



Black Rose



TAMELIA  
TUMLIN

# Blind LOVE

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by

Tamelia Tumlin

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Blind Love

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

Publishing History

First Black Rose Edition, 2008

Published in the United States of America

## **Dedication**

As always, a special thanks to my wonderful editor,  
Callie Lynn Wolfe. She's such a gem to work with.

To my family for their support and patience.

Especially, my son, Jacob.

To my readers. Thank you for all your kind words  
and support.

The jaguar jerked at the intensity of the explosions that rumbled through the ravine. Each burst ricocheted through the canyon like detonated ammunition. The cat arched, scented the acrid air while the hair along its back stood on end.

*Smoke.*

Stiffening the jaguar crept to the edge of the cliff, dug its claws into the dirt, and looked over the edge. Billows of thick, black fumes wafted up as red-orange flames licked at the foot of the mountain. The feline snarled and flexed its muscles, twitching with fear. Smoke, thick as tar, cloaked the animal. The jaguar sniffed again.

*Jet fuel.*

Strong pungent vapors burned the cat's eyes, causing it to blink. Leaping onto a nearby boulder, it watched the flames dance near the base of the mountain still several thousand feet below. As the flames licked higher, the smoke continued to swell. The feline's heart slammed against its ribcage and adrenaline surged through its veins.

*Someone's in danger.*

With speed unknown to any man, the animal raced down the mountain toward the wreckage.

\*\*\*\*

Dr. Jared Fields squeezed the white cloth over

the silver bowl upon the oak nightstand. Cold water dripped between his fingers. The soft splashes echoed in the silent room. He glanced at the woman lying in his bed and gently blotted her perspiring forehead with the edge of the rag.

She stirred and exhaled a soft moan. Her lids fluttered open revealing blank light green orbs that seemed to stare right through him. Jared's pulse quickened. She's awake.

*Finally.*

"Where am I?" Her words coarse and dry as fear tightened her delicate features. She struggled to sit up.

"It's all right. You're safe now." Jared pushed an ash-blonde tendril from her bruised cheek. The purple-blue mark emphasized her pale features. Angry abrasions covered her arms and forehead. She flinched and fell back against the pillows. "You're in my home. I'm Dr. Jared Fields. Can you tell me your name?"

She cocked her head toward his voice then waved her hand frantically across her face. "Anna Stodger." Panic laced her voice, as she fought the empty air in front of her. "I can't see. Everything is dark. Why can't I see anything?"

Jared's stomach clenched. *It's worse than I thought.*

He forced his voice to remain calm even though his suspicion that she might be blind seemed to be right on target. She had wavered in and out of consciousness for the past few days never seeming to see him. He had hoped it was due to her semi-comatose state. Now he knew better.

"I'm sure it's just a temporary condition. The plane crash caused trauma to your head."

"Plane crash?" He watched as understanding dawned, and Anna paled. "Where's my father?"

Jared sucked in a deep breath and plunged a

hand through his hair. This was the part he'd been dreading. "I'm so sorry. He didn't make it. Neither did the pilot."

Her strangled cry slid over him like sandpaper, and his chest tightened. It was never easy to lose someone you loved. And he should know. Ten years ago, Jared had lost everything that had meant anything to him. Now he lived a life of solitude cradled deep within the Smokey Mountains. And he preferred to keep it that way.

"How long have I been here?" Her words came out weary and spirit-broken.

"Four days. The small plane crashed at the foot of the mountain. You were the only survivor. I'm very sorry," Jared repeated at a loss for anything more comforting to say.

"You rescued me?"

Jared nodded, then realized she couldn't see him. He cleared his throat and continued, "I heard the crash and made it down the mountain just as the plane burst into flames. I found you a lying a few feet from the wreckage. You're lucky to be alive." He didn't tell her that he had made it down the mountain in record time due to his ability to shape shift.

"Yeah. Lucky..." She turned her head away from his voice.

Dusk had settled over the mountain. He knew she couldn't see it, but he could. And he knew what that meant.

A small reprieve from the misery he lived each day.

