have taken that for granted, but I'm sure Hilda didn't see it that way," Edward said, handing her a stack of plates.

"What do you mean?"

"I think Hilda looks on whatever their relationship is, as a convenience to both of them. Saves them going out and about alone. You know how people in this town match make, well, if they were together there was no need for match making and they were left alone."

"Perhaps that's how Hilda saw it, but from comments father has made this visit, I'd say he had something more in mind."

"Maybe he should have told Hilda before he told you," Edward laughed.

"Told Hilda what?" Mr. Thorn demanded from the doorway, where he stood, cup in hand. "I come out to save you a trip in for my cup, and I find you discussing my private life with this young.... young..." he sputtered, at a loss for words.

"It's all right Dad. We were really talking about Hilda. I was explaining that she was having dinner with Dr.

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