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Book 5

An
Arranged
Betrothal
with a Blind
Duke

SALLY FORBES

An Arranged Betrothal with a Blind Duke

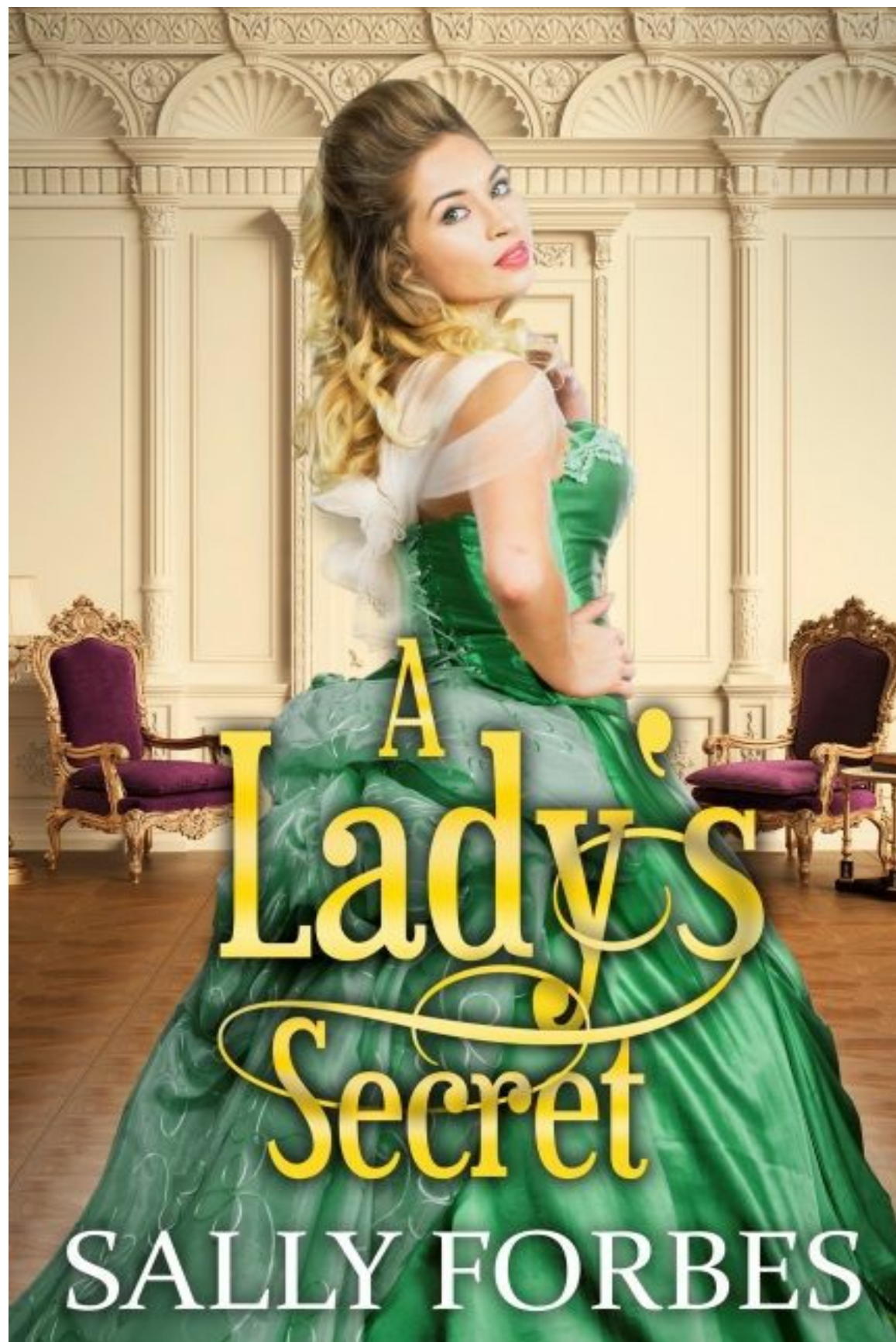
HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

Sally Forbes

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Prologue

Adrian Westfield, the Duke of Thornwood, sat astride his majestic horse, surveying the verdant field before him. His heart echoed the rhythmic beat of the eager gentlemen's horses' hooves, the adrenaline of the impending hunt awakening his senses.

The morning air was crisp, invigorating; it carried the unmistakable aroma of dew-kissed earth, the sweetness of the summer blooms, and the smell of horseflesh, mingling with the faint traces of tobacco and brandy from the gallant gentlemen who surrounded him. The symphony of prancing hooves, rustling leaves, and the good-humored banter of his companions formed the soundtrack to the beautiful tapestry of the day.

Adrian had always felt a sense of connection with nature, a link that transcended the usual comprehension of his class. It was in these moments, perched high on his stallion amidst the thrill of the chase, that he felt most alive. He loved the freedom, the vitality, and the wild, untamed spirit that

hunting encapsulated. Yet, as he glanced at the pack of hunting dogs and the path that lay before them, he couldn't quell the nagging sense of unease that lurked within him.

His steed, Valor, was a striking beast; a powerful stallion with a glossy black coat that shone like obsidian under the sun's touch. The horse was as sure-footed as they came, and the bond between Adrian and Valor was one of profound trust and mutual respect.

“Look out, Adrian,” one of Adrian’s fellow hunters shouted.

“Dobs, go help him,” another yelled amongst the fresh clatter of thunderous horse hooves.

But it was too late. The shouts became urgent barks as Adrian sat atop his stallion in horror. In an unexpected, heart-stopping moment, Valor whinnied – a high, alarmed sound that broke through the rhythm of chatter and laughter. The horse reared, his powerful body tense as his eyes rolled with evident fear, spooked by something unseen.

The world seemed to tilt on its axis. Unprepared for the sudden

upheaval, Adrian felt his grip loosen on the reins, the once secure saddle seeming to slip away from beneath him. Time itself seemed to slow down as he was catapulted through the air, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm in his chest.

Images swirled in his mind as he descended; the startled faces of his companions, the sky's serene blue marred by the ominous circling of a hawk, the ground rushing up to meet him in a devastating embrace. Panic gripped him, a fear that was as foreign as it was terrifying. This couldn't be his end, not like this, not here.

And then, just as abruptly as it had started, it was over. The ground met his back with an unyielding harshness that forced the air out of his lungs in a painful gasp. He was distantly aware of the alarmed shouts, the frantic thudding of hooves, the world spinning before his eyes. But it all seemed muffled, surreal, as if he were under water.

His breathlessness was all he could feel for several agonising seconds. But when he was able to draw breath, pain lit up his body like a wildfire in dry brush. It was only then that he noticed a searing pain in the back of his head. Through his steadily blurring vision, he saw that he had landed on the

ground at the base of a tree.

His back was flat on the ground, but his head had connected with a gnarled surface root, beside which his head had slowly slid. A warm, tricking sensation made itself known through the pain, and he realized with numbness that he had to be bleeding. He was terribly injured, and the world was fading around him.

His last coherent thought before darkness wrapped him in its cold, unforgiving embrace was of the life he'd led, the regrets he had yet to amend. A mental plea for a second chance rushed through him as the spectre of unconsciousness closed in, shrouding the radiant morn in an abyss of emptiness. His world turned black, the sounds of concern and chaos echoing distantly in his ears before he succumbed to the unyielding tide of oblivion.

Adrian Westfield, awoke in his bed with a gasping intake of breath, his heart pounding in his chest like a war drum. He blinked, expecting to see the familiar ornate ceiling of his bedchambers at Thornwood Manor, but was greeted instead by an unyielding, encompassing darkness.

He blinked again, attempting to banish the darkness. However, his eyes

refused to cooperate. Anxiety, fervent and abrupt, swelled within his breast. His breath hitched, his fingers curling into the sheets beneath him. His mind was a whirlpool of confusion and denial. This couldn't be right. He was the Duke of Thornwood, powerful, respected, feared. He couldn't be blind.

He reached out, trying to make sense of his surroundings through touch. His fingers grazed the cool silk sheets of his bed, and then the hard, familiar contours of his walnut nightstand, finally resting on the leather-bound book he had been reading before the hunt. His book. His room. He was in his bedchambers.

The air was heavy with the sterile scent of liniments, a noxious scent that scraped at the rare of his gullet and pricked at his teary orbs. A soft murmur of voices carried to his ears, the lower cadence unmistakably belonging to Dr. Bentley, the family physician.

The other voice was softer, nurturing. His Aunt Marjorie. The revelation struck him like a deluge of frigid water. She only fretted over him when he was truly in danger. A wave of melancholy washed over him. It was her comforting presence that now felt like a death sentence.

The murmur of their conversation became clearer, the words slicing through the silence like a sharp dagger.

“ I'm afraid... the majority of his vision... irreparable harm...” he heard Dr. Bently utter. "Any vision that is regained shall be clouded and hazy, at best. Yet I do not anticipate any amelioration whatsoever.”

His aunt gasped, uttering something that was muffled, it seemed, by her hands being cupped over her mouth. What she said next should have brought Adrian comfort. But it only made him feel more helpless and lost than he did moments before.

“I will do everything it takes to help and accommodate him,” she said. “Oh, my poor, sweet nephew...” she trailed off as she began sobbing softly.

Adrian shuddered as a new realization settled on him. Not only would he be unable to fulfill his duties for the dukedom, but he would likely need constant care and assistance. And from the sound of it, it would be for the rest of his life. Worst of all, it would be his aunt's burden. He felt the world reel around him. The words fell like stones around him, echoing ominously within his silent chamber. He had lost his sight. He was blind.

He envisioned himself at the next social gathering, the whispered jibes, the hidden smirks, the pitying looks. He would become the subject of ridicule among the ton. He, Adrian Westfield, a duke, reduced to a pitiful spectacle. He would not only be a pariah himself, but he would also bring down his aunt's good name.

She had treated him like her own son his entire life, helping his father raise him after his mother died giving birth to him. Then, when he lost his father ten years prior to a terrible illness, his aunt had stood beside him, offering him comfort and advice as he entered his rein as duke. And now, he was repaying her love and kindness by tarnishing her reputation through her association with a disabled nephew.

In that moment, he wished the accident had claimed his life, rather than permanently blinding him. At least then, his aunt would be spared the ridicule that was sure to come. His heart pounded louder, faster, each beat echoing the gravity of his new reality. Fear, anger, despair - they all crashed onto him, leaving him breathless. I cannot manage through life as a blind man, he thought, tears brimming in his unseeing eyes. I cannot do this to Aunt Marjorie...

In the weeks following the accident, Thornwood Manor, once a sanctuary of warmth, laughter, and life, felt different. It had morphed into a labyrinth of shadows, each corner whispering haunting echoes of the life he had once led. Each familiar scent, every distinct texture, the echoes of laughter that had once resonated within these walls - they all now served as a bitter reminder of what he had lost.

The vibrant colors that used to dance within his vision, the sharp details of the world that he had taken for granted, were now reduced to hazy outlines and faint hues. The once lively morning sun was now a vague lightness that graced his senses, the lush green of Thornwood's sprawling gardens, a mere whisper of a memory.

Adrian's hand trailed over the rough stone walls as he navigated through the manor's dimly lit corridors, each stone a cold reminder of the fortress he was now trapped within. His other senses heightened, he smelled the musty scent of age and heard the low echo of his footsteps bouncing off the grand archways. Each step was an affirmation of the labyrinth he now

lived in. His heaven had turned into his prison.

However, despite the challenging circumstances, he was not one to languish in self-pity. Adrian was a man of action, and this predicament, while it had altered his world, had not stolen his resolve. And Lady Marjorie Westfield, the spinster sister of Adrian's father, had been a miracle to Adrian.

His aunt had been an absolute blessing, attending to his every need, even coming to his aid in the early hours of the morning should he require assistance or find himself unable to return to his chambers. He felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for burdening her. It was this very sentiment that spurred the events that marked the commencement of his departure from Thornwood .

Six weeks after the accident, he joined his aunt for lunch for the first time since the fall that changed his life. He couldn't see her face, but he heard the chair fall to the ground and her skirts rustling as she rushed up to greet him.

“Darling, you've come to join me?” she asked tentatively.

Adrian nodded, embracing her gently as she wrapped her arms around him.

“I am,” he said. “If that’s all right.”

His aunt laughed, putting her arm around his waist.

“It’s wonderful, darling,” she said.

He pushed aside the self-pity that had been eating away at him. He gave her a broad smile and nodded, allowing her to lead him to the table. He was just learning to use a cane, and he was growing accustomed to it quickly. Still, he was grateful for his aunt’s help.

Once he was seated beside her, his aunt went back to her chair. She put poached eggs, toasted bread, and a piece of steak on his plate, then put the fork in his hand. The food smelled wonderful, and it felt good to do something that felt natural to him. He tried not to think about how he couldn’t see the spread before them, or his aunt’s kind, caring face.

After a moment of silent eating, Adrian turned toward his aunt.

“I was thinking that I would like to attend a social event with you,” he said, getting directly to the point.

His aunt gasped, grabbing onto his arm gently.

“Truly?” she asked, her excitement clear in her voice.

Adrian nodded, smiling at how happy she sounded.

“Indeed,” he said. “I think I would like to start with a dinner party. A ball, I believe, would be too much just now. But maybe, if the party goes well, I will attend a ball before the end of this Season.”

Beside him, Marjorie shifted in her chair. He could feel the joy radiating off her, and he smiled again.

“Splendid,” she said. “There is a dinner party this week. Would you like for me to let Lord and Lady Procton know that we will both be in attendance?”

Adrian nodded. He wasn't sure if he was ready for a dinner party that soon. But it had been his idea. And what better time to start reintegrating with society than immediately?

“That would be lovely,” he said.

That weekend, Adrian had Blake dress him in a fine crimson suit with a cravat that was so deep red it was almost black, boots that matched the cravat, and a crimson top hat. His cane was black, so it complimented his outfit. And his light blond hair was combed back and tucked neatly beneath the hat. He couldn't see himself, but Blake assured him that he looked sharper and more refined than he ever had.

The trip to Lord and Lady Procton's estate was nerve racking for Adrian. He was happy to let his aunt prattle on excitedly about how thrilled she was that he was attending the party with her. He let himself believe that, as she told him, that it would be a wonderful evening. He even allowed himself to think that the ton wouldn't be as critical as he had first feared after his accident.

However, from the moment he and Marjorie Westfield entered the

manor, he could feel scrutinizing, judgmental eyes on him. He heard the whispers as he and his aunt passed, and the conversations that quieted when the guests laid eyes on him. His self-consciousness was overwhelming. And yet, for the sake of his aunt, he put on a tense smile and pretended to not notice that everyone was behaving as though he was a monster.

When dinner was finally served, disaster struck. The layout of the mansion was unfamiliar to him, and he was clinging to his aunt for guidance. But as they turned a corner, his cane got ahead of him. He tripped a gentleman just ahead of them, right around the corner. The man fell, creating a scene around them as others tried to help him off the ground.

When the gentleman regained his composure, he immediately confronted Adrian, standing face to face with him.

“You really must watch what you are doing,” he said with a sneer in his voice. “I don’t know why someone like you would dare try to mingle in with normal society again.”

Adrian, feeling utterly humiliated, had tried to mumble an apology and an explanation of his situation. But the man stormed off, the cluster of people

who had stopped to help or watch the spectacle uttering whispers of things like ‘disgraceful’ and ‘ghastly.’ Beside him, his aunt defended him. But no one responded to her. For the rest of the evening, he and Marjorie were virtually invisible.

When they returned home that night, Adrian hugged his aunt tightly.

“I’m so sorry, Aunt Marjorie,” he said. “I feel horrible for embarrassing you.”

His aunt held him as he choked back tears of frustration and humiliation.

“No, darling,” she said, rubbing his back in a motherly fashion. “You did not embarrass me. What truly humiliates me is being associated with a society that conducts itself in the manner those arrogant individuals did this evening. I am ashamed to be associated with any of them. And I promise you, I will never subject you to an environment where people would treat you in such a manner ever again.”

Adrian nodded. His aunt’s words were comforting. But deep down, he

believed that her association with him would eventually rob her of her friends, of her social life, of everything that a lady of her stature deserved within society. He let his aunt lead him to his chambers and to his bed. But that night, he decided that he needed to do something to spare his aunt any further humiliation.

One evening, almost three months after he had lost his sight, he made the hard decision. He needed to distance himself from the memories that Thornwood held, to be away from the prying eyes of society, the stifling air of pity, the gossip that he was sure ran rife within the ton, especially after the debacle at the dinner party. He sat down with his aunt at dinner, though he had had virtually no appetite since the party.

“Aunt Marjorie,” he said. “I have decided to rent a property in Bath. I will no longer be staying here at Thornwood.”

Marjorie was silent for a moment. Then, she spoke, a sad smile in her voice.

“I know things have been difficult for you here,” she said. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Adrian nodded firmly.

“I am,” he said. “You can continue to live here if you like. I will ensure that you are cared for, that you have everything you need. You are free to do as you like...”

“No, my dear,” she said, with just as much determination as Adrian. “I will not allow you to be on your own. I love you, darling. And where you go, I go.”

Adrian looked toward his aunt, tears stinging his eyes.

“Won’t you miss the balls and the dinner parties, and your friends?” he asked.

His aunt chortled.

“I lost many friends when they decided to be cruel to you,” she said.

“My true friends will come visit me. And when it comes to social gatherings, I have no interest in associating with individuals who conduct themselves in such uncivilized and disrespectful manners.”

Despite the heavy resignation he felt, Adrian laughed.

“Very well,” he said. “I shall have our things packed up tonight. We will leave first thing tomorrow.”

The next morning, Adrian summoned his steward to his chambers after Blake had gone to oversee the loading of his aunt’s and his luggage.

“I am entrusting you with Thornwood, Higgins,” Adrian informed his loyal steward, his voice steady despite the turmoil that lurked beneath the surface. Higgins had served his family for decades, his loyalty and dedication to the estate unmatched.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Higgins responded, his voice filled with an emotion Adrian could only imagine was a mix of surprise and concern. “Are you certain about this, Your Grace?”

Adrian nodded, thinking of how his aunt had asked him the very same question the evening before.

“I’ve never been more certain, Higgins. I need some time away,” Adrian replied.

Thus, the Duke of Thornwood found himself bidding farewell to his beloved manor, setting off towards Bath, a city known for its healing waters. Bath offered the solitude he desired, a refuge from the suffocating atmosphere of London, a place to come to terms with his new reality.

As the carriage pulled away, Adrian let his fingers trail along the leather upholstery, his mind filled with a kaleidoscope of emotions. Thornwood was his home, his sanctuary. Leaving it behind felt like leaving a part of himself. But it was a necessary sacrifice, one that he hoped would bring him peace, acceptance, and perhaps, in time, a new beginning.

Chapter One

Three years had passed since the unfortunate hunting accident, the one that had changed Adrian's life forever. The duke of Thornwood was now a shadow of his former self, his sharp hunter's gaze replaced by vacant eyes that held the darkness of his world.

Haunted by the tragedy that had stolen his sight, Adrian sought solace in the sanctuary of his ancestral home. His heart pulsed with a rhythm of regret and relief, a melody of melancholy and fortitude that echoed in his chest. He had come home to Thornwood, a place that once sparkled with the vibrant hues of life and was now a canvas of shadows and hazy outlines.

The expansive Thornwood estate nestled in the heart of the English countryside was an orchestra of nature's melodies. Even without sight, Adrian could see its beauty through the lens of his memories. He remembered the vivid green of the rolling fields, the way the trees rustled under the delicate

caress of the wind, the blossoming flowers that added splashes of color to the grounds. The fragrance of dew-kissed earth and fresh blooms filled his senses, painting a vivid picture of Thornwood's verdant beauty, offering him a semblance of sight.

The echo of his cane against the polished wood floors guided him through the familiar halls, each tap a breadcrumb leading him back to the life he once knew. He found himself in the drawing room, a room that bore the weight of countless family gatherings and joyous memories.

By the scent of her lavender perfume and the muddled outline of her delicate figure, he deduced that his aunt was already there. Her presence filled the room like the soft glow of a hearth on a winter's night, radiating a warmth that made the shadows seem less daunting. She was the constant rock in his tumultuous sea of darkness, her voice a lighthouse guiding him through the gloom.

“Adrian, my dear,” she cooed, her voice resonating with tenderness. “I am so glad that you decided to return here. I have missed this place dearly.”

His lips curled into a smile.

“It’s wonderful to be home,” he said. “Thank you for putting up with me these past years. And for me uprooting you from here in the first place. I don’t know what I would have done throughout all this without you. Though I do feel terrible about the weight that my constant need for assistance must be putting on you.”

Her endearing chuckle washed over him, making his heart swell with a comforting warmth.

“Darling, I adore you as though you were my very own child,” she said. “And you did not uproot me from Thornwood. I made the choice to follow you to Bath happily. You do not know what joy it brings me to be able to offer you such aid. It is hardly a weight, my dear. It is my greatest honour to be here for you through this.”

Adrian gave his aunt a warm smile. He was sure she meant the words she spoke. However, he was equally certain that she had to be frequently fatigued or worn out. She hardly attended social events anymore, even on her own, and she would come to him if summoned at all hours of the night. Still, her words offered a balm to his worries, and he sighed with a mix of

contentment and weariness.

Even in his world of perpetual blurriness, he could 'see' her in his mind's eye – her soft gray curls, her warm, loving blue eyes, the wrinkles etched delicately on her face from years of laughter and sorrow. The warmth of her presence was a reassurance that he wasn't alone.

His fingers traced the edge of the armchair he now occupied, the fabric under his touch a reminder of countless evenings spent engrossed in delightful banter and family tales. He took a deep breath, the scent of polished wood and old books filling his nostrils, a scent that screamed of home.

The echoes of his past reverberated in the tranquility of Thornwood, his memories crafting vivid images in his mind's eye. Despite the loss of his sight, he found solace in these echoes, a testament that even the darkest of tragedies could not rob him of his past, of his home. His world was shrouded in shadows, yet he found light in his memories, his loved ones, and the timeless beauty of Thornwood. For now, that was enough.

A subtle commotion alerted Adrian to the arrival of the servants. He

heard the clinking sound of porcelain cups against silver saucers and the muffled rustle of cakes being placed on the trays. It was a symphony of familiarity that stirred within him a longing to see the spectacle in clear focus again.

His vision had not been entirely lost; it was a cruel jest of fate that he was left in a limbo between darkness and sight. As Dr. Bentley had forewarned, his sight might improve to an extent, but most likely, it would not. It had returned, but it was nothing more than a nebulous sea of milky images and blurred shadows, like an unfinished painting forever out of focus.

Adrian steeled himself against the fresh surge of self-pity that threatened to engulf him, despite his aunt's previous comforting words. He was a Westfield, the Duke of Thornwood, and he had sworn to himself he wouldn't wallow in despair. Yet, he couldn't help the wistful thought that teased his mind, his bitter yearning for the day he'd never gone hunting.

His musings were interrupted by the gentle sound of liquid pouring into a cup. He turned his head toward the sound, instinctively knowing it was his Aunt Marjorie pouring the tea. There was a brief silence before her soothing voice echoed through the room.

“Adrian, dear,” she began, her words delicately laced with a comforting warmth that seemed to seep into his very being, mending the fissures in his confidence, stitching together his broken heart. “Do not let your loss of sight define you. You are so much more.”

He wanted to believe her words. He longed for them to be his guiding star, his beacon of hope in the disorienting darkness.

“Thornwood needs its duke, Adrian,” she continued, her voice imbued with an insistent strength. “And Thornwood is patient. It has been waiting for your return. It doesn't care about your sight. It cares about your heart, your spirit. We did the right thing coming home. Trust me.”

A lump formed in Adrian's throat. He swallowed hard, fighting the overwhelming wave of emotion that surged within him. He was the duke of Thornwood, he was more than his blindness. His identity, his worth, was not defined by his ability to see but by his ability to lead, to love, and to endure.

He took a deep breath, allowing Aunt Marjorie's words to wash over him, soothing his anxieties. He nodded, a gesture more for himself than for

her. He still wasn't sure if he believed what his aunt was saying. But she believed in him. That was enough for him to make an effort to be the duke she believed he could be.

“Thank you, Aunt Marjorie,” he whispered, his voice carrying a newfound determination. “I shall endeavour to be the duke Thornwood needs, sight or no sight.” I just hope that I do not regret returning here, he thought.

With breakfast behind him, Adrian felt an irresistible pull toward the outdoors, the allure of the summer morning too inviting to resist. Guided by the constant presence of his loyal canine companion, Patches, he ventured beyond the stone walls of Thornwood Manor.

The moment he crossed the threshold, the day seemed to wrap around him like a comforting blanket. The air was heavy with the perfume of blossoming flowers, a fragrant melody that whispered of warm sunshine and rebirth. The surrounding orchestra of chirping birds performed a delightful symphony, their song a sonnet of morning joy that brushed against his ears.

Adrian inhaled deeply, savoring the taste of the summer air on his

tongue. His bare fingers brushed against the leaves of a nearby bush, the texture rough yet familiar. Each element of the morning— the warm sun on his face, the velvet breeze against his skin, the rich earthy scent in the air— was a vivid reminder of the world beyond his blindness.

Despite the haze that shrouded his vision, he found solace in the tactile beauty beneath his feet. The coolness of the dew-kissed grass, the roughened texture of the gravel pathway, the reassuring solidity of the earth— all painted an image of Thornwood more vivid than any sight could provide.

A sigh of contentment slipped from him. The larger part of him was grateful for the familiar sanctuary that Thornwood offered, its silent understanding offering him the solitude he craved. His heart seemed to settle, finding its rhythm once more in the tranquil pulse of his ancestral home.

Yet, a smaller part of him, a vulnerable corner of his soul, harbored a lingering dread of what was to come. The inevitable whispers of society, their reactions to his condition, lingered at the edges of his thoughts. He pushed it away, silencing the gnawing worry with a firm resolve. There was a time and place for such concerns, and it was not now, not when the sun was shining, and the birds were singing.

For the moment, he chose to let the peace of Thornwood wash over him, lapping against his consciousness like a soothing tide. He was home, he was safe, and with Patches by his side, he had a steadfast friend. The fear of the future would not steal the comfort of the present.

His hand found its way to Patches' head, his fingers sinking into the soft fur.

“It's just you and me out here, Patches,” he murmured, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Just us and the vast grounds of Thornwood.”

And for that moment, standing beneath the embracing sky, with the fragrance of summer wrapping him in its gentle hold, it was enough.

Adrian's peaceful solitude was soon interrupted by an unanticipated sound. A gentle humming reached his ears, a melody that seemed to twirl and pirouette on the strands of the summer breeze. The sweet tune was foreign, yet it elicited a thrilling sense of intrigue, a pulsating curiosity that caused his heart to quicken its rhythm.

His brow furrowed, and he squinted, trying to focus his milky vision. The vague outline of a figure, distinctly feminine, flitted in and out of focus in the distance. Her silhouette was a mystery he yearned to unveil, a song he longed to hear in its entirety.

Compelled by the magnetic pull of the enchanting melody and the allure of the elusive silhouette, Adrian, guided by Patches, moved closer. His cane tapped rhythmically against the gravel path, its sound punctuating the harmony of the morning chorus.

His heartbeat seemed to keep time with his advancing steps, a pulsating tempo of anticipation echoing in his ears. The humming grew louder, its notes swirling around him, filling the air with a symphony that stirred an inexplicable yearning in his heart.

As they neared the silhouette, Patches' tail wagged with greater excitement, its steady rhythm conveying a sense of trust. Adrian took in a deep breath, the scent of blooming roses and the lingering traces of the woman's perfume intermingling in a dance that quickened his pulse further.

With every step, he felt his world expanding, the unfamiliar contours of

the unexpected moment promising a new narrative in the canvas of his existence. His senses heightened, heart thudding, he reached out toward the source of the beguiling melody. Thornwood, it seemed, had more mysteries to offer than he had anticipated.

Chapter Two

Basking in the balmy warmth of the early afternoon, Annabelle Ludlow, wearing a gown of azure silk, gracefully wandered through the sun-dappled meadow. The notes of a beloved tune, one her late mother had often hummed, floated from her lips in a gentle, melodic whisper. The memories imbued in the melody wrapped her heart in a warm embrace, creating a moment of serenity that seemed as delicate as spun glass.

Lost in the enchanting reverie, her heart echoed the familiar tune, her pulse beating in harmony with the song that danced on the edge of her lips. The sounds of nature wove themselves seamlessly into her music, birds chiming in with their own verses and the wind whispering the rhythm.

However, the tranquility that had begun to encase her in its soothing balm shattered like a dropped crystal goblet. The stillness of the meadow was abruptly broken by a sound that was distinctly human. The soft, rhythmic

crunching of boots on grass; the undeniable indication of an approaching presence.

Alarm coiled in her stomach like a hissing snake, tightening as she turned towards the source of the disturbance. As her gaze moved from the sea of wildflowers to the forest's edge, her breath hitched. There he stood, a tall silhouette against the verdant backdrop, the duke of Thornwood.

His austere countenance bore a mark of isolation, like a hermit returning from his self-imposed solitude. The piercing sapphire gaze that met hers held an intensity that brought forth memories of whispered rumors – his hunting accident, the terrible incident that had disabled him years ago, and the subsequent retreat from the world. She had never met him in person. But living so close to his countryside retreat, she was aware that he lived nearby. But

what were the chances that she would coincidentally encounter him, while both of them happened to be taking a walk at the same time?

The duke's story, which was often narrated in hushed voices in the parlors and ballrooms of society, suddenly took on a tangible form. The wave

of apprehension that swept over her was as palpable as the wildflowers brushing against her silk-clad legs, sending her heartbeat into a quickened pace.

But Annabelle was no simpering debutante. The strength that lay beneath her ladylike exterior surfaced, silencing the flutter of nerves. With all the courage she could muster, she met his stare, her eyes filled with determination.

“Miss Ludlow,” the duke greeted, his voice low and gruff, as though it hadn't been used in conversation for a long time.

“Your Grace,” Annabelle replied, her voice steadier than she had expected. As she dipped into a delicate curtsy, her mother's lessons on grace and decorum echoed in her mind. Even though the duke couldn't see her, she knew it was proper to greet him formally. She straightened and looked at him, her heart drumming with a mix of fascination and unease against the confines of her ribcage. “Forgive my boldness, but how is it that you know my name?”

What she really wanted to ask was how he could see enough of her to

even know that she was a woman. She supposed that her soap and perfume might carry a feminine scent on the light breeze. But even then, how could he see her face to know who she was?

The duke chortled softly, and she prayed she hadn't offended him.

“With the perfume, I guessed that you were a woman,” he said, confirming part of her assumption. “And my aunt knows everyone who lives in this part of London. If not personally, then by way of gossip. I assume the same is true if you knew to address me as ‘your grace.’”

Anabelle nodded, even though the duke couldn't see.

“That's right,” she said. “My uncle is much the same way.” Although I would imagine that your aunt's gossip is far different from my uncle's bitter complaining, she added silently.

While his name had often been the subject of society's gossip, Annabelle could not deny the man standing before her was shrouded in an air of mystery and allure. His sudden appearance, both alarming and intriguing, stirred within her a renewed sense of curiosity. And it was with this curiosity

and a hint of apprehension that she stepped into the whirlwind that was the Duke of Thornwood.

In the wake of their exchanged greetings, an unsettling silence hung heavy in the air between Annabelle and the Duke of Thornwood, punctuated only by the chorus of summer birds flitting in the nearby branches, and the gentle rustle of leaves stirred by a soft breeze. The unease of their encounter seemed to solidify the air, its weight pressing down upon Annabelle's slender shoulders. It was a contrast so stark to the harmony that the meadow had serenaded her with only moments before.

Just as the silence threatened to consume her entirely, a plaintive whimper broke the tense stillness. Annabelle's eyes darted towards the source of the sound, and a warm smile spread across her face. Emerging from the tall grasses was the duke's faithful hound, tail wagging with an exuberant rhythm. The dog carried itself with a pride befitting the pet of a nobleman. Annabelle instantly loved the animal.

“What's your name, sweetheart?” she asked, bending over with an outstretched hand to allow the animal to get her scent.

The duke chuckled, seemingly pleasantly distracted by the interaction.

“His name is Patches,” he said, sounding as proud as the dog stood.

Annabelle smiled brightly at the duke, forgetting for a moment that he couldn't see it. And yet, he returned her smile, as though he could feel it.

“Patches,” she cooed, her voice light and tender. “May I pet him?”

The duke chuckled again, the sound surprisingly light and innocent, despite his ghastly reputation.

“If he doesn't mind, then I don't,” he said, gesturing toward the dog. The aim of his hand was just a bit off from where the dog actually stood. Annabelle's heart clenched as she tried to imagine what it must be like to be blind. But her sadness was short lived as Patches nuzzled her hand with his cold, wet nose.

She gracefully sank onto her knees, extending a delicate hand towards the dog. Patches trotted forward, nuzzling against Annabelle's palm with an affectionate warmth that soothed her jangled nerves. A sigh escaped her lips,

her smile deepening at the simple joy of the dog's company.

She loved animals, as well. But her uncle would never hear of her having a pet of her own. She had taken in a starving, wounded young kitten that had been abandoned by its mother the previous year. Her uncle found out and got especially stern with her. A day after, the kitten was missing, and she never saw it again. But with as uncharacteristically nice as her uncle was to her afterward, she knew he had done away with it.

She looked up at the duke, her brown eyes gleaming with genuine happiness. It was as if the looming presence of the duke had receded, replaced by the friendly wag of a dog's tail and the wet press of a nose against her hand. As if sensing her delight at his friendliness, Patches hitched up on his back legs, brushing a strand of her chestnut hair that had fallen from her bonnet away from her eyes. She giggled as the cold wetness grazed her cheek, and Patches wagged his tail even more furiously still.

The duke watched the scene, surprise etching its way into his sharp features.

“My word,” he said, sounding stunned. “Patches is usually rather

discerning with new people. At least until he's seen them a few times."

Annabelle nodded, not looking up at the duke.

"I can see that," she said with another giggle. "Is he named Patches because of his patchwork of black and brown fur?"

Annabelle regretted the question as soon as she asked it. Of course, the blind duke likely had no idea what his own pet looked like. But he didn't miss a beat. He grinned, nodding as he smiled fondly at the dog.

"He is," he said, once more sounding proud. "My aunt helped me pick out the name. I encountered him whilst out and about in Bath. He was weak and sickly, so I brought him back home. He has been a loyal companion ever since."

Annabelle nodded, laughing as Patches flopped dramatically onto the ground and exposed his belly for scratches. She obliged, looking up at the duke.

"He certainly is a very sweet dog," she said, thinking again wistfully of

her lost kitten.

The duke took a tentative step forward, kneeling as well to pat his dog's exposed belly.

“Miss Ludlow,” he started, his voice a blend of curiosity and mild astonishment. “It would appear Patches has taken quite a liking to you. He absolutely never shows new people his belly upon the first meeting. This is a rare feat, indeed.”

A soft blush dusted Annabelle's cheeks.

“Is that so, your Grace?” she asked. “He's a lovely creature. Animals have a way of understanding us better than we understand ourselves, don't you think?”

The Duke of Thornwood looked thoughtfully at her, another slow smile creeping onto his face.

“I must say that I agree,” he said.

Patches, having accepted Annabelle's affections with a contented wag of his tail, settled by his side. Her constant presence seemed to create a barrier between Annabelle and the world, grounding her in a comforting reality. Yet, even the pleasant weight of the dog's head on her knee couldn't muffle the frantic rhythm of Annabelle's heartbeat or the creeping awareness of her situation.

Her heart pounded a frantic tempo against her ribs as the realization dawned with undeniable force: she was alone with the Duke, not a chaperone in sight. A vivid image of the scandalous whispers that would echo through society's parlors if they were discovered sent a shudder of fear through her. The vibrant greens and blues of the meadow seemed to pale, turning monochrome under the weight of her sudden apprehension.

The conventions of their time were explicit in their dictation of decorum and propriety, especially in situations involving an unmarried woman and a man of the duke's reputation. Panic crept into the edges of her mind like tendrils of morning fog, clouding her thoughts and quickening her breaths. She could not allow herself to become the subject of society's ruthless gossip.

Swiftly, as though the action could diminish the rising tide of her worries, Annabelle rose to her feet. Patches whined, a look of confusion in his canine eyes as he was disturbed from her comfortable spot. Ignoring the soft whimper, Annabelle dusted off her skirt, the movements of her hands betraying the turmoil she felt inside.

“Your Grace,” Annabelle began, her voice shaking ever so slightly under the strain of her panic. She steadied herself, drawing a deep breath and plastering a polite smile onto her face. “I must apologise, but I find that I have stayed longer than I should. I must return home.”

He nodded, the sharp gaze of his sapphire eyes softening, though whether from understanding or disappointment, Annabelle could not tell. She didn't dare to linger, couldn't afford the luxury of deciphering the emotions behind his gaze.

With a final, respectful curtsy and a soft pat on Patches' head, Annabelle turned, leaving the duke and his dog behind. As she retraced her steps back through the meadow, the weight of the encounter and the societal constraints pressed down on her like an ill-fitting garment, reminding her that the path to her heart's desire would never be as straightforward as a stroll

through a summer meadow.

Having navigated her way through the meadow with haste, Annabelle arrived at the Ludlow estate, her heart still beating its frantic tune. She allowed herself a moment to collect her thoughts, a futile attempt to brush off the lingering effect of her meeting with the Duke. But as she crossed the threshold, all thoughts of her peaceful morning, and her nerve-racking encounter with the Duke, were replaced with a far more imminent concern.

Her uncle, Oswald Ludlow, sat in his imposing armchair, his stern gaze meeting hers as she entered. There was a stern, unyielding quality to his eyes that reminded Annabelle of the oppressive guardianship he had wielded since her parents' tragic demise in a carriage accident five years ago. The familiar setting of her home seemed to shift under the weight of his scrutiny, every item of furniture seeming to bear witness to her reprimand.

“Annabelle,” Oswald began, the deep timbre of his voice reverberating in the quiet room. “You should not be gallivanting alone in the meadows. It is time for you to put aside such childish escapades.”

His sharp words carried a biting edge, stirring a deep-rooted resentment

within Annabelle. But it was his next words that truly took her breath away, sending a chill prickling down her spine.

“I have been considering your situation, and it is high time you were married.”

The word 'married' echoed ominously in the room, its implications chilling her to the bone. Oswald was a man of many acquaintances, but few could be described as savory company. The prospect of the wretched match he might have in mind for her struck fear into her heart.

“Marriage?” Annabelle repeated, her voice barely more than a whisper. She tried to keep her expression neutral, but her mind was a whirlwind of apprehension. The thought of being tethered to a man of her uncle's choosing was a nightmare she had long feared. Now, it appeared, her nightmare was on the brink of becoming her reality. “To whom?”

Her uncle scoffed, shrugging.

“I have not yet decided,” he said. “I shall let you know when I find a suitable match.”

There were two things in her uncle's voice: decisiveness and deceit. He likely did already have a suitor in mind. And he would not be moved.

Still, she couldn't stop herself from pleading her case. She was a woman who enjoyed reading. Very few gentlemen would be content with that.

"Uncle, I would like to decide when and if I will marry," she said.

But before she could continue, her uncle held up his hand.

"We will talk about it again once I have found a suitor," he said again. "Until then, I want you to prepare yourself."

Annabelle stared at her uncle, aghast. She had faced many trials since the loss of her parents, her world shrinking to the rigid confines set by her uncle. But this... This was a boundary she could not allow to be drawn around her.

"Uncle, please," she began. But once more, Oswald shut her down.

“You will do as I say, Annabelle,” he said. “And that is the end of the matter.”

Chapter Three

Adrian found himself roused early the next morning, his mind plagued by an inescapable unease that tugged at the corners of his consciousness. The sun shone through the heavy curtains of his regency-era study, throwing patches of light across his brooding features. The strain of his thoughts was almost palpable as they swirled about him, darkening the room with an uncharacteristic gloom.

His memory had relentlessly thrown him back to his encounter with Annabelle Ludlow, the images and emotions of that afternoon clinging to him like a perfume. Her silhouette, delicately outlined by the setting sun, the quiver of her lip, the hint of vulnerability in her eyes that he had never seen before; all these details haunted him, pulling him into an unending spiral of reflection.

It was as if the visage of Annabelle had been painted onto his very soul,

casting a melancholic shadow over his usual stoic facade. Patches had taken an immediate shine to her, which was extremely rare, as he had told her. That should have set him at ease. So, why did his stomach still twist into knots when he thought about her?

His Aunt Marjorie, an elegant woman with keen eyes and a natural intuition for the subtleties of emotion, noticed the change immediately. Despite Adrian's practiced air of composure, the aura of contemplation that hung about him like a cloud was not to be missed. With the delicacy of a woman well-acquainted with the nuances of the heart, she addressed him.

“My dear Adrian,” she said softly, her voice washing over him like a comforting tide. “You seem rather unlike yourself this morning. Would you care to discuss what's troubling you?” Her inquiry hung in the air between them, echoing the unspoken concern she held for her nephew.

Adrian looked at his aunt, his countenance as calm as the smooth surface of a lake, yet his azure eyes, typically radiant with zest, bore the imprint of his unquiet mind. Her offer was a beacon of solace in his sea of thoughts.

With a sigh, he leaned back into his chair, the rich mahogany creaking slightly beneath his weight. He paused for a moment, the silence humming between them as he gathered his thoughts.

“Yesterday, I ran into Miss Ludlow while I was out for a walk with Patches,” he said.

His aunt gasped, and he heard the smile in her voice when she spoke.

“Oh, how lovely,” she said. “She is a very sweet young lady.”

Adrian sighed, shaking his head.

“I’m sure she is,” he said. “But she asked me how I knew who she was. She said that she meant how I knew her, as we have never been formally introduced. But I suspect that she was indirectly referring to my blindness. It’s just... it reminded me so of how it felt to be scrutinized.”

Marjorie listened attentively, and Adrian felt her empathetic gaze softening as he laid bare his thoughts. It was not often that her composed, self-assured nephew showed such vulnerability.

His confession ended with a profound sigh, the words he had uttered hanging heavily in the air around them. The room, filled with an unspeakable understanding, felt warm and comforting, a sanctuary from the tumult of Adrian's thoughts.

In the quiet of his confession, Adrian felt the peculiar sense of unease recede slightly, pushed back by his aunt's understanding and empathy. He was grateful for Marjorie's attentive ear, and in her compassionate silence, he found a semblance of peace amid his lingering thoughts.

Marjorie reached over from her seat beside him and took one of his hands in hers.

“I understand that must have felt strange to you,” she said. “And I admit that I do not know Miss Ludlow well personally, though I have met her at social events, and she was perfectly lovely and sweet. But darling, do not assume that everyone is out to judge you. There are good people out there who simply do not know how you will approach them after so many years of solitude.”

Adrian bit his lip, not wanting to further his pity party by pointing out to his aunt that everyone he had encountered in public since losing his sight had treated him as an abomination. Fortunately, their conversation was abruptly cut short by the unexpected arrival of a familiar soul.

Adrian looked up at the sound of boisterous laughter echoing through the hallway. A broad grin spread across his face as the tall, robust figure of his best friend, Henry, burst into the room, his jovial nature infecting the sober atmosphere instantly.

“Adrian!” He boomed, enveloping his friend in a warm embrace. His loud cheer echoed through the stately room, bouncing off the walls lined with ancient family portraits and priceless heirlooms.

“Henry,” Adrian replied, clapping him on the back. “You haven't changed a bit.” The sight of his childhood friend, the same jovial spirit he had always been, brought a momentary respite to Adrian's heavy heart. His soul, weighed down by past encounters and emotional turmoil, felt lighter in Henry's energetic presence.

The pair settled into the plush armchairs by the hearth, exchanging tales

and laughter over a pot of steaming tea.

“Where have you been hiding yourself?” Adrian asked as Aunt Marjorie summoned the servants to fetch more tea and treats.

Henry sighed, the sound of a weary but content man.

“Overseas, my friend,” he said. “I was in France for the past six months, just for one business deal. And I was in the Far East for nearly that long before that. I just returned to London a week ago. I concluded that my top priority in terms of official matters was to pay you a visit.”

Adrian grinned. Henry was the only person in London who saw him no differently since he became blind, apart from his aunt. When he was with Henry, it was easy for him to forget that he wasn't a normal nobleman anymore. He usually hid when visitors came to Thornwood since his accident, infrequent though those occasions were. But Henry was one visitor that Adrian would always wish to see.

Amidst their hearty chatter, the topic of horse riding surfaced. It was Henry, ever eager for adventure, who brought it up.

“Adrian, when will we see you back in the saddle?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with anticipation. “It's been too long since our last race, don't you think?”

The question, although posed innocently, struck Adrian like a bolt of lightning. His heart tightened within his chest, his mind besieged by haunting images. The accident that had robbed him of his sight, the breathless panic as he had fallen from his horse, the searing pain...

Three years. It had been three long, arduous years since he had last rode. The very suggestion of returning to the activity that had been the root of his tragedy sparked a surge of fear within him. He felt his muscles tense involuntarily, his hands instinctively tightening around the porcelain teacup.

His eyes, veiled by the murky darkness of his memories, met those of his friend. There was genuine concern etched into Henry's features, the joviality fading momentarily. Adrian took a deep breath, steeling himself against the wave of fear that threatened to consume him.

“I...” He began, his voice quieter than he'd intended. “I haven't thought

about it, Henry. It's been a long time, and things are not the same anymore.” His words hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder of the trials he had endured.

Being with his best friend again stirred the reminder of a time when life was simpler, a time before his accident. But it also evoked the stark reality of his present situation. The prospect of returning to horse riding was daunting, but Adrian couldn't deny the tiny spark of longing that flickered within him. For the first time in three years, he dared to envision himself back in the saddle, the wind in his hair, the strength of the horse beneath him... Fearful, yet not entirely unwelcome.

Henry, however, seemed to have caught on to Adrian's hesitation and did not falter in his persuasive pursuit. With a determined glint in his eyes, he leaned forward in his chair, gripping Adrian's shoulder in a firm, reassuring grip.

“Adrian,” he said, his tone as earnest as Adrian had ever heard it, “horse riding could be your path back to freedom. It could be a distraction, a way to escape from the burdens you've been shouldering. You know, a therapeutic pursuit.”

Adrian's eyebrows knitted together at Henry's suggestion, a multitude of emotions threatening to overflow. The sheer thought of returning to horseback was enough to send tremors of fear cascading down his spine. Yet, there was something intriguing about Henry's words that he couldn't dismiss.

His gaze fell to the intricate patterns woven into the expensive rug beneath his feet. It was not often that he allowed his uncertainties to surface. But here, with his best friend and confidante, he let the defenses crumble a bit.

Therapeutic. He pondered over the word, letting it roll around in his mind, coating his thoughts with its promises. Could it be? Could riding be the key to freeing him from the burdens that had been pulling him under? The shackles that had bound his heart since the accident, could they be broken?

As he contemplated, he felt the undercurrent of doubt begin to swirl, tugging at his newfound spark of hope. He remembered the sensation of the ground rushing up to meet him, the gut-wrenching fear, the agonizing darkness that had consumed his sight. Was it worth risking another catastrophe?

Yet, there was an undeniable allure to Henry's proposal. An offer of an outlet, a chance to find freedom, to feel the wind whipping past him as he raced across open fields once again. The memories of those exhilarating moments of freedom were etched deep within his soul, never fully forgotten despite the time and trauma.

Caught in this emotional tug-of-war, Adrian found himself considering the possibility. He was at a precipice, peering into the chasm of his fears, and for the first time, he felt a gust of courage stirring within him. A fleeting feeling, yes, but one that suggested perhaps he might just be ready to face his fear.

“Maybe you're right, Henry,” he said finally, his voice barely more than a whisper, yet carrying an unforeseen weight. “Perhaps it is time for me to consider trying again.”

