



A Game of Hearts

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Category: Historical

Description: When Miss Emma Everton is paired with Nathaniel Fairmont, Earl of Limnwood, during a Valentines lottery at the Duke of Pelhampton's houseparty, sparks fly.

Their clashing personalities set the tone for a battle of wits, but the hidden agendas of other attendees and a cascade of misunderstandings soon threaten more than their fragile partnership.

As the house party reaches its grand finale, can these unlikely partners navigate a storm of intrigue and find love?

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Miss Emma Everton smoothed her pale blue silk gown and tried not to fidget as she followed the butler into the grand dining room of Pelham Hall. The Duke of Pelhampton's annual Valentine's house party was, by all accounts, the most anticipated event of the winter, and her first glimpse of the room showed her why. Crystal chandeliers cast rainbow-hued light over gleaming silver and pristine white linen, while perfect table arrangements of hothouse grown spring flowers scented the air.

A cluster of fresh snowdrops and delicate purple crocuses graced the arrangement nearest her assigned seat, making her smile. Someone had worked hard in the Duke's celebrated conservatory and greenhouses to grow these harbingers of spring. Soon, the main gardens would show the same growth, as spring warmed the world.

"Miss Everton."

The butler's measured tones directed her attention to her assigned seat. She murmured her thanks, allowing a footman to assist with her chair.

"My dear Miss Everton, how delightful to have you with us this year!" The Duchess of Pelhampton beamed at her from across the table. "I was just telling His Grace how much we enjoyed your performance at Lady Millbrook's musical evening last month."

"You are too kind, Your Grace."

Emma felt herself relaxing slightly. Until her aunt caught her eye from three seats away and raised an eyebrow in silent warning. Lady Agatha need not worry – Emma

had no intention of being anything less than perfectly proper tonight.

“And how is your dear mother?” the Duchess continued. “I trust that Lady Everton is recovered from her cold?”

“Yes, Your Grace, though she still requires rest. That is why my aunt was kind enough to agree to chaperone me for this house party.”

The sound of the dining room door opening again drew her attention. She glanced up, then caught her breath. The man entering could only be the Marquess of Limnwood – his bearing alone would have marked him as nobility, even without his striking height and aristocratic features. His grey eyes swept the room with military precision, missing nothing. His evening attire, though perfectly correct, had none of the elaborate flourishes that marked so many gentlemen of the ton. Instead, its severe cut emphasised his broad shoulders and commanding presence.

“Ah, Limnwood!” The Duke’s voice boomed out. “Excellent timing. We’re just about to begin.”

To Emma’s dismay, the only remaining seat was beside her. She watched as Lord Limnwood made his way to the chair, his expression stern and remote. Clearly, the tales of his rigid propriety had not been exaggerated.

“Now then,” the Duke rose, lifting his glass. “Welcome, one and all, to our Valentine’s house party! As those who have attended before will know, we have a cherished tradition...” Emma found her attention divided between the Duke’s words and the Marquess beside her, who seemed to be studying her with unveiled disapproval. Had she somehow already managed to offend him? She lifted her chin slightly, meeting his gaze with quiet challenge. “As is our tradition,” the Duke continued, “tomorrow being Saint Valentine’s Day, we shall hold our annual Valentine’s lottery this evening. Each unmarried gentleman will draw a lady’s name,

and that lady shall be his partner for all of our planned activities over the next fortnight.”

A ripple of excitement passed through the assembled guests. Emma noticed Lady Anne Fotheringham straightening in her seat, her dark eyes fixed on Lord Limnwood with barely concealed interest. The lady’s perfectly arranged dark curls and elegant burgundy gown spoke of careful preparation - clearly, she had specific aims for this evening.

“Of course,” the Duke’s eyes twinkled, “propriety shall be maintained at all times. But we find that sharing challenges and triumphs often leads to... deeper understanding between our participants.”

“What sort of activities might we expect, Your Grace?”

Lady Anne’s voice carried just the right note of demure inquiry.

“Ah, that would be telling, would it not?” The Duke chuckled. “But I assure you, all will be both entertaining and entirely proper.”

Emma caught her aunt’s slight nod of approval at this assurance. She suppressed a sigh. At twenty, she was perfectly capable of managing her own behaviour without constant supervision. Still, she understood her aunt’s concern - they could ill afford even a hint of scandal, not with her younger sister, Isabelle’s, coming out planned for this next Season.

“The lottery will commence after dinner,” the Duke announced, seating himself again. “For now, let us enjoy this excellent food.”

The first course was served, and Emma found herself searching for something appropriate to say to her stern-faced dining companion. Before she could speak, Lord

Limnwood addressed her.

“I understand, Miss Everton, that you are acquainted with my cousin, Lady Harriet Carbrook?”

“Yes, my Lord. We often meet at musical gatherings. She plays the pianoforte beautifully.”

“Indeed.” His tone suggested that he found such gatherings frivolous. “Though I believe that she mentioned some rather... spirited behaviour at the last such event.”

Emma felt heat rise in her cheeks.

“If you refer to the impromptu dancing, my Lord, I assure you that it was entirely proper. Lady Harriet herself suggested it.”

“Proper?” His eyebrow lifted. “To dance without formal introduction of partners?”

“We were all previously acquainted, my Lord,” Emma replied, keeping her voice level, despite her rising irritation. “And Lady Harriet’s mother was present throughout.”

“Nevertheless, such spontaneous displays can lead to... unfortunate consequences.”

“And what consequences would those be?” Emma couldn’t quite keep the edge from her voice. “The terrible fate of people enjoying themselves?”

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“The consequence, Miss Everton, of young ladies developing a reputation for being... fast.”

Emma's hand tightened on her soup spoon.

"How fortunate then, my Lord, that you were not present to witness such shocking behaviour. I fear that your sensibilities might not have survived the ordeal."

A flash of something - surprise? annoyance? - crossed his face before his expression settled back into stern disapproval.

"I merely point out that a lady's reputation is a delicate thing."

"While a gentleman's, apparently, is made of sterner stuff?" Emma arched an eyebrow. "How convenient."

"Oh!" Lady Anne's voice cut smoothly into the tension, "I believe that I spy the first strawberries of the season being brought in. His Grace must have had them forced in his hothouse."

"Indeed," the Duchess smiled. "Our gardener is quite skilled with the hothouses. Though I confess, the flavour is never quite the same as summer strawberries."

Emma welcomed the interruption, though she noticed Lady Anne's gaze lingering appreciatively on Lord Limnwood. Well, she was welcome to him. Clearly, the Marquess was every bit as stuffy and judgmental as rumour had painted him.

The rest of dinner passed in a blur of elaborate courses and carefully polite conversation. Emma found herself counting the minutes until she could escape, though she maintained an outward appearance of perfect composure. She was not about to give Lord Limnwood any further cause to criticise her behaviour.

To her relief, the Duke finally rose again.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, if you would proceed to the drawing room? The lottery awaits!”

The drawing room of Pelham Hall buzzed with anticipation. Footmen had arranged chairs in a semicircle, with a small table at the centre holding two covered baskets. The Duke stood beside them, clearly enjoying his role as master of ceremonies.

Emma found herself seated between her friend Lady Beatrice Somers and her aunt. Lady Beatrice leaned close to whisper to her.

“I do hope that I’m paired with someone agreeable. Did you notice Lord James Fairmont at dinner? He seems quite charming.”

“Which one was he?” Emma whispered back.

“The fair-haired gentleman near the end of the table. Lord Limnwood’s younger brother, though they’re nothing alike in temperament, thank goodness.”

Emma’s interest quickened.

“Lord Limnwood’s brother? I wouldn’t have guessed - they look nothing alike.”

“Lord James takes after their mother’s family, I’m told,” Lady Beatrice explained. “Though he has all the Fairmont height. But hush - they’re starting!”

“Ladies, your names have been placed in this basket.” The Duke gestured to the left. “Gentlemen, you will each draw one slip. The lady whose name you select shall be your partner for our upcoming activities.”

Emma watched as, one by one, the gentlemen stepped forward to draw names. Her stomach tightened with nerves as each slip was drawn and read, then dropped into the other basket..

“Lord James Fairmont,” the Duke called.

The young man Emma now recognised stepped forward, his easy smile and graceful movement providing a stark contrast to his brother’s rigid bearing.

“Lady Beatrice Somers,” he read out, and bowed to Beatrice with a flourish that made her blush prettily.

More names were drawn. Emma tried not to fidget as the number of remaining gentlemen dwindled. She noticed Lady Anne leaning forward each time, clearly hoping to hear her name paired with Lord Limnwood’s.

“The Marquess of Limnwood.”

Emma held her breath with the rest of the unmarried ladies. She found herself fervently hoping that she would not be chosen. After their clash at dinner, two weeks of forced partnership would be torture.

“Miss Emma Everton.”

The silence that followed seemed to stretch forever. Emma forced herself to smile as Lord Limnwood turned to bow to her, his expression as rigid as ever. She rose and curtsied, perfectly aware of Lady Anne’s furious gaze boring into her back.

“What a fortuitous pairing,” Lady Anne’s voice carried just loudly enough to reach Emma’s ears. “Though I fear some may find the activities rather... challenging. Not everyone is suited to proper society entertainments.”

Emma lifted her chin, refusing to show how the barb stung.

She was a Baronet's daughter, perfectly well trained in proper behaviour. That she chose not to be rigid and joyless did not make her less suited to society.

After that, as the last few gentlemen drew their partners, Emma was in something of a mental haze. How on earth would she manage to cope with two weeks in the close company of a man so unsociable?

Finally, the last names were drawn.

"How delightful!" The Duke clapped his hands. "And now, let us have some music. The first of our Valentine's activities will begin tomorrow morning after breakfast."

Emma sank back into her chair, her mind still whirling. Two weeks. She would have to partner with Lord Limnwood for two whole weeks of activities.

As the evening drew to a close, Emma caught Lord Limnwood watching her with that same disapproving expression. She met his gaze steadily, refusing to be intimidated. If he thought to manage her into rigidly proper behaviour by stern looks alone, he would soon learn otherwise. She might have to partner with him, but she did not have to become the prim, lifeless creature he seemed to prefer.

The next fortnight promised to be quite a battle of wills.

Nathaniel stood at the library window, a barely touched glass of brandy in his hand, watching moonlight silver the formal gardens. Behind him, the gentle clink of glasses and murmur of masculine conversation filled the room, but he found himself unable to focus on any of it.

His mind kept returning to the flash of defiance in Miss Everton's remarkable violet eyes.

"Come now, brother, surely the prospect of partnering the loveliest girl at the houseparty isn't that dire?"

James appeared at his elbow, his own glass significantly emptier.

"Lovely she may be, but her behaviour..."

Nathaniel shook his head.

"Ah yes, heaven forbid a young lady should actually enjoy herself." James' tone held a sharp edge beneath its usual lightness. "Tell me, when did you become such a stick in the mud? You weren't always like this."

"When I learned what can happen when people ignore the rules of proper behaviour."

The words came out harsher than he had intended.

"Miss Everton is hardly likely to cause a scandal by participating in a few parlour games," James pointed out. "Though I noticed that Lady Anne seemed quite put out by the lottery's result."

"Lady Anne's disappointment is not my concern."

"No? She was quite determined to catch your eye last Season. Impeccable manners, perfect propriety... exactly what you claim to want in a wife."

Nathaniel turned to study his brother's face.

“You sound as if you disapprove.”

“Of Lady Anne? Let’s just say I’ve seen her perfect manners slip once or twice when she thought that no one of consequence was watching. Miss Everton, on the other hand...”

James paused meaningfully.

“Yes?”

“Is exactly what she appears to be. Warm, genuine, intelligent... and quite capable of keeping you on your toes, I’d wager.”

“That is hardly a recommendation.”

“Isn’t it?” James grinned. “When was the last time anyone challenged you? Made you question your assumptions? Besides me, of course.”

Nathaniel found himself remembering Miss Everton’s arch comment about his sensibilities. Despite himself, his lips twitched.

“She is... quick-witted, I’ll grant you that.”

“And beautiful. And well-born. And...” James broke off as Lord Radmill approached. “Ah, Radmill! I was just telling my brother how fortunate he is in his lottery partner.”

“Indeed?” The Earl of Radmill’s expression suggested that he thought otherwise. “I would have thought my daughter, Lady Anne, a more suitable match. She has always moved in the very highest circles, you know.”

Nathaniel stiffened at the barely veiled hint.

“The lottery is merely for entertainment, my Lord. I doubt many lasting matches have resulted from it.”

“Though it does have an interesting way of throwing people together,” James mused. “I find myself quite looking forward to partnering Lady Beatrice.”

The conversation turned to other topics, but Nathaniel found his thoughts returning to Miss Everton. She had stood up to his criticism without losing her composure - that showed strength of character, at least. And James was right about one thing - she was genuine. There was nothing artificial in her manner, unlike some...

He caught himself. This line of thinking was dangerous. Miss Everton's genuine nature made her more of a risk, not less. Someone who followed their impulses without considering consequences could cause no end of trouble. He had seen it happen before.

Still, as he bid goodnight to his brother and made his way to his assigned bedchamber, he couldn't quite banish the memory of those remarkable violet eyes, sparking with challenge. Tomorrow would certainly prove... interesting.

A tap at his door preceded the entrance of his valet.

“Shall I assist you in preparing for bed?”

“No, thank you, Staples. I believe that I can manage.”

Once alone, Nathaniel found himself standing at his window, much as he had in the library. The grounds of Pelham Hall stretched out before him, perfectly maintained even in winter. Order. Structure. Everything in its proper place. That was what society needed - what he had fought to protect during his years in the Navy.

So why did he find himself wondering what Miss Everton might say about such rigid arrangements? Would she prefer the wildness of unconstrained nature? He could almost hear her voice suggesting that perhaps a few flowers breaking ranks might improve the view.

Irritated with himself, he turned away from the window. This would not do at all. Miss Everton was his assigned partner for the house party activities, nothing more. That she had sparked his curiosity was irrelevant. That she had made him question his own rigid standards, even for a moment, was dangerous. He had seen what happened when people let their hearts rule their heads. One of his own cousins had nearly ruined herself through such foolishness. If he hadn't been there to interrupt that scandalous elopement...

No. Better to maintain proper distance. Miss Everton might resent his correction of her behaviour, but better that than disaster. He would simply have to be on his guard - against her quick wit, against that sparkle in her eyes when she challenged him, against the way that her dark red curls caught the light... Nathaniel shook himself. Clearly, he needed sleep. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges, and he would need all of his wits about him to maintain proper behaviour with such an unpredictable partner.

Yet as he lay in his bed, sleep proved elusive. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Miss Everton's face - not as she had looked when angry with him, but as she had been when he first entered the dining room, her expression full of joy and anticipation. Before he had spoiled her evening with his criticism.

Perhaps, he admitted to himself in the darkness, he had been a touch too severe...

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Emma stared at the paper before her, fighting the urge to crumple it into a ball and throw it at Lord Limnwood's perfectly proper head. His latest attempt at a Valentine's verse was technically perfect in metre and rhyme, and utterly devoid of any real feeling.

"Perhaps, my Lord," she managed, keeping her voice steady, "we might attempt something a touch more... heartfelt?"

He looked up from where he sat opposite her at the small writing desk, his grey eyes cool.

"The verses are perfectly adequate, Miss Everton. They follow all the proper forms."

"That is precisely the problem." The words escaped before she could stop them. "They're adequate. Proper. And completely bloodless."

A muscle ticked in his jaw.

"I see. And what would you suggest? Something wild and inappropriate, no doubt?"

"Heaven forbid." She couldn't quite keep the edge from her voice. "But perhaps we might manage something between complete impropriety and utter tedium?"

Around them, the morning room buzzed with conversation as other couples worked on their assigned Valentine's verses.

Lady Beatrice's quiet laugh drew Emma's attention to where her friend sat with Lord

James, their heads bent together over their paper, clearly enjoying the task.

“The Duke has requested that each pair perform their verses before the assembled company this afternoon,” Lord Limnwood reminded her. “We cannot afford to be... experimental.”

“No,” Emma agreed, suddenly inspired. “But we might draw upon classical sources. Surely you cannot object to Ovid? Or perhaps Catullus?”

His eyebrows rose slightly.

“You are familiar with the classical poets, Miss Everton?”

“Is that so surprising? My father believed in education for both his sons and daughters.” She met his gaze steadily. “Though perhaps you find that somehow improper as well?”

Something flickered in his eyes - surprise? respect? - before his expression settled back into its usual stern lines.

“Not at all. Though I confess, I would not have expected...”

“A frivolous girl to know of such things?”

The words came out sharper than she intended.

“I did not say that.”

“You did not need to, my Lord. Your disapproval has been quite clear since our first meeting.”

He sat back slightly, and Emma was startled to see genuine confusion cross his face.

“You believe that I disapprove of you?”

“Do you not?” She gestured to the paper between them. “Everything I suggest is too informal, too spirited, too... everything.”

“I merely believe in maintaining proper standards.”

“And you believe that I do not?”

Before he could answer, Lady Anne’s voice carried across the room.

“Oh, how delightful! Lord Radmill, you must hear the verses that Lord James and Lady Beatrice have composed. Such perfect propriety of sentiment.”

Emma noticed Lord James’ slight grimace at this pronouncement. Clearly, Lady Anne’s interpretation of their verses differed from their intent.

“Perhaps,” Emma said quietly, turning back to Lord Limnwood, “we might find a way to be both proper and genuine? Unless you fear that genuine feeling might somehow taint propriety?”

His eyes narrowed.

“You do take delight in provoking me, do you not?”

“Not at all, my Lord. I simply believe that truth and propriety need not be enemies.” She picked up her pen. “Shall we try again? I promise to maintain perfect decorum, if you will allow at least a touch of genuine feeling.”

He studied her face for a long moment, and Emma found herself holding her breath, suddenly acutely aware of him as a man, not merely an embodiment of rigid propriety. The morning sunlight caught golden glints in his dark hair, and there was something in his eyes that made her heart beat faster.

“Very well,” he said finally. “Show me what you propose.”

Emma bent to write, trying to ignore how his proximity affected her. His cologne - something subtle with hints of bergamot and cedar - teased her senses. How unfortunate that such an attractive man should be so determined to eliminate every drop of joy from life. The scratch of her pen filled the silence between them as she wrote. When she finished, she passed the paper to him without speaking.

He read it, his expression unchanging. Then, to her surprise, the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

“Catullus?”

“With significant modification for propriety’s sake,” she assured him. “Do you approve?”

“It is... acceptable.”

But there was something in his voice that suggested more than mere acceptance.

“High praise indeed, my Lord.”

She couldn’t quite keep the dryness from her tone. His eyes met hers again, and for a moment, something sparked between them - a recognition, perhaps, of the absurdity of their situation. Then Lady Anne’s voice broke the moment.

“Lord Limnwood, surely you cannot mean to allow such... experimental verses? What will people think?”

Emma felt Lord Limnwood stiffen beside her at Lady Anne’s words. She waited, breath caught, to see how he would respond to this public challenge.

“I believe, Lady Anne,” he said, his voice cool and measured, “that Miss Everton and I have found an acceptable balance between classical inspiration and modern propriety.”

Emma’s surprise at his defence warred with satisfaction at Lady Anne’s barely concealed frustration. The dark-haired beauty recovered quickly, however.

“Oh, how fascinating,” Lady Anne’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I look forward to hearing your... creation this afternoon. Though I fear some of our older guests might find classical allusions rather beyond them.”

“I suspect, Lady Anne,” Emma couldn’t help responding, “that you underestimate our audience.”

The morning room had grown quiet, their exchange drawing attention. Emma saw Lady Beatrice’s encouraging smile, and Lord James’ obvious amusement at his brother being drawn into literary debates.

“Indeed,” the Duke of Pelhampton’s voice cut through the tension. “I quite look forward to all of our performances. Now then, luncheon awaits, after which we shall reconvene in the drawing room to hear our poetic offerings.”

The drawing room of Pelham Hall had never seemed quite so large to Emma as it did

now, watching couple after couple present their verses. Lord James and Lady Beatrice had just finished a charming exchange of romantic compliments that managed to be both proper and genuinely sweet, earning warm applause.

“Miss Everton.” Lord Limnwood’s voice drew her attention. “I believe that we are next.”

She rose, suddenly conscious of every eye upon them. They had practised their alternating verses twice, agreeing that Emma would begin. Now, standing before the assembled company, she was achinglly aware of Lord Limnwood’s tall presence beside her.

Taking a deep breath, she began:

“In gardens fair where lovers meet,

Where spring’s first breath brings promise sweet,

I seek a heart both true and strong,

To match the spirit of my song.”

His deep voice took up the next verse, and Emma was startled by the richness of emotion he allowed to show:

“Through duty’s paths and honour’s ways,

Through winter nights and summer days,

I seek a heart both wise and free,

To share life's journey faithfully."

Their eyes met as they continued, trading verses that spoke of love's balance between freedom and commitment, joy and duty. Emma found herself caught in his gaze, the rest of the room fading away. There was something in his expression she had never seen before - a softness, a vulnerability that made her heart beat faster.

As they finished the final coupled verses together, the applause seemed to come from very far away. Emma curtsied automatically, her mind whirling. What had just happened? For those few moments, Lord Limnwood had shown a depth of feeling she would never have suspected him capable of.

"How... interesting." Lady Anne's voice cut through Emma's confusion. "Though perhaps a touch too... passionate for a drawing room performance? What do you think, Lord Radmill?"

Lord Radmill cleared his throat. It was obvious that she expected her father to support her opinion.

"Well, I..."

"I thought it was beautiful," Lady Beatrice spoke up firmly. "A perfect balance of classical elegance and true feeling."

"Quite so," the Duchess of Pelhampton nodded. "Reminded me of some verses my dear Duke wrote to me in our courting days. Though perhaps not quite so well composed," she added with a fond smile at her husband.

Emma felt Lord Limnwood's tension beside her as they returned to their seats. She glanced at him, trying to understand the rigid set of his shoulders, the way that his earlier openness had vanished completely.

“My Lord,” she began quietly.

“It seems,” he cut her off, his voice barely above a whisper, “that I was mistaken to allow such... emotional display. Lady Anne is quite right - it was inappropriate for the setting.”

“Inappropriate?” Emma couldn’t keep the hurt from her voice. “To show genuine feeling? To actually mean the words we spoke?”

“There are proper ways to express sentiment.”

“Yes, there are. And we found one. Unless...” She met his eyes directly. “Unless you did not mean a word of it, did not believe in the type of sentiments that it expressed? Was it all merely performance for you, my Lord?”

Something flickered in his grey eyes - pain? regret? - before his expression closed completely.

“What else could it have been, Miss Everton?”

The words struck like a physical blow. Emma lifted her chin, refusing to show how deeply his dismissal hurt.

“How foolish of me to imagine otherwise. I shall know better than to expect genuine feeling from you in future, my Lord.”

She turned away, focusing determinedly on Lady Anne’s performance of some excessively proper verses with her partner. But Emma’s eyes burned with unshed tears, and she could not have repeated a single word of what she heard. Beside her, Lord Limnwood sat in rigid silence, and Emma wondered if she had imagined that moment of connection during their performance. Clearly, she had been a fool to think

that anything could pierce his perfect, proper armour.

The remainder of the afternoon's performances passed in a blur of proper verses and polite applause. Emma maintained her composure through sheer determination, though she felt Lady Beatrice's concerned glances and saw Lord James watching his brother with obvious exasperation. When at last they were dismissed to dress for dinner, Emma rose quickly, intending to escape to her chamber. Lady Anne's voice stopped her.

"Such a shame, Miss Everton, to have your... enthusiasm... lead Lord Limnwood into impropriety. But then, not everyone understands the importance of maintaining proper standards."

Emma turned slowly. Lady Anne stood with several other young ladies, her smile pure poison beneath its veneer of concern. Before Emma could respond, another voice cut in.

"I found their performance most affecting." Lady Agatha's tone could have frozen the Thames. "Though perhaps one must have some understanding of classical poetry to truly appreciate it. The Duke certainly seemed to approve - and surely his opinion carries the most weight here?"

Lady Anne's smile slipped.

"Of course, Lady Agatha. I merely thought..."

"Did you indeed?" Lady Agatha's eyebrow rose. "How fascinating. Emma, my dear, pray accompany me to the library. I believe that I saw some volumes of poetry there that might interest you."

Emma gratefully fell into step beside her aunt. They were nearly to the door when

Lord James intercepted them.

“Miss Everton, might I have a moment? With Lady Agatha’s permission, of course.”

Lady Agatha considered him, then nodded.

“I shall wait in the library, Emma.”

When she had gone, Lord James spoke quietly.

“I feel that I must apologise for my brother.”

“There is no need, my Lord. Lord Limnwood made his position quite clear.”

“Did he?” James’ tone was wry. “I rather think that he did the opposite. You see, I have never seen my brother react so strongly to anything - or anyone - as he did to your performance together.”

“His reaction seemed clear enough.”

“Did it? Consider, Miss Everton - why would a man who felt nothing need to retreat so completely behind his shields of propriety?”

Emma’s breath caught.

“I...”

“Just something to consider.” He bowed. “And now I believe that I see my brother approaching, no doubt to corner me about proper behaviour. I shall make my escape while I can.”

He disappeared through a side door just as Lord Limnwood entered the main one. Their eyes met across the room, and Emma felt that same spark of connection which had so disturbed them both during their performance. For a moment, she thought that he might speak. Then Lady Anne appeared at his elbow.

“My Lord, you simply must give me your opinion on these verses. I have been working on a new version...”

Emma turned away, not waiting to see his response. She had preparations to make for dinner, after all.

And if her hands trembled slightly as she closed the drawing room door behind her, there was no one to see.

In his chamber, Nathaniel stood at the window, watching Miss Everton cross the garden below with Lady Agatha. Even at this distance, her grace and vitality drew his eye. The sunlight caught fire in her dark red curls, and he found himself remembering how her eyes had shone as she spoke their verses. He had been a fool to let himself be drawn in, to show such open emotion. And an even greater fool to retreat into cold propriety afterward. He had seen the hurt in her eyes, though she had hidden it quickly.

A knock at his door preceded his valet.

“Your evening clothes are ready, my Lord.”

“Thank you, Staples.”

But he remained at the window until Miss Everton disappeared from view, wondering

how he could possibly maintain his proper distance through two more weeks of intimate partnership, when every moment in her presence made him question everything that he had ever believed about propriety and passion. It had only been a little over one day, and already, she had shaken the very foundations of his existence. Somehow, he would have to find a way. The alternative - letting himself feel everything that she stirred within him - was unthinkable. Yet as he finally turned to dress for dinner, her voice echoed in his mind, speaking of hearts both wise and free, and he wondered if perhaps he was fighting a battle that he had already lost.

Dinner proved an exquisite form of torture. Seated beside Miss Everton again, Nathaniel found himself hyperaware of her every movement, every carefully controlled expression. She maintained perfect politeness, answering his few attempts at conversation with cool courtesy that gave him no opening for a more meaningful exchange.