Jared shot a glance at his reflection in the silver bowl. Dark hair and blue eyes stared back at him. Along with his grotesque and contorted face. The distortion resembled one in a carnival mirror. The kind children poke fun at in the House of Mirrors. It would be laughable if it were not his real image. He

should be used to the deformity by now.

He wasn't.

Anger exploded through his veins, burning with such intensity, he nearly ignited. Ten long years he had lived with the disfigurement. Scars as deep as the Great Smokey Mountain canyons and lumps on his right jaw and left cheek as bulky as the natural terrain he now called his home. Remnants of an evil spell cast by a treacherous, love-struck witch—a patient who had turned him into a disfigured beast of a man by day and shape shifter by night. All because he hadn't returned her sentiment. His only reprieve from the torturous life was the few hours between dusk and dawn when he shifted into another creature. And he forgot who he was if for a little while.

Jared jerked his gaze from the bowl. His reflection always caught him off guard. Several years ago, he had rid his home of all mirrors. However, every so often, he would catch his image in an unsuspecting place. An ugly reminder he would never find true love. No woman could ever love such a monster.

Torn between his urgent need to put some distance between them before Anna discovered his secret and the desire to make sure she was all right, Jared hesitated beside her.

"Is there someone I should call? I'm sure your family is worried about you."

"There isn't anyone. My father was all I had." He heard the raw emotion in her voice. "We were flying to New York. Dad had a job interview. A formality more than anything. He was a shoe-in for the position." Tears choked her voice. "It was supposed to be a fresh start for both of us. We lost mom this past summer." Her shoulders slumped. "I was going to apply for a teaching position as soon as we settled." Another wave of fear crossed her face.



"I-I don't even have anywhere to go. We sold our house in Georgia."

Jared shifted uncomfortably beside the bed. "I'm sorry for your loss. I know this is hard for you, but you are welcome to stay here as long as you need."

A tear escaped the corner of her eye. "Thank you."

Jared's heart constricted at her pain. He wanted to comfort her and help her through the tragedy. But what could *he* do? "I'm sure you're hungry. Would you like something to eat? A sandwich perhaps?"

Anna shook her head. "No, thank you."

Jared swallowed hard. "I'll let you rest then. If you need anything just call me. I'll be downstairs."

In two long strides, he crossed the wooden floor and left the room, relieved to put some distance between them. Anna's presence in his home triggered emotions that he had thought long since buried. And he didn't like it. Not one bit.

He reached the front door just as darkness swallowed the mountain. Jared jerked open the screen and stepped onto the porch. He sucked in the crisp mountain air, cleansing his lungs. Moonlight pooled into a spotlight of white against the lush mountainside. Somewhere nearby crickets chirped their own serenade. He spread his arms wide and embraced the chilly night.

*Sovereignty.*

His only reason to live.

Inhaling the precious scent of freedom, he released the binding chains of his curse and allowed his body to morph into the jaguar. For the next few hours he could forget that the man within was cursed to a life of solitude. Only this time he would stay close to the house in case Anna needed him. His gentle nature would give up those few hours of reprieve and morph back into his disfigured body if she needed him. Even for a moment.

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Anna drifted in and out of sleep. Images of a burning plane, a jaguar with glittering yellow eyes, and pain-filled shrieks tormented her dreams. She awoke drenched in sweat, shaking.

Reaching out into the darkness, her hands clasped onto nothing. Fear slid along her spine.

*Alone.*

A high-pitched scream sliced through the air. Anna covered her ears to drown the sound while her heart slammed against her chest. She rocked back and forth on the bed silently begging the horrible noise to cease.

Within seconds, a door burst open.

“Anna! Anna, are you all right?”

Through the screams, she heard the gentle voice, the same masculine voice that had comforted her earlier.

*Jared!*

She struggled to breathe, but the room seemed to lack oxygen. Her breaths came quick and labored.

“Anna?” Strong arms hauled her toward a warm chest. The sensuous scent of exotic spices and musk filled the air helping to calm her.

“It’s ok. You’re safe now.” Large muscled arms encircled her body. Anna could feel a soft heartbeat against her ear as she laid her head against Jared’s hard chest. For the first time in a long time, she felt safe.

The screams subsided. Only whimpers remained.

