The price of a bride

A gilded cage

Chapter 1 (1913)

The air in "The Pig & Barrel" was thick with the scent of stale beer, cheap perfume, and desperation. The establishment, though trying to pass itself off as a respectable public house, was merely a dimly lit den where the desperation of the working class mixed freely with the shallow boredom of the wealthy who came to slum it. Standing on the slightly sticky floor, a man named Benedict Jones, barely past twenty, cut a striking, if somewhat chaotic, figure. He was unquestionably handsome—a face sculpted by genetics with long dark hair and eyes the colour of warm whiskey—but the current setting and state of inebriation significantly marred the perfection. His expensive, bespoke suit, now slightly rumpled and dusted with ash from a forgotten cigarette, only served to underscore his dramatic fall from grace, or rather, from the high expectations that came with his *nouveau riche* status.

Benedict's father, a man of ruthless ambition and unexpected luck in the booming industrial investments of the late Victorian era, had made a fortune and bought Benedict this air of casual superiority. Benedict, however, found no joy in industry; his sole ambition was to spend the money as quickly and spectacularly as his father had earned it. Tonight, his mission was to buy affection, a common errand that usually ended in failure and increasing belligerence.

"Come on, darlings! Don't be shy!" Benedict slurred, his voice carrying over the din of the bar, laced with a mix of entitlement and artificial joviality. He swayed dramatically, clutching a nearly empty glass that rattled dangerously, spilling a few drops of questionable liquid onto the worn wooden floor. "I am a generous man. Tell you what, I'll buy you a whole bottle of that fizz stuff. Champagne! Just tell me your price for the night."

He'd targeted a pair of women huddled in a booth, whose exhaustion was almost palpable even under the bar's weak gaslight. Their polite smiles, initially professional attempts to defuse the situation, had long since curdled into expressions of tight-lipped annoyance. One of them, a brunette with a sensible cardigan and weary eyes, finally snapped.

"We're not interested, thank you," she said, her voice strained with effort. The attempt at politeness barely masked her desire to be left alone. "Please, just go back to your own table."

Benedict, however, only registered the word "no" as a challenge, a petty defiance to his inherited power. He leaned precariously over their booth barrier, the silver watch chain looped across his waistcoat catching the light. His breath, heavy with alcohol and a recent cigar, washed over them. "A challenge, is it? Fine. Fifty quid. Cash. Right now. Just for a little company. Is that enough to get your attention? That's more than your father makes in a month, I wager." He fumbled in his tight trouser pocket, pulling out a crumpled fifty-pound note, holding it aloft like a trophy, its value a weapon against their pride.

That was the last straw. A shadow fell over Benedict. Brendan, the bar owner—a man whose bulk rivaled a small refrigerator and whose patience had been worn thin by years of late-night shenanigans—gripped Benedict's shoulder with a hand like a vise. The air went instantly cold around them. "That's enough, Benedict. You're done," Brendan rumbled, his voice low and dangerous. "You're disrupting my paying customers."

"Woah! Hands off, you Neanderthal!" Benedict protested, trying to shrug off the grip, his pride instantly overcoming his intoxication. He straightened up, attempting to summon the dignity of his inherited wealth. "I *am* a paying customer! I'm trying to buy some company! It's commerce, you giant idiot! They just don't have enough sense to accept my generous offer!"

Brendan didn't argue. Years of experience told him this type of money was best dealt with quickly and quietly. He simply applied pressure, turning Benedict around with firm, irresistible force. A quick, efficient shove propelled the young man towards the exit.

"Out. And don't come back until you sober up and learn some manners," Brendan said, holding the door open. The draft of freezing November air rushed in, momentarily clearing the smoke. "Next time you try to buy affection, you'll be doing it somewhere else."

The cold night air hit Benedict's face, a sudden, shocking contrast to the warm, smoky humidity of the bar. He stumbled onto the pavement, narrowly avoiding a collision with a trash bin. He spun around, furious and utterly humiliated, to face the brightly lit, now-closed door of "The Pig & Barrel." The muffled sounds from inside were now mocking laughter in his alcohol-fueled imagination.

"You hear that, you lot inside?" Benedict yelled at the anonymous, muffled sounds emanating from within. He puffed out his chest, attempting to look imposing but mostly succeeding in looking pitifully drunk, his shadow

lengthening and shrinking wildly under the distant gas lamp. "I don't need your cheap attention!"
He took a few unsteady steps back towards the middle of the street, gesturing wildly at the establishment. His face was red, a mix of cold and rage.
"Next week! Next week I'll have all the company I could ever want! The best company! The kind that's guaranteed! You hear me? My wife will make sure of it! I'll get more sex than all of you put together! You just wait and see!"
With one final, meaningless roar of defiance, Benedict turned unsteadily and began to weave his way down the deserted street, leaving the dubious promise hanging in the quiet night air. He was going home, a spectacular failure of a night behind him, the nice prospect of his upcoming marriage—the source of his promised sexual bounty and the guarantee of a respectable woman—waiting just around the corner.

A few streets away, in a room where the candles had long been extinguished, the fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Brown felt a chill run through her bones. The room in her modest middle-class home was silent save for the occasional creak of the old floorboards, yet she felt a distant, ugly presence, a sickness creeping into her peace. She shivered, as if the cold wind and Benedict’s disgusting promise had slipped into her room.
Elizabeth lay rigid beneath her sheets, staring blindly at the faint outline of her window, her mind racing. One week, that is all the freedom she had left, for she was to marry the drunk, Benedict Jones, in just seven days' time.
Her freedom was not measured in days, but in the distance between her small, safe bed and the impending touch of a stranger. She imagined the wedding night, the sound of Benedict’s heavy, drunken steps, his whisky breath, and the horrible knowledge that Elizabeth, the girl who dreamed of suffrage and universities, would be nothing more than his property. Her marriage was not a union; it was a prison.

Chapter 2

The tearoom at the Ritz was a sanctuary of crystal, white gloves, and hushed conversation. The room, bathed in the muted light filtered through elegant lace curtains, served as a perfect stage for the dramas of the upper class—dramas of reputation, duty, and lineage. Yet, the voice of Lady De Vere, though soft, sounded utterly relentless in the delicate setting.

