

Beatrice Wynn



A WINTER BARGAIN

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CHAPTER 1



The wind on the Yorkshire ridge did not care that Eleanor Hartley was now the mistress of the estate. It whipped at the heavy black crepe of her mourning dress and pulled strands of hair from her pins with a rudeness that no person in the valley would dare replicate. Eleanor pressed her hand to the top of her bonnet to keep it from flying off toward the slate-grey river below. Below her boots the land stretched out in a patchwork of green and brown that she knew better than the lines on her own palm.

This was Hartley land. It had been Hartley land when her father was alive and it had remained so under the stewardship of her aunt. Now the deed and the heavy iron key to the manor sat in her pocket but the weight of it felt like a heavy anchor dragging her down into the mud.

She looked down at the cluster of cottages near the stream where smoke rose from stone chimneys in thin and wavering lines. The tenant families were there. The Millers. The Davises. The O'Malleys. They were working the soil or tending to the sheep or mending fences that the winter storms had battered. Every one of them looked to the big house on the hill for protection. They looked to her.

A figure detached itself from the lower path and began the trudge up the incline toward her. Eleanor stiffened. She recognized the gait immediately. It was Thomas Miller. He walked with a limp he had earned fixing the barn roof three winters past.

Eleanor waited. To turn away now would be an admission of weakness.

Thomas reached the crest of the ridge. He took off his flat cap and twisted the wool fabric between his dirt-stained hands. He did not look her in the eye immediately but focused on the hem of her skirt.

"Miss Eleanor," he said. His voice was rough like gravel. "I did not mean to disturb your grieving."

"You are not disturbing me, Thomas," Eleanor said. She clasped her hands in front of her waist to stop them from shaking. "Is there trouble with the flock?"

Thomas looked up then. The lines around his eyes were deep. He looked older than his forty years.

"It is not the sheep, Miss," he said. "It is the talk in the village. The men who came yesterday. The ones with the surveying chains."

Eleanor frowned. She had seen no men. She had been buried in the library organizing the funeral flowers and answering condolences.

"What men?" she asked.

"Strangers," Thomas said. "They were walking the boundaries near the coal seam. Measuring. Marking trees with red paint." He paused and swallowed hard. "The talk is that they work for a Duke. That the land is to be sold. That we..." He stopped and looked back down at the cottages. "That we will have to leave."

Eleanor felt a cold prickle run down her spine that had nothing to do with the wind.

"This is Hartley land, Thomas," she said. Her voice was sharper than she intended. "My aunt left it to me. There is no sale. I have not spoken to any buyers."

"But the men," Thomas insisted. He took a step closer. "They said the new owner wants the coal. They said the cottages stand on the best access route."

"They are mistaken," Eleanor said. She forced her lips into a tight line that resembled a grimace. "You go back to your family. Tell them that I am the mistress here. No one is evicting anyone."

Thomas looked at her. He searched her face for a long moment. Eleanor held her chin high and refused to blink. Finally the tension left his shoulders.

"Thank you, Miss Eleanor," he said. "I will tell them. We were worried. With your aunt gone..."

"I am here now," Eleanor said.

She watched him walk back down the hill. He moved faster now. He had hope. Eleanor watched him go and felt a wave of nausea rise in her throat. She had lied. She had not meant to lie but she had spoken without knowing the truth. Who were these men?

She turned and walked briskly back toward the manor. The stone house loomed ahead. It was a sturdy building that had weathered centuries of storms. It looked permanent. Invincible.

But as she entered the front hall the silence of the house struck her. The servants were moving quietly in the back corridors. The mirrors were still draped in black cloth.

"Miss Eleanor?"

The voice came from the library doorway. It was Mr. Abernathy. Her aunt's solicitor. He was a thin man with spectacles that constantly slid down his nose. He held a sheaf of papers in his hand and he looked pale.

"Mr. Abernathy," Eleanor said. She untied the ribbons of her bonnet and handed it to the maid who appeared at her elbow. "I was just coming to find you. One of the tenants mentioned surveyors on the land. Do you know anything about this?"

Mr. Abernathy winced. He retreated into the library and gestured for her to follow.

"Please," he said. "Come inside. We must talk."

Eleanor followed him. The library was cold. The fire in the grate had burned down to embers. Piles of ledgers covered the heavy oak desk.

"Sit down, Miss Hartley," Abernathy said.

Eleanor remained standing. "I prefer to stand. Tell me about the surveyors."

Abernathy sighed. He placed the papers on the desk and smoothed them flat with a trembling hand.

"Your aunt," he began, "was a woman of great heart. She cared deeply for the estate and for the families."

"I know that," Eleanor said. "Get to the point."

"She was not," Abernathy continued, "a woman of great financial acumen. The last few years... the harvest was poor. The repairs to the manor were expensive. She did not want to reduce the wages of the tenants."

Eleanor gripped the back of the leather chair. "So there are debts. We can economize. I can sell the London jewelry. I can sell the silver."

"It is not a matter of silver, Miss Hartley," Abernathy said. He picked up a document with a heavy wax seal. "Three years ago your aunt took out a mortgage on the estate. A very large mortgage."

"A mortgage?" Eleanor stared at him. "She never mentioned it."

"She hoped to pay it back before you inherited," Abernathy said. "She invested the money in a shipping venture. She thought the returns would clear the debt and leave you with a fortune."

"And the venture?"

"Failed," Abernathy said. "Completely. The ship was lost at sea."

Eleanor closed her eyes. The room seemed to tilt slightly to the left.

"Who holds the mortgage?" she asked.

Abernathy looked down at the paper. "The debt was purchased six months ago by a private investor. He bought the note from the bank."

"Who?"

"His Grace, the Duke of Ashford."

The name hit Eleanor like a physical blow. Alexander Radcliffe. She had never met him but she read the papers. Everyone knew the Duke of Ashford. He was a predator in a cravat. A man who turned everything he touched into gold and left ruin in his wake.

"The Duke," Eleanor repeated. "Why would a Duke want a mortgage on a sheep farm in Yorkshire?"

"He does not want the farm, Miss Hartley," Abernathy said. "He wants the land. Or rather, what is under the land."

"The coal," Eleanor whispered. She remembered Thomas's words.

"Precisely," Abernathy said. "He intends to strip the land. Expand his mining operations from the neighboring county. It is a very lucid business plan. The seam runs directly under the tenant cottages and the main pastures."

"He cannot," Eleanor said. She walked to the window and looked out at the garden. "It would destroy everything. The families would have nowhere to go. The land would be ruined."

"He can," Abernathy said gently. "And he will. The terms of the mortgage are strict. The full amount is due."

"When?" Eleanor asked.

Abernathy hesitated. "Three months from today."

"Three months?" Eleanor spun around. "That is impossible. No one can raise that sum in three months."

"That is the point," Abernathy said. "He does not want the money. He wants the foreclosure. If you do not pay in full by the date he takes possession of the title. The estate becomes his. He can evict the tenants and begin digging the very next day."

Eleanor stared at the solicitor. Her chest felt tight. The air in the room was too thin.

"There must be a mistake," she said. "My aunt would never agree to such terms."

"She was desperate," Abernathy said. "And the original terms were with the bank. The Duke bought the debt and he is enforcing the clauses to the letter."

Eleanor looked at the ledger on the desk. It was just numbers. Ink on paper. But those numbers represented the lives of fifty families. They represented Thomas Miller and his limp. They represented the home where she had grown up.

"How much?" Eleanor asked.

Abernathy named a figure.

Eleanor gasped. It was a fortune. It was more money than she had ever seen.

"I have to see him," Eleanor said.

"The Duke?" Abernathy looked alarmed. "Miss Hartley, that is not advisable. The Duke is... he is a difficult man. He is known for his ruthlessness. He does not conduct business with young ladies."

"He is trying to steal my home," Eleanor said. Her voice rose. "He is trying to destroy the lives of my people for... for coal? For profit?"

"He is within his legal rights," Abernathy pointed out.

"I do not care about his legal rights," Eleanor snapped. "I care about what is right. I will go to London. I will find investors. I will find someone to buy the debt from him. Or I will convince him to give me more time."

"Miss Hartley," Abernathy said, "London is expensive. You have very little ready cash."

"I have enough for the journey," Eleanor said. "And I have a trunk."

She turned and marched out of the library. She did not look back at the solicitor. She could not look at him because if she did she might start screaming and never stop.

She went up the stairs to her bedroom. Her maid, Frances, was there mending a tear in a sheet. Frances looked up as Eleanor burst in.

"Pack my things," Eleanor said.

Frances dropped the needle. "Miss? Are we going somewhere?"

"London," Eleanor said. She went to the wardrobe and threw the doors open. "We are going to London. Today. Now."

"But the mourning," Frances said. "We are not receiving. We cannot go to London during the mourning period."

"We are not going for the season, Frances," Eleanor said. She pulled a grey traveling dress from the rail and tossed it onto the bed. "We are going to save the roof over our heads."

Frances stood up. Her face was pale. "Is it bad, Miss?"

Eleanor stopped. She looked at the young maid. Frances had been born on the estate. Her parents lived in the lodge by the gate.

"It is... complicated," Eleanor said. She forced herself to speak calmly. "But I will fix it. I promise you."

She did not know how she would fix it. She did not know how she would face a man like the Duke of Ashford. She was a country woman. She knew about sheep and crop rotation and how to manage a household budget. She knew nothing about high finance or the sharks of London society.

But she thought of Thomas Miller on the ridge. She thought of the fear in his eyes.

"Pack the blue silk as well," Eleanor said. "And the green velvet."

"The green velvet is old, Miss," Frances said. "The lace is fraying."

"It will have to do," Eleanor said. "I am not going to London to be fashionable. I am going to fight."

Frances moved to the trunk and began to fold the dresses. Eleanor went to her vanity table. She opened the jewelry box. It was meager. A string of pearls. A gold locket with her mother's picture. A few rings.

She put them all into a pouch. It was not enough. It would never be enough to pay the debt. But it might be enough to buy her a few days in a boarding house. It might be enough to buy her a meeting with a banker.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was pale. Her eyes were wide and frightened. She did not look like a woman who could challenge a Duke. She looked like a "naive country mouse," as the society papers often called girls like her.

"I despise him," she said to her reflection. The words tasted like bile. "I have never met him and I hate him."

Frances looked up from the trunk. "Who, Miss?"

"The Duke of Ashford," Eleanor said. "The man who thinks he can buy our lives with his coal money."

Frances shuddered. "I have heard stories of him. My cousin works in a house in London. She says he is..."

"He is what?" Eleanor asked. She turned to face the maid.

"She says he has ice water in his veins," Frances whispered. "She says he ruined a man just for looking at him wrong in a club. She says he has no heart."

"Good," Eleanor said. She shoved the jewelry pouch into her pocket. "Then I won't have to worry about breaking it."

She walked to the window and looked out one last time. The sun was setting behind the hills. The light was turning the grey stone of the cottages to gold. It was peaceful. It was home.

"Three months," Eleanor murmured.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked loudly. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Every second was a second lost. Every second brought the surveyors closer. Every second brought the Duke closer.

"Are you ready, Frances?" Eleanor asked.

Frances snapped the latches of the trunk. "Yes, Miss."

"Then let us go," Eleanor said. "We have a train to catch."

She walked out of the room. She did not look back. She could not afford to look back. The past was gone. Her aunt was gone. The safety of her childhood was gone.

There was only the future now. And the future was a man named Alexander Radcliffe.

Eleanor walked down the stairs. Her boots made a sharp, staccato sound on the wood. It sounded like a drumbeat. It sounded like war.

Down in the hall, Mr. Abernathy was waiting. He looked wretched.

"Miss Hartley," he said. "Please reconsider. Write a letter. Let me negotiate."

"You said he gave an ultimatum," Eleanor said. She pulled her gloves on, smoothing the leather over her fingers. "Ultimatums are not invitations to negotiate by post. They are threats."

"He will eat you alive," Abernathy said.

"He can try," Eleanor said.

She signaled to the footman to take the trunk. The heavy door of the manor swung open. The carriage was waiting. The horses stamped their hooves on the gravel.

Eleanor climbed in. Frances followed, looking terrified. The door slammed shut.

As the carriage jolted forward, Eleanor leaned back against the squabs. She did not cry. She had done her crying at the funeral. Now there was no room for tears. There was only room for anger.

A cold, hard knot of anger sat in her stomach. It was heavy and sharp. It was the only thing holding her together.

She would go to London. She would march into the Duke's house. And she would make him look her in the eye and tell her why his profit was worth more than her people.

The carriage rolled through the gates. The manor disappeared behind the trees. Eleanor stared at the empty seat opposite her. She imagined the Duke sitting there. She imagined him laughing at her.

"Just you wait, Your Grace," she whispered.

The wind howled outside the carriage, but Eleanor did not hear it. She heard only the ticking of the clock in her mind.

Three months.

The game had begun.

CHAPTER 2



The oak paneling of Mr. Sterling's office was dark enough to absorb the scant light filtering through the high, narrow windows. Eleanor sat on the edge of the stiff leather chair and kept her back straight. She had been sitting there for twenty minutes while Mr. Sterling reviewed the ledgers she had brought from Yorkshire. The ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner was the only sound in the room.

Mr. Sterling finally closed the heavy book. He removed his spectacles and cleaned them with a handkerchief. He did not look at Eleanor while he did this.

"Miss Hartley," he said. "These figures are... quaint."

Eleanor tightened her grip on the handle of her reticule. "They are accurate, Mr. Sterling. The yield from the flock has increased by fifteen percent over the last four years. The wool prices are stable. The estate is profitable."

"profitable in a rustic sense," Mr. Sterling corrected. He placed his spectacles back on his nose and looked at her with an expression one might reserve for a child who had presented a mud pie as a culinary masterpiece. "But we are discussing a mortgage of significant size. A mortgage held by the Duke of Ashford."

"I am aware of who holds the mortgage," Eleanor said. "That is why I am here. I am seeking an investor to purchase the debt. If you look at the projection for the next harvest, you will see that the repayment schedule is viable."

Mr. Sterling laughed. It was a dry, brittle sound. "My dear young lady. You are asking this bank to bet against the Duke of Ashford. Do you know what the Duke intends for that land?"

"He intends to dig for coal," Eleanor said.

"Precisely," Sterling said. "Coal. Industry. Progress. The Radcliffe mines are the most lucrative in the north. The Duke is a visionary. He sees the future of England in the earth. You see... sheep."

"I see families," Eleanor said. "I see a community that has lived on that land for generations. Does that have no value to your bank?"

Sterling sighed. He pushed the ledger back across the desk toward her. "Sentimental value does not pay dividends. The Duke's plan is guaranteed profit. Your plan relies on the weather and the health of livestock. It is a poor risk."

"I am not asking for charity," Eleanor persisted. She leaned forward. "I am offering a steady return. And I am offering the moral certainty that you are not displacing fifty families for the sake of a mine shaft."

Sterling stood up. It was a clear dismissal. "This is London, Miss Hartley. Not a village parish. Business is business. The Duke holds the paper. If he wants the land, he will have the land. He is not a man who loses."

Eleanor stood as well. She picked up the heavy ledger. "So you refuse."

"I decline," Sterling said. "And I would offer you some advice. Go home. Marry a nice country squire. leave business to the men who understand it. You are a naive country mouse trying to stop a steam engine. You will only get hurt."

Eleanor stared at him. Her face felt hot. "I am not a mouse, Mr. Sterling. And I do not run from steam engines."

She turned and walked to the door. She opened it herself, as Sterling did not move to assist her.

Outside on the busy street, the noise of London hit her. Carriages rattled over the cobblestones. Hawkers shouted their wares. The air was thick with smoke. Eleanor stood on the step of the bank and took a breath. This was the third bank in two days. The answer was always the same. No.

Frances was waiting by the hired hackney carriage. The maid looked tired. Her bonnet was sagging in the damp air.

"Miss Eleanor?" Frances asked as Eleanor climbed in. "Did he agree?"

Eleanor sat down and placed the ledger on the seat beside her. "No. He did not."

Frances slumped against the squabs. "That was the last name on Mr. Abernathy's list. What do we do now? The room at the boarding house is paid only until Friday."

Eleanor looked out the window. The buildings of the city blurred past. They were grey and tall and imposing. They looked like fortress walls.

"We do not go back," Eleanor said.

"But if no one will lend us the money..." Frances started.

"If no one will lend us the money to pay the Duke," Eleanor said, "then I must deal with the Duke himself."

Frances's eyes widened. "You cannot mean to go to him? To Ashford House?"

"Why not?" Eleanor asked. "He is the one threatening us. He is the one driving us off our land. Why should I speak to his intermediaries? Why should I speak to cowardly bankers who are afraid of his title?"

"But he is... he is the Duke of Ashford," Frances stammered. "They call him a rake. A libertine. My cousin said no decent woman goes to his house unchaperoned."

"I am not going as a woman seeking his favor," Eleanor said. She smoothed the fabric of her gloves. "I am going as a property owner. I am going to negotiate."

"He will not see you," Frances said. "Men like that do not see people like us."

"He will see me," Eleanor said. "Driver!"

She knocked on the roof of the carriage. The driver opened the trapdoor.

"Change of destination," Eleanor called out. "Grosvenor Square. Ashford House."

The trapdoor slammed shut. Frances looked terrified.

"Miss Eleanor, please," Frances whispered. "Think of your reputation."

"My reputation will not keep the rain off the Millers' heads when their cottage is pulled down," Eleanor said. "My reputation will not feed the Davis children when their father has no flock to tend. Alexander Radcliffe thinks he can ruin us from a distance. He thinks we are just lines on a map to be erased. I want him to look at me while he does it."

The carriage rattled on. Eleanor checked her reflection in the small glass mounted on the carriage wall. Her bonnet was simple. Her dress was plain

black bombazine. She did not look like the ladies she had seen in the park, with their silk parasols and brightly colored ribbons. She looked severe.

Good, she thought.

The carriage slowed and stopped. Eleanor looked out. Ashford House was a palace. It took up half the block. White stone pillars rose three stories high. Broad steps led up to a massive black door. It was a fortress of wealth and power.

“Wait here,” Eleanor told Frances.

“Miss!”

“If I am not back in an hour,” Eleanor said, “you may worry. Until then, keep the meter running.”

Eleanor stepped out of the carriage. She walked up the steps. Her boots clicked on the stone. She did not hesitate. She reached for the heavy brass knocker and brought it down three times. The sound echoed like a gunshot.

The door opened. A butler stood there. He was tall, thin, and looked down his nose at her with an expression of practiced boredom.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I am here to see the Duke of Ashford,” Eleanor said.

The butler did not blink. “His Grace is not receiving.”

“I did not ask if he was receiving guests,” Eleanor said. “I said I am here to see him. It is a matter of business.”

The butler looked her up and down. His gaze lingered on the hem of her mourning dress and the lack of a maid attending her.

“His Grace does not conduct business at his private residence,” the butler said. “And certainly not with... solicitors.”

“I am not a solicitor,” Eleanor said. “I am Eleanor Hartley. The Duke holds the mortgage on my estate. I wish to speak with him regarding the terms.”

“Miss Hartley,” the butler said, the name clearly meaning nothing to him. “If you have a grievance, you may write to His Grace’s secretary at his business offices in the City. Good day.”

He began to close the door.

Eleanor planted her hand against the wood. The butler stopped, his eyes widening slightly at the physical contact.

“I have written,” Eleanor lied. “I have received no reply. I have traveled from Yorkshire. I am not leaving this doorstep until I speak to the Duke.”

“Madam, remove your hand or I shall summon the footmen to remove you,” the butler said. His voice dropped an octave, becoming dangerous.

“Summon them,” Eleanor said. “Let them drag a grieving woman off the Duke’s steps in broad daylight. I am sure the gossip columns will find it delicious. Is that not what the Duke is famous for? Scandal?”

The butler hesitated. In that second of hesitation, Eleanor moved and pushed past him until she stepped into the grand foyer.

The floor was black and white marble. A crystal chandelier the size of a carriage hung from the ceiling. Statues of Greek gods stood in niches along the walls.

Two footmen in livery stepped forward from the shadows. They looked at the butler for instruction.

“Stop her!” the butler hissed.

Eleanor did not wait. She saw a set of double doors at the end of the hall. They were mahogany with gold handles. They looked important. They looked like the doors a man who wanted to hide from the world would hide behind.

“Miss!” one of the footmen shouted. He reached for her arm.

Eleanor swerved. She gathered her skirts and walked faster. “I am going in!”

“You cannot go in there!” the butler shouted, losing his composure entirely.

Eleanor reached the doors. The footmen were close now. She could hear their heavy footsteps on the marble. She grabbed the handles. They were cold under her gloves.

She threw the doors open.

The room beyond was vast. The walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. Heavy velvet drapes were pulled half-shut, blocking out the afternoon sun. The air was still.

In the center of the room sat a massive desk. And behind the desk sat a man.

Eleanor stopped. She breathed hard. Her bonnet had slipped back on her head. Her pulse was hammering in her throat.

Alexander Radcliffe, the Duke of Ashford, looked up.

He looked like a weapon that had been sheathed in fine tailoring.

He was leaning back in a leather chair, one leg crossed over the other. He wore a dark blue coat that fit too perfectly across shoulders that were

too broad for a man of leisure. His hair was dark, almost black, and fell across his forehead in a way that suggested he had run his fingers through it recently.

He held a glass of amber liquid in one hand. A stack of papers sat before him.

He did not look surprised. He looked annoyed.

“Henderson,” the Duke said. His voice was deep. It carried across the large room without effort. “I thought I gave specific instructions that I was not to be disturbed.”

The butler appeared in the doorway behind Eleanor. He was panting slightly.

“Your Grace,” Henderson said. “I apologize. This person... she forced her way in. I shall have her removed immediately.”

The two footmen stepped into the room. They looked at Eleanor like she was a stray dog that had wandered into a cathedral.

Eleanor took a step forward. She moved away from the door. She moved into the room.

“I will not be removed,” she said. Her voice shook, but she forced it to stabilize. “Not until you listen to me.”

The Duke looked at her then. Really looked at her. His eyes were dark, intelligent, and completely cold. He scanned her face, her dress, her hands. It was an appraisal. It was the way a butcher looked at a carcass.

“And who,” the Duke asked, “are you?”

“I am Eleanor Hartley,” she said. “From Yorkshire.”

The Duke took a sip of his drink. He did not offer her a seat. He did not stand.

“Hartley,” he said. He swirled the liquid in the glass. “Ah. The sheep farm. The foreclosure.”

“It is not a farm,” Eleanor said. “It is an estate. It is a home.”

“It is an asset,” the Duke corrected. “An asset with a significant lien against it. A lien that is currently in default.”

“It is not in default,” Eleanor said. “The term is three months. I have three months.”

“Then why are you here?” the Duke asked. “If you have the money, pay the solicitors. If you do not have the money, you are wasting my time.”

He looked back down at his papers. He dismissed her. Just like that.

Eleanor felt the anger rise up in her. It was hot and sharp. This man sat here in his silk cravat, drinking brandy in the middle of the day, deciding the fate of fifty families without even blinking. He did not care. To him, she was nothing.

“I am here,” Eleanor said, her voice rising, “because you are a thief.”

The silence that followed was absolute.

The butler gasped. “Miss!”

The Duke stopped moving. He slowly lowered the paper he was holding. He looked up at her again. This time, there was no boredom in his eyes. There was a spark.

“A thief?” he repeated softly.

“You are stealing my land,” Eleanor said. She walked toward the desk. The footmen made to grab her, but the Duke raised a hand. They froze.

Eleanor stopped in front of the desk. She placed her hands on the polished wood and leaned forward.

“You bought the debt so you could foreclose,” she said. “You do not want the money. You want the coal. You are planning to destroy the cottages. You are planning to turn the valley into a pit.”

The Duke studied her. He leaned back in his chair, studying her flushed face.

“I am a businessman, Miss Hartley,” he said. “Coal warms homes. Coal powers factories. Coal is progress. Sheep are... dinner.”

“Those sheep support families,” Eleanor said. “Real people. People who have served your country. People who have children. Do they not matter to you? Does anything matter to you other than the weight of your purse?”

The Duke stood up.

He was tall. Much taller than he had looked sitting down. He towered over her. The physical intimidation of him was sudden and overwhelming. He took up all the air in the room.

Eleanor wanted to step back. Every instinct in her body told her to run. He was dangerous. She could see it in the set of his jaw. She could see it in the way he held himself, like a coiled spring.

But she thought of Thomas Miller. She thought of the look on his face when he asked if he would lose his home.

She planted her feet. She lifted her chin. She looked up at him.

“I am not leaving,” she said. “I am not leaving until you agree to negotiate. I need more time. Or I need a guarantee that the cottages will

stand.”

The Duke walked around the desk. He moved with a predatory grace. He stopped inches from her. She had to crane her neck to look him in the eye.

“You are very brave,” the Duke said. His voice was low. “Or very foolish. Do you know who I am?”

“I know what you are,” Eleanor said. “You are a bully.”

The Duke’s mouth twitched. It was almost a smile, but it was not a nice one.

“I have been called many things, Miss Hartley,” he said. “Rake. Scoundrel. Bastard. But bully... that is quaint.”

“Stop mocking me,” Eleanor snapped.

“I am not mocking you,” the Duke said. “I am warning you. You have stormed into my house. You have insulted me. You have interrupted my work. And you have done it all with a bonnet that is arguably the most tragic piece of millinery I have seen this season.”

