



Trusting Her Duke

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Category: Historical

Description: Alexander Cavendish, Duke of Ravensworth, returned from war to find that his father and brother had followed his mother into death, leaving him to protect his sister, and manage the estates. He retreated into a rigid and rather harsh approach to the world, and despised what he saw as 'charitable weakness' in his neighbours, whom he generally avoided.

Lady Penelope Whitmore, supported by her father, the Earl of Stanyon, organized other local landholders to provide charity and support to the tenant farmers in the whole district. The only large landowner not involved was the Duke of Ravensworth, who regarded her efforts as simply bad estate management.

They avoided each other, polite enemies, until the day when a storm stranded Penelope at Alexander's home. The presence of Alexander's cousin was barely enough to dampen the sparks which flew between them... It might have ended there, if a conniving minor landholder had not chosen that moment to attempt to defraud both of their estates...

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Alexander Cavendish stood at the window of his mother's bedchamber, his shoulders rigid beneath his black coat. Behind him, the quiet rustle of the physician's movements and his mother's laboured breathing filled the oppressive air. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Ravensworth Hall's pristine lawns, touching the spring flowers that his mother would never see bloom again.

"Alexander." Her voice, barely more than a whisper, drew him from his dark thoughts. "Come here, my darling boy."

He turned, covering the distance to her bedside in three long strides, and dropped to his knees beside her. At eighteen, he was already tall, but kneeling thus brought him level with her wan face.

"Mother, please, save your strength."

His voice caught on the words, betraying emotion that he struggled to contain. The Duchess of Ravensworth lifted one frail hand to touch his cheek. Her skin was cool, too cool, against his face.

"My time grows short, dearest. There are things that I must say to you."

From the corner of his eye, Alexander saw the physician gather his things and quietly exit the room, leaving only Jenkins, their butler, standing discretely by the door, and his mother's personal maid hovering nearby, wringing her hands.

"Mother, Father will return soon. He has gone to fetch-"

“No.” She shook her head slightly against the pillow, dark curls looking dull against the pristine white linen. “Your father will not return in time. He does not wish to. We both know this.” Anger flared in Alexander’s chest. His father should be here. Yet the Duke had departed three days ago, claiming urgent business in London. Business that could surely have waited. “Alexander, listen to me carefully.” His mother’s grip on his hand tightened slightly. “You must remember that duty is not only about ledgers and contracts. It is about people. Our tenants are not just names in books - they are families who depend upon us.” He bowed his head, knowing what was coming. This was the source of the bitter arguments between his parents - his mother’s insistence on helping their tenants beyond what the estate could truly afford. “I know that your father believes my charitable works have damaged Ravensworth. Perhaps he is right, in some ways. But Alexander, a noble family’s duty is to more than just preserving wealth. We must preserve humanity, kindness, hope.”

“Mother, please don’t distress yourself.”

He tried to gentle his voice, to hide his own conflicted feelings about her actions. The arguments he had overheard between his parents had grown worse over the years, as his father raged about depleted resources and his mother insisted that they must help those in need.

“Promise me something.” Her voice grew stronger for a moment, intensity lending it power. “Promise me that you will remember that there must be balance. Duty without compassion becomes tyranny. Compassion without wisdom becomes folly. Find the balance, my son.”

Alexander’s throat tightened. How could he deny her anything, in this moment? Yet he had seen the effect of her charitable works on the estate’s finances. Had watched his father’s fury grow as reports showed dwindling resources.

“I promise to remember your words, Mother.”

It was the most honest answer he could give.

She smiled slightly, seeing perhaps both his evasion and his struggle.

“You are so like your father sometimes. So certain that discipline and control are the answer to everything.” Her fingers brushed his cheek again. “Yet you have my heart, my darling. No matter how you try to hide it.”

A sob caught in his throat.

“Mother...”

“Shhh.” She soothed him as she had when he was small. “I need you to be strong now. Your father... he will not cope well. Richard will need you - he is not ready to be the next Duke. And your sister... little Rosalind. Promise me you’ll watch over her.”

“I promise.”

The words emerged thick with tears he refused to shed.

Her breath caught, and fear lanced through him. But she rallied, determination lighting her eyes.

“There is something else. In my escritoire, there is a letter. For you. Read it when you are ready.” Her voice faded to barely a whisper. “When you can hear me.” Alexander gripped her hand tighter, as if he could hold her to life by will alone. But her eyes were growing distant, focusing on something he could not see. “My beautiful boy.” The words were so soft he had to lean close to hear them. “Remember... love is... never wasted...”

Her hand went slack in his. For a moment, he stayed frozen, unable to accept what had happened. Then her maid's quiet sob broke the silence, and reality crashed in upon him.

“Mother?” The word escaped him, child-like in its pain. “Mother!”

But there was no answer. There would never be an answer again.

Later that evening, he stood in his father's study, having taken a moment from the chaos of messages to be sent and arrangements to be made. The letter from his mother's escritoire burned in his pocket, but he could not bring himself to read it yet.

A commotion in the hall drew his attention. His father's voice, raised in anger, penetrated the heavy oak door.

“What do you mean, she's gone?” The Duke's voice cracked with something that might have been grief or rage. “I was coming back. I was...”

Alexander opened the door to find his father standing in the hall, travel stained and wild-eyed. Their gazes met, and for a moment, Alexander saw naked anguish in his father's face. Then the Duke's expression hardened.

“When?”

“Just after four o'clock, Father.” Alexander kept his voice steady with effort. “She... she asked for you.”

The Duke flinched.

“If she had not been so stubborn about her damned charitable works... if she had not exhausted herself... insisted on visiting the sick herself...”

Anger flared in Alexander’s chest.

“Father!”

“No!” The Duke’s face was harsh. “I will not pretty it up. Her soft heart killed her, boy. Remember that. Sentiment is a weakness that none of us can afford.”

Alexander watched his father stride away, and felt something harden inside himself. His mother’s words about balance echoed in his mind, but they seemed far away and unreal now. His father was right. Sentiment was weakness.

Duty was all that mattered.

The letter in his pocket seemed to grow heavier. He took it out and stared at it for a long moment. Then, with deliberate movements, he crossed to his father’s desk, opened the drawer where important papers were kept, and placed it inside. He was not ready to hear her voice yet. Perhaps he never would be.

When he left the study, his spine was straight, his face composed. He had duties to attend to. The estate needed managing, his siblings needed care, and there was no time for sentiment.

In the days that followed, as arrangements were made and the funeral conducted, Alexander maintained that rigid control. He stood straight-backed in church as his mother was laid to rest, his arm supporting Rosalind, who sobbed quietly beside him. He managed the household in his father’s absence, for the Duke had retreated to his rooms with a bottle of brandy. He wrote the necessary letters, spoke to the necessary people, and never once allowed himself to show weakness.

The only crack in his composure came late one night, a week after the funeral. Unable to sleep, he had wandered the silent house, eventually finding himself in his mother's sitting room. The moonlight touched her empty chair, her embroidery still sitting in its frame beside it. On the small table, her account books lay open, showing neat columns of figures - expenditure on medicines, food for the poor, repairs to tenant cottages.

He picked up the top book, meaning to close it, when a loose paper fell from between its pages. His mother's handwriting drew his eye.

'My dearest Alexander,

If you are reading this, then I am gone, and you have not yet opened my letter. I know you too well, my son. You are so afraid of feeling deeply that you will lock your heart away. But remember what I told you - there must be balance.

All my love,

Mother'

Alexander's hands trembled. Then, with deliberate care, he replaced the note in the book, closed it firmly, and set it aside. There would be no more sentiment. No more weakness. Duty alone would guide him.

As he walked away, the moonlight touched the book one last time, then faded, leaving the room in darkness.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:27 am

The morning sun streamed through the library windows of Stanyon House, catching golden glints in Lady Penelope Whitmore's fair curls as she bent over her account books. Dust motes danced in the warm light, and the soft scratch of her quill provided counterpoint to birdsong from the gardens below. The familiar scents of leather bindings and beeswax polish wrapped around her, comforting in their constancy. She paused in her careful notation of figures, touching her quill thoughtfully to her lips. The numbers before her represented more than mere calculations - each carefully inked entry stood for a family's welfare, a child's hunger, a widow's comfort. The leather-bound volume under her hands might look like any estate account book, but its contents held the promise of real change.

If only everyone could see it that way. The memory of cold green eyes and cutting words intruded, making her hand clench slightly on the quill. The Duke of Ravensworth's voice seemed to echo in her mind, as clear as it had been that day at Lady Ashworth's.

"Reckless sentiment that will destabilise every estate foolish enough to participate."

The quill snapped. Penelope stared at the broken feather, ink staining her fingers, and forced herself to take a calming breath. She would not allow that arrogant man's opinions to affect her so. Yet even as she reached for a fresh quill, she could not completely suppress the memory of how his words had stung, not for herself, but for her father.

"My Lady?" Mary's voice drew her from her brooding thoughts. Her maid stood in the doorway, sunlight catching the pale threads in her dark hair. Despite her relatively young age, Mary Harper carried herself with the dignity of a much older woman, her

practical nature reflected in every aspect of her neat appearance. “The ladies are beginning to arrive.”

“Thank you, Mary.” Penelope carefully blotted her last entry before gathering her papers into a leather folder. The tooled leather was worn soft with age and use - it had been her mother’s, and using it made Penelope feel somehow closer to the woman she barely remembered. “Is everything prepared in the morning room?”

“Yes, my Lady. Mrs. Wilson has arranged tea and those little almond cakes that Lady Prescott favours.” A hint of amusement touched Mary’s usually serious face. “And your father asked me to tell you that he will join you briefly before retiring to his study.”

Warmth bloomed in Penelope’s chest at this evidence of her father’s thoughtfulness. The Earl of Stanyon’s support had never wavered, even when his peers criticised his ‘excessive’ concern for tenant welfare.

“He always knows exactly how to help, doesn’t he? His presence will lend weight to our proposals, yet by withdrawing early, he’ll allow the ladies to speak freely.”

“Indeed, my Lady.” Mary stepped forward to straighten a ribbon at Penelope’s sleeve that had come loose during her writing. “Though some might say you have inherited his gift for managing people.”

“Mary!” Penelope tried to look scandalised, but couldn’t quite suppress her smile. Few would dare to suggest that a young lady might ‘manage’ anyone, let alone her social equals. Yet Mary’s steady presence and quiet understanding had long since earned her the right to speak freely with her mistress. “You shouldn’t say such things.”

“Whyever not? It’s true enough.” Mary’s capable hands smoothed Penelope’s skirts

with practiced efficiency. “Now, shouldn’t you proceed to the morning room? Lady Prescott always arrives early, and you know how she dislikes waiting.”

Gathering her papers, Penelope rose and made her way through the familiar corridors of her home.

Portraits of Whitmores past looked down from the walls, their painted eyes seeming to follow her progress. She had often wondered what these ancestors would think of her charitable endeavours. Would they approve of this new approach to noble responsibility, or would they share the Duke of Ravensworth’s disdain? The morning room presented a welcoming aspect as Penelope approached. Spring sunshine poured through the tall windows, highlighting the fresh flowers Mrs. Wilson had arranged on every surface. The subtle scent of lilacs mixed with brewing tea, creating an atmosphere both elegant and inviting. As Mary had predicted, Lady Prescott already occupied her favourite seat near the fireplace, despite the warmth of the spring day.

The elderly lady’s sharp eyes brightened at Penelope’s entrance.

“Ah, there you are, my dear. I was just telling Mrs. Bellingham about your clever management of the grain distribution this past winter.”

Mrs. Bellingham, the vicar’s wife, sat nearby, her kind face creased with concern as she nodded a greeting.

“Indeed, Lady Penelope. Your organisation made such a difference to so many families.”

“You are too kind.” Penelope settled into her chair as one of the maids began directing the arrangement of tea things. “Though I must say, your husband’s assistance was invaluable. Having the church participate in distribution helped ensure that we reached those most in need.”

Lady Morton, who had been gazing out the window, turned at this.

“That’s precisely what we need to discuss. This past winter revealed gaps in our understanding of who truly needs assistance. Some are too proud to ask, while others...”

She left the sentence delicately unfinished.

“Exactly so.”

Penelope opened her leather folder, drawing out her carefully prepared notes. The paper was of excellent quality - she had learned that presenting information properly could make the difference between being taken seriously and being dismissed as a romantic girl with impractical notions.

“I have been analysing the pattern of hardships over the past three years, and I believe that we can be far more effective if we coordinate our efforts.” More ladies filtered into the room as she spoke. The maid moved efficiently among them, ensuring that each had tea and refreshments while Penelope continued. “For example, I have noted that grain prices follow a predictable pattern throughout the year. If we pool our resources for bulk purchase in summer...”

“But surely,” Mrs. Bellingham leaned forward, her tea forgotten in her earnestness, “the issue is not just preparation? The problems run deeper than that.”

“Indeed, they do.” Penelope drew out several sheets covered in her neat handwriting. “I have been visiting tenant families throughout the winter, learning about their specific challenges.”

A slight murmur ran through the assembled ladies at this. Such direct involvement was unusual for a young lady of Penelope’s station. She lifted her chin slightly,

prepared to defend her actions, but Lady Prescott's voice cut through the whispers.

"Very sensible. How else is one to truly understand the situation? Though I imagine some would consider such visits... unconventional."

The unspoken reference to the Duke of Ravensworth hung in the air. Penelope could almost hear his scathing commentary on 'interfering females who don't know their place'. The memory of that day at Lady Ashworth's rose again unbidden... She had been seated with several other young ladies, presumably considered too young to have opinions worth hearing, when the Duke had started his tirade. His commanding presence had dominated the room as he condemned her father's support of tenant improvements.

"It is this sort of soft-headed mismanagement that weakens estates," he had declared, his deep voice carrying clearly across the drawing room. "Tenants must learn to manage their own affairs, not depend upon charitable handouts that encourage idleness."

Penelope had gripped her fan so tightly that one of the delicate ivory sticks had cracked.

The Duke's dramatic good looks - which had caused several young ladies to sigh over him despite his notorious severity - had only made his cold words more shocking. How could someone blessed with such advantages be so utterly devoid of compassion? The gentle opening of the morning room door drew Penelope from her memories. Her father's distinguished figure appeared, his silver-streaked hair catching the sunlight as he entered. The Earl of Stanyon's presence always brought a sense of calm stability with it, and Penelope felt her tension ease as he smiled warmly at the assembled ladies.

"I trust that I am not interrupting anything too secret?"

His eyes twinkled as he spoke, drawing appreciative chuckles from several of the older ladies. The Earl had long been considered one of the most charming men in the county, his genuine kindness making him well-loved despite what some called his ‘eccentric’ views on estate management.

“Not at all, my Lord,” Lady Prescott declared firmly. “We are merely allowing your daughter to show us how thoroughly she has thought through these proposals. I must say, the girl does you credit.”

“Rather, Lady Prescott, I hope that I do her credit.” The Earl moved to stand behind Penelope’s chair, resting one hand gently on her shoulder. “I find my daughter’s practical approach to charitable works most enlightening. But pray, do not let me interrupt. I merely wished to express my support before retiring to my study.”

Penelope reached up to touch her father’s hand, remembering how he had defended her that day at Lady Ashworth’s, after the Duke’s cutting remarks. The Earl had merely raised one elegant eyebrow and observed that some men might do better to examine their own management choices before criticising others. His mild tone had made the rebuke all the more pointed.

“Thank you, Papa.” She smiled up at him, drawing strength from his unwavering support. “I shall find you there when we are finished?”

“Indeed.” He squeezed her shoulder gently before withdrawing. “Ladies, I leave you in my daughter’s capable hands.”

As the door closed behind him, Penelope returned to her papers with renewed determination.

“Now, as I was saying, I believe we can achieve far more by coordinating our efforts. I have prepared detailed proposals for how we might structure this.” She drew out

several carefully written sheets, passing them to Lady Prescott first, as the most influential of her supporters. “You’ll see that I have outlined a system for verifying genuine need without causing embarrassment to the families involved.”

“Quite thorough,” Lady Morton observed, leaning forward to examine the papers as they were passed to her. “Though I notice that you have not included Ravensworth in your calculations of available storage space.”

A slight tension crept back into Penelope’s shoulders.

“The Duke has made his position quite clear on such matters. I saw no point in including resources that would not be available to us.”

“Hmph.” Lady Prescott’s disapproving grunt spoke volumes. “That young man needs a lesson in proper nobility. His mother would be quite disappointed by his current attitude.”

“You knew his mother?”

The question escaped Penelope before she could stop it. She had heard little of the previous Duchess, save that she had died when the current Duke was quite young.

“Indeed I did.” Lady Prescott’s eyes grew distant with memory. “A lovely woman, with a true understanding of noblesse oblige. She did a great deal of good in the county before her death. The old Duke never quite recovered from losing her, they say.”

“The current Duke was quite young when she died, was he not?” Lady Morton asked quietly.

“Eighteen.” Lady Prescott nodded. “And his father followed within the year - hunting

accident, though some said grief played its part. Then the elder brother's death just as the current Duke returned from war... well, perhaps one can understand his rigid attention to duty and finance."

Penelope found herself unconsciously softening towards the Duke, before firmly reminding herself that tragic circumstances did not excuse cruel behaviour.

"Understanding the source of his attitude does not make that attitude correct," she observed, more sharply than she had intended.

"No indeed," Lady Prescott agreed, her shrewd eyes studying Penelope's face. "Though I suspect that you might be just the person to show him that."

Heat rose in Penelope's cheeks.

"I hardly think that the Duke of Ravensworth would welcome any suggestion from me, Lady Prescott. Now, shall we examine the proposed schedule for grain purchases?"

For the next hour, the ladies discussed possibilities and challenges. Penelope guided the conversation carefully, noting both supporters and those who seemed hesitant. She was particularly pleased when Lady Morton offered the use of several empty barns on her estate for storage.

"The question of distribution remains crucial," Mrs. Bellingham observed, accepting a fresh cup of tea from the maid. "We must find a way to help those truly in need without encouraging... dependency."

Penelope had expected this concern.

She drew out another carefully prepared document.

“I have given that considerable thought. You’ll see here that I propose regular visits to tenant families by those who know them best. Not as interference, you understand, but as friendly support that allows us to truly understand their circumstances.”

“Rather like your own visits to our tenants,” Lady Prescott observed shrewdly. “I had wondered about your frequent rides about the estates these past months.”

Penelope met the elderly lady’s knowing look steadily.

“I believe it important to understand the real situations we face, not merely discuss them in drawing rooms.”

“Very sensible,” Lady Morton nodded approvingly. “Though I imagine some might consider such direct involvement... inappropriate for a young lady of your station.”

“I cannot think it inappropriate to understand the responsibilities we hold,” Penelope replied, her voice firm despite her racing heart. She had rehearsed this argument many times in her mind. “How can we make informed decisions about assistance if we do not know the true circumstances of those we aim to help?”

“Well said!” Lady Prescott thumped her cane enthusiastically against the floor. “Now, my dear, tell us exactly what you need from each of us.”

As the meeting continued, Penelope felt a growing sense of accomplishment. Most of the ladies agreed to participate in some capacity, and several offered resources she hadn’t dared hope for. Even Mrs. Bellingham, despite her initial reservations, volunteered to help coordinate with other parishes. When the last lady had departed, save Lady Prescott, Penelope began gathering her papers with hands that trembled slightly from relief and excitement.

“You handled that very well, my dear.” Lady Prescott remained seated, her sharp

eyes missing nothing. “But do be careful. Not everyone will appreciate such capable organisation from a young lady.”

“Thank you for your concern, Lady Prescott.” Penelope helped her elderly friend adjust her shawl. “But I cannot let fear of criticism prevent us from doing what is needed.”

“Brave words.” Lady Prescott’s voice softened. “Just remember that some men feel threatened by a woman who thinks too clearly for their comfort. Particularly men who are unused to being challenged.”

The unspoken reference to the Duke hung between them. Penelope busied herself with collecting the last of her papers.

“The Duke’s opinion matters little to me, Lady Prescott. I doubt our paths will cross often enough for his disapproval to be relevant.”

“Do not be too certain of that, my dear.” Lady Prescott allowed Penelope to help her rise. “In my experience, fate has a way of bringing together those who most wish to avoid each other.”

Before Penelope could respond to this cryptic observation, the maid appeared to escort Lady Prescott to her carriage. Gathering her papers, Penelope made her way to her father’s study, her mind already turning to the next steps in implementing their plans.

She found the Earl at his desk, reading correspondence through his quizzing glass. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the study windows, highlighting the silver in his hair and the fine lines around his eyes - lines that spoke of both laughter and care.

“Well, my dear?” He looked up with a warm smile that always made her feel safe and

understood. “Was your meeting successful?”

“Very much so, Papa.” Penelope settled into her favourite chair near his desk, smoothing her skirts around her. The leather of the chair was worn soft with age, its familiar comfort welcome after the tension of the meeting. “Though Lady Prescott warns me that I must be careful not to appear too... capable.”

The Earl set aside his letters, giving her his full attention. The afternoon light caught the subtle pattern in his navy coat as he leaned back, studying her face.

“Ah. You are thinking of young Ravensworth’s outburst at Lady Ashworth’s.”

“He is hardly young, Papa. He must be at least thirty.” Penelope smoothed an imaginary wrinkle from her skirts, trying to hide her agitation. “And his opinion matters little to me. I simply cannot understand how anyone could be so coldly dismissive of genuine need.”

“The Duke has his reasons, my dear.” Her father’s voice held that thoughtful tone that usually preceded some piece of wisdom she wasn’t quite ready to hear. “The old Duke’s death, followed so quickly by his elder brother’s... well, I understand that the current Duke inherited quite a tangle of financial difficulties. Perhaps that colours his view of charitable expenditure.”

“That hardly excuses his rudeness to you, Papa.” The memory sparked fresh anger in her chest. She could still see the Duke standing in Lady Ashworth’s drawing room, his tall figure commanding attention, those striking green eyes cold as he had condemned her father’s management choices. “To publicly declare your decisions ‘foolishly sentimental’ was unconscionable.”

“Your loyal defence of me warms my heart.” The Earl’s eyes twinkled with suppressed amusement. “Though I seem to recall that you were rather forceful in

expressing your opinion of him afterwards.”

Heat flooded Penelope’s cheeks as she remembered her sharp comments to Lady Ashworth about the Duke’s apparent lack of basic manners and humanity. She might have gone further, had her father not caught her eye across the room.

“I spoke only truth,” she muttered, examining the embroidery on her handkerchief with sudden intensity.

“Perhaps.” Her father rose and came around the desk to kiss her forehead. The familiar scent of his cologne wrapped around her comfortingly. “But come now, you have achieved much today. Don’t let thoughts of Ravensworth spoil your triumph. Tell me more about Lady Morton’s offer of storage space.”

Grateful for the change of subject, Penelope drew out her notes.

“I believe that we can coordinate between her barns and the old tithe barn at Stanyon Cross. If we time the purchases carefully...”

They spent the next hour discussing practical details, the Earl offering subtle suggestions that Penelope knew would strengthen her plans. This was what she loved most - working through problems methodically, finding solutions that would make real differences in people’s lives. As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the study floor, her father sat back with a satisfied smile.

“You’ve thought this through very thoroughly, my dear. I am quite proud of you.”

“Thank you, Papa.” Penelope began gathering her papers. “Though I fear that not everyone shares your approval of a lady involving herself in such matters.”

“The times are changing, Penelope.” Her father’s voice grew serious. “The war has

shown us that old ways of thinking must adapt. Even the Duke of Ravensworth may learn that, in time.”

“I doubt that very much.” Penelope rose, tucking her folder under her arm. “A man so rigid in his thinking is unlikely to change.”

“You might be surprised.” The Earl's eyes held that knowing look that always made her wonder how much he truly saw. “Sometimes the most rigid tree is the one most likely to break in a storm.”

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Penelope pondered her father's words as she prepared for bed that evening.

The soft glow of candlelight filled her chamber, creating dancing shadows on the pale blue walls.

Mary moved quietly about the room, laying out clothes for the next day.

"The blue riding habit for tomorrow, my Lady?" Mary held up the garment in question. "You mentioned visiting the Williams family at the north farm."

"Yes, I think so." Penelope turned from her mirror, where she had been absently brushing her hair. The golden curls tumbled about her shoulders, catching the candlelight. "Though perhaps we should pack a spare skirt. Mrs. Williams mentioned showing me her new method of planting root vegetables."

"Very wise, my Lady." Mary's lips twitched with suppressed amusement. "We wouldn't want a repeat of the incident with the Carter family's piglets."

"That was hardly my fault!" Penelope protested, laughing despite herself. "How was I to know the little creatures would escape just as I was examining their pen?"

"Indeed, my Lady." Mary's dry tone spoke volumes. "Though I notice that such incidents occur with remarkable frequency when you visit tenant farms."

"Well, one can hardly understand their challenges without experiencing them firsthand." Penelope settled into the window seat, drawing her knees up beneath her nightrail. The spring night was clear, stars scattered like diamonds across the velvet

darkness. “Though I suppose the Duke of Ravensworth would consider such involvement beneath the dignity of a Lady.”

“The Duke of Ravensworth,” Mary observed as she turned down the bed, “seems to occupy rather a lot of your thoughts for someone whose opinion matters so little to you.”

“Mary!” Penelope turned from the window, scandalised. “That is not... I mean, I merely...”

“Of course, my Lady.” Mary’s face was the picture of innocence as she gathered up the discarded day dress. “Shall I leave the second candle burning?”

“No, thank you.” Penelope rose from the window seat, trying to ignore the heat in her cheeks. “I believe that I shall read a while, but one candle will suffice.”

As Mary bid her goodnight and quietly left the room, Penelope tried to focus on the book of poetry she had been reading. But her thoughts kept straying to green eyes and a deep voice that could somehow be both commanding and cold at once. It was most vexing that such an arrogant man should be so handsome. Not that his looks mattered in the slightest, of course. His attitude more than counterbalanced any physical appeal he might possess.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the window casement, making her start. The spring weather had been unusually volatile lately, with storms appearing seemingly from nowhere. Tomorrow’s ride to the north farm might prove interesting if the weather turned.

Penelope marked her place in the book and set it aside, unread. She had more important things to think about than the Duke of Ravensworth and his disapproving manner. Tomorrow would bring new challenges and opportunities, and she needed

her rest.

As she blew out the candle and settled into bed, a last thought drifted through her mind.

What would the Duke make of her expanding charitable network? Would news of today's meeting reach him?

The wind gusted again, stronger this time, and somewhere in the darkness, a door slammed.

The morning dawned grey and blustery, with heavy clouds scudding across the sky like ships before a gale. Penelope stood at her chamber window, watching the trees bend in the strengthening wind. Perhaps she should delay her visit to the north farm.

"The weather looks rather threatening, my Lady." Mary's voice echoed her thoughts as the maid entered, carrying a breakfast tray. "Cook insisted on sending up hot chocolate this morning - she says it's far too cold for tea."

"Thank you, Mary." Penelope turned from the window, smiling at this evidence of the household's care for her. The rich scent of chocolate filled the room as Mary poured. "Though I begin to wonder if I should postpone my visit."

"The Williams family are expecting you, my Lady." Mary's practical tone held a note of understanding. "And Mrs Williams was particularly eager to show you her new planting methods. Perhaps if we left early, we might return before any weather breaks."

Penelope wrapped her hands around the warm chocolate cup, considering. The

Williams family were one of their most industrious tenant families, always willing to try new methods of farming. Their success could encourage others to adopt similar improvements.

“You’re right, of course.” She moved to where her riding habit lay ready. “We’ll go, but make haste about it – we’ll take the small gig, rather than riding, I think, for that will allow us to perhaps stay a little drier, and make it easier to take some things to the Williams family. The clouds do look rather ominous, and I do hate riding in soaked clothes, so the gig it is.”

Within the hour, they were on their way, Penelope and Mary seated on the narrow driver’s box of the gig, with Mary driving. The wind whipped at their clothes, and Penelope was grateful for the warm spencer jacket she wore beneath her pelisse. They had covered perhaps half the distance to the north farm when the first spots of rain began to fall. Penelope hesitated, signalling Mary to rein the mare to a halt. The horse shifted nervously, ears back, as the wind gusted around them.

“Perhaps we should turn back, my Lady?”

Mary’s voice carried a hint of worry. Before Penelope could respond, a stronger gust of wind brought more rain.

“There’s a shorter route through Ravensworth land,” Penelope said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “If we use that narrow lane that cuts across their south pasture, we could reach the Williams farm in half the time.”

“Across Ravensworth land?” Mary’s tone held distinct disapproval. “My Lady, considering the Duke’s feelings about your charitable work...”

“We hardly need his permission to use an established right of way.” Penelope waved for Mary to proceed. “The lane has been used by tenants for generations. Come

along, before this rain becomes worse.”

They turned onto a narrow track that led through a small copse of trees near the edge of the Ravensworth south pasture. The branches above them creaked ominously in the wind, and the growing gloom made it seem much later than mid-morning. They had nearly reached the edge of Ravensworth land when it happened. A sudden crack of thunder startled the mare. She reared slightly in the traces, surging forward, and as Mary brought her under control, Penelope heard an ominous sound from the wheel of the gig.

“My Lady!” Mary’s voice held real alarm now. “Something’s wrong with the wheel!”

Penelope peered cautiously over the side of the cart as Mary brought them to a halt. Even to her inexperienced eye, the wheel looked decidedly unstable. The recent rains had made the track treacherous, and it appeared that, when the mare had half-reared and surged forward, they had gone over a large stone, which had damaged the already worn wheel.

“We can’t continue like this. The wheel might shatter completely at any moment.” She looked around, trying to get her bearings through the increasingly heavy rain. “We’re closer to Ravensworth Hall than to home now.”

“Surely you’re not suggesting...”

Mary’s eyes widened with horror. Another crack of thunder cut off her words. The mare shifted nervously, and the damaged wheel creaked alarmingly.

“We have no choice.” Penelope tried to sound more confident than she felt. “We cannot risk the wheel failing completely, and this storm is worsening by the moment.”

As if to emphasise her words, lightning split the sky, followed almost immediately by thunderous crash. The wind drove the rain nearly sideways now, and Penelope could feel it seeping through her supposedly waterproof pelisse.

“The Duke will be absolutely furious.”

Mary muttered the words, but she gathered the reins, urged the mare into motion, and carefully guided the cart towards Ravensworth Hall. The great house appeared through the gloom like a grey ghost, its imposing facade made more dramatic by the storm-darkened sky. As they approached, Penelope’s heart began to pound. What sort of welcome would they receive? Would the Duke himself be in residence?

A groom appeared as they reached the stable yard, his eyes widening as he recognised them.

“Lady Penelope! Here, let me help you down.” He hurried forward, then caught sight of the cart’s wheel. “Oh, that’s properly done for, that is. We’ll need Mr Featherstone to look at it, and he’s away in the village today.”

“Thank you, Tom.” Penelope was grateful to recognise the young groom - he was cousin to one of their own stable boys. “I’m afraid we must impose upon the Duke’s hospitality until the weather clears and the wheel can be repaired.”

“Of course, my Lady. Here, let me help Miss Harper down, and then I’ll deal with getting the cart to the stables, and the mare out of the rain. You’d best get inside - you’re soaked through!”

Indeed, Penelope could feel water running down her neck despite her hood. Her boots squelched as she crossed the yard, and her skirts were thoroughly muddied. The butler who opened the door managed to combine perfect correctness with distinct disapproval in his expression.

“Lady Penelope Whitmore,” he intoned, as if her bedraggled appearance might make her identity uncertain. “If you will follow me, I shall inform His Grace of your arrival.”

“His Grace is in residence then?”

Penelope fought to keep her voice steady as she followed the butler’s rigid back through the hall.

“Indeed, my Lady. If you will wait here.”

He showed them into a small parlour, clearly not one used for honoured guests, and departed with frigid dignity. Mary immediately began fussing over Penelope’s wet clothes.

“You’ll catch your death, my Lady. Here, let me at least wring out your pelisse.”

But before Penelope could remove the sodden garment, the door opened again. She turned, her heart jumping into her throat, to find herself facing the Duke of Ravensworth himself. Alexander Cavendish filled the space with his presence even more thoroughly than she remembered. His severe black coat emphasised the breadth of his shoulders, and his cravat was tied with military precision.

Those striking green eyes swept over her bedraggled form, his expression unreadable.

“Lady Penelope.” His deep voice seemed to resonate in her bones. “This is... unexpected.”

Penelope lifted her chin, despite being acutely aware of her dishevelled state.

“Your Grace. I apologise for this intrusion. Our cart wheel was damaged, and the

storm...”

“So Jameson informed me.” He stepped fully into the room, and Penelope fought the urge to step back. “Though I confess myself curious as to why you were traversing my land at all.”

Heat crept into Penelope’s cheeks, but she kept her voice steady.

“We were taking the tenant’s lane to the north farm, Your Grace. A route that has been established for generations.”

“Ah yes.” His tone could have frozen hot water. “No doubt another of your charitable visits.” Before Penelope could frame a suitably cutting reply, Mary sneezed violently. The Duke’s attention shifted to her maid, and something like resignation crossed his severe features. “Jameson,” he called, and the butler appeared as if conjured. “Please have Mrs Thackeray prepare rooms for Lady Penelope and her maid. And send someone to assist...”

He paused, clearly waiting for the maid’s name.

“Mary, Your Grace,” Penelope supplied, when Mary appeared too flustered to speak.

“To assist Mary in drying out. Lady Penelope will require something dry to wear as well.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Jameson bowed and disappeared. “My sister Rosalind is unfortunately away visiting relatives,” the Duke continued, his tone marginally less glacial. “But I’m sure we can find something suitable of hers for you to wear. Unless you prefer to remain in your wet things?”

The sardonic lift of his eyebrow made Penelope’s temper flare.

“Your Grace is too kind,” she managed, her voice sweet enough to cause toothache. “Though I would not wish to inconvenience you. Perhaps once the storm passes...”

A tremendous crack of thunder emphasised the impossibility of leaving any time soon. The Duke’s mouth twitched slightly, though whether with amusement or annoyance she couldn’t tell.

“I fear you must resign yourself to accepting my hospitality, Lady Penelope.” Was there a hint of mockery in how he emphasised her title? “Inadequate as you no doubt find it.”

“I would never presume to judge your hospitality, Your Grace.” Penelope matched his formal tone perfectly. “Though I confess, I had not thought to intrude upon it, given your well-known views on... interfering females.”

His eyes narrowed slightly at her reference to his previous comments. Before he could respond, however, the housekeeper appeared - a comfortable-looking woman whose calm presence immediately made Penelope feel less awkward.

“If you’ll come with me, my Lady,” she said warmly, “we’ll soon have you dry and comfortable. Mary, Sally will show you to your room.”

As Penelope followed Mrs Thackeray from the room, she was intensely aware of the Duke’s gaze following her. The weight of it seemed to press between her shoulder blades, making her spine stiffen further.

The housekeeper led her up a gracefully curving staircase, their footsteps muffled by rich carpeting. The house’s interior surprised Penelope - she had expected something as austere as its master, but instead found elegant decoration and obvious care in every detail.

“Here we are, my Lady.” Mrs Thackeray opened a door to reveal a charming bedroom decorated in soft blues and cream. “This was Lady Rosalind’s room before she moved to the other wing. I think some of her gowns might suit you - you’re of a similar height, though perhaps more...” she gestured vaguely, “blessed in certain areas.”

Penelope felt her cheeks warm at the housekeeper’s frank assessment, but couldn’t help smiling at the woman’s motherly manner.

“Thank you, Mrs Thackeray. You are very kind.”

“Not at all, my Lady. Now, let’s get you out of these wet things before you catch your death. His Grace would never forgive us if we let a guest fall ill.” Something in the housekeeper’s tone made Penelope look at her sharply, but the woman’s face showed nothing but practical concern as she helped Penelope out of her sodden pelisse and day dress.

“There now,” Mrs Thackeray said, holding up a lovely sage green day dress. “This should do nicely. Lady Rosalind hardly wore it - said the colour didn’t suit her dark colouring. But with your golden hair...”

As the housekeeper helped her change, Penelope found herself studying the room more closely. Unlike the rather impersonal parlour downstairs, this chamber held signs of real personality. Watercolour sketches decorated one wall - landscapes that showed considerable talent. A small shelf held books that surprised her - volumes of poetry mixed with serious works on estate management and agriculture.

“Did Lady Rosalind paint these?”

She gestured to the sketches as Mrs Thackeray deftly adjusted the dress’s fit.

“Oh yes, my Lady. She has quite a gift. His Grace encouraged it, you know, even when the old Duke thought it a waste of time. Insisted on proper materials and instruction for her.”

This glimpse of brotherly devotion seemed at odds with the cold man downstairs. Before Penelope could ask more, however, a knock at the door heralded the arrival of a maid with hot tea.

“His Grace thought you might need warming up, my Lady,” the girl said shyly. “And he asks if you would join him in the library once you’re settled. He says there’s something about tenant access he wishes to discuss.”

Penelope’s momentary softening towards the Duke vanished. Of course he would want to lecture her about proper procedures and protocols. Well, she was quite prepared to defend both her actions and the traditional rights of tenant access.

“Thank you,” she said to the maid. “Please inform His Grace that I shall join him shortly.”

As she sipped the excellent tea, Mrs Thackeray efficiently arranged her damp hair into a simple but elegant style. The sage green dress, though slightly loose in the waist, fitted well enough to be presentable. Its fine wool was far more practical for a country house than the silks Penelope knew many ladies preferred.

“There now, my Lady.” Mrs Thackeray stepped back with satisfaction. “Quite presentable. Though if you’ll pardon my saying so, you’d look well in anything. Rather like the late Duchess, if I may make so bold.”

“The late Duchess?” Penelope turned from the mirror in surprise. “Did you know her well?”