Henry's answering smile was triumphant yet tender, a testament to their years of friendship. As Adrian stared into the flickering flames in the hearth, a tiny glimmer of hope ignited within him. Uncertain and unsure, but existent nonetheless, a small flicker in the darkness he had grown accustomed to.

“Wonderful, Adrian,” he said, grinning. “I will let you decide when you are ready. And I will be willing and waiting when you are.”

Adrian's routine engagement with his steward, Higgins, followed soon after. Higgins was an elderly gentleman with a disciplined air, wearing a perpetually thoughtful expression behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. His diligence and careful organization were admirable traits that had proved invaluable in managing the estate.

Seated across from Adrian, Higgins began detailing the monthly records, his voice a steady drone as he listed out transactions, expenses, and incomes with practiced ease. His hands shuffled through neatly stacked papers, each document detailing the complex workings of the estate.

“Your Grace,” he began, his tone formal yet infused with a subtle warmth that came from years of faithful service. “I have the monthly accounts and records ready for your perusal.”

With measured steps, Higgins approached the desk, unfolding the documents and laying them meticulously in front of Adrian. His hands moved deftly, a testament to his years of experience.

“These tenants have already paid their monthly rent,” he said, reading off the list of names. “There were only two who have not. I have already sent them a letter on your behalf, inquiring that all goes well with their finances, and asking them to contact you if they need assistance, or a little more time to pay.”

Adrian grinned at the steward.

“Perfect,” he said.

Higgins continued.

“And these are business partnership offers you have been sent,” he said. “I shall read them to you. If you hear one you wish to partake in, I shall place the paper down for you to sign.”

Adrian nodded.

“Very good,” he said.

Adrian listened attentively, his acute hearing compensating for the sight he had lost. His sharp mind captured each word, mentally sorting and analyzing the information presented. A ledger might have been just paper and ink to others, but to him, it was a tactile reminder of the responsibilities he bore.

“Thank you, Higgins,” he said. “Respond to Lord Tallson about his wine exportation merger proposal. Tell him if he will consider negotiating the partnership profit split, I will consider his offer. And to Lord Granger, tell him that I already have a profitable investment with another gentleman in the technology trade. Tell him he is welcomed to make an offer and come on as another partner.”

Higgins shuffled the papers again, patting his master on the shoulder.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” he said cheerily.

With patience, he gave Higgins instructions where necessary, his commands clear and decisive. Each decision was calculated, weighed against the future of the estate, the well-being of the staff, and the comfort of his household.

His hand moved in practiced strokes as he signed the necessary documents, guided by Higgins' steady hand. Despite his blindness, his signature was always consistent, a testament to his indomitable spirit and perseverance.

Higgins then turned the discussion towards the current state of supplies and upcoming invoices.

“The supplies of grain and other food items are running low,” he said. “Several invoices from the city merchants are also due.”

“Place an order for the necessary supplies, Higgins,” Adrian commanded, his voice resonating with authority. “And as for the invoices, settle them promptly. Ensure that all our debts are cleared.”

Page after page of records, accounts, and invoices were laid bare before him, each requiring his personal attention and discerning judgment. The decisions were never simple, yet Adrian always approached them with a level of attention and diligence that was admirable. The responsibility of overseeing such extensive property was a daunting task, but it was one that

he undertook with unyielding dedication.

The ticking of the antique grandfather clock echoed in the room, marking the passage of hours. Soon, the sun reached its zenith, casting a warm glow that filtered through the study's stained-glass windows, bathing the room in an array of colors. With each passing moment, the confines of the room seemed to close in on Adrian, the usually comforting scent of old parchment and polished wood growing stifling.

Higgins gave one final bow, patting Adrian on the shoulder once more.

“I shall get started overseeing this straightaway,” he said.

Adrian nodded, smiling gratefully.

“Thank you, Higgins,” he said. “I could never do this without you.”

The steward chuckled softly.

“It is a pleasure to be of service, Your Grace,” he said.

As the steward left the room, Adrian sighed heavily. Feeling a need to escape the weight of his responsibilities, if only for a little while, he dismissed the steward, promising to conclude their discussion on the morrow. Stretching his muscles, stiff from the long hours of sitting, he made his way out of the study.

His feet carried him to the courtyard, the crunching gravel underfoot marking a familiar pathway. There, he found Patches, his faithful canine companion, sprawled lazily under the shade of an old elm tree. The image of the dog, his tongue lolling out as he panted in the afternoon heat, brought a genuine smile to Adrian's face.

“Patches,” he called, kneeling down to run a hand over the dog's warm, scruffy coat. The dog's tail thumped against the ground, his amber eyes bright with affection. The bond between them was profound, forged through countless hours of shared solitude and mutual understanding.

With Patches at his side, Adrian felt a soothing calm wash over him. The dog's unquestioning companionship, his silent understanding, provided a comforting balm to Adrian's troubled thoughts. As they ventured further into the sprawling gardens, the burdens of the morning's discussions and the

lingering uncertainties about horse riding seemed to dissolve in the warm sunlight, replaced by a moment of tranquility that he desperately needed.

As he walked, Patches' familiar presence by his side, Adrian felt a peculiar sense of anticipation stir within him. The world outside was not as daunting as he'd grown to believe. The prospect of horse riding, of experiencing the exhilarating freedom he once had, did not seem as impossible anymore. It was a small step, one might say, but for Adrian, it was a leap towards confronting the ghosts of his past.

Chapter Four

With the afternoon sun sitting lazily along the horizon, Annabelle found herself trudging along the cobblestone pathway, her heart heavy within her chest. Even amidst the confusion of her life, her feet had unerringly led her towards one sanctuary she knew she could rely on - the comforting presence of her dear friend, Penelope.

Their friendship was a well-aged book, each page filled with laughter, shared secrets, and countless afternoon teas. It was a bond not easily broken, but rather, one that offered solace from the unrelenting storm that was brewing within Annabelle's life.

Penelope's manor stood grand and welcoming at the top of a gentle hill, framed by the waning daylight. As Annabelle approached, the mansion's grandeur did little to intimidate her, instead, its familiar architecture served as a comforting sight. A sense of relief washed over her as the towering doors

swung open, revealing Penelope's radiant smile. It was as warm as the hearth in winter, a symbol of their friendship that had remained unchanged over the years.

“Annabelle!” Penelope exclaimed, her green eyes sparkling with warmth. She rushed forward, her hands outstretched to envelop Annabelle's in a reassuring grip. “What brings you here so unexpectedly?”

Annabelle opened her mouth to address her friend. But she choked on the words, her worry and whirling thoughts preventing her from uttering a word.

Penelope seemed to understand at once. She linked her arm through Annabelle's, ushering her toward the mansion.

“Come, darling,” she said warmly. “Let's have some tea, and you can tell me everything.”

Annabelle nodded, smiling gratefully at her dear friend as she followed her inside the manor.

The parlor, where they soon found themselves, was cozy and inviting. Its emerald-green drapes let in the warm sunshine, the fireplace crackling with a welcoming warmth. Penelope settled into the high-backed chair opposite Annabelle, a porcelain cup of steaming tea cradled in her hands. She waited, her gaze filled with genuine concern.

The words threatened to stick in Annabelle's throat. The reality of her predicament felt far too daunting, far too real to voice aloud. Yet, she knew she could trust Penelope with the darkest recesses of her heart, just as she always had. Taking a deep breath, she let the torrent of her worries flow free.

“Oswald,” she began, her voice barely above a whisper, “has plans for me. He intends to arrange my marriage.”

Penelope's gaze flickered with surprise, but she remained silent, encouraging Annabelle to continue. Her friend's unwavering attention served as a balm, allowing her to trudge on.

“That alone unsettles me,” she continued, a deep sigh escaping her lips. Her gaze drifted to the flickering flames in the fireplace, the light dancing within her hazel eyes. “But the recent encounter with the Duke of

Thornwood...,” her voice trailed off as she recalled the disquiet that that particular event had sown within her.

Annabelle found herself spilling out the details, the mysterious aura that surrounded the duke, the manner of their meeting and the unsettling fascination he seemed to have held for her. Every word seemed to hang heavy in the air, painting a vivid picture of her inner turmoil.

Her heart was a maelstrom of feelings, oscillating between fear, confusion, and a strange sense of anticipation she didn't quite understand. Annabelle feared the future Oswald planned for her, yet, she could not quell the curiosity the Duke had sparked within her. The unspoken question lingered between the two women, their expressions mirroring the gravity of the situation.

Her unburdening complete, Annabelle looked up at Penelope, her gaze filled with a mixture of apprehension and hope. Despite the chaos that life had chosen to throw her way, she was grateful. For in this moment, she found solace in the shared silence, the comforting presence of her friend, and the knowledge that no matter what, she wouldn't have to face these trials alone.

“Annabelle,” Penelope began gently after a long moment of silence. Her voice was soft yet held the comforting weight of wisdom. “I may not have the power to change Oswald's decisions, but remember this; you have strength within you, strength you have yet to fully realise.”

Her words hung in the air like the fragrance of fresh roses, potent and lingering. She was not offering solutions, Annabelle knew, but the assurance she provided was enough to ease the tumult within her.

“You mustn't let yourself be swept away by the current of their decisions,” Penelope continued. “Consider your choices carefully, stand firm in your beliefs. This is your life, your future.”

The words resonated deeply within Annabelle, like the chords of a harp plucked with precision. She nodded slowly, her lips curving into a semblance of a smile.

“Yes, you're right, Penelope,” she said. Her agreement was sincere, and she found herself grateful for her friend's counsel.

But as Penelope's words began to settle, a question rose to the surface

of her mind, churning the still waters once more. How could she possibly assert herself against her uncle, a man who held her future in his hands, a man who could mould it as he saw fit? Her heart clenched at the thought. The truth was a bitter pill to swallow, with uncertainty haunting her dreams like a relentless nightmare.

When the last drop of tea was gone, and the embers in the fireplace began to dwindle, the hour to depart had come. Annabelle rose, tucking her worries back into the corner of her mind. The hour was rapidly getting late, and the road home awaited.

As she prepared to step into the cool air of the early evening, Penelope pulled her into a warm embrace, the comforting scent of lavender wafting from her friend.

“Take care, dear Annabelle. I will come visit in a few days,” Penelope promised, her voice filled with affection.

Annabelle nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. She stepped into the twilight, the promise of Penelope's visit echoing in her ears, a beacon of hope amidst the uncertain shadow her life was becoming. Her heart was still

troubled, the questions still lingering, but she found a semblance of peace in her friend's words, and that was enough, at least for now.

Her heart somewhat lightened by Penelope's counsel, Annabelle headed home via the meadow, a route she had come to love for its tranquil beauty. This verdant oasis, surrounded by tall oak trees, held a serene magic that charmed her, a balm to the clamour of her thoughts.

The sun hung low in the sky, casting tall shadows that danced upon the tall grass as the evening's cool breeze teased them. The quiet rustle of leaves and the rhythmic song of the birds as they called to each other to bid one another a goodnight before settling in at dark were the only sounds in the otherwise still night. Lost in the symphony of nature, she allowed the serenity to soothe her troubled heart.

Just as she was beginning to find a measure of peace, an excited bark broke her reverie. Annabelle turned, her heart leaping as she recognized the familiar sound. Patches, the Duke of Thornwood's faithful hound, came bounding towards her, his caramel coat gleaming under the moonlight.

The sight of the joyful canine brought an unexpected warmth to her

heart. She knelt down, anticipating giving him a scratch behind the ears.

“Patches!” She laughed as the enthusiastic hound launched himself at her, his tail wagging so furiously it seemed it might fly off. She found herself unable to resist his infectious energy, her hands instinctively reaching out to ruffle his soft fur.

His tongue lolled out in a happy pant as he settled down, his large, adoring eyes meeting Annabelle's. She felt a chuckle rise in her throat, her worries from earlier momentarily forgotten.

“Patches, you lovable rogue,” she murmured affectionately, scratching behind his ears. His enthusiastic response elicited another round of laughter from her, a sound as pure as the babbling brook nearby.

For a moment, all was right in the world. The specter of Oswald's plans and the unnerving intrigue of the duke felt a million miles away. Her heart felt lighter, a soothing calm spreading within her. Annabelle knew the reprieve was temporary, but for now, she reveled in the serenity, allowing herself to be swept away in the simple joy of her unexpected companion.

Just as Annabelle was about to surrender herself fully to the peace that the meadow offered, a voice echoed from a little distance, shattering the tranquil air.

“Patches,” the voice called.

Annabelle froze, a chill running down her spine as she recognized the voice. She slowly turned, her heart hammering in her chest, and there he stood under the silvered canopy of the moon. The Duke of Thornwood.

In the fading light, he looked both powerful and remarkably gentle. His attire, less formal than their first encounter, made him look more approachable. His expression was slightly flustered, a stark contrast to his usual composed demeanor, but a warm smile graced his lips as he looked at her.

A peculiar sensation, the same that she had felt during their first encounter, fluttered in her chest. It was akin to a deer caught in the gaze of a predator, yet there was an undercurrent of excitement, something she couldn't quite identify. Her pulse quickened, and her breath hitched in her throat as he started to approach.

The duke made his way towards her, Patches frolicking joyously around him. His eyes were fixed on Annabelle, a certain warmth in his gaze that she hadn't noticed before. A part of her wanted to run, to escape the intense scrutiny of his gaze, but her feet seemed rooted to the ground.

“Miss Ludlow,” he greeted, tipping his hat slightly in a gentlemanly gesture, “I apologise if my companion here has caused any disturbance.”

“Oh no, not at all,” Annabelle quickly replied, her cheeks warming. “Patches and I are good friends.” She looked down at the dog, who wagged his tail, seemingly agreeing with her.

The duke's warm smile widened, reaching his eyes and making them sparkle in the moonlight. Seeing him in this light, without the pressures of society's formalities and expectations, Annabelle couldn't help but feel an unfamiliar pull towards him. This wasn't the intimidating figure she had heard of. This was a man who smiled fondly at his dog and wore his emotions openly.

Her heart fluttered uncomfortably in her chest, the unfamiliar sensation

growing stronger. This, she thought, was dangerous territory. Her mind began to race, trying to piece together the implications of this encounter.

But for now, under the oncoming twilight and the comforting presence of Patches, she couldn't help but feel her worries from earlier ebb away, replaced by a certain curiosity towards the duke. How was it that a blind duke make her feel so light and giddy, yet so terrified and flighty simultaneously?

Chapter Five

Adrian's heart pounded a brisk tempo against his chest as he sprinted across the verdant lawns of Ludlow Manor. His reliable and usually obedient companion, Patches, had taken a sudden, bounding charge towards Miss Annabelle Ludlow, making a beeline for her with his tongue lolling and tail wagging with reckless abandon.

Adrian couldn't help the sheepish grin that slowly spread across his face as he neared the scene. The normally composed and dignified Miss Ludlow was taken by surprise by the sudden onslaught of canine enthusiasm. A stray curl had come loose from her neatly arranged hair, framing her flushed and startled face. And in that moment, she looked less like the composed gentlewoman he was accustomed to, and more like a vivacious nymph, full of life and charm.

The embarrassment he felt was mixed with a strange sense of

amusement. Patches, a dog whose senses were usually so attuned to Adrian's needs, always had a rather inconvenient fondness for Miss Ludlow. It was as if the creature had a mind of his own when it came to her.

“Patches,” Adrian's voice rang out in a firm but loving tone as he caught up to his pet and began to reign him in. “My sincerest apologies, Miss Ludlow,” he began, trying to suppress his grin as he regarded her with a deep bow. “Patches here, it seems, has an insurmountable fondness for you.”

His words carried a note of warmth, a genuine softness that made his usual stern countenance seem almost gentle. Miss Ludlow, to his surprise, merely laughed. It was a sound that was pure and hearty, bubbling up from her and echoing through the summer air. To Adrian, it was more melodious than any finely tuned instrument, or any sound he'd ever heard. It made his heart flutter with an emotion he couldn't quite put his finger on.

“That is quite alright, Your Grace,” Miss Ludlow

replied, her eyes twinkling with unshed mirth. “I do find Patches to be quite delightful. And he has excellent taste, I must say.”

Her words were playful, causing the tension in his chest to melt away. The atmosphere between them, usually fraught with societal expectations and restraint, was replaced with an ease that he never expected. Once again, his loyal pet surprised him by how quickly he became attached to the young woman. Adrian felt a strange, strong desire to see her face. If it was as lovely as her spirit must have been to draw in Patches, Adrian felt sure he was missing out on an exquisite sight.

Adrian found himself smiling at the young woman, wishing he could clearly see the scene unfolding before him.

“He certainly seems to feel the same way about you,” he said. “Though I cannot attest to your taste.”

Miss Ludlow laughed, a sound that struck Adrian as if he was hearing it for the first time. That was foolish, of course, as he had heard it the day before. But something about the melodiousness of it caused his heart to skip that early evening. His smile widened, and he unconsciously took a step toward her.

“I cannot attest to my taste, either,” she said with another giggle. “But I

do adore Patches, even though this is just our second meeting.”

Adrian nodded slowly. It was unordinary enough for Patches to take to a total stranger. It was even more so that a stranger took to him. Apart from Henry, most people detested when the dog approached them. But Miss Ludlow seemed to truly enjoy his company.

Lost in their pleasant conversation and the soft radiance from the smile he could hear in her voice, Adrian couldn't help but wonder if perhaps Patches, with his uninhibited affections, had been right about Miss Ludlow all along.

There was another moment of silence, this one much less awkward than the previous ones. Miss Ludlow was the one to break it, though he could still hear her continued scratching on his beloved dog.

“It was such a beautiful afternoon today,” she said. “And it is turning into a lovely evening.”

With an audible gasp, Miss Ludlow stopped speaking. Adrian didn't need to ask what had startled her. He gave her a warm, hearty chuckle and

shook his head.

“Please, there is no need for that,” he said. “My vision affords me the slightest bits of sight. I can see pieces of colour on pretty days. And even though it’s not quite the same as having my full sight, the smells and sounds tell me just how wonderful a day it is. And you are correct. It has been a fantastic day.”

Miss Ludlow let out a sigh which Adrian could tell was relief.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I just do not wish to offend you.”

Adrian gave her a small bow, his heart skipping again. Her words were genuine. She wasn’t dancing around his disability because it made her uncomfortable. She was dancing around it because she thought it made him uncomfortable.

To prove to her, and perhaps, to himself, that that was not the case, he gave her another small smile, gesturing out over the meadow that conjoined their properties.

“I’ve always been enamored with Thornwood,” he began, his gaze drifting over the young woman’s face to rest on the distant, emerald expanse behind her. “Its sprawling landscapes have been a constant companion throughout my life. There’s a spot, near the lake,” he continued, his voice holding a tender note, “I used to escape to it for hours with a good book.”

His words were soft and laced with nostalgia, painting vivid imagery of rolling green pastures, towering oaks, and the tranquil lake that mirrored the cerulean sky. His heart clenched with the poignant recollections. Days when life was simpler, less entangled in the responsibilities that he had grown to shoulder. Each word he uttered seemed to transport him back to that serene spot, the faint rustle of leaves in the breeze, the subtle ripple of water as ducks paddled idly by.

As he talked, he expected the young lady to become bored or uncomfortable. But to his surprise, Miss Ludlow seemed captivated by his reminiscences. He couldn’t see her face beyond the vaguest outline of its shape. But he sensed that she never took her eyes off him. It was the first time that anyone apart from Henry and his aunt had looked directly at him for more than a single moment since his accident. And strangely, he didn’t feel uncomfortable. In fact, he almost felt at home.

When he finally finished speaking, the young woman's voice was soft, but filled with delight and excitement.

"I, too, share an ardour for books, Your Grace," she confessed. "The worlds they harbor, the emotions they stir within one's soul, there's an indescribable magic about them."

He was taken aback by her confession. Could it be that the cultured Miss Ludlow was an ardent bibliophile as he was? His heart fluttered with a newfound sense of camaraderie.

"Is that so?" he asked, struggling to contain a rush of excitement. "Who are your favourite authors?"

Miss Ludlow softly clapped her hands together, and he could feel her brilliant smile.

"I adore Mary Shelley," she said. "And I also enjoy the works of Jane Austen."

Adrian's mouth fell open. He, too, liked those authors. Jane Austen's books were a guilty pleasure of his, atypical of men in the ton. He respected her talent, and her ability to capture the accuracy of the time flawlessly.

"As do I," he said, amazed. "I am also a big fan of Bronte and Shakespeare."

Miss Ludlow gasped again, this time with sharp delight.

"I do, as well," she said. "I also love reading authors I've never heard of before. There are so many underrated authors out there who deserve much more acclaim than they currently receive."

Adrian nodded.

"I couldn't agree more," he said.

The sun was slowly setting, bathing the vast expanse of Thornwood in a vague ethereal glow. Yet, all Adrian could focus on was the woman in front of him, the woman who shared his deep-seated passion for literature, who valued the same landscapes that he held dear. In this moment, under the

dwindling light of day, he felt a connection with Miss Ludlow that was as beautiful and complex as one of the classics they both cherished.

An unexpected connection tethered him to Miss Annabelle Ludlow, as if an invisible thread had woven itself between their hearts. It was a realization that dawned on him gently, and yet held the force of a revelation.

He found himself enraptured in a world of two - two beings, two souls, from vastly different walks of life, but bound together by a shared affinity for literature and the captivating allure of Thornwood. This was an intersection he hadn't anticipated, a crossing of paths that revealed to him the intertwining of their worlds in ways he had never imagined.

As the sun began its descent, casting elongated shadows that stretched across the verdant meadow, a profound sense of contentment settled within him. It was time to part ways, he knew, though a part of him longed to stay, to continue to explore the depth of their shared interests.

“I must thank you, Miss Ludlow,” he began, his voice echoing sincerity. He bowed in respect, his gaze unwavering. “Our conversation today has been quite enlightening.”

The young woman was quiet for a moment. Adrian wished he could see her face. He pretended that he could see her facial expression. But the more he heard her voice, the more convinced he was that she was beautiful. When she spoke, he could hear her smile.

“It certainly was, Your Grace,” she said. “I find it delightful to encounter someone who loves the same authors that I do.”

Adrian grinned, dipping into a half bow.

“Likewise, Miss Ludlow,” he said. “I would be more than happy to lend you some books from my collection, if you’d like.”

This time, he didn’t need to guess what the young woman was doing when she went quiet. She gasped softly, clearly surprised by his offer.

“Oh, Your Grace,” she said, her voice soft and filled with awe. “That’s very kind of you. Are you sure you wouldn’t mind?”

Adrian shook his head, giving her another warm smile.

“Not at all,” he said. “It would be my pleasure. Would you like to meet with me here to retrieve them at about three o’clock tomorrow afternoon?”

Miss Ludlow didn’t pause at all that time.

“That sounds perfect, Your Grace,” she said. “Thank you so very much.”

Adrian nodded once more, still smiling. The warmth and sincerity in her voice as she thanked him were profoundly stirring. She accepted his offer with a grace that made his heart flutter. He hadn't experienced such an emotion in a long time, this euphoria, this anticipation that lifted his spirits.

“I look forward to it, Miss Ludlow,” he said, surprised at how true the words were.

“Very well,” she said, the smile still evident in her voice. “I shall see you then. Good evening, Your Grace.”

Adrian gave her a full bow, tipping his hat to her in a silly fashion and

eliciting one final giggle from her.

“Good evening to you, as well, Miss Ludlow,” he said.

As he listened to her disappear into the golden evening light, he couldn't help but feel an unusual sense of excitement for what the next day might bring. Thornwood and its serene landscapes, once merely a reminder of his solitary past, were now intertwined with the prospect of a delightful companionship.

Chapter Six

In the soft twilight, Annabelle reluctantly made her way home, her heart aflutter with a feeling akin to the wonder of the day's extraordinary happenings. The lingering radiance of the sun's kisses on the cobblestones mirrored the warmth of joy that emanated from her heart, its source a memory of a day spent in the company of the Duke of Thornwood.

His charm, his easy laughter, and his thoughtful conversation had conspired to carve a place in her heart. In all the time they spent talking in the meadow, she had forgotten about his blindness. For that brief time, he was a regular gentleman, a charming, enchanting, handsome duke, whose company she had enjoyed immensely. She touched her cheek gently, almost expecting to feel the heat of his gaze still lingering there. The timid connection that had sparked between them sent waves of anticipation coursing through her veins.

Her heart was in the clouds, her dreams painted in hues of excitement

as she approached the elegant Regency-era townhouse that was her home. The twinkling gas-lamps threw a welcoming light on the stone steps, a beacon guiding her back to the realm of normalcy. Yet, as she crossed the threshold, a shiver of foreboding ran down her spine, abruptly erasing the warmth from her thoughts.

In the drawing-room, by the hearth's dying embers, stood Oswald, his silhouette a dark reminder of her societal obligations. His demeanor was as frosty as the evening chill seeping in through the windowpanes. The usually inviting room seemed to carry a different aura in his presence, its usual charm dimmed.

Oswald turned his pale gaze toward her, his eyes glinting in the flickering firelight. "You're late, Annabelle," he said, his voice as jarring as the clatter of bare branches against the window. The harmony of the Duke's voice still echoed in her memory, and Oswald's harsh tone jarred her back to the unpleasant reality.

"Apologies, Uncle," she replied, her voice calm despite her quickened heartbeat. "I was detained longer than I expected." She removed her gloves, her gaze avoiding his as she replayed her afternoon with the duke in her

mind.

“Indeed?” Oswald’s skepticism was palpable. His disdain for frivolity and mirth, especially the sort inspired by young, eligible gentlemen, was well known to Annabelle. His displeasure cast a long, unyielding shadow that dampened her spirits.

Her excitement began to wane, extinguished by the cold truth of her circumstances. An unexpected wave of melancholy swept over her, leaving her thoughts as frostbitten as the dying roses outside. Her connection with the Duke, which a few moments ago had seemed so vibrant and full of promise, now seemed as fragile as a snowflake in the palm of a hand.

The warmth of the meadow, the lightness of the laughter they'd shared, the duke’s captivating, though unfocused, gaze - these memories seemed to belong to a different world, a world far from Oswald’s harsh reality. She held onto them, wrapping them tightly around her heart, knowing they were her only defense against the chill that threatened to consume her.

“Remember your place, Annabelle,” Oswald reminded her, his voice breaking into her reverie.

His words were a cold splash of water on her already dwindling dreams, yet they did not completely diminish her resolve. The bloom of hope the Duke had planted in her heart was strong enough to withstand the cold winds of Oswald's disapproval.

“I shall, uncle,” she replied, her voice steady. She lifted her chin, a silent pledge to herself. No matter the chill, she would keep the warmth of the day alive within her. She would nurture the connection she had found with the duke, in defiance of Oswald's cold reality. She was Annabelle, after all, and a little frost had never withered her spirit.

Annabelle stood rigid in the middle of the drawing-room, swallowed by the weight of Oswald's gaze. Before she could even attempt to voice a response to his initial admonishment, he launched into a diatribe. The stern words tumbled from his lips with such urgency that they seemed a river in flood, every criticism and rebuke a stone in its raging current.

“Our financial predicament is grave, Annabelle,” Oswald asserted, his voice reverberating through the silent room. The brocade drapes, her father's old maps, the porcelain figures that once delighted her childhood - all bore

mute witness to Oswald's reproach. "It's high time you start acting with some level of responsibility."

His words were daggers, and with each one he flung, Annabelle could feel her heart punctured anew. She tried to tell herself that Oswald was right, that their financial plight was as desperate as he described. Yet, her mind stubbornly revisited the meadow, where under the vast azure expanse, she had dared to dream of love and companionship.

"The focus of your attention should be securing a favorable match, not gallivanting around the countryside," Oswald's said, his words, as biting as a winter wind, cut through her thoughts. The venomous tone left her with the sour taste of betrayal. "Your frivolous pursuits," he continued, his nostrils flaring with every exhaled word, "are unbecoming of our precarious situation."

The flame of hope within her flickered but didn't extinguish. She clenched her hands into fists, her fingers seeking strength in the soft fabric of her gown. Oswald's insistence that marriage was the only viable option for her filled her heart with dread. It was as though he was dismissing the possibility of her finding love, declaring it as trivial as a child's fantasy.

She wanted to stand up to him as she thought about the advice she got from Penelope. But she knew it was better to just let her cruel uncle speak his mind and then console herself in the aftermath. Thus, she remained completely silent.

His bitter tirade continued, each word a harsh reminder of her role in the household since her parents' demise five years ago.

“Since taking you under my wing,” Oswald said, his voice heavy with resentment, “I've made sacrifices, financial and personal. I've tolerated your whims and fancies out of an ill-placed sense of obligation.”

A knot of anger formed in Annabelle's stomach, making her chest feel tight and her mouth dry. Oswald's claim of sacrifices made her seethe. Yes, he had provided her a home, but it was a home devoid of warmth, its every room echoing with the emptiness of her loss. Her gratitude towards him was marred by his refusal to understand her need for happiness, not just security.

His veiled eagerness to orchestrate her marriage was not lost on her. The subtle hint in his words made her cheeks flush with indignation. Would he trade her happiness for a filled coffer? Was his duty to her so burdensome

that he'd see her unhappily wed just to unburden himself?

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Oswald moved towards the door.

“I shall return late. Don't wait up, Annabelle,” he said with a sarcastic flare, a final blow to the evening's tranquility. As the door shut behind him, leaving her alone in the dim-lit drawing room, she heard the crunch of gravel beneath his boots fade, indicating his departure to the local pub. The silence left in his wake echoed ominously around her, amplifying her feelings of unease.

She sank into a chintz-upholstered armchair, her mind awash with her conversation with Oswald. The memories of the day's joy were marred by his words, leaving her with an emptiness that gnawed at her heart. Her gaze drifted to the window, where the stars twinkled innocently against the inky sky. They held no hint of the turmoil brewing inside her. The peaceful serenity of the night belied her inner storm, making her feel more alone.

A chilling gust of wind slipped through the slightly ajar window, sweeping Oswald's bitter accusations away, but leaving in their place a haunting sense of foreboding. Oswald's insinuations, his threats of

orchestrating her marriage, swirled around in her head like vultures around a dying prey.

The injustice of it all struck her sharply. A profound resentment bubbled within her as she considered their financial situation, which had been severely worsened by Oswald's reckless spending. She knew, as did the entire village, that her late father's once ample fortune had been systematically squandered by Oswald's penchant for drinking and gambling. His indulgent nights at the local pub, the endless games of Whist and Hazard had whittled away at the legacy her father had left her.

Her fingers traced the armrest of her chair, the damask fabric rough against her skin, a sensory testament to her rapidly dwindling lifestyle. How could Oswald berate her for seeking happiness when he himself was the architect of their misfortune?

The tears that had been threatening to spill finally welled up in her eyes, but she held them back. She wouldn't give Oswald the satisfaction of seeing her broken. She was her father's daughter, resilient and determined. His unjustified tirade had only hardened her resolve to find her own happiness. She would not be a victim of Oswald's follies.

Annabelle stood up, her determination casting a new light in her eyes. She wouldn't let Oswald's fear-mongering manipulate her. She would seek her own destiny, not the one he had so heartlessly mapped out for her. Her heart might be burdened with worry, but it was also brimming with newfound resolve. In the battle between her dreams and Oswald's harsh reality, she was now a combatant, not a casualty.

Annabelle quietly ascended the sweeping staircase, her hand barely touching the ornate balustrade as she made her way to the solace of her bedchamber. The heavy mahogany door closed behind her with a soft thud, sealing her away from the disturbing world she had left behind in the drawing-room. The familiar scent of lavender and old books greeted her, a balm to her frazzled nerves.

Her bedchamber, a sanctuary from the storm of her life, held an aura of serene tranquility. The moonlight filtering through the diaphanous curtains bathed the room in a soothing glow. Her eyes were drawn to the large painting of her parents that hung over the fireplace. The familiar sight of their loving expressions, forever captured in oil and canvas, offered her a glimmer of hope.

As she sank into the plush comfort of her canopied bed, the fabric curtains whispered soft tales of solace around her. The worries Oswald's words had planted seemed momentarily distant within these four walls. Her mind, now freed from his influence, started to drift toward a more pleasing image. The Duke of Thornwood.

The memories of their encounter in the meadow, which had been temporarily obscured by her conflict with Oswald, now returned with comforting clarity. Her thoughts wandered to the handsome gentleman with the mesmerizing blue eyes. The Duke, with his captivating combination of charm and kindness, had unwittingly etched himself in the canvas of her heart.

Her fingers traced the embroidered pattern on her duvet as she recalled his features. The way his eyes twinkled when he laughed, the chiseled jaw softened by his ready smile, the way his hair glinted in the sun, like spun gold.

Her heart fluttered at the memory of his voice. How his words had spun tales of places she had only dreamt of, his every phrase painting vivid

pictures in her mind. How he listened to her with genuine interest, treating her ideas with respect, not dismissing them as Oswald often did.

But it wasn't just his physical appeal that enchanted her. The duke's kind-hearted nature, his genuine respect for her opinions, and his ready laughter had drawn her in. He was a gentleman, not just in appearance but in spirit too. The stark contrast between his behavior and Oswald's was a balm to her wounded heart.

As she closed her eyes, his image was etched on her eyelids, a beacon of hope in the troubled seas of her thoughts. Despite the storm Oswald had stirred, her heart held onto the promise of her friendship with the Duke, his essence acting as an antidote to her uncertainties. She would hold onto this hope, for it was all that kept the chilling winds of her reality at bay.

Chapter Seven

The rays of the sun, like a warm caress, began to creep into the chambers of Adrian, the Duke of Thornwood. He blinked away the sleep that clung stubbornly to his lashes, his cerulean eyes adjusting to the morning light. As the veil of slumber lifted, he gradually became aware of the one particular anomaly.

Patches, his beloved dog, was not nestled in his usual place by the bed. The space by Adrian's side was devoid of the warm, comforting presence that usually greeted him in the morning. A slight furrow of worry momentarily etched itself on his handsome face. But his concern melted away as he contemplated the more plausible scenario.

A vision of Patches, tail wagging with unrestrained joy, chasing the frisky squirrels in the garden painted itself in Adrian's mind. He had never seen the dog. But his aunt had described him very well to him the day he

found him, and he could feel the thickness of his fur and the bulk of his size, so it was easy to imagine.

The thought elicited a gentle, unguarded smile that curved his lips, a rare sight that softened the severe lines of his aristocratic face. He could almost hear the ecstatic bark, see the frenzied scamper of paws over the dew-kissed grass. His heart warmed, the dog's innocent revelry allowing him a moment of tranquility in his otherwise rigid life of duty and decorum.

A soft knock broke the peaceful silence of the room, followed by the entry of Blake, his trusty valet. The man paused in his steps, his astute eyes noting the unusual lightness in his master's demeanor.

“Your Grace, you seem to be in rather good spirits this morning. To what do we owe this pleasant surprise?” Blake inquired with a cheeky grin in his voice, his words infusing the room with warmth and familiarity.

Adrian turned towards Blake, his smile unwavering. His voice, usually commanding, was softer, laced with an uncharacteristic warmth that made the servant blink in surprise.

“Oh, it's nothing that would concern you, Blake. Let's just say... life has its way of presenting delightful surprises.”

Blake chuckled, a light sound that echoed in the room.

“Indeed, Your Grace, indeed,” he said. “I have always said, it's the little things that keep the world spinning.”

As the valet went about helping Adrian into his suit, the duke's thoughts strayed back to the lively chase in the garden. His heart was lighter, his mood better. In that moment, he resolved to spend more mornings just like this one – taking joy in the small, endearing antics of his loyal companion. After all, even a duke needed moments of simple, unadorned happiness.

Adrian descended the grand staircase, the stately grace of his movements complemented by the sturdy tap of his cane echoing in the silence of the manor. He was met with the familiar scent of freshly brewed tea and warm pastries wafting from the drawing room, a comforting morning melody that welcomed him to the start of a new day.

Marjorie, his beloved aunt, sat at the breakfast table. The room seemed to brighten with her presence.

“Adrian, dear boy, come, join me,” she called, her voice weaving a familiar tapestry of love and comfort.

Sharing meals with Marjorie was often the highlight of Adrian’s days. Their conversations flowed easily, filled with the warmth and affection that only kin could understand. Adrian relished these moments, the taste of the food secondary to the delightful company of his aunt. He found solace in her words, her laughter, her wise counsel.

That morning, his delight for the day ahead seemed to be quite apparent. His aunt, after serving him a hearty plateful of what Adrian could smell was scrambled eggs, fried ham, buttered toasted bread and strawberries and placing it in his hands, patted his arm, the feel of her gaze curious and intense.

“I haven’t seen you smile like that in ages, darling,” she said. “What’s the occasion?”

Adrian, suddenly bashful, shrugged as he took a bite of eggs and ham.

“I am going to meet with Miss Ludlow today,” he said. “I offered to loan her some books from the library here. I do hope that’s all right with you.”

Marjorie laughed musically.

“Oh, of course, my dear,” she said. “I am so glad that you are making a friend.”

Adrian shrugged again, feeling his cheeks grow warm.

“I don’t know if I would call us friends yet, Aunt Marjorie,” he said. “But she is a very sweet woman, just as you said. And we share a love for books.”

His aunt patted his arm gently.

“Well, I am thrilled that you are looking forward to your visit with her,” she said. “Perhaps one day, we can invite her to join us for tea.”

Adrian couldn't help smiling at the idea. He had only just met the young woman. But he knew that he liked her seemingly genuine nature. And he didn't need more proof of how much Patches liked her.

"That is a fine idea," he said.

Following the meal, Adrian felt drawn to the quiet solace of the manor's extensive library. Guided by a map etched deep within his memory and the steady rhythm of his cane against the marble floor, he navigated the labyrinth of corridors until he stood before the towering shelves of parchment and ink.

Adrian's eyes lingered over the titles, each one a silent testament to the wealth of knowledge contained within the room. The scent of old books, like a heady perfume of history and wisdom, filled his senses.

With the assistance of a servant, Adrian began the careful selection of volumes. Each book he chose was a treasure, chosen with thought and care. His mind filled with thoughts of Miss Ludlow. The idea of sharing these literary gems with her ignited an ember of joy and anticipation within him.

Her delightful company, her sparkling wit and intelligence had captured his attention in a way that few things ever did.

As the servant left, Adrian allowed himself a moment to bask in the quiet tranquility of the library. He leaned on his cane, his heart fluttering like a hummingbird at the thought of his upcoming meeting with Miss Ludlow.

In the quiet solitude of the library, amidst the silent conversation of thousands of books, Adrian felt an unusual tranquility. His heart sang a soft melody, resonating with the thought of sharing the wonders of the written word with Miss Ludlow. It was an anticipation, a joy he had seldom experienced. Life, indeed, was brimming with delightful surprises.

As the cool shade of the manor gave way to the warm glow of the sun-kissed meadow, Adrian embarked on a leisurely walk, Patches prancing ahead with an exuberant stride. The sound of the hound bounding freely, tail wagging fervently, ignited a soft smile on his features.

The rhythm of nature's morning chorus harmonized with his footfalls, a familiar melody wafted towards him on the gentle breeze. The soft hum was a lullaby that teased his senses, coaxing his heart into a swift rhythm. Squinting

against the brilliance of the morning sun, he recognized the graceful silhouette in the distance. Miss Ludlow.

His heart fluttered, much like the wings of the butterflies that flitted among the wildflowers surrounding them. He imagined her looking as radiant as the day itself, her aura of quiet elegance rivaling the beauty of the meadow.

“Good day, Miss Ludlow,” he called, a hint of warmth creeping into his voice. His words rode the soft wind, travelling the distance between them.

“Your Grace,” she said. “Good day to you, as well.”

He extended the pile of books towards her, an offering filled with silent respect and admiration. Their hands brushed in the transaction, a fleeting moment that sent an electric jolt, a thrill of awareness, cascading through his veins. His senses heightened, the world became acutely defined - the sound of her laughter, the scent of her perfume, the way he could see faint outlines of tendrils as the wind flirted with her hair.

It was as if, even though he had never seen her, he could see her the

way he saw everything else since becoming blind. And as he had thought the previous day, in his mind's eye, she was absolutely beautiful.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said. She sounded breathless, and he wondered if she had felt the same jolt that he had. He desperately wanted to ask her. But he reminded himself that not only had he just met the young woman, but he was also a blind man.

He didn't want to risk frightening off the one friend he had managed to make since his accident by making things uncomfortable. He had quickly grown accustomed to hearing her laughter and the melody of her sweet voice. The idea that he could do something to risk never hearing it again was enough to silence his question.

Instead, he smiled at her, offering her his free arm.

“Would you like to join me for a stroll?” he asked.

Miss Ludlow paused, but in the faint milkiess of his vision and the bright light of the day, he could see movement from her side to her face. She must have put a hand to her mouth, and he wondered if she was blushing. If

she was as pretty as he imagined, a blush to her cheeks would be most endearing.

“That sounds wonderful, Your Grace,” she said.

Gently, she took his arm, and another jolt coursed through him. The young woman seemed to melt into him, and his heart skipped.

“Would you like me to carry those books for you?” he asked, suddenly remembering himself. In his excitement to see her, he had forgotten to put them in a basket or bag for her. He stopped, starting to pull away from her, but she patted his arm with a gentleness that made him shiver.

“No, Your Grace,” she said sweetly. “I’ve brought a bag. That’s very sweet of you to offer, though.”

Adrian grinned at her again, eating up the kind words.

“My pleasure, really,” he said.

They walked along, with Adrian feeling the way with his cane, which

was in his other hand. Patches ran not beside him, but beside Miss Ludlow, occasionally letting out a bark so that she would speak to him.

“Would you rather I carried you, sweet Patches?” she asked the animal.

An excited bark made Adrian burst out laughing. And a giggle from Miss Ludlow told Adrian that the dog might, indeed, be begging to be carried. She issued a small grunt, and a second later Adrian realized that she had, indeed, picked up the big dog.

“Are you happy now, darling?” she asked, gasping between her peals of laughter.

Adrian shook his head.

“Bad dog, Patches,” he said, trying to sound stern through his own laughter.

The only response he got from his dog was a big huff, which he felt as much as he heard. There were kissing sounds, and Adrian guessed that Miss Ludlow was kissing the dog’s fur. He smiled warmly at her, finding himself

won over by her as quickly as his dog had been.

“He is such a delight,” she said with much sincerity in her words. “I don’t believe I have ever seen such a sweet dog.”

Adrian grinned.

“As I said before, he isn’t usually this way with just anyone,” he said.

The young lady laughed grunting again as Adrian heard the sound of paws once more scuffling along in the grass.

“Well, I feel truly honoured to have made such a wonderful friend,” she said.

Every word she spoke, every heartfelt sentiment she shared, every enchanting smile she offered him, felt like a precious gift. He found himself drawn to her as a moth to a flame, the illumination of her intelligence casting a glow on his heart.

Adrian found himself more entwined in the enchantment of Miss

Ludlow. The day, once ordinary, now held a spark of magic. In the heart of the meadow, amidst shared laughter and thoughtful silences, he felt a stirring within his heart, a profound sentiment growing steadily like the wildflowers under the warmth of the sun.

The sweet tranquility of the meadow became a stage, a verdant canvas on which Adrian and Miss Ludlow painted vibrant strokes of conversation. Every word, every shared sentiment was like a treasure Adrian cradled in his heart. There was something profound about their shared moments, a connection that transcended the confines of social norms and personal limitations.

“I dare say,” Miss Ludlow said during a moment of comfortable silence. “The time I have spent with you out here has been some of the most enjoyable of my life. It is so beautiful out here. And your company is most pleasant and delightful.”

Adrian blushed, for the first time in ages. He gave her a crooked smile, looking at her with amazement.

“I feel the same, Miss Ludlow,” he said.

She paused, and he felt something shift within her slightly.

“I do feel terrible, however,” she said. “I can sit here and witness this beautiful day, see all the colours and the flowers and the little animals flying and scampering about. But that has been taken from you. I am deeply saddened by the pain you are experiencing.”

For once, Adrian felt seen - truly seen - not as the duke with a cane, but as a man. A man with passions, dreams, and a fervent love for literature. With Miss Ludlow, he wasn't confined by his disability or the physical limitations it imposed. He wasn't the shell marred by scars and dependent on a cane for support, but the vibrant soul within.

“It’s quite all right, Miss Ludlow,” he said. “I saw enough in the years before my blindness. And I know this land better than the back of my own hand. I paint my own pictures of the landscape, the animals, the weather. The true disappointment is when I can’t see the beauty of something new.”

He hadn’t realized that he had allowed his feelings toward her creep into his thoughts. The feelings seeped into his voice, and he heard her breath

catch. He gave her a quick smile, hoping that he hadn't made her feel awkward.

“But it is kind of you to be concerned,” he said. “Not many people in the ton seem to see me as human anymore. Let alone care about how my condition might make me feel. That was very thoughtful of you.”

The young woman sighed, and he felt relief. He hadn't made her uncomfortable. That was suddenly more important to him than anything.

“The ton members can be truly cruel, can they not?” she asked. “I'm sorry you have to go through such torment with them.”

Adrian shrugged. That very thing had tortured him for three years. But in that moment, there in the meadow with Miss Ludlow, he couldn't care less.

“As my aunt once said, I would rather not associate with cads who could behave in such a way.”

Miss Ludlow giggled, sending another shiver up his spine.

“I couldn’t agree more,” she said.

The invisible walls that often surrounded him, constructed by the judgment and sympathy of society, crumbled under the weight of their shared laughter and authentic interactions. The world didn't just revolve around him; it expanded, inviting him into its vibrant tapestry of experiences, unburdened and unhindered.

Adrian felt alive - truly alive. His heart pulsed with a new rhythm, a thrilling harmony that resonated with the genuine connection they shared. The shared stories, the laughter, the intellectual banter - all resonated with a beauty and depth he had seldom experienced.

Every word Miss Ludlow spoke, every shared silence, every heartwarming smile - all of it was a symphony he wished to forever bask in. There was an exhilarating freedom in these moments, a liberation from the shackles of societal expectations and judgment. His scars, the tangible remnants of past tribulations, no longer felt like a badge of perceived weakness. Instead, they were a testament to resilience, to the trials he had overcome.

With every passing moment, he found himself delving deeper into the connection they were building. His heart resonated with an inexplicable harmony, an enticing symphony that made him cherish the exhilarating feeling of being alive. His reality, often shaped by his disability, was beautifully rewritten under the warmth of Miss Ludlow's companionship.

As the sun painted the meadow with hues of gold, Adrian reveled in the authentic, unfiltered acceptance Miss Ludlow offered him. Their shared moments, filled with laughter, warmth, and intellectual discourse, became his haven. A haven where he was not a disabled Duke, but simply Adrian - the man with a love for literature, the man capable of affection, the man who was allowed to dream, and more importantly, the man who was understood, seen, and cherished.

Chapter Eight

Annabelle had never found it easy to leave the verdant cradle of the meadow behind. Its grassy arms held a soothing charm, the brilliant blue of the sky's canvas overhead competing for attention with the vibrant flower-studded carpet below. The sanctuary had been her haven and escape, a paradise on earth where she had spent the day absorbed in Adrian's delightful company.

As the sun descended beyond the horizon, its molten hues bled into the afternoon skies, tinting them in shades of melting copper and crimson - mirroring the warmth that had unfurled within her own heart. The shared passion for literature, their laughter and light-hearted banter echoed in her ears, a sweet serenade that had entwined their souls more closely.

The books Adrian had chosen for her with such consideration rested securely in the crook of her arm, a tangible embodiment of the affectionate

bond forming between them. Each volume was a testament to their shared moments of joy, their effervescent conversation floating on the currents of the warm summer breeze, the soft rustle of pages, and their hearts beating in shared rhythm. She clutched them closer, her heart swelling with gratitude for his thoughtful gesture.

