

Chapter 28

The jolting of the horse is uncomfortable at first but Evelyn eventually gets used to Neptune's long stride and falls into the rhythm. They venture past the outskirts of London and Evelyn allows the tears to fall. They fall fast and thick and only stop when they are a mile away from 104 and from Duke Blackmoore.

Not being a seasoned rider means that in the third hour of solid riding, switching between trotting and cantering, the exhaustion hits hard. Her stomach also grumbles it's displeasure. The midday sun tries to shine down upon them but the thick clouds blanket the sky. When Evelyn can no longer feel any part of her legs she decides that a break is in order.

She slows Neptune to a walk and finds a spot on the side of the road next to a small brook. Taking her feet out of the stirrups, she stretches her legs and half rolls, half jumps, on the horse. She hits the ground hard and staggers as her dead legs can't take her weight. She groans and stretches her neck out before leading Neptune over to a tree by the trickling water.

She ties his hip up and he reaches his head down to the sparkling clear water to drink his fill. She strokes his neck as he drinks and observes her surroundings, it's a quiet road that is lined with thick trees and thorn bushes. The little stream twists away and turns a corner to be hidden by a few small rises. She approaches the saddlebags and undoes the buckles to look inside. The smaller of the two has a few apples, some bread and a bit of cheese as well as a full water pouch. She has a small drink of the water and takes out an apple, a few bites she gives the rest to Neptune who munches it up happily. In the other bag, she finds some woolly socks, a spare pair of gloves, a tiny knife and a pouch of coins. She takes the money and tucks it into her inside coat pocket.

Neptune looks around for her as he finishes his drink, he nickers softly and she moves over him. She hugs his neck and breathes in the sweet smell of horse and hay.

"I don't know what I am going to do." She whispers to him and he snuggles her hand. "It's a bit of a mess."

Neptune's dark intelligent eyes blink at her and he seems to sense her sadness, he nudges her gently. She sinks onto the ground and plays with the grass, the trees around protect her from the worst of the wind. For half an hour she rests, she watches the stream and talks to Neptune.

The sun has completely vanished behind the dense cloud and although it remains dry, the air has turned colder. Evelyn looks up at her horse.

"Ready?" She asks, getting to her feet and untying his reins. Neptune suddenly goes very tense as she pulls the reins over his head.

"Miss, can I help you?" A voice says from behind her.

"I am fine thank you." She says squeakily, not turning around. She hears the sound of hooves on road and then two more footsteps join, she closes her eyes and nestles closer to Neptune.

"Miss Wright?"

Hearing her name she whips around to see Lawrence Jordan walking over to her, a black stallion walking loyally behind him.

"Hello." She says, astonished.

"This is a very unexpected surprise." He says, smiling.

"Quite." She agrees and she looks around for anyone else but there is only the two of them, "What are you doing here?"

He looks bashful and glances away from her. "I don't tell many people because family money is the only money around here." He looks embarrassed and won't look at her. "But I have a shipping company and I am travelling to Newcastle port for business." He gives her a handsome quirky smile, "And yourself?"

"I...am going home." She says carefully, not sure whether he has heard about her current predicament. "My cousin and brother want to stay longer but I missed the countryside."

"I understand, there are times when I really miss New York." He says.

"New York? That's your home?" She says, her interest raised, "I've always wondered what that city was like, I've heard such stories."

"It's pretty magical," Lawrence replies with a wistful smile.

"London must be such a bore in comparison." She says.

"On the contrary it has perks, I am enjoying my time." He says and his smile is bright and blinding. "You have a gorgeous horse." He adds looking at the palomino who is standing protectively by Evelyn's shoulder.

"He's a charm." She agrees, rubbing his neck, "He's looking a er me because I am not the greatest rider."

There is an awkward silence, they stand opposite each other with polite expressions.

Lawrence looks to the ground and then back at her. "I know we aren't the most familiar but would you like to travel together until our paths take different roads?"

"I don't see the harm in that." She says with a small smile.

"Alright then." He smiles at her and turns his horse so he can mount. Evelyn leads Neptune back onto the road and climbs up less smoothly than her companion. She steers him to the left of Lawrence.

"I was disappointed that I didn't get a dance at Hardwick Manor." He says.

"I wasn't feeling at my best." She replies, fiddling with the reins, trying not to think about that ball.

"It didn't affect your game." He comments lightly, "You made fools out of us all."

Embarrassed, she turns her head away and concentrates on Neptune's stride.

"I am teasing." He says. She looks at him through her lashes, his jovial expression is enough that a reluctant smile graces her lips.

"How long are you planning to stay in England then?" She asks.

"My original trip was meant to be three months, but I think I am going to have to extend it." He says, rubbing his horse's neck.

"It's not been a successful trip?" She questions.

"It has but I am thinking of investing in a shipping yard in Portsmouth." He tells her.

"Oh, so you'll be overseas more often then if you decide to?"

"Most likely"

"I've always wanted to travel, I always planned to when I turned 18."

"What happened?" He asks. She looks at his open and honest face and then down at Neptune's mane.

"There are things I don't tell people either." She says, "But, my family had a spell of bad luck and we lost everything a few years ago so I never got the chance."

"That does explain why such an intelligent and beautiful woman hasn't been snatched up into marriage yet." He says. "I was wondering, though I felt it rude to ask."

She laughs and blushes. "There have been other factors but yes that is the main one." She says.