Eleanor’s hand flew to her head. The bonnet was crooked. She knew it was crooked. But his mention of it was a slap in the face.

“My bonnet is not the issue,” she said.

“Everything is the issue,” the Duke said. “You are out of your depth. Go back to Yorkshire. Pack your trunks. The surveyors arrive in two weeks.”

“No,” Eleanor said.

“No?” The Duke raised an eyebrow.

“No,” Eleanor repeated. “I will fight you. I will find the money. I will find an investor. I will find a way to stop you.”

“There are no investors,” the Duke said. “I made sure of that. I own the bank that holds your note. I own the neighboring land. No one will touch that estate because no one wants to cross me.”

Eleanor felt the blood drain from her face. “You... you blocked me?”

“I secured my investment,” the Duke said. “It is just business.”

“It is cruel,” Eleanor whispered.

“It is effective,” the Duke said.

He turned his back on her. He walked to the window and looked out.

“Henderson,” he said without turning around. “Escort Miss Hartley out. If she returns, call the constable.”

The butler stepped forward. He took Eleanor’s arm. His grip was firm.

“This way, Miss,” Henderson said.

Eleanor looked at the Duke's broad back. She wanted to scream. She wanted to throw something. The arrogance. The absolute, unshakeable arrogance of the man.

She shook Henderson's hand off.

"I can walk," she said.

She looked at the Duke one last time.

"This is not over," she said to his back.

The Duke did not answer. He did not turn.

Eleanor turned and walked out of the study. She kept her head high. She walked past the footmen. She walked past the statues.

She walked out the front door and down the steps.

Frances was waiting in the carriage, her face pressed to the glass.

Eleanor climbed in. She sat down. Her hands were shaking so hard she had to clasp them together in her lap.

"Miss?" Frances asked. "What happened? Did he agree?"

Eleanor looked at the manor house. The door was closed again. The fortress was sealed.

"No," Eleanor said. "He did not agree."

"So we are going home?" Frances asked.

Eleanor looked at her shaking hands. She remembered the Duke's eyes. She remembered the cold calculation in his voice. *Sheep are dinner.*

The fear was gone. The desperation was gone. All that was left was the fire.

"No," Eleanor said. "We are staying."

"But the money..." Frances said.

"I do not know how yet," Eleanor said. "But I am going to make him pay. I am going to make him sorry he ever heard the name Hartley."

She leaned back. The image of the Duke standing in his study burned in her mind. He was a monster. A beautiful, terrible monster.

And she was going to slay him.

CHAPTER 3



The carriage had not yet moved when Eleanor's hand slammed against the roof. The leather vibrated under her palm.

"Stop," she said.

Frances jumped in her seat. "Miss? We are leaving, are we not?"

"No," Eleanor said. She reached for the handle of the door. "We are not."

"But the Duke," Frances stammered, looking out at the imposing stone facade of Ashford House. "He dismissed you."

"He tried," Eleanor said.

She pushed the door open and stepped back onto the pavement. The rain had begun to fall, a light drizzle that slicked the cobblestones, but Eleanor did not feel the cold. She felt only the heat in her cheeks and the thrumming of her blood in her ears. She had walked away. She had let him turn his back on her.

She marched back up the stairs.

The butler, Henderson, was still in the foyer. He was instructing a footman to lock the main door. He turned as Eleanor pushed the heavy wood panel open and stepped inside, dripping water onto the marble.

"Miss Hartley," Henderson said. His voice was no longer bored. It was alarmed. "You were told to leave."

"I am not done," Eleanor said.

"The Duke is occupied," Henderson said. He moved to block her path. "He is not to be disturbed."

“Then he should not have threatened to destroy my home,” Eleanor said.

She did not wait for his rebuttal. She did not shove him this time. She simply walked around him with a speed that defied the weight of her skirts. She crossed the foyer. The footmen watched her, too stunned to intervene a second time.

She reached the double mahogany doors. She did not knock. She seized the handles and threw them open so hard they bounced against the interior walls with a crack that sounded like a pistol shot.

Alexander Radcliffe was exactly where she had left him. He was standing by the window. He turned slowly, a glass of brandy in his hand.

“You,” he said.

“Me,” Eleanor said. She slammed the doors shut behind her, sealing them in the room.

“I thought I made myself clear,” Alexander said. He walked back to his desk and set the glass down. “The discussion is over.”

“There was no discussion,” Eleanor said. She walked into the center of the room. “There was a dictate. You gave orders. You made threats. You did not listen to a word I said.”

“I heard you,” Alexander said. “You want money. You want time. You want me to pity your sheep. The answer is no.”

“It is not about the sheep!” Eleanor shouted.

The sound of her own voice surprised her. She never shouted. She was a lady. She was the mistress of an estate. But looking at his impassive face, and the mask of boredom he wore like armor, a tether snapped in her chest.

“It is about greed,” she continued, stepping closer. “You’re a man who has so much he cannot even count it, yet feels the need to take the little that others possess. Why? Is it a game to you? Do you enjoy the suffering? Does it make the brandy taste sweeter?”

Alexander’s jaw tightened. A muscle jumped in his cheek.

“Do not presume to know what I enjoy,” he said. His voice dropped, becoming dangerously quiet. “You know nothing of my responsibilities.”

“Responsibilities?” Eleanor laughed. It was a harsh sound. “You speak of responsibilities while you sit here in your palace and order the destruction of a village? I am the one with responsibilities. I am the one who has to look those people in the eye. I am the one who has to bury them when they starve because you wanted another coal mine!”

“They will not starve,” Alexander snapped. “They can work in the mines. They can move to the city.”

“To the slums?” Eleanor demanded. “To the workhouses? That is your solution? You would tear them from the land their grandfathers worked and throw them into the gutter so you can add another zero to your ledger?”

“It is progress!” Alexander roared.

He slammed his hand down on the desk. The papers jumped. The inkwell rattled.

“It is theft!” Eleanor screamed back.

The volume of their voices rose, bouncing off the high ceiling and echoing through the thick oak door. Eleanor could hear nothing but the rush of her own anger. She paced the room, her hands moving as she spoke, gesturing wildly.

“You are a coward,” she said. “You hide behind your solicitors and your surveyors. You are afraid to see the damage you cause.”

“I am afraid of nothing,” Alexander said. He moved around the desk. He was closing the distance between them. “And I am certainly not afraid of a country spinster who thinks the world owes her a living.”

“The world owes me nothing,” Eleanor said. “But you owe me decency. You owe me a chance to pay my debt without losing my soul.”

She spun around to face him. Her movement was so sharp, so violent, that the ribbon of her bonnet caught on the high collar of her dress. She yanked her head back, but the fabric held fast. The bonnet twisted. It slid sideways, hanging precariously off her left ear, exposing her hair which was beginning to slip from its pins.

She did not fix it. She did not care.

“Look at you,” Alexander said. He was shouting now, standing mere feet from her. “You come in here, dripping wet, hysterical, making demands you have no right to make. You are a nuisance, Miss Hartley.”

“And you are a villain,” Eleanor spat. “You are exactly what they say in the papers. A rake. A libertine. A man with a stone where his heart should be.”

Alexander let out a growl of frustration. He reached up and tore at his neckcloth. The perfectly tied starch restricted him. He yanked the silk loose, the knot unraveling. The ends hung down his chest. He ran his fingers through his hair, destroying the sleek style, leaving the dark locks standing up in chaotic spikes.

“I am a businessman!” he yelled. “And you are trespassing on my property!”

“It is your property now,” Eleanor cried, stepping into his space, looking up at him with blazing eyes. “But it was my home first. And I will not let you take it without a war.”

“Then it is war,” Alexander said. He loomed over her. His face was flushed. His breathing was heavy. “And I promise you, I never lose.”

“There is a first time for everything,” Eleanor said.

They stood there, chests heaving, inches apart. The air between them crackled with a volatile mix of rage and frustration. It was intimate. It was raw. It was the closest Eleanor had ever been to a man who was not a relation, and the heat radiating from him was terrifying.

Alexander looked at her. His eyes dropped to her mouth, then back to her eyes. He looked ready to throw her out or shake her.

Then the handle of the door turned.

Neither of them moved. They were locked in their standoff, consumed by the fight.

The door swung open.

“Alexander?” a voice said. “We heard shouting from the foyer. Is everything—”

The voice cut off.

Eleanor froze. She blinked, the red haze of anger clearing just enough for her to realize that the room was suddenly full of people.

She turned her head.

Standing in the doorway was a woman. She was older, regal, dressed in stiff purple silk. Diamonds glittered at her throat. Behind her stood three other women, all of them peering into the room with wide, shocked eyes.

They were society.

Eleanor felt the blood drain from her face. She looked at the woman in purple. Then she looked down at herself.

She was standing alone with the Duke. The door had been closed. Her chest was heaving. Her bonnet was hanging off the side of her head like a drunkard’s hat.

She looked at Alexander.

He was no better. His cravat was undone, the white silk dangling over his waistcoat. His hair was wild, sticking up where his hands had gripped it. His face was flushed.

To the outside observer, it looked like a ravishment.

The silence that descended on the room was heavy. It was suffocating.

The woman in purple—Alexander's mother, the Dowager Duchess, Eleanor realized with a sick lurch of her stomach—stepped into the room. She held a lorgnette to her eyes and surveyed the scene. Her gaze traveled from Alexander's undone necktie to Eleanor's crooked bonnet.

"Alexander," the Dowager said. Her voice was ice. "Care to explain why you are disheveled in your study with a strange woman behind closed doors?"

One of the women behind her gasped. Another covered her mouth with a gloved hand. They exchanged glances. The kind of glances that destroyed reputations before the sun went down.

"Mother," Alexander said. He stepped back from Eleanor. He tried to smooth his hair, but the damage was done. "This is not what it looks like."

"It looks," said a woman in a green dress, "like you have been entertaining, Your Grace."

"I have not been entertaining," Alexander snapped. "We were arguing."

"Arguing?" The Dowager raised an eyebrow. "Is it your custom to undress during a debate?"

Eleanor reached up and touched her bonnet. She tried to straighten it, but her hands were shaking so badly she only made it worse.

"We were discussing business," Eleanor whispered. Her voice sounded thin and pathetic in the large room.

"Business," the Dowager repeated. She looked Eleanor up and down. "I see. And what business requires such... passion?"

Alexander buttoned his coat. He looked trapped. For the first time since Eleanor had met him, he looked unsure of himself.

"This is Miss Hartley," Alexander said. "She is a... petitioner."

"She looks like a mistress," the woman in green murmured.

Eleanor flinched. The word hung in the air.

"She is not a mistress!" Alexander shouted.

The outburst only made it worse. It showed he cared. It showed he was involved.

The Dowager Duchess tapped her fan against her palm. Tap. Tap. Tap.

"You were alone," she stated. "The door was shut. The servants were barred from entering. And now look at you both."

She gestured to the room. The papers on the floor. The disarray. The heavy breathing.

"The scandal," the Dowager said softly, "will be immediate. Lady Jersey is standing right behind me, Alexander. Do you think she will keep this to herself?"

Eleanor looked at the women. She saw the gleam in their eyes. They were already writing the letters in their heads. *Did you hear? The Duke of Ashford. A country nobody. In his study. Caught in the act.*

The realization washed over Eleanor. She had come here to save her estate. She had come here to fight for her tenants.

Instead, she had just destroyed herself.

"Mother, please," Alexander said. "Miss Hartley forced her way in. We were shouting about a mortgage."

"A likely story," Lady Jersey said. She smiled, a small, cruel smile. "Although I admit, it is a novel excuse for passion."

Eleanor felt the room spin. She took a step back and bumped into the desk.

"I must go," Eleanor said. "I must leave."

"You cannot leave," the Dowager said. "You have been seen. The damage is done."

"I did not do anything!" Eleanor cried.

"It does not matter what you did," the Dowager said. She looked at her son. "It matters what we saw. And what London will hear."

Alexander looked at Eleanor. His eyes were hard again. The heat of the argument was gone, replaced by a cold realization of the trap they had walked into.

"Get out," Alexander said to the women. "All of you."

"We are leaving," the Dowager said. "But we expect you at dinner, Alexander. We have much to discuss regarding your... future."

She turned and swept out of the room. The other women followed, casting one last look at Eleanor's ruined bonnet and Alexander's bare throat.

The door closed.

Eleanor stood in the silence. It was deafening.

She looked at Alexander. He was staring at the door. He looked furious. But this time, the fury was not directed at her. It was directed at the world.

"You fool," he said. He did not look at her. "You utter, little fool."

“Me?” Eleanor squeaked. “You are the one who—”

“Do you have any idea what you have just done?” Alexander asked. He turned to her. His face was pale. “Do you have any idea who those women were?”

“Your mother,” Eleanor said.

“My mother,” Alexander said. “And the most vicious gossips in the ton. By tomorrow morning, every person in London will believe I have taken you as a lover.”

Eleanor gripped the edge of the desk. “But it is not true. We can deny it.”

“Deny it?” Alexander laughed. “With you looking like that? With me looking like this?” He gestured to his undone cravat. “Truth has no place in society, Miss Hartley. Perception is everything. And the perception is that you are a ruined woman.”

Eleanor felt the tears prick her eyes. She fought them back. She would not cry. Not in front of him.

“I do not care about society,” she said. “I care about my home.”

“You won’t have a home,” Alexander said brutally. “When this news reaches Yorkshire, your reputation will be in tatters. No one will receive you. No one will do business with you. You will be a pariah.”

Eleanor stared at him. The weight of his words settled on her. She had risked everything to save the estate. And she had lost.

“Then I have nothing left to lose,” she whispered.

Alexander looked at her. For a second, just a second, she saw something flicker in his eyes. Regret? Pity?

Then he turned away.

“Fix your bonnet,” he said. “And get out of my house.”

Eleanor reached up. Her fingers trembled as she untangled the ribbon. She tied it under her chin. It was still crooked.

She walked to the door. She did not look back.

She opened it and walked out into the hall. The servants were staring. The butler was staring.

She walked past them all. She walked out the front door and down the steps to the waiting carriage.

Frances was asleep in the corner. She woke up as Eleanor climbed in.

“Miss?” Frances asked. “Did you speak to him?”

Eleanor sat back. She felt numb.

“Yes,” Eleanor said. “I spoke to him.”

“And?” Frances asked.

Eleanor looked out the window. The rain was falling harder now. It blurred the lights of the house.

“And I think,” Eleanor said, “that I have made a terrible mistake.”

CHAPTER 4



The Yellow Drawing Room at Ashford House was designed to intimidate. Every surface was gilded, mirrored, or upholstered in silk of a blinding canary hue that made Eleanor feel pale and insignificant in her worn black mourning dress. She sat on the edge of a settee that cost more than her entire flock of sheep. Her hands were folded in her lap. She squeezed her fingers together to stop them from trembling.

She had been waiting for forty minutes.

The door finally opened. It did not creak. The hinges were too well-oiled for that.

The Dowager Duchess of Ashford swept in. She wore grey silk that rustled with the sound of dry leaves. She did not look at Eleanor. She walked straight to the fireplace and adjusted a porcelain figurine on the mantelpiece.

"The *Morning Post*," the Dowager said to the room at large, "has devoted three columns to the subject of your bonnet, Miss Hartley. The *Tatler* was less generous. They focused on my son's neckwear."

Eleanor stood up. Her legs felt stiff.

"Your Grace," she said. "I did not intend for any of this to happen."

The Dowager turned. Her face was a mask of white powder and severe lines.

"Intent is irrelevant," she said. "Consequence is everything. You were found alone with the Duke. You were disheveled. You were shouting. To the world, you are a seductress who has ensnared a peer of the realm."

"I was negotiating a mortgage," Eleanor said.

"You were ruining a reputation," the Dowager corrected. "Mine. My son's. The family name."

The door opened again. Alexander walked in.

He looked worse than he had the day before. There were dark circles under his eyes. He wore a fresh coat and a cravat tied with geometric precision, but he carried himself with the tension of a man walking to the gallows.

He did not look at Eleanor. He walked to the window and stared out at the street.

"Mother," he said. "I told you I would handle this."

"You have handled nothing," the Dowager snapped. "You have created a spectacle. And now I must clean it up."

She sat down in a high-backed chair and pointed a finger at the settee.

"Sit, Miss Hartley."

Eleanor sat. She felt like a schoolgirl called to the headmistress's office.

"The situation is intolerable," the Dowager said. "The invitations for the grand ball have already been sent. We cannot have the Duke of Ashford associated with a... sordid affair involving a provincial nobody. It suggests a lack of judgment. It suggests a lack of control."

"I am right here," Eleanor said.

"I know you are," the Dowager said. "That is the problem. But there is a solution."

She paused. She smoothed her skirt.

"You will marry him," the Dowager said.

Eleanor blinked. She looked at Alexander. He did not move. He did not turn from the window.

She looked back at the Dowager.

"I beg your pardon?" Eleanor asked.

"You will marry Alexander," the Dowager repeated. "Immediately. By special license. We will announce the engagement tomorrow. We will say it was a love match. A whirlwind romance that overcame the boundaries of propriety. It is the only way to silence the gossip. If you are his betrothed, the scene in the study becomes a passionate lapse of judgment between lovers, not a scandal."

Eleanor laughed. It was a short, incredulous sound.

"Marry him?" she asked. "I despise him."

Alexander turned from the window then. His expression was grim.

"The feeling is mutual, Miss Hartley," he said.

"Then why would you agree to this?" Eleanor demanded. She stood up again, unable to remain seated. "It is madness. I came here to save my home, not to shackle myself to the man trying to destroy it."

"Sit down," the Dowager ordered.

Eleanor did not sit. "No. I will not marry him. I would rather lose the estate. I would rather live in a cottage. I would rather scrub floors than marry a man who values coal over human lives."

"You would rather lose the estate?" the Dowager asked softly.

She picked up a cup of tea from the silver tray that a footman had silently placed on the table. She took a sip.

"Tell me, Miss Hartley," the Dowager said. "What happens to your tenants when you lose the estate?"

Eleanor froze.

"What happens to the Miller family?" the Dowager asked. She picked up a piece of paper from the table. "And the Davises? My solicitors have been very thorough. I have a list of every family living on the Hartley land."

"Do not speak their names," Eleanor whispered.

"They will be evicted," the Dowager said. "Within the week. The foreclosure will proceed. The cottages will be razed. The families will be cast out onto the roads. Winter is coming, is it not?"

Eleanor gripped the back of the settee. The velvet pattern dug into her palms.

"You are cruel," Eleanor said.

"I am pragmatic," the Dowager said. "You say you want to protect them. You say you are the guardian of your people. Prove it."

"I cannot marry him," Eleanor said. She looked at Alexander. "He does not want this either."

"It does not matter what he wants," the Dowager said. She looked at her son with cold eyes. "Alexander has his own obligations. The terms of his grandfather's trust are clear. He must be married by his thirtieth birthday to access the full capital. And he must remain free of scandal. If he does not marry you, and this scandal festers, the trustees will cut him off. He will lose his position. He will lose his funding. He will be nothing."

Alexander's jaw tightened. He looked at Eleanor. There was no hatred in his eyes now. Only a bleak resignation. He was as trapped as she was.

"So we are both pawns," Eleanor said.

"We are all pawns to duty," the Dowager said. "Now. Here is the offer."

She placed the teacup down. The china clinked against the saucer.

"Marry my son," the Dowager said. "Be the Duchess of Ashford. Play the part for one year. Give us the respectability we require."

"And in return?" Eleanor asked.

"In return," the Dowager said, "I will personally pay off the mortgage on the Hartley estate."

The room went silent.

Eleanor stared at the woman. "You... you will pay it?"

"In full," the Dowager said. "The debt will be cleared. The land will be yours, free and clear. The mining operations will be halted on your specific parcels. Your tenants will be safe. Forever."

Eleanor felt the breath leave her lungs.

It was everything she had come for. It was the safety of the Millers. It was the future of the Davises. It was the preservation of her aunt's legacy.

All she had to do was sell herself.

She looked at Alexander. He was watching her closely. He knew exactly what was going through her mind. He was the businessman, after all. He knew the value of a transaction.

"One year," Eleanor said.

"One year of public marriage," the Dowager agreed. "After that, you may live separately. You may retire to the country. But for one year, you must be the perfect Duchess."

Eleanor looked down at her hands. They were red and rough from the cold wind in Yorkshire. They were not the hands of a Duchess.

But they were hands that had held the hands of dying tenants. They were hands that had worked the earth.

She thought of the look on Thomas Miller's face. She thought of the smoke rising from the chimneys in the valley.

She had no choice. She had never had a choice.

"I will require a contract," Eleanor said. Her voice was steady, though her knees shook. "A written guarantee that the mortgage is paid the day of the wedding. And a clause protecting the tenants from eviction."

The Dowager smiled. It was a terrifying expression.

"You are more practical than you look, Miss Hartley," she said. "The papers are already drawn up."

She gestured to the desk in the corner. A document lay there, waiting.

"Alexander?" the Dowager said.

Alexander walked to the desk. He picked up the quill. He dipped it in the ink.

He looked at Eleanor.

"I will not be an easy husband," he said.

"And I will not be a docile wife," Eleanor replied.

"Good," Alexander said. "I would hate to be bored."

He signed the paper. The scratch of the nib was loud in the quiet room.

He held the pen out to her.

Eleanor walked across the carpet. It felt like walking through deep water. She took the pen. His fingers brushed hers. They were cold.

She looked at the document. It was a sale. A trade. Her life for their lives.

She signed her name. *Eleanor Hartley*.

She put the pen down.

"It is done," the Dowager said. She stood up and rang the bell. "Henderson will show you to the guest suites. Your trunk will be fetched from your... lodgings. Dressmakers will arrive in the morning. The wedding will be in three days."

"Three days?" Eleanor gasped.

"Scandal does not wait for a long engagement," the Dowager said.

"Welcome to the family, Eleanor."

She swept out of the room without looking back.

Alexander and Eleanor were left alone. The ink was still wet on the page.

Alexander walked to the sideboard and poured himself a drink. He drank it in one swallow.

"Do not expect me to thank you," he said. "You have forced my hand just as much as she has."

"I did not force anything," Eleanor said. "I came here to pay a debt. I did not ask to be found in your study."

"But you were," Alexander said. "And now we are bound together."

He looked at her with a mixture of resentment and assessment.

"You have your estate, Miss Hartley," he said. "I hope it keeps you warm at night. Because I certainly will not."

"I do not want your warmth, Your Grace," Eleanor said. She wrapped her arms around herself. "I only want your signature on the deed release."

"You shall have it," Alexander said. "On the wedding day."

He walked to the door. He paused with his hand on the latch.

"We are at war, you and I," he said.

"We have been at war since the moment we met," Eleanor said.

"True," Alexander said. "But now we have to sleep in the same house."

He opened the door and left.

Eleanor stood alone in the Yellow Drawing Room. She looked at the gilded mirrors and saw her reflection. A small woman in black, standing in a golden cage.

She had saved them. She had saved everyone.

Everyone except herself.

CHAPTER 5



The dressmaker pinned the final fold of the cream silk. She stepped back and admired her work with a critical eye.

"It fits," the woman said. "Though the waist could be tighter."

Eleanor stood on the pedestal in the center of the guest suite. She looked at her reflection in the cheval mirror. The gown was expensive. The lace at the cuffs was Belgian. The silk was heavy enough to stand on its own.

"It will do," Eleanor said.

She stepped down. Frances was waiting with the shoes. They were new satin slippers that pinched Eleanor's toes.

"The carriage is waiting, Miss," Frances said. She held out the gloves.

Eleanor took them. She pulled the white kid leather over her fingers. It was the third day since the meeting in the Yellow Drawing Room. The hours had passed in a blur of fittings and legal documents.

She walked out of the room. The hallway was empty. The house was quiet.

Downstairs, the Dowager Duchess waited in the foyer. She wore a hat with a stiff feather that pointed straight up at the ceiling.

"You are on time," the Dowager said. "Good. Punctuality is a virtue in a Duchess."

Eleanor did not curtsy. She nodded.

"Where is the Duke?" Eleanor asked.

"He has gone ahead to the church," the Dowager said. "He prefers to wait at the altar rather than ride with the bride. It is less... suffocating."

They walked out to the carriage. The London sky was a sheet of grey slate. Rain threatened in the heavy clouds.

The ride to St. George's Hanover Square was silent. The Dowager read a letter. Eleanor watched the streets roll by. People were walking, laughing, buying flowers. They lived their lives.

Eleanor sat with her hands clasped in her lap. She was about to end her life as she knew it.

The carriage stopped. The church steps were wet.

Eleanor climbed out. She looked up at the stone portico. It looked like a mausoleum.

Inside, the church was empty save for the priest and two witnesses provided by the Dowager's solicitors. The air was cold. It smelled of old incense and damp stone.

Alexander stood at the altar.

He wore a black morning coat. His back was to the nave. He stood with his feet apart, his hands clasped behind his back. He looked like a soldier waiting for a firing squad.

The Dowager nudged Eleanor forward.

"Go," she said.

Eleanor walked down the aisle. Her footsteps echoed on the stone floor. Click. Click. Click.

Alexander turned.

His face was pale. His jaw was set so hard a muscle twitched near his ear. He looked at her dress. He looked at her face. His eyes were flat.

Eleanor reached the altar. She stood beside him. She did not look at him. She looked at the priest.

"We are gathered here," the priest began. His voice droned in the empty space.

The ceremony was short. It was a transaction. A business merger conducted before God.

