



willowvy whisper

BLOOMS *for*
NAUGHT

Blooms for Naught

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The rush of heat spread through her cheeks. She wished it away—begged it away, but to no avail. It stayed there, just as it always did, and she could do nothing in the world to stop it. *Don't come closer.* Her silent plea, but he didn't listen.

He edged closer, whistling, tapping his baton against the side of his leg. He looked brisk in his uniform, but then again, didn't he always?

Her tender, anxious heartbeat . . . it quickened in her chest. She drew in a breath, but couldn't let it out. It lodged in her throat, that tiny intake of air, and seemed to kill her.

His steps made a song on the cobblestone. Then, suddenly, silence. Had he stopped?

That's close enough. Only a breath away, but if he came any closer, she knew her heart would fail her entirely. She lifted her eyes, awed at her own braveness, frightened that he might catch her gaze.

He didn't. Instead, he looked at the flowers in her basket. He took another step forward. Oh so close . . . nearly a foot away. Then his voice, smooth and deep, rumbled from his chest, "The roses are for sale?"

What had happened to her voice? Had it, too, forsaken her? She gaped her lips, panicked, then finally nodded.

He reached forward—he touched her pretty roses! With gentle fingers, he caressed the petals, admiring them. "Pretty, aren't they?"

"Yes." The word came out squeaky. What was wrong with her?

"How much?"

How much? Her mind reeled. Ah, yes. How much. "Two blooms a shilling."

"I'll take four." He met her eyes. They were startling, so blue that they put the sky to shame. So deep, so bottomless, so frightening . . .

She pulled out four roses. Then it dawned on her—why else would he buy roses? Why else but for a sweet little lass, his own true love?

He reached into his pocket and pulled out two shiny coins. He placed it in her palm . . . fingers brushing . . . even as jolts worked through her.

She lowered her gaze, smiling, blushing. "Thank you, Constable."

"Not at all." He grinned in return. "Good morning to you." And then he went on, his footsteps still singing on the cobblestone, until finally he was too far away to be heard.

She stood there longer, bearing the heat of the day. At long last, the roses wilted in her basket. She hurried home, tossing her flowers to the street, and made her way into the one-room lodgings. She had hardly shut the door when someone knocked upon it. "Come in."

Black in soot, Charles Lumpfrey came through the door. "You look tired."

"Some." She shoved her basket on top of the cupboard. "All done with your chimneys?"

"For today." He came full into the room, sweeping off his cap. Then he took a hankie and rubbed at his ruddy cheeks, hoping to smear away the black. "Look right ghastly, don't I?"

She smiled at him, half-amused, but said nothing.

“Polly, dear, I've got to have a word with you.”

“Of course, Charles.” She poured two glasses of water and handed him one. “Won't you sit?”

“Ah no. I like to stand.” But stand he did not. Next thing she knew, he had lowered to one knee, dirty cap gripped in his hand. “Polly, don't say no to me. I got no ring. You know that.” His smile was cheeky. “But if you'd be my wife—”

Charles? She gasped, biting the edge of her lip. *Silly, sweet little Charles?* He was like a cousin, a brother, a friend but . . . a husband?

“I know I ain't got much to offer. But I love you, Polly. You know that.”

“Charles, I—”

“I know.” He cut her off, his bashful grin faltering. “You don't love me, but I don't mind. You see, my love's enough for the two of us. Please say yes, Polly. Please.” He rose to his feet and pressed light lips against hers.

No failing heart beat . . . no jolts . . . no silly feeling that went all through her. Nothing at all. His lips ignited nothing, while the Constable's fingertips . . .

But what choice do I have? She'd watched the Constable walk by every morning, for more days than she could count. What had he ever done, next to smiling or tipping his hat? She had a future to think about. And no one was sweeter, or more earnest, than Charles Lumpfrey.

So with a feeble voice, Polly whispered back, “Yes.”

He slowed his pace as he rounded the curve. He tapped the baton on his leg. He dare not whistle, though. Not this morning. His poor self could never possibly survive such a task, not in his state of mind—not with the way his insides trembled and his heartbeat sped.

He nearly tripped when she finally came in sight. Such pretty long hair, golden in the morning sunlight, braided in a circle on top of her head. That basket was in her arms, roses displayed neatly. She called sweetly, her voice angelic, rising to by-passers, “Two blooms for a shilling! Two blooms for a shilling!”

He hurried his steps. *Miss, whatever is your name?* No, that wasn't good. *Where do you live?* Too bold. *May we go eat together, sometime?* His mind jumbled up the words. Besides that, it was too late. He was already next to her. He stopped quickly, sucking a breathing, opening his mouth . . .

The sun glinted at her finger.

A ring? His hopes plummeted; his chest throbbed. *She's married?* All those days of watching her, gathering the courage, waiting for the right time . . . all of it for naught.

“Four blooms, sir?” she whispered softly.

“It's too late.” His voice came out raspy, low. He forced a quick smile. “Thank you, though.” Without another word, the Constable walked away.