“Someone was screaming,” Anna whispered into the soft cotton of his freshly laundered shirt. Then with a shudder she added, “It was awful.”

“Shhh.” Jared’s breath lifted a strand of hair near her temple while he rocked her tenderly. “It’s ok. You were the one screaming. You just had a

nightmare.”

Anna’s body went limp against him. His arms tightened around her.

“I’m sorry. I-I thought someone was in trouble.”

“No. Everything is fine now.” Jared brushed his lips across her left temple. Her heart skipped a beat at the tenderness in his gesture. Security enveloped her like a warm blanket on a frigid winter night as he whispered, “You’re safe with me.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The bruising is not as prevalent, Jared noted a week later. Anna remained conscious for longer periods, and she seemed to have accepted the loss of her father, though she occasionally slipped into bouts of depression. He knew she was trying to find a way to put her life back together. He admired her spunk and courage.

Jared checked her vitals. With the stethoscope, he listened to her chest. Everything looked and sounded good.

*Everything except her eyes.*

She had not regained her sight.

Jared straightened and stepped away.

“So, what’s the verdict, doc?” Anna’s lips turned up at the corners. Her ready smile sent a flutter through his stomach.

Jared winced. He hadn’t considered himself a doctor in years.

Even though the evil witch had stolen his chance for happiness, Jared had naively thought that he could still practice medicine; that it wouldn’t matter if he resembled the Elephant Man, until the day one of his patients shrank away from him in horror when she saw his disfigured face. It was then he realized life, as he knew it, ceased to exist. He hadn’t treated a patient since.

Until now...

The memory of Dalia's evil spell sucker-punched him in the gut and he tightened his hand around the stethoscope, then forced his concentration back to Anna.

"Everything is fine except your eyes."

Anna's shoulders deflated. "I'm never going to regain my sight, am I?"

Jared took her hand. The warmth of her touch zipped through his veins like an electrical current and caused his pulse to quicken. She is so beautiful, he thought. Even without her eyesight. Long ash-blond hair, her small-boned, creamy oval face, and green eyes, that darkened with passion or lightened with delight. Not to mention the tantalizing scent of plumeria she always wore. However, the thing he found most fascinating was her kind spirit, a genuine beauty with which no physical feature could ever compete.

Bitterness burned through him. He longed to have someone with whom to share his life. Someone who could love him. Someone like Anna. But it was not to be. Dalia had seen to that. Jared pushed the image of the beautiful witch to the back of his mind.

"Without further tests, we have no way to know the extent of your injury. It could be a temporary condition due to damage to one of the lobes in your brain." He squeezed her hand. "Or it could be permanent. Only time will tell."

Anna's blank stare focused on the direction of his voice. "In other words, I just have to wait and see." She offered him a weak smile. "No pun intended."

He gave her hand another reassuring squeeze relieved to see her humor still intact.

"Thank you for being so kind to me," Anna whispered softly. "Can I—I would like to see you." She tentatively reached toward him.

Jared drew a sharp breath knowing what she

meant. He caught her hand in mid-air. Shivers of awareness pricked his fingertips. "Maybe some other time."

"Oh." Anna jerked her hand back. Heat singed her cheeks. "I didn't mean to imply—I mean I shouldn't have been so forward."

Tight bands of guilt squeezed Jared's chest. It was only natural for her to want to "see" him the only way she could. After all, she had been in his care for over a week. Yet, he couldn't bear the look of terror on her face once her hands discovered his flawed features. Or worse, her pity.

He cleared his throat. "Would you like to get out of bed for a while? I'm sure you're stir-crazy after being incapacitated for so long."

Her face brightened. "Could I?"

Jared's heart lightened. It felt good to be able to do even the smallest thing to make her happy. "Here. Take my hands. I'll lead you."

Anna reached toward his voice. Jared caught her hand in his and patiently waited as she collected her bearings when her feet touched the floor. She wore one of his over-sized T-shirts that nearly reached her knees. He would need to see about getting her some clothing since all of her belongings burned in the crash.

"Lead the way, doc." Anna grinned up at him. At six foot two, Jared suddenly realized that he was several inches taller than her.