But as she crossed the threshold of her home, the enchanting spell of the day snapped as if severed by a cruel blade. The comforting warmth drained away, replaced by an icy apprehension. Uncle Oswald awaited her in the entrance, his stern face a foreboding storm cloud in the calm sea of her blissful memories. His eyes, always dark and intense, seemed to have taken on a new shade of displeasure, his brows knitted together to form an intimidating furrow.

“Annabelle, where have you been?” his voice, harsh and demanding, stabbed the quietude of the hallway, each word a pointed accusation. She froze, her heart pounding in her chest as she faced his stern scrutiny. She felt as though she was walking a tightrope, every word a potential misstep that could plunge her into a bottomless abyss.

She clutched the books tighter, their comforting presence a lifeline. The

thought of admitting her afternoon spent with Adrian made her stomach churn with apprehension. But the truth was a sharp sword hanging over her head, threatening to slice through the thin veil of her peaceful existence.

How could she convey the magical connection they had formed? How could she make him understand that their shared love for literature had woven a spell around them, binding their hearts in an intricate dance of affection, respect, and perhaps, something more profound?

Words escaped her grasp, slipping through her fingers like wisps of smoke. She swallowed hard, mustering the strength to meet her uncle's piercing gaze. Fear constricted her heart, but the lingering enchantment of her time with Adrian provided her a spark of courage. She drew in a deep breath, ready to face the daunting storm that was Uncle Oswald.

Under the weight of Oswald's angry gaze, Annabelle felt as though she were a mere paper doll, her façade crumbling under the harsh blow of his ire. She forced her lips to curve into a semblance of a smile, a futile attempt to smooth the wrinkles of worry etched onto her uncle's brow.

“I... I was in the meadow, Uncle,” she stammered, her heart pounding

like a drum in her chest. She clung to the half-truth as though it were a lifebuoy, the image of the serene meadow and her favorite oak tree forming a buffer against her uncle's anger. "I... I lost track of time. I was reading," she added quickly, lifting the books slightly as if to corroborate her explanation.

Oswald's gaze lingered on her, the skepticism in his eyes challenging her wavering confidence. His hardened expression remained unyielding, like a marble statue—cold, imposing, and utterly intimidating. His silence was unnerving, stretching the seconds into eternity.

Then, quite unexpectedly, a smirk curled the corners of his lips, a sly expression that filled her with a new wave of dread.

"Well, you'll have plenty of time for reading soon," he said, his voice laced with unsettling nonchalance. "Lord Spencer will be joining us for dinner tomorrow."

The mention of Lord Spencer was akin to a brutal gust of wind snuffing out a candle flame. Her heart stuttered in her chest, the name echoing in her ears like a dreadful prophecy. She had crossed paths with the man on numerous occasions in the past. Every encounter had etched a deeper imprint

of his despicable character into her mind. She knew him to be a man of advanced years, his temperament as sour as his appearance.

A cold shudder raced down her spine at the thought of spending an entire evening in his company. She swallowed hard, her throat constricting as she wrestled with her rising panic. She had hoped to spend the following day basking in the enchanting memories of her time with Adrian, but the prospect of Lord Spencer's visit cast a shadow over her anticipation. His presence would only serve to taint the magical connection she had woven with Adrian in the meadow.

Feeling like a cornered animal, Annabelle tried to control the tremble in her voice.

“I look forward to meeting Lord Spencer, Uncle,” she managed to say, masking her anxiety behind a veil of polite indifference. But deep within, a storm of dread and despair was brewing, threatening to engulf her newfound happiness. There was nothing she looked forward to less than meeting the gentleman. She desperately wished she could flee to Penelope’s house, rather than continue to discuss the aging nobleman. Or the meadow, where she could lose herself in the duke’s beautiful blue eyes.

“All the better,” her uncle said, clearly not believing the fib she had just told. “I will expect you to be dressed in your best, and for you to be punctual.”

Annabelle nodded, averting her gaze so that her uncle didn't see the tears brimming in her eyes.

“Of course, Uncle,” she whispered.

Oswald chortled, shaking his head.

“That means no frolicking in that forsaken meadow tomorrow,” he said. “At all. It seems you forget what time means when you're out there. And I don't care if you encounter the king out there next time. You will start returning home at a reasonable hour from now on.”

Annabelle gritted her teeth. Sharp words of self-defense were dancing on her tongue. But she knew well not to let them get past her lips.

“Yes, Uncle,” she said.

She could feel Oswald's eyes on her, and she had to try hard to not start trembling like a leaf clinging tightly to a tree in autumn. With each tick of the hallway clock, Annabelle's heart hammered an echo. Her mind buzzed with the implication of her uncle's words, the ominous subtext sinking its claws into her.

A horrifying thought began to take shape, its silhouette monstrous and grotesque against the backdrop of her fears—could Oswald be considering a match between her and Lord Spencer?

The very notion of marrying Oswald's unpleasant associate was tantamount to a life sentence, a bleak future devoid of warmth and joy. It was as though she stood at the precipice of an oppressive abyss, chained to the edge by the iron shackles of social convention and Oswald's dominating authority.

She pictured a future with Lord Spencer—a mansion echoing with harsh words, devoid of laughter or tenderness, every day another link added to her chain of despair. The thought was suffocating, a cold and unfeeling cage threatening to lock away her dreams of love, to extinguish the spark of

hope Adrian had kindled within her heart.

Trapped in the confines of her circumstances, she felt like a bird ensnared within a gilded cage, its wings clipped, and spirit dampened. Oswald's dominance had tied her fate to a mast, the waves of his wishes threatening to drown her. She felt powerless against the mighty currents, her own desires reduced to mere whispers against his thunderous expectations.

As she looked at her stern-faced uncle, a twinge of desperation tugged at her heartstrings. The books in her arms suddenly felt like anchors, pulling her down into a sea of dread. The house, once her sanctuary, was now a fortress against her happiness, its high walls casting long, cruel shadows over her dreams.

“Uncle, I would be happy to attend the Season,” she blurted quickly. “If you wish for me to marry, I will seek a husband at the balls and parties.”

She regretted the words before she finished speaking them. Her uncle's face began to turn red, and his eyes narrowed.

“I am your guardian, Annabelle,” he said. “I will see to your

matchmaking if I see fit. For the time being, you will do as I say and have dinner with Lord Spencer tomorrow.”

Annabelle nodded, swallowing.

“Yes, Uncle,” she repeated.

Each tick of the clock seemed to mirror the throbbing pulse of her anxiety, the passage of time playing a sinister symphony of her impending doom. Each second brought her closer to the dark abyss of uncertainty, her fate hanging in the balance as the shadow of Lord Spencer loomed large and menacing in her life. As the realization sank in, her heart cried out in silent despair, yearning for an escape from the grim fate that awaited her.

“Is that all?” she asked at last.

Oswald looked her over, clearly not impressed with her audacity. But he waved his hand, shrugging.

“I suppose,” he said gruffly. “Be on time tomorrow night. No leaving the mansion. And dress as though you’re happy to dine with Lord Spencer.”

Because you will be happy to do so, and grateful for the opportunity. Now, go.”

Annabelle wasted no time. She fled up the stairs, locking herself in her chambers. Then, and only then, did she let the tears flow. What was becoming of her life?

Chapter Nine

The grand dining hall of Thornwood Manor was adorned with flickering candlelight, casting a warm glow on the finely set table. Adrian, dressed in his elegant evening attire, stood near the fireplace, the crackling flames adding a touch of coziness to the room. The tantalizing aroma of roasted meat and freshly baked bread filled the air, as servants bustled about, ensuring everything was prepared to perfection.

The anticipation of Henry's arrival hung in the air, adding an undercurrent of excitement to the atmosphere. Adrian's heart raced, for he knew that this evening held the potential to bring about a profound change in his life. As he adjusted the folds of his cravat nervously, Marjorie, his beloved aunt, approached him, her eyes filled with curiosity.

“Adrian, my dear, it has been quite some time since we last spoke,” Marjorie said, her voice tinged with a gentle lilt. “Tell me, what have you

been occupying yourself with lately?”

Adrian hesitated, momentarily caught off guard by his aunt’s question. His mind raced, searching for an appropriate response. Should he reveal the encounters with Annabelle, or should he choose discretion and keep their connection hidden? Ultimately, his desire for honesty won over, and he mustered the courage to speak his truth.

“I must confess, aunt Marjorie,” Adrian began, his voice soft yet earnest. “I have had the pleasure of spending a good amount of time with Miss Ludlow as of late.”

Marjorie's brows raised slightly, a smile playing at the corners of her lips. She leaned in attentively, her eyes glimmering with curiosity.

“I am so glad the two of you are getting on,” she said. “I knew she was a sweet young lady. Pray tell, Nephew, what is it about this Miss Ludlow that has put such a smile on your face?”

Adrian took a deep breath, feeling a mix of trepidation and excitement.

“She and I share a deep love for literature, as I believe I have mentioned,” he explained, carefully omitting the burgeoning affection that was beginning to bloom within him. “Our conversations have been a delightful exchange of thoughts and ideas since I loaned her some books, and I find her intellect to be truly enchanting.”

Marjorie's smile widened, a subtle sparkle glinting in her eyes. Adrian couldn't help but wonder about the hidden meaning behind her expression. Did she suspect his feelings for Annabelle? Was there something more to her reaction? The thoughts swirled in his mind, leaving him bewildered and intrigued.

“Has she met Patches?” his aunt asked.

Adrian couldn't keep himself from beaming as he thought about Miss Ludlow's interactions with his loyal dog. He nodded, his smile growing so wide his cheeks ached.

“She has,” he said. “Before she and I formally met, in fact. He seems to be really taken with her, I must say.” And so am I, he added silently.

His aunt gave a surprised, delighted scoff.

“Sweet Patches is very discerning of new people,” she said, echoing Adrian’s first thoughts when he remained unabashedly friendly with Miss Ludlow for the first time.

“He is,” he said, uttering a small sigh. “The two of them made fast friends, to my utter shock.” He chuckled, shaking his head affectionately. “I dare say that they enjoy each other’s company more than they enjoy mine.”

Adrian and his aunt shared a laugh. He didn’t know if Miss Ludlow enjoyed his company as much as he enjoyed hers. But her laugh was light, genuine, and infectious, and her words were always kind, without judgment or malice.

“And what about you?” Marjorie asked, her voice carrying a subtle hint of... something.

Adrian tilted his head, looking in his aunt’s direction.

“What about me, what, Aunt?” he asked.

Marjorie giggled.

“How do you feel about the young lady?” she asked.

Adrian felt the blush creep in before he could stop it. He shrugged, feeling his grin return despite himself.

“She is a lovely woman,” he said, trying his best not to sound as dreamy as he felt. “Besides her love of literature and Patches, she enjoys the meadow between our two homes as much as I do.” He paused, recalling something she had once said. “And she seems to dislike the uptightness of society, just as I do.”

Marjorie was silent for a moment, but Adrian could practically feel her considering his words. He wondered what she thought about his sudden friendship with Miss Ludlow. It was, after all, out of character for him to make an effort to make friends.

“Do you think she’s a young lady that you might consider marrying?” she asked.

Adrian's mouth fell open, and he stared dumbly at his aunt. He had been avoiding the subject for years, and his heart skipped as the idea entered his mind right then. The notion of entertaining matrimony, of binding a woman to a blind man, overwhelmed him. Especially a woman as sweet and kind as Miss Ludlow. He had never clearly seen her face. But her laughter gave him a good idea of what her smile must look like. And to think of doing something that would turn that smile into an eternal expression of resigned sadness was too much for Adrian.

Before he could voice a single one of his whirling thoughts, the butler approached, announcing the arrival of Henry. The sound of footsteps echoed through the hall, growing louder with each passing moment. Adrian's heart skipped a beat, his focus momentarily diverted from Marjorie's enigmatic smile.

“Henry,” Adrian said, rising from his seat. “Please, come join us.”

Henry made his way to the table and took the seat beside Adrian. The servants immediately served the three of them, and there was a moment of napkin placement and silverware arrangement. Then, Henry clapped Adrian

on the back, and Adrian could feel his friend's smile.

“Good evening, Adrian,” he said. “Thank you for having me for dinner.”

Adrian grinned at his friend.

“It is our pleasure,” he said. “How have you been since we last spoke?”

Henry chuckled, clapping his hands together.

“I have been thinking about the upcoming fair,” he said. “I think I will actually do a little something to actually participate in it this year.”

Marjorie murmured approvingly from her end of the dining table.

“Is that so?” she asked. “What is it that you'll be doing?”

Adrian kept his gaze fixed on his friend, intrigued. Henry cleared his throat, clearly for dramatic effect. Adrian held his breath, waiting for his friend to answer.

“Well, my dear friends,” Henry declared with a proud smile, “I shall be participating in the highly anticipated horse race. Prepare to witness my prowess as a rider.”

Marjorie and Adrian applauded. Adrian’s heart dropped at yet another mention of horseback riding, but he would not let his renewed unease ruin his friend’s announcement. He knew that Henry was proud of his equestrian skills. He would be nothing but thrilled and supportive for his friend.

“That’s terrific,” Adrian said. “You can count on my support.”

Marjorie clapped her hands together, clearly pleased with Adrian’s response.

“And mine, as well, dear Henry,” she said.

As the evening progressed, Adrian found his thoughts of Henry’s horse racing event dwindling and the weight of Marjorie's earlier words returning to his mind. He couldn't help but steal glances at her across the table, feeling her gaze on him more than once. He would have never considered the notion of

marrying Miss Ludlow on his own. But now that the thought was in his mind, it wouldn't leave.

As the night drew to a close, he longed for the solitude of his bedchamber, where he could confront the weighty thoughts that burdened his heart. When the meal ended, Marjorie bade Henry and Adrian a good night, kissing her nephew softly on the cheek. Her gaze lingered on him a second longer than normal, and her words came rushing back to him. Would you consider marrying Miss Ludlow?

Adrian prepared to escort Henry to the door. Normally, he would have invited his friend to stay and enjoy some port with him. But his thoughts had left him weary, and he ached for the comfort of his bed.

Henry must have noticed. He put a hand on Adrian's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Is everything all right, Adrian?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Adrian gave his friend a tight smile. He wasn't ready to further discuss

anything regarding the idea of marrying Miss Ludlow right then. So, he simply nodded, giving his arms an exaggerated stretch of fatigue.

“Of course, Henry,” he said. “I had a fitful night last night, and I feel especially tired this evening.”

Henry squeezed once more before releasing Adrian’s shoulder. There was a pause, and Adrian feared that his friend wouldn’t be convinced. But then, Henry yawned, chuckling at himself as he did.

“Forgive me,” he said as the yawn finished. “It seems I’m in the same boat.”

Adrian leaned on his cane, patting his friend on the back with his free hand.

“Then, off with you,” he said. “You will need plenty of rest for your practice before the fair. Not that you need any practice at all.”

Henry was silent, but Adrian could practically hear his grin.

“I do need my beauty sleep, though,” he said playfully.

Adrian chuckled.

“Ten years of sleep could not make you beautiful,” he teased.

Henry cackled.

“Says you, my good man,” he retorted lightheartedly.

Adrian bid Henry farewell, then he closed the door to the manor.

His steps were slow and deliberate as he ascended the grand staircase, each creak of the wooden boards echoing the heaviness within him. The flickering candlelight cast elongated shadows along the corridor, mirroring the uncertainty that danced within his mind.

As he settled into the sanctuary of his bedchamber, the voices of the evening's conversations still lingered, mingling with the relentless beating of his own heart. His aunt's words echoed in his ears, each syllable carrying the weight of tradition, duty, and the responsibility that came with his dukedom.

of Thornwood.

He knew that marriage was not just about him. It encompassed the dukedom of Thornwood, secured the Thornwood legacy passed down to him from his forefathers. And his aunt's words had struck a chord deep within him, unraveling a tapestry of conflicting emotions. The image of Miss Ludlow, her vibrant spirit and infectious laughter, surfaced in his thoughts once more, intertwining with the realization that his choices held consequences far beyond his own desires.

Restless, Adrian paced the room, his mind ablaze with the unending battle between love and duty. The prospect of marrying for the sake of his dukedom felt stifling, a surrender of his heart's deepest longings. Yet, the undeniable truth remained—the future of Thornwood relied upon him, upon his ability to secure a suitable alliance.

The flickering candle flames cast shifting shadows upon the ornate furnishings, mirroring the turmoil that churned within Adrian's heart. Uncertainty gnawed at his resolve, each decision carrying the weight of generations before him. Should he forsake his own desires in pursuit of what was expected, or dare he follow the path of his heart, risking the unraveling

of Thornwood's legacy? Or, what if Miss Ludlow was the key to his very desires, and he was too blind to see it?

Chapter Ten

The following morning dawned bright and clear, casting a golden glow across the elegant dining room as Annabelle settled herself at the breakfast table. The fragrance of freshly brewed tea mingled with the aroma of freshly baked scones, usually a delightful start to her day. Yet, a heavy unease settled upon her, clouding her thoughts, and stealing away her appetite.

Oswald joined her at the table, his usual bitter demeanor replaced by an odd smile and a chipper posture. Annabelle couldn't help but notice the peculiar shift in his behavior, his overly chipper conversation effort that seemed to conceal something far more significant. Her instincts, ever sharp, sent alarm bells ringing in her mind.

“Good morning, Annabelle,” Oswald greeted her with a twinkle in his eyes that chilled her. “I trust you slept well?”

Annabelle nodded, although her mind was preoccupied with the events of the previous evening.

“Well enough,” she said, surprised by the question. Her uncle hadn’t taken an interest in her night’s sleep since he moved there. What was he up to?

“I will not be here much of the day,” he said, dismissing her answer. “I have an important meeting at the pub today.”

Annabelle nodded, the knot of unease growing in her stomach. She would have normally reveled in the notion that he would be gone, and that she could go enjoy the meadow for a couple hours with Penelope as without worrying about returning home to his disapproving scowl. But the cryptic mention of an “important meeting” at the village pub had left her mind spinning, and she couldn’t find the same excitement she normally would. Could this be the fateful encounter with Lord Spencer? She could only pray that it wasn’t.

“Very well,” she said simply, trying to seem as though she didn’t have a care in the world regarding whatever he was up to. But as she felt his gaze

on her, with that unknown glimmer in his eyes, an unsettling shiver ran down her spine. It was all she could do to not flee the room and hide in her chambers.

As Oswald poured himself a cup of coffee, he glanced at Annabelle, his gaze lingering a moment longer than necessary. The glimmer remained in his eyes, and a smirk twitched at the corners of his mouth.

“Annabelle,” Oswald began, his voice low and serious. “I must warn you, the events that lie ahead hold great significance. The world we know may change irrevocably.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his words. What did he mean? Was Lord Spencer's introduction into her life to be accompanied by some unforeseen calamity? Annabelle's mind raced, her emotions in a tangled web of hope and fear.

She wanted to ask her uncle what all his mysterious behavior was about. But part of her knew she didn't want the answer. She also knew that her uncle likely wouldn't answer her. She couldn't feign an appetite, and her uncle didn't seem to notice that she wasn't eating. And when he rose slowly

from his seat, she breathed an audible sigh of relief.

Yearning for a respite from the oppressive atmosphere of the grand house, Annabelle eagerly sought solace in the company of her dear friend Penelope. Their meeting had been arranged, according to a letter from Penelope and delivered secretly by Sarah, Annabelle's lady's maid. Oswald didn't approve of Penelope. He didn't approve of anything Annabelle did. But as Annabelle stepped out into the sun-drenched garden, a sense of freedom washed over her.

Penelope stood there, radiant as ever, her vibrant gown matching the blooming flowers that surrounded them. Annabelle's worries momentarily faded away, replaced by the comforting presence of her companion. They greeted each other with warm smiles and linked arms, ready to embark on a leisurely stroll through the lush countryside.

“Oh, how glad I am to see you, Penny,” she said, embracing her friend tightly.

Penelope pulled back, giving her a concerned look.

“What’s wrong, darling?” she asked.

Annabelle quickly explained her uncle’s strange behavior that morning, and the things he said to her. Her friend listened patiently, nodding along as she spoke.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “I wonder what he could be up to.”

Annabelle sighed, shrugging.

“My thoughts precisely,” she said.

Penelope smiled brightly, linking her arm through Annabelle’s.

“Well, let’s see if I can help keep your mind off that,” she said.

Annabelle smiled gratefully at her friend.

“That sounds perfect,” she said.

As they meandered along the cobblestone path, their conversation

flowed effortlessly, like a babbling brook cascading over smooth stones. Penelope's effervescent personality and quick wit always brought a lightness to Annabelle's heart, and today was no exception. They spoke of trivial matters, shared laughter, and reveled in the simple joy of each other's company.

Then, as if a spark had ignited within her, Penelope's voice grew animated. She spoke of the upcoming village summer fair, her eyes alight with excitement and her gestures illustrating her enthusiasm. Annabelle couldn't help but be drawn into Penelope's infectious energy.

“Oh, Annabelle, you simply must come to the fair!” Penelope exclaimed, her voice brimming with anticipation. “There will be colourful stalls filled with delectable treats, lively music floating through the air, and games that promise endless delight. It's the highlight of the summer, a chance for merriment and laughter!”

Annabelle's worries momentarily took a backseat as she listened to Penelope's vivid descriptions. The mere thought of such festivities ignited a spark of joy within her. The oppressive weight that had settled upon her heart seemed to lighten, replaced by a glimmer of excitement and the promise of a

much-needed diversion.

“That sounds lovely,” she said. “Oh, I wonder if Oswald would notice if I was gone long enough to attend with you.”

Penelope gave Annabelle an impish grin.

“I will just come calling for you,” she asked, winking. You can slip out the servant’s entrance while I have him distracted. Then, meet me in the meadow, and we will go from there.”

Annabelle laughed.

“Perfect,” she said.

As they continued their leisurely walk, Annabelle found herself swept up in Penelope's contagious enthusiasm. They discussed the fair in great detail, imagining the various attractions and envisioning the laughter that would fill the air. It was a welcome respite from the mounting concerns that had plagued her thoughts.

In that moment, Annabelle realized the importance of such simple pleasures in life. Amidst the grandeur and complexities of their world, it was the shared moments of joy, the carefree laughter, that truly mattered. The fair became a symbol of hope, a beacon of light cutting through the shadows that threatened to engulf her.

The sun-drenched countryside gradually transformed into the quaint village, with its cobbled streets and charming cottages. Annabelle and Penelope strolled through the heart of the bustling town, taking in the sights and sounds that surrounded them. The buildings, adorned with colorful flower boxes, exuded a rustic charm that evoked a sense of warmth and simplicity.

As they walked, their conversation carried them forward, their voices floating amidst the hum of activity. But their cheerful mood was interrupted when Annabelle's gaze fell upon a familiar face—Cynthia, the viscount's wife, accompanied by her daughter Sophia. Both ladies exuded an air of superiority that instantly irked Annabelle, casting a shadow over her previous joy.

Cynthia and Sophia exchanged haughty glances, their disdainful

expressions and deliberate snubs leaving a bitter taste in Annabelle's mouth. It was as if they believed themselves to be the epitome of social standing, entitled to look down upon those they deemed beneath them. The weight of their judgment settled upon Annabelle's shoulders, tainting the otherwise idyllic day.

“I see you are without escorts, girls,” the viscountess said, a poisoned threat lacing the dripping honey in her voice. “Sophia and I, of course, know that you are upstanding young ladies. But others in the village might not be so... astute.”

Sophia gave the two women a snide smile.

“Does your uncle know that you have left your quarters unattended?” she asked.

Annabelle stuck up her chin, determined not to let her fear show.

“Penelope and I serve as chaperone for one another,” she said, thankful that she sounded surer than she felt. “Everyone knows that two ladies together, such as a mother and daughter, is perfectly acceptable.”

At this, Cynthia blanched, clearly catching onto the implications. She realized too late that she couldn't threaten or frighten Annabelle and Penelope, when she and her daughter were unescorted, as well.

Sophia, however, was undeterred. She stepped closer, tilting her head upward.

“Did you say that your uncle knows you are about?” she asked again, raising her voice. “I do believe that he is very strict with you, as any caring guardian would of his charge.”

People were starting to look their way, and Annabelle's cheeks flushed.

Penelope, however, was cool and unflustered by the women. She pulled Annabelle close, looking at her and completely ignoring the two horrible women in front of them.

“Come, darling,” she said, raising her own voice as she tugged Annabelle away from the viscountess and her snobby daughter. “The cufflinks Oswald requested are sure to be this way. Let us leave these two

ladies alone, as they were when they approached us.”

Cynthia and her daughter gasped as Penelope led Annabelle away from them. Seeking solace from the gossiping whispers that seemed to follow them like a cloud, Annabelle and Penelope quickened their pace, their footsteps leading them towards the welcoming haven of the haberdashery. The tiny shop beckoned with its colorful displays of ribbons, lace, and delicate accessories, providing a refuge from the judgmental gazes and whispered conversations that followed their encounter with the viscountess and her spoiled, big-mouthed daughter.

As they stepped through the door, the atmosphere shifted. The tinkling of a bell announced their arrival, and the friendly smile of the shopkeeper greeted them warmly. The air inside was fragrant with the scent of freshly cut fabric, and the soft lighting cast a cozy glow upon the merchandise that lined the shelves.

Annabelle breathed a sigh of relief, feeling a weight lifted from her shoulders as she immersed herself in the familiar comfort of the haberdashery. Here, amidst the delicate trinkets and vibrant fabrics, she could momentarily escape the expectations and superiority of the outside world.

She ran her fingers lightly over the intricate lace, marveling at the craftsmanship. The textures and colors sparked her imagination, igniting a sense of creativity and possibility. In this sanctuary, she could be herself, unburdened by the judgmental glances and snubs that had plagued her earlier.

Penelope, sensing her friend's need for respite, stepped closer and gently squeezed Annabelle's hand. Their unspoken bond provided solace and strength, anchoring them amidst the storm of social expectations. Together, they explored the haberdashery, their laughter mingling with the rustling of fabrics and the soft murmur of conversation.

“Oh, Annabelle,” Penelope gushed suddenly, rushing to the end of one long shelf and plucking a shimmering pink satin swatch of fabric. Her eyes were teeming with excitement, and she draped the swatch over her head. “Isn’t this just divine?”

Annabelle giggled.

“Haven’t you got enough pink dresses?” Annabelle teased, gesturing to the pink silk dress embroidered with dark pink pearls that adorned Penelope’s

delicate, petite figure.

Penelope looked at Annabelle with pretend mortification.

“ You speak in a manner that is sacrilegious, Annabelle,” she said, clutching the swatch to her bosom. “To think there is any such thing as enough pink is simply ghastly.”

Annabelle doubled over at her friend’s theatrical display, the remaining tension leaving her body. She shook her head as she righted herself, wiping at her eyes.

“I should be punished, I suppose,” she said, still giggling.

Penelope put her free hand on her, her lip set in a straight line that trembled while her eyes sparkled with laughter.

“Indeed,” she said. “And your punishment shall be to endure more shopping in this lovely store with me.”

Annabelle sighed in feigned resignation.

“So be it,” she said as both women laughed.

In the cozy confines of the haberdashery, Annabelle and Penelope meandered through the aisles, their fingers delicately brushing against various fabrics and trimmings. Penelope's cheerful banter served as a comforting backdrop, her lively anecdotes providing a respite from the whirlwind of thoughts that consumed Annabelle's mind.

Yet, amidst the colorful displays and Penelope's laughter, the Duke's presence persistently invaded Annabelle's consciousness. She couldn't help but wonder—had he gone for a leisurely walk with Patches, their loyal canine companion? What might he be doing at this very moment? The image of his unseeing eyes, squinting in concentration as he listened intently, remained etched in her mind.

Try as she might to focus on the task at hand—choosing ribbons for a new bonnet or inspecting the fine lace—her thoughts inevitably gravitated towards the duke. There was an inexplicable pull, an invisible thread connecting them that refused to be ignored. Her heart longed for his presence, yearned to be in his company once again.

Annabelle's fingers traced the intricate patterns of a delicate embroidery, her mind drifting to the moments they had shared. The way his voice had resonated in her ears, the warmth of his hand as it had brushed against hers—it all felt both distant and achingly close. The memory of his deep, resonant laughter stirred a longing within her, a hunger for more of those stolen moments that had ignited a flame within her soul.

Penelope's voice broke through Annabelle's reverie, and she turned her attention back to her friend, forcing a smile to her lips. Penelope's infectious energy was a balm to her troubled thoughts, but deep within her heart, the duke's presence loomed large, filling every crevice and corner.

“Oh, Annabelle, look at this exquisite lace!” Penelope exclaimed, holding up a delicate piece for her inspection. “Would it not make the most enchanting addition to your gown for the upcoming ball?”

Annabelle nodded absentmindedly.

“Indeed,” she said, her gaze fixed on the lace but her thoughts drifting back to the Duke of Thornwood. The image of his strong jawline, his piercing

gaze that seemed to see beyond the surface, fueled her yearning. She longed to unravel the mysteries that lay behind those unseeing eyes, to delve deeper into the depths of his soul.

As the minutes slipped away, Annabelle's internal struggle intensified. The rational part of her urged caution, reminding her of the complexities and challenges that lay ahead. Yet, the fire within her burned brighter, refusing to be quelled. The allure of the duke, his enigmatic presence, held an undeniable hold over her heart.

With a sigh, Annabelle turned her attention back to the fabric in front of her. She chose a length of delicate silk, its softness gliding through her fingers, a tactile reminder of the emotions that swirled within her. The task of selecting ribbons and trimmings became a way to distract herself, a means to momentarily set aside the thoughts of the Duke that threatened to consume her.

Chapter Eleven

Adrian strolled leisurely through the sun-dappled pathways of Thornwood, the familiar scent of earth and blossoms filling his senses. Henry rode beside him atop his majestic black stallion. Adrian started their outing feeling embarrassed that he still refused to get on a horse just yet. But Henry didn't say a word about it. Before long, Adrian forgot his discomfort.

“Do you remember how we used to seek out the mud puddles here after a rain?” he asked.

Adrian laughed heartily.

“I do,” he said. “If we weren't jumping in them, we were pushing each other into them.”

Henry joined in his laughter.

“Or we were grabbing handfuls and painting each other with them,” he said.

Adrian shook his head, still laughing.

“My governess used to scold me fiercely for that,” he said. “But she loved me, and I think she always knew that I would do it again the next chance I got the chance.”

Henry nodded.

“And we did, until we were nearly grown,” he said.

The sound of their laughter echoed through the tranquil woods, reminiscent of the carefree days they had spent together.

As they wandered deeper into the woods, Adrian's mind wandered back to their shared memories, the mischief they had concocted and the adventures they had embarked upon. How time had flown since those days, like a fleeting summer breeze. The weight of responsibilities and societal

expectations had settled upon their shoulders, but moments like these provided a brief respite from the pressures of adulthood.

Henry's voice interrupted Adrian's reverie, tinged with regret.

“I must apologise, Adrian,” he said, his tone growing serious. “I didn't mean to bring up the past in such a thoughtless manner. I know how difficult it has been for you.”

Adrian turned toward his friend, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips.

“There is no need for apologies, Henry,” he replied, his tone warm and understanding. “You have always been honest with me, and I value that above all else. Your concern is genuine, and even though I hesitate to get back on a horse, I do know that I must someday.”

Henry was silent for a moment, and Adrian imagined he was contemplating what to say. The tension that had briefly hung between them dissolved like mist under the morning sun. Their bond, forged in the fires of shared experiences, remained unbreakable. Adrian reached out, stretching his

arm upward and placing a comforting hand on Henry's arm.

“You need not worry,” he assured his friend, his voice gentle and reassuring. “I have come to terms with my injury, and though I may never ride again, it does not define me. I am still the same person you knew as a child, and that person will always cherish our memories together.”

Henry's body relaxed, and Adrian could hear the smile when he spoke.

“I'm grateful to have you in my life, Adrian,” he confessed, his voice filled with sincerity. “I cannot imagine my days without your friendship. No matter what challenges lie ahead, we will face them together.”

Adrian's heart swelled with affection for his friend, the depth of their connection running deeper than any obstacle.

“And together we shall overcome them,” he replied, his voice steady with conviction. “For we are bound not only by the threads of the past but by the unbreakable ties of friendship and understanding.”

They continued their leisurely stroll through the whispering woods, the

sunlight filtering through the canopy above. Adrian's spirits lifted, his burdens momentarily forgotten in the company of a friend who knew him better than anyone else. Adrian truly was thankful for his friend. If it hadn't been for Henry and Marjorie, Adrian would have surely lost his humanity in the years following his accident.

The tranquil atmosphere of Thornwood was suddenly punctuated by the sweet sound of feminine laughter, floating through the air like a melody. Adrian's heart skipped a beat, his senses instantly alert to the presence of someone new. Patches, his loyal companion, darted ahead with a playful bark, leading the way as if guided by an invisible thread.

Though Adrian's sight painted the world in blurred outlines, one silhouette stood out unmistakably against the verdant backdrop. It was Miss Ludlow, a vision of grace and elegance. Her delicate features and vibrant spirit had captivated Adrian from the moment he had first laid eyes on her. His pulse quickened, and a mix of anticipation and nervousness filled his being.

Henry, ever observant, dismounted from his horse with practiced ease. Adrian followed suit, his hand lingering on the saddle for support. As they

approached Miss Ludlow, Adrian's heart swelled with a mingling of hope and uncertainty.

“Good day, ladies,” Henry greeted with a warm smile, his voice filled with genuine pleasure. “What a delightful surprise to find you here amidst the enchantment of Thornwood.”

Miss Ludlow's laughter sparkled like sunlight on a rippling brook. “Good day,” she said. “I must confess, it’s a happy coincidence that we run into people out here today. It was a spontaneous decision we made to explore these woods, but the serenity they hold is simply enthralling.”

Adrian bowed, listening intently, his heart racing with both eagerness and trepidation. He smiled at her, paying no mind to the second woman who accompanied her.

“Good day, Miss Ludlow,” he said. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Miss Ludlow turned her gaze toward Adrian, her eyes alight with contentment.

“And Your Grace, it is wonderful to see you again, as well,” she said, her voice warm and inviting. “Allow me to introduce my dear friend, Miss Penelope Brown.”

Adrian then briefly turned his attention to the other woman. She, like Miss Ludlow, was little more than a blur. But the ruffle of skirts told him that she curtseyed, so he bowed again in kind.

“Delighted to meet you, Your Grace,” she said.

Adrian didn't realize he had tensed, preparing for judgment in her voice or demeanor, until he heard a similar friendly warmth in her tone that he heard from Miss Ludlow during their first meeting.

“Likewise, Miss Brown,” he said. “And this is my friend, Lord Henry Harrington.”

There was more rustling of skirts and, beside him, Henry bowed.

“Pleasure to make the acquaintance of two lovely ladies,” he said.

Miss Brown giggled, and Adrian felt eyes on him. He turned toward the blur that he knew to be Miss Ludlow and gave her a smile.

“Imagine our luck, encountering such handsome gentlemen on such a lovely day,” Miss Brown said.

Adrian smirked, this time at the interaction between Miss Brown and Henry. If he didn’t know better, he would think that it sounded a little like flirting.

He turned back to Miss Ludlow, his grin returning.

“Would you two like to join us on our stroll?” he asked.

There was a pause during which Adrian assumed the two women were sharing glances. Then, Miss Ludlow cleared her throat, while Miss Brown giggled again.

“We’d be delighted,” she said.

With the introductions finished, a sense of possibility filled the air.

Adrian's mind whirled with questions and curiosity. His mind went back to his aunt's spontaneous mention of a marriage to Miss Ludlow. It seemed as though such a meeting on the very same day was something delivered to him from fate. Would this meeting pave the way for something more? Were the threads of fate weaving together their destinies in this idyllic corner of Thornwood?

With Patches frolicking nearby and the company of Miss Ludlow and Miss Brown, Adrian felt a glimmer of hope igniting within his chest. The path ahead, though obscured by blurred outlines, seemed to hold the promise of unexpected connections and whispered romances. In this enchanted moment, Adrian allowed himself to believe in the power of chance encounters and the potential for a love that transcended the limitations of his sight.

The air around them was filled with lighthearted banter and shared laughter, intertwining like a delicate tapestry. Adrian found himself swept up in the lively conversation, his heart buoyed by the warmth of companionship. As they walked along the tree-lined path, the anticipation of the village summer fair danced in their words, each person adding their own touch of excitement.

“I wonder if Mrs. Beasel will be selling her famous pies this year,” Miss Ludlow pondered aloud. “She won the pie tasting contest, and rightfully so. I understand that she will not compete this year, as to give some of the new young contestants a chance to really shine. She truly is a dear, that woman.”

Miss Brown gasped in the way that young, excited ladies did.

“I certainly hope so,” she said. “And I hope that the fortune teller returns, as well.”

Beside him, Miss Ludlow nodded eagerly.

“I hope they have musicians as wonderful as they did last year,” she said dreamily. “Their numbers were played so exquisitely that it was impossible not to be swept away by the melody. Even dancing alone amidst the vibrant tents and the joyful laughter of fellow fair-goers, moving to their music felt like a glimpse of heaven.”

Miss Ludlow’s voice, vibrant and animated, painted vivid images of the

fair in Adrian's mind. He could almost see the colorful stalls and hear the merry tunes of the musicians. Her enthusiasm was infectious, igniting a spark of anticipation within him. The fair, a much-anticipated event in the village, seemed to come alive through her words.

He listened intently to the stories and anecdotes, his heart swelling with genuine delight. It was as if time stood still, allowing him to fully immerse himself in the joys of the present. The worries and uncertainties that often plagued his mind were momentarily set aside, replaced by the carefree laughter and bright conversation that filled the air.

“Do you remember the young man who got tangled up in a long string of ribbons?” Miss Brown asked, bursting into a fit of giggles. “He was so excited, singing to himself about delighting his love with them, and the breeze caught them just right and they tangled around his feet.”

Miss Ludlow giggled, quickly stifling herself.

“Oh, I feel terrible for laughing at his misfortune,” she said, sounding suddenly sheepish. “But he looked up at us with the grin of a young man in love and said, “I would take a million falls just like that if it pleased my

darling Glenda.”

Henry laughed heartily at the story.

“Well, if he was happy, then there is no reason to fret,” he said. “A fool in love probably still thought he was walking on clouds.”

Miss Brown giggled hysterically at Henry’s quip.

“He certainly was,” she said. “Annabelle and I helped him up, and he carried on, dirty pants and all, still grinning madly.”

Adrian gazed toward Miss Ludlow, imagining her eyes sparkling with excitement and her smile radiant. She had been kind enough to help a fallen man off the ground. Somehow, that didn’t surprise him. But it made him admire her even more.

In that moment, he couldn't help but admire her zest for life and the way she effortlessly brought joy to those around her. Her presence, like a ray of sunshine, illuminated his world, reminding him of the beauty that could be found amidst life's challenges.

Adrian's world, once dimmed by the limitations of his disability, was now enlivened by the vibrant interactions and the people who graced his life, most notably the captivating Miss Ludlow. Her spirit and warmth radiated like a beacon, penetrating his once secluded existence with a renewed sense of connection and possibility.

The once-distant world that had seemed lost to him was gradually taking shape again, painted with the brushstrokes of friendship, anticipation, and the compelling presence of Miss Ludlow herself. Her laughter and sparkling conversations filled his heart with joy, dispelling the shadows that had threatened to consume him.

As they discussed the upcoming village summer fair, Adrian's anticipation soared. The prospect of exploring the fairgrounds, surrounded by the bustling energy and cheerful ambiance, filled him with a childlike excitement. The fair, once an event he observed from a distance, now beckoned to him with a promise of newfound enchantment.

But it was Miss Ludlow herself who stirred the deepest emotions within him. Her genuine kindness and the sparks of understanding that passed

between them awakened a long-dormant desire for companionship and connection. Adrian couldn't help but be captivated by her presence, her every word and gesture leaving an indelible mark on his heart. For the first time since his accident, he had hope.

Chapter Twelve

The quartet walked along, chattering away merrily. However, Annabelle noticed that the Duke of Thornwood said very little. His expression was pleasant enough. But he seemed to be deeply lost in thought. Had encountering Penelope and her detracted him from other plans of his for the day? He didn't seem angry. In fact, he seemed content. But it wasn't like him to remain so quiet.

On the other hand, Lord Harrington and Penelope could hardly go a second without speaking. They gushed about their favorite fair activities, many of which they had in common, and they were laughing every minute or so. They seemed to be getting on very well, and it felt as though the four of them had been friends for years.

As the topic of the upcoming village summer fair danced in the air, the Duke turned to Annabelle, his eyes sparkling with genuine interest.

“Miss Ludlow,” he began, his voice a velvety melody, “I’ve been meaning to ask you about the books I lent you. Have you had the chance to peruse them?”

A smile blossomed on Annabelle's lips, a mixture of pleasure and mild embarrassment. She lowered her gaze momentarily before meeting Adrian's expectant eyes.

“Oh, I must admit the decision has proven quite difficult,” she confessed. “Each book holds its own allure, and I find myself torn between their captivating tales.”

In truth, Annabelle's inner turmoil extended beyond the choice of literature. Oswald's unsettling presence lingered in her mind, casting a shadow upon her every thought. The way his piercing eyes bore into her, filled with an enigmatic mix of desire and menace, had left her unable to fully immerse herself in the books she held dear. It was a sentiment she could not voice, for fear of tarnishing the idyllic atmosphere of the summer fair preparations.

Whether it was merely for the sake of continuing the conversation, or because he sensed the sudden shift in her mood, the duke furrowed his brow.

“You have not had the chance to read any of them, have you?” he asked. His tone was not accusatory. Rather, he sounded surprised and, if she wasn’t mistaken, a little concerned.

With a small sigh, she continued, her voice tinged with a hint of wistfulness.

“The truth is that while I long to be engrossed in their pages, my uncle has kept me... quite busy.” She bit her lip, silencing herself. Not only was she unwilling to put her burdens on the duke, but she was also uncomfortable speaking about her troubles in the presence of a man she had just met only moments before.

The Duke looked sympathetic, and he gave her a kind smile.

“I understand,” he said. “Sometimes, duty and obligation get in the way of curling up with a good book. Please, take all the time you need. I am in no hurry to get back the books.”

Annabelle felt weak with relief. Just when she thought the duke couldn't surprise her any more with his warmth and consideration, he proved her wrong.

"I heard there will be a play performed at the fair," Penelope said, her voice teeming with excitement. "I cannot remember which play, but apparently there will be some poetry reciting in it."

Both Annabelle and the duke whipped their heads to look at her.

"Is that so?" the Duke asked. "Well, that sounds absolutely delightful."

Annabelle smiled brightly at her friend.

"It certainly does," she said. "I wouldn't mind hearing some good poetry being read."

From there, the conversation gracefully shifted, transitioning from the upcoming summer fair to the realm of literature and poetry. Annabelle found herself engaged in a spirited discussion about the famous poets of their time,

her eyes sparkling with genuine enthusiasm.

The duke touched her gently on the arm, and her heart skipped as she looked at him.

“Who are your favourite poets?” he asked.

Annabelle blushed. She had never met anyone, apart from Penelope, who cared anything for any of her interests. Particularly when it came to literature, and certainly not a gentleman. Men in the ton didn't care for well-read women. They wanted ladies who sang and danced and played music, and who looked pretty on their arm at social events. She found the duke's interest in her love for literature refreshing.

“I adore John Milton,” she said shyly. “Especially his poem, Paradise Lost. William Wordsworth is very talented, as well. He and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I believe it was, published a fantastic collection called Lyrical Ballads.” She paused, biting her lip. “And Shakespeare himself dabbled in poetry a little. I have found his poems to be utterly enthralling.”

The duke laughed heartily, smoothly moving closer to Annabelle.

“I agree, particularly about Shakespeare,” he said. “He was a man of so many talents in the art of writing. I wish I could write half as well as him. I also enjoyed Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, as well as John Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*, and Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*.”

As soon as the Duke of Thornwood spoke the name of the last poem, his face paled.

“Oh, heavens,” he said, his white cheeks developing red patches on them. “Forgive me. That was perhaps one I should have kept to myself...”

“I agree with you about *The Rape of the Lock*,” Annabelle said quickly, giving the duke a warm smile, even though he couldn’t see it. “It was, in my humble opinion, one of the best satirical poems ever written.”

Lord Thornwood visibly relaxed, his smile returning once more.

“Wasn’t it?” he asked. “I don’t believe I even understood satire until I read that poem.”

Annabelle laughed and nodded.

“I feel the same,” she said.

As they continued talking, she found herself amazed that the duke shared in her passion for the written word. His deep knowledge and appreciation for poetry mirrored her own, forging a connection between them that they were yet to comprehend. As they delved into the intricate nuances of beloved verses and the profound emotions they evoked, Annabelle's heart stirred with a sense of exhilaration.

She marveled at the way his eyes lit up when he spoke, his voice resonating with an unwavering passion for the art of poetry. On the other side of her, she could vaguely hear Penelope and Lord Harrington conversing amongst themselves. Their voices melded seamlessly as they regaled each other with tales of horses and equestrian adventures. Their mutual enthusiasm shone through, their laughter and spirited gestures capturing the attention of those nearby.

She felt bad for ignoring her friend. But she couldn't tear herself away from the spell under which the Duke of Thornwood seemed to place her

when he spoke. Annabelle's gaze wandered momentarily, catching a glimpse of Penelope's radiant smile and Henry's animated gestures. She couldn't help but feel a pang of admiration for the effortless harmony between them. They seemed to possess an understanding that surpassed mere words, a connection that echoed through their laughter and shared interests.

In that moment, Annabelle realized how easily love could blossom from the simplest of passions, from the shared joys and excitement of life's pursuits. It was, of course, foolish, and presumptuous to say that her friend and the Duke's friend shared any kind of love. But they were bonding easily and seemed to be enjoying each other's company. It was easy to see how strong bonds formed. And as she observed Penelope and Henry, a flicker of longing danced within her own heart, a yearning for a connection as profound and effortless as theirs.

But like a dark storm cloud looming on the horizon, Oswald's arrival on horseback shattered the tranquility that had settled upon the gathering. Annabelle's heart sank as her eyes fell upon him, his presence disrupting the harmony they had been reveling in. His eyes gleamed with an unyielding determination, his lips curling into a sneer that sent a shiver down Annabelle's spine.

With an air of harshness, Oswald addressed her, his words laced with a venomous edge.

“Annabelle,” he said sharply. “I have returned. I would like to speak with you.”

Flustered, Annabelle curtsayed, trying to gather herself.

“You are earlier than I expected,” she said, floundering terribly for words. “Uncle, I’d like you to meet...”

“I would speak with you at once,” he said, utterly dismissing the duke and the others in her company.

The mirth in Annabelle's heart evaporated, replaced by a growing unease. She braced herself for what was to come, the anticipation heavy in the air.

In response, the Duke’s eyes narrowed as Oswald's dismissive attitude sliced through the light-hearted atmosphere like a sharpened blade. The

disdain Oswald displayed towards Adrian betrayed his lack of respect, his very presence casting a shadow over their joyous gathering.

The duke, sensing the tension, stepped forward with unwavering resolve.

“Sir, I must insist that you show some respect,” he declared, his voice steady but laced with an underlying challenge. “Miss Ludlow is free to decide what she does, and it is not for you to interfere.”

Oswald's sneer deepened, his eyes narrowing as he directed his wrath towards Adrian.

“You speak out of turn, Your Grace,” he spat, his words filled with malice. “This is a matter between Annabelle and me. She is my niece, my charge, and she will accompany me back home, as I demand.”

But the duke's protests echoed with an unyielding determination. “I will not stand by and watch you exert control over Miss Ludlow,” he declared, his voice resonating with a mixture of concern and protectiveness. “She is not a possession to be claimed, but a woman of her own free will. I implore you,

sir, reconsider your demands. We will escort her home safely as soon as she is ready, I assure you.”

Annabelle's heart swelled with gratitude for Adrian's unwavering support, but her own emotions were a tumultuous storm raging within her. She knew that to defy Oswald openly would invite further chaos into her life, and yet she longed to break free from the suffocating grasp he held over her.

