



# A Suitable Countess (To All the Earls I've Loved Before #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Lady Viola Winspears parents are missing in a sandstorm in Egypt and she must secure a proposal, preferably from the wealthy catch of the season, to save them. If she fails, her only chance to keep her siblings from starvation will be to risk everything, even if it means dressing as a man and playing poker in a gaming hell.

Lord George Amhurst, the Earl of Romney, must marry by his thirtieth birthday. Grimly determined to fulfil the promise to his mother in order to return to his explorations in Africa, he attends a ball where he is intrigued while dancing with Lady Viola. She is unlike all the others, and his hopes rise—until he later discovers her dressed as a man and winning at poker in a gaming hell.

What sort of earl would still consider her a suitable countess?

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Lady Viola Winspear counted out the coins in the lockbox before allowing them to trickle through her fingers onto the last banknote. The remaining money would not sustain her, her four sisters, and their younger brother, Frederick, through the next month, let alone the entire Season.

A feeling of hopelessness, a malaise usually unknown to Viola, gripped her as she picked up the letter which had arrived that afternoon, bearing news of the worst kind. News she had yet to break to her siblings.

Their archaeology-loving father and sweet-natured mother had disappeared in the desert sands during a storm while hunting for an ancient treasure in the Valley of the Kings.

She set her hand over the letter that conveyed the news.

Disappeared, not died, which offered a scintilla of hope, but Viola struggled to contain her fear for her parents' safety.

It was the stuff of nightmares.

Once news got out about the disappearance of Lord Winspear, creditors would begin circling, and if Viola couldn't find a way to stave them off, there would be nothing left for her parents to return home to.

And they would come home.

They had to.

Viola believed that with a ferocity born of love and desperation.

And if they succeeded in finding an ancient treasure, would that success restore the family fortune lost by her recently deceased grandfather?

With her parents having vanished, it seemed almost a moot point. But how to keep body and soul and her family together until then was the immediate problem.

Viola was good at many things, especially cards, at which she excelled. A shame that was not considered feminine. If only it was acceptable for a young woman to play for more than pennies against men whose pockets were deep, she would soon reverse her family's fortune.

Without her father's presence, it would be only a matter of a month, perhaps as little as two weeks, before she and her siblings found themselves dunned and destitute.

Before then, she would find a way to save them.

She had to.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

### In Which Our Hero Espies Our Heroine Across a Crowded Room

The Melton ball was a cacophony of voices, music and studied enjoyment as Lord George Amhurst, fifth Earl of Romney, stepped through the double doors.

The muscles in his neck tightened, and he gritted his teeth as he surveyed the guests: twittering debutantes, predatory mamas, and fellow bachelors already imbibing their hosts' drinks to ease their way through an evening of matrimonial prospects.

Bachelors like himself.

George's stomach clenched as the evening stretched before him, full of inane pleasantries and simpering smiles. Would conversation lean more towards the weather or the Regent's latest waistcoat, a vulgar puce satin that made George long for the green and brown of the African plains?

And yet, one of the women here could become the next countess if he was to fulfil his promise to his mother. Certainly, before the end of the season, George needed to have a countess on his arm, with an heir on the way by this time next year.

Blast it.

Stepping into an African jungle full of man-eating beasts held far more appeal than the elegant melee before him. Facing a rampaging herd of elephants on the grasslands would be preferable to the society matrons already eyeing him off.

If not for that promise he'd made to wed by his thirtieth birthday, he'd not even have

returned from Africa, as his mother well knew. But socially acceptable countesses were thin on the ground of an African plain.

Thinking longingly of the card room and the brandy being served there, he allowed his gaze to roam the ballroom once more, slowly assessing each young woman. Not one caught his eye or drew his interest.

No woman stood out from the crowd, unless it was the elderly matron sporting a trio of ostrich feathers and a set of patently false teeth.

George groaned. Aloud, if the raised brows of the nearby foreign ambassador were any indication.

Disguising his faux pas with a discreet cough into his gloved hand, he edged around the ballroom, hugging the wall when he was able and avoiding catching the eye of ladies on the prowl.

Then, across the crowded ballroom, a group opened up, and he saw her.

Tall, striking rather than beautiful, with hair the flaming red of an African sunset. George couldn't take his eyes off her. He prided himself on being an excellent judge of character, and there was something about her manner that drew him. Confidence, perhaps?

A little older than the current crop of simpering debutantes, he decided. So why hadn't he encountered her before he'd gone to Africa?

His campaign to win a wife would begin, and, if he were very lucky, end with her, if he could find his hostess to effect an introduction.

Having adopted the Regent's love of violent splashes of colour in clothing, Lady

Melton was easy to find. Indeed, the acid-green dress she wore would have been at home in the tropical rainforest he had recently explored.

“Lady Melton, your servant,” he said, offering a small bow. “I hoped I might gain an introduction to a young lady with whom I wish to dance.”

“I would be delighted to make the introduction, my lord. Which particular lady do you wish to stand up with?”

He turned, seeking the flaming redhead amongst Lady Melton’s guests. “The lady in the rose-pink gown.”

Lady Melton knew immediately to whom he referred. “Lady Viola Winspear. A good choice of dancing partner, my lord, and a worthy contender to become your countess.”

George narrowed his eyes, but what could he say when marriage was the fate of most of the unwed lords and ladies at the ball? Indeed, the search for a life partner was the reason they showed up at Ton events time and time again.

His hostess tapped his arm lightly with her fan. “Your mama is my dear friend, and she was saying just the other day how delighted she was that you had returned from your travels in order to fulfil your promise to her.”

“One cannot disappoint one’s mother.”

By this time, they had crossed the dance floor and reached the object of George’s interest.

“My lord, may I introduce Lady Viola Winspear. My lady, Lord George Amhurst.”

George took her hand and bowed. Her curtsy was graceful, like the gazelle he had seen on his travels.

“My lord, a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

A contralto voice. George liked that. Not the high-pitched voices of the gaggle of debutantes all sounding the same. And her eyes, when she met his . . .

A stab of lust caught George off guard.

Lady Viola’s eyes, a rich gentian blue, appeared to see into his very being. A man could lose a great deal of time staring into their depths.

Beside him, Lady Melton’s low hum of acute interest brought him back to his surroundings. “If you wish further introductions, my lord, please let me know.” With the slightest nod, she left.

“May I claim two dances with you, Lady Viola?”

“Two, my lord? Are you not concerned two may be misconstrued?” She offered her dance card, and he saw it was already half-full.

“Two is a perfectly acceptable number in every ballroom, including the Prince Regent’s.” He wrote his name beside the waltz and the supper dance, seeing they were yet unclaimed. “I look forward to hearing about your parents’ voyage to Egypt.”

“How do you—” Her brow wrinkled briefly.

“Your father’s passion for ancient history is well known, and there was a great deal of interest in his current expedition when I was last at a meeting of the Society.”

A murmur and movement off to the side reminded George that conversation must defer to the social niceties he needed to observe.

Bowing, he said, “Until our first dance, my lady,” and moved away, making room for other men wishing to claim her as a partner.

Lady Melton must have been waiting for him to finish with Lady Viola, for as soon as he stepped away from the cluster of men vying to secure a dance with the redheaded woman, his hostess approached again.

Taking his arm, she led him to a small group of three young women clustered beside a giant aspidistra and murmured, “It would be a kindness, my lord, to invite some of these young ladies to dance.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Having secured three more dances with the would-be wallflowers, George was content to wander into the card room, where already one table had formed and a fierce game of vingt et un was underway.

The stakes were high, and the air crackled with tension as four young gentlemen focused their attention on the cards in their hands.

Bets were rash, and it felt more like a grudge game than the sort of civilised, low stakes he was used to at such evenings.

High stakes were meant for private parties and gaming hells and had no place at social gatherings.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spied Lady Viola slipping into the room. She hovered near him at a little distance from the table but appeared to be following the play with interest, watching each of the players intently until the orchestra struck up the introduction to the first dance.



Her sigh, though soft, was audible as she checked her dance card before turning back to the ballroom.

A wayward thought occurred to him that not all young women enjoyed these events.

Was that why she was still unwed? Because she didn't exhibit the appropriate enthusiasm for the chase and catch game of matrimony?

But when he collected her for their waltz, it was apparent she was an excellent dancer—light on her feet and responsive to his directions, and her pleasure in the dance felt genuine.

"I am wondering why I have not seen you previously."

"Perhaps because you have been out of the country, my lord. Africa, I believe? I am most interested in hearing your experiences in that vast land."

"Perhaps over supper, I can share some of what I have seen. But your father must have told you about his travels, surely?"

"From his earlier trips to Egypt, yes. He has been on two previous expeditions to the Land of the Pharaohs, but despite the fact Egypt and wherever you have been belong to the same continent, I imagine those places are vastly different from one another. Papa has returned to a dig site with—" As her voice trailed off, her gaze fell, and an indefinable sadness wrapped around her.

"And? I imagine you miss your father a great deal. How long will he be away?"

The absence of her father could prove to be a stumbling block on his path to marital bliss if his return to England was delayed much beyond summer.

A soft gasp escaped her lips, and George met her sad gaze. Her lips pressed together as she looked past his shoulder, but he thought he saw her throat undulate as she swallowed.

What had he said to cause that reaction?

“I’m sorry if my question has caused concern. I’m sure your father is well and will be home before you—”

“Please, my lord, do not speak further of it.”