His heart fluttered as her smile lit up the room. He swallowed hard. He was falling in love with his patient. The realization dropkicked him right in the gut. Jared's stomach twisted into a sailor's knot. Falling in love was not an option.

Not for him.

Jared steeled himself against the unexpected emotion. She could never love him. Not if she knew. Refusing to think about it, Jared took her arm and

guided her through the house. She explored his home with her hands, and he taught her how to use senses other than sight to move about independently. Several hours later Jared noticed a weakness in her movements though she never complained.

"That's enough for today." He led her toward the winding staircase. With his arm around her waist for support, he helped her ascend the stairs. "You don't want to over do it."

Anna nodded. "Thank you, Jared. I don't know what I would have done without your help. You've been so kind to me. How can I ever repay you?"

"There's no need for that,"

"But there must be something I can do."

"I just want you to get well. That's all you need to do."

"Is that doctor's orders?" She laughed.

The sound, so carefree and real, expanded his heart. Anna was exactly the type of woman he could love.

If only...

"Omigod!" Anna gripped his arm and stumbled on the stair. "I saw something! A flash of light."

"What?"

"A flash. It was gone in an instant, but I saw it. Does that mean I might be able to see again. I mean that's good isn't it? That I saw something?"

"Maybe." Jared agreed as they reached the top stair.

Was her blindness only temporary? Bands of apprehension gripped his chest. If she regained her sight then she would see him. And she would leave. Just like his fiancé had ten years ago.

"That has to be good, doesn't it?" Excitement bubbled in her voice.

"Yes, Anna. I think it might be a very good sign," Jared told her softly. She would need more

tests. And he didn't have the resources to do them.

As Anna slid into bed, Jared realized that he cared enough about her to do what was best for her. Even if that meant exposing himself in the process.

She lay back against the pillows, excitement still evident on her face.

He took her hand in his. "I'll arrange for you to have more tests so we will know what we are dealing with."

"At the hospital where you work?"

Jared froze. "I don't practice medicine anymore, Anna. I haven't in nearly ten years."

"Why not? I thought you must work evenings. I hear you leave every night after dark."

"No. I don't work anymore. Something happened with one of my patients." He closed his eyes as if to ward off the memory.

"Someone died?"

*Yes. Me.*

Jared took a deep breath. It was time to tell her the truth. She deserved that much from him. After all, she had placed her life in his hands.

"No. One of my patients was a witch, a beautiful woman with an evil spirit. She thought she was in love with me. When I didn't return her love, she-she put a spell on me." The words laced with bitterness.

"What kind of spell?" Anna's eyebrows drew together.

"She turned me into a shape shifter by night and this." He pulled her hand to his face. "By day."

"Shape shifter?" Anna swallowed hard and bit the inside of her cheek. Her hand shook against his cheek.

"It means I can morph into something else. A jaguar, to be exact." Jared plunged a hand through his hair. "For a few precious hours each night, I can be something else."

"A jaguar? Why?"

Jared blew a breath between his lips. "Witches generally have a familiar-an animal companion-one that is loyal to the witch." Jared's blood turned to ice as his stomach recoiled. "Dahlia thought she could make me hers. I refused which only angered her more." A sharp bubble of fury rose inside him. He pushed it down. No point in getting worked up over it again. Nothing could help him now. Jared's chin tightened. "A jaguar is the largest, fastest cat in the America's. It's also a solitary animal, so I guess that suits me."

Understanding dawned in Anna's eyes. "No wonder you were able to get to me so fast." Anna's hand felt warm on his cheek. She gently traced the scars and lumps, carefully trailing her fingers along his jaw line. Surprise flickered across her face. "Oh, Jared. How awful for you."

Jared drew a sharp breath and turned away from her exploring hand.

*Pity.*

He heard it in her tone.

"Can the spell be broken?" she asked quietly.

"No." He didn't see any reason to tell her that there was one way. Not when it was an impossibility.

"I'm so sorry, but surely you can still practice medicine. You're a wonderful doctor. Why are you wasting your talents?"

"I frighten the patients. No one wants a hideous doctor, and I can't even blame them." He clenched his jaw.

Anna reached into the space between them until she found his face once more. She touched one of the scars gently. "I would."

