



REGAL QUILL
PUBLISHING

*The Earl's
Reluctant Artist*
HENRIETTA
HARDING

The Earl's Reluctant Artist

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

HENRIETTA HARDING

Copyright © 2025 by Henrietta Harding

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

[*Free Exclusive Gift*](#)

[The Earl's Reluctant Artist](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[The Earl's Forever Quill](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

Free Exclusive Gift

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel “The Lord's Favourite Game”** (available only to my subscribers) for **FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://henriettaharding.com/diana>



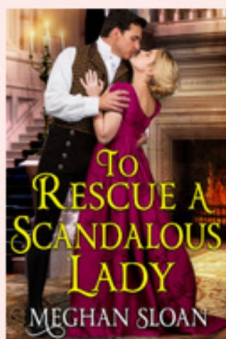
The Earl's Reluctant Artist

Introduction

Eliza Harwood never chose this marriage. Forced by her brother to a man she has never met, she enters Evermere with nothing except fear and her love for painting. Her husband is cold and unreadable, but every glance from him unsettles her. Has she stepped toward freedom, or into another kind of prison?

Lord Tristan Vale, Earl of Evermere, bears scars of war and the weight of his legacy. Determined to protect his land, he weds out of duty. Yet, Eliza's quiet courage disarms him, and her beauty tempts him to break his silence. Will he push her away or risk letting her in?

As whispers grow louder and a dangerous scheme threatens Evermere, their bond is tested like never before. Drawn together by danger, Eliza and Tristan must decide if trust is worth the risk. When love and loyalty stand at war, will they rise together or be lost to the darkness forever?



Do you want **9 FREE novels** straight to your Kindle?

[Claim your FREE novels NOW!](#)

Chapter 1

The boy's breathing came quick and shallow, and his small hands trembled where they gripped the long rifle. The wild boar ahead poked through the ground with its nose, its sharp fur glistening with mud and tree bark.

Tristan's brown hair shone in the sun as he placed a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder, as if to reassure or place undue pressure on him. Whichever one was going to get the work done.

"Steady, George," he said, his tone even but clipped. "With things like this, you have to breathe through it. Keep your eyes on the animal. Do not blink or try to shift focus. Then you relax your shoulders and pull the trigger."

The boy swallowed hard, but his elbows wavered. Tristan cleared his throat, his brown eyes watching the boar shift to a path that gave the boy a clearer shot.

"Now," he ordered, and George snapped the trigger back.

The shot cracked through the clearing and across the leaves. The boar squealed and stumbled sideways before gaining its footing and vanished into the green wall of the footpath. George wanted to go after it, but Tristan gripped his shoulder. They both watched as a streak of blood marked the boar's exit from sight.

"There is no point now, George. It is gone."

George lowered the rifle with a startled gasp. "I-I thought—"

“It is all right,” Tristan said, stepping forward to watch the animal’s shadow finally disappear. “These things happen. You just have to prepare harder for the next one. And maybe try to focus even harder this time around.”

The boy’s mouth opened, but he closed it again. Tristan heaved a sigh and placed his hands on his hips, his fingers gripping the edges of his white shirt.

“I apologize, Lord Vale. I do not—”

“It is my fault,” Tristan said, cutting him off. “I thought you were ready and put too much on you.”

A muscle in George’s jaw jumped, and his eyes glistened. Tristan could see the tears beginning to gather below his lids, and he exhaled slowly.

“Oh, do not be like that, George. How old are you?”

“Thirteen, my lord.”

“In another world, you would already be leading a pack of men into war. You cannot afford to be weak, do you hear me? Emotions get the better of you. They make you reckless and force you into making rather poor decisions. You must put them down. Always.”

George swallowed, nodding gently at Tristan’s words.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“A soldier’s greatest enemy is his feelings,” Tristan said, watching the boy’s face.

George nodded again.

Tristan sighed again. “Wipe your tears. We cannot have your mother grill you about this.”

“Grill him about what?” a third voice called from behind the tall rows of hedges at the edge of the clearing. They both turned at the same time and watched a figure step into view.

“Mrs. Andrews. How long have you been back there?” Tristan asked, clearing his throat.

“Just got here now, my lord,” the woman responded, her voice curt.

“Mother,” George greeted, still fidgeting with the rifle.

Mrs. Andrews stepped even closer to them, her apron brushed with flour and her greying red hair tucked in a neat bun.

“Might I make an inquiry as to what is going on here, my lord?” she asked, her eyes shifting from George and his rifle to Tristan and the calm smirk that settled on his face.

“Nothing, Mrs. Andrews,” he responded, his voice sharper than he intended. “I was only showing your young man here how to catch a boar.”

She glanced at the rifle again. “Are you telling him tales of your time in the military, too, my lord?”

“Oh, you know me. They go hand in hand.”

Mrs. Andrews’ lips curved, and she gave a small nod. She stayed where she was while George and Tristan faced the clearing again.

“Hold the rifle steady, George,” Tristan said, adjusting the boy’s grip with a firm hand.

When he glanced back over his shoulder, Mrs. Andrews was still there.

“Is there something I can help you with, Mrs. Andrews?”

“A letter came for you this afternoon, my lord. I came to inform you as soon as the courier left.”

“Who is it from?”

As she opened her mouth to respond, Tristan raised a hand.

“Do not tell me. I have a good feeling about who it is. I suppose saying it out loud will only ruin the mood.”

Mrs. Andrews shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and Tristan could have sworn he saw a flicker of sympathy cross her face.

“Shall I bring the letter here, my lord?” she asked again, her voice forcefully breaking the brimming silence.

“No.” The word came out too quickly. “I will take it when I return to the lodge.”

“Very well.” She turned to George. “Hurry, George, so you may eat before it grows dark.”

She walked back along the narrow track, her steps fading behind the rustle of leaves.

Tristan watched her go, then looked at George. “I suppose your mother does not want you learning to shoot so soon, Georgie boy.”

“She says it is not proper,” George muttered.

“She may not be far off if she thinks you might hurt yourself.”

George shrugged. “It is more than that. She says there are other things to learn first.”

Tristan kept his eyes on the clearing. “You have a parent who worries. You must be grateful. Not everyone is that fortunate.”

The boy nodded.

A flash of movement caught Tristan's eye once again, and he turned. A deer stood some yards ahead, its ears twitching as it fed on the low grass. The air between them stilled as Tristan stared at it. It had not seen them. At least not yet.

"Hand me the rifle," Tristan said quietly to the boy. "I will take the shot."

"I can do it, my lord," George whispered.

"All that I have said today, you may begin to practice tomorrow," Tristan told him. "For now, hand me the rifle. It is important that the shot is precise."

"I can do it, my lord," George repeated, his tone firmer.

Tristan looked down at him. "You wish to redeem yourself?"

George nodded, setting his jaw.

"Very well. Breathe in and hold. Then let the air settle in your chest before you pull."

George raised the weapon again, and his grip steadied. Tristan watched him put all his focus on the target ahead of them.

"Now," Tristan murmured.

George pressed the trigger, and a shot rang out in the air. The deer jerked, stumbled, and collapsed in the tall grass, and a slow smile touched Tristan's

lips.

“It seems there may still be hope for you, Georgie boy,” he said gently, patting his back.

The boy’s grin spread wide. “Do you think—”

“Do not let it go to your head,” Tristan cut in. “One shot does not make you a marksman. But it is a start.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tristan glanced at the path Mrs. Andrews had taken. “Your supper awaits. Go on ahead. I will follow shortly.”

George hesitated. “Shall I wait for you, my lord?”

Tristan’s eyes narrowed faintly. “No. I will be in shortly.”

The boy nodded, then trudged toward the path, the rifle balanced in both hands.

When he was gone, Tristan let out a breath, his gaze drifting back to where the deer had fallen. The forest had grown quiet again, except for the soft whisper of leaves. He stared at the leaves, praying their sight kept him out of thinking about what awaited him when he stepped back into the lodge.

The weight of the deer pressed into his shoulders as he stepped into the lodge. The scent of the kill clung to his clothes, sharp and metallic. Mrs. Andrews stood in the hall, wiping her hands on her apron. She looked up at him and watched with focus as he walked into the house, his back bent from the weight.

“Where would you like it?” Tristan asked, his voice on the edge of a mild groan.

The older woman eyed the lifeless body. “Preferably alive and back in the forest, my lord, but since we cannot manage that, the kitchen will do.”

Tristan laughed and turned in the direction of the kitchen, but she stepped forward as though to take it from him.

“I can handle it from here, my lord. You do not have to—”

“Nonsense,” Tristan said, shirking away from her before she could even reach him. “I will do it myself.”

He carried the deer through to the kitchen and let it drop with a dull thud onto the long table. When he came back to the hall, Mrs. Andrews was opening a drawer.

He watched with interest as she pulled out an envelope and set it on the side table. “The letter, my lord.”

He nodded in response. “Do you need help skinning the deer? I can bring a —” he asked.

“I will have to beg your pardon for speaking out of turn, my lord,” she said, her eyes narrowing slightly, “but when it comes to skinning deer, I never need anyone else.”

He gave a faint smile in response as she walked away, her footsteps echoing faintly across the house.

After she was gone, Tristan’s eyes shifted back to the letter, and his fingers closed around it.

“What possible news could you have for me this time, Grandpapa?”

He broke the seal and unfolded the paper, feeling the words practically leap at him. His jaw tightened as he took in the contents word by word. Line by line.

Oh, dear lord.

He shuffled his feet and squeezed the paper into his hand, making it damp. By the time Mrs. Andrews returned, muttering about forgetting a stick of butter, the paper lay crumpled on the table.

She paused. “Is anything the matter, my lord?”

“The letter is from my grandfather,” Tristan responded.

“Yes. It is.” Mrs. Andrews responded in a tone that seemed to say that was something they both knew already.

“He has summoned me to the castle.”

The woman’s brows furrowed. “Summoned?”

Tristan let out a nervous chuckle. “More like threatened, if I am being honest.”

Mrs. Andrews said nothing. Instead, she watched with interest as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Something has come up,” he revealed.

The woman took a step back in surprise.

“Is everything all right?”

Tristan squeezed the letter. “Oh, not yet. But it will be.”

“My lord, if you need help with anything—”

Tristan laughed again. “You have been quite the most help, Mrs. Andrews. I do not know how I can possibly repay you.”

Silence fell between them, and Tristan exhaled as loudly as he could.

“I am afraid I must leave for Evermere tonight.”

Mrs. Andrews sighed. “And what about the deer, my lord?”

“Think of it as a gift from me to you, Mrs. Andrews.”

He left her in the hall and went to his room. Evermere was only half a day’s ride. If he left now, he could arrive before it grew fully dark.

He pulled a few shirts and a coat from the chest, rolled them tightly, and stuffed them into a leather satchel. When he stepped back outside, the evening light had begun to fade. He walked to the stable and led his horse into the yard.

“Shall I prepare something for you to take along?” Mrs. Andrews called from the doorway.

“It is too late, Mrs. Andrews. But I am grateful for the sentiment,” Tristan said.

George appeared, trotting toward him. “I will help with the reins, my lord.”

Tristan handed him the leather straps. “Remember, Georgie, the lodge is under your control now. You must protect it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good.” Tristan mounted the horse. “Stay sharp.”

The boy nodded, and Tristan urged the horse forward, the steady rhythm of hooves carrying him onto the open road. His mind worked over the letter’s words. His grandfather never spoke idly of the inheritance. If he had put it in writing, he meant it.

The night air was cold by the time the towers of Evermere rose against the horizon. He rode through the gates, ignoring the curious glances of the two maids who stood near the front steps.

“Where is my grandfather?” he asked.

They exchanged glances before one spoke. “He is in his study, my lord.”

Tristan strode through the halls, the familiar smell of polished wood and parchment filling his lungs. He found the door open and the reflection of shaky candlelight bouncing off the walls.

“Tristan,” his grandfather said, leaning back in his chair. “I knew the letter would get you here.”

He closed the door behind him, letting his eyes briefly settle on the portraits that were hung all around the walls.

“So you decided the only way to get me here was to threaten me with my inheritance?”

“No, I threatened you with it so you would marry this Season.”

“Oh, how kind.”

The old man’s eyes narrowed. “You cannot put it off any longer, my boy. Do you remember your younger cousin, Lady Rosamund Barrow?”

“What does Rosie have to do with anything?” Tristan asked, raising his hands.

The duke leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. “She is getting married in a fortnight. Tristan, she is five years younger than you, and she is already married.”

Tristan sighed. “I am sorry if I am not keen on the idea of dedicating my life to someone else, Grandpapa.”

“Well, perhaps you should be keen on the idea of losing the estate and everything that comes with it after I die.”

Tristan’s voice cooled. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you are my only heir, and I cannot have you waste the rest of your life in a hunting lodge in Northumberland.”

“I could not find anyone I like in time to marry this Season.”

“You could not find anyone in time to do anything,” his grandfather said dryly. “You do not like anyone enough to fall in love with them. Which is why I have asked my solicitor to arrange an advantageous match.”

Tristan felt his stomach twist. “Garrett?”

“Yes.”

Tristan's brow narrowed. "You went to such lengths before even sending a word to me?"

"I do not want you to refuse, my boy. I hope you do what I say this time around. If you do not, I will hand off my estate to someone else."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "You do not need to make the threat twice, Grandpapa."

"I am being serious."

"And I am here. Is that not enough proof that I am aware of that?" Tristan muttered.

His grandfather ignored it. "Garrett will be here tomorrow."

Tristan's jaw flexed as he turned around.

"Fine."

Chapter 2

Eliza stood before the mirror as it captured her face in the soft light of the morning. Her eyes settled on her reflection, and she watched in wonder as her reflection stared back at her. Her cheeks were framed with brown hair, and they fell in rather loose strands that seemed to brush her shoulders. Her hazel eyes looked wider than usual and had a slight hint of red about them.

She hadn't been sleeping properly as of late, and she needed to remedy that as soon as possible. Her frame was slight and her shoulders were narrow. They filled out her gown, which was plain in color. She brushed her hair with slow strokes, pressing her lips together as if the motion would steady her thoughts.

She was halfway done with her hair when the door creaked open.

Ruth, the serving maid, curtsied before stepping in, her voice low and careful. "Miss, your brother is here."

Eliza's brush stilled. "He is back?"

"Yes, miss. And he brought a friend with him."

Eliza swallowed. "Thank you, Ruth."

Ruth dipped again and slipped out of the chamber. Eliza placed the brush on the dressing table with a trembling hand. Her heart jumped and then sank. She rose to her feet, lifting the ends of her gown as the fear started to get the better of her. The best way to avoid Marcus's anger was to remain out of sight.

And that was what she intended to do.

She hurried out immediately, her slippers practically digging into the wooden floorboards as she left her chamber.

The staircase stretched before her, its edges lined with dust and the steps stripped of polish. She remembered when it used to shine with no consequence. When light from the tall windows spilled across it like gold. Now it looked dry and brittle, a reminder of the former grandeur she used to live in.

She descended quickly, her dress still gathered in one hand. Her feet crossed the faded carpet of the hall, each step echoing in the emptiness. She glanced behind her as though expecting someone to appear.

She turned back too late and collided with a solid form. A gasp escaped her lips.

“Watch where you are going, you half-wit!” Marcus snapped, pushing his hand out and shoving her aside.

Eliza stepped back, her heart pounding in her chest with no limit. She watched him smooth the lapel of his coat with sharp flicks of his fingers, his mouth drawn into a thin line.

“I beg your pardon,” Eliza said quickly, her cheeks flushing as she managed to exhale.

Marcus looked down at her, but the man beside him drew her eyes instead. His figure was taller than her brother’s, and his coat was dark and well cut. His gaze met hers and softened faintly.

“Miss Harwood,” the man said with a polite bow. “I am Mr. Coltrane.”

Eliza dipped her head just slightly. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“I am about to have a very important meeting with Mr. Coltrane,” Marcus said, his voice rising with authority. “If you know what is good for you, make yourself scarce.”

Eliza clenched her hands together, the knuckles growing white. She watched as Marcus and Mr. Coltrane walked toward the opposite end of the house. Her teeth pressed hard together. If Marcus already saw her, she might as well take her chance now. There was something she needed. Something she was certain he could provide for her.

She drew a breath and stepped forward. “Marcus, now that you are here, there is something I would like to ask of you.”

Marcus stopped mid-step and turned slowly, his dark eyes boring into her, heavy with disdain.

“Well, speak, Eliza,” he said. “Not all of us have time to waste.”

Eliza rubbed her hands together, her gaze falling to the floor and then back up again. “I had hoped to purchase some hues for my painting. I meant to go to the market this morning, but I have no money. I wondered if you might give me some.” She swallowed. “You could even lend it, and I will repay you when I have it.”

A low laugh broke from Marcus, and he stepped toward her until the space between them seemed to shrink.

“When you have it? Eliza, have you lost all sense? We are growing penniless by the second. The house is disintegrating around us, yet you ask me for colors.”

“I only—”

“You only waste breath,” Marcus cut in, his voice sharp and filled with scorn. “Look around you. Look at where we currently live. This house once stood proud, a glorious mansion with endless maids and cooks. Now we are reduced to one servant and a girl in the kitchen who cannot apparently tell what fish should taste like—”

“Anna is trying her best —”

“Did I say you could speak?”

Eliza’s chest rose and fell, the words burning her throat.

“Let us say I lend you the money, how would you repay me?” Marcus demanded.

He lifted his boot and tapped the sole against the floor. “You are as useless as this bit of leaf at the bottom of my shoe. You do nothing but sit before a canvas all day and draw useless images. You have no prospects, no suitors of worth, no skill that would keep you fed for even a week. And still you ask me for colors.”

Her throat tightened, and she bit the inside of her lip until she tasted blood.

Marcus leaned closer, his words low but edged with cruelty. “The only responsibility I have, dear sister, is to keep you alive, and I do that by feeding you. Anything else is a frivolity, and for you, a luxury.”

Eliza lowered her eyes. “I am sorry. I only meant to ask—”

“Well, you meant wrong.”

Eliza swallowed. “You must accept my apologies.”

A wave of tension passed between all three of them before Marcus eventually broke it.

“Make certain you never ask me that again,” he said, his voice leaving no room for argument. He turned on his heel and strode away with Mr. Coltrane, leaving her rooted to the spot.

Left alone, she felt her skin start to crawl with embarrassment. Her vision blurred, and she blinked hard, but the sting in her eyes did not fade.

“Miss,” Ruth’s gentle voice broke through as she hurried forward and touched Eliza’s arm. “Do not cry. Please, do not let your brother’s words fall too deep. It will be well.”

Eliza forced a breath, steadying her voice, though it wavered. “Yes, Ruth. I am well aware of that, believe me. I know it cannot continue this way.”

Ruth gave her a searching look. “No, it cannot. Do you need me to fetch you anything? A handkerchief, perhaps? Maybe a handkerchief for your eyes?”

“You are too kind,” Eliza stated. “But you do not have to worry. The worst of it is all over, I suppose.”

Ruth said nothing. Instead, she only nodded and remained rooted to the spot. Eliza brushed her sleeves against the falling tears in her eyes and cleared her throat.

“Tell me, Ruth,” she said, “Who is Mr. Coltrane? Is he someone we used to know? Something about him seems oddly familiar.”

“I do not think so, miss,” Ruth answered softly. “But if you will forgive my forwardness, I cannot help but wonder what mischief your brother is plotting this time around.”

Eliza’s lips pressed into a thin line. She lifted her chin and nodded faintly. “I cannot help but wonder as well.”

The afternoon light slid lazily through the tall window, softening the hard lines of Eliza’s chamber. She sat with her easel near the window, her brush moving gently across the canvas. A shallow plate of hues rested at her side, the colors new and precious. She had asked her only friend, Clara, for money to purchase them. She could still hear Clara’s voice in her mind as she painted.

Do not fret, Eliza. I only want you to pay it back when you can.

Her hand trembled slightly with gratitude as she dipped the brush into the vivid blue. For a moment, she allowed herself to breathe. The scent of oil and pigment filled the room, intense but somewhat soothing. Her brush

moved, laying out the lines of stone steps, tall drapes, and windows filled with light.

She was not painting what lay outside her window. There was nothing worth painting there. All she could see now were broken shutters, cracked stones, and a courtyard overrun by weeds. No, she painted what had once been, what the house used to be like when her parents were still alive.

She painted the mansion as she remembered it, when it looked graceful and stately and when it was filled with the hum of life.

The tall cobblestone steps shone in her imagination, and the courtyard brimmed with polished carriages. Drapes of ivory fell in soft folds from high windows, and the sun pressed hard against the bright walls.

She painted the grandeur of yesterday. The one she could no longer get back. The thought struck her just as it had come.

Her throat tightened, and she set down the brush for a moment. Tears filled her eyes as she folded her hands together.

“Papa. Mama.” Her voice was low and uncertain as she pressed her palms against her knees.

“You always said you would be with me. Yet it feels as though you have abandoned me.” She raised her gaze to the ceiling as if the light might carry her words.

“I remember the dinners you gave. I remember the plays we attended, the carriage rides through town. Now we have nothing, except enough to keep us from starving.”

She bent her head again, lifting the brush but not moving it.

“Marcus is no solicitor anymore. He was caught stealing, and he has brought disgrace upon us. I have had to borrow from a friend for these colors.”

Her breath caught, and she blinked against the sting in her eyes.

“This cannot be the life you wished for me. I know you wanted better, and I want better, too. I want freedom. I want to escape his hand upon me. If you hear me ... if you truly are still with me ... please send me a sign.”

The door burst open without warning, and Marcus stepped in, his boot digging into the floor with purpose. She watched his eyes sweep over her painting before settling on her face, and she gently lowered her brush.

“I suppose it would be too much to ask that you knock before entering my room.”

He shut the door behind him with a click. “The last thing you want to do is waste my time with sass.”

Her lips pressed tight. She placed the brush on the table before her and waited. Whatever her brother had to say, it couldn’t be worse than anything he had said before.

“I’ve brought news,” Marcus eventually said, walking across the chamber with deliberate strides. He sat down on the edge of her bed, his hand settling on his coat. “Good news.”

She arched her brow. "What news?"

"It has all been arranged," Marcus began, his tone measured and calculated. "You are to marry Lord Tristan Vale, the Earl of Evermere."

For a moment, she could not speak. She blinked at him, uncertain whether she had misheard, then, at the very last minute, a sharp and quick laugh broke from her lips.

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her. "Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yes. Did you hear what you just said?"

"Yes," Marcus responded, his voice flat and devoid of any kind of humor.

"And it is quite hilarious," Eliza said, shaking her head. "You have either taken up a role as a court jester, or you have finally lost your mind."

His expression hardened. "You will not speak to me in that manner."

"Is this a joke? No lord would ever agree to marry a girl from a family in ruin. I have nothing to offer, Marcus. No inheritance or promise of dowry."

Marcus's mouth curved into a smile, even though it held nothing but mischief. "It is fortunate you need not worry about that. Lord Tristan knows nothing of our state. All he knows is that you are the daughter of a powerful baron, with noble connections and wealthy friends. As a female, you are left with a small inheritance held in trust. That will be difficult to disprove."

Her breath left her sharply. “You mean to have me enter into marriage by deceit? You truly have gone mad.”

He rose and crossed the room, stopping near the small table where her brushes lay. “This is everything we have been hoping for.”

She stood, squaring her shoulders. “No. It is everything you have been hoping for. I will not do it.”

His eyes narrowed. “You have no choice.”

“I am certain that I have a choice in whom I marry. I will not submit to a scheme or give myself to a man under false pretenses.”

Marcus’s hand came down hard on the table, rattling the bowl of colors. “Need I remind you again of our situation? Our father is gone. We have no income, no standing. The roof falls in each passing day, and the walls rot around us. Your purpose to this family is to make yourself useful.”

Her lips trembled, but she held her ground. “You are the reason we are in this state. You squandered what we had on dishonest dealings and disgraced our name. Why should I have to pay for your transgressions?”

Marcus leaned close, his face tight with fury. “Enough.”

Eliza exhaled and continued to watch him.

His gaze fell on the canvas by the window. The painted drapes and carriages gleamed in vivid color.

“And this?” he said with a sharp laugh. “This is what you do while the house decays? A child’s game. It will never feed you.”

Her hand clenched against her skirts. “There must be another way.”

“There is none,” Marcus said. His voice cut across the chamber like a knife. “If you refuse, then the house will crumble over our heads, and you will bear the blame.”

He straightened and smoothed his coat again as he walked toward the door. Then he grabbed the doorknob and turned to her. “You will marry him. And that is final.”

He stepped out, and the door shut tight behind him.

Eliza stood still, her breath uneven. Her hand trembled when she lifted the brush again, but she could not bring herself to paint. She stared at the bright colors she had bought at such cost. She would have to marry an unknown earl.

She had no choice.

Better to face a stranger than the wrath of her brother.

Chapter 3

Tristan had always cherished the early hours of the morning. The fragile quietness that came with it and the way it often let him get his mind in order. It was also the time he managed to get the most sleep, at least when he was still at the hunting lodge.

He would find that the situation was no longer the same, and perhaps in a rather harsh manner at Evermere.

The knock on his door was firm and jarring enough to throw the remainder of his sleep from his eyes. He groaned and wiped his hands over his face.

“My Lord? It’s Stanley.”

Wonderful, he thought.

“Enter,” he said, his voice rough.

The door opened and Stanley, one of the manor’s footmen stepped in, his uniform neat, though his collar sat slightly slant. Perhaps it was still the sleep making him see things.

“My lord,” he said with a bow, “His Grace requests your presence after breakfast this morning.”

“Does he?” Tristan raised a brow as he swung his legs from the bed. His eyes then caught the faintest hesitation in the footman’s expression and gave a dry smile. “And by after breakfast, does my grandfather by any chance mean during breakfast?”

Stanley's ears turned pink. "So it would seem, my lord."

Tristan pushed to his feet and reached for his coat. "A clever little scheme to force me out of this chamber and into the dining room." He shook his head, pulling his waistcoat into place. "My grandfather cannot abide anyone who eats alone. It has always been his campaign against me."

Stanley said nothing, wisely keeping his gaze lowered.

Tristan dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "Go on, then. Tell His Grace I shall be there soon."

The door closed behind the footman, and Tristan gave a small sigh. His appetite was thin, but there was no avoiding the duke once he had summoned him. He dressed quickly, tugging his cravat into place, and stepped into the hallway, his eyes studying the clean carpet and bright walls.

The scent of toast and coffee filled his nostrils the instant he stepped into the dining hall. His gaze immediately found his grandfather seated at the head of the long table, rigid and commanding as always. But it was not the duke who caught Tristan's attention next.

It was the figure to his left.

"Aunt Evelyn?" Tristan said, his eyes wide and his lips curving faintly. He leaned down to embrace the older woman, the perfume of lavender clinging to her gown.

"When did you arrive?"

Evelyn patted his cheek with gloved fingers. “Very late, my dear. I am certain the clock had already struck one.”

“That is quite late indeed.” Tristan settled himself across from her, his eyes still focused on her. Aunt Evelyn was his father’s immediate sister. She was also one of Tristan’s favorite family members because, well, there was never a dull moment with Aunt Evelyn around.

“Do not look at me as though I were guilty,” Evelyn said, lifting her chin. “Blame the carriage driver. His daughter had the influenza, so he delayed my journey for hours to take her to the physician.”

Tristan’s brows lifted. “Truly? That was his reason?”

“Yes,” she said, as though affronted. “That was quite insensitive, was it not? It was only influenza, not dropsy or anything of significance.”

A low chuckle escaped Tristan, and he shook his head. “You are merciless.”

“Honest,” Evelyn corrected, reaching for her napkin.

The duke cleared his throat, the sound commanding silence. He gestured, and the butler gave a nod to the footmen. Plates of eggs, fresh bread, and a steaming dish of ham began to appear upon the table.

Tristan accepted a plate, watching as Evelyn poured herself tea. “What brings you here, Aunt? You do not often come without Lord Howard at your side. How is he?”

Evelyn's eyes narrowed slightly, though amusement lingered at the corner of her mouth. "Hamish is in America, on business. And if I had to spend one more hour alone thinking of him wandering about that strange land, I would burn a hole through my brain."

Tristan arched a brow as he buttered his bread. "It is only America."

"Yes," Evelyn said sweetly, "and Dante's Inferno is only a circle."

Tristan chuckled again, and he could have sworn he saw the faintest hint of a smile on his grandfather's face.

Evelyn, who seemed oblivious to the reactions, gave a satisfied nod, then lifted her teacup with poise. "So I decided to see your grandfather instead. Imagine my delight to find you lurking about as well."

Tristan smirked faintly and glanced toward the duke. "I suppose it was inevitable, was it not?"

The duke ignored the jab and continued to speak to Evelyn anyway. "Tristan is set for London tomorrow to meet my solicitor, Mr. Sedgwick."

Tristan paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. "Sedgwick? I thought Hayes was your solicitor?"

"He was," his grandfather responded, setting down his knife with precision. "But unfortunately, I had to drop him after his scandal."

Tristan's interest piqued despite himself. "What scandal?"

The duke's expression tightened. "He was discovered in bed with a married woman."

"What?" Evelyn asked, her fork frozen beneath her palm.

"In broad daylight, no less," the duke continued, his voice slightly raised. "The affair could not be contained. Therefore, it was the end of Hayes' career as a solicitor."

Evelyn tutted, shaking her head in mock sorrow. "Poor thing."

"Do not waste your sympathy," the duke said sharply. "That is the price one pays for such folly."

"I was not referring to him," Evelyn replied smoothly. "I was referring to the woman. Imagine the indignity of having Ronald Hayes above you in the afternoon, with no darkness to shield his face."

Tristan coughed into his napkin, laughter breaking loose despite his efforts to restrain it.

"Evelyn," the duke snapped, though his glare held little real heat.

"Sometimes, Aunt, you cannot explain away the people you develop feelings for," Tristan said, once he had recovered enough to speak.

Evelyn waved her hand as if brushing away a fly. "Darling, I have seen vultures more pleasant-looking than your father's former solicitor. No one should be required to explain such a misfortune in the first place."

Tristan gave her a sidelong smile as he reached for the ham. “Your honesty is as unyielding as ever.”

“And it keeps me young,” Evelyn said, dabbing delicately at her lips with her napkin.

Breakfast continued, and so did the small talk. The duke spoke of his meetings with other noblemen, and Tristan listened with half interest. Aunt Evelyn spoke as well, of her latest adventures, but none of their words dulled the ringing in his head. The inevitable thought of what would happen tomorrow.

He sipped his coffee and let the thoughts continue to settle deeply in his mind. All he could think of could be summed up in three words. London. Sedgwick. And a marriage looming closer. A marriage he never wanted in the first place.

The next morning was colder, even though rays of the rising sun were already digging past the clouds. Tristan stepped out of the manor and walked down the steps with nothing but determination in his face. He tightened the black gloves that wrapped his hand and collected a polished cane from one of the footmen who stood beside him.

“Thank you, Henry,” he said, and the footman only gave a slight bow in response.

The carriage stood waiting at the edge of the gravel drive, two dark horses stamping and snorting as the footman soothed them with a firm hand. As Tristan approached the carriage, he noticed Evelyn was already there.

She stood beside the open door, her shawl wrapped elegantly around her shoulders, and her eyes bright with the satisfaction of a woman who had much to say and all the time in the world to say it.

“Aunt Evelyn, I did not know you would be out here,” Tristan called, tightening his grip around the cane in his hand.

“Oh well, you could not go off to London and the lions without at least having a word from me,” she said as Tristan reached her side.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Tristan responded.

She only gave a brief smile in response. Her eyes settled on him as he stood by the open door, the smile on his face completely vanishing. “I know you think your grandfather is being dreadfully imposing, demanding you marry with such haste and to a woman you scarcely know.”

“I suppose he is the duke. It is either this or a life with no inheritance.”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes before nodding briefly. “Well, if there is one thing to appreciate about London, it is its excellent matchmakers. Trust me, your grandfather only wants what is best for you.”

Tristan handed his small travel bag to the waiting footman and gave his aunt a steady look.

“I do understand, Aunt Evelyn. And I understand more than you think. I know that when one is born to Evermere, duty must always transcend desire. Just because I am aware of my obligations should not mean I am not allowed to dislike all of this, now, should it?”

Her eyes softened at that, and she lifted one hand to stroke his cheek. “Oh, you poor thing. You still have so very much to learn about life, do you not?”

He allowed himself the faintest smile before she suddenly gasped and grabbed his left sleeve. “Good heavens, what is this?”

Tristan looked down, puzzled, then saw the tiny crease upon the upper part of his coat. “It is a crease, Aunt Evelyn. I believe I shall live.”

She straightened, aghast. “Live? You cannot step into London society with such disorder upon your person. A crease speaks of carelessness. Carelessness speaks of negligence. Negligence leads to ruin, and ruin ... well, you see where I am going.”

“Not quite,” Tristan said dryly.

“You know very well,” she retorted. “If you had a proper valet, this tragedy would never have occurred.”

“I do not need a valet,” Tristan said firmly, adjusting the sleeve himself.

Evelyn’s brows arched in disbelief. “You do not need a valet? Do not be ridiculous. I know you are accustomed to that terribly rustic life in your hunting lodge—”

“It is not rustic,” Tristan responded.

“All you have there is one housemaid, a cook, and a housekeeper. Now what in God’s name do you call that?”

Tristan said nothing, though his mouth tightened.

“I know you are too proud to admit it,” she continued, undeterred, “but you are at Evermere now. The world expects a certain order from this house, and a valet keeps not only a gentleman’s clothes in order but his reputation as well. I shall speak to your grandfather before you return from London. He will see sense where you refuse.”

Tristan opened his mouth to protest, but she raised her hand as if she were a queen upon her throne. “No. Do not argue with me. It is unseemly to quarrel in the drive before the servants.”

He tightened his lips again and watched as she turned to the coachman seated at the front of the carriage.

“Watch out for the rough paths. I hear the Coral Bandits are ravaging the woods these days.”

“Of course, my lady,” the coachman replied.

Tristan climbed into the coach and leaned back against the cushion, letting the breath leave him in a long sigh. The great stone house of Evermere began to shrink behind him, its familiar towers fading against the pale morning sky.

He knew well enough that Evelyn’s meddling words would reach his grandfather’s ear before long. If he wasn’t forced to pick a valet the instant he returned from London, one would be picked for him in only a matter of time.

London was always noisy. That, or he was, once again, used to the quiet life at the hunting lodge. He watched for the better half of a minute, the way carriages and wheels creaked past the road before crossing to the other side.

He took off his hat with one hand and rested the other on the cane before stepping towards the building. He eyed the wooden post by the edge, reading the words almost aloud.

Sedgwick and Co.

The solicitor's clerk opened the door with a bright smile on his face and ushered him into the room where Sedgwick usually received his clients.

"He is expecting you."

Tristan walked into the room and caught the solicitor on one side of the wooden table. What he didn't expect, however, was someone else. A woman already sat opposite Sedgwick, her hands folded neatly in a pair of dove-gray gloves and her posture upright. She looked as composed as a portrait.

"I will wait outside. Forgive me if—"

"No. Please, come in," the solicitor said, a laugh lifting his dark moustache. He pushed his glasses closer to his face and gestured to the other empty chair in the room.

"Lord Vale," Sedgwick said, watching Tristan settle into the other chair. "I thank you for attending so promptly. Please, allow me to present Mrs. Flick Ashcombe."

Tristan bowed slightly at the woman, his eyes assessing her. She returned the gesture with a sly smile that seemed both polite and unreadable at the same time.

“Mrs. Ashcombe is a lady of particular reputation,” Sedgwick continued. “In discreet circles, her discernment and judgment are sought most highly. Given the significance of the matter, I thought it prudent that you meet her directly.”

Tristan turned to her once again, his eyes narrowed. “A matchmaker then.”

Mrs. Ashcombe’s eyes glinted with the smallest hint of amusement. “A term too lightly used in society, my lord. I am merely an intermediary who values precision, propriety, and discretion. The word ‘matchmaker’ suggests folly and chance, and I deal in neither.”

Her voice was steady and clear. She had all the confidence in the world, yet something about the woman’s choice of words made Tristan feel uneasy. Like she had rehearsed this.

Was this her way of pleasing him? Was this what she did with all her clients?

“Is that right?” he eventually asked, turning to the solicitor.

Sedgwick nodded approvingly. “Indeed. It is through her hand that the most respectable unions of the last five Seasons were secured. I trust her judgment in these matters more than any registry or ledger.”

Mrs. Ashcombe reached into the satchel beside her and withdrew a slim folder. She pulled out a sheet of paper from the folder and slid it across the

table toward Tristan.

“This,” she said, her gaze steady, “is Miss Eliza Harwood.”

Tristan picked up the paper, and his eyes moved across the neat script that described a young woman of modest background but refined education, the daughter of the late Baron Harwood. A dowry noted as being held in trust. References to her composure, her gentility, and her adaptability in a household of stature.

“She is well-bred,” Mrs. Ashcombe said, her gloved hands folding once more. “Moreso, she has been prepared for the responsibilities that accompany a title of weight. You must trust, my lord, that I will not recommend her otherwise.”

Tristan lowered the page and studied her. “You speak with certainty.”

“I speak with care,” Mrs. Ashcombe responded. “In these matters, words are not given idly. A household such as Evermere requires harmony and a wife who will not fracture beneath expectation. Miss Harwood has the composure to endure and is intelligent enough to adapt to life there.”

The phrasing was elegant and precise. Yet Tristan continued to feel like he was being guided. The woman spoke with such grace that it felt almost too good to be true.

“You present her as a paragon,” he said, his mouth curving faintly. “Is there no fault to her name? Not a single blemish in the slightest?”

Mrs. Ashcombe did not flinch. “I do not deal in perfection, Lord Vale. I deal in suitability. Of course, a man like you is smart enough to know no

one is perfect. Miss Harwood is not without fault. Just like you are not. But I can say, with all confidence, that Miss Harwood is suitable.”

Sedgwick leaned forward, his hands clasped. “There is also the consideration of timeliness. His Grace was clear that matters must not linger, and Mrs. Ashcombe has been kind enough to move Miss Harwood’s name to the forefront of her recommendations.”

Tristan’s brow lifted slightly. “To the forefront.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Ashcombe said, her tone still smooth. “It is in everyone’s interest that a resolution is reached promptly because a delay would invite uncertainty. I suppose I must also inform you, my lord, that you are not the only one in line for her hand in marriage.”

The words carried the faintest tug, as though a hook had been placed delicately in the water. He was no stranger to persuasion. He had lived amidst orders, bargains, and threats for years. Yet this did not feel like a threat. It was softer for some reason and more refined.

He returned his gaze to the page, scanning once more the careful summary. There was no glaring fault or any obstacle to pinpoint. On paper, she was perfect.

Tristan set the paper down, his decision swift. Since this woman seemed as fitting a choice as any, he might as well do this and get it over with.

“She appears suitable,” he said at last, his tone clipped but final.

Mrs. Ashcombe smiled. “She does, my lord.”

Tristan leaned back, the paper resting upon the table between them. His eyes settled on Sedgwick for a moment, and the solicitor only gave him a quiet nod. Then he returned his gaze to Mrs. Ashcombe.

“So when do I meet this—” he lowered his gaze briefly to the page, his voice firm “—Eliza Harwood?”

Chapter 4

The soft knock at her chamber door drew Eliza from her quiet thoughts as a maid stepped in with a small curtsy. “Lady Rivers is asking for you, Miss Harwood. She is waiting in the parlor.”

Before Eliza could respond, Clara rushed past the maid and hurried across the room.

“Eliza, I came as soon as I heard,” she said, her voice brimming with excitement. However, the moment she caught sight of Eliza lying upon the bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling, her expression faltered.

“What is this?” Clara asked, walking towards her and sitting gently on the side of the mattress. “You look like you had a dog that died. What happened?”

Eliza lifted a hand to the maid who still stood by the door. “Thank you, Ruth. That will be all for now.”

Ruth curtsied again and stepped out, closing the door softly behind her. Silence hung between them for a moment, and Eliza felt herself unable to breathe for almost a full minute. Then she turned to Clara, her hazel eyes heavy with unease.

“It is this wedding,” she whispered. “I do not have any good feelings about it.”

Clara blinked, taken aback. “You mean ... the wedding slated for tomorrow?”

“Yes, that very one.” Eliza pushed herself even more upright and pulled her knees close, clasping her arms around them.

Clara studied her for a long moment, then sat back with a sigh. “Why now, Eliza? Why are you troubled? You have had days to prepare yourself, have you not?”

“I have always been troubled,” Eliza replied, her voice sharper than she intended. “From the first moment Marcus spoke of this arrangement, I feared it. I suppose I convinced myself it was one of his passing whims, and that it would vanish as quickly as it appeared, but it has not. It has only grown more real with each passing hour.”

Clara nodded thoughtfully, her brown curls bouncing as she did so. “Your brother never pursues anything unless it will benefit him greatly. That is no secret.”

Eliza gave a humorless laugh. “And what benefit does he stand to gain from forcing me into marriage with a stranger?”

Clara raised her brows. “The benefit, dearest, is that you are no longer his burden. Once you are wed, your care falls into another man’s hands, and your brother is free.”

Eliza’s gaze fell to her lap. “It feels as though it is more than that. There is something else. Something he has not confessed. I do not know, Clara. I can just feel it.”

Clara waved a hand dismissively, though her eyes softened. “Do not work yourself into knots. This is a wedding, Eliza, not a funeral.”

“There is that, too,” Eliza murmured, looking toward the windows. “I do not even know what the Earl of Evermere looks like. For all I know, he is a short, hairy man kept indoors and permitted to step outside only once a fortnight.”

Clara pressed her lips together to contain a laugh. “A little less fantasy and a little more sense, if you please. Life is not a gothic novel.”

Eliza turned her head back, her hazel eyes still shining with unshed tears. “You know, I always thought I would marry a man I loved. Truly loved. I thought my heart would decide such a thing, but now, the dream is gone, all thanks to my brother. Every choice in my life has been taken from me and placed in the hands of men who believe themselves entitled to command me. First my father, then Marcus, now this earl. And what of me? What of my desires?”

Her voice broke at the end, and she pressed a hand against her mouth as though to push back the tears threatening to escape.

Clara leaned forward, sliding her arms around her shoulders and drawing her close. “Oh, Eliza. You cannot think of it that way, or you will drive yourself mad.”

“I cannot help it,” Eliza whispered against her friend’s shoulder. “My parents always said they would remain with me in spirit, that I would never be alone. Yet I feel abandoned.”

“Now, that is where you are wrong,” Clara said, stroking her back soothingly. “You are never alone, because you have me. And perhaps, just perhaps, this earl is not the monster you fear. It may not be what you want to hear, but people surprise you.”

Eliza pulled back and shook her head, her voice growing once more. “But that is just it. My life, my future, is now reduced to a bunch of perhaps. Perhaps he will be kind. Perhaps he will not despise me. Perhaps I will not regret this union for the rest of my days. I am to marry a man I have never met, and all I can do is cling to foolish hope.”

Clara smiled softly, wiping the corner of Eliza’s eye with her thumb. “Well, sometimes foolish hope is enough. It holds you firmly until reality becomes kinder.”

Eliza let out a trembling laugh. “You always know how to soothe me, Clara, do you not?”

Clara leaned back, resting her hands in her lap with an exaggerated air of command. “Yes. And this leads to my next decree.

Eliza narrowed her eyes. “And what is that?”

Clara cleared her throat. “You shall not fret tonight. You shall not cry. You will allow me to stay with you, and tomorrow, you will walk down that aisle with your head held high. And if this earl dares to disappoint you, I shall come to Evermere myself and lecture him until he begs for forgiveness. I do not know where it is, but I am certain I can find it.”

Eliza’s lips curved into a faint smile despite herself. “I am certain you will terrify him.”

“Good. Let him be terrified. A husband ought to respect his wife’s friends.”

Eliza reached for her hand and squeezed it. “Thank you, Clara. Truly. I do not know what I would do without you.”

Clara squeezed back. “And you never shall. Not while I draw breath.”

With those words, Eliza pulled Clara into another hug, this time around, letting her friend’s soothing embrace provide relief, even if only for a moment.

Eliza still clung to Clara’s embrace, when the door burst open without a knock, and Marcus stood in the doorway, his eyes sharp with disapproval.

“Why in heaven’s name are you still lying about?” he demanded, his tone carrying more accusation than inquiry. “You ought to be sorting through every gown in your closet, by now, Eliza. You are to be a bride tomorrow, not a sloth.”

Eliza stiffened, but Clara rose from the bed at once, her expression calm. “She is just about to begin, Mr. Harwood. There is no need to be so loud.”

Marcus turned his gaze to Clara, narrowing his eyes. “If you wish to remain in this house as a friend to my sister, then advise her properly. This marriage cannot fail, and yet it very well will if she continues to sulk like a child.”

Clara stepped closer to him, folding her arms. “We both know that you are eager to rid yourself of Eliza. You may drop the pretense of concern. No one here is deceived by it.”

Marcus’s mouth twitched, and he leaned forward to retort, but Clara acted swiftly. With a snap of her wrist, she grabbed the door and slammed it in his face. Eliza’s eyes widened as the sound echoed through the room.

For a moment, only silence followed. Then Marcus's voice rang from the other side, sharp and furious.

"Open this door at once, Clara, or you shall regret it."

Clara bent close to the wood, her lips parting gently. "You must forgive me, Mr. Harwood. Your sister is not in a state to entertain you just now. She has her monthly visitor. I mean, unless of course you wish to come in and see for yourself."

The pause on the other side was heavy and uncomfortable. Then Marcus's voice returned, lower and clipped.

"No."

Clara and Eliza exchanged looks as his footsteps retreated down the hall. After he was gone, Eliza pressed a hand to her mouth to stifle the laugh that threatened to burst free. Clara straightened, her face smug with triumph.

"You are outrageous," Eliza whispered, and then the two of them dissolved into a quiet fit of laughter.

When at last they calmed, Clara grew solemn again. She returned to the bed and sat beside Eliza. "He is insufferable, but he is also right in this one matter. You must pack, dear. There is no more time to waste."

Eliza nodded reluctantly. Together they began pulling gowns from the small wardrobe, laying them across the bed. Most were older and duller than when they were bought, but Clara moved through them with determination.

As they worked, Clara's gaze caught the stack of canvases set upon the table. She reached for one, holding it up, and her lips parted in awe.

"Eliza," she breathed, her eyes wide. "These are extraordinary. Good God! Look at the color, the life in every stroke. They are beautiful."

Eliza's hands faltered as she folded a gown. "I am glad you think so. Those may well be my last ones for some time."

Clara's head snapped toward her. "Why would you ever say that?"

"Because it is obvious," Eliza replied softly, her gaze fixed on the bundle of fabric in her lap. "The Earl of Evermere ... whoever he may be, will not be tolerant of a wife who paints. Such things are frivolous in his world. So my brushes will be put away once I cross that threshold."

Clara set the canvas down, placed her hands upon her hips, and shook her head. "It amazes me how you imagine you have this man fully pegged when you do not even know the shape of his nose or even the sound of his voice. You are making him into a tyrant before you have even met him."

Eliza lifted her chin. "I must be ready for what awaits me."

Clara leaned down until their eyes were level. Her voice was firm. "What you must be ready for is to refuse to surrender yourself entirely. What you create with your hand is a gift. You breathe life into canvas, Eliza, and it would be a sin to abandon it. Whatever husband you gain, whatever new household you enter, you cannot give that up. You must not."

Eliza's lips trembled, and she reached to brush her fingers over the edge of one painting, a soft depiction of the house as it had once been. "You make it

sound so simple.”

Clara smiled gently. “It is not simple. But it is necessary. Promise me you will not forsake this part of yourself.”

Eliza lowered her gaze, then nodded slowly. “I will try.”

“That is the spirit,” Clara declared, her tone brightening as she reached for another gown. “We shall make certain you arrive at Evermere as yourself, not as the hollow shell Marcus would have you be.”

Eliza drew a long breath, then bent to the task once more.

The morning arrived far more swiftly than Eliza had hoped. It was Clara who stirred her from bed, speaking in that bright, practical tone she always used when she knew Eliza’s nerves were stretched thin.

“Up, dearest,” Clara urged gently. “We have work to do.”

Eliza obeyed, though her body felt heavy, her mind slower still. Clara opened the wardrobe and reached for the gown folded carefully inside. Eliza gestured toward it with a stiff hand.

“It was my mother’s,” she said softly. “Marcus had it altered for me.”

Clara lifted it free, letting the light catch its pale fabric. “Well, that may be the first good decision your brother has made in years.”

Eliza remained quiet as Clara helped fasten the dress at the back.

“Are you ready?” Clara eventually asked when she was done.

Eliza nodded.

“Good,” Clara muttered.

They left the room together, Clara holding her arm as though she feared Eliza might collapse before the day had even begun. Marcus waited in the hall below, his face alive with satisfaction.

“Ah, finally,” he said, looking her up and down as if inspecting a prize. “Everything is in order. The wedding will be held in a small parish in London. It will be quick, efficient, and without delay.”

Eliza said nothing. Her lips were frozen, and her chest felt tight. Marcus continued to talk excitedly about the wedding arrangements as they climbed into the carriage and set off, but Eliza’s mind was elsewhere.

Anywhere but the present. Clara seemed to notice her friend’s despair and leaned closer, amid Marcus’s speech.

“It will be all right,” Clara whispered, close to her ear. “You will see. It will be all right.”

Eliza wanted to believe her, but numbness settled deeper. She had never seen the man she was about to marry. She had never been asked if this was what she wanted. The bells of the church tolled as they arrived, and Eliza felt her heart beat like an angry prisoner.

Inside, the little parish was silent. Clara walked by her side, whispering words of encouragement, though Eliza heard little of it. Her eyes lifted and met the gaze of the man waiting at the altar.

Oh.

