

Chapter 1

London

Summer 1848

Some men were born with an innate sense of self, able to wield their force of will like a weapon or shield, attacking and defending when needed. Others gained it through years of training as the world pummelled them again and again. Yet another group believed themselves in possession of it by nature of their birth, and while they often exhibited some talent for it, theirs was the weakest of all.

Jonathan Hatcher claimed entry into two of those groups. Certainly not the last, for his natural station in life was far below that notorious band of brothers. Though not strong in the ways of leadership and dominance in his youth, he had possessed an innate quality that demanded the attention of those less assured than he; it was the very reason why his time under Captain Furton's rule had molded Jack into a new creature, rather than shattering him beneath that monster's boot.

That time aboard his ship had taught Jack much about commanding others and served as the forge that had melted away Jack's impurities, leaving behind something stronger in its place.

But Mr. Simon Kingsley had inherited his confidence, given to him at birth alongside his thriving estate. Such people were always placed on pedestals, reinforcing that belief, leaving them certain they were the ruler of their domain. Mr. Kingsley was a good man, but far too gentle to pose any real threat. Unfortunately, the fellow didn't realize it.

Sitting in the midst of his empire, Mr. Kingsley propped his elbows on his chair, his eyes narrowed and searching as he stared at Jack. No doubt, the gentleman believed himself to be intimidating, but after seeing true malice in the eyes of a superior officer, Jack was not easily cowed—though Mr. Kingsley made a good show of it.

Jack held his gaze, refusing to turn away. He didn't go so far as to relax into his seat, but neither did he straighten or squirm beneath that regard. Lily loved him. Jack knew it, and he doubted any amount of worry from her father would stop her from meeting him at the altar three weeks from now.

At least... he didn't think so.

Hang it all, that wasn't a comforting thought. Jack's bride-to-be cared deeply about her parents' opinion. Though he didn't understand why that was the case, neither could he deny the fact that Mr. Kingsley held much sway in regards to Lily.

Surely, she wouldn't cast him off if her father demanded it. Lily was of an age where she didn't need his consent, and Jack didn't require her dowry to provide for her. So, there was no legal or financial reason to fret.

Jack shifted in place.

“No doubt you’ve spoken to Lily and your brothers-in-law, so there is no need for me to recite the details of our courtship or the unusual circumstances that led to our engagement,” said Jack. “But I assure you we are both pleased with this turn of events and have every intention of our marriage being a success. We are not making this commitment lightly.”

Mr. Kingsley remained silent; nothing about his expression altered in the slightest. It was as though a painted statue were staring at him with only the occasional rise and fall of his chest any indication that he was alive.

Perhaps Jack had underestimated just how much presence Mr. Kingsley possessed, for the back of his neck itched under the fellow’s regard, and he shifted in his seat once more.

No. He would not allow himself to be cowed by Mr. Simon Kingsley. Jack Hatcher had seen far worse. Experienced far worse. If he could bear the lashes all those lashes Furton had ordered without crying out, surely, Jack could manage to hold a conversation with a gentleman who had likely never experienced a tragedy in his life.

Of course, this was different. This involved Lily. *His* Lily. A single word of disapproval may persuade her to cut ties with him, and the thought settled in his stomach like a lead weight. Jack’s pulse quickened as the silence stretched, and just when Jack thought Mr. Kingsley was determined to never speak to him, the fellow shifted in his seat.

“I am not pleased with you, Mr. Hatcher.”

“I am not surprised by that. I doubt any father would be pleased with the man who compromised his daughter—”

Holding up a hand, Mr. Kingsley shook his head. “I do not need to hear any more on that score. But I was speaking of the pain you’ve caused her. I understand from my brother-in-law that she has been quite overwrought during your ‘engagement.’”

Jack stilled, a scowl lurking beneath the surface as he considered that. Lily may be prone to tears, but he had given her far too many causes to let loose a torrent of them. His throat tightened, and he nodded.

“I am sorry to say that is true, Mr. Kingsley.”

