



Enchanting By Candlelight (Sweet Christmas Novella)

Author: *Tabetha Waite*

Category: Historical

Description: Miss Miranda Applegate had vowed that Anthony Gravehill was the only man for her. From the time she was ten years old, until a confirmed spinster at twenty-five, she had held on to her devotion. But when she's invited to the charming countryside of Cumbria to spend the holiday season with her siblings and their families, she reconnects with the crush from her past.

Anthony has emotional wounds from war that have never fully healed, the kind that rival the outward scars he wears. He has found peace at long last, but has never quite forgotten the girl who wrote him countless letters he received on the battlefield, who later continued to help him through the darkest days of his life. He is determined to see her again, if only one last time, but he isn't prepared for the feelings this beautiful woman stirs inside him.

Total Pages (Source): 12

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

London, England

December 1802

“Move over, Miranda! I can’t see!”

Miranda rolled her eyes and tossed her brown hair. Her glare pinned her younger sister where she was fidgeting on the staircase. They had both snuck out of bed in order to get a better look at the party taking place downstairs. Elaine was eager to see the finery of the guests and the dancing. Miranda yearned for something else.

“I swear, if you elbow me one more time—”

“That sounds suspiciously like a threat, Miss Applegate. What would your mother say?”

Miranda gasped as she pivoted her head around to see the speaker through the spindles of the railing. For a moment, she was unable to speak. Mr. Anthony Gravehill had long been the subject of her childish fascination. At least, that’s what some might claim it was, but she knew better. It was love. True love, and it couldn’t be distinguished by anything like age or maturity. From the very first moment he had appeared on her family doorstep as the guest of her elder brother, Jacob, at home from school, she’d thought of little else.

But then, how could anyone be immune to that stubborn lock of dark hair that wanted to fall over his forehead, or those mesmerizing green eyes that captured her and pulled her into his very soul? He might have been the younger son of a viscount, but

he was her future, and anyone who said differently would hear about it from her.

There was only one problem. She couldn't seem to speak around him. She knew she ought to respond to his teasing now, but words simply failed her whenever he was near.

Her younger sister, however, didn't have that problem. "Miranda is being mean!"

She spun on her. "Me?" she snapped. "Elaine, if you were any more annoying, you should be a fly next to my ear when I'm trying to sleep!"

"Come now, children..."

That brought Miranda's head back around. "Pardon me, sir, but I am nearly fifteen years old. Hardly a child."

His lips twitched, and she was held captive by how well shaped and masculine they appeared. He truly was magnificent. "I stand corrected. Forgive me for my error."

Miranda yearned to sigh, because of course, she would forgive him for any sort of transgression.

"She loves you."

Miranda's stomach dropped to her feet as she spun toward her ten-year-old sister. "Elaine!"

"What?" She shrugged. "It's true." She then proceeded to sing. "Miranda and Anthony sitting in a tree..."

With a gasp of outrage, Miranda lowered her voice. "Don't you dare finish that

sentence if you don't want me to tell Mama what really happened to her pearl necklace."

Elaine abruptly closed her mouth tightly, although her blue gaze was mutinous. Miranda had no doubt that she would come to suffer the consequences of her actions toward her younger sister, but it would be worth it not to be completely humiliated in front of the man she loved.

"You love me, do you?"

Miranda's head swiveled back around to Anthony, who was wearing a crooked grin.

Rather than slink back to her room in embarrassment, she lifted her chin and said, "Of course. I care for you just as I would my brother."

"That's reassuring," he said softly, his gaze growing distant. "Because I shall be leaving to serve in the Royal Navy just after Christmas."

Immediately, Miranda's stomach dropped to her feet. She knew that Jacob was enlisting, which was heartbreaking enough, but to know that Anthony would be in danger as well... It was almost too much to bear.

She dared to reach a hand out to him through the spindles. With tears in her eyes, she spoke the truest words in her heart. "Please say you'll be careful."

He smiled gently as he accepted her offering. "I promise. How else might I come back to you?"

With a tweak of her nose, he released her and returned to the party.

Miranda, on the other hand, was determined that she fulfill the part of her vow that

remained unspoken between them. “I’ll wait for you,” she whispered to his retreating back. “Forever, if I must.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

Keswick, England

15 years later...

Miranda exited the carriage and breathed deeply of the clean air around her. She sighed, not realizing how much smoke lingered in the London air until she had made the harrowing journey to the county of Cumbria. Surrounded by white-capped mountains and a sparkling lake, it looked like something out of a painting from Sir Augustus Wall Callcott. She had spent quite a bit of money to acquire his works, but she considered money well spent when going to such a talented artist.

When her father had died shortly after Miranda had turned twenty-two, and Jacob had just recently wed, she decided that it was time she started thinking of finding a way to support herself. She could have married, but of course, her soul still pined for another. But by that time, her hope that she might ever reconnect with her heart's desire was quickly diminishing. She had exchanged a few letters with Anthony when he'd left for the war with France all those years ago, but after a few months, they ceased and diminished completely, although she had continued to write, with the wish that he would eventually respond.

He did not.

Miranda always lamented the fact that they couldn't have continued to be friends, at the very least, but Anthony had cut off contact with everyone, including his own family. Jacob had told her Anthony had been injured, adding that the last time he'd spoken to his school friend, he had become a bitter shell of the man he'd once been, to the point he no longer bore any resemblance to the carefree lad from their youth.

Naturally, Miranda had been quite aggrieved by this news, but she hadn't pressed her brother for more information. Elaine, however, had done it on her behalf. Although they'd had their differences when they'd been children, she had become Miranda's closest confidante. Since most of her other friends had married and proceeded with their life, she knew it was time for a change.

She had always possessed a talent for watercolors and poetry, so she had put together a book of illustrated verses and dared to take a chance on getting them published. To her delight, she was accepted, but only if she remained anonymous. She had considered turning down the offer, until she found out how much they planned to give her. Realizing that her chances of marrying were slim, and with little other options for her, she had reluctantly agreed to the anonymity.

In the years since, Miranda had forced herself to put on a brave face for the rest of the world. She had become so adept at it, that she seldom showed her true emotions anymore. With both of her siblings happily settled, and Miranda a spinster at nine and twenty, she told herself she was content. She had a steady income and had been a companion for her mother until her death nearly a year before. Miranda continued to feel her loss rather acutely and still wore muted shades of violet and gray in her memory.

Perhaps that was the true reason she'd decided to come to Cumbria this Christmas. Truth be told, she couldn't bear the thought of spending it alone without her. Her brother and his wife often came here during the year and had invited Miranda to join them several times before. She usually declined, but this time she'd decided that it was time for a respite from her lonely life. Maybe a refreshing, mountain retreat was exactly what she required to finally lay her morose feelings toward her mother's death—and her love for Anthony—to rest at long last.

Either way, she was determined to enjoy her time there, and intended to continue working on her latest illustrations. She had yet to write about a wintry scene, and with

the scent of snow in the air, she had no doubt it would be the perfect inspiration.

As she waited for her trunks to be unloaded from the public coach, the front door of the King's Arms Inn burst open and her brother's eldest children came rushing toward her. "Aunt Randie!"

She gasped in dramatic delight and held her arms out wide to the twins. She adored Camille and Carter as if they were her own and doted on them frequently when they were in town. However, they generally remained at the country estate, because Jacob and his wife, Catharine preferred the quiet, country surroundings best. "Randie" was the nickname they had given her when they were learning to talk. Even at seven years old, it continued to be their preferred endearment.

They threw themselves at her with an enthusiastic embrace, and she held on to them tightly, knowing that she might never have the same someday. She'd had the opportunity, but none of the gentleman who had asked for her hand had ever quite affected her like Anthony had. Thus, some sacrifices had to be made regarding her happiness.

"Give your aunt some room to breathe," Jacob chided gently, as he walked down the steps to greet her. "You're looking well, Miranda. I trust your journey was pleasant?"

"Very much so." She nodded. "I had interesting company along the way, and the roads were not terribly rough."

He nodded. "They have done much to improve them through the years, since Cumbria has become something of a popular destination for many."

Miranda glanced at her surroundings once more and imagined the changes that the dawning age of industry would soon make. "Just imagine. Someday we won't have to rely upon carriages for travel. Railroads will soon be making their mark."

“Heaven help us.” He rolled his eyes dramatically. “More smoke to fill the air. As if London chimneys don’t supply enough.”

She laughed. “That is true, but just think of the advantages when it comes to traveling. You will be able to be in Cumbria much earlier than you are now.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he reluctantly admitted.

She offered him a wink. “I know, but then, I generally am.”

Jacob snorted at that, and for a moment, she was transported back in time to when they were children. She saw the annoying older brother that he used to be. At times, she yearned for those days to return. But there was no use being upset over something that couldn’t be changed. That was a lesson she’d learned long ago.

Once her trunks had been unloaded, Miranda started to go inside the inn, but Jacob held her back with a light hand on her arm. He instructed the twins to go ahead as he turned to her with a solemn expression. Although she was curious as to the sudden change, there was also a frisson of alarm that snaked up her spine.

“I have to tell you something that you might not want to hear.”

Although her entire body felt wooden, she managed to ask, “Is something wrong?”

He hesitated, unknowingly dragging out the anticipation. “I thought you should know that Anthony is here.”

“I see.” She absorbed this information, although she wasn’t quite sure what to do with the knowledge. But then, a rather important fact occurred to her. “I didn’t think you had spoken to him in years.”

“I hadn’t,” he admitted. “But a few months ago, he came to visit me at the estate.” He frowned deeply. “I was as surprised as you are now. We had a long talk and he told me that he was starting to drag himself out of the dark pit he’d been in for the past few years after the war.”

Miranda had never dared to ask how bad Anthony’s wounds actually were—both physically and emotionally—but she found the courage to do so now. “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know the full extent of his injuries,” Jacob said grimly. “We weren’t in the same unit, but if it was anything like the men I saw fall around me...” He stopped and swallowed hard. He spoke very little of his time on the battlefield to Miranda, and if Catharine was to be believed, he was rather tight lipped on the subject with her as well. Perhaps that was his way of dealing with such a terrible tragedy. But everyone was different. Her brother had been spared most of the horrors, but not everyone had been so fortunate. Some might have been better off if they’d perished on the field. Or in Anthony’s case, at sea.

Miranda reached out and grasped her brother’s hand. “Thank you for letting me know. It shall be nice to see him again.”

“Indeed...” He nodded. “Just don’t be too... upset when you do.”

Her heart started to pound as she entered the hotel. Her eyes scanned the area around them, but she saw no sign of the man she’d known. However, if Jacob was right, Anthony wasn’t the same man anymore. She did, however, spy her sister, Elaine. With her small child on her lap and her husband of three years sitting next to her, she gasped in happiness and handed over her daughter, then got up and rushed over to embrace Miranda.

“I’m so glad that you were able to make the journey and spend Christmas with us in

Cumbria this year! Isn't it magnificent?"

Miranda pulled back. "I daresay it is. Quite charming."

"Hello, Miranda."

That voice. It slid over her skin like a soft caress. Whatever else had changed with Anthony, that had remained the same.

She saw Elaine look at her expectantly, as if waiting for her reaction, and then she shifted her eyes toward the speaker. She saw the smile first. It was the same, carefree one she recalled from all those years ago. "It's been a long time," he said softly.

She lifted her gaze and that was when everything stopped. The noise from the other occupants in the hotel faded away, as a buzzing sound filled her ears.

That face. It was so similar to the young man he had been in his youth, but time and maturity had hardened some of the planes of his face and sharpened his jaw. Even his collar-length, dark hair was threaded with bits of silver, likely evidence of the hard life he'd lived thus far.

But it was his eyes that captured her. Or more particularly his right one. What used to be a mossy green was now pure white, a scar going down the middle of his face that reached from his forehead to his chin. His appearance was drawing attention from the casual passerby, many giving him a wide berth as they whispered when they passed.

All she could think of was how much he must have suffered.

Miranda could feel the earth start to spin as her vision eclipsed around her. But the last thing she was going to do was faint in front of him and give him the wrong impression. He would think it was his deformity, when it was merely the

overwhelming sensation of seeing him again. Alive, after all these years.

Nevertheless, it was Elaine who said, “Are you feeling well? You look rather pale.”

“I’m fine,” Miranda reassured her sister, although she sat down in the nearest chair she could find. “Perhaps some water?”

“Of course.” Elaine scurried off to procure the request, while Miranda struggled to regain her composure.

“I’m sorry.” Jacob entered her line of sight. “I should have thought you might be exhausted after your journey.”

It was the perfect excuse for Miranda to latch on to. “Yes. I daresay it was quite harrowing.” Although moments ago, she had just remarked how pleasant it was, thankfully, he didn’t mention it.

“Maybe it would be best if you lie down for a spell. We can all catch up at dinner this evening.”

“Yes. I think that would be best.” She sent her brother a gaze conveying silent gratitude, because he had long known she wasn’t a wilting wallflower. She was probably the strongest one out of all of them. She hadn’t shed a tear during their mother’s funeral, preferring to spill her grief in private.

To be fair, she had known her mother was struggling at the end of her life, whereas Miranda had no time to prepare for this unlikely reunion with the one man who had never left her thoughts for long.

She knew she was being a coward, but she couldn’t even look in Anthony’s direction as Elaine put an arm around her and led her to her suite of rooms. Once they were

inside, and the servants at the hotel had left her trunks, Miranda sank down in one of the chairs by the cheery fireplace.

“He looks quite fearsome, doesn’t he?” Elaine said softly.

Miranda shook her head and exhaled heavily. “It has nothing to do with his scars, but everything to do with the man I have never forgotten.”

Elaine was silent for a time, and then she said, “Do you still love him? After all of these years?”

Miranda took a moment to consider her words. “What exactly is love, Ellie? If you mean, have I always thought of him in my quietest moments through the years? Then yes, I suppose I do. At the same time, I never got to experience the kind of love that you share with Daniel. I’ve never had anyone look at me with adoration in his eyes like he does you, and I haven’t done the same for Anthony since I was fifteen years old before he went off to war.”

Elaine’s expression was empathetic. “Perhaps this is the season for miracles.”

“If only that could be true, Ellie.” She glanced down at her lap. “If only.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

Anthony stood on the terrace in his room. It overlooked the mountains and the lake below. If there was any place he might consider for his final path to healing, this was certainly it. The air was crisp and clean, and nothing but tranquility as far as the eye could see.