He was the furthest thing from a hairy monster. No, the man standing before her was in no way a beast. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and looked like he stepped out of a romance novel. His face was not just handsome. It was strikingly handsome, and his tense jaw looked like it could cut glass.

However, it was his grey eyes that held her. They looked intense, yet softened by something she could not name. For one suspended moment, she forgot the walls around her, forgot Marcus and everything else.

Everything but those eyes.

Then he looked away, turning aside as if she had already ceased to exist.

The ceremony was brief, and she went through it almost absentmindedly. He did not look at her again throughout the event. Not even once.

When the clergyman beckoned them toward the register for their signatures, he stepped up first and signed, the wave of his hand smooth against the paper. He set the quill down and moved aside, waiting for her to step forward.

Her legs carried her, though her mind felt far away. She bent over the page, and her fingers closed around the quill. She dipped it in ink and tried to steady her hand.

It shook.

Her vision blurred suddenly, and for some reason, everything came crashing down on her. This was her life. A life she had not chosen, bound and sealed in one line of ink.

Was this really it? Was this what it all came down to?

Her hand trembled harder, and she wondered, just for a moment, if she could even bring herself to write her name. Then she felt him reach forward and cover her hand with his.

Her heart dropped.

The touch sent a jolt through her body, and electricity raced from her hand to her heart. She looked up at him, startled, and found his gaze settled on her again.

He narrowed his eyes and gave her the briefest nod. "I know."

Her throat tightened as she swallowed, then lowered her eyes. With his hand firm around hers, she pressed the quill to the page and wrote her name. Each letter trembled, but when she finished, she knew there was no undoing it.

It was done.

The book was closed, and the ceremony was complete.

There was no going back now.

Chapter 5

The carriage moved with an air of finality. One Tristan could feel more than the bumpy road itself. His back was against the cushion, pressing against a newspaper he had saved for later. Now he couldn't even bring himself to open and read because he had underestimated just how awkward the ride home would actually be.

Across from him sat Eliza Harwood.

No,

Eliza Vale now.

His wife.

The word did not fit yet, not in his mind, nor in the air between them. He found himself studying her when she turned her face toward the window. Ms. Ashcombe had said she was beautiful. That was true.

But this woman was something more. She looked like something he'd seen as a representation of beauty from a troubled painter before. The way her curls fell on both sides of her face. Her hazel eyes and the way they shone. No, she wasn't just beautiful.

She was ethereal.

Her eyes held composure and sorrow at the same time. That was what struck him. She was not a bride beaming with joy. She was calm, but calm in the way one endures a burden. He knew the look. He had seen it in

soldiers who accepted orders that might cost them their lives. He probably had the same look on his face at the moment.

He thought back to the church and her brother. He remembered the way he had treated her like a trinket passed from one hand to another. No gentle farewell, no word of care.

It had angered him in the moment, though he had said nothing. He may be her husband, but it was far from his place to interfere in issues of family.

Then she looked up at him, completely catching him off guard, and his thoughts froze.

He dropped his eyes to the floor and cleared his throat. “Forgive me. I do not know why I was—”

“It is fine,” she said at once. Her voice was calm, almost cold. She folded her hands in her lap. “I am your wife, am I not? A husband may look at his wife if he chooses.”

He let out a quiet breath. “Still, I did not mean to stare. Only ... I thought of how strange this must feel to you. It does to me as well. Yet in the end—”

“Duty outweighs love,” she said, finishing the thought before he could.

He gave a small nod. “That is exactly what I was going to say.”

Another wave of silence spread once more, and she turned back to the window. He remained where he was and let the sound of the wheels fill the space between them.

After a few more minutes of gentle contemplation, he reached behind him and finally drew out the folded newspaper. He spread it open across his knee, glad to put his eyes to something other than her sorrow. He read in silence for a time, the words on the page giving him some measure of steadiness if nothing else.

His eyes caught on a headline, and his eyes narrowed.

“A man by the name of David Fletcher was arrested,” he said aloud, his tone even. “It seems he swindled some old noblemen of their money. He persuaded them to invest in businesses that did not exist.”

Eliza’s eyes shifted toward him. “Do you read the news often?”

“I do,” he replied, glancing at her. “It reminds me of what is beyond my own life and gives me an appreciation for what I have.”

She looked down at her hands. “I have read the news before. Too often, it fills me with sadness. So I avoid it. One cannot mourn every wicked act of men and still keep their strength.”

He gave a slight nod. “Perhaps. But I find the reminder useful.” He lowered his eyes back to the page.

The carriage rolled on, and he read in silence again until one name leaped from the paper. He paused, his brow furrowed.

“It says here that Fletcher was once in company with a disbarred solicitor. A Marcus Harwood,” he said slowly.

When he lifted his eyes, he caught the flicker of change in hers. Her lips pressed tightly together before she spoke. “Yes,” she said at last. “That is my brother.”

“Are you certain?”

“That sounds well enough like him,” she responded. “I am not surprised he is named among such men. Of course, Marcus would choose his friends in that way.”

Tristan’s jaw tightened, though he said nothing more. He folded the newspaper and set it aside.

The silence that followed was heavier than before. He turned his face toward the window, watching fields pass, though he saw none of them.

The name of Harwood lingered in his mind, attached now to shameful company. He swallowed the thought, unwilling to press her further. She had spoken with such bitterness that no more words were needed.

After some time, he turned to her, his eyes gleaming with all the possible excitement he could offer. “In an hour or two, we should be in Evermere.”

“I see,” she said, her tone low and her gaze still fixed on her lap.

For a moment, he felt her eyes on him. He turned slightly and their gazes crossed. It lasted only a second before they both looked away again, each as if caught doing something forbidden. His shoulders tensed, and he knew she felt the discomfort as much as he did.

Yet he could not stop himself from watching her again. The more he told himself to look away, the more his eyes returned to her. To the delicate slope of her face, to the stillness of her figure, to the strange sorrow that seemed to rest over her like a veil.

He leaned back into the carriage seat, closing his eyes for a moment as though rest might calm him. But when he opened them, she was still there, magnificent as before.

They rode on in silence, two souls bound together by duty, each pretending not to see the other, while unable to look away.

The carriage rolled through the gates of Evermere Manor long after nightfall. Lanterns glowed faintly along the drive, casting long shadows over the gravel. When the wheels at last halted, Tristan stepped out first before offering his hand to Eliza. Her fingers were cool and light, as though she gave them out of necessity.

“Welcome home, my lord, my lady,” the butler intoned as the doors swung open. The staff lined the hall in neat rows, their eyes cautious.

“Dinner,” Tristan ordered, his voice low but firm.

They were led into the dining hall where a fire burned in the fireplace. The warmth was soothing as servants placed plates before them and stepped back. Tristan took his seat at the long table, across from Eliza, who placed her napkin in her lap before lifting her fork.

“Your companion at the wedding,” he said, “Clara. She is a friend of long standing?”

Eliza cut her meat into small pieces. “Yes. Since childhood. She has always been steadfast.”

“Then you value her.”

“Yes.”

The short answers tightened the air further, but he tried again. “And your brother? He seemed ... eager to see this union completed.”

Her fork stilled. “Marcus concerns himself with many things. Too many, if I may say.”

He gave a faint smile. “Present, then, but not always pleasant?”

She looked up, the candlelight catching her hazel eyes. “Something of the sort.”

For a moment, their gazes locked, and something unspoken passed between them, but Eliza looked away first. She sipped her wine with composure, though her hand trembled faintly. Just like it had right before she signed that register.

The silence returned, and he lifted his own glass, holding it a moment before drinking. “Perhaps, in time, you will grow more at ease here.”

She set her glass down carefully. “Time will tell, my lord.”

The words were polite, yet carried weight. He felt it sharply. Their meal passed with little else said, and soon, they were finished.

Their first meal together, and it was as uneventful as anything.

At last, he rose. "Come. I will show you to your rooms."

She followed in silence, her hand light upon his arm. Their steps moved along the carpeted hallway until they stopped before a door. He opened the door to a prepared chamber and gestured inside.

"This will be yours. If there is anything you require, summon the maid. She will see to it."

She curtsied faintly. "Thank you."

"Rest well, Lady Vale," he said, gently bowing his head and turning away.

The hallway stretched before him as the door clicked shut.

He longed only for solitude, for the weight of the day to ease. Yet just as he neared his chamber, a footman appeared, bowing low.

"My lord, forgive me. His Grace requests your presence in his study."

"It is late," Tristan said. "Tell him I will speak with him in the morning."

The footman hesitated. "I am afraid, my lord, he insists. He said it cannot wait."

Tristan drew a breath, then exhaled in resignation. “Very well.” He turned back and strode toward the study.

The duke sat behind a wide oak desk, the fire at his side casting shadows over his lined face. “You are wed,” he said. “The matter is settled, and well done. You have secured your future, Tristan. You are my heir, not only by blood but by right.”

Tristan inclined his head. “I thank you, Grandfather. But the hour is late, and I should like to rest.”

“One moment,” the duke said. “There is something I wish to show you. You have resisted a valet long enough, and tonight, I will end that.”

Tristan exhaled. *Evelyn.*

“It is about time,” the duke continued.

Tristan’s jaw tightened. “I have managed on my own for quite a while, Grandpapa. I do not require a valet.”

“Perhaps you will reconsider once you meet the man I have engaged.”

Tristan’s eyes narrowed. “You have engaged one already?”

The duke’s mouth curved in satisfaction. “Indeed.”

The door opened, and footsteps crossed the floor. Tristan didn’t turn at first and waited for the owner of the footsteps to come into view.

“Is this the proud Earl of Evermere I see before me, still bristling against the help of others?” The familiarly loud voice rang out behind him, and he swallowed.

No.

He turned sharply. “Gideon?”

There he stood, Gideon Hale, his comrade from the army, a tall, red-haired man with a domineering presence and that signature sly smile on his face.

Tristan crossed the room in three strides and seized him in a firm embrace. “By God, it is you. What in Heaven’s name brings you here?”

Gideon laughed after Tristan broke the embrace. “I am afraid it is a rather boring story.”

“I would like to hear it,” Tristan insisted.

Gideon exhaled. “Oh well, after the war, fortune did not favor me. I tried to find a place, but doors shut faster than they opened. Then came this offer. It was either serve as valet to an earl, or muck out pigs in Essex. And you know, my lord, I was never fit for farming.”

Tristan struck his shoulder with a laugh. “Do not call me ‘my lord.’ You called me Tristan in the thick of battle, and I would not have it any other way.”

“But this is not the battlefield,” Gideon said with a smirk. “This is Evermere. You wear a title now.”

Tristan sighed. “That shouldn’t mean anything.”

“It should. That is how the world works, my lord.”

Tristan was about to protest again when the duke’s voice cut in, “Well? Will you still refuse a valet when one of your closest companions stands ready?”

Tristan looked from his grandfather to Gideon and felt the ground shift beneath him. A valet had always been unnecessary in his eyes, a burden upon his independence. Yet to send Gideon away would feel like betrayal.

“You will stay?” Tristan asked.

“If you will have me,” Gideon replied. “Though I must say, it will be strange pressing your coats instead of watching your back.”

Tristan gave a low chuckle. “I trust you with both.”

The duke leaned back with satisfaction. “Then it is settled. Evermere will have order, and you will have a man you trust at your side.”

Tristan felt the weight of the change settle upon him. Marriage, Evermere, and now Gideon within these walls. Everything he had known was shifting, and no matter how hard he wanted, he could not turn it back.

“Very well,” he said quietly. “I will not refuse him.”

The duke nodded once. “Good. You are learning at last.”

Tristan looked at Gideon, the faintest of smiles breaking across his face.
“Welcome to Evermere, old friend.”

Chapter 6

It was her first night in Evermere, and no matter how hard Eliza tried, sleep did not come. She lay still and counted her breaths, even backward, yet her eyes still would not close.

The silence pressed around her, and for some reason, it felt new and sharp. She had wanted to be away from Marcus. She had wished for it. Now the stillness felt like a hollow room.

She sat up and pushed the bedsheets aside. Then she reached for the candle by the bed and lit it. After casting the room in a golden glow, she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and opened the door. Exhaling as much as she could, she stepped into the hallway.

The path ahead of her was long and straight, and the wall panels shone in the light. The rugs were deep and comforting under her feet. She moved slowly and let her fingers touch and graze the wood. Then she paused by a portrait. A woman in emerald silk sat with her hands folded. The eyes in the painting looked almost warm, and Eliza tried to smile.

She walked on instead, drawing a breath and letting it out. She raised the candle a little and looked up at the plasterwork. She traced the shape of a leaf with her gaze.

She thought of pigment and light.

She thought of her brush.

“There is so much to paint here,” she whispered. “If I am allowed.”

“My lady.”

The voice came from behind her, and she turned at once, causing the candle in her hand to shake. She winced as she felt wax slide toward her knuckles.

A woman stood a few paces back, wearing a dark dress with a plain collar. Her hair was gray and neat, and her hands were tucked tight behind her. Eliza narrowed her eyes and studied the woman even more. She looked to be in her late fifties, and her stance was quiet and firm.

“I knew I heard someone upstairs,” the woman said.

Eliza steadied the candle and found her voice. “Forgive me. I could not sleep. I thought a walk would calm me.”

“The first night can be a trial. Thoughts crowd where rest should be,” the woman said.

Eliza lowered her gaze and nodded. “That is true. I feel I must look and learn. I want to prepare for what this house will ask of me.”

“There is much to learn, my lady. But not in one night,” the woman said, then she looked at Eliza for a moment. “Will you follow me?” she said.

Eliza adjusted her shawl and lifted the candle a little. “Yes.”

They walked together, their steps soft on the rugs. The hallway opened to a landing, and a clock ticked somewhere below. The woman turned into another hallway and pushed open a door.

It was a drawing room, perhaps larger than the ones Eliza was used to. The air still held a trace of smoke even though the fire had sunk low. The chairs along the walls stood in neat groups, and the curtains looked heavy and pale.

“Sit here,” the woman said, drawing one of the chairs near the dim fireplace. “Wait a short while, and I will make you some tea.”

Eliza set her candle on a small table and sat with her shawl pulled close. Her eyes went to the walls at once. Again, the architecture in this part of the room was greatly mesmerizing.

Landscapes in gold frames lined the room, and her eyes steadied on the designs. There was one showing a storm over hills. Another reflected a river with a stone bridge.

She took her eyes off the walls and looked up at the mantel. A stag’s head hung above it, its antlers rising and spreading like bare winter branches. The glass eyes seemed to catch the dim light.

“You are a proud one, are you not?” she whispered. “I bet he caught you, too.”

The door opened again at that moment, and the woman came back with a small tray. A pot and a single cup sat upon it, and Eliza watched the steam rise.

“Here,” the woman said. She set the tray down and poured. “It will help you sleep.”

Eliza took the cup in both hands. The heat soaked into her skin, and the scent was gentle and clean. She sipped and felt warmth move through her.

“Thank you. You are very kind,” she said.

“It is no trouble. It is my place,” the woman said.

Eliza took another sip and let out a breath she had been holding. She looked up and felt color rise to her cheeks. “I never even asked your name.”

The woman’s mouth softened at the corners. “Mrs. Yarrow. I am the housekeeper.”

Eliza straightened a little. “Oh,” she said. “Then we were to meet in the morning.”

“That was the plan,” Mrs. Yarrow said, folding her hands again with quiet care. “We were officially supposed to meet properly tomorrow, but I might as well welcome you to Evermere now.”

Eliza nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Yarrow.”

A brief moment of silence descended until the housekeeper decided to break it, much to Eliza’s relief.

“Pardon me, my lady,” Mrs. Yarrow said, her voice low and even. “But in my experience, there are quite a few reasons why new brides do not get their rest on their wedding night. The biggest reason is often restlessness.”

Eliza's hands circled her teacup as she sat in the chair and let out a breath. "That is true. I feel restless. I am aware that I should be glad. It is just ..."

Her voice trailed off, and her words drifted into the darkness.

Mrs. Yarrow folded her hands in front of her. "Let us start from the very beginning, shall we? What troubles you the most?"

Eliza stared at the firelight. "My brother," she said at last, her voice cracking. "He was a cruel man. One of the cruelest on earth. I could not be happier to be away from him, and yet—" she hesitated, clutching the cup tighter—"and yet I miss him."

Mrs. Yarrow tilted her head, studying her. "Miss him?"

"I know it sounds odd," Eliza whispered. "But not having him near ... not hearing his voice storming through the walls, not hearing his plans to use me for his schemes. It digs a hole in me. A wrong sort of silence."

Mrs. Yarrow's eyes softened. She leaned forward slightly. "You do not miss him, my lady. What you miss is the noise. The body grows used to its cage, and when the door is opened, it mistakes freedom for loss. Your mind is only trying to tell you that your old life was safer. But was it safer?"

Eliza looked at her, and the housekeeper's tone rose just a notch.

"Tell me this. If you could return to your old house this very night, with no consequence waiting for you, would you go?"

Eliza lowered her gaze, and her thoughts twisted in her chest. She thought of Marcus's sharp words, the weight of his demands, the constant fear of what foolishness he would try next. She thought of the cold rooms of that

house. She thought of her paints hidden away, her every choice bound by him.

“No,” she eventually whispered. “I would not go back.”

Mrs. Yarrow smiled faintly. “And there you have it.”

Eliza’s lips pressed together. A little of the weight lifted, but another soon took its place. “All well and good, but what life is there for me here? My husband has barely spoken to me. He says nothing except what sounds like orders and has barely looked at me with any warmth. It is as though I were not even here. Is he always like that?”

Mrs. Yarrow gave a small laugh. “Yes. The earl has a kind heart, though you will not see it at first. He hides it under walls stronger than stone. No one has yet managed to bring them down. Do not take it to heart.”

“He hardly even looked at me,” Eliza said. “I am his wife. Should he not try to get to know me?”

“He may not know how,” Mrs. Yarrow replied simply. “War changes a man. You must not let his distance make you think you are unwanted here.”

Eliza took another sip of the tea. “Then what should I do? Sit here every day, waiting for him to speak to me?”

Mrs. Yarrow shook her head. “No, my lady. If I were you, I would make myself busy. The manor has more to offer than silence. There is the library, filled with books. There are portraits, each with its story. You may find your own ways to make this place less lonely. However, if you continue to wait for the earl, the days will feel long indeed.”

Eliza managed a small smile. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It is simple,” Mrs. Yarrow said, rising to her feet. “You must not think of yourself as trapped. This house can be yours as much as his. But you must claim it.”

Eliza leaned back, her eyelids growing heavy. She tried to speak again, but only yawned.

Mrs. Yarrow nodded. “The tea is doing its work. Come, my lady, let me see you to your room.”

Eliza rose and followed her into the hallway. When they reached her chamber door, Eliza turned to her.

“Thank you, Mrs. Yarrow. I do not know what I would have done tonight without you.”

Mrs. Yarrow inclined her head. “Goodnight, my lady.”

Eliza slipped inside and leaned against the door once it closed, the warmth of the tea still in her. The bed drew her, and she sank into it with a long sigh.

The sleep wasted no time before it claimed her.

The next morning, after a quiet breakfast in her room, Eliza stood by the window for a long while, her eyes drawn to the gardens below. The sun touched the flowers in a way that made them glow, and the soft green of the hedges looked almost painted already.

She hesitated before reaching for her sketchbook. It had always been her one comfort. With the book pressed to her chest, she left her room, walked down the hallways, and stepped outside.

The garden air was fresh and sharp, and the breeze carried the smell of roses. She found a bench near a patch of lilies and sat down, pulling her charcoal from her reticule. For a moment, she only stared, then her hand began to move, tracing the curve of a stem.

She couldn't believe she let herself forget just how much of a joy it was to paint things she appreciated. Perhaps Mrs. Yarrow was right after all.

She was lost in the work when sharp footsteps came from behind. She turned quickly, her lips parting, half hoping it was Tristan.

It was Mr. Hale, his valet. He bowed his head slightly.

"My lady," he said.

Eliza returned his greeting with a small smile. "Mr. Hale. I hope I am not in anyone's way out here."

"Not at all," he said. His eyes dropped to the sketchbook on her lap. "I must admit, I did not expect to see you with charcoal in hand. When you were introduced to us this morning, you looked every bit the proper lady of the house. Not someone who could draw like this."

She gave a quiet laugh. “I assure you, it is nothing grand. I do it only to steady myself. It is my way of grounding myself when everything else feels too heavy.”

“Then it serves its purpose well,” he said. “But it is more than grounding. You make the page come alive. That is not something everyone can do.”

Eliza looked down at her hands. “Oh well, to my brother and probably half of society, it is not something to be proud of. I only enjoy it because it is the one thing that keeps my mind from wandering too far.”

“You should be proud,” Mr. Hale answered, his tone steady. “You take what is plain and make it bright. A house can have walls and halls, but it is things like this that give it warmth. Do not ever think little of it.”

Her lips curved faintly. “If my friend Clara were here, she would say the exact same thing.”

“Then your friend has sense,” Mr. Hale said with a smile. “She sees what is true when others may not.”

“Yes,” Eliza said softly. “She does. She has always been that way.”

“I have known a few people like that in the past,” Mr. Hale responded.

For a moment, Eliza was quiet. Then she turned her eyes to the sketchbook while still speaking to the valet. “You would get along with her, I think. You both speak in the same way—about meaning and purpose and things most people ignore.”

“Then she sounds like a person worth knowing,” he said. “It is rare to find those who value such things.”

“She is worth knowing,” Eliza said. “I miss her terribly already.”

Mr. Hale shifted his stance, folding his arms lightly. “And yet, I think you will find companionship here as well. The earl, for one, may not show it, but he values more than duty and order. You and he may be alike in ways that surprise you.”

Eliza’s brows lifted at that. “I cannot say I know him well enough to see any likeness. He speaks little, and when he does, it sounds as though he is giving orders on a battlefield.”

Mr. Hale chuckled. “That is fair. The war left its mark on him, and he still speaks as a soldier. But beneath it, there is a steadiness. And steadiness, my lady, is not so far from the grounding you spoke of.”

She frowned a little, her hand pausing on the page. “Perhaps. Yet he has not spoken more than a few words to me. I cannot tell what he thinks at all.”

“In time, you will,” Mr. Hale said. “It may take patience, but you will.”

Eliza glanced back down at her sketch. “I am not sure I have patience left.”

“You do,” he said firmly. “You carry it, even if you doubt it. Look at what you do here. You sit, you watch, you draw line after line. That is enough patience.”

Her lips parted, then closed again. Finally, she said, "I know I keep saying this, but you sound very much like Clara."

"Then perhaps Clara is right more often than you allow yourself to believe," he replied with a kind smile.

Eliza gave a small laugh. "She will be unbearable if I ever tell her she was right about this."

"Then do not tell her," he said with a grin. "Keep it to yourself, and let her wonder."

She shook her head, amused despite herself.

Mr. Hale straightened a little. "I should not take more of your time. I only wished to say that your work is worth more than you think. Do not put it aside."

Eliza looked up at him. "Thank you. That is kind of you to say."

He bowed his head once more. "It is only the truth."

With that, he turned and began walking back toward the house.

Eliza sat for a long while after, her fingers moving more freely across the page. She finished the flowers, shaded the stems, and added the turn of leaves. Her chest felt lighter, and she grew more hopeful. Perhaps there may be a chance for her here after all. If Tristan would just talk to her.

Suddenly, a strange sense came over her and broke into her thoughts. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. Her hand stilled on the canvas, and she turned around slowly, lifting her head. At a tall window above, she saw him.

Tristan.

His face was half-shadowed, but his eyes were clear and fixed on her. There was no disdain there. No sign of objection. Only curiosity, or what seemed to be curiosity anyway. It was hard to read his face.

Her eyes met his, and her breath caught. For the next few moments, neither of them moved. At last, when it seemed clear she would not look away, he gave a small nod and turned away from the window.

Just like that, he was gone.

Alone again, she set her charcoal down and felt her hands tremble faintly for no reason.

Chapter 7

Tristan stood in his study, tall at the window with his hands buried deep in his pockets. From that high place, he could see the gardens spread out before him. He could also see how the morning sun shone on everything, displaying them in a rather clear light. It caught the flowers, the hedges, and the trees.

It also caught the bench where his new wife sat.

She was bent slightly forward, a sketchbook open in her lap, and her hand moving with calm steadiness. He watched the way she paused, then marked the page again, her face narrowed in concentration.

He had not expected this. He had thought her quiet, reserved to the point of being cold. Yet here she was, alive in a way he had not seen in the carriage or at their first dinner.

He remembered seeing Gideon walk to her earlier. They had spoken, and he had found himself almost amused by the thought. What could Gideon, the hardened soldier that he was, possibly have to say to this young woman with her gentle, careful hands? He had turned back to his work then, but his eyes kept returning to the garden, drawn against his will.

The door opened behind him.

“My lord,” Stanley greeted with a soft bow. “Lady Howard has arrived.”

Tristan turned his head just slightly. “Show her in.”

Stanley bowed again. “Yes, my lord.”

A moment later, Evelyn swept in, dressed in a soft lavender gown, and her gloved hands folded neatly over one another. Her smile was easy, almost like she didn’t even know it was there.

“Oh, my sweet boy,” she said at once, her tone both fond and teasing. “What are you doing by the window? Trying to burn a hole through the gardens with those sharp eyes of yours?”

Tristan did not respond. Instead, he returned his gaze to the figure below and continued to watch the small movement of her hand as she drew.

Evelyn walked closer, the rustle of her dress filling the silence. She leaned closer to the glass panes and followed his line of sight.

“Ah,” she said with a knowing hum. “A lady who draws. Perhaps if I stand here beside you, we can burn a hole together. Though in her sketchbook rather than her gown.”

Tristan exhaled slowly, his hands curled into fists in his pockets. He eventually turned to Evelyn, his face devoid of any kind of laughter, and when he spoke again, his voice was even.

“Did you know my mother also painted?”

Evelyn’s head turned at once, her eyes wide. “What? Josephine? You cannot mean it.”

He nodded. “Yes. She loved to paint, and architecture was her delight. When she traveled with my father, she would sketch buildings, village centers, halls, and arches. And when they returned, she would lock herself away in the observatory.

My father refused to build her a proper atelier, so she took the observatory as her own. She would be in there for hours, drawing everything she remembered.”

He paused, the image of his mother hunched over a table with ink and charcoal staining her fingertips settling into his mind. He could even almost see the rare and satisfied smile on her lips.

“Of course, it vexed my father endlessly,” he continued anyway when he realized Evelyn wouldn’t say anything. It was one of those rare occasions when his aunt was lost for words. “He would entertain visitors, and she would vanish upstairs. I even remember whispers. Some thought she was having a secret affair.”

Evelyn gave a sharp laugh. “I thought she was carrying on a secret affair. To think she was only painting is quite unbelievable.”

Tristan nodded as Evelyn shook her head, half amused and half scandalized. “But now it makes sense. A woman of her status could hardly let it be known. An affair may have been unforgivable, yes, but at least it was something society could name.”

Tristan ground his jaw as his aunt continued to speak.

“Painting, however? There is no excuse for that. People who do that barely have time for anything else. My dear, I can almost forgive her secrecy.”

Tristan sighed. “Perhaps. But I remember the look on her face. The quiet contentment. She loved it, and that was enough.”

Evelyn nodded and said nothing else. His aunt almost seemed to understand, for some reason, that this was his time to speak.

Tristan looked back toward the garden again. “I see that same look now on Eliza’s face. She has found some measure of peace with her sketches, and I cannot think of taking that from her. I cannot be like my father.”

Evelyn moved closer and rested her hand on his arm, giving it a small squeeze. “Whether society deems it proper or not does not matter now. What matters is harmony between the two of you. Because that is what sustains a marriage.”

Tristan made no answer. His eyes remained fixed on the bench below.

“Tell me,” Evelyn said after a moment, her voice lighter again, “have you spoken with her about it?”

He let out a breath. “I have not spoken with her about anything. Not since the wedding.”

“What in God’s name are you doing then?” Evelyn asked, her eyes sharp.

“I am giving her space,” Tristan said firmly. “She has been through enough, and I do not wish to crowd her. I believe she deserves time to find her place here.”

Evelyn leaned closer, lowering her voice as though confiding a great secret. “Darling, the very last thing newlyweds ought to give each other is space. It belongs to strangers, not to couples bound by vows.”

Her words struck him more than he wished to admit, and he shifted slightly, looking away from her knowing eyes.

Evelyn smoothed her gloves. “Well, I will not press you further. You are just as stubborn as your father, and no amount of my talk will change that in a day.”

A brief laugh escaped his lips as she took a step back. “Oh well.”

She smiled as well. “Now, I am off with the ladies. There is a gathering, and I should not be late. Plus, I expect to find you less brooding when I return. Do you hear me?”

She moved toward the door, her perfume trailing lightly behind her. At the threshold, she looked back once, her eyes gleaming with something between affection and warning.

Then she was gone.

The study was silent again, and Tristan stood unmoving at the window, Evelyn’s words circling in his mind. He looked down once more to the garden, where Eliza bent over her sketchbook, her hand steady on the paper, then he drew in a long breath.

Space or no space, his aunt was right. Something had to shift.

Tristan sat in his study again the next morning. The sun was brighter, and it cut rather sharp lines across the floorboards. From his window, he could see the garden below. She was there again, his wife, with her sketchbook. She sat on the bench with her back straight, the light falling across her shoulders. He watched her tilt her head, then lower it as her hand began to move over the page.

He found himself staring again, and a part of him wondered how many hours she could sit like that.

Could she do that all day?

At last, he forced himself away from the window and sat at his desk where the estate ledgers waited. He had just begun reading through the sheep tallies when a knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” Tristan said, his eyes not leaving the page.

The door opened, and Gideon stepped in, a stack of books tucked beneath his arm. He crossed the room and put them on the desk with a dull thud.

“Here are the volumes you asked for, my lord,” Gideon said.

Tristan looked up at him and shook his head. “I still have not grown used to hearing you say that.”

Gideon’s mouth tugged into a smile. “I have grown used to saying it.”

Tristan raised a brow. “So easily?”

“I have always been quick to adapt,” Gideon said.

Tristan leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “You know what might help me adapt?”

Gideon tilted his head. “What?”

“A game of archery.” Tristan’s voice lightened, though only slightly. “I shall ask my grandfather to have a few targets set up in the back courtyard. Perhaps you will find yourself humbled.”

Gideon laughed under his breath. “If memory serves, I remember beating you once or twice back then. I still remember the look on your face. It was glorious.”

Tristan chuckled, shaking his head. “That was years ago. I have improved since then. After the war, I spent the better part of two years at the hunting lodge and learned to draw and release until my arms ached. Trust me, Hale, I am not the same man with a bow as I was then.”

“Mm,” Gideon said with a grin. “We shall see.”

Silence fell for a moment. Gideon shifted his weight, his hands behind his back, and Tristan leaned forward over the ledgers once more.

“If that’ll be all, my lord,” the valet eventually said, making to turn around.

Then Tristan again, his voice lower. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything,” Gideon replied at once, steadying his feet back to their original position.

Tristan lifted his eyes from the page. “Has my wife eaten today?”

The question seemed to catch Gideon off guard as his brows rose, though only for a moment.

“I cannot say, my lord. That is a matter for Mrs. Yarrow. But from what I have seen, the lady spends much of her time in the gardens. Hours, in fact. So it is not far off to assume she eats little.”

Tristan drew in a breath and let it out again slowly. “That is not very healthy, is it?”

Gideon hesitated, then stepped closer to the desk. “If you will permit me, my lord, that is not the problem.”

Tristan lifted his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“The problem is not whether she eats or not. The problem is whether she eats with you. You have not spoken a word to her since the wedding.”

Tristan swallowed, letting the words hang heavy between them. Then his jaw tightened, and he looked down at the ledger. “I have my reasons.”

“I know your reasons,” Gideon said, his voice devoid of malice. “I remember the nights at camp, when you told me you never meant to marry. You said often that a wife meant vulnerability. That you could not afford such a thing.”

Tristan closed the ledger with a sharp snap.

“But you have one now, my lord, whether you like it or not,” Gideon went on, unflinching. “She cannot be ignored like a ledger or a post on the field.”

Tristan pressed his fingers together, his elbows on the desk. He said nothing, though his chest rose and fell in a measured rhythm.

“I do not mean any disrespect,” Gideon added after a pause. “You know I never would. But if you treat her like a stranger, she will remain one. And then all of this—” he paused and gestured toward the window, and the estate beyond “—will weigh even heavier on you.”

The room grew still, and for a moment, nothing could be heard except the faint tick of the mantel clock.

At last, Gideon stepped back and bowed slightly, his expression softer now. “Think about it, my lord.”

Then he turned and moved toward the door. Tristan’s eyes followed him, but no words came. He watched as the door closed behind him, leaving him alone once more in the study.

He leaned back in his chair, staring at the books Gideon had brought. But his thoughts did not rest on the ledgers or the volumes. They rested on the quiet figure in the garden, and on the words his old friend had left him with.

Whether he liked it or not.

The third morning broke clear, sunlight spilling across the garden. Tristan stood once again at his study window, his arms folded and his eyes fixed on her. Eliza sat near the roses with her sketchbook open, her hand moving in steady strokes.

No.

He had watched long enough. Each day, he told himself he would speak, and each day, he held his tongue. This morning, he decided, would be different.

He left the study and moved through the long hallways, his boots firm against the floor. As he turned the corner, Mrs. Yarrow appeared, her hands folded neatly in front of her.

“My lord,” she said, dipping her head. “Would you like your dinner served in your room this evening as usual?”

“Yes,” he replied at once, almost paying it no mind.

Then he stopped.

Something about the word left him dissatisfied, so he turned back to her. “Wait.”

Mrs. Yarrow paused, her brows raised.

“We will have dinner,” Tristan said.

Her expression sharpened. “We, my lord?”

“Yes,” he said with a short nod. “My wife and I. Together. Please set up a private dinner in the smaller dining hall.”

Mrs. Yarrow’s mouth curved the faintest bit, though her tone remained even. “Very good, my lord. And what shall I tell Mrs. Teague to prepare?”

Tristan hesitated. He had not thought that far. “Why don’t you and the cook ... surprise me?”

That seemed to please her. “Mrs. Teague will be delighted. She has been attempting a new dish of late—pigeon pie. She thinks she has perfected, but she still needs someone to try it. Someone proper.”

“As long as it is edible,” Tristan said dryly.

Mrs. Yarrow dipped her head again, a spark in her eyes. “It shall be arranged, my lord.”

He nodded and strode past her, pushing through the tall doors that opened into the garden.

Eliza had her knees tucked beneath her gown, her sketchbook balanced in her lap. She looked so at ease, so far from his own stiffness, that he almost

faltered.

Almost.

He stopped a few paces before her, his shadow falling across her work. She looked up quickly, surprised to see him standing there.

“This evening,” he said, his voice firm, “you will dine with me. Eight o’clock. In the smaller dining hall.”

Her brows rose. “That was sudden.”

“It is dinner,” he replied, his tone clipped. “There is no reason for hesitation.”

She tilted her head at him, a small smile tugging at her lips. “You make it sound like an order.”

“It was not an order,” he said, though the words felt weak even as they left him.

“Oh, it certainly sounded like one,” she answered. She set her pencil across the sketchbook and leaned back slightly. “Do you always speak that way?”

He frowned. “What way?”

“Like a naval captain,” she said, laughter slipping into her voice. “Do you command your guests to eat?”

The heat rose in his neck. “I ... do not.”

“You do,” she said, her eyes glinting with quiet amusement. “You stand as if you expect a regiment to salute you.”

He shifted uncomfortably, clearing his throat. “I am only informing you of dinner.”

“In the tone of a man preparing for battle,” she teased.

He drew in a sharp breath. It had been so long since he had spoken freely with a woman.

Too long.

The words came stiff, the delivery harsher than he meant. He could not help it.

“What I meant,” he tried again, his voice lower, “was that you will join me for dinner. If that pleases you.”

Her smile softened, though she tilted her head once more. “Now that sounded almost like a request.”

He bristled. “It was not a request.”

“Then an order still?”

“An invitation!” he snapped, then regretted the edge in his voice.

She only laughed lightly. “Very well, my lord. An invitation, then. I shall attend.”

He cleared his throat again, unable to meet her gaze for long. “Eight o’clock,” he repeated, as though the reminder gave him ground to stand on.

Her lips curved once more, but she said nothing.

Tristan turned sharply, every muscle wound tight, and walked back toward the house before he said anything further.

Good God, that was alarmingly uncomfortable.

Chapter 8

Eliza sat before her table, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her cheeks could use a little more color. A part of her laughed at the irony of that thought, and the other part thought of her encounter with Tristan that afternoon.

She thought of how rigid his words had felt and how firm he wanted to be when he spoke to her. Her gaze remained fixed on her face in the mirror again, and as a momentary thought broke out of her.

Would he notice during dinner that her cheeks needed more color?

She shrugged off the thought and let the memory of his eyes take over instead. She remembered how grey and watchful they were and how they seemed to linger in her head even after he was gone.

She pressed her palms together, steadying herself. If this dinner was to happen, she needed to be ready to make a request of her own. If she could explain herself, perhaps he would grant her one small space. She did not need much, just a room with light and enough space to sketch. She needed somewhere she could be herself. That was all.

Her lady's maid entered and fussed with her gown, fastening the last button at her sleeve.

"You look very well, my lady," the maid said.

Eliza forced a smile. "It will do."

When she was ready, she walked down the hallways toward the small dining hall. She paused at the door, drew a breath, and stepped in.

The table was set for two, and the polished silver candlesticks glowed on the table. Tristan stood at the head of the table, tall and composed, as he turned to her as she approached him, a smile on his face.

One she could tell he had to force.

“My lady,” he said evenly. “Good evening.”

“Good evening,” she replied, her voice quiet.

He gestured toward the table. “Mrs. Teague has prepared some pie. Apparently, she has been trying her hand at it for some time.”

Eliza nodded but barely registered the words. It was the first time they had sat so close since the wedding, and his calmness unsettled her. It was almost like she was sitting next to a statue.

They sat and watched the servants place the dishes before them. When they retreated, Eliza picked up her fork. She took a small bite, even though her appetite was long gone.

Nothing could be heard except for the clinking of cutlery against porcelain. Eliza counted the minutes in her head and wondered how long it was going to take for one of them to eventually break.

At last, he spoke, turning to her. “We should talk.”

Her fork paused, and she lowered it slowly. “About what?”

“Our circumstances,” he said. His tone was measured, the words firm in his mouth. “I will be direct. I do not expect you to do anything.”

Her hand tightened in her lap. “What?”

“I want you to feel at home here,” he continued. “As much as one can, and I know this marriage cannot be what you hoped for. It was not what I hoped for either. This is not a fairytale.”

Her throat tightened as she continued to listen to him.

“However,” he said, his eyes fixed on her, “you will have security here. You will want for nothing. And in time, there must be an heir, as that is required.”

The words cut through her. He spoke of children as though they were an obligation, not a choice. Perhaps they were an obligation for a man like him. She looked at him, searching for any trace of warmth.

She found none.

“I hope you understand,” he finally said.

Her chest ached as she stared at him. Those damn eyes again. She could let the silence swallow them one more time, but she steadied herself. She had come prepared.

“Then may I ask something?”

He lifted a brow. “What is it?”

“I would like a room,” she said carefully. “A small one. With enough light. I could use it as an atelier. A place to keep my paints, my sketches. It would occupy my time, and I promise it would not disturb you.”

He studied her, his gaze unreadable. The candles flickered against the sharp lines of his face, and she forced herself not to look away.

“I ... I would not disturb you. I only ask for a place where I can paint. My sketchbook is small, and it is not enough. I need ... more.”

Still, he did not speak, and the silence pressed down harder. She could not tell if he disapproved, if he thought it foolish, or if he was simply indifferent.

Finally, he placed his fork down with care and said, “You will.”

Her breath caught. “I will?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “It will be arranged.”

Relief broke through her chest, though she kept her expression composed. “Thank you.”

“Do not thank me,” he said, voice still clipped. “If it keeps you occupied, it serves us both.”

His words carried no softness, but she clung to the agreement.

The silence that followed no longer felt as heavy. She picked up her fork again, taking another small bite. The food tasted stronger now, though she could hardly focus on it.

Across the table, he watched her in that same calm way, like he was still deciding what kind of woman now sat across from him.

Deciding to pay him less mind, she lowered her gaze to her plate. Whatever else he thought, she would have her space. That was enough for tonight.

Later that evening, after dinner, she sat before her mirror while her maid unfastened the back of her gown. The day's heaviness clung to her, but she felt lighter now, almost eager and unable to hold back her thoughts.

"I will finally have something to do here," she said. "A room of my own. I can set out my brushes and paints and not have to clear them away each time. Can you imagine? An atelier, right here at Evermere."

The maid smiled as she folded the gown. "It is good to hear you speak so happily, my lady. I have not seen you this bright since you arrived."

Eliza leaned forward against the table. "I was afraid I would never find a place here, that each day would feel the same. But this ... this could change everything. I might even feel alive again."

"And what will you paint first?" the maid asked.

“Perhaps more of the gardens,” Eliza said, her eyes softening. “They are always changing, and I could spend hours watching them. Or perhaps the hallways and the wall panels. They look like something out of a Gothic novel, if I have ever seen one.”

The maid tilted her head. “And for your colors and brushes? Do you have enough?”

Eliza shook her head. “Not nearly. My sketchbook is small, and the paints I brought are almost gone. I would need fresh ones and proper canvases, too. Do you think such things can be found here?”

“That should not be hard,” the maid said quickly. “The marketplace has stalls with supplies, and I can fetch them for you myself. All you need to do is tell me what you want.”

Eliza turned toward her, her eyes bright. “Would you really? That would mean so much to me.”

“Of course, my lady. Only ...” The maid paused.

Eliza’s smile faded a little. “Only what?”

“You must be careful,” the maid said in a lower voice. “Lady Howard may not approve.”

Eliza blinked. Evelyn had already struck her as sharp, her gaze weighing and measuring. Still, she laughed lightly, though her throat tightened. “Why? Does Lady Howard frown upon women painting?”

The maid shook her head quickly. “Nothing of the sort. She has her ways, that is all. She sees much and says more. Best to mind yourself around her.”

Eliza swallowed and nodded. “I see. Thank you.”

The maid straightened. “Do you need anything else before I leave you, my lady?”

“No, that is all.”

The girl curtsied and slipped away, leaving Eliza alone. The room felt too still, the silence too heavy. She tried to steady herself, but her thoughts pressed in. She needed air, she needed to move. She lifted a candleholder from the table and slipped into the hallway.

The house at night was quiet, her steps echoing against the wood. She let the flame guide her, moving up staircases and into the upper rooms she had not yet seen. The air was cooler there, and dust lingered in the corners.

At last, she pushed open a door into the attic. The space was filled with draped furniture and forgotten things. Her candlelight fell on a tall frame leaning against the wall, covered by a sheet. She set the candle down, stepped closer, and pulled the cloth away.

A portrait stood before her, damaged and faded, but the woman’s eyes still shone through. They were gentle and kind, looking out as if waiting for someone to see her again.

Eliza’s breath caught. She touched the frame, feeling the cracks in the paint. She knew at once what she would do. This portrait would be hers to restore, her first project at Evermere.

She lifted it carefully, heavier than she expected, and began the walk back toward her chambers.

“My lady?”

The voice made her start. She turned, the portrait held close, to see Mrs. Yarrow standing at the end of the hall.

Eliza steadied herself. “Mrs. Yarrow ... I did not mean to disturb anyone. I was only ... exploring.”

The housekeeper’s gaze shifted to the portrait. “And you found something.”

Eliza looked down at the woman’s painted eyes, then back to her. “Do you know her?”

Mrs. Yarrow stepped closer, studying the canvas with calm interest. She shook her head. “No one has paid attention to that one in years.”

“Would it trouble anyone if I restored it?” Eliza asked quietly.

“Trouble? Not at all,” Mrs. Yarrow said, her tone gentle. “If it gives you purpose, then do it. The painting has waited long enough.”

Eliza felt warmth stir in her chest, a spark of joy. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Shall I have a place prepared for it tomorrow?” the housekeeper asked.

“Yes,” Eliza said, smiling faintly. “Yes, please.”

Mrs. Yarrow inclined her head. “Goodnight, my lady.”

“Goodnight,” Eliza replied softly.

Back in her room, Eliza set the portrait against the wall. The candlelight flickered across the woman’s face, softening the cracks. For the first time, she felt she had found a purpose of her own.

She felt like she had something to look forward to.

Chapter 9

The sun bore down hard upon the roof of the estate's old accounts shed as Tristan wiped beads of sweat off his brow. The smell of hay and dust filled his nostrils and the air almost at the same time, a feat he wasn't especially accustomed to.

He sat behind a chair and let his eyes settle on the estate ledgers before him, then he looked out at the queue across his desk and huffed a sigh of frustration.

Standing by his side, his hand tucked behind his back, was Gideon, who did not exactly look happy to be there either. Tristan exhaled one more time and let his eyes drift to the rafters above. The rays of the sun were a giant distraction, and he was certain that the people standing before him could feel it as well.

Tristan tapped his quill impatiently against the paper on the table, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

"Are you all right, my lord?" Gideon asked, stepping forward.

"As all right as one can be," he responded. "I still cannot believe he made me come out here."

Gideon glanced sideways. "Your grandfather did insist it was part of a landowner's duty."

Tristan scowled. "Part of a landowner's torment, more like. I did not return from years at the hunting lodge just to weigh the worth of chickens and coins. This is an utter waste of my time."

“Someone must do it,” Gideon reminded him.

“Yes, but it ought to be anyone but me.” He scratched a sharp line into the ledger, nearly tearing the page. “What am I to gain from counting every penny and every animal these people offer? There are better uses of my day.”

Before Gideon could answer, a woman approached the table, clutching a small purse in one hand and a chicken in the other. Tristan and Gideon exchanged knowing glances before turning back to look at the woman.

She gave a nervous bow of her head before holding out the bird. “My lord, I have brought the rest of what I can. Please accept it.”

Tristan arched a brow, looking at the chicken suspiciously. “This?”

“Yes, my lord,” the woman responded.

Tristan opened his mouth to speak, but the chicken’s wings flapped suddenly, and in the same moment it escaped her grasp, flying straight up into the rafters. A flurry of feathers filled the shed, and the startled tenants ducked immediately.

He swore under his breath as the creature landed with a thud against the roof, then tumbled down to the ground with a strained squawk.

The woman scrambled to scoop it up again, red-faced with shame. “I...I am sorry, my lord. I meant no trouble. But that is all I have. You will still take it, will you not?”

Tristan leaned back in his chair, studying her. “The only thing you have?”

She nodded quickly, stroking the bird as though it might calm both of them. “Yes, my lord. I worked as much as I could to raise the rest, but there was not enough. This was the only substitute I could bring.”

For a long moment, Tristan said nothing. His quill rested against the page, idle. Then he exhaled and pushed the ledger away. “Take it with you.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “My lord?”

“Keep it,” he repeated, his voice curt. “You will not need to pay again next month either.”

The woman’s lips trembled with relief. “You are very kind, my lord. Thank you.” She bowed and hurried out with the chicken clutched tight to her chest.

As the murmurs in the line quieted, Gideon folded his arms and looked squarely at Tristan. “I cannot believe you just did that.”

Tristan shrugged. “It was the easier choice. I have no use for a chicken flying around in the carriage. Imagine it leaping about every time the horse galloped.”

“You mean to tell me that is your reason?” Gideon pressed, his voice skeptical.

Tristan nodded.

“Your only reason?” Gideon pressed.

Tristan kept his eyes on the ledger. “What else would it be?”

“Pity, perhaps?”

“Convenience,” Tristan corrected sharply. “If we gave way to pity for every soul who failed to pay, Evermere would collapse into ruin within the year. Sentiment does not balance accounts.”

“I know that,” Gideon responded, his eyes still narrowed. “I was only trying to see if you do as well, my lord.”

“I do,” Tristan responded, his voice just as sharp.

Gideon studied him for a moment longer, but said nothing, though the corner of his mouth twitched as if he was not entirely convinced.

The next tenant came forward, an older man this time. His hands were rough with years of work; he bowed low before speaking.

“My lord, forgive me. I have nothing to offer this month.” His voice shook, and Tristan studied him further. “My only farm horse died last fortnight, and without it I could not manage the fields. Nor could I pay a farmhand to help. I ask only for more time.”

Tristan lowered his gaze to the open ledger, scanning the notes until he found the name. “Mr. Jones, is it?”

The man nodded.

“It says here you have missed payments the last two months as well,” Tristan said, his voice even. “I imagine your horse was still alive then.”

The man looked stricken but admitted, “Yes, my lord. But the harvest was too poor. I had just enough to scrape by, to put food on the table. Nothing more.” His voice dropped lower. “I have taken a job in the marketplace now, one that promises decent pay. By next week, I will have the money. All of it. I promise you.”

Tristan leaned back slightly, weighing his words. The man’s shoulders sagged in a way Tristan couldn’t help but feel terrible about. At last, he closed the ledger with a deliberate hand.

“Next week,” he repeated.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Very well. You may go. Report the sum then.”

The man’s face lit up, and relief washed over him. “Thank you, my lord. Thank you. You will not regret it.” He bowed deeply before hurrying away, gratitude spilling from every step.

Gideon smirked as the man disappeared. “And what was that, then? Convenience again?”

Tristan shot him a sidelong look. “Do not start.”

Gideon only grinned wider.

“How many more?” Tristan asked, rubbing a hand over his temple.

Gideon leaned to peer down the line stretching toward the door. “About twenty more, I should think.”

Tristan groaned and let his head fall back against the chair. “God help me.”

The line shuffled forward again.

Tristan pushed through the doors, grateful to be back in the manor one more time.

“Good God, I never believed there was a time I would look forward to that cold interior air,” he said, dusting his shoes at the entrance while Gideon walked gently behind him.

“It does put things into perspective, does it not, my lord?”