William De Vere sat across from her, his back uncomfortably straight. He felt as out of place as one of his rare first editions would feel on a common pub table. His very presence seemed to jar with the room's air of casual masculine confidence. His appearance—long, honey-blond curls that gave him an almost girlish softness, and bright blue eyes often hidden behind his spectacles—drew glances from the other patrons. He was eighteen, yet looked even younger, with a slight build and a reserved, polite expression that seemed permanently fixed on his face. He was an anomaly in 1913 London society: an Earl who preferred the company of deceased poets to living debutantes.

"Now listen, William," Lady De Vere said, her diamonds catching the light. Her tone was one of weary insistence. She leaned slightly forward, resting her white-gloved hands on the crisp linen tablecloth. "You have your title, you have the fortune, and you have your poetry. But you have no bride. The estate needs a clear line of succession. You are almost twenty. Your cousin, Charles, had two children and a mistress by that age." She finished her sentence with a dramatic downturn of her lips, suggesting Charles's decadence was at least preferable to William's intellectual pursuits.

William felt the familiar flush of heat creep up his neck and cheeks. He knew her lectures by heart. William flushed deeply, took a sip of tea, and carefully placed the cup back down, ensuring the saucer didn't rattle.

"Mother, I'm not even nineteen yet and you know that... the women of society are not particularly fond of my company. They expect a certain kind of brute, a man who hunts and commands. I am, perhaps, too cautious. Too polite." He paused, his voice soft, almost hesitant. "I have no desire to pursue women who merely look at our bank account. I wish to marry for love, not for reputation." He knew the words were naïve, but they were true, born from hours spent reading about idealized romance in dusty libraries.

"Then you must act the part they seek!" Lady De Vere's voice tightened. She suppressed the urge to strike the table with her fan. "Love, William, is a luxury

afforded after duty is complete! You must learn to play the role of the Earl, not the scholar! You must speak less of Shelley and more of horses. Less poetry, more spirit! They are looking for a man, William, not a philosopher with spectacles." She sighed, looking exasperated. "This is 1913, William. We are still governed by tradition. You must secure the line."

As Lady De Vere delivered her cutting assessment of her son's social ineptitude, two young gentlemen of similar age—broad-shouldered and in perfectly tailored tweed, the very epitome of the kind of man William was *not*—stood behind their table, waiting for a server. They had caught the last few sentences, and their attention was immediately drawn to the source of the high-society drama.

The first man, with a crude smile, whispered to his companion: "The poor De Vere is being scolded by his mother for having too much 'poetic melancholy'! No wonder no woman wants him. Look at him." His comment was loud enough to be heard over the light tinkle of cutlery.

The second young man chuckled, tapping his chest in an exaggerated gesture. He leaned closer to his friend, his eyes glinting with malice. "Oh, be still, my heart! He's too refined for the ladies. Or perhaps, he's not a ladies' man at all. The shame of the De Vere family. Better stick to your books, boy. Leave the real world to us."

William looked angrily over his shoulder at the two men who kept grinning. He felt a sudden, sharp stab of rage. He then looked at his mother, who gave him a look that said "See what I mean?"

William simply looked away and sighed. The weight of the earldom, usually a comfortable cloak of security, felt like a smothering blanket. He hated the performance society demanded, yet he knew he could not escape the necessity of marriage. He was trapped between his title and his true nature. The necessity of a bride was rapidly becoming a crisis.

Chapter 3

Mr. and Mrs. Brown sat across the table from Benedict Jones, their faces etched with a blend of resignation and quiet sorrow. The dining room of the Brown's respectable, yet slightly faded, higher-class home felt oppressively quiet. The polished mahogany table, which usually hosted lively family dinners, was now the site of a cold, commercial transaction.

To their surprise Benedict was entirely sober, his eyes clear, giving a rare, unnerving weight to the conversation. His appearance was impeccable today; the expensive suit was pressed, his hair neatly slicked back. This sobriety, however, did not imply respect or repentance, but rather a chilling business-like seriousness that made his true nature even more sinister than his drunken antics.

“The sum we have agreed upon is fifteen hundred pounds,” Mr. Brown stated, his voice barely a rasp. The amount felt monumental, a crushing burden of debt and salvation combined. He was a man accustomed to the precision of numbers, but this final figure felt obscene. He didn’t meet Benedict’s gaze, instead finishing up the contract lying on the polished wood of the table. His hands trembled slightly, a subtle betrayal of his outwardly calm demeanor.

Elizabeth’s mother, Eleanor, let out a shaky breath, her fingers nervously twisting the simple wedding band on her hand. “It is a staggering amount. It could keep us afloat for years, settle every last debt, and restore our name. The cost of our salvation, perhaps, but it is the cost of our daughter’s hand.” A sting of bitterness laced her tone. She saw the paper as a deed of sale, not a marriage certificate.

Benedict permitted himself a small, smug smile, leaning back in the chair he knew was better than anything in the house. He tapped a finger against the document, as if impatient to finalize his purchase. “An amount I’m eager to pay for the girl, as long as she bears me an heir. I need a respectable name to quiet the society gossip, and a son to inherit the money my father so tediously accumulated. Let's just hope she is worth every penny.” His crude reply, delivered with cold clarity, quickly overshadowed his sober appearance. It confirmed every fear the Browns harboured about his character.

Mr. Brown finally looked up, his expression one of profound fatigue. He looked like a defeated man. “We ask only one thing of you, Mr. Jones. Despite

all of this, despite the nature of this bargain, we love Elizabeth dearly. She is our clever girl, headstrong and full of life. Please," he implored, his voice breaking slightly, "please, take care of her." The plea was a final, desperate attempt to reclaim some shred of paternal duty, a small prayer whispered into the void of the transaction.

Benedict stood up without a word, pulling a heavy silver pen from his inner jacket pocket and quickly scrawling his signature onto the contract, sealing the fate of the girl he had never truly met. "I'll do my best to please her," he said, grinning. The double meaning was unmistakable and vulgar. "Have a good day. Mr. Brown, Mrs. Brown." He paused just long enough to enjoy the sight of their misery before walking out. The front door clicked shut with a hollow, final sound.

Once the door closed behind Benedict, Elizabeth's mother turned to her husband. The restraint she had maintained instantly evaporated. "Is there really no other way? John, look at him! That poor excuse of a man is a pig. He will never make her happy." Tears welled in her eyes, tears not for their impending ruin, but for their daughter's imprisonment.

