



The Farmer Has a Wife

Author: *Sienna Waters*

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Description: She needed a husband. She got a wife... and a whole lot of feelings.

Eleanor Brewster is a proper English lady with a crumbling manor to prove it, and one inconvenient problem: she needs to marry to keep her family estate.

Danni Franks is a no-nonsense farmer with a newly acquired (and deeply in debt) farm, a complicated family, and precisely zero interest in aristocratic drama.

But when Danni's tractor collides, literally, with Eleanor's sports car, she somehow ends up engaged to a woman who considers tweed a fashion statement.

A fake marriage should solve both their problems: Eleanor keeps her home, Danni gets some much-needed stability, and neither of them has to worry about pesky things like romance. Easy, right?

Except Eleanor is alarmingly good at making Danni's heart race, and Danni is impossibly attractive in flannel. Throw in a scheming investor, a meddling best friend, and a horse with far too many opinions, and their arrangement might just turn into the love story neither of them saw coming.

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Chapter One

Not for the first time, Eleanor almost got concussed before breakfast. Twice, actually. Once when she inadvertently miscounted the stairs and forgot to skip the third one from the top, the one that wobbled so badly that there was a fair chance that she'd end up in the cavernous tiled hallway rather faster than she'd planned on getting there. The second when she opened a window to the bright dawn only to have a roof tile slide down and crash to the ground an inch from her nose.

By the time she'd finished a fast breakfast of a scrambled egg, twisted her blonde hair into something resembling a bun, and put on clothes that, embarrassingly, she was having to take to the local laundrette to wash due to the laundry room being too dangerous to set foot in, she felt like she'd been dicing with death all morning.

Some people, she supposed, lived a more dangerous life. Some people were racing drivers and first responders, or fighter pilots, or things of that sort. Being a lady of the manor was not supposed to be risky, though.

The ancient doorbell rang exactly when expected. She straightened her spine and went into the hall to answer it. Avoiding the cracked tile that had once sent her sprawling in front of a very surprised postman.

"Right on time," she said cheerfully as she let Samson in.

Samson, who insisted on being called Samson and was definitely not a Mr. Cooper, stepped carefully into the house. "I'm always on time."

“Good to know,” said Eleanor.

“This place’ll need enough doing that we won’t be able to afford to be late,” he said, sniffing doubtfully.

Eleanor looked around at the grand and more than slightly crumbling entrance hall of Brewster Manor. The scent of aged oak furniture polish and just a hint of damp filled the air. A reminder that whilst the house had been in her family for generations, it was also on the verge of collapsing around her ears.

Samson, wearing his high-visibility vest and an expression of mild exasperation, was already flipping through the pages on his clipboard. He took out a sheaf of papers, and shifted his weight from one work-booted foot to the other, as if already regretting taking on the job.

“Here it is then, Your Majesty.” He proffered the papers.

“Eleanor is fine,” said Eleanor, biting back a grin. “Lady Eleanor, if you can’t manage just Eleanor. I do draw the line at Nelly though.”

He sniffed and nodded. “Right you are, Your Ladyship.”

She sighed. It was better than being mistaken for a queen, she supposed. “What’s the plan of attack, then?”

“The roof repairs are our first priority,” he said, glancing up at the high, vaulted ceiling with an expression Eleanor didn’t care for. It was the expression of a man wondering how much his insurance covered. A look that said the roof could fall on their heads at any moment. “We’ve got some serious water damage in the west wing, and if we don’t reinforce the beams soon, we’ll be looking at collapsed ceilings.”

Eleanor gave a sharp nod. “And the masonry work? The east-facing facade is showing significant deterioration.” She knew the house like the back of her hand. She couldn’t remember a time when she hadn’t known the house. She’d lived in it her entire life.

“On the list,” the builder confirmed. “We’ll need to replace sections of the stonework and repoint the mortar. I’ve got a man who does that sort of thing. Period specialist and all that, nothing to worry about.”

“Good,” Eleanor said with another nod. “The work needs to be done properly. Efficiently, too, we can’t afford unnecessary delays.”

She could sense Samson eyeing her warily, as if trying to gauge whether she was the type of posh woman who might swoon at the thought of scaffolding. But Eleanor had long ago accepted that if she wanted this house, her house, to survive, she’d have to roll up her sleeves and deal with the realities of crumbling estates and skyrocketing costs.

“We’ll all do our bests, Your Highness,” Samson said with a scratch of his nose. “The goal is to restore the estate to its former glory.”

Eleanor allowed herself a small smile. She was glad he felt a sense of duty toward the house. That’s what she’d been looking for in a builder.

She accepted the sheaf of paperwork from him and showed him out, with promises to get him the signatures necessary within the week so that he and his team could get started as soon as possible.

When he was gone, she lingered for a moment in the hall. Running her fingers over the ornate woodwork of the grand staircase, memories of childhood flashed through her mind. She’d slid down this bannister so many times it had barely needed

polishing when she was a child.

The house had always been a sanctuary. A place of peace and a source of comfort. Something unchanging in a life that changed rather more and rather faster than she'd wanted it to. These days, though, it was turning out to be more of a source of worry than not.

She sighed and squared her shoulders. No use dwelling. She had places to be.

THE DRIVE UP to The Willows Retirement Home was scenic, though Eleanor was too preoccupied to really appreciate it. She was going through mental checklists, thinking about finances, managing the ever-present anxiety that came with dealing with an estate on the verge of ruin.

And a tiny part of her brain was listening to the engine of her prized MG, making sure it was purring as gently as she knew it should, priding herself on how well-maintained she kept it.

She pulled up in front of the house, a sprawling red-brick building with gables and turrets and Georgian fripperies, stepping out of her car with the precise grace of someone who had been raised to do such small things properly.

The facility was as pleasant as a retirement home could be, she thought as she went inside. The reception area was discreet, the air smelled of lemon polish and freshly baked biscuits. The roof wasn't falling down on anyone's head, which was a large improvement on her grandmother's former house. She signed herself in and tracked her grandmother down in the large drawing room, sitting in front of a window with a woolen shawl draped over her shoulders.

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“Eleanor,” she said, standing up to receive a kiss on the cheek. “How very dutiful of you.”

“Grandmother,” said Eleanor, sliding the folder full of paperwork onto the side table. “Dutiful would be once a week on a Saturday afternoon, I think you’ll find. Nearly every day is verging more on affectionate, don’t you think?”

Isabella smiled and patted her granddaughter’s hand. “I’m teasing, my dear. Now, what delights have you brought me today?”

“The final renovation plans that are simply awaiting your signature,” Eleanor said, nodding at the folder.

Isabella took the folder and began reading through the enclosed papers with the unhurried scrutiny of a woman who knew how to terrify bank managers and had no time for haste. After what felt like an eternity, she beckoned for a pen, which Eleanor provided, signed with a flourish, and laid the folder down again.

“Permission granted,” she said. Her sharp eyes were on Eleanor’s face. “Although why you’re quite going to all this trouble, I’m not sure I understand.”

“Because the house is falling down, grandmama,” Eleanor said, hoping that they weren’t about to fight.

“My house is falling down,” her grandmother said.

Eleanor wanted to groan, but was far too well-brought-up. So she simply smiled.

“Your house.”

“It’s not that I don’t want you to have the house,” Isabella said. “I very much do. I can’t think of anyone that I’d rather have it. But you know the terms.”

“Terms that you could change should you choose to.”

Isabella raised an eyebrow. “The house is held in trust, I could no more change the terms of it than I could climb Everest. Besides, even if I could, I wouldn’t. Marriage is a sign of maturity and responsibility. If you can’t find a partner in life, then why should you be trusted to run an entire estate?”

“Because I’ve been doing it for years,” Eleanor pointed out. “And because having to be married in order to inherit the house is an archaic and absurd condition.”

“You’re just lucky that the terms simply state that you must be married, not that you must be married to a man,” her grandmother pointed out. “Otherwise, we’d be marrying you off to the middle son of a local lord like we all lived in one of those awful Jane Austen novels.”

“Lucky, am I?” Eleanor said, raising an eyebrow of her own. “In that case, I shall be on the lookout for the perfect woman to scandalize the town with.”

Isabella grinned. “At this point, dear, I’d accept a circus performer if it meant you showed some commitment to something other than these dastardly renovation plans.”

“They’re necessary renovation plans,” Eleanor said. Then she shook her head. Arguing with Isabella was like arguing with a stone wall, something her grandfather had always told her. She stood up and collected the papers. “I’d better get these back to Samson.”

“Of course, darling,” said Isabella, with the air of someone who knew they’d won an argument.

As Eleanor stepped outside into the bright freshness of the morning, she took a deep, full breath.

There was little point in arguing with Isabella. However stupid the terms of the trust might be, there was nothing that either one of them could do about it. In the absence of a son, a daughter might inherit, providing that she was married.

She threw the folder onto the passenger seat of the car. She didn’t particularly want to be married. She certainly didn’t need a husband. Thinking about the weak-chinned men of suitable ancestry that she’d known all her life made her feel just a little bit sick.

What she did need though, was her house. Brewster Manor was the only place she’d ever really known, and she felt as attached to it as most people would to a person.

And for the first time, she wondered just how far she would be willing to go to keep the house that was hers by right.

Chapter Two

Danni Franks didn’t consider herself a pessimist. She was a farmer. By nature, farmers had to be optimists. Every year, she planted seeds in the ground with the blind faith that they’d actually grow. Despite the persistent threats of drought, disease, and sheep with no sense of self-preservation. Though this was the first year she’d be reaping the rewards of her very own sowing.

But even Danni’s optimism had its limits. Today, that limit was reached when her ancient tractor let out an almighty wheeze, shuddered violently, and died in the

middle of the back field.

Ten minutes later, she threw her spanner down into the mud and stood back, hands on her hips, glaring at the offending machine. “You’re a bloody menace,” she growled through gritted teeth.

Tommy Ellis, her farmhand and occasional source of unwanted wisdom, stood nearby, leaning against a fence post with all the urgency of a man watching paint dry. “Try hitting it,” he said, nodding sagely toward the tractor.

She turned her glare on him. “Oh, brilliant idea, Tom. Why didn’t I think of that? It’s not a vending machine that’s eaten your last Crunchie.”

Tommy shrugged. “Sometimes a bit of tough love works.”

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Out of sheer desperation, Danni slammed her boot against the side of the tractor. Predictably, nothing happened, except for a loud clang and burst of pain through her ankle.

Tommy sniffed. “Looks like you’ve scared it into submission,” he said. “That should do the trick.”

Danni sighed and wiped a greasy hand across her face, only realizing too late that she’d just smeared oil across her cheek. Perfect. It would match the mud on her overalls. And the straw in her hair. Her life was a mess and now she had the appearance to match. “I haven’t got the cash to fix this thing, Tommy.”

Tommy chewed thoughtfully on a blade of grass. “Could plow by hand, I suppose. Or get some oxen. That’s what my grandda would have done. Yours too, come to that. Or I suppose you could always sell the farm.”

Danni’s eyes narrowed. “Have you got a death wish?”

“Just saying.” He held up his hands, a lazy grin on his face. “It’s almost been a year now, Dan. And when the wolves are at the door, sometimes you’ve got to open the window and jump out.”

“Not helpful,” she said, looking over the old tractor. “To be honest, though, I’m a bit short on solutions right now. Unless a money tree miraculously starts growing in the front paddock, that is.”

Tommy paused, as if genuinely considering the possibility of a money tree. “Yeah,

could really use one of them. Still, dunno where we'd get the seeds from, and even if we did, things like that always take years to mature. Like apple trees. Wouldn't get any fruit until we're too old to do anything with it."

Danni groaned and rubbed her temples. "Right, well, standing here isn't fixing anything. Help me push this pile of junk back to the shed before I have a breakdown of my own."

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Danni was in the small farmhouse kitchen, treating herself to a cup of tea before going back to work, when Hector strode in without knocking. Her brother ran the family farm up the hill, the one she'd grown up on and hadn't stood a chance of inheriting. He was freshly showered and smelled of deodorant, unlike Danni, who still had oil on her cheek and mud under her fingernails.

"You got another," he said, dropping a letter on the kitchen table. "And I brought the small tractor down. Tommy said you needed it. You can keep it until you get yours fixed." He looked at her seriously. "It's not a gift, it's a loan, alright?"

She nodded, aware that he was helping her when he didn't have to, aware that he, more than anyone except herself, really wanted to see her succeed. "Thanks," she muttered, even though she wished she didn't need the help at all.

"You need to have your post re-directed down here," he said, nodding at the letter. "I can't be bringing it down from the big house every day."

"Nobody asked you to," she said mildly, picking the letter up and looking at it. She didn't need to open it to know what it was. She glanced toward a growing pile of similar envelopes behind the kitchen clock, all from the same investor who'd been trying to buy her farm for months now. "Still anonymous?" she asked, knowing Hector would have opened it.

“Still anonymous,” he said. “And still offering more money than this place is worth.” He crossed his arms, and Danni knew that he was preparing himself for the same old argument.

For something to do, she opened the ripped envelope and skimmed the letter. Yep. Another generous offer. Another vague promise to ‘preserve the land’s legacy.’ And, as always, no name attached, just a generic solicitor’s office address. She let out a short laugh. “Unbelievable. Someone must really want this place.”

“You should at least consider it,” Hector said. He was always the practical one. Mind you, he could afford to be. “You’ve got a broken tractor, a barn that leaks like a sieve, and enough debt to sink the Titanic. Maybe it’s time to be realistic.”

“The Titanic is already sunken,” she said. “And I am being realistic. Realistically, if I sell, I lose everything I’ve worked for. This farm is my dream. I’m not giving it up because some fancy-pants investor wants to turn it into a bloody country retreat or...” She gestured wildly. “Or... a llama sanctuary.”

Hector snorted. “A llama sanctuary?”

“You don’t know, it could be.”

“Mmm, because llamas are in such high demand in rural England.”

Danni huffed and downed the rest of her tea in one dramatic gulp. “Point is, I’m not selling.”

“You won’t lose everything,” he said, more softly now. “You could come home. There’s always a place for you at the farm. There’s a job for you the minute you say you want one. A room for you. We’d be glad to have you back.”

Which was, to be fair, true. What he wasn't saying was that going home would mean admitting to everyone, her mother in particular, not to mention the various farm-men she'd grown up around and who had scoffed at her ideas of farming herself, that she'd been wrong. That she'd over-estimated herself. That she couldn't do it. "Not selling," she said again, truculently.

Hector leaned against the counter, eyeing her with that older-brother concern that was both touching and, mostly, annoying. "Look. I get it. You don't want to give up. But if you don't find a solution soon, Dan, you might not have a choice."

Danni groaned and thunked her forehead against the table. "Why must you always speak in ominous truths?"

"It's my job as your brother." He came over and patted her on the head like she was a wayward puppy. "You'll figure something out. You always do."

"Do I?" she asked, needing some positivity in her life.

"You're sitting in the middle of your own kitchen, aren't you?" Hector said with a grin. "And I'd better be getting back before someone sets the grain silo on fire, or falls into the muck pit, or something equally bad."

"Alright. Love to everyone up there."

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He patted her head again, and left her sitting at the table, staring at the pile of letters, bills, and a financial situation that looked about as hopeful as a hospital patient circling the drain. Oh, and now she needed to add in a tractor repair bill. Assuming that it could be repaired, and she didn't need to replace the entire thing. She sighed. Maybe Tommy had a point. Maybe she should get a couple of oxen.

She had no intention of selling. But equally, she had no idea how to fix her current predicament. She'd saved where she could, she'd cut corners where she could, but the truth of the matter was that farming was a dubious proposition these days. Most small farms didn't make money. She'd thought that she'd be the exception. And it was looking more and more like she wasn't.

"Right," she muttered to herself. "Options. I need options."

She could take out a loan. Except she already had one, and she was unlikely to find anyone else willing to give her another at this point.

She could apply for grants. Except those took time to come through, and, honestly, by the end of a hard day on the farm, she couldn't bring herself to look at the complicated forms and attachments that she needed to provide to get her hands on some money.

She could, she supposed, win the lottery. That would definitely work. Well, except for the part where she'd have to find the money to buy a ticket. Maybe if she scrounged down the back of the couch she might come up with fifty pee.

"Danni?" Tommy's voice came from the doorway. He poked his head in, looking far

too cheerful for someone who had spent the morning watching her descend into financial ruin.

“What?”

“Just checking to see that you haven’t topped yourself out of financial desperation,” he said. “Or finally decided to sell.”

She grabbed the nearest thing to hand, which happened to be a used tea-bag, and lobbed it at him. Tommy ducked, laughing, and the tea-bag splatted on the wall behind him.

“I take it that’s a no, then?” he said.

“Get out of my house, Tommy. Make sure that hole under the chicken fence has been filled in and stomp it down well. Those bloody foxes think they’re digging their way out of Colditz.”

“I think that was Stalag-luft,” Tommy said doubtfully. “Colditz was a castle on a hill, wasn’t it?”

She glared at him.

“Alright, alright, I’m going.”

Danni sat back in her chair, staring at the ceiling, every crack of which belonged to her and her alone. Well, ninety percent of the cracks technically belonged to the bank, she supposed.

She didn’t need a miracle. She just needed a break. She wasn’t asking for a fortune. She was willing to work hard. She needed something, anything, to get her through

this rough patch.

She had a terrible feeling that whatever was going to happen next was going to be dramatic.

Little did she know, she was absolutely right.

Chapter Three

Eleanor, in general, prided herself on being a calm and collected person. There was no need to make a fuss, as her grandmother had told her many times growing up. She didn't like a fuss. She didn't like mess. She liked... order. She liked things to be the way they should be.

Which was perhaps why today she wasn't quite as calm and collected as she usually was. Having picked up the minimum of shopping from the local market, she was maneuvering her sleek MG down the winding country lane toward home, tapping her perfectly manicured fingers against the leather steering wheel, and running through the ever-growing list of problems in her life.

There were, unfortunately, quite a few.

Firstly, there were the renovations. Samson seemed competent enough, despite his predilection for calling her by the wrong title. But the whole endeavor still meant trusting her beloved house to a group of strangers. Would they really respect the centuries-old woodwork? Would they understand the delicate balance between restoration and ruination? Would they, God forbid, want to do outlandish things like install an open-plan kitchen?

She'd need to keep a close eye on matters.

Which brought her to her second worry of the day. Just where exactly she was supposed to be staying. Should she move into a hotel until the works were finished? The idea of living somewhere where breakfast arrived via buffet made her faintly uncomfortable. Plus, there were the additional costs. Not that she was particularly hurting for money at the moment, but who knew how long the renovations would really take?

She could hardly move in with her grandmother. But the alternative was to move through different rooms of the house as the renovations progressed. A solution that was messy, discombobulating, and would ruin her routines. Hardly satisfactory.

Then, underlying it all, was the marriage problem.

She had spent years ignoring the fact that she would need to marry. She was the only direct heir to the house. But that counted for nothing, as Isabella had frequently reminded her. In its long history, the house had been passed down to adopted sons and bastards, to distant cousins and foreign spouses. Exceptions would not be made for her.

Her grip tightened on the steering wheel. It was absurd that she had to marry just to inherit the home that was already, in every meaningful way, hers. She loved Brewster Manor with the kind of devotion that people typically reserved for pets or firstborn children. It wasn't just a house. It was her history, her future, her entire identity wrapped up in stone and ivy.

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Why on earth should she need a husband in order to prove that she was responsible enough to take care of it? Hadn't she, and she alone, been responsible for the house since her grandmother's stroke? Since Isabella had agreed that the house was too much for her and that she needed, and deserved, a quieter and more relaxed retirement?

She'd negotiated her way through the entire renovation plans and would be overseeing them as they took place.

And yet marriage was supposed to be a sign of maturity and stability. She snorted to herself. Her parents had been married, and by all accounts they had been neither mature nor stable.

Distracted by this increasingly infuriating spiral of frustration, Eleanor didn't notice the enormous tractor until it was entirely too late.

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Danni was not having a good day.

She wasn't even having a mediocre day.

Her day had begun with Tommy informing her that the mechanic had said that the tractor wasn't worth saving. Given that tractors were somewhat vital to farming, this was, to put it mildly, a disaster.

"Maybe it just needs a bit of oil and TLC?" Tommy had offered optimistically,

kicking one of the enormous tires.

“Maybe it needs a miracle,” Danni had said despondently as she watched a growing puddle of fluid leak from the bottom of the vehicle.

“Well, at least Hec let you use his little tractor,” Tommy had said brightly. “And you know what he’s like. He’ll let you have it as long as you need it. Probably.”

Which was probably true, not that Danni wanted to take advantage of his generosity. And Hector, designated voice of reason that he was, had been utterly unsympathetic when she rang him with the news of her tractor’s final demise. She’d caught him just as he was going out to repair fences, his most hated job, and he hadn’t been feeling charitable.

“I told you not to buy that place,” he’d reminded her, his voice crackling through the phone. “You’re stretched too thin.”

“I’m fine,” Danni had insisted, though she patently wasn’t. “I just need to get a new tractor, is all. Well, a new old tractor. Not a new new one, obviously.”

“Which will cost money.”

“Which I’ll find,” she’d said.

“You’re a terrible liar,” Hector had sighed. “Have you given any more thought to this buy-out offer?”

She’d stayed mulishly quiet on the other end of the phone until her brother had sighed again.

“It’s a decent offer. You could take that money and start up somewhere else.”

“I like it here.”

“They keep offering,” Hector had said.

“I keep saying no.”

“Danni—”

“I’ll sort it, Hector,” she’d snapped, before hanging up.

The conversation had done nothing to improve her mood.

So, when she found herself behind the wheel of Hector’s old tractor, driving down the familiar narrow lane, she was not in the best frame of mind. And, perhaps, not exactly paying quite as much attention as she should have been.

To be fair, the last thing that she expected to see was a tiny sports car come flying around a bend like it was auditioning for the fiftieth Fast and Furious film.

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The moment Eleanor registered the tractor in front of her, she slammed on the brakes. Unfortunately, the country lane was both gravelly and damp, meaning her beautifully pristine MG didn’t so much stop as it skidded dramatically forward.

The driver of the tractor yanked the steering wheel to one side, but tractors are not generally known for their grace and agility.

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There was a tiny moment of silence as momentum took hold of the situation, and then there was a thud, followed by an ominous crunching sound.

Then a soft, quiet ticking.

Eleanor let out a horrified breath before flinging open the door and jumping out of the driver's seat. "Oh, my God. You've murdered my car," she moaned, looking down at the damage.

The farmer, who had climbed down and was looking at the dented side of her own vehicle, snorted. "Yeah? Well, your little tin can just took a chunk out of my brother's tractor, and he's going to kill me."

Eleanor, too distressed to really register this, flung herself around and marched toward the other driver, heels clicking against the road. The farmer turned around, planting her work boots on the gravel and putting her hands on her hips.

And the two women stared at each other for the first time.

Eleanor, in her tailored blazer and silk blouse, her blonde hair in a chignon and her heels just the right height, was well aware that she looked exactly how she was supposed to look. Effortlessly elegant and tastefully stylish. Despite the stress of the moment, she stood ramrod straight and held her head high.

This farmer, by contrast, looked like she had just spent her morning wrestling a particularly stubborn sheep. Her flannel shirt had seen better days, her jeans were more hole than denim, her dark hair clearly needed a wash, and there was a streak of

something across her cheek that Eleanor strongly hoped was just mud.

“What were you thinking?” Eleanor hissed, gesturing at the damage done to her beloved car. “Were you even looking where you were going?”

“Me?” the farmer barked out a laugh, dark eyes flashing. “You were the one speeding.”

“I was not speeding,” Eleanor shot back, scandalized at the very thought.

The farmer crossed her arms. “Lady, I don’t know if you realize this, but the speed limit around these parts is thirty. You were going at least...” She squinted at the car. “At least sports car speed.”

Eleanor let out an exasperated sound. “This is a classic MG, I’ll have you know. It’s worth more than... than...” She pointed at the tractor, at a loss for a comparison.

“Worth more than a tractor?” the other woman said. “Congratulations, so’s my left boot.”

They glared at each other.

There was tension.

Something inside Eleanor was telling her that this was not the ‘we’ve just had an accident’ kind of tension. It was more... a ‘why are you irritating and also oddly attractive’ kind of tension. Which was ridiculous because there was nothing attractive about someone with potential animal manure on their face. Eleanor took a breath, swallowed, and found her sense of self again.

“Fine, let’s be civil,” she said, pulling a notebook from her handbag. “We’ll exchange

details, our insurance companies can deal with the rest.”

The farmer raised an eyebrow. “Insurance? Sure you don’t want to call daddy’s solicitor?”

Eleanor gave her a look. A look that she’d honed in years of dealing with people underestimating her. “I assure you, I am perfectly capable of handling my own affairs.”

The farmer smirked, taking a crumpled piece of paper that proved to be a receipt out of her pocket, and gesturing for Eleanor’s gold pen. She scribbled something on it and handed both to Eleanor.

“This is a feed store receipt,” Eleanor said, looking down at it.

“Paper’s paper.”

Eleanor closed her eyes briefly, as if summoning patience from the heavens. “Unbelievable.”

With a deep breath, and one last glare, she folded the receipt and put it carefully into her handbag before climbing back into her car and attempting to start the engine.

Fortunately, the damage didn’t seem to be bad enough that the little car wouldn’t start. She got a grumble and then a purr, so she shifted into gear, reversed, and drove around the tractor, feeling the farmer’s eyes on her with every move that she made.

Then she sped off down the lane, nursing a sneaking suspicion that this wasn’t the last time that she’d see the infuriating woman.

Chapter Four

It wasn't so much that Danni had imagined that owning a farm would be all fresh air and rolling fields and the deep satisfaction of a hard day's work well done. She'd grown up on a farm, after all, she knew the realities of life. However, she hadn't quite imagined it would be so much broken equipment, endless bills, and a constant state of mild panic.

She stood in the kitchen, the ancient kettle wheezing like it had personally plowed a hundred fields, stirring a cup of instant coffee that was more granules than water. The animals were fed, cleaned out, and either scratching around in the dirt or out to pasture, and this was the first chance she'd had to get some desperately needed caffeine into her body.

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The entire house smelled faintly of livestock, damp wool, and something suspiciously like burning toast, even though she was sure that she hadn't made toast for weeks. She'd opened up all the windows when she came in to air the place out.

The spoon clattered in the cup as she stirred, and as much as she knew she should be thinking about a way to make some money fast, Danni found that she just kept coming back to her. The woman from yesterday. The one with the fancy car and the crisp accent and the very punchable expression of absolute certainty that Danni was to blame for their little collision.

Eleanor Brewster.

Lady Eleanor Brewster, as she'd been so careful to write on her contact information. Like the Lady would help matters.

Danni huffed, leaning against the counter with her coffee cup in hand. She knew Eleanor's type. Rich, entitled. She probably had a horse named something ridiculous, like Wellington or Bartholomew. The kind of person who thought work meant signing documents in fancy offices with expensive pens. The kind of person that Danni had no time for in the slightest.

Except.

Danni frowned into her coffee. Except she obviously did, didn't she? Because here she was thinking about the damn woman.

The problem was, Eleanor had been attractive. Annoyingly so. That sleek blonde hair

and those sharp cheekbones. Those green eyes like bottle glass. The way her generous mouth had curled in absolute disdain at the state of Danni's jeans and flannel shirt.

She sighed.

She'd never been much for dating. It wasn't like she had time for much other than working. Hell, she barely had time to shower most days. At least every third day, she just slammed on some extra deodorant and stuck a hat on.

Running a farm took every ounce of time and energy that Danni had. But she wasn't dead. She had noticed Eleanor. And that was annoying. Infuriating, even.

A loud knock at the front door nearly made her spill her coffee.

Scowling, she stomped to the door, already assuming that it was Hector coming by to lecture her about her finances and choices again. It was only as she was swinging the door open that she realized that Hector would never come to the front door. No one would. Everyone knew that if you wanted attention in a farmhouse, the kitchen door was the one to knock on.

And by that point, it was too late. The door was already open.

Eleanor Brewster, sorry, Lady Eleanor Brewster, stood on the porch looking as out of place as a queen in a pigsty. She was dressed immaculately, of course. Cream-colored trousers and a tailored navy trench coat, a scarf slung over her shoulder that looked expensive enough to fund the next three rounds of tractor repairs. Painted lips were pressed into a tight line and her expression screamed that she was not amused.

Danni blinked, hoping to dispel the vision, but it didn't work. "Well, if it isn't Her Royal Highness."

Eleanor's right eye twitched. "Charming, I'm sure. I've been attempting to reach you."

"Have you?" asked Danni airily. "Well, there's this new-fangled invention called the telephone, I'm not sure if you've heard of it?"

"Of course I've heard of it. And I've been ringing all morning. Apparently, your phone is disconnected."

Ah. Danni had a sinking feeling in her stomach. "Probably just... a service issue."

"Or perhaps," Eleanor said coolly, and hitting the nail right on the head, "you haven't paid your bill."

Danni shifted her weight and crossed her arms, making a mental note to pay the damn phone bill. "What do you want, Princess?"

Eleanor inhaled sharply, clearly summoning all the patience her aristocratic bloodline had ever possessed. "For a start, I'd like you to pay for the damage to my car."

Danni let herself stare for a long moment before laughing. "Oh, that's sweet."

"Excuse me?" Eleanor's nostrils flared.

"You think I can afford to fix your fancy little car?" Danni said. "Lady, I can barely afford to fix my tractor. And, as you've pointed out, my phone bill hasn't been paid for at least three months. Not to mention my brother's tractor, that's now dented thanks to your precious little sports car."

Eleanor's gaze darkened. "So what? You're refusing to take responsibility?"

“Not at all,” Danni shrugged. “I’ll take responsibility if it was my fault. I just won’t be paying for it, that’s all.”

There was a long silence, during which Eleanor looked as if she was calculating whether or not she could have Danniexecuted. Danni found herself reminded of the Queen of Hearts from Alice in Wonderland.

“You do realize,” Eleanor said icily, “that I could take legal action?”

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“Go for it,” Danni said, leaning against the doorframe. “Not sure how much you’ll get out of me, though. My net worth right now is a couple of cows, far too many chickens, some stubborn sheep, and a fridge full of expired milk.”

For a second, Eleanor looked less angry. “Why do you have expired milk?” she asked curiously.

“Not the point.”

Eleanor let out a breath, pinching the bridge of her nose like she was developing a migraine just from being in Danni’s presence. “You crashed into me.”

“Debatable.”

“No, not debatable.”

Danni tilted her head. “Technically, I suppose we crashed into each other. Could’ve been either of our faults.”

Eleanor’s jaw tightened. “Oh, for—” She stopped herself, took a breath, and started again. “Fine. For the sake of argument, let us say that it was a mutual disaster. That still leaves us with the issue of my car being undrivable.”

“You drove it away yesterday,” Danni pointed out. “It’s parked in my farmyard right now.” She nodded to the car.

Eleanor glared. “I require some form of compensation.”

Rubbing the back of her neck, Danni sighed. “Look. I’d love to help. Really. But unless you want to be paid in eggs, expired milk, and vague promises, I’m fresh out of cash.”

“So you’re saying you’re completely broke?” Eleanor asked in disbelief.

“Not completely,” said Danni. “I’ve got about three pounds in my pocket. There’s almost always some spare change down the back of the couch, but I’m saving that for a rainy day.”

Eleanor gave her a long, assessing look, and Danni could see the moment that she realized that this wasn’t an act. The second that Eleanor knew that Danni was genuinely and completely skint.

Some of the fire in Eleanor’s eyes dimmed, replaced by something softer. She folded her arms. “You’re really struggling, aren’t you?”

Danni stiffened. “No more than usual.”

Rubbing her temples, Eleanor sighed. “You could sell up, most farmers around here have.”

“No,” said Danni immediately. “I’ve worked too hard for this. No fancy investor is swooping in and turning it into a bloody golf course or whatever they’re planning.” She stared at Eleanor suspiciously. “This isn’t a set-up, is it? You haven’t been sent by them to try and bankrupt me so I have to sell?”

“What?” asked Eleanor, looking honestly confused. “Them? Who’s them?”

“This mysterious investor that keeps trying to pressure me into selling. Offering good money too,” Danni said, not really sure why she was still talking.

Eleanor's face changed. "Huh. Interesting."

"Why do you care?" Danni asked.

Eleanor hesitated, just for a moment, before smoothing out her expression. "No reason. It's probably nothing. Coincidence is all. And anyway, you're not the only one with problems, you know. I do have... complications of my own."

There was a moment during which Danni was very tempted to make a joke. Something about struggling to decide which mansion to summer in, or whether to buy a bigger yacht or not. But something in Eleanor's eyes gave her pause. For the first time since she'd met her, she saw something other than cold disapproval in those sharp green eyes.

Hesitation. Frustration. Maybe even a little uncertainty.

So perhaps she wasn't the only one being backed into a corner.

Danni puffed out a sigh. "Alright, Princess. I can't pay you. But maybe we can sort something out."

"Like what?" asked Eleanor with a sniff.

Danni grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. "No idea, but wouldn't it be fun to find out?"

To her credit, Eleanor did not roll her eyes. But it looked like a very near thing. "Fine. But don't think I'm going to let you off easy."

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“Wouldn’t dream of it, Princess,” Danni said with a smirk. She stood back, pulling the front door wide open. “Come on, then.”

“Come on?” Eleanor asked.

“I might be broke, but I’m not so broke that I can’t offer you a cup of tea.” She considered this for a second. “Well, as long as you don’t take milk.”

“Expired,” Eleanor said faintly. “I remember.”

“Get inside then,” Danni said. “We’ve things to discuss, I suppose.” Eleanor still hesitated. “I haven’t got the black plague or anything,” Danni said helpfully. “And there’s no sheep in the kitchen. Not today at least.”

And tentatively, Eleanor took her first step into the farmhouse.

Chapter Five

She’d expected ducks waddling out of the living room and the smell of manure. What she got was a quaint, cozy little house that was unexpectedly clean. Okay, so there was a faintly animal smell around, but no worse than the wet dog smell that most country homes had. Eleanor found herself looking around with something close to approval as Danni led her to the kitchen.

There she found a large, unlit fireplace, a scratched wooden table, a collapsing couch against one wall, and a smug-looking cat sitting on said table. The cat stared at her with the kind of disdain she was only used to from countesses and the like.

She straightened her blazer. “Charming.”

Danni snorted as she petted the cat. “What? Expected a barn with a sleeping bag in it, did you? Or is Cat the problem?”

“Cat?”

“Yes, the cat.”

“Your cat is called... Cat?” Eleanor clarified.

“What of it?” huffed Danni. “I’ve got too much to be doing to go around thinking of fancy names for animals. Cat does the job, it’s a very serviceable name.”

“Indeed,” Eleanor said, somewhat wrong-footed. She cleared her throat. “And you have a very nice home.” Which was overstating things slightly, but it was still basically true.

She had, if she were being honest, expected something farmore rustic. Something that reflected the mud-covered, tractor-wielding, entirely too smug woman standing in front of her. Instead, the warm, sun-filled kitchen suggested cozy late-night conversations and homemade meals, though it wasn’t the tidiest of places.

It unsettled her.

Before she could dwell too much on her unsettlement, her gaze landed on an official-looking letter on the kitchen table. A letter that looked all too familiar. Her pulse quickened.

“You’ve been getting letters from an investor?”

“Did I not just tell you that literally two minutes ago?” Danni asked, turning to a cupboard and liberating two cracked mugs. She put the mugs down and turned to swipe the letter from Eleanor’s grasp. “And what if I have?”

Eleanor frowned, trying to make sense of this. “Because I’ve been getting them too. Same letters. Same envelopes. Same mystery investor.”

Danni folded her arms and sniffed. “Congrats, I suppose. We have something in common, finally.”

“I wouldn’t celebrate just yet,” Eleanor bristled.

Before she could press the matter any further, Danni clapped her hands together. “Right. Tea. Let’s get this over with. Sit down, if you want.”

She busied herself with the kettle, clearly uninterested in discussing anything further. And Eleanor decided to let it go. It was probably none of her business. Whoever this investor was might just be trying his luck around the entire village.

Instead, she watched Danni. The economy of her movements. The way her hair curled messily but also healthily, shiny and glossy. The clearness of her skin. The boundless health of her. And she found herself growing impatient.

“Well?” she said. “Are you planning to pay for the damage to my car? Or are we just here for a kaffee-klatsch?”

“A kaffee what?” Danni asked. She shook her head as she poured water from the kettle. “Lady, I can barely afford to fix my own stuff, vehicles I need to actually run the farm, let alone your luxury toy.”

Eleanor exhaled sharply. “Then what do you propose we do about it?”

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Danni handed her a chipped mug of tea. “First, we drink this. Then we complain about our lives and realize that we’re both up shit’s creek in different but equally annoying ways.”

“You make it sound so appealing,” Eleanor said, taking the mug hesitantly.

“You’ll love it,” Danni said with a smirk. She sat down and wrapped her long-fingered hands around her mug. “So what’s up with you, then?”

Eleanor looked at her in surprise. “Nothing. Other than my car, of course.”

“No, come on. You said you’ve got your own problems. So what are they? Educate the uneducated masses. You might as well tell me. You’ve got to sit here until you drink your tea anyway,” Danni said. “And it might help me have a bit more sympathy for you.”

“Charming,” Eleanor said again. But she took a breath, looked into her teacup, and then, to her immense surprise, found herself explaining her predicament. The house, the renovations, the chances of her getting concussed before breakfast, which made Danni chuckle in a most annoying way. And then the inheritance clause, the trust, the sheer absurdity of needing a husband just to claim what was rightfully hers.