Tristan turned and opened his mouth to speak but then a rhythmic noise broke into his hearing. It sounded jagged and rough, like a hammer banging hard into a wall. Gideon heard it as well because his head seemed to shift toward the direction of the sound.

Tristan frowned. “What in God’s name is that noise?”

Gideon adjusted the papers tucked under his arm. “That must be the workers. They started this morning on the reconstruction for Lady Vale’s atelier.”

Tristan’s brows rose. “They are here already?”

“Yes, my lord. Mrs. Yarrow was quick to set things in order. They seem to have made good progress.”

Tristan turned in the direction of the noise. Gideon tried to speak behind him, but the noise was either too loud or his valet was never audible in the first place, but he followed the noise anyway.

Soon, he halted and stood by the doorway, watching the room ahead of him get a complete change. The men inside worked with full energy, and the smell of polish clung to the damp air.

The leader of the crew spotted him immediately and came forward, cap in hand. He bowed quickly. “My lord. I was just about to send word. We’ve run into a small matter.”

Tristan folded his arms. “What’s the matter?”

The man gestured toward the half-bared wall. “We’ll need to replace this section here. We can go with plaster, which is what was there before, or we can use a finer lime finish instead. The plaster is the cheaper choice, and is easy to set.

The lime, on the other hand, takes longer, costs more, and requires a bit of care to get right. My advice, if I may, is plaster. It’ll hold well enough, and

the lady will hardly notice the difference. She won't be spending long hours in here, after all."

Tristan's expression sharpened. "Which was here before?"

"The plaster, my lord."

Tristan glanced at the wall, then back at the man. "Would that not be harsh on her eyes when she is at work? The light here will reflect poorly on it, will it not?"

The man chuckled, shaking his head. "Well, maybe, but with respect, she won't be here often enough to notice. Ladies have other matters to tend to, as you well know. Embroidery, attending balls, entertaining guests, and all that. She won't be keeping herself locked away painting for hours. The plaster will be enough."

The words hung in the air, and Tristan inhaled sharply. Gideon's gaze flicked to him at once, as if knowing what was coming.

Tristan took a slow step forward, his eyes narrowing. "I do not suppose you are dictating what Lady Vale may or may not do with her time, are you?"

The worker's face lost its ease, the humor slipping away. "No, my lord, of course not. I meant only—"

"Because, sir," Tristan cut in, his voice low but edged, "that would be a gross overstepping of your boundaries."

The man swallowed hard. "I only meant, between the two of us—"

Tristan spoke over him again, sharper now. “You will use the lime finish. If the cost requires increasing your payment, then submit a request for it. But do not presume to decide what my wife will or will not notice.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And do not make insinuations about how she chooses to spend her hours, either. Not in my hearing. Am I understood?”

The man’s shoulders hunched as though bracing himself. “Yes, my lord. Very well. We will proceed with the lime. My apologies.”

“Good.” Tristan’s tone left no room for further debate. “Carry on.”

He turned on his heel and strode from the room, Gideon falling in step behind him. They walked in silence down the hallway, the sound of hammers fading into the distance.

They got to his study in less than a minute, and this time, Gideon stepped in first. Tristan removed his gloves and walked right behind him, his eyes scanning the room like it had changed since he left it. He watched Gideon cross the room to his table and inspect the fresh batch of correspondence that must have arrived in their absence.

“Anything new for me?” Tristan asked, tugging off his gloves.

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Gideon reached into the pile and drew out an envelope, sealed with a pressed floral emblem. “This arrived an hour ago.”

Tristan broke the wax and unfolded the parchment, scanning the lines carefully. His brow lifted slightly as he read to the end. “A garden party.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tristan flipped the invitation shut between his fingers. “And we are invited. Lady Vale and myself.”

“That is usually the case with such events,” Gideon said mildly.

Tristan leaned back in his chair, a faint smirk curving his mouth. “Indeed.” He tapped the edge of the invitation against his palm. “Well, then. I had better deliver the news to Lady Vale myself.”

“As you wish.”

Tristan rose to his feet one last time and made his way out of his study. If he were to inform his wife of the party they were to attend, he might as well do it now and get it over with.

Perhaps it was because of the continuous hammering on the other side of the manor, or just the mere fact that he was too deep in thought to think, something pushed him to step into Eliza’s chambers without knocking.

When he realized his mistake, it was too late. He caught her in the middle of pushing something under her bed. Something framed.

He stopped short, realizing his mistake and her actions almost at the exact same time.

“Tristan,” she greeted him, pushing away the stray strands of hair off her face. “I did not hear you come in.”

“Forgive me,” he said, his voice clipped, a sharp contrast to her nervous chuckle. “I should have announced myself.”

Her hands smoothed her gown as though nothing had happened. “It is all right.”

But his eyes narrowed. “What was that?”

Her head tilted, her lips pressing into a small smile. “Nothing.”

“That was not nothing.”

“I—” She froze.

His eyes remained focused on her.

She exhaled almost in exasperation.

He could almost see the gears turning in her head like she was desperately trying to think of something to say. When she spoke again, her voice was a bit clearer.

“It is nothing you should concern yourself with, Tristan.”

The words reminded him too much of the excuses he had heard before, vague and dismissive. He shook his head. “That was clearly a painting.”

Her eyes widened, caught, though she still tried. “You cannot be so sure—”

“I can,” he said sharply. He stepped further inside, letting the door fall closed behind him. “And I will not leave until you pull it out.”

She lifted her chin. “You cannot stand there forever.”

A dry laugh left him. “I served on the front lines, Eliza. I have stood in mud for three days with no sleep and no fire, waiting for an enemy charge. Do not think I lack patience. I will wait here for as long as it takes.”

The air between them tightened. She saw it, he knew she did, for her shoulders slumped. At last, with a reluctant breath, she bent down and drew the canvas from beneath the bed.

Tristan’s chest went still when his eyes settled on it.

The painting was damaged, the frame cracked, but the restoration she had attempted ... it was enough to bring the woman’s likeness forward again. The colors in the canvas gave life to the face of the woman in the painting. A face he had not seen in years.

His mother.

Her green eyes looked back at him, and along with shock, he felt a deep wave of despair settle at the very bottom of his stomach.

Eliza looked at him, cautious. “I—”

“Where did you get this?” His voice cut through the chamber, rougher than he intended.

She swallowed. “Do not be angry. I only—”

“Do not tell me not to be angry,” he snapped. His hand tightened against his sleeve. “Answer my question.”

Her mouth trembled as she spoke. “I found it in the attic when I was exploring. It was left under a sheet, forgotten. Mrs. Yarrow said no one had touched it in years and that it would not matter if I—”

“I had no idea Mrs. Yarrow was in charge of the paintings in the manor,” he said coldly.

“She is the housekeeper,” Eliza tried, her voice lifting slightly. “So technically—”

“Do not get technical with me.” His tone cut hers away.

She stared back at him, frustration flaring in her eyes now. “What is the great matter? I am only trying to restore it. To bring it back to its original state. I am not destroying it, Tristan.”

“That is not the point,” he said through clenched teeth. “The point is, you chose to do this without a word. Without permission.”

She drew herself taller. “I am sorry, but in case you have not noticed, there is nothing else to do in this place. Nothing. I was only trying to give myself a purpose.”

“Then find another purpose,” he returned quickly. “Read, sew, walk the gardens. Do not go about taking things that are not yours to handle.”

Her eyes burned at him. “I did not know it was forbidden. If I had, I would have asked. I can take it back—”

“It is too late,” he said flatly.

Her lips parted in disbelief. “Too late? It is only paint. I can—”

“Please stop.”

“I will, when you stop trying to bite my head off over this. Like I said, it is just a pai—”

“Enough!” His voice cracked through the chamber, the word louder than he meant, final and sharp.

The silence that followed was thick, heavy as stone. She lowered her gaze, her hands trembling slightly against her gown.

Tristan drew in a slow breath, steadying himself. “Please forgive me. That was completely uncalled for.”

Eliza said nothing, but he could tell she had a lot to say just by the look on her face. The way her eyes bore into him seemed to say everything she couldn’t.

Everything she didn’t want to.

“I ...” He trailed off, unable to take his eyes off the portrait. It was like he was staring at a portal through Eliza’s hand.

He cleared his throat again. “I ... will take a break. For now.”

She said nothing, and he could tell she wanted to.

“I apologize once again. Please excuse me,” he stated, then turned around to leave. He could feel her eyes on him as he walked out of the room, but he didn’t turn back to confirm them. Not once.

The hammering sound resumed as he made his way down the hallway. This time, though, he could tune it out because nothing else occupied his thoughts except the image of his mother.

Chapter 10

Eliza took one last look at the mirror and adjusted her hair. She swallowed and let her thoughts remain in one place. Ever since her rather brutal encounter with Tristan that afternoon, she had refused to leave her room in fear of running into him. She didn't know if she could bear the hurt look in his eyes.

She stepped out of her chambers anyway and headed down the hallway. Tristan should be in his study by now, which meant the chances of running into him were low. The sound of hammers pounding into nails and into walls filled her ears as she walked.

As she grew closer to the room, the noise grew even louder. Finally, she paused by the doorway and watched the men work in what she could only describe as chaotic coordination. She continued to watch how the men worked in silence and bliss until she broke the silence.

“Good evening,” she said softly.

The workers turned, some wiping their brows, others dipping their heads. “My lady,” they said in return before continuing their work.

Eliza walked slowly across the room, her eyes running over the walls, the light, the growing order. “It looks wonderful,” she said with genuine warmth. “I love how it is coming together.”

The head of the workers, a tall man with broad shoulders and a dark beard, stepped closer. His expression was careful, as though he were not entirely convinced. “You are certain you love what you see, my lady?”

She gave him a small smile. “Yes. Very certain.”

“Are you completely certain?” he asked again, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Her brows lifted at his persistence. “I am. I promise you, I am quite pleased.”

The man finally gave a single nod. “Good.”

She tilted her head. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

He shook his head quickly, his voice flat. “No reason.” Then he stepped back, returning his gaze to the men at work.

Eliza lingered a moment, curious, but decided not to press him. Instead, she asked, “When last did you all take a break?”

One of the younger workers answered between strokes of his hammer. “A few hours ago, my lady.”

“Then I’ll have some lemonade sent up,” Eliza said firmly. “Or at least some water. It isn’t right to keep working without it.”

The bearded man shook his head again. “That won’t be necessary.”

But Eliza smiled faintly and lifted her chin. “It will be done anyway. I’ll see to it myself.”

Without waiting for another protest, she turned and left, the noise of their labor following her into the quiet corridor. She made her way toward the kitchens, her steps echoing in the long hallway, when a door opened suddenly, and Evelyn Howard stepped out.

Eliza stopped and composed herself quickly. “Lady Howard. It is you.”

Evelyn’s lips curved into the faintest smile, her brows arching. “I should hope so.”

Eliza gave a polite nod, unsure whether to laugh or not. “I see you are well this evening.”

“I see you are settling in,” Evelyn said, her voice smooth and cool, her gaze flicking briefly in the direction of the atelier.

“Yes,” Eliza replied, steadying her tone. “And I have the duke to thank for it.”

“Don’t,” Evelyn said at once, the word sharp but almost amused. “The last thing my father needs is someone stroking his ego.”

Eliza inclined her head and allowed the silence to settle. The hammering from the atelier filled the space between them, each strike echoing faintly through the walls.

At length, Evelyn broke the pause. “So you are serious about this atelier of yours.”

“It is only a hobby,” Eliza said. “I hope you do not disapprove.”

“Not at all,” Evelyn answered, her voice as smooth as ever. “I am a sailor by nature. I get used to things as they come.” Her mouth curved a little more. “My husband, if he were here, would say I was being disingenuous. But you must know I am not.”

Eliza studied her face, searching for insincerity, but found none. “I believe you,” she said softly.

Evelyn’s gaze sharpened slightly. “If Tristan is renovating the atelier for you, perhaps there is something in this marriage beyond convenience.”

Eliza gave a short laugh, though it sounded weary to her own ears. “I doubt it. I angered him this afternoon, and he has not spoken to me since.”

Evelyn let out a laugh of her own, richer than Eliza expected. “Do not worry yourself. Tristan has always been the sort to stew in his feelings until he is able to swallow them.”

Eliza frowned at that. “That is unhealthy.”

“Of course it is,” Evelyn said with lightness. “The man was in the army, for God’s sake. I am afraid that was already a given.”

That earned a soft laugh from Eliza, despite herself. “Still, it seems a poor way to live.”

“Perhaps. But he has managed all the same.” Evelyn’s tone carried a finality to it. Then she softened slightly. “Do not fret. He will come around. If he can get past your painting hobby, he can certainly get past whatever else has unsettled him.”

Eliza lowered her gaze for a moment before meeting her eyes again. “Thank you. That is comforting to hear.” She smoothed her shawl. “But I must go. I promised the men some lemonade.”

Evelyn’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly, though her smile remained. “Of course you did. Well, I must not delay you.”

Eliza began to step away, but Evelyn caught her hand gently, halting her. Eliza turned, a flicker of surprise crossing her face.

“My dear,” Evelyn said, her voice lower now, “you are married to my favorite nephew.”

Eliza narrowed her eyes faintly. “I thought he was your only nephew.”

Evelyn’s smile deepened, her eyes glinting. “Same difference. The point, Eliza, is that you do not need to call me Lady Howard. Aunt Evelyn will do just fine.”

Eliza blinked at the shift, then gave a small nod. “Very well. Thank you ... Aunt Evelyn.”

Evelyn released her hand, her expression still fixed in that poised smile.

Eliza dipped her head once more, then turned and continued down the corridor, her thoughts spinning. She had set out only to offer refreshment to the workers, yet somehow she had walked away with a new form of address for a woman she was not yet sure she trusted.

Still, she held onto her composure as she made her way toward the kitchens, the echo of Evelyn's words following her every step.

The next morning came with muted light that stretched through Eliza's windows. She sat still while Rose, her maid, brushed her hair into order for breakfast. Rose's fingers were gentle, the brush moving in slow strokes. Eliza studied Rose's full cheeks and bright red hair in the mirror and exhaled.

"Rose," she said after a moment, her voice low, "is Lord Vale in the dining room yet?"

"I cannot tell, my lady," Rose replied. "I'm not permitted in there. That is for Mr. Gideon, his valet. He would know."

Eliza shifted in her seat. "And have you seen Mr. Gideon this morning?"

Rose nodded. "Yes, my lady, but only briefly. Five minutes in the servants' hall, nothing more."

Eliza studied her reflection in the glass. "And did he...well...did he appear as though my husband had left the manor this morning? Perhaps something in his demeanor?"

Rose paused in her brushing. "I'm sorry, my lady. I could not tell. Mr. Gideon is not a man who shows much in his manner."

Eliza gave a short, rueful smile. “No. I suppose he is not.” She lifted her eyes to Rose’s in the mirror. “You must not apologize. You were not meant to know.”

Rose returned her focus to the hair, tying it up neatly, while Eliza tried to hold herself steady, even though her thoughts scattered in different directions. Why did she care so much whether Tristan was there or not? Why should his absence trouble her? Was it because, unlike before, she had been the cause of his withdrawal?

That thought lingered uncomfortably in her head, and she hated the way it made her feel. It was like she had wronged him more than she had intended.

“My lady,” Rose said gently, breaking into her thoughts. “I did hear something spoken of in passing. There was mention of a special guest.”

Eliza blinked and turned a little. “A special guest?”

Rose nodded. “Yes. Supposedly, someone is to arrive at the manor this evening. That is all I heard.”

Eliza frowned. “Someone? And is this someone familiar with the manor? Or is this a friend of His Grace?”

“I couldn’t say, my lady. Only that there is to be a guest. The rest was not shared with me.”

Eliza nodded once, settling her hands in her lap. “Very well. Do not trouble yourself further. Thank you, Rose.”

Rose smiled. “Your hair is finished, my lady. You are ready for the morning.”

Eliza rose, straightening her dress before making her way down the hall. The sound of her steps carried softly as she neared the dining room, but her thoughts filled her head with noise. Soon, the doors opened and she stepped inside.

At the long table sat the duke, stern and still, and beside him was Evelyn, bright in her manner as ever. Evelyn looked up at once and raised her brows.

“Darling, what a relief you have joined us,” Evelyn said with a smooth laugh. “I thought we might have to climb the stairs and settle ourselves outside your door to wait.”

Eliza paused, uncertain. “You needn’t have—”

“She is being sarcastic, my dear,” the duke cut in, his tone plain.

“Oh.” Eliza flushed faintly, a nervous smile breaking over her lips. “Yes. Of course.” She gave a light laugh and moved to take her seat.

She could feel Evelyn’s eyes on her as she placed her napkin on her lap, but she said nothing about it. Instead, she moved to a more pressing subject. “Will Tristan be joining us this morning?”

Evelyn leaned back with an amused look. “Tristan could grow a beard in that study of his and no one would ever know.”

Eliza's heart sank a little. She had been hoping to see him, to find some way to speak, to offer an apology for their quarrel. She glanced at his empty chair, its vacancy too obvious.

After a pause, she cleared her throat. "I was told a guest is expected at Evermere later today."

The duke looked up, his brows drawing together. "A guest?"

"Yes."

"I was not aware of that."

"Oh," Eliza murmured, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

"Perhaps it is one of Tristan's military friends. They always wander around these parts once in a while."

Evelyn gave a small shrug as though it made no difference to her. "We shall see soon enough." She reached for her bread, then looked to Eliza. "And how was your night, dear?"

"It was fine," Eliza answered. "Restful."

Evelyn smiled wistfully. "I envy you. I dreamed I was walking down a street in Boston."

She took a bite and chewed slowly, and Eliza waited, her eyes settled on her. However, she realized soon enough that nothing else would come forth,

and she tilted her head. “Sorry, is that all?”

“Of course,” Evelyn said easily. “Was that not dreadful enough?”

Eliza pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh.

“Be prepared, Eliza,” the duke said with a touch of dryness. “You will find that my daughter has long carried a dislike for America.”

“Dislike?” Evelyn lifted her brows in mock indignation. “You make it sound like I simply do not enjoy beans on toast.”

The duke’s eyes narrowed. “Your husband is there, Evelyn. The country is not the ring of fire you imagine.”

“It does not have to be,” Evelyn murmured, reaching for her cup. “It can still burn you.”

The remark made Eliza laugh before she could stop herself. Evelyn’s wit was sharp, too sharp at times, but it amused her. Yet even as she laughed, her eyes drifted again to the seat across from her. Tristan’s absence pressed in more than she wanted to admit.

She sipped from her cup, smiled where she needed to, but inside her thoughts spun in circles. She had hoped this morning would be different.

She had hoped for him.

After breakfast, she decided to take a little stroll to a wing of the manor instead of going straight back to her room as usual.

The atelier smelled of lime and fresh plaster when Eliza stepped inside. Her eyes settled on the pale walls that almost seemed to glisten in the late afternoon sun. The work tools of the construction workers still lay by the foot of the walls, and for some reason, she studied how worn they seemed to look.

It was almost complete, though clearly not finished. Her mind tried to process what it would eventually look like when it was finished. She imagined herself spending most of her free days in the room, letting nature and everything around her inspire her painting. She could almost feel her fingers around a paintbrush and oil on her face. She could smell the colors and the cold, tense texture of the paints.

No.

She couldn't get excited yet. Not now anyway. She needed to wait.

A soft knock sounded behind her, and she turned quickly.

Tristan stood in the doorway. He was in a dark coat with a snowy white cravat. His hands were tucked behind his back as his eyes searched the atelier. Then he smiled in a way that unsettled Eliza for a rather brief second before fully stepping in.

“What do you think of it?” he asked.

Eliza blinked, startled by his sudden presence. “It is ... it is quite good. The place looks wonderful.”

He gave a small nod. “It should look even better once it is finished.”

A silence stretched. She looked back at the walls, but her thoughts turned to him instead. She had dreaded and hoped for this meeting in equal measure.

She turned toward him at last. “I must apologize.”

At the same instant, he said, “You must understand—”

They both stopped, caught in the collision of words. Eliza’s lips curved, and a smile broke across her face despite herself. Tristan gave a faint laugh as well, the smallest shift in his otherwise stern expression.

“Why don’t I go first?” he said after a moment.

She inclined her head. “Very well.”

He stepped further into the room, his boots quiet against the dusty floor. “I am sorry for the way I reacted. Nothing you did warranted such a response. I had the night to think about it. And...” his mouth tugged briefly at the corner, “Gideon saw fit to give me an earful about it this morning as well.”

Eliza folded her hands in front of her. “I see. And here I was thinking you were avoiding me.”

“Far from it,” Tristan replied. “I only needed time to process what I had done.”

His gaze drifted briefly toward the far wall before returning to her. His voice dropped lower, more careful. “The painting was of my mother. Seeing it brought back memories I was not prepared to face. I took that out on you. That was wrong. What you were doing—restoring it—was a kindness. I should have met it with more grace.”

Eliza studied him, her breath catching slightly. She had not expected such open words from him, not so soon. Slowly, she nodded. “Then I hope this place,” she gestured at the atelier around them, “might serve as some small way to make up for my missteps.”

His eyes warmed, just barely. “It should do more than enough.”

Another quiet moment passed. Dust motes hung in the air between them, caught in the shaft of light from the tall window.

“You said the portrait brought back memories you weren’t ready to face,” Eliza said softly at last. “What memories are those?”

He cleared his throat, his jaw tightening.

She drew back slightly. “Forgive me. Perhaps I’ve gone too far.”

Tristan shook his head. “No. You are my wife. You have the right to know.”

Eliza held his gaze. “I assume it involves your mother.”

“You assume correctly,” he said.

But before she could press further, a sharp knock rattled at the atelier door. Both their heads turned.

A footman stepped inside, bowing quickly. “My lord, Mr. Harwood is here. He waits in the drawing room.”

Eliza’s breath caught hard in her chest. She felt her blood turn to ice.

Tristan’s tone remained even. “Tell Mr. Harwood I will be there shortly.”

“Yes, my lord.” The footman bowed again and disappeared.

Eliza’s hands curled into fists against her skirts. “Mr. Harwood?” she whispered, her voice edged with disbelief.

“Yes.” Tristan’s eyes rested on her face with something unreadable. “My apologies for not telling you sooner. Your brother requested an audience with me.”

Eliza swallowed, her throat tight. “Why? What is he doing here?”

“That,” Tristan said, straightening, “is what I am about to find out. You must excuse me.”

He turned and left, his coat brushing the doorway as he disappeared.

Eliza remained frozen in the middle of the room. Her skin crawled as the same question reverberated in her head over and over again, almost like a warning gong.

What in God's name was Marcus doing at Evermere?

Chapter 11

Tristan walked into the drawing room as steadily as possible with his hands tucked behind him. Marcus Harwood sat on one of the settees closer to the fireplace, a satchel wrapped around his shoulder and a cup of tea in hand.

On the small table before him was a tray of freshly made cakes and biscuits. However, it was clear from what he'd seen that Marcus seemed to enjoy the tea more than the cakes themselves for some reason he could not understand.

Tristan stopped a few paces from him, and Marcus's eyes snapped up, a sly smile on his face.

"I will be honest with you, Mr. Harwood," Tristan began, his tone clipped as he settled into the chair facing Marcus, "I rarely take visit requests if they are not made at least a week in advance. It is a rule my grandfather put in place, and I have found it works for me as well.

"Oh," Marcus responded, and the smile on his face faltered just a little.

Tristan exhaled and continued, "But since you are my brother-in-law, I will make an exception."

Marcus lowered his cup, a gentle smile spreading across his face. "And I am grateful for the courtesy, Lord Vale. Next time, I will be sure to notify you with the proper formality. It is simply that this chance fell into my lap. I thought it would be a disservice to you if I did not take it at once."

Tristan gave the smallest nod. "Then let us call it settled."

Marcus leaned back, letting his eyes sweep across the room. “These walls,” he started, tapping the panel nearest to him, “they feel incredibly luxurious. Top of the line, I imagine?”

Tristan followed his gaze but offered nothing more than a calm nod. “My grandfather does not compromise on comfort.”

“I can see that,” Marcus said warmly. His eyes moved again, almost hungrily to the doorway. “On my way in, I passed the stables. Magnificent creatures. And the saddles ... They look like they were drafted just for you. They must have cost dearly.”

Tristan shifted slightly in his seat, his expression still, but his eyes narrowing.

Marcus did not stop. “And the cobblestones...when were they polished last? They glimmer in the sun. I just say all in all, the manor is being kept in a remarkable position.”

Tristan cleared his throat. “You’ll have to thank our staff for that.”

“And in the hallway just before this room, I saw a painting of the manor itself. A fine hand must have worked on that canvas. Now, I am certain that would have cost a fortune. No painter in his right mind would take that work without a proper sum.”

The air grew thinner with each observation, and Tristan shifted again in his seat. He pressed his thumb against his knee, then cleared his throat with a deliberate cough.

“Mr. Harwood,” he eventually said, evenly, “are you not missing something?”

Marcus paused, as though he had been waiting for that moment. He set his cup down on the table and folded his hands together. “Yes, I knew I was. I was saving it for last.”

Tristan allowed a small curve of his mouth, but his eyes remained sharp. “And that would be?”

“The cushions,” Marcus said with a grin and patted the arm of his chair. “These feel immensely kingly. Sitting here, I almost imagine I am on a cloud. Pure comfort.”

“No,” Tristan said flatly. His voice cooled.

Marcus cocked his brow. “No?”

Tristan sighed. “Eliza.”

Marcus blinked. “What?”

“You have been in this room for almost ten minutes. Eight of those I have spent sitting with you. You have complimented everything in this house except the chamber pots, and yet you have not once asked about your sister.”

The smile on Marcus’s face faltered again and was replaced by a cold glare. One Tristan could almost swear wasn’t that of remorse or regret.

“Is what you came here for so urgent that you have forgotten who granted you this familiarity in the first place?” he asked, letting the silence carry his words.

Another wave of silence settled between them.

Marcus’s hands clasped tighter in his lap. “I was going to mention her eventually.”

“Eventually,” Tristan repeated, his tone dry. He leaned forward, his gaze fixed on Marcus. “I am afraid that isn’t good enough, Mr. Harwood. She is your sister. The least you could have done was ask after her at once.”

Marcus gave a shallow nod. “You are right, Lord Vale. I trust her well enough in your care, which is why I thought it safe to wait. Still, I should have asked. My apologies.”

Tristan leaned back again, exhaling through his nose. “What is it you wanted to discuss with me?”

Marcus straightened, his voice lowering. “I feel it is best if we move this discussion to your study.”

Tristan’s brow furrowed. “The drawing room is not sufficient for you? Does the light here offend your purpose?”

“No, not at all,” Marcus said quickly. “It is only that your study seems the more appropriate setting for the nature of our conversation.”

Tristan's jaw tightened, though he kept his voice level. "Very well." He raised his hand and signaled to a maid waiting by the wall. "Clear Mr. Harwood's table."

The maid stepped forward, reaching for the tray.

Marcus lifted his cup once more. "If Lord Vale does not mind, I would prefer to hold on to the tea."

Tristan's eyes settled firmly on him. "I do mind. Visitors do not drink in my study."

The words fell like a stone in the air. Marcus hesitated, then let out a shallow breath and passed the cup to the maid. "As you wish."

Tristan rose from his chair, straightening to his full height. "Follow me."

Marcus nodded and rose to his feet as well. Tristan watched him adjust his coat, the same smile on his face.

"Thank you, my lord," Marcus continued. Tristan only gave him a brief nod and turned around. They both made their way down the hallway and up the stairs toward his study. Marcus cleared his throat as they walked, a bid, Tristan imagined, to clear the silence.

Tristan, on the other hand, continued to think about his first impression of Eliza's brother. There was something about him. Something he couldn't put his finger on. Something that continued to pull at his mind over and over and wouldn't budge one bit.

The study was quiet save for the faint ticking of the clock on the mantle. Tristan motioned to the chair across from his desk.

“Sit, Mr. Harwood. Let us not waste more time. Why are you here?”

Marcus settled himself, his coat brushing against the armrest as he reached into a leather bag at his feet. From it, he pulled a folder, thick and bound with ribbon, and placed it gently on the desk between them.

“I have been working on an investment opportunity, Lord Vale. Nearly three years of work with a few colleagues. I would hate for a man like you...a man responsible for my sister, no less, to miss out on it.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes, though he remained still. “An investment, you say?”

“Yes.” Marcus slid the folder closer. “All the details are inside.”

Tristan untied the ribbon and opened the cover, feeling the faint smell of ink and wax fill his nostrils. On the first page, a wave of bold lettering caught his eye. He read it and then looked back at Marcus, his face and tone edged with skepticism.

“The Berkeley Project?”

Marcus’s face brightened. “Indeed. We researched it deeply, five of us. We saw ways the town’s conditions could be improved. Basically, avenues where opportunity might grow.”

“You must forgive me, Mr. Harwood, but I am struggling to understand you.”

Marcus exhaled. “I do not blame you, my lord. It is quite the most robust topic.”

“Then make it less robust, will you?”

“Very well, my lord. It is quite simple. The Berkeley Project is a way to redefine community.”

Words and more words.

“The plan, of course, is to revolutionize land developments, the use of trade routes, and industry in general.”

“I see,” Tristan responded, his voice faint as he began to flip through the pages. Each page was filled with notes and messages he would have to take some time with. Marcus continued anyway, forcing Tristan to choose where to shift his focus to.

“Remember, I said five of us came up with this project? One of our group, his name was Sir Isaac Berkeley. He laid the foundation of it all. You might know him.”

“The name does not sound familiar,” Tristan responded, his voice sharper than he’d intended. “He was a brilliant man,” Tristan continued anyway. “He died of measles last month.”

Tristan looked up briefly. “So you named this after him.”

“Yes. To honor him, and to carry forward his vision.”

Tristan tapped the paper once with his finger. “And how does it work, exactly?”

Marcus leaned forward, his eyes bright. “It is simple. The land and trade routes are developed with help from contributors like yourself. Once developed, we petition the Crown for letters granting us authority to commercialize.

Then, profits flow back to our investors. Imagine it this way: You pay a portion...perhaps only a quarter of what your eventual profits might be. The rest multiplies in return.”

Tristan didn’t know what worried him the most, the words or the glee with which his brother-in-law delivered them. Marcus, on the other hand, smiled and lifted his hands slightly as if presenting a gift.

“This is not only business, Lord Vale. It is securing the future for yourself and your family. I am assuming, of course, that you and my sister intend to have children.”

Tristan’s jaw stiffened. He coughed lightly and set the paper flat on the desk. “We have yet to properly discuss that matter.”

Marcus waved it off. “Naturally. It is to be expected in time. But still, this project ensures stability for the next generation. It is more than just money. It is a way to build a strong legacy.”

Tristan’s gaze returned to the folio. The words blurred slightly as he thought of Marcus’s tone. He sounded polished. Perhaps too polished.

Has he always spoken like that? Or was the entire thing rehearsed to impress him?

He lifted his head again anyway. “So, in short, you mean to make me richer by charging people for routes and land that were once free.”

Marcus gave a light laugh. “You make it sound so exploitative.”

“I think you are doing a good job of that all by yourself, Mr. Harwood,” Tristan said flatly.

The air shifted, and he knew Marcus sensed it as well.

The man leaned back, his smile dimming. “I understand your doubts.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, and I believe it is quite wise to have them.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes in the brief moment of silence that settled between them.

“Which is why I leave this with you.” Marcus eventually said, pointing to the folio. “I would like you to study and understand it.”

Tristan’s eyes shifted to the folio once again.

“This is the future, my lord. And before you say more, know this ... the poor will not be taxed. Only the wealthy, those well able to afford it.”

Another wave of silence stretched between them. Tristan let it settle, then exhaled through his nose. “Very well. I will read it through. You will have my answer in time.”

Marcus gave a sharp nod. “I urge you not to waste that time. Others have already joined, so the opportunity grows thinner by the day.”

“Others?” Tristan asked, his eyes narrowed.

Marcus straightened, as though he had expected the question. “Yes. Noblemen just like yourself have expressed interest.

“Really?”

“Yes, my lord. People like Lord Witherford, Lord Ellis, Lord Prescott ...”

Tristan’s brows rose at the same time. “Prescott. I knew him. We were at school together.”

Marcus continued, listing names. “Yes. Also, people like Lord Endicott and Lord Hargrave.”

Tristan’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “I knew Hargrave as well. We served together in the Army.” He raised his eyes. “And they are all committed?”

Marcus nodded firmly. “Entirely. They understand the opportunity here. I only hope you will, too.”

The clock ticked again in the silence that followed, and Tristan pushed the folio aside, his expression unreadable. “Is that all?”

Marcus stood slowly. “It is. I must take my leave.”

“You could stay the night,” Tristan said, his tone polite.. “A bed can be prepared for you.”

Marcus shook his head. “I would never impose. Perhaps next time.”

“Very well,” Tristan said.

They left the study together, Marcus moving with a spring in his step, Tristan with deliberate calm. In the front hall, Marcus collected his bag and coat. Tristan nodded once, then turned back toward the hallway.

However, he decided to wait at a window, curiosity pulling him. He drew back the curtain and looked down at the path outside. Marcus had just stepped out, the late afternoon light catching his coat.

Eliza stood a few paces away. She looked up, her expression hopeful, but Marcus passed her without a word, his shoulders stiff and his stride quick. Her gaze fell to the ground, and she held herself still.

Tristan’s chest tightened as he watched. Then he let out a long breath as Marcus climbed into the carriage, and Eliza remained outside in silence, her head still bowed.

Chapter 12

The sky outside was a gloomy gray when Eliza walked into the servants' quarters that morning. The chatter and clatter stopped at once, and chairs scraped back, much to her surprise. She stretched out her hand in a bid to stop them all, but it was too late. Every servant had already risen to his or her feet.

“Good morning, my lady,” they said together.

She gave a gentle smile and lifted her hand again. “Please, sit. It was not my intent to interrupt your meal.”

They obeyed, though carefully, and returned to their food. The smell of bread and porridge filled her nostrils as she stepped forward and let her eyes settle on the housekeeper. Mrs. Yarrow stood at the end of the table, her back as straight as ever.

“Everything is well this morning, Mrs. Yarrow?” Eliza asked.

“Could not be better, my lady,” the woman responded.

“Good. Then, if it will not be any trouble, may I borrow Rose for a moment?”

Mrs. Yarrow nodded. “Certainly.”

Rose jumped from her seat, nearly knocking her chair back. “Of course, my lady.”

“It is only for a moment,” she said, her voice still apologetic as the maid followed her outside into the hallway.

Once the door closed behind them, Eliza pulled a folded letter from her pocket. “I wonder if you could help me post this.”

Rose took it with care. “Of course, my lady.”

“It is for my friend Clara,” Eliza explained. “I am sure you have noticed as well, but I have been ... rather lonely here. I thought I would write to her. If only to ask her to visit me. Or at the very least, write back.”

Rose’s smile was warm. “I will make sure it is posted right away, my lady.”

“Thank you, Rose,” Eliza said softly.

Rose curtsied and tucked the letter into her apron. Eliza gave a small nod before turning back down the hall.

Halfway along, she saw Gideon walking toward her. He held a stack of papers under one arm, moving quickly but neatly.

“Mr. Hale,” she called.

He stopped at once and bowed, a ghost of a smile on his face. “Good morning, my lady.”

“I was just coming from the servants’ hall. Is there a reason why you are not eating with the others?” she asked.

“His lordship required an early departure,” Gideon said. “I had to prepare him.”

Her breath caught. “Wait ... he is gone?”

“I am afraid so, my lady.”

“Wonderful,” she whispered to herself before looking back up at Gideon, her voice softening. “Do you know when he will return?”

“I cannot say yet because he went to collect a few things. But I do not expect he will be away long.”

Eliza pressed her lips together, then nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Hale.”

“Always, my lady.”

He moved on, and Eliza continued up to her room, though slower now. Her thoughts felt heavy and her steps unsteady. She had thought she could catch Tristan that morning and ask what Marcus had wanted.

In her chamber, she closed the door and walked to the table by the window. The portrait she had been working on lay there, and she lifted it carefully. The woman’s faint eyes seemed to meet hers through the aging the picture had gone through. It felt almost like the more she stared at the woman in the portrait, the more she wanted to know about her.

It was exhilarating to say the least, having to repair a face she knew nothing about. She was still examining the painting when a knock came at the door.

“Yes?” she called.

The door opened, and Rose stepped in, curtsying. “My lady.”

Eliza put the portrait down. “Is something wrong?”

Rose shook her head. “Not at all. I only wanted to tell you that your letter has been posted.”

Eliza smiled faintly. “Thank you, but you did not need to come all the way up here for that.”

Rose stepped closer and held out an envelope. “That is not the only reason. A letter arrived for you as well.”

Eliza frowned, taking it. The handwriting tugged at her memory. She shrugged it off and read the name on the seal instead.

Marcus Harwood

Her heart stirred as she broke it open. The words were simple, polite, and direct. Eliza could feel Rose’s eyes on her as she took in each sentence in the letter.

Eventually, Rose tilted her head. “Bad news?”

Eliza shook her head slowly. “No. Only an inquiry. My brother wants to know if all is well.”

Rose's face brightened. "How thoughtful. It must be nice to know he cares enough to ask."

Eliza gave a short laugh. "Well, I do not think I would say care exactly. More likely, he wants to keep his new status as an earl's in-law, and this was his way of ensuring I was fine, I suppose. It is quite fascinating because the last time he was here, he would not even look at me."

Rose shrugged. "Perhaps your brother is coming around."

Eliza scoffed as she folded the letter and set it down. "A leopard has a better chance of changing its spots."

Rose smiled. "Shall I leave you to your work, my lady?"

She turned, but Eliza called softly, "Wait."

Rose paused.

"How quickly could you fetch the colors I need from the market?"

Rose's face lit up. "Very quickly, my lady. Absolutely."

Eliza smiled back. "Good. Please see to it."

Rose curtsied again, still smiling, and left.

Eliza sat alone once more. She picked up the portrait again and turned it toward her, running her fingers along the cracked surface.

Soon, she would have her colors. Soon, she could properly bring life back to the woman's eyes. This woman, who still remained as mysterious as anything.

However, the thought of Marcus returned, sharp and unwelcome. His visit, his silence, the way he had walked past her without a word.

She picked up his letter again, holding it in her palm and reading through it once again.

If she could not find answers yet, she would at least find peace in paint. The woman in the portrait, once forgotten, would have her voice again.

At the very least, in a way.

The warmth of the afternoon sun she had found was a source of serenity for her rather than a gross inconvenience.

The way the light shone across the subjects and reflected their beauty back to her in the most fascinating way often provided all the focus she could ever need. Rose was yet to return from the market with the colors so, for now, she had decided to sketch some of the things she might paint later.

Pale lilies rose from the paper in quiet waves, their petals unfolding under her hand.

Her focus was complete. She leaned closer, the tip of her tongue brushing her lip as she worked at the finer details. The peace surrounding her was

enough to keep her going for a long time.

This was the kind of environment she had always wanted. One that gave her inner resolution. An environment so peaceful, she was certain nothing or no one could ruin, or even try to ruin, her focus.

“Hello.”

Her hand jerked, and the pencil slipped, cutting an ugly mark across her page. Eliza gasped and let the book fall to her lap. Her face was white as snow when her eyes darted up.

Tristan stood just a few steps away, his face, she could see, on the edge of breaking into a smile.

“You...” she yelped, her breath caught as her pencil fell from her grip and rolled across the ground.

He bent quickly and grabbed it. Eliza watched him with keen interest as he rose to his feet one more time and began to laugh. Not the faint, tight sound she sometimes heard from him, but a quiet, almost boyish laugh.

A most genuine one.

“Oh well,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “I am glad I was enough of a source of entertainment for you this afternoon, Tristan.”

He still chuckled as he handed the pencil back. “Forgive me, but your face...it went completely white. I cannot seem to stop seeing it in my head.”

She frowned, though her cheeks warmed. “Well, it would. Because you frightened the blood out of me. How long were you standing there anyway?”

“A few minutes,” he responded. “You were so focused that you did not notice I had been studying you for a while.”

Her brow arched. “Studying me?”

He nodded once, then hesitated. “Yes. It is quite uncanny, just how much you remind me of my...” His voice trailed off, and he looked away.

“Reminded you of your what?” she pressed.

He cleared his throat. “We should change the subject.”

She narrowed her eyes but let it pass. “Very well. What shall we speak about then? Perhaps you would like to discuss how Aunt Evelyn stopped by earlier and said she half expected me to draw goblins or lizards next.”

Tristan exhaled through his nose, a sound halfway between amusement and irritation. “My aunt does say whatever comes into her head, without much care for how it sounds. But she means well...most of the time.”

“Most of the time?” Eliza echoed, smiling faintly.

“Believe me when I say this, Eliza,” he said dryly, “that is the best you will ever get from her.”

Eliza laughed, the tension in her shoulders reducing. She bent to look at her page again, brushing the stray mark with her finger.

Tristan tilted his head. “Your sketches are quite ... intricate. I had not expected such detail.”

She looked up, surprised by the quiet compliment. “Thank you.”

“You also do not have to worry about using the garden for much longer. The atelier should be finished in two days,” he added. “Then you will have the proper space for all of this.”

She felt her chest lift. “That is wonderful. Thank you again.” She hesitated, then said, “I wrote a letter inviting my friend Clara to visit. I hope you do not mind.”

“Not in the least,” he replied without pause.

Eliza smiled, relieved. “Good. I miss her company.”

Her words seemed to remind him of something. He straightened a little. “That does bring another matter to mind. A close friend of mine, Sir Gordon, has invited us to a garden party. I meant to tell you before your brother arrived yesterday.”

Her eyes widened. “A party?”

“Yes.”

She looked down at her plain dress and laughed softly. “I would not even know what to wear to something like that.”

Tristan’s lips tugged faintly, a very tiny smile resting on the edges of his face. “Do not worry. I am sure the seamstress will whip up something suitable.”

“I hope so,” she said, half laughing again.

The silence that followed was far from uncomfortable. It was light. Perhaps just the lightest form of silence she had experienced with him so far.

“Well,” he said at last, clearing his throat, “I should return to my study. There are matters I must see to.”

She nodded. “Of course.”

He tilted his head slightly, then turned and walked back across the garden.

Eliza watched him go, her pencil still warm in her hand. A smile slowly crept over her lips. Perhaps she could grow used to this.

And maybe...just maybe, she could even learn to make a marriage of it.

Chapter 13

Gideon was already holding a towel when Tristan stepped out of the bath. The cold water dug into his skin as the morning air settled on him, and Gideon stood by the edge of the door, a towel resting on his outstretched hand.

Tristan took it and wrapped it over his shoulders, his hair damp against the linen.

“The water was cold today,” Tristan muttered, rubbing his arms briskly.

“My apologies, my lord,” Gideon replied at once. “I’ll see that it is warmer tomorrow.”

Tristan gave a short laugh. “It is fine. Do you remember how we had nothing but freezing water in the field? At least this was clean.”

Gideon folded the used towel neatly in his hands. “We were fortunate compared to many. Most soldiers went days without washing.”

“Imagine that,” Tristan said dryly. He sat down, stretching out his legs. “And that being one of the least terrible things a man endured at the front.”

Gideon gave a small nod. “True enough. Imagine.”

Tristan finished drying his hair and set the towel aside. Gideon was ready with a crisp white shirt, holding it out with the sleeves open. Tristan pushed his arms through and let Gideon fasten the buttons.

“If there were any way to avoid Lord Gordon’s garden party,” Tristan said, his voice edged with reluctance, “I would have done it already. I’m not sure I care to stomach society’s chatter again.”

Gideon smoothed the shirt across Tristan’s shoulders before answering. “You’ll get the hang of it quickly, my lord. These things always seem worse in thought than they are in practice.”

“Perhaps,” Tristan muttered. His brow furrowed. “And Lady Vale...how do you think she’s taking it? I told her of the invitation. She seemed calm enough, but I cannot say she is thrilled.”

“That is not the impression I had,” Gideon replied, a wave of amusement crossing his face.

Tristan turned to him, one brow raised. “And what impression did you have?”

Before Gideon could answer, a knock came at the door. Tristan exhaled, gesturing for him to see to it.

Gideon crossed the room and opened the door. A footman bowed low in the doorway. “A letter for Lord Vale, delivered this morning, sir.”

“Give it here,” Gideon said, taking the sealed envelope. He shut the door behind him and returned to Tristan, holding out the letter.

Tristan broke the seal and unfolded the page. His eyes scanned the words, his jaw tightening as he read.

“It’s from Harwood,” he said after a pause.

“Lady Vale’s brother,” Gideon said carefully. “Is this about the Berkeley Project?”

Tristan nodded faintly and read further. “Apparently, he is suggesting a meeting. A gathering of all interested parties. He writes that he hopes I will attend.”

“And will you?” Gideon asked.

Tristan lowered the paper, thinking. “My mind is not settled about the project itself. It smells too much like an overreach. But attending a meeting to hear the others—” He shrugged. “It can do no harm. I will consider it.”

“That seems wise, my lord.”

Tristan looked down at the letter again, and his eyes lingered on one line. “Hmm. Surprising.”

Gideon, who was fitting cufflinks at his wrists, glanced up. “What is, my lord?”

Tristan read aloud, his tone clipped. ““The duke’s interest in swift alliances is what brought us together in the first place. It can work again.”” He let the words hang before folding the paper.

“Well,” Gideon said after a moment, “we know one thing for certain. Mr. Harwood has a talent for persuasion.”

“Persuasion or manipulation,” Tristan muttered. He set the folded letter on his desk.

Gideon uncorked a small glass vial and dabbed cologne at Tristan’s neck and wrists. The sharp scent cut through the closed room.

“There,” Gideon said quietly. “Now you look and smell every inch the gentleman for society’s eyes.”

Tristan looked into the mirror as Gideon stepped away. His reflection stared back, composed and immaculate, though his mind felt far from calm.

“What would I ever do without you, Gideon?” he asked lightly.

Gideon chuckled. “Best not to think about that, my lord. And do not thank me. It is my work.”

“Even so,” Tristan said under his breath.

Gideon straightened the final fold of his coat. “Shall I call on Lady Vale? She may wish to prepare alongside you for the event.”

Tristan shook his head. “No. Leave her be. She should be down soon enough on her own.”

Gideon lowered his chin in understanding and stepped back. Tristan stood tall in the mirror, the weight of Harwood’s words still pressing in the back of his mind.

A short while later, Tristan stood at the bottom of the stairs, his heart pounding hard in his chest for some reason. This was the first formal outing where he and Eliza would appear hand in hand as husband and wife. He had gone through the motions before and done a thousand of these events.

So why was his heart beating this hard?

Was he nervous for himself or for her? Would she do well in the midst of people like him? People who seemed to be like him anyway. And worse, what if she didn't? What if she failed every obscure and indirect test placed in her presence?

What if he did?

The sound of polished shoes against the floor made him turn. Evelyn appeared from the drawing room, her fan already in her hand, though the air was cool enough.

"Well," she said, tapping the fan lightly against her wrist. "Do you not look solemn? You would think you were preparing for Parliament, not a garden party."

Tristan allowed a small breath to escape. "Maybe they are the same in nature."

Evelyn tilted her head. "I doubt Parliament would bore you nearly as much. At least there you would have the satisfaction of a quarrel. At garden parties, all you get are cakes, tea, and Margaret."

Tristan narrowed his eyes. “Margaret?”

“You know her,” Evelyn said, waving her fan lazily. “Gordon’s mother. She will corner you within five minutes and begin another long tale about how her roses descended from Pompeii.”

“Wait,” Tristan exhaled, letting his mind transport him to the past. “I remember her now. You could not go anywhere in London without her in the year before last.”

“That was a dreary moment of my life. Must you hold that against me?”

“So she is no longer your friend?”

“She was never my friend,” Evelyn hissed. “To call her a convenient acquaintance would still be a gross overstatement.”

Tristan gave her a dry look. “You exaggerate.”

“I do not,” Evelyn retorted. “If she were a witch, her only spell would be endless conversation.”

He chuckled softly. “If that is her power, I shall survive it.”

“You say that now,” Evelyn murmured, “but mark my words, she will drain the life out of you before the first tray of sweet tea arrives.”

Before Tristan could respond, footsteps sounded from the landing above. He turned sharply, and so did Evelyn.

Eliza stood at the top of the stairs.

Her dress was bright blue and seemed to flash down at them both. Her hair was neatly pinned behind her head, and her fan rested gingerly between her fingers. She took a pause at the top of the stairs just for a few seconds before she began to descend.

Tristan felt his chest suddenly grow tight for some reason, and his eyes narrowed.

What in God's name was that feeling?

Why did the mere sight of Eliza make his heart suddenly skip?

Like she was reading his innermost thoughts, Evelyn leaned toward him, her voice pitched low. "That is your wife."

"Yes," Tristan said quietly, his gaze fixed on Eliza. "That is my wife."

Eliza reached the last step and lifted her eyes. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting."

"When you come out looking like this, dear," Evelyn said warmly, "you have no reason to apologize."

Color rose in Eliza's cheeks, and she smiled politely.

Tristan found his words at last. "We should leave before we are any later."

Evelyn gave a long sigh. “Yes, yes, off you go. But remember what I said. Do not let Margaret trap you. It is how she lures men to their doom.”

Tristan’s brow arched. “And what doom is that?”

“Mind-numbing boredom,” Evelyn said with conviction. “Truly the worst fate of all.”

Eliza laughed softly, glancing between them.

Evelyn touched her fan to Eliza’s shoulder. “Enjoy yourself, my dear. I leave him in your capable hands.”

With a final wave, she swept away, leaving the two of them alone near the stairs.

Tristan offered his arm. “Shall we?”

Eliza placed her hand lightly on it. “We shall.”

They walked outside together, where the carriage waited. Tristan helped her inside first before stepping in after her. The door shut, and the wheels rolled forward.