Lady Anne, seated to his left, kept up a steady stream of properly elegant conversation, but he found himself comparing her practiced charm to Miss Everton's natural grace, and finding it wanting. Even as he reminded himself that Lady Anne's behaviour was exactly what society demanded, he could not help watching the way that Miss Everton's eyes sparkled as she discussed poetry with Lord Radmill's son, or how her quiet laugh at something Lady Beatrice said lit her whole face with joy.

"I trust that tomorrow's activities will prove less... challenging," Lady Anne murmured. "The Duke has arranged a scavenger hunt in the gardens. That has much less scope for inappropriate displays than poetry provides."

Nathaniel saw Miss Everton's shoulders stiffen slightly, though she gave no other sign of having heard.

"I found nothing inappropriate in today's activities," he said quietly.

Lady Anne's eyes widened slightly.

"But surely you agreed that..."

"I agreed to nothing, my Lady. If you will excuse me, I believe that I see my brother attempting to catch my eye."

It was a lie - James was deep in conversation with Lady Beatrice - but it served to end the exchange. As he turned away, Nathaniel caught a flash of something - surprise? satisfaction? - in Miss Everton's expression before she looked down at her plate.

The Duke's voice rose over the general conversation.

"I trust that everyone will be well rested for tomorrow's adventure? The weather promises to be fine, and I have arranged some rather challenging clues."

Nathaniel watched Miss Everton's face light up at the prospect of intellectual challenge, and felt an answering spark of interest. Despite his fears about propriety, he could not deny that he looked forward to matching wits with her again. Heaven help him, for he was beginning to suspect that poetry was not the only thing about Miss Emma Everton that might prove dangerous to his peace of mind.

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Morning sunlight streamed through the conservatory windows, turning the glass panes into a kaleidoscope of crystal and gold. Emma paused in the doorway, breathing in the rich scent of blooming jasmine and early spring flowers. The Duke's conservatory was famous throughout the county, and now she understood why.

"The first clue should be here somewhere," Lord Limnwood's voice behind her broke into her contemplation. "Though I confess, I find the Duke's reference to 'Venus' favourite' rather obscure."

Emma turned to face him, careful to maintain a polite distance. After last night's dinner, she was achingly aware of the need to prove that she could be perfectly proper.

"Not so obscure, my Lord, if one considers classical mythology. Venus' favourite flower was the rose, although she was also fond of violets."

His eyebrows rose slightly.

"I had forgotten that detail."

"How fortunate then, that we are partnered. Between your propriety and my classical education, we might actually succeed at this challenge."

She hadn't meant to sound quite so tart, but his slight flinch suggested that the barb had struck home. To her surprise, instead of retreating into cold correctness, he smiled slightly.

“I deserve that, I suppose. Shall we examine the roses?”

The conservatory held several varieties, their blooms perfuming the air. Emma moved carefully between the plants, conscious of Lord Limnwood’s tall presence behind her. Other couples were searching the conservatory as well - she could hear Lady Anne’s voice from somewhere beyond the orange trees, instructing her partner rather imperiously.

“Here.” Emma stopped before a magnificent white rose bush. “These are Damask roses - they were sacred to Venus in Roman times.”

Lord Limnwood stepped closer to examine the plant. Emma caught her breath at his proximity, the subtle scent of his cologne mingling with the roses. For a moment, neither spoke.

“There.”

He pointed to a small piece of parchment tucked among the blooms. As he reached for it, his sleeve caught on a thorn.

“Careful!”

Emma moved without thinking, her hands coming up to help free the fine wool from the thorns. Her fingers brushed his wrist, and she felt him go very still.

“I... thank you.”

His voice was oddly rough. When she dared look up, his eyes were dark with something she didn’t dare name.

A crash from the other side of the conservatory broke the moment. They turned to see

young Lord Henry Ashworth, recently down from Oxford, apologising profusely to the gardener for knocking over a pot of orchids.

“Poor Lord Henry,” Emma murmured. “He seems quite overwhelmed by this challenge.”

“He would do better to pay attention to his task rather than constantly looking to see what others are doing,” Lord Limnwood observed.

“He’s very young.” Emma watched the young man’s clear distress as the gardener lectured him about the value of the plants. “And clearly nervous. Not everyone finds such competitions easy.”

Something in her tone made Lord Limnwood look at her more closely.

“You seem very understanding of his situation.”

“I remember my first house party.” She smiled slightly. “Everything seemed so overwhelming. So many rules to remember, so many ways to go wrong. Sometimes a little kindness can make all the difference.”

Their eyes met, and Emma was startled to see real interest in his expression.

“You surprise me, Miss Everton.”

“Do I? Because I understand nervousness? Or because you did not expect me to care about others’ feelings?”

“Because you see far more than you admit to.” He unfolded the clue they had found. “Just as you saw the meaning of ‘Venus’ favourite’ when I did not.”

Emma felt warmth bloom in her chest at this unexpected praise.

“Perhaps, my Lord, there is more to both of us than first impressions might suggest.”

His eyes met hers again, and that same spark of connection she had felt during their poetry recital flickered between them. Then Lady Anne’s voice carried across the conservatory.

“Lord Limnwood! Have you found anything of note? We seem to be quite stuck with our clue.”

Emma saw him stiffen slightly, his expression closing again.

“We should proceed with our hunt,” he said quietly. “The next clue seems to indicate the temple folly by the lake. We must be getting close to the last clues now, surely.”

She nodded, trying to hide her disappointment as his walls went up again.

They had been so close to... something. Understanding? Friendship? Or perhaps something more dangerous to them both?

As they left the conservatory, Emma noticed Lord Henry still looking lost and confused, studying his clue with obvious bewilderment. Making a swift decision, she paused beside him.

“You might try looking near the violets,” she whispered. “They were sacred to Venus too.”

His face lit up.

“Oh! Thank you, Miss Everton!”

She hurried to catch up with Lord Limnwood, who had stopped in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

“That was against the rules,” he said quietly.

“Was it? I don’t recall any rule against being kind.”

“The teams are meant to work independently.”

“And they are. I simply... eased his path a little. Surely you cannot object to a small kindness?”

His jaw tightened.

“Rules exist for a reason, Miss Everton.”

“Yes, they do. But they should not prevent basic human compassion.” She met his eyes steadily. “Or do you disagree?”

“Your compassion does you credit,” Lord Limnwood said stiffly, “but it sets a poor example. If everyone simply ignored rules they found inconvenient...”

“A hint about flowers is hardly likely to bring about the collapse of civilised society.” Emma fought to keep her voice level. “Though I begin to wonder what happened to make you so afraid of the slightest deviation from absolute propriety.”

His face went pale, then flushed.

“You go too far, Miss Everton.”

“Do I? Or do I simply see what you wish to hide? That somewhere beneath all of this

rigid propriety beats a heart that actually feels things?”

They had reached the path to the lake, the temple folly visible through the trees. Emma was grateful for the privacy that the winding path provided - she had no wish for others to witness this clash. Lord Limnwood stopped walking, turning to face her fully.

“You think me heartless because I understand the importance of proper behaviour?”

“No. I think that you hide your heart because you fear where it might lead you.”

The words escaped before she could stop them, and she saw them strike home. For a moment, something raw and vulnerable flickered in his eyes. Then his expression hardened.

“You know nothing of my heart or my fears, Miss Everton. But since you seem to set such store by kindness, let me be kind enough to be absolutely clear - I have no interest in your attempts to reform my character or understand my motivations. We are partners in this house party by chance, nothing more. I suggest that we complete our tasks with proper dignity and minimal conversation. As it is, we risk scandal simply because we are on this path alone, with no others currently in sight. If we hurry, then perhaps we will find ourselves back in company before anyone notices.”

Emma felt as if he had slapped her. She lifted her chin, refusing to show how deeply his words had hurt.

“As you wish, my Lord. Though I wonder - does proper dignity require you to be quite so cruel?”

She turned away, blinking back tears, and nearly collided with Lady Anne, who had apparently approached without their notice.

“Oh dear,” Lady Anne’s voice dripped false concern. “Have I interrupted something? Though really, Miss Everton, such displays of emotion are hardly appropriate for a morning’s entertainment.”

“Your concern is noted, Lady Anne.” Emma was proud of how steady her voice remained. “Though unnecessary. Lord Limnwood and I were merely discussing the rules of engagement for this activity. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I believe I see the next clue.”

She walked away, her back straight, letting none of her turmoil show. Behind her, she heard Lady Anne’s soft laugh.

“Such spirit, my Lord. Though hardly suitable in a lady of quality. I cannot imagine what Sir William was thinking, to allow his daughter such... freedom of expression.”

Emma didn’t wait to hear Lord Limnwood’s response. She had reached the temple folly, its classical columns cool and smooth under her trembling fingers as she steadied herself. She would not cry. She would not give either of them the satisfaction.

The sound of footsteps made her stiffen, but it was Lord James who appeared around the column.

“Miss Everton! Just the person I hoped to see. Lady Beatrice and I are completely stuck on this clue about Minerva’s bird. I don’t suppose...”

“The owl,” she supplied automatically. “Though I shouldn’t tell you that. It’s against the rules.”

Something in her tone made him look more closely at her face. His easy smile faded.

“I say, are you quite all right? Has my brother been being particularly stubborn about something?”

“Your brother is exactly what he wishes to be - a perfect model of proper behaviour.”

She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice.

“Ah.” Lord James' expression showed perfect understanding. “He's been noble and correct and completely idiotic, hasn't he?”

A reluctant laugh escaped her.

“Something like that.”

“Miss Everton.” Lord Limnwood's voice behind her made her jump. “I believe that we have a task to complete.”

“By all means, dear brother,” Lord James said cheerfully. “Though you might want to consider that sometimes the biggest risk to propriety is in maintaining it so rigidly that you drive away all possibility of joy.” He bowed to Emma. “Thank you for the hint about the owl. Lady Beatrice will be delighted.”

James strolled away, whistling, leaving them in a silence thick with unspoken words. Around them, on the banks of the small lake and on the paths, the other couples were scattered about, most looking quite confused. Nathaniel watched Emma move gracefully around the folly's columns, studying each carved detail as if he and his cutting words didn't exist. Her dignity in the face of his cruelty shamed him. Yet he could not seem to find a way to bridge the gulf that his harsh words had created.

“The next clue should be here somewhere,” she said, her voice perfectly controlled. “Though perhaps we should wait for others to catch up more closely, lest us searching might remove us from clear public view for a few moments, and that would apparently be a grave breach of propriety.”

He deserved that.

“Miss Everton...”

“Please, my Lord. You made your position quite clear. Let us simply complete our task.”

But her hands trembled slightly as she reached for a piece of parchment tucked into a carved owl’s beak, and he found himself moving to steady her without thought. His fingers brushed her wrist, and he felt her sharp intake of breath.

“I should not have spoken so harshly,” he said quietly.

She turned to face him, and the hurt in her violet eyes struck him like a physical blow.

“No. You should not have. But you did, and now we both know exactly where we stand.”

“Do we?”

“Don’t.” She stepped back, breaking contact. “You cannot tell me that my very nature offends your sense of propriety one moment, then expect me to forget it the next.”

“That is not what I...”

“Lord Limnwood! Miss Everton!” The Duke’s voice carried across the garden. “Have you solved all of the clues? Several couples have already returned to the house.”

Miss Everton’s spine straightened.

“We should go. Heaven forbid that we fail to complete our proper task in the officially allotted time.”

She looked down at the piece of parchment, quietly reading it, then looked up at him and smiled.

“As it happens, this is our last clue – it asks a question – to which I know the answer – and apparently, that answer is all that we need to complete our quest. I gather, from the way that this had proceeded, that there were many correct paths through the clues, but that they all ended up pointing to that one final answer. How very clever of the Duke.”

She moved past him, her skirts brushing his legs, her scent – lemon water, touched by a hint of the jasmine and roses from the conservatory - teasing his senses. He watched her walk away, her head high, and wondered how he could have gone so completely wrong in the space of one morning.

The conservatory had felt like a beginning - her quick mind and generous heart had drawn him in despite his reservations. For a few precious moments, he had glimpsed what it might be like to let down his guard, to trust in something beyond rigid rules.

Then she had helped young Lord Henry, and all of his fears had come rushing back. One small breach of the rules could lead to others. He had seen it happen before - his cousin Charlotte’s reputation ruined by one seemingly harmless moment of impropriety that had led to so much worse. But Miss Everton was not Charlotte. And he was not responsible for saving everyone from themselves.

“Coming, my Lord?” Her voice carried back to him, cool and distant. “Or shall I tell the Duke that you required more time to consider the proper approach to returning to the house?”

He caught up to her in a few long strides.

“Your talent for subtle mockery is quite remarkable.”

“Thank you. I do try to keep it within proper bounds.”

But he saw the corner of her mouth twitch, just slightly.

They walked in silence through the gardens, joining other couples heading for the house. Ahead of them, Lord Henry was explaining excitedly to his partner about finding the clue by the violets. The boy’s obvious joy made Nathaniel’s conscience prick uncomfortably.

“Perhaps,” he said very quietly, “I was overly harsh about your assistance to Lord Henry.”

Miss Everton’s step faltered slightly.

“Perhaps?”

“I...” he hesitated. “I have seen what can happen when rules are ignored.”

“So you said. Though I notice that you have not actually apologised for calling me a poor example to others.”

“Would you accept such an apology if I made it?”

She was silent for several steps.

“That would depend, my Lord, on whether you actually meant it, or were simply being properly polite.”

Before he could respond, they reached the house. Lady Anne was waiting on the steps, her expression brightening as she saw him.

“Lord Limnwood! I wondered if you might advise me about the day after tomorrow’s activities? I understand that we are to arrange flowers for the dinner table, and I would so value your opinion on proper classical forms...”

Miss Everton’s quiet laugh held no humour.

“You need not fear, Lady Anne. Lord Limnwood’s opinions on proper behaviour are quite rigid. I am sure that he will be happy to prevent any unfortunate deviations from absolute correctness. Although perhaps proper attention to the finalisation of today’s activities would be more appropriate, before considering tomorrow’s tasks?”

She slipped past them into the house, leaving Nathaniel to wonder if he had just made things vastly worse, or if that flash of genuine feeling in her laugh meant that there might still be some hope of understanding between them.

Either way, he had a great deal to think about before tomorrow’s activities threw them together again.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

Emma stood with the other ladies along one wall of the ballroom, trying not to fidget as the dancing master explained the intricacies of the waltz. She had danced it of course, at least once or twice, but it was still considered inappropriate for young ladies by many of the older members of the ton. It was, in a way, quite wicked of the Duke to have made this an official activity...

She wondered how many of those present had danced it, and how many had not. And what it would feel like to be held that close by Lord Limnwood.

Her palm still tingled from where he had helped her over a muddy patch in the gardens that morning, though she told herself firmly that such fanciful notions were beneath her.

“Now then,” Monsieur Girard clapped his hands. “Partners, if you please. We shall begin with the basic step.”

Emma felt Lord Limnwood’s approach before she saw him. Something about his presence made the air feel charged, as if a storm approached. He bowed perfectly.

“Miss Everton.”

She curtsied, keeping her eyes carefully lowered.

“My Lord.”

“Ladies, remember,” Monsieur Girard called, “your right hand rests lightly in your partner’s left. Your left hand upon his shoulder. Gentlemen, your right hand at your

partner's waist - properly placed, if you please! And you must, at all times, retain a distance between your bodies. There will be no scandalous behaviour in my class!"

Emma's breath caught as Lord Limnwood's hand settled at her waist. Even through her morning dress and stays, his touch seemed to burn. She forced herself to place her own hand upon his shoulder, achingly aware of the solid muscle beneath his coat.

"Are you sufficiently comfortable, Miss Everton?"

His voice was pitched for her ears alone.

"Perfectly, my Lord."

Though her racing heart suggested otherwise.

"One, two, three... One, two, three..." Monsieur Girard began counting as the musicians played. "Begin with the basic step, then we shall add the turn."

They moved together, and Emma was startled by how naturally they found their rhythm. For all his rigid propriety, Lord Limnwood danced beautifully, leading her with subtle confidence that required no thought to follow. It was obvious to her that he had danced the waltz far more often than she had...

"You dance well," she said, then wished that she hadn't spoken as his eyes met hers.

"As do you."

His thumb moved slightly against her waist as they turned, probably unconsciously, but the small motion sent sparks through her entire body. She spoke to distract herself from the sensation.

“I confess, I am surprised that you approve of the waltz. It is a rather... intimate dance. Then again, it has royal approval now. Surely that makes it proper enough even for your exacting standards?”

His lips twitched.

“I begin to think that you take some delight in provoking me, Miss Everton.”

“Would that be improper of me?”

“Undoubtedly.” But there was a warmth in his voice that made her heart skip. “Though perhaps not entirely unwelcome.”

Before she could respond to this surprising statement, Monsieur Girard called for them to stop.

“Non, non! Lord Henry, you must not grip Lady Mary’s hand so tightly. She is a delicate flower, not a cavalry horse! Watch Lord Limnwood - see how he maintains perfect form while appearing completely at ease?”

Emma felt Lord Limnwood stiffen slightly at becoming the centre of attention. All around them, couples turned to observe their form. She heard Lady Anne’s quiet sniff of disapproval.

“Really, such display. Though I suppose some people enjoy being the centre of attention.”

Emma’s hand tightened instinctively on Lord Limnwood’s shoulder. To her surprise, he responded by drawing her slightly closer as they resumed the dance.

“Ignore her,” he said quietly. “You have nothing to apologise for.”

Emma looked up at him in surprise, and found herself caught in his grey eyes. The rest of the room seemed to fade away as they moved together, and she saw something in his expression that made her breath catch.

“Very good!” Monsieur Girard’s voice broke the spell. “Now, we shall attempt the more complex turn. Ladies, you must trust your partners completely...”

Trust her partner completely? Emma almost laughed at the irony of the dancing master’s instruction. Lord Limnwood might dance divinely, but trusting him with anything beyond the physical steps seemed unwise after yesterday’s harsh words.

Yet as his hand tightened slightly at her waist, preparing for the more complex turn, she found her body responding instinctively to his lead. They moved together as if they had danced this way a hundred times before, her skirts brushing his legs as they turned.

“Magnifique!” Monsieur Girard cried. “You see? When partners trust each other, the dance becomes as natural as breathing.”

Emma felt Lord Limnwood’s breathing shift, making his chest rise and fall which also made his arm at her waist move infinitesimally, and wondered if his breathing really was as unsteady as her own. Surely it was just the exercise affecting them both?

“You make it easy to follow,” she said softly, then wished she hadn’t as his eyes met hers again.

“Do I?” Something flickered in his expression. “Despite my rigid adherence to proper form?”

“Perhaps because of it.” She surprised herself with the honesty of her response.

“There is... security in knowing exactly where one stands.”

His thumb moved against her waist again, and this time she was certain that it was deliberate.

“And where do you stand, Miss Everton?”

Before she could respond, a crash from nearby made them both jump. Lord Henry, attempting the complex turn, had managed to tangle his feet with his partner’s skirts, sending them both stumbling into a pedestal holding a magnificent Chinese vase. Only Lord James’ quick dive prevented disaster.

“I believe that is enough for today!” The Duke’s voice held barely suppressed laughter. “Perhaps some refreshment in the drawing room? Monsieur Girard, you have been most instructive.”

The dancing master bowed, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like a prayer of thanksgiving in French.

Lord Limnwood’s hand lingered at Emma’s waist a moment longer than strictly necessary as they parted. She stepped back, curtsying automatically, trying to slow her racing heart.

“Miss Everton.” His voice was oddly rough. “Might I...”

He stopped as Lady Anne appeared beside them.

“My Lord, you must tell me if I held the proper form during that last turn. I would so value your opinion.”

Emma saw his jaw tighten slightly.

“I fear that I was too occupied with my own partner to observe others, Lady Anne.”

Something warm bloomed in Emma’s chest at his words. She turned away to hide her smile, but not before she caught an answering gleam in his eyes.

“Emma!” Lady Beatrice hurried up. “I’ve left my sheet music somewhere in the music room - would you help me find it before tea? You know how particular Mama is about me keeping track of my music.”

“Of course. Lord Limnwood, thank you for the dancing. I will take my leave of you now.”

Emma welcomed the excuse to escape before Lady Anne could make any more pointed comments. But she was intensely aware of Lord Limnwood’s gaze following her as she left the room.

The music room was blissfully cool and quiet after the heat of the ballroom. Afternoon sun slanted through tall windows, catching dust motes in bars of gold. Emma moved to help Lady Beatrice search through the papers scattered on the pianoforte.

“I was sure I left it here...” Lady Beatrice frowned. “Oh! Perhaps I left it in the drawing room this morning. I’ll just run and check.”

She hurried out before Emma could respond. Left alone, Emma found herself drawn to the instrument. Her fingers drifted over the keys, picking out the melody they had waltzed to.

“I did not know that you played.”

Emma's fingers stilled on the keys at Lord Limnwood's voice. She hadn't heard him enter.

"I play a little," she admitted. "Though not as well as Lady Beatrice."

"Yet well enough to remember the waltz."

He moved closer, and she caught that now-familiar scent of bergamot and cedar.

"It is a memorable piece."

She kept her eyes on the keys, afraid of what he might see in her face if she looked up.

"Indeed." He was beside her now, close enough that his coat sleeve brushed her shoulder. "Though perhaps not as memorable as dancing it."

Her breath caught at the unevenness in his voice. Slowly, she turned to face him, and found his expression as unguarded as she had ever seen it.

"My Lord..."

"Nathaniel." The word seemed to escape without his intention. "After dancing together so... intimately... might you not use my name? When we are private, at least?"

Private. The word seemed to echo in the quiet room. Emma suddenly realised that they were quite alone - unchaperoned - and that knowledge sent heat flooding through her.

"I do not think that would be proper."

But she made no move to step away.

“No.” He reached up, brushing back a curl that had escaped during the dancing. “It would not.”

His fingers lingered against her cheek, and Emma felt the last of her resistance melting. Surely just this once, just for a moment, propriety might give way to...

“Emma? Did you find...” Lady Beatrice’s voice broke off as she entered the room. “Oh! I beg your pardon.”

Emma stepped back so quickly that she nearly stumbled. Lord Limnwood’s hand shot out to steady her, then dropped away as if burned.

“Lady Beatrice.” His voice was perfectly controlled again. “Your music was not here, I take it?”

“No, I... that is... I should go.”

“We all should.” Emma couldn’t look at him. “The others will be waiting for tea.”

She hurried from the room, her heart pounding. Behind her, she heard Lady Beatrice’s whispered ‘I’m so sorry!’ but couldn’t bring herself to respond.

What had she been thinking? One dance, a few kind words, and she had been ready to throw all propriety to the winds. Lord Limnwood had been right yesterday - she was a poor example indeed.

Yet she could still feel the ghost of his fingers against her cheek, still see that unguarded look in his eyes. Proper or not, something had changed between them.

She only hoped that they would both survive the consequences.

The drawing room hummed with quiet conversation as footmen served tea. Emma sat with Lady Beatrice, both of them maintaining perfect composure while steadfastly avoiding any mention of what had nearly happened in the music room. But Emma could feel Lord Limnwood's presence across the room like a physical thing, drawing her attention no matter how she tried to focus on her tea.

"I really am sorry," Lady Beatrice whispered. "If I had known..."

"There was nothing to know." Emma kept her voice equally low. "Nothing happened."

"But something might have, mightn't it?" Her friend's eyes sparkled with suppressed excitement. "The way that he looked at you..."

"Beatrice, please."

Emma glanced around anxiously, but no one seemed to be paying them any attention. No one except Lady Anne, whose sharp gaze missed nothing.

"More tea, Miss Everton?" Lady Anne's voice carried just far enough to draw notice. "You seem quite flushed. Perhaps the dancing was too... vigorous for you?"

Emma felt heat climb her cheeks but kept her voice steady.

"Not at all. Though your concern does you credit."

"One must be concerned for those less accustomed to proper society entertainments."

Lady Anne's smile didn't reach her eyes. "But then, Lord Limnwood seemed quite willing to... guide you through the steps."

Before Emma could respond, Lady Agatha's cool voice cut in.

"Indeed. My niece is fortunate in her partner. Though I noticed that Lord Limnwood maintained perfect form throughout - unlike some who seemed more interested in drawing attention than in dancing correctly."

Lady Anne's face tightened. She opened her mouth to respond, but Lord James' arrival interrupted her.

"I say, is that Cook's famous chocolate cake? I declare, the Duke's table puts all others to shame." He dropped into a chair beside Lady Beatrice. "Though I'm more impressed by how well everyone managed the waltz. We'll all need to improve, as I'm quite sure we'll see it being danced, more and more, at most society events. Even poor Lord Henry improved by the end. Don't you agree, Limnwood?"

Emma couldn't help looking up as Lord Limnwood joined their group. Their eyes met briefly before both looked away.

"Indeed." His voice gave nothing away. "Monsieur Girard is an excellent instructor."

"Though some pupils clearly needed less instruction than others," Lady Anne observed. "You and Miss Everton seemed perfectly... in harmony."

Emma saw Lord Limnwood's shoulders stiffen slightly.

"Miss Everton follows well."

The words seemed to hang in the air between them, laden with meaning that had

nothing to do with dancing. Emma's hands trembled slightly as she set down her teacup.

"If you'll excuse me." She rose carefully. "I believe that I left my shawl in the music room."

"Let me escort you," Lord Limnwood said automatically.

"No!" The word came out sharper than was really appropriate. She moderated her tone. "Thank you, my Lord, but I'm sure I can manage."

She felt his eyes on her as she left the room, and heard Lady Anne's quiet laugh. But she couldn't stay there another moment, watching him retreat behind his walls of propriety while her own heart betrayed her with every beat. In the hall, she leaned against the wall, closing her eyes. What was happening to her carefully ordered world? A few days ago, she had thought Lord Limnwood cold, proper, and completely unlikeable. Now...

"Miss Everton?"

She started at his voice. He stood in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

"My Lord, please. We should not..."

"I know." He ran a hand through his hair in a gesture that seemed unconscious. "But I must say... that is, I should apologise..."

"No." She straightened, forcing herself to meet his eyes. "We both... that is, nothing happened that requires apology."

"Doesn't it?" His voice roughened. "I behaved..."

“Quite properly, I assure you.” She managed a smile. “After all, nothing actually occurred.”

“But something might have.” He took a step closer, then stopped himself. “If Lady Beatrice hadn’t...”

“But she did. And now we both know better.” Emma lifted her chin. “Shall we agree to maintain perfect propriety henceforth?”

His eyes darkened.

“Is that what you want?”

“What I want...” She caught herself. “What I want is irrelevant, my Lord. We both know what society demands.”

For a moment, she thought that he might argue. Then his expression closed again.

“Of course. You are quite right.” He bowed perfectly. “I shall see you at dinner, Miss Everton.”

She watched him walk away, his spine rigid with proper bearing, and wondered if her heart would ever stop aching again.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

Emma sat before her dressing table, watching in the mirror as her maid arranged her hair for dinner. The afternoon's events kept replaying in her mind - the warmth in Lord Limnwood's eyes as they danced, the gentle touch of his fingers against her cheek, the way that the afternoon sun had caught golden glints in his dark hair...

