



*To Love Edmund*

*Ashcombe*

Story by Priscilla Li

Copyright © 2026 Priscilla Li

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced.

This is a work of fiction.

## *Chapter 1*

### *Edmund*

It was pouring rain in the streets of London when I returned. Paris had been sunnier, breezier — far less confined than this grey city that insists upon dampening one's spirits along with one's coat.

I ducked into the first café I saw, desirous of strong coffee and something sweet — an indulgence that might remind me, if only faintly, of my last station abroad.

She deposited my coffee and a cream-filled éclair upon the table.

I cast a curious glance at her. It was her manner that struck me first — then her voice. Soft, lilting, not quite London.

“You're not from here,” I said lightly. There was no malice in it — merely observation.

I leaned a little closer, bringing myself level with her. Her eyes met mine only briefly before retreating. Interesting.

“Neither are you... sir,” she replied.

I laughed. “Sprung. I have just returned from France. And you, Miss—?”

She evaded the question entirely, her small smile vanishing as she slipped into the kitchen.

My gaze lingered after her. Curious. Very curious indeed.

The café owner chortled. “She's full of secrets, don't mind her.”

“I don't mind if I do,” I answered.

A girl with secrets is a girl worth knowing.

And what, precisely, is this little mouse hiding?

## *Elsie*

I served him as swiftly as I could and disappeared to assist the other customers, dearly hoping it might be the last I saw of him. I was quite mistaken. He remained for another two hours, ordering one coffee after another, one pastry after another. My employer was delighted with his patronage. As for me, I could not shake the uneasy feeling of a mouse aware of a patient cat.

He watched me move about the café — smiling, serving, doing my utmost to appear composed. I avoided his gaze whenever possible, circling him as though he were some quiet danger. It seemed only to intrigue him further. He paid his bill and left, yet returned the next day. And the day after that. Soon it became a daily occurrence: he would come, order coffee and a pastry, and watch.

I tried not to be intimidated. Still, I began making the most foolish errors. A scone slipped from my fingers. I fetched the wrong pastry — sometimes even the wrong sandwich entirely. Once or twice I misheard a customer. It was mortifying. He was exceedingly distracting.

And he noticed. Of course he noticed. When I dropped a scone, I heard his soft chuckle. When I returned with the wrong pastry, one brow lifted in silent amusement. When I misheard a patron, he hid a grin behind his hand. His visits, I suspected, had become something of a sport to him — a quiet game in which my flustered dignity was the prize.

Today, it seems, he means to raise the stakes.

“Miss—”

I was already rather annoyed. If these small mistakes continued, they would not remain small for long, and my position here was hardly secure. I answered him with what must have been a distinctly displeased look. I did not intend to appear emotionally unsettled — yet he had a way of testing my patience beyond reason.

He smirked at my expression, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he leaned back in his chair, plainly enjoying my frustration.

“I’ll have the same as always,” he said calmly — perfectly aware, I am certain, that his ‘always’ unsettled me.

“And could you...” He paused deliberately, as though savouring the moment. “...bring me an extra croissant this time?”

His tone was impeccably polite, yet a mischievous glint lingered in his eyes.

“Wouldn’t want you to forget that too.”

I swivelled toward him, decidedly annoyed. With the tongs I lifted the croissant, kept my eyes fixed on his, and dropped it onto the plate with rather more force than necessary. I handed it to him with a carefully plastered smile before turning away to busy myself with wiping the dishes.

He watched the entire performance, of course. I could feel it without even looking. When I finally glanced back, he was taking a slow bite, chewing with deliberate calm while maintaining that unrelenting eye contact. My rudeness appeared only to amuse him.

“Thank you,” he said sweetly — far too sweetly — drawing out the words as though to irritate me further. Then, as if the matter had only just occurred to him, he added, “And perhaps some water too?”

His smirk widened when my jaw tightened.

“Please.”

The please was almost mocking.

I very nearly slammed the glass down when I fetched it, but I caught sight of my employer leaning against the counter, arms folded, observing far more closely than I liked. His wife was peering over the glass cabinet as well. The entire scene seemed to have become... curious entertainment.

He noticed their attention too. His smirk never faltered as he took another bite of his croissant.

“The water would be lovely,” he said — just loud enough for them to hear — his tone steeped in exaggerated politeness. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

His gaze never left mine, as though daring me to lose composure. The café had grown oddly quiet.

I swallowed.

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

He leaned back in his chair, arms spreading comfortably along the rests, perfectly at ease.

“Such good service...” he murmured, clearly amused by my forced civility. His grey eyes flicked briefly toward my employer before returning to me.

“Another coffee. Black. No sugar.”

A pause.

His voice lowered — not loud, but pointed enough that I alone was meant to feel it.

“And... your name.”

His gaze lingered on my face.

“What is your name, sweetheart?”

The last word was pure provocation. He knew perfectly well my employer was watching.

I shrank back slightly. I did not wish to answer him — not yet, certainly not today. Out of the corner of my eye I saw my employer still staring.

Then he grunted, “Elsie, come help me with the back orders. It’s getting quiet now.”

Relief washed over me. I murmured a quick acknowledgment and retreated at once, grateful for the reprieve.

*Edmund*

I watched her retreat to the back, my amusement faltering — only slightly. That name... Elsie. It lingered curiously, clinging to the mind like honey.

“Elsie,” I repeated quietly under my breath.

I settled my bill, leaving a tip generous enough to make her employer’s eyes widen. As I rose, I caught the older man’s gaze.

“Your girl is interesting,” I remarked lightly.

He shrugged. “Came to us last winter. Never said exactly why.” A brief pause. “Chinese accent, perfect English though — you know.”

I pretended not to notice Elsie moving about behind the back doorway, fussing with boxes, stacking them away with exaggerated focus — clearly listening while wishing not to appear so.

Her employer leaned against the counter, voice lowered. “She’s quiet. Keeps to herself. Never talks about family... or home.” He considered a moment. “Hard worker, though. Never late, never complains. Customers like her.”

He chuckled.

“Especially the men.”

That pleased me more than it ought to have.

“She’s pretty, polite,” he added, “sweet accent too.”

I shifted against the doorframe, hat in hand.

“What a popular little waitress,” I said.

He laughed knowingly. “She’d probably murder you if she heard you call her that. There’s spine under all that politeness.”

My interest sharpened at that.

“I don’t doubt it.”

I tipped my hat slightly, lingering near the doorway. “How long has she been here? About a year?”

“Near enough,” he replied, wiping his hands on a rag. “Came during the worst storm last winter.”

I nodded, left another coin for good measure, and stepped out at last — my thoughts far more occupied than I cared to admit, though I found myself enjoying the distraction immensely.

Rain met me again as I stepped onto the pavement. I pulled my hat lower, yet my mind remained firmly inside that café.

Elsie.

The name rolled about my thoughts like a marble in a pocket.

I turned once more to glance at the café window before walking on.

“Quiet... keeps to herself,” I murmured. “Never speaks of home...”

My lips curved despite myself.

“She is not from here. That much is certain.”

And the mystery of it — of her — made her all the more compelling.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Elsie*

I returned to the café for work over the next few days and, rather surprisingly, I did not see Edmund - nor that persistent gentleman at all. It was a relief not to feel his lingering stare upon me while I worked, and yet... somehow, it felt as though something were missing.

The café bustled as usual: businessmen seizing quick lunches, tourists escaping the drizzle, and our familiar regulars — Mr. Thompson among them, faithful as ever to his afternoon tea and scone. Yet there was no sign of the tall, dark-haired man who had made himself such a fixture of late.

My employer bustled behind the counter, cheerful as always. “Elsie! Could you take this order to table four?”

“Yes, coming in a second,” I called back.

I lifted the tray and walked the well-worn path across the café. No mysterious gentleman in the corner. No irritatingly persistent patron ordering coffee after coffee. Just... quiet.

I set the order before an elderly couple and received a warm, “Thank you, dear,” in return. Back at the counter, I wiped it down mechanically while rain tapped steadily against the window.

My employer glanced at me. “Lost your shadow, I see,” he chuckled. “That fellow had been here every day for weeks.”

“Yes. A rather annoying one,” I muttered.

He raised an eyebrow but wisely refrained from comment. I was not known for complaining about customers.

The door chime rang as another patron entered, breaking the lull. Yet as the hours wore on, his absence grew oddly noticeable. By evening, the café began to empty, and I busied myself stacking chairs, wiping tables, restoring order to the day’s small chaos.

At last, I leaned lightly against the shop door, drawing a deep breath as I surveyed the London streetscape. Stone façades, brick shopfronts, the clatter of carriages mingling with the newer growl of motorcars. The sun dipped low, leaving a soft purplish haze across the sky.

“It is certainly different from back... home,” I murmured to myself.

As I lingered there, lost in thought, the café door creaked open behind me. Expecting some late customer, I turned — and found him instead.

Edmund Ashcombe.

Slightly wet, windswept, dark hair damp and faintly disordered.

“Still open?” he asked, shaking off his umbrella before stepping inside. “I missed luncheon.” He glanced about the nearly empty café. “Just a coffee, if any remains.”

I confess I gasped quietly. I had not expected him to return. My employer had stepped away to clean up, so I prepared the coffee myself — carefully measuring the grounds, securing the portafilter, letting the hot water pass through. The dark liquid dripped steadily into the ceramic cup.

The aroma of fresh coffee filled the air. I was acutely aware of his gaze while I worked.

When I handed him the cup, his fingers brushed mine — only briefly, yet enough to unsettle me.

“Thank you,” he said softly. There was something in his tone beyond simple gratitude. “You’re still here.”

Not quite a question. More a quiet observation that seemed, oddly, to matter to him.

I looked at him, puzzled. “So are you.”

He took a slow sip, steam rising between us as he held my gaze over the rim of the cup.

“I had some business to attend to,” he said vaguely. “Yet I found myself... drawn back here.” His hand rested on the counter, fingers tapping lightly against the wood. “I missed my afternoon coffee.”

The implication was hardly subtle.

“And perhaps something else,” he added, his voice lowering — almost intimate in the quiet of the nearly empty café.

Something... else?

His smirk played faintly at his lips as he took another slow sip of coffee. Outside, the rain intensified, tapping insistently against the windows. He leaned slightly nearer, lowering his voice.

“Your company.”

He set the cup down with a soft clink. The honesty of it was unexpectedly disarming.

“I find your... presence rather pleasant,” he continued, eyes lightly teasing. “Despite your initial hostility toward me.”

He picked up a sugar packet and tore it open with idle thoughtfulness.

“But, sir, I rarely spoke to you.” I could not keep the confusion from my voice.

He laughed softly — a warm sound that seemed to fill the quiet café.

“Precisely. Your silence has been far more captivating than most conversations I’ve endured these past weeks.” He stirred the sugar into his coffee, watching it dissolve. “You work diligently. You do not complain. There is a certain... quiet intensity about you.”

His gaze softened, less mocking now, more openly curious.

“Most people speak too much. You observe. You listen.”

He took another sip, his eyes never quite leaving me.

I found myself smiling despite caution.

“As do you,” I said slowly.

His smirk returned — though this time it softened his features rather than sharpened them.

“Touché,” he admitted, leaning back slightly against the counter. “Perhaps that is why I find myself so... intrigued.”

Rain continued its steady percussion outside.

“A woman who can hold her own against my wit is uncommon,” he went on. “One who manages it largely in silence... rarer still.”

My confusion deepened — then, suddenly, the familiar reality of men pressed forward in my mind.

“If you wish me to... accompany you once you are married — I cannot.” I raised my hands quickly in defence. “I will not. I will not be used.”

Grasping the nearest tea towel, I began wiping the tables with unnecessary diligence, hoping he might simply finish his coffee and go.

His expression shifted — genuine surprise flickering there. He set his cup down and stepped closer, not crowding me, merely seeking my eyes.

“Elsie,” he said quietly, almost gently. “I said nothing of marriage, nor of any... degrading arrangement you appear to fear.”

He paused, studying my defensive posture.

“I simply enjoy watching you work. That is all.”

He pulled out a chair and gestured toward it.

“Sit.”

My eyes flicked toward the kitchen — no sign of my employer. With some reluctance, I sat, smoothing my skirt slowly as I did so.

He watched me settle into the chair, clearly noting my cautious posture.

“You think me some sort of... cad?” he asked gently — not offended, merely curious. “A gentleman in search of a mistress, or some such tiresome nonsense?”

He shook his head slightly.

“I am five-and-thirty, Elsie. If I wished for a woman, I should find one who was not plainly unsettled by my very presence.”

His candour caught me somewhat off guard.

“And, truth be told, I find your silence far preferable to most ladies’ endless chatter.”

“Then... what do you want from me?” I asked, curiosity overcoming caution.

He leaned back in his chair, arms loosely crossed, considering the question while the rain beat steadily against the windows — a soothing counterpoint to the tension between us.

“I want... company,” he said simply. “Intelligent, quiet company. Someone who does not demand my attention with constant questions or meaningless conversation.”

His gaze held mine steadily.

“You fascinate me, Elsie. Your silence. Your diligence. Your... mystery.”

A pause. His voice lowered almost to a whisper.

“And perhaps...”

“Yes?”

He hesitated, thoughtful now. The café had grown very quiet; only the rain spoke.

“And perhaps... something more,” he admitted softly. “Though that is not something I have yet determined.”

His eyes searched mine with unsettling intensity.

“For the present, I simply desire your company.” A faint smile followed. “No obligations. No expectations. Merely conversation. Merely...”

My thoughts began to race. His honesty was respectable — even disarming — yet what possible company could a foreign waitress offer a gentleman of his standing? And I would not — absolutely would not — give my body in exchange for comfort or security.

He must have seen the panic rise in my eyes, for he quickly raised a hand in reassurance.

“Elsie, please.” His voice was firm but gentle. “I am not asking anything improper. I have no wish to... compromise you or use you so.”

He shook his head.

“I seek intellectual companionship, not physical intimacy. If you imagine otherwise, you misunderstand me entirely.”

He paused, allowing the words to settle.

I drew a steadying breath. If I was to face this situation, I must do so plainly.

“Would you... by any chance intend to finance such company, sir?” I asked carefully. Then, more quietly, “I must pay for my board and lodgings.”

“Alright.”

He rose then, the bell above the café door giving a soft twinkle as he stepped out into the rain.

My employer peeked from behind the storage room shortly thereafter.

Yet before leaving entirely, Edmund’s eyes had widened — only slightly — at my directness. Then they crinkled with genuine amusement.

“I admire your honesty, Elsie,” he had said, leaning forward. “Most people dance around such matters.”

