



A  
LADY'S  
GUIDE  
TO  
MARVELS  
AND  
MISADVENTURE

A NOVEL

ANGELA  
BELL

A  
LADY'S  
GUIDE



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MARVELS



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A NOVEL

**ANGELA BELL**



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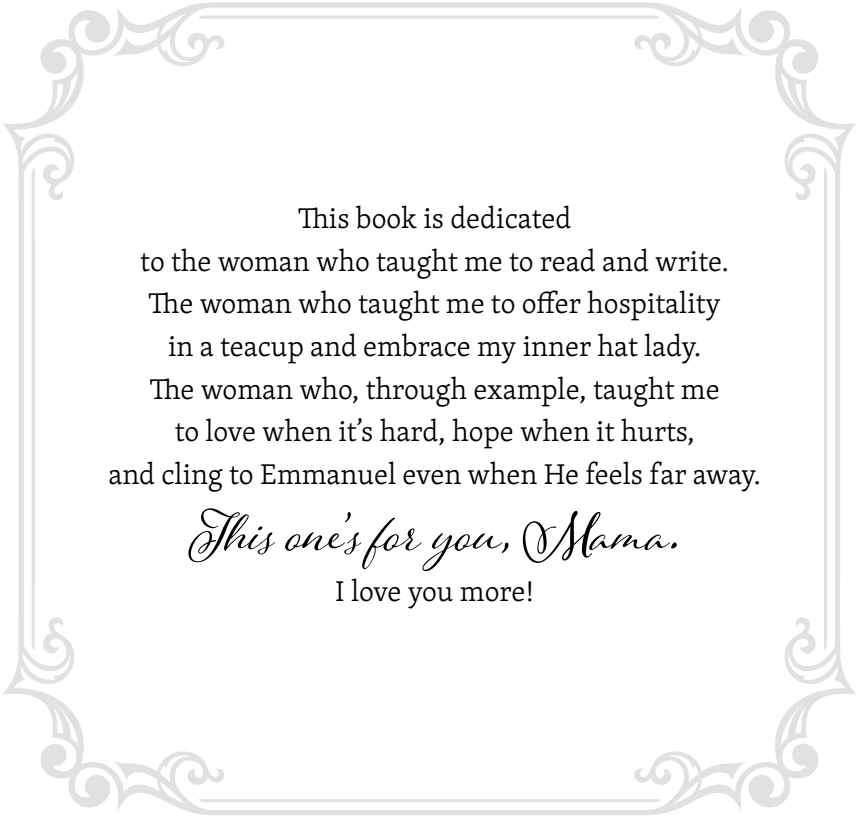
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This book is dedicated  
to the woman who taught me to read and write.  
The woman who taught me to offer hospitality  
in a teacup and embrace my inner hat lady.  
The woman who, through example, taught me  
to love when it's hard, hope when it hurts,  
and cling to Emmanuel even when He feels far away.

*This one's for you, Mama.*

I love you more!

CHAPTER  
1

A decorative graphic featuring a large, stylized number '1' in the center. Above the '1' is the word 'CHAPTER'. The graphic is embellished with several starburst symbols and two gears, one on the left and one on the right, connected by a flowing, wavy line.

**FEBRUARY 1860**  
**LONDON, ENGLAND**

**F**or Miss Clara Marie Stanton, the task of preventing her family from being committed to an asylum had become as commonplace as it was exhausting.

Ever since word of her broken engagement had gotten out three months prior, rumors had flown about town like a colony of bats, screeching allegations of hereditary insanity and a contaminated bloodline. Unfortunately, her ever-amused family found their new title of “dangerous loons” quite hilarious and saw no reason to temper their eccentric habits.

Which is why, on this late-February day, Clara found herself dashing across London to stop her dear mother from protesting outside yet another millinery shop that trimmed their wares with avian plumes.

Clara worried her hands, aggravating the frayed seams of her gray gloves as she navigated one of the West End’s popular shopping districts that teemed with parasols and

pretension. Why must Mum go sneaking off like this? Why couldn't she have ignored the advertisement for Petite Paris' new stock of feathered fans? If she would simply bide her time, Mum could resume her unconventional cause as soon as they were out of danger. Not today, when the slightest bizarre incident might bring ruin to those she loved most.