"Ouch!"

She flinched as the maid caught a tangle.

"So sorry, Miss!"

The girl's fingers gentled immediately.

A tap at the door preceded Lady Beatrice's entrance.

"Are you nearly ready? I simply must speak with you before dinner."

"Nearly done, my Lady," the maid assured her.

Emma studied her friend's reflection in the mirror. Lady Beatrice fairly vibrated with barely contained excitement.

"There now, Miss." The maid stepped back. "Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you, Susan. That will be all."

The moment the door closed behind the maid, Lady Beatrice dropped onto the bed.

“Emma, you cannot possibly mean to pretend that nothing happened in the music room!”

“Nothing did happen.”

Emma smoothed her skirts, avoiding her friend’s eyes.

“Only because I interrupted! Though I still feel terrible about that. If I had known...”

“Known what? That I was about to do something completely improper with a man who thoroughly disapproves of any breach of proper behaviour?” Emma’s laugh held no humour. “Perhaps your interruption was for the best.”

“But the way he looked at you...” Lady Beatrice leaned forward. “Emma, I’ve never seen Lord Limnwood look at anyone that way. And during the waltz! Even Lady Anne noticed how well you moved together.”

“Lady Anne notices everything that might be turned to her advantage.” Emma couldn’t quite keep the bitterness from her voice. “No doubt she’s already planning how to use this afternoon’s events to demonstrate my unsuitability for proper society.”

“Do you care what she thinks?”

“No. But...” Emma’s hands twisted in her lap. “He does. You’ve seen how rigid he is about propriety. Today was... a moment of weakness, nothing more.”

“Was it?” Lady Beatrice’s voice gentled. “Or was it the first time that he let himself show what he truly feels?”

Emma’s breath caught. Before she could respond, another tap at the door heralded

Lady Agatha's arrival.

"Are you girls ready for..." She broke off, studying their faces. "What has happened?"

"Nothing, Aunt." Emma tried to smile. "We were just discussing the dancing lesson."

"Indeed." Lady Agatha's shrewd eyes missed nothing. "Lady Beatrice, might I have a moment alone with my niece?"

Lady Beatrice rose immediately.

"Of course. I'll see you both at dinner."

The moment the door closed, Lady Agatha sat in the chair beside Emma's dressing table.

"Now then. Tell me what truly occurred this afternoon."

Emma's hands clenched in her lap.

"Nothing improper, I assure you."

"But something that has you thoroughly unsettled." Lady Agatha reached out to cover Emma's hands with her own. "My dear, I have watched you these past few days. The way that Lord Limnwood looks at you... and the way you look at him."

"It doesn't matter how we look at each other." Emma's voice wavered slightly. "He values propriety above all else, and I... I cannot seem to meet his standards."

"Cannot? Or choose not to?" Her aunt's voice held no censure, only genuine

curiosity. “There is a difference, you know.”

Emma looked up, startled.

“I...”

“You have always had a generous heart, Emma. It is not in your nature to stand on ceremony when kindness calls. That is not a fault, whatever some might think.”

“Lord Limnwood thinks it is.”

“Does he? Or does he fear where such generosity of spirit might lead?” Lady Agatha’s eyes grew distant. “Sometimes, my dear, when people are very rigid about proper behaviour, it is because they have seen the consequences of its lack. Or because they fear their own capacity for impropriety.”

Emma’s breath caught as she remembered the unguarded look in Lord Limnwood’s eyes, the way that his hand had trembled slightly against her cheek.

“This afternoon,” she began hesitantly, “in the music room... when we were accidentally alone for a very short time, for a moment, he seemed... different. Less controlled. But then Lady Beatrice came in, and he...” She gestured helplessly. “It was as if a wall came down between us.”

“Ah.” Lady Agatha squeezed her hands gently. “And now you wonder which is the true man? The one who maintains perfect propriety, or the one who looked at you with his heart in his eyes?”

“How did you...”

“My dear, I have been watching young people fall in love for many years now.”

“Love?” Emma’s voice rose sharply. “No, that’s not... we barely know each other!”

“Don’t you? You’ve spent nearly every moment of the past three days together. You’ve argued, danced, collaborated on poetry... and I suspect you’ve seen sides of each other that you show to very few others.”

Emma stared at her aunt, mind whirling.

“But he’s so... and I’m not... we’re completely unsuited!”

“Are you? Or do you perhaps balance each other perfectly?” Lady Agatha rose, smoothing her skirts. “Something to consider, my dear. Now, shall we go down? The dinner gong will ring at any moment.”

Emma followed her aunt from the room, her thoughts in chaos. Love? Surely not. Attraction, yes. Fascination, certainly. But love?

Yet as they descended the stairs, her heart gave a treacherous leap at the sight of Lord Limnwood in the hall below. Their eyes met for a brief moment before both looked away.

Heaven help her, but her aunt might be right after all.

Nathaniel stood at the library window, a glass of brandy untouched in his hand. The setting sun painted the gardens in shades of gold and crimson, reminding him inexorably of the way that the afternoon light had caught in Emma’s hair. He closed his eyes, but that only made the memory of her closeness in the music room more vivid.

“Hiding, brother?”

He didn't turn at James' voice.

“Merely seeking a moment of quiet.”

“Ah yes. Quiet. Something distinctly lacking in the drawing room at present, what with Lady Anne holding forth about proper behaviour at house parties.” James' tone held clear disdain. “Though I notice that Miss Everton isn't present either.”

“I hadn't noticed.”

“Hadn't you? Just as you haven't noticed how your eyes follow her whenever she's in the room? Or how your expression changes when someone merely speaks her name?”

Nathaniel's hand tightened on his glass.

“You go too far, James.”

“Do I? Or do I not go far enough?” James crossed to pour himself a drink. “Someone needs to shake you out of this rigid shell you've built around yourself.”

“You know why...”

“Yes, yes, because of Charlotte.” James dropped into a chair. “Though I fail to see how our cousin's scandal has any bearing on Miss Everton.”

“It has every bearing!” The words burst out before Nathaniel could stop them. “You remember what happened. One small breach of propriety led to another, and another, until...”

“Until Charlotte nearly eloped with a fortune hunter who would have ruined her.” James’ voice gentled. “But you stopped it. You saved her reputation.”

“Barely. And only because I happened to return from sea at exactly the right moment, three weeks before....” Nathaniel turned from the window at last. “If I hadn’t...”

“But you did. And Charlotte went on to make an excellent marriage to a man who truly loves her.” James leaned forward. “Though I note you’ve never asked yourself why she was so susceptible to that fortune hunter in the first place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think, brother. Charlotte had been raised exactly as you would wish - every rule followed, every proper form observed. And what did it get her? A heart so starved for real feeling that she mistook the first man to show her warmth for her true love.”

Nathaniel stared at his brother.

“That’s not...”

“Isn’t it? You’re so determined to protect everyone from impropriety that you fail to see the danger in too much propriety.” James set his glass down with unusual force. “And now you’re doing the same thing to yourself. Worse, you’re doing it to Miss Everton.”

“I am protecting her!”

“From what? From feeling? From joy? From love?”

The last word seemed to echo in the quiet room. Nathaniel turned back to the window, but not before James saw his expression.

“Ah.” His brother’s voice softened. “So that’s it. You’re not truly afraid she’ll be improper. You’re afraid of what you feel for her.”

“James...”

“Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you don’t love her already.”

Nathaniel’s silence was answer enough.

“It doesn’t matter what I feel.” Nathaniel’s voice was barely audible when the words finally came. “I cannot... I will not risk her reputation.”

“By loving her? Or by letting her see that you do?” James rose to stand beside his brother. “Because I rather think that she already knows the first. It’s your denial of it that truly hurts her.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Don’t I? I was there too, remember? I saw what happened with Charlotte. But I also saw what happened after - how she found real happiness once she learned to balance propriety with genuine feeling.” James touched his brother’s shoulder. “The world isn’t divided into proper and improper, Nathaniel. There’s a whole world of possibility between rigid correctness and ruin.”

“And if I cannot find that balance? If I lose control completely?” Nathaniel’s voice roughened. “This afternoon, in the music room...”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Everything.” Nathaniel ran a hand through his hair. “For a moment, I forgot every rule, every proper consideration. If Lady Beatrice hadn’t come in...”

“You might have kissed her?” James’ voice held no censure. “And would that have been so terrible? A private moment between two people who clearly care for each other?”

“It would have been improper.”

“More improper than denying your feelings until they burst out in some way that you truly cannot control?” James shook his head. “Think about it, brother. And think about this - Miss Everton is nothing like Charlotte. She knows her own mind, and her own heart. Perhaps it’s time you trusted yours as well.”

Before Nathaniel could find words to respond, James squeezed his shoulder once more, then turned as if to leave him alone with his thoughts.

Through the door, Nathaniel could see couples making their way to dinner. He caught a glimpse of dark red hair and pale violet silk – Miss Everton, walking with her aunt.

Even at this distance, something in him responded to her presence. James was right about one thing - he did love her. Heaven help him, but he did. The only question was what he meant to do about it.

“There’s more to the story of Charlotte, isn’t there?” James’ voice pulled Nathaniel from his thoughts. His brother hadn’t left after all, but stood watching him with unusual seriousness.

“You know what happened.”

“I know what everyone knows. That you stopped her from running away with that fortune hunter. But there’s something else, isn’t there? Something that made you take it all so personally?”

Nathaniel stared into his brandy.

“I should have seen it coming. There were signs...”

“Such as?”

“Small things at first. She started meeting him in secret - just for a moment in the garden, she said. Just a brief conversation in the library. Nothing improper.” His laugh held no humour. “Until suddenly it was very improper indeed. Do you know what she said to me, when I caught them about to leave?” James shook his head. “She said that she knew it wasn’t proper, but that she didn’t care. That she would rather have love than propriety.” Nathaniel’s voice roughened. “She had no idea that he didn’t love her at all - that he’d already run through two other women’s fortunes and left them ruined.”

“How did you know?”

“Pure chance. I’d served with someone who knew his history. If I hadn’t...” He broke off. “Charlotte was so innocent. So trusting. She thought that love conquered all - she had no concept of the reality of scandal, of ruin. And I realised then that all of our family’s careful attention to proper behaviour hadn’t actually protected her. It had only made her more vulnerable.”

“So you decided to become the guardian of everyone’s propriety?” James’ voice held understanding rather than censure. “To protect them from themselves?”

“Someone has to maintain standards.”

“But Miss Everton isn’t Charlotte. She’s no naive innocent to be taken in by pretty words and false promises.”

“No.” Nathaniel smiled slightly, remembering Emma’s sharp wit, her clear-eyed understanding of the world. “She sees rather too clearly for that.”

“Exactly. So perhaps it’s time to stop protecting her from imagined dangers and start trusting her judgment? And your own?”

Before Nathaniel could respond, voices in the hall announced the arrival of more guests on their way to dinner.

“Surely he must be here somewhere?” Lady Anne’s voice carried clearly. “Lord Limnwood always seems to seek solitude after any... incident.”

“I’m not certain that we should disturb him.” Lord Radmill’s voice held uncertainty. “After all...”

“Nonsense. He’ll welcome sensible company after this afternoon’s... display.”

Nathaniel saw James’ hands clench.

“Shall I get rid of them for you?”

“No.” Nathaniel straightened his cravat. “I believe it’s time that I stopped hiding in libraries. Though perhaps we might use the other door?”

James grinned.

“Lead on, brother.”

“Emma.” Lady Agatha’s voice pulled her back from her thoughts. They had reached

the bottom of the stairs, but her aunt's hand on her arm held her back from entering the dining room. "There's something else you should know."

"What is it?"

"I've heard... whispers. About Lord Limnwood's cousin, Lady Charlotte. It might explain some things about his behaviour."

Emma's heart quickened.

"What sort of whispers?"

"A few years ago, before her marriage, she was nearly ruined by an unsuitable attachment. Lord Limnwood himself prevented the scandal - he caught them just before they could elope. The man turned out to be a notorious fortune hunter."

"How terrible!" Emma's mind whirled. "No wonder he's so concerned with propriety."

"Indeed. Though from what I understand, Lady Charlotte went on to make an excellent marriage. Sometimes what seems like disaster can lead to something better." Lady Agatha's shrewd eyes studied Emma's face. "If one has the courage to keep one's heart open."

"Even when it might be broken?"

"Especially then." Her aunt squeezed her arm gently. "Now, shall we go in? Though perhaps you might wish to repair to the ladies' retiring room first? You look a touch flushed."

Emma nodded gratefully and slipped away to the retiring room. Inside, she found

Lady Beatrice in close conversation with Lady Mary.

“Oh, Emma!” Lady Beatrice broke off quickly. “We were just...”

“Discussing this afternoon’s events, no doubt.” Emma managed a smile. “You needn’t stop on my account.”

“We were just saying how well you and Lord Limnwood dance together,” Lady Mary offered. “Though Lady Anne seems quite put out about it.”

“Lady Anne seems put out about many things.”

Emma moved to the mirror, pretending to adjust her hair while listening intently.

“She was quite vocal about it in the drawing room earlier,” Lady Mary continued. “Going on about proper behaviour and suitable connections. Though if you ask me, she’s just jealous. Everyone can see how Lord Limnwood looks at you.”

“Mary!” Lady Beatrice protested. “You shouldn’t...”

“Well, it’s true! I’ve never seen him so animated as when he’s arguing with Emma. Even when he’s disapproving, he’s more alive somehow.”

Emma’s hands trembled slightly as she smoothed her skirts.

“Lord Limnwood’s opinions on proper behaviour are quite fixed, I assure you.”

“Are they?” Lady Mary’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Then why did I see him heading for the music room right after you left? And why did Lady Beatrice come back looking so flustered?”

“I... that is...”

Lady Beatrice stammered, her words trailing off. Then the door opened, admitting Lady Anne. The conversation died immediately.

“Ladies.” Lady Anne’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Discussing the afternoon’s entertainment? It was most... instructive, was it not? Though perhaps not in quite the way that Monsieur Girard intended.”

Emma met her eyes in the mirror.

“Indeed. One learns something new every day about people’s true characters.”

Lady Anne’s smile tightened.

“How very true. Though some lessons can be quite costly to learn. Especially for those who aim... above their natural sphere.”

Before Emma could respond, the dinner gong sounded. She turned from the mirror, keeping her expression serene despite her racing heart.

“Shall we go? We wouldn’t want to be improper by being late.”

She swept past Lady Anne, head high.

But inside, her thoughts churned. Everyone had noticed Lord Limnwood’s attention to her - whether with approval or disapproval. There would be no hiding from the consequences now.

The only question was whether those consequences would lead to heartbreak or happiness.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

The morning dawned cold, crisp and bright, with just enough lingering frost to make the gardens sparkle. Emma stood on the terrace with the other house party guests, trying not to be hyperaware of Lord Limnwood's presence nearby. After a largely sleepless night spent reliving their almost-kiss in the music room, she felt oddly brittle, as if the slightest touch might shatter her composure completely.

“For today's entertainment,” the Duke announced, clearly enjoying his role as master of ceremonies, “we have something similar to yesterday morning's activity, but with a twist. We have arranged a series of riddles leading to various treasures hidden throughout the gardens. Each pair must solve their own unique set of clues, but the paths may cross. The first couple to collect all of their clues, reach their treasure and return here will be celebrated at tonight's dinner.” Emma felt Lord Limnwood shift slightly beside her. She kept her eyes firmly on the Duke. “To ensure fair play,” the Duke continued, “each couple's clues will be marked with their assigned colour. Taking another couple's clue will result in immediate disqualification.” His eyes twinkled. “Though offering assistance to those who seem... confused... is perfectly acceptable.”

Emma's lips curved slightly, remembering Lord Limnwood's disapproval of her helping young Lord Henry yesterday. She wondered what he made of the Duke's tacit approval of such kindness.

“Your first clues await you on the table. When the bell sounds, you may begin.”

Lord Limnwood's hand touched her elbow lightly.

“Shall we examine our clue, Miss Everton?”

His touch, though perfectly proper, sent warmth spreading through her entire body. She managed a nod, following him to where several sealed envelopes lay arranged on a small table. Each bore a couple's names in the Duke's elegant hand.

"The blue ribbons are ours, it seems." He broke the seal and unfolded the paper within. "'Where wisdom takes flight, seek the guardian's sight.' What do you make of that?"

Emma welcomed the distraction of a puzzle.

"Wisdom... Minerva's symbol was the owl, was it not?"

"Indeed." His voice warmed with approval. "And, apart from the owl we found in the temple folly, I believe that I saw a stone owl mounted above the entrance to the maze, yesterday."

"The maze?"

Emma's heart quickened. The maze would be very private at this time of year, with the hedges still thick with winter growth... The bell rang before she could follow that dangerous line of thought.

"Shall we?"

Lord Limnwood offered his arm. She placed her hand on his coat sleeve, trying to ignore how the simple touch affected her.

"You're not worried that I might suggest something improper? Like helping other contestants?"

His steps faltered slightly.

“I... may have been overly rigid in my views yesterday.”

Emma’s breath caught at this admission.

“May have been?”

“The Duke’s words about assistance being acceptable... they reminded me that kindness need not compromise propriety.”

She snuck a glance at his face, but his expression gave nothing away. Still, something in his voice suggested that more had changed than just his view on helping other contestants. They reached the maze entrance, where a magnificent stone owl perched above the archway. Its carved eyes seemed to follow them as they searched the area.

“There!” Emma pointed to a flash of blue ribbon visible in a nearby urn set on a wall. “Though I don’t see how we can reach it without...”

Before she could finish, Lord Limnwood had moved to the urn and lifted her bodily by the waist. She gasped, her hands falling to his shoulders for balance.

“Can you reach it now?”

His voice was slightly strained. Emma stretched up, trying to ignore how his hands burned through the fabric of her pelisse, how his breath had stirred the curls at her temple as he lifted her. Her fingers closed around the ribbon.

“I have it!”

He lowered her slowly, their bodies sliding almost together in a way that surely violated every rule of propriety. For a moment after her feet touched the ground, neither moved. Emma became exquisitely aware of every point where they touched -

his hands at her waist, her palms against his shoulders, their faces close enough that she could see gold flecks in his grey eyes.

“The next clue?”

His voice was rougher than usual.

Emma forced herself to step back, untying the ribbon with trembling fingers. Another piece of paper fluttered free.

““Where Neptune’s daughters dance, seek the heart of romance.”” She was proud of how steady she kept her voice. “The fountain with the mermaids, perhaps?”

“An excellent suggestion.” He offered his arm again, though she noticed that he was careful to maintain more distance between them now. “Though we shall have to go around the lake to reach it.”

They walked in charged silence, both hyperaware of each other. Emma’s skin still tingled where his hands had held her. Ahead, she could see other couples searching their own areas - Lord James and Lady Beatrice examining a sundial, Lady Mary and her partner studying something near the greenhouse.

A flash of movement caught her eye.

“Look there - a blue ribbon!”

She hurried forward, not seeing the patch of ice near the lake’s edge. Her foot slipped, and for a heart-stopping moment she felt herself falling towards the freezing water. Then strong arms caught her, pulling her back against a solid chest. They stumbled together, and somehow she found herself pressed between Lord Limnwood and a tree trunk, his body sheltering her from view of the path.

“Are you hurt?”

His voice was barely a whisper against her hair. Emma shook her head, not trusting her voice. Every nerve in her body sang with awareness of him - the strength of his arms around her, the rapid beat of his heart against her palm, the warmth of his breath stirring her curls where a few escaped from their pins. She should step away. She should thank him properly and continue their hunt. She should... His hand cupped her cheek, tilting her face up to his. Their eyes met, and Emma saw her own longing reflected in his gaze.

“We shouldn’t,” she whispered, even as she swayed closer.

“No.” But his thumb brushed her lower lip, and she felt him tremble. “Emma...”

The use of her given name undid her completely. She lifted up on her toes, closing the last distance between them, and felt his control break. His mouth claimed hers with a hunger that stole her breath, and she gave herself up to the kiss completely.

Time seemed to stop in that moment - there was nothing but the warmth of his mouth on hers, the strength of his arms around her, the solid trunk of the tree at her back. Emma’s hands curled into the fabric of his coat, holding on as the world tilted beneath her feet. It was only a few short moments, but it felt like forever, as if time had stopped.

A sharp gasp broke through their absorption. They sprang apart as if burned, but Emma knew it was too late - Lady Anne stood on the path, her expression a mixture of shock and triumph.

“Well,” Lady Anne’s voice dripped ice, “how... interesting. Though perhaps not surprising, given recent displays.”

Emma felt Lord Limnwood stiffen beside her. Her heart plummeted as his familiar mask of rigid propriety slammed back into place.

“Lady Anne.” His voice was perfectly controlled. “Miss Everton nearly fell. I was merely...”

“Merely?” Lady Anne’s laugh held no humour. “I saw exactly what you were ‘merely’ doing, my Lord. Though I confess, I had thought better of you than to engage in such behaviour. But then,” her gaze raked Emma dismissively, “some people do have a talent for encouraging impropriety.”

Emma’s cheeks burned, but she lifted her chin.

“You seem very concerned with other people’s behaviour, Lady Anne. How fortunate that you happened to be in exactly the right place to observe it.”

Lady Anne’s eyes narrowed at the implied accusation.

“I was simply following my own clues. Though perhaps I should inform Lady Agatha that her charge requires closer supervision?”

“That will not be necessary.” Lord Limnwood’s voice was arctic. “As I said, Miss Everton nearly fell. I prevented an accident. Nothing more.”

Nothing more. The words struck Emma like physical blows. She stepped away from both of them, straightening her pelisse with hands that shook only slightly.

“Indeed,” she managed. “How fortunate that you were there to prevent disaster, my Lord. Though perhaps we should continue our hunt separately? Since if Lady Anne is to be believed, clearly we cannot be trusted to maintain proper behaviour when alone together, even out here, with many other couples around us, all able to see us.”

She saw him flinch at her tone, but she simply handed him the ribbons and notes that they had found so far, and turned away. He made no move to stop her as she walked, her back straight, her steps measured, making her way towards the house, dignity the only shield she had left. Behind her, she heard Lady Anne's voice, honey-sweet with false concern.

"Such a shame when people forget their proper place, is it not? Though perhaps it's for the best that such... tendencies are discovered early, before any lasting damage is done."

Emma's vision blurred with unshed tears, but she refused to let them fall. She had been a fool to think that one kiss - one moment of perfect connection - could overcome Lord Limnwood's rigid propriety. Worse, she had given Lady Anne exactly the weapon she needed to destroy any chance of understanding between them.

A rustle in the shrubbery beside her made her jump, but it was only Lord James, emerging from what appeared to be a deeply frustrating search for his own clues. Lady Beatrice was some distance away, also looking about in the bushes near a path.

"Miss Everton!" His smile faded as he saw her face. "What has my fool of a brother done now?"

"Nothing that was not entirely mutual, I assure you." She managed a wan smile. "Though perhaps you might tell him that Lady Anne's triumph need not be complete? I have no intention of spreading tales about his... lapse in judgment."

Understanding dawned in Lord James' eyes.

"Ah. She saw something, did she? That explains why she looked so pleased with herself when she passed me a moment ago." He studied Emma's face. "Though I suspect that what she saw was less a lapse in judgment than a moment of honest

feeling?”

Emma’s breath caught.

“It hardly matters now.”

“Doesn’t it? Tell me, Miss Everton - do you truly believe my brother’s rigid propriety is his natural state? Or might it be armour against exactly this sort of situation?”

“I...” She hesitated. “Your brother made his position quite clear.”

“Did he? Or did he react exactly as he always does when threatened - by retreating behind his walls?” Lord James’ voice gentled. “Give him time. He may surprise you yet.”

Before Emma could respond, Lady Beatrice came hurrying up the path.

“Lord James! I’ve found the most peculiar clue... oh!” She stopped short at sight of Emma. “Dear heaven, what’s happened? You look quite pale!”

“The morning’s activities proved somewhat overwhelming,” Emma managed. “I believe I shall retire to my room for a while.”

“But the treasure hunt...”

“I fear Lord Limnwood will have to complete it alone.” Emma’s voice wavered slightly. “Though given his dedication to proper behaviour, I’m sure that he will manage admirably.”

She turned away before either could respond, but not before she caught the look that passed between them - concern from Beatrice, and something that might have been

anger from Lord James. Let them think what they would. She had her own feelings to manage.

The house seemed very far away. Each step required all of her concentration, lest she give in to the urge to run, or worse, to turn back. To find him. To demand... what? That he choose her over propriety? That he risk scandal for love?

Love.

The word stopped her in her tracks.

When had this happened? How had she let herself fall in love with a man who valued society's rules over the heart's truth?

"Miss Everton?"

She looked up to find the Duke watching her with genuine concern.

"Your Grace." She managed a curtsy. "I fear I'm not feeling quite the thing. Might I be excused from the remainder of the hunt?"

"Of course, my dear." His keen eyes missed nothing. "Though perhaps you might permit an old man an observation?" She nodded, not trusting her voice. "The truly valuable treasures in life are rarely found by following maps and clues." He smiled gently. "Sometimes one must simply trust one's heart to lead the way."

Emma's eyes filled with tears.

"Even when it leads to disaster?"

"Especially then." He patted her hand. "Rest now. But don't give up hope entirely.

Even the most rigid tree may bend in the right wind.”

She watched him walk away, his words echoing in her mind. Trust her heart? Her heart had led her straight into the one situation she had sworn to avoid - falling in love with a man who could never put feelings before proper behaviour.

Though the memory of his kiss suggested that perhaps proper behaviour wasn't quite as important to him as he claimed.

Nathaniel stood rooted to the spot long after Emma disappeared up the path, his hands clenched at his sides. Every fibre of his being urged him to follow her, to explain, to... what? Apologise for the kiss? He wasn't sorry. To apologise for denying it? That shame would haunt him far longer than any scandal might have done. But how else could he have protected her reputation?

“Really, Lord Limnwood,” Lady Anne's voice grated on his already raw nerves, “you needn't look so distressed. I'm sure that we can prevent any... unfortunate gossip from spreading.”

He turned to face her, suddenly seeing with perfect clarity what his brother had been trying to tell him about her.

“And how do you propose to do that, Lady Anne? By spreading your own version first?”

She blinked at his tone.

“I merely meant...”

“I know exactly what you meant. Just as I know that you did not come upon us by accident.” The words emerged cold and precise. “How long did you follow us before making your presence known?”

A flash of guilt crossed her face before she recovered.

“I’m sure that I don’t know what you mean. I was simply concerned...”

“About maintaining proper behaviour? How fascinating that your concern for propriety extends to stalking other guests through the gardens.”

“I would never...” She drew herself up. “Really, my Lord, I begin to see why you were so drawn to Miss Everton. You share her tendency to dramatise situations.”

“No, Lady Anne. Miss Everton and I share something far more important - honesty.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “So let me be perfectly honest with you. If I hear one word - one whisper - against Miss Everton’s reputation, I will ensure that society learns exactly how you spend your time at house parties. I doubt many would find such behaviour proper.”

Her face went pale.

“Are you threatening me?”

“Merely being honest. Good day, Lady Anne.”