She seemed distraught, and George wondered if there had been bad news. Expeditions were notorious for the things that went wrong, the people who went missing, the—

Hadn’t there been some vague rumour about a disappearance circulating at the club earlier? What were the chances that it was about her father’s dig?

“My apologies, Lady Viola, if you do not wish to speak of him here. I understand from my mother’s experience that a certain level of worry attaches to every long voyage and exploration of mine. I imagine it is the same for you with your father.”

“Parents, in fact. My mother accompanied my father to Egypt. She has something of an explorer’s heart herself.”

“Indeed, and does that run in your family?”

One shoulder rose in a delicate shrug. “I have four sisters, my lord, none of whom wishes to travel, and one brother, the last and youngest of my siblings, so, unless you consider his unsupervised roving around Papa’s estate to be exploration—”

“It is the precursor to adventuring abroad. I did much the same when I was a boy. That your sisters do not wish the same is understandable.”

She nodded once, but her eyes gained a merry gleam, and a slight smile played around her lips. Soft, pink lips that tantalised him with possibilities. “I defer to your experience. Only males have an adventurer’s spirit.”

Was she laughing at him? Teasing, perhaps?

“Lady Viola, why do I get the feeling you, too, roamed at will in your childhood?”

“That would be giving away secrets, my lord.” Her smile remained in place, and George accepted the redirection of conversation with good grace.

“In that case, tell me about your siblings.”

“As you wish. In descending order, my sisters are Marie, Juliet, Hermione, and Diana. Their interests are varied, and their talents unique, I believe. Frederick is twelve and famously interested in discovering the natural world. Who dares to enter his bedroom does so with great caution and a strong stomach for the number of creatures he keeps there to study.”

“In that event, it sounds as though he will one day be joining the Royal Society.” George barely stopped himself from adding, ‘like his father’, but it hung in the air between them if the brief tightening of Lady Viola’s brow was any indication.

George would never knowingly inflict pain on anyone, but somehow, he had done so not once but twice in the space of a single dance with this delectable woman.

“I suspect the weather might be a safer topic for now. The mornings have been quite cool, have they not?”

Lady Viola met his eyes, and he imagined he saw gratitude in them as she said, “Indeed, they can be quite chilly, although once the world begins to stir and the sun comes up, they are not so bad.”

“Are you an early riser? I myself enjoy an early morning ride wherever I am.”

“Even in Africa?”

“Unfortunately, not there, unless I wished to saddle an elephant, but here in London or when I am visiting any of my estates, that is my preferred way to begin the day. Do you ride, Lady Viola?”

“I, too, love an early morning canter, although that has not been possible since I came to London.”

“Do you not have your horse here? If that is the problem, I have a bay mare with a beautiful gait that you might enjoy. Would you consent to accompany me out riding tomorrow afternoon?”

An indecipherable flicker of emotion crossed her expression and vanished.

“What do you say, Lady Viola? A ride at two tomorrow?”

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Viola smiled at her partner, surprised by how quickly his interest had been caught. Of all the men she had met and danced with this evening, Lord Amhurst was the best prospect.

He was undoubtedly the most interesting, and there was the bonus that she had to look up at him, unlike several of her partners who were less well-endowed in height.

Lord Amhurst was as tall, if not a shade taller, than her father.

Not that height was a requirement for a husband, but she felt less conspicuous when not towering over her dancing partner.

“A ride would be most acceptable, my lord.”

“I will need your direction to pick you up.”

Panic flared at the thought of the earl turning up at her family home. Even if he only stepped into their foyer, the careful economies she had been forced to practise included letting most of the staff go, and Lord Amhurst would certainly notice.

How to avoid that—

Moments later, her careful planning for all eventualities returned to her. “If it suits you, my lord, I would prefer to meet you at Hyde Park. I have an earlier engagement with a cousin who lives close by and who will not mind my visiting her dressed in my riding habit.”

“As you wish,” he said as the waltz drew to an end. They bowed and curtsied, and he took her arm to lead her from the dance floor.

“Shall we say the eastern end of Rotten Row at two o’clock? I look forward to our ride, Lady Viola.”

“We have one more dance, my lord. I shall see you at supper.”

“And for that, I am very glad.” His eyes held a definite warmth that eased the tightness in Viola’s chest as she waited for her next partner to claim her.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In which our Hero and Heroine go riding

Viola paused in front of the hallway mirror and adjusted the half-net of her riding hat over her face. Like her riding habit, it wasn't the latest fashion, but she liked the touch of mystery it added.

She smoothed an imaginary crease from her skirt and smiled. Thanks to Lord Amhurst, she was going to enjoy a ride in the soft sunshine of an early spring day.

"Vi, what shall we do?" Marie, younger by eighteen months but grown closer during their shared worries, ran up, wringing her hands.

About to walk out for her riding engagement with Lord Amhurst, Viola stood with her hand on the front door. "Tell me what it is."

"The butcher refused to give further credit to Mrs Macey until his bill has been paid, and I don't think we can even afford to keep her on." A frown marred Marie's brow.

Viola glanced at the time on the longcase clock in the entry hall. It was not yet half one. Not wishing to arrive with flushed cheeks, she had allowed herself plenty of time to walk sedately to the park, but Marie needed her right now.

Accepting she would have to walk to her engagement quickly and risk appearing pink-cheeked, she tugged Marie's hand and drew her into the front parlour where their siblings would not overhear them.

"We can't afford her, nor Simmons, and how will that look with not even a butler to

greet callers? We can't afford any staff if we are to feed ourselves beyond the next fortnight."

"I thought we had enough for a month?" Viola couldn't believe she had miscalculated what their meagre store of funds would cover.

"That was before I paid Mrs Macey her wages this morning."

Viola sat abruptly. "How could I have forgotten to include that?" Panic welled within as their bad situation became dire.

"Why are you dressed for riding when we need to do something? We don't even have a horse!"

"Which is why I am meeting Lord Amhurst at the park. He believes we haven't brought our horses to town and has offered the use of one of his for our ride today."

"Lord George Amhurst?" Marie's eyes brightened with recognition. "He's the explorer earl, isn't he? Are you planning to marry him to rescue us from our troubles?"

"You know that's why I attended the Melton ball, to find a suitably wealthy husband."

Marie smiled at the idea, but her smile quickly faded, and she shook her head. "A grand idea, but there's just one tiny little problem, sister dear."

"Only one?" Toning down her sarcasm, she asked, "What is it?"

"Even if he were to ask you to marry him within the fortnight, which would be a short courtship even by London standards, you said you weren't certain we could survive

beyond the next two weeks.”

“I know, but the fact of my engagement to a wealthy lord would keep the creditors at bay. It would buy us time.”

“Vi, we need funds now!”

“I know.” She strode around the room, wringing her hands in quite the same manner as her sister had done.

It was beyond vexing to Viola that the only idea open to one of her sex and social station was to wed as soon as possible.

“I doubt anyone could bring a suitor up to scratch in less than a month, much less two weeks.”

Viola stopped in the middle of the room and bit her lip. “There must be some other way to secure funds to see us through until Father and Mother return.”

If she were a man, she’d have choices.

If she were a man, she’d be able to keep her family safe.

Tears sprang into Marie’s eyes, and her voice was soft as she asked, “Do you truly believe they will come home to us? That letter—”

“Said only that they were missing following that sandstorm. Why, they might have been found already while we sit here worrying.” She sat beside Marie, took both her sister’s hands in hers, and stared into her eyes, trying beyond all that was reasonable to share her desperate hope with her sister and convince her.



“I have to believe, Marie. Anything else is unthinkable.”

Marie nodded and sniffed. “Then I will work on believing too.” She pulled one hand free and searched in her pocket for a handkerchief.

“Now, didn’t you say you were to meet your earl at two o’clock? Hurry, Vi, or you’ll be late, and that won’t help your cause.”

Viola squeezed her sister’s hand, nodded, and hurried from the house and along the street towards Hyde Park.

She was some fifty yards from the entrance when she spotted a beautiful bay mare with a blonde mane and tail, sporting a side saddle. Her steps slowed as she cast a critical eye over the magnificent horse before her gaze landed on its owner.

Despite seeing Lord Amhurst only from behind, she’d recognise him anywhere. He was engaged in conversation with another gentleman, and he had not seen her, but it gave her time to appreciate his form: the upright stance, broad shoulders, and well-developed rider’s thighs.

If she had to marry to save her family, it would be nice if the sight of her intended husband inspired rather than revolted her, and a bonus if he was kind.

An earl such as Amhurst must be considered one of the catches of the season.

He had liked her enough to invite her to go riding, and on a mount that was clearly a thoroughbred.

In another man, that might have been construed as flaunting his wealth, but from the little she had seen of Lord Amhurst during their two dances and supper conversation, she rather thought it showed a generosity of spirit and consideration for her.

That was a quality she had not dared to hope for.

An unfamiliar tingling sensation ran between her thighs, through a part of Viola's body best not thought about when in public. Heat rose in her cheeks as she approached the men and caught a snatch of their conversation.

“ . . . high stakes, and that young hothead Picton will be at Elverson's hell tomorrow night ready to . . . ”

The gentleman speaking to Lord Amhurst espied her approach and cut short whatever remark he'd been going to make, but it was enough for Viola.

Picton had been one of the vingt et un players she had studied at the Melton ball. He had a subtle tell, but Viola had spotted it and knew she could beat him in any game they played.

If only she were allowed.

Lord Amhurst's companion tilted his head in Viola's direction, catching the earl's eye and alerting him to her arrival. The earl turned, saw her, and bowed.