"Do you, Alexander," the priest asked.

"I do," Alexander said. His voice was rough.

"Do you, Eleanor," the priest asked.

Eleanor looked at the stained glass window above the altar. It depicted a martyr.

"I do," she said.

Alexander reached for her hand. His fingers were ice. He shoved a gold ring onto her finger. It was heavy. The metal was cold against her skin.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the priest said. He closed his book.

There was no kiss. Alexander dropped her hand immediately. He turned and walked to the vestry.

"Come," the Dowager hissed. "Sign the register."

Eleanor followed. The vestry was small. The register lay open on a table.

Alexander signed his name with sharp, angry strokes. *Ashford*.

Eleanor took the pen. Her hand shook. She wrote *Eleanor Radcliffe*.

The name looked foreign. It looked wrong.

"Excellent," the Dowager said. She placed a second document on the table. It was the deed release. "And this."

She dipped the pen for Alexander.

He looked at the paper. It was the mortgage release for the Hartley estate.

He looked at Eleanor. His eyes narrowed.

"You have your prize," he said.

"I have my home," Eleanor said.

He signed it. He did not look at the paper. He looked at her while he wrote. It was a challenge.

The Dowager picked up the deed. She blew on the ink to dry it. She folded it and handed it to Eleanor.

"The estate is yours," the Dowager said. "Now. The carriage is waiting to take you to the station. You will honeymoon at the estate. It is fitting, is it not? Since the land is the reason for this union."

"We are leaving immediately?" Eleanor asked.

"I have business in the north," Alexander said. He walked to the door. "And I have no desire to remain in London to hear the whispers."

They walked out of the church. The rain had started. It fell in sheets.

They ran to the carriage. Alexander helped her in. His grip on her elbow was tight. Too tight.

He climbed in after her. The door slammed. The carriage lurched forward.

They were alone.

Eleanor sat on one side. Alexander sat on the other. The space between them was filled with the sound of rain drumming on the roof.

Alexander took off his gloves. He threw them onto the seat beside him.

"Well," he said. "Are you satisfied, Your Grace?"

He said the title with a sneer.

"I am relieved," Eleanor said. She touched the paper in her pocket. "The tenants are safe."

"The tenants," Alexander scoffed. He leaned his head back against the leather. "You sold your freedom for a collection of stone cottages and illiterate farmers."

"I sold my freedom to stop a tyrant," Eleanor said.

Alexander turned his head. He looked at her.

"A tyrant," he repeated. "Is that what I am?"

"You threatened to destroy them," Eleanor said. "You forced this."

"I forced nothing," Alexander said. He sat up. "Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I wanted to be shackled to a woman who looks at me as if I am the devil himself?"

"Then why did you agree?" Eleanor asked. "You are a Duke. You could have refused."

"Refused?" Alexander laughed. It was a bitter sound. "You know nothing of my family. My grandfather's trust controls the entire fortune. The capital. The investments. The mines. All of it."

"And?"

"And the terms are specific," Alexander said. "I must be married by thirty. And I must be a man of 'moral standing.' If I cause a scandal—a scandal like being caught with a woman in my study—the trustees have the power to freeze the assets. They would cut me off. I would lose everything. The business. The ships. The power."

Eleanor stared at him. "So you married me for money."

"I married you for control," Alexander corrected. "I married you to keep what is mine. Just as you married me to keep what is yours. We are exactly the same, Eleanor. We are both mercenaries."

"We are not the same," Eleanor said. "I did it for others. You did it for yourself."

"Is that so?" Alexander asked. "You enjoy the title, do you not? You enjoy the silk dress? You enjoy the fact that you are now a Duchess?"

"I hate the dress," Eleanor said. "And the title is a burden."

"Liar," Alexander said.

"Do not call me a liar," Eleanor snapped.

"Then stop pretending to be a martyr," Alexander said. "You played the game. You won. You have the deed. You have the ring. But do not expect me to play the doting husband."

"I expect nothing from you," Eleanor said. "Except distance."

"You will have it," Alexander said. "Once we are at the estate, I will manage my affairs. You will manage yours. Keep out of my way."

"I will manage the estate," Eleanor said. "As I always have."

"The estate is mine now," Alexander said. "By marriage laws. I control the property."

"The deed is in my name," Eleanor said. She patted her pocket.

"The deed is in your name," Alexander agreed. "But the management rights belong to the husband. That is the law."

Eleanor went cold. She stared at him.

"You said... the Dowager said the land would be mine."

"Ownership is yours," Alexander said. "Administration is mine. I will review the ledgers. I will review the tenant agreements. I will decide what is efficient."

"You will not touch the tenants," Eleanor said. Her voice rose. "That was the agreement. They are safe."

"They are safe from eviction," Alexander said. "For now. But if they are inefficient... if they drain the resources... changes will be made."

"You are trying to punish me," Eleanor said.

"I am trying to run a business," Alexander said. "I do not let sentiment rule my ledger."

"You are a monster," Eleanor whispered.

Alexander looked at her. His eyes were dark.

"I am your husband," he said. "Get used to it."

The carriage slowed. They had arrived at the train station.

The noise of the steam engines was deafening. Whistles blew. Metal screeched against metal.

Alexander opened the door. He stepped out. He did not offer her his hand.

Eleanor climbed down. Her silk shoes sank into a puddle of oily water.

She looked at Alexander's back as he walked toward the platform. He walked with long, angry strides.

She followed him. She kept her hand on her pocket. The deed was there.

But she realized now that the paper was just paper. The man she had married was the real danger.

They boarded the private car. It was plush, with velvet seats and mahogany tables.

Alexander sat in a chair by the window. He picked up a newspaper. He snapped it open.

Eleanor sat opposite him. She looked out the window. The train began to move. London slid away. The grey buildings gave way to grey suburbs.

"How long is the journey?" Eleanor asked.

Alexander did not lower the paper.

"Six hours," he said.

"Six hours," Eleanor repeated.

She looked at his hands holding the paper. They were large hands. Strong hands.

She remembered how they had looked signing the register. Angry.

"Alexander," she said.

He lowered the paper an inch. He looked at her over the top.

"What?"

"Are we to spend the next year like this?" Eleanor asked. "In silence? In anger?"

"You started the war, Eleanor," he said. "I am just fighting it."

"I did not start it," Eleanor said. "You started it when you bought the debt."

"Business," Alexander said. "It was business."

"To you," Eleanor said. "To me, it was life."

"And now your life is tied to mine," Alexander said. "A tragedy for us both."

He raised the paper again. The wall was up.

Eleanor looked at the headlines on the back of the page. *Coal Prices Rise. Industrial Expansion in the North.*

He was reading about his money. Even on his wedding day.

She turned to the window. The rain streaked the glass. It blurred the world outside.

She thought of the ridge in Yorkshire. She thought of the wind.

She was going home. But she was bringing the storm with her.

A steward entered the car. He carried a tray with a teapot and sandwiches.

"Your Grace," the steward said. "Lunch."

He placed the tray on the table between them.

"Thank you," Eleanor said.

The steward bowed and left.

Eleanor reached for the teapot. The train lurched. The pot slid.

Alexander reached out. He caught the pot before it tipped.

His hand brushed hers.

Eleanor pulled back as if burned.

Alexander set the pot down. He looked at her hand. Then he looked at her face.

"I am not going to bite you," he said.

"I do not know that," Eleanor said.

Alexander sighed. He ran a hand through his hair. It was the same gesture he had used in the study. The gesture of a man at his limit.

"Eat a sandwich, Eleanor," he said. "You look pale."

"I am not hungry."

"Eat," Alexander ordered. "If you faint, I will have to carry you. And I have no desire to wrinkle my coat."

Eleanor glared at him. She picked up a sandwich.

"I will eat," she said. "But only because I need my strength."

"Strength for what?" Alexander asked.

"To fight you," Eleanor said.

Alexander picked up his own sandwich. He took a bite. He chewed slowly.

"You can try," he said. "But remember. I own the board. I own the pieces. And now, I own the Queen."

Eleanor put the sandwich down.

"I am not a piece in your game," she said.

"You are the Duchess of Ashford," Alexander said. "That is the most powerful piece on the board. But it is still just a piece."

"A Queen can take a King," Eleanor said.

Alexander stopped chewing. He looked at her. A small smile touched his lips. It was not a nice smile. It was the smile of a predator who had found prey that might actually be interesting to hunt.

"Checkmate," he said softly.

Eleanor looked away. Her heart beat fast against her ribs.

She had challenged him. She had poked the beast.

And the beast was looking back.

The train rattled on. North. Always north.

Toward the cold. Toward the coal. Toward the war.

Eleanor touched the ring on her finger. She twisted it. It was tight. It felt like a shackle.

She looked at Alexander. He was reading again.

She had saved the estate.

But she wondered, as the miles disappeared beneath the wheels, if she had damned herself.

CHAPTER 6



The carriage wheels crunched over the gravel of the long drive leading to Hartley Manor. Eleanor sat straight against the cushions. She watched the familiar beech trees pass by the window. They were bare branches against a grey sky.

Alexander sat opposite her. He did not look at the trees. He looked at a pocket watch he had consulted three times in the last hour.

"The road is in poor repair," he said. "The carriage nearly lost an axle at the last turn."

"It is a country road," Eleanor said. "It serves its purpose."

"It serves to delay transport," Alexander said. He snapped the watch shut. "Inefficient."

The carriage halted before the stone steps of the manor. The house looked smaller to Eleanor than it had when she left. Or perhaps the man sitting across from her simply took up too much space.

The footman opened the door. Eleanor stepped out. The wind caught her skirt. It was the same wind she had stood in days ago. But now she stood in it as a Duchess.

Mrs. Gable, the housekeeper, waited on the steps. The staff stood in a line behind her. They looked nervous. Their eyes darted from Eleanor to the tall, imposing figure descending from the carriage behind her.

"Welcome home, Miss... Your Grace," Mrs. Gable said. She curtsied low.

Eleanor smiled at the older woman. "Thank you, Mrs. Gable."

Alexander walked up the steps. He stripped off his gloves. He looked at the facade of the house. He looked at the moss growing on the north corner. He looked at the ivy climbing the trellis.

"The ivy will damage the mortar," he said to Mrs. Gable. "Have it cut down."

Mrs. Gable blinked. She looked at Eleanor.

"The ivy has been there for fifty years, Your Grace," Mrs. Gable said.

"Then the mortar is likely compromised already," Alexander said. "Remove it. Today."

He walked into the house without waiting for an answer.

Eleanor followed him. She caught Mrs. Gable's eye. She gave a small shake of her head. *Wait*, the gesture said.

She found Alexander in the main hall. He was turning in a slow circle. He assessed the portraits. He assessed the threadbare rug.

"My study," he said. "Where is it?"

"The library is down the hall," Eleanor said. "My aunt used the desk there."

"The library," Alexander repeated. "Fine. Have my trunks sent up. I have work to do."

He walked toward the library. He opened the door and disappeared inside.

The war had come to Yorkshire.

THE NEXT MORNING, Eleanor entered the breakfast room. Alexander was already there. He sat at the head of the table. Her aunt's chair.

He was reading a ledger. *The* ledger. The main account book for the estate.

Eleanor stopped in the doorway. "That is private."

Alexander looked up. He held a piece of toast in one hand.

"It is an account of the estate assets," he said. "Therefore it is my concern."

"Those are the tenant records," Eleanor said. She walked to the sideboard and poured herself a cup of tea. Her hand shook slightly. She steadied it against the silver pot. "They contain personal details."

"They contain a catalogue of errors," Alexander said. He tapped the page. "Here. The Miller family. They have paid no rent for three months."

"Thomas Miller broke his leg," Eleanor said. "He could not shear the sheep. We extended his credit."

"You gave him charity," Alexander corrected. "And here. The repairs to the west barn. You used local stone. It cost twice as much as brick."

"It matches the landscape," Eleanor said. "And it supports the local quarry."

"It is sentimental," Alexander said. He closed the book with a heavy thud. "You manage this estate like a charity ward. It bleeds money."

"It supports the people," Eleanor said. She sat down at the table. She stared at him over the rim of her cup. "We are not a factory, Alexander. We are a community."

"A community that cannot pay its debts is a failed community," Alexander said. "I have ordered a review. My own surveyors arrive at noon."

Eleanor set her cup down. The china rattled.

"Surveyors?" she asked. "For what?"

"To map the expansion," Alexander said. "The coal seam runs under the grazing lands. We need to determine the best location for the new shafts."

"You promised," Eleanor said. "The agreement. You said the tenants would be safe."

"I said they would not be evicted," Alexander said. "I did not say the land would remain a museum exhibit. We will dig around the cottages if we must. But we will dig."

He stood up. He buttoned his coat.

"I am going to the ridge," he said. "I expect the surveyors to be prompt. Do not interfere."

He walked out.

Eleanor sat alone in the breakfast room. The toast on her plate was cold.

She looked at the ledger. He had marked pages with red ink. Red lines through the names of families she had known all her life.

She stood up. She walked to the window.

Outside, a carriage was coming up the drive. It was not a gentleman's carriage. It was a utility vehicle. Men with tripods and chains were jumping down.

The surveyors.

Eleanor turned. She ran out of the room. She grabbed her bonnet from the hook in the hall. She did not tie the ribbons.

She ran out the back door. She cut across the kitchen garden. Her boots sank into the wet earth.

She had to get to the ridge first.

* * *

THE WIND on the ridge was biting. Eleanor stood by the wooden gate that marked the entrance to the upper pasture.

She saw them coming up the hill. Three men carrying heavy equipment. Alexander rode a black horse beside them. He looked like a general leading a charge.

Thomas Miller was there too. He stood by the stone wall, watching the men. He looked terrified.

"Miss Eleanor!" Thomas called out. "They say they are here to measure for the digging!"

Eleanor reached the gate. She slid the heavy wooden bolt into place. She turned to face the approaching men.

"Stand back, Thomas," she said.

The men reached the gate. They stopped. They looked at the bolted wood. They looked at the small woman standing in front of it.

Alexander rode up. He reined in the horse. The animal danced sideways, kicking up clumps of turf.

"Open the gate," Alexander said. His voice was a crack of thunder.

"No," Eleanor said.

The surveyors looked at Alexander. They looked uncomfortable.

"Your Grace?" one of them asked.

"Open it," Alexander repeated. He looked down at Eleanor. "You are being childish."

"I am protecting my land," Eleanor said. "This pasture is vital for the winter grazing. If you dig here, you destroy the feed for the entire flock."

"We will buy feed," Alexander said. "Move aside."

"No," Eleanor said. She gripped the top rail of the gate. Splinters dug into her gloves. "I will not let you turn this field into a pit."

Alexander dismounted. He handed the reins to one of the surveyors. He walked to the gate.

He was tall. He loomed over the wood. He loomed over her.

"Eleanor," he said. "You are embarrassing yourself. The tenants are watching."

She looked past him. Down the hill, people had gathered. The Davises. The O'Malleys. They stood in clusters, watching the confrontation. They looked frightened.

"Let them watch," Eleanor said. "Let them see who is fighting for them."

"You are fighting progress," Alexander said. "I own the mineral rights. I own the management rights. Open the gate."

"The deed is in my name," Eleanor said.

"And I am your husband," Alexander said. "Do not make me force the lock."

"You will have to break it," Eleanor said. "And you will have to move me."

They stared at each other. The wind whipped Eleanor's hair across her face. Alexander's coat flapped around his legs.

He reached for the bolt.

Eleanor placed her hand over his.

His hand was warm. Large. It covered hers completely.

"Do not do this," she whispered.

Alexander looked at her hand. Then he looked at her face. His expression was hard. Unyielding.

"I gave an order," he said.

He pulled the bolt back. He used his strength. Eleanor stumbled back as the heavy timber slid.

He pushed the gate open.

"Proceed," Alexander said to the surveyors.

The men walked past Eleanor. They did not look at her. They carried their chains into the pasture.

Alexander mounted his horse. He looked down at her.

"Go back to the house, Eleanor," he said. "Leave the business to me."

He rode through the gate.

Eleanor stood in the mud. Thomas Miller came up to her.

"Miss Eleanor?" he asked.

Eleanor watched Alexander's back. He was pointing at the ground. He was directing the men. He was drawing lines across her heart.

"Close the lower path," Eleanor said.

Thomas blinked. "Miss?"

"The lower path," Eleanor said. Her voice was steady. "The one the carts use to bring the equipment up. Block it."

"Block it with what?" Thomas asked.

"With the sheep," Eleanor said. "Move the flock. Now. Fill the lane. If they want to bring their machines up, they will have to carry them over five hundred ewes."

Thomas grinned. The fear left his eyes.

"Aye, Miss," he said. "We can do that."

"And the bridge," Eleanor said. "The wooden one over the stream. It looks... unstable. Does it not?"

Thomas nodded slowly. "Very unstable, Miss. Might be dangerous for heavy wagons."

"Best close it for repairs then," Eleanor said. "Immediately."

"I will see to it," Thomas said. He ran down the hill, whistling.

Eleanor turned back to the pasture. Alexander was far ahead. He did not look back.

He thought he had won. He thought the open gate was the victory.

He did not know the land. He did not know the people.

He had started a war.

But he was fighting on her territory.

Eleanor tied her bonnet ribbons. She pulled them tight.

"Survey that," she whispered.

She walked back down the hill. She did not run. She walked with the stride of a woman who had work to do.

The household staff watched her from the kitchen windows as she approached. They saw the set of her shoulders. They saw the mud on her hem.

They saw that the mistress of Hartley Manor was not defeated.

She entered the kitchen. The cook, Mrs. Bunting, stopped chopping onions.

"Your Grace?" Mrs. Bunting asked.

"Mrs. Bunting," Eleanor said. "The Duke's surveyors will likely be hungry later."

"Shall I prepare a basket?" Mrs. Bunting asked.

"No," Eleanor said. "We are short on supplies. The larder is locked."

Mrs. Bunting's eyes widened. Then she smiled.

"I see," she said. "The key is missing then?"

"misplaced," Eleanor said. "Tragic."

She walked out of the kitchen.

In the library, Alexander's papers were spread across the desk. His plans. His maps.

Eleanor walked to the desk. She looked at the map of the expansion.

She picked up the inkwell. She looked at it.

She did not pour it. That would be childish.

Instead, she moved the stack of surveyor reports. She placed them on the shelf with the gardening journals. High up. Behind the encyclopedias.

She sat down in the chair.

Let him look for them.

The door opened. Alexander walked in. He brought the smell of cold air and horses with him.

He stopped when he saw her.

"I told you to go to your room," he said.

"I am in my room," Eleanor said. "This is the library. I read here."

Alexander walked to the desk. He reached for his reports. His hand hit empty wood.

He frowned. He looked at the empty spot. He looked at her.

"Where are the reports?" he asked.

"I tidied up," Eleanor said. She opened a book of poetry. "A cluttered desk is... inefficient."

Alexander stared at her. His eyes narrowed.

"You are playing a dangerous game, Eleanor."

"I am not playing," Eleanor said. She turned a page. "I am managing the household. As is my right."

Alexander leaned over the desk. He placed his hands flat on the wood.

"You blocked the lower path," he said. "My men say there are sheep everywhere."

"It is grazing time," Eleanor said. "Sheep wander."

"And the bridge?" Alexander asked. "Suddenly under repair?"

"Safety first," Eleanor said. "We cannot have an accident."

Alexander let out a short, sharp breath. He pushed off the desk.

"Very well," he said. "If you wish to obstruct me, I will simply work around you. I will build a new bridge. I will build a new road."

"With what stone?" Eleanor asked. "The quarry is closed. The men are busy... shearing."

Alexander looked at her. For a moment, she thought he might yell. She thought he might throw her out.

Instead, he walked to the window. He looked out at the grey hills.

"You think you are clever," he said.

"I think I am right," Eleanor said.

"We shall see," Alexander said.

He turned back to her.

"Dinner is at seven," he said. "Do not be late. And wear something... appropriate. We are not peasants."

"I will wear what I have," Eleanor said.

"Then have the dressmaker make something new," Alexander said. "You are a Duchess. Try to look like one."

He walked out.

Eleanor closed the book. Her heart beat against her ribs like a trapped bird.

She had defied him. She had sabotaged him.

And she had survived.

She looked at the shelf where the reports were hidden.

Round one to the country mouse.

CHAPTER 7



The week following the incident at the gate passed in a series of calculated skirmishes. Alexander rose early. Eleanor rose earlier.

He ordered the surveyors to map the eastern ridge. Eleanor informed the gamekeeper that the grouse were nesting in that exact location and could not be disturbed under penalty of the poaching laws.

He scheduled a meeting with the foreman to discuss blasting powder. Eleanor entered the room five minutes into the discussion. She carried a tray of tea and a large, dusty book.

"I found this in the archives," she said. She placed the book on top of the map Alexander was studying. Dust motes danced in the shaft of sunlight hitting the desk.

Alexander looked at the book. Then he looked at her.

"What is this?" he asked.

"A geological survey from 1790," Eleanor said. "It appears there is a subterranean river running directly beneath the proposed shaft three. If you blast, you will flood the valley."

The foreman, Mr. Henderson, looked alarmed. "A river, Your Grace? That would be catastrophic."

Alexander closed his eyes for a second. He took a deep breath.

"Thank you, Eleanor," he said. His voice was perfectly level. "Leave the book. We will... review it."

"I have marked the relevant pages," Eleanor said. "With bright red ribbon."

She smiled at him. It was a weaponized smile.

She turned and walked out. She waited in the hall. Through the thick oak door, she heard the sound of a heavy book hitting the floor.

She smoothed her skirts. A small, tight knot of satisfaction sat in her chest.

He wanted a war. He was getting one.

THE TRUCE WAS ANNOUNCED on Thursday morning.

Alexander found her in the conservatory. She was pruning the dead leaves from a fern. Snipping the dry stems gave her something to do with her hands.

"We have guests tonight," Alexander said.

Eleanor did not look up. Snip. Snip.

"I am aware," she said. "Mrs. Gable informed me. The Squire. The Vicar. The Whellingtons."

"The local gentry," Alexander said. "They are coming to inspect us."

"They are coming to inspect *you*," Eleanor corrected. "They know me. They want to see the London Duke who bought the mortgage."

"They want to see the happy couple," Alexander said.

Eleanor paused. The shears hovered over a brown leaf.

"Then they will be disappointed," she said.

"They must not be," Alexander said. He walked closer. He stopped beside the potting table. "Rumors are already circulating in the village. About the gate. About the sheep on the road. About the separate bedrooms."

"People talk," Eleanor said.

"People invest," Alexander said. "Or they do not. And right now, I need the cooperation of the local landowners for the rail extension. If they think my household is in chaos, they will hesitate."

"Your household *is* in chaos," Eleanor pointed out.

"Tonight," Alexander said, "it will be a model of domestic bliss."

He leaned against the table. He looked at her.

"We will call a truce," he said. "For five hours. From the moment the first carriage arrives until the last one leaves. We will be civil. We will be affectionate."

"Affectionate?" Eleanor laughed. She put the shears down. "You ask too much."

"I ask you to do your duty," Alexander said. "You are the Duchess. Play the part. Convince them that this marriage is real. Convince them that you adore me."

"I am a poor actress," Eleanor said.

"Then learn," Alexander said. "Quickly. Because if the rail deal falls through, I will have to transport the coal by road. And that means widening the lanes through the village. Which means tearing down the stone walls you love so much."

Eleanor stared at him. He held her gaze. He was not bluffing.

"You are blackmailing me," she said.

"I am negotiating," Alexander said. "Do we have an accord?"

Eleanor wiped her hands on her apron. She looked at the fern. It was trimmed. Orderly.

"Five hours," she said.

"Five hours," Alexander agreed. "Wear the blue silk. It matches your eyes."

He pushed off the table and walked away.

Eleanor watched him go. She picked up the shears. She snapped them shut. The sound was sharp in the quiet glass room.

THE BLUE SILK WAS TIGHT. The corset beneath it was tighter. Eleanor stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom. Frances adjusted the sapphire necklace that Alexander had sent up on a velvet tray an hour ago.

"It is beautiful, Miss," Frances whispered.

"It is heavy," Eleanor said. The stones were cold against her throat. They felt like a collar.

There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Eleanor said.

Alexander walked in. He wore formal evening dress. The black coat fit him perfectly. The white cravat was crisp. He looked every inch the Duke.

Frances curtsied and scurried out of the room.

Alexander looked at Eleanor. His gaze traveled from the diamonds at her neck to the hem of the gown.

"Adequate," he said.

"High praise," Eleanor said.

"Come," Alexander said. He held out his arm. "They are arriving."

Eleanor walked to him. She placed her hand on his forearm. The wool of his coat was fine. The muscle beneath it was hard.

They walked down the stairs together. Their steps were synchronized.

"Smile," Alexander murmured.

Eleanor forced the corners of her mouth up. "I am smiling."

"You look like you are in pain," Alexander said.

"I am," Eleanor said. "These shoes pinch."

"Think of the stone walls," Alexander said.

They reached the bottom of the stairs just as the butler opened the main door.

Squire Danbury and his wife bustled in. They were followed by the Vicar and Mrs. Whellington.

"Your Grace!" Squire Danbury boomed. He bowed low. His face was red from the cold. "An honor. A true honor."

"Squire," Alexander said.

He stepped forward. The transformation was instant. The cold, efficient businessman vanished. In his place was a charming host. His smile was warm. His posture was welcoming.

"Welcome to Hartley Manor," Alexander said. "Eleanor has told me so much about you."