All during his years on the ship, fighting under Admiral Nelson, one of the finest men he'd known, he had never imagined the tragedy that awaited them all at the Battle of Trafalgar. Not only did Horatio perish from enemy fire, but that was also when Anthony had been severely injured trying to hold off the enemy's embarkment by manning one of the ship's carronades. He'd been cut down by a bayonet, but his efforts hadn't been in vain. With the assistance of his fellow comrades, they had won a major victory for England that day, although it was bittersweet with the loss of their commander and so much more.

Anthony knew the battle ahead was far from over, for many of the men—and especially for him. When he'd been taken below deck to see the surgeon, he was told that he would never see out of his right eye again. When he'd heard that, something inside of him had died alongside his commanding officer. He'd immediately thought of the letters he'd carefully kept in a bundle close to his bunk, the ones that had come from an infatuated child. But her kind innocence had helped him through the worst.

He soon realized that he couldn't continue to fan her childish dreams and stopped writing back, because he would never be able to offer her anything more than a ruined shell of a man. He would never be whole as he had been. It was best to let her hate him, rather than pray for his return and be disgusted by his monstrous appearance when he did. He would have to break his promise to a girl whom he had hoped would one day become his bride.

But no longer.

It had taken him weeks to recover, but those days encompassed the wounds that others could see. The personal ones ran a lot deeper than that. He'd soon fallen into a deep despair that he didn't dare pass on to anyone else. No one could help him, and he wasn't about to become a burden. He had to face these demons alone. He'd pushed everyone away because he thought it was for the best.

For years, he'd wandered in his own misery, traveling from one part of England to another, until he'd finally settled in the small town of Braithwaite, not far from where he was now. Of course, only his family knew that he'd managed to put together a quiet life for himself in this rugged part of the country. It was so different from anything that he'd known before, that he'd decided to stay, much to the initial dismay of his mother. She had always wanted him to remain near London and return to the social whirl, but it was the last thing he needed. The peace he'd found here was worth more than any debutante with her enticing dowry that he might have wed. He hadn't told his mother that he was a working man now, she would surely faint from the idea that a gentleman was doing such menial labor, but becoming a fisherman and spending hours upon the sea had done wonders for his torn soul.

He had decided that he wouldn't darken any doors in London once he'd reconciled with his family, but that was before he'd received word from his sister that Jacob's mother had passed. On impulse, he'd gone to see his long-time friend. It had been a stilted reunion at first, but they soon started to laugh about the antics from their youth and he remembered what it had been like to be... normal. It wasn't until Jacob had invited him to spend Christmas with them in Cumbria that Anthony had been taken aback. He might have declined the offer, except Jacob mentioned her. Miranda—the girl he'd left behind with a broken heart.

Once he'd learned that she had mourned her mother quite heavily, Anthony knew he had to make amends for all those lost years. She had been the one bright light in his

dismal world, and he had the opportunity to help ease her pain now...if she would let him.

He pondered their initial meeting and couldn't decide if it was the shock of seeing him again that had caused her to falter, or the shock of him. For a long time, he'd worn a patch over his eye, but it had started to become a bother, so he'd dared to discard it. People were wont to stare at him either way, so they might as well solve their curiosity by finding out what had been hiding beneath the leather strap for so long.

He expelled a heavy breath. He should have known it wouldn't be easy for Miranda to see him either way. He certainly didn't blame her if she refused to do so. He had treated her badly, and for no other reason than his own upset.

But that didn't keep him from praying for a Christmas miracle.

When he closed his eyes, Anthony kept seeing the child she'd once been, and when she'd walked into the hotel, he had noticed some of the characteristics she had always carried, like her curly, chestnut hair and those bright, green eyes that sparkled with life. He noted that a bit of that sparkle had dulled somewhat, likely because she had become a disillusioned woman.

He clutched the railing in front of him. Oh, yes, that part had certainly changed. Her curves were perfect, made for a man's hands. And had things been different, if he hadn't been hurt and buried his head in the sand like the coward he was, he might have been granted the chance to court her upon his return from the Navy. He could have greeted her with a hero's welcome. Although he had been noted for his service to Crown and country, it was nothing compared to the prize he would have in Miranda Applegate.

With one last glance out at the scenic, winter view before him, Anthony told himself

that he had one opportunity to repair things with Miranda. If he failed, then he wouldn't bother her any longer. He would leave the hotel and fade away into the night without a backward glance. He told himself he should do that now, but he owed her too much to go now. He had to try to earn her respect, at the very least. He might not have much in this life, but he did have his honor.

It might very well be all he had left to give.

But it was hers.

Miranda told herself that she was prepared to see Anthony again, but when she inspected her appearance in the mirror later that evening, she wondered if she hadn't been fooling herself.

She had dressed in her finest gown, a violet satin with black lace trim. She thought it was one of the few half-mourning gowns that complimented her features, but when she'd stared at her reflection with a critical eye, she suddenly felt so drab. And it didn't matter how many times she tried to style her hair, it wouldn't do anything but fly around her head, in an uncontrollable mess.

Frustrated, she finally pulled it back into a simple knot and pinned it at the nape of her neck. At least she didn't have to pinch her cheeks to add any color, because her anger was high enough to offer enough.

She grabbed her reticule and left her rooms but stopped abruptly over the threshold when she saw Elaine standing on the other side, her hand poised to knock. They startled each other and began to laugh, which helped to ease some of Miranda's earlier tension.

With a sheepish expression, her sister said, "Jacob wanted me to come and check on you since you were running late." She didn't mention about how they likely all

thought Miranda might not appear since Anthony was there.

It was nice that Miranda had a supportive family who would help her over any hurdle. They had always been there for her when she needed them most.

“I had a slight altercation with my hairbrush,” she teased. “But everything is fine now.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Nevertheless, her sister knew her almost better than she knew herself and threaded her arm through hers as they headed down the hall. After a moment, she said quietly, “I know it must be difficult to see Anthony again.”

“Nonsense.” Miranda lifted her chin in case there was any doubt. “It wasn’t as if there was anything between us. I was a child when I saw him last.”

“I know how much you adored him,” Elaine pointed out.

“I shall always care for him because he was such good friend to Jacob. I appreciate his loyalty to our family.”

“But you wrote to him—”

Miranda stopped walking, forcing Elaine to do the same. She looked at her steadily. “Please don’t think anything more of it, Ellie. Whatever I might have felt toward Anthony—or rather, Mr. Gravehill—has long since passed. He is merely an acquaintance now. Don’t fret over me.”

Elaine lifted a brow. “And yet, you nearly fainted when you saw him.”

“The journey was tedious,” she returned firmly. “And I’m not as young as I used to be.”

Her sister rolled her eyes. “You are hardly in your dotage, Randie.”

“And yet, there are days I feel much older.” She paused. “Especially after Mama passed.”

With a comforting squeeze to her hand, Elaine’s blue eyes were sympathetic when she said, “It will be difficult for us all not to have her with us this year, which is why I think it’s best we spend this time away from London. Even if we used to spend most of the holiday at Jacob’s estate, there are too many memories all around to haunt us. A change of scenery will no doubt, help to ease any doldrums we might be feeling from her loss.”

Miranda smiled. “No doubt it will.” As she offered the assurance, she wasn’t certain anywhere would keep her from feeling the pang of her mother’s absence this Christmas. She had been the closest to their mother in her last days, since she had stayed with Miranda.

They walked into the private dining room together, and Miranda found that she was grateful for the support. As if eager to lay her eyes on him again, he was the first face she saw. He was standing and talking with her brother, his face in profile. From that angle, he almost looked as he had the last time she’d seen him at her parents’ Christmas party before the war.

However, as he turned his head upon her arrival, the sight of that white eye and the dreadful scar he would always carry with him was still quite shocking. Her heart ached for him, yet again, and she knew his recovery had been fierce.

She averted her gaze as her sister-in-law, Catharine, approached and greeted her warmly.

“Hello, Miranda. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to greet you when you arrived.”

“It’s perfectly fine,” she replied. “How is Mary doing?” Jacob had written her before she’d left London and told her that their youngest child had been suffering from a case of the croup. It had struck when they had been traveling to Cumbria, but with love and care from her parents, Miranda had no doubt she would recover soon enough.

The relief in Catharine’s voice was proof enough of her assumption. “Better.” She glanced over to where the three-year-old toddler was playing with her twin siblings and Elaine’s daughter, Elizabeth, who was a year younger. “She’s actually starting to act like herself again.”

“That is very good, indeed.”

Catharine turned back to her. “We have much to be thankful for.” She put a hand to her stomach. “And with another one on the way...”

Miranda gasped in delight and reached out to hug her brother’s wife. “Congratulations! I know my brother is thrilled to be expanding his family.”

As if he’d heard his name, Jacob walked over and joined them. Anthony followed as well. “What’s going on over here?”

Catharine glanced at her husband. “I told Miranda our news. I’m so sorry, but I couldn’t wait.”

“I’m thrilled for you both,” Miranda said honestly. Although she always felt the pang of not having her own children, she was starting to accept the fact she would be alone.

“Do you have any children, Miranda?”

She looked at Anthony, and although he was reduced to seeing out of one eye, it was just as direct and piercing as she recalled. “No. I do not.”

He studied her carefully, and she had to wonder what he was thinking. “Have you not been married?” he asked.

She smiled tightly. She found it uncomfortable to admit that she had given up all of her dreams in lieu of the fantasy that would never appear. “No. I’m content being the spinster aunt.”

“Not a spinster. You can’t be more than nine and twenty. Still plenty of time to find a husband and settle down.”

She straightened her spine. “I find I no longer have the inclination to do so. I already have a household that I manage to run quite well in London.”

Something sparked in that green eye. “Do you?”

Tension crackled in the air, and Jacob had the grace to intervene. “Miranda is quite well known in most literary circles. She is a prominent author of children’s stories.”

A dark eyebrow raised at that. “Is that so?”

She had the sudden feeling she should defend herself, so she said, “Yes. I am. I write anonymously, but I am paid just the same. It is a way I can showcase my talents with both watercolors and verse.”

Catharine’s eyes brightened. “The children have been looking forward to your next book.”

“I shan’t disappoint,” Miranda promised with a smile. When she glanced at Anthony

again, his focus was still fixed on her. It was rather unnerving to say the least.

“Shall we eat?” Jacob announced. “I believe dinner is ready.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Elaine’s husband, Daniel, said with a broad grin. He walked over to Miranda and offered her a gallant bow, and then held out his arm. “Would you do me the honor, Miss Applegate?”

She laughed and set her arm on his. “I should be delighted, kind sir.” She had liked Daniel from the first time he had come to call on her sister. She always had adored a man with a sense of humor. At one time Anthony had been delightful as well, but something told her those days were gone with the war.

It was a shame. It was one of the things she’d first adored about him. The first time she’d met Daniel, she’d told Elaine that she thought he was the one. She’d even taken note of how he’d regarded her sister, and his devotion had been real. Together, they had started a family that had made a world of difference in Elaine’s demeanor. They balanced each other perfectly.

Miranda had once thought the same about Anthony. They had always had nice chats when he came to visit with Jacob during leave from school. Other than her siblings, he’d been the only other person she could open up to when something bothered her. But even then, he’d been so much more.

She withheld a sigh and pasted a smile on her face, determined to make it through the rest of the meal without allowing melancholy over the past to bring her down.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

She was beautiful. It was the only word he could use to truly describe the woman Miranda had become. She had blossomed like a flower in the spring and brightened up the room with her brilliance. He was thankful that he had one good eye with which to see her, because to have missed her smile and her grace would have been a true shame. He would have lamented his wounds much more than he already did.

At times, he closed his eyes and listened. He had heard that, with the loss of one sense, one or more of the others became heightened. He could pick her laugh out of the assemblage, and it flowed over his skin like the finest spun silk. But it was nothing compared to witnessing her charm firsthand. He had long admired her courage and determination when she'd been young, but now, with the maturity of age, she had proven what a worthwhile lady she had become. No doubt her parents had been proud of her accomplishments.

“How long have you been published, Miss Applegate?” he asked. He hated using her surname, but he knew it was best if he gave her some proper space, some sense of normalcy.

“About five years,” she replied politely.

“How many books have you written?”

“Seven, so far, but I hope to complete the eighth while I’m in Cumbria.”

He smiled. “I’m sure you will be able to find the right amount of inspiration here.”

“Yes,” she concurred. “It is rather serene.”

As her sister slid into the conversation, Anthony wondered if she was similar to him, in that she was looking for a temporary escape from her life. He had also been searching for that blessed feeling of solitude, a place in which to restore his soul. He had found the answer to his long-awaited prayers in Cumbria. Perhaps she would as well.

“There’s two weeks until Christmas,” Miranda was saying. “That should give me ample opportunity to complete several watercolors for my next book.”

Before Anthony quite knew what he was about, he said, “Allow me to offer my assistance in showing you around Keswick.” As the table quieted, he cleared his throat. “I have become acquainted with the area in recent months and have found some rather interesting places that should be brought to life by your paints.”

He noted that Miranda didn’t seem all that thrilled to spend any more time in his company than she had to. Her sudden inability to speak when he had always known her to be quite vocal proved that. He just hoped her reluctance wasn’t because of his eye. If so, he would be willing to wear that dreadful eye patch, just to put her at ease.

“I think that’s a capital idea,” Jacob noted. When Miranda turned to him with an outright glare, he dared to add, “Think of all the benefits it would give you, Randie. Not only would you have an expansive area in which to paint, but it would give you and Anthony a chance to catch up.”

“I fear there isn’t much to catch up on, Jacob,” she returned stiffly. “You would surely have more to discuss with Mr. Gravehill. I was fifteen years old the last time I spoke with him.” As if realizing she was speaking of Anthony as if he wasn’t in the same room, she looked at him and said, “Pardon me if I sound crass. I just don’t wish to take up any of your time.”

He smiled in understanding. “It’s not a burden, I assure you. I would be glad for the

distraction.”

After his explanation, she seemed to relax slightly. “Then I shall accept your generous offer.”

Miranda sighed as she set down her hairbrush. She was in her room, getting ready for bed, but her mind was elsewhere. She wasn’t sure if she would sleep a wink at all this night. More than that, she didn’t know whether she should start to panic now or later. Dear God, she was going to be alone with Anthony after all these years. It was almost too unimaginable to believe. She had long dreamed of this bittersweet reunion, but now that it was at hand, she wasn’t sure how to behave.

Her brother certainly hadn’t helped matters. No doubt he was grateful to find a way to entertain Anthony at the same time he could be rid of her. This way, he could spend time with his family without being bothered by his spinster sister.