He withdrew a silver pocket watch and flipped it open with deliberate thoughtfulness.

“How much do you require?” His tone had turned entirely businesslike — no trace of flirtation, no mockery. “And what precisely would I be compensating you for?”

My mouth had fallen open before I could stop myself.

“I... have not yet calculated the figures,” I admitted. “How much are you willing to offer — and for what duration of time?”

He snapped the watch shut and regarded me carefully.

“Three hours a week. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.”

His fingers tapped lightly against the table as he considered.

“For those hours, I shall pay you seventy pounds. Per week.”

He watched my reaction closely. It was an extraordinary sum for mere conversation — far beyond what I earned here.

“That should comfortably cover board and lodgings,” he added evenly. “With a surplus besides.”

In that moment my thoughts raced. With such an arrangement, I could reduce my café hours... perhaps allow myself small comforts, even leisure.

It was a very good proposition.

A very tempting one.

“Alright,” I said at last.

A genuine smile touched his features as he stood and extended his hand across the table.

“Excellent. Consider it settled.”

His grip was firm and warm — all business now.

“I shall send a carriage on Mondays. We shall dine, converse — perhaps read, or listen to music if it pleases you.”

He paused, and his thumb brushed lightly across my knuckles before he released me.

“No expectations beyond that. Merely... be yourself.”

His gaze held mine with unexpected sincerity.

When he departed properly, the bell chiming once more, my employer stepped forward, wiping his hands on a dish towel.

He surveyed me with a knowing look.

“So,” he drawled slowly, nodding toward the door. “What’s all that about then?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Seventy pounds a week for three hours? That’s five times what you make here, Elsie.”

He leaned against the counter.

“And he wants... conversation?”

“Yes,” I replied quietly. “It appears so.”

He grunted thoughtfully.

“Well, I’ll be. Never seen the like.”

After a moment, his tone shifted — more protective now.

“You be careful with him, alright? Men like that... they often have expectations. Even if they claim otherwise.”

He pointed a finger gently at me.

“You don’t give him anything beyond your time. Understood?”

I nodded — and, quite unexpectedly, felt a rush of gratitude so strong that I stepped forward and embraced him.

“I shall continue working here,” I promised. “I won’t leave.”

He patted my back awkwardly, clearing his throat.

“Alright, alright. Keep your hours, keep that extra money for yourself.”

He chuckled softly.

“Maybe even treat yourself to something nice.”

Then, with a mischievous grin:

“And if that fine gentleman tries anything improper—”

He winked.

“You come straight to me.”

I smiled, warmth settling in my chest, and together we resumed tidying the café.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *Elsie*

Monday evening arrived, and true to his word, a sleek black carriage drew up outside the café. The driver, impeccably dressed in livery, stepped down at once and opened the door.

“Miss Elsie?” He tipped his hat politely. “Mr. Ashcombe awaits you.”

The interior of the carriage was warm and unexpectedly comfortable, with plush seating and soft lamplight.

I settled inside, clutching my book bag close.

It is only conversation, I told myself. Nothing more... I hope.

The carriage moved smoothly through London’s rain-slick streets, the steady rhythm of hooves and wheels forming a strangely calming melody. Still, I held my bag tightly, nerves refusing to settle.

At last we stopped before an elegant townhouse. The driver opened the door, mist drifting faintly through the lamplit street.

“Right this way, Miss Elsie.”

Inside, my coat and bag were taken with polite efficiency.

“Mr. Ashcombe will join you shortly.”

I was shown into a comfortable drawing room — fire crackling, chairs deep and inviting, everything tastefully arranged without ostentation.

I sat gingerly in one of the armchairs, attempting to steady my breathing.

Then came the soft click of footsteps on marble, and he appeared.

Edmund Ashcombe — my new patron.

Tall, composed, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, dark hair perfectly arranged. He smiled warmly, grey eyes bright with intelligence.

“Elsie,” he greeted softly, crossing the room to sit opposite me by the fire.  
“Thank you for coming.”

His voice was smooth, cultured.

Unsure what etiquette demanded, I rose automatically.

“Ah — yes.”

He stood as well at once, a reflexive gentlemanly courtesy. Seeing my awkwardness, his smile softened. He walked around the table between us and gently took my elbow, guiding me back toward the armchair.

“Please,” he said quietly, “there is no need for ceremony with me.”

He released me at once and resumed his own seat with practiced ease.

“I thought we might begin with dinner,” he continued, watching to ensure I was settled. “And conversation. Just as agreed.”

“Alright.”

A maid entered shortly thereafter carrying a tray — roast chicken, vegetables, fresh bread. She placed it carefully between us. Edmund poured two glasses of wine before dismissing her with a courteous nod.

“Let us eat,” he suggested softly, lifting his fork and knife. “And perhaps we might begin with books?”

He gestured toward my bag.

“Is that yours?”

His tone remained conversational, deliberately unthreatening.

“Oh — yes.” I reached for the bag and produced several books: one English-language volume, a classic, and two romances.

“Please do not think too highly of me,” I added with a small, self-conscious smile. “The classic is largely for show. I have not actually read it yet.”

He chuckled softly at my candour, the corners of his eyes creasing pleasantly. Setting down his cutlery, he leaned forward slightly to examine the books I had laid out.

“There is no shame in reading what one enjoys,” he said warmly. “Romance novels possess a charm all their own.”

He picked up one of the romances, turning a few pages before placing it back upon the table.

“And this one?” he asked, tapping the English volume lightly. “Have you read any Shakespeare?”

“No,” I admitted plainly. “I do not yet understand that sort of... English.”

He nodded with easy understanding, his expression thoughtful rather than critical.

“Well, that is something we might work on together,” he said encouragingly. “Perhaps we could begin with a few sonnets — or even a play, if you prefer.”

He took a measured sip of wine.

“But for now, let us keep to something more... approachable.” His smile softened. “Why not discuss your romances instead?”

I blinked.

“Pardon?”

He leaned back, a faint smile playing about his lips, lifting one of the novels again.

“These books are clearly favourites,” he said. “So let us speak of them.”

He set it down and regarded me expectantly.

“What do you enjoy most about romance novels?”

His tone was genuinely inviting, absent of mockery.

“And do not concern yourself with my opinion. There are no incorrect answers here.”

I paused, uncertain whether to trust the invitation. *May I speak honestly?* I decided to test him.

“I like how the protagonist — is that the correct term? — is wanted. Noticed.” I hesitated. “It feels... real.”

He listened attentively, expression earnest and entirely non-judgmental. When I finished, he set down his glass and leaned forward slightly, elbows resting upon his knees.

“So you appreciate the idea of being seen... and desired?” he asked quietly, eyes meeting mine with surprising intensity. “Of being the centre of someone’s world — even if only within the pages of a book?”

A nervous laugh escaped me.

“You are analysing me,” I said lightly. “But... perhaps you are not entirely wrong.”

My gaze drifted toward the fireplace.

He smiled gently at my admission, continuing to observe me with thoughtful interest.

“And is that so terrible?” he asked. “To be seen, to be desired — particularly by someone who values you as you truly are?”

His voice carried no pressure, only quiet curiosity.

“You strike me as a woman who values her independence and her mind. Admitting you enjoy stories where a woman is appreciated — that is hardly weakness.”

I found myself continuing before caution could intervene.

“Not all romances are alike,” I said, words spilling more freely now. “Some are far more emotive than others. And some heroines...” I smiled sheepishly. “Well, I cannot imagine any sensible woman truly relating to them.”

I hesitated, then added:

“And I confess, I rather prefer the colder, more brooding sort of gentleman in fiction...”

And before I realised it, I was chattering on quite happily.

He listened with growing amusement — and, I suspected, genuine interest — as I continued my rather earnest critique of romance novels. His eyes held a quiet sparkle, clearly entertained by my animated expressions and the way my hands betrayed my enthusiasm.

“Cold, brooding gentlemen?” he repeated at last, a faint smirk touching his lips. “So you favour men who are... complex. Mysterious. Rather than those who rely upon charm or easy flirtation?”

He leaned forward slightly, clearly engaged.

“Is there any particular reason for such a preference?” he asked.

I paused, considering.

“I suppose... I may have something of a saviour complex,” I admitted.

He chuckled softly, never quite taking his eyes off me.

“A saviour complex,” he echoed thoughtfully. “You are drawn, then, to men who appear guarded or troubled — perhaps in need of rescue... or capable of rescuing you in turn.”

A brief pause, his expression reflective.

“So, essentially, souls somewhat... complicated.” He smiled gently. “Is that a fair assessment?”

Then, more quietly:

“And what might that suggest about you, I wonder?”

Silence settled between us.

“I prefer authenticity,” I said at last. “Or... brokenness, perhaps.”

He nodded slowly, his expression growing more pensive.

“Authentic. Broken. Not the polished heroes of conventional romances.”

His grey eyes studied me in a way that felt oddly searching.

“You prefer flaws. Reality. A measure of pain.” His voice lowered slightly. “Rather than the immaculate Prince Charming.”

Another pause.

“Why is that?” he asked softly.

The question felt unexpectedly intimate.

“What draws you toward the broken?”

I leaned back, setting my cutlery down upon the plate. The answer hovered dangerously close to my lips — *because I am broken too* — yet I could not quite bring myself to say it aloud.

He must have noticed the change in me: the stiffening shoulders, the uncertainty in my gaze. He set his own cutlery down gently and leaned forward, expression intent yet softened.

“Elsie,” he said quietly, “you have not answered.”

A beat passed.

“Is it because you recognise something of yourself in them?”

His perception felt almost too sharp — as though he saw far more than I had offered.

I suddenly wished to rise, to excuse myself, to leave entirely. My hands clasped tightly together in my lap as I attempted to steady myself. These questions ventured uncomfortably close to the personal. I wanted to answer... yet could not understand why he was so invested in knowing.

He seemed to sense my unease immediately and lifted a hand in quiet reassurance.

“Wait,” he said softly, forestalling my movement. “I do not intend to distress you.”

His voice remained gentle but steady.

“But you have shared your literary tastes with me,” he continued. “And such preferences often reflect character — what resonates, what speaks inwardly.”

A pause.

“Broken characters touch something within you, Elsie.”

His gaze remained calm, patient, though I was certain he recognised my discomfort.

“That is true,” I answered softly.

He nodded slowly, his gaze never quite leaving mine.

“And that something... it is personal, is it not?” he asked gently. “You are drawn to broken characters because some part of you feels broken too.”

His voice remained soft, yet certain.

“Am I mistaken?”

He held my gaze steadily, not pressing, yet inviting honesty all the same.

“You may trust me with it, Elsie,” he added quietly, his tone carrying a promise of discretion.

*How could I possibly tell him?*

That I could not keep suitable marriage matches back home — that I was always too much, not enough, too small, too short, too inadequate, not pretty enough... or somehow too pretty. Not clever enough. Never quite correct. Never meeting even the simplest expectations.

My eyes drifted away. Tears threatened despite my efforts to contain them.

He noticed at once; his expression softened immediately. Rising quietly, he moved around the table and drew a chair beside mine rather than opposite.

“Elsie,” he said gently, voice low, soothing. “Look at me.”

He waited patiently until I did.

“Whatever it is you are not yet saying — it is alright. You need not speak it aloud tonight.”

“I am sorry,” I murmured quickly. “I should not... You did not pay me to cry.”

He lifted a hand lightly.

“No,” he agreed. “I did not pay you to cry.”

A brief pause.

“But I did ask for your company — your genuine self.”

His grey eyes remained steady, kind.

“And at present, that self happens to be a woman holding back tears. That is sufficient.”

From his pocket he produced a clean handkerchief and offered it quietly.

“The money is beside the point,” he continued. “You owe me nothing beyond honesty — and only when you are ready.”

“... Thank you.” I accepted the handkerchief gingerly, touched more than I cared to show.

He merely inclined his head, watching without judgement as I blotted my eyes. For a moment he sat beside me in comfortable silence, his presence calm rather than intrusive.

After a time, he spoke again.

“Do you know what I suspect?” he asked softly.

I said nothing.

“I think you have endured something that left you feeling... inadequate.” His choice of words was careful, almost protective. “And that is why broken characters resonate with you.”

A pause.

“Am I at least somewhat correct?”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

He smiled faintly at that single word, taking it as permission — or perhaps merely encouragement.

“And I suspect whatever occurred back home may have wounded you,” he said quietly. “Yet you remain standing. You built a life here. That requires no small strength.”

His hand hovered near mine briefly before he gently ensured the handkerchief remained within my grasp — a gesture almost protective.

“You need not tell me everything tonight,” he added softly. “Or ever, if you prefer.”

Another small pause.

“But know this, Elsie...”

His voice softened further.

“I see you.”

“Oh... well,” I heard myself say quietly. “Thank you.”

He inclined his head gently, accepting the deflection with unexpected kindness.

“You need not thank me for recognising what is already there,” he said softly. He leaned back slightly, affording me space.

“And do you know what else I see?” he continued. “Someone who endured something painful enough to feel broken... yet still chose to rebuild her life thousands of miles from home.”

There was unmistakable respect in his voice.

“That requires courage.”

“You are... kind,” I said, a little uncertainly.

He chuckled softly.

“Not always, I assure you,” he admitted. “But with you — tonight at least — I am making the effort.”

A thoughtful pause followed.

“You deserve kindness, Elsie. You deserve to be seen... and heard. And you deserve someone who can acknowledge your pain without judgement.”

His gaze met mine steadily.

“For tonight, if nothing else, I shall endeavour to be that person.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“Now — dry your tears. Let us change the subject.”

“I would like that.”

“Good.”

His smile broadened slightly. He drew a steady breath before continuing.

“Perhaps I might tell you something of myself instead. Something... personal.”

He leaned back comfortably, posture open, inviting.

“It seems only fair after the confessions I have coaxed from you this evening.”

A brief pause.

“You know already that I am an only child,” he began quietly.

I waited, allowing him the space to continue if he wished.

“My parents were... distant,” he said after a moment. “My father perpetually occupied with work, my mother devoted to her charities and social engagements.”

A small shrug.

“I was largely raised by nannies and tutors. Materially, I lacked for nothing. Yet...”

His voice trailed off; his gaze drifted somewhere past the fire.

“I was often quite alone.”

He looked back at me then, steady again.

I listened without interruption.

“That loneliness shaped me,” he continued after a sip of wine. “In ways I am still attempting to understand. It explains why I value solitude — yet also why I recognise genuine connection when it appears.”

His eyes held mine more directly now.

“Like this evening.”

A pause.

“I have never spoken this openly before,” he added quietly. “Not to anyone.”

There was unmistakable vulnerability in his voice.

I considered my response carefully.

