



# Duke at First Sight (Love at First Sight #1)

**Author:** *Jillian Eaton*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Get your sweet tooth ready for a brand new, love-at-first-sight series by best-selling author Jillian Eaton. Like a perfectly poured latte with a heart on top, a hug from your favorite person, or a fudge brownie still warm from the oven, these short stories are meant to be enjoyed in one sitting and leave you smiling for days afterward.

Shuttered away for most of her life by an overprotective father, Annalise is ready to find her Prince Charming and be swept away into happily-ever-after. She's even made a list. Her future husband will love poetry, dancing, and animals. She's counting on it. The one thing she didn't count on? Running into Derrick Blake, AKA the Debauchorous Duke.

Go for a walk, Derrick's valet said. Get some fresh air, he said. As if sunshine will cure his sudden disinterest in drinking and gambling. When a goose attacks him, Derrick's ready to call it a failed experiment. But when that goose leads him to a curiously enchanting debutante with mud on her skirts and a feather in her hair... well, that's when things start to get interesting.

With nothing better to do (he would rather choke on a frog than read poetry), Derrick offers to find Annalise a husband in Hyde Park. The twist? Neither of them knows that the man she's looking for is already standing right in front of her...

**Total Pages (Source):** 5

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:41 am*

## Part I

“There is only one happiness in life; to love and be loved.” ~French Novelist George Sand

When Lady Annalise Buttercream awoke that morning she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that today was the day she was going to fall in love.

“I can feel it,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms out wide as she swung in a circle in the middle of her sun filled bed chamber. “Can’t you feel it, Becca?”

Her maid, a sturdily built woman who had been looking after the Earl of Sandwich’s only child since the day she was born, grunted as she ducked under a flying fist. “What is it I’m meant to feel, my lady?”

“Love.” Bringing her arms in, Annalise gave herself a giant hug as she went to the large window overlooking the busy Mayfair Street below and sighed. “Love, Becca. It’s in the air. I can smell it.”

“Can you?” said the maid mildly. “Here I thought Cook burned the bacon again.”

“Maybe it’s love and burnt bacon,” Annalise allowed. Grinning, she turned to face her oldest companion and most trusted confidant. After losing her mother in childbirth, she had relied mostly on Becca to raise her. While her father had done his best, his easily flustered nature had often led him to pass her over to the maid whenever she had cried, sneezed, wrinkled her nose, or breathed.

In addition to fits of panic, Lord Sandwich was also highly protective of his daughter, as she was the only living memory of the beloved wife that he'd lost. As a result, he'd kept her largely secluded from an outside world that would, in his eyes, attempt to harm her.

While other young girls had attended tea parties, Annalise had explored the woods of their sprawling countryside manor with Becca trailing faithfully behind. While other parents had hired a deluge of tutors and governesses, Annalise had learned to dance under Becca's watchful eye. And when other young ladies had been presented to the queen before their debut into High Society as the Season's newest crop of debutantes, Annalise had stayed home playing whist with, yes, Becca.

But that was all about to change today.

Because today she was going to fall in love.

Today, her life would truly begin.

Today she was going to meet her future husband.

She just had to find him first.

"What do you think he'll look like?" she asked, hardly able to contain her excitement as Becca nudged her into a chair and began to arrange her blonde hair into glossy tendrils pinned at the crown of her head with a papillote iron and curling papers.

"Who?" Becca asked, speaking around a pile of pins pinched between her lips.

"My husband . I think he'll have blue eyes, like mine, and a charming smile. A princely smile. He'll be kind, and gentle, and poetic. You know how I love poetry. He'll also love animals, as I do. He'll be an adept equestrian. A wonderful dancer.

He'll be..." She smiled dreamily. "He'll be perfect."

Becca met Annalise's gaze in the gilt-framed mirror above her dressing table and lifted a weathered brow. "And where are you planning to meet this blue-eyed poetic prince?"

"I thought we'd start with Hyde Park. All the best romances begin in Hyde Park."

"We?" Becca's second brow rose to join the first. "I wasn't aware I'd be joining you on this little husband-seeking search."

"Well, I cannot go by myself. And since Father is out of town until later today..."

"Speaking of your Father, has he approved of your pending nuptials?"

Annalise, always a terrible liar, looked down at her lap and fidgeted with a piece of silk ribbon on her violet morning dress. "Not exactly," she hedged. "But next month I turn twenty, Becca. Twenty! If I don't find a husband now, then when? No, it has to be today." Steely resolve glinted in her soft doe eyes as she lifted her chin and stared at herself in the mirror's silvery reflection.

What she saw staring back at her was a woman full grown. A woman that had spent most of her life locked away like a precious porcelain vase. But she wasn't a vase, and she wasn't made of porcelain. She wouldn't break. The world wouldn't shatter her. If solitude had given her anything, it was strength. Perhaps not the steel and iron wit that other ladies of her age possessed. Ladies who had fought ruthlessly for fortunes in ballrooms and at house parties that Annalise had observed wistfully from afar. But there was strength to be found in goodness. In kindness. In an optimistic heart.

The man of her dreams was out there.

How much longer could she expect him to wait?

“Twenty isn’t as old as all that,” said Becca, squeezing Annalise’s shoulder. “You’ve time yet, my lady. But it is a rather bright sunny day, isn’t it? The warmest it’s been all week. Perhaps a stroll through Hyde Park would help pass the hours until your Father’s return.”

Annalise blinked back a sudden sting of tears. “Thank you, Becca,” she said softly.

“For what, my lady? It’s just a walk.” The maid shrugged. “If we happen to come across a handsome suitor that gets down on bended knee and begins to recite Mr. Keats, well then maybe you’re right. Maybe love is in the air. And we can hardly be faulted for that, can we?”

\*\*\*

Derrick Blake, Duke of Tennyson, did not like poetry.

Actually, he loathed it.

Along with puppies (too much licking), cats (too untrustworthy), dancing (too tedious), and smiling (too painful). He had formed these opinions over twenty-four years comprised of a strict upbringing followed by a period of wild carousing that had earned him the moniker the Debaucherous Duke. A title he wore with some pride, not that anyone would know it mostly due to the lack of smiling and a little bit due to the growling sound he made whenever someone dared invoke it.

Rather like a bear, Derrick enjoyed jaunts of socialization before retreating into his cold, dark cave to sleep off whatever headache his indulgence in spirits and all-night gambling sprees had yielded. Tucked away in his Grosvenor Square manor with the curtains drawn and the candles dimmed, he would sleep for hours. Sometimes even

days. Then he'd wake up and do it all over again, because why not? What else was a duke with enormous wealth but no true purpose in life supposed to do? Take up gardening?

Perish the thought.

Although lately, his favorite gambling hell wasn't exciting him as much as it used to. His favorite brandy had started to taste bland. Even his interest in the large busted, heavy lidded sirens that draped themselves over the back of his chair at the hazard table had begun to wane. In short, he was suffering from a terrible case of ennui. Which, all things considered, was completely unacceptable. Thus, Derrick found himself doing the one thing he hated most of all: he was going for a walk. In the park. In the morning . A good five hours before he normally arose from his bed, staggered into his tub, and submerged himself into a frothy, bubbly mixture of soap and regret.

It was his butler that had suggested it.

'Refresh the body, Your Grace, and the spirit will follow.'

Utter claptrap, if you asked him.

But at this point he was willing to try almost anything, and so when a brisk knock sounded on his door at the absolutely deplorable hour of half past nine, he'd gotten dressed, chugged a cup of black coffee without a single splash of brandy (might as well have put a dagger in his heart), and stumbled outside into the fresh air and the sunshine that Grieves had assured him would fix all of his ailments.