"Is that the Stanton girl? Mr. Forrester's fiancée?"

A mother and daughter strolled arm in arm as they blatantly gawked in her direction.

The mother smirked. "Former fiancée. Lucky bloke missed the noose on that one."

Clara's jaw clenched. Gossiping gnats always turned things the wrong way round, biting the wounded who dared to bleed. She averted her gaze and used the brim of her bonnet as blinders. Would she ever cease to be shocked by London's insatiable desire for gossip? By mouths eager to spew ash and soot, like so many factory chimneys, with little regard for those who suffocated in the process? By Rupert's lack of remorse for igniting the rumor mill's blaze?

No, not Rupert. Mr. Forrester. The man forfeited the right to such familiarity months ago, so she'd not grant it to him now, even in thought.

A sign hanging above the crowded street caught her eye. The wood, carved to resemble a globe, was emblazoned with the initials *J. W.*, backed by a crown. Ah yes, it was Mr. James Wyld's distinguished cartography shop, favored by the queen herself. She used to love perusing that establishment with Papa. They'd go in to acquire up-to-date maps for his fleet of merchant ships, and inevitably, after much oohing and aahing from Clara, she'd walk out with a new map all her own.

She paused before the familiar storefront. A pair of globes stood in the window display. One terrestrial and one celestial, both accented with gold leaf and perched upon bases of mahogany. Betwixt them, resting open-faced upon a blanket

of velvet, lay a map of Italy. Elegant in its exactness. Pristine in its design. She traced a finger across the glass separating her from the Mediterranean Sea. Beautiful waters she'd only ever read about.

The waters she'd planned to sail across on her wedding journey.

Clara's fingers curled into a fist upon the glass. All her maps had been packed in trunks and entombed in the attic for a reason. She'd not the time to entertain foolish dreams. She had responsibilities. A family counting on her to be their level head and steady shoulders now that Granny was no longer here to do so.

Prying herself away, Clara turned onto the next street, where the fashion industry ruled, and passed fortunate mercers and milliners currently not blockaded by her mother.

Minutes later, a strident voice with the authority of a general and the sweetness of a sugarplum assured Clara her quarry was near. Standing on tiptoe to gain perspective over the throng, she spotted Mum chanting and marching in a one-woman military formation. *Caught you, Mummy dearest.*

She hastened toward Petite Paris Millinery, where the object of Mum's fury was displayed with a sign reading, *The finest fashions direct from France.* The finest, apparently, were white satin bonnets paired with ivory-handled fans and parasols—all trimmed with fluttering plumes. Mum wouldn't be easily averted from this affront to her principles.

Mum turned on her heel and discovered she'd been caught, which only enhanced the impish twinkle in her blue eyes. "Excellent timing, ducky. I was about to begin a dramatic reading of 'Maker of Heaven and Earth.' When I reach the stanza 'Each little bird that sings,' why don't you pipe in with a convicting chant such as 'They sing no more, dead in your store'? That will ruffle some feathers of conscience."

The stares of passersby branded *dangerous loons* on the back of Clara's neck. "Mum, I can't—"

"Of course you can. Resist the treacherous tentacles of timidity." Mum dragged Clara into the conspicuous demonstration. "Let's march a bit to build your confidence."

"Mum. We've discussed this. We agreed to abstain from protests until—" A gasp seized Clara's throat. "Tell me my sight is failing and you are not wearing Fred about your neck. Please. Tell me I need spectacles. Tell me I'm hallucinating."

"Your sight is as keen as a hawk's."

*Perfect.* Fred, the very alive ermine, lounged about Mum's neck like an expensive stole. "Mum, you promised."

"I promised to do what was best, and taking a stand against cruelty is the best thing to be done. Those feathers belong on birds, amongst the clouds, not plucked and pinned to a matron's coif. And don't even get me started on the ivory." Tears puddled in Mum's eyes as her pinched lips fanned out in a manner tragically comical. "When I think of what is done to those precious elephants . . . those majestic, God-formed pachyderms . . . I-I-I—"

*Oh dear. Here it comes.*

Clara grasped the silver vial of smelling salts hanging from the chatelaine pinned to her skirt and shoved it under Mum's nose before a fit of vapors could draw an audience. "Breathe. Come now, Mum. Inhale gently . . . now exhale. Good. Once more, inhale."