“Well... I appreciate your trusting me.”

He smiled softly at my words, the corners of his eyes creasing pleasantly.

“I do not trust easily,” he said. “Yet with you... it feels natural.”

He leaned forward slightly.

“You possess a certain manner — quiet, non-judgmental. You listen without interruption, without attempting to repair what may not require fixing. You simply... accept.”

A faint pause.

“It is refreshing. Almost therapeutic, in fact.”

Then, more softly:

“Would you object if I asked something rather personal?”

I laughed lightly, attempting to ease the mood.

“Another question?”

He chuckled, joining my effort at levity.

“A fair objection,” he admitted, smiling briefly before growing thoughtful once more. “But truly — this one is not about your past, nor anything painful. It is merely something I have observed.”

His gaze held mine steadily.

“May I ask?”

A quieter addition followed:

“Please?”

“Yes?”

He drew a measured breath, leaning forward again, elbows resting lightly upon his knees — a posture that felt unexpectedly intimate.

“I noticed something earlier,” he began softly. “When you were upset... you did not wish to burden me with it.”

He paused, watching my reaction.

“And I suspect that is generally true of you. You do not like imposing upon others.”

There was no criticism in his voice, only observation.

“You would rather endure quietly than ask for assistance.”

“Well...” I answered honestly, voice subdued. “There are not many people I might burden. And even if there were... I am not certain how they could help, even if they wished to.”

He nodded slowly.

“That is understandable,” he said gently. “Yet sharing one’s sorrow is not always a burden. Sometimes it simply means you trust someone enough to let them see you unguarded.”

A brief pause.

“And if I may say so — I think you underestimate your own strength.”

His gaze remained steady.

“You endured something difficult. You built a life here. That is not weakness.”

His voice lowered slightly.

“That is survival.”

A soft smile followed.

My own voice dropped in response.

“It is the only thing I am moderately... passable at.”

His brows knit faintly as he considered my words.

“Passable?” he repeated thoughtfully. “Elsie, survival is not a skill one merely manages. It is resilience — and not everyone possesses it.”

His hand moved toward mine, hesitated, then settled gently over my fingers.

“You survived,” he said quietly. “You adapted. You persisted.”

His kindness undid me; tears rose again before I could stop them.

This time he did not withdraw. His fingers tightened slightly around mine, steady rather than possessive, allowing me to cry without embarrassment.

After a moment he spoke again, voice calm and reassuring.

“Do you know what I suspect?”

I did not answer.

“I think you have been so focused on surviving... that you have not yet allowed yourself to recognise that you are also living.”

His thumb brushed lightly across my knuckles.

“You created a new life here. You learned a new language, new customs. You adapted.”

A gentle pause.

“And that,” he added softly, “is no small achievement.”

I wiped my eyes quickly with my hands.

“I suppose,” I murmured.

He released my hand gently and produced his handkerchief once more, offering it with a quiet smile.

“No ‘supposes’ about it,” he corrected kindly. “You have done remarkably well for yourself, Elsie — and I do not refer merely to physical survival.”

Leaning back in his chair, he continued to watch me steadily.

“You have built a life here. A community.”

A brief pause.

“A home.”

His voice softened further.

“Even if it is not where you began.”

I could only nod.

He nodded in return, seeming to understand the weight of my silence.

“And I believe you deserve to feel proud of that,” he went on earnestly. “To recognise your own strength — not simply because you endured hardship, but because you created something new from it.”

Another small pause followed.

“And if anyone merits kindness just now,” he added gently, “it is you.”

His hand reached out again, resting lightly atop mine — no pressure, merely presence.

After a moment, his gaze shifted toward the clock upon the mantelpiece. His expression grew thoughtful. He withdrew his hand with quiet care and rose smoothly.

“It grows late,” he said softly. “Your first hour has concluded.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“I should say the evening has been rather successful.”

He stepped around the table to stand beside me, extending a hand should I require assistance in rising.

“The carriage awaits outside whenever you are ready.”

## *Chapter 4*

### *Elsie*

The next few days passed in something of a blur. I worked at the café, returned home, and repeated the same quiet rhythm. Letters arrived from home as well — news of weddings, baby celebrations, toddlers already taking their first steps. I read them carefully, sighed, and folded them away.

No one seemed particularly concerned with how I was faring. Sometimes I wondered — not dramatically, merely curiously — whether my absence had made any difference at all. Whether, had I simply ceased to exist in their world, anything would truly change.

The days settled into monotony. The café became a kind of sanctuary: familiar faces, predictable routines, small comforts in repetition. Yet those letters lingered at the back of my mind, reminders of lives moving forward elsewhere while mine remained... uncertain.

On Wednesday evening, I gathered my books once more in preparation for my meeting with Mr Ashcombe. My employer noticed my distracted expression.

“That gentleman’s carriage just arrived, Elsie.”

“Oh? May I?”

I gestured toward the door; he nodded easily, waving me off.

Outside, the driver opened the carriage door with a courteous tip of his hat.

“Miss Elsie. Mr Ashcombe is expecting you.”

The carriage interior was warm and softly lit, streetlamps casting shifting shadows across the upholstery as we travelled through London’s damp evening streets. My thoughts drifted again to those letters — each one a quiet reminder of how easily one might be forgotten.

Upon arrival at Mr Ashcombe's residence, I stepped into the foyer to wait. Alone for a moment, I lightly slapped my cheeks.

"No crying, Elsie. Behave," I murmured under my breath.

As I finished admonishing myself, he appeared in the doorway leading to the drawing room. Tonight he was dressed more casually than before — tailored trousers, a well-cut shirt without waistcoat or jacket. His hair was slightly disordered, as though he had run his hands through it repeatedly.

"Elsie," he greeted warmly. "Punctual as always."

He stepped aside.

"Do come in."

There was something subtly different in his tone this evening — gentler, yet carrying an undercurrent I could not immediately name.

I nodded and followed him.

He closed the drawing room door softly behind us before turning back to face me, expression thoughtful.

"You look tired," he observed simply, without judgement. "The café keeping you busy?"

He moved to the sideboard, pouring two glasses of whisky from a decanter.

"Or is it something else?"

The question lingered between us. Without waiting for an answer, he handed me one of the glasses.

"Drink this."

"I... I do not usually drink," I said quietly. "It makes me sleepy." Still, I accepted the tumbler.

He watched with a small nod.

“Just a sip,” he suggested gently. “It may help you relax.”

He took his usual armchair and gestured for me to sit opposite on the sofa.

“Now,” he continued, eyes steady on mine, “tell me what troubles you.”

His tone held quiet authority, softened by genuine concern.

“And please do not say ‘nothing’. It is quite visible in your eyes.”

“Nothing... not very much,” I said, though even to myself it sounded unconvincing.

One eyebrow rose slightly.

“Elsie,” he said softly but firmly, “you are an excellent liar when necessity demands it. When it does not... less so.”

He took a measured sip of whisky.

“You may tell me what weighs on you — or I shall attempt to deduce it. And I warn you, I am rather skilled at deduction.”

He set the glass down and leaned forward, elbows resting lightly upon his knees.

“Do not guess,” I said with a faint, reluctant smile. “If you tell me something... then I shall tell you something.”

His lips curved into a faint smirk at my proposed compromise. He leaned back in his chair, considering me for a moment.

“Very well,” he agreed. “You first.”

He lifted a hand before I could object.

“No arguments. You are clearly carrying something rather heavy — in both heart and mind.”

His voice softened.

“I give you my word: I shall match your honesty with my own.”

A brief pause.

“Promise.”

His grey eyes fixed on mine with quiet intensity.

“So — no evasion. No polite deflections. Tell me plainly.”

And somehow, the words simply tumbled out. My fears of being forgotten... the letters from friends announcing marriages, babies, new lives unfolding without me. The uneasy sense that I had slipped quietly from everyone’s priorities.

He listened without interruption. No reassurances, no premature comfort — merely attention. When at last my voice faltered into silence, he drew a slow breath.

“You feel forgotten,” he said softly. “As though no one back home truly cares anymore.”

There was understanding in his tone — uncomfortably perceptive.

“As though everyone has continued without you.”

A small pause.

“Am I near the mark?”

I inhaled slowly.

“Yes.”

He nodded, gaze steady.

“And that frightens you,” he continued quietly. “The idea of genuine aloneness — of being remembered by no one.”

He leaned forward slightly.

“That is what unsettles your sleep, is it not?”

Another pause.

“Elsie?”

When I did not answer immediately, his voice softened further.

“Look at me.”

My eyes lifted to his. Every instinct suggested retreat, yet I held the gaze.

“I am simply... afraid,” I admitted. “I remain in the same place — not that it is a bad thing, do not misunderstand. But it feels as though no one quite has space for me anymore.”

His expression softened noticeably. Slowly, carefully, he took my hand.

“No space for you,” he repeated gently, thumb brushing lightly across my knuckles. “Not because you lack worth — but because their lives have shifted.”

A quiet pause.

“It is not personal, Elsie. Merely the passage of life.”

His voice remained calm, reassuring.

“They are not forgetting you deliberately.”

His hand tightened slightly around mine.

“Yes,” I said softly. “That is true.”

He studied my face for a moment longer, thumb still tracing slow, absent circles.

“Then allow me to ask this,” he said quietly. “Does their inability to make space for you diminish your value?”

His gaze held mine with unexpected intensity — almost protective.

“Because I would argue you have demonstrated rather more resilience than most.”

A faint pause.

“You crossed an ocean alone. Built something new.”

His voice lowered.

“They remained where they were. You changed. You grew.”

Then, after a moment:

“Truth for truth.”

My eyes must have brightened, for he gave a soft chuckle at once.

Releasing my hand, he leaned back comfortably in his chair.

“Your turn,” he reminded me. “I have offered my observations rather freely. It is only fair that you match my candour.”

He lifted his glass, taking a measured sip.

“And do not restrain yourself. My sensibilities are not so fragile.” His eyes glimmered faintly with amusement. “I assure you.”

He settled back, waiting.

“Go on.”

I blinked, momentarily perplexed.

“Is there something in particular upon which you desire my thoughts?”

A small smile curved his lips, as though my confusion pleased him.

“No specific subject,” he clarified. “Merely... something honest. About me. About us. About this arrangement.”

He gestured lightly between us.

“Something you have been withholding.”

His gaze sparkled mischievously over the rim of his glass.

“Consider it repayment for my earlier analysis.”

The air shifted slightly — lighter, almost playful — yet still charged with something quieter beneath it.

“Come now,” he encouraged.

I considered carefully.

“Hm. You are a thoughtful listener,” I began slowly. “Possessed of a very inquisitive mind. You do not judge — at least, not overtly.”

A faint smile touched my lips.

“I value my... may I call it friendship with you?”

His expression softened immediately.

“Friendship,” he repeated, as though testing the word for fit. “I find I rather like that.”

He set his glass aside and leaned forward slightly.

“And I value your honesty — regarding both myself and yourself.”

There was warmth in his voice now that had not been present before.

“You have granted me more insight this evening than I anticipated.”

A brief pause followed, and then:

“In return...”

I tilted my head slightly.

“In return?”

He smiled gently.

“A truth about myself, as promised.”

He shifted in his seat, as though assembling his thoughts with care.

“You remarked upon my curiosity. My questions.” His voice lowered a fraction. “That inclination stems from a certain... disconnection.”

He held my gaze.

“I observe rather than participate. I question because I genuinely wish to understand. Yet I seldom volunteer my own inner workings.”

I nodded faintly. I could see the truth of that in him.

He acknowledged my recognition with a slow inclination of his head.

“You see,” he continued, “most people weary me. They say precisely what they believe I wish to hear. They perform for the ‘gentleman of means.’”

His gaze sharpened slightly.

“But you — you withhold, yes. Yet when you do speak, it is unvarnished.”

He leaned closer, voice lowering further.

“You do not perform.”

His eyes held something unreadable — something intent.

“And that is exceedingly rare.”

“Sometimes,” I explained quietly, “because I do not perform — or when I attempt to, I do so rather poorly — I seem to arrive nowhere. I simply try to be myself, yet that is not always the easiest thing for others to accept. I have had to reconcile myself to that.”

He listened, expression thoughtful — almost pensive.

“You reconcile yourself to it,” he repeated softly, “because others cannot quite accept your honest self.”

He leaned back slowly, crossing one leg over the other.

“And that... must wound you.”

There was a new understanding in his tone now, as though some hidden mechanism within me had become clearer to him.

“Your honesty unsettles people,” he continued quietly. “Perhaps it feels too direct — too real — for them to bear comfortably.”

A pause.

“Is that so?”

“I suppose it is,” I sighed. “Which is likely why I struggle to make — or keep — friends.”

He nodded slowly, something almost sympathetic in his gaze.

“Honesty is a double-edged thing,” he said. “Refreshing and sincere — yet, for some, intimidating.”

Another pause.

“Many do not know how to respond to a person who is simply herself. They prefer something... adjusted.”

His eyes held mine steadily.

“And that is why you feel alone, is it not?”

His voice was soft, though probing.

“Probably.”

I took a small sip from the tumbler; the warmth travelled steadily down my throat.

His gaze flickered briefly to the motion before lifting again. A faint smirk touched his mouth — not unkind, merely observant.

“You have an interesting habit,” he began slowly, “of answering without entirely answering.”

“I do?” I asked.

“Oh, very much so.”

He chuckled softly, amusement brightening his eyes.

“Each time I ask how you truly feel, you soften the response. You diminish it. You answer with a question. Or you employ a cautious little qualifier — ‘probably,’ ‘I suppose.’”

He counted them lightly upon his fingers.

“It is quite ingenious. A means of remaining truthful whilst still concealing yourself.”

A small pause followed.

“Brilliant, in fact.”

“And also...?” I prompted.

His smile deepened, lines forming faintly at the corners of his eyes.

“And also rather exasperating — for a man attempting to know you properly.”

His tone was lighter now, almost playful.

“Each time I believe I have progressed a step closer, you erect another careful layer.”

He leaned back once more, though his gaze never left mine.

“So let me ask you something plainly.”

His voice softened, but the question itself did not.

“Do you wish to be known? Truly known?”

A slight pause.

“Yes or no, Elsie. No qualifications.”

I sank back into the armchair, thoughtful.

“I do,” I admitted slowly. “... I suppose I am simply afraid they will not like me. Most people, in my experience, do not.”

He nodded gradually, his expression growing more serious.

“Ah,” he said softly. “There it is — the heart of the matter.”

Leaning forward, elbows resting lightly upon his knees, he continued:

“You fear that if people were to know you fully — the unguarded version of you — they might not care for what they find.”