"Not if you could see me. *Really* see me." Jared stood. "I'll be downstairs if you need me."

He glanced out the window. Night had settled once again. Moonlight filtered through the window



casting dark shadows on the walls.

Jared hurried from the room. He couldn't wait to shift. Anything to forget he had just lost Anna forever. No woman could love a monster like him. Not even one as gentle and kind as Anna.

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"Are you sure you don't want to come with me?" Anna asked three days later, while she awaited a taxi in the living room.

"No. I've contacted one of my former colleagues. He will take good care of you."

"I really wish you would come with me. I'd feel more comfortable with you there." Her green eyes pleaded with him. The resolve he clung to began to melt, but he couldn't give in to her request.

"I can't." Jared's heart lurched into his throat. He wanted to go with her, but he just couldn't face the stares anymore. He hadn't been off the mountain in nearly eight years.

Now, for the first time in a long time, he wished his life could be different. He wished he could have a life with the beautiful woman in his charge.

"I understand." Anna gave him a tight smile. Though she tried to be brave, her bottom lip quivered. Once more, Jared nearly gave into her plea.

A horn blared outside.

"That's my ride. Wish me luck." Anna stood and felt her way to the door. Jared opened it and tried to ignore the knot in his gut. He hated to see her leave. He knew she would never return.

*Go with her! Don't let her walk out of your life!*

Jared stood fists clenched so tight, his nails dug into his palms.

His heart and logic played tug-of-war inside his head. Logic won. There was no way could he leave the mountain. He had no choice but to let her go.

Anna placed her hands on his shoulders and stood on her tiptoes. She placed a quick kiss on his cheek. "Thank you, Jared. I won't ever forget you."

Three impatient beeps blared again.

"I've got to go." She stepped onto the porch and carefully made her way to the waiting cab. She clutched the small bag of belongings in one hand and felt along with the other until she reached the car. Jared watched as Anna disappeared into the taxi and out of his life.

He ran a thumb along the scar where her lips had touched. He could still feel the warmth and smell her freshly shampooed hair. The sweet scent of plumeria lingered in the air.

Sadness slid over him. He would miss Anna. And what could have been.

If only...

\*\*\*\*\*

Two months later, Jared crept along the mountainside. His heightened senses warned him that something wasn't right. An unusual scent wafted across the night breeze.

With the stealth of the jaguar, he moved, almost silently, through the bushes until he reached his house. Crouched low, Jared watched the shadow on the porch through yellow slits.

He growled softly.

Someone invaded his territory.

Predatory instincts kicked in. He lowered his body, keeping his stomach close to the grass and crept closer to the porch, muscles flexed with each fluid movement. When Jared reached the steps, he hid within the shadows of the night.

Waiting.

Something moved across the porch. The wood creaked.

Crouched and ready to pounce, Jared dug his

claws into the moist earth. He sniffed.

*Plumeria.*

Jared stilled.

*Anna?*

Lifting his head, he caught sight of a slim woman dressed in jeans and a T-shirt standing at his front door.

She lifted her hand and rapped on the wooden door. With a hiss, Jared fled across the yard into the woods.

*It is Anna!*

His heart pounded in his chest as he forced his body to morph back into his human counterpart. He didn't know which was worse. To see him as the shifter or the disfigured monster.

He chose the monster.

*Why is she here?*

He knew the operation had been successful. His colleague and longtime friend, William, had informed him of her progress. But, she had never contacted him.

Until now...

Jared waited until his body settled into the man within before he headed back to the house. Quietly, he stopped by his truck and slipped into the extra pair of jeans and shirt he always kept with him. Just in case he ever morphed away from home.

He reached the porch. "Anna?"

She turned. In the moonlight, Jared could see her smile. His heart stopped. She was as beautiful as he remembered.

"I hope you don't mind. I wanted to see you again."

Jared brushed past her and opened the door. "Come in."

He hesitated before he turned on the light. Could he let her see him? Would she run away in horror? *I can't hide forever.* He gritted his teeth. *Now*

*or never.* Jared turned on the light and stepped aside so she could enter. "How are you?"

Anna stepped into the living room and turned to him. She didn't run. She didn't scream. Her face remained impassive. "I'm fine now. I had the operation. It took a while for my eyes to heal properly."