And Danni listened, nodding along as she took large, scalding sips of her tea, seeming genuinely interested. When Eleanor finished, Danni leaned back in her chair. “That’s crazy,” she said. “Your rich ancestors really said, ‘no house for you unless you bag a husband’?”

Eleanor sighed. “In essence, yes.”

Danni tilted her head. “Why don’t you just sell it?”

Eleanor blinked at her. “Excuse me?”

“The house,” Danni shrugged. “If it’s causing this much of a headache, why don’t you and your grandmother just sell it and move on?”

Eleanor gaped. “Because it’s my home.” She raised an eyebrow. “Why don’t you just sell this farm?”

Danni’s smirk faded slightly. “Right,” she said. “Yeah. I suppose I get it. Sometimes... a place can define who you are, what you are.”

The words cut right to the heart of it and Eleanor was surprised that Danni, of all people, had said them. A moment of silence stretched between them. The kind of silence where two people unexpectedly recognize something familiar in one another. Eleanor didn’t like it.

Danni took another mouthful of tea and leaned forward. “Well, sounds like we’re both in a right mess.”

“Yes,” Eleanor said in agreement. “We are.” There was another pause until, without thinking, Eleanor muttered, “Unless you’re in the market for a bride.”

To be clear, she had meant it as a joke. An utterly ridiculous, impossible joke.

Which was why it was deeply alarming when Danni said, completely straight-faced, “Alright.”

Eleanor stared. “Excuse me?”

Danni shrugged again. “Why not? Unless...” She narrowed her eyes at Eleanor. “Have you got money? Or are you one of those aristocrats that hasn’t got two pennies to rub together and you kill your own deer, that sort of thing?”

“A lady does not discuss finances,” Eleanor said primly.

“Only asking,” said Danni, grumpily.

And Eleanor, stung by the idea that Danni would think that she would run a failing estate, took a breath. “There are accounts that go along with the house,” she said. “We are not... bankrupt.”

“Alright then,” Danni said, more cheerfully. “In that case, why not get wed? You get to keep your house. I can get a bit of financial help to fix my farm up from your ‘accounts that go along with the house’. Win-win.”

Eleanor laughed, half in disbelief. “Why not? Because we don’t live in an eighteenth century romance novel, that’s why not. Honestly, I do think that marriages of convenience have rather outstayed their course.”

“Really though?” Danni asked with a thoughtful sniff. “I mean, rich lady, poor farmer, marriage of convenience. It all seems a bit on-brand.”

Eleanor opened her mouth and then closed it again. It was ridiculous. Completely ridiculous. And yet... The idea did make a certain amount of sense, she supposed.

Danni leaned back, arms behind her head. “We could do it, you know? Just a business arrangement.”

And the quaint kitchen suddenly felt a little suffocating. Eleanor pushed her chair back. “I have to go.”

Danni grinned. “You do that. Give it some thought. See what you come up with. I don’t see why we shouldn’t both help each other out, though. I think it’s a great idea, actually.”

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Eleanor left the farmhouse in a hurry, half-convinced that she'd fallen into some sort of strange fever dream. She got safely into her car and drove it, battered as it was, away from the farm before pulling into a lay-by and pulling out her phone.

She dialed Elizabeth's number. Her best friend and, quite conveniently, also the family solicitor. The friendship part had come first, obviously. The two had endured several years of boarding school together.

She answered on the second ring. "I swear to God, Nor, if you've found another loophole to exploit, I—"

"Hypothetically," Eleanor cut in, because she really didn't have time for this, "if one were to marry only to satisfy a legal requirement... how binding is that?"

Elizabeth went silent for a moment. Then, in a deeply suspicious tone, she said, "Eleanor, what are you thinking?"

Eleanor drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "Just answer the question."

Elizabeth sighed. "In terms of the actual marriage, it would be binding until you got a divorce, just like any other marriage would be. Though the divorce laws have simplified remarkably in recent years. All divorce is now no-fault, and you simply have to be married for twelve months before filing on-line for divorce. You don't even need a lawyer if things are amicable."

"Not exactly what I was asking," Eleanor said.

Another sigh. “I know what you’re asking, Nor. I’ve been through that trust paperwork a million times. Fine. Technically, you are only required to marry. There are no other conditions. The contract doesn’t specify a loving, romantic union. In fact, you wouldn’t even have to live together.”

Eleanor inhaled slowly. “Right. Good.”

“Oh God, you are thinking something,” Elizabeth groaned.

“I’m merely considering all my options,” Eleanor said.

“Your options should not include mail-order brides, proposing to random people in the village pub, or, God forbid, simply kidnapping a stranger off the street and forcing them into marriage. There are far more complicated laws about forced marriages.”

“She’s not random,” Eleanor said, still thinking about Danni.

Elizabeth paused. “She?”

Eleanor pinched the bridge of her nose. “Not important. I need to go.”

“Eleanor—”

Eleanor hung up before Elizabeth could talk her out of doing anything she considered stupid.

Because it wasn’t stupid.

It was still ridiculous, absolutely absurd.

But no more absurd than insisting that a woman be married before claiming property. And it definitely wasn't stupid. Not if both parties could profit from the arrangement.

In fact, she was already getting used to the idea.

Chapter Six

The Fox and Hounds had seen its fair share of odd conversations. Heated debates about cricket were practically par for the course. There had been scandalous gossip about the vicar and an assortment of village widows, as well as chatter about whose garden gnome had mysteriously appeared in the village fountain one night. A man had once tried to order a flat white, and had been thrown out on principal. But even for this pub, a negotiation over a marriage contract was a new one.

Eleanor arrived first, naturally. She had never been late to anything in her life and wasn't about to start now, even if the meeting she was about to have was odd beyond all reasonable standards. Punctuality was a sign of good breeding. She selected the cleanest table she could see, though clean was a relative term in an establishment where the furniture had seen better centuries, and sat down, posture ramrod straight. She smoothed her blazer, trying not to dwell on the fact that she was about to orchestrate a marriage of convenience over a pint.

In fact, she was the one that had chosen the pub. Neutral ground had seemed wise, though she was dubious about the decision just at the moment. And she was going to order beer. When in an unfamiliar place, one did what one could to blend in, and in a pub that meant drinking beer. A tiny piece of her was excited at the thought of it.

But by the time Danni strolled in, precisely ten minutes late, no waitress had appeared to take Eleanor's order. Danni looked like she hadn't a care in the world, particularly not when it came to scheduling, and was in muddy boots, jeans with a suspicious-looking stain on the knee, and a flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up. She looked as

though she'd just finished wrestling an unruly cow. Which, as far as Eleanor knew, might be the truth.

She sauntered over and flopped into the chair across from Eleanor, grinning.

"You're late," Eleanor said.

Danni stretched her legs out, looking entirely too comfortable. "I'm on farmer time. It's flexible."

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“Civilization does not operate on ‘farmer time’,” Eleanor said.

“You could have got the drinks in,” said Danni, ignoring her.

“I would have, had I known what you would like, and had a waitress come to ask.”

Danni rolled her eyes and got up. “It’s a pub. You order at the bar. What do you want?”

“A pint,” Eleanor said, having never said the word before without the addendum ‘of milk’ and rather enjoying the sound of it.

Danni’s eyebrows raised, but she said nothing and went off to the bar. She came back a few minutes later carrying two large glasses. “So, do I get a ring, or are we just skipping straight to the prenup?”

Eleanor eyed the glass in front of her. It was rather larger than she’d imagined it would be. Then she exhaled sharply through her nose and pulled out her notebook, flipping to a neatly written list that she’d prepared in advance. “This is a business arrangement. Nothing more. If we are to do this, we need clear boundaries.”

Danni smirked and took a mouthful of beer that left her with a foamy mustache. “Oh, goody. Boundaries.”

“It’s for both of our benefits,” Eleanor continued. “We get legally married. I gain my inheritance. You gain financial stability. We keep our personal lives separate.”

“So, no cuddling?” Danni said, raising an eyebrow.

Eleanor pursed her lips. “No.”

“Are you going to drink that beer or just look at it?” Danni asked.

Hesitantly, Eleanor picked up the glass and took a small, polite sip. It tasted of sourness and countryside and elements that she couldn’t name. She swallowed quickly to avoid choking on it.

Danni looked amused. “What about holding hands at village fêtes then?” she asked.

“Certainly not,” said Eleanor, still trying to dispel the taste of beer from her mouth and wishing that she’d asked for a glass of water as well.

Danni looked over her shoulder and made a gesture to the woman working behind the bar and then turned back to Eleanor. “You sure about that?” she asked. “I mean, we wouldn’t want anyone asking questions, would we?”

Eleanor took a second to consider this. As far as she knew, there’d be no one asking questions. But then, could she be sure? She gave a sharp nod. “Very well. We’ll be seen in public together. Shall we say once a month?”

Danni snorted, which Eleanor took as assent. “What about passionate declarations of love in the rain?” she asked.

“No,” Eleanor said. “And if you’re not going to take this seriously, then we can end this conversation right now. It might be a marriage of convenience, but we both still stand to gain, and potentially lose, a fair amount. We both have an interest in making this work.”

Before Danni could reply, a shadow fell over the table and Eleanor looked up to see a young woman of about Danni's age, a glass of wine in her hand, and a shocked look on her face. "Tell me I did not hear what I think I just heard," she said.

With a groan, Danni looked at Eleanor. "El, meet Indi. We went to school together."

"El?" Eleanor said.

"Just trying it out, Princess," said Danni.

"I don't like it."

"Fine. Lena?"

"No."

"Excuse me," said Indi. "Are they two of you planning a fake marriage over steak and ale pie?"

"Not unless you're offering," said Danni. "I'm skint. Oh, but you've got the fake marriage bit right."

"Fake is taking things a bit far," Eleanor allowed.

"It's all above board and legal," said Danni. "Practical, as well."

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Indi stared at her like she was contemplating smacking her upside the head with a bar towel. “Oh yes, because nothing says practical like marrying a posh lady you crashed into two days ago. I’m assuming this is her?”

Eleanor, who was quickly figuring out that maintaining her dignity in this situation was going to be an uphill battle, cleared her throat. “It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement. Perfectly legal.”

Indi squinted at both of them and then sighed. “You two are insane. Fine. I know that Danni won’t listen to sense, and I’m assuming your Ladyship won’t either. I suppose it’s a secret?”

“Maybe,” said Danni, looking a bit unsure.

“Then my lips are sealed for the moment.” A wide grin spread across Indi’s face. “As long as I get to be there when you tell Hector.”

“That’s a terrible condition,” Danni groaned.

“It’s my price, take it or leave it,” said Indi. She put the glass of wine down in front of Eleanor. “It’s a Grafenraben Cru d’Alsace Riesling from the Domaine Bott-Geyl,” she said. “Very drinkable, saline notes with hints of stone fruits.”

Eleanor gaped at her.

“It’s not the fifties,” Indi said defensively. “We’ve got a wine cellar. Quite a decent one, actually.” She waltzed off, Eleanor still gaping.

Danni reached over and pulled Eleanor's beer over to her side of the table. "I get it," she said. "Strictly business. Cold. Emotionless. Purely transactional. Sounds delightful."

"Hector?" Eleanor asked, finally finding her voice. She took a mouthful of the wine and it was, as Indi had said, extremely drinkable. Very good, in fact.

"My brother," said Danni. "He runs the farm up the hill from mine. The big one. You must have seen it driving up to my house."

Eleanor nodded. "Any further family?"

"Just my mum left," said Danni. "She and I... it's complicated." She took a couple of gulps of her pint. "What about you?"

"Grandmother," Eleanor said.

"Oh. Um..."

Eleanor sighed. She supposed that they would have to know at least the bare minimum about each other. Just in case it came up. Just in case a nosy lawyer or someone came asking questions. "I'm an only child. My parents went down in a plane crash. I was three. Somewhere over the Thai jungle or something."

Danni considered this but didn't say anything, for which Eleanor was grateful. She was particularly grateful that Danni didn't say sorry, which was what most people said, and it had always struck Eleanor as foolish. What would they be sorry for? She wasn't sorry. She barely remembered them. From all she'd heard, she'd been better off with her grandmother. Hippies, the both of them, her grandfather had used to say.

Feeling as if she'd briefly lost control of the conversation, Eleanor cleared her throat

again. “Back to the matter at hand. We shall, as you say, maintain appearances for legal reasons. Occasional public outings, as you suggest. I’ll add to that a Christmas card, perhaps an occasional shared dinner if absolutely necessary.”

With a glint in her eye, Danni leaned back in her chair, watching Eleanor. “You know, for someone who insists that this is strictly business, you’re putting a lot of effort into making it sound like a marriage.”

For a moment, Eleanor felt a fluttering in her stomach as Danni looked at her. She ignored it. This was business. Nothing more.

She tapped her pen against her notebook. “Very well. I’ll take care of the legal details and we’ll get to the registry office as soon as they can squeeze us in.”

“Cool,” said Danni. “But I have to ask, are you going to propose properly, or what?”

Eleanor, momentarily caught off guard, opened her mouth, nearly responding in earnest before she saw the glint of mischief in Danni’s eyes.

“Kidding,” Danni smirked, picking up her pint and draining it before pulling Eleanor’s closer to her. “Unless, of course, you want to get down on one knee, Lady Eleanor? Do things properly?”

Eleanor scowled and stood up. “Goodnight, Danielle.”

“Serious names, is it?” Danni laughed. “Go on then. I suppose I’ll see you at the altar.”

Eleanor was all the way out into the sunny afternoon before she realized that Danni was probably right. The next time they saw each other would be at the altar. Well, the registry office desk, she supposed.

Chapter Seven

The registry office smelled faintly of disinfectant and bureaucracy. The chairs were the kind that made one's back ache after thirty seconds, the beige walls were adorned with posters about civil ceremonies and legal name changes, and the lighting was just harsh enough to ensure that no one looked particularly attractive.

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Even Isabella, who Eleanor had always considered a true English rose, looked jaundiced beneath the light.

Eleanor sat primly on one of the uncomfortable chairs, her hands folded in her lap, the very picture of poised patience. She'd made an effort, choosing a cream-colored suit for the occasion. It was stylish, rather than ostentatious, appropriate for what was, essentially, a business transaction. She crossed her legs at the ankles and took a slow, deep breath.

"I'll go and have a look to see if the bride is coming," Elizabeth said after an eternal silence.

"The bride is here, my dear," said Isabella, nodding toward Eleanor. Then she flushed slightly. "Ah, yes, I do see what you mean. Please, go on."

Elizabeth left with a sigh of relief.

"Are you quite alright?" Eleanor asked her grandmother politely.

Isabella surveyed the setting with a look of mild horror. "You mean, other than you obviously fully embracing romance?" she said tartly.

"It's not about romance," Eleanor sighed.

"Clearly," murmured Isabella, pulling her scarf up on her shoulder a touch. She turned to Eleanor with a pointed expression. "You know, I'm hardly a stranger to marriages of convenience. In my time, they were probably the rule more than the

exception. What, with most of the aristocratic houses losing their money after the war and all. Our family has had plenty of them, as have many of my friends.”

“Indeed,” Eleanor said, wondering just where her grandmother was going with this.

“In fact, sometimes, I do rather think that such relationships do end up working for the best. Romance can be fleeting.”

“This isn’t about romance,” Eleanor said again.

“I know,” said Isabella with a sigh. “That’s rather the problem. Whilst I understand the... utility of a marriage of convenience, I do question whether you have the temperament for such an arrangement.”

Eleanor stiffened. “Meaning?”

Isabella laid a hand on her granddaughter’s arm, her voice a little gentler. “You may think that you’re all logic and reason, Eleanor. But you’re more sentimental than you realize. You get that from your father, you know.”

Irritation bristled over Eleanor’s skin. She knew an insult when she heard one, and she wasn’t about to accept it, even from her grandmother. “That’s insulting.”

Isabella narrowed her eyes. “Is it, my dear? You must barely remember the man. I remember him. I remember him quite well, as it happens.”

Eleanor closed her eyes. She forgot, sometimes, that when she lost her parents, her grandmother had lost a son. “Of course,” she said. “I apologize.”

“Apology accepted,” Isabella said briskly. “And my point here was that this might not be as simple as you think.”

Eleanor lifted her chin. “It is simple. I need to be married to inherit. This is the most efficient solution for everyone involved.”

“Mmm,” Isabella said.

And before Eleanor could pursue the matter further, Elizabeth returned with the news that a decrepit Land Rover was currently parking in the disabled parking space at the front of the building.

???

Danni threw the old truck into park and wiped her hands on her jeans. “Here we are then,” she said.

“Dan, this is ridiculous.”

She turned to look at her brother. To his credit, he was wearing a jacket and a tie. He must have done that for her, it was unlikely that their mother would have taken much interest in what he was doing or even where he was going.

“Yep,” she said. “And yet, here we are.”

“When I told you to be smarter with money, I didn’t mean to for you to marry your way out of debt,” he said, exasperation heavy in his tone. “I didn’t mean for you to get a sugar-daddy to pay all your bills.”

“Sugar-mummy,” Danni said. She sighed. “Look, I know how it sounds—”

“Do you?” said Hector, his cheeks flushed pink. “Because if you did, I’m not so sure you’d be so gung-ho about doing it.”

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Danni rolled her eyes. “It’s a business deal, Hector. She gets her house, I get some breathing room. It’s just like you negotiating for feed or leasing the bottom field for the season, or any one of a hundred other little deals you make to keep the farm going.”

Hector gave her a flat look. “Right. And what happens when you start actually liking her?”

Danni burst into laughter. “Really? That’s what you’re worried about here? Wait until you actually meet her. She’s... impossible. Annoying, irritating, she gets right under your skin like sand at the beach.”

“Exactly your type,” Hector cut in. “Except she’s posh.”

Danni pulled a face. “Rude.”

“I’m trying to help here, Dan,” said Hector. “Come on. You don’t have to do this. You can come up with something else. I’ll help, if you want. We can sit down, brainstorm some ideas.”

Danni put her hand on the doorhandle. “If you want your tractor back and fixed, this is how it’s going to happen,” she said. “Now, you don’t have to come in. I didn’t have to tell you. But I did, because you’re my brother and I love you and I want you there. Even if this is all just play-acting. Are you coming, or not?”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Fine. I’ll come and watch you make the worst decision of your life.”

“Oh no,” said Danni, opening the door. “I’ve made way worse decisions than this. What about when I bought those goats?”

And even Hector chuckled as they walked into the building.

It took a few minutes to figure out where to go and when they finally got the directions right, the two of them turned the corner to be confronted by Eleanor, who looked like a doll in a cream suit, a woman in a neat black suit that Danni assumed was Elizabeth, the friend and solicitor, and an older woman with an expensive shawl slung over her shoulders and a sharp look in her eyes.

Eyes that reminded Danni of Eleanor’s.

Danni suddenly found herself feeling oddly nervous. There was something about Eleanor’s grandmother that made her feel like she was being x-rayed, being tested and found wanting. She sniffed, wiped her hand on her jeans, and held it out, half-expecting to be ignored.

To her surprise, Isabella took her hand firmly and shook it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said politely. “You run a farm, I hear.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Danni, not knowing why she was addressing this woman like she was the queen, but feeling like it was necessary, nevertheless.

“Not an easy choice of occupation. Are you any good at it?”

Danni didn’t hesitate. “Yes, I am.”

Isabella eyed her for a long moment, then nodded, looking satisfied. “Good. At least one of you knows herself and what she’s doing.”

Danni glanced over at Eleanor, who looked both scandalized and slightly betrayed, and had to bite back a smile.

Isabella reached over and patted her granddaughter's hand. "Perhaps this isn't such a bad idea after all," she said, eyes still on Danni and a small smile on her lips.

Eleanor looked as though she might be sick, and Danni found herself liking Isabella rather more than she'd really expected to.

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Eleanor looked across at where Danni was slouched on her chair, looking as if she might be about to doze off. She was wearing jeans that looked clean in only the most relative of senses, boots, and a flannel shirt that might have seen an iron at some point in its existence, but not recently. She also looked far too comfortable for someone about to enter into a legally binding commitment.

With a sigh, she stood up and went to sit beside her.

"I'm glad to see that you made an effort," she said dryly.

Danni looked down at her clothes in surprise. "Didn't know I was supposed to show up in the big white dress. You should have said something."

"You could have worn a skirt," Eleanor said. "Or a trouser suit. Perhaps a twin set."

"I only know what one of those things is," said Danni. "And I've been at work all morning and I'll go back to work when this is all done, so be happy that I put on a clean shirt. The other one had sheep poo on it."

"Right," Eleanor said faintly. She swallowed. "Are you... Are you sure about this?"

She wasn't sure if she was asking for Danni or asking for herself.

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Danni looked at her and gave a lazy grin that made her dark eyes crinkle at the corners and her nose wrinkle a little. “We shook on it, didn’t we?”

“Yes, but—”

She was interrupted by an announcement of both their names. It was time.

“Let’s get this done, Princess,” Danni said, heaving herself out of her chair with what looked like great effort.

Eleanor sighed and straightened her jacket. “Fine.”

After that, it was all very fast.

The official called them forward. The ceremony, if it could even be called that, was brief. There were no vows, no rings, no fanfare. Just paperwork.

Eleanor signed her name in her usual elegant script, penmanship had always been important to her. Danni scrawled hers in a rushed, barely legible mess, like she was signing for a hay delivery.

Elizabeth and Hector signed as witnesses, both with varying degrees of concern on theirs faces.

Isabella watched it all with an unreadable expression.

And just like that...

They were married.

Chapter Eight

Danni wiped the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand and straightened up, surveying the fence post that she and Tommy had been struggling with for the past hour. It still leaned slightly to the left, but frankly, that was going to have to be a part of its charm.

“Some best mate you are,” Tommy was still grumbling, hammer dangling from his hand. “I didn’t even get a slice of cake.”

“What cake?” Danni asked, wiggling the post to make sure it was stable enough to leave.

“Um, wedding cake?” said Tommy.

“What wedding cake?”

“Exactly,” said Tommy, jabbing his hammer accusingly in her direction. “You went and got yourself married and I didn’t even get a slice of cake.”

Danni groaned and grabbed a bottle of water from a nearby wall. “I didn’t have a wedding cake, Tom. No cake, no dresses, no guests, no embarrassing speeches from drunken relatives. Just a few signatures on a piece of paper in an office that smelled a lot like an old primary school. Job done.”

Tommy shook his head in disbelief. “Not even a buffet?”

“Nope.”

“That’s the best bit of a wedding,” he said. “Well, that or the open bar, depending on your tastes.”

“Didn’t have either,” said Danni.

“Bloody hell. That’s the most depressing thing I’ve heard all day.” He sighed dramatically before squinting at her against the sunlight. “And I don’t suppose you’ve even seen this house, have you?”

Danni hesitated before shrugging. “No.”

Tommy shook his head again. “You married a woman for a house and you didn’t even go and look at it first? Danni, mate, that’s just bad business. How do you even know if the place exists? It might all be a scam for all you know.”

“It’s not a scam,” she said. But now that she was thinking about it, he did have a point. She’d signed an entire marriage contract for this damn house, she should probably at least have a look at the thing.

“Might not exist,” Tommy said again.

“Fine,” she said, tossing her work gloves aside. “I’ll go and have a look when we’re finished here. Happy?”

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Tommy sniffed. “Be happier if I had cake, but yeah, I suppose so. Careful you don’t get lost, though. I’ve heard these posh places have entire wings.” He thought for a second, then clarified, “I don’t mean the flying kind either.”

IT OCCURRED TO Danni, as she drove up the endless driveway, that she might not entirely have understood just what her marriage was buying. She’d known that the house was going to be posh, known that it was going to be big. She hadn’t imagined that it would give Downton Abbey a run for its money.

Brewster Manor was a beast of a house.

It had wings on wings, and columns and ivy and grounds, and probably, Danni thought, an entire army of staff. She pulled up in the forecourt and gaped at the place. Tommy was right, she’d have to be careful. If she got lost in there, it might be weeks before anyone found her. There were probably mummified bodies of servant girls who’d turned left inside of right inside cupboards.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered, as she got out of the car. “Whathave I gotten myself into?”

At any other house, Danni would have gone around to the kitchen door. But given that here, that would include a hefty hike around some rather overgrown looking grounds, she satisfied herself with marching up to the big front doors and then looking around for anything that might be construed as a bell.

Scaffolding towered over her, shading the door enough that she couldn’t identify a bell. She was just steeling herself to knock when there was a loud crack from

above.

She jumped back just in time as a large brick tumbled from the scaffolding, almost braining her.

“What the hell?” she yelped.

“Bugger,” said a man in a hard hat, peering down at her from the scaffolding. “You alright?”

“Just about,” she said, as he climbed down to meet her.

“House is a bit temperamental,” he said, wiping his hands on his trousers. “You looking for Her Majesty?”

“You mean Eleanor?” Danni asked in amusement.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” He extended a hand. “I’m Samson. Head builder. Don’t suppose you’re the new wife, are you?”

Danni shook his hand. “Heard about that, have you?”

“Might have done,” Samson grinned. “Seems like a sensible idea to me. Can’t be doing with all this old-fashioned business about needing a husband to run a house. Think things’d probably all go a lot smoother with two wives, to be honest. A husband’d probably just get in the way.”

“Probably,” agreed Danni.

Samson sniffed. “Come on then, I’ll show you around, if you like.”

She'd been expecting Downton Abbey glamor to match the outside of the house, and was sorely disappointed when Samson pushed open the front door. Alright, the tiles on the floor were nice, but everything else was covered in dust cloths and plastic.

In fact, the inside of Brewster Manor was an absolute disaster.

"Just getting started," Samson said. "Gonna get worse before it gets better, to be honest. We've got the roof to do, the masonry, and most of the electrics were put in in the last century, so we'll be doing those as well."

"Bloody hell," Danni said, looking around.

"Plumbing's alright though," he said, as though that made up for everything else. "Still, we're going to be knocking a lot of things down so we can put a lot more things back together again, if you know what I mean?"

They stepped over piles of broken tiles, trying not to inhale too much dust, as Samson rattled off long lists of what needed to be done in each room.

Danni whistled low. "And Eleanor's living in this?"

Samson shrugged. "Surviving might be a better word. I told her that she should go to a hotel, but she won't. Don't think it's that she doesn't trust us. She seems alright with my men being here. Think it's more that she doesn't want to. Not that I blame her. It might be a while and no one wants to live in an anonymous hotel for long, do they?"

Danni nodded in agreement. "But no one should be living in a death trap either," she said.

"You're preaching to the choir," said Samson. He pointed down a long corridor. "If

you go down there you'll come to the kitchens. You should find Her Highness around there somewhere. Just give a shout if you can't and someone'll hear you."

"You sure?" Danni asked. "I don't want to get lost in here."

Samson laughed. "I count everyone in and out and we send a search party for the stragglers once a week on a Wednesday, so don't worry."

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She found Eleanor in a tiny room off the kitchen, perched on a camp bed. The newly official Lady of Brewster Manor was impeccably dressed to be sure. But she was also sitting on a bloody camp bed trying to take notes in an agenda by the light of a very small lamp.

Danni leaned against the doorframe, folding her arms. “So, this is where you’re sleeping?”

Eleanor looked up, startled. “What are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d take a look at what my marriage bought you,” Danni said. “It’s quite a place, I’ll give you that. I think I understand just a bit more why you might want to keep a hold of it.” She scratched her nose. “Not sure about this bit of it, though.”

“It’s perfectly fine,” Eleanor said. “And it’s only temporary.”

“Mmm,” said Danni. “I’m sure there’s a hundred four-poster beds upstairs with your name on them. Unfortunately, for now you can’t sleep in them. And this... place is...” She sighed. “I’ve seen more hospitable chicken coops.”

Eleanor sniffed, having the grace to look embarrassed. “I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

“Why don’t you stay in a hotel?”

“Anonymous and horrible breakfasts,” Eleanor said. “And I like to keep an eye on the house.”

Danni shook her head. “You can’t live like this. You can come and stay at the farm with me.”

“Absolutely not,” said Eleanor, looking horrified.

Danni rolled her eyes. “There’s a spare room,” she said. “There’ll be nothing untoward. And more importantly, the farm might not be much, but it’s got four walls, a solid roof and, best of all, there’s no risk of bricks killing you in your sleep.” She tilted her head. “Well, not unless you annoy me so much that I’m the one wielding them.”

“It’s entirely inappropriate,” said Eleanor, standing up and putting her hands on her hips.

“So’s living on a construction site,” Danni pointed out. “And we’re technically married, so I’m not sure inappropriate is the word that you’re looking for. It’s very appropriate, isn’t it? Even your dead Victorian ancestors have to approve of married couples living in the same house.”

“You’d be surprised,” Eleanor said sourly. “I’m not sure two women were what they had in mind when they defined marriage.”

“Just as well that definitions can change then, isn’t it?” said Danni, cheerful now. “Come on, this is ridiculous. You can’t live like this. There’s a spare room at the farm and it’s only a fifteen minute drive away. Your man Samson will take care of everything and you can come up here every day.”

“No,” Eleanor said again.

But just as she said the word, a loud crash echoed from upstairs. A fresh cloud of dust billowed into the tiny scullery room, covering both of them in a fine layer of debris.

Eleanor coughed and rubbed at her eyes before starting to pick the larger pieces of plaster off her blazer.

Finally, she sighed and looked at Danni, her eyes large and luminous green in the plaster-white of her face. “Fine. But only until the house is safe again.”

Danni smirked. “Then I’d better get the guest room ready, Princess.”

Eleanor groaned. “I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?”

“Probably,” grinned Danni. “But at least you won’t die under a pile of bricks and plaster, and there’s a lot to be said for that.”

Eleanor looked like she might not necessarily agree with that sentiment, but a fresh cloud of brick dust descended and then she was too busy coughing to argue the point.

Chapter Nine

Eleanor had never considered herself a woman of weak constitution. But as she stood in the doorway of the farmhouse’s so-called guest room, she found herself feeling slightly faint and reconsidering just how sensitive she might be.

“This is it?” she asked, slowly stepping inside.

The room was small, functional even, and painted in a cheerful shade of pale yellow that looked like sunshine. It was, however, missing a rather critical element. There was a wardrobe in the corner, a comfortable-looking armchair by the window, a rug on the floor and... nothing else.

Danni leaned casually against the doorframe and grinned. “Yep. Welcome home, wife.”

Eleanor turned to her, incredulous. “Danni, where exactly am I supposed to sleep?”

“Hey, I said that there was a guest room, not a guest bed,” Danni said. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “I suppose we could haul that old couch up from the kitchen. I think we’d get it up the stairs as long as we took it on a sort of diagonal sideways approach.”

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“Absolutely not,” Eleanor shuddered. “I’m not moving furniture around.”

Danni puffed out a breath. “Well, you were sleeping on a camp bed up until now,” she said. She looked around the room. “And atleast here there’s no bricks falling. No dust either.”

Eleanor raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry,” Danni said with a shrug. “I was thinking mostly about the no bricks part. Less about the no bed part.”

Eleanor exhaled sharply, pinching the bridge of her nose. She’d been prepared for plenty of inconveniences about this arrangement. The absence of a bed had not been one of them. And whilst it was nice of Danni to offer her a place to stay, she was regretting her decision rather sooner than she’d expected. “Danni, be serious for a moment here.”

“Fine,” Danni said with a sigh. “You can have my bed, Princess. I’ll sleep on the couch in the kitchen.”

“I didn’t mean to kick you out of your bed,” Eleanor said quickly. That hadn’t been her intention, and it seemed, well, unfair.

“It’s not like I sleep in,” Danni said. She sniffed. “And to be honest, it’s not like I don’t sleep on the couch most nights, anyway. Climbing the stairs just to come down them a couple of hours later doesn’t always make a lot of sense.”

Eleanor studied her. Danni looked completely unfazed, as if giving up her bed to a woman that she barely tolerated was no big deal. Eleanor herself was already starting to feel guilty, though only slightly. This had all been Danni's idea, after all. "Thank you," she said finally. "That's very generous."

"Don't mention it," said Danni, already turning to leave. "I'll just consider it one of my wifely duties."

Eleanor unpacked what little she'd brought, stowing things away in the wardrobe and small bathroom. This wasn't the worst idea, she told herself as she worked. In fact, it was probably a good thing. If anyone came asking, they lived together. And it wouldn't be for that long.

Anyone could put up with anything for a few weeks.

And, to be fair, the room was larger than the one she'd had at boarding school, and at least she wasn't sharing a bathroom with eleven other girls.

No, she had to look on the bright side.

She stowed her small case under the bed and, in search of a proper cup of tea, descended into the kitchen. Only to freeze in horror at the sight before her.

Muddy boots were lined up uncleaned next to the door. A sink full of washing up awaited attention. There was a butter dish in the middle of the table that bore the distinct mark of a cat's bite.

Eleanor took a slow, steady breath. You can deal with this, she told herself.

Rolling up her sleeves, she got to work on the washing up. When she was done, she wiped down the counters and, seeing that the spices in the rack were out of order,

began alphabetizing them. She was placing nutmeg when the back door opened and Danni strolled in, stopping short at the sight of Eleanor.

“Um, what are you doing?” Danni asked, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Putting your spices back into alphabetical order,” Eleanor said. “Where I presume they belong?”

“Then you presume wrong,” said Danni. “They belong in whichever order they last got used in, to my knowledge.”

“Ah,” said Eleanor, standing back. “Right.” She looked around and picked up a dish towel that had begun to stiffen. “And how long has it been since this was last washed?”

Danni shrugged. “Dunno. Couple of weeks. Three maybe. It’s a dish towel. Only used to dry clean dishes. So it doesn’t touch dirt, you see.”

Eleanor gasped as if she’d been struck. “Three weeks?”

Danni sighed and shook her head. “Oh, you’re going to be so much fun to live with,” she said.

Eleanor dropped the dish towel into the sink and began running boiling water over it.

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When the alarm went at a quarter to five, Danni stretched the crick out of her neck and pushed the bundle of blankets to the end of the couch. She pulled on the jeans she’d left on the kitchen chair and went out into the cool of the morning to get started.

By half past seven, the animals were fed and cleaned out, and Danni was gasping for a cup of tea. Not that she expected Eleanor to be up and about. Still, she supposed she had to make allowances. Allowances that were a bit easier to make given that Eleanor had signed off on a new rental tractor that was due to arrive that afternoon.

She crept into the house, making sure that the door didn't creak, only to be greeted by the sight of Eleanor, already dressed, definitely already awake, and already fuming.

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“Honestly, who leaves their dirty dishes next to the sink rather than in it?” Eleanor demanded, arms crossed.

Danni yawned. “Um, me?” she hazarded. The piece of bread she’d scoffed down that morning seemed so long ago that she barely remembered it. Which reminded her. “What happened to the butter?”

“I threw it away,” Eleanor said. “The cat had taken a bite out of it.”

“Not all of it,” Danni said. “You just have to be careful to take a bit from the opposite end.”

Eleanor huffed and turned to the kettle. As Danni watched, she performed what looked like a very complicated routine involving a loose-leaf tea, a strainer, an egg timer, and what appeared to be some sort of sacrificial offering to the gods of tea perfection.

After three minutes of this, Danni shook her head and grabbed her own tea mug, still dirty from that morning, from the draining board. She threw in a tea bag, ran the kitchen tap until it was hot, then stuck the mug under it.

She turned around to see Eleanor staring at her in horror.

“That is not how you make tea!”

Danni grinned, took a slow, deliberate sip, then shrugged. “Tastes alright to me,” she said.

Eleanor looked personally offended, and Danni had to bite back her laugh. The tea was disgusting, but it was worth it, just to see the look on Eleanor's face.

IT WAS LATE evening by the time Danni was done with farm chores and Eleanor was back from the house. Danni frowned as she flicked through the mail that Hector had dropped off. She really should re-direct everything. Then she saw the familiar envelope and stiffened.

"You got one too," Eleanor said, looking up from her phone.

"Yeah," said Danni, tearing the envelope open. "And look at that. The offer's gone up again."

"Mine too," Eleanor said. "They must be getting desperate."

"Not tempted?" Danni said, eyeing her.

"Are you?" asked Eleanor, raising an eyebrow.

Danni scoffed. "Not a chance."

For a moment, they simply sat there, then, without a word, Danni crumpled the letter up and threw it into the fireplace.

"That would be far more impressive if you had a fire going," Eleanor pointed out.

"Yeah, well, it's the thought that counts, isn't it?"

Eleanor's lips twitched. "I threw mine into the compost bin with the worms," she said.

“Lucky worms,” said Danni. “But I’m quite sure that’s not how compost works.”

“It’s the thought that counts, isn’t it?” Eleanor parroted.

Danni grinned and then Eleanor was grinning back, and for a brief second they weren’t so different after all.

“Mind you, at least I know how to load a dishwasher,” Eleanor said, ending their little moment. “You can’t just shove everything in willy-nilly.”

“Did one of the servants teach you how?” asked Danni, an innocent look on her face.

“I’m not quite as spoiled as you might think. I did go to boarding school, you know?” Eleanor said indignantly.

“Oh, did you? Boarding school. That must have been horrific. Were you expected to wash your own knickers?” Danni asked.

Eleanor glared at her. “I can adapt.”

Danni snorted. “Of course you can, Princess.”

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“I do wish you’d stop calling me that,” Eleanor scowled.

“Your wish is my command, Your Royal Highness,” Danni said.

Eleanor groaned, resisting the urge to throw something at her. “You’re going to have to mind your manners,” she said. “Not to mention getting a bit of a wardrobe update.”