He strode away, his mind churning. He had protected Emma’s reputation - or tried to - but at what cost? The memory of her face when he’d denied their kiss... he had seen something break in her eyes.

“I trust that you’re pleased with yourself?”

He turned to find James watching him, arms crossed.

“What would you have had me do? Allow Lady Anne to spread scandal about Emma’s behaviour?”

“Ah, so it’s Emma now, is it?” James’ voice held no humour. “Tell me, brother, did you even consider simply acknowledging your feelings? Standing up to Lady Anne’s spite with truth rather than denial?”

“And risk ruining her?”

“The only one risking her ruin is you - by making her doubt herself. By making her think that you’re ashamed of caring for her.”

The words struck home.

“I’m not ashamed...”

“Aren’t you? Then why deny what happened? Why not simply say that yes, you kissed her, and that anyone who objects can go hang?”

“Because that’s not how society works! There are rules...”

“Rules that matter more than her heart? Than yours?” James shook his head. “You know, for all your fear of Emma being like Charlotte, you’re the one behaving exactly as our cousin did – until you helped her see the truth of a man who truly loved her. You are letting fear of scandal override truth and love.”

Nathaniel staggered as if struck.

“That’s not...”

“Isn’t it? Charlotte let fear of an arranged marriage drive her into the arms of a fortune hunter. You’re letting it drive you away from the woman you love.” James’ voice gentled slightly. “Though I will say one thing for you - at least you managed to threaten Lady Anne properly. I heard that part.”

“You were listening?”

“Of course I was listening. Someone had to make sure that you didn’t make an even bigger cake of yourself.” James clapped him on the shoulder. “Now, what do you intend to do about the mess you’ve made?”

Nathaniel stared up at the house, where he could just see Emma’s figure disappearing inside.

“I don’t know.” His voice roughened. “But I do know that I cannot lose her. Not like this.”

“Well, that’s a start.” James smiled slightly. “Though you might want to work out the rest before dinner. I suspect that facing her across the table while pretending that nothing happened will be rather uncomfortable.”

Nathaniel’s hands clenched as he remembered how she had felt in his arms, the softness of her mouth under his, the way that she had trusted him completely in that moment before Lady Anne’s intrusion.

He had betrayed that trust. Somehow, he had to find a way to earn it back.

The only question was whether she would give him the chance.

Emma had managed to claim a megrim, and avoid the afternoon's flower arranging activity, but Beatrice had come to see her in her room in the break while everyone was dressing for dinner, concern filling her face.

“Emma! Are you recovered at all? You do still look pale. And you must tell me what really happened this morning. Lord Limnwood dutifully found all of the treasures that were marked for you, and he even finished faster than any of the other couples!”

Emma shook her head.

How absolutely typical that Lord Limnwood's response to that devastating moment when Lady Anne had come upon them was to be perfectly proper and complete the task at hand. But then a thought came to her, and despite herself, she gave Beatrice a conspiratorial smile.

“Perhaps I'll tell you – but later. First, you must tell me about the flower arranging tasks – How skilled did Lord Limnwood turnout to be, with flowers?”

Beatrice laughed, shaking her head.

“Sadly, the flower arranging has been postponed to tomorrow afternoon – although I think that Lord Limnwood was rather relieved at that – I suspect that he was dreading such a task without your assistance. And certainly, if we had continued he would have had to face dealing with Lady Anne, whilst she interfered and annoyed him at every chance she got. I can't imagine that it would have gone any other way.”

“Oh my! The poor man, I can imagine his dread. No one deserves the ‘delights’ of Lady Anne's attentions...”

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

Emma sat at her dressing table, watching as Susan arranged her hair for the evening's card party. She had pleaded that her head still hurt, hoping to avoid dinner, which she did, but Lady Agatha had been firm about her attendance at tonight's entertainment afterwards.

"Hiding only gives credence to gossip, my dear," her aunt had said, with a shrewd look that suggested that she knew exactly why Emma wished to hide.

"The blue ribbon, I think," Emma said, more to distract herself than from any real interest. But when Susan wove it through her dark red curls, she had to admit that the effect was striking. It was the same deep blue as the ribbons from their morning's truncated treasure hunt...

She closed her eyes against the memory of his hands at her waist, his mouth on hers, the way that everything had seemed so perfect for that one breathtaking moment, before it all fell apart.

"There now, Miss." Susan stepped back. "Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you."

Emma studied her reflection. At least she looked composed, even if she felt anything but. A tap at her door preceded Lady Beatrice's entrance.

Her friend took one look at her face and rushed to embrace her.

"Oh, Emma! After I left you here, I saw Lord James in the parlour, just before we

went in to dinner. He told me everything. That horrible Lady Anne! Though he says that Lord Limnwood did threaten her quite impressively about not spreading tales.”

Emma’s heart gave a treacherous leap.

“Did he?”

“Yes, though that hardly makes up for denying the kiss in the first place.” Lady Beatrice drew back to study her. “You look lovely. That blue brings out the blue tones in the violet of your eyes beautifully. Though...”

She hesitated.

“Though what?”

“Well, it is the same colour as this morning’s ribbons. People might notice...”

Emma’s chin lifted.

“Let them. I refuse to let Lady Anne dictate my choice of ribbons along with everything else.”

Lady Beatrice’s eyes sparkled.

“Good! Now, shall we go down? Lord James says that the Duke has planned some sort of special entertainment with forfeits for the card games.”

“Forfeits?” Emma’s stomach dropped. “What sort of forfeits?”

“Valentine-themed ones, apparently. Though the Duke assured everyone that they would be completely proper.” Lady Beatrice’s expression turned mischievous. “Even

if they do require interaction between partners.”

Emma closed her eyes briefly. Of course they would. Because this evening needed to be more complicated.

They descended to find the drawing room already filling with guests. Emma’s eyes found Lord Limnwood immediately, though she quickly looked away. He stood with his brother near the fireplace, his evening clothes emphasising his height and broad shoulders in a way that made her breath catch.

“Ah, Miss Everton!” The Duke’s cheerful voice drew her attention. “We missed you at dinner. I trust that you’re feeling better?”

“Much better, Your Grace. Thank you.”

“Excellent! Then you’ll be able to participate fully in our entertainment.” His eyes twinkled. “We’re dividing into groups at four tables - you’ll find your assigned place marked with a blue ribbon.”

Of course it was. Emma managed a smile and moved towards the indicated table. Lord Limnwood was already there, though he seemed intensely focused on adjusting his cuffs. Lord James and Lady Beatrice would complete their four, she noticed with some relief. At least she would have friendly faces at the table.

“Now then!” The Duke called for attention. “The rules are simple. Each hand lost requires the paying of a forfeit, drawn from these bowls.” He gestured to where footmen were placing decorated china bowls on each table. “The forfeits must be paid immediately, and no exchanging or refusing is permitted. Though I assure you, all are perfectly proper.”

Emma sank into her chair, keeping her eyes carefully lowered. She could feel Lord

Limnwood's presence across the table like a physical thing.

"Shall we begin?" Lord James' voice held carefully suppressed amusement. "Though I should warn all of you, I am absolutely terrible at cards."

"How fortunate then," Lady Anne's voice carried from the next table, "that the forfeits will provide such excellent entertainment. Though some might find them rather... challenging."

Emma's hands clenched in her lap, but she forced herself to appear unaffected. Lord Limnwood, she noticed, had gone very still.

"I believe it's your deal, brother," Lord James said pointedly.

The cards whispered against the green baize as Lord Limnwood dealt. Emma picked up her hand, grateful for something to focus on besides his proximity. The familiar patterns of hearts and diamonds swam before her eyes.

"Your play, Miss Everton."

She started at his voice - the first words he had spoken to her since that morning.

Quickly, she played a card, then immediately realised her mistake.

"Oh dear," Lord James' grin widened. "I believe that means that you must pay a forfeit, Miss Everton."

Emma's heart thundered as she reached for the bowl. The slip of paper she drew trembled slightly in her fingers as she read it.

"Well?" Lady Beatrice prompted. "What does it say?"

“‘Recite a verse about your partner’s best quality’.” Emma’s voice emerged steadier than she felt. She looked up, meeting Lord Limnwood’s eyes properly for the first time that evening. For a moment, she was back in the garden, feeling his arms around her, his lips on hers... She drew a steadying breath and spoke:

“In proper form his manner’s cast,

Each rule observed, each boundary fast,

Yet ‘neath that rigid mask, I see

A heart that longs to beat more free.”

She saw him flinch slightly at her words, though his expression remained carefully neutral. Around them, conversation at other tables continued, but she felt the weight of Lady Anne’s attention from the next table.

“Very clever,” Lady Anne’s voice dripped honey-sweet poison. “Though perhaps some might consider such... observation... rather forward.”

“I believe,” Lord Limnwood’s voice cut through the tension like a blade, “that the forfeit specifically required commenting on one’s partner’s qualities. Miss Everton has fulfilled that requirement with both wit and propriety.”

Emma’s breath caught at his defence, unexpected after his denial that morning. She caught a glimpse of something raw in his eyes before he looked away.

“Your play, my Lord,” Lord James prompted quietly.

The game continued, but Emma’s mind whirled. What did it mean, that he would defend her so publicly after this morning’s events? And why did her heart leap with

hope despite her best efforts to guard it?

Three hands later, Emma's concentration was thoroughly shattered. Lord Limnwood had been forced by forfeit to describe her eyes in detail - a task he performed with careful correctness that nonetheless left her pulse racing. Lady Beatrice had recited a comic verse about Lord James' smile that had everyone laughing. And now...

"Your forfeit, my Lord."

Lord James held out the bowl to his brother, his eyes dancing with barely suppressed mischief. Lord Limnwood drew a slip of paper, and Emma saw his shoulders stiffen as he read it.

"Well?" Lady Anne called from the next table. "Do tell us what the forfeit requires. Though perhaps it might prove too... challenging for some sensibilities?"

Emma saw his jaw clench before he spoke.

"Stand behind your partner's chair and arrange their cards for one hand, ensuring no other player can see them." The room seemed to still. Emma's heart thundered so loudly she was certain everyone must hear it. Across the table, Lord Limnwood's eyes met hers, asking a silent question. She lifted her chin slightly and nodded. He rose with careful grace and moved around the table. Emma forced herself to breathe normally as he came to stand behind her chair. "May I?"

His voice was barely a whisper as he reached for her cards. She nodded again, not trusting her voice. His hands brushed hers as he took the cards, and she felt him draw a sharp breath. The scent of bergamot and cedar surrounded her as he leaned closer to arrange the cards, his breath stirring the curls at her temple.

"How cosy." Lady Anne's voice dripped acid. "Though perhaps some might find

such... intimate arrangements rather disturbing. What do you think, Lord Radmill?"

"I..." Lord Radmill looked uncomfortable. "That is..."

"I think," Lord James cut in smoothly, "that my brother manages the forfeit with perfect propriety. Though if you find it disturbing, Lady Anne, perhaps you might focus on your own game?"

Emma felt Lord Limnwood's silent approval in the slight relaxation of his posture. But he remained close behind her, closer than strictly necessary, as he arranged her cards with careful precision.

"A good hand, I believe," he murmured.

His voice was pitched for her ears alone. The warmth of his breath against her ear made her shiver.

"Thank you."

She managed to keep her voice steady, though her whole body hummed with awareness of him. He didn't move away immediately, and Emma found herself holding her breath, wondering if he might... what? Kiss her again, here in front of everyone? The very idea was absurd. Yet something in the charged silence between them suggested he was thinking of it too.

"Your play, Miss Everton," Lady Beatrice prompted gently.

The spell broke. Lord Limnwood stepped back, returning to his seat with perfect composure. But Emma saw his hands clench briefly as he sat, suggesting that his control wasn't quite as complete as he wished it to appear.

“Really,” Lady Anne’s voice carried clearly, “one must wonder about the wisdom of such forfeits. Particularly when some participants seem to find proper behaviour so... challenging.”

“I believe,” the Duke’s voice cut through the tension, “that all forfeits are being performed with perfect propriety. Though perhaps, Lady Anne, if you find them disturbing, you might wish to retire?”

Emma didn’t dare look up, but she could feel Lady Anne’s fury radiating from the next table. The woman’s voice, when she spoke, was tight with suppressed rage.

“Not at all, Your Grace. Though I do feel that someone should speak up when standards of behaviour are at risk of being compromised.”

“And who better to do so than one so... experienced in observing others’ behaviour?” Lord Limnwood’s voice was arctic. “Though perhaps some might find such close observation rather disturbing in itself.”

The silence that followed his words was profound. Emma looked up to find his eyes blazing with barely controlled anger. Lady Anne had gone pale.

“I’m sure that I don’t know what you mean, my Lord.”

“Don’t you?” His smile held no warmth. “How fascinating, given your detailed knowledge of events you could only have witnessed through very... dedicated... observation.”

Emma’s breath caught as she realised what he was doing - reminding Lady Anne of his morning threat without explicitly revealing anything.

“I believe it’s your play, brother,” Lord James intervened smoothly. “Though perhaps

we might take a brief pause for refreshment? The evening grows warm.”

Indeed, the tension in the room had raised the temperature considerably. Emma welcomed the chance to step away as footmen appeared with glasses of lemonade and small cakes.

“Walk with me?” Lady Beatrice touched her arm. “I fear that I need a moment of air.”

They moved to stand near the windows, which had been opened slightly to admit the chill evening breeze. From this position, Emma could see Lord Limnwood’s reflection in the glass, still seated at their table, his expression was thunderous as Lady Anne approached him.

“I don’t know what game you think you’re playing,” Lady Anne’s voice carried just far enough for Emma to hear, “but surely you cannot mean to actually... that is, someone of your position...”

“My position?” His voice was deadly quiet. “And what position would that be, Lady Anne? That of a man who values truth over malicious gossip? Or perhaps that of one who recognises the difference between genuine concern for propriety and mere spite?”

Emma’s hands trembled slightly as she lifted her glass of lemonade. After his denial that morning, she hadn’t expected him to defend her so fiercely. Yet there he sat, facing down Lady Anne’s spite with cold precision, while still maintaining perfect propriety himself.

“He’s rather magnificent when roused, isn’t he?” Lady Beatrice whispered. “Though I confess, I’ve never seen him quite so angry.”

“I don’t understand,” Emma whispered back. “This morning he...”

“This morning he acted from instinct - the instinct to protect you that’s been drilled into him since childhood. But now?” Lady Beatrice smiled slightly. “Now he’s had time to think about what truly threatens you. And it isn’t gossip about a kiss.”

Emma’s heart gave a treacherous leap of hope.

“You think so?”

“I think,” Lady Beatrice said carefully, “that a man doesn’t defend a lady so fiercely unless his feelings run very deep indeed. Though he might not yet be ready to admit it.”

Before Emma could respond, the Duke called for the games to resume. As she returned to her seat, she found Lord Limnwood watching her with an intensity that made her breath catch. For the first time since that morning, she wondered if perhaps all was not lost after all. The remainder of the evening passed in a blur of cards and forfeits, though none quite so challenging as those earlier ones. Emma found herself hyperaware of Lord Limnwood’s every movement, every careful word. He played his cards with perfect attention, yet she noticed his eyes straying to her whenever he thought she wouldn’t notice.

As the clock struck ten, the Duke rose to signal the evening’s end.

“A most entertaining series of games!” He beamed at the assembled company. “Though perhaps tomorrow’s activities might prove less... provocative.”

Emma couldn’t quite suppress a shiver as she remembered that tomorrow’s entertainment would involve flower arranging - which meant working closely with Lord Limnwood again. As if reading her thoughts, he looked up, their eyes meeting

across the table.

“Miss Everton.” He rose, bowing perfectly. “Might I escort you to your aunt?”

Her heart leapt at this unexpected courtesy.

“Thank you, my Lord.”

They moved away from the table together, maintaining proper distance, yet somehow seeming to draw every eye in the room. Emma felt Lady Anne’s gaze boring into her back, but kept her chin high.

“I feel that I must apologise,” he said very quietly as they walked, “for allowing Lady Anne to make you uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t allow anything.” She matched his quiet tone. “Indeed, you were quite... forceful in your defence.”

He glanced down at her, something warming in his grey eyes.

“Not forceful enough, perhaps.”

Before she could respond to this cryptic statement, they reached Lady Agatha’s chair. Emma curtsied, her skirts brushing his legs as she did so.

“Until tomorrow, my Lord.”

“Until tomorrow.” His voice roughened slightly. “Though perhaps... that is...” He stopped, glancing around at their interested audience. “Sleep well, Miss Everton.”

He strode away, leaving Emma to wonder what he had been about to say. Lady

Agatha's knowing look suggested that she had her own thoughts on the matter.

"Well, my dear," her aunt rose, taking her arm, "a most interesting evening."

"Indeed." Emma managed to keep her voice steady. "Though I fear that Lady Anne found it rather trying."

"Did she?" Lady Agatha's tone could have frozen mulled wine. "How fascinating that she should be so concerned with others' behaviour, when her own leaves so much to be desired."

They had reached the door when Lady Anne's voice carried across the room.

"Such a shame when people forget their proper place in society. Though I suppose some find it difficult to maintain proper standards when their circumstances are... reduced."

Emma felt the words strike like physical blows. Her family's reduced circumstances after her brother's death had been carefully glossed over in society, but Lady Anne's words made it clear - she knew, and meant to use that knowledge. A sudden silence fell as Lord Limnwood stepped into Lady Anne's path.

"How interesting." His voice carried clearly. "I had always thought true nobility to be shown most clearly in behaviour, rather than circumstances. Though perhaps some find that concept... difficult to grasp." He turned on his heel and strode to where Emma stood frozen in the doorway. To her complete shock, he bowed over her hand, his lips brushing her glove in a gesture that bordered on impropriety. "Good night, Miss Everton. I look forward to tomorrow's activities with great anticipation."

Emma's heart thundered as she watched him walk away. That gesture, that pointed courtesy in front of everyone, had been a declaration of sorts. But of what? Support?

Friendship? Or something more?

“Well,” Lady Agatha said dryly as they climbed the stairs, “it seems that Lord Limnwood has finally decided which side of propriety truly matters.”

Emma touched the spot on her glove where his lips had pressed.

“What do you mean?”

“My dear, there are two kinds of proper behaviour. That which protects reputation through rigid rules, and that which protects through honour and courage.” Her aunt smiled slightly. “It seems that his Lordship has finally learned the difference.”

Emma fell asleep that night with her glove still clutched in her hand, dreaming of grey eyes and gentle lips and the possibility that perhaps, just perhaps, love might prove stronger than rules after all.

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Dawn mist still clung to the grounds of Pelham Hall as Emma made her way to the stables. She had risen early, hoping to enjoy a quiet ride before the morning's planned activities, only to find that several other guests harboured similar intentions.

Lady Beatrice waved to her from where she stood with Lord James, both already mounted. Other horses were being led out by grooms, their riders following in twos and threes. Emma's heart gave a treacherous leap as she recognised Lord Limnwood's tall figure near the stable door, speaking quietly with the head groom.

"Miss Everton!" The Duke's cheerful voice carried across the yard. "Excellent! We seem to have arranged an impromptu morning riding party. Would you care to join us?"

Before she could respond, Lord Limnwood turned. Their eyes met, and Emma felt the weight of last night's events hang between them - his defence of her, that almost-improper kiss of her hand, the way that he'd looked at her as he wished her good night...

"Your usual mount is ready, miss." The head groom led forward the sweet-tempered bay mare that Emma had ridden several times during their stay. "Though I fear that there's been a slight change in the arrangements."

"Oh?"

Emma forced herself to focus on the groom rather than on Lord Limnwood's approaching figure.

“Yes, miss. Lady Anne’s mare came up lame this morning - nothing serious, mind, just a stone bruise - so she’ll be riding Bella instead. Which means you’ll need to take Shadow, as he’s the only other mount suitable for a lady.”

Emma’s breath caught. Shadow was a beautiful black gelding, but rather more spirited than the sort of horses that she usually rode. She had admired him from afar but never...

“Is there a problem?”

Lord Limnwood’s voice was carefully neutral.

“Not at all,” Emma said quickly - too quickly, perhaps.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“Shadow can be challenging, from what I’ve seen. Perhaps...”

“I am perfectly capable of managing him.”

Emma lifted her chin, ignoring the flutter of nerves in her stomach. She would not show weakness, not with Lady Anne watching from her perfectly docile mount.

“As you wish.” But something in his tone suggested that he was not entirely convinced. “Though perhaps you would permit me to ride nearby? Simply to maintain proper supervision of the party.”

Her heart leapt at this transparent excuse to stay close to her.

“If you feel it necessary, my Lord.”

A groom brought forward the mounting block, but Emma hesitated, noting its slightly unstable placement on the cobbles. Lord Limnwood noticed her concern.

“Allow me to assist, Miss Everton?” He moved forward, positioning himself beside Shadow’s shoulder. “The yard is quite uneven here.”

Emma’s heart quickened as he cupped his hands to create a step. She felt his strength as she placed her foot in his hands and he easily boosted her up smoothly as she pushed against his support, allowing her to settle perfectly into the sidesaddle. The fluid grace of the movement surprised her - clearly, he had assisted ladies with mounting before, though something in his expression as their eyes met suggested that this time felt different.

“Thank you, my Lord.” She was proud of how steady she kept her voice, despite the lingering warmth she felt from his assistance.

He swung onto his own mount - a magnificent grey stallion - with easy grace. Emma found herself admiring the smooth movement, the way he sat his horse, and the strength evident in his shoulders, before she caught herself and looked away.

“Shall we?” The Duke’s voice broke into her inappropriate daydream. “I thought that we might ride to the old abbey ruins - the view of the sunrise from there is quite spectacular.”

They set out in loose formation, Lord James and Lady Beatrice in the lead with the Duke, other couples falling in behind. Emma found herself near the rear with Lord Limnwood, which she suspected was not entirely accidental on his part.

Shadow proved to be everything she’d heard - responsive but spirited, requiring constant attention. She focused on maintaining perfect form, very aware of Lord Limnwood watching her.

“You ride well,” he said quietly as they followed a path through the woods. “Though I confess, I find myself concerned about Shadow’s temperament.”

“Because you think me incapable of managing challenging situations?”

The words emerged in a sharper tone than she had intended.

Something flickered in his expression - concern, perhaps, or something warmer.

“On the contrary. I begin to think you quite capable of managing any situation. Which makes me wonder why you feel the need to prove it.”

She looked at him then, startled by the understanding in his tone. The morning light caught those golden glints in his dark hair, and for a moment she forgot to breathe.

“Perhaps,” she said softly, “because some people’s good opinion seems worth earning.”

Their eyes met, and Emma felt the world narrow to just this moment, this understanding passing between them. His expression softened in a way that she had never seen before.

Before he could respond, a pheasant burst from the undergrowth directly under Shadow’s nose. The horse shied violently, nearly unseating Emma. She kept her seat through pure instinct, but Shadow had already taken the bit between his teeth, charging off the path into the woods.

She heard Lord Limnwood’s curse, the thunder of hooves behind her as he gave chase. But all her attention was focused on staying mounted as Shadow crashed through the undergrowth. She tried to turn him, to check his headlong flight, but he simply ran faster.

Through the rush of wind in her ears, she heard Lord Limnwood's voice. "Emma! Let him run - there's a clearing ahead!"

She forced herself to relax her death grip on the reins, trusting him. Shadow's pace began to slow, and soon they burst into an open space - the remains of what might once have been a garden, now grown wild with early spring flowers. Emma took a firm grip, and pulled Shadow into a turn, forcing him to slow even more for balance as they circled the clearing. Every step, she prayed that the horse would keep his footing on the uneven ground, but all was well. The gelding recovered from his fright, and began to respond as he should, training overcoming the moment of shock.

Lord Limnwood's grey caught up to them as Shadow finally dropped to a walk, blowing hard. Without a word, Nathaniel reached across to place his hand on Emma's as they brought both horses to a halt.

"Are you hurt?"

His voice was rough with what sounded like genuine fear.

"No." But she couldn't quite control her trembling. "Though I begin to think that you were right about Shadow being too challenging."

"You handled him beautifully." He dismounted in one fluid motion, moving to help her down. "Most riders would have lost their seat entirely."

She lifted her right leg over the pommel, and sat fully sideways for a moment. Then, before she could simply slip to the ground, his hands settled at her waist and steadied her as she slid down. When her feet were firmly on the ground, he didn't immediately let go. Emma found herself pressed against him, her hands on his shoulders, both of them breathing hard from more than just the wild ride.

“I thought...” His voice was barely a whisper. “When I saw him bolt with you...”

“I’m perfectly well, my Lord.” She looked up, and found his face much closer than she’d expected. “Though perhaps it is not entirely proper, being alone with you like this.”

“No.” But he didn’t step back. “Though for once, I find that I care rather less about propriety than about the fact that you’re safe.”

Emma’s breath caught at his words. His hands still rested at her waist, warm and steady, and she could feel the rapid beat of his heart where her palm now pressed against his coat.

“Yesterday morning,” she began hesitantly, “you seemed to care very much about propriety.”

His grip tightened slightly.

“Yesterday morning I was...” He broke off, studying her face. “When I saw Shadow bolt with you...”

“You were worried?”

She meant it to sound teasing, but her voice emerged soft, uncertain.

“More than worried.” His hand rose to brush a strand of hair from her cheek. “Emma...”

The use of her given name made her shiver. His eyes darkened at her response, and she knew that he was remembering their kiss from yesterday, just as she was. The proper thing would be to step away, to maintain distance between them. Instead, she

found herself swaying slightly closer.

“We shouldn’t,” she whispered, even as her hands continued to rest against his chest.

“No.” But his other hand curved around her waist, drawing her nearer. “Tell me to stop.”

She couldn’t, didn’t want to. When his lips met hers, she melted into the kiss, feeling his sharp intake of breath at her response. This kiss was different from yesterday’s - slower, deeper, full of unspoken feelings that neither of them was ready to name.

When they finally drew apart, she saw her own confusion and desire reflected in his eyes. Something was growing between them, something that terrified and thrilled her in equal measure.

A distant call made them both start. Reality crashed back - they were alone, unchaperoned, and had just shared a highly improper embrace. The rest of the riding party must be searching for them.

“We should go back,” Emma said reluctantly. “Though... what will you tell them?”

“The truth.” He brushed a final kiss across her lips. “That Shadow bolted, that I caught up to you, and that we are both perfectly well.” His eyes sparkled. “Though perhaps we needn’t mention every detail of what occurred after the horses stopped.”

“And Lady Anne?”

“Will say what she wishes, as she always does.” His expression hardened slightly. “Though she would do well to remember that I have influence enough to make society question her observations rather than your behaviour.”

Emma touched his cheek gently.

“I don’t want you to compromise your position for me.”

“I’m not. I’m finally living up to it.” He caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. “A man of my rank should protect those he... those he loves. Not through denial or rigid rules, but through honour and truth.”

She almost gasped at his choice of words, but, before she could speak, could ask him... the calls were getting closer. When he turned away a little and looked to the horses, Emma simply stood, waiting, until he helped her remount, his hand coming up to rest on her knee once she was safely settled in the saddle. The heat of that touch seemed to fill her whole body, distracting her from the exigencies of the moment.