As the standoff between Oswald and the Duke escalated, Annabelle's mind raced, searching for a way to navigate this treacherous path. Oswald's gaze was murderous on the duke, and for one terrifying moment, Annabelle thought that Oswald might dismount from his horse and take to fighting with the Duke of Thornwood.

“It's all right, your Grace,” Annabelle said, giving the duke a pleading look that she knew he would not see. “I will go with my uncle. There is no sense in this encounter ruining the day for the rest of you.”

She heard Penelope mutter something under her breath, and she saw the duke step forward. But before anything more could be said, she pulled herself atop her uncle's horse, sitting sidesaddle behind him and holding onto the

sides of the saddle. She knew she was in a precarious situation. But she also knew that her uncle wouldn't dare bring her harm, not when people had just witnessed his abrasiveness with her.

The journey back home was enveloped in a suffocating silence, the weight of Annabelle's heart bearing down upon her like an insurmountable burden. The horse trudged along, each passing moment only adding to the heaviness that filled the air. She dared not look at Oswald, for even from behind him she could feel nothing but cold indifference and the looming wrath he was capable of unleashing.

As they arrived at the familiar gates of her home, a mansion that had once been a sanctuary, Annabelle's stomach churned with unease. She knew the significance of this moment, the unraveling of her carefully woven dreams and desires. A sense of dread settled within her, constricting her chest, and robbing her of the air she so desperately sought.

Oswald barely let the front door close behind them before he whirled to face Annabelle.

“You think yourself clever, Annabelle,” he said. “But you are not as

clever as you think you are by half. Your days of wandering off to suit your fancy are at an end. I have met with Lord Spencer, and an arrangement has been made for him to marry you.”

The words struck Annabelle like a physical blow, a torrent of emotions crashing against her fragile resolve. Lord Spencer, a man she barely knew, had been chosen as her match, her fate sealed with the callous decision of those who sought to control her life.

“Uncle, no,” she breathed, feeling as though the entryway of the manor was suddenly devoid of lifegiving air.

Oswald smirked.

“Overjoyed, I see?” he taunted. “Good. For Lord Spencer has gone on a trip. Upon his return, you shall be married at once.”

Annabelle's world shattered in that moment, the ground beneath her feet giving way to a chasm of despair. The walls she had erected to protect her heart from such a fate crumbled, leaving her exposed and vulnerable. The realization of her powerlessness hit her with a force she couldn't comprehend,

rendering her speechless. Wordlessly, Annabelle pushed past her uncle, fleeing from his presence. His maniacal laughter followed her up the staircase and down the now seemingly endless hallway.

Retreating to the solitude of her bedchamber, Annabelle sought solace in the familiar comfort of her surroundings. The room that had once been her refuge now bore witness to her anguish. Tears streamed down her face, her sobs muffled by the pillow that absorbed her despair. Each wrenching cry echoed the shattered dreams and shattered heart that lay before her.

In the depths of her agony, Annabelle grappled with a multitude of emotions. Fear gripped her tightly, its icy fingers squeezing her heart. The unknown future that awaited her, bound to a man she barely knew, filled her with a sense of foreboding. Desperation clawed at her, the realization that her agency had been stripped away, leaving her at the mercy of those who sought to dictate her fate.

Chapter Thirteen

The days that followed the incident with Miss Ludlow and Oswald weighed heavily on Adrian's heart. He thought about what she had said, about how her uncle had kept her too busy for her to have time to read the books he loaned her. Was he routinely cruel to her? Did he expect her to forego any hobbies or solaces, in lieu of whatever he wanted? After the confrontation he had witnessed, he guessed there was something more that she had not yet told him.

As he wandered the paths of Thornwood, his faithful companion Patches trotting loyally by his side, he yearned for a chance encounter with Annabelle. The meadows, however, remained empty of her presence, leaving behind a lingering silence that filled the air with melancholy.

With each step, Adrian's mind replayed the events that had unfolded between them. The way Annabelle's eyes widened in shock when Oswald

revealed his intentions, the fear that flashed across her delicate features. He recalled how he had come to her aid, desperately shielding her from harm, and the profound relief he had felt when she was finally safe. But alongside that relief, a pang of sorrow tugged at his soul.

“Where are you, Miss Ludlow?” Adrian whispered softly, his voice carried away by the rustling breeze. Patches, sensing his master's longing, let out a low whimper and nuzzled against Adrian's leg, offering what comfort he could.

Adrian's heart strangely ached for her presence. He had grown accustomed to their spirited conversations and the lightness she brought to his days. Her absence felt like a void, an emptiness that stretched across the meadows and tangled within the roots of Thornwood's ancient trees.

As he neared the spot where he first encountered Miss Ludlow, Adrian's gaze swept across the grassy expanse, searching for any sign of her. The wildflowers that once danced in the wind seemed listless, as if mourning her absence too. Each blade of grass whispered her name, a gentle plea for her return. He couldn't admit it to himself, not directly. But some part of his heart recognized that he had grown incredibly fond of her.

His footsteps grew slower, his hope waning with every passing moment. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows upon the landscape. Adrian paused, his heart heavy with longing, and sank to the ground, his eyes fixed on the spot where they had first met.

“Miss Ludlow,” he murmured, his voice barely audible. “Please, let our paths cross again. I long for our conversations about literature.” I long to hear that musical laugh of yours...

The memories of their shared laughter and stolen glances flooded his mind. He could almost hear her melodic laughter carried by the wind, and he wished that he could see the sparkle in her eyes as they engaged in lively debates. He closed his own eyes, imagining the way hers looked when she smiled. In his imagination, she had big, sweet brown eyes that rivaled pools of melted milk chocolate.

A deep sigh escaped his lips as Adrian's thoughts turned inward. He questioned his own actions, wondering if he had done enough to protect her. The weight of guilt settled upon his shoulders, intertwining with his longing. Perhaps he had failed her, unable to shield her from the cruelty of the world.

It was a silly notion, he knew, as they were only friends. And yet, he couldn't help feeling like that.

Patches, sensing his master's distress, nestled his head against Adrian's knee, offering solace and a silent reminder of loyalty. Adrian's hand instinctively found its way to Patches' soft fur, finding comfort in the dog's unwavering presence. The sweet, loyal dog had fallen in love with Miss Ludlow long before Adrian had had sense enough to appreciate her presence. And now, he wondered if he missed the young lady as his master did.

The next morning, Adrian reluctantly joined his aunt for breakfast in the elegant dining room. His heart remained heavy with guilt. The vibrant colors of the room seemed dull, and even the delicate China plates before him held no allure. His thoughts were consumed by the memory of Miss Ludlow's hurt voice, the pain embedded into every syllable she spoke.

Aunt Marjorie, ever the vivacious and perceptive woman, carried on with her lively chatter, oblivious to the storm brewing within Adrian. Her voice danced through the air, mingling with the clinking of silverware and the

soft crackling of the fireplace, but the guilt remained an uninvited guest at the table. He knew he was still being foolish. But he couldn't help thinking that there was more he could have done to help her.

As though finally sensing Adrian's turmoil, Aunt Marjorie paused mid-sentence, her sharp eyes narrowing as she studied her nephew's distant expression. She set her teacup down delicately, her gaze filled with concern.

"Adrian, my darling," she began gently, her voice laced with compassion. "You seem preoccupied. Is something troubling you?"

Adrian's eyes met his aunt's, their depths reflecting the turmoil within his soul. He took a deep breath, his voice heavy with regret.

"It's Miss Ludlow, Aunt," he said. "I witnessed the most horrendous spectacle between her and her uncle. He spoke atrociously to her. To me, as well, though I am very much accustomed to it. I tried to defend her, but... I'm afraid that I failed. And I feel terrible for having done so."

Marjorie made a knowing sound, reaching out to take Adrian's hand.

“Ah, my dear Adrian,” she said. “Perhaps, in your guilt, lies the answer you seek to this turbulence you feel.”

Confusion knitted Adrian's brow as he regarded his aunt, searching for understanding within her words.

“What do you mean, Aunt Marjorie?” he asked. “How can my guilt be the answer? I feel as though I failed her. If that is the answer, then I can never live with myself.”

His aunt leaned forward, her voice carrying a note of sincerity.

“Because if you care for Annabelle as deeply as your guilt suggests, perhaps it is time to consider a more permanent solution,” she said, her voice taking on the same cryptic tone it had when she suggested marriage to him before Henry came to dinner. This time, however, the idea struck him with a mix of surprise and possibility, as if a hidden door had suddenly been unlocked before him.

“But, Aunt Marjorie,” he stammered, his voice barely above a whisper. “Is it not too soon? Would she even entertain the thought?” He paused, the

most obvious thought in his mind spilling forth like a ruptured fountain.

“Would she ever wish to marry a man in my... condition?”

Marjorie's smile was evident as it radiated toward him.

“Love often finds its way into hearts unexpectedly, Adrian,” she said. “And sometimes, when faced with adversity, it is the very thing that can heal the deepest wounds. If you truly care for Annabelle, my boy, consider this: a marriage built on love and understanding can bring solace to both of your hearts.”

Adrian sat in stunned silence, his mind whirling with newfound possibilities. Could marrying Miss Ludlow be the path to mending their fractured connection, to protect her from further harm? The thought both excited and frightened him, for he knew that such a decision held immense consequences.

Wishing he could see his aunt's knowing eyes, Adrian's determination flickered to life. If marrying her was a way to shield her from pain and build a future together, he would give it earnest consideration. The guilt that had weighed upon him began to transform into a flicker of hope, a glimmer of

possibility that warmed his troubled heart.

With gratitude in his voice, Adrian replied.

“Thank you, Aunt Marjorie,” he said. “Your words have given me much to ponder. I shall carefully consider the path before me, for Annabelle's sake and my own.”

Aunt Marjorie nodded, her expression filled with pride and affection.

“Listen to your heart, darling,” she said. “May it guide you towards the happiness you both deserve.”

Their conversation lingered in the air, mingling with the aroma of freshly brewed tea. Adrian knew that a decision of such magnitude required careful thought, but the seed of possibility had been planted. As he finished his breakfast, his thoughts began to shift, imagining a future where he and Miss Ludlow stood united, their love an unbreakable bond. Was it possible? He did not know. But he couldn't afford not to entertain it. Especially if he wanted to help Miss Ludlow.

Her words, like a lingering melody, echoed in Adrian's mind long after the breakfast had concluded. A marriage of convenience—a notion both tempting and terrifying. The mere thought of binding his life to Annabelle's stirred a tumultuous sea of emotions within him. Could she ever see him, a man with partial blindness, as a suitable partner?

Doubts and insecurities gnawed at Adrian's resolve, casting shadows upon the flickering flame of hope. The image of Annabelle's radiant smile danced before him, juxtaposed with the reality of his own limitations. Would she truly consider him as a husband, or was he merely indulging in a flight of fancy, allowing his longing to cloud his judgment?

Shaking his head to dispel the swirling doubts, Adrian determinedly rose from his seat, leaving the comforting confines of his aunt's home. The fresh air beckoned him, and he yearned for the solace of Thornwood's meadows, where his thoughts could wander freely.

Patches, ever the faithful companion, bounded ahead, his tail wagging with unbridled enthusiasm. Adrian followed, his footsteps a resolute echo against the path's cobblestones. The meadow, usually a bastion of tranquility, held a certain allure today—a balm for his conflicted heart.

Yet, as Adrian stepped into the familiar serenity of the meadow, a subtle shift in the atmosphere disrupted the usual calm. A faint sound of pitiful sobbing reached his ears, carried by the wind like a melancholic lullaby. His heart clenched, and he quickened his pace, desperate to uncover the source of such sorrow.

With each step, the cries grew louder, piercing through the silence of the meadow. Adrian's pulse quickened, his concern mounting as he followed the sound. Patches, sensing his master's distress, trotted beside him, his eyes filled with a mix of curiosity and empathy.

The meadow's verdant expanse unfolded before them, its beauty marred by the presence of sorrow. And there, nestled beneath the sheltering embrace of an ancient oak, sat a figure—a woman, her shoulders shaking with each tearful gasp. Even with his lame vision and the angle at which the woman sat, he recognized immediately who it was.

Adrian's heart went out to her, compassion welling within him. He approached cautiously, careful not to startle Miss Ludlow. Her sobs tore at his soul, and he couldn't find words. His own eyes stung with tears, catching

him quite off guard. He wouldn't have expected to be so affected by her sadness. But as the pain of her distress seeped into his mind, his heart ached in a way it hadn't in as long as he could remember.

He sensed it when she lifted her head and looked toward him. She tried to stifle her sobs, but her sniffles belied her ability to cease her tears. He stood staring at her for a long moment, and he tried to think of something to say. How should he handle the situation before him? Should he ask her what was troubling her, or should he leave her in peace?

Chapter Fourteen

In the comforting solitude of the meadow, Annabelle sought solace from the overwhelming weight of Oswald's intentions. Hidden away from prying eyes, she allowed her tears to flow freely, her heart burdened by the heavy realization that her fate may lie in the hands of a man she hardly knew.

As she sat on a moss-covered rock, her shoulders shook with silent sobs. The meadow, usually a place of tranquility, mirrored the turbulence within her soul. The gentle rustling of leaves and the soft whisper of the wind seemed to echo her melancholy.

Lost in her sorrow, Annabelle barely noticed the approach of Patches until his joyful barks pierced through the veil of her reverie. Startled, she looked up to see her loyal dog bounding towards her, tail wagging with unrestrained delight. Patches, with his unruly fur and bright, attentive eyes, seemed unaffected by the world's troubles.

“Oh, Patches,” she murmured, her voice laced with both gratitude and sadness. “You're the only one who truly understands me, aren't you?” She extended her hand, allowing him to nuzzle against her palm, finding comfort in his warm presence.

But even as she said the words, she didn't think that was true. Patches' master, the Duke, seemed to understand her very well. And there was never an interaction with him that left her with anything other than pleasant thoughts and wonderful memories. She knew she would have to return the books soon, as it was clear that she wouldn't have time to read them. And since Oswald planned to marry her off to Lord Spencer, she would likely never get to see the duke again.

Annabelle wiped away her tears with the back of her hand, still clutching Patches by her side. The tender warmth of his affection provided a brief respite from her overwhelming emotions. She found herself envying the simplicity of his existence—the way he lived in the present moment, unaffected by the intricacies of human affairs.

Gazing into Patches' deep, soulful eyes, Annabelle couldn't help but

wonder if she, too, could find a way to rise above her circumstances. She yearned for the strength to confront Oswald, to challenge his intentions, and to assert her own desires.

The thought of facing him, however, sent a shiver down her spine. She knew that she couldn't rely on Patches alone. She had to gather her own resolve, find her voice amidst the tangled web of societal expectations and personal desires.

“I won't let him dictate my future,” she whispered fiercely, her determination slowly overpowering her despair. “I am not a pawn to be moved at his whim. I will fight for my own happiness.”

With resolve battling for defeat in her heart, Annabelle tilted her head, her tear-streaked face lifted towards the sky. The meadow, once suffused with sorrow, now held the promise of her inner strength. If only I could grasp it, she thought, fresh tears filling her eyes. She took a deep breath, feeling the crisp air filling her lungs, and whispered a heartfelt plea to the heavens above.

As much as she wanted to stand firm against Oswald, she knew she

stood little chance of succeeding. He was her guardian, after all. The only way she could get out of the arrangement of marrying Lord Spencer would be if she had another suitor who asked for her hand. But who would ever do such a thing?

Moments later, the familiar sound of the duke's approaching footsteps reached Annabelle's ears, causing her heart to flutter anxiously. She had sought solace in the meadow, but now the arrival of the man she trusted and admired brought a mix of relief and trepidation. She wondered if he could sense the turmoil within her if her distress was as palpable to him as it was to herself.

As the Duke drew nearer, his footsteps growing louder and more distinct, Annabelle took a deep breath to steady herself. She straightened her posture, hoping to hide the traces of tears that stained her cheeks. Despite her efforts, her trembling hands betrayed her unease. He looked toward her, his unseeing eyes seeming to peer right into her soul. They remained silent for several long seconds before she finally spoke.

"Your Grace," she stammered, her voice betraying her emotional state. "I... I did not expect to see you here."

His voice, normally gentle and warm, softened even further as he responded, concern lacing his words.

“Miss Ludlow, are you well?” he asked. “You seem... troubled.”

The tenderness in his voice touched a tender chord within her, and for a moment, she allowed herself to revel in the comfort of his presence. But the weight of her burden bore down on her, and she knew she couldn't keep the truth hidden any longer. She needed someone to confide in, someone who could understand the gravity of her situation.

With hesitant desperation, Annabelle mustered the courage to let him in on Oswald's plans. She spoke in a hushed tone, the words carrying the weight of her fears.

“My Uncle Oswald... he... he intends to... marry me off,” she said, tears streaming down her face once more. “He has made an arrangement to have me wed to a most elderly, unsavory gentleman. And he has seen fit to not give me a choice in the matter.”

The words hung in the air between them, the silence amplifying the magnitude of her revelation. The future she had once dreamt of seemed to crumble before her very eyes, replaced by a vision she dreaded. She anxiously awaited the Duke's response, hoping against hope that he would offer her guidance, support, or even just a glimmer of understanding.

The duke was silent for a long moment, his features obscured to her, given his near-total blindness. She felt his gaze upon her, his eyes seemingly squinting, as if he were attempting to observe her as well as he could. In that quiet pause, a storm of emotions raged within her—fear, uncertainty, and a desperate yearning for a better outcome.

Finally, the duke broke the silence, his voice laden with sympathy.

“Miss Ludlow, I cannot fully fathom the depth of your distress,” he said, his voice filled with compassion and tenderness beyond what she could have expected. “However, I promise you this—I will do everything within my power to aid you.”

His words, though not a definitive solution, provided a glimmer of hope in the darkness that had enveloped her. Annabelle took solace in his

unwavering support, knowing that she had someone by her side, even if there was nothing he could do but show her kindness, as he was right then.

“I fear there’s little that can be done,” she said, her voice trembling again. “My uncle has made up his mind. He believes that it’s up to me to marry and bail him out of his debts.”

The duke nodded thoughtfully, and Annabelle witnessed an array of emotions flicker across his face. She also noticed that expression spoke of an idea long before more words left his lips.

Suddenly, as if out of the depths of her tumultuous thoughts, the duke made an offer that left Annabelle stunned.

“What if you were to marry me?” he asked. “I could offer you a marriage of convenience. That way, you would not be forced to wed the man your uncle has selected for you.”

The words tumbled from his lips, weaving a proposition that she had never expected. A marriage of convenience—those three simple words echoed in her ears, their implications sending ripples of astonishment through

her core.

Her gaze met his, searching for any hint of jest or insincerity, but all she found was earnestness and a flicker of vulnerability. Adrian's proposal held the promise of safety and respect, a haven from the oppressive control Oswald sought to exert over her. It was an unexpected lifeline, a lifeline she had never thought possible.

“I would provide for you, always,” the duke continued. “Nothing would be expected of you, except in your duties as duchess. You would be free to do as you please the rest of the time. And, of course, I would handle any financial expenses necessary, including those to clear your uncle’s debts.”

As she listened to his persuasive words, her heart stirred with confusion. She had always dreamt of a marriage born out of love, a union steeped in shared affection and deep connection. Yet, here was an escape, a refuge from the suffocating grasp of Oswald's intentions. A union with the Duke of Thornwood would provide her with a shield against the storm that threatened to consume her.

Annabelle's mind whirled with conflicting emotions. She questioned if

it was a betrayal of her own dreams to consider such an arrangement. But the alternative, a life bound to Lord Spencer, was far more dreadful.

She closed her eyes for a moment, seeking clarity amidst the whirlwind of thoughts. The weight of the duke's offer bore down on her, and she realized that sometimes, dreams had to be adjusted, reshaped to fit the contours of reality. In his proposal lay an opportunity to forge her own path, to carve out a measure of control over her destiny. But why would he make her such an offer? Of what consequence was she to him that he would be willing to give up his own freedom?

“Your Grace, this... I could have never anticipated this,” she said truthfully. “I have always longed for a love that transcends convenience. But in your words, I find a way to break free from the clutches of Oswald's intentions. A union of convenience, built upon trust and mutual respect, may be the only way to safeguard my happiness and reclaim my own autonomy.”

As the words left her lips, she felt a surge of both relief and trepidation. She hoped she hadn't offended the kind duke. They, indeed, did have some kind of connection. But surely, one could not call it love. Could they? In this moment, she embraced the possibility of a different kind of love—one that

bloomed from an alliance of understanding and shared goals.

Adrian's eyes softened, his gaze filled with a mixture of empathy and determination. He reached out and gently touched her damp cheek, his touch imbued with tenderness.

“Miss Ludlow, I understand your reservations,” he said. “And I promise you this: I will do everything within my power to ensure that this union we contemplate is one filled with compassion, respect, and perhaps, with time, even a deeper connection.”

As Annabelle contemplated her options, her heart yearning for a way out of the suffocating grasp of Oswald's intentions, her gaze lingered on Adrian. There was a safety, a refuge, that seemed to emanate from him—a lifeline she couldn't ignore.

With a deep breath, she made her decision. She smiled softly at the duke, her voice steady but filled with a mix of apprehension and hope.

“Your Grace, I... I accept your proposal,” she said.

Relief washed over her as Adrian's expression softened, and he gently squeezed her hand in acknowledgment. His touch provided reassurance, a glimmer of comfort in the face of the uncertainty that lay ahead.

His voice, filled with conviction, broke through the silence that enveloped them.

“Miss Ludlow, you have made a brave choice,” he said. “I promise you, I will not falter in my commitment. I shall call upon Oswald to declare my intentions, ensuring that the world knows you have found sanctuary within our union.”

Her heart fluttered at his words, a mixture of gratitude and anticipation swelling within her. In Adrian's unwavering resolve, she found strength—a beacon of hope that just moments before she thought was lost to her.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she whispered, staring at him with wonder.

The duke nodded, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I assure you, it is my pleasure, Miss Ludlow,” he said.

Chapter Fifteen

“Your Grace, you are a bundle of nerves today,” Blake said as he helped Adrian into a deep purple suit.

Adrian gave his valet a sheepish smile, feeling like he was, in fact, nothing but a bundle of raw nerves.

“Today, I am going to make a formal offer for a lady’s hand in marriage,” he said.

Blake fell silent, and from the milky blur of his vision, he could sense that the valet was staring at him in shock.

“Indeed?” he asked. “This is certainly an unexpected surprise.”

Adrian nodded.

“For us both,” he said. “But I believe that I am making the right decision.”

Blake continued looking at him, and Adrian knew he would be thinking that his master had lost his mind.

“Is that so?” he asked.

Adrian thought about Miss Ludlow’s musical laugh, and how his heart had broken when her laughter had been reduced to heart-wrenching sobs.

“It is,” he said softly, with more determination than he had ever felt in his life.

The valet stared at him for a moment longer. Then, he finished his work on the suit, ushering Adrian to his vanity.

“Then we must be sure that you look your best,” he said.

A short time later, Blake was ushering him out of the door of his

chambers, escorting him down the stairs to join his aunt for breakfast. The soft morning light streamed through the lace curtains, casting a delicate glow over the elegant dining room as Adrian sat down at the breakfast table. A sense of anticipation mingled with his morning tea, for he knew today held a conversation of utmost importance. Beside him, his aunt Marjorie, a woman of great wisdom and compassion, exchanged a knowing glance.

“Your entire demeanour has changed, my darling,” she said. “Have you reached a decision about dear Annabelle?”

Adrian took a deep breath. He had hidden away in his chambers after issuing his proposal to Miss Ludlow. He was in luck; his aunt had retired early the evening before, which had given him plenty of time to think. His intention had been to tell her at breakfast that day. But now that the time had come, he was terribly nervous.

“I have,” he said. “And I asked her to marry me yesterday.”

He felt the surprise radiating off his aunt. Clearly, she had not expected him to bring such news so soon.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” she said cautiously. “But what made you act so soon?”

Clearing his throat, Adrian told his aunt everything that Miss Ludlow had told him the day before. When he was finished, Marjorie reached out and took his hand.

“Adrian,” Marjorie began, her voice warm and filled with genuine concern. “Can we discuss this proposal? Are you sure this is the right time?”

Adrian nodded, his heart pounding with a mix of nervousness and excitement. He was surprised at his aunt’s reaction, as marriage had been her idea in the first place. He had admired Miss Ludlow’s grace and intelligence since the day he met her, and now he had taken the bold step of asking for her hand in marriage. Yet, there were doubts lingering in the depths of his mind, doubts that Marjorie's guidance could help dispel.

“I must admit, Aunt Marjorie, that I feel a certain trepidation,” Adrian confessed, his gaze fixed on his tea. “While I find Miss Ludlow captivating and our union may bring benefits to both of us, I cannot help but be fearful.”

Marjorie patted his hand gently.

“Oh, my dear boy, I understand your concerns,” she said. “Marriage is a sacred bond, one that should be founded on love above all else. I too have stood at the crossroads of such a decision in my youth.”

Intrigued, Adrian turned his attention fully to his aunt, eager to absorb her wisdom.

“Tell me, Aunt Marjorie, how did you know that love was the guiding light on your path?” he asked.

Marjorie's lips curled into a wistful smile as she spoke, her voice imbued with fond remembrance.

“It was a sunny afternoon, much like this one, when I first laid eyes on your uncle, Edward,” she said. “From that moment, a spark ignited within me, and love bloomed. We shared laughter, dreams, and even tears, and it was through those moments that our bond grew stronger.”

Adrian felt a surge of hope and yearning. He longed for a connection as

deep and genuine as the one his aunt described.

“But Aunt Marjorie, how can I be sure that such love exists between Miss Ludlow and me?” he asked. “How can I be certain that our marriage will be built on the solid foundation of true affection?”

Marjorie's gaze met his, unwavering and wise.

“Love, Adrian, is a journey of discovery,” she said. “It begins with genuine admiration and respect, but it flourishes with time and shared experiences. Trust your heart, my dear boy, and listen to its whispers.”

Adrian bit his lip.

“But I am going into this blindly,” he said. “I care enough about her to be pained to see her distress at her situation. But I do not know if that constitutes love, or if it means that we will have a loving marriage.”

There was a brief pause, and Adrian guessed that his aunt was thinking over his words.

“Perhaps, that is true,” she said. “But would you have extended the same offer to any other woman? Or did you make the offer to Annabelle because of something you feel deep within yourself?”

Adrian closed his eyes, trying to summon the image of Annabelle, the radiant smile he heard so often in her voice, and the twinkle he always imagined that existed in her eyes. In his mind's eye, he saw her vibrant spirit, her kindness that extended beyond society's expectations. And in that moment, he realized the truth.

“No, Aunt Marjorie,” he whispered, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “I wouldn’t dream of making that offer to just any woman. When I am in Miss Ludlow’s presence, I feel an undeniable connection. Her laughter brings light to my world, and her dreams resonate with my own. Love, true love, is indeed the foundation upon which a successful marriage can be built.”

He could feel it when Marjorie beamed at him, and he imagined her eyes sparkling with pride and contentment.

“Oh, Adrian, my dear, I am overjoyed to hear those words,” she said, embracing him. “Follow your heart, for it shall lead you on the path to

happiness. Trust in love, and let it guide you in making the decision that will shape your future.”

As Adrian took a sip of his tea, the warmth spreading through him, he knew that he had found his answer. Love, as his aunt had so beautifully reminded him, was the compass that would guide him through the intricacies of life. He would embark on this journey alongside Miss Ludlow, ready to build a future rooted in the depths of their shared affection. They enjoyed one another’s company, and they had strong common interests. If any couple could build a love based on that, it was the two of them.

After breakfast, Adrian sought brief refuge in his study, his gaze fixed on the flickering flames dancing in the hearth as he collected his thoughts. The crackling fire mirrored the whirlwind within his heart, as he wrestled with a decision that held his very honor and the fate of Miss Ludlow in its balance. The conversation with his aunt had been enlightening, her words of love resonating deeply within him. But the conversation ahead of him would surely prove difficult. Indeed, it might be the end of his intentions of marrying Miss Ludlow, no matter how appealing the notion was to him.

Protecting her was his paramount duty, of that he was certain. His disability, the lingering reminder of a past tragedy, cast shadows of doubt on his heart. Could he truly provide her with the life she deserved, one filled with joy and fulfillment? The weight of his limitations pressed upon him, an invisible barrier threatening to confine his hopes and dreams. And the uncertainty of the capacity of love for one another gave him further pause. He knew that Miss Ludlow had stirred something in him that he had never felt before. But could that ever be love?

Adrian, go, a voice that sounded much like his father's rang in his mind. You mustn't waste time. She accepted your proposal, knowing of your disability. Do not fail her by failing in the task ahead of you because of uncertainty.

He realized with sudden clarity that the words rang true. Miss Ludlow had, in fact, accepted the proposal, fully aware of his lack of sight. And she was depending on him to fulfill the promises he had made her the day before. He left the study, making his way to the waiting carriage. There was no time to waste, not while Miss Ludlow's future was at stake.

The carriage ride to Annabelle's residence felt interminable, each hoofbeat echoing the weight of Adrian's decision. His heart, a pendulum swinging between hope and trepidation, seemed to match the rhythm of the horse-drawn carriage. As they approached the grand estate, he straightened his coat, summoning his courage to face the imminent challenge.

The imposing doors swung open, revealing a stoic butler who regarded Adrian with a discerning gaze. Adrian's limited sight did not hinder him from sensing the disdain that emanated from the man, and he silently attributed it to his own disability. Steeling himself, he met the butler's gaze with unwavering determination.

“Your Grace, please follow me,” he said. “Mr. Ludlow is in his study,” the butler intoned with measured formality, his voice as cool as the marble columns that lined the entrance hall.

Adrian followed the butler's lead, his cane tapping gently against the polished floor, guiding him towards the heart of the house. Oswald's study, a bastion of power and influence, lay beyond the intricately carved doors that loomed before them.

As Adrian stepped into the study, his senses heightened. He detected the faint scent of aged leather and the acrid undertone of cigar smoke. But it was Oswald's presence that permeated the room, a subtle tension coiling in the air. Adrian's heart pounded, his grip on the cane tightening.

Oswald Ludlow, a man clearly well-versed in the art of manipulation, greeted Adrian with a façade of surprise that thinly veiled his true intentions, acting as though their altercation in the meadow had never occurred. His gaze pierced through Adrian, and it took every ounce of Adrian's self-control not to let his unease show.

“Your Grace,” he drawled, his voice dripping with feigned curiosity. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit? Pray, do enlighten me.”

Adrian stood tall, his voice resolute and unwavering.

“I have come to make my intentions clear, sir,” he said. “I wish to ask for Miss Annabelle's hand in marriage.”

The room seemed to hold its breath as Adrian's words hung in the air, the gravity of his declaration enveloping them both. Adrian could sense the

wheels of Oswald's mind spinning, considering the implications of such a union. The prospect of his ward, an heiress, marrying a Duke was too tempting for Oswald to dismiss outright.

A sly aura crept into the air as Oswald smacked his lips.

“I will assume that you are unaware than an offer has already been made for her hand,” he said snidely. “An offer which I readily accepted.”

Adrian tightened his jaw, an unexpected surge of jealousy running through him at the thought of Miss Ludlow marrying anyone else.

“Well, I believe that I can offer more than any other suitor who might have asked for her hand,” he said. “I have vast wealth, and the title of duke. I would ask for no dowry, and I would see to any financial needs of Miss Ludlow and her family.”

There was a long silence, and Adrian knew that the cruel man was weighing his words.

“Your Grace, while your proposal comes as a surprise, I cannot deny

the allure it presents,” he said. “Annabelle's future, intertwined with that of such a high noble title, is a tempting prospect indeed. But how can I be sure of your vast wealth? And how do I know that you will fulfill your part of the bargain once you have married my dear Annabelle? I am, of course, concerned for her welfare most of all.”

Adrian saw through Oswald's facade, his mind sharp despite the clouded vision that plagued him. He recognized the man's tactics, his attempts to manipulate the situation to his advantage. But Adrian would not be swayed by such artifice.

“I've no doubt that my reputation precedes me,” he said firmly. “As such, one would know what fortune lies within my family. My dukedom is a strong one, and my business ventures are quite prosperous. Not only do I have the fortune which I inherited from my father, but also my income is steady and impressive.”

Oswald Ludlow sniffed.

“Your reputation precedes you, indeed, Your Grace,” he said, his words drawn out with a cold edge. “And thus, you might know that I am aware of a

certain... disability. One which, in time, might force you out of work.”

Adrian bristled at the implication, and he forced himself to remain calm.

“I assure you that my fortune is such that I could provide for several generations, even if I were to retire tomorrow,” he said confidently. “And my title would ensure that Miss Ludlow would be afforded all the respect of my title as duchess, and that she would inherit my fortune, in the event that I became unable to handle affairs on my own.”

This silenced the shady gentleman, and Adrian could feel the weight of his consideration. The air in the room thickened, and Adrian hoped he had sufficiently convinced the man to grant his blessing to marry his niece. It felt like an eternity before he finally spoke again.

“You make a very tempting offer,” he said. “Indeed, better than the previous one.” He paused, sighing. “Very well. I accept your offer. But if you do not make good on every word you have spoken here today, I will come for your fortune personally.”

Adrian felt weak with relief, but he managed to keep his cool.

“I would expect no less,” he said.

Mr. Ludlow huffed, and Adrian presumed he had nodded.

“When will this wedding take place, then?” he asked.

Adrian hadn’t had an answer for that question until that moment. But suddenly, he did.

“As soon as possible,” he said. “I will leave immediately to procure a special license in London. As we reside on the outskirts of London, I will need a few days. The wedding will take place within a few weeks from then.”

Again, the man huffed. The silence was longer, and Adrian sensed that he was thinking hard about his decision. But at last, he did speak, and Adrian was all too happy.

“So be it,” he mumbled. “Leave me. I have my own preparations to make.”

Adrian didn't hide a smirk as he turned to leave the room. Yes, you have an arrangement to break, he thought smugly to himself. Good luck with that, you unfortunate soul.

Chapter Sixteen

Meanwhile, in the garden, the gentle breeze whispered through the blooming roses as Annabelle kept Patches, her faithful canine companion, by her side. She anxiously awaited the duke's return from his meeting with Oswald, her heart burdened with a mixture of hope and trepidation. The outcome of this encounter could shape her future in ways she dared not yet fathom.

As she stroked Patches' soft fur, her mind teemed with a whirlwind of emotions. She understood all too well the power Oswald held over her fate. He, who had once declared her hand would be bestowed upon Lord Spencer, could easily rebuff Adrian's audacious proposition. Annabelle's heart skipped a beat at the mere thought of such a possibility, her eyes darting towards the manor, longing for a glimpse of the man who had captivated her soul.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the Duke of Thornwood

emerged from the grand doors of the manor, his figure tall and commanding, despite the cane that guided his steps. Annabelle's heart raced, her breath caught in her throat as she watched him approach with purpose in his stride. Her eyes searched his face for any hint of the meeting's outcome, her fingers twisting nervously in the folds of her skirt.

“Miss Ludlow,” he called out, his voice a melody that soothed her restless soul. “I have spoken with your uncle.”

Annabelle’s heart leapt into her throat. She hesitated to ask the question, because a negative answer would destroy her. But she had to ask, as the duke was now standing before her.

“What did he say?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The duke slowly grinned at her in a way that melted her heart.

“He has given his approval.” He spoke calmly, but Annabelle could have sworn that she saw a spark of joy twinkling in his eyes.

Relief washed over her, flooding her being with a wave of gratitude.

She could scarcely believe her ears. The Duke of Thornwood – Adrian, since he was to be her husband – had succeeded where she feared he might fail. A smile danced upon her lips as she fought to contain her elation. She was still uncertain about a marriage of convenience, even to a man with as much in common with her as the duke. But the prospect felt far better to her than a marriage to the aging, unsavory Lord Spencer.

“He has agreed?” she managed to utter, her voice filled with a mixture of disbelief and wonder.

Adrian nodded, his own smile mirroring hers.

“Indeed,” he replied, his voice tinged with triumph. “Oswald has given his blessing for our union.”

Annabelle's heart swelled with happiness, the weight of uncertainty lifted from her shoulders. She could hardly contain the overwhelming joy that surged through her veins. The garden seemed to transform before her eyes, blossoming with newfound vibrancy and life.

“But there is more,” Adrian continued, his eyes gleaming with

anticipation. “I must journey to London to obtain a special license.”

A special license? The words reverberated through her mind, igniting a flicker of curiosity. She had heard of such a thing, a way to expedite the path to matrimony. The mere thought of being bound to Adrian, free from the constraints of society's rigid timetable, sent a shiver of delight down her spine.

“Of course, Your Gr... Adrian,” she murmured, her voice filled with disbelief and, heavens help her, a little excitement.

A tender smile graced his lips, his eyes glowing with adoration.

“Then it is settled,” he declared, his voice filled with conviction. “Tonight, I extend an invitation for you to join me at my residence for dinner. I desire for you to meet my Aunt Marjorie.”

“I would be delighted,” she replied, her voice a gentle whisper. “To meet your Aunt Marjorie tonight.”

Adrian gave her a warm smile.

“Very good,” he said. “Then I shall see you tonight, Annabelle.”

She stood frozen, watching him head back to his carriage. Something about the way he had said her name thrilled her in a way that utterly surprised her. For the first time since Oswald had told her he meant to marry her off to Lord Spencer, she felt nothing but a pure rush of excitement for her future.

Once Adrian had returned to his home to arrange the preparations for her to join him and his aunt for dinner, Annabelle made her way to Penelope's cottage. Seeking solace in the embrace of a dear friend seemed the perfect balm for her fluttering heart. As she stepped through the quaint wooden door, the familiar scents of home greeted her, mingling with the comforting sounds of Penelope's mother bustling about in the kitchen.

The air was thick with the sweet aroma of freshly baked pies, their delectable scent wafting through the air. Annabelle couldn't help but feel a pang of nostalgia as she watched Penelope's mother meticulously prepare each pastry, her skilled hands moving with practiced grace. It was a scene that spoke of love and familiarity, a haven of warmth amidst a world of uncertainty.

“Does Penelope know that you’re here, Annabelle, darling?” Harriot Brown asked.

Annabelle shook her head, preparing to tell her that she didn’t think so, as the butler had let her in and that Penelope hadn’t yet come down. But an interruption stopped her words mid-breath.

“I do now,” Penelope said, rushing inside the kitchen and throwing her arms around Annabelle. “Are you all right? What brings you here on such short notice?”

Their embrace was a comforting embrace, one that spoke of years of shared memories and unspoken understanding. Annabelle found solace in the presence of her dear friend, knowing that here, she could unburden her heart without judgment.

As they settled into the cozy sitting room, Annabelle's fingers nervously traced the delicate pattern of her gown. She took a deep breath, summoning the courage to share her news. The words danced upon her tongue, eager to be released into the world.

“Penelope,” she began, her voice soft but steady, “I have news to share, news that fills my heart with both joy and trepidation.”

Penelope's eyes sparkled with curiosity as she leaned forward, her genuine interest palpable. “Pray, do tell, dear Annabelle. What has set your heart aflutter?”

A smile tugged at the corners of Annabelle's lips as she unfolded her tale. “I am betrothed, Penelope,” she revealed, her voice carrying a mixture of wonder and disbelief. “Adrian, the man who has captured my heart, has sought my hand in marriage.”

The air seemed to still for a moment as Penelope absorbed the weight of Annabelle's words. Then, a knowing smile spread across her face, a gentle light shining in her eyes.

“Ah, my dear Annabelle,” she whispered, her voice filled with warmth, “love often sprouts in the most improbable of places.”

Annabelle's heart fluttered at Penelope's words, their truth resonating

deep within her soul. Yes, Adrian and she had come from different worlds, their paths intertwining in a manner deemed unlikely by society's standards. But love, she realized, was a force that defied conventions and bloomed where it pleased. She just hoped that it pleased to bloom between her and Adrian.

She certainly felt fond of him, and she figured that he must feel a fondness for her, to offer to marry her, just to save her from torment. Would that be enough for them to have a happy life together, however?

“Oh, heavens, Sarah,” Annabelle said later that afternoon as she flew around her room in her bath robe. Her skin was freshly washed with her rose and sage soap, her hair already styled neatly in ringlets that were pinned to her head with diamond encrusted combs. “I could have never imagined this would be my life.”

Her lady's maid, who was chasing her around the room, trying to fasten her diamond necklace to her, laughed.

“I couldn’t tell,” she said with a giggle.

Annabelle turned to face the maid to see her holding the necklace. She stopped sheepishly, allowing her lady’s maid to put the necklace on her. Then, she hurried over to the bed, pointing to the gold dress she had selected.

“Do you think this is the right dress to wear?” she asked. “Is it enough? Is it too much?”

Sarah laughed again, taking Annabelle’s hands.

“You sound as though you have never attended a dinner before, Miss Ludlow,” she said. “You must calm yourself so that I can help you finish getting ready.”

Annabelle bit her lip, giving the maid an apologetic look.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I am just so nervous to be meeting my future aunt-in-law.”

Sarah gave her a knowing look.

“Or is it that you wish to impress both her and your future husband?” she asked.

Annabelle wanted to dismiss the thought. After all, she and Adrian were out for a marriage of convenience. It was only to save her from a bleak, miserable life with Lord Spencer. But as she surveyed the gold dress, which was now in Sarah’s hands, she knew that wasn’t all there was to it. At least, not for her.

“Let’s get me dressed,” she said, blushing as she avoided the question. “I haven’t much time left.”

A short while later, Annabelle was dressed in her gold silk gown, heading down the stairs to the carriage that would take her to Thornwood Manor with Sarah, who would act as chaperone. Her lady’s maid gave her a bright smile, patting her shoulder reassuringly.

“You look as lovely as a princess,” she said.

Annabelle nodded, her nerves burning as if on fire. That might be true.

But would she get along with Adrian's aunt? Or would his aunt disapprove of their union and try to convince Adrian to call off their betrothal?

When she reached Thornwood Manor, a footman helped her from the carriage. He then escorted her to the mansion, waiting until they had reached the bottom of the stairs to leave her. As she ascended the staircase, each step seemed to carry her closer to a future she had longed for, a future intertwined with Adrian's love. The butler greeted her with a respectful nod when he answered her knock on the door before escorting her into the splendid drawing room. The soft glow of candlelight flickered against the walls, casting a warm ambiance upon the space.

Adrian stood near the entrance, his eyes alight with anticipation as he caught sight of her. A smile played upon his lips as he extended his arm, offering it to her with a flourish. Annabelle's heart skipped a beat as she accepted his gesture, their fingers intertwining with a delicate touch.

“May I introduce you to my beloved aunt, Marjorie Westfield?” Adrian's voice was filled with a mixture of pride and affection as he led her further into the room. “Aunt Marjorie, this is Annabelle Ludlow, my wife-to-be.”

Marjorie, a vision of elegance in her silver-haired splendor, turned towards them with a welcoming smile. Her eyes, framed by gentle lines etched with wisdom, sparkled with a warmth that mirrored Adrian's. Annabelle curtsied gracefully, her heart swelling with gratitude for the opportunity to meet the woman who held such significance in Adrian's life.

“Dear Annabelle,” Marjorie's voice was filled with genuine warmth as she extended her hand. “It is a pleasure to finally meet the woman who has captured my nephew's heart. Welcome to Thornwood Manor.”

Annabelle's cheeks flushed with a blush of pleasure as she clasped Marjorie's hand.

“Thank you, Lady Marjorie,” she replied, her voice tinged with sincerity. “I am honoured to be here and to have the chance to meet you.”

Marjorie gave her another kind smile, pulling gently on the hand she held and wrapping Annabelle in a warm, motherly embrace.

“Please, darling,” she said, pulling away to survey Annabelle. “I insist

that you call me Marjorie.”

Annabelle felt tears sting her eyes at the woman’s warm welcome.

“As you wish, Marjorie,” she said, giving the older woman a small curtsy. “This is a lovely home.”

Marjorie smiled graciously.

“You are too kind,” she said. “Adrian helps me keep everything in tip-top shape. And I just love decorating. I never grow tired of coming up with new ways to keep the place looking vibrant.”

Annabelle nodded, surveying the bright tapestries and upholstery that complimented the bright wood of the furniture.

“It is wonderful,” she said, shivering with delight at the difference she felt compared to the cold, drab manor which she shared with her cruel uncle.

The butler announced that dinner was to be served, and Adrian smiled down at her.

“Shall we?” he asked, his eyes sparkling.

Annabelle found herself spellbound as she looked at him. She was amazed at how easy it was for her to forget how handsome he was each time she was away from him.

“I am,” she said, following his confident stride as they made their way to the dining hall.

Dinner began with the clinking of silverware on the plates as food was served to each person at the table. Marjorie beamed at Annabelle when the first course was served, raising her wine glass in the air.

“Thank you for coming this evening, dear Annabelle,” she said. “May you and Adrian have all the happiness in the world ahead of you.”

Annabelle returned the toast, trying to suppress her returning nervousness. She wanted them to be happy, as well. But the question of whether there was true love between them, or the affection of two light acquaintances still lingered. Still, she smiled, accepting the toast by joining

the other two people in the toast.

“Aunt Marjorie, I shall depart for London tomorrow,” Adrian said. “I wish to procure a special license, so that we can be wed as soon as possible.”

Annabelle had already heard the news. But hearing it again and seeing Marjorie’s face light up made it even more real for her. One month from then, she would be sitting at that same dinner table as Adrian’s wife, the duchess of Thornwood. That knowledge carried with it promise. It also brought fear. She didn’t have a mother or a sister who could help her with wedding plans, let alone plans that would need to be completed so soon. She had Penelope, but her friend would be attending social events and unable to withdraw from some of them on such short notice. What would she do?

Marjorie, sensing the bittersweet undercurrent in the room, reached out with a reassuring smile.

“Worry not, my dear,” she said, her voice gentle but resolute. “While Adrian is away, we shall begin the preparations for your upcoming nuptials. Consider me your ally in this endeavour.”

A wave of relief washed over Annabelle, gratitude welling up within her. The weight of wedding planning had threatened to overwhelm her, but with Marjorie's promise of assistance, a burden seemed to lift from her shoulders. She could already envision the two of them pouring over fabric swatches and discussing flower arrangements, their shared excitement mingling with anticipation.

“Thank you, Marjorie,” she said, flooded with gratitude. “I appreciate that more than you can imagine.”

Marjorie winked at her, glancing knowingly at Adrian.

“I am more than happy to help you, darling,” she said.

The moon cast a gentle glow upon the serene landscape as Annabelle returned home, her heart filled with the remnants of the evening's enchantment. The world around her seemed hushed, as if holding its breath in anticipation of the unknown. As she ascended the stairs to her bedchamber, her thoughts swirled like a tempest, a whirlwind of emotions and possibilities.

Retiring for the night, she found herself surrounded by the familiar comfort of her sanctuary. The candlelight danced upon the walls, casting shadows that mimicked the twists and turns of her racing thoughts. The events of the day played out in her mind, like a vivid tableau, each moment etching itself into the depths of her memory.

Adrian's proposal, Oswald's reluctant approval, meeting Marjorie—each thread of her journey wove together, creating a tapestry of uncertainty and hope. The path she had once envisioned for herself had been irrevocably altered, like a river diverted by an unexpected obstacle. And though uncertainty loomed before her, one thing stood clear amidst the chaos: her life was about to take a turn she had never anticipated.

Chapter Seventeen

The cold morning dew still clung to the sprawling countryside as the ducal carriage bounced along the uneven road. The rhythmic jostling, coupled with the hooves' clop on the rough cobblestones, echoed the turmoil within Adrian's mind. He sat across from Henry, the lush velvet of the carriage engulfing them in quiet comfort as he attempted to marshal his thoughts. Henry was accompanying him not only for support, but to attend some business meetings while in London.