“There’s a wardrobe in the spare room,” Danni said. “There’s no bed, but there’s definitely a wardrobe.”

“Not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Eleanor tapped her phone. “There’s a small gathering at the country club next week. I thought it would be a good occasion to make our public debut.”

“Debut?”

“Why not?” asked Eleanor. “There’s less chance of you embarrassing yourself if we’re just popping in for a glass of something. No sit-down conversations. It seems an ideal opportunity.”

And for once, Danni was the one lost for words.

Chapter Ten

Danni stood in the back room of the pub surrounded by drink crates and wrestling with the dress that Indi had thrust upon her. The thing had about a million tiny buttons and she was beginning to suspect that rich people just liked to make getting dressed as complicated as possible.

“This is ridiculous,” she grumbled, twisting around to reach a particularly stubborn button. “I could be at home, in my jeans, eating a perfectly good pasty. Instead, I’m squeezing myself into this... torture device.” She gestured at the dress, nearly topping over in the process.

Indi, who was perched on a stool watching all of this with great amusement, sipped at her drink. “You’ll survive,” she said.

Danni scowled. “You don’t know that.”

“You’ve faced down angry cows and had your hand up a sheep’s bum. I’m pretty sure you can handle a cocktail party, Dan.”

“That’s debatable,” Danni muttered. She groaned as she finally managed to do up the last button. “Living with Eleanor is driving me up the wall. She’s got rules about everything. I swear to God, if I leave my dirty boots by the door one more time, the woman’s going to have me hung, drawn, and quartered.”

“Sounds like she’s got your number,” Indi smirked. “And I thought you’d never met a woman that you couldn’t charm?”

Danni scoffed at this. “Eleanor’s immune. She got vaccinated as a child or something.”

“Mmm-hmm,” said Indi, clearly unconvinced. She stood up and gave Danni an appraising look, straightening the dress on her shoulders a little. “Well, I hate to say

it, but you actually look kind of posh.”

Tommy stuck his head around the door, took one look at Danni, snorted and muttered, “Bloody hell, miracles do happen.”

Indi smacked him on the arm.

Danni rolled her eyes and grabbed her jacket, which had seen better days and was currently covered in a fair sprinkling of hay. “I’m going. I just want to get this over with at this point.”

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Eleanor was fixing her earrings in the small mirror by the back door when the door opened. “Finally,” she said, huffing and turning around. And then she nearly swallowed her tongue.

Danni stood in the doorway in the borrowed dress, and for the first time, she actually looked like she belonged at the country club. Her usual scruffy farm-wear was gone, replaced by elegant lines and fabric that actually fit her. A dark bottle-green color bringing out her dark eyes, her dark curls piled on top of head. Alright, her hair was still a little messy, but in a way that was... Eleanor swallowed... almost roguishly charming.

“You alright?” Danni asked, raising an eyebrow. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

Eleanor snapped herself out of it, straightening up. “You, um, you look... presentable.”

Danni smirked. “Careful, El. Any more enthusiasm and I might think you like having

me around.”

“Just try not to embarrass me,” Eleanor snapped. “And don’t call me El.”

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“Sorry, Princess,” said Danni with a syrupy smile. “Your car or mine?”

“Is that really a question?” asked Eleanor, picking up her purse.

“Yours got hit by a tractor, remember?” Danni said. “Thought you might want to take mine.”

“Just get in the damn car,” Eleanor said, gritting her teeth and already regretting this little outing.

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The country club turned out to be all dark wood and plush carpeting and Danni had an inexplicable urge to graffiti the toilet walls, but held herself back.

She was on her best behavior. Despite what Eleanor might think, she did know how to behave herself, and she knew how to play nice. She was going to keep to her side of the bargain, she knew what there was to gain.

So she shook hands and smiled politely and even managed to fake interest in some truly awful conversations.

Eleanor, to her credit, seemed surprised and rather gratified at how well Danni was doing. She smiled and was graceful, and Danni found herself wondering why Eleanor couldn't be a little more charming at home as well.

But even Danni's patience eventually wore thin. The rich might dress nicely, and

have decent taste in little snacky things, to be fair. But they were also fake, all smiles and polite nods until someone walked away, and then it was open season with the barbed insults.

“These people are awful,” Danni hissed, leaning toward Eleanor.

Eleanor sighed. “That’s just how it is.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” Danni snorted. “Who’s the wanker with the kilt?”

A look passed over Eleanor’s face that interested Danni.

“Go on, who is he?” she poked. “Ex-boyfriend?”

“No,” said Eleanor sharply. “As it happens, he’s my great-uncle.”

Danni peered at the blonde man across the room. “No shit? But he’s not that much older than Hector.”

“Mmm,” Eleanor said. “My grandmother’s sister was... a woman of certain tastes. And Stephan wasn’t above taking advantage of those tastes. I’m surprised they let him in here, the last I heard he’d declared bankruptcy.”

“Looks like he’s doing alright now,” Danni observed. “He’s chatting up anyone that’ll listen. He does look a wanker in the kilt, though.”

“I didn’t know he was Scottish,” Eleanor admitted.

“Don’t think he is,” said Danni. “Think he just thinks he’s got nice calves and wants to show ‘em off. He’s that kind of bloke.”

“Behave yourself,” Eleanor said threateningly.

“Don’t worry, new tractor on the line, I’ve got it,” Danni said. “I’m all out of drinks, though, so you could probably bribe me with alcohol for better results.”

Eleanor put her hand in the small of Danni’s back to escort her to the drinks table, and Danni felt an odd shiver go down her spine as her skin started to tingle. Jesus, these toffs made their drinks strong. Maybe she should go easy on the next one.

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Just as Eleanor was steering Danni toward the drinks table, a familiar, unwelcome voice rang out. Eleanor’s stomach dropped.

“Well, Eleanor, darling, isn’t this... unexpected?”

Eleanor took a deep breath before turning around to see Beatrice Allenton standing there, lips curved into a razor-thin smile.

Beatrice had been the bane of her existence since boarding school, always ready with a mean quip or spiky insult. She had the uncanny ability of being able to pin-point one’s weaknesses, an ability she took full advantage of.

“What is unexpected?” Eleanor asked, already dreading the answer. She really must learn to stay far away from Beatrice. She’d been avoiding the woman all evening, but Danni had distracted her.

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“Your husband.” Beatrice’s eyes flicked to Danni with amused disdain. “Or should I say, wife? I’m not sure of the proper vocabulary under these circumstances.”

Eleanor tensed. “This is Danni—” she began, determined to make a proper introduction.

Beatrice didn’t let her finish. “Quite the change of taste, isn’t it? One might even say... desperate.”

Eleanor felt her jaw clench. She took a breath, searching for the proper, polite response that wouldn’t start a scene in front of all these people, but before she came up with anything, Danni spoke.

“Interesting,” Danni drawled, voice dripping with false innocence.

“Interesting?” Beatrice said, eyes alight with wicked amusement.

“Well, such a fascinating way to say, ‘Congratulations, Eleanor, I hope you’re happy.’ I wouldn’t have put it that way myself. You have quite the way with words, don’t you?”

Beatrice blinked, clearly taken aback.

Danni leaned in, lowering her voice just enough that only the three of them could hear. “Here’s the thing, Duchess. See, Eleanor’s got class. She’s got poise. Which means she’s far too well-bred to tell you what she really thinks of you. Luckily, I’m not well-bred at all. I think you’re an insufferable little woman who has so little to do

she picks on others. A bully, if you will. And I think that if Eleanor had wanted to marry a pretentious snob, she'd have picked someone like you. But instead, she picked me. So what does that tell you?"

Beatrice opened her mouth, closed it again, then backed off, almost tripping over her dress as she did so.

Eleanor stared at Danni, utterly stunned. "Did you just...?"

Danni grinned. "Yep. Absolutely did."

And to Eleanor's horror, she felt herself start to grin back.

It wasn't until the drive home that Eleanor really had time to take in what Danni had done. It wasn't so much the words, though they helped, it was more the springing to her defense that took her by surprise.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, Eleanor turning over Beatrice's words, and Danni's response, in her head.

And finally, she said, "Thank you. For earlier."

She'd been expecting Danni to pretend not to know what she was talking about, to drag things out somehow, to want more praise. But she just waved a hand. "Eh, can't have people talking to my wife like that, can I?"

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "It was still appreciated."

"Just don't expect it to happen too often," Danni said, with a tired sigh. "I do have a reputation to maintain if I'm going to be your bit of rough."

Eleanor shook her head, smiling despite herself. There was something about Danni being her ‘bit of rough’ that made her feel... better. Something about Danni being hers, however temporarily, that made things just a little nicer, warmer. They fell into a more comfortable silence, the hum of the road lulling them into a truce.

Then, just as they pulled into the bumpy drive, Danni gave another sigh. This time of relief. “Well, at least we don’t have to do that again anytime soon.”

“Not until Saturday, at least,” Eleanor said, slowing down and watching out for foxes.

Danni’s head snapped toward her. “What’s happening on Saturday?”

“Dinner with my grandmother,” Eleanor said airily.

Danni let out a strangled groan. “Oh, fantastic.”

Eleanor couldn’t help but laugh as she stepped out of the car. Danni took her elbow to steady her up the stairs, and then turned to unlock the front door. And Eleanor had a feeling that Saturday’s dinner was going to be very interesting indeed.

Chapter Eleven

If Danni ever had a day off, she wasn’t sure what she’d do with it. She’d literally never had a day of holiday in her adult life. She’d been to Blackpool once as a child with her aunt and uncle, but she’d woken up at five every morning anyway, primed and ready for work.

Farmers didn’t do days off. Even Sundays. So she was up at the normal time, out into the sweet summer sun, taking care of business and working up an appetite. After doing the most pressing chores, she headed back to the kitchen for some caffeine, and to her surprise, found Eleanor already sitting at the kitchen table. She was furrowing

her eyebrows over a neatly written list of renovation supplies.

“You’re up early,” Danni said suspiciously as she filled the kettle.

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“Toast?” Eleanor offered, gesturing at the plate in the middle of the table. She was perfectly composed, though Danni suspected that the t-shirt she was wearing cost more than her monthly feed bill, despite being a plain white t-shirt. “I’ve been up for an hour. I like to be productive in the mornings.”

“Right,” Danni said, grabbing a piece of toast and cramming half of it into her mouth as she went back to the kettle to prepare her normal coffee sludge.

“It’s Sunday,” Eleanor said, tapping a pen against her list.

“Well spotted,” Danni said, swallowing her toast.

Eleanor tapped the pen a little harder. “Sorry, I should have been more specific. I meant that since it’s Sunday, the workers won’t be at the house. Perhaps you could use a little help around the farm today?”

Danni dropped the other half of her toast, bent to pick it up, and then hit her head on the kitchen counter. “What?” she said, rubbing her head.

“Help. You. Need.”

“You want to help with farm work?” Danni said, not entirely sure she was understanding what was going on.

Eleanor lifted her chin. “Yes.”

Danni swallowed and wiped her hands on her jeans. “Um, you do realize that farm

work involves things like dirt, lifting, actual effort? There's a solid chance that there'll be manure involved at some point too."

"I started riding when I was three," Eleanor said, as though this explained everything. "I am fully acquainted with mucking out a stable, thank you very much."

Nearly choking on her much-needed coffee, Danni said, "You?"

"Yes, me," said Eleanor, giving her a sharp look. "I'm perfectly capable of physical labor, thank you. I'm a fit and healthy woman."

Danni felt her eyes dart down to Eleanor's body instinctively, and she dragged them back up again. "Alright, Princess," she said. "Let's see what you've got, then."

DANNI LED ELEANOR out to the stables, fully expecting her to take one look at the manure and bolt. To her surprise, Eleanor smiled slightly and walked over to where Sam, the old work horse, was munching on his morning oats.

"Who's this then?" she asked.

"Sam," said Danni. "He came with the farm. He's been here donkey's years. Doesn't do much anymore, but my dad always said a farm without a horse wasn't a farm at all."

"Too right," Eleanor said, admiringly, stroking down Sam's neck. "He reminds me of my childhood horse."

"Does he?" Danni asked, rolling her eyes. "And what was he called then?"

"He was a she and she was called Millicent Mary."

Danni bit back a reply to this. She'd known from the beginning that Eleanor must have had a horse with a stupid name. It was comforting to be proven correct. "Pitch fork's over there," she said instead, nodding to where it was standing propped up against the stable wall.

And Eleanor stretched her shoulders and got to work.

For the first five minutes, Danni watched in stunned silence as Eleanor competently shoveled dirty hay into a nearby wheelbarrow.

Until Eleanor put down the fork, put her hands on her hips, and glared at her. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"You've got hay in your hair," Danni pointed out.

Eleanor reached up and pulled out a piece.

"There's more," said Danni helpfully.

Eleanor sighed. "Still not as bad as the time I got a bird stuck in my hat at Ascot."

Not sure she'd heard correctly, Danni said, "You got a bird stuck in your hat?"

"Well, it was more of a fascinator, really," Eleanor explained, picking another piece of straw out of her hair. "It had feathers. A pigeon got confused."

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Danni started to giggle. “That’s the poshest problem I’ve ever heard. And I’d pay good money to see a video of it.”

“You haven’t got any money,” Eleanor reminded her, picking up the pitchfork again. “But I’m sure you have got plenty of other chores to do. So get to them.”

A couple of hours later, Danni found Eleanor sweaty, covered in dust, and oddly triumphant. She watched her grin in satisfaction at the work she’d done, and had to admit, she was impressed. “Nice job.”

“I deserve a medal,” Eleanor declared.

Danni smirked. “I’ll get you a sticker later. Ready for lunch?”

Eleanor disappeared upstairs to clean up while Danni, feeling magnanimous, made sandwiches from thick cut tomatoes and cheese that Hector had brought down the day before. When Eleanor came down, she was wearing jeans, neatly ironed, and a shirt with rolled up sleeves.

“What?” Eleanor said, catching Danni’s look. “I thought I should be more appropriately dressed.”

Danni wasn’t at all sure that appropriate was the word for the way those jeans curved over Eleanor’s backside, but she didn’t say anything. Eleanor sat and took a bite out of a sandwich.

“Delicious,” she said. “I wouldn’t have thought you capable of making sandwiches.”

Danni narrowed her eyes. “What do you think I eat? Grass?”

“I assumed you survived on raw meat and determination,” Eleanor said with a sniff.

Danni gave her a look, but was fighting back a grin. “Got another of those letters on Friday,” she said. “They’re coming in about once a week now.”

“Sounds about right,” Eleanor nodded. She wiped her hands on a napkin and sat up straighter. “Which reminds me, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all,” said Danni, taking another sandwich.

“It’s about ways to legally protect your farm from predatory buyers,” said Eleanor, dabbing the napkin to the corners of her mouth.

Danni blinked. “Legal protection?”

“I’ve been doing some research,” Eleanor said, pulling another of her neat notebooks to her. “There are ways to tie up the land in so much red tape that any investor would find it more trouble than it’s worth.”

Intrigued despite herself, Danni frowned. “Like what?”

Eleanor launched into an explanation, and Danni listened carefully, nodding along, genuinely interested in what Eleanor was saying. For a moment, she forgot that Eleanor was just a posh woman she’d crashed into with a tractor, a businesspartner in a business marriage. Her explanation was to the point, useful, and Eleanor herself was clever, quick, and actually trying to help.

Then Eleanor reached over to hand Danni a document, heavily highlighted, and their

hands brushed.

For an instant, nobody moved.

Danni felt that odd shiver again, like her blood was warming up inside her. She gulped and pulled her hand away, even though it felt like pulling iron from a magnet.

Eleanor cleared her throat and slid the paper the rest of the way across the table to Danni. Danni leaned over it, feigning more interest than she really had, while she waited for the flush to dissipate from her cheeks.

THE REST OF the afternoon passed in a strange, new rhythm.

Danni found that she was unexpectedly observant, noticing things about Eleanor that she really hadn't seen before. The way she chewed her lip when she was thinking, the way her hands moved when she talked. But then, she told herself, they hadn't exactly spent a lot of time together before. In fact, this was probably more time than they collectively spent in each other's company in total.

For her part, Eleanor seemed to be relaxing more, laughing more, responding to Danni's sarcasm with chuckles instead of rolling her eyes like a school prefect.

It was, Danni decided, quite nice actually.

Having someone to help with the farm was nice. Though she supposed it was no different than having Tommy around. Except it was different. Different in ways that she didn't quite want to think about, thank you very much.

They were just finishing up for the day. Danni had corralled the chickens back into their coop, Eleanor had given Sam his evening oats. The sun was still warm and Eleanor stretched and sighed.

“What?” asked Danni.

“Nothing,” Eleanor said.

“No, go on, what?”

Eleanor shrugged. “I was just thinking about the new facing for the library shelves, whether they should be stained darker or whether we can get away with a lighter stain that will develop a patina as it gets older.”

For some reason, Danni’s stomach dropped into her boots.

The house.

Right.

That was what all this was about for Eleanor. Not about them getting along. Not about a brush of hands. Not about laughing or chatting or even developing a feeling that maybe, just maybe, they were becoming friends.

This was a business deal, a proposition, a bargain.

This was about a house.

Eleanor’s house.

Danni swallowed down something that tasted a bit like disappointment. She wiped her forehead with her arm and stretched out her back. “Yeah, you’ll have to get that sorted. Don’t want a library with mis-matched shelves now, do you?”

Eleanor rolled her eyes, and Danni turned away, suddenly feeling very tired. She wasn't supposed to forget what this was all about, that it was about a farm and a house and not about a farmer and a lady.

But for a moment there, she almost had.

Chapter Twelve

Eleanor had never been so busy in her life. Running the estate had kept her out of trouble, attending benefits and fundraisers and making sure everyone knew what was to be done. Renovating the estate, on the other hand, was proving far more work, overseeing everything every day, making sure no mistakes were made.

And it was becoming increasingly inconvenient.

She barely saw Danni all week, which, in theory, really should have been a relief. Instead, for reasons Eleanor really couldn't for the life of her discern, it was irritating. Every morning, she woke up to find the farmer already gone. Every evening, when she returned from a long day of overseeing the renovations, Danni was already asleep on the couch in the kitchen, or out somewhere. Presumably doing something ridiculous and reckless.

Not that it should matter. Not that it did matter. It wasn't as if they were real spouses who needed to check in with each other. It was almost like living alone, and Eleanor knew that she should appreciate that. Still, though, she found it annoying that their paths barely crossed. After all, the reason she had her house at all was due to Danni. And the reason Danni had a farm to run was because of her. The least they could do was have a civil conversation now and again.

And then Saturday arrived, rather sooner than Eleanor had planned on it coming. So soon that she was very nearly late getting dressed and got downstairs just in time to

see Danni picking up the truck keys.

“We’ll take—” Eleanor began.

“No. We’ll take the Land Rover,” said Danni. “I’m tired of being chauffeured around. You’re the princess here, not me.”

“Not a princess,” Eleanor said as she followed Danni out of the house.

The mistake was clear from the beginning. The Land Rover smelled of hay, and there was a very suspicious-looking stain on the passenger seat that forced Eleanor to sit faintly lop-sided, so that every time Danni took a turn, her stomach lurched in protest.

“I could have driven, you know,” Eleanor muttered, gripping the door handle and hoping that it didn’t come off in her hand.

“I know. And I told you. I’m not a princess. I don’t need a chauffeur. Nor do I want one. Anyway, that sports car of yours is a death trap, we’re far better off and safer in this.” Danni patted the steering wheel affectionately.

“Mmm,” groaned Eleanor as Danni took another turn.

“Relax, Princess,” Danni said cheerfully. “I’ve only crashed into one thing this year, and that, technically, was your fault.”

“It was not,” Eleanor said, before realizing that she was being goaded. She let out an exasperated sigh and turned to stare resolutely out of the window.

“YOU ARE GOING to behave yourself,” Eleanor said, more as an instruction than a question.

“I’ll be fine,” said Danni. “Besides, your gran loves me.”

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“Please don’t call her gran,” groaned Eleanor.

“What should I call her then?” asked Danni as they walked up the stairs to the Retirement Home’s door. “Izzy? Iz? Bel?”

“Your Ladyship will be just fine,” said Eleanor grimly as she opened the door for Danni to go through.

The home had private dining rooms to allow their inhabitants to entertain both family and friends, and they were shown into a small but tastefully decorated room with a table set for three. Isabella was already waiting, and she stood as they arrived.

“My dear,” she greeted Eleanor warmly, kissing her cheek, before turning to Danni. “I’m not at all sure we’re on kissing terms yet, my young farmer,” she said.

Danni grinned. “Probably not, to be honest, Your Ladyship. There’s nothing wrong with a good old-fashioned handshake, though.”

“My thoughts precisely,” Isabella said, grasping Danni’s hand and shaking it. “And less of the Ladyship business. Isabella will be just fine.”

To Eleanor’s horror, Danni turned and stuck her tongue out in Eleanor’s direction, a gesture that Isabella missed as she seated herself again.

“I do like a nice, firm handshake,” Isabella was saying.

Danni grinned at her. “You don’t have to worry about any wet fish handshakes from

me. I can't bear them."

"Nor can I," said Isabella. "The Duke of Dawley used to have a handshake that was like gripping a flaccid sea cucumber. Most unpleasant."

Eleanor sank into her own chair, a sinking feeling settling into her stomach as she realized what was happening. Her wife and her grandmother were getting along far too well.

And it set precedent for dinner, which was a disaster. Not because of Danni, but because of just how well Danni did. Eleanor had been braced for crude jokes or inappropriate comments, or Danni's trademark sarcasm. Instead, Danni was effortlessly charming. She listened intently to Isabella's stories, asked intelligent questions, even made Isabella laugh.

Eleanor wasn't at all sure what to do about that.

Except, perhaps, to watch in growing fascination as she began to realize that Danni was a truly entertaining and well-mannered young woman. Danni's smile lit the room up, just being around her was a pleasure, and Eleanor began to feel a tingle of something in her stomach, a tingle that had something, somehow, to do with Danni.

"What about Eleanor's parents?" Danni said, as dessert was cleared away.

Eleanor cleared her throat, ready to jump in and rescue the situation. But to her astonishment, Isabella actually answered.

"You would have liked them, I think," she said. "Jonathan was a sweet boy, and Mirabelle was the perfect match for him. They were... unpretentious, I think the word is, and very much in love. Perhaps too much, since they sometimes seemed to forget that there was anyone else in the room with them."

“Awkward,” Danni said.

Isabella smiled. “Occasionally, yes.” She folded her napkin neatly to one side. “My husband and my son never got along,” she added matter-of-factly. “Edward thought the boy was too soft, too much of a dreamer. You know how men can be with sons.”

Eleanor blinked. “Grandmama...”

“He grew up to be a kind man, though,” Isabella continued. “Too kind, perhaps. He always wanted to fix things, but never quite had the spine to stand up for himself.” She paused and turned to look at Eleanor. “You have his smile, you know.”

Eleanor’s breath got caught in her chest. She hadn’t known. She had never, ever heard her grandmother talk about her father like that. But then, she’d never asked. Not really.

Sensing a shift in the air, Danni pushed her chair back and excused herself to find a bathroom, and Eleanor had to take a sip of water before she could speak.

“You’ve never told me any of that before,” she said quietly.

Isabella picked up her wineglass before she answered. “You needed a mother figure, not a friend. You had grief of your own and I wasn’t about to burden you with mine to carry alongside it.”

“And now?” asked Eleanor. “What’s changed?”

“You’re an adult,” Isabella said simply. “A married woman. And I happen to think that Danni is good for you.”

Eleanor stiffened. “This isn’t real.”

Isabella smiled knowingly and Danni returned, putting any thoughts of further private conversation to bed.

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Talk shifted to safer topics, namely the investor letters.

“You need to find out who this person is,” Isabella advised them both. “Better a devil you know than one that can take you by surprise. While neither of you may have any intention of taking up the offer, you should know who’s behind it in case they’re minded to make more trouble.”

Eleanor nodded, the advice was sound. “We will.”

And Danni, for once, agreed.

AS THEY LEFT, walking out into the cool evening, Eleanor decided to offer Danni a compliment. Not something she did often, but frankly, she thought Danni deserved it.

“You did well tonight,” she said.

Danni stopped in her tracks, turning to look at Eleanor with a raised eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

It was clear from her tone that she’d taken the compliment as an insult. Eleanor tried to back-track. “I just meant—”

“Oh, no, please. Do elaborate,” Danni said, crossing her arms. “What? Did you think I was going to start throwing food? Eating dessert with my hands?”

Eleanor sighed. “I was trying to be nice.”

“Well don’t,” Danni snapped. “It’s patronizing and unnecessary. I’m fully aware of what you think of me, and I don’t need a gold star just for not embarrassing you.”

“I don’t think—” Eleanor began, temper flaring, but Danni was already stomping off toward the Land Rover, leaving Eleanor fuming behind her.

She took a deep breath, reminding herself that none of this was real. None of this really mattered. In fact, she shouldn’t be getting close enough to Danni for it to matter. She shouldn’t be getting close at all. She should have precisely zero feelings for Danni. Her business partner, because that’s what she was.

When it came to Danni, she shouldn’t be feeling anything about her at all.

And yet... she did.

Chapter Thirteen

After dinner with Isabella, the investor letters had been on Danni’s mind. And the more she thought about them, the more they pissed her off. So when she went up to the big farmhouse to pick up her mail and saw another, she was cross enough that she balled it up and threw it into the Aga before going out to track Hector down.

She found him in one of the outbuildings, stacking bags of feed.

“Tell me something,” she said, leaning against the wooden doorframe. “Who do you think keeps sending me those damn letters trying to buy the farm?”

Hector straightened up and wiped his brow. “Hello Danni, nice to see you, how are you, how’s married life, what a lovely day we’re having.”

“Huh?”

“Just illustrating how conversations usually begin,” Hector said.

“Right,” Danni said. “So. The letters?”

Hector wiped his hands on an already dirty rag. “It’s a developer, it’s always a developer. That’s how these things work.”

“You don’t know that for certain. You can’t,” said Danni, reaching down and picking up a feedbag to add to the stack.

Hector raised an eyebrow and got back to work himself. “I don’t need to know. It’s just how these things work,” he said again. “They see the land, they think about all the money they could make developing the land, they want the land, they buy the land. Simple as that. And if you, the landowner, say no, then they make sure you change your mind.”

Danni looked at him curiously. “How?”

Hector tossed another bag onto the pile. “Don’t underestimate just how much these people want to build hundreds of identical houses in what used to be a field,” he said. “They don’t play fair. You think they’ll just take ‘no’ for an answer? Developers pull strings. They mysteriously get zoning laws changed. Crops get sabotaged. Equipment starts to mysteriously break down. That’s just the way they work. Which is why I keep saying that you need to be smart about all this.”

Danni stopped and folded her arms. “I am being smart.”

“No, you’re being stubborn.”

“Am not.” She ground her teeth.

Hector sighed. “Look, all I’m saying is that this is a lot of money. Money you need, your weird marriage situation aside. And in all likelihood the developer will win out in the end, they usually do. So why not take the money and save yourself all the hassle? All this just because you don’t like the idea of selling.”

Danni clenched her jaw. “Yeah? So I sell, and then what? Where do I go? What do I do? The farm is my life, Hec.”

“You come home,” he said. “At least for a while. Speaking of which, it’s about time, Dan.”

“No,” Danni said immediately.

Hector put his hands on his hips. “You got married. You think that no one’s told her? I know that the two of you don’t get on, but you promised me that you’d keep things civil. Which means that at some point you’re going to need to introduce your wife to your mother.”

“Forget it,” said Danni, backing out of the building. “Not going to happen.”

“Dan, come on.”

“Nope,” Danni said. “I’ll sell out to a developer before I get Eleanor and mum in the same room. Which means it’ll never happen. Not ever.”

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The cafe was beautifully decorated, and Eleanor had to admit that despite being new, the place did know how to make a good pot of tea, always a good test of a new place. She was pouring herself a second cup when Elizabeth bustled in, her briefcase close to bursting.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, pulling out a chair. “I got stuck in court and it’s been a pig of a morning.”

“Have a cup of tea,” Eleanor said, pouring one out for her.

“You’re a savior,” said Elizabeth, taking it. She looked Eleanor up and down. “You’re also looking stressed.”

“Yes, well, my house is an active construction site,” Eleanor reminded her. “I had to climb over three ladders and avoid a near-death experience with a flying hammer just to get to my car, which still needs repairing. Not to mention that I’ve got to go back and make sure that Samson doesn’t let anyone pull out the original Georgian wallpaper from the gun room.”

“With a big house comes big responsibilities,” Elizabeth said. “Not regretting taking the place on, are you?”

“Never,” Eleanor said sharply. “Although I do need your opinion on something.” She took out the latest investor letter and slid it across the table.

Elizabeth picked it up and scanned it. “Hmmm.”

“Hmmm?” Eleanor repeated. “That’s all you have to say?”

“It’s probably from a developer, these things usually are,” Elizabeth said. “Ignore it if you’re not interested.” She looked up. “If you are interested, I could set up a meeting?”

“I’m not interested,” Eleanor said. “And I would ignore it, but this is about the thirtieth copy I’ve received, which makes it rather hard to ignore. Now, can you tell me anything I don’t already know?”

Elizabeth looked at the letter again and shook her head. “I know the solicitor’s firm, I’ve got a friend from law school who works there.”

Eleanor sat forward. “And?”

“And that’s it,” Elizabeth said. “They’re a solid firm, good at keeping secrets, discreet, as is fitting for a law office.”

Eleanor huffed at that. “Ridiculous. They can send letters harassing us, but we can’t find out who’s behind them?”

“Us?” asked Elizabeth.

“Danni’s been getting them too, about the farm.”

“Interesting,” said Elizabeth. “This is a lucrative offer. But it’s not harassment, I’m afraid, so there’s nothing much that can be done. I’ll ask around see if anyone knows anything.”

“Thank you,” Eleanor said. “And as lucrative as the offer might be, I’m not interested.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you would be,” Elizabeth said. “But your wife might be.”

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Eleanor scoffed, but the words lingered. Because, well, because it wasn't an unfair point. There was a chance that at some point, the offers would become so generous that Danni might not be able to turn one down.

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Dinner together at the farmhouse was a rare occasion, and Eleanor cooking was an even rarer occasion still. Danni sniffed at the air suspiciously as she came into the kitchen, pulling her boots off.

"Should I be worried?" she asked.

"The builders stopped early," Eleanor said, face over a steaming saucepan. "Something about needing to dry damp plaster. So I thought we'd have a nutritious meal for once." She looked up. "I can cook, you know."

"So that expensive education was good for something then," Danni said. To Eleanor's credit, the food did smell good. Danni's stomach rumbled as she pulled plates out of a cupboard.

"Sit down," Eleanor said. "And don't interfere."

"Fine," said Danni. She sat down at the kitchen table. "I was talking to Hector today about the letters. He said that developers play dirty and we should be careful." She didn't mention the part about her mother.

"Sadly, that's probably true," Eleanor said, putting a plate in front of Danni and then

one on her own side of the table. “From what I’ve heard, these things can get messy. Which is ridiculous, because this is our land we’re talking about, nobody should be able to take it from us if we don’t want them to.”

“Hec says that we should consider the offers before things get worse,” said Danni.

“I’ve got Elizabeth on the problem,” Eleanor said. “I met with her for lunch today. She’s going to ask some questions. Perhaps she’ll know more.”

“Perhaps,” Danni said. She was tired, and she knew she didn’t sound chirpy and hopeful.

“I won’t be bullied,” Eleanor said.

“No,” said Danni. She sat up straighter. “No, neither will I. We stick together, yeah?”

“Absolutely.”

But Danni could see from the way that Eleanor was looking at her that she wasn’t so sure. She didn’t know if Eleanor was doubting her own commitment to the cause or Danni’s, and before she had a chance to say anything, Eleanor’s phone rang.

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“Anything?” Eleanor said, picking up the phone the moment she saw Elizabeth’s name on the display.

“Nothing,” said Elizabeth. “I told you. Discretion, client confidentiality, all of that is important.” She paused.

“But...” Eleanor prompted.

Elizabeth sighed. “But nothing, not really. Just... Well, when I mentioned your name, my friend said something about keeping it in the family, which sounded odd. He wouldn’t explain himself, I think the words slipped out before he realized what he was saying.”

“What?” Eleanor asked.

“That’s all I’ve got,” said Elizabeth. “Some kind of family connection. But to be honest, Nor, you’re related to half the county, that doesn’t exactly narrow things down, does it?”

“No,” Eleanor said. She hung up and filled Danni in.

“Not helpful then?” Danni said.

“We’re not likely to find out much more, I don’t think,” Eleanor said. “We’ll just have to be careful, keep an eye on things, make sure that these people don’t start making more trouble. I honestly don’t see what else we can do.”

“No,” Danni said, and she yawned. “Sorry, long day.”

The rest of dinner was a silent affair, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Eleanor loaded the dishwasher as Danni showered and then made her way upstairs. On her way up, she cast a glance at the couch in the kitchen.

Just for a moment, she thought about giving Danni her bed back. Not that Danni had ever complained about sleeping on the couch. But the woman was obviously tired.

She hesitated, debating as she went upstairs to change into her pajamas. She closed the bedroom door just a little too loudly.

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“Hey, don’t break anything expensive in there, Your Ladyship,” Danni called out from the bathroom.

And Eleanor rolled her eyes and flopped onto the bed, abandoning all thought of giving it up in favor of the couch. Danni had asked her to stay, knowing that there wasn’t a guest bed, so Danni should pay the consequences. Besides, she hadn’t complained about sleeping on the couch.

There was a second there when the thought of Danni crawling into her own bed, her own bed that was occupied by Eleanor, snuck into Eleanor’s mind.

She growled to herself and got up to get ready for bed.

None of this was real, she reminded herself. As if it ever could be.

Chapter Fourteen

The morning of the village fête had dawned bright and sunny, which had immediately put Danni into a bad mood. She’d been hoping for rain. Not just because the land needed it, which it did, but because it would have given her a good excuse to forgo the festivities. Fêtes were for vicars and ladies that made their own jam. Not for busy farmers.

As it was, she was putting the Land Rover into park and muttering at herself about her own lack of judgment and making promises without thinking through the consequences.

It was just as chaotic as she'd feared. Children were running wild between rows of stalls, dogs wove between people's legs, and there was already a minor altercation brewing near the tombola stand. Somebody had probably rigged it again.

Danni exhaled heavily. "Why did I agree to this?" she moaned.

"Because you love Tommy and will do anything for him," Indi said, grinning. She was holding a toffee apple and had practically bounced over to the truck when she saw Danni. "And also because I lent you that dress for that country club thing, so you owe me."

"Right, because standing in a field eating questionable sausage rolls is exactly the same as borrowing a dress."

"That's the spirit." Indi stopped at a stall and then handed Danni a beer. "Now drink this and try not to be a grump. The fête is fun."

"You and I have very different ideas of fun," Danni said. "And as much as I do love Tommy, I think we both have to admit that his band could profit from music lessons."

"Grump, grump, grump," Indi said. "Settle down and enjoy yourself. You can't work all the time, and it's a beautiful day. Ooo, look at that rhubarb."

With Indi's attention distracted, Danni took a sip of her beer. Maybe it wasn't so bad. A sunny afternoon, a beer in hand, a few hours when she wasn't thinking about crops and water and sheep. She had just decided that Indi was right, and she should try harder to enjoy herself, when she spotted Eleanor.

She was standing by a jam stall, listening intently to a woman who looked like she'd spent the last fifty years perfecting her preserves. She was also wearing a light summer dress that clung to her curves and made Danni instinctively think that

Eleanor should wear more dresses.

Danni sniffed and made her way over. “Bet you’ve never even had a shop-bought jam, have you?” she said, peering over Eleanor’s shoulder.

Eleanor turned, raising an elegant eyebrow. “Of course I have.”

Danni folded her arms. “Really?”

Eleanor hesitated. “Once. It was awful.”

“Knew it,” Danni said, letting out a laugh.

“Would you like to try some of my raspberry and elderflower, dear?” the jam lady asked, offering them both a spoon.

Eleanor took a tiny bite and made a delighted noise. “Oh, that’s exquisite.”

Danni took her own taste and wrinkled her nose. “Eugh, tastes like cat pee and flowers.”

“Elderflower, raspberry and elderflower,” Eleanor corrected.

“Yeah, but why ruin the raspberry?” Danni muttered as Eleanor handed over a five-pound note to buy a jar. “And I hope you don’t think you’re bringing that home.”

“The elderflower adds nuance,” Eleanor said sharply. “Something you’d appreciate if your palate weren’t exclusively used to steak and ale pie at the Fox and Hounds. And this jam will be on the table for breakfast tomorrow.”

Danni growled something, but Indi interrupted her. “There you are. I thought you’d

done a bunk already,” she said.

Danni already had her mouth open to retort, but just then, something else had caught her attention. A tall, well-dressed woman had sidled up to Eleanor and was smiling at her. Smiling at her in a way that Danni didn’t like. A way that said that flirting over artisanal preserves was just how things were done in the Home Counties.

She growled again.

“Oh. My. God,” Indi said from behind her. “You’re jealous.”

“Am not,” Danni said quickly and far too forcefully.

“Are to,” Indi said. “Look at your face. It’s doing that thing.”

“What thing?”

“That thing where it looks like you’ve swallowed a whole lemon,” said Indi.

