



# Mr. Totton's Christmas Miracle

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Mr. Thomas Totton's life has never been easy, but when he's called upon to help a lady in distress, he uncharacteristically decides to employ her as his housekeeper. Even as he falls under her spell, he's fully aware that she's hiding things, and that at some point there will be a reckoning.

After being forced from her home Elinor Smith is grateful to have finally met a man of integrity. She is happy to remain incognito, but her foolish decision to attend a Christmas party, and a meeting with an irascible viscount lead to her unmasking. Can she salvage her relationship with Mr. Totton or will circumstances beyond her control tear them apart?

**Total Pages (Source):** 8

## CHAPTER 1

Mr. Thomas Totton bade his employer a cordial goodnight and left the office. It was only a ten-minute walk back to his house in Mare Street, but it was dark, the path icy, and the streetlights were not yet operational in his part of town. He passed the new railway station that his employer, Mr. Elijah Hepworth, had brought to Millcastle with the sheer strength of his will. It was currently deserted, the last train had left on the half hour, and the next wasn't expected until morning.

He knew far more about the workings of the railway station, and the hotel next to it than anyone in Millcastle, apart from Mr. Hepworth, and was quietly proud of what they'd achieved. Goods from Millcastle could now travel to new destinations, opening up the factory markets and increasing profitability.

He turned left at the corner after the Station Hotel and walked down the cobbled pathway between the two rows of new red brick houses he'd helped design with Mr. Hepworth's architect. The detached houses were for the new rising middle class--mill managers, overseers, station masters, and the professional gentlemen of Millcastle. Each had three stories and a cellar, four large bedrooms, servants' quarters at the top, and an inside water closet. Thomas thought they were very fine and had been delighted when his employer had offered him the opportunity to buy one at a reduced rate.

Thomas paused to open the back gate and entered the neat garden at the rear of his property. The garden was laid to grass with wide flower borders on two sides. Having never owned a garden before, he hadn't had much time to think of what to do with it. He was considering consulting with the municipal authority who had recently laid out

the town park. He'd never had much time for flowers in his life, but he was impressed by the colorful displays.

There was a light on in his kitchen window and he stopped to stare at the figure illuminated within.

He didn't need a live-in housekeeper.

He shouldn't have offered her the position, but he didn't regret it.

She'd come to him without references or experience, yet he'd allowed her to stay, and she'd proved her worth.

And yet... he knew nothing about her apart from the name she'd given him—Elinor Smith—and even that might not be real.

It was lucky he worked so hard and had no time for friends because he was fairly certain they would've warned him off hiring a woman like her. He wasn't even sure if she deserved to be called Mrs., because she'd never mentioned a spouse living or dead. At least the title gave her the veneer of respectability they both needed to maintain their relative positions in society and for her to manage his house.

Despite all her efforts to hide it, she was beautiful in a way that made men stop and stare. Her hair was the darkest chocolate brown and her eyes the color of violets. Not that he'd noticed these things when he'd first encountered her alone and desperate at the notorious George and Dragon coaching inn in the center of town.

He still wasn't sure what instinct had made him stop when she'd called out to him, but he had paused to listen to her tale of woe, and, incredibly, he'd believed every word of it.

She'd come to Millcastle to work as a governess only to find that the position was not as she'd imagined, and that the letter writer was an elderly man with no children simply wishing to entrap her within his house and use her as he wished. When he'd met her off the coach, instinct had told her he wasn't being truthful. She'd asked about his children and he'd become angry and defensive, seemingly unable to remember the names he'd fabricated in his letter. He'd tried to force her to get into his carriage, and she'd made a scene, racing toward the entrance of the inn where she'd run straight into—him.

Thomas shivered as the first faint hint of snow brushed his cheek. He looked up at the silent, falling flakes that would soon mask the scars of the growing industrial town he'd helped create. Not that he wasn't proud of what he'd achieved. He'd grown up with nothing and now had an excellent job, a fine house to live in, and—Mrs. Smith.

He shook off his foolish thoughts and marched up to the back door, wiped his feet on the mat and stepped inside. There was no sign of his housekeeper, but the fragrant smell of beef stew perfumed the air and the house was warm around him. These days he never had to think about rationing coal or light, which was a blessing.

He took off his boots and set them in the scullery along with his coat and hat. When he entered the kitchen, she was there with a warm towel in her hands and a welcoming smile.

“Good evening, Mr. Totton.”

“Mrs. Smith.” He inclined his head.

“Was it starting to snow?” she asked as she handed him the towel. “The butcher told me he could smell it in the air, but I didn't quite believe him.”

“Yes, but it's not really settled yet.” He washed his hands in the bowl of warm water

she'd left for him in the sink and dried them with the towel. "But it looks like it will."

"A white Christmas," she said, her expression pensive. "When I was a child, I expected every Christmas to have snow and was rather annoyed when it didn't happen. I remember getting quite cross with my papa when he refused to take me ice skating because the lake wasn't properly frozen over."

Thomas imagined Mrs. Smith as a child and wondered how any parent could've denied her anything. On the very rare occasions when she shared anything about her childhood, he had the impression that it had been a happy one. What had happened to upset that? He'd never had the courage to ask.

He set the towel down. "I'll eat in the kitchen tonight, if that's acceptable to you, Mrs. Smith. There's no point wasting money to set a fire in the dining room just for me."

In truth, the house was far too large for a man without a family. He occupied the main bedroom, Mrs. Smith had a room on the floor above, and, as there was no other live-in help, the rest of the rooms remained unoccupied.

"As you wish, Mr. Totton." She turned toward the stove. "I just need to check my dumplings."

While she had her back to him, Thomas was able to study her at his leisure. Her dark hair was braided and secured at the nape of her neck in a neat bun. She wore one of the two day-dresses she owned in a serviceable brown and had a large work apron tied around her waist. When she served in the dining room on the rare occasion he had guests, she wore a white apron and added a lace collar to the round neck of her dress.

After stirring the pot, she laid the table and gestured for Thomas to sit down.

“Thank you.” He took his usual seat. “It was a very busy day at work.”

“Mr. Hepworth expects a lot of you.” Mrs. Smith filled a jug of water from the pump and set it on the table along with two glasses. She also put the tea pot down and poured him a cup.

“He pays me well enough to demand the best,” Thomas said as he stirred in some sugar and drank the strong brew down in one gulp. “Although, some days I do wonder how I manage to get everything done.”

“Everyone speaks very highly of you, Mr. Totton,” Mrs. Smith said.

“That is very kind of you to say so, ma’am, although I doubt all of them truly like me. I represent Mr. Hepworth, and he remains a divisive figure in this town. Not everyone appreciates the railway or the navvies who built it.”

“Then they are fools because the railway brings prosperity.” She refilled his cup and went over to the stove to get the cast iron pot containing the stew. “It also allows the common man to travel further than ever before. Who would not appreciate that?”

“Have you been on the train, Mrs. Smith?” Mr. Totton inquired.

“Not yet, but I intend to. I’d like to see the sea again.” She took the lid off the pot and a cloud of steam rose over the rounded dumplings. “Shall I serve you your dinner, sir, or would you rather help yourself?”

“You may do it.” He watched her ladle a hearty portion onto his plate. “But make sure you leave enough for yourself.”

She fetched the bread, which he knew she made herself, and a slab of golden butter from the local dairy. He waited until she had settled back at the table before he spoke

again.

“If you wish to take leave over Christmas, Mrs. Smith, you are more than welcome to do so.”

She looked directly at him. “You are planning on going away yourself?”

“No, but it just occurred to me that you haven’t taken a single day off since you got here over a year ago, and that you are due a holiday.” He paused. “Perhaps you could take that trip on the train to the coast.”

“That is very kind of you, but I’d rather stay here.” She looked down at her plate. “I have no one to go with or to visit.”

“You have no family at all?” Thomas asked.

“None that would wish to acknowledge me.” Her quick smile spoke of past tensions.

Thomas chewed a chunk of beef as he framed his next question. “You are estranged from your kin?”

“Yes.”

“I find it hard to believe that anyone would be so cruel as to cast a woman such as yourself adrift, Mrs. Smith.”

“But you don’t know what I’ve done, Mr. Totton. I could have threatened to murder the lot of them.”

He met her gaze. “I doubt it, ma’am.”

“There are far worse things than murder,” she said quietly. “Things that leave wounds that can never heal.”

“I don’t believe that Mrs. Smith. Time and distance have a way of healing all wounds.”

“You never speak of your own family, sir.”

He knew she was deliberately changing the subject, but it had been a long, trying day, he was tired, and suddenly all he wished to do was tell the truth.

“My wife and child died in a house fire in Leeds.”

Mrs. Smith’s sharply indrawn breath was audible. “How... terrible.”

“It’s one of the reasons why I was willing to follow Mr. Hepworth on his travels up and down the country to build new railways. I hated going home to the silence.” He looked around the kitchen. “This is the first house I’ve ever owned.”

He almost started as Mrs. Smith reached over and patted his hand. To his knowledge, it was the first time she’d touched him in public. She withdrew her fingers before he could move his own.

“There is no need for sympathy, ma’am, it was ten years ago, and, as I said, time is a great healer.” He swallowed hard. “In truth, I can barely remember what my wife and bairn looked like anymore.”

Her continued silence made him feel like an emotional fool. He poured himself more tea. “If neither of us have plans to leave Millcastle for yuletide perhaps you might care to accompany me to Mr. Hepworth’s for Christmas day? Mrs. Hepworth invited us both and it would save you having to cook.”



She was slow to reply. "I'm sure they invited you, sir, but me? I'm hardly of the right class."

"You're probably better bred than the lot of us," Thomas said bluntly. "You'll fit right in." He met her worried gaze. "In fact, I'd be glad if you did come with me. I always have to partner some dotty old aunt who doesn't know quite what to make of me."

"I'll come if you want me to," Mrs. Smith said.

"Good." He smiled at her and applied himself to his dinner. "Is there any pudding?"

Afterwards, they sat in companionable silence in the front parlor. Mr. Totton read the newspaper while Elinor darned his socks. She felt the first faint stirring of disquiet. Should she attend the festivities? She'd kept her head down for a year and no one had recognized her, which was a miracle in itself. She should have asked Mr. Totton for a list of exactly who was attending just in case anyone from her past life turned up and recognized her. But how likely was it that the Hepworth's, who weren't from the nobility, would have friends who were? And what questions would Mr. Totton have if she demanded such a list?

She yearned to leave the house and simply enjoy Christmas with the man who had taken her in without question and had never asked her to explain herself. He'd helped her when she'd begun to believe there were no good men left in the world. At least, she'd known how to keep house—her stepmother had made sure of that when she'd decreed that Elinor's place was no longer with the family and that she needed to work for her keep.

What had astounded her then, and continued to do so, was that not a single person in her father's family had stood up for her. They'd all meekly allowed the new Lady Redmayne to do as she pleased to her husband's only daughter. Her Great Aunt

Matilda had tried once—offering Elinor a home—but she hadn't been allowed to leave because that might have exposed her stepmother's plans to the wider world.

“Oh.”

Mr. Totton looked up at Elinor's involuntary exclamation.

“Is something wrong, ma'am?”

“I don't have anything to wear.”

His gaze went over her. “You seem perfectly adequately clothed to me.”

“For the event at the Hepworth's.”

“Ah, perhaps you should pop into your dressmaker and ask if she has anything you might purchase.”

“I don't have a dressmaker and I'm not sure I wish to waste the money on a new gown I'd only wear once,” Elinor explained.

“I appreciate your frugality, Mrs. Smith, but on this occasion, I think you should reconsider. My wife always used to say that one good dress would last a woman a lifetime.”

Elinor tried to remember the days when she'd changed her clothes at least four times and left everything on the floor for someone else to pick up. Her father had loved to see her in a new dress...

“Madame Lisette's on the corner of the town square sometimes had second-hand dresses for sale,” Mr. Totton wasn't finished. He was always a very thorough man,

“I’d try there.”

“Thank you for the suggestions,” Elinor replied. “Perhaps it would be simpler if I didn’t go.”

He looked at her over the top of his newspaper. “I would be disappointed if you chose not to accompany me.” He returned his gaze to the page, leaving her biting her lip.

He never asked anything of her and she owed him everything.

With a sigh, she mentally reviewed the contents of her savings account. “I’ll do my best, sir, but I can’t promise anything.”

He nodded, his attention on whatever he was reading, and she returned to her darning until the clock on the mantelpiece chimed nine times. They were both early risers. She had to get breakfast started and he had to leave on time for his job with the demanding Mr. Hepworth.

“Time for bed,” he murmured as he did every night. “I’ll check the locks.”

“And I’ll make sure the kitchen fire is banked.”

Elinor rose to her feet, put her mending away, and went into the kitchen where she hung her apron on a hook behind the door and stretched out her spine. She’d started her Christmas preparations months ago and Mr. Totton would still be getting his plum pudding and mince pies whether they went to the Hepworths or not.

She made sure all the gas lamps were off and mounted the stairs, a single candle in her hand. He was waiting for her at his bedroom door, his gaze serious as he raised an eyebrow in a question. She nodded and he drew her into his bedroom, closing the door behind her. She blew out the candle leaving them in total darkness, but it didn’t

matter. She knew how to undress him in the blackness, the hard lines of him, the curve of his buttock and the rough hair on his chest. He knew her just as well, his fingers sure and steady as he unbuttoned the back of her dress and the waistband of her petticoats so that she could step out of them.