“Ah, Lady Viola, we have a lovely afternoon for our ride.”

She curtsied and smiled. “Indeed we do, sir. I hope I have not kept you waiting.” Nearby, church bells chimed twice.

“Not at all. May I present Sir Gregory Hunt, an old school friend?”

After introductions and brief remarks on the fine day for riding, Sir Gregory took his leave, allowing Viola to give some attention to her mount.

She approached the horse and stroked her long neck. “She’s a beautiful mare, my lord. What is her name?”

The earl chuckled, a wry, throaty laugh that Viola mentally added to the positive side of her potential groom’s ledger. So far, she hadn’t added anything to the negative side.

He ran a hand over the beautifully curried neck of the mare. “Given her breeding and appearance, you’d expect her to be called something regal or goddess-like, such as Aphrodite or Hera, but my niece, Isabelle, when she was only five years old, named her, and I allowed her to.

“For her sins, the mare is Daffy, short for Daffodil.”

The name was so unexpected Viola barely suppressed a snort. Quickly regaining her composure, she patted the mare. “A perfectly logical name if she was born with this golden mane and tail. At five years of age, I may also have thought Daffodil the perfect name for such a golden creature.”

Lord Amhurst smiled, and it was clear he approved of her response. “Allow me to assist you to mount the fair Daffy.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

What an unusual man the earl was proving to be. Instead of leaving the task to his groom, Lord Amhurst handed her the reins while the groom moved to the far side and held the cheekpiece.

Viola had resigned herself to making a match with whichever suitable gentleman could be brought to offer first, but those feelings were rapidly changing with each encounter with Lord Amhurst.

He was a good prospect, wealthy, and Cousin Sybil, Viola's sometime chaperone and informant on all matters pertaining to the Ton, had discovered he was intent on marrying this Season. Just this morning, she had replied to Vi's query and shared what she knew in a note sent to the house:

"A promise to his mother to wed, no less. You could not have chosen better, Viola."

Her would-be suitor offered his locked hands to boost her into the saddle.

As Viola lifted one foot, the mare took a small sidestep.

Caught off balance, Viola instinctively placed a hand on the earl's shoulder.

Her fingers dug into solid muscle, and her breath hitched.

What would it be like to be held in his strong embrace?

"My lady?"

Viola blinked and raised her foot a second time. "Of course, thank you." He boosted her to the saddle with ease, and she drew the reins together, but her fingers retained the feel of Lord Amhurst's shoulder.

Solid. Dependable. Stirring.

How had she been so lucky in her gambit when all else in the lives of her family had turned topsy-turvy?

If one had to marry, then Lord Amhurst was clearly the cream of the crop. Securing him in marriage would offer more benefits than simply securing her family's future.

The earl mounted his horse, a darker bay than Daffy, and drew alongside. “Are you comfortable, Lady Viola?”

“I am, thank you, and keen to experience riding on this beauty.”

They set both horses to a sedate walk, as the crowds of those wishing to see and be seen were still making their way into the park.

But even at a walk, Daffy’s breeding showed.

Her gait was smooth, and Viola longed to set her galloping over a stretch of grassland.

She imagined it would feel like flying, free from trouble and strife.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

She patted the mare's neck and tried to allow herself to simply enjoy the moment. There were too few such moments since that letter had arrived. She must treasure each one.

"Did you enjoy the ball?" Lord Amhurst's voice broke into her reverie and recalled her to the expectations of a ride with her prospective suitor. It would not do to become complacent about his interest in her.

"The evening was very pleasant, my lord. Did you not find it so?"

"I know I should agree, but to be honest, I would rather be back in Africa than attend these events. At least there, attacks by wild animals are about survival."

Momentarily taken aback by his comment, Viola hesitated before answering.

"Do you feel . . . hunted at such events?"

"Precisely the word. There is a wild, but almost military precision to Society mothers' tactics when they set out to capture a son-in-law."

Viola's throat tightened, and she turned her head to hide the flush of guilt surely staining her cheeks. She was as bad as any doting mother waging a campaign to win the earl. The only difference was, she was betting on herself to win the prize of the Season.

"If you dislike it so much, why put yourself through the experience? Women have no choice but to wed, but as a man, you are free to do as you please. You can go

wherever you choose, do whatever you wish—”

“If only it were that simple, Lady Viola. An earl is duty-bound to marry and sire an heir, and I promised my mother I would attend to my duty by my thirtieth birthday. I have no choice other than who to make my countess before the Season ends.”

Viola met his gaze, surprised to see speculation in his eyes as he looked at her. Of course, she was being assessed for the role as surely as she was assessing him.

But while the earl was free to move on to another lady if Viola failed to meet his requirements, he was her best bet.

“My apologies, my lord. Of course you have your duty. We all do; duty to family is foremost in all our minds, and you have a great name to uphold and a line to continue. Please tell me about your family. You have mentioned your mother and a niece. Is she the daughter of a sister or younger brother?”

“Isabelle is my only sister’s child. Irene is younger by three years and widowed far too young. Her husband fought at the Battle of Waterloo and died of his wounds some weeks later.” A muscle ticked in the earl’s cheek, and she could almost hear his teeth grinding.

“A difficult death by the sound of it. I am sorry for you and your family’s loss. Let us find a happier topic.”

“It seems we both have losses within our families that cause pain. May I ask, before we move on to less fraught topics, have you had news of your parents recently?”

Viola dragged in a painful breath and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she realised their horses had stopped and Daffy had lowered her head to chomp at a succulent plant. Tugging gently on the reins, Viola diverted the mare

away and walked her on into the shade of a large oak.

When the earl stopped his horse beside hers and dismounted, she glanced around. They had arrived at a rare quiet spot in the park. The earl tied his reins to a low branch before walking around the mare and holding his arms up to help her dismount.

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she leaned forward, and he set his hands about her waist to lift her down, but somehow, Viola felt untethered. In his arms, she floated to the ground.

Looking up into his face, it took her far too long to realise he was still holding her. His hands almost encircled her waist. Even through the layers of clothing, they felt warm and strong. Comforting.

The earl's hands should not have still been on her person, but she didn't want them to leave.

“Viola?”

She gasped and stepped away. “I am sorry, my lord.” But she wasn't sure if she was sorry for the extended intimacy, or for its sudden loss.

“I fear I should not have asked about your parents. It seems to cause you pain, and I never meant for that to happen.”

“It is not your fault, my lord. Indeed, the subject is a natural one. But in my case, we, my siblings and I, have received difficult news. Our parents are missing from their dig in Egypt. There was a sandstorm—”

The earl took hold of her hand and drew her to a nearby stone bench. “I see. And you have had no further news since their disappearance?”



Viola shook her head. “No.” She blinked, trying to stop the tears that sprang to her eyes whenever she pondered her parents’ fate.

“News from abroad is slow to arrive, and whoever sent that news should perhaps have waited for the outcome of the search for your parents before writing of it to you.” A white handkerchief appeared in her blurred vision, and she gratefully accepted it.

The earl continued. “My understanding is that your father is an experienced explorer. I am certain he would have made every effort to ensure the safety of your mother and himself when he saw the storm approaching.”

Dabbing her eyes, Viola nodded. “I think the same, but why would their native guide have informed the authorities and arranged for that letter to be written if Father’s team hadn’t already searched and found no sign of them?”

“Fear, perhaps, that he would be blamed for the loss of two English people. Or he may have used the excuse of the storm to cover a theft or decided to abandon them in order to make off with their property.”

“You sound as though you have experienced some of those things?”

Lord Amhurst spread his hands and shrugged. “Managing a native team of porters and guides on an expedition carries certain risks. One must expect that not everyone has the same goal. But your father has a reputation for dealing fairly with his workers.”

“I am glad to hear it. But I still don’t understand why the guide had that letter sent to us.

“To cover himself. Viola, there are many scenarios in which your parents are alive

and well, and will be coming home to you, and only one which is inconceivable for a loving child to contemplate. Hold to the possibility of the many, not the unthinkable one.”

Even as she appreciated the earl’s kindness and logical assessment of the situation, Viola was aware that some change had occurred between them.

“Thank you, my lord.” She used his handkerchief to dab her nose and imagined how wretched she probably looked after giving in to her sorrow. That was not how she wished to present herself to Lord Amhurst—

“Oh, you called me by my name.”

An arrested look appeared in his eyes. “Did I? My sincere apologies, Lady Viola. I sought only to reassure you.”

“You did, and please do not concern yourself. I feel much better after your sensible evaluation of the situation, my lord.”

“Please, I would be happy if you would use my name. It is George.”

That invitation, so personal and intimate among the upper levels of Society, should have made Viola proud of her rapid success with the earl. To go from being introduced last night to using his first name today was a minor miracle.

But Viola felt he had offered it as a kindness in her distress rather than as a suitor in pursuit of her hand. In her weak moment—and Viola hated feeling weak—she had found a connection with the earl. A connection brought about because of his humanity.

Perhaps if she played her cards well, she would find more than the usual convenient

Ton marriage with him.

“Do you wish to continue riding, or shall I return you to your home?”

Viola met his compassionate gaze and then glanced at Daffy. “If it’s all the same to you, my lord—”

“George.”

“George.” Viola couldn’t help but smile. “I would dearly love to find somewhere to at least canter. Such a fine day should not be wasted.”

“Then let us not waste a moment more.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In which our Heroine has a Change of Clothes

George entered the discreetly disguised door of Elverson's hell and handed over his coat and hat.

His godson would have much to answer for when he got hold of him, coming to a hell for a grudge match.

