



To Love Edmund

Ashcombe

Story by Priscilla Li

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This is a work of fiction.

It is pouring rain again on the London streets — relentless, enclosing. Paris had felt sunnier somehow, breezier, less confining. London always seems to press inward.

He ducks into the first café he finds, clearly seeking refuge — coffee, something sweet, perhaps a moment's peace after travel. I recognise that particular weariness; stations and departures leave it behind.

I set his coffee before him, along with a cream-filled éclair.

He glances up — curious rather than bold — my voice, it seems, having caught his attention before my face properly has.

“You’re not from here,” he says lightly. There is no accusation in it, only interest. He leans slightly closer, and I notice then his dark grey eyes — very direct, very observant.

I instinctively retreat half a step.

“Neither are you... sir,” I reply.

He laughs — an easy, unoffended sound.

“Caught out. I’ve only just returned from France. And you, Miss?”

I do not answer. Instead, I offer the faintest polite smile and slip back toward the kitchen before he can press further.

Still, I feel his gaze follow me.

Curious. Increasingly so.

The proprietor chuckles as he passes his table. “She’s a secretive one, that girl. Don’t take it personally.”

“I don’t mind at all,” the gentleman replies.

A pause.

Then, softer — almost to himself:

“A girl with secrets is usually worth knowing.”

I serve him quickly and move away just as swiftly, fully intending this to be our only encounter. I am quite wrong. He remains for nearly two hours — coffee after coffee, pastry after pastry. My employer is delighted with the steady patronage. I, however, feel rather like a mouse under the steady observation of a very patient cat.

He watches me move about the café — I can feel it without looking. The more carefully I avoid his gaze, the more deliberate his attention seems to become.

Eventually he pays and leaves. But the following day, he returns. And the next. Soon it becomes routine: one coffee, one pastry, and that same watchful presence.

I try not to appear unsettled, though I begin making small mistakes — a dropped scone here, the wrong sandwich there, misheard orders. Entirely unlike me. He is... distracting.

I notice, to my growing irritation, that he finds this amusing. A quiet chuckle when I fumble, an arched brow when I err, a suppressed grin when I correct myself too hastily. It begins to feel like a private game to him — one in which my composure is the prize.

Then one afternoon:

“Miss.”

I am already on edge. If I continue making errors, my position here may well become uncertain. I turn toward him — perhaps more sharply than intended.

“Yes, sir?”

“I shall have the usual,” he says calmly — that infuriating “usual” he knows unsettles me.

A pause.

“And perhaps an extra croissant today... just so nothing is forgotten.”

The mischief in his eyes is unmistakable.

I pivot, retrieve the croissant with deliberate care, then place it onto his plate with rather more force than etiquette recommends. Maintaining steady eye contact, I present it with an excessively polite smile before retreating to wipe dishes nearby.

He takes a bite — slowly — still watching me.

“Thank you,” he says, stretching the words as though testing my patience.
“And perhaps some water as well?”

A beat.

“Please.”

The “please” is almost worse than the request.

I very nearly set the glass down harder than necessary — but I catch sight of my employer observing from the counter, his wife peering curiously over the display case. The entire room seems suddenly attentive.

He notices it too.

“The water would be lovely,” he says, just loudly enough for them to hear. “If it isn’t too much trouble.”

The café grows noticeably quieter.

I swallow.

“No trouble at all, sir. Is there anything else I may assist you with?”

He leans back expansively, far too relaxed for my liking. “Excellent service,” he remarks. His gaze flicks briefly toward my employer, then back to me.

“Another coffee. Black. No sugar.”

A pause — his voice lowers.

“And your name. What might it be, sweetheart?”

The last word is deliberate provocation. He knows perfectly well we have an audience. I instinctively step back. I do not wish to answer — not here, not like this. From the corner of my eye, I see my employer still watching. Then he grunts:

“Elsie — come give me a hand with the back orders. It’s quieting down.”

Relief floods me. I murmur a polite excuse and retreat quickly, grateful for the interruption.

I hear him speaking to my employer as I busy myself at the back — opening boxes, stacking supplies, pretending to be entirely absorbed in my work. I do not turn around. I certainly do not listen.

Yet his voice carries.

“Elsie,” he repeats softly, as though testing the sound of it.

My employer seems pleased by the generous gratuity he leaves; I hear the coins distinctly. Then their conversation lowers, though not enough to escape entirely.

“Your girl is interesting,” he remarks.

My employer shrugs. “Arrived last winter. Never quite said why. Chinese accent, perfect English. Keeps herself private.”

I continue fussing with boxes that do not particularly require fussing.

“She works hard,” my employer adds. “Never late. Never complains. Customers like her.”

A chuckle. “Especially the gentlemen.”

There is a brief pause — then the gentleman’s voice again, closer this time.

“What a popular little waitress.”

“She’d likely object to that description,” my employer says dryly. “Polite girl, yes — but she’s got spirit under it. Spine, you might say.”

“I suspected as much.”

Another pause.

“How long has she been here?”

“About a year. Came during that dreadful winter storm, remember?”

Footsteps follow. A hat lifted. Coins again. The door opens; rain sounds swell briefly — then fade as it closes.

I do not turn.

Not until I am certain he has gone.

Days pass. To my surprise, he does not return. At first, the absence feels like relief. No watchful gaze. No unsettling attention. Work resumes its ordinary rhythm.

And yet... something feels faintly missing. I dislike admitting that even to myself. The café returns to its usual bustle — businessmen in haste, tourists escaping the weather, familiar regulars with predictable orders. Perfectly normal.

“Elsie!” my employer calls from the counter. “Table four needs this.”

“Yes — coming in just a moment,” I reply, wiping my hands and collecting the tray.

Normal again. Entirely normal.

At least, that is what I tell myself.

I collect the tray and make my way to table four. No mysterious gentleman in the corner today. No persistent orders for coffee and pastries. Just... quiet.

The elderly couple thank me kindly as I set their order down. I smile, return to the counter, and wipe it absently while rain taps steadily against the windows.

My employer glances over.

“Lost your shadow, I see,” he remarks with a small chuckle. “That gentleman had become rather regular.”

“Yes,” I murmur. “A somewhat annoying one.”

He lifts a brow — I am not known for complaining — but says nothing further. The door chimes again, another ordinary customer enters, and the day continues in its usual rhythm. Yet his absence grows oddly noticeable.

By evening the café begins to empty. Chairs are stacked, tables wiped, the familiar closing routine settling in.

I step outside the doorway for a moment’s air. London stretches before me — stone façades, brick shopfronts, the steady movement of carriages and motorcars alike. The sunset leaves a violet haze hanging in the sky.

“It is rather different from... home,” I murmur to myself.

The café door creaks behind me. I turn, expecting a late patron.

It is him.

Edmund Ashcombe — slightly damp from the rain, hair wind-tossed, expression unexpectedly tentative.

“Still open?” he asks, closing his umbrella before stepping inside. “I appear to have missed luncheon. Perhaps just a coffee, if any remains.”

I cannot quite hide my surprise. I had not expected his return. With my employer occupied at the back, I prepare the coffee myself — carefully measuring the grounds, locking the portafilter into place, watching the dark liquid drip steadily into the ceramic cup.

The aroma fills the air. When I hand it to him, his fingers brush mine — lightly, briefly.

“Thank you,” he says softly. Then, after a pause:
“You are still here.”

Not quite a question. More an observation weighted with meaning.

I tilt my head slightly.
“So are you.”

He takes a sip, eyes lingering on mine over the rim of the cup.

“I had matters to attend to,” he says vaguely. “But I found myself... drawn back.”
His fingers rest against the counter, tapping idly.
“I missed my afternoon coffee.”

A beat.

“And perhaps something else.”

His voice lowers slightly in the otherwise empty café.

I raise a brow. “Something else?”

His lips curve faintly before he takes another slow sip of coffee. Rain intensifies outside, drumming steadily against the windows. He leans slightly nearer, lowering his voice.

“Your company.”

He sets the cup down with a quiet clink. The frankness of it unsettles me more than teasing ever did.

“I find your presence... rather agreeable,” he continues, a hint of amusement returning. “Despite your initial hostility toward me.”

He reaches for a sugar packet, opening it thoughtfully.

“But, sir,” I say, genuinely perplexed, “I scarcely spoke to you at all.”

He laughs softly — warm, unforced.

“Precisely. Your silence proved more interesting than most conversations I endure.”

He stirs the sugar into his coffee, watching it dissolve.

“You work diligently. You complain very little. There is a quiet intensity about you — as though you are always observing.”

His gaze softens.

“Most people fill silence with noise. You seem comfortable letting it exist.”

I cannot help a small smile.

“As do you,” I say slowly.

His expression brightens slightly.

“Touché.”

He leans back a fraction, rain still murmuring outside.

“Perhaps that is why I find myself... intrigued. A woman who can match my wit is uncommon. One who can do so without speaking at all? Rarer still.”

For a moment, I simply stare at him. Then an uncomfortable realisation surfaces — one I have learned through less pleasant experience.

“If you are suggesting,” I say carefully, “that I accompany you whilst you remain married — I cannot.”

I raise my hands instinctively, defensive.

“I will not be used, sir. Not in that way.”

I seize a tea towel and begin wiping an already clean table, hoping activity will end the conversation.

His expression shifts — surprise first, then something more thoughtful. He sets his coffee aside and steps closer, though not intrusively.

“Elsie,” he says quietly. “I suggested no such arrangement. And I would never ask it of you.”

A brief pause.

“I simply enjoy observing you. That is all.”

He pulls out a chair and gestures lightly.

“Sit. Please.”

I glance toward the kitchen. No sign of my employer. After a moment’s hesitation, I sit, smoothing my skirt with unnecessary care.

He studies me carefully as I settle into the chair, no doubt noticing the caution in my posture.

“You take me for some sort of cad?” he asks mildly. “A gentleman seeking a discreet mistress, perhaps?”

There is no offence in his tone — only curiosity.

“I am thirty-five, Elsie. If I wished merely for a woman’s company in that sense, I should find someone far less alarmed by my presence.”

A faint smile touches his mouth.

“And truthfully, I find your quiet far more agreeable than most society chatter.”

“Then... what is it you want from me?” I ask.

Rain continues its steady rhythm against the windows. He leans back, arms loosely folded, considering.

“Company,” he says at last. “Intelligent, undemanding company. Someone who does not require constant entertainment or explanation.”

His gaze holds mine — steady, thoughtful.

“You intrigue me, Elsie. Your restraint. Your diligence. Your... mystery.”

A pause.

“And perhaps... something more, in time. Though I have not yet decided what that might be.”

He leans forward slightly, voice soft.

“For now — simply conversation. Nothing more complicated than that. No expectations. No obligations.”

My thoughts begin racing despite his reassurance. What possible company could a foreign café waitress provide a gentleman of his standing? And I will not — absolutely will not — trade my dignity merely for comfort.

He seems to sense the shift in me and lifts a hand gently.

“Elsie — please. I am not proposing anything improper. I seek companionship of the mind, not the body. If that were my aim, I assure you I should pursue it elsewhere.”

His tone remains calm, sincere.

“You misjudge me if you think otherwise.”

I draw a breath. If honesty is the currency here, then I will spend it plainly.

“Would you,” I ask carefully, “expect to finance this... companionship you speak of?”

A small pause.

“I must pay for my board and lodgings, sir.”

His brows lift slightly — surprise, then amusement. Not mockery — more appreciation of the directness.

“I admire your candour,” he says. “Most people circle such matters endlessly.”

He produces a silver pocket watch, glances at it absently, then looks back at me — expression now distinctly practical.

“How much do you require?”

A beat.

“And — more importantly — what precisely would I be paying for?”

My mouth falls open before I can stop it.

“I have not yet calculated the... figures,” I admit. “How much were you considering — and for what duration of time?”

He closes his pocket watch with a quiet snap, expression turning momentarily businesslike.

“Three hours weekly,” he says. “Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.”

A small pause while he calculates.

“For that time — seventy pounds per week.”

The number settles heavily between us. It is an extraordinary sum for what he describes as simple companionship.

“That should more than cover your board and lodging,” he adds calmly. “With something left for comfort.”

I cannot help thinking what it might mean — fewer café shifts, a little leisure, perhaps even savings. It is undeniably tempting.

“Alright,” I say at last.

His smile is genuine as he rises and offers his hand across the table. His handshake is warm, firm — professional rather than intimate.

“Excellent. I shall arrange a carriage for Mondays. We can dine, converse, perhaps read together or listen to music if you wish.”

A brief pause; his tone softens slightly.

“No expectations beyond your company. Simply be yourself.”

I nod, still absorbing it.

My employer appears moments later, dish towel in hand, expression unmistakably inquisitive.

“So,” he says slowly, nodding toward the door Edmund has just exited. “Fifty pounds a week... for conversation?”

“Yes,” I reply. “That appears to be the arrangement.”

He lets out a low whistle.

“That’s five times your wages here, Elsie.”

A pause.

“You be careful with gentlemen of that sort. Even when they claim otherwise, expectations often follow money.”

His concern warms me more than I expect. Without thinking much about it, I give him a quick hug.

“I will continue working here,” I assure him. “I promise.”

He pats my shoulder awkwardly, clearly unused to such displays.

“Good. Keep your independence. And if that polished fellow steps out of line — you come straight to me.”

“I shall.”

Monday evening arrives damp and grey. True to his word, a polished black carriage draws up outside the café. The driver, immaculate in livery, steps down and inclines his head politely.

“Miss Elsie? Mr. Ashcombe awaits you.”

The carriage interior is warm, softly lit, the upholstery far finer than anything I am accustomed to. I settle inside, clutching my small book bag for reassurance.

Only conversation, I remind myself firmly. Nothing more.

Or so I very much hope.

The carriage moves steadily through rain-darkened London streets, the rhythmic clatter of hooves oddly soothing. I hold my book bag closer than necessary, reminding myself — conversation only. Nothing complicated.

Eventually the carriage stops before an elegant townhouse. Gas lamps glow faintly through the mist. The driver opens the door and assists me down with practiced politeness.

“Right this way, Miss Elsie. Mr. Ashcombe will join you shortly.”