She lay down on the bed and he joined her, his callused hands everywhere, exciting her as no other man had with the honesty of his touch and his gratitude for everything she gave him in return. She hadn't been a virgin when she'd come to him, and he'd never asked her about the whereabouts of Mr. Smith.

His breath caught as she ran her fingernails down his back, and he quickly parted her thighs finding her slick and ready for him. With a groan, he pushed inward, his shaft thick and hard enough to give her pleasure she'd never had before and the patience to teach her how to achieve it.

When she'd first come to his bedroom, he'd been shocked—horrified that she thought that had been his intention all along—that she somehow owed him her body for saving her. But that wasn't it. She'd simply sensed he'd be kind, and she'd needed that more than life itself. She'd been hurt, afraid, and desperate to find someone who could erase her fear without expecting an explanation. Mr. Totton had understood—giving her yet another reason to be grateful to him.

They never spoke of their nighttime liaisons, but they were frequent and intensely enjoyable. Elinor closed her eyes as she came, her hands in his hair, her heels locked on his hips holding him deep within her. She sensed his determination to pull out before he climaxed even as she foolishly tried to stop him. But he was stronger than her both physically and mentally and always spared her the horror of a pregnancy.

Afterward, she'd be grateful and embarrassed by her own instincts, but he never scolded her. Perhaps he understood her better than she realized. She repaid his kindness by never lingering or expecting soft words and embraces. She slipped from

his bed without a word leaving him in the darkness as she'd found him, leaving the warmth of his bed for the cold reality of her own room and its narrow window and meager fire.

Elinor washed in cold water, shivering as the sponge scraped over her most private parts where he'd pleased her with the relentless efficiency he brought to everything he did. She put on her nightgown and climbed between the sheets she'd starched and ironed the day before. It was quiet outside apart from the call of the foxes in the fields behind the railway station. She was more used to the sounds of the countryside than those of the town having been brought up by her ailing mother at the family's country house.

She pictured the rose garden behind the vast house, her mother pausing to smell the flowers, and snip off the best of them for the arrangements that filled their home. She'd been too busy running around to stay with her mother, something she bitterly regretted now. If she'd known her mother only had months to live, she would have stuck to her side like glue. She pictured her brother Robert waving at them from the house. Where was he now? When he'd returned from India, what story had they told him about her absence?

Elinor determinedly closed her eyes. There was no point dwelling on the past. She had an occupation, money in her savings account, and a good man to take care of. What more could any woman want than that?

## Page 2

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### CHAPTER 2

“Mrs. Hepworth, might I have a moment of your time?” Thomas asked.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Totton.” Mrs. Alice Hepworth was always pleasant to him and such a benign influence on her rabble-rousing husband. “Is it about Christmas?”

They stood at the front entrance to Mr. Hepworth’s business offices where Mrs. Hepworth had just visited her husband and collected her stepson who had run ahead to the waiting carriage.

Thomas bowed. “I would like to accept your kind invitation to your Christmas festivities.”

“Good.” She beamed at him. “And what about Mrs. Smith?”

“She would like to come, but she is hesitant because she doesn’t have the right clothing to wear.”

Thomas knew that his housekeeper would be extremely irritated with him for bringing this up with Mrs. Hepworth, but he’d noticed she’d had no luck procuring a dress and was fearful that she intended to excuse herself from the party all together.

“Oh,” Mrs. Hepworth said. “Of course. I should’ve thought of that.”

Despite her well-bred tones, Mrs. Hepworth hadn’t started life in the upper classes. She was the illegitimate child of the previous Viscount Grafton-Wesley, making her

the current title holder's half-sister. Thomas only knew because he'd help draw up the marriage contract between the irascible viscount and the equally difficult Mr. Hepworth. Even if he hadn't, he would've had a soft spot for Mrs. Hepworth because she was kindness itself.

She nodded briskly and turned to the door. "Leave it with me, Mr. Totton."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She went out onto the street where her stepson helped her ascend into the carriage. Thomas had no doubt that she would help him. He just hoped it wouldn't take too long, and Mrs. Smith would forgive him for interfering.

"Mr. Totton!"

Thomas sighed as he heard his employer's raised voice and went back into the office. Occasionally, these days, he wished he worked for a less cantankerous gentleman but he owed Mr. Hepworth his livelihood, and his sanity, and he would never forget that.

"How may I assist you, sir?" Thomas walked into Mr. Hepworth's office.

"I want you to get me a copy of the London Times."

"Now, sir?"

"Yes." His employer's eyebrows drew together. "When did you think I'd want it—yesterday?"

"I wonder if Viscount Grafton-Wesley has it delivered?" Thomas mused almost to himself. "I shall go and inquire, sir."

“Thank you.”

“Perhaps we might consider getting a subscription of our own?” Thomas suggested.

“Yes, why not. I like to keep my eye on those foolish politicians in Parliament.” Mr. Hepworth scowled. “They’re always trying to ruin my business.”

“Perhaps you should stand for Parliament yourself, sir?”

“Give over, lad.” Mr. Hepworth grinned at him. “I don’t have the vote. They’d kick me out on my arse the second I got up to speak.”

Thomas concealed a smile as he left the office and went to the inn next door where he asked the stableboy to saddle him a horse. It didn’t take long to get to Grafton Hall. If the weather was less pleasant, he would’ve taken the gig. It always surprised him how quickly the smoke and fumes of Millcastle faded away and he was surrounded by lush countryside.

Somewhat to his relief, the viscount wasn’t available, but the countess was more than happy to give him both the latest paper and the one from the previous day. He thanked her kindly, got back on his horse, and was back sitting at his desk half an hour later. Mr. Hepworth had gone out, so Thomas finished a few immediate tasks and then set about refolding the older of the two newspapers which had been mangled almost beyond repair.

It was only by chance that his gaze alighted on a large advertisement in the personal columns seeking information.

MISSING. A petite lady of good family with dark brown hair and eyes of a most unusual violet color. Last seen in the vicinity of London Bridge Railway Station a year ago. Any information on her whereabouts will be financially rewarded. Replies



to this newspaper treated in strictest confidence. RR.

Thomas stared at the advertisement for quite some time, his instincts fighting between believing the notice had to be about Mrs. Smith or that she had nothing to do with it. He took a moment to jot down all the relevant details and folded the paper again, his mind racing. She'd been afraid when he'd met her and not just of the old gentleman who'd sought to entrap her. She'd been terrified to the bone.

He sat back in his chair and studied his notes. Which led to the question of whether the person who'd paid for this advertisement had her best interests at heart. It was possible the ad was an attempt to trap her and return her to whatever she had run away from in the first place. Or it could be from a relation who wished to restore her to her rightful position...

"Mr. Totton?" He looked up with a start to see Mr. Hepworth at his door, his hand held out. "My newspaper?"

"Yes, sir. Of course." He jumped up and handed over the two nicely folded newspapers. "The countess assured me that there was no need to return them."

"I should think not." Mr. Hepworth looked indignant. "Although Francis Grafton is penny-pinching for an aristocrat."

"May I ask you a question, sir?"

His employer who'd been just about to leave paused in the doorway. "What is it?"

"How might someone find out who put a particular advertisement in a newspaper?"

"How would I know?" Mr. Hepworth looked at him as if he was daft. "That's what I employ you for."

After he left work, Thomas took a different route home and went into the newly established Millcastle Daily News offices just off Market Square. He was greeted pleasantly by a young clerk who stood behind the high counter. The clatter of the printing presses was loud behind him.

“How may I help you, sir?”

“Good afternoon,” Thomas said. “I am inquiring about the process of placing an advertisement in the personal section of a newspaper.”

“Of course, sir.” The clerk explained how costs were calculated by the word count and the size of the advertisement.

“I see. And if one receives replies? How does one know that they will remain confidential?”

“Each advertisement is numbered or given a special designation by us, which means all replies to that particular ad are placed in a secure box just for the customer without our staff reading them,” the clerk said importantly. “We value your privacy and do our utmost to maintain it.”

“What if someone wished to know the name of the person who placed the advertisement before replying? Could they find that out?”

“Not from us, sir.”

“Thank you,” Thomas said. “You have been most helpful.”

The clerk took his pen from behind his ear. “Do you wish to proceed, sir?”

“Not at this moment. I have to consider my options. But I appreciate all your advice.”

He left the office deep in thought as he made his way home. He'd retrieved the older newspaper from Mr. Hepworth's bin, carefully cut out the original advertisement, and placed it in his pocket. If he mentioned the matter to Mrs. Smith, how would she react? The thought of her abruptly leaving his house gave him grave concerns. But what if someone who cared for her was looking for her? Didn't she deserve the chance to know that?

His thoughts were interrupted when he noticed the Hepworth carriage outside his front door. He increased his pace and went in using his front door key. He paused in the hallway and heard voices coming from the kitchen.

Mrs. Smith appeared in the doorway; her expression unreadable. "Good evening, Mr. Totton. We have a visitor."

"So, I see." Thomas took off his coat and hat and made his way into the kitchen where Mrs. Hepworth was sitting at the table with a cup of tea. She smiled when she saw him.

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Totton. Mrs. Smith was beginning to worry."

"I do apologize. I am normally very punctual, but I had some personal business to attend to." Thomas bowed.

"It is of no matter. We've been enjoying a comfortable chat while we waited for you, haven't we, Mrs. Smith?"

"Indeed." Mrs. Smith resumed her seat at the table opposite their guest. "Mrs. Hepworth brought me a dress."

"That was kind of you, ma'am," Thomas said, aware that his housekeeper would probably have a few words to say to him once Mrs. Hepworth had departed.

“It’s something I wore before I was married that my husband considers too plain for me now.” Mrs. Hepworth’s fond smile reminded Thomas that despite his ferocious appearance, his employer was very much in love with his wife. “I thought Mrs. Smith might find a use for it.”

She turned back to Mrs. Smith. “You might need to take the hem up because you are shorter than I am, but we are much of the same size so the dress should suit you perfectly.”

Mrs. Smith bit her lip. “It is very generous of you, ma’am, but I’m not sure if I should accept such a gift.”

Mrs. Hepworth stood up. “Perhaps you would prefer to consider it a loan? You can give it back to me after Christmas, and no one will be any the wiser.”

“I’ll... think about it.”

“Of course. Try it on first and see if it suits,” Mrs. Hepworth advised as she headed for the front door. “If it doesn’t, just come in your Sunday best.” She paused in the doorway, her earnest gaze fixed on Mrs. Smith. “I have been in your position, Mrs. Smith. I understand your concerns, but I can assure you that this offer is meant with the best of intentions. I promise I will not take offense if you choose not to wear the gown. I want you to be present at the celebrations regardless of what you wear.”

Thomas escorted Mrs. Hepworth to her carriage and went back inside, his steps slowing as he neared the kitchen. Mrs. Smith had her back to him as she attended to something on the stove.

“Thank goodness I made shepherd’s pie. An extra fifteen minutes in the oven is hardly going to ruin it.” She took out the dish and placed it on the table. “I’ll just get the peas.”

Thomas washed his hands and sat down, his gaze on his housekeeper as she bustled around the kitchen. She made no mention either of the visit or his part in arranging it, as she offered him a cup of tea, and a large portion of the pie. He cleared his throat.

“I hope you don’t mind that I mentioned your need for a suitable dress to Mrs. Hepworth.”

“I certainly don’t expect you to worry about my personal needs, Mr. Totton,”

He raised an eyebrow, and she had the grace to blush.

“Be that as it may, it was kind of Mrs. Hepworth to go to so much trouble on my behalf,” Mrs. Smith continued. “She is a very kind lady.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t mind me telling you that she had a difficult start to life,” Thomas said as he settled in to eat his dinner. “She told me she arrived at Grafton Hall with two dresses to her name and no idea whether the viscount would have anything to do with her.”

Mrs. Smith set her fork down. “Don’t tell me she was Francis Grafton’s mistress?”

“No, she’s his half-sister. Her mother was his father’s mistress.”

“Good Lord.”

“Which is why I think she understands the difficulties women can face through no fault of their own.”

“I won’t tell anyone what you just said,” Mrs. Smith said. “Most people think she’s the viscount’s cousin.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d keep my confidence,” Thomas said.

“Who would I tell? I have no family to speak of. I owe you far more than my silence and well you know it.”

“You owe me nothing,” Thomas said gruffly. “Will you at least try on the dress?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Good.” Thomas concentrated on his food because he was truly hungry before sitting back and wiping his mouth on his napkin. “That was excellent, Mrs. Smith. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll put on the kettle for some more tea.”

He waited until she sat down again, mentally rehearsing the question he wanted to ask until he phrased it just right.

“I know you say that you have no family, ma’am, but there must have been someone who cared for you.”

She remained quiet for a moment, her head bowed to her cup. “I had a brother.”

Thomas waited to see if she’d say more but she remained quiet.

“Is he still alive?”

“I don’t know.” She finally met his gaze. “He went off to India and I never saw him again.”

“He didn’t write to you?”

“For the first year or so and then nothing.”

“Were you officially notified that he was... deceased?”