Why she had given her heart to him was a mystery. Despite being known for a clear head and possessing forethought—both of which helped him succeed in business—Jack couldn’t comprehend Lily’s decision. He certainly didn’t deserve it. But if Mr. Kingsley was wishing for him to admit such and cry defeat, they would be sitting there indefinitely.

Jack wouldn’t turn aside this windfall.

“My daughter has been very clear in what she desires,” said Mr. Kingsley, his brow furrowing, and Jack could imagine just how persistent she had been on that score. Lily never struggled for words, and when determined, they doubled. “And she is old enough to know her mind.”

Jack didn't relax into the chair, but his muscles loosened a touch.

"But I need to ask you an important question that I fear my daughter may be too enamored to truly consider." Giving him a long look, Mr. Kingsley asked, "Will you make her happy?"

"I will not take my responsibility as her husband lightly," replied Jack, his brows rising.

Mr. Kingsley frowned, his expression pinching. "'Responsibility?'"

Shifting in his chair, Jack knew what words the gentleman wanted, and for so many, they were easy to speak, but they clogged in his throat. Lily was his, and she possessed his heart entirely. What more need they say? Jack opened his mouth, though he doubted anything useful might emerge.

"Do not give me a quick answer," said Mr. Kingsley, his fingers tapping along the arms of his chair. 'It's easy to give assurances when the romance is new and still burning through you. I wish to know if you will try your best to make her happy. I do not demand that you do it, for I know too well that even our best efforts do not always have the desired impact, but I want your word that you will do your utmost to keep her needs and desires in the forefront of your thoughts.'

There was no need to draw out the moment, for Jack knew the answer. The words came out with all the conviction with which he felt them. "I will."

Mr. Kingsley held his gaze for a long time before nodding. Then shifting in his seat, Mr. Kingsley's gaze fell to the top of his desk, unfocusing as he studied it. "I've heard people speak flippantly about how a happy life requires a happy wife, but I assure you there is no greater pain than knowing you have hurt the dear woman who has graciously accepted you as her husband. And conversely, being the architect of her joy compounds your own ten-fold."

The words settled in Jack's heart, affirming that which he'd already learned from hard experience. It was not as though he was incomplete without her, but every spark of happiness he'd felt in the past weeks were infinitely brighter when shared by her.

"I know that to be true," said Jack.

Mr. Kingsley's gaze rose to meet his again, and there was a slight lift to his brows, as though waiting for him to expound on the subject, but Jack merely watched him back, his expression showing nothing but a firmness in his convictions.

With a nod, the gentleman dismissed him, and Jack rose to his feet—only to find Lily standing on the other side of the study door. She glanced at her father with raised brows before snatching Jack's hand and dragging him away with a bright smile, and Jack savored the feel of her as his fingers entwined with hers.

When they put a few feet between them and the door, Lily whirled around and whispered, "He didn't rake you over the coals, did he?"

Jack merely raised his brows, a faint smile tugging at his lips in silent challenge, and she chuckled, stepping closer and wrapping his arms around her. Then she was kissing him, and Jack marveled at how the world had shifted so thoroughly. Countless others had tried to force his obedience, but this sweet lady—who was as vicious and intimidating as a daisy—had bent his will to hers, twisting his heart about in her hands until he couldn't break free.

Not that Jack wished to.

"I knew you would win him over," she said once she pulled back, her eyes alight. "I never doubted it for a minute."

Jack smirked at that utter hogwash, and ignored her words in favor of stealing another kiss. It was far nicer than speaking and said far more.

A throat cleared, and though Lily jerked, Jack kept her tucked close to him as they peered over his shoulder to see Mr. Kingsley frowning at them. As much as Jack wanted to scowl back for the interruption, he had enough sense than to antagonize his future father-in-law, and allowed Lily to drag him away to the parlor, where their latest serial awaited them.

Yet as much as Jack yearned to brush aside thoughts of Mr. Kingsley (for he would much rather consider the fellow's beautiful daughter), that conversation lingered in his thoughts, demanding that Jack consider it again and again.