"Gah, I've snorted one!" Mum's face contorted as she sneezed and sputtered. Sputtered and sneezed. "Owww! Mercy, but those salts burn something fierce."

"Perhaps you'll remember that fact and not inhale so aggressively in the future." Clara reattached the vial to her chatelaine and opened a small pouch hanging from a different chain, soon producing a clean handkerchief. "Here you are."

Mum accepted the handkerchief, dabbing stray tears, be-

fore giving her nose a sound blow. “Thanks, ducky. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Get arrested, I expect, which is why I must insist we go home. Making your stand amid speculation of insanity is hardly beneficial to your cause.” She stepped closer to whisper, “And what of Fred?”

Clara met the spoiled ermine eye-to-eye, attempting to glower in censure, but the endeavor was undermined when his whiskers tickled her nose. She suppressed a grin. This adorable rascal, with his lame legs that trailed behind him when he scuttled about the house, was her favorite of all Mum’s disabled rescues. And the one that caused the most trouble. “Oh, Fred . . . you don’t exactly defend Mum’s soundness of mind, you know.”

Vocalizing his pleasure with a soft *took-took-took*, Fred tilted his furry brown head and begged to have his chin scratched.

Clara obliged his request, scratching his tiny jaw . . . until pedestrians with more perfume than politeness began to stare. She withdrew her hand from the “stole” and straightened her shoulders. “Please, listen to reason. We cannot afford for Fred to indulge in excursions at present.”

“Horsefeathers.” Puckering her lips to Fred, Mum stroked the top of his brow. “You needed fresh air, did you not, Freddy? Poor little dear. Besides, he’s a champion reformer. Nothing makes a lady reconsider the violent tendencies of fashion like admiring a beautiful stole only to have it nibble her hand.”

“Mother!” Clara glanced at a giggling party of shoppers. *Please, God, let it be that no one heard that remark.*

With a gentle yet determined grip, Clara guided Mum away from Petite Paris and endeavored to conceal them behind a lamppost. She took a breath to rid her voice of the fear and irritation churning in her stomach. “Mum, you know I love and support you, always. However, in our current circumstances, we must be cautious. If Fred nips one more hand—just one—

the constable warned you could be brought up on charges. Even arrested. Like it or not, you can't help a single creature if our good name is reduced to refuse in the gutter, so please, promise me—no more protests or outings with Fred until our current predicament has been resolved.”

With a huff, Mum crossed her arms. “Such vain imaginings are absolute balderdash. But I shall agree for your sake. On one condition.”

*Thank heavens.* “Anything.”

“Get yourself out of the house more often.”

“Why . . . I leave the house every day.”

“Popping into the clock shop to check on your grandfather hardly qualifies. Much of your time is spent stuffed up in the house, working. You work as your grandfather's nurse. You work as your papa's secretary. You work as our housekeeper and my very right hand. So much labor without any amusement is not healthy. You need to have fun, ducky. Attend the ballet. Meet people. Take a trip to the seaside. Have an adventure like you always planned.”

*Like Rupert—Mr. Forrester—and I had always planned.*

When they'd first met, she'd been a starry-eyed dreamer of twelve, and he'd been a furrow-browed planner of fifteen. Spending their time tucked away in the library with a stack of travel guides, an open map, and voracious wanderlust. Growing, planning, and dreaming together. Little Atlas and Buccaneer Bill off to tour the world . . . until they weren't. Until she'd discovered his duplicitous reasons for matrimony. Until she had given up the ring and any desire for adventure.

Pollutants in London's atmosphere triggered a fine, stinging mist in Clara's eyes. “If I attend a ballet with Papa's escort, may we call a truce?”

“Very well.” Mum gave Clara's arm a tender pat. “I probably ought to return home in any case. In my haste this morning,

I neglected to give Cook instructions regarding tonight’s dinner party.”