Or kill him outright.

Why the bloody hell do people do this willingly, he wondered as he glared around at the myriad of carriages and pedestrians traveling up and down the muddy walking

trails and bridle paths of Hyde Park.

Given that it was the middle of February, the ground had frozen and softened and frozen again, resulting in both sheets of treacherous ice and large ruts that Derrick did his best to avoid as he veered down a lesser traveled trail that wound its way over a bridge and around a pond dotted with barnacle geese that were about as pleasant as their name suggested.

“Go away,” he snapped when a trio of feathered menaces came waddling toward him, wings outstretched and black beaks bobbing. “I haven’t any bread for you. I said I haven’t - bloody hell !”

With a loud honking battle cry, the largest goose charged and Derrick dove to the side then spun around just in time to see the other two barnacle geese following their leader into the fray. Honking and hissing, they surrounded him as he backed slowly toward the bridge with his hands raised.

“Easy there, you ugly feathered bastards. Come any closer and I’ll wring those long necks and have you on my table by supper. Don’t think I won’t. Brandy and buttered goose. I can’t think of a better meal. So go ahead, you stupid birds.” He’d reached the edge of the bridge. A wood plank creaked under the heel of his boot as he eased onto it. “Waddle one more step-”

“Augustus, Marcus, Constantine!” a light, feminine voice called out airily from around a bend in the path. “Where are you, boys? I have your corn!”

As one, the geese turned around and - to Derrick’s general disbelief - formed a single file line before chuffing off in the direction of the magic voice coaxing them with what was, presumably, their favorite treat. Certainly they appeared to like it better than duke mutton. He heard happy honks and the tinkling of laughter, the sound of it reminiscent of a wind chime made of shells that had hung outside his window when

he was a boy.

Strange, that he would think of that now when it hadn't crossed his mind in years. He and his mother had made the wind chime together when they were on holiday in Bath. It was one of his few, genuinely joyful memories from a childhood he'd done his best to largely forget. But the laughter brought it all back. The salty smell of the ocean. The warm beat of the sun against his neck. The weight of his mother's hand on his as she'd patiently taught him how to tie the shells together.

She'd died shortly after that and his father had promptly sent him off to boarding school where he'd endured the cruel, relentless taunts of a bully until he finally grew big enough to put the bully in his place. By then, his father was dead as well, and he was the newly minted Duke of Tennyson. Arrogant and half-feral with a chip on his shoulder large enough to fell a tree.

After putting the right staff in place to ensure he wouldn't have to lift a finger when it came to the running of his dukedom and the various properties, employees, and charitable causes that accompanied one of England's oldest titles, he'd thrown himself into sin.

Drinking.

Gambling.

Carousing.

Feeding into the vices that had, for a time, soothed the raw ache in his soul left there by a child's lingering bewilderment at having been abandoned by the two people who should have loved him the most.

But that damned laughter... that tinkling, musical, angelic laughter... brought him



back to a place he'd sworn he would never visit again.

His past.

Grinding his teeth together, Derrick took another step onto the bridge. Part of him, a large part, recognized this as his opportunity to sod off right back to his manor. His butler's advice be damned. But another part, considerably smaller yet annoyingly persistent, urged him to see the face behind the wind chimes.

It was probably an old, stooped over woman with a gnarled cane. Old, stooped over women seeming particularly fond of feeding fowl, which in turn led those same fowl to go looking for food in the pockets of dukes. Nasty habit, that. If nothing else, he owed it to his fellow brethren to tell this old lady she was culpable in a goose assisted murder attempt.

Squaring his shoulders and adjusting his cravat, he set off down the path from whence he'd come, following the noise of contended honks. A scathing warning already heating the tip of his tongue, he marched around the corner... and stopped short, startled by the sight that awaited him.

Not a stooped old woman at all, but a young lady. His age, perhaps a few years less. With hair the color of sunshine peeking out from beneath the brim of a violet bonnet that complimented the rosy pink of her high arching cheekbones with the most adorably upturned nose he'd ever seen.

She was crouched on her heels, apparently not caring that the hem of her pelisse and dress dress were being dragged through the muck. A small white feather was caught in her curls. As he watched, frozen in place by some unnamed force that had temporarily rendered his vocal chords useless, she reached out and patted the biggest barnacle goose on its hideously ugly head. Making a purring sound deep in its throat - who the devil knew that geese could purr - the blasted bird leaned into her hand,

rubbing his feathers against her gloved palm, and was he... was that... was that a flicker of jealousy he felt? That the damned goose, named after a crustacean found on the hull of old sailing vessels, was being touched by the fair-haired corn maiden with the musical laugh while he, the Duke of Tennyson, was made to stand by and watch.

Impossible.

In tolerable .

Obviously, all of the brandy he'd imbibed over the past few years had started to get the best of him. He was going mad. Even his heart was beating faster than it usually did.

"Pardon me," he said curtly as his voice abruptly returned on a wave of thinly concealed ire. "Are you aware that you are feeding dangerous animals, and in doing so encouraging them to seek out food from unsuspecting patrons of the park ill-equipped to handle their ferocious natures?"

The lady jumped.

The goose hissed.

Derrick took a step back.

Just to be safe.

"Oh my goodness," she cried, clasping a hand over her heart as she rose to her feet. "You startled me! I'm sorry, I didn't realize anyone was there. What do you mean, dangerous animals?" A frown tugged at her bottom lip when her head swiveled from side to side. "Where are they?"

He gestured at the geese. “You’re feeding them, as I said.”

“Are you referring to Augustus, Marcus, and Constantine?” Wide blue eyes framed with thick tawny lashes met his incredulously. “Why, they wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

“Don’t geese eat flies?” He put his hands on his hips while he awaited her response... even as his traitorous gaze dropped to her mouth. She really was a lovely little thing. All innocence, rainbows, and unicorns in comparison to the dark, sultry temptresses he usually kept company with. Temptresses that had, as of late, inexplicably failed to arouse him. A fault he didn’t place at their feet, but his own. He’d simply grown weary of the transactional nature of his past relationships. Not that he’d ever paid for a woman to occupy his bed. Not outright in money, that is. But he also wasn’t stupid. He knew they’d been there not because of who he was, but what he was: a duke with nearly unlimited wealth and power at his disposal.

Yet here was a lady not prowling the hallways of a gambling hell seeking out her next mark, but throwing corn to geese. Admittedly savage geese that likely would have ripped out his jugular if he’d let them, but still. There was a certain appeal in her innocence. A quiet tug of genuine attraction that he hadn’t experienced since... well, maybe ever.

“You’re right,” she conceded, “geese do eat flies. Although, they much prefer grass and aquatic plants. However, they do love corn on occasion as well. Would you like to give it a go?” Fist closed, she held out her arm expectantly.

Derrick stared at it.

“Did you miss the part where I said they have ferocious natures?” he wondered aloud. “I value all ten of my fingers, thank you very much.”

There was that laughter again. It washed over him like a warm wave at the peak of

sunset when the sky was a thousand different shades of orange and the surf unfurled itself upon the shore in frothy laps of white.

“Don’t be silly!” she exclaimed. “Marcus and Constantine would never dare bite. Not even so much as a nibble. Sometimes Augustus gets a little excited, but it won’t hurt. I promise.”

Against his better judgment, Derrick accepted the corn. “You do realize you’ve named them after Roman emperors responsible for thousands of brutal slayings.”

Those blue eyes blinked at him, shimmering pools of indigo that threatened to pull him right in. “I rather thought they were regal names. I’m sorry they’re not to your liking.”