He turned to Eleanor. He reached for her hand. He lifted it to his lips.

"Has she not, my dear?" he asked.

His lips brushed her knuckles. His breath was warm on her skin.

Eleanor froze. Her heart skipped a beat. It was a performance. She knew it was a performance. But he did it so well.

"Yes," Eleanor managed to say. "Indeed."

"And Mrs. Danbury," Alexander continued, turning his charm on the Squire's wife. "I understand you are the champion of the local rose growing competition. You must give Eleanor some advice. She struggles with the aphids."

Mrs. Danbury beamed. She turned pink with pleasure.

"Oh, Your Grace! It is all in the soap water," she twittered.

Eleanor watched him. He moved among them with practiced ease. He laughed at the Squire's bad jokes. He listened intently to the Vicar's story about the church roof.

He was a liar. A magnificent, terrifying liar.

"Shall we go in to dinner?" Alexander asked.

He offered Eleanor his arm again. She took it. He pulled her slightly closer than necessary.

"Better," he whispered in her ear. "But try to look less like a hostage."

"I am a hostage," Eleanor hissed back.

"Then enjoy the ransom," Alexander said.

They walked into the dining room.

The table was set with the best china. The candles flickered in the silver candelabras.

Alexander sat at the head. Eleanor sat at the foot. But the table seemed shorter tonight. His presence filled the room.

The conversation flowed. Alexander steered it masterfully. He asked about the harvest. He asked about the local hunts.

"And how are you finding married life, Eleanor?" Mrs. Whellington asked. She leaned forward, her eyes bright with curiosity. "It must be a change. After so many years alone."

Eleanor looked down at her soup. "It is... an adjustment."

"Eleanor is too modest," Alexander said from the other end of the table. "She has taken to the role beautifully. Though I admit, I distract her from her duties far too often."

The guests chuckled. A suggestive ripple went through the room.

Eleanor choked on her spoon. She looked at Alexander. He winked at her.

He winked.

She wanted to throw a bread roll at him.

Instead, she smiled. "Alexander is a demanding husband," she said.

"Only because I value your company," Alexander countered smoothly.

The dinner dragged on. Course after course. Roast beef. Potatoes. Glazed carrots.

Eleanor ate mechanically. She answered questions. She nodded. She smiled until her cheeks ached.

Finally, the meal ended. They moved to the drawing room.

Mrs. Danbury sat at the piano. She began to play a waltz.

"Dance with me," Alexander said.

He stood in front of Eleanor. He did not ask. It was a command wrapped in a velvet glove.

"Here?" Eleanor asked. "Now?"

"It is expected," Alexander said.

He took her hand. He pulled her up.
He placed his other hand on her waist.
His hand was large. The heat of his palm seared through the blue silk. It burned against her corset.

Eleanor gasped softly. She looked up at him.
He pulled her closer. Their bodies brushed.
"Relax," Alexander murmured. "You are as stiff as a board."
"I do not dance," Eleanor said.
"Everyone dances," Alexander said. "Follow me."

He began to move. He led her effortlessly. He steered her around the furniture.

Eleanor stumbled. He caught her. His grip on her waist tightened.
She looked at his throat. The pulse beat steadily beneath his skin. She smelled the soap he used. Sandalwood.

"You are doing well," Alexander said. His voice was low. Intimate.

"I am lying to them," Eleanor said. "We both are."

"We are giving them what they want," Alexander said. "Look at them."

Eleanor glanced over his shoulder. The Squire and the ladies were watching them with sentimental smiles. They saw a young couple in love. They saw a fairytale.

"They do not know," Eleanor whispered. "They do not know you want to dig up their fields."

"Tonight," Alexander said, "I only want to dance."

He spun her. The room blurred. The candlelight smeared into streaks of gold.

For a moment, Eleanor forgot the war. She forgot the coal. She was just a woman in a blue dress, held by a man who moved like smoke.

Her hand on his shoulder tightened. She looked up into his eyes.

They were dark grey. Like the storm clouds over the moor.

He looked back at her. The charm slipped. The mask cracked.

He looked intense. Hungry.

"Eleanor," he said.

The music stopped. Mrs. Danbury finished with a flourish.

Alexander stopped. He did not let go immediately. He held her for a second longer than propriety allowed.

Eleanor's breath hitched.

Then he stepped back. The mask slammed back into place.

"Thank you, my dear," he said loudly. "You dance divinely."

He turned to the guests.

"Brandy in the library for the gentlemen?" he suggested.

The spell broke. The Squire stood up. The men left the room.

Eleanor sank onto the sofa. Her legs felt weak. Her skin tingled where he had touched her.

"Your husband is charming," Mrs. Whellington sighed. "You are a lucky woman, Eleanor."

"Lucky," Eleanor repeated.

She looked at the door where Alexander had vanished.

She felt sick. She felt exhilarated. She felt confused.

The rest of the evening was a blur. Tea. Gossip. Polite farewells.

Finally, the last carriage rolled away down the drive. The heavy front door closed.

The silence rushed back into the hall.

Alexander stood by the table. He was pouring a glass of whiskey. He looked exhausted. The charm was gone. He looked like a man who had carried a heavy weight for hours.

Eleanor stood near the stairs. She unclasped the diamond necklace.

"They are gone," she said.

"Yes," Alexander said. He drank. "And the Squire agreed to the rail easement. The truce was successful."

"I am glad," Eleanor said. Her voice was flat.

"You played your part well," Alexander said. He did not look at her.

"I am tired," Eleanor said. "I am going to bed."

"Eleanor," Alexander said.

She stopped. She turned.

He looked at her. He looked at the place on her waist where his hand had been.

"The survey," he said. "The one about the underground river."

"Yes?"

"My engineers reviewed it," Alexander said. "You were right. The shaft would have been unstable."

Eleanor gripped the banister.

"I see," she said.

"So," Alexander said. "You saved me a considerable amount of money. And embarrassment."

"I saved the valley," Eleanor said.

"Regardless," Alexander said. "Thank you."

It was the first time he had thanked her. It was the first time he had admitted she was right.

"Goodnight, Alexander," Eleanor said.

"Goodnight," he said.

She walked up the stairs. She felt his eyes on her back.

She went into her room. Frances was waiting to unlace her.

"Did it go well, Miss?" Frances asked.

Eleanor looked in the mirror. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were bright.

"Yes," Eleanor said. "It went well."

She touched her waist. The heat was still there. A phantom brand.

She realized then that the war had changed. It was no longer just about land.

It was about him.

And that was a much more dangerous battleground.

CHAPTER 8



The mud on the lower road was thick enough to swallow a boot, so Eleanor lifted her skirts high as she walked along the verge. The hem of her heavy wool cloak dragged against the wet grass, collecting moisture with every step.

Alexander walked ahead of her, wearing high riding boots and a heavy greatcoat that shielded him from the biting wind. He stopped every few yards to inspect the drainage ditches, poking a stick into the slurry of leaves and water with a frown.

"Blocked again," he said, tossing the stick aside.

"The leaves fall every year," Eleanor said, stepping over a puddle. "It is the nature of trees."

Alexander turned, and the wind whipped his dark hair across his forehead. "It is the nature of maintenance to clear them. If the water cannot drain, the road floods, and if the road floods, the coal wagons cannot pass. It is simple physics."

"We usually clear them in November," Eleanor replied.

"It is November now, and the ditches are full," Alexander pointed out, marking the location in a small notebook he carried.

They continued walking in a silence that was filled only by the sound of their boots on the gravel. It was the fourth day of their inspections, and Alexander insisted on seeing every inch of the estate boundaries because he did not trust the maps. Eleanor accompanied him, telling herself it was to

protect the tenants from his criticism, though the house felt too large and empty when she remained behind.

They rounded a bend in the lane near the O'Malley farm where the track narrowed, bordered by a steep bank on one side and a stone wall on the other. A wagon sat in the middle of the road, piled high with timber for the fence repairs. It sat at an odd angle because the left rear wheel had sunk deep into a rut, causing the load to list dangerously toward the wall.

Patrick O'Malley stood by the horse, pulling on the bridle and shouting at the animal while the horse's hooves slipped on the wet stones. "Heave! You useless beast!"

The wagon did not move, and the wood groaned under the strain.

Alexander lengthened his stride and walked toward the cart. "Stop shouting at the horse," he ordered. "You will break its leg on these stones."

Patrick jumped and spun around. He saw the Duke and snatched his cap off his head. "Your Grace! I... I am sorry. The wheel slid into the mud."

Eleanor caught up to them and looked at the wheel. The axle rested on the ground, and the mud held the rim like a vice. "It is stuck fast," she said. "We will need to send for another team to pull it out."

"That will take hours, and if this timber shifts, it will crush the wall," Alexander said, walking around the cart to inspect the load. He took off his gloves and shoved them into his pocket. "Unhitch the horse."

Patrick stared at him blankly. "Your Grace?"

"The horse," Alexander repeated, gesturing to the traces. "Unhitch it. It is doing no good pulling against dead weight."

Patrick scrambled to undo the traces and led the horse away from the shafts. Alexander took off his greatcoat and handed it to Eleanor without looking at her.

"Hold this," he said.

He wore a fine tweed jacket underneath, which was hardly suitable for manual labor. He walked to the back of the wagon and crouched down. "We need to lift the axle so we can place stones under the wheel to give it traction."

"Lift it?" Patrick asked, his eyes wide. "Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but that cart weighs a ton. It took three men to load it."

"Then it is a good thing I am here," Alexander said. "Grab the left corner, Mr. O'Malley. I will take the axle."

Eleanor stepped forward, clutching his heavy coat. "Alexander, you cannot. You will ruin your clothes and hurt yourself."

He ignored her, crouching deeper into the mud until the muck seeped over the tops of his boots. He gripped the greasy wood of the axle. "On my count. One. Two. Three. Lift."

He gritted his teeth, and the cords of his neck stood out as he exerted himself. The wagon groaned and the wood creaked, but slowly, agonizingly, the heavy cart began to rise. The wheel sucked against the mud, making a wet, popping sound as it broke free.

Eleanor watched with her mouth parted slightly, stunned by the sheer physical power required to move the weight. She saw the strain in his shoulders and realized this was not the idle strength of a sportsman, but the functional power of a laborer.

"Higher," Alexander grunted. "Get the stone, O'Malley. Kick it under."

Patrick struggled with the corner but managed to kick a large, flat rock under the rim of the raised wheel.

"Down," Alexander said, and they lowered the cart. The wheel settled onto the stone, sitting higher now and clear of the deep rut.

Alexander stood up and wiped his hands on his trousers, leaving streaks of axle grease and mud on the fabric. He breathed heavily, his chest rising and falling with the exertion. "Now, hitch the horse. It should roll."

Patrick stood staring at him, his gaze fixed on the Duke's dirty hands. "I... thank you, Your Grace. I never thought..."

"Do not think," Alexander said, reaching for his coat. "Just move the timber before it rains again."

Eleanor held the coat out to him, looking at him with a new perspective. There was a smudge of dirt on his cheek, his hair was disheveled, and he looked rough. He looked real.

"You are covered in mud," she said.

"Mud washes off," Alexander replied, buttoning the coat over his ruined jacket. "Broken axles are expensive." He looked at Patrick, who was hitching the horse with renewed vigor. "He works hard but overloads the cart. Tell him to make two trips next time."

"You could tell him," Eleanor suggested.

"He is terrified of me," Alexander said. "He listens to you."

He turned and began to walk back toward the manor with a functional, long-legged gait that ate up the distance, stripping away the arrogance she

usually associated with him. Eleanor hurried to catch up.

"You surprised him," she said.

"I surprised you," Alexander corrected.

"Yes," Eleanor admitted. "I did not think a Duke knew how to lift a cart."

"Physics, Eleanor," Alexander said, rubbing a thumb over a smear of grease on his hand. "Besides, I spent my summers in the mines in Cornwall. My grandfather insisted I learn the business from the bottom."

"You worked in a mine?" Eleanor asked.

"I carried lamps and pushed carts until I was sixteen," Alexander said. "I know the weight of things."

Eleanor looked at his profile, sharp against the grey sky. She had built a picture of him in her mind as a man of silk and ledgers who sat in clubs and gambled, but she had never pictured a boy pushing coal carts in the dark.

"I did not know," she said quietly.

"There is a great deal you do not know," Alexander said, stopping to look at the ditch they had passed earlier. "Just as there is a great deal I do not know about sheep. But I know this ditch needs clearing."

"I will speak to the groundskeeper," Eleanor said.

"Good," Alexander said.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, but the sharp edge of hostility had dulled, replaced by the quiet camaraderie of two people who had worked a problem and solved it.

* * *

THE LIBRARY WAS WARM, and a fire crackled in the grate, casting long, dancing shadows across the rows of books. The wind battered the windowpanes and rattled the frames, but inside it was still. It was past midnight, and the house was asleep, yet Alexander sat at the desk, still working.

He had bathed and changed into a velvet smoking jacket, but the lines of fatigue were etched deep around his eyes and mouth. He was reading the survey reports on the north pasture, holding a pencil in his right hand and making small, precise notes in the margins.

Eleanor sat in her aunt's wingback chair with a book open in her lap, but she had not turned a page in twenty minutes because she was watching him. She watched the way his brow furrowed when he found a discrepancy and the way he rubbed the bridge of his nose when his eyes grew tired. He did not look like a monster; he looked like a man carrying the weight of the world.

She thought of the wagon and the way he had stepped into the mud without hesitation. Alexander had lifted the weight himself, proving he was not the idle libertine she had imagined.

He sighed, a heavy, ragged sound, and reached for his glass of water, finding it empty. Eleanor stood up, the rustle of her silk dressing gown breaking the silence, and walked to the sideboard. She picked up the crystal decanter and poured a small amount of amber liquid into a glass, then placed it near his hand.

"Brandy," she said. "It helps with the cold."

Alexander looked at the glass and then at her, his eyes unguarded and the cold shield down. "Thank you."

He took a sip and ran a finger around the rim of the glass. "The O'Malley cart. Did it reach the barn?"

"Yes," Eleanor said. "Thomas told me they finished the fence before dark."

"Good," Alexander said. "The stone wall there is old. Twelfth century?"

"Thirteenth," Eleanor corrected. "The monks built it."

Alexander nodded thoughtfully. "It is good work. Solid. We should preserve it."

Eleanor felt a jolt of surprise in her chest. "I thought you wanted to widen the road."

"Not there," Alexander said, looking up with a ghost of a smile. "Not if it means destroying history. We can route the wagons through the lower valley, which will add two miles to the journey but save the wall."

Eleanor stared at him. "That is... inefficient."

"Perhaps," he allowed. "But some things have value beyond their utility."

Eleanor looked at his hands resting on the open report. There was a bruise on his knuckles from the wagon wheel and a scrape on his thumb. They were capable hands that could destroy, yes, but also hands that could build and help.

"Why do you do it?" Eleanor asked. "Work this hard? You have solicitors and managers. You could stay in London and let them send you the profits. Why are you here, up until midnight, reading about drainage ditches?"

Alexander looked at the fire, the light reflecting in his eyes. "Because it is mine," he said. "And because if I fail, I am just another useless aristocrat spending an inheritance he did not earn."

He picked up the pencil and turned it over in his fingers. "I spent ten years rebuilding this family name. I bought the mines and the ships, clawing it out of the gutter. I will not let it slide back."

Eleanor looked at the lines on his face and saw the desperation there, the fear of failure that drove him. He was not greedy; he was terrified.

"You are not your father," Eleanor said, though she did not know why she said it.

Alexander looked at her, his gaze intense and searching. "I am a Radcliffe. The blood is the same."

"But the man is different," Eleanor insisted. "Your father would not have lifted Patrick's cart."

Alexander held her gaze while the clock on the mantel ticked steadily. "No," he said quietly. "He would have walked past."

He looked down at the report and turned the page slowly, with a strange gentleness that caught Eleanor's attention. His large hand smoothed the paper flat, and she remembered the heat of that hand on her waist during the dance and the strength of it on the gate. Now she saw the care in it, and she felt a crack in her armor, a hairline fracture in the wall she had built against him.

"You should sleep," Eleanor said. "The ditches will be there in the morning."

"The ditches never sleep," Alexander said, closing the folder and standing up. "But you are right."

He moved close to her, the warmth of the fire radiating from his velvet jacket. "Eleanor," he said.

"Yes?"

"The blue silk," he said, looking at her with a serious expression. "The one you wore to dinner. You should wear it again. It does not look like a hostage's dress."

Eleanor felt the blood rise in her cheeks and turned toward the door.
"Goodnight, Alexander."

"Goodnight, Eleanor," he said.

He waited for her to leave, watching her walk to the door without turning away. Eleanor walked out into the cold hallway and leaned back against the closed wood, pressing her hand to her chest where her heart beat a heavy rhythm. She had called him a monster and a thief, but tonight, in the firelight, she had seen a man who lifted carts and worried about stone walls.

She walked toward her room through the dark house, but for the first time since she had married him, it did not feel empty. It felt like the house was waking up, and so was she.

CHAPTER 9



The fragile peace that had settled over Hartley Manor lasted exactly three days. It was a period marked by civility and a shared focus on the estate which allowed Eleanor to almost forget the transactional nature of their union. They ate breakfast together, discussing the repairs to the tenant cottages, and they spent their evenings in the library where the silence was companionable rather than hostile.

On the morning of the fourth day, Eleanor entered the breakfast room to find Alexander already seated. He was peeling an apple with a small silver knife, cutting the skin away in one long, continuous ribbon.

"Good morning," Eleanor said, taking her seat opposite him. "Mrs. Gable tells me the roof tiles for the barn have arrived."

"They arrived at dawn," Alexander said, slicing a wedge of apple. "I inspected them before breakfast because I wanted to ensure the slate was of sufficient quality."

"And?"

"It is adequate," Alexander said, offering her a slice on the tip of the knife. "The quarry master knows better than to send me seconds."

Eleanor took the apple slice, careful not to touch the blade. "You terrified him."

"I ensured compliance," Alexander corrected, though a faint smile touched the corner of his mouth.

The door opened, and Henderson entered carrying the morning post on a silver tray. The stack was substantial, as it always was, containing ledgers

from London, reports from the mines, and invitations from society hostesses who had not yet heard that the Duke had retreated to the country.

"The post, Your Grace," Henderson said, placing the tray by Alexander's elbow.

Alexander picked up the stack and began to sort through it with practiced efficiency. He tossed the invitations into a pile for the fire and set the business reports aside for later review.

Eleanor buttered her toast, watching him. She had grown used to the rhythm of his work.

Then his hand stopped.

Alexander held a single letter. The envelope was thick, cream-colored parchment, sealed with heavy red wax. There was no stamp, which meant it had been delivered by hand or special courier.

Eleanor watched the color drain from his face. It happened instantly, leaving him looking grey and ill. He stared at the handwriting on the front of the envelope as if it were a death warrant.

"Alexander?" Eleanor asked, lowering her knife.

He did not answer. He broke the seal with a sharp, violent snap of his thumb and pulled the single sheet of paper out.

He read it. His eyes moved back and forth across the lines, widening with every word. His grip on the paper tightened until the edges crinkled, and his knuckles turned white against the mahogany table.

"What is it?" Eleanor asked, standing up. "Is it the mine? Is there trouble in London?"

Alexander crumpled the letter in his fist. He stood up so abruptly that his chair scraped loudly against the floorboards, toppling backward with a crash.

"Leave me," he said. His voice was unrecognizable. It was low, guttural, and stripped of all the polished charm he usually wore like armor.

"Alexander, you are frightening me," Eleanor said, reaching across the table.

"I said leave me!" he roared.

He turned and marched out of the room, slamming the door hard enough to rattle the china in the cabinets.

Eleanor stood in the silence of the breakfast room. She looked at the overturned chair and the abandoned apple peel on his plate.

She walked around the table. The crumpled letter lay on the floor where he had dropped it in his haste. Eleanor knew she should not read it because it was a violation of his privacy, but the look of absolute terror on his face drove her to pick it up.

She smoothed the paper flat. The handwriting was sharp and jagged.

My Son,

I hear rumors of your retreat to Yorkshire. I hear you are playing the country squire while the family investments stagnate. Do not think that your marriage secures your position. The trustees watch every move. If the yield on the northern expansion does not increase by the quarter, I will personally see to it that the trust is dissolved. You will be destitute, Alexander. And you will deserve it.

Prove your worth. Or cease to exist.

Ashford.

Eleanor lowered the paper. The signature was his father's.

She looked at the cruel, biting words. *Cease to exist.*

She realized then that the ruthlessness she had seen in Alexander, the cold drive for profit and efficiency, was not born of greed. It was a desperate, clawing need to survive. He was a man running from a monster, and the monster was his own father.

The day passed in a suffocating silence. Alexander did not appear for lunch, and Henderson reported that the library door was locked.

Night fell, bringing a storm that lashed rain against the stone walls of the manor. Eleanor sat in the drawing room, unable to focus on her embroidery. She watched the clock tick past ten, then eleven.

She stood up and walked into the hall. A line of light showed beneath the library door.

She tried the handle. It turned.

She pushed the door open.

The fire had burned down to embers, casting the room in shadow. Alexander sat behind the desk, slumped in his chair. A bottle of brandy sat before him, three-quarters empty. His cravat was gone, his collar was open, and his hair was in disarray.

He looked up as she entered. His eyes were bloodshot and unfocused.

"I told you to leave me," he rasped.

"That was twelve hours ago," Eleanor said, closing the door behind her.

She walked to the desk. The air smelled of spirits and old ash. Alexander picked up his glass and drained it. His hand shook as he reached for the bottle to pour another.

"Go away, Eleanor," he said. "I am not fit company for a Duchess tonight."

"You are not fit company for anyone," Eleanor said.

She reached out and took the bottle from his hand.

Alexander gripped the neck of the bottle. For a second, she thought he would fight her for it. His eyes met hers, dark with anger and misery.

Then his hand fell away. He slumped back in the chair, defeated.

"Give it back," he muttered. "It is the only thing that stops the voice."

"What voice?" Eleanor asked, placing the bottle on the far side of the desk.

"His voice," Alexander said. He tapped his temple. "He is always there. Telling me I am a failure. Telling me I am weak."

"Your father," Eleanor said.

Alexander laughed, a harsh, broken sound. "The Great Duke. The man who expects perfection from a son he despises."

"I read the letter," Eleanor said.

Alexander went still. He looked at her, his expression hardening into ice. "You had no right."

"You dropped it," Eleanor said. "And you looked like you had seen a ghost."

"I see ghosts every day," Alexander said. He rubbed his face with his hands. "He will do it, you know. He will cut me off. He will strip the title. He will leave me with nothing."

"He cannot simply strip a title," Eleanor said.

"He controls the money," Alexander said. "Without the trust, the title is a hollow shell. I will be a Duke in name only, living in a ruin, unable to pay the servants."

He looked at her, and the vulnerability in his face was devastating.

"I spent my life trying to be what he wanted," Alexander whispered. "I became ruthless. I became cold. I turned myself into a machine that generates gold because that is the only language he speaks."

Eleanor felt a surge of unwanted empathy rise in her chest. She had hated this man. She had called him a thief and a monster. But now she saw the terrified boy hiding inside the imposing man.

He was not digging for coal to buy another palace. He was digging to prove he had a right to exist.

"You are worth more than his approval," Eleanor said.

Alexander shook his head. "I am nothing without it. That is what he taught me."

He reached for the glass, but it was empty. He gripped the edge of the desk until his knuckles turned white again.

"I hate him," Alexander said. The words came out as a sob. "And I am terrified of him."

Eleanor walked around the desk. She stood beside his chair. She hesitated, then placed her hand on his shoulder.

He flinched at her touch, his muscles bunching under the velvet of his coat.

"Alexander," she said.

He leaned his head against her stomach. It was a gesture of absolute surrender. He wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in the silk of her dress.

"I am so tired, Eleanor," he mumbled into the fabric. "I am so tired of fighting."

Eleanor stood frozen. Her hand moved to stroke his hair. It was thick and soft.

"I know," she whispered.

She held him while he shook with silent tremors. She realized that his drive for profit was a mechanism for survival, a deep-seated insecurity instilled by a family that viewed affection as a weakness.

This revelation complicated everything. It was easy to hate a tyrant. It was impossible to hate a victim.

Alexander pulled back. He looked up at her. His eyes were wet, though no tears fell.

"You should despise me," he said. "I am weak."

"You are not weak," Eleanor said. "You carried a wagon to save a horse. You saved a stone wall because it was beautiful."

"I am drunk," Alexander said.

"You are honest," Eleanor corrected.

She took the glass from the desk and set it on the tray.

"Come," she said. "You cannot sleep here."

Alexander stood up. He swayed slightly, bracing himself against the desk. Eleanor took his arm. He leaned his weight on her, heavy and warm.

They walked out of the library and up the stairs. The house was silent around them.

At his bedroom door, Alexander stopped. He looked at her, his gaze searching her face.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked. "I threatened your tenants."

"Because you are my husband," Eleanor said. "And because I think you are not the man you pretend to be."

Alexander touched her cheek. His fingers were rough, but his touch was gentle.

"Be careful, Eleanor," he whispered. "If you look too closely, you might find something you cannot fix."

"I am not trying to fix you," Eleanor said.

"Then what are you doing?"

"I am trying to understand you," she said.

Alexander dropped his hand. He opened his door.

"Goodnight, Eleanor," he said.

"Goodnight," she replied.

He closed the door.