“We will need to be careful,” he said quietly. “It is so easy to slip into impropriety. But never doubt, Emma - my feelings are engaged, I think, beyond what is sensible at all.”

She smiled down at him, joy bubbling up despite her awareness of the complications ahead, if he meant what she thought he meant.

“As are mine. You make me want to do things I shouldn’t - even when you’re being impossibly proper.”

His laugh was interrupted by the arrival of Lord James and Lady Beatrice, both looking relieved to find them safe. Emma noticed Lord James’ quick assessment of their slightly dishevelled appearance, the knowing gleam in his eyes.

“There you are!” Lady Beatrice called. “We’ve been so worried! Though...” She glanced between them with barely suppressed excitement. “I trust everything is... well?”

“Perfectly well,” Nathaniel said smoothly, mounting his horse. “Though perhaps we should return to the house? I do believe that Miss Everton has had quite enough excitement for one morning.”

They rode back together, maintaining proper distance but unable to quite hide their shared joy. Emma caught Lady Beatrice watching them with obvious delight, while Lord James wore an expression of profound satisfaction.

As they approached the house, Emma saw Lady Anne waiting on the steps, her expression calculating. Their absence had clearly been noted. Emma’s stomach tightened - what had been a moment of perfect connection now felt dangerously exposed to society’s judgment.

She lifted her chin, refusing to let anxiety dim the warmth that still lingered from their kiss. Whatever Lady Anne might suspect, she had done nothing truly wrong. Even if her heart still raced every time she caught Nathaniel - Lord Limnwood, she corrected herself firmly, for if she allowed herself to think of him that way, despite the fact that he had given her licence to use his forename, then she was sure to call him so in a situation where it was most inappropriate - looking at her.

As they dismounted in the stable yard, Emma could feel the weight of curious stares. Lady Anne had clearly been busy during their absence - several other guests lingered near the steps, watching with poorly concealed interest.

“Miss Everton.” Lady Agatha’s voice cut through the morning air as she descended the steps. “Are you quite well? We were most concerned when it was reported that you had become separated from the party.”

Emma caught the sharp look her aunt cast between her and Nathaniel. Something in Lady Agatha’s expression suggested that she saw more than Emma might wish her to.

“Quite well, thank you. Shadow was startled by a pheasant, and it took some time for me to bring him back under control, but Lord Limnwood’s quick thinking in following me prevented any mishap.”

“How fortunate that he was there to... assist you.” Lady Anne’s voice dripped honey-sweet venom. “Though one must wonder why it took you so long to return? The woods cannot be that extensive.”

Emma felt heat climb her cheeks at the memory of exactly why their return had been delayed. But before she could respond, Nathaniel spoke, his voice cool and controlled.

“We had to allow the horses to cool down a little, after their exertion,” he said smoothly. “As any experienced rider would know.”

Lady Anne flushed at this subtle reminder that she had given up her usual mount due to lameness, and then taken the quieter of the available horses, due to her claimed inability to handle Shadow. But her eyes narrowed as they moved between Emma and Nathaniel, clearly noting something in their manner which fed her suspicions.

“Come, my dear.” Lady Agatha took Emma’s arm. “You must change before breakfast. Though perhaps we might have a moment of conversation first?” Emma’s heart sank at her aunt’s tone. She allowed herself to be led away, though not before catching Nathaniel’s glance. The warmth in his eyes made her breath catch - how had they gone from proper distance to such awareness in so short a time? “I couldn’t help but notice,” Lady Agatha said as they reached Emma’s chamber, “that both you and Lord Limnwood returned looking rather... windswept.”

Emma busied herself removing her riding gloves.

“We were riding through the woods at speed, and not on a trail, aunt.”

“Indeed.” Lady Agatha’s voice softened. “Emma, look at me.”

She turned reluctantly to face her aunt, expecting censure. Instead, she found understanding in Lady Agatha’s eyes.

“You’re developing feelings for him, aren’t you?”

Emma’s breath caught.

“I... I hardly know what I feel. Everything is so confused.”

“That, my dear, is exactly what concerns me.” Lady Agatha settled into a chair. “Confused feelings can lead to confused behaviour. And in society, behaviour is everything.”

“Nothing improper happened,” Emma said quickly - perhaps too quickly.

“No?” Her aunt’s eyebrow rose. “Then why do you look both guilty and delighted? No, don’t answer that. Just... be careful, my dear. Growing feelings are wonderful things, but they need time to be understood. And society is not always patient with such understanding.”

Emma sank onto the edge of her bed, suddenly overwhelmed by the morning’s events. The memory of Nathaniel’s kiss made her fingers tremble as she unpinned her hat. What was happening between them? How had simple attraction become something that made her heart race at just the thought of him?

“I don’t know what to do,” she admitted softly.

“Do nothing, for now.” Lady Agatha rose. “Let your feelings settle. Let his show themselves for what they truly are. Time has a way of making things clear - or

showing them to be mere passing fancies.”

But as her aunt left, Emma pressed her fingers to her lips, remembering their kiss. Whatever was growing between them, it felt like anything but a passing fancy.

She only hoped that she wasn't being a fool to let her heart become so engaged before she was sure of his – but he had implied, had almost said....

A tap at the door made her start. Susan entered with a silver tray bearing a note. Emma's hands trembled slightly as she recognised Lord Limnwood's precise hand.

Miss Everton,

I trust that you are recovered from this morning's excitement with Shadow. Please allow me to express my admiration for your excellent horsemanship, and my relief that no harm came to you. I find myself quite unable to concentrate on anything else until I am assured of your wellbeing.

Your most humble servant,

Limnwood

Emma pressed the note between her palms, feeling, somehow, that by touching it, she might absorb the proper phrases that somehow conveyed so much more than their surface meaning.

He had written nothing that could raise eyebrows if intercepted, yet she felt the concern - and something warmer - behind his words.

“Shall I help you change, Miss?”

Susan's voice held careful neutrality, though Emma caught her quick assessment of her mistress' flushed cheeks.

"Yes, though..." Emma hesitated. "Perhaps the blue muslin for breakfast? Since we're to have botanical drawing in the conservatory later."

"Very good, Miss." Susan moved to the wardrobe, then paused. "Though... if you'll pardon me saying so, perhaps the green would be more suitable? It being rather warmer in the conservatory?"

Emma caught her meaning - the green was more modest, less likely to draw attention when she was already the subject of speculation.

"Yes, you're right. The green will do very well."

As Susan helped her change, Emma's mind wandered back to that moment in the clearing. The way he had looked at her, the kiss, the gentleness in his touch that had belied his usual rigid manner... what did it really mean? And more importantly, what did she want it to mean?

"Your hair's come quite loose, Miss," Susan observed, carefully removing pins. "Shall I put it up again, in a different style?"

Emma caught sight of herself in the mirror - windblown curls escaping their pins, cheeks still flushed, eyes bright with remembered emotion. No wonder Lady Agatha had looked concerned.

"Yes, please do," she decided. "Though please hurry - I wouldn't want to be late to breakfast."

Being late would only fuel speculation. She would have to face them all - face him -

with perfect composure, as if this morning had been nothing more than a minor adventure with a spirited horse. Yet she knew, with a certainty that thrilled and terrified her, that everything had changed. Not just because of their kiss, but because of the way he had looked at her then, as if seeing her properly for the first time.

“There now.” Susan stepped back, surveying her work. “No one would guess you’d had such an eventful morning.”

Emma smiled at her maid’s loyalty.

“Thank you, Susan. Though I fear Lady Anne’s imagination will supply whatever details she wishes, regardless of my appearance.”

“Let her imagine what she likes, Miss.” Susan’s chin lifted slightly. “Those who matter will know the truth.”

But that was just it, Emma thought as she made her final preparations to face the day. She wasn’t entirely sure what the truth was anymore. Only that her heart beat faster whenever he was near, that his touch made her forget everything proper, and that somehow, without quite meaning to, she had started down a path that might lead to joy or heartbreak - or possibly both.

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Emma smoothed the silver-grey silk of her afternoon gown, conscious that its colour perfectly matched a certain pair of eyes. She had chosen it with particular care, knowing that the afternoon's entertainment would keep her much in Lord Limnwood's company.

"The Duke has arranged the most romantic scenes for the tableaux," Lady Beatrice enthused as they made their way to the drawing room. "Though I notice that Lady Anne looked rather pleased about something at luncheon. I don't trust that expression of hers at all."

"Nor should you." Emma kept her voice low. "Though at present, I find myself much too happy to care overmuch about her schemes."

"I should think so!" Lady Beatrice squeezed her arm. "The way that Lord Limnwood looked at you at breakfast..." Lady Beatrice squeezed her arm. "I thought that the room might catch fire from the heat of his gaze alone. And don't tell me that you didn't notice - I saw you blush every time your eyes met."

"Beatrice!"

But Emma couldn't help smiling at the memory. They had maintained perfectly proper behaviour at breakfast, yet somehow every glance, every careful word, had felt laden with meaning after their shared moment in the woods. The memory of his kiss made her heart race even now, though she scarcely dared examine too closely what it might truly mean.

The drawing room had been transformed for the afternoon's entertainment. Footmen

had arranged chairs in a semicircle facing an area cleared for the performances. Screens created a makeshift stage at one end, with small chambers on either side for participants to prepare.

“Ah, excellent!” The Duke beamed at the assembled company. “For our first entertainment, we shall have charades. Then, after tea, tableaux vivants depicting famous romantic scenes from literature and mythology. Each couple will participate in both activities.”

Emma’s heart quickened as Lord Limnwood appeared beside her, bowing perfectly.

“Miss Everton.” His voice gave nothing away, but his eyes held warmth that made her breath catch. “I trust that you are recovered from this morning’s adventure?”

“Entirely, my Lord. Though I might hope for less exciting pursuits this afternoon?”

“I fear that may not be possible.” His lips twitched slightly. “I see that we are to perform the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet in the tableaux.”

Emma’s pulse jumped. The balcony scene? She would have to stand above him, gazing down with a lovestruck expression while he looked up adoringly... which, she had to admit, would require very little acting on either of their parts.

“How... appropriate,” she managed.

“Indeed.” His voice became suddenly uneven. “Though perhaps we might focus on the charades first? I believe that we are in the first group to perform.”

They moved toward the screens, passing Lady Anne deep in conversation with a footman. Emma saw her press something into the man’s hand - a note? - but before she could observe more, they reached their preparation area.

“We are to act out ‘devotion’,” Lord Limnwood said quietly as they consulted their instructions.

His voice held an undercurrent that made her pulse quicken. Emma’s cheeks warmed.

“Though perhaps we should be careful not to be too... convincing?”

“Are you afraid that I might forget myself, Miss Everton?” His voice dropped to a whisper. “After this morning’s... adventure... I find myself particularly aware of the need for proper behaviour. In public, at least.”

The way he emphasised ‘in public’ sent shivers down her spine, reminding her all too vividly of their moment in the forest clearing. Before she could respond, the Duke called for the first performance to begin.

Their charade went perfectly - perhaps too perfectly. Emma knelt in pretended prayer while Nathaniel stood guard beside her, his hand resting protectively near her shoulder. The tenderness in his expression as he gazed down at her was entirely unfeigned, and she heard several sighs from their audience.

“Devotion!” Lady Beatrice called out almost immediately. “Oh, how perfectly done!”

“Indeed.” Lady Anne’s voice cut through the general approval. “Though one wonders if some performers might be drawing on... personal experience?”

Emma felt Lord Limnwood stiffen beside her as they returned to their seats. His hand brushed hers briefly - a gesture of reassurance that only she could see.

“I believe that it’s your turn, Lady Anne,” the Duke said pointedly. “Perhaps you might wish to focus on your own performance rather than critiquing others?”

Lady Anne's lips tightened, but she rose and moved behind the screens with her partner. Emma barely noticed their performance, too aware of Lord Limnwood's presence beside her, of maintaining the careful distance between them while surrounded by watchful eyes. As the charades concluded, footmen appeared with tea and refreshments. Lady Beatrice hurried to Emma's side, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"You and Lord Limnwood were wonderful!" She clasped Emma's hands. "Though perhaps a touch too convincing? I noticed Lady Anne looking quite put out."

"Let her look," Emma said quietly. "We have nothing to hide."

"No?" Lady Beatrice's smile widened. "Then why do you both keep watching each other when you think no one will notice?"

Emma felt her cheeks warm.

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

"Of course not." Lady Beatrice laughed. "Just as I'm sure Lord Limnwood chose to wear that blue coat today purely by chance, and not because you mentioned yesterday that it was your favourite colour."

Conscious that her blush was deepening, Emma rose.

"If you'll excuse me, I believe I need to visit the retiring room before the tableaux begin."

In the hallway, she paused to collect herself, pressing her cool hands to her warm cheeks. How was she to maintain proper composure when every glance from Lord Limnwood set her heart racing?

“Miss Everton?”

She turned to find a footman holding a silver salver.

“A note for you, Miss. From Lady Beatrice.”

Puzzled - hadn't she just left Beatrice in the drawing room? - Emma opened the message.

My dear friend,

I require your assistance with a matter of some delicacy. Please meet me in the library at three o'clock. I dare not say more here.

Your devoted friend,

Beatrice

The handwriting looked somewhat odd, but Emma supposed her friend might have written in haste. She tucked the note away, wondering what could be so urgent.

When she returned to the drawing room, the Duke was calling for attention.

“Now then! We shall have a brief interval while the tableaux are arranged. Players, please consult your assignments and prepare accordingly.”

Emma glanced at the clock. A quarter before three. She would have just enough time to assist Beatrice before the tableaux began. As she moved towards the door, she noticed another footman delivering a note to Lord James.

Near the fireplace, Lady Anne watched events unfold with a smile of deep

satisfaction.

The library stood quiet and cool, sunlight slanting through tall windows to illuminate dancing dust motes. Emma hesitated in the doorway, surprised to find Lord James rather than Lady Beatrice waiting there.

“Miss Everton?” He looked equally startled. “I had expected to find my brother - he sent a note asking me to discuss estate matters.”

“How strange.” Emma moved into the room, maintaining proper distance. “I received a note from Lady Beatrice requesting my presence here.”

James’ brow furrowed. He glanced toward the depths of the library, making an odd gesture that Emma didn’t quite understand.

“Did you indeed? Most peculiar.”

“Perhaps there has been some confusion about timing?”

Emma looked around, but saw no sign of either Beatrice or Lord Limnwood. The library seemed deserted except for themselves.

“Miss Everton...” James’ voice held an odd note of warning. “I believe that we should -”

Before he could finish, voices approached in the hallway. Emma recognised Lady Anne’s carrying tones.

“But surely you saw them, my Lord? Both going towards the library, quite alone...”

Emma's heart stopped as Lord Limnwood's voice responded.

"I'm certain that there must be some explanation."

"Oh, indeed." Lady Anne's laugh held what sounded oddly like triumph. "Shall we see what that explanation might be?"

Emma was frozen in place, suddenly acutely conscious of how this looked. Her eyes went to Lord James, but before she could do or say anything, the library door flew open.

Lady Anne stood there, Lord Limnwood beside her, and behind them several other guests including Lord Radmill. Emma's breath caught at the expression on Limnwood's face as he took in the scene - her and Lord James, apparently alone together.

"Well." Lady Anne's voice dripped satisfaction. "How... interesting."

Nathaniel stared at the scene before him, his mind refusing to accept what his eyes reported. Emma - who only that morning had melted into his kiss, had looked at him with such trust and affection in her eyes - stood in private conversation with James. His own brother. The two people he had just begun to let past his careful defences, meeting in secret.

Lady Anne's words from moments before echoed in his head: 'You must come at once - I've seen something that you need to know about...'

He had followed her reluctantly, irritated by her interruption of his thoughts about the morning's intimate moments, about the way that Emma had felt in his arms, the

emotion in her eyes when she'd looked at him. Now Lady Anne's eagerness to bring him here took on new, terrible meaning.

The betrayal struck deeper than any physical blow. Memories of Charlotte's scandal rose unbidden - another trusted family member, another secret meeting, another web of lies and betrayal. He had been such a fool, letting his guard down, letting himself feel... letting himself hope...

Pain transmuted to fury, fed by his own stupidity. Had they laughed at him, planning this assignation even as they encouraged his growing feelings? Had James known, when he urged Nathaniel to trust his heart, that he himself intended...

He couldn't complete the thought. Better the cold comfort of anger than this searing agony of betrayal. His chest constricted, each breath an effort as proper behaviour warred with primitive urges to shout, to strike, to demand explanations. Instead, he let ice fill his veins, letting rigid control suppress the volcano of emotion beneath. They would not see how deeply this cut. He would not give them that satisfaction.

The irony struck him with brutal force - he who had just begun to trust in feelings over propriety, was now faced with the very situation his rigid rules had been designed to prevent.

Every beat of his heart felt like it was breaking.

"Nathaniel," James started, "this isn't-"

"Isn't what?" Nathaniel's voice could have frozen fire. "Isn't exactly what it appears? My brother and Miss Everton, meeting in secret?"

“We’re not meeting in secret!” Emma found her voice. “I received a note from Lady Beatrice -”

“How convenient.” Lady Anne’s smile was pure poison. “Though one must wonder why Lady Beatrice is even now in the drawing room, seemingly quite unaware of any note.”

Emma’s mind whirled. If Beatrice hadn’t sent the note... She looked at James and saw dawning comprehension in his eyes. They had been intentionally trapped – she could come to no other conclusion.

“My Lord,” she turned to Lord Limnwood, “surely you cannot think...”

“Think what, Miss Everton?” His voice was arctic, his expression rigid with control. “That I find you alone with my brother, having apparently arranged a secret meeting through staged correspondence? What precisely should I think?”

Emma felt the words strike like physical blows. The rigid disapproval in his face, the utter lack of trust in his eyes - it was too much. Without another word, she turned and fled the library, her composure shattering further with each step.

Behind her, she heard a new voice speak - her aunt’s voice? - but she couldn’t stop, couldn’t bear to hear more accusations, more assumptions of her guilt. She had thought that their growing understanding meant something, had dared to hope that he might trust her character above appearances. She had been wrong.

If she had waited a moment longer, she might have heard Lady Agatha say, quite clearly, ‘I can assure you, Lord Limnwood, that your brother and Miss Everton were never alone in this room’.

But she didn’t wait. She ran, skirts rustling, until she reached her chamber. Only

there, behind a locked door, did she allow her tears to fall.

The tableaux would begin soon. She would have to find some way to face them all again, to play Juliet to his Romeo as if her heart weren't breaking. She had never understood until now just how that story's heroine must have felt.

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“I can assure you, Lord Limnwood, that your brother and Miss Everton were never alone in this room.”

Lady Agatha’s calm voice cut through the charged silence following Emma’s departure. Nathaniel felt each word like a physical blow. His hands began to shake as the full import of her statement registered - he had not only doubted Emma and James, he had publicly accused them without a moment’s consideration of their characters or their previous trustworthiness.

Lady Agatha had emerged from behind the shelves, her expression giving nothing away, though her eyes held a mixture of disappointment and concern that made Nathaniel’s shame deepen. He watched Emma’s aunt settle herself on the nearby couch with perfect composure, while his own world tilted on its axis.

The memory of Emma’s face as she fled - hurt, betrayal, heartbreak - burned behind his eyes. Only hours ago he had held her in that woodland clearing, had kissed her with such tenderness, had felt the walls he’d built around his heart beginning to crumble. Yet at the first hint of impropriety, he had betrayed not only their growing understanding but his own brother’s honour.

James stood rigidly by the window, his usual easy manner replaced by cold dignity. The transformation from his typically laughing brother to this stern-faced stranger was entirely Nathaniel’s doing.

“I must trust, brother,” James’ voice held an edge that Nathaniel had never heard before, “that my word would have been sufficient, had you bothered to ask for it.”

The words struck deep - not just because of their truth, but because they echoed countless conversations where James had urged him to trust more and judge less. He had failed them both - Emma with her generous heart that he had so casually broken, and James who had always supported him despite his rigid ways.

“I...” Nathaniel began, but Lord Radmill interrupted.

“Most irregular, this entire business. Though perhaps not surprising, given... certain circumstances.”

The implied slight to Emma’s reputation made Nathaniel’s hands clench. He had allowed this - his quick judgment had given credence to such assumptions. Even as his heart cried out to defend her, his own actions had denied him that right.

Lady Anne’s satisfied expression had faltered at Lady Agatha’s appearance, but now she rallied.

“Indeed. Though one must wonder why -”

“One must wonder,” Lady Agatha’s voice could have frozen an ocean, “why anyone would find it necessary to treat a private matter as a theatrical performance. The tableaux will begin shortly. I suggest that those not directly involved in this situation might better employ their time preparing for that entertainment.”

Her meaning was clear. The assembled onlookers shifted uncomfortably. Nathaniel noticed Lady Anne’s expression flicker - something about Lady Agatha’s presence had clearly disturbed her carefully laid plans. The sudden realisation that this might all have been planned - but not by Emma and James - sent fresh waves of self-loathing through him.

“Lady Agatha is quite right.” Lord Radmill seized the excuse to retreat. “Come, Lady

Anne. We should..."

"Indeed you should." Lady Agatha's gaze fixed on Lady Anne with such penetrating intensity that the younger woman actually stepped back. "I'm sure that you have much to prepare for."

The room emptied quickly, Lady Anne casting one uncertain glance over her shoulder as Lord Radmill all but dragged her away. When the door closed behind them, the silence stretched taut as a bowstring. Nathaniel's chest felt too tight to breathe. The magnitude of his mistake pressed down on him like a physical weight. He had spent so many years guarding against scandal, trying to protect others as he had nearly failed to protect Charlotte, that he had become the very thing he feared - someone who destroyed reputations through hasty judgment.

"James." His voice emerged rough with emotion. "I cannot express my shame at having doubted you. There can be no excuse for such behaviour from a brother."

The words seemed pitifully inadequate against the depth of his transgression. He forced himself to meet his brother's eyes, ready to accept whatever condemnation he found there. James' expression softened slightly, though the hurt remained visible.

"Perhaps not. Though I begin to understand why Lady Anne took such pains to arrange this little scene." At Nathaniel's questioning look, he continued, "She seemed unusually interested in my movements this morning. I thought nothing of it at the time, but now..."

"Now it becomes clear that she arranged the entire situation." Lady Agatha settled more comfortably in her chair, her tone suggesting that she had suspected something of the sort all along. "The forged notes, the careful timing, the theatrical discovery - all designed to create exactly the reaction it achieved."

“But why would she...” Nathaniel broke off as understanding dawned, bringing fresh horror. “Because she saw. The other morning, during the treasure hunt, in the garden...”

He remembered their momentary kiss in the garden, after Emma had slipped into the pond - how perfect everything had seemed in that moment, no matter how short it had been.

They had brushed it off at the time, and he had thought that Lady Anne understood his veiled threat, understood that she should say or do nothing.

But his joy had made him careless - he should have known that Lady Anne would be watching, waiting for any opportunity to strike. Their little adventure in the woods this morning had obviously made Lady Anne infuriated – enough that she had chosen to act, in a manner that seemed indirect.

He had, without ever meaning to, handed her the perfect weapon - his own tendency to assume the worst at the first hint of impropriety.

“Something significant occurred between you the other morning, and, perhaps, today also?” Lady Agatha’s eyebrow rose. “Yes, I rather thought that it must have, given your changed behaviour at breakfast. Lady Anne would hardly have gone to such lengths without some motivation.”

The memory of that morning’s joy in the woodland clearing twisted like a knife in Nathaniel’s chest. How quickly he had turned from that moment of perfect understanding to assuming the worst of Emma’s character. The realisation made him physically ill.

“I have been a complete fool.” He sank into a chair, his head in his hands. Every beat of his heart seemed to echo with Emma’s name, with the memory of her hurt

expression as she fled. “To doubt both my brother and the woman I most care for, all because of manufactured evidence...”

“Evidence manufactured by a woman who has shown herself quite capable of spite.” James’ voice held surprising venom. His expression, when Nathaniel dared look up, showed not just anger at Lady Anne but deep concern for his brother. “I confess, I had thought her merely ambitious. I see now that she is something far worse. It has been obvious for some time that she sees you as a good potential match – not that you would ever consider a woman like that. But now, now that you have shown signs of caring for Miss Everton, Lady Anne has chosen to eliminate the competition, as she sees it.”

“Eliminate the competition? I don’t...”

“Simple, brother – if Miss Everton and I had been forced into a compromise, and therefore into a marriage, that would have left you unable to be matched with her, and in Lady Anne’s opinion, available for a match with Lady Anne herself. As I look at it now, I realise that this is all about Lady Anne wanting you for her husband, for the higher place in society that marrying you would give her. Miss Everton and I are unimportant to her – whatever happened to us doesn’t worry her at all, so long as it furthers her own desires. None of this is your fault, Nathaniel, although I confess that I would have been happier had you not been so fast to allow yourself to be deceived...”

Nathaniel closed his eyes against a surge of gratitude for his brother’s forgiveness. He didn’t deserve such understanding, yet James offered it freely, already moving past his own hurt to focus on the larger problem.

“The question,” Lady Agatha said firmly, though her eyes held compassion as she regarded Nathaniel’s obvious distress, “is what we intend to do about it. Lady Anne’s scheme must be exposed, and quickly, before the damage to Miss Everton’s

reputation - and your own happiness, my Lord - becomes irreparable.”

The pragmatic tone helped steady him. Yes, he had been monumentally stupid, had let his fears override both love and trust, but wallowing in self-recrimination wouldn't help Emma – or James, for that matter.

“But how?” He looked up, forcing himself to focus. “We can hardly simply announce to the assembled company that she forged notes and arranged a false compromise.”

“No.” James' expression turned thoughtful, his tactical mind - so often hidden behind his easy manner - clearly at work. “But we might arrange for her to expose herself. This evening, at dinner perhaps?”

“yes – but before that,” Lady Agatha interjected, her voice gentling, “you have a tableau to perform with my niece. I suggest that you find some way to communicate your regret to her, Lord Limnwood. Emma has a generous heart, but it has been sorely tested today.”

The thought of facing Emma across a crowded room, of having to maintain proper polite social distance while his heart ached to beg her forgiveness, seemed an impossible task. Yet he had no choice. His own actions had created this situation - now he must find a way to fix it.

“Whatever it takes,” he said, his voice rough with determination, “I will make this right. With all of you.”

The words emerged as both promise and prayer. He would find a way to earn back Emma's trust, to prove himself worthy of the love that he had so carelessly damaged. The alternative - losing her because of his own rigid fears - was unthinkable.

“Good.” Lady Agatha rose, and Nathaniel saw in her expression the same strength

that he so admired in Emma. “Then let us plan exactly how to ensure that Lady Anne’s schemes rebound upon her own head. I believe that I have an idea...”

Her tone held both wisdom and a hint of steel that gave Nathaniel his first real hope since this nightmare began. Between Lady Agatha’s clever mind, James’ observation skills, and his own determination to make things right, surely they could find a way forward.