Adrian recognized the cruciality of this journey, its importance pulsating in the forefront of his mind with unrelenting urgency. This mission, to secure the special license, was paramount if he were to offer Annabelle a place by his side.

The notion of it evoked a strange amalgam of nervousness and anticipation that settled heavily in his chest. He could not say that he was in

love with her. But he knew that he would do anything to help her escape the fate she told him that her uncle was trying to impose upon her.

Yet, even as he strove to concentrate on the task at hand, his thoughts were elsewhere. They travelled back to Thornwood and to her, to the vision of Annabelle with her fiery hair and the smile that made his heart thunder. His heartstrings tugged with longing and a thread of unease crept into his consciousness. The gnawing discomfort of leaving Annabelle, even if temporary, lingered, scratching at his mind like a persistent specter.

“I don’t like the look of that brooding face, Adrian,” Henry’s voice broke through his musings, a jovial grin playing on his lips. His teasing tone was a beacon of familiarity amidst Adrian’s storm of thoughts.

Adrian’s heart stopped. He wasn’t sure how to broach the subject of his turmoil about marrying Annabelle. He gave his friend an exaggerated roll of his eyes, trying to lighten his dark mood.

“I’m not brooding,” Adrian retorted, hoping the playful retort might ward off the uncertainty threatening to engulf him. Yet his gaze drifted towards the window, his reflections refracted through the glass. Images of

her, their time together, danced in the shards of the morning sun.

Henry snickered, shaking his head.

“Yes, and I am not red headed,” he said with a chuckle.

Adrian sighed. Of all the people he knew, only his aunt and Henry could decipher when something troubled him. And with him trapped in a carriage with his friend, he knew he was fooling no one.

“I am just worried about Annabelle,” he said. “Her uncle is nefarious, indeed. I have only known her a short time, but I feel as though I should be there to protect her always, especially since she is to be my wife.”

He felt his friend's eyes on him, perceptive as ever.

“I suspected she had something to do with your mood,” Henry replied, chuckling softly. “But this journey, Adrian, is for her. To secure your future together. Surely, that brings you some comfort?”

Adrian nodded, swallowing around the knot in his throat.

“Yes,” he admitted, his gaze still lost in the passing scenery. “And yet the thought of leaving her, even for a short while, is rather...disconcerting.”

Henry patted his knee reassuringly.

“Miss Ludlow has a strong spirit, Adrian,” he said. “And we'll be back before she knows it.”

Adrian managed a faint smile, the reassurance echoing hollowly inside him. Yes, Annabelle was strong, stronger than any other ladies he had ever met. It was one of the things he admired about her. However, it was not her strength that concerned him. It was the potential for the torment she might endure in his absence.

In silence, he contemplated his friend's words, the carriage continuing its journey through the rolling landscapes, marking the distance between him and Annabelle. Each jostle, each bump, was a reminder of the necessary distance he had put between them, a compulsory task that he needed to undertake for their future. He clung to that knowledge, like a lifeline in the rough seas of his anxieties, the beating of his heart keeping rhythm with the

carriage wheels against the uneven road.

The countryside continued rolling past them, in his blind-eyed mind, a picturesque backdrop to the solemn, introspective silence within the carriage. Adrian sighed, the weight of his new responsibilities pressing against his chest, a leaden anchor tethered to his heart. His brow creased in worry, his fingers tightening around the plush velvet of the carriage seat.

His thoughts whirred relentlessly, a barrage of concern and duty that beat a steady rhythm against his consciousness. His future with Annabelle hung in the balance, so delicately tethered to his actions. It was a responsibility that was both thrilling and terrifying in equal measure.

As he stared vacantly at the vague shifting patterns on the carriage floor, he felt his introspection veer toward melancholy. The frown etched on his face mirrored his inward tension, a potent testament to the whirlwind of thoughts besieging him. He was not dreading a lifetime with Annabelle. He was afraid that she would come to dread a lifetime with him. With his sight impaired as it was, she was sure to become the talk of London very quickly. Did she understand what she was getting herself into? And was the life he offered her truly better than that of an aging nobleman?

“Adrian,” Henry's voice broke through his somber reverie, the familiar warmth bringing him back to the present. “If you frown any deeper, you're going to etch a hole in the carriage floor.”

Adrian blinked, his friend's light-hearted jest piercing through the dense fog of his worries. A laugh, surprised and genuine, escaped his lips, the buoyant sound effectively scattering his brooding thoughts.

“You jest, Henry,” he responded, shaking his head, “But I am plagued by concerns.”

Henry grew serious, shifting his weight in the seat across from Adrian.

“Adrian, you worry too much. Annabelle will not be alone, your aunt Marjorie will be with her,” Henry reminded him, his tone gentle, yet firm. “And as for Oswald, I don't believe Annabelle to be so easily swayed by his demands. After all, with what you have told me, she chose to accept what you offered her, as opposed to what her uncle offered.”

Adrian turned to face his friend, Henry's words providing a respite from

his tumultuous thoughts. He nodded, the simple gesture speaking volumes of his trust in his friend's wisdom.

“And,” Henry continued, a hint of a smile creeping into his words, “Annabelle is stronger than you give her credit for. She possesses a spirit that is tenacious and vibrant. She can handle Oswald.”

The reminder was like a balm, easing Adrian's concerns. He knew Henry was right, Annabelle was strong and spirited. She was a woman of substance, her strength unmatched. His worries seemed to dissipate, like morning mist in the warmth of the sun.

“Yes,” Adrian said, his voice filled with newfound resolve. “You are right, Henry. Annabelle is indeed stronger than I realise.”

With Henry's reassuring words echoing in his mind, Adrian allowed himself to relax into the journey, his thoughts now focused not on his worries but on his faith in Annabelle. He knew she could handle whatever came her way, and he would be back soon to offer his firm support once more.

As the carriage rumbled on, a comfortable silence fell between the two

men. The countryside outside their window continued its endless display of verdant, albeit dulled, hues, while within the confined space, each man was lost in his own world of thought. The steady rhythm of the horses' hooves on the uneven road provided a familiar soundtrack to their musings.

Finally, Henry broke the silence once more, his tone a stark departure from the light-hearted jesting earlier. The serious undertone made Adrian glance up in curiosity.

“Adrian,” Henry began, his gaze steady. “I must admit, I am rather content with your betrothal to Annabelle.”

Adrian's eyebrows lifted in surprise, intrigued by his friend's admission.

“Oh?” he asked, curiosity lending a keen edge to his voice.

Henry paused, presumably nodding, his gaze unfaltering.

“Indeed,” he said. “Miss Ludlow is a woman of many virtues - her kindness, authenticity, compassion, and resilience are admirable. Such qualities are rare, and she carries them with a grace that's enchanting.”

Adrian found himself grinning at Henry's earnest proclamation. He had known of Annabelle's virtues. But hearing them reaffirmed by his closest friend cemented their importance.

“And, most importantly,” Henry continued, a spark of warmth evident in his eyes, “I believe she will bring you great happiness, Adrian.”

The sincerity in Henry's voice, the conviction behind his words, reached Adrian with a force that made him catch his breath. He felt a rush of gratitude towards his friend, the weight of his previous concerns seemed to lighten.

“Thank you, Henry,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. His heart swelled with the comfort that Henry's words provided, the reassurance that he was making the right choice. Henry's encouragement was like a tincture on his previously troubled thoughts, filling him with a renewed sense of purpose and determination.

As they continued their journey, Adrian found himself lost in his thoughts once more, but this time, they were hopeful. He mulled over Henry's words, letting them soak in, strengthening his resolve. His mind filled with

images of Annabelle – her sparkling eyes, her warm smile, her undeniable strength.

Yes, he decided, Annabelle was indeed the woman he was willing to spend his life with, and he was eager to make it a reality. A soft smile touched his lips as he gazed out the carriage window, the passing landscape a mere blur in his blind eyes. His heart pulsed with a rhythm of anticipation and profound love, beating a song for the future he envisioned – a future with Annabelle. He just hoped that she would be as content as he anticipated being himself.

As the carriage maintained its steady pace through the countryside, on day three of their journey, the inside of the luxurious coach became a sanctuary of shared recollections and laughter. The conversation between Adrian and Henry, who had just awakened, took a turn towards the past, a path laden with shared escapades and stories told in hushed tones beneath the cover of night.

“Do you remember the night we switched the ale for apple juice at Lady

Carrington's soiree?" Adrian asked, a mischievous twinkle lighting up his eyes.

Henry burst into hearty laughter at the memory.

"Of course," he said with a hearty, albeit sleepy laugh. "The look on old Sir Thompson's face when he took that first swig was priceless!"

Adrian found himself laughing along, the sound ringing in the enclosed space, echoing against the ornate fixtures and warming the cool morning air. The recollections served as a soothing balm to Adrian's troubled heart, the warm tendrils of nostalgia and friendship providing a welcome distraction.

The more they shared, the more Adrian found himself relaxed, his previous trepidation replaced with a sense of belonging and camaraderie. It was the same camaraderie that had sustained them through their youth, a bond that was unyielding in the face of time and change.

Despite the serious undercurrent of their journey, this moment of light-hearted reminiscing transformed the ride into an unexpected moment of respite. It was a welcome interlude in the otherwise daunting task of securing

his future with Annabelle.

His heart, earlier filled with worry, began to flutter with hope, bolstered by the mirthful conversation. A renewed determination unfurled within him, steeling him for the challenges that were yet to come. The laughter within the carriage merged with the sound of the hooves against the gravel, weaving a soothing melody that danced in harmony with Adrian's heightened spirits.

As the miles disappeared behind them, so too did Adrian's apprehensions. His thoughts now held a newfound clarity, each beat of his heart pulsating with the promise of a life filled with love and laughter. A sense of peace washed over him as he realized that no matter the hurdles, he was not alone. With loyal friends like Henry and a love like Annabelle waiting for him, Adrian found himself ready to face whatever came his way.

Chapter Eighteen

Annabelle awoke as dawn's first light swept across the vast English countryside, the tender pink hues kissing her bare cheeks with a whisper of warmth. It was not the chirping birds or the gentle breeze that stirred her awake, but a sense of anticipation that swirled like an unfurling bud within her. Today, she had decided, would be different, better.

As she rose from her canopy bed, the embroidered silk coverlet slipped to the floor, echoing her determination to shed the constraints of her past. She called for Sarah, who helped her into her dress, a simple yet elegant gown in a gentle blue. Sarah then wound her hair into an unpretentious bun with waves of her chestnut hair dangling down and framing her face. She was a picture of elegance, a lady at the threshold of womanhood, her spirit as alive as the golden rays now peeking through her window.

“You are positively radiant,” Sarah said, looking Annabelle over and

smoothing out a wrinkle in her skirt. “Being betrothed seems to suit you quite well.”

Annabelle blushed.

“I do not know about that,” she said, ignoring the brief shiver of delight that traveled unbiddenly up her spine. “But I do enjoy Adrian’s company very much. And it is wonderful to not have to think of enduring that horrid Lord Spencer for the rest of my life.”

Sarah gave her a knowing look as she tucked a strand of hair behind Annabelle’s ear.

“Enjoying each other’s company is the first step to a happy life together,” she said.

Annabelle shook her head, but her smile grew. She couldn’t deny that she had never experienced feelings like the ones she felt when she was around her fiancé. She didn’t know if he felt the same for her, but his laughter and the way she caught him sneaking glances at her when they were together implied that he wasn’t uncomfortable with her. Perhaps, Sarah was right.

Perhaps, that was only the beginning for them.

When she was dressed, Sarah walked with her out of her chambers. Her soft-soled slippers barely whispered against the grand hallway's polished oak flooring as she made her way through the hushed corridors of the stately manor house. Shadows played on the walls, dancing to the rhythm of her fluttering heart. Her mind flitted from one thought to another, much like the hummingbird that fluttered about in the gardens. What adventures would the day bring? A chance meeting with a certain gentleman, perhaps? A thrilling ride across the vast estate?

She dismissed Sarah, who went to tidy up her bathing and sitting rooms. Annabelle continued on her own, making her way quietly down the stairs. Her wanderings led her to the parlor, and it was there that her musings were interrupted. Hearing voices within, she paused, hesitating before she walked past the cracked door. She peeked carefully inside, her heart leaping into her throat.

Oswald lay sprawled across the velvet chaise lounge. His once crisp cravat was skewed, his brocaded waistcoat stained, a visible testament to his nocturnal excesses. Empty decanters littered the ornate tabletop while half-

burnt candles cast a somber glow across his disheveled countenance. He was as much a part of their grand family estate as he was a blight upon it.

A sigh escaped Annabelle's lips, the delicate sound seeming louder in the silent hallway than she intended. Her heart ached for her uncle, lost in his world of indulgence and despair. She hadn't known him well before he became her guardian. But she was sure that, at one point in his life, he had been a pleasant and friendly man. If her father's disposition was any indication. But then, Oswald might have always been a cranky, selfish grouch. She couldn't know for sure. All she knew was that she lived with constant anxiety because of her uncle's cruel, drunken demeanor.

"No, not today," she whispered to herself, her gaze sliding away from Oswald's unconscious form. Today was her day, and she refused to let his state taint it. With a quiet resolve, she made her way out of the parlor, leaving Oswald to his dreams.

Her spirit rose again, and she could almost feel the flutter of butterfly wings within her chest. Yes, today was going to be her day, a day of possibilities and promise. No despair, no disappointments could mar it. As the manor house came to life with the day's activities, Annabelle was ready to

face it, her heart radiant with hope. After all, wasn't hope the best breakfast for the soul?

The anticipation within her was not just a feeling; it was a wish, a prayer wrapped in the folds of her heart, waiting to burst forth in a resplendent bloom. As she strode forward, the world outside beckoned to her, waiting to unfold its myriad secrets. Today, she believed, would indeed be a day of new beginnings.

Just as she was heading for the servant's entrance, the butler came to Annabelle with a small, parchment envelope. His silver brows rose as he presented it to her on an ornate silver tray, a delicate wisp of a smile dancing on his thin lips.

“An epistle for you, Miss Ludlow,” he announced, his voice as hushed as the rustle of silk.

The envelope was aged, much like the hands that presented it to her. Its cream surface was adorned with a seal of vibrant crimson wax. At the sight of the emblem impressed into it, a lion rampart against a thorny bush, her heart gave a small flutter. It was the seal of Thornwood Manor.

Her fingers traced the wax seal, its intricate design a representation of the noble lineage of its house. The seal's discovery piqued her interest, her heart echoing the rhythm of a waltz in her chest. She carefully broke it open, unveiling an elegantly scripted invitation.

The invitation was from Marjorie. It was an invitation to a morning tea to discuss the upcoming wedding. Marjorie's flowing script trailed off at the bottom with a note stating Annabelle was free to bring along a friend.

A smile, like the first light of dawn, graced Annabelle's face. The serenity of her eyes gave way to twinkling merriment. She knew just the person who would relish such an opportunity. Penelope had an unparalleled enthusiasm for social gatherings and a fondness for scones. And Annabelle had the idea that she and Marjorie would get along famously.

The invitation promised a diversion from their daily monotony, an exciting secret they could share. Annabelle imagined Penelope's surprise, the eagerness in her eyes. It was an enticing prospect, one that chased away any lingering shadows of her uncle's presence and attitude.

As the letter found its place within the folds of her dress, she gathered her shawl and hat. Her heart matched her brisk steps with its pulsating rhythm, her anticipation a song that echoed through the grand halls. She raced up the stairs, calling for Sarah as she went. Her lady's maid met her in her chambers, where she was already removing her plain dress before the maid joined her.

"I am to have tea with Adrian's aunt," she said. "I wish to wear something a bit nicer than this."

Sarah grinned and nodded.

"My pleasure, Miss Ludlow," she said.

With Sarah's help, Annabelle chose a hunter green day dress that was embroidered with silver thread and matching shoes and came with a custom-made parasol on which those two colors were reversed. Sarah also traded her bonnet for a hunter green hat with silver flowers, and she restyled Annabelle's hair, pulling it up so that a cascade of waves rolled down the back of her neck, while the others rested atop her head beneath the hat. As a final touch, Sarah sprayed Annabelle with her rose perfume and applied a

light sprinkle of rouge to her cheeks. Ready at last, Annabelle once again exited her chambers, this time with purpose in her step.

When she reached the servant's entrance, Annabelle bid the butler a quick farewell, her eyes alight with the joyous secret she harbored. As she stepped outside, the cool breeze brushing against her cheeks felt like a sweet promise of the delightful day that lay ahead.

The path leading to Penelope's residence was a familiar one, a journey she had made countless times. Yet, today, it felt like an adventure. The sun-dappled path seemed brighter, the rustle of the leaves a more melodic tune. The thrill of sharing the news added wings to her feet, and before she knew it, the familiar façade of Penelope's home came into view.

Annabelle knocked gently on Penelope's residence, her heart fluttering with unspoken joy. The door swung open, revealing her friend's cheerful face, her eyes as bright as a summer day. The sight of her brought warmth to Annabelle's heart, a welcome reprieve from the brisk morning air.

“Penelope, I have some news,” Annabelle said giddily. She couldn't hold back her excitement. It bubbled up within her, an effervescent wave

eager to break upon the shore.

Penelope's eyes widened in anticipation, a light in them that could outshine the sunniest day.

“Oh, do tell, Annabelle,” she said, tugging at her friend's hand to lead her to the parlor.

Annabelle paused just outside the parlor door, patting her friend's hand, and giving a gentle shake of her head.

“Adrian's aunt invited me to a morning tea discussing the wedding,” she said. “And she has asked me to bring a friend.”

A gasp escaped Penelope, her eyes sparkling with excitement, her face alight with the same contagious energy she always carried with her.

“Oh, heavens,” she said. “That sounds perfectly delightful.” She grabbed Annabelle's hand once more, this time tugging her toward the stairs. “Come. I must get out of this old frock of a dress. I shan't take long, but I need your help selecting a dress.”

Annabelle laughed as she let her friend drag her up the stairs and to her chambers. Penelope's lovely yellow day dress was hardly an old frock, but it was clear that her friend wanted to look her best, as Annabelle had. Annabelle couldn't help but laugh at Penelope's exuberance, her mirth bubbling up in tinkling waves. Penelope was a vision of unbridled joy, her enthusiasm as infectious as a happy melody. This is why she had thought of her. The idea of bringing anyone else now seemed unimaginable.

It was in moments like these that she found herself incredibly grateful for Penelope. Despite the uncertainties and trials of life, her friend's constant positivity was like a lighthouse guiding her through rough seas. With Penelope true to her word, they were heading out the door and boarding a small carriage, on their way to the home of Annabelle's future family.

As the grand edifice of Thornwood Manor revealed itself, Annabelle felt a knot of excitement tighten in her abdominal. The manor, with its ivy-laden stone walls and towering turrets, exuded an aura of venerable elegance. The rhythmic symphony of hooves and wheels came to a halt, their journey ending in a flurry of hooves and whinnies.

No sooner had they alighted than Patches bounded up to them. His tail wagged like a banner in a strong breeze, his tongue lolling out in a show of enthusiastic welcome. His affections brought an easy smile to Annabelle's face, a sigh of relief escaping her at this friendly reception.

“Hello, darling,” she said, bending over to scratch the dog behind the ears. “How are you this morning?”

In reply, Patches stood on his hind legs, waiting for Annabelle to take his paws in her hands before he began licking them. She laughed merrily, with Penelope joining in as he gave her a quick, disinterested sniff and then began leading the way to the door of the manor.

The tea with Marjorie unfolded beautifully. They were ushered into a sunlit drawing-room where a porcelain tea set gleamed on the table, accompanied by an array of delectable pastries and fruit. The fragrance of blooming roses from the adjacent garden wafted through the open windows, an aromatic signature of the Thornwood estate.

Marjorie was a delightful hostess, her radiant smile softening the grandeur of her surroundings. She welcomed the women warmly, embracing

Penelope as though she was an old friend, even as Annabelle was introducing them.

Penelope curtsayed politely, but Marjorie stopped her with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“There’s no need for that, my dear,” she said. “While you are here, this is your home, and you are family. Just like my dear Annabelle here.”

Annabelle and Penelope both blushed, and they shared a look of mutual delight at the woman’s warm nature.

“Thank you, Lady Marjorie,” Penelope said as she and Annabelle took seats.

Marjorie shook her head with the same sweet smile.

“None of that, either, darling,” she said. “Call me Aunt Marjorie. I insist.”

Penelope giggled.

“Very well, Aunt Marjorie,” she said.

Marjorie nodded, turning to Annabelle with a smile.

“Have you thought about the wedding yet?” she asked.

Annabelle sighed. She had thought of little else. But she didn’t know the first thing about planning one.

“I’m afraid I am very lax in my knowledge of wedding planning,” she said. “Though I do not mind if it is a small, simple affair. I would hate to go overboard with the costs of everything.”

Marjorie gave Annabelle a sympathetic look and shook her head.

“No, darling,” she said. “Remember, Adrian and I will be paying for the wedding. And I am at your disposal for any assistance any time. You need only ask.”

Annabelle looked at Marjorie in wonder. She would normally protest,

as it felt a little like taking advantage of such grandiose kindness from someone she'd only just met recently. But Marjorie's eyes were glittering with pride and excitement, and a hint of determination. Clearly, she had made up her mind, and she would not be swayed.

“This is so very kind,” she said. “Thank you, if I have not said that already. I can't recall having ever been so grateful.”

Marjorie shook her head, waving her hand in her usual, humble manner.

“It is more than a pleasure, darling,” she said. “I couldn't be more thrilled about assisting in any way with this wedding.”

As they conversed about the upcoming wedding, Annabelle couldn't help but be moved by Marjorie's earnest efforts to ensure the occasion would be a memorable one. She saw in her a kindred spirit, a kind, motherly woman yearning to weave magic into the threads of her life.

Then came the moment that left Annabelle spellbound.

“I cannot stand it any longer,” Marjorie said, cutting herself off in the

middle of a sentence about wedding attire. “I called you here because I have a surprise for you.”

Annabelle blinked, already rather surprised.

“Oh?” she asked.

Marjorie nodded, rising and holding out her hands to Penelope and Annabelle.

“Come with me,” she said.

With the same excitement as Penelope had earlier, Marjorie led the two younger women up the stairs and to chambers that appeared to be a guest room. She waltzed over to the wardrobe, opening it with a flourish. With a twinkle in her eye, she revealed her assortment of wedding dresses. One by one, the gowns were unveiled, each an exquisite creation of either satin or silk and lace, pearls, and velvet. Annabelle could only marvel, her eyes wide as she took in the dazzling display. Each dress was more gorgeous than the last, embodying a grace Annabelle hadn't considered for herself.

“I had these delivered for you to see,” she said. “If you find one you like, we will have the rest sent back. And if you don’t, do not fret. We can have more delivered, or we can take you to the village to find one.”

Annabelle nodded, but she was too stunned to speak. She was vaguely aware of Penelope gasping beside her as she took in the sight of the dresses. It was a selection fit for a queen, in Annabelle’s eyes. The amount of care and thought that had gone into choosing the dresses was very apparent. She would be the luckiest woman in England to wear any one of them.

“They are incredible,” she breathed, looking at Marjorie with tears in her eyes.

Penelope, as always, proved indispensable in the process of selection. Her keen eye for fashion and her innate sense of style made her the perfect companion for such a task.

Finally, their eyes settled on a dress that was nothing short of exquisite. A pristine creation of pale ivory satin, it was the epitome of regency elegance. The gown was designed with a soft empire waist that flowed gracefully into a skirt of cascading silk. The bodice was a marvel, adorned

with the most delicate lacework and trimmed with tiny seed pearls. Its short, puffed sleeves were sheer, accented with intricate motifs of floral embroidery.

They had found the dress. The dress she would wear when she would become a bride. A bride to a man who was a duke. The weight of the title hung before her, a beacon of the change that was imminent.

As Penelope congratulated her, a whirlwind of emotions seized Annabelle. Excitement, apprehension, joy, and a strange sort of sadness tugged at her heart. Her life, as she knew it, was about to change. A soft sigh escaped her as she traced the fine embroidery on the gown, her reflection in the mirror a ghost of the woman she would soon become.

She was not just choosing a dress. She was choosing a life. A role she was yet to understand fully, responsibilities she was yet to fathom. She would be a bride, yes, but more than that, she would become a duchess.

“Let’s see how it looks on you,” Marjorie said.

Annabelle nodded.

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

Chapter Nineteen

After the frenetic pace and incessant din of London, the quiet expansiveness of the English countryside was a welcome balm. Adrian gazed out of the carriage window, his gaze drawn to the landscape awash in the golden hue of the setting sun. It had been three demanding days of legal rigmarole, society gatherings, and business affairs. Henry had attended to a string of meetings while Adrian had navigated the labyrinthine bureaucracy to secure his marriage license.

The carriage pulled up in front of Henry's home. Its imposing structure was softened by the warm glow of lamps that shone from the windows. This was Henry's home, a comfortable retreat far removed from the hustle of city life.

"Successful trip, all in all," Henry mused, gathering his coat. His voice had a serene quality, underlined by the satisfaction of securing new business

dealings in the technology and wine importation industries. He was a formidable businessman, his sharp intellect always on display.

“Yes, indeed,” Adrian replied, his tone laden with an unusual gravity. “You return half a fortune richer. And the marriage license is secure.” He patted his pocket, where the document rested like a hidden treasure.

Henry paused, taking in Adrian's words, and then he broke into a smile.

“Well, my friend, that's one step closer to married life,” he said. “You've chosen an excellent partner. And remember, my council is always at your disposal, no matter the hour.”

Adrian managed a smile in return, touched by his friend's unwavering support. “I will remember that, Henry. Thank you.”

The carriage rolled away, leaving Henry waving from his doorstep. And at long last, Adrian was alone with his thoughts. The familiar road to Thornwood Manor stretched before him. His heart quickened as he envisioned the beautiful, familiar silhouette of his future home. The manor held the promise of the life he yearned to have - filled with companionship,

love, laughter.

As the lush foliage gave way to the picturesque sight of Thornwood Manor, Adrian's mind whirled with the myriad of details yet to be sorted. The arrangements for the wedding, the guests, the banquet... He felt the tickling tendrils of anticipation, intertwined with a flutter of apprehension.

His heart pounded a tumultuous rhythm as he anticipated the union that awaited him. It was an intricate dance of emotions – an intense longing to embrace this new chapter, contrasted by the uncertainty that accompanies such momentous change. It wasn't the commitment that he feared, but the weight of his role as a husband, the promise he was about to make, the profound expectation attached to his impending vow.

He leaned back against the plush upholstery of the carriage, his heart heavy with the thoughts. He had everything planned out to the minutest detail, and yet, it felt like he was teetering on the edge of an abyss, the unknown depths beckoning him.

Adrian pressed his fingers against the pocket of his coat, the texture of the marriage license soothing under his touch. It was more than just a piece of

paper; it was a passport to a life that he had only dreamt of, a life that was now within his grasp.

“Almost there,” he murmured to himself, watching as Thornwood Manor grew larger on the horizon. His life was about to change in unimaginable ways, and he found himself surprisingly eager to meet it head on, to start this next chapter. The wedding was no longer a distant event. It was real, tangible, looming ever closer as the manor came into view.

Steeling his resolve, he stared at the grand silhouette of Thornwood Manor, ready to step into the exciting unknown, fortified by the love he held for the woman he was about to call his wife.

As Adrian alighted from the carriage, a familiar, excitable ball of fur came bounding towards him. Patches, the Manor's steadfast canine companion, was overjoyed at his arrival. The retriever's tail wagged furiously as he launched himself at Adrian, a sloppy, wet tongue eagerly lapping at his hands. Adrian couldn't help but chuckle, his heart warming at the pup's unabashed affection. His mind, a constant tumult of thoughts and worries, quieted momentarily at this simple, pure interaction. His hand found its way into the thick, soft fur of Patches' coat, the familiar sensation grounding him.

“Easy, boy,” he murmured, his voice soft. “I've missed you too.”

Taking a deep breath, Adrian lifted his gaze to the imposing edifice of Thornwood Manor. It was a place that held many memories, ones he looked forward to creating anew with his bride-to-be. As he moved towards the entrance, Patches trotted beside him, a constant comforting presence.

On entering the manor, the familiar scents of beeswax, old books, and gently simmering tea filled his nostrils. It was a scent that felt like home, one he had longed to experience again. The sight that met his eyes warmed his heart further. In the cozy drawing room, the soft glow of the fire illuminated Aunt Marjorie and Annabelle, deep in lively conversation over tea.

“Ah, Adrian. You've returned,” she exclaimed, her eyes twinkling in delight. “We've been eagerly waiting for your arrival.”

Adrian embraced his aunt, then turned to smile at Annabelle. He had forced himself to put away the worries he felt for his betrothed when he and Henry had been on their way to London. But now that he had returned, he nearly melted with relief at having heard her musical laugh when he entered

the room.

“Welcome home, Adrian,” she said, her voice melodious, filling the room with a warmth that even the crackling fire couldn't match.

As he moved closer to join them, his anxieties began to melt away, replaced by a burgeoning sense of joy and anticipation. For the first time since leaving London, he felt a glimmer of peace. The sight of Annabelle and Aunt Marjorie, their laughter mingling with the comforting sounds of Thornwood Manor, was a salve to his turbulent thoughts.

And with every step he took towards them, he felt more at home, more ready to embrace the future that awaited him.

“Thank you, Annabelle,” he said softly, his cheeks warming from the inside, rather than from the fireplace. “It is good to be home.” And to be back with you...

Adrian approached the pair, the rustle of his clothing a quiet accompaniment to the soft murmur of conversation. His gaze lingered on the delicate China cups, the rich aroma of tea wafting towards him. The mundane

details, in their sweet familiarity, held a calming influence that had the power to still his restless heart.

“May I join you, ladies?” He inquired, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Of course, dear,” Aunt Marjorie replied, her voice rich with affection.

Settling down into the plush armchair, he accepted the cup of tea offered by Annabelle. Her fingers brushed against his in the exchange, sending a comforting warmth coursing through him. He allowed the conversation to envelop him, their excited chatter about table arrangements, guest lists, and floral decorations swirling around him like a buoyant melody.

Sensing his unease, Marjorie reached out to pat his hand. Her touch was as comforting as her presence, a strong anchor in the midst of his emotional storm.

“Adrian, dear, you needn't worry,” she said. “Annabelle and I have been planning meticulously. Your wedding will be as wonderful as possible.”

His gaze shifted toward her, the sincerity radiating to him in her eyes dispelling a fraction of his anxiety. He was acutely aware of the relief that her words brought.

“Aunt Marjorie, I can't express how much your support means to me,” he said.

Her answering smile was apparent in her voice, like a ray of sunshine, warming his heart.

“And it will always be there, dear,” she said.

His eyes flickered toward Annabelle, her radiant presence thawing the lingering tension within him. Her unwavering belief in their future, her tranquil grace amidst the chaos, filled him with gratitude. It was her trust in him, her unspoken promise of companionship, that kept him steady amidst the tides of uncertainty.

“Thank you, Aunt Marjorie,” he murmured, his voice laced with emotion. His fingers tightened around the cup, the smooth porcelain a stark contrast to the turmoil of his thoughts.

His heart was a battleground of emotion, gratitude and relief warring with the remnants of unease. Despite the assurances, despite the evident progress in the preparations, a sliver of uncertainty clung to him like a stubborn shadow. It was the fear of the unknown, the fear of stepping into uncharted territory.

He took a sip of his tea, the warmth spreading through him, much like the warmth of the company he was in. There was comfort here, in this room, with these people who loved him. It made him believe that perhaps, despite his fears, everything would indeed turn out to be just as wonderful as they promised.

Their conversation flowed as freely as the tea in their cups, the cozy atmosphere of the room punctuated with bursts of laughter and shared anecdotes. And then, as if on a whispered promise of the summer breeze, Annabelle mentioned the upcoming village summer fair. Her eyes danced with an unspoken excitement, her voice carrying a note of anticipation that was impossible to miss.

“The summer fair,” she breathed, a smile playing at her lips. “It’s

always such a delight. The villagers put in so much effort to make it a grand affair. The games, the food, the music - there's a certain magic in the air.”

Adrian listened as she lost herself in the memory, her enthusiasm infecting him. He could almost hear the laughter of the villagers, the rhythmic strumming of a lute, the sizzle of food cooking over open fires. For a moment, his heart was transported to the vibrant ambiance of the village fair, the sounds and smells playing out vividly in his mind's eye.

Before he could dwell further, Aunt Marjorie, in her typical, vibrant manner, seized the moment.

“Well, Adrian, you should accompany us,” she said. “It's been ages since you last attended, and besides, what better opportunity to be seen publicly as an engaged couple?”

Her words took a moment to sink in, and when they did, they left him grappling with a tempest of emotions. A public appearance as a couple? The notion struck him with a sudden wave of uncertainty.

In the depth of his silence, his mind was a tumultuous sea. To be seen,

to be recognized as Annabelle's intended, filled him with a strange sense of trepidation. But there, amidst the churning doubts, glimmered a beacon of comfort. A vision of their shared future, crafted from shared interests and mutual respect, dawned upon him, softening the sharp edges of his apprehension.

Despite the blindness that shrouded his world, he yearned to give Annabelle more than just companionship. He yearned to walk with her, hand in hand, towards a future built on shared laughter, shared dreams, and the shared joy of simple pleasures like attending a village fair.

He glanced toward Annabelle, her radiant joy lighting up the room. He wanted to experience that joy with her, to be a part of the excitement that the summer fair promised. Even if the thought made his heart thump with anxiety, even if it was a step into the unknown, he found himself agreeing.

“I'd be honoured to attend the fair with you, Annabelle,” he said, his voice steady, his eyes locked on hers.

And in her smile, in the sheer happiness that radiated from her at his words, he found his fears subsiding, replaced by a strange sense of peace.

Despite his uncertainties, he was ready to embark on this new journey, a journey that promised to be as exciting and vibrant as the village summer fair.

Chapter Twenty

The dawn of the village fair day arrived, the sun throwing its delicate tendrils over the dew-kissed English countryside. Annabelle's heart fluttered like a bird caught in a cage. Excitement danced within her, mingled with a trepidation that dampened her spirit. Today was the day. Today she would be announcing her engagement to Adrian, the kind-hearted yet blind man who had saved her from a life with an aging, despicable nobleman. She stole a glance at the mirror, her eyes shining in anticipation.

Padding softly across her chamber's polished oak floor, she pulled out a cream satin dress from her wardrobe, its delicate lace trim whispering of innocence and propriety. She called for Sarah, her heart skipping as she imagined the day ahead. She knew that Penelope would be there, helping her mother. And Adrian, the man who was to be her husband, would be in attendance, as well.

Once Sarah arrived, she helped her mistress to dress. Annabelle was as nervous as she was excited. She knew that the village would be alight with gossip about her sudden engagement to the duke. She didn't mind; there were far worse men to be engaged to, such as Lord Spencer. But what would they think of the situation? What rumors would spread about an engagement that occurred before a courtship period?

But what would they have thought about an engagement to Lord Spencer? She thought with a shudder. She knew that arranged marriages for young ladies by their guardians were very common. But a woman of her age with an elderly nobleman like Lord Spencer would spark chatter within the ton just as quickly as a fast engagement to a blind duke. And she didn't mind being betrothed to Adrian. In fact, she was coming to rather enjoy the idea.

Annabelle shivered as Sarah pulled Annabelle's chestnut curls into a simple updo, a few tendrils left to cascade gently around her flushed cheeks. As she pushed the heavy wooden door open, the unmistakable scent of stale ale assaulted her senses. There in the cold, silent hallway stood Oswald, a figure silhouetted by the feeble rays of the morning sun seeping through the narrow windowpanes. He held a clear bottle of liquor clutched tightly in his hand.

His bloodshot eyes narrowed at her, his lips curving into an insidious sneer.

“Off to sell yourself to a blind man, are we now, Annabelle?” he slurred, the venom in his words only rivaled by the stench of liquor on his breath.

Her heart pounded in her chest, a surge of righteous indignation flaring within her. He had given his blessing for Adrian to marry her. She supposed that her uncle might have made such an agreement under the influence of the same thing he held in his hand right then. A lesser woman would have wilted under his loathsome remarks, but Annabelle possessed a resilient nature.

Raising her chin, she met his sneer with a cold, defiant gaze.

“Adrian may lack sight, Uncle,” she said. “But he has more vision, more kindness in his heart than you could ever aspire to possess,” she retorted, her voice firm, her eyes sparkling with defiance. Her heart thundered in her chest, the words she'd held back so long now echoing in the narrow corridor.

The sneer faltered on Oswald's face, replaced by a stunned expression. She held his gaze a moment longer, allowing the impact of her words to settle in. She then turned on her heel, her muslin skirts swishing around her ankles, leaving Oswald standing there, drunk, and speechless.

As she made her way to the staircase, Annabelle let out a shaky breath. She was a woman of courage, a woman who defended those she cared for. With each step she took, her anticipation for the fair – and her future with Adrian – grew, the apprehension slowly fading into the background. Oswald's taunts were but an unpleasant blip in her day, a test of her resolve. And she was determined to come out victorious.

After her turbulent encounter with Oswald, the solid oak door of Annabelle's family home opening to reveal Adrian, Marjorie, and Patches, the loyal dog, was a welcome relief. Adrian was poised as always, his tall frame dressed in tasteful, though not flashy attire, his countenance calm despite his lack of sight. Patches, ever faithful, wagged his tail merrily, his glossy coat shining in the soft morning light. And Marjorie, her rosy cheeks glowing with mirth, her eyes twinkling with an untold secret.

“Good morning, darling,” Marjorie said, looking her over and embracing her. “That cream coloured dress looks wonderful on you. And your simple hairdo with the lovely ringlets is just perfect for the fair.”

Annabelle pulled back, looking at Marjorie strangely for a moment. Then it occurred to her. Marjorie was used to describing things for Adrian. He was looking from her to his aunt, which silently confirmed her quiet theory. Instead of reacting, she simply curtsied to her future aunt-in-law and smiled brightly.

“Thank you kindly, Marjorie,” she said. “And I must say that pink silk looks good on you, as well.”

At this, Adrian grinned brightly. Her heart skipped as he bowed to her.

“Aren’t I so fortunate, attending the fair with two beautiful women,” he said, almost shyly.

Annabelle smiled at him, wondering if he could feel the warmth.

“We are the fortunate ones,” she said softly.

Marjorie offered Annabelle her arm, as though they were old friends.

“Are we ready to be off?” she asked.

Annabelle smiled, relishing the affection she felt from Marjorie and the warmth she felt from her betrothed.

“We certainly are,” she said.

With a heart fluttering like butterfly wings, she braved the challenge ahead. Annabelle linked her arm with first Marjorie and then Adrian, their fingers brushing against each other, sending thrills of anticipation coursing through her veins. Patches, their amiable dog, trotted faithfully at their side.

As they walked towards the village fair, the air thickened with the sweet, heady aroma of freshly baked pies, roasted chestnuts, and sugared apples. The symphony of laughter, cheerful chatter, and the lively fiddle filled the air, adding to the allure of the grand village fair.

Marjorie, ever sociable, was soon pulled away by a group of giggling

friends, leaving Annabelle and Adrian to explore the stalls. Her heart pounding in her chest, Annabelle guided Adrian through the rows of stalls, describing each vibrant scene to him with loving detail.

“The Johnson's stall is adorned with the reddest apples, and the Millers have outdone themselves with ribbons and trinkets,” she narrated, her words painting a vivid picture for him.

Adrian grinned at her, inhaling deeply.

“And I don't need to see the food and treats to know it will all be wonderful,” he said.

Annabelle's heart skipped again. She was finding his smile more charming each time he showed it to her.

“I'm looking forward to some of the delightful treats, as well,” she said.

Every now and then, Adrian would stop and ask her to describe something in more detail. The softness of a plush toy, the weight of a finely crafted pocket watch, the smell of a leather-bound book. It was their world,

their shared experience. Despite the bustling crowd, it felt as if they were in their own intimate cocoon, a special connection blooming between them with each shared moment. Each giggle, each stolen glance, each brush of their fingers was an affirmation of their love.

Today, they were not merely two individuals lost in a crowd, but a couple bound by love, exploring the wonders of the fair together. Annabelle couldn't have wished for a more perfect day, a more perfect companion. As they strolled through the fair, arm in arm, each new discovery only served to deepen their bond, carving out a special place in their hearts for this day, this fair, this beautiful memory.

They came upon a gypsy tent, bathed in an exotic allure that seemed out of place in the typically quaint English village fair. Piles of intricate fripperies, a riot of colors, and glistening trinkets drew Annabelle in like a moth to a flame. Her heart pounded as her fingers delicately brushed over a small silver pendant, its craftsmanship exceptional, the cool metal winking in the sun.

Adrian, attuned to her movements, sensed her interest.

“Have you found something special?” he asked, his voice was a warm caress, a balm to the residual sting of Oswald's words.

“It's a beautiful pendant, Adrian,” Annabelle replied, her voice betraying her admiration. “A delicate silver piece with a sapphire at its heart.”

Adrian gave her another of his handsome smiles, holding out his hand toward the pendant she held.

“May I see it?” he said with a hearty chuckle.

Annabelle giggled at his little carefree joke about his sight.

“Certainly,” she said, placing the necklace in his outstretched hands.

He felt of it, closing his eyes and, she guessed, imagining its shapes and setting from his sense of touch. But then, instead of handing it back to her, he tugged her toward the merchant with an impish grin.

“It is far too lovely to not purchase,” he said. “Come, then. I shall buy it for you.”

Annabelle looked at her fiancé with wide eyes.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I brought my coin purse, and I do not mind buying it myself.”

But Adrian shook his head, giving her another grin.

“Consider it an engagement present,” he said.

Without further ado, Adrian purchased it. The pendant had now become a testament of Adrian's love, the weight of it causing her heart to flutter in her chest.

They continued to meander through the stalls, the aroma of freshly baked goods leading them to a familiar figure. Penelope, her blonde curls caught in a sunbeam, was manning her mother's pie stand, an assortment of pies with golden crusts and tantalizing fillings lining the stand.

Her joy at seeing them was palpable.

“Annabelle, Adrian,” She greeted them warmly. “You must try Mother's blackberry pie. It's the best batch yet.”

Annabelle turned to Adrian inquisitively, who was already nodding eagerly.

“That sounds delightful,” he said. “Annabelle did say that she was looking forward to the treats here. And I could go for some pie just now, as well.”

Annabelle blushed, glancing at her betrothed. He had remembered what she said about wanting to enjoy treats. He had bought her a lovely pendant. And he looked happier than she thought she had ever seen him; so much so that she was able to forget that passersby were staring and whispering about the two of them.

Penelope served them each a slice of the warm, fragrant pie. As she handed Annabelle hers, she noticed the pendant, which was still in her hand. Annabelle explained how she got it, and Penelope gave Adrian an approving look.

“Well, here, let me help you put it on,” she said.

Adrian bowed, giving her a warm smile.

“That is very kind of you,” he said, giving Annabelle a wink. “I’m afraid my eyes aren’t quite what they used to be.”

Annabelle laughed again. She could hardly believe how comfortable Adrian was with his dull sight in public. Was it possible that she made him feel more comfortable with himself, as he did for her?

Penelope fastened the necklace on Annabelle, and they cooed over how lovely it was. Annabelle couldn’t deny that, as she stood arm in arm with a duke, the duke who would soon make her a duchess, she felt like a princess. As they chatted and enjoyed Penelope's spirited company, Henry, a jovial giant of a man with rosy cheeks and a hearty laugh, joined them. He carried with him a pitcher of lemonade, the refreshing aroma of citrus mingling with the sweet scent of pies.

“Why don't we get out of this heat and enjoy these treats under the old oak tree?” He suggested, his friendly demeanor acting like a beacon, inviting

them towards the shade of the massive tree nearby.

Guided by Henry, they made their way towards the tree, its giant leaves rustling in the summer breeze. As they sat under the dappled shade, laughter filled the air, the cheerful chit-chat a pleasant accompaniment to the sweet lemonade and delectable pies. Adrian's hand found hers, a silent declaration of his love, a promise of a future together. Annabelle could not help but feel content, her heart swelling with happiness at the simple pleasures of the fair, the company, and the unspoken love that bloomed between her and Adrian.

As they sat under the old oak, the leaves providing a cool reprieve from the summer sun, the camaraderie between them was palpable.

“I propose a toast,” Henry suddenly said boisterously. “My dearest friend is betrothed to one lovely, sweet young lady. I wish to be the first to formally offer my congratulations, and to wish them a very long and happy marriage.”

Annabelle blushed, glancing at Penelope, who was nodding in agreement.

“They certainly make a lovely couple,” she said, lifting her own lemonade cup. “Congratulations to the both of you.”

The congratulations from Henry and Penelope, the tangy sweetness of the lemonade, and the presence of her beloved Adrian, Marjorie, and good-hearted Henry combined to create a bubble of contentment around Annabelle.

Each compliment, each warm wish for her and Adrian's future, made her heart flutter. She was part of a world that cared for her, people who cherished her, a man who loved her. Her heart was alight with the warmth of the love around her. She couldn't imagine a moment more perfect, fuller of happiness.

However, the moment was tainted by the appearance of Cynthia and Sophia. Annabelle spotted them from the corner of her eye. Their hushed whispers and spiteful glances in their direction felt like a splash of cold water. A cloud seemed to darken the sunlit afternoon as her contentment began to dissipate, replaced by a sinking feeling of apprehension.

She steeled herself, refusing to allow their petty malice to ruin this precious moment. She wouldn't dignify their jealousy with a response. After

all, they were the ones who were not privy to the genuine happiness she was experiencing.

Redirecting her attention to the laughter and lighthearted conversation around her, Annabelle felt the comforting presence of her friends and her beloved. The sour notes from Cynthia and Sophia seemed to fade into the background, overshadowed by the protective bubble of warmth and affection.

She caught Adrian's hand, squeezing it gently, and he responded in kind. His smile, radiant despite his blindness, was a silent promise - they were together in this, against all the world's cynicism and cruelties. As Annabelle leaned her head against his shoulder, the joy and love she felt was not merely a fanciful dream but a reality, a reality that no one, not even Cynthia and Sophia, could shatter.

Chapter Twenty-one

The melody of laughter and lively discourse filled the golden afternoon, drifting lazily through the dappled shade under the old oak tree where Adrian reclined. Around him, his friends held court, their jests and debates as lively and colorful as the silks and satins they wore. Their merriment was a sweet symphony to the senses, yet within Adrian a serene calm prevailed.

His dimmed gaze meandered through the gathering, finally settling upon Annabelle, his betrothed. As he did his best to get the best possible look at her, her bonnet tilted to reveal her fair countenance, his heart experienced a rare serenity. In her he sensed a sparkling mischief as she engaged in a discussion with Miss Brown, their laughter floating across the manicured lawn like the notes of a sonata, the effect utterly bewitching. Adrian found his mind drifting, not for the first time, toward a peace he hadn't dared to yearn for until now.

Adrian leaned back, the rough bark of the tree a counterpoint to his tailored waistcoat, watching the tableau before him unfold. Annabelle, his Annabelle, was in her element. It looked as though her curls delicately framed her face as she laughed, a sound so rich and unpretentious it echoed through his soul. She seemed like a living portrait, a watercolor with a life of its own.

He was aware of Henry's story reaching a punchline, of his hearty guffaw, and of the accompanying ripples of laughter. He heard it all, yet he was not truly there. His world had shrunk to the small sphere that held Annabelle. It was a simple, yet profound contentment, and one that felt foreign after years of restlessness.

"Why, Adrian, you look rather contemplative. Is our company so dull?" Henry's voice, jovially teasing, pierced his reverie.

"No, not at all," he replied, summoning a smile to his lips. "It is merely that one's thoughts do tend to wander on such a splendid day."

A sly smile crept into Henry's voice as he spoke again.

“Or perhaps on such splendid company,” he suggested, his tone threaded with mirth.