Was he truly doing everything in his power to make Lily happy?

Chapter 2

Had anyone suggested a few short months ago that Jack would be standing at the front of a church, anxiously shifting from foot to foot like a sinner on the Sabbath, he wouldn't have believed it. Doubly so if they had said it was anticipation and not dread that had him fidgeting.

A huff of laughter at his side had Jack scowling as he turned his frown on Silas, who looked as unrepentant as ever, but when he returned his gaze to the handful of guests gathered in the pews, Jack was met with a warm smile from Judith before she sent a censorious look at her husband—who was no more cowed than when Jack had done so.

Ignoring them both and all the hubbub as Lily's family settled into their seats, Jack's eyes remained fixed on the church door. Knowing that she stood just on the other side, Jack felt like marching over there and dragging her to the altar. And wouldn't that make quite the memorable wedding?

But then the door opened, and Lily stepped through. All other thoughts stripped away as Jack stared: they say all brides were beautiful on their wedding day, but no other woman was as lovely as his Lily. Despite not knowing a thing about fashions or flowers, he'd heard many long discourses on the subject of her wedding clothes, and though she would look equally ravishing in her plain day dresses, the effect was splendid.

Eschewing the white, grays, and maidenly blues that so many brides chose, Lily's gown was a rosy pink, which she insisted was far more fuschia than carnation (whatever that meant), but Jack thought it fitting that she chose such a bold shade. It complimented not only the rosiness of her cheeks but her personality. Honeysuckle and Indian jasmine crowned her head, holding fast a veil as thin as gossamer.

Jack couldn't tear his gaze from her. Not that he wished to. Their gazes locked from across the nave, connecting them with an invisible bond as tangible as if cords bound his heart to hers. A broad smile lit her face until she was aglow as she floated down the aisle, and some of the tightness within his chest eased, releasing the pressure that had slowly built from the moment he'd met her.

Lily was here, and in just a few moments, they would be irrevocably bound. Man and wife forever. Finally.

A smile twitched at the edge of his lips as though hers had spread through those ties that connected their hearts together, but as Lily drew closer, the gazes of their guests were turned towards him, and Jack tucked it away. It was odd enough to have so much attention fixed on him, and he struggled not to fidget.

Jack frowned at that thought, but then Lily was beside him, taking his hand in his. Her gaze peered through him, seeing him as no one else did. More surprisingly, she seemed to comprehend, for she took hold of his arm (ignoring the vicar's look of surprise) and held fast to him, settling his heart.

Despite having little experience with weddings, Jack had no interest in listening to this one. Whatever fool had decided that a simple exchanging of vows ought to be stretched out in such a fashion ought to

be drawn and quartered. The only part that mattered in this moment were the vows, the pronouncement, and the signing of the registry. The hymns, sermon, readings, and the like were well and good on the Sabbath, but Jack itched to hoist his bride in his arms and escape to the train station.

But the vicar had been adamant on what ought to be done. Curse the man.

That blissful moment eventually arrived, and they stood in the vestry as Lily's tears overflowed and dripped onto the registry whilst she signed her maiden name for the last time before the vicar handed her the marriage certificate. Lily clutched it close, her watery gaze turning to Jack, and his heart melted away at the giddiness radiating from her eyes.

"Now you are mine forever." And with that, she pressed a kiss to his lips.

Jack wrapped his arms around her, crushing them together as he reveled in her affection, deepening the kiss for several long moments until a cough caused Lily to stiffen and jerk away. Leveling a narrowed look at the vicar, Jack allowed her to distance herself and contented himself with the knowledge that in less than an hour, they would be secreted away on a train, bound for a fortnight alone—without a soul to disturb them.

Laughing at his glower, Lily gave a light smack on his chest as she took his arm and turned them towards the front of the church.

Flower petals showered them as their small wedding party threw handfuls aloft, shouting their hip-hip-hoorays, but Jack's focus was on the carriage and getting Lily into it. The minutes passed by with excruciating slowness as they made their way back to her parents' home to change, all the while Jack could only think of how grateful he was for Judith's foresight in sending the trunks to the station ahead of them, for it was difficult enough getting through the tiny throng of well-wishers without needing to manage all that as well.