“Oh yes, my Lady. I was here when His Grace was just a boy. Such a lovely lady she was - always thinking of others, always trying to help where she could. Rather like...”
The housekeeper stopped abruptly, looking somewhat flustered. “But there, I’m running on when His Grace is waiting for you. Shall I show you to the library?”

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The library at Ravensworth Hall proved to be everything a library should be, Penelope thought, momentarily distracted from her apprehension by the magnificent room. Two storeys tall, with a graceful gallery running around the upper level, it boasted floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with leather-bound volumes. Large windows would normally flood the space with light, though now they showed only the storm's fury. The Duke stood before one of the windows, his tall figure silhouetted against the grey light.

He turned as she entered, and Penelope felt her breath catch slightly. Blast the man - why did he have to be so impossibly handsome? It made maintaining a proper degree of antagonism quite difficult.

"Lady Penelope." He bowed correctly, though his expression remained severe. "I trust Mrs Thackeray has made you comfortable?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you, Your Grace." She moved further into the room, drawn despite herself to examine the nearest shelves. "You have a remarkable library."

"My mother's influence." His voice held an odd note she couldn't quite interpret. "She believed that books were the foundation of both education and entertainment."

"A wise woman."

Penelope ran one finger along the spine of a volume on agricultural improvements, noting that it was well-worn, not merely decorative.

"Indeed." He moved closer, though still maintaining a properly correct distance.

“Though I wonder what she would make of young ladies who risk their health and reputation by gadding about the countryside alone.”

And there it was - the criticism she had been expecting. Penelope turned to face him, lifting her chin.

“I hardly think that visiting tenant families constitutes ‘gadding about’, Your Grace. Nor was I alone - Mary accompanied me.”

“Ah yes, your maid.” His tone could have etched glass. “Who is even now suffering from exposure to the weather due to your... charitable impulses.”

“Mary chose to accompany me because she believes in the work we do.” Penelope fought to keep her voice level. “Unlike some, she understands that nobility brings responsibility as well as privilege.”

His eyes narrowed dangerously.

“You presume to lecture me about responsibility, Lady Penelope? You, who encourage dangerous expectations among the tenant families with your interfering ways?”

“I encourage nothing but sensible improvements and mutual support between estates.” She matched his cold tone perfectly. “Though I understand such concepts might be foreign to one who sees tenants merely as entries in a ledger.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and Penelope wondered if she had gone too far. But before he could respond, a tremendous crash of thunder shook the windows, making her jump despite herself. In the same moment, the library door burst open.

“Your Grace!” Jameson’s usual dignity was distinctly ruffled. “A tree has fallen

across the main drive, and Featherstone reports that the bridge to the village is flooding. I'm afraid..." he cast an apologetic glance at Penelope, "I'm afraid we may be quite cut off until the storm passes."

Penelope watched the Duke's face and saw the exact moment that he realised she would have to stay the night. His expression suggested he'd just bitten into something extremely sour.

"I see." He turned to her with rigid courtesy. "It appears, Lady Penelope, that we must extend our hospitality to you somewhat longer than anticipated. I trust that you will find it adequate, despite my apparently lacking understanding of noble responsibility."

The biting sarcasm in his tone made Penelope's fingers itch to slap him. Instead, she swept him a curtsy that would have done credit to any royal drawing room.

"Your Grace is too kind. I'm sure I shall manage to endure somehow."

Something that might have been unwilling amusement flickered in his eyes before he turned to his butler.

"Jameson, please inform Mrs Thackeray that we shall require dinner for three this evening. My cousin Albert is still here, I believe?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Though he mentioned riding out to check the home farm's drainage."

"In this weather?"

Penelope couldn't help exclaiming. Both men looked at her with nearly identical expressions of surprise at her intervention.

“Albert is quite capable of managing himself in adverse conditions, I assure you,” the Duke said drily. “We are not all so delicate as to require rescue from spring showers.”

“Delicate!” Penelope almost choked on her indignation. “I was not the one who required rescue, Your Grace. I merely sought shelter, given a broken wheel on our gig, from a storm that any sensible person would recognise as dangerous. Though I begin to question whether seeking it here was entirely sensible.”

Their eyes locked in mutual antagonism. Jameson coughed discretely.

“Shall I have tea brought to the morning room, Your Grace? Perhaps Lady Penelope would be more comfortable there until dinner.”

“An excellent suggestion.” The Duke’s tone suggested he’d rather like to suggest she wait in the stables. “Lady Penelope, if you will excuse me, I have estate matters to attend to. Jameson will see to your comfort.”

He strode from the room without waiting for her response, his long legs carrying him away with military precision. Penelope found herself staring after him, noting how his broad shoulders filled out his coat to perfection, before catching herself and turning hurriedly to Jameson. The butler’s face was entirely proper, but something about his eyes suggested he missed very little.

“This way, if you please, my Lady. The morning room has an excellent view of the gardens, though perhaps not at their best in current conditions.”

As she followed him through the house, Penelope couldn’t help observing how well-maintained everything was. Despite her prejudice against the Duke’s management style, she had to admit that Ravensworth Hall showed every sign of careful stewardship. The morning room proved to be a delightful chamber, clearly decorated with a woman’s touch. Penelope wondered if it dated from the late Duchess’s time, or

if Lady Rosalind had influenced its design.

“Mary will join you shortly,” Jameson informed her. “She has been made comfortable and provided with dry clothing.”

“Thank you.” Penelope settled into a chair near the fire that burned cheerfully despite the spring date. “You are very kind.”

“Not at all, my Lady. We aim to maintain the standards the late Duchess established.” He hesitated, then added, “She would have approved of assisting anyone caught in such weather, regardless of... circumstances.”

Before Penelope could question this interesting comment, he had bowed and withdrawn. Left alone, she found herself pondering the glimpses she’d been given of the late Duchess’s character. Everyone who mentioned her seemed to do so with real warmth - how had such an apparently kindly woman produced a son so rigid and cold?

The door opened again, admitting Mary, now dressed in a serviceable dark gown that suited her perfectly.

“My Lady! Are you well? That dreadful man hasn’t been too unpleasant?”

“That dreadful man is our host, Mary,” Penelope reminded her, though she couldn’t help smiling at her maid’s protective instincts. “And he has been...” she paused, searching for the right word, “correctly hospitable, if not exactly welcoming.”

“Hmph.” Mary settled into a chair with more force than strictly necessary. “I heard that the bridge is flooded. We’ll have to stay the night!”

“So it seems.” Penelope turned to watch the rain lashing against the windows.

“Though I’m more concerned about the Williams family. We never did reach them, and no one will have warned them that we wouldn’t come.”

“Oh! I forgot to tell you - one of the stable lads mentioned that His Grace sent riders out to all of the tenant farms as soon as the storm worsened. Standard procedure here, apparently.”

Penelope absorbed this information with surprise. It seemed the Duke did take some care of his tenants, even if he disapproved of more direct charitable involvement. A maid arrived with tea, and what proved to be excellent sandwiches. As they ate, Penelope found her gaze drawn repeatedly to the window, where the storm showed no signs of abating. The rain now fell in sheets, driven almost horizontal by the wind, and the gardens beyond were barely visible through the gloom.

“At least we’re dry and warm,” Mary observed practically. “Though I must say, this house is not what I expected.”

“No?” Penelope turned from her contemplation of the weather. “What do you mean?”

“Well...” Mary glanced at the door as if expecting the Duke to materialise. “It’s so... well-kept. Comfortable, even. Not cold and austere like its master at all. And the servants seem happy - Mrs Thackeray was telling me how His Grace insisted on raising wages last quarter, and how he never refuses medical care for their families.”

“Really?” Penelope frowned thoughtfully. This didn’t align with her image of the Duke at all. “Perhaps he simply understands that well-treated servants work more efficiently.”

“Perhaps.” Mary’s tone suggested she wasn’t convinced. “Though Tommy - that’s one of the footmen - says His Grace spent hours sitting with the cook’s youngest when she had fever last month. Insisted on calling the physician himself.”

Before Penelope could absorb this bewildering information, they heard voices in the hall.

The door opened to admit a gentleman she didn't recognise, his clothes damp but his expression cheerful.

"Ah!" He bowed elegantly. "You must be Lady Penelope. I'm Lord Albert Cavendish, cousin to our gracious host. I understand we're all to be storm-stayed together."

Albert proved to be everything that his cousin was not - friendly, talkative, and possessed of an easy charm that soon had both Penelope and Mary relaxing.

He regaled them with tales of his ride to check the home farm ('Quite an adventure, I assure you!') and somehow managed to make even the threatening weather seem more entertaining than alarming.

"Alexander was quite right about the drainage improvements," he observed, accepting a fresh cup of tea. "Though I'm sure he'll be insufferable about it. He does so love being proved correct."

Penelope found her interest sharpening at this casual reference to the Duke.

"His Grace takes a personal interest in such improvements?"

"Oh Lord, yes." Albert's eyes twinkled. "Drives his steward quite distracted sometimes, wanting to examine every detail himself. But then, that's Alexander all over - has to understand everything completely before he'll make a decision."

"How... thorough of him." Penelope tried to keep her tone neutral, though she found this glimpse of the Duke's character intriguing despite herself.

“Thorough! That’s one word for it.” Albert chuckled. “I call it obsessive myself, but then, it’s served him well enough. Brought the estate round remarkably since he inherited.”

“Was it in very bad shape?”

The question slipped out before she could stop herself.

Albert’s expression grew more serious.

“Rather. The old Duke... well, after the Duchess died, things rather fell apart. Then Richard’s death right after Alexander returned from war... it was quite a tangle to sort out.”

A knock at the door interrupted them. Jameson appeared, as correctly elegant as ever despite the late hour and storm.

“Dinner will be served in half an hour,” he announced. “Lord Albert, His Grace asks if you would join him in the study beforehand. Lady Penelope, Mrs Thackeray will send someone to help you dress.”

As Lord Albert rose to leave, he smiled warmly at Penelope.

“Don’t let my cousin intimidate you too much, Lady Penelope. His bark is generally worse than his bite.”

“I am not intimidated by His Grace,” Penelope replied with more spirit than wisdom. “Merely... unimpressed by his attitude towards certain matters.”

“Is that so?” Albert’s smile widened. “How fascinating. I look forward to dinner immensely.”

After he left, Mary turned to Penelope with concern.

“Do be careful, my Lady. His Grace is not a man to cross lightly.”

“I have no intention of crossing him, Mary.” Penelope stood, smoothing the borrowed dress. “I merely intend to maintain my own opinions, regardless of his disapproval.”

But as she prepared for dinner, Penelope couldn't help wondering about the contradictions she'd discovered.

The cold, disapproving Duke who yet sat with sick servant children.

The rigid master who raised wages unprompted.

The man whose servants spoke of him with respect rather than fear, despite his austere manner.

Lightning flashed outside her window, followed almost immediately by thunder that shook the glass in its frames. The storm, it seemed, had no intention of releasing them any time soon. Penelope squared her shoulders as she checked her reflection one final time. Well, if she must endure the Duke's company, she would do so with dignity. Even if his presence did make her pulse race in a most vexing manner.

Another thunder crash rattled the windows as she turned towards the door.

The night, she suspected, would prove interesting indeed.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:27 am

The dining room at Ravensworth Hall was clearly designed to impress. Two massive chandeliers cast warm light over a table that could easily seat twenty, though tonight only three places were set at one end. Crystal and silver gleamed, while the deep green walls seemed to gather shadows in their corners despite the chandeliers' best efforts. Penelope entered to find both gentlemen already present. The Duke stood with his back to the fire, while Lord Albert lounged against a sideboard with casual grace. Both men bowed, Lord Albert's gesture friendly, the Duke's precisely correct and somehow remote.

"Lady Penelope." The Duke's deep voice seemed to resonate in the large room. "I trust you find yourself adequately comfortable, despite the circumstances?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you, Your Grace." Penelope allowed him to seat her, acutely aware of his presence behind her chair – and the fact that, really, they had no socially acceptable chaperone here.... "Your staff have been most kind."

"Remarkably good servants here," Lord Albert observed cheerfully, taking his own seat. "Though I suspect that has more to do with Alexander's management than anything else. Gone are the days when one could find Jameson sleeping in the silver pantry."

The Duke shot his cousin a quelling look as he sat.

"I hardly think Lady Penelope needs to hear ancient household gossip, Albert."

"Oh, I don't know." Lord Albert's eyes twinkled as the first course was served. "It rather illustrates the difference good management can make, doesn't it? Rather like

those drainage improvements we were discussing earlier.”

Penelope noted how the Duke’s shoulders tensed slightly at this obvious attempt to draw him into conversation. His green eyes flickered to her face briefly before he turned his attention to his soup.

“I understand that you take a great interest in estate improvements, Your Grace?”

She kept her tone carefully neutral, though she couldn’t quite suppress her curiosity about this aspect of his character.

“I believe that responsible estate management requires attention to detail.”

His voice held that familiar cold note that seemed designed to discourage further questions.

“Oh, come now, Alexander!” Lord Albert laughed. “You can hardly describe your three-month study of soil drainage patterns as mere ‘attention to detail’. I thought Featherstone would expire from excitement when you approved his new system.”

Penelope found herself leaning forward with interest.

“Three months of study? That seems quite thorough.”

“One cannot make informed decisions without proper understanding.” The Duke’s tone suggested that he found this self-evident. “Though I suppose such methodical approaches lack the dramatic appeal of more... emotional responses to problems.”

The subtle dig at her charitable works made Penelope’s teeth clench.

“Indeed, Your Grace? How fortunate that you have time for such extensive study.

Some of us must occasionally act more quickly when we see immediate need.”

The Duke’s eyes met hers across the table, and for a moment the air seemed to crackle between them.

“Immediate action without proper understanding often causes more problems than it solves, Lady Penelope.”

“Whereas endless study while people suffer shows a remarkable lack of humanity, Your Grace.”

Lord Albert’s head swivelled between them as if watching a tennis match.

“I say, the soup is particularly good tonight, isn’t it? Cook has quite outdone herself.”

Neither Penelope nor the Duke appeared to hear him.

“You presume to judge my humanity?” The Duke’s voice had dropped dangerously low. “Based on what? Village gossip and your own prejudiced assumptions?”

“I judge what I observe, Your Grace.” Penelope lifted her chin. “Your own words about ‘interfering females’ and ‘sentimental foolishness’ made your position quite clear.”

“Did they?” He set down his soup spoon with precise care. “How interesting that you feel qualified to understand my position so completely after one public encounter and a handful of hours in my home. Tell me, do you always form such quick judgements, or am I especially honoured?”

A flush crept up Penelope’s neck, but she held his gaze.

“Do you always dismiss others’ efforts to help those in need, or am I especially honoured?”

“I dismiss efforts that do more harm than good, regardless of their intent.” His voice held that insufferable tone of superiority that made her want to scream. “Good intentions without proper planning merely create dependency and instability.”

“Whereas proper planning without action creates nothing at all,” she shot back. “Tell me, Your Grace, how do your extensive studies help a family whose roof leaks now?”

Lord Albert cleared his throat rather loudly.

“I say, is that thunder getting louder? Remarkable storm, really. Most remarkable.”

But neither of them looked away from their clash of wills. The Duke’s green eyes had darkened to the colour of winter moss, and Penelope found her breath coming slightly faster, though surely that was just anger.

“An interesting example,” he said softly. “Tell me, Lady Penelope, what would you do about such a leak?”

“I would fix it, of course!”

“Immediately?”

“Of course, immediately! You would prefer that the family suffer while you studied the proper angle of roof tiles?”

“I would prefer,” his voice held something that might have been amusement or might have been anger, “to fix it properly the first time, rather than waste resources on a temporary solution that would fail again with the next storm.”

Penelope opened her mouth to retort, then closed it again as his words sank in. There was, she had to admit, at least some logic in his position. But before she could frame a response, the second course arrived. The Duke turned his attention to his plate with that same precise care that he seemed to bring to everything. The elegant efficiency of his movements drew her eye despite herself - even cutting meat, he displayed a kind of commanding grace that she found... disturbing.

“I trust that the venison is to your taste, Lady Penelope?”

His voice was perfectly correct again, as if their heated exchange had never happened.

“It’s excellent, thank you.” She forced herself to focus on her food rather than the way that his hands handled the silverware. “Your cook is very accomplished.”

“Mrs Graves has been with us since I was a boy.” For a moment, something almost soft touched his expression. “She was one of the few staff who stayed after... well, after my mother died.”

“The Duchess was much loved, I understand.”

Penelope watched his face carefully as she spoke.

“She was.” His expression shuttered again immediately. “Though her methods of managing the estate were not always... practical.”

“Unlike your own *très méthodique* approach, cousin?” Lord Albert’s voice held a gentle challenge. “Though I seem to recall that the Duchess also believed in understanding situations thoroughly before acting.”

“She believed in many things.” The Duke’s tone discouraged further discussion of the

topic. “Not all of them wise.”

Lightning flickered beyond the dining room windows, followed by a crash of thunder that made the crystal glasses ring faintly. Penelope noticed that the Duke’s eyes went immediately to the windows, his expression showing brief concern.

“Still flooding out there, I’ll warrant,” Lord Albert observed. “Good thing you had Featherstone shore up that bridge last autumn, Alexander. The old structure would never have held in this.”

“Another of your extensive studies, Your Grace?”

Penelope couldn’t quite keep the hint of challenge from her voice.

His eyes returned to her face.

“Indeed. Though perhaps you would have preferred that I simply threw a few boards across and hoped for the best?”

“That would rather depend on whether anyone needed to cross while you conducted your study, wouldn’t it?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but something that might have been reluctant respect flickered in his eyes.

“You are very quick to challenge my methods, Lady Penelope. Yet I note that your own charitable endeavours seem quite methodically organised, from what I hear.”

Penelope blinked, surprised that he knew anything about her work.

“You... have heard about our charitable network?”

“I make it my business to know what occurs in the county.” His tone was dry. “Particularly when it might affect estate stability.”

“I assure you, Your Grace, we have no intention of destabilising anything.” Penelope set down her fork with careful precision. “Our goal is to prevent problems before they become crises.”

“Through coordinated grain purchases and organised distribution?” His raised eyebrow suggested he knew far more than she’d expected. “Rather systematic for someone who advocates immediate action over careful study.”

“One can plan methodically while still responding promptly to immediate needs.” Penelope met his gaze steadily. “The two are not mutually exclusive.”

For a moment, something almost like approval crossed his face. Then Jameson appeared at his elbow, murmuring something too low for Penelope to hear. The Duke’s expression darkened.

“More trees down?” Lord Albert asked, obviously having caught the butler’s words.

“Yes. The old oak by the south path has fallen.” The Duke’s voice held genuine regret. “That tree was there in my grandfather’s time.”

“Was anyone hurt?” Penelope asked before she could stop herself.

His eyes met hers again, and this time there was definitely a hint of approval.

“No. Thanks to Featherstone’s ‘excessive’ pruning last autumn, it fell away from the path.”

“Another result of careful study?”

She kept her tone light, almost teasing, surprising herself.

“Indeed.” His lips twitched slightly. “Though I’m sure you would have simply chopped it down immediately.”

“Only if someone needed the firewood, Your Grace.”

Lord Albert’s quiet chuckle broke the strange tension that had built between them.

“I must say, cousin, it’s rather refreshing to hear someone challenge you so directly. Most people are far too intimidated.”

“I am not intimidated by His Grace,” Penelope declared, lifting her chin.

“So I observe.” The Duke’s voice held that note she couldn’t quite interpret - amusement? Annoyance? Something else entirely? “Though perhaps you should be.”

“Should I?” Penelope heard the challenge in her own voice and wondered at her daring. “Are you so very frightening then, Your Grace?”

The look he gave her made her breath catch.

“I can be, Lady Penelope.” His deep voice seemed to caress her name in a way that sent shivers down her spine. “When sufficiently provoked.”

Lord Albert coughed rather pointedly.

“I say, do you think this rain will affect the spring planting? Most inconvenient timing.”

Neither Penelope nor the Duke responded immediately, their gazes still locked in

what felt like a silent duel. Finally, the Duke turned to his cousin.

“The drainage improvements should prevent any significant delays.” His voice was back to its usual precise tones. “Though I’ll have Featherstone check the lower fields tomorrow.”

The remainder of dinner passed in more general conversation, with Lord Albert skilfully keeping the topic to safe subjects like the weather and local news. Yet Penelope remained acutely aware of the Duke’s presence, of every movement of his hands, every slight change in his expression.

When the meal finally ended, the Duke rose with that same fluid grace that made him seem more warrior than aristocrat.

“Lady Penelope, perhaps you would prefer to retire early? After your... adventures today.”

“Thank you, Your Grace, but I am not particularly tired.” She met his eyes steadily. “Though if you wish to be rid of my presence, you need only say so.”

Lord Albert made a sound that might have been either a laugh or a cough. The Duke’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“I merely thought you might wish to rest.” His tone could have frozen the wine in the glasses. “But by all means, join us in the library if you prefer. I believe that there are several volumes on charitable organisation that might interest you.”

“How thoughtful.” Penelope matched his tone perfectly. “Though perhaps I might find your treatise on drainage more entertaining?”

For a moment, she thought she saw his lips twitch again. But before he could

respond, a tremendous crash of thunder made her jump slightly. In the same instant, all the candles in the room flickered ominously as the air in the room shifted.

“Perhaps the library would be wise,” Lord Albert suggested quickly. “It’s rather more sheltered than this room, and the fire there is usually better established.”

The Duke offered Penelope his arm with rigid courtesy. As her fingers settled on his coat sleeve, she felt the solid muscle beneath the fine wool and had to suppress a shiver that had nothing to do with the chill in the air.

They had barely taken three steps when another thunderous crash shook the house. The candles flickered again, and this time went out completely as a gust of air found its way in around the windows, plunging them into darkness broken only by occasional flashes of lightning seen through the windows.

In the sudden darkness, Penelope found herself clutching the Duke’s arm more tightly than strict propriety would allow. His other hand came up immediately to cover hers, steadying her as they moved into the hall.

“Be careful,” his voice came from surprisingly close to her ear. “There are steps just ahead.”

His warm breath stirred the curls near her temple, making her intensely aware of how close they stood. The occasional lightning flash illuminated his profile in stark relief, and Penelope found herself grateful for the darkness that hid her burning cheeks.

“Dash it all,” Lord Albert’s voice came from somewhere behind them. “Where’s Jameson got to with a lamp?”

“Here, my Lord!” The butler’s voice preceded a welcome glow of lamplight. “The wind has affected the chimney drafts, which is causing problems with the candles, but

the lamps should serve.”

In the soft lamplight, Penelope suddenly realised that she was still clutching the Duke’s arm rather desperately. She made to pull away, but his hand tightened briefly over hers.

“Carefully,” he murmured. “The floor can be treacherous in this light.”

She wanted to protest that she was perfectly capable of walking on her own, but something in his tone stopped her. This protective gesture seemed almost unconscious, at odds with his usually rigid manner.

They made their way to the library without further incident, though Penelope remained uncomfortably aware of the Duke’s solid presence beside her. The library proved to be both warmer and better lit than the dining room, with a fire burning cheerfully in the massive fireplace.

“There now,” Lord Albert said cheerfully as they entered. “Much more comfortable. Though I must say, Alexander, perhaps it’s time to consider installing some of those new gas lights I’ve heard about?”

“Gas is still experimental,” the Duke replied, finally releasing Penelope’s hand to motion her to a chair near the fire. “I prefer to wait until the technology is more proven.”

“More extensive study required?” Penelope couldn’t resist asking, as she settled into the offered chair.

His eyes met hers, and in the firelight they seemed to hold hints of gold among the green.

“Precisely. Though perhaps you would prefer that we simply set the house ablaze immediately?”

“Only if someone were freezing, Your Grace.”

That almost-smile touched his lips again.

“You are very quick with your responses, Lady Penelope.”

“Whereas you, Your Grace, prefer to consider every word thoroughly before speaking?”

“I prefer,” he said softly, taking the chair opposite her, “to be certain of my ground before taking action. Unlike some, who seem to delight in rushing in where angels fear to tread.”

The firelight caught the angles of his face, softening his usual severity, and Penelope found herself studying him with unwilling fascination. There was something almost vulnerable in his expression as he gazed into the flames.

“Sometimes,” she said, her voice gentler than she’d intended, “one must act on faith rather than certainty.”

His eyes lifted to meet hers.

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“Faith can be dangerous, Lady Penelope.”

“So can excessive caution, Your Grace.”

Lord Albert, who had been watching their exchange with obvious interest, suddenly straightened in his chair.

“I say, is that hail?”

The sharp rattling against the windows did indeed suggest something more solid than mere rain. The Duke rose and went to look out into the darkness, his broad shoulders blocking much of the window.

“The glass should hold,” he said, though Penelope thought she detected a note of concern in his voice. “Though the gardens will suffer.”

“Oh dear,” she couldn’t help saying. “The spring plantings...”

He turned to look at her, surprise evident in his expression.

“You know something of gardening, Lady Penelope?”

“I help our gardener with the kitchen gardens.” She lifted her chin, expecting mockery. “Another activity you no doubt consider beneath a lady’s dignity?”

But instead of the cutting remark she expected, he looked thoughtful.

“Not at all. My mother always said that understanding how things grow was essential to understanding estate management.”

“Your mother seems to have been a very wise woman.”

Something flickered in his eyes - pain? Regret? Before she could be sure, he turned back to the window.

“She was.” His voice was so low she barely caught the words. “Though not always practical.”

A particularly loud crack of thunder made the window panes rattle in their frames. The Duke’s hand went automatically to the glass, as if to verify its stability.

“Always the protector, eh cousin?” Lord Albert’s voice held affectionate amusement. “Though I don’t think even you can guard against thunder.”

“One must guard against what one can,” the Duke replied, his voice distant. “And accept what one cannot change.”

The words seemed heavy with meaning beyond the immediate situation. Penelope found herself wondering what burdens this complicated man carried beneath his rigid exterior.

“Guard against what one can,” Penelope repeated softly. “Like studying drainage patterns before improving them?”

He turned from the window to look at her, and something in his expression made her heart beat faster.

“Precisely. Though I note that you guard against winter hunger by organising grain

purchases in summer. Not entirely impulsive after all, are you?"

"As I said, Your Grace, planning and prompt action need not be enemies."

"Indeed." He returned to his chair, the firelight once again softening his features. "Though I wonder, Lady Penelope, do you apply such balanced thinking to all of your charitable works?"

She bristled slightly at his tone.

"I assure you, Your Grace, we take great care to verify genuine need before providing assistance."

"Through personal visits to tenant families?" His voice held that note she couldn't quite interpret. "Rather hands-on for a lady of your station."

"How else can one truly understand the situations one hopes to improve?" She met his gaze steadily. "Or do you manage your estate entirely from behind a desk?"

Lord Albert made a choking sound that might have been suppressed laughter. The Duke's eyes narrowed slightly.

"You know very well that I do not, given your earlier comments about my extensive studies."

"Ah, but studying is not the same as understanding, is it?" Penelope leaned forward slightly, warming to her argument. "One must see, must experience..."

"Must rescue piglets from flooding pens?" His dry tone made her flush. At her startled look, he added, "News travels quickly in a small community, Lady Penelope."

“I...” She lifted her chin. “The situation required immediate action.”

“Did it?” Those green eyes seemed to see right through her. “Or did you simply wish to prove yourself willing to face any challenge?”

“Does it matter?” She met his gaze defiantly. “The piglets were saved.”

“At the cost of a ruined dress and considerable risk to yourself.” His voice had dropped lower, almost intimate. “Do you always rush into danger so readily?”

“Only when the need arises.” She found her own voice had grown softer, though she couldn’t have said why. “Do you always criticise actions you would likely have taken yourself?”

His eyebrows rose slightly.

“You think that I would have jumped into a flooded pen to save piglets?”

“I think, Your Grace, that you would do whatever you believed necessary, regardless of personal cost.” The words emerged before she could consider their wisdom. “Just as you sent riders to warn tenant farms about this storm.”

Something flickered in his eyes - surprise? Respect? Before he could respond, a sharp crack from the fire sent sparks flying up the chimney. Lord Albert, who had been watching their exchange with fascinated attention, leapt up to tend to the flames.

“Bit dry, that last log,” he observed cheerfully. “Remarkable how conversation can make one forget to mind the fire properly.”

The Duke’s eyes hadn’t left Penelope’s face.

“Remarkable indeed,” he murmured, so softly she wasn’t sure she was meant to hear.

The grandfather clock in the corner chimed ten, making Penelope start slightly. Had they really been talking so long? The storm still raged outside, but somehow the library had come to feel like a separate world, warm and oddly intimate despite her companions.

“Perhaps,” the Duke said, his voice returning to its usual precise tones, “we should all retire. It has been a... somewhat eventful day.”

“Indeed.” Penelope rose, smoothing her borrowed dress. “Though I thank you for your hospitality, Your Grace, unexpected as my arrival may have been.”

“One must adapt to circumstances, must one not?” That almost-smile touched his lips again. “Even without extensive study beforehand.”

She found herself fighting an answering smile.

“How very practical of you, Your Grace.”

“I do try.” He rose and offered his arm with elegant courtesy. “Allow me to escort you to your chamber. The hallways can be quite dark during storms.”

As her fingers settled on his coat sleeve again, Penelope told herself firmly that the slight tremor in them was merely fatigue. Yet she couldn’t quite ignore how his other hand came up to cover hers, just as it had before, warm, and oddly reassuring.

Lord Albert’s cheerful “Good night!” followed them into the hallway, where indeed the lamplight created more shadows than illumination.

The Duke moved with sure steps, clearly familiar with every inch of his home, while

Penelope found herself drawing slightly closer to him than strictly necessary to avoid a shadowy piece of furniture. His fingers tightened briefly over hers, and she could have sworn that she felt him turn slightly towards her, as if to shield her from the darkness.

They climbed the stairs in silence, their footsteps muffled by thick carpeting. Lightning flashed through the tall windows, throwing their shadows against the wall in stark relief - his tall figure and her smaller one, moving in perfect synchronisation. At her chamber door, he released her hand with careful correctness, though Penelope felt the absence of his touch like a physical thing.

“I trust you will find everything you need,” he said, his deep voice somehow both formal and intimate in the shadowed corridor. “Should you require anything...” A particularly fierce growl of thunder cut off his words, and Penelope couldn’t quite suppress a small start of surprise. His hand came up automatically, as if to steady her, then dropped back to his side. “The storm sounds worse than it is,” he said quietly. “The hall’s architecture tends to amplify the thunder.”

“I am not afraid of storms, Your Grace.”

Yet even as she spoke, another thunderclap made her jump slightly.

“No?” That almost-smile touched his lips again. “Then perhaps you simply enjoy proving your bravery at every opportunity?”

“Perhaps I simply refuse to let fear rule my actions.” She met his eyes steadily. “Rather like someone else I know who rides out in storms to check estate drainage.”

Something shifted in his expression - a softening around his eyes, a slight relaxation of his usual severity.

“Touché, Lady Penelope.” He bowed with grave courtesy. “Sleep well.”

“Good night, Your Grace.”

She slipped through her door, closing it carefully behind her, only then allowing herself to lean against it as her heart raced with emotions she didn’t care to examine too closely.

Mary appeared from the dressing room, already prepared to help her undress.

“Are you well, my Lady? You look rather flushed.”

“It’s merely warm in the library,” Penelope said quickly, moving to the dressing table. “The fire was quite strong.”

“Mmhmm.” Mary’s tone suggested that she wasn’t fooled. “And did His Grace continue to be... correctly hospitable?”

Penelope caught her maid’s knowing look in the mirror and felt her cheeks warm further.

“He was... not quite what I expected.”

Thunder crashed again outside, and through the wall she heard the Duke’s firm tread moving away down the corridor. Her fingers trembled slightly as she removed her borrowed necklace, and she told herself firmly that it was merely the storm affecting her nerves.

Yet as Mary helped her prepare for bed, she couldn’t quite forget the way that his eyes had softened in the firelight, or how his hand had felt covering hers in the darkness.

Morning light crept tentatively through gaps in the heavy clouds, illuminating puddles and debris left by the night's storm. Penelope stood at her chamber window, watching as estate workers moved about the grounds with practiced efficiency, clearing fallen branches and assessing damage. Their coordinated efforts spoke of good management and clear protocols - something that shouldn't have surprised her, given what she now knew of the Duke's methodical nature.

A knock at her door heralded Mary's arrival with breakfast.

"Good morning, my Lady. Mrs Thackeray sent up extra toast - she says everyone needs a proper breakfast after such a dramatic night."

"How kind of her." Penelope turned from the window, noting how the morning light made the room's blue and cream furnishings appear even more elegant than they had seemed yesterday. The whole chamber spoke of feminine taste and attention to detail - clearly Lady Rosalind's influence. "Though I hope that we won't need to impose much longer."

"Oh! I nearly forgot." Mary set down the tray and produced a note. "This just arrived from home. One of His Grace's men rode out at first light to check on things."

Penelope broke the seal on her father's note, warmth spreading through her chest at his characteristic consideration.

'My dearest daughter,

All is well here, though we were quite concerned until His Grace's messenger arrived last evening to inform us of your safety. The bridge remains problematic, but I am assured that it will be passable by afternoon. Until then, try not to vex your host too

thoroughly.

With love,

Papa'

"I do not vex him," Penelope muttered, then caught Mary's raised eyebrow. "Well, not intentionally."

"Of course not, my Lady." Mary's tone could have dried wet washing. "I'm sure His Grace always looks so... intense... when discussing estate management with young ladies."

Penelope felt heat rise in her cheeks as she remembered the way that the Duke's eyes had seemed to see right through her pretences during their discussions the previous evening. Before she could frame a suitable response to her maid's impertinence, another knock sounded.

This time the knock heralded a young lady who could only be Lady Rosalind Cavendish.

Her entrance brought an immediate sense of warmth to the room, her natural animation providing a striking contrast to her brother's severity. Though she shared the Duke's dark good looks, her features held a liveliness that invited friendship rather than intimidation.

"Good morning!" She swept in with the confidence of someone completely at home. "I arrived home only a few hours ago. We had to leave the carriage the other side of the bridge, and I've walked up – the bridge was safe enough for one person, but not more – and really, I probably shouldn't have done it... But I'm stubborn, and I wanted to get home. And now that I've changed, I simply had to come to meet you

properly. I'm Rosalind."

"Lady Rosalind..." Penelope began formally, but the other girl waved this away.

"Oh, please, just Rosalind. Anyone who can make my brother forget his rigid propriety enough to argue about estate management over dinner must be worth knowing properly."

Penelope felt her cheeks warm again.

"You've already heard about dinner?"

"Albert told me everything when I arrived." Rosalind's dark eyes sparkled with amusement. "He said it was the most entertainment he's had in months, watching Alexander try to maintain his dignity while being thoroughly challenged."

"I'm sure His Grace's dignity remained perfectly intact," Penelope murmured, though she couldn't quite suppress a smile at the memory of his almost-hidden reactions.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so certain." Rosalind settled comfortably into a chair, arranging her morning dress with unconscious grace. "Albert says he actually almost smiled. Twice! Do you know, I can't remember the last time anyone managed to provoke such a response from him? He's been so... remote... since returning from the war."

Something in her tone made Penelope look at her more closely. Behind Rosalind's cheerful manner, she glimpsed real concern for her brother.

"The war changed many men," Penelope said carefully. "And with your father and brother's deaths coming so soon after..."

"Yes." Rosalind's animation dimmed slightly. "Sometimes I think Alexander tries to

be both father and brother to me, as well as himself. As if he must somehow make up for everyone we've lost." The moment of vulnerability passed quickly as Rosalind brightened again. "But come, you must tell me how you came to be here! Albert mentioned something about a damaged wheel?"

As Penelope explained the previous day's events, she found herself warming to Rosalind's genuine interest and quick understanding. The younger girl asked intelligent questions about the tenant families Penelope had been planning to visit, showing a clear grasp of estate matters that matched her brother's, if expressed with considerably more animation.

"So you see," Penelope concluded, "we really had no choice but to impose upon your brother's hospitality."

"Oh, I'm so glad you did!" Rosalind leaned forward eagerly. "It's been an age since anyone properly challenged Alexander's rigid views. Though..." she tilted her head thoughtfully, "Albert says you're not nearly as impulsive as Alexander seems to think."

"I try to be practical," Penelope admitted. "Though your brother seems to believe that anything less than months of study constitutes reckless haste."

"He wasn't always so..." Rosalind paused, searching for the right word. "Controlled. Before Mother died, he was quite different. More like Papa, actually - decisive but not inflexible."

Before Penelope could respond to this intriguing glimpse into the Duke's past, a knock at the door heralded Jameson. The butler's dignity seemed, if possible, even more pronounced than usual.

"Sir Lionel Fletcher has arrived, my Lady," he announced to Rosalind. His tone

suggested that he was announcing the arrival of something unpleasant found on the bottom of his shoe. “His Grace asks if you would join them in the morning room.”

Penelope didn't miss the flash of displeasure that crossed Rosalind's expressive face before being replaced by careful politeness.

“Please inform my brother that we shall join them shortly.”

“We?” Penelope asked as Jameson withdrew.

“Oh yes.” Rosalind's smile turned decidedly mischievous, though something sharp lurked behind her playful tone. “I absolutely insist you accompany me. Sir Lionel can be quite... tedious... and I shall need support to endure his company.”

As they prepared to go down, Penelope caught Mary's concerned look. Her maid clearly remembered the stories they'd heard about Sir Lionel Fletcher's reputation for causing trouble among the local gentry.

“Don't worry,” she murmured to Mary. “I'm sure it's just a brief social call.”

But something in Rosalind's carefully controlled expression suggested otherwise.

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The morning room presented a rather different aspect in daylight. Sunlight now struggled through the clearing clouds, illuminating elegant furniture that Penelope realised must have been selected by the late Duchess - the feminine touches were similar to those in her borrowed bedroom, yet clearly of an earlier style. The impression of the previous Duchess's taste lingering in the room was somehow both comforting and melancholy.