Mr. Brown sighed, running a hand over his thinning hair. He looked older than his years, a man broken by the weight of poor investments and an unforgiving economy. "He's a pig with money and we are on the brink of bankruptcy. The debtors are already circling, demanding repayment by the end of the month. We are already indebted for hundreds of pounds. Our home, our reputation... everything is at risk. If we don't take this deal, we'll be ruined. Elizabeth will be unhappy, perhaps, but she will have a roof above her head, be well-fed, and the family will survive. It is the lesser of two evils, Eleanor."

They sat in silence, the signed contract a damning testament to their failure. The fifteen hundred pounds was secured, but the shadow it cast over their daughter's future felt heavier than any debt.

Chapter 4

Hyde Park was a green oasis of propriety amidst the growing chaos of London. It was the place where the wealthy paraded their status and the middle class attempted to emulate it. But for Elizabeth Brown, the place felt like a gilded cage. The rigid formality of the park only emphasized the suffocating lack of control over her own life. The afternoon sun filtered through the fresh, green leaves of the oak trees as she followed the paved path, accompanied by her parents and her loyal, slightly nervous friend, Mary. The arrangement was typical of their blurring social lines: Mary was also her family's housemaid but they had grown up together and had built a beautiful friendship—a bond that transcended the strict social hierarchy.

Elizabeth was a picture of pale, youthful beauty, her blonde hair worn in a loose bun, clad in a light cotton dress and jacket. Her attire was simple but respectable, a final attempt by her mother to maintain an appearance of gentle breeding before the marriage. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Brown, walked stiffly ahead, their faces tight with a mix of pride and dread: pride in their daughter’s beauty, dread of the financial abyss threatening their family name.

Mary, walking beside Elizabeth, leaned closer. She worried for Elizabeth, but her sense of duty and the sheer inevitability of the situation kept her anxiety high. "Please, Elizabeth, calm yourself. You'll make yourself ill. You must try to be optimistic."

Elizabeth let out a bitter, soft laugh that was immediately muffled by the rustle of wealthy clothing and the surrounding decorum. She was far too intelligent and far too much of the "new woman" to accept this fate quietly. "Optimistic, Mary? I am a calf being led to the slaughter! They are selling me, not marrying me off! My parents talk about Benedict Jones as if he were a saving angel. He’s a drunkard, a pig! I met him once. Just once, and he smelled like the sewer bathed in whisky." She grimaced. The memory was enough to curdle her stomach.

She threw a quick, suspicious glance at her parents' backs; they were bowing to a passing lady of rank. This display of propriety, while their own daughter was being sacrificed, fueled her rage. She kept her voice low, a whisper of pure anger and betrayal.

"I don't understand it, Mary. There must be other ways! We live in this enormous house; we still have jewels. How can they sacrifice me, their only daughter, to such a man, simply to save their own reputation?" Her voice was vibrating with the revolutionary spirit she was only beginning to recognize in herself.

Mary grasped Elizabeth's hand, but her gaze was anxious and her voice sounded weak. "The debts are immense, Elizabeth. You know that. The investments are gone. The business loans, the bad decisions... everything caught up to them. They need money to keep the house and the name, or they lose everything."

"Money," Elizabeth hissed, as if the word choked her. "It's fifteen hundred pounds. He is buying me, Mary. He is buying my body to do with as he pleases, and my soul will rot in exchange for fifteen hundred pounds, just so my parents can keep up the pretense of prosperity." She pulled her hand away, the thought of the exchange fueling a deep sense of injustice.

She stopped abruptly by a cast-iron bench, just out of earshot of her parents. Her face was pale with genuine terror. "I don't want him to touch me," she confessed, her voice now a fragile plea. "I know what men like that want. He will never make me happy. Never. I dream of the moment I can run away. Surely there is a man somewhere in London, who would take me in—a gentleman, a scholar, someone who values a mind, not a commodity."

Elizabeth stared desperately at the rippling Serpentine.

Her despair made her careless of her surroundings.

She failed to notice that, a few feet away, half-hidden behind a thick rhododendron bush and clutching a volume of poetry, William De Vere shot up straight. He had sought the park's quiet corner specifically to escape his mother's latest marital pressures, burying his nose in *Adonais*.

He hadn't been eavesdropping, but the raw facts and the emotional intensity in the young woman's voice were impossible to ignore.

Fifteen hundred pounds. A drunkard. And she wants to be saved.

William narrowed his eyes. The words resonated with the humiliation he had just suffered at the Ritz. His mother had urged him to find a bride, but all the girls laughed at his poetic leanings and his frail figure.

No one wanted to marry the 'milksop' who preferred living in books to the race track. His family had money—lots of it—but William lacked charm and the aggressive masculinity required by a society that valued swagger over intellect.

As Elizabeth vented her distress over the marriage and her parents' shame, a strange, fierce idea formed in William's mind.

It was reckless, unconventional, and perfectly suited to his desperation. He pressed the poetry book against his chest. He lacked affection, but he certainly had money. And she wanted to be rescued… It was a plot straight out of the Romantic literature he cherished.

He looked at the back of Mr. Brown, who was now waving goodbye to the lady of rank with a look of worried preoccupation.

Could this be his chance at a wife, a chance at respect and a chance to save someone from the clutches of a monster?

William straightened his shoulders. His normally pale complexion gained a determined flush. Suddenly, he no longer felt like a shadow. He had a plan.

Unbeknownst to Elizabeth, her desperate whisper in the park had been heard.

Chapter 5

A loud, authoritative knock on the front door startled the Brown family.. Mr. Brown, who had just been pouring over his ledger with a look of defeated resignation, looked up sharply.

“Are you expecting anyone, dear?” Mr. Brown looked at his wife who quietly shook her head in confusion. Mrs. Brown straightened her dress, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle. She glanced at their daughter who seemed just as surprised. Mr. Brown hesitated, then crossed the hall. He pulled open the heavy oak door. Mr. Brown's eyes got wide and his mouth fell open as he opened the door. Standing on his doorstep was a figure he instantly recognized from society pages and whispered gossip: Lord De Vere.

“Good evening, Mr. Brown. I’m William De—” William started before Mr. Brown started rambling, gesturing to William to come inside.

“Lord De Vere! I am very well aware of who you are, my Lord. It’s an honour. How may I be of service?” Mr. Brown stammered, ushering the young Earl into their drawing-room with an almost comical deference. He was acutely aware of the dust on the mantelpiece and the slight wear on the carpet. William De Vere, the Earl, in *his* house.