And now why did he feel as if he’d kicked a small, defenseless kitten?

“I do like them,” he said gruffly. “They’re excellent names.” Turning his hand over, he dumped the small pile of corn she’d given him unceremoniously onto the ground.

She sighed. “Not like that . Here, let me show you.”

Derrick’s heart started beating even faster when she placed another small pile of corn into his palm, but this time she slid her hand down to gently hold his wrist while she plucked a kernel from his grasp and threw it several feet away.

“There, you see?” she said brightly as Marcus, at least he thought it was Marcus, waddled eagerly after the tiny treat. “They prefer it when you make a game out of it.”

“Yes, I see,” Derrick murmured, except he wasn’t looking at the goose. “You’ve told me your pet’s names, but not your own.”

“Oh, they aren’t my pets,” she said, quite seriously. “They live here, in the park. I just come and visit them once in a while.”

The corners of his mouth twitched in a shape that vaguely, maybe, possibly was the start of a smile. “Your name, my lady. Unless you’d like me to call you Tiberius.”

“Annalise “ Belatedly, she appeared to realize that she was still holding his wrist and her cheeks lit up with a blush every bit as adorable as her nose before she snatched her hand away and took a step back. “Lady Annalise Buttercream.”

“Buttercream,” he repeated.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Although I do like Tiberius.” A grin pushed up her rosy cheeks. “It has a nice ring to it should I ever decide to turn into a goose.”

“Lady Annalise, it is a... unusual pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Derrick Blake, the Duke of Tennyson”

He waited for her to gasp, or giggle, or - as one woman had done last year - faint.

People, especially women, had odd reactions when he revealed who he was.

But Annalise didn’t do any of those things.

Instead, her eyes narrowing ever-so-slightly, she asked him a question. A rather peculiar question, in and of itself. But then again, everything about their interaction thus far had a certain air of peculiarity.

“Your Grace... do you like poetry?”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:41 am*

### Part II

“T here is no instinct like that of the heart.” ~English poet Lord Byron

Annalise had dreamt of this day for years . A decade, almost. Ever since she was a young girl of ten, she had imagined what would happen when she met the Prince Charming of every fairytale she'd ever read and that had been read to her.

She had dreamt of what he would look like. What he would say. How he would act.

Thus far, the Duke of Tennyson was exceeding every single expectation.

First and foremost, he was handsome. Dashingly so, with dark, thick hair that swept low over his left brow and a matching shadow of whiskers across his strong jawline he'd not yet shaved. Admittedly his eyes weren't blue, as she'd told Becca she was hoping for, but the dark mahogany flecked with shards of amber suited him quite well. He was also tall, rugged, and - her knees did a strange wobble when she thought of the word she would never dare say aloud - virile .

He did have a rather strange aversion to geese. But he'd fed them nonetheless in a display of kindness that had warmed her heart. There was gentleness as well, underneath a bit of gruff. No one was perfect , after all. Not even a prince. Or in this case, a duke. A title that honestly didn't sway her one way or the other, but she knew it would please her father which was, in the grand scheme of things, quite important as she did love him despite the restrictions he'd placed upon her. All well-intentioned, to be sure. She knew the death of her mother had left him devastated and he'd done his best to keep his daughter from succumbing to a similar fate, be it

preventing her from going to a ball (“the roads are too icy, what if the carriage crashes?”), or a dinner party (“what if you choke on the salmon?”), or a play (“the theater steps are perilous, what if you fall?”).

Those ‘what ifs’ had kept her secluded from her peers in a world of her own imagination with only books, the outdoors, and Becca to keep her curious mind busy. Some might have harbored resentment, even hate, but not Annalise. It simply was not in her nature. But that did not mean she hadn’t quietly spent most of her adult life yearning for something more. Yearning for something bigger. Yearning for a love that would take her away from her prison, for even a gilded cage was still a cage. And her father would be loath to release her from it if he did not approve of the man opening the door. He would also be aghast to learn she’d snuck away from her lady’s maid shortly after arriving at Hyde Park, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and as her twentieth birthday loomed, she was becoming increasingly desperate.

Desperate to escape.

Desperate to live a larger life.

Desperate to find true love.

“Your Grace... do you like poetry?” she asked, biting her lip in anticipation of his response. He had to love it. She just knew it. Why, with a name like-

“Poetry?” he repeated, looking at her oddly. “No, I cannot abide it.”

Her jaw dropped. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, positive.”

“But... but your name is Derrick Blake , the Duke of Tennyson .”

“And?” he said, appearing nonplussed.

“And those are poets! Wonderful, widely celebrated poets! Geniuses of their craft!”

Her perhaps-not-so-perfect-after-all prince shrugged. “Wouldn’t know. Never read them.”

“You’ve never read Tennyson,” she said faintly. “Do you like dancing?”

“Not particularly.”

“Animals?”

“They make me sneeze.”

“Horseback riding?”

Derrick’s brows drew together. “I was bucked off a pony when I was seven and broke my arm. Haven’t met a horse I trusted since. Is that goose staring at me in a threatening manner or is it just me?”

She glanced at Augustus whose beady black eyes were trained unblinkingly on the duke as he extended his long neck and gave a loud honk. “He probably senses that you’re not my true love,” she mumbled under her breath, disappointment curdling in her stomach like cream that had turned the day prior.

“Pardon?” Derrick queried politely, having gone very, very still.

“I said that he must sense you’re not my true love.”



“That’s what I thought you said.”

“Now I have to keep searching and I’ve already wasted an hour.” Belatedly recalling the manners Becca had drilled into her, Annalise dropped into a quick, perfunctory curtsy. “If you would excuse me, Your Grace, I must be on my way before my companion catches up. I’ve much to do and little time to do it in.”

She started to walk past him, angling her body to the side so that she could slip by without stepping off the path and soiling her dress, completely oblivious to the streaks of mud that were already there. She let out a gasp when Derrick’s arm shot out and caught her, his large hand curling possessively around her waist as he effectively halted her in her tracks.

“Are you husband hunting, Lady Annalise?” he asked, those dark, dark eyes traveling slowly down her frame before settling on her face with a searing intensity that made her blush return tenfold.

“I...I suppose you could call it that.” By her count, there were five layers of clothing between the duke’s hand and her waist. His glove, her pelisse, gown, petticoat, and shift. How, then, did she feel his fingers like a hot brand against her skin? “I...I am looking for love. True love.”

“And you hope to find it in Hyde Park?”

“I thought it would be a good place to start.”

Derrick scratched his jaw. “Very well. I’ll help you.”

Annalise’s eyes widened. “You’ll... you’ll help me?”

“Yes.” His broad shoulder lifted in a negligent shrug. “It’s not as if I have anything

better to do. What sort of chap are we seeking? Someone titled and wealthy, I presume.”

Did he realize that his arm was still wrapped around her ribcage and he was holding her far closer to his body than a man ought to have held a woman that was not his wife? Or was he so accustomed to physical intimacy that their position was immaterial to him? Regardless, she couldn’t possibly entertain his offer to accompany her on her search for a potential husband.

Could she?

“Title and wealth are not un important,” she acknowledged. “I should like to have children, and be able to provide for them without worry. But it is the quality of a man’s character that matters most.”

“What sort of qualities should this man have?”

“Well, he must be kind,” she said, repeating herself from earlier in the day. “Chivalrous.”

“Chivalrous?” Derrick’s brow lifted.

“Chivalrous,” she confirmed with a decisive nod. “A man that I can love but also one that I can admire.”

“So he must be handsome.”