Three men stood as the ladies entered - the Duke by the window, his tall figure silhouetted against the brightening sky, Lord Albert lounging near the fireplace with carefully casual grace, and a stranger who could only be Sir Lionel Fletcher.

Penelope's first impression was of studied charm masking something far less pleasant. Sir Lionel was handsome in a conventional way, his clothes fashionable without being ostentatious, his manner perfectly correct. Yet something about him set her teeth on edge.

"Ah, Rosalind!" He stepped forward immediately, his smile just a fraction too practiced. "And who is this charming creature?"

"Lady Penelope Whitmore," the Duke's deep voice cut across whatever Rosalind had been about to say and something in his tone suggested that he didn't care for Sir Lionel's familiar manner. "Who found herself storm-stayed with us last evening."

Penelope didn't miss the sharp calculation that flickered through Sir Lionel's eyes before his smile widened.

"Lady Penelope! I've heard so much about your charitable works. Such... touching...

concern for the lower classes.”

The subtle emphasis made Penelope’s spine stiffen. Before she could frame a suitably cutting response, Rosalind spoke.

“Lady Penelope takes a very practical approach to estate management, Sir Lionel. Rather like my brother, actually.”

The Duke’s eyebrows rose slightly at this comparison, while Sir Lionel’s smile acquired a distinct edge. Penelope noticed how he shifted slightly, attempting to position himself between her and the Duke, as if to dominate the conversation.

“How fascinating.” His tone suggested that it was anything but. “Though surely such concerns are better left to those more qualified? I cannot imagine that Lord Stanyon appreciates his daughter involving herself in such matters.”

“My father,” Penelope said coolly, “believes that understanding all aspects of estate management is essential for anyone of our class. Whether male or female.”

She moved deliberately to stand nearer to Lady Rosalind, refusing to be manipulated by Sir Lionel’s attempt to isolate her. From this position, she could see both his face and the Duke’s, and the contrast was striking. Where Sir Lionel’s expression held calculated charm, the Duke’s showed genuine, if carefully controlled, irritation.

“Indeed?” Sir Lionel’s gaze shifted to the Duke. “Rather progressive views, wouldn’t you say, Ravensworth? Though perhaps not surprising, given Stanyon’s... reputation for unusual methods.”

The Duke straightened slightly, his expression hardening in a way Penelope was beginning to recognise as dangerous.

“I find practical knowledge admirable in any form, Sir Lionel. Though some prefer to manage their estates from London.”

The subtle dig clearly struck home. Sir Lionel’s practiced smile slipped for just a moment, revealing something cold and angry beneath. He recovered quickly, but not before Penelope saw Lord Albert and Lady Rosalind exchange a significant look.

“Speaking of estate management,” Sir Lionel produced some papers from his coat with a flourish that seemed rehearsed, “I actually came to discuss that matter of the disputed woodland. I’ve discovered some rather intriguing documents that might interest you.”

Penelope noticed how Lady Rosalind tensed at the mention of the woodland. The Duke’s expression remained impassive, but something in his stance suggested increased attention. He moved slightly, almost unconsciously, as if to shield both his sister and Penelope from Sir Lionel’s predatory smile.

“Indeed?” His tone could have frozen the morning tea. “How fortuitous that you should discover such documents just now.”

“Yes, quite fascinating really.” Sir Lionel’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes as he tapped the papers against his palm. “It seems that there may be some question about the original boundary lines. Documents that might affect both Ravensworth and Stanyon lands, actually.”

Penelope felt rather than saw the Duke’s quick glance in her direction. His face remained impassive, but she sensed his concern - not for himself, she realised suddenly, but for how this might affect her family.

“Perhaps,” he said carefully, “such matters should be discussed privately.”

“Oh, but surely Lady Penelope would be interested, given that her family’s lands are involved?” Sir Lionel’s voice held a note that made Penelope’s skin crawl. “Unless, of course, there’s some reason you’d prefer she not know about these... discrepancies?”

The implied threat hung in the air like poison. Penelope lifted her chin, refusing to be intimidated.

“I’m sure that my father would be happy to discuss any concerns directly with His Grace,” she said firmly. “Though it seems odd that documents about our lands should come into your possession, Sir Lionel.”

“One hears things, my dear lady. One investigates.” His smile widened unpleasantly. “One discovers all sorts of interesting facts about one’s neighbours.”

“Does one indeed?” The Duke’s voice had dropped to that dangerous tone Penelope remembered from their arguments. But where their debates had held passionate conviction, this held something colder. “How very... industrious of you.”

Lord Albert, who had been watching this exchange with unusual gravity, suddenly straightened.

“I say, didn’t you mention wanting to show Lady Penelope the conservatory, Rosalind? While there’s still some morning light?”

“What an excellent idea!” Lady Rosalind caught Penelope’s arm with what seemed like relief. “You simply must see it - though I fear the storm may have damaged some of the glass panels.”

As they left the room, Penelope glimpsed Sir Lionel’s face. The mask of charm had slipped completely, revealing something cold and calculating beneath. But more

disturbing was the way that he watched the Duke - like a predator seeking weakness.

The door closed behind them with a decisive click.

“Well,” Rosalind said quietly as they moved down the corridor, “that was thoroughly unpleasant. Though I must say, you handled him beautifully.”

“He seems...”

Penelope searched for a diplomatic word, conscious of their footsteps echoing on the marble floor.

“Horrible?” Rosalind supplied helpfully. “Sly? Manipulative? Do feel free to choose any or all of those. He’s been trying to cause trouble ever since Alexander refused to sell him that piece of woodland last year.”

They reached the conservatory doors, and, once inside, Rosalind drew Penelope to a window seat nearby. Morning light streamed through the tall windows, creating pools of warmth on the polished floor.

“There’s something you should know,” she said, her usual animation replaced by serious concern. “Sir Lionel’s father and ours were rivals of sorts. When Papa died, Sir Lionel’s father tried to claim that some old gambling debts invalidated our claim to part of the estate. It was nonsense, of course, but Alexander had to fight it in court while still grieving and trying to manage everything else.”

“How terrible!”

Penelope felt a surge of sympathy for the Duke, imagining him dealing with such challenges while newly returned from war, and bereaved.

“Indeed. And now Sir Lionel seems determined to continue his father’s vendetta.” Rosalind’s dark eyes showed a flash of her brother’s steel. “Though bringing your family into it... that’s new. And concerning.”

“But surely he can’t really threaten either estate?” Penelope tried to sound more confident than she felt. “If the boundaries have been established for generations...”

“Old documents can be... interpreted in many ways.” Rosalind’s voice held careful neutrality. “Especially in the Court of Chancery. And Sir Lionel has been gathering tenant depositions to support his claims - offering better terms to any who’ll testify in his favour. Not to mention his friends among certain London solicitors.”

A crash from the direction of the morning room made them both start. Through the heavy doors, they could hear the Duke’s voice, though not his words. The tone, however, was unmistakably angry.

Rosalind’s expression showed brief satisfaction.

“Good. Alexander’s finally losing patience with him.”

“Should we...”

Penelope gestured vaguely towards the morning room.

“Oh no.” Rosalind’s smile held a hint of sisterly pride. “Alexander handles Sir Lionel much better when we’re not there to be used as tactical advantages. Besides,” she added, rising and moving further into the conservatory, “I really do want to show you something.”

The conservatory was a magnificent space, though signs of the storm’s fury were evident in several cracked panes near the ceiling. Morning light filtered through the

glass, creating rainbow patterns on the exotic plants that filled the space.

“Most of these were Mother’s,” Rosalind said softly, leading Penelope down a narrow path between flowering shrubs. “Alexander maintains them exactly as she did, though he pretends it’s merely practical to keep the structure in use.” They reached a small clearing where a delicate wrought-iron table and chairs stood surrounded by blooming orchids. Rosalind touched one gently. “She loved these best. Said they were like people - each one unique, each requiring different care to thrive.” She turned to Penelope with sudden intensity. “That’s what Alexander’s forgotten, I think. That different problems need different solutions. That, sometimes, immediate action is as important as careful study.”

“Your brother seems very... committed to his methods,” Penelope offered carefully.

“He’s committed to protecting everything and everyone he cares for.” Rosalind’s voice held both pride and frustration. “But he’s so focused on preventing any possibility of failure that sometimes he forgets to actually live.”

Before Penelope could respond to this insight, Lord Albert appeared in the conservatory doorway.

“Ah, there you are!” His usually cheerful face looked troubled. “Sir Lionel has gone, thank heavens, but I’m afraid he’s left rather a mess behind him. Alexander wants to speak with you, Rosalind. And Lady Penelope... he asks if you would be willing to look at some documents regarding your father’s estate.”

Penelope felt her heart beat faster at this request. The Duke asking for her opinion suggested both trust and concern - neither of which she would have expected yesterday. They found him in the library, standing at a large table covered with maps and documents. Afternoon light streamed through the tall windows, catching dust motes disturbed by their entrance.

The Duke looked up as they entered, his face showing traces of the anger they'd heard earlier.

"Lady Penelope." He bowed precisely. "I apologise for involving you in this... situation. But given Sir Lionel's claims, I believe that you have a right to know exactly what we're facing."

She moved to the table, conscious of both his proximity and the seriousness of his expression. The map before them showed the boundaries between their estates, with the disputed woodland clearly marked.

"These are the original survey marks," he indicated several points with a strong, capable finger. "But Sir Lionel claims to have documents suggesting that the boundaries were altered during our grandfathers' time."

"That's ridiculous!" Rosalind exclaimed from Penelope's other side. "Grandfather would never have..."

"No," the Duke cut her off, "but Sir Lionel's grandfather might have. And therein lies our problem."

Penelope studied the map carefully, noting how the woodland in question formed a natural buffer between the estates.

"The tenant farmers use these paths regularly," she observed. "Surely that established usage counts for something legally?"

The Duke's eyes met hers with something like approval.

"Indeed. Though Sir Lionel seems to have found a judge in London who might disagree."

“His solicitor in London is one who’s known for pursuing lengthy Chancery cases,” Lord Albert added grimly from near the fire. “The sort that can drain estates dry through legal costs alone.”

Understanding dawned.

“He means to force both estates into an extended legal battle in Chancery,” Penelope said slowly. “While using bribes and promises to turn our tenants against us.”

“Precisely.” The Duke’s voice held grim satisfaction at her quick grasp of the situation. “Though I suspect his ultimate goal is not the woodland itself.”

“No,” Rosalind agreed. “He wants to damage both estates enough that he can buy pieces of them cheaply. Just as his father tried to do.”

Penelope looked up to find the Duke watching her intently.

“What do you suggest we do?”

His eyes widened slightly at her inclusive ‘we’, but he didn’t correct her. Instead, he straightened, something like his usual commanding presence returning.

“First,” he said, “we secure our tenants’ true testimony and gather our documentation. Then we prepare to fight him in Chancery. Every false statement he obtains through bribery will only strengthen our case against him.”

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The library at Ravensworth Hall held a different atmosphere in the afternoon light. Dust motes danced in golden shafts that streamed through tall windows, creating patterns that shifted and changed as clouds passed overhead. The scent of leather bindings mixed with beeswax and wood smoke from the banked fire, while beneath these familiar library smells lurked something distinctly masculine – a distinctly male cologne scent, and leather, which suggested that the Duke spent considerable time here.

Penelope sat cross-legged on the floor near a bottom shelf, surrounded by estate records and agricultural texts, her borrowed morning dress spread around her like a sage-green pool. The cloth rustled softly with each movement as she turned pages, the sound accompanied by the gentle tick of the long-case clock in the corner. She had retreated here after luncheon, determined to understand more about the woodland dispute. If Sir Lionel meant to challenge both estates, she refused to be caught unprepared. The Duke's extensive collection of legal volumes had proved surprisingly helpful, though some required careful interpretation.

The leather-bound volume currently occupying her attention contained records dating back three generations. The precise handwriting spoke of careful documentation - first in an older hand that must have been the previous Duke's, then in writing she recognised from current estate papers as belonging to Alexander himself.

The methodical nature of the records shouldn't have surprised her, given what she now knew of him, yet somehow these pages revealed something more personal than his rigid public manner suggested. Here was a man who cared enough to document every detail that might affect his estate's welfare. Not from cold duty alone - the careful notes in the margins showed genuine concern for how changes might impact

tenant farmers and local families. It forced her to reconsider her initial impression of him as merely cold and controlling.

So absorbed was she in this revelation and the dense legal text before her that she didn't hear the library door open. Her first awareness of company came as a deep voice addressed her.

"I'm not certain that my mother would approve of a lady sitting on the floor, but I must admit your dedication to research is... impressive."

Penelope started, nearly dropping the heavy volume in her lap. The Duke stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders filling the frame in a way that made the room feel suddenly smaller. Afternoon light caught the few subtle threads of grey at his temples, and made his green eyes appear almost golden. His expression held something that might have been amusement, though as usual, he kept it carefully controlled.

"Your Grace!"

She moved to rise, acutely conscious of her undignified position and the way that her borrowed dress had wrinkled. He waved her back down with a gesture that somehow managed to be both commanding and courteous.

"Please, don't disturb yourself." He crossed to where she sat, his movements holding that fluid grace which she was beginning to find dangerously fascinating. After a moment's hesitation that suggested internal debate, he lowered himself to sit on a nearby chair. "Though I confess myself curious about what captures your attention so thoroughly."

Heat crept into her cheeks as she displayed the volume's spine.

“I thought... well, given Sir Lionel’s threats, it seemed wise to understand the legal precedents regarding established land usage.”

His eyebrows rose slightly, and something that might have been approval flickered in his eyes.

“Most young ladies would be reading poetry or novels.”

“Most young ladies,” she replied with more spirit than wisdom, “have not had their family estates threatened by manipulative neighbours.”

To her surprise, that almost-smile touched his lips again, softening his severe features in a way that made her heart beat faster.

“Touché, Lady Penelope.” He leaned forward to examine the books spread around her, and the scent of his cologne grew stronger. “Though I notice that you’ve also been studying our agricultural records.”

The leather of his boots creaked softly as he shifted, and Penelope found herself acutely aware of how his presence seemed to fill the space around her. The afternoon sun caught reddish highlights in his dark hair, and this close, she could see the tiny lines around his eyes that suggested he hadn’t always been so serious.

“Yes.” She touched one of the leather-bound volumes carefully, trying to focus on the matter at hand rather than her uncomfortable awareness of him. “I was curious about the woodland’s historical usage. Your records are remarkably thorough.”

“My grandfather began the practice of detailed documentation,” he said, reaching past her to select a particular volume. His sleeve brushed her shoulder, sending an unexpected shiver down her spine, and the warmth of his arm near her face made it difficult to concentrate on his words. “Though I suspect that he never imagined his

records might be needed for such a purpose.”

“The tenant farming records are particularly interesting.” She indicated several pages she had marked with thin ribbons, conscious of how his shadow fell across the pages as he leaned closer. “They show consistent shared usage of the woodland paths for at least three generations.”

The Duke’s eyes sharpened with interest, and she noticed how the afternoon light brought out flecks of gold in the green.

“You noticed that?”

“Of course.” She met his gaze steadily, though her pulse quickened at his proximity. “Just as I noticed that Sir Lionel’s family records, at least as presented to you, show suspicious gaps during the period he claims the boundaries were altered.”

For a moment, he simply looked at her, and Penelope found herself holding her breath. The quality of his attention was almost physical - as if all that contained power and intelligence was focused solely on her. Then he did something completely unexpected - he smiled. A real smile, not the slight softening she had seen before, and it transformed his severe features entirely. The effect was devastating. The smile reached his eyes, crinkling their corners and warming their colour to summer-leaf green. It softened the commanding line of his jaw and revealed a small dimple in his right cheek that she immediately wished she hadn’t noticed. This, she realised with a jolt, was the man Rosalind had described - the brother who had existed before duty and tragedy had weighted him with armour.

“You continue to surprise me, Lady Penelope.”

“Because I can read account books?” She lifted her chin, trying to hide how his smile had affected her. “Or because I understand their implications?”

“Both.” He shifted to sit more comfortably, apparently forgetting his earlier concern about proper behaviour. The movement brought him slightly closer, and Penelope caught herself watching how the sun played across the fine wool of his coat, highlighting the breadth of his shoulders. “Though I begin to think I should not be surprised at all. Your own charitable network shows considerable organisational skill.”

It was Penelope’s turn to raise her eyebrows, her fingers nervously smoothing the pages before her.

“You’ve studied our records?”

“Those available to me, yes, thoroughly.” His tone held no apology, though something in his expression suggested he wasn’t entirely comfortable admitting this. “When one’s neighbour begins a project that might affect estate stability, one investigates.”

“And what did your investigation reveal, Your Grace?”

She tried to keep her voice steady, though her heart had begun to race. The thought of him studying her work so carefully, even if from suspicion, made her uncomfortably aware of how much his opinion had come to matter.

His eyes met hers with unexpected warmth.

“That I may have been... hasty in my initial judgement of your methods.”

Coming from him, it was practically an apology. Penelope felt warmth bloom in her chest at this admission.

“Hasty, Your Grace? How unlike you.”

That almost earned her another smile, and she found herself watching his mouth with perhaps more attention than proper.

“Even I am occasionally capable of error, Lady Penelope. Though I would appreciate if you did not spread that information too widely.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” She found herself smiling back at him, the tension which had marked their earlier interactions somehow transformed into something warmer, more dangerous. “Though in return, perhaps you might explain these drainage records to me? I confess they’re rather beyond my current understanding.”

He reached for the volume in question, and for the next hour, Penelope found herself absorbed in a detailed discussion of estate management that ranged far beyond mere drainage. The Duke proved to be an excellent teacher when he chose, his explanations clear and his manner surprisingly patient. More than once, she caught herself watching his hands as he traced patterns on the maps - strong, capable hands that somehow managed to handle the fragile old papers with exceptional gentleness.

“You see,” he said, indicating a particular set of figures, his finger brushing against hers as they both pointed to the same line, “the initial investment may seem excessive, but over time...”

“The savings in reduced flood damage more than compensate,” Penelope finished, trying to ignore how that brief touch seemed to burn against her skin. “Just as our grain purchasing network requires significant initial outlay but ultimately saves money.”

“Precisely.” His voice held approval that made her pulse quicken, and he shifted the book slightly so she could see better, bringing him close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body. “Though I would be interested to hear more about how you structure your purchases.”

The genuine interest in his tone made her brave. She reached for another volume, explaining her methods with growing confidence. Their heads bent together over the papers, and Penelope found herself increasingly aware of every small movement he made - the brush of his sleeve against her arm, the way his breath stirred a loose curl near her ear, the subtle scent of his cologne that seemed to wrap around her.

Their discussion flowed naturally, each building on the other's points, and Penelope realised with surprise that they worked well together. His methodical approach complemented her more intuitive one, and more than once their different perspectives combined to reveal solutions neither might have seen alone.

A sharp knock shattered their absorbed conversation.

Sir Lionel entered without waiting for acknowledgment, his practiced smile faltering slightly at finding them seated so companionably among the books.

Penelope felt the Duke tense beside her, his entire manner shifting from warm engagement to cold authority in an instant. In the doorway, Jameson appeared, looking chagrined that Sir Lionel had managed to barge past him and interrupt them so rudely.

"Ah, Ravensworth! Lady Penelope! How... cozy." Sir Lionel's tone made the word an insult, and his eyes moved between them with calculated insinuation. "I had hoped to discuss those documents further..."

"Had you?" The Duke's voice had returned to its usual arctic temperature, though Penelope noticed that he didn't move away from her. If anything, he seemed to shift slightly closer, as if shielding her from Sir Lionel's predatory gaze. "I believe that I made my position quite clear this morning."

"Oh, but surely Lady Penelope would like to know more about how her father's

management choices might have... compromised certain legal positions?"

The threat in his voice was unmistakable, and Penelope felt cold fury rise in her chest. Before she could speak, however, another figure appeared in the doorway, bringing with her a breath of fresh air that seemed to clear some of Sir Lionel's poisonous atmosphere.

"Sir Lionel!" Lady Rosalind's voice held perfectly pitched surprise, though Penelope caught the sharp intelligence behind her wide-eyed expression. "I thought that you had departed. I was so disappointed - I particularly wished to speak with you about that unfortunate incident at Lady Ashworth's card party - my Aunt was there, you know. But now that I discover you still here..."

The change in Sir Lionel's demeanour was immediate and fascinating. His confident smile faltered noticeably, colour draining from his face as though he'd seen a ghost.

"Lady Rosalind, I... that is... perhaps another time..."

"Oh, but I must be most insistent." Rosalind advanced into the room with the air of someone herding an unwanted cat towards a door, her morning dress rustling with determined purpose. "Something about certain markers being presented rather precipitously in the game?"

"I really must be going." Sir Lionel backed towards the door with rather unseemly haste, his carefully cultivated charm completely abandoned. "Another time, Ravensworth. Lady Penelope."

The moment that he disappeared, Rosalind's innocent expression melted into satisfaction. Penelope noticed how she shared her brother's tendency to lift one eyebrow when pleased with herself.

“Well, that’s dealt with him for today at least. Though I suspect Mama would have completely disapproved of me doing that.”

“Our mother isn’t here to see it – and she did approve of getting results...,” the Duke observed dryly, though Penelope caught the flash of approval in his eyes as he looked at his sister.

“Sir Lionel just doesn’t want to risk it being revealed exactly how much he lost at that card party. Or to whom.” Rosalind grinned impishly, dropping onto a nearby sofa with casual grace. “Sometimes Aunt Margaret’s gossip is useful.”

Penelope looked between the siblings with growing understanding, noting how their obvious affection for each other showed in subtle ways - the slight softening around the Duke’s eyes, the way Rosalind unconsciously mimicked his posture.

“He’s in debt?”

“Extensively.” The Duke’s voice held grim satisfaction, though he seemed to suddenly remember their close proximity. He rose smoothly to his feet, offering Penelope his hand. “Though proving it is another matter entirely.”

His palm was warm against hers as he helped her up, and Penelope found herself standing rather closer to him than strictly necessary. This near, she could see the flecks of gold in his green eyes, and the way that his severe expression softened almost imperceptibly when he looked at her. For a moment, neither of them moved, and Penelope felt as though the very air between them had grown thick with unspoken possibilities.

“I should...” Penelope gestured vaguely at the books scattered around them, very aware that he hadn’t immediately released her hand. The afternoon light caught the fine wool of his coat, emphasising how close they stood, and she found herself

fighting the urge to smooth the fabric where it had wrinkled slightly from sitting.

“Allow me.” He finally stepped back, though his eyes held hers for a moment longer, something unreadable flickering in their depths. “Rosalind, perhaps you could show Lady Penelope the rose garden while I deal with these?”

“Of course!” Rosalind’s tone held barely suppressed glee that made Penelope’s cheeks warm. “Though I think the evening dew will be falling soon. Perhaps we should wait for tomorrow? Or do both?”

“Indeed.” The Duke began gathering books with precise movements, though Penelope noticed that his usually efficient actions seemed slightly less coordinated than normal. “Lady Penelope, would you honour us with your company at dinner again this evening? I believe that the bridge will not be safe until tomorrow.”

“I...” Penelope struggled to find her usual composure, still feeling the phantom warmth of his hand on hers. “Thank you, Your Grace. You are very kind.”

“Not at all.” He straightened, his arms full of leather-bound volumes, and something in his stance reminded her of how he’d moved to shield her from Sir Lionel’s presence. “I find your perspective on estate management quite... illuminating.”

As they left the library, Rosalind’s knowing smile made Penelope wish she could hide behind one of the massive tapestries that lined the corridor. Her friend’s dark eyes, so like her brother’s in shape though warmer in expression, missed nothing.

“High praise indeed from my brother,” Rosalind commented as they moved towards the stairs. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him willingly discuss estate matters with anyone but Albert. And certainly never while sitting on the floor with their heads together like a pair of consulting scholars.”

“He did not sit on the floor – although I did!” Penelope protested, though the memory of his proximity made her pulse quicken. “And he was merely being helpful.”

“Oh, certainly.” Rosalind’s voice dripped with amused disbelief. “That’s absolutely why he spent an hour explaining drainage patterns to you with such dedicated attention. I’m sure it had nothing to do with how your eyes light up when you’re discussing estate improvements.”

“Rosalind!”

“What? I’m merely observing that my usually rather rigid brother seems quite... comfortable with you. I haven’t seen him so engaged with anyone since before the war.” Rosalind’s teasing tone softened to something more serious. “It’s rather wonderful, actually.”

Before Penelope could frame a suitable response to this observation, they heard voices from the drawing room ahead - one of them unmistakably Sir Lionel’s silken tones. The sound was like a bucket of cold water after the warm atmosphere of the library.

“I thought he’d left!” Penelope whispered as they paused in the corridor. The thick carpet muffled their footsteps, allowing them to hear more clearly.

“Apparently not.” Rosalind’s face had lost its teasing expression, her features settling into lines that reminded Penelope strongly of her brother’s more severe moments. “And he’s speaking with Featherstone - our estate manager.”

They couldn’t quite make out the words, but Sir Lionel’s tone held something smooth and persuasive that made Penelope’s skin crawl. Featherstone’s responses seemed hesitant, uncertain - very unlike the confident estate manager she’d observed earlier.

“We should...” Penelope began, but Rosalind was already moving forward with determined stride, her silk skirts swishing with purpose.

“Mr Featherstone!” Her voice rang out clearly as she entered the drawing room, every inch the Duke’s sister in her commanding tone. “Just the person I hoped to find. His Grace requires your immediate attention in the library regarding those drainage records you discussed last week.”

Featherstone, a weathered man in his fifties whose practical manner usually matched his working clothes, looked almost pathetically relieved at this interruption.

“Of course, my Lady. If you’ll excuse me, Sir Lionel...”

“Now really,” Sir Lionel began, but Featherstone was already hurrying past them, his usually measured pace nearly a run.

Rosalind fixed Sir Lionel with a look remarkably like her brother’s coldest stare. In that moment, the family resemblance was striking.

“I believe, Sir Lionel, that you were just leaving?”

His face worked for a moment, charm warring with fury, before settling into a bland smile that didn’t reach his eyes. The late afternoon light through the drawing room windows caught the sheen of perspiration on his forehead, betraying his discomfort despite his careful composure.

“Indeed.” His gaze shifted to Penelope, and something in it made her want to step back. “Though I do hope, Lady Penelope, that you’ll think carefully about what we discussed earlier. Family loyalty is so important, don’t you agree?”

The threat in his voice was subtle but unmistakable. Penelope lifted her chin, drawing

on the quiet strength she'd felt while working with the Duke.

"I couldn't agree more, Sir Lionel. Which is why I find it so surprising that you would attempt to damage two of the county's oldest families for your own gain."

His smile slipped for just a moment, revealing something ugly beneath. The mask of charm had cracked just enough to show real malice before he recovered, bowing with exaggerated courtesy that bordered on insult. Without another word, he swept from the room, his boots clicking sharply on the marble floor of the hall.

"Well," Rosalind said into the ringing silence that followed, her usual animation subdued by concern, "I believe that my brother needs to know about this immediately."

As they hurried towards the library, Penelope couldn't shake the feeling that something significant had just shifted. The game Sir Lionel was playing had suddenly become much more dangerous - not just a matter of land disputes and legal challenges, but something darker. His attempt to influence Featherstone suggested that he was willing to attack the estates from within.

They found the Duke still in the library, now standing at the table with several letters spread before him. The evening light slanting through the windows caught his profile, reminding Penelope of how he'd looked bent over the estate books with her just hours ago. He looked up as they entered, his face darkening as Rosalind rapidly explained what they'd overheard.

His eyes met Penelope's with an intensity that made her breath catch. Something passed between them - an understanding, perhaps, or a recognition of shared purpose. The warmth she'd felt earlier transformed into something stronger, more determined.

"It seems," he said quietly, his deep voice carrying the weight of decision, "that we

all have rather more at stake than we realised.”

The setting sun cast long shadows across the library floor, and in that moment, Penelope knew with absolute certainty that none of their lives would be quite the same after today.

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The morning room was filled with sunlight when Lord Albert spread a collection of documents across the table, his usually cheerful face uncharacteristically serious.

“You see the problem,” he said, indicating a gap in the sequence before him. “These records should match the originals in the London office, but there are clear discrepancies. The ones he gave us copies of, here, don’t match what I’d expect.”

The Duke stood at his cousin’s shoulder, his tall figure casting a shadow across the papers.

“When did you first notice this?”

“Yesterday evening, after Sir Lionel’s visit. Something about his manner made me suspicious, so I reviewed everything we have about the woodland boundaries.” Albert’s finger traced a line of text. “These dates don’t align with his claims.”

“No,” the Duke agreed grimly, “but they also don’t completely refute them. Not without the missing documents.”

Penelope, who had been quietly drinking her tea while they talked, leaned forward to examine the papers more closely.

“These signatures look different from the ones we saw yesterday in the library.”

Both men turned to look at her with surprise, as if they’d forgotten her presence. The Duke’s eyes sharpened with interest.

“Different how?”

She rose and moved to stand beside them, conscious of the Duke’s proximity as she pointed to specific examples.

“See here? The flourish on the ‘R’ is completely different. And the spacing between letters...”

“By God, she’s right, Alexander.” Albert exclaimed. “When did you become such an expert on handwriting, Lady Penelope?”

“My father taught me to notice such things,” she said, trying not to feel too pleased at their approval. “He says that details matter in estate management.”

“Indeed they do.” The Duke’s voice held that note of almost-approval which made her pulse quicken. “Though I wonder what else we might be missing.”

“If Sir Lionel has access to documents that we don’t, it seems” Albert mused, shuffling through more papers, “the question becomes - how did he obtain them?”

“And what else might he have acquired,” the Duke added. His shoulder brushed Penelope’s as he reached for another document, and she felt the brief contact like a shock of static. “Lady Penelope, would your father still have records from that period?”

“Some,” she said, forcing herself to focus on the matter at hand rather than his distracting proximity. “Though many of our older documents were damaged when the library roof leaked twelve or thirteen years ago.”

“Convenient for Sir Lionel,” Albert observed. “Almost as convenient as the fire that destroyed part of the Ravensworth records during your father’s illness, Alexander.”

The Duke's expression darkened.

"Too convenient, perhaps."

A knock at the door interrupted them. Jameson entered with his usual dignity, though something in his manner suggested concern.

"Your Grace, Mr Featherstone requests an immediate audience. He seems... agitated."

The Duke straightened, his manner shifting from focused study to commanding presence in an instant.

"Show him in."

Featherstone entered looking distinctly uncomfortable, his weathered face showing signs of a sleepless night. His eyes darted between the room's occupants before settling on his master.

"Your Grace, I... that is..." He twisted his hat in his hands. "There's something you should know about Sir Lionel's visit yesterday."

"Indeed?"

The Duke's voice held carefully neutral encouragement.

"He made certain... suggestions. About documents that might be found. Or not found." Featherstone's discomfort was painful to watch. "He implied that if I were to... assist... in their discovery, there might be compensation."

Penelope caught her breath at this blatant attempt at bribery. The Duke's expression hadn't changed, but she noticed how his hands clenched slightly at his sides.

“I see.” The Duke’s measured tone belied the tension Penelope could see in his shoulders. “And how did you respond to these... suggestions?”

“I told him I’d think on it, Your Grace.” Featherstone lifted his chin slightly. “Seemed safer than outright refusal, given how he was pressing. But I wanted you to know.”

“You did exactly right,” Lord Albert interjected, his usual good humour replaced by sharp attention. “Did he mention any specific documents?”

“Something about original boundary markers, my Lord. And...” Featherstone hesitated, glancing uncertainly at Penelope.

“Speak freely,” the Duke commanded. “Lady Penelope is fully involved in this matter.”

The estate manager’s weather-beaten face showed brief surprise before he continued.

“Well, sir, he mentioned records of meetings between the old Duke - your father, that is - and Lord Stanyon. Said there might be evidence of some agreement about the woodland that was never properly registered.”

Penelope felt cold anger rise in her chest.

“My father would never have made unofficial agreements about estate boundaries.”

“No,” the Duke agreed, his voice holding unexpected warmth as he glanced at her. “Nor would mine. Which makes me wonder what documents Sir Lionel thinks he can produce to suggest otherwise.”

“Or what documents he’s already removed,” Lord Albert added grimly. “These gaps

in our records seem increasingly suspicious.”

A flash of memory made Penelope straighten suddenly.

“The library fire you mentioned - when did it happen exactly?”

“Three months before Father died,” the Duke replied, his expression shuttering slightly at the memory. “Why?”

“Because that’s when our library roof developed its mysterious leak.” She met his eyes, seeing understanding dawn in their green depths. “Too much coincidence, surely?”

“Far too much.” The Duke turned to Featherstone. “I want every record we have concerning the woodland brought to my study. Every map, every letter, every scrap of paper. And I want guards posted at all estate boundaries.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Featherstone hesitated. “And if Sir Lionel should visit again?”

“Inform me immediately.” The Duke’s tone was icy. “But do not refuse to speak with him. Let him think that his attempts at persuasion might be working.”

After Featherstone departed, Albert began gathering the scattered papers with methodical care.

“We’ll need to review everything, cousin. Every document from both estates.”

“Both estates?” Penelope asked, though she already suspected the answer.

“If we’re to counter whatever Sir Lionel is planning,” the Duke said, turning to face her fully, “we need complete understanding of both properties’ histories. That is...”

he paused, something almost like uncertainty crossing his face, “if you’re willing to work with us on this?”

The question hung in the air between them. Penelope felt the weight of it - not just a request for assistance, but an offer of trust, of partnership. She straightened her spine.

“Of course I’ll help. Though my father should be informed.”

“Already done,” Lord Albert announced cheerfully. “I sent a message to Stanyon House at first light. The Earl should be joining us shortly, because the bridge is now repaired enough for some light traffic.”

The Duke shot his cousin a look that suggested this initiative hadn’t been discussed beforehand. But before he could speak, another knock interrupted them.

“Your Grace?” Jameson appeared, looking slightly harried. “Sir Lionel’s carriage has been observed on the London road.”

“Heading to London?” Albert asked sharply.

“No, my Lord. Returning from it.”

The Duke’s expression hardened.

“So. He’s been to see his pet judge. He’s obviously desperate – he must have risked the roads in the dark after he left here, or he couldn’t possibly have got there and back by now, even though we are relatively close to London.”

“We need to act quickly,” Lord Albert said, all traces of his usual levity gone. “Before whatever he’s planning can take effect.”

The Duke nodded, his attention already focused on their next steps.

“Lady Penelope, would you be willing to review these records with us? Your fresh perspective might notice things we’ve overlooked.”

“Of course.” She moved towards the table, then stopped as a thought struck her. “Though perhaps we should work somewhere less... visible than the morning room?”

Something that might have been approval flickered in his eyes.

“My study would be more private.”

They gathered the documents and moved through the house, Penelope acutely aware of the Duke’s presence beside her.

His study proved to be a handsome room panelled in dark wood, with windows overlooking the rear gardens.

Unlike the rather austere public rooms, this space felt lived-in, personal.

A half-drunk cup of coffee sat cooling on the desk, and papers were spread across various surfaces in organised disarray.

The morning sun caught the leather spines of books on nearby shelves, and a jacket thrown carelessly over a chair suggested that the Duke had been working early.

“I apologise for the disorder,” he said, quickly removing the jacket. “I wasn’t expecting...”

“To have your private space invaded?” she suggested, trying to lighten the moment.

That almost-smile touched his lips.

“I was going to say ‘to have company’, but yes.”

Lord Albert, who had been watching this exchange with poorly concealed interest, cleared his throat.

“Shall we begin? These boundary maps won’t examine themselves.”

They settled into what became a surprisingly comfortable routine, each taking a section of documents to review.

The Duke sat at his desk, Lord Albert claimed a chair by the window, and Penelope found herself at a small side table, afternoon sun warming her shoulders as she worked.

The quiet scratch of quills and rustle of papers filled the air, broken occasionally by soft discussions of particular points.

Penelope found herself increasingly aware of how the Duke would glance her way whenever she made a note, as if her observations particularly interested him. It was during one such moment of quiet study that they heard the commotion. Voices raised in the hallway, followed by rapid footsteps approaching the study door.

“Your Grace!” Jameson’s voice held unusual urgency. “Sir Lionel insists-”

The door burst open before he could finish. Sir Lionel stood in the doorway, his usual smooth manner replaced by barely contained agitation. He carried a leather folder that he clutched like a shield.

“Ravensworth, this really won’t...” He stopped abruptly, taking in the scene before

him. His eyes moved from the Duke to Lord Albert, then settled on Penelope with obvious displeasure. “Well. How... industrious you all appear.”

“Sir Lionel.” The Duke’s voice could have frozen flame. “I don’t recall inviting you to my private study.”

“No?” Sir Lionel’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “How unfortunate. Particularly as I have something rather important to discuss.” He patted the folder meaningfully. “Something that might interest Lady Penelope as well.”

Penelope felt rather than saw the Duke tense. He rose slowly from his desk, his height and bearing suddenly intimidating in the confined space.

“Whatever you wish to discuss can be handled through proper channels,” he said, each word precisely measured. “Through our solicitors, perhaps?”

“Oh, I think not.” Sir Lionel’s smile widened unpleasantly. “Some matters require more... immediate attention. Though perhaps Lady Penelope would prefer to discuss this privately? To avoid any... unnecessary complications?”

The threat in his voice was unmistakable.

Penelope rose, her hands steady despite her racing heart.

“I prefer to conduct all business openly, Sir Lionel. Unlike some.”

His face hardened.

“As you wish. Though you may regret such... transparency... when certain facts come to light.”

The Duke moved then, placing himself slightly in front of Penelope. The protective gesture might have annoyed her from another man, but from him it felt like partnership rather than presumption.

“If you have something to say, Sir Lionel,” the Duke’s voice held dangerous quiet, “say it. Otherwise, I suggest you leave. Immediately.”

Sir Lionel’s fingers tightened on his folder.