“No one would’ve written to me, sir. I was just a child and those in authority over me would hardly have told me even if it was true.” She paused. “I did ask, but I was punished for daring to inquire and I soon learned not to do it anymore.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You are hardly responsible for the ills of my childhood, Mr. Totton.”

“I am aware of that.” He met her gaze. “Have you ever searched for your brother?”

“If he returned home, I’m sure my family would’ve done their utmost to convince him that I had left on my own accord without considering his existence.”

“Would he have believed them?”

She looked away. “Have you finished your tea, sir? There’s plenty more in the pot.”

“I have offended you,” Thomas said. “I apologize. It’s just that thoughts of Christmas have made me consider my own lack of family more intensely.”

“What did happen to the rest of your family, Mr. Totton?” It was her turn to stare at him.

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“That seems unlikely.”

“The first thing I truly remember is arriving in a cartload of children to a mill in Leeds. I believe we were shipped over from Ireland after being orphaned during the famine. I have no recollection of ever having a home. I was housed in a shed with the other working boys until I had served out my apprenticeship. I was lucky enough to have an affinity with numbers and was taken on by an accountant who trained me and offered me a position in his company.”

He looked at her. “I’ve already told you about what happened to my wife and bairn, is there anything else you’d like to know?”

She bit her lip. “Now, who needs to apologize.”

“Not you, for one.” He sipped his tea. “I consider myself a survivor, Mrs. Smith. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved in my life.”

“As you should be.” She nodded. “At least I always knew where I came from.” She paused. “I must admit that I have been reluctant to search for my brother.”

“Which is quite understandable.”

“If he turned away from me...” She sighed. “I’d have to give up on the hope that he would not.”

“After my wife died, I heard rumors that someone had saved my child,” Thomas said slowly. “I spent months staring at every baby I saw in the streets around our old house, just hoping that one of them would turn out to be mine. It almost destroyed me,”

“Hope is a treacherous thing,” Mrs. Smith said softly.

“Indeed.” Thomas cleared his throat. Should he tell her about the advertisement now,



or wait until after Christmas? He hesitated. “Mrs. Smith...”

But it was too late she was already on her feet clearing the table. He rushed to help.

“Why don’t you go and try on that dress?” he suggested. “I’ll finish up in here.”

“You will not, sir. You will go and sit in the parlor and read your paper,” She met his gaze, her eyes suspiciously bright. “I’ll try on the dress when I’m done and not a moment before.”

## Page 3

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### CHAPTER 3

Elinor had no idea why she'd allowed herself to be talked into attending the Christmas festivities at the Hepworths' rather elegant country house on the outskirts of Millcastle. If she was honest, no one had forced her to attend—she'd wanted to go. The mere thought of enjoying Christmas with people who wouldn't treat her as a burden was curiously enticing. And to go with Mr. Totton, a man who had restored her faith in humanity, was as close to perfection as she was likely to achieve in her new life.

She glanced over at him as he drove the gig toward an arch on the side of the house which led into a stable yard. He wasn't a particularly handsome man, and he rarely smiled, but there was a strength to him that calmed and steadied her.

A boy came to hold the horse's head and she waited until Mr. Totton came around to offer her his assistance to alight. She put out her hand, but he reached up and placed his hands around her waist bringing her effortlessly to the ground. For a moment, she was pressed against the starched white shirt she'd ironed for him and could smell the hint of his bergamot shaving lotion.

"Thank you, sir." She made the mistake of looking up at him and he smiled at her.

"Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Might I ask a favor of you?" He hesitated. "Would you mind being less of my

housekeeper and more of my friend during this event?”

“But what will people think?”

“Do you care? It’s not as if either of us are married or behaving dishonorably, is it?”

“I’ve never been married, sir.”

“I thought as much.” He smiled at her again. “If you can’t bring yourself to call me Thomas in public perhaps you might use Mr. Totton rather than sir?”

“As you wish.” She tentatively smiled back. “I must admit to being out of practice in how to behave in society.”

“This is Millcastle, not London.” He set her hand on his arm. “We can behave exactly as we like.”

They entered the hall and a maid immediately ushered Elinor up to the bedroom where she would stay the night to take off her cloak and change her shoes. She waited as Elinor dithered over whether she should unpack her possessions and gently cleared her throat.

“I can attend to your clothing while you dine, ma’am.”

“Oh! Thank you. I’m not used to being...” Elinor paused. She was supposed to be enjoying herself, wasn’t she? “Thank you, that would be most kind.”

She paused to check her appearance in the mirror and patted her hair. She was wearing her best Sunday dress for the evening’s entertainment and would change into her borrowed gown for Christmas day.

“I can help you curl your hair tomorrow ma’am, if you wish?”

Elinor couldn’t remember the last time she’d had help with anything.

“I would appreciate that.”

The maid beamed and headed for the door. “I’m Bea, ma’am. Mrs. Hepworth asked me to take special care of you over the next two days.”

“Thank you.” Elinor followed her out of the room and toward the stairs. She hesitated on the galleried landing, which looked down onto the hall and the large Christmas tree. Loud voices and laughter came from the open doors where the other guests were gathering. Elinor took a deep breath and reminded herself that she had been invited and that at least two people at the party wished her well.

She gathered her skirts and set off down the shallow steps, her heart beating far too fast. The butler met her at the foot of the stairs and bowed.

“Mrs. Smith? Please follow me. Mrs. Hepworth is in the drawing room.”

Her hostess wore a tartan gown in red, brown, and green with a lace trimmed ribbon around the bodice and a matching rosette in her hair.

“Mrs. Smith.” She took both of Elinor’s hands in hers. “Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for the invitation.”

Elinor looked cautiously around the room but could see no one more threatening than several Hepworth employees, and the rather irascible Dr. Nash who even terrorized the navvies who worked on the railways. His wife, Ruby, who was also plain speaking, but far kinder, was already an acquaintance of Elinor’s from church. She

came over to Mrs. Hepworth's side.

"It's nice to see you out in company, Mrs. Smith." She patted her rather large bump. "My husband is being insufferably overprotective and I'll rely on you both to stand up for me if he gets too bossy."

"When is your baby due, ma'am?" Elinor asked.

"Within the next month, so there's nothing to worry about." Ruby smiled. "You'd think a man who has assisted at several births would be more sanguine about such a natural event, but my dear husband is such a worrier."

"Men often are," Mrs. Hepworth agreed. "Elijah was in a terrible state when I was expecting Alice."

She looked across the room to where her husband sat with his daughter on his knee and an extremely doting expression on his face. Alice, who was as dainty as her mother, looked like a little doll next to her large father but she obviously didn't fear him in the slightest and was, in fact, telling him off about something while he meekly nodded.

"She has him wrapped around her little finger," Mrs. Hepworth said.

"Charles is the same with Nora." Mrs. Nash sighed. "I think he's hoping this one will be a boy to even up the household."

"I'm hoping this baby will be hale and hearty." Dr. Nash joined them and glanced down at his wife. "Bear that in mind before you consume too much pudding."

"I shall eat as much pudding as I like." Ruby Nash raised her chin.

Dr. Nash quickly looked away and his gaze landed on Elinor. He frowned. "I'm sure I've seen you before somewhere, ma'am but I can't for the life of me remember where."

"I'm Mr. Totton's housekeeper, sir."

"That's not it." He studied her so intently she wanted to turn and flee. She'd forgotten he had aristocratic connections. She should have recognized the upper-class drawl of her childhood. "You remind me of someone I knew in London..."

Mrs. Hepworth gently cleared her throat. "Please don't mind, Dr. Nash, Mrs. Smith. Sometimes his manners stray into the brusque."

Dr. Nash bowed to Elinor. "I do apologize, Mrs. Smith. You're an extraordinarily beautiful woman and once seen, such beauty does tend to stick in one's head."

"Perhaps it was a portrait," Mrs. Nash said. "But whatever it was you are embarrassing Mrs. Smith." She took her husband's arm. "I'll take him away before he says anything worse."

Elinor tried to laugh but it was a forced effort. Mrs. Hepworth touched her shoulder.

"There is nothing to fear here, Mrs. Smith. I will not allow anyone to hurt you."

Elinor realized she was trembling and that her hostess was looking at her with some concern.

"I apologize, ma'am. I'm not used to company and tend to feel some apprehension when I'm the center of attention."

"I quite understand," Mrs. Hepworth smiled at her. "And here is Mr. Totton come to

look for you. I have him as your partner for dinner so if you wish to take his arm and proceed toward the dining room you can enjoy a quiet evening together.”

“What happened?” Mr. Totton murmured as soon as Mrs. Hepworth moved onto her other guests.

“Nothing, sir,” Elinor said quickly.

“You know I’ll keep your secrets, ma’am.” He looked into her eyes. “There’s nothing you could tell me that would shock me.”

Elinor sighed. “I hoped that if I kept my troubles to myself no one would bother me. I find I become anxious around people I’m not familiar with.”

“And what exactly did the good doctor say to make you feel like that? You are shaking.”

Aware that he must have been keeping an eye on her, Elinor replied somewhat tartly. “I thought you promised me a convivial evening, sir, with nothing to worry about,”

“No, I asked you to consider me as your friend and this is what friends do, Mrs. Smith, they look out for each other.” He held her gaze. “I would appreciate it if you would tell me what is going on.”

She sighed. “Dr. Nash said I reminded him of someone he’d met in London.”

“He does have connections in the city,” Mr. Totton said thoughtfully.

“High ones?”

“Yes, his father is an earl.”

“Then he might have met my—” Elinor stopped and then reluctantly continued. “My mother. I am supposed to resemble her greatly.”

“I assume she is no longer living?”

“She died when I was twelve,” Elinor replied. “My father remarried the same year.”

“And that, I assume is when your life changed and not for the better,” Mr. Totton said. “Shall we go into dinner? I believe Mrs. Hepworth’s butler is about to come and hurry us along.”

To Elinor’s relief, dinner proceeded as planned. Dr. Nash kept any further thoughts he had about her to himself and she was able to enjoy the meal, and the excellent wine served with it. It was very pleasant not to have to cook and even nicer not to have to clear up. She joined the ladies in the drawing room where Mrs. Hepworth’s daughter and her stepchildren awaited them.

Mrs. Hepworth’s face lit up as she rushed over to embrace her family. “How lovely it is to have all my darlings home for Christmas! Dan, you’re getting so tall! Ada, dearest, how are you enjoying London?”

There was clearly a lot of love between them, which gladdened Elinor’s heart. Her experience with her stepmother and new family had been very different and, in the end, had driven her to run away from everything she had known. Her only regret was that she had lost contact with her only surviving brother.

If she wrote to her stepmother and inquired about his whereabouts, would she even reply? Or would she send someone to bring Elinor home to face her wrath? She couldn’t risk it. Perhaps in years to come when the current viscountess was dead, Elinor would contact one of her stepsisters who might be more amenable to assisting her.



“You’re looking far too serious, ma’am.” Elinor jumped as Mr. Hepworth addressed her in his loud, jovial voice. “Would you care for a hand of cards?”

“With you?” She studied him doubtfully.

He smiled making the hard lines around his eyes crinkle. “Why, yes, Mrs. Smith. I hear from my wife that you play whist very well and I’m in need of all the assistance I can get.” He offered her his arm. “Now, come along before anyone else tries to steal you away from me.”

He escorted her to the far corner of the room where the card tables had already been set up. She found herself facing the vicar and his wife who already looked terrified by the prospect of dealing with the notoriously competitive Mr. Hepworth. He drew out a chair for her and sat opposite. He winked as he pulled a handful of coins out of his pocket. “We’ll keep the stakes to pennies, vicar, don’t you worry, and before you ask, Mrs. Smith, as you’re my partner I’ll stand surety for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The vicar cleared his throat and shuffled the cards. “Are we ready to begin?”

Elinor settled down to enjoy herself. She’d always loved playing whist and with Mr. Hepworth as her partner, she expected she’d be in for a very enjoyable evening.

Thomas waited until Elinor was comfortably settled at the card table before going in search of Dr. Nash. He found him outside in the garden smoking a cigar. There was a bright moon that illuminated the frost on the grass and the trees and even made the distant gloom of Millcastle look almost picturesque.

“Mr. Totton.” Dr. Nash nodded to him. “Would you care to join me?”

“That would be most kind of you, sir.” Thomas took his time over the ritual of preparing the cigar and lighting it. “I don’t often indulge but it is one of my guilty pleasures.”

“The ladies don’t like it,” Dr. Nash observed as he blew out a smoke ring. “Makes a mess of their carpets and God help you if something catches fire.”

“Understandably so.” Thomas hesitated. “I have a horror of fire. My wife and child perished in a house fire in Leeds.”

“Not due to your smoking, I hope.”

“No, they believe something caught fire in the kitchen, and in such a poorly constructed building, the flames spread far too quickly to be put out,” Thomas said. “I was at work in the mill and knew nothing about it until I came home and found my whole street in an uproar and half the houses burned to the ground.”

“That’s terrible,” Dr. Nash said. “And far too common an occurrence in our overcrowded cities.”

He hesitated. “My condolences on your loss.”

“Thank you. It was a long time ago.” Thomas smoked his cigar while he thought how to pose the question, he really wanted to ask without revealing too much.

“Dr. Nash...”