The young scamp thought himself invincible.

While he was a decent poker player, he had little self-control when it came to knowing when to leave the table.

Or when to slow his drinking.

George sighed. Hadn't they all thought they were invincible at Philip's age?

But he needed to make sure the boy didn't lose his entire fortune in deep play, hence this evening's excursion into the gambling hell of Elverson's.

Keeping an eye on the boy had become a whole lot more exhausting once he'd attained his majority and access to his inheritance.

Sorrow stabbed through George's heart at the thought of his lost friend and the heavy charge he'd laid on George with his last breath.

Raising a boy to manhood took constant care, and George had shouldered that

responsibility willingly. But now Philip was grown and gained control of his inheritance, he still looked for guidance in how to manage it. Who would look out for Philip when George returned to Africa?

Noise rose, weighty as the fug of cigar smoke, as George wandered through two rooms already heavily populated with men eager to prove their worth at the tables, before he spotted his godson in the third.

A quick glance at the pile of notes in front of him relieved George's fear he'd arrived too late.

Two of the other three players were known to George; friends of Philip's, but not the focus of the grudge match he'd anticipated following the Melton ball. His gaze landed on the back of the third fellow, whom he didn't recognise from his present angle.

Slowly, George circled the table to get a better view. Nothing about the fellow intent on his hand jumped out, although the confident angle of his chin seemed vaguely familiar.

George stopped slightly to the right of the youth's direct line of sight, for youth he was, if the smooth chin was any indication, and catalogued further details.

His clothes were of good quality but had not been in fashion for over ten years.

They hung off the lad's frame, so perhaps they'd not been made for him but for an older man.

Dull brown hair in a less-than-neat cut, tallish from the proportion of his body draped in the chair, and soft, white hands. Well-kept fingernails that were at odds with the raggedy haircut.

A tingle of suspicion raced through George, and his attention zeroed in on the lad's face, noting a feminine fineness and eyebrows of a rich reddish hue barely visible beneath the shaggy fringe. Odd. He seemed familiar, but where—

The youth looked up, his eyes catching George's and widening in surprise.

Eyes of a rich, gentian blue, in which a man could lose himself.

If not for that moment of instant recognition, George might have imagined the youth to be a very close cousin of Lady Viola, but that flare of surprise gave her away.

He folded his arms over his chest and frowned.

What the hell was Lady Viola doing dressed as a man and playing cards in a gambling den?

Her lips pressed together, and a muscle ticked in her cheek before she was chivvied by the other players to bid or fold. Most vocal was his godson.

George noted a small pile of notes in front of Viola and wondered if she knew his godson held what was probably the winning hand.

With a slow lift of one eyebrow, Viola looked directly at Philip before adding to the pot. "Call."

"Are you so keen to lose your winnings to me, Victor?" Philip grinned, cast a conspiratorial smile at George, and laid his cards down.

A pair of queens and a pair of twos should have been enough to claim the pot. Indeed, Philip half rose, and his hands reached for his winnings when Viola's lips twitched.

She leaned forward and tapped the table.

“I think not, Philip.”

George’s godson froze in the act of scooping what he thought were his winnings into his pile as all eyes turned to Victor.

Casually, she set her cards down.

Five black cards in sequence: two clubs and three spades.

A straight.

“I believe the pot is mine.” Viola’s contralto suited a youth’s voice. If George hadn’t known she was a woman, he could as easily have believed her to be Victor as did the others.

Philip’s cheeks pinked as he dropped into his chair. “You have the Devil’s own luck, Victor.”

“I told you I was feeling lucky.”

George leaned in and extended his hand to Viola. “Lord George Amhurst, Philip’s godfather. How do you do?”

Viola shook his hand with studied nonchalance. “Victor Wi—Watling. How do you do, my lord?”

“I’d like a chat with you, if you please.”

Philip offered a half-hearted protest. “But the game—”

“Can continue while I get to know your new friend.”

Viola glanced around the table and sighed before collecting her winnings. Folding the notes, she tucked them into an inside breast pocket in her jacket, rose with a slight bow to the other players, and turned to George. “Your servant, my lord.”

George led the way to a quiet corner and requested two brandies from a passing footman. He caught Viola’s eye, nodded to indicate the second club chair, and spoke at a volume unlikely to be heard by anyone passing by.

“Have a seat, Victor. I must say, you make a most convincing young man.”

Viola tilted her chin up and pinned him with her blue gaze like a bug to a display board. “I’m sure you think the worst of me, my lord. Indeed, I’m surprised you didn’t out me at the table. Why prolong it with this farce of having a drink?”

“I like solving mysteries, and you, my lady, are the most intriguing I’ve encountered.

Besides, were I to out you, your reputation would be gone forever.

Your siblings would suffer by association, and your parents would be scandalised upon their return.

So my first question must be why? Why risk everything on such a hazardous lark? ”

Her chest rose with an audible and long indrawn breath. Until that moment, he hadn’t been fixated on it, but now he struggled to lift his gaze. How had she disguised herself so thoroughly?

“Lark! Only the most dire of circumstances drove me to this deception.” Her voice was a soft hiss of anger, and he leaned forward the better to hear her.



“If Society did not forbid a woman from doing the same things as a man, I would not have had to risk everything to gain breathing space for my family.”

“What are you talking about?”

She held her tongue while the footman placed two glasses of brandy on the table and waited until he left. High colour stained her cheeks, and she glared at him.

“Money, my lord, or the lack thereof. Something you have probably never had to worry about.”

“Your father would not have left you destitute. Didn’t he—”

“He left us with what he believed to be sufficient funds, but then he extended their stay in Egypt when they uncovered the entrance to a nobleman’s tomb. Credit was offered to us by most merchants, of course—”

“But rumours of your parents’ disappearance caused all sources of credit to dry up. I begin to understand.” How irresponsible of her father not to have foreseen that eventuality.

“You are correct, my lord.”

George’s anger and disbelief dissipated, replaced by an odd sort of admiration. He knew of no other woman who would risk everything, including social suicide, to save her family as Viola had.

But she had targeted his godson, and that was not easily forgiven, although . . . she had not thrown everything into the pot on that last hand. Did that indicate a conscience even in her straitened circumstances?

“Dire circumstances demand bold action. I understand that, but answer me this: did you set out to fleece my godson?”

“What? No. I had no idea who he was in relation to you. I observed him in the card room at the Melton ball and realised I could read his tell, as I did with the others. As I was approaching you at the park, I overheard Sir Gregory mention another of the players and this place. Those two things were the genesis of this idea.”

“And your disguise? How was that achieved in so short a time?”

She plucked at the collar of her jacket.

“Father’s clothes from the trunk in the attic.

As for—” She touched the brown wig. “Our cook knew someone who knew someone who makes them for the theatre. Thanks to that connection, the perruquier was willing to lend it to me for the night on the promise of payment upon its return.”

George nodded, sat back in the club chair, and drank his brandy. It wasn’t particularly good, but in his present mood, he needed something to take the edge off the anger that had swirled in his gut.

How strange to be sitting here, sipping brandy with the woman disguised as a man whom he had been considering as an easy answer to his need for a countess.

Was he still considering her?

His gaze ran over their surroundings, and then over Viola.

“How did you know about this place? I can’t imagine it being known, let alone discussed among ladies.”

“I asked our butler. He wasn’t happy telling me about it, but he knows me well. He knew I wouldn’t be asking without good reason.”

“And do you still think your reason for risking everything is justified?”

“I do, my lord.”

“George.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In which our Hero and Heroine Take a Carriage Ride

“What will you do now you have seen through me, my lord?” Viola’s heart thudded despite her outward calm. The merest tremor in her hand shook the brandy in her glass as she lifted it and sipped.

The liquid burned her lips, burned her throat, and she barely suppressed a coughing fit, which in this place would have given her away as surely as if her wig had fallen off.

“I asked you to call me George.” Strangely, his distracted answer that wasn’t really an answer gave her hope.

Ridiculous, tentative, longed-for hope, all because he’d offered his name again. Would he do that if he intended to out her now?

She sat quietly, watching his furrowed brow, wanting to squirm under his intense gaze, but aware she had to continue to wear her confidence like her coat and wait upon his decision.

“I don’t like it, but I understand the reason why you did it. In some ways, it is even estimable that you were prepared to go to such lengths to protect your family in the absence of a male relative. However, it needs to cease immediately.”

His dictum made sense. She might have accepted such if it had come from her father, but Viola burred up at the tone of his voice and the assumption that any male besides her father dared to assume he had the right to tell her what she could and could not

do.

“Who are you to order me around?”

“I’m the man you considered marrying. Be honest, Viola, wasn’t that your intention?”

Mutely, she gave him a single nod.

“Tell me, what changed your mind and brought you here tonight? I’m sure you know I’m wealthy, and becoming a countess is nothing to sneeze at, so why risk it all now?”

A waspish need to poke at his arrogance, even if what he said was true, provoked her reply. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s just that I like to eat once a day when possible.”

Horror filled George’s eyes before he quickly rearranged his expression. “Is your situation truly that desperate?”

“The butcher and the coal merchant have refused to extend further credit, and I have had to let all our staff go, aside from our butler and cook, and I was going to tell them we can’t afford to keep them any longer.

Within the fortnight, I believe we will have nought to feed off but the air, as Shakespeare wrote in the Danish play. ”

“That bad?”

She nodded. “That is why I am here tonight, thus attired.” She tapped her jacket above where her small wad of winnings resided in an inner pocket.