If only his heart would stop replaying the sound of Emma’s retreating footsteps, the memory of tears that she had refused to let fall.

Emma’s hands trembled so badly that she could barely manage the door latch. The moment that it clicked shut behind her, her legs gave way. She slid down against the solid wood, her skirts pooling around her as the first sob tore free.

How had everything gone so terribly wrong?

This morning in the woods he had held her as if she were precious, had kissed her with such tenderness she’d dared to hope...

His grey eyes had been so warm, his smile so tender as he’d drawn her close, made her believe that perhaps he was beginning to truly see beyond mere proper behaviour to something deeper between them.

All of those hopes were shattered now.

The first hint of scandal had him believing the worst of her.

She pressed her hands against her mouth, trying to stifle the sounds of her sobbing.

Even now, even here alone, the habits of proper behaviour ran deep. But oh, how it hurt. The cold accusation in his eyes, the rigid disapproval in his bearing - he hadn't even asked for an explanation. Hadn't trusted her character enough to question Lady Anne's staged discovery – for it was very, very cleverly staged, she was now certain.

“You fool,” she whispered to herself, the words catching on another sob. “You utter fool, to think that his growing feelings for you might overcome his rigid propriety.”

She should have known better. Hadn't he shown her from the start exactly who he was? Every moment of warmth had been followed by withdrawal into proper behaviour. Every spark of connection had been carefully guarded against possible observation.

Even their kiss in the garden during the treasure hunt... her fingers brushed her lips at the memory. Even then, his first response to discovery had been denial. She had forgiven that, understanding his wish to protect her reputation. But this...

Fresh tears spilled as she remembered his arctic tone. ‘What precisely should I think?’ The words echoed in her mind, cutting deeper with each repetition. He should have thought that she was worthy of trust. That their feelings for each other meant something more than mere proper form.

The worst part was knowing that they still had to face each other. The tableaux... dear heaven, she would have to play Juliet to his Romeo, to pretend love and trust while her heart lay shattered at his feet. A laugh that was more than half sob escaped her.

How appropriate that they should play those star-crossed lovers. Though in their case, it wasn't warring families that stood between them, but Nathaniel's own rigid nature.

She forced herself to rise on shaking legs, moving to her dressing table. The mirror showed her a ghost - pale face, red-rimmed eyes, and tear-stained cheeks. She would

have to compose herself somehow, and find a way to face them all with dignity.

But first... first she needed these few moments to mourn what might have been. What she had thought they had.

Her fingers found the note he had sent just that morning, tucked into her dress pocket. 'I trust you are recovered from this morning's excitement,' he had written, his careful phrases somehow conveying so much more than their surface meaning. She crumpled the paper, the physical action doing nothing to ease the tight band of pain around her heart.

"I will not break," she told her reflection firmly. "I am my father's daughter. I will show them all that proper behaviour can mask anything. Even this."

But in the privacy of her own heart, she knew that nothing would ever be the same. Growing affection, love, as she had hoped it to be, it seemed, was not enough to overcome a lifetime of rigid rules and quick judgment. The hardest part was knowing that despite everything, her heart was already so deeply engaged - even now, even knowing that he would always choose propriety over trust, she still yearned for him.

Emma pressed a cool cloth to her eyes, the practical action steadying her slightly. Years of training in proper behaviour provided a framework - she knew exactly what steps to take to make herself presentable again. Each small task could be a barrier between her broken heart and the world's observation.

A tap at the door made her start.

"Come in, Susan."

Her maid entered, took one look at her face, and moved immediately to the washstand.

“The water’s quite cold, Miss. Just the thing for... for refreshing oneself before the tableaux.”

Emma felt a rush of gratitude for this tactful pretence that nothing was wrong.

“Thank you. Though I fear I’ve crushed my dress rather badly.”

“Nothing that can’t be put right.” Susan’s deft hands smoothed the silver-grey silk, carefully avoiding any questioning of how it had become so crushed. “Though perhaps... that is, the blue silk might be more suitable for the tableaux? It brings out such a lovely colour in your eyes.”

The blue silk. Which she had chosen this morning specifically because Nathaniel had admired it once.

“No.” Her voice emerged sounding harsh, and rather sharp. “The grey will do very well.”

“Yes, Miss.” Susan’s hands were gentle as she helped Emma repair her hair. “Though if you’ll permit me to say, you look quite pale. Perhaps a touch of rose water...”

“To hide that I’ve been crying?” Emma met her maid’s eyes in the mirror. “No, Susan. Let them see what they will. I have no reason to hide my distress - I am not the one who should feel shame for what happened in the library.” The words made her sound stronger than she felt, but speaking them helped. She had done nothing wrong. If Lord Limnwood chose to believe the worst of her without evidence, that was his shame to bear, not hers. “Besides,” she managed a small smile at Susan’s concerned expression, “a pale complexion will suit Juliet. She was, after all, about to face her own tragedy.”

“Oh Miss.” Susan’s hands stilled on her hair. “Surely it’s not as bad as all that? When

this morning...”

“This morning is gone.” Emma squared her shoulders. “We must deal with what is, not what might have been.”

Yet even as she spoke, her fingers traced the crumpled note in her pocket. The evidence of what might have been, of happiness so briefly held before propriety and suspicion tore it away.

“There now.” Susan stepped back, surveying her work. “Your hair at least is perfectly proper again.”

Perfectly proper.

The words echoed with bitter irony.

She had never wanted to be perfectly proper - she had wanted to be loved.

To be trusted.

To be valued for herself, not for her adherence to society’s rules.

What a fool she had been.

“Thank you, Susan.” She rose, smoothing her skirts one final time. “I believe that I can manage now.” But as her maid turned to leave, Emma caught her arm. “Susan... thank you. For not asking. For just... helping.”

The girl’s eyes filled with tears that Emma herself could no longer shed.

“That’s what we do, Miss. We help put things right again.”

If only, Emma thought as she waited for Susan to leave, everything could be put right so easily. But some breaks went too deep for simple repair.

She took a deep breath, then another.

She could do this.

She could face them all - could face him - with perfect composure.

She had survived near scandal and near poverty and society's cutting judgment before. She would survive this too.

Even if her heart felt like it might never beat properly again.

A tap at her door made Emma's spine stiffen. She wasn't ready, not yet...

"A note from Lady Agatha, Miss."

Susan's voice held relief at having something helpful to offer.

Emma's hands trembled slightly as she broke the seal.

My dearest niece,

Do not rush to join the others. Take what time you need - I have informed the Duke that you are resting before the tableaux, and he quite understands.

Remember this, my dear - things are not always what they at first appear, particularly when certain people take great pains to arrange deceptive appearances. Your own character is beyond reproach, and will be proven so.

Trust in yourself, even if you cannot currently trust in others. And know that I have seen more than some might think.

Your loving aunt.

Emma read the note twice, her mind catching on certain phrases. 'When certain people take great pains to arrange deceptive appearances.'

Something in her aunt's wording suggested that she knew more than Emma did about what had happened in the library.

But how? She had been alone with James when...

A memory flickered - James' odd gesture, as if trying to tell her something. Had there been someone else in the library? Someone who had seen... And... hadn't she heard another voice, just as she strode out of the library, under all of those disapproving eyes?

She shook her head. It hardly mattered now. Whatever her aunt might have witnessed, it couldn't change the fundamental truth - that Nathaniel had believed the worst of her without a moment's hesitation.

Still, her aunt's words steadied her. Yes, her character was beyond reproach. She had done nothing wrong. Let them whisper and watch - she would show all of them what dignity in the face of unfair judgment looked like.

She tucked the note carefully away, smoothed her skirts one final time, and moved to the door. Whatever came next, she would face it with her head high.

Even if her heart lay in pieces on the library floor.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

Dawn crept into Emma's chamber, finding her already awake and dressed. She had barely slept, spending the night alternating between composing and rejecting possible excuses for avoiding company. In the end, the simplest solution had presented itself - a megrim. Society expected young ladies to suffer from delicate heads and nerves, particularly after emotional upheaval.

Though in truth, her head did ache somewhat from a night spent trying not to cry anymore.

"Your breakfast, Miss." Susan entered carrying a tray. "And Lady Agatha sends word that she's informed the Duchess that you're indisposed this morning. She suggested that rest and quiet might help your megrim."

Emma's throat tightened with gratitude for her aunt's understanding.

"Thank you, Susan. Has... has everyone else gone down?"

"Yes, Miss." Susan's hands were careful as she arranged the tray, her voice deliberately casual. "Though Lord Limnwood was asking after your health when I passed the breakfast room. He seemed quite concerned."

Emma's hands clenched in her lap.

Concerned now, was he? After publicly assuming the worst of her character?

"How fortunate that my indisposition saves him from having to maintain proper behaviour in my presence," she said, unable to quite keep the bitterness from her

voice.

Susan's expression softened with sympathy, but she maintained the fiction of ignorance.

"Cook sent up her special tea for megrims. And Lady Agatha said to tell you that the morning's activity is botanical drawing - nothing that absolutely requires your presence." Emma nodded, relieved. Botanical drawing would keep everyone occupied in the conservatory, well away from her chamber. She could maintain her dignified retreat without causing comment. "Will there be anything else, Miss?"

"No, thank you." Emma managed a small smile for the maid's obvious concern. "Though... if anyone asks..."

"You're resting quietly, Miss, and not to be disturbed." Susan's chin lifted slightly. "And if certain persons should try to send notes or messages, I'll be sure to tell them you're sleeping."

Emma's smile became more genuine. Trust Susan to understand without being told.

"Thank you."

Left alone, she picked at her breakfast, remembering yesterday morning's joy. Had it really been only yesterday that she and Nathaniel had shared that moment in the woods, that kiss that had seemed to promise so much more? It felt like a lifetime ago. Like something that had happened to someone else entirely.

A burst of laughter from the garden below drew her to the window. She peered carefully around the curtain, watching the house party guests make their way to the conservatory. Lady Anne walked with Lord Radmill, her expression supremely satisfied. The sight made Emma's stomach clench.

What tales were already circulating about yesterday's events in the library? What subtle poison was Lady Anne spreading among the guests?

Movement near the house caught her eye. Lord Limnwood emerged, his usual straight-backed military bearing somehow diminished. Even from this distance, she could see the tension in his shoulders, the way that he held himself apart from the general conversation.

Good, some uncharitable part of her thought. Let him feel some fraction of the discomfort that he had caused her.

But even as the thought formed, her traitorous heart ached at his obvious distress.

She stepped back from the window, angry with herself for still caring about his feelings when he had so comprehensively demonstrated his lack of trust in her.

James had noted Lady Anne's growing satisfaction throughout the morning's botanical drawing session. Her smug glances towards his brother, her whispered conversations with Miss Morton - it all spoke of someone enjoying the fruits of their schemes rather too openly.

So when she and Miss Morton slipped away from the main group, heading towards the smaller connecting greenhouse, James found himself following at a discrete distance. The connecting greenhouse's design created interesting acoustics - something he had discovered during previous house parties at Pelham Hall.

Sound carried remarkably well from certain spots to others.

He positioned himself near a large orange tree, apparently absorbed in sketching its

blossoms. Lady Anne and Miss Morton settled on the far side of a towering palm, clearly believing themselves private.

“Really, Anne,” Miss Morton’s voice carried clearly, “it worked out even better than you planned. Though I was terrified when Lady Agatha appeared - I thought for certain...”

“Oh, that hardly matters now.” Lady Anne’s satisfaction dripped from every word. “The damage is done. Lord Limnwood showed his true nature – he was so quick to believe the worst! Though I confess, I’m a little disappointed. After watching them grow so close, and seeing that kiss in the garden...” Lady Anne’s satisfaction dripped from every word. “I thought I might need more evidence, more careful manipulation. But no - one staged scene was all it took. Men who pride themselves on propriety are so very easy to manage, especially when they’re fighting their own feelings.”

James’ pencil stilled. He hardly dared breathe for fear of missing a word.

“But surely, given that Lady Agatha witnessed...”

“What can she prove?” Lady Anne laughed softly. “That she was present? That means nothing. The scene played out exactly as I had intended - Miss Everton’s reputation is tarnished, Lord Limnwood’s trust in her is shattered. He’ll have to look elsewhere for a suitable wife now.”

“To you, you mean?”

Miss Morton’s tone held a trace of envy.

“Naturally. Though I confess, his quick condemnation of Miss Everton was almost disappointing. I must hope that I can capture his affections more thoroughly than she obviously had – I would not want to be so easily disregarded myself!”

James had heard enough. He moved away carefully, his mind racing. Here was everything they needed - proof of her scheming, her own admission of staging the scene.

But how best to use it? A slow smile spread across his face as he considered the possibilities. The dinner table tonight would provide the perfect setting for Lady Anne's schemes to unravel - with the entire house party present to witness it.

He needed to speak with Lady Agatha immediately. Together, they could ensure that Lady Anne's carefully laid plans rebounded upon her own head.

And perhaps, finally, his fool of a brother might have a chance to make things right with Miss Everton.

James found Lady Agatha in her private sitting room, a maid arranging tea things nearby. Perfect - the presence of a servant would make his visit entirely proper while allowing them to speak freely in carefully chosen words.

"Lord James." Lady Agatha's keen eyes assessed his expression. "How kind of you to join me for tea. Mary, another cup if you please."

He waited until the maid had arranged everything to Lady Agatha's satisfaction and stepped back to a discrete distance.

"I've had the most interesting morning in the conservatory. Lady Anne seems quite pleased with herself."

"Indeed?" Lady Agatha's tone was perfectly modulated, but her gaze sharpened. "Do tell me about the botanical drawings. I understand that some of the most fascinating conversations occur among the plants."

“Oh yes.” James stirred his tea, choosing his words with care. “Particularly near the orange trees. The acoustics there are really quite remarkable. One hears the most... illuminating things about careful plans and their success.”

Lady Agatha set her cup down with deliberate precision.

“How fascinating. And did these... acoustics... provide any particular insights into yesterday’s events?”

“Several.” James allowed himself a small smile. “Including some rather telling admissions about the crafting of certain notes, and satisfaction at how easily some people can be manipulated.”

“I see.” Lady Agatha’s eyes gleamed. “And would you say that these... insights... might be worth sharing at dinner? When, most likely, all of the interested parties might benefit from such knowledge?”

“I thought that very thing.” James leaned forward slightly. “Though timing would be crucial. Too early, and some might leave to avoid the revelation. Too late, and the impact would be lessened.”

“The fish course, I think.” Lady Agatha nodded decisively. “Early enough to prevent escape, late enough that everyone is settled. And of course, all interested parties must be present.”

Her meaning was clear - Emma must attend dinner. James frowned slightly.

“Will she be willing? After yesterday...”

“Leave that to me.” Lady Agatha rang for the maid. “Mary, please tell Susan that I wish to speak with her about Miss Everton’s evening dress. The blue silk, I think.”

As the maid departed, Lady Agatha turned back to James.

“Now then, let us be precise about exactly how this revelation should occur. We want maximum impact with minimum appearance of manipulation. Everything must appear completely natural.”

“Unlike some people’s careful planning?”

James couldn’t quite hide his satisfaction.

“Precisely.” Lady Agatha’s smile held steel. “Sometimes the best revenge is simply allowing truth to speak for itself. Though perhaps with carefully chosen timing and audience.”

James raised his cup in salute to her clever mind. Between them, they would ensure that dinner proved most enlightening indeed.

A tap at her door preceded Lady Agatha’s entrance. Her aunt surveyed the barely touched breakfast with a critical eye.

“You must eat something, my dear. Maintaining dignity requires strength.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Still, Emma picked up a piece of toast at her aunt’s stern look.

“No? Well, perhaps you’ll have more appetite when I tell you what I’ve observed this morning.” Lady Agatha settled into a chair. “It seems that Lady Anne’s triumph is not quite complete.”

Emma's hand stilled.

“Oh?”

“Indeed. Lord James appears to be watching her most carefully. Almost as if he suspects something.” Lady Agatha's tone was deliberately casual. “He's had quite an interesting morning already, spending time in conversation with Lady Anne's particular friend, Miss Morton.”

Something in her aunt's voice suggested deeper meanings, but Emma was too tired to untangle them.

“I'm sure it's all very interesting, but I cannot bring myself to care about house party intrigues today.”

“No?” Lady Agatha rose. “Well, perhaps you're right. Though I suspect that by dinner time you might find that events have taken some surprising turns.” She paused at the door. “You need not join us for luncheon - I'll have a tray sent up. But I think, my dear, that you might wish to dress for dinner. If only to show certain persons that your dignity remains untouched by their poor judgment.”

After her aunt left, Emma stood at the window again, watching the distant figures in the garden. What had Lady Agatha meant about Lord James and surprising turns of events?

But she was too weary to puzzle it out. For now, this quiet room was her sanctuary. Everything else could wait.

Emma looked up from her book as Lady Agatha entered her chamber. She hadn't

taken in a single word of it in the past hour, but it provided a shield against well-meaning interruptions.

“My dear,” her aunt’s voice held just the right note of casual interest, “I believe it’s time we discussed this evening’s dinner.”

“I had still hoped to just have a tray sent up.”

Emma’s fingers tightened on her book.

“No, no, no. As I said to you earlier today, circumstances change – people overhear the most interesting things. And that means that you absolutely must come down to dinner.” Lady Agatha settled into a chair, her expression thoughtful. “Tell me, what do you imagine people are saying about yesterday’s events?”

Emma’s breath caught.

“I try not to imagine it.”

“Perhaps you should. After all, those who spread tales rarely consider the truth - they consider only what seems most likely based on behaviour.” Lady Agatha’s keen eyes studied her niece. “And what behaviour would seem more likely to confirm suspicions - hiding away as if ashamed, or showing yourself with perfect composure and dignity?”

Emma closed her book slowly.

“You really think that I should attend dinner.”

“I think, my dear, that sometimes the best defence against malicious gossip is to demonstrate its absurdity through one’s actions.” Her aunt’s voice gentled. “You

have done nothing wrong. Why should you hide?"

"Because I cannot bear to see him." The words escaped before Emma could stop them. "To sit there, maintaining proper behaviour, while knowing how quickly he was ready to dismiss everything growing between us. How readily he believed the worst of my character, when I thought..."

She broke off, unable to voice how much she had started to hope, to trust.

"When you thought he might be beginning to care for you as much as you were coming to care for him?" Lady Agatha's voice held gentle understanding.

"Yes..."

The word was a mere whisper.

"Ah, but there you have the advantage." Lady Agatha's smile held a hint of steel. "For you need not maintain anything beyond perfect dignity. Let others observe his discomfort. Let them see which of you better bears scrutiny."

Emma's chin lifted slightly.

"You think that I should face them all? Even Lady Anne's satisfaction?"

"I think, my dear, that Lady Anne's satisfaction might prove somewhat premature." Her aunt rose and moved to the dresser. "Now then, I believe that the blue silk will suit you best for dinner. With your grandmother's pearls, I think. Nothing speaks of quiet dignity quite like family jewels worn with perfect composure."

Something in Lady Agatha's tone caught Emma's attention.

“Aunt... do you know something that I don’t?”

“I know many things, my dear. Chief among them being that truth has a way of emerging at the most interesting moments.” She turned back with the box containing the pearls in her hand. “Shall we ring for Susan? Your hair will need particular attention if we’re to achieve exactly the right effect.”

Emma found herself rising, drawn in despite her reservations.

“And what effect would that be?”

“Why, that of a young lady of perfect breeding, demonstrating that some people’s judgment says far more about their own character than about hers.” Lady Agatha’s smile grew decidedly satisfied. “The dinner table can be quite the stage for such demonstrations, don’t you think?”

Susan’s hands moved with careful precision as she arranged Emma’s hair, each pearl-headed pin placed with deliberate attention. Emma watched in the mirror, noting how her maid kept glancing at the blue silk gown as if ensuring some particular effect.

“The pearls next, Miss?” Susan lifted the case with unusual ceremony. “Lady Agatha was most particular about them.”

“Was she indeed?” Emma fingered the smooth stones. “And did my aunt give you any other particular instructions about my appearance this evening?”

Susan’s hands stilled for just a moment - long enough to confirm Emma’s growing suspicion that more was happening than mere dinner preparation. “Only that you should look your very best, Miss. Though...” She hesitated.

“Though?”

“She did say something about some people being surprised by how the evening turns out.” Susan’s expression in the mirror was carefully blank. “Now then, shall we add just a tiny touch of rouge? Not too much - just enough to suggest perfect composure.”

Emma’s fingers traced the pearls at her throat - her grandmother’s pearls, worn on every significant occasion of her life. Why had her aunt insisted on them tonight? What surprise could possibly make this evening anything but an exercise in maintaining dignity through mortification?

The blue silk settled around her with familiar elegance. Yesterday morning she had chosen it, hoping to please Lord Limnwood. Now... now she would wear it as armour, showing him exactly what he had thrown away with his quick condemnation.

“There, Miss.” Susan stepped back, surveying her work with satisfaction. “You look...”

“Perfect?”

Emma’s smile held a touch of irony.

“Strong,” Susan corrected softly. “You look strong.”

Unexpectedly touched, Emma met her maid’s eyes in the mirror.

“Thank you, Susan. For everything.”

“Shall I tell Lady Agatha that you’re ready?”

Emma took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders.

“Yes. Though... Susan?”

“Miss?”

“If my aunt has something particular planned for this evening, I don’t want to know. I believe that I’d rather face whatever comes with genuine reactions.”

Susan’s expression suggested that this was exactly the right decision.

“Very good, Miss. Though... perhaps you might want these?”

She held out a delicate lace handkerchief and a spare pearl-headed pin. Emma raised an eyebrow in question.

“Just in case, Miss. One never knows when one might need emergency repairs. To one’s composure or one’s hair.”

The oddly specific nature of these offerings only confirmed Emma’s suspicion that something was afoot. But she took them without comment, tucking them into her reticule.

Whatever her aunt and the others had planned, she would face it with dignity. And if their plans went awry... well, she was prepared for that too.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

The Duke's dining room glittered with candlelight, crystal, and carefully maintained civility. Emma kept her eyes on her soup, aware of the subtle glances being cast in her direction. Lady Anne's voice carried from the far end of the table, something about the proper way to arrange morning visits. The banality of her conversation struck Emma as almost offensive after yesterday's events.

She could feel Lord Limnwood's presence, though she carefully avoided looking at him. The seating arrangements - which she suspected her aunt had influenced - placed him across and two seats down from her, close enough to be aware of, but too far away for direct conversation.

"I trust that your headache is better, Miss Everton?"

Lord Radmill's voice drew her attention.

"Much better, thank you." She managed a serene smile. "Though I fear that I missed some fascinating botanical drawings this morning."

"Oh yes!" Lady Anne's voice took on that satisfied tone which Emma was beginning to hate. "Some of us made the most interesting discoveries in the conservatory. Didn't we, Miss Morton?"

Emma saw Lord James' head lift sharply at that. Something passed between him and Lady Agatha - the barest exchange of glances.

"Speaking of discoveries," Lord James' voice carried that perfect aristocratic tone that somehow commanded attention, "I had the most illuminating morning. It's

fascinating what one can learn about people's true characters when they believe themselves unobserved."

Lady Anne's soup spoon clattered against her bowl.

"Indeed?" The Duke looked interested. "Do tell us more, Lord James."

"Well, you see, I was sketching orange blossoms – and it's a remarkable thing, the acoustics in that part of the conservatory..." Emma saw Lady Anne go rigid, her face draining of colour. Beside her, Miss Morton seemed to shrink in her chair. "One hears the most remarkable conversations there," James continued pleasantly. "About careful plans, and forged notes, and how easily certain people can be manipulated. Particularly, it seems, those who pride themselves on propriety."

The silence that fell was absolute. Emma's breath caught as understanding dawned. She dared a glance at Lord Limnwood and found him staring at Lady Anne, his expression thunderous.

"I'm sure that I don't know what you mean." Lady Anne's voice shook slightly. "Really, Lord James, to suggest..."

"Oh, I suggest nothing." Lord James' smile was razor sharp. "I merely repeat what I heard. Your own words, in fact, about how satisfying it was to see your schemes succeed. Though you did mention being somewhat disappointed at how easily my brother believed the worst. What was it you said? Ah yes - 'one staged scene was all it took'."

Emma's hands clenched in her lap as the full import of his words registered. It was as she had suspected, Lady Anne had arranged everything - the notes, the discovery, all of it carefully planned to create exactly the scene she desired.

“This is outrageous!” Lady Anne pushed back her chair. “I will not sit here and listen to such accusations!”

“Not accusations, my dear.” Lady Agatha’s voice was all icy civility. “Merely a repetition of your own words. Though I must say, they sound rather different when spoken before the entire company than they did in what you thought was privacy.”

“I...” Lady Anne looked wildly around the table, finding no sympathy in any face. “Miss Morton, surely you...”

But Miss Morton, it seemed, had some sense of self-preservation. She kept her eyes firmly on her plate. The Duke cleared his throat.

“Lady Anne, I believe that your father’s carriage is still at your disposal. Perhaps it might be best if you were to make use of it. Tonight.”

The dismissal was clear. Lady Anne rose, her face now flaming with humiliation. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then clearly thought better of it. With one final glare at the assembled company, she swept from the room. In the silence that followed, Emma felt rather than saw Lord Limnwood’s eyes turn to her. She kept her gaze carefully on her soup, though her appetite had quite deserted her.

“Well,” the Duke said cheerfully, “shall we have the fish course? I believe that Cook has prepared something quite special.”

Emma escaped to the terrace as soon as propriety allowed. The evening air held a hint of spring, despite February’s lingering chill, and she needed its freshness after the stifling atmosphere of the dining room. Her mind whirled with Lord James’ revelations, with the knowledge that Lady Anne truly had orchestrated everything. A step behind her made her spine stiffen. She didn’t need to turn to know who approached - she would know his presence anywhere.

“Miss Everton.” Lord Limnwood’s voice was rough with emotion. “I hardly know how to begin.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t.” The words emerged sharply, brittle and harsh. She forced herself to turn, to face him. “Lady Anne’s schemes may explain the situation, my Lord, but they do not excuse your immediate assumption of the worst.”

He flinched as if struck.

“No. They do not.” He moved to the balustrade, keeping careful distance between them. “I could say that I was prompted by past experience, by having seen scandal destroy reputations before. But the truth is simpler and far worse - I failed to trust in your character, in the understanding growing between us.”

Emma’s hands clenched on her fan.

“In what was growing between us? You mean the trust that we were building, the feelings which we were just beginning to acknowledge? The same feelings that you so readily dismissed at the first hint of impropriety?”

“Emma.” The raw pain in his voice made her breath catch. “I have been the worst kind of fool. My fear of scandal, my rigid adherence to propriety - they made me forget everything that matters. Made me hurt the two people I should have trusted most in all the world.”

“And you did exactly what Lady Anne expected. You saw what she arranged for you to see, and you never once considered that there might be another explanation. Never once asked for the truth.”

“No.” He turned to face her fully, and the moonlight caught the anguish in his expression. “I let my fears override everything - my trust in you, my trust in James,

my own heart's knowledge of your character. I have no excuse.”

“Your fears?” Something in his tone caught her attention. “What fears could be strong enough to make you doubt so completely?”