“Yes. I mean no.” How red, she wondered, could a person’s cheeks turn before they caught fire? “I mean, I should like to find him, ah, attractive. But on the inside as well as the out.”

“I presume by your questions that he should also have an affinity for poetry, dancing, and animals.”

“That is my hope.”

“Excellent,” Derrick declared, finally lowering his arm and gesturing for her to proceed him down the path. “Then we’ll start by looking for a lord the exact opposite of me.”

\*\*\*

Derrick was never taking his butler’s advice again.

Go out for a morning stroll, he’d said.

It will help clear your head , he’d said.

What Grieves had failed to mention was that the ‘morning stroll’ would turn into a husband-hunting venture with an impossibly naive blonde and three angry geese. If Annalise was truly looking for love, she’d have a better time finding a needle in a haystack. And if one of his friends went looking for him, this was the last place in London they’d ever search.

The Debauchurous Duke wandering through Hyde Park in the early afternoon without a drop of drink or a card game in sight? They’d laugh so hard they’d split their trousers wide open. But Derrick wasn’t laughing. For some inexplicable reason, he was taking his quest with Annalise quite seriously.

One might say almost too seriously.

“What about that gentleman?” she whispered, pointing discreetly at a parallel walking

trail where a trio of young men formed a half circle.

“The chap in the middle?”

“Yes, with the tall hat.”

“He whips his horse,” he said dismissively.

“He does?” she asked, quickly lowering her arm. “How can you tell?”

“I just can.”

Her brow furrowed. “I never would have guessed. What about the man to his left?”

“Yells at children.”

“The one on the right?”

“Has three mistresses he has no intention of giving up when he’s married.”

She sighed loudly. “This is much harder than I anticipated.”

“Could it be because you’re seeking something that does not exist?” he suggested as they resumed walking. His gaze slid to her nape where a golden curl dangled temptingly above folded collar of her pelisse. When his fingertips itched to touch it, he frowned and tucked his hands behind his back.

“What do you mean?” Fishing into her reticule, she procured yet another handful of corn - honestly, how much of it did she have? - and dropped the kernels in a neat row as they traversed a stone bridge littered with tiny yellow petals from a willow tree that overlooked the stream. Throughout the park, all of the foliage was in varying

stages of bloom.

There were cherry trees heavy with pink blossoms, colorful clusters of purple bluebells, and sunny daffodils. The air smelled fresh and slightly sweet, like a shirt after it had dried outside in the breeze. Songbirds sang lively tunes as they hopped from branch to branch, bits of twigs and horsehair stuffed in their beaks. Out of the corner of his eye, Derrick spied a brown rabbit as it hopped along the bottom of a hedge beside the willow. It paused, tipped a long ear in their direction, and then darted away.

“I mean,” he drawled, stopping in the middle of the bridge to lean against the parapet with his arms crossed, “love, at least the kind you are describing, does not exist.”

Annalise halted so abruptly that Marcus ran into the back of her with a startled honk. “But of course it does,” she said, her blue eyes filling with sparkling indignation. “Love exists in all forms. The kind between a parent and child, and siblings, and friends. The kind that comes after two people have been together for a long time, and the kind that comes when they’ve only just met.”

“You’re speaking of love at first sight.”

“I am.”

“How can you love someone when you don’t know them?”

She huffed out an impatient breath. “If you read poetry, you’d understand.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me?”

“Close your eyes,” she instructed, and to Derrick’s own amazement, he did. “What do you see?”

“I cannot see anything. My eyes are closed.”

“I realize that. But what can you see ? Don’t use your eyes.”

“Then what else am I-”

“Use your heart.”

It was evident that Annalise had been spending too much time with her geese. Still, though he’d never admit it to Grieves, Derrick was beginning to enjoy himself. If he were being completely honest, this was the most enjoyment he’d had in... well, in recent memory. Maybe in any memory. So he kept his eyes closed, took a deep breath, and implored his cynical, sin-filled heart to magically grow a pair of eyeballs.

For a few seconds, while feeling utterly foolish, he saw nothing but darkness. But then... something began to happen. Something began to shift. His nostrils flared as he inhaled a new scent. Rose, with an underlying hint of warm cinnamon. Annalise’s perfume, dashed so lightly upon her wrists and throat that he had not noticed it before.

He heard the rustle of feathers as one of the geese adjusted their wings. Followed by the distant thump, thump, thump of the rabbit as it struck its foot against the ground and the gurgle of water trickling under the bridge.

He felt the warm, bathing glow of sunlight on his face and the tickle of a light wind through his hair.

All things that had always been there, but that he’d overlooked or taken for granted in his haste to find whatever vice would fulfill him the quicker. Never pausing in his hurtling quest toward damnation to consider that what he truly wanted, what he truly needed, could not be found in a gambling hell or at the bottom of a glass of brandy.

Ever so slowly, Derrick opened his eyes... and all he saw was Annalise. Sweet, amusing, oddly perceptive Annalise with the golden hair and a heart infinitely more pure than his own. How beautiful she was, standing in the middle of the bridge with her trio of loyal feathered companions at her feet waiting to attack his nether regions at a moment's notice. How calm and quiet she was; a soothing balm to a soul that had grown ragged at the edges.

Without thinking about what he was doing, or the potential implications that would follow once it was done, he went to her and gently cupped her cheek, his palm dwarfing her delicate bone structure as he coaxed her face up while he lowered his down.

The kiss was as soft as the breeze. Her lips were as warm as the sun. Blood rushed through his veins like the water flowing beneath them. Angling his head, he deepened the kiss as his fingers slid under her bonnet to tangle in the silky shine of her curls and he braced his legs on either side of her skirts.

She tasted... she tasted glorious .

Of peaches, and sugar, and all that was sweet and good.

She was a sunrise after years of sleeping through daybreak.

She was the first flower to bloom after a cold winter.

She was all he hadn't known existed and more than he could have ever dreamt of.

How did you describe the ocean to a man that had never seen water? Or a mountain to someone that lived underground? Or an angel to a disillusioned duke that dealt in self-interest and over-indulgence?

On a small gasp, Annalise leaned slightly forward, her hands reaching shyly for the notched lapels of his tailcoat as the kiss lingered, both of them loathe to be the one to end it. All things being equal, Derrick might have stayed on that bridge with Annalise wrapped in his arms for another hour, a day, a month, a lifetime.

But Constantine had other ideas.

“Bloody hell ,” he snarled, wrenching his mouth away from heaven to curse at the goose that peered smugly up at him out of a glinting black eye, a torn piece of his trousers held firmly in its beak. “That hurt, you feather-brained little-”

“I am sure it was an accident,” Annalise interceded hastily. “He didn’t mean it.”

Derrick snorted. “He looks like he meant it.”

“It was just a...” She bit her bottom lip, flushed from his kiss. “A peck of affection.”

“I’ll show him a peck of affection,” he growled, curling his hand into a fist. With a loud honk, Constantine dove behind Annalise.

She gazed at him in dismay. “You would hit a poor, frightened, innocent animal?”

Derrick glared at Constantine.

Poking his head out from behind Annalise’s skirts, Constantine glared at Derrick.

He relaxed his hand. “No, I wouldn’t dream of it.” Coward he mouthed at the goose and he would have sworn, even though Constantine’s beak was anatomically incapable of producing human facial expressions, that the goose smirked. “Shall we continue on?” he asked, returning his attention to Annalise. “Or are you ready to admit that there is no such thing as love at first sight?”



Her chin lifted. “I will admit no such thing, Your Grace.”

“Your pet tried to perform an unsolicited amputation. I believe you can call me Derrick.”