For the better half of the next hour, the only sound between them was that of the creaky wheels. Tristan tried to keep his focus on the dry path outside the carriage, but once in a while, his eyes would wander back toward her.

On one of those occasions, she caught him looking. “You keep staring at me. Is something wrong?”

“Not at all.”

Her lips curved slightly. “Are you certain? It would be rather embarrassing if I had something on my face and you refused to tell me.”

He shook his head. “There is nothing wrong.”

She narrowed her eyes at him as he struggled to find a way to express just how beautiful she looked. He wanted to tell her how her dress caught the light and how her hair seemed to almost shimmer. However, he forced the wrong words out instead.

“The dress looks well on you.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking down at it. “It was one of the gowns delivered last night. I was not sure which to choose, but this one seemed to call to me.”

“You chose well.”

She studied him for a moment, her eyes bright, as if she was expecting more. But he had no other words. Silence stretched again.

At last, she leaned forward, the brightness in her eyes still lingering, “Do you dislike these parties so much?”

He shrugged, like he found the answer to the question rather obvious. “I find them unnecessary.”

She leaned back against the cushion. “And yet you attend.”

“I have little choice.”

Eliza tilted her head. “I should think I will be just as uncomfortable as you.”

That earned a small smile from him. “At least you are honest.”

She gave a soft laugh, then looked out the window as the countryside continued to pass around them.

A little while later, they arrived at the party, and the last thing Evelyn felt was uncomfortable. As soon as Tristan found a quiet corner to bury himself, he watched Eliza mingle among the people. She talked like she had known them for a long time, and they listened to her like she was a dear friend of theirs.

“Is this another one of your talents, Eliza?” He murmured to himself as he watched her. “Easily finding your way among a large group of people?”

He watched her still, the disbelief not leaving his face for even a second. It was like she had transformed into a completely different person.

The garden swelled with laughter and polite chatter. The men gathered near the corners under the shade, balancing their cups of tea or brandy as if the weight of both were too much to bear. Tristan had hardly taken three steps

when a cluster of lords broke away from the group and descended upon him.

“Lord Vale,” one of them said, his voice too loud for the rather quiet setting, “at last we see you among us. We were beginning to wonder if you were more shadow than man.”

Tristan allowed a small curve of his mouth. “I assure you, Lord Thompson, I am made of flesh and bone. Shadows do not have to endure garden parties.”

The men laughed politely, as if every word he spoke was meant to entertain. Another lord stepped forward, his eyes flicking past Tristan and toward the ladies gathered at the center lawn.

“Your wife seems quite lovely. She’s a bright creature, too, and manages to draw the ladies around her.”

Tristan followed his gaze, catching sight of Eliza with three women. She was smiling, speaking with her hands as if she was weaving her words into the air. The ladies leaned in, completely enraptured.

“She is lovely,” Tristan said simply. His voice held no hesitation, though his chest tightened a fraction as he spoke the truth aloud.

“Yes, yes,” another lord chimed in. “Tell me, Lord Vale, did you secure her through London’s circle of matchmakers?”

Tristan raised his chin once. “I did.”

“Fortunate,” a baron with a deep voice said. “Quite fortunate. My matchmaker saddled me with a Jezebel of a woman. No sense of temperance, no kindness to the staff. She bled my accounts until she carted half away with her.” He chuckled bitterly and sipped his drink. “Good thing fortune smiles on me elsewhere with the Berkeley Project.”

Tristan’s hand went still on his cup. The words had landed hard on him for some reason, and his gaze sharpened. “The Berkeley Project?”

The baron froze as though he’d let a secret slip. His lips parted, then closed, and he brought a hand quickly to his mouth. “Ah ... I was not meant to say that out loud.”

Tristan said nothing. He only continued to fix him with a steady look.

The baron cleared his throat. “Well. Since I have already begun, I suppose I may as well tell you. It is...well, it is a venture of the most promising kind. A deep and emerging project, as we call it. Promises a return four times the capital.”

Tristan’s voice dropped low. “And you plan to invest?”

“Of course,” the baron said, almost too eagerly. “Land, trade, a bit of industry—all with proper backing. Men of standing, like yourself, will do handsomely.”

Tristan studied the man’s flushed face, the glint of greed behind his eyes.

The baron leaned closer, lowering his voice. “But keep it close. If too many learn of it in this first stage, profits may dwindle. Best to spread the word only after we have collected our due.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes as the baron gave a short and wheezy laugh. “Would you not agree, Lord Vale?”

Tristan held his gaze for a long moment, then answered evenly. “Yes. I would agree.”

The baron slapped his shoulder as though they were old comrades. “I knew we had much in common.”

Tristan only gave the barest of nods.

“Think on it,” the baron added before bowing himself away into the throng.

Left alone, Tristan let the smile slip from his face. His jaw tightened. He had no appetite for further conversation, not now. He turned away from the noise, walking down a quieter garden path.

Guests nodded to him as he passed, and he returned their greetings with few words, his mind already elsewhere. Eventually, he stopped near a bed of roses, their heads bobbing gently in the summer breeze. He took a sip of his tea and let his eyes rest on the colors.

“Lovely, are they not?”

The voice behind him was slow and deliberate. He swallowed before turning.

The dowager duchess stood there, her gown heavy with lace despite the heat of the garden. Her hands rested on a cane she did not seem to need.

“Yes,” Tristan replied. “They are ... lovely.”

Her lips curved. “I had them brought all the way from Egypt.”

Tristan raised a brow. “I did not know roses were grown in Egypt.”

“They are not,” she said, with a dramatic pause. “Which makes them all the more special.” She took a pause before continuing. “How is Evelyn? I heard her husband is in America.”

He remembered Evelyn’s warning. *Do not let Margaret trap you. It is how she lures men to their doom.* Yet here he was, caught in that very snare.

“She is fine,” he eventually responded, his voice curt.

The duchess took a step closer. “The key to any true garden is arrangement. You must think of it as a symphony. Roses, lilies, lavender...they must all play in concert.”

“Indeed,” Tristan murmured, already feeling the weight of her words press down.

She continued without pause. “This bed alone took three weeks to plan. Each hue was considered, and each leaf was accounted for. That is what makes it art, Tristan. One cannot simply toss seeds into soil and expect harmony. It requires vision, patience, discipline...”

Tristan’s gaze flicked toward the house. There was no escape without appearing rude. He drew a breath and braced himself.

“And I have not even begun on the lilies,” she pressed on, her eyes bright with certainty. “They are the true stars of the garden. Their stems—”

“Forgive me, madam,” a new voice cut in, and Tristan turned at once.

Eliza was approaching from the other path, her steps quick but graceful. Her face was composed, though her eyes darted once toward him before settling on the dowager.

“I saw you talking to my husband and thought it would be shameful of me if I did not ask,” Eliza said, her tone bright, “how did you manage such command of the color yellow? It is striking.”

The dowager blinked, then softened at once. “My word. What a keen eye you have.”

“I could not see such an arrangement and resist asking,” Eliza said with a polite smile. “Will you tell me everything about it? Please, I must know.”

“Of course, child,” Margaret said, delighted. “Come, walk with me.”

The dowager turned, already beginning her explanation anew, and Eliza fell into step beside her.

As she passed him, Eliza glanced back. For the briefest instant, their eyes met, and Tristan mouthed a *Thank you*.

Her lips twitched before she returned her gaze forward, drawing the dowager duchess away with her questions.

Tristan exhaled, the tightness in his chest reducing, and turned back to the roses.

Chapter 14

Eliza's eyes settled on the road speeding past them as the carriage made its way back to the manor. The garden party had been a huge success, and she felt a wave of warmth in her chest, even in the aftermath.

Tristan's eyes remained settled on her, and she could almost feel the sheer force of his gaze piercing her skin, but she said nothing. Partly because she greatly enjoyed the silence, but mostly because there was absolutely nothing to talk about.

He cleared his throat, and she eventually looked up at him, her eyes bright.

"I must thank you," he began, his voice low and unusually calm. "I do not know what I would have done had you not swooped in to save me back there with the dowager."

Eliza tilted her head, studying him. "I am certain you would have come up with something."

His mouth curved slowly. "Yes. Something like shouting that the ground was cracking beneath us, or perhaps claiming there was a fire."

Eliza laughed, her shoulders shaking. "You truly dislike uncomfortable silences, do you not?"

"I do," Tristan responded without hesitation. "Along with some other things. Endless talking. Standing too long in one place."

Eliza narrowed her eyes with mock severity. “But did you not tell me the other day that you could stand for as long as possible in my room?”

“I am certain I could,” Tristan responded. “I simply despise doing it.”

Her lips curved in a smile. “I understand. There are things I used to do often that I despised as well.”

As Tristan opened his mouth to speak, the carriage jerked forward, its creaky wheels rocking violently against a hidden stone.

Eliza gasped and felt her body lurch forward, nearly losing her balance. Before she could wrap her mind around what was happening, Tristan’s arms were instantly around her. A sharp exhale escaped her lips as he steadied her against his chest, and for the better half of a few seconds, she completely forgot how to breathe.

Above them, the driver shouted an apology. “Forgive me, my lord, my lady! A rock in the road I did not see. Are you well?”

Tristan’s voice was steady. “We are fine.” Then he glanced down at her, his arms still firm around her. “Are you well?”

“Yes,” Eliza whispered, though her voice came out as more breathing than actual sound. “I am.”

For what must have been as long as a few minutes, neither of them said anything. Then, almost like she grew aware of their positions as the carriage continued to move, Eliza snapped out of her momentary reverie. She cleared her throat immediately and scooted back. She could still feel his eyes on her as she settled properly against the cushion.

“Thank you for that,” she said, unable to meet his gaze directly.

He shrugged, the dismissal in his voice evident. “It was nothing.”

Well, if it was nothing, why was he still staring at her? She could still feel his eyes boring into her skin like a knife on paper.

His eyes then shifted down to the floor of the carriage. “Is that your book?”

Eliza followed his eyes and reached down and took the book she was holding earlier. It must have slipped from her lap in the commotion. She cleared her throat and lifted it quickly, holding it against her chest.

“Yes. It was given to me by one of the women at the party.”

Tristan squinted at the cover. “I did not know you enjoyed novels.”

“I am full of surprises,” she said, her tone playful. “If you are patient, you may uncover me completely.”

For a moment, his composure wavered. “I should like that very much,” he said, his voice quieter. Then, with a slight cough, he nodded at the book. “But first, I must contend that Mrs. Radcliffe is overrated.”

Her jaw fell open. “You cannot mean that. You truly cannot.”

“I do mean it,” Tristan responded with a straight face.

Eliza pressed her hand to her chest in mock horror. “When I was growing up, I devoured her novels. The *Romance of the Forest*, *The Italian*, and, of course, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. They shaped my youth.”

“I read some of them as well,” Tristan said. “But I never found the appeal. I thought they were too fanciful. There were too many shadows. It just became rather unrealistic for me.”

She folded her arms, a smile now tugging at her lips. “And just what kind of books did you prefer?”

He exhaled. “I prefer Henry Fielding. His stories are more rooted in realism.”

Eliza burst into laughter, and for almost a minute, she didn’t stop.

“What?” He asked, his voice gentle.

“Only a man like you would prefer Fielding over Radcliffe.”

“It was what I enjoyed growing up,” Tristan said simply.

She leaned toward him, her eyes gleaming. “No wonder you became...” She stopped, almost like she caught herself abruptly.

He turned his head. “Became what?”

“Never mind.”

“No,” Tristan insisted. “I would like to hear it. Became what?”

Eliza exhaled. “A brooder.”

His eyes widened slightly. “A brooder?”

“Yes,” she said, her lips twitching. “You brood a great deal. Do you know it was the first thought I had when I saw you for the very first time?”

“That I was a brooder?”

She shrugged. “Yes. A brooding earl.”

Tristan scoffed. “That is the most inaccurate characterization I have ever heard.”

“Is it?” she asked sweetly, tilting her head.

“I—” he stammered, then stopped, the words slipping from his grasp.

Eliza threw her head back and laughed. “It is fascinating to see you dumbfounded.”

Tristan leaned into his seat, shaking his head, though his lips betrayed the smallest hint of amusement. “I hope you enjoyed it, for you will not see it again.”

“Is that certain?” Eliza pressed.

“It is a promise,” Tristan replied firmly.

They both settled into silence again, and Eliza’s gaze returned to the book in her hand. She still couldn’t look at him without accompanying it with some reason.

Then his voice came again, softer. “We are here.”

Eliza felt her heart grow still as the manor appeared down the road. She couldn’t wait to exit the carriage and envelop herself in the usual silence and serenity she was used to.

The tension in the carriage was slowly making its way above her neck. She took one look at Tristan as his eyes settled outside the carriage window and wondered in that moment what he could possibly be feeling.

Eliza was just waking up the next morning when she heard the knock at her door. Her eyes snapped open even more properly, and her eyes settled on the doorknob. Was it Tristan? But then, if it was, surely he would announce himself.

“Enter,” she eventually said.

The door pushed open, and Rose walked in, an eager smile on her face. Eliza looked down at her hands and noticed the envelope wedged between her fingers. Rose stepped forward after curtsying and held out the envelope.

“A letter for you, my lady.”

Eliza took it quickly, her eyes darting to the familiar handwriting upon the seal.

“It is from Clara!” she cried, breaking it open with eager fingers. She read the neat script, her lips moving silently until she reached the end, then she pressed the paper to her chest with a laugh of delight. “She will be here within the week. She says she has missed me as much as I have missed her.”

Her excitement escaped her in a small shout, and Rose clapped her hands in delight before embracing her. “That is wonderful, my lady.”

At that moment, Mrs. Yarrow entered, brows drawn in mild disapproval. “Is everything all right in here?”

Eliza froze and felt her cheeks grow completely red. “Forgive me, Mrs. Yarrow. I may have been a little loud.”

The housekeeper’s expression softened. “I am glad for your good news, my lady, but let us keep it gentler. His Grace is still asleep, and you know how sound travels through these halls.”

“Of course,” Eliza said quickly, looking down at the floor. “I shall be more mindful.”

Mrs. Yarrow gave a satisfied nod and left them. As soon as the door closed, Eliza turned to Rose again, her smile wide. The happiness still lingered in her as she seized the maid’s hands.

“Clara, here in Evermere! I can hardly believe it. We have not sat face-to-face in so long. There is so much to tell her.”

Rose returned her joy, though after a moment, she lowered her voice. "I must prepare you, my lady. His Lordship has requested breakfast with you this morning."

The thought made Eliza's pulse lift in a different way. She remembered the carriage ride the evening before...how the wheel had struck the stone, how she had been thrown forward, and how Tristan's arms had caught her just in time. The warmth of that memory followed her while Rose arranged her hair and fastened her gown.

When she entered the dining room, Tristan was already at the table. He stood briefly in greeting before they both sat, the smell of warm bread and fresh butter lingering between them.

"Where is Aunt Evelyn?" Eliza asked, glancing at the empty chair beside them.

Tristan reached for his cup. "She has chosen to take her breakfast in her chambers. She said she is not in the mood to use her mouth."

Eliza arched her brow. "That is unusual. She never turns down an opportunity to speak."

"Then whatever troubles her must be serious indeed," Tristan replied.

Eliza smiled faintly. "That is fair."

She took a sip of her tea, then turned back to him with suppressed excitement. "Clara has written. She will visit this week. Perhaps any day now."

Tristan nodded, cutting a piece of toast. "I look forward to meeting her."

Eliza's fingers tightened around her fork. She thought of shelving the thought in her mind, but at the very last minute, she decided against it.

"And will any of your friends come to Evermere? Surely you must have a few who are close to you," she asked, looking at him.

Tristan took another bite of his toast. "You know Gideon. He is my friend."

Eliza laughed. "He is also your valet."

"That cannot be helped."

Her laughter rose again. "The point is, I know very little about you. One way to know a person is through those who see him most clearly."

Tristan set down his cup, his eyes narrowing faintly. "You are asking about my friends?"

Eliza lifted her shoulders. "Is it not the best way to get the full picture of someone's character? Through the people who study the canvas?"

He leaned back, his tone dry. "You did not just compare me to one of your portraits."

Eliza hid a smile. “Should that not be a compliment?”

“Not to me,” he said evenly.

She studied him a moment longer. “I cannot tell if you are being serious.”

“I am,” Tristan replied, his gaze falling briefly to his plate. “My mother used to call me that. A canvas. She painted often, like you.”

The playfulness immediately disappeared. Eliza set her fork down, sensing the change in his voice.

“I see,” she said softly.

He swallowed, as if forcing the words.

Eliza exhaled. “If you do not wish to speak about this matter—”

Tristan shook her head. “Not at all.”

“All right,” she responded.

He drew a breath and pressed on. “I was only searching for the right way to say it.”

“Say what?” she asked, her voice etched with nothing but utter curiosity.

Tristan grabbed a glass of water. “My father did not care for her painting. He mocked it, dismissed it, sometimes, he even forbade her altogether. He made it difficult for her to find pride in her work.”

“Oh,” Eliza muttered, feeling no other word escape her lips.

His jaw tightened. “She painted anyway, but always beneath his judgment. I believe she carried shame for what she loved.”

Eliza’s heart ached, yet she did not reach for pity. She sensed that was not what he needed. Instead, she met his gaze steadily. “Then perhaps it falls to me to say what she was never permitted to hear. There is no shame in beauty created with honesty and passion. No judgment from another person should ever silence it.”

Something flickered across Tristan’s eyes. Something vulnerable and unguarded. He looked at her for a long moment, then nodded. “Thank you.”

Neither of them spoke for the next few minutes. Finally, Eliza lifted her cup again, her voice quiet but steady.

“I shall expect Clara with eagerness, and perhaps, when she comes, you will tell me more about the woman who painted before me.”

Tristan’s mouth curved, though not quite into a smile. “Perhaps I will.”

For the next few days, Eliza had nothing else to think about than the imminent arrival of her best friend. The atelier was nearing full completion, and that created another wave of excitement in her as well.

Finally, on a Thursday morning, it happened.

She ran out of her room, her feet carrying her as fast as they could across the hallway before she stopped by the entrance. A dark carriage rolled to a complete halt, letting out puffs of dust right by the steps of the manor. Her expectant eyes watched the veiled window until, eventually, Clara stepped out, nothing but pure excitement on her face.

“Eliza!”

Eliza ran forward and drew her into a firm embrace. In that moment, all the stiff and tight air that came with being on her own completely disappeared. At that moment, it was her and her best friend.

Just like it had always been.

Clara pulled back and studied her with a grin. “I cannot tell for the life of me if you have stayed the same weight or grown thinner.”

Eliza laughed. “Do not be ridiculous, Clara. It is the same weight, I assure you. I have not wasted away just yet.”

Clara arched her brow, skeptical, then bent to take her bag, but Eliza stopped her. “Do not trouble yourself. The maids will see to those.”

“Look at you,” Clara said, shaking her head with mock wonder. “Lady Vale.”

Eliza rolled her eyes but laughed, and together they walked toward the doors. A small sense of pride seeped into her mind as she watched Clara’s

eyes scan the hallway and the surrounding panels. She could see the expression of approval in her friend's smile, and she hadn't known until right then that it was something she absolutely needed.

"Tristan is not here at present," she explained as they walked into the great hall. "He had to ride into Yorkshire. But he should return before nightfall."

Clara nodded, her eyes still roving over the high walls and carved arches. "So this is the famous Evermere."

Eliza opened her mouth to respond, but the sound of footsteps cut into her words. They both turned and noticed Gideon approaching from the end of the hall. He had his hands behind his back and a somewhat stern look on his face for some reason.

"Mr. Hale," Eliza said, smiling. "May I present my dear friend, Clara?"

Gideon came closer, his face composed, neither warm nor cold. Clara extended her hand but let it drop when he merely gave her a polite nod in response.

"Mr. Hale is Tristan's close friend."

"I am also his valet," Gideon added, his tone clipped.

Clara studied him with amusement. "You look like you are about to demand why I am not in uniform."

Gideon's expression did not shift.

“My goodness,” Clara murmured to Eliza quietly. “He’s very stern.”

At last, Gideon lowered his head just a little. “Welcome to Evermere, Lady Clara.”

Clara narrowed her eyes in mock suspicion. “Am I truly welcome?”

He did not answer that. Instead, he turned to Eliza. “If it pleases my lady, I must see to his lordship’s shirts.”

Eliza nodded. “Of course, Mr. Hale.”

He turned sharply and departed, leaving Clara staring after him.

“He doesn’t seem like a friendly fellow,” Clara said once his footsteps faded.

“Be careful,” Eliza cautioned gently. “He served in the war.”

Clara snorted. “Oh well, that explains the manner. He’s the brooding soldier type, is he not?”

“It’s certainly a problem here at Evermore,” Eliza muttered with a small laugh, and together they climbed the stairs toward her chambers.

Once inside, Clara’s gaze moved eagerly about the room, taking in the tall windows, the delicate curtains, and the neat arrangements upon the writing desk. “This is lovely. It is far grander than the rooms you had at your home.”

“I shall try my best to not be offended by that.”

Clara turned to Eliza, a smile on her face. “Oh, you know what I mean.”

Eliza smiled. “The maids are preparing your chamber now. It will not be long. But for the moment, we can stay here.”

Clara flung herself onto a chair, stretching as if she had traveled a hundred miles on foot. “Then let us catch up at once. I cannot wait to hear everything.”

Eliza settled opposite her. “Where do I begin? The atelier, perhaps. Tristan had it renovated for me. It is nearly finished, and I shall finally have a place to paint.”

Clara leaned forward, eyes wide. “So he does not mind? Not one objection?”

“Not at all,” Eliza replied. “His mother used to paint as well. He told me that a few days back.”

“Ah,” Clara said, nodding. “That makes sense.”

Eliza hesitated, her fingers playing along the fabric of her skirt. “He is beginning to open up to me, in small ways. But sometimes I wonder if it will all vanish tomorrow. If he will retreat again into silence.”

Clara tilted her head. “Is that what you are worried about? For him, or for yourself?”

Eliza's lips pressed together. "For the marriage itself. What if it does not work?"

Clara chuckled softly. "It has been, what, two months? Do not start to discourage yourself so soon, Eliza." She smirked. "Or should I say Lady Vale?"

Eliza groaned. "Only when the servants are around. Aunt Evelyn insists on it."

Clara's brows rose. "Aunt Evelyn? Do I even want to know the story behind that?"

Eliza waved a hand. "You will meet her soon enough. And you will understand why I say it that way." She reached for Clara's hands, squeezing them tightly. "I am simply glad you are here."

Clara's eyes softened. "I am glad, too."

They fell into another hug, one that Eliza clung to, perhaps longer than she should have, but she could not help it. Eliza could feel it even now as she stared at her friend. Her overall mood had changed. It would only be a matter of time before her friend's arrival properly affected all of Evermore.

Chapter 15

One of the things Tristan could admit he enjoyed at the very least was a trip around the estate. While it was partly because he could stay in the carriage for most of the occasion and not have to deal with the sun, it was also because it helped him oversee the estate properly and see what his people were up to.

He directed the driver to go into the village, and as they passed the front of the tavern, his eyes narrowed.

A rather familiar man was sitting by the window inside the tavern, his shoulders bent and a bottle pressed to his lips. Tristan narrowed his eyes as he grew closer.

It was Mr. Jones.

“Stop,” Tristan said.

The carriage slowed at once. Tristan climbed out of the carriage, his boots hard against the gravel on the ground as he moved. When he pushed open the tavern door and stepped in, the air around him completely changed.

The smell of sweat and beer filled his nostrils as he walked, and he tried his best to pay little to no attention to the continuous chatter that happened all around him.

Jones sat at a table near the wall, just as he had seen him. He was holding the bottle in his hand, and as Tristan approached, his head lifted. His eyes widened as if he had seen a ghost. He shoved the bottle behind him and straightened.

“My lord,” he rasped, clearing his throat, “what a ... surprise.”

“Is it?” Tristan’s voice was quiet, but even. He took a step closer. “How are you faring?”

“Fine, my lord. Very fine indeed.”

Tristan let his gaze fall to the half-drained glass. “I see. Tell me, Mr. Jones, do you intend to stay behind and scrub the floors when you are done drinking? Since you cannot pay for the brandy in your hand?”

Jones froze, his mouth twitching before he forced a laugh. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know.” Tristan’s tone sharpened. “A man who has missed payments for three months now sitting here with a drink that costs more than his week’s work.”

At that moment, the serving woman passed by, carrying a tray of cups. She stopped when she saw Tristan, dipping into a quick curtsy. “My lord. Would you care for a drink?”

“No,” he replied curtly.

She smiled nervously. “We have fine brandy, the high-end kind. Like the one Mr. Jones enjoys.”

Tristan turned his head, his eyes pinning Jones. “High end?”

Jones shifted, tugging at his sleeve.

The woman bobbed again, sensing the tension. “I shall leave you to your talk, my lord.” She disappeared into the crowd.

“You should have returned to pay your taxes last week,” Tristan said, his voice low. “I let it pass because I believed you were still working hard. Tell me, is this what you call work? Sitting here with brandy?”

Jones swallowed. “Far from it, my lord. Not the entire time.”

“Then what do you call this?” Tristan leaned forward slightly, the weight of his stare leaving Jones with nowhere to hide.

The man exhaled heavily, rubbing a hand down his face. “This is only to take the edge off, my lord. You know how it is, do you not?”

Tristan said nothing, his jaw tight.

Jones continued, desperation creeping in. “I promise you, my lord, I will pay what I owe. One more week. That is all I need.”

“One week?”

“Yes,” Jones said quickly, nodding. “One more week, and you shall have it all.”

The tavern grew quieter around them, men shifting in their seats to listen without seeming to. Tristan glanced at them, then back at Jones.

“I will not embarrass you before these people,” he said at last, rising to his feet.

Relief flickered across the older man’s face. “That gesture is fully appreciated, my lord.”

“But, mark my words, Mr. Jones,” Tristan continued, his tone turning cold, “if anything should happen to delay your payment again, I will not be as gracious.”

Jones lowered his head. “I understand, my lord.”

Without another word, Tristan turned and strode out, immediately grateful for the fresh air outside the tavern. He climbed back into the carriage without turning once to look back at the tavern.

By the time he returned to the manor, dusk was fast approaching. He stepped out of the carriage and walked straight past the entrance, the day’s weight already pressing down on him. He just needed to get to his room and have a solid bath.

However, before he reached it, a sound caught his attention. It was a wave of high feminine laughter. One that practically made his heart skip. He hadn’t heard a sound like that in the manor for quite a long time.

Pure unadulterated laughter.

It was far from Evelyn’s sharp and knowing laugh. No, it was something much brighter.

He paused at the drawing room doorway, leaning slightly forward to see.

Inside, Eliza stood near the fireplace, a smile lighting her face as she turned toward him. “You are back,” she said, her voice carrying with it a note that almost startled him.

Beside her, another woman rose from her chair. She was younger than Evelyn, her face open and warm. She dipped into a neat curtsy.

“It is a pleasure to meet you properly at last, my lord. Lady Vale has spoken so much about you, I was beginning to wonder if you existed.”

Tristan allowed himself a brief laugh. “I assure you, I exist.”

“This is Clara,” Eliza said, her eyes shining as she made the introduction. “My dearest friend.”

Tristan lowered his head slightly. “Welcome to Evermere, Lady Clara. How was your journey?”

“Uneventful, thankfully. The roads were clear, though the driver complained of the dust.” Clara’s grin widened. “I ignored him.”

“That was wise,” Tristan said, his mouth twitching with amusement.

For the next few minutes, the three of them spoke about everything and almost nothing at the same time. It wasn’t lost on Tristan, however, just how bright Eliza seemed to be in Clara’s presence. He didn’t even know she was capable of emotions like that, and the knowledge for some reason stirred something in him.

Something he simply refused to acknowledge.

At length, he excused himself. "I shall leave you both to your reunion. If you need anything, the staff will see to it."

Clara curtsied again. "Thank you, my lord."

Eliza smiled softly, her gaze following him as he turned away.

Tristan left them in the drawing room and made his way to his chambers as initially intended. The image of Eliza laughing heartily crossed his mind again, and the feeling he had refused to acknowledge faintly resurfaced once again.

And once again, he paid it no mind.

Tristan stood before the mirror, fastening the buttons of his coat, and Gideon walked around behind him, adjusting his shoes and placing them appropriately in his wardrobe.

The morning sun filtered in through the tall windows in his chambers and settled on him. A part of him admired how the rays seemed to properly bring out the brown in his hair.

"Where will you be riding today, my lord?" Gideon asked, his voice low and almost casual, though his hands continued to work as fast as they could.

“Nowhere far,” Tristan responded, slipping a sleeve into his coat. “Just a few friends from London. They have not seen the estate, and the woods make for a decent escape.”

“So a derby?” Gideon asked.

Tristan laughed. “It is nothing like a derby, merely a ride to clear their heads.”

Gideon gave a short nod. “And you intend to return by noon?”

“That is the plan. A quick ride there and back. Nothing elaborate.”

He moved toward the mantelpiece, where his pocket watch lay gleaming, while Gideon crossed to the table and retrieved a small box of cufflinks. As he worked them through Tristan’s cuffs, his brow creased.

“Will you speak to these friends about the Berkeley Project?” he asked.

Tristan’s mouth tightened. “Not yet. I am still weighing my options. Mr. Harwood presented it well enough, and the folio he left does appear in order. But you know as well as I do that presentation and truth are not always the same thing.”

Gideon nodded gently. “Caution suits you, my lord.”

“Caution keeps men alive, we both know that,” Tristan said evenly. Then he leaned forward even more, his voice dropping. “Still, I may go along with it after I meet with Mr. Harwood again.”

Gideon made no remark as he adjusted the set of Tristan's sleeves, but Tristan caught the flicker in his eyes. He did not press. Instead, he allowed the silence to hang until he himself broke it.

"It is pleasant, is it not?"

Gideon looked up. "What is, my lord?"

"The change of atmosphere." Tristan exhaled through his nose and gave the faintest smile.

"Change of atmosphere?"

Tristan shot him a glare. "My wife's friend. Lady Clara."

"Ah," Gideon said, his tone unreadable.

"She has breathed some kind of new life into the manor," Tristan continued. "Even Grandfather tolerates her company, and that is no small feat."

Gideon gave a mild grunt, which made Tristan glare even harder at him. "You have reservations."

"My lord—"

"Do not deflect. Tell me what you think."

Gideon hesitated, then straightened his shoulders. "If you insist, then yes. I find Lady Clara somewhat vain. She is a bit too bright for my liking."

Tristan chuckled. “A bit too vain, you say?”

Gideon nodded.

“You, Gideon, need more time among the London elite. There you would see true vanity.”

“With all due respect, my lord,” Gideon responded, his voice dry, “that sounds like a nightmare.”

Tristan laughed. “That is because it is. The elite is a pageant of nothing but peacocks. Believe me, compared to them, Lady Clara is mild.”

Gideon said nothing, but Tristan continued anyway.

“She might be just a smidge too vibrant, yes. But being vibrant is not a fault, is it?”

Gideon pursed his lips, conceding with a nod. “Perhaps you are right.”

“I usually am,” Tristan muttered, half under his breath, though the edge of humor remained in his voice.

He crossed back to the mirror, inspecting the line of his coat, then looked back at Gideon again. “In fact, I have considered organizing a ball. A proper one to introduce Eliza into local society. What do you think? Tell me plainly if it is a terrible idea.”

Gideon narrowed his eyes. “The issue here, my lord, is not whether the idea is terrible or not.”

Tristan blinked. “What is the issue then?”

Gideon grabbed a linen from the floor, then began to fold it. “For as long as I have known you, you have always thought balls were unnecessary. I am only finding it a bit hard to believe that you suggested this.”

Tristan nodded. “Well, I did not come up with it on my own. Aunt Evelyn had suggested it this morning at breakfast and would not stop pestering my grandfather until he agreed to it.”

Gideon exhaled. “Oh.”

“It is a terrible idea, is it not? I knew it,” Tristan whispered.

Gideon blinked, then allowed the rare curve of a smile. “On the contrary, my lord. It is an excellent idea. It would benefit Lady Vale greatly. She deserves such a welcome.”

Tristan studied his own reflection, as though seeking confirmation there. “So this is not just you telling me what I do not want to hear?”

“No,” Gideon responded firmly. “Quite the opposite. Have you told her yet?”

Tristan shook his head. “Not yet.”

Gideon gave a soft laugh, surprising in its ease. “I think you should inform her, my lord.”

“That settles it,” Tristan replied. “I will tell her this evening.”

He pulled out his pocket watch and snapped it open. A mild gasp escaped his lips. “Goodness. Is that the time? I must hurry. They will be waiting for me already.”

Gideon stepped back, satisfied with his work, and gestured toward the boots. “Then you are ready, my lord.”

Tristan slid them on, the leather snug, and straightened once more. “Very well. If anything urgent arises while I am gone, you know where to find me.”

“Yes, my lord,” Gideon replied simply.

Tristan gave him a brief nod before striding toward the door. The morning ride awaited him, but already his thoughts had leapt forward to a ball that might reshape his wife’s place in the house, and perhaps, even though he was not ready to admit it aloud, reshape his own as well.

Chapter 16

When Tristan told her about the ball that would be held in her honor, Eliza's first thought, in fact, was fear. She had never had to organize something where she would be the one everyone came to see.

"Do not worry. It is only going to be a few friends and family members," Tristan had reassured her.

So, for the next week, she engaged with the servants and footmen to plan the ball. The lingering thought that she might make a fool of herself did not disappear throughout the planning process. One of the nights, she was even certain Mrs. Yarrow noticed her anxiety.

"You do not have to worry, my lady," the housekeeper had said, her voice filled with care. "It is only for one night."

Days later, when she stood in front of the door, her heart pounded every single way but straight. Her hand settled on her gown, and she tried to listen to the sound from the other side of the room. She could hear footsteps, and a part of her tried to count them.

Ten?

Twenty?

A hundred?

The music did not exactly help in keeping her focus either, and the thought of having to go in there and face the guests alone seemed to terrify her to the core. She tried to slow her breathing and keep calm but it did little to nothing to help her growing anxiety.

From the sound alone, the ballroom was full. More people than she had expected. More eyes than she wanted.

Her breath came shallow. She told herself it was only a ball. She had been to dozens. Yet her feet would not move.

Why was she suddenly nervous?

She closed her eyes for a moment and let the truth press hard against her chest. This was not like other nights. This was not someone else's celebration.

"Lady Vale," Clara's voice called behind her, immediately pulling her back to the present. "Do not tell me you are nervous over a simple event."

Eliza opened her eyes, turning to her friend. Clara stood with her arms folded and her head tilted as if she already knew the answer.

And that was because she did.

"Why are you still out here?" Clara continued. "I thought you'd be inside already."

Eliza let out a shaky breath. "When Tristan first mentioned this ball, I thought it would be simple. That I could step inside, smile, and own the

room. But now —” Her voice broke. “Now I do not know if I can even open the door.”

Clara’s brow pinched. “What are you talking about? This is not your first ball. It is not even your twentieth. Why tonight? What makes this one different?”

Eliza pressed her hand to her waist as if it might calm her.

“At those other parties, I had nothing to fear. They were never about me. I could move through the crowd, and no one cared. Tonight, it is different. Tonight, every glance will fall on me.”

Clara nodded, a wave of understanding crossing her face. “Oh.”

“And Marcus is in there,” Eliza added, almost like an afterthought.

“Ah,” Clara said, her eyes softening. “I forgot your brother has to attend these things.”

Eliza gave a bitter laugh. “I would have prayed for him to stay away. But he is here, and I cannot send him away.”

“Unfortunately,” Clara said with a small smile.

Eliza opened her mouth to speak, but the tall doors pushed open. They both turned and watched Evelyn step out, her eyes searching the hallways. The surprise on her face could cut glass when she laid her eyes on them both.

“Good heavens,” Evelyn said, her voice cutting. “I may be getting old, but is it not tradition for the hostess of a ball to normally be at the ball?”

“She is only dealing with a little nervousness,” Clara said quickly. “I’m attempting to help her through it.”

“What does she have to be nervous about?” Evelyn scoffed. “These are only the local gentry. Nothing to fear here. If it were London, I would understand. Those people would tear you apart for one wrong move.”

Eliza watched Clara give Evelyn a flat look. “Thank you, Lady Howard. Your words, as always, are eternally comforting.”

“It is fine, Aunt Evelyn,” Eliza muttered, even though everything in her voice proved otherwise.

Evelyn ignored them both, lifting her chin. “Do you need me to drag you in by the wrist? Would that help?”

Eliza straightened. “No. I will be fine.”

“Good,” Evelyn said. “And you know what else will be fine? Making your entrance. Preferably before supper. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Eliza said, her voice quiet but firm.

Evelyn leaned in, lowering her tone. “Then hurry. I cannot watch those shameless spinsters hover over your husband for another minute.”

With those words, she opened the doors and spun into the ballroom, and the doors swung close behind her.

Clara gave a low whistle. “Is she not a wonder? If sharp words were blades, she could cut through steel.”

Eliza’s lips tugged into the smallest smile. “Something like that.”

“But she is right,” Clara said more gently. “This is not the time to hide. Everyone inside came for you. Do not let fear take it from you. Walk through those doors and show them you have nothing to be afraid of. I will be there with you the whole time. And so will Lord Vale.”

Eliza’s chest tightened even more at the thought, but Clara reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Now come, I am certain Lady Howard will return with reinforcements if we do not make it in there on time.”

Eliza drew in a deep breath. Then another. She smoothed her gown, letting her palms trace the folds, as if summoning courage from the fabric itself.

She eventually stepped forward, feeling her slippers tap against the polished floor, and pushed the door open. The ballroom shone with light from almost every direction, and the chandeliers above reflected the light onto the polished floors. Eliza stood at the edge, her knuckles interlocked as she looked around.

Men and women moved around the room in their finery. Couples danced a quadrille on the dance floor.

Clara stayed close, speaking quietly to her every now and then. “You see? You had nothing to worry about. Everyone looks charmed already.”

Eliza gave her friend a warm smile in response, glad for what she was trying to do. But she still felt the wave of tightness pressing down on her chest.

At least until she heard his voice.

“My lady?”

She turned around and swallowed. Tristan stood right in front of her, his coat sharp and a calm smile resting on his face. She studied the way his dark coat stretched over his broad shoulders. His hair was slicked back, and a gentle smile rested on his face.

“Would you care to dance?” he asked.

She hesitated. Dancing meant stepping into the center of all those watching eyes. Still, something in his tone kept her relaxed. Or was she just thinking what she wanted?

Without lingering too long, she placed her hand in his. “Yes.”

He led her onto the dance floor, and they began to move. Their steps were careful at first, as if any wrong move would break the subtle rapport between them.

However, as the music carried them along, something shifted. The light brown in his eyes grew softer, and for a moment, the distance that often

stood between them completely faded.

“You are lighter on your feet than I expected,” he eventually said.

She raised a brow. “Was that meant as a compliment?”

“It was.”

“Then I will accept it.”

A smile appeared at the corner of his mouth, and the tightness in her chest loosened. For a moment, it felt like laughter might escape her.

The dance ended too soon, and he led her back toward the side. They stayed together after that, talking about the men and women in the ballroom. For a very brief moment, the crowd seemed to completely disappear around them.

She was with him. Just him.

And nothing could break this moment.

“Lord Vale.”

Eliza’s eyes snapped shut, and she felt her stomach twist. She would recognize that voice even if she heard it while unconscious.

Marcus stood before them, his smile tight, his eyes glinting with calculation.

“Brother,” Eliza said coolly.

Marcus all but ignored her by bowing slightly and looking straight at Tristan.

“Might I borrow Lord Vale for a moment? There are a few matters best discussed in private.”

Tristan’s jaw shifted. “Mr. Harwood, this is hardly the place—”

Marcus pressed on smoothly. “It will not take long. And I promise, my lord, you will want to hear it.”

Tristan’s gaze lingered on Eliza before he gave a short nod. “Very well.”

Eliza’s stomach twisted even more as Marcus laid a hand on Tristan’s arm and steered him toward the door and into the hallway. She watched them go, the unease growing in her.

She was still staring at them when a glass of water appeared in her line of sight.

“Here,” Clara said, holding the glass out to her. “You need this more than I do.”

Eliza accepted the water but barely tasted it. Her eyes remained fixed on the hallway.

“You see?” Clara said, smiling. “Nothing to fear tonight. I told you—”

“Clara,” Eliza cut in, her voice low. “Would you ... manage the guests for a while? There is something I must do.”

Clara blinked. “What is it?”

“I cannot explain,” Eliza said, shaking her head. “Please. Just help me.”

Clara hesitated, then nodded. “Go.”

Eliza slipped away, her slippers gliding quickly across the marble floor. Before she could get to the hallway, a woman intercepted her, face bright.

“My lady, congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Eliza responded, her impatience evident.

“What a splendid event!” the woman continued anyway. “You must tell me, where did you find the tapestries?”

“Hmm...” Eliza trailed off instead, her eyes still fixed on the door.

“And the claret, good heavens, it must have cost—”

Eliza gently tapped the woman’s shoulder. “I am glad you are enjoying yourself, my lady. Please, drink as much as you wish.” She moved forward and then paused, her voice softening but firm. “Not too much though.”

The woman blinked at the dismissal, and Eliza moved on.

The hallway grew quiet as she moved closer to Tristan's study. A wave of murmurs filled her ears, and the closer she got, the clearer the conversation became. She pressed herself against the wall, listening. She immediately recognized Marcus's tone among them.

"When we rebuild the junction, it will be the only access. Control it, and everything else follows."

Another voice rose, "And the landowners in those parts?"

"Leave them to me," Marcus responded smoothly.

A third voice spoke up. "The Collins will not give up farmland so easily. It has been in their family for generations."

"Before them it belonged to another," another man said. "Even the Collins must see that things cannot remain unchanged forever."

"And what of the path to the marketplace?" a fourth man asked. "It is the only road through the woods."

"I was coming to that," Marcus responded, his voice dropping.

Eliza leaned closer, hoping to hear more. Then the beads at the hem of her dress brushed against the wall. She couldn't stop the sound before it traveled.

They all heard it, and the voices inside fell silent.

“Did you hear that?” one of them muttered.

Her heart leapt to her throat, and she pressed flat against the wall, her breath wavering.

“Close the door,” Marcus ordered. “You cannot be too careful.”

A moment later, she heard the door click shut, and silence followed.

Eliza exhaled shakily. She couldn’t hear anything anymore.

Turning quickly, she made her way back toward the ballroom, her mind racing. What was Marcus plotting this time?

What had she just stumbled into?

“Oh, there you are,” Tristan’s voice broke into her train of thought. She turned and watched him approach her gently, his footsteps easy on the polished floor. “I thought you’d run away again.”

“I would not do that,” Eliza responded, her voice soft. Marcus raised his glass, and she clinked hers gently with his. They both sat by the terrace and watched the crowd mingle with each other.

“There is something I must tell you.”

Eliza frowned. Tell me?

“We are to meet your brother tomorrow at the local harvest festival,” Tristan continued, oblivious to the questions growing in her thoughts. “I thought it was high time we finished the discussions and got straight down to business once and for all.”

Eliza swallowed, her fingers gripping her drink just a bit tighter. “And you want me to come with you?”

He turned to her, his brow raised. “Would that be a problem?”

“Not in the slightest,” her response was quick. “So tell me about this so-called project of yours. Or would that be too forward of me to ask?”

“You are my wife, Eliza. You are never too forward to ask me anything.”

The reassurance in his voice was almost intoxicating.

“And it is called the Berkeley Project,” he continued.

The words turned around in her head, like a wardrobe with a false bottom. Something that had more to it than meets the eye.

The Berkeley Project.

The thought lingered in her head as Tristan started to explain everything to her about the project so far. It lingered even when he was eventually done.

The Berkeley Project.

Tristan leaned closer as the murmur of voices continued to fill the hall. “Well? What do you think of it?”

She tilted her head, pretending to weigh her words with care. “It does sound like ... a nice project.”

His brow arched. “Nice? That is all you have to say?”

“Yes,” she responded, a teasing edge in her voice. She could hear the mild frustration in his tone, and for some reason, something told her to pursue that. “It is nice. Quite simple and tidy enough. Does it not please you to hear it?”

He gave a low chuckle. “Not in the least. A man brings his wife into his confidence about matters of investment, and all he earns for his trouble is ‘nice?’”

She could practically hear the disgust in his voice as he mentioned the word.

“Well, I could say more,” she responded, her voice solemn. “It is... very nice”

Tristan let out a breath, shaking his head. “You are enjoying this quite well, are you not?”

“You cannot begin to imagine,” she responded, her eyes filled with amusement.

Their words lingered between them, playful, but she could feel it. They were edged with something more. Something she wished they could keep exploring right here and now. In fact, for a moment, she thought he might respond to her quips with a smile. He looked past her shoulder and frowned. She followed his gaze.

A boy darted across the floor, chased by two of his younger companions. Their laughter seemed to ring even louder than the music.

“Do not run too much,” Tristan called, his voice firm. “You will fall.”

The boy looked back, then kept running, his legs flying behind him.

Tristan muttered, half to himself, “Why do I even bother?”

Eliza pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. “Because you enjoy giving orders, perhaps?”

He looked at her, one brow still raised. “I shall try not to take offense at that.”

“Please do,” she said lightly.

His gaze moved again, scanning the room. Then he straightened. “Excuse me a moment. That is Lord Graham near the wall. If I do not speak to him, he will think I have snubbed him.”

Eliza smiled. “I am certain everyone already thinks that.”

He gave her a pointed look, though she could see the hint of humor behind it. “Do not worry. It is your day. You can be as merciless as you want.”

“You were the one who married me,” she replied.

“I shall never live it down,” he said, his tone dry, before moving away toward Lord Graham.

Eliza watched him go, her smile fading slowly. Once his tall figure was lost among the guests, she allowed her eyes to wander across the crowded room.

She noticed a few noblemen she had yet to meet but knew she would as she continued to move in Tristan’s world. Her eyes caught Marcus sitting at a table with a few more men she didn’t recognize.

He leaned back in his chair, speaking with two lords, a glass of wine in hand. His laughter was loud.

Much too loud.

And his expression smug, in that way she knew too well. Her chest tightened as she crossed the floor with steady steps. When she reached the table, she greeted the men politely, then looked straight at her brother.

“Might I have a moment with Mr. Harwood?”

The men glanced at one another, surprised, but rose from their seats with murmured excuses. Marcus’s glare darkened.

“Please forgive me!” she murmured behind them as they all left.

“What do you want?” Marcus said through clenched teeth.

“You will know,” she answered calmly, “if you come with me.”

His jaw worked almost like he wanted to refuse, but after a pause, he stood, pushing back his chair. He followed her out into the hallway, and the doors closed behind them, muting the music.

Eliza turned, fixing him with a steady gaze. “What are you up to?”

Marcus feigned confusion. “What do you mean?”

“This new venture of yours. What are you trying to drag my husband into?”

He gave a sharp laugh. “Your husband? Need I remind you who got you that husband in the first place?”

Her eyes narrowed. “That is not what I am speaking of, and you know it. I know you, Marcus. You always have something hidden up your sleeve, and it never ends well. I would very much prefer you not involve Tristan in it.”

Marcus leaned closer, a sly smile tugging at his lips. “Since when did you grow so possessive? You sound almost fond of him.”

“That is none of your concern,” she shot back.

“My dear sister,” he drawled, “I have a project that could make us all richer. If your husband wishes to invest, who am I to stop him?”

Her teeth ground together, her chest burning. She wanted to strike him and tear that stupid smirk from his face, but she stood still.

At last, he stepped back, his expression hardening. “Do not bother me again tonight. I did not come here for you.”

Eliza lifted her chin. “This is my ball.”

“Which does not negate a word I just said,” he replied smoothly.

Then he turned, his coat brushing past her as he walked back toward the hall.

Eliza stood frozen for a moment, her heart pounding, her thoughts knotted. She hated the feeling this gave her. Marcus was planning something. And whatever it was, it had Tristan’s name drawn into it.

She drew a long breath and forced herself to follow him back inside, her face composed and her steps measured. It was a good thing Tristan had invited her to come with him the next day. Perhaps she could see first-hand what her husband and her brother were both about to step into.

Chapter 17

Lord Graham's voice carried easily above the swell of music and chatter, and a part of Tristan began to wonder just how much longer he would have to stay before leaving became less impolite.

"So, Lord Vale, how do you find the management of Evermere? If I know anything about your grandfather, it is that your estate has a reputation for discipline. Are you maintaining that as well?" Lord Graham asked, his voice just as clear.

Tristan adjusted his cuff, his tone steady. "Oh, well, I do what I must. The tenants know their duties, and I keep the ledgers clean. There is no use running a house if its books do not balance."

The older man gave a slow nod. "Oh, I know exactly what you mean. And the people? Do they answer well to your commands?"

"They do. Some more readily than others," Tristan responded, his mind briefly wandering toward Mr. Jones. "But that is the way of the world."

A wave of amusement crossed Graham's eyes. "It has been some time since the war, and you still speak like a soldier."

"Oh well," Tristan said, his voice clear. "Old habits die hard."

The older lord sipped from his glass, studying him over the rim. "And tell me, will you be at the gathering tomorrow? The one where we speak further about this Berkeley Project?"

Tristan raised his head. “Yes. At first, I admit, I was doubtful. But Mr. Harwood has laid out the details with skill. He has a way of making a man feel that the thing is half built already.”

“Indeed,” Graham replied. “And do you trust it now?”

“I trust the numbers I have seen,” Tristan said carefully. “That is not the same as trusting the men behind them.”

Lord Graham chuckled. “Caution is wise.”

Tristan nodded. Could he leave now?

Before he could contemplate the answer, Lord Graham’s voice broke into his thoughts again.

“And married life? How has that settled upon your shoulders?”

Tristan let a pause sit between them before answering. “I cannot complain.”