“Following the ball, my sister made it clear I did not have the luxury of waiting for a proposal from you or any man if we were to keep body and soul together.

“What I won tonight was honestly come by, and will keep food on the table and coal for the kitchen for another week or two. If you— permit me to continue—” How uttering that word galled her, but Viola was sensible enough to know a single word from George would be her undoing.

“I can secure our next month with another hour of play here.”

“Didn’t your father provide a letter to your bank? What of his man of business?”

“The bank manager refuses to speak with a woman. As for Father’s man of business, he has not seen fit to answer any of my letters. I had always thought him an honest man, but perhaps the absence of my father to oversee the accounts was too tempting.”

How it hurt Viola to expose the depth of their need. It felt like a betrayal of her father, but Lord Amhurst—George—had to be made to understand why she absolutely had to return to the game.

“Very well.”

“Very well what, my lord?”

“You may continue to play for one hour, and I will play alongside you. Just one more thing.”

“What is that, my lord?” Exultant at having convinced him, she would grant his request.

“You will call me George or else I will address you as Viola.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“I advise you not to push me, Victor.” He tossed off the rest of his brandy and stood.  
“Ready?”

They rejoined George’s godson when the current round ended, and Viola felt a twinge of nerves running through her stomach as she took her small wad of banknotes from her pocket.

Seeing in it the meat on their table and coal for the kitchen range, she removed three notes, folded them, and replaced them in her pocket.

No matter how confident she felt, it was best to play conservatively.

As play progressed, Viola began to suspect George was somehow controlling the size of the bets made, but she couldn’t prove it.

Perhaps it was only that, in deference to his godfather’s presence, Philip’s occasionally rash, high-stakes bets were tempered.

Or the fact she caught him casting surreptitious glances at his godfather before he raised the stake.

The other players followed suit, but the outcome was that Viola’s winnings grew steadily rather than dramatically.

When the hour George had allotted her was up, she had a tidy pile of notes in front of her. They were a small but essential barrier against looming insolvency. They were a lifesaver.

George rose and collected his stake, making brief eye contact with each player in

turn. “Gentlemen, my thanks for a good game, but I must leave you to it. Victor, if you’ve had enough play for the night, I’ll give you a lift.”

How neatly and completely George assumed control, but Viola was content to leave. Tonight’s winnings would pay the most pressing of their bills and see them through to the end of next month, if she was careful.

By then, God willing, her parents might have returned, or at least, good news about their safety.

“Kind of you, George. Thank you. Good night, gentlemen.”

Philip waved a hand. “Be assured I’ll beat you next time we play, Victor.”

“I look forward to it, Philip.” She offered a small, ironic bow.

Even if his godson didn’t yet acknowledge it, George knew that, until the lad learned to control his tell, the outcome would be the same in any rematch with Viola. Philip was occasionally good, but she was much better. But Philip would have to figure that out for himself.

George stood aside, allowing her to precede him.

Once in the entry and waiting for George’s carriage to be called, he turned to her. “Your ability to read each player is uncanny. I’m pleased to have had the chance to see you in action, but Viola, that must be the last time.”

“Why, George? No one guessed who I was except you. How did you, by the way?”

“Your eyes.”



“Many people have blue eyes.”

“Not gentian blue. Yours are quite remarkable. And when you looked up at me, your eyes gave away that you knew me.”

“Ah, I must work on that.”

“No need, since you will not be pulling that trick again. Besides, you should have enough money to see you through until your parents are found to be alive and well.”

That comment sealed Viola’s suspicion and stirred an angry spark within her relief at having staved off destitution for now. It irked that her winnings weren’t solely from her own efforts. However, he had achieved it, George had ensured she won an amount that would keep her family safe.

“You let me win.”

“You attribute me with power I don’t possess. No, winning was all you. My presence merely tempered my godson’s bets.”

As she had suspected, but she let further comments lie unspoken.

The carriage pulled up at that moment, and no more was said until they were settled inside, George having asked for her address and given the direction to the coachman.

The horses set off, and Viola sank into the luxuriously soft seat with a sigh. “George, why do you persist in thinking you can tell me what to do? We barely know one another. You are not my father, nor my husband, nor even my fiancé. I’m not sure if you are even my suitor anymore.”

“And yet I feel responsible for you.”

“There is no need to, I assure you.” In the low light spilling inside from the carriage lamps, she tried to read George’s expression, but he had settled back against the squabs into deeper shadow.

“You do not know me.” If she repeated that often enough, perhaps he would back off. But perhaps not, since he seemed not to have understood what she saw as the key reason why he shouldn’t be helping. “You don’t know me, and you have no cause to worry about my family’s situation.”

“That is where you are wrong, Viola. I believe I know a lot about you already.”

“That’s not possible in the short time we’ve known one another.”

“First impressions are rarely wrong.”

“Even if I thought you were a pompous ass?”

“Did you?”

“No, but if I had, your insistence that you know me after one night of dancing and a single horse ride would be accurate.”

He chuckled at that and leaned forward so that she saw his expression when he told her, “You are stubborn and strong-minded, qualities that are often admired in a man but not in a woman. But they are the qualities that have allowed you to make difficult decisions to ensure your family survives.

“You are also fair; dare I say, noble even, in your self-sacrifice for your siblings.”

Having delivered his assessment of her character, he sat back, returning to the shadows.

A shame, Viola decided. She quite liked watching his face as he talked. His was a face she could imagine across the breakfast table every morning, if indeed marriage to the earl was still on offer.

“A mixed bag of qualities. Who wouldn’t help their family if it were in their power to do so? But none of that explains why you are intent upon this crusade to help me.”

“The game.” George crossed one long leg over the other.

Within the confines of the carriage and with her long legs also in the footwell, inevitably, his brushed against hers.

For some reason, that touch disturbed her even more than his hand at her waist during the waltz and reminded her how alone they were in his carriage.

“Why do you persist in annoying me so?”

“I annoy you?”

“Yes, by not speaking plainly.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Was she simply tired and overreacting? Or did her men's clothing give her a sense of freedom to say anything that she wouldn't when dressed as a woman? In truth, she had had enough of mysterious utterances.

She angled her body and moved her legs as far away as it was possible to go in a carriage until her knee banged against the door. "What do you mean, 'the game'?"

"When one observes a man playing cards, he reveals more of himself than he knows. Your play was honest. You never attempted to drive the stakes so high as to inflict real losses, but you ferreted out each player's weakness."

"Not yours, George. I couldn't get a read on you."

He shrugged. "What you see is what you get."

Viola's annoyance, as well as her strange reaction to the intimacy of sharing the carriage with him, subsided, and her calm, rational mind reasserted itself.

"I believe you are a kind man who cares a great deal about those close to him. Your godson is fortunate to have you looking out for him. But I still do not understand why you trouble yourself with me."

"Permit me to speak plainly then. You are not the only one who must marry. I have an aversion to being viewed as prime Sunday roast by menacing mamas. Acquiring a wife will free me from their sights, appease my mother, and fulfil my promise to her. It will also allow me to return to Africa sooner. I would call that a successful outcome, wouldn't you? "

“You will leave England as soon as you are married? What a joyful union that will be for your unfortunate wife.”

“I will naturally wait to secure an heir before I depart.”

“And then you will leave your wife and child?”

“That is my intention. It would be unimaginable to take them with me to the Dark Continent.”

“Why? My mother travelled with my father.”

“Leaving a grown-up family. A young child is an entirely different proposition. Dangerous animals, snakes, diseases— even native uprisings. There are numerous potentially fatal dangers there. I would not wish to expose my family to such a situation.”

“You believe my father was wrong to take my mother with him?” Viola couldn’t stop the hard edge in her voice.

“That sounded like you were condemning him for wanting to share the wonders of his exploration with his wife. There are two sides to that argument, you know. It was her choice to go or stay. She chose to go with him.”

There was a pause before George replied. “That was not my intention to condemn him. I meant only to explain my own reasons for choosing to travel alone. Perhaps if I were in your father’s shoes, I would choose differently.”

“My parents have shown me what a good and loving marriage looks like, and it is not one where my husband is not by my side. If I have the freedom to choose, mine will be similar to a man I love and who loves me enough to either stay with me or take me

travelling with him. Anything less would be a disservice to myself.”

“And yet, until you won at the tables tonight, you were willing to work towards gaining a proposal from me to save your family from ruin. I do not know whether to applaud you for your sacrifice or deride your mercenary intent.”

“My lord! That was—”

“Harsh but true.” He heaved a sigh and turned his head away. “Marriage is the goal of most young people attending society balls. Why would you expect you and I to be different?”

When she married, Viola expected she would miss her loving, noisy family, but she had always imagined her husband would be there to assuage that hole in her heart. But George planned to leave on his adventures as soon as he had sired an heir.

If she were to marry George, his plan to leave his wife behind while he went off exploring meant there would be no smiling face across the breakfast table each morning, no interesting discussions, and, on top of that, she wouldn’t even have the comfort of her family around her.

Could she truly contemplate such a lonely existence?

Did she still have that choice?

Was it likely George would offer her even that shell of a marriage?

Viola was nothing if not strictly honest, even when the truth was, as George said, harsh. She had burned her bridges with him, and marriage to her would be the last thing on his mind.

Certain she had failed her family, she sighed. “You are correct. I was prepared to do what was necessary. I attended the ball hoping to catch the eye of a marriageable man.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like that choice is still open to me with you.”

Silence from the shadows.

Where was his vehement agreement? Surely it was impossible he would entertain offering for her now.