Eleanor stood in the hallway. She felt the ghost of his touch on her cheek. She understood now. The anger, the coldness, the ledgers—it was all a wall he had built to keep the fear out.

She walked to her own room, her mind racing. She had married an enemy, but she had found a wounded man.

And she knew, with a terrifying certainty, that she could no longer just fight him. She had to save him.

CHAPTER 10



The morning sun struggled to break through the heavy bank of clouds hanging over the valley, casting a flat, grey light over the courtyard.

Eleanor pulled on her riding gloves and checked the cinch on her mare's saddle. She had intended to slip away before the household stirred, hoping to avoid Alexander after the raw vulnerability of the previous night in the library.

"The girth is loose," a deep voice said from behind her.

Eleanor turned, her hand freezing on the leather strap. Alexander stood there, dressed for riding in a dark coat and high boots. He looked composed, the impeccable Duke once more, with no sign of the broken man who had wept against her silk dress hours ago, save for a slight redness in his eyes.

"I tightened it myself," Eleanor said, though she stepped back to let him inspect it.

Alexander moved past her, bringing with him the scent of cold air and leather. He gripped the strap and pulled it up another notch with a sharp, efficient movement. "Now it is safe. Where are we going?"

"I am going to the tenant cottages," Eleanor said, gathering her reins. "The weekly inspection."

"I will accompany you," Alexander said, signaling to the groom to bring his stallion forward.

Eleanor looked at him, surprise registering in the slight parting of her lips. "Inspections are tedious, Alexander. They involve leaky roofs and

complaints about fences. You usually prefer to read the summaries in the ledger."

"The ledger tells me numbers," Alexander said, swinging into the saddle with a fluid motion. "It does not tell me why the Davis family is three months behind on their rent. I intend to find out."

He turned his horse toward the gate, expecting her to follow. Eleanor mounted her mare, her mind racing. Yesterday, he would have evicted the Davises for inefficiency. Today, he wanted to visit them. She urged her horse forward, catching up to him as they trotted down the long drive.

"The Davises live in the lower valley," Eleanor said. "The damp settles there in the winter."

"Then it is a poor location for a dwelling," Alexander noted, scanning the landscape with his critical gaze.

"It is where the cottage was built a hundred years ago," Eleanor replied. "We cannot simply move the valley."

They rode in silence for a mile, the rhythm of the hooves on the soft earth filling the space between them.

They reached the cluster of stone cottages near the stream. Smoke rose sluggishly from the chimneys, and a few chickens pecked at the muddy ground. Eleanor dismounted in front of the third cottage, where the thatch looked thin and moss grew heavy on the north wall.

"This is the Davis home," Eleanor said.

She knocked on the door. It opened a moment later to reveal Mrs. Davis, a woman whose face was lined with worry and exhaustion. She wiped her hands on a ragged apron and curtsied low when she saw the Duke standing behind Eleanor.

"Miss Eleanor," Mrs. Davis said, her voice trembling. "Your Grace. We... we did not expect you."

"We are here to check the property," Alexander said, stepping into the low doorway. He had to duck his head to enter the main room.

The cottage was dim and smelled of damp wool and peat smoke. A small fire burned in the grate, but it did little to combat the chill that seeped from the stone floor. In the corner, on a pallet bed, a small boy lay bundled in blankets. His breathing was raspy, a wet, rattling sound that filled the small room.

Eleanor went to the bed immediately. She stripped off her gloves and placed her hand on the child's forehead.

"He is burning up," Eleanor said, looking back at Mrs. Davis. "How long has he been like this?"

"Three days, Miss," Mrs. Davis said, twisting her apron. "It is the chest cold. The doctor said he needs warmth, but..." She trailed off, looking at the ceiling.

Alexander looked up. A dark stain spread across the plaster, and a steady drip of water fell into a bucket placed near the hearth. The dampness in the room was palpable; it clung to the walls and settled in the lungs.

"The roof," Alexander said. "It leaks."

"Yes, Your Grace," Mrs. Davis whispered. "We tried to patch it with straw, but the wind took it. We have no money for slate."

Eleanor stood up. She moved to stand between Mrs. Davis and Alexander, a protective instinct flaring in her chest. She braced herself for his judgment. She expected him to cite the cost of slate. She expected him to mention the unpaid rent. She expected the cold businessman to calculate the loss.

"We will bring blankets from the manor," Eleanor said firmly. "And broth."

"Blankets will not fix a hole in the roof," Alexander said.

He walked to the bucket. He looked at the dirty water. Then he looked at the boy, who coughed a weak, painful cough. He watched Eleanor stroke the child's hair, observing the genuine fear in her eyes. It was not pride that drove her to fight him, he realized. It was this. It was the terrifying responsibility of keeping these people alive.

He turned to Mrs. Davis.

"How much for the repairs?" Alexander asked.

Mrs. Davis went pale. "The mason said five pounds, Your Grace. It is a fortune. We cannot pay."

"I did not ask if you could pay," Alexander said. "I asked the cost."

He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a small leather book and a pencil. He scribbled a note on a page and tore it out.

"Take this to the estate office in the village," Alexander said, handing the paper to the woman. "Tell the foreman to send the slate immediately. And tell him to send the carpenter to fix the draft in the window frames."

Eleanor stared at him. The breath left her lungs in a rush. "Alexander?"

"Do not look at me like that," Alexander said, his voice clipped. "If the boy dies, the family loses a worker. If the roof collapses, the cottage loses

its value. It is a maintenance issue."

Mrs. Davis burst into tears. She grabbed Alexander's hand and kissed his gloved knuckles. "Oh, thank you, Your Grace! Thank you!"

Alexander looked uncomfortable. He pulled his hand away gently. "See to the child," he said. "And get the fire up."

He turned and ducked back out of the door.

Eleanor followed him. The fresh air hit her face, cool and clean after the stifling atmosphere of the cottage. Alexander was already untying his horse, checking the girth again as if the emotional scene inside had never happened.

"You authorized the funds," Eleanor said, walking up to him.

"I authorized a repair," Alexander corrected, mounting the stallion. "A leaking roof destroys the timber beams. Replacing beams costs ten times as much as replacing slate."

"You did it for the boy," Eleanor said. She mounted her mare and brought the horse alongside his.

"I did it for the ledger," Alexander said, though he refused to meet her eyes. He stared straight ahead at the road leading back to the manor.

"You are a terrible liar," Eleanor said.

Alexander glanced at her then. The mask slipped, just for a second, revealing the man she had seen in the library. "And you are a stubborn woman, Eleanor. You fight for them as if they were your own blood."

"They are my responsibility," Eleanor said. "Just as the mines are yours."

"Perhaps," Alexander said. "Perhaps there is some overlap in our... methods."

They rode back up the ridge. The clouds were beginning to break, allowing shafts of pale sunlight to touch the heather. Eleanor looked at him, really looked at him, as he rode with that easy, commanding grace.

She had called him an enemy. She had called him a thief. But an enemy did not buy slate for a sick child. A thief did not worry about drafty windows.

"Thank you," Eleanor said quietly.

"Do not thank me," Alexander said. "Just ensure Mrs. Davis pays her rent when the harvest comes in."

"She will," Eleanor said. "I will make sure of it."

"Good," Alexander said. "Then we are agreed. The estate must run efficiently."

"Yes," Eleanor said. "Efficiently."

A silence settled between them again, but the tension had bled out of it.

Eleanor watched his hands on the reins. They were strong, capable hands. She remembered how they had looked holding the glass of brandy, shaking with fear. And she saw how steady they were now, guiding the powerful horse.

He was complicated. He was difficult. He was proud.

But he was not heartless.

"Alexander," she said.

He looked over at her. "Yes?"

"The surveyors," she said. "The ones mapping the south pasture."

"What about them?"

"There is a bog near the lower gate," Eleanor said. "It looks solid, but it will swallow a heavy machine. You should tell them to approach from the west ridge."

Alexander pulled his horse up. He looked at her with a sharp, assessing gaze.

"You are helping me dig," he said.

"I am helping you avoid losing a drill," Eleanor said. "It is expensive equipment. Is it not?"

Alexander smiled. It was a genuine smile this time, one that reached his eyes and crinkled the corners.

"Very expensive," he agreed. "Thank you, Eleanor."

"You are welcome," she said.

They kicked their horses into a canter. They rode side by side, their knees brushing occasionally as the horses moved together. The wind rushed past them, cold and invigorating.

Eleanor felt a strange sensation in her chest. It was a fluttering, a lightness that had nothing to do with the speed of the ride.

She looked at her husband. He was riding into the wind, his head high, his expression determined.

She realized with a jolt that she was not afraid of him anymore. And she was not fighting him anymore.

She was riding with him.

And for the first time since the day in the study, she wondered where the road might lead them.

CHAPTER 11



The library, once a battlefield where they fought over coal rights and evictions, had transformed into a command center for their shared operations. Alexander sat at the desk with the estate ledgers spread before him, while Eleanor occupied the chair opposite, armed with her own stack of invoices and a pen that she wielded like a saber.

"The grain bill is extortionate," Alexander announced, tapping a column of figures with his index finger. "Mr. Henderson paid three shillings a bushel more than the market rate in Leeds."

"Mr. Henderson bought from the local mill," Eleanor replied without looking up from her correspondence. "The local mill grinds faster, which means the bread reaches the tenants while it is still fresh, and a well-fed tenant works harder than a hungry one."

Alexander leaned back in his chair and regarded her with a look of amused exasperation. "You have an answer for everything, do you not?"

"Only when I am right," Eleanor said, signing a letter with a flourish. "Which is usually the case regarding Yorkshire."

"Arrogance is a Radcliffe trait, Eleanor," Alexander said, reaching across the desk to take the invoice from her hand. "Be careful, or people might mistake you for me."

"Heaven forbid," Eleanor said, though a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Alexander laughed, a low, genuine sound that seemed to vibrate in the air between them. He took the paper, and his fingers brushed against hers.

The contact was brief, a mere grazing of skin against skin, yet Eleanor pulled her hand back as if she had touched a hot coal. Her pulse jumped in her wrist, and she looked up to find Alexander watching her.

His gaze dropped to her hand, then returned to her face. The amusement in his eyes dimmed, replaced by a darker, more intense focus that made the air in the room feel suddenly thin.

"We need to inspect the north woods," Alexander said abruptly, breaking the tension. "The foreman claims the timber is ready for harvest, but I want to see the density before we sign the contract."

"I will get my cloak," Eleanor said, standing up a little too quickly. "The air is heavy today. It feels like a storm."

They rode out within the hour, leaving the manor behind as they crossed the moorland toward the dense tree line that marked the northern boundary. The sky was a bruised purple, heavy with unshed rain, but they pushed the horses into a gallop, racing against the weather.

Eleanor felt the wind tear at her bonnet and sting her cheeks. She looked at Alexander riding beside her. He looked wilder here than he ever did in London. The wind ruffled his hair, and the color high in his cheeks made him look less like a statue and more like a man of the earth.

They reached the woods and slowed to a trot. The trees were ancient oaks and tall pines that blocked out the strange, metallic light of the storm. Alexander guided his stallion between the trunks, pointing out trees marked with white chalk.

"These are good," he shouted over the rising wind. "Straight grain. They will fetch a high price at the shipyard."

"Leave the ones near the stream," Eleanor called back. "Their roots hold the bank together."

"Agreed," Alexander said.

A crack of thunder split the air, shaking the ground beneath the horses' hooves. The sky opened up, dumping a deluge of freezing rain that soaked through Eleanor's velvet riding habit in seconds.

"We cannot make it back!" Alexander shouted, struggling to control his startled horse. "The hunting lodge is half a mile east. Follow me!"

He turned his horse and kicked it into a run. Eleanor followed, bending low over her mare's neck to avoid the whipping branches. The rain fell in sheets, blurring the world into grey streaks.

They burst into a clearing where a small stone structure stood against the treeline. It was the old hunting lodge, unused for years, with ivy swallowing the chimney and moss thick on the roof.

Alexander dismounted and ran to Eleanor's horse. He grabbed the bridle and held the animal steady while she slid down into the mud.

"Inside," he ordered, grabbing her arm to steady her.

They ran for the door. Alexander threw his shoulder against the wood, forcing the swollen frame to give way. They tumbled inside, breathless and dripping.

The lodge was cold and smelled of dust and dry pine needles. Alexander slammed the door shut against the wind and leaned back against it, wiping water from his eyes.

"That was close," he said, breathing hard.

Eleanor shivered violently. Her clothes clung to her skin, heavy and freezing. "We are trapped. The path will be washed out."

"Then we wait," Alexander said, pushing away from the door. "There should be wood here."

He moved to the large stone hearth. A stack of dry logs sat in the corner, covered by an old canvas tarp. Alexander knelt and began to build a fire with the efficiency he applied to everything. He struck a match, shielding the flame with his hands until the kindling caught.

The fire grew, casting a warm, flickering orange light into the room. Eleanor moved closer to the heat, wrapping her arms around herself to stop the trembling.

"You are freezing," Alexander said. He stood up and stripped off his sodden greatcoat, hanging it on a peg by the door. "Get close to the fire."

Eleanor knelt on the hearthrug. The heat hit her face, stinging her cold skin. Alexander joined her, sitting on the floor with his long legs stretched out toward the flames. He ran his hands through his wet hair, spiking it up.

"I have not been this wet since I fell off a dock in Cornwall," he said, watching the steam rise from his boots.

"You were working?" Eleanor asked, her teeth chattering slightly.

"I was showing off," Alexander admitted, glancing at her with a wry smile. "I tried to jump from a barge to the pier to impress a girl."

"Did it work?"

"She laughed until she cried," Alexander said. "And then she helped pull me out. It was a humbling lesson in gravity."

Eleanor laughed, the sound surprising her in the quiet room. "I cannot imagine you being humbled."

"I am humbled every day, Eleanor," Alexander said, his voice dropping. "Usually by you."

He looked at her then. The firelight danced over his face, softening the sharp angles and deepening the shadows in his eyes. He reached out and touched a wet lock of hair that had escaped her bonnet.

"Your hair is soaked," he said. "Take the bonnet off. It will dry faster."

Eleanor untied the ribbon with numb fingers and pulled the hat off, setting it on the stone floor. Her hair tumbled down, a heavy, damp curtain around her shoulders.

Alexander watched her. He did not look away. The silence stretched between them, heavy with the sound of the rain battering the roof and the crackle of the logs.

"Why did you marry me, Alexander?" Eleanor asked suddenly. The question had been burning in her mind for weeks. "Truly. You could have paid the mortgage and left. You could have faced the scandal."

Alexander picked up a twig and tossed it into the fire. "I told you. The trust."

"That is a reason," Eleanor said. "Not an explanation. You are a man who lifts wagons and fights for his name. You do not seem like a man who bows to a board of trustees."

Alexander looked at the flames. "I was tired, Eleanor. I was tired of fighting alone. And when I saw you in that study, screaming at me about greed and families..."

He paused and turned to look at her fully.

"You were the first person in ten years who looked at me and saw a man, not a bank account," he said. "You hated me, yes. But you hated *me*. Not the title. Not the fortune. You hated Alexander Radcliffe."

"I do not hate you," Eleanor whispered.

"No?" Alexander asked, leaning closer. "What do you feel, then?"

Eleanor looked at his mouth. She looked at the pulse beating in his throat. The attraction that she had tried to bury under layers of duty and resentment rose up, undeniable and terrifying.

"I feel..." Eleanor started, but her voice failed.

"I feel like I am standing on the edge of a cliff," Alexander said. "And I want to jump."

He reached out and took her hand. His fingers were warm now. He traced the line of her knuckles with his thumb.

"We are alone here," Alexander said softly. "There are no tenants. No trustees. No titles. Just us."

Eleanor's breath hitched in her chest. She looked into his eyes and saw the hunger there. It mirrored her own.

"Who are we, Alexander?" she asked. "If we are not the Duke and the Duchess?"

"I am just a man who wants his wife," Alexander said.

He leaned in. The movement was slow, giving her every chance to pull away. Eleanor did not move. She stayed rooted to the spot, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird.

His face was inches from hers. She could feel the heat radiating from him. She could see the flecks of gold in his grey eyes.

"Eleanor," he breathed.

The wind howled outside, shaking the door in its frame. The noise broke the spell, or perhaps it just suspended it. Alexander pulled back slightly, though he did not let go of her hand.

"The storm is getting worse," he said, his voice rough. "We will be here all night."

"Yes," Eleanor said. "We will."

Alexander squeezed her hand, then released it. He stood up and walked to the window, staring out at the rain. His back was rigid, the tension in his shoulders visible even through his wet coat.

Eleanor watched him. She touched her lips where his breath had brushed them. She realized then that the war was over. The enemy had fallen.

And in his place stood something far more dangerous.

A man she could love.

CHAPTER 12



Eleanor woke to the sound of water bubbling. She opened her eyes, blinking against the sharp, clean light streaming through the dusty window of the hunting lodge. The storm had passed, leaving the sky a brilliant, washed-out blue.

She pushed herself up from the hearthrug. Her muscles were stiff from sleeping on the stone floor, and her velvet habit was wrinkled and stained with mud.

Alexander stood by the fire. He had removed his cravat and his waistcoat, leaving him in a white shirt that was unbuttoned at the throat. He held a battered tin kettle over the flames with a pair of iron tongs.

"There is tea," he said without turning around. "Or at least, there is hot water and some dried leaves I found in a tin on the shelf. I cannot vouch for the vintage."

Eleanor smoothed her hair back. "You made tea?"

"I boiled water," Alexander corrected, turning to face her. He poured the steaming liquid into two chipped mugs that sat on the hearth. "It seemed the hospitable thing to do."

He handed her a mug. His hand was steady. The tension that had defined his posture for weeks was gone, replaced by a loose-limbed ease.

"Thank you," Eleanor said. She took a sip. The tea was bitter and strong. "It is terrible."

"It is hot," Alexander said, taking a drink from his own mug. He grimaced. "And yes, it is terrible."

They looked at each other over the rims of the mugs. Alexander smiled. It was a small, private smile that made Eleanor's pulse beat a rapid rhythm against her ribs.

"We should go back," Alexander said. "The staff will send a search party if we are not at breakfast."

"They will worry," Eleanor agreed.

"They will gossip," Alexander said. "Let them. For once, the rumors might be true."

Eleanor lowered her mug. "What rumors?"

"That the Duke and Duchess are conspiring," Alexander said. He finished his tea and set the mug down on the mantelpiece. "Come. The horses are waiting."

The ride back to the manor was slow. The ground was soft from the deluge, so they kept the horses to a walk. They did not speak much, but they rode close together, stirrup to stirrup.

When they arrived at the stables, the grooms ran out to meet them, looking anxious. Alexander dismounted and tossed his reins to the head groom.

"Rub them down well," Alexander ordered. "They were out in the cold all night."

He walked around to Eleanor's horse. He did not wait for the groom to bring the block. He reached up and placed his hands on her waist.

Eleanor placed her hands on his shoulders. He lifted her down. For a moment, her feet dangled above the ground, and she was pressed against the length of him. He held her there, suspended.

"You are safe," he said quietly.

"I was never afraid," Eleanor said.

He lowered her until her boots touched the cobblestones. He stepped back, but he did not move away. He offered her his arm.

"Shall we face the lions?" he asked.

"The foreman is waiting in the library," Eleanor said. "He arrived while we were gone."

"Then let us go see him," Alexander said.

They walked into the house together. They walked with the synchronized step of a team.

MR. HENDERSON, the estate foreman, stood by the library desk. He looked impatient. He checked his pocket watch when Alexander and Eleanor entered, still wearing their mud-stained riding clothes.

"Your Grace," Henderson said, bowing stiffly. "I trust you were not caught in the worst of the weather."

"We were delayed," Alexander said. He walked behind the desk and remained standing. "Whatever you have, Henderson, make it brief. I need a bath."

"It is the mining plan for the west quadrant," Henderson said, unrolling a large map across the desk. He weighed the corners down with brass paperweights. "We are ready to break ground on the new shaft. The line goes straight through the tenant gardens, here and here."

He pointed to a red line that sliced through a cluster of cottages.

"It is the most direct route to the seam," Henderson explained. "We can shore up the foundations, but there will be noise. And dust. The tenants will complain."

"They will do more than complain," Eleanor said, stepping up to the desk. "They will leave. You cannot grow vegetables in coal dust."

Henderson glanced at her, then looked back to Alexander. "The efficiency reports suggest this route maximizes the yield, Your Grace. It is what you requested."

Alexander looked at the map. He looked at the red line. Then he looked at Eleanor.

He picked up a pencil.

"The plan has changed," Alexander said.

He drew a heavy black line on the map. It curved away from the cottages, looping around the back of the ridge and entering the seam from the rocky outcrop to the north.

"We will dig here," Alexander said.

Henderson frowned. "The outcrop? Your Grace, that is solid granite. Drilling through that will take weeks. It will cost thousands in extra equipment and labor."

"I am aware of the cost," Alexander said.

"But the yield," Henderson protested. "The investors will see the delay. They will see the expense."

"Let them see it," Alexander said. "The tenant boundary is to be respected. No shaft will be sunk within five hundred yards of a dwelling."

That is a standing order."

Henderson looked stunned. "This is highly irregular. You have always prioritized speed."

"I am prioritizing stability," Alexander said. "If we destroy the village, we lose the workforce. If we lose the workforce, the mine stops. It is a long-term investment, Henderson."

"It is sentimental," Henderson muttered, echoing the very word Alexander had used against Eleanor weeks ago.

Alexander's eyes narrowed. "It is an order. Do you have a difficulty with it?"

Henderson looked at the Duke's hard face. He swallowed.

"No, Your Grace. But the granite... the equipment we have is not sufficient. We would need the heavy drills from the Newcastle site."

"Then send for them," Alexander said.

"It will delay the schedule by a month," Henderson argued, looking to Eleanor as if seeking an ally in logic. "Surely Her Grace understands that the budget cannot sustain such a deviation."

Eleanor looked at the map. She looked at the black line Alexander had drawn. It was a line that saved the gardens. It was a line that protected the peace.

She looked at Henderson.

"The budget is robust," Eleanor said firmly. "I reviewed the quarterly returns myself. We have a surplus from the wool sales. We can cover the cost of the drills."

Henderson blinked. "The wool sales? But that is separate revenue."

"It is all one estate," Eleanor said. "And the Duke is correct. The granite route is safer. If we dig near the cottages, we risk subsidence. A collapsed cottage costs more than a drill."

She stood next to Alexander. She placed her hand on the desk, right next to his.

"We are agreed," Eleanor said.

Alexander looked at her. Approval shone in his eyes. It was sharp and bright.

"You heard the Duchess," Alexander said. "Redraw the map, Henderson. I want the new survey on my desk by tomorrow."

Henderson rolled up the map. He looked defeated.

"As you wish, Your Grace," he said. "I will send for the drills."

He bowed and left the room.

Alexander let out a breath. He leaned back against the bookshelves.

"That will cost me a fortune," he said.

"It will buy you loyalty," Eleanor said. "The tenants will know you spared them."

"I did not do it for the tenants," Alexander said.

"No?"

"I did it because I do not want to argue with you at breakfast for the next ten years," Alexander said.

"Ten years?" Eleanor asked.

"Or twenty," Alexander said. "Or fifty."

He pushed off the shelf and walked toward her. He stopped a foot away. He reached out and brushed a smudge of dirt from her cheek.

"Go and bathe, Eleanor," he said. "We have won the battle. We can rest now."

"We are a good team," Eleanor said.

"We are formidable," Alexander corrected.

He turned and walked to the door. "I will see you at dinner."

* * *

ELEANOR WALKED up the stairs to her room. Her heart felt light.

She bathed and dressed in the blue silk gown. She sat at her vanity table while Frances brushed her hair.

"You look happy, Miss," Frances said. "Did the ride go well?"

"Yes," Eleanor said. "It went very well."

She looked at her reflection. The fear was gone from her eyes. The anger was gone.

She stood up and walked to the window. She looked out at the estate. The sun was setting, casting long shadows across the lawn.

She saw a figure walking in the rose garden below. It was Alexander. He was walking slowly, his hands behind his back.

He stopped by a bush of white roses. He reached out and touched a bloom.

Eleanor watched him. Her breath caught in her throat.

He was not the enemy anymore. He was the man who made terrible tea in a storm. He was the man who moved a mine to save a garden.

She placed her hand on the glass.

Can two people who started as enemies build something real? The question had haunted her since the wedding.

She watched Alexander turn and look up at her window. He saw her. He did not wave. He simply stood there, looking at her across the distance.

Eleanor did not look away.

She felt the answer in the rapid beat of her heart. She felt it in the warmth that spread through her chest.

Yes. They could.

She turned from the window and walked toward the door. She would not wait for dinner. She wanted to be where he was.

She walked down the stairs, the silk of her dress rustling like a promise.

She was going to find her husband.

CHAPTER 13



The morning sun filtered through the high windows of the library, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air as Eleanor and Alexander stood over the large oak desk. They were reviewing the weekly yield reports, their shoulders brushing as they leaned over the parchment. Alexander pointed to a figure at the bottom of the column, a faint smile softening the usual severity of his features.

"The yield is up ten percent," he said. "Your wool sales have offset the cost of the new drills."

"I told you," Eleanor said, dipping her pen in the inkwell. "The local mill pays a premium for clean fleece."

"You were right," Alexander admitted, watching her write. "We make a profitable alliance, Eleanor."