“Such hostility, Ravensworth. And here I thought we might reach an amicable arrangement.”

“There is nothing amicable about attempted blackmail,” Lord Albert observed, his usual good humour completely absent. “Or about bribing estate managers.”

A muscle ticked in Sir Lionel’s jaw.

“I see that Featherstone has been... indiscreet. How disappointing.” His gaze shifted to Penelope again. “Though perhaps not as disappointing as a lady of quality involving herself in matters that might damage her reputation.”

“My reputation?” Penelope stepped forward, anger overwhelming caution. “I’m not the one attempting to steal land through falsified documents.”

“Falsified?” His laugh held no warmth. “Such accusations, my dear. I wonder what your father would think of his daughter spending so much time in a gentleman’s private study? Particularly one known for his... rigid moral standards.”

The Duke moved so quickly that Penelope barely saw him.

One moment he stood beside her, the next he was directly before Sir Lionel, his

height and bearing suddenly martial rather than aristocratic.

“Get out.” The words emerged as barely more than a whisper, yet they seemed to drop the temperature in the room. “Before I forget that we are gentlemen.”

Something like fear flickered across Sir Lionel’s face. He stepped back, clutching his folder tightly.

“As you wish. Though I think you’ll find this situation less easily dismissed than my person.”

He turned and strode away, his boot heels clicking sharply on the marble floor of the hall. They heard Jameson’s voice murmuring something, then the more distant sound of the front door closing.

Into the ringing silence, Lord Albert spoke quietly.

“Well, cousin. I believe that we’ve just discovered exactly what kind of man we’re dealing with.”

“Indeed.” The Duke turned back to them, his face still hard with anger. “Though I suspect we’ve only seen the beginning of his schemes.”

Penelope met his eyes across the study, seeing in them the same mixture of fury and determination she felt. Whatever Sir Lionel planned, they would face it together.

A clock chimed in the hall, marking the hour with gentle indifference to the tension filling the study.

Morning mist clung to the gardens of Ravensworth Hall like a lace shawl, softening the formal edges of hedge and path. Penelope stood at her bedroom window, watching early light transform the moisture into diamonds that clung to every branch and leaf.

The peaceful scene belied the tension that had gripped the house since Sir Lionel's threatening visit the previous day.

She had slept poorly, her dreams haunted by thoughts of missing documents and veiled threats.

The borrowed nightrail whispered against her skin as she turned from the window at Mary's quiet entrance.

"Good morning, my Lady." Her maid set down a breakfast tray, steam rising invitingly from the chocolate pot. "His Grace asks if you would join them in the library after you've eaten. Sir Lionel has sent a message saying he'll arrive at ten with some documents for review."

Penelope's fingers tightened on her wrapper's silk sleeve.

"So soon? I had thought he'd wait at least a few days after yesterday's confrontation."

"Perhaps that's why he's moving quickly?" Mary's practical nature showed in her frown as she laid out a morning dress of deep blue silk. "The Duke was up before dawn, they say. Cook mentioned he'd already been through three pots of coffee."

The image of Alexander - somehow she'd begun thinking of him that way in her private thoughts - pacing his study through the pre-dawn hours made something twist in Penelope's chest.

She'd seen the weight of responsibility he carried, the fierce protectiveness he felt for his family and estate. This threat to both must be eating at him.

"The blue dress, Mary? Not very practical for sorting through dusty documents."

"But very becoming, my Lady." Mary's expression turned knowing. "And certain gentlemen seem to notice such things, even when pretending to focus entirely on estate business."

Heat crept into Penelope's cheeks.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Of course not, my Lady." Mary's tone could have dried washing. "Just as His Grace doesn't find reasons to pass the library door whenever you're working there."

Penelope busied herself with her chocolate, trying to ignore both Mary's knowing looks and her own racing pulse at the thought of spending another day working closely with the Duke.

The morning sun caught the blue silk of her chosen dress where it lay across the bed, making the fabric shimmer like deep water.

"There's something else," Mary said, her tone turning serious as she began arranging Penelope's hair. "I overheard two of the maids talking. Apparently Sir Lionel was seen speaking with several of the tenant farmers yesterday afternoon. They seemed... unsettled... afterward."

"Unsettled how?"

Penelope turned sharply, earning a reproving click of the tongue from Mary as a curl

slipped free.

“They wouldn’t say exactly. But Cook’s nephew - he works one of the boundary farms - mentioned Sir Lionel’s solicitors were there, taking preliminary statements from the tenants. Offering better lease terms to those willing to swear to certain facts before the Court.”

Anger flared in Penelope’s chest, hot and immediate.

“He’s trying to turn the tenants against their own interests! They may not understand that any temporary advantage he offers would be nothing compared to losing their traditional rights in the woodland.”

“Indeed, my Lady.” Mary secured another curl with careful precision. “Though perhaps someone should explain that to them?”

Penelope caught her maid’s eye in the mirror, seeing her own determination reflected there.

“Perhaps someone should.”

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By the time she descended to the library, the mist had burned away under the strengthening sun. She found the Duke already at work, his tall figure bent over a spread of documents on the large table. Morning light caught subtle dark auburn highlights in his dark hair, and the fine lawn of his shirt stretched across his shoulders as he moved, reminding her that his commanding presence came from physical strength as much as bearing.

He looked up at her entrance, and something in his expression made her breath catch. For a moment, the weight of responsibility seemed to lift from his features, replaced by what might have been pleasure at her arrival.

“Lady Penelope.” He straightened, and she noticed the shadows under his eyes that spoke of his sleepless night. “I trust that you rested well?”

“Better than you, I suspect,” she said before she could think better of it. At his raised eyebrow, she added, “The entire household knows you’ve been up since dawn.”

“News travels quickly.” That almost-smile touched his lips. “Though in this case, we have reason for early vigilance. Sir Lionel’s solicitors sent word - he’s coming with what he claims is evidence ready for submission to Chancery regarding the boundary disputes.”

The smile faded as he spoke, his expression turning grave.

Penelope moved closer, drawn by the concern she could read in his stance.

“You think that the documents are forgeries that he means to present to the Court?”

“I’m certain of it.” He ran a hand through his hair, dishevelled it slightly in a way that made him look younger, more vulnerable. “The question is, how convincing will they be? And how many people has he already convinced to support his claims?”

“Mary mentioned he’d been taking statements from tenant farmers.”

“Yes.” His voice held controlled anger. “Having his solicitors draw up preliminary depositions, no doubt, with promises of better lease terms attached. Though what he doesn’t tell them is that once they’ve sworn false testimony in Chancery, they’ll be bound by it. After that...”

He broke off, his hands clenching at his sides.

Without thinking, Penelope stepped closer, close enough to catch the scent of coffee and the cologne that she’d come to associate with him.

“We won’t let that happen.”

His eyes met hers, and something flickered in their green depths that made her heart race.

“We?”

“Of course.” She lifted her chin. “You’re not facing this alone, you know.”

For a moment, he simply looked at her, and Penelope found herself acutely aware of how close they stood, of the warmth radiating from him, of how his cravat was slightly askew from running his hands through his hair.

A knock at the door made them both start. Lord Albert entered, his usual cheerful expression replaced by serious purpose.

“He’s here,” he announced without preamble. “With his solicitor and potential witnesses for the Chancery case.”

The Duke’s expression hardened, all trace of their previous warmth vanishing.

“Already taking depositions?”

“Three tenant farmers from the boundary lands,” Lord Albert confirmed. “Ready to swear statements about historical usage. And a surveyor from London prepared to challenge the registered boundaries.”

“How convenient.” The Duke’s voice held the chill of a winter morning. “Show them into the morning room. Lady Penelope, perhaps you would...”

He hesitated, clearly torn between protecting her and needing her insight.

“I will attend,” she said firmly. “If Sir Lionel means to threaten both our estates, I should hear his claims directly.”

Something like pride flickered across his face before he nodded. They moved towards the morning room together, and Penelope felt the subtle shift in his bearing - the way that he drew himself up, adopted the mantle of authority like armour. Yet she also noticed how he positioned himself slightly ahead of her, as if still wanting to shield her from whatever was coming.

The morning room seemed smaller than usual, crowded with nervous energy and unfamiliar faces. Sir Lionel stood by the windows, morning light catching the subtle gleam of his obviously new waistcoat. The tenant farmers - men Penelope recognised from her charitable visits - huddled together near the door, their expressions uncomfortable. A thin man in London clothes stood slightly apart, a leather portfolio clutched to his chest.

“Ah, Ravensworth!” Sir Lionel’s smile held triumphant edges. “And Lady Penelope! How fortunate you’re both here. It saves having to go through this twice.”

“Through what, exactly?”

The Duke’s tone was sharp, cutting, like knife’s edge.

“Why, the presentation of evidence, of course.” Sir Lionel gestured to his companion. “Mr Winters here is prepared to testify before the Court of Chancery. His survey report challenges the original boundary registration.”

The surveyor stepped forward, his manner suggesting that he’d rehearsed this moment.

“Yes, quite fascinating indeed. The affidavit I’ve prepared for the Court demonstrates discrepancies between the originally registered boundaries and current usage...”

Penelope watched the Duke’s face as the man droned on, noting how his expression grew increasingly cold. The evidence being prepared for Chancery was clever - she had to admit that. Little discrepancies, subtle shifts in boundary stones, all carefully documented to challenge the original bill of rights to the land.

But something felt wrong about the whole presentation. The surveyor’s manner was too practiced, his evidence too neat. And the tenant farmers... Penelope studied them carefully, noting how they shifted uncomfortably whenever certain points were emphasised.

“So you see,” Sir Lionel concluded smoothly, “these gentlemen are prepared to give sworn testimony before the Court about historical usage patterns. Their depositions will show that current practices don’t reflect the original agreements. Isn’t that right, John?”

The oldest of the farmers looked startled at being addressed.

“Well, sir, that is... my father always said...”

“Your father,” the Duke cut in quietly, “worked this land for forty years. Did he ever mention any dispute about the boundary lines?”

John’s weather-beaten face showed obvious conflict.

“No, Your Grace. But Sir Lionel says...”

“Sir Lionel says many things.” Penelope couldn’t keep quiet any longer. “But did he mention how losing access to the woodland paths would affect your livestock grazing? Or how the changes he proposes would impact the water rights for your lower fields?”

The farmers exchanged uncertain glances. Sir Lionel’s smile acquired a sharp edge.

“My dear Lady Penelope, surely such technical details are beyond your understanding? Perhaps we should leave these matters to those more qualified?”

“You mean like your suspiciously well-prepared surveyor?”

The words escaped before she could stop them. She felt rather than saw the Duke’s quick glance of approval.

“Mr Winters’ credentials are impeccable,” Sir Lionel said smoothly, though Penelope noticed how the surveyor himself suddenly seemed very interested in his own boots.

“Indeed?” The Duke’s voice held dangerous quiet. “Perhaps he would care to explain to the local Magistrate why the boundary marks he intends to cite in his Chancery

case show signs of recent tampering? My groundskeeper has already sworn an affidavit about the fresh tool marks he discovered this morning.”

Colour fled from the surveyor’s face. Sir Lionel’s smile turned rigid.

“Tool marks can occur for many reasons,” Sir Lionel said, though his confident manner had acquired a brittle edge. “Such matters are for the Court of Chancery to determine.”

“No,” came a new voice from the doorway, “such tampering is a matter for the local justices. Interfering with boundary marks is a criminal offense, Sir Lionel, quite separate from any civil dispute over property rights.”

Penelope turned to find her father standing there, his distinguished figure commanding immediate attention. The Earl of Stanyon’s silver hair caught the morning light as he entered, and his expression held the quiet authority that had always made him such an effective estate manager.

“Papa!”

The word escaped before she could stop it.

“My dear.” He smiled briefly at her before turning his attention to Sir Lionel. “I took the liberty of examining those boundary marks myself this morning, with two magistrates present as witnesses. Most enlightening. The affidavits are already being prepared.”

Sir Lionel’s face worked for a moment before his practiced smile returned.

“Lord Stanyon! I had no idea that you would honour us with your presence. Though perhaps we should discuss these matters through our solicitors? Before any hasty

statements are made? Some of the evidence I've gathered might prove... uncomfortable... for family loyalty."

"Is that a threat, Sir Lionel?"

The Duke's voice had dropped to that dangerous quiet which Penelope was learning to recognise as a warning.

"Merely an observation." Sir Lionel's smile didn't waver. "Though speaking of observations, I couldn't help but notice that your daughter seems to spend a great deal of time here, Stanyon. In rather... informal circumstances. One wonders what the Court of Chancery might make of such... unusual arrangements while considering the validity of boundary claims."

Penelope felt heat flood her cheeks, but before anyone could respond, her father laughed.

The sound held genuine amusement.

"Indeed she does. Working to protect both of our estates from what appears to be a rather clumsy attempt at fraud." His smile held steel beneath its courtesy. "Though I wonder what the local justices would make of your recent activities? Tampering with boundary marks is a felony offense, while your property claims can wait for Chancery to examine."

The tenant farmers stirred uneasily, moving slightly away from Sir Lionel. The surveyor clutched his portfolio tighter, looking like he dearly wished to be anywhere else.

"Now, my Lord," Sir Lionel's smile grew desperate at the edges, "surely there's no need for such accusations. I merely thought to bring certain... discrepancies to

everyone's attention. Perhaps we could reach some arrangement?"

"The only arrangement," the Duke said with deadly quietness, "will be your immediate departure from my property. Unless you'd prefer to explain your activities to the magistrate?"

For a moment, something ugly flickered across Sir Lionel's face. Then he sketched an elaborate bow that bordered on insult.

"As you wish. Though I wonder..." his gaze shifted between Penelope and the Duke, "what other arrangements might need explanation to the authorities? Such interesting hours you keep in your library, Your Grace."

Penelope felt the Duke tense beside her, but her father stepped forward before anything more could be said.

"I believe," the Earl's voice held pleasant menace, "that you were leaving, Sir Lionel? While you still can?"

The implied threat hung in the air. Sir Lionel's facade cracked completely for just a moment before he turned on his heel and strode from the room, his surveyor scurrying after him like a frightened mouse.

Into the ringing silence that followed, John the tenant farmer cleared his throat.

"Beggin' your pardon, Your Grace, my Lord... we never meant..."

"No harm done, John." The Duke's voice had gentled considerably. "Though perhaps next time someone makes extraordinary claims about boundary rights, you might discuss it with us first?"

The farmers nodded eagerly, clearly relieved to be forgiven their brief disloyalty. As Lord Albert showed them out, the Earl turned to his daughter with a knowing look.

“Well, my dear. It seems you’ve been quite busy since that storm stranded you here.”

Penelope met her father’s gaze steadily, though she felt colour rise in her cheeks.

“We’ve been investigating Sir Lionel’s claims, Papa. There are suspicious gaps in both estates’ registered documents that suggest--”

“That suggest someone has been systematically removing papers which should have been filed with the Court,” the Earl finished. “Though thankfully, our solicitors maintain their own copies of all properly registered documents.”

“Yes Father, exactly.”

“I had come to that conclusion when I reviewed our archives yesterday.” He turned to the Duke. “Your message was most timely, Your Grace.”

“Lord Stanyon.” The Duke bowed slightly. “I hope you’ll forgive the liberty of my involving your daughter in this... situation.”

“Forgive?” The Earl’s eyes twinkled. “My dear boy, I’m rather counting on Penelope’s involvement. She has an excellent head for detail, and unlike the rest of us, she’s been systematically visiting tenant farms for months. Her knowledge of current land usage patterns is probably better than anyone’s.”

Penelope felt warmth bloom in her chest at her father’s praise, especially when she caught the Duke’s expression of surprised approval.

“Indeed,” the Duke said slowly. “We’ve found her insights invaluable.”

Something in his tone made her pulse quicken. When she glanced at him, she found his eyes already on her, their green depths holding warmth that had nothing to do with estate management. Her father cleared his throat pointedly.

“Yes, well. Perhaps we should examine these records you’ve been collecting? I brought some interesting documents from our archives that might help establish the original boundary lines.”

As they made their way back to the library, Penelope found herself hyperaware of the Duke’s presence beside her.

Their shoulders brushed as he held the door, and that brief contact sent awareness shivering through her entire body.

The sun had reached the library windows, filling the room with golden light that caught dust motes dancing in the air. The space still held traces of their work from yesterday - papers carefully sorted into piles, ribbon markers in relevant books, a cup of long-cold coffee forgotten on a side table that the servants had missed.

“I see you’ve been thorough,” the Earl observed, examining their organised chaos with approval. “Though perhaps we should start with these.” He withdrew several ancient-looking documents from his coat pocket. “I found them in a rather unexpected place - inside an old volume of Shakespeare, of all things.”

“Shakespeare?” The Duke’s eyebrows rose slightly. “That seems...”

“Deliberately misleading?” The Earl smiled grimly. “Yes, I rather thought so. These are part of the original bill of rights to the land, properly registered with the Court when the boundaries were first established. I distinctly remember having our solicitors make certified copies well before that mysterious library leak.”

Penelope moved closer to examine the documents her father spread across the table. The Duke stepped up beside her, and she caught that now-familiar scent of his cologne and coffee. His sleeve brushed her arm as they both leaned forward to study the faded writing.

“These are the original survey marks,” she said, trying to focus on the paper rather than his proximity. “All properly witnessed and sealed by the Court. Look at how the boundaries are described - using the old oak trees as markers. Sir Lionel’s solicitors can’t dispute such properly registered documents.”

“Most of those trees still stand,” the Duke added, his breath stirring a loose curl near her ear as he leaned closer. “Though the one which Sir Lionel claims marks a different line...”

“Was only planted forty years ago,” the Earl finished. “Yes, exactly. Rather destroys his entire argument about ancient boundaries being moved, doesn’t it?”

Penelope felt rather than saw the Duke’s satisfied smile.

“Combined with the evidence of tampering we found...”

“And the tenant farmers’ testimony about traditional usage,” she added, turning slightly to face him.

This proved to be a mistake, as it brought them almost nose to nose. His eyes met hers, and for a moment the rest of the room seemed to fade away. She could see flecks of gold in the green of his irises, count each of his dark eyelashes, feel the warmth radiating from his body.

The Earl again cleared his throat rather pointedly.

“Yes, well. Perhaps we should examine the rest of these documents?”

They spent the next hour reviewing the papers, building a clear picture of how Sir Lionel had attempted to manipulate the evidence. The Earl’s knowledge of local history proved invaluable, filling in gaps that even the Duke’s meticulous records couldn’t cover. Penelope took extensive notes in the little notebook that she had dedicated to this task, wanting to be sure that nothing discovered was forgotten.

“The real question,” Lord Albert said, having joined them after seeing the farmers safely away, “is what Sir Lionel’s solicitors will present to Chancery next. He’s not the sort to rely on just one approach.”

“No.” The Duke’s voice held grim certainty. “And that veiled threat about taking sworn testimony concerns me. He’s building a case designed to drag through the courts for years.”

“Let him plan,” the Earl said calmly. “We have properly registered deeds, historical precedent, and centuries of documented usage on our side. Chancery takes a particularly dim view of attempts to overturn such long-established rights. Though...” he paused, looking thoughtful, “perhaps we should have our solicitors prepare certified copies of these key documents? Multiple sets, properly witnessed and sealed?”

“An excellent suggestion.” The Duke turned to Penelope. “Would you be willing to help prepare the documents for our solicitors? Your eye for detail in organising the registered deeds would be invaluable.”

She nodded, trying to ignore how her pulse jumped at the thought of spending more time working closely with him.

“Of course. Though perhaps we should also speak with the tenant farmers again?”

Ensure that they understand the gravity of giving sworn testimony in Chancery, and what rights they'd be surrendering if Sir Lionel prevails?"

"I could do that," Lord Albert offered, his expression suspiciously innocent. "Leave you two to handle the documentation."

The Duke shot his cousin a quelling look, but before he could respond, Jameson appeared in the doorway.

"Your Grace, a message has just arrived from London. It appears rather urgent."

The Duke took the sealed letter, his expression darkening as he read.

"It seems," he said quietly, "that Sir Lionel has indeed been busy. His solicitors have filed a bill of complaint in Chancery. Against both estates."

Penelope moved to his side without thinking, close enough to read over his shoulder. The legal language was dense, but the threat was clear - Sir Lionel was claiming improper management of boundary rights and challenging both properties' ancient claims.

The Earl's face grew grave.

"So. He means to drag us through the Court of Chancery. These cases can take years to resolve - during which time he'll continue undermining our tenants' loyalty."

"Yes." The Duke's voice held contained fury. "Though he's made one serious miscalculation."

"Oh?" Lord Albert leaned forward with interest.

“He’s forgotten,” the Duke said softly, his eyes meeting Penelope’s with unexpected warmth, “that united, we can present a much stronger case to Chancery. Two ancient estates defending their properly registered rights carries more weight than his recent claims. We’re stronger together than apart.”

A knock at the study door interrupted whatever response Penelope might have made to that charged statement. Mary appeared, looking somewhat flustered.

“Begging your pardon, my Lady, Your Grace, but Cook insists on knowing if everyone will be staying for luncheon? And...” she hesitated, glancing between them, “there are rather a lot of people gathering in the village. It seems that Sir Lionel has been making speeches at the tavern.”

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There was a moment of silence in the room as everyone took in the implications. Penelope felt, in that instant, rather sick in the stomach. But then, the Duke straightened, his manner shifting from personal to commanding in an instant.

“What kind of speeches?”

“About changes coming to both estates, sir. He’s offering to have his solicitors draw up new tenancy agreements with better terms for those willing to give sworn testimony supporting his claims in Chancery.” Mary’s usually calm face showed real concern. “Some of the younger farmers seemed excited by his promises, not understanding they’d be binding themselves under oath.”

“Of course they are,” Penelope said bitterly. “He’s offering them dreams without explaining that false testimony before the Court could cost them more than just their tenancies.”

“Then perhaps,” the Duke said quietly, “we should ensure that they understand what sworn testimony in Chancery means.” He turned to her, something like challenge in his eyes. “You know these families, their concerns. Would you be willing to help them understand the legal implications before Sir Lionel’s solicitors take their depositions?”

“Together?”

The word escaped before she could consider its implications.

“Together.” His voice held certainty, and something warmer that made her breath

catch. “After all, they should see that both estates stand united before the Court. False testimony under oath carries serious consequences.”

The Earl watched this exchange with raised eyebrows.

“An excellent suggestion. Though perhaps we should discuss strategy over luncheon? These matters are always clearer with food.”

As they moved towards the dining room, Penelope found herself walking beside the Duke. Their hands brushed briefly, sending sparks of awareness up her arm. Penelope realised that she was carrying the notebook she’d been adding to so extensively – the notebook designed to aid their compilation of evidence. Suddenly, it seemed extremely sensible to her that she should present that evidence to Alexander, that he could best use it. The moment seemed right, so she paused slightly as they walked, he stopped beside her.

“I... I have something for you.” She held out the notebook, and he took it, his expression uncertain. “It’s a summary of everything we’ve discovered so far. I thought that you would find it useful.”

“Thank you,” he said softly, pitched for her ears alone.

“For what? It’s just some notes.”

He shook his head, his expression a little bemused.

“Not just for the notebook. For being willing to face this. For helping protect both our estates. For...” he hesitated, then added even more quietly, “for understanding what must be done.”

She looked up at him, struck again by how his severe features could soften when he

chose, how his eyes could hold such unexpected warmth.

“We protect what matters,” she said simply.

His hand brushed hers again, and this time she was certain it wasn’t accidental.

“Yes,” he agreed softly. “We do.”

Candlelight transformed the dining room of Ravensworth Hall into something from a fairy tale. Crystal sparkled, silver gleamed, and the deep green walls seemed to gather shadows in their corners despite the dozens of candles burning in massive silver holders.

Penelope stood in the doorway for a moment, taking in the scene before her. The Duke had insisted on hosting a small dinner party - a calculated display of confidence before the local gentry, many of whom would likely be called to testify about traditional boundaries and ancient rights. Local landowners filled the room with quiet conversation and rustling silk, though Penelope noticed how they gathered in small clusters, discussing Sir Lionel’s legal manoeuvres in low voices.

Her blue silk evening gown whispered against the doorframe as she stepped into the room. She had taken extra care with her appearance tonight, though she tried not to examine her reasons too closely. The deep blue brought out gold lights in her hair, and Mary had arranged her curls with particular attention.

“Lady Penelope.” The Duke’s voice came from behind her, making her start slightly. “You look...” he paused, something flickering in his eyes as he took in her appearance. “Most elegant.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” She tried to ignore how his evening clothes emphasised his height and breadth of shoulder, how his perfectly tied cravat drew attention to his strong jaw. “Though I wonder if a dinner party is truly wise, given the circumstances?”

“Precisely because of the circumstances.” He offered his arm to lead her into the room. “We must show that we stand firm, that Sir Lionel’s legal manoeuvres haven’t shaken our position. The Court of Chancery takes note of such things - how established families maintain their estates during disputes.”

His sleeve felt warm under her fingers, the fine wool of his evening coat unable to completely mask the strength beneath. They moved through the room together, greeting guests with careful courtesy while maintaining a united front that she suspected wasn’t lost on their observers.

“Did you notice,” he murmured as they paused between groups, “how Lady Ashworth keeps glancing at Sir Lionel’s empty chair? Her husband sits on the local bench - he’d be among the first to know if Sir Lionel has filed any claims with the Court.”

Indeed, the elegant matron had looked several times at the conspicuously vacant place setting.

“She was rather friendly with him at her card party last month,” Penelope replied quietly. “Do you think she’s involved in his schemes?”

“No.” His voice held certainty. “But she might know something useful. Perhaps you could...”

“Draw her out?” Penelope smiled slightly. “I suspect she’d be more receptive to feminine curiosity than masculine interrogation.”

That almost-smile touched his lips.

“Precisely why I asked.” His hand covered hers briefly where it rested on his arm.
“You see things I might miss.”

The warmth of his touch seemed to linger even after he’d released her. Before she could respond, Lord Albert approached, his usually cheerful face serious.

“Featherstone’s here,” he said quietly. “He says Sir Lionel’s solicitors have been taking depositions from tenant farmers - not just about boundaries, but about supposed private agreements they claim to have witnessed.”

The Duke’s expression hardened.

“Now?”

“He says it’s urgent.”

“Go,” Penelope said softly. “I’ll keep Lady Ashworth occupied.”

He looked down at her, something complex moving behind his eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.” She smiled, trying to project more confidence than she felt. “After all, we protect what matters.”

His eyes warmed at her echo of their earlier conversation.

For a moment, she thought he might say something more, but instead he simply bowed over her hand, his lips brushing her gloves in a gesture that seemed more

genuine than mere courtesy.

As he left with Lord Albert, Penelope turned to find Lady Ashworth watching her with shrewd interest.

Well then.

Time to discover what the lady might know about Sir Lionel's plans.

Music began as dinner concluded, the small orchestra in the gallery filling the air with elegant strains of Mozart. Couples moved towards the ballroom, drawn by the promise of dancing.

Penelope remained at the dining table a moment longer, considering what she'd learned from Lady Ashworth.

The older woman's carefully worded hints suggested that Sir Lionel had been mortgaging future expectations heavily in London.

More concerning were her observations about his recent visitors - men known, she had discovered, for purchasing disputed property claims and pursuing them through Chancery.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

She looked up to find the Duke beside her again, his expression suggesting that his own conversation had been equally troubling.

"Lady Ashworth proved quite informative about Sir Lionel's activities in London's

financial circles,” she said quietly. “Though perhaps we should discuss what she revealed about his dealings with certain solicitors somewhere more private?” He offered his arm again, but instead of leading her to his study, he guided her towards the ballroom. “We should be seen dancing,” he murmured. “It will seem odd if we disappear to talk business now.”

Her pulse quickened at the thought of dancing with him. They had maintained careful distance these past days, despite working closely together.

Physical proximity seemed somehow more dangerous than intellectual cooperation.

The first notes of a waltz filled the air as they took their places.

His hand settled at her waist, warm through the silk of her gown, while hers found his shoulder. Even through layers of evening clothes, she could feel the strength in him, the contained power that made him so commanding.

“Tell me what you learned,” he said softly as they began to move.

His voice was pitched low, for her ears alone, and his breath stirred the curls near her temple.

Penelope tried to focus on Lady Ashworth’s revelations rather than how perfectly they moved together, how naturally they found their rhythm.

“He’s been borrowing heavily,” she managed, though her voice wasn’t quite steady. “From some rather questionable sources.”

“Ah.” His hand tightened slightly at her waist as he guided her through a turn. “That explains Featherstone’s news. Sir Lionel has been offering to purchase tenant rights and ancient claims - for considerably more than they’re worth.”

“ But he hasn’t the funds for that,” Penelope frowned, momentarily forgetting their intimate position in her concern. “Unless...”

“Unless he’s already sold the potential proceeds to his London creditors.” His voice held controlled anger. “He’s mortgaging the outcome of a Chancery case he hasn’t even won yet - promising them portions of two prosperous estates in exchange for funds to pursue his claims.”

The music swelled around them as they turned again.

Penelope was acutely aware of how other couples had drawn back slightly, giving them more space on the dance floor.

No doubt tomorrow there would be gossip about the Duke of Ravensworth dancing exclusively with Lady Penelope Whitmore.

“We need to warn the tenants,” she said, pushing aside thoughts of gossip. “Before any of them give sworn statements to his solicitors. Once they’ve testified in Chancery, they’ll be bound by their words.”

“Already done.” His thumb moved slightly against her waist, probably unconsciously, but the small motion sent awareness shivering through her. “Featherstone is explaining the legal implications tonight. But there’s something else more concerning about these depositions...”

He pulled her slightly closer as another couple passed nearby. The scent of cologne and starched linen enveloped her, making it difficult to concentrate.

“What else?” she managed, looking up at him.

It was a mistake. His eyes caught hers, and for a moment the rest of the room seemed

to fade away.

“Perhaps we should continue this discussion somewhere more private after all,” he said, his voice rougher than usual.

The music drew to a close, but neither of them moved immediately apart. Around them, other couples began leaving the dance floor, but they stood frozen in their own pocket of silence.

“The conservatory?” she suggested, surprised at how breathless she sounded.

He nodded, offering his arm once again. As they walked from the ballroom, Penelope caught Lord Albert’s knowing smile and her father’s raised eyebrow. But there wasn’t time to worry about appearances - not with Sir Lionel’s threats hanging over them.

The conservatory was lit only by moonlight filtering through the glass panels overhead. Night-blooming jasmine filled the air with sweet perfume, and somewhere water trickled in one of the ornamental fountains.

Their footsteps echoed softly on the tiled floor as they moved deeper into the jungle-like space.

“Featherstone found these in Sir Lionel’s carriage house,” the Duke said without preamble, withdrawing several folded papers from his coat. “His groom has apparently developed a conscience - or perhaps simply a healthy fear of being charged as party to falsifying documents meant for the Court of Chancery.”

Penelope moved closer to see the documents in the dim light.

Their shoulders brushed as they bent over the papers together, and she felt him tense

slightly at the contact.

“These are...” she broke off, anger flooding her as she recognised what she was seeing. “These are forgeries meant to look like private agreements that would invalidate our registered claims. But they’re better than his previous attempts.”

“Yes.” His voice was tight with controlled fury. “He’s had them professionally prepared this time, complete with false dates and counterfeit seals. The sort of documents that could force lengthy examinations in Chancery, even if they’re eventually proved false.”

She leaned closer, trying to see the details he indicated. His hand came up to steady her, resting warm against her back, and suddenly she was acutely aware of how alone they were, how intimate the moonlit conservatory felt.

“The signatures look almost real,” she said, trying to focus on the documents rather than his proximity. “But surely any careful examination would show...”

“That’s just it.” He turned slightly towards her, his hand still at her back. “These aren’t meant for close scrutiny by the Court. They’re meant to force us into lengthy Chancery proceedings, creating just enough doubt about our rightful claims... The process of verification could take months, even years. Meanwhile, every registered right, every ancient claim would be held in question. The Court tends to preserve the status quo during disputes, which means...”

“It would force both estates to defend against false claims,” she finished. “Draining resources, creating delays...”

“Until his creditors lose patience.” His voice had dropped lower, and she realised they’d drawn even closer together as they talked. “He’s already selling portions of what he hopes to gain in Chancery. The longer the case drags on, the more pressure

they'll apply. Until selling becomes the only way to end the legal battles.”

She looked up at him, ready to suggest some strategy for countering this threat. But the words died in her throat as she met his eyes. In the moonlight, they seemed darker than usual, full of something that had nothing to do with estate management.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved. The distant sound of music drifted from the ballroom, muted by distance and glass walls. A night bird called somewhere in the darkness beyond the conservatory windows. Penelope felt her pulse thundering in her ears, every nerve aware of his proximity, of how his hand still rested warm against her back.

“We should...” she began, but couldn’t quite remember what they should do.

His other hand had come up to touch her cheek, so gently she might have imagined it.

“Yes,” he agreed softly, though she hadn’t finished her thought. “We should.”

Then he was kissing her, and thinking became impossible. His lips were warm and sure against hers, one hand cupping her face while the other drew her closer.

She found herself responding without conscious decision, her hands sliding up to his shoulders as if they belonged there.

The kiss deepened, and Penelope discovered that his careful control extended to this too - each movement deliberate yet somehow burning with contained passion. She felt rather than heard his soft groan as she pressed closer, forgetting everything but the feel of him, the taste of him, the way the world seemed to narrow to just this moment.

A crash from the direction of the main part of the house shattered the silence. They

broke apart, both breathing heavily. For a moment they simply stared at each other, the reality of what they'd done settling over them like evening dew.

"Your Grace!" Lord Albert's voice carried from the house, urgent and unwelcome.
"Alexander!"

The Duke's expression shifted from dazed to alarmed.

"Something's wrong."

His hands lingered on her waist a moment longer before releasing her. Penelope felt the loss of contact like a physical thing, but pushed the sensation aside as Lord Albert's rapid footsteps approached.

"Alexander!" Albert burst into the conservatory, barely sparing a glance for their intimate positioning. "You need to come to your study. Now . Someone's been through the deed box. The registry copies are disturbed."

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The Duke's study showed clear signs of having been searched. Papers lay scattered across the desk and floor, books stood open or knocked askew on their shelves. But most alarming was the deed box lying open in the centre of the chaos - the iron-bound chest Penelope recognised as containing the registered documents and ancient claims records. Next to it lay their carefully prepared evidence for Chancery, disrupted and dishevelled.

“How?”

The Duke's voice held deadly quiet as he surveyed the damage. His hand had moved to Penelope's elbow, either forgotten or deliberately maintained in their rush to investigate.

“Jenkins found one of the maids crying in the hallway,” Albert reported grimly. “Seems Sir Lionel had been... persuading her to help him gain access to the deed box. Promised her brother a position if she'd let his man examine our registered documents. But that's not the worst of it.”

He held out several sheets of paper, their edges crumpled as if they'd been handled roughly. The Duke released Penelope to take them, and she moved closer to read over his shoulder in the lamplight.

Her breath caught as she recognised what she was seeing.

Letters, apparently in her father's hand, discussing private arrangements about the woodland boundaries - the sort that would invalidate the registered claims in Chancery if they were genuine. Letters that suggested exactly the sort of unofficial

agreements Sir Lionel had claimed existed.

“These are forgeries,” she said immediately. “My father would never create private agreements that would invalidate our ancient rights. The Court of Chancery has confirmed our boundaries for generations.”

“Of course they’re forgeries.” The Duke’s voice held both anger and something else - something that made her blood run cold. “The question is, how did they come to be among our registered documents? Who had access to the deed box?”

She stepped back, stung by the implication in his tone.

“Surely you don’t think...”

“What am I to think?” He turned to face her, his expression harder than she’d ever seen it. “These documents appear immediately after I grant you access to my private deed box, to my family’s registered claims. After I trust you with papers that could destroy both estates if they fell into the wrong hands at Chancery.”

“Alexander,” Lord Albert began, but the Duke cut him off.

“No. The timing is too perfect. Sir Lionel’s threats, your apparent willingness to help, and now these conveniently discovered letters?” His voice had turned to ice. “Tell me, Lady Penelope, was that scene in the conservatory part of the plan as well?”

The accusation struck like a physical blow. Penelope felt all the warmth of their earlier intimacy freeze into something sharp and painful.

“How dare you?” Her voice emerged barely above a whisper, though she wanted to scream. “After everything we’ve worked for, everything we’ve shared...”

“Everything you’ve learned about our legal position, you mean?” His face had settled into harsh lines she barely recognised. “Every vulnerability in our ancient claims that you’ve discovered while pretending to help prepare our case for Chancery?”

“Cousin,” Lord Albert stepped forward, his usually cheerful face grave. “You’re not thinking clearly. Lady Penelope would never...”

“Never what? Protect her family’s interests?” The Duke’s laugh held no humour. “Even at the expense of honour?”

Penelope felt tears burning behind her eyes but refused to let them fall. She straightened her spine, lifting her chin in a gesture that felt like armour.

“You speak of honour,” she said, her voice steady despite the pain in her chest, “yet you dishonour us both with these accusations. I have never betrayed your trust. Never.”

“Then explain these.” He thrust the letters towards her, his hands actually shaking with suppressed emotion. “Explain how they came to be in my study, among my private papers.”

“I cannot explain what I did not do.” She met his eyes steadily, though it hurt to see the coldness there. “But I see now that your faith in me was as false as these forged letters.”

Something flickered in his expression - doubt? Regret? But before he could speak, another voice cut through the tension.

“What is the meaning of this?”

They all turned to find the Earl of Stanyon in the doorway, his distinguished features

set in lines of concern. His eyes moved from his daughter's pale face to the Duke's rigid stance, then to the scattered papers and disrupted room.

"Papa." Penelope's voice nearly broke on the word. "It seems that I stand accused of betraying the Duke's trust. Of planting false evidence in his study."

The Earl's expression darkened as he stepped into the room.