There was no judgement in his voice, only quiet understanding.

“So you soften yourself. Conceal certain edges. Present a safer, more neutral version in the hope it will be acceptable.”

A small pause.

“But here is what I have observed...”

“Yes?”

“The very qualities you hesitate to show — your honesty, your vulnerability, your genuine thoughts — those are precisely what draw someone like me.”

His gaze met mine steadily.

“You do not perform. You do not pretend. You simply exist as yourself. And that... is compelling.”

Another brief pause.

“So allow me to ask you something further. If someone who values authenticity above all else were to offer you a space that is entirely safe — a place where you might simply...”

“Talk?” I ventured, perhaps a touch presumptuously.

“Exactly.” He smiled, eyes bright with genuine interest. “To speak freely. No judgement. No performance. No fear of rejection. Merely honest conversation.”

He leaned back, arms resting along the back of the chair.

“Would you accept such an offer? Would you allow yourself to be seen fully?”

His voice softened, though the intensity remained.

“Specifically by me, Elsie. Would you allow me to know you without those protective layers?”

I hesitated.

“Tempting,” I heard myself say. “... Very well.”

His face lit at once with a genuine, almost boyish delight.

“Excellent,” he said softly, leaning forward again. “Then let us begin simply. No grand revelations this evening — merely conversation.”

He paused, gathering his thoughts.

“Tell me something true about yourself that no one else knows. Nothing dramatic. Something small, perhaps mundane — but real.”

He settled back comfortably, crossing one leg over the other.

“I shall begin.”

“Please do,” I teased lightly. “I should appreciate a brief respite.”

He laughed quietly at that, clearly enjoying the lighter turn.

“Very well. Here is something thoroughly trivial — yet entirely true.”

A theatrical pause.

“I possess an absurd fondness for lemon tarts. The sharper the better. Quite ridiculous, really — to harbour such enthusiasm for something so simple.”

He ran a hand lightly through his hair, looking faintly self-conscious.

“There — unremarkably honest.”

He turned his gaze back to me, expectant.

“Your turn.”

“I too enjoy lemon tarts,” I admitted. “I could quite happily consume an entire batch if left unattended.”

His eyes widened slightly at that, delight spreading across his features.

“You as well?” he laughed, leaning forward. “Now that is a revelation. I appear to have discovered a kindred weakness.”

A playful grin followed.

“If we were not in such respectable surroundings, I should be tempted to order a full plate of lemon tarts this instant.”

He leaned back again, eyes bright with amusement.

“Come now — another trivial truth.”

“I am actually very lazy,” I confessed. “Excessively so.”

He threw his head back with genuine laughter.

“Lazy? Truly? That is unexpectedly charming.”

His grin turned mischievous.

“You always appear so composed. Let me guess — a master of procrastination? Tasks postponed until the last possible moment?”

His eyes sparkled.

“Confess, Elsie — how indolent are we speaking of?”

I gave a small, half-serious whine.

“I do not wish to work at all. I simply want to be idle, free of responsibilities.”

He chuckled warmly, clearly amused rather than critical.

“Oh dear. That is impressive laziness.”

Leaning forward slightly, he lowered his voice conspiratorially.

“If left entirely to your own devices, would you spend the day in bed reading novels and consuming lemon tarts?”

A playful lift of his brow.

“No obligations? No chores? Just pure indulgence?”

A pause.

“I believe I might quite like this version of you.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “That would be the dream existence.”

He smiled softly.

“It is rather appealing, is it not? Simply existing without constant expectation.”

His gaze lingered thoughtfully.

“I suspect I should enjoy being lazy with you.”

A light laugh followed.

“We would make an excellent pair of sloths. Entirely unbothered.”

Then, after a beat:

“One more truth — something even lazier, if you can manage it.”

“Wait,” I said quickly. “You neglected to offer another trivial truth yourself.”

He smirked at the oversight.

“Quite right.”

A soft laugh escaped him.

“Very well. Here is another — perhaps even more indolent than the last.”

A theatrical pause.

“I possess a truly scandalous difficulty rising in the mornings. Before noon, ideally. The very notion of early rising strikes me as barbaric.”

He rolled his eyes playfully.

“I remain deeply suspicious of morning people.”

A grin.

“Your turn.”

“I am, in fact, a morning person,” I said. “Surprising, perhaps, for someone so lazy.”

He froze momentarily, his smile slipping — only to burst into laughter a second later.

“A morning person? Surely you jest.”

He shook his head in theatrical disbelief.

“How does one manage to be both lazy and a morning person? That is nearly a contradiction in terms.”

Leaning forward, he studied me with genuine curiosity.

“Do you spring out of bed at dawn, eager to conquer the day?”

Another laugh escaped him.

“That hardly sounds indolent. It sounds... positively alarming.”

He paused, then seemed to catch himself.

“Should I be offended?” I teased lightly.

That only made him laugh harder, hands lifting in apology.

“No, no — not offended. Merely astonished.”

A mischievous grin appeared.

“I am attempting to imagine ‘lazy Elsie’ bright-eyed at sunrise. It is... unexpectedly charming.”

He leaned back again.

“But truly — how do you reconcile laziness with early rising? I feel I require this knowledge for scientific purposes.”

“Well,” I explained, “I prefer retiring early. And mornings are quite ideal for exercise — it sets the tone for the day.”

He nodded slowly, expression thoughtful.

“Early to bed, early to rise...” he murmured, as though translating an unfamiliar dialect. “You sacrifice late evenings for calm mornings.”

A small smile followed.

“That is, admittedly, rather sensible.”

A pause.

“And exercising? Truly? Lazy Elsie exercises?”

He chuckled softly.

“That is surprisingly responsible.”

A thoughtful tap to his chin.

“My turn again, then.”

“Yes — do not forget,” I reminded him.

He grinned.

“Quite right. Another trivial truth, then — perhaps equally lazy.”

Settling back comfortably, he continued:

“I possess an incurable habit of napping after luncheon. Without fail. A small ritual I refuse to relinquish — twenty minutes of complete withdrawal from civilisation.”

A casual shrug.

“My one non-negotiable indulgence.”

He paused, eyes sparkling.

“And now, another truth from you.”

I hesitated only briefly.

“I had a very pleasant evening,” I said, offering him a genuine smile.

His expression softened immediately.

“As did I,” he admitted quietly. “More than I anticipated, if I am honest.”

He leaned forward slightly, sincerity unmistakable.

“I have enjoyed our conversation — trivial, indolent, perhaps — yet unexpectedly revealing.”

A soft chuckle followed.

“I believe we have learned a fair amount about one another.”

He rose then.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Indeed we have.”

He crossed to the sideboard and lifted the decanter once more.

“You know,” he said casually while pouring himself another glass, “this could easily become a habit.”

He turned back toward me, a faint smirk forming.

“Lazy confessions over lemon tarts and whisky.”

A small pause.

“I suspect I may begin looking forward to Wednesday evenings.”

There was warmth in the admission — something edging comfortably toward friendship.

“Does that sound ridiculous?”

“It gives us both something to anticipate,” I muttered. “Work tomorrow... ugh.”

He laughed softly at my complaint.

“Do not remind me,” he replied with a mock sigh. “Back to the ordinary world for us both.”

He took another sip of whisky before setting the glass aside.

“But you know,” he added suddenly, turning toward me with a thoughtful look, “this has been unexpectedly pleasant. Genuine.”

His tone carried quiet reflection.

“Not at all what I imagined.”

I stilled slightly.

“What did you imagine?”

He paused, considering carefully.

“Truthfully? I expected awkward silences. You withdrawing into yourself. Myself attempting to coax words from you.”

A small shrug.

“I did not anticipate laughter. Nor this... ease.”

His gaze held mine steadily.

“And I certainly did not expect to enjoy myself to this extent.”

The sincerity in his voice was unforced.

“Well,” I replied softly, “then I suppose we may consider it a success.”

He smiled gently, lines forming faintly at the corners of his eyes.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I believe we may.”

A small pause followed.

“And Elsie?”

His voice lowered slightly, more serious now.

“For what it is worth — you are not lazy. Not in the slightest.”

He held my gaze firmly.

“You are simply comfortable being yourself. And that is far rarer — and far more valuable — than most people recognise.”

Something shifted between us then. Not dramatic. Not loud. But steady — as though some quiet understanding had settled into place.

## *Chapter 5*

### *Elsie*

I returned to the café the following morning. My employer looked me over almost immediately.

“Nothing untoward from last evening, I trust?”

His tone was casual — lightly teasing, perhaps — yet there was unmistakable curiosity beneath it. A gentleman does not send a carriage for a young woman without inviting speculation.

“No,” I replied. “Very fortunate indeed.”

He nodded slowly, appearing satisfied — though a faint smirk suggested he was not entirely convinced that “nothing” meant precisely nothing. He knew me well enough to suspect I was inclined to minimise.

“Fortunate indeed,” he echoed, clapping his hands lightly together. “Right then — plenty to do today.”

He turned away, though not before casting one last curious glance in my direction.

I took my place at the tills, serving customers, preparing coffees, settling comfortably into the familiar rhythm of work. After the unusual intimacy of the previous evening, the ordinary bustle of the café felt oddly reassuring.

Customers came and went. Orders repeated themselves. Cups clinked, steam hissed, and conversation filled the air in that pleasant, everyday way.

My employer moved about behind the counter, occasionally glancing at me with a thoughtful expression — as though quietly reconciling the dependable waitress he knew with the woman who spent evenings in the company of Mr Ashcombe.

“Elsie?”

“Yes?” I asked, expecting instructions.

Instead, he approached holding a small wrapped parcel.

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

He handed it over, brow faintly furrowed.

“You expecting anything?”

“Not that I recall.”

His tone remained casual, yet there was protectiveness in it — the sort that comes from looking after one’s own.

“Go on then,” he encouraged. “Open it. I confess I am curious.”

He leaned slightly over my shoulder as I began unwrapping the package.

I unwrapped the small parcel carefully, revealing a neat, handmade envelope within. The paper was of fine quality, the script upon it elegant and unmistakably deliberate.

My employer leaned closer, attempting — not very discreetly — to glimpse its contents.

Inside was a brief note:

Dear Elsie,

Thank you for a most agreeable evening. A small reminder of our conversation.

I look forward to Friday.

— N

Tucked neatly beside it lay a beautifully wrapped lemon tart from one of the finer patisseries in the district — the sort known for its exquisite indulgences.

My employer's eyes widened.

So did mine.

He straightened abruptly, a knowing smile spreading across his face.

“Well, well,” he murmured. “It appears that ‘nothing happened’ may mean something rather different in Mr Ashcombe’s vocabulary.”

He tapped the note lightly.

“A lemon tart, no less. The man listens.”

He chuckled again — then paused.

“Next Tuesday?”

His brow lifted meaningfully.

“Elsie...”

“Yes, boss?”

He leaned closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

“Is there anything I ought to be aware of regarding you and Mr Ashcombe? Because this—” he gestured toward the note and tart, “—this is not merely friendly.”

A mischievous grin tugged at his mouth.

“It is decidedly flirtatious. And expensive. That tart alone must have cost two pounds at least.”

His expression sobered slightly.

“You be cautious, alright? Men of that sort...”

He left the sentence unfinished, but the warning was clear.

I stepped forward and embraced him again, hoping to ease his concern.

“I shall be quite alright,” I assured him. “And you will be the first to know should anything untoward occur.”

He laughed softly, tension easing under the gesture. He patted my back with awkward affection.

“Very well, very well,” he said gently. “If you say you are safe, I shall take you at your word — for the present.”

He stepped back, expression still thoughtful.

“But I mean it, Elsie. If anything... unusual arises, you come straight to me.”

I nodded, clutching the lemon tart rather carefully.

I nodded, smiling faintly, and took a careful bite of the lemon tart.

The flavour was exquisite — the perfect balance of sweetness and sharp citrus — and I closed my eyes for a brief moment as it melted pleasantly on my tongue.

My employer watched with clear amusement, and perhaps a hint of approval. He seemed rather satisfied by the choice — whether the dessert itself or the sentiment behind it, I could not quite say.

Just then, the café door opened with a burst of chatter as a lively group entered — the luncheon rush arriving earlier than expected.

He straightened at once, his cheerful professional manner returning.

“Right then,” he said briskly. “Back to business.”

And with that, he turned to greet the newcomers, leaving me momentarily alone with my unexpected treat... and the neatly folded note still resting in my hand.

## *Chapter 6*

### *Elsie*

Tuesday arrived with surprising swiftness. I finished my shift at the café and made my way, as arranged, to Mr Ashcombe's residence.

Upon my arrival, the butler received me with quiet courtesy and led me once more into the drawing room. Mr Ashcombe stood near the fireplace, a glass of whisky in hand. At the sound of my entrance, he turned — and his face brightened with unmistakable warmth.

“Elsie,” he said, setting his glass aside and crossing toward me. “Punctual as ever.”

He relieved me of my coat with easy familiarity, passing it to the butler before returning his attention to me.

I offered a small smile.

“Mr Ashcombe.”

He chuckled softly at the formality.

“Ned,” he corrected gently. “When it is only the two of us.”

He gestured toward the sofa.

“Do sit. Dinner shall be served presently.”

As I seated myself, he noticed the small brown-paper parcel tucked beneath my arm. One brow lifted in mild curiosity.

“And what have we here?”

I felt warmth rise to my cheeks.

“Something for you,” I admitted. “I purchased it because it reminded me of you.”

His expression softened immediately — almost boyish in its delight. He crossed to me and, rather than taking his usual chair opposite, sat beside me.

“You bought me something?” he asked quietly, taking the parcel with care.  
“Elsie, that was not necessary—”

His words halted as he unwrapped it, movements deliberate.

I hesitated.

“It is not to your liking?” I began, reaching instinctively to retrieve it. “I can return—”

He gently drew it out of my reach, holding it with quiet firmness.

“No,” he said simply. “You most certainly shall not.”

His grey eyes fixed on mine, suddenly serious.

“Did you select this yourself?”

His thumb traced absently over the wrapping.

“Or were you persuaded?”

There was an intensity in his curiosity that surprised me. Beneath the coffee table, his knee brushed lightly against mine — perhaps accidental, perhaps not.

“Well,” I replied carefully, “the shop assistant presented several options. I merely exercised the discernment expected of a respectable customer.”

His expression grew thoughtful, a faint crease appearing between his brows.

“The shop assistant offered you options?” he repeated slowly, his thumb still tracing idle patterns along the brown paper. “And you chose this one deliberately?”

His gaze moved between me and the parcel in his hands, something unreadable flickering in his eyes.

“This... reminded you of me?”

