

Magic Slippers

Chapter 1

Dove Reynolds pulled his rake across the grass, his arms moving in that familiar motion while he peered into the neighbor's yard. The stone wall dividing the properties was too tall for him to see over, but the designer had carved out the occasional hole to make it feel more open and light. Personally, Dove didn't care about the aesthetics as much as he loved the chance to spy on the Jepsens. Or more specifically, Ella Jepsen.

No, he wasn't a creep. At least, Dove didn't think of himself as a creep. Lovelorn, awestruck, sure. But creepy? Never. Just a silent admirer of a girl so high above his station that he'd never even spoken to her. An undergardener had little to recommend himself, but that didn't keep Dove from dreaming. Hoping. Admiring.

It was pointless to fight it. There was an indescribable quality about Ella Jepsen—the light in her eyes and joy in her step—that pulled Dove to her. From the moment he'd first seen her, his heart was hers. She had no idea that he even existed, but Dove lived for moments like this where he could sit beside the master's wall and wait for a glimpse of the girl who personified perfection.

A sound came from behind him, and Dove began raking in earnest. His own heart aside, he needed this job, and he wasn't about to let the head gardener catch him gawking about. But all his good intentions went out the proverbial window when she appeared.

She. Dove held the word in reverence. It meant one and only one person in the entire world whenever he thought of it. A word filled with fanciful dreams and impossibilities that his eighteen-year-old heart just wouldn't abandon.

Ella Jepsen rushed into the back yard and threw herself onto a bench just a few feet away from him. Of course, she was blocked by the massive wall, but that was a minor detail. Drawing closer, he watched her through the holes. Her golden hair cascaded around her, and her pale hands covered her face. Dove was so enchanted to see her up close that he nearly missed her muffled whimpers.

Dove wanted to vault right over the wall and pull her into his arms. The sound of her cries and the sight of her delicate shoulders shaking tore at his soul, and it took all his strength and determination not to do exactly what his heart wanted to do. That would definitely fall into creep territory. But what he was seeing was so shocking that Dove was desperate to know what had upset her to the point of clouding over her sunshiny personality. In all the years he'd watched her, Dove had never seen her like this.

Ella had lived a pampered life, yet she was no fragile, weak thing. Dove had watched her shoulder the burden of losing her mother, never allowing that tragedy to pull her down into the depths of despair. Ella was a ray of happiness whose example had helped Dove bear his own mother's death just a couple years later.

“Miss?” Dove wanted to say her name, but that was one liberty too far. It was bad enough that he’d spoken up in the first place.

Ella gave a trembling sob.

“Miss?” Dove repeated, and Ella pushed back her hair to reveal a face so gorgeous that even the red eyes and splotchy cheeks couldn’t dim her beauty.

“Hello?” It came out quiet and shaky, the remnants of her tears filling the word.

“Are you all right?” he asked, cringing at the insipid question. Of course, she wasn’t all right. A person doesn’t cry their eyes out when everything is all right—especially if that someone is Ella. But the prospect of talking to his love was more than his agitated brain could handle.

“No.” Her response was so pathetic and sorrowful, and Dove knew he had to fix it. Whatever “it” was.

“Who are you?” she asked, her eyes turning to search the area.

“Dove,” he replied. A part of him always cringed when said his silly name. If it weren’t for the fact that his mother had loved it, Dove would’ve chosen a new one years ago. But it was the only thing he had left of her, so he kept it.

Ella glanced up at the lush branches above her. “Oh, is that you, little bird?” she asked, staring up at one of the winged creatures nestled among the leaves. Standing, she sang a twittering string of notes, as if to call it down from the branch.

Dove’s head cocked to the side as he watched her coo at the bird. “Uh...no. And that’s a sparrow.”

Ella’s gaze turned to his voice, and their eyes met through a hole in the stone. Dove had watched her from afar for years, but this was the first time he’d seen her—really seen her. Her eyes were the color of sapphires, sparkling and glimmering with a blue so striking Dove was sure no other person in the entire world had such vivid eyes. Her lips were full, and Dove’s mind immediately pictured what it would feel like to kiss them. Her skin was luminescent with perfectly pink cheeks the color of a damask rose. And it was all offset by a halo of golden curls.

There couldn’t be a lovelier girl, and when their eyes met, Dove felt the world shrink around them until it was only them in this moment, infinite and eternal.

“Oh, hello,” she said, a smile crossing her face for a moment before the pain in her heart wiped it away. “I didn’t see you there. I’m sorry if I bothered you.”

“It’s no bother,” he said. And Dove was proud he got the words out. Sure, his voice cracked in the middle like a little boy, but he’d spoken comprehensible and non-creepy words. If only he could stop gawking.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. Again, a major triumph.

“My stepmother won’t let me go to the ball.” Ella’s eyes fell to the ground, her lovely eyebrows pulling together; Dove hadn’t known that eyebrows could be lovely, but Ella’s most certainly were. However, all thoughts of eyebrows disappeared when he realized what she had said.

Dove had been worried that they’d finally found Mr. Jepson’s remains; her father had been missing for several weeks, and at this point, it was unlikely they’d find him alive. Or perhaps their family’s finances had taken yet another downturn. Or any number of other possibilities. But Ella crying over a ball had not crossed his mind.