Danni rolled her shoulders back. “I’m not jealous.” She darted a look over to where the tall woman still stood. Eleanor, however, had moved on to a small toy stall. Her heart beat freer in her chest again. “I don’t care who Eleanor talks to. It’s none of my business who she talks to.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Indi said. “Sure. That’s why you’re staring at that poor woman like you want to punch her even though you’ve never actually met her.”

Danni made a huffing noise and looked away. She didn’t care. She didn’t.

Eleanor might be her wife, but she was a paper wife. There was nothing to be jealous of, since she and Eleanor didn’t have a relationship at all. Which meant that nothing mattered, none of this. And she didn’t care.

Except that she sort of did and it niggled in her stomach and made her beer taste sour.

There was a clash of slightly out of tune chords and Indi squealed. Tommy's band had taken to the stage, or rather the rickety wooden platform that barely deserved the title. The crowd cheered as the chords morphed into something that might be considered a song.

Indi grabbed Danni's hand. "Come on!"

"Nope. No way."

"Yes way. You owe me, remember? Dress? Country club?"

Danni groaned, but the rhythm was starting to get to her and others were beginning to dance too. "Fine. But if I step on your foot, it's your fault for dragging me into this."

Indi laughed as she spun Danni out onto the makeshift dance floor.

???

They danced wildly, ridiculous and carefree. Indi dipped Danni dramatically, making them both laugh as Danni barely managed to keep her balance. They weren't graceful. But they were young, and they were having fun, and their happiness was almost contagious.

Eleanor took a sip of her lemonade and watched them. It was envy she was feeling, not jealousy, she told herself. Definitely not jealousy. Even though the feeling burned in her chest in a way that made her feel a little sick.

She envied how easy it was for Danni to let go. To laugh. To be utterly ridiculous without worrying about looking foolish. It must be nice, she thought. She also knew that she herself had never been able to do that, would never be able to do that. She was far too aware of how people perceived her.

But that wasn't the only thing bothering her.

It was the way that Danni's eyes crinkled when she laughed. The way her hair bounced as she moved. The way that she looked so completely at ease in the world in a way that Eleanor knew she never did.

And, most frustratingly of all, it was the way Indi was dancing with her. The way Indi's hand skimmed Danni's waist, the easy way they clasped hands, the way their bodies brushed together that made Eleanor lose her breath again and again.

No. Not jealous. Just envious.

There was nothing to be jealous about.

Though they'd not discussed it, Danni could see who she pleased, Eleanor thought. Then she chastised herself for not foreseeing this and putting it onto their list of boundaries. Okay, Indi was Danni's friend, there was almost certainly nothing going on. But they should have made a rule, just to keep things clean and clear. A rule where they could, should, would even, be able to... dance with other people.

Her mouth felt dry despite the lemonade.

"Having fun?"

Eleanor jumped. She'd been so busy thinking that she hadn't seen Indi and Danni leave the dance floor.

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She lifted her chin. “Of course, the fête is lovely. It always is.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Danni grinned, as if she could see straight through Eleanor’s lie. “Hey, do you mind?” She reached for Eleanor’s lemonade.

Without comment, Eleanor let her take the cup and then watched as Danni drank from it thirstily. When Danni tried to hand it back, she thought for an instant about putting her lips where Danni’s had been, and her stomach tightened. “Finish it,” was all she said.

“Please yourself,” said Danni. She drained the cup.

“I’ll go and get us all some more, if you like?” Indi offered generously.

But Danni was looking up at the darkening sky, clouds beginning to loom on the horizon. “Dunno if that’s a good idea.” Even as she spoke, a gust of wind blew a pile of napkins off a nearby stall. She turned to Eleanor. “Did you bring the MG?”

Eleanor shook her head. “It’s at the garage. I just dropped it off and walked over.”

“Garage?” Danni asked, all innocence. “What happened? Did you hit a tractor?”

Eleanor ignored her and looked up at the sky again. The weather really was starting to turn. “I was planning on walking back up to the farm.”

“Wouldn’t if I were you,” said Danni. “I’ve got the Land Rover. I’ll take you back. And we should probably get going. It looks like the heavens are about to open.”

Eleanor nodded, and they said goodbye to Indi, who was already pulling out a rain poncho. “You two don’t go to enough music festivals,” she said. “You’ve gotta be prepared.”

“Yes, prepared to go home,” Danni said. “And we’re going now, before we get soaked.”

As they walked over uneven tufts of grass, neither Danni nor Eleanor mentioned the tension that was lingering between them, the way they’d both stared at each other throughout the day.

But they both felt it.

Even if they weren’t quite ready to admit it yet.

Chapter Fifteen

Danni knew from the moment that Eleanor sniffed and adjusted the temperature control knob of the Land Rover like it was a priceless artifact, that this drive home was going to be an ordeal.

Something was stuck in Eleanor’s craw, and she had no idea what it was. For once, she couldn’t think of a single thing that she might have done to put Eleanor in this mood. Other than exist.

She gripped the steering wheel of the battered Land Rover and did her best to ignore the woman beside her, who was sitting in the passenger seat like she was bracing for impact. Eleanor had been weird all afternoon, but then, Danni thought, maybe she’d been weird all afternoon too.

There was this... tension in the air. And it had nothing to do with the coming

thunderstorm. A tension that, no matter what Indi might think, had nothing to do with Danni being jealous.

Danni was not jealous.

Not of some fancy woman making eyes at Eleanor. Not of Eleanor's posh life. Not of anything at all.

Still, she was relieved when the rain started tapping against the windscreen, giving her something else to focus on. Until, of course, her windscreen wipers decided that now would be an excellent time to give up the ghost.

Eleanor made a sound that suggested she had thoughts on this matter.

"Don't say it," Danni warned, rolling down the window and leaning forward to give the wiper a helpful nudge on its way.

"I wasn't going to say anything," Eleanor replied, which was clearly a lie. She had absolutely been about to say something.

The Land Rover gave an ominous splutter.

Danni scowled. "Don't you dare, you—"

The dull roar of the engine became a cough and then a spasm of coughing, and then, with one last little polite cough as though the car had tried its best but really just couldn't go on, the Land Rover rolled to a slow and tragic stop. Danni just managed to turn the steering wheel to get it up on the verge before it died for good.

There was a beat of silence.

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Eleanor looked placidly out of the windscreen. “Would you like me to say something now?”

Danni thumped her forehead against the steering wheel. “No,” she muttered.

Eleanor sighed and unbuckled her seatbelt, folding her arms. “Well. This is... a turn of events.”

Swearing, Danni shoved the door open and stomped out into the rain to lift the bonnet. She peered inside, using all of her mechanical knowledge, which was, if she was honest, limited to shaking or kicking things and hoping for the best. The engine, despite being glared at, did not miraculously fix itself.

She could feel Eleanor’s judgment staring at her through the windscreen.

“Don’t say it,” she said, slamming the bonnet shut and getting back into the car.

“You need a new car,” said Eleanor primly.

“Wow. What a revolutionary thought. That has actually never crossed my mind before,” Danni said, leaning her head back against the seat and wondering just what she was going to do now.

Eleanor sniffed. “Perhaps if you took better care of your things—” she began.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” interrupted Danni. “Do I not send my car to the garage often enough for you? Maybe that’s because it costs a fortune every time it goes for a tuneup.

Thought of that, have you? I'm guessing not, since you can afford to replace your car the moment it so much as sneezes."

Eleanor tilted her chin up, her shoulders stiff. "My car has been in my possession since I was seventeen, I'll have you know." She rolled her shoulders. "I shall walk home."

And before Danni could argue, Eleanor opened the door and stepped out into the rain. Just at that moment, there was a loud grumble of thunder, and the rain began to bounce off the road. Not that that bothered Eleanor. She began to march in the direction of the farm.

Danni gawked at her for half a second, then threw up her hands. "Are you serious?"

But Eleanor didn't answer. Because Eleanor was already half-way down the road. Danni swore eloquently under her breath, kicked the door open, got out, slammed it shut again, and ran through the rain after Eleanor.

After a steady four minutes of walking, Danni was starting to genuinely worry that Eleanor was going to drown in her own stubbornness. The storm had gone from drizzle to torrential rain in the blink of an eye, and Eleanor was dressed only in the thin cotton sundress that Danni had admired what felt like a lifetime ago. She was soaked through, the dress clinging to every curve of her body.

Danni, sensibly dressed in jeans and a flannel, with the wax jacket she'd grabbed from the car, was still miserable, but at least she wasn't trailing fabric and shivering like some sort of sodden ghost.

"You know, if you weren't so bloody proud, we wouldn't be doing this," she shouted to Eleanor over the rain.

Eleanor lifted her chin. “I beg your pardon? If I weren’t proud?”

“Yes! You! You literally just stormed out in a storm.”

Eleanor tutted, stepping over a rather large puddle with all the poise of a woman who’d spent her life dodging peasants. “Perhaps if your car wasn’t an actual death trap,” she began.

Danni waved a hand. “Oh, here we go.”

“I’m just saying,” Eleanor went on. “A little maintenance wouldn’t hurt.”

“A little maintenance costs money, Your Ladyship.”

Eleanor gave her a look that very clearly translated into ‘I’m trying not to strangle you.’ “A little money spent now saves a larger sum of money in the future.”

For an instant, Danni thought about trying to explain the realities of the situation to her, that as much as she understood the sentiment, when it came to a choice between car maintenance and sheep nuts, the animals needed to be fed. Then she spotted a familiar gray stone building in the distance.

“Come on, there’s a bus shelter over there. Run. You’re going to catch pneumonia,” she called, breaking into a jog.

Eleanor hesitated for only a second, reluctant to accept what was clearly a good idea, before a particularly strong gust of wind and loud clap of thunder urged her onward. Danni watched her smugly as she ducked into the small shelter.

It wasn’t a large space. But the stones were tightly packed, it was windproof, and it only smelled a little bit of sheep. Eleanor, soaked through to the bone, wrapped her

arms around herself and shivered.

Danni sighed. “Oh, for God’s sake.” She peeled her jacket off and all but threw it at Eleanor. “Put that on before I have to deal with tending to your sick bed as well as everything else I have to do.”

Eleanor, stiff with pride, hesitated before grudgingly putting it on.

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Danni sat down on the small bench, and after a moment, Eleanor joined her. They sat in silence as the rain poured down outside, clattering on the tiled roof. It was a long time before Danni said anything.

“It’s not that I don’t want to maintain the Land Rover,” she said quietly. “It’s that when money comes in, it’s always earmarked for something else already.”

Eleanor nodded quietly.

And Danni, who usually avoided feelings like the plague, accidentally had one. The stray thought of money and debt and all the rest of it hit her like a stone.

“I can’t lose the farm.”

Eleanor, surprised, turned to look at her.

Danni swallowed. “I don’t... I don’t have anything else.” She closed her eyes. “And I know that there’s Hector and Home Farm, but that’s not what I mean. I don’t have anything else that’s me. That’s mine.”

Eleanor hesitated, then, very, very carefully, said, “I don’t know who I am without my home either.”

Opening her eyes, Danni looked at her, saw the raw honesty on her face, and, without thinking, lifted her arm and placed it around Eleanor’s shoulders.

And Eleanor, to her credit, didn’t slap her.

She actually leaned into the warmth.

For all of a second.

Then, far too quickly, she straightened up, moving so that Danni's arm dropped back to her side, and cleared her throat. She peered out into the brightening day. "Looks like the rain's calming down. We should probably get back."

Danni, a little shocked by what she'd just done, nodded. "Yeah, yeah, right. We'll start walking. I'll, um, I'll get Tommy to come and have a look at the Land Rover when he's finished at the fête, if he's in any fit state, that is."

"No need," said Eleanor. She pulled out her phone and started to walk.

Danni trotted after her, curiosity turning to irritation, and then outright anger as Eleanor talked to the AA agent and arranged to have the Land Rover towed and serviced as well as a rental car provided.

When Eleanor hung up, Danni stopped dead in the middle of the lane.

"What?" Eleanor asked, turning around to look at her.

Danni just stared at her.

"What?" asked Eleanor again.

"Why the fuck didn't you do that in the first place?"

Eleanor arched an eyebrow. "I assumed that you'd want to fix the car yourself. Or you'd call your own tow service."

Danni groaned. “You are unbelievable, do you know that?”

“I’m unbelievable?” asked Eleanor. “You’re the one without a break-down service. It really should be considered part of the cost of owning a vehicle. You do have insurance, don’t you?”

“Of course I have insurance. It’s illegal not to have insurance,” said Danni.

“I’m only asking, it wouldn’t have surprised me,” Eleanor said.

“It wouldn’t have surprised you that I was breaking the law?” asked Danni. “Now, why does that not surpriseme?”

And they bickered the entire way back to the farmhouse, wet and sodden as they were.

Yet something seemed to have changed, Danni couldn’t quite put her finger on it. It was like the bickering wasn’t as intense, wasn’t as meaningful as before. And her arm felt all tingly from where she’d put it around Eleanor.

Chapter Sixteen

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The morning after their trek through the rain was... uncomfortable. Eleanor had woken up early, but not so early that she should have expected Danni to be anywhere but out on the farm. Unfortunately, it seemed that Danni had woken up even earlier and was now back in the kitchen having her morning caffeine infusion. Instant coffee mixed with the bare minimum of water so that it looked like quicksand.

“Morning,” Eleanor said.

She was feeling guilty. Guilty that she’d walked off into the rain, guilty that she hadn’t thought to call AA earlier in proceedings, and guilty that she’d shook Danni’s arm from around her shoulders when the woman was just trying to be nice.

It hadn’t been her fault, though. Not really. She’d been in a strange mood ever since seeing Danni dancing with Indi and... And that was no excuse.

“Morning,” Danni said, peering at her over her mug.

“Tea?” Eleanor offered, far too stiffly. She moved toward the kettle, keeping a careful distance. She needed a good cup of tea. Strong tea. Immediately.

“Got coffee,” said Danni. She sipped and stretched. “Wouldn’t mind another, though.” She got up.

But as Eleanor reached for the kettle to fill it, Danni did exactly the same thing. Their hands brushed. Eleanor froze. So did Danni. The briefest touch, almost nothing, but it sent a strange, tingling awareness through Eleanor’s skin.

Danni pulled back first. “Need a butler to help you with that?”

“I’m perfectly capable of boiling a kettle,” Eleanor snapped. She filled it from the tap and put it back on its stand.

“Of course you are, Princess,” Danni said. She put her cup on the draining board. “Changed my mind. I’d better get back to it.”

She walked out of the kitchen and Eleanor found that she felt both better and worse that she was gone.

BY MIDDAY, ELEANOR had grown weary of reading through spec sheets and notes from Samson, so she decided to check in on Sam. The stables were one of the few places on the farm where she felt truly competent.

But when she got out there, she found Danni stacking hay bales. Eleanor stopped. Danni had removed her flannel shirt, and was wearing a white tank, sweat glistening on her skin as she tossed bale after bale. Eleanor’s mouth grew ridiculously dry.

Suddenly, Danni looked up. “What are you doing here?”

“I can’t check on Sam?” Eleanor challenged.

Danni wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving a streak of dirt across it. “Sunday. Right. I forgot.” She sniffed. “You can check on him as long as you’re willing to be put to work. There are no free-loaders on a farm.”

“I’m not a free-loader,” Eleanor said, stung.

“Best get to work then,” said Danni. “You know where the pitchfork is.”

“I know how to handle a stable.”

Danni grinned. “Go on then.”

Eleanor stopped in her tracks. “Go on then, what?”

Danni nodded to the stack of hay bales. “If you’re so competent in the stable, show me how you throw a hay bale. Just one. Take your pitchfork and toss this bale onto the top of the stack. Go on.”

For an instant, Eleanor froze, then she shrugged. How hard could it be? It was only a bale of hay, after all. She stalked over to where Danni was standing, planted her fork in the middle of the bale, and strained her muscles to lift and swing.

The bale was deceptively heavy. Far heavier than she’d expected. She did manage to lift it, but in doing so she swung it approximately a meter off the ground and promptly fell on her behind.

She prepared herself for Danni’s taunts, but when she looked up, Danni looked impressed.

“Haven’t seen anyone lift a bale on the first try,” Danni said. “You’re not bad. It’s all in the shoulders though. You’ll have to practice. You need to get it higher than that. Still, you actually lifted it.”

“Was that a compliment?” Eleanor asked.

“Maybe.”

Their eyes met, and for the first time, neither of them looked away immediately. The moment stretched just a little too long before Eleanor turned to get back to her feet,

pretending that her heartbeat wasn't hammering in her ears.

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Eleanor worked cleaning out the stall and then pottered around the barn, feeling Danni's eyes on her, but saying nothing, until she really had run out of things to do.

"I'd better, um..." she began, not sure how to finish that sentence.

"Better what?"

"Start on dinner," she said finally.

"Alright then," Danni said, turning to get back to her work.

It was another hour before Danni came back to the farmhouse kitchen, and by then Eleanor was stirring a sauce that was dangerously close to boiling over. She wasn't cooking to impress Danni, she told herself. This had nothing to do with the approving look that Danni had given her after tossing a hay bale. Not a thing.

No, she just wanted a decent meal. That was all.

"Well, look at you, domestic goddess," Danni said as she kicked off her boots.

Eleanor didn't dignify that with a response. Danni came over and sniffed at the saucepan. Eleanor reached for a spice jar, but Danni was suddenly there, reaching for the same jar at the same time. Their fingers brushed again.

They both stilled.

Eleanor felt her breath catch. The kitchen felt suddenly too small, too warm. Danni's

gaze flicked to hers before she cleared her throat and stepped back.

“Smelled like it needed more thyme,” she said.

“Mmm,” was all Eleanor managed to get out.

“You, uh, need help with anything?” Danni asked, rubbing the back of her neck.

“No,” said Eleanor, a little too quickly.

“Well, I’ll go and shower then. Stay out of your way.”

“Right.”

DINNER WAS A silent and awkward affair. Eleanor pretended to be engrossed in her notebook, whilst Danni flicked through her mail and ate with her fork in her right hand. And once the dishes were done and the plates in the dishwasher, Eleanor found that she couldn’t do this anymore.

She needed some space.

Some space and some familiarity.

And a drink.

Which led to her sitting in the half-constructed ruins of her future home an hour later, candles flickering on the kitchen table, a bottle of wine from the cellar already opened.

“Hello?” shouted a voice.

“Down here,” Eleanor called back.

She’d texted Elizabeth because drinking alone was rarely a good idea. And because she wanted the company, she wanted to be with someone that understood her, someone that she didn’t have to walk on eggshells around.

Elizabeth walked into the kitchen, took one look at Eleanor’s expression, the layer of brick dust covering the floor, the dust sheet over the kitchen table, and sighed. “Darling, this is a disaster.”

Eleanor groaned. “I know. And you don’t know the half of it.”

Pouring herself a glass of wine, Elizabeth pulled out a chair and sat down. “Darling, construction is always a bear. It won’t last forever, even though it might feel like it.”

Taking a deep breath, Eleanor decided to be honest. Maybe it was the wine. Maybe she was just tired of dealing with things alone. “It’s not the renovations,” she said. “At least, it’s not only the renovations.”

“No?”

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Puffing out a breath, Eleanor said, “You’ll think me foolish.”

“Never, I swear,” Elizabeth said. She smiled gently. “Danni?”

Eleanor bit her lip. “I think... Damn it.” She took a gulp of wine.

“You think you might have real feelings?” asked Elizabeth.

“How do you know that?” Eleanor asked, looking up.

“My love, I think at this point, you might be the only one that doesn’t know,” said Elizabeth. “The tension between the two of you is electric. Any idiot could see it. The real question is, what do you intend to do about it?”

“This wasn’t supposed to be real,” Eleanor said. “It didn’t start real. I don’t know what happened.”

“You’re two attractive women living in close proximity,” said Elizabeth. “It would be odd if one of you didn’t have at least a stray thought about the other. How does young Danni feel about this?”

“Not a clue. I haven’t asked her and I don’t intend to.”

“Why on earth not?” Elizabeth picked up the bottle and topped up Eleanor’s glass.

“Because she’s young, relatively carefree, and because she didn’t get into this arrangement for feelings. It would be unfair of me to burden her like that.”

“I would agree, unless she happens to have feelings of her own.”

Eleanor snorted. “Even if she did, what of it? We’re completely different, we both have a life that we like, and we have a business arrangement.”

“She’s only a few years younger than you,” Elizabeth said.

“Not the point.” Eleanor drank, the wine dark and sticky in her throat.

“So you’re going to mope around like Viola after Duke Orsino?”

“I am not,” said Eleanor, sitting up straighter. “I don’t mope. And there’s no point thinking that way. Nothing can come of this. It’s not part of the arrangement.”

“Arrangements can change.”

“No,” Eleanor said firmly. “The best I can do is attempt to leave Danni a little better off than when I found her. She got me this house, my house, the least I will do is ensure that her life has improved by the time we divorce.”

Elizabeth sighed, but Eleanor ignored her. She knew that she was right. She had to do something useful for Danni. Something that meant Danni would have the life she wanted, or at least a decent shot at it.

“Nor, you’re being a fool.”

“I don’t wish to discuss this any further,” Eleanor said. “Now, do we open another bottle, or are we going to be sensible and just finish this one?”

Elizabeth grinned. “Sensible? You? Never.”

Eleanor had to laugh. “Fine. I’ll take a candle and go down for another.”

But as she came back up from the dusty cellar with a bottle in her hands, she couldn’t help but wish that it was Danni waiting for her in the kitchen.

Chapter Seventeen

The old hay shed smelled like mildew and bad decisions. Danni had been meaning to clean it out for months now, but never seemed to have the time. Honestly, she probably didn’t have the time now, but some cathartic punishment work sounded like a good idea.

Why was she punishing herself? She hadn’t quite decided yet. It just felt somehow necessary.

She’d spent the past hour hauling out rotting bales of hay, only to discover an entire ecosystem of spiders that were far too confident for her liking. A particularly bold large one had stared down at her from atop a beam, clearly judging her life choices. And honestly? Fair.

Her life choices weren’t exactly stellar, were they? Not when she actually thought about them. She’d taken everything she had, every penny she’d got from her father’s death, from working every hour that she could, and used it all to put a down payment on a tiny farm. The kind of farm that most people were aching to sell.

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And now she'd fake married an aristocrat in order to pay the bills.

Yeah. Put like that, she wasn't exactly one of life's winners.

"You're muttering to yourself." Indi's voice came from behind her. "Which means one of two things. You're either finally losing your mind or... you've developed feelings for a bale of hay. Either way, I'm concerned."

Danni turned, wiping sweat off her forehead. Indi was standing there, holding two takeaway coffees and wearing the smug expression of someone who had yet to lift anything heavier than a shopping bag that day.

"You could try helping," Danni grumbled, taking a coffee out of Indi's hands.

"I could," Indi agreed, sipping her own coffee. "But then I wouldn't be able to fully appreciate the sight of you suffering. What's got you in a bad mood this morning?"

"Nothing," Danni said quickly. Too quickly. As soon as Indi had asked the question she'd known the answer. She was in a bad mood because of yesterday. Because yesterday she and Eleanor had spent the entire day dancing around... something. And the tension of it had given her a headache and a strange feeling in her stomach and... and she really didn't want to think about it all.

She looked up. The large spider was still there, silently watching. Judging.

Danni took a slug of her coffee and wiped her face on her sleeve. "Why are you actually here?" she asked, voice slightly more friendly this time.

“Came to check on you. Also, because watching you work yourself into an early grave is free entertainment.”

“Glad to be of service,” Danni said. “Remind me to come down to the pub one night and repay the favor.”

“You’ll be welcomed with open arms,” said Indi cheerfully. “More bums on seats, that’s what the boss always says we need.”

“Right,” Danni said, putting her coffee down on a shelf by the door and picking up her pitchfork again.

“So...” said Indi, leaning against the doorframe.

“So...” mimicked Danni.

“You and Eleanor then.”

Danni froze and swallowed. “What about me and Eleanor?” she said eventually, looking anywhere but at Indi.

“I think you fancy her.”

Danni forced herself to laugh and began moving ancient hay again. “I’m married to the woman.”

“And yet,” Indi grinned, “you’re not denying it.”

“Eleanor is... impossible. Stubborn. Bossy. Prissy.”

“And?”

And. That was the thing, wasn't it. With Eleanor, there were an awful lot of ands. Danni sighed and turned back to look at Indi. Indi was her friend, probably her best friend. "And... And maybe there's..." She took a breath, puffed it out. "And maybe I might like her a bit. But it doesn't matter." She went back to forking hay.

"Why doesn't it matter?"

Danni hesitated, shoving her pitchfork into a pile of hay with unnecessary force. "Because what exactly would a rich, experienced, older woman see in me?"

Indi snorted. "Great sex?"

Reaching down, Danni grabbed a handful of stinking hay and flung it in Indi's direction. "Helpful, thanks."

Dodging effortlessly, Indi held up both hands. "Look, I get it, Dan. She's intimidating. I have actually met the woman. But you've got a lot to offer, even if for some weird reason you think you don't. You're kind, you work hard, you..."

"Smell like manure and hay?" Danni offered.

Indi ignored her. "More importantly, I think she likes you back."

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Danni gave one of her best eye rolls. “Yeah, sure. I’ll believe that when she stops looking at me like I’ve tracked mud into her soul.”

And Indi just smirked back, like she knew something Danni didn’t. Which was very, very irritating.

THAT EVENING, DANNI trudged into the farmhouse exhausted. She fully expected Eleanor to be out, either panicking over wallpaper in her damn house, or attending some kind of function that insisted on serving tiny food on sticks.

She was looking forward to an evening of scavenging for food and then collapsing into unconsciousness, and was already wondering if it was even vaguely nutritious to just eat her Ramen dry, when she opened the kitchen door.

What she was not expecting was to see Eleanor sitting at the kitchen table, surrounded by stacks of papers, looking like some kind of terrifying, and, to be very honest, slightly sexy school teacher.

“Um... what’s all this?” Danni asked, eyeing the uncharacteristic mess.

Eleanor looked up from the sheaf of papers she was reading, looking over the top of her glasses at Danni. Danni, who hadn’t even known that Eleanor wore glasses, found herself feeling very warm. She gulped.

“Sit,” Eleanor said.

A lifetime of obeying teachers and her mother meant that Danni didn’t even think

before pulling out a kitchen chair and sitting down.

“Eat,” said Eleanor. “We have work to do.”

There was a sandwich on a plate next to her place. It looked good, too. Thick bread, real butter, and something that might have been homemade chutney. Danni’s mouth watered. She took a bite, still wary.

“Define ‘work,’” she said between chews.

“A grant application,” Eleanor replied, still distracted by the paper in her hands, as if that explained everything.

Danni blinked. “For what?”

“Your farm.”

Danni nearly choked on her sandwich. “Say what now?”

“Did you know that almost a fifth of British farms have been lost over the last decade?” Eleanor said, putting her papers down and removing her glasses to look at Danni.

Danni, grateful somehow that the sexy glasses were gone, finally took a full breath. “Sounds about right,” she said.

“That’s an immense failure rate, due mainly to government policies and the more economically viable structure of large farming.”

“No arguments here,” said Danni. She knew this of old, she’d grown up around these conversations.

“What you might not know is that there’s now a serious effort to promote smaller and more sustainable farming,” Eleanor went on, thrusting the papers she’d been holding toward Danni. “In order to stem the growing tide of large farms and to allow smaller farmers to use better, more environmentally friendly practices.”

Danni looked down at the papers, then back up at Eleanor.

Eleanor sighed, rubbing her temples, like Danni was the exhausting one here. “There’s a grant available for farms like yours, ones that prioritize sustainable agriculture. If you qualify, it could mean a significant amount of money every year.”

“Significant,” Danni said.

“For you, life-changing,” said Eleanor.

“And you just... found this?” Danni asked.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. “I looked for it.”

“Why?”

Eleanor’s green eyes glowed darker under the kitchen light. She sniffed, then shrugged. “Because I wanted to help you.”

The words hit Danni like a sucker punch. Eleanor didn’t even hesitate as she said them. Help. Just help, just offered like that. It was all Danni could do to control herself, to blink her suddenly heavy eyes.

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She swallowed, looking uncomprehendingly down at the papers in front of her. She couldn't look at her wife, her fake wife, who had, somehow, become an infuriatingly wonderful part of her life.

She cleared her throat, pushed her plate to one side, and nodded. "Alright, show me what I need to do, then."

IT WAS ALMOST midnight. The clock on the mantle over the fireplace ticked into the silence. After hours of working together, Danni was certain that she'd learned more about government bureaucracy than she'd known in her entire life up to this point. She had a new-found respect for the big spider in the hay barn. Being a spider suddenly seemed like a wonderfully free and uncomplicated life.

Her back ached, her brain felt fried, and yet, somehow, she wasn't annoyed. Or at least not as annoyed as usual.

This was almost entirely down to the fact that as well as putting her glasses back on again, Eleanor had taken off her blazer and rolled up her shirt sleeves, and was currently chewing on the end of a pen in a way that was very distracting.

Jesus, she was tired. That must be it. Danni forced herself to look away, clearing her throat. "So, um, we finished here?"

Eleanor stretched, her blouse shifting slightly just as Danni looked back in her direction. Danni felt something in her brain short-circuit.

Eleanor caught her staring.

For one terrifying, heart-stopping moment, neither of them looked away.

Danni felt like she was being dragged down by an anchor, drifting helplessly toward the seabed, drowning but not caring because the water felt so good against her skin.

Then Eleanor cleared her throat and pushed her chair back. “Yes. We should get to bed.”

Danni nodded dumbly, watching Eleanor walk away.

As she lay on the couch that night, as uncomfortable as ever, Danni stared up at the ceiling, replaying that lingering glance. Which led her to think about every accidental touch, every word that may have been spoken unintentionally. And all that led her to wonder if maybe, just perhaps, Indi had been right.

Could Eleanor be feeling things, too?

Chapter Eighteen

The evening air carried the scent of fresh earth and hay as Eleanor stepped outside of the farmhouse kitchen. It wasn't lost on her that she was starting to feel comfortable here, starting to feel more of a sense of belonging.

She stretched, trying to release the tension of a long day on the construction site. It was time for the roof to be done and she was paranoid that Samson was going to leave her precious rooms open to the air, no matter how many times he told her he wasn't.

She breathed in deeply, the farm settling into the late evening, the sky a beautiful blend of oranges and pinks and purples. It was peaceful, yet she still felt inexplicably restless.

And there was Danni, down in the paddock. So maybe that restlessness wasn't quite so inexplicable. Eleanor sighed. Danni had her sleeves rolled up, her hair was disheveled, and as Eleanor walked closer, she could see that there was sweat glistening on Danni's skin as she secured a gate hinge.

She had to stand for a moment, she had to steady herself, watching Danni work, the effortless way she moved, strong and sure. A thought flickered in her mind, so dangerous in its implications that she pushed it quickly away.

"Evening," Danni said, sensing Eleanor behind her but not turning, intent on her work.

"Evening," said Eleanor. She wasn't sure what else to say, so she didn't say anything.

Sam strolled over to the paddock fence, ears flicking against the flies, coming closer to nuzzle at Eleanor, looking for treats. Which gave Eleanor an idea, something that might help her restlessness. "Mind if I take Sam for a ride?" she called out.

Danni did turn around now, brows lifting in surprise. "No one rides Sam."

"No one?" Eleanor asked, tilting her head. "Or just no one else?"

Danni hesitated before sighing. "Fine. But he's a rough ride. If you fall off and break a leg, don't come running to me."

"Well, I wouldn't, would I?" Eleanor said reasonably as she led Sam toward the gate. "Not with a broken leg."

Danni grunted and opened the gate to let Sam out of the paddock.

Saddling the horse was second nature. Eleanor's hands worked deftly, years of

muscle memory kicking in. Swinging into the saddle, she barely had to touch her thighs to Sam's side before he set off at an easy trot through the stable yard and out into the paddock and from there the open fields. So much for a rough ride.

The breeze tugged at her hair as Eleanor let Sam stretch his legs, reveling in the familiar rhythm of riding, the steady movement beneath her. It had been years since she'd just ridden, just for pleasure, for the joy of it. But it was instinctual, which gave her mind time to wander again.

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She'd been out of sorts ever since that night with Elizabeth. And the reason was very clear.

Eleanor prided herself on her ability to control her emotions, her ability to remain pragmatic, detached even, when necessary.

Yet Danni unsettled her in ways that she wasn't sure how to process. There was something infuriatingly captivating about her. Her confidence, her ease, the way she seemed to exist so solidly in her own skin. Okay, so she was irritating. Annoying even.

But then there was the absolutely undeniable fact that Danni was, objectively, a very attractive woman. All the willpower in the world couldn't make Eleanor deny that.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had actual feelings. Not real ones. Not ones that made her cheeks flush and her heart feel funny. She was a busy woman, she'd always kept herself busy. An estate relied on her. Even now, with the house closed for renovations, she had a host of workmen that needed to be paid. Once the house was done, there'd be estate workers and house staff and all the rest of it.

She didn't have time for anyone.

Until now.

But, and here was the crux of the matter, this wasn't a real marriage. This was an arrangement. A business transaction. Which meant she shouldn't, couldn't, take advantage of Danni. But it was getting harder and harder to remember that, when she

caught Danni looking at her in a certain way, or when their hands brushed by accident, and Eleanor's stomach did an annoyingly traitorous little flip.

And when she could see from Danni's looks that she might not be the only one having these thoughts.

Things could get messy, she told herself. Ah, yes, but then things might not, said another half of her brain. Hardly helpful.

She sighed and tugged on the reins, guiding Sam back toward the farm, determined to shake whatever foolish thoughts had begun creeping into her mind.

Danni was waiting for her when she returned, leaning against the gate, arms crossed over her chest, watching her approach with an unreadable expression.

"Huh. You weren't lying," Danni said, as Eleanor dismounted with practiced ease. "You can ride."

"I did tell you," said Eleanor, hooking Sam's rein to the gatepost. "My mother gave me my first riding lesson when I was three." She hesitated for a moment. "It's, um, I think it's the only thing I really remember about her."

There was a second of silence. Then Danni said, "That must be difficult."

"I don't know any different," Eleanor said, stroking Sam's nose.

Silence stretched between them, heavier than before, and Eleanor didn't really know what to say to break it. In the end, she went with something that had been on the edges of her mind. "I've met your brother."

"You lucky thing, you," said Danni.

“You said your mother was up at the farm too, though. I haven’t met her.”

Danni shifted, her easy demeanor faltering. “It’s complicated.”

“So you’ve said,” said Eleanor, turning now as Sam bent to crop some grass by the fence.

Danni sighed and looked out over the paddock toward her brother’s farm. “She and I... She wanted sons. She got Hector. Someone strong to run the farm. Daughters weren’t her thing. I wasn’t her thing. She... She never thought I could do anything. It was like I was a disappointment before I even tried, I dunno.”

“Danni,” Eleanor said softly.

“Then she found out I brought this place and called me an idiot and a hundred other names and we argued and, well, I haven’t really spoken to her since. She’s up there, I see her sometimes when I get the post and what-not, but we don’t really talk.”

Eleanor studied Danni for a moment. “Do you miss her?”

“Not really,” said Danni, shaking her head.

Eleanor turned toward the horizon where the sun was starting to sink, turning all of the light orange. “Sometimes, I’m glad I don’t have to deal with parents,” she admitted.

“That’s a bit morbid, Princess,” Danni said, cocking an eyebrow.

“It is, isn’t it?” said Eleanor, smiling a little.

The breeze picked up, carrying the cool scent of damp earth and hay. Eleanor

shivered slightly, her t-shirt offering little protection against the night air.

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Danni grumbled something and reached over to grab hershirt, which was still hanging over the fence. “Here.”

Eleanor hesitated for only a second, looking at Danni in her tank-top, before she accepted the shirt. Danni laid it around her shoulders, the warmth of it enveloping her immediately. It smelled of earth and cedar and hay and so entirely like Danni that Eleanor lost her breath for a moment, closing her eyes, taking in the scent.

When she looked up, Danni was watching her, something flickering behind her dark eyes. Eleanor lost her breath all over again.

The air between them shifted, suddenly thicker, charged with something that Eleanor couldn’t identify, a promise that she had no words for. The hum of the night, the hiss of the breeze, faded to nothing and Eleanor became acutely, exquisitely aware of just how close they were standing, of the way that Danni’s gaze dropped, just for a second, to her lips.

Eleanor knew that she should say something, that she should step back, that she should break this tension.

Instead, she found that she was frozen, trapped in the pull of a riptide that she couldn’t name.

And Danni was the one that reached up, fingers brushing a stray strand of hair from Eleanor’s face. It was barely anything, the faintest whisper of contact, but Eleanor felt it like a brand.

Which meant that she was the one that leaned in, drawn by this invisible force.

She was the one that brushed her lips against Danni's until, inevitably, they were kissing.

It was soft and tentative at first, as if neither of them could quite believe that they were doing it. But then, something gave way, and Eleanor found that she was pressing herself closer, her hands curling onto the straps of Danni's tank as the kiss deepened.

Danni made a small, surprised sound in her throat before responding in kind, her hands finding Eleanor's waist, grounding her, steadying her in a way that Eleanor hadn't known she needed.

The moment stretched out, perfect and fragile all at once, into the deepening twilight.

And then...

A distant rumble of thunder broke them apart.

Eleanor stepped back quickly, breath unsteady, heart hammering against her ribs.

Danni looked just as stunned, lips parted, eyes dark in the dim light.

Neither of them spoke.

And then, just as if the moment hadn't unraveled something in both of them, Eleanor cleared her throat and said, "I should go."

Danni said nothing, and Eleanor took a step back, then another, then turned and began to walk away.

And nothing was going to be the same again.