He reached out and covered her hand with his own. His skin was warm, and his thumb traced the line of her wrist in a slow, deliberate rhythm. Eleanor looked up, her pulse jumping in her throat. The air between them felt charged, heavy with the promise of something that had begun in the hunting lodge and grown stronger with every shared meal and quiet evening.

"Alexander," she whispered.

The sound of carriage wheels on the gravel drive shattered the moment.

The noise was loud and demanding, the crunch of stone under heavy iron rims echoing through the open window. Alexander froze. His hand went rigid over hers, then pulled away abruptly. He turned toward the

window, his posture shifting from relaxed intimacy to rigid tension in the span of a single heartbeat.

"Who is it?" Eleanor asked, moving to stand beside him.

She looked out. A massive black carriage with gold crests on the doors had halted at the base of the steps. Four black horses stamped their hooves, their breath steaming in the cold air.

Alexander gripped the window ledge. His knuckles turned white. All the color drained from his face, leaving him looking like a marble statue of himself.

"It is my father," he said.

Eleanor stared at the carriage. "The Duke? Here?"

"He has come to inspect his investment," Alexander said. His voice was flat, stripped of all the warmth it had held seconds ago. "He never travels without a reason."

The carriage door opened. A footman scrambled to lower the steps. A man stepped out.

He was tall, like Alexander, but where Alexander was broad and powerful, this man was gaunt. He wore a heavy fur-collared coat and carried a silver-tipped cane. He looked up at the house with a sneer that etched deep lines around his mouth.

"Go to the drawing room," Alexander ordered. He did not look at Eleanor. He stared fixedly at the figure on the drive. "Do not speak unless spoken to. And for God's sake, Eleanor, try to look like a Duchess."

Eleanor recoiled as if he had slapped her. "Alexander?"

"Go!" he snapped.

He turned and strode out of the library, leaving the door swinging on its hinges.

Eleanor stood alone in the silence. The warmth of the morning had evaporated, replaced by a sudden, biting chill. She smoothed her skirts with trembling hands and walked to the drawing room.

She heard voices in the hall. Henderson's stammering greeting. The heavy thud of the cane on the marble floor. And then a voice that sounded like grinding stones.

"The drive is a disgrace," the older man said. "I saw weeds, Alexander. Weeds."

"We are repairing the drainage first," Alexander's voice replied. It sounded thin. Submissive.

The doors to the drawing room opened. Alexander entered, followed by his father.

The older Duke walked into the room as if he owned the air within it. He stopped in the center of the carpet and surveyed the furnishings with cold, hooded eyes. Finally, his gaze landed on Eleanor.

He looked her up and down, inspecting her as one might inspect a prize mare at an auction.

"So," the Duke said. "This is the bride."

"Eleanor," Alexander said, stepping forward but keeping his eyes on the floor. "This is my father, the Duke of Ashford."

Eleanor curtsied. It was a deep, respectful curtsy, perfect in its execution.

"Your Grace," she said. "Welcome to Hartley Manor."

The Duke ignored her greeting. He turned to Alexander.

"She is small," the Duke said. "And she has the look of the country about her. I expected something more... substantial for the price we paid."

Eleanor stiffened. She looked at Alexander, waiting for him to defend her. She waited for him to say that she was capable, that she was intelligent, that she was his partner.

Alexander said nothing. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, staring at a point on the wall. He seemed to shrink under his father's gaze, the confident man who had lifted a wagon reduced to a terrified boy.

"The mortgage was a necessary expense to secure the mineral rights," Alexander murmured.

"Assets," the Duke corrected. "She is an asset. The estate is an asset. Do not dress it up in sentimental language."

He walked to the window and tapped the glass with his cane.

"I reviewed your latest reports from London," the Duke said. "You moved the shaft."

"Yes," Alexander said. "To the north outcrop."

"Through granite," the Duke spat. He turned, his eyes blazing with cold fury. "You chose a route that will take weeks to drill. A route that costs thousands in equipment. Why?"

"The direct line went through the tenant gardens," Alexander said. "We... I decided it was better to preserve the village stability."

"Stability?" The Duke laughed. It was a cruel, hacking sound. "You sound like a woman. Sentimental. Weak. You are prioritizing cabbage

patches over coal."

"The tenants are the workforce," Alexander tried to say. "If we destroy their homes—"

"If we destroy their homes, they will work harder to rebuild them," the Duke interrupted. "You are soft, Alexander. I always knew it. You let this... sheep farmer influence you."

He pointed the cane at Eleanor.

"You have let her turn a business operation into a charity ward," the Duke said. "Look at her. Standing there in a dress that cost more than her entire inheritance. She is a drain on the trust."

Eleanor felt the anger rise in her throat, hot and sharp. She looked at Alexander.

"Tell him," she willed him silently. *Tell him about the subterranean river. Tell him about the wool profits. Tell him we are a team.*

Alexander remained silent. His jaw worked, but no sound came out. He looked paralyzed.

"I expect the original plan to be reinstated," the Duke said. "Drill through the cottages. Evict the tenants if they complain. I want the coal flowing by next month, or I will freeze the accounts."

"Yes, Father," Alexander whispered.

The disappointment crashed over Eleanor like a physical blow.

She looked at the man she had started to love. The man who had bought slate for a sick child. He was gone. In his place stood a stranger, a coward who would burn her world to the ground to please a tyrant.

"Dinner will be served at seven," Eleanor said. Her voice was steady, though her heart was breaking.

She turned and walked out of the room. Neither man stopped her.

THE DINING ROOM WAS A TOMB. The only sounds were the clink of silver against china and the ticking of the grandfather clock.

Alexander sat at the foot of the table, opposite his father. He had reverted to the cold, ruthless figure he had been in London. His face was a mask of indifference. He ate mechanically, his eyes fixed on his plate.

Eleanor sat on the side, watching them.

"The soup is cold," the Duke announced, dropping his spoon. "Much like this house."

"I will speak to the cook," Alexander said.

"You should speak to your wife," the Duke said. "Domestic management is her only purpose, and she seems to be failing at it."

Eleanor placed her hands flat on the table.

"The soup is a gazpacho, Your Grace," she said. "It is meant to be cold."

The Duke turned his head slowly to look at her. "I do not like foreign food. And I do not like women who speak out of turn."

He looked at Alexander.

"Control her," the Duke said.

Alexander looked up. He met Eleanor's eyes. For a second, she saw the misery there, the desperate plea for understanding.

But then he looked away.

"Eat your soup, Eleanor," Alexander said quietly.

Eleanor looked at him, and the old fears reignited. He would always choose his family's approval over her. He would always choose the trust over the tenants. The man she had seen in the lodge, the man who wanted to build something real, was just a mirage.

"I have lost my appetite," Eleanor said.

She stood up and her chair scraped against the floor.

"Sit down," the Duke ordered.

"No," Eleanor said.

"Alexander," the Duke barked. "Tell her to sit down."

Alexander gripped his wine glass and he did not look up.

"Let her go," Alexander muttered.

"You're weak," the Duke sneered. "You're bloody pathetic."

Eleanor turned and walked out of the room. She walked through the hall, past the library where they had worked together, past the portraits of Alexander's ancestors.

She felt the coldness return, settling into her bones. It was colder than the winter wind on the ridge.

She went to her room and locked the door, then sat by the window and looked out at the dark estate.

Down in the valley, the lights of the tenant cottages twinkled. Alexander had promised they were safe. He had drawn the line on the map himself.

But tonight, in the face of his father's scorn, he had erased it.

She realized then that the war was not over. It had simply changed fronts. And this time, she was fighting alone.

CHAPTER 14



The following morning brought a sky of bruised purple and a biting wind that rattled the windowpanes of the breakfast room. Eleanor sat alone at the table, forcing herself to swallow toast that tasted like sawdust. Alexander had left the house before dawn, riding out to the mines with the foreman, while his father remained in the guest suite, presumably drafting new lists of inadequacies to level against his son.

Eleanor set her teacup down with a sharp clatter. She could not sit there and wait for the axe to fall.

She stood up and walked to the French doors. Outside, in the formal garden, a figure moved among the dormant rosebushes. It was the old Duke. He walked with his cane, poking at the shrubs with the silver tip, accompanied by the head gardener, Mr. O'Shea.

Mr. O'Shea held his cap in his hands, his head bowed low. The Duke pointed the cane at a trellis, shouting something that the wind carried away, but his posture radiated contempt.

Eleanor opened the door. The cold air hit her face, stinging her cheeks. She gathered her skirts and walked out onto the terrace.

The Duke turned as she approached. He wore a heavy wool coat with a fur collar that made him look like a predatory bear.

"You," the Duke said. "Tell this man to dig up these bushes. They are overgrown. We will plant cabbages here. They are more practical."

Eleanor stopped in front of him. She looked at Mr. O'Shea, whose face was pale.

"Mr. O'Shea," Eleanor said. "Please leave us."

"Your Grace?" the gardener asked, looking from the Duke to the Duchess.

"Go," Eleanor said. "The roses stay."

Mr. O'Shea bobbed a quick bow and practically ran toward the potting shed.

The Duke narrowed his eyes. He leaned on his cane, looking at Eleanor with cold amusement.

"You countermand my orders," he said. "Alexander needs to put a tighter leash on you."

"Alexander is the master of this estate," Eleanor said. "And I am the mistress. We do not destroy fifty-year-old rose gardens for cabbages."

"Alexander is a fool," the Duke said. "He wastes money on sentiment. I saw the accounts. The wool surplus. He spent it on drills. Drills to bore through granite because you cried about a few cottages."

"He spent it to ensure stability," Eleanor said. "He spent it because he understands that a loyal workforce is more valuable than a quick profit."

"Loyalty is bought," the Duke sneered. "Fear is cheaper. Alexander is weak. He always has been. He tries to play the businessman, but inside he is still the soft boy who cried when I sold his pony."

Eleanor stepped closer. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. The fear she had felt at dinner was gone, burned away by a white-hot anger.

"You do not know him," she said.

"I made him," the Duke retorted. "I beat the softness out of him. Or I tried. Clearly, I failed."

"You did not make him," Eleanor said. Her voice rose, carrying over the sound of the wind. "You broke him. And then he rebuilt himself. He rebuilt this family name that you dragged into the gutter."

The Duke's face turned a mottled red. "How dare you."

"I dare because I see the truth," Eleanor said. "Alexander works until midnight every night. He walks the drainage ditches in the rain. He lifts wagons out of the mud with his own hands to save a horse. He is ten times the man you are."

"He is a disappointment," the Duke shouted. "He is a failure!"

"He is a good man!" Eleanor shouted back. "He cares for this land. He cares for these people. And he is terrified of you because you are a bully who cannot stand the fact that your son is better than you."

The garden gate slammed open.

Alexander stood there. He was covered in coal dust, his face streaked with black grime. He had clearly ridden hard from the mines. He stared at Eleanor, his chest heaving.

"Eleanor," he said. His voice was a warning.

The Duke turned to his son. He smiled, a cruel, twisting of his lips.

"Your wife has a sharp tongue, Alexander," the Duke said. "She thinks you are a hero. She thinks you are... good."

He laughed. It was a dry, hacking sound.

"Tell her," the Duke said. "Tell her what you really are."

Alexander looked at Eleanor. His eyes were dark voids in his blackened face.

"Go inside, Eleanor," he said.

"Alexander, please," Eleanor said, reaching out to him. "Stand up to him. Tell him we are partners."

"I said go inside!" Alexander roared.

Eleanor recoiled. She looked at the Duke, who was watching with satisfied glee. Then she looked at Alexander, who refused to meet her eyes.

She turned and ran back to the house.

SHE PACED the floor of their bedroom for an hour. The fire in the grate burned low, but she did not ring for more coal. She could not bear to see a servant. She could not bear to see anyone.

The door opened. Alexander walked in.

He had washed the coal dust from his face and hands, but his hair was still damp and his eyes were rimmed with red. He closed the door and locked it.

He turned to face her.

"What were you thinking?" he asked. His voice was low, shaking with suppressed rage.

"I was defending you," Eleanor said. "He was insulting you. He was ordering O'Shea to destroy the garden."

"I can handle the garden," Alexander said. "I can handle my father. I do not need my wife to fight my battles for me in front of the staff."

"You were not handling him," Eleanor said. "You were at the mines. And last night at dinner, you let him humiliate me. You let him humiliate yourself."

"I endured him," Alexander said. "That is how one survives him. You endure. You do not provoke."

"I told him the truth," Eleanor said. "I told him you are a good man."

Alexander laughed. It was the same bitter laugh he had used in the carriage, only sharper.

"A good man?" he asked. "Do you know what I did this morning, Eleanor? I ordered the foreman to revert to the original plan. We are digging through the cottages."

Eleanor froze. The blood drained from her face.

"No," she whispered. "You promised. We agreed."

"My father threatened the trust," Alexander said. "He threatened to freeze the accounts by noon if I did not show progress. I had no choice."

"You always have a choice," Eleanor cried. "You could have told him to keep his money. We have the estate. We have the wool."

"The wool is pennies!" Alexander shouted. He paced across the room, running his hands through his hair. "The wool pays for tea and ribbons. It does not pay for the maintenance of a dukedom. It does not pay for the ships. It does not pay for the power that keeps the wolves at the door."

"You are the wolf," Eleanor said. "You are becoming him."

Alexander stopped. He looked at her.

"I am him," he said. "That is what you refuse to see. You have painted this picture of me in your head. The misunderstood hero. The man who likes old walls. But I am Alexander Radcliffe. I am a businessman. And I will burn down a hundred cottages to save my position."

"I do not believe you," Eleanor said. She walked up to him. She grabbed the lapels of his coat. "I saw you in the lodge. I saw you in the library. That was real."

"That was a weakness," Alexander said. He gripped her wrists and pulled her hands away from him. "That was a moment of exhaustion. Do not mistake vulnerability for virtue."

"It is not weakness to care," Eleanor said. "It is your strength. Your father calls it soft because he is empty inside. But you are full. You have a heart, Alexander. I know you do."

"Stop it," Alexander said. He dropped her hands.

"I love the man who fixed the roof," Eleanor said. The words tumbled out before she could stop them. "I love the man who made tea in a storm. I love you."

Alexander flinched. He looked at her with wide, terrified eyes.

"Do not say that," he whispered.

"It is true," Eleanor said. "I love you. And I know you are better than this."

"I am not!" Alexander yelled. "I am a fraud, Eleanor! I am a coward who bows to a hateful old man because I am terrified of being poor. I am a monster who is about to destroy the lives of people you care about because I value my own comfort more than their survival."

He backed away from her. He looked repulsed. Not by her, but by himself.

"You love a fantasy," Alexander said. "You love a man who does not exist."

"He exists," Eleanor said. "He is standing right in front of me."

"Then look closer," Alexander said. "Because the man in front of you just signed the eviction orders."

Eleanor stared at him. The room seemed to tilt.

"You signed them?" she asked.

"Yes," Alexander said. "The Davises. The Millers. All of them. They have until sunset tomorrow."

Eleanor felt a tear slip down her cheek. She did not wipe it away.

"Then you are right," she said softly. "I do not know you at all."

Alexander looked at her. His face crumpled for a second, a flash of agony crossing his features. He reached out a hand, as if to touch her, but then he pulled it back.

"I tried to warn you," he said. "I told you I was not an easy husband."

"You are not a husband," Eleanor said. "You are a stranger."

She turned her back on him. She walked to the window and looked out at the grey afternoon.

"Leave me," she said.

Alexander stood in the silence. The clock on the mantel ticked. Tick. Tick. Tick.

"Eleanor," he said.

"Go," she said.

She heard his footsteps retreat. She heard the door open and close.

She was alone.

She looked down at the garden. The Duke was there again, pointing his cane at the roses.

She had fought for Alexander. She had exposed her heart and she had offered him her love as a shield against his father.

And he had taken that shield and smashed it.

She pressed her hand to the glass. It was cold.

The war was over. Alexander had surrendered.

And in his surrender, he had destroyed everything they had built.

CHAPTER 15



The light in the library was cold and unforgiving, stripping the room of the warmth it had held during their late-night sessions. Eleanor stood in the center of the room, her hands clasped tightly before her. She had come to retrieve her personal correspondence and her aunt's journals, intending to pack them before she left the room forever.

The desk was a chaotic landscape of papers. Alexander had clearly spent the night here after their argument, and the evidence of his turmoil was scattered across the mahogany surface. Ledgers lay open, maps were unfurled and weighed down with tumblers, and balls of crumpled paper littered the floor.

Eleanor moved to the desk. She intended only to take her own papers, but a sheet of heavy parchment caught her eye. It sat atop a stack of mining surveys, half-hidden under a leather-bound folio. The handwriting was Alexander's, unmistakable in its sharp, angular strokes.

She reached out and pulled the paper free.

It was a memorandum, titled *Draft Strategy: Estate Acquisition and Tenant Management*.

Eleanor read the first line.

Objective: Secure full administrative control of the Hartley estate to facilitate the southern expansion.

She read on, her breath hitching in her throat.

Tactics: The Duchess is driven by sentimentality regarding the tenant families. To ensure cooperation, it is necessary to feign alignment with her

preservation goals. Agreement to minor concessions, such as roof repairs or garden maintenance, will serve to lower her defenses. Once the marriage is legitimized and the deed transfer is irrevocable, the original excavation plan through the lower valley can proceed without legal hindrance.

Eleanor lowered the paper. Her hands shook so violently that the parchment rattled.

Feign alignment.

Lower her defenses.

She looked at the date scribbled in the corner. It was obscured by an ink blot, a careless spill that covered the month and year, leaving only the damning words visible.

She remembered the tea in the hunting lodge. She remembered the way he had drawn the line through the granite to save the gardens. She remembered his hand on her waist during the waltz.

It was all there on the page. *Tactics.*

He had not saved the gardens because he cared. He had done it to pacify her. He had played the part of the reformed rake, the misunderstood hero, just as he had played the charming host at the dinner party. And she, the naive country mouse, had fallen for it completely.

She had given him her heart, and he had filed it under "minor concessions."

The door handle turned.

Eleanor dropped the paper back onto the desk. She shoved it under the folio, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. She could not let him see that she knew. Not yet. She felt too raw, too exposed.

Alexander walked in.

He looked haggard. He wore the same clothes he had worn the day before, rumpled and stained with soot. His jaw was dark with stubble, and his eyes were rimmed with red exhaustion.

He stopped when he saw her. He held something in his hand.

It was a white rose.

The petals were bruised slightly from the cold wind, but the bloom was intact. It was a rose from the bush she had saved from his father's cane.

Alexander took a step forward. He held the flower out to her. His hand trembled.

"Eleanor," he said. His voice was rough, cracking on her name. "I... I went to the garden."

Eleanor stared at the rose. Yesterday, it would have made her weep with joy. Today, it looked like another prop in his performance.

Feign alignment.

"I wanted to apologize," Alexander said. He took another step. "For yesterday. For the things I said. I was angry. I was... afraid."

He looked at her with an expression of open pleading. It was a look of vulnerability, the same look that had melted her defenses in the library.

But now she knew what was behind the mask.

"I brought you this," Alexander said. "As a promise. I will not let him destroy the garden. I will fight him on that."

Eleanor looked from the rose to his face. She saw the calculation in his eyes, or what she now believed was calculation. He was doing exactly what the memo said. He was offering a minor concession to secure her cooperation.

"Stay back," Eleanor whispered.

Alexander froze. He lowered the rose slightly.

"Eleanor?"

"Do not come near me," she said. She backed away until her hips bumped against the edge of the desk.

"Please," Alexander said. "I know I hurt you. I know I signed the orders. But I am trying to find a way—"

"A way to what?" Eleanor asked. Her voice was ice. "A way to manage me? A way to keep the asset quiet while you destroy the rest?"

Alexander frowned. "No. A way to fix this. I spoke to Henderson this morning. I told him to delay the evictions."

"Delay," Eleanor repeated. "Not cancel. Just delay. Until the Duchess is calm again. Until she stops making a scene."

"That is not what I meant," Alexander said. He reached for her hand.

Eleanor recoiled. She pulled her arms tight against her chest, shrinking away from his touch as if he were diseased.

"Do not touch me," she said.

Alexander stopped. His hand dropped to his side. The rose hung limp in his fingers.

"Eleanor, look at me," he said.

"I am looking at you," Eleanor said. "And I see nothing."

She refused to meet his eyes. She looked at the wall. She looked at the floor. She looked anywhere but at the face of the man who had made a fool

of her.

"I trusted you," she said to the floor. "I believed in you."

"You can still believe in me," Alexander said. "We can build this back."

"You cannot build on a foundation of lies," Eleanor said.

She moved sideways, skirting the desk, keeping the heavy oak furniture between them as a barricade. She moved toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Alexander asked.

"Away from you," Eleanor said.

"Eleanor, wait," Alexander said. He moved to block her path. "We need to talk. We need to solve this."

"There is nothing to solve," Eleanor said. "The contract is signed. The deed is transferred. You have what you wanted."

"I do not have what I want," Alexander said. "I want my wife."

"Your wife represents a maintenance issue," Eleanor said. "And she is resigning her position."

She stepped around him. She did not look at his face. She did not look at the rose.

She walked out of the library and closed the door.

She heard him call her name. "Eleanor!"

She did not stop. She walked up the stairs. Her legs felt heavy, like lead weights were attached to her ankles.

She reached her bedroom and went inside. She turned the key in the lock. The click of the mechanism was loud in the silent house.

She walked to the window and looked out. The sky was grey and flat. The garden below was empty, save for the wind whipping the bare branches of the rose bushes.

She wrapped her arms around herself. She felt cold. It was a cold that went deeper than the bone.

She had thought she was saving him. She had thought she was fighting a war for his soul.

But there was no war. There was only a business plan.

And she was just an obstacle to be managed.

She sat in the chair by the window. She did not cry. She was beyond tears. She sat in the silence and mourned the future she had started to believe in. The future where they inspected fences together. The future where they drank terrible tea in the rain.

It was gone. It had never existed.

Down in the library, Alexander stood alone. He looked at the closed door. He looked at the white rose in his hand.

He crushed the flower in his fist. The petals bruised and tore, falling to the floor like snow.

He did not know about the paper on the desk. He did not know that the draft he had written months ago, at the behest of his cynical solicitor, had just become the weapon that destroyed his life.

He only knew that Eleanor looked at him with hate.

And he knew, with a sinking certainty, that his father had won.

The rake had returned. And the naive country mouse had learned her lesson.

CHAPTER 16



Eleanor unlocked her bedroom door and walked into the hallway with the paper clutched in her hand. The edges of the parchment were crumpled where she had gripped them for the last hour, pacing the floorboards until her anger hardened into a cold, sharp resolve. She would not hide in her room like a frightened child while he plotted the destruction of her home downstairs.

She descended the stairs, the rustle of her skirts marking her approach. Alexander was still in the library, standing by the window with his back to the door. He held a glass of whiskey in one hand, though he had not taken a sip since pouring it.

"Alexander," Eleanor said.

He turned slowly. His face was weary, and the lines around his eyes seemed to have deepened since she left him. "Eleanor. I am glad you came back. We must discuss the eviction orders. I have a plan to—"

"I do not want to hear your plans," Eleanor interrupted, walking to the desk. She slammed the document down on the wood. "I have read your plans."

Alexander looked at the paper. He frowned, setting his glass down. "What is this?"

"It is your strategy," Eleanor said, her voice shaking with the force of her accusation. "Your 'Draft Strategy for Estate Acquisition.' It details exactly how you intended to handle me. How you intended to 'feign alignment' with my sentimental goals to lower my defenses."

Alexander reached for the paper. He picked it up and scanned the text. His expression shifted from confusion to shock.

"Eleanor," he said, looking up at her. "Where did you find this?"

"On your desk," she said. "Hidden under the mining surveys. Was that part of the strategy too? To leave it where I might find it after you had successfully deceived me?"

"This is old," Alexander said, dropping the paper as if it burned him. "This is a draft from months ago. From before I even met you. My solicitor drew it up when we bought the mortgage."

"The date is covered in ink," Eleanor pointed out. "Conveniently obscured."

"It was an accident," Alexander said. "I spilled the inkwell last night. Eleanor, listen to me. This was written by a man who did not know you. A man who thought you were just an obstacle."

"And that is what I am," Eleanor said. "An obstacle. You wrote it yourself. 'The Duchess is driven by sentimentality.' You played me, Alexander. You moved the mine to the granite outcrop. You bought the slate for the roof. It was all a performance to keep me quiet while you signed the eviction orders."

"No," Alexander said. He walked around the desk, reaching for her. "The roof was real. The granite was real. I did those things because I cared. Because I listened to you."

Eleanor stepped back, evading his touch. "You listened to the memo. 'Agreement to minor concessions will serve to lower her defenses.' Well, it worked. My defenses were lowered. I believed you were a good man."

"I am trying to be a good man!" Alexander shouted. "I am fighting my father. I am fighting the trustees. I am fighting my own nature every single day for you!"

"You are fighting to win," Eleanor said. "And you have won. You have the estate. You have the coal. You have the wife who signed the contract. Congratulations, Your Grace. The acquisition is complete."

Alexander stared at her. His chest heaved with exertion, and his hands were clenched into fists at his sides. He looked at her face, searching for any sign of the woman who had held him in the hunting lodge.

He found only stone.

"Is that what you believe?" Alexander asked quietly. "That everything between us was a lie? The tea? The dance? The night in the library?"

"The paper says it was a tactic," Eleanor said.