My coat and bag are taken, and I am shown into a drawing room warmed by a lively fire. Comfortable chairs, understated luxury — nothing ostentatious, yet unmistakably refined.

I sit carefully in one of the armchairs, hands folded in my lap, willing my nerves to settle.

Footsteps approach — measured, confident. Then he appears.

Edmund Ashcombe — immaculate as ever, dark hair neatly arranged, suit precisely tailored. He smiles warmly, though something gentler sits beneath the polish.

“Elsie,” he says. “Thank you for coming.”

Unsure of etiquette, I rise at once.

“Ah — yes.”

He stands as well, clearly appreciating the courtesy. Seeing my awkwardness, he gently guides me back toward the chair with a light touch at my elbow.

“Please,” he says softly. “No ceremony required here.”

He resumes his seat opposite mine.

“I thought we might begin with dinner — and conversation. Precisely as agreed.”

“Alright,” I reply.

A maid enters carrying a tray: roast chicken, vegetables, fresh bread. Simple but thoughtfully prepared. Edmund pours wine into two glasses before dismissing her with a quiet nod.

“Let us eat,” he says easily. “And perhaps talk about books? I noticed your bag.”

“Oh — yes.”

I retrieve the books: an English-language learning text, one imposing classic volume, and two well-thumbed romance novels.

“Please do not think too highly of me,” I add sheepishly. “The classic is mostly for display. I have not truly attempted it.”

He chuckles softly — not unkindly.

“There is no shame in reading what one enjoys. Romance has sustained far more readers than the canon ever has.”

He glances through one of the novels before setting it down.

“And this English text? Working on fluency?”

“Yes.”

He taps the classic gently.

“And Shakespeare?”

“I... no,” I admit honestly. “That sort of English still confuses me somewhat.”

He nods thoughtfully, expression warm rather than patronising.

“That is something we might address together,” he says. “Shakespeare becomes far less intimidating when approached slowly. Sonnets first, perhaps. Or a play, if you feel brave.”

A small pause, a sip of wine.

“But tonight, let us begin with what you actually enjoy.”

His smile softens.

“Tell me about these romance novels instead.”

I blink at him.

“Pardon?”

He lifts one of the novels again, turning it over in his hands as though genuinely curious.

“They are clearly favourites. So — what appeals to you about them?”

His tone is open, unguarded. No mockery. That surprises me most.

I hesitate. Dare I answer honestly? I decide to test him.

“I suppose I like how the protagonist — is that the correct term? — is... wanted. Noticed.”

A small pause.

“It feels real. Or at least... desirable.”

He listens carefully, then leans forward slightly, elbows resting loosely on his knees.

“So the idea of being seen matters to you,” he says gently. “Of being valued — perhaps even central to someone’s world. Even if only on the page.”

His gaze is steady, searching without being invasive.

I laugh nervously.

“You are analysing me now.”

A pause.

“Though... you may not be entirely wrong.”

My eyes drift toward the fire, watching the flames shift.

“Is that truly so unreasonable?” he asks softly. “Wanting to be seen? Appreciated? Especially by someone who recognises your mind as well as... everything else.”

He says it without embellishment, which somehow makes it more sincere.

I find myself continuing before caution intervenes.

“Not all romances are equal,” I say, warming to the topic. “Some are emotionally convincing; others... quite absurd. Certain heroines behave so foolishly I struggle to believe anyone sensible would relate to them.”

A small shrug.

“And I confess I prefer rather reserved male characters. The quieter, brooding sort.”

I realise I am talking more than usual — hands moving slightly as I speak.

He watches with unmistakable interest, clearly entertained.

“Brooding gentlemen?” he repeats, a hint of amusement at his lips. “So — complex rather than overtly charming? Reserved rather than flamboyant?”

He leans forward again, genuinely engaged.

“And why do you think that appeals to you?”

I pause, considering.

“I suspect I possess something of a... saviour complex,” I admit quietly.

He chuckles softly, though not dismissively.

“A desire to rescue — or perhaps to be rescued?” he suggests. “Those brooding, complicated gentlemen in novels often invite that instinct.”

A small pause.

“So you are drawn to troubled souls? People who feel... unfinished?”

His tone remains gentle, probing without accusation.

Silence settles between us.

“I think I prefer authenticity,” I say at last. “Or characters who are a little... broken. They feel more believable.”

He nods slowly.

“Imperfect rather than polished. Real rather than idealised.”

His voice lowers slightly.

“And why does that appeal to you, Elsie?”

The question lands closer than I expect. Intimate, almost uncomfortably so.

I lean back, setting my cutlery aside. The answer presses at the edge of speech — because I recognise something of myself there. Because perfection has never felt attainable.

He notices the shift immediately. His own cutlery rests quietly on the plate.

“Elsie,” he says gently. “You need not answer if it makes you uneasy.”

That surprises me.

“I did not intend interrogation. Only conversation.”

His expression softens further.

“Sometimes the characters we gravitate toward simply reflect what we understand — not necessarily what we are.”

A small, reassuring pause.

“And sometimes... they reflect wounds we are still learning to live with.”

I remain silent, hands clasped together more tightly than I realise.

“I apologise if I pressed too far,” he adds quietly. “Curiosity can occasionally outrun good manners.”

The fire crackles softly. Outside, rain continues its steady rhythm.

“And for the record,” he says more lightly, easing the tension, “mystery suits you rather well. You need not explain everything tonight.”

“That is true,” I answer softly.

He studies me for a moment — not intensely, not intrusively — simply attentively.

“And that ‘something’ you mentioned... it is personal, isn’t it?” he asks gently.

“Perhaps something that left you feeling... less certain of yourself than you once were.”

His tone invites honesty without demanding it.

My thoughts race — memories I rarely allow to surface: failed marriage prospects, whispered judgments, never quite meeting expectations. Too much of this, not enough of that. Too small. Too plain. Too noticeable. Not noticeable enough. Never precisely right.

I look away quickly as tears threaten.

He notices at once. Without fuss, he moves his chair nearer rather than remaining across from me — a quiet gesture, not dramatic.

“Elsie,” he says softly. “You need not explain anything if it feels too heavy tonight.”

I manage a small breath.

“I apologise. You did not engage my company merely to witness tears.”

He lifts a hand slightly, dismissing the notion.

“I asked for your company — not a performance. If this is part of you, then it belongs here too.”

From his pocket he produces a clean handkerchief and offers it with quiet courtesy.

“The money is incidental. You owe me nothing beyond what you freely wish to share.”

“...Thank you.”

I accept it carefully, dabbing my eyes. He remains beside me, silent, allowing the moment to settle rather than filling it with unnecessary reassurance.

After a pause, he speaks again — cautiously.

“If I may venture a guess... something in your past made you question your own adequacy. That sort of experience can leave echoes.”

His words are careful, not diagnostic — more observational.

“Perhaps that is why imperfect characters resonate. They feel... honest.”

I consider.

“Maybe,” I say.

He smiles faintly — not triumphant, simply understanding.

“Whatever occurred, it did not diminish you as much as you think,” he says quietly.

“You are still here. Still working. Still curious. That suggests resilience, not brokenness.”

He places the handkerchief gently back into my hand rather than taking it away — as though the kindness remains mine to keep.

“You need not explain everything tonight. Or at all.”

A pause.

“But I do see you, Elsie. More than you perhaps realise.”

“Oh... well,” I murmur, slightly overwhelmed yet comforted, “thank you.”

He inclines his head slightly, accepting my reluctance with surprising grace.

“You need not thank me merely for noticing what is already there,” he says quietly.

“But I do see someone who endured something difficult enough to leave its mark — and yet chose to begin again, far from home. That requires courage.”

“You are... kind,” I tell him.

A faint chuckle escapes him.

“Not universally, I assure you. But tonight — with you — I am making the effort.”

His expression softens.

“You deserve kindness. And to be heard without judgement. If, for this evening, I can provide that... then I am content.”

A small pause.

“But perhaps we should change the subject before the atmosphere becomes unbearably solemn.”

“I would like that,” I admit.

“Good.”

He leans back slightly, gathering his thoughts.

“Then allow me to balance the conversation somewhat. Something personal about myself, if you are willing to hear it.”

I nod quietly, waiting.

“I am an only child,” he begins. “My parents were... well-intentioned but largely occupied elsewhere. Father with business, Mother with society obligations and charitable pursuits. I was raised mostly by tutors and nannies.”

He shrugs faintly.

“I lacked nothing materially. Yet I often felt rather alone.”

He pauses, eyes momentarily distant before returning to me.

“That solitude shaped me. I learned to value it — perhaps too much. Yet when genuine connection appears, I find I want it quite intensely.”

A small, almost self-conscious smile.

“Like this conversation tonight.”

His candour surprises me.

“I appreciate your trusting me with that,” I say.

“I do not trust easily,” he replies. “But you have a... calming presence. You listen without interruption or judgement. Most people rush to advise, correct, or impress. You simply allow things to exist.”

A brief pause.

“It is unexpectedly restorative.”

He studies me for a moment, then adds gently:

“May I ask something more personal?”

I laugh lightly, attempting to ease the seriousness.

“Another question? You are certainly ambitious this evening.”

He smiles faintly at my attempt to lighten things.

“Fair enough,” he concedes. Then his expression grows thoughtful again. “But there is something I have been wondering — nothing painful, I promise. Simply curiosity.”

He hesitates slightly, which is unusual for him.

“May I ask?”

“Yes?”

He leans forward a little, voice gentler now.

“I noticed tonight... when you became upset, you tried very hard not to trouble me with it. And I suspect that is not unusual for you.”

A pause.

“You prefer to carry things alone rather than risk burdening others.”

“Well...” I answer honestly, “there are not many people I could reasonably burden. And even if there were, I am not always sure what help they could offer.”

He nods, considering.

“That is understandable. But allowing someone to see your vulnerability is not necessarily a burden — sometimes it simply means trust.”

His gaze steadies on mine.

“And you may underestimate your own strength. You endured something difficult. You rebuilt your life here. That is not fragility — it is resilience.”

His voice softens.

“That is survival.”

I look down.

“It is the only thing I seem moderately... passable at,” I admit.

His brow furrows faintly.

“Passable?” he repeats. “Elsie, survival is not a minor accomplishment. Many never manage it with such grace.”

A brief hesitation — then his hand settles lightly over mine, careful, respectful.

“You survived. And more than that — you adapted.”

The kindness proves unexpectedly overwhelming. My eyes fill again despite myself.

This time he does not withdraw. He simply remains there, hand steady over mine, allowing the moment without fuss.

“You know what I suspect?” he says quietly. “You have spent so long surviving that you have not quite acknowledged that you are also living.”

A gentle pause.

“You learned a new language, new customs, built independence. That is not merely endurance. That is growth.”

I wipe my eyes hastily.

“I suppose,” I murmur.

He withdraws his hand gently and produces his handkerchief once more, offering it with a quiet smile.

“No ‘supposing’ about it,” he says softly. “You have done remarkably well, Elsie. Not merely surviving — living.”

He leans back slightly, studying me with calm attentiveness.

“You have built something here. Work. Routine. Connections.”

A pause.

“A home, even if it is not where you began.”

I can only nod. Words feel unnecessary — and somewhat insufficient.

He nods in return, understanding the silence.

“And I believe you deserve to feel proud of that,” he continues. “Not simply because you endured hardship, but because you rebuilt afterwards. That takes uncommon strength.”

His voice lowers slightly.

“And if anyone deserves a little kindness at present... it is you.”

His hand rests lightly over mine again — not possessive, simply reassuring.

Then he glances toward the mantel clock.

“It is getting late,” he says gently, rising. “Our allotted hours appear to have concluded.”

A small smile follows.

“I should call the evening a success, however.”

He offers his hand politely as I stand.

“The carriage is ready whenever you wish.”

The following days pass in a curious blur — work at the café, quiet evenings, and letters from home.

Friends marrying. Babies arriving. Lives progressing in ways mine does not seem to.

I fold each letter carefully, though a faint heaviness settles afterward. Sometimes I wonder — if I quietly vanished, would anyone truly notice? Or would life simply continue uninterrupted?

The café becomes comfortingly predictable: familiar patrons, steady routines, small conversations that require little emotional investment.

Yet the thoughts linger.

Wednesday evening arrives quickly.

I gather my books again, preparing to leave when my employer looks up from the counter.

“That gentleman’s carriage is here again, Elsie,” he says with a knowing glance.

“Oh, truly? May I?” I ask, gesturing toward the door.

My employer nods, waving me off with a small smile.

Outside, the driver opens the carriage door with practiced politeness.

“Miss Elsie. Mr. Ashcombe is expecting you.”

The carriage interior is warm again, softly lit by passing streetlamps. London glides by in muted golds and shadows, yet my thoughts linger on those letters — weddings, infants, lives advancing without me. It is a strange feeling, to wonder whether one might be... quietly forgettable.

At his townhouse, I step into the foyer and pause briefly. Before anyone can see, I pat my cheeks lightly.

“No tears tonight, Elsie. Compose yourself,” I mutter.

Unfortunately, I am not alone for long.

“Elsie.”

I turn. Edmund stands in the doorway to the drawing room. Less formal tonight — tailored trousers, open-collared shirt, no waistcoat. His hair slightly disordered, as though he has been thinking too much.

“You are punctual,” he says warmly, stepping aside. “Come in.”

I nod and follow him.

The door closes softly behind us. He studies me — attentively, not critically.

“You look tired,” he observes. “The café demanding too much of you? Or something else?”

He pours two small glasses of whisky from a decanter and offers one to me.

“Here. It may help you relax.”

“I do not usually drink,” I admit. “It tends to make me sleepy.”
Still, I accept the glass politely.

“Just a sip,” he suggests gently.

He takes his usual armchair, gesturing for me to sit opposite. I comply.

“Now,” he says quietly, “tell me what is troubling you. And please do not say ‘nothing.’ I can read your eyes rather well by now.”

“Nothi— not much,” I attempt weakly.

His eyebrow lifts, unconvinced.

“Elsie,” he says softly but firmly, “you are capable of deception when necessary. But tonight, you are not trying very hard.”

A small sip of whisky.

“If you do not tell me, I may be forced to speculate. And I should warn you — I am reasonably skilled at that.”