Chapter Nineteen

The moment Danni's lips left Eleanor's, panic surged through her. What had she just done? More importantly, what had she been thinking? Sam nickered next to her, seemingly in sympathy, as Eleanor walked away.

She hadn't been thinking, that was the problem, Danni thought.

One minute they'd been talking about family, about loss and disappointment and things that Danni was pretty sure neither of them ever discussed... and then... they'd kissed. Or Eleanor had kissed her. Or she'd kissed Eleanor. She wasn't exactly sure which.

And then, well, then, Eleanor had turned and walked away. No, not walked, fled. And Danni hadn't moved, hadn't called after her, she'd simply watched as Eleanor disappeared into the night, her hair catching the glow of the house lights before she was swallowed up by the shadows.

Then Danni did what any reasonable women who'd just been kissed by Eleanor Brewster, or who had just kissed Eleanor Brewster, would do. She grinned.

"Bloody hell," she muttered to herself, bringing a hand up to her lips. They still tingled. "Bloody hell, Sam, did you see that?"

Sam nickered again.

Eleanor Brewster had kissed her. And it was good. No, more than good. It was... hot and amazing and incredible and a whole host of words that Danni definitely did not use on an everyday basis.

She let out a quiet, breathless laugh. Then another. Only then did she stop and frown.

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Right. Eleanor had run away. That really wasn't a good sign.

With a sigh, Danni unhooked Sam's rein from the gatepost and opened the gate so that she could lead him into his stable. She curried him, made sure he had oats, and laid a blanket on his back because he wasn't a young horse. Only once he was settled did she go to the house and get her keys.

Lucky that the Land Rover was back on its feet. Lucky that Eleanor had AA and could afford to have the Land Rover running again. The only question now was, where was Eleanor most likely to be?

And that was hardly a difficult one.

Danni tossed the keys in her hand as she went out to the truck. Eleanor Brewster had kissed her. She'd kissed Eleanor Brewster. She could still taste her, could still feel her, could still hear her heart stuttering as Eleanor's lips had met hers.

It had been, without a single doubt, the greatest moment of her life. Better even than the day she signed the papers for the farm. Better than she could ever imagine a moment ever being again.

All except for Eleanor running away, of course. That part hadn't been great.

She couldn't help grinning to herself as she started the engine, though.

She and Eleanor had kissed, and it had made her hair stand on end and her blood race through her veins. And she'd loved every second of it.

PULLING UP AT the manor, Danni once again thought what an odd life Eleanor must lead. Living in a house like this must be like living in a museum. Well, not just at the moment, she reconsidered, as she pushed through the open front door and began to pick her way past tools and piles of material.

Just as she'd thought, she found Eleanor sitting at a dust-covered kitchen table, surrounded by flickering candlelight.

Danni leaned against the doorframe and folded her arms. "Ah yes, the perfect place to sulk. Nothing like the scent of fresh brick dust to help you think."

Eleanor looked up sharply, startled. For a moment, she looked like she might deny sulking, but then she sighed and rubbed her temples. "I..."

"You ran," Danni filled in.

"I didn't run. I left."

Danni gave her a look. Eleanor groaned and dropped her head onto the table. "Alright, fine, I ran," she mumbled.

Danni sniffed and pushed off the doorframe, strolling into the kitchen, brushing dust off a chair before she sat across from Eleanor. "Care to tell me why? I haven't been eating garlic or raw onions or anything. Kissing me can't have been that terrible. I've done it before and not had any complaints."

Eleanor straightened and immediately started babbling. "I shouldn't have done it. It was inappropriate. Unfair to you. A mistake."

Danni raised an eyebrow. "I think I'll be the one to decide what's fair and unfair to me, thank you. But a mistake?"

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” Eleanor’s face looked as though she was anything but sure.

Danni tilted her head. “It didn’t feel like a mistake. It felt... It felt like something that had to be done, it felt like a necessity.”

Eleanor’s lips parted, but no words came out. For once, she had nothing to say, no quip, no sarcasm, nothing.

And Danni could see that she was struggling with this, though she didn’t really see why. Maybe because of their arrangement, maybe it was mixing business with pleasure. Maybe because of their age difference, though she didn’t think it was that big. Maybe just because Eleanor didn’t do well with feelings, which she of all people could understand.

Whatever the reason, Eleanor obviously needed time, and Danni took pity on her. She looked at at the kitchen echoing around them. “This house is huge,” she said.

“Changing the subject, are we?” said Eleanor, finding her tongue.

“No, actually,” said Danni. “I was going to say that this house is huge, it wasn’t built in a day.”

“Obviously.”

“So... why should anything else be?” Danni said. She sighed. “We kissed, Eleanor. It was nice. That doesn’t mean we have to do anything else, and it doesn’t mean we don’t have to do anything else. It just means... we kissed. The world’s still turning,

the sky didn't come crashing down, you don't need to make any decisions right now."

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Eleanor let out a long breath, like she was processing what Danni had said. She nodded, albeit reluctantly.

Danni pushed back her chair.

“Good. Now, there is one decision you need to make, I’m afraid.”

Eleanor arched an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Putting her hands on her hips, Danni smirked. “Are you coming back to the farm, or are you planning to die by inhaling construction fumes?”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “I’m perfectly fine here.”

With a groan, Danni gestured at the exposed wiring, the open walls, the crumbling plaster. “Sure, totally safe.”

“It’s my home.”

“A home that I literally just walked into,” Danni pointed out. “You can’t keep an open house secure. Not to mention the risk of a brick falling on your head as you sleep.”

“Not going to happen.”

“Or the risk of Samson finding you here in your nightie when he arrives early in the morning,” Danni added.

Eleanor hesitated a little at this.

“Come home,” said Danni, more gently. “I’m not going to push matters, if that’s what you’re afraid of. I’ll be the perfect gentlewoman.”

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

“Then stop sulking here and be sensible. All your things are at the farm.”

Eleanor sighed, and finally begrudgingly agreed to come back. She blew out the candles, flicked on her torch, and stood up. “Come on, then.”

They picked their way through the hallway and out into the entrance, until there was a gasp and a short curse as Eleanor stepped on an uneven tile, and before she even realized what was happening, she stumbled.

Danni was there in an instant.

Her hands grabbed Eleanor’s waist, steadying her. She felt Eleanor sucking in a breath. The world paused for a whole second, quiet and still and perfect.

Eleanor’s hands had landed on Danni’s chest, her fingers grabbing the flannel of her shirt and twisting it in her fists. Their bodies were inches apart. Danni’s breath came faster, her mouth went dry.

Neither of them moved.

An owl hooted outside.

“Careful,” Danni murmured. Her voice was low and husky.

Eleanor swallowed. Danni could feel her heart hammering, could feel the warmth of her. “I, uh...”

Danni didn’t let go, she didn’t step back. She just... held her. Until the look in Eleanor’s eyes was too much. She had to kiss her or...

Or deflect. “You know, for someone so refined, you sure do fall into my arms a lot.”

And just like that, the spell was broken.

Eleanor shoved at her. “Oh, shut up.”

Danni let go, laughing, the air between them still crackling with tension. “Just stating the truth, Princess.”

“If I’m a princess, I suggest you escort me to my awaiting chariot,” Eleanor said.

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And Danni laughed, taking the torch, and leading them both back out into the night.

THE RIDE BACK to the farm was silent. Eleanor stared out of the window, lost in thought.

Danni, for her part, was very much not thinking.

Nope. Not at all.

Definitely not thinking about the kiss. Not thinking about Eleanor in her arms. Not thinking about how Eleanor's touch had made her chest feel tight and her stomach flip.

Not. Thinking. At. All.

She parked the Land Rover in front of the farmhouse, and Eleanor climbed out without a word, heading straight inside. Danni had the fleeting thought that they'd left Eleanor's car back at the house. She'd have to drive her in in the morning.

Danni watched her go. Then she sighed, ran her hand through her hair, and shook her head. "Well, I'm in trouble," she muttered.

She got inside just in time to see Eleanor disappearing up the stairs to her bedroom. Danni sighed, thought about making some tea, and finally decided she was too tired for anything but collapsing onto the too-small couch. But when she did, all she did was stare at the ceiling.

Replaying the kiss in her mind.

Replaying the moment Eleanor tripped into her arms.

Replaying the way her heart had jumped when she'd touched Eleanor.

She groaned, let out a long breath, and screwed her eyes tight shut. What were the chances of her actually sleeping tonight when Eleanor was just one floor away?

Practically zero, she thought.

Because that had definitely been more than just a kiss. She was sure of it. Even if she did have to try to pretend that it hadn't happened for the sake of Eleanor's sanity.

Chapter Twenty

Eleanor stood in the middle of what had, at some point, been the grand hall of Brewster Manor, and which was now an active construction zone. Sawdust hung in the air, mixing with the scent of old wood dust and fresh paint. She was trying very hard to focus on varnish options, but her mind was completely elsewhere.

More specifically, her mind was on Danni. Ultra-specifically, her mind was on that kiss.

She'd spent most of last night, and the entirety of this morning, trying to convince herself that it had all been a mistake. Something to do with twilight and fresh air and horse-riding and... general witchiness, perhaps. A fleeting moment of weakness brought on by the intimacy of their conversation, the weight of the night air, the way Danni had looked at her.

Unfortunately, she wasn't having great success in persuading herself that it had all

been in the heat of the moment, that it had all been a terrible misjudgment. Particularly when Danni had so obviously kissed her back.

“Lady Brewster?” One of the workmen called, pulling Eleanor out of her thoughts.

“Yes?” she said, hoping that her face wasn’t as flushed as it felt.

“Did you want us to keep the archway as it is, or follow the original design from the blueprint?”

She blinked at him, thinking, her brain remembering everything she’d ever heard and read about the house. “Keep it as is,” she said. “The third Lord had the design changed, but the blueprints were never updated to reflect that fact.”

He nodded and went back to work, leaving Eleanor to stare at the exposed beams of the ceiling and contemplate her growing problem.

It was one thing to remind herself that the marriage was supposed to be a business arrangement, which it was. However, it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore just how much... She took a breath. Just how much she wanted Danni.

There, the words were out there, even if she was just thinking them.

And why shouldn’t she think them? She was a grown adult.

They were both grown adults, come to that. A little affair wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, would it? They were married, for heaven’s sake. And it wasn’t as if she’d never been with a woman before. Though, her body reminded her, it had been some time.

Danni was interested too, this wasn’t one sided.

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Yes, there was business involved, but they seemed to be doing just fine on that front.

And yes, Danni was younger than she was. And freer. And more care-free. But then, it wasn't that many years. She was hardly a crone now. She was a healthy woman with a healthy sexual appetite that just happened to have been buried for a wee while. And now, well, now it...

"Eleanor!"

She looked up in surprise to see Elizabeth stepping over a pile of discarded wooden beams and looking deeply unimpressed.

"I have been trying to reach you for hours," Elizabeth said, stepping over a paint tin and holding up her phone.

Eleanor patted her pockets, suddenly realizing that she had absolutely no idea where her phone was. "I must have left it somewhere," she said. "The damn thing's under a dust-sheet or something."

Elizabeth sighed and slid her phone into her pocket. "We have a problem."

"Just the one?" Eleanor asked.

"What?"

"Nothing," said Eleanor. "Do go on."

“The investor made another move.”

Eleanor straightened up, her mind very much focused now. “What kind of move?”

“The kind where he tries to bribe me.”

“What?” She felt frozen.

Elizabeth pulled a letter out of her bag and handed it over. Eleanor scanned the words quickly, her temper rising with each line. The investor’s solicitor was offering a generous ‘consulting fee’ if Elizabeth would advise Eleanor to reconsider selling the house. She seethed. This was underhanded, infuriating, and insulting.

“Absolutely not,” she snapped, handing the letter back to Elizabeth. “And this is crossing the line.”

“I’d like to agree,” Elizabeth said, pocketing the letter. “However, legally, it stops just short of crossing the line. Unfortunately. There’s no direct bribe offered, even though both you and I know that’s exactly what this is.”

“I don’t care who this person is, they’re not getting my home.”

Elizabeth nodded, but her expression remained grim. “You do realize this means that they’re getting desperate. And desperate people don’t stop.”

“I don’t see what we can do without knowing who this person is,” Eleanor said. “Other than continually saying no.”

“You should step up security on the house,” Elizabeth said. “Make sure there’s someone around here at night, just in case anyone decides to do anything untoward.”

“I’ll talk to Samson about it,” said Elizabeth. “Whoever this is, they’re not going to win.”

BY THE TIME Eleanor got back to the farm, the sun was already beginning to set. She found Danni at the kitchen table, going through bills methodically and paying each one on her laptop before moving on.

“Decided to come back, have you?” Danni said, eyes on her computer screen.

Eleanor ignored that. “Ah, the romance of farming,” she said instead.

Danni looked at her and then grinned. “It’s not all muck and mud, you know. Paperwork’s the bane of my existence. Although at least there’s money in the accounts for the bills, thanks to you.”

Eleanor pulled out a chair and sat down. “And I have a house, thanks to you. So we’re even on that front. Speaking of the house, the investor contacted my solicitor today.”

“Elizabeth?” Danni said. “About what?”

Quickly, Eleanor explained what had happened, telling Danni exactly what was in the letter. With every word, Danni’s expression darkened. By the time Eleanor had finished, she was practically scowling and had a face like thunder.

“He tried to bribe Elizabeth?” Danni repeated. “Come on, that has to be illegal, right? Can’t we get him arrested or something?”

“You’re assuming it’s a man.” Eleanor said.

“I bet it is. Only men are this stupid and this... covetous.”

“Nice word,” said Eleanor. “And if only it were so simple. Unfortunately, this sort of thing happens in business all the time. Elizabeth says that the letter stops short of actual bribery, it was written by a solicitor, after all. There’s really nothing we can do.”

Danni scoffed. “Business is stupid.”

Eleanor let out a short laugh, surprising herself. “Agreed. I’ll drink to that.” She looked around the kitchen, spotting a bottle of wine on the shelf by the stove. “Shall we have a glass?”

“It’s probably vinegar,” Danni said. “Hector gave it to me when I bought the farm.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Eleanor said, getting up and getting the bottle. “Corkscrew?”

Danni was one step ahead of her, opening a drawer and pulling out a corkscrew. “You let me know if this guy shows up in person at the house. I’ll come and throw him into the nearest cow pat.”

“Chivalrous,” Eleanor said, screwing the metal spring into the wine cork.

“I try,” said Danni.

Eleanor attempted to pull the cork out of the bottle and failed. Danni took a step toward her, reaching for the bottle so that their hands touched and Eleanor's pulse raced. For a second, they stood there, then Danni slipped the bottle from Eleanor's grasp.

"Chivalrous, remember?" she said, sliding the cork from the bottle with a satisfying pop.

"Right," said Eleanor, mouth suddenly dry. She felt warmth creeping up her neck. She needed a change of subject, immediately.

Danni poured the wine into two coffee mugs before Eleanor could stop her, and passed one to Eleanor. "Here's to wankers with money," she said.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry," Danni said. "I forgot that you probably know plenty of people like that. I meant more the wankers with money that want to steal our land."

"I can drink to that," Eleanor said, tapping her mug against Danni's. She took a mouthful of the wine, which proved to be tart and good, better than she'd expected even.

"Eugh, it always tastes like bad grape juice, doesn't it?" Danni complained, sticking her tongue out.

But Eleanor was rescued from having to start a lecture about wine tasting by her phone ringing. She'd found it that afternoon under a pile of papers on the kitchen table at the house. Now she answered it.

"You are coming to the Hunt Ball, aren't you?" Isabella's voice was crisp and clear

over the line.

“Good evening, grandmama,” Eleanor said.

“You’re coming, yes? Only you forgot to RSVP.”

“The invitation is probably somewhere at the house,” Eleanor said. Her stomach was dropping. She’d forgotten about the damn thing.

“Oh, good, well then I’ll RSVP in your stead,” Isabella said airily. “You won’t want to miss it. And you’ll be bringing your wife, of course.”

Eleanor’s stomach dropped even further. Not only had she forgotten about the ball, she hadn’t even considered the fact that she might be expected to show up with her new wife in tow. “About that..” she began.

“Perfect,” purred Isabella. “I’ll RSVP for the both of you, then. This will be an excellent opportunity to show Danni off.”

Eleanor barely had time to process all of this before Isabella was bidding her goodnight and hanging up. She sighed and rubbed her temples before turning back to Danni.

“What was all that about?” Danni asked, her lips looked red and sticky from the wine. Inviting, was the first word that popped into Eleanor’s head.

“The Hunt Ball,” Eleanor said flatly. “It’s this weekend.” She cleared her throat. “We’re invited.”

Danni perked up. “A ball? Like in Bridgerton? Nice.”

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Eleanor blinked. This was not the reaction she'd anticipated. "You do realize that you'll have to dress appropriately?"

Danni grinned. "Relax, Princess. I've got this covered. I clean up pretty nicely, don't you worry."

Eleanor wasn't entirely convinced. But as she watched Danni, casual and confident, she couldn't help but wonder just what she'd gotten herself into this time.

Chapter Twenty-One

Danni tugged at the collar of her shirt, scowling into the mirror as Indi fussed over her tie. "Isn't it too tight?"

"It's fine," Indi said, slapping Danni's hand away. "You're going to a fancy event, we don't go looking like we just wrestled a sheep, remember?"

"I did just wrestle a sheep," Danni said with a grin. "One got stuck on the cattle grid coming over from the front field and the damn thing wouldn't keep still while I freed it."

"Of course you did," sighed Indi, standing back to look at her work. "Not bad."

"And, to be clear, I don't object to wearing the fancy suit," Danni said, looking at herself in the mirror. "I like wearing the fancy suit. I'd wear the fancy suit every single day if I could, due to the fact that I look hot as all get out in it. I just want it to look perfect."

She turned side to side, eyeing her reflection. The suit was black, tailored so that it hit every single curve thanks to Indi's clever needlework. The tie was slightly loose, just the way she liked it, her boots were heeled and polished to a shine. She looked like she could take on the world, like a Georgian rake with her curls slipping over one eye. She grinned at herself.

"Not bad," Indi said.

"You'd jump me if you were at all into girls," Danni said.

"I might jump you anyway," said Indi. "You look like an evil villain in that suit."

"Think Eleanor'll approve?" Danni asked with a smirk.

Indi gave her a knowing look. "Oh, she'll approve alright. Whether or not she'll resist is another question. But I'm guessing from your look that you don't want Eleanor to resist, right?"

"I... I want Eleanor to do what she wants," Danni said, looking away from her reflection. "But if you're asking whether I'd throw her out of bed, the answer's no."

"You're sleeping on the couch," Indi pointed out. "She'd be the one throwing you out of bed. And it looks like the jury's still out on that one." She hesitated. "Just... be careful, Dan, alright? Eleanor seems nice, but she's from a different world, you know that. You don't want to get your heart broken."

"Eleanor's not like that," said Danni. "She's different. Not like other rich people. As for getting my heart broken, not going to happen. My heart's made of steel, can't be broken even if you tried."

Indi crossed her arms. "She's only sticking around temporarily, Dan. Don't go falling

for someone that can be gone tomorrow.”

“I can handle myself,” Danni said.

Indi sighed. “Fine, fine. I know you can. I’m just trying to give you some wisdom, that’s all. Tommy says you’ve been waltzing around the farm like that woman out of The Sound of Music all week.”

“Tommy should learn to mind his own business,” Danni said.

Just then, headlights swept through the window, and Indi nodded toward the back door of the pub. “Sound like your ride’s here. Now go and charm your lady.”

With a grin, Danni practically skipped out.

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Eleanor sat in her car, fingers drumming against the steering wheel. This was a mistake. It had to be a mistake. A massive, ridiculous mistake. What had she been thinking inviting Danni to the Hunt Ball? Alright, she’d done fine at the country club, but this was a whole different level of society. This was...

Danni stepped out of the pub door.

She stepped out and strolled in front of the car, lit by the headlights, and Eleanor lost the ability to think. She lost the ability to breathe.

The tailored suit fit her like a second skin. The white of the shirt against her tanned skin made Eleanor’s mouth water. The tie was slightly undone, like someone had just pulled it, dragging her in for a kiss. And those high heels at the end of long, long legs encased in the tightest trousers Eleanor thought she’d ever seen.

Danni opened the car door. “Not bad, eh?”

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Eleanor squeaked. Actually squeaked. She cleared her throat. “Get in the car.”

Danni chuckled, but obeyed, settling into the passenger seat. As they drove, Eleanor could feel Danni glancing at her, taking in the midnight blue dress she was wearing, the way it clung to her until it flared around her hips into wisps of material so light they were barely there.

For a second, she thought she might have to stop driving, might have to pull over.

“So, what’s the plan for tonight?” Danni said, finally tearing her eyes away from Eleanor’s dress. “Are we expected to chase foxes around in ballgowns? Or do the foxes chase us?”

Eleanor shot her a look. “It’s a social event. The social event of the summer, actually. A chance for those of a certain level of society to drink very expensive champagne and gossip.”

Danni pulled a face. “Sounds unbearable. How much champagne will I need to drink in order to survive?”

Eleanor smiled. “At least three glasses.”

Danni grinned. “Noted, Princess.”

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The Hunt Ball was even more extravagant than Danni had expected. It was held on

the estate of someone that Danni immediately forgot the name of, some distant relative of Eleanor's. But then, as Eleanor pointed out, she was related in some way, shape, or form to everyone at the ball.

There were grand chandeliers, flowers in vases bigger than Danni's entire body, their scent mixing with that of expensive perfume and aged whiskey. Couples waltzed to the sound of a string quartet, and waiters in crisp uniforms floated through the room with silver trays of champagne glasses.

Danni, standing close to the entrance, let out a low whistle. "And here was me thinking that your old pile was fancy."

Eleanor smothered a laugh. "Try not to look too impressed."

"I'm not impressed, I'm wondering how much their electric bill must be," Danni said.

Before Eleanor could reply, a too-familiar voice cut through the crowd. "Eleanor, darling, and you've brought the help."

Beatrice Allenton.

Both Danni and Eleanor turned, and Danni could feel Eleanor tense. Beatrice, her supercilious face over-made up, was standing in front of them, looking Danni up and down with a disdainful smirk.

"Farmers at the Hunt Ball," she said. "How... modern."

Danni saw Eleanor's temper flare, saw the flush rise in her cheeks. "At least Danni owns her farm. That's more than can be said for most of the people in this room. I hear that a lot of these big estates are being mortgaged nowadays."

Beatrice turned red and then mauve as Eleanor looped her arm through Danni's and swept them both away.

"You do know that the farm's mortgaged too, right?" Danni said once they were out of hearing range.

"Not the point," Eleanor said. "Honestly, she makes me so..."

"So it was your turn to defend my honor," said Danni, grinning. "Can't say I don't like it."

Eleanor turned to her and, to Danni's surprise, grinned right back. "I suppose I did do that, didn't I?"

"You really do care," Danni said.

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "Come on, let's dance."

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On the dance floor, Eleanor felt strangely... light. Danni's hand was firm at her waist, grounding her, their fingers were entwined as they moved together. Danni's fresh scent was in her nose, and it was all she could do to keep from pressing against her.

Danni didn't help.

"So," she said, moving in, voice low. "How scandalized do you think the aristocracy would be if I kissed you right now, right here?"

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Eleanor's heart pounded. "Don't you dare."

"Just asking," said Danni innocently, pulling away slightly again. "Hypothetically, of course. Purely for scientific and cultural study reasons."

Eleanor laughed, and they danced as Danni grinned and, for the first time in years, Eleanor found that she was actually enjoying the Hunt Ball.

In fact, she didn't want the night to end.

But eventually, the string quartet stopped playing, and the guests began to drift away and it was time to go.

The drive home was quiet but comfortable. Danni hummed softly under her breath and Eleanor gripped the steering wheel a little too tightly, thinking about the warmth of Danni's touch on her waist.

And when they reached the farm, Eleanor stopped the car, listening to the engine ticking for a moment before she opened the door. She stepped out, inhaling the cool of the night air, turning to find that Danni had quietly come around the car and was right behind her, far closer than she'd expected. The air between them was thick.

Eleanor bit her lip, her breath hitching in her throat. Danni stepped in, tilted her head just slightly.

Do it, said a voice in Eleanor's head. Just do it.

But panic flared.

She took a step back. “I, um, I think I need some fresh air before bed.”

“Eleanor—” Danni began.

But Eleanor was already walking away, calling goodnight over her shoulder as she practically fell over the cobbles of the farmyard.

She made it as far as the gate into the paddock, stopping and taking deep breaths, looking out into the night, hoping to get control of herself.

She could hear Danni’s footsteps on the cobbles, following her, could hear Danni come up behind her. But she didn’t turn.

“Eleanor,” Danni said softly. “What’s wrong?”

Her heart beat hard in her chest and now she did turn, she had to turn, and Danni was there, those curls framing her face, her eyes dark and concerned, and the question hung between them.

The night was so still, the tension thick. Eleanor opened her mouth, but no words came.

Danni simply waited.

But Eleanor had nothing more to say.

She simply nodded.

And Danni’s face cleared in understanding.

Chapter Twenty-Two

That nod was all the permission that Danni needed. All the permission that she'd been waiting for all night, what felt like all her life. She could wait no more. It would take all the wild horses in the world to drag her away from this. To drag her away from Eleanor standing against the gate in that midnight blue dress, the moonlight in her eyes, her hair swept up from her neck.

And Danni did the only thing she could.

She dropped to her knees in front of Eleanor, her hands reaching up under the wisps of skirt, grasping smooth, muscled calves and traveling upward, taking the skirt with them, uncovering the pale loveliness of Eleanor's legs, reaching soft thighs as Eleanor gasped and leaned back against the metal gate.

Danni parted Eleanor's legs, reaching upward until she found the rough lace and soft silk of underwear. She leaned in, placing her face against Eleanor's center, drawing in a breath and only then realizing that what she was doing had skipped several steps. She pulled back.

"Shall I stop?" she said, before Eleanor's face had materialized properly out of the darkness.

Eleanor was grasping onto the top rail of the gate like she might never let go, her head was tilted back slightly, her eyes were closed, her breath was coming faster.

"Not if you value your life," she hissed through gritted teeth.

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Blood pounded in Danni's veins, a shot of heat went through her core, with trembling fingers, she pulled at the delicate underwear in front of her, almost tearing it in the heat of desperation. Finally, she yanked it to one side, pushing her hands between Eleanor's legs, cupping her buttocks with her hands, and pulling her in, burying her face in the earthy, rich, wetness of Eleanor.

Eleanor groaned and Danni's tongue began to move, began to lick and lap at the round hardness she found between Eleanor's legs, dipping down into her wetness, then coming back up. Eleanor's hands came down, somehow tangled themselves in Danni's hair, and Danni pressed in harder, moving her tongue faster, unsure how all this was happening so quickly, but praying to any god that was listening not to let it end.

"Oh God," Eleanor moaned.

Danni felt her tensing, felt her thigh muscles hardening, felt her hips pushing up against her tongue, felt a pulsing and then a great release as Eleanor cried out into the night and pushed Danni's face hard against her and shuddered so hard that Danni thought she might fall.

Only when there was complete stillness and the only sound was Eleanor's rough breathing, did Danni finally move, leaning back, her lips full of Eleanor and raising an eyebrow.

"Well, Princess," she began.

But Eleanor was pulling at her, yanking her back up, pulling her in and pressing her

lips against Danni's until Danni could barely breathe, until she barely wanted to breathe.

It took everything she had to pull back. "I've been wanting to do that for a long time," she said.

"I've been wanting it for a long time," Eleanor said. Her hair was starting to come down, a tress caressing her chin. "And we are far from done."

Already, Eleanor's hands were at Danni's waist, reaching for the button to her trousers.

"Oh no, Princess," Danni grinned. "We're not fucking in the farmyard like animals. At least not again."

Eleanor grabbed the waistband of Danni's trousers and twisted it, exerting an exquisite pressure that made Danni hiss in air over her teeth. "Do you make the rules around here?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," said Danni, feeling her heart beat between her legs.

"Then you'll do what you're damn well told," said Eleanor, her lips millimeters away from Danni's. "Clear?"

"As day," muttered Danni, desperate now for contact, desperate to move just that little bit closer, but unwilling to disobey Eleanor.

"Follow me."

Eleanor turned and stalked away and Danni followed like a puppy, wondering how far she'd have to go, how long she'd have to wait, and knowing that the second

Eleanor touched her she was likely to explode.

They made it as far as the barn.

The barn with its sweet smell of hay.

And then Eleanor was turning, pulling Danni in close again, wrapping her fingers in Danni's hair and kissing her until neither one of them could breathe, and Danni was reaching back, fiddling for the zip to Eleanor's dress, and pulling it down, shrugging the dress off her shoulders, leaving her pale skin exposed to the warmth of the night.

Eleanor was unbuttoning Danni's pants and Danni thought she might die from anticipation but then thought that maybe this was the best part. Except it wasn't. Not by a long shot.

She pulled off her jacket, throwing it down onto the hay as a makeshift blanket, as Eleanor unzipped her trousers and Danni kicked off her shoes and then Eleanor was fiddling with the buttons on Danni's shirt and Danni was stepping out of her trousers, and then there they both were. Eleanor naked in the moonlight except those infuriating knickers, and Danni clad only in an unbuttoned shirt.

And the sight of Eleanor, her curves, her body, was more than Danni could take, she was pushing her down, bending to her as she lay on top of the dark jacket on the sweet-smelling hay. And then she was straddling her, feeling the firmness of her body between her legs, feeling the softness of her belly as she pressed her wetness against it.

"Sure?" she asked, looking up and into Eleanor's eyes.

"Still sure," Eleanor said. "You?"

“You’re kidding?”

“Not in the slightest,” said Eleanor, stirring so that she pushed slightly against Danni’s center.

Danni groaned, grinding herself down onto Eleanor’s body, her breath coming in short, hot gasps. “Please,” she said, just the one word.

And Eleanor was reaching down, sliding her hand between her body and Danni’s center, and then slipping long fingers inside her, letting Danni press down and ride against her hand, letting the pressure build up and up until Danni was certain she was going to explode.

There was a short moment of perfect stillness and then it happened, a flash-flood of sensation that made Danni screw her eyes up tight and hold her breath so that the feelings could overtake her and wash over her and leave her breathless and spent until she collapsed next to Eleanor, feeling her slide her fingers out and hum in satisfaction.

“So,” Eleanor said.

“So,” said Danni, still slightly breathless.

“We seem to have broken some sort of record for speed of orgasm.”

“Not my usual style, I can assure you,” Danni said.

“Nor mine,” said Eleanor. “Although, I’m not entirely sure that I have a usual style.”

Danni reached out, trailing a hand over Eleanor’s torso, the curve of her waist, the curve of her breast, stopping only when she came to a raspberry pink nipple. “Do you not?” she said, pinching just slightly.

Eleanor hissed a breath. “Maybe I do.”

Danni grinned, leaning down and taking the nipple into her mouth, sucking gently on it until Eleanor groaned and pushed up against her again. She gave one last suck and looked up. “We could practice, see if you do?” she said.

“Practice?” Eleanor said, raising both her eyebrows. “You think after that we need practice?”

“Mmm, maybe not,” Danni agreed, putting her hand on Eleanor’s waist and rubbing her thumb across the hipbone there. “Maybe we’re just naturals. Geniuses. Savants.”

Eleanor growled deep in her throat, her hips bucking toward Danni. “Maybe so.” She

reached for Danni, gripping her shirt, pulling her closer, dropping her head and catching Danni's breast in her mouth, sucking hard, almost, but not quite, too hard.

Danni, unable to help herself, let out a moan as she felt a flood of wetness between her legs.

"Or, at least I am," said Eleanor, pulling her mouth away.

"Oh, are you?" Danni asked, amused.

"It appears so. And I thought we'd already established that I make the rules around here."

Danni's stomach contracted with wanting, needing. Her breath was coming faster again. "So you seem to think," she said.

"Are you going to do as you're told, or not?" Eleanor's eyes had clouded with lust, Danni could smell her, taste her, wanted almost to be inside her skin.

"That depends," said Danni, voice hoarse. "You haven't actually told me what it is that you want yet."

"Have I not?" Eleanor said. She reached up, pulled Danni down so that her lips were touching her ear. "It's very simple," she whispered, every syllable making the hair on Danni's neck stand on end. "I want you to fuck me."

That word in that accent almost sent Danni over the edge. She squeezed her legs together and felt the pulsing as Eleanor pulled her in, took her hand, put it between her legs, and then Danni gave in to all her basest desires and Eleanor moaned.

IT WAS ALMOST dawn before Eleanor was sighing, her head on Danni's chest, and

Danni was pulling her close, her legs aching and her stomach tight and every need finally sated.

“We should go to bed,” Eleanor said.

“We should,” agreed Danni.

Lazily, Eleanor trailed a finger down Danni’s stomach and Danni felt the stirring of wanting again. “Are you going to carry me?”

“Are you that much of a princess?” Danni chuckled.

Eleanor laughed. “No, I’m not. Truly, I’m not. Come on, you’re going to have to be up again in a few hours.”

“Not even a few,” Danni said, stirring and sitting up, brushing hair off her skin and finding Eleanor’s dress.

“Regretting your decisions?” asked Eleanor.

Danni looked at her, hair mussed up, makeup smudged, lips red and swollen, breasts outlined by the moonlight. “Jesus, no,” she whispered.

“Good to know.”

“You?”

Eleanor shook her head, then stopped. “Well, perhaps just one decision.”

Danni inhaled. “What’s that then?” she asked lightly, almost afraid of the answer.

“I think I’ve slept alone in your bed long enough, don’t you?” Eleanor asked, pulling her dress on and handing Danni her trousers.

Danni grinned. “Maybe so.”

“Going to miss the couch?” asked Eleanor as she slid on her shoes.

“I’ll survive,” said Danni, as she reached once again for Eleanor.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Eleanor woke up slowly, stretching beneath the sheets, feeling the glorious ache in her muscles as soft morning light streamed in through the curtains. The bed was warm, the scent of Danni still lingering on the pillows. And for a brief moment, Eleanor allowed herself the indulgence of simple feeling.

And then she reached out, her hand landing on empty sheets.

She blinked, propping herself up on one elbow. Danni was gone.

Her stomach twisted into something suspiciously like disappointment, the emptiness

of an empty bed, of someone leaving before she'd even awoken. But she took a breath and pushed it aside. Of course, Danni was already up and about. She was a farmer, early mornings were practically in her DNA, they were a necessity. It didn't mean anything, Eleanor told herself. It wasn't like Danni had run away or anything.

She collapsed back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling, and another realization crashed over her. She was disappointed that Danni wasn't there. And there was only one reason that she would be so disappointed.

She was falling for Danni.

She was falling for her and... and she was damned if she cared.

The thought should have terrified her. It should have sent her scrambling for the walls she had so carefully constructed around her heart. She should be telling herself right now about all the reasons this couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't work.

But instead, it just felt... right.

Right and natural and, Eleanor thought, very nice indeed.

Danni was fearless and kind and strong and funny, confident and ambitious and infuriating in ways Eleanor had never known before. She was also, Eleanor now realized, everything she had ever needed. And last night, for the first time in a long time, Eleanor had simply allowed herself to be with someone. No expectations. No responsibilities. Just feelings.

And damn it, she wanted more.

She'd been trying to stop herself feeling anything for so long that it felt odd to let the feelings out now. But now that they were there, she was wondering just what she'd

been so afraid of.

She was no fool. She could see the pop psychology of the situation. A woman who had lost her parents at a young age learned not to get too attached to anyone. But this was different. This was good. She could feel it in her soul.

She closed her eyes then opened them again. Alright, there were only so many feelings she could deal with at once. She wasn't going to spend the whole day wallowing in bed when Danni was already up and working. She was going to do something.

She grinned and pulled a sweater on.

She was going to do something domestic. Something wifely.

She was far from a helpless aristocrat, whatever others might assume. She knew her way around the house, and her grandmother had insisted that she learned not just to cook, but also to clean her own bedroom and bathroom and generally look after herself. "A woman that can take care of herself never need depend on anyone else," Isabella had always said.

Something that Eleanor had had more than one occasion to be grateful for.

What her grandmother hadn't said, was that a woman who could take care of herself could also take care of someone else.

In the kitchen, Eleanor rolled up her sleeves and got to work. The scent of fresh tea and sizzling bacon soon filled the air, as she moved around with practiced ease, cracking eggs into a pan, flipping slices of golden toast, arranging mushrooms and tomatoes with precision.

By the time she heard the back door opening, she was just finishing plating up two full breakfasts. She placed them on the table as Danni walked in, kicking off her boots on the mat. She stopped still when she saw the table.

“What’s all this in aid of?”

“Why do you look so shocked?” Eleanor asked.

Danni rubbed the back of her neck, stepping closer. “Dunno. I suppose I didn’t picture Lady Brewster slaving over a hot stove to make me a full English?”

“Doubting me already, are you?” asked Eleanor lightly.

Danni eyed her. “But then, I suppose I didn’t picture Lady Brewster naked in a pile of straw either, did I? So maybe I’m just not that good at picturing things.”

“I’m sure you’ll improve,” Eleanor said.

But Danni was already coming closer, already tilting her head, coming in, brushing her lips against Eleanor’s in a way that made Eleanor’s blood run hot in her veins. “I’ll improve at loads of things,” Danni said. “Just you wait and see.”

Eleanor groaned. “If you’re not careful, you won’t be going back out to that farm anytime soon.”

Danni laughed as she broke away. “Afraid work has to take priority, Princess,” she said, as she took a seat. “But I do appreciate the breakfast.”