“Spit it out man. You of all people know I work with the navvies and have heard almost everything the world might throw at a man. I won’t be shocked whatever you tell me.”

“You mentioned that Mrs. Smith reminded you of someone.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” Dr Nash raised an eyebrow. “You must have wondered how a beautiful woman with an upper-class accent ended up being your housekeeper. I certainly have.”

“From the small amounts of information Mrs. Smith has revealed, I believe she felt she had no option other than to leave her home.” Thomas took another puff off his cigar. “She was terrified when I first met her.”

“And you’re wondering whether I can remember who on earth she reminds me of?” Dr. Nash frowned. “It wasn’t someone I was well acquainted with, I can tell you that.” He paused. “It was probably another woman. That particular eye color is rare enough to be rather noticeable.”

“If you do remember anything, might I ask that you tell me rather than Mrs. Smith?” Thomas asked. “The last thing I want is for her to feel afraid again and that she must leave.”

Dr. Nash looked at him. “You’re sweet on her, aren’t you.”

Thomas didn’t reply and Dr. Nash grinned.

“As you wish.” He bowed. “I’ll tell you if I remember a name.”

“Thank you.”

After finishing his cigar, Thomas returned to the drawing room and was soon drawn into conversation with a group of Mr. Hepworth’s employees. He kept an eye on Mrs. Smith who appeared to be thriving at the card table with his employer as her rather loud whist partner.

Mr. Hepworth only stopped playing when his youngest daughter, Alice, who was four, came over and tugged on his coat tails until he picked her up and gave her his entire attention. It always surprised Thomas how gentle his employer was with those he loved and his complete indifference as to what anyone else thought when he showed that softer side of himself.

Thomas walked over to where Mrs. Smith sat talking to the vicar.

“Would you like a drink, ma’am?” He offered.

“No, thank you.” She smothered a yawn behind her hand. “I think I’ll go to bed. I promised Mrs. Hepworth I would be up bright and early to help with the children.”

He held out his hand to assist her to rise and she took it.

“Thank you.”

He was yet again struck by how beautiful she was and how trusting her gaze. She was a different woman to the one he’d given shelter to over a year ago.

“May I escort you to your room?” he murmured.

“Not without causing gossip,” she replied. “The bottom of the stairs will suffice.”

“As you wish.”

She said her good nights, offered her thanks, and he walked her through to the hall where someone had placed a convenient branch of mistletoe on the arch under the stairs.

“May I?” He pointed at the mistletoe.

He didn't miss her quick glance around the hall before she went up on tiptoe and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Goodnight, Mr. Totton."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Smith."

She leaned in, her breath caressing his skin. "I did notice there is a connecting door between our suites if you care for me to use it?"

"I'll leave that entirely up to you, ma'am. I wouldn't wish to impose."

She took a step back, the soft welcome in her eyes fading. "I apologize if I have overstepped. Good night, sir."

He watched her ascend the stairs then turned and went back into the drawing room where he helped himself to a large brandy from the decanter. He'd hurt her, he knew it, but there was something about her lack of trust that upset him. What else could he do to prove that he was a good man?

He finished the brandy and poured himself another one.

Nothing.

His frustration quickly died as he realized his expectations were unfair. What right did he have to demand anything? She was already beholden to him for a place to live and a wage. Did he really want to become the kind of man who insisted on payment in kind—in eternal gratitude? She deserved better than that.

He considered going and apologizing but had a sense she wouldn't welcome his presence in her bedroom that night even though he yearned to make it up to her in the

most basic way possible. And they were in his employer's house and servants talked...

"Mr. Totton."

He turned to find Dr. and Mrs. Nash behind him.

"I thought of a name connected to the woman I met in London."

"Yes?"

"Her last name was Redmayne. I don't know anything about the family, but I'm fairly certain that was it."

"Thank you, Dr. Nash."

"I hope it helps." The doctor nodded and followed his wife into the hall and up the stairs, his arm around her waist. Thomas took the advertisement out of his coat pocket and looked at the initials at the end of it. There were two R's... Were they from Mrs. Smith's new family or her brother? He had no idea. The only person who might know was Elinor and he certainly wasn't going to bother her tonight over such a matter.

Mr. Hepworth came over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come and have a drink, Thomas. I was just telling my wife about how we met and she's eager to hear the whole story."

"I hardly think it shows me in a good light," Thomas remarked as he obediently followed his employer over to the fireplace where the remaining guests were gathered. "As I recall, I was drunk and fighting your navvies."

"Aye, you were, but it makes me look very well indeed." Mr. Hepworth winked.

“And all I care about is impressing my wife.”

### CHAPTER 4

Elinor woke up at her usual time of six o'clock with something of a start. It took her a moment to realize where she was and that nothing demanded her attention until at least seven when she'd offered to meet Mrs. Hepworth in the drawing room to help with the children, who would be excitedly opening their Christmas stockings.

She lay back against the mound of pillows and wiggled her toes under the warm weight of her many blankets. A fire had already been lit and the room was warm despite the frost patterned windowpanes. It was still dark outside and so quiet Elinor couldn't believe how close they were to Millcastle where the noise never stopped.

Her thoughts flew back to her last encounter with Mr. Totton and her sense of contentment dissipated. He'd been disappointed in her. He'd offered to be her friend, but unsettled by Dr. Nash's remarks, she'd kept him at arm's length, which he hadn't deserved. She'd also forgotten that they were in his employer's home and that his conduct and hers would be under observation.

She pressed a hand to her now hot cheek. And she'd propositioned him! How could she have been so stupid? Her delight at being in unfamiliar surroundings had clouded her judgement and might have caused him harm. She got out of bed, grabbed her shawl and headed for the connecting door between their suites. The key was on her side, so she turned it and went in.

The room was in darkness, the bed unoccupied. She jumped as someone cleared their throat.



“Good morning, Mrs. Smith.”

She gasped as he spoke from the chair by the fire. He was already dressed and reading a book which he set aside to observe her more closely.

She tightened her grip on the ends of the shawl. “I... wanted to apologize.”

“For what?”

“My overly familiar behavior last night.”

He removed his spectacles and carefully folded them before placing them in his waistcoat pocket. “No apology is needed.”

“I was too forward—and in your employer’s house?—”

He spoke over her. “Please don’t distress yourself. I was at fault. I was the one who started it by offering to accompany you to your room.” He paused. “That was unfair of me.”

She realized she was trembling. “I promise I’ll behave myself from now on, sir.”

“Elinor...” He rose to his feet and approached her. “Your behavior is always impeccable.”

He curved his hand around her neck and she leaned into him. “I was presumptuous,”

“No,” he said softly, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “You were not.”

She pressed her palm over his heart and simply let his strength and calmness overwhelm her.

“Perhaps we should simply admit we are out of practice in communicating with those we care about,” he murmured.

Elinor managed to smile against his waistcoat. “And forgive each other?”

“That would mean a lot to me.”

She raised her chin and met his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“As am I.” He kissed her properly this time, only drawing back when she reciprocated. “Shall we start again? Happy Christmas, Elinor.”

“And the same to you, sir, I mean, Thomas,” Elinor said, still somewhat shakily, but he didn’t seem to mind. “I do have a gift for you, if you’d like to receive it now?”

He nodded and she went back into her own room to pick up the present she’d hidden in the wardrobe. She’d wrapped it in brown paper and tied it with string, a piece of holly was the only decoration.

He took the parcel and looked at her. “May I open it?”

“Please.”

He sat down and unwrapped the paper, his gaze downward as he revealed a sturdy knitted brown scarf with matching gloves.

“Thank you,” he said, looking up at her. “This is just what I needed.” He cleared his throat. “I like the thought that something you’ve knitted will keep me warm and be with me when you are not.”

Elinor pressed her hand to her cheek. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“Will you help me try it on?” He stood and offered the scarf to her.

He bent his head slightly so that she could arrange it around his neck to her satisfaction, her fingers slightly trembling as she tucked one end through the other.

“There.” She glanced shyly up at him. “You look very fine.”

He leaned forward and kissed her very gently on the lips. “Thank you, my dear.”

“Happy Christmas, Thomas,” she murmured and kissed him back.

“I have something for you.” He paused. “I intended to give it to you privately as I knew you wouldn’t want a fuss.”

He moved away from her and took something from his luggage. It was square and quite large. “It’s rather bulky. I’ll put it on the floor for you.”

Elinor tried to remember the last time someone had given her a present as she sank down onto the floor and enthusiastically attacked the string.

“Oh...” She reached out to touch the smooth wood. “What on earth?”

He crouched down opposite, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled at her. “When I was inquiring at the dressmakers about something for you to wear, I happened to notice that this was for sale. I believe it came in lieu of a debt from an older lady who is now deceased.”

Elinor opened the lid of the inlaid mahogany sewing box and gazed at the satin lined interior, which was filled with everything a needlewoman might ever want.

“It came with its contents,” Thomas said. “I hope you don’t object.”

“Not at all.” Elinor picked up the pincushion, which was studded with pins and smelled of lavender. “It’s wonderful.” She swallowed hard. “What a kind and thoughtful gift.”

He looked relieved. “I’m not the kind of man to indulge in flashy presents, I thought this would be... useful.”

“I’ll keep it all my life,” she assured him. “I couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

They beamed at each other, all the earlier tension somehow forgotten. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the quarter hour and Elinor rose to her feet.

“I have to get ready to meet Mrs. Hepworth in the dining room to help with the children.”

Thomas rose, too. “I’ll put the box in your room for you.”

“Thank you.” She rushed back into her bedroom to put up her hair and went down the main staircase. She could already hear the excited chatter of young voices coming from the breakfast table where she knew Mrs. Hepworth had placed the Christmas stockings. It reminded her of her youth when both her parents had been alive and the festive season had been a magical, unforgettable, thing.

Squaring her shoulders, she stepped into the dining room to a sea of excited faces. She was pleased to see that Mrs. Hepworth had invited the staff’s children as well.

“Good morning, Mrs. Smith!” her hostess called out to her. “Have you ever seen such a joyous Christmas morning?”

“Never,” Elinor assured her as she picked up a painted spinning top that had fallen off the table and gave it back to its owner.

Mrs. Hepworth came over. She had Alice on one side and Nora, Mrs. Nash's daughter, on the other, both of them clutching new peg dolls that looked remarkably like their owners.

"The trick will be to persuade them all to stop playing long enough to eat something, perhaps you can help me with that?"

"I have little experience with children, ma'am, but I will do my best."

Mrs. Hepworth nodded. "Perhaps you might call me Alice? I'd much prefer it."

"And you must call me Elinor." They smiled at each other. "I suspect once they start bringing in the food, some of the children will be hungry enough to eat and the others will follow their example."

"I do hope you're right. I'll go and hurry the kitchen staff along. We don't want the parents coming down to this mayhem on Christmas morning."

The day passed swiftly, as she helped Alice organize games and treats for the children and exclaimed over the presents exchanged under the Christmas tree. Elinor was surprised to receive a beautiful lace collar and an embroidered handkerchief from her hostess when she'd only knitted her a pair of warm mittens. Mr. Hepworth, who was far cannier than most people realized, called across to her after she thanked his wife profusely.

"Will you make me a pair of those mittens, Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes, of course, sir."

"Good. I can't have Mr. Totton showing me up." He winked at her.

By the time they sat down for dinner the children were exhausted and had been taken up to the nursery or home to bed, leaving the adults to enjoy the long, formal dinner in relative peace.

Elinor came down the stairs, aware of the rustling of her stiff new petticoat under her borrowed silk gown and the brush of curls against her cheeks courtesy of the maid's attention to her hair. Mr. Totton—Thomas—awaited her in the hall, his gaze riveted on her as she came down the stairs.

“You look... beautiful,” he said as he took her gloved hand and kissed it.

“Good Lord,” a loud voice behind Elinor almost made her jump as Mr. Hepworth approached. “I almost didn't recognize you, lass. Talk about hiding your light under a bushel. You're very pretty indeed.”

“Don't embarrass her, Elijah.” Alice came to claim her husband, her amused gaze on Elinor. “I knew that gown would look well on you, my dear.”

“And you were right.” Elinor curtsied. “Thank you again for letting me borrow such a treasure.”

Mr. Hepworth looked at his wife. “You should let her keep it. I'll buy you another one.”

“I intend to.” Alice smiled at him. “It really does suit her.” She turned to Mr. Totton. “After dinner we will be going to Viscount Grafton-Wesley's house where there will be an informal dance for anyone who cares to participate.”

They moved on, leaving Elinor with Thomas. She looked up at him.

“I feel as if I'm living in a fairytale.”

“Then perhaps you should simply enjoy it?” He raised his eyebrows. “We both work hard all year round, don’t we deserve the occasional day off?”

“Perhaps we do.”

“There’s no ‘perhaps’ about it.” He took her hand and placed it on his sleeve. “If there is dancing, will you dance with me?”

“I haven’t danced since—” She sighed. “My father’s wedding.”

“Did she treat you badly, your stepmother?”

“Yes,” Elinor said simply. “Sometimes I think she hated me. She questioned my legitimacy and taught her children to treat me with contempt.”

“She had children from a previous marriage?”

“Three. Two girls and a boy.”

“Whom she wished to advance in your place,” Mr. Totton suggested. “It’s not an uncommon story, but I wonder why your father didn’t put a stop to it.”