I cannot help a faint smile.

“Please do not speculate,” I say. “If you share something first... I will reciprocate.”

He considers, lips twitching slightly.

“An equitable arrangement,” he agrees. “But you first.”

He raises a hand to forestall protest.

“You are clearly carrying something heavy. I will match your honesty with my own — I promise.”

His gaze settles on mine, steady, encouraging rather than demanding.

“So,” he says gently, “no deflection this time.”

The words escape before I can properly censor them — my fears of being forgotten, the letters from home filled with weddings, babies, lives unfolding without me. I speak more than I intended, yet once begun, I cannot quite stop.

He listens without interruption. No platitudes, no hurried comfort. Simply attention.

When I finish, he draws a slow breath.

“You feel forgotten,” he says quietly. “As though those you once belonged with have... moved on.”

A small pause.

“And that leaves you wondering whether you still matter there at all.”

I inhale slowly.

“Yes.”

He nods, expression thoughtful rather than pitying.

“And that possibility frightens you. Not simply being alone — but being... unremembered.”

He leans slightly forward.

“That is what troubles you most, is it not?”

His voice remains gentle, encouraging rather than insistent.

“Elsie?” he prompts softly when I hesitate.

I meet his eyes — briefly intending to look away, yet somehow maintaining the contact.

“I am simply afraid,” I admit. “Everyone seems to have found their place. I am still... here. Not unhappily, but...”

I struggle for the words.

“There does not seem to be space for me there anymore.”

His expression softens noticeably. He reaches for my hand with quiet care.

“That does not mean you lack worth,” he says. “Only that their lives evolved differently.”

A thoughtful pause.

“People do not always forget intentionally. Sometimes life simply becomes crowded.”

Yes,” I whisper. “That is true.”

He studies me for a long moment, thumb moving gently over my knuckles.

“But tell me this — does their lack of space diminish you?”

His gaze sharpens slightly.

“You crossed an ocean alone. Built independence. Adapted.”

A faint smile.

“They remained. You changed.”

His voice lowers.

“And now... truth for truth.”

Something hopeful flickers in me — unexpected, but real.

He releases my hand and leans back, whisky glass returning briefly to his lips.

“Your turn,” he says lightly. “I have shared my observations. Now you must match my honesty.”

A hint of amusement touches his expression.

“I assure you — I am not easily wounded.”

He settles comfortably, clearly prepared to listen.

“Go on,” he encourages gently.

I blink, momentarily uncertain.

“Is there something specific you would like my thoughts on?”

His lips curve faintly — amused, patient.

“No particular subject,” he says. “Simply something honest. About me, perhaps. Or us. Or this rather unconventional arrangement.”

A small, playful gesture between us.

“Consider it fair exchange for my earlier observations.”

The atmosphere lightens slightly — still intimate, but less heavy.

“Well...” I consider. “You are a thoughtful listener. Exceptionally inquisitive. And you do not judge... very much.”

A small pause.

“I value what I suppose I may call our... friendship.”

His expression softens noticeably.

“Friendship,” he repeats quietly, as though testing the word. “Yes. I find I like that very much.”

He leans forward slightly, voice warmer now.

“And I appreciate your honesty — about me, and about yourself. You have shared more tonight than I expected.”

A brief hesitation.

“In return...”

“Return?” I prompt gently.

“A truth about myself, as promised.”

He shifts in his seat, gathering his thoughts.

“You noticed my curiosity. It stems partly from feeling... disconnected from most people.”

A thoughtful pause.

“I tend to observe rather than fully engage. I ask questions easily. Offering pieces of myself does not come quite so naturally.”

He meets my eyes directly.

I nod. That seems entirely plausible.

“Most people,” he continues frankly, “tell me what they think I wish to hear. There is often a performance involved when wealth or status enters a room.”

A slight shrug.

“You, however, do not perform. Or if you attempt it, it is brief. What you say tends to be genuine.”

He leans a fraction closer, voice lower.

“That is... uncommon.”

I smile faintly.

“Sometimes it is not advantageous,” I admit. “When I do try to perform socially, I tend to do so rather poorly.”

A small breath.

“I simply attempt to be myself. That is not always the easiest thing for others to accept. I have had to make peace with that.”

His expression grows thoughtful as he listens, almost contemplative.

“You reconcile yourself to it,” he says quietly, “because others sometimes struggle with your honesty.”

He leans back slowly, considering.

“And that can be painful.”

A small pause.

“Authenticity can unsettle people. It forces them to confront things they may prefer to ignore.”

His gaze steadies on mine.

“Does that feel accurate?”

“I suppose so,” I sigh. “It does make forming — and keeping — friendships somewhat difficult.”

He nods with quiet understanding.

“Because honesty attracts the right people, but it can also intimidate others.”

A thoughtful beat.

“And that sometimes leaves you feeling rather alone.”

“Probably,” I admit, lifting the glass and taking a small sip. The whisky warms my throat more than I expect.

He notices, though his expression remains composed.

“You do something interesting,” he says after a moment. “You answer honestly — but cautiously. You offer enough truth to be sincere, yet not quite enough to expose everything.”

A faint smile.

“It is a very elegant defence.”

“I do?” I ask, genuinely surprised.

“Oh yes.”

He chuckles softly.

“You often soften statements — ‘perhaps,’ ‘probably,’ ‘I suppose.’ It allows honesty without full vulnerability.”

A brief pause.

“Understandable, given your experiences.”

He leans back again, tone gentler.

“It can make getting to know you slower, though. Not impossible — just... gradual.” Then his question comes, simpler than before.

“Do you actually want to be known? Fully? Yes or no.”

I settle deeper into the armchair, thinking longer than expected.

“Yes,” I admit quietly. “I do.”

A breath.

“I am simply afraid people will not like what they discover. Experience suggests that outcome is not entirely unlikely.”

He nods slowly, expression thoughtful rather than intense now.

“Yes,” he says softly. “That seems to be the heart of it. You worry that if people truly saw you — unfiltered — they might not stay.”

A gentle pause.

“So you offer a safer version. Honest, but measured.”

I hesitate, then nod slightly.

He continues, voice warm rather than probing.

“But those very qualities you guard — your sincerity, your thoughtfulness, your quiet strength — they are precisely what makes you interesting. To me, at least.”

His gaze steadies on mine.

“You do not perform. You simply are.”

A small silence settles comfortably.

“So,” he adds lightly, “if someone offered you a space where honesty was not punished... where you could speak freely without needing armour... would you accept?”

“Talk?” I venture.

“Exactly.”

He smiles — genuine, almost relieved.

“No judgement. No expectations beyond conversation.”

I consider longer than expected.

“Tempting,” I admit. Then, quietly:

“Alright.”

His expression brightens immediately — boyish, unexpectedly so.

“Good. Then we begin simply. Nothing heavy tonight. Something small but true.”

He leans back comfortably.

“I shall start.”

“Please do,” I tease gently. “I require a brief reprieve.”

He laughs.

“Very well. A thoroughly unimportant confession: I have an absurd fondness for lemon tarts. The sharper the better. Entirely undignified for a grown man, I suppose.”

He looks faintly self-conscious after admitting it.

“Well,” I say, smiling slightly, “you are not alone. I could consume an entire tray of them myself.”

His eyes widen slightly at my admission, delight flickering there.

“You as well?” he laughs. “Well, that is a most gratifying discovery. A fellow devotee of lemon tarts.”

A playful smile follows.

“If this were a less formal evening, I should insist upon producing a full plate immediately.”

He leans back, still amused.

“Another small truth, then. Something equally trivial.”

“I am... rather lazy,” I confess. “Very lazy, in fact.”

That earns a full laugh — warm, unrestrained.

“Lazy? I would never have guessed. You present yourself so efficiently.”

He studies me thoughtfully.

“Let me speculate — a tendency toward procrastination? A fondness for postponing unpleasant duties?”

I give a small, exaggerated groan.

“I do not particularly wish to work. Ideally, I should prefer idleness without responsibility.”

His expression softens with amusement rather than judgement.

“A life devoted to leisure, books, and lemon tarts?”

He lowers his voice conspiratorially.

“No obligations, no demands?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Precisely that.”

A thoughtful smile crosses his face.

“A charming ambition. One I suspect many secretly share.”

He pauses.

“I should not mind being idle alongside you. We would make a very respectable pair of indolent creatures.”

I laugh quietly.

“Now another trivial truth,” he prompts. “Something even more indulgent, if possible.”

“You forgot your own second confession,” I point out.

“Quite right.”

He considers, then sighs theatrically.

“I am abysmal at rising early. Truly dreadful. Morning, as a concept, feels unnecessary. Anyone functional before noon strikes me as deeply suspicious.”

His grin returns.

“Your turn.”

“I am actually a morning person,” I admit. “Which is somewhat surprising, given my supposed laziness.”

He freezes briefly at my confession, then laughs outright.

“A morning person? Surely you jest.”

He shakes his head in theatrical disbelief.

“How does one reconcile laziness with rising at dawn? That feels almost contradictory.”

He leans forward, curiosity clearly genuine.

“You do not spring from bed at first light ready to conquer the day, do you? That would contradict the entire ‘lazy Elsie’ thesis.”

I tilt my head.

“Should I be offended?” I tease lightly.

That only makes him laugh more.

“Not at all. Merely astonished.”

His grin softens.

“The image is unexpectedly charming.”

“Well,” I explain, “I prefer sleeping early. And mornings are... pleasant for exercise. It steadies my day.”

He nods thoughtfully.

“That is remarkably sensible.”

A pause.

“And exercise? From someone who professes great laziness?”

“I maintain I am selectively lazy,” I reply.

He chuckles.

“Fair enough. My turn, then.”

He settles back comfortably.

“I possess an unwavering post-luncheon napping habit. Every day. Entirely non-negotiable.”

“That sounds enviable,” I admit.

“Your turn again,” he prompts.

I hesitate only briefly.

“I had a very pleasant evening,” I say — smiling genuinely this time.

His expression softens noticeably.

“So did I,” he replies quietly. “More than anticipated.”

A small chuckle follows.

“Apparently trivial conversations can prove rather meaningful.”

“Yes, indeed.”

He rises, moving toward the sideboard to pour himself another small whisky.

“You know,” he says casually, “this arrangement might become something of a ritual.

Lemon tarts, idle confessions, conversation.”

He glances back with a faint smirk.

“I may find myself looking forward to it.”

“That gives us both something pleasant to anticipate,” I reply, then sigh.

“Work tomorrow, unfortunately.”

He laughs softly at that.

“Reality does tend to intrude.”

He laughs softly at my complaint.

“Back to reality for both of us, I suppose.”

A small sip of whisky follows.

“But truly — this evening has been unexpectedly pleasant. More... natural than I anticipated.”

I pause.

“What were you expecting?”

He considers carefully before answering.

“Silence, perhaps. Politeness without warmth. You keeping your distance while I attempted to coax conversation.”

A faint shrug.

“I did not anticipate laughter. Or ease.”

His gaze steadies on mine.

“Nor did I expect to enjoy your company quite this much.”

“Well,” I reply lightly, “we may consider the evening a success.”

“Yes,” he says quietly. “I believe we may.”

A pause — then his tone turns more earnest.

“And Elsie — for whatever it is worth — you are not lazy. You simply appear comfortable being yourself. That is rarer than you think.”

Something settles between us then — a quiet understanding rather than anything dramatic.

The following morning returns me to the café and its familiar rhythms. My employer looks me over the moment I arrive.

“Nothing untoward last night, I hope?” he asks, tone casual but eyes curious.

“No,” I answer. “Very fortunate, really.”

He nods, though a faintly knowing smile lingers.

“Lucky indeed.”

He claps his hands together briskly.

“Right then — plenty to do.”

The day resumes its usual cadence: coffee poured, tills balanced, pastries served. Familiar faces, steady routine — oddly comforting after the previous evening’s emotional terrain.

My employer moves about behind the counter, occasionally glancing my way as though still piecing together impressions.

Then:

“Elsie?”

I look up from wiping the counter.

“Yes?” I ask, expecting instructions.

Instead, my employer approaches holding a small, carefully wrapped parcel.

“This arrived for you,” he says, curiosity evident. “No return address.”

He hands it over.

“You expecting anything?”

“Not particularly,” I admit.

“Go on then — open it. I’m curious now.”

He hovers just close enough to observe without quite intruding — though he is clearly intruding.

I unwrap it slowly. Inside is a neat handmade envelope, elegant script on the front. Within: a short note.

Dear Elsie,
Thank you for a lovely evening. Something to remind you of our conversation.
Looking forward to Monday.
— N

Tucked alongside it sits a beautifully wrapped lemon tart — unmistakably from one of the more expensive patisseries.

My employer’s eyes widen. Mine likely do the same.

“Well now,” he chuckles. “So ‘nothing happened’ has varying interpretations, apparently.”

He taps the note lightly.

“A lemon tart. Thoughtful fellow.”

Then he pauses.

“Monday, you say?”

“Yes, boss?”

He leans in slightly, voice lowering.

“You and Mr. Ashcombe — anything I ought to know? Because this... feels rather more than casual courtesy.”

I smile faintly.

“It is simply conversation. Truly.”

He studies me, half convinced.

“That tart cost a small fortune,” he mutters. Then more seriously:
“Just be careful, Elsie. Gentlemen with means sometimes expect... returns on investment.”

I hug him briefly — instinctive reassurance.

“I will be alright. And you shall hear first if anything untoward occurs.”

His concern softens immediately.

“Good. That’s all I ask.”

He steps back, still smiling faintly.

“Now enjoy that tart before someone else claims it.”

I do exactly that — one careful bite. Sharp citrus, perfect pastry. A small indulgence... and perhaps a pleasant reminder of an unexpectedly kind evening.

I savour the lemon tart slowly, closing my eyes for a moment as the sharp citrus sweetness lingers pleasantly. My employer observes with visible approval before the early luncheon rush sweeps him away, leaving me alone with the note, the tart, and thoughts I am not entirely ready to examine.

Monday arrives sooner than expected. After finishing my shift, I make my way to Mr Ashcombe’s residence, as arranged.