William stood rigid and awkward by the fireplace, his long curls seeming even blonder in the candlelight. The richness of his tailored velvet jacket was at odds with his hesitant posture. He felt clumsy in this setting, but the memory of Elizabeth's desperate voice—*I don't want him to touch me*—gave him an unexpected backbone. The need to save her suddenly outweighed his social anxiety. He got straight to the point, bypassing the usual pleasantries he detested.

“Mr. Brown,” William began, his voice surprisingly steady, though pitched a little too high. He looked directly at Elizabeth's father. “I have come to ask for your daughter, Miss Elizabeth’s, hand in marriage.”

Mr. Brown’s mouth dropped open. The shock rippled across the room. Mrs. Brown gasped, clutching her hands to her chest. Elizabeth, who had frozen by the doorway, stared at the ethereal-looking nobleman, utterly bewildered. Mr. Brown quickly recovered, managing a forced, regretful smile.

“My Lord, I… I appreciate your interest, and the honour you do our family, but alas, that is impossible. Elizabeth is already promised. The marriage contract with Mr. Benedict Jones is signed. The ceremony is in one week.”

William nodded, his gaze unwavering. He ignored the panic in the air. "I am aware of that. May I see the contract?"
Mr. Brown, utterly bewildered by William's directness and the sheer audacity of his request, obeyed the implied command. He went to his desk and retrieved a scroll of parchment. "Here, it is a binding legal document, my Lord. The money has already been… partially received." He presented the document with a tremor in his hand, both embarrassed and proud of the huge sum it represented.
William took the contract and glanced at it only fleetingly. He saw the signatures, the seals, the cold legal language that sealed the fate of a fifteen-year-old girl. He briefly let his eyes scan the name 'Benedict Jones.' Then, to Mr. Brown's utter horror, he tore the document in half with a sharp, loud motion, and then into quarters. The sound was startling, a violent tear in the genteel silence of the room.
"What contract?" William asked with a sudden, unyielding resolve in his voice. It was the most commanding statement he had ever made. He let the shredded pieces fall onto the hearth rug as if they were worthless.
Mr. Brown stared at the scraps on the floor, his face pale with shock and outrage. His composure finally broke. "My Lord! That is vandalism! You have just destroyed my family's financial salvation!"
"On the contrary," William countered. He reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out a thick stack of banknotes, freshly withdrawn from his bank. He counted the notes carefully, almost obsessively, as if completing a precise task. "Mr. Jones paid you fifteen hundred pounds. I offer you double. Three thousand pounds, in cash. Moreover, I will absorb the partial sum you have already received from Mr. Jones and handle any repercussion. I will be the one who deals with that drunkard's inevitable complaint. Elizabeth's hand for three thousand pounds, and a partner in society that Benedict Jones could never offer."
Mr. Brown's anger evaporated instantly, replaced by hope and naked greed. He stared at the mountainous stack of money on the table. Three thousand pounds. Enough to save the house, enough to restore the family name, and grant them a connection to a family of true, old nobility.
But the Brown pride still reared up. Mr. Brown knew he had to ask the necessary question to protect his daughter's dignity, if nothing else. "Lord De Vere… why? Why are you so eager for my daughter? She is not a Lady of Rank, my Lord."

William gently removed his reading spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose.
“I will be honest, Mr. Brown,” William said, a trace of shyness he could not mask still present. He looked briefly at Elizabeth, then back at her father. “I am… not a man of horses or automobiles. I am a man of books and poetry. The women of my class mock me. They find me unsuitable for a husband. They see a ‘milksop’, a man who lacks dangerous passion. I am doomed to be alone if I follow the conventional path.”
He took a steadying breath and spoke with a conviction that belied his appearance. “But I am a good man, Mr. Brown, with my heart in the right place. And I know that Elizabeth will be safer with me, free from the drunk aggression of Jones. I overheard her despair. I can offer her what she truly needs: stability, propriety, and respect. That is what I have to offer for the three thousand pounds.”
William waited. The silence in the room was broken only by the crackling of the fire and the sound of blood rushing in Mr. Brown’s ears. Elizabeth's father looked from the massive stack of money to the sincere, if socially awkward, Lord, and back to the torn remnants of the Jones contract. The choice was not difficult, only shameful in its immediacy.
“My Lord,” Mr. Brown finally said, his voice hoarse with emotion and relief. ”you have a deal.” He extended his hand, sealing the new, and far more beneficial, transaction.

Chapter 6

The front door clicked shut behind William De Vere. The sound was muted, signaling the end of one nightmare and the start of another. The silence that fell back over the Brown's sitting room was heavier than the previous tension.

Mr. Brown stood by the hearth, a hand resting on the stack of money, a look of stunned relief and profound moral compromise etched on his face. Mrs. Brown sat at the dining table, her posture deflated. Tears welled in her eyes, a strange mix of salvation and shame overwhelming her. She had survived ruin, but she had lost her daughter's trust.

Elizabeth, who had been sitting rigidly in the chair at the far end of the table, stood up so quickly her chair scraped loudly against the polished floor, the sound sharp and accusatory. She had been an unwilling witness to the entire scene. She had heard every word, every rustle of the destroyed contract, and every count of the life-saving money. She now stepped into the middle of the room, her young face set in an expression of furious control.

"Are you truly satisfied?" Elizabeth's voice shook, low and sharp. Her composure was breaking, but her rebellious spirit was shining through. She looked first at the remnants of the contract on the floor—the literal scraps of her first fate—then at the thick stack of notes on the mantelpiece, and finally at her parents. Her bright, intelligent eyes were full of accusations. "You have sold me twice now, haven't you? From one man you know is a drunkard, to a man you know nothing about!"

Mrs. Brown rose, reaching a hand out to her daughter. "Elizabeth, please! Don't use that tone. We were ruined, utterly ruined! Do you not understand the generosity of Lord De Vere?"

"Generosity?" Elizabeth scoffed, the word tasting like ash. Her modern, well-read mind rejected the notion of being a charitable object. "No, Mother, it's a transaction! I am saved from the 'Pig & Barrel' drunkard only to be tossed into the arms of a wealthy stranger who buys me like a piece of furniture! And for what reason? To save himself the bother of courtship! I am only fifteen years old! I am a child, not a pawn to secure your house and reputation!"