His voice lowered slightly, almost hesitant — as though he were unsure how to receive such a gesture.

“Elsie...”

“If it troubles you,” I offered quietly, “I can keep it instead.”

His hand came down gently over mine, halting my movement. The grip was firm yet careful.

“No,” he said quickly — almost sharply — before softening at once. “No. Please do not take it back.”

He glanced down at the parcel again, then met my eyes.

“It is perfect. Truly.”

His thumb brushed lightly across my knuckles before he withdrew his hand.

“Thank you.”

At that moment, the butler appeared to announce that dinner was served.

“Come,” Ned said softly.

I followed him, somewhat tentatively.

He guided me toward the dining room, his hand resting lightly at the small of my back — steady, perhaps a touch possessive, though not unwelcome. The butler drew out my chair, and as I seated myself, Ned chose the place beside me rather than opposite, as he had on previous evenings. His arm brushed mine deliberately as he sat.

“I should like to admire my gift while we dine,” he said casually, beginning to untie the wrapping with careful precision. “You do not object, I hope?”

“N-no,” I replied, nerves fluttering rather inconveniently. What if he disliked it after all?

He unwrapped it slowly, almost ceremoniously. The brown paper fell away to reveal a beautifully crafted leather-bound notebook, his initials embossed discreetly in gold upon the cover.

He ran his fingers across the lettering with quiet appreciation before opening it and turning several blank pages.

“It is exquisite,” he murmured, genuine delight lighting his eyes. “I have been meaning to acquire a new journal. This is... exactly right.”

He turned toward me fully.

“Elsie, this is extraordinarily thoughtful.”

“Well,” I said a little awkwardly, “something to write your thoughts in, I suppose. You strike me as a gentleman with rather a great many of them.”

His eyes gleamed with quiet amusement.

“You have no idea,” he replied softly. “I do have a tendency to overthink — you may have noticed.”

He set the notebook carefully beside his plate and picked up his fork.

“Do eat, Elsie,” he added gently, warmth evident in his tone now. “And do not look so anxious.”

A faint smile followed.

“I truly love it.”

“Oh — oh,” I murmured, picking up my cutlery and attempting to carve into the steak. The knife met more resistance than I expected, and for a moment I felt as though I were sawing timber rather than supper. After a brief struggle, I quietly abandoned the effort and turned instead to the roast potatoes.

Ned watched me with open interest. I sensed his attention before I looked up. His expression held faint amusement, though not unkindly.

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

“Ah —” I coughed lightly. “It is not that. I fear I may lack proficiency with Western cutlery.”

My hand went instinctively to the back of my neck.

“It felt rather as though I ought to attack it with an axe.”

His lips twitched, clearly suppressing laughter.

“My dear Elsie,” he said softly, “this is a fork and knife — not forestry equipment.”

He demonstrated with effortless ease, slicing neatly through his steak before taking a measured bite.

“Observe. No carpentry required.”

A faint smirk followed.

I attempted to imitate his movements.

He leaned closer, watching attentively. I became suddenly conscious of how near he was — the clean scent of him, something fresh and faintly citrus, unexpectedly distracting.

“Like this,” he murmured.

His hand briefly covered mine, adjusting my grip with gentle precision.

“Firm, but not forceful.”

He released me, then demonstrated once more.

“Now you try.”

His closeness made me acutely aware of him — the warmth of his presence, the quiet confidence in his movements. I followed his instructions carefully.

“There,” he said softly, voice a shade deeper than before. “No sawing.”

A small smile appeared.

“You are doing it correctly.”

Our eyes met briefly before he seemed to realise how near he still leaned. He drew back slightly.

“Go on — taste it.”

I did.

“Mmm... this is very good.”

His smile widened at my obvious approval, a flicker of satisfaction passing across his features. He cleared his throat softly and resumed eating, perhaps to steady himself.

“It is rather excellent,” he agreed. “The chef here rarely disappoints.”

He took a sip of wine.

“Do you care for wine?” he asked, glancing at the untouched glass beside my plate.

“Ah — no,” I told him gently. “I do not drink very much. I either grow sleepy... or rather unwell.”

He chuckled softly, seeming genuinely charmed by the admission. Setting his wine glass aside, he pushed it slightly away as though to reassure me.

“Then no drinking,” he said easily. “Water will do perfectly well.”

With a subtle gesture, he signalled the butler, who promptly refreshed my glass.

“I myself favour brandy or whisky,” he added. “Though I do enjoy a respectable claret now and then.”

His eyes flicked once more toward my untouched wine glass before returning to me.

“So you truly do not drink at all?”

“No,” I answered. “Is that... undesirable?”

He shook his head at once, expression unexpectedly earnest.

“Not in the slightest. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

He leaned back comfortably.

“There is a regrettable tendency here — particularly in certain circles — toward excess. Your restraint is rather refreshing.”

A small smile followed.

“And admirable.”

Before I could respond, the butler entered bearing dessert, neatly interrupting the moment.

“Chocolate pudding?” Ned offered.

I clapped a hand lightly over my mouth.

“What a delightful surprise. I adore chocolate pudding.”

The butler smiled approvingly, clearly pleased that the choice had landed well. Ned, meanwhile, watched my reaction with a faintly satisfied expression — as though my enjoyment itself pleased him.

“Chocolate pudding it is,” he confirmed. “With cream, I presume?”

He already knew the answer.

“And Elsie?”

“Yes?”

“I shall have the same.”

He signalled for another pudding.

“So we may... share the experience.”

There was something quietly intentional in the gesture — a small intimacy within an otherwise formal setting. The butler withdrew discreetly, leaving us alone with our identical desserts.

“Go on,” Ned encouraged softly, taking up his spoon.

I dipped mine into the pudding and let the rich chocolate linger on my tongue.

“Oh... this is wonderful,” I said, unable to suppress a pleased smile.

His eyes brightened at my reaction. He tasted his own portion slowly, yet his attention remained largely on me — on my obvious enjoyment, the small contentment I could not quite conceal.

“I am very glad you like it,” he said quietly, voice softened.

“It has long been a favourite of mine.”

## *Edmund*

After we finished our meal and I folded my napkin neatly beside my plate, I rose.

“May we?” I asked.

I extended my hand to her — formally, as propriety demanded — yet I knew there was warmth beneath the gesture. I waited for her fingers, steady and patient. The dining room had grown quiet, save for the faint clink of staff clearing away the last of the dishes.

“Shall we retire to the drawing room?”

When she placed her hand in mine, I allowed my thumb to brush lightly across her knuckles — a small indulgence. I held her gaze for a moment longer than strictly necessary before guiding her toward the adjoining room.

She seated herself, visibly relaxing.

I released her hand — reluctantly — and crossed to the sideboard. Pouring two measures of brandy, I watched the amber liquid catch the firelight in the crystal. I handed one glass to her, letting my fingers graze hers deliberately before taking a seat beside her rather than opposite.

“Comfortable?” I asked quietly, my knee brushing hers as I settled. “The fire should warm us.”

She leaned back against the sofa, her head resting lightly upon the cushion, eyes drifting closed.

I found myself watching her.

The firelight softened her features; the shadows played gently across her face. I took a slow sip of brandy but scarcely tasted it. After a moment, I set the glass aside.

Without quite deciding to, I reached toward her. My fingers passed lightly through her hair — an absent gesture, though not without intention. It was softer than I expected.

“Elsie?”

A quiet murmur answered me.

My hand stilled.

“Come here,” I said gently.

I cupped the back of her neck, guiding rather than commanding. She yielded easily, her head shifting from the cushion to my shoulder. I wrapped an arm about her, drawing her closer until she rested against my chest. The brandy remained untouched upon the table.

“More comfortable?” I murmured into her hair.

I felt her stiffen — the moment awareness returned to her.

She had drifted; now she realised precisely where she sat.

I tightened my arm slightly — not to restrain, but to reassure.

“Do not think so much,” I murmured softly. “It is merely... comfortable.”

My hand resumed its slow passage through her hair, smoothing, steadying.

“Like friends,” I added quietly.

Even as I said it, I knew the position felt rather less innocent than friendship alone.

And yet, I did not release her.

*Elsie*

I wanted simply to relax. The clock ticked steadily, the fire crackled softly, and beneath it all I could hear the quiet rhythm of our breathing.

Then — quite without planning it — I asked:

“Ned? Do you... have... I mean... you could not possibly... fancy me? Could you?”

His hand stilled in my hair at once. The fire seemed suddenly very loud in the silence that followed. I felt his arm tighten instinctively around me before he consciously softened it again.

“Elsie,” he said slowly, voice lower than before, “where has that question come from?”

His fingers resumed their gentle, calming strokes.

“Look at me a moment.”

I did — anticipation and dread warring somewhere behind my eyes.

He studied my face intently. The firelight reflected in his gaze, turning his grey eyes almost silver. He swallowed before speaking.

“Yes,” he said quietly, almost a whisper. “I do fancy you.”

The admission seemed to settle heavily between us — simple words, yet charged with something neither of us quite dared define. His thumb brushed softly along my cheek, then tilted my chin upward so he could look at me fully.

I swallowed. Rather hard.

I had asked the question without considering what the answer might mean.

“Now,” he said softly, his voice slightly roughened, “may I ask you something in return?”

His thumb rested lightly against my jaw, lifting my face a fraction higher.

“Do you—”

A gentle knock sounded at the door.

He withdrew from me immediately, confusion — and unmistakable irritation — crossing his features.

“Yes? What is it?”

The butler appeared, visibly uncomfortable.

“My apologies, Sir. A Mr Whitmore has arrived unexpectedly. He insists upon seeing you immediately.”

“Whitmore?” Ned repeated, a definite edge entering his voice. “Tell him I am... engaged.”

“But, Sir — he is already in the foyer.”

Ned rose abruptly, hands tightening briefly at his sides.

“Very well,” he said, clipped. “I shall see him. But kindly make it clear his timing is most unfortunate.”

He turned back toward me, apology already forming.

“Elsie, I am so—”

The sentence never finished.

Mr Whitmore pushed past the butler and entered the drawing room without invitation.

I gasped softly as a stocky, balding gentleman strode into the room without ceremony. His presence felt abrupt — intrusive. His gaze swept about with bold curiosity before settling upon me.

And lingering.

Far too long.

There was something calculating in his expression — a mixture of surprise and something sharper, something almost territorial. He smoothed a hand over his bald head before speaking, his voice loud and uncouth.

“Ashcombe! I did not expect you to be entertaining company so late.”

His eyes flicked back to me briefly before returning to Ned.

“Especially not company like...” He paused deliberately. “...that.”

I rose at once.

“I had not realised it was so late. I apologise.”

Ned’s expression softened toward me for a fleeting moment — silent reassurance — before his posture changed. Without quite seeming to, he shifted closer, placing himself slightly between Mr Whitmore and myself.

Whitmore noticed.

His face coloured faintly.

“Late?” Whitmore scoffed. “The evening is scarcely begun.”

He took a step forward.

“Will you not introduce me to your...”

The unfinished sentence hung unpleasantly in the air.

A familiar unease crept up my spine. I knew this type of man. There had been some back home. Some at the ports when I first arrived. Even a few who lingered too long at the café counter.

Ned must have sensed my tension. His hand settled firmly at the small of my back, drawing me subtly nearer. The gesture was protective, instinctive.

Whitmore’s eyes dropped to that hand before rising again — his expression sharpening.

“And who might this charming lady be?” he asked, addressing Ned directly. The implication beneath his tone was unmistakable. “Your mistress?”

“Wha— what?” I stammered. “Pardon?”

Ned’s demeanour altered at once. The warmth vanished from his expression, replaced by something cold and controlled.

“Mind your language,” he said quietly, his voice edged with steel. “This is Miss Elsie. A guest in my home.”

His hand moved to my shoulder, his fingers resting protectively at the base of my neck — a gesture at odds with the frost in his gaze.

“She is most certainly not my mistress.”

Whitmore gave a short, derisive laugh.

“How could she not be?”

The question lingered — crude and accusatory.

Ned's hand tightened almost imperceptibly at my back — whether from anger or protectiveness, I could not tell. His eyes flashed as he stepped fully before me, shielding me from Whitmore's direct view.

“Because she is not,” he said sharply, his voice brooking no argument. “And even if she were — it would be none of your confounded business.”

He drew a measured breath, clearly striving for composure.

Whitmore's eyes narrowed.

“But your... partner might disagree.”

My eyes widened at once.

Ned went very still. The warmth drained from his expression, replaced by something cold and tightly controlled. His hand on my shoulder squeezed — perhaps reassurance, perhaps warning.

“What did you say?” he asked quietly, his voice edged with unmistakable threat. “You will explain yourself immediately, or I shall remove you myself.”

His gaze flicked briefly toward me — a silent instruction not to react.

“Partner?”

Whitmore gave a smug little smile.

“Do not play coy, Ashcombe. Ever the gentleman, aren't you? You know precisely what I mean.”

His eyes returned to me.

“You there — girl. Best return yourself to your house on the Strand. Off you go.”

The familiar unease returned sharply. I had encountered men like this before — men who presumed authority simply by existing.

Ned's restraint snapped visibly.

"Firstly," he said, each word clipped, "she is not a 'girl'. She has a name — Elsie. Use it."

His hand curled into a fist at his side.

"And secondly, she is not leaving. Not unless I say so."

Whitmore rose slightly from his stance, satisfaction creeping into his expression.

"Perhaps you should explain that to your wife," he said coolly. "She will be arriving shortly."

Wife?

The word seemed to echo.

Ned's face lost all colour. His fist slowly relaxed, replaced by something far closer to panic. He turned to me fully, eyes wide, guilt unmistakable.

"Elsie," he began, reaching for my hands, "please — allow me to explain—"

Before he could finish, a woman's voice carried clearly from the foyer, followed by the unmistakable sound of heels upon marble.

"Ned?"

She entered moments later.

Beautiful. Impeccably dressed. Every detail of her appearance spoke of wealth, status, certainty. And when her gaze settled upon me, the disdain in it was unmistakable.

I instinctively gripped the arm of the chair for balance.

I knew I should leave.

“Elsie,” she said coolly, eyes moving between Ned and myself. “I see you have met my husband.”

She emphasised the final word deliberately.

“You... you know my name?” I managed.

Mrs Ashcombe’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smile.

“Of course, my dear,” she said smoothly. “I make it my business to know the names of my husband’s... acquaintances.”

Her eyes rested briefly upon Ned before returning to me.

“And you are leaving now, are you not?”

It was not a question. It was a dismissal.

“Before matters become... uncomfortable.”

She stepped closer to him, her hand sliding possessively around his arm.

“Ned will see you out.”