“Derrick,” she said slowly, and a thrill of pleasure shot through him upon hearing his name spill from her perfect pink lips. “Very well. You may call me Annalise, if you’d like.”

He did like.

He liked it a great deal.

He liked her a great deal.

Maybe... just maybe... her idea of love at first sight had some merit.

Not for him, of course. But for a duke with a heart.

Surely, for a duke with a heart, there were far worse fates than falling in love with an utterly enchanting, goose-befriending woman he’d met on a whim in a park. Like traveling through his whole life whilst only living half of it.

He cleared his throat. “From the sound of their raised voices, it appears as though a congregation of young, able-bodied gentlemen is around the next bend arguing about whose horse is fastest. Should we see if your future husband is among them?”

Annalise nodded and began walking, the three emperors waddling in her wake. “Oh, and Derrick,” she called out suddenly over her shoulder when she reached the end of the bridge. “I am looking forward to proving you wrong.”

“Challenge accepted, my dear Annalise,” he murmured as a grin cracked the corners of his mouth. “Challenge accepted.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:41 am*

### Part III

“ I f I had a flower for every time I thought of you, I could walk through my garden forever.” ~Lord Alfred Tennyson

Her first kiss.

Her first kiss.

Her first kiss .

If Annalise were alone, she would have thrown out her arms in giddy excitement and spun in a circle until her skirts billowed around her in a curtain of violet. As it was, she made do with a quick, giddy skip and shared a conspiratorial smile with Marcus who affectionately pecked her shoe before veering off the path in search of clover.

Oh, what a dream come true! And what a kiss . Soft, passionate, gentle, consuming. It had lifted the downy hairs at her nape and made her toes curl. Her toes ! She hadn't known they would do that. Or that her lips would still be tingling minutes after. Or that whenever she stole a glance at Derrick she couldn't help but blush, even though he had called Constantine a name, and that wasn't nice, but the kiss... the kiss had been better than nice. It had been everything she'd ever hoped it would be and more.

If only he liked poetry.

Still, she surmised as they wound their way along the trail in pursuit of prospective suitors, if the duke could help her find a man who kissed half as well as he did and

checked off most of the wants on her list, she would consider the day a success. And if she could prove to Derrick that true love did exist, well, that would just be the icing on her favorite lemon cake.

He was far too handsome to be so cynical. Or perhaps he was cynical because he was so handsome. Regardless, she was determined to show him that the length of time you knew someone had little to do with how much they meant to you... or how much they could mean, given the right circumstances.

There did have to be a bit of luck involved, she acknowledged. If the person you were meant to love lived in another city, or - heaven forbid - another country, that could certainly put a knot in things. But there were carriages, and trains, and ships. Why, even if they lived next door, there was no guarantee that paths would cross. All things considered, it was a small miracle in and of itself that she'd met Derrick this morning. Under normal circumstances, this might have been their eleventh, twelfth, or even thirteenth meeting. How many balls had she missed? She'd given up count long ago. Because nothing about her upbringing had been normal. Wasn't the very fact that they were walking beside each other, that he'd kissed her, proof that the type of fate poets devoted entire sonnets to really did exist?

If only he liked dancing.

"What do you think?" Crouching behind a thicket of forsythia, Derrick gestured for her to join him. "The one on the gray does not appear diseased."

Gathering her dress to avoid trotting on the hem, Annalise joined the duke in peering through the hedgerow of tiny yellow flowers at four men on horseback. "I don't think any of them look diseased. What do you think, Marcus?"

The smallest of the three geese honked in agreement.

“You can never be too careful,” Derrick said ominously. “Look at the one in the middle. Has smallpox all over his face.”

She squinted. “I believe those are freckles.”

“And the one on the bay mare? Gout.”

“How can you possibly-”

“Now that I’ve taken a closer look, the fellow on the gray is clearly suffering from an advanced case of syphilis.”

Annalise sighed in exasperation. “And the gentleman on the chestnut?”

“Consumption,” he said gravely. “Highly contagious. We should move on before the wind shifts.”

Before she could argue, he took her by the hand and pulled her along to a different trail. This one was narrower than the last, with thick roots snaking under the dirt from the oaks that towered above. When she stumbled, he caught her by the waist and she leaned back against his firm chest, her heart thumping wildly.

“T-thank you,” she managed.

“You’re welcome,” he murmured, his voice cradling her ear in a husky whisper.

“I... I have my footing now. You can release me.”

But he kept holding her in the sun kissed shade of a grand old tree, longer than he should have and not as long as she wanted him to. How odd it was, that when she’d woken up this morning in her familiar room, filled with her familiar things, that she’d

had no idea she was about to meet a very unfamiliar man. A stranger, by every definition of the word. But if he was so strange and unfamiliar, why did she feel so comfortable with him? Why did their sentences click together with nary an awkward lull? Why did her pulse leap when he touched her, and why did she want to stay in his arms forever, even though he abhorred poetry, dancing, and horses?

He was helping her to find a husband!

Not offering himself up in the role.

A tiny fact she needed to remind herself of even as a part of her wanted to sink deeper into his embrace.

“We should keep going,” she said, reluctantly stepping out of his arms and turning to regard him with a smile that wobbled, just a little, at the edges. “My chaperone will be upon us at any moment, and she won’t be pleased with me for wandering off.”

Derrick raised a dark brow. “Not much of a chaperone if she’s let you escape into the company of a disreputable duke.”

“Are you?” she asked with some surprise. “Disreputable, that is.”

“I kissed you, didn’t I?”

“You also kept me from falling.”

“I’d like to roast Constantine for supper.”

“You fed him corn.”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to insult me?”

“Are you trying to insult yourself?” she countered. “I know we’ve only just met, but you seem like a very kind man to me.”

“Take that back. I’m debaucherous.”

“Delightful.”

“Devilish.”

“Debonair.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Would a delightful, debonair duke do this ?”

Their second kiss wasn’t at all like the first. That had been slow and soothing, a ripple moving through a pond on a hot summer’s day. This was an ocean wave crashing upon the shore. Turbulent, shocking, and utterly enthralling.

His fingers diving into her hair, Derrick dragged her under the frothy surf while his tongue plundered between her lips. Stunned by the sheer heat, she threw her arms around his neck, desperately seeking balance even as her entire world tipped precariously on its axis.

With a low growl, he ravished her as all reprehensible knights ravished the innocent maiden trapped in the tower; wildly, wantonly, wickedly . Establishing once and for all that he was no Prince Charming, but rather the fiendish villain that the good prince slayed before he claimed the maiden for himself.

When the kiss stopped as abruptly as it had begun, Annalise pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and stared at Derrick wide-eyed, her thoughts a wild jumble and her body a muddled pool of mysterious want. The feelings he invoked inside of her... feelings of lust, passion, and longing... she’d never felt yearnings like those before.

She'd never even read about them. For no poetry, no play, no written word could ever capture what it was like to be desired by Derrick Blake, Duke of Tennyson.

"I take it back," she murmured, slowly lowering her arm. "You are devilish."

"Told you," he said, but for some reason he didn't appear pleased to have proven her wrong. "If your chaperone were here, she would tell you to stay far away from the likes of me."

She swallowed. "And if I didn't want to listen to her?"

His dark brows drew sharply together. "Then I would tell you to stay far away."

"You offered to help me," she reminded him as the red in her cheeks gradually faded to a rosy pink. "But you've found something wrong with every man we've come across."

"Because none of them are good enough for you," he said flatly. "And neither am I. This is where we part ways, Lady Annalise. I wish you the best in your search. I would say it has been a pleasure, but your goose bit me, so I will say that it has been... a memorable experience."