The trip to the station was both a frantic blur and an agonizing slog, but soon, they were settled on their train carriage, and Jack sank onto the seat beside and sighed as Lily curled into his side. Thank heavens he'd been able to secure the entire carriage for themselves. The cost was nothing compared to the felicity of having his Lily to himself once more. No chaperones clucking their tongues at their cozy position.

A rumble from Lily's stomach had Jack straightening and studying his bride.

Lily wrinkled her nose. "I was so excited I couldn't eat a thing before we left for the church."

"And, brute that I am, insisted we not remain for the wedding breakfast," mumbled Jack, pointing his scowl inward where it belonged.

Taking his face in her hands, Lily forced him to look at her. "As I have said many times before, I am pleased that my parents and the others wish to continue the celebration, but I have no desire to do so.

We are only allowed a fortnight for our wedding trip, and I am not going to waste it with our friends and family.”

Jack seized the opportunity and stole a kiss, but before he could say a thing about wishing they could remain away for a month, Lily turned his attention to the basket her mother had handed her as they’d left. In a trice, she had a picnic spread across the empty seats, though she focused most of her attention on a pork pie as she eased back into the crook of his arm.

The train swayed as it rumbled to life, inching along as it gained speed until the world outside passed by in a blur. But Jack couldn’t pay attention to any of it while Lily was so comfortably situated. After a few bites, she shifted, and he forced himself not to growl as she straightened and reached into her reticule. Pulling out the bit of paper, she sank back into him.

Unfolding the marriage certificate, they looked at it. Their names listed there, bound together as husband and wife.

“I can hardly believe it,” she whispered.

“About time.”

Lily chuckled, her head resting against his. Laying her free hand on his chest, she traced the edges of his waistcoat and sighed, the sound so full of contentment that Jack felt like preening like some ridiculous peacock.

“I love you, Jack.”

Turning her head, she met his eyes, those brown depths so full of her heart that even if she hadn’t spoken the words, Jack would’ve heard them all the same. They seeped into him, weaving through every bit of him.

Then she pressed her lips to his, showing that same fervor and declaration in his touch, and Jack met it with all the certainty of his own feelings. When they broke apart, Lily tucked that precious paper away once more and returned to her previous position, picking at the food as they sped through the countryside.

Jack’s brows pinched together as he struggled to keep himself from crushing her closer, his mind replaying his conversation with Mr. Kingsley.

Simon? Father? None of those names felt right. But it didn’t matter.

Lily’s happiness. Having spent much of the past few months focused so thoroughly on securing her and by extension both their happinesses, Jack was already quite familiar with what made Lily Kingsley (now Hatcher) happy. And despite all that he had done and all he had planned, one little thing niggled in the back of his thoughts, reminding him that he had not done “everything” to secure it.

I love you.

Simple words, perhaps, but Jack's tongue refused to work. She gave them to him so freely, but every time he thought to do the same, his mouth seized, leaving him standing there, silent.

Jack tried to assuage the gnawing thought by telling himself that he had done so much already, and Lily didn't demand it of him, but he sensed the desire behind the patience. Lily didn't give voice to that longing, but he felt it lurking beneath the surface; she had finally learned to trust his affection and now accepted that his feels were deeper than he could say, but she still longed to hear them all the same.

As he sat there with his bride in his arms—having proclaimed before God, witnesses, and their families to love and cherish her for the rest of their days—Jack realized that the truth was that he feared more than he loved.

Scowling, he let loose a few more colorful phrases in his thoughts, cursing Captain Furton for all that he'd done to him and the rest of his men; the crew had been little more than animated corpses, moving about their tasks with no spark of their own. Those poor souls who had been at his mercy, their lessons beaten into their backs and written into their flesh.

Keep your head down. Keep silent. Emotion was a weakness. Weaknesses could be exploited.