Eleanor sat down and poured them both tea as Danni dug in, moaning in appreciation at her first bite. “Good?”

“You can seriously cook,” Danni said through a mouthful.

Eleanor hid her pleased smile behind the rim of her teacup. And she thought that she could really get used to this.

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Tommy was watching Danni with deep suspicion. “You’re happy this morning.”

Danni tossed a handful of feed to the sheep, whistling between her teeth. “Am I?”

“Yeah.” Tommy folded his arms, eyeing her. “What’s got you in such a good mood, then?”

“Dunno,” shrugged Danni, emptying out a pail of dirty water. “Life’s good, I suppose.”

Tommy narrowed his eyes. “Nothing to do with her ladyship, then?”

For a second, Danni didn’t say anything. Then she couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across her face. She was just so damn happy, hiding it was going to be impossible. “Maybe.”

“Seriously?” asked Tommy, leaning up against the fence.

“Yes, Tommy, seriously. There’s this thing that grown ups do, it’s called ‘having a relationship.’ You’ll understand when you’re all big and grown.”

Tommy snorted. “You two are from different planets. What do you even talk about?”

Danni shot him a glare. “She’s smart, she listens, she’s funny, you don’t have to like

the same bands to have something to talk about, you know?” She exhaled. “She makes me happy, alright?”

Tommy’s expression softened, but he still shook his head. “Just don’t get your hopes up too high. She’s still a lady, and a rich one, she might not stick around forever. You’re not really married, remember?”

She knew that Tommy was being protective, was caring in his own way. So, as much as his words bristled, she forced herself to let them go. Tommy didn’t know Eleanor the way that she did. Eleanor was going nowhere, and Tommy would just have to accept that he was wrong.

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Eleanor wandered through the house, trailing Samson as he updated her on all the works that had been done, the problems they were encountering, the solutions he’d come up with. She could see the vision coming together beneath the lingering dust. But her mind was elsewhere.

They walked into the dining room, the Victorian wallpaper carefully preserved under large sheets of plastic. And she could imagine a life here, could see Danni sitting at the long table, could see her drinking tea and pulling a face at fancy breakfast foods.

And it was the same with every room. Everywhere they went, Eleanor could see Danni sitting or standing or playing her part.

For a long time, Eleanor had seen the house empty, or seen the ghosts of the people who no longer lived there. Now, for the first time in what felt like forever, she could see the house with life in it, with Danni in it. And suddenly, everything felt possible.

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Meanwhile, Danni was behind the wheel of the Land Rover, the radio babbling in the background, on her way to the feed store and thinking about breakfast, which was an admittedly strange thing to think about at three in the afternoon.

But there it was, her and Eleanor over the breakfast table, a different future from the one she'd ever imagined, but a future all the same. A future where Eleanor chose the farm, where she was there every morning, not because she had to be but because she wanted to be. Where she made breakfast every morning, where she teased Danni about her terrible paperwork. Where she was there, her skin pale and perfect against the sheets every night.

A future where this marriage wasn't just for convenience, where it was for real.

And Danni felt the stirrings of something that she was pretty sure was hope.

???

That evening, Eleanor made a simple supper and laid it out on the table when Danni came in from the farm, and they sat and ate together. The table was small, far smaller than the one at the house, Eleanor thought. But this felt oddly like home. That was a word she'd never applied to anywhere but the manor before.

She sipped at some wine, glancing over at Danni, who looked tired. "So, how was your day?"

Danni snorted. “Tommy’s convinced that you’re going to break my heart.”

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. “Is he indeed? And what do you think?”

Danni leaned back in her chair and looked at Eleanor through heavy lidded eyes that made Eleanor’s heart beat harder. “I think that I don’t particularly care what Tommy thinks.”

Eleanor smiled softly. “I see. He might have a point though, you should be careful. We should always be careful.”

“So should you be,” Danni said. She looked down at her plate. “But I think we’re doing alright, don’t you?”

For a moment, Eleanor took in the warmth and comfort of all this. Sitting down to dinner with someone she had feelings for. The memories of the night before. The promise of what would come later this evening.

“I think we make a rather good team,” she said finally, putting her fork down.

Danni looked up again and grinned. “Yeah. We do, don’t we?”

And as they sat there, sharing a quiet look that said so much, neither of them were pretending anymore.

Because this wasn’t just a business arrangement, not now.

It was becoming something so much more.

And neither Danni nor Eleanor wanted to stop it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Danni wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand and surveyed the newly repaired drainage ditch. It had taken most of the morning, but at least the sheep wouldn't be swimming the next time it rained. She rolled her shoulders, stretching out the stiffness, and then heard the unmistakable growl of Hector's truck rumbling up the road. She groaned. Ten-to-one he was looking for her, and fifty-to-one odds this wasn't going to be a social call.

"Danni?" He called, leaning out of the driver's side window.

She waved an arm so that he could see her and he pulled into the side of the road, climbing out of the truck and slamming the door shut. "Danni, we need to talk," he said, as he strode over the field toward her.

"Good morning to you too," she muttered, treading her spade into the earth so that it stood unaided. "What's so important that you drove all the way down here looking for me?"

"You weren't at the house," he said.

"I've got a farm to run."

"So do I." He crossed his arms over his chest. "It's about this investor business. You need to think very seriously about selling."

Danni snorted. "Seriously? That again? I thought we'd already had this argument."

"Yeah, I thought so too. But then I started doing some digging." Hector's voice was heavy with what Danni assumed was frustration. "Dan, the sooner you take the offer, the sooner you can get your life back. You don't have to be tied to all this."

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Danni's hackles rose. "I don't want to sell. This is my home. My land. I like being tied to it."

Hector let out a sharp breath. "Be realistic here. What happens when this marriage of yours ends? What happens when the Lady Eleanor moves on? You really think she's going to stick around here for farm life? And when she goes, the money goes with her."

"Things are going well with Eleanor," Danni said, stiffening.

Hector looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "You're actually serious about her?"

"Yes." Danni met his gaze, daring him to argue with her.

He ran a hand through his hair, exasperated. "Alright, so you're serious. But do you think that means anything? Really? You're from two different worlds, Dan. She's got money, connections, the whole nine yards. What could you possibly have in common?"

For a second, Danni clenched her jaw, breathing through her nose and reminding herself that this was her brother and she loved him and he loved her. "I know you think you're looking out for me, but I don't need your approval, Hec. Eleanor isn't like that."

"You're setting yourself up for heartbreak," Hector said, shaking his head.

Danni folded her arms. "So what? I should just give up because it's not easy?"

"Alright," Hector said with a heavy sigh. "If she means that much to you, why haven't you brought her up to meet mum?"

Danni felt her stomach drop. "You know why."

"No, I don't," said Hector, his voice rising. "You two haven't spoken for months now, all because of one stupid argument."

"It wasn't just one argument."

"She's our mum, Danni," Hector shot back. "At some point, you need to grow up and realize that she's all we've got now, and she's not getting any younger."

Danni said nothing, her jaw tight. She really didn't want to have this conversation again.

Hector shook his head in frustration. "Fine, do what you want. But before I go..." He pulled a small notepad from his pocket, flipping it open. "I found the name of the investor." He looked at her. "Stephan Marren."

The name sent a jolt through Danni's memory, but she couldn't quite place it, even though she was sure that she'd heard it before and relatively recently too.

She sighed as she watched Hector climb back into his truck and drive off, brake lights vanishing into the distance. Why couldn't people just trust her to make her own decisions?

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Danni drove into town to go to the bank. The Land Rover was vibrating and making a strange whirring noise. She'd need to get AA to

come and take another look, she thought. And then she wondered just when she'd gotten so used to having Eleanor's money around that she'd have thoughts like that.

The name Stephan Marren was still rattling around her brain, gnawing at her. She hated mysteries, especially ones that smelled like trouble.

She dropped off her checks at the bank and was about to hop back into the truck to head home when she spotted a familiar face sitting outside a cafe. She smiled, maybe here was her chance to get to know Eleanor's circle a little better.

"Danni," Elizabeth called, waving her over. "Fancy meeting you here."

"I don't just wrestle sheep," Danni said, grinning. "I'm allowed to leave the farm every now and again."

Elizabeth grinned back. "Join me for a coffee?"

Danni hesitated for only a second, then nodded. "I'll run in and get one. Can I get you anything?"

"Nothing, I'm perfect," Elizabeth said.

A couple of minutes later, Danni was back, pulling out a chair to sit in the warm sun.

"So," Elizabeth said, smiling pleasantly. "How's married life treating you, then?"

Danni took a sip of her coffee, buying herself a moment, then shrugged. "Can't complain."

"That's a rather vague answer," Elizabeth said, arching an eyebrow.

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“And a rather nosy question,” Danni pointed out.

Elizabeth laughed. “Fair enough. I just wanted to make sure my best friend isn’t being led astray, that’s all.”

“You think I’m some kind of troublemaker?” Danni asked, crossing her legs at the ankles and letting the sun stroke her face.

“I think that Eleanor doesn’t usually take risks,” said Elizabeth, watching her closely. “And you are a risk.”

Letting out a slow breath, Danni nodded. “I get what you’re doing. I’d be doing the same if it was my best friend. You’re protecting Eleanor and I respect that. But you don’t need to worry.” She swallowed and looked at the lawyer. “I, um, care about her.”

“That’s quite a departure from how all this started,” said Elizabeth, still studying her.

“Life’s full of surprises,” shrugged Danni.

“That it is.” Elizabeth was smiling in a way that suggested to Danni that this outcome wasn’t entirely unexpected for her. “And your agreement?”

Danni met her gaze. “Why does that have to change anything?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Alright, understood. And for what it’s worth.” She cleared her throat. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think I’ve seen Eleanor so happy in... well, ever,

I suppose.”

“Thank you,” said Danni quietly. She stirred her coffee and decided that a change of subject was probably in order. “Have you ever heard the name Stephan Marren?” she asked.

Elizabeth’s expression shifted immediately, her body going still. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Hector,” Danni said. “He found out that’s who’s been trying to buy up all the property around here. I know I’ve heard the name, I just can’t remember where.”

Elizabeth let out a breath. “Stephan Marren is Eleanor’s great-uncle.”

Danni blinked. “What? Her uncle? That makes no sense at all. Why would her own family want to buy out the house that’s already in the family? And what would they want with my farm?”

Elizabeth shook her head, face stormy. “Not a clue. But I’m going to find out.”

Danni sat back, head spinning, not really understanding what was happening.

“Leave it with me,” said Elizabeth, patting her leg. “I’ll take a look into all this and get some answers.”

But Danni wasn’t so sure that she shouldn’t start protecting herself rather than relying on someone else to do it. And protecting Eleanor too, of course.

DRIVING HOME, DANNI kept one hand on the wheel, the other drumming against her thigh as she thought. Something wasn’t adding up here. Why would Eleanor’s great-uncle be making secretive deals behind her back? It was obvious that Eleanor

had no idea who the investor was, otherwise she'd have mentioned it, wouldn't she? Unless this was all part of a huge scam to make her sell her farm. But that didn't add up either.

No, she was almost certain that Eleanor knew nothing about this.

She thought about the house, how much it meant to Eleanor, how much she'd sacrificed to keep it. And now someone in her own family was trying to take it from her?

She knew now where she'd heard the name before. Stephan Marren had been pointed out to her at the country club party. The wanker in the kilt. What had Eleanor said about him? Something about her grandmother's sister having bad taste in younger men. And she'd mentioned bankruptcy, too.

Danni's hand tightened on the wheel. Whatever it was that was going on, Eleanor needed to know about it. And Danni would be damned if she was going to keep anything from her, especially when it came to something as important as Eleanor's home.

By the time she pulled into the farm, the evening was starting to turn the light faded and orange. She climbed out of the Land Rover, stretched her back, and made her way inside, feeling an unexpected rush of comfort at the sight of Eleanor setting the kitchen table.

"Long day?" Eleanor asked, glancing up and smiling as Danni came in.

"You have no idea," Danni muttered, bending over to pull off her boots.

The scent of roasted chicken and rosemary filled the air, making Danni's mouth water. "Dinner won't be long, if you're ready for it?" Eleanor asked.

A slow smile crept across Danni's face. "You know, sometimes you're almost as convincing as a real wife."

For a moment, Eleanor smiled at her across the table. "You know, sometimes I feel like a real wife."

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“And is that such a big thing?” asked Danni, pulling out a chair.

“Do you know, it just might not be,” said Eleanor. “Now, are you ready to eat?”

“Famished,” said Danni. She picked up her knife and fork as though ready to carve into the table. But the weight of what she had to tell Eleanor had settled heavy in her chest. After dinner, she told herself. She’d tell her after dinner. Because something told her that, after tonight, everything might change.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eleanor sat at the kitchen table, her fingers curled around the glass of whiskey that Danni had given her, swirling the liquor around absentmindedly. She wasn’t entirely sure she liked whiskey, but it was what one did when faced with shocking news. One swirled a drink and pretended to be alright, to be in control.

Across from her, Danni was leaning against the kitchen counter, her arms crossed, watching with a look of worry and wariness on her face. “So, are we just going to sit here while you process this, or should I fetch you some smelling salts?”

Eleanor exhaled through her nose. “It’s just... unfathomable.”

“Oh, it’s pretty fathomable,” Danni said, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl on the table and biting into it. “Your great-uncle’s a greedy sod who lost all his money and now wants to take what isn’t his.”

Eleanor narrowed her eyes. “A very succinct summary of an extremely complicated

family dynamic,” she admitted. She couldn’t remember the first time she’d set eyes on Stephan Marren. But she did remember that he’d always made her uncomfortable. He’d always been a little too loud, a little too happy, just not quite... right.

“Well, I do my best,” Danni said with a wink, and Eleanor found herself almost smiling. Almost.

She set her glass down with a sigh. “Stephan Marren. Maybe I should have known, should have guessed.”

“Why?” asked Danni, pulling out a kitchen chair and sitting down to eat her apple.

“Because... he never seemed quite right. I only remember him coming to the house a handful of times, but every time it was like he was valuing it with every glance, like he was totting up the amount he could get for it. He always seemed interested in family history. A ruse, I suppose, to find out more about the house. He’s only related by marriage, of course.”

Danni tilted her head. “What exactly is his deal?”

Eleanor leaned back in her chair. “My great-aunt, my grandmother’s younger sister, was... beautiful is the first word that comes to mind. But also...” She breathed out. “I don’t quite know how to put it delicately. I know that there were some problems at her birth, though no one ever told me what exactly. And she was perfectly nice and gentle and a lovely woman. But not... bright.”

“I see,” said Danni.

“In those days, a lot of families would have put their daughter into an institution. It’s just what was done. But my family didn’t. From everything my grandmother said, everyone just pretended that nothing was wrong.” She sighed again and rubbed at her

face. “And for the most part, I think Imogen lived a good life, a happy life, she was always surrounded by friends, she was always smiling.”

Danni smiled at Eleanor. “Better than being institutionalized.”

“Indeed,” said Eleanor. “And then Marren came along. Imogen had her own money, though my grandmother and her husband got the house and the estates. He was thirty years younger than her, and everyone knew he was a gold-digger. Everyone except Imogen. My grandparents did what they could, but she wouldn’t listen, and in the end I think it was easier just to let things go as they would. We all knew that my grandparents would look after Imogen when the worst happened.”

“And it did, I assume?” asked Danni, biting down to the core of her apple.

Eleanor nodded. “Marren married her and spent her money on bad investments and disastrous horse-racing bets, and then blamed my family for not bailing him out. Imogen died not long after, I’m not sure if she ever knew that he was a sham. I hope not.” She bit her lip. “It appears he’s still holding a grudge.”

Danni let out a low whistle. “And now he’s got his sights set on your house and my farm.” She frowned. “Wait, does that make sense? The house and the farm?”

Eleanor nodded. “If he’s working with developers, he’s likely planning to sell the entire area for commercial property. He’ll have already bought or made offers on other properties in the area, I’m sure.”

Danni sucked on her teeth. “A lot of it around here is council land,” she said. “I know from when I was buying this place.”

“Right, so he’ll probably have brought that for a song and all he needs now is the random privately-owned properties to join up with the other segments he’s purchased

in order to make one large plot of land.”

Danni let out an unimpressed grunt. “He sounds like a right bastard.”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Eleanor, taking a sip of whiskey.

They sat in silence for a moment, the light low and orange still coming through the kitchen window. Eleanor was lost in thought, her mind running through all the ways that this could go wrong, all the signals that perhaps she should have recognized.

But Danni, apparently, was thinking of solutions. “If we can’t stop him outright,” she said. “We can at least make things harder for him.”

Eleanor turned to her, raising an eyebrow. “I’m listening.”

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Danni shifted her weight, looking more serious than Eleanor had ever seen her. “We’re married,” she said. “If we put both properties in both of our names, then it would make things more complicated. He’d need both of our signatures in order to sell. It might make him reconsider, or just complicate things so much that he walks away.”

For a second, Eleanor could say nothing. When she finally did, her voice was about an octave too high. “Are you insane?”

Danni blinked. “I mean, probably, sometimes, maybe, I’m trying to run a farm single-handed, after all. But that seems unrelated to the subject at hand.”

“That house has been in my family for generations. It’s my home.”

“And this farm is my home,” said Danni. “Which is why I’m trying to keep both of them safe.”

Eleanor’s stomach twisted and felt sour. She knew that Danni was only trying to help. But the idea of tying her entire legacy to someone else, even someone as dependable as Danni, made her insides churn.

“You don’t want my name on the house,” Danni said, voice low.

“It’s not that,” Eleanor began. “It’s...”

Danni held up both hands in surrender. “It’s alright, it’s fine. It was just an idea. No need to get defensive, Princess. I was only thinking aloud.”

Eleanor winced. “I know, I just...” She broke off, pressing her fingers to her temples. “This whole situation is spiraling. I’m not used to relying on other people.”

“I was good enough to save your house once,” Danni pointed out. “I mean, you did marry me to get it. I just thought...” She stopped, took a breath, and nodded. “It’s fine, I forget sometimes that you’re Little Miss Independent.”

Eleanor shot her a look, but Danni’s expression was warm, understanding, a little hurt perhaps, but not angry. At least not as far as Eleanor could tell. “Is this our first fight?” she asked, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

“God no,” said Danni with a grin. “I’m pretty sure we had that when you ran your sports car into my tractor.”

“You mean when you drove your tractor into my MG,” Eleanor said. She sipped her drink again. “I, um, I know that you were just trying to be helpful before.”

Danni nudged her foot under the table. “That’s what I do. I’m a very helpful person. Full of help, I am, absolutely brimming with it.”

Eleanor finally let out a soft laugh, shaking her head. “You’re infuriating.”

“And yet, here you are, still talking to me.”

Eleanor glanced at her, feeling something shift in her chest. Danni was still sitting there, apple core abandoned on the table, tilting her head to one side and smiling and listening, and Eleanor realized, for what felt like the first time in a very long time, that perhaps she wasn’t alone in all of this.

For the first time in her life, someone was standing beside her. Even if currently that person happened to be sitting opposite her.

Her heart pounded in her chest. “I, um...”

Danni cocked an eyebrow. “You... what?”

Eleanor swallowed. “I appreciate it. This. You.”

“I know that,” Danni said, grinning.

Something in the air changed. The tension that had begun to simmer when Danni had made her suggestion coalesced into something else, a different kind of tension, one Eleanor was becoming more familiar with. Perhaps she should step back before she did something reckless, something that might change the situation. But Eleanor didn’t think she could. Didn’t want to.

She stood up, walking around the table, going to stand next to Danni, to pick up her hand. She stroked Danni’s wrist with her thumb. “I don’t want to fight.”

She saw Danni’s breath hitch. “Then don’t.”

Which was all the encouragement that Eleanor needed. She bent down, hair falling over her space, closing the distance between them, pressing her lips to Danni’s in a kiss that was far too soft, far too tender, for the chaotic feelings that were running through her head.

Danni’s hands found her waist, she scooted her chair back, pulling Eleanor in and down until Eleanor was sitting astride her. Eleanor melted against her, tilting her head to deepen the kiss.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew that this could be another mistake, that she was getting in so deep and so fast.

But just at the moment, she really didn't care a jot.

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All that mattered was the way Danni held her, the way she kissed her back without hesitation, the way she made Eleanor feel something that she hadn't felt in a very long time. Safe.

The rest of the world could wait.

For now, this was enough.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eleanor stood in the empty, cavernous foyer of the west wing of Brewster Manor, gazing around at the ceiling above her. The smell of fresh paint lingered in the air, mingling with the faintest traces of wood polish. The floors gleamed, the windows reflected the bright summer sunlight and, most importantly, the roof no longer leaked.

It was, finally, her home again. Well, part of it, at least.

Samson stood beside her, his arms crossed, surveying his team's work with satisfaction. "That's the big stuff taken care of, Your Highness. This side of the old place is officially water-tight, structurally sound, and, if I say so myself, better than the day it was built."

"Consider yourself better than an accomplished architect and stone mason, do you?" Eleanor asked in amusement.

Samson sniffed. "It's a damn good job, if you'll pardon my language, Your Honor. There's a few cosmetic bits to do, but I'd say this wing is ready for you to move in

whenever you'd like. Must be a weight off your mind, eh? Being able to come back home again."

For a second, Eleanor stood frozen. She was supposed to be thrilled. No, she was thrilled. Really, she was. For years now, she'd been worried about the whole house falling to pieces around her ears, worried about whether it would really be salvageable or not. And now, here it was, partially whole. She should want to move back in immediately. It was her home. Yet she was having trouble trying to conjure up the appropriate enthusiasm.

Why did the idea of moving back in make her stomach twist in the wrong way?

She glanced toward the large bay windows, where sunlight was streaming in, highlighting the dust still settling in the air, and took a breath. She knew exactly what the problem was.

Moving back here would mean leaving the farm. Leaving the quiet, early mornings when Danni got up before dawn, moving through the house with a soft tread so as not to wake her. Leaving the warmth of shared meals and easy conversations. Leaving the way Danni looked at her, touched her, kissed her.

Which was ridiculous because they were not in a real marriage.

Eleanor shook her head sharply. She needed to focus.

But the thought wouldn't leave her alone. For a while there, she'd wondered if she could persuade Danni to move in here, to live with her in the manor.

Yet when she tried to picture it now, Danni in this grand house, muddy boots stacked up by the front door, a cat curled up in the entry hall, farm equipment in the courtyard, she gulped. The image was so vivid that Eleanor startled, making Samson

jump.

“You alright there, Your Ladyship?”

She sighed. It couldn't work, could it? Practically it just couldn't. All other things aside, she could make allowances, they could compromise. But Danni needed to be on the farm early in the morning, how could she possibly live all the way out here?

“I'm fine,” she said briskly to Samson. “And you've done a wonderful job. Your men are to be commended. Efficient and on budget. I can only hope that the rest of the house will turn out so well.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” he said, grinning. “Whenever you're ready to come back in, give me the word. I'll have some of the boys start bringing the furniture back in, shall I?”

Eleanor forced a polite smile and nodded, but before she could say anything else, her phone buzzed in her blazer pocket. She dug it out and saw Elizabeth's name flashing on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?” barked Elizabeth.

“I'm at the house,” said Eleanor. “The west wing is just about—”

“You need to get to my office,” Elizabeth said.

“But—”

“Now.”

Something about Elizabeth's tone made Eleanor straighten up, made her heart beat strangely and her mouth go dry. "Elizabeth, what is it? What's wrong?"

"I'll explain when you get here," Elizabeth said crisply. "Just... come as soon as you can."

The line went dead.

Eleanor's stomach dropped. Whatever this was, it did not sound good. She wasn't sure that she could handle bad news just at the moment.

"You alright?" Samson asked, peering at her face.

"Quite fine," she murmured, getting her car keys out of her pocket. "Just... a quick errand."

She flashed him a smile and strode away, heels clacking on the tiled floor.

ELIZABETH WAS ALREADY standing when Eleanor stepped into her neat office, looking uncharacteristically tense. A thick file lay open on her desk, its contents spread out in neat, methodical stacks.

Eleanor shut the door behind her. "Elizabeth, what's going on?"

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "There's no easy way to say this, Nor, so I'm just going to tell you. Marren is suing you for the house."

For a moment, Eleanor could only blink, then a smile spread across her face and she started to laugh. "Oh dear," she said, pulling out a chair and sitting down.

But Elizabeth's face didn't change. "I'm not kidding," she said. "I'm absolutely serious."

A sense of cold dread began creeping up Eleanor's spine. She stopped laughing. "No, no, you're joking."

"I wish I were." Elizabeth pulled out her desk chair and sat down.

"But..." Eleanor tried to have a coherent thought. "But, that's absurd! He can't possibly think... What's going on here?"

Elizabeth slid a document across the desk. "Read it yourself."

Eleanor took the paper and scanned through the legal jargon. It made no sense to her, she couldn't focus. The only words that drilled into her brain were the ones right at the top. Claimant: Stephan Marren. Defendant: Lady Eleanor Brewster.

Her insides seemed to roll around and she felt dizzy. "But... how?"

"He's claiming that as the only living male heir, he has a legal right to the estate," Elizabeth said.

Eleanor's head snapped up. "Male heir? What? But there's a trust, there are terms, how could you not see this coming?" She was aware that she was snapping, that she was blaming Elizabeth. But she had to blame someone.

"You're correct," Elizabeth said quite calmly. "We all know the terms of the trust backward and forward. But, to be honest, you were the only living inheritor we ever considered. If you'd been ineligible to inherit, if you hadn't married, for example, we'd have dug deeper and tried to find a suitable heir. But Marren was never on our radar. He married your grandmother's younger sister. We'd have looked for cousins and first cousins before we even glanced at him."

"This is like the Middle Ages," she said.

“You’d be surprised just how often archaic inheritance laws are still pulled out in cases like this,” Elizabeth said. “My honest opinion is that he doesn’t stand much of a chance. You’re a direct blood relative of the last owner of the house, and you’ve fulfilled the obligation of the trust by marrying. However, this is a nuisance suit that’s going to cost you a lot of money and a lot of time.”

Eleanor’s hands curled into fists. This was exactly the kind of underhanded scheme she should have expected from her devious great-uncle. He had no real claim to the house, but he thought if he made things difficult enough, she might be pressured into giving up. Well, he’d severely underestimated her. She was not one to back down from a fight.

“I’ll take him on,” she said, her voice cool and steady. “I won’t let him win. This is ridiculous and nonsensical.”

Elizabeth gave her a small, approving nod. “Good. Because this will be a battle.”

Exhaling slowly, Eleanor tried to get a handle on her anger. “Very well. We’ll do what’s necessary. Now, is that all? Or is there some other delightful disaster that you’d like to inform me about?”

She’d been expecting Elizabeth to smile, perhaps to ask her to lunch, but instead, the woman hesitated.

Eleanor felt anxiety creeping all over her skin. “What?”

Elizabeth took a breath, closed her eyes, and appeared to come to some kind of decision. Because when she opened her eyes again, she said, “There’s something else you need to consider. You’re married now.”

“I’m fully aware of that fact,” Eleanor said. “It’s how I got the damn house in the first

place.”

“I know that,” Elizabeth said, obviously trying to keep her patience. “But whenever legal proceedings against a member of a married couple come into play, there’s extra considerations to be taken into account.”

“Like what?”

“I’ve said that I don’t think the courts will rule against you. But I can’t guarantee that. Nor can I guarantee that the ensuing legal bills won’t bankrupt you,” said Elizabeth. “You make your decisions for your estate, Nor. But you have to remember that should the worst happen, your assets are now tied to Danni’s through marriage. Meaning that her farm could be at risk.”

The air seemed to leave the room.

Eleanor could handle a fight over her own house. But Danni’s farm?

Danni had spent years struggling to get her own land, had sacrificed everything, including a relationship with her mother, to get what she knew she wanted. The farm was everything to her.

And if there was even the smallest chance that Danni’s home could be taken from her, that it could be Eleanor’s fault...

No.

No, she was not going to let that happen. Not when they had a sham marriage, a mere business arrangement.

She crossed her legs and leaned forward. Her voice was quiet and controlled when she spoke. “How do I protect her?”

Elizabeth watched her carefully. “The only way to make sure Danni isn’t dragged into this legally is to separate your assets.”

Eleanor swallowed hard. She was no fool. There was only one way to do that. She lifted her chin. “I need you to prepare papers of legal separation.”

“Eleanor,” Elizabeth said, expression softening.

“No. You are my solicitor and I am instructing you to prepare separation papers as a precursor to divorce,” Eleanor said. She looked firmly at Elizabeth. “I have no choice here.”

A long silence stretched between them.

Then Elizabeth nodded. “I’ll have them drafted and communicated.”

Eleanor nodded. It should be fine, it shouldn’t matter, this wasn’t a real marriage, she kept telling herself. She pressed her lips together. This was the right thing to do. Protecting Danni was the right thing to do.

She should never have let herself get emotionally involved in the first place.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Danni shoved the back door open with her shoulder, dropping the stack of empty sacks by the door, and then trying to take her boots off without touching them with her hands. It was a delicate job, and she had to lean back against the door to accomplish it.

She sniffed, looking for a clue as to what might be for dinner. The scent of roasted vegetables and something buttery lingered in the air, but that was the remnants of last

night's dinner. It had been a good dinner. A good night. They'd talked, they'd laughed, and then they'd fallen into bed and Danni thought that that was what marriage was supposed to be about.

They might have started out faking it, but they were rapidly becoming pros, at least in Danni's opinion.

But there was no new smell in the air, no beef roasting, no saucepan boiling, nothing. Which was fine, obviously. It wasn't like she expected Eleanor to cook every night or anything. It was just... a little off. She cocked her head, seeing the shadow of something unfamiliar in the front hall. Peering closer, she saw suitcases. Eleanor's suitcases.

Her heart kicked up an uneasy beat.

"Eleanor?"

There was no answer.

Danni stepped forward, scanning the kitchen, the couch. The stove was unlit. The book that Eleanor had been reading was missing from the arm of the couch. There were no planners sitting on the kitchen table. A growing sense of wrongness slithered up Danni's spine.

Then there were footsteps on the stairs, and Eleanor appeared, perfectly put together as always. She was in soft gray trousers, a starched white shirt, not a hair out of place. Except something else was out of place, just Danni couldn't quite figure out what it was.

There was no smile, no sarcastic remark.

Instead, Eleanor gripped her handbag closer to her side and stared down at the ground as though it might have some answers to some very serious questions.

Danni blew out a breath. “Um, what’s with the bags?”

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Now Eleanor did finally look at her, eyes deep green and unreadable. “I’m moving back to the house.”

The words came out crisp and clean with no hesitation, nothing but meaning, like they’d been rehearsed. No emotion even. Just words. Just there, spinning around the room. Danni opened her mouth, then shut it again. She blinked, shook her head slightly. “Wait... what?”

Eleanor held her bag closer to her body. “The roof’s finished on the west wing. Samson says I can move back in safely. So I’m going.”

Danni tried to process this, tried to find a way to make sense of it, but every explanation she landed on didn’t quite fit. “So... what about dinner?” she asked, grasping onto the smallest, safest thing she could think of. “Shall I make something?”

Eleanor exhaled sharply through her nose, something that wasn’t quite a laugh but wasn’t far from it either. “I won’t be here for dinner, Danni.”

Danni shifted her feet, the tiles cold through her socks. “Right, yes, obviously. Sorry. But, um, but you’ll be back, yeah?” Because it was unthinkable that she wouldn’t be. It was unthinkable that this was happening right now.

There was silence. Just long enough for Danni to feel a deep, sinking certainty in her stomach.

“No,” Eleanor said finally. She looked away. “No, I won’t.”

It took a second for this to land. “Right.” Danni huffed out a small laugh. “Okay, is this...?” She gestured vaguely. “Is this a joke? Or did I do something? Is this about something I did? The boots again? By the door? Because I can—”

“It’s not you, Danni,” Eleanor cut her off.

“Then what is it?” Danni asked, confusion in her voice.

Eleanor looked at her again. “I was never meant to stay. I never intended to stay.”

Danni flinched. The words cut right through her, sharp and precise. She shook her head, trying to keep her voice steady. “No, no, of course, not at the beginning. But then... But we...” She took a breath, it was shaky, too shaky. “But now it’s different. This is bollocks. We’re happy, we’re...”

She could see Eleanor’s fingers tightening around the strap of her bag, the knuckles turning white. “That was never the point of this,” she said. “The two things should never have become intertwined.”

Danni knew what she meant. Knew that she meant that the feelings and the business arrangement should have been kept separate. But that didn’t mean that this had to happen, did it? She took a slow step forward, something raw and bloody rising in her chest. “So what? That’s it? You just separate the feelings out and go on back to your house like none of this happened?”

There was a moment when she thought that Eleanor was going to say something else, when her expression changed just a little. But then she shook her head. “That’s exactly what’s happening,” she said.

“You don’t get to decide all of that all on your own,” Danni said, clenching her fists at her side, feeling the anger burning up inside her, wanting to hit something or kick

something. Not Eleanor, but something. The couch, the table, anything, anything to let out some of this anger that was threatening to bubble over.

“I do, actually,” Eleanor said, looking away.

And there was something about that quiet certainty that broke something in Danni. “Unbelievable,” she muttered, raking a hand through her hair. “Un-fucking-believable. You... what? You just get bored of slumming it? Bored of having a bit of rough? Want to go back to your old, rich life, do you? Or is this one of those things where the emotions all got too much for your stiff upper lip? You need to push people away before they get too close and discover that you’re actually human beneath all that aristocratic bullshit?”

Eleanor inhaled sharply, but didn’t say anything. It was like she was standing there knowing that she deserved the words, knowing that she deserved to be punished.

Danni let out a breath. “You’ll miss me,” she said, as much to herself as to Eleanor. “You’ll miss all of this. Just you wait and see. You think it’s all high ceilings and high tea. But you’ll miss this, Princess. You’ll miss me.”

Again, she almost thought that Eleanor was going to break, going to say something. But after an instant, Eleanor stood up taller, a cool, distant expression passing across her face. “Let’s not make this dramatic.”

“Yeah, God forbid that something in your life actually means something. Other than your damn house, of course.”

A flicker of something crossed Eleanor’s face, but it was gone before Danni could place it. Instead, Eleanor straightened her shoulders, as poised as ever. “I’ll set up a standing order for the farm. Monthly payments into your account.”

Danni recoiled. “What?”

“That was the deal, wasn’t it? You needed money, I needed marriage. I’m not backing out of our agreement. You’ll have what you need for the farm.”

It felt like being punched, like a fist to her stomach. “You think that’s what this is?” Danni said, her voice raw. “You really believe that’s all this was?”

Eleanor’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I think it’s best that we remember why we did all this in the first place.”

Danni could only stare at her, could only look at the careful mask that Eleanor had put back into place. She knew that she’d made Eleanor take that mask off once, was sure of it. She didn’t know why it was back, and she didn’t know how to remove it again. “Fine,” she said, giving up. “Fine. You want to go, then go. I’m not stopping you.”

For a fraction of a second, Eleanor hesitated. Just a fraction. A tiny sliver of time when things could have changed, where this could all have ended differently. Then she turned away, picking up her bags, and opening the front door.

Danni didn't stop her.

She listened as Eleanor's footsteps receded, as the front door clicked shut behind her, as the engine of the little sports car roared to life. Then she just stood there, staring at nothing, fists clenched so tightly that her knuckles ached.

What the hell had just happened? What had changed? How had they gone from building something to suddenly there being nothing there? It didn't make sense. Except that Eleanor was so obviously hiding something.

She'd come to her senses, Danni thought. Once she was alone in that big, empty house, she'd realize what she'd done. She'd miss waking up together. She'd miss their stupid fights, the banter, the way they made up afterwards. She'd miss it all. She'd—

A knock at the door startled her.

She blinked, shaking herself, before realizing that this could be Eleanor. Maybe she'd come to her senses already, maybe she'd changed her mind, turned the car around, come back here to say that she'd been afraid, been stupid, been...

Danni yanked the door open, but Eleanor was not standing there.

A man in a motorcycle helmet and leather jacket was holding out a large buff-colored envelope. "Delivery for Danielle Franks."

Danni frowned, taking it. "What is it?"

The man shrugged. “Legal documents. Sign here.”

She signed, her hand trembled, her pulse pounding in herears.

When she closed the door, her fingers fumbled with the envelope, tearing it before she slid the papers free, crisp and cold between her fingers.

At first, she took nothing in.

Then she read again.

Only then did her stomach knot and her breath stop. Only then did she really understand.

Eleanor wasn't just moving home. She wasn't taking some space. She wasn't just freaked out because it had all got serious. No.

Eleanor wanted a divorce.

It was over.

Danni sank onto the bottom stair, staring blankly at the words on the page. She'd been wrong. Eleanor wasn't coming back. Not ever.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Eleanor walked through the grand front doors of the manor without even noticing that they hadn't been locked. Her heels clicked against the polished floor, the sound echoing through the empty, cavernous entryway. She could smell dust and paint and all the reminders that the house wasn't yet finished. But she strode through the house to the west wing, holding herself together, not spilling a single tear.

She'd done it.

She'd walked away from Danni.

It had seemed best not to complicate things, best to separate, be clear that this was a business relationship. That was the best way of Danni keeping what was hers, of not putting Danni's livelihood at risk.

Any hint that a divorce wasn't on the up-and-up and Danni's assets could come back into play, and that wasn't why she'd done this at all.

So she'd walked away from Danni and the farm, from the warmth of waking up beside someone who made her laugh. So she'd done the right thing.