Mr. Brown walked slowly toward her, his face drawn. He attempted the gentle persuasion of a loving, yet flawed, father. "My darling, you misunderstand. This is not like before. Lord De Vere is a man of title, of ancient respect. He

has secured an honourable name for you. He has given us a fortune and you will have a life Benedict Jones could never offer."

"I don't care about his title!" Elizabeth cried, her control finally breaking. She stamped her foot, an involuntary, childish gesture that spoke of her true age and helplessness. "I care that I am still being forced to marry a man who merely sees me as an object! He spoke of books and poetry! He is clearly odd! He buys a wife like one purchases an antique! He destroyed a contract and paid three thousand pounds cash for me! What kind of man does that?"

Mrs. Brown stepped in, her voice taking on a frantic edge. She focused on the tangible reality of their survival. "The kind of man who ensures we keep a roof over our heads! The kind of man who has saved us from being thrown onto the street! He promised you respect, Elizabeth! He said he was a good man!"

"A good man who feels the need to buy a wife?" Elizabeth repeated, her chest heaving. The intellectual contradiction of William's actions fueled her indignation. She looked from her pleading mother to her relieved, yet ashamed father. The unfairness of it all—the helplessness of her position as a young woman in 1913—was a cold shock.

"It is settled," Mr. Brown said, his voice regaining a fraction of its paternal authority. He had to impose control now, for all their sakes. He gestured to the mantelpiece. "Lord De Vere has secured our survival, and he will secure yours. You are becoming a Countess, Elizabeth. Do you understand that honour?"

Elizabeth stared at the money, then at her parents' relieved faces, a sudden, blinding fury mingling with her despair. She felt utterly betrayed, as if they had merely changed the colour of her cage.

Without another word, she spun on her heel and fled the room, tears of disbelief and desperate anger streaming down her face. She took the stairs two at a time, stumbling into the sanctuary of her bedroom and slamming the door shut. The finality of the sound echoed downstairs. She collapsed onto her bed, burying her face into her pillow, letting out a raw, silent scream of a child who had just realized her life was no longer her own.

Downstairs, Mr. and Mrs. Brown stood separated by the expanse of the room and the magnitude of what they had just done. They were survivors, but their victory tasted sour.

Mrs. Brown finally sank back into her chair, pressing her fingers against her temples. “God forgive us,” she whispered, the relief still struggling with the shame. “She hates us. She will never forgive us for this.”

Mr. Brown slowly picked up the stack of banknotes from the mantelpiece, his hand trembling as he weighed the fortune. The weight of the money felt like blood money. “She is a child, Eleanor. She only sees the man she lost, not the man she gained, nor the ruin she saved us from.” He looked at his wife, his eyes reflecting the deep conflict of a man who had won a battle by sacrificing the most precious thing he owned.

“She is safe now,” he insisted, his voice hardening with self-justification. He needed to believe in the nobility of the sacrifice. “Lord De Vere is eccentric, perhaps, but he is a peer. Her position will be unassailable. I have traded a disaster for a certainty. She will realize that in time.”

He placed the money on the table, pushing a few stray scraps of the torn contract aside.

“I am sorry, my love,” he said, his voice dropping to a raw, defeated rasp.

Chapter 7

Hill Manor, a magnificent blend of medieval stone and Tudor brick, stood on the outskirts of London, its defensive moat and towering gatehouse lending it a formidable beauty. The ancient seat of the De Vere lineage was a chilling testament to centuries of power and tradition. It was a dwelling that commanded respect, looking very much like a grand, preserved fortress. Yet, despite his ownership, William De Vere approached it not as a lord returning to his seat, but as a boy preparing for a scolding.

He walked through the heavy front doors, the sound of his boots echoing on the polished stone floor. The great hall was quiet, save for the crackling logs in the enormous fireplace—a welcome warmth that barely touched the chill emanating from the sheer size of the room. Lady De Vere was waiting, attending to her correspondence at a massive carved table. She was meticulous, aristocratic, and thoroughly intimidating. She looked up as William entered, her face an immaculately sculpted mask of polite expectation.

"William. You're late," she said, her voice laced with sarcasm. She lifted a delicate china cup to her lips. "I trust your afternoon was productive? Did you manage to find a woman who appreciates Byron and your spectacles, after all?"

William removed his gloves and spectacles, rubbing the bridge of his nose—a gesture that always preceded a difficult truth. He took a deep breath, the familiar scent of old wood, beeswax, and his mother's expensive perfume filling his lungs.

"Mother, I have secured a bride," William stated, walking toward the fire. He didn't sound triumphant, only resolute, his voice steadier than he felt.

Lady De Vere froze, the movement of her pen halting instantly. She slowly lowered her teacup, the silver spoon rattling softly. She waited, her sharp gaze pinning him. "Secured? That sounds terribly final, William. Who is she? The daughter of the Duke of Richmond, finally? Or is it Lady Montagu? Have you finally come to your senses and courted a suitable match?"

"No. Her name is Elizabeth Brown. She is fifteen. And she is not titled."

The silence returned. Lady De Vere’s eyes narrowed, disbelief warring with anger. She rose slowly, placing her pen down with deliberate care. The action was measured, the calm before the storm.

"Not titled? William, are you well? Have you been drinking? You know the family requirement. A De Vere may marry wealth, but he marries rank. A 'Miss Brown' will not do." Her voice was dangerously low, vibrating with aristocratic disdain.

"She will do, Mother, because the arrangement is already finalized," William said, finding an unexpected steadiness in his voice. The memory of Elizabeth's desperate plea fueled his courage. "I bought her contract. Three thousand pounds. Cash. I destroyed the previous agreement. She was betrothed to a disgusting brute named Jones, who bought her from her bankrupt parents for half that sum. I rescued her."

Lady De Vere walked closer to him, her silk skirt swishing softly. "You bought her? Like chattel? William, you are a peer of the realm, not a slave trader! And why would you double the price for a girl who brings no name and no political advantage? On the contrary, this will become the scandal of the year!"

"She brings me safety," William countered, looking directly into his mother's furious eyes. "She brings me a wife who will, hopefully, be grateful and meek, and not one who will mock me at every society ball and betray me with a cavalier. She is innocent and she is in need of protection. I can offer that. She is a practical choice, Mother. A means to an end."