“Is it?”

“Are you asking if I am willing to propose, or if I can guess your state of mind?”

“The former. Clearly, the latter is impossible.”

“You are an unusual woman, Viola. And you are strong of mind, which may be a virtue in a countess. I wonder—if you were my wife, I might discover I could not bear to leave you behind.

“If I were your wife, I think you would find it difficult. I would not sit at home quietly sewing cushion covers. That is not me.”

“No, I don’t imagine it is. Do you believe you would persuade me to another course?”

“I can be very persuasive, so I am told.”

“And there are many ways one may be convinced of a course of action.”

He sounded thoughtful, and she settled back on her seat, unwilling to disturb his thinking. If she was lucky, if a miracle happened, maybe she hadn't ruined everything.

The hoofbeats of the horses measured out the seconds of silence between them—seconds in which she scarcely dared to breathe, seconds in which they drew closer to her home and the end of their journey.

The end of every possibility with the earl.

And then he asked, “What do you say to the idea of us getting to know one another better?”

“I thought you already knew me so well.” Sarcasm laced her voice. It wasn't wise, but for the moment, she wanted George to be on the receiving end.

Somehow, he took her snippy comment as humour, with a grace she hadn't expected, for he laughed and leaned towards her.

“Now, now, Vi, you know what I mean. However, I think you need time to get to know whether I am truly that ‘pompous ass’ you mentioned—”

“That was a jest, George. I do not think you are one.”

“But you aren't sure how well we will deal together, and while I am reasonably certain, I suggest we take some time to learn more about one another.”

“You aren't cutting your losses with me?”



“No. You are unlike most women, and I would like to explore—possibilities. Explorers don’t just see something and accept it at face value. They look beneath the surface.”

Viola touched the cravat she had tied so carefully at the beginning of the evening. “Such as how a lady might dress as a man and enter an all-male establishment?”

His laugh was deep and came from his belly. “I am interested in the qualities that gave you the courage to do so. In addition, we converse easily, which I had hoped for but not expected to find, and I believe we will be compatible in other areas of day-to-day living.”

“What other areas?”

“Our desire to do well by those who depend upon us: your family, mine, and the lives of my tenants. We are both of a mind to improve their lot in life, and I believe together we can.

“Then there is the bedroom.”

Viola’s mind caught on the word and blanked out everything else.

The bedroom? Had he really mentioned—the bedroom?

Viola’s imagination latched onto the memory of his hand on her waist and the feel of his leg against hers. The heat burning through her clothing, the way their steps in the dances matched so well. And now he was talking about how well they might match in bed.

Polite society did not mention such things, nor condone discussion between unmarried couples, especially when one was an unmarried lady, and yet he had raised

the subject.

While they were alone.

In a carriage.

At night.

Talking about intimate relations.

“You aren’t suggesting we—”

“No. I would not suggest such. But perhaps you are curious what it will be like to kiss me? I must confess, I would like to know just how compatible we are. A kiss would be a good way to start our investigation, don’t you agree?”

Suddenly, that was all Viola could think about. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart sped up until surely he could hear it thumping in her chest.

What would it feel like, kissing George, feeling his lips on hers, knowing that good kisses might be the prelude to more.

Whatever that more might be.

Honesty, Vi.

“I—would like to know.”

“I knew you were an explorer at heart. Come here.” He took hold of her hand and drew her across the carriage.

It rocked when she moved, and he shifted along the seat so she might sit beside him. Their thighs touched along their length.

She could feel his gaze on her, although only a faint gleam reflected in his eyes in the low light.

Dressed in men's clothing and sitting in shadow, Viola had never felt more seen.

The moment felt ripe with possibility as George raised a hand and tipped her chin up.

Heat. Expectation. Touch.

They whirled around her as she waited for the touch of his lips on hers. And then—

Soft and enticing as sin, his lips brushed hers once, twice. Hers parted, and Viola was lost in his kiss.

Which continued until the carriage pulled up in front of her home.

He insisted on escorting her to her door but refrained from bowing and left her with a promise they would continue their exploration the following afternoon with a ride in the country.

Viola murmured, "I look forward to it, George," before climbing the stairs to her bedroom.

If she was going to marry to save her family, George had much to recommend him.

He knew enough of her circumstances that the burden of hiding it was lifted from her shoulders, and she could be more herself.

He might still want to travel, but she would persuade him to take her with him, by whatever means necessary.

If that involved more kissing, she would be very happy.

Touching her lips, she decided she was going to enjoy getting to know him better.

Enjoy learning how to persuade him.

Enjoy exploring with him.

Exploring him.

Her lips tipped up in a broad grin.

Sin really shouldn't feel so good.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In which the Hero feels inordinately pleased at a Picnic in the Country .

George felt decidedly pleased with himself as he walked away from the Admiralty building.

He'd spent a pleasant but productive hour with his good friend, Sir Gregory Hunt, whose work as a naval secretary gave him direct access to the Admiral.

Gregory had promised to arrange passage to Egypt for an agent aboard the next naval ship heading to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea.

The agent, whose services George had just that morning procured, was a veteran of the war in Egypt against Napoleon. His mission was to ascertain the whereabouts of Viola's parents and what had befallen them. He would then proceed according to whether the news was good or bad.

In the event he succeeded in finding Lord and Lady Winspear alive and well, he would deliver a letter from George with news of Viola's family's situation and an assurance from him that he would take care of Viola and her siblings until such time as Lord Winspear returned or sent written instructions to his bank, which said agent would be happy to deliver.

Having set the search for Viola's parents in motion, George was about to take her for a drive in the country in order to get to know her better.

But no matter how he couched his decision to continue courting her as scientific inquiry, he was honest enough to acknowledge he liked her.

The very qualities other men would shun in a wife were those he considered strengths.

Not that he wished her to make a habit of wearing men's clothing, unless it was for his eyes only, but the strength of her determination to protect her siblings would as easily extend to her duties as his countess.

The more George considered Viola, the more he believed his search for a wife to be over. His reward would be sweeter than the tempting treats his cook would have packed into the picnic hamper.

George planned to taste them on Viola's lips.

Yes indeed, he was feeling very pleased with himself as he entered his house and headed for the stairs to change his attire. But before he climbed more than two steps, his butler appeared below him.

"My lord, you have a visitor in the library. He said he was happy to wait." Pickering knew better than most when George did not wish to be at home, and George had most specifically told him he would not be at home today, so why had he allowed a visitor inside?

It was unlike Pickering to forget such details. Annoyance flickered in George's response. "I am going out again. Convey my regrets to my visitor."

"I shall, my lord, only it is your godson. He was most insistent that he see you today."

Ah, that explained Pickering's lapse.

"That's fine, Pickering. You did right to install him there." George sighed, turned around, and headed to the library. He didn't want to be late to Viola's, but Philip was

like family.

Wondering how on earth his godson had fallen into another scrape since last night's poker game, George steeled himself to hear whatever mess Philip had got himself into.

Philip had made himself at home in front of the fire. Feet up and with a decanter of brandy on the side table, he looked perfectly at home and not at all discomposed.

"I can spare you five minutes. What have you got yourself into?"

"Good morning to you, too, George. Nothing is wrong, nothing requires you to fix it, only that fellow, Victor—"

"What about him?" A queasy feeling like sea sickness disturbed George's stomach. If his godson suspected Victor was actually Viola, there would be hell to pay.

"I liked him. He's good company and I want to invite him for drinks and another game of poker at my club, but I never got his address. You dropped him home, didn't you?" Philip tossed off the brandy in his glass and got to his feet. "Can you give it to me now, and I'll go call on him?"

Hell's bells.

George's mind blanked for a moment.

"George? Is there something about him I don't know? I thought he was a decent sort of chap, the sort you'd be happy for me to know."

George cleared his throat and turned to the brandy decanter to buy himself time. He poured a good slug into a glass before turning back to his godson.

“He is a decent sort, but I’m sorry to disappoint you. He asked me to drop him off along the way. Said he was visiting a friend. I have no idea where Victor lives.” A half-truth at best, but since Victor wasn’t real, George could live with it.

“Blast it. Well, I’ll keep an eye out for him at Elverson’s next time I’m there. And if you see him, can you get his address for me?”

George chose not to add to his white lie and merely nodded before drinking half the brandy in his glass. Crisis averted.

For now.

Was there any chance Philip would recognise Viola as Victor if he were to meet her later? Given George was fairly certain he would be marrying Viola in the near future, the likelihood of his godson meeting his wife was more of a certainty.

He and Viola would have to concoct a cover story to explain the uncanny resemblance. A family connection would be best, George decided, and Victor would have to go on an extended tour to the Continent before the wedding.

“If there’s nothing else? I have an appointment elsewhere.”

Philip shook his head. “That was all. Except . . .” He looked at George, and there was something different in his eyes.

It wasn’t maturity exactly, but it was as if Philip were looking at him differently. As an equal.

“I enjoyed playing poker with you last night. We should do it again.”

With that, his godson gave the smallest of bows and strode from the room, leaving



George frankly gobsmacked. They'd always got on pretty well, but to have his godson actively seeking his presence, for entertainment no less, well—

Surprised and rather pleased with his godson's changing attitudes, George was contemplating another glass of brandy when he heard the longcase clock striking the quarter hour.

If he didn't get moving, he'd be late to pick up Viola.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In which our Hero and Heroine go on a Picnic.

Viola was on tenterhooks waiting for George to arrive. Following that kiss, her dreams had been of him—dreams that were frustratingly vague about what came after such kisses.