I could not feel my feet properly as I moved. The carpet beneath me was thick and luxurious, yet it seemed to drag at my steps as though I were wading through water. The hallway felt longer than before. The portraits lining the walls appeared to watch me pass, stern and accusing.

No one spoke.

A servant opened the front door for me. His expression remained professionally blank, though there was something faintly sympathetic in his eyes.

The night air struck my face at once — sharp and cold — and only then did I realise how fiercely I had been holding back tears.

I ran.

I did not consider direction or dignity. I simply ran. The wind cut through my coat; my breath burned in my lungs. The cobblestones blurred beneath me as tears streamed down unchecked.

I ran until my chest ached. Until my legs felt weak. Until there was nothing left to outrun but my own foolishness.

Somehow, I found my way home.

I collapsed into my bed fully clothed, curling tightly beneath the blankets. The room was warm, yet I could not stop trembling.

How could I have been so trusting?

I replayed it again and again — Ned's pale face, the cold elegance of his wife, Whitmore's smug satisfaction.

I had been a fool.

The next morning, I shuffled to work as though nothing had altered.

I threw myself into my tasks with near mechanical precision. I arrived early. I left late. I scrubbed, poured, counted, carried. Anything to prevent thought.

Yet every time the bell above the door chimed, I startled.

Every time the telephone rang, my heart leapt into my throat.

My employer noticed, of course.

“Elsie,” he called gently during a quiet moment.

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

The question slipped past my carefully arranged composure with alarming ease. I felt tears threaten once more, sharp and insistent, but I forced them back. I would not cry at work. Not here. Not before anyone.

“Yes,” I replied, perhaps a little too stiffly. “Everything is perfectly fine.”

Even to my own ears, the falsehood rang hollow.

His expression softened, concern plainly written there.

“Elsie...” he began again, more cautiously this time.

“Did something happen... with that fancy gentleman?” he asked.

At the mention of him, a fresh ache rose in my chest — anger tangled hopelessly with embarrassment. My cheeks warmed despite myself, and my hands curled tightly at my sides.

“No,” I said rather quickly, my voice betraying a slight tremor. “Nothing happened.”

The words tasted bitter. Something had happened. Something that had left me feeling foolish, exposed... and rather small.

“Please... just leave it,” I added, perhaps more sharply than I intended, turning away to busy myself wiping an already immaculate counter.

“Please.”

## *Chapter 7*

### *Elsie*

I left work at last, quietly relieved simply to have endured another day. Deciding I ought to collect my letters, I took an alternate route toward the post office.

As I drew near, I noticed a motorcar pull to the curb. A woman stepped out — elegant, composed — and then turned. Her eyes narrowed in my direction. Recognition dawned.

Ned's wife.

A small gasp escaped me. My instinct was immediate flight, but she had already seen me.

“Elsie,” her voice chimed across the pavement. “Come here.”

The tone was not invitation — it was command. Like a mistress calling a reluctant hound.

Mrs. Ashcombe's voice cut cleanly through the bustle of the street — sharp, controlled, unmistakably authoritative. My heart began to race as she beckoned with one elegantly gloved finger. Large dark spectacles shielded her eyes, reflecting the harsh afternoon light.

Despite every instinct urging retreat, my feet carried me toward her — slow, reluctant, inevitable.

“There you are,” she said softly, her voice sweet in that unsettling way honey sometimes is — pleasant, yet somehow edged with danger.

I approached her shakily.

She stepped closer, her heels granting her a slight height advantage. With deliberate grace she removed her spectacles, revealing eyes sharp enough to pin me where I stood.

“I believe we ought to have a little conversation, don’t you?” she said mildly.  
“About my husband. About you.”

Her head tilted, a faint smile playing at her painted lips — not kind, not friendly. Appraising.

“Shall we walk,” she continued, “or would you prefer we discuss matters here, where every passer-by may observe?”

“I... I will go where you wish, ma’am,” I managed, my voice thinner than I intended.

She gave a small dismissive flick of her hand.

“Ma’am,” she repeated, amusement curling her mouth. “Such careful manners. I imagine that is part of your charm — appearing so very innocent... so wholesome.”

Before I quite realised it, she had stepped nearer, gently but firmly pressing me back toward the brick wall of a narrow side alley. Her voice dropped, losing its sweetness entirely.

“But I see you clearly, Elsie,” she murmured. “A mouse attempting to play at being a cat.”

One manicured finger pressed lightly — but pointedly — against my chest.

I gulp. I had not been trying to charm anyone — truly, I had not. It was not at all what it appeared.

She laughs then — a harsh, mirthless sound that seems to ricochet off the narrow alley walls.

“Oh? Then what was it, Elsie?” she demands, leaning closer until her breath warms my cheek. “Because from where I stand, it looks very much as though you are attempting to seduce my husband.” Her voice falters ever so slightly, jealousy flickering beneath the anger. “And let me tell you something — you are doing a remarkably effective job of it.”

Before I can react, her hand comes up and grips my chin firmly.

“P-pardon?” I stammer.

Her hold tightens, forcing my eyes to meet hers.

“Did I stutter?” she hisses. “I said you are seducing my husband.” Her gaze searches my face ruthlessly, thumb pressing uncomfortably into my cheek. “Those innocent eyes... those soft manners... that infuriating sweetness. It works on him.” Her voice cracks despite herself, exposing the raw hurt beneath the fury. “Stop it.”

“I’m not,” I whisper.

Her eyes widen fractionally, though the anger does not recede.

“Not what?” she snaps. “Not seducing him? Or not intending to?” She leans closer still, her perfume heavy in the confined space. “Because I know my husband. I know precisely how he looks when he is interested in someone.” Her voice lowers dangerously. “And that look — he wears it every time he sees you.”

Tears well despite my efforts to hold them back.

“I didn’t know,” I manage, voice breaking. “I didn’t know he was... married.”

At my choked confession, something shifts in her expression. For a fleeting instant I think I glimpse something softer — almost sympathy — but it is quickly buried beneath pride and resentment.

“You didn’t know?” she repeats, incredulous, releasing my chin abruptly. “You didn’t know he was married?” Her tone drips with disbelief. “Oh, please. Every woman knows to check whether a man wears a ring before throwing herself at him.”

Was he wearing one? I cannot recall. I never noticed one at all.

She stills then, studying me more closely. I sense her reassessing — searching for deceit and finding none. Only confusion. Hurt. Embarrassment.

“You truly didn’t know,” she says at last, more quietly, almost to herself.

Her composure falters briefly before she gathers it again.

“He doesn’t wear his wedding band,” she admits bitterly.

I draw several deep breaths — from fear, from the rush of adrenaline, from the swell of emotion that seems to strike all at once. Everything is colliding inside me.

Mrs. Ashcombe watches me closely — the rise and fall of my chest, the faint trembling of my hands at my sides. Something in her expression shifts; the sharp edge of her anger dulls as though a realization has finally taken hold.

“You truly had no idea,” she says quietly, almost as if speaking to herself.

“You were not trying to... take him from me.”

She steps back abruptly, her heels clicking crisply against the alley pavement.

“You look quite unwell,” she observes. There is still coolness in her voice, but the venom has gone.

Then she leaves me.

The moment she disappears from sight, my strength abandons me. I stagger back against the brick wall and sink slowly downward until I am sitting on the cold ground.

Everything hits at once — the shock, the humiliation, the ache in my chest that I cannot quite name.

I fold my arms tightly around my knees and draw them close, as if I might hold myself together by sheer force. The sobs come before I can stop them.

I cry for the betrayal I feel... for the embarrassment... for losing something I realise now I never truly possessed. I cry for trusting a man who never once spoke of his wife. I cry, too, for my own foolishness.

The alley remains silent and cold around me. No one comes. No one interrupts.

And perhaps, in that moment, I am grateful for the solitude.

## *Chapter 8*

### *Elsie*

I manage, somehow, to collect my letters from the post office. There are several — a few from friends... and two from Ned.

The sight of his handwriting makes my chest tighten.

The two envelopes feel heavier than they ought — as though they burn through the thin fabric of my dress. I have the sudden urge to tear them in half. To cast them into the gutter. To set a match to them and watch them curl into ash.

Yet I do not.

Some foolish fragment of hope — stubborn and humiliating — insists there must be an explanation.

I clutch the letters to my chest all the way home, as though they are either shield or weapon, I cannot quite tell.

By the time I reach my room, my fingers are numb from the cold and from everything else.

I set my friends' letters aside without opening them. I cannot bear cheerful updates, engagements, christenings — lives progressing neatly forward.

My gaze fixes instead upon the two from him.

My fingers tremble as I break the first seal.

The paper crinkles loudly in the stillness of my small room. His handwriting is unmistakable — bold, confident, assured.

I begin to read.

And then — absurdly — I read aloud, as though hearing the words spoken might somehow make them less real.

“My dearest Elsie,” I whisper, my voice already faltering.

“I find myself unable to concentrate on anything but the memory of your smile, the sound of your laughter, the way your hair catches the light...”

My throat tightens. Tears fall before I can stop them, blotting the ink.

“Last night was perfection. You were perfection. I wish I could remain as we were — wrapped up in you, lost in your sweetness...”

I cannot continue.

The words cut too cleanly.

Perfection.

Sweetness.

All written by a married man.

I lower the page slowly, the paper trembling in my grasp.

With a shaking breath, I open the second letter.

The faint scent of him — fresh air, lime soap, something clean and reassuring — rises from the paper. I resent it instantly. I resent that even now it unsettles me.

I begin to read, my voice scarcely more than a whisper.

“My beloved Elsie, today has been the longest day of my life. Every moment away from you feels like a particular sort of torture. I cannot concentrate on my work, my friends’ conversations bore me senseless, even food has lost its taste...”

My voice falters. Tears slide unchecked down my cheeks.

“All I want is you.”

I lower the letter slowly.

What is happening? Why cannot this simply... disappear? Why must it linger and ache like this?

I climb into bed still dressed, pulling the covers about me as though they might shield me from the world. The letters remain clutched in my hand long after I stop reading them.

I lie there.

Hours pass — or perhaps days. Time becomes strangely shapeless. I sleep in fragments, wake heavy-headed, stare at the ceiling, then sleep again. The room grows dim, brightens, dims once more.

Everything feels suspended.

As though the rest of the world has moved on... and I have not.

## *Chapter 9*

### *Elsie*

Days pass, and I scarcely leave my bed.

I eat little. I sleep in fragments. Mostly, I simply exist — suspended in a dull haze of grief and confusion. Ned's letters lie scattered across the small table beside me, like remnants of some fevered dream that has turned against me.

A few friends call — kind, concerned — but I cannot bring myself to receive them properly. I cannot explain what has occurred without dissolving entirely. And so I avoid them.

I begin to feel like a ghost in my own life — pale, silent, barely present.

On the third day, there is a knock at my door.

I rise at last, reluctantly, and open it.

The door creaks as I pull it inward, revealing a familiar figure: Ned's butler.

His expression is solemn — tinged, perhaps, with pity. He holds out an envelope sealed with Ned's unmistakable crest.

“Miss Elsie,” he says gently, “my master requested that I deliver this personally.”

I stare at the letter for a moment before accepting it with trembling fingers.

“He instructed me to say... that if you did not reply to his previous letters... this would be his final attempt.”

“Pardon?” I manage faintly.

The butler exhales softly, smoothing a hand over his hair in quiet discomfort.

“My master is... persistent, Miss. And at present, he is determined that you read this.”

He hesitates.

“He further remarked that should you decline to answer this one as well... he intends to call upon you himself.”

The implication hangs uncomfortably between us. The butler’s loyalty is evident — but so, too, is his disapproval.

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

I nod, murmur a subdued thanks, and close the door.

For a long moment I lean against it, the envelope clutched tightly in my hand. My heart pounds in my chest. The seal — his crest — stares back at me, a symbol of wealth and power and influence. Even here, in my small, quiet room, he can intrude with nothing more than paper and ink.

With shaking fingers, I break the seal and unfold the letter.

“My dearest Elsie,” it begins. “If you are reading this, then my previous letters have failed to move you.”

The words blur slightly as tears gather once more.

Still, I force myself to continue reading.

“I understand if you are angry — hurt — confused. But pray, hear me out. I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, I cannot think straight without the sound of your voice echoing in my mind. Your silence is driving me quite mad. If you do not respond to this letter, I shall come to your house personally. I will stand outside your door until you speak to me... until you tell me to go away.”

The letter ends abruptly, his signature scrawled with uncharacteristic force at the bottom:

Ned Ashcombe.

I stare at it for a long moment.

Then I throw the letter onto the floor.

The sound of paper striking wood seems louder than it ought to be.

I climb back into bed, pulling the covers up as though they might shield me from everything — from him, from the humiliation, from my own foolish heart.

He may come, if he wishes.

The cat can find the mouse.

## *Chapter 10*

### *Edmund*

Three days later, I stood before her door in the thin grey of early morning. The sky had not yet surrendered to daylight; the world felt suspended between night and confession.

I knocked.

Once.

Twice.

Then again — firmer.

There was no answer.

I knew she was inside. I could feel it — an instinct as certain as breath. I knocked again, the sound echoing sharply through the quiet street.

When there was still no reply, the knocking turned to pounding — the dull thud of my fist against wood, insistent as my own pulse.

“Elsie,” I called, my voice rougher than I intended. “Open the door.”

From within, I heard her faint protest.

“Leave. Leave me alone.”

Leave?

I could not.

The latch yielded — I scarcely recall turning it — and the door opened beneath my hand.

She lay in bed, wrapped in blankets as though shielding herself from winter or war. Her hair was unkempt; her face pale. Her eyes — God — her eyes were red with exhaustion.

For a moment, I nearly retreated.

“Leave?” I repeated, quieter now. “I cannot.”

I stepped inside and closed the door firmly behind me.

“Not until you speak to me.”

She drew the blankets tighter about her, as though I were some invading force. The sight of it — of her shrinking from me — struck harder than any insult.

“Elsie,” I said hoarsely, raising my hands slightly in unconscious surrender, “I am not going to touch you. I only ask that you listen.”

She lay back deliberately and turned away from me.

The dismissal was unmistakable.

I stood there longer than I care to admit, watching her feign sleep. My shoulders sagged, though I refused to leave.

Very well.

If she would not speak, I would.

“You will not answer me at all?” I said quietly. “Very well.”

I drew a steadying breath.

“I shall explain everything.”

The words felt heavier than they ought.

“My wife and I... have an arrangement,” I began, my voice flatter than I intended. “She has her life. I have mine. We attend the necessary functions together. We occupy the same house at intervals.”

I swallowed.