“He wasn’t himself,” Elinor said. “After my mother died, he seemed to give up. He only lived for three years after his second marriage. After he died and my brother went into the military, I was all alone with my stepmother. She stopped me visiting my relatives, she wouldn’t allow me to socialize, and she treated me like a servant.”

“I’m so sorry, my dear.”

Elinor looked up into his kind gaze. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this now, it must be the champagne.”

He gently cupped her cheek. “We’re friends, remember? I wish you’d tell me her name so that I could pay her a visit.”

“And do what exactly?” Elinor asked. “In the eyes of the world, she has done nothing wrong. I am the one who ran away and besmirched the family name.”

“Has she made any effort to find you?” Thomas asked.

“Not that I am aware of.” Elinor searched his face. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that you’re obviously from a wealthy and probably titled family,” he said quickly. “Such persons normally merit finding.”

“If she wants me back, she’ll claim I stole something and will have me tried as a thief.”

He was watching her carefully. “Did you steal anything?”

She raised her chin. “I only took what was mine—bequeathed to me by my own mother.”

“She’ll dispute that, of course,” he said. “Have you ever thought of exposing her for the fraud she is?”

“To what end?”

He frowned. “Forgive me if this is none of my business, but surely you are set to inherit something?” He paused. “Or was what happened to make you flee so dire that such considerations seemed meaningless?”

He was coming perilously near a truth Elinor had hidden from for years. She looked



away from him.

“Perhaps we should go into dinner and continue our conversation at a later date?”

He blinked. “Yes, of course. I apologize. Mrs. Hepworth will be wondering what has become of us.”

### CHAPTER 5

Elinor had never been to Grafton Hall before. She'd met Caroline, the viscountess, once when they'd both been visiting Mrs. Hepworth and she'd been very gracious. Mrs. Hepworth had mentioned to Elinor that Caroline had survived the death of her first husband and had been reduced to working as a seamstress before she'd met Viscount Grafton and married him. Such stories gave Elinor hope that she too could rise above her past and make a new life for herself.

She glanced up at Thomas who had a firm grip on her hand as they joined the crowd of people in the large medieval hall beside a roaring fire. Elinor hadn't seen so many elegantly dressed ladies since she'd last attended a ball with her stepmother. Not that she'd been allowed to dance or take her place in society. She'd stayed mainly in the kitchen waiting for commands from her family about needing a shawl, or a hem pinning up, or a curl rearranged. The staff had treated her as one of their own and she'd been glad of the company and the copious amounts of food.

"Mrs. Smith and Mr. Totton," The butler said their names to the host and hostess who stood at the bottom of the stairs greeting guests.

Elinor curtsied and Thomas bowed. When she looked up, the viscount was staring right at her. She'd always thought her stepmother had the coldest eyes in the country but there was something about the viscount that made her shiver.

"A pleasure, Mrs. Smith." He took her hand and kissed it, his gaze lingering on her face. "I don't recall meeting you before."

“Mrs. Smith is Mr. Totton’s housekeeper,” the viscountess said with a smile for Elinor.

“Lucky man,” murmured the viscount. “A real beauty.”

“Mrs. Smith is far more than that, sir,” Thomas said. “She is an exemplary cook and housekeeper.”

“Please enjoy your evening, ma’am.” The viscount bowed. “And save me a dance if you would?”

“I—” flustered, Elinor looked at the viscountess.

“You’ve frightened her, Francis,” Caroline said. “You don’t have to dance with him if you don’t wish to, ma’am. He won’t press you.”

Thomas took Elinor’s arm and steered her past a footman with a tray of drinks and into the large drawing room beyond where the carpet had been taken up to allow for dancing. There was a string quartet tuning up, but no one was dancing just yet.

“Don’t concern yourself about the viscount, Mrs. Smith. He’s perfectly respectable since his marriage.”

“He looks like a pirate,” Elinor said.

“He did have something of a reputation in Millcastle before he settled down,” Thomas admitted. “He owns the inn you arrived at for one and used to live there. He’s not a man I would cross.”

Elinor took a deep breath and looked up at Thomas. “I am determined to enjoy this evening. I will not allow my silly fears to ruin it before it has begun.”

“Good,” Thomas said. “I’ll wager neither of us have been invited to dance at a viscount’s house before,” he said. “Well, you might have been.”

“Not to dance,” Elinor hastened to reassure him.

In reply, Thomas took two glasses of champagne from one of the passing footmen and held one out to Elinor.

“Happy Christmas, Mrs. Smith.”

“And to you, Mr. Totton.”

They clinked their glasses together and Elinor drank her champagne down in one gulp. If she did have to dance with the fearsome viscount, she’d need all the courage she could muster.

Somewhat to her surprise, Elinor began to enjoy herself. She danced first with Thomas, then Mr. Hepworth, and two other gentlemen she didn’t know who were most complimentary. It was the first time she’d actually danced at a ball having learned all the steps from her mother in anticipation of her coming out in society, but never having been given the chance to use them.

Viscount Wesley-Grafton came to find her and claimed the supper dance she’d promised to Thomas. He somewhat reluctantly gave way to the viscount’s claim, but Elinor could sense that he was uneasy. Filled with champagne and the reckless courage that had driven her to escape her stepmother’s home, Elinor placed her hand in the viscount’s and allowed him to lead her out on the floor.

He danced very well—well enough to maintain a conversation, which Elinor still found somewhat difficult.

“You are something of a puzzle, Mrs. Smith,” the viscount said.

“In truth, I am quite boring, sir, I can assure you.”

“Boring in the sense that you are currently living the kind of life where you will not be known as who you really are?”

Elinor’s gaze snapped to his face. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re a Redmayne.”

She concentrated on her steps as they rounded the corner and still hadn’t thought what to say before he continued speaking.

“I remember there was quite a scandal when your mother died, and your father remarried rather quickly. I also happen to know that the woman he chose to marry was a grasping harpy. I assume she made your life a misery.”

“She—” Elinor looked desperately at the door. “I cannot discuss this while I dance, sir.”

“Then let’s adjourn to my study, shall we?”

“There is no need. With all due respect, this matter has nothing to do with you.”

“You might be surprised to hear that it does.” He met her gaze, a steely determination in his eyes that made her realize that unless she wished to cause a scene, she should do as he asked. “Please, Mrs. Smith.”

She nodded and he walked her off the dance floor, through the hall and into a candlelit room lined with books. He lit another set of candles and poured them both

glasses of what she assumed was brandy,

“Here. Take this. You’re as white as a sheet.”

“Can we not pretend this never happened, sir?” Elinor asked desperately. “I’m not doing any harm. I’m simply trying to live my life without fear of being exposed.”

“With a face like yours?” The viscount shook his head. “You’re far too recognizable. Your mother was a famous beauty and you’re easily her equal.” He took her elbow and led her to a chair. “Sit down before you swoon.”

“I thought that coming to Millcastle would keep me hidden.” Elinor gave up any hope of denying who she was. “I still don’t understand what it has to do with you.”

The viscount sat down, his glass in his hand, and studied her. “Perhaps you’ll allow me to explain my interest. None of what I am about to tell you reflects particularly well on my character, but I was a different man, then, angry, wild, and reckless with my possessions and myself. I liked to gamble and that was where I met your stepmother, Lavinia. She worked at one of the most notorious gaming houses. Her specialty was persuading stupid young men to relinquish their fortunes at her table and to lavish money on her extravagant tastes. She was instrumental in the death of one of my closet friends.” He paused. “How she got her claws into your father I’ll never know, but she did, and he was foolish enough to marry her.”

As he seemed to require a response, Elinor nodded.

“In truth, I had hardly given the matter much thought until recently when I was in London, and I encountered a member of your family.” He finished his brandy and set the glass down. “Or to be more precise, I was present at an altercation between your stepbrother and your brother.”

Elinor pressed her hand to her bosom. “My brother’s in England?”

“Yes, as I’d crossed paths with him in India during my military service, I must admit, I was more inclined to believe his side of the story than that of Lavinia’s wastrel son, Denton.”

She couldn’t think about Denton, his face too close to hers, the reek of spirits on his breath...

“You spoke to Robert?”

“Yes, after we’d sent Denton away with a flea in his ear.” Viscount Grafton lit a cigar. “We sat down together to reminisce about India and what had happened to your family since your mother’s death. Robert was obviously worried about what had become of you.”

There was a knock at the door. The viscount looked up in irritation and was about to deny entry when Thomas came into the room, his gaze on Elinor.

“Is everything all right, Mrs. Smith?”

“What in God’s name do you want?” Viscount Grafton demanded. “This is a private matter.”

“I would prefer it if Mr. Totton stayed.” Elinor faced down the viscount. “He knows that I have been hiding in Millcastle.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that at least, Mr. Totton. I was beginning to wonder whether everyone in Millcastle was too dense to wonder why Mrs. Smith ended up in their midst.”

“Perhaps because they mind their own business, sir?” Mr. Totton refused to be cowed.

“This is my business.” The viscount glared at him. “As I have just been explaining to Lady Elinor!”

“Lady Elinor?” Mr. Totton looked at her.

“She’s the daughter of an earl, the title comes with the peerage,” the viscount explained. “If you insist on staying, sit down, and stop guarding her like a watchdog. I, of all people, mean her no harm.”

Elinor turned to Thomas as he took his seat. “Viscount Grafton knew my stepmother before she married my father and does not have a high opinion of her.”

“I have no objection to anyone risking everything to improve their life, but I cannot abide leeches,” Viscount Grafton said. “And Lavinia was never satisfied. She enjoyed making people suffer.”

Elinor wrapped an arm around her waist as she remembered her stepmother’s almost casual cruelties—killing Elinor’s dog, selling off her horse, firing all the staff who’d been employed by the previous holder of her title—the list went on and on. She almost startled as Thomas’s fingers closed around hers, enfolding her hand in his warm clasp.

“She was incapable of kindness,” Elinor said.

“I’ll wager she was a lot worse than that. I’m not surprised you ran away.”

“I felt I had no other choice.”



The viscount nodded. "It was a brave thing to do. Are you aware that your family have put it about that you are a thief and the reason why their finances are in such a precarious state?"

Elinor raised her chin. "I took my mother's jewelry. It belonged to me, not the estate, and I have the legal documents to prove it."

"Good, because you might need to prove that in court."

"As I have no intention of returning to my family, I see no need for litigation."

"But your brother might." The viscount paused to offer Thomas a drink, which he declined. "He returned home to find his late father's estate almost bankrupt. Only the bravery of the family solicitors has prevented dear Lavinia and her brood from taking everything."

"Poor Robert."

"He is intent on righting the wrongs and proving they lied about you."

"How does he know that I am still alive?"

"I might have had something to do with that," the viscount said. "I saw you at church last year, and you immediately reminded me of the whole Redmayne scandal. When I met your brother again, I put two and two together and guessed exactly why you were hiding in Millcastle." He took a breath. "It's not entirely my fault because Lavinia had already told Robert she had paid people to acquire information as to your current whereabouts and was considering whether to set the authorities on you. She refused to tell him more than that. It would be just like her to use such information to blackmail him into backing down on his threat to take her to court."

“You mean she’s known where I am all the time?” Elinor briefly closed her eyes.  
“Dear Lord. I thought I’d been so clever.”

Beside her, Thomas cleared his throat. “That does solve one matter I’ve been pondering, my lord.”

“What is that?”

“I inadvertently stumbled across an advertisement in the newspapers asking for information about a violet-eyed young lady. I wasn’t sure if the advertisement had been placed by Mrs. Smith’s, I mean, Lady Elinor’s friends, or by her foes. But if this Lavinia knew where Mrs. Smith was all the time, I must assume the information was needed by her brother.”

“He did say he’d been placing discreet advertisements in the papers, but he feared that after a year, the trail had gone cold.”

Elinor struggled to maintain her composure as the two men talked over her.

“Does Robert wish to see me?”

“Yes, of course.” The viscount looked at her as if she was being silly.

Elinor abruptly stood. “I must ask you not to contact him until I have made my mind up as to whether I wish to see him.”

She had the satisfaction of seeing both of them look confused.

“What is there to think about?” the viscount demanded. “He’s your brother. He’s worried sick about you. The sooner you see him, the sooner you can resume at least some semblance of your real life and your place in society.”

“I am asking you, my lord, not to do anything until I am ready.” Elinor faced him, her gaze lifted to his, her hands fisted at her sides. “Is that too much to ask?”

The viscount sighed. “No, of course it isn’t. This has been something of a shock to you.”

“Thank you.” She curtsied and headed for the door. “I’ll let you know when I’ve made my decision.”

Thomas watched her leave and rose to his feet as well. “If you’ll excuse me, my lord, I’ll go after her and make sure she’s all right.”

“You care for her, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Thomas wasn’t prepared to deny it even in this exulted company. “I’m sure once her usual good sense returns, she’ll be more than willing to meet with her brother.”

“One might hope so. He’s going to need all the help he can get to claw back at least some of his fortune. Lady Elinor might have important information to help him achieve that.” The viscount paused, “If I might be blunt, Totton? If she does regain her place in society, she won’t need to work for her living.”

“I am well aware of that, my lord.” Thomas bowed. “Now, if you will excuse me.”