Adrian merely raised a brow in response, unwilling to admit the depth of his feelings in such a public setting. He noted, however, the warmth that rose within him at the thought that his affection for Annabelle was so easily noticed. His heart, so long shrouded in winter's grasp, was finally thawing under the gentle sun of her regard.

“Yes, Richard,” he agreed in a tone that sought to close the topic, “the company is indeed splendid.” He paused, turning his gaze once more to Annabelle, imagining a flush rising to her cheeks under his intense scrutiny. It was a welcome vision, one that spoke of reciprocated feelings and mutual affection.

The vivacious assembly, indulging in their afternoon repast under the old oak tree, began to turn the tide of their discourse towards the upcoming horse race. It was a grand affair in the village calendar, anticipated with bated breath and a palpable enthusiasm that rivalled the grandest ball or the most intricate of soirees. A murmur of excitement shivered through the group as Henry, a known connoisseur of equine pursuits, began detailing the

impressive lineage of the participating thoroughbreds.

Henry, his face alight with passion, leaned in closer to the group as he described the grace and majesty of the racehorses. His eyes, normally a soft hazel, sparkled in the sunlight, their golden flecks gleaming with excitement. Adrian noted the pure elation in Henry's voice, how it rang with an admiration that couldn't be feigned.

“There's a new horse this year, a black stallion from the north. Purebred, strong, and faster than anything I've ever seen. His rider, a known and seasoned jockey, is sure to take him to the victory post,” Henry was saying, his hands unconsciously mimicking the galloping movement of a horse.

Adrian couldn't help but smile at his friend's fervor. The world of horse racing was a labyrinth of complexities, of pedigrees, and training routines, and he had to admit he was more of an observer than an enthusiast. But Henry's passion was infectious. “It sounds like an event not to be missed, Henry,” Adrian responded, his voice steady yet laced with amusement.

Henry turned towards Adrian, the hint of a plea in his eyes.

“Promise me you'll come, Adrian? Your support would mean the world to me.”

The earnestness in Henry's voice struck a chord within Adrian. It was not often that Henry asked for anything. And even though it involved horseback riding, which was an activity that still filled Adrian with great apprehension, he couldn't begrudge his friend such an urgent request.

“I promise, Henry,” he said, patting his friend's shoulder in assurance, “I wouldn't miss it for the world.”

As Henry's face broke into a broad grin of satisfaction, Adrian felt a warmth spread within him. His promise was not merely a word given in the spirit of friendship, but a pledge made from the depths of his heart. The horse race, once a mere event in his calendar, had now become a symbol of camaraderie, a moment in time where he could stand by his friend's side, echoing his passions and sharing his triumphs.

He glanced towards Annabelle, catching her eye across the gathering. Her smile was gentle, knowing. The shared understanding, the unspoken

bond between them, reassured him once again that he was where he was meant to be, with the people who mattered most to him. Adrian realized that the horse race wasn't just an event to anticipate, but another opportunity to build lasting memories with those he held dear.

Adrian listened to his friends engage in the vibrant discussion about the upcoming horse race. As they hypothesized on the possible victors and rivalries, he felt a delightful sense of companionship. Yet amidst this mirthful chatter, his attention was frequently drawn towards a figure gracefully apart from the lively huddle, his betrothed, Annabelle.

Through the corner of his eye, he noticed her stealing secretive glances his way. Each time her gaze brushed over him, his heart did an eager pirouette in his chest, an honest admission of the power she held over him. Her presence, even in the periphery of his vision, was an enchanting spell he found himself increasingly unable to resist.

With a gentle, coy flip of her hand, she cast another glance his way. A sweet, secret smile played on her lips, the corners tilting upwards in a bewitching curve. Her rosy cheeks held an inviting warmth that beckoned him, a warmth that was irresistibly drawing him to her like a moth to a flame.

Her eyes, he knew, held a world within them. He knew they must twinkle with mirth, shine with intelligence, and sparkle with an indefinable emotion that had Adrian yearning to decipher. He wished to lean in, to hold her gaze properly, to plunge into the depths of those captivating eyes, and find therein the secrets she was so subtly insinuating.

Adrian could not help but wonder at the emotions that were brewing within her. Was it mischief that had her teasing him so? Or was it affection, a tender regard mirroring his own, that had her casting these surreptitious glances his way? A peculiar joy filled him at the thought, a happiness so profound it radiated from his very core, lending a vibrant glow to his ordinarily stoic countenance.

His heart pounded rhythmically in his chest, each beat echoing Annabelle's name. Each beat yearning for a moment alone with her, a moment where he could indulge in the intense feelings simmering within him. He was not a man given to such fervent emotions, and yet, with Annabelle, everything seemed possible. Every glance, every smile from her, hinted at a deeper connection, a love that could perhaps outshine even the grandest of passions.

Indeed, he yearned to see her, to gauge the emotions swirling in her eyes, and most importantly, to assure himself that he was not alone in this dance of affection. After all, what was a dance if not a harmonious blend of two souls moving as one, each beat, each step mirroring the others? He could only hope that the rhythm of their hearts was as harmoniously entwined as his own fervent wishes.

The joyous bubble that the group had been enjoying, full of laughter and camaraderie, was abruptly pricked by the sound of approaching footsteps on the gravel pathway. Adrian's stomach tightened in a twist of discomfort even before he saw the two ladies.

“Good day, Lady Cynthia,” his aunt said. “And to you as well, Lady Sophia.”

Marjorie's greeting indicated a strained smile fixed on her face, revealing their identities - Cynthia and Sophia. Adrian's grimace was concealed by a polite nod as he acknowledged their presence. He had heard plenty about the two women, their love for idle gossip and haughty attitudes, which served as a jarring note in the otherwise melodious afternoon. He

didn't need to guess why they would take it upon themselves to approach Adrian's small group. They sought to sneer at the young lady who had tied herself to a blind man. He looked down, wishing the women would just leave.

The two ladies glided over, their rustling skirts stirring the quiet tranquility of the moment. Sophia's delicate fan fluttered in the breeze, her pale blue eyes assessing their gathered company with a thinly veiled air of superiority. Cynthia, on the other hand, held herself with an air of self-assured grandeur that felt unsettlingly out of place in the laid-back atmosphere.

"Your Grace, Miss Ludlow," Cynthia began, her voice echoing in the temporary silence that had fallen over the group. "Allow us to congratulate you on your betrothal. Quite the event of the season, it seems."

Her words, wrapped in the guise of well-wishes, held an undercurrent of insincerity that sent an awkward chill around them. Adrian's grip tightened imperceptibly around his glass of lemonade. His lips pressed into a tight smile, acknowledging her words with a brief nod.

“Thank you,” he said curtly, allowing his own voice to adopt its own edge. They were making Annabelle uncomfortable, and while he wouldn’t make a scene, he wouldn’t let that go unnoticed.

He cast a quick glance towards Annabelle, the concern evident in his eyes. She held herself with grace, the natural elegance that was her trademark, a small smile playing on her lips as she graciously accepted Cynthia's words. There was a strength in her demeanor, an unshakeable confidence that ignited a spark of admiration within Adrian. Her resilience in the face of unwelcome company was nothing short of remarkable.

In the echo of Cynthia's words, an uncomfortable silence spread around their circle. The usually jovial assembly seemed to hold its collective breath, waiting for the discomfort to pass. Adrian felt the urge to dispel the tension, to bring back the mirthful spirit that had been momentarily stifled.

An urge to protect Annabelle from the veiled barbs hidden behind polite conversation also welled up within him. A resolve began to form within him, a silent promise to shield his betrothed from the unnecessary trials and tribulations of society gossip. After all, their love was a delicate bloom, one that needed nurturing and protection, and not the fuel for idle chatter and

haughty comments.

“We would ask you to join us, but we were just getting ready to see the rest of the fair,” he said, giving a pointed look at Henry.

His friend didn't miss a beat. He cleared his throat and shifted to look up at the snide women.

“We certainly are,” he said. “We do hate to be rude, but I'm sure you understand.”

The women sniffed, and Adrian took a small satisfaction in the looks he imagined were on their faces now.

“Of course,” Lady Sophia said coldly. “Good day to you all.”

As Cynthia and Sophia glided away from their little congregation, their departure left behind a stifling silence. The once jovial atmosphere had been considerably dampened by their unsavory visit, like a cloud obscuring the sun on a warm summer's day. The remaining friends exchanged uncomfortable glances, their smiles strained as they sought to regain the lost merriment.

Adrian stared into his half-empty glass, the lemonade swirling aimlessly, much like his thoughts. In the wake of their departure, he was acutely aware of his insecurities rearing their unsightly heads. He was a man of prestige, of title, and yet, he wished he could offer Annabelle more.

He wanted to be a man of substance, a man worthy of her love, not just someone who could offer her protection under his name. He desired to overcome the darkness that clouded his world, to be a beacon of light for her. His heart ached with the need to prove himself, to validate the faith she had placed in him. Yet, he couldn't shake off the persistent shadow of self-doubt that threatened to drown him.

Just as his thoughts threatened to spiral, he felt a light squeeze on his arm. He looked down to see Annabelle's delicate fingers resting there, a silent reassurance. Her touch was as soft as a whisper, but it held a power that echoed through his being. His gaze met hers and in her eyes, he felt an unwavering warmth and belief, a silent affirmation of her trust in him.

“That was amazing,” she said, letting slip a tentative giggle. “You should have seen the expressions on their faces.”

Adrian grinned. As much as he hated not seeing it himself, hearing the pleasure Annabelle took in it made it well worth it to him.

His breath hitched, the grip of his insecurities loosening. As her fingers lingered on his arm, he realized that while his world may lack the light he desired, it was filled with the warmth of her friendship, her faith in him. His heart swelled with an emotion so profound it left him breathless. The depth of her understanding, her acceptance of him, quirks and all, was a solace he hadn't known he needed.

“Splendid,” he said, lifting his chin. “I daresay we do not require the interference of such prying meddlers on our delightful day.”

Chapter Twenty-two

The morning sun hung low in the sky as the carriage trundled along the country lane, the chitter of sparrows filling the air with a lively chorus. After the nerve-racking day at the fair the previous day, she had expected to be a wreck going back. But she had slept surprisingly well, having been able to avoid her uncle when she returned the evening before, as he had once again passed out in his parlor. And she was excited to attend the fair once more and witness Henry's horse riding event, especially since it meant another day with Adrian. She had had Sarah dress her quickly, and she was anxiously waiting when Marjorie and Adrian arrived to retrieve her, as they had the day before.

Through the window, Annabelle watched the rolling green fields give way to the quaint thatch-roofed cottages of the village. Fluttering pennants announced the much-anticipated summer fair, a wash of color against the otherwise tranquil pastoral scene. But as Annabelle turned to share her

excitement with her fiancé, Adrian, she was met with his steely silence and the sight of his far-off gaze.

Adrian's usual lively spirit was replaced with a stillness that didn't quite suit him. He sat opposite her, his forehead creased as he stared intently out of the opposite window, his usually vibrant green eyes clouded with distant thoughts. His silence was uncharacteristic and unnerving, stirring a swell of worry in her chest.

“Adrian?” she ventured, her voice barely more than a whisper, drowned out by the clamour of the carriage wheels against the cobbled lane. His eyes shifted to meet hers, but his gaze felt hollow, causing a knot of unease to tighten within her. “I hope you're looking forward to the competition today.” She felt a desperate need to draw him out, to fill the silence that was rapidly growing oppressive. She longed for the playful teasing, the warm smiles, and the quick-witted charm that were so inherently Adrian. His silence was disconcerting; it stirred in her a sense of dread she had been trying hard to ignore.

“I am,” he replied. His voice held no trace of his usual enthusiasm, and his response did little to quell her anxiety. It was too curt, too indifferent—

unlike the Adrian she knew. The Adrian she loved.

A chill gripped her heart as a dreadful thought surfaced, a thought she had been battling since the change in Adrian's demeanor. Was he having second thoughts about their impending nuptials? Was he regretting his proposal?

No, she chastised herself silently, forcing the unwelcome thoughts away. It was most probably wedding nerves, she reasoned, attempting to stifle the rising panic. She reminded herself that Adrian always seemed to genuinely enjoy her company, drawing comfort from the memory of his tender gaze, his unwavering assurance. Adrian was a man of his word, and she needed to trust him, trust in their growing friendship.

Striving to shift her mind from the troubling thoughts, she turned her attention back to the passing scenery. The village was abuzz with activity now. Stalls with colorful trinkets, games, and sweets lined the narrow streets. Children ran about, their laughter mingling with the lively chatter of the villagers, their faces aglow with excitement and anticipation. Yet, in the midst of this cheerfulness, her heart felt strangely heavy.

“Annabelle?” Adrian’s voice broke through her reverie, a glimmer of his former self resonating within the syllables of her name.

“Yes, Adrian?” she responded, trying to suppress the eagerness in her voice.

“I hope...” He trailed off, leaving the sentence hanging in the air between them like a fragile thread. He finally turned to meet her eyes, his own filled with a turmoil she couldn’t quite comprehend. “I hope you enjoy today,” he finished, his voice as soft as a summer's breeze. There was a trace of his usual smile on his lips, and his eyes were kind as ever.

With his words, an unfamiliar tension seemed to lift, leaving in its wake a renewed hope. Annabelle reached across the carriage to take his hand, offering a gentle squeeze.

“I believe that we’ll enjoy it together,” she reassured him, hoping that her words would bring some comfort to his troubled mind.

As the carriage slowed to a halt, the village fair bursting into life around them, she silently pledged to herself to understand the cause of Adrian's

disquiet. After all, love was not merely about sharing the joys, but facing the fears as well - together. She would stand by Adrian through this mysterious turmoil, for in her heart, she knew they were stronger together.

As their carriage came to a stop, the world outside brimmed with vibrancy and laughter. It was a scene right out of a watercolor, alive with motion and filled with the murmur of countless conversations. The fair was in full swing, an intoxicating blend of colors and sounds that made Annabelle's heart flutter with excitement.

They had barely stepped down from their carriage when a familiar voice rang through the air.

“Annabelle! Adrian!” called Penelope, her honeyed curls bouncing as she hurried towards them, her face alight with a warm welcome. Behind her, her parents, the esteemed Mr. and Mrs. Brown, trailed at a more leisurely pace, their faces wreathed in smiles.

“Good morning, Annabelle,” Mrs. Brown said, curtsying to her.

Annabelle returned the greeting, smiling warmly at the parents of her

dearest friend.

“I believe you remember my fiancé, the Duke of Thornwood,” she said, blushing as she spoke the words.

Mr. Brown stepped forward, bowing politely before offering his hand. Annabelle gently helped Adrian take it, and the duke beamed at Mr. Brown.

“It is a pleasure to formally meet you,” he said, turning to smile at Penelope’s mother. “The pie yesterday was just divine.”

Mrs. Brown smiled sweetly, curtsying again.

“You are very kind,” she said. “I’m delighted that you enjoyed it.”

With her friend’s arrival, Annabelle's spirits lifted. Penelope's energetic chatter filled the air, a comforting contrast to Adrian's silence during their journey. In the company of her dear friend and her parents, Annabelle felt a soothing sense of normality return, brushing away her worries, if only temporarily.

Hand in hand, they wove their way through the crowd towards the racetrack, their anticipation mirrored by the eager faces of the assembled spectators. Their eyes were drawn to the majestic stallions, muscles rippling beneath gleaming coats, their breath fogging up in the morning air. Annabelle's heart pounded in sync with the rhythmic thudding of hooves against the grassy earth, the atmosphere electrified by the promise of the thrilling race to come.

It was then that Henry and his mother, Nancy Harrington, made their appearance, their beaming faces unmistakable in the crowd. Mrs. Harrington, with her magnificent plumed hat and the sparkle in her eyes, was always an undeniably striking figure. And Henry, with his infectious laugh and boundless enthusiasm, was a joy to be around. And the smile that lit up Adrian's face flooded Annabelle with relief. The palpable energy they brought with them acted as a balm, dispelling the last vestiges of the morning's unease.

“Ho, Adrian! Annabelle!” boomed Henry, his voice carrying easily above the excited chatter. “Isn't this just the most splendid sight? Look at these fine steeds!” He gestured toward the horses, his face animated with anticipation. Annabelle couldn't help but smile at his boyish excitement, so

reminiscent of the childhood she had shared with Penelope.

Next to her, she felt Adrian relax, his arm loosening around her waist as he joined in Henry's laughter. In that moment, she saw a glimpse of the Adrian she loved - carefree and joyful, his worries momentarily forgotten. And though questions still lingered in the back of her mind, she allowed herself to bask in the temporary reprieve, deciding to seize the joyous moment that the fair had to offer.

"Let the races begin!" Henry's mother announced grandly, her cheer echoed by the crowd. With a flutter in her heart, Annabelle turned her attention to the starting line. Today, they would set aside their worries and revel in the summer fair's excitement. The troubled waters would be navigated another day, she resolved, for the race was about to start, and life, for now, was meant to be savored.

The exhilaration of the race was a heady thing. The thunderous roar of the crowd as the horses surged past the finish line, the collective sigh as the winner was announced - all of it consumed Annabelle with an intense fervor. Yet, as the fervor began to ebb, and the crowd started to disperse, she became painfully aware of the focused gazes directed towards her.

Through the thinning crowd, she caught sight of Cynthia and Sophia, two faces she'd hoped to avoid. Their aristocratic features were set in stern expressions as they observed her with an unnerving intensity. Annabelle's heart lurched. Their gaze was intrusive, inquisitive, and it filled her with a sense of discomfort that was hard to shake off.

She had always found their scrutiny unsettling, their penetrating stares often igniting a sense of inadequacy in her. Though she was soon to marry into the same social strata, she could not help but feel the weight of their judgement. It was as though they held her worth, her place in society, in their haughty glances, and found it lacking. Or, perhaps, they simply couldn't see what she might see in a blind duke. Did they think she intended to use him in some unspeakable way? Or were they just repelled by their relationship altogether?

Next to her, Adrian shifted, a flicker of concern darkening his eyes. She felt the comforting pressure of his fingers on her palm, his thumb tracing gentle circles, an attempt to soothe her palpable discomfort. He, too, had noticed the lingering stares and had deciphered her unease.

“Annabelle,” Adrian murmured, his voice a soft whisper just for her ears. “Are you alright?”

She forced a smile, lifting her gaze to meet his concerned one.

“Yes, Adrian. I am quite alright,” she lied, choosing to hide her distress behind a mask of serenity. She did not wish to burden him with her worries, not when he seemed to have his own demons to battle.

However, Adrian knew her too well. His eyes still held a tinge of anxiety, his fingers tightening around hers. She admired his silent strength, his unwavering support. It comforted her, even as a twinge of guilt gnawed at her. She wished she could lighten his burden as he did hers.

“Are you sure?” he asked, glancing around with his alert but largely unseeing eyes. “Has something happened to make you nervous or uncomfortable?”

Annabelle shook her head, standing close enough to her fiancé for him to pick up on the gesture.

“I promise, Adrian. I am alright,” she reassured, trying to infuse more conviction into her words. She squeezed his hand in return, a silent promise that she could stand up to the pressure, to the stares, and to the weight of expectation that hovered over them.

As the echoes of the race died down, replaced by the resurgence of festive chatter and music, Annabelle steeled herself against the critical gazes and the nagging self-doubt. She had Adrian by her side. She drew strength from his unwavering presence, knowing they would face whatever trials lay ahead together.

As evening fell, the candles in Marjorie's grand dining hall cast a soft, warm glow over the opulent room, the gold accents glinting in the flickering light. A banquet of delicious dishes was spread out on the long oak table, filling the air with tantalizing aromas. Laughter rang out against the polished walls, bouncing between the elaborate tapestries and fine China. The room was alight with merriment, filled with familiar faces that Annabelle held dear. They had gathered at Thornwood Manor to celebrate Henry's racing victory.

Annabelle sat between Penelope and Henry, their lively banter drawing a soft smile on her lips. Penelope's parents, laughed along at their antics, while Lady Westfield chimed in with her own wit. The air was thick with camaraderie and joy, the conversation flowing seamlessly from one topic to another.

“Congratulations to my dear friend, Henry,” Adrian said, rising to toast his friend once the main course of the meal had been served. “You rode an incredible race, and you deserve the ribbon that you received.”

Henry grinned, raising his wine glass as everyone else followed suit.

“Thank you, my good man,” he said, humbly nodding to everyone at the table. “But I couldn’t have done it without the support of all my closest friends.”

Penelope giggled and blushed, giving Henry a dotting gaze. Annabelle saw the wink that Henry gave her and smiled at the two of them. They seemed to be enjoying each other’s company very much. And Annabelle thought that was wonderful. They certainly got along famously, as far as she could see. She smiled at her friend, who blushed again as she touched her

glass to Henry's. The toast concluded with a round of applause from the table.

Yet, amidst the laughter and jokes, one topic reigned supreme - the upcoming village summer ball. Speculations about the beautiful gowns, the food, and the possible romantic rendezvous filled the air with an intoxicating sense of anticipation. Amidst the excitement, Annabelle's mind drifted towards Adrian, picturing the two of them swirling on the dance floor, lost in their own world.

The rest of the evening passed in a pleasant blur, and before she knew it, it was time to leave. As she rose from her chair, bidding her goodbyes, she felt a gentle hand on her arm. She turned to find Adrian, a tender smile playing on his lips.

“Annabelle,” he began, his voice low, causing a delicious shiver to run down her spine. “Might I see you at the meadow tomorrow?”

His words caught her by surprise. The meadow held a special place in their hearts; it was where their love had first bloomed, surrounded by wildflowers and the chirping of birds. It was their sanctuary, a place where

they could escape from their duties and lose themselves in each other.

She studied his face, his eyes flickering with a mix of anticipation and the familiar hint of anxiety she had noticed earlier. She wondered what stirred behind those emerald orbs, what was the reason for this unexpected invitation. But, seeing the earnest plea in his gaze, she knew she couldn't refuse.

“Of course, Adrian. I would love that,” she responded, her voice steady despite the fluttering of her heart. She offered him a reassuring smile, placing her hand over his in silent affirmation.

His face relaxed, his shoulders dropping a fraction.

“Wonderful,” he said. “Until tomorrow, then.”

As she left the room, her mind was a whirl of thoughts and questions, her heart pounding with anticipation. The meadow, their meadow, awaited them tomorrow. And with it, perhaps, the answers to the questions that echoed in her mind, in their shared silences. With hope burning brightly in her heart, she looked forward to unraveling the mystery that was Adrian, her

betrothed.

Chapter Twenty-three

As dawn broke the next day, the enchantment of the Regency era presented itself. Underneath a warm golden sunrise, Adrian, a man of grace and charm but concealed insecurities, found himself in the idyllic meadow accompanied by his trusty steed, Patches. He was there to meet the sparkling gem of his life, Annabelle. An oasis of serenity, the meadow offered them a comforting seclusion, a refuge from prying eyes and bustling society.

Adrian gazed at the meadow, awash in soft morning light. The verdant expanse spread out before him, a symphony of nature humming quietly. The twittering of birds melded with the rustling of leaves, creating an ambient sonata that was almost as soothing as Annabelle's melodious voice.

He caught a blurry glimpse of her, a vision in a dress of soft ivory, the morning light lending a luminous quality to her already radiant beauty. He couldn't be sure. But it felt to him like each time he encountered Annabelle,

he could see her just a little better. Perhaps, it was foolish. But he couldn't deny that he loved what he did see.

He swallowed hard, overcome with emotion.

"Annabelle," he greeted her, his deep voice echoing the warmth in his heart. He leaned on his cane as he offered her his arm.

She turned, and he felt her face lighting up upon seeing him.

"Adrian," she called back, the corners of her mouth lifting into a genuine smile that reached her eyes.

He bowed slightly, smiling again as she took his arm.

"Would you join me for a walk this morning?" he asked.

Annabelle giggled.

"I would be delighted," she said.

They ambled towards the small brook, their footfalls muffled by the thick carpet of summer grass as they exchanged pleasantries. Part of him was afraid to let her see how vulnerable he felt. But another, bigger part of him hoped that the two of them, soon to be one in wedded matrimony, could open up about their forthcoming union.

Adrian was, by all accounts, the picture of eloquence. Yet, he had his vulnerabilities, his sight-related insecurities often haunting him. Would he prove a good enough husband, he wondered, unable to see the worry reflected in his azure eyes.

“Annabelle,” he began, the timbre of his voice betraying a hint of unease. “Are you... Do you ever wonder if this will work? Between us, I mean.”

She turned to him, concern etching lines on her forehead. She reached for his hand, the warmth of her touch a balm to his anxieties.

“Adrian, I do sometimes think about us,” she said. “But I believe in us. In our shared interests and ease in getting along. Yes, there are uncertainties. But there is no life without them. We'll navigate our path together.”

His heart hitched in his chest at her words. Her comforting presence was more than just a salve; it was a promise, an anchor. They laughed then, their shared mirth ringing through the air, echoing amidst the meadow's tranquility.

“So, you aren’t too afraid of marrying a blind man?” he asked. He meant the question to be lighthearted and merry. But he couldn’t mask the insecurity that slipped out into his voice.

Annabelle paused, seeming thoughtful.

“Oh, you’re blind?” she asked, her own voice truly filled with mirth, warmth, and he dared to imagine, affection. “I hadn’t noticed.”

The two of them laughed again. As their laughter dwindled to smiles and comfortable silence, their discussions grew more personal. They talked about their aspirations, their dreams. The barriers between them crumbled as understanding bloomed. The meadow was no longer just a meadow, but a place where the seeds of shared dreams were sown and nurtured.

Adrian could feel it, the stirring of something deep within him. Something powerful, profound, raw. Something he had never permitted himself to acknowledge until now. His heart pounded in his chest, its rhythm echoing the truth he could no longer deny.

As twilight painted the sky with hues of lavender and pink, Adrian found himself escorting the vivacious Marjorie and the lovely Annabelle to the village inn. This evening, the heart of the Regency era was beating in the bustling summer ball.

Adrian, despite his perceived limitations, was a figure of considerable attraction. His black and blue ensemble, well-curated, whispered of elegance and sophistication. His silk cravat sat perfectly under his strong chin, and his waistcoat clung to him in just the right way. The soft glow of candlelight danced on his face, casting playful shadows on his countenance, making him look even more enigmatic. Yet, he knew his eyes held a subtle worry.

Blake brushed some particles off the shoulders of Adrian's blue coat, studying his master thoughtfully.

“You look sharper than I believe you ever have before,” he said. “And yet, you look as though you have never been so frightened.”

Adrian sighed and nodded.

“It was one thing to attend the fair with Annabelle,” he said. “At least, during the day and outside, I could make my way around without being too much trouble for her. But tonight, we will be inside, dependent on nothing but candlelight and traces of moonlight. And we will be dancing, on top of that.”

Blake stood back, and Adrian could see the man’s kind face smiling at him.

“You worry that you will embarrass her terribly tonight,” he said.

Adrian nodded and sighed.

“I do,” he said. “We fielded some snide remarks at the fair. But I do not wish to subject Annabelle to anymore of that.”

Blake chuckled, turning Adrian around gently and leading him toward the door to his chambers, where his cane rested against the frame.

“You just said ‘we,’ Your Grace,” he said sagely. “Perhaps, you should remember that.”

Adrian thought it over for a moment before nodding again.

“Perhaps,” he said. So long as we doesn’t become I by the end of the ball.

He met his aunt Marjorie at the bottom of the stairs, and he offered her his arm.

“That red gown looks wonderful on you, Aunt Marjorie,” he said as she kissed his cheeks.

His aunt sighed, squeezing his arm gently.

“And you look so dashing,” she said. “Annabelle is a very lucky young

lady.”

Adrian blushed at his aunt’s kindness and shook his head.

“I believe I am the lucky one,” he said, and he meant it.

Setting eyes upon Annabelle when he arrived at her uncle’s home to retrieve her confirmed his notion. Up close, he could see that she wore a silver gown with a wide skirt, and that her hair seemed to glitter in brief glimpses of candlelight, as though full of diamonds. He guessed that her brown locks had been pinned up with diamond encrusted combs, and his aunt’s compliments for his betrothed confirmed it.

He bowed, giving Annabelle a crooked smile. His nerves had hardly abated. But in her presence, and with her looking as beautiful as she was, he couldn’t help feeling marginally calmer.

“You look beautiful,” he said as he gave her his free arm.

Annabelle sniffed, and she brought her face close to his so he could see her a bit better. Her eyes sparkled brightly, and there was a rosy tint to her

cheeks. He could also smell her rose perfume, and his heart nearly stopped.

“You look so very handsome, Adrian,” she said, sounding breathless.

Adrian grinned proudly.

“Thank you, Annabelle,” he said. “Let us get to the ball.”

The inn was alive with joyous laughter and gaiety. A merry tune played by the in-house musicians filled the air, tickling the rafters and setting toes tapping. Adrian, Annabelle, and Marjorie made their way to the refreshments stand, the latter two engaged in an animated chatter about the ball's opulence.

While Marjorie and Annabelle were engrossed in their conversation, Adrian found himself engaged in a chat with Henry. Their talk was as smooth as the brandy Adrian had in his hand, effortlessly shifting from politics to the latest trends in literature.

“You really must consider attending a play at the theater,” Henry said, patting his friend gently. “Trust me, the actors perform such wonderful renditions of Shakespeare's plays that you don't need to be able to see the

stage. I should know. Last time I went, I ended up not getting a box, but a terrible seat behind two ladies with the tallest hair I've ever seen. And yet, I enjoyed it far better than I do reading his collections."

Adrian chuckled softly. He did sometimes miss watching performers on the stage at the theater. He wondered if theater was an activity that Annabelle would like to partake in once they were married.

"I don't see the harm in trying," he said.

His amicable interaction with Henry was interrupted when he overheard an undercurrent of hushed tones from behind him. The unmistakable voices belonged to Cynthia and Sophia, two of society's notorious gossip-mongers.

"Why would any lady agree to marry a blind man?" Cynthia whispered. It didn't take long for him to figure out that the women wanted to be overheard. But still, he stood perfectly still, trying to appear as though he didn't hear a word.

"It certainly was a hasty arrangement," Sophia said. "Doesn't it make you wonder what the motivation could be?"

The whispered insinuations about him and his hurried betrothal to Annabelle twisted his gut. His jaw tightened as the words hit him like darts. Was he being impulsive? Was it fair to Annabelle? Doubts sprouted like weeds in the garden of his mind.

His hand instinctively clenched around his glass, the cool exterior contrasting the burning anger that surged through him. He knew the malicious whispers were baseless, an idle chatter of bored socialites, but they stung, nonetheless. His gaze shifted from Henry to the crystalline contents of his glass, its amber hues mirroring his turmoil.

“Betrothed out of desperation...” another voice snickered.

“More interested in her inheritance than her heart,” said still another.

The voices were like bees buzzing around a hive, relentless, intrusive. Adrian willed himself to block them out, but they echoed in his mind, each word amplifying his insecurities.

His gaze found Annabelle, radiant and joyous, unaware of the vile

whispers around them. He saw not an obligation but a woman he'd grown to admire and cherish. His heart clenched painfully at the thought of her being maligned because of him.

In the sea of glittering gowns and tailcoats, beneath the merry tunes and the joyful clatter, Adrian fought an invisible battle. It was not just a fight against society's judgments but also against his own nagging doubts. Yet, as he looked at Annabelle, her laughter cutting through his insecurities, he knew he was ready to brave the storm for her. After all, love demanded courage, and Adrian was not one to shy away from a challenge.

The rumors whispered by Cynthia and Sophia filled Adrian's mind, pulsating like a second heartbeat. A growing wave of protectiveness washed over him, a fierce instinct that dwarfed his own insecurities. It was accompanied by a burgeoning affection for Annabelle, a feeling that was no longer just an echo in his heart but a full-blown symphony.

He decided then, amidst the laughter and music, he would not let these false rumors stand unchallenged. No, he would prove his love for Annabelle, not with words, but with actions, making his intentions clear to her and to the world.

The dance floor called to him, a colorful sea of twirling gowns and tailcoats, bustling under the golden glow of chandeliers. Although his sight limited his view, he was no stranger to the rhythm and tempo of the music, the ebb and flow of the dance. He could feel the vibrations under his feet, the melodic rise and fall like a pulsing heart beneath the polished wooden floor. He just had to pray that would be enough to get him through a dance with Annabelle.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he turned to Annabelle, who stood by his side, her arm looped through his. His heart pounded in his chest like a drum.

“Annabelle,” he began, his voice laced with an undercurrent of determination, “may I have this dance?”

He sensed her surprise, felt her turn to look at him. A moment of silence hung between them, stretching thin like a thread on the brink of breaking. Then he felt her warm hand squeeze his arm, a gesture of reassurance that fueled his courage.

“Adrian, I... of course.” Her voice was soft, gentle, and laced with a hint of uncertainty. Yet, there was a definitive yes.

The heat of a blush rose to his cheeks. He knew the murmurs this would cause. A blind man on the dance floor was unusual, indeed. However, the glimmers of apprehension in him were quickly doused by the sheer resolve to show the world his genuine affection for Annabelle.

As he guided her towards the dance floor, his heart echoed the rhythm of the music. Each beat was a reassurance, each note a balm to his insecurities. There, amidst the crowd, he held Annabelle close. He could hear the whispers already, but their tone had changed. Surprise replaced malice, and amidst the murmurs, there was a sense of respect.

As the first notes of the waltz filled the ballroom, Adrian's heart raced in tandem. Anxiety buzzed at the back of his mind, like a specter, threatening to overshadow his resolve. Each step held a potential blunder, a slip that could embarrass not just him but Annabelle as well.

Yet, as he held her hand, a sense of calm washed over him. It was not the cool confidence of a man who had danced a thousand dances, but the

quiet certainty of a man who knew he held his world in his arms. He could not see her, but he could feel her - the warmth of her hand, the silkiness of her gown against his fingertips, the delicate fragrance of her perfume mingling with the ballroom's floral decor.

Together, they moved, the grandeur of the room fading into insignificance. To Adrian, there was only the music, the pulse of the waltz reverberating through them. Their bodies swayed, two separate entities merging into one fluid motion.

The doubts and murmurs were there, whispered words darting around the room like invisible sparks. But with each passing moment, each swing and turn, they mattered less and less. In their place, a tangible sense of awe and respect filled the room. The whispers grew softer, the hushed tones replaced by the captivating spectacle of their dance.

The fear of blunders retreated, beaten back by the harmony between them. They moved in sync, their steps weaving a tapestry of their shared emotions on the dance floor. The rhythm of the waltz was in their hearts, guiding their bodies in a symphony of movement and emotion. It was as if the music understood their story, each note speaking of their burgeoning

bond, their steadfast courage, their unspoken affection.

As the final notes of the waltz filled the room, Adrian held Annabelle close. He could feel her heartbeat against his chest, as quick and fluttery as his own. He knew then, amidst the applause and the shared smiles, their dance was not merely a dance. It was a testament, a proclamation to the world of their deepening bond.

“Wow,” Annabelle breathed as Adrian reluctantly released her and offered his arm once more. “That was wonderful.”

Adrian wasn't sure if he could be heard over the sound of his pounding heart. But he smiled brightly at his fiancée, his cheeks burning with her compliment, the movement of the dance, and the passion of the music that was still ringing in his head.

“It certainly was,” he said softly.

Chapter Twenty-four

The morning sun pierced through the velvet drapes, casting a gentle glow upon the viridian wallpaper and the intricate rosewood furnishings. Annabelle stirred from her slumber, her long lashes fluttering open as the new day beckoned her from her dreams. The satin sheets rustled against her delicate form, like whispers in the wind of a love sonnet only the night could compose. The previous evening's events rolled over her like a surging tide, causing her heart to flutter beneath her lace-adorned bodice.

A fleeting smile flitted across her lips as the image of Adrian's handsome visage danced through her memory, his glossy hair and enchanting blue eyes as clear as if he stood before her that very moment. The sensation of his strong, warm hand, so gentle against her waist, seemed to linger upon her skin. A tremor ran through her, awakening her senses to a crescendo, rendering her heart into a melody only he could command. She could still hear the hypnotic strains of the waltz they'd shared, her steps guided by his

confident lead. It was a dance that promised intimacy, vulnerability, and the whispers of a romantic tale yet unwritten.

However, the cruel sting of reality intervened, the vicious undertow of society's whispers threatening to pull her under. Sophia and Cynthia's insidious insinuations flooded her mind, their poisonous darts casting an ominous pall over the cherished memory of her waltz with Adrian. Their words hung in the air like a harsh winter frost, nipping at the budding flower of affection she held for Adrian.

What if there was truth in their spiteful rumors? What if he was only marrying her because of his difficulties finding a wife with his blindness? Or what if Adrian's courteous attention was but a farce, offered to her only because he pitied her and her situation? The very thought of it threatened to shatter the fragile sanctuary her mind had woven around their shared moment.

Yet, amid the turmoil, a flame refused to be extinguished. It flickered resiliently in the darkest corners of her heart, fueled by the warmth that Adrian's touch had ignited. The security of his arms around her, the sincerity in his gaze, the husky timbre of his voice after their dance; they all spoke of a

man far removed from the loathsome, troublesome man people whispered about him being.

She heaved a sigh, a cloud of uncertainty hanging heavily over her. Her heart wished to believe in the charming nobleman who had swept her off her feet in the moonlit ballroom. Yet, her mind was burdened with the unsavory possibilities. She knew she shouldn't let whispers and rumors bother her. But she was still getting to know Adrian, and she had never been under such societal scrutiny. If any of the rumors were true, she didn't know what she would do.

Nevertheless, despite the threat of impending heartbreak, a sentiment fought against the onslaught of her doubts. It was an emotion born from an intimate dance, from stolen glances, and quiet laughter shared beneath the twinkling chandeliers. It was a feeling that dared to challenge the status quo, that dared to dream of a love that could withstand the trials of time and the venom of wagging tongues.

As the morning sun reached its zenith, casting a radiant glow on the quiet serenity of her chamber, Annabelle realized that no matter the truth behind the rumors, she was irrevocably, profoundly affected by Adrian. For

better or for worse, her heart seemed to have chosen its course, and all she could do was hold on for the tumultuous journey that lay ahead.

Lost in the labyrinth of her conflicted thoughts, Annabelle felt a magnetic pull towards the solace of the outdoors. The meadow, with its golden expanse, dotted with wildflowers and bathed in the midday sun, promised a tranquil refuge from the turbulent waves of her mind. Donning her straw bonnet and a simple muslin dress, she left her room, her footfalls light against the polished oak floorboards.

The manor was quiet, save for the muted rustle of housemaids and distant clatter of kitchenware. The opulent hallways, usually bustling with vibrant energy, echoed the hushed whispers of the house and the somber echoes of her heavy heart.

As she neared Oswald's study, her steps faltered. A voice reached her, paired with the unmistakable slurring of her uncle's drunken speech. The closed oak door to her uncle's private sanctuary stood slightly ajar, and she could distinguish the silhouettes of two men in deep discussion.

Swallowing her apprehension, Annabelle edged closer to the door,

straining to make sense of the fragmented conversation. It was a voice she recognized as belonging to Lord Spencer. Lord Spencer, a name that brought forth full-body tremors from Annabelle. She had thought to never see or hear from him again, after her uncle had accepted Adrian's proposal for her hand in marriage.

The pieces of conversation she caught sent a chill down her spine. "Deal...hand in marriage...marital rights..." The words hung heavily in the air, a chilling realization dawning on her with the cold clarity of a winter's morning.

She stood rooted to the spot, the blood draining from her face. Her heart pounded relentlessly in her chest, a wild symphony of terror and betrayal. She felt sick, the horrifying truth unraveling before her like a grotesque tapestry. She was not a beloved niece to be cherished but a mere commodity to be traded in her uncle's drunken dealings. Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring her vision, her hands clenching into fists at her side.

Every word was a dagger, each syllable piercing her heart as Lord Spencer laid bare his intentions. He had bought her hand from Oswald like she was a prized mare, her worth determined by a sum of money exchanged

behind closed doors. He spoke of his marital rights with an entitlement that made her skin crawl, his voice cold and impassive as if he were discussing a business transaction.

The room around her spun, her breath coming out in harsh gasps as the enormity of her predicament washed over her. Her dreams of love and a future filled with genuine happiness seemed to crumble around her, leaving her standing amid the ruins of her innocent hopes.

Her vision blurred with unshed tears, and her body moved on its own accord. She needed air, space, a place far away from the suffocating reality she was thrust into. As quietly as she had arrived, she prepared to move away from the study. The verdant meadow and the promise of solitude beckoned her more fiercely than ever, the only balm to her bleeding heart. Her beloved waltz with Adrian, their intimate connection, all seemed a world away as she tried to pull herself away from the conversation within the study, her face pale and damp.

She was a pawn in Oswald's game, it seemed, and Annabelle's mind raced wildly. Would her uncle now take away the only hope she'd have of a happy future? She had thought her worries were over regarding Lord

Spencer. Had she been wrong? Would he make a better offer for her hand than Adrian had?

Before she could force herself to move, however, she heard her uncle speak to Lord Spencer again.

Under the stark light of the conversation within, Oswald's study took on a sinister guise. Every inch of it seemed to scream of his betrayal, the gilded edges of the furniture, the plush rugs, the thick velvet drapes now holding her captive in an ugly reality. Her uncle, who was supposed to protect her and her best interests, now stood before her worst nightmare with a confession that sent icy tendrils of fear curling around her heart.

“I squandered the money,” he admitted, his voice hoarse and eyes glassy from the alcohol. His words echoed ominously, a chilling testament of his negligence and deceit.

Lord Spencer snorted, cackling bitterly under his breath.

“I care not for your petty concerns,” he said. “The wedding...it cannot be called off. You promised her to me. And I shall have her. Or you will be

ruined, Ludlow.”

A shiver coursed down her spine, fear and revulsion mingling in a tumultuous surge. He didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation or the monstrous sacrifice he was demanding of her. Each word he slurred was another nail in her coffin, one more step towards a life chained to a man who saw her as nothing more than property. He had no idea she was listening. But she knew deep down it wouldn't have mattered if he did.

“Very well, very well,” Oswald slurred again. “I shall find a way to make this right. You will have what was promised to you.”

Panic gripped her, her heart pounding in her chest like a desperate bird against a cage. The walls of the room seemed to close in on her, the air growing thick and stifling. Her vision swam, the opulent decor of the study blurring into a sea of betrayal and shattered trust.

In a blind frenzy, Annabelle bolted, fleeing from her home, her sanctuary turned into prison. The gravel crunched under her feet as she ran, the air a chilling contrast against the heat of her teary cheeks. The path was familiar yet foreign, her house a mere shadow of the haven she once knew.

She ran without thought, without direction, driven by an instinctive desire for solace.

Thornwood provided the refuge she sought.

Marjorie's heart as vast as the blue sky, her comforting presence a soothing reprieve when Adrian had gone to London to procure their wedding license, when Annabelle had been too uncomfortable to spend more time around Oswald than had been necessary. The butler turned to lead her inside, but Marjorie came to see what the commotion was. Seeing Annabelle's disheveled state, her bonnet askew and dress rumpled, Marjorie rushed towards her, worry creasing her usually serene face.

“Good heavens, darling,” Marjorie exclaimed, her gray eyes wide with alarm. “What on earth happened?”

Annabelle couldn't find the strength to voice her plight, the horrendous reality too raw to be articulated. She shook her head, tears streaming down her face in a silent confession of her despair.

Marjorie didn't press her for an explanation. Instead, she opened her

arms, enveloping Annabelle in a warm embrace. Her touch was tender, soothing the jagged edges of her broken spirit. Amid the revelations that turned her world upside down and the harsh reality of her circumstances, Marjorie's comforting touch provided an oasis of calm in a storm-ravaged sea.

In the safety of Marjorie's arms, Annabelle let herself crumble, her sobs echoing through the house. It was a silent surrender, a moment of vulnerability in the face of an unforgiving reality. But as the tears stained Marjorie's dress and her sobs subsided into shaky breaths, Annabelle felt a small flicker of hope ignite within her. She was not alone, and though the path before her was uncertain and terrifying, she was determined to face it with courage. When she could finally speak, she told Marjorie everything she had overheard just moments prior. She had no idea what the woman who was supposed to be her future aunt-in-law could do. But it was a tremendous relief to pour her heart out.

Chapter Twenty-five

Adrian strode along the verdant border of Thornwood, his loyal dog Patches trotting at his side. His footfalls rustled through the undergrowth, their harmony with nature's chorus a salve to his fretful spirit. The crisp morning air, still holding onto the remnants of the night's chill, filled his lungs and swept away the residue of stifling village rumors and conjecture that had been clinging to him.

He reveled in the solitude that the vast Thornwood offered, an entirely different world from the constant scrutiny and high expectations of village society. His shoulders dropped an inch, the strain of the past week seeming less burdensome amid the calm of the untamed woodland.

It was impossible, though, to entirely escape the reason behind his recent preoccupations. Despite the current distance from the village, he found himself helplessly reliving the dance he'd shared with Annabelle at the last

assembly. Her delicate hand in his, the softness of her laughter ringing like sweet music in his ears, the shy glances from beneath her lashes, all had imprinted onto his senses like a cherished keepsake.

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips, and his heart thrummed a peculiar beat. Although his vision was impaired, he had worked his hardest over the past few days to use what limited sight he had to see as much of her as he could. And she was absolutely beautiful. The mere recollection of Annabelle sent a frisson of anticipation coursing through his veins. For a fleeting moment, he felt her presence beside him, her fragrance, a blend of lavender and innocence, wafting in the air.

His amusement was so profound that he failed to notice the otherwise perceptible shift in Patches' demeanor. The typically gentle beast had grown tense, his playful trot replaced by a guarded stance, the ruff of his neck bristling. It was only when the animal issued a low, soft growl that Adrian stopped walking, leaning down to scratch him behind the ears.

A moment later, the tranquility of the morning was broken by a pounding rhythm in the distance. It was the distinct sound of horse hooves hammering against the earth, growing louder as they approached. The serene

woodland was no longer a haven but had transformed into a stage set for an unforeseen encounter.

Adrian's heartbeat raced in his chest. His thoughts swiftly shifted from daydreams to alert readiness, every muscle in his body coiling up like a sprung trap. Patches emitted another, louder growl, a sound Adrian had come to recognize as a warning of approaching danger. It was a growl he had heard only on rare occasions, a growl reserved for real threats. He vainly tried squinting to see who was coming. But with his vision impairment and the movement of the blurry figure, he couldn't make out a face.

His hand instinctively reached for the pistol hidden in his coat, his eyes pointed toward the approaching hoof claps, alert to the unknown. Amid the beauty of the Thornwood border, he was starkly reminded that tranquility often masked turmoil, and solitude carried its own threats. He often took it for granted that he would be safe because he was home, and because of Patches. But now, he was scolding himself for allowing such complacency.

The steady rhythm of hooves ceased abruptly, replaced by a nauseatingly familiar voice that shattered the morning's tranquility. A drunken slur, filled with ill-intent and malice, tumbled out, causing Adrian's

fists to clench involuntarily. Oswald.

The man's horse emerged from behind the cover of the trees, carrying its slovenly rider with an air of wearied patience. As Oswald staggered off his steed, the putrid scent of cheap liquor clung to him, polluting the fresh air of Thornwood. The acrid stench was so intense, it nearly made Adrian retch.

“Your Grace,” Oswald began, his voice a croaking mockery of civility. “Compromising the fair Annabelle, are we?”

His words were a slap in the face, stinging in their audacity. Adrian's heart clenched, not for himself but for Annabelle's honor, which Oswald so carelessly tainted with his insinuations. And it was already part of Adrian's insecurities. He wanted to both fight and flee in that moment. His features hardened, the affable gentleman replaced with an iron countenance.

Oswald continued, swaying slightly. His smirk was ugly, filled with vindictive pleasure.

“An expedited betrothal and wedding, perhaps?” he continued, his tone mocking and cold. “Very clever, Your Grace, but it will cost you.”