“She does not love me.”

The room remained silent.

“And I do not love her.”

Still she did not move.

“I never did,” I added. “We married because it was expected. Because it was suitable. Because our families approved.”

Then —

The faintest rustle beneath the blankets.

Proof that she was listening.

Proof that she still cared enough to react.

And I clung to that small sound like a drowning man to driftwood.

My eyes flew to her the instant I heard the rustle of blankets. Hope — sharp and sudden — sparked within me. Slowly she sat up, the covers pooling about her waist. Her hair was dishevelled, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen from tears, yet she was looking at me now — truly looking.

“You are listening,” I said quietly, stepping nearer the bed. “That is... something at least.”

She gave no verbal reply, only that steady, wounded gaze.

I swallowed and continued.

“Our marriage is a sham,” I said. “A business arrangement. She gains a wealthy husband; I gain a suitable wife to present at dinners and functions. There is no affection between us. No love.”

My voice softened despite myself.

“Not until you.”

I held her gaze.

“You smiled at me. Laughed with me. Argued with me. You treated me as a man, not a title — not a prize to display.” I drew closer still. “And somewhere along the way... I fell in love with you.”

Her reply came hoarse, raw from disuse.

“You couldn’t tell me you were married... when we were trying to be honest with each other?”

The words struck like a blow. My composure faltered entirely.

I crossed the remaining distance in two strides and sank to my knees before her bed. My hands reached for hers cautiously, fearful she might pull away, yet she allowed it. I held them gently, my thumbs brushing her knuckles as if apology could be spoken through touch.

“I should have,” I said urgently. “God help me, I should have told you the moment I realised how much you meant to me.”

“She met me.”

At that, a darker expression settled over me.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “She did.”

Bitterness edged my voice.

“She was jealous. Furious, in fact. She has never concerned herself with my... other attachments before. But you—”

I hesitated, searching her face.

“You are different.”

Without quite thinking, I lifted my hands toward her face, cupping it gently — reverently almost.

Her next word was quiet but sharp.

“Indiscretions?”

Guilt flickered across me. I withdrew my hands at once, running them through my hair in frustration.

“Women,” I said gruffly. “They pursue me — they always have. Wealth, position... these things attract attention.”

I paused, studying her carefully before continuing more softly.

“I have had mistresses before. Several.”

I waited for jealousy, anger, disgust — something.

Nothing came.

A weary sigh escaped me.

“My wife has always known. It was never... a secret.”

“Right.”

I nodded slowly, mistaking her brevity for contemplation rather than quiet devastation. I believed she was weighing my confession — my past — when in truth she seemed merely absorbing it like a physical blow.

“But none of them meant anything,” I continued, pressing forward as though words alone might mend what I had broken. “None of them were... you.”

I drew a steady breath.

“I have never brought another woman into my home like this. Never... loved them.”

She sat silently upon the bed, her gaze drifting toward the window. The faint morning light traced her profile, pale and distant.

The silence unnerved me.

I rose slightly on my knees and reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“Say something,” I murmured, my composure fraying. “Be angry. Throw something at me if you must.”

My voice betrayed me, cracking at the edges.

“Only do not sit there so quietly.”

A swallow.

“Please.”

At last she spoke.

“What did you want from us?”

Relief rushed through me at the sound of her voice, though the question struck deeper than I anticipated.

“Everything,” I answered without hesitation. “I wanted everything with you.”

The words came faster now, earnest, almost boyish in their foolishness.

“A real life. Coming home to you each evening. Waking beside you. Travelling together. Introducing you to my family. Quarrelling over the morning paper like any ordinary couple...”

I faltered, suddenly aware of how painfully domestic — how impossible — my desires sounded.

She offered a faint smile. It did not reach her eyes.

“That’s nice,” she said softly.

The emptiness in her expression frightened me more than anger would have.

“It is nice,” I agreed, gripping her hand as though she might vanish if I did not anchor her. “But it is not possible. Not... presently.”

My thumb moved absently across her knuckles.

“My wife will not grant me a divorce. My family would never forgive it.”

A pause.

“And I cannot give you up.”

The final words broke against my throat despite my efforts.

“Mmm. I see,” she replied — lifeless, distant.

The sound of it hollowed me.

“I am trying,” I insisted desperately. “Every day I search for some way to make this right. To be with you properly.”

I tilted her chin gently so she would meet my eyes.

“You must meet me halfway, Elsie. Do not close yourself off from me.”

Then she spoke again.

Quietly.

And the words struck harder than any accusation.

“The only possibility is... if I am your mistress.”

The air left my lungs.

For a moment, I could not speak.

Her words struck me like a physical blow. I felt the colour drain from my face as the cold truth of her statement settled between us. She was not wrong. It was precisely what my wife had suggested — that I keep Elsie quietly, discreetly, as one keeps an indulgence best hidden.

“I cannot,” I said hoarsely, shaking my head with more force than I intended. “I will not reduce what exists between us to some sordid secret.”

My voice rose despite myself.

“You deserve far better than that.”

I tightened my hold upon her hand, as though conviction alone might make it true.

She only shrugged, with a resignation that unsettled me far more than anger would have.

“If I had known my life would come to this,” she murmured, almost to herself, “I should never have left home. I ought to have tried harder.”

Those quiet words cut deeper than any deliberate reproach. I froze, the thought of her regretting London — regretting me — shattering something inside my chest.

“Do not say that,” I whispered sharply, my composure fraying entirely. “Do not even think it.”

I knelt before her again, my hands rising instinctively to her face, perhaps more roughly than gentleness allowed.

“You leaving home — coming here — it brought you to me. And that alone makes every hardship worth it. Every regret.”

She looked at me steadily.

“Is it, though?”

Desperation rose swift and choking. I searched her eyes for some glimmer of belief, some echo of what I felt. Finding none, my expression faltered. Before I quite realised what I was doing, I buried my face against her neck, drawing in the faint scent of her as though it might steady me.

“It is,” I murmured against her skin, the words breaking. “It must be.”

My arms wrapped about her, holding her tightly — too tightly perhaps — as if she were the last solid thing in a shifting world.

“Because I love you, Elsie.”

I held her there for what felt an eternity. I expected resistance, protest, rejection. Yet she remained still, silent, her acceptance neither warm nor cold — simply absent.

Eventually I drew back. My eyes burned; I suspected they were red, perhaps swollen. I rose slowly, my movements stiff, mechanical.

“I love you,” I repeated once more, quieter now — a final offering, or perhaps a final plea.

“All I know,” she said softly.

Not *I love you too*.

Only *I know*.

Understanding came swiftly and mercilessly. She knew my love, but she could not return it — not enough to accept the shadows I could offer.

“I should go,” I said at last, reaching for my coat. “My wife will be waiting.”

The words sounded hollow even to my own ears — the echo of obligation reclaiming me from the one place I wished to remain.

## Chapter 11

*Elsie*

He leaves — and his final sentence leaves me utterly hollow.

I cry, and cry again.

The door clicks shut behind him, and the silence rushes in at once, filling every corner he had occupied. I sit quite still for a moment, as though I have forgotten how to move. Then the tears come — great, wrenching sobs that shake my whole body.

I cry for the love spoken too late.

For the impossibility of it all.

For the man who looked at me with such desperate honesty — and still chose to leave.

*My wife will be waiting.*

Of course she will. She has been waiting since before he ever met me... and she shall continue to wait long after.

---

In the end, I decide to purchase passage home.

I think upon it for hours. London has given me memories both sweet and bitter — kindness, independence, discovery... and also loneliness, humiliation, heartbreak. I cannot untangle one from the other any longer.

So I pack.

Slowly. Methodically. As though careful order might quiet the storm inside my head. A dress folded here. A book tucked there. The hairbrush my mother once pressed into my hands before I left.

When I come to Ned's letters, my hands linger.

One by one they go into the trunk. I do not destroy them. I cannot. They are proof now — of something that existed, however ill-fated.

Days later I stand upon the docks.

The wind cuts sharply through my coat, whipping my hair loose. The ship looms ahead, vast and solemn — a passage back toward something simpler, or perhaps merely something known.

I take one step.

Then another.

I have been so weakened by all this that I must almost train myself in courage — rehearsing bravery I do not truly possess.

The gangplank sways faintly beneath my feet. An omen, perhaps. A warning.

Halfway across, a voice cuts sharply through the air.

“Elsie!”

I turn.

My feet refuse to move.

He is there — Ned — pushing through the crowd, hair windswept, coat disordered, eyes wild with something dangerously close to panic.

He reaches me within seconds. His hands close around my arms — not painfully, but firmly enough that I cannot pretend he is not real.

“Don’t,” he says, the word breaking apart in his throat.

“Don’t board that ship.”

He steps closer, effectively blocking my path.

“Don’t leave me.”

The last words crack completely, stripped of pride or composure.

“Ned... I... I need to,” I manage, though my voice falters badly.

“Need to?” he repeats, searching my face as though answers might be written there. “Need to do what, Elsie? Leave me? Finish breaking my heart?”

His voice lowers, almost a whisper.

“Because that is precisely what this feels like.”

A crewman calls from the ship:

“Final boarding, ma’am!”

Time collapses suddenly into seconds.

“Choose me,” Ned says.

The word escapes me before I can stop it.

“Why?”

Pain flashes openly across his face.

“Because I love you,” he answers, voice unsteady. “Because life without you has become unbearable. Because each day apart feels like punishment. Because I would gladly burn the world itself for one more of your smiles.”

He swallows hard, eyes pleading now without disguise.

“Because I am begging you not to leave me alone.”

The ship’s horn sounds — loud, final.

“Please,” he whispers.

“Choose me.”

I want to cry out — *you are married, you are bound to family expectations, to titles, to wealth, to a whole world I do not belong to* — but he looks as though he still has more to say, should I choose him.

He studies my face carefully, as if he can see every argument warring inside me. He draws a steady breath, the sort a man takes before stepping into danger.

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

His voice lowers further, nearly swallowed by the wind.

“But I also know that without you... I am nothing.”

He releases one of my arms and reaches inside his jacket.

When his hand emerges, it holds his wedding ring.

---

I stare at it, puzzled — almost afraid to understand.

He holds it out to me: that small band of gold which represents his marriage, his obligations, everything that has stood between us.

His hand trembles.

“Take it,” he says hoarsely. “Throw it into the Thames if you wish. Melt it down. Keep it. Do whatever you like.”

His voice fractures completely.

“Just... choose me over this. Choose me over everything.”

It strikes me then what he is offering — not merely affection, not merely sentiment, but symbolic access to every portion of his life. His standing. His expectations. His carefully constructed world.

And yet my mind fills only with questions. Endless, unanswered questions.

He seems to read that in my face.

“Ask me anything,” he says urgently. “Anything about my marriage, my family, my obligations. No more secrets. I will answer all of it.”

---

The ship’s horn sounds again.

I look up.

The vessel is already pulling away — slow, inevitable, the gangplank withdrawn. Smoke drifts across the grey water. I have... missed it.

The realisation lands heavily.

I remain on the cold dock, a married man’s ring clenched in my hand.

The ship diminishes steadily on the horizon until it vanishes altogether.

Silence settles between us — dense, almost suffocating.

“You missed it,” Ned says quietly.

---

I exhale, long and tired.

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

He turns back to me slowly, the wind tugging at his coat, his eyes mirroring the same confusion that churns inside me.

His gaze drops briefly to the ring still enclosed in my palm, as though it were both anchor and chain.

“Fate,” he repeats softly.

Then, after a pause:

“Or perhaps something else entirely.”

He watches me carefully now.

“Perhaps... you wished to stay.”

His heart seems almost audible in the quiet, and he waits — not pushing, not demanding — simply waiting for whatever truth I might choose to give.

A slow realisation settles upon me.

I do not like my feelings. I do not like how deeply he wounded me. I do not like how much strength it took merely to half recover from what he did.

I do not like any of it.

And yet, when I speak, my response is small — almost unrecognisable as my own.

“Maybe.”

The word feels foreign in my mouth.

He inhales sharply, as though that single syllable has altered the course of his life. I see the flicker in his eyes — hope, raw and dangerous.

“Maybe,” he repeats softly, almost reverently. “As in... you are considering staying? Considering... us?”

His voice trembles slightly upon that final word.

“Us.”

“Maybe,” I say again, this time slower, more deliberate.

The word stretches between us — neither promise nor refusal.

He studies me as though I am something fragile and rare.

“‘Maybe’ is not ‘yes,’” he says carefully, as though afraid to disturb whatever balance exists between us.

“No,” I reply quietly. “But maybe... it could be.”

I see his breath catch at that.

He does not smile — not fully — but something steadies in him. His hand lifts slowly, hovering over mine in silent request before his fingers gently close around my hand — and the ring still clasped within it.

“Could be,” he echoes softly, his thumb brushing lightly across my knuckles. “I can work with ‘could be.’”

“Mmm,” I murmur — neither encouraging nor discouraging.

He watches me closely. I can feel it — his awareness of my guarded posture, the way my shoulders curve inward, the way I avoid meeting his gaze for too long. He understands, I think, that I will not fall back into him easily.

I will not forgive in a breath.

I will not make this simple.

“How about...” he begins, then pauses, weighing his words with unusual care. “What if...”

“What if?”

“What if we begin again?” he says cautiously. “What if we pretend we never met — never... fell as we did — or rather, pretend I never shattered what was forming between us.”

His thumb continues its slow, unconscious motion over my knuckles.

“What if we meet again — today, here upon these docks — and I court you properly this time. No deception. No omissions. No half-truths.”

He looks at me steadily now.

“Just myself. Entirely. Attempting to win you honestly.”

He pauses, waiting — not demanding, not claiming — but offering.

I consider it deeply.

“Al...right.”

The word leaves me cautiously, almost reluctantly, yet it is there all the same.

His expression shifts at once — relief, hope, something fragile lighting in his eyes. Not triumph. Not certainty. Simply gratitude that I have not walked away entirely.

“All right,” he repeats softly, the sounds of the docks nearly swallowing his voice. “Then we begin again.”

He releases my hand slowly, as though afraid any sudden movement might shatter this tenuous new beginning.

Then, with deliberate formality:

“My name is Edmund Ashcombe. You may call me Ned. Might I ask your name, Miss?”

I look at him properly now — truly look.

The same dishevelled suit. The same wind-tossed hair. The same earnest desperation lingering in his eyes. Yet his manner has altered. No presumption. No easy charm. Only careful respect — as though he fears one wrong step will lose me again.

I draw a steady breath. It feels faintly absurd — play-acting at first meetings when we have already crossed so many emotional thresholds. And yet...

It is also a chance.

A reprieve.