Miranda closed her eyes. Now she was just being unfair. Neither Jacob nor Elaine had ever done anything to make her feel as though she was set apart from them. They never failed to invite her to any gathering that they held.

And yet...

Miranda was the one who had started to slowly distance herself from her married siblings. They had families and responsibilities to see to, while Miranda had nothing but her books now that their mother was gone.

Although she might be terribly uncomfortable around Anthony again, she would deal with those dreaded silences, because she owed it to her brother and sister. She had always vowed that she wouldn’t become a burden to them, and so she would remain true to her word.

She climbed into bed and turned down the lamp on the table next to her.

For a time, she stared at the flames in the fireplace, but when sleep would not come, she got back up and walked over to the terrace doors that overlooked the valley below. She was fortunate to have a room that faced the lake beyond, rather than the quaint village.

She gathered her art supplies and moved the desk before the window. Although it was nighttime, she was blessed with a nearly full moon. With the snow helping to illuminate the countryside, it was the perfect way to begin with a magnificent, Christmas Eve setting. And that was when she knew she would write a holiday themed story. With a blank page of woven paper ready and waiting for her to create the art that her readers seemed to enjoy, she dipped her brush in the black pigment and after considering where she wanted to begin, she started to make a few strokes.

After a fashion, contentment settled over her. This was the only time that she could truly relax and allow the cares of her life to melt away. When she was painting, she could almost imagine herself transported inside the scenes she created. She was always enthusiastic to draw inspiration from other works of art and was eagerly looking forward for the Dulwich Picture Gallery to open to the public in London the following year. Of course, she had traveled to Paris after the war and visited the Louvre before most of the works inside were returned to their countries of origin, leaving only a few hundred left in France. But with famous pieces like the Mona Lisa, and the sculpture of Venus, it was no wonder she had found it fascinating. The connections she'd felt with these artists of the past were undeniable, and she vowed that one day, one of her books would be listed among the classics.

Miranda took care to make an appealing outline of her current painting, before she reluctantly washed her brush and left it to dry for the night, to be picked up again in the morning.

She glanced at the clock on the mantel and winced when it showed it was nearly half past two. Whether she felt as though she could sleep or not, she needed to try. She was due to meet Anthony in the lobby around nine o'clock. Then again, she was used to rising early. Although she lived in London, she chose not to keep town hours. Her mother had enjoyed rising with the sun, and after a time, Miranda had started to as well.

This time when she climbed into bed, she had no trouble falling asleep.

In her dream, Miranda frowned, because she wasn't ready to rise, but that persistent noise in the background finally roused her. Her eyes opened slowly, but as soon as she realized that the sun was streaming through her window, she sat up quickly. She looked at the clock and saw that it was nearly ten.

Her mouth promptly fell open. She rarely overslept, and yet, she had done so today of all days.

As another brisk summons came from her door, she threw off the covers and grabbed her robe lying over a nearby chair. "I'm coming!" She quickly tied it about her waist, and with her hair flowing about her shoulders, she quickly opened the door.

She expected to see Elaine standing there, but when she spied Anthony, she froze.

His lips twitched as his gaze swept over her. "I'm either too early, or you're late."

She put a hand to her forehead, temporarily forgetting that she was in a state of undress. "Forgive me. I had trouble going to sleep last night, and so I started to paint and—" She offered a sheepish grin. "I fear time got away from me."

"It has a way of doing that," he agreed.

She felt foolish standing there and having this conversation in the hallway, where anyone might come upon them. She opened the door wider. "Please, do come in."

He hesitated for a moment, and then walked inside. She shut the door behind him, and then realized she didn't know what to do with him. She wasn't generally in the habit of entertaining gentlemen in her bedchamber. This was a hotel with a modest sitting area and a privacy chamber blocked off for bathing, but otherwise, it was very much the same, as the unmade bed was clearly in plain sight.

Her cheeks warmed when she thought of their precarious situation, but he didn't seem to mind as he walked over and grabbed the poker and stirred some of the smoldering ashes of the waning fire, bringing them back to life and adding some much needed warmth into the air.

When that was done, he turned to where she continued to stand, unsure of what to do next. He smiled, as if understanding her hesitation. "Why don't you make yourself more presentable, while I order us some tea and perhaps a bit to eat? I'll meet you downstairs."

She quickly latched on to the invitation to gather herself. "Yes. That would be ideal. Thank you."

He inclined his head and walked out the door. When he had closed the door behind him, she reached out and attempted to steady herself on the back of one of the chairs. She had to stop doing this. She couldn't fall apart every time she encountered him.

Steeling herself, Miranda gathered her things and quickly made herself ready. Again, all she had was muted tones, but she donned a simple, dove gray dress and told herself she wasn't there to impress Anthony. He was acting as a guide so that she could work on the paintings for her book.

After gathering her supplies in her valise, she patted her hair then walked out the door and headed downstairs.

She found Anthony sitting at a table for two. It also didn't escape her notice that people around them were glancing at him and whispering. That made her bristle immediately, because she knew what he'd gone through to get those scars. He was a war hero, had fought valiantly and nearly given his life so that these people could sit here and eat their breakfast without concern.

She set her valise down with a decided thump. Anthony glanced at her with a twitch of his lips. "Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?"

"No," she stated firmly. "It just annoys me that some people can be so rude."

"Ah."

Her brows furrowed. "How can you be so placid about it? Doesn't it bother you?"

He snorted. "I have been through more than anyone should have the right to bear. I've watched gallant men fall all around me, lost my vision in my right eye, and as well I shall carry a scar with me for the rest of my days from an enemy's sword. What need do I have to worry about other people's opinions?"

Miranda swallowed. "You are absolutely right, Mr. Gravehill. I just wish people wouldn't be so judgmental when they see something they know nothing about."

"I have learned to live with it," he returned evenly. "It is in our human nature to peer at the unusual and extraordinary. What is the purpose of a freak show but to entertain with the oddities that certain people possess? It is intriguing to some people to try to understand the abnormalities of nature."

“You are not an abnormality,” she returned heatedly. “And neither are those poor souls that are stared at and mocked by the general assemblage.”

“And yet,” he asked slowly, “how else might they support themselves if not by catering to the public’s insatiable curiosity?”

Miranda had nothing to say to that, because, like it or not, he made a valid point. She sighed heavily. “I just wish there was another way.”

“I’m sure if there is, you might find a solution.”

She glanced at him. “I fear you are directing your faith in the wrong direction.”

“I’m not,” he countered. “I remember several times I came to visit your family and you were always solving some trial or another. I recall one instance in particular. There was a cat stuck in the tree and you had the idea of climbing the tree to free the frightened creature. Jacob asked how you might manage such a feat, so you gained the assistance of the stable groom, who put a ladder next to the tree and allowed you to save the day.”

Miranda laughed. “Oh, my. I had nearly forgotten that. It has been so long ago. I couldn’t have been more than nine at the time.”

“I believe you were eight.”

She blinked. “I’m impressed by your memory to recollect such trivial instances in my past, when I fail to do the same.”

His eyes fell on her, and although one was white and unable to see, it caused her to shiver with intensity, just the same. As if he had more power to peer into her soul than with the ability of actual sight. “I remember everything about you, Miranda.”

She wasn't sure how to reply to that, but she was saved by the arrival of a member of the hotel staff, who had brought their food. She turned her attention to the fare at hand. "It smells divine. Thank you." She carefully concentrated on her plate, rather than the words that were still suspended in the air between them.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

It warmed Anthony's heart when Miranda got irritated on his behalf. When he had first gone out in public after his injury, it was the shock he'd seen on the faces of others that had made him don the patch. But when he saw them stare at him regardless of whether his eye was shielded, he had decided to suffer the consequences.

Now, he hardly even realized that he was the subject of such interest. In truth, it hadn't fazed him in some time, but through Miranda's eyes, he recalled the way it had initially felt, as though he was someone to be shunned, to be hidden away from the rest of the world. It had taken some time before he'd realized he had as much right to be there as anyone else. If anything, his differences set him apart from the rest of the hypocrites that ruled over the rest, the ones who believed they were doing God's work, while at the same time, warning those who were different to stand aside. Perhaps someday, he could open those closed minds to compassion and understanding.

Once they had finished their meal, he asked, "Are you ready to get started?"

"Of course." As they stood, he reached down and grabbed Miranda's valise just as she started to reach for it. "I'm quite capable of carrying my own things, Mr. Gravehill."

He kept his firm hold on the bag. "I have lost sight in one eye, not my ability to act as a gentleman." With that, he started walking, giving her no choice but to follow.

"If memory continues to serve," he noted. "You are not averse to the water."

“Not at all. I used to swim in the pond at the estate, and later, when Jacob was in London before he wed, we would sail on the Thames.” She peered at him askance. “Why do you ask? You don’t intend for me to paint in the water, do you?”

He laughed, surprised to find that it sounded a bit rusty, but then, it wasn’t often that he found much of anything very humorous anymore. But a few moments alone in Miranda’s company was vastly changing that. She truly had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. She had made him chuckle as a child, entertaining him with her various antics, but as a woman, she had the same delightful wit. “Do not concern yourself in that regard. Although I did have a certain area in mind. However, it is only accessible by boat.”

“I see.” She appeared to mull this over, and then she said, “I’m fine with that. I dressed warmly today, since I wasn’t certain what you had planned.”

He glanced at her attire—the fur trimmed pelisse in dark burgundy that easily complimented the chestnut curls peeking from beneath her black velvet bonnet. “Don’t worry. I would have found something else to do if not. I wouldn’t have allowed you to catch a chill.”

They made their way to the river’s edge, a short walk from the inn, where there was a simple, wooden boat, ready and waiting. “Is this yours?” she asked.

“No. I borrowed it from a friend.” He didn’t want to admit that it was his, because how would he explain why he traveled with a boat? And he wasn’t prepared to tell her all about his life thus far. It had become complicated in areas that still were not particularly easy to discuss.

He climbed in first, set down her bag, and then offered her a hand to assist her. Once they were settled, he pushed off from the bank and then sat down and gathered the oars on either side. The day was bright, but a slight chilly breeze made the brilliance

of the sun a bit deceiving.

“How are you doing?” he asked, hoping that she wasn’t overly cold. Her nose and cheeks were starting to turn a bit pink already. He realized that he should have had the foresight to bring along a blanket.

“I’m fine. Don’t concern yourself with me. I always preferred the cold to the summer heat.” She tilted her head to the side. “I’m surprised you don’t remember that about me.”

He offered a crooked grin. “I suppose it would be impossible for me to recall every detail.”

Silence fell for a time, and then she said, “I seem to remember that you liked the cold too.”

He inclined his head. “The same is true now. With all of the layers that gentlemen must wear, it is much nicer to wear wool in the winter season.”

“I imagine it is just as tedious as wearing restricting undergarments,” she murmured with a teasing mien.

He smiled as their eyes met and held for a time. Thus far, it was the best time he’d had in a long while. But then, there had always been something about this impish lady that made his spirits brighten when he feared there was no hope of doing so again.

He thought about the bundle of letters he still kept at his modest house in Braithwaite and how they had kept him from doing something foolish more than once. Whenever the despondency in his heart had become too much to bear, he would take out every single letter and read them over and over again, until he told himself that he had to

live long enough to see her—just one last time.

Now that she was here with him, he was very glad that he had kept that promise.

Miranda wasn't sure what to make of the sudden spark that lit Anthony's gaze. She wanted to believe that he was enjoying their time on the water as much as she was, but he looked so... far away in that moment, that she wondered where his thoughts had traveled off to. But perhaps it was best she didn't know. If he had disappeared to some dark place in his mind, she didn't want to disturb him. He would return to her soon enough.

They had been floating along the water for some time now, and she was wondering how far he intended to go. At the same time, she was reluctant for the day to end. It had been ages since she had spent time with anyone of the opposite sex, other than Jacob, and since he was her brother, it didn't really count. She had almost forgotten how much she enjoyed this sort of companionship. Perhaps after the holiday was over, she might consider returning to London and laying aside her mourning clothes and rejoining society, and perhaps even find a husband.

She had always said she would wed Anthony or no one at all, but those had been the ideals of young love. It was time to start thinking rationally. She enjoyed her books very much, but did she truly want to be alone for the rest of her days? Or did she desire to have someone to share these little moments with? Although she would have to leave the bittersweet memory of Anthony behind, at least she could do so knowing that they had shared a lovely Christmas season together. She might still ache for him, but at least she could close the book on their time together and move forward with the rest of her life. Perhaps it was time for her to start reconsidering her spinster status at long last.

As they came to a bend in the lake, Miranda caught sight of a hidden cove. However, it wasn't the initial scenery she saw that caught her breath, but rather, what lay

beyond. It was as if she had caught a glimpse of paradise. “How did you find this?” she murmured in awe, her focus riveted on the tall, evergreen trees that lined the water’s edge. Their branches were covered with snow, but the most amazing part was the way the sun shone upon the side of the mountain opposite. It glowed with a sort of red fire that she was eager to paint.

“I thought you might like it,” Anthony said quietly, as he moored the boat next to the edge, and pulled it onto the bank. He got back into the boat and sat down, but Miranda was already digging out her materials to start putting this wonder down on paper.

She gathered her things and held out a glass for him to fill with water. She was already starting to mix some of the colors together to try to duplicate the glow before them. “I can’t believe how majestic it looks.” She shook her head. “I could stare at it all day.”

“As could I,” he returned. “In fact, I have.”

At this, she paused in her task. “I can certainly understand the appeal. It’s quite magical, isn’t it?”

“Indeed, it is.”

Miranda had the feeling that he was speaking of more than just the scenery, so she paused and glanced up to find that his gaze was upon her. She quickly lowered her gaze back to the blank paper she had set on the portable desk. “It’s regrettable that you won’t have anything to occupy your time while I’m painting.”

“On the contrary, I came prepared.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a miniature book. He also withdrew a set of glasses and perched them on the bridge of his nose.

Keeping her attention fixed on the landscape, she set her brush and made the first strokes.

There wasn't any sound for a long time while she created her latest masterpiece, other than the gentle lapping of the water, although it didn't rock the boat to the point she was afraid she might make an error. For now, all she was doing was creating a general outline. The fine touches would come later when she had a steady hand.

For the most part, Anthony hardly read a single word of his novel. He had read it so many times already that he could nearly recite it. He just held it now so it wouldn't be so obvious that he was observing her. There was certainly something enchanting about the way she carefully studied what she was doing. When he thought he might be caught looking at her, he would allow his gaze to fall back down to the page, which he occasionally turned it to make it appear as though he was fully engrossed in the story.

