

Bits of dew still lay on the grass while steam departed at the behest of the sun. With a gentle breeze sending waves through the tall trees that surrounded, the day all but challenged Mel to find a fault. Though there were days she wouldn't hesitate to take them up on that, as she watched Alis walk through the gates toward the modest building used for school, she didn't quite have the nerve to ruin such a perfect start with something as pointless as reality. From the little water battle straight from bed, delightful chatter on the walk over regarding something her friend Marry told her the day before, all the way to the no-longer-guaranteed hug goodbye she received just moments ago.

*It was perfect.*

Moments like these could not and should not be forgotten. Too often there was a coldness in the air when she was with her daughter. The aloof, selfish child – always at odds with her own kind but wounded heart – clashed often with the tired, lonely mother she was blessed with. No. This morning would not be forgotten.

Almost as if she knew of her happiness and wanted to put an abrupt stop to it, Alis turned from her group of friends and looked at her. The look held no regard for their previous good will and instead resulted in an eye roll and wave of her hand as if to say “Move along mum. I'm with my friends now.” and with that, Mel turned and headed to work. A quick look at her watch and she picked up the pace in the direction toward the third of her life she had little to no control over.

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Sir Nibbles – known officially as Mr. Donnelly – stood at the entrance of the orchard with his arms crossed. The scowl she swore was present at birth held firmly in place. “This is the second time this week Miss Furlow.”

Mel quickly ran through the list of excuses she had prepared on her way over but, given the especially impatient glare she was faced with, she opted for a simple swallowing of her pride and apology. There would be no hope of understanding from one such as Sir Nibbles. Not when harvest was at its peak. Or under any other circumstances really.

“I’m sorry Mr Donnelly, it won’t happen again.” Mel wore her most contrite expression as she slowly moved past him. She hoped this demonstrated how eager she was to begin the all important job of filling crates for his profit and not her aversion to spending any more time than necessary in his presence.

There was a single grunt of disapproval but, other than that, no sign that she would need to continue the uncomfortable greeting. Keeping her brisk pace, she walked up the well maintained drive to the “Employee storage and break room”. The detached building that consisted of multiple small cubbies and two round tables stood in stark contrast to the extravagant brick house to the left of it. Apart from the hint of rotten fruit here and the spices Mel hung in her own hovel, the smell might have held a comforting familiarity. That is to say, it was quite musty.

Her usual routine took no more than a couple of minutes and she was soon equipped with a water bag and a deep pocket apron. The back door opened far more easily than her own and she was met by sight both beautiful and sad. More than one could count, there stood rows and rows of apple, fig and plum trees. In their perspective sections, the perfectly formed lines could leave one breathless. That is, if they didn't know their owner.

It wasn't as though Mr Nibbles business ethics were terribly worse than many others. It was just that where there was money to be made, they would make it. Sending the best of the harvests out of town to those that could afford and desired excellence while keeping the fallen and bruised for locals to purchase at "more manageable prices" was a reality most were used to.

Mel was used to it in her own way as well. She didn't have the funds for most of what he had to offer either, but she didn't need it. The deep pockets in the apron, supplied by Mr Nibbles himself, was very useful for work. Very useful indeed.

Two familiar, pale-white ears caught her eye. The head they crowned turned toward her, wearing a smile as warm as the morning sun. With one last deep breath – for energy, and for hope – Mel joined her friend.

*Maggie.*