Astonished by the sudden ending of what had been starting to feel like an improbable beginning, she could only watch in disappointed silence as he walked away.

\*\*\*

It was official, Derrick vowed to himself grimly as he resisted the very palpable urge to turn around and march right back to Annalise. He was never - ever - getting out of bed before noon again.



Had he remained under the blankets where he belonged, he wouldn't have gone to Hyde Park. Had he not gone to Hyde Park, he wouldn't have been attacked by geese. Had he not been attacked by geese, he wouldn't have followed them to an enchantingly beautiful blue-eyed fairy. Had he not followed them to an enchantingly beautiful blue-eyed fairy, he never would have kissed that fairy. And had he never kissed that fairy, he wouldn't have fallen-

No.

No .

He wasn't going to say the words. He wasn't even going to think them. Because he was the Debauchurous Duke. And if anyone knew anything about debauchurous dukes, it was that they did not fall in love at first sight, or last sight, or any sight. Because love was hogwash. Utter nonsense. Complete claptrap.

So he was going back to bed, putting a pillow over his head to drown out the damned sunlight, and sleeping until Annalise and her trio of murderous feathered fiends were nothing but a distant dream.

"Back so soon, Your Grace?" Grieves had the bloody nerve to ask him the moment he entered the front foyer. "How was your walk? Do you find your spirits restored?"

"No, I do not find them restored," he snapped as he yanked off his waistcoat and threw it at Grieves who caught the garment without blinking. "Truth be told, I think my spirits are worse than when I woke up. Tell me, Grieves. Have you ever been bitten by a goose?"

"I cannot say that I have, Your Grace."

"Well I have," he said, bristling. "And I do not recommend it."

“I don’t imagine anyone would, Your Grace.”

“Do you know what else I don’t recommend?” Stomping over to the stairs, he sat on the third step and scowled at his valet. “Helping young, naive ladies find a husband.”

Grieves’s stoic expression wavered ever-so-slightly. “Is that what you did today, Your Grace?”

“You should have heard her list of requirements,” he went on, both ignoring the valet’s question and answering it all at the same time. “Her husband must be able to recite poetry. Poetry, Grieves!”

“A noble pastime, Your Grace.”

“Bah.” He waved his hand in the air. “She also wants a man that enjoys dancing. Ridiculous. Show me a man that likes to parade around like a trussed up flamingo and I’ll show you one that can walk on water. As if that’s not bad enough, the poor chap has to like horses!”

“You like horses, Your Grace.”

“Betting on them, maybe. But you know what that pony did to me,” he said darkly. “You know .”

“It was quite a pugnacious animal,” Grieves agreed. “I take it you did not find what this young lady was looking for?”

Derrick stood and began to pace. “Of course we didn’t. Because such a perfect, virtuous man does not exist . And if he does, he’s probably already married. And if he’s already married, then he’s probably miserable because he spends his spare time reading poetry on the back of a horse after staying up late the night before dancing!”

“If I may be so bold, Your Grace, this young lady seems to have made quite the impression on you.”

Without warning, Derrick’s ears filled with the sound of Annalise’s musical laughter and his mouth flooded with the taste of peaches. You can call me Annalise, if you’d like... I am looking forward to proving you wrong.

Devil take it, he needed her out of his head.

How was he supposed to enjoy a proper evening filled with degenerate and lascivious activities if every time he turned around, he smelled her perfume? Or he pictured the sunlight glinting her hair? Or he saw the fetching twinkle in her eyes?

This wouldn’t do.

This wouldn’t do at all.

Scowling at Grieves, he abruptly yanked his tailcoat back and shoved his arms into the sleeves. “I have return to the park. I forgot something.”

“Would you like for me to fetch it for you, Your Grace?” asked the valet politely.

“What I need you cannot get me, Grieves. Unless you’re able to claim a last word on my behalf.”

“I would never presume to be able to do that, Your Grace.”

“Poetry,” Derrick muttered under his breath as he stalked to the front door and threw it open. “I’ll show her poetry.”

Except when he returned to where he’d left her, she wasn’t there. Nor was she by the

bridge. Or the pond. Or a little wooden bench that was just the right size to draw her onto his lap and-

Dear God.

What was wrong with him?

Dragging his hands across his face, he began to calculate the distance to the nearest gentleman's club. Then, out of the pristine blue sky, he heard it. The distant, but unmistakable, sound of a honk.

"Constantine, you bastard." He spun in a circle, narrowed eyes searching the manicured bridle paths and walking trails for signs of his arch-nemesis. He saw young children being shepherded by weary looking governesses. Two dowagers yielding canes out for a very slow stroll. A buggy carrying a man and a woman that couldn't look away from each other. But to his utmost annoyance, there was no sign of a goose. "Where the hell are you?"

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:41 am*

### Part IV

“ W e are all fools in love.” ~Pride and Prejudice written by British novelist Jane Austen

“I am sorry that you didn’t find the man of your dreams,” Becca consoled Annalise later in the day as they took their afternoon tea in the shade of the side veranda. “You can always try again tomorrow.”

“I was so sure he would be out there.” With no appetite to speak of, Annalise stared glumly at her cucumber sandwich. How wretched it was, to feel something with such absolute certainty... only to have that something never materialize. Instead, she’d spent her morning being dragged about by a duke who she was beginning to suspect hadn’t ever had any intention of helping her find a husband.

How cruel, to have wasted her time.

And how foolish, to have allowed it to be wasted.

Maybe her father was right. Maybe it was better to live safely behind glass walls rather than risk the pain of breaking free. Why, she was willing to bet her entire hair ribbon collection that the man of the bay mare didn’t even have gout. He probably would have made a very fine husband. Except she hadn’t gone looking for fine. She’d gone in search of extraordinary. Instead, all she’d found was Derrick.

Derrick, the duke with two poet’s names who despised poetry.

Derrick, the self-proclaimed rake.

Derrick, the first man to have kissed her.

Derrick, the first man to have broken her heart.

Well, she amended, poking a finger at her sandwich, maybe not broken . She was made of sterner stuff than that. But he had hurt her feelings. To have walked away like that, as if the time they'd spent together, while admittedly short, had meant nothing ...

“Has your food offended you in some way, my lady?”

Startled, Annalise raised her gaze from her plate to find Becca watching her. “Oh... no. I'm sorry. I'm not... I'm not hungry at the moment.”

“I can see that. You know,” the lady's maid began as she freshened both their tea cups, “it has not escaped my notice that you spent thrice as long feeding your geese at the park today, yet when I sought out where you regularly feed them, you were nowhere to be found.”

Guilt, sticky and uncomfortable, like the sweat that clung to her chest when she tried to sleep in the middle of summer, weighed heavily on Annalise's shoulders. “I... took them to a new spot. On the other side of the pond.”

“Did you,” Becca murmured, giving her tea a stir.

“Oh, very well!” she cried, wringing her hands together. “I confess. I snuck away in the company of a gentleman and he kissed me. Twice . At first he said that he was going to help me in my search, but then along the way I began to think that he might be whom I was searching for, except he said he wasn't good enough for me, and then

he left.” Her bottom lip wobbled. “He left, Becca.”

“Oh, my dear girl.” In a rare display of maternal affection that went beyond the boundaries of lady’s maid and lady, Becca left her seat to envelop Annalise in a hug. Rubbing her back in soothing circular strokes, she said, “Men can be, on their best day, careless creatures. Not always on purpose, as I hope is the case with the Duke of Tennyson, although I must say his reputation precedes him. Still, I’ve found people aren’t nearly as bad as they are portrayed to be, nor as good, but somewhere in the middle where we are all infinitely human.”