He imagined this becoming a habit between the two of them. It would be a calm, winter's night, and he would sit by the fire with a book while he was lulled into sleep by the gentle sound of her brushstrokes.

But then, that was wishful thinking. He knew it would never come to pass. His injuries in the war had made him unfit for any woman. Granted, he could still perform any marital duties with ease, if he were to feel the inclination again. His mentality had been too unstable for the past several years, such that he hadn't engaged in a brief liaison. He was sure that no one would be able to stomach his appearance long enough to engage in an affair should he be struck with the urge. Although Miranda had been the first who had been able to look past his disfigurement, she had also been a friend long ago. No doubt she was coming to his defense on behalf of their former acquaintance, even if she had no reason to do so.

"I'm sorry for not returning your letters."

He hadn't meant to speak aloud, had intended to keep anything intimate buried in his heart under tight lock and key, but for some reason, the words spilled forth.

She had been in the midst of a firm concentration, but now she paused abruptly and glanced at him. She said nothing, likely assuming that there was more to come.

He took a heavy breath and looked out over the lake, rather than meet her gaze and show his cowardice. It was bad enough that he would be relaying it in words. When he started speaking, he found that he couldn't stop the deluge. "I did enjoy writing to you at first. But once the severity of battle hit me, I couldn't find the proper words to send to a child. It was horrible, full of bloody violence. I wanted to spare you that." He had to pause and gather himself, the horrors of that time still hitting him in the center of his chest. "When I got injured, I found that I didn't care about anything, or anyone. I wanted to die because I was in so much pain, and I hated to think that I would be a monster for the rest of my days. It took me a long time to get over that feeling of despondency. When I did, it just didn't seem right to drag you back down into the mire of my existence."

For a time, the only sound was the slight breeze rustling the branches of the evergreens. But then there was the soft touch of a hand in his. Surprised, he looked at Miranda to see an empathetic expression on her face. "I admit that I was hurt when you didn't return my letters. I thought you had... forgotten about me. I suppose for a while you did, but through no fault of your own. I can't imagine the hardship you must have endured during that time." She paused, her voice lowering to a soft whisper, "I wish I could have been there with you."

He regarded her steadily and replied truthfully, "I wish you would have been there too." Their eyes held for a time, and then he gently pulled away from her with a lopsided grin. "I didn't mean to put a damper on such a lovely day."

She smiled. "It's time we should be getting back anyway." She turned the woven

paper around to show it to him. “I got most of the landscape finished. I’ll do the rest later this week.”

He stared, spellbound, at the colors she’d produced. “It’s remarkable. You have quite a talent, Miss Applegate.”

“It was wrong of me to suggest we address each other so formally. Over the years you’ve been as close as a brother to me. I would like it if you called me Miranda again.”

He tried to tell himself that when she’d referred to him as a brother it didn’t sting, but then he would be lying. “If only you will do me the same courtesy and call me Anthony.”

“Of course.”

He shoved off of the bank and set the oars into the water, steering them back toward the inn.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

Miranda needed some time to think. It had been so much easier to hold on to her hurt over the years, to imagine that Anthony had forsaken her. However, to hear that he had never forgotten her, but rather he had lost himself—it was almost too much to bear. As he'd told her his story, the breath in her lungs had tightened. It pained her greatly to picture him in so much abject misery. She had always known he'd suffered, but she hadn't made herself face the harsh reality of it. She'd found a way to dupe herself into believing that it wasn't as bad as Jacob had claimed.

But it was.

She packed her things away in her valise as they returned to the inn; however, she kept the painting out to let it fully dry. Anthony offered to carry it for her as they walked inside. When they did, he asked if she would like to join him for lunch.

“I would like that. Just let me put my things in my room.”

She started to leave, but he fell into step beside her. “I'll walk with you.”

They said little on the way, mainly remarking on the inn. When she unlocked her door and went inside, he surprised her by following. She set down her things, but when she turned to go, he had found his way to the painting she'd been working on early that morning.

“Is this the reason you were still abed this morning?”

“It was,” she concurred.

He bent down to inspect the work more closely, and she wondered if it was because of his poor eyesight, or if he wanted to gain a better perspective. Either way, it was almost surreal to see him standing in the same room with her again after all these years. So much had changed, and yet so little. She still adored him as much as she had when she'd been a child, but now that she was a woman fully grown, the awareness of a man in her chamber was rather... unnerving.

"It's enchanting." He straightened and looked out the window, as if trying to picture what it was she had seen. "You have a keen eye, Miranda." He turned to her. "Did you always want to paint? Or write?"

She shrugged. "I never thought I was very good at poetry, but there is something about painting that brings the words to life for me. I might not have any idea of what I intend to say, but when I finish a scene, like the two I've started, it will start to come together, like the stories in my books."

He smiled. "I imagine that many children are entertained by them."

"And adults as well," she pointed out. "I've had many women come up to me and tell me what an enchanting story I've written."

"I'm not sure it has anything to do with your books, but more to do with the fact you are enchanting."

Miranda's heart faltered, but then she reminded herself that this was Anthony. He was merely being kind. She waved a hand with a laugh. "Don't be nonsensical. Of course it's the entire story I've put together that gathers the reader's attention. Most don't know me."

"I do," he returned softly. "And I guarantee that a part of you reflects in your work. You would not be as successful without the personality to match."

She turned away, finding that this subject was going into deeper waters, more so than she was comfortable treading. “Perhaps. Shall we go?”

She started for the door, but a masculine hand covered hers. She closed her eyes as Anthony spoke at her back. “Don’t think so little of yourself, Miranda. You were the only thing that saved me all these years when I had lost the will to live. I read your letters countless times, and prayed for the day I would see you again.”

Miranda started to tremble. “It’s not wise to say such things.”

“Why? Because they are true.”

“That’s exactly why. What could possibly come from it, except to cause one, or both of us, further injury.”

She held her breath and waited as he reluctantly released her. The heat from his body slowly ebbed as he moved away from her. “Yes. I suppose you’re right.”

It was all she could do to hold back the tears that wanted to burst forth. This was all she’d ever wanted or dreamed about, and yet, she knew that he was still too raw to truly mean the sentiments. He was still healing, and with her mother’s death, she was too vulnerable to believe it all. “Let’s enjoy the rest of this lovely day.”

With that, she opened her eyes and walked out into the hall. As a single tear seeped from the corner of her eye, but she quickly brushed it away and pasted a bright smile on her face.

He was a fool. He had never had any intention of pouring out his innermost thoughts to her like that, and yet, he was desperate for her to know how much she meant to him. How much she had always meant to him. But he could tell that he’d gone too far. He’d scared her. He could but hope that he hadn’t pushed her completely away.

Either way, he would have to live with whatever consequences arose from his actions. He'd had to do so for years, ever since he'd had the dream of fighting for the honor of his country.

When Miranda started to head for the hotel dining area where they'd shared breakfast together, he gently steered her toward the door. "I had somewhere else in mind."

"Oh?" she asked curiously, although she allowed herself to be guided outside, thankful she had kept her coat on.

He shrugged as they walked down the street. "It's one of the favorites of the locals. It's not as well known, but the food is exemplary."

She laughed, and he was glad to hear it. Maybe that meant the tension from earlier had dissipated. Or else, perhaps she'd decided to move past it. "You really do know your way around for someone who is a tourist like the rest of us."

He grinned. "Not really. I just get around. "

They entered the establishment in question, a modest pub at the edge of the main thoroughfare. "Mr. Gravehill!" The bartender greeted him heartily, and he glanced at Miranda to see her eyeing him warily.

All he could do was lift his hands in supplication as the gentleman walked over and said, "Would you like your usual table in the corner? I reserve it just for you." He glanced at Miranda and said with a wink, "He's one of my best customers."

"Don't be trying to gain extra coin from me, Matthews," Anthony said dryly. "But yes, the corner table will be fine for the lady and myself."

As they sat down, Miranda folded her arms and set back in her chair. She lifted a

brow. “Will we be granted the wine list as well?” she teased.

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you,” he returned. “Just relax and prepare to be amazed.”

As the barkeeper took their order and left to get their drinks, Miranda asked, “I find it rather unusual that...Matthews, is it?...seems to know you quite familiarly when you claim you are merely passing through.” She tilted her head to the side. “I have the feeling you aren’t telling me everything.” Anthony looked down at the table, because he couldn’t lie to her face, but when she gasped, he glanced back at her. “You have taken up residence here, haven’t you? That’s why you’re so familiar with the surroundings and why the barkeeper seems to know you so well.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. He had hoped to keep at least some part of his life a secret, but it appeared that was not to be the case. “I don’t call Keswick my home, although I spend a lot of time here. I make my home in Braithwaite, about four kilometers from here.”

She stared at him. “How long have you been here?”

He shifted in his seat. Something told him to be cautious of his answers, that it could mean his demise. “A while.”

“Long enough to have written to me?” she demanded. “Or come to London to see Jacob?”

He decided there was no point in dismissing the truth when it had condemned him. “I wasn’t prepared to—”

“So you allowed all of us to mourn you when you were—” She stopped, and then added, “Doing what, exactly?”

He swallowed hard. "I have a fishing boat."

She barked out a laugh that was anything but humorous. "So, in essence, you were on holiday while you left the rest of us to worry about you? Well done, Mr. Gravehill. I applaud your great selfishness."

He frowned at that. "I wasn't thinking of myself when I decided to remain here. I told you I was in a dark place for a long time—"

"And you believe you are the only one who has suffered in this life?" She snorted. "I have lost both of my parents and lived a lonely life, all while anticipating your return. You promised that you would come back to me. And I waited all that time—"

She clamped her lips together, because not only was her voice starting to rise with her upset, but she must have realized she had said too much.

She got to her feet. "Forgive me for not staying, but I find that my appetite has quite diminished."

She stalked toward the door. By the time Anthony had recovered from the shock of everything she'd said, she was already halfway outside. He stood. "Miranda!"

She didn't pause.

He slowly sank back down, just as the drinks were brought over. The barkeep looked at him in sympathy. "It seems as if you have a history with the lady."

"Indeed," Anthony muttered grimly, as he grabbed the ale and took a hefty swig. "But I don't foresee a future."

Miranda was furious enough to bite through glass by the time she had returned to the

inn. She walked inside and nearly ran her sister over, who was on her way out with Daniel and their daughter. Elaine's eyes widened in surprise, either at Miranda's rush through the door, or the look of rancor that was likely plastered all over her face. "Randie?"

For some reason the sound of that sweet nickname suddenly grated on Miranda's nerves. She didn't stop to exchange pleasantries but kept walking.

Of course, Elaine wouldn't have left things like that. Miranda heard her tell her husband to go on without her, and she finally caught up to Miranda at the bottom of the stairs. "Dear God, what's happened?"

Miranda caught a flash of the door opening and saw Anthony walk inside. Their eyes met for an instant before she turned away. "Not here," she muttered to Elaine and then quickly made her way to her rooms. She checked the hall and was relieved to find it empty as she let Elaine inside then shut and locked the door behind them.

Elaine's eyes widened at that. "What is going on? Are you in some kind of danger?"

Miranda tossed aside her bonnet and her reticule, and as she was taking off her pelisse she said, "You can thank Mr. Gravehill for my current demeanor."

Elaine frowned as she slowly sat down. "What has he done?"

"First, he takes me out on a boat ride on the lake this morning. We were having a perfectly lovely time. I was painting and he was reading, and then suddenly, he tells me how sorry he was for not returning my letters." She threw her hands up into the air.

Her sister must not have understood, because she said slowly, "And that is bad because...?"

“That part was fine. I accepted his apology, and actually felt bad for him.” She expelled a heavy breath as she started to pace the room. “What I got angry about was the fact he told me he lives not far from here and he’s been doing so for the past several years!”

She paused and set her hands on her hips, but Elaine still didn’t seem to comprehend what she was saying. Her confused expression said what words did not.

“All this time I was afraid that he’d died, or something equally appalling, but instead, he’s been here fishing! Can you imagine? He’s been on holiday while Jacob and I have been concerned over his welfare.” She shook her head. “I consider it the worst sort of betrayal. I daresay if I never see him again it will be too soon.”

A knock at the door intruded on her tirade. Elaine made to move, but Miranda put a finger to her lips and waved her back down. As suspected, she heard Anthony’s deep voice coming from the other side of the wooden barrier. “Miranda?” He paused. “Miranda, open the door. I know you’re in there.” Another pause. “Elaine? Perhaps you might be more reasonable and hear me out.”

Elaine turned to her with a beseeching expression, but Miranda was having none of it. “Don’t you dare!” she whispered hotly.

Her sister reluctantly obeyed. “I don’t think now is a good time, Mr. Gravehill. Perhaps we might discuss this over dinner this evening?”

There was a slight hesitation, and then, “Very well.”

Miranda waited until she could hear his footsteps walking back down the hall, and then she turned on her sister. “What on earth possessed you to say that?”

“What do you mean?” Elaine snapped in return. “He is Jacob’s friend and has been

invited to spend the holiday with us, the same as you.”

“But I’m family,” she retorted. “While Anthony isn’t.”

“It never bothered you before.” Elaine stood, apparently to confront her on a more direct level. “In fact, there was a time when you prayed that he would become part of it.”

Miranda set her hands on her hips. “I can’t believe that you’re taking his side!”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side,” Elaine returned firmly. “I’m only suggesting that it would be best to talk out this little disagreement, rather than act like an ostrich with its head in the sand, unwilling to face its problems.”

Miranda’s mouth fell agape. “Out of all the people I thought might understand how much I’m aggrieved right now, I thought it would be you. Nevertheless, forgive me if I don’t come down to dinner this evening.” She crossed her arms.

Elaine shook her head. “I can’t believe you’re going to be this petty. It’s not as if you aren’t going to have your family around you for support.”

“Like you’re showing now?” Miranda put her hands to her temples. “I’m starting to get a headache. Please, just go.”

Elaine softened slightly as she walked over to her. She put a hand on her shoulder. “I knew this wasn’t going to be easy for you, but I didn’t imagine it would be so impossible.”

With a sigh, some of Miranda’s frustration ebbed. “It’s Anthony. The one true love of my life. Of course it’s impossible.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

Climbing the side of a hotel in the dark with only one good eye was not an easy feat to accomplish, but somehow, Anthony found himself at Miranda's terrace that night. He had hoped to find an audience with her after dinner, but he'd been told she wasn't coming. That had been disheartening, to say the least, and even more so when he'd gone to her room later and found that she still wasn't talking to him.