Lady De Vere walked to him. Her expression softened slightly, recognizing the fear of inadequacy that motivated him. "A day ago, you swore you would only marry for love. You lamented the state of society, and you said you would not chase women interested only in our bank account. And now? Now you choose the first damsel in distress and buy her?" She saw the hypocrisy in his actions.

William shrugged, turning back to the fire. He looked at the dancing flames, hardening his heart to his mother’s censure and his own idealism. "Perhaps I have learned a valuable lesson, Mother. Love is for poetry, and marriage is for practicalities. I needed a wife who would not ridicule me, and she needed a protector. It is a mutually beneficial agreement. We need an heir. The Brown girl will provide one, in time. And once the child is born, I do not care who its mother is, titled or not. The De Vere fortune and title go to my child, regardless of who Elizabeth Brown is."

He paused, a dark flicker passing through his eyes. It was the first time he had fully asserted his authority as the Earl. "In six days, I will be married, and I will be the master of this house. You will, as we agreed, move to the Dower House in Surrey. Elizabeth and I will require discretion and peace. I trust you will commence your departure preparations immediately."

Lady De Vere, having lost the argument on principles, now focused on the practical threat of immediate eviction. The change in her son was astounding; the scholar had momentarily transformed into the Earl.
"Very well, William," she conceded stiffly, her voice sharp with residual defeat. She gave a curt nod. "But I sincerely hope that your chosen vessel proves worthy of the De Vere name."

Chapter 8

Elizabeth spent the next two days alternating between cold fury and crippling despair. Her bedroom, usually a sanctuary filled with books and sketching paper, felt like a lavish prison cell. She refused to leave it, communicating with her parents only through Mary, who brought trays of food that went mostly untouched. The rebellion was fueled by her sense of injustice; the refusal to eat was a small, silent form of protest against her fate.

On the third day—just four days before her wedding to a man whose face she barely remembered—a frantic tapping came at the door.

Mary slipped inside, her eyes wide with a mixture of excitement and dread. "Elizabeth! You must get up. Your mother insists. Lord De Vere has arrived for the official presentation. They are waiting for you downstairs."

Elizabeth sat up, pushing her unbound blonde hair from her face. She felt hollowed out, utterly drained. "The 'official presentation'? Is this a sale of livestock or a wedding? Tell them I am indisposed. Tell them I have the plague." Her sarcasm was sharp, a shield against her fear.

Mary wrung her hands. Her voice was urgent. "Please, don't be ridiculous! He is Lord De Vere! This is an honour! Your father says it is a crucial matter of decorum and to refuse is to insult him and destroy all credit we've bought with his money. You must meet your future husband."

Elizabeth clenched her fists on the duvet. The money. It always came back to the money. The three thousand pounds had bought her parents peace, but it had bought her nothing but a new, unknown master. She finally swung her legs out of bed.

"Fine," she hissed, standing up. She grabbed a velvet ribbon to tie back her hair, preparing for battle.

When Elizabeth entered the sitting room, she felt the silence again—the same stifling silence that had filled the room after the contract was torn. Her parents stood stiffly, their smiles brittle, expressions plastered on their faces that clearly warned her against any display of temperament. They were terrified she would undo their newfound security. And there he was: William De Vere.

He was standing precisely where he had stood before, near the large fireplace, looking impossibly young and slightly ridiculous in his tailored morning coat. He was dressed impeccably, but his long, honey-blonde hair seemed perpetually untidy. Though this time, his blue eyes were not shielded by those

professor-like spectacles. They were probably only for reading then, she thought. His face was refined, almost fragile, lacking the brute confidence of the men she usually saw in London.
He was holding a cup of tea, and as she entered, he offered a small, hesitant bow.
"Miss Brown," he said, his voice quiet, almost shy. There was no malice or lust in his tone, only profound formality. "It is a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance."
Elizabeth curtsied stiffly, barely dipping her head. Her body was rigid with defiance. She refused to look at him, addressing only the air between them.
"Lord De Vere," she returned, her voice flat.
Mr. Brown nervously cleared his throat. He needed to move the conversation along, away from the dangerous silence. "Right! Well, now that introductions are made… My Lord, perhaps you would care to walk Elizabeth to the gardens? A little time alone before the ceremony? It would be... appropriate."
William nodded, placing his teacup down. "An excellent suggestion, Mr. Brown. Miss Brown?" He offered her his arm.
Elizabeth met her mother's desperate, pleading eyes, which begged for compliance. *Do not ruin this, Elizabeth.* The sight was enough to fuel her rebellious spirit. She took a breath, stepped back, and crossed her arms.
"I have no desire to walk the gardens, Father," Elizabeth stated, her voice icy and controlled, a clear defiance of her parents' will. She finally met William's gaze, looking for the anger she was sure to find there. "And I certainly have no desire to spend time alone with my purchaser."
The colour drained from Mrs. Brown's face. Mr. Brown took a sharp, indrawn breath, expecting the Earl to take severe offense and possibly demand his money back. But William De Vere did not react as they expected. He did not flush with anger or storm out.
He merely kept his hand suspended, tilted his head slightly, and observed her through his long lashes. He saw her fear hidden beneath her bravado. A moment of absolute silence passed before he spoke, his voice remaining calm, lacking offense, but infused with a sudden, unnerving authority.
"I understand your resentment, Miss Brown," William said, his eyes holding hers. "However, I did not come here for a demonstration of your temper. I came here to ensure the future stability of both of our lives. You will be my wife in a few days. You have a choice: you may hate me quietly in the garden,

or you may hate me loudly in this room, thereby embarrassing your parents and yourself."
He lowered his arm slightly, his expression unchanging. He had used logic, the one thing that appealed to Elizabeth's nature as a scholar.
"You may dislike the truth of our arrangement, but you will respect its formality. Now, are we going to the garden, or are we going to ruin your mother's afternoon tea?"
Elizabeth fought the urge to stamp her foot, her pride warring with the cold, hard logic William had just presented. With a tight, sharp intake of breath, she relented.
"The garden, then," she managed, her voice barely a whisper of defeat. She placed her hand lightly on his arm, the formal contact feeling stiff and entirely wrong.