The butler greets me warmly and ushers me inside. Ned stands by the fireplace, whisky glass in hand. When he sees me, his expression brightens in a way that still catches me slightly off guard.

“Elsie,” he says warmly, setting the glass aside. “Punctual as ever.”

He relieves me of my coat with quiet courtesy before gesturing toward the sofa.

“Come sit. Dinner should be along shortly.”

I smile politely.

“Mr Ashcombe.”

He chuckles softly.

“Ned,” he reminds me. “At least when it is just us.”

As I sit, he notices the brown-paper parcel tucked under my arm.

“And what is this?”

I feel myself blush.

“Something for you. I saw it while out... and it reminded me of you.”

His expression shifts immediately — surprise, then something softer, almost boyish. He sits beside me rather than opposite and unwraps it carefully.

“You bought me something?” he asks quietly. “Elsie, you did not need to—”

He stops as he sees it.

Silence stretches just long enough for my nerves to catch up.

“Is it not to your taste?” I reach instinctively. “I can return it.”

He pulls it gently but firmly out of my reach.

“No,” he says simply. “Absolutely not.”

His gaze lifts to mine, unexpectedly serious.

“Did you choose this yourself?”

“Well... the shop assistant offered several options. I selected this one.”

He studies both the object and me with thoughtful intensity.

“So this reminded you of me.”

“Yes.”

My voice is softer than intended.

“If it troubles you,” I add carefully, “I can keep it instead.”

He shakes his head at once.

“It does not trouble me.”

A pause.

“It surprises me, that is all. People rarely give me things chosen simply because they thought of me.”

His tone carries quiet honesty rather than drama.

“This feels... personal.”

“I only meant it kindly,” I say.

“And kindly it is received,” he replies.

He sets it aside with noticeable care, as though it already holds significance.

“I like it very much, Elsie.”

Relief slips out of me in a small breath.

“I am glad.”

Our knees still lightly touch beneath the table. Neither of us moves away.

“You are more thoughtful than you admit,” he adds softly.

“That is your interpretation.”

“No,” he says gently. “Observation.”

Then, with a lighter tone returning:

“Come — dinner awaits. And I believe tonight’s dessert has already been settled between us.”

I follow him, somewhat tentatively. His hand rests lightly at the small of my back as he guides me toward the dining room — not forceful, merely steady.

The butler seats me. Ned chooses the chair beside mine rather than across, as before. Our sleeves brush as he settles.

“I should like to look at my gift while we dine,” he says casually, beginning to untie the wrapping again.

“You don’t mind?”

“N-no,” I manage, though nerves flutter unpleasantly. What if he secretly dislikes it?

He unwraps it carefully. The leather-bound notebook appears — dark, elegant, his initials discreetly embossed in gold. He runs his fingers over it appreciatively before opening it.

“It is exquisite,” he murmurs. “I have been meaning to find a proper journal. This... suits perfectly.”

He turns toward me fully.

“Elsie, this was very thoughtful.”

“It seemed appropriate,” I say quietly. “You strike me as a man with many thoughts. Perhaps they might prefer somewhere orderly to reside.”

Amusement warms his expression.

“You are not wrong.”

He closes the notebook carefully, setting it beside his plate.

“Now — please eat. And do stop looking as though you expect criticism. I truly like it.”

“Oh — good.”

Relief loosens my shoulders slightly. I take up my cutlery and attempt the steak. It proves unexpectedly stubborn. After a brief, undignified struggle, I retreat to the roast potatoes instead, which offer considerably less resistance.

He pretends not to notice, though the faint smile at the corner of his mouth suggests otherwise.

He watches me with quiet attention, evidently noticing my strategic retreat toward the potatoes.

“Elsie,” he says gently after a moment, “do you not care for steak?”

“Ah—” I cough lightly. “It is not the steak itself. I simply suspect I am not yet proficient with Western cutlery.”

I rub the back of my neck sheepishly.

“It felt rather like sawing wood.”

His lips twitch despite himself.

“My dear, this is a knife and fork, not forestry equipment.”

He demonstrates smoothly, cutting his steak with effortless precision.

“Observe — no lumberjack technique required.”

I mimic him carefully, determined not to appear entirely incompetent.

He leans closer, attention focused.

“Like this,” he murmurs, briefly guiding my hand to adjust the grip. “Firm, but not forceful.”

The proximity makes me suddenly aware of him — the faint scent of citrus, something fresh and green, unexpectedly pleasant. I follow his instruction carefully.

“There,” he says softly. “That is perfect.”

I try a bite.

“Oh,” I murmur. “That is very good.”

His expression brightens faintly, as though pleased by my approval.

“The chef does take pride in his work.”

He takes a sip of wine, then glances toward my untouched glass.

“Do you enjoy wine?” he asks mildly.

“Ah, I do not drink very much,” I explain. “It either makes me sleepy... or rather unwell.”

He chuckles softly, not mocking — simply amused.

“Then you shall not be pressured into it here.”

He nudges my wine glass slightly aside.

“Water is perfectly acceptable.”

The butler appears almost immediately to refill it. Ned thanks him with a small nod.

“I tend toward whisky or brandy myself,” he adds conversationally. “Though a decent red wine has its merits.”

A pause.

“So truly — you do not drink at all?”

“No. Is that very unusual?”

“Not at all,” he says firmly. “If anything, it shows admirable self-knowledge. Many people drink simply because they feel obliged.”

His smile carries quiet approval rather than judgment.

“I respect that.”

Dessert arrives shortly after — chocolate pudding, glossy and rich, accompanied by cream.

I instinctively clap a hand over my mouth.

“What a surprise — I adore chocolate pudding.”

Ned looks faintly pleased, as though this reaction was precisely what he hoped for.

“With cream?” he asks, though clearly already certain.

“Yes, please.”

“And one for me as well,” he tells the butler. “It seems only fair we enjoy it together.”

There is nothing improper in the statement, yet it carries a gentle intimacy — shared dessert, shared moment.

“Go on,” he says quietly once we are alone again. “Taste it.”

I dip my spoon in carefully. The chocolate is rich, smooth, almost decadent.

“Oh... that is wonderful.”

I cannot help smiling.

He watches — not intrusively, but attentively, as though my enjoyment pleases him.

“I am glad,” he says softly. “It has always been a favourite of mine.”

When the plates are cleared, I dab my mouth carefully with the napkin. Ned rises, offering his hand with easy courtesy.

“Shall we?”

The invitation is simple, yet something about his tone suggests the evening is not quite finished.

I place my hand lightly in his.

“Yes.”

He offers his hand formally, though the warmth in the gesture goes beyond mere courtesy. His fingers are steady, inviting. The dining room has fallen quiet save for the faint clink of cutlery being cleared behind us.

“Shall we retire to the drawing room?”

His thumb brushes lightly over my knuckles when I place my hand in his — a small, almost intimate reassurance — before he leads me through.

I settle on the sofa and allow myself to relax. He releases my hand only reluctantly, his fingers lingering just a fraction too long.

He pours two glasses of brandy, though I suspect mine will remain largely ceremonial. When he sits beside me, his knee brushes mine, deliberate yet gentle.

“Comfortable?” he asks softly.

“The fire should help.”

I lean back, letting my head rest against the cushion, eyes drifting closed for a moment.

Silence settles — the fire crackling, the steady ticking of a clock somewhere nearby. I sense his gaze before I open my eyes again. Then his fingers brush lightly through my hair — absent-minded almost, yet attentive.

“Elsie?”

“Mmm?”

His hand pauses, then gently cups the back of my neck.

“Come here.”

Before I can overthink it, he draws me slightly closer until my head rests against his shoulder — then his chest. His arm settles naturally around me. The brandy glasses remain forgotten.

“Better?” he murmurs above me.

My eyes flutter open. Good heavens — I am in his arms.

I stiffen slightly at the realization. He seems to notice immediately.

“Do stop thinking quite so much,” he murmurs quietly into my hair.

“It is merely a comfortable conversational arrangement.”

A soft pause.

“Friends do occasionally sit this way.”

It certainly does not feel entirely platonic — but neither does it feel improper. Just... warm.

I try to relax. The clock ticks. The fire breathes softly. His heartbeat is faintly audible beneath my cheek.

Nerves gather anyway.

“Ned?”

“Yes?”

The words come awkwardly, tripping over themselves.

“Do you... I mean... forgive the bluntness, but... you could not possibly... fancy me? Could you?”

His hand stills in my hair at my question. The fire crackles rather loudly in the sudden quiet. I feel his arm tighten slightly around me before he seems to notice and relaxes it again.

“Elsie,” he says slowly, voice softer than before, “what prompted that question?”

His fingers resume their gentle movement through my hair.

“Look at me.”

I do. Anticipation flickers somewhere between hope and alarm.

The firelight catches in his eyes, making them appear almost silver. He studies me carefully — not hurried, not evasive.

Then, quietly:

“Yes. I do fancy you.”

The honesty lands gently but heavily between us. No flourish. No dramatics. Simply truth.

His thumb brushes my cheek, almost absent-mindedly.

I swallow. I had asked impulsively — without considering what the answer might require of me.

He seems equally aware of that. His expression shifts — thoughtful, perhaps slightly uncertain.

“And now,” he says softly, voice faintly roughened, “may I ask you something in return?”

His thumb rests lightly at my jaw, encouraging me to meet his gaze fully.

“Do you—”

A knock interrupts us.

He withdraws at once — not abruptly, but with visible reluctance. Mild irritation touches his expression as he calls toward the door:

“Yes? What is it?”

The moment fractures — not lost entirely, but postponed. I sit very still, heart rather louder than seems reasonable.

The butler appears hesitantly in the doorway, clearly aware he is interrupting something delicate.

“Apologies, sir,” he says stiffly. “A Mr Whitmore has arrived unexpectedly. He insists upon seeing you immediately.”

Ned’s jaw tightens at once — irritation barely concealed.

“Whitmore?” he repeats, voice edged. “Tell him I am... occupied.”

“But sir — he is already in the foyer.”

The irritation sharpens. Ned rises abruptly, hands briefly clenching at his sides.

“Very well. I shall see him. Make it clear this intrusion is unwelcome.”

He turns toward me, apology already forming.

“Elsie, I am so—”

The sentence never finishes. Whitmore pushes past the butler and strides into the drawing room uninvited.

I cannot suppress a small gasp.

He is stocky, balding, exuding the sort of confidence that borders on entitlement. His gaze travels around the room before settling on me — lingering longer than politeness permits.

Ned steps instinctively closer to me. The movement is subtle, but unmistakably protective.

“Ashcombe!” Whitmore booms. “Didn’t expect you to be entertaining company this late.”

His eyes flick toward me again.

“Especially not company like... that.”

I rose at once. “I had not realised it had grown so late. My apologies.”

Ashcombe’s expression softened for the briefest moment as I stood — a silent acknowledgement more than spoken thanks. He stepped nearer, almost unconsciously, positioning himself slightly between Whitmore and myself. The gesture did not escape Whitmore. His face coloured at once — whether from jealousy, irritation, or wounded pride I could not tell.

“Late?” Whitmore scoffed. “Why, the evening is barely begun.” He moved closer still. “Perhaps you might introduce me to your—”

I knew the type instantly. There had been men like him at home, men like him along the ports when I first arrived, even certain patrons at the café who carried that same unsettling air. They made one instinctively guarded.

Ashcombe must have sensed my unease. His posture tightened, and his hand came firmly to rest at my lower back, drawing me subtly nearer to him as Whitmore advanced another step. Whitmore’s gaze dropped to that hand — lingering there with something almost possessive — before lifting again to my face, his expression sharpening.

“And who is this charming lady?” he asked Ashcombe directly, his tone suggesting claim rather than courtesy. “Your mistress?”

“Wha— what? I beg your pardon?”

Ashcombe’s expression darkened at once. The hand at my back shifted upward to my shoulder, his fingers resting protectively at the base of my neck.

“Mind your tongue,” he said quietly, the restraint in his voice far more threatening than anger. “This is Miss Elsie — a guest under my roof.” His thumb brushed lightly at my neck in reassurance, though his gaze toward Whitmore remained cold. “And she is certainly nothing of the sort.”

Whitmore only laughed. “How could she not be?”

The question lingered in the air, unwelcome and heavy.

I felt Ashcombe’s hand tighten almost imperceptibly at my back — whether from anger or something more complicated, I could not tell. His eyes flashed as he stepped fully before me, effectively shielding me from Whitmore’s gaze.

“Because she is not,” he said sharply, his tone allowing no contradiction. “And even if she were she so — it would be none of your blasted concern.” He drew a slow breath, visibly restraining himself.

Whitmore’s eyes narrowed. “Your... partner might dispute that.”

My eyes widened before I could stop myself.

Ashcombe’s expression stilled — then settled into a cold, controlled anger. His hand at my shoulder tightened, almost painfully now; whether it was meant to steady me or silence me, I could not be certain.

“What did you say?” he asked quietly — too quietly. “Explain yourself at once before I escort you out personally.” His gaze flickered toward me in warning: do not react. “Partner?”

“Oh, do not pretend innocence, Ashcombe. Ever the gentleman,” Whitmore drawled. “You know precisely what I mean.” His attention shifted to me, dismissive, cutting. “You, miss — best return to your house on the Strand. Run along.”

The rudeness of it seemed to strike Ashcombe physically. His jaw tightened; colour rose along his temples.

“Firstly,” he said, each word deliberate, “she is not ‘girl’. She is Miss Elsie. You will address her properly.” His hand curled into a fist at his side. “Secondly, she is not leaving. Not unless she herself wishes it.”

Whitmore stood then, a faintly satisfied look crossing his face. “You may wish to inform your wife of that sentiment,” he said. “She shall be arriving shortly.”

Wife?

The colour drained entirely from Ashcombe's face. The anger dissolved into something alarmingly close to panic. He turned toward me quickly, reaching for my hands.

"Elsie — please — allow me to explain—"

Before he could continue, a woman's voice sounded from the foyer, light and assured, followed by the distinct rhythm of heels against marble.

"Ned?" she called sweetly.

I saw her then — and instinctively gripped the armchair for balance. The disdain in her gaze upon noticing me was unmistakable. I knew, with sudden clarity, I must leave.