Thus, he'd had to resort to drastic measures to get past her stubborn nature. He had caught a glimpse of it when she was a child, but it knew no bounds as an adult.

Something told him that although it was nearly one in the morning, she would be awake. The landscape she'd been working on near the window in her room was a clear indication that she wasn't through seeking inspiration from the night sky.

That was proved moments later when he walked to the open doors and she glanced up and saw him, giving a brief shout of alarm, until he walked into the light and she instantly settled.

But that didn't stop her from putting a hand over her heart and setting down her paintbrush. "Are you trying to give me an apoplexy?" she demanded.

"If that's what it takes to gain an audience with you," he murmured as he stepped past the open drapes and walked into her room. He tried not to notice that she was attired in nothing but her nightdress.

She tossed her head, the long chestnut curls brushing her back. "Perhaps the reason I haven't sought you out is because I'm not ready to talk to you."

His dark eye flashed, while the one that held the scar caught the light of the moon and shone with an almost unholy light. “That is regrettable, since I intend for us to do it anyway,” he pointed out. “You left this afternoon without hearing all of my explanation.”

“I heard enough,” she said uncharitably, as she moved away, as if trying to put as much distance between them as possible.

He withheld a sigh. “All you did was come to the conclusion that you wanted. I wasn’t fit to visit anyone, let alone write and act as though nothing was wrong. I had tried to take my own life. I have the scars to prove it.” He removed his jacket and tossed it aside, and then rolled up the lower sleeves of his shirt, where two white, jagged marks cut across his wrists.

Her face paled slightly. “Why didn’t you let anyone help you?”

“I didn’t know how to tell anyone what I needed, because I had no idea myself. I wasn’t sure what it was that would help me through the pain of my injuries.” He crossed his arms and leaned against the mantel. “The single thing that seemed to help was going out on the lake and just... thinking. It gave me a chance to clear my head, something that the nightmares when I slept wouldn’t allow me to do.”

She lifted a brow. “It took years for you to clear your mind?”

He wasn’t sure how to explain so that she might understand the depth of his despair. “To fully comprehend it all, you have to imagine things from my perspective.” He found a focal point in the room and concentrated on it, while his mind returned to the past. “I was nineteen years old, eager to make my way in the world, to be someone other than a younger son of a viscount. I wanted nothing more than to carry the glory of being a war hero. What I wasn’t prepared for was the horror I would witness. Men I shared a meal with were cut down right next to me. I couldn’t understand why I

survived and their family would be told they weren't coming home again. It wasn't always enemy fire that claimed the sailors, but various ailments. They would sweep through the regiment like fire. I saw more sea burials than I ever care to witness again."

He put his hands behind his back when he realized they had started to tremble. "But no matter what, I persevered. It wasn't until the Battle of Trafalgar that everything changed. When Nelson died and I was wounded, I thought I had let down the rest of my men. I felt guilty for losing an eye and being forced out of service and into the ship's infirmary. Rage poured through me like some sort of demon. I screamed in bed every night. I had delusions and thought for sure that I was suffering from madness, but it was the fever I carried from infection. When I was finally brought on shore, the doctor tried to remove my eye, but I threatened to run him through if he did. I had no compassion for anyone or anything. I wanted to continue fighting."

He shoved a hand through his hair. "I was incoherent like that for weeks. Just before I was sent to Bedlam, the nightmares ceased and I was released on my own merit. But the stirring continued to burn within me. I grew restless. I was searching for something to ease the turmoil within me, to ease the despondency, but nothing worked." He swallowed hard. "That's when I turned to opium. I—"

"Stop. Oh, please, stop."

Anthony's gaze shifted to where Miranda was leaning against the post of her bed. Tears were trailing down her face. Shame washed over him, and he walked toward her. "God, Miranda, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"No." She shook her head. "I wasn't. I should have known not to compare your life to mine. I had hardships and loss, it's true, but nothing like what you endured. My God, how can you forgive my behavior?"

His chest warmed. “There is nothing to forgive. You were speaking from wounded pride. You thought I had forsaken you and moved on with my life while you were still trying to deal with yours.”

She slowly shook her head and lifted a trembling hand to rest on his cheek, on the side with the scar that he had abhorred for so long. “Pride had nothing to do with it. I was upset because I’d loved you.”

He froze. His lungs felt tight. He could hardly speak. “Meaning that you don’t any longer?”

She closed her eyes and whispered, “I don’t know. I care about you. That has never changed, but it’s been fifteen years.” She opened her eyes. “Things change. I’ve changed. We’ve changed.”

He couldn’t dispute the truth. He reached up and wiped away one of her tears with the pad of his thumb. “Perhaps all we need is a reminder.” His gaze dropped to her lips. “Can I kiss you, Miranda?”

She couldn’t move. She certainly couldn’t breathe. For so long, she’d dared to fantasize about this very moment. Now that it was upon her, she was terrified that what she’d hoped for all these years wouldn’t be as perfect as she wanted. It would be her very first kiss. She had vowed it would belong solely to Anthony. When she’d claimed she didn’t know if she still loved him or not, she was being truthful. The love that filled her heart was the dream of a girl who was besotted. But the reality of a woman might be vastly different.

Perhaps he was right.

She slowly nodded, the decision made. “Yes.”

She closed her eyes as his head began to descend to hers. With the gentlest of kisses, he pressed his mouth to hers. It was as if the ground shook beneath them. She raised her arms and tentatively placed them on his shoulders, as his hands went around her waist. He didn't try to touch her or ask for more than she might give. He kept the embrace chaste and innocent.

When he pulled back, she lamented the loss, but she knew it shouldn't go any further than this. There was still so much that they needed to learn about each other. Things that they had to sort out before further intimacy could take place.

He touched a lock of her hair. "You're just as sweet as I always thought you'd be."

And you're just as perfect, she thought, but she didn't dare voice the words aloud.

He released her with obvious reluctance and turned toward the terrace. "I should be going."

Her eyes widened. "You can't mean to climb back out the window!"

"I made it in just fine," he pointed out.

"That may be, but I don't want to be responsible should you slip and break your neck." She walked toward her door and unlocked it, then turned back to him pointedly.

He gave a lopsided grin and said, "I don't know whether I should be relieved or affronted that you think I can't manage such a feat a second time."

"I'd rather not take the chance since you've finally been returned to me in good health." Her cheeks warmed as she met his eye and shifted her gaze away. "For the most part, anyway."

He lifted her chin, bringing her gaze back to his. "I'm as healthy as ever. I just have a bit less sight now, is all." He let go, but before he left, he asked, "Will you go on the lake with me again tomorrow? I have several other places I'd like to show you."

Miranda considered his proposal and then said, "Actually, I should like to go to Braithwaite and see where you live."

His gaze was steady, but then he inclined his head. "Of course. I would be honored to act as your host, but I should warn you that my tea cart isn't prepared for guests."

She smiled. "I think I'll be able to manage for one afternoon." She tilted her head to the side. "It might be something I should like to paint. I'm sure I could find a way to add a German Christmas tree and wrapped presents."

"I have no doubt of it." He gave a light bow. "I'll come collect you after luncheon. You've seen the lake in the bright light of morning, but it's best viewed at sunset, when the sun turns everything into fiery perfection."

"I'm looking forward to it," she said softly, and she was. There were times she nearly forgot that her brother and sister were even there, especially when Anthony looked at her like he was now, as if he adored everything about her. She could only wish that someday he could come to terms with his past and find that she was enough. That they were enough to combat anything.

"Sleep well, my lady." He offered her a wink.

After he was gone, Miranda shut and locked the door to her room. She stood there for a moment and then walked over to the open window. She was reluctant to close it, but after giving the night sky one last, lingering look, and saying a small prayer for Anthony, she closed the doors and climbed into her warm bed, eager to wake on the morrow.

When Miranda was invited to dine with Jacob, Elaine, and their prospective families for lunch, she knew the inquisition was going to begin. Of course, following her upset the day before, she knew that Elaine would waste no time in telling their brother what had occurred. Now, she had to explain that everything was well, and that she was going to be spending the day with Anthony.

“Are you?” Jacob said with a lifted brow. “Naturally, I don’t mind, so long as he won’t hurt you like he did yesterday. I was nearly prepared to have words with him.”

She instantly held up a hand. “Please don’t. The fault was mine. I overreacted out of previous pain and frustration. I shouldn’t have gotten so angry.”

Elaine set a gentle hand on her arm. “I knew you would find a way to work things out. You always do.”

Jacob hadn’t looked as convinced, and Miranda was tempted to point out that he was the one who had invited Anthony to spend Christmas with them in the first place. But she wasn’t going to start an argument. No doubt Jacob was still dealing with the way Anthony had disappeared without a trace as well, when they had been close friends. What made the sting a bit less biting was that he’d had a family to focus on, while Miranda’s heart continued to beat for Anthony. Every other man of her acquaintance never quite measured up to him. It was why she had never married. He had quite literally ruined her for anyone else.

Now, as she stood in the foyer of the hotel with her valise of painting supplies and waited for him, she was surprised to hear her name called. “Miranda? Is that truly you?”

Miranda glanced up and saw a gentleman she was quite familiar with. Her mouth went slack with surprise, but then she recovered enough to reply. “Terrance! What are you doing here?”

He smiled as he walked toward her and she was struck by the genuineness of it. The sandy-haired gentleman, Mr. Barbour, was similar to Anthony in that he was the younger son of a viscount. The difference was, he hadn't gone off to battle but had become a solicitor. During the time she had known him, ever since her come out, he had made his fortune and become her devoted suitor not long afterward.

She had come close to marrying him at one point. He'd asked, but she had eventually declined. Her emotions just wouldn't allow it. She knew the same would still hold true if he were to ask again. But that didn't mean they hadn't become good friends over the years. They often shared a cup of afternoon tea or a carriage ride through the park.

Most importantly, he had been there for her when her mother had passed. He'd helped her through the worst. He was a true, caring man. It was just a shame for him that he wasn't Anthony. He didn't stir her soul like the battle-weary hero did.

They embraced fondly, and then he said almost regretfully, "I'm on holiday with my fiancée and her family."

She smiled, although her stomach sank for some unknown reason. Perhaps it was because her friendship with him would soon be altered. Or that he hadn't bothered to tell her the news and she'd had to read it along with the rest of the population. "Ah, yes. I seem to recall reading about your upcoming marriage in the papers shortly before I left London. That's wonderful news. I'm very happy for you both."

He regarded her so intently that she could only guess what he might be thinking. "Thank you, Miss Applegate." He glanced around, as if expecting someone to appear. "I daresay you told me you were coming to Cumbria at your brother's invitation, but I didn't think we would be staying at the same hotel. I should think that's what I would call a rather ironic happenstance."

“Indeed, sir,” she laughed. “I would heartily agree. Perhaps you and your fiancée might like to join us for supper one evening?”

“I would like that very much,” he returned smoothly.

“You haven’t introduced me to your friend, Miranda.” She started as Anthony came up behind her and put a familiar arm about her waist. She noted that Mr. Barbour tensed slightly, although he merely bowed slightly as she made the introductions.

“A pleasure, Mr. Barbour,” Anthony said tightly.

“Likewise,” came the chilly reply.

Miranda quickly grasped Anthony’s arm and steered him back toward the entrance to the hotel. “I will talk to you soon, Terrance.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

Anthony didn't like the sound of her parting promise. It seemed entirely too... intimate for his liking. "Who was that?"

She kept her focus ahead of her. "I thought we already established that it was Mr. Terrance Barbour."

"Indeed," he said evenly. "But what I want to know is his connection to you."

"I don't see that it matters, as he is to be married."

"Is to be married isn't married yet," he pointed out. "That could easily change."

She stopped walking and turned to him. "Don't say that you're actually jealous?" She snorted in disbelief. "It's been fifteen years, Anthony. I was a child when I saw you last. Do you think it impossible that I might have gone on with my life as you have yours? Did you imagine that I remained home, pining for you all that time?" She shook her head. "I hate to disappoint you, but Terrance has become a very important part of my life." She glanced away. "Although that will likely change now that he will soon be wed and starting a family."

Anthony tried to recover the proper amount of shame that he should be feeling for his behavior, but just as she was upset to learn he hadn't immediately returned to London after the war, he wasn't pleased to find out she had been a social butterfly about town. According to the letters of her youth that he'd pored over countless times, he was under the impression that there was no one else for her, that she would wait for him until her dying day, if that's what it took.

It was uncharitable of him to have actually expected her to do so, but at the same time, he wanted to be selfish and believe it, because other than a handful of liaisons during his darkest hours, he had reserved his heart solely for her.

However, he didn't need to upset her and send her scurrying away from him now, so he shoved aside his pride and swallowed down the regrets of the past and forced himself to be sincere in his apology. "I'm sorry, Miranda. It isn't fair for me to ask so much from you."

Some of the tension left her shoulders. "It's all right." She offered a chagrined smile as they continued walking. "I seem to get upset easily around you, although I can't say why. You just have a habit of saying the right thing to cause me to overreact, I suppose."

He shoved a hand through his hair. "You're not to blame for any of this. I am the one who took too long to come back for you."

They were silent for a time, and then she admitted, "I never stopping thinking of you." He glanced at her, but she kept her attention fixed forward. "When Jacob returned home, I expected you to walk through the door with him as you had countless times before. When you didn't, I knew something was terribly wrong. After he told me you'd been injured, and he found it exceptionally difficult to speak about his time on the battlefields, a part of me feared you were lost forever. But even then, I couldn't seem to accept it. Every time a carriage stopped in front of the house, or the butler walked into the parlor with a silver salver, I imagined it was you."

"I wanted to come back," he said quietly. "But I wasn't sure how to face you with... this." He gestured to his face, not even knowing if she was looking. "Once I had recovered my senses, I felt like a monster, certainly one who was unworthy of you."

He paused when she laid a gentle hand on his arm. Her enchanting, green eyes stared

deeply into his soul. “You forget that it isn’t your appearance I always adored about you. It was your kindness, your ability to make me laugh, but most importantly, your loyalty. No matter how irritated you got with Jacob, you were always a good friend to him.” She smiled in fondness. “And you were rather good at helping to keep me from getting too upset with Elaine.”

He snorted. “You were both quite precocious as children.”

She winked. “We still are.”