They walked out of the back door and onto the manicured paths, leaving her parents behind in a silent cloud of strained relief. The air was cool, carrying the scent of damp earth and late-blooming flowers.
William maintained the silence until they were well out of earshot, passing the clipped hedges of the labyrinth.
"Miss Brown," William began, his voice softening slightly, losing the authoritative edge he'd used indoors. "I want you to understand one thing: I am not your enemy in this transaction. Benedict Jones is a monster; I merely represent the escape from him."
He stopped by an ancient stone sundial, looking at her with a sincerity that was difficult to dismiss.
"I know this is not how you wished to choose a husband, and I know you are unhappy. But you need to know what I can offer you. I will not drink or gamble. I will not beat you or humiliate you. I will offer you a life of absolute security and respect. Hill Manor is vast. You may live your life within its walls with the utmost privacy. Your studies, your books, your interests—they will not be curtailed. You will be Lady De Vere, and I will be your protector."
He turned his gaze towards the house, his expression distant. "I will require a wife in name, and a hostess when necessary. I will be a good husband, Elizabeth. And when the time comes, I will be a good father to the children of Hill Manor."
It was the word 'father' that truly broke through Elizabeth's wall of anger, triggering a sudden, silent panic. *Children.* The inevitable means to that end.

Four days. That was all the time she had left. In four days, she would stand at the altar, and in four nights—or perhaps that very same night—she would be expected to fulfill her duty as a wife: the "inauguration" of the marriage. The completion.

Her mind raced, desperately searching for clarity. She was fifteen. What did that entail? The shame, the confusion, and the sheer terror of her youth prevented her from uttering a single word about it to the man walking beside her. He was a stranger, and the thought of discussing intimacy with him was paralyzing. She had to talk to Mary. Mary was seventeen, and engaged to her own childhood sweetheart, Jean—a French boy who had grown up in London. Mary must know.

While Elizabeth's mind was drowning in these terrifying, unspoken fears, William continued, entirely oblivious to her internal state, assuming her silence was merely disdain.

"Your mother mentioned you have not yet chosen a personal maid," he said, shifting back to practical matters. "You should do so immediately. When you arrive at Hill Manor, you will need an attendant to help you out. Also, your current title is 'Miss Brown,' but as my wife, you will be styled Lady De Vere. You will also need to decide how you wish to furnish your private rooms at Hill Manor. I insist they reflect your own tastes."

He gestured vaguely toward the sprawling grounds. "Hill Manor is far from London society, which I believe suits us both. It will be our world, Elizabeth. I promise you, I will take care of everything."

He spoke of chambers and maids and titles—all the outward signs of her new, elevated life. But all Elizabeth could hear was the frantic ticking of the clock: four days until she had to surrender her body to a man she did not know, for a purpose she did not understand. She barely registered his promise of care; she was too consumed by the harrowing uncertainty of what awaited her on her wedding night.

Chapter 9

The Earl's carriage pulled up in front of The Pig & Barrel. The contrast could not have been greater: the gleaming black coach with the family crest on the door, parked in the mud of a street where despair hung heavy.
William sat still for a moment. His hands, gloved in white leather, rested on his walking stick. His heart was hammering in his throat. This was no tea room at the Ritz. This was the territory of men like Benedict Jones. But he thought of Elizabeth's face, of her fear of the man inside. He set his jaw, pushed open the door, and stepped out.
When William entered the pub, the low hum of conversation ceased instantly. He was an apparition from another world. His velvet jacket, his polished boots, and his pale, refined face did not belong here amidst the haze of cheap tobacco and stale beer.
At the bar, surrounded by a few cronies, stood Benedict Jones. He was already well on his way to being drunk. Noticing the silence, he turned around with some effort. His eyes, clouded by drink, narrowed as he recognised the young man.
"Well, look at this," Benedict slurred, a mocking grin breaking across his face. "Little Lord De Vere is lost. Looking for your library, lad? It's on the other side of town." His drinking companions chuckled.
William walked to the bar. He ignored the stench and the hostile stares. He stopped a yard away from Benedict, just out of reach of his breath. "Mr Jones," William said. His voice was soft, but in the sudden silence, it was crystal clear. "I have come to inform you of a change in your future plans."
Benedict leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms. "Is that so? And what would the Earl have to say to me?"
"It concerns Elizabeth Brown."
The grin vanished from Benedict's face. He pushed off the bar and took a step forward. He was broader than William, heavier, and accustomed to brawling. "What've you got to do with my bride? Stay away from her, you coward. She’s mine. I’ve paid for her."
"Not anymore," William said calmly. He withdrew an envelope from his inner pocket and dropped it onto the bar. The sound was dull but heavy. "In this

envelope is two hundred pounds. The portion of your investment that you had already paid, plus a generous interest for the... inconvenience."
Benedict stared at the envelope, then back at William. Rage began to simmer. "Do you think you can buy everything? I don't want your money. I want the girl. We have an agreement!"
"That agreement no longer exists," William said. He felt his knees trembling but forced himself to keep looking Benedict straight in the eye. "I have destroyed it. Elizabeth is no longer promised to you. She is engaged to me."
A shocked whisper rippled through the pub. Benedict's face turned a deep red. He clenched his fists. "You filthy little..." He took a threatening step forward and seized William by the lapels of his jacket. "You're stealing her from me! I'll...!"
William stiffened, but he did not back away. He knew he didn't stand a chance physically, so he used the only weapon he had: his rank. "Go ahead," William said coolly, his gaze fixed tightly on Benedict's bloodshot eyes. "Strike me. But be very aware of who I am. If you touch me now, my family will ensure you are in a gaol cell before sunrise—one you will never leave. You won't just lose your money, Mr Jones, but your freedom and whatever remains of your reputation."
It was a bluff—William had no idea if he could actually make that happen—but it worked. The social hierarchy of 1913 was deeply ingrained. A labourer or a middle-class man did not strike an Earl, not without ruining his own life. Slowly, his hands shaking with suppressed rage, Benedict let go. He shoved William away and turned toward the envelope on the bar.
"She isn't worth it," Benedict snapped, snatching the envelope. He tried to save his pride in front of his friends. "She's a skinny, moody thing. You can have her. Good luck to you."
William straightened his jacket. He felt sick from the adrenaline, but he let none of it show. "A wise choice," he said. "I assume you will leave the Brown family and my future wife in peace from now on. Good evening, gentlemen."
He turned and walked out of the pub, his back straight, leaving the silence behind him. Only when he was outside in the cool night air, and had pulled the carriage door shut behind him, did he let his mask slip. He sank deep into the cushions and exhaled a long, shaky breath.