Why, then, did it feel so utterly wrong?

She exhaled slowly, straightening her shoulders. It was better this way, she kept telling herself. She had to protect Danni. And if that meant cutting her out of her life completely, then so be it. No room for doubt, no room for second-guessing. She'd been brought up to do the right thing, and damn it, she was going to do the right thing. What she might actually want was completely irrelevant.

"Did I not tell you to get a night watchman around here? Or at least lock the damn door?"

Eleanor spun around to see Elizabeth standing in the doorway, her suit wrinkled and her eyes tired. "What do you need?" she asked.

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“I came to check on you,” Elizabeth said, eyeing Eleanor with thinly veiled concern. “You’re not answering your phone.”

Eleanor waved a dismissive hand. “It must have died somewhere in my luggage. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Elizabeth came into the room, closing the door behind her, and raising a skeptical brow. “Really? Because I’ve just spent the last fifteen minutes on the phone with Danni’s solicitor. She’s received the separation papers.”

With a sniff, Eleanor turned away, busying herself by smoothing a nonexistent wrinkle from her sleeve. “Good. That’s what I wanted.”

“Nor, are you absolutely sure about this?” Elizabeth sighed. “Because from where I’m standing, you look like someone who just made the biggest mistake of her life.”

“What I look like,” Eleanor said coolly, “is someone with an estate to run. I need to focus on the house, the renovations, the finances. That’s all that matters now.”

Elizabeth frowned. “So that’s it? You’re just going to pretend she never existed?”

Eleanor lifted her chin. “I’m moving on. It’s the sensible thing to do.” It was the only thing to do. Anything else would break her. Besides, if Danni thought there was a hint that there were any feelings, she’d never take no for an answer, she’d ruin everything and put her farm at risk. Eleanor knew her well enough to know that.

After a moment, Elizabeth sighed again, shaking her head. “If you say so. But if you

need me, I'm here. Just... don't bury yourself in the work and pretend it doesn't hurt."

Eleanor didn't reply. She wasn't going to lie to her best friend. Instead, she walked toward the window and stared out at the sprawling estate, the fields stretching beyond the horizon.

Moving on.

Yes, that's what she had to do.

???

Danni hefted a full feed sack off the trailer and dropped it onto the growing pile near the barn. Her shoulders ached with the effort, but the physical hurt was better than whatever chaos was going on inside her. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows over the fields, but she barely noticed. She'd spent twenty-four hours now trying to avoid thinking. But it wasn't quite working.

Eleanor had left.

Not just left, but actually left. Left her. Like none of it had meant anything. Like Danni herself hadn't meant anything.

"What's wrong with you?" Tommy's voice cut through her thoughts. He stood a few feet away, arms crossed, his expression hovering somewhere between concern and exasperation. "If you leave them sacks there, they'll just get gotten by the rats. Better off in the trailer for now."

Danni said nothing, just kept hefting sacks, kept working.

“You’ve been weird all day,” Tommy said.

She clenched her jaw. “I’m fine.”

“About as fine as a cow stuck in a ditch.” He took a step closer. “Go on, tell me what’s wrong. Did something happen? Is it Eleanor?”

Danni snapped. “Nothing. Nothing happened, alright? Just drop it.”

Tommy blinked in surprise, then slowly raised his hands. “Alright, alright. No need to bite my head off.”

She ran a hand over her face. “Tom, sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re all twisted up, I get it.” He studied her for a beat before shaking his head. “I’ll be in the barn if you decide you actually want to talk like a normal human.”

He turned and walked off, leaving Danni alone with the weight of her thoughts. She kicked at a patch of dirt, frustration bubbling up inside her.

She needed something. What, she didn’t know. But work wasn’t distracting her. The farm wasn’t enough.

For the first time, it felt like she didn’t have everything she needed. And it was an uncomfortable thought.

HECTOR STRODE INTO the farmhouse after dinnertime, wearing his usual nonsense expression. He put the kettle on before he did anything else, then turned, leaned against the counter, and looked at Danni.

“Tommy says you’re acting weird. What’s going on?”

Danni exhaled. “Nothing.”

He snorted. “Try again.”

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. He was going to find out sooner or later, she supposed. She still had to take a deep breath before she could speak the words out loud. “Fine. Eleanor left. She’s gone back to the big house.”

He didn’t look surprised. “And?”

Danni gave him a flat look. “And what? That’s it. She left. Sent separation papers and the whole kit and caboodle. It’s over.”

Hector turned around and made tea for them both. “That was the deal though, wasn’t it?” he said, his back to her. When he turned around again, he placed a cup in front of her. “Are you alright with it?”

She let out a bitter laugh. “No, I’m not alright with it. But what choice do I have? You’re right, that was the deal. And she made it perfectly clear that that’s all this ever was, a deal. It was never real, it was always about the money.”

He sat down, wrapping his hands around his mug. “But that’s not true, is it?”

She clenched her jaw. “Doesn’t matter now, does it?”

A long silence stretched between them before Hector finally sipped his tea and sniffed. “So, what are you going to do?”

She stared at the table, coming to the conclusion that she knew she had to come to, not wanting everyone else to be right, but what if they were? Everyone had been right about Eleanor, after all, hadn't they? "I don't know," she said eventually. "Maybe you're all right. Maybe I should take the offer and sell the farm while it's still on the table."

Hector's eyebrows shot up. "You're serious?"

Danni shrugged. "What's keeping me here? The land? The sheep? The backbreaking work? My own damn stubbornness?"

"You love this farm," Hector said carefully. "You worked your arse off to get it and keep it, so you keep telling me."

"And look where that got me," she shot back. "I'm broke, I'm exhausted, and now I'm alone as well."

For a second, the kitchen clock ticked into the silent room. Then Hector reached across and awkwardly patted her hand. "You're not alone, Dan. I'm here. We're all here. And you know that there's nothing we'd all like better than to have you back at home with us. You can help run the big farm, just like you always did. You know as well as I do that big farming is how things are going. Running a wee place like this is practically impossible to make a living out of."

Danni let out a breath, shaking her head. "No, Hec. No. If I sell up, then I'm leaving. I don't know where, but I'm going. I need a fresh start. Something new, something else, something that doesn't leave me feeling like I've failed."

For the first time, realization dawned on Hector's face. "You're not talking about moving back home?"

“No,” she said quietly. “No, I’m not coming home, Hec.”

He watched her for a long, long moment, then sighed and stood up. He crossed the kitchen and, without a word, pulled Danni up from her chair and into a tight hug, holding her close so that she smelled the scent of his jacket, their father’s jacket, the smell of home and farm and dad.

Danni stiffened at first, then, after a moment, she let herself lean into it.

She was tired of fighting, tired of pretending. And tired of missing someone who clearly didn’t miss her back.

And after Hector left, with promises to check on her the next day, the rest of the night stretched on long and heavy. Danni sat by the kitchen window, staring out into the darkened fields, seeing the barn, the stables, and not crying.

She’d spent so long imagining a future here. A future where she’d run her own farm and prove to everyone that she could do it. Then a future where she and Eleanor laughed over their morning coffee and argued over paint colors for the kitchen. A future where that damn marriage certificate they’d got actually meant something.

But that future wasn’t real, because Eleanor had left.

And Danni had no idea how to let her go.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Eleanor was perfectly aware that the wall she was painting did not, in fact, require a fourth coat of paint. It had been perfectly acceptable after the first, excellent after the second, and borderline obsessive by the third. But yet here she was, paintbrush in hand, methodically covering the same stretch of plaster for the fourth time, because

otherwise, she might have to sit down and think.

Thinking was dangerous.

Thinking led to regret.

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And regret led to that sinking feeling in her stomach that she refused to acknowledge as heartbreak.

Truth be told, she'd known from the moment she'd walked out of Danni's front door that she was making a mistake. Had known it in the way her fingers had ached to reach back for her. Had known it in the way the air felt thinner, cooler, as soon as she left. But here she was, forcing herself to be productive, forcing herself to believe she'd done the only thing she could decently do to save the situation. And forcing herself to paint this poor wall for the fourth time. If she focused on the house, if she made it her entire world, then maybe...

"Oi!" Samson's voice rang through the mostly empty room. Startling Eleanor so badly she nearly sloshed paint onto her boots. "What d'you think you're doing here, eh? It's not a museum you can just wander around, you know."

Eleanor stood up hurriedly, wiping her hands on a rag, and rushed out into the hall to see just what was going on.

She arrived just in time to see Samson put his hands on his hips and glare at someone standing in the doorway.

"Nuffin to worry about, Your Maj, I got this," he growled.

"I think you'll find that the Lady Eleanor is more properly titled as Your Ladyship," Isabella said crisply. "And who might you be, young man?"

"Samson," Samson said suspiciously. "And what about yourself?"

“Lady Isabella Brewster, dowager of the house.”

Samson snorted. “What’s one of them, then?”

“A dowager?” Isabella asked. “Simply the wife of a dead important man.”

“It won’t do that,” Samson said. “Not defining yourself by a man. My daughter’d have none of that. She’d say you’re a woman in your own right.”

Isabella raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like a sensible girl,” she said. She turned to Eleanor. “My dear.”

Eleanor finally found her tongue. “Grandmama,” she blurted, horrified. “What on earth are you doing here? This is a building site!”

“Calm yourself, child,” Isabella said breezily, adjusting the fur stole around her shoulders as if she were arriving at a grand ball rather than a half-renovated manor house. “I’ve walked through war zones, I’ll have you know. Your paint fumes are hardly a deterrent. Now, what must one do around here to get a cup of tea?”

“I can get you one, Your Dowagerness,” Samson said grandly.

“Nonsense,” said Isabella. “You look like a man with an important job to do, and you should do it, not run around after old women with teapots.”

Samson chortled. “Right you are, Your Ladyship.”

He walked off and Eleanor watched him. “He gets it rightoccasionally,” she said. “And he’s a magnificent renovator.”

“He seems like a very nice man,” Isabella said. “Now, about that tea.”

Eleanor nodded. “To the kitchens.”

“You’re not going to stir it with that, are you?” Isabella said.

Eleanor looked down to see that she was still holding a paintbrush. She hurriedly put it down on the nearest paint can, and led her grandmother down the passage toward the kitchens.

“I do hope you have biscuits,” said Isabella as they walked. “The good kind, not those tasteless digestives. If not, I shall ask that Samson, I’m sure he’s got a stock.”

Eleanor sighed and once they were in the kitchen, pulled out a box of biscuits. Isabella crowed in delight as Eleanor put the kettle on.

“Now,” Isabella said, once a pot of tea was on the table and she’d eaten a chocolate bourbon biscuit. “Elizabeth has told me everything.”

Eleanor almost dropped the sugar bowl. “She had no right—”

“Oh, hush. Someone had to tell me before I found out by reading about your dramatic spiral into despair in the society pages.”

“I am not dramatically spiraling,” Eleanor snapped, then she waved vaguely at the half-painted kitchen. “I’m renovating.”

“One can do both,” said Isabella, given the kitchen a cursory glance. “And nothing screams ‘emotional stability’ like attacking a single patch of plaster as though it insulted your lineage.”

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Eleanor pressed her lips together. “I assume you didn’t come all this way to critique my painting.”

“I did not,” Isabella agreed, pouring herself a cup of tea. “I came all this way to call you a coward.”

Eleanor blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“A coward,” Isabella repeated, helping herself to another biscuit. “Running from love because it frightens you. Because you don’t think you deserve it. Because you’re so wrapped up in this house that you’ve forgotten that it’s just a thing.”

“That’s not true,” Eleanor said, stiffening.

“Please, if this was about protecting the house rather than protecting that lovely young woman, you would have fought harder to make sure that you kept what you loved. This is about you. About how terrified you are to let someone love you when you have no control over what might happen next.”

Eleanor said nothing, clenching her fists in her lap.

Isabella sighed and set down her teacup. “Imogen,” she said.

“Your sister?” asked Eleanor hesitantly.

“She lit up this house like no one I’ve ever known,” said Isabella. “Her laugh, her smile, she was the most beautiful woman.” She turned sharply to Eleanor. “She

wasn't perfect, but my mother always used to say that none of us were, so why should it matter?"

"I don't remember her," Eleanor said.

"You wouldn't. You were far too young. And then she fell in love with Stephan Marren, despite every single one of us warning her not to."

"Which didn't exactly end well," said Eleanor.

"And yet Imogen was happier than I'd ever seen her. Happy that she finally had what she'd seen so many others have. Someone to love. And, to give the fool his due, he adored her back, in his own selfish way. He read her stories that made her laugh, played games just to see her smile. I once found him creeping into the house at two in the morning carrying a dripping box of ice cream cake that Imogen had wanted."

"Oh," Eleanor said, not sure what else to say.

"Of course, we all knew he was a disaster waiting to happen, but nothing we could have said would have changed Imogen's mind. Because when you love someone, really love them, no one else's opinion matters, does it?"

Eleanor swallowed hard.

Isabella smiled. "And then, in that first summer that Stephan came to live here, your father met your mother." She chuckled at the memory. "It was quite the summer, love was all around us, the air was full of the scent of roses. I'll admit that even your grandfather and I..." She eyed Eleanor. "Well, perhaps that's going too far. What I meant to say was that it was one glorious, perfect summer."

Eleanor watched her grandmother carefully.

“It was my only solace, you know,” Isabella said, picking her cup up again. “That when your parents died at the very least they were together. It was all they would have wanted. They were so devoted to each other it bordered on the obscene.”

Eleanor’s throat tightened. “Is that supposed to be comforting?”

“Yes,” Isabella said simply. “Because what they had was real. All of them. However it all turned out, whatever their endings were, every one of them had that crashing moment of realization that another person can be the other half of you. And you...” She pointed a perfectly manicured finger at Eleanor. “You have that. And you’re throwing it away.”

Eleanor found that her eyes were stinging, that she had to blink a little too hard. She let out a shaky breath. “It’s too late.”

“Rubbish,” Isabella snapped. “You think that you’re protecting Danni. Maybe you are. But there are other solutions. What you’re really doing is protecting yourself, trying to make sure that no one and nothing can hurt you. But all you’re doing is ensuring that you die alone, clinging to a house that will never love you back.”

Silence stretched between them, heavy and suffocating. Eleanor’s mind reeled, every carefully built defense cracking under the weight of her grandmother’s words. She had been so sure that she was making the right choice. So sure that leaving was necessary. But what if... what if she had been wrong?

“It was obvious from the first moment I saw you together,” Isabella said, sipping at her tea. “Once you’ve seen love, you don’t forget it, you can identify it anywhere.”

Eleanor swallowed. Her hands were trembling. “I... I love her.”

Isabella sat back, satisfied. “Well, finally. That took long enough.” She looked

around herself. “Do you think that I could persuade that fine Samson to drive me home?”

Eleanor looked at her grandmother. “What do I do?”

Isabella’s eyes twinkled. “Isn’t it obvious?”

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Eleanor stared at the half-plastered wall of the kitchen, then looked back at her grandmother. Slowly, a plan began to form. If she wanted Danni back, she couldn't just apologize. She had to prove that she was worthy of Danni's love.

And if there was one thing about Lady Eleanor Brewster, it was that she never did anything by halves.

Chapter Thirty

Danni screeched the Land Rover into the big farmyard, kicking up a cloud of dust. She'd been meaning to get her mail redirected for months, but she supposed there was no point now. In fact, she wasn't even sure why she was picking it up.

She banged through the front door, stopping at the big wooden table in the hall that held keys and syringes and letters and God knew what else. Probably only bills and crap about farming regulations, she thought, as she picked up a bundle clearly marked with her name. She shoved them into her coat pocket and was about to make her escape when a voice called her name.

"Danielle."

Danni winced. There was only one person in the world that called her by her full name. Well, two if you counted the policeman that had once given her a speeding ticket. Assuming that Hector hadn't decided to employ an ex-cop, that meant that there was only one other person standing behind her.

Turning slowly, as if delaying the inevitable, Danni finally found herself face to face

with the woman that had given birth to her and then spent the following decades perfecting the art of disappointment. Her mother stood in the living room doorway, arms crossed, looking as formidable as ever.

“We need to talk.”

“Mum, I really don’t—”

“Now.”

Danni considered running. It was a solid option. She was in good shape, her mother was wearing slippers, she could probably make it. But then, her mother knew where she lived, so the long-term prospects of escape didn’t look promising.

In the end, she tossed her coat onto the hall table and followed her mother down the corridor toward the kitchen.

The old wooden table was scarred and scratched and, out of habit, Danni took the second chair on the right side. That had always been her seat when she lived at home. Not that this was home. Not anymore.

Her mother put a pot of tea on the table, poured two cups out of it, then sat down opposite her. Not her usual seat at the table.

Danni folded her arms and sighed. “Alright. What do you want?”

Her mother took a measured sip, then said, “I heard about what happened with this Eleanor.”

Danni stiffened. “Oh, yeah? And what of it? Want to gloat at me failing at marriage? Would that make you feel a bit better about yourself?”

For a second, her mother looked at her, then she shook her head. “Just wanted to say I’m sorry. Even if I never met the woman.”

“Why do you even care?” Danni scoffed.

Another moment of silence, then her mother sighed. “Because, despite everything, you’re still my daughter.”

That shut Danni up. It was a rare thing for her mother to say something so direct, so honest. Rarer still for her mother to admit anything that came even close to an emotion or a feeling.

“Look,” her mother continued. “I know we’re not close. We never have been, and I expect we never will be.”

“Well, that’s uplifting,” Danni muttered, grabbing hold of her mug of tea.

“Do you want to know why?”

Danni raised an eyebrow. “Oh, please, do tell.”

“We’re too much alike, you and I,” her mother said. “I look at you and I see me. And it’s not always a pleasant sight.”

“Did you get me in here just to fling insults around?” asked Danni, stung. She hadn’t spoken to her mother for months, and this, right here, was the reason why. Everything ended up being an argument.

“I wasn’t commenting on your appearance,” said her mother. “I’m simply saying that looking yourself in the eye isn’t always an easy thing to do. You see the mistakes you made, you see how you wanted to do things different.” She sighed. “And, if I’m

being honest, I look at you and I get jealous. Always have been, I suppose.”

Danni nearly knocked her tea over. “What?”

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Her mother looked down into her cup. “You were always strong, always fearless. Even as a kid. You went after what you wanted and never let anyone stop you. That’s the kind of woman I always thought I would be. And watching you become that, well, it wasn’t easy, truth be told.”

Danni didn’t know what to say. She’d spent practically her whole life thinking that she wasn’t enough like her mother. That she was too brash, too reckless, too wild and willful. But jealous? All this was new. It was something she’d never heard before, and it grated against her sense of reality, her sense of how things should be.

“If you admired me so much, why didn’t you support me when I bought the farm?” Danni asked, a hard edge creeping into her voice. “All you ever did was tell me I was wasting my time and money, telling me I was going to fail.”

Her mother let out a long breath and looked up. “Because I wanted better for you.”

“Better than what?” Danni demanded. “Better than the beautiful home you have? The healthy life, the decent kids, the loving husband?”

Her mother’s mouth twitched into something almost like a smile. “Yes. Everything except the husband.”

Danni blinked. She wasn’t sure what she was hearing, wasn’t sure what was happening here.

“Farming life is hard, Danielle,” her mother said softly. “You of all people should know that. It’s hard and unpredictable and there are no breaks, no holidays, no

thanks. And at the end of the day almost all small farmers have to sell up. The only thing that made all of it worth it for me was your father.”

The large chair at the head of the dining table stood empty. Danni couldn't look at it, hadn't been able to for two years now. Not since her dad went out to the top field and didn't come home again. A heart attack, they'd said. Nothing anyone could do, which seemed wrong because as far as Danni knew, her dad had had the biggest heart in the world.

But it was only now, looking at her mother, that she realized that she'd never truly thought what that loss had meant to anyone other than herself.

“It's none of my business,” her mother said. “I know that. I know I've got no right telling you what to do and not do with your life. But if there's one thing that I know, it's love. The kind that burns deep and hard and doesn't ever go out. And I'll tell you something, girl. You have that and you're throwing it away, well, you're not as like me as I'd have thought.”

Danni swallowed, her throat tight and thick.

And she actually looked at her mother. Really looked at her. Not as her mum, the complaining, shouting, nagging woman that had always pushed her to do bigger and better. But as the woman who looked a little smaller, a little sadder, than Danni had remembered her. A woman who was, perhaps, lonely.

“I might sell the farm,” Danni said finally. It seemed the best she could do, let her mother think that she'd been right all along.

But her mum simply nodded. “You can come home anytime. But I don't think you will.”

Danni exhaled. “No. I don’t think I will either.”

“Then go,” said her mother, pushing her chair back. “Have the adventures that I didn’t have.” She cast a steely-eyed look at Danni. “But before you do, you make sure you make things right with this Eleanor.”

Danni bit her lip. “What... what if she doesn’t take me back?”

“Then she doesn’t,” shrugged her mother. “You can’t help that. You can only do your part, speak for your own feelings on the matter. But you need to know that you did the right thing. That’s the one thing about you, Danielle. You always do the right thing.”

Danni rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at her lips. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me, young lady,” said her mother. And she turned her back, going to the big kitchen sink and starting the washing up. “You see that brother of yours, you tell him that I’ll need a pint of milk if he’s expecting any lunch from me.”

“Yes, mum,” Danni said, standing up. She paused for a second, looking at her mother’s back. “Thanks.”

“Don’t go getting all touchy-feely on me. Now get out of my kitchen and go tend to your own business.”

IT WAS EIGHT o’clock before Danni could get away from the farm. The windows of The Fox and Hounds were lit up bright in the growing darkness, and she pulled into the pub car park and jumped out of the Land Rover, knowing she was late.

“It’s about damn time,” Hector grumbled, when she finally got inside.

Tommy, who was already halfway through a pint, narrowed his eyes at her as she slid into a seat. “Alright, what’s going on? You’ve been weird all week.”

“I’ve not been weird,” Danni protested. “I’ve just been... thinking.”

“Oh, that’s dangerous,” Indi muttered, taking a sip of her drink.

“Charming,” said Danni. “And aren’t you supposed to be working? You can’t drink on the job.”

“I work in a pub,” said Indi. “Drinking is part of the job. And I’m on break, thank you very much.”

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Hector rapped on the table. "Order, order," he said. "Some of us have a farm to run. Are you going to tell us why you called us all here or not?"

"It's like at the end of Poirot when he gets everyone together to tell them who the murderer is," said Tommy.

"You've not killed anyone, have you Tom?" Indi asked.

Hector cleared his throat.

"Sorry, sorry," said both Indi and Tommy.

Danni leaned forward, planting both hands firmly on the table. "I've got you here because I need your help."

Tommy groaned. "Oh no, not another one of your plans."

"Excuse me, my plans are brilliant."

"Your plans are chaotic," corrected Indi. "And half the time they involve someone almost dying or at least getting covered in muck."

Hector sighed. "Alright, fine, what did you need our help with?"

Danni grinned. "Just a little thing."

"What little thing?" Indi asked suspiciously.

“A little plan that I’m calling Operation: Save Brewster Manor,” said Danni. “And it’s a doozy.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Isabella had said that whatever it was Eleanor had to do, it was obvious. Which bothered Eleanor as she walked slowly through the sprawling grounds of Brewster Manor, hands linked behind her back, shoes crunching on the summer-dry grass. The air was warm and heavy, tinged with the smell of mown grass and damp earth.

There was one obvious answer here, but Eleanor wasn’t exactly sure that it was the one her grandmother was suggesting.

She barely noticed where she was going. These grounds had been her world since she was a child. She turned toward the old gazebo, a place she’d always found oddly comforting, despite its obvious damp problem. It had been a retreat, a place to play make believe, and as she got older, a space she could read in, dream in.

It had been a place to hide, she realized now. A place where she could be anyone, not just the Lady Eleanor.

It had been an odd childhood, by most definitions. As she walked, her mind drifted back. She’d been an only child. More than that, she’d been the only child in a house that had echoed with emptiness. She’d been sent to boarding school when she was six, learning Latin, History, and how to mask her emotions behind a perfect smile.

Not that she hadn’t had friends. She had. Boarding school friendships were deep and lasting. But they also tended to stay at school. The only person she’d known in the area was Elizabeth, though she wasn’t sure if they’d been sent to the same school by design.

And then, as she got older, there had been relationships. Well, she'd thought of them as relationships. There'd been sex, of course. And outings. Dates. But it had always been... controlled. Safe.

Until Danni.

There was something so different about being with Danni. She only realized now that living with Danni was the first time she'd ever truly shared a space with someone else. The first time she'd fallen asleep to the sound of someone else's breathing. The first time she'd fought over which way mugs should face in a cupboard.

The first time she had felt at home.

She reached the gazebo, her fingers grazing over the slowly rotting wood. The place needed renovating just as much as the house. And then she turned so that she could look back at the house, at its grandeur. It had stood there for centuries now, steeped in history, a testament to the family name. But what was it really? Just a house. A building. Something that could never love her back.

It had been her home. Except now she knew what home really was, and she'd walked away from it. How was that possible? How could she think that was the right thing to do?

Danni was home.

Her breath came sharp and uneven as she let the realization settle. Fear had driven her away, but was fear really a good enough reason to throw away something that had made her feel so alive? What if she wasn't good at this? At love? What if she failed?

What if she didn't?

Isabella had been right about one thing. There was more than one way to protect Danni. She cast one last look over the house. And what she had to do was glaringly obvious.

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She straightened her spine, turned on her heel, and strode back toward the house, heart hammering.

There was no more room for doubt. She'd made a mistake, but mistakes could be fixed. Whether or not that would lead to a happy ending, she had no idea. But what kind of fool would she be if she didn't at least try?

ELEANOR MARCHED INTO Elizabeth's office at a quarter past two. Elizabeth was sitting at her desk, glasses perched on the tip of her nose, as she frowned at a pile of paperwork. She didn't look up as Eleanor walked in.

"I'm rather busy."

"You're not too busy for me," Eleanor said.

Elizabeth looked up in surprise. "Nor? Is everything alright?"

"Yes and no," said Eleanor. She pulled out a chair and sat down. "I'm going to need all the paperwork you have about the terms of the estate trust and the valuation of both the house and the grounds."

That got Elizabeth's attention. She set her pen down slowly. "Pardon?"

Eleanor crossed her legs and put her elbows on Elizabeth's desk, steepling her fingers. "I want to know exactly what I can and cannot do with the house and the surrounding land, as well as finding out the most recent valuations of both."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. “Nor, what exactly are you up to?”

“Just thinking about my future,” said Eleanor airily.

“Sounds ominous.”

“No, it’s long overdue,” Eleanor said.

Elizabeth glanced at her paperwork, before pushing it to one side and rubbing at her temples. “Eleanor, I’m your friend, but I’m also your solicitor. I can listen to your worries and even advise you on them, but it’s also my job to ensure that you’re making good decisions when it comes to your assets.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Eleanor pointed out.

“No, I can’t. Not as long as you’re on the right side of the law,” Elizabeth sighed. “Alright, what is it that you’re trying to do, exactly? You’ve always been so obsessive about keeping the house. I find it difficult to believe that you’ve suddenly changed your mind.”

Eleanor exhaled slowly, drumming her fingers together. Then, as if the thought had just struck her, she said, “Has it ever occurred to you that a house would be terribly bad in bed?”

Elizabeth’s hand slipped, sending her pen rolling off the desk. “Has it... What?”

“Exactly what I said,” said Eleanor. “House. Bad in bed. Also, awful at cooking breakfast, not great at words of wisdom, and positively boorish to talk to.”

“Have you had some kind of stroke?” asked Elizabeth, reaching for her phone with a look of concern.

“No, no,” Eleanor said, waving a hand. “What I mean is that I think that all this time I’ve been in love with a house. Or, perhaps more accurately, the idea of a house. What it stood for. Just the other day, Samson told my grandmother that she shouldn’t call herself dowager, that she shouldn’t define herself by what her husband was. But here I am, defining myself by a house, which is equally ridiculous, if not more so.”

“Your grandmother met Samson?” asked Elizabeth, trying desperately to keep up.

“You can’t build a life with a house, Elizabeth. It won’t argue with you about tea brands or tease you for having an irrational fear of liquid soap. It won’t hold you when you’re half asleep and pretend not to notice that you’re crying at a film.”

Elizabeth blinked. “You’re scaring me a little.”

“I’m scaring myself,” Eleanor said, leaning back. “But I need to be scared. I need to break out of my life, otherwise I’ll never find anything new, will I?”

“This is about Danni, isn’t it?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes.” There was no point in lying. Elizabeth would find out sooner or later.

“Mmmhmm. You wanted to file for divorce.”

“I know,” Eleanor said.

“But now you don’t?”

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“I... don’t know,” said Eleanor. “Let’s just put that on hold for a short while. There are other things to be done first.”

“What exactly are you planning to do, Nor?” Elizabeth asked.

Eleanor took a deep breath. “I’m going to fix it.”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “Fix what? Fix it how?”

Ignoring her, Eleanor leaned forward again. “Tell me, Elizabeth, what’s the bravest thing that you’ve ever done?”

For a second, Elizabeth hesitated, then she said, “Skydiving.”

Eleanor snorted. “That’s not brave. It’s simply falling and hoping for the best.”

“And what do you call brave, then?” Elizabeth asked, slightly stung. “Because I’ll have you know that ten thousand feet is an awful lot higher than you might expect it to be, particularly when you’re staring down at the ground from a plane.”

“No,” Eleanor said, smiling softly. “No. Brave is letting someone in. Brave is knowing how fragile we all are, and yet opening up the door anyway and inviting someone in. Someone who might shatter all the plates and break all the windows. But someone who might just make themselves at home instead.”

“Are we talking about the house again?” asked Elizabeth.

“We’re talking about love,” Eleanor corrected. “Loving someone enough to risk everything.”

Elizabeth sighed and rubbed at her temples again. “And what happens if Danni isn’t interested in taking you back?” she asked. “The papers of formal separation have already been signed, you know.”

Eleanor’s chest ached at the thought, but she nodded, resolute. “Then I’ll at least know that I tried. And I’ll know that I wasn’t a coward. I’ll know that the brass ring was there and I jumped for it. I won’t spend the rest of my life wondering.”

“If you’re about to do what I think you’re about to do, then you might find yourself living the rest of your life without a roof over your head.”

Eleanor said nothing, and eventually Elizabeth shook her head and exhaled.

“Alright, what do you need me to do?”

A weight lifted off Eleanor’s shoulders. “Set up a meeting with the representatives of the trust and the bank.”

Elizabeth picked up a pen and scribbled something down. “Consider it done. But Eleanor?”

Eleanor was about to stand up, but she paused. “Don’t you dare try to talk me out of this.”

“I wasn’t going to,” said Elizabeth. “I know better than that. But I will just say that if you’re planning on grand-gesturing your way back into Danni’s life, then I really would prefer it if you didn’t get arrested. I’m too old to be answering two a.m. phone calls from the police station.”

Eleanor huffed a laugh and got up. “Your wish is my command,” she said as she walked out of Elizabeth’s office.

She felt lighter than she had in years. For the first time in her life, she was choosing love over duty.

And God help her, she wasn’t about to mess it up this time.

Chapter Thirty Two

Danni had spent the better part of the last twenty-four hours making choices that, if she thought too hard about them, would probably make her throw up. But for once in her life, she’d decided to trust her gut rather than her pride. The problem was, trusting her gut felt an awful lot like free-falling with no parachute.

Which all led her to standing here, in Elizabeth Allen’s office, trying to look like she had everything under control. And trying to look like wearing actual trousers rather than jeans and shoes rather than boots didn’t make her want to roll on the floor kicking her feet like a toddler.

Elizabeth steepled her fingers and looked at Danni over the rim of her glasses with a tired, knowing look. “I assume you’re here about the divorce?” she asked dryly. “And if that’s the case, I’m afraid that I’m obligated to tell you that my client has—”

“No,” said Danni.

“No,” echoed Elizabeth. She gave Danni a skeptical look. “I’m representing your wife, you do understand that—”

“It’s not about the divorce,” Danni interrupted again. “I signed the paperwork, I’m not planning on contesting the divorce. From everything I’ve heard that means that

you won't even need to represent Eleanor for that. We wait out the year, file online, and we're good to go." Saying the words felt weird, discussing it felt weird, but divorce was the least of her problems just at the moment. She'd jump over that fence when and if she came to it.

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Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “It’s not about the divorce?”

Danni shook her head.

“Okay, well then, I’m not entirely sure why you’re here?”

“I need a solicitor,” Danni said. “Look, it’s just for a meeting I’ve set up. It’s nothing shady, nothing illegal, I just need someone to keep me from accidentally signing away my soul or whatever.”

“A meeting about what?” Elizabeth said.

Danni sucked on her teeth. “Um, nothing to do with Eleanor. No conflict of interest. I swear. If it is, you can just walk out. It’s just that it’s in half an hour and, well, I didn’t think things through quite as far as I probably should have and, well, and Hector just reminded me that I should probably have a solicitor present, and...”

“Hector,” Elizabeth said. “That’s that tall, handsome one. Your brother, correct?”

Danni nodded.

Elizabeth grinned. “Hector. Mmm. And you can’t tell me what this meeting is about?”

“It’s in like...” Danni checked her watch. “Twenty-two minutes. You’ll find out soon enough. I’ll fill you in on the way. You’re the only solicitor I know.”

“You have your own solicitor.”

“I have a voice on the end of a phone. Never met the man,” Danni said urgently.

“Please?”

A long pause stretched between them. Elizabeth let out a resigned sigh. “I don’t suppose Hector will be there?”

“He might meet us after for a drink?” said Danni, not at all sure this was true, but more than willing to pimp her brother out if it meant Elizabeth would come with her. Hector was a big boy, he could look after himself.

“Fine. Against my better judgment, I’ll come.”

Danni let out a breath, her shoulders relaxing slightly. “Great. Let’s go.”

ALMOST AN HOUR later, they walked out of an office building, Elizabeth staring at Danni like she’d grown a second head, and Danni feeling... dizzy and sick and light and right, all at the same time.

“You said that had nothing to do with Eleanor,” Elizabeth said accusingly.

“Technically, it didn’t,” said Danni.

“It had absolutely everything to do with Eleanor, didn’t it?”

Danni tilted her head to one side. “Perhaps.”

Elizabeth sighed and shook her head. “Well,” she said finally. “That was unexpected, I suppose. I don’t think anyone saw that outcome coming.”

“Yeah, well, don’t go thinking I’ve gone soft or anything,” Danni said with a sniff.

Elizabeth actually smirked. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” She took Danni’s arm and they started walking down the street. “So, what happens now?”

“Dunno,” Danni said. She caught Elizabeth looking at her in surprise. “What? I told you I hadn’t thought this through as far as I should. I just... It just... There’s right and there’s wrong, you know?”

“I know,” said Elizabeth. They walked in silence for a few steps before she spoke again. “You did a good thing in there, Danni.”

Danni shrugged. “Don’t tell anyone. I’ve got a reputation to maintain, after all.”

“That you do.” Elizabeth took a breath. “Um, Eleanor also has a reputation to maintain.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Danni asked, stopping and turning so that they were face to face. “And you can’t tell her a thing. I’ve got confidentiality here, Hypocratic Oath and all that stuff.”

“That’s doctors,” Elizabeth said gently. “But you do have confidentiality. As does Eleanor.” She raised one eyebrow like she was trying to get a message across.

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“Yeah, right, and?”

Elizabeth cleared her throat, looking like she was debating with herself. “And... Eleanor has client confidentiality. Just like you do. I can’t say anything about your affairs to her, and I can’t say anything about her affairs to you.”

“Right, okay,” Danni said, getting that there was a point but not truly understanding what it was.

“Jesus,” Elizabeth said. “When they taught us ethics at law school, there was nothing as complicated as this.” She took a breath and tried again. “What I’m trying to get at is that I strongly suggest that you... discuss things with Eleanor.”

Danni’s heart clenched in her chest, but she forced herself to stay cool, to look like she was in control. “I will,” she said, a little too quickly. “Just... not yet.”

“Christ.” Elizabeth rubbed her temples. “Alright, but I wouldn’t leave things too long if I were you. In fact, I’d advise you to open negotiations as soon as possible.”

Danni rolled her eyes. “Alright, alright,” she said. “I’ll try and piece my heart back together and move on to business negotiations, happy?”

Elizabeth shook her head and sighed. “If this doesn’t work out, it won’t be through lack of trying,” she mumbled to herself.

DANNI NEEDED A drink. Or five.

She left Elizabeth to go back to her office and went straight to the pub, knowing that the others would be there awaiting the outcome of her meeting. She walked in, strode up to the bar, threw some bills on the counter, and ordered beers for the entire pack.

It didn't take long for Indi, Tommy, and Hector to close in on her, like wolves scenting blood, to pick up their pints.

"Alright," Indi demanded, hopping onto a barstool. "Spill. What the hell happened in this mysterious meeting of yours?"

"You're wearing shoes," Tommy pointed out. "I didn't know you had any. Barely knew you had feet, actually."

"What are you talking about? Of course I've got feet," said Danni.

"She almost didn't though," Hector said. "She ran after dad on a combine when she was about four. Could've lost her feet that day."

"Aye, combines are dangerous beasts alright," Tommy said, lifting his beer. "Not to be messed with."

Indi was staring at them both incredulously. "Do you two not even have the slightest shred of curiosity?" she asked.

"Not enough to mess with a combine harvester," Tommy said.

"Me neither," said Hector with a shiver.

"For Christ's sake," Indi said. "Danni. The meeting. What happened?"

Danni took a long sip of her beer, stalling. "It's complicated."