A possibility.

I extend my hand, somewhat hesitantly.

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

He takes my hand gently. Warm. Steady. His grip lingers a fraction longer than etiquette demands, his grey eyes softening as a small, genuine smile appears — unpolished, unperformed.

“Pleasure to meet you, Miss Elsie Lu.”

He repeats my name carefully, almost thoughtfully, as though discovering it anew.

He clears his throat.

I wait.

He seems uncharacteristically uncertain — a man accustomed to confidence now navigating unfamiliar vulnerability.

“So...” he begins, slightly awkward, almost endearing in the effort, “what brings a lovely young lady such as yourself to the docks on a dreary morning like this?”

I answer plainly — perhaps too plainly.

“I was fleeing a man I... fancied. Unfortunately, he turned out to be married. And I rather missed my boarding call.”

He stills completely at that.

My honesty lands exactly as intended — not cruel, not theatrical — simply true.

And truth, I find, has a remarkable way of striking harder than any accusation.

He looks at me — truly looks — and I can tell he finds no malice there. No anger sharp enough to wound him back. Only weariness. Sadness. And, perhaps, a faint thread of dark humour at the absurdity of it all.

His voice, when he speaks, is scarcely above a whisper.

“How dreadful.”

I smile despite myself. The entire situation is so thoroughly ludicrous that resistance seems pointless.

“Indeed,” I reply lightly. “And yourself? What brings you here alone on such a morning?”

He smiles in return — gently, almost cautiously — as though matching my tone step for step.

“I am... waiting for someone,” he admits quietly, his gaze steady upon mine. “Someone I hope to persuade to remain.”

He gestures vaguely toward the horizon, where the ship has long since vanished.

“She was meant to sail today. Fate, it seems, intervened.”

My heart gives a most unexpected flutter — the first true spark of excitement I have felt in days. Perhaps longer. It catches me unprepared, and I dislike how quickly hope can return when it has no business doing so.

Still... it is there.

“Mmm,” I murmur. “That sounds rather romantic of you.”

He exhales softly, the hint of a rueful smile touching his mouth.

“It is not romance,” he confesses. “It is desperation. I am desperate for her to stay — to hear me out — to allow me a chance to mend what I so thoroughly mishandled.”

His eyes search mine with a quiet intensity that does not demand, yet does not retreat either.

“Perhaps she will let you,” I say.

Something bright flickers in his expression — hope, fragile but unmistakable. He moves a little nearer, carefully, as though mindful not to startle me. His hand lifts, hesitates, then his fingertips brush lightly against my palm — a question rather than a claim.

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

“Maybe.”

That word again — *maybe*.

Beautiful. Terrifying. Hopeful.

He seems able to build entire futures upon that fragile syllable. Slowly, gently, he closes the remaining distance between our hands, his fingers intertwining with mine as though they have always known their proper place there.

“*Maybe* is not *no*,” he says softly, his thumb brushing the curve of my knuckles. “*Maybe* means hope.”

He lifts my hand to his lips, placing a light, chaste kiss upon my knuckles.

“And I shall take hope over nothing any day.”

I meet his gaze directly.

“Then love her properly,” I say quietly. “With trust. With honesty. With authenticity.”

His breath catches — I see the weight of the words settle upon him. This is no romantic flourish now, no charm or persuasion. It is a standard. A condition. A truth.

“I will,” he vows solemnly. “I promise you — I will love her with every fibre of my being. Openly. Honestly. Without pretence.”

His eyes search mine, earnest and unguarded.

“With complete honesty.”

He pauses.

I wait.

His jaw tightens slightly, his thumb stilling where it rests against my hand.

“It will not be easy,” he admits quietly. “My wife will oppose me. My family may very well cast me off. Society will talk. Divorce...” He exhales slowly. “It will be unpleasant. Painful. Possibly ruinous.”

His grip on my hand firms — not possessive, simply steady.

“Is she worth it?” I ask.

The question clearly strikes him. He closes his eyes briefly before opening them again, resolve settled firmly there.

“She is worth everything,” he says, voice thick yet unwavering. “My reputation. My fortune. My family’s approval. If losing all that gains me her — it is a price I would gladly pay.”

A faint, almost rueful smile touches his mouth.

“She has my whole heart.”

I rise slightly onto my toes and press a soft kiss to his cheek.

“Good luck,” I murmur.

He stills entirely at the gesture — as though the simple touch carries more meaning than any declaration. When his eyes open again, something gentler lives there.

Before I can withdraw fully, he catches my hand once more and presses a lingering kiss to my knuckles.

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

## *Chapter 12*

### *Edmund*

Over the course of those weeks — then months — my life descends into something very near chaos.

Time blurs into a relentless procession of solicitors, courtrooms, tense meetings, bitter arguments, and a heartache I would not have believed myself capable of enduring. My wife contests me at every turn. What began as anger sharpens quickly into something uglier — manipulation, jealousy, calculated cruelty. The papers seize upon it at once, of course. Headlines scream about the “scandalous Ashcombe divorce,” as though my private life exists purely for public entertainment.

And yet I remain resolute.

Every hearing, every document, every humiliating confrontation played out before strangers — I endure it. For her. For the woman I love. That fact alone steadies me when everything else threatens to unravel.

In time, it seems to transform into a sort of epic romance for society to devour.

The society columns cannot get enough of it. They dissect every courtroom exchange, every sharp remark from my wife, every public sighting of me looking, apparently, either devastated or grimly determined. Someone christens it “The Great Ashcombe Divorce.” Another calls it “A Modern Tragic Love Story.” I cannot walk ten paces without seeing my own photograph staring back at me — invariably described as “handsome yet heartbroken,” which I suppose is their polite way of saying ruined.

They speculate endlessly about my supposed obsession, my sacrifice, my impending social downfall.

Let them.

Through all of it, I keep my composure. My dignity remains intact — at least outwardly — and my love for her has not wavered for a single moment.

Not once.

## Chapter 13

### *Elsie*

I continue working at the café, though I am no longer quite so anonymous. Customers now arrive less for the coffee and more, it seems, for curiosity — to dine, to sip, and to quietly inspect what the newspapers have taken to calling *Ned Ashcombe's mysterious lover*.

The place becomes something of a spectacle. People order coffee they scarcely touch, pastries they leave half-eaten, all for the privilege of observing me from across a table. Some offer sympathy in hushed tones; others are openly unkind. A few, emboldened by scandal, even venture indecent propositions — as though notoriety renders a woman public property.

Through it all, I keep my composure. I serve, I smile, I carry on.

It is easier than thinking too much.



One afternoon, as I gather a tray of half-eaten pastries, I glance up.

The bell above the café door rings softly — a gentle, musical chime. And there he is.

Ned.

He is dressed simply today: trousers, a white shirt open at the collar, no tie, no formal coat. His hair is slightly disordered, as though he has been running his fingers through it repeatedly. Less polished than usual — more human. More vulnerable.

He sees me at once.

My hair is pinned into a neat updo, apron tied firmly at my waist — hardly society finery — yet the way he looks at me makes it feel otherwise.

The café quiets noticeably as recognition spreads among the patrons. Eyes turn. Conversations stall.

But he notices none of it.

Only me.

My breath catches.

“Ned?”

He smiles — soft, almost relieved — clearly recognising the involuntary warmth in my voice. My cheeks betray me with a flush, and I cannot quite help the way my eyes search his face.

“Good afternoon,” he says quietly, stopping before me.

His gaze flicks briefly around the room, taking in the attentive silence, then returns to me as though nothing else exists.

“May I speak with you... in private?” he asks gently.

My employer, perceptive as ever, gestures discreetly toward the storage room. Ned inclines his head in appreciation.

And suddenly, my heart is beating far too quickly again.

He follows me into the small storage room, the door closing behind him with a soft, decisive click. The space is dimly lit, shelves lined with supplies, the faint scent of coffee beans lingering warmly in the air.

He turns to me at once. His hands come up, gently cradling my face.

“I needed to see you,” he whispers hoarsely. “Needed to touch you. To look into your eyes without half of London watching.”

His forehead rests lightly against mine, breath mingling with mine.

“The divorce is final today.” His voice falters slightly on the last word.

I gasp.

“Well... congratulations,” I murmur, my lips so close to his they almost brush as I speak.

He inhales sharply at that — at my breath, at the nearness. Our faces hover inches apart, eyes locked, the world narrowing to the quiet between us.

He moves slowly, deliberately, giving me every chance to retreat.

I do not.

His lips meet mine — gently at first, a restrained, almost tentative kiss. Then it deepens, not indecorous, but unmistakably relieved, earnest... hungry in a way that speaks more of longing than impulse.

“Thank you,” he murmurs softly against my mouth.

“Now what does Edmund Ashcombe wish to do?” I ask quietly.

He smiles faintly, his hands sliding from my face to rest at my waist, drawing me a little nearer.

“What do I wish to do?” he repeats, as though considering something obvious.

He pulls back slightly, grey eyes searching mine.

“I should like to take you out properly. No secrecy. No hiding. No glancing over shoulders.” His thumb brushes lightly along my cheek. “To court you as I ought to have done from the start. Dinners, picnics, the theatre... ordinary pleasures made honest.”

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

He chuckles softly, entirely unoffended.

“That is all being settled,” he assures me, stepping back though his gaze never leaves mine. “The townhouse is being sold. Everything divided fairly.”

A faint, boyish smile touches his lips.

“Though I ought to warn you...”

He steps closer again.

“Warn me?”

“When the house sells and matters are concluded, I shall become... considerably wealthier.” His voice lowers, teasing but warm. “And, I suspect, rather more eligible in society’s eyes. A small army of ambitious young ladies may well appear.”

His expression then softens, sincerity replacing humour.

“But I want only one.”

He tucks a stray lock of hair gently behind my ear.

“And she happens to be standing before me.”

A pause.

“So — Miss Elsie Lu — will you allow me to court you? Properly this time?”

“Yes... and, by the way, earlier I only asked about your finances because I thought you might have none. I was going to ask whether you wished to work with me.”

His laughter — warm and utterly unrestrained — meets my innocent offer.

It fills the small storage room, genuine and surprised. He shakes his head slightly, eyes crinkling at the corners as he looks at me with unmistakable amusement.

“You were going to ask if I wanted to work with you?” he repeats, still smiling. “You thought I was penniless — and intended to offer me a position?”

He steps nearer, his voice softening.

“Sweetheart...”

His hand comes up, gently cupping my cheek.

“Do not laugh so hard,” I protest quietly. “I was trying to help.”

That only makes him laugh more — shoulders shaking now. He draws me into a gentle embrace, resting his forehead against mine.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he says between soft chuckles, voice warm against my hair. “You are quite adorable... and entirely unaware of my finances.”

He pulls back a little, still smiling.

“I am, I assure you, a very wealthy man. So — no employment offers necessary.”

His thumb brushes lightly along my cheekbone.

“Mmm.”

He studies me then — my small responses, my unpolished honesty, my complete indifference to his status. I can almost see the realisation settling over him.

“You know,” he murmurs softly, “keep treating me precisely like this. As though I were simply an ordinary fellow. Not a fortune. Not a scandal. Not a name.”

A pause.

“It is... refreshing.”

“You are a normal man,” I mutter. “Do stop inflating yourself so.”

His smile widens at that — delighted rather than offended.

“And do you know what else is refreshing?” he asks quietly, drawing me a little closer.

“Your lack of ceremony.”

He laughs softly again.

I watch him laugh. He looks so handsome when he does — lighter somehow, freer. It tugs at me before I quite realise it, and I lean forward and kiss him once more.

He melts into it immediately, hands finding my waist, drawing me gently against him. The storage room, the café, the curious patrons outside — all of it recedes.

There is only this.

A slow, unhurried kiss — relief, triumph, tenderness all woven quietly together.

When he finally pulls back, his eyes are heavy-lidded, his lips faintly flushed.

“I missed you,” he murmurs softly against my mouth. “Every day I fought through that trial... I missed you.”

I mouth the words quietly:

“I know.”

He smiles softly at my wordless understanding — the way I seem to grasp him without elaborate explanations. He draws me into another gentle kiss, pouring into it everything he has not yet quite said aloud: relief, affection, hope, perhaps even a quiet promise. When we part, both a little breathless, he rests his forehead lightly against mine.

“Tonight,” he whispers, “will you come to my new place? Dinner. Just us.”

A pause.

“No expectations. Simply... us.”

“If you insist,” I reply, striving for nonchalance — though my happiness betrays itself rather shamelessly.

He chuckles softly, clearly unconvinced by my attempt at indifference. A light kiss lands at the corner of my mouth, lingering just enough to make my heart skip.

“I do insist,” he says warmly. “Around seven? We shall dine, talk... perhaps steal a kiss or two if you are feeling charitable.”

That playful smile again. Then he steps back, leaving a small pocket of cool air where his warmth had been.

We leave the storage room together. Outside, the café resumes its gentle bustle as though nothing extraordinary has occurred. He gives me a small wave before stepping into his town car, and I watch as it pulls away, oddly comforted rather than anxious.

For the first time in many months, nothing feels precarious.

Only... possible.

That evening, London seems unusually kind. The lamps glow softly, the air holds the faintest hint of spring, and I find myself walking rather than rushing — as though my life no longer requires escape.

His new residence proves elegant but less imposing than the old townhouse. There is warmth there. Intention. A sense of beginning rather than display.

He answers the door himself.

No butler. No spectacle.

Just Ned.

“Right on time,” he says gently, taking my coat with an ease that feels domestic rather than formal.

Dinner is simple — beautifully so. Conversation easier still. We speak of ordinary things: work, books, ridiculous society gossip, future plans neither of us pretends are fully mapped yet.

And gradually, I realise something.

The grand drama is behind us.

This — quiet dinners, shared laughter, tentative rebuilding — is the real love story.

Later, as we sit by the fire, his hand finds mine naturally, without urgency or demand. I let it stay there.

“Thank you,” he murmurs.

“For what?”

“For not leaving. For giving me another chance to do this properly.”

I think about the ship I almost boarded. About the girl who ran, who cried, who thought leaving would be simpler.

Perhaps she needed to exist so I could become this version of myself — steadier, wiser, still soft but no longer easily shaken.

“I am not promising perfection,” I tell him quietly.

“Neither am I,” he replies.

“Good.”

A small smile passes between us.

---

Months later, London stops calling me the *mystery lover*.

I become simply Elsie again — a woman with work she enjoys, friends she trusts, and a man who courts her openly, patiently, properly.

Not a fairy tale.

Something better.

Real.

And if anyone asks how it all began, I simply say:

“I missed a ship once.

And, rather unexpectedly, found my life instead.”