Chapter 10

Later that evening, the tension of the day having finally lifted the self-imposed banishment, Elizabeth sat curled on a chaise lounge in her bedroom. Her head felt clearer now that she had escaped the suffocating supervision of her parents. Mary was perched on the edge of a nearby armchair, the door firmly locked against the possibility of her parents' unwanted intrusion. A single lamp cast soft light over the heavy atmosphere, throwing long, nervous shadows across the room.

Elizabeth had barely touched the dinner tray and now gripped a cushion to her chest, her breathing shallow. Her mind had circled one topic all day, and now, finally alone with her only confidante, she found herself paralyzed. She didn't know how to start such a humiliating, intimate conversation.

"Mary," Elizabeth whispered, her voice barely audible. She looked at her friend, her eyes pleading for a wisdom she knew Mary might not fully possess. "Tell me. About marriage. About... what happens after."

Mary immediately understood. Her own face softened with a mixture of sympathy and awkwardness. At seventeen, she felt miles ahead of Elizabeth, yet her knowledge was equally rudimentary, filtered through the same Victorian modesty.

"Oh, Elizabeth," Mary said, leaning forward. "You mean the... the joining." She lowered her voice further, glancing instinctively at the locked door. "My mother explained it to me. It's... your duty. Your principal duty to your husband and to the lineage."

"Duty," Elizabeth scoffed inwardly. She had spent hours reading radical essays on women's rights; her duty, as she saw it, was to cultivate her mind, not sacrifice her body. "But what is it?" Elizabeth pressed, desperation overriding her modesty.

Mary swallowed hard, recalling the hushed, vague instructions she'd received. She stammered slightly over the forbidden topic. "Well, you will be together. Alone. You will... show affection. And then... you will be naked."

The word 'naked' struck Elizabeth with the force of a physical blow. The idea was horrifying, stripping her of the last layer of privacy and control she possessed.

"Naked?" Elizabeth repeated, horrified. Her intellectual focus vanished, replaced by primal terror. "What if he doesn't find me beautiful? What if I don't find him beautiful? We barely know each other!" Her resistance was rooted in the lack of emotional connection, in the sheer foreignness of the man who held her contract.

"It doesn't matter, love," Mary murmured, trying to be reassuring. She spoke from the perspective of duty and necessity. "It's not about being beautiful; it's about being fruitful. He needs an heir. To secure the estate, he must perform his duty as well. To make a baby, he must... he must enter you. With his—" Mary gestured vaguely downward, her cheeks flushing crimson. "With his manhood. It's called... penetration."

Elizabeth stared at her. *Penetration.* The word was clinical and terrifying. What if it hurts? What if she truly could not bear to be touched by a stranger she had barely spoken two dozen words to? The prospect of the physical invasion, compounded by her lack of desire for William, made her whole body tense.

"What if I don't want to do it?" Elizabeth asked, her voice trembling. She was seeking a loophole, a sign that she still held dominion over her own body.

Mary looked genuinely shocked. Her social conditioning was absolute on this point. "You can't refuse, Elizabeth! It's your duty as his wife! He has a right. He paid for that right. You must simply grit your teeth and endure it. It's what all good wives do. He will be quick, I am sure. He seems... reserved." Mary tried to offer a small consolation, using William's awkwardness as a source of hope.

Elizabeth watched her friend. She saw the genuine innocence and devotion in Mary's eyes. "Mary, are you frightened of your own wedding night? With Jean?"

Mary fiddled with a ribbon on her black dress. "Nervous, yes, of course. But Jean... I love Jean. And I know he loves me. I will do everything I can to make him happy, and if he is happy, then I will be happy, too." A sweet, dreamy smile touched her lips, illuminating the difference between their fates.

Elizabeth shuddered, pulling the cushion tighter. The contrast was agonizing. Mary would endure a brief discomfort out of love and devotion for her childhood sweetheart. Elizabeth would be submitting to a transaction, enduring a profound violation of privacy for three thousand pounds.

The whole concept—the enforced nakedness, the physical invasion by a stranger—was utterly repellent. She had been saved from a drunkard, only to

be delivered into the quiet, polite tyranny of duty. The idea of 'gritting her teeth' for a lifetime of such duties was simply something she could not reconcile.

Chapter 11

The massive stone cathedral of St. Jude's was thronged. The enormous Gothic structure, built centuries ago to humble man before God, now served as the grand stage for this unlikely, scandalous union. News of the Lord’s unexpected, last-minute nuptials had swept through the surrounding villages like wildfire. The tenant farmers, the estate staff, and the local gentry had all turned out, crowding the aisles and spilling onto the steps outside. Everyone wanted to witness the arrival of the mysterious, untitled girl who had captured their eccentric young master. They craned their necks, eager to see the face and gauge the character of the woman who would be their new Lady De Vere.
Elizabeth stood before the altar, the cathedral’s vast, cold stone towering over her slight, fifteen-year-old frame. The height of the vaulting seemed to press down on her, magnifying her isolation. She was clad in heavy white silk, a thick veil shrouding her face, making her feel less like a bride and more like a ghost—a ghost of the vibrant, rebellious girl she had been just a week ago.
William stood beside her, his posture ramrod straight, his profile betraying nothing but a formal earnestness. He, too, felt the weight of the spectacle, but beneath his composure, there was a steady resolve.
The ceremony proceeded with agonizing slowness. The familiar words of the Anglican rite felt hollow, stripped of all spiritual meaning and serving only as a legal formality. When the vicar finally pronounced them husband and wife, William turned to face his bride.
He lifted her veil. Elizabeth finally met his gaze—his blue eyes were earnest, but unreadable. He leaned down, and the obligatory kiss was placed on her lips. It was softer than Elizabeth had braced herself for, brief, almost hesitant, and oddly sweet. For one dizzying moment, she felt a flicker of confusion—this was not what she had imagined. There was no aggression, no demand, only the fleeting brush of his reserved lips.
The organ swelled, and they walked back down the aisle together. As they emerged into the afternoon light, a cheer went up from the villagers, and they were instantly enveloped in a shower of rice and rose petals—a traditional, joyous deluge that felt entirely undeserved by the two strangers who had just completed a desperate transaction.