Footsteps approached down the hall, hurried but precise, and turned into the parlour, heralding the arrival of the oldest of her sisters. Viola knew how each of her siblings walked and what the cadence of their footsteps revealed about their mood.

She turned from the window seat, where she had been peeking around the curtain, keeping an eye on the street as Marie entered.

“You look well, Vi. What are you doing today?” Marie dropped onto the sofa, ending Viola’s pleasant daydream about George.

How odd that the man she had first met only days ago was occupying so much of her thoughts.

“Lord George is taking me for a drive in the country. He mentioned taking a picnic.”

“At least you will eat well today.”

Despite her winnings and the news they could now buy sufficient food, Viola heard the hunger in her sister’s voice and realised with a start how very slim her sister had become. Her day dress was not sitting properly across her chest, and her face was thinner than it should be.

Marie had probably given up her meagre share of their meals to their younger siblings, just as Viola had done more than once.

“After my success last night, Mrs Macey has money for food. Once she has been to the market, you will eat well, but I shall slip whatever I can from the picnic into my reticule to bring home as well. This plan is working, Marie.”

“You were lucky last night, but Vi, it is dangerous, and I’m not just talking about your reputation if you are found out. Please, don’t disguise yourself again. Pursuing your earl is safer; speaking of which, is your pursuit going well?”

“Tolerably.”

If one counted the earl’s kisses as merely tolerable. “Quite—tolerably.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and Viola dipped her head, busying herself with the contents of her reticule.

Two handkerchiefs in which to wrap biscuits would have to do.

Her reticule was not particularly capacious, but then she was not like those governesses she had seen in the park whose reticules were the size of carpet bags.

“Will tolerably provide food on the table next month?”

Viola understood why Marie’s tone was grumpy. Too often in recent weeks, they had both scrimped on their meals to ensure the younger ones had enough.

“I believe it will. George—Lord George, that is—seems like a solid prospect.”

“If you’ve reached the stage of calling him by his name, then he’s more than solid.

Your Lord George might yet prove to be our saving grace.”

Marie looked thoughtful as she caught Viola’s gaze, and then she grinned. “Any—other interesting developments you’d care to share?”

“Such as?”

“Judging by your pink cheeks, I’d say you’ve kissed him, haven’t you?”

“That would be most inappropriate.” Goodness, she sounded like their great-aunt Maud, all prudish and judgemental.

But Marie laughed, the first genuine laugh Viola had heard from her sister in far too long. Her sister clapped her hands and ran to Viola, dropped to her knees, and took hold of her hands.

“Tell me all about it. How was it? How was he? Did you like it?”

Viola closed her eyes, reliving George’s kiss in the carriage.

“It was—an awakening.” She opened her eyes and looked at her sister.

“I had no idea two mouths could connect and create such feelings in my body. They ran through me like lightning in a summer storm. I wanted to plaster myself to his chest and never let go.”

Her sister picked up the book Viola had made no pretence of reading, and fanned herself.

“Oh my. No wonder our mamas are so intent on chaperoning us so closely. Were that to become widely known amongst debutantes, Society would fall into chaos.”

“I wonder if such feelings happen no matter who the man is. Perhaps there is only one who will set my heart racing.”

“It seems you have found him.” Marie squeezed Viola’s hand. “I am happy for you, Vi. But bring home more than biscuits—please!”

“I’ll try.” Viola turned to the window at the sound of carriage wheels approaching. A smart phaeton drawn by a matched pair of dappled greys came into view and pulled up outside their home.

“That’s him.” Awareness and memory ran through her body, and she let the curtain fall.

The sisters rose, and Marie fussed over the skirt of Viola’s gown, patting and smoothing out wrinkles. “There, you look splendid. Who needs new gowns every season when you look so fine no matter what you wear?”

Impulsively, Viola hugged Marie. “I will make all well, I promise. And you shall have a sweet treat from the picnic.”

“Not as sweet as yours will be, I am certain.”

A discreet knock on the parlour door was followed by Simmons entering the room. “Lord George Amhurst for Lady Viola.”

George entered and bowed, first to Viola, then to Marie. “Ladies, delighted to see you both on this fine day.”

“My lord, this is my sister, Lady Marie. Marie, Lord George Amhurst.”

Marie bobbed another curtsy. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, my lord,

having heard so much about you.”

George’s gaze slipped to Viola, but he simply said, “Indeed. Believe only one-tenth of what you hear and discard the rest.” Turning to Viola, he asked, “Are you ready for our ride, Lady Viola?”

“I am looking forward to it.” She didn’t mean to, but she looked directly at his lips. One corner of his mouth tipped up, and Viola knew he knew where her thoughts had flown.

Marie slapped a hand over her mouth and turned what had surely been a snort into an indelicate cough.

As for Viola, she didn’t know where to look.

George offered a brief adieu to Marie before taking Viola’s arm. Once outside, he assisted her into his phaeton, personally arranging a blanket over her legs against any stray breeze before climbing in and taking the reins. The groom climbed up and sat on the perch behind.

“All set?”

“Yes, my—George, I am quite comfortable, thank you.”

Just before the horses moved off, Viola caught a glimpse of her sister watching them through the window. She smiled and waved before George set the horses to a slow walk.

The city roads were busy, but once they reached the open road, George encouraged the horses to a trot, which they maintained until he turned onto a narrow lane that led to a sweet meadow and an offshoot of the River Thames.

“This is beautiful. How did you find this place?”

George pulled on the reins, and the horses halted with a tossing of manes and a stamping of hooves. “I’m an explorer. I find interesting places.” He grinned, and once the groom had jumped down and was holding the horses’ heads, George climbed out and lifted her down.

His hands on her body sent a shaft of need through Viola. The physical ache between her thighs made her want to squirm. Since a lady could not squirm, at least not in polite company, she walked as quickly as she dared towards the river and hoped he would not be a complete gentleman all afternoon.

Meadow sweets and various wildflowers had begun to open, and their blooms sweetly perfumed the air.

It was so much nicer than the coal-choked air in the city and Viola stopped, drawing in a long breath.

It was a beautiful spot, and for the first time since the arrival of that devastating news from Egypt, some of the tension that held her in its grip eased.

“We’ll stay on this higher side of the meadow for our picnic, where the ground is firm. Would you like to eat first, or walk beside the water?”

She had half expected the ground to be soft underfoot, but it seemed George knew the lie of the land very well. Usually, a walk would precede eating, but Viola’s stomach chose that moment to gurgle. She prayed he hadn’t heard, but by the quirk of his lips, he had.

“Let’s eat first and walk afterwards.”

Grateful for his tact, she walked towards the back of the phaeton where a picnic hamper was strapped. “May I help set the food out?”

“We’ll do it together.”

He nodded to the groom, who unstrapped the hamper and a thick blanket and carried them a short distance from the phaeton. He spread the blanket where George directed him and set the hamper on one corner.

“Will that be all, my lord?”

“Move the horses to a patch of shade, Jenkins.”

“Very good, my lord.”

“I’ll help unhitch them. I won’t be long, Viola.”

And he wouldn’t, not if he tended to the horses as efficiently as he did everything else. She had only a couple of minutes to secrete something in her reticule before he returned. Quickly, Viola took out and unwrapped several covered plates and bowls, checking their contents.

Sandwiches, strawberries, a cold meat pie . . . all of those would squash or fall apart in her reticule. She opened another covered dish. Ah, three types of biscuit. The bounty seemed unending.

Casting an anxious glance over her shoulder, she emptied all of one type of biscuit into her handkerchief and shoved it into her bag, praying they weren’t George’s favourites as she pulled the drawstring closed just before George ambled up and knelt on the blanket.



“You were quick. Allow me to pour you a drink. There is ginger beer or wine. The ginger beer is made on my Yorkshire estate. I have them deliver a crate to me each month.”

“If it’s that good, then I should like to taste your ginger beer.” Now that George was seated on the blanket too, Viola looked at the amount of food spread before her. “This is a ridiculous amount of food for two people, George.”

“I expected a good walk would build up our appetites. Besides, I don’t know your preferences yet.”

“Oh, I hope I have not upset your plans by wanting to eat first?”

“Not at all. Walking off our meal will be just as good, if not better, for the digestion. Please help yourself.”

“For future reference, my favourite food is fruit in any form. Fresh is best, but I also like fruit pies . . .”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Viola didn't want to appear greedy, but the thought of waiting even for the time it took to select items to make a polite plate was too much.

Her stomach ached at the smell of the pie, and the fresh, sweet scent of the strawberries was too much.

Her hand darted down and she took a strawberry, biting the plump fruit in half.

Slightly tart but still sweet, the taste hit her tongue and drew a soft groan of pleasure from her lips. "You'd best take some of these now before I eat them all."

Viola offered the bowl of strawberries to George before noticing his gaze was riveted on the half-eaten fruit in her hand. Or perhaps he looked at her lips.

"My apologies, George. I—missed eating breakfast this morning."

George took a single red globe from the proffered bowl, bit into the plump fruit, and waved off the rest. "Feel free to indulge your pleasure in them. I'm partial to a pie myself. May I serve you a piece?"

At her assent, he cut a large wedge, put a fork on the plate beside it, and set it down in front of her. "I would not wish to see you faint away from hunger."

"You take that piece, George. It's far too big a slice for my delicate female appetite."

"Not if you missed breakfast. And if you finish it, I'll give you what we don't eat from the hamper to take home."

“Why?”