“Thank you,” Annalise sniffled, “That helps a great - wait. How do you know his name?”

“Well...” said Becca, dragging the word out as she returned to her chair and took her own turn at poking at her cucumber sandwich. “I followed you.”

“What,” she gasped.

“Please do not take offense, my lady. It is my duty to protect you. I have no greater responsibility than that.” Becca folded her hands primly. “Did you really believe I would allow my favorite charge to go off in the company of a stranger and not follow at a safe distance?”

“I am your only charge.”

“Yes, which makes you all the more special.”

“Maybe I’m not meant to marry,” Annalise mused aloud. Tilting her head back, she studied a trail of fluffy white clouds as they slowly made their way across the clear blue sky. “Maybe I am meant to stay in this house forever, slowly drying out like a rose left too long in a vase.”

Becca clucked her tongue. “What else did he say? This duke of yours.”

“He’s not my duke.”

“He was this morning.”

Yes , she thought silently. Yes, he had been. All hers. For a little while, at least.

“We argued, mostly. First about the geese, and then about whether love at first sight truly existed.”

“And then?” Becca prompted.

“And then...” Closing her eyes, she traced the pad of her thumb across the swell of her bottom lip where she could still taste him. “And then he kissed me. The first time.”

“What brought on the second kiss?”

“I questioned how disreputable he really was if he was trying to help me. For some reason, that seemed to annoy him. So he kissed me to prove me work.”

“And?”

Her eyes opened. “It worked. He must be as disreputable and debaucherous as he claimed, or else why would he have left as he did? I was... I was nothing more than a passing amusement for him. A toy to be played with and then cast aside.”

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s true.”

“Why not?”



“Because if I am not mistaken, your duke is standing outside our gate.”

\*\*\*

What was Derrick doing at a young woman’s private residence with a trail of three honking geese behind him?

The hell if he knew.

Once again, he blamed Grieves. If not for the valet’s suggestion to go for a walk... but no. No, he couldn’t really blame him. Because to blame someone for something, you had to be unhappy with the outcome. And if he searched deep within himself, Derrick wasn’t unhappy.

He was nervous.

Nervous that after squandering the start of his adulthood on gratuitous drinking and gambling, he’d ruined his one chance at true fulfillment. He had wasted countless hours, days, months in dark rooms that stank of cigars and stale sweat, searching for meaning in the shadow of sin. Then all it had taken was a single morning in the sunlight to show him what his life could be like... if Annalise were in it.

Annalise, with a feather in her hair and mud on her skirts.

Annalise, with her laughter that sounded like wind chimes.

Annalise, with a pure heart and beautiful soul.

Annalise, the type of woman he didn’t deserve... but damned if he wasn’t going to try to change himself into the type of man that did.

When he felt a hard peck on the back of his leg, he turned and scowled down at Constantine who glared right back at him out of a beady black eye. “I am working up to it,” he growled at the goose. “What would you have me do, just knock on the door and admit that I was wrong? Tell her that I was a bloody idiot for walking away, because when you’re fortunate enough to find love at first sight, you don’t leave it behind. You hold onto it with everything that you have.”

“Yes,” a soft, musical voice said from behind him. “Yes, that’s exactly what you should do.”

Derrick’s swallowed with difficulty as he slowly turned back around to discover Annalise silhouetted in the doorway, her blue eyes luminous through what he prayed were a sheen of joyful tears.

“You...” When his tongue stuck the roof of his mouth, he swallowed again and cleared his throat. “You weren’t meant to hear that. Not yet. I’m still working on it.”

“Some of the best poetry is composed without planned forethought.”

“Poetry?” he said, aghast. “I wasn’t... That isn’t... no .”

Bollocks.

This wasn’t off to a great start.

“How did you find where I live?” she asked, canting her head to the side.

She’d changed, he noted belatedly. From the violet dress she’d worn in the park to a pale green gown with capped sleeves and a heart-shaped bodice that threatened to draw his eye to a place where he wouldn’t want to be caught staring. Not now, at any rate. Not when he was already bungling the matter top to bottom.

“The geese brought me. You must have a hole in your pocket, because there was a trail of corn all the way here.” His brow furrowed. “How do you hold such an immense amount of corn, anyway? It defies the laws of matter.”

“I had my pockets specially made. They’re far deeper than they appear. That way I never run out if I ever meet other geese along the way.” Annalise frowned. “I’d never want them to go hungry.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Derrick murmured as a smile, his first true, genuine smile since he was a boy, spread all the way across his countenance from the edges of his mouth to the corners of his eyes. “Wild geese fending for themselves? We couldn’t have that.”

Annalise bit her lip. “Can you say it again? What you said when you thought I wasn’t listening.”

“Must I?” he asked with a pained grimace.

“I think it would be best.”

“May I come in, at least?”

Her gaze went past him. “Well, I don’t want the geese to feel left out.”

Constantine honked in agreement while Marcus preened his feathers and Augustus studied his reflection in a puddle.

Derrick sighed. “All right. A public declaration it is, then. How did I start?”

“You were going to tell me that you were an idiot-”

“A bloody idiot. Yes, I remember now.” He took a deep breath. Perhaps the deepest of his life. And then he laid his heart bare. “I was a bloody idiot, Annalise, for walking away from you this morning. I said it was because I wasn’t good enough for you. The devil knows that much is true. You should be with a man better than me. You should be with any man other than me.”

She raised a brow. “Because they all have gout and smallpox?”

“Yes. Precisely. And because I am not a pillar of virtuous behavior. But I want to be, when I am in your company. When I am with you, the sun is brighter. The sky is bluer. The grass is softer under my feet.”

“You’re wearing boots.”

He gave her an irritated look. “I am trying to create poetry, if you don’t mind.”

Her eyes sparkling, she pressed her lips together and nodded for him to continue.

“What I am trying to say, in the most eloquent way possible, is that I love you, Annalise. At first sight. At last sight. At every sight. As incredible as it seems, given our short acquaintance, I love you.”

“But that’s just it, isn’t it? Love is incredible. And it’s strong. And it’s quiet. And it’s loud. And it’s brave. And I love you, too.” Walking through the doorway, she leapt off the cast stone and into his arms.

Catching her easily, he plucked her off her feet and held her as if she belonged nestled against his chest. As if somehow, someday, they were always meant to end up here. Together. Forever.

Honk. Honk. Hooooonk.

Surrounded by geese.

“When we marry,” he began, striving for a casual tone, “and travel to my country estate for the summer-”

“Good idea,” she said seriously. “We should plan to bring Constantine, Augustus, and Marcus with us. You do have a pond, don’t you?”

“Several. But-”

“I’ll have suitable traveling cages made. They’ll have to be in our carriage, of course.”

Derrick tipped his forehead down to hers. “Of course.”

Annalise raised her eyes to his. “Did you say marry?”

“I did.”

“Then this is a confession of love and a marriage proposal?”

“I...” It hadn’t been his plan. But what was a plan, when love at first sight was involved? “I suppose it is. I’ll have to speak with your father.”

“And my lady’s maid.”

“Your lady’s maid? I don’t-”

“Here she is,” Annalise said cheerfully, moving to the side to reveal a slightly shorter, older, and more robust woman with a stern look to her gaze and shoulders set in iron. “Becca, might I present the Duke of Tennyson.”

“Your Grace.” The lady’s maid lowered herself in a curtsy. “A pleasure to formally make your acquaintance. It is my understanding that you took it upon yourself to kiss my young charge this morning not once, but twice. Is this accurate?”