He was silent for so long that she thought he wouldn't answer. When he did, his voice was barely above a whisper.

“I once found my cousin Charlotte about to elope with a fortune hunter. She was so innocent, so trusting - she thought that love could overcome everything. She never knew that he had already ruined two other women. If I hadn't returned that exact day...” He broke off, raking a hand through his hair. “I thought that my rigid adherence to propriety would protect others from such harm. Instead, it made me quick to assume the worst, to see scandal where there was none. To hurt those whom I love most in a misguided attempt to prevent hurt.”

Emma's heart twisted at the pain in his voice.

“And what of now? Will you always be looking for scandal, always quick to believe the worst?”

“No.” He took a step towards her, then stopped himself. “These past days have taught me that there are worse things than scandal. Losing your trust, seeing the hurt in your eyes - nothing could be worse than that. I would rather risk a thousand scandals than ever cause you such pain again.”

She studied his face in the moonlight, seeing the truth of his words in his expression.

“Pretty words, my Lord. But can I trust them? Can I trust you?”

“I pray that you will try.” His voice roughened. “I know that I have no right to ask it,

but my feelings for you run deeper than I ever expected could be. Even when I was being an utter fool about showing it, even when I was hiding behind propriety, my heart was already yours. Give me the chance to prove that I have learned to trust in these feelings more than in rigid rules.”

Emma’s heart thundered in her chest. The sincerity in his voice, the raw emotion in his expression - everything in her yearned to trust him again. But...

“How can I be sure?” She forced herself to speak past the tightness in her throat. “The next time that someone suggests impropriety, the next time that appearances are against me - how can I trust that you won’t immediately assume the worst?”

“Because I’ve learned what truly matters.” He moved closer, though still maintaining proper distance. “When I thought that I’d lost you... when I saw the hurt that I caused... Emma, I’ve never felt such shame, such devastating regret. I would rather face anything than ever see that pain in your eyes again.”

“And yet you caused it so easily.” She lifted her chin. “One suggestion from Lady Anne, and all of your kisses, all of your words of affection, meant nothing.”

“They meant everything.” His voice roughened. “That’s why it hurt so much - because I love you so deeply that the thought of betrayal was unbearable. But I was a fool. Instead of trusting in that love, I let my fears rule me.”

“And now?”

“Now I know that love means trusting, even when appearances suggest otherwise. It means asking for truth rather than assuming the worst.” He took another step closer. “It means believing in you, in us, more than in any rigid rules of propriety.”

Emma’s breath caught at the intensity in his eyes.

“Pretty words, my Lord.”

“Not just words. A vow.” His hand lifted as if to touch her, then dropped. “Give me the chance to prove it. To show you that I’ve learned what truly matters.”

She studied his face in the moonlight. The proud, rigid man who had condemned her so quickly was gone, replaced by someone who looked at her with such naked vulnerability that it made her heart ache.

“I cannot pretend that it didn’t happen,” she said finally. “I cannot forget how easily you believed the worst.”

“I don’t ask you to forget. Only to let me earn back your trust.” His voice dropped to barely a whisper. “To let me show you, every day, that I’ve learned to value love over appearances, truth over assumptions, you over everything.”

Something in Emma’s chest loosened at his words. Not everything - the hurt was too deep for that. But enough to let her breathe properly for the first time since the library.

“It will take time,” she said softly. “Trust, once broken, is not easily mended.”

“Then I will spend however long it takes proving myself worthy of that trust.” The moonlight caught the hope dawning in his eyes. “You once told me that kindness need not compromise propriety. Now I understand that trust need not compromise caution, that love is stronger than rules.”

Emma felt tears threaten.

“When did you become so wise, my Lord?”

“When I nearly lost everything that truly mattered through being a fool.” He smiled slightly. “Though I believe that I had an excellent teacher in the value of balancing proper behaviour with genuine feeling.”

Despite herself, Emma felt an answering smile touch her lips.

“And have you learned your lesson well?”

“I believe that I have at least learned where to start.” His expression sobered. “That is, by saying, with complete sincerity, that I am more sorry than I can express for doubting you. For letting fear override trust. For hurting you just when we were beginning to understand each other, just when I was starting to let myself hope for something more between us.”

Her tears spilled over then. Nathaniel made an instinctive movement as if to brush them away, then stopped himself, remembering propriety. But this time the restraint felt like respect rather than rejection.

“We should go in,” Emma said softly. “Before we’re missed.”

“Of course.” He offered his arm with perfect correctness, as she brushed the tears away herself. “Though perhaps... might we walk in the gardens tomorrow? With your aunt as chaperone?”

“To continue this conversation?”

“To continue earning your trust.” His eyes met hers. “However long it takes.”

Emma placed her hand on his arm, feeling the familiar spark between them, but tempered now with understanding rather than just attraction.

“Tomorrow then,” she said. “We can begin again.”

The drawing room’s warmth enveloped them as they returned. Emma was acutely conscious of the eyes that turned their way, of the sudden lull in conversation which suggested that their absence had been noted. But for once, Nathaniel seemed unconcerned with the appearance of things.

“Miss Everton required some air after the excitement at dinner,” he said clearly, his voice carrying just enough for interested parties to hear. “I trust that Lady Anne’s departure has not cast a pall over the evening’s entertainment?”

The Duke’s eyes twinkled.

“Not at all. Indeed, I find the atmosphere much improved. Though I confess, Lord James’ talent for observation has quite overshadowed my plans for charades.”

“Perhaps something less dramatic?” Lady Beatrice suggested from her place at the pianoforte. “Some music?”

Emma moved to join her friend, aware of Nathaniel’s gaze following her. The weight of it felt different now - less a burden of judgment, more a warmth of genuine care.

“I trust all is... progressing?” Lady Agatha murmured as Emma passed her chair.

“We are beginning again,” Emma said softly. “With better understanding on both sides.”

Her aunt’s smile held satisfaction.

“Good. Though I suggest that you allow him to prove his word over time. A man’s actions speak louder than his declarations, however prettily phrased.”

“I have learned that lesson well.” Emma’s fingers brushed the pearls at her throat.
“Though perhaps we have both learned something about trust and judgment.”

The evening passed in gentle conversation and quiet music. If anyone noticed that Lord Limnwood’s expression held more warmth than rigid propriety when he looked at Miss Everton, they were too tactful to mention it. And if Miss Everton’s smile, when she bid him goodnight, held promise of forgiveness to come, well, that was between them.

Some healing, after all, was best accomplished quietly, with patience and understanding on both sides.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

Morning sunlight streamed through the drawing room windows, creating pools of warmth on the carpet where the Duke's staff had arranged several small tables. Each held an array of materials - papers in delicate shades, ribbons, lace scraps, and tiny paste gems that caught the light.

"For our final Valentine's activity," the Duke announced, clearly enjoying himself, "we shall create tokens of affection. Though Saint Valentine's Day itself has passed, the sentiment behind it - the expression of growing regard - remains worthy of celebration."

Emma's fingers traced the edge of a piece of silver-grey ribbon that matched certain eyes perfectly. She felt Nathaniel's presence behind her before he spoke.

"Might I join you, Miss Everton? Though I fear my hands are better suited to ship's ropes than delicate craftwork."

She turned, finding his expression caught between hope and uncertainty. Yesterday's reconciliation still felt new, fragile - like spring ice that might crack under too much weight.

"I should be happy to offer guidance, my Lord." She gestured to the chair beside her. "Though I suspect that you underestimate your capabilities."

His smile, when it came, held none of his former rigid restraint.

"Your faith in me is... more than I deserve, perhaps. But I find myself quite determined to prove worthy of it."

The double meaning in his words made her heart flutter. Around them, other couples settled at the small tables, but Emma was aware only of Nathaniel's careful movements as he drew his chair close enough for them to work together while maintaining proper distance.

"Perhaps," he said softly, selecting a piece of cream-colored paper, "you might show me where to begin?"

Emma demonstrated the first fold, creating a heart shape from the paper.

"The trick is to be both precise and gentle. Too much force and the paper creases wrongly. Too little and the fold lacks definition."

Nathaniel's hands moved with surprising delicacy as he copied her actions. His attention to the task reminded her of how he had described handling ship's navigational instruments - that same careful balance of strength and precision.

"Like this?"

He held up his attempt.

"Perfect." She found herself smiling at his obvious satisfaction. "Now for the more challenging part - placing the lace without crushing it."

"I defer to your expertise." His voice held warm humour. "Though I confess, watching you work makes it appear deceptively simple."

She handed him a piece of delicate lace. Their fingers brushed, sending that now-familiar spark through her entire body. When she dared look up, she found his eyes dark with awareness.

“Sometimes,” she said softly, “the most worthwhile things require careful handling.”

His expression softened with understanding.

“And patience?”

“And patience.” She returned her attention to her own work, though her heart raced at the tenderness in his tone. “Though the results can be worth the effort.”

Around them, other couples chatted as they worked. Lady Beatrice’s laugh carried from where she sat with Lord James, who appeared to have tangled himself thoroughly in ribbon. The Duke moved between tables, offering encouragement and the occasional jest.

But Emma was aware only of Nathaniel’s presence beside her, of how his careful movements showed his determination to master this delicate task. Just as he was determined to prove himself worthy of her renewed trust. When she glanced at him again, she found him frowning in concentration as he attempted to tie a tiny bow. His large hands moved with infinite care, treating the fragile ribbon as if it were precious. Something in her chest tightened at the sight.

Oh.

The realisation struck her with the force of summer lightning. This man, who could command a ship through storm and battle, who maintained rigid control in all things, was willing to risk appearing foolish with paper and ribbon, simply to share this activity with her. To prove that he could learn gentleness, could balance strength with delicacy.

And she loved him for it. The thought should have terrified her. Instead, it felt like coming home - like finding the missing piece of a puzzle she hadn’t known needed

solving.

“I appear to have created a knot rather than a bow,” Nathaniel’s rueful voice broke into her revelation. “Though in my defence, these ribbons are remarkably uncooperative.”

Emma blinked back the tears that had gathered without her noticing.

“Here,” she managed, reaching to help him. “Sometimes it helps to loop it this way first...”

Their hands brushed again as she demonstrated, and she wondered if he could feel how her fingers trembled. If he could somehow sense the momentous discovery that she had just made.

But no. This newfound knowledge was hers to keep safe, at least for now. They were still rebuilding trust, still finding their way back to each other. A declaration of her heart’s certainty could wait until the ground between them was more secure.

“Your token is coming along quite well,” the Duke observed, pausing beside their table. “Though Lord Limnwood, I believe that particular knot might be better suited to securing a mainsail than adorning a Valentine.”

Nathaniel’s quiet laugh held no trace of his usual reserve.

“I fear that you’re right, Your Grace. Though Miss Everton’s patience with my attempts is admirable.”

“Admirable indeed.” The Duke’s eyes twinkled as he glanced between them. “How fortunate that this house party has allowed for such... instruction in delicate matters.”

Emma felt her cheeks warm at his knowing tone. Around them, she could sense other guests watching with poorly concealed interest. Their reconciliation was obvious - and obviously noteworthy to society's observers.

"I have found," she said carefully, "that some lessons are worth the teaching."

Nathaniel's hand stilled on his work.

"And some students," he replied quietly, "are more grateful for the instruction than they can properly express."

The Duke's smile widened.

"Well then, I shall leave you to your... educational pursuits."

As he moved away, Emma became aware of the whispered conversations around them. Lady Beatrice was beaming in their direction. Even Lord Radmill, who had been so quick to accept scandal, at his daughter's instigation, now watched them with approval.

"I believe," Nathaniel said softly, "that we are providing the morning's entertainment."

"Does that concern you?"

She couldn't quite keep the tension from her voice.

"No." The certainty in his tone made her look up. "Let them watch. Let them see that I am learning to value what truly matters." His eyes held hers, and Emma felt the world narrow to just this moment, this understanding passing between them. Society's observation meant nothing compared to this growing trust, this careful

rebuilding of something precious. “Though perhaps,” he added with a trace of his old dry humour, “they might also observe that I am utterly hopeless with ribbon.”

“Not hopeless,” Emma assured him, reaching to adjust his latest attempt. “Simply unpractised. Though I confess, I find your determination to master it rather...”

She hesitated, searching for a word that wouldn’t reveal too much of her heart.

“Rather what?”

His voice held a warmth that made her pulse quicken.

“Rather admirable,” she managed, though the word seemed inadequate to describe how deeply his efforts touched her.

“I find,” he said quietly, his attention seemingly fixed on his work, “that I have developed a new appreciation for delicate things. For the care that they require. For their...” His eyes lifted to hers. “Their inherent worth.”

Emma’s breath caught at the intensity in his gaze. Before she could respond, Lady Beatrice appeared beside their table.

“Oh, those are lovely!” She beamed at their creations. “Though Lord Limnwood, I believe that your ribbon has somehow formed a reef knot.”

“Has it indeed?” Lord James joined them, grinning at his brother. “Well, at least we know it won’t come undone.”

“Unlike your own efforts,” Lady Beatrice teased. “I believe that half of your ribbon supply is currently decorating the carpet.”

Their light banter created a shield of normality around Emma and Nathaniel's more serious interaction. Emma felt a rush of gratitude for their understanding - they were providing cover for this careful rebuilding of trust.

"Perhaps we might all benefit from more practice," Nathaniel suggested, his lips twitching. "Though I believe a walk in the gardens would be beneficial first. Miss Everton, might I persuade you to join us? With Lady Agatha as chaperone, of course."

Emma's heart leapt at this proper way of arranging more private conversation.

"I should like that very much."

As they rose to seek her aunt's company, Emma noticed several approving glances from the other guests. Their careful adherence to propriety now, after everything, seemed to be earning society's approval rather than censure.

How strange that Nathaniel's former rigid propriety had led to scandal, while this new, more natural attention to proper behaviour was healing it.

The gardens held the first hint of spring, tiny buds breaking through winter-bare branches. Emma walked beside Nathaniel, with Lady Agatha and Lady Beatrice following at a discrete distance. Lord James had claimed Lady Beatrice's attention, allowing conversation ahead to remain private while maintaining proper appearance.

"Your aunt is most understanding," Nathaniel observed quietly.

"She sees more than most." Emma's fingers tightened on his arm as they navigated a slightly uneven path. "Though I suspect that she has decided that you are worth the effort of watching over."

“Worth the effort?”

His voice held a question.

“Of allowing us time to... rebuild.” She chose the word carefully. “Many chaperones would be more rigid after yesterday’s events.”

“Ah.” He covered her hand with his, just for a moment. “Then I must endeavour to prove worthy of her trust. As well as yours.”

They walked in comfortable silence for a few moments, the gravel crunching beneath their feet. Around them, the garden seemed to hover between seasons - not quite winter anymore, but not yet spring.

“Rather like us,” Emma mused aloud.

“I beg your pardon?”

She flushed, not having meant to speak the thought.

“The garden. It’s caught between seasons, everything changing but nothing quite settled yet. Rather like...”

She hesitated.

“Rather like us,” he finished softly. “Though I find myself rather looking forward to spring.”

The warmth in his voice made her breath catch. Before she could respond, they reached the small ornamental bridge over the stream. They paused there, ostensibly to admire the view while their chaperones caught up.

“I have been thinking,” Nathaniel said carefully, “about writing to your father.”

Emma’s heart jumped at his words, though she kept her voice steady.

“About writing to my father?”

“Yes.” His eyes remained on the water below, though his hand tightened slightly where it covered hers on his arm. “To request permission to call on you in town. Properly. Though perhaps...” He hesitated. “Perhaps you might think it too soon?”

The uncertainty in his voice made her chest tight. This proud man, who had commanded ships and men, was willing to risk rejection for the chance to court her properly.

“I do not think it too soon,” she said softly. “Though Papa can be rather... protective.”

“As he should be.” Nathaniel finally turned to face her. “I would think less of him if he did not examine my intentions thoroughly. Particularly given recent events.”

“Your intentions?”

The word emerged breathier than she’d meant it to.

His expression softened.

“To court you properly. To prove myself worthy of your trust. To show your family that I can be relied upon to cherish their daughter’s happiness above rigid rules or appearances.”

Behind them, Emma heard Lady Agatha’s quiet cough - a gentle reminder that they had been standing rather close for rather long. They resumed walking, but something

had shifted between them.

“I believe,” Emma said carefully, “that Papa will appreciate your honesty about recent events. He values truth above appearances.”

“Then he will understand why I must tell him everything. The mistakes that I made, the lessons that I have learned...” He glanced down at her. “The treasure that I hope to prove worthy of.”

Emma’s heart soared even as she maintained perfect composure.

“Such pretty speeches, my Lord. One might almost think you had been practicing them.”

His quiet laugh held real joy.

“Only in my head, a thousand times. Though they never seem quite adequate when actually spoken.”

“I find them perfectly adequate.” She smiled up at him. “Though perhaps actions speak louder than words?”

“Indeed, they do.” His expression grew serious. “Which is why I think that I shall write to your father today. With your permission?”

“Yes.” The word emerged soft but certain. “Though I wonder what the ton will make of it, after everything?”

“Let them make of it what they will.” His voice held new confidence. “True worth shows itself over time. I intend to take all the time necessary to prove mine.”

As they returned to the house, Emma was aware of the subtle shift in how others regarded them. Their proper, chaperoned walk had not gone unnoticed - nor had the new certainty in Nathaniel's bearing.

Lady Beatrice squeezed her arm as they removed their pelisses.

"You look remarkably well, dear friend. The air has brought such colour to your cheeks."

"The air?" Emma's lips curved. "Not the company?"

"Both, perhaps." Her friend's eyes sparkled. "Though I noticed Lord Limnwood went directly to the library with quite a determined expression. Would that have anything to do with your happy look?"

"He means to write to Papa." Emma kept her voice low, though her joy was difficult to contain. "To request permission to call on me in town."

"How perfectly proper." Lady Beatrice's smile widened. "And how perfectly romantic, in its way. To think that Lord Limnwood, who once seemed all rigid rules, now shows such beautiful attention to proper forms out of real feeling rather than mere duty."

"It is rather wonderful, isn't it?"

Emma watched as Nathaniel emerged from the library, clearly having already dispatched his letter. Their eyes met across the hall, and that familiar spark passed between them. The Duke's voice carried from the drawing room.

"Shall we have some music before dinner? I believe that Miss Everton's skill at the pianoforte has been much praised."

As Emma moved to take her place at the instrument, she felt Nathaniel's presence nearby - close enough to turn her pages, far enough to maintain propriety. The whole room seemed to hold its breath, watching this tableau of perfect behaviour born of genuine feeling.

She began to play, her fingers finding the keys without conscious thought. The piece was one she had played a hundred times, yet never had it felt so meaningful - like her heart speaking through the music the words that her lips could not yet say.

And Nathaniel, standing beside her with such careful attention, seemed to hear every word that her heart was speaking.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

The night before the Masquerade Ball found Emma in an unusual state of anticipation. She stood still as Susan arranged her hair for dinner, watching her maid's careful movements in the mirror without really seeing them. Tomorrow's Ball would mark the end of the house party - an event that had begun with such trepidation and led to such unexpected developments.

"The blue silk for tomorrow, miss?" Susan held up the gown. "Or perhaps the new silver one?"

"The silver, I think." Emma touched the fabric thoughtfully. "Though we'll need to adjust the trim. It's a masquerade - everything should have a touch of mystery."

"Like the mask Lord Limnwood was working on this afternoon?" Susan's eyes sparkled with barely suppressed excitement. "Cook's assistant said he spent hours in the stillroom with the housekeeper, getting the silver paint exactly right."

Emma's heart warmed at this evidence of Nathaniel's dedication to the preparations. He had thrown himself into the mask-making activity with the same focused attention that he gave to everything which mattered to him. That he counted this among such things spoke volumes.

A tap at the door preceded Lady Beatrice's entrance.

"Oh good, you're nearly ready. I simply had to come to tell you - Lord James just told me the most interesting thing about tomorrow night's arrangements."

"Did he indeed?"

Emma smiled at her friend's obvious excitement.

"It seems that certain gentlemen have been practicing their dancing rather religiously, even though they already dance with exquisite skill." Lady Beatrice settled onto the bed, clearly prepared to share every detail. "The Duke's dancing master was quite impressed by their dedication."

Emma's fingers stilled on her pearl necklace.

"Certain gentlemen?"

"Mm-hmm. Particularly ones who wish to make a perfect showing at their first public ball since... recent developments."

Warmth bloomed in Emma's chest at this evidence of Nathaniel's determination to make everything perfect. Even now, he was proving his dedication through actions rather than mere words.

"Though that's not the most interesting part," Lady Beatrice continued, her eyes dancing. "Lord James says that his brother has been corresponding with your father daily since that first letter a few days ago."

Emma's breath caught. She knew of the initial exchange - her father's cautiously worded permission for Nathaniel to call on her in town, once they returned. But daily correspondence?

"He wants to do everything properly," Lady Beatrice said softly, reading Emma's expression. "To ensure that your father understands both his intentions and his character. Lord James says that he's never seen his brother so determined about anything."

“He need not try so hard,” Emma murmured, though her heart sang at this evidence of Nathaniel’s commitment.

“Needn’t he?” Lady Beatrice’s voice gentled. “After everything that has happened? I rather think that he feels that he must prove himself worthy of not just your trust, but your family’s.”

Before Emma could respond, another tap at the door heralded Lady Agatha’s arrival. Her aunt surveyed the scene with knowing eyes.

“Discussing tomorrow’s ball, I see.” She moved to adjust Emma’s necklace. “Though perhaps some details should remain surprises?”

Lady Beatrice’s eyes widened.

“Oh! You mean...”

“I mean nothing at all.” But Lady Agatha’s smile held secrets. “Now then, we should go down. I believe that certain gentlemen are already awaiting our arrival in the drawing room.”

The drawing room hummed with pre-dinner conversation when they entered. Emma was immediately aware of Nathaniel’s presence near the fireplace, deep in discussion with the Duke. He looked up as she entered, and the warmth in his eyes made her heart skip.

“Miss Everton.” He bowed perfectly. “Might I show you something? His Grace has been most helpful with a particular project.”

Emma moved to join them, conscious of the eyes following her progress across the room. The Duke’s smile held approval as he stepped away, leaving them in relative

privacy while remaining perfectly visible to all.

“I wanted to ask your opinion.” Nathaniel’s voice was low, meant for her ears alone. “About the masks for tomorrow night.”

He drew a small package from his coat pocket, unwrapping it carefully. Inside lay two masks - one silver, one deep blue, both decorated with intricate patterns that somehow complemented each other perfectly.

“The blue would suit you,” he said softly. “Though only if you approve, of course.”

Emma’s fingers traced the delicate silver work on the blue mask. The design incorporated tiny stars and what looked like ocean waves - a subtle reference to his naval background.

“They’re beautiful,” she breathed. “Though I suspect that they required rather more than just the Duke’s help?”

His smile held a touch of sheepishness.

“The housekeeper may have provided some assistance. And Lord James contributed his artistic talents. Though the design...” He hesitated. “The design is meant to show how two different natures might complement each other. Strength and delicacy. Rules and freedom. Perfect balance in seeming opposition.”

Emma’s breath caught at the deeper meaning in his words. Before she could respond, dinner was announced.

But as he offered his arm to escort her in, she saw in his expression all the hope and determination that had gone into creating something so perfectly symbolic of their journey together.

Dinner passed in a haze of anticipation, every glance between them laden with meaning. The Duke kept the conversation general, speaking of preparations for tomorrow's ball, but Emma noticed how he skilfully deflected any references to previous events. The ton's memory might be short when it chose to be, particularly when presented with a more interesting current narrative.

"I understand, Miss Everton," Lord Radmill said during the fish course, "that you'll be returning to town next week?"

"Yes, my Lord." Emma kept her voice steady, though her pulse quickened at the thought of what awaited in London - properly chaperoned calls from Nathaniel, the chance to build something real beyond the magical atmosphere of the house party.

"Excellent timing," the Duke inserted smoothly. "The Season will be beginning in earnest. I expect that we shall see quite a few familiar faces at various events."

His meaning was clear - their courtship would have society's approval and support. Emma caught Lady Agatha's satisfied smile. Her aunt had played no small part in managing this transformation of circumstances.

"Though I fear that London's ballrooms may seem rather ordinary after tomorrow night's entertainment," Lady Beatrice added. "His Grace's Masquerades are legendary."

"Particularly when certain guests put such effort into their preparations." The Duchess' eyes twinkled as she glanced between Emma and Nathaniel. "I was most impressed by the workmanship on those masks, my Lord."

Emma saw Nathaniel's cheeks colour slightly at this reference to his dedication to the project. But his voice was steady as he replied.

“I had excellent motivation to achieve perfection, Your Grace.”

The warmth in his tone made Emma’s heart flutter. She focused on her plate, aware of the knowing looks being exchanged around the table. Yet somehow, their gentle teasing felt like a blessing - society showing its approval of this careful courtship built on growing understanding.

When the ladies withdrew after dinner, Lady Beatrice pulled Emma into a quiet corner of the drawing room.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Lord Limnwood so... transformed,” she whispered. “Who would have thought that the man who once lectured us about proper behaviour would spend hours crafting masks just to create the perfect symbolism?”

“He hasn’t transformed,” Emma said softly, understanding finally dawning. “He’s simply found a way to be himself - to balance his natural care for propriety with his capacity for deeper feeling. Rather like those masks of his - strength and delicacy in perfect harmony.”

When the gentlemen joined them, Nathaniel made his way to where Emma sat at the pianoforte. She had been playing quietly, more to occupy her hands than for any real musical purpose.

“Might I turn pages for you?” he asked softly.

She nodded, moving slightly to make room on the bench. As she played, she was acutely conscious of his presence beside her, of how his fingers brushed near hers each time he reached to turn a page.

“I received another letter from your father today,” he said quietly between movements.

Emma's fingers nearly stilled on the keys.

"Did you?"

"Yes." His voice held something she couldn't quite identify. "He was most particular about which events he expects to attend this Season. Events where, he suggested, he might observe how well I live up to my written assurances."

A smile tugged at her lips.

"Papa can be rather..."

"Protective?" His own smile held understanding. "As he should be. Though I confess, his attention to detail rivals my own."

"I wonder where he learned such careful attention to propriety?"

She kept her tone light, though her heart raced at this evidence of how seriously he was pursuing her father's approval.

"I begin to think," he said softly, "that proper attention to form can come from care rather than mere rigid rules. Your father's careful questioning shows his love for you far more than simple acceptance would have done."

Emma's breath caught at the deeper meaning in his words. Before she could respond, the Duke called for some Scottish reels.

"One last practice before tomorrow's ball," he announced cheerfully. "Though perhaps something livelier than waltzes for now?"

As they took their places in the set, Emma caught Nathaniel's eye. The warmth in his

gaze made her heart soar. Tomorrow's ball might mark the end of the house party, but it felt more like a beginning than an ending.

A beginning built on understanding, trust, and the perfect balance between proper form and genuine feeling.

Later, as the evening drew to a close, Emma found herself alone with Nathaniel for a brief moment in the card room. They had been playing whist with Lord James and Lady Beatrice, but their friends had been called away by the Duke for some mysterious consultation about tomorrow's festivities.