Jack had thought leaving that ship would free him of those shackles. Then, Furton's death had promised freedom. Yet the blackguard's spectre haunted him, tainting his dreams and keeping those shackles firmly bound around his heart. Jack had been free of that man for fifteen years, yet he was still trapped beneath Furton's whip.

And the nightmares were returning.

"What has your brow furrowing so deeply?" asked Lily.

Silence stretched for a heartbeat and two as Jack thought of what to do. He knew what he wanted to say, but two large boulders sat in his way, blocking his path. Even if he laid it all bare to her, what would it do to her sweet soul? Jack had shared bits of his past with her, but the horror and blood still remained somewhat obscure to her, far from the sweetness and purity that radiated from her.

Could Jack darken her soul? Share more of the wretchedness that plagued him?

Latching onto a part of the truth, Jack focused on the here and now, casting aside thoughts that ought not to taint this beautiful moment.

"I am happy. Thank you for marrying me."

Something in Lily's gaze told him she sensed something more to his words, but she drew in a deep breath and pressed a kiss to his lips once more. "I assure you, the pleasure is all mine."

Thank the heavens for good friends. Had Jack been left to his own devices when planning the wedding trip, he would've simply chosen a comfortable inn in which to spend the next fortnight. Their time was short, and Jack didn't want to waste it cavorting about the countryside, playing the tourist. Silas had insisted otherwise, offering up Stowell Cottage as a prime location, and Jack had to admit his friend and business partner had been correct.

Nowadays, the Byrnes spent much of their time in London whilst Jack traveled across the country to establish their various ventures, and it had been long enough since he'd last stepped visited that Jack had forgotten how much he adored that house. It had been his first home after so many years in the navy, and it was fitting that they would begin their new life together here.

And seeing Lily alight with glee as she dragged him over hill and dale, exploring the lands round about and the streets of Plymouth, was compensation enough for having to play guide to her insatiable desire to see it all. She faced the world with such unrestrained joy, every emotion flitting across her face as she shared every thought that crossed her mind.

As it took little effort to discern Lily's greatest desires, Jack found great pleasure in purchasing anything that caught her fancy, loading up his arms and carriage with so many packages that it was going to take an entire train carriage for them to ship it all back to London.

And with the marriage certificate safely signed and recorded, there were no boundaries to the affection he could shower upon her. More kisses. More embraces. Jack wondered how any couple ever tired of it.

Yet all the while, the revelation he'd had on the train followed him. Did he truly fear more than he loved? For all that Jack thought himself master of his domain, a new truth began taking shape, sending a shudder through his soul. He was still that frightened little boy who had been on the receiving end of his captain's discipline, unable to do anything more than grit his teeth and bear it.

"I love you." Not an hour passed without Lily speaking those words, and though Jack cherished that show of affection, they pricked and prodded his conscience. But no matter how he tried, his tongue felt bound fast, unable to move.

Chapter 3

Gasping, Jack's eyes burst open, his heart thumping a rapid beat against his ribs as his lungs heaved. Darkness swallowed their bedchamber, but as he stared at the nothing, his eyes adjusted to the shadows and the moonlight peeking around the edge of the curtains.

Stowell Cottage. His home. The floor was not swaying beneath him, rising and falling with each wave. The air was not steeped in salt, the breezes catching the ocean spray and coating everything in grittiness. The bed was no hammock.

And the world was silent, except for his panting breaths.

Jack brushed the sweat from his brow, though it did little good as the neck of his nightshirt was soaked through. His pillow was damp as well. Captain Furton's voice still rang in his head, his dreams replaying again and again as the worst of his memories layered one atop the other until they were a chimera of pain and agony.

Lily stirred, and he tried to still, but his pulse pounded in his neck and his breathing wouldn't slow. The bedclothes wrapped around him, trapping him in place, and Jack longed to cast them aside, but she would wake for certain—

"Jack?" she whispered, and that was all he needed to hear. Reaching for her, he took her into his arms, wrapping around her as his muscles shook. She repeated his name, her voice sharp as the sleep cleared from her tone. But Jack couldn't speak as he clung to her. Her lips pressed against his temple, and Jack shuddered, struggling to scrub away the final remnants of his dream.