"Indeed? And what evidence would that be? What documents could possibly override centuries of properly registered claims?"

The Duke handed over the letters without speaking.

Penelope watched her father examine them, his experienced eye noting each detail as one who had handled estate documents his entire life. His face grew grimmer with each page.

"Well," he said finally, his voice deceptively mild, "these are quite clever. They've even managed to copy that slight tremor in my hand that developed after my hunting accident two years ago. A detail known to anyone who's seen my signatures in the parish registry since then."

"What?"

The Duke's harsh tone faltered slightly.

"Oh yes." The Earl held one letter to the lamplight. "See here? The slight shake in the downstrokes? Most people wouldn't notice it, but it only started after I broke my wrist. Which makes these letters, supposedly written four years ago and witnessed by your own grandfather's solicitor, rather interesting, wouldn't you say? Particularly as your grandfather had been deceased for two years by that date."

Silence fell in the study. Penelope watched the Duke's face as understanding began to replace suspicion. But the pain of his accusations still burned too freshly for her to feel any satisfaction.

"I think," she said quietly, "I should return home now."

"Lady Penelope..." The Duke moved towards her, that terrible coldness finally leaving his expression. "I..."

"Don't." She stepped back, maintaining distance between them. "You've made your opinion of me quite clear, Your Grace. I won't trouble you with my presence any longer. Though I suggest you have your solicitors examine those forgeries carefully before you present them to Chancery as evidence of my supposed betrayal."

"Penelope," her father's voice held gentle understanding, "perhaps we should consider how this affects our joint petition to the Court..."

"Please, Papa." She was proud that her voice remained steady. "I would like to leave. Now. Our solicitors can handle any necessary communications regarding the case."

The Earl nodded slowly.

"Of course, my dear. Though I believe I shall stay a while longer. His Grace and I have some matters to discuss."

Penelope didn't look at the Duke as she left the study, though she could feel his eyes on her. The weight of his gaze seemed to burn between her shoulder blades as she walked away, head high despite the tears she refused to let fall.

Behind her, she heard her father's voice, cold in a way she'd never heard before.

“Now then, Your Grace. Shall we discuss how a man whose own family’s ancient rights depend on properly registered claims could so easily believe in secret arrangements that would undermine them? How readily you accepted the very sort of document that would destroy everything your ancestors built?”

She didn’t wait to hear the Duke’s response.

The drive back to Stanyon House passed in a blur of moonlight and shadows. Penelope sat rigid in her father’s carriage, grateful that Mary had the wisdom to remain silent beside her. The steady clop of hooves against the road provided counterpoint to the thundering of her heart, still painful in her chest.

Her fingers traced the embroidery on her reticule, the familiar pattern offering no comfort. Just hours ago, she had dressed so carefully in this blue silk, had felt such foolish pleasure when the Duke’s eyes had warmed at the sight of her. Now the gorgeous gown felt like a costume, worn by some other, more naïve, girl who still believed in trust and understanding.

The memory of his kiss burned like frost against her lips. How quickly warmth had turned to ice, tenderness to suspicion.

His face when he’d accused her... she pressed her eyes closed, but the image remained: those green eyes gone cold, that beloved mouth set in harsh lines of judgment. Beloved? The word rose unbidden in her mind, making her chest ache anew. When had she begun to care so much what he thought of her? When had his good opinion become so devastatingly important?

“My Lady?” Mary’s voice came soft in the darkness. “We’re nearly home.”

Penelope opened her eyes to find that they had indeed reached the familiar avenue of oaks leading to Stanyon House. Moonlight filtered through bare branches, casting dappled shadows across her lap like nature's own lace.

"Thank you, Mary." Her voice emerged steadier than she'd expected. "I trust you can handle any necessary explanations to the household?"

"Of course, my Lady." Mary's tone held fierce loyalty. "Though perhaps we should discuss what actually happened? So I know what to say?"

"What happened?" Penelope's laugh held no humour. "What happened is that I was a fool. I allowed myself to believe that birth and breeding guaranteed honour. That a Duke's word meant something."

"If you'll pardon my saying so," Mary's practical voice cut through her bitter thoughts, "a man doesn't kiss a woman like that if he truly believes her dishonourable."

Heat flooded Penelope's cheeks.

"You saw?"

"I was bringing a message to His Grace. Though I retreated quickly when I realised the conservatory was... occupied." A hint of satisfaction crept into Mary's tone. "Which makes his subsequent behaviour even more incomprehensible."

"Does it?" Penelope turned to watch moonlit fields pass by the carriage window. "Or does it simply prove that physical attraction means nothing compared to ingrained prejudice? That a man might kiss a woman one moment and believe her capable of betrayal the next?"

The carriage wheels hit a rut, jostling them slightly. Penelope welcomed the physical discomfort - it provided distraction from the deeper pain in her chest.

“Those letters,” Mary said carefully, “they must have been quite convincing to make him doubt properly registered rights.”

“They were excellent forgeries, crafted to look like private agreements that would invalidate our claims in Chancery.” Penelope’s hands clenched in her lap. “But that’s not the point. He should have known - after all our work preparing our case together, all our...”

She broke off, unable to categorise exactly what had grown between them during those hours in his library.

“All your trust?” Mary suggested gently.

“Trust.” The word tasted bitter now. “Such a small word for such a devastating thing to lose.”

They passed through the gates of Stanyon House, gravel crunching under the carriage wheels. The familiar facade rose before them, windows glowing warmly in welcome. Yet Penelope felt cold to her core, as if something vital had frozen inside her.

“What will you do now?” Mary asked as the carriage drew to a halt.

“Now?” Penelope straightened her spine, drawing dignity around herself like a cloak. “Now I shall do exactly what I have always done. I shall continue our charitable work, manage our estate responsibilities, and prove through actions rather than words that honour is not the exclusive province of Dukes.”

Inside Stanyon House, the familiar scents of beeswax and lavender wrapped around

her, yet provided no comfort. Penelope moved through the halls like a ghost, barely acknowledging the concerned greetings of their evening staff. She had just reached the stairs when another carriage's wheels sounded on the gravel outside. A moment later, Lady Rosalind burst through the front door, her evening cloak askew and her dark eyes bright with concern.

"Penelope! Thank heavens I caught you. My brother is being an absolute fool!"

"Lady Rosalind." Penelope's voice emerged cooler than she'd intended. "You should not have come. It's most improper at this hour."

Even as she said those words, Penelope was drawing Rosalind into the small parlour, away from curious staff, and closing the door after them.

"Improper?" Rosalind advanced on her, where she now stood in the centre of the parlour, rather at a loss for what to do next. Rosalind was practically vibrating with protective fury. "Do you know what's improper? Accusing someone you care for of betrayal without a moment's thought! Making judgments based on manufactured evidence when all logic suggests otherwise!"

"Please." Penelope held up one hand, unable to bear Rosalind's fierce loyalty. "What's done is done."

"No," Rosalind insisted, catching her hand. "It's not done. Alexander is already beginning to realise his mistake. Albert is making him see reason, and your father..." a slight smile touched her lips, "well, I've never seen the Earl quite so forceful in his opinions."

"It doesn't matter." Penelope gently withdrew her hand. "Whatever your brother now believes, he revealed his true nature when pressure was applied. He showed exactly how much his fine words about trust and partnership were worth."

“He’s afraid,” Rosalind said quietly. “Surely you can see that? After losing our parents, after nearly losing the estate once before... fear makes him react badly to perceived threats.”

“Fear may explain his actions,” Penelope replied, fighting to keep her voice steady. “It does not excuse them.”

“No,” Rosalind agreed softly. “It doesn’t. But perhaps it makes them understandable? Forgivable, even?”

Penelope turned away, unable to bear the pleading in her friend’s eyes.

“Understanding and forgiveness are luxuries I cannot afford right now. We have real threats to face - Sir Lionel’s petition to Chancery, the tenant farmers being pressed for sworn statements, the upcoming depositions before the local justice...”

“All the more reason to stand together!” Rosalind moved around to face her again. “You know we’re stronger united. You and Alexander work so well together when you’re not both being ridiculously stubborn.”

A knock at the door interrupted whatever response Penelope might have made. Mary appeared, her face grave.

“Begging your pardon, my Lady, but Sir Lionel has been seen riding towards the village. He appears to be gathering people at the pub again.”

“Of course he is.” Penelope’s laugh held no humour. “He must have planned this perfectly - sow discord between the estates, then strike while we’re divided.”

“Then don’t let him succeed!” Rosalind caught her hands again. “Come back with me. Help us fight this properly.”

“No.” Penelope squeezed her friend’s hands once before releasing them. “I will fight this, but I will do it my way. Through the proper channels, with evidence and facts, not... not emotions and misplaced trust.”

“Penelope...”

“Please, Rosalind.” She was proud that her voice remained steady. “Go home. Your brother needs you more than I do right now.”

As if summoned by her words, they heard another carriage approaching. This one’s wheels rang against the gravel with military precision that could only mean one thing.

“He wouldn’t...” Rosalind began.

“Oh, but he would.” Penelope turned towards the stairs. “Mary, please show Lady Rosalind out. And inform His Grace, should he demand entrance, that I am not at home to visitors.”

She had reached the first landing when the Duke’s voice carried from below, deep and commanding.

“Lady Penelope!”

She paused, one hand on the banister, but did not turn. The polished wood felt cool beneath her fingers, grounding her against the sudden wild beating of her heart.

“Your Grace,” she heard Mary say with perfect correctness, “I regret that my Lady is not receiving visitors this evening.”

“This is ridiculous.” His voice held frustration now. “I must speak with her. There are things to explain...”

“There is nothing to explain.” Penelope surprised herself by speaking, though she still did not turn. “Your actions made your thoughts perfectly clear.”

“Did they?” Something raw entered his tone. “Or did they simply prove how badly fear can cloud judgment? How easily past hurts can poison present trust?”

She closed her eyes against the pain in his voice, steeling herself against the urge to turn, to look at him, to allow him to explain.

“Past hurts? And what of present ones, Your Grace? What of trust destroyed not by time but by choice?”

“Penelope.” Her name on his lips still held power to wound. “Please.”

“No.” She forced steel into her voice. “You made your choice in your study, sir. Now I make mine. Good evening, Your Grace.”

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She continued up the stairs, each step requiring more strength than the last. Behind her, she heard Rosalind's quiet murmur, then Mary's firm announcement that she really must insist His Grace leave now.

The sound of the front door closing echoed through the house like a physical blow. Penelope reached her chamber door before her composure finally cracked. Once inside, she pressed her back against the solid wood and allowed herself to slide to the floor, her blue silk skirts pooling around her like water.

Only then, in the privacy of her room, did she finally let the tears fall.

Dawn found her at her writing desk, correspondence spread before her like battle plans. She had not slept - what was the point of trying when every time she closed her eyes she saw his face, felt his kiss, heard his accusations? Better to work, to plan, to prepare their defences against whatever Sir Lionel might attempt next.

Her evening gown lay discarded across a chair, the blue silk now seeming to mock her with memories of happiness so briefly held. She had changed into a practical morning dress of grey wool, its severe lines matching her mood.

A knock heralded Mary's arrival with breakfast and the morning's reports from the village.

"Sir Lionel was busy last night, my Lady," her maid announced without preamble. "He's been making grand promises to anyone who'll listen. Better lease terms, improved rights of usage, positions of authority for those willing to swear statements supporting his petition to Chancery..."

“Empty promises,” Penelope said, not looking up from her letters. “But effective ones, I suppose? How many seem willing to give depositions?”

“Some of the younger men, mainly. Though...” Mary hesitated. “Thomas Carter was there. He says Sir Lionel had papers with him. Documents he claimed would prove to the Court of Chancery that both the Duke and your father have been... concealing ancient rights.”

“More forged evidence for his petition?”

“It seems so. Though these appear to be private agreements between His Grace and your father, supposedly showing how they’ve conspired to deny traditional grazing rights. The sort of evidence that could undermine all those centuries of registered claims.”

Anger flared hot in Penelope’s chest.

“As if either of them would ever... no. This ends now.”

She rose, moving to the window where morning light painted the frost-covered gardens in shades of silver and gold. The same way that light had filtered through the conservatory roof last night, turning that kiss into something from a fairy story... She pushed the memory aside with savage determination.

“My Lady?” Mary’s voice held concern.

“Bring me the records from our tenant meetings.” Penelope turned from the window, purpose replacing pain in her bearing. “All of them - every properly witnessed statement I’ve taken these past months about traditional usage rights, water privileges, and ancient boundaries. We’ll need everything properly documented for our solicitors. And send word to Mrs. Williams - I want to meet with her this

morning.”

“Mrs. Williams?” Mary frowned. “The farmer’s wife who’s been helping coordinate our charitable distribution?”

“Exactly.” Penelope moved to her desk, beginning to sort papers with swift purpose. “She knows every family in the area, knows their concerns, their true loyalties. And more importantly, they trust her.”

“You mean to counter Sir Lionel’s influence through her?”

“I mean to ensure that our people understand exactly what they stand to lose if his petition succeeds in Chancery.” Penelope’s voice held steel now. “He offers them dreams of better futures while hiding how their sworn statements could destroy rights their families have held for generations. We’ll show them the truth of what they’d be giving up before the Court.”

Mary nodded, something like satisfaction crossing her face.

“I’ll fetch the records immediately. Though... what of His Grace? Surely he should be informed...”

“His Grace,” Penelope said coldly, “has made his position quite clear. We will proceed without his assistance.”

A soft tap at the door interrupted them. One of the maids entered, bobbing a nervous curtsy.

“Beggin’ your pardon, my Lady, but Lady Rosalind is below. She says it’s urgent.”

Penelope closed her eyes briefly.

“Tell her I’m indisposed.”

“She... she says she won’t leave until you see her. Says it’s about Sir Lionel’s plans for this afternoon.”

That made Penelope’s eyes snap open.

“This afternoon?”

“Yes, my Lady. Something about taking tenant depositions before a local justice? Lady Rosalind says he means to use them to support his petition in Chancery. He’s gathering sworn statements about ancient rights and historical usage.”

For a moment, Penelope stood frozen, mind racing through implications. These sworn statements would support Sir Lionel’s petition to Chancery, forcing both estates to defend their ancient rights. Such cases could take years to resolve, during which time every traditional usage would be questioned. Years during which Sir Lionel’s influence could grow, during which more tenants might be persuaded to give damaging testimony, during which generations of carefully preserved rights could crumble...

“Very well.” She straightened her spine. “Show Lady Rosalind up.”

Mary moved to protest, but Penelope shook her head.

“Personal feelings must wait. This is too important.”

Moments later, Rosalind burst into the room, her usual elegance somewhat disrupted by obvious haste.

“Thank heavens you’ll see me! Penelope, it’s worse than we thought. Sir Lionel has

somehow convinced three of the boundary farmers to give depositions supporting his claims in Chancery. He's taking them before a justice this afternoon to swear statements about historical usage rights!"

"Which farmers?" Penelope demanded, her mind already calculating possibilities.

"The Hendersons, young John Carter, and..." Rosalind hesitated.

"And?"

"And Thomas Williams."

Penelope felt the blood drain from her face.

"Mrs. Williams' son? But they've been loyal to Stanyon for generations!"

"Sir Lionel offered him a position managing part of the woodland - once the Court of Chancery grants him control, of course." Rosalind's voice held bitter understanding. "The boy's always wanted more responsibility than his father would give him. Now he's ready to swear away his family's ancient rights for the promise of advancement."

"And he'll lose everything his family has built over generations, all for empty promises that won't stand once the case is settled. His sworn statement could destroy rights his children should have inherited." Penelope turned back to her desk, drawing out fresh paper. "Mary, send for the carriage. And find Featherstone - the Duke's Mr Featherstone. Tell him... tell him I need to speak with him immediately."

"Penelope?" Rosalind stepped closer, hope lighting her face. "Does this mean you'll help?"

"This means I'll do what needs doing." Penelope's quill scratched rapidly across

paper. "With or without your brother's cooperation."

But even as she wrote, she couldn't quite suppress the ache in her chest at the thought of facing this battle alone.

The morning sun slanted through the library windows at Stanyon House, catching dust motes that danced in the air like silent witnesses to Penelope's restless pacing. She had transformed the room into a command centre of sorts, with maps and documents spread across every available surface. The familiar scent of leather bindings and beeswax polish mixed with fresh coffee, brought by an increasingly worried Mary.

Three days had passed since that disastrous dinner party at Ravensworth Hall. Three days of careful planning, of gathering evidence, of trying to ignore the hollow ache in her chest that had nothing to do with estate business and everything to do with green eyes gone cold with suspicion. Every time she touched a document, she remembered how they had worked together in his library, heads bent close over similar papers. Every time she examined a map, she recalled the warmth of his hand covering hers as he pointed out important details.

The blue silk gown still hung in her armoire, a silent reminder of everything that had gone so terribly wrong. She had taken to wearing her most severe dresses, as if their dark colours and practical lines could somehow armour her against memories of candlelight and dancing, of moonlit conservatories and devastating kisses.

"The local justice has agreed to delay taking the tenant depositions," her father announced from the doorway, making her start slightly. The Earl looked tired, silver hair slightly dishevelled as if he'd been running his hands through it. His usual elegant composure showed signs of strain - this crisis was wearing on him more than

he would admit. “Though I’m not certain that’s entirely to our advantage.”

“Sir Lionel will use the time to gather more support,” Penelope agreed, turning to face him. The morning light caught the silver threads in her father’s hair, reminding her painfully of how much he had aged in recent years. “How long?”

“A week.” The Earl moved into the room, examining the papers spread across her desk. His fingers traced the edge of a particular document - one showing ancient rights properly registered with the Court of Chancery generations ago. “Though I suspect that our opponent already knew this would happen. He seemed remarkably pleased for someone whose plans had been apparently disrupted.”

Penelope’s fingers clenched on the document she held, crinkling the paper slightly before she forced herself to relax her grip.

“Because delay works in his favour. Every day gives him more time to gather sworn statements from tenants, to turn more people against the properly registered rights of both estates.” She paused, then added quietly, “As if we needed help creating division.”

“Indeed.” Her father’s keen eyes studied her face, missing nothing of the shadows beneath her eyes or the tension in her bearing. “Though I wonder if he might have another reason for satisfaction? Division between estates makes his work considerably easier, after all.”

“Papa, please.” She turned away, unable to bear the gentle understanding in his gaze. The morning light caught her reflection in the window - she looked pale, she realised, the grey wool of her dress washing out her complexion. Not that it mattered. Not anymore. “We have more important matters to consider than His Grace’s... than the Duke’s opinion of me.”

“Do we?” The Earl settled into his favourite chair, the leather creaking softly. The sound reminded her sharply of Alexander’s study, of hours spent working together in comfortable silence. Her father watched her with the careful attention he usually reserved for estate matters. “When that opinion affects our ability to present a united front against Sir Lionel’s schemes?”

“We don’t need Ravensworth’s help to prove our case.” The words emerged sharper than she’d intended, brittle with suppressed pain. She moved to her desk, straightening papers that needed no straightening, just to have something to do with her hands. “Our registered rights are clear, our ancient claims properly documented.”

“And yet we’re fighting with one hand tied behind our backs.” Her father’s voice held careful neutrality, though she could hear the concern beneath it. “Division weakens our position before the Court, Penelope. You know this. It’s exactly what Sir Lionel hoped to achieve - two ancient estates appearing unstable just as he challenges their rights.”

The truth of this struck her like a physical blow. Had they played directly into their enemy’s hands? Had pride and pain done Sir Lionel’s work for him? Before she could examine this uncomfortable thought too closely, Mary appeared in the doorway, her usually calm face showing signs of agitation.

“Begging your pardon, my Lady, my Lord, but Mr Featherstone is here. He says he has information about Sir Lionel’s latest visits to the boundary farms.”

Mary’s eyes held sympathy as she looked at Penelope, making her wonder just how much her maid understood about the situation. Penelope straightened, pushing personal concerns aside with the practice of recent days.

“Show him in.”

Featherstone entered looking uncomfortable, his weathered face showing signs of internal struggle. Though technically the Duke's employee, he had been providing information to both estates since the crisis began - a fact which probably violated his strict sense of loyalty. His coat showed signs of hard riding, and his boots were mud-spattered, suggesting he'd come directly from the boundary farms.

"My Lady, my Lord." He twisted his hat in his hands, a gesture she'd noticed he made when particularly distressed. "Sir Lionel's been making more promises. Not just to the younger farmers now - he's started approaching the older families. Offering to honour all ancient rights once the Court of Chancery grants him control, plus additional considerations for those willing to give sworn testimony supporting his petition."

"And do they believe him?" Penelope asked, though she feared she knew the answer.

She moved to the large map spread across one table, the one showing tenant holdings along the disputed boundaries. Each farm represented a family whose future hung in the balance, whose trust they needed to maintain.

"Some do." Featherstone's face showed his distress, years of loyal service warring with current uncertainties. "Others... well, they're worried about choosing wrong. If Sir Lionel wins his case, they don't want to be on the losing side. But they don't trust him neither. They remember how his father treated tenants on his own lands, before..."

"Before he lost them through mismanagement," the Earl observed quietly, his tone suggesting intimate knowledge of that history. "So they wait, these families who have worked our lands for generations."

"Yes, my Lord." Featherstone glanced between them, clearly struggling with something. His fingers worked ceaselessly at the brim of his hat, threatening to

permanently reshape the worn felt. “Though... if I might speak freely?”

“Please do.”

Penelope gestured for him to continue, noting how he shifted his weight nervously, as if what he had to say might be unwelcome.

“They’re confused, seeing the estates divided. They’ve always looked to both houses to protect their ancient rights, especially since you and His Grace started working together to document and preserve traditional usage.” His eyes met Penelope’s briefly before dropping, but not before she caught the mixture of loyalty and concern in them. “They don’t understand what’s happened. One day you’re both visiting farms together, showing such unity of purpose, and the next...”

He broke off, clearly uncomfortable with speaking so plainly to his betters.

“The next we appear to be at odds.”

Penelope finished the sentence for him, her voice steady despite the pain that lanced through her chest at the memory of those shared visits. How natural it had felt, working with Alexander, their different approaches somehow complementing each other perfectly.

His methodical nature balancing her more intuitive one, his attention to detail supporting her grasp of human considerations.

“Yes, my Lady.” Featherstone’s voice held genuine distress now. “And Sir Lionel, he’s using that confusion. Telling people that if the great houses can’t trust each other, how can simple farmers trust either of them? Making them wonder if perhaps it’s time for... for new leadership.”

The Earl rose from his chair, moving to study the map beside Penelope. His finger traced the boundary line that had caused so much trouble.

“He plays his game well, I’ll give him that. Every action calculated to increase uncertainty, to shake loose old loyalties.”

“And we’ve helped him do it,” Penelope said bitterly. The morning light seemed suddenly harsh, highlighting every worry line on her father’s face, every sign of strain in Featherstone’s bearing. “Our... discord... has given weight to his arguments.”

“My Lady,” Featherstone ventured carefully, “if I might... His Grace, he’s not been himself these past days. Hardly sleeps, from what the house staff say. Spends hours in his study, going over the same documents again and again...”

Penelope held up one hand, unable to bear this glimpse of Alexander’s state of mind.

“Thank you, Featherstone, but the Duke’s personal habits are not our concern. What we need to know is how many families Sir Lionel has approached, and what specific promises he’s made.”

The estate manager recognised the dismissal in her tone and turned to more practical matters. For the next hour, they discussed the situation in detail - which farmers seemed most swayed by Sir Lionel’s arguments, which remained loyal, which waited to see how events would unfold. Throughout it all, Penelope maintained rigid control of her expression, refusing to show how each mention of Ravensworth lands or the Duke’s tenants made her heart clench.

When Featherstone finally departed, laden with instructions to keep watching and reporting, the Earl turned to his daughter with concern evident in his face.

“You cannot go on like this, my dear.”

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“I can and I will.” Penelope moved to her desk, selecting documents with careful precision. “We have work to do, Papa. The tenant depositions may be delayed, but we must be prepared. While Sir Lionel gathers evidence for his Chancery petition, we must document every ancient right, every traditional usage. We cannot waste this time.”

“And what of Alexander? What of his efforts to make amends?”

“His efforts?” Penelope’s laugh held no humour. “You mean his single attempt to speak with me, followed by three days of silence? Or perhaps you refer to the messages he’s sent through others, as if he cannot bear to face me himself?”

“You know that’s not fair.” The Earl’s voice remained gentle, though his eyes showed steel. “He has tried to see you multiple times. You’ve refused him entry. Lady Rosalind says he’s written letters which you’ve returned unopened.”

“Because there is nothing left to say!” The words burst from her with more force than she’d intended. She modulated her tone with effort. “He showed his true opinion of me quite clearly. All his fine words about trust and partnership meant nothing when tested. I will not give him the opportunity to wound me again.”

Her father studied her for a long moment.

“And so you throw yourself into work, wear only dark colours, refuse all company save those directly involved in estate business. My dear, you’re not just protecting yourself from pain - you’re denying yourself any chance of joy.”

“Joy?” She turned to the window, watching as clouds gathered on the horizon. A storm approaching - how appropriate. “There are more important things than personal happiness, Papa. The estate, our tenants, our responsibilities...”

“All of which would be better served by reconciliation with Ravensworth.” He moved to stand beside her, his reflection joining hers in the window glass. “You know I’m right, Penelope. United, our estates are formidable. Divided, we give Sir Lionel exactly what he wants.”

“Then perhaps His Grace should have considered that before choosing to believe the worst of me.” She straightened her spine, drawing dignity around herself like armour. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have letters to write. The magistrate may have delayed the hearing, but we still need statements from loyal tenants to counter Sir Lionel’s claims.”

The Earl sighed but didn’t press further. As he reached the door, however, he paused.

“You know, my dear, sometimes the bravest thing we can do is allow ourselves to be vulnerable again. To risk pain for the chance of something greater.”

He left before she could respond, leaving her alone with thoughts she’d been trying desperately to avoid. The library suddenly felt too confined, too full of memories of another library where she’d felt so perfectly at home. Where she’d thought she’d found someone who understood her completely.

Moving to her desk, she picked up the latest report from Mary about Sir Lionel’s activities in the village. Her maid had developed quite a network of informants among the local servants, providing valuable intelligence about their opponent’s movements.

Today’s notes suggested that he’d been meeting with a London solicitor known for

challenging ancient rights in Chancery, one with a reputation for overturning long-established claims. A knock at the door interrupted her reading.

“Enter,” she called, expecting Mary with more reports.

Instead, Lord Albert Cavendish stepped into the room, his usually cheerful face uncharacteristically serious.

“Lady Penelope.”

She stiffened, wondering if he came as another emissary from his cousin.

“Lord Albert. This is... unexpected.”

“Yes, well.” He moved further into the room, studying the papers spread across every surface. “I see you’ve been as busy as Alexander. Though perhaps with better organisation - his study looks rather like a whirlwind struck it.”

“Did you come to discuss His Grace’s housekeeping habits?” Her tone could have frozen fire. “Or is there some purpose to this visit?”

Lord Albert’s face showed brief frustration.

“You know, you’re both remarkably alike in some ways. Equally stubborn, equally unwilling to bend even when it might be wise to do so.”

“Lord Albert...”

“No, hear me out.” He held up one hand. “Please. What I have to say concerns both estates’ futures.”

Something in his tone made her pause.

“Very well. Speak.”

“Sir Lionel has found allies in London. Powerful ones. Men who stand to profit handsomely if he gains control of both estates. They’re preparing to present evidence at the hearing that goes far beyond boundary disputes.”

Penelope sank into her chair, the gravity of his words settling over her like a physical weight.

“What kind of evidence?”

“Documents challenging both estates’ management of ancient rights. Allegations of tenant privileges being denied, of traditional usage being restricted, all carefully prepared for presentation to Chancery.” Albert’s voice held carefully controlled anger. “They mean to undermine centuries of registered rights, not just for that one boundary area, but for everything, to make any defence we offer seem suspect.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” She rose again, unable to remain still. “Anyone who knows either estate, who has witnessed our adherence to traditional rights...”

“Will know it’s false, yes.” Lord Albert nodded grimly. “But the Court of Chancery will only see what’s presented to them. Sir Lionel has engaged London solicitors who specialise in challenging ancient claims, who have no knowledge of our true practices.”

Cold understanding dawned.

“Someone who specialises in finding flaws in ancient rights?”

“Exactly.” Lord Albert moved to examine the map she’d been studying earlier. “The delay in taking depositions? It’s to give them time to prepare their petition to Chancery, to gather more sworn statements undermining our registered claims. They mean to make it so comprehensive, so convincing, that even those who know us will begin to doubt.”

Penelope’s mind raced through implications.

“The tenant farmers...”

“Will be even more uncertain, yes. Especially if they see the estates at odds before the Court.” He turned to face her directly. “Lady Penelope, I know my cousin behaved abominably. His pride and fear led him to make accusations that can never be fully unmade. But right now, with ancient rights at stake, we need each other. All of us.”

She closed her eyes briefly, fighting against the pain his words awakened.

“What would you have me do? Simply forget his lack of trust? Pretend that he didn’t believe me capable of betrayal?”

“No.” Lord Albert’s voice gentled. “I would have you remember the man you worked with so effectively before fear clouded his judgment. The man who trusted you enough to share his deed box, his family’s registered claims, his own growing feelings...”

“Please don’t.” She turned away, unable to bear the sympathy in his eyes. “Whatever feelings existed between us, they’re done with now. Finished.”

“Are they?” He moved towards the door, but paused before leaving. “Then why does he still reach for you whenever someone mentions your name? Why does he stand at

his study window for hours, staring towards Stanyon House? Why does he handle that little notebook you gave him as if it were more precious than crown jewels?"

He left her standing there, surrounded by papers and maps and evidence, yet seeing only memories of green eyes warm with trust, of hands gentle on hers as they examined documents together, of a kiss that had seemed to promise everything before reality shattered it all.

Outside, the gathering storm clouds finally burst, and rain began to fall.

The morning room at Stanyon House seemed unnaturally quiet as Lady Rosalind finished relating her news. Penelope stood at the window, watching rain streak the glass in endless rivulets, while Mary sat nearby, her usually calm face showing clear concern.

"You're certain about this?" Penelope asked, though she already knew the answer. Her fingers pressed against the cold windowpane as if seeking to ground herself against the gravity of what she'd just heard.

"Absolutely certain." Rosalind's reflection in the rain-streaked glass showed grim determination. "Sir Lionel's London allies aren't just financiers - they're men with significant influence in legal circles. If they succeed in discrediting both estates before Chancery..."

"They could block any attempt to defend our ancient rights," Penelope finished. "Ensure that whatever the Court decides strips both estates of their traditional privileges."

"Exactly." Rosalind moved to stand beside her, close enough that their reflections

merged in the glass. “Albert discovered it yesterday. He’s been investigating Sir Lionel’s London connections.”

The rain intensified, drumming against the window like impatient fingers. Penelope watched a leaf spiral past, torn from its mooring by the wind.

“How did he learn this?”

“Some of Alexander’s old war connections...” Rosalind hesitated. “From when he worked with that special group - His Majesty’s Hounds, they were called. Apparently they still maintain certain... information networks.”

Penelope turned from the window, surprised by this glimpse into Alexander’s past. She knew he’d served, of course, but he’d never spoken of his specific role. Yet another thing she’d thought she understood about him, only to discover hidden depths.

“My Lady,” Mary spoke up from her chair, “Cook’s nephew just brought word. Sir Lionel’s been seen heading towards the village again. With several well-dressed strangers.”

“His London allies, no doubt.” Penelope’s voice held carefully controlled anger. “Come to see their investment in person.”

“They’ll likely visit the tenant farms,” Rosalind added, her dark eyes showing the same fierce intelligence Penelope had once admired in her brother. “Present themselves as concerned parties, interested in local welfare...”

“While gathering sworn statements to support their Chancery petition.” Penelope moved to her desk, drawing out the properly registered documents she’d been compiling. “Mary, send word to Mrs Williams. I want to know exactly what these

men say to every farmer they visit.”

“Already done, my Lady.” Mary’s practical tone held satisfaction. “I took the liberty of alerting our usual observers as soon as we heard of Sir Lionel’s approach.”

Penelope felt a flash of gratitude for her maid’s initiative. These past weeks had taught her the value of loyal servants - and the pain of discovering whom you could truly trust.

“There’s something else.” Lady Rosalind’s voice held careful neutrality. “Alexander has found discrepancies in Sir Lionel’s own estate records, what of them he has been able to gain intelligence on through servants and others. Signs that he’s been mortgaging rights he hopes to gain through Chancery.”

“Selling his expected victory in advance?” Penelope’s laugh held no humour. “How very like him.”

“Yes, but don’t you see?” Rosalind stepped closer, her animation returning. “It means he’s vulnerable. If his plans fail, if he can’t gain control of the disputed lands...”

“His creditors will turn on him.” Understanding dawned. “He’s risking everything on this scheme succeeding.”

“Which makes him desperate.” Mary’s quiet observation drew both women’s attention. “And desperate men make mistakes.”

Thunder rolled in the distance as if emphasising her words. Penelope turned back to the window, watching dark clouds mass on the horizon. The storm that had threatened all morning was finally approaching.

“We need to move quickly,” she said, mind already racing through possibilities.

“Before his London friends can build their case. Mary, bring me the tenant records - all of them. Rosalind, if you’re willing to help...”

“Of course I’ll help.” Rosalind was already moving to examine the papers spread across Penelope’s desk. “Though... wouldn’t this be easier if you and Alexander...”

“No.” Penelope’s tone brooked no argument. “We can coordinate through you and Lord Albert if necessary, but I will not...”

She broke off, unable to voice the pain that still rose at the thought of facing him.

“He’s sorry, you know.” Rosalind’s voice gentled. “Sorrier than I’ve ever seen him about anything. He barely sleeps, barely eats. Just works endlessly, trying to find a way to prove Sir Lionel’s deception.”

“His regret changes nothing.” Penelope kept her back turned, unwilling to let Rosalind see how this information affected her. “The damage is done.”

“Is it?” Rosalind pressed. “Or are you both so afraid of being hurt again that you’d rather face this crisis divided than risk trusting once more?”

Before Penelope could frame a response, Mary returned with an armful of leather-bound volumes.

“The tenant records, my Lady. Though some seem to be missing.”

“Missing?” Penelope turned sharply. “Which ones?”

“The registered documents concerning water privileges for the boundary farms.” Mary set down her burden, finger tapping one particular ledger. “And the properly witnessed statements about grazing rights from three summers ago - the ones that

were filed with the Court of Chancery.”

“When Sir Lionel first began showing interest in the woodland.” Penelope’s mind raced. “He must have somehow gained access...”

“No.” Rosalind straightened, her face showing sudden understanding. “Those records weren’t stolen - they’re at Ravensworth. Alexander was reviewing them when...” she hesitated.

“When he accused me of betrayal.” Penelope finished flatly. “So now we need those records, but they’re in his possession.”

Thunder crashed closer now, and rain began to hammer against the windows with renewed force. The storm was almost upon them.

“I could fetch them,” Rosalind offered, but Penelope was already shaking her head.

“No. Your brother needs to be fully aware of what we’re doing. This affects both estates equally.” The admission cost her, but truth was truth. “Mary, send a message to Lord Albert. Ask if he would be willing to act as intermediary.”

As Mary left to dispatch the message, Rosalind moved to stand beside Penelope at the window.

“You know, he keeps notebook you gave him on his desk. Won’t let anyone touch it.”

“Please don’t.” Penelope’s voice caught slightly. “I cannot think about... about personal matters right now. There’s too much at stake.”

“Isn’t that exactly why you should think about them?” Rosalind’s reflection showed fierce determination. “Sir Lionel’s whole strategy depends on keeping you two apart.

On preventing you from working together as effectively as you did before.”

“We can work together through intermediaries.” Penelope turned from the window, moving to examine the papers on her desk. “Professional cooperation doesn’t require personal trust.”

“Doesn’t it?” Rosalind’s voice held challenge. “Then why have you achieved nothing in the past three days that compares to what you accomplished together in just one afternoon of shared purpose?”

The question struck home with painful accuracy. Penelope’s fingers clenched on the edge of her desk, the smooth wood failing to provide its usual comfort.

“My Lady!” Mary’s voice carried from the hallway, urgent enough to break through their tension. She appeared in the doorway, face flushed from running. “Sir Lionel’s solicitors - they’re not just taking tenant depositions. They’re serving writs demanding immediate examination of both estates’ deed boxes!”

“What?” Penelope straightened. “On what authority?”

“Something about preserving evidence for their Chancery petition.” Mary handed over a crumpled notice, clearly acquired through some feat of servant intelligence. “They’re heading for Ravensworth first, then here.”

Penelope scanned the document quickly, her heart racing as she absorbed its implications.

The legal language was dense but clear - Sir Lionel had somehow convinced a London judge to grant him access to both estates’ records, under the premise of preventing evidence destruction before the hearing.

“This is ridiculous!” Rosalind leaned over her shoulder to read. “He means to use a writ from some minor court to interfere with documents that should only be examined by Chancery!”

“No.” Penelope’s voice had gone quiet with fury. “He means to plant false evidence among our registered documents, then ‘discover’ it during an official examination. Make his forged claims appear more credible by having them found among proper estate papers.” Thunder crashed directly overhead now, making the windows rattle in their frames. The storm had arrived in full force, turning the morning nearly as dark as evening. “They’re going to Ravensworth first?”

Mary nodded.

“Yes, my Lady. Though with the weather...”

“They’ll be slowed by the storm.” Penelope was already moving, her mind racing ahead. “How long ago did they set out?”

“Not ten minutes past. They stopped at the pub first, making quite a show of their legal authority.”

“Then we have perhaps an hour before they reach Ravensworth.” Penelope turned to Rosalind. “Your brother - will he know which of the registered documents are most crucial? Which ancient rights Sir Lionel might try to challenge through planted evidence?”