With another laugh that sounded a bit less rusty than before, he offered Miranda his arm and led her to his curricule.

Although the air was a bit chilly, and the threat of snow hung in the heavy, gray clouds in the distance, Miranda didn’t complain all the way to Braithwaite. She had been curious to see where Anthony had been hiding all this time, because really, that was what he’d been doing. He’d called it healing, but it was a way to withdraw from society and retreat into his own suffering. Granted, she didn’t deny that he’d had a difficult time after Trafalgar, but had it truly taken fifteen long years for him to finally gain the courage to return to the life he’d left behind?

To her?

So many unanswered questions flitted through her mind, but she didn’t dare voice anything further aloud. She had this Christmas with him, and if this was her final farewell, she could at last return to London and grieve for him. She’d been denying herself the necessary part of her own healing process, but now she could shut the door on that part of her life and lock up her heart. Her parents’ townhouse wasn’t entailed to any sort of heir, so perhaps she might decide to strike out on her own. She had always yearned to travel to Italy, but she hadn’t gone for fear that would be when Anthony finally appeared on her doorstep. But no longer. She wouldn’t deny herself

anything she wanted. While she might never have children, at least she would ensure that her life became her own. After seeing Terrance today, she wondered if she hadn't made a terrible mistake by turning down his proposal, but neither could she agree to marry him when she hadn't known where Anthony stood—or even where he was. She had hinged her entire life on him since before she was fifteen years old. She had vowed to wait for him for eternity, but she was finding that eternity was much longer than she'd anticipated. Life was quickly passing her by, and if she wasn't careful, she would miss all the special moments she might experience. She had waited years for her first kiss to come from Anthony. Maybe that was as far as it would ever go.

A gust of cold air struck Miranda, and she snuggled deeper into her woolen pelisse. She was quite sure her nose was already red, and she could tell her cheeks were chapped from the cold, even though she wore a bonnet to protect her from the elements. Somehow, they always found a way to whip around and encase her in their icy hold.

“Here, take this.”

She glanced over at Anthony to see him holding out his greatcoat to her. She quickly shook her head. “I couldn't possibly—”

“Take it, Miranda. Trust me when I say I've suffered worse when it comes to being outside.” He shrugged. “Besides, I've grown quite accustomed to the cold while I've been here in the north.”

She hesitated only a moment more, and then she took the offering. Laying it over her lap like a blanket, she was instantly enveloped in his warmth. “Thank you.”

He turned to her with a solemn expression. “I know you may not believe this, because I certainly haven't given you much cause to trust in what I say, but I would do anything for you.”

Miranda wasn't sure what to say to that, so she just inclined her head and kept silent.

She sat on the side of him that showed his good eye, and if she didn't know better, she might not have realized he was injured. His jawline was strong, his gaze direct. Everything about his profile was quite admirable, and although a few more lines had made an appearance on his weathered face, he still looked exactly as she remembered. It was still hard to believe that he was sitting next to her again after all this time.

The years had seemed to pass endlessly, but now when she looked back, it had been a flash of memory and nothing more, nothing less. It was only her memory that told her everything that had transpired through the years, and a few words written in a journal, but otherwise, there was nothing to account for any part of her life.

It was quite disquieting, to say the least.

While most women her age had already left their mark by having children and filling their nursery, Miranda had a few paintings and some verse on a page. It might not be much, but perhaps her legacy would somehow live on through her books.

Miranda was brought of her woolgathering by the sight of a few cottages lining the path into the village. It was much smaller than Keswick but filled with various people going about their day and minding their own affairs. When Anthony's carriage passed, they might offer a wave or two, but otherwise, they continued about their chores. It was a far different scenario than in London where the sight of the two of them riding together would cause several fans—and tongues—to start wagging with the desire for an impending scandal.

As they moved slowly throughout the dwellings lined with stone, and the tall, landscaped mountains in the distance, she turned to Anthony and said, "It's quaint. I can understand how you found it so appealing."

“Indeed. It’s as close to heaven on earth as I’ve found in England.”

She took note of the wistfulness in his tone, and she realized that he would never leave. This was the place he intended to call home for the rest of his days. She wasn’t sure whether she ought to be pleased or terrified by that. It would certainly mean that he wouldn’t return to London, and that was where she called home.

Deciding to push that aside for later, Miranda concentrated on her surroundings. It would certainly be quite easy to paint a scene about this place.

When Anthony finally set the brake in front of a modest cottage that resembled those around it, she looked at him curiously. But even before he confirmed it, she knew that this was where he lived. “Welcome to Gravehill Manor,” he jested lightly.

As he assisted her down, she realized that it was quite surprising to find the son of a viscount living in such unassuming surroundings. Another detail that would delight the gossips of London.

Anthony removed a lantern from a peg hanging by the door and lit it before he led the way inside. If anything, Miranda decided, it was just as chilly indoors as it was outside, but at least they had shelter.

“I’ll get a fire going. Feel free to look around.”

It was ironic, because Miranda thought he seemed a bit unsure of himself now that she was standing in the middle of his living area. She certainly wouldn’t call it a parlor. Or any other room that was there. She could almost look around the entire cottage, just standing in one spot.

Anthony was kneeling in front of the grate, but he must have read her mind, because he said, “I know it’s small, but it has been enough for me.”

She nodded her understanding and then started to meander about. She took note of the cot where he slept, as well as the copper tub, washstand, and shaving utensils that sat on top of his dresser. It was so... intimate, that she continued on her way. However, as she was about to make a circle around the backside of the chimney which also opened into his bedchamber, she spied something sticking out from his desk drawer.

Intending to shove the paper back inside where it belonged, she opened the drawer. Immediately, something caused the hair to stand up on the back of her neck, a subtle warning that she was poking around where she shouldn't. However, curiosity compelled her to reach out and lift one of the papers out.

With trembling hands, she read the few, hastily scribbled lines.

I don't know where to begin with this letter. All I can say is that I'm truly sorry. I've been haunted for so long that I'm not sure I can differentiate between madness and reality anymore. I'm not sure how much longer I can take this pain, this misery that I hold inside of myself that has nothing to do with my outward injuries. If there was a way I could reverse time and never get on that ship, seeking honor and glory, I would. Instead, I fear it would have been best had I perished alongside so many good men with the same hopes and dreams...

“I never finished it.”

Anthony had known that Miranda’s curiosity wouldn’t go unchecked for long. He remembered that much about her. That was why she’d been on the staircase the last time he’d seen her, hoping to catch a peek of the festivities during her parents’ Christmas party when she should have been in bed. As she jumped guiltily and spun around with a gasp, he knew the same held true now.

The question that remained was—which letter had she decided to read?

However, any shame that she might have been feeling faded with the paper in her grasp. “Does this mean what I think it does?” she demanded.

He regarded her steadily. Even though he only had one good eye left to him, he could see the horror on her face clearly enough. “What do you think?” he asked softly. “I told you I was in a dark place for a long time.”

“But this letter is dated before you went to war!” She tossed the unfinished letter on the desk. “I might have understood your sorrow, your reluctance to come home after the horror you witnessed, what you were subjected to, but not this. By your own hand, you weren’t planning to come back to me. You don’t get the right to choose if you want to live or not!” She was fighting a new wave of hot tears. “In the intervening years since you were gone, I buried both of my parents. Not only that, but I had to see the distraught faces of the women who received the news that their loved one wasn’t coming home from battle. Each day I lived with the fear that my brother would be one of those men. You weren’t the only one who suffered, but I wanted to mourn with you when you showed me those scars on your wrists. Now I feel like it

was all a lie.”

There was silence for a time, and then Anthony said, “You’re right. But it still took me a long time to push aside my own agony and see it all around me. I still struggle with it, but I’ve found a new reason for living.” You. Although he left that part unsaid.

Some of the tension receded from her shoulders. “I’m glad to hear it. Perhaps I won’t feel so guilty about returning to London after the holidays.”

She turned and continued her inspection of the cottage, which was why she didn’t see the frown on Anthony’s face. He didn’t know why he thought she might have fallen in love with Cumbria as he had, but of course, she had lived in the city most of her life. Her publisher was there as well, so it made sense that she couldn’t leave whenever she liked. Unlike him, she had responsibilities, while he was a ne’er-do-well. Or at least, that was how he saw himself these days. Perhaps he was the one who needed to make a change. It was time to stop running, stop hiding; time for him to dare to walk out into the light again, to feel the warmth of the sun upon his scarred face.

As he moved into the living space, he watched as she removed a new, blank paper from her bag, along with several paints. “Surely you don’t mean to paint in here?”

She paused and glanced up. “Why not? It’s entirely too cold to be outside today, and that window makes a lovely winter scene.”

He glanced out the one she indicated, and with a bit of frost collecting on the pane, combined with the barren landscape beyond, it did portray a rather haunting imagery.

Once she had gathered her things and sat in a nearby chair, which afforded her a good view, she looked at him. “Should you like to read while I paint, as before?”

Since Anthony had hardly comprehended a word that he'd read, he asked, "I should like to watch you work, if it doesn't bother you for someone to peer over your shoulder."

She smiled. "Not at all. I am so used to my nieces and nephew doing it now that I hardly even notice."

"Do you need me to bring the lantern closer so you can see better?"

She shook her head. "I prefer the natural light. I've found it is easier to shade that way."

Anthony pulled up another chair and placed it a short distance behind her and waited. With a glance in his direction, she turned her attention back to the blank paper. After a moment's hesitation, she started to draw an outline of the overall portrait.

While he imagined he might be distracted by the sight of her, it wasn't long before Anthony was captured by her talent. His heart fell, because he realized how much of her life he'd truly missed, time that they could have been together as soon as she had turned of age and made her come out. He would have courted her properly, taking her for rides in the park and waltzing with her at a society function.

Instead, he'd tried to escape everything because he couldn't accept the future as a disfigured monster.

But the truth was, Miranda had always been his everything. She was all that had mattered. It was too bad it had taken him this long for his eyes to open to the truth. He should have known her kind nature wouldn't have balked at his appearance as others had done. She accepted him, flaws and all. He'd been a fool not to return to her as soon as he'd healed.

But she was here now, so perhaps there was such a thing as a Christmas miracle after all.

Miranda could feel Anthony's eyes upon her as surely as if he'd reached out and touched her. A shiver crawled up her spine, causing gooseflesh to break out on her arms. If the fire he'd started hadn't chased away her earlier chill, then she could have blamed her reaction on the weather. But the temperature outside wasn't the cause for this.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand. The longer they were here together, the more word had a chance of spreading. Although Braithwaite wasn't the sort of place like London, where gossip ran rampant, there was still a lady's reputation to consider. It could falter anywhere at any time. She didn't need any sort of scandal to follow her after she returned to London. If so, she would risk her publisher's ire and, even though she wrote anonymously, they likely wouldn't accept anything further if they thought she had a tarnished reputation. It was best that she make her outline as quickly as possible and return to the hotel.

After a time, in the silence around them, other than the occasional log popping in the grate, Miranda was soon finished with the image she wished to portray in her head.

When she set down her brush, she looked at the work in progress with a critical eye. She was never truly pleased with the final project, feeling as though she could have done something different, but this one suited the verse that was starting to evolve in her mind.

Mama in her kerchief, and I in my cap, had just settled down for a long winter's nap...

"It's breathtaking." She looked over at Anthony, whose gaze was fixed on the object in her hands. "You truly have a vision when it comes to bringing something to life.

It's almost as if I can reach out and open the window. And I certainly didn't think my cottage was quite so appealing before now. It was just some place to lay down my head after a day on the water."

She grinned broadly. "Now you can picture it even more fondly. Perhaps I'll send you the original once the next book is published."

"I would like that very much." He paused. "But even more so if you brought it back in person."

Miranda's breath caught. She knew this was when things could get dangerous. He spoke of things that she might yearn to do but knew there was no way of doing. He surely had to know that. "I'm afraid that's impossible." She gathered her things and then got to her feet. "We should be getting back before it's too late."

He regarded her with something that looked oddly like longing, but then he dropped his gaze and said, "Of course." He walked over and kicked some ash over the smoldering logs, ensuring that the fire was out before he grabbed the lantern and led them out of the cottage.

As they stepped outside, a few, white flurries drifted down from overhead. As Anthony put her things in the carriage, Miranda noticed a boy in short pants and a woolen coat and hat running up and down the lane with his tongue stuck straight out. She smiled, because she could remember trying to catch snowflakes the same way when she was young.

Feeling the sudden urge to mimic his actions, she stuck out her tongue and waited patiently for a single drop of moisture to touch the tip.

"What are you doing?"

She shifted her gaze to Anthony and drawled in return, “Don’t tell me you never did the same when you were a child.”

He crossed his arms, his brow lifting. With his damaged eye, he looked rather rakish in that moment. “Did what?”

She laughed. “Caught snowflakes on your tongue.” She proceeded to demonstrate.

“I never did anything so ridiculous,” he lifted his gaze heavenward.

She narrowed her gaze. “While I don’t fully believe you, there’s no time like the presence to start.”

She waved a hand and with a heavy sigh, he reluctantly extended his tongue.

Anthony had never felt so utterly foolish in his life.

Or so utterly fascinated by Miranda.

He knew she had always been a free spirit, but he was starting to wonder if that girl was still in there somewhere. Now he knew that she was, and it warmed his heart to know that she hadn’t been completely broken by the losses and disappointments she’d had in her life.

Suddenly, he didn’t feel nearly as idiotic as he had a moment ago. If doing this caused that broad smile on her face, then he was more than willing to oblige.

Seeing that he was willing to play along, she went so far as to throw her arms out wide and spin in a circle with uninhibited joy. The laugh that came from her made him stop and stare, spellbound by her magnetism. She exhibited a youth that he thought had perished in battle, but he was finding it bubbling back up inside of him,

the devil-may-care rogue that he'd once been.

He started to laugh, and together, as the snow started to fall in earnest, they stood there amid the swirling flakes and had the time of their lives.

Until Miranda twisted her ankle.

She fell forward, and Anthony didn't think, but rushed toward her and caught her before she could fully hit the ground, although they ended up on their knees. Her eyes were sparkling with life and exuberance, and Anthony quickly sobered. There was little to separate them. It would be so easy to lean forward and take her in his arms...

With a surge of apparent mischief, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his.

He was lost.

Anthony didn't heed the snow, the cold, or even their surroundings. Time itself seemed to stand still as he held Miranda in his arms. Never before had he felt so complete, so... whole. After Trafalgar, he wasn't sure he would be able to overcome the torment that had become his constant companion, but with this woman at his side, nothing else mattered.