“Everything’s complicated with you,” Tommy said. “It was easier when you weren’t married. Back then we only had to worry about sheep. Now there’s sheep and a woman.”

“Another dangerous combination,” put in Hector.

Indi put down her beer. “I swear to God, one more word from either of you two about combine harvesters, sheep, or anything that’s not to do with whatever this meeting is that Danni’s just had, and I will personally take you by the ear and escort you out of my pub. Understood?”

“It’s not your pub,” Tommy said. But he shut up as Hector elbowed him.

Danni sighed. “Alright, fine. You want the truth? The reason that I had you three chatting up the locals was to get an idea of the big plan, the grand scheme of things.”

“What?” asked Tommy.

“It’s simple. I got a local map, and every time one of you told me that so-and-so had sold their back field, or their farm, or their gardening patch, or whatever, I marked it on the map. It let me see what Marren already owned.”

“Alright,” said Hector. “I see where you’re going with that.”

“Then I just got lucky,” Danni went on. “My farm was bang slap in the middle of it all. In fact, there was a big swathe of land that he’d brought and then a hole in the middle of it, cutting the lot into two.”

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Hector put his beer down. “What did you do, Danni?”

Danni took a sip of her beer before answering. “I sold it.”

Silence. Heavy, stunned silence.

“You what?” Indi shrieked, startling the entire bar. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Possibly,” Danni said.

Tommy, looking like he’d just been slapped, shook his head. “You wouldn’t sell the farm to save yourself from going broke, but you’d sell it now? What the hell changed?”

“Let me guess,” Hector said. He had a large, comforting hand on Danni’s shoulder. “You made a deal.”

Danni nodded. “I sold the farm, meaning the developer had one large plot of land. But only on the condition that Eleanor’s estate was left out of things.”

Indi’s jaw dropped, Tommy looked genuinely dumbfounded, Hector just studied her with something like admiration.

“It wasn’t all me,” Danni said. “Elizabeth helped. She pointed out that the house couldn’t be touched because it’s protected, and half the woodland in the estate is protected too. There’d be so much red tape getting the estate developed that it could hardly be worth it. In the end, they backed down, said they didn’t need the rest of the

land.”

“You save Eleanor’s house,” Indi said.

“Well damn, that’s kind of romantic,” said Tommy.

Indi shook her head in disbelief. “And now what? You’re just... what? Walking away?”

Danni hesitated. The truth was, she really hadn’t thought any further away than this. No further than giving Eleanor what she wanted, needed. “I don’t know,” she admitted, staring down into her beer. “I have absolutely no idea.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eleanor was not the sort of person that ignored telephone calls. In fact, she had always prided herself on being the kind of person who promptly returned all correspondence, who was always prepared, and always professional.

And yet, here she was, staring as her phone vibrated incessantly in her hand, displaying Elizabeth’s name again and again. She declined the call yet again with a swipe of her thumb.

The problem was that she knew why Elizabeth was calling.

And all of this was difficult enough without Elizabeth’s entreaties about... heritage or responsibilities, or sound financial decisions, or whatever else.

Not that she wasn’t going to follow her decision through. She most certainly was. Once decided, this seemed like the most sensible course of action. To cut herself free, to become who she wanted to be, to, perhaps, one day deserve the love of someone

like Danni. And, in return, to be able to fully give herself to that person.

But Elizabeth, ever the pragmatist, was trying to talk her out of her impending meeting. Her mind was made up, though. Today she would stand in front of the trust and the bank and do what needed to be done.

Her phone rang again, she ignored the call again, and she straightened her blazer, striding into the conference room, head held high. She was ready.

ELEANOR STEPPED OUT of the meeting feeling as if she'd been hit by a runaway tractor. And she, of all people, should know what that felt like.

The world outside the quiet discretion of the bank seemed unnaturally bright, the sounds of cars too loud, the air too crisp. She reached for her phone with trembling fingers and, for the first time in an hour, attempted to return Elizabeth's call.

A clipped, professional voice answered on the second ring. "Elizabeth Allen's office."

"I need to speak to her," Eleanor said, her voice steadier than her legs as she leaned against the brick wall of the bank.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, Ms. Allen is currently in court. Can I take a message?"

Eleanor clenched her jaw. Of course she was. Elizabeth had warned her that she had a hearing today, which could mean that she wouldn't be reachable for hours yet. Eleanor stared blankly at the phone, then at the bustling street in front of her.

What the hell had just happened in that meeting?

ELEANOR PULLED THE car up in front of The Willows, not entirely sure how

she'd gotten there. One moment, she'd been standing outside the bank, and the next she was pulling into the long drive. She left the car, marched into reception, and demanded to see her grandmother.

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A few minutes later, she was being escorted to the outside terrace, where she saw Isabella sitting and enjoying her tea as if the world were not spinning off its axis.

“Oh dear,” Isabella said. “I assume something dreadful has happened?”

Eleanor sank into the chair opposite her, rubbing her temples. “I’m not sure if dreadful serves,” she said. “But the most extraordinary thing has happened.”

Isabella lifted a brow. “You’ve learned to knit?”

Eleanor shot her a glare. “No.”

“Good. Dreadfully common hobby. In fact, I disapprove of the word hobby. Pastime is a far more serviceable word.”

“Grandmama,” Eleanor said in exasperation.

“When you get to my age, dear, nothing seems quite as urgent anymore. But my apologies. What is it that has you so ruffled?”

Eleanor took a breath. “The offer on the estate is gone. There’s no longer a buyer. No one wants it.”

Her grandmother hummed, taking a slow sip of tea. “Interesting.”

“One minute I’m being snowed under with offers, practically begging me to sell the land at the very least, and suddenly, now, there’s nothing.” It didn’t sound real, even

as she was saying it. It hadn't sounded real when the bank had informed her that the offer had been rescinded.

Isabella set her cup down with a quiet clink. "Then, my dear, you should be suspicious."

Eleanor frowned. "Suspicious?"

"Nothing in this world simply disappears without cause. You should find out why."

Eleanor exhaled, wishing she could run her hands through her hair but not wanting to ruin her immaculate chignon. "I can't get hold of Elizabeth."

"I see." Isabella picked up her cup again. "Well, until you can, answer me this. Were you truly going to sell?"

Eleanor hesitated, staring over the terrace railing. The thought of giving up the estate had once been unthinkable, but now...

"Yes," she said quietly. "If it was the only way that I could have Danni, if it would prove to her that I'm worth having, that I'm not so in love with something else that she'd have to fight for me, yes, I would have done it."

"Interesting," Isabella said.

"Why is that?"

Her grandmother gave her a knowing smile. "Because it means that you've finally figured out what's truly important." She waved her hand. "Selling the estate was a grand gesture, but I was fairly certain it would never pan out. Not many people have the money for large houses these days, and it was unlikely that the developer had

considered the constraints of building around a protected property. I'm assuming Marren was just the spokesperson, the money must have come from elsewhere."

"You never intended for me to sell the estate?" Eleanor asked in horror.

Her grandmother shrugged. "It's just a house, my dear. If you sold it, then so much the better, as long as it was what you wanted to do. But I didn't think it would be easy. What really needed to happen was that you had to see that the house was keeping you from living the life you wanted. You can have both, you know, as long as you're willing to compromise."

Eleanor sighed and sat back. "As it happens, I do have another idea."

She laid out the details before her grandmother, Isabella listening carefully, and then nodding in approval.

"That could work," she said finally.

"Good," Eleanor said.

"However, if you want Danni back, you'll need to do more than make plans," said Isabella. "You will need to show her how you feel."

Eleanor stiffened. "I'm not one for grand displays."

"And therein lies your problem." Isabella lifted her china cup and sipped.

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This was too much, Eleanor thought. “You were the one who taught me to hide my feelings,” she protested.

“In polite company, yes,” said Isabella. “But a real lady will show her emotions to those who matter. When I think of some of the fights that your grandfather and I had. He was a passionate man.”

“He was?” Eleanor said, thoroughly shocked.

“In front of me, of course,” Isabella said. “He hid nothing from me, and I nothing from him. But what went on behind closed doors was our own business. Danni, on the other hand, grew up in a different style. I think you might find that our stiff-upper-lip nonsense doesn’t do much for her. Tell me, does she matter to you?”

The question made Eleanor’s stomach twist. “Yes,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Then,” Isabella said, “perhaps it’s time you let her see that.”

Eleanor huffed. “So what? I should arrange a flash mob? Hire a hot air balloon? Perhaps graffiti my declarations on a motorway bridge?”

Isabella serenely sipped her tea. “You should do what is right. Do what Danni would like.”

Eleanor mulled that over. She wasn’t demonstrative. But perhaps that was going to be necessary. Perhaps to win Danni over, if she could win Danni over, she’d need to

open up, reveal what was beneath the shell.

She swallowed, the thought was unnerving.

“My dear,” Isabella said, taking pity on her. “You were about to give up a grand inheritance for the woman. I should think that you could find the courage to open your heart to her, don’t you?”

Eleanor nodded.

“And if not,” said Isabella thoughtfully, “you might ask that Samson. He looks like a man with a few romantic ideas. Such a shame that he’s already married.”

“Grandmama,” Eleanor said.

“What?” asked Isabella. “I’m old, not dead. And perhaps it’s time that I demonstrated to you that being honest about one’s wants and desires is no bad thing.”

“Please, no,” said Eleanor, feeling slightly faint.

“Very well,” sighed Isabella. “In that case, I suggest you go about your business and leave me to my tea. But a word of warning, don’t leave things too long. No one likes to wait around. Particularly if they think that no one is coming.”

Eleanor stood up. “Thank you,” she said softly, dropping a kiss on Isabella’s cheek.

“Go and fix what you so clearly broke,” said Isabella. “And bring Danni with you to visit next time. Or, failing that, Samson. I could use a little cheering up.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes and went back into the large drawing room.

THE ROAD UP to the farm was so familiar by now that it almost felt like driving home. Except this wasn't home, as Eleanor had to keep reminding herself. It was evening now, the light getting softer, the smells of cut hay and animals coming in through the open car window.

She still wasn't quite sure what she was going to do or say. She just knew that she couldn't wait a moment longer.

But as soon as she pulled up in front of the house, she knew something was wrong. A quiet, sinking feeling settled in her gut. The place was deserted.

The farmhouse was eerily still. There was no sign of Danni's old Land Rover, no lights in the farmhouse window, no scent of cooking, no sound of Tommy whistling somewhere off in the back barn. It was as if the farm had been abandoned.

Panic started to rise in her chest. She had taken too long. She'd spent so much time trying to figure out what to do and how to do it that she'd missed her chance entirely.

She turned in a slow circle, scanning the property. No lights. No movement. Nothing.

Her breath hitched.

It couldn't be. Had Danni... left? The thought sent a wave of nausea rolling through her, made her skin clammy and her breath come faster.

For the first time in her life, Eleanor felt truly afraid, well and truly lost. And she had no idea what she was supposed to do next.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:00 pm

The pub was in full swing, the air thick with laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the warm, comforting smells of beer and fried chips. Danni sat at the bar, absently tracing the rim of her pint glass with her thumb, as Hector and Tommy played a game of darts in the corner.

Her mind was firmly not on the pub. It was miles away, lost in a labyrinth of thoughts about Eleanor, about everything she'd done, everything she'd sacrificed, and how she still wasn't sure that it was enough.

It had been the right thing, she was certain about that. What she wasn't certain about was just where to go from here. It was almost an anticlimax, selling the farm. Less important, less life-changing than she'd thought.

The details were simple. Hector was going to take on her animals and most of the equipment. The rest would be sold at auction. Easy. Easier than whatever it was that Danni was supposed to do with herself, anyway.

Indi, sensing Danni's brooding, leaned over the bar and grinned at her. "Still no plan, huh, Romeo?"

"Nope," Danni said, staring into her beer. "Not a real one, anyway."

"I'll tell you what you need," Indi said, putting her hands on her hips. "You need one of those grand gestures."

"You mean roses?" Danni asked, finally looking up.

“Jesus Christ,” Indi said. “No. A Grand Gesture, with capital letters. Like... I dunno, like hiring a circus. Oh, or putting on a big firework show that spells out Eleanor’s name at the end. Or hiring a marching band. No, wait, what about a huge bloody rock concert, right there on the lawn? Think about it, Eleanor stepping out onto that pristine grass of hers, only to find herself being serenaded by The Rolling Stones or Sabrina Carpenter. Iconic.”

Danni stared at her in wonder. “You’re an eejit.”

“Just trying to help,” Indi said.

“And Eleanor would hate all those things.” She shook her head, imagining the horrified look on Eleanor’s face. “She’s... well, she’s Eleanor. Lady Eleanor. She’s got that stiff-upper-lip, remember? She doesn’t like big displays of emotion. She’d hate a grand gesture. She keeps everything private, behind closed doors.” She sighed. “Private even from me, I think.”

Indi groaned, throwing her hands up dramatically. “Romance is dead! What are you going to do then? Write her a heartfelt letter, seal it with a kiss, and slip it under her door like you’re in a Jane Austen novel?”

“Well, we did start out with a marriage of convenience,” Danni said. “That’s pretty Jane Austen.” She took a drink of her beer. “Actually, I was going to finish this drink, a bit of Dutch courage, and then I was going to walk over to the house and, um, well, throw myself at her mercy, I suppose.”

“That’s your plan?” Indi asked. She shook her head. “What are you going to say?”

Danni shrugged. “Dunno.”

Indi pinched the bridge of her nose between her forefinger and thumb. “No wonder

you're single."

But before Danni could say anything in response to this, the pub door swung open, bringing in a gust of fresh air. Danni looked up to see Elizabeth striding in, her heels clicking against the tiles of the floor.

She was dressed immaculately, her hair perfectly smooth, her suit well-pressed, just a hint of color on her lips. But there was an air of impatience about her as she scanned the room.

"She with you?" Indi asked.

"Um, maybe?" hazarded Danni.

Then Elizabeth's eyes landed on Danni, and she wasted no time making her way over.

Danni frowned as Elizabeth removed her suit jacket, laying it carefully on the barstool next to her. "What are you doing here?"

Elizabeth lifted an eyebrow. "Somebody promised me a drink with their brother, remember? I'm here to collect."

"Oh dear," Indi said. "Just wait until Hec hears that you've pimped him out for your own devious purposes."

"I haven't pimped him out," Danni said.

"Not technically," Elizabeth said. "Though there is still hope."

Indi narrowed her eyes. "You look suspiciously like someone with an ulterior

motive.”

“I’m a solicitor, I always have an ulterior motive,” Elizabeth said. “And you look like someone who might be in a position to provide me with a drink.”

“S’pose,” Indi said with a sigh. “What do you want?”

“What stouts do you have on tap?”

Indi’s eyes widened. “Stout?”

“My mother always said it was good for the digestion,” Elizabeth said. “I’ll take a Murphy’s, if you have it.”

“Coming right up,” Indi said, looking impressed.

“You’ve wormed your way into Indi’s heart, at least,” Danni said. “But I didn’t really expect you to come slumming around here.”

Elizabeth ignored that. “I have to ask, have you spoken to Eleanor yet?”

Danni exhaled heavily. “No, not yet. I was just about to go up there.”

Elizabeth groaned. “Oh God.”

“What?”

“I’ve been in court all afternoon, I wasn’t able to get hold of her. She had a meeting today with... Well, I can’t say. I just...” She growled in frustration. “Really, the two of you have put me in the most difficult of positions. Right in the middle. So much for your mysterious meeting having nothing to do with Eleanor. Lord, I shouldn’t have let myself get involved with all of this.”

“What’s going on?” Danni asked, confused.

Before Elizabeth could answer, her phone started to ring. She glanced down at it. “Thank heavens.” She turned to Danni. “Don’t you move a muscle, young lady,” she said, before striding away, phone at her ear.

Eleanor paced the stable, the dim light casting long shadows along the wooden beams. Sam the horse stood patiently, his large dark eyes watching her as she walked from one side of the building to the other, phone pressed to her ear.

The stable had been the one place she could think of to go. The one calm place. And Sam was still here, that had to mean something. Danni wouldn’t just disappear off and leave Sam.

But there was no one else here, and the empty house had left a gnawing sense of panic in her gut. She was starting to spiral, and she didn’t know what to do. She’d always been able to fix her mistakes before, but what if this time she couldn’t? What if this time there was no second chance?

She’d have to accept that, she supposed. Accept that there was no happy ending, no...

The phone clicked and the call connected.

“I came to the farm. Danni isn’t here. I don’t know what to do.”

“Nor?”

“I don’t know what to do,” Eleanor said again, still pacing. It was a cry for help to the one person she felt comfortable enough to call. “She’s gone, Elizabeth. Gone.”

There was noise over the phone line, something like the clinking of glasses, the sound

of laughter. “Eleanor, take a deepbreath,” Elizabeth said.

Eleanor stopped still, closing her eyes, breathing. In and out, in and out.

“Alright, first, tell me, did you sell the house?”

“That’s what you’re interested in?” Eleanor said, her eyes flashing open. “I’m having a breakdown and you’re still being my solicitor?”

“No, wait, Nor, please, this is very, very important. Did you sell the house?”

“No,” Eleanor said, frustration mounting. “The offer was withdrawn.”

There was the sound of a long, drawn-out sigh of relief from the other end of the phone. “Thank God. Alright, I’m going to need you to come and meet me. Are you in a fit state to drive, or do I need to send a taxi?”

Eleanor took a breath. “No, no, I don’t think so, Elizabeth. I need to go home. I need to lick my wounds in peace.”

Elizabeth, clearly exasperated, lowered her voice. “No. We’re getting all of this sorted once and for all. I’m sick and tired of being in the middle of things.”

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“What are you talking about?” Eleanor stopped and put a hand on Sam’s flank.

Elizabeth growled. Actually growled. “I... I can’t say a damn thing right now and it’s driving me absolutely mad, so I suggest that you don’t push things. Just get over here and... and I’ll tell you exactly what happened with the investor and Marren and the offer to buy the estate being withdrawn.”

Eleanor hesitated. “You know what happened?”

“I do. And I’ll tell you. Or, if I don’t, somebody else will. Either way, you’ll know. Alright?”

Eleanor exhaled slowly. She wanted answers. But more than that, she wanted to understand why everything felt like it was slipping through her fingers. “Fine,” she said eventually. “Where?”

There was a faint hesitation on the line. “The Fox and Hounds.”

Eleanor scowled. “Absolutely not—”

But the call had already disconnected.

Eleanor glared at her phone, resisting the urge to throw it across the stable. The pub, of all places. The very idea of going in there, of walking into a room full of curious eyes and whispers, made her stomach churn. What the hell was Elizabeth up to?

She turned back to Sam, running a hand down his nose. “What do you think? Pub or

home?”

Sam, thoroughly unbothered by her existential crisis, nudged at her ear with his muzzle.

Eleanor sighed. “Of course you’d say that.”

She took one last look around the stable, a pang of melancholy hitting her. She’d spent a long time trying to convince herself that all of this meant nothing. Now she could see that it meant everything.

Standing here now, surrounded by the scent of hay and horses, she realized exactly why she’d been willing to sell the house. She didn’t just want Danni, she wanted the life they could have had together.

But how was she supposed to get that if she couldn’t find Danni? What was she supposed to do? She’d give anything for a second chance, a moment to explain things, to apologize, just to see her.

With a sigh, she squared her shoulders and turned toward her car.

She’d give Elizabeth five minutes at the pub. But then she was going home and burying herself in her bed and perhaps never coming back out again.

Chapter Thirty Five

She knew from the second she walked into the pub that she had been set up. The place was buzzing, half the damn village seemed to be there, and it smelled of beer and food and people and Eleanor saw and smelled none of it. From the moment she saw Danni sitting at the bar, she was the only thing in the entire world that Eleanor could see.

Until she took a step closer and saw Elizabeth leaning against the bar, her arms folded and a look of complete satisfaction on her face.

Eleanor narrowed her eyes. “What the hell is going on?” she said to herself.

She marched across the room, heels clicking, ignoring the curious looks from the villagers who had picked up on the tension in the small pub. Elizabeth looked utterly composed and Danni, Danni looked...

Eleanor had to take a second to get her breath. Danni looked as comfortable and familiar as home, as exotic and unattainable as a rare bird, and... confused. Danni looked confused.

Fully intending to demand an explanation, Eleanor walked up to the two other women. But before she could say anything, Elizabeth brandished two sheets of paper, slapping one down in front of Danni, and handing Eleanor the other.

“Sign these,” she said briskly.

Danni frowned, picking up the document. “What is it?”

Elizabeth exhaled slowly as though she was hanging on to her very last shred of patience. “This is a legal agreement that waives client confidentiality in the specific cases outlined in the document. You will both sign it or, I swear to all the gods, I will walk out of here and never speak to either one of you again.”

Eleanor folded her arms. “Why should I sign this?”

“Because I’m going to explain exactly what is going on and we’re going to end this ridiculous miscommunication once and for all. Now sign the damn agreement, Lady Eleanor, or I’ll be forced to withdraw my legal services.”

“Why can’t you just tell us?” Danni asked.

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“Because rules exist for a reason,” said Elizabeth, enunciating each word very, very clearly. “And I, unlike certain people around here, actually follow them.”

Danni and Eleanor exchanged a look, both equally perplexed. But there was something in Elizabeth’s expression, a weary sort of exasperation, that made Eleanor think that she was being deadly serious right about now.

Silently, they both signed. Elizabeth glanced down at the documents, nodded, folded them neatly and slipped them back into her briefcase with the satisfaction of a woman who had just completed a particularly arduous task.

“Excellent,” she said. “Now listen very carefully, I’ll do this once and once only. I’m not going into details, I’m not accepting questions, I’ll tell you exactly what you need to know, and then you can sort out everything else yourselves.”

Eleanor and Danni both nodded like children in the headmaster’s office.

Elizabeth turned to Eleanor. “Right, Danni sold her farm to the developer on the condition that all claims to your property were rescinded. Which is why there is no longer an offer and you can’t sell the estate. This includes the lawsuit suing for inheritance, which has also been dropped.”

Eleanor’s breath caught in her throat. “She... what?”

Elizabeth, clearly enjoying her moment, held up her hands. “No questions,” she reminded her. She turned to Danni. “Eleanor met with the bank and the trust today, fully intending to sell the estate in order to prove to you that she loved you and

wanted a life with you on the farm that was so important to you. The only reason she didn't sell was that there was no longer an offer."

There was a long silence that stretched between all three of them as all the relevant information was digested.

This was it, was all Eleanor could think. This was her time. Danni's grand gesture had been made, it was her turn. Isabella was right, there was only one shot to get this right, one chance to show that her heart belonged to Danni and always would. And this was no time to be discreet.

She tore her gaze from Elizabeth and looked straight at Danni. There were a thousand words that she wanted to say, but none of them seemed right. None of them cut to the heart of the matter. But perhaps Elizabeth was right too, perhaps the miscommunications had to end.

So she did the only thing she could think of.

She clapped her hands together, loudly, sharply, the sound echoing through the room so that the entire pub fell curiously silent, all eyes turning toward her.

Eleanor Brewster was not one to make a scene. Not until now.

"I have something to say," she said, loud and clear.

A few murmurs rippled through the crowd, but she paid them no mind. Instead, she turned to Danni, heart hammering in her chest.

"This woman is the most remarkable, wonderful person that I have ever met. I walked out on her. I am an absolute and complete fool for doing so."

A few people laughed, Indi let out a whoop from behind the bar. But Eleanor was not done.

Taking a deep breath, she dropped to one knee, the entire crowd watching her every move. Her skin itched from all the attention, but she wasn't going to stop now.

“You are the only thing that matters to me in the entire world. My heart is, and always will be, yours, and I can think of nothing in this universe that I want more than for you to be my wife. Marry me.”

For a moment, Danni just stared at her, dumbfounded. Then, the pub erupted into cheers and applause, people clapping and whistling, Indi jumping up and down with excitement behind the bar.

“Oh, for God's sake,” Elizabeth said, rolling her eyes.

Danni finally shook off the shock, laughing as she reached down and pulled Eleanor to her feet. “I thought you hated scenes,” she said. “You didn't have to do that.”

“Yes, I did,” said Eleanor. “It needed to be said, and it needed to be witnessed.” She turned to Indi. “Champagne for everyone.”

“No, no, no,” Elizabeth said. “You two need to actually talk before celebrating anything.” She grabbed Hector by the arm. “This handsome young man and I are going to have a quiet drink. I suggest that the two of you have a quiet chat.”

They stalked off, leaving Eleanor and Danni alone.

“You were really going to sell the estate?” Danni asked softly. “I thought the house defined you?”

“I define me,” Eleanor said. “But I’d like you to define me, too. I’d like to be your wife. And anyway, you sold your farm.”

“I’d sell a hundred farms for you, Princess.”

“I’d sell a hundred estates for you,” Eleanor said. “Although, currently, no one even wants to buy one.”

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“Probably for the best,” Danni said thoughtfully. “It’d be nice to have somewhere to live.”

“Ah, yes,” Eleanor said. She reached into her bag and pulled out a bundle of paperwork. “About that. I have something here.”

Danni flipped through the papers, frowning. “What is this?”

“An agreement to buy a section of the estate,” Eleanor said. “I cleared it with the trust. It’ll be yours. Farm it. You’ll buy it at a fair market price, this isn’t a gift, it’s dependent on nothing. You get to keep your independence. I get to keep you in my life.”

For a second, Danni’s expression was unreadable, then a slow grin spread across her face. “Pen.”

Eleanor handed her one.

“You know, romance involves an awful lot more paperwork than I was really expecting,” she mused as she signed the papers. “I thought it was all supposed to be flowers and wining and dining. Didn’t realize it was mostly contracts and agreements.”

“Speaking of which,” Eleanor said, heart still beating painfully fast. “You, um, didn’t answer my question.”

“Which question is that?” asked Danni.

Eleanor cleared her throat. “The, um, the one where I asked you to be my wife.”

“Ah, yes, that one.” Danni raised an eyebrow. “You see, there’s a small problem with that.”

Oh God. Eleanor felt like she might fall through the floor, like she might melt away into nothingness, like the world might end just right there and then. “What’s that then?” she managed to ask.

Danni grinned. “See, I’m already married,” she said. “And my wife, well, she’s the most wonderful person I’ve ever met. She’s prissy and correct, she drinks tea with her little finger sticking out, and she never gets her shoes dirty.”

“She sounds terrible,” Eleanor said, taking a step closer and feeling Danni’s warmth.

“No, no, she’s incredible,” Danni said. “She can cook and arrange flowers, she can run an entire estate.” She leaned in, lowering her voice. “She can make me explode in a second with one touch of her fingers.”

Eleanor felt a deep heat spreading through her core.

“And she’s funny and clever and caring,” Danni said, taking one more step forward. “She’s a princess, you see.”

“I see,” Eleanor said, quite seriously. “Well, I’m not sure I can compete with that.”

“I’m not sure anyone could,” Danni said, looking up at her with dark eyes. “I don’t think I ever stood a chance.”

“I’m not sure either of us did, to be honest,” said Eleanor, as she took Danni’s face into her hands. “Just as well we ended up together, I suppose. Stops either of us

wandering around heartbroken for the rest of our lives.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Princess,” Danni said. “Forever is a very long time.”

“I’m not sure it’s going to be long enough,” Eleanor murmured, as her lips caught Danni’s in a kiss.

Epilogue

Eleanor sat in the newly-painted morning room stirring her tea as Elizabeth watched her carefully. Two years, it had taken to completely finish the house, and Eleanor still wasn’t completely used to it being done. Parts of it still felt like someone else’s house.

“Not sure yellow would have been my first choice,” Elizabeth said.

“It’s sunshine yellow and perfectly appropriate for the room,” said Eleanor crisply. “And isn’t every room in your house painted white?”

“It makes it far easier to choose furniture,” said Elizabeth. “Now, are you going to tell me what’s wrong? You’ve been like a bear with a sore head all morning. It’s not like you to be so snappy. Are you bored because the house is done?”

“God, no,” said Eleanor, putting her tea down. “I’ve got about a million things to do, an estate doesn’t run itself. The farm is making us half self-sufficient and we’re looking into expanding, the grounds still need plenty of work. No, I’ve got enough to do for a lifetime.”

“So...?”

She sighed. “It’s Danni,” she admitted. “She’s been distant lately, distracted. I

wondered if maybe she'd said anything to you?"

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“Oh no,” said Elizabeth. “I don’t get between the two of you, you know that. I’ve got a blanket ban on keeping secrets from spouses. Anything you tell me goes to her and anything she says goes to you. It’s easier that way.”

“Not helpful,” Eleanor said.

“But less stressful,” said Elizabeth. “Any idea what it’s all about?”

For a second, Eleanor bit her lip, wondering whether to speak about anything so personal. But this was Elizabeth. “I think it’s the IVF,” she said. “The failed attempts have hit her hard, and even though she tries to act like she’s fine, I can tell she isn’t. I’ve suggested stopping or taking a break, but...” She hesitated, staring into her teacup. “I don’t know how to help her.”

Elizabeth raised a single eyebrow. “Considered asking her?”

“She just says she’s fine. But I know she’s keeping something from me,” Eleanor said.

Elizabeth set her cup down. “I see.”

“That’s all you’ve got?”

“It’s your marriage, Nor, I can’t get involved. All I can say is that I’m sure between the two of you, you’ll work things out.”

Eleanor groaned and flopped back against the cushions. “You are supremely

unhelpful.”

???

“You’re sure it’s ready?” Danni asked, brushing a speck of dust off her best jacket as Samson wriggled uncomfortably in his tie.

“Keeping this whole thing secret from Her Majesty has been a bloody nightmare, but yes, it’s ready. Just don’t touch that last part of railing over there, the stain’s still a bit tacky.”

Danni looked over at the back railing of the gazebo. There were chairs in front of it, so it was unlikely that anyone would touch it. “It has to be perfect,” she said.

“We’re about to put the final decorative touches on,” Samson said. “Or we will be if you get out of our way.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Danni said, looking at her watch. “I just hope everyone else does what they’re supposed to do on time.”

“You do know that Lady Eleanor is going to throttle you for keeping all this a secret?” Samson said.

“I know,” said Danni, eyebrows dancing devilishly. “But she’ll forgive me. We all get one grand gesture in life, and Eleanor’s already had hers. This is my turn.”

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Eleanor had rather been hoping that Elizabeth would take her mind off things, would perhaps even suggest lunch. But she’d plead off, citing some sort of legal reason about court or something equally unimportant, and had scurried off after morning tea.

Leaving Eleanor uncharacteristically at a loose end. She tapped her mobile phone in her hand, wondering whether she should call Danni and demand a heart-to-heart. But she was probably busy at the farm. Talking would have to wait until later.

Instead, she called her grandmother.

Isabella answered on the third ring. “Eleanor.”

“Grandmama.”

“Is it something terribly important, my dear? I’m afraid I’m quite tied up at the moment.”

Eleanor frowned. “Um, no, not terribly.”

“Oh, good,” said Isabella. “In that case, if you don’t mind...?”

“No, no,” Eleanor said.

But Isabella had already hung up.

What on earth was going on? Was everyone in her life deserting her? All she wanted was someone to complain to. Perhaps that was the problem. Perhaps she needed to bear her own worries and frustrations, and not inflict them on others.

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She was just wondering whether or not she should go on a long walk and try to forget that the rest of the world existed, when a knock sounded at the morning room door. She turned and saw Indi standing in the doorway, grinning.

“Let myself in,” Indi said airily. “There’s no security around here, did you know that? Big old door, just standing there unlocked. Honestly, if I weren’t such a law-abiding citizen, I could have stolen the family jewels by now.”

“What are you doing here?” Eleanor asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Girls’ afternoon,” Indi said, breezing past her into the room and dumping an armful of bags on the sofa.

“Girls’ afternoon doing what?” said Eleanor suspiciously.

Indi shrugged. “Trying on clothes, gossiping, drinking tea... or something stronger. Your choice.”

Eleanor crossed her arms. “Is this a setup?”

“Absolutely,” Indi grinned. “I’ve been working on a new dress, and I need a human model. There’s only so much I can do on a mannequin. And you seem to be at a loose end.” She held out a garment bag.

Eleanor sighed, but took the bag. Even Indi was better than a cross romp through the countryside, she supposed.

???

Danni pulled up outside The Willows in her battered Land Rover, and Isabella was already standing on the porch and waiting.

“It’s about time,” Isabella grumbled, as she clambered up into the passenger seat. “And when are you going to get rid of this awful vehicle? Honestly, you’re a lady of the manor, surely you could drive something with a little more class.”

“Sentimental attachment,” Danni said. “Besides, sheep don’t fit in the back of the Rolls, so it’s not exactly practical.”

Isabella laughed. “Is everything ready?”

“Ready as it’ll ever be,” said Danni, pulling out of the driveway. “We’ve just got to stop by the big farm and then we’ll be on our way.”

“Has Eleanor guessed anything yet?” Isabella asked as they drove.

“Don’t think so. But you know her, she’s a dark horse. There’s every chance that she knows it all and just hasn’t said anything about it.”

“She did call me this morning,” said Isabella. “I told her I was busy.”

For a while they chatted about the farm, Isabella showing shrewd interest in Danni’s new planting policies. And then they were bumping over the cobblestones into the big farmyard. Hector was already pacing around, looking far from happy in his suit and tie.

“I hate suits,” he said as he opened the door and climbed into the back seat. “And you’d better make sure you keep that Elizabeth away from me. She’s a maneater.”

Isabella rolled her eyes. “She’s a lawyer, not a lion.”

“Same thing,” Hector said darkly.

There was the sound of high heels on the cobblestones and Danni looked in the rearview mirror to see her mother tottering toward the car.

“She’ll be on her best behavior,” Hector said, catching Danni’s glance.

“She’s promised to teach me poker,” Isabella said.

“Oh God,” said Danni.

“She’s pleased to be invited,” said Hector. “Honestly, Dan. You’ve made her year.”

“Yeah, well, she’s my mum,” said Danni. She started the engine as her mother climbed into the car.

“Drink for the journey?” asked her mum, rattling a bag that seemed to be filled with airport miniatures.

“Oh, yes, please,” said Isabella, accepting a tiny bottle of gin.

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Eleanor smoothed down the beautiful blue dress that Indi had practically sewn her into and admired herself in the mirror.

“Just put your hair up like this,” Indi said, sticking a few pins in. Then she stood back, nodding.

The dress was undeniably stunning, Indi was a talented girl. Eleanor took a second to really appreciate it before turning back to Indi. “You’ve done a wonderful job here,” she said. “It looks fantastic. But if you could just get the zip for me.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Indi said.

“Yeah, probably not wise, Your Maj,” Samson said, standing in the doorway.

He was wearing a full suit and had flowers in his buttonhole. He was also holding out his arm as though he was going to escort Eleanor.

She looked from Samson to Indi and back again. “What’s going on?”

Indi grinned. “You’ll see. Go on.”

Extremely suspicious, and more than slightly nervous, Eleanor allowed Samson to take her arm and lead her down the stairs and out into the grounds. She immediately saw what had changed.

“It’s finished?” she gasped. The old gazebo had been surrounded by scaffolding for months now.

“Oh, just you wait,” laughed Samson.

As they got closer, Eleanor could see flowers adorning every surface, fairy lights twinkling like stars up in the beams, and rows of chairs that seemed to be filled with people. And there, right at the front, stood Danni.

“But... but we’re already married,” was all Eleanor could think of to say.

Danni thanked Samson and took Eleanor’s arm herself. “Yeah, but you did sort of propose twice, so I figured two weddings was just in keeping with the theme,” she said. “That and I thought that maybe we should do this properly this time. For real.”

Eleanor stopped. “It’s always been real,” she said softly.

“I know,” said Danni. Music started playing inside the gazebo. “You ready for this?”

Eleanor laughed. “Me? I was born ready.”

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Later, as they danced on the lawn beneath the stars, Eleanor’s head on her shoulder, Danni didn’t think she’d ever been so happy.

“You know, I thought you were keeping secrets,” Eleanor said.

“Oh, I was,” said Danni.

“Yes, that’s relatively clear now,” said Eleanor, looking up. “But now you’ve had

your big gesture, so no more making a scene, okay?”

“Says the person that proposed in a crowded pub,” said Danni.

“A one off.”

“So was this,” Danni said. She took a breath. This was the part that she was stupidly nervous about. Nervous with no real cause. It was what they both wanted. “So the other secret that I was keeping, that’s just for us.”

“Another secret?” Eleanor said. Danni looked at her and Eleanor stopped dancing, just stared at her, her face a mixture of fear and excitement. “Are you sure?” she whispered.

“A little prince of princess for Brewster Manor,” said Danni. “Aren’t you glad you didn’t sell the place now?”

Tears were streaking down Eleanor’s face and Danni reached up to wipe them away with her thumbs. “I’d be anywhere with you. Anywhere with us.”

“If you keep crying, then people might guess our secret,” Danni said, pulling her in close.

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“They’ll guess soon enough,” laughed Eleanor.

“Well, I think we can keep it to ourselves just for tonight,” Danni said. “Just me and you and... whatever this is. Kylie? Kevin? Josephat?”

“Oh Lord, how are we going to decide on names?”

“We’ll let Sam decide,” Danni said solemnly. “He’s the smartest one of us all.”

“He’s a horse.”

“We can’t all be perfect,” said Danni.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. “Are you implying that I’m imperfect?”

Danni grinned. “Never, Princess.” And she bent to catch Eleanor’s lips with her own as the music played on and the stars shone above and the two most mismatched people in the village, perhaps the universe, sealed their love with a kiss that was as perfect as two perfectly imperfect people can be.