Derrick had faced down some of the best gamblers that London had to offer. He’d stared certain financial ruin in the eye if the cards didn’t turn his way and sneered. But now, faced with the judgmental gaze of a dragon disguised as a lady’s maid, he felt a terror in his gut the likes of which he’d never experienced before.

“Ah... y-yes.” When his admission came out on a hacking cough, he cleared his throat and tried again. “Yes, I did. I did do that. Yes.”

Gray eyebrows as sharp as scalpels arched toward her white mob cap. “Were your intentions impure?”

Bloody hell.

When were his intentions not impure?

“Er...”

“Becca, please don’t frighten him,” Annalise implored as she laid a comforting hand on Derrick’s forearm. “He came here to tell me something very important.”

“Which is?” Becca said sharply.

He had to say it again?

But maybe the best things were meant to be repeated.

Over and over, until the words were imprinted on the wind.

“I love Annalise.” He put his hand on top of hers and squeezed. “From first sight, as it so happens, even though I assured myself that such a thing did not exist.”

“Hmmm.” Becca pursed her lips. “You’ve known her for less than a day.”

“And when I’ve known her for an eternity, in this world and in heaven, if I’m so fortunate as to be admitted, I will feel exactly the same as I do now.”

“Oh,” Annalise sighed dreamily, leaning her head on his shoulder. “You are a poet.”

Derrick grimaced. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

Unfortunately, the lady’s maid didn’t appear quite as smitten with him as her charge.

“You are a duke with a reputation, Your Grace.” Becca folded her arms. “For drinking, gambling, and - Annalise, don’t listen, my dear - whoring. Is it your intention to give up all of your vices?”

“Well, I was going to keep a few . Jestng,” he said hastily when Becca’s eyes narrowed. “Only jesting. If you are asking if I intend to remain loyal to Annalise, my answer is, and will always, be yes. I am will not lie and describe myself as a good man, Miss Becca. But when I am in the company of Annalise... when I am in the company of Annalise, I don’t feel as bad as I’ve convinced myself that I am. I realize that sounds trite, given the hours that she and I have known each other. But that doesn’t make it any less true.”

Terrible, torturous moments of silence.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

“I like him,” Becca announced, unfolding her arms. “Annalise, my lady, you’ve chosen well. Your Grace, you may continue with your proposal.”

His proposal?

Oh, right.

That.

“Don’t you dare bite me,” he told Constantine as he lowered himself to bending knee and gazed up into the beautiful countenance of the woman that he loved. “Annalise, I... I am afraid I’ve run out of poetry.”

“That’s all right.” Her smile’s brightness rivaled the sun. “I’d like to share some of my own. I went out this morning determined to find true love. You see, while you spent most of your adulthood in gambling dens and gentleman’s clubs, I’ve spent mine here, closed off from the rest of the world, forced to watch as it passed by without me in it. So I went out into that world today to search for my future husband. Instead, I found you. Or you found me. You weren’t who I was looking for, Derrick.”

He frowned. “I am not sure I like the direction this proposal is heading.”

“You weren’t who I was looking for,” Annalise repeated, holding up a finger, “but you were certainly who I was meant to find, and I love you. Will you marry me?”

“I thought I was supposed to say that part,” he said, a tad disgruntled.”

“You can if I like.”



“I do like, thank you very much.” He reached out and took her hand. “Lady Annalise Buttercream, protector of geese and love of my slightly jaded heart, will you do me the incredible honor of being my wife?”

“Yes,” she said happily while Becca began to clap and the geese honked. “Oh, a thousand times yes!”

“What’s all this?” asked a man as he came walking briskly up the front pathway, his eyes - the same blue as Annalise’s - going from the trio of geese, to Derrick, still on his knee, to a sniffing Becca, to a glowing Annalise, and then back to Derrick. A frown already forming, he snapped, “Who are you? What are you doing here? Why are you kneeling like that?”

What was that saying of desperate men?

The third time was the charm?

“Good afternoon, Lord Sandwich,” he said formally as he rose to his feet. “I am Derrick Blake, the Duke of Tennyson. And I am in love with your daughter...”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:41 am*

### Epilogue

They were married by special license precisely three weeks later. It rained, as it was won't to do in London during the springtime, but when Annalise and Derrick emerged from the church there was a rainbow that stretched from one side of the Thames to the other.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Annalise gasped, halting in her tracks to point at the breathtaking display of colors.

"Not as beautiful as what I'm looking at," Derrick said huskily and she blushed a deep pink when she realized he was looking at her.

"Derrick," she hissed, poking him with her elbow.

"What?" he said innocently. "Can't a man gaze at his wife?"

Wife.

Oh, how she loved that word.

The past twenty days had been a whirlwind of activity. From announcing their engagement – Lady Annalise who ? – to finding the perfect dress to helping her father come to the terms with the idea that she was finally leaving to start her own life, she'd hardly had time to draw a breath. But there would be plenty of time for breathing during their carriage ride to Derrick's estate in the country where they would enjoy a long, relaxing honeymoon. Just them, the staff, and–

HONK!

“Don’t worry, Constantine!” she called out the goose. “We’re coming!”

“I still don’t understand why they couldn’t ride on the roof,” Derrick grumbled as he climbed into the town coach behind her and squeezed himself between two spacious bamboo cages containing Marcus and Augustus while she sat across from him next to Constantine.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Digging around in her reticule, she found a few pieces of corn in her reticule (kept for emergencies) and fed Constantine through the bars.

Derrick snorted. “I would argue that I am not the one being ridiculous.”

“You could do that,” she allowed. “But you would be wrong. Just like you were wrong about love at first sight.”

The carriage gave a groaning lurch and they set off through the crowded London streets. Startled by the unfamiliar movement, Marcus and Augustus huddled low in their cages but Constantine began to honk loudly and beat his wings against the bars, his neck extended in fear.

“Constantine!” she cried. “Oh, you poor thing. It’s alright. We’ll be there in just a few hours. You have to stop. You’re going to hurt yourself!”

“Here.” Leaning forward, Derrick unlatched the large goose’s catch and, to Annalise’s utter disbelief, pulled out Constantine and placed him right on his lap. “There you are, handsome fellow,” he murmured, patting the goose’s ruffled feathers. “Nothing to be scared of, my brave chap. Word has it there is quite the pretty young goose waiting for you in the pond. You wouldn’t want her to hear of such antics, would you? No. I didn’t think so.”

Annalise's heart, already so filled with love for her husband that it was close to bursting, grew even bigger. "Derrick, you darling man. I knew you liked the geese."

"Tell anyone about this," he said, scowling at her over the top of Constantine's head, "and I'll deny it. I'm still the Debaucherous Duke, you know."

"Oh yes," she said solemnly. "Very debaucherous."

"That's right." His mock scowl softening, he balanced Constantine in his arms as he stood halfway up and stole a kiss. "I love you, Annalise."

"I love you, Derrick. And you too, Constantine," she added when the goose gave a miffed honk. "Do you think my father and Becca will be alright together? I worry about them both, but I am glad she agreed to stay on at the house."

"I'm sure she'll keep him busy, and they're both coming to visit in July."

"You're right." Leaning her head against the cushioned seat, she closed her eyes as the rocking motion of the carriage began to lull her toward sleep. "Thank you for reassuring me."

"Annalise?" Derrick said several minutes later.

"Yes?" she asked, muffling a yawn.

"To be clear, the geese will not be entering our bedchamber tonight."

Her eyes popped open. "But what if—"

"No."

"They might be—"

“My terms are non-negotiable.”

“Very well,” she conceded, the corner of her mouth twitching. “No geese in the bedchamber.”

But he’d never said anything about the parlor...