As Miranda's eyes fluttered open moments later, he looked deeply into her enchanting, green eyes and whispered, "Marry me."

Although she was still attempting to recover her equilibrium after their embrace, she had the wherewithal to pull away from him. She was shaking her head as she got to her feet. "Don't say things that you don't mean."

He rose and started toward her, but she held out a hand. He stopped.

She turned back to him, tears glistening in those enchanting eyes now. It cut him to the quick. “You have no idea how long I yearned for you to return and say those words to me. For years, I waited, I prayed, I hoped, I dreamed, for that day.” She put a fist over her heart. “But when all those days turned into weeks, and then months, and eventually years, I started to realize that I didn’t need anyone in my life, that the only one I could truly depend on was myself. After coming to this conclusion, I wrote my first book, and found something that I could do to earn a respectable living, while remaining a spinster. I’ve learned one thing in all that time. I was a fool to have ever wasted so much time on a fantasy.” She straightened. “I’m not sure what you expected when you decided to join Jacob and our family this Christmas, but if it was merely to try and win my hand, I’m afraid you have wasted an endeavor. I’m content as I am and I won’t allow my harmony to be disturbed when you don’t truly know what it is you want.”

When she was finished, Anthony didn’t quite know what to say. He certainly wasn’t going to admit that he had reconciled with Jacob all those weeks ago in the hope that he might have a chance in winning Miranda’s hand. Of course, he should have known it wouldn’t be so simple as to say those two little words and she would come tumbling back into his arms. He had wounded her deeply. Those emotional scars tended to heal much more slowly than outward ones.

As far as claiming that he didn’t know what he wanted, perhaps there was some truth to that as well. When he’d seen Miranda again and she hadn’t shied away from his disfigurement, a brief bit of light had been spun in his soul. She had reminded him of what he’d been like in the days before he’d enlisted in the Royal Navy. But if she accepted his proposal, who was to say that they would be able to embark on a happily ever after? Nightmares still plagued his sleeping hours, and more than once he’d woken in the middle of the night with a scream on his lips and a blade clutched in his grasp without knowing how it had gotten there.

The harsh truth was that he might always be damaged. It wasn’t right of him to ask

her to accept someone so broken.

“You’re right,” he said softly, although he didn’t choose to elaborate on that score. With his brow creased in a frown, he said, “We should be getting back.”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

Miranda was sitting in the hotel foyer, staring off into the distance when Elaine found her. “There you are.”

With a start, she turned to her sister with a smile as she set aside the painting she was supposed to be working on, but yet, was still a blank sheet of paper on her lap and nothing more. Not even a rough sketch. It was as if all inspiration had vanished. But it was no wonder. Anthony hadn’t come by the hotel for the past few days. It was Christmas Eve, and at this point, she wasn’t sure she would see him. Regret over their stilted parting still washed over her. She hadn’t meant to allow her emotions to take over, but again, she’d found herself speaking before she gave thought to her words. That was turning out to be quite a habit for her. At least, where Mr. Gravehill was concerned. Before Anthony had returned to her life, she had been capable of holding her tongue.

Withholding a sigh, she patted the empty seat of the settee. “You act as though I’ve been in hiding,” she teased lightly.

“Well,” Elaine said with a shrug. “You have been rather withdrawn for the past couple of days. I thought for sure that our shopping excursion the day before yesterday might have brightened your spirits, but even that failed to do so.”

“If you recall,” Miranda returned dryly, “you were the one who always demanded a new ribbon for her bonnet. I never particularly cared for such fripperies.”

“Yes, I do realize I’m the one who finds her weakness is a lovely watered silk,” Elaine said with a dramatic sigh. “But this is one Christmas that you’re going to be wearing something other than the drab half-mourning attire you insist on wearing.”

She folded her hands together in her lap and announced, “I have ordered a new gown for you, and I am assured it shall be ready by this afternoon.”

“How do you know my measurements?” Miranda wondered.

“We’re nearly the same size. I took one of my gowns to the local seamstress earlier this week when you were spending time with Anthony, and she was able to create one specifically for you.”

Miranda had to applaud her sister’s quick thinking, but it did little to erase her melancholy. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Elaine, but truly, the only gift I need is sitting right beside me.” She reached out and took her sister’s hand in her own and gave it a slight squeeze. This time, she allowed the sigh from earlier to escape. “If only I could figure out a way to paint something worthy of note. Although this is a lovely scene—“ She waved her hand to indicate the window in front of her. “I can’t seem to gain the proper amount of enthusiasm for it, even now that it is covered in fresh, sparkling snow.”

Elaine regarded her steadily, and then she said, “Perhaps what you need is a change of scenery then.”

Miranda rolled her eyes. “And where do you think I might go?”

“It depends. Do you trust me?”

With a laugh, Miranda lifted a brow. “I suppose that depends on if you plan on leaving me somewhere in the wilderness.”

Elaine rolled her eyes. “That was one time, and I’ve told you repeatedly that it wasn’t on purpose.”

“So you say.” Miranda’s lips twitched.

“I’ll be back.” Elaine left, and then she returned a short time later with her pelisse draped over her arm. “Gather your things. Let’s go.”

Miranda put her painting utensils in her valise and said, “Where did you run off to?”

“To tell Daniel that I wouldn’t be around for a bit and that he would have to watch Elizabeth until we returned.”

Miranda’s brows lifted. She recalled the days when they were younger. Although she had loved their father dearly, he seldom spent any solitary time with anyone other than Jacob, and that was because he was speaking of business matters. “And he didn’t mind?”

“It’s becoming a new world, Randie,” Elaine said with a broad smile and she looped her arm through hers. “Why, I shouldn’t be surprised if someday, men ran the household while ladies went to work.”

With a laugh, Miranda said, “That would be something to see, I agree, but I don’t think it will happen in our lifetime.”

Miranda returned to the King’s Arms later that day and found that her smile had been restored. After the winter storm, some of the chill had passed with it. But even if her teeth had chattered the whole time, it would have been worth it to gain the incredible view that the Castlerigg stone circle offered. Smaller in scale than the infamous, Stonehenge, Castlerigg was still quite remarkable. Not only were the mountains in the distance enough to make her breath catch, but the circle itself was quite extraordinary. Like Stonehenge, no one seemed to know how long it had been there, or even how it had appeared. Either way, it had become something of a curiosity that added to the town’s allure. From the carriage, Miranda had drawn an outline of the

stones and the landscape beyond, and then she had gotten out and walked amongst them with Elaine for a time.

“Daniel cares nothing for archaeology or science,” Elaine noted, “while I have been particularly fascinated by it. Is it that we can’t recall anything about these stones, or were we not meant to remember?”

Miranda had merely shook her head. Elaine had always been more involved in mathematics and how things worked, whereas Miranda preferred the arts. That was why it made no sense that Elaine should pore over the new fashions when they arrived in London. Miranda wondered if it was the fabric itself that intrigued her sister, the way it was woven into an intricate design or specific material, rather than the latest plates at the modiste’s shop.

“I would prefer to remain ignorant if that’s the case,” Miranda murmured with a shudder. “God only knows what we might uncover should our memory resurface.”

“But it might give us a glimpse into the unknown, like what lies beyond the stars.” She glanced toward the heavens, as if she might be granted the answer right then.

“I regret to disappoint you,” Miranda said, “But I don’t believe you shall receive divine intervention for your own curiosity.”

“No,” she agreed softly. “But perhaps there will be an exception for love written in the stars?”

Miranda had instantly stiffened. She generally confided in her sister about most things, but Anthony was a strict line that she refused to cross, especially now. “Don’t be nonsensical. The next thing I know you’ll be spouting off such ridiculousness that if I did a dance among these stones it will grant me my heart’s desire.”

Elaine shrugged. “It might be worth a try...”

“No.” With that, Miranda had headed for the carriage. Again, Anthony had managed to upset her just by the mere thought of his name and nothing more.

As Elaine joined her and they headed back for the hotel, she asked, “What happened between you and Anthony?”

“I don’t wish to discuss it,” Miranda returned flatly.

“But perhaps if you talk about it, it might set your mind at ease.”

Miranda lifted her chin almost mutinously. “There’s nothing to say that hasn’t already been said.”

Elaine’s mouth turned down in the corners as she gave a heavy sigh. “I should think I am smart enough to know when you’re lying to me.”

“Don’t worry.” Miranda glanced out the window. “Whatever ails me should pass soon enough.”

At least, that’s what she hoped.

That night, as she sat down to dinner with her siblings and their families, Miranda shoved the food around her plate and realized that she had never felt more alone. She had always believed that she was immune to marriage, that she could be happy alone, but after spending the last few days with Anthony, her heart yearned to claim otherwise. Although she enjoyed the candles, and the evergreen boughs and holly berries that the hotel had set up to make a festive atmosphere in the public areas, when she entered her rooms, it was nothing but a reminder of the stark, empty house that awaited her when she returned to London.

She'd had to stop herself more than once from running back to him and begging his forgiveness. But then she reminded herself that it would be a mistake. She wanted to know that he wouldn't regress into that miserable shell he'd been in, the one who had been so close to ending it all. She wouldn't be able to leave with the fear that he might do something foolish and she was powerless to stop him. That was why she'd had to refuse him. If she thought he was truly sincere, she wouldn't hesitate to accept his hand. But knowing that he'd always struggled with these ideas, told her that there was still a long road ahead of him, and he might never reach the end of it.

"Miranda?"

She blinked at the sound of her name, and when she glanced at Jacob, she noted that he had a look of consternation on his face. A glance at Elaine showed that her expression mirrored that of their brother. She forced a smile. "I'm sorry. I fear I was woolgathering."

"Indeed. You seem to be doing that a lot lately." His voice was firm, like that of their father when he was about to deliver a stern lecture. She feared she was in for the same. Naturally, as the head of the household, Jacob likely assumed it was his responsibility, but she was well past the age of her majority, and made her own way, so he had no reason to tell her what to do. Nevertheless, she considered what he was about to say as the caring nature of an older sibling. "I realize that I made a mistake inviting Anthony to spend the holiday with us. I think it would have been best if I hadn't reintroduced him back into your life. I feel it was the wrong thing to do, and for that, I'm sorry for causing you further pain. Please believe that it wasn't my intention."

Miranda sat there, unsure of how to respond. She hadn't been expecting an apology, but she was grateful for the gesture. Thus, she replied truthfully. "I hold no regrets for seeing Anthony again, and I certainly don't hold you responsible. It was nice to see him, and I can return to London with the relief that he shall continue to heal."

Her brother inclined his head. "Very well said. I just hope that you will be able to enjoy the festivities with us this evening."

She smiled broadly. "I'm looking forward to it. And with all the free time I've had lately, you will be happy to know that I have nearly all the sketches I need for my next story. I believe only one remains, and I shall finish that tomorrow. What better way to celebrate the holiday than by capturing the innocence of a Christmas morning?"

"I think that's a lovely idea," Elaine chimed in, and gave Miranda an encouraging grin. "Someday, you shall be famous, dear sister. When you walk down the street, it shall be impossible to escape from all your adoring admirers!"

Miranda laughed. "I'm not so sure about that, but it is a way for me to do something I enjoy and live by my own means."

"And we are all very proud of you for it," Jacob said, and there was a murmured assent around the table.

It warmed Miranda's heart, and that was all she needed to remember in her darkest moments: she still had the people who cared most of all around her.

After dinner, Miranda started to return to her rooms to continue working on her watercolors, but she was stopped by Mr. Barbour in the hallway. "Terrance," she greeted him fondly. "I trust you and your fiancée are having a nice time in Cumbria?"

"Indeed," he replied somewhat distractedly. "I must speak with you on a most urgent matter." He glanced around and then took her hand and led her to a slight alcove, presumably out of the distance of prying eyes.

Warning bells sounded in Miranda's head, but she heeded them too late. Terrance had

her trapped against the wall, his hands upon her face before she quite knew what he was about. “Terrance...”

“Shh. Don’t speak. Just let me say what I have to.” He placed his forehead on hers and kissed the side of her temple. “I have been in misery ever since I came to this place and saw you. I convinced myself I was going to be happy with Delia, but now I know it can never be. I have been fooling everyone, but I know the truth.” He pulled back far enough to look deeply into her eyes. “My heart will always be yours. Is there any way at all that you might reconsider a life together with me? Dear Miranda, put me out of my misery and consent to be my wife.”

Miranda blinked. She didn’t know what to say. She had noticed the lingering glances he sent her way for a long time now, but just as she’d set aside her deeper emotions toward Anthony, she assumed that Terrance could do the same. She wished with all of her heart that she could grant his desires, but then she would be the one fooling everyone. She regarded him with empathy, hoping that he could read the regret in her gaze. “I’m sorry, Terrance, but my answer will always remain the same, because you see, like you, I shall always bear the cross of unrequited love. I don’t want to hurt you by entering into a union that would eventually make us both miserable. Me, because you wouldn’t be him, and you, because I could never fully allow my heart to engage with another the way I long for him.”

He was still for a moment, and then he allowed his hands to slip away. A hard glint entered his gaze. “Is it the man you’ve been spending time with here? Mr. Gravehill?”

Miranda neither confirmed nor denied his claim, but the damning evidence in her silence was just as bad.

He stepped back. “I see.” He lifted a brow. “I assume he’s made you an offer then?”

Again, Miranda said nothing, because although Anthony had proposed, it wasn't the declaration of love she'd always yearned for.

His mouth kicked up at the corner, a look of reluctant acceptance filling his gaze. "I guess neither of us shall ever be truly happy in this life then." He bowed in a formal manner. "Goodbye, Miranda. I wish you nothing but the best life has to offer. I'm sure you will understand if I cease calling from this point on. It will be wise for both of us, I think."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode back down the hall.

Miranda exhaled a shaky breath when he departed. With trembling hands, she retrieved the key to her rooms. She shut the door and leaned against it, as she tried to draw a full breath. Tears filled her line of vision, causing everything to waver. She slowly slid down the length of the hard wood. By the time she'd slumped to the floor, the tears were falling in earnest. Heaving sobs, the feeling of a wasted future filled her. Had she just made a dreadful mistake by turning down Mr. Barbour's proposal for the last time? She had long admired him, and with his companionship, she had made it through the last few years of loss with his steady presence at her side. But now, she'd lost even that—all for a man who was tormented by his own demons, who might never be whole again.