Clara’s heart tilted on its axis. Society had been turned against them—spies had been sent amongst them—and Mum wished to host a dinner party? “W-with humans?” *Please let the guests consist of feathered friends.*

“Only a few of your father’s business associates. And some neighbors. And a couple ladies from my whist consortium. And a couple more from the Charitable Ladies League. I invited Emily and Bridgette, but they’ve yet to send a response, so I don’t know whether to expect them.”

Of course, her would-have-been bridesmaids hadn’t bothered to reply. Like the rest of her friends, they’d severed all ties once the rumors began and the scandal broke, lest they become tainted by association. Just last week, on her way to Grand’s shop, Emily and Bridgette had spotted her and promptly crossed to the other side of the street in a choreographed *cut*, as if they’d never known her and didn’t wish to suffer the misfortune. Only kindhearted Mum would take such a slight to be accidental and invite them to dinner in good faith.

“If the girls don’t pop by, we should only have sixteen guests, all told.”

A vein in Clara’s temple twitched. Sixteen people in the house, and any number of them might well be informants for Mr. Forrester. Lured by his coin. Armed by his spite. Dispatched by his command to scour their home for the leverage he sought to validate his claims and cement his revenge.

“How can you welcome outsiders into the house after all that transpired? After what happened just yesterday? Your room is still in shambles.” Drawers overturned. Chair cushions sliced. At least this latest spy, a chimney sweep who’d charmed Mum into giving him work, had been decent enough to look shamefaced when caught and confess by whom he’d

been paid—a dapper bloke by the name of Forrester. A revelation that confirmed her mounting suspicions and worst fears.

Mum gave Clara's cheek a gentle pat meant to reassure. "Things can be replaced, and the room can be set to rights soon enough. No real harm was done."

But the potential for harm was all too real. She shuddered to think how differently things might have ended yesterday. "What if that man had taken his knife to you or Papa instead of the furnishings?"

"The man was a dishonest and destructive thief, I admit, but I can't believe he'd have gone so far as to hurt anyone. People with dimples are rarely given to violence."

*Oh, Mum.* How could she still be so naïve? "Call off the dinner party, please. Inviting people into the house poses too great a risk. As long as Mr. Forrester persists in his search, we should operate under the assumption that all outsiders are spies and we can trust no one."

"Fiddle-faddle and twaddle. What did your Granny always say? 'Don't let the bite of one grass snake . . .'"

" . . . prevent you from enjoying the garden."

"That's right, and my mama was the smartest woman to grace God's good earth."

Blinking away a sudden blur of tears, Clara nodded, conceding that irrefutable point. If only the serpent who'd bitten them had been a harmless grass snake rather than a venomous adder.

"There now, that's settled. We shall have our party, and a marvelous time shall be had by all. Dinner, laughter, good conversation. Perhaps an impromptu dance or two. It will be splendid, won't it, Fred?" Mum leaned an ear to the ermine's snout and nodded. "Fred concurs. Now let's be off before those horrible French fashions change my mind."

Clara hastened to match Mum's gait, twitching temple now

a pounding migraine in the making. Somehow, she must prevent this dinner party from ending in disaster. Somehow, she must corral Mum's menagerie of rescued animals, make the house appear as normal as possible, and keep a wary eye on their sixteen guests. If she spotted any evidence of a wolf in sheep's clothing—so much as one wolf hair on a guest's woolen coat—out the door they'd go! She refused to lower her guard and let her family be put in greater peril because of her misplaced trust.

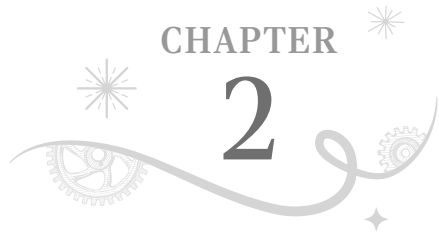
She set her jaw. By might and main, this day would not end with the remaining pieces of her heart being carted off to a madhouse and locked away forever. She'd already lost two people she loved to the horrors of an asylum.

She'd not lose another.

Years ago, she'd been too young and powerless to save her family from that pain. Now she had the advantage of years and wisdom. She was a strong, independent woman, after all. She could take care of her own. On her own.