She was undeniably beautiful — elegantly dressed, every detail immaculate, jewels catching the light with quiet authority. Her eyes moved between Ashcombe and myself with cool assessment.

"Miss Elsie," she said at last, her tone edged with frost. "I see you have made my husband's acquaintance." She lingered deliberately on the word husband.

"You... you know my name?"

Mrs Ashcombe's lips curved into a knowing, almost triumphant smile. "Of course, my dear. I make it my business to know the names of my husband's... acquaintances." Her gaze lingered on him for a beat before returning to me. "And you are leaving now, are you not?"

It was not phrased as a question. It was an instruction.

"Before matters become... uncomfortable." She moved closer to him, her hand sliding possessively along his arm. "Ned will see you out."

I scarcely remember agreeing. My feet felt strangely heavy as I walked the corridor, the plush carpet seeming to clutch at each step. Rooms I had admired only hours before now felt cold, alien. Even the portraits along the walls appeared to observe my retreat with quiet judgement.

A servant opened the front door. His expression remained impeccably neutral, though I thought I detected a trace of pity in his eyes.

The night air struck my face sharply. Only then did I realise I had been holding back tears.

And then I ran.

I ran without direction, without dignity — only distance mattered. The wind cut through my coat, my breath burned, my vision blurred with tears I could no longer restrain. I did not know where I was going, only that I needed to be anywhere but there.

Eventually — I scarcely recall how — I reached home.

I curled into my bed fully clothed, drawing the blankets around me as though they might shield me from humiliation itself. I tried not to scold myself, yet the thought returned relentlessly:

How could I have been so trusting?

Sleep did not come easily. When it did, it was shallow, restless, crowded with images — Ashcombe's stricken expression, his wife's cool disdain, Whitmore's insufferable satisfaction.

The following morning I went to work as though nothing had occurred.

Or rather — I worked harder than ever.

I arrived early, left late, spoke little. Occupation was safer than reflection. My hands moved almost automatically through familiar tasks; efficiency became my refuge. My colleagues seemed to notice the change but politely refrained from comment.

Still, certain things betrayed me. Each time the bell rang or the telephone sounded, I startled visibly — a reflex I could not quite master.

During a quiet moment, my employer called gently across the room:
“Miss Elsie...”

“Elsie... is everything quite alright with you?” my employer asked gently.

The kindness in his voice nearly undid me. For one dangerous moment I felt tears threaten again, but I forced them back stubbornly. I would not cry at work. I would not unravel before witnesses.

“Yes,” I replied, perhaps too quickly. “Everything is perfectly fine.”

Even to my own ears the words rang hollow.

His expression softened further. “Elsie...”

“Did something occur... with that gentleman? The well-dressed one?”

At the mention of Ashcombe, a fresh sting of hurt rose so sharply it almost winded me. My cheeks grew warm; my hands curled tightly at my sides.

“No,” I said, more sharply than intended. “Nothing at all.”

The falsehood tasted bitter. Something had happened — something humiliating, something I preferred not to examine too closely.

“Please,” I added, turning away to polish a counter that already shone, “do let the matter rest.”

He did not press further, for which I was quietly grateful.

By day’s end I felt an almost disproportionate relief simply to have survived it. On impulse, I decided to collect my post before returning home and took a quieter route to the post office.

That was when I saw her.

A motorcar had just drawn up. The lady stepping from it was unmistakable. Even before she turned fully, I knew.

Mrs Ashcombe.

She noticed me at once. Her eyes narrowed slightly in recognition.

My breath caught. Instinct urged me to retreat — but too late.

“Elsie,” she called, her voice bright yet unmistakably commanding. “Do come here.” The tone was less invitation than summons.

I approached despite myself, each step reluctant.

“There you are,” she said pleasantly, though something in her voice suggested sweetness sharpened to a blade. Large dark spectacles concealed her eyes, reflecting the afternoon glare.

I stopped a polite distance away.

She removed the glasses slowly. Her eyes, when revealed, were cool, deliberate, assessing.

“I believe we ought to speak,” she said. “About my husband. About you.” A faint smile touched her lips, though it held no warmth. “Would you prefer a walk... or shall we conduct this conversation here where all may observe?”

“I... I shall go wherever you prefer, ma’am,” I managed.

“Ma’am,” she echoed with faint amusement. “Such careful manners. I imagine they serve you well — appearing so modest, so unassuming.”

Before I fully realised it, she had stepped closer, guiding me toward the brick wall beside the pavement. Her voice lowered.

“But I see rather more clearly than most, Miss Elsie.”

Her finger tapped lightly — yet pointedly — against my bodice.

“A mouse attempting to pass itself off as something altogether bolder.”

I swallowed hard. I had never intended to charm anyone. It was never meant to appear as it must have done.

She laughed then — a brittle, joyless sound that seemed to strike the brickwork and return sharper still.

“Oh? Then what precisely was it, Elsie?” She leaned nearer, her breath warm, her gaze uncomfortably intent. “Because from where I stand, it very much resembles an attempt to captivate my husband.” A faint tremor crossed her voice, jealousy flickering through the anger. “And I assure you — it appears to be succeeding rather well.”

Before I quite realised, her fingers caught my chin, firm enough to startle. “P-pardon?”

Her grip tightened, compelling me to meet her eyes.

“Did I speak unclearly?” she murmured. “You are captivating him. Those wide, innocent eyes... that gentle manner... that troublesome sweetness. He responds to it.” Her voice wavered almost imperceptibly before hardening again. “You will stop.”

“I’m not,” I whispered.

Her eyes searched mine sharply.

“Not what?” she pressed. “Not trying? Or not meaning to?” She leaned closer still; her perfume, elegant yet overpowering, surrounded me. “I know my husband, Miss Elsie. I recognise the way he looks when his attention is engaged.” Her voice softened into something more dangerous than anger. “And he looks at you that way.”

The words struck deeper than I expected. Tears rose before I could prevent them.

“I didn’t know,” I managed, my voice breaking. “I truly did not know he was married.”

Something shifted in her expression then — fleeting, almost reluctant. The severity did not entirely vanish, yet it softened at the edges.

“You didn’t know?” she repeated.

I shook my head helplessly.

Her hand fell away from my face.

“Oh, come now,” she said, though the sharpness had dulled. “Any sensible woman observes whether a gentleman wears a ring before allowing matters to progress.”

Was he wearing one? I tried desperately to recall. I had never noticed such a thing. Perhaps I had simply never looked.

She watched me closely — assessing, recalculating. Whatever she sought in my expression, she appeared to find sincerity rather than calculation.

“You truly had no idea,” she murmured, more to herself than to me.

A pause followed. When she spoke again, bitterness edged every syllable.

“He does not wear his wedding band.”

I drew several deep breaths, though they did little to steady me. Fear, humiliation, lingering hope — it all seemed to descend at once.

Mrs Ashcombe observed me closely, her expression altering almost imperceptibly as my composure faltered.

“You truly had no idea,” she said at last, more quietly than before. “You were not attempting to... take him from me.” She stepped back, the sharp rhythm of her heels against the pavement oddly final. “You look quite unwell,” she added, though the earlier hostility had softened.

And then she left.

The moment she disappeared from view, whatever fragile control I possessed collapsed. I leaned heavily against the brick wall, then slowly slid downward until I found myself seated on the cold ground. My arms wrapped instinctively around my knees as the sobs came — uncontrollable, ungraceful, but necessary.

I wept for humiliation. For trust misplaced. For the absurd ache of losing something I had never truly possessed. For the foolishness of believing myself seen, valued — perhaps even cherished.

The alley remained mercifully empty.

After some time — minutes, perhaps longer — I gathered enough composure to rise.

I collected my post with unsteady hands. Among the letters were several from friends... and two unmistakably from Ned.

Those I almost destroyed on the spot.

Yet I could not. Some small, stubborn hope — or perhaps mere curiosity — restrained me.

By the time I reached home my fingers were numb from cold and emotion alike. I set the friendly letters aside without opening them. My attention fixed entirely upon the two heavier envelopes.

My hands trembled as I broke the seal of the first.

The paper rustled loudly in the otherwise silent room. His handwriting appeared bold, confident — painfully familiar.

I began to read aloud, absurdly hoping the spoken words might somehow feel less real.

“My dearest Elsie...”

My voice faltered immediately.

“I find myself incapable of concentrating on anything save the memory of your smile, the sound of your laughter — the way the light lingers in your hair...”

Tears fell freely now, blotting the ink.

“Last evening was perfection. You were perfection. I could happily remain forever as I was then — entirely wrapped in your gentleness, quite undone by you.”

I stopped.

The words felt less like affection now and more like accusation.

I lowered the letter slowly, unsure whether I wished to continue — yet unable quite to stop.

What is happening? I wanted desperately to ask — though I scarcely knew of whom.

With unsteady fingers I opened the second letter.

The faint scent of lime soap clung to the paper — absurdly familiar, immediately unwelcome. I began to read, my voice little more than a whisper.

“My beloved Elsie, this day has stretched unbearably long. Every hour apart from you feels a small torment. I find myself inattentive to my work, indifferent to conversation, even food has lost its flavour...”

My voice faltered. Tears blurred the ink.

“All I find myself wanting... is you.”

I lowered the page slowly.

Why could this not simply disappear? Why must it linger — insistent, complicated, painful?

I retreated to bed intending only a short rest.

Instead, days slipped past in a blur.

I scarcely ate. Sleep came irregularly, shallow and unrestful. The letters lay scattered about the room like relics of some strange dream I could neither fully accept nor quite dismiss. Friends called — kind, patient — but I could not explain. Words felt insufficient; composure even less attainable.

I existed, rather than lived.

On the third day, a knock sounded at my door.

Reluctantly, I answered.

Standing there was Ned's butler. His expression was unusually grave, touched — I thought — with pity. He extended a sealed envelope bearing Ned's crest.

“Miss Elsie,” he said quietly, “my master requested that this be delivered to you personally.”

I accepted it numbly.

“He indicated,” the man continued with visible hesitation, “that if his previous letters went unanswered... this would be his final attempt.”

“Pardon?”

He shifted slightly, clearly uncomfortable. “My master can be... determined when his mind is set. He very much wishes you to read this.” A brief pause. “He also mentioned that, should this remain unanswered... he may call in person.”

The implication settled heavily between us.

“I apologise if this causes you further distress, Miss.”

I nodded, murmured thanks, and closed the door as gently as I could.

Leaning back against it, I stared at the envelope. Ned's seal seemed almost intrusive now — a reminder of his reach, his certainty, his unwillingness to relinquish what he desired.

With trembling hands, I broke it open.

“My dearest Elsie,” the letter began, “if you are reading this, I must assume my earlier letters have failed to persuade you.”

I continued reading, though the words swam before my eyes, each line carrying both longing... and complication I no longer knew how to bear.

“I understand if you are angry... hurt... confused,” the letter continued. “But I beg you — hear me out. I cannot sleep. I cannot eat. I cannot think clearly without your voice lingering in my mind. Your silence is quite undoing me. If you do not answer this letter, I shall come myself. I will stand at your door until you speak to me — even if only to send me away.”

The signature below was not the usual elegant flourish but a fierce, hurried scrawl:

Ned Ashcombe.

I let the letter fall to the floor.

If he wished to come, he might. The cat, after all, could seek the mouse if he insisted.

I retreated to bed.

Three mornings later — still dark, that strange hour before dawn — a knock sounded at my door. Firm. Insistent.

I pulled the blankets over my head, willing it to stop.

It did not.

The knocking became pounding — heavy, urgent, impossible to ignore. Then the handle rattled. A click followed.

“Elsie.”

His voice carried through the house — deep, strained, unmistakably his.

“Open the door.”

I nearly cursed aloud. This could not truly be happening.

“Do go away,” I muttered hoarsely. “Leave me in peace.”

The door opened regardless.

Ned stood there — dishevelled in a way I had never seen. His usually immaculate attire was rumpled; his hair looked repeatedly disturbed by restless hands. His eyes were reddened, shadowed with exhaustion.

He looked like a man who had not slept.

“Leave?” he repeated quietly. “I find I cannot.”

He stepped inside without invitation and closed the door behind him with quiet finality.

“Not until we speak.”

I pulled the blankets tighter around myself — armour of the simplest sort.

He halted when he saw me properly then. I must have appeared a wretched sight — pale, untidy, defensive. His expression shifted; something like regret crossed it.

“Elsie,” he said softly, “I shall not touch you.”

His hands lifted slightly, almost in surrender.

“Only listen.”

His voice faltered on the last word.

I lay back deliberately, eyes closed, refusing acknowledgement.

Silence stretched. I heard him shift his weight, then begin pacing slowly across the floorboards. Each step sounded heavier than the last.

“You will not speak at all?” he asked eventually, almost to himself.

A pause.

“Very well. Then I shall speak.”

Another steadying breath.

“My wife and I...” He hesitated. “We live by arrangement more than affection. She has her pursuits; I have mine. We appear together when society requires it. At home — only occasionally.” His voice flattened. “There is no love between us.”

He waited, perhaps expecting some reaction.

I remained still.

“I never loved her,” he continued more quietly. “The marriage was expected. Advantageous. Entirely proper.”

And yet nothing about this felt proper now.

I shifted slightly beneath the blankets — a small movement, but apparently enough.

He noticed at once. Hope flickered across his tired face as I slowly pushed myself upright, the covers gathering at my waist. I must have looked dreadful — hair disordered, eyes swollen — yet I was looking at him now. Properly looking.

“You are listening,” he said quietly, stepping nearer. “That alone is something.”

I gave the smallest nod for him to continue.

“Our marriage,” he said after a pause, “is little more than a formal arrangement. She gains a husband of means; I gain a wife suitable for society’s expectations. We appear together when required, nothing more. There is no affection in it.” His gaze held mine steadily. “Until you.”

His voice softened.

“You laughed with me. You argued. You treated me not as an ornament or obligation, but as a man.” Another cautious step forward. “And I found myself caring for you... far more quickly than I intended.”

Silence stretched.

“You might have told me you were married,” I said at last. My voice sounded rough, unused. It was more speech than I had managed in days. “Especially when we were attempting honesty with one another.”