Miranda buried her face in her hands and sat alone, while the storm washed over her. Sorrow poured through her soul until it felt as though it was being ripped from her body. Tomorrow, she would put on a brave face and partake of a joyous celebration of the season for her siblings and their families. She was determined not to ruin this holiday for them, even if she might wish for nothing more than this miserable season to end.

Once it was over, she could finally go back to London and hopefully, find a way to convince herself that this nightmare had never occurred.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:43 am

Anthony was a coward. For a war hero, he wasn't very smart when it came to matters of the heart. He knew this, and yet, he continued to stay away from Miranda, sequestered as he was in his small cottage in Braithwaite as Christmas Day came to a bitter close. He was feeling the sting of rejection, but he knew it wasn't because of his appearance. Miranda loved him. He'd known it ever since she was fifteen years old and looked at him with stars of hope in her innocent eyes. And yet, he had asked her to save him when he couldn't manage to do it himself.

He sat with his head in his hands, the fireplace glow as his only light source, and called himself every derogatory name he could recall. He hadn't wanted things to end this way, truly he didn't, but he didn't know how to come back from the brink of despair. He was terrified that he would falter and find himself going down the same dark path he'd been on after he'd been released from service. Like a dead leaf falling off the tree in the autumn, he was adrift on the breeze without any clear indication of what to do. People went out of their way to give him a wide berth on the street and because of his hideousness, he knew he couldn't return to his family. To Miranda. He would be doing them a disservice.

He had considered ending it all so many times.

But then, he would remember the letters. Like a drowning man on the sea searching for some way to lift himself out of the mire, he would tear the worn ribbon off of the stack and read each one over and over again. They had started out in the handwriting of a child, but as the years passed, he could see the differences in the style. He would long imagine how she had matured, and looked forward to the day they were reunited once more. All of that was before his battle wounds, of course, but even afterward, he would be comforted by the warm homecoming he might have received. He pictured

dancing the waltz with her at her come out ball, and coming by to pay an afternoon call, perhaps taking her riding in the park.

His chest ached, because he knew it would never happen. The pain would rip him apart as acute as the day that bayonet had removed the sight from his eye.

He looked at the letters sitting on the floor between his feet. They were still tied with that worn ribbon, each page barely held together, the folds carefully preserved in permanent creases. There were faded splatters of mud, blood, and his own tears that coated the outside. They were a reminder of everything that he'd yearned for, prayed for, but could never have.

He glanced at the fireplace and could feel the familiar well of emotion rising up within him. If he destroyed these letters, he knew it would all be over. There would be no other beacon of hope to guide his way to Miranda. But what was the point now that she was gone? He no longer had anything to live for.

And yet, as he stared at that pile of papers, he couldn't find the strength to do even that. He was consumed with Miranda, with the love that he felt for her but was unable to express for fear his sleeping demons would resurface with a vengeance.

It was time to let go.

He closed his eyes tightly, and then opened them again when he heard a brisk knock at his front door. He shot to his feet, expecting to see Miranda on the other side. He shoved the letters under his chair and then strode forward and threw open the door.

Jacob stood there.

With a mutinous expression on his face, Anthony should have been prepared for the fist that came crashing toward him and set him on his backside, but nevertheless, he

knew he deserved it.

“You deserved that.”

Anthony hung his head at the sound of disgust in his friend’s tone. “I know.” He slowly picked himself off the floor and faced Miranda’s brother once more. He held his hands up in supplication as a trickle fell from his nose. “You still have a mean right hook.”

“I’ve learned more than that through the years,” Jacob shot back. “But most of all, I know how to tell if my sister has been sobbing all through the night.”

Anthony hadn’t thought it possible, but his heart sank even further. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Jacob looked at him expectantly, but when nothing was forthcoming, he demanded, “Is that all you have to say for yourself?” He shook his head in disbelief. “When you came to see me at the estate and I invited you for Christmas, it wasn’t just because I was glad to see you among the living again, but because I felt sorry for you. There, I said it. But I never intended for you to make the holiday this terrible for my sister. She’s suffered enough, but all you can do is think about your own selfishness.”

Instead of retaliating, Anthony accepted every barb that was thrown at him, because he knew Jacob was right. “I don’t know how to fix this,” he admitted miserably.

“Why don’t you start by telling her you love her? That you have for years, that you never stopped loving her?” he suggested.

Anthony shoved a hand through his hair. “I don’t want to condemn her to more upset. What if I can never get past this?” He waved a hand at his face, but they both knew, as former military men who had fought a difficult battle, that the scars went much

deeper than that.

“We don’t know,” Jacob returned evenly. “I may not bear the outward appearance you do, but when I say I struggle with what I saw, it gets very difficult to endure at times. It’s not as if I can confide in my wife, because she wasn’t there. She doesn’t understand, and I certainly don’t want to offer all the horrific details.” His gaze was firm when he continued. “But neither was I going to let those hard emotions take any more away from me than they already had. I decided I was going to be stronger than that. I wanted to live, when so many around me had perished, so that’s what I’m doing. I have a family now, and although I won’t lie and say it goes away, the innocence and love I have surrounded myself with has made it bearable. The same can be said for you if you will allow it. But it has to be your choice. I could hit you all day long and demand that you see the error of your ways, but that would accomplish nothing except to pacify my own upset in seeing Miranda so despondent, although she does her best to hide it, I know my sister well enough to see she’s unhappy. More so, I think than when our mother died, and I thought that might very well destroy her. Would you condemn her forever because of your own reluctance?”

Anthony frowned. Jacob had given him a lot to consider, but it wasn’t anything he hadn’t already discussed on his own. “I... will have to think on it, Jacob. That’s all I can promise.”

“The problem is you’ve done too much thinking. You have imprisoned yourself in this place. You might have thought it was a safe haven, but we both know the truth. I hope you do the right thing—for your sake, as well as for Miranda’s.” With that, Jacob turned on his heel and left.

Anthony slowly closed the front door. But it was a long time before he removed his fist and pushed away from the frame. He returned to his chair and gathered the letters in his grasp. He considered them for a long time, and then he lifted his chin, squared his jaw, and entered his chamber.

Miranda walked inside the front door of the townhouse she'd once shared with her parents. After spending the holiday season among excited family members and a populated hotel, the silence and calm of home was almost deafening, but all for the wrong reasons.

Jacob and Elaine had chosen to remain in Cumbria through the new year, but Miranda had left on Boxing Day, the morning after Christmas, finding that her enjoyment had waned drastically. Of course, they had urged her to stay, but she wasn't sure she would be able to keep a brave face any longer.

Both her brother and sister had given her a lingering hug upon her departure with the promise that they would visit her as soon as they returned.

As Miranda glanced about the expanse, she almost wished she'd remained, but it would have been impossible. Her nerves were taut, because she kept expecting to see Anthony—who never appeared. At least here, she could take heart with the certainty that he wouldn't suddenly be standing in front of her.

Deciding that a bit of holiday spirit might lift her own, Miranda sent the housekeeper on an errand for some greenery, a few extra candles, and even a pink poinsettia, that had been her mother's favorite. When the servant returned, the evergreen bough with its few pine cones were draped over the parlor mantel, the flower placed on a side table, and a wreath with a bright red ribbon hung above one of the floor-length windows.

With the gentle glow of the fireplace and the flickering candles, Miranda decided that it did help a bit. She decided to dress for dinner that evening, in the new, blue satin gown with its gold ribbon about the bodice that Elaine had given her for Christmas, along with a lovely peacock shawl. She'd even asked her maid to style her hair, and donned a small, diamond tiara and teardrop earrings to complete the ensemble. It had been so long that she'd worn anything other than half mourning, that she was almost

surprised by her appearance. There was a certain glow about her that had been lacking until then, but a morose heart would surely be exacerbated by dreary attire. It was almost a shame that she had dressed up for nothing. No one would see her looking the best she had in a long time. Then again, she wasn't doing it for anyone but herself.

She went downstairs with a hint of a smile on her face, just as there was a knock at the front door. One of the footmen opened it, and although Miranda couldn't see who was on the other side, the sound of the murmured, deep voice carried across the marble foyer.

“Who is it, Evans?”

The footman reluctantly stepped aside as a well-dressed gentleman walked into view. “I don't believe I need an introduction.”

Miranda was halfway down the stairs, but she stopped and clutched the railing with her gloved hands. She started to utter Anthony's name, but if it hadn't been for the sight of his wounded eye, she might not have believed it was him. He was dressed as fine as any gentleman of the ton in black trousers and a matching jacket, a white cambric shirt and cravat and even a maroon waistcoat. She had always thought he was handsome, but standing there in tall, shiny black boots, he was devastating.

When the silence lingered, he smiled slightly. “May I come in?”

“Of course,” she returned breathlessly, already forgetting that he'd broken her heart. She slowly descended the rest of the stairs as the footman disappeared from view. When she reached the foyer and she stood staring at Anthony on a more intimate level, she offered, “Would you care to join me in the parlor?”

He extended his arm to her. “It would be an honor.”

As they headed that way, he glanced back at the staircase. “I have good memories of that banister,” he noted.

“Do you?” she said, her voice still little more than a whisper.

“Indeed.” He turned her to face him in the middle of the room. His focus roamed over her face. “You have always looked so enchanting by candlelight.”

Miranda’s heart was pounding. “I didn’t think you’d noticed me all those years ago.”

“I’ve always noticed you.” His smile grew. “That precocious girl who dared to take a risk, who wrote to a poor, aggrieved soldier on the battlefield, to the woman who brought a man back from the depths of hell.”

“But...” She swallowed hard. “You act as though you’ve never left.”

“I didn’t think I had either, until I read your letters again.” He reached into his jacket and withdrew a packet of sad looking papers in a bundle of faded ribbon. He set them on a nearby table. “When I actually looked past my own grief, I started to comprehend yours. You didn’t just write to me to try to make me feel better, you did it so you could deal with your own sadness. I’m just sorry it took me all this time to finally push aside my upset to help comfort you when you need me.”

“Is that why you’re here now?” she whispered. “To comfort me?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “But so much more than that. To start, I want a dance with you. The one I should have guided you in on the day of your come out ball.”

She tilted her head to the side. “But there’s no music.”

“Then we shall have to make our own.” He took her into his arms and, using his

smooth baritone to hum a familiar tune, he guided her about the middle of the parlor. He never took his gaze from her face, and Miranda wondered if she was dreaming, for surely this couldn't be real. It was as if every fantasy she'd ever entertained was coming to fruition. After such a devastating departure, she was convinced she would never see him again, and especially not in London looking as he did.

As they danced, she asked, "What made you decide to visit in such formal attire?"

He lifted a brow in the coy way she had long remembered. The sort of action that had first caused her heart to melt around him. "How else might I court you properly?"

She stilled mid-stride. "Court me?" Again, her pulse picked up pace. "Do you mean to say that you're going to stay in London?"

"It would be deucedly inconvenient to court you otherwise, don't you agree?" he teased.

She blinked. "Does that mean you intend to return to society?"

He laughed. "I would be sorely disappointing my mother if I went back on my word now, not to mention the exorbitant amount of funds I used to procure all of the items I'm wearing at present." He leaned forward, as if to impart a secret. "I even employed a valet."

She found all of this quite unbelievable. "Where are you staying?"

"With my parents for the time being, but I intend to secure my own lodgings very soon."

"This is impossible..." she breathed. She put a hand to her forehead wondering if she was dreaming, or if she'd suddenly gone mad.

He reached out and gently lifted her chin. “Not when it comes to proving how much I love you, Miranda. You were there with me during my darkest days. It’s only fair that you should be a part of it during the light, because that’s what you are to me. I stayed away, thinking that I would drag you down, but the truth is, I drag myself down. You are the one who lifts me up. I don’t want to try to survive without you. Please tell me I’m not too late to win your regard. I won’t ask for your hand again, not until you’re ready. If you never are, then I’ll be content to just be near you, to be your friend, but just don’t let me go.”

The fresh sting of tears assaulted Miranda’s eyes, but this time, it was joy and happiness, not melancholy. “Oh, Anthony...” She reached up on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth to his for a chaste kiss. “I loved you then, and I love you still. I always have, and I always will.”

Christmas 1818

“Are you sure we have everything?”

Miranda glanced about the bedchamber she shared with her husband of two months and had to smile when he reached behind her and enveloped her in his arms and nuzzled her neck.

“If we don’t, then we’ll just purchase it on the way to Cumbria.”

She turned in his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. With a pensive look, she said, “Are you sure you don’t mind going back there? It won’t cause any bad memories for you?”

“Why would it?” he asked. “It’s where I reconnected with you.”

“It is,” she agreed. “But you always spoke of such fondness of the mountains and the lake and—”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “It all pales in comparison to you, my lovely wife.” His smile grew. “Besides, the last book you wrote about the night before Christmas was so well received that you said you wanted to try to duplicate its success.”

“Try being the main objective,” she noted.

“You doubt yourself far too much, even though I do my best to convince you otherwise.”

“That you do.” She nodded. With a sigh, she said, “I did like it there very much. Perhaps someday we might go there in our dotage and decide to stay.”

“Only if you are done writing, and something tells me that will never happen.”

She smiled a bit sheepishly. “I enjoy it almost as much as being your wife.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Mrs. Gravehill.” He lifted her in his arms and this time, he kissed her soundly on the lips. “We should go before your brother comes pounding on the door demanding to know why we haven’t left yet.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She snuggled closer to him. “But then, he might just have to wait.”

Her husband threw back his head and laughed, and Miranda realized that she would never tire of the sound. Just as she would never tire of him and their everlasting love for one another.

It was surely a Christmas to celebrate.

Author’s Note

Although Miranda’s sister, Elaine, starts to torment her at the beginning of the story with the K-I-S-S-I-N-G song, the actual origin is unknown. However, it does mention a baby carriage, and they were invented in 1733 in England by a man named William Kent for use by the Duke of Devonshire. So for true, childish gain, I decided to use it in my story.

I based Miranda’s Christmas book on the popular “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.” This poem originated in New York in 1823, published by an anonymous author. It wasn’t until 1837 that a professor by the name of Clement Clarke Moore came forth and accepted credit for the piece.

The poinsettia didn't come to England until the mid-1800's, but for the sake of the story, I wanted to add a bit of Christmas cheer that embodied my childhood, and this flower was my grandma's favorite!

The quote that Miranda utters to Anthony has long been immortalized in modern art, but when it comes to finding the origin, it was difficult for me to determine. Either way, when it is generally used for anniversaries, I thought it was perfect to end Miranda and Anthony's road to love. Whichever path you take, love always finds a way!