Clara pulled back her knotted shoulders. Of course she could. For she would not let down her family and her God a second time.

Now. Wherever was she to hide the infernal talking parrot?



CHAPTER  
2

“Hello again, London, old girl.”

Theodore planted his crutch on the street, absorbing the rattling, growling city that thrummed beneath his single worn boot. He inhaled the city’s unique stench—burning coal, horse manure, sewage from the Thames, and a hint of pretentious cologne. Just like he remembered.

By George, how he’d missed this place. Countless times, he’d wanted to return. Longed to return. How excruciating it had been to wait for the haggard years and hard miles to form a rusted patina on his polished appearance and thus eliminate the risk of being recognized. Now, finally, that day had come. All that remained was to find some tucked-away spot where he could settle down, tinker for his supper, and forget why he’d been forced to become a vagabond in the first place.

A peddler woman trudged by with a basket of posies clutched in her arthritic hands. Theodore acknowledged her with the tip of an imaginary hat. Her wrinkled grin set him off with a jaunty air to his one-legged, crutch-aided gait. Right-

oh. Everything was going to be all right. The sun had risen in the east, constant and reliable as a finely crafted clock. Life carried on with a chorus of clomping horse hooves, shouting costermongers, and laughing street urchins celebrating the spoils of a successfully picked pocket. And now it was his turn to—

“Oi, get back here!”

A ragamuffin barreled into Theodore and knocked him off-kilter. Reeling, he braced against his prop and tensed every muscle, somehow managing not to hit the ground as a ruddy constable dashed by in pursuit. The crutch dug into Theodore’s armpit as he breathed through clenched teeth, clinging to the names he’d carved deep in the woodgrain. The names of the men he’d lost at the Charge. A tribute to the fallen, and a tangible reminder that he was just like them. Forgotten in death.

Father had made sure of that.

Quickly, Theodore shoved the memories back in the clock casing that kept his pain hidden. Contained. Without that mental encasement . . . without Arthur . . . he wouldn’t have been able to carry on all those years ago. Only when the case door was shut tight and his broken pieces locked away was he able to find his bearings. Right-oh. Everything was going to be all right . . . so long as he could keep up the pretense that nothing was wrong.

After trekking along for an hour or so, he reached the tick-tocking heartbeat of London’s timepiece trade, where entire streets were lined with clockmakers’ shops. Ones that hopefully needed an extra pair of hands. Question was, which one would be willing to hire a drifter off the street?

All the shops appeared to have been designed by one architect with traditional tastes and a limited imagination. Wrought-iron hooks held glossy signs overhead that the elements were forbidden to touch. Marble columns framed

every doorway like pairs of footmen in livery, afraid to so much as sneeze. Immaculate window displays boasted refinement and perfection, luring full purses with ornate clocks that varied from porcelain mantelpiece numbers to longcase clocks inlaid with gold. Fine goods that indicated a chap wouldn't get far without a smart suit and impressive references.

Yet one establishment at the end of the lane stood out like a hearty smile amid upturned noses. An older building ambushed by progress and surrounded by new construction. No fewer than six paint colors flaked off the speckled storefront, each shade representing a different season—long ago—when the owner had still bothered to keep up appearances. The windows were devoid of wares for sale. Devoid of anything apart from dusty curtains that veiled the interior in mystery. There wasn't even a sign over the door, just a pair of rusted chains robbed of purpose. Surely this place wouldn't snub a man who blended so well into its façade?

Leaning on his crutch, Theodore limped toward the anomaly. Nails pinned a torn sheet of parchment to the sun-bleached door, bearing seven words clumsily scrawled in black ink.

*Drosselmeyer and Son, Unique Clocks and Dreams.*

Theodore traced his finger across the last word. Dreams too often darkened to nightmares. Why, then, was this shop's name so appealing? Probably because this ramshackle place was likely the only one to give him a chance to make some sort of life for himself.