"To hell with the paper!" Alexander roared. "Look at me, Eleanor! Look at me!"

"I am looking at you," Eleanor said. "And I see a rake who knows how to charm a country mouse."

Alexander flinched. The color drained from his face, leaving him pale and defeated. He took a step back, putting distance between them.

"I see," he said. "You have made your judgment."

"The evidence is irrefutable," Eleanor said.

"The evidence is a piece of paper," Alexander said. "The truth was standing in front of you, begging for your faith. But you do not want faith, Eleanor. You want to be right. You want to believe that I am the monster everyone says I am because it is easier to hate a monster than to trust a man."

He turned away from her. He walked to the window and looked out at the grey afternoon.

"I cannot fight this anymore," Alexander said. "I cannot fight my father and you at the same time."

"Then stop fighting," Eleanor said. "Go back to London. Leave us in peace."

Alexander went still. The silence stretched in the room, heavy and suffocating.

"Very well," Alexander said.

He turned back to face her. His expression was blank. The fire was gone. The desperation was gone. There was only a cold, hollow resignation.

"I will leave within the hour," he said.

Eleanor felt a jolt in her chest. She had said the words, but she had not expected him to agree. She expected him to argue. She expected him to fight for her.

"You are leaving?" she asked.

"It is what you want," Alexander said. "I am the villain of this story, am I not? Villains should be banished."

He walked to the bell pull and rang it. Henderson appeared in the doorway moments later.

"Your Grace?" the butler asked, looking between the two of them with wide eyes.

"Have my trunks packed," Alexander ordered. "And have the carriage brought around. I am returning to London."

"Immediately, Your Grace?" Henderson asked. "But the dinner... the guests..."

"Cancel everything," Alexander said. "I will not be returning."

Henderson bowed and hurried away.

Alexander looked at Eleanor one last time. He looked at her black dress. He looked at her hands, clenched white at her waist.

"You have your estate, Eleanor," he said. "You have your victory. I hope it keeps you warm."

He walked past her. He did not touch her. He did not look back.

Eleanor stood in the library. She heard his footsteps on the stairs. She heard the servants running back and forth. She heard the heavy thud of trunks being dragged across the floor.

She did not move. She told herself this was right. She told herself she had exposed the spy and saved the kingdom.

But her chest ached with a physical pain that made it hard to breathe.

An hour later, she heard the carriage pull up to the front door. She walked to the window and pulled back the curtain.

Alexander walked down the steps. He wore his heavy greatcoat and his hat was pulled low over his eyes. He did not look at the house. He did not look at the rose bushes he had promised to save.

He climbed into the carriage. The door slammed shut. The driver cracked his whip.

The black horses lunged forward. The wheels crunched over the gravel.

Eleanor watched until the carriage disappeared around the bend in the drive, swallowed by the trees and the mist.

He was gone.

The man who had lifted the wagon was gone. The man who had drawn the line through the granite was gone.

She was the mistress of Hartley Manor once more. She was safe. She was alone.

She turned away from the window and looked at the desk. The paper still lay there. The damning proof of his treachery.

She picked it up and crushed it in her hand.

She had won the war.

So why did it feel like she had lost everything?

CHAPTER 17



The silence in Hartley Manor was absolute. It settled in the corners of the high ceilings and draped over the furniture like dust sheets.

Eleanor sat at the long dining table, the mahogany surface stretching out before her, empty and polished to a mirror shine.

A single place setting sat at the head of the table.

Mrs. Gable entered through the service door, carrying a silver tureen. The sound of her footsteps on the parquet floor was loud, almost intrusive.

"Dinner, Your Grace," Mrs. Gable said. She placed the tureen down and lifted the lid. Steam rose in a white cloud.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gable," Eleanor said.

She picked up her spoon. The silver felt heavy in her hand. She looked at the empty chair at the foot of the table.

"Will that be all?" Mrs. Gable asked.

"Yes," Eleanor said. "You may go."

Mrs. Gable hesitated. She smoothed her apron. "The staff... we were wondering. About the Duke."

Eleanor lowered the spoon. "What about him?"

"Will he be returning for the harvest festival?" Mrs. Gable asked. "The village is asking. They expected him to lead the procession."

"The Duke is detained in London," Eleanor said. Her voice was steady, practiced. "Business matters require his attention."

"I see," Mrs. Gable said. She did not look convinced. She curtsied and left the room.

Eleanor sat alone. She stirred the soup. She did not eat it.

She stood up and walked to the window. The reflection in the glass showed a woman in black, standing in a room that was too big for one person.

Alexander had been gone for three days.

The house had returned to its former rhythm. The servants moved quietly. The meals were on time. The ledgers were balanced.

It was exactly what she had wanted. It was peace.

And it was unbearable.

She walked out of the dining room and into the hall. She passed the library door. It was closed. She had not entered the room since he left.

A heavy knock sounded at the front door.

Eleanor stopped. Henderson, the butler, appeared from the shadows of the servant's hall. He opened the door.

Mr. Henderson, the mine foreman, stood on the step. He held his cap in his hands and looked agitated.

"Mr. Henderson," the butler said. "It is late."

"I must speak with Her Grace," the foreman said. "It is urgent."

Eleanor stepped forward into the light of the chandelier.

"I am here," she said. "What has happened? Is there an accident at the mine?"

"No, Your Grace," the foreman said. "It is the delivery. The wagons arrived from Newcastle an hour ago. The drivers are demanding a signature for the receipt, and I... I do not have the authority to sign for such a sum."

"What delivery?" Eleanor asked.

"The equipment," the foreman said. "For the granite tunnel."

Eleanor frowned. "The heavy drills?"

"Drills, yes," the foreman said. "And the shoring. And the ventilation engines."

"Ventilation engines?" Eleanor repeated.

"Come in, Mr. Henderson," she said.

The foreman stepped into the hall. He pulled a sheaf of papers from his coat pocket.

"The Duke ordered them," the foreman explained, handing the papers to Eleanor. "Before he left. He sent the requisition by special courier the morning after the storm."

Eleanor took the papers. She walked to the table where a lamp burned. She held the invoice under the light.

It was a detailed order form from the *Newcastle Ironworks*.

Item: High-Tensile Steel Props (x50). Item: Steam-Driven Ventilation Fans (x2). Item: Safety Lanterns (Davie Model) (x100).

Eleanor read the list. The cost at the bottom of the page was staggering. It was three times the annual income of the wool harvest.

"I do not understand," Eleanor said. "Why do we need steel props? We have always used timber."

"For the granite route," the foreman said. "The rock is unstable where it meets the shale. Timber would snap under the pressure. The Duke said he would not send men into that tunnel without steel supports."

Eleanor looked at the date on the order.

It was dated the morning after they had returned from the hunting lodge. The morning he had drawn the line on the map to save the tenant gardens.

"He ordered this immediately," Eleanor whispered.

"Yes, Your Grace," the foreman said. "He was adamant. We argued about the cost. I told him timber was cheaper. I told him the ventilation fans were unnecessary if we dug a second shaft through the cottages."

"And what did he say?" Eleanor asked.

The foreman shifted his weight. "He said that a mine is only as good as the men who work it. He said he would not risk a single life for the sake of a ledger. He said... he said you would never forgive him if a man suffocated in the dark."

Eleanor gripped the edge of the table. The paper shook in her hand.

"He said that?"

"He did," the foreman said. "He prioritized the safety equipment over the extraction machinery. The drills are actually the smallest part of the order. Most of this money is for protection."

Eleanor looked at the invoice again. She saw the signature at the bottom. *Ashford*.

The ink was black and bold.

She remembered the memo she had found. The *Draft Strategy*. The words that had convinced her he was a monster.

Feign alignment.

Minor concessions.

This was not a minor concession. This was a fortune. This was the finest safety equipment money could buy. A man who viewed his tenants as assets to be exploited would never spend this kind of money on ventilation fans.

A man who was feigning alignment would have bought the cheapest timber and hoped for the best.

Alexander had bought steel.

He had bought it because he cared. He had bought it because he listened to her.

"He really changed the plan," Eleanor said. "He really meant to save the village."

"He did, Your Grace," the foreman said. "He stopped the eviction orders the morning he left. He told me to burn them."

"Burn them?" Eleanor asked. Her voice cracked.

"Yes," the foreman said. "He said the tenants were to remain. He said the estate was yours, and your wishes were law."

Eleanor closed her eyes. The room spun around her.

She had accused him of treachery. She had thrown the memo in his face. She had called him a liar and a fraud.

And all the while, the order for the steel props was already on its way from Newcastle.

The memo was old. It was a ghost from a time before he knew her.

But the invoice in her hand was real.

"Your Grace?" the foreman asked. "The drivers are waiting. Shall I send them away?"

Eleanor opened her eyes.

"No," she said. "Unload the wagons. Install the fans. Make the tunnel safe."

She picked up a pen from the table. She signed the receipt. *Eleanor Radcliffe*.

"Thank you, Your Grace," the foreman said. He took the paper. "The men will be relieved. They were worried the new plan would be scrapped now that the Duke is gone."

"The plan stands," Eleanor said.

The foreman bowed and left. The heavy door closed behind him.

Eleanor stood in the hall. She looked at the invoice copy she still held.

She had won. The tenants were safe. The mine would be safe. The gardens were safe.

But Alexander was gone.

She had driven him away. She had let her pride and her fear blind her to the truth standing right in front of her.

You want to be right, he had said. *You want to believe I am a monster.*

He was right. She had wanted to protect herself. She had been so afraid of being hurt, so afraid of being the naive country mouse, that she had refused to see the man who loved her.

She walked to the library door. She opened it.

The room was cold. The fire was dead. The desk was tidy, cleared of his papers.

She walked to the chair where he used to sit. She sat down.

She put her hand on the leather armrest. She imagined the warmth of his hand there.

"I was wrong," she whispered to the empty room.

The silence did not answer.

She thought of him in London. He would be back in his club. Back in the world of high stakes and cold stares. He would be playing the rake again, hiding the boy who lifted wagons behind a wall of cynicism.

Because she had told him that was all he was.

She had confirmed his father's voice. She had told him he was a fraud.

Guilt washed over her, heavy and suffocating. It pressed down on her chest until she could barely breathe.

She stood up. She paced the room. She walked to the window where he had stood when he said goodbye.

She looked out at the dark drive.

"He loved them," she said aloud.

He loved the people because she loved them. He had made their safety his priority because he wanted to be the man she believed in.

And she had crushed him for it.

She wandered out of the library and into the drawing room. It was empty. She went to the music room. It was empty.

The house was a mausoleum.

She walked up the stairs to her bedroom. She opened the wardrobe.

Her black mourning dresses hung there. The grey traveling dress.

And at the back, the blue silk gown.

She touched the fabric. It was cool and smooth.

She remembered the way he had looked at her when she wore it. The hunger in his eyes. The hope.

We are formidable, he had said.

She pulled the dress from the rail. She held it against her chest.

She could stay here. She could be the Duchess of Hartley Manor. She could grow old alone, safe in her victory, presiding over a perfect, empty estate.

Or she could fight.

She looked at the reflection in the mirror. The pale, frightened woman was gone. In her place was a woman with flashing eyes and a set jaw.

She was a Radcliffe now. And Radcliffes did not surrender.

She rang the bell pull. She pulled it hard, again and again.

Frances came running in, her cap askew.

"Miss? Your Grace?"

"Pack the trunk," Eleanor said.

Frances blinked. "The trunk? But we just unpacked."

"Pack it again," Eleanor ordered. "And the blue silk. And the diamonds."

"Where are we going?" Frances asked.

"London," Eleanor said.

"London?" Frances gasped. "But the Duke... he just left."

"I know," Eleanor said. "And I am going to get him back."

She tossed the dress onto the bed.

"Order the carriage," Eleanor said. "We leave at first light."

"But the scandal," Frances said. "Chasing a husband who left you..."

"Let them talk," Eleanor said. "I do not care about the scandal. I care about my husband."

She walked to the window and looked out at the night one last time.

The wind was blowing from the north, carrying the scent of rain and coal.

"Wait for me, Alexander," she whispered.

CHAPTER 18



The steam engine hissed and groaned as the train pulled into King's Cross Station, filling the cavernous iron shed with billowing clouds of white smoke. Eleanor stepped onto the platform before the train had come to a complete halt, her boots hitting the soot-stained pavement with a solid thud. Frances scrambled to follow, struggling with the smaller valise while a porter wrestled the heavy trunk from the luggage car.

London was loud. The noise assaulted them instantly—the screech of metal, the shouting of hawkers, the rattle of carriage wheels on cobblestones. It was a chaotic, grinding roar that usually made Eleanor want to retreat to the quiet of the moors, but today the noise fueled her. It matched the chaotic urgency that had driven her across half of England in a single day.

"Find a carriage," Eleanor ordered the porter, pressing a coin into his hand. "A fast one."

They navigated the crushing crowd to the street. The city air was thick with coal dust and fog, coating the back of Eleanor's throat with a gritty taste. She climbed into the hackney cab, ignoring the torn leather of the seat and the damp straw on the floor.

"Grosvenor Square," she told the driver. "Ashford House."

The driver cracked his whip, and the horse lurched forward. Eleanor gripped the leather strap by the window, watching the city blur past. The grey buildings looked like prison walls, and the people on the streets were faceless shadows in the gaslight.

"We are making good time, Miss," Frances said, clutching her bonnet. "The Duke might be at dinner."

"He might be anywhere," Eleanor said, staring at the passing streetlamps. "He might be at his club. He might be... gone."

She did not finish the thought. The fear that she was too late sat heavy in her chest, a physical weight that made it hard to draw a full breath. She checked the small watch pinned to her lapel. It was past nine o'clock.

The carriage turned into Grosvenor Square. The great houses stood like silent sentinels, their windows glowing with golden light. Ashford House was dark, save for a single lamp burning in the foyer.

The carriage stopped. Eleanor did not wait for the driver. She threw the door open and jumped down. She ran up the broad stone steps, the same steps she had marched up weeks ago to demand a negotiation.

This time, she did not knock. She tried the handle. It was locked.

She pounded on the wood with her gloved fist.

"Open up!" she called.

A minute passed. Then another. Finally, the heavy bolts slid back. The door opened to reveal Henderson.

The butler looked older than she remembered. His uniform was impeccable, but his shoulders slumped slightly, and his eyes were tired. He blinked, staring at the woman standing on the doorstep in a travel-stained grey dress.

"Your Grace?" Henderson asked, his voice cracking with genuine shock. "We... we did not expect you."

"Where is he?" Eleanor asked, stepping into the foyer. She stripped off her gloves and tossed them onto the marble table. "Is he here?"

Henderson closed the door against the night air. "The Duke is out, Your Grace."

"Where?"

"He is attending the ball at Rochester House," Henderson said. "The Duchess of Rochester insisted. She sent three invitations."

"He went to a ball?" Eleanor asked. She felt a flash of cold disappointment. She had imagined him brooding in the library, mourning their separation. Instead, he was dancing.

"He went because the Dowager Duchess commanded it," Henderson clarified, lowering his voice. "She said his sudden return to London was

causing talk. She said he needed to be seen. To show that everything is... normal."

"Normal," Eleanor repeated. "Is he alone?"

"He went alone, Your Grace," Henderson said. "He looked... he did not look like a man going to a celebration. He looked like a man going to a funeral."

Eleanor nodded. She turned to the mirror in the hall. Her reflection stared back at her—pale, disheveled, with coal dust smudged on her cheek.

"I need to change," Eleanor said. "Is the carriage still here?"

"The Duke took the town coach," Henderson said. "But the barouche is in the mews."

"Have it brought around," Eleanor said. "And tell Frances to bring the blue silk to the dressing room. I have a ball to attend."

Henderson's eyes widened. A slow smile spread across his face, banishing the fatigue.

"Immediately, Your Grace," he said. "Welcome home."

THE DRESSING ROOM was a flurry of activity. Frances moved with a speed born of desperation, lacing Eleanor's corset and smoothing the heavy silk skirts of the blue gown. Eleanor sat at the vanity, scrubbing the soot from her face until her skin shone pink.

She did not pin her hair up in the severe, practical knot she wore in Yorkshire. She let Frances style it in loose, shining coils that framed her face, weaving a string of sapphires through the dark strands.

She clasped the diamond necklace around her throat. The stones were cold, but they glittered with a hard, bright light.

"You look like a queen, Miss," Frances whispered, stepping back.

Eleanor stood up. She looked at herself. The dress was the same one she had wore the night she danced with Alexander. The night she had realized she loved him.

"I am not a queen," Eleanor said. "I am a wife."

She walked out of the room and down the stairs. Henderson waited in the hall with her velvet cloak. He placed it over her shoulders.

"The carriage is ready," he said. "The driver knows the way to Rochester House."

"Thank you, Henderson," Eleanor said.

She walked out into the night. The air was biting, but she did not feel it. The adrenaline coursing through her veins kept her warm.

The ride to Rochester House took twenty minutes. The streets were crowded with carriages, all heading in the same direction. The London season was in full swing, a carousel of wealth and judgment.

Eleanor's carriage joined the line. She watched the other guests descending from their vehicles—women in feathers and jewels, men in black coats and white gloves. They laughed and chattered, their voices shrill in the night air.

They were the wolves. The people Alexander feared. The people who could destroy a name with a whisper.

Eleanor gripped her fan. She remembered how small she had felt in the Yellow Drawing Room. She remembered the shame of the scandal.

But she also remembered the steel props in the mine. She remembered the line on the map.

Alexander had faced his father for her. He had risked his fortune for her principles.

She could face a ballroom for him.

The carriage stopped. The footman opened the door.

"Her Grace, the Duchess of Ashford," the footman announced to the crowd on the steps.

Heads turned. Conversations stopped.

Eleanor stepped down. She held her head high. She walked up the red carpet, her silk skirts rustling like armor.

She reached the top of the stairs. The major-domo stood at the entrance to the ballroom, his staff of office in hand. He looked at her, then at his list.

"I am not on the list," Eleanor said. "My husband has my invitation."

The major-domo hesitated. He looked at the Duchess of Ashford. He saw the set of her jaw. He saw the fire in her eyes.

He bowed low.

"Your Grace," he said.

He turned to the room. The ballroom was a sea of color and light, filled with hundreds of people. The orchestra played a quadrille.

"Her Grace, the Duchess of Ashford!" the major-domo bellowed.

The music did not stop, but the room seemed to tilt. Hundreds of faces turned toward the door. The sound of conversation dropped to a hush, then rose again in a wave of frantic whispering.

"The Duchess?"

"I thought she was in Yorkshire."

"They say they are estranged."

"Look at her. She is alone."

Eleanor ignored them. She walked into the room. She moved through the crowd, the people parting before her like the Red Sea. She did not look left or right. She looked straight ahead, scanning the room for one face.

She saw Lady Jersey standing near the punch bowl, whispering behind her fan to a group of debutantes. Lady Jersey looked up, her eyes widening in malicious delight.

"Well," Lady Jersey said, loud enough for Eleanor to hear. "The country mouse has come to town. Searching for stray sheep, are we?"

Eleanor stopped. She turned slowly to face the woman who had helped orchestrate her humiliation.

"No, Lady Jersey," Eleanor said. Her voice was clear and carried over the music. "I am searching for my husband. Though I imagine you are more familiar with the pursuit of other women's husbands than I am."

A gasp went through the circle. Lady Jersey turned a blotchy red.

Eleanor turned away. She continued her search.

She checked the card tables. Alexander was not there. She checked the balconies. He was not there.

Panic began to rise in her chest. Had he left? Had he retreated to the shadows where she could not follow?

She pushed through a knot of gentlemen near the terrace doors.

"Excuse me," she said.

"Your Grace," they murmured, stepping aside.

She reached the edge of the dance floor. She scanned the room again, desperation clawing at her throat.

Then she saw him.

He was standing on the far side of the room, near the open French doors that led to the garden. He was alone.

He stood with his back to the wall, a glass of champagne in his hand. He was not drinking it. He was staring out at the dancers with a look of profound isolation.

He looked impeccable. His coat was perfect. His cravat was tied with mathematical precision. He was the very image of the Duke of Ashford.

But Eleanor saw the truth.

She saw the tension in his jaw. She saw the way his hand gripped the glass too tightly. She saw the hollowness in his eyes, a grey emptiness that matched the sky over the moors.

He looked like a man who had been carved out of ice.

He looked lonely.

Eleanor felt a crack in her heart. She wanted to run to him. She wanted to shout his name.

But the crowd was thick between them.

She started to move. She dodged a pair of waltzers. She skirted a table of dowagers.

A hand reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Eleanor?"

She stopped. It was the Dowager Duchess. Alexander's mother.

The older woman wore purple silk and a tiara that looked heavy enough to break a neck. She looked at Eleanor with sharp, calculating eyes.

"What are you doing here?" the Dowager hissed. "You are supposed to be in Yorkshire. Maintaining the fiction of a happy country life."

"I am done with fiction," Eleanor said. "I am here for Alexander."

"You are causing a scene," the Dowager said. "Look at them. Everyone is staring. If you approach him now, and he rejects you... the scandal will be irreparable."

"He will not reject me," Eleanor said.

"How do you know?" the Dowager asked. "He left you. He told me he was finished with the marriage. He has returned to the fold, Eleanor. He is a Radcliffe. He does not need a distraction."

"He is miserable," Eleanor said, nodding toward Alexander. "Look at him. He is dying inside this cage you built for him."

The Dowager looked at her son. Her expression faltered slightly.

"He is doing his duty," the Dowager said. "It is what we do."

"It is what you do," Eleanor said. "It is not what we do."

She pulled her arm free from the Dowager's grip.

"I am going to him," Eleanor said.

"If you do this," the Dowager warned, "there is no going back. If you cross this floor and he turns away, you will be the laughingstock of London."

"I have been a laughingstock before," Eleanor said. "I survived."

She turned and walked away.

She was ten yards from him. Five.

Alexander was looking at the floor. He seemed lost in thought, oblivious to the noise and the color around him.

Eleanor stopped a few feet away.

"Alexander," she said.

He froze. His head snapped up. He looked at her.

For a moment, he did not react. He stared at her as if she were an apparition, a ghost summoned by his own misery.

He looked at the blue dress. He looked at the sapphires in her hair.

"Eleanor?" he whispered.

The music seemed to fade. The crowd seemed to vanish.

"I found the invoice," Eleanor said.

Alexander blinked. "The invoice?"

"The Newcastle order," Eleanor said. She took a step closer. "The steel props. The fans. I saw the date, Alexander."

Alexander's face paled. "Eleanor, this is not the place—"

"It is exactly the place," Eleanor said. "Because everyone is watching. And I want them to see."

"See what?" Alexander asked. "The wreckage of our marriage?"

"No," Eleanor said. "I want them to see me fighting for you."

She reached out. She took the champagne glass from his hand and set it on a nearby table.

"You bought the safety equipment," she said. "You saved the gardens. You saved the tenants. You did it all before I even accused you."

"I had to," Alexander said. His voice was hoarse. "I could not let them be hurt."

"You did it because you are a good man," Eleanor said. "The man I saw in the library. The man I saw in the lodge. He is real."

"He is weak," Alexander said, his eyes darting to the crowd watching them. "He is a fool who let his wife see him cry."

"He is the man I love," Eleanor said.

Alexander flinched. "Do not say that here. Do not mock me."

"I am not mocking you," Eleanor said. "I traveled two hundred miles to say it. I love you, Alexander. I was wrong about the memo. I was wrong to doubt you. My pride made me blind."

Alexander looked at her. The ice in his eyes began to crack. A desperate hope flared there, bright and painful.

"You came back?" he asked. "After everything I said?"

"I came back because of what you did," Eleanor said. "You acted with honor. You acted with love. And I will not let you stand here alone in the dark while you believe you are unworthy."

She took his hand. It was cold. She squeezed it hard.

"Come with me," she said.

"Where?" Alexander asked.

"Anywhere," Eleanor said. "Away from these people. Away from the noise."

Alexander looked at the crowd. He saw the whispers. He saw his mother watching from the other side of the room.

Then he looked at Eleanor. He looked at her hand holding his.

He tightened his grip.

"The garden," he said.

"The garden?"

"It is quiet there," Alexander said.

He did not let go of her hand. He turned to the French doors. He pushed them open.

The cold night air rushed in.

"Come," Alexander said.

He led her out onto the terrace, away from the lights, away from the judgment, and into the dark.

The heavy velvet curtains swung shut behind them, muffling the music, leaving them alone under the stars.

CHAPTER 19



The heavy velvet curtains swung shut behind them, cutting off the golden light of the ballroom and plunging the terrace into shadow.

The sudden silence was absolute, broken only by the distant, muffled strains of the orchestra and the wind rattling the bare branches of the elms in the garden below.

Alexander released Eleanor's hand immediately. He walked to the stone balustrade and gripped the cold masonry, turning his back to her. He stared out into the darkness, his posture rigid, the lines of his shoulders tense under his black coat.

"You should not have done that," he said, his voice low and devoid of the warmth he had shown in the library. "You should not have come here."

"I had to come," Eleanor said, smoothing the silk of her dress which the wind whipped around her legs. "I could not stay in Yorkshire while you were here, believing lies."

Alexander laughed, a sharp, brittle sound that vanished into the night air. "Lies? You were very clear about the truth, Eleanor. You called me a fraud. You called me a monster. You said I was exactly like my father."

"I was wrong," Eleanor said.

"Were you?" Alexander asked, turning his head slightly to look at her over his shoulder. "I signed the eviction orders. I was ready to tear down the cottages. That is a fact."