The words seemed to strike him. He crossed the remaining distance quickly and knelt before me, as though compelled. His hands reached for mine carefully, almost asking permission before touching.

“I ought to have told you immediately,” he said, urgency breaking through his usual composure. “The moment I realised how important you had become to me. I was a coward, Elsie. I feared losing what we had before it even began.”

“She approached me,” I said quietly.

His expression hardened at once.

“Yes,” he replied, bitterness edging his tone. “She did. Jealous, for once — which is not her usual disposition.” A faint, weary smile flickered. “My past... indiscretions rarely troubled her. But you...” He hesitated. “You unsettled that comfortable arrangement.”

“Indiscretions?”

Guilt crossed his face. He released my hands and ran his fingers through his hair, clearly struggling for candour.

“Other women,” he said plainly. “There have been... attachments before. Society tolerates such things for men of my position, whether it ought to or not.” A pause. “My wife is fully aware.”

I absorbed this quietly.

“Right,” I said at last.

And the word seemed to hold far more weight than its simplicity suggested.

He nodded slowly, clearly misunderstanding my quiet response. He seemed to think I was weighing his confession, forgiving perhaps — when in truth I was simply absorbing it, like a blow one does not yet fully feel.

“But none of them mattered,” he continued. “None of them were... you.” He drew a steady breath. “I have never brought another woman home. Never cared in this way. Never... loved them.”

I remained seated, silent. My gaze drifted toward the window where the early light was beginning to soften the sky.

He watched me carefully, unease creeping into his expression. After a moment he reached out hesitantly, brushing a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“Do say something,” he murmured. “Be angry if you must. Scold me. Throw something, if that helps. Only... do not retreat from me entirely.” His voice faltered. “Please.”

At last, I spoke.

“What exactly did you want from us?”

Relief crossed his face instantly. He leaned closer, earnest now, almost boyish in his urgency.

“Everything,” he said simply. “A real life together. Coming home to you. Waking beside you. Travelling, introducing you properly, sharing ordinary quarrels over the newspaper...” He stopped, the domesticity of it sounding almost painfully idealistic.

I managed a faint smile — one that did not reach my eyes.

“That does sound... nice.”

He seemed to notice the emptiness behind it. His hand closed around mine again, firm, almost pleading.

“It is nice,” he said softly. “But it is not simple. Not yet.” His thumb traced small circles over my knuckles. “My wife will not grant a divorce. My family would likely cast me off if I forced the matter.” A pause. “And still... I cannot relinquish you.”

“Mmm... I see.”

Even to my own ears, I sounded distant — tired in a way deeper than sleep could remedy. I was no longer certain what he wanted from me, nor what future he imagined possible.

“I am trying to find a way,” he said, urgency returning. “Constantly. Something honourable, something workable.” He lifted my chin gently so I would meet his gaze.

“But you must not close yourself to me entirely, Elsie. I cannot solve this alone.”

My next words came quietly, yet they seemed to strike him harder than any anger might have.

“The only arrangement that appears possible... is that I remain merely your mistress.”

And the silence that followed felt heavier than anything spoken before.

My words seemed to strike him physically. The colour drained from his face; he looked momentarily unsteady.

“I cannot,” he said hoarsely, shaking his head. “I will not turn this into some hidden, sordid arrangement. You deserve better than secrecy. Better than that.”

I gave a small shrug, though my voice sounded strangely distant even to myself.

“If I had known my life would come to this,” I murmured, half to myself, “perhaps I ought never to have left home at all. I should have tried harder... stayed where things were simpler.”

He froze at that — utterly still.

“Do not say that,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “Do not even think it.” He knelt again before me, his hands coming to my face with an urgency that bordered on desperation. “You coming here — meeting me — that matters. It makes everything worthwhile.”

“Does it?” I asked quietly. “Truly?”

He searched my eyes as though looking for confirmation that hope still existed between us. Whatever he saw — or failed to see — seemed to undo him. He leaned forward suddenly, pressing his face against my neck, drawing a long, unsteady breath as though committing the moment to memory.

“It must,” he whispered against my skin. “Because I love you, Elsie.”

He held me then — tightly, almost fearfully — as if I might vanish. Time blurred. I did not resist, yet neither did I return the embrace. I simply remained there, suspended somewhere between tenderness and exhaustion.

Eventually he drew back. His eyes were reddened, movements stiff now, as though each gesture required deliberate effort.

“I love you,” he repeated softly.

All I managed, after a pause that felt too long, was:
“I know.”

The words seemed to settle heavily between us.

Understanding dawned on his face — not dramatic, not angry — simply quiet acceptance. He reached for his coat.

“I should go,” he said at last. “My wife will be expecting me.”

His voice sounded hollow, almost unfamiliar.

He left without further protest.

The door closed gently behind him, yet the silence that followed felt thunderous. For a moment I remained motionless. Then the tears came — uncontrollable, shaking, impossible to restrain.

I wept for what had never properly begun.

For affection offered too late.

For circumstances neither of us could alter.

For the quiet dignity of leaving when one cannot stay.

And, perhaps most painfully, for the knowledge that somewhere, his wife had been waiting long before I ever entered the picture — and would continue waiting long after I had gone.

I decided, at last, to return home.

The thought had circled my mind for hours — perhaps days — until it ceased to feel dramatic and simply became inevitable. London had given me beautiful memories... but also heavier ones. Ones I no longer wished to carry alone.

I packed slowly. Deliberately.

A dress folded. A book wrapped carefully. The hairbrush Mother had given me — I held that longer than necessary. The letters from Ned I placed into my trunk one by one. I did not destroy them. I could not. They were part of the truth now, whether I wished them or not.

Days later, I stood at the docks.

The wind off the water was sharp, lifting strands of my hair as the ship loomed ahead — vast, imposing, final. A passage not merely across oceans, but back toward a version of myself I hoped still existed.

I stepped forward.

One step. Then another.

Courage did not come naturally; I had been rehearsing it quietly, teaching myself how to move despite the absence of it.

The gangplank shifted faintly beneath my shoes. I fixed my gaze ahead.

Then—

“Elsie!”

His voice.

Sharp, urgent, unmistakable.

I turned instinctively. My feet refused further progress.

Ned was forcing his way through the crowd, breathless, disordered, desperation written plainly across his face. He reached me within moments, his hands finding my arms — not rough, but urgent, as though proximity alone might prevent my departure.

“Don’t,” he said hoarsely. “Please... don’t board that ship.”

He stepped closer, effectively blocking my path.

“Do not leave me.”

The words fractured at the end.

“Ned... I need to,” I said, though even I could hear the uncertainty in my voice.

“Need to?” he echoed, searching my face. “Need to abandon us entirely? Because that is what this feels like.” Softer now: “Like losing you for good.”

Behind him a crewman called out, “Final boarding, miss!”

Time, it seemed, had suddenly become very finite.

“Choose me,” he said quietly.

The question escaped before I could prevent it.

“Why?”

Pain flickered openly across his face.

“Because I love you,” he said simply. “Because life without you has already begun to feel unliveable. Because every ordinary day seems empty when you are absent.” His voice steadied, though his eyes did not. “Because I am asking — sincerely, humbly — that you not leave me here alone.”

The ship’s horn sounded then — deep, final.

“Please,” he whispered. “Choose me.”

And for a moment, the entire world seemed to hold its breath.

I wanted to protest — to remind him he was married, bound by family expectation, title, position, wealth — all the things that made *us* impossible. Yet something in his expression suggested he had more to say, should I allow it.

He seemed to read the struggle plainly on my face. After a steadying breath, he spoke again.

“I know I am married. I know what my family expects of me.” His voice lowered, nearly lost beneath the wind. “But I also know that without you... I feel strangely diminished. As though the rest loses meaning.”

Then he reached inside his coat.

When his hand emerged, he was holding his wedding ring.

I stared at it, unable immediately to comprehend.

He extended it toward me. His hand trembled.

“Take it,” he said hoarsely. “Throw it into the Thames if you wish. Melt it down. Keep it. Discard it. Only... choose me rather than what it represents.”

His voice broke slightly.

“Choose me over all of it.”

For a moment I simply looked at the ring. Such a small object — yet it carried the weight of family expectation, society’s judgement, duty, history. And now, apparently, his defiance of it.

Questions crowded my mind faster than I could form them.

“Ask me anything,” he said urgently. “About my marriage, my obligations, my family. No evasions this time. I shall answer plainly.”

Before I could speak, the ship’s horn sounded again — longer this time.

I looked up.

The vessel was already pulling away.

A quiet, almost surreal realisation settled over me.

I had missed it.

The ship grew smaller against the grey water until it vanished entirely from sight. The docks seemed suddenly very still.

“You missed it,” Ned said softly, as though confirming something already understood. I released a long breath.

“I suppose... fate has made the decision for me.”

He turned back toward me slowly. The wind caught his hair; his expression was searching, cautious.

“Fate,” he repeated. “Or perhaps... inclination.” His gaze dropped briefly to the ring still resting in my hand. “It may be you wished to remain more than you realised.”

I did not answer immediately.

Because I was not entirely certain he was wrong.

The realisation settled slowly — unwelcome, uncomfortable.

I did not like my feelings.

I did not like how deeply he had hurt me.

And I certainly did not like how much effort it had taken simply to regain half my composure.

Yet, to my own surprise, I heard myself murmur:
“Perhaps.”

The word felt foreign coming from me.

He seemed to hear far more in it than I intended. Hope flickered immediately across his face, cautious but unmistakable.

“Perhaps,” he repeated softly. “As in... you are considering remaining?
Considering... us?”

His voice faltered slightly on the last word.

“Perhaps,” I said again, more clearly this time — though deliberately without enthusiasm.

The word hung there — ambiguous, fragile.

“Perhaps is not quite yes,” he observed carefully, as though afraid sudden movement might scatter it.

“No,” I agreed quietly. “But perhaps it might become one.”

His breath caught. Slowly, almost respectfully, his hand came over mine — still holding the ring — his touch tentative, seeking permission rather than assuming it.

“Might become,” he echoed. “I can work with that.”

I gave a small, noncommittal hum in response.

He watched me closely. I knew what he saw: guarded posture, minimal eye contact, caution in every movement. Whatever affection existed had been bruised badly; neither of us could pretend otherwise.

After a moment he spoke again, carefully.

“What if... we began again?”

I glanced at him.

“Meaning?”

“What if we set aside everything that went wrong — not forget it, perhaps, but refuse to let it define what comes next. What if we met properly... here, today... and I courted you as I ought to have from the beginning? Honestly. No evasions. No omissions. Simply a man attempting, sincerely, to earn your regard.”

He paused, clearly weighing whether he had overstepped.

The sea wind carried a quiet stillness between us.

And I realised, somewhat reluctantly, that part of me was listening.

I considered it carefully — more carefully than he probably expected.

“Al...right.”

The word felt cautious rather than enthusiastic, yet he seemed to understand the distinction. His expression softened, relief mingling with something like determination.

“Alright,” he echoed quietly. “Then we begin again.”

He straightened slightly — a subtle return of formality.

“My name is Edmund Ashcombe,” he said, measured, respectful. “Most call me Ned. May I ask your name, Miss?”

I studied him properly for the first time since everything had unravelled. The same windswept hair, the same slightly disordered suit, the same hopeful tension about him — yet his manner was unmistakably different now. Careful. Deliberate. Almost... humble.

It did feel rather like play-acting. Pretence. Yet also, strangely, a chance.

I offered my hand — tentatively.

“Elsie... Lu. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

He took my hand gently. Warm, steady. He held it perhaps a moment longer than etiquette required, though without impropriety.

“A pleasure indeed, Miss Lu,” he said, testing the name softly, as though committing it to memory anew.

Then silence settled briefly — not uncomfortable, merely uncertain.

He cleared his throat, visibly navigating unfamiliar territory.

“So... what brings a young lady to the docks on such a bleak morning?”

The question sounded almost endearingly awkward.

I answered plainly.

“I was escaping a gentleman I rather liked... who turned out to be married.” A small pause. “Unfortunately, I missed my boarding call.”

He went very still.

There was no anger in my tone, no accusation — only fatigue, perhaps a trace of dry amusement at the absurdity of it all.

When he finally spoke, his voice was soft.

“How extraordinarily unfortunate.”

And for once, he did not attempt to soften the truth.

I smiled despite myself. The entire situation was so utterly improbable that resistance felt almost pointless.

“Indeed,” I said lightly. “And yourself? What brings you wandering the docks alone on such a morning?”

He returned the smile — softer this time, less polished than before, more genuine.

“I am waiting for someone,” he admitted. “Someone I very much hope to persuade to remain.” A slight pause. “She was meant to board that ship.”

He gestured vaguely toward the horizon where the vessel had already disappeared.

“But circumstances... intervened.”

Something fluttered unexpectedly within me then — not quite certainty, not quite forgiveness, but something warmer than I had allowed myself to feel in days.

“Mmm,” I murmured. “That does sound rather romantic.”

He shook his head faintly.

“Not romance,” he said quietly. “Desperation, if I am entirely honest. I wish to make amends — properly this time. Without concealment. Without foolish pride.” His gaze held mine steadily. “I should like the opportunity to earn her trust again.”

“Perhaps she will allow you that,” I said.

Hope brightened his expression immediately, though he remained cautious. His hand drifted nearer mine, pausing as though seeking silent permission before his fingers lightly touched my palm.

“Do you think she might?” he asked softly.

“Perhaps.”

The word lingered between us again — uncertain, yet not unkind.

His fingers closed gently around mine, not possessive this time, simply present.

“Perhaps suggests possibility,” he said. “And I should rather like to believe in possibility.”

He lifted my hand briefly, pressing a restrained, almost formal kiss to my knuckles — nothing overt, merely respectful.

I met his gaze directly then.

“Then you must love her properly,” I said quietly. “With honesty. With trust. With authenticity — not merely sentiment.”

Because without those, whatever we attempted again would only fracture once more.

And I had no appetite for repeating that lesson.

His breath caught at my steady gaze. I could see he understood the weight of what I had said — love, if it were to exist between us at all, must be honest this time. Entirely so.

“I will,” he said quietly, though the words carried surprising strength. “I shall love her with openness — no concealment, no pretence. With my whole heart, as plainly as I know how.”