With his free hand, Theodore swung open the door and hobbled inside, trading brilliant sunshine for the homey glow of gaslight. A ragtag army of clocks pitched camp on every square inch of space, tick-tick-tocking in uniform rhythm. He stopped in the middle of the uninhabited room, mouth agape. The clockwork regiment heralded the new hour with

an enthusiastic hurrah of gongs, chimes, dings, and cuckoos, as if to extend him a friendly welcome. A greeting that stirred the very windings of his soul.

One wounded soldier limped to join its brothers, sounding a metallic ping at two minutes past. Hmmm . . . the regulation needed adjusting. If he could regulate the clock's movement, it might induce the proprietor to consider him for hire. Theodore approached the east wall's cluttered shelves in search of the tardy timepiece, only to be distracted by a captivating cuckoo. A graceful ballerina twirled in place of the expected bird. Never in all his days had he beheld finer craftsmanship. Not even amongst the timepieces he'd taken apart as a boy and reassembled gear by gear at Kingsley Court.

His mind recoiled too late. The jaws of wretched memory clamped down hard and fast, piercing him once more with Father's words. *"If you were going to besmirch the family honor so spectacularly, you might've at least had the decency to die."*

The memory spit Theodore from its maw, and he caved upon his crutch, trembling inside and out. Coming here was a mistake. A shop of dreams was no place to escape one's nightmares.

As he turned to make his escape, an insect landed on his shoulder. He brushed it off, but the persistent pest buzzed round and settled on his crutch hand. *Bothersome gnats.* Ready with a well-aimed smack, his free hand stilled over a tiny butterfly. Switching the prop to his unoccupied hand, he raised the bug to eye level. By jove, it was a machine!

Superbly crafted from tarnished brass, the automaton resembled a life-size speckled wooden butterfly, complete with white enamel spots inlaid along the edge of each delicate wing. The butterfly's antennae twitched and wings undulated, readying to take flight with the aid of an intricate clockwork movement, the likes of which he'd never seen.

"My inventions have always been able to recognize other

clockmakers." A male voice chuckled behind him, and the butterfly alighted, as if beckoned by the sound.

Theodore whirled round to find an elderly man with bright eyes topped by feathery brows of wizened white. The clockwork butterfly joined a flutter of others nestled in the man's receding hair and unkempt mustache. A bemused grin creased the fellow's face as he studied Theodore. "Who'd you apprentice for, lad?"

Tremors be hanged. He couldn't afford to pass up interest from a potential employer. "I've trained under clockmakers in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, Italy, and even as far off as Egypt and India. None of my previous employers are notable beyond the borders of their respective countries, but each are skilled and talented craftsmen. I learned a great deal from them, one and all. Although I didn't stay in any one place long enough to receive proper references, I give you my word that I'm a hard worker. Knowledgeable and willing to learn more still. I can prove as much, if you're willing to give me a chance, sir."

The man shuffled over, leaving open the door to what must be his workshop. He extended a hand, weathered but steady. "C. E. Drosselmeyer at your service."

Accepting the handshake, Theodore smiled. "What's the C. E. stand for?"

"An old family name with more letters than is decent. Folks just call me Drosselmeyer. Much simpler. Rolls off the tongue like that drivel called poetry. And you are?"

"Name's Arthur." He'd said it often enough, it almost felt true.

"Arthur . . . what?"

"Just Arthur." A name chosen at random, a name without shame or shadows. "Much simpler." Theodore winked. Respond with minimal information and misdirection. Worked like a debutante's charm . . . if only it weren't becoming so

dratted hard to pull off. Five long years of stuffing traumatic memories and overwhelming emotion deep inside had stressed the hinges of the casing he'd built to confine them.

Drosselmeyer twirled his downy mustache. "From where do you hail, young man?"

"As my unwritten reference suggests, I've lived here, there, and everywhere in between."

"No, son. I mean, where are you from? Where is home?"

Where, indeed. After years of searching, he'd yet to find such a thing. Theodore mustered a hearty chuckle that, on a good day, would've come naturally. "I don't have any property to my name. Houses and land aren't for the likes of me. Roads and rails, that's where I live."

"Again, you mistake my meaning. Home is neither house nor land." Reaching into his wild mane, Drosselmeyer gathered three of the butterflies and arranged them in a row on one finger. "Home is your people. Generations, roots, family."