"But you rescinded them," Eleanor said, stepping closer. "You stopped them before you even left the house. And you bought the steel."

Alexander turned fully then. His face was a pale mask in the moonlight, his eyes shadowed and unreadable. "The steel was a business expense. An investment in asset protection."

"Stop it," Eleanor said. "Stop hiding behind ledgers. I saw the invoice, Alexander. I saw the date. You ordered the safety equipment the morning after the storm. You ordered it the same day you drew the line through the granite."

"It does not matter," Alexander said, looking away.

"It matters to me!" Eleanor cried. She reached out and grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at her. The wool of his sleeve was rough under her fingers. "It proves that the memo I found was meaningless. It proves that you cared about the tenants' safety more than the profit margin. You saved them, Alexander. You saved the gardens. You saved the village."

Alexander looked down at her hand on his arm. He did not pull away, but he did not cover it with his own.

"I did what was necessary," he said. "That does not make me a hero."

"It makes you a good man," Eleanor said. "The man I fell in love with."

Alexander flinched. The muscle in his jaw jumped. "Do not use that word. You do not love me. You love the idea of me. You love the man who fixed a roof. You do not love the man who has spent his life clawing for money and power."

"I love all of it," Eleanor said. "I love the man who lifts wagons. I love the man who worries about stone walls. And yes, I love the man who clawed his way out of his father's shadow because he refused to be broken."

"I am broken," Alexander whispered. "My father... he was right. I am weak. I let you see the cracks, and you used them against me."

"I used them because I was afraid," Eleanor confessed. Her voice shook, and she tightened her grip on his arm. "I found that memo, and I was terrified. I was terrified that I had given my heart to a man who saw me as a transaction. I wanted to hurt you before you could hurt me. It was my pride, Alexander. My stubborn, foolish pride."

Alexander looked at her. He searched her face, his gaze moving from her eyes to her mouth. He looked for the deception. He looked for the trap.

"You left me," he said. "You stood in that library and told me to go."

"And I have regretted it every second since the carriage disappeared," Eleanor said. "I sat in that empty house, and it felt like a tomb. I have the

estate. I have the deed. I have the safety of the tenants. And none of it matters without you."

She dropped her hand from his arm. She stood before him, defenseless. The wind bit through her cloak, but she did not shiver.

"I am here to offer you a surrender," Eleanor said. "The war is over. I do not want to fight you anymore. I want to stand beside you."

Alexander stared at her. The silence stretched between them, agonizing and heavy. He looked at the woman who had stormed into his study weeks ago, the woman who had fought him for every inch of land.

He saw the tears standing in her eyes. He saw the tremble in her lower lip.

"You came all this way," Alexander said slowly. "Alone. To a ball where you knew you would be judged."

"I would walk through fire for you," Eleanor said. "A ballroom is nothing."

Alexander closed his eyes for a second. He took a breath, the cold air filling his lungs. When he opened his eyes again, the ice was gone. The grey emptiness was gone.

In its place was a raw, desperate hope.

"I thought I had lost you," he said. "I thought I would have to live the rest of my life in this cold."

"You will never be cold again," Eleanor promised. "I will not let you be."

She reached for his hands. She took them in hers. They were large and cold, but they held hers with a strength that anchored her to the earth.

"Can we build something real?" Eleanor asked. "Can two people who started as enemies learn to be... something else?"

Alexander looked at their joined hands. He looked at the sapphire ring on her finger.

"I do not want to be enemies," he said.

"Then what do you want?" Eleanor asked.

"I want to be the man you believe I am," Alexander said. "I want to be worthy of you."

"You are already worthy," Eleanor said. "You just need to believe it."

She waited. She watched the conflict in his eyes resolve into determination.

He squeezed her hands.

"Then let us begin," Alexander said. "No more strategies. No more ledgers. Just us."

"Just us," Eleanor agreed.

She looked up at him. She offered him her heart completely, standing on the cold terrace under the London stars.

And for the first time, she saw him smile. It was not the charming smile of the rake. It was not the cynical smile of the businessman.

It was the smile of a man who had finally come home.

CHAPTER 20



Alexander looked at Eleanor standing in the moonlight. The wind whipped the hem of her blue silk dress around her ankles, and the sapphires in her hair caught the faint light from the ballroom. She looked small against the vast backdrop of the London night, yet she stood with a solidity that made the stone balustrade seem fragile by comparison.

His resolve, which had been fracturing since she appeared in the crowd, finally shattered.

He crossed the distance between them in two long strides. He did not ask for permission. He reached out and pulled her into his arms, burying his face in the crook of her neck. The contact was sudden and desperate, erasing the cold space that had separated them for days.

"I only wanted to be worthy of you," Alexander whispered against her skin. "I thought if I fixed the estate, if I saved the village... perhaps the money would not matter. I thought I could buy my redemption."

"You did not buy it," Eleanor said, wrapping her arms around his waist and holding him tight. "You earned it. You earned it in the mud and in the rain."

Alexander pulled back slightly to look at her face. His eyes were dark and intense, searching hers for any lingering doubt. He found only the clear, steady gaze of a woman who had fought a war for him and won.

He lowered his head and kissed her.

It was a kiss that sealed their union. It was deep and claiming, stripping away the last pretenses of their arrangement. There was no convenience in

the way his mouth moved over hers, and there was no business strategy in the way his hands tangled in her hair, dislodging the carefully placed pins. It was an act of deep, abiding love.

Eleanor rose on her toes to meet him. She pressed herself against the rough wool of his coat, savoring the heat and the strength of him. The world narrowed down to this single point of contact on a cold terrace.

They broke apart slowly, breathless. Alexander rested his forehead against hers.

"We have to go back in," he said. "My mother is watching."

"Let her watch," Eleanor said. "Let them all watch."

Alexander smiled. He straightened his coat and offered her his arm.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Eleanor said.

They walked back to the French doors. Alexander pushed them open, and the noise of the ballroom rushed out to meet them.

They stepped over the threshold together.

The conversation nearest the door died instantly. Heads turned. Fans snapped shut. The Dowager Duchess stood near the center of the room, her eyes widening as she saw them.

They did not look like an estranged couple. They looked like a fortress.

Alexander led Eleanor onto the dance floor. The orchestra began a waltz. He pulled her into his arms, ignoring the whispers that rippled through the crowd like a wave.

"They are talking," Eleanor murmured, glancing at Lady Jersey's scandalized expression.

"Let them talk," Alexander said, spinning her through a turn. "We have given them a show. Now we will give them a silence."

He looked down at her. His expression was proud. Possessive.

"I love you, Eleanor," he said loud enough for the couples nearby to hear.

Eleanor smiled. It was a radiant, victorious smile.

"And I love you, Alexander," she said.

They danced until the music stopped. They stood together against the world, their connection undeniable.

SIX MONTHS Later

The wind on the Yorkshire ridge was gentle, carrying the warmth of the late afternoon sun. Eleanor stood on the high ground overlooking the valley, her hand shielding her eyes from the glare.

Below her, the estate was alive with activity. The harvest was in full swing. Wagons piled high with golden wheat moved along the road that Alexander had cleared. The sound of laughter and singing drifted up from the village green where the tenants were gathering for the celebration.

The cottages stood secure, their slate roofs gleaming in the sun. The smoke rising from the chimneys was thick and steady, signaling well-stocked hearths.

Eleanor heard the sound of hoofbeats behind her. She turned to see Alexander riding up the path. He dismounted and walked toward her, looping the reins over a fence post.

He looked different. The lines of exhaustion were gone from his face, replaced by a healthy tan. He wore his country tweed with a natural ease, the stiff London tailoring abandoned for the practical attire of a working landowner.

"The foreman reports a record yield," Alexander said, coming to stand beside her. "And the new ventilation fans in the north tunnel are working perfectly. The air quality is excellent."

"And the wool?" Eleanor asked.

"Sold," Alexander said. "At a premium. You were right about the Leeds market."

He wrapped his arm around her waist. Eleanor leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. They stood together, looking out over the land that had once divided them.

"We did it," Eleanor said.

"We did," Alexander agreed.

The mortgage was paid. The deed sat in the safe in the library, signed and witnessed. The tenants were secure, their leases renewed for ninety-nine years. And the mining operations hummed along in the granite outcrop, safe and profitable.

Alexander turned her in his arms. He looked down at her.

"Do you remember the day you stormed into my study?" he asked.

"I remember you insulted my bonnet," Eleanor said.

"It was a terrible bonnet," Alexander said, smiling. "But the woman wearing it was magnificent."

He kissed her. It was a slow, leisurely kiss, filled with the comfort of a shared life.

"Come," Alexander said, taking her hand. "The tenants are waiting. We have a harvest to celebrate."

They walked down the hill together. They walked past the stone wall Alexander had saved. They walked past the rose garden where the white bushes were in full bloom.

They had healed their old wounds. They had found a home in each other.

Eleanor squeezed Alexander's hand. He squeezed back.

Two people who started as enemies had built something real. They had built a life.

EPILOGUE



The snow began falling just after midnight on Christmas Eve, drifting down from a slate-grey sky to blanket the Yorkshire moors in a heavy, silent layer of white. By morning, the drifts had piled high against the stone walls of Hartley Manor, blocking the lower panes of the French doors and turning the estate into an island of white isolation.

Inside the master suite, the fire had burned down to glowing embers, casting a dim, red warmth across the room. Eleanor woke slowly, surfacing from a deep sleep to find that she was trapped. A heavy arm lay across her waist, pinning her to the mattress, while the rest of Alexander's large frame acted as a barrier against the chill of the room.

She shifted, attempting to slide toward the edge of the bed, but the arm tightened instantly, pulling her back into the center of the warmth.

"Do not even think about it," Alexander murmured, his voice rough with sleep and vibrating against her shoulder.

"It is morning," Eleanor whispered, turning in his hold to face him. "The sun is up, or at least it would be if the clouds were not so thick."

Alexander opened one eye, peering at the grey light filtering through the curtains before closing it again with a decided finality. "The sun is wrong. It is clearly the middle of the night. Go back to sleep, Eleanor."

"I cannot sleep," she said, poking his chest with a finger. "Mrs. Gable is expecting me in the kitchen to approve the menu for the tenant supper, and I have to ensure the holly is arranged in the Great Hall before noon."

"Mrs. Gable is a tyrant," Alexander grumbled, burying his face in the curve of her neck. "And the holly can wait. I, however, cannot."

"You are the Duke of Ashford," Eleanor said, trying to sound stern despite the laughter bubbling in her throat. "You are a captain of industry. You are the man who ordered steel props from Newcastle at dawn. You do not sleep in."

"I have delegated the industry," Alexander said, moving his hand to trace the line of her spine through her nightgown. "And I have decided to implement a new policy of extreme leisure during the winter months. It is an efficiency measure to conserve body heat."

"Is that so?" Eleanor asked, shivering as his hand slipped lower.

"It is a scientific fact," he claimed, finally opening both eyes to look at her.

The darkness that had once haunted his gaze was gone, replaced by a warm, heavy lidded contentment that made her heart stutter in her chest. He looked younger in the morning light, with his dark hair mussed against the pillow and the shadow of a beard along his jaw.

"You are impossible," she said.

"I am comfortable," he corrected, shifting his weight until he hovered over her, bracing himself on his elbows. "And I am currently exercising my management rights to keep you exactly where you are."

"Management rights?" Eleanor raised an eyebrow. "I believe the deed to the estate is in my name, Your Grace."

"A technicality," Alexander said, lowering his head to brush his lips against hers. "I am still the husband. And I say we stay here until the snow stops."

"That could be days," Eleanor breathed, her hands coming up to tangle in his hair.

"Then we shall starve," Alexander said against her mouth. "A tragic end. The headlines will be sensational. 'Duke and Duchess Perish in Fortress of Down Quilts.'"

He kissed her then, a slow, lazy exploration that tasted of sleep and warmth. Eleanor melted into the mattress, her earlier urgency to check the menus dissolving under the weight of his attention. He kissed her with a thoroughness that suggested he had nowhere else to be and nothing else to do, stripping away her protests until she was wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer.

They stayed in bed until the clock on the mantel chimed ten, ignoring the muffled sounds of the house waking up around them. When they finally emerged, dressed in thick wool and velvet against the drafty corridors, they walked down the stairs hand in hand, a united front against the day.

The Great Hall was a scene of chaos. The servants had brought in baskets of holly, ivy, and fir branches, piling them on the long refectory tables. Red velvet ribbons lay in tangled heaps, and the air was thick with the dust of dried pine needles.

Alexander, the man who could calculate mining yields in his head and negotiate shipping contracts with the French government, stood before a pile of greenery with a look of utter defeat.

He held a spool of ribbon in one hand and a prickly branch of holly in the other. He had attempted to tie a bow, but the result was a lopsided knot that looked more like a snare than a decoration.

"It defies logic," he said, dropping the branch onto the table as Eleanor approached. "The friction coefficient of the velvet prevents a smooth loop."

"It is a bow, Alexander," Eleanor said, picking up the ribbon. "Not a suspension bridge."

"Bridges are easier," he muttered, crossing his arms and leaning against the stone fireplace. "Steel behaves predictably. This... vegetable matter is willful."

"You are just impatient," Eleanor said, her fingers moving deftly to twist the red fabric into a perfect, symmetrical shape. She wired it to the holly and held it up. "There. Simple."

Alexander watched her, his eyes narrowing in mock annoyance. "You are enjoying this."

"Immensely," she admitted. "It is rare that I get to see the Great Duke of Ashford defeated by a shrub."

"I am not defeated," Alexander said, pushing off the fireplace. "I am merely... delegating the artistic elements to the specialist."

He walked around the table, stalking toward her with a predatory grace that made the maids giggle and hide their faces behind their aprons. Eleanor backed away, clutching the holly wreath to her chest like a shield.

"What are you doing?" she asked, laughing as he cornered her against the sideboard.

"I am conducting a performance review," he said, trapping her between his arms. "I believe the specialist requires a bonus for her efficiency."

"Alexander, the servants," Eleanor whispered, though she did not push him away.

"The servants are busy looking at the floor," Alexander said.

He reached out and took the wreath from her hands, tossing it carelessly onto a chair. Then he gripped her waist and lifted her effortlessly, setting her onto the high edge of the sideboard so that they were eye to level.

"Alexander!" she squeaked, her hands flying to his shoulders to steady herself.

"Much better," he said. "Now I do not have to bend down."

He kissed her soundly, oblivious to the whispers and the rustle of pine boughs as the footmen busied themselves in the far corner. It was a playful, claiming kiss that made Eleanor's toes curl in her boots.

When he pulled back, he was grinning. It was the boyish, unguarded grin that she loved most, the one that erased the years of coldness he had endured.

"Now," he said, lifting her down and setting her on her feet. "Where does this infernal greenery go?"

"On the mantelpiece," Eleanor said, smoothing her skirt and trying to regain her composure. "High up. Where no one can see your terrible knots."

Alexander grabbed the largest bough of holly. He walked to the massive stone hearth and lifted the decoration high above his head, placing it perfectly in the center of the mantel.

He turned back to her, dusting his hands on his trousers.

"Done," he said. "Now, let us go outside. I need fresh air before I am strangled by ribbon."

The snow had stopped falling, but the world was still white and silent. They walked out through the garden doors, their boots crunching through the fresh crust. The air was sharp and clean, biting at their cheeks and filling their lungs with ice.

They walked toward the walled garden. The rose bushes were dormant, wrapped in burlap sacks to protect them from the frost, looking like strange, sleeping statues.

"The wall held," Alexander noted, brushing snow from the top of the stone barrier he had diverted the road to save. "The mortar is solid."

"It will stand for another hundred years," Eleanor said. "Because you saved it."

Alexander looked at the wall, then at her. He reached down and scooped up a handful of loose snow, packing it into a ball with his gloved hands.

"Alexander?" Eleanor asked, eyeing the snowball.

"Physics," he said casually, tossing the ball lightly in his hand. "Trajectory. Velocity. Impact."

"You wouldn't," Eleanor said, taking a step back.

"I am a man of science," he said. "I must test the theories."

He threw it.

The snowball hit Eleanor squarely on the shoulder, exploding in a puff of white powder.

She stared at him, her mouth dropping open in shock. Alexander laughed, a deep, booming sound that echoed off the garden walls.

"Oh, you are in trouble," Eleanor said.

She dropped to her knees, ignoring the wet cold seeping into her skirts, and scooped up a double handful of snow. She did not bother to pack it. She just flung it.

It hit Alexander in the chest, coating his fine wool coat in a sheet of white.

"War," Alexander declared, his eyes dancing.

He lunged for her. Eleanor shrieked and ran, lifting her skirts as she dashed through the deep drifts. She ducked behind the fountain, gathering ammunition as she went.

Alexander pursued her, dodging her erratic throws with irritating agility. He cornered her near the potting shed, his arms wide.

"Surrender," he demanded.

"Never!" Eleanor shouted, throwing a final, desperate snowball that hit him in the chin.

He roared and tackled her.

They fell together into a soft, deep drift, tumbling over each other in a tangle of limbs and laughter. Alexander took the brunt of the fall, landing on his back with Eleanor sprawled on top of him.

They lay there for a moment, breathless, staring up at the white sky. The cold snow pressed against their backs, but the heat between them was instantaneous.

Alexander reached up and brushed the snow from her hair. His gloves were wet, but his touch was gentle.

"You are a menace, Your Grace," he said.

"I am a Radcliffe," she countered, smiling down at him. "We do not surrender."

"No," he agreed, his gaze dropping to her lips. "We do not."

He pulled her head down and kissed her, cold lips meeting cold lips, warming instantly with the contact.

"I am freezing," Eleanor murmured against his mouth after a moment.

"Then let us find somewhere warm," Alexander said.

He rolled them over and stood up, pulling her to her feet. He brushed the snow from her coat with brisk, efficient strokes.

"The conservatory," he said. "It is heated."

They ran to the glass structure attached to the side of the house. Alexander opened the door, and they slipped inside.

The air in the conservatory was heavy and humid, kept warm by the coal-fired boiler in the basement. Condensation ran down the glass panes, blurring the white world outside into abstract shapes.

It was silent here, and the contrast between the biting cold and the tropical heat was dizzying.

Eleanor leaned back against a potting bench, breathing hard. Alexander locked the door.

He walked toward her, stripping off his wet gloves and tossing them onto a shelf. He unbuttoned his heavy coat and let it fall to the floor.

"You are wet," he said, reaching out to touch the damp velvet of her collar.

"So are you," she whispered.

He stepped closer, crowding her against the bench. The smell of damp earth and growing things surrounded them, rich and fertile. Alexander placed his hands on the bench on either side of her, trapping her in a cage of his arms.

"Do you remember when you used to hide in here to avoid me?" he asked, his voice low.

"I was pruning ferns," Eleanor said. "I was very busy."

"You were ignoring me," Alexander corrected. "It was infuriating. I wanted to shake you."

"And now?"

"Now," Alexander said, pressing his hips against hers. "I want to do this."

He kissed her again, but this time there was no playfulness in it. It was hungry and intense, fueled by the adrenaline of the cold and the heat of the glasshouse. His hands moved over her, seeking the warmth beneath the layers of wool and velvet.

Eleanor arched into him, her hands gripping his shirt. They stood there in the humid silence, hidden from the world by the steamed-up glass, losing themselves in each other until the sun began to dip low in the sky.

By late afternoon, the tenants had gathered in the Great Hall. The long tables were laden with roasted meats, pies, and jugs of ale. A fiddle player from the village stood by the hearth, playing a lively jig that had the younger children clapping their hands.

Alexander and Eleanor stood at the head of the room. They had changed into dry clothes—Alexander in a fresh coat, Eleanor in a dark green dress that matched the holly.

Patrick O'Malley and Thomas Miller approached them, carrying a wooden box between them. They stopped and pulled off their caps, looking nervous but determined.

"Your Grace," Thomas said, stepping forward. "The families... we wanted to give you something. To say thank you."

Alexander looked at the men. He looked at the box.

"You pay your rent," Alexander said. "That is thanks enough."

"It is not for the rent," Patrick said. "It is for the mine. For the fans. And the steel."

Thomas lifted the lid of the box. Inside sat a writing set carved from dark, polished oak. It was beautiful work, the grain of the wood smooth and rich.

"It is made from the timber of the old barn," Thomas explained. "The one you lifted the wagon to save. We thought... well, we thought you might use it to sign the new leases."

Alexander stared at the box. His throat worked. He reached out and touched the wood, his fingers tracing the edge.

Eleanor watched him. She saw the way his eyes blinked rapidly. She saw the way his hand trembled slightly before he gripped the box.

He had spent his life believing that respect was something to be bought with fear or inherited with a title. He had never expected to earn it with kindness.

"It is magnificent," Alexander said. His voice was thick. "Thank you."

"We are grateful, Your Grace," Patrick said. "Truly."

The men bobbed their heads and retreated to the ale kegs.

Alexander stood looking at the box. He looked at Eleanor.

"They made this," he said softly.

"They value you," Eleanor said. "Because you value them."

Alexander looked out at the room. He saw the Davis family sitting near the fire. The little boy who had been sick was running around the table, chasing a dog.

Alexander watched the child. A strange, soft expression crossed his face.

"He is fast," Alexander noted.

"He is healthy," Eleanor said.

The boy tripped and fell, scraping his knee. He looked up, his face crumpling, ready to cry.

Alexander moved before Eleanor could. He walked over to the child and knelt down. He was a giant next to the small boy, but he spoke quietly.

Eleanor could not hear what he said, but she saw him reach into his pocket and pull out a coin. He made it vanish and reappear behind the boy's ear.

The boy's eyes went wide. The tears stopped. He giggled.

Alexander smiled. He patted the boy on the head and stood up.

He walked back to Eleanor.

"You are good with children," she said.

"I learned a few tricks in London," Alexander said, dismissing it. "Distraction is a useful negotiation tactic."

"Is that what that was?" Eleanor asked, taking his arm. "Negotiation?"

"Maintenance," Alexander said. "Crying children are inefficient."

But his eyes were warm, and his hand covered hers on his arm, holding it tight. Eleanor leaned her head against his shoulder, watching the room full of people who were safe and warm because of the man standing beside her.

The celebration ended, and the last tenant tramped out into the snowy night, clutching a basket of leftovers. The servants cleared the tables and extinguished the lamps in the Great Hall, leaving the house to settle into silence.

Alexander and Eleanor retreated to the library.

The fire was roaring, casting the room in a golden glow. Alexander walked to the desk and placed the wooden box in the center of the leather blotter. It looked right there, solid and permanent.

"I have something for you," Eleanor said.

She picked up a flat, rectangular package wrapped in brown paper from the side table. She handed it to him.

Alexander took it. "I told you, no gifts."

"Open it," she said.

He tore the paper. Inside was a sketchbook bound in blue leather.

He opened it. The pages were filled with charcoal drawings.

There was a sketch of the ridge in the wind. A sketch of the sheep blocking the road. A sketch of the hunting lodge in the rain.

And in the center, a detailed drawing of a man in shirtsleeves, his back strained, lifting a heavy wagon wheel out of the mud.

Underneath, in Eleanor's neat script, it read: *The Day I Saw You*.

Alexander looked at the drawing for a long time. He traced the lines of charcoal.

"I looked like a laborer," he said.

"You looked like a king," Eleanor said.

He closed the book gently. He looked at her.

"I have something for you as well," he said.

He opened the drawer of the desk and pulled out a heavy document with a wax seal. He handed it to her.

Eleanor took it. She recognized the seal. It was from the solicitors in London.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Read it," Alexander said.

She unfolded the document. It was a trust deed.

The Hartley Tenant Protection Trust.

She scanned the legal text. It established an irrevocable fund, independent of the main estate and the Radcliffe fortune. The sole purpose of the fund was to ensure the maintenance of the cottages and the welfare of the tenant families in perpetuity.

The trustee named was *Eleanor Radcliffe, Duchess of Ashford*.

"Alexander," she whispered. "This... this separates the village from your inheritance. Even if the mines fail, even if the trustees in London freeze everything..."

"They will be safe," Alexander said. "No matter what happens to me, no matter what my father does, you will never have to worry about them again. You hold the power, Eleanor. Completely."

He had given away his control. He had given away his leverage.

He had given her peace.

Eleanor dropped the paper on the desk. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Thank you," she cried. "Thank you."

Alexander held her. He buried his face in her hair.

"It is your home," he said. "I just wanted to make sure it stood forever."

"It is our home," Eleanor said.

She pulled back to look at him. The firelight reflected in his grey eyes, making them shine like silver.

"Come," she said.

She led him to the wingback chair by the fire. She sat down, and he sat on the ottoman at her feet, resting his back against her legs.

It was the reverse of the night she had comforted him. Now, he rested in her strength.

She ran her fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes and sighed, a long, deep sound of contentment.

The ledgers were closed. The strategies were forgotten. The war was a distant memory, buried under the snow.

Outside, the wind howled around the stone corners of the manor, searching for a way in. But the walls were thick, the roof was slate, and the fire was warm.

They were safe.

Eleanor looked down at her husband.

"Happy Christmas, Alexander," she whispered.

He reached up and took her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm.

"Happy Christmas, Eleanor," he said.

Two people who had started as enemies sat together in the quiet dark, listening to the fire crackle and the wind sing. They had built a fortress out of their pride, and then they had torn it down to build a home.

And in the silence of the night, they knew they had won the only victory that mattered.

They had each other.

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