“With a wife as lovely as yours, who could?”

The words pulled Tristan’s gaze to the far side of the room. Eliza was crouched among a group of children, her bright dress reflecting the candlelight around her as she passed small biscuits into their hands. The children laughed at something she said, their voices rising with each second.

“She is lovely,” Tristan said at last, his voice softer than before.

Graham's expression shifted, something warmer in his eyes. "My second marriage was arranged, you know. Clara was her name. She was a gentle woman. Patient too. Perhaps too patient."

Tristan swallowed and turned to him as he continued, "She loved me more than I deserved, though I was too blind to see it."

"Oh," Tristan responded, unsure of what else to say.

"You see, I had lost my first wife years before, in a carriage accident. She was my first love, and I buried myself in grief. I thought it noble to mourn, but what I did was selfish. I let it consume me until I could see nothing else. And Clara...well, she stood there beside me, waiting. Always waiting. By the time I turned and realized she wanted nothing more than to share that burden with me, it was too late."

Tristan felt his chest tighten. "That must have been ... harsh."

"Harsh," Graham agreed. "But more than that, it was a waste. A waste of her love, a waste of her years. She would ask to walk in the gardens with me, and I would refuse. She once painted me a small portrait, and I never even hung it on the wall. And then, one morning, she was gone. Illness took her in weeks. Do you know what I felt as I stood at her grave?"

"What?"

"Regret. That is what I carried. Regret is the cruelest companion, Lord Vale. Believe me when I tell you, do not let it be yours."

Tristan's throat worked, but no words came at once. His eyes drifted back to Eliza. She was laughing again, her hands outstretched as the children pulled

at her gown for more sweets.

“My point,” Graham said, his voice just as steady, “do not be afraid to let someone in. It may seem like a burden, but a woman like that—” he gestured gently toward Eliza “—if you lose her, you will spend the rest of your life wishing you had not. And wishes are no cure for the years.”

Tristan breathed slowly, still watching her. At last, he turned back to Lord Graham and exhaled. “I thank you for your counsel.”

“See you tomorrow, then,” Graham said, straightening his coat.

“I look forward to it.”

The older man slipped back into the crowd, leaving Tristan alone with thoughts that pressed heavier than before.

He hadn’t registered what he was feeling when a brush of familiar silk came at his side. Evelyn appeared, her eyes sharp as ever. She looked across the room with the intensity of a hawk, then back at him.

“Aunt Evelyn,” Tristan greeted her.

Evelyn shuffled her legs. “It is turning out well, is it not? The people seem to like Eliza.”

“She is a good person,” Tristan said.

Evelyn smiled faintly. “This is a good thing you have done. A pity Howard is missing it. He would have enjoyed such an evening.”

Tristan lifted a brow. “I am sure they have balls in America, Aunt Evelyn.”

She gave a short laugh. “No doubt they do, though I wonder if they have chandeliers half so fine.”

Tristan laughed.

“So, is this a sign that the marriage might work after all?”

He shook his head. “I only meant to introduce Eliza to the local society with this, that’s all. Do not read into it.”

Evelyn’s eyes narrowed, edged with amusement. “Of course you did.” She tapped his arm lightly. “Whatever you tell yourself, Tristan.”

Before he could answer, she slipped back into the crowd, leaving the words lodged in his chest.

Whatever you tell yourself.

His gaze pulled back to Eliza. She was still surrounded by children, smiling as she offered the last of the biscuits. One little boy tugged at her sleeve, and she bent down again.

For a reason he could not name, Tristan found himself holding his breath.

The morning after the ball was quieter, much to the relief of every person in the house. Breakfast had barely ended when one of the footmen entered the hall. He bowed low, his hands folded behind his back.

“My lord, the carriage is ready.”

Tristan pushed back his chair and stood. “Very well.”

Eliza rose as well, adjusting the lower parts of her gown. Evelyn, who sat across the table, looked up with sharp eyes. “She is coming with you?”

“Yes,” Tristan replied evenly.

“What a pity,” Evelyn said with a sigh. “I was rather hoping the two of us might take a walk in the gardens later this afternoon.”

The duke, seated at the head of the table, folded his paper and looked toward her. “Do you not have that meeting this same afternoon with Lady Fitz?”

Evelyn groaned so dramatically that Eliza covered her mouth to hide a laugh.

“You had to remind me, did you not, Father? Lady Fitz is a bloodsucker. She will keep me in her rooms for hours and force me to sample her dreadful perfumes.”

“Is there anyone you actually like, Aunt Evelyn?” Eliza asked, her voice crisp.

Evelyn shut her eyes, almost like she was trying to think about the answer. “I will have to give you a response when you return from your journey, dear.”

Eliza could not help but laugh then. “Clara is still in her chambers. I could send her to keep you company if you prefer.”

Evelyn froze, her fork hanging midair. “Clara, you say?”

Eliza nodded.

Evelyn shook her head at once. “On second thought, I shall take my chances with the bloodsucker. Even misery has limits.”

Tristan allowed himself a laugh, rare though it was. “Then the matter is settled. We must be off.”

The duke wished them well, and the pair left the hall together.

The carriage rolled down the long and bumpy road, the wheels crunching against gravel. Through the open window, the air was sharp and bright, and the scent of leaves could be perceived, although just faintly so. Eliza leaned forward, her eyes filled with curiosity.

“What is that tower over there?” she asked, pointing toward a grey tower in the distance.

“That is the old mill,” Tristan responded. “It has been idle for years, though they say the water there still runs the clearest in the county.”

“And that field?”

“Tenant land. Barley, most likely. They send half the yield to market and keep the rest for themselves.”

Eliza nodded, but her gaze never seemed still. Tristan noticed how she was always turning toward some detail, some new corner of the land she had not yet noticed. After a while, she shifted her eyes back to Tristan and pushed her back against the cushion. “This meeting with Marcus...What is it truly about?”

Tristan rested one arm on the window frame. “It is to finalize the arrangements for the Berkeley Project. Just a bunch of formalities and numbers. The kind of dull necessities that no one enjoys but everyone must endure.”

“And you want me there?” she asked.

He lifted one shoulder. “I have found that meetings are more bearable when you are present.”

Eliza’s laugh surprised him, bright and unguarded. “I cannot imagine how. I hardly ever say anything of use.”

“Your presence is enough,” Tristan replied simply.

She studied him for a moment before shaking her head. “I hope you know you cannot take me to every meeting.”

“No,” he said. “But I can take you to the ones I choose.”

She smiled faintly and turned back toward the window. The smile lingered on her lips, and he found himself watching it until the road curved and the view ahead drew her attention again.

“What are those people doing?” she asked.

He followed her gaze. A line of carts and people with baskets filled the road in the distance.

“Today is the local harvest day,” Tristan explained. “They carry their crops to the market. Prices will be low, since everyone sells at once.”

Her expression grew warm. “Do you mind if we stop at the market on our way back?”

He glanced at her. “What is it you wish to buy? The maids can fetch whatever you require.”

“I know,” she said. “But it is not the same. I just...miss it.”

Tristan’s eyes narrowed at her. “You miss the market?”

“Yes. I miss the noise. The calls of the sellers. The smell of fruit and bread and spice. I have not walked through a proper market in months.”

Tristan regarded her for a moment, then nodded. “Well, if that is what you want, we shall stop.”

Her smile grew. “Thank you.”

The carriage rocked gently along the road, and for a time neither spoke. The only thing that could be heard was the sound of hoofbeats. Then Tristan leaned forward, his gaze fixed on her. “Your brother is a persuasive man, is he not?”

Eliza’s smile faded. “Yes. He can be very persuasive when he chooses.”

“You say that with little joy,” Tristan remarked.

She gave a half-shrug. “He was a lawyer once. He always knew how to bend words until they suited him.”

“Including with you?” Tristan asked, his voice low.

She gave a small, humorless smile. “He did persuade me into this marriage.”

The words hit harder than he expected. Tristan’s gaze lingered on her face, but she did not look at him. Her tone had been flat, and her shoulders grew tense.

“He did?” he asked, almost against his will.

“Yes,” she said, her eyes fixed on the trees rushing past the window.

Tristan leaned back into the seat, his mind circling the admission. He had never asked her what Marcus had said to her, nor how he had pressed the matter. Until this moment, he had assumed she had agreed willingly.

At least as willingly as arranged marriages go. It didn't feel like she had a choice in what the matchmaker provided for her.

The question burned inside him. What exactly did Marcus say to convince her? Or was she threatened?

The carriage eventually stopped beneath the branches of a wide oak. Beyond the clearing, riders waited, Marcus among them.

Tristan touched Eliza's hand lightly. "We are here."

She looked up at him and nodded.

The harvest festival stretched wide before them as they both stepped down. The square was lined with stalls draped in cloth of different shades.

The air was filled with the smell of baked bread, roasted chestnuts, and the hint of sweetened cider. Tristan turned to look at Eliza and noticed the subtle smile on her face as she took in the sights.

There it was.

"What do you think?" he eventually asked, his voice clear.

“I have no words,” she responded, the disbelief in her voice almost as clear as the morning sky.

The sound of laughter rose above the music of fiddles, and children darted between carts, their ribbons flying behind them. He watched Eliza take in more of the sights until her gaze landed on a group of women and children who had gathered by the fountain. She touched Tristan’s arm gently.

“I shall go over there,” she said, pointing toward them. “You may call for me if you need me.”

He frowned. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” she answered, her tone calm but firm. “You have meetings with half the aristocracy of London today. I doubt they would want my presence even if I insisted. Better I stay out here.”

He studied her a moment longer. “Very well,” he said at last, releasing a slow breath.

She gave a warm smile and made her way across the square. Tristan watched her kneel beside the children, her dress settling around her. She laughed as the little ones thrust flowers into her hands and touched her hair. Then, with a reluctant turn, he moved deeper into the festival where the men waited.

Marcus had gathered them in a side room off the square. The tables in the room were littered with maps and papers. Tristan took his seat calmly and watched Marcus sit at the head, his voice steady and confident.

“Gentlemen,” Marcus began, “as you all know, this project is not simply an expansion. It is an opportunity to tie our fortunes together, to strengthen trade routes, and to build something greater than the sum of our lands.”

Tristan scanned the faces around him. Some were familiar; most of the others were not. He spotted one he knew. It was the baron from the garden party days ago.

“My lord,” Tristan greeted him with a nod.

“Lord Vale,” the baron said, leaning forward with a grin. “I am glad you are here. This will be of interest to you.”

“We shall see,” Tristan responded, his voice almost a whisper.

The baron cleared his throat before continuing, “We wait for a few more, but it seems Mr. Harwood does not intend to wait.”

Marcus cleared his throat and carried on. “The idea is simple. We build new mills. We cut a broader road through the forest and direct trade through our lands. In time, wealth flows not only to us, but to every house allied in this effort.”

The men murmured in approval, but Tristan folded his hands, his gaze steady.

“And the villagers?” he asked at last.

Marcus paused, then smiled as though expecting the question. “They will be fine.”

“Fine?” Tristan pressed. “If I follow this correctly, the project will cut into their farmland and limit their trade. What will happen to those who cannot invest? What becomes of them?”

One of the lords shifted uncomfortably as Marcus’s smile thinned. “There will be mechanisms in place to ensure they are not left behind.”

“What mechanisms?” Tristan asked. His voice was calm, but his eyes narrowed.

“We are still refining those,” Marcus admitted. “But the principle stands. Progress demands adaptation. Once the returns begin, everyone will benefit.”

Tristan leaned forward. “Should that not be the first priority? The lords may be powerful partners, but we all know very well that their interests do not always align with those of the people. If this truly is for growth, then the villagers must see that growth as well.”

Marcus waved a hand, his tone sharp. “We will make it align. Do not worry yourself with every detail, Lord Vale. That is why you have me.”

Something in his voice felt jarring, almost insensitive. Like the villagers were completely an afterthought. Tristan sat back, the discomfort sharp in his chest.

“Perhaps we should pause,” he said finally. “We are still waiting for others to arrive, and the festival outside deserves our attention. Let us take a break.”

The men looked at one another, then nodded. At last, Marcus exhaled, forced to agree. “Very well.”

They all rose and stepped out into the sunlight once more.

The first sound Tristan heard was a boy’s laughter. A child ran toward him, his small legs pumping hard. Tristan recognized the mop of brown hair and the scar on the knee.

“Matthew,” he said with a subtle smile. “How is your leg?”

The boy grinned. “It has been fine, my lord, ever since you wrapped it that day.”

“Good,” Tristan said. He crouched so they were level. “As long as you do not trouble your mother again, it will not give you pain.”

Matthew laughed, bobbed his head, and ran off toward his friends.

Tristan straightened and turned. Across the square, Eliza was still with the children. She had a daisy crown in her lap, and the little girls were weaving flowers into her hair. Something softened in Tristan’s chest, and he took a step toward her.

“Lord Vale,” Marcus’s voice cut in. He had followed him out, glass in hand. “I wanted to continue where we left off. The finer details—”

“You must excuse me,” Tristan said, his tone firm. “I promised my wife I would join her.”

Without waiting for a response, he crossed the square. Eliza looked up as he approached, her smile widening.

“You came,” she said.

“Of course,” he answered.

A boy tugged at his hand, urging him to sit. Tristan lowered himself beside Eliza. At once, the children crowded them, showing him the small wooden toys they carried.

“Do you like soldiers, my lord?” one of them asked.

Tristan examined the little carving. “Yes. Though I prefer when they are at rest.”

Eliza laughed, nudging him gently. “They never believe you smile, you know. You had best prove them wrong.”

“I smile,” Tristan said, his face completely blank. “On occasion.”

The children giggled, and one girl offered him a biscuit. He hesitated at first, but Eliza kept her eyes on him until he took it. The taste of sugar lingered in his mouth as he chewed, and the children laughed once again.

For the next few minutes, they played together, tossing a ball, passing it between them while the children shrieked with delight. Tristan found himself watching Eliza more than the game.

The way she listened intently when the children spoke. The way her hands moved with elegance. Even the sound of her laughter was enough to draw his attention.

Would she be like this if they had children?

He swallowed, the thought almost catching him off guard. Why in God's name was he thinking about children? Was it the look of peace that settled on Eliza's face? Or was it something else? Something he couldn't explain. Something he didn't want to explain?

He watched the smile on Eliza's face disappear and narrowed his eyes. The laughter had completely faded, and her gaze had shifted across the square.

Tristan followed it.

Marcus stood near a stall, his wine glass raised at her. Then he turned to the men beside him and toasted them as well.

Eliza's expression tightened, and Tristan felt his jaw clench. He had thought this would be something he wouldn't have to interfere in, but it was rather clear now.

Something was going on between Eliza and her brother, and he would have to ask her about it.

Chapter 18

The sun had not dimmed yet, but the clouds at the far edge of the sky swelled in a heavy gray. Eliza tilted her head back, lifting one hand to shield her eyes.

“It looks like it is going to rain,” she said, her voice half playful and half certain.

Tristan, standing at her side with his hands clasped behind his back, did not even look up. “I doubt it.”

“It is barely noon and the edges of the sky are beginning to grow dark,” she teased, lowering her gaze to him. “That is certainly the threat of rain.”

“It rarely rains around here, no matter how dark the sky gets,” Tristan responded, calm and sure. “Trust me, we will have a clear day.”

Eliza pursed her lips and lifted her hand in mock surrender. “Very well. When we are drenched and wandering in search of shelter, I shall remind you of this moment. We should at least make arrangements for an inn nearby just in case.”

“There is no need for that, because you know why?” Tristan said again, his tone almost stubborn. “It is not going to rain.”

“Fine.” She smiled despite herself. “Then follow me to the market.”

Tristan cast one glance toward the square where Marcus and the others still lingered, then back to her. “There is still time before the lords arrive. Very

well. Lead the way.”

The marketplace was just as she had imagined it. A lively row of stalls on both sides.

“My lady!” a woman called, waving a basket filled with oranges. “Freshly picked, sweetest you shall ever taste!”

Another stepped forward with a platter of butter. “The best you will eat this year, Lady Vale!”

Men shouted the prices of smoked fish and wooden furniture while others asked if there was any service they required.

Eliza slowed, breathing it all in. “Do you smell that?” she asked, turning toward Tristan.

He had slipped his hands into his pockets, walking just behind her as carefully as possible. His expression had not shifted once.

“Tristan?” she called again, her voice louder.

“I smell nothing other than raw meat and a handful of herbs,” he responded, his voice casual.

Eliza laughed, shaking her head. “Exactly. All of it together. Is it not exhilarating? People travel from every corner of the village to lay out their goods, each scent mingling into the others. It feels alive.”

Tristan's mouth quirked in something that might have been a smirk, though it faded almost instantly. "If one finds joy in such things, I suppose."

"I do," she said firmly. "And you should learn to enjoy yourself more."

"I should try to return to the lords," Tristan countered dryly, "before your brother bores them senseless with talk of industry and land."

Eliza arched her brow. "Are you saying Marcus can bore a man like you?"

"I am saying Mr. Harwood has the talent," Tristan muttered.

She hid her laughter behind her hand and moved on. The crowd grew thinner near the far end of the stalls, and it was there she noticed a man standing with a cat nestled against his arm. The animal's coat gleamed, silver with subtle streaks of white, and its eyes were bright gold. Eliza stopped before she realized it.

"Good God," she breathed. "That is the most beautiful cat I have ever seen."

The villager turned toward her with a nod. "Is he not a beauty?"

The cat gave a soft purr, pressing its head into the man's chest.

Tristan stepped up beside her. "We have not made your acquaintance."

"Mr. Kale," the man said, bowing slightly.

“Lord and Lady Vale,” Tristan replied.

Kale’s eyes widened. He bowed again, deeper. “An honor, my lord, my lady.”

“You are going to the festival?” Tristan asked, his gaze landing briefly on the ribbon tied around Kale’s wrist.

“My daughter is there,” Kale said. “She insisted I bring Lemon.”

“Lemon?” Eliza repeated, her brows rising.

Kale smiled. “That is his name.”

She let out a laugh, delighted. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am entirely serious. The cat is called Lemon. And he lives up to it. He is sweet, but quick to sour.”

Eliza reached to scratch behind Lemon’s ears, and the creature blinked slowly, entirely pleased with her attention. “A perfect name then,” she said.

“Why do we not walk back together?” she suggested. “We have just come from the festival.”

Kale agreed at once, and the three of them turned down the path.

As they walked, Eliza kept her hand close to Lemon, enjoying the steady hum of his purr. “What is it you do in the village, Mr. Kale?” she asked.

“I manage an inn on the far side of the park,” he replied.

“An inn?” Eliza’s voice warmed. “And how does business fare?”

He shrugged, shifting Lemon gently in his arms. “We cannot complain. Some days are good, others less so. But enough to live by. At least for now.”

Her brows knit. “For now?”

Kale glanced around, then lowered his voice. “You did not hear it from me, my lady, but there is talk. A rumor about parts of the park being torn down because of some new project.”

Beside her, Eliza felt Tristan’s head snap toward him.

Kale went on, utterly unaware. “They say it will bring trade, wealth, and fine things for the lords. But for such things to be gained, something must be lost. And who bears the loss?” He shook his head. “Not the aristocrats, that much is sure. The poor landowners, the villagers, they will all be left with nothing.”

Eliza’s throat tightened. She looked down at Lemon, whose tail flicked lazily as he purred on. It was easier to focus on the cat than on the weight of Kale’s words.

The cheer of the market pressed in from every side, but her chest grew uneasy.

The three of them reached the festival again. The crowd had thickened since earlier, and more villagers had gathered. She could still see a few more sellers and farmers trying to finish selling the rest of their wares and go back home. The sky had grown just a smidge darker, but she knew Tristan would not see it as a cause for concern, so she said nothing about it. Her eyes remained focused on the children who ran back and forth instead with no care for what was happening around them.

Tristan cleared his throat and looked toward the far side of the square, where a group of well-dressed men had gathered. Eliza followed his gaze, and her eyes settled straight on Marcus. The uneasy feeling rose in her throat once again.

“The lords have arrived,” Tristan said, his hand briefly brushing her arm. “I must excuse myself.”

Eliza nodded, though her stomach tightened. She watched him cross the lawn, his stride steady, until he disappeared into the crowd of noblemen.

Beside her, Mr. Kale let out a sound between a grunt and a sigh. “There they are. All of them gathered to make decisions that will fatten their pockets. Not a thought for the common man at the end of the day.”

His words pierced deeper than he might have known. Eliza’s chest felt heavy. She did not want to believe Tristan belonged in that circle, planning ventures that made men like Mr. Kale feel invisible.

Before she could answer, a small tug came at her gown. She looked down to see a boy with messy curls staring up at her, his lip trembling.

“My lady,” he whispered. “George said my ears are too big.”

Eliza bent low, so they were eye to eye, and gently tapped his ear with one finger.

“No,” she said after a moment of mock consideration. “They look perfectly normal to me.”

The boy’s face broke into a smile. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

He giggled and raced back toward his friends, his earlier sorrow forgotten.

“You are good with children,” Mr. Kale noted, shifting Lemon in his arms.

Eliza stood, brushing at the creases in the front of her gown. “Seeing children gives me joy. Their honesty, their laughter... it is a balm for the soul.”

A brief moment of silence passed between them before the older man posed his next question.

“Do you have any of your own?”

She scoffed softly. “No. And I doubt I shall have them any time soon.”

Mr. Kale nodded, as though he understood more than he spoke. Then a tiny voice rang out from the other side of the park.

“Father!”

They both turned at the same time. A girl with long dark braids stood before one of the houses at the edge of the common path, waving with all her might.

“That is my daughter,” Mr. Kale said, smiling at last. “Jane.”

“She is quite beautiful,” Eliza responded warmly.

“Yes, for now. In a few minutes, she will be in tears when she learns I have not let Lemon down for her.”

Eliza’s gaze dropped to the purring cat. “Then we should not delay you.”

Mr. Kale bowed once more, then strode toward his daughter, the cat’s tail flicking lazily as they went.

Eliza remained still for a moment, watching the easy affection between father and child. Then her eyes shifted back to the lords. Marcus stood in the center, his arms moving in wide gestures, his words spilling forth with ease.

Too much ease.

She could see it even from here, the salesman’s charm, the way he painted pictures so vividly that no one thought to question whether they were real. He had them all eating out of the palm of his hand.

All of them except Tristan, she hoped.

Tristan returned a while later and stayed close to her rather than Marcus, answering questions when asked but never joining in the fervor. Eliza noticed that after answering a question from one of the Lords, he would turn toward the villagers who all stood from the edges and watched.

It didn't take a soothsayer to see the fear and uncertainty on their faces. None of them liked what her brother was doing one bit, and she couldn't really blame them.

"Do you think Mr. Kale is right?" Tristan eventually asked quietly, his eyes still fixed on the crowd. "Do you think the Berkeley Project is going to destroy everything the people around here have spent decades building?"

Eliza exhaled, the sound heavy across her lips. She wanted to say something. To find words from the bottom of her heart, but no matter how hard she tried, nothing came forth.

"You know your brother, do you not? Is he an honest man?"

Eliza swallowed. Before she could open her mouth to speak, however, the sky rumbled above them. The roaring music faltered just a little as several heads from around the park tilted upward.

"It looks like you might be right after all," Tristan said, his voice low enough that only Eliza could hear.

"Oh, certainly. Only when the clouds turn black do you admit it."

A short laugh escaped his lips, and Eliza let her attention drift back to Marcus's group. She couldn't fully make out what they were saying, but

some words drew her attention, and not in a good way. Whenever the wind shifted, she would hear words like extraction rights or tenancy adjustments.

The lords spoke of them as if they were small matters, easily arranged. Their tones were casual, almost bored, as if the lives behind those words were nothing more than pieces on a board.

Eliza's throat tightened, and she felt the pull of it, the current that Marcus was pushing, all under the name of progress.

But progress for whom?

She thought of Mr. Kale's face when he spoke of the community. She thought of Jane waving from the house, her tiny hands shaking in the air.

And Marcus was still standing there, smiling like a man who had already won.

Thunder cracked across the sky, causing several women to cry out, and the children shrieked in fear, running toward the closest houses.

Tristan touched her arm lightly. "We should think of finding a place to stay."

She turned to give him a glare, and he rolled his eyes.

"Do not worry. You can say I told you so later."

“I agree,” Eliza said, her eyes drifting toward the far side of the park where Mr. Kale had pointed earlier. The inn sat beneath the looming clouds, its outside lanterns already lit.

“What about that place?” she said, gesturing.

Chapter 19

The smell of wood and smoke was the first thing that settled across Tristan's senses as they walked into the inn. His eyes looked around the reception area, taking in the accommodations. He stared at the decent floorboards, the walls that seemed to look all right for their age.

At least, he polishes them regularly, he thought to himself. A few lanterns burned softly at the edges of the walls, casting a somewhat flickering glow on the floorboards themselves.

"This does not look that bad," Eliza commented.

"I was going to say the exact same thing."

He was still inspecting the room when the side door by the wall opened and Mr. Kale stepped out with his daughter. His features, for some reason, were more defined under the candlelight. Tristan could see the glow of his beard clearer now.

"Well now," Mr. Kale said, smiling at both of them as he moved closer. "It is good to see you both again."

Tristan offered a nod, but his eyes followed Eliza instead. She had already knelt down, her dress spilling softly across the worn planks, to greet Kale's daughter.

"And you must be Jane," Eliza said, her tone bright with playfulness.

Jane clutched Lemon close to her chest. “I am Jane, my lady,” she said, eyes wide with a mixture of shyness and pride. “How do you know my name?”

“Well, let’s just say your father loves to talk about you,” Eliza replied, pretending to pout.

Jane’s eyes widened. “Thank you, my lady. What is your name?”

“Jane, you cannot ask the lady—”

“Please,” Eliza interrupted, raising her hand. “I don’t mind answering her questions. My name is Eliza.”

“You have a lovely name, too,” Jane replied, her arms tight around the purring cat.

Eliza gasped softly, as though Jane had just paid her the grandest of compliments. “Do you think so? Then I shall believe you, because you seem to be a very honest little girl.”

The child giggled, her shoulders lifting as if she had just been handed a secret treasure.

Tristan stood a pace behind, watching it all unfold. The way Eliza tilted her head when she listened. The way her hands hovered near the child, not too close, not too far, gentle in their steadiness.

Jane pulled at Eliza’s glove and held Lemon out into the firelight. “Would you like to hold him?”

“Oh my, are you certain?” Eliza asked.

Jane nodded firmly.

Eliza gathered the cat into her arms. Lemon purred, curling into the crook of her elbow as though he had known her all his life.

Eliza laughed, her soft voice carrying gently through the reception. “He is much heavier than I thought.”

Jane leaned close, whispering with mock seriousness. “He eats too much.”

“Let me tell you a secret,” Eliza teased, leaning closer to the girl and dropping her voice. “So does my husband.”

Tristan’s mouth curved before he could stop it. He shook his head, but Jane burst into giggles, and Eliza laughed along with her.

Mr. Kale returned with a key in hand. “I have found you a room. One of our best. You will find fresh linens and the fire already set.”

Eliza rose carefully, returning Lemon to Jane. “You knew we would be spending the night here?” she asked, her brow lifting.

Kale shrugged with easy humor. “This is the only inn for miles. And it does not take a clever man to look at the sky and know rain is coming.”

Eliza turned toward Tristan, a sly smile tugging her lips. “Did you hear that?”

He raised a hand. “Do not.”

Her laugh answered him, light and bright against the deepening storm outside.

Kale gestured toward the stairwell. “This way. You will be comfortable here for the night.”

He walked them up to the second floor, the stairs creaking beneath his boots. At the door, he turned the key and pushed it open. “If you need anything, do not hesitate to call.”

“Thank you,” Tristan said.

Once the man and his daughter left, silence settled. Nothing could be heard except the brewing storm lashing hard at the shutters. Tristan slipped out of his coat and hung it on the peg by the door, and Eliza crossed to the fireplace, crouching low as she held her hands toward the flames.

“Mr. Kale seems kind,” she said over her shoulder.

Tristan nodded. “He does. A man who loves his work.”

Her gaze lingered on the fire, but her voice had grown quieter. “It is such a shame all of that may soon be taken from him.”

Tristan exhaled. The words pressed against something heavy in his chest. He joined her near the fire, though he remained standing, watching the way the light brushed against her profile.

“I wish there was something we could do,” Eliza murmured. “Something that could help him now and not later.”

Tristan’s jaw tightened. “I wish the same.”

For a time, neither of them spoke. Tristan eventually broke the silence by turning away from the fire. “Are you cold?”

She shook her head, a small smile forming. “No. The fire is enough.”

“You are certain?”

“Yes. Quite.”

He studied her for a heartbeat longer, then nodded. “Very well.”

The bed was ready and made enough for the two of them. Tristan sat at the edge and stared off at the wall. He tried to think of anything. The storm outside, the cat Eliza had been playing with, but nothing fully replaced the burrowing thought of the Berkeley Project in his mind.

Eliza crossed the room and sat on the opposite edge of the bed. She did not speak; instead, she folded her hands in her lap and let her eyes settle on the flames.

Tristan’s mind, on the other hand, would not grow quiet. What truly was the Berkeley Project? A plan of progress, or a mask for greed? Who stood to gain, and who stood to lose?

“Goodnight,” Eliza offered, planting her back on the cushion, her hands resting gently on her stomach. Tristan looked at her and nodded.

“Yes. Goodnight,” he responded and turned back to the wall. Something told him the thoughts in his head wouldn’t leave him soon.

Not until he did something about it.

The rain was most definitely what the world needed. The next morning came with the kind of clean air that made people appreciate life even more, especially Tristan. He stepped out of his room and walked down the stairs, fastening the last button of his coat.

Down in the reception room, Mr. Kale sat behind his desk. Lemon, smug as ever, was perched on the table, his tail swishing lazily back and forth.

“Good morning, my lord,” The older man said, rising half a breath as Tristan approached.

“Good morning,” Tristan answered, giving a brief glance to the cat before meeting the innkeeper’s eyes. “I suppose you had a good night and there was no trouble at all?”

“No trouble at all,” Mr. Kale responded. “Does the lady require anything?”

“Eliza is still asleep,” Tristan said. “She seemed tired after last evening.”

Kale nodded, scratching behind Lemon’s ears.

Tristan hesitated for a moment, then spoke up again. “Would you mind walking me round the back of the village? A small tour, nothing more.”

Kale’s brow lifted. “Of course. Let me just put these ledgers back in the drawers, and I will be with you shortly.”

Tristan swallowed. “Who will mind the desk?”

Mr. Kale laughed. “Whoever is in need of a room will wait. A roof and a bed do not vanish in an hour.”

Tristan gave the faintest smile. “Very well then.”

They stepped out into the cool morning, the air soft and fresh against their faces. A few yards beyond the inn, the land seemed to open into softer fields littered with trimmed hedges and oak trees.

The village seemed quieter around these parts, just like it had been back in the hunting lodge. The thought made him miss his serenity just briefly.

As they walked, he watched Mr. Kale stretch out his hand and call out to a farmer leaning over a fence.

“Robert! Morning to you.”

The man straightened, wiping soil from his hands onto his breeches. He bowed low when he saw Tristan.

“My lord.”

“Robert,” Tristan acknowledged. “How goes the work?”

Robert climbed over the fence to join them, falling into step. “Better than last Season, thank God. The festival has given men spirit again.”

“Has it now?” Tristan asked, his voice clear.

“Yes. A man plows straighter when he knows the grain will feed his children.”

“That is encouraging,” Tristan said. “And the harvest itself?”

Robert gestured toward the land rolling ahead of them. “See there? The wheat is nearly ripe. The soil still fights us in patches, but it gives enough to live. A few more weeks, and we shall fill the barns.”

Tristan nodded, listening carefully as Robert continued to talk.

“There—” the farmer pointed to an oak tree with gnarled branches stretching wide “—that tree has stood more than fifty years. My father’s father tied horses to it when he first took up the land.”

“That is quite interesting,” Tristan responded.

Robert’s voice softened. “Families have worked these fields since long before I even drew breath. Over there—” he pointed to a row of cottages “—that is where the Collinses live. Generations of them. They keep cattle. Not much, but enough. Their boy, Thomas, served in the military. He came back with a limp but took up the plow again, all the same.”

Tristan's gaze followed the gesture. The cottages were plain but sturdy, smoke drifting from chimneys. These were lives stitched quietly into the land.

“And there ... orchards tended by the Lane family. They grew apples, pears, oranges, you name it. When my wife was still alive, she used to trade preserves with them. Sweetest you could taste.”

Mr. Kale grunted softly. “And this is what the others want to take away from us.”

Tristan said nothing at first, but his jaw tightened. The speeches of the lords yesterday paled in comparison to Robert's heartfelt speech about hard work.

Robert seemed to read his silence. “If this project of theirs takes root, my lord, we may as well say farewell to it all. The cottages, the fields, even that oak. Once men in velvet coats take measure of a place, they leave little behind for the rest of us.”

Tristan exhaled slowly. “You may be right.”

The weight of those words pressed hard on him. His title might have been inherited, but his loyalty to these people had to be chosen.

He could not pretend otherwise.

They walked on for nearly two hours while Robert spoke of repairs needed for a barn roof and tenants who worked through pain because no one else could manage the soil. Tristan listened as attentively as he could to everything.

By the time they turned back toward the inn, Tristan's thoughts were heavy, circling round the same truth. What Marcus called progress would come at a cost too steep for the people who had the least.

As they approached the inn, voices carried through the open windows. The high, bright tones of children's laughter. Tristan slowed down, immediately drawn by it.

Beneath the wide tree in the yard, Eliza sat with a book open in her lap, surrounded by a circle of children. They all leaned in and listened as attentively as they could as she read aloud. Jane sat behind her, as well, her face completely filled with concentration. She was braiding Eliza's hair, but it was clear she was making a rather huge mess of things.

Eliza laughed when the braid tangled for the umpteenth time. "You are far braver than I am, Jane. I should have given up long ago."

The little girl grinned. "It is almost perfect."

"I believe you," Eliza said warmly, and turned to another page of her book.

Tristan stopped at the edge of the yard, watching. Something in his chest shifted, unsettled and steadying all at once. She looked so natural there, her voice carrying over the laughter.

Mr. Kale leaned closer. "Children suit her, my lord."

Tristan's throat tightened before he answered. "They do, do they not?"

He walked forward at last, and the children scrambled to make room. Eliza looked up, her eyes meeting his with a spark he had not seen before.

“Come,” she said, patting the space beside her. “You must help us decide which story is best.”

He sat down, still in his coat, and for a few minutes, they spoke of nothing and everything at the same time. He let the children teach him things like the foolish endings of stories, the stubbornness of cats, and the best way to climb a tree without tearing breeches. The children laughed, and the book lay forgotten.

However, one thing burned itself into Tristan’s thoughts, and that was Eliza’s smile.

The realization dawned on him in the middle of the children, and he couldn’t help but admit it, at least to himself. He wanted children.

And he wanted them with no one but her.

Chapter 20

A while later, as the children managed to settle into a blissful rhythm, Tristan decided to break it.

“Children, might I borrow Lady Vale for a moment?” He asked, his tone calm but leaving little room for protest.

The group dispersed reluctantly, scattering back to their games. Eliza rose and dusted off her gown before walking to Tristan’s side.

“You left early this morning,” she said lightly. “I thought perhaps the heat or the room had suffocated you.”

“Oh, trust it was neither,” Tristan replied, his eyes steady on hers. “I needed to clear my head. Mr. Kale here was of help. He showed me what is truly at stake should we proceed with this project.”

Eliza turned her gaze to Mr. Kale, who stood nearby with arms folded loosely. He gave a small smile.

“Yes, my lady,” Kale said. “We spoke at length. There is much to lose.”

Tristan nodded. “We cannot move forward with this project. Not until we are certain these people will not suffer.”

Eliza folded her hands, trying to suppress the smile of pride that crept across her face. Of course, Tristan wasn’t one of those people. This just confirmed it for her.

He continued, oblivious to her thoughts. “I intend to write to your brother at once, but before that, I must visit the other village. There are lords there who ought to be consulted. I should be back by evening.”

“I see,” Eliza murmured.

“Then tomorrow morning,” Tristan continued, “we can return to the estate.”

“That is fine by me,” Eliza said, though her heart felt oddly unsettled. “It will give me time to explore a little.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes. “Explore where?”

Mr. Kale cleared his throat gently. “If I may, my lord, there is a parish half an hour from here. It is worth the walk. The stonework is very old, and the grounds are peaceful.”

Eliza turned to Tristan with a spark in her eyes. “Then it is settled. I shall visit the parish.”

Tristan gave the faintest grunt of disapproval, though his gaze softened. “Very well. But do not wander too far.”

Behind them, shrieks of laughter rose again. Jane had returned, waving the pencil in triumph.

“Now, if you will excuse me,” Eliza said brightly, “I have an artist to attend to.”

She turned back toward the children, feeling Tristan's eyes follow her. The weight of his gaze lingered even as she bent low to greet Jane, her smile returning with ease.

By the late afternoon, the only sign that it had rained the previous day was the damp earth and the wet huts around the inn. The sun was shining so bright that it was hard to imagine there had been a storm just the day before. Eliza stepped out of the inn and drew her shawl closer. Mr. Kale, who was busy scrawling on his ledgers, looked up from behind the desk as she passed.

"My lady," he greeted warmly.

"Mr. Kale," she responded, her voice quiet. "I thought I might take a trip to the parish now."

"Do you need someone to guide you around? The paths outside can twist if you do not know them well."

Eliza smiled. "I will manage. You need not trouble yourself."

"You are certain?" Mr. Kale pressed.

"I am. Do not worry for me," she said, and with that, she gave him a small nod and walked out.

The village was alive again. Market stalls still stood in rows, though fewer than the previous day at the festival. She paused here and there to ask gentle

questions of the people who passed by.

Most of what she asked had to do with directions, and the people were quite eager to help. Soon enough, she was pointed down a narrower track that wound between hedges until the parish came into view.

The building was modest, its stonework worn but sturdy. She stopped by a tree to examine the parish more closely. A few strings of ivy crept along the sides, and a shiny wooden cross crowned the roof. She exhaled and eventually moved closer, not stopping until she got to the door.

A woman stepped forward from the doorway as Eliza approached. She had dark hair neatly bound and a smile that was more polite, rather than warm.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “I am Isabella, the vicar’s wife. May I ask who comes calling?”

Eliza raised her head. “Good morning. I am Lady Vale.”

The woman’s eyes flickered. “Oh. Lord Vale’s wife.”

Eliza narrowed her gaze. “You have heard of me?”

Isabella gave a small shrug. “News of a marriage to one of the most influential men on the nearby estate does not take long to pass around. Word travels fast here.”

Eliza nodded. “I see.”

“May I ask what brings you?” Isabella said politely.

“I wanted only to see how the parish is doing. I have always had an admiration for places like this, you know, their quiet and their design. I thought since I was in the village, I might as well look in and see. If you will allow me, of course.”

Isabella considered her for a moment, then smiled. “Very well. If you like, I can give you the tour. My husband would not look kindly upon me if he heard the lady of Evermere came to the parish and was not received properly.”

“I would not wish to impose,” Eliza replied.

“You are not,” Isabella said firmly. “Please.”

Eliza softened. “Then I thank you.”

They walked together through the nave, where light filtered through tall, plain windows. Isabella’s voice carried a rhythm, like she had done this before several times. She spoke with calmness and confidence, and it made Eliza grow fond of the walls.

“These walls date back nearly two hundred years,” she explained. “Laid stone by stone by the villagers themselves after the last war. You see the uneven cut of the masonry? They had little more than picks and carts, yet they raised this place in less than five years.”

Eliza reached out to touch the cool stone. “Remarkable. But surely materials like this are rare. I cannot imagine the level of maintenance it takes.”

“Indeed,” Isabella said with a small laugh. “We patch as best we can. The rain often eats at the mortar, and during the cold seasons, the roof suffers for it. Yet somehow it all holds. Thanks to donations from kind folk, it is made just a little easier.”

“You receive donations?” Eliza asked, turning.

Isabella nodded. “It is the only way we manage to keep this parish alive. Villagers give what they can, but the larger sums come from those with means. It is the way of things.”

Eliza frowned thoughtfully. “And how do you keep track of them?”

“Everything is recorded in the big book,” Isabella replied.

Eliza frowned. “The big book?”

Isabella nodded. “Yes. Would you like to see it?”

“I would very much,” Eliza said.

Isabella led her to a side chamber, where shelves leaned with age. From a low table, she pulled a heavy volume bound in cracked leather. A pile of dust rose as she lifted it, but she laid it open with care.

“Here,” she said, flipping through. “Every offering. Land rents, alms, relief for widows. We keep careful records.”

Eliza bent over the pages, her eyes moving slowly down the neat lines of script. Coins and goods noted. Dates stretching back years. She admired the precision.

But then a name leapt out. Perhaps it was because of the different handwriting, or the familiarity of the name itself, but her eyes froze on it.

“Lord Calthorne,” she murmured, reading it aloud.

Her brow furrowed. She had met someone with that name just a few days ago, at her ball. It was one of the men who had come specifically to meet with Marcus. Her eyes traced the line again. A large donation had been entered just weeks before, and it seemed to be earmarked for community improvement.

Something was wrong, and she could feel it in her bones.

Community Improvement.

The handwriting here was different. It wasn’t done by the same steady hand that had written the earlier records.

Eliza tapped the line. “This one. Who recorded it?”

Isabella peered closer. “Ah. That came through Mr. Greyson. A solicitor, I believe. He handled the money on behalf of several gentlemen, and my husband received it. However, he did not write the note himself.”

“Several gentlemen,” Eliza repeated quietly.

“Yes,” Isabella said. “It was presented as a collective gift. We were not told anything else. But it was generous, and we could not refuse. We cannot afford to look a gift horse in the mouth, my lady.”

Eliza stared at the ink, the same unease growing in her again. Her eyes settled on the date the donation came in. Marcus had been in London at that time.

She closed the book gently, though her hand lingered.

“Thank you,” she said. “You have shown me much.”

Isabella smiled, unaware of the storm behind her guest’s calm face. “It is my honor, Lady Vale. Would you like to see the grounds as well?”

“Another time,” Eliza replied, straightening. Her voice was even, but her thoughts were racing.

Why would men from outside Evermere pour money into this place? Why through borrowed names and hidden hands? The only answer, of course, was that it was not charity at all. It was something more sinister.

Something she could bet Marcus already knew of.

She forced a smile at Isabella, offered her hand in thanks, then stepped back into the open air. But the unease followed her, heavier than anything. The questions needed answers, and she had to find a way to get them.

Chapter 21

Tristan entered the room later that evening, the stress of the day pressing down on him. He had been in a carriage for so long, his body was beginning to feel numb. The door closed behind him, and he looked up. Eliza sat near the bed, her posture upright. The flickering fire around the room reflected rather softly on her eyes.

“You were gone for an awfully long time,” she said.

“I was,” he answered, removing his gloves and setting them on the table. “The meeting stretched more than I expected.”

“I see.”

“Yes,” Tristan responded, sitting by the other side of the bed and taking off his coat. “If we were back in Evermere, now would be the time Aunt Evelyn would ask what monster rumbled my coat on my way back.”

That earned a soft laugh from Eliza. One that seemed to be music for his ears. He rose to hang his coat over the back of a chair.

“And?” she asked, leaning forward.

Tristan stared at her, his face blank. “And what?”

“What came of the meeting with the lords? Did they agree with you?”

He shook his head. “Not all. A few of them said they would think about it. Most of them were adamant. They will not budge unless Mr. Harwood himself calls the whole thing off. Now, should the project move on, he will need my grandfather’s approval to proceed.”

Her lips pressed together. “So it depends on my brother entirely?”

“And my grandfather,” Tristan said. “And believe me, trying to talk some sense into either of them can prove to be a Herculean task.”

Eliza exhaled, her eyes steady on him as he returned to the bed. “I understand that very well.”

A tense moment of silence passed between them, and the only sound to accompany it was that of the logs burning in the fireplace.

Eliza broke it before he could think of what to say. “So, what made you change your mind?”

He turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“I knew you had some doubts here and there at the beginning,” Eliza continued. “But I knew they were not enough to keep you rigid on this new decision of yours. What exactly did you see on your walk with Mr. Kale this morning?”

He folded his arms and leaned against the chair. “Things I should have seen much earlier before letting this entire project run this far in the first place.”

She leaned closer, though they were both still on opposite sides of the bed. “Things like what? All you said was that we could not move forward unless we were certain the people would not suffer.”

He paused again before responding. “I saw the lives of the people this project would affect. Farmers, tenants, men with families, women who keep their homes, children who run through the fields. All of them would lose something. Their land. Their work. Perhaps even their homes. I realized they would bear the weight of it. The lords may profit, but the villagers would suffer.”

Her brows lifted. “And you cannot accept that.”

“No.” His voice was steady. “I cannot. I served in the war, Eliza. I know what it is to see men lose everything. I will not bring that on my people now, not under my watch.”

Eliza turned from him then and rose to her feet. She crossed to the other side of the bed and sat at the side, her hands folded tightly in her lap.

His eyes landed on her, the confusion on his face palpable. She lowered her eyes, silent for a long moment.

Tristan continued to study her. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” she said quickly.

He frowned. “Are you certain? You look troubled.”

“I am fine.”

“You do not look fine.” He moved closer. “You look as if there is something you want to say but will not.”

She shook her head. “There is nothing. It is only this whole matter. It worries me.”

He moved nearer until there was almost no space between them. The bed dipped with his weight, and for a moment, he only looked at her profile, especially the way the firelight caught faintly on her cheek.

Something about the sight of her this close to him tugged at something in his heart. Something he couldn’t stop fast enough.

Oh, I am going to regret this.

Without fully thinking it through, he reached out and took her hand. Her eyes flicked down at once. The touch surprised her. It surprised him, too, but he did not release her.

“Eliza,” he said, his voice low, “if there is something you wish to say, you may. You can trust me.”

She drew in a slow breath.

“Arranged or not,” he continued, “you are still my wife.”

Her lips parted, and she turned her face toward him. Their eyes met, and neither of them looked away. It was almost like they couldn’t.

“You say that,” she whispered, “but do you really mean it?”

“Yes,” he responded, his thumb brushing gently against her knuckles. “I mean it.”

Her chest rose with another breath. “And if I did speak, would you listen? Truly listen?”

“I would.”

Her gaze lingered on him, steady now, searching. “You are not what I expected,” she said quietly.

“And what did you expect?”

“A man who would never look at me like this,” she admitted.

He almost smiled. “And yet I do.”

They stayed like that with their hands still joined.

“Eliza,” he said again, his voice softer this time.

“Yes?”

“I want...” He stopped himself, but the words hung in the air.

Her lips curved faintly. “You want what?”

He leaned toward her. She did not move back. Her eyes lowered briefly, then rose to his again.

The space between them narrowed even more, and her breath brushed against his. His heart beat hard

in his chest, and for once, he did not think of duty or land or projects. He thought only of her.

She tilted her head, almost like she was waiting.

He moved closer.

A knock at the door rang out cold in the air, slicing the tension between them. They both startled. She pulled her hand free at once, her breath sharp.

The moment fractured.

Tristan stood quickly, almost too quickly, steadying himself with a deep breath. He looked at her once more, her cheeks tinged with bright red and her eyes downcast.

“Of course,” he muttered. He crossed the room, his steps firm but heavy, and pulled open the door.

Mr. Kale stood there, his hands folded in front of him and his expression apologetic.

“Mr. Kale?” Tristan said, his words a question rather than an acknowledgement.

“My lord,” the older man greeted him with a small bow. “Forgive the intrusion at this hour. A letter just came for you.”

Tristan straightened. “A letter?”

“Yes, my lord.” Mr. Kale responded, extending a folded envelope sealed in red wax across to him. “Thought about giving it to you tomorrow, but I do not know when you will be leaving the inn.”

Tristan accepted it with a nod. “Thank you for bringing it.”

Kale shifted his weight, looking past Tristan as though unsure if he should speak further. Then he cleared his throat. “There is also a letter for Lady Vale.”

Tristan turned his head slightly. “Really?”

“Yes, my lord.” Kale produced a second envelope and handed it over. “Both were delivered by a private courier who would not say more..”

Tristan felt his gaze grow sharp. “I see. He inclined his head. “Thank you for bringing it up here.”

“Do you need anything else? Perhaps some extra blankets or warm water for the night?” Mr. Kale asked, his measured tone anxious.

“No. Thank you. That will be all.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Mr. Kale exhaled, bowed again, and stepped away down the hallway.

Tristan closed the door and carried both letters inside. Eliza was still perched on the bed, her posture tight and her eyes fixed on him with unspoken curiosity.

He crossed the room and held out the smaller envelope. “This is yours.”

Her fingers brushed his as she took it. “From whom?”

“We shall soon see,” Tristan replied, breaking the seal on his own.

He opened the letter and read.

The words struck like hammer blows.

What?

He felt his jaw grow tight. This could not be true. This had to be impossible. He read again, slower this time, each sentence pressing the weight of truth heavier upon him.

No.

Eliza tilted her head, noticing his change of color. “What is it? Did something happen back home?”

He lowered the page, his hand tightening on the edge. “It is from the duke.”

Her voice softened. “What does he say?”

Tristan’s eyes burned on the lines once more before he answered. “Apparently, in the few days we have spent out here, the manor has received a visitor. A man called Lord Blackmere has been purchasing several small plots near Evermere’s border.”

He could see the confusion on Eliza’s face grow just a little. “Lord Blackmere?”

Tristan shifted in his seat. “He is one of the lords I met with for the Berkeley Project. He was with us yesterday at the harvest festival.”

“Why would he buy lands near the border?”

Tristan shrugged. “Apparently, he bought them under an alias, and Grandfather only found this out after doing research of his own.”

Eliza drew in a breath. “Oh. I see.”

“Grandfather has always been a stickler for numbers, you see. He reviews records intermittently. After our marriage, he began reviewing the records, as he often does, and that is when he found out about this.”