“I... perhaps?” Rosalind’s eyes widened as she caught Penelope’s meaning. “But surely you don’t mean to...”

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“We have no choice.” Penelope was already turning towards the stairs. “Mary, have the groom ready my horse. I think that the small carriage would be too slow in this weather. Then hurry upstairs and help me change into my riding habit.”

“My Lady!” Mary’s voice held alarm. “You cannot mean to ride out in this storm!”

“I can and I will.” Penelope’s voice held steel. “Sir Lionel means to destroy both our estates through false claims in Chancery. I will not stand idle while he plants forged documents that could invalidate centuries of properly registered rights.”

“At least let me come with you,” Rosalind pleaded, already reaching for her own cloak.

“No.” Penelope’s voice brooked no argument as she secured her riding hat. “You must go in the carriage. If you reach Ravensworth first, warn your brother - and make sure that he understands that this isn’t about...” she faltered slightly, “about personal matters. This is about protecting both estates’ ancient rights.”

Thunder crashed again, closer now, and a flash of lightning illuminated the window like daylight. Mary wrung her hands, clearly torn between loyalty and genuine fear for her mistress’s safety.

“My Lady, surely there must be some other way. The storm...”

“Will slow Sir Lionel’s men as much as it slows me.” Penelope checked her hat strings with fingers that trembled only slightly. “And I know these lanes better than they do. I’ve ridden them often enough while visiting tenants. Now stop wasting time,

and let me go to change.”

The thought brought a fresh stab of pain - how many of those rides had been with Alexander, learning the bounds of both estates? How easily they had worked together then, his methodical attention to detail complementing her understanding of the people who worked these lands. She hurriedly changed, assisted by Mary once she returned from asking that the horse be made ready, then rushed back downstairs.

“Artemis is ready, my Lady,” called a groom from the doorway, rain dripping from his oilskins. “Though she’s not happy about it.”

“No more than any of us,” Penelope muttered, but her voice strengthened as she continued, “Very well. Rosalind has taken the carriage. Mary, send word to my father - he should know what’s happening. And have Featherstone alerted. We may need witnesses to whatever Sir Lionel attempts.”

She paused at the door, suddenly struck by the magnitude of what she was about to do. Riding out in such weather was madness. Riding to Ravensworth, to Alexander... that was perhaps even greater madness. But she could not - would not - allow Sir Lionel to destroy everything that generations had built, merely because she and Alexander had allowed personal pain to divide them.

Minutes later, the rain struck like needles against her face as she urged Artemis through the storm. The mare was steady despite her displeasure, picking her way carefully along the muddy lanes. Lightning flashed again, showing the path ahead in stark relief for just a moment before plunging them back into grey darkness. Every hoofbeat seemed to echo Penelope’s thundering heart. What would she find at Ravensworth? How would Alexander react to her arrival? The questions plagued her even as she pushed them aside to focus on more immediate concerns - like keeping Artemis upright on the increasingly treacherous path.

She chose the tenant's lane through the woodland, the same path that had started all this trouble when her carriage broke down those weeks ago. The trees provided some shelter from the worst of the rain, though every gust of wind sent showers of drops down from the branches above. Another flash of lightning showed a fallen branch ahead. Penelope guided Artemis around it, remembering how she and Alexander had walked this very path just days ago, discussing the ancient right of way that connected their estates. His voice had been warm then, full of plans for improving access for their tenants...

She forced the memory away. Focus. She needed to focus.

Through the drumming of rain and thunder, she heard what seemed like hooves on the main road - multiple horses, moving at a careful pace in the storm. Sir Lionel's party, no doubt. They'd chosen the longer but better-maintained route, just as she'd hoped. Penelope urged Artemis faster. The tenant's path would bring her to Ravensworth's stable yard, while Sir Lionel's men would have to approach by the main drive. She had perhaps ten minutes' advantage, no more.

The grey bulk of Ravensworth Hall loomed suddenly through the rain, its windows glowing with warmth that seemed to mock her drenched and shivering state. As she drew closer, a figure emerged from the stables, running towards her through the downpour.

"Lady Penelope!" It was Alf, Alexander's head groom. "Here, let me take her. Though what you're doing out in this..."

"No time," she swung down from the saddle, her sodden skirts slapping against her legs. "Sir Lionel's men are coming. They have some sort of writ... where is His Grace?"

"In his study, my Lady. Hasn't left it since dawn." Alf's weathered face showed

concern as he took Artemis's reins. "Lady Rosalind's carriage just arrived too, though how she got here so fast..."

"She took the main road just before the storm worsened." Penelope was already moving towards the house, water streaming from her riding habit. "Have stable boys posted to watch the drive. I need to know the moment Sir Lionel's party arrives."

She didn't wait for his response, taking the kitchen entrance rather than the more formal front door. The warmth hit her like a physical blow as she stepped inside, and the familiar scent of beeswax and coffee - always coffee in this house - made her heart clench painfully.

Mrs Thackeray appeared from the kitchen, took one look at her dripping form, and immediately began issuing orders to hovering maids.

"Hot water, blankets, and... oh, my Lady, you're not here for comfort, are you?"

"No time," Penelope said again, though her teeth had begun to chatter. "His Grace's study. Now."

As she approached the study so did Rosalind from the other direction. For a moment, her steps faltered. The last time she'd been in this room...

No. Focus on what matters.

She pushed open the door without knocking, Rosalind beside her. They entered the room together. Alexander stood by his desk, still in riding clothes himself, his cravat askew as if he'd been tugging at it in frustration. He looked up at her entrance, and the shock on his face would have been amusing in other circumstances.

"Penelope?" Her name emerged halfway between a question and a prayer. "What in

God's name..."

"Sir Lionel's men are coming," she cut him off, moving quickly to his desk. "They have some sort of writ demanding access to estate records. They mean to plant false evidence among your papers, 'discover' it during their search, and use it to support their petition to Chancery."

She watched understanding replace shock in his eyes, followed quickly by something that might have been admiration.

"You rode through this storm to warn us?"

"I rode through this storm to protect both our estates – I couldn't be sure that Rosalind would get here in time, by carriage," she corrected sharply. "Now, which documents are most crucial? Which ones do we need to secure before they arrive?"

For a heartbeat, he simply looked at her, water still dripping from her riding habit onto his carpets. Then his expression shifted to one she recognised from their days working together - focused, strategic, yet somehow warmed by something deeper.

"The original boundary documents are in the deed box," he said, already moving to a cabinet behind his desk. "Along with the water rights agreements you've been looking for. But there's more..." He paused, glancing at Rosalind. "Leave us."

"But..."

"Now, Rosalind. And station Albert at the front door. Delay them when they arrive - legally, properly, but delay them."

His sister departed with obvious reluctance. As soon as the door closed, Alexander turned back to Penelope, his expression intent.

“There’s something you need to see.” He withdrew a leather folder from the cabinet, handling it with careful reverence. “I found these yesterday, but I couldn’t send them through intermediaries. They’re too important.”

Despite herself, Penelope moved closer. The scent of his cologne and coffee enveloped her, and she forced herself to focus on the documents he was spreading across his desk rather than his proximity.

“These are...” she broke off as she recognised the handwriting. “These are from your father’s time. And mine.”

“Yes.” His voice was soft but urgent. “Look at the dates, Penelope. Look at what they were planning together.”

Her eyes scanned the papers quickly, understanding dawning.

“They were creating a joint petition to Chancery. To formally register the shared rights of both estates...”

“Which would have made it impossible for anyone to ever challenge the traditional boundaries.” He was standing very close now, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from him. “Our fathers were working together to protect both estates’ future. Until...”

“Until your father’s accident.” The pieces fell into place. “And the documents were never filed with the Court.”

“No. But they were properly witnessed. If we file them now...”

A thunderous knock from below interrupted whatever else he might have said. Lord Albert’s voice echoed up the stairs, properly courteous but pitched to carry.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I’m afraid that His Grace is quite occupied at present. Perhaps if you’d care to wait in the morning room?”

“They’re here.” Penelope’s hands moved swiftly, gathering the crucial documents. “These need to be hidden. Somewhere they won’t think to look during their search.”

“Agreed.” Alexander was already moving, his actions swift and certain. He pulled a book from the shelves - a volume of Shakespeare, she noticed with sudden remembrance of where her father had found other important papers. Behind it, a small panel swung open.

“A hidden compartment?” Despite their urgent situation, she couldn’t help but smile. “How very dramatic of you.”

“My grandfather’s innovation.” That almost-smile touched his lips as he carefully stored the documents. “He had a flair for the theatrical. Though in this case...”

“It may save both our estates.” She finished for him, then added quietly, “I should have trusted you to have legitimate reasons for studying those water rights documents.”

His hands stilled on the panel.

“Penelope...”

“No.” She stepped back, remembering why they stood here, drenched, and desperate and divided. “We don’t have time for... for that discussion. What else needs to be secured?”

He closed the panel and restored the book. The sound of voices again carried from below - Sir Lionel’s distinct tones now joining Lord Albert’s. Alexander’s expression

hardened as he turned back to his desk.

The desk on which lay the notebook she'd given him, filled with her notes on the boundary issues.

"The tenant ledgers." He pulled several volumes from a stack. "They'll want to examine these, claiming to look for evidence of mismanagement. But they're more likely to add false entries while they're at it."

"Give them to me." At his questioning look, she explained, "I'll take them to the library. Make it appear I'm simply continuing our work from... from before. They'll be less likely to interfere with a lady's reading. And this..." she scooped up the notebook, "put it on the bookshelves, and hopefully they won't notice it."

Understanding dawned in his eyes.

"Yes. And it gives you legitimate reason to be here, beyond..." He hesitated. "Beyond warning us about their arrival." More voices from below, growing louder. Footsteps on the stairs. "Go." He handed her the ledgers, then scooped up the notebook, turning to the shelves as he indicated a door. "Through the connecting door to the library. I'll receive them here."

She turned to leave, then paused.

"Alexander..."

"I know." His voice held everything they didn't have time to say. "We'll talk. After."

The library felt like both sanctuary and torment as Penelope settled at the reading table, spreading the ledgers before her with careful precision. Every detail of the room sparked memories - the window seat where they'd spent hours reviewing

documents, the globe they'd used to trace trade routes affecting local farmers, the chess set where a half-finished game still stood exactly as they'd left it.

Her riding habit was slowly steaming in the warmth from the fire, but she couldn't bring herself to care about the impropriety of her appearance. Through the connecting door, she could hear voices in Alexander's study - Sir Lionel's smooth tones clearly audible.

"Your Grace, I assure you that this is all quite proper. The writ specifically allows us to examine any documents pertaining to estate management and boundary claims."

"How fortunate that Lady Penelope is already reviewing the relevant ledgers." Alexander's voice held that dangerous quiet she remembered. "Though I'm curious how you anticipated our need to examine these particular documents today."

A pause, then Sir Lionel's voice again, slightly less smooth.

"Lady Penelope is here? How... unexpected."

"Is it?" Alexander's tone was glacial. "Given that these matters affect both estates equally?"

Penelope bent over the ledgers, making a show of taking notes, as footsteps approached the library door. Sir Lionel entered first, followed by two men she didn't recognise - London solicitors by their dress - and Alexander.

"Lady Penelope." Sir Lionel's practiced smile didn't reach his eyes. "What a delightful surprise. Though you seem somewhat... damp."

"The weather is rather inclement," she replied without looking up. "But estate business cannot wait upon sunshine, Sir Lionel. As I'm sure you're aware, given your

own urgent activities this morning.”

One of the solicitors moved towards her table, but Alexander’s voice cracked like a whip.

“The lady is working. You may examine other documents until she is finished.”

The man hesitated, glancing at Sir Lionel, who smiled again - that same empty expression.

“Of course, of course. We wouldn’t want to interrupt such... dedicated attention to estate matters. Though I do wonder what brings you here in such weather, my lady. Surely these ledgers could wait for a finer day?”

Penelope met his gaze steadily, though her hands wanted to clench into fists beneath the table.

“As His Grace mentioned, these matters affect both estates. Unlike some, we prefer to maintain proper documentation of all traditional rights and usage.”

She saw Alexander’s slight nod of approval from the corner of her eye. The implied contrast with Sir Lionel’s own notorious lack of estate records didn’t go unnoticed - one of the London solicitors shifted uncomfortably.

“Indeed.” Sir Lionel’s smile acquired a sharp edge. “Though one wonders about the propriety of such... close cooperation between estates. Especially given recent events.”

“I wonder more at the propriety of attempting to overturn centuries of registered rights through manufactured evidence.” The words escaped before she could moderate them, but she kept her tone perfectly pleasant. “Though perhaps that’s

simply my limited understanding of modern estate management.”

A muscle ticked in Sir Lionel’s jaw. The solicitors had begun examining shelves of documents, as indicated by Alexander, but she noticed how they lingered within earshot.

“My dear Lady Penelope,” Sir Lionel’s voice dripped false concern, “you seem somewhat overwrought. Perhaps recent tensions have affected your judgment? I would hate to think that your father’s position might be compromised by any... emotional decisions.”

“That’s enough.” Alexander’s quiet voice held more threat than a shout. “You are here to examine documents, Sir Lionel, not cast aspersions on a lady’s character.”

“Merely expressing concern.” Sir Lionel spread his hands in a gesture of innocence. “After all, riding out alone in such weather, arriving in such a state... one might almost think that there was some urgency to prevent our legitimate examination of estate records.”

The trap in his words lay obvious - any protest would only confirm his implications. Penelope forced herself to turn a page in the ledger, keeping her voice light.

“The only urgency, Sir Lionel, is in completing this review of water rights documentation before the quarter sessions. Though of course, you would know all about urgent financial matters, wouldn’t you?”

Sir Lionel’s carefully maintained expression faltered for just a moment.

“I’m sure I don’t take your meaning, my Lady.”

“No?” Penelope made a careful notation, not looking up. “How fascinating. I had

heard that you were quite... knowledgeable about leveraging future expectations. Though perhaps I misunderstood the terms being discussed in certain London gaming hells?"

She heard Alexander's sharp intake of breath, felt rather than saw him move slightly closer to her table. Sir Lionel's face had gone quite still.

"You overstep, madam."

"Do I?" Now she did look up, meeting his gaze directly. "I rather thought it was you overstepping - hoping to gain control of ancient rights you've already sold to your creditors. How much did they advance you, Sir Lionel? How much are our estates worth in your gambling debts?"

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One of the solicitors had stopped pretending to examine documents, his attention caught by this exchange. The other was writing something in a small notebook, his expression troubled.

“These allegations are quite improper,” Sir Lionel said, his voice tight with suppressed anger. “I had hoped to conduct this examination with professional courtesy, but if you insist on making unfounded accusations...”

“There is nothing unfounded about properly witnessed statements from your creditors.” Alexander’s voice came from directly behind Penelope’s chair now, solid and reassuring. “Would you care to examine those documents as well? I’m sure that they would make fascinating evidence for the Court of Chancery.”

The silence that followed felt sharp enough to cut. Sir Lionel’s face worked through several expressions before settling into careful blankness.

“I begin to think,” he said finally, “that perhaps this examination would be better conducted another day. When emotions are less... heightened.”

“By all means.” Alexander’s tone could have frosted the window panes. “Though I suggest you consider very carefully what evidence you choose to present to Chancery. Some games, once begun, cannot be easily abandoned.”

Sir Lionel’s departure held none of his usual smooth grace. The solicitors followed, one still scribbling in his notebook, the other looking distinctly uncomfortable. Lord Albert’s voice carried from the hall, courteously showing them out while managing to delay them long enough to ensure that no papers mysteriously disappeared during

their exit.

Penelope's hands trembled slightly as she closed the ledger. The full impact of what she'd just done - threatening Sir Lionel with exposure of his gambling debts - began to settle over her. If he chose to retaliate...

"That," Alexander's voice came, quiet behind her, "was either extremely reckless or absolutely brilliant."

"Perhaps both?" She tried to keep her tone light, though her heart raced at his proximity. "Though I suspect that Lady Ashworth would be devastated to know that I used her confidences so directly."

"Ah." She heard the smile in his voice. "So that's what she told you during that dinner party. I had wondered what intelligence you gathered while I was speaking with Featherstone."

The reminder of that evening - of dancing and shared purpose and a kiss in the moonlight - brought all their current tension rushing back. Penelope rose quickly, needing space to think clearly.

"I should return home before the weather worsens again." She gestured at her still-damp riding habit. "I'm hardly dressed for..."

"Penelope." Just her name, but it held volumes. "Please. We need to talk about..."

"My Lord!" Albert's voice interrupted from the doorway. "You need to see this. One of the stable boys found something interesting in Sir Lionel's carriage while they were preparing to leave."

Alexander made a sound of pure frustration.

“Now?”

“Now.” Lord Albert’s usually cheerful face held grim satisfaction. “It seems that our ‘friend’ was so concerned about examining our documents that he brought some of his own. Though I doubt he meant us to see them.”

He held out a leather portfolio, its contents partially visible where the clasp had broken - perhaps during a hurried exit. Alexander took it, his expression darkening as he examined the papers within.

“These are copies of the forged documents he planted in my study.” His voice held cold fury. “Complete with instructions on where to ‘discover’ them during today’s search.”

“Not just that.” Albert reached over to tap one particular page. “Look at the watermark. And the date.”

Penelope moved closer despite herself, drawn by the intensity in Albert’s tone. The paper Lord Albert indicated bore an intricate watermark - one she recognised immediately.

“That’s from the paper mill that burned down two years ago,” she said, leaning in to see better. “The one that supplied both our estates before...”

“Before Sir Lionel’s father bought it, just before that fire happened, claimed the insurance, and then sold the remains of the building and business.” Alexander finished. His arm brushed hers as he shifted the documents for better light. “Which makes it rather difficult for these supposedly ancient agreements to have been written on paper manufactured last month.”

“Last month?” Penelope looked closer at the date printed in the watermark. “But how

did he obtain paper with that maker's mark?"

"Because," Lord Albert's satisfaction grew more pronounced, "he didn't just buy the mill. He bought the original plates and moulds as part of the purchase, and what was left of them went to the new owner as well, when it was sold on, after the fire. It looks like Sir Lionel has been having paper specially made by the new owners, planning to match old documents. Except..."

"Except he didn't know about the subtle change in the watermark after the fire," Alexander's voice held grim triumph. "When they created the new main plate, they added a tiny arrow that appears in these forgeries, but wouldn't have been there, in any paper made more than two years ago."

Penelope straightened, her mind racing ahead.

"So we can prove that these are fake. We can show that they're recently manufactured rather than historical documents."

"Better than that." Lord Albert pulled another paper from the portfolio. "We have his instructions to the paper maker. Complete with his seal and signature, and a rather detailed explanation of exactly why he needed paper that would appear aged."

Thunder crashed outside, but it seemed distant now, unimportant compared to what lay before them. Alexander's hand clenched on the portfolio.

"This is enough to ruin him completely. Not just in Chancery, but criminally. Forgery of this nature..."

"Is a hanging offense." Penelope's voice came soft, the gravity of their discovery settling over her. "Though given his connections in London..."

“His connections won’t help him once his creditors learn of this.” Alexander’s voice held the same quiet certainty she remembered from their days working together. “They’ve advanced funds based on his promises about the estates. When they discover those promises rest on forgeries...”

“They’ll turn on him immediately,” Albert finished. “Self-preservation, if nothing else. No one will want to be associated with such fraud.”

Penelope moved to the window, watching rain continue to slash against the glass.

“We’ll need to move quickly. Once he realises what’s missing from his carriage...”

“He’s already gone.” Rosalind’s voice came from the doorway. She looked slightly dishevelled, as if she’d been running. “Headed towards London at a gallop, despite the weather. Left his solicitors to find their own way back in the carriage.”

“Of course he did.” Alexander’s tone held dark amusement. “Running to warn his creditors, no doubt. Or perhaps to flee them.”

“Then we need to act now.” Penelope turned back to face them. “Before he can hide his assets or destroy other evidence. Lord Albert, can you ride to the local magistrate? We’ll need official witnesses to these documents.”

“Already sent for him,” Lord Albert smiled. “And Featherstone’s gathering the tenant farmers who were approached about giving false testimony. They’ll want to make statements of their own, I expect, now that the tide has turned.”

“Good.” Alexander moved to his desk, reaching for paper. “I’ll have messages sent to our London solicitors. They’ll need to file petitions immediately...”

“Alexander.” Rosalind’s voice held gentle warning. “Perhaps there are other matters

that need immediate attention first?”

He looked up, his eyes meeting Penelope’s across the room. The air between them seemed to thicken with everything still unsaid.

Lord Albert cleared his throat.

“Rosalind, I believe we should check on those tenant farmers. Immediately.”

The door closed behind them with soft finality, leaving Penelope suddenly, acutely aware of being completely alone with Alexander for the first time since that disastrous night in his study. The rain drummed against the windows, filling the silence that stretched between them.

He moved first, setting down the portfolio with careful precision.

“You rode through a storm to warn us.”

“I rode through a storm to protect both estates.”

The words emerged automatically, the same defence she’d used earlier, but they felt hollow now.

“Did you?” His voice gentled. “Or did you ride through a storm because, despite everything, you couldn’t bear to see either of us personally destroyed by Sir Lionel’s schemes?”

“Does it matter?” She turned back to the window, unable to bear the way he looked at her - as if he could see straight through her carefully maintained composure. “We have what we need to stop him now. The rest is...”

“The rest is everything.” He moved closer, his reflection appearing beside hers in the rain-streaked glass. “Penelope, I was wrong. So terribly, unforgivably wrong.”

“Alexander...”

Her voice caught on his name.

“No, let me finish.” His hand rose as if to touch her shoulder, then fell back. “Fear and old hurts made me forget everything I knew about you. Everything we’d built together. I forgot that trust, once given, should not be withdrawn without absolute proof. I forgot...”

“You forgot that I loved you.”

The words slipped out before she could stop them, hanging in the air between them like something fragile and dangerous. She heard his sharp intake of breath, saw his reflection’s eyes close briefly as if in pain.

“Loved?” His voice held something raw. “Past tense?”

Before she could respond, voices rose from the courtyard below - Featherstone had arrived with several tenant farmers, all eager to give statements about Sir Lionel’s attempts to bribe them. The immediate demands of the situation pressed in again, reminding them both that personal matters must wait.

“We should...”

Penelope gestured vaguely towards the door.

“Yes.” Alexander’s voice held resignation. “The local magistrate will need to see these documents immediately. And we’ll need proper witnesses to every statement.”

She moved towards the door, but his voice stopped her.

“Penelope. Once this is done... once Sir Lionel’s schemes are fully exposed...”

“Then we can discuss everything else.” She managed to keep her voice steady. “But for now, we have duties to attend to.”

The following hours passed in a whirl of activity. Tenant farmers arrived in steady streams despite the weather, each eager to describe Sir Lionel’s attempts to undermine both estates. The local magistrate, a serious man named Sir James Whitworth, examined the forged documents with growing concern, even as the day darkened outside, evening now upon them.

“This goes far beyond simple property disputes,” he declared, setting aside another of Sir Lionel’s careful forgeries. “This is an organised attempt to defraud not just two estates, but the Court of Chancery itself.”

“And several London creditors,” Lord Albert added with satisfaction. “Our messenger just returned - apparently Sir Lionel’s arrival in London caused quite a stir among certain gaming hells. His creditors are already filing their own charges.”

Alexander, who had been reading through tenant statements, looked up sharply.

“How many creditors?”

“At least six major ones so far. Though more are coming forward hourly, according to our solicitor’s note. It seems Sir Lionel has been quite... creative with his promises about these estates.”

“He promised the same rights to multiple creditors,” Penelope realised, the full scope of Sir Lionel’s desperation becoming clear. “Each one thinking they alone would gain

control once his case succeeded in Chancery.”

“And each advancing funds based on those promises.” Alexander’s voice held grim satisfaction. “No wonder he fled so quickly when he realised we’d found proof of his forgeries. His entire house of cards is collapsing.”

Sir James cleared his throat.

“Your Grace, my Lady - if I might suggest? These statements should be properly recorded immediately. And given Sir Lionel’s connections in London...”

“We need to move quickly,” Alexander finished. “Before he can marshal his allies or destroy more evidence.”

“Exactly.” The magistrate began gathering papers with efficient movements. “I’ll need both of you to attend me while I take formal statements from the tenants. Everything must be properly witnessed and sealed.”

Penelope glanced down at her still-damp riding habit.

“Perhaps I should return home first, change into something more...”

“No time,” Alexander cut in. “Every moment we delay gives Sir Lionel more opportunity to cover his tracks.” He paused, then added more softly, “Though perhaps Mrs Thackeray could find you something dry to wear? I believe that some of Rosalind’s old gowns might serve...”

The memory of the last time she’d borrowed Rosalind’s clothes - during that first stormy visit that had started everything - hung between them for a moment.

“Yes,” Penelope managed. “Thank you. That would be... sensible.”

As if summoned by their discussion, Mrs Thackeray appeared in the doorway.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but Cook insists on knowing if everyone will be staying for dinner? What with all these people arriving to give statements...”

Alexander glanced at Sir James, who nodded.

“This will take several hours at least. And more tenants are still arriving.”

“Then yes,” Alexander decided. “Please have dinner prepared for...” he glanced around the room, mentally counting, “at least twenty. Though perhaps served in stages, as people finish giving their statements.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” Mrs Thackeray turned to Penelope. “And if you’ll come with me, my Lady, we’ll find you something more suitable to wear while your habit dries.”

Penelope changed into one of Rosalind’s day dresses - dark blue this time, not the grey silk of memory - and returned to find the library transformed into an impromptu court.

Sir James sat at the main table, recording statements with methodical precision while Alexander and Lord Albert questioned each tenant about their interactions with Sir Lionel. She took her place beside them, her knowledge of the families proving invaluable as they pieced together the full scope of Sir Lionel’s schemes. The tenants spoke more freely to her, sharing details they might have hesitated to reveal to their landlords directly.

“He offered my Thomas a position managing the woodland,” Mrs Williams said, twisting her apron between work-roughened hands. “Said he’d be overseeing all the timber rights once the case was settled. But when I asked to see these promises in

writing...”

“He refused?” Penelope prompted gently.

“Said there’d be time enough for papers later. But something in his manner...” The farmer’s wife shuddered slightly. “It reminded me of his father, in the old days. All smooth words and grand promises, until the debts came due.”

Sir James’s quill scratched steadily as he recorded her words. Alexander, standing near the window, asked quietly, “And your son? What did he think of these offers?”

“He was tempted, Your Grace. I won’t lie about that.” Mrs Williams lifted her chin. “But his father and grandfather worked these lands under your family’s protection. When I reminded him how your father stood by us during the bad harvests...”

Penelope saw Alexander’s expression soften slightly.

“The Williams family have always been loyal to both estates,” he said. “We don’t forget such things.”

The woman’s eyes filled with tears.

“Thank you, Your Grace. It’s knowing things like that that kept most of us from being took in by Sir Lionel’s fancy promises.”

As Mrs Williams departed, Lord Albert entered with fresh news from London.

“Sir Lionel’s creditors are moving faster than we expected. They’ve already filed petitions with Chancery to freeze his assets.”

“How did they act so quickly?” Penelope wondered, sorting through the latest batch

of statements.

“Apparently,” Lord Albert’s voice held careful amusement, “someone had already sent copies of our evidence to several key creditors before Sir Lionel even reached London. They were waiting for him.”

Alexander looked up sharply.

“Someone?”

“Lady Rosalind may have mentioned something about using your old war contacts to expedite matters.” Albert’s smile widened slightly. “Amazing how quickly information can travel when the right people are motivated.”

“Speaking of information,” Sir James interrupted, “I believe that we have enough sworn statements now to proceed with criminal charges. Sir Lionel’s attempts to suborn tenant testimony, combined with these forgeries...”

A commotion in the hallway cut him off. Moments later, Featherstone burst in, his weathered face showing rare excitement.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Your Grace, my Lady, but you’ll want to hear this. Sir Lionel’s London solicitors - the ones who were here earlier? They’ve turned on him completely. Seems they had no idea about the forgeries, and now they’re worried about their own reputations.”

“Where are they?” Alexander demanded.

“Waiting in the morning room. Say they have documents you need to see. Evidence of Sir Lionel’s instructions to them about challenging both estates’ ancient rights.”

Penelope and Alexander exchanged glances. This could be the final piece they needed - proof that Sir Lionel's entire petition to Chancery was based on deliberate fraud.

"Sir James?" Alexander turned to the magistrate. "Would you care to join us for what I suspect will be a most interesting conversation?"

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The solicitors looked considerably less composed than they had earlier. The older one - who had been taking notes during their confrontation with Sir Lionel - spread several documents on the morning room table with trembling hands.

“You must understand,” he began, his voice holding a slight quaver, “we had no knowledge of the forgeries. Our firm’s reputation...”

“Is currently balanced on a knife’s edge,” Alexander finished coldly. “Though your cooperation now may help matters considerably.”

“Yes, exactly.” The man mopped his brow with a handkerchief. “We have here Sir Lionel’s original instructions regarding the challenge to your estates’ ancient rights. Including his admission that he needed to create evidence that didn’t actually exist.”

Penelope moved closer to examine the papers, acutely aware of Alexander doing the same. Their shoulders brushed as they bent over the documents, and she felt him tense slightly at the contact.

“These are dated three months ago,” she noted, forcing herself to focus on the matter at hand. “Before he began approaching the tenant farmers.”

“Yes, my Lady.” The younger solicitor spoke up eagerly, clearly hoping to establish his own innocence. “It appears that he had the whole scheme planned out - first create doubt about the boundary rights, then use that uncertainty to pressure tenants into giving false testimony.”

“Which he would then use to support his petition to Chancery,” Alexander’s voice

held controlled anger. “While simultaneously selling rights he didn’t own to multiple creditors.”

“A rather ambitious plan,” Sir James observed dryly. “Though perhaps not as well executed as Sir Lionel might have hoped.”

“It would have worked,” the older solicitor said miserably, “if the estates had remained divided. His whole strategy depended on preventing any unified defence of the ancient rights.”

Penelope felt rather than saw Alexander’s quick glance in her direction.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “He didn’t count on certain... alliances... proving stronger than he anticipated.”

“Indeed not,” Sir James gathered the solicitors’ documents with careful precision. “These will need to be properly copied and witnessed before you gentlemen return to London. I trust you’re willing to swear to their authenticity?”

Both solicitors nodded eagerly, clearly relieved to be offering evidence rather than defending against accusations.

“Good.” The magistrate’s tone turned brisk. “Then let us proceed with the formal statements. Though perhaps...” he glanced at the darkening sky visible through the windows, “we should arrange accommodation for everyone? These proceedings may take some time.”

“Already done, Sir James,” Lord Albert spoke up from the doorway. “Mrs Thackeray has prepared rooms, and the local inn has space for those we can’t house here. Though...” his usually cheerful face showed concern, “there’s another storm approaching. The roads to London may be impassable by morning.”

“Excellent.” Sir James nodded with satisfaction. “That will give us time to properly document everything before presenting our evidence to the authorities in London. Your Grace, if we might use your study?”

As the Magistrate led the solicitors away, Penelope found herself alone with Alexander for the first time since their interrupted conversation in the library. The air between them felt charged with everything still unsaid.

“You should stay,” he said quietly, not quite looking at her. “Until the weather clears. Your father would never forgive me if I let you attempt the ride home in another storm.”

“I...” she hesitated, torn between propriety and practical necessity. “Yes, that would be... sensible.”

“Sensible,” he repeated, something like frustration entering his tone. “Always so practical, aren’t we? Even when...”

A crash of thunder interrupted whatever he might have said next. Through the window, they could see the first heavy drops of rain beginning to fall. Lord Albert appeared in the doorway again, his timing as impeccable as ever.

“Alexander, Sir James needs you to witness some statements. And Lady Penelope, Mrs Thackeray would like to know if you’ll take dinner in your room, or...”

“In my room, I think.” Penelope managed to keep her voice steady, though Alexander’s slight movement beside her suggested he might have been about to object. “It’s been a rather long day.”

“Of course.” Lord Albert’s expression showed perhaps too much understanding. “I’ll have someone show you up. Though...” he hesitated, glancing between them, “there

are still some documents that need reviewing. For tomorrow's proceedings."

"Tomorrow will be soon enough," Alexander said quietly. "Lady Penelope has done more than enough for one day."

The formality of his address felt like another wall building between them. Penelope turned towards the door, unable to bear the tension any longer.

"Good night, then. Your Grace. Lord Albert."

But as she reached the doorway, Alexander's voice stopped her.

"Penelope."

She paused but didn't turn.

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For riding through the storm. For... everything."

She nodded once, not trusting her voice, and continued up the stairs as the storm broke in earnest outside.

Morning light filtered through departing storm clouds, painting Ravensworth Hall's library in gentle shades of gold. Penelope stood at the window, watching early workers clearing fallen branches from the paths. She had slept poorly, her dreams filled with swirling memories of rain and thunder, of green eyes and unfinished conversations.

She had changed back into her now-dry riding habit, though she knew there would be no riding home yet - the roads were still treacherous from the storm. More guests had arrived early, summoned by Sir James to provide additional testimony about Sir Lionel's schemes.

"My Lady?" Mary's voice came softly from the doorway. Her maid had arrived with the dawn, bringing fresh clothes and a determined expression. "His Grace asks if you would join him in his study. There are some documents regarding the tenant depositions that need your attention."

Penelope's hands smoothed her skirts automatically.

"Of course. Though perhaps you should accompany me?"

"I think not, my Lady." Mary's practical tone held gentle firmness. "Some conversations need no witnesses. And you've been avoiding this one long enough."

"I haven't been..." Penelope began, but Mary's raised eyebrow stopped her weak protest. "Very well. Though I don't see what good can come of it now."

"Don't you?" Mary began tidying the papers Penelope had been pretending to review. "Then perhaps you're not as clever as I thought."

The walk to Alexander's study felt both endless and too short. Penelope paused outside his door, gathering her courage, then knocked softly.

"Enter."

He stood at his desk, but not behind it as he usually did. Instead, he faced the door, as if he'd been waiting for her. The morning light caught the auburn highlights in his dark hair, and she noticed that he wore the same clothes as yesterday - had he worked

through the night?

“Thank you for coming.” His voice held careful neutrality. “There are some matters we should discuss before Sir James begins today’s proceedings.”

“Of course.” She moved to the desk, maintaining a safe distance. “The tenant depositions...”

“Are not why I asked you here.” He ran a hand through his hair, dishevelled it further. “Though they provide a convenient excuse, don’t they? Like estate business and charitable works and all the other ways we’ve avoided actually talking to each other these past days.”

“I’m not sure what there is to say.” She kept her voice steady with effort. “The situation with Sir Lionel is nearly resolved. The estates’ ancient rights will be protected. Everything else is...”

“Everything else?” Something flashed in his eyes. “You mean the trust that I betrayed? The accusations that I made? The pain that I caused when I should have known - did know, somewhere beneath my cursed pride and fear - that you could never act against either estate’s interests?”

“Alexander...”

“No.” He moved closer, though still maintaining a careful distance. “Let me finish. You rode through a storm yesterday to protect both our estates. Even after what I’d done, you came. Because duty and honour mattered more than personal hurt.”

“Of course they did.” She lifted her chin. “The estates, the tenants, their ancient rights - those things are larger than any personal considerations.”

“Are they?” His voice gentled. “Or did you come because, despite everything, you knew I would listen? Because somewhere beneath all the pain and anger, you still trusted that I would see the truth when it was shown to me?”

She turned away, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze.

“What does it matter now? The crisis is nearly over. Sir Lionel’s schemes are exposed. There’s no need for us to...”

“There’s every need.”

“Is there?” She faced him again, letting him see the pain she’d been hiding. “You believed the worst of me so easily, Alexander. One planted document and all our work together, all our... everything we shared meant nothing.”

“Not nothing.” He took a step closer, his expression raw with honesty. “It meant so much that the very thought of betrayal devastated me. I reacted from fear - fear of losing everything again, fear of having trusted wrongly. But even then, even in my anger and suspicion, I couldn’t stop...” He broke off, moving to the window. Morning light carved his profile in stark relief as he continued more quietly, “I couldn’t stop reaching for you every time someone mentioned your name. Couldn’t stop staring towards Stanyon House, wondering if you were looking back. Couldn’t stop handling that notebook you gave me, remembering how it felt to be trusted so completely.”

“And now?” Her voice emerged barely above a whisper. “What do you feel now?”

“Now?” He turned back to her, and the emotion in his eyes made her breath catch. “Now I understand what my mother tried to tell me all those years ago. About balance. About how duty without compassion becomes tyranny, but compassion without wisdom becomes folly. You taught me that, Penelope. You showed me how to blend both.”

“Your mother?” The reference surprised her. “I don’t understand.”

He crossed to his desk, opened a drawer, and withdrew a letter - old and slightly yellowed with age.

“Her last letter to me. The one I couldn’t bear to read after she died. I finally opened it three days ago, after you left. After I realised what my fear of vulnerability had cost me.”

His hands trembled slightly as he held out the letter.

“Read it. Please.”

Penelope took the fragile paper carefully, her eyes moving over the faded writing:

‘My dearest Alexander,

If you are reading this, then I am gone, and you have finally found the courage to face what that means. I fear you will react as your father does - by closing yourself off, by choosing rigid duty over human connection. It is a natural response to pain, my darling, but it is the wrong one.

There must be balance in all things. You have such capacity for love, for understanding, for seeing the human hearts beneath estate management and noble duty. Don’t lose that in your determination to be strong. Don’t let fear of loss prevent you from trusting again.

Someday, you will meet someone who challenges you to be better than your fears. Someone who shows you how duty and compassion can work together, how strength can coexist with tenderness. When that happens, my son, be brave enough to recognise it. Be brave enough to trust not just their actions, but your own heart.

All my love,

Mother'

Penelope's vision blurred slightly as she finished reading.

"Alexander..."

