

# DARLING BEAST by Elizabeth Hoyt

## Excerpt

“You’re more than a simple gardener, aren’t you?” Lily Stump sank into the old settee, seemingly not noticing how the thing rocked unsteadily beneath her.

Apollo wasn’t going to risk the fragile piece of furniture beneath his weight. He crossed to the round table and brought back one of the chairs. She was examining his sketch of the pond with the bridge in the background when he returned. He placed the chair across from her and sat.

She turned the page slowly, tracing her fingers over the next sketch: a study of an ornamental waterfall. “These are lovely. Will the garden really look like this when you’ve finished with it?”

He waited until she glanced at him, then nodded.

Her brows knit as she turned another page. The next one showed a wide, craggy oak at the foot of the bridge. “I don’t understand. Where did Mr. Harte find you? I think I would’ve known if there were a mute gardener of your talents in London.”

There was no way to answer that without giving himself away. She waited a beat and then turned the page again. The drawing here caught her eye, and she pivoted the notebook, examining the sketch. “What is it?”

Parallel lines took up both pages across the open notebook, some intersecting, some leading nowhere. A few of the lines were wavy. Here and there a circle or square sat in spaces between the lines.

He leaned closer, inhaling orange and clove, and wrote along one side of the page, next to the sketch, *A maze*.

“Oh! Oh, I see.” She cocked her head, examining the diagram. “But what are these?” She pointed to a square and then a circle.

Follies—places for lovers to sit or amusements like the waterfall. Things to gaze upon and amaze the viewer.

“And these?” She traced the wavy lines.

He inhaled quickly, excited that she was interested, frustrated that he couldn’t just tell her.

Quickly he reached over and flipped through the pages of the notebook still in her hands. He found a blank one and ripped it out, then turned back to his diagram of the maze. He wrote swiftly on his knee, the pencil nearly poking through the paper in several places. The wavy lines are the parts of the hedge that I can salvage from the fire. The plants that are still living.

He showed her his words, waited while she read, her brows knit, and when she looked up, snatched the paper back before she could say anything.

The solid lines will be new plantings. The maze will be the centerpiece of the new garden. The pond on one side, the theater on another, so that from the theater one will look across the maze to the pond. There may be viewing places in the theater itself so that visitors may see the maze and those within it. It will be—

The pencil finally broke through the paper at this point. He balled his fist, frustrated, the words bottled up inside him.

Slim fingers covered his fist, cool and comforting.

He looked up.

“Beautiful,” she said. “It will be beautiful.”