He went out into the hall and looked around but there was no sign of Mrs. Smith. Music flowed from the open doors into the ballroom, but he doubted she’d gone back in there. He took a deep breath and told himself to remain calm. If there was ever a time Elinor had needed his strength and support it was now—even if it meant she left him forever.

He'd known in his soul that she wasn't his to keep, but the prospect of her departure hurt far more than he'd anticipated. He'd grown to care about her immensely and the thought of his house without her presence within it made him feel cold.

"Mr. Totton?"

He turned to find Mrs. Hepworth behind him.

"If you are looking for Mrs. Smith. I saw her go into the conservatory at the back of the house. She seemed a little out of sorts."

"I'll attend to her, ma'am." Thomas bowed. "Thank you."

He asked one of the footmen to direct him toward the conservatory. The man insisted on accompanying him to the door while relaying with some pride that the viscountess had recently added it to the house on the recommendation of her brother-in-law who was a famous botanist.

Thomas thanked the footman and went inside. The combination of rotting vegetation, humidity, warmth and strong fragrances was quite something. Candles set in jars lined the paths, making it easier to see in the green gloom. Thomas took the first path, his ear picking up the sound of running water as he reached the center of the space where a fountain stood surrounded by stone benches.

His heart stuttered as he recognized Elinor sitting on one of them, her gaze fixed on the fountain. He went and sat beside her, but she didn't look at him. He considered what to say first.

"I'm glad that your brother is still alive and on these shores."

She didn't immediately reply.

“Surely that gives you joy?”

She looked down at her hands, which were clenched together in her lap. “Does it?”

“I thought?—”

“You thought you knew better than me, sir. You kept information to yourself that might have lessened the shock of the viscount’s revelations.”

Thomas rapidly recalculated his approach. “I was trying to protect you.”

“What right did you have to assume that I needed to be protected? I’ve survived this far by myself. The least you could’ve done was given me the choice to decide whether I wished to answer the advertisement or not, but you thought you knew better than me.”

“Elinor, this is hardly fair. Perhaps you’d do better to direct your anger at?—”

She rose to her feet. “Oh, don’t worry, sir. I have enough anger for all of you. For the viscount for interfering, for my brother’s long absence where he gave me not a thought, and for you thinking you knew better than me.”

“I was trying to find out who placed the advertisement before I approached you with my findings.” Thomas stood, too. “I didn’t want to alarm you.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You didn’t trust me to deal with my own problems because you thought you knew better.”

“Not at all.” An unaccustomed sense of hurt stirred in his chest. “I was afraid for you.”

She looked away. “You told the viscount something you should have told me first.”

Thomas let out his breath. “I agree that wasn’t well done of me, but in my defense, I was simply trying to help.”

“Help.” She shook her head.

Thomas was no longer prepared to be passive. “My attempting to solve the riddle of the advertisement has little to do with the viscount’s decision to meddle in your family’s business.”

“Ah, so you’re blaming him?”

“I am simply attempting to draw a line between two completely different situations.”

“How are they different?” Elinor asked, her chin in the air. “I simply see two men thinking they know better than I do—three if I include my brother who only wishes to find me so that I can bolster his legal defense.”

“I doubt that’s entirely true,” Thomas said. “From what the viscount said, your brother’s been looking for you for quite a while.”

She drew herself up. “Please tell me you didn’t answer that advertisement.”

“Of course, I didn’t.” He met her violet gaze. “You should know me better than that.”

She was the first to blink. “I thought I knew you.”

He took a step back. “Everything I did was with the best of intentions. I would never willingly hurt you.”

A tear ran down her cheek and his heart twisted. “Elinor, I want only the best for you, that is all.”

She went to speak and then walked away from him, just as he’d always feared, and had tried so hard to prevent. He stood there for a while watching the graceful fall of the fountain until he could breathe properly again. In attempting to keep her safe, he’d closed his fist too tightly, and just like the water, she’d slipped through his grasp leaving him with nothing but regrets.

As he exited the conservatory, the same footman came up to him.

“Mr. Totton? The viscountess wishes to speak to you.”

He followed the footman into the medieval hall where his hostess awaited him. To his surprise Elinor was with her. She looked far too pale for his liking and was avoiding his gaze.

“Mr. Totton,” the viscountess said. “Mrs. Smith will be staying with us tonight, so do not worry about her wellbeing, we will take good care of her.”

“Of course, this place is far more suitable, isn’t it?” Thomas couldn’t help himself. “No one could expect a ‘lady’ to lower herself to my standards.”

“I thought you’d prefer to be rid of me, sir,” Elinor spoke.

“Why in God’s name would you think that when I have done nothing but keep you safe for the past year?”

“Mr. Totton...” There was a warning note in the viscountess’s voice. “I don’t think this is helpful.”

“You’re correct, my lady.” He bowed. “I’ll take myself off. Merry Christmas to you both.”

Elinor bit her lip as Thomas walked away. She hadn’t meant to make him angry; her own misery was hard enough to deal with.

“I think he’s quite upset,” the viscountess murmured. “Who would’ve thought it?”

“Upset? He was angry.”

“Men often display their feelings in the most contrary of manners,” the viscountess said. “Francis is particularly terrible at it. Getting him to admit to experiencing any emotion is a constant battle.” She paused. “Does Mr. Totton have reason to be angry with you?”

“I was quite harsh with him earlier,” Elinor admitted.

“Justifiably so?”

“I... felt as if he and the viscount were attempting to manage my life for me.”

“Men tend to do that as well.” The viscountess drew her arm through Elinor’s and turned to the stairs. “I’ve sent for your belongings from the Hepworths, and they’ll be here shortly. Come up and see your bedchamber and I can introduce you to your maid.”

Elinor was shown into a beamed bedroom with two small windows on one side. The viscountess adjusted the curtains and set the fire in the grate alight.

“You’re in the older part of the house. It’s quieter here so the party won’t disturb you if you don’t want to come down again.”



“I do have something of a headache, my lady,” Elinor admitted. “This is not quite how I expected my day to end.”

In truth, she’d hoped she and Thomas would end the day together in his bed, but why was she surprised? Nothing had ever gone right in her world since her mother’s death.

“Would you be comfortable calling me Caroline?” the viscountess asked. “I’m not one for formality.”

“Mrs. Hepworth told me that you and your sisters worked in the dressmakers on the square when you first lived in Millcastle.” Elinor sat beside the fire.

“That’s correct,” Caroline joined her. “The viscount was my landlord. I only met him because my mother gambled away the rent money and I had to ask him to wait to be paid,” She paused. “My first husband had died and left me penniless with two sisters and a mother to support. I was willing to do anything necessary to survive, which is why I agreed to be Francis’s mistress.”

Elinor hoped her surprise didn’t show on her face as Caroline continued.

“Which is why I have so much sympathy for what you have gone through, Mrs. Smith. Francis told me about your family and how you had no choice but to escape them.”

“I think my stepmother would have arranged for my death if I’d stayed much longer,” Elinor blurted out. Goodness she must be tired because she couldn’t seem to stop talking, but the viscountess was such a sympathetic audience.

“How horrible for you. And how lucky you were to meet Mr. Totton.”

There was a question behind her words that Elinor understood all too well.

“Mr. Totton truly saved me, ma’am, and asked for nothing in return.”

“How refreshing,” Caroline said. “And how unlike my own husband who was determined to get his money’s worth from me.”

Elinor gazed at her, uncertain how to respond until Caroline laughed.

“Don’t look so worried. I soon turned the tables and I made him grovel quite satisfactorily before I agreed to marry him.”

Elinor shivered and rubbed her bare arms. “I asked the viscount not to contact my brother until I had made up my mind as to whether I wished to do so.”

“Yes, Francis told me.” Caroline paused. “Although I am at a loss to understand why.”

“The viscount said that my stepmother knows where I am and that she told Robert.”

“And?”

“If he truly wished to see me, don’t you think he would have forced my stepmother to reveal that information to him?” Elinor asked. “He obviously didn’t think it was a priority until he realized he’d need my testimony in his legal case.”

“I expect he was too busy fighting with your stepmother to think of anything but that,” Caroline said. “I sound like I’m making excuses for him but I truly understand how you must be suffering. There is nothing worse than feeling you have no control over your life and that your very existence depends on others.”

Elinor could only nod in agreement.

Caroline went over to the bed and turned down the quilt. “I’ll send Aggie up to you immediately. There is a Boxing Day hunt that gathers at the hall early tomorrow morning but Francis doesn’t participate. His friend, the Duke of Thorsway will officiate in his stead which means the majority of my guests will be gone all day. I’ll tell Aggie to bring you your breakfast in bed so that you can have a quiet day to consider your options.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Elinor bobbed a curtsy. “I mean, Caroline, and please call me Elinor.”

“Please don’t worry. Now Francis has taken an interest in this matter, I’ll wager things will work out for the best.”

She walked over to the door, her silk skirts rustling behind her. “Good night, Elinor and Happy Christmas.”

Left alone, Elinor sank down into the chair beside the fire and watched the leap of the flames even as tears blurred her vision. She was almost too tired to think. All the months she’d been afraid of Lavinia dragging her back to London to face charges of theft paled into insignificance beside being used as a tool to blackmail her brother Robert.

Elinor wiped her tears away with her fingers. She’d been unkind about Robert’s motives but what could he have done differently? Even she knew you should never give into blackmail, especially by Lavinia, who didn’t play fair at the best of times and was now fighting for her life and her children’s future.

Not that Elinor had any pity left in her for Lavinia. She didn’t deserve it. Perhaps the fact that Robert had tried to find her using more surreptitious means by placing the

advertisements meant he'd been trying not to draw attention to his actions while he continued to deal with his stepmother. If only Thomas had shown her the advertisement earlier, she could've replied to it. Except, in the misguided belief that he somehow knew better than her, he'd decided to keep that information to himself and that she found hard to forgive.

But was it fair of her to absolve her brother of fault and not forgive Thomas?

She swallowed back a sob as the door opened and a cheery-faced red-haired maid came into the room.

“Good evening, miss. Her ladyship said I was to take very good care of you indeed. Now shall I help you out of your dress? Your things have arrived from the Hepworths.”

### CHAPTER 6

Thomas went through the front door of his house into the darkened hall, the stupid hope that Mrs. Smith would somehow be there lodged in his heart. But she wasn't present and she hadn't been near him for days. For all he knew, she could be back in London with her brother and have forgotten his very existence. He hung up his coat and hat and took off his boots before going into the kitchen.

"Damnation." He hurried over to the range which had gone out.

He lit the lamp and emptied out the ashes from the range—something he should've done that morning but had forgotten in his haste to leave. At least he'd bought some kindling and had a delivery of coal to relight the fire, and warm the kitchen again, but it would take some time.

He opened the door into the pantry and took out a loaf of bread, some cheese and a jar of pickles. The range wouldn't be hot enough to boil a kettle let alone allow him to cook himself a meal, so he'd have to make do with the cold offerings from the larder. If he was still hungry, he could always go to one of the pubs for a hot meal and a pint.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, he made himself a thick sandwich and ate it hungrily. The cheese had some mold on it, but he didn't care, he'd grown up eating far worse, and he wasn't about to waste good food.

Just as he contemplated cutting more of the bread there was a loud knock on his front door. It was so unexpected that he almost jumped before rising to his feet and heading

down the hallway. He opened the door somewhat warily and was surprised to see Viscount Grafton standing there, looking his usual intimidating self.

“Good evening, Mr. Totton. May I come in?”

Thomas stepped back and the viscount followed him inside.

“I’ve never been in one of these houses before. Hepworth did well,” the viscount commented as Thomas took him through into the kitchen.

“I’d offer you something to drink but I don’t keep spirits in the house and it will take half an hour for the kettle to come to a boil as the range was out.” Thomas resumed his seat.

“I’ve just eaten, thank you.” The viscount looked at the quarter loaf of bread. “I see that you are missing your housekeeper.”

“I’ll find another one,” Thomas said.

“You must be wondering why I’ve called on you.”

“I assume you’ve come to tell me Mrs. Smith has been reunited with her brother.”

“Not quite. She’s still reluctant to meet with him.”

“Why?” Thomas was done with being deferential. If the viscount chose to come into his house, he would be treated like everyone else. “She obviously cares about him.”

“Well, I don’t know.” The viscount raised his eyebrows. “I was hoping you might have an idea. Is there any reason why she might be reluctant to see him again?”

“Apart from the fact that she thinks he only remembered her when he needed her for legal purposes of his own?”

“She’s at peace with that.” The viscount waved off Thomas’s concerns. “It’s almost as if she’s afraid he’ll condemn her for something.”

Thomas tapped his knife on his plate as he considered the viscount’s words. He did have an idea as to what might be causing Elinor’s reluctance, but he certainly wasn’t going to tell the other man what it was and betray her again.

“She did run off with her mother’s jewelry. Perhaps she thinks he’ll want that.”

“He hasn’t mentioned it to me.” The viscount hesitated. “Would you be willing to speak to her, Mr. Totton?”

“I was under the impression that she didn’t wish to associate with me, sir.”

“Balderdash. This matter is far too important for such niceties.” The viscount stood. “Come along. I have my carriage at the inn. I’m sure Caroline will be willing to offer you something better to eat than this.”