"Another nightmare?" Her question echoed in the dark. When he didn't answer, Lily added, "Do they plague you every night?"

Dropping his head into the crook of her neck, Jack squeezed his eyes shut, though it did nothing to hide him from the shame that seeped into his heart. It had been so long since his dreams had troubled him this much, and there was no denying that he hadn't gotten a full night's rest in the past fortnight.

Lily's fingers ran through his hair, and she hummed a little tune, her arms welcoming him there. It was several long moments before Jack could breathe properly, the low melody weaving through the silent room as he struggled to shake free of the past.

"Speak to me, my love," she whispered.

Jack shook his head, and she sighed, her fingers never stopping as they ran soothingly along his scalp.

"Holding it all inside is clearly doing you no favors," she added.

"And filling your head with those images will do you no favors," he murmured in return.

Leaning away, Lily studied him, though her hand continued to caress his face and jaw. In the darkness, her features were obscured, but at this distance, the play of shadows allowed him to see her brows crease.

“I am stronger than you believe, Mr. Hatcher.”

“My nightmares are worse than you know.”

Lily’s fingers drifted down his neck, running along the scars that wove their way over his shoulders. Through the gaping neck of his nightshirt, she traced the ridges.

“I am well aware that there is evil in this world, Jack, and I know that bearing it alone is only doing you more harm,” she whispered, her fingers finding another scar. “We promised to help and support one another through the good and the bad. I am determined to keep my word.”

There was a pause before she added, “I shan’t press the issue, Jack—they are your secrets to tell—but know that I want to help.”

“I do not want to hurt you.”

Lily’s hand dropped to his chest, resting above his heart. “It hurts me to see you struggling alone. I want to help and comfort you, even if it is only offering up a listening ear.”

Though she made a good show of it, Jack heard the pain buried in her heart, and he felt the world shifting beneath him, giving him clarity. This was a pivotal moment. He felt it deep in his bones. Whether instinct or divine inspiration, he didn’t know, but Jack knew if he remained silent, something would break between them. Lily meant it when she said she wouldn’t force him to speak, but to turn her away would damage the bonds that bound them together.

Did he love her more than he feared the past?

“I was dreaming of Captain Furton,” he murmured. Lily shifted closer, and Jack rolled onto his back; her head rested against his chest, her arm draped across him as he began to describe the dream. Wrapped in darkness and nestled in bed beside her, it was easier to speak. Though he knew she listened closely, Jack was able to pretend he was merely releasing the words into an empty bedchamber.

But he couldn’t detail the images he’d seen, and soon Jack’s narrative drifted all about the place, speaking of things he’d never shared with anyone except those unfortunate souls who had served with him. Even Silas, whom Jack trusted more than anyone else, knew little more than Furton’s black reputation.

“The worst wasn’t when he’d punish me,” he whispered. “I could bear that pain, so Furton turned his attention to my friends, making them bear the brunt of any infraction—real or imagined—that I committed. Sometimes he made me mete it out, and for every time I refused, he’d add another of my men or comrades to the punishment.”

Jack's words stumbled, but he forced himself to continue, "One time, he beat one cabin boy so badly that the lad couldn't walk, but he was required to do his chores nonetheless. A storm rolled in, and even those with sturdy legs struggled to keep aboard. We tried to help him, but there we couldn't keep the waves from snatching him away, and when the storm cleared, Furton waved it away as though it were no great thing—even refusing to grant him a funeral service as the weak deserve no remembrance."

Though her muscles strained to keep herself quiet, Lily's lungs hitched, and a few tears dripped onto Jack's chest.

Pressing a kiss to the top of her head, he encircled her in his arms. "Please do not cry."

Lily huffed, a watery chuckle burbling forth as she leaned up on her elbow to face him, her eyes bright with tears. "You know full well that I cannot help it. I feel so helpless. I cannot change the past but I yearn to do something. I want to heal your heart and fill your nights with pleasant dreams. I want to ease your suffering—"

"You are." Jack captured her lips in a kiss, echoing the certainty of those words with tender touches. "Keep loving me, Lily."