"I meant no offence." He says, "I personally find that women with family money are corrupted by its influence." He quickly looks at her, "Not all of course."

Evelyn nods, "Will you tell me about New York?" She asks hopefully.

"If you tell me about your home in return." He bargains. She nods once and he launches into a description of the house he grew up in, the parks and where he first learnt about ships.

The companions have been riding for about two and a half hours when the weather takes a forceful turn and hail starts to pound and bounce on the road, making it difficult to see ahead.

"We need to take cover," Lawrence shouts over to her, shielding his face from the icy hard stones. "There should be an inn up ahead."

He clicks his horse into a canter and Neptune follows, not wanting the other horse to be in the lead. They ride quickly, but carefully, for fifteen minutes or so before they come across a tiny inn on the side of the road. By this time the hail storm has increased and the tiny white dots are falling with increasing frequency.

Evelyn jumps on Neptune and hands him over to Lawrence who takes both horses to rest in the tiny stable that is attached to the main building. She skips over the puddles to stand by the inn's door that has some shelter from the weather. She rubs her hands together to spark a little heat in her icy fingers, the gloves, although better than nothing, at this point, are not providing enough protection from the bitter wind. Lawrence returns from the stable, shielding his head from the hail.

"What are you still doing out here?" He asks, taking her arm and pushing her into the pub. The warmth that greets them covers them like a hot bath. Sighing in happiness Evelyn strips off her gloves and scarf that have become sodden by the hail. The inn is small but tidy and well looked after with a comforting feel. The fire roars in the corner bathing the wooden tables and chairs in golden light. A few travellers sit around drinking and eating as they rest their weary bodies.

"Welcome to the Kings Arms." A young girl walks up to them with a charming smile. "What can I get you?"

"Two whiskeys please," Lawrence says smiling at her, she blushes but looks to Evelyn and the wet clothes in her hands.

"I'll take them, and your coats. I'll dry them by the fire." She says taking her scarf and gloves. Lawrence hands her his things too, Evelyn reluctantly removes her coat and gives it over. The barmaid casts a strange look at her thin day dress but doesn't say anything.

Lawrence leads Evelyn to a table in the corner and closest to the fire. They sit down and the girl brings their drinks over a moment later. Evelyn wraps her hands around the glass and sips the drink, her chilled body begins to thaw from the combination of the alcohol and the blazing flames.

"Frightful outside." He comments. "This is one thing that would never happen in New York."

"I suppose not." She replies, sipping the whiskey, "You must miss your family."

"I do," He says sadly, "My parents died when I was four but I still have my grandmother and sister."

"Oh I am so sorry," Evelyn says automatically placing her hand on his before she can think. He looks down at their hands and smiles.

"Thank you, I had a good childhood though my grandparents raised me and my sister in a comforting home." He squeezes her hand.

"Maybe one day your sister could come over here for a visit." She says.

"No." He says abruptly, releasing her hand. Evelyn sits back in surprise at his firm tone. His eyes crease in regret.

"I am sorry." He says, "I just can't contemplate my sister in this society without someone to look after her. I think you know as I do how harsh these people can be and I couldn't be with her all the time."

"Of course, naturally you are very protective of her and that is nothing to apologise for." Evelyn smiles to reassure him.

The hail storm lessened to a stop during their lunch which consisted of a rich stew with freshly baked bread. From politics to horses to literature they talk about everything that springs to mind and they find that they have much in common. The ease Evelyn feels around her new friend is surprising and she finds herself enjoying the refreshing conversation with someone who is not asking her for anything nor requiring her to help them.

"Alright, alright," Lawrence holds up his hands in surrender, Evelyn laughs.

"I concede." He says, "Paris is a nicer place than Rome. But only in theory as you have been to neither."

"Thank you." She says, "I'll take that victory."

Lawrence glances out the window and sighs. "I must apologise for this but I need to make haste if I am to be in Newcastle by nightfall." He says, "I am glad to have taken this part of the journey with you." He offers his hand and kisses her knuckles.

"Of course." She stands and the barmaid hurries over with their warm dry clothes. He places some coins in her hand for the drinks and food.

"I hope to see you soon." He says, bowing to her. "And I wish you luck with your journey."

"Travel safe." She says smiling. He smiles at her and waves before heading out the door. Evelyn retakes her seat. Talking with Lawrence had put her current predicament in the back of her mind but now it consumes her every thought.

She pulls on her coat, gloves and scarf and takes a last longing look at the fire before going outside. The hail is completely gone but the grey sky is still hanging low. A small boy bows to her as she enters the stable, she finds Neptune comfortably nestled in a stable with plenty of hay, he approaches her as she comes to his gate.

"Hello." She strokes his face and scratches his neck. "Are you ready to carry on?"

"He's been watered and fed miss, your gentleman friend made sure he has looked after." The stableboy squeaks, hurrying over to her and undoing the latch and leading her horse out.

"Thank you." She says taking the reins from him and smiling. She hoists herself up into the saddle and adjusts her dress. She waves goodbye to the boy and nudges Neptune into a steady trot down the path. With no one to talk to she finds the journey to be more monotonous.

She reaches Broughbrough at 16:00 and her heart feels lighter, she is almost home. Determined to make it home before the darkness descends she pushes Neptune harder but the horse is unaccustomed. When they start to take the path over the hills he falls into a long powerful stride and eats up the ground beneath him.