Elinor sat next to Caroline in the drawing room at Grafton Hall. She was far too tense to make conversation. Her hostess seemed to understand and hadn’t pressed her to reply beyond the barest civilities. Viscount Grafton, who thankfully hadn’t invited Elinor to call him Francis, had disappeared just after dinner after asking them to wait for him to return.

From the direction of their earlier conversation, Elinor was fairly certain he’d gone to speak to Mr. Totton. She still wasn’t sure how she felt about that. Picturing her employer alone in his house without her to care for him was upsetting enough. Imagining Viscount Grafton arriving at his door demanding information was

something else entirely. Thomas didn't owe her anything and, after the manner of their parting, he might refuse to help her.

She started as the viscount strode into the room.

"I've brought him back with me, Caroline. Poor man was sitting in his kitchen eating stale bread and cheese because he'd let the range go out."

The viscountess went over to her husband. "Then I'll go and ask the kitchen for a plate of something hot for him to eat."

"Not until he's finished with Lady Elinor," the viscount said. "He can eat then." He turned to Elinor. "I do hope you'll speak to him. It's imperative that we work together to support your brother's claims."

Elinor stood up, her knees shaking, as Mr. Totton came through the door. He looked tired and the collar of his shirt drooped from lack of starch and a good iron. He met her gaze, his expression impersonal as he inclined his head.

"Lady Elinor."

"Mr. Totton." She curtsied and hastily sat back down.

"Talk to her," the viscount said as he took his wife's arm and left the room. "I'll leave you to it."

Silence stretched between them as Elinor stared at the rug.

"I hope you've been well, my lady," Mr. Totton said.

"I've... been well looked after, sir, but I must confess that I miss my home."



“I’m sure you do,” he said then paused. “You have been away for more than a year now.”

“I meant your home, Mr. Totton.”

He lapsed into silence and Elinor scrambled for what to say next. “I want to apologize to you.”

“There is no need. You were rightfully angry with me.” He shifted slightly in his seat. “I did tell the viscount that you might not wish to speak to me, but he insisted I come. I do hope I’m not inconveniencing you.”

There was nothing of familiarity in his respectful tone. He spoke to her like she was a complete stranger and maybe that’s how he saw her now. Even in her borrowed gown, as a titled lady she was socially far above him. She made herself meet his gaze.

“I insist on apologizing. You were right that I took my anger out on the wrong person. You have been nothing but kind to me, sir.”

“I was glad to help, my lady.”

She had the frustrating sense that he wasn’t going to let down his guard with her again, and who could blame him? She sighed.

“What exactly did Viscount Grafton ask you here to do?”

“He asked if I knew why you haven’t contacted your brother. I suggested it might have something to do with you taking your mother’s jewelry.”

Elinor frowned. “I had a perfect right to the jewelry. It’s written quite plainly in both my father and mother’s wills. Viscount Grafton knows that, and I assume my brother

does as well.”

“So, Viscount Grafton said as much.”

“Then why did you come?” She looked appealingly at him.

Would he say that he’d missed her—that he’d simply wanted to see her face?

He looked down at his hands. “I did have one thought as to why you might not wish to see your brother, but it wasn’t something I wished to share with the viscount.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t wish to distress you, my lady, but?—”

“Please just say it,” Elinor said somewhat fiercely.

“I wondered if you felt ashamed.”

She blinked at him. “Of my current circumstances?”

“No, that was hardly your choice, was it?” He looked as if he’d rather be anywhere other than where he was. “I was thinking of a more personal matter.”

“That I shared your bed? I am not ashamed of that either and I never will be.”

“When you came to my bed you were not a virgin.”

“So?”

“If you will excuse my informality, I should imagine that most women of your high

status would wait to consummate their relationship until after marriage. I understand it is a matter of inheritance.” He held her gaze. “You were terrified of bedding me, yet you did it anyway. At the time I assumed some man had treated you very badly and I wanted to make it better for you.”

She could only stare at him.

“Elinor?” He reached for her hand. “That is not a comment on your morals. It is more that someone forced you, didn’t they? And that’s why you left home.”

She tried to breathe, and he squeezed her fingers hard.

“Please don’t cry, my dear. I thought what you did was the bravest thing in the world.”

“Running away from home or finding shelter in your bed?” Elinor whispered.

“Both, perhaps. Having the courage to believe that the way that man treated you was wrong, and you deserved better.” He cleared his throat. “Your trust in me was a remarkable thing. I will never forget it.”

Elinor took a deep, shuddering breath. “It was my stepbrother, Denton.”

Mr. Totton went very still.

“I knew his mother wouldn’t believe me and I knew he’d keep doing it until I either died or was forced to bear his child.”

“The absolute filthy bastard.”

The fury in Mr. Totton’s voice gave Elinor pause. “How can I face Robert without

telling him this? And what if he doesn't believe me or, or what if he does, and he tries to kill Denton?"

Mr. Totton visibly regained control of himself as he faced her. "Your brother doesn't need to know anything about this."

"You're suggesting I lie to him?"

"Not at all. I'm saying that it is none of his business. If you choose to tell him what happened after he has secured his inheritance that's up to you."

"But what if Denton told his mother and she uses it to goad Robert into open warfare?"

Mr. Totton frowned. "It will still not be your fault, my dear."

"I hate him," Elinor said fiercely and shuddered.

Mr. Totton reached for her and then seemed to remember his place and slowly sat down again, his fingers flexing.

"As is your right." Mr. Totton paused. "I have been thinking of a way to make sure Denton never bothers you again. If you are in agreement, may I ask the viscount to join us so that I can tell you my plan?"

Elinor nodded, too overcome for speech, and Mr. Totton went to find the viscount. He returned with both Caroline and her husband and a maid with a heavy tray of food.

"The viscountess is insisting I eat something," Thomas apologized as he came back in.

“If you must, while you eat, I’ll talk.” The viscount took center stage. “Let’s review.”

He turned toward Elinor. “Your brother is in the throes of attempting to regain control of his estates. He currently has no idea that I have located you—something I hope will change very soon if Mr. Totton has made you see sense.”

Elinor looked up at him. “Mr. Totton has a plan, sir. I have agreed to hear it.”

“Are you willing to communicate with your brother?”

Elinor met his gaze. “Yes, but?—”

“Thank God. Well done, Mr. Totton,” the viscount said.

“Francis, you are being very rude,” the viscountess said. “At least let Lady Elinor finish her sentence!”

“I am merely trying to speed things along. Lavinia Redmayne needs to be stopped. Lady Elinor can help with that. I don’t understand all the flittering about.”

Mr. Totton, who had gulped down a sandwich and drunk an entire cup of tea, held up his hand.

“I propose that I answer the advertisement.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“And tell Robert that his sister is alive?” the viscount asked. “What’s the point when I can send him a message immediately?”

“I will reference the advertisement in my letter, but I’ll send it to Lavinia. I’ll suggest

I asked for money from the original poster of the ad and was denied. I'll insist I want a financial reward before I fully disclose Lady Elinor's location and I'll suggest a place to meet."

"Go on," the viscount said.

"If I word the letter correctly, I believe Lavinia will send her son after me." He tried not to let Elinor's shiver distract him from his purpose. "From what I've heard about this gentleman, we can assume he'll behave disgracefully. At that point, you, as the local magistrate, sir, can step in and commit him to the local gaol." Thomas sat back. "Which gives us a bargaining counter of immense value to use against Lavinia."

"She dotes on Denton," Elinor said slowly. "She'd do anything to get him back." She sat up straight. "I think your plan would work even better if he actually saw me."

"There is no need for you to be anywhere near him, my lady," Thomas said. "I would not expect that of you."

"With respect, Mr. Totton, the only way he would react in the way you want is if I am present. If you are alone, he might be violent toward you and that I cannot allow."

"Mr. Totton can tell Denton you're staying here and we can manage the rest," the viscount said. "Once he's on my property all the power belongs to me."

"Then are we agreed?" Thomas asked.

Elinor nodded as did the viscount and his wife.

"Then I'll write the letter tonight and send it by special messenger first thing in the morning."

“Come to my study and write it now, I’ll send it out tonight,” the viscount ordered. “And then Caroline will take you down to the kitchen for a proper dinner.”

“As you wish.”

Thomas stood and so did Elinor. She rushed over to him and put her hand on his sleeve.

“You don’t have to do this, sir.”

He looked down into her violet eyes and tried not to lose himself in them. “I want to, my lady. I have a burning desire to see those who hurt you suitably punished so that you can resume your rightful place in the world.”

“You are a very good man, Mr. Totton.”

He inclined his head. “I try my best to be a decent human being, my lady.”

The viscount cleared his throat. “If you’ll follow me, Totton, I’ll show you to my study.”

“Yes, of course, sir,” Thomas was finding it very difficult to tear his gaze away from Elinor’s. “I’m coming.”

He followed Viscount Grafton across the hall and into his study. which was warm, well-lit, and smelled faintly of cigar smoke.

“Please avail yourself of the writing instruments on my desk.” The viscount lit a cigar while he watched Thomas. “I won’t frank the letter—that would give the game away, but I will send it by special messenger.”

Thomas took his time composing the letter, mainly because his companion kept chipping in, but in the end, they were both satisfied with what he'd written. He suggested he'd asked for money from the original poster of the advertisement and had been turned down and decided to go to the source and hope he'd be treated better. He gave the address of his workplace rather than his home and hinted at reasons why 'the lady' might have shared personal information with him that might also have value.

He signed the letter with his real name having no fear of discovery, blotted the ink and folded the page, sealing it with red wax, and his own ring.

"That should do it," the viscount remarked. "I'll wager we'll see Denton here within the week."



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:21 am*

### CHAPTER 7

Two days later, Thomas was working at his desk when his door was flung open with a crash. He didn't look up as a large, blond-haired gentleman with ruddy cheeks and unkempt dress strode toward him.

"Totton?"

Thomas set his pen down and slowly looked up.

"Good afternoon. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"That's none of your concern, where's my sister?"

Thomas sat back. "I'm afraid you'll have to be clearer about your intentions, sir. I have many business interests and I'm unsure what or whom you are referring to."

"I'm Denton Redmayne. Does that ring a bell?"

Thomas frowned. "I'm not aware of anyone with that name."

Denton took a step forward, his fists clenched at his sides, his color alarmingly high.

"How dare you speak to your betters like this. You damn well know who I am."

"I am aware of a Lady Lavinia Redmayne and a Viscount Redmayne." Thomas looked Denton right in the eye. "Are you claiming to be one of them?"

“Enough of your insolence,” Denton snapped. “I want Elinor. Where is she?”

“She’s not here.” Thomas lowered his voice. “And there is the matter of financial compensation for my time and efforts to assist your family.”

“You’ll only get paid once she’s safely in my hands.”

Thomas sat back. “Then I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“You—” Denton lunged for him and Thomas produced the pistol he’d taken from his desk drawer and pointed it straight at Denton’s head.

“It is loaded, sir. If you wish me to cooperate with you, I suggest you step back and compose yourself.”

“Aye, lad.” A loud voice came from behind Denton where Mr. Hepworth stood in the doorway. “I don’t appreciate my staff being threatened.”

“If you employ this man, you should be aware that he is a blackmailer, and deceiver,” Denton half-turned toward Mr. Hepworth. “He is holding my sister to ransom.”

“Is he now?” Mr. Hepworth, who had been informed of Thomas’s plan, raised an eyebrow. “I’ve always found him the most honorable of men. Perhaps he isn’t the liar here, Mr. Redmayne .”

He winked at Thomas over Denton’s shoulder. “The lass isn’t here. She’s been staying up at the hall.”

“Mr. Hepworth—” Thomas attempted to interrupt his employer who was going off his scripted roll. “Perhaps you might let me deal with this? I don’t want to bother you.”

“Oh, it’s no bother,” Mr. Hepworth said. “I’m very fond of the lass and if this truly is her brother come to take her home, what could be better?” He addressed Denton. “She’s at Grafton Hall. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you, sir.” Denton cast a glance of pure triumph back at Thomas. “I don’t need your help, Totton, and you can forget any chance of financial remuneration. In fact, I’ll be laying charges with the local magistrate against you for kidnapping and holding my beloved sister to ransom.”

He strode out of the room, leaving Thomas staring at Mr. Hepworth who winked.

“Don’t worry, lad. The moment he came barging in here I sent a message off to the hall. They’ll be ready for him when he finally works out how to get there.”

Thomas stood up. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go up there myself.”

His employer bowed and made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Have at him, lad. He deserves a good thrashing at the very least.”

The viscount came into the sitting room, a note in his hand.

“A man calling himself Denton Redmayne has turned up at Mr. Hepworth’s place of business. He’ll be arriving here shortly with the intent to take Lady Elinor home with him.”

Elinor’s stomach dropped and she clutched the arms of her chair. The very thought of seeing Denton again—of being in his power—made her want to retch.

“Don’t worry, my dear,” Caroline said quietly. “I won’t leave you alone with him for a second.”

Elinor glanced over at her hostess and wondered if she'd guessed what Elinor had tried so hard to conceal.

"If you don't leave me alone, he won't have the chance to force me to leave," Elinor pointed out, amazed at how calm she sounded.

"She's right," the viscount said. "But let's try the polite way first. We'll welcome him together, deny him access to Lady Elinor, and see what he's willing to do next."