Holding his face in her hands, her mouth hovered before his, her lips brushing against his as her eyes shone with all the great love in her heart. "I shan't ever stop, Jack. I promise."

Light shone from around the edges of the curtains, and Jack hazarded to guess that it was nearer to noon than dawn. He hadn't thought himself capable of sleeping past the first light, but then, his bed had never been so appealing before.

Burrowed into his side, Lily's hand rested on his chest, rising and falling with each of his breaths, and Jack wasn't certain how to categorize what he felt at present. It wasn't lazy per se. Languid? Jack's muscles were all loose and relaxed, and despite the disrupted sleep, he felt more restful than he had in...

Jack considered that, and he couldn't say the last time he had ever felt like this.

Shifting carefully, he rolled to his side to face her, and Lily's hand fell away, her nose twitching as she groaned. Jack settled, holding his breath as she relaxed once more. Her braid was draped across her shoulder, and several strands had pulled free and clung to her skin; creases were pressed into her cheeks where she had nestled into the sheets, and Jack's fingers itched to feel her skin once more.

His precious Lily. How had he ever captured her heart? Jack didn't know, but he'd been on the receiving end of good fortune before, receiving dividends far greater than anticipated and had never questioned such happy twists of fate.

Love. What did it truly mean? Jack had received glimpses of it before circumstances had forced him from his childhood home into the pits of hell. Jack had witnessed as Silas and Judith had succumbed to the

sentiment, their lives intertwining and then expanding as their family grew. But he'd never anticipated it feeling like this.

Strong. Powerful. Pulsing through him like a second heartbeat. It filled the whole of him, until he thought himself unable to feel anything greater. But then, his wife held him in her arms, weeping over his past as though it were her own pain, and Jack's heart expanded even more, giving him a whole new understanding of that little word.

Love.

Jack loved Lily beyond all reason and beyond all doubt. And staring at his wife whilst sheltered in the silence of their bedroom, he felt the words on the tip of his lips.

"I love you, Lily." They came out quiet and halting, like a child attempting to walk for the first time. But the words were like a bellows, breathing life into the fire that burned in his heart.

Lily hummed, her eyelashes twitching. He ought to allow her to sleep after stealing so much of her night away, but Jack's hands trembled at the thought of allowing the moment to pass. With a gentle touch, he caressed her cheek, the corner of her mouth lifting in a smile as she turned into his touch. Her eyes opened, burning with such brightness—as though seeing him was precisely what she wished to see most in the world.

"I love you," he whispered.

Stilling, Lily's brow furrowed, her eyes struggling to focus on him. And so he repeated himself.

"I love you, Lily."

"I know," she replied, her smile turning wry.

"No. I truly love you." Jack swallowed, forcing the tightness from his chest. "From almost the very moment we met, I have loved you as I have never loved anything or anyone before. And it terrifies me. I have worked hard to be my own man, to never allow myself under another's thumb, and then you appeared—"

"I know, dearest." Lily leaned close, feathering a kiss on his lips. Studying him, a sad smile played on her lips. "It terrifies me as well. The thought of losing you causes my physical pain. My happiness is irrevocably linked to yours, and it is frightening to be so vulnerable."

"I—" Jack frowned, struggling for the proper words to explain, but his thoughts struggled for coherence, especially when her fingers absently fiddled with the neck of his nightshirt, brushing touches against his chest. But even if he could, he doubted Lily would accept the truth.

Had she never met him, Lily's world may have been dimmer, but she would've found joy in it nonetheless. It was in her very nature to be happy. But on his own, Jack would never achieve such a thing.

Her love had saved him. Had pulled him from the brink. Jack had been a broken man with a half-life. Lily had taken those shattered fragments and pieced him back together.

But any protest he might've made was silenced when Lily pressed her lips to his, the touch so tender and full of her heart's inherent sweetness, and Jack set about showing her what words could never convey.

His dearest love.