“What are you doing here?” Adrian snapped, swallowing every reaction his body itched to display.

The drunken man seemed temporarily stunned. He was silent for a long moment before snickering.

“You caused me to go back on my word to my business partner,” he slurred. “And now, you’re traipsing around in public with her as though you are already married. People talk, you know. And for her to break one engagement and rush into another is good reason to talk. And what am I to do about the partner who has already paid me for her hand?”

Adrian bristled. A demand for hush money. A threat to cancel the betrothal. Adrian’s world tilted on its axis, the implications of Oswald’s words sinking in slowly. He could feel the heat of anger rising, threatening to choke him. But the larger part of him was filled with cold dread, an icy fear gnawing at the edges of his heart. Not for himself but for Annabelle. For the scandal it would bring upon her, the shame it would cast on her family.

“Perhaps, pay your friend back his money,” he said, trying to hide how

badly his mind was reeling. “As for the rest, it seems that you are less concerned about Annabelle’s honour than you are in gaining a profit from her.”

Oswald uttered a strange screech that was somewhere between a laugh and a growl.

“Let me make myself perfectly clear,” he said as though Adrian hadn’t spoken. “Pay off my debt to Lord Spencer if you want Annabelle’s hand.”

Adrian swallowed, his hands trembling and his heart racing. At his feet, Patches continued a steady, low growl. He wanted to tell the drunken man that he would pay any price for Annabelle. But the interaction had him so flustered that he could hardly speak.

“And if you do not comply,” Oswald pressed, “The betrothal is off. I’m sure the whole village would love to hear about your little...misadventure.”

Adrian’s mind spun as he battled the shock and anger surging within him. His hands itched to knock Oswald from his smug perch, but he knew that violence wouldn’t solve this. He needed a plan, and fast. But for now, he

had to keep Oswald talking, keep him distracted. The less he thought, the more likely he'd slip, revealing a weakness Adrian could exploit.

Still reeling from the audacious threats, he was at a loss for words. The game had changed, and he wasn't sure how to play it. But he knew one thing for certain: he wouldn't let Annabelle suffer the consequences of Oswald's greed and malice. No matter the cost.

Adrian was on the verge of retorting, his jaw clenched, eyes sparking with a dangerous blend of anger and determination when another voice sliced through the tension-laden atmosphere.

“Mr. Ludlow, fancy seeing you out and about so early in the morning,” Henry said.

Adrian's loyal friend and confidant emerged from the thicket, his voice filled with stern admonishment. The surprise arrival momentarily stunned Oswald, his teeth snapping closed in disbelief. Adrian himself was quite surprised, and he gave his friend a grateful nod.

“Good morning, Henry,” he said, glad to have a distraction. “Mr.

Ludlow came to discuss his niece.”

Henry moved closer, putting himself between the two men.

“So I heard,” he said, his tone clipped and menacing. “And it sounds as though the conversation is finished. Thus, perhaps it is time for you to take your leave, Mr. Ludlow.”

There was another long moment of silence. Then Oswald, with his tail between his legs, retreated without another word. Adrian watched him go, his previous fury now replaced with immense relief.

The tension in the air didn’t dissipate entirely, but it lightened considerably with Oswald’s departure. Adrian turned to Henry, a torrent of gratitude welling up within him.

“Henry,” he said, “I cannot express...”

Henry raised a hand, silencing him.

“There’s no need, Adrian,” he said firmly. “That man is intolerable, and

he had no business bullying a blind man.”

Adrian smirked. He was aware that Oswald was also disabled in his own right and considered it a fair confrontation. But he was more physically able bodied, as well, and he could have gotten in serious trouble if they had resorted to a scuffle.

“Thank you just the same, my friend,” he said. “That man is true evil, I believe.”

Henry clapped Adrian on the back, leaning down to scratch Patches, who had returned to his usual friendly demeanor, on the head.

“Let’s get you home,” he said.

The walk back to Thornwood was filled with silence, but it was a comfortable one. The silence of two friends who knew that words, at times, were unnecessary. Adrian’s mind was still spinning, though Henry’s steady presence anchored him. The morning’s event had jolted him, yet his resolve remained unshaken – he would protect Annabelle at any cost.

As they reached the Thornwood estate, the murmur of hushed voices brushed against Adrian's ears. His heart constricted as he recognized the speakers – Marjorie and Annabelle, their tones laced with a gravity that chilled him to the bone. His feet felt leaden as he moved closer, a new apprehension seizing him. The morning's calm had given way to a whirlwind of tensions, and the storm, it seemed, was far from over.

Adrian halted at the entrance of the parlor, the strain in Marjorie's voice pulling at his heartstrings. With a lump in his throat, he silently observed Annabelle. Her demeanor, usually a beacon of joy and warmth, was a portrait of distress.

“Annabelle, you mustn't let yourself worry so,” Marjorie implored, her voice a soothing whisper. “We will not let anything happen to you. Not even due to your uncle.” But her words seemed to do little to ease Annabelle's anxiety. Adrian felt an overwhelming urge to be her source of comfort, to replace the fear in her eyes with reassurance. He could guess that Oswald must have said or done something to hurt Annabelle. That was enough for him to become fiercely defensive of her.

As if sensing his presence, Marjorie glanced up, her eyes meeting his.

She rose from her seat to quickly embrace him, putting her lips to his ear.

“She needs you, darling,” she whispered softly. “Her uncle is trying to force that horrid friend of his on her again. Go to her. Comfort her.”

Taking a deep breath, Adrian strode into the room. His gaze softened as he took in the sight of Annabelle, her delicate hands wringing nervously in her lap.

“Annabelle,” he called gently, his voice echoing softly in the quiet room. His heart pounded fiercely in his chest, a stark contrast to his calm exterior.

She looked up, surprise flashing across her face, quickly replaced by a wave of relief.

“Adrian,” she breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I didn’t... I didn’t see you come in.”

He offered her a small, reassuring smile, hoping it might bring her some semblance of comfort.

“I am here for you, Annabelle,” he said. He extended his hand, palm up, a silent vow to protect and stand by her side through whatever tumultuous events life might bring their way.

Chapter Twenty-six

Annabelle's heart raced as she tried to make sense of the swirling tempest of thoughts that threatened to consume her. Every revelation about Oswald's dealings with Lord Spencer was like a shard of ice, stabbing into her very soul. How could someone she once held dear be involved in such nefarious schemes?

As if sensing her distress, a gentle hand clasped her elbow. She glanced up to see Adrian, his eyes filled with concern. "Annabelle," he murmured, "may I have a word with you?"

She allowed herself to be guided into the manor's parlor, a room that always evoked memories of laughter, dances, and simpler times. But tonight, the dim glow of the candelabras seemed to cast shadows filled with secrets and whispers.

With each step, Annabelle could feel the weight of the revelation pressing down on her. She barely noticed when Adrian softly closed the doors behind them, ensuring their privacy.

“Annabelle,” he began, his voice gentle yet determined. “Please, tell me what troubles you.”

Annabelle bit her lip nervously. She didn’t know what, if anything, Adrian had heard before he had approached her in the parlor. But she didn’t want to keep secrets from Adrian either way. So, she told him what had transpired with Oswald earlier that day. Adrian nodded, listening, but he didn’t look terribly surprised. And when she was finished, he put his arm around her shoulders, holding her gently.

“I know that the recent happenings have been trying for you, especially given Oswald’s involvement,” he said. “I want you to know that I am here for you.”

She looked down, fingers twisting the delicate fabric of her dress.

“Adrian, how could he?” she asked, sounding like a plaintive child.

“How could he enter into such a covert deal with Lord Spencer? And for what?”

He held her closer, cupping her face gently and compelling her to meet his gaze.

“I do not know the depths of Oswald’s intentions,” he said. “But I promise you, I will protect you from any fallout.”

Adrian’s eyes, deep pools of unwavering determination, served as her anchor amidst the stormy seas of deception surrounding her. His very presence was a rock, solid and unyielding, amidst the chaos of the past few days.

She leaned into his touch, her voice faltering. She thought about what she had heard at the dance, the whispers of the strangeness of her betrothal to Adrian, combined with what she knew must be known, at least amongst a few ton members, about her former arrangement to Lord Spencer.

“Adrian, what if the truth tarnishes our family name? What if—”

“Annabelle,” he whispered, his thumb brushing away a stray tear. The warmth in his voice enveloped her like a comforting shawl. “You have nothing to fear. Not while I’m here.”

She took a deep, steadying breath, drawing strength from his unwavering support.

“Thank you, Adrian,” she whispered, her eyes locking onto his. “In this overwhelming fog of despair, you remain my one beacon of hope.”

Adrian’s lips quirked in a small smile, his hand still cradling her face.

“Always, Annabelle. Always,” he said.

And in that moment, the treacherous world outside faded away. All that mattered was the bond between them, one that could weather any storm.

Taking her hand gently, Adrian’s fingers grazed the back of her palm.

“Annabelle, tomorrow, how about an escape from these confining worries?” he asked.

Annabelle looked up at him, tilting her head.

“An escape?” she echoed, her curiosity piqued.

Adrian painted a picture with his words, his voice gentle and soothing,

“A picnic by the lake,” he said. “I’ve heard the lilies are in full bloom, and the gentle hum of nature is ever present. We could bask in the sun, laugh, and for a moment, let the world drift away.”

Annabelle closed her eyes, letting his words wash over her. The thought of sunlight warming her skin, the gentle lapping of water against the lake’s edge, and the soft melodies of nature seemed like a distant dream — a much-needed reprieve from the turmoil she felt inside.

She squeezed his hand, her voice filled with gratitude.

“Adrian, that sounds wonderful,” she said.

He leaned closer, his breath tickling her ear.

“Then tomorrow, we shall seek our sanctuary, even if just for a day,” he said.

And in that promise, Annabelle found a sliver of hope, a respite from the whirlpool of apprehensions that threatened to consume her.

Their heartfelt discussion gradually came to a close, a comfortable silence settling between Annabelle and Adrian as their mutual understanding deepened. Words had been shared, secrets revealed, and in those stolen moments, their connection had grown into something profound and unspoken.

“Shall we go back to Aunt Marjorie?” Adrian asked after a long, comfortable silence.

Annabelle smiled, wishing that Adrian could see it so that he could see how much weight he had helped lift from her shoulders.

“Of course,” she said.

They stood together, their minds still lingering on the warmth of their conversation, before slowly making their way back to the parlor.

Marjorie awaited them, her poised presence emanating grace and hospitality. As they entered, her eyes sparkled with a warm and genuine welcome, and she greeted Annabelle with a radiant smile that lit up her elegant features.

“Ah, dear Annabelle. I do hope you will stay for dinner,” she said.

There was an insistence in her tone that was as comforting as it was sincere. Marjorie was a woman of wisdom and kindness, and her invitation was an open-hearted gesture that Annabelle could not refuse.

“I would be honoured, Marjorie,” Annabelle replied, her voice filled with genuine gratitude. A smile blossomed on her face, reflecting the warmth she felt.

The dining room of Thornwood Manor was alight with the soft glow of candlesticks, their flames dancing merrily and casting a golden hue over the opulent room. Crystal chandeliers sparkled overhead, while the scent of

roasted game and fresh bread wafted through the air. But tonight, the grandeur of the setting paled in comparison to the topic of discussion: Annabelle's impending nuptials to Adrian.

Seated gracefully at the head of the table, Marjorie's eyes twinkled with mischief and delight as she addressed the couple.

"Oh, my dears," she began, her voice lilting with excitement. "I've been thinking all day about the wedding! Just imagine a ceremony at the village chapel, with all the roses and lilies we can possibly fit inside."

Annabelle clasped her hands together, her heart fluttering. The very idea painted such a serene and romantic scene. "Marjorie, that sounds enchanting," she said.

Marjorie beamed, clearly pleased that Annabelle was happy with the idea.

"And of course, we will have much more lavish decorations, as well," she said. "Oh, and I can hardly wait to put together the wedding breakfast. I will begin the preparations for that alone tomorrow. I was thinking about

wreathes and streamers, and maybe some special ornaments.”

Annabelle nodded again, her smile widening.

“You are truly very kind,” she said. “It sounds like a wonderful day already.”

Marjorie, ever the enthusiastic hostess, continued discussing the details of the upcoming wedding. Her excitement was contagious, each utterance painting a vibrant picture of a hopeful future. The silk and lace of the bridal gown, the fragrance of blooming roses, the melodies that would grace the air—all were described with a loving care that brought them to life in Annabelle’s mind.

Adrian leaned in, his voice filled with warmth.

“And if Aunt Marjorie has her way, half of England will be in attendance,” he said.

Annabelle laughed, her joy echoing through the hall.

“That might not be such a bad thing,” she said. “It would certainly be a wedding to remember.”

The thought of it all – the grandeur, the joy, the union – made Annabelle’s heart race with anticipation. Every word from Aunt Marjorie added another brushstroke to the masterpiece she was beginning to envision.

The evening continued, with each dish served becoming a backdrop to further elaborate on the dream wedding Aunt Marjorie envisioned. As the candles burned low, Annabelle felt a thrill she hadn’t known in a long time. The promise of a beautiful future with Adrian, surrounded by loved ones and celebrated in grand style, was a dream she eagerly awaited.

Annabelle found herself swept away in the whirlwind of excitement, her previous concerns momentarily forgotten. The treachery of Oswald, the weight of the secrets she bore, all seemed distant and insignificant in the glow of Marjorie’s optimism.

Throughout the meal, the conversation flowed, each word a brushstroke on the canvas of their shared anticipation. The room was filled with warmth and joy, a small oasis of happiness in a world that had become so fraught

with complexity.

As they finally rose from the table, their bodies nourished and their spirits lifted, Annabelle realized that this evening had been more than a simple meal. It had been a reaffirmation of friendship, a celebration of the bonds that united them, and a reminder that, even in the darkest times, hope and love could still blossom.

After dinner, Marjorie's conversation took on a tone that was softer, yet more resonant. Her words, laced with wisdom and affection, seemed to reach into the very soul of Annabelle, touching a place that had been clouded with uncertainty and fear.

"My dear Annabelle," she began, her voice gentle yet filled with conviction, "I hope I am not being too bold. But I would like to say that I believe we are all guided by a higher hand. There are connections, bonds, that are meant to be. Your relationship with Adrian, the trust and understanding you share, it's something quite special, don't you agree?"

Her eyes met Annabelle's, and in their depths, Annabelle could see a reflection of her own unspoken thoughts, her own hidden dreams.

“Yes, Marjorie, it is indeed special,” Annabelle replied, her voice almost a whisper, the emotions within her threatening to spill over. “I believe that I do agree.”

Adrian glanced at her, giving her a small smile.

“Aunt Marjorie is never wrong,” he said.

Annabelle blushed, looking away shyly. Marjorie giggled, no doubt sensing the special connection between Adrian and Annabelle.

“Chance can sometimes deliver us the best things we could ever hope for in life,” she said. “And I believe that when chance favors us, we are the luckiest people in the world.”

There was wisdom in Marjorie’s words, a profound understanding of the human heart that went beyond mere observation. It was as if she had peered into Annabelle’s soul, seen the fears and doubts that lay hidden, and with a few gentle words, had swept them away.

As they continued talking, an unexpected peace washed over her. The turmoil that had been churning within her, the confusion and uncertainty, seemed to dissolve, replaced by a calm that settled over her like a soft, comforting blanket.

Her heart, which had been aflutter with worry and indecision, found solace in Marjorie's words. The unspoken promise that lingered in the air was a balm to her troubled soul. She looked at Adrian, his strong profile softened by the candlelight, his face reflecting the serenity that she now felt. A smile played on her lips as she realized that, indeed, their paths were meant to cross, their destinies intertwined.

The realization filled her with a warmth that spread through her entire being, soothing her fears, calming her doubts, and filling her with a sense of purpose and hope. She knew, deep in her heart, that she was where she was meant to be, with the people who understood her, cared for her, and saw her for who she truly was.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The first light of dawn seeped gently through the gauzy curtains of Adrian's bedchamber, whispering the start of a new day. The usual symphony of chirping birds greeted him outside, a lovely pastoral aria that stirred his senses. He awakened with his heart pulsing against his chest, the rhythmic beat echoing his anticipation.

His thoughts, on waking, were solely of Annabelle. Her image fluttered in his mind like a cherished memory brought to life, dancing behind his closed eyelids as if bidding him rise from his slumber. He could see the golden strands of her hair caressed by the sunlight, her rosy cheeks rivaling the splendor of a blooming rose, and her sparkling eyes that held the kind of tranquility one found in an undisturbed lake.

Drawing a deep breath, he expelled it slowly, letting the scent of lavender and crisp morning air fill his lungs. It was strange, he thought, how

the mere idea of someone's presence could bring such a profound sense of longing. Yet he could not deny the thrill that coursed through his veins at the prospect of spending time with Annabelle. A sweet shiver of anticipation skittered down his spine, as delightful as it was tormenting.

Suddenly, the memory of his confrontation with Oswald intruded upon his rapture. Oswald's disdainful sneer, his vitriolic words intended to provoke, all conspired to cast a shadow over his thoughts. Adrian's brows furrowed, the remembrance of the ugly incident attempting to sow seeds of doubt in his mind. But he pushed the recollection away, as one might dispel a pesky fly. He would not allow Oswald's petty grievances and imagined slights to tarnish the joy he was determined to experience.

"No," Adrian murmured aloud to the solitude of his chamber. "I refuse to let him have power over my happiness."

He lay there for a moment longer, gathering his thoughts. His eyes found the ornate ceiling of his chamber, its patterns spiraling into motifs that mirrored the tumultuous journey of his emotions. But his determination was as sturdy as the oaken bed beneath him; he would not let his past mar his present. A defiant spark ignited within him, burning away the remnants of the

previous night's discord.

Rising from his bed, Adrian summoned his valet to assist him in dressing for the day. His choice of attire was a navy frock coat over a white waistcoat and cravat, the fine linen speaking volumes of his stature. Yet, his attention was preoccupied, his gaze distant, as his valet adjusted his cravat to a perfection that mirrored his anticipation.

A short time later, Adrian, Annabelle, and Patches, his loyal guide dog, strolled through the well-trodden paths of Thornwood, with Annabelle carrying a picnic basket that Marjorie had prepared for them. The earth beneath their feet was a rich tapestry of sensations, a mosaic of textures that Adrian had come to know and appreciate deeply. Thornwood was more than just a series of trails; it was a lifeline, a source of solace, a world teeming with vitality that he could explore despite his blindness.

The fragrance of blooming wildflowers, the serenade of distant birds, and the gentle rustle of leaves in the wind: all these familiar sounds and scents became the colors of Adrian's world, painting a vivid picture that no sight could rival.

Beside him, Annabelle's presence was like a warm, glowing ember, her voice a soothing melody that resonated with his very soul. Her hand lightly rested on his arm, a touch that spoke of kindness, understanding, and something more delicate, something he dared not yet define.

"Adrian, can you perceive the garden over there?" Annabelle asked softly, her voice filled with genuine curiosity. "The roses are in full bloom, and they look magnificent."

"I can smell them," Adrian said, his face breaking into a gentle smile. "The aroma is rich and inviting. To me, it's a vibrant shade of red, so intense that I can almost see it."

Annabelle squeezed his arm affectionately.

"That's beautiful, Adrian. Your perspective is so different, yet so enriching."

He turned his face towards her, knowing instinctively where she stood.

"I may not see the world as others do, Annabelle," he said. "But I feel

it, taste it, and hear it in ways that bring richness to my life. Sometimes, I think that my other senses have developed their own unique vision.”

Her laughter was soft, musical, a sound that he could bask in forever.

“I believe that, Adrian,” she said. “You see with your heart, and it’s an extraordinary sight indeed.”

As they continued their walk, the tranquility surrounding them seemed to deepen, wrapping them in a world that belonged only to them. Patches led the way, his gait confident, his senses attuned to Adrian’s needs. The dog’s trust and loyalty were a mirror to what Adrian felt growing between himself and Annabelle.

They talked of simple things, of the freshness of the morning, the sound of a distant brook, the texture of the bark on an ancient oak. Yet in those simple things lay profound connections, shared understandings that went beyond mere words. Adrian found himself opening up to her in ways he hadn’t done with anyone else.

As they reached a bench beneath a sprawling tree, Adrian’s fingers

found the familiar contours of the carved wood. He knew every inch of this place, and the memories it held. But today, it was different, imbued with a new meaning, a new promise.

They sat, and the world around them seemed to hold its breath, as if acknowledging the tenderness of the moment. He could feel her warmth beside him, hear her gentle breathing, sense the unspoken emotions that hovered between them like the delicate wings of a butterfly.

The universe might have robbed him of his sight, but it had given him something far more precious. A connection that transcended the ordinary, a love that he could feel blossoming like the unseen roses, and a richness in his world that he had never known before.

For Adrian, Thornwood was no longer just a well-trodden path; it was a journey into a life he had never dared to imagine. A life filled with the vitality of nature, the loyalty of a faithful companion, and the exquisite joy of a newfound love. All these thoughts occupied his mind as they resumed their leisurely stroll.

The morning's serenity shattered in an instant, the tranquility fractured

by Annabelle's sudden, sharp gasp. The sound was an arrow that pierced the calm, followed by the foreboding splash of water. Adrian's heart froze, terror seizing him in its icy grip. Only in that moment did he realize how much further Annabelle had gone ahead of him. The echo of the splash reverberated in his ears, a cruel taunt that mocked the peacefulness of only moments ago.

“Annabelle!” he cried, his voice a blend of fear and urgency.

Panic surged within him like a wild tempest, the darkness of his world closing in. But fear rapidly gave way to adrenaline, his heightened senses attuned to every nuance of his surroundings. Patches' urgent barks guided him, a beacon of sound that drew him towards the source of the commotion.

His mind raced, painting a terrifying picture. Annabelle, slipping on the bank of the lake, falling into the icy water, her cry of alarm still echoing in his ears. Every second was a lifetime, every heartbeat a torment as he sprinted towards the water, driven by a desperate need to reach her.

He plunged into the lake, the icy shock of the water stealing his breath, but he pushed on, his limbs guided by instinct, purpose, and love. The chaos of waves, the turmoil of his own heartbeat, and the frantic splashing of

Annabelle's struggle became a cacophony that threatened to overwhelm him.

But he found her, his fingers brushing against her arm amidst the thrashing water. A lightning bolt of relief shot through him as he wrapped an arm around her, holding her tightly against the pull of the lake. Her skin was cold, her breaths labored and terrifying in their shallowness.

"It's alright, Annabelle," he gasped, his voice ragged with exertion and fear. "I've got you. I've got you."

Her reply was a choked sob, her body trembling violently as he guided them back to shore. The echo of her labored breaths reverberated in his ears, a stark reminder of the narrowly averted danger, a haunting melody that would stay with him forever.

They reached the bank, and he pulled her onto solid ground, the wet earth beneath them a welcome sensation. She was safe; they were safe. But the realization did nothing to quell the shaking of his limbs or the terror that still clung to him like a shadow.

He held her close, his breath coming in ragged gulps, his mind still

reeling from the swiftness of the disaster. Her body was a fragile bird in his arms, her breaths shallow whispers that spoke of vulnerability and trust.

“You saved me,” she whispered, her voice a fragile wisp of sound.

“I will never let any harm come to you,” he replied, his voice thick with emotion. “Not while I’m here.”

Annabelle leaned into him, her whole body still shaking.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I got too close to the edge. I saw some fish swimming, and I went to look closer...”

Adrian held her tightly, shaking his head.

“You needn’t explain,” he said. “I’m just glad that you’re all right.”

All that mattered was the pulse of her heart against his, the warmth of her breath, the trust in her eyes. The lake had tested them, had threatened to tear them apart, but they had emerged, not broken but stronger, their connection deepened by the shared brush with danger.

Adrian knew then, with a clarity that defied his blindness, that their love was more than a fleeting emotion. It was a bond, unbreakable and true, a promise of forever that neither time nor circumstance could sever. The realization was a balm, a healing touch to the raw wound of fear, and he held it close, a precious treasure that he would never let go.

As they rested on the shore, soaked and shivering, a torrent of emotions engulfed Adrian. Relief that they were safe, fear at the danger they had narrowly escaped, and a strong wave of self-doubt that churned within him, as relentless as the lake's waves.

His inability to see had exposed them to danger. What had been a romantic stroll had transformed into a life-threatening incident in a mere heartbeat. He could feel the limitations of his blindness intensifying, gnawing at his confidence like a relentless tide eroding the shore. The question clawed at his soul: Could he truly provide Annabelle with the life she deserved, considering his blindness? Was he enough for her?

They sat together, their bodies clinging to each other for warmth and comfort. Her breaths, still slightly ragged, were warm puffs of air that tickled

his neck. He could feel the beat of her heart, the gentle press of her body against his, and in those sensations lay the contradiction to his fears.

His love for her was a tangible thing, a connection that transcended mere physical sight. He knew her in ways that went beyond the superficial, in the timbre of her voice, the grace of her movements, the kindness and intelligence that shone in her words. The accident had unveiled his deep feelings for her, feelings he could no longer dismiss or suppress.

“Adrian?” Annabelle’s voice was gentle, probing, as if she sensed the turmoil within him. “Are you well? You’ve gone terribly quiet.”

He forced a smile, not wanting her to think he was upset with her.

“I’m just reflecting on what happened, my love. It has shaken me more than I care to admit.”

She leaned closer, her voice soft but firm.

“Adrian, look at me.” Her hand found his face, her fingers tracing the lines of worry etched there. “What happened today was an accident. It could

have happened to anyone. Your blindness had nothing to do with it. It was my own fault. Not yours.”

He closed his eyes, leaning into her touch, wanting to believe her words, yet the doubt persisted.

“But what if, Annabelle?” he asked. “What if my limitations expose you to more danger in the future? What if I can’t be the husband you need?”

She hushed him with a gentle kiss, her lips lingering on his as if trying to soothe his fears away.

“Adrian, your kindness, your wisdom – these are the things that matter to me,” she said. “Not your sight. I know what I’m embracing, and I choose you, with all my heart.”

Her words were a balm, a healing touch to the raw wound of his self-doubt. He held her tightly, his love for her a flame that burned away the shadows of insecurity. But a shadow of his doubt still lingered. Would his love truly be enough to compensate for all his insecurities?

Chapter Twenty-eight

The following morning, Annabelle approached Thornwood Estate, her heart pounding with anticipation and lingering terror. The echoes of the previous day's near tragedy still reverberated within her, casting a shadow over the manicured lawns and grand facades of the estate. It was not so much the memory of her slipping and falling into the cold water, but the image of Adrian's face, pale and determined, as he reached out to pull her to safety. And there was the knowledge that he could have succumbed to the water, just as well as she could. That would have been her fault. And she didn't know if she could have ever forgiven herself.

Adrian's prompt action had saved her life, instilling within her a deep admiration for the man she was soon to marry. As she stepped onto the grounds of Thornwood Manor, she couldn't help but feel her knees go weak at the thought of seeing him again. His face had been lined with guilt as they'd parted the previous day, and she knew that he had assumed

responsibility for the incident. The accident had been nobody's fault but her own, and yet Adrian had seemed tormented by what had almost happened.

“Miss Ludlow,” the butler greeted her, bowing. “Lady Marjorie is expecting you in the drawing room.”

Annabelle's heart fell a little. She had hoped it would be Adrian waiting to greet her. Was he still upset about the previous day?

“Thank you,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

As she made her way to the drawing room, she couldn't shake the sensation that her life had forever changed. No longer was Adrian simply her fiancé; he was her saviour, the man who risked himself to save her life. The man I love, she thought with amazement and wonder.

Upon entering the drawing room, Annabelle was greeted by Marjorie.

“Annabelle, darling,” Marjorie said, her voice carrying a tremor of worry as she embraced her. “How are you feeling?”

Annabelle smiled warmly at the older woman's concern.

"I'm perfectly fine," she assured her soon-to-be aunt-in-law. "What of Adrian. Is he all right?"

Marjorie chewed on her lip, glancing toward the window that overlooked the terrace.

"Adrian is in the rose garden," she said. "He has been there since dawn, wrestling with guilt over what transpired yesterday. I fear it weighs heavily on him."

Annabelle's heart clenched at those words, but she maintained a calm demeanor as she replied.

"Marjorie, it was merely an accident," she said. "My fault, if anything. Adrian should not shoulder the blame. These things happen, and thankfully, no harm came to either of us."

Marjorie nodded, but her eyes still held concern.

“You are most gracious,” she said. “I do hope you can bring some peace to his mind.”

Annabelle glanced out the window, as well. Even though she couldn't yet see Adrian, she could imagine the brooding expression on his face.

“I will do everything in my power to do just that,” she said.

With a reassuring smile, Annabelle made her way through the grand hallways of the estate, her thoughts a tumultuous mix of emotions. The events of the day before were still fresh in her mind, but her concern for Adrian overshadowed her lingering fear. He was a good man, and she knew he would be torturing himself unnecessarily over the accident.

When she reached the rose garden, the sight that met her eyes only deepened her concern. The beauty of the garden, abloom with vibrant roses of every hue, was marred by Adrian's slumped figure on a stone bench. Beside him lay Patches, his faithful canine companion, looking up with a soulful expression as if he, too, sensed his master's turmoil.

Adrian's head was in his hands, his shoulders trembling with the weight

of his emotions. His appearance was disheveled, and his eyes, when he looked up, were filled with a haunting pain.

“Adrian,” she’d said softly, her voice gentle yet firm, “I’ve spoken with Marjorie, and I know what you’re feeling. But you must know that what happened was an accident. There is no blame to be placed on your shoulders.”

He’d stared at her for a long moment, his eyes searching hers, before he finally whispered,

“But what if I had not been there in time, Annabelle?” he asked. “What if I had lost you?”

Taking a deep breath, Annabelle approached Adrian, who sat with his sightless eyes cast downward, lost in thought. The rose garden was alive with color and fragrance, but its beauty was lost on Adrian. Patches, his loyal dog, lay by his side, sensing the tension in the air.

“Adrian,” Annabelle began, her voice trembling with emotion. “I need you to know how profoundly grateful I am for what you did yesterday. Your

bravery saved my life.”

He shook his head, a pained expression on his face.

“It was the least I could do, after not being able to see the danger and preventing it,” he said.

Annabelle’s heart ached. He was clearly agonizing over the issue of his sight. And she wasn’t sure how she could soothe or reassure him. But she knew that she would do anything she could to do that for him. She also realized that she was madly in love with him.

“No,” she insisted, sitting beside him, and taking his hand. “You must know that your blindness doesn’t make you less, Adrian; it makes you more. You saved my life despite your blindness. Not because of it.”

Her words, sincere and heartfelt, lingered in the air between them. Adrian’s face, usually so composed, crumbled, and she could see the tears that welled in his unseeing eyes.

“You truly believe that?” he whispered, his voice breaking.

Annabelle smiled, putting his hand in both of hers.

“With all my heart,” she replied, squeezing his hand.

Patches, ever loyal, nuzzled at her side, a comforting presence in this emotionally charged moment. Annabelle reached down to pet him, her thoughts swirling.

Adrian had never spoken as much of his blindness as he had the past couple of days, but she knew that it weighed on him. He saw it as a deficiency, a flaw that made him less than others. But she saw it differently. To Annabelle, Adrian’s blindness had shaped him into a compassionate and empathetic man, capable of understanding and kindness that went beyond mere appearance. It had given him an inner strength, a resilience that she admired more than anything. He had seemed so tough and unaffected when she first met him, and she could hardly blame him. But now that she had gotten to know him, she knew that losing his sight had given him a bigger heart. A heart she now wanted to keep forever.

“You must never think yourself less,” she told him, her voice firm.

“Your courage, your kindness, your understanding, these are the things that truly matter.”

He turned towards her, his face wet with tears, but his expression one of hope and gratitude.

“Thank you, Annabelle,” he said. “Thank you for seeing me as I truly am.”

She smiled, wiping his tears with her thumb.

“I see you, Adrian,” she said. “I always have, and I always will.” And I love you, as well, she added silently, wishing for the bravery to speak the words aloud.

They sat together in the rose garden, hands entwined, as the world moved around them. In that moment, they were connected by something deeper than mere sight, bound by a love and understanding that transcended the physical.

Adrian remained silent, his sightless gaze fixed ahead. The words they

had shared still hung in the air, but there was something more profound in his expression, something that went beyond mere words. His face was a study in contemplation, his brows furrowed as he grappled with emotions too deep to articulate.

Recognizing his need for solitude and reflection, Annabelle remained by his side, her heart filled with a compassion that went beyond mere sympathy. She knew that he was wrestling with something profound, something that touched the very core of who he was.

As she met his unseeing gaze, her heart tightened, and she perceived, with startling clarity, that she had fallen madly in love with Adrian!

It was not a gentle realization, but a force that struck her with the power of a thunderbolt. It was in the way he held himself, in the dignity with which he faced a world he could not see, in the kindness that shone from him even in his darkest moments. Her love for him was not a fleeting affection but a deep, abiding passion that she knew would last a lifetime.

She held his hand, feeling the warmth of his skin and the strength in his fingers. He did not pull away but allowed her touch, his face still a mask of

contemplation.

“Adrian?” she whispered, her voice filled with the love she now recognized.

He turned his head slightly, acknowledging her presence but saying nothing.

“I’m here for you,” she said, her voice filled with conviction. “Whatever you need, whatever you feel, know that I’m here.”

He remained silent, but she felt his hand squeeze hers, a simple gesture that conveyed more than words could say. They sat together in the rose garden, surrounded by the beauty of nature but lost in a world of their own. Annabelle knew that this was a pivotal moment in their relationship, a time when truths were recognized, and feelings laid bare.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a golden glow over everything, she knew that they had crossed a threshold. There was no going back, no denying the love that had blossomed between them. Her heart swelled with joy and anticipation, knowing that she had found the love of her

life in Adrian. And as they sat together in the fading light, she also knew that they were ready to face whatever the future might hold. Together, they were strong, united by a love that transcended all barriers, even those of sight and perception. That was if he felt the same way about her. But if his reaction to the incident the previous day was any indication, she suspected that he did.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Adrian sat silently on the bench, his free hand clenched in his lap, his face a mask of contemplation. Annabelle's words had stirred something deep within him, something he had long buried and sought to forget. The memory of the incident at the lake was sharp, its edges cutting into him even now, filling the atmosphere with its icy touch.

The garden was filled with the gentle whistling of the birds and the rustling of the rose bushes amidst which they sat, a comforting sound that did little to ease the tension. Annabelle sat beside him, her eyes wide with concern, her hands wrapped tightly around his. Her words had opened a door, and now they both stared into the abyss beyond.

He could feel her watching him, her gaze tender and probing. The weight of her concern was almost physical, pressing against him, urging him to speak. His heart ached with a longing to confide in her, to share the burden

he had carried for so long. His silence wasn't one of anger. It was one of long, contemplative debate. He needed to say something to Annabelle. He just hoped that it wouldn't frighten her away.

“I must tell you something,” he finally said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

Annabelle's face brightened, and she leaned forward, her eyes locked on his.

“Of course, Adrian,” she said. “I am right here for you. What is it?”

He took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. The words were there, but they were heavy, and he feared what they might unleash.

“My blindness,” he began, his voice trembling, “has been both my greatest challenge and fear.”

He paused, feeling a sharp pang in his chest as the words hung in the air. He could hear Annabelle's sharp intake of breath, feel her anxiety mounting. He knew she could be sick of hearing him complain about his

blindness, especially in reference to how it might affect her in the future. But he felt that if he were to ever move on from what happened the previous day, he needed to get all the thoughts out of his head. And he was beginning to believe that Annabelle truly cared for him, and that she genuinely wanted to help him.

“Go on,” she urged gently, her hand moving to rest on his shoulder. Her touch was warm and reassuring, and he found the courage to continue.

“I have had countless moments when it has made me question my worth,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I have wondered who would desire a man unable to appreciate the world’s beauty, unable to look into the face of his own wife.” He squeezed her hand, his eyes brimming with unshed tears.

“Oh, Adrian,” Annabelle whispered, her voice breaking. “You mustn’t think that way. Your worth is not defined by your eyesight. You are so much more than that, as I told you. You must see that, or you will put yourself through misery that a man as kind and caring as you could never deserve.”

He shook his head, a bitter smile touching his lips.

“I have felt that way,” he said, his voice strengthening. “But now, you have given me a fresh perspective, Annabelle.”

She gasped softly, and she sat up straighter.

“I have?” she asked, her voice filled with hope.

Adrian nodded, giving her a warm smile.

“Yes,” he said, his voice full of conviction. “You have shown me that there is more to life than what I can see. You have taught me to appreciate the world in a new way, through touch and sound and emotion. You have made me realise that nothing is confined to the visual, that it resides in the soul.”

A sniffle told Adrian that a tear slipped down Annabelle’s cheek, and she leaned forward, her face shining with love and understanding.

“Oh, Adrian, I am so glad to hear that,” she said. “It weighed heavily on my heart, knowing that you thought so poorly of yourself.”

He reached out and touched her face, feeling the warmth of her skin, the wetness of her tears.

They sat together, their hands entwined, their hearts beating as one, a newfound understanding and acceptance settling between them. The incident at the lake seemed far away now, a distant memory overshadowed by the love and trust that had blossomed in its wake. For Adrian, the darkness had lifted, replaced by a light that was all the more beautiful for having been discovered in the deepest recesses of his soul. His blindness was no longer a curse but a part of who he was, a part of the man that Annabelle loved. And that, he realized, was all that mattered.

Adrian rose, standing at the edge of the garden, the scent of blooming roses filling the air, his mind abuzz with the realization of what he had discovered. The incident at the lake had been a turning point, a moment of clarity that had opened his eyes to a truth he had never dared to acknowledge. She had taught him that he, too, was worthy of love, that he was more than just his blindness. Annabelle's presence in his life had been a revelation, her gentle understanding and unerring belief in him had peeled away layers of doubt and fear. And along this journey, he had found himself falling, truly plunging, into the depths of love with her.

His heart swelled with the emotion, a sensation so powerful and profound that it left him breathless. He turned, his face alight with a joy he had never known, and found her standing right behind him, seemingly holding her breath. He knew there was one more thing she needed to hear.

“And there is one other thing I wish to tell you,” he said, summoning all his courage.

Annabelle stepped toward him until their bodies were almost touching.

“You can tell me anything,” she whispered, putting her hands on his arms.

Adrian nodded, hoping that was true.

“Annabelle,” he said, his voice trembling with the weight of his confession. His words hung in the air, a poignant echo swept up by the morning breeze, the world holding its breath as it waited for her response. “I love you.” His voice was a gentle caress against the morning’s quietude. It was a declaration, a vow, a promise that encompassed all that he was and all

that he hoped to be.

Her response was another gasp, and when she spoke, he didn't need to see her face to pick up on her joy.

“And I love you, Adrian,” she whispered with a tenderness that reached into the very depths of his soul.

They stood there, lost in the beauty of the moment, the world falling away as they embraced the truth of their love. The garden around them seemed to shimmer with a magic of its own, the flowers more vibrant, the birdsong sweeter. For Adrian, it was as if he were seeing it all for the first time, his blindness no obstacle to the beauty that surrounded him. He had found love, a love that transcended the physical, that spoke to the very essence of who he was. He had found a woman who saw him, not his disability, a woman who loved him with a passion and depth that took his breath away.

And as they stood there in each other's arms, hearts intertwined, he knew that he had found his home. His journey had led him here, to this moment, to this place of acceptance and joy. He was whole, he was loved,

and he was ready to face whatever the future might hold, secure in the knowledge that he had Annabelle by his side. Emotion surged, blurring his sightless eyes, a wave of joy and relief that threatened to overwhelm him. He gathered her into his arms, pulling her close, feeling the press of her body against his, the gentle curve of her cheek as he bent to kiss her.

Their lips met in a tender affirmation of their love, a kiss that was sweet and lingering, a promise and a pledge. Time seemed to stand still as they lost themselves in each other, the world around them fading into insignificance. A jubilant bark disrupted the tranquility, and they broke apart, laughter bubbling up as Patches bounded into the rose garden, his tail wagging, his eyes bright with excitement.

“Oh, Patches!” Annabelle exclaimed, bending to pet the enthusiastic canine, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

Adrian joined in the laughter, the sound rich and full, a testament to the joy that filled his heart. The dog’s intrusion, rather than a distraction, seemed a fitting punctuation to the moment, a reminder of the simple joys and pleasures that awaited them.

“I think he approves,” he said, also leaning down to pet his beloved dog. The animal was bouncing and leaping between the two lovers, and when Adrian spoke, he began licking his master’s hand as if in confirmation. Adrian laughed again, guessing that Patches had switched to licking Annabelle by the way she began giggling again.

“I think you are right,” she said. “Oh, heavens, I had no idea I could ever be so happy.”

Adrian’s expression grew more serious, but it was with dotting love and affection for the woman who would soon be his wife.

“Nor did I,” he said. “You are the best thing that could have ever happened to me.”

Annabelle put her arm around him again, resting her head against his chest, even as the dog kept his joyful leaping around them.

“I feel the same,” she said softly.

Amidst the roses, under the soft glow of the morning sun, they stood

together, their arms wrapped around each other, their hearts united. The path that led them to that point had not been without its challenges, but they emerged stronger, their love tested and found true.

“I am so grateful for you, Annabelle,” Adrian murmured, his voice thick with emotion, “You have given me a life I never thought possible.”

Annabelle tilted her head so that her chin was resting on his chest, and he could feel her looking up at him.

“And you have given me love, Adrian,” she replied, and she was close enough for him to vaguely see that her eyes were shining with tears of happiness. “A love I never thought I’d find.”

They embraced again, Patches’ joyful barks a melody that mingled with the birdsong, a harmony that echoed their own. As they stood there, amidst the beauty of the garden, surrounded by the fragrance of blooming roses, he knew that they have found something rare and precious, a love that transcended all barriers, a love that would endure. And in her arms, he found a home, a place where he was seen, understood, and cherished, a place where he could be truly himself.

Chapter Thirty

Annabelle's heart thumped in her chest as she stood before Adrian inside Thornwood's village chapel, her hands trembling like fragile leaves caught in a soft wind. The walls, adorned with timeworn paintings of patron saints, seemed to echo the eternal nature of their love. The filtered sunlight, which danced through the stained-glass windows, cast colorful rays upon the wooden pews and created a heavenly aura around Adrian.

Adrian, the duke who was, in mere moments, going to be her husband. The man she had fallen in love with unexpectedly. The man who loved her, in return. Her soul was full, and she was beside herself with joy.

"As we stand here today," Adrian began, his eyes locking with Annabelle's, brimming with sincerity, "I vow to love and cherish you with all that I am, in sickness and in health, through joy and sorrow." Each syllable carried profound emotional weight, blurring the line between a beautiful

dream and a tangible reality. His voice trembled with the passion he felt, resonating deep within Annabelle's soul.

The words were familiar, yet spoken by Adrian, they were imbued with a profound and extraordinary meaning. A solitary tear escaped Annabelle's eye, gliding down her cheek like the delicate trail of a shooting star. Adrian reached out to wipe it away, his touch as gentle as the first rays of dawn.

"My love," Annabelle responded, her voice no louder than a whisper yet filled with a resonance that filled the small chapel, "I vow to stand by you, to be your unwavering partner in life, your solace in times of trouble and your joy in times of happiness."

Their hands intertwined, fingers meshing together as though they were always meant to be one. The minister watched them with a knowing smile, recognizing the depth of love that united the two souls.

With the vows exchanged, a wave of delight washed over Annabelle, casting a serene light on the challenges they recently overcame. Memories of doubt, pain, and struggle in the face of her uncle's nefarious efforts and plans drifted away like shadows fleeing from the sun. In their place, a calm

assurance settled in, affirming that whatever life may throw their way, they would face it together.

“You may now kiss the bride,” the minister declared, his voice thick with emotion.

Adrian’s lips met Annabelle’s, a kiss filled with promise and eternity. The congregation erupted into jubilant applause, but to Annabelle, the world was still and quiet, and there was no one else but Adrian.

As they walked down the aisle, hand in hand, the love they shared surrounded them like a protective shield. A love that time could never erode, a love that defied mere words, a love that was their truth.

In the safety of Adrian’s arms, Annabelle knew that the dream they were living was their beautiful reality. Her heart, once heavy with uncertainty, now soared with unbounded joy and a profound sense of peace. The future, with all its unknowns, did not daunt her, for she walked into it with her beloved Adrian, united in love, faith, and undying devotion.

The ceremony gave way to a festive wedding breakfast at Thornwood

Manor, masterfully orchestrated by Marjorie, and as lavishly decorated and lively as she had promised. The manor, grand and aristocratic, had been transformed into a vibrant realm of celebration. Flowers of summer hues adorned each corner, their fragrance permeating the air with a promise of new beginnings. The guests, meticulously dressed in their finest attire, chattered amongst themselves, creating a melodic hum that filled the expansive dining hall.

The event was livened by the presence of Penelope and her parents, as well as Henry and his mother. Their excitement and congratulations injected a comforting warmth into the celebration, turning the grandeur of Thornwood Manor into a cozy gathering of kindred spirits. Their laughter and joyful chatter wove an invisible tapestry of love and support, an affirmation of the strong bonds that tied them together.

“Annabelle, I am so happy for you,” Penelope gushed, fiercely hugging Annabelle.

Annabelle laughed, holding tightly onto her friend.

“I never dreamed this could be possible,” she said. “But I couldn’t be

more grateful.”

Henry clapped Adrian on the back, grinning broadly at his friend.

“I never thought I’d see the day that you got married,” he said. “It certainly looks good on you, Adrian.”

Adrian beamed at his friend, wrapping a gentle arm around Annabelle’s waist, and sending tingles up her spine.

“It feels wonderful, too,” he said, pausing to kiss his bride once more. “I could have never imagined that I could be so happy.”

Annabelle’s heart swelled with a warmth she had never known, recognizing that these people, though not related by blood, were truly her family.

After the meal, Adrian and Annabelle found themselves at the center of the dance floor for their first dance as a wedded couple. Adrian, in his pristine coat, extended his hand towards Annabelle, his eyes twinkling with anticipation. The warmth of his hand against hers sent a pleasant shiver down

her spine, a silent reminder of the promise they made to each other.

Each elegant movement and intimate step embroidered a promise of eternity. Their bodies moved as one, harmoniously swaying to the soft melody of the violin. The world blurred around Annabelle, fading into an ethereal background as they lost themselves in each other's eyes.

Every gaze from Adrian made Annabelle's heart flutter anew, every gentle touch from him amplified her love for him, and every whisper from his lips sent her on a sweet journey into a future filled with shared laughter, whispers of love, and a bond that time could only strengthen.

Her dress, a symphony of lace and silk, twirled elegantly around her as Adrian spun her around the dance floor. The dance, elegant in its simplicity and profound in its implication, mirrored the love story they had been writing since their paths crossed.

Annabelle leaned into Adrian, her head resting against his chest.

"Can life get any more perfect than this?" she murmured, nuzzling him with her cheek.

Her new husband tilted her face up toward his to kiss her gently on the forehead.

“I imagine it can,” he said, giving her a secret smile.

She closed her eyes, savoring the warmth of his body against hers, the rhythm of his heart beating in harmony with hers. In that moment, Annabelle knew, as surely as the sun rose and set, that she found her forever in Adrian.

Nestled in a quiet corner of the ballroom, their dog Patches snoozed, embodying tranquility. The canine’s gentle breathing and occasional twitch of his ear provided a serene backdrop to the lively celebration. He was a symbol of home and comfort, a piece of normalcy in their extraordinary day. Annabelle glanced his way during the dance, a smile playing on her lips as she watched him dream away, safe and content.

As the dance concluded, Adrian pulled Annabelle into a tender embrace, their bodies fitting together as if they were two pieces of the same puzzle. Time seemed to stand still, as Adrian’s eyes, filled with endless love and devotion, met Annabelle’s. Their lips met in a soft kiss, sweet and

lingering, a taste of a lifetime they were about to embark upon. There was no rush, no urgency, only the profound understanding that they were home.