He paused, as though recognising that promises, however sincere, were only beginnings.

I waited.

His jaw tightened slightly; his thumb, which had been idly tracing my knuckles, grew still.

“It will not be simple,” he admitted at last. “My wife will resist. My family... almost certainly as well. Society will have its opinions. Divorce is never graceful.” He swallowed. “There will be discomfort. Possibly scandal.”

His grip remained gentle, though deliberate.

“Is she worth that?” I asked.

The question seemed to land deeply. He closed his eyes briefly, then looked at me again — steadier now.

“She is worth everything,” he said simply. “Reputation. Comfort. Approval. Even loss, if it must come to that.” A faint breath. “Some things are worth rebuilding one’s life for.”

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then, without overthinking it, I rose slightly onto my toes and pressed a light kiss to his cheek.

“Good luck,” I said softly.

Not a declaration.

Not a surrender.

Merely... permission for possibility.

And perhaps, just perhaps, the beginning of something more honest than what had come before.

He stilled at the brief touch of my lips against his cheek — as though the gesture carried more weight than either of us had anticipated. When I stepped back, he caught my hand gently, pressing a quieter, steadier kiss to my knuckles.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

And then life — his life especially — became rather turbulent.

The weeks that followed unfolded in a manner both exhausting and oddly distant, as though I observed them through glass.

Lawyers. Meetings. Endless discussions. Society's inevitable scrutiny.

His wife contested everything fiercely. The matter ceased to be private almost immediately; newspapers, ever eager for sensation, seized upon it with enthusiasm. What might once have remained a discreet family difficulty became public spectacle. The society columns soon christened it The Great Ashcombe Divorce. Some styled it tragic. Others romantic. A few simply scandalous.

Ned, for his part, endured it all with surprising composure. Court appearances, public whispers, unkind caricatures in print — he bore them steadily. Whether for love, principle, stubbornness, or some mixture of all three, I could not always say.

But he did not retreat.

And gradually, people began speaking of it less as impropriety... and more as devotion.

My own life changed more quietly, though not without complication.

I continued my work at the café — I insisted upon it. Familiar routine proved grounding when everything else felt unsettled. Yet anonymity, once so comforting, proved impossible to maintain.

The café had, quite against my wishes, become something of a spectacle.

People arrived not merely for coffee but for curiosity — to observe, to speculate, to whisper. Cups were ordered and scarcely touched; pastries sat abandoned on plates while their purchasers conducted quiet surveillance. Some customers were kind, offering sympathetic smiles. Others less so. A few, emboldened by notoriety, mistook attention for availability — which I ignored with as much composure as I could muster.

I continued my work steadily. Calmly. As though nothing remarkable had happened. It was easier that way.

One afternoon, as I gathered a tray of half-eaten pastries, the bell above the door chimed again.

I glanced up automatically.

And froze.

He looked different — less formal than usual. No tailored coat, no careful polish.

Merely trousers, an open-collared white shirt, hair faintly disordered as though he had run his hands through it repeatedly. There was a certain weariness about him, yet also unmistakable resolve.

The café fell unnaturally quiet as recognition spread.

My breath caught.

“Ned?”

His smile was small but genuine.

“Good afternoon,” he said softly.

His attention did not stray toward the watching patrons. Not once. It rested entirely on me.

“May I speak with you? Somewhere private, if possible.”

My employer, with admirable discretion, gestured toward the storage room at the rear. Ned inclined his head gratefully.

I set down the tray, suddenly aware of my heartbeat, my hands, the peculiar weight of expectation in the room.

And then I followed him.

Because despite everything — the scandal, the waiting, the uncertainty — part of me had been expecting this moment all along.

He followed me into the small storage room; the door closed quietly behind us. The dim light, the scent of roasted coffee, the closeness of the space — everything suddenly felt very immediate.

He turned to me at once, his hands coming gently to my face.

“I needed to see you,” he said softly. “To speak without half of London observing. To be certain you were truly here.”

He rested his forehead lightly against mine.

“The divorce was finalised this morning.”

My breath caught.

“Well... congratulations,” I murmured, the words softer than intended, spoken so close our breaths mingled.

He drew in a sharp breath at that, his expression shifting — relief, exhaustion, something brighter beneath it. He leaned closer slowly, giving me every opportunity to retreat.

I did not.

The kiss that followed was gentle at first — almost cautious — more reassurance than passion. When it deepened, it carried relief rather than urgency; the sense of something long strained finally loosening.

“Thank you,” he murmured quietly.

I pulled back slightly, studying him.

“So what does Edmund Ashcombe wish to do now?”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“I should like to take you out properly,” he said. “No secrecy, no whispered speculation. Dinner, perhaps. Walks. The theatre. Ordinary things, done honestly.” His thumb brushed lightly against my cheek. “I should like the chance to court you properly.”

“But your townhouse... the shared assets with your former wife...”

He gave a small, reassuring laugh.

“All being settled,” he said. “The house will be sold; matters divided fairly. It will take time, but it is already in motion.” A teasing note entered his voice. “Though I suspect I shall emerge from it all rather financially comfortable — which, apparently, makes me more socially ‘eligible’ than ever.”

“Yes... and, for the record,” I added, “I only asked about your finances earlier because I assumed you might have very little left. I was fully prepared to offer you employment.”

His laughter came easily — warm, unguarded, entirely infectious.

“You intended to employ me?” he repeated, clearly delighted. “You believed me destitute and meant to rescue me with honest café work?”

He stepped nearer, amusement softening into affection.

“Do not laugh so heartily,” I protested mildly. “I was attempting to be helpful.”

That only made him laugh again, though more gently now. He drew me into a light embrace, his forehead resting briefly against mine.

“It was kind of you,” he said. “And rather endearing. Though I assure you, my circumstances remain... comfortable.” A faint smile lingered. “No employment necessary, I’m afraid.”

“Mmm,” I replied — unconvinced that wealth should alter how one was treated. He studied me thoughtfully.

“Promise me something,” he said quietly. “Continue speaking to me as you always have. Not as society does. Not as the newspapers do. Simply... as a man.”

“You are a man,” I said dryly. “Stop inflating yourself into something theatrical.” That earned another soft laugh.

“I suspect your straightforwardness is precisely what I needed all along,” he admitted.

I found myself watching him — properly watching — noticing how much lighter he seemed now, how genuine the smile was. Without entirely thinking it through, I leaned forward and kissed him again.

This time the moment felt calmer. No desperation. No urgency. Just quiet certainty. When we separated, he remained close, his expression softened by relief.

“I missed you,” he said simply. “More than I care to admit publicly.”

“I know,” I murmured.

And, for once, knowing felt sufficient.

He smiled at my quiet understanding — that wordless sort of comprehension we seemed increasingly able to share. He kissed me again, softly this time, the sort of kiss that carried reassurance rather than urgency. When we parted, he rested his forehead lightly against mine.

“Tonight,” he murmured, “would you dine with me? At my new place. Nothing elaborate — simply us.”

There was a small pause, almost tentative.

“If you are willing.”

“If you insist,” I replied, deliberately casual — though my heart had already agreed before my voice caught up.

He laughed softly, clearly unconvinced by my attempt at indifference. A light kiss brushed the corner of my mouth.

“Seven o’clock then,” he said. “Dinner... conversation... perhaps a few stolen moments if fortune favours me.”

Then he stepped back, the warmth of his closeness replaced by the cooler air of the storeroom.

We emerged together. The café’s ordinary bustle resumed as though nothing extraordinary had occurred — which, in its own way, felt comforting. Outside, his motorcar waited. He offered a small wave before climbing in, the gesture informal yet unmistakably affectionate.

I watched the car disappear into the London traffic longer than necessary.

Your words seemed to strike him physically.

Colour drained from his face so quickly it was almost alarming — as if someone had pulled warmth straight out of him. His jaw tightened, then loosened, then tightened again, the muscles working like he was trying to swallow something too heavy to bear.

He knew you were right.

You could see it in the flicker of shame across his eyes.

Because it had been suggested — quietly, politely, cruelly — that you could remain a discreet arrangement. Hidden. Convenient. Contained.

A mistress. Nothing more.

“I can’t,” he said finally, voice hoarse, roughened by something close to panic. His head shook once, then again, more forcefully. “I won’t reduce what we have to... that. To some sordid little secret.”

Emotion crept into his voice despite his effort to keep control. “You deserve better than that.”

His hand tightened around yours, almost painfully so, like he was trying to anchor himself — or perhaps keep you from drifting further away.

I only shrugged.

Not dramatic. Not angry. Just tired.

“If I’d known my life would become... this,” I murmured, the words slipping out before I could stop them, “I shouldn’t have left home. I should have tried harder. Stayed. Made it work somehow.”

It wasn’t meant for him.

But he heard every word.

He went utterly still. The kind of stillness that comes when something fractures inside a person. His breathing faltered; his grip on your hand loosened just enough to tremble.

“Don’t say that,” he whispered, the harshness in his tone betraying how close he was to breaking. “Don’t even think it.”

Before you could react, he dropped to his knees in front of you — elegant composure abandoned completely. His hands came up to your face, not gentle this time but urgent, almost desperate, as though he needed to physically hold your attention.

“You leaving home... coming here... it brought you to me.”

His voice cracked outright now. “And that makes every hardship, every regret worth it.”

You searched his face. He looked sincere. He probably was.
But sincerity did not solve anything.

“Is it?” I asked quietly. “Is it though?”

The question seemed to hollow him out. His eyes searched yours frantically, like he was hunting for some flicker of belief, some softening, anything that suggested you still saw a future where he saw one.

When he found none, his expression collapsed.

Slowly, almost helplessly, he leaned forward until his face pressed into the curve of your neck. You felt his breath — uneven, warm, unsteady — against your skin.

“It is,” he whispered, voice muffled. “It has to be.”

His arms wrapped around you then, fiercely. Not romantic. Not polished. Just raw need — like a drowning man clinging to driftwood.

“Because I love you, Elsie.”

He held you for a long time.

Long enough that the clock’s ticking grew unbearably loud. Long enough that your arms went slightly numb where they rested uselessly at your sides. Long enough that the weight of what he’d said settled fully between you.

He seemed to expect resistance. A push. Tears. Anger.

You gave him none.

“Don’t say that,” he whispered, the harshness in his tone betraying how close he was to breaking. “Don’t even think it.”

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He seemed to expect resistance. A push. Tears. Anger.

You gave him none.

Silence, it turned out, hurt him far more.

Eventually he drew back. Slowly. Reluctantly. His eyes were rimmed red now, lashes damp, composure hanging by a thread.

He stood, movements stiff — mechanical, almost.

“I love you,” he repeated softly, one last attempt, like a gambler placing a final losing bet.

All I managed was: “I know.”

The words sounded distant even to me.

Understanding dawned on his face with painful clarity. Not anger. Not accusation. Just a quiet acceptance that love alone wasn’t enough to persuade you into the shadows he couldn’t escape.

He nodded once.

“I should go.” He reached for his coat, fingers fumbling slightly. “My wife will be waiting.”

That sentence landed heavier than any confession.

Empty. Final. Absolute.

He didn’t look back when he left.

The door closed gently — almost politely — but the silence that followed rushed in like cold water.

For several seconds I sat completely still.

Then the tears came.

Not graceful ones. Not cinematic. The kind that twist your ribs and make breathing difficult. I cried for what almost existed. For what could never exist. For trusting honesty to protect me.

And most painfully...
For loving a man whose life already belonged elsewhere.
His last words echoed relentlessly:
My wife will be waiting.
She always had been.
And she always would be.

I decide, at last, to purchase a ticket on a ship bound for home. I had turned the matter over in my mind for hours; though there were good memories here, there were difficult ones also — the sort that settle heavily in one’s chest.

I pack my belongings slowly, methodically — as though attending carefully to each small object might prevent my thoughts from wandering where they ought not. A dress here, a book there, the hairbrush Mother once gave me. My hands linger longest on Ned’s letters as they fall, one by one, into the trunk. I do not destroy them. I cannot. They are evidence of everything now.

Days later, I stand at the docks, the cold wind threading through my hair. The ship rises before me — vast, imposing — a passage back to what I tell myself will be a simpler life.

I take one step, then another. I had been so debilitated once; I had to train myself into a courage I was never certain I possessed.

I draw a steadying breath. That carefully rehearsed courage tastes strangely false as I place one foot before the other. The gangplank shifts faintly beneath me — an uneasy prelude to the journey ahead. I am nearly halfway when a familiar voice cuts sharply through the air.

“Elsie!”

I turn. My feet refuse further instruction; they simply remain where they are.

Ned reaches me within seconds — coat askew, hair disordered by the wind, eyes bright with unmistakable panic. His hands close around my arms as though he might halt my departure by will alone.

“Don’t,” he says, voice rough, almost broken. “Don’t board that ship.”

He steps closer, effectively blocking my path. “Don’t leave me.”

“Ned? I... I need to —” My voice falters disgracefully.

“Need to?” he repeats softly, grey eyes searching mine with near desperation. “Need to do what, Elsie? Leave me? Finish breaking my heart?”

His voice drops further. “Because that is precisely what this feels like.”

He does not release my arms — his hold firm, yet careful.

A crewman calls from the ship: “Final boarding, ma’am!”

The urgency in his tone leaves little doubt — I have mere moments.

“Choose me,” Ned says.

The word escapes me before I can stop it. “Why?”

Pain crosses his face openly now. “Because I love you,” he answers, voice unsteady. “Because life without you is scarcely life at all. Because every day you are absent feels... intolerable. I would burn the whole world down for one more smile from you.”

He swallows, eyes pleading in a way I have never seen before. “Because I am begging you not to leave me here alone.”

The ship’s horn sounds — final warning.

“Please,” he whispers. “Choose me.”

I want to cry out — you are married, bound to family obligations, to your title, your wealth, your entire world. Yet he looks as though he has more yet to say... if only I will let him.

Ned studies my face closely. He sees the struggle there — the arguments I have been having silently with myself. He draws a long breath, as if gathering what little courage he has left.

“I know I am married,” he says quietly. “I know my family expects me to remain with my wife.”

His voice lowers further, nearly lost to the wind. “But I also know that without you... I am nothing.”