"Family?" Pain snapped in Theodore's chest, paralyzing breath like a broken rib.

"Aye, the ones you miss. The ones who miss you."

*The one I disappointed from birth.*

*The one who'd rather throw dirt on my grave than claim a broken failure as his son.*

Theodore tightened the grip on his crutch to keep from swaying and fought to prevent his grin from slipping. Of all the questions to ask, why must the bloke fire off one that struck his weakest point? If he told the truth of his origins, the strained casing that held him together would crack wide open and scatter his broken movement across the floor for all to see. No, he couldn't afford to fall apart when he was unworthy of seeking repair from the only Maker capable of reassembling a shattered soul.

"Dear, dear. Have you lost your family, lad?"

Breath resumed with laborious agony. One might say that

... but he couldn't. Theodore pointed to the walls of clocks as if noticing them for the first time. "Incredible work you've done here. Do you tinker alone, or is the son of Drosselmeyer and Son off in the backroom? 'Twould be an honor to shake his hand."

The sunny glint in Drosselmeyer's eyes faded as though obscured by a passing cloud. Gaze unblinking, he grasped the pocket of his waistcoat and stared at the wall of clocks, seeming to see straight through them.

Theodore knew that vacant look. Had felt the grief that dwelt within that void. This man was bereft of a son as surely as he was bereft of a father. Blast his idiot mouth! He'd never meant the diversion from his pain to awaken pain in another soul. He needed to fix this. Now.

He searched the room for possible sources of distraction and spotted the tardy clock, a wall-mounted mahogany lyre clock. That would have to do. "Mr. Drosselmeyer, I'd like to demonstrate my proficiency in clock repair in hopes that you might better consider making a place for me here." He removed the clock from its nail. "If you'd be so kind as to indulge my forwardness?"

Drosselmeyer blinked into coherency, though his countenance remained shadowed. "Certainly, certainly. My tools are in the backroom."

"Thank you, sir. But I won't be needing them." Setting the lyre clock on the sales counter, Theodore shed his overcoat and spread it beside the timepiece, revealing the hidden lining covered from seam to seam in mismatched, handsewn pockets weighted with the whole of his worldly goods and various bits, bobs, and tools he'd collected over the years. "As you can see, I'm equipped to tinker in a pinch." He tossed the old chap a wink and was rewarded with a feeble smile.

Right-oh, now he was getting somewhere. "Are you prepared to time me, sir? For my aim is to disassemble and reas-

semble this clock in just five minutes, beating my previous record of six minutes, five and forty seconds.”

Eyebrows hoisting his wrinkled forehead in astonishment, Drosselmeyer produced a gold pocket watch from his waistcoat. “Ready, lad. On your mark. Go.”

Theodore’s hands took flight, alighting to the work that challenged mind and thrilled heart. Going beyond an artistically designed casement to the intricate workings within, where every cog and gear served a purpose, every pendulum and spring had a place to belong. Where brokenness that haunted with silence and stillness could always be mended and revived to tick-tick-tock once again. “Done!”

“Time.” Drosselmeyer gawked at his pocket watch, the glint restored to his eyes. “Remarkable, remarkable. Five minutes, squarely on the dot.” He hunched to inspect the clock. “And you’ve managed to fix the regularity problem and eliminate the two-minute delay. Remarkable. With skills such as this, and a quick visit to a tailor, you could get hired at any shop in London. Are you certain you wish to settle for an apprenticeship here, lad? I can’t offer much.”

A chance to settle was all he asked for. “Absolutely, sir. But only if you’re certain I can be of service.” He’d not take advantage of this kind man’s grief-induced vulnerability. Not for anything. “Perhaps a trial period would be wise? To ensure you’re pleased with my work.”

“Nonsense, nonsense. I’ve seen enough to be pleased, and I’ve orders enough to make use of an extra pair of hands. If you agree to lighten my workload, I can provide you with an apprenticeship that includes your food and lodging. No salary, I’m afraid. However, I could build you a mechanical leg to rid you of that confounded crutch.”

Food and lodging with clocks to tinker on. Perhaps this was a shop of dreams after all. A place he could belong . . . at least for now. “How long would this apprenticeship last?”