Meanwhile, a voice reached Annabelle's ears, someone mentioning Oswald's name in passing. Her heart caught in her throat, memories of menace and manipulation threatening to cloud her perfect day. But the words that followed were a balm to her soul.

"He's left the village, has he?" Henry's voice floated towards her, tinged with disbelief.

"Yes," another voice confirmed, "and nobody knows where he's gone."

Annabelle breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing that Oswald had left the village, with his whereabouts remaining a mystery. The shadows of his malice and Lord Spencer's cruelty no longer loomed over her. She harbored hope never to cross paths with them again. The weight of their threats seemed to lift, leaving in its place a sense of freedom and a future unencumbered by fear.

Adrian sensed her sudden tension and followed her gaze. "What is it,

my love?” he whispered into her ear, his breath warm against her skin.

“Nothing, Adrian, nothing at all,” she replied, nestling closer to him, the certainty in her voice emanating from a newfound peace.

Together, they looked out at their friends and family, each face reflecting joy and love. The world seemed to have shifted on its axis, aligning itself perfectly with their desires and dreams. And in that moment, Annabelle knew that no matter what lay ahead, they were strong enough to face it, for they had each other, and that was all they needed.

On the other hand, Cynthia and Sophia had moved onto disseminating fresh gossip, their voices lilting in exaggerated excitement as they shared the latest scandalous tidbits. With fans fluttering and eyes twinkling, they effectively removed themselves from the spotlight, providing a humorous distraction. Annabelle couldn't help but shake her head at their antics, grateful for their presence, yet equally relieved at their self-imposed distance.

As the evening wore on, the room was filled with the cheerful clinking of glasses and the joyful melodies of a string quartet. Laughter resonated through the grand ballroom, creating an atmosphere of genuine happiness and

camaraderie.

The celebrations reached a crescendo when Henry, his face glowing with an irrepressible joy, took the center of the room to make an announcement.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he began, his voice strong and clear, “I have the great pleasure to announce my betrothal to Penelope!”

A collective gasp filled the room, followed by enthusiastic applause and cheers. Annabelle’s eyes widened in delighted surprise, and she exchanged a knowing glance with Adrian. Their dear friends had found love in each other’s arms, a bond that was now to be sealed with the sacred vows of marriage.

Annabelle and Adrian were thrilled for their friends, their own joy amplifying at the happiness of Henry and Penelope. Sharing a special toast between the four friends, they raised their glasses, the crystal shimmering in the chandelier’s light.

“To love, friendship, and the adventures that await us all!” Adrian

proclaimed, his eyes shining with sincerity.

“To love,” they echoed, the word resonating with a profound significance.

As the evening wound down and the guests began to depart, the glow of the candles seemed to cast a magical aura around the room. The reality of the love and connection they all shared was more potent than any fairytale. In that intimate circle of friendship, Annabelle felt a surge of contentment. They had weathered storms and overcome obstacles, but they had emerged stronger and more united.

Her thoughts drifted to Adrian, her partner in life, her love, her everything. They had embarked on this journey together, and now, they were surrounded by friends who were equally committed to their own paths of love and happiness. It was a tapestry of human connection, woven with threads of affection, trust, and loyalty.

Annabelle’s heart swelled with gratitude as she looked at the faces of the people she loved. The world was full of possibilities, and she was ready to embrace them all, hand in hand with Adrian, and with the unwavering

support of friends who had become her chosen family.

Epilogue

One morning, a month after the loveliest wedding Annabelle could have ever imagined, she found Adrian leaning against the grand bay window, watching as the first golden rays of dawn illuminated the sprawling gardens below. The mist lifted gracefully from the blooming roses, the world outside a mirror to the joy he felt inside. He turned to Annabelle, his eyes soft, his lips upturned in a contented smile. They were still in the glow of their first few weeks of marriage, two hearts merged into one.

“You look exceptionally beautiful this morning, my love,” Adrian whispered, pulling Annabelle close. Their fingers intertwined, with Adrian’s thumb grazing the back of her delicate hand.

Annabelle blushed, her curls cascading down her back.

“And you, my dearest, are the reason for my happiness,” she said.

Adrian set his cane, which he rarely used those days, to the side, pulling Annabelle in front of him and wrapping both his arms around her.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” he asked, sighing happily.

Annabelle tilted her head back, looking at her husband, puzzled.

“You can see outside?” she asked.

Adrian chuckled, kissing her on the top of her head and shaking his own.

“Only in my memory, darling,” he said. “What I mean is this feeling. Isn’t it just the loveliest thing that has ever existed?”

Annabelle nodded eagerly. Even after a month of calling herself Adrian’s wife, she could still hardly believe how much joy he brought her.

“It is, indeed,” she said.

Their tranquil moment was abruptly interrupted by a knock on the door. The sturdy silhouette of their butler appeared as he bowed slightly,

“Your Grace, there’s a letter for you.” He held it out with both hands, presenting it to Annabelle as if it held the weight of the world.

Annabelle’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Who would be writing her so soon after their wedding? Taking the letter with hesitant hands, she examined the seal. Her heart sank. The wax bore the mark of her father’s solicitor.

She carefully broke the seal and began to read aloud. Adrian, sensing her growing unease, moved closer, his arm instinctively encircling her waist. The room felt as if the temperature had dropped several degrees.

“Dearest Annabelle,” she began, her voice trembling, “It is with great regret that I convey a disturbing revelation. Your uncle Oswald, motivated by greed and a lack of honour, manipulated my trust and fabricated documents claiming your family estate as his own.” Her hands shook, the paper crinkling under her grip. “It transpires,” she continued, her voice barely audible, “that the estate was always destined for you.”

Adrian's face darkened, a mixture of anger and disbelief.

"That scoundrel," he growled. "No wonder he was so quick to try to trade you off like a piece of furniture."

Tears welled up in Annabelle's eyes, memories of her beloved father flashing before her. "I always felt something amiss about Uncle Oswald's sudden claim to our estate after Papa's passing. But I couldn't believe he'd stoop to such levels."

Adrian held her tightly, his heart breaking at the raw pain in her eyes.

"We will make this right, darling," he said softly, looking at her with his kind eyes. "We will reclaim what is rightfully yours."

The room, once filled with the warmth of their love, now echoed with a newfound purpose. They would face this challenge head on, united in love and resolve. But there was more. The letter went on to say that Lord Spencer, who was far less than reputable, was legally owed money from Oswald. Annabelle's heart began to race again as she read of the man she was almost

forced to marry and his plans to seek out her uncle. She looked at her husband with wide eyes.

“Surely, he will not come here,” she breathed.

Adrian chuckled, catching her off guard.

“I hardly think so,” he said. “He is beneath the station of a duke, my darling. You and I are both above him in status. He has long since been apprehensive about approaching me. Besides, from the sound of this letter, it seems that he plans to personally track down your uncle and extract what is owed to him.”

Annabelle reread the last part of the letter. It seemed that Adrian was right; Lord Spencer had contacted her father’s solicitor in an effort to locate Oswald. Upon failing, he merely wrote a missive, stating that he was to be contacted at once if Oswald Ludlow made an appearance, and that he would seek other means of helping to locate him in the meantime.

Annabelle breathed a sigh of relief. Breakfast was hardly ended, and already she had been through a sea of emotions. But the news was largely

good. With Oswald missing, and her legal rights status to her family's property restored, she could reclaim her childhood for her own. And there would be nothing he could do about it.

The grand drawing room of Annabelle's ancestral home was bathed in the soft, dusky light of late afternoon. Rich tapestries, aged paintings of her forebears, and gilded mirrors adorned the walls, each bearing silent witness to the room's rich history.

Annabelle stood by the fireplace, lost in thought, her fingers gently tracing the ornate carvings on the mantelpiece. She had been thrilled when Adrian suggested they visit her old home. But now that she was there, she was having a mixture of emotions. The knowledge of her Uncle Oswald's deception had left a hollow feeling in her chest, yet from the ashes of that treachery, an idea began to blossom.

Adrian, sensing the depth of her contemplation, approached her quietly.

"You've been distracted today, my love," he said. "What weighs on

your mind?”

Annabelle took a deep breath, her brown eyes meeting his with determination.

“Our estate... this grand home with its countless rooms... what if we could give it new purpose?” she asked. “A purpose that would honour my father’s memory and the legacy of our family.”

Adrian tilted his head, curiosity sparking in his eyes.

“It sounds like you might have an idea or two,” he said with a smile. “What do you propose?”

She took his hands, her fingers trembling with excitement.

“A school, darling,” she said. “A school for the less fortunate children of the village. An opportunity to provide them with education, hope, and a brighter future.”

Adrian looked around the room, seemingly envisioning the potential

transformation.

“It’s a bold idea,” he said. “And a noble one. But are you sure?”

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“When I think of the potential, of the laughter and learning that could fill these halls, I feel a warmth in my heart,” she said. “It would be a way to ensure that the wrongs done by Uncle Oswald are righted in some way.”

He squeezed her hands reassuringly.

“There will be challenges, darling,” he said. “But if this is your heart’s desire, then I am by your side.”

She leaned her forehead against his, a sense of peace washing over her.

“Thank you, Adrian,” she said. “This home has seen generations of our family grow and flourish. Now, it will see countless children embark on journeys of their own.”

And so, amidst the chaos of revelations and familial betrayals, Annabelle's heart found its purpose. Her ancestral home, once a symbol of power and prestige, was set to become a beacon of hope for the future.

The grandeur of the mansion underwent a striking transformation over the following months. Rooms once filled with ornate furniture and relics of the past were now brightened with rows of desks, chalkboards, and shelves laden with books. Every dawn brought the melody of hammers and saws, and every dusk saw Annabelle and Adrian reviewing the day's progress.

Adrian had been her pillar, his support unwavering. Whenever Annabelle felt overwhelmed by the enormity of her vision, he was there, soothing her worries with gentle words and ensuring that every need was met. From acquiring the best tutors to ordering an array of children's books, Adrian fulfilled her every request with a grace and efficiency that left Annabelle in awe.

One evening, as they sat in the newly christened library, pouring over lesson plans, Annabelle gazed up at Adrian.

“How did I ever get so lucky to have you by my side?” she asked. Her

voice was soft, tinged with wonder.

He chuckled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead.

“I believe it was destiny, as Aunt Marjorie once told us,” he said. “And besides, how could I resist aiding such a noble cause?”

Just as their worlds seemed to be aligning perfectly, there came an unexpected knock. The door opened to reveal Henry, and he was smiling slyly.

Adrian stood swiftly, curiosity evident in his eyes.

“Henry?” he asked. “What brings you here at this hour? And to the school, of all places?”

Henry smiled slowly, his gaze flitting to Annabelle.

“I come bearing news,” he began, taking a deep breath. “The butler told me that the two of you were here, and I decided that this can’t wait. It’s Lord Spencer. He’s been arrested.”

Annabelle gasped.

“Arrested? Whatever for?”

Henry snorted.

“He assaulted a man in the village tavern, believing him to have information about Oswald’s whereabouts,” he said. “The man wasn’t hurt, of course. He filed a formal accusation, nonetheless. And from what I understand, he was wanted for a couple of other things. The odds are excellent that he will be put away for quite some time.”

Adrian chuckled, putting his arm around Annabelle.

“Well, I suppose that removes that trouble from our lives,” he said.

Annabelle breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t often that she thought of Lord Spencer or her uncle. But when they did plague her thoughts, they left a dark cloud of dread in their wake.

“If only Uncle could be found,” she said. “I would feel much better knowing that neither of them could create trouble for the school.”

Adrian held her close, kissing her softly on the top of her head.

“I assure you that no one will do any such thing,” he said. “I will not stand for it.”

Annabelle smiled up at her husband, thinking again about how fortunate she was to have him.

“I love you, darling,” she said.

Adrian stooped to kiss her lips.

“I love you more,” he said.

From that point on, the days turned swiftly, and before they knew it, the day of the school’s grand opening dawned bright and clear. The village buzzed with anticipation, children in their Sunday best, parents with tears of gratitude in their eyes.

Almost six months to the day after making the decision to open the school, Annabelle, resplendent in a flowing gown of soft blue, stood on the entrance steps, Marjorie and Penelope by her side, their eyes shining with pride. As she cut the ribbon, the crowd erupted in cheers, and children flooded into their new sanctuary of learning.

Taking a moment to absorb the joy around her, Annabelle's eyes glistened with tears.

"This," she whispered to herself, "is what true happiness feels like."

Marjorie, who had been just as supportive and integral in the preparations for the school, hugged her tightly.

"I am so proud of you," she said. "You did it, Annabelle."

And indeed, she had. With love, determination, and an unwavering spirit, Annabelle had transformed a symbol of her family's legacy into a

beacon of hope for generations to come.

The End

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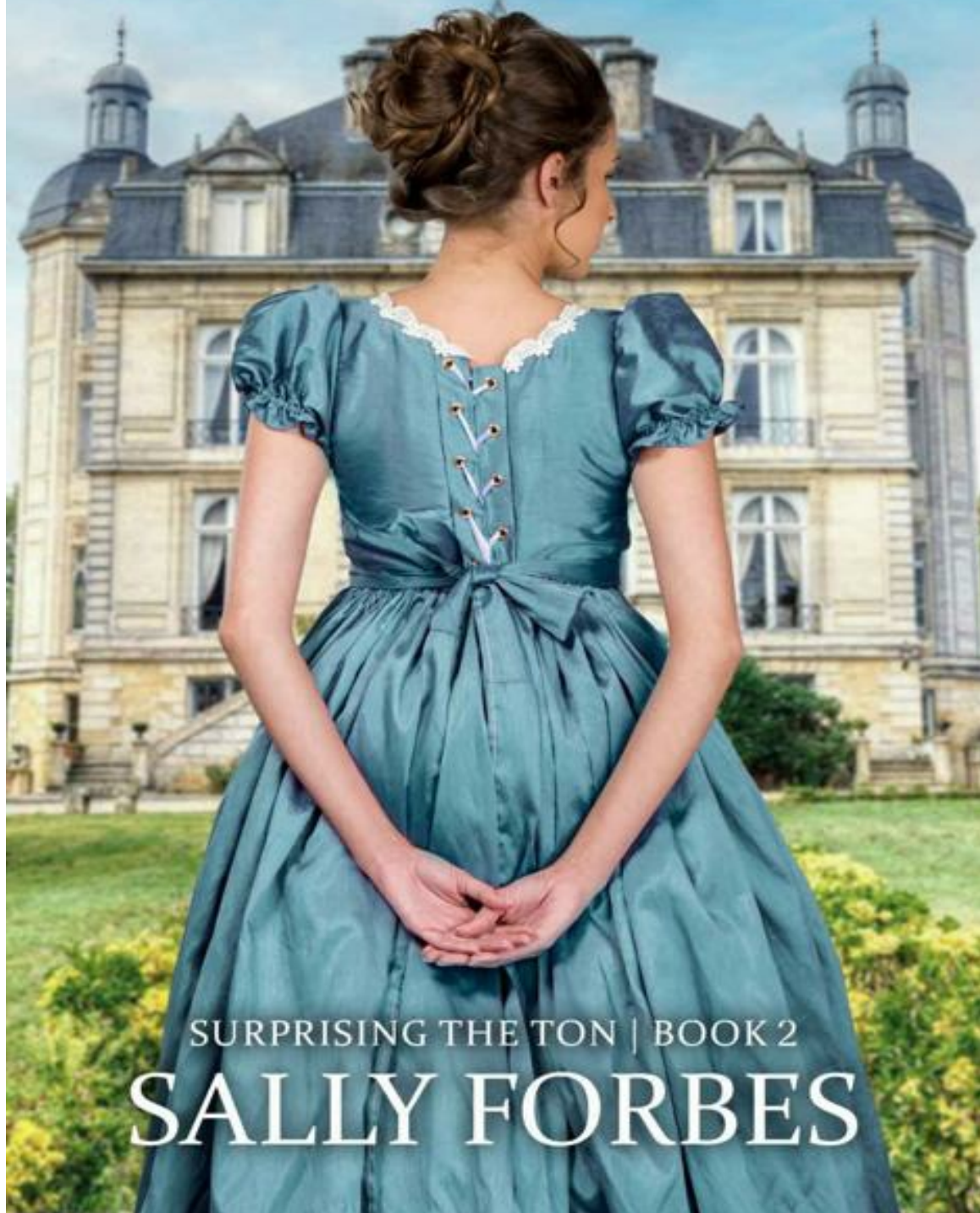
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THE MARQUESS'S
Forbidden Cinderella



SURPRISING THE TON | BOOK 2

SALLY FORBES

The Marquess's Forbidden Cinderella

(Surprising the Ton Book 2)
HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

Fate could never have imagined that after the death of her mother, her life would take such a bad turn. Her father's debts and bad reputation force her to pretend and keep secrets about her past and to seek a job for the sole purpose of survival. When all seems hopeless, can love come to the rescue?

Prologue

Gloria stood in the austere study of Dewsbury Manor, a room filled with the ghosts of her family's once great fortune. The wooden wainscoting, polished to a high shine, reflected the dim light filtering through the dust-laden windows. The once vibrant oriental carpet underfoot had faded into a tapestry of pastel hues, a poignant reminder of times past. The room was almost empty, save for a grand mahogany desk and two chairs, one occupied by Mr. Haversham, the family lawyer, the other waiting for Gloria.

After a long, uncomfortable silence, the lawyer shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

“Miss Dewsbury,” Mr. Haversham began, his voice echoing in the near-empty room. He gestured to the vacant chair opposite him, his expression solemn. “Please, come have a seat.”

She nodded, her heart heavy, and took the proffered seat. She did so with reluctance, feeling too nervous and stressed to sit still. But the papers the

lawyer had brought with him were very important. She knew they needed to be tended quickly. She couldn't linger in a house that was sold, after all. So, she tried to just focus on the papers in the lawyer's hand.

The worn leather of the chair was cool beneath her fingers, but with the heavy business at hand it brought her no comfort. The air was thick with the scent of old parchment, well-worn books, and a hint of pipe tobacco, a scent that had always been synonymous with Mr. Haversham. It was also pregnant with the news she needed but would never want: news about her family's estate. Not for the first time since her father had fallen ill, she wished that things could have gone any other way.

He shuffled the papers before him, his old, vein-ridden hands steady and assured.

"As you know," he began, his tone professional, "the sale of Dewsbury Manor and its remaining furnishings has been concluded."

Gloria swallowed hard as his words hit her.

"Yes, I'm aware, Mr. Haversham," she said sadly. "You have done well

to help me with everything. But I cannot say that I am any readier to let everything go than I was when we first started.”

The older man nodded, glancing up at her briefly over his spectacles.

“These things are never easy, I’m afraid,” he said. “However, it went as quickly and smoothly as possible.”

Gloria nodded again, slowly. *Perhaps, it did for you,* she thought to herself.

Mr. Haversham slid a document across the polished surface of the desk. Gloria reached for it, forcing herself to pick it up.

“These are the final papers, Miss Dewsbury,” he said. “Your signature is required at the bottom.”

Gloria bit her lip, taking the ink well that the lawyer slid to her next.

With a trembling hand, she took the quill he gave to her and signed the document, her signature neat and practiced. She had to blink rapidly when

tears stung her eyes, so none of them ended up on the page. As she put down the quill, Mr. Haversham handed her a small pouch, its weight surprisingly heavy in her hands.

“That is the profit from the sale after all debts and current bills have been paid,” he said. “It's not a fortune, but it's something.”

Gloria opened the pouch and peered inside. A small assortment of gold and silver coins gleamed back at her. It was a meager sum, to be sure. But she didn't want Mr. Haversham to think that she was ungrateful to him for his help.

He seemed to have noticed her expression, as he gave her another sad smile.

“Will it be enough to see you through for a little while?” he asked.

Gloria shook her head.

“I think it will barely enough to sustain Father and me,” she said. “Especially with hm in the asylum. The bill for which is due quarterly, which

will be in just another fortnight.”

The attorney nodded solemnly.

“I do hope he can recover from his... illness,” he said. “I know that things would be better for you if he could.”

Gloria nodded again.

“It certainly would,” she said. “However, there is no guarantee with such an illness.”

The attorney sighed and nodded once more.

“That is unfortunately true,” he said. “He was in a terrible state, indeed. All we can continue to do is to keep him in our prayers, and you do the best you can while he’s in there. You are doing very well, Miss Swann.”

Gloria took a deep breath. She felt sure that her best wouldn’t be enough, especially with money now so hard to come by. But she was grateful to him for his kindness.

“Thank you, Mr. Haversham,” she managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper.

The attorney gave her a nod, checking over the paper she had just signed. Then, he slowly rose from his seat and tipped his bowler hat to her.

“Please, do not hesitate to let me know if there is anything else you need from me,” he said. “I will be happy to help.”

Gloria gave him a small smile.

“I am sure that I will,” she said. “But I’m afraid that I won’t have the money to do so.”

The man gave her another kind look and shook his head.

“We could work out something at another time,” he said. “Let’s just get you through your father’s sickness.”

Gloria sighed. She didn’t know if there would be a way through her

father's sickness. He seemed worse each time Gloria went to visit him. But she appreciated the solicitor's kindness.

“Thank you, Mr. Haversham,” she said. “You have been so good to my family. I am sorry that we will no longer have need of a solicitor.”

Mr. Haversham waved his hand.

“Your father was a good client and friend of mine,” he said. “That will not change. My client list changes often, what with people dying and children marrying and moving away. I understand it's nothing personal. I do hope that you will be all right, however.”

She stared at the pouch in her hands, her mind racing. It was clear to her now. She doubted that she would ever be all right ever again. She had been raised to prepare to marry a nobleman. Not to end up a bankrupt, land-poor daughter of a mentally ill baron with no money and nowhere to go. She was unencumbered, free of her family's debt, but with the responsibility of her father's care on her shoulders and no house to call home.

The weight of her new reality settled heavily upon her. She would have

to find some way of bringing in money. She had never been the one responsible for making or handling money, and she wasn't even sure how to go about it. She could ask the solicitor for advice. But part of her was ashamed that she couldn't solve her family's problems herself. Even despite her lack of experience doing so.

“Do you have any inkling what you will do now?” the solicitor asked.

Gloria sighed. She was thinking of telling him that she didn't have any idea what she would do. But he held up a finger as though he had just gotten an idea.

“Have you considered talking to any of the previous servants of your family?” he asked. “They really seemed to care about you and your family. Perhaps, if they are still seeking employment, they would allow you to stay with them until you found a more permanent solution.”

Gloria shook her head. She couldn't think of imposing on the people who had once worked so hard for her and her family. It wasn't a matter of pride. They were no more capable of taking care of her than she was. But an idea sparked in her mind. It was a heavy, loaded one. But it was an idea,

nonetheless.

“I suppose I could find employment,” she said, the words sounding foreign to her ears.

Mr. Haversham nodded, his gaze sympathetic.

“I believe that would be wise, Miss Swann,” he said. “It is a respectable decision, and one that a lady in your position shouldn’t be ashamed to consider.

Gloria nodded, grateful for the support. She couldn’t tell Mr. Haversham just how strange it felt to her to even consider it. She didn’t want to seem as though she was a delicate lady who shunned the idea of making her own living to take care of her ailing father. It was just not something she would have ever imagined that she would need to consider. And where would she even start? She didn’t want to bother Mr. Haversham with such burdens. But she didn’t have the first clue as to how to go about getting gainful employment.

Mr. Haversham bowed to her, reaching out to take one of her hands and

give it a gentle pat with his wrinkled ones.

“I’m afraid I must be going,” he said. “It might not seem like it now, but things will work out in time. You’ll see.”

Gloria nodded, doubting his words.

“Thank you again,” she said, giving him a small smile. “Allow me to walk you out.”

The solicitor nodded, giving her a warm smile of his own.

“Very well,” he said.

With a last glance at the grand old study, Gloria rose from the chair, the weight of her new life heavier than the coin-filled pouch in her hands. She had lost her home, her wealth, but she would not lose her dignity. She led the solicitor to the front door, trying not to look at the barren state of her childhood home. *It is no longer my home*, she thought tearfully as she waved goodbye to the solicitor and closed the door behind him. *Now, it belongs to someone else.*

Chapter One

The morning sun painted a glowing warmth on the cold stones of Dewsbury Manor. The once proud residence now bore the weight of neglected years and financial strain. The grandeur of the past was but a faint echo in the empty halls and unkept gardens. Gloria, the young baroness, was to leave this life behind. Mrs. Lane, the housekeeper from Kensington, arrived in a humble hackney, a stark contrast to the elegant carriages that once adorned the manor's drive.

She looked out the window of her bedchambers, thinking about how much different her life was than it was when she was a girl. The grounds and the house were once full of nice things, as well as many servants. But now, she had had to sell her life piece by piece after her father went to the asylum, and she had had to fire all the servants one by one. But there was one with whom she had remained very close; the last one she was forced to send away.

Mrs. Lane, her family's beloved housekeeper, had been much like a

mother to her after her own mother died. She had been very supportive, and she had stayed on with Gloria's family for as long as she possibly could before she had to go find new employment. She had even worked for no pay the last month she worked for Gloria. But she had found new employment shortly after, and Gloria had bid her a reluctant goodbye. Now, however, Mrs. Lane was helping her once more. She had gotten her work, and she would be coming soon to escort Gloria to her new home and place of work.

As Gloria's mind wandered further, her apprehension deepened. She pondered the intricacies of her new role within the Meltonshire household. Would her noble upbringing, marked by her father's ruin and subsequent confinement to an asylum, be a constant reminder of her destroyed life? Would her refinement and polish render her unworthy of the duke and duchess's esteemed presence? It was highly irregular for noble people to take on work. How would the duke and duchess feel when they found out that she was a baron's daughter who was now having to depend on work just to avoid the poorhouse, not only for herself, but for her father?

Fear gnawed at the corners of her consciousness, threatening to overwhelm her fragile resolve. Doubts echoed through her thoughts like haunting whispers, questioning her every move, and casting a shadow upon

her aspirations. Yet, amidst her unease, a spark of determination flickered within her, refusing to be extinguished. She was afraid, to be sure. And she knew that she had a long road ahead of her, especially as she adjusted to the life of a woman who had to work for a living. But she also knew that she had no choice. And she knew that she couldn't fail.

An approaching hackney distracted her, and she watched as it came to a stop in front of the empty townhouse. Mrs. Lane exited the cabin, and Gloria raced down the stairs to greet her. When she flung open the door, her former housekeeper, embraced her tightly, smiling as she looked into Gloria's eyes.

“Are you ready, my dear?” she asked.

Gloria sighed.

“No,” she confessed. “But it isn't as though I have a choice, is it?”

Mrs. Lane put her hand on Gloria's back, rubbing it gently.

“I am here to help,” she said. “Let us get you ready to depart.”

Gloria led the housekeeper up the stairs, knowing she was making the ascent for the very last time. Mrs. Lane linked her arm through Gloria's, which offered Gloria marginal comfort. The two women headed back to Gloria's bedchambers. Mrs. Lane looked around, and Gloria could see the surprise and sadness in her eyes. She understood without a word what her family's old housekeeper was thinking. She hadn't seen it since she had parted ways with them. She was just as disheartened as Gloria was by the hollow, empty spaces that once held so much life and luxury. Somehow, seeing it on Mrs. Lane's face made it even more painful and real for Gloria. She clung to her old housekeeper as they made their way to her bedchambers.

Once inside the room, Mrs. Lane sighed.

"Well, let us finish up getting you packed, dear," she said. "We need to depart for Miltonshire Manor as soon as we can."

Gloria nodded, taking a deep breath.

"Very well," she said.

The two women headed for the few possessions that Gloria had left.

They consisted of a hairbrush, a hand mirror, a bottle of lavender perfume, six gowns with matching shoes, two riding habits with plain black shoes, a robe, and a nightgown. Gloria went over to her vanity and began packing away her personal items. It was hard for her to imagine that she would never again use those things to attend balls or dinner parties. She mourned the loss of the life she had always known, even if she had never been very fond of the parties and social events.

As Gloria moved about her room, Mrs. Lane watched from the side, her fingers delicately folding the young woman's dresses and placing them into a travel trunk. The room was tinged with the warm sunlight, creating a poignant scene of departure.

Gloria finished packing the items in and on her vanity. She scanned the small bookshelf, which she knew was already empty, as she had donated the books to the village bookstore. Then, she checked her bedside tables. One of which was completely empty. The other contained something that took her a moment to recognize. She paused, pulling out a small, well-worn book of poetry. That book had helped her through more sleepless nights and megrims than she could remember. She was glad that she hadn't found it in time to donate it. But it wasn't like she would be able to take it with her.

“I suppose I won't have much time for these anymore,” she murmured, more to herself than to her companion.

Mrs. Lane glanced over her shoulder, giving Gloria a gentle smile as she studied the book.

“Nonsense, my dear,” Mrs. Lane said, setting a folded garment in the trunk, and looking up at Gloria. “The Duke of Moltenshire is a patron of the arts. I believe he will appreciate a well-read woman.”

The young woman offered a tentative smile, placing the book gently in the trunk.

“I can only hope he does not find it strange that a servant would be interested in reading,” she said.

Mrs. Lane shook her head.

“My dear, we all have to learn to read and write,” she said. “Some of us are called to help with secretarial duties for our masters. It will hardly be a

surprise that you might read at bedtime or something. So long as you do not exhibit any advanced abilities regarding reading and writing, it should be fine. And if you only read at night, none of the masters of the home will ever see you.”

Gloria nodded, grazing the cover of the old book as she put it in the trunk alongside the rest of her belongings.

“I... I wanted to thank you, Mrs. Lane,” she said.

The older woman straightened, an elegant eyebrow raising in surprise.

“Whatever for, my dear?” she asked.

Gloria looked at her with tears in her eyes.

“For all of this,” Gloria said, gesturing around the room, her expression earnest. “For believing in me, for securing my employment. I fear without your intervention, my fate would have been quite different.”

Mrs. Lane's countenance softened, her eyes reflecting a warm

understanding.

“Miss Swann, you earned this position through your own merits,” she said. “You have a keen mind and a diligent spirit. I merely helped open the door; you walked through it on your own.”

Gloria blushed, her gaze falling to the floor.

“Still, you have my gratitude, Mrs. Lane. Truly,” she said.

The older woman reached out, tilting Gloria's chin upward gently.

“There's no need for formalities or words of thanks, my dear,” she said. “We're to be companions in service to the duke, after all. But know this - your appreciation is accepted with warmth and my expectation of your continued excellence remains.”

Gloria's gaze met Mrs. Lane's, her eyes sparkling with determination.

“You shall not be disappointed, I promise you,” she said.

With a nod and a small smile, Mrs. Lane returned to packing.

“I do not doubt it, Miss Swann,” she said. “Now, let's finish packing. It's time.”

Gloria looked up from her trunk, her eyes glistening with determination, yet haunted by a sadness too deep for her years. “Thank you again, Mrs. Lane,” she said. “I would never have managed without you.”

Mrs. Lane offered a comforting smile.

“You've had a rough time of it, dear, more than anyone your age should bear,” she said. “I can't imagine not doing everything I can to help you through this rough time.”

As they loaded the last of Gloria's things onto the hackney, Gloria gave her family's home one last forlorn look. It was the last time she would ever see the place, and suddenly she was overwhelmed with a sense of panic. What if she couldn't adapt to her new life? How would she ever become accustomed to a home that wasn't hers?

“Come, dear,” Mrs. Lane said, taking her hand and leading her into the seat of the hackney. “We have much to discuss before we reach Miltonshire.”

Gloria nodded, turning her back on her childhood home for the last time as the hackney pulled away. Neither of them spoke a word until the hackney had reached the road. Then, Mrs. Lane reached over and took her hand lovingly.

“You do understand that none of this is your fault, don’t you?” she asked.

Gloria shook her head.

“Sometimes, I am not sure,” she said. “Sometimes, I think that, if I could have helped Mother better, she would have recovered from influenza, and Father would have never become so weak-minded. He suffered for three years after her death, and he invested our family fortune so poorly, simply out of grief. I can’t help feeling like I could have avoided it all, had I just taken better care of Mother.”

Mrs. Lane patted her arm gently.

“Influenza is a strange thing,” she said. “Sometimes, people get well. Other times, it takes our loved ones before we even have a good grasp on how to help them. You mustn’t blame yourself. For your father’s state, either. Your family endured a great deal in a short time. But you could have done nothing more than what you did to help.”

Gloria nodded, but she didn’t speak. Despite the comforting words, she wasn’t convinced. Her mother had been sick for a fortnight before she ended up confined to her bed. Gloria thought that, if she had convinced her mother to have the physician summoned sooner, she could have been saved. She had tried, and failed, to do so. But she was sure if she had pressed the issue, she could have succeeded. And now, she feared that she would fail her father as he depended on her in the asylum, the same way she had failed her mother. What would become of him if she did?

Mrs. Lane patted her once more, giving her a bright smile.

“Now, let us discuss your new employers,” she said. “The duke and duchess of Meltonshire's family are good people. They live with their son, the marquess of Hillingdon, and his young son, Theo. Bless his heart, he's such a

sweet child. He's been through so much..." Mrs. Lane's voice trailed off, hinting at a deeper sorrow.

Gloria looked at her former housekeeper, her own sorrows forgotten for the moment.

"What happened?" she asked.

Mrs. Lane sighed.

"Lady Hillingdon died about two years ago after an illness," she said. "She left the marquess a young widower, and poor little Theo a half orphan. The family loves the child dearly, but it is clear that they worry a great deal about him. As I suppose they should. No child should ever have to lose his mother so young."

Gloria's heart clenched at the thought of her new role. She would no longer be a baroness, but a maid, serving the family of the Duke. Her interest was piqued when she learned about the young Marquess of Hillingdon, a widower, and his son Theo. Yet, the fear of her new life was nearly suffocating.

“That is horrible,” Gloria said, thinking of her own heartache at losing her mother once more. She had been almost an adult when her mother died. She couldn’t imagine how a young child must feel, losing a parent.

Mrs. Lane nodded.

“I knew you would understand,” she said. “Now, you will not be tending to little Theo. You will be working with me as a maid. It is unlikely that you will ever interact with Theo or the marquess. However, there are some things you must know before we arrive at the manor.”

Gloria took a deep breath and nodded. It was a relief to her that she wouldn’t be tending to the child. She didn’t know if she was ready for such a big responsibility. Especially being so new to the working world.

“Very well,” she said. “I am listening.”

Mrs. Lane gave her a bright smile.

“That’s the spirit,” she said. “Now, you must remember that you are a

servant now. Not a lady. The masters of the mansion will expect you to behave as such. You must never speak unless you are spoken to. Never look them in the eyes, even when they address you. See to whatever tasks they give you immediately, no matter what it was that you were doing before they summoned you. Be sure to get out of sight quickly if they catch you working. They want to know that you are working, but they don't want to see it. And above all, remain completely humble and compliant. Sometimes, they will test your patience. But you must remember that you are not speaking to a peer in the ton any longer. You are speaking to your employer. Remember these things at all times."

Gloria swallowed. She didn't want to say as much to her former housekeeper, as she had been born into a world where she was destined to be a servant. But Gloria was terrified of the transition. She didn't know if she could do all the things Mrs. Lane was telling her to do. It felt strange to her to be in the midst of people her family would have once called peers. How was she ever supposed to behave like a servant when she really wasn't?

"And lastly, my dear, you must keep your background a secret," Mrs. Lane continued. "No mention of your father, the baron, or the asylum. And your education... it must stay hidden as well. It would only raise suspicions."

Gloria frowned.

“But how will I ever conceal that from them?” she asked. “I can hardly change my name or station.”

Mrs. Lane grinned.

“I believe that we can,” she said. “We shall call you Eleanor Dobson, and we will tell Lord and Lady Miltonshire that you were raised in a parsonage.”

Gloria blinked in confusion.

“Why?” she asked. “Won’t that add more complication to the situation?”

Mrs. Lane shrugged.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But, while we can hide your ability to read and write well, and we can change your name, there is little to be done about your

refined speaking. Thus, we must explain it in such a way as to not rouse suspicion.”

Gloria sighed. It was hard enough to leave her status as nobility and the only life she had ever known. But now, she had to keep up with so many lies, when she had never told a lie in her life. How would she ever survive in this new world?

A short time later, Gloria and Mrs. Lane arrived at Miltonshire Manor. The grand mansion in Kensington loomed ahead of them, a stark reminder of the life she had lost and the one she was about to begin. Mrs. Lane shared the customs of servitude, the need for subservience, and the necessary humble demeanor. The hackney came to a halt at the servants' entrance, a stark symbol of Gloria's new status.

Gloria felt the reality of her situation bearing down on her. The fear was palpable, yet she found solace in Mrs. Lane's reassurances.

“Remember, I will always be here for you, Gloria, no matter what,” she said.

Gloria nodded, but her head was still spinning. She had to memorize a new identity, as well as a new way of behaving. To say that she was overwhelmed was an understatement, and it took all her willpower to remain focused.

As they stepped out of the hackney and into the bustling world of Kensington, Gloria looked back one last time at the life she was leaving behind. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through the entrance of her new life, the grand mansion looming ominously before her.

Chapter Two

A symphony of clinking silverware and rustling silk filled the grand drawing room of the Duke of Meltonshire's opulent Kensington mansion. Christian Huges sat with his mother and father, and his younger sister for breakfast. The room was a flurry of activity, as a small army of liveried servants scurried about, attending to the family's every need.

Christian had little interest in the conversation around him, however. From what he gathered, the season's opening ball was happening in a few days' time. And none to his surprise, his sister was bubbling with excitement about the affair. She was soon to have her own debut ball, and she had been looking forward to her very first season. Christian adored his sister. He could hardly believe she had grown up so quickly.

She was chattering away so excitedly that their mother had to interrupt her.

“Vicky, dear, you must eat something,” the duchess coaxed, watching her daughter push around the food on her plate. “You'll need the energy for the Season. And our shopping is not yet finished.”

Vicky, a vibrant young woman of eighteen, grinned.

“Oh, Mama, the excitement itself is more than enough,” she said. “My stomach is too full of butterflies to manage a single bite. Oh, just imagine the ball at Downshire House.” Her eyes shone with anticipation and a dash of fatigue. Christian suspected that days spent shopping for the perfect gowns and accessories had taken their toll on his sister. He himself hated shopping, and only did it on the most necessary of occasions. He made sure he always had fresh suits. But the idea of shopping until one literally dropped was as about appealing to him as having his foot trampled by a horse stampede.

The duchess smiled indulgently at her daughter.

“Darling, of course you are excited,” she said. “But you would have a hard time participating in all the events if you are collapsing with megrims at each one.”

Vicky waved away her mother's words of caution.

“If we go shopping today, we could go for tea at Gunter's,” she said. “I simply cannot eat a single bite right now.”

The duchess chuckled, nodding.

“I suppose you're right, dear,” she said. “A spot of tea at Gunter's would be a welcomed treat after all that shopping.”

Christian felt a small twinge of guilt. His mother doted on his sister, and never told her no about anything. Christian supposed it was fitting, though. She was the youngest, and she was a young woman. And Christian and his sister loved each other dearly.

Vicky sighed happily.

“Wouldn't it be wonderful if I found a suitor during my very first season?” she asked.

Their mother beamed at her daughter proudly.

“I would be highly surprised if you did not,” she said. “You are beautiful, charming, and the very definition of refined.”

Vicky blushed heavily at the praise. Despite the amount of spoiling lavished upon her by her parents, she retained a bit of humility.

“I am sure that I will not be the prettiest,” she said. “But I do hope to catch the eye of just the perfect suitor.”

The Duke chuckled, his eyes twinkling.

“I’m sure you’ll turn many a head, my dear,” he said. “Perhaps, you’ll even find one who wishes to make you his wife.”

Vicky beamed at her father, looking at him with big doe eyes.

“Do you really think so, Papa?” she asked.

In that moment, she sounded just like the little girl Christian had grown up with. His protective nature took over and he set aside his plate and shot a

glance at his sister.

“There's really no need to rush, Sister,” he counselled. “Enjoy the festivities. It is your first season, after all. You will not get another first season. Finding suitors and looking for marriage can wait.

His words, though well-meant, ruffled the duke and duchess. He had suspected that he might. But he didn't want to see his sister rushed in the same way he had been.

“Darling,” his mother said, her tone carrying an edge of warning. “Your sister is now old enough to decide what she wishes for her life. I think it's best that we don't try to interfere with her opinions and decisions.”

Christian snorted.

“Like you just were?” he snapped. He instantly felt guilty when he saw his sister flinch. The last thing he wanted was to take away the joy she felt about the upcoming season. His ideas were not worth hurting his little sister. “What I mean is, it should be her decision. And no one should add any extra pressure to her, during what should be the most wonderful time of her life.”

Vicky relaxed, giving her brother a warm smile.

“Oh, I plan to do both, Brother,” she said. “I will attend all the balls and events, and I will have a lovely time. But I will be ever hoping to find an incredible suitor who will eventually offer for my hand.”

Christian clenched his jaw. He wouldn't upset his sister again. But he thought that his parents should be more interested in their daughter's happiness than in marrying her off, at least for one more year.

“As long as it is your choice,” he said, even though he didn't mean the words.

The duke, his jovial expression souring, turned to his son.

“And what of you, Christian?” he asked. “It's high time you considered remarrying. Florence has been gone for two years. Theo needs a mother.”

The room's energy shifted. Christian's face hardened. It was difficult to keep his mood from affecting his sister's, especially now that his father had

thrown down the gauntlet regarding Christian finding another wife. He wouldn't have that conversation with his father a second time.

“As Theo's father, I will decide what he needs, and when,” he said, trying to be careful with his tone. “And thus far, he is doing very well with us and his nursemaid.”

The duchess gave her son a sympathetic look.

“I know how hard it must have been for you to lose Florence,” she said. “But it is keeping you from seeing what is best for Theo.”

Christian clenched his jaw once more. He didn't point out that his mother couldn't possibly know what it was to lose a spouse, as hers sat right across from her right then. Nor did he mention that he had never been in love with Florence; that his marriage to her had been all but arranged by the duke and duchess. Instead, he shook his head, looking at his mother with pointed eyes.

“I know what is best for Theo,” he said. “And I think that introducing a whole new person in his life right now is nothing close to what is best.”

The duke cleared his throat, looking at his son with authority.

“Every boy needs a mother, Christian,” he said. “If that weren’t the case, then none of us would have one. You really should consider finding a second wife during this season.”

Christian huffed, giving up all pretenses of keeping himself calm.

“I won't be a pawn in your game, Father,” he said. “You may have married me off once for the sake of our fortunes, but I won't let it happen again. If I remarry, it will be my choice.”

The duke bristled, but before the argument could escalate, the drawing room door opened, and in toddled little Theo, hand in hand with his nursemaid. The room brightened instantly, as if the sun had peeked from behind a cloud.

“Papa,” Theo exclaimed, running towards Christian. He stooped and hoisted the boy into his arms, the earlier tension momentarily forgotten.

Christian nodded to the nursemaid. He wasn't usually fond of her letting Theo take control of her. But in that moment, what he needed more than anything was his son's bright smile.

"Thank you," he said, masking his annoyance. "It's all right if he sits in here with us for a little while."

The young woman curtsayed and nodded.

"Very well," she said, pointing to a corner of the drawing room. "I will be just over there, tidying up his toys."

Christian nodded, but he was no longer looking at the nursemaid. He was ruffling his son's hair, which was just as dark and curly as his own.

"Good morning, my boy," he said, happy to not need to engage with his parents for the moment. They had angered him, and he didn't want Theo to pick up on his tension. "Did you sleep well?"

The young boy nodded, sticking a finger in his mouth.

“Ann woked up,” he announced proudly.

Christian laughed.

“You certainly did, son,” he said. “Are you hungry?”

The boy surveyed the plates of food on the table carefully, as though he was about to make a life altering decision. Christian chuckled at how serious his son could be sometimes. He supposed that would serve him well when he grew up. Being serious had served Christian well, after all.

After a minute, he walked over to the bowl of strawberries and grapes. He filled his tiny hands with them, then went promptly up to Vicky.

“Eat,” he said, putting some of the fruit pieces in her hand. Then, he took a bite of one of his own, looking at Vicky expectantly.

Vicky giggled, looking up at her brother with awe.

“How could he have known that Mother was just trying to get me to eat?” she asked.

Christian shrugged.

“He is very smart,” he said. “He likely just noticed that, unlike the rest of us, you have no food on your plate.”

She looked down and laughed again.

“I suppose you’re likely right,” she said. She bit into one of the strawberries that Theo had given her, earning her a bright smile of pride from the boy.

“Ya,” he said, taking another bite of his fruit. Then, two wooden toy soldiers sitting at the corner of the table caught his attention. He shoved the rest of the fruit into his mouth, dripping strawberry juice all down his chin and making Vicky and his grandmother laugh with dotting endearment. He walked to the other side of his aunt so he could get to the soldiers. Meanwhile, the nursemaid came and tidied up the table, allowing Theo room to play with his toys beside Vicky.

“Perhaps, we should take him to get more toys,” the duchess said, scooting over to reach out and stroke the boy’s cheek.

The duke chuckled heartily.

“He can have as many toys as he would like,” he said.

Christian gave his parents a warning look.

“Perhaps, someone should ask his father if it is all right to buy him another room full of toys,” he said. He kept the edge out of his voice, but his eyes were cool and pointed.

The duke merely shook his head.

“It would hardly hurt to get him a couple more toys,” he said. “Every child should get to have the best childhood possible.”

Christian bit his tongue to keep from issuing another bitter remark. He himself had had toys to play with as a child. But he couldn't think of once where his family had played with them with him. Still, he was able to curb the stinging in his ego by watching how happy little Theo was.

Vicky sat daintily at the large mahogany table and watched the exuberant display of her toddler nephew. The boy had recently turned three, and he was very well loved by Christian's entire family. She reached out to Theo, who was presently engaged in a complex maneuver involving his wooden soldiers on the tabletop. "Theo, dear," she cooed, picking up one of the toy soldiers. "Would you like Aunt Vicky to assist in the battle?"

Theo beamed up at his aunt, nodding eagerly.

"Pay me," he said.

Vicky giggled yet again, reaching for one of the soldiers. The pair engaged in a brief, but very intense battle between the wooden toys. It wasn't long before Vicky's soldier fell down, an indication that Theo's had beaten it. She gave Christian a wink, indicating that she had allowed him to beat her. Christian smirked. If there was any better aunt in all of England, he would never believe it.

Christian watched as his family cooed over his son, a bitterness settling in his heart. His own childhood had been devoid of such indulgence. And now, the only thing he seemed to be good for to them was to get married to

some insufferable woman and end up in another loveless marriage, just to appease them. He simply wasn't willing to do that. Especially not for a second time.

When he finally broke the silence, his words were laced with a sharp edge once more.

“It seems Theo doesn't need a mother, since he is so spoiled by all of you,” he said.

Before anyone could say anything else, Christian rose, kissing his son on top of his head. He would allow him to continue playing for a little while. He, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with his family in that moment. Leaving the room in a huff, he ignored the stunned expressions on his family's faces. His heart was heavy, but his resolve firmer than ever. He would not let his past dictate his future, no matter the cost.

If you liked the preview of **“The Marquess’s Forbidden Cinderella ”**, you can get your copy now for **FREE with Kindle Unlimited [HERE](#)**.

About Sally Forbes

Inspired by her grandmother who was a regency historical romance author, Sally loved romance from a very young age. After all, she decided to turn her hobby to a professional level.

She was born in the United Kingdom, of an American father and a British mother. When she was ten years old, they moved as a family to Chicago, where Sally made her dream come true to study Literature at the University.

She is riveted to a wonderful man who gave her two adorable daughters to be proud of. A lovely Labrador is part of the family as well.

In her free time, Sally prefers to spend time with her family. She loves arts, especially theater and opera. Also, she is a big fan of Jane Austen.

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