He releases one of my arms and reaches into his jacket. When his hand emerges, it holds his wedding ring.

I stare at it, unable to disguise my confusion.

He extends the ring toward me — that small golden circlet containing his obligations, his promises, everything that ought to keep us apart. His hand trembles faintly. “Take it,” he says hoarsely. “Throw it into the Thames if you wish. Melt it down. Do whatever you like with it.”

He hesitates; his voice fractures. “Just... choose me over it. Choose me over everything.”

It feels as though he is placing his entire life into my hands — symbolically, impossibly. All that once mattered to him, offered so simply. Yet my mind floods with questions. So many questions. Too many unanswered ones.

I look at the ring for what feels an eternity. Thoughts circle endlessly, but one truth rises above the rest — he is offering me everything, or believes he is. Title, wealth, expectation, duty — all reduced to this small band of gold resting in my palm.

“Ask me anything,” he urges softly, desperation plain now. “About my marriage. My family. My obligations. I will answer it all.”

The ship’s horn sounds again. I glance up sharply.
It is already drifting away.
I have missed it.

The realisation settles slowly — heavy, unavoidable. I remain standing on the damp dock, the wind cold against my face, his wedding ring still clasped in my hand. The ship grows smaller upon the water until it disappears entirely.

Silence falls between us — thick, almost suffocating.

“You missed it,” he says at last.
I exhale, long and weary.

“I suppose... fate has made my choice for me.”

He turns back toward me slowly. The wind unsettles his hair; his eyes mirror the same turmoil I feel but cannot name. His gaze drops briefly to the ring still in my hand, as though it anchors us both.

“Fate...” he repeats softly. “Or perhaps something else altogether.”

A pause.

“Perhaps you wished to stay.”

His voice is tentative now — hopeful, even fearful — as he waits for my answer.

Realisation dawns slowly upon me. I do not like my feelings — nor the pain he caused, nor how much effort it took simply to half recover from it all. Yet what escapes my lips is an answer wholly unlike myself.

“Maybe,” I murmur.

The word seems to startle him. It carries more weight than any grand declaration could. He searches my face carefully — he sees the hurt still there, the anger not entirely buried, the confusion I myself scarcely understand. He realises, I think, that I will not make this simple for him.

“Maybe,” he repeats softly, almost reverently. “As in... you are considering staying? Considering... us?”

His voice falters slightly on that last word.

“Maybe,” I say again — more deliberately this time, the syllables drawn out as though I am testing their sound.

The word hangs between us — uncertain, fragile. He knows he has little right to hope, yet hope flickers plainly in his expression. I am not fleeing. Not demanding immediate explanations. Simply... considering.

“‘Maybe’ is not yes,” he says cautiously.

“No,” I reply. “But... perhaps it could become one.”

His breath catches — hope, cautious but unmistakable. Slowly, as though seeking silent permission, he reaches for my hand. His fingers close gently over mine, the ring still resting in my palm.

“‘Could be,’” he echoes softly. “I can work with ‘could be.’”

“Mmm,” is all I manage.

He watches me closely — too closely. He notices everything: the guarded set of my shoulders, my reluctance to meet his gaze, the instinctive way I hold myself slightly apart. He understands, I think, that forgiveness will not come swiftly — if it comes at all.

“How about...” he begins, then hesitates. “What if...”

“What if?” I prompt.

“What if we began again?” he says carefully. “Not pretending we never cared — that would be impossible — but perhaps pretending I never... made such a ruin of things.”

A small pause.

“What if we met again, properly — here, today — and I courted you as I ought to have from the start. No evasions. No half-truths. Simply myself, attempting honestly to win your regard.”

I consider this more deeply than I expected to. It is a dangerous proposition — yet oddly gentle in its way.

“All right,” I say at last.

His agreement seems to steady him — though I can see his heart is still racing. It is not an enthusiastic yes I have given him, merely a cautious allowance. Yet he treats it as something precious. He squeezes my hand lightly before releasing it, almost reluctantly.

“Alright,” he repeats softly. “We begin again.”

He straightens slightly, adopting a formality that feels both strange and oddly comforting. “My name is Edmund Ashcombe — though most call me Ned. May I ask yours, Miss?”

I truly look at him then — properly, perhaps for the first time since everything unravelled. The same disordered suit, the same wind-tossed hair, the same unmistakable hope in his eyes. Yet his manner has changed: respectful, measured, careful not to presume.

It feels faintly theatrical... yet also like an opportunity. A rare second chance.

I draw a breath and offer my hand, somewhat hesitantly. “Elsie... Lu. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

He takes my hand gently. His grip is warm, steady. He holds it perhaps a fraction longer than etiquette requires, a small smile touching his mouth — not charming, not calculated. Simply sincere.

“A pleasure, Miss Lu,” he says, as though tasting the name anew.

I wait. He appears momentarily uncertain — which, for him, is novel.

“So...” he begins, slightly awkward now. “What brings a young lady such as yourself to the docks on so dreary a day?”

His attempt at casual conversation is endearingly imperfect.

“I was fleeing a gentleman I... fancied,” I reply dryly, “who unfortunately happened to be married. Regrettably, I missed my boarding call.”

He stills at once. The honesty of it lands exactly where intended. Yet when he looks at me again, I see no defensiveness — only a kind of quiet ache.

“How dreadful,” he murmurs.

The absurdity of it all overtakes me, and I smile despite myself.

“Indeed. And you, sir? What occupies you here alone?”

He returns the smile — softer this time.

“I am waiting for someone,” he says. “Someone I hope might reconsider leaving.” A small gesture toward the horizon where the ship has vanished. “She was meant to be aboard that vessel. It seems fate intervened.”

My heart gives an unexpected flutter — light, almost girlish. Excitement, even. I had not felt that in some time.

“Mmm,” I murmur. “That sounds exceedingly romantic.”

“It is not romance,” he replies quietly. “More... desperation. I should very much like the opportunity to make amends, if she will permit it.”

His gaze searches mine with disarming earnestness.

“Perhaps she will,” I say.

Hope flickers unmistakably across his face. Slowly, cautiously, his hand drifts nearer mine — not grasping, merely brushing my palm with his fingertips, as though asking rather than claiming.

“Do you think she might?” he asks.

I allow the faintest smile. “Maybe.”

That word again — that fragile, terrifying, hopeful maybe. It seems enough for him; astonishingly, he looks as though he could build an entire future upon it. He closes what little distance remains between us, his fingers threading gently through mine, as though they have always belonged there.

“Maybe is not no,” he says softly, his thumb moving slowly over my knuckles. “Maybe means there is hope.”

He lifts my hand and presses a light, perfectly proper kiss upon it — chaste, almost reverent. “And I shall take hope over nothing, any day.”

I meet his gaze directly then, without evasion.

“Then love her properly,” I say quietly. “With trust. With honesty. With authenticity.”

His breath catches slightly at my bluntness. For once, he does not retreat behind charm or wit. He seems to understand the weight of what I am asking.

“I will,” he says solemnly. “I swear it. I will love her with everything I possess — openly, truthfully. No more concealment.”

His eyes search mine, as though asking whether I believe him. I do not answer — not yet.

His jaw tightens faintly; his thumb stills against my hand.

“It will not be easy,” he admits at last. “My wife will contest it. My family will very likely cast me off. Society will talk — incessantly. And the divorce...”

He exhales slowly. “It will be unpleasant. Painful.”

He squeezes my hand gently, almost apologetically.

“Is she worth it?” I ask.

He closes his eyes briefly, as though steadying himself before answering.

“She is worth everything,” he says finally, voice thick but steady. “My reputation, my fortune, my family’s approval — all of it. If losing those things means gaining her, I accept the exchange.”

A faint, wry breath escapes him. “She has my whole heart already, whether she wishes it or not.”

I rise slightly onto my toes and press a soft kiss to his cheek — a simple gesture, nothing dramatic. A blessing more than an embrace.

“Good luck,” I murmur.

He stills entirely at the touch, as though committing the moment to memory. When I begin to step back, he catches my hand once more and kisses my knuckles — more firmly this time, though still perfectly restrained.

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

In the weeks and months that follow, Ned's life becomes... rather chaotic.

The months that follow pass in a blur — lawyers' offices, strained meetings, whispered arguments, and a great deal of heartache. His wife contests everything; anger curdles into something sharper — manipulation, public reproach, quiet cruelty.

The newspapers feast upon it. The so-called 'Ashcombe Divorce' becomes a minor national spectacle. Yet through all of it, Ned remains unwavering. He attends every hearing, signs every document, endures each public slight with quiet resolve — all, apparently, for the woman he claims to love.

To my mild astonishment, it begins to resemble an epic romance in the society pages. They relish every detail — the dramatic court scenes, her pointed remarks, his visible exhaustion, the speculation surrounding me. "The Great Ashcombe Divorce," they call it. "A Modern Tragic Love Story." There are photographs of him looking handsome and heartbreakingly solemn, editorials about sacrifice, obsession, ruin. Through it all, he conducts himself with remarkable dignity. He never once retracts his intention.

As for me, I continue working at the café — though anonymity has rather deserted me. Customers arrive less for coffee than curiosity. They watch. Whisper. Linger over untouched pastries simply to observe what the papers have dubbed 'Ned Ashcombe's mysterious lady.' Some are kind. Others... less so. A few mistake notoriety for invitation. Still, I carry on — pouring coffee, clearing plates, maintaining composure. Then, one afternoon, a familiar figure appears at the door.

I glance up while collecting a tray of half-eaten pastries.

The bell above the door chimes softly as he enters. Today he is dressed simply — trousers, an open-collared white shirt, no tie. His hair looks as though he has run his hands through it repeatedly. A little tired. A little thinner. But unmistakably him. The café falls gradually quiet as patrons recognise him, though he seems entirely oblivious to their scrutiny. His attention fixes solely on me.

My breath catches.

"Ned?"

He smiles — softly, almost cautiously — as though unsure what reception awaits him.

“Good afternoon,” he says quietly. His gaze flicks briefly around the silent room before returning to me. “Might I speak with you... privately?”

My employer, who has been observing matters with discreet interest, gestures toward the storage room. Ned inclines his head in gratitude.

He follows me into the small storage room; the door closes softly behind us. The space is dim, lined with shelves of provisions, the faint scent of roasted coffee lingering in the air. Before I can properly gather myself, he turns toward me — his hands coming up to cradle my face with surprising gentleness.

“I needed to see you,” he says hoarsely. “To speak without all of London watching. To remind myself you are real.”

He rests his forehead lightly against mine. “The divorce was finalised today.”

The words land heavily. I gasp — softly.

“Well... congratulations,” I murmur, my lips far nearer his than propriety strictly permits.

He draws a sharp breath at the closeness. Neither of us moves away. Slowly — giving me every chance to object — he closes the remaining distance. The kiss begins lightly, almost cautious, but relief and long-contained feeling soon deepen it into something more earnest, though still restrained.

“Thank you,” he murmurs softly when we part.

I study him for a moment. “And what does Edmund Ashcombe intend to do now?”

He smiles faintly — a genuine, almost boyish expression — his hands settling briefly at my waist before he remembers himself and eases back slightly. “What I should have done from the beginning,” he says. “I would like to court you properly. No secrecy. No complications. Dinners, walks, perhaps the theatre... ordinary things, though they no longer feel ordinary to me.”

I hesitate. “But your townhouse... the shared assets with your former wife?”

He gives a quiet, rueful chuckle.

“That is being resolved. The house is to be sold, everything divided fairly. A clean conclusion, as much as such things allow.”

A hint of humour touches his expression.

“I should warn you, however — once everything settles, I shall technically be a rather eligible bachelor again. Society may take an interest.”

He steps closer once more, though more carefully this time. “But I find my own interests considerably narrower.”

His voice softens. “There is only one lady whose good opinion I value now.”

He gently tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “So... Miss Lu — will you allow me the chance to court you properly this time?”

“Yes — and for the record,” I add lightly, “I was asking about your finances earlier because I assumed you might have none. I was fully prepared to offer you employment.”

His laughter fills the little storage room — warm, unrestrained, entirely genuine. It startles me more than anything else has today. He shakes his head slightly, eyes bright with amusement.

“You were about to offer me a position?” he repeats. “You believed me penniless and wished to rescue me?”

He steps closer, affection softening his voice. “My dear girl...”

“Do not laugh so much,” I protest quietly. “I was only attempting to be helpful.”

This only makes him laugh harder. He draws me gently into an embrace, resting his forehead briefly against mine. “You are quite extraordinary,” he murmurs, still smiling. “And quite mistaken about my financial circumstances. I promise you, I am not in need of employment.”

“Mmm,” I reply, unconvinced that wealth should excuse arrogance.

He studies me then — thoughtfully. I suspect he realises something: I do not treat him as society does. Not as a scandal, nor a prize, nor a wealthy curiosity. Simply... as a man.

“You know,” he says softly, “I rather hope you never change that. Treating me as ordinary — it is unexpectedly refreshing.”

“You are ordinary,” I mutter. “Kindly do not inflate yourself beyond reason.”

His smile widens — pleased rather than offended. “Your honesty may be my favourite quality.”

I watch him laugh again — relaxed, happy in a way I have rarely seen — and something inside me softens. Before I quite think better of it, I lean in and kiss him once more.

This time the kiss is slower, unhurried. Relief, affection, quiet triumph — all of it mingles there. When we part, his eyes remain half-closed, his expression softer than I have ever known it.

“I missed you,” he says quietly. “Every day of it.”

“I know,” I mouth.

He seems to understand without further explanation. Another gentle kiss follows — less urgent, more certain.

“Tonight,” he murmurs after a moment, “would you dine with me? At my new place. Nothing elaborate — just us.”

“If you insist,” I answer with deliberate nonchalance, though my heart is undeniably lighter.

“I do,” he replies, smiling. “Seven o’clock? Conversation, dinner... perhaps the occasional stolen kiss, should you permit it.”

He finally steps back, allowing the cooler air to settle between us once more.

We leave the storage room together. The café resumes its hum of conversation as though nothing extraordinary has occurred. Outside, he pauses only long enough to give me a small wave before departing in a waiting motorcar, leaving me standing there — oddly hopeful.