"She could have been describing you." His voice came soft and certain. "You've challenged me from the first moment - questioned my rigid approaches, showed me better ways to serve our people. And when I forgot her wisdom, when I let fear override trust, you proved her right again by putting duty above personal hurt." He moved closer, close enough that she could catch that familiar scent of cologne and coffee. "I don't deserve your forgiveness. But I ask for it anyway. And I ask for the chance to prove myself worthy of your trust again."

Penelope looked down at the letter in her hands, then back up at him. The morning light caught his face, showing every line of strain, every sign of sleepless nights that matched her own.

"It's not that simple," she said quietly. "Trust, once broken..."

"Can be rebuilt." He took another step closer, though still not touching her. "Like estate boundaries can be reestablished, like ancient rights can be protected. Through patience, and care, and absolute dedication to truth."

Despite herself, a small smile touched her lips.

"Are you comparing our relationship to estate management?"

"Perhaps." That almost-smile she'd missed so much flickered across his face.

“Though I hope with better results than my previous attempts at managing either.”

She handed the letter back to him carefully.

“Your mother was very wise.”

“Yes.” He placed the letter on his desk, then turned back to her. “Though not as wise as her son has been foolish. Penelope, I...”

A knock at the door interrupted whatever he might have said. Lord Albert’s voice carried through the wood.

“Alexander? Sir James needs both of you. Sir Lionel’s London solicitors have more documents to review before they make their formal statements.”

Penelope moved towards the door, but Alexander’s voice stopped her.

“Wait. Please. We’re not finished here.”

She turned back, meeting his eyes directly for the first time.

“No,” she agreed softly. “We’re not. But duty calls, doesn’t it?”

“For now.” His voice held promise rather than resignation. “But afterward...”

“Afterward,” she nodded, and was rewarded with a real smile, one that warmed his eyes to summer-leaf green.

They walked to the door together, not touching but somehow more aligned than they had been in days. There was still much to discuss, much to resolve, but for now, this careful beginning would do.

The library had filled with people during their absence - Sir James at his makeshift desk, the London solicitors looking even more nervous than yesterday, Lord Albert organising papers with his usual efficiency. But Penelope noticed how everyone's attention shifted slightly as she and Alexander entered together.

"Ah, good." Sir James looked up from his work. "Your Grace, Lady Penelope - these new documents require immediate attention. It seems that Sir Lionel's schemes went deeper than we initially thought."

"Deeper?"

Alexander moved to examine the papers, and Penelope noticed how he positioned himself so she could see them equally well. The old habits of working together seemed to resurface naturally.

"Yes." The older solicitor stepped forward, his manner suggesting that he hoped to further secure his own position by being helpful. "We've found evidence that Sir Lionel began planning this attack on both estates years ago. Even before he started accumulating gambling debts."

"He was watching," Penelope realised, studying the dates on the documents. "Waiting for any sign of weakness or division between the estates."

"Precisely." Alexander's voice held grim satisfaction. "Though he didn't count on our ability to work together despite personal conflicts."

She felt his quick glance, and acknowledged it with a slight nod. Yes, they had managed to protect what mattered, even when their own relationship lay in ruins. Perhaps that said more about their fundamental compatibility than either of them had realised.

“The Court of Chancery will want to see all of this,” Sir James observed, gathering the papers into careful order. “Though I suspect that Sir Lionel won’t be in any position to pursue his petition, given his current legal difficulties.”

“No,” Albert agreed cheerfully. “Latest word from London suggests he’s fled to the continent. Several of his creditors are in pursuit.”

“Then it’s over?” Penelope asked, though she already knew it couldn’t be quite that simple.

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“The immediate threat, yes.” Alexander’s voice held careful precision. “Though we’ll need to file joint petitions with Chancery to formally document everything that’s happened. To protect against any future challenges to our ancient rights.”

“Joint petitions?” She caught his meaning immediately. “You mean, continue working together?”

“It would be sensible,” he said, though his eyes held something beyond mere practicality. “The estates have always been stronger united. Recent events have only proved that more clearly.”

Sir James cleared his throat.

“If I might suggest? The formal documentation of your cooperative management of shared boundaries would carry considerable weight with the Court. Especially given how effectively you’ve handled this crisis together.”

Penelope noticed Lord Albert hiding a smile behind some papers. Even the London solicitors seemed to be watching them with more than professional interest.

“Yes,” she said finally, meeting Alexander’s gaze directly. “That would be... sensible.”

His eyes warmed at her deliberate echo of their earlier conversation.

“Purely practical, of course.”

“Of course.” She couldn’t quite suppress her own smile. “Though perhaps we should discuss the details more thoroughly? After the immediate business is concluded?”

“I believe,” Lord Albert spoke up with suspicious promptness, “that Sir James and I can handle the rest of today’s statements. If you two have other matters to attend to?”

Alexander’s expression suggested he might kiss his cousin, if it wouldn’t completely ruin his dignity. “Thank you, Albert. We do indeed have some... estate matters... to discuss.”

Penelope felt her cheeks warm at the inadequacy of that description, but she managed to maintain her composure as they left the library. They had much to resolve, much to rebuild. But for the first time since that terrible night in his study, she felt hope unfurling in her chest like the first buds of spring. They returned to his study by unspoken agreement, but this time Alexander closed the door behind them with deliberate finality. The morning light had strengthened, filling the room with a clarity that seemed appropriate for what needed to be said.

“Estate matters?”

Penelope raised an eyebrow, though she couldn’t quite hide her smile.

“Would you have preferred that I announce to the entire room that I needed to properly apologise to the woman I love? To beg her forgiveness and to try to explain how completely losing her trust made me realise that I cannot live without it?”

The words hung in the air between them, too important to be immediately acknowledged. Penelope moved to the window, needing the moment to steady herself.

“And have you?” Her voice emerged softer than she intended. “Realised that?”

“I realised it the moment that you walked away that night.” He stayed where he was, giving her space she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted. “I realised it again when you rode through a storm to warn me. And I realise it now, watching you put duty and honour above personal hurt, showing me daily what true nobility looks like.”

She turned to face him, seeing in his expression all the stresses that matched her own.

“Alexander...”

“I love you.” He said it simply, directly, as if it were both the most obvious and most important truth in the world. “I loved you when we worked together in this room, when we visited tenants, when we danced at that dinner party. I loved you even when fear and pride made me forget to trust that love. And I love you now, though I have no right to expect anything in return.”

Penelope felt tears burning behind her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. This moment deserved clarity, not emotional confusion.

“And what if I said that love without trust is meaningless?”

“Then I would spend every day proving that trust can be rebuilt.” He took one step closer, then stopped, letting her choose the next move. “Every day showing you that I’ve learned from my mistakes. Every day demonstrating that your faith in me isn’t misplaced.”

She studied him for a long moment, seeing both the man who had hurt her so deeply and the one who had worked beside her so effectively. The one who had let fear override trust, and the one who had stood with her against Sir Lionel’s schemes despite their personal pain.

“It won’t be easy,” she said finally. “Trust, once broken...”

“Takes time and care to rebuild.” He finished for her. “Like properly registered rights need constant attention. Like estate boundaries need regular maintenance.”

A small laugh escaped her.

“You really must stop comparing our relationship to estate management.”

“Why?” That almost-smile touched his lips again. “It seems to have worked rather well so far. We’re both rather good at maintaining important things, aren’t we?”

She took a step towards him, then another.

“And is that what I am? Something important to maintain?”

“No.” His voice deepened as she drew closer. “You are everything. The heart of it all. The balance my mother wrote about - showing me how duty and feeling can work together, how trust and verification aren’t opposites but partners.”

Another step brought her within reach, though still not touching.

“And if I said that I needed time? To be sure?”

“Then I would wait.” His eyes held absolute certainty. “However long it takes. Though I hope that you might let me court you properly while you decide? No more hiding behind estate business and charitable works?”

“I think,” she said carefully, “that might be... sensible.”

His laugh was unexpected and beautiful.

“Sensible? Is that really the word you want to use right now?”

“No.” She smiled up at him, finally letting him see everything she felt. “But it’s safer than saying I love you too.”

His breath caught audibly. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, the morning light wrapping around them like a blessing. Then, slowly, giving her every chance to step away, he raised one hand to cup her cheek.

“Penelope.” Just her name, but it held volumes. “May I...”

“Yes.” She leaned into his touch. “Though I reserve the right to remain sensible about estate matters.”

“Of course.” His other hand came up to frame her face. “I would expect nothing less from the woman who rode through a storm to protect ancient rights.”

“And the man I rode through that storm to find?” Her voice softened. “What should I expect from him?”

“Everything,” he promised, and kissed her.

This kiss held none of the desperate passion of their first in the conservatory. Instead, it felt like coming home - like finding something precious that had been lost, like the first warm day after a long winter. His lips moved against hers with careful tenderness, as if she were something infinitely valuable that he feared to damage again.

When they finally parted, he rested his forehead against hers.

“I don’t deserve this second chance.”

“No,” she agreed, smiling to soften the words. “But I’m giving it to you anyway.”

Though if you ever doubt me again...”

“Never.” He pulled back just enough to meet her eyes. “I’ve learned that lesson rather thoroughly.”

A knock at the door made them step apart, though he caught her hand and kept it.

“Come in,” he called, and Penelope noticed how his voice had regained that quiet confidence she remembered from their early days working together.

Lord Albert entered, took one look at their linked hands, and broke into a broad grin.

“I take it the estate matters are resolved satisfactorily?”

“Perfectly,” Alexander replied, his thumb moving gently across Penelope’s knuckles.

“Though I believe we’ll need to review the details regularly. Just to be certain.”

“Just to be sensible,” Penelope corrected, and was rewarded with his warm laugh.

Morning light filled Ravensworth Hall’s library with soft gold tones, catching dust motes that danced above spread papers and ancient ledgers.

Several months had passed since Sir Lionel’s flight to the continent, since trust had been rebuilt in a sunlit study. Now Penelope sat at what had become her usual place near the window, reviewing their joint petition to Chancery one final time.

“The Court seems quite impressed with our documentation,” Alexander observed from his position near the fire. He held a letter from their London solicitors, its contents clearly satisfying. “Particularly the way we’ve organised the tenant

depositions about traditional usage rights.”

“Probably because we actually consulted the tenants instead of just making decisions for them.”

Penelope smiled without looking up from her work. These quiet moments together, discussing estate business that affected both their lands, had become precious to her. She felt rather than saw him move closer, sensed his presence behind her chair moments before his hand came to rest, warm on her shoulder.

“Rather like someone once suggested to me? Before I learned to listen properly?”

“I seem to recall that conversation.” She tilted her head back to look up at him. “Though as I remember, you were rather resistant to the idea at the time.”

“I was rather resistant to many good ideas.” His thumb moved in a small circle against her shoulder. “Fortunately, you’re remarkably persistent when you know you’re right.”

“One of us had to be sensible about these matters.”

His quiet laugh still sent warmth through her chest. These past months of careful courtship had shown her new sides of him - the dry humour that lay beneath his severe manner, the tenderness that balanced his strength.

“Speaking of sensible matters,” he said, moving to take the chair beside her, “there’s something we should discuss.”

She recognised his tone - the one that meant he was about to say something important but was trying to approach it carefully.

“Yes?”

“The Court of Chancery will formally confirm our joint management of the shared boundaries next week.” He reached for her hand, a gesture that had become natural between them. “Once that’s registered, both estates’ ancient rights will be permanently protected.”

“I know.” She turned her hand in his, linking their fingers. “That’s why we’re reviewing everything one last time. To ensure that all the documentation is perfect.”

“Yes, but...” He hesitated, then seemed to gather his courage. “Have you considered what comes after?”

“After?” She looked at him more closely, noting the slight tension in his shoulders, the way his other hand tapped restlessly against his knee. “You mean continuing our joint management of the properties?”

“I mean continuing everything.” His voice deepened slightly. “Penelope, these past months, working together, courting properly... they’ve shown me something that I think I knew from the beginning, before fear and pride nearly ruined everything.”

Her heart began to beat faster, but she kept her voice steady.

“And what is that?”

“That we’re better together. Not just at estate management, though God knows you’ve improved my methods considerably. But at everything.” He shifted in his chair to face her fully. “The way you balance my tendency towards rigid control with practical humanity. The way that I can support your innovative ideas with careful implementation. The way we simply... fit.”

“Alexander...”

She barely breathed his name.

“Let me finish.” His grip on her hand tightened slightly. “I love you. I think I’ve loved you since that first day you challenged my opinions about charitable works. I know that I’ve loved you since I watched you ride through a storm to protect both our estates. And I want to spend the rest of my life proving worthy of your trust and your love.”

He released her hand, but only to reach into his coat pocket and withdraw a small box. Inside, nestled on dark velvet, lay a ring - not a flashy new piece, but something that spoke of history and meaning.

“This was my mother’s,” he said quietly. “She left it for me, with instructions to give it only to someone who understood what she had tried to teach me about balance. About how duty and love can work together.” His eyes met hers, showing a vulnerability that made her heart ache. “Will you marry me, Penelope? Make our personal partnership as permanent as our estates’ one?”

For a moment, she couldn’t speak past the emotion tightening her throat. The morning light caught the ring’s antique stones, making them sparkle like the tears she refused to let fall.

“That’s not a very sensible proposal,” she managed finally, though her voice shook slightly. “Comparing marriage to estate management again?”

His expression held both hope and amusement.

“Would you prefer something more romantic? I could quote poetry, though I suspect you’d see through such an obvious attempt to sway your emotions rather than your

practical nature.”

“Alexander...” She reached out to touch his face, feeling the slight tremor in his jaw that betrayed his tension. “When have I ever needed you to be anything but exactly who you are?”

“Is that a yes?”

His hand came up to cover hers where it rested against his cheek.

“Yes.” She smiled through the tears that escaped, despite her best efforts. “Though I reserve the right to continue challenging your more rigid approaches to estate management.”

“I would expect nothing less.” He slipped the ring onto her finger, then pulled her into his arms. “In fact, I’m counting on it.”

The kiss they shared held both tenderness and promise, but a knock at the door separated them before it could deepen. Lord Albert entered, took one look at their position and Penelope’s newly adorned hand, and broke into a broad grin.

“Finally! Rosalind was beginning to worry you’d never get around to it, cousin.”

“You knew?” Penelope asked, though she couldn’t summon any real surprise.

The whole household had probably been watching Alexander work up to this moment.

“My dear Lady Penelope,” Lord Albert’s eyes sparkled with mischief, “we’ve all been waiting since the day you rode through that storm. Though some of us,” he shot a meaningful look at his cousin, “have been rather slow about recognising the

obvious.”

“I preferred to be thorough,” Alexander defended, though his arm remained warm around Penelope’s waist. “To be certain that everything was properly prepared.”

“Like a properly documented estate transaction?” Penelope couldn’t resist teasing him. “All rights carefully registered?”

“More like ensuring that I deserved the gift being offered.” His voice turned serious despite her light tone. “That trust, once rebuilt, was strong enough to support forever.”

Lord Albert cleared his throat.

“Yes, well, as touching as this is, you might want to know that your father has just arrived, Penelope. Apparently, he had some estate business to discuss?”

Penelope felt Alexander’s quiet laugh.

“I might have sent him a message this morning. Requesting a private conversation.”

“Of course you did.” She shook her head fondly. “Always so proper about these things.”

“Not always.” He pressed a kiss to her temple before releasing her. “I did kiss you in the conservatory before properly declaring my intentions.”

“And look how well that turned out,” Lord Albert muttered, though his grin belied his tone.

The Earl of Stanyon waited in the morning room, his distinguished face showing both

expectation and amusement as they entered. His eyes went immediately to Penelope's hand, then to Alexander's face.

"I see that you finally found the courage, my boy." His voice held warm approval. "Though I was beginning to wonder if I would have to drop some rather pointed hints."

"Papa!" Penelope moved to embrace him. "Did everyone know about this except me?"

"My dear," her father's eyes twinkled, "I've known since the day you rode through that storm. No one does something that dramatically foolish unless love outweighs sense."

"It wasn't foolish," she protested. "It was necessary to protect the estates."

"Of course it was." The Earl patted her hand. "Just as it was necessary for Alexander to spend the past three months courting you under the guise of estate business. Though I must say, your joint petition to Chancery is remarkably thorough."

Alexander moved to stand beside her, his presence solid and reassuring.

"We believed in being comprehensive, sir. In all matters."

"So I see." The Earl's expression softened as he looked between them. "Your mother would be proud, Alexander. She always said the right woman would teach you about balancing duty with heart."

"She did." Alexander's voice held quiet certainty. "In her last letter to me. Though it took nearly losing Penelope to make me understand what she meant."

“Well,” Lord Albert spoke up from where he lounged against the doorframe, “now that’s all settled, perhaps we should discuss how to announce it? The Harvest Festival is next week...”

“Perfect,” the Earl nodded approvingly. “The tenants from both estates will be there. It would be a fine time to announce the formal joining of the properties through marriage.”

“Through love,” Alexander corrected softly, his hand finding Penelope’s. “The estates are merely a bonus.”

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:27 am

Later that evening, after her father had departed and dinner had been served, Penelope found herself back in the library with Alexander. Lord Albert had made himself scarce, claiming estate business that couldn't wait, though his wink as he left suggested otherwise. The fire cast dancing shadows across the familiar room as Alexander drew her into his arms. Whilst being alone together like this wasn't exactly as propriety demanded, they had gone rather past the point of caring – especially as Penelope's father was not in the least concerned.

“Happy?”

“Mmm.” She settled against him, feeling the steady beat of his heart. “Though I'm still not entirely sure about announcing it at the Harvest Festival. Won't that seem rather... public?”

“Says the woman who confronted Sir Lionel in front of his own solicitors?” His chest rumbled with quiet laughter. “Since when are you shy about public declarations?”

“That was different.” She tilted her head back to look up at him. “That was about protecting what mattered.”

“And this isn't?” His expression grew serious. “Penelope, I want everyone to know - not just that we're to be married, but that both estates will be permanently united. That the partnership we've built these past months will last forever.”

“There you go again,” she smiled, “comparing our marriage to estate management.”

“Because it works.” He brushed a kiss across her forehead. “We work. In every way

that matters.”

She had to admit he was right. These past months had proved how effectively they complemented each other - his methodical nature balancing her intuitive approach, her practical humanity softening his tendency towards rigid control.

“I love you,” she said quietly, watching his eyes warm at the words. “Even when you’re being ridiculously proper about everything.”

“I love you too.” His hands tightened slightly at her waist. “Even when you’re riding through storms to prove me wrong about everything.”

“Not everything,” she corrected. “Just the important things.”

His laugh was swallowed by her kiss, and for a long moment, estate management was the furthest thing from either of their minds.

A log shifted in the fire, sending sparks dancing up the chimney. Alexander drew back slightly, though he kept her close in his arms, their warmth around her filling her with joy.

“I have something else for you,” he said, a hint of nervousness entering his tone. “Though perhaps I should have given it to you before the ring.”

“Oh?”

She watched curiously as he moved to his desk and withdrew a document from a drawer.

“I found this last week, when I was organising the final papers for our Chancery petition.” He handed it to her carefully, and settled back on the seat beside her. “It’s

from your father's correspondence with my father, from just before... before everything changed."

Penelope unfolded the yellowed paper, recognising her father's handwriting.

'My dear friend,

Your suggestion about joining our estates more permanently through the next generation shows your usual foresight. Your Alexander and my little Penelope are both too young now for such considerations, but perhaps someday... They share our commitment to proper estate management, after all. Though I suspect your boy might need someone to challenge his more rigid tendencies, much as your dear wife challenges yours.

With warmest regards...'

"They planned this?" She looked up at Alexander in surprise. "Even then?"

"Not exactly." He moved to sit beside her again, his arm sliding around her shoulders as she continued reading. "They discussed the possibility, but agreed to let us make our own choices when the time came. Though it seems they saw something we didn't realise until much later."

"That we complement each other?" She leaned back against him. "That we're stronger together than apart?"

"That, and apparently that I needed someone to challenge my rigid tendencies." His voice held rueful amusement. "Though I doubt they anticipated just how thoroughly you would manage that."

"I didn't do it alone." She turned in his arms to face him. "You had to be willing to

learn, to change, to trust.”

“And I had to be willing to admit when I was wrong.” He touched her cheek gently. “Though perhaps we could avoid testing that particular lesson quite so dramatically in the future?”

“No more storms?”

She smiled up at him.

“Oh, I’m sure there will be storms.” His expression grew serious. “But we’ll weather them together from now on. No more letting fear or pride drive us apart.”

“Together,” she agreed softly. “Though I reserve the right to continue improving your methods of estate management.”

“I would expect nothing less.” His thumb traced her cheekbone. “Just as I expect you’ll continue riding out in inappropriate weather whenever you think something needs immediate attention.”

“Only when necessary,” she protested, though they both knew better. “And speaking of necessity, we should review the arrangements for the Harvest Festival. If we’re to make an announcement...”

“Not tonight.” He caught her hand as she moved towards the desk, and pulled her gently back to him. “Tonight is for us. Estate management can wait until tomorrow.”

“Can it?” She raised an eyebrow. “What happened to my properly organised Duke who insists that everything must be thoroughly planned?”

“He learned that some things are more important than proper planning.” Alexander

drew her back into his arms. “Though I did already have Albert start organising the festival details. And Rosalind is handling the announcement arrangements.”

“Of course you did.” She couldn’t help laughing. “Heaven forbid anything be truly spontaneous.”

“I can be spontaneous.” He affected a wounded expression. “I did kiss you in the conservatory that night.”

“Yes, and then spent three months making up for that momentary lapse in proper behaviour.” But she softened the teasing with a gentle touch to his face. “Though I suppose your methodical courtship did prove rather effective.”

“Did it?” His eyes darkened slightly. “Perhaps I should be methodical about this too, then.”

The kiss that followed was anything but methodical, though it maintained that careful control she’d come to recognise as his way of showing how precious she was to him. When they finally parted, both slightly breathless, she rested her forehead against his chest.

“I love you,” she said quietly. “Even when you’re being ridiculously proper about everything.”

“I love you too.” His arms tightened around her. “Even when you’re completely disrupting all of my carefully laid plans.”

The fire crackled softly, casting warm light over them as they stood together. Through the library windows, Penelope could see the first stars appearing in the darkening sky. How different this evening was from that stormy day when she’d first sought shelter at Ravensworth Hall.

“What are you thinking?”

Alexander’s voice came soft above her head.

“About how much has changed. How far we’ve come since that first storm.” She lifted her head to meet his eyes. “Though some things haven’t changed at all.”

“Oh?” His expression held curious amusement. “Which things?”

“You still compare everything to estate management.” She smiled up at him. “You still insist on proper documentation for everything. You still drink far too much coffee when you’re working late.”

“And you still challenge my every decision.” But his tone held warmth rather than criticism. “Still insist on practical solutions over traditional methods. Still ride out in any weather when you think something needs immediate attention.”

“We do rather suit each other, don’t we?” She reached up to touch his face, feeling the slight roughness of evening shadow against her palm. “Even when we’re driving each other mad.”

“Especially then.” He turned his head to press a kiss to her palm. “Though I expect we’ll have plenty of opportunity to practice dealing with that. Running two estates together won’t always be simple.”

“Nothing worth doing ever is.” She let her hand slide down to rest over his heart. “But we’ve proved we can handle difficulties together, haven’t we?”

“We have.” His own hand came up to cover hers. “Though perhaps we could handle future difficulties with slightly less drama? I’m not sure my heart could take watching you ride through another storm like that.”

“No promises.” Her smile widened at his mock groan. “After all, someone needs to keep you from becoming too set in your ways.”

A knock at the door interrupted whatever response he might have made. Lord Albert appeared, his expression apologetic.

“Sorry to interrupt, but there’s a matter that needs attention. Featherstone’s here about the Harvest Festival arrangements. Apparently there’s some question about the traditional boundaries for the celebration?”

Alexander’s laugh held resigned amusement.

“Of course there is. Though perhaps this is an appropriate first test of our joint management?”

“Very appropriate.” Penelope stepped back, though she kept hold of his hand. “Shall we show everyone how well we work together?”

“You already have,” Lord Albert observed dryly. “Though some of us noticed rather sooner than others.”

They followed him to the study, where Featherstone waited with maps and papers spread across the desk. The estate manager’s weathered face showed relief at seeing them together.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Your Grace, my Lady, but with the estates joining proper-like now, some of the tenants were wondering about the traditional divisions for the Harvest celebrations. Seeing as how we’ve always had separate festivals before...”

“But not this year,” Alexander said firmly, drawing Penelope closer to the desk. “This year we celebrate together. As we will from now on.”

Penelope studied the maps, her practical mind already working on solutions.

“We could use the south meadow - it’s traditionally shared grazing land anyway. That way neither estate’s tenants would feel their rights were being overlooked.”

“Perfect.” Alexander’s approval came warm and immediate. “And it would demonstrate how we intend to manage things going forward. Together, with respect for traditional rights on both sides.”

Featherstone’s face cleared.

“That’ll settle everyone right enough. Especially with the announcement being made there.”

“Speaking of the announcement,” Lord Albert spoke up from near the door, “Rosalind has some ideas she wants to discuss...”

Later that night, as Penelope’s carriage carried her home through starlit darkness, she found herself smiling at the memory of their impromptu planning session. How naturally they had worked together, her practical suggestions complementing Alexander’s careful attention to tradition and protocol.

The ring on her finger caught the lantern light, its antique stones holding memories of past Duchesses of Ravensworth. Soon she would join their ranks, joining the estates as permanently as they were joining their lives.

Mary, sitting opposite her in the carriage, watched her with knowing eyes.

“You seem happy, my Lady.”

“I am.” Penelope touched the ring gently. “Though I suspect you’ve known that this

was coming for some time?”

“Since the day you rode through that storm.” Mary’s practical voice held satisfaction.

“No one does something that foolish unless they’re in love.”

“It wasn’t foolish,” Penelope protested automatically. “It was necessary.”

“Of course it was, my Lady.” But Mary’s smile suggested she knew better. “Just as it was necessary for His Grace to spend three months courting you through estate business.”

“We needed to rebuild trust,” Penelope said softly. “To be sure we could work together properly.”

“And are you sure now?”

Penelope looked out at the familiar lanes passing by, lanes that connected both estates like the lives they would soon join.

“Yes,” she said simply. “We balance each other. In everything that matters.”

The carriage turned onto the drive to Stanyon House, and Penelope found herself already looking forward to tomorrow. To more estate business that wasn’t really about estates at all. To more careful courtship that would soon become something permanent and precious.

To everything their future held, storms and all.

The Harvest Festival transformed the south meadow into a scene from a fairy tale.

Bright autumn sunlight gilded the changing leaves, while scattered clouds cast dramatic shadows across the assembled crowd. Penelope stood at the edge of the gathering, watching tenants from both estates mingle freely, their earlier uncertainties forgotten in shared celebration.

“Quite a transformation,” her father observed beside her. The Earl’s eyes held quiet pride as he surveyed the scene. “Though I suspect this is just the beginning of changes to come.”

“Good changes.”

Penelope’s voice was soft, her hand straying to the ring she now wore openly. Its weight had become familiar over the past week, though each glimpse still brought a surge of joy that made her heart race. Across the meadow, she could see Alexander speaking with a group of tenant farmers. Even at this distance, she noted how his usual severity had softened, how he listened with genuine attention to their concerns. The past months had changed him - or perhaps just revealed what had always been there, hidden beneath duty and fear.

“He’s learned well,” the Earl said, following her gaze. “Though I suspect his teachers were both you and his mother, in different ways.”

“His mother?”

Penelope turned to her father curiously.

“That ring you wear - I remember his mother wearing it. She had the same way about her, you know. Of softening duty with understanding, of making protocol serve people rather than the other way around.”

Before Penelope could respond, Rosalind appeared at her elbow, practically vibrating

with excitement.

“It’s almost time! Are you ready? Should we make the announcement now, or wait until after the traditional ceremonies?”

“Let the traditional ceremonies happen first,” Penelope said, watching another group of tenants arrive. “This day belongs to both estates’ people. Our announcement shouldn’t overshadow their celebrations.”

“Very diplomatic,” Alexander’s voice came from behind her, making her heart leap even as she smiled at its familiar warmth. “Though I suspect they already know. Mrs Williams has been looking entirely too pleased with herself all morning.”

“Of course they know.” Rosalind rolled her eyes fondly. “The entire neighbourhood has been watching you two dance around each other for months. Though I still say you took an unnecessarily long time about it, brother.”

“I preferred to be thorough.” Alexander moved to stand beside Penelope, his hand finding hers with practiced ease. “To be certain that everything was properly prepared.”

“Properly prepared?” Albert joined them, grinning. “Is that what we’re calling three months of pretending estate business required daily visits?”

Penelope felt her cheeks warm, but Alexander’s thumb stroked across her knuckles reassuringly.

“Those visits were entirely necessary,” he said with dignity. “We had much to discuss.”

“Oh yes,” Albert’s grin widened. “Very important discussions about grain storage

and water rights. Though I notice those discussions often seemed to happen in the conservatory. Or the rose garden. Or..."

"I believe," the Earl interrupted smoothly, though his eyes twinkled, "that the traditional ceremonies are about to begin. Shall we?"

The harvest ceremonies had been part of both estates' traditions for generations. Now, watching Alexander step forward to speak the ancient words of blessing over the gathered crops, Penelope felt the rightness of their estates' joining. His deep voice carried across the meadow, firm and sure, as he acknowledged the partnership between land and people that had sustained both properties for centuries. When it came time for her part in the ceremony, Penelope moved to stand beside him. Together, they distributed the traditional gifts - bread from each estate's grain, apples from shared orchards, tokens that represented the abundance both properties had enjoyed. The tenants' earlier uncertainty about the combined celebration had vanished completely. They approached as one community now, accepting the gifts with clear pleasure at seeing their Lord and Lady working in such harmony.

"See how natural they look together?" Penelope heard one farmer's wife whisper to another. "Like they was meant to be that way all along."

"Aye," came the response. "Though they took their time about realising it, didn't they?"

Alexander's slight smile suggested he'd heard too, but his voice remained steady as he continued the ceremony. When he reached for Penelope's hand to complete the final blessing, the contact felt as natural as breathing.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:27 am

As the formal part of the celebration ended and the feasting began, Lord Albert stepped forward to call for attention. This was the moment they'd planned - the official announcement of their betrothal. Yet somehow, watching the happy crowds, Penelope realised that it felt less like an announcement and more like a confirmation of what everyone already knew.

“My friends,” Lord Albert’s voice carried clearly across the meadow. “Today we celebrate not just a bountiful harvest, but a union that promises even greater abundance for years to come.”

She felt Alexander’s hand tighten slightly on hers as Albert continued. This man who had once been so rigid about protocol, so careful about proper behaviour, now stood openly holding her hand before both their estates’ people. The change in him moved her deeply, even as she recognised that he had changed her too – he had taught her that sometimes tradition and protocol could serve love rather than hinder it.

“The Duke of Ravensworth,” Lord Albert announced with obvious pleasure, “and Lady Penelope Whitmore wish to share their joy with all of you. Their upcoming marriage will unite our estates permanently, joining two ancient properties that have always been stronger together than apart.”

A cheer went up from the assembled crowd, genuine and heartfelt.

Penelope felt tears prick at her eyes as she saw Mrs Williams dabbing at her own with her apron, while Featherstone tried to maintain his dignity despite his broad smile.

Alexander turned to face her, his public reserve softening as he met her gaze.

“Shall we make it official, my love?”

She smiled up at him, remembering all the times they’d stood together in his study, heads bent over estate documents. How far they’d come from those early days of cautious cooperation.

“I thought we already had?” She couldn’t resist teasing him. “Or did you need more documentation?”

His laugh, warm and free, carried across the meadow, making several people turn in surprise. The Duke of Ravensworth, laughing openly at his own Harvest Festival? But the surprise in their faces quickly turned to approval as Alexander drew Penelope closer.

“The only documentation I need,” he said softly, for her ears alone, “is the promise you’ve already given me. Though I suppose making it public does satisfy proper protocol.”

“Always so proper,” she murmured, but her tone held only love.

“Not always.” His eyes darkened slightly with memory. “I seem to recall kissing you quite improperly in the conservatory that night.”

“That worked out rather well in the end, didn’t it?”

Instead of answering, he kissed her there before everyone - a proper, ceremonial kiss that nevertheless held promises of less proper ones to come.

The celebration continued long into the afternoon.

Penelope found herself swept from group to group, accepting congratulations and sharing in the general joy. She noticed how easily the tenants from both estates mingled now, their earlier concerns about changed management forgotten in the evidence of their lords' happiness. Alexander stayed close, his hand finding hers whenever possible. She watched him interact with their people - for they were truly their people now - and marvelled at how naturally he balanced authority with warmth.

"You've changed him," Rosalind said softly, appearing beside her as Alexander spoke with a group of farmers about winter preparations. "Or perhaps just helped him remember who he really is, beneath all that rigid control."

"We've changed each other," Penelope corrected, watching as one of the older farmers clapped Alexander on the shoulder - a familiarity that would have been unthinkable months ago. "He's taught me that sometimes tradition has value, that protocol can protect as well as restrict."

"And you've taught him that sometimes the heart knows better than the head." Rosalind squeezed her arm affectionately. "Though I must say, you both took an age to listen to your hearts properly."

"Some things are worth taking time over." Penelope touched her ring gently. "Worth building properly, with a foundation that will last."

"Like properly registered estate rights?" Rosalind teased, then grew more serious. "Though I suppose that comparison does rather suit you both. You do tend to approach everything like estate management."

"Not everything," Penelope protested, though she couldn't help smiling as Alexander glanced their way, his eyes warming as they met hers.

"No?" Rosalind's knowing look suggested she saw more than Penelope might wish.

“Then why do I suspect you’ve already started organising improvements to combine both estates’ charitable works?”

“That’s different,” Penelope defended, though she had indeed been making such plans. “That’s about practical necessity.”

“Of course it is.” Rosalind’s tone held affectionate disbelief. “Just as my brother’s daily visits to discuss estate business were absolutely necessary.”

Before Penelope could respond, Alexander returned to them, his expression holding that quiet contentment she’d come to treasure.

“What’s this about estate business?”

“Nothing,” both women said together, then laughed at his suspicious look.

“I was just telling Penelope how well you two suit each other,” Rosalind explained. “Though I still say you could have realised it sooner and saved us all months of watching you pretend everything was about estate management.”

“It wasn’t pretence,” Alexander said with dignity, though his eyes held amusement. “We had many important matters to discuss.”

“Yes, brother.” Rosalind patted his arm fondly. “Very important discussions that somehow required daily visits and long walks through the rose garden.”

“The rose garden has excellent privacy for sensitive estate business,” he replied with perfect seriousness, though Penelope felt his hand squeeze hers gently.

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” Lord Albert joined them, grinning. “Though I must say, your methods of estate management have produced remarkable results.”

Looking around at their joined estates' people celebrating together, at the easy way the two communities had merged, Penelope had to agree. Though perhaps not for the reasons Albert meant.

"The best results," she said softly, meeting Alexander's warm gaze, "come from balancing heart with duty. From understanding that love and responsibility can work together."

"Like your mother tried to teach you?" she added quietly, for his ears alone.

His expression softened further.

"Like you showed me was possible. Though I suspect she knew what she was about, leaving you that ring."

"She didn't know me," Penelope protested.

"No, but she knew her son." His thumb stroked across her knuckles where they joined with his. "Knew exactly what kind of person could teach me to balance duty with heart."

The afternoon light had begun to take on the golden quality of early evening, casting long shadows across the meadow. Most of the tenants had begun their journeys home, though many lingered to share one last cup of celebration ale or exchange congratulations again.

"We should thank them properly before they leave," Penelope said, watching another family prepare their cart for departure. "They've made this day perfect."

"They've made it real," Alexander corrected gently. "Shown us that our estates truly can work as one."

“Like us?”

She smiled up at him.

“Exactly like us.” He bent to kiss her temple, propriety relaxed by the late hour and general atmosphere of celebration. “Though perhaps with slightly less arguing about proper methods?”

“I wouldn’t count on that.” Her laugh held pure joy. “After all, someone needs to keep you from becoming too set in your ways.”

“I look forward to it.” His voice deepened slightly. “To everything about our future together.”

The setting sun painted the autumn trees in shades of gold and crimson, nature’s own celebration of their joy. As they moved together to bid farewell to their people, Penelope felt the rightness of it all settle into her bones.

This was what her father had meant about balance, what Alexander’s mother had written about in that last letter. This perfect joining of duty and love, of tradition and progress, of heart and responsibility. As the last cart rumbled away down the lane, Lord Albert approached with news from the village.

“Word’s already spreading about the announcement. Though I suspect half the county has been expecting it since that stormy day when Lady Penelope rode to warn us about Sir Lionel’s schemes.”

“Has anyone heard of him recently?” Penelope asked, though she kept her tone light to avoid disturbing the day’s joy.

“Last report placed him in France,” Lord Albert replied with satisfaction. “Most of

his creditors have given up the chase, satisfied with claiming portions of his remaining properties. Though I understand his London solicitors are still rather anxious to avoid any association with his actions.”

“As well they might be.” Alexander’s arm slipped around Penelope’s waist, drawing her closer as the evening air cooled. “Though perhaps we should focus on more pleasant matters? The wedding preparations, for instance?”

“Ah yes,” Lord Albert’s grin returned. “I understand that Rosalind has rather extensive plans for that.”

“Nothing too elaborate,” Penelope protested quickly, though she knew it was probably hopeless. Alexander’s sister had been making lists since the moment they’d announced their betrothal to the family.

“You’ll have to take that up with her,” Alexander said, amusement clear in his voice. “Though I suspect you’ll find her as stubborn about proper celebrations as I am about proper documentation.”

“Heaven help me,” Penelope laughed. “I’m marrying into a family of perfectly proper planners.”

“Not quite perfect.” His voice softened as he drew her slightly away from Albert’s knowing smile. “After all, I did kiss you in the conservatory before making my intentions officially known.”