"I suspect," Nathaniel said dryly, "that we are being managed."

"By the Duke?"

"By everyone, I rather think." His smile held rueful amusement. "Though I cannot find it in myself to object. Even if every moment alone with you feels rather..."

"Rather what?"

Emma's voice emerged softer than she'd intended.

"Rather dangerous." He met her eyes. "Not to propriety - we are in full view of the drawing room. But to my peace of mind. Every time I'm near you, I find myself wanting... more."

The low intensity in his voice made her shiver.

"More?"

"More time. More understanding. More..." He broke off as footsteps approached.

“More than I can properly express in a card room.”

“Then perhaps,” Emma said carefully, gathering her cards, “tomorrow’s ball will provide better opportunity for expression?”

His eyes darkened.

“I believe that it will. I have something particular in mind, if you’ll permit it.”

Before she could ask what he meant, Lord James and Lady Beatrice returned, full of elaborate apologies for their absence. But Emma caught the knowing look that passed between the brothers - something was definitely being planned for tomorrow night.

As she prepared for bed later, Emma found herself studying the blue mask that Nathaniel had created. Its intricate design seemed to shimmer in the candlelight, promising mystery and revelation all at once.

“It’s beautiful, miss,” Susan said softly, brushing out Emma’s hair. “Though not just for its workmanship.”

“No?”

Emma smiled at her maid in the mirror.

“No. It’s beautiful because of what it means. That he’d spend so much time making something perfect, just to show you that he understands.”

Emma touched the mask gently.

“Understands what?”

“How to balance things proper with things true.” Susan’s hands were gentle as she braided Emma’s hair. “Like you’ve been teaching him all along.”

Emma’s heart squeezed at this simple observation.

Tomorrow’s ball suddenly seemed full of infinite possibility.

In his chamber, Nathaniel stood at the window, turning his silver mask in his hands.

Two weeks.

Had it really been only two weeks since he had arrived at this house party, so certain of his rigid principles, so sure that proper behaviour was the answer to everything?

The man who had arrived at Pelham Hall would never have spent hours crafting masks just to show a lady that he understood her heart.

Would never have valued trust over appearances, joy over rules.

Would never have learned that true propriety came from caring rather than control.

Emma had changed everything.

Not by trying to change him, but by being herself - showing him that one could maintain standards while still embracing life’s deeper pleasures.

That trust meant more than rules, that understanding mattered more than appearance.

His fingers traced the pattern he had worked so carefully into the silver - strength

intertwined with delicacy, just as Emma's spirit had intertwined with his more rigid nature, making both stronger.

Tomorrow he would take the final step in this transformation. Would show her, and all of society, exactly what she meant to him.

His heart quickened at the thought.

Looking out at the moonlit gardens, he remembered how he had once judged her behaviour there as too spirited, too free. Now he understood that her spirit was exactly what he needed - what made him more than just a collection of proper rules and rigid control.

She had taught him to feel, to trust, to hope.

Tomorrow, he would show her just how well he had learned those lessons.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

The ballroom of Pelham Hall glowed with hundreds of candles, their light catching on masks of every description - from simple dominos to elaborate creations of feathers and jewels. Emma stood in the doorway, her blue mask settling comfortably against her face, and felt the magic of the evening sweep over her.

Behind her mask, she could observe without being observed. Her eyes found Nathaniel immediately - his height and bearing making him unmistakable even with his silver mask. He stood with Lord James near the musicians, his attention apparently on their discussion, yet she saw his head lift the moment that she entered.

“Rather fitting, don’t you think?” Lady Beatrice whispered beside her. “Everyone in masks, yet you two find each other instantly.”

“As if masks could hide what matters.” Lady Agatha’s voice held approval. “Go on, my dear. I believe that your presence is eagerly awaited.”

Emma moved into the room, accepting compliments on her mask from several guests. The Duke had arranged for everyone to wear their masks from the start of the evening - adding an air of mystery to even simple conversation.

“Miss Everton.” Nathaniel’s voice behind her made her pulse jump. “Might I claim your first dance?”

She turned to find him bowing perfectly, his silver mask catching the light. The intricate pattern seemed to shift and change as he moved, making her think of moonlight on water.

“Our masks complement each other beautifully,” she said softly as he led her to the floor. “Almost as if they were designed that way.”

“Almost.” His smile was visible beneath his mask. “Though I find the lady wearing the blue far more compelling than any mere craftwork.”

The music began - a waltz, of course. Emma’s breath caught as Nathaniel drew her into his arms. They had danced together several times since their reconciliation, but something about tonight felt different. Perhaps it was the masks, creating an illusion of privacy even in this crowded room. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the house party was ending, that tomorrow would begin a new chapter in their story.

“You seem deep in thought,” he murmured as they turned.

“I was thinking about endings and beginnings.” She met his eyes through their masks. “About how much has changed since that first night when the Valentine’s lottery paired us together.”

“Ah yes. When I thought you too spirited, and you thought me too rigid.” His hand tightened slightly at her waist. “How wrong I was about so many things.”

“Not wrong, exactly.” She smiled up at him. “Just... incomplete in your understanding. As was I.”

“And now?” His voice held a deeper note that made her heart race.

“Now I understand that true propriety comes from caring, not rules. That trust matters more than appearances.”

“You taught me that, even as you learnt it.” The warmth in his tone made her breath catch. “You taught me so many things about what truly matters.”

They waltzed in silence for a moment, both aware of the eyes watching them. Even behind masks, their growing closeness was obvious to the assembled company.

“I have something planned,” Nathaniel said softly as the dance drew to a close. “After the supper dance. Will you trust me?”

Emma’s heart leapt at the combination of uncertainty and hope in his voice.

“Yes. Always.”

The evening seemed to float past in a whirl of music and laughter. Emma danced with Lord James, with Lord Radmill, with the Duke himself - but her awareness remained fixed on Nathaniel. He moved through the room with his usual grace, perfectly correct in his behaviour, yet somehow different. More relaxed, more genuine in his interactions.

“He’s quite transformed,” the Duke observed during their set. “Though perhaps ‘revealed’ might be a better word. The real man was always there, just hidden behind too many rules.”

“Your Grace is very perceptive.” Emma followed the figures of the dance, watching Nathaniel bow to his current partner.

“One tries.” The Duke’s eyes twinkled behind his elaborate mask. “Particularly when one has gone to such trouble to arrange certain... opportunities.”

Emma’s steps faltered slightly, as a startling idea arrived in her mind.

“The Valentine’s lottery wasn’t truly random, was it?”

“My dear Miss Everton, what a shocking suggestion.” But his smile widened.

“Though I must say, everything has worked out rather as I hoped. Even the... complications... only served to prove what was real.”

As the set ended, Emma saw Nathaniel speaking quietly with the musicians. Her heart quickened - the supper dance would begin soon. Whatever he had planned... She turned away, and went towards Lady Beatrice, determined to trust...

“Miss Everton.” His voice behind her made her turn. “Might I partner you for supper?”

“Of course, my Lord.”

But instead of leading her towards the supper room, he drew her to the centre of the ballroom. The musicians began to play - not the usual country dance, but a waltz. A waltz that seemed somehow familiar...

“The same music that they played that first night,” Nathaniel said softly. “When the lottery paired us together. Though this time...” He reached up and removed his mask. “This time I want no barriers between us.”

A hush fell over the ballroom. Emma’s hands trembled as she removed her own mask, aware of every eye upon them. Nathaniel took both her hands in his, his expression more open than she had ever seen it.

“When I arrived at this house party,” he said, his voice carrying clearly in the silence, “I thought that I knew everything about proper behaviour. About what mattered in life. I was wrong.” His smile held such tenderness that it made her heart ache. “You showed me that real propriety comes from caring, not rules. That trust matters more than appearances. That love... love is worth any risk.”

Emma’s breath caught as he bowed deeply before her, still holding one of her hands.

The he rose, and met her eyes. Everything else seemed to fade away in that moment – she was captivated.

“Miss Emma Everton, you have taught me to trust, to feel, to hope. Will you do me the very great honour of becoming my wife?”

Tears spilled down Emma’s cheeks as she looked into his beloved face - no masks, no barriers, just truth between them.

“Yes,” she whispered, then louder, “Yes.”

The ballroom erupted in applause as Nathaniel drew her close, lifting their joined hands. His kiss was perfectly proper, just a brief touch of his lips to her hand, but his eyes promised so much more.

“Well!” The Duke’s voice held satisfaction. “I believe that this calls for a celebration. To supper, everyone! Though perhaps we might dispense with masks for the rest of the evening?”

Emma sat beside Nathaniel at supper, her heart still racing from his proposal. The Duke had arranged their seating perfectly - her aunt across from them, Lord James and Lady Beatrice to either side, creating a bubble of understanding around their newfound joy.

She was betrothed. The thought kept sweeping through her, making her fingers tremble slightly as she lifted her glass. Not just betrothed, but betrothed to a man who had learned to balance strength with tenderness, rules with feeling. Who had transformed himself not because she demanded it, but because he had discovered what truly mattered.

Every time she glanced at him, she found him already watching her, his expression holding a warmth that made her breath catch, and warmth fill her. The rigid mask of propriety had vanished completely, replaced by genuine joy that lit his entire countenance.

“I believe,” he said softly, for her ears alone, “that I have never been so happy in my life.”

“Even though everyone is watching?”

She couldn't help teasing him gently about his former obsession with appearances.

“Let them watch.” His smile held both tenderness and triumph. “Let them see that true happiness comes from trust, not rules. From letting oneself feel deeply rather than maintaining perfect control.”

Emma's heart swelled.

This was the real Nathaniel - the man she had glimpsed beneath his rigid exterior from the start. The man who could command a ship through storms yet spend hours crafting a delicate mask just to show her that he understood.

Around them, conversation flowed easily. She caught fragments of plans being discussed - her aunt and the Duchess already talking of wedding preparations, Lord James teasing his brother about finally getting something right, Lady Beatrice glowing with shared happiness.

But mostly she was aware of Nathaniel beside her, of how their fingers kept finding ways to touch as they passed dishes or reached for glasses. Each brief contact sent sparks through her entire body, making her wonder how she would survive the weeks until their wedding with any composure at all.

Nathaniel could scarcely focus on his food, so caught was he by the joy in Emma's expression every time she looked his way. His heart felt too full for his chest, expanding with each smile, each brush of her fingers against his.

He had planned the proposal carefully - the music from their first meeting, the removal of masks to show complete honesty, the words that he had practiced a hundred times. Yet in the moment, different words had come, springing from his heart rather than careful preparation.

And they had been perfect. Just as she was perfect - not because she never made mistakes, but because she was real, genuine, true to herself in all things. She had taught him that perfection lay not in rigid rules but in honest feeling.

"I do hope," Lord James murmured from beside him, "that you realise how fortunate you are, brother."

"More than fortunate." Nathaniel watched as Emma laughed at something Lady Beatrice said, her entire face lighting with joy. "Though I cannot quite credit that she accepted me, after everything."

"She accepted you because you learned." James' voice held unusual seriousness. "Not just about trust and feeling, but about yourself. About what kind of man you truly want to be. And because your love for her was overwhelmingly obvious to anyone who looked at you."

Nathaniel considered this as he watched Emma.

Yes, he had learned - about trust, about love, about letting go of rigid control. But most importantly, he had learned that real strength lay not in perfect behaviour, but in

perfect understanding. Now that he understood it, he was forced to wonder how he had ever been so blind as to not see the truth of it before.

The supper service began to wind down. Soon they would return to dancing - their first dance as a betrothed couple. The thought made his heart race with anticipation.

When the musicians began to play again, another waltz, Nathaniel led Emma onto the floor. The other guests drew back, giving them space for this moment. Emma felt herself trembling slightly as he drew her into his arms.

“Everything has changed,” she whispered as they began to move.

“And yet somehow everything feels exactly right.” His eyes held such tenderness that she could scarcely credit it was real. “As if every step of our journey, even the painful ones, led us to precisely where we needed to be.”

They moved together perfectly, as if they had been dancing so for all of their lives. Emma was acutely aware of his hand at her waist, of how his touch felt different now - still proper, but with a promise of forever in it. Other couples joined them on the floor, but they remained in their own world, speaking through glances and subtle touches what words could not yet say.

“I have something else for you,” Nathaniel said softly as they turned. “Though perhaps it should wait until we’re properly chaperoned tomorrow.”

“More secrets, my Lord?”

“No more secrets.” His smile lit his entire face. “Only true tokens of affection. Though I fear that my craftwork may never quite match my feelings.”

Emma’s heart soared at this evidence of how far he had come - from rigid propriety

to open declarations of feeling, yet somehow maintaining perfect behaviour through it all.

As the dance ended, she saw their future stretching before them - a future built on trust and understanding, on the perfect balance between propriety and feeling.

The Duke's voice broke through her reverie.

"The last dance, everyone! Let us end this Valentine's house party as we began - with joy and possibility."

Nathaniel's hand tightened on hers.

"Shall we, my love?"

Emma's smile held all her heart.

"Always."

And as they moved into the final dance, she knew that while the house party might be ending, their real story was only beginning.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:45 am

The spring sunshine streamed through the church windows, catching on Emma's pale blue silk gown and the delicate orange blossoms in her hair. She stood before the altar beside Nathaniel, their hands joined, hearts beating in perfect time as they spoke their vows.

The month since the house party had passed in a whirlwind of preparations, calls from Nathaniel, and carefully chaperoned moments together – walks in the park, drives along Rotten Row at the fashionable hour and more. Yet somehow those restrictions had felt different - not confining but precious, each moment made sweeter by their growing understanding of each other, and their looking forward to the moment when they would be wed.

Now, watching Nathaniel's face as he spoke his vows, Emma saw the perfect balance they had achieved. His words were formal, yet his eyes held such depth of feeling that her heart threatened to burst.

In the pews behind them, society had turned out in force to witness this marriage. The Duke and Duchess of Pelhampton sat in a place of honour, their satisfied smiles suggesting that they had known all along how their Valentine's house party would end.

Lady Beatrice, with her family close by, sat beside Lord James, their own growing attachment obvious to anyone who cared to look.

Even Lord Radmill, who had once been so quick to assume scandal, and whose daughter had caused so many problems, now beamed with approval. Though perhaps that had something to do with how Nathaniel had handled certain business

arrangements to everyone's advantage - proving that correct behaviour and clever strategy were not mutually exclusive.

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

Nathaniel's kiss was delicate, fleeting, yet somehow conveyed every bit of passion and tenderness that propriety forbade him to show, there in the church. Emma's heart soared as he drew back, his eyes promising so much more to come.

At the wedding breakfast, toasts flowed freely. The Duke's speech was particularly memorable, touching on how his Valentine's house party had once again proved the perfect setting for true love to flourish.

"Though perhaps," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "this year's match involved a few more... interesting developments... than usual."

"Development is precisely the word," Lord James offered in his own toast. "Though I must say, watching my brother develop from a man of rigid rules into one who understands the true meaning of propriety has been most satisfying."

Emma caught Nathaniel's eye glancing to where he sat beside her, seeing his quiet amusement at his brother's teasing. The rigid man who had arrived at Pelham Hall that February evening was gone, replaced by someone who could balance strength with tenderness.

As they took to the floor for their first dance as husband and wife, Nathaniel drew her closer than strict propriety might allow. But his smile, as he looked down at her, held no trace of concern for appearances.

"Happy, my love?" he asked softly.

“Perfectly.” She smiled up at him. “Though I suspect that Lady Anne might not approve of how closely you’re holding me.”

His quiet laugh held pure joy.

“I find I care far more about my wife’s approval than society’s rules. Though perhaps...” His eyes sparkled with mischief. “Perhaps we might say that my attention to proper behaviour simply extends to ensuring my wife’s complete comfort while dancing?”

“Such a clever justification, my Lord.” Emma’s heart swelled with love for this man who had, it seemed, learned to play with rules rather than be bound by them. “I believe that you’ve learned rather more than just balance from our time together.”

“I’ve learned everything that matters.” His voice was low, and a little rough. “And I intend to spend the rest of our lives learning more.”

As they moved through the dance, Emma caught glimpses of their guests - Lady Beatrice blushing at something that Lord James whispered to her, the Duke and Duchess watching with proud satisfaction, society’s approval evident in every smile and nod. Those glimpses were fleeting, and soon ceased all together, for Emma’s whole world had narrowed to this moment - to Nathaniel’s arms around her, to the warmth in his eyes as he looked down at her.

As the dance ended, he drew her towards the terrace doors. Their guests were occupied with the next set, and no one marked their brief absence as they stepped into the spring sunshine.

“I have something for you,” he said softly, drawing a small package from his coat.

Emma unwrapped it carefully to find a delicate favour, worked in silver and blue -

their colours, now and always. The design echoed their masquerade masks, but with a new motif woven through it - two hearts, perfectly balanced, perfectly matched.

“Your craftwork has improved considerably, my Lord,” she teased gently, though her eyes filled with tears.

“I had excellent motivation to learn.” He drew her closer, his eyes holding hers. “And now I have a lifetime to perfect the art of showing you how much I love you. For I love you not just properly, or correctly, but with my whole heart.”

“And I love you.” Emma reached up to touch his cheek. “My perfectly imperfect Lord.”

His kiss, when it came, held all the passion that propriety had forced them to contain, yet somehow remained exactly correct - their first real kiss as husband and wife.

And in that kiss was every promise of their future together.

The End

Chapter One

The coal box was empty. The larder contained some cheese, some bread, and very little else. Serafine walked to her room with a heavy heart. In her dresser drawer there was a small metal chest – the sort that, in another life, she might have used as a jewellery box.

She turned the key, and opened the chest. She stared at the contents, as despair gripped her. The box contained only ten pounds. Ten pounds that were their last remaining money. And, carefully wrapped in a scrap of silk, a heart made of lace and ribbon and beads, all sewn onto a piece of parchment.

Lace that was all she had left of her grandmother. Everything else had been sold.

Sewing that heart had been just for fun, then – it seemed an eternity ago – before ‘the fall ’ as she thought of it. Before her fool of a brother had gambled away everything, drawn into a tawdry gaming hell by that demon Pendholm, and bled of everything that had any value in their lives. Before her brother had committed the ultimate betrayal, and killed himself because of it.

Before the ton had shunned them for the scandal of a suicide in the family. Before...

She shut the thoughts away. At least they had the house.

It was small, and in a rather unfashionable part of town – not quite respectable at all – but it was her mother’s outright, left to her by her aunt, shortly after Serafine’s father’s death. Although an unheated house, with no servants, and little furniture left

was not exactly the most pleasant place to live, at least it was theirs.

She took out two pounds, her finger absently stroking the lace as she did, then shut and locked the chest, hiding it away again. Today, she could buy food and coal. What would she do on the day when there was no longer any money to do so?

Serafine sighed, holding the bag of food close against her. It was heavy, but she treasured the weight – it was the substance of survival, at least for a little longer. The coal would be delivered later in the day – enough for a month, if she was very careful.

The food would not last near so long.

Passing the shop on the corner, she paused to look in the window a moment. Once, she would have thought such a shop beneath her – now, what it contained was as far beyond what she could afford as the moon was above the earth. Yet she still liked to look at pretty things. A little collection in one corner of the window caught her eye. A pile of what might be called favours – little cards and items, decorated with ribbons, lace and sometimes paste gems or feathers.

Pretty little nothings that a man might give his mistress, or a woman he was courting.

One, in particular, a little stained on the edges, but still pretty, reminded her of the heart with her grandmother's lace – it was the sort of thing that some called a Valentine. She stared at it for a while, feeling as if it was important, but not knowing why, then shrugged, lifted her bags again, and went home.

The next day was clear and bright, but very cold – they would likely have snow on Christmas Day.

Serafine sat at the window of the parlour, sewing. She was nearly finished embellishing the gown for Mrs Johnson, which was a relief, for it meant that she would be paid for the work, but also a worry, for there were no more dresses waiting her attention. And her sewing was their only income –the only way to stretch out what money they had, for a little longer.

The ladies of the merchant classes, who lived all around them, those who had some money, but were not rich enough to ever consider going to a modiste in the heart of London, they were her customers. They found the idea of a Lady born sewing for them somehow satisfying (not that anybody ever called her ‘Lady Serafine’ any more – that manner of address belonged to before – now she was just ‘miss’ most of the time. And to those who knew her name at all, she was Miss Sera – Serafine had seemed a lovely name to her mother, who was fascinated by old mythology and similar, but now it was simply out of place for her current station in life.).

The merchant ladies appreciated her fine sense of fashion. But more than that, they appreciated her affordable pricing.

She hummed as she worked, her clever fingers sewing beads onto a tracery of lace on the hemline of the dress, but her mind was elsewhere.

Her thoughts kept going back to that sad little pile of favours in the shop window. She wondered if they sold well, and what sort of people bought them. She’d seen a few things like that... before ... but she’d never thought much of it. She thought of it now. They were such little things, and sewing them was, she suspected, not so different from sewing embellishments onto dresses.

Were they a thing that members of the ton might buy?

Perhaps – if someone important bought one, or gave one to someone noticeable... if that happened, then others would follow – there were always those who simply copied everything the arbiters of fashion did, or the royal family did. She brought her attention back to sewing the last few beads onto the dress – what a goose she was, dreaming about the royals and the ton ! They had nothing to do with her world now, nothing at all.

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Mr Raphael Morton was bored. That was a terrible thing to admit, when what he was doing was going over the business ledgers with the man he employed to do his accounts. Mr Manning was excellent at his job, and the ledgers were neat and clear. They showed just how wealthy Raphael was – just how well Morton Empire Imports was doing.

Most men would be excited by what they saw – not bored.

But, bored he was. For Raphael, the exciting part was the planning, laying out the path that led to this, that ensured that, if all the steps were followed, the wealth would grow. After years at war, the inactivity of sitting in an office, or walking the warehouse and speaking to customers, was slowly driving him mad. To make it worse, his ship's captains came back not only with cargoes of exotic goods to make him even wealthier, but with tales of distant lands, strange sights and different people.

He envied them. He wanted to see those places himself. No amount of wealth and rich living here could change that. London was a gilded cage.

For, no matter what they had vowed to each other, the world would go as it did – his friends, those who had been closer than family for those long years of war, would be forced away from him. It was simple fact. They were all titled, and he was not.

He was, in fact, that worst of things (from the ton's point of view), a Cit – a merchant, one tainted by dirtying his hands with trade. No matter that it had made him wealthier than most of them, no matter that they craved the luxuries he imported, he was, to the ton, to be disdained for his lower class existence.

How could his friends ever overcome that? He would not wish them shunned by their peers for associating with him. Yet he missed them sorely. Better to travel the world alone, than to live here in luxury, so close, yet never able to see them.

“That will do for today, Manning. Your work is excellent, as usual. Make sure that the Captain of the Morton Venture receives a suitable bonus – he has done far better than I expected with this cargo.”

Manning blinked in some surprise, for they were barely half way through the review of the ledgers, then nodded, closed the books, and left the office.

Two hours later, Raphael was still sitting there, thinking. He had reached the rather depressing conclusion that there was no easy answer to his boredom, or to his sense of being trapped. Perhaps it might be more bearable if he had something new and different to do, some new venture?

At least then he could sink himself into the planning, into bringing something new to life, and making it profitable. But what? He had warehouses full of exotic materials, objects, spices and other things – was there some new way that he could use them, something new he could create, that could be cleverly brought to the attention of the most influential of the ton, or perhaps even the Prince Regent? Raphael knew that, for something new to become a profitable venture, it would have to draw the attention of those with money to spend.

The idea took hold, it was a puzzle to be solved – what new thing could he create, using goods that he already had, which could take the fashionable people by storm, and make him even wealthier? (not that he cared about the money, he had enough – it was the challenge that mattered...)

He spent the next few days stalking through his warehouses, looking at everything,

terrifying his managers and warehouse labourers, who were certain that he must be seeking evidence of wrongdoing on their part.

He could feel an idea, an insight, at the edge of his thoughts – but it refused to surface.

He went home to toss and turn in restless sleep, dreaming of exotic oddities.

With Mrs Johnson's dress completed and delivered, Serafine took a little of the money that she had been paid, and went to the market. She would add some more food to their supplies while she could, and getting out and walking felt good, after the last few days of sitting and sewing.

At the little shop on the corner she stopped, looking at the items in the window again.

Surprised at what she saw, she considered a moment, then turned and entered the shop.

“What can I do for you, Miss?”

The shopkeeper looked at her, obviously assessing her possible wealth from her clothes.

“In the window – those little... favours? I noticed them the other day, and meant to come in earlier – I particularly liked the heart shaped one, but I can't see it now – has it been sold?”

“Oh yes Miss, you've got to be quick to get a nice one of those – they sell all the time, any that I get. The young gents are always looking for tokens to give the girls they're courting. The heart shaped ones go fastest – seems they like it to be obvious

what they mean when they put it in the girl's hands. Don't often get a young lady asking about them though."

Serafine thought for a moment, as the shopkeeper waited, his expression curious.

"Where do they come from? I mean, who do you buy them from?"

"Well Miss, it's not always the same. Used to be my old mother made some for me, but she's gone to God now, and m'wife don't like to sew fiddly things. So now it's only when someone brings some in, that they want to sell, that I can get any. Pity, because there's always those as wants to buy 'em."

"How much do you sell them for?"

Serafine waited for the answer, almost holding her breath.

When the shopkeeper, after some time thinking, named a figure, she was pleasantly surprised, even though she suspected he might have inflated the number, because he thought she looked like she could afford more. That idea almost brought a bubble of bitter laughter to her, but she repressed it. An idea was forming – maybe there was a way for her to earn more, to keep them surviving a bit longer.

"What if I had some to sell you? New ones, heart shaped ones with pretty beads or ribbons, not just lace?"

The shopkeeper's eyes narrowed with avarice, and Serafine knew, instantly, that her instinct was right – this was a way to earn more.

"Likely I'd be interested in buying... if the price was right..."

Twenty minutes of haggling later, Serafine left the shop, with a bounce in her step that hadn't been there for a long time. They had agreed that she would bring him

three as a sample, in a few days' time. For those, he would give her about half of the price he normally sold them for.

If they sold well, he would buy more – and give her a better percentage of the price, especially if she made things that he could sell for a higher price to begin with.

By her calculations, she could earn as much from making four or five of the pretty little favours as she could from embellishing a dress – and she would need to use less materials to do so. After a quiet luncheon with her mother, who declared it far too cold to go out, and wanted only to huddle by the fire and read, Serafine went out again – to buy beads and lace, and some heavy paper.

It was time to get to work.

Some hours later, tired but satisfied, she carefully put away the collection of beads, laces and little paste gems that she had bought – the amount it had cost her, even buying mismatched and second-hand (for small favours did not need many beads, unlike dresses!), worried her, for it had taken far more of their money than she was comfortable with, but there really was no choice – she had to earn money somehow, and that meant spending some first.

If these did well, though, she would need to find another source of materials – both to get better quality, and because, with today's purchases, she had quite exhausted the supply from the places she usually shopped.

Continued...