Jared swallowed the lump forming in his throat. He crossed the room and sat down on the couch. He felt exposed, his scars and lumps plainly visible.

Anna sat down beside him. She took his hand. "I wanted to thank you for saving my life."

Jared shifted uncomfortably, keeping his head down. "You didn't have to come all the way back here to do that."

"I didn't."

Jared jerked his head up. "What do you mean?"

Anna took a deep breath. Her hand trembled in his. "I came to tell you that-that..."

"What is it, Anna?" Concern filled his voice. Was something else wrong?

Anna blushed, then jumped to her feet. The sudden movement ripped her hand from his. The warmth from her hand in his evaporated and an arctic chill settled over him.

He fought the urge to pull her into his arms, knowing she would cringe with repulsion. She couldn't want to be near him. So why was she here?

Anna stood in front of him twisting her hands. "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Jared's voice sounded clipped even to him. She should just go. Save them both the humiliation. He knew what he was. Now, she knew too. No need for her to pretend that she wanted to be here.

"I just meant that I know you are all alone here on the mountain."

Jared shifted uncomfortably on the couch. The

springs squeaked. His voice hardened, "I prefer it that way."

"I know you do. I just can't bear the thought of you spending your life all alone. Surely, you want some kind of socialization. A friend maybe?" Anna rocked back on her heels, her eyes wide and nervous, then she rushed on, "It's not good for someone to be alone all the time."

"I'm used to it." Jared gritted his teeth. What exactly did she want? Why doesn't she just go? "I'm glad your better, Anna. I wish you all the best." He deliberately made his words sound dismissive, like a final goodbye.

Anna took another deep breath and quickly plunged on. "I wanted to tell you that I love you, Jared."

Stunned Jared's jaw dropped. All thoughts of goodbye disintegrated. What did she just say? He couldn't form the words, but questions swirled in his mind at a dizzying pace.

"I know you don't feel the same way about me," Anna said in a low voice. "I needed to tell you how I feel. Not that I'm expecting you to do anything. I just wanted you to know." She lowered her lashes.

"Anna, how can you love me? I'm a monster." His words tinged with an edge as hard as steel.

Her eyes jerked up. She sat back down beside him and took his hand once more. Her touch sent tingles of warmth through his entire body.

"No, Jared. You're a kind and generous man. When I couldn't see, I fell in love with the man you are inside. I never got to know the man on the outside. Your scars are a part of you, but they are not all of you." She reached up and tenderly touched the lump along his jaw.

Was he dreaming? Did she mean it? He searched her face for deception, but all he saw was love shimmering in her green eyes.

Could she...?

No! It wasn't possible. He was a creature doomed to an eternity of solitude. No woman could ever love him.

But...

"Anna, my love. You can't mean that. I have nothing to offer you except a life of misery."

"All I want is you," she said softly rewarding him with her heart-stopping smile. She squeezed his hand tightly. "That's all I need."

Hope lightened his heart and suddenly he felt free for the first time in a decade. Dalia's spell shattered by the one thing he thought he would never have.

*True love.*

Jared felt his facial muscles tighten. The lumps shrank and the scars began to disappear.

He was free.

Finally.

He reached, touched his face.

No scars.

No lumps.

No evil spell.

Anna gasped. "What's happening?"

Jared's eyes bored into hers. "The spell has been broken."

"How? I thought you said it couldn't be broken."

"The only way was by finding true love. I never thought anyone could love me. Not the way I looked."

Anna shook her head. "Jared, true love is blind." She laughed. "No pun intended. And I love you, no matter what you look like. I love the man inside. The one who saved my life and helped me get my sight back. I love you, Jared. All of you."

"Anna, my sweet Anna," He groaned pulling her hand to his chest and held it over his wildly beating heart, his fingers intertwined with hers. "I love you,

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Anna, with all of my heart. I have from the moment I discovered what a beautiful spirit you have. So kind and generous." Jared swallowed hard. "I just never dared to hope you might one day love me too." He crushed her to his chest and held her close. "Will you marry me, my sweet, Anna?"

Anna's green eyes sparkled. "Of course, my love."





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