Elinor held herself rigidly still as Denton was shown into the drawing room by the butler. He spotted her immediately and came toward her.

"My dearest girl, I have finally found you." He reached for her and Elinor took a hasty step back. "There is no need to be afraid, you are safe now." He bowed to Caroline. "Thank you for taking care of her after her horrendous ordeal. Our family is most grateful."

Caroline stepped in front of Elinor. "Please take a seat Mr....?"

"Albright-Redmayne, my lady," Denton bowed again.

"Redmayne?" The viscount spoke for the first time. "I doubt you have a claim on that name or the title that goes with it,"

"My mother asked me to use the name as I've been part of the Redmayne family for more than ten years and I've acted as the heir," Denton said as he reluctantly took a seat.

"Then you must be relieved to hear that the real heir to the title, Robert Redmayne is back in the country, and more than ready to take over his responsibilities." The viscount paused. "I am acquainted with the new viscount, and I know he will do

splendidly once the estate is released into his care.”

“I’m sure he will,” Denton said. “My mother has done her best to keep the estate together in difficult times. It’s a shame that the new viscount doesn’t appear to appreciate all her hard work.” He turned to Elinor. “If my sister returns and brings back what she took from us without consent, I’m sure she will be forgiven.”

Elinor found her voice. “I took nothing that didn’t belong to me, sir.”

“Come now, you deprived your sisters of their share of the family jewelry.”

“But they aren’t part of the Redmayne family,” Elinor said. “I am, and everything that was left to me by my mother and grandmother is mine by right.”

Denton turned to the viscount. “And now you see why she needs to return home. Such lack of regard for the family who have brought her up is disappointing.”

“Brought me up?” Despite a warning look from the viscount, Elinor couldn’t let that go. “Your mother treated me like a servant.”

“Come now, Elinor.” Denton’s laugh was forced. “There is no need for these childish allegations. Of course, my mother tried to do the best for her own daughters as well as you. Your jealousy is quite unbecoming.”

“I know what your mother did, sir.” Elinor looked him right in the eyes. “And I’m willing to go to court to testify to her abuse.”

There was a flash of anger in his eyes, which would have terrified her before. She knew that if they were alone, he would’ve struck her.

“Be that as it may, Elinor, you can sort all this out when you return home.” Denton

stood and held out his hand. “Come along. There’s no need to pack your belongings. You can send for them at a later date.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” Elinor stood, too, annoyed that her voice was shaking but unable to stop it.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” His scowl returned. “I’ve wasted quite enough time chasing you down to be thwarted now.”

“Mr. Albright.” The viscount’s cold voice cut across the room. “If Lady Elinor doesn’t wish to leave with you. I hope you will respect her wishes.”

Denton swung around to face the viscount. “With respect, you have no authority here.” He grabbed Elinor’s elbow in a powerful grip. “Come along, you know you’ll be better off at home.”

The feel of his hand on her skin made something inside Elinor explode.

“Take your hands off me!” she shouted. “You... disgust me.”

He didn’t release her, his gaze furious. “Don’t disrespect me in public, sister, or?—”

“Or what? You’ll beat me?” Elinor asked. “Throw me to the ground and rape me?”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Caroline who moved toward Elinor. “Francis...”

In his rage, Denton seemed to have forgotten they weren’t alone. “You little slut, you bloody asked for it—begged for it!”

Elinor slapped his face, and his expression darkened. “You bitch, I’ll?—”

His hands went around her throat and for a second Elinor thought everything was lost until the viscount pulled him away from her. She sank down into the nearest chair, her fingers touching her neck as Denton was wrestled to the ground by two of the viscount's footmen.

They hauled him to his feet and made him face the viscount, who looked coldly furious.

“You are mistaken if you think I lack authority, here, Albright. I'm the local magistrate and I'm charging you with attempted murder and committing you to gaol until the next assizes.”

“You can't do that,”

“I bloody well can.” The viscount nodded to one of the footmen. “Take him down to the cellars and make sure he can't escape until I can arrange transport to the county gaol.”

The butler had to help remove the struggling Denton from the room. His angry threats could be heard echoing down the corridor until he was taken down to the cellars.

Caroline immediately rushed over to Elinor and sat beside her. “My poor dear, girl, what a horrible man.”

Elinor managed to nod as Caroline patted her hand.

“There's no need to worry about him anymore, Lady Elinor,” the viscount said. “I'll make damn sure he never bothers you again.” He paused as someone else came into the room. “Ah, Mr. Totton. Your plan worked and I have secured Albright in the cellar. The next thing I need to do is write to his mother and offer her a deal.”

Mr. Totton came over to Elinor, his expression anguished. “Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

Caroline moved away, leaving them alone and Elinor looked up at Thomas.

“I’m... fine. He just lost his temper.”

He took her hand, and she noticed he was trembling almost as much as she was.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t get here any sooner and warn you. Mr. Hepworth?—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Elinor said. “It all worked out perfectly.”

He cupped her chin so that she had to look at him. “There’s no need to pretend with me. I know how difficult it must have been for you to see him again.”

“I was fine until he grabbed hold of me and then I panicked because...” She couldn’t finish her sentence. Mr. Totton nodded as if he understood completely.

“It’s all right. The viscount will deal with this matter from now on and you need have no part in it.”

The belief and strength in his voice made her start to relax. She took a deep breath and let go of his hand. “After all that, I think I’m ready to see my brother again.”

“That’s... wonderful news.” He sat back, the emotion on his face disappearing behind a polite mask. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see you.”

“Thank you,” Elinor said. “For everything.”

He took a deep breath and stood up. “No, thank you for enriching my life and



showing me how to move on from tragedy.” He looked blindly around the room. “I’ll go and speak to the viscount. Goodbye, my lady.”

Elinor stood, too. “Does it have to be goodbye?”

He met her gaze, the regret in his eyes almost overwhelmed her and made her want to ask for things she was certain he wouldn’t permit himself to even imagine.

“We are of different classes, Lady Elinor. It is time that you returned to your rightful place in society where you will soon forget about ever demeaning yourself to work as a common man’s housekeeper.”

“You’re wrong about that,” Elinor said with purpose. “I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me.”

He bowed over her hand and kissed it. “I really should go.”

He turned on his heel and left without a backward glance, leaving Elinor feeling far worse than she had in front of Denton. It seemed Mr. Totton was determined that whatever was between them was at an end. And in this moment, she had no idea how to stop him from walking out of her life forever.

“Elinor?”

She started as Caroline came back into the room, her expression full of concern. “Are you all right?”

“I have something of a headache,” Elinor said through her gathering tears. “I think I might take myself to bed.”

“An excellent idea,” Caroline put a comforting arm around her shoulders. “By the

time you feel better, I'm sure Francis will have dealt with all your problems and you will be free to see your brother on your own terms."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:21 am*

### CHAPTER 8

Thomas blinked as someone opened the door to his office.

“Why are you still here, lad?” His employer demanded. “It’s almost midnight and the new year’s about to be rung in.”

“One might ask the same of you, sir.”

“I’m leaving right now. My Alice wouldn’t be happy if I wasn’t there to see in the new year with her.”

Thomas contemplated returning to his empty house and picked up his pen.

“I’ll go when I’ve finished editing this document, sir. It’s very important that we get the terms right. Don’t worry, I’ll lock up securely.”

He waited for Mr. Hepworth to leave but instead he came further into the office. “You’ve been a right miserable little bugger since your fancy housekeeper left.”

Thomas kept his gaze on the papers in front of him.

“Have you heard from her?”

“Lady Elinor wrote to tell me that she’d been reunited with her brother, sir.”

“And?”

Thomas finally had to look up. “And what, sir?”

Mr. Hepworth frowned. “Did you reply to her?”

“I didn’t think that would be appropriate.”

“Why bloody not?”

Thomas concealed a sigh. Once his employer’s attention was caught by something it was impossible to divert him.

“Lady Elinor has a new life now. She hardly needs to be reminded of what happened to her here in Millcastle,” Thomas said. “She did write to me again, but I decided it was better if I left things as they were.”

“Bloody fool,” Mr. Hepworth muttered.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“She cared for you.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. “She was my housekeeper. That’s what I paid her to do.”

“Don’t be obtuse.” Mr. Hepworth was now glaring at him. “It was more than that, and according to Alice, Lady Elinor reciprocated your feelings.”

Unwilling to be stared at like a small boy, Thomas stood. “I appreciate your interests in my personal affairs, Mr. Hepworth, but your concern is unnecessary. Please rest assured that I fully intend to complete my work in my usual exemplary fashion.” He nodded toward the door. “Now, don’t let me keep you. I don’t want you to be late for Mrs. Hepworth’s celebrations.”

For a moment, they glared at each other and for the first time it was Mr. Hepworth who looked away.

“Go home, lad,” he said gruffly. “Perhaps the new year will bring you better luck.”

He turned and left. Thomas sat back down, his concentration destroyed. After trying and failing to make any sense of the legal language he rolled up the paper, put it in the safe, and reset the lock.

He might as well go home. After Elinor’s departure he’d found a woman called Mrs. Jones to cook and clean for him but she didn’t live in. He couldn’t have borne that. She’d probably left him some supper on the range, which would probably be dried out now as she was an indifferent cook, but he needed to eat.

After making sure the office was secure, he turned for home. One of the pubs was still open and blared with light. It was filled to bursting with working men bringing in the new year. Thomas had to sidestep a dozen rowdy drunks whom he suspected would be regretting their decision when they had to get up for work in the morning. He’d stopped drinking after Elinor had left—afraid he’d come to like it too much. He only went to the pub to buy a hot meal if Mrs. Jones hadn’t provided one.

The cobblestones were slippery with frost and the lighting too dim to hurry his journey as he turned into the wide alleyway that ran between the two rows of detached houses. He went in through the garden gate and, as was his custom, stopped to look at the back of his house. There was a light on in the kitchen. Was Mrs. Jones still there or had she forgotten to extinguish the lamp before she left?

His fear of fire meant he increased his pace as he hurried along the path, almost sliding on the ice. He used his key to enter the house and rushed inside, his breath catching as he saw who was in his kitchen.

“Good evening, Mr. Totton.”

He blinked hard but the vision that looked remarkably like Lady Elinor remained stubbornly in view.

“What on earth?”

She came toward him, her expression welcoming. She wore a gown of soft blue that he’d never seen before with a cream lace collar and buttons. “Shall I take your coat and hat? It’s shockingly cold out there. I’m surprised you haven’t got your scarf and gloves on.”

“What are you doing here?” he asked as she relieved him of his coat as if he was a small child.

She set the coat over the back of one of the chairs and brushed at it off with her fingertips, avoiding his gaze.

“You didn’t answer my letters.”

“I thought it best.”

“For you or for me?” She looked up, her violet eyes filled with emotion he couldn’t accept. “I missed you.”

“I’m sure your brother?—”

“My brother is very kind, but he isn’t you.”

Thomas steeled himself. “Lady Elinor, from what Viscount Grafton has told me you have been completely restored to your position in society with no scandal attached to your name. The Albrights have been shipped off to Europe and there is nothing to stop you from marrying a man of suitable rank.”

“And what if none of them appeal to me?”

“With respect, my lady, you’ve barely been back in society,” Thomas pointed out. “I’m sure in time you’ll settle down well enough to find the right gentleman.”

“You’re sure of that, are you?”

He forced himself to meet her gaze. “How else can it be?”

“I think I’d rather stay here with you, sir.”

“I’ve already employed another housekeeper,” Thomas said rather stupidly.

She straightened her spine. “That’s good news because I think I’d prefer to be your wife.”

Silence fell between them, which was only interrupted by the kitchen clock whirring with the energy to strike twelve times to end the year and begin the new one.

“I’m not good enough for you,” Thomas said hoarsely. “You’re an aristocrat.”

“I think you’re the best man I’ve ever known. Isn’t that what’s most important?” Elinor asked.

“Your family will be horrified.”

“My brother married a woman from India and has brought her home with him. She told me most men like him keep brown women as mistresses not wives. She is concerned they will be ostracized but Robert doesn’t care in the slightest if they are. No one in society knows much about me because my stepmother never allowed me to make my debut so who I choose to marry won’t interest them either.”

“But—”

She held out her hand. “I’m still the same woman, Thomas. Being restored to my family doesn’t mean I’ve changed even if my title has.” She met his gaze. “I feel safer with you than with anyone else in the world.”

“Your gratitude isn’t?—”

“I am not grateful!” She glared at him. “I am in love with you. If you don’t reciprocate my feelings or are too afraid of ‘society’ to express them, then tell me right now, and I’ll be on my way.”

He took her hand. “So fierce and so beautiful.”

“I don’t care. ”

He drew her close and kissed her hard on the lips. With a gasp, she opened her mouth and kissed him back with a fervor and joy that brought life to his veins. He wrapped one arm around her waist pulling her hard against him.

“Are you quite sure about this? We could attempt a trial period of say a year to make certain that you truly wish to remain in Millcastle with me.”

“Stop talking and kiss me,” she demanded. “I am here for good, and you’d better remember it,”

Thomas did as he’d been told and, as the church bells rang in the new year, he gave thanks for his very own Christmas miracle and vowed to never let the love of his life go again.