Eliza’s eyes widened. “All of this happened in just two days?”

“Yes. And I am beginning to think all of this is deliberate,” Marcus responded, walking around the room, unable to stand still in one spot anymore.

“I agree. The timing is quite convenient. Also, lands by the border? That is incredibly strategic.”

“I know,” Tristan responded. “And I think this somehow involves the Berkeley Project.”

“It has to,” Eliza replied, her voice gentle.

Tristan nodded, his jaw set. He folded the letter slowly, too slowly, his chest rising with each controlled breath. “I cannot believe it took me this long to realize just how much of a disaster this project was set out to be in the first place. This was never about prosperity or creating wealth. It is a land grab, plain and simple. A hostile reshaping of the countryside disguised as opportunity.”

“Tristan—” Eliza called, but he was too upset to stop talking.

“And you want to know what I personally think? Mr. Harwood is well aware of all of this. In fact, I think this was what he set out to do in the first place. It is not just a side effect of what opportunity may cost, no. This is the Berkeley Project. A plain old-fashioned con.”

Her brow furrowed. “Tristan—”

“And Mr. Harwood? He is the face of it,” Tristan said bitterly. “The charming front they use to lure men like me. Bringing all the lords in to soften our doubts and dress greed as progress.”

He moved to the fireplace, the letter trembling in his hand. Without a word, he fed it to the flames. The wax seal curled and melted.

“I cannot believe I let myself—” His voice broke, the anger growing in him as he watched the edges of the letter darken and eventually burn away.

“I cannot begin to imagine how you feel,” Eliza said, her voice a soft contrast to the simmering rage pounding in his chest.

He resumed pacing the length of the room, every step sharp against the wooden floor.

“I will not let this stand. I was trying to do this in a civilized manner before, but it is clear some drastic measures have to be taken. The people of Evermere will lose everything. Do not get me started on the orchards, the cottages, and the grazing fields that fed them for generations. And all the while, men like Lord Blackmere and Mr. Harwood would sit at tables, raising their glasses over the ruin.”

Eliza rose and crossed toward him. “You must calm yourself.”

“Calm?” Tristan’s voice was harsh. Then he stopped, caught himself, and lowered his tone. “No. You are right. Anger will not fix it. But I cannot stand idle.”

She reached out as if to touch his arm, then let her hand hover instead. “What will you do?”

“I must find a way to delay everything. No agreements. No signatures. Nothing formalized until I trace every detail. I will speak with the smaller

landowners myself and gather their support. This cannot be swept under the rug.”

Eliza nodded slowly. “Then you must. But promise me something, Tristan.”

He turned to her. “What?”

“Do not let anger guide you. It solves nothing. Resolve will do more than rage ever can.”

Her words settled deep in his chest. He studied her, then gave a curt nod. “Yes. Certainly, that, too.”

Her lips curved faintly, though the worry in her eyes did not reduce one bit.

He stepped closer, softening his stance. “And you?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Me?”

“Your letter,” Tristan responded, gesturing toward the open paper between her fingers. “What exactly did it say?”

Eliza blinked, then offered a small smile. “Oh, this was just from Clara. She was wondering why we are not home yet. Nothing more.”

“Nothing more?” he asked, watching her carefully.

“Nothing more.”

Tristan held her gaze for another long moment, then raised his head. “Very well. She would not have to worry for long anyway. We leave for the manor at first light.”

Eliza exhaled and nodded.

For a time, neither spoke. The logs and letter burned in the fireplace, but the silence between them did not feel empty. In fact, it was the complete opposite of that.

Tristan summoned all the courage he could muster and moved closer, his steps slow and deliberate. He placed a hand gently on her back, almost like he was trying to keep her steady.

She looked at him, her face softening, the tension in her shoulders leaving.

“Everything is going to be just fine, you know that, do you not?” he asked quietly. “I only have a problem with your brother and not you.”

She leaned into his touch, her eyes not leaving his for a second. “I just want to be certain you will not do anything rash.”

He did not pull away. “I promise.”

Chapter 22

The cold dawn air settled almost harshly on Eliza's face as she stepped into the reception hall with Tristan by her side. Mr. Kale stood by the doorway, waiting for them with his usual steady look.

"My lord, my lady," he said, bowing his head. "Jane wished to rise early and see you off, but she could not. Sleep held her too fast. She will be most disappointed."

Eliza smiled softly. "Please tell her she has nothing to be sad about. I will come to visit soon, and she must be ready to show me more of her drawings. And, Mr. Kale, do tell her that I shall treasure the one she gave me for as long as I live."

Kale's lips curved slightly, though his sigh carried weight. "I hope you will not think her too forward, my lady. It is just that she has grown fond of you in a short time."

"Offended?" Eliza shook her head gently. "It is more excitement than I have had in days, believe me. Your daughter has given me joy."

"Then I shall relay this to her with the utmost joy in return."

Eliza nodded as they walked the narrow path toward the waiting carriage. The wheels shone with the falling morning dew, and the horses dug their hooves lightly into the earth. They stopped, and Eliza watched Tristan give Kale a firm nod.

"I suppose this is farewell, for now," Tristan said. "But I will see you again before long."

Mr. Kale gave a small shrug. "If I am still here and the land has not been stripped from us by then."

The words landed heavily, and Eliza felt them cut straight into her chest. She stared at Tristan, who met Mr. Kale's eyes with steady resolve.

"Do not worry, Mr. Kale. Do not worry at all," Tristan said quietly. He reached into his coat, drew out several coins, and pressed them into Mr. Kale's hand. "For the inn. For letting Jane keep my wife company and, of course, for all your troubles."

Mr. Kale stared down at the coins, his brow furrowed. "My lord, this is far too much. I cannot take it. I only charge a quarter of what you have paid me for all guests."

"Then think of it as a gift for Jane," Tristan answered firmly. "And know this ... I will not let this land be stolen from you. You have my word."

Mr. Kale swallowed hard. His voice roughened as he bowed. "You have my gratitude, my lord. My lady."

With that, Tristan helped Eliza into the carriage. She settled against the cushioned seat, looking back as Mr. Kale lifted his hand in farewell. Jane's absence tugged at her heart, but the drawing folded safely in her satchel was proof enough of their bond.

The horses snorted, the driver gave a click of his tongue, and the carriage rolled forward. The inn and its people faded into the distance.

Eliza turned her eyes to the window and watched the fields sweep past. Some of the villagers were up already and were moving about their

morning work. The smell of damp earth hung in the air, and she traced the glass lightly with her finger, her thoughts restless.

Across from her, Tristan broke the silence. “There is no way Mr. Harwood did not know. I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt last night, but I couldn’t. He must have known the cost of this scheme. He must have known what it would take from them. And still, he concealed it.”

Eliza said nothing at first. Instead, she reached into her satchel and pulled out the folded letter from the night before, her fingers lingering on its edges.

Tristan noticed and tilted his head. “Still reading Clara’s words?” His mouth curved into a small smile, though his eyes were weary. “Relax. You will see her soon enough.”

Eliza gave a small, nervous laugh. “Yes. Soon enough.”

But her gaze dropped back to the page, and her smile faded. The truth pressed against her chest like stone.

It was not Clara’s letter. She had lied.

The letter bore no signature, so she had no idea who it came from. It warned her in plain terms that she was being used. Marcus was behind everything, and the project was designed in the first place for nothing but profit.

It was a big way for Marcus to line his pockets, and Evermere’s future was the cloak for a darker design.

The worst part was that she, his sister, had been a tool to place Tristan within his grasp. Her stomach knotted as she read the words again, though she knew them by heart already.

She had thought Marcus only wanted this marriage to rid himself of her and make her someone else's problem. Now she knew the truth.

Her hands trembled as the thought settled deeper. Marcus had not sought her happiness. He had sought Tristan's signature. He had tied her to this household not to secure her future, but his own. She was a means to an end.

He had used her to open a door, and Tristan was the prize.

Her throat tightened at the thought, and she felt her fingers squeeze the piece of paper. She could not keep this secret forever.

She lifted her eyes and saw Tristan watching the passing fields, his profile sharp, yet softened by thought. She remembered the way he had looked yesterday at the villagers, at the children, at her. He was not a man who played games with people's lives. He was a man who shouldered burdens, not one who created them.

He deserved nothing but the truth.

Her heart pounded faster in her chest as the question she had been trying to avoid all night pierced her mind.

Would he forgive her?

The fear gnawed at her. If she spoke, if she confessed that her brother had bound Tristan to her through lies, would Tristan ever look at her the same way again? Would he see her as part of the betrayal, even if she had not known?

Eliza pressed the letter into her lap, remembering his words the night before.

Arranged or not, you are still my wife.

Her chest ached at the memory. He had trusted her with that admission. She could not let fear keep her silent.

Yet she could not speak now. Not here, not while the carriage wheels rattled and the walls of Evermere drew closer with each passing second.

“Are you well?” Tristan’s voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“Yes,” she said too quickly.

His eyes lingered on her, searching, but he did not press further. He turned back to the window. “We are almost there.”

The carriage rattled over the last stretch of the road and soon, in the distance, the familiar grey walls she had come to recognize rose from the ground. Her eyes remained still on the manor as they approached it. This was what she had been traded for.

The place Marcus had always wanted. The place she now called home.

As the carriage rolled through the gates, Eliza held the letter tight in her hand. She knew the truth now, and she knew it could not remain unspoken for long.

Her heart raced as the carriage slowed and as Tristan's voice broke the silence once more.

“We are here.”

The smell of lime in the atelier had greatly reduced, and she was grateful for it. She could spend most of her days here now without disturbance or any kind of worry about her health.

That was if she still had had days here anyway.

Her fingers were steady around the brush, and she painted gently on the canvas balanced on the easel. It was a slight accurate reiteration of the inn she had stayed in. It was far from perfect as she was painting from memory, but it was enough to keep her mind completely occupied for now.

It had been mere hours since they returned to Evermere, and she had been restless ever since. She pressed her lips together and added another careful shade to the roof.

She was about to put her brush into a dark hue when the door creaked, and she turned. Clara stood there, her arms wide, a look of slight relief plastered on her face.

“Good grief!” Clara exclaimed. “It is like I have not seen you in forever. Thank you for coming back.”

Eliza managed a small smile as Clara crossed into the room and pulled her into a hug. The familiar warmth made her chest loosen, if only for a moment.

“I did not know you missed me that much.”

“Believe me. I do. For some reason, I keep seeing Mr. Hale everywhere I turn.”

“Really?”

“That man is wearing me down, I am telling you.”

“Is that a good thing or a...” Eliza asked, her voice trailing off.

Clara’s gaze shifted past her shoulder, half out of curiosity and half in a bid to shut her up and change the subject. “What is this?” She stepped closer to the easel, eyebrows raised.

“Oh, this...” Eliza muttered, her eyes turning as well. “This is the inn we stayed at the other day.”

“You are painting the inn?”

Eliza only sighed, dipping her brush again. “I suppose so.”

Clara tilted her head. “All right, tell me the truth now.”

Eliza blinked, her hand growing still for the fraction of a second. “What?”

“You heard me.” Clara folded her arms. “I know what that face means.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know what you look like when something is gnawing at you. So talk.”

Eliza gave a small huff. “You do not know me as well as you think, Clara.”

“Oh, do I not?” Clara arched her brow. “Let me see. You are doing that thing where you tap your thumb against the edge of your brush. You only do that when you are thinking too hard.”

Eliza blinked and looked down at her hand. Sure enough, her thumb was brushing against the soft bristles of her paintbrush. How did she not even notice she was doing that in the first place?

“When you are upset but trying to hide it, you laugh too lightly,” Clara continued, the utter vindication in her voice prevalent. “And when you are nervous, you bite your lower lip. Shall I go on?”

Eliza’s mouth opened, then closed. She set the brush down. “Fine. You know me more than I thought. Still, that proves nothing.”

“It proves everything,” Clara pressed. “Now, come on. Let us hear what is cooking in that head of yours.”

Eliza exhaled long and slow. Her fingers twisted together in her lap.

“I know something,” she began. “Something I ought to tell Tristan. But if I do, it will ruin everything. I would no longer have any of this. The atelier. The room. The...” She trailed off, her voice faltering.

“The what?” Clara leaned forward, her eyes intent.

Eliza’s shoulders sagged. “The connection. I would no longer have him.”

Clara’s gaze softened, and she dropped her arms. “Oh, darling.”

“I know.”

“How about you think about it like this. What if he finds out some other way? Which would be worse, him hearing it from you, or him hearing it from another?”

Eliza swallowed. “I suppose some other way would be worse.”

“Then you must tell him,” Clara said firmly. “And soon.”

Eliza opened her mouth, words perched on the edge, when the door opened again.

Aunt Evelyn swept in, her cane tapping against the floor. She looked from one young woman to the other, her sharp eyes narrowing.

“Aunt Evelyn,” Eliza greeted them, her voice soft.

Evelyn's eyes continued to dart from one person to the other. "Am I interrupting something? What is going on here?"

Eliza began, "It is nothing. I..."

But Clara cut in before she could finish, her voice quick. "Eliza wants to tell Lord Vale something. Something that may or may not destroy their marriage."

Eliza's head snapped toward her cousin. "Thank you for that," she muttered, shooting her a glare.

Clara only shrugged.

Evelyn studied her with calm interest. "Do not fret, dear. Tristan is my nephew, and of course, my loyalty leans toward him. But I know better than anyone how destructive secrets can be, especially once revealed."

Eliza straightened. "You do?"

"Oh, believe me. I have had a fair share of secrets that I decided not to reveal to my husband."

"So you kept things from Lord Howard?" Clara asked.

"Oh, plenty," Evelyn replied without hesitation.

Clara frowned. "Did any of those secrets threaten to destroy your marriage?"

Evelyn's mouth tugged at one corner. "Several, if I am being frank. And here is what I learned. Sometimes, we do more damage by speaking than by keeping silent. Do not let anyone tell you otherwise. On the rarest of occasions, honesty may not be the best policy."

Eliza nodded, taking in Evelyn's words one after the other. She understood the older woman's perspective.

Clara shook her head at once. "I cannot agree with that. Your marriage with Lord Vale is still in its early days. It is better that they speak everything now. That way, it does not weigh them down later."

Evelyn waved her cane lightly. "In the end, the choice is Eliza's. But she must be honest with herself. Is she keeping this secret to protect him, or is she keeping it to protect herself?"

The words sank deeper than she thought, and Eliza lowered her eyes to her lap, her heart pounding.

Clara surprised her by nodding. "For the first time, Lady Evelyn, I agree with you."

Evelyn gasped, clutching at her pearls. "What do you mean, for the first time? You mean you have never once agreed with me?"

Clara rolled her eyes. "You have had some rather questionable opinions. Especially about Americans."

Evelyn drew herself up. "I beg your pardon. My belief that the country deserves nothing but fire and brimstone is not at all questionable. I will have you know that it is, in fact, a reasonable opinion to have."

Eliza laughed before she could stop herself, the sound breaking through the tension in the room. Clara shook her head, and Evelyn huffed, and the two of them slipped into their usual sparring.

Eliza leaned back, watching them with a strange fondness. Their words faded into the background, but her mind circled the same thought. They were right.

She had to decide.

Would she keep this secret to spare herself? Or would she speak it and face what followed? Her chest rose and fell. She knew the answer, though fear still tried to smother it.

She had to tell him because she could not let him discover the truth in some other way. And if she was being honest with herself, she already knew the choice she would make.

She only needed to find the courage.

Chapter 23

Tristan stopped before the door to Eliza's chambers and took a few breaths. This was an important discussion that he needed to have with her, and it was now or never. Taking one more deep breath, he raised his knuckles and knocked gently.

"Enter," Eliza's voice came from behind the door.

He swallowed and stepped inside, his eyes darting through as he closed the door behind him. Clara and Eliza sat on the bed, their silence louder than his heartbeat as they both looked at him.

"Lady Clara," he greeted, his voice low.

Clara rose at once, running her hands down her dress.

"Lord Vale," she said, bowing her head slightly.

"If this is a bad time, I can always come—"

"No!" Clara interjected, her voice a bit too sharp. Her cheeks rose in a smile as she took a few steps forward. "I should excuse myself,"

"Thank you," Tristan answered.

Clara smiled faintly at Eliza, then moved past him and slipped out, shutting the door behind her. Tristan crossed the room and sat beside Eliza on the bed.

“We need to talk,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” she agreed at once, her fingers tangled together in her lap. “I know.”

A mild frown crossed his face as his eyes searched hers. “You have something to say?”

She nodded but hesitated. “I do. And I would like to go first. It is important.”

Tristan gave a slow nod. “Go on.”

Eliza inhaled deeply, her voice shaking as she began. “This marriage, you must understand ... It was never truly my choice.”

Tristan frowned but did not interrupt.

“My brother,” she said, her throat tight. “Marcus. He engineered the whole thing. He walked into my room one day and said I was to get married to the Earl of Evermere.”

“I am confused,” Tristan said, narrowing his eyes at her. “You knew we would get married before the matchmaker?”

“All I know is that Marcus was behind it all. I tried to stop it, Tristan. I did. I looked for a way out. But he gave me none. He planned everything from the start, and I had no choice but to follow it.”

Tristan’s jaw set hard, though he stayed silent.

“After our parents died, I became Marcus’ responsibility, and he did not exactly like that at all. He hated having to think of me in every plan he made, so when he told me he was marrying me off, I thought it was his way of getting rid of me. He was not exactly pleasant to live with, so I did not fully reject the idea. I should have known something was wrong when he was insistent on this marriage working.”

He ground his teeth together, his eyes shifting to her hands and the way they trembled in her lap.

“And I went along with it,” she whispered. “Because I felt trapped. Because I thought I had no choice.”

Tears filled her eyes. She brushed them away with the back of her hand, but they kept coming. “I should have told you from the beginning. I should have told you the truth on the day we married, I know that now. I could say I was afraid that you would hate me or that you would look at me and see nothing but a pawn, but I have no excuse.”

Still, Tristan did not speak. His silence pressed down like a weight.

Eliza’s voice broke. “And I could not bear that. Not now. Because—” She stopped, her breath catching. Then she forced the words out. “Because I love you.”

Her shoulders shook with sobs. “I love you, Tristan. I did not plan it. I did not want it. But it is true. I love you. And it terrifies me.”

Her words tumbled faster. “I am sorry. Sorry I kept this. Sorry for the lies. Sorry for everything. If this ruins our marriage, then so be it. But I could not carry it anymore.” She looked at him through her tears. “Please. Say something.”

Tristan leaned forward, and without a word, he kissed her.

Eliza gasped against his mouth, startled, her sob cut short. His hand rose to her cheek, brushing away the wetness there. The kiss was steady and patient. It was deliberate, like it was Tristan's way of responding to her.

She froze at first, then melted into him. Her hand slid to his jaw, her fingers trembling as they touched his skin.

He pulled back, resting his forehead lightly against hers. The quiet stretched on. It was less a silence of mistrust, rather than the heaviness of a shared burden. It was simple. He believed her.

From what he had seen of her in the past few days, Eliza wouldn't deliberately try to involve herself in a scheme like that. He said nothing about it, though. Instead, he let the silence continue to do its work between the two of them.

They sat close, their breaths uneven. Eliza turned slightly, and her hand brushed against his. She did not move it away. He did not either. Her gaze lifted to his face. His features were lined with fatigue, yet beneath, it she saw something she had not before.

Trust.

She lowered her head onto his shoulder, and Tristan stiffened at the sudden gesture, but then he let it be. Her hair brushed against his jaw, light and soft. They remained that way for the next few moments, almost like a pair that had discovered the next step in their relationship.

Eliza's tears slowed. Her breathing steadied against him. He sat still, listening to the faint rhythm, feeling the weight of her leaning there.

At last, she spoke in a low murmur. "I thought you would despise me."

"I do not," Tristan said simply.

She lifted her head, eyes wide. "You do not?"

"No." His voice was calm. "I have my feelings against Mr. Harwood, but not you."

Eliza's lips parted as if to speak again, but no words came. She dropped her gaze, blinking quickly as another tear slid down.

"Do not hide from me again," Tristan said. His tone was even, but it carried a quiet command. "If there is truth I should know, speak it. I would rather hear the truth from you than from anyone else."

Eliza's chest rose and fell. She gave a small nod. "I promise."

Tristan's hand shifted, covering hers. The gesture surprised him as much as it did her. His thumb brushed once against her knuckles.

She looked up at him, eyes shining. "Thank you," she whispered.

He did not answer, but the way he held her hand said enough. Minutes passed, and neither of them pulled away. The silence between them had stretched long enough. Tristan broke it first.

“We must talk about your brother.”

The words seemed to hang in the air. Tristan felt Eliza’s shoulders grow stiff, though her gaze stayed steady. “We must?”

“Yes. That was why I came here in the first place,” Tristan responded.

He rose to his feet and walked to the table at the far end of the wall and leaned gently against it. The weight of Eliza’s gaze continued to press on him as he folded his arms. The weight of his own thoughts pressed heavily on him.

“There is no easy way to say this because he is your brother at the end of the day, but we need to stop him. And we need to do so before he destroys everything.”

Eliza said nothing, and he took that as an approval to continue his words.

“He has played a game behind my back. He has used you to open doors and move his chest pieces. I will not let it go on.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and she lowered her eyes to the floor before looking back at him. “I agree. Marcus needs to be stopped. But what can we possibly do without any solid proof? My brother is always ahead.”

Tristan shuffled his feet, his arms folded as Eliza’s helplessness grew even more obvious with each passing second.

“I thought I had escaped when this marriage was settled, but now it is clear I only stepped deeper into his schemes.”

“Well, another thing is also clear, Eliza,” Tristan responded. “You will not fight him alone anymore.”

Eliza stared at him, her eyes blank.

“We can do it together now.” His voice came out sharper than intended, but he did not soften it. His jaw was tight, his chest rising steadily with controlled breath. “Leave the strategy to me. I only ask one thing of you ... stand beside me. No more hiding. No more silence.”

“Yes. I agree.”

“And no more secrets.”

Eliza nodded. “I agree with that as well.”

“Good. Now I just need to figure out what to do and how to stop him from going ahead with the project.”

Eliza’s eyes softened, but the worry still lingered. “And you truly believe stopping him is enough to free us from his shadow?”

“I do.” Tristan straightened, pushing off the table. The decision had already been carved into his mind. “But it requires honesty and courage. You have given me both tonight, and I owe you the same.”

For a moment, something flickered in her face. Tristan recognized it. It was the furthest thing from fear or hesitation. It was hope. It wasn’t very prevalent on her face, but he knew what it was.

“Then tell me,” she whispered, leaning forward. “What is it you mean to do?”

“We can start tonight by exploring the west wing of the manor,” Tristan said quietly.

Her brows arched. “The west wing?”

He nodded once. “Yes. It holds the archive room so we can find ledgers, maps, titles that go back centuries. If Marcus is trying to rope Evermere into his plan, we can find what we need to stop him.”

She tilted her head slightly, studying him. “And you trust me with that search?”

He looked directly at her, his voice steady. “You are my wife, Eliza.”

When night came, it was heavy on the manor. Tristan and Eliza made their way to the archive room, their steps light but the floor creaking anyway.

“Are you certain no one can hear us?” Eliza asked, the worry in her voice evident.

Tristan, who held the lamp, laughed slightly. “We are not thieves in the night, Eliza. We are not trying to escape something. This is our manor. It does not matter who hears us or not.”

“Right,” Eliza whispered, her voice soft. “Right.”

They proceeded down the West wing, the paneled walls growing even more desolate as they moved. The air was thicker there, and so was the silence.

“It feels abandoned,” Eliza whispered.

“Well, that is because most people avoid it,” Tristan said, raising his lantern higher. The glow revealed thick dust on the shelves and walls. “There are no guest rooms here or ballrooms. Only the bones of Evermere.”

“Bones of Evermere,” Eliza repeated. “You make it sound like a castle out of a Gothic novel.”

Tristan turned to look at her. “Perhaps it is.”

Her fingers brushed the wall as she walked, almost as if touching the past itself. “And you know the way well?”

“I know it enough.” He glanced back at her. Her gown moved lightly as she followed, her steps careful but curious. “My grandfather used to say the archives hold every secret we have ever buried.”

She gave a small, doubtful laugh. “And do you believe him?”

Tristan’s lips curved faintly, the expression brief. “We are about to find out.”

They resumed walking again, and at that exact moment, her slipper caught on a loose stone. A sharp gasp escaped her mouth as she pitched forward.

“Eliza!” Tristan caught her arm before she could fall. His grip was firm, the lantern shaking in his other hand.

Her balance returned, but her hand lingered in his, longer than necessary. She looked up at him, breathless.

“It seems you are always catching me.”

He released her, stepping back to give her space. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” she said with a laugh that softened the tension. “But I should probably fall less, should I not?”

A small smile escaped him despite himself. “It would save me the trouble.”

They moved on until the passage widened into a tall chamber. The air was cool, carrying the smell of old parchment. Dust covered the shelves. Parchments and scrolls filled the long tables, untouched for years.

“This is it,” Tristan said, setting the lantern on the desk. Its glow threw the room into a soft golden haze.

He pulled out a chair for her. “Sit. This may take hours.”

She sat, smoothing her gown, her eyes sweeping across the shelves. “Where do we begin?”

Tristan spread out a map across the desk. His voice was calm, but the edge of determination cut through it. “We begin with Mr. Harwood. As we already know, so far, his plan is not about prosperity. It is a power play. He wants to re-zone the land, strip tenant protections, and tie Evermere to investors who do not care for the people here. But to do that, he needs one thing.”

Eliza leaned forward, brows furrowing. “What is that?”

“The duke’s approval. It is why he needs me on board. It is quite essential for his plan.” Tristan tapped the parchment with one finger. “With it, Mr. Harwood has power. Without it, he has only ideas.”

She rose, moving closer, and brushed dust from a ledger. “Show me.”

Together, they sifted through the documents. She was even more helpful than he could have imagined. Once in a while, a name would pop up in one of the ledgers, and she would point at it.

“Lord Sinderby,” she had said one time, running her finger across the name on the paper. “I remember him.”

“You do?” Tristan had asked.

“Yes. He was one of my father’s business partners. I do not remember much, but I believe they were in the coal mine business together. Lord Sinderby had a lot of mines, and my father generated the workers to shell the mines of their coal.”

“I see,” Tristan responded, his voice solemn. “Eliza, in case you ever want to talk to me about your father—”

“I will come to you,” she responded, a laugh crossing her lips. “Even though you are not the best with words and emotion?”

“I will do my possible best,” he responded, his voice tame.

She nodded and returned her gaze to the ledgers. They continued to flick through, examining business dealings, taxes, transactions that went back decades, until all of a sudden, a sharp gasp escaped Eliza’s mouth.

“What?” Tristan asked, his voice deep.

“Here,” she said suddenly, pointing at a name. “Lord Calthorne. I saw this in the parish records. He donated through a solicitor.”

Tristan frowned, scanning the writing. “What are you saying?”

“Calthorne is one of the lords you met with, and I believe he is funneling money into the church. What I do not believe is that the money is for donation purposes.”

“Which means he is pulling outside men into this.” Tristan’s tone hardened. “He is trying to create the illusion of wide support.”

Tristan’s jaw tightened, the weight of it sinking into him. “It is not progress. It is theft.”

The hours passed as papers piled across the table. Their hands brushed more than once as they shifted scrolls. Her sleeve brushed his arm when she leaned closer. At one point, his palm steadied her wrist as she rolled up a map.

The small things lingered. Steady. Natural.

Tristan caught himself staring at her. Not at her brother's pawn. Not at the woman the matchmaker had passed to him on paper. No, he was staring at Eliza—the woman who stood with him when it mattered.

“Eliza,” he said softly, almost impulsively.

She looked up, meeting his eyes. “Yes?”

The words caught in his throat, and he shook his head. “Nothing. Never mind”

She tilted her head, a faint smile playing. “You really need to start learning how to use words, Tristan.”

A smile tugged at his lips, and he turned to look at her. As he opened his mouth to give a response, a sharp knock echoed into the brief moment, interrupting the silence.

Tristan rose and walked to the door. He opened it and watched a footman walk in, an apologetic look on his face. The footman bowed, holding out a sealed letter.

“A message for you, my lord. The courier delivered it just now.”

Tristan accepted it, the wax seal already familiar. Mr. Harwood.

“Thank you,” he eventually said, his voice curt as he dismissed the footman. After he left, Tristan returned to Eliza and began to break the seal. His eyes raced across the words, tightening as they went.

Eliza stepped close. “What is it?”

Tristan passed her the paper. “It is an invitation from your brother. He wants me to attend a private gathering outside town three days from now.”

Her eyes scanned the letter. “He wants to make a final pitch.”

“And I am expected to provide my answer by then,” Tristan responded, his voice rough.

Eliza looked up at him, the confusion settling on her face. “But is this not just a little too early?”

Tristan’s voice dropped low, heavy with anger. “It is. He must have found out that I met with the lords behind his back, and he means to corner me.”

Eliza folded the paper with steady hands and looked up, eyes clear. “Then we do not run. We face him.”

Tristan studied her. There was no fear now, no hesitation, and resolve. He realized in that moment that she was no longer just his wife. She was his ally as well, and for the first time, he allowed himself to feel the weight of that and the strength it gave him.

Her gaze lifted to his, but his voice was clear. “Yes. We face him.”

Chapter 24

Eliza closed the door to the atelier gently and made her way to Clara's chambers. It was high time she brought her friend up to speed on everything that had been happening. Her mind burned with the events of the previous night as she made her way down the carpeted hallway.

She thought of how close she and Tristan had been when they were looking through the ledgers, just how many times their hands had brushed. He was her husband. She shouldn't be feeling these things for him. And if she was, she shouldn't be this giddy about these feelings.

But somehow she was. Her brooding husband had somehow awakened feelings she never thought she could have for anyone inside her, and if she was being honest with herself, she never wanted those feelings to die. She stopped by Clara's door and knocked quickly.

Inside, Clara was at her dressing table, brushing out her hair. She looked up at once.

"You look troubled," Clara said. "What has happened now?"

Eliza sat on the edge of the bed, placing her hands in her lap. "I must tell you everything."

Clara put the brush down and turned fully to face her. "What is going on, Eliza?"

Eliza hesitated for a moment, trying to find the words. "We searched through the west wing archives last night. Tristan showed me ledgers, maps, and documents that go back centuries. Marcus is behind all of it. The

Berkeley Project is not what it seems, and I thought you should know especially—”

“Wait,” Clara raised her hand, freezing the words in Eliza’s mouth. “What in God’s name is the Berkeley Project?”

Eliza stared at her friend and swallowed. “You have no idea what has been going on, do you?”

“And whose fault is that?” Clara asked, glaring at her.

Eliza exhaled, then explained everything to Clara. How Marcus had approached Tristan, asking him to invest, how Tristan had found out the project was not all it was built out to be, and how Marcus might just rip Evermere from their hands if they do not do anything about it.

Clara frowned after the last word slipped out of Eliza’s mouth. “This has been happening, and you never told me?”

“I apologize.” Eliza’s voice tightened. “We found records and donations coming from outside men, filtered through lawyers. It is all meant to make it look legitimate, and Marcus is at the center of it.”

“And of course, who better to manipulate the law than a former lawyer?” Clara asked. “And Lord Vale? What does he mean to do?”

“He wants to fight it,” Eliza said. “And I intend to be there alongside him.”

Clara tilted her head. “I would expect nothing else from a cold earl.”

Eliza looked down at her hands, her chest tightening. “No. He is not cold. I see that now. He cares for this place, Clara. For its people. He is more honorable than I ever gave him credit for.”

Clara studied her quietly. Then she asked, “And I suppose you know all of this because you just like to know things about people? You have no ulterior motive?”

Eliza swallowed hard. “I—” She forced herself to continue. “I suppose I have grown used to him. I no longer feel like we are strangers in this marriage. There is a connection between us, and I cannot deny it.”

Clara gave a small smile. “Eliza, are you telling me you are falling for your husband?”

Eliza’s cheeks warmed. “Does it matter if Marcus has trapped us both in his plans? How can Tristan trust me when it was Marcus who forced this marriage upon us in the first place?”

Clara leaned forward. “Does Tristan know that yet?”

“Yes.” Eliza’s voice lowered. “I told him, and he is not worried, but what if he changes his mind tomorrow?”

“Do you love him?” Clara asked plainly.

Eliza looked away, heart racing. “Yes.”

“Then he will not change his mind,” Clara said firmly.

Eliza nodded slowly, though the weight of it all pressed heavily on her. Before she could speak again, a knock came at the door. Both women turned at once, and Mr. Hale stepped in, bowing slightly.

“Lady Vale.” His eyes flicked toward Clara, and he gave another bow. “Lady Clara.”

Clara cleared her throat quickly. “Mr. Hale.”

Eliza’s gaze darted between them. She caught it...the brief pause in Clara’s voice, the slow red rising in her cheeks. Eliza’s lips parted, but she stayed silent.

Mr. Hale spoke again. “Lord Vale requests your presence in his study, my lady.”

Eliza nodded. “Tell him I will be there shortly.”

Hale bowed once more. “Very well.” His eyes lingered for the briefest moment on Clara. “Lady Clara.”

Then he turned and left.

As soon as the door shut, Eliza turned back to Clara. “Are you—”

“I cannot take whatever you are about to say,” Clara cut in, lifting a hand.

Eliza raised both hands in mock surrender. “Very well.” She smiled faintly. “It seems a great deal can change in two days.”

Clara shrugged, though her lips twitched. “Yesterday afternoon, after Aunt Evelyn abandoned me for the news of her husband’s arrival, Mr. Hale offered to continue the garden walk with me.”

Eliza narrowed her eyes. “Without a chaperone?”

Clara gave her a sharp glare. “It was only a walk. And I am twenty-six, Eliza. I hardly think walking with a valet is scandalous.”

Eliza pressed her lips together, suppressing a grin. “I did not say it was scandalous.”

“Then what are you implying?” Clara asked.

“Nothing,” Eliza said innocently. “Not a thing.”

Clara huffed. “It is written all over your face.”

Instead of answering, Eliza changed the subject abruptly. “I was thinking we might take a walk to the park later. It has been some time since we last did that.”

Clara blinked, caught off guard. “Yes, please.”

“When I go to see Tristan, I could ask if his valet would like to join us,” Eliza teased, her eyes bright.

Clara froze, then shot her a cold glare. “You would not dare.”

Eliza tilted her head, lips curling in mischief. “Would I not?”

“Eliza,” Clara warned.

“Very well,” Eliza said, laughing as she rose from the bed. “I shall behave.”

Clara crossed her arms but could not hide the small smile tugging at her lips. “You are insufferable.”

“Perhaps,” Eliza said, walking toward the door. “But later we shall walk, and you may thank me for my kindness then.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “Do I need to change first?”

Eliza paused at the door, narrowing her eyes. “Is there someone you wish to impress?”

Clara gasped. “No, of course not.”

“Then what you are wearing will do fine,” Eliza said.

Clara muttered, “You are something else.”

Eliza smiled in response and opened the door.

Chapter 25

The sun felt fresh against their faces, and Eliza continued to realize, as they walked even further down the path, that it was exactly what she needed. Her eyes shifted to Clara, who seemed to have some nervousness hiding behind her eyes as she looked through the crowd they walked past.

“What is it?” Eliza asked, her voice sharp and her eyes narrowed.

“I do not know,” Clara responded, her voice genuine. “It just feels so strange to be this far from London and somehow still have this many eyes on me.”

Eliza smiled. “I understand completely. Evermere has its own kind of watchful crowd. They may be quieter, perhaps, but the last thing they are is less curious.”

Clara nudged her and laughed. “I am beginning to see that now. And how do you fare, *Lady Vale*? Are you still nervous every time you must stand in front of them?”

Eliza exhaled, shaking her head. “Less nervous than before. You see, Tristan has a way of steadying me, even when I do not expect it.”

Clara’s eyes lit with interest. “Ah, so he steadies you now? Tell me more.”

Eliza hesitated, her fingers pressing down against her dress as she tried to find a way to express her words. “I cannot explain it properly. I mean, he is stern, but ... there is patience in him, too. I find myself speaking more freely than I thought I could.”

Clara nods. “Hmm.”

Eliza looked up at her. “I know that look.”

“Well, if you feel this way toward the Earl, perhaps this is a step toward fondness,” Clara responded. “A dangerous step, nonetheless, but it is one.”

Eliza swallowed, feeling her lips curve into a small smile. “Well, maybe I do not want to think about it yet. Let us talk about you. What exactly is going on with Mr. Hale?”

Clara stopped mid-step, heat rising in her cheeks. “Eliza.”

“You have to know it was only a matter of time before I asked,” Eliza said innocently. “But judging from your face, I believe I have my answer.”

Before Clara could protest further, Eliza’s attention shifted. A flicker of movement ahead caught her eye. Near the hedges, a woman was walking briskly, her bonnet tilted low as if to shield her face.

Eliza narrowed her eyes as she caught the side frame of the woman. Something struck her. “I know that woman.”

Clara followed her gaze, her eyes narrowing as well. “Wait, I do, too.”

The recognition slammed into Eliza like a hurricane, and everything suddenly fell into place. The facial structure and the look on the woman’s face grew the familiarity in her.

“That is Miss Flick Ashcombe,” she eventually said, swallowing.

Clara followed her gaze. “It looks like her. But why is she moving so quickly? It is almost as though she does not want to be seen.”

Eliza felt suspicion stir in her chest. Something about the way the woman had looked at her at the ball, the kind of things she happened to know about Tristan, and the way she wouldn’t spend a minute more with her. She swallowed and turned to Clara.

“Come. Let us follow.”

Clara frowned. “Eliza ...”

“Look, we can just go quietly behind her,” Eliza urged. “I have a feeling something is not right.”

Clara sighed, almost as if she realized she couldn’t convince her anymore. “Fine.”

They both slipped off the main path, careful not to let their shoes press too loudly against the gravel. Their whispers carried low between them.

“This feels improper,” Clara murmured. “Following a woman in secret like this.”

Eliza’s heart thudded. “I have my suspicions, Clara, and they are telling me this woman has something up her sleeve. Something we have to know.”

Flick hurried past a hedge arch and disappeared while Eliza and Clara crept after her, their steps cautious. Soon, they both arrived in an even more secluded section of the park, where the gardens were quieter.

“Do not move too close,” Eliza whispered.

Soon, Flick stopped, and they did, too. A man stepped out from the other side of the arch in the garden.

Eliza narrowed her eyes.

Wait.

The man’s hat cast most of his face in shadow, but the way he tilted his shoulders, how solid his stance was, the way he shifted from one leg to the other. Her eyes widened.

Dear God.

Clara leaned closer. “Who is it?”

Eliza felt her throat grow tight. “It ... It is Marcus.”

She couldn’t hear the words they exchanged. Not without straining her ears anyway, but she could feel the desperation in Flick’s voice and the anger in Marcus’s. Something about this scene tugged hard at her, and she decided to lean forward just a little to hear the conversation.

“I did this for you, Marcus. Do not tell me you have forgotten all my efforts toward this marriage already.”

“How could I forget when you keep mentioning it at every turn?”

“I made this marriage happen. Do you think any matchmaker in her right mind would connect an earl to someone like your sister?”

Eliza pressed a hand to her lips.

“Clara,” she whispered. “It is her. She is the matchmaker who arranged my marriage. And Marcus...”

Clara’s eyes widened. “You mean ...”

“Yes.” Eliza’s whisper shook. “They are connected.”

Before Clara could respond, the conversation ahead grew louder, and she didn’t have to strain her ears to hear them anymore.

“You promised me more than this,” Eliza could hear Flick say, her voice cracking. “I have given you everything, Marcus. My reputation, my name ...”

Marcus cut her off. “And you will have what you are owed. But you must hold your tongue. Speak of this again, and I do not think I will be so kind.”

Her voice broke, strained with tears. “If this is you being kind, I would hate to see what is on the other side. You have ruined me already.”

Marcus's tone hardened. "Enough."

He stepped back, straightened his coat, and strode away, his boots grinding against the stone path. Flick covered her face with her hands, shoulders trembling, before turning in the opposite direction.

Eliza and Clara stood still, their bodies pressed against the hedge, waiting until both figures had completely disappeared.

Clara let out a slow breath. "Good heavens."

Eliza's heart pounded so loud she feared it might give them away. "Did you hear what she said? What has he dragged her into?"

"Something foul," Clara said bitterly. "And if she arranged your marriage under his command ... Eliza, do you understand what this means?"

Eliza nodded faintly, though her hands shook. "It means Marcus set every piece in place. He used her, he used me, and he used Tristan."

Clara gripped her arm. "We must be careful. If he discovers we overheard ..."

"I know." Eliza's voice was tight. "We cannot let him know. Not yet."

They slipped back the way they had come, their steps light and their breaths shallow. Neither spoke again until they reached the main garden path, where the laughter of children and the soft hum of voices filled the air once more.

But the secret pressed heavy against Eliza's chest. The sight of Marcus with Flick Ashcombe burned in her memory, and the realization that Marcus had been behind everything from the beginning left her reeling.

As she walked beside Clara, her face calm for the sake of appearances, her heart whispered one truth only.

The time had come to act.

Eliza and Clara hurried back from the park. Their steps were fast and their voices remained low. They didn't want to linger too long after what they had heard.

Especially after what they had heard.

Clara broke the silence first as their feet hurried across the path leading to Evermere. "Eliza, you must tell the Earl. You know this is not something you can keep to yourself."

"I know," Eliza responded, her voice strained. "I know I must."

"So you will?" Clara pressed, her eyes searching her friend's face. "Tonight?"

They got halfway to the path toward the manor, and Eliza eventually slowed down, her arms folded across her chest as they continued to walk.

“I suppose at this point, I have no choice. He deserves the truth. I mean, I have always assumed the extent of Marcus’ manipulation was only the Berkeley Project, but now ... Now it seems he had orchestrated the entire thing from the beginning. He didn’t create the Berkeley Project because I was married to Tristan. He made me marry Tristan because of the Berkeley Project.”

“Good God,” Clara said firmly. “The lengths that man would go to.”

But Eliza shook her head. “I hate that I didn’t see this, and I should have, Eliza. I was used to it. *Tristan* was used. He had forgiven me once. I doubt he would be able to do that again once he learns about this.”

Clara’s expression softened. “Eliza, he is not blind to your character. He has seen you speak with the villagers, and he has seen you stand up to him. He will know your heart.”

Eliza nodded, ignoring the twist in her stomach. Clara was right. He may forgive her once again. But for him to do that, she needed to tell him. She cannot delay. Not again.

Soon they reached the manor, and by that time, she was panting hard. As the footmen welcomed them, a part of her was completely focused on finding Tristan first. Perhaps she could look in his study first, and if possible, his chambers.

However, as they entered, the sound of voices drifted from the drawing room. One was deep. A man’s voice, and one that she didn’t recognize. The other voice she could distinguish in her sleep. Evelyn’s inflections were clear as they settled in her ears.

She turned to Clara, who raised her brow. “It seems your husband’s aunt has company.”

Eliza hesitated, then stepped toward the drawing room. She pushed the door gently and peered inside, her eyes taking in the sight.

Evelyn sat on a chair close to the fireplace, her hands resting gently on her lap. She looked just as stoic as she always did, the fireplace reflecting the sharp silver in her dress. Across from her stood a tall man with broad shoulders and an air of command. His dark coat was well-cut, and his boots were polished dark.

Evelyn’s eyes snapped up, and she noticed Eliza almost immediately. Eliza thought of retreating, but it was too late. She was already caught.

“Ah, there she is. Eliza, my dear, come in. You must meet Lord Howard.”

The man turned toward her. His eyes were sharp but still held some sort of kindness, and his back stood straight and steady.

He bowed slightly as Eliza stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “Lady Vale, I presume. A pleasure.”

“Lord Howard ...” Eliza responded, turning to Evelyn. Suddenly, the color in her cheeks made much more sense. “As in—”

“My husband.” Evelyn was quick to cut in.

“Ah,” Eliza responded and then curtsied, her mind still racing from what she had seen in the park. “My lord.”

Lord Howard's voice was even and warm, but the weight it carried was still present.

"I have heard much of Evermere's new mistress. Your arrival has stirred more conversation than you might think."

Evelyn gave a small laugh. "Do not tease the girl. She has had enough attention as it is."

Howard smiled faintly, his gaze never leaving Eliza. "It is not teasing, Evelyn. It is true. A household shifts with new leadership, and many watch to see how it fares."

Eliza lowered her eyes, uncertain how much to say. She still felt the heat of what she had seen in the gardens pressing against her. She forced composure. "Evermere has stood long before me, my lord. I only hope not to fail its people."

Howard nodded, visibly impressed. "A wise answer. Too many forget that land is not merely soil but lives tied to it. Your husband seems to understand this well."

The mention of Tristan tightened her chest. She wanted nothing more than to leave and find him now, to spill everything. Yet Lord Howard's presence held her in place.

Evelyn clasped her hands. "Lord Howard was just telling me of his dealings in America. And all I have been telling him is how lean he had gotten. They probably feed themselves with the same food they feed their dogs over there."

Lord Howard turned to Evelyn, the smile on his face as big as anything. “I just told you, dear. They just do not put as much importance as we do on food over there.”

“Yes. And your frame has made that quite clear,” Evelyn responded.

Eliza laughed at Evelyn’s lines despite herself. She could feel Clara lingering by the door, waiting for her to step back out, but she couldn’t. At least not while she still continued to listen to the couple before her.

Lord Howard’s eyes seemed to weigh her. “You look troubled, my lady. Forgive me if I intrude, but one learns to read faces after many years. Is all well?”

Eliza kept her voice even. “It is nothing, my lord. Only a long walk and heavier thoughts than I expected.”

He studied her a moment longer, then inclined his head. “Then I shall not press.”

Evelyn broke in with a laugh that carried a note of nervousness. “Do not be so serious, Howard. You will frighten her away before she has even had her tea.”

Lord Howard chuckled, though the weight of his presence did not lighten. “Very well. Will you come join us for tea?”

Eliza shook her head almost immediately. “I am afraid I must decline. I apologize, but I have some matters to attend to, and you will have to excuse me.”

Lord Howard nodded as well, giving her another slight bow. “Of course, Lady Vale. I look forward to speaking with you again.”

Evelyn gave her a warm smile. “Go, my dear. We shall manage here.”

Eliza curtsied again and left the room, her steps quickening the moment the door closed behind her. The air in the corridor felt cooler and sharper against her skin. She pressed her hand against her chest, trying to steady her breath.

Lord Howard’s presence had been commanding, yes, but her thoughts could not linger on him now. What mattered was Tristan. The truth weighed too heavily to wait.

She turned down the hall, her heart fixed on one resolve.

She would tell him tonight.

Chapter 26

The morning was yet to fully begin, but Tristan could already feel the weight of the next day pressing down on him. The gathering Marcus had called, the lords who would demand answers, the schemes waiting to ensnare them.

Everything gnawed at him like a steady but dull ache beneath his stomach. He couldn't wait to get this over with. To eventually challenge Marcus and know exactly what his goal was at the end of the project.

He tried to push the thoughts aside and keep his features calm. For now, Eliza did not need to see the storm raging in him. At least not more than she was already aware of.

He stood in the drawing room as his grandfather spoke quietly with Lord Howard. Both men looked perfectly at ease, though Tristan could feel the sharpness in their presence. They were men who had weathered storms far worse than this. His grandfather had wasted no time, of course, in telling Lord Howard about everything that had been happening so far. The way some man had been quietly purchasing lands around Evermere, and what it could possibly mean.

"This is clearly a daylight land grab if I have ever seen one," Lord Howard whispered after the duke finished narrating everything that had happened so far. "You cannot let this Mr. Harwood and whoever his cohorts might be get the better of you. That would do nothing except cause irreparable damage."

The duke looked up at Tristan, who remained standing by the edge of the door, the look on his face saying *Do you hear him?*

“I am working on it as we speak, Uncle Howard,” Tristan responded.

As Lord Howard opened his mouth to speak once again, Eliza stepped in, her light step drawing every eye. Her bright green dress reflected the flecks of sunlight that drifted in through the tall windows. She had tied her hair back loosely, a few strands brushing her cheeks. When she smiled in greeting, Tristan felt something inside him ease.

The duke’s expression softened. “My dear,” he said, holding out his hand. “You bring warmth into this room.”

Eliza curtsied, her cheeks touched with color. “You are kind, Your Grace.”

Lord Howard stepped forward with a slight bow. “And may I say, Lady Vale, I see why your name has reached so far already. You carry yourself with quiet strength. It is rare.”

Tristan watched Eliza’s eyes widen slightly. “I hardly deserve such praise, my lord. I only do what I can.”

Lord Howard’s gaze lingered on her, approving and steady. “That is exactly why you deserve them.”

Tristan’s throat tightened. He had been worried ... worried that these men would see her as nothing but a woman of misfortune who managed to find her way into the web of Evermere’s riches. The fact that her brother was an architect of what could possibly be the manor’s downfall did not exactly help matters.

Yet what he saw now was different.

They studied her with respect. With belief, and it made his heart ache with something he could not easily name ... gratitude perhaps? Or was it pride? Perhaps it was something sharper that pressed against the edge ...

Wait.

It couldn't be ...

Was it ...

The duke rose, interrupting his flow of thoughts and the damning conclusion growing in his head. Tristan's eyes settled on his grandfather as he stepped forward, leaning on his cane.

"Shall we?"

"Shall we what?" Tristan asked, his eyes narrowed.

The duke and Lord Howard both turned to him at the same time, the amusement in their faces quite clear. "Your wife promised us a glimpse of the new atelier."

Tristan turned to Eliza, who only looked back at him with a mild shrug. Then she hesitated for a heartbeat, after which she smiled. "Yes, of course. If you will follow me."