“I know that must make me sound so shallow,” said Ella, a sigh on her kissable lips. Her eyes met his, and Dove felt as if she could see into his soul. “I know there are far more important things, but have you ever had a dream that means so much? One that seems impossible yet possible at the same time?”

Any number of Dove’s fantasies could be described that way. Some were small—a token of affection from the enchanting girl in front of him. Some were large—their lives entwining into a lifetime together. Each was impossible, yet with Ella standing before him, they seemed quite possible. After all, her family may have been posh before, but their fortunes were crumbling fast. Ella was still miles above him, but the storybooks were full of uneven marriages. True love conquers all, right?

“I’ve dreamt of going to the Royal Ball since I was a little girl,” she said. “My mother used to tell me such stories about it. A ball so lavish and grand that it spans three days. The dresses and dancing. It all sounded so beautiful and amazing that I’ve spent years wishing for my chance to go. And now that I’m old enough, my awful stepmother won’t let me unless I do an impossible chore.”

Dove’s heart seized in his chest as he watched her speak with such longing. It may be a silly thing, but he knew just how important such things can be. Sometimes they’re the flickering light in the darkness, and Dove knew that he was willing to do just about anything to make Ella’s dream come true.

And if that perhaps brought him one step closer to achieving his heart’s desire, all the better. For both of them.

“What did she ask you to do?”

“She wants me to scoop a pot full of lentils from the ashes in the fireplace,” she said, wringing her hands. “There’s must be millions of them, and I’ll never get them all out.”

“And if you do that, she’ll let you go to the ball?” he asked.

New tears filled her eyes, and she gave a sad nod. “But it’s impossible.”

Dove glanced over his shoulder, searching for his boss, but it was about time for Norris’s morning break. The guy really should’ve retired years ago, but he kept showing up to work every day, determined to keep his master’s garden up to his high standard. However, Norris spent more time napping than weeding, and even though the fellow had a penchant for catching him at the worst times, Dove knew this would be worth the risk.

Getting a foot up on a tree trunk, Dove vaulted over the wall and dropped next to Ella. She gave a startled gasp and stepped away, but Dove smiled; he knew his was crooked and nowhere near as enchanting as Ella's, but he hoped that some part of it would entice her.

"It's not impossible," he said. "Show me where the lentils are."

The look on Ella's face was worth every second he spent helping her. Of course, it wasn't that difficult a chore, really. The stepmother wasn't going to comb through the ashes to make sure every single lentil was picked up, and sieves were created for a reason.

Standing at the washbasin, Dove watched Ella bring over a shovelful of ashes. He hated seeing her struggling with the weight of it. He'd rather do both jobs himself, but Ella insisted on helping and holding the massive colander was the harder task. She dumped her load into it, and Dove drained a bucket of water over the top of the mess, washing away the majority of the ashes. Dove picked out the larger chunks of ashes that remained before hefting up the colander to knock it against the edge of the basin, which dislodged more ash and liquid.

"So, why is your stepmother making you do this?" he asked, grasping for anything that might strike up a conversation. It wasn't as if Ella had much in common with a lowly undergardener, so this topic was as good as any.

"She's jealous of me," said Ella. "She's always been unbearable, but she's gotten worse since Papa went missing."

Dove suspected it wasn't so much that the new Mrs. Jepson was jealous as much as she didn't want Ella stealing the spotlight at the Royal Ball. Mrs. Jepson's daughter, Petunia, was pretty in her own right, but there wasn't a girl in all the land who could match Ella.

"No," said Dove, turning his thoughts away from wicked stepmothers and their endless scheming. "I mean, why did she do this? Of all the things she could do, throwing a pot of lentils into the fireplace is a bit random." Not to mention she could simply forbid Ella from attending. She was the girl's guardian, after all. There was no need for the pretense.

Ella brought over another scoop of ashes. Her cheeks pinked and her white teeth bit down on her lip. She cast a quick glance at Dove, and he responded with an encouraging look.

"It was my fault," she said, her shoulders falling. "I was preparing supper and tripped. The pot of lentils I was holding fell into the fire. Mother Julia wasn't very happy that I'd wasted our food and said I couldn't go unless I fixed it."

And that made more sense. Not that Dove could picture Ella ever tripping—the girl was the epitome of grace—but it made sense that Mrs. Jepson would react in this way. A chore was a handy excuse to keep her from going, but Mrs. Jepson hadn't expected Ella to have such a handy friend around.

And Dove certainly hoped Ella would think of him as a friend from now on.

All in all, the effort took only a few minutes, but the way Ella reacted, it was as if he'd slain a dragon. With a shriek of joy, she threw her arms around his neck. And then she gave him a kiss on the cheek, and Dove swore the birds broke out into song and the clouds parted, letting through a burst of sunshine to envelop them in the dark and dingy kitchen.

"You are the best!" gushed Ella.

Dove floated all the way through the yard and over the wall. He wished he'd had something more gallant or elegant to say than the 'ah, shucks' he'd given, but this morning was only the beginning of their story. The start of something new between them. The dawning of his dreams coming to fruition. Ella's admiration glowed in her eyes as she watched him, and Dove felt it burning in his heart.