“Your one moment of impropriety.” She turned in his arms to face him. “Though it led us here, didn’t it?”

“It led us home,” he corrected gently, and kissed her as the first stars appeared in the autumn sky.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:27 am

Early morning light filled Stanyon House's family chapel with jewelled colours from the centuries old stained glass. Penelope stood before the small mirror in the adjoining chamber, watching as Mary made final adjustments to her wedding clothes. The pale gold muslin gown, trimmed with Brussels lace that had been her grandmother's, fell in graceful folds to just touch the floor.

"There, my Lady." Mary secured the last pearl pin in her hair, nestling it among the orange blossoms that symbolised purity and fertility. "Though I still say that we should have used the white roses instead."

"Orange blossoms are traditional," Penelope smiled at her maid's fussing. "And you know how the Duke feels about proper traditions."

"As if anyone could forget." But Mary's tone held affection rather than criticism. She'd grown quite fond of Alexander's careful attention to protocol, especially after he'd insisted on providing her with a generous marriage portion in recognition of her years of loyal service.

A soft knock heralded Rosalind's arrival. Alexander's sister looked radiant in her role supporting Penelope, her blue silk dress exactly the shade they'd finally agreed upon after weeks of careful deliberation.

"Everything's ready," she announced, then paused to study Penelope with a critical eye. "Perfect. Though..." she reached to adjust a curl that had escaped its pin, "there. Now you're truly ready to become a Duchess."

"Is anyone ever truly ready for that?" Penelope asked softly, touching the pearl

necklace which Alexander had sent over that morning - a traditional gift from groom to bride on their wedding day.

“You’ve been ready since the day you rode through that storm to protect both our estates,” Rosalind said firmly. “Everything since then has just been a matter of proper documentation.”

“Speaking of proper documentation,” Penelope’s father appeared in the doorway, resplendent in his finest coat, “the special license is all in order, the settlements have been signed, and your bridegroom is trying very hard not to wear a path in the chapel floor with his pacing.”

“Alexander? Pacing?” Penelope couldn’t quite hide her smile. “Surely he’s being perfectly composed and proper about everything.”

“Well,” the Earl’s eyes twinkled, “he did check the marriage articles only twice this morning, which for him shows remarkable restraint.”

They all laughed softly, the sound helping to ease the butterflies in Penelope’s stomach. The marriage settlements had indeed been thoroughly reviewed - Alexander had insisted on being exceptionally generous, ensuring that both estates would be properly managed and their future children well provided for.

“It’s time,” Mary said softly, handing Penelope her small bouquet - white roses and orange blossoms, bound with silk ribbon.

The Earl offered his arm, his expression softening as he looked at his daughter.

“Ready, my dear?”

“Yes.”

The word came clear and certain. Any nerves she felt were about the ceremony itself, not about the man waiting for her. That certainty had been growing since that stormy day when trust had been rebuilt in his study.

The small chapel was filled with family and closest friends - they'd chosen an intimate ceremony rather than a grand London affair.

Through the open door, Penelope could see Alexander standing before the altar, his broad shoulders straight beneath his perfectly tailored blue coat. Lord Albert stood beside him, apparently murmuring something that made Alexander's stance relax slightly. As the first notes of music began, Penelope took a deep breath.

"Together?" she whispered to her father.

"Together," he agreed softly. "Though I suspect that word will have new meaning after today."

The short walk down the chapel aisle seemed both endless and far too quick. Alexander turned as they approached, and the look in his eyes made Penelope's heart skip. All his careful control, his proper reserve, fell away for just a moment as he saw her. When her father placed her hand in Alexander's, the warmth of his grip steadied her slightly trembling fingers. They turned together to face the Vicar, but not before she caught his whispered words.

"You're beautiful."

The ceremony itself passed in something of a blur, though certain moments stood out with crystal clarity: the slight tremor in Alexander's voice as he spoke his vows, the warm weight of the gold ring as he slipped it onto her finger, the gentle pressure of his hands holding hers throughout the prayers.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.”

The words seemed to echo slightly in the small chapel. Alexander turned to her, his eyes holding something that made her breath catch. The kiss he gave her was perfectly proper for a church ceremony, but carried promises of less proper ones to come.

As they turned to face their families, now officially husband and wife, Penelope felt the rightness of it settle into her bones. This was what balance meant - duty and love working together, tradition and progress supporting each other.

The wedding breakfast that followed was a relatively small affair, though Mrs Thackeray had conspired with Mrs Wilson at Stanyon House, and they had outdone themselves with the preparations.

Both estates' senior staff had been invited - a somewhat unconventional choice that nevertheless felt perfectly appropriate for them.

“Your Grace,” Featherstone approached with a glass raised in toast, then stopped, suddenly flustered. “That is... both Your Graces?”

Alexander's laugh held genuine warmth.

“I think we can maintain the use of names among those who know us well, Featherstone. Though perhaps not when official business requires proper protocol.”

“Speaking of official business,” Lord Albert approached, his usual grin even broader than normal, “I've had word from London. The Court of Chancery has formally registered your joint petition. Both estates' ancient rights are now permanently protected under your combined management.”

“Excellent timing,” Alexander said with satisfaction. “Though I suspect you arranged for that news to arrive today specifically?”

“Would I do such a thing?” Lord Albert’s attempt at innocence fooled no one. “Though I did think it made a rather appropriate wedding gift - the formal recognition of how well you work together.”

Penelope felt Alexander’s arm tighten slightly around her waist.

“Very appropriate,” she agreed. “Though I hope you don’t expect us to spend our wedding day reviewing the documentation?”

“I considered suggesting it,” Lord Albert admitted cheerfully. “But Rosalind threatened dire consequences if I mentioned estate business at all today.”

“Good,” Alexander said firmly. “Because for once, estate management can wait.” He looked down at Penelope, his eyes warming. “Today is about something far more important.”

“More important than proper documentation?” she teased gently. “Who are you, and what have you done with my perfectly proper Duke?”

His laugh drew surprised looks from several guests - the Duke of Ravensworth, laughing openly at his own wedding breakfast? But the surprise in their faces quickly turned to approval as he bent to kiss her again, somewhat less properly than in the chapel.

“I’m still perfectly proper,” he murmured against her ear. “I simply have better priorities now.”

“Better balance,” she corrected softly, remembering his mother’s letter about duty

and heart working together.

“Exactly.” His thumb stroked across her knuckles where their hands joined. “Though I reserve the right to maintain proper documentation of everything else.”

The afternoon passed in a whirl of congratulations and celebrations. Penelope found herself constantly aware of Alexander’s presence beside her, the way his hand would find hers naturally, how they moved together as if they’d been doing so for years rather than months. As the sun began to set, casting long shadows through the Stanyon House ballroom windows, the time came for their departure. They would spend their wedding night at Ravensworth Hall - their home now, though Penelope would always maintain her connection to Stanyon House through their joint management of the estates. Mary helped her change into a traveling dress of deep blue silk - the same shade as the gown she’d worn that stormy day when trust had been rebuilt. The symbolism wasn’t lost on either of them.

“You’ll do very well, my Lady,” Mary said softly as she secured the last button. “Though I suspect you already knew that.”

“I did.” Penelope touched her new wedding ring gently. “From the moment he proved willing to learn better ways of doing things. From the moment I realised that his rigid adherence to protocol was just his way of protecting what mattered.”

“And now you’ll protect each other.” Mary’s practical voice held genuine affection. “Though heaven help anyone who tries to interfere with either estate’s ancient rights in the future.”

“They’d have to be braver than Sir Lionel to try,” Penelope laughed. “Or more foolish.”

“Speaking of foolish,” Rosalind appeared in the doorway, “my brother is trying very

hard to be patient about waiting for you, but I believe his perfect composure is starting to crack slightly.”

“Heaven forbid,” Penelope smiled, gathering her traveling cloak. “We can’t have the Duke of Ravensworth appearing anything less than perfectly proper.”

Alexander waited by the carriage, his own traveling clothes as immaculate as ever. But his composure did indeed slip slightly when he saw her, his eyes warming in a way that made her cheeks flush despite their now-official status.

“Ready, my love?”

He offered his hand to help her into the carriage.

“Always.”

She settled beside him as Lord Albert and Lady Rosalind called out final congratulations. The familiar lanes between Stanyon House and Ravensworth Hall seemed different somehow in the gathering dusk. Or perhaps it was she who was different - no longer just Lady Penelope Whitmore, but the Duchess of Ravensworth, with all the responsibilities and privileges that entailed.

“Having second thoughts?” Alexander’s voice came soft beside her.

“Never.” She turned to find him watching her with that intense focus she’d come to treasure. “Though I was thinking about responsibilities.”

“Of course you were.” His laugh held tender amusement. “Even on our wedding day, you’re considering duty and obligation.”

“Says the man who checked the marriage settlements twice this morning?”

“Touché.” He caught her hand, bringing it to his lips. “Though perhaps we could agree to think about responsibilities tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” she agreed softly, letting herself lean into his warmth. “Though I reserve the right to suggest improvements to your methods of estate management whenever necessary.”

“I would expect nothing less.” His voice deepened slightly as Ravensworth Hall came into view. “Though I think, my love, that for tonight at least, we might find more interesting things to discuss than estate management.”

The look in his eyes made her breath catch, even as she smiled at his carefully proper phrasing.

“More interesting than properly documented ancient rights?”

“Much more interesting.” His thumb stroked across her wedding ring. “Though I promise to be thoroughly proper about everything.”

“Not too proper, I hope,” she whispered, and was rewarded with his quiet laugh as the carriage turned onto the drive towards home.

The familiar facade of Ravensworth Hall glowed warmly in the last light of day, lanterns already lit to welcome them home. Penelope could see the assembled staff waiting to greet their new Duchess, Mrs Thackeray’s practical form prominently placed among them.

“They’re eager to welcome you properly,” Alexander said softly. “Though I suspect they’ve considered you mistress of the Hall since that first stormy day.”

“Even when you were being ridiculously suspicious of my motives?”

“Especially then.” His hand tightened on hers. “They saw what I was too blind to recognise - how perfectly you fit here. How much better everything is when we work together.” The carriage began to slow as they approached the front steps. In the gathering darkness of the enclosed space, Alexander turned to her. “Before we face all the proper ceremonies of welcome,” his voice held both love and amusement, “might I kiss my wife? In a thoroughly improper manner?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she managed, before his lips claimed hers.

This kiss held nothing of the proper restraint shown in the chapel. This was the kiss of a man who had waited months to call her his, who had rebuilt trust piece by piece, who had learned to balance duty with passion. In the shadows of the carriage interior, Penelope found herself responding with equal fervour, propriety forgotten in the joy of finally, finally belonging to each other completely. The carriage came to a halt, but Alexander took his time ending the kiss, his hands framing her face with infinite tenderness.

“I love you,” he whispered against her lips. “My perfectly imperfect Duchess.”

Then he straightened, helped her arrange her slightly dishevelled appearance, and stepped down from the carriage with his usual graceful authority. Turning to assist her, he took her hand firmly in his.

“My good people,” his voice carried clearly across the courtyard, holding warmth that would have been unthinkable months ago, “I present to you Her Grace, the Duchess of Ravensworth.”

The staff’s chorus of welcome echoed into the autumn evening, but Penelope heard only the love in Alexander’s voice as he led her home.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:27 am

Spring sunshine warmed Ravensworth Hall's library, catching dust motes that danced above the familiar desk where Penelope sat reviewing estate correspondence. More than one year of marriage had changed much about the room - her writing desk now stood as a permanent fixture beside Alexander's larger one, their papers mingling much as their lives had merged.

She paused in her work, one hand drifting unconsciously to rest on the gentle swell of her stomach - still barely noticeable beneath her morning dress, but a constant joy nonetheless. Alexander had been impossibly protective since their discovery two months ago, though he tried to hide it beneath his usual proper manner.

"Your Grace?" Mrs Thackeray appeared in the doorway, her practical face wreathed in smiles. "His Grace asks if you'll join him in the south meadow. Something about the new drainage system needing your opinion."

Penelope couldn't help laughing.

"Does it really need my opinion, or is he simply checking on me again?"

"Perhaps both, Your Grace." The housekeeper's fond tone suggested she thoroughly approved of her master's protective tendencies. "Though I believe there truly is some question about water rights that needs settling."

"Of course there is." Penelope rose carefully, accepting the light shawl Mrs Thackeray held out. "Heaven forbid we discuss anything without proper documentation."

She found Alexander exactly where she'd expected - standing in the meadow that had hosted the Harvest Festival, now green with spring promise. He turned at her approach, and the love in his eyes still made her heart race, even after more than a year of marriage.

"Checking on me again?" she asked as she reached him, laughing at his attempt to look innocent.

"Not at all." He drew her into his arms, one hand settling protectively over their child. "I genuinely need your opinion on these water rights. Though I won't deny the pleasure of seeing you in the spring sunshine."

"Mmm." She settled against him, enjoying the familiar scent of his cologne and coffee. "And this has nothing to do with my riding out to visit tenants yesterday?"

"You mean your completely unnecessary excursion when Featherstone could have easily handled the matter?" But his tone held more amusement than censure. "I wouldn't dream of questioning my Duchess's methods."

"Wise man." She tilted her head back to smile up at him. "You've learned so much this past year and more."

"I've had an excellent teacher." His hand moved gently over her stomach. "Though I hope our child inherits your intuitive approach to estate management rather than my rigid one."

"Perhaps a balance of both?" She covered his hand with hers. "Like your mother wrote about. Duty and heart working together."

"Speaking of duty..." He gestured to where Lord Albert approached across the meadow, carrying what appeared to be estate papers. "I really did need your opinion

on these water rights. The Court of Chancery requires proper documentation for any adjustments to traditional usage.”

“Of course it does.” She couldn’t help laughing. “Heaven forbid we make any improvements without thoroughly documenting everything.”

“Would you have me any other way?”

His eyes held both love and amusement.

“No,” she said softly, seriously. “I would have you exactly as you are. My perfectly proper Duke who learned to balance duty with love.”

Lord Albert reached them, grinning at their obvious contentment.

“Still discussing estate management during private moments? Some things never change.”

“Some things shouldn’t change,” Alexander replied, though he kept his arm around Penelope. “Though I like to think we’ve found a better balance between duty and... other considerations.”

“Other considerations?” Lord Albert’s grin widened as he glanced at Penelope’s gentle curve. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“We’re calling it the future of both estates,” Penelope said firmly, though she couldn’t help smiling. “Though I suspect this child will learn about proper documentation before learning to walk.”

“Along with proper protocols for everything,” Lord Albert agreed cheerfully. “Though with you as its mother, it might also learn to ride through storms for good

causes.”

“Not for several years at least,” Alexander said quickly, his hand tightening slightly at her waist.

Penelope exchanged an amused look with Lord Albert. Her husband’s protective instincts, always strong, had become almost overwhelming since learning of her condition. Though she had to admit, his attention to detail served them well in preparing for their child’s arrival.

“The water rights?” she prompted gently, before Lord Albert could tease them further.

“Ah, yes.” Alexander produced a map from the papers Lord Albert carried. “The new drainage system works perfectly, but we need to adjust some traditional boundaries to accommodate it. I thought perhaps...”

As he explained the technical details, Penelope felt the rightness of it all settle into her bones. This was what she’d dreamed of during those early days of their charitable work - two estates working in true partnership, tradition and progress supporting each other, duty and love perfectly balanced.

The spring breeze carried the scent of new growth, of possibility. In the distance, Penelope could see tenant farmers working their fields - families from both estates cooperating naturally now, the old divisions forgotten in the success of their joint management.

“You’re not listening to a word about drainage, are you?”

Alexander’s voice held tender amusement.

“I’m thinking about legacy,” she admitted, turning to face him. “About everything we’ve built together this past year and more. Everything we’re building for the future.”

His hand moved gently over their child again.

“A future with proper documentation for everything?”

“And improper rides through storms when necessary,” she agreed, laughing at his mock groan. “Though perhaps I’ll wait until after our child arrives for any more dramatic rescues.”

“Thank God for small mercies.”

But his eyes held nothing but love as he bent to kiss her.

Lord Albert cleared his throat pointedly.

“Shall I come back later with these water rights documents?”

“No,” Alexander straightened, though he kept one arm around Penelope. “We should finish this properly. Though perhaps we could continue the discussion over luncheon? Mrs Thackeray mentioned something about your particular cravings...”

“Now who’s checking on me?” But Penelope couldn’t help smiling at his careful attention. “Though I wouldn’t say no to more of her apple tarts.”

As they walked back into the Hall together, Penelope caught sight of their reflection in a window - the Duke and Duchess of Ravensworth, perfectly matched in their balance of duty and love. Just as Alexander’s mother had predicted, just as her father had hoped.

The future stretched before them full of promise, like the spring-green meadows of their joined estates. Whatever storms might come, they would weather them together, protecting what mattered most - their lands, their people, their love.

And if their child inherited both Alexander's attention to proper documentation and her tendency to ride out in any weather for good causes... well, that would be a perfect balance indeed.

The End

I hope that you enjoyed 'Trusting Her Duke'!

Chapter One

Having broken his fast at the inn that morning, Hunter Barrington, tenth Duke of Melton, had decided that he would ride for the last leg of his journey, because he was heartily sick of the stuffy carriage and of his valet's mournful mien.

This worthy, whom he had hired following his friend Raphael's advice (for it seemed that his business was a source of excellent information, not just imported goods), had vainly tried to turn him into a dandy during their short stay in London. Hunter smiled thinking of Bulwick's dismay when he had flatly refused to use the cane that Bulwick had tried to foist upon him, or to buy the inordinate number of fobs, which it was fashionable to attach to one's watch chain. After years in the field, his taste in dress was so simple that it could be called austere. Not so long ago, a day with clean clothes had been worth savouring, so all of this fuss seemed rather ridiculous to him.

Poor Bulwick had been horrified when he had declared his intention to ride.

"You can't possibly do that, my Lord," he had whispered.

"You will reach Meltonbrook Chase in a dishevelled and mussed condition. You will get a head cold, of a certainty. And, my Lord, if I may presume to comment further, the road is in very bad condition and frozen all over."

"Fustian!"

Hunter had exclaimed, shrugging away his valet's concern.

“It will do me good. Look after my luggage, Felton. I’m off.”

The road, in his opinion, was quite good – certainly a vast improvement on trampled battlefields and roads in a war zone!

So, without further ado, he had swung onto his horse, leaving the bewildered valet with his mouth still open in protest.

For the first few miles, the ride had been exhilarating. Warmly clad in his greatcoat, beaver hat and fur lined gloves, astride his dapple grey stallion, he had delighted in the cold wind and in the speed-blurred landscape, as he let the stallion run off his energy.

The feeling of freedom, however, did not last long and had already vanished when Meltonbrook Chase appeared in the distance.

It was the first time he had seen his family estate since his father, the late Duke, had purchased a commission for him, as was traditional for a second son. Hunter could remember, perfectly well, his father’s stern admonitions, imparted before sending him on his way to London, and hence to the Peninsular and war.

“Honour first of all, my son. Honour means more than life to our family. Never tarnish it, never demean yourself, never show a streak of the yellow. Remember, an officer and a nobleman must be an example for his men. England must stand against the French tyrant. Your commitment must be wholehearted. Your days as a dissipated and wild young buck have ended. Do you understand?”

‘I thought I understood, Father, but I didn’t. Only later, I did. Oh, yes, later I understood, all too well, what you meant.’ Hunter’s thought was wry, and a little sad.

He was so absorbed in his musings that he was barely registering the landscape. It

took some time for him to realise that he was inside Meltonbrook Chase's expansive park. He reined in his horse, and stopped to look at the wintry landscape around him.

The silence was profound, broken only by the cawing of a crow, somewhere in the woods, and by the soft murmuring of the nearby brook. The grounds were immaculate under the heavy pall of snow, the ice-traced tall poplars, which surrounded the lake, shining like silver filigree under the setting sun's slanting rays.

"I'm home." he thought, steeling himself for his first meeting with his family, after so many years.

Riding into the deserted stable yard, it seemed surreal that he was actually here – and even more surreal that his father and brother were gone, that all of this was his now.

He dismounted, the icy gravel crunching under his feet, as a brawny groom, in a leather coat, came running toward him.

"Master Hunter! Master Hunter! Is it you? Is it really you? At long last you're home again!" The man suddenly checked and lowered his head.

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace. I've been overfamiliar, but my happiness made my tongue run away with me, it did, old fool that I am."

"Never you mind, Nick. Master Hunter it is, if you wish it, as long as you keep it just between us. You know how stuffy my mother can be... Now, this is Nuage...." he gestured to the horse, which snuffled curiously at the old groom. "I bought him in France, and a valiant fellow he is. Take good care of him, will you? Go with Nick, my boy, he's a good one."

Nick stroked the horse's silky coat and took the reins.

“Always been a good judge of horseflesh, Master Hunter. Since you was a stripling, you was. Come along Nuage, a good rubdown is what you need right now. And what about some clean straw to lie on and some oats to chew?” Talking to the horse, the head groom disappeared around the corner toward the stable, as the carriage, bearing his valet, and his meagre luggage, drew up before the house.

Nerissa looked at her reflection in the tall mirror and sighed.

She would never be an Incomparable, and that was that. Her colouring was all wrong, she was too tall and her face was too angular.

In the pale pastel colours that were deemed fashionable for young ladies, she faded into insignificance.

She sighed again, thinking of her sister Maria, an acknowledged Beauty, who had cut a triumphant swathe through the ton during the previous Season. It had been fashionable to be in love with Maria, with her flashing amber eyes, rich auburn hair and flawless creamy complexion. Thus, Maria had had the opportunity of choosing from amongst a veritable army of suitors and was now betrothed - very advantageously betrothed, to be sure, to a wealthy Earl, to their parents' delight.

Donning her fur lined pelisse and her velvet bonnet, Nerissa crossed the hall and stepped into the carriage with her maid, bound to Meltonbrook Chase, where she was to have tea with her bosom bow Alyse, the Duke of Melton's daughter.

No, not daughter, sister, she amended her thought. Hunter was Duke, now, after the untimely demise of his father and his elder brother.

She blushed. They hoped that Hunter would be home soon, for he had sent his family

a message from London, but with the deep snow on the roads, he was likely delayed.

Would he recognise her? She did not think so. He had had scant interest to spare for her, to begin with, when he was a young man just back from his term in Oxford, and she was just a shy ten year old, all angles and elbows and not even a promise of feminine allure.

Nerissa leaned back on the carriage seat, closing her eyes. ‘Much good it does me to wool-gather like that’, she chided herself. ‘I’ll be lucky if I don’t find myself married to some gouty old man before the Season is over.’

She shivered, and not because of the sharp wind blowing and howling through the naked trees.

As Hunter approached the door, the butler, a delighted expression lighting his usually impassive features, opened it. Immediately regaining his formal demeanour, Jermyn schooled his expression to a more serious face, better suited to the Butler of a great house.

“Welcome home, my lord. The ladies are in the drawing room. Follow me, please.”

“No need, Jermyn, I know the way”, answered Hunter, secretly amused by the butler’s display of self-restraint, and almost ran to the drawing room doors, suddenly unable to wait any longer to see his family.

He opened the doors, and an instant of shocked silence followed his entrance.

Hunter scanned the tableau – a morning visit frozen before him. All of his family were there (although part of his mind still expected to see his father and Richard as

well), and there was someone else.

A woman he did not know, a woman who was more beautiful than any he had seen.

She had burnished golden hair, surrounding her face with a profusion of waves and ringlets, a honey and gold complexion; long, almond shaped green gold eyes, fringed by thick burnished golden eyelashes and emphasized by high cheekbones, and a tall, shapely body.

The only feature detracting from perfection, but greatly adding to character, was a rather large, mobile mouth, much more capable of expressing feelings (and temper, he suspected!) than a proper prim little rosebud. He was captivated. Her eyes met his across the room, and for a moment, everything else faded away.

He was brought back to the moment when the silence was broken by his sister Alyse, who cried out: "Hunter! Hunter, you are back! Is it really you, Hunter?" and, without any further ado, threw herself at him.

His eye contact with the woman was broken, and he forgot her in the chaos that followed.

Hunter's mother, the Duchess Louisa, half-fainting, reclined on the sofa, fanning herself and calling for her vinaigrette. His sister Sybilla, almost jigged around the table, before forcing herself to behave with greater propriety. His brother, Charles, obviously tried to be the cool gentleman, but could not help but step forward and embrace Hunter, his eyes shining with held back tears.

"At long last, my son," sobbed his mother.

"Come here, and let me look at you. Last time I saw you, you were a boy. Now you are a man. And what a man! Your father, God rest his soul, would be so proud of

you...”

Moved despite himself, Hunter gathered his weeping mother into his arms.

“Shush, Mother, I’m here to stay. I’m so sorry I was not here when it would have really mattered. I feel that I have failed you all, yet it was at the time of Waterloo, and I did not even hear the news for months! I’m so sorry...”

The Duchess brushed her tears impatiently aside.

“I’m a foolish old woman, my son. This is not a time for weeping, but a time for rejoicing. God knows, we have been mourning long enough. And look who is here, Hunter. Do you remember Lady Nerissa Loughbridge, Lord Chester’s youngest daughter?”

A faint recollection of a meddlesome brat, always trying to follow him around, vaguely stirred in Hunter’s memory.

He turned his head and froze again, caught by her appearance.

Brat? She was not a brat anymore, she was a woman, and a very beautiful woman at that, more so because of her unusual colouring.

It was all he could do not to stare at her with his mouth agape. He tried to react in some polite way, and smiled, suddenly recalling one of Nerissa’s youthful misdeeds.

“Nerissa? Was it you who hid inside your brother Kevin’s portmanteau, because you wanted to come with us when we went to our hunting lodge near Cottesmore? And did we not discover you because you sneezed? Do you remember, Charles?”

Nerissa had not heard a single word.

Hunter's sudden appearance had completely stunned her.

All her childhood emotions flooded back, crowding her mind, amplified with new meaning and significance. A rosy blush washed upon her face as she dared to smile back.

"She's not a child anymore, Hunter," broke in Alyse.

"She is a dear friend to us all, and I really don't know how we would have managed without her. She is a sensible young woman, with a good head on her shoulders, and she gave us invaluable help when Mother was so ill after..." Alyse's voice faltered "...after the accident..."

Hunter looked at his family: his sisters, pretty, vivacious, eager to try out their wings during the London Season, his mother, with her gentle face marked by loss and sorrow, his brother, suddenly scowling and dark browed, and the enchanting stranger in their midst. He felt rather like he had stepped into the centre of a whirlwind.

Suddenly he felt mortally tired, in dire need of rest and solitude.

He went to his mother and kissed her gently on her cheek.

"Will you please excuse me, Mother? I have had a long and tiring journey and I'm much fatigued. I believe that, if you will forgive me, I will have a bath drawn and a tray sent to my room. I am not really up to a formal supper. Tomorrow, we can all begin to catch up."

"But of course, my dear. How thoughtless of me not having foreseen your needs... my happiness at seeing you again quite overwhelmed me. I have not all my wits about me, I'm sure... Jermyn, please, see His Grace to his apartments and make sure that his valet attends him."

“Yes, my Lady. Please follow me, Your Grace.”

To his chagrin, Jermyn did not lead Hunter to his bachelor’s quarters as he had unthinkingly expected, but to his father’s apartments.

That was the precise moment at which the full import of his new condition crashed in upon him like a dark and overwhelming wave.

He was the Duke of Melton.

Not his father, nor his elder brother, both now dead after a freak carriage accident. Himself.

He had not wanted it, he had not coveted it, truth to tell, he had no idea how to go about being a Duke, but there it was, with all its implications and obligations, including the need to marry, and to sire heirs to the title.

It was like a bad dream, but it was not going to disappear at dawn.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:27 am

Hunter rode along a rutted track, across a barren and ravaged landscape, under a dark and menacing sky. The stench of burned and rotting flesh, of death and decay was all pervading, a leaden overcoat on his shoulders. Far away, one could hear the great, long-distance artillery guns roaring, more like a muted vibration than a real noise.

Around him, there was nothing but destruction - bloated carcasses, untended fields, ruined buildings and skeletal trees - where once cattle had grazed, wheat had ripened and orchards had blossomed. Suddenly something, a white rag fluttering in the rank wind, half-hidden by the ditch, attracted his attention. He was drawn toward it, almost without volition, but stopped dead in horror when he was near enough to see.

Beatriz lay lifeless, among rubble and sundry discarded items, her skin beaten and bruised with the imprint of vicious hands, her body broken and bloody, her mouth still half open in a hopeless scream, her lovely dark eyes fixed, and staring in a desperate appeal into the eternity of death.

Beatriz. His love.

Beatriz, on whose grave he had cried until his throat was raw. Beatriz, whom war had wrenched from him and who had died alone, in shame and terror, ravished by French troops in rout after the battle of Vitoria.

Beatriz, one of the countless casualties of war.

Suddenly, something shifted, and a flickering image of another face, in a soft green and golden light, like a sunbeam on new leaves, flashed into his mind, and broke the grip of the dream.

Hunter woke, drenched in cold sweat, lurching to his feet, his heart beating wildly against his ribcage. At first, he stood bewildered, unable to recognise his surroundings, still gripped by the horror of his recurring nightmare, then, gradually, he calmed down, his heartbeat steadied, and his anguish receded. It was not real. He had never seen Beatriz like that, he had only seen her grave, been told of her death. He did not know, could never know, how terrible that death had been – but his imagination was all too able to present him with the ghastly possibilities. As it did – almost every night.

Completely awake now, he drank deeply of the water, which Bulwick had thoughtfully provided, in a carafe on the side table. He went to the window, opened the heavy velvet drapes, and peered outside. It was still dark, but a faint rosy shade began to colour the East. No question of going back to sleep, now. Hunter was sure that Nick was already up and going. He would look for the old groom and wipe away the last of the nightmare, listening to Nick relating everything that had been going on here, during his long absence from home.

Louisa Barrington, Duchess of Melton, looked critically at her face in the mirror, while her young maid, Prudence, was arranging her hair under a flattering beribboned lace cap.

“You look yourself again, Your Grace, if I may say so. You have filled up a bit and your eyes... But now”, she went on briskly “his Lordship is back home again, and everything will be all right, will it not, my Lady?”

Her Grace of Melton smiled. She had known Prudence since her birth, the daughter of a respectable but impoverished family, and was used to her artless demeanour. And the girl was right. For the first time since the accident, she could look at herself with some satisfaction, and at the future with some hope.

She closed her eyes, remembering the mindless terror that had gripped her when the careening coach, driven by some drunken lout, had suddenly appeared around the bend. The horses had reared, neighing, and the heavier vehicle had smashed full into their light travelling carriage, with a sickening noise of crushed wood. That sound was the last thing she could recall before oblivion had claimed her.

Louisa shook herself out of her brooding. Time to start the new day and to get to know, again, her own son – so much time had passed - she wondered what sort of man he had become.

There was so much to be said and done. She sighed. Some of what had to be said would not be pleasant. Her late elder son, Richard, heir presumptive to the title, had not been wise. Handsome and debonair, always exuding charm, a redoubtable Corinthian, able to spar with Gentleman Jackson himself, and to feather angles with his curricule, he had also been a reckless gambler and had entertained questionable relationships with ladies of dubious virtue. His father, the late Duke, had been so inordinately proud of his heir, that he had never checked or restrained him.

“Don’t you fret, my boy,” he had indulgently told Charles, his hard working, serious third born, when he had shown his father the heavy dent that Richard’s expenses were making in the estate’s revenues. “Let him be, he will calm down in time and, anyway, we can afford it, can’t we?”

‘Well, we are not destitute ,’ she thought, ‘ and the estate is vastly profitable, thanks to Charles’ thrifty management, but, with two dowries to provide for, a mansion in London to keep up, and a living to arrange for Charles, if he decides to enter the Church (although that seems rather less likely now)... things need to change. It is, truly, not seemly for Charles to act as his brother’s steward – regardless of the cost, an estate manager must be employed. And, as Hunter really must marry, and get himself an heir, a good dowry would not come amiss, now, would it?’

In a few days, a routine, of a sort, had been established.

Hunter would wake at dawn, after a restless night plagued by nightmares, go down to the stables and have a chat with Nick, take a brisk walk in the park and then break his fast, with his family, in the small dining room. It was a cosy and intimate room which he liked infinitely better than the formal dining room, with its long table, musty hangings and depressing centrepieces. His mother would tell him about his neighbours, and expound on her plans for the coming Season; his sisters would laugh and chatter and talk of French couturières, balls and routs; his brother would prose on about the estate, the tenants and the improvements he had thought of. Hunter would listen to everybody, nod genially, let the flow of conversation dance around him, and reprove himself for his lack of interest.

After having dealt with decisions which entailed life or death, for much of his adult life, he could not help but feel that there was a slight lack of import, or even sense, in the topics in which his family – as dear as everyone was to him – seemed so absorbed. Life as Colonel Lord Barrington had been much harsher, but much simpler, than life as His Grace the Duke of Melton.

Hunter soon realised that his mother wanted him married tout de suite, possibly before the Season ended, and preferably to a young lady with a fat dowry. He found this an appalling prospect, because, even if not averse to marriage in principle, he did not want to be rushed, neither did he want somebody else to choose for him. His mind felt scarred, still torn by everything that he had seen and done – and he was not about to explain anything of that, to anyone. It was still too sensitive a topic, and his nightmares unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

Perusing his library, he had found a book of Ancient Greek poetry, and read a fragment by Sappho, with which he felt a total affinity:

“Like wild gales, sweeping desolate mountains

uprooting oaks

Eros harrows my heart

sweet, bitter, indomitable wild beast...”

Beatriz was still an indelible, aching wound. He did not want to suffer again. He did not want to lose his heart to somebody who could tear it asunder. He wanted an affectionate, companionable marriage. He wanted to be friends with his wife. He wanted a sensible, cool-headed young woman, not some vapid, giggling miss or some haughty high-flier.

One afternoon, while Hunter was walking, brooding and trying to sort out his feelings, full of a sense of guilt, that he, as the Duke, could not bring himself to care, more, for the management of his estates, he wandered away from his usual path and found himself deep inside his neighbour's park. Looking around, at first he did not understand where he was: the natural woods of the park had progressively given way to a more structured growth. The park seemed larger than he remembered, with cunningly planted thickets, graceful avenues flanked by stately trees, cosy nooks, elegant fountains, well designed flowerbeds, and herbaceous borders. Even now, in the depths of the winter, it was not difficult to imagine a profusion of bright colours vying with each other to the beholder's delight.

He remembered the park as he had known it during his childhood: a fascinating tangle of trees, creepers, and weeds, which could well become a mysterious jungle, where his friend Kevin, Lord Chester's son, his brothers and himself, would hunt for wild beasts, find hidden treasures and fight warlike natives. Lord Chester must have hired a new head gardener, Hunter mused. The place had improved beyond recognition.

His senses, honed by times when the ability to hear insignificant noises could make the difference between life and death, perceived a slight rustle, as if something were moving between the winter bare bushes, and he stepped abruptly past the branches.

To his chagrin, he found himself at less than a foot's distance from Lady Nerissa, who could not hold back a soft whimper of startlement at his sudden appearance.

"I am sorry, Lady Nerissa", he spoke softly, almost as startled as she appeared to be. "Did I scare you?"

She smiled, lowering her eyes. He found himself disappointed that she had veiled their green-gold depths from his sight.

"Not at all, my Lord. However, I should not be here on my own, without a chaperone. Please excuse me, I must go back at once."

Her beauty seemed to burn like a flame against the frozen background, composing a jewelled symphony of brilliant shades: gold, silver, coral, aquamarine, mother of pearl, as the cool winter light reflected from the warmth of her skin.

"Nerissa!" Hunter exclaimed, loath to let her go. "Lady Nerissa, we are old friends and neighbours, are we not? Surely nobody could object to our exchanging a few words in an open place, during a casual meeting. I am the meekest and most inoffensive of gentlemen, I do assure you!"

Nerissa looked at Hunter under her lowered lashes. He gave an impression of energy and passion kept on a tight leash, like a wild horse straining at restraints. His deep sapphire eyes flashed in a countenance darkened by many seasons spent in warmer climates, his firm mouth and strong chin bespoke character and courage, his lean, hard body and his long, sensitive fingers, made her feel... she could not even name those feelings.

No, he was not inoffensive, he was very dangerous, much too dangerous for her own peace of mind, for she had discovered, to her chagrin, that she found him just as attractive now, as she had as an infatuated ten-year-old. She should go away, but she could not. Mesmerised by his smile, she smiled in return.

“Just a few minutes, then. Let’s walk, it is too cold, and the ground too damp, to sit anyway...”

They walked for a while, making small talk, stealing surreptitious glances at each other, laughing without a real reason, somehow prisoners of the strange enchantment of their unexpected meeting. Nerissa felt as if they were inside a fragile, iridescent bubble and, at the same time, she clearly perceived the terrible impropriety of their situation.

Even so, the rebellious mood which had driven her to fly from home and seek the haven of her beloved park persisted, and made her feel stubborn and daring, enjoying Hunter’s company with a carefree elation.

But, while she was tucking a stray, wind-tossed tress under her bonnet, the portfolio she was carrying opened and the sheets inside fluttered and fell to the ground.

Hunter was quick to stoop and help her collect them, but was very surprised when he discovered that they were not the kind of artwork that one was used to expecting from a young lady - pastels, gouaches, flowers and landscapes, painstakingly rendered, dull and respectable - but something completely different, something resembling, strangely enough, the neat battle plans he had so often pored over during his soldiering days.

Nerissa blushed a deep crimson, and almost wrenched the sheets from his hand. The laughing, relaxed mood of the last hour disappeared in a moment, and she was suddenly tense and distant.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Nerissa whispered. “I must go now. Goodbye...” and turning quickly, she almost ran away, leaving Hunter bewildered and wondering what all that had been about.

Continued...