They walked down the corridor, their steps falling in rhythm. Tristan walked slightly behind, watching the way the duke and Lord Howard sauntered at Eliza's side, speaking with her as though she had always belonged here.

When they entered the atelier, Tristan watched the duke stop short. His eyes swept across the canvases, the light pouring over sketches and finished works alike.

“Good heavens,” he murmured. “It has changed entirely since I last stepped inside.”

Eliza looked down, shy now. “It is nothing extraordinary. Only small pieces of myself put on canvas.”

Lord Howard moved closer to a painting of the village in the middle of the harvest festival. Eliza had managed to capture the atmosphere in colors and brush strokes.

“Small pieces?” The duke repeated, his eyes settling on Eliza. “My dear, this is no small thing. This is life, caught and held. You remind me ...” His voice faltered, then he cleared his throat, and his voice remained steady. Tristan knew exactly where he was going, but he let him finish speaking anyway.

“You remind me of Tristan’s mother.”

Tristan watched Eliza’s throat bob. A reaction he had expected.

“Oh,” she eventually responded, words clearly failing her.

The duke continued anyway, almost like he was unaware of what she could possibly be feeling. “She had the same eye for drawing and the same carefree spirit you had.”

The room fell still, and Eliza's eyes widened, then softened. "I ... I do not know what to say."

"You do not have to say anything," Lord Howard replied quietly. "Just know that you are honoring her memory with every painting."

The duke gave a single, slow nod. "Indeed, you do. She would have admired you."

Tristan's chest ached as he looked at Eliza. She glanced back at him, uncertain, almost flustered under their praise. He wanted to cross the room, take her hand, and tell her she had nothing to doubt. Instead, he stayed where he was, forcing his hands behind his back.

Eliza cleared her throat. "If you will allow me, my lord, I would like you to have one."

Howard turned, startled. "One of your paintings?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes. I know it is not much, but ... if it would please you, I should be honored."

For a moment, Howard said nothing. Then he stepped closer and bowed his head. "It would please me greatly. I shall treasure it."

Eliza's cheeks turned pink. She moved toward a smaller canvas resting against the wall. A quiet landscape ... the inn, its sign just visible, the fields beyond. She lifted it carefully and held it out.

Howard accepted it with both hands. “Thank you, Lady Vale. This is more than a gift. It is a reminder that Evermere’s spirit lives on in good hands.”

The duke smiled faintly, though his eyes drifted toward Tristan. “Yes,” he said. “Very good hands.”

Tristan felt the weight of that look. He gave the smallest nod in return.

“Your Grace, where do you think this would fit in my house? I am thinking I could put it on a wall in the drawing room.”

A sly smile crossed the duke’s face. “And that is if Evelyn lets you.”

Lord Howard turned to Eliza, the smile on his face clear. “That is also true.”

Tristan laughed, and soon, the conversation shifted. Lord Howard mentioned the lords, the murmurs of discontent, and the way they needed to make sure Marcus’s plans did not succeed.

At the mention of Marcus, Tristan had turned to Eliza. He noticed how stiff she had gotten and how her fingers had brushed over the edge of a chair. He noticed how the guilt crept into her posture and saw how her eyes flickered down as though she was the one to blame for all of this in the first place.

The feeling that had unsettled him back in the drawing room came again, except a bit stronger.

No, this couldn’t be just pride.

Lord Howard's words carried on in the background, but Tristan barely heard them. He watched Eliza instead.

He wanted to speak, to cut across the room and tell her she was not guilty, that Marcus's schemes were his alone. He wanted to shield her from even the hint of that shadow. Instead, he remained still, though the vow burned in his chest.

I will not let Mr. Harwood ruin her. I will not let anyone harm her.

He had done enough already, and she had carried enough blame. He was wise enough to know that from here forward, whatever happened next would be on him and him alone. The determination in him continued to rise with each passing second.

Whatever comes tomorrow, she will not stand alone.

The duke leaned on his cane. "We must let Lady Vale rest. She has given us more than we deserve today."

Howard raised his head. "Indeed. And she has given me something I shall never forget." He glanced at Eliza one last time, his eyes warm. "You honor your house, my lady. And you honor your husband."

Eliza's lips parted, and she dipped her head again. Tristan could see it clearly from where he was standing. She was completely unable to form words.

"We shall be right behind you as well," he eventually said, stepping forward and placing a hand gently at her back as he guided her toward the door. He

could feel the tension in her and the way her body seemed to hold everything just a bit too tightly.

He wanted to tell her right there, in front of them all, that she was enough. That she was more than enough. But the words caught in his throat, as well. It felt almost like his mouth wouldn't cooperate with his mind, no matter how hard he tried.

They all returned just the way they had come back to the drawing room. On the way back, Lord Howard had given the painting to one of the maids to give to Evelyn so they could take it home.

Eventually, they stepped in once again.

Tristan closed the door behind them and motioned for Eliza and his grandfather to sit. Lord Howard remained standing by the mantel, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes thoughtful but sharp.

Tristan remained standing as well, the pressure in his chest making it impossible to rest.

"So," Lord Howard said, turning to him. "About this Mr. Harwood. Do you have a plan?"

"We cannot waste time," Tristan responded, his voice firmer than he felt. "Tomorrow, Mr. Harwood plans to gather the lords. He will speak with confidence, and many will follow him blindly. If I walk in with only doubt and suspicion, he will find a way to sweep us aside. We need more than words. We need proof."

The duke studied him calmly, but Tristan saw the flicker of approval in his eyes. “Go on.”

“I saw enough on my walk with Kale to know the cost,” Tristan continued. “But what we carry is not enough to stop him. We must strike with evidence, something no one can ignore.”

He felt Eliza’s gaze on him. When he finally met her eyes, she looked pale, torn between fear and urgency. Her hands twisted in her lap.

“Is everything all right?” he eventually found himself asking.

“Well,” she said suddenly, her voice breaking into the silence. “There is something I have not yet told you.”

Every head turned toward her.

Tristan watched her continue to speak, swallowing hard. “This morning, Clara and I went walking in the park. We saw a certain woman ... a Miss Flick Ashcombe.”

“Mrs. Flick Ashcombe,” Tristan repeated, a wave of recognition hitting him harder than he could imagine. He could recognize the name in a daze. It had stood out sharply to him the first day he heard it, and it still stood out now. “That was the matchmaker I met in London. She was the one who introduced you to me.”

Eliza swallowed, continuing anyway. “She was moving as though she did not wish to be seen. We followed. And we found her speaking with Marcus.”

Tristan froze. “What?”

Eliza nodded, her words tumbling out now, rushed and trembling. “They quarreled. I could not hear every word, but she accused him of betrayal. He spoke to her with coldness, with threats. She cried. And then he left her there, in tears.”

Tristan shuffled his feet slightly, feeling his mouth grow tight. “Miss Ashcombe and Mr. Harwood.”

The duke’s eyes swept toward Tristan. “If your matchmaker and her brother know each other ... That means ...”

“The marriage was a setup,” Tristan finished.

“She was his choice all along,” Eliza muttered, and the room went completely still.

Tristan felt the world tilt for a moment, the puzzle pieces colliding into place. He gripped the back of a chair to steady himself.

“Tristan ...” he could hear Eliza call, but the blood in his body ran hot.

“So he used her,” he said slowly. “He used her to trap us both.”

Eliza lowered her head. “Yes.”

The duke’s face hardened, his jaw set like stone. “Well, now we know we need to act fast. It is clear this Mr. Harwood is not acting alone.”

“I agree,” Lord Howard responded, eventually stepping away from the mantel.

“Something tells me this woman is part of something larger and is not the only one at that. He may have his own circle of frauds who weave marriages and contracts for their gain.”

Tristan turned to Eliza again. She looked stricken, her hands trembling against her dress.

“I should have spoken sooner,” she whispered. “I should have told you before. Perhaps I was afraid of what you would think. That I was blind, or foolish, or ...” She trailed off.

The duke surprised them all by leaning forward and giving a small smile. “My dear, truth, even late, is better than silence forever. Do not carry shame for what was never yours to bear.”

Her eyes widened at his gentleness, and Tristan’s chest tightened again. He wanted to echo his grandfather’s words, to tell her that she was braver than she believed, but his voice caught in his throat.

Howard stepped even further toward the trio. “Then we must act. If Ashcombe has been his ally, she must be pressed. She will know more. And with the right hand guiding her, she will speak.”

The duke nodded firmly. “She must be brought here at once. We cannot wait for Mr. Harwood to control the tale. We shall have her confess before them all.”

Tristan nodded but said nothing. The drawing room was immediately thrown into unimpeachable silence.

The duke rose, his movement slow as he beckoned a servant who stood near the entrance of the drawing room.

“Your Grace,” the servant, a young blonde-haired man, greeted, bowing immediately.

“I need you to send word to the magistrate. We need to find a woman called Miss Flick Ashcombe,” he ordered.

“Tell him this is a matter of grave urgency and that she must be brought here as soon as possible.”

The servant bowed and, just as he had come, left the room almost immediately.

Tristan exhaled, his shoulders tense. His mind spun with the revelation, with the risk. At least now they had something solid, something to wield against Marcus.

Eliza sat still, her eyes fixed on the fire. He wanted to reach for her, but before he could move, footsteps came fast down the hallway.

The door burst open, and a young footman, breathless, stepped inside. “My lord ... my lady ...” He swallowed hard. “Miss Flick Ashcombe has just arrived at the door. She asks for entry.”

Every voice fell silent.

The duke's cane pressed against the floor with a sharp click. "Already here?"

Tristan's heart pounded, and Eliza's lips parted, her face pale.

Lord Howard's eyes narrowed. "Is this not quite convenient?"

"Yes," Tristan found himself responding before he could think too hard about it. "Yes. This is quite convenient."

The duke looked back at the servant. "Bring her in here at once."

Chapter 27

The drawing room grew silent as the servant turned to leave. Eliza felt her chest rise and fall quickly, as if the air around her had thickened and grown heavy. Miss Flick Ashcombe was here, at their door, and soon she would stand before them.

She folded her hands together, pressing them tight to keep them from shaking.

The truth she had expressed to Tristan earlier still thundered in her ears. Now it was no longer memory or suspicion. Now the woman who had shaped her fate and caused all of this to happen in the first place was only a few yards away. She laughed at just how cunning fate was.

She could feel Tristan's eyes on her as a slightly uncontrollable chuckle escaped her lips. She could even feel him take a step closer, about to ask what happened when the door eventually opened, freezing all his movements and intended concern all at once.

They all looked up at the door at the exact same time and watched Miss Flick enter slowly, as if every step cost her strength. She clutched a small satchel against her chest so hard that her knuckles were white.

Eliza noticed how quickly her eyes darted around the room, first landing on her, then shifting quickly to Tristan, then the duke. Her lips parted, but no words came.

The sight of Lord Howard, who by now had returned to resting by the mantel, seemed to terrify her even further.

“Miss Ashcombe,” Eliza said, her voice clear despite the chill in the air.

Flick remained stiff, and then all of a sudden, she took one step back toward the door.

“Miss Ashcombe,” Tristan called, the confusion in his tone prevalent.

Her voice cracked, thin and broken, “I must apologize... I did not know there was going to be a ... No I cannot ... Surely you must understand why I can—”

It was the duke’s turn to speak so he leaned forward in his chair, his cane planted firmly against the polished floors. “You will speak, Miss Ashcombe. Whatever brings you here tonight, say it.”

Miss Flick’s eyes filled with tears. She shook her head, backing toward the door again. “Not here. Not before all of you.”

Her distress was raw, and Eliza’s heart clenched. She remembered being cornered by Marcus, her own voice silenced, her choices stripped away. She knew full well exactly how the woman standing before them felt.

Lord Howard’s deep voice broke the moment before anyone else could speak. “If my presence hinders truth, then I will not remain.”

Eliza turned quickly to him. “My lord, you do not have to...”

But Howard had already straightened, his gaze sweeping across the room. “The truth must come out and better it be spoken than swallowed. I will take my leave.”

He bowed slightly to the duke, then to Eliza, and stepped past Miss Flick without another glance. The door shut behind him, leaving the air taut and close.

Now it was only Eliza, Tristan, the duke, and Miss Flick Ashcombe, who still stood by the door, trembling.

Eliza stepped closer to the woman. Her voice came out calm, but she could almost hear her blood rushing in her ears.

“Miss Ashcombe, please. Sit down. No one here will harm you.”

The hesitation appeared on Flick’s face again, and Tristan took over. “You came because you have something to say. You are safe.”

The woman’s eyes flicked to him, wide and searching. “Safe?”

“Yes,” Eliza added, her tone softening a hint. “Safe.”

Miss Flick’s breath hitched. She stood frozen for a long moment, then edged forward and lowered herself into a chair near the door. She clutched her satchel still, like it was some kind of weapon that protected her.

Eliza watched Tristan move to his grandfather as well and take a seat beside him. His gaze was unreadable, but Eliza knew there was only one thing on his mind at that point: How to get rid of Marcus once and for all. She shared exactly the same sentiment.

“So,” the duke resumed, his voice coming across the drawing room with nothing but utter ease. “Why have you come to our manor today, Miss

Ashcombe?”

A wave of silence settled into the drawing room and, for a moment, Eliza wondered if she had been the only one who heard the duke in the first place.

At last, Miss Flick spoke, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I should not have come. I thought I could keep silent, but ... Marcus ...” She trailed off, pressing her hand to her mouth.

Eliza leaned forward. “He cannot reach you here, Miss Ashcombe. You can say it.”

Tears slipped down Miss Flick’s cheeks. “I have recently found out rather forcefully that Marcus is not the man I thought he was.”

“Oh, well. You and me both,” Eliza added, her voice intended to soothe the frail woman, whose eyes continued to dart toward the door like Marcus would walk in any moment soon.

“I believed him once,” Flick continued. “I believed his promises. He told me I would be part of something greater, that I was helping to build futures. But it was all lies. Lies wrapped in charm.”

Eliza scoffed at just how true the statement was.

Lies wrapped in charm.

There was no more apt description for her brother.

Flick's words broke, and she shook her head. "I have wronged you, Lady Vale. More than you know. I stood as the one who arranged your marriage. I told myself it was my duty. That I was serving families, serving tradition. But in truth ... I was serving *him*."

Eliza's stomach twisted. The quiet confirmation, spoken aloud, seemed to ring through the room. She knew this already but why did it still hurt to hear out loud? She said nothing this time around. Flick had to finish her confession and she couldn't let anything get in the way of that, not even herself.

Flick wiped at her eyes. "He spoke sweetly. He said I would be remembered. He said no one else understood his vision. And I ... I listened. I agreed. I told myself it was proper. That it was fate. But I see now it was nothing but his game."

She looked at Eliza with nothing but raw sorrow. "I am sorry. For every tear you shed, for every hour you felt trapped in this marriage. I could never finish apologizing for what I have put you through. But you must understand that I never wished you any harm, even though it came anyway."

The duke's voice cut through the silence one more time, steady and grave. "Why now? Why confess this now?"

Miss Flick's fingers twisted against her satchel. "Because I cannot bear it any longer. He used me and then cast me aside. I have tried to make things right with him but now he has turned to threats. He said if I spoke of his dealings, I would regret it. But I already regret everything"

Her voice faltered and she broke into sobs.

Eliza rose and crossed the space between them. She knelt lightly beside Flick's chair, her hand hovering before resting gently on the woman's trembling arm.

"You are here now. You are speaking. That is what matters."

Miss Flick stared at her through tears. "You are kinder than I deserve."

Eliza shook her head. "No. I only know what it is to feel trapped. You are not alone in that."

Behind her, she felt Tristan watching, his silence heavy but not cold. She did not turn.

Miss Flick's words spilled faster now, as though Eliza's touch had loosened them. "Marcus is after Evermere's wealth. He wants the power and influence"

Eliza swallowed as Flick continued.

"I helped him once. But no more. I will not help him any longer."

Eliza's grip steadied. "Then tell us all you know. Everything. It may be the only way to end this."

Miss Flick nodded weakly, wiping her face with a lace handkerchief. "I will try. But you must believe me when I say ... I am afraid."

"You are not alone," Eliza repeated. "We are with you now."

The duke leaned forward, his cane pressing the floor. “Then let the truth be spoken. All of it.”

The burning logs in the fireplace crackled, the silence deepened, and Miss Flick drew in a long, unsteady breath.

“The Berkeley project,” she began, her voice raw, “it is nothing but a scam. He ... Marcus ... told me it would reshape Evermere, that it would lift everyone. But it was lies. He only plans to use it to fill his own pockets, and those of a few men who follow him. No one else matters.”

Tristan stepped even closer as the duke’s cane tapped once against the floor. “Mr. Harwood has been saying otherwise to every lord in the county.”

Flick shook her head quickly. “Do not believe him. He swore I would come out of it a rich woman. That was his promise. But he has not spoken a word to me in over a month. When I tried to warn him that this must stop, that it had gone too far, he shut me out. He would not even let me through the door. The next time he sent for me, it was to basically threaten me into silence.”

“The park.” Eliza whispered, her voice almost too quiet to hear. “That was the reason for your meeting with him.”

Flick turned to her, her eyes widening. “You were there?”

Eliza nodded, her eyes softening.

Flick’s voice cracked as she continued to speak. “I thought he was going to destroy me, the way he has destroyed so many others.”

The duke leaned back, watching her with sharp, measuring eyes. Tristan's jaw had set like stone, but he did not speak.

Flick's hands moved at last. She lifted the satchel onto the table and unfastened its clasp. A small ledger, bound in worn leather, slid into the glowing firelight.

Eliza leaned closer without thinking and the duke tilted forward. Tristan, on the other hand, stood, his body sharp against the wall.

Flick pushed it toward them with shaking fingers. "This is his ledger. I ... I took it. I do not know what that makes me, but it holds everything. Copies of deeds, records of sales that never took place, and I am certain there are some forged documents as well."

Tristan opened it with stiff hands. His eyes darted down the first page, then another. His face hardened. "These are in my name."

Eliza felt her breath stop. "In your name?"

He held up the page, his voice low with fury. "Well, not just my name. But in the names of other noblemen in the county. He has forged them. To make it appear like we approved transfers that never occurred in the first place."

The duke's features turned grim. "Well, it is quite clear, is it not? Mr. Harwood has crossed a line no man returns from."

Flick clutched her knees as if shrinking from the heat of their anger. "I can give this to you. But you must swear ... swear on your honor ... that my name stays hidden. If he learns I betrayed him, he will ruin me."

The duke's reply came slow but firm. "You have my word. No one here will expose you. You are under *my* protection."

Eliza's gaze slid to Tristan. He had not spoken. His eyes remained locked on the ledger, his chest rising and falling with quiet force.

Flick pressed her palms together. "The last thing I want is to incur his wrath in any way. You must all understand. If he finds out I was ever involved in any of this...You do not know Marcus. He would hunt me down. I have tried all I could to warn all of you, especially Lady Vale."

Eliza froze at the mention of her name and a stark realization settled in the bottom of her stomach. "It was you, was it not? You sent the letter to me at the inn."

Flick nodded. "I could not keep silent. I could not watch him ruin more lives, yours most of all. He has already taken too much."

Eliza's throat tightened. "You should have come sooner."

"I know," Flick whispered. "But I was afraid. I still am."

Silence stretched, broken only by the crackle of the fire. Eliza looked down at her hands, then up at the woman before her. The betrayal was bitter, but so was the sorrow in Flick's eyes.

The duke broke the stillness. "You will not return to him. You will leave this place. Tonight, if possible."

Flick's head jerked up. "Leave?"

“You have done your part,” Tristan said. “What remains is ours to handle. Stay, and you will be hunted. Go, and you may yet have a life untouched by his ruin.”

He drew out a purse, heavy with coins, and set it on the table beside the ledger. “Take this. It will see you safely beyond his reach.”

Flick’s lips trembled. Her hand brushed the purse, then pulled back. “I do not deserve such mercy.”

The duke’s voice cut sharp. “This is not about what you deserve, Miss Ashcombe. It is about how you survive.”

Flick bowed her head, tears streaking her cheeks. She rose unsteadily. As she passed Eliza, she touched her arm with trembling fingers. “Forgive me. I never wished harm to you. I only wished to be seen.”

Eliza swallowed the lump in her throat. “Go, Miss Ashcombe. Make this choice the one you do not regret.”

Flick nodded once, clutched the purse, and left the room.

The door clicked shut. The air seemed to release, yet no one moved.

Eliza turned to Tristan. His eyes were still on the ledger, fury and something heavier etched into his face. She stepped closer, her voice soft.

“I am sorry. I am sorry for what my brother has done to you. To all of us.”

At last, Tristan looked at her. His expression was hard, but not cold. The firelight showed the weight of betrayal, yet also the faintest crack of something gentler.

“Eliza,” he said quietly, “this is not your burden. It is his. And now it is mine to answer.”

She felt tears sting her eyes. “Still, I cannot help but feel ...”

He shook his head, cutting her off. “Do not take his shame upon yourself.”

Her breath caught. She reached out, hesitating, before resting her hand lightly against his arm. “Then let us face it together. Whatever comes.”

For a moment, he did not move. Then his hand covered hers, warm and steady. His voice dropped, almost a vow. “Together.”

Eliza drew closer, the fire’s glow at their backs. Their embrace was quiet, but full, the kind that needed no words. For the first time in weeks, the fear loosened its hold.

They would stand, not alone, but side by side.

And Marcus’s shadow would no longer be enough to break them.

Chapter 28

The carriage wheels hummed against the rough road. Tristan sat stiffly, arms folded across his chest, the weight of the ledger still burned into his mind. The firelight from last night seemed to follow him even now and every line of Marcus's forgeries replayed in his head.

Even the lies sat heavily against his chest as he drew a slow breath.

This is no longer only about land. It is about the people who depend on me. And about her.

Across from him, Gideon watched him with a soldier's sharp eyes. At length, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"You are grinding your teeth again, my lord," he said flatly.

Tristan blinked. "Am I?"

"You are," Gideon said. "Your jaw is tight enough to crack a stone."

"I should have said something against holding this meeting at night. I do not like the silence."

Gideon's eyes strayed out of the carriage and then back to Tristan's face. "Yes, but that is not exactly the cause of your distress, is it? There is something else."

Tristan shifted in his seat. He hated feeling this transparent.

“What are you thinking about?” Gideon eventually asked, his voice clear.

“Nothing. Just that I cannot afford a misstep. Not tomorrow, not tonight. If Marcus has already convinced half of those lords, then ...”

“Then you will convince the other half,” Gideon cut in, his voice sleek and sharp against Tristan’s demeanor. “You know how to do that, convince people.”

Tristan gave a dry laugh. “You speak as if it is that simple.”

“It is not simple,” Gideon said. “But you are capable of it. I have seen you when men were ready to scatter and die. Do you remember the ridge outside Antwerp?”

Tristan looked up sharply. “How could I forget? And how come you always pick that one.”

“Because it fits,” Gideon said. His voice lowered, steady as stone. “We had no food left. The supplies had been cut off for three days. Men twice your age were ready to desert, ready to throw down their arms as you stood there, hungry as the rest of us, and you told them if they abandoned the line, the entire flank would fall. You held them with nothing but your voice, my lord. You did not use your rank or any kind of medal. Only words.”

Tristan felt the memory tug at him. It all came rushing back like a smooth waterfall. He could almost feel the cold in the air that gray dawn and the mud in his boots. The smell of powder hanging thick filled his nostrils. He remembered everything. Men hollow-eyed and trembling. He had spoken without thinking, had told them to stay, to fight. And somehow they had.

“You made them believe,” Gideon continued. “And you saved us. That was not a battle of rifles. That was a battle of will. This is nothing but another battle of will. It is no different.”

Tristan shook his head slowly. “No different? This is politics, Gideon. Land, ledgers, signatures. There are no rifles to point, no charges to rally.”

“Do not let this situation dissuade you, my lord,” Gideon said. His voice sharpened. “This *is* war. Only the weapons are different. What you have instead are pens instead of bullets and signatures instead of swords. Mr. Harwood is your enemy across the line. And just like before, you cannot let him break through.”

Tristan sat back, his hands tightening on his knees. “If I fail, Evermere falls. And so does my wife.”

Gideon’s tone softened. “Then you will not fail. You never have when it truly mattered.”

The carriage rattled over a rut, shaking both men. Outside, the countryside lay completely black and silent, broken only by the glow of the moon on the fields.

Tristan pressed his palm against the window, staring out into the night. “It is strange. I have faced bullets, cannon fire, the screams of men dying all around me. Yet my heart has never beaten like this.”

“Because this time it is not just your dignity on the line,” Gideon said. “It is hers, too.”

Tristan closed his eyes.

Eliza.

Always Eliza now.

The way she looked at him last night, her hand against his arm. The way she had whispered that they would face this battle with Marcus together. That vow rang louder than any battlefield oath.

“I will not let him use her again,” Tristan muttered, almost to himself.

Gideon’s gaze softened, though he said nothing.

For a long moment, the only sound was the wheels and the horses’ steady rhythm. Then, on the horizon, faint traces of light appeared. Lanterns rose with the landscape, glowing in the darkness.

“There it is,” Gideon said quietly.

Tristan leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. A house rose at the edge of town, its windows lit, the air around it faintly alive with voices that seemed to carry on in the wind. The house was not exceptionally daunting in any way, yet the voices he heard coming from the house seemed to send waves of fear down his spine.

The battlefield.

The carriage slowed as they approached the house, and the horses stamped at the gravel. Gideon reached across and straightened Tristan’s coat with a firm tug.

“There,” he said. “At least look like a man who knows what he is doing.”

Tristan gave him a sharp look, but the corner of his mouth lifted despite the weight pressing on him. “I cannot tell because it feels like I am still sometimes treated like a boy.”

“Only when you forget who you are, my lord,” Gideon said.

The carriage eventually jolted to a complete stop, and silence fell between them. Tristan’s hand tightened once on the door handle.

“If I can face bullets, I can face words,” he said at last.

He pushed the door open and stepped down into the cool night. The lanterns threw long shadows across the gravel, and the low murmur of voices swelled from the house ahead. Every nerve in his body was taut, but his spine stayed straight.

The battle had begun.

The hall smelled of polished wood, tobacco, and way too much wine. Crystal chandeliers cast golden light across velvet curtains and heavy oak tables, and laughter rang too loud. Tristan recognized that kind of laughter as he stepped closer to the house. It was the kind that tried to mask the unease underneath.

Marcus stood near the center, his wine glass in hand and the smile on his face broader than the surface of a babbling brook. His smooth voice carried effectively around the room as he spoke, but then he faltered as Tristan approached the door.

“Lord Vale,” he said as Tristan entered. “At last. I feared you might miss the toast.”

“I would not dream of it,” Tristan answered, his voice even.

You have no idea what you are about to step into, Mr. Harwood.

Several lords raised their glasses.

“To Evermere’s future!” one cried.

The others echoed, voices clinking against each other’s glasses.

Tristan accepted a glass but did not drink. His eyes moved across the room as he studied the men even further. They were all men of wealth, men of hunger, men who spoke of vision but looked only at maps and numbers. He had always been blind to this, but now he saw rather clearly that their cheer was for the numbers and not for the people.

Good God.

Marcus spread his arms as if unveiling a stage. “Gentlemen, we stand at the edge of history. Evermere is no longer a quiet estate. With the Berkeley Project, it shall be a hub. A gateway. Imagine mills humming, rails cutting across fields, warehouses filled with goods. The countryside will no longer be stagnant. It will be alive with industry.”

The room stirred with nods and hums of agreement.

One lord leaned forward, voice thick with drink. “And the trade routes, Mr. Harwood, you said they will link to the coast?”

“Precisely,” Marcus said, his smile deepening. “A central artery for commerce. We will compete with the largest estates in the kingdom.”

Another lord laughed. “And with competition comes profit.”

Tristan kept his face calm. “Tell me, Mr. Harwood,” he said lightly, “what of the farms? The orchards, the grazing lands ... the soil that has fed families for generations. Where do they stand in this vision?”

Marcus waved his hand. “They will adapt. New work will come. Men who once plowed fields will find employment in the mills, and their sons will learn trades. My most sincere apologies, my lord, but you of all people should know that we cannot cling to the past forever.”

Tristan tilted his head. “Employment in mills, yes. But whose mills? Yours? Theirs?” He gestured to the gathered lords. “And when the farms are gone, will their sons truly find a place? Or will they be pushed out eventually when their land is gone and their names forgotten?”

The murmuring in the room shifted. Some eyes lowered. Marcus’s smile stiffened.

“Progress demands sacrifice,” he said. “Evermere cannot remain a backwater while the rest of the country surges ahead. These changes will elevate us all.”

“Or elevate *you*,” Tristan said softly.

The remark drew a ripple of uneasy laughter. Marcus bristled but recovered, raising his voice. “Do you think I speak only for myself? Gentlemen, do you not see? This is for Evermere’s greatness. For the future.”

The doors opened then, and silence fell. The duke stepped inside, his presence filling the room without effort. Lords rose instinctively, bowing.

“Your Grace,” Marcus said too quickly, his voice an attempt at charm. “You honor us.”

The duke gave him a cool glance before turning to Tristan. “I hear much about Evermere’s future tonight, so I decided to do the next best thing. I came to hear it for myself.”

Marcus’s shoulders tightened, but he lifted his chin. “Then you shall hear the vision, Your Grace. Real vision.”

Tristan’s lips curved faintly. “Yes. Let us hear it. From the beginning, if you please.”

So Marcus began again, laying out his dream with elaborate gestures. He drank deeply between points, mistaking the room’s silence for admiration.

Tristan noticed the slight withdrawal he had in his second explanation. For some reason, it was like he became even more timid. Like this was not something he planned, but had to go through anyway.

Of course, it was clear he never intended to do this before the duke but now he had to. His eyes shifted to his grandfather, who listened with feigned rapt attention, but he knew there was only one thing on his grandfather’s mind, and that was to expose Marcus Harwood for the total fraud that he was.

Once in a while, the duke would ask a question or two, and Marcus would respond as aptly as he possibly could. Even Tristan was subtly impressed.

How could a man so selfish and evil drip with charm this severe?

When Marcus eventually finished, another wave of silence settled into the crowd until, at last, Tristan laughed.

“That was a wonderful presentation, Mr. Harwood. I could not have done it better.”

“Your words are well appreciated, Lord Vale,” Marcus responded, his voice clear.

Perhaps it had something to do with his grandfather’s presence or just the mere fact that he could properly see through the man’s deceit now, or even the lingering words of his valet about how this was no longer just about him but about Eliza now.

He didn’t know exactly what it was, but something gave him courage. The kind of courage he had been waiting for since he got into the gathering. He didn’t waste time.

He rose to his feet immediately, feeling Marcus’s eyes on him.

“You describe growth. But growth for whom? For the lords in this room, perhaps. But what of the tenant families who will lose their homes? What of the men who cannot buy their way into these ventures? Do they not belong to Evermere’s future?”

“They will benefit from the wealth created,” Marcus said, his tone clipped.

“Will they?” the duke asked suddenly. His voice cut across the room like steel. “Or will they starve while you sell their land?”

Marcus faltered. “That is unfair.”

“No,” Tristan said. His voice had grown steady, almost cold. “What is unfair is stripping men of the soil their fathers bled for. What is unfair is calling greed ‘progress.’”

A murmur swept the room. One lord shifted uncomfortably. Another whispered to his companion and slipped toward the door.

Marcus’s face darkened. “You twist my words, Lord Vale. These gentlemen know I speak the truth.”

The duke leaned forward, eyes like ice. “Truth? You speak of greatness, but every sentence begins and ends with you. Is it Evermere’s greatness you seek, or Marcus Harwood’s?”

A few lords chuckled nervously. More stood, muttering excuses. Chairs scraped against the floor. The room thinned.

Marcus’s voice rose, desperate now. “You are blind. You cling to an old world while the new one rises without you.”

“Better blind than deceived,” Tristan said.

The last straw came when one lord, red-faced with shame, muttered, “I will not be party to this,” and left with two others. Marcus stood surrounded by only a few loyal die-hards, his wine glass trembling in his hand.

It was time.

Tristan pulled out the ledger Miss Flick had given him and laid it on the table, ignoring the way the sound cracked through the room.

“This,” he said, his voice ringing, “this is proof of your fraud, Mr. Harwood. Forged sales in my name and in several other lords’ names as well. Documents that strip this land bare. And worst of all, your use of my wife as a pawn in your game.”

The last words burned his throat, but he spoke them clearly.

Marcus stared at the ledger. For a long moment, he said nothing. Then, slowly, he smiled.

“You think you’ve won,” he said softly. “But you know nothing.”

His gaze swept the room, then settled on Tristan. “Do you think I did not prepare for this? Do you think I have no leverage? I have something far greater than your ledger.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes. “Face the facts, Mr. Harwood. You have lost.”

“Oh, but I have not. At least, not yet, my lord. There is still one more card.

“What are you insinuating?”

Marcus took a step closer, and his voice lowered dangerously. “I have proof, Lord Vale. Proof that your legitimacy is not what it seems.”

Tristan froze. “What did you say?”

Marcus’s smile widened. “Your name, your title, your claim to Evermere ... I can unravel it. Unless, of course, you sign over what I ask. Give me what I want, and your secret stays buried.”

The room went dead silent. Tristan felt the air press against his chest.

He turned to the duke, waiting for his grandfather’s denial and for his booming voice to cut through the lie. But the duke said nothing. His face was carved stone, his silence louder than Marcus’s words.

For the first time that night, Tristan’s heart faltered.

What?

Chapter 29

The muted morning light spread through the tall windows of the atelier, soft but cold against the bare canvases scattered across the room.

Oh for the love of God.

Eliza sat with a brush in her hand, staring at the canvas before her. The tip trembled as she tried to steady her strokes, but it didn't work. The anticipation continued to gnaw at her. She took a deep breath and stared at the lines before her.

She didn't need a critical pair of eyes to tell her that they looked wrong and completely uneven. She pressed harder on the canvas, hoping the motion would ground her and keep her busy, but it only deepened her frustration.

She drew the brush back, staring at the mess of color. She had meant to paint a side of the garden behind the manor, and somehow, all she had managed to do was draw a huge mess of color. The strokes were too sharp and the lines ...

Good God, the lines.

A dog could draw better than she was doing at the moment.

Her chest tightened as her eyes took in the scene around her. Would she be able to gain control of herself before her husband returned? The sun was beginning to peek out from the horizon, which meant Tristan's carriage should be rolling to a halt before the manor anytime soon.

She leaned back, her brush slipping from her hand, and pressed her palms against her lap. A mixture of shame and joy played together in her heart, just like the mess of colors on her canvas. She had managed to find joy. It was still a bit undefined, but she had found it.

And she found it here at Evermere despite Marcus' manipulations. She could even say her brother's inadvertent schemes eventually brought her to her happiness.

She should be excited about it. She loved Tristan, and while he hadn't exactly expressed them in words, a part of her trusted that he felt the same. And that alone was enough for her.

And then, there was the actual problem.

Marcus.

His greed tainted every glance and every kindness she shared with Tristan. He was always there in the background, an overt reminder of what Eliza stood to lose just because of him.

"Am I even worthy of this?" She whispered to herself, unable to steel the words in her heart any longer.

The door creaked, and Clara's voice broke through. "Do not tell me you are already doubting the masterpiece."

Eliza turned quickly, startled. Clara swept into the room in her usual fashion, the low ends of her bright blue dress brushing against canvases.

“You have not even seen it yet,” Eliza muttered.

“It is your work. I am certain it is a—”

She froze as her eyes settled on the painting, then she looked back at Eliza with raised brows.

“That is the most dreadful thing I have ever seen,” Clara said, though her tone was more amused than cruel.

“I know—”

“I mean, what are you even trying to paint here?”

“I know,”

“Good God, even looking at it is giving me a headache. I mean, how do you even—”

“Clara!” Eliza snapped.

Her friend turned to look at her, the amused expression still resting on her face.

“Trust me,” Eliza continued, her voice a bit lower. “I know.”

“Well,” Clara resumed, her voice softer. “What exactly happened?”

Eliza sighed. “Is it not clear? My mind is unsteady.”

Clara stepped closer, folding her arms. “Ah. Then this is not about the painting. Thank heavens.”

“Thank heavens?”

Clara laughed. “For the briefest of moments, I thought you were losing your ability to paint. Well, it is clear this is about your brother.”

Eliza’s throat tightened at the sound of his name, and she nodded. “I cannot stop thinking about it. His schemes, his lies. And Tristan ... how much more can he bear? I feel as though my brother’s corruption shadows me as well. As if it makes me ... less.”

Clara’s face softened. She pulled out a stool and sat beside her. “Eliza Harwood, you are not your brother. His sins are his own. Do not chain them to your name. Lord Vale knows who you are. So do I. Goodness, even Aunt Evelyn, who is a harsh judge of character, knows who you are.”

Eliza turned to look at Clara, saying nothing.

“None of us would let his deceit define you.”

Eliza looked down, voice faint. “But what if his schemes ruin everything? Tristan, the estate, even this marriage?”

Clara reached out and took her hand. “Then you will fight it. With him. Love and loyalty prevail when nothing else does. That has been true for every family, every marriage worth anything. You must believe it.”

Eliza blinked fast, her eyes stinging. She nodded. “I will try.”

“Good,” Clara said, giving her hand a squeeze. Then, in a deliberate change of tone, she pulled back and stood. “Now, enough gloom. I came here for something far more important.”

Eliza tilted her head. “More important than my canvas and despair?”

“Indeed.” Clara turned toward the chair in the corner and pulled out a gown draped across it. She twirled the fabric with a grin, holding it against herself. “Tell me if this is good enough.”

Eliza blinked. “Good enough for what?”

Clara swayed with the dress, pretending to admire herself in an invisible mirror. “Perhaps ... good enough for a compliment.”

Eliza’s lips parted, and then the answer struck her. “Clara,” she whispered, eyes wide. “Is this for Mr. Hale?”

Color rushed into Clara’s cheeks. “Absolutely not.”

Eliza leaned forward. “It is. You are blushing.”

“I am not.”

“You are,” Eliza said with a laugh. “I have never seen you this way. It is rare to see you so smitten.”

Clara rolled her eyes, trying to fold the gown back into its place. “It is nothing. He is only ... pleasant company. He has invited me for a walk this evening.”

Eliza raised a brow. “Another one?”

Clara shot her a glare. “Well, I do not think there is any kind of limit on how many walks one can have, now, do you?”

Eliza tried and failed to keep her smile back. “I suppose there is not.”

Clara pointed a finger at her. “Say it outright. Say whatever you are holding back. I can see it written across your face.”

Eliza laughed, shaking her head. “I will say nothing. Only that all of this clearly matters to you. That is enough.”

Clara exhaled, half annoyed, half shy. “It does not. It is just ... he listens. And he does not try to impress me, which is more than I can say for half the men in London.”

“Then perhaps you should allow your heart to open,” Eliza said gently. “Let the current carry you where it may.”

Clara groaned. “Now you sound like some poet.”

“Perhaps I am,” Eliza said, a smile tugging at her lips.

The two of them laughed then, the weight between them easing for the first time that morning. Clara twirled the dress again, pretending to curtsy, while Eliza sat back and shook her head. For one fleeting moment, her heart felt light.

Then the door burst open and a maid hurried in, her cheeks flushed and her voice breathless.

“My lady,” she said, eyes darting between them. “His Grace and Lord Vale have returned.”

Eliza froze. Tristan.

Her brush slipped from the table to the floor with a soft clink, and she rose slowly, her pulse rushing in her ears. Clara straightened as well, the gown forgotten in her hands.

“They are back,” Eliza whispered. She felt the words as both relief and dread.

Clara touched her arm. “Then go. I shall wait here for you.”

“Are you certain you do not want to come?”

“Very,” Clara responded, her voice sharp.

Eliza nodded, her chest tightening. She turned toward the door, her steps quickening.

The morning light no longer felt calm. It pressed at her back, urging her forward.

Eliza's slippers tapped too fast against the wooden floor as she hurried down the hallway. Her breath came tight and shallow. She had imagined this moment since the maid's announcement.

She had pictured Tristan stepping through the doors, proud and steady, bringing with him the kind of strength that lit the halls of Evermere. She had thought she would see him smile, perhaps tired but victorious.

But when she reached the entrance, her heart staggered.

The carriage door opened, and the duke stepped down first, his face pale and his mouth pressed into a hard line. Then Tristan followed, his shoulders rigid and his steps heavy. His eyes lifted only once, catching hers across the distance, and then fell away at once. He looked as though the life had been drained from him.

"You are back," she said, her voice faint.

Tristan did not pause. He moved past her, his gaze fixed on the staircase, and his jaw tight. He vanished up the steps without a single word.

Eliza's chest turned cold, and the air around her seemed to grow thicker with silence. She turned sharply to the duke.

"Your Grace," she said, her voice thin but urgent. "What happened?"

The duke's lips parted, but no words came. He looked older than she had ever seen him, shadows deep beneath his eyes. After a while, he lowered his head and walked slowly toward his study.

Eliza's pulse raced faster as several thoughts and questions pulsed through her mind. Was this it? Was this the end of her stay at Evermere? Had Marcus eventually managed to poison the last of the well?

She gathered the skirts of her dress and hurried up the stairs. Tristan's chamber door loomed at the end of the hall. She raised her hand and knocked.

"Tristan?" she called softly.

No answer.

"Tristan, are you there?"

Still no answer.

"Please, let me in. What has happened?"

Only more silence followed her words.

Her hand trembled against the wood. She knocked again, firmer. "Tristan. Speak to me. Please, do not shut me out. What happened with Marcus?"

The door eventually opened, and her heart skipped, but it was not Tristan who appeared. Mr. Hale stepped into the hallway, closing the door gently

behind him.

Eliza grew startled. “Mr. Hale—please, tell me. What has happened to him? What was said at the gathering?”

The valet bowed his head slightly. “My lady, it is not my place to speak of it.”

Her desperation flared. “Not your place? Then whose? Tristan is breaking before my eyes, and you expect me to stand aside?”

Mr. Hale’s eyes met hers, steady but pained. “He must be the one to tell you, my lady. Not me. Forgive me.”

Her mouth opened to argue, but something in his expression stopped her. He would not bend. She swallowed hard, pressing her lips tight. Without another word, she turned and rushed back down the stairs.

The duke’s study door was slightly open. She pushed it all the way open and stepped in, catching her breath as she closed the door.

He was there, seated behind the desk, though his frame slumped against the chair. Fresh logs burned low in the fireplace, throwing light across his lined face. She had never seen him this distraught before.

What in God’s name happened at that event?

“Your Grace,” she said, her voice steadying with effort. “I beg you, do not keep me blind. Tell me what has happened. Did Marcus do something?”

She stuttered as the second question escaped her lips. “Did *I* do something?”

He did not look up at once. He clasped his hands together, the knuckles stark white. Finally, he drew a slow breath.

“Eliza,” he started, his voice heavy. “You deserve to know. Perhaps you are the only one who can bear this with him.”

Her heart pounded. “Know what?”

The duke’s eyes lifted to hers, shadowed with shame. “Years ago, Tristan’s father ... my son ... strayed. He had an affair with a maid in this very house and a child came of it.”

Eliza swallowed. “What?”

“It was a child born in secrecy. The matter was kept quiet with a lot of money, of course, and nothing was ever recorded. The child did not live past a year.”

Eliza’s breath stilled.

The duke looked away, his voice breaking. “I thought it was buried forever. But your brother somehow managed to find evidence. He is now holding it over Tristan’s head in order to force him to go ahead with the Berkeley Project.”

Eliza felt the room tilt around her. Her hands gripped the edge of a chair to steady herself. She had feared betrayal, but not like this. The cruelty of

secrets, the rot of shame passed down like a curse.

Yet as the shock rolled through her, another truth struck harder. It was not Tristan's fault. None of this was his sin. Her chest ached for him.

"Does Tristan know all of this?" she asked.

The duke closed his eyes. "He does now. And it has wounded him deeper than I can measure."

Eliza pressed her hands together tightly, as if the pressure might hold her steady. "Then I must go to him. I cannot let him bear this alone."

The duke gave a small nod. "Go."

She left the study at once, her steps carrying her up flight after flight until she reached the hallway that led to his chambers. She knocked on the door once, and when he did not respond, she slammed her eyes shut and pushed it open anyway.

He was still. His shoulders hunched, his hands braced against the frame. His face was pale, hollow. The sight of him pierced her.

"Tristan," she whispered.

He did not turn. "You should not be here."

She stepped closer, her voice low but firm. "Then where should I be? Away from you, when you are suffering? Never."

His hand curled against the wooden frame of his bed. “You do not understand.”

“The duke already told me everything.”

Tristan nodded. “Oh, well, it is good that he is quick to speak now.”

“You cannot blame him for keeping quiet all these years.”

“Can I not?” Tristan asked, throwing her a glare. “My very name may be false, Eliza, I have lived on lies. How can you stand beside me when I am nothing more than a shadow of dishonor?”

She came nearer, until she stood at his side. “Do not say that. You are not a lie.”

His eyes flicked to her, hollow with doubt. “I was not a straight heir, Eliza. I could have lived my life knowing I had a brother, but I did not. My life might have as well been a giant falsehood.”

Eliza swallowed, her throat tight. She reached for his hand, her fingers wrapping around his.

“You are the man who protects his land when all others seek to strip it. You are the man who sees his people as more than numbers. You are the man who chose to honor me, even when our marriage began in chains. Legacy is not only blood. It is choice as well, and I have never seen a man choose to be so relentlessly good as you have, Tristan.”

His breath caught. He searched her face, as if afraid to believe. “And you ... you can still believe in me? Even now?”

Her eyes glistened, but her voice did not falter. “I do not merely believe in you. I love you. And nothing Marcus or anyone else uncovers will change that.”

The silence that followed was deep, heavy, but not cold. He lifted her hand, holding it tight as though it was the only anchor left to him. Then, slowly, he leaned forward, his forehead resting against hers.

Eliza closed her eyes. “You are not the lie, Tristan,” she whispered. “You are the choice.”

At last, his arms came around her. She pressed against him, holding him as though she could shield him from every shadow.

Chapter 30

Later that morning, Tristan was still unable to get any kind of sleep. The journey back home from the edge of town should have, on normal occasions, thrown him into a deep sleep the instant he landed in the manor. However, the reverse seemed to be the case. He could not sleep because he could not stop thinking.

Not of Marcus. Not of the gathering. Not even of the ledger that had nearly shattered him. His mind circled the same truth: the maid, the child, the silence.

The silence hurt more than the scandal. His grandfather had chosen it, and in doing so had left shame to rot in the dark. Secrets instead of trust. Pride instead of honesty. And in that silence, the family had been wounded far worse than by any rival's blade.

He stopped by a window. He couldn't remember any time he had been up while dew still grazed the flowers. Of course, there was that moment he was leaving the inn with Eliza, and he needed to be up before the first light.

Eliza.

He thought of her, how often he had kept her at arm's length. Had he been mirroring his grandfather without even meaning to? Holding people away, building walls, guarding wounds instead of sharing them.

His grandfather had done the same, brooding, resentful, never explaining. A cycle of distance passed from one man to the next, until it reached him.

And he was tired of it.

“Up before the sun, my lord?”

The voice drew him back. Gideon stood at the corridor’s bend, a cup in his hand, his expression calm as ever. He sipped, then walked toward him with the steady ease that had steadied him in darker days.

“You look like a ghost walking the halls,” Gideon said.

“Perhaps I am,” Tristan replied. His voice felt rough in his throat.

Gideon tilted his head. “Does she know?”

“She does,” Tristan said quietly. “I told her. Or rather, she learned it before I could decide. And still she stayed.”

“Then she is braver than most,” Gideon said. He leaned against the wall, his tone blunt but warm. “Listen, my lord. A name may be passed down, but it is only as good as what you make of it. The world remembers deeds, not pedigrees.”

Tristan let the words sink in. “You make it sound simple.”

“It is simple. You carry the Vale name, but what people will remember is whether Lord Vale fought for them or not. Titles vanish with the holder at the end of the day, but actions? They stay forever.”

Tristan almost smiled, though the weight in his chest remained.

At that moment, Clara came into view at the far end of the corridor. She carried a book pressed to her chest, her hair loose in the morning light. Gideon, calm as ever, tipped his head in polite greeting.

“Lady Clara,” he said.

She blinked, clearly startled, then dipped her chin and continued past, though not before a faint flush rose across her cheeks.

“I thought you did not exactly like Lady Clara. You told me that a few days back.”

“Yes, my lord. I remember.”

Tristan’s brow lifted. “And now you greet her as if she were a duchess. So tell me, what changed?”

Gideon shrugged. “People are not defined by one mistake, my lord. Not Lady Clara. Not me. Not even you.”

With that, he pushed away from the wall. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have a household to see to. You, however, have a different matter to face.”

Tristan watched him walk away. The faint blush on Clara’s face lingered in his mind, and for the first time in days, something inside him eased. Perhaps the world was softer than he had always believed. Perhaps people were more than their shadows.

He turned toward the grand staircase, climbing slowly until he reached the duke’s study. The door was open. The old man sat behind the desk, his cane

resting across his knees, his face drawn with fatigue.

Tristan stepped inside. “You wished to see me?”

The duke lifted his eyes. They were weary, but steady. “I thought perhaps you would come without summons.”

Tristan stood for a moment, then moved closer. “You knew this day would come. That silence would one day break.”

The duke’s hand tightened on the cane. “I thought I was sparing us shame. In truth, I spared myself. That cowardice stole something from your father, and from you.”

The words struck harder than any lecture could. For a moment, Tristan could only stare at the man he had both feared and resented all his life. “It is too late for apologies,” he said at last. His voice was quiet, but firm. “But it is not too late for honesty.”

The duke’s eyes glistened, though no tears fell. “Honesty, then. I failed you. I failed your father. I buried what should have been spoken, and the silence rotted until Marcus unearthed it. I cannot undo that.”

Tristan let out a slow breath, the air heavy in his lungs. “Do you know what I hated most? Your distance. I thought it was pride. But now I see it was the same chain you carried from him. The same silence I took into myself. A curse we have all worn.”

The duke lowered his head. “Then break it. Do not carry it further.”

For a long moment, neither spoke. The room seemed to breathe around them, the dust floating in the morning light, the fire gone cold in the grate.

At last, the duke raised his head. His voice was steady, almost sharp again. “I cannot change the past. But I can protect your future. Marcus believes he has cornered you. He has not. Leave him to me. I have a plan.”

Tristan studied him. For once, the weight between them felt less like a wall and more like a scar.

He eventually nodded. “Very well. But I will not stand in silence again.”

The duke’s lips twitched, the faintest shadow of approval. “Nor should you.”

Tristan turned, his steps slower and steadier than when he had entered. The burden was not lifted or even healed. But something within him had shifted. He didn’t know what it was yet, but he knew what he had to do next.

It had never been clearer to him.

Tristan stood with Eliza in the long gallery, the light cutting through the tall windows, scattering reflections across the floor. The air was quiet, too quiet, until the heavy roll of wheels echoed from outside. He turned sharply toward the courtyard.

A dark carriage had just drawn up before the steps. His eyes narrowed as he watched the passenger step out.

What is he doing here?

Eliza's hand tightened around the edge of her shawl. "Marcus," she breathed.

Tristan felt the name like a spark against dry wood. "Stay close," he said quietly.

They descended the staircase together, and the entrance doors opened before they reached the bottom. Marcus strode in as though the house *already* belonged to him. His usual smirk curled at the corners, and his eyes glinted with the usual devilry behind them.

"Lord Vale," he said, voice smooth as polished glass. "And my dear sister." His gaze flicked over Eliza with cold amusement. "You look well enough."

Tristan stopped a few paces away. "What are you doing here, Mr. Harwood?"

Marcus spread his arms as though the answer were obvious. "I was invited."

"What?"

"Yes," Marcus responded, a shrug escaping his lips. "I suppose His Grace finally shows sense where you show none. No offense, of course, my lord."

Tristan stepped forward, but Eliza snatched his arm just in time.

“No,” she muttered.

“I would listen to her if I were you, Lord Vale,” Marcus added.

Before Tristan could reply, a footman entered, bowing low. “His Grace requests your presence in the study. All three of you.”

Marcus gave a satisfied hum. “How timely.”

He led the way down the corridor without waiting. Tristan caught the wave of unease on Eliza’s face. He brushed his fingers against hers.

The duke was waiting when they entered, standing behind his desk, a folder lay open before him. The air felt charged, every tick of the clock sharp in Tristan’s ear.

Marcus stepped forward first, his tone already thick with practiced charm.

“Your Grace,” he began, bowing slightly. “I appreciate that you have allowed me the courtesy of a hearing. I came only to remind you of where true loyalty lies. Evermere’s legacy deserves vision, strength, not sentimental hesitation.”

The duke said nothing.

Marcus continued, confidence swelling. “My associates are prepared to fund the Berkeley Project fully. You need only sign, and your grandson’s resistance will no longer delay progress. I am sure you value prosperity over misplaced pride.”

When silence answered him, he pressed on. “The world is changing. Land must serve men of ambition, not cling to the past. I have merely offered Evermere a place in that future.”

“Have you finished?” the duke asked quietly.

Marcus blinked, momentarily thrown. “I believe I have said enough.”

The duke reached forward, opening the binder. Inside were letters, receipts, and at the top was a page bearing Flick Ashcombe’s signature.

Tristan exhaled as the truth of the situation began to dawn on him.

“What is going on?”

“This,” the duke said, his tone still mild, “this is a written confession. And these other documents are just records of the accounts you forged in my grandson’s name.”

Marcus froze, the color draining from his face. “You cannot—”

“Oh, but I can. You threatened me. You threatened Tristan. You did not possibly think you would get away with that, did you?”

Marcus swallowed. “Your Grace, I—”

Tristan stepped closer. “It is over, Mr. Harwood. Miss Ashcombe confessed everything. You used her, lied to your partners, and deceived this family.”

Marcus's voice cracked as he tried to recover. "Confessions can be bought! None of this will matter. Society needs only to believe the scandal, not the truth."

The duke's tone sharpened. "You mistake my silence for weakness, Mr. Harwood. If you choose to press this any further, I will see you imprisoned, and believe me, this time, you will not talk your way out of it."

Marcus faltered. The charm slipped away, revealing the desperate edge beneath. "You would destroy your own family's name?"

Before Tristan could answer, Eliza stepped forward. Her voice, steady and cool, cut through the room. "Enough, Marcus."

He turned to her, eyes narrowing. "What?"

"His Grace is giving you a choice here. Drop this whole thing and leave. If you had any sense, you would take it."

Marcus stepped forward toward her. Tristan did the same as well, his protective instincts taking over.

"Oh. I see. You can no longer speak to me with respect now?"

"I will speak to you as you deserve." Her gaze did not waver. "And God knows you deserve worse than this."

"Eliza—"

“You will leave Evermere. I do not care where you go, but you will not return. You will not use my name, or this house’s, for gain or gossip. You are my brother by blood, but you are nothing to me now.”

Marcus blinked, momentarily lost for words. “You cannot mean—”

“I do,” she said simply. “And I mean it when I say you are finished here.”

Marcus looked from her to Tristan, then to the duke, searching for sympathy and finding none.

His jaw tightened. “You will regret this.”

“No,” Eliza said softly. “I doubt we will.”

He turned and strode from the room. The sound of his boots struck the floor hard, echoing until the door closed behind him.

Silence followed.

Tristan exhaled, the weight that had been pressing on his chest slowly easing. He looked at Eliza. She stood tall, her eyes bright but unshaken.

Eliza’s hand trembled slightly in his, but she didn’t let go.

“Is it truly over?” she asked.

Tristan met her gaze. “Yes, my dear. It is.”

He leaned in and kissed her, slow and steadily. Outside, the sound of carriage wheels faded down the gravel drive. Inside, the house felt lighter, the air clean again.

Epilogue

It felt rather strange to Tristan that everything that had happened for the last few weeks had managed to strengthen his relation with Eliza.

Other couples who were not even set up by greedy brothers would not have lasted this long; he was well aware of that. Yet, it felt like the trials and tribulations they had both faced had pushed them out the other side, leaving them feeling much more victorious than ever.

As he walked along the path that led to the trimmed hedges of the manor, the thoughts continued to settle even further into his head.

“My lord,” a maid greeted as he walked, throwing him a mild curtsy.

He responded with a brief nod.

Soon, he found the duke by the hedges, cane balanced in his hand. The old man’s gaze was fixed on the atelier’s window, where they could see Eliza painting through the glass.

“She steadies us all, does she not?” the duke murmured. “Even when she thinks she paints only for herself.”

Tristan slowed his steps as he grew closer to his grandfather. “She paints more truth than words can carry.” His voice was just a little lower than he had intended.

The duke turned, his eyes sharper than Tristan expected for his years. He reached into his coat, then pressed something into Tristan's palm.

Tristan opened his hand. It was an old ring made of pure gold.

"It belonged to your mother," the duke said. "She specifically requested that I give this to you when I was certain that you were well enough to stand on your own. What I have seen in the last few days has told me all I needed to know."

Tristan's breath caught. "I never thought you would say that to me."

The duke exhaled, his voice edged with regret. "It took me far too long. Forgive an old man his pride."

Tristan closed his fingers over the ring, the weight of it more than metal. "There is nothing left to forgive."

The duke's eyes shone briefly, but he only nodded and turned back toward the house, leaving Tristan standing with the ring tight in his grip.

He entered the atelier quietly, ignoring the soft rays of the sun as he closed the door behind him. The air smelled blatantly of oils and canvas. Eliza stood at her easel, her brush in hand, and the apron over her dress marked faintly with paint. On the wall, his mother's portrait hung, the restored colors warm and alive.

He stopped, staring, and his chest tightened at the sight.

Eliza noticed, turning with a crease of worry in her brow. "Tristan?"

He said nothing. His eyes instead remained fixed on the painting.

“You are staring so hard that it does not make it easy to tell what you are thinking. Does the portrait displease you?”

“Displease? Quite far from it.”

Eliza narrowed her eyes but said nothing.

“It humbles me,” Tristan eventually said, his voice rougher than he meant. “You have managed to give me back a piece of her I thought was gone forever.”

Her lips curved in a quiet smile. “Well, it was not hard. All I had to do was paint what you already carried.”

He stepped closer, the ring hidden in his hand. His pulse quickened. Then, with no flourish or practiced words, he gave her a tense stare.

“Eliza,” he said steadily, “will you renew your vows with me, not out of duty, this time, but out of love?”

Her eyes widened. For a moment, she only stared. Then her hand rose to her lips, and a soft laugh broke through, tangled with tears.

“You know you never needed to ask, Tristan. But if you wish to make me weep in my atelier, then yes. A thousand times.”

He wrapped his hand around hers.

“We should celebrate,” she whispered. “But not only for ourselves. For everyone. We owe them joy as much as we owe it to ourselves. Let it be big, humble, and for the village.”

Tristan tilted his head. “A wedding for Evermere?”

She nodded, smiling through her tears. “Yes. Let them dance and sing. Let them see that light comes after darkness. That is the marriage I want.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss against her knuckles. “Then let us marry again, in the sight of all.”

She brushed her eyes and laughed. “And you will let me choose the flowers this time?”

“I will let you choose everything.”

For a long moment, they stayed close, her brush still in one hand, his hand holding hers. The portrait of his mother watched from the wall, no longer a reminder of loss but of love carried forward.

The ring gleamed faintly in the morning light. He raised her head to his and leaned closer, his lips sealing hers in a kiss that gave them both the exact closure they needed.

A month later, they would have a big wedding. One that would be spoken about for days.

Eliza hoped for a big celebration, but she had no idea just how big it was going to get. People came from all parts of the countryside just to celebrate with them, and she had no idea how she managed to remain up and standing through all of the felicitations.

She walked beside Tristan, her hand settled in his, and every step felt lighter than the last. People stopped them along the way, offering smiles, blessings, and cups raised in cheer.

“Evermere has not seen such joy in years, my lord!” one villager called, his voice rising above the music.

Tristan nodded, a faint smile escaping him. “Then may it never see less.”

The reply drew a cheer from those nearby, and the fiddles picked up a faster tune. Children darted around, playing with each other and with animals. Eliza’s heart swelled watching them, their laughter ringing out in the dusk.

Not far ahead, Clara twirled on the grass, her face flushed with color. Gideon tried to match her steps, his boots clumsy against the rhythm.

“You are stepping on my toes, Captain!” Clara teased, her eyes sparkling.

“Then it must be the boots,” he answered with mock seriousness. “They were made for battle, not for waltzes.”

She blushed, laughing all the same. “Still, I prefer you clumsy to absent.”

The words softened, almost lost in the music, but Eliza caught them. Tristan must have, too, for he leaned closer.

“I suspect Evermere will soon celebrate another wedding,” he murmured.

Eliza raised her brow, amused. “You think so?”

“I have seen that look in a man’s eyes once before ... my own, when I first looked at you.”

Her breath caught, but she smiled, squeezing his hand. “Then perhaps you are right.”

Villagers moved to clear a space in the center of the makeshift dancefloor, where a circle formed and more joined in the dancing. Trays of bread, roasted meats, and pitchers of ale passed from hand to hand. A boy no older than six stumbled into Tristan’s side, clutching a sugared bun.

“Sorry, my lord!” the child squeaked, face smeared with sugar.

Tristan ruffled his hair. “No harm done. Just be sure you save some for the others.”

The boy nodded furiously and ran off again, leaving Eliza laughing softly.

The duke sat a little apart beneath the wide oak tree, but even he allowed himself a smile, his cane propped against the bench. Villagers had gathered around him, offering him cups and drawing him into their talk as though he were one of them, not their duke. The sight warmed Eliza’s heart in a way she hadn’t expected.

Lanterns swung higher as twilight deepened. Someone called for a toast, and cups rose into the fading light.

“To Lord and Lady Vale!”

The cheer that followed lifted into the sky, rolling through the crowd. Eliza’s cheeks warmed at the sound, her heart full. Tristan met her gaze, the flicker of lanterns dancing in his eyes.

As the music softened, they slipped away from the crowd for a moment, walking the quieter path along the garden edge. The hum of voices trailed after them, fading beneath the chirp of night insects.

“I have a question,” Eliza asked, her voice low. “Do you ever wonder if we would have found our way without all the trials?”

Tristan’s jaw tightened as he considered. Then he shook his head. “No. Because it was the trials that led me to you.”

Her throat tightened, words tangling in her chest. “Then we are both fortunate. We did not just endure ... we found love.”

He stopped, turning to face her fully. The lantern light caught his features, gentled them. He leaned forward, his lips brushing hers in a kiss that felt just as steady as the feeling of joy in her heart.

“In each other’s arms,” he whispered against her mouth. “Always.”

THE END?

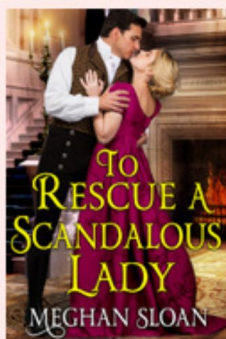
Do you want to know how the relationship between Eliza and Tristan
unfolds in the future?

Then make sure to check out this complimentary short story featuring our
beloved couple!

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<https://henriettaharding.com/eliza>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**The Earl's Forever Quill**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



Do you want **9 FREE novels** straight to your Kindle?

[Claim your FREE novels NOW!](#)



REGAL QUILL
PUBLISHING

*The Earl's
Forever Quill*
HENRIETTA
HARDING

The Earl's Forever Quill

Introduction

Miss Juliana Harcourt never intended to wed. She prefers ink-stained pages to glittering ballrooms. Yet, when her father insists her sister can not marry until she does, Juliana is forced to join the Season, only to end up at odds with a brooding earl whose sharp wit unsettles her more than she dares admit.

Nathaniel Blackthorne, Earl of Loxley, avoids courtships at all costs. Scarred by his parents' troubled marriage and burdened with a failing estate, he keeps his distance from any attachments. Yet, when a clever young lady defends his anonymous essay and dismisses his romantic stories, Nathaniel feels a spark he cannot ignore.

Drawn into a false courtship to quiet meddling families, Juliana and Nathaniel soon find their hearts entangled in ways neither expected. However, when secrets resurface and betrayal puts their trust to the test, can two writers who never believed in romance create their own love story?

Chapter 1

Juliana Harcourt dipped her pen once more and brought the nib to the paper, its surface already filled with bold, angular script. The ink dried quickly in the morning warmth, and she paused to blot the final line before leaning back, the faintest trace of a smile touching her lips.

Mr Jonathan Halliwell had just completed another chapter. If such a man had truly existed, Juliana might have given him her applauding accolades. Alas, he existed only to the reading public and to the man who ensured his royalty payments.

She drew a careful breath, folded the fresh pages, and set them beside the stack already waiting for the post. Across the narrow escritoire, a letter lay open, its neatly printed seal bearing the name of Blackwell & Sons Publishers. She had read it thrice already, but her eyes returned to it again. It was not the first such letter she had received, yet she still always carefully examined the words of acceptance repeatedly.

“We are pleased to inform you that *A Romance at Ramsgate* has been accepted for publication,” it read.

Her hand hovered above the page before she turned it facedown, as if its presence carried a temptation best restrained. The letter offered a quiet triumph, but one not easily shared. In the household beyond her chamber walls, no one must ever hear of Mr Halliwell’s success.

Juliana reached beneath the desk to draw out the small iron key tied on a ribbon. It slipped easily into the concealed drawer built into the lower compartment. The mechanism gave way with a soft click. Inside lay a bundle of yellowing pages, bound with string.

Each envelope bore her name, written with the same formal exactitude in which Mr Halliwell's name was scrawled. However, the letters beyond the formality harboured a much different message. She untied the bundle with care, plucking the first from the top of the fragile stack.

"Miss Harcourt," she read silently to herself, sneering at the words she had perfectly memorized. "While your prose displays some felicity of expression, we do not believe the market favours such a style from a female pen."

She shook her head. That was the letter that had almost cost her the ambition to pursue her dream.

She picked up another letter, its edges softened from too many readings. The wax had crumbled long ago. The hand was bold and inked in blue. It had arrived just after her twentieth birthday, the summer Arabella made her first formal appearance in society.

The memory returned with sharp clarity. On the day she had received that last letter, her father had discovered her with an ink-smudged cheek and papers spread across the floor. She remembered his narrowed eyes, the way his jaw had clenched ...

"A lady ought not concern herself with the affairs of publishers," he said. "There is little honour in rejection, and less dignity in pursuit."

Juliana flinched. She had never meant to allow her father to discover her secret attempts to have her writing published. Her parents supported her talent as a hobby. However, their strict sense of propriety dictated that she never entertain the notion of becoming a 'real author.'

No gentleman from the ton would accept a wife who indulged in such pursuits. Thus, she was hardly surprised at her father's repulsion as he glimpsed her recent rejection letter atop the messy stack of pages on her desk.

"I had hoped to prove them wrong," she said, averting her gaze.

Her father shook his head, his disapproval very apparent in his eyes.

"You have proved yourself stubborn," he said. "And foolish. Have we not impressed upon you how unsavoury this makes you as a potential bride?"

Juliana nodded numbly, but she could not force herself to speak...

The message had been clear. No one, even her own family, would ever accept her as an author ... He had left the room then. She had heard the door close behind him, softly but with finality. Her mother, undoubtedly informed by her husband of their daughter's scandal, said nothing to her for days afterwards, her silence a form of censure worse than scolding.

Still, Juliana had continued to write, albeit under the name of her imaginary author. And even as Mr Halliwell's success continued and grew, she could not forget the words of the letters she quickly returned to their secret drawer of shame.

With a rushed breath, she straightened the pages on the desk, the chapter she had just completed still bearing the freshness of recently dried ink. Mr Halliwell's sharp-tongued, fearless, and scandal-prone heroine had escaped another fictitious entanglement. His readers would cheer her boldness. They always did. The irony did not escape Juliana.

She rose, carrying the finished pages to the writing box, and tucking them behind a folder labelled in a hand no one would recognize. The clock on the mantel chimed ten. She looked once more at the hidden drawer. The letters waited in silence, unanswered by Miss Harcourt. But Mr Halliwell had another acceptance. She had won, if only behind a mask.

Juliana had only just secured her fresh pages when a sharp voice cut through the corridor.

“Arabella, this is absurd,” the baronet said, clearly scolding his youngest daughter. Juliana froze. The sharpness of his address echoed up the stairs, unmistakable even through the carpeted landing.

A muffled reply followed. It was softer and harder to decipher, but it was unmistakably Arabella speaking. She shut the writing box at once. The key, ever near at hand, slid into its lock and disappeared beneath the drawer lining. She crossed the room swiftly, smoothed her skirts, and opened the door.

By the time she reached the morning room, Arabella had pressed herself into the far corner of the settee. Her hands were knotted in the folds of her muslin gown, pale blue, now crumpled from trembling fingers. Her cheeks were blotched, and her eyes were red and swollen.

Sir Lionel Harcourt stood by the hearth, his jaw tight and arms folded.

“Forgive my intrusion,” Juliana said as she entered, hurrying towards her sister. “What has happened?”

Arabella looked up at once, and fresh tears spilled over.

“I told him,” she said, voice catching. “I told him I wished to marry Thomas.”

“Captain Greaves,” Sir Lionel corrected. “Not only has he no estate or notable connections, but there are terms which must be met before I even consider such an arrangement.”

Arabella sobbed.

“He is honourable,” she said indignantly. “And he loves me. That should be all that matters.”

The baronet shook his head, his stony expression unchanging.

“That is not the point,” he said sternly. “Your feelings, though unfortunate, do not alter what must be done.”

Juliana stepped closer. Her hand found Arabella’s and squeezed it.

“What must be done?” she asked, hoping to help her sister. She was aware of Arabella’s feelings for the captain. In fact, she was the one who had encouraged her sister to speak openly to their father about her wishes to marry him. However, it appeared that the conversation had yielded terrible results.

The baronet turned towards her fully, his brow lowered.

“Your sister cannot marry before you,” he said matter-of-factly. “Certainly, not a man of such a lowly status.”

Juliana's stomach turned cold. The words struck with blunt finality.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, wishing she had somehow misheard her father.

The baronet nodded curtly.

"She is the younger daughter," he said. "Custom dictates the elder marries first. It would appear improper otherwise."

Juliana's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Improper?" Juliana repeated.

She felt Arabella's fingers tighten, her voice trembling as she rejoined the discussion.

"He said I must wait," she said. "He said it would shame the family if I married first. He said that no respectable gentleman would overlook such a breach of decorum."

Juliana turned back to their father.

"And do you believe that, Father?" she asked. "Do you truly believe that Arabella's happiness must be postponed because I have not yet secured a husband?"

The baronet nodded again.

“I believe that a man must protect his daughters’ reputations,” he said. “I will not have this family ridiculed in drawing rooms from Hanover Square to Bath. You are four-and-twenty, Juliana. It is time you made a match.”

Juliana’s heart raced as she stared at her father.

“And if I do not wish to?” she asked.

Arabella inhaled sharply, and Juliana saw the look of anguish, the silent plea not to speak further. Her sister’s happiness, so nearly within reach, was now tethered to a condition Juliana had never sought to fulfill.

Sir Lionel raised an eyebrow.

“Then you may content yourself with spinsterhood,” he said. “But you will condemn your sister to the same fate, as I will not allow her to marry until you do. That is final.”

He stepped to the door, then paused.

“To that end, you will attend this Season,” he said in that same cold, emotionless tone. “It will start with Lady Pemberton’s salon this evening. Eligible gentlemen will be present, and it would do you credit to remember how a young lady is expected to comport herself.”

Juliana said nothing. Arabella had turned away, her face buried in a handkerchief. The baronet departed without waiting for a reply. Only once the door had shut behind him did Juliana speak again.

“I had not expected him to object,” she said softly.

Arabella shook her head, patting her sister's arm gently.

"I had hoped that if I told him plainly, he would see I was in earnest," she said. "Besides, as you said, he would never know if Thomas and I did not speak with him."

Juliana sat beside her, unsure of what to say. The sisters sat in silence for a moment. She had been perfectly content with the prospect of a spinster's life, and until then, her father did not seem eager to press the matter of marriage. However, her own choices would be the end of her sister's dream. How could her father be so willingly cruel to daughters he claimed to adore?

Arabella shook her head, then reached for Juliana's hand again.

"I do not blame you," she said firmly despite her tears. "Do not sit here blaming yourself."

Juliana squeezed her sister's hand softly.

"You should," Juliana said. "I would."

Arabella gave her head another firm shake.

"But I do not," she said. "You did not ask for this."

Juliana looked at her sister's tearful eyes, so open and sincere, and felt a slow, cold twist of shame beneath her ribs.

No, she thought bitterly. I have not asked for it. But I have also done nothing to avoid it. She had ignored every entreaty, dismissed every eligible suitor, and undermined every suggestion of matrimony with barbed remarks and elusive answers. She had been determined not to marry, and now that refusal would cost her younger sister her future.

“I am not like you,” she said softly. “Father seems to forget that. I do not wish to write books, travel the world, or shock dinner parties with irreverent remarks. I only want a home of my own. A husband who loves me.”

Juliana’s throat tightened. Her sister had cast no blame with her words, but Juliana took responsibility just the same.

“Then you shall have one, Arabella,” she said with resigned resolve.

Arabella looked at her.

“How?” she asked.

Juliana stood and smoothed her gown.

“I will attend Lady Pemberton’s salon tonight,” she said. “I will smile. I will converse. I will do everything required of a marriageable young lady.”

Arabella blinked.

“But you—”

“I have no desire to marry,” Juliana said, finishing the thought for her sister. “But I have even less desire to be the reason you do not.”

Arabella looked stunned. Juliana leaned down and kissed her sister’s brow. Then she turned to go. She had meant what she said. However, that did not suddenly make her all right with agreeing to a marriage she would never want. She needed to think and sort her thoughts before she said something to make Arabella feel guilty.

She climbed the stairs slowly, each step heavier than the last. Her chamber door closed behind her with a soft click. She moved to the *escritoire* again, the box where Mr Halliwell’s next chapters lay waiting. Her hands trembled as she opened it.

A scathing satire began to form in her mind. A farce of a Season filled with witless young men and simpering chaperones. A heroine determined to remain untouched by marriage, only to find herself ensnared by irony and fate. She would attend this Season.

She would study every fool, every hypocrite, every pious matron, and every arrogant suitor who believed a woman’s greatest triumph lay in marriage. She would write them all down. She would turn this absurd injustice into the most biting novel she had ever composed. She would find a way to secure Arabella’s future without sacrificing her own.

Chapter 2

Nathaniel had always despised London in the spring. The streets swelled with noise and soot, the stench of horses, sweat, and fashionable desperation rising like heat from the cobbles. The parks teemed with peacocks, both feathered and human, strutting for attention. Every salon,

every assembly room, and every drawing room became another stage for matrimonial farce.

There is no way that all these people are as happy and unified as they appear, he thought bitterly as he observed yet another obviously married couple laughing and clinging to one another. He stood at the window of his godmother's townhouse on Berkeley Square, watching the carriages parade past. Somewhere below, liveried footmen shouted to one another.

He turned from the glass. The room behind him bore all the marks of the dowager countess's influence. There were gilt mirrors, Aubusson carpets, and an absurd number of porcelain figurines on every table. Not one thing was out of place. Not one shadow was permitted.

He rubbed his brow, then pressed the heel of his hand against his temple. The headache had started before breakfast and had not since relented. He could still hear her voice, clear as crystal and twice as sharp, issuing orders as she inspected his cravat ...

"You are six-and-twenty, Nathaniel," she had said. "You are an earl. You cannot sulk about in Yorkshire forever. A title must be visible. It must be respected."

He said nothing, despite his silently protesting thoughts. There had been no point, as she had already made her point quite clear.

"I have written to Lady Pemberton," she said. "Her salon is this evening. Every eligible girl in London will be there."

He had not asked whether they would be intelligent, kind, or capable of enduring a northern winter with equanimity. He knew the answer already.

The truth was not that he opposed marriage. The truth was that he had never witnessed one worth emulating.

He could still remember the slam of the drawing room door on that winter night. His mother's voice had been shrill and her footfall uneven. She had been drinking. Again ...

"Your father spends the family fortune like a child in a sweet shop," she said to a son who was far too young to hear the words even once, never mind for the tenth time. "And I am the one left to beg our butcher for credit."

He was fourteen then. He had not moved from the staircase.

Much later that night, he witnessed his father come in from Brooks's with his waistcoat undone. His breeches were stained with wine, he was two days unshaven, and he reeked of brandy and betrayal.

"You shall not speak to me of restraint," his father said when confronted by an equally inebriated wife, slurring the words. "I am a peer of the realm. You are merely my wife. My conduct is my own, and you would do well to remember that ..."

Nathaniel had learned then what society meant by nobility. It meant freedom to ruin whomever one pleased and expect deference for the privilege. It meant presenting a façade to one's peers while living a life of the utmost debauchery and hypocrisy when no one was looking.

And marriage was not an enviable or desirable institution. It was just another means to appear respectable and acceptable, and a way to bear children to help keep up that appearance.

It had taken years to restore even a fraction of the estate's solvency. His father's debts were buried in every corner of the country. Nathaniel had spent his Cambridge years not at leisure but in the law library, learning precisely how many ways a man might be held responsible for the chaos of his lineage.

In studying law, he had found solace, not in the information he found, but in the factuality of it all. The law was definite and solid. It was not ambiguous in its meanings or its finality. It was straightforward and unyielding. Most of all, it was consistent and unable to lie to him.

He had returned to Loxley Hall after his mother's funeral. The place had been gutted of servants and dignity. He had lived in two rooms while the rest rotted. The tenants had come, hat in hand, with quiet hope. He had hired a steward, cut leases, repaired roofs, fired drunkards, and paid the schoolmaster's arrears.

And still, it had not been enough. The land needed drainage. The tenants needed seeds and tools. The hall needed walls that did not admit every wind from the moor. In short, it needed more than his father's coffers had left to offer.

He had sent a letter to the Dowager Countess of Halford last November, requesting the release of the remainder of his trust. Her reply had been prompt, and it was the very reason he had travelled to her home.

Marry respectably. Then we shall speak of money.

She had raised him when his parents would not. She had paid for his education. And she had once more taken him in while his estate remained largely unsuitable for habitation. He did not doubt she believed herself right with her absurd demand. And perhaps, she was. He would not pretend to be

the foremost expert on earldoms or marriages, and certainly not on societal standards.

Those who observed him out in public did so with raised eyebrows, as he had little use for the expectations of virtual strangers. Yes, it was possible that his godmother truly was thinking of what was best, not only for him, but for the future of his estate and earldom, as well. But the price she asked would bind him to a future he had never desired.

He stood and walked to the escritoire. A stack of correspondence awaited reply. He ignored it and opened the bottom drawer instead. Beneath the accounts book and unopened invitations lay a battered folio. He drew it out. The title page contained only one name: The Witty Widow of Wycliffe. It was a romantic serial in five instalments and written by a man who did not exist. He had sent it anonymously to a publishing agent in Holborn, unsure whether it would be laughed from the office. It had not been.

He had published four more under the same signature. They paid very little. He had never revealed the truth to anyone. But those stories had preserved his sanity in Yorkshire winters.

They had been the only part of him untouched by scandal, debt, or duty. And now, they too would be sacrificed in favour of his duties to his estate, his tenants, and to his godmother. And to a future bride, it seems, he thought with a shudder. The future Lady Something Blackthorne, and Lord Nathaniel Blackthorne ... All hail the Earl and Countess of Loxley ...

He stared at the folio for a long moment before tucking it away again and then sent orders for his valet to meet him in his chambers. Then, he reluctantly left his desk and his work to make ready for that evening's salon, which was to be the first of many dreaded social events to come for him. His only hope was that his godmother might recant her demand for

marriage when she saw how utterly he failed to attract a bride during the Season.

The Pemberton townhouse stood on Bruton Street, its windows blazing with candlelight. Conversation spilled from the drawing room to the hall, muffled only by the velvet draperies and the soft rustle of silk. Nathaniel and the countess entered the townhouse, greeted with the polite indifference reserved for those newly returned to Society after too long an absence.

The spinster Lady Pemberton, resplendent in peacock blue, welcomed them with effusion and immediately turned to secure their presence in what she called “the literary circle.” In truth, it was an uneven collection of titled men and ladies whose intellect ranged from keen to ornamental.

After a brief, cordial exchange with Lord Penbrooke, who looked as if his outfit had been tailored directly from the dress of his hosting wife, Nathaniel took his place near the hearth, schooling his features into mild interest. He had no desire to speak and even less to be spoken to. But then a voice cut through the civilized hum.

“I say again, the anonymous essayist’s proposals are dangerously naïve,” a man said, his voice bellowing as Nathaniel turned to identify him. “To suggest that legal reform must serve the tenant farmer as much as the landowner is a pleasing fantasy, but one born of inexperience.”

Nathaniel recognized the speaker as Lord Reginald Beckett, a man with more titles than convictions. He knew the essay in question as well. It had been his. The essay had been published under the heading Conscience and Common Law: Reflections from the North and had circulated modestly among reform-minded gentlemen. It had also received no small share of derision.

“Perhaps the experience of which you speak is what is naïve,” he said. His godmother gave him a warning look, one which he ignored.

Lord Beckett looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Naivety implies a belief in something impossible or untrue,” he said. “And I believe that I speak for every businessman here when I say that our experience with such matters is very real.”

Nathaniel nodded. He knew he should continue the debate with care, lest he give himself away as the author. He contemplated his point while another gentleman chimed in to agree with Lord Beckett.

He might have chosen to remain silent, had a young lady not spoken.

“Forgive me, Lord Beckett, but I believe you misread the essay entirely,” she said. “The author does not propose that landowners surrender their rights. He argues that justice must consider the balance between duty and power.”

The room turned, falling eerily silent. Nathaniel looked at her fully. She was seated just beyond the circle, near a table of pamphlets and periodicals considered to be ambitious reading materials for noble women. Her gown was a modest green silk, serviceable but well-fitted, with no excessive ornament. Her hair was arranged without affectation. Her expression, however, was earnest, intelligent, and utterly unrepentant.

Lord Beckett narrowed his eyes.

“You have a generous view of the matter, My Lady,” he said. “You must allow that essays written anonymously often disguise their author’s true

purpose. This one, while prettily phrased, strikes me as the product of youthful rebellion.”

Nathaniel watched as her chin lifted.

“Or moral clarity, My Lord,” she said. “One need not be a revolutionary to believe that stewardship includes responsibility to those who live and labour on one’s land. If the laws fail to account for that, they are not just.”

Silence followed once more. Even Nathaniel’s godmother looked briefly uncertain whether to reprimand her or applaud.

Nathaniel cleared his throat, intrigued to observe such a seemingly intelligent young woman.

“Have you read the author’s other works, My Lady?” he asked.

She turned towards him.

“I have,” she said with a confidence that enthralled everyone present.

Nathaniel smirked, taking a casual step towards her.

“Then allow me to ask you something,” he said. “Do you believe the essays to be persuasive?”

She nodded.

“They are,” she said. “Though I confess, I prefer his earlier work. There is less polish but more urgency. One feels he is writing from lived experience, not ambition.”

Nathaniel tilted his head.

“And what of the more entertaining offerings in the periodicals?” he asked. “I understand *The Witty Widow of Wycliffe* continues to enjoy some popularity.”

A few ladies tittered. Someone mentioned a scandalous third instalment. The woman looked unimpressed.

“I have read it,” she said. “It is amusing enough. Light fare. But the author does not understand love.”

A murmur passed through the group. Lord Beckett smothered a laugh into his brandy. Nathaniel studied the young woman with raised ire.

“Indeed?” he asked. “That is a bold declaration.”

She met his eye.

“It is a bold premise to presume that love may be reduced to farce and flourish,” she said with disconcerting confidence. “Wit alone does not make a heart true.”

His lips curved.

“Perhaps the author meant only to amuse,” he said, knowing perfectly well that the young lady had a point.

She shrugged, looking utterly impassive.

“Then he has succeeded,” she said. “But he has not persuaded his audience. Nor has he moved them.”

Nathaniel bristled, but he forced his expression to remain unmoved. Lord Beckett raised his glass.

“A fair critique, My Lady,” Nathaniel said coolly. “And, I might add, more civil than the ones published in the reviews.”

Nathaniel bit down on his tongue. Never had he heard such public criticism of his work. He was not a friend of Lord Pembroke, and he did not know the young lady. He was not adverse to constructive criticism, but he felt as though he himself was being assessed. He pushed aside the thought that perhaps he deserved such harsh judgments on a subject he was sure he did not understand. He was proud of his writing, and it was his pride that reacted to the words of the people around him.

Beside Lady Pemberton, who was hosting the salon that was rapidly becoming the most interesting event Nathaniel had ever attended, another older lady rose hastily, as if someone had just lit her dress ablaze. She rushed to the young woman’s side, and her scolding eyes could have burned directly through the younger lady.

“Juliana, darling, I would like to introduce the Earl of Loxley,” she said, with a pointed glare at the young woman. “Lord Loxley, this is Miss Juliana Harcourt, daughter of myself and the Baronet Sir Lionel Harcourt.”

Before she could offer a pleasantry, her mother took her arm. Only Nathaniel could see how fierce the older woman's grip was. Before he looked away, he noticed the resemblance. It was clear that the older woman had once been very striking. Much like her daughter was, despite her crimson cheeks.

"Juliana," she said in a voice sharp enough to pierce satin. "We are leaving. Now."

Miss Harcourt nodded without protest.

"Good evening," she said, more to the room than to him.

He watched them go. They paused at the foot of the stairs. While the rest of the room began buzzing with gossip, Nathaniel found himself eavesdropping. The baronet's wife spoke in a low voice, but not quite softly enough to keep the words from echoing off the walls and filtering back to Nathaniel's ears.

"You have humiliated yourself in front of half of London," her mother said, not troubling to lower her voice.

"You speak like a bluestocking and make yourself ridiculous. No one wants a wife who argues with titled men in drawing rooms. That man is a peer. You are the daughter of a baronet with an unfortunate talent for being overheard and a curse of speaking too bluntly. You will be silent when spoken to and agreeable when asked. That is the way of things."

The voices faded down the stairs. Nathaniel remained in his chair, still holding his untouched glass. He did not know why her words had wounded him, but they still stung. She had dismissed his romantic writing with a

precision that left no room for complaint. She had praised his political work with sincerity.

Yet it was her remark about love that remained. He had written the Widow of Wycliffe series to amuse. He had delighted in the banter, the clever twists, the romantic contrivances. He had never claimed to understand love. But now he wondered if there was any credence to Miss Harcourt's words.

His father had spoken of love only when drunk, calling it a woman's trap. His mother had treated it like currency, exchanged for jewels and influence. Nathaniel had always believed both were wrong.

Yet he had never considered what might be right. He leaned forward, bracing his arms on his knees. She had called his essays urgent. She had called his stories shallow, and he did not know which mattered more. Even so, he found that he hoped to see her again.

Chapter 3

The following evening, Lady Chantwood's ballroom shimmered with chandeliers and restless silks, with every surface polished to a gleam and every guest postured for display. Juliana stood at her mother's side with her gloved hands folded too neatly before her. Arabella, radiant in a blush-pink gown, whispered a nervous hope that Captain Greaves might attend, though her smile faded each time their father glanced her way. Juliana did not speak.

She remained alert, glancing around the room for danger. Not danger in the common sense, as she knew they were perfectly safe. She looked for the kind of danger that would be dressed in satin, danger reeking of privilege, danger presented with the forced charm of an older man whom no one dared refuse. She found him near the refreshment table.

Baron George Pembroke wore plum-coloured velvet, his cravat a fussy arrangement better suited to a younger man. His expression suggested permanent disappointment with everyone but himself. She had overheard Lady Denning call him "distinguished." He had been a widower for six years. His reputation was unblemished, his fortune secure.

His manners were the kind that required constant defence from other men. He meant no harm, they always said. He was only being kind, even when his gaze lingered a little too long in places it did not belong on proper ladies. And her father was speaking with him, pointing in their direction with a satisfied smile.

Not in our direction, she realized with horror. In my direction.

Her stomach turned as she watched Sir Lionel Harcourt approach at last, his chest inflated with paternal pride and expectation.

“There you are, Daughter,” he said, as if he had been searching for her all night, instead of arriving with her only moments before. “Stand up straight.”

Juliana obeyed, her spine stiffening.

“I have secured the introduction,” he said, giving her a horribly pointed look. “You must not waste it.”

Juliana swallowed the bile rising in her throat.

“Of course, Papa,” she said.

The baronet looked her over, his smile steadfast, even as his eyes scrutinized her.

“Smile,” he said, through clenched teeth. “A young lady does not scowl in company. Certainly not in public.”

Juliana tried until her cheeks ached to comply with her father.

“I am smiling,” she said, even though it felt more like a grimace to her.

He gave her a hard look, which told her that he agreed. She took a slow breath, willing her face to relax and appear more natural. It was not for her sake, or for her father’s. It was for the sake of Arabella and the future she deserved to have.

Lord Pembroke reached them with the air of one doing a charitable deed. He bowed and kissed her gloved hand with a flourish that made her fingers curl in protest. Her father paid her discomfort no heed as he made the formal introductions.

“Miss Harcourt,” Lord Pembroke said. “Your father speaks most highly of your accomplishments. He tells me you are fond of books.”

Juliana curtsied, still struggling with her unnatural smile.

“Yes, My Lord,” she said.

The baron gave a nod, his eyes already filling with the contempt she had seen in many other potential suitors.

“I have an excellent collection at my estate in Berkshire,” he said. “Though I confess, I rarely open them. I prefer conversation. As I am certain that a proper young lady such as yourself would.”

Juliana’s grimace trembled, threatening a scowl.

“I am sure you find it more enlightening,” she said with unmistakable scathing.

He chuckled, though she had meant no humour.

“Your father tells me you read French,” he said.

Juliana nodded, her heart beating wildly.

“I do,” she said, wondering at her father’s choice of words. Why would he speak so much of her reading and interests if he were ashamed of them?

The baron gave another nod, his eyes assessing everything below hers.

“Ah, Molière and Rousseau, no doubt,” he said. “I believe young ladies are fond of sentiment.”

Juliana bristled.

“I prefer Voltaire, My Lord,” she said coldly.

He raised his brows.

“How spirited,” he said. “One does not often find such opinions in a ballroom.”

Juliana shuddered with the effort it took to keep from turning and walking away from the loathsome gentleman.

“No, My Lord,” she said. “They often remain unread on a gentleman’s shelf.”

Her father cleared his throat, but she did not meet his gaze. Lord Pembroke’s smile faltered, then returned with forced benevolence.

“You must allow me the honour of the next dance,” he said. “I find your views most invigorating.”

She looked to her mother, who gave the barest nod of approval. It seemed as though even her mother was ignoring the obvious nature of the baron. But Arabella's hopeful, fearful eyes gave her refreshed determination.

"Of course, My Lord," Juliana said stiffly.

He led her to the floor with exaggerated courtesy. His hand at her back pressed lower than propriety allowed, and his fingers splayed as if he meant to claim what he touched. The scent of brandy clung to him like a second coat. Juliana fixed her eyes on the far wall, refusing to meet his gaze any longer than she must.

The music began. She moved through the steps with practiced precision, her expression composed, if not quite pleasant. Lord Pembroke talked without pause.

"I do think the country is far preferable to London, do you not?" he asked, the bite of his words hardly concealed. "The air is cleaner, the lanes are quiet, and there is none of this modern nonsense about women's opinions." He smirked, looking her over once more. "You would find my library charming. My late wife never went near it. She said it smelled of old vellum."

Juliana lifted her chin, still avoiding his eyes.

"I should find that most agreeable," she said, remaining coolly detached.

"Of course," he said with apparent distaste. "Your father says you are not too forward with your cleverness. That is a relief."

Juliana did not miss the irony with which he spoke.

“Indeed,” she said flatly.

He leaned in.

“Though a clever woman, if properly managed, can be very pleasing,” he said. His breath soured the air between them.

She pulled back, but the dance held her in place. She could keep her discomfort from showing or continue with her sharp tongue. She could no longer do both.

“You are trembling,” he said.

Juliana forced a still expression.

“It must be the heat,” she said, summoning all the calmness she could muster.

The baron smiled again.

“You will grow accustomed to it,” he said. “The nervousness of youth fades once one is married. I have always believed a young wife ought to be instructed gently.”

Juliana looked at him, barely hiding her repulsion.

“Instructed?” she asked.

He gave her hand a tight squeeze, but he did not reply. Her mind catalogued each point of discomfort, like the hand that lingered too long at her waist, the cloying mixture of brandy and perfume, and the way he spoke as if marriage were a classroom and she the unruly pupil.

He intended to make his bride bend to his every whim, and who knew what he would do to one who did not. And from the way her father was acting, he knew exactly what the baron had in mind.

The music ended. However, he did not release her.

“Perhaps you will favour me with another,” he said, clear that he did not intend to grant her the freedom of choice.

She drew breath to firmly reject the demand, but her father’s eyes were upon her.

The last thing she expected was to find salvation. Yet it approached in green satin with cream trim and silver cufflinks. An unruly strand of dark hair fell onto the forehead of Lord Loxley, dancing just above his dark hazel eyes. His gaze was politely curious, but his smile was warm and intent.

“I believe this next dance is mine,” he said, offering his hand.

Juliana’s heart leapt into her throat, even as she gave him a bland curtsy.

Lord Pembroke looked displeased.

“I was not aware the lady had made an engagement,” he said.

The earl gave a tight smile.

“I asked only moments ago,” Nathaniel said, still offering her his arm. “Miss Harcourt, shall we?”

Juliana took his arm without hesitation and before the baron had the opportunity to argue about the impossibility of Lord Loxley’s claim regarding when he asked for his dance.

“Thank you, My Lord,” she said with deliberate gratitude.

As they walked to their place, her breath steadied. The music began anew at a brisk pace. She met the earl’s eyes.

“I am indebted to you,” she said.

Lord Loxley shook his head. His expression was warm, but largely unreadable.

“No,” he said. “I was merely aware that I should ask you for a dance.”

She gave a dry glance towards Lord Pembroke, who had returned to the wall with the expression of a man denied a prize.

“One would think the baron was just denied a valuable prize,” she muttered, unable to hide her bitterness.

The earl gave a curt nod.

“Or that he was a child denied a puppy,” he said.

She laughed despite herself.

“He smells of brandy,” she said, her nose wrinkling.

Lord Loxley nodded, mimicking her disgust.

“Indeed, he did,” he said.

Juliana shuddered, speaking again before she intended to.

“He believes he might train a clever wife into obedience,” she said.

She stared at the earl with horror, wondering at her incapability to mind her words, especially with someone of the earl’s status. But yet again, he surprised her as he smirked.

“Then he ought to marry a pony,” he said with a low chortle.

Her laughter spilled over, bright and unguarded. She was uncertain why the earl had taken a sudden interest in dancing with her, especially after the strain of their first meeting, but relief overwhelmed her in the moment, and all she could be was grateful.

The music rose around them, sweeping them into the next movement. The earl’s hand remained light at her waist, his steps exact, but it was the silence that had suddenly settled between them that felt strange. It was not

awkward, as she would have expected. Instead, it was curiously free of strain. When he spoke again, his voice was low and measured.

“You do not enjoy the Season,” he said as if it were a fact she had just given him herself.

Juliana blinked in surprise before nodding.

“That is plain enough, I suppose,” she said.

The earl nodded.

“To one who also dislikes all the nonsense, it is,” he said.

Again, Juliana was surprised.

“You seem to tolerate it better than I,” she said. “And you are dancing of your own volition.”

The strange smirk returned to Lord Loxley’s face as he shrugged once more.

“You looked as if you might need rescuing,” he said.

She nodded, oddly satisfied to admit her displeasure with the baron’s company.

“I did,” she said, blatantly ignoring the gawking eyes of two debutantes who were staring and gossiping very apparently behind their fans. “My

father has already decided what is best for me. My younger sister must wait until I marry, even though she already has a gentleman vying for her hand in marriage. It is a rule of his that his eldest daughter weds first. Arabella is in love with a poor but honourable naval officer. I am only in the way.”

He looked at her sharply.

“And you mean to sacrifice your future for hers?” he asked.

Juliana lifted her chin.

“I mean to see her married,” she said firmly. “As for my own future, it was never mine to claim.”

She expected the earl to recoil or fall into a genuinely uncomfortable silence when she did not continue explaining. Instead, however, his eyes slowly widened as the song faded to its end.

“Follow me,” he said quietly, offering his arm before she could argue.

As before, she took it, trusting the man she had only spoken to twice, even as he led her to a secluded corner of the ballroom. He did not speak again until they were well out of sight of the other guests. He glanced around with a conspiratory expression.

“My godmother wants to see me settled,” he said. “She means to withhold crucial funds for my estate and tenants if I do not take marriage more seriously. And your father wishes to see you married. We each have our reasons to avoid those outcomes.”

Juliana nodded slowly.

“Yes,” she said cautiously.

He chuckled, this time with something more than dark dread behind it.

“Then why not satisfy them with something that requires no sincerity?” he asked. “A courtship. A false one. It would give you freedom from unpleasant suitors. It would show my godmother I am making an effort. No feelings, no promises. Merely an elaborate performance if you will.”

Juliana nearly stumbled as she tried to find her words.

“A performative courtship?” she asked, uncertain whether she had heard him correctly.

The earl nodded as he steadied her.

“Was that too bold?” he asked.

She shook her head, attempting to understand what was happening.

“No,” she said slowly. “Only unexpected.”

He gave her a nod, though she thought he looked wounded. Or perhaps afraid.

“I should think you, of all people, might appreciate the logic,” he said.

She held up her hand.

“I do,” she said. “Entirely. But you speak as if deception comes easily to you.”

He shook his head fervently.

“It does not,” he said. “But necessity outweighs comfort. My estate has suffered enough for my father’s excesses. If I fail to act, others will pay for it.”

Juliana bit her lip. She should not be considering such a mad notion. She was not sure she even understood. The idea of an arranged marriage was not foreign to her. This, however, was unheard of.

“And if we are discovered?” she asked, surprised it was the only question from her lips.

Lord Loxley did not take long to give his answer, as if he had thought of it before she asked.

“Then I shall claim affection and face the scandal,” he said.

She gave him a long look.

“You would throw yourself upon the sword for me?” she asked.

He allowed a half-smile.

“We should both benefit from the arrangement,” he said. “I am not in the habit of risking myself without cause.”

Juliana turned her head, noting how deeply in conversation the baron was with her parents. He had surely told them of the unorthodox interruption of his dance with her. She could guess how they would react once he did.

“I must think on it,” she said.

The earl’s expression relaxed, as if she had answered affirmatively.

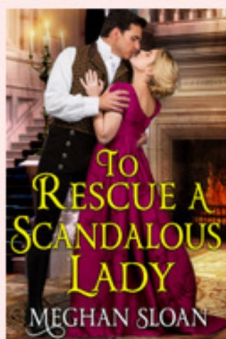
“Of course,” he said. “I can call upon you at your home in two days’ time, if it pleases you.”

She paused for another moment. Was she really entertaining such an outlandish, seemingly impossible plot?

“Very well,” she said as she began to wonder if she had any control over her words at all. She had meant to ask more questions or raise more concerns. But it seemed that something within her was attracted to the wildest question she had ever asked. Could it be done? Or would they find themselves in a worse position than they were already in?

Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)

Also, please turn the page to find a special gift from me!



Do you want **9 FREE novels** straight to your Kindle?

[Claim your FREE novels NOW!](#)

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel “The Lord's Favourite Game”** (available only to my subscribers) for **FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://henriettaharding.com/diana>