“So your siblings can enjoy more than just the biscuits you hid in your reticule.”

Her hands flew to her cheeks. “You saw that?”

“Viola, you could have just asked me, you know. I would happily provide more, but I think you enjoy a bet, so—”

“Why do I have to eat this piece of pie?”

“Knowing you can take this food back to your siblings, I don’t trust that you will eat anything if I don’t watch you eat it now.”

“Surely that is my choice.”

“True, but having met Lady Marie, I suspect both of you often give up your servings so your younger siblings may eat. She is so slim she will soon be gaunt and you—” Unusually for George, he failed to finish his sentence, merely picking up the plate with the slice of pie and offering it to her.

“Finish that piece of pie and give the rest to your family tonight.”

Her mouth watered as the scent of meat pie filled her nose, and her hand rose of its own volition.

“Every crumb, mind,” George said, and sat back with his cup of ginger beer, watching as Viola cut the end off her slice of pie.

“I feel self-conscious with you watching me.” And inhibited. Viola’s stomach demanded she feed it as fast as possible, but a lady was supposed to eat delicately, in

birdlike quantities.

“Will it help if I say I approve of a healthy appetite?”

Perhaps. And Viola couldn't resist. She devoured the first forkful and readied another, relishing the lightly spiced meat filling, and the light, flaky top crust.

By the time she finished her serving, George was offering a plate of sandwiches. “Do try these. I promise they are not cucumber. I loathe cucumber sandwiches, so my cook never prepares them unless I request them for a guest. I guessed you would not like them. Should I have asked for them?”

Viola shook her head. “The only thing they have to recommend them is the crunch when freshly made. Other than that, I find them flat and tasteless. Is that one cheese?”

“It is.”

By the time George was satisfied she had eaten sufficiently well that she was not going to faint away, they had demolished barely a quarter of what had been packed.

Viola looked at the remaining food and then met George's eyes. “You planned on this amount of food to give me what we didn't eat, didn't you? Did you also plan to make that bet with me?”

He shrugged, clearly unembarrassed that she'd seen through his plan. “It seemed the simplest way to ensure you accepted. It's not charity, Vi. Just ordinary human decency.”

“There is nothing ordinary about it, nor is it common. But as far as charity goes, it is a charitable action, and my sisters and brother will feast tonight. Thank you. You are a very decent human being.”

He waved away her thanks. "It is a simple act. I am in a position to make a difference, and I choose to do so. You should not read more into it than that."

"Many others are also in such a position, but they do not act as you do." She looked down at her folded hands. "I almost didn't attend the Melton ball, you know."

"That would have been my loss."

"You danced with many young ladies, all of whom would have enjoyed your company, and yet, you chose to follow up on me. Why, George?"

"Not one of them was half as interesting as you."

Her lips twitched, and she met his gaze. "You mean not one of them would have risked her reputation by dressing up as a man and entering a gambling hell, don't you?"

"I didn't know that about you then, but there was something in your eyes, the way you looked at the people in that ballroom, that attracted me. I asked Lady Melrose for an introduction."

"Oh." She'd assumed Lady Melrose had simply been doing her duty as a good hostess. Knowing George had sought her out made her feel strange; hot and unsettled and wanting more.

Her gaze dropped to his lips. "Shall we go for that walk now?"

"An excellent idea." He offered his hand and, when she rose, he set her hand on his arm and covered it with his. It should have made her feel safe; it was the gentlemanly thing to do, after all, and Viola knew she could walk safely by his side over the uneven ground.

But touching him now, after last night's kisses, and his revelation that he had asked for their introduction upon first espying her, that touch took on a whole new meaning.

She was aware of him in ways she'd never felt before.

Her body zinged at the thought of kissing him again, but the way he covered her hand where it rested on his arm felt protective.

Comfort and lust.

The two reactions should have been at odds, but they chased one another through her body, neither winning nor losing the race, each making the other stronger.

Would George know if that was normal, with his experience of the world? Could she ask him?

"George, I feel we can talk about anything."

"And everything. I confess I'm relieved. I had hoped, without high expectation of finding, someone to converse easily with."

That stopped Viola. "You have a list of requirements? What else is on it?"

"Hmph. I hadn't thought of myself as fulfilling a wish list, but now you ask the question, it is obvious I must have had one. Let's see—"

While he pondered, they strolled along the riverbank where the ground was soft towards a willow.

Delicate fronds reached for the water, as though admiring their reflection in a mirror.

A pair of ducks skimmed the surface and landed with a splash in the middle of the stream, sending wavelets that disrupted the tree's reflection.

George stopped where a branch grew out at an angle that made a natural place to sit and drew Viola down beside him.

"I enjoy good conversation, not the fatuous remarks generally found in a ballroom; discussion such as you offered over supper, and which gave me hope. My mother was an excellent countess beside my father, and not just for her good works, which she continues to this day. She has compassion for those who depend on my family for their livelihoods."

"Your mother's example sounds inspiring and a challenge to live up to."

Niggling doubt crept into Viola's mind. In her desperation to do right by her family, she hadn't thought beyond marriage, however there would be other challenges—many others, depending on her good sense and management—if she were to wed the earl.

She had never managed a household, let alone an estate and the many people who lived on it.

Could the daughter of a mere baron live up to such expectations?

"Certainly, to be a good countess requires a strong-minded woman."

"What else?" Did he think she was strong-minded despite finding her in men's garb, gambling? Surely it was impossible he thought she was the right stuff to be a countess, so why was he still talking, let alone picnicking with her?

"My wife's suitability to fill my mother's role is my primary goal, but—"

“But what, George?”

“Duty is important. You have shown that to be uppermost in your mind by your actions, risky as they were. But duty should not be all-consuming. I believe there must be room to pursue other interests.”

“Such as your explorations.” Viola nodded. “I’m beginning to understand.”

“Good. In addition to my marriage providing a suitable countess and securing my family line, I want companionship and physical compatibility.”

There it was again. “By physical compatibility, you mean—kissing?”

As far as she was concerned, they were entirely compatible in that area.

“And in the bedroom. Not that such activities need be confined to one room. Indeed, they do not need to be confined within doors.”

There he went again, talking about the bedroom with her. He was a most unusual earl. Indeed, he was a most unusual man.

“I thought— do you mean anywhere one can lie down? Like in your carriage?”

George’s lips quirked up. “One does not have to be horizontal to indulge in those pleasures. Oh, Viola, I am going to enjoy introducing you to the delights of marriage.”

She looked into his eyes, seeking answers. Seeking reassurance and hope she might, against the odds, have secured her family’s future. “That sounds as though you have made a decision.”



“We agreed to get to know one another better, cerebrally speaking. As far as physical intimacies go, last night gave me hope.”

“Will you think me bold if I confess how much I enjoyed kissing you too?”

“Oh, Viola, you really are one of a kind.” And then he drew her onto his lap, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

If last night made her feel hot and bothered and fed her dreams, today’s kisses shattered her into a million sparkling pieces.

His tongue dipped into her mouth, and she found herself sitting on his lap, her arms twined around his neck and his holding her close.

She liked this position much better than sitting beside him as she had in the coach. More of her body was in touch with his. His body was warm and hard where hers was soft, and she wriggled, trying to get closer.

“Don’t.” George’s arms clamped around her, stopping her moving.

“I need to.”

“You really don’t, Vi. Not yet.” He sucked in a slow, deep breath and gently set her back on the branch.

“But—”

“That need must wait until after marriage vows are exchanged.” He stood and walked to the edge of the riverbank where he stood gazing out over the water.

Viola gazed longingly at the river, wishing she could just jump in, clothes and all.

While his back was turned, she sat on the branch and wriggled. Squirmed really, because he'd set her body on fire and she had no idea how to put it out.

He turned back, and Viola froze mid-squirm. Heat filled her cheeks, but George grinned.

“I believe we have established our physical compatibility.”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In which our Hero visits his mother.

George's carriage turned down the avenue that ran between ancient oaks, planted by the first Earl of Amhurst centuries earlier, and Amhurst Hall rose above the mist like Camelot must once have appeared to King Arthur and his knights.

George's heart lifted at the sight of home: the imposing grey facade, the crenelations around the roof of the original building, and the twin towers and the turrets added by a later ancestor, which had inspired his childhood explorations.

Steady stewardship and a string of sensible ancestors had kept his inheritance intact and flourishing, and now George was one of the richest noblemen in England.

His position was not to be taken lightly, and while he wanted to bed Viola Winspear into forever, he knew such a decision shouldn't be taken with the wrong head.

Hence, the visit to his mother for her wise counsel.

As the carriage drew to a halt under the Grecian portico, added in the previous century by George's grandfather—George knew the history of every part of his home—one of the massive front doors opened, and Protheroe, Amhurst's butler, appeared on the top step.

Usually imperturbable, Protheroe's expression indicated something was terribly wrong.

“What is it, Protheroe? Is my mother at home?”

“Yes, my lord, but the doctor is with her.”

“The doctor? Is she ill? Why didn’t you send a message?” George’s gut clenched as he moved towards the staircase.

“She has a fever, and the doctor—” The butler hurried beside him, wringing his hands. “We sent a messenger to you only an hour ago.”

“I must have passed him along the way.” George thrust his hat and cape at Protheroe and bounded up the central staircase two steps at a time, running as he hadn’t run since he was a boy.

At the door to the countess’ apartment, he slid to a halt and reached for the handle, pausing a moment to catch his breath before entering. Despite her passionate French nature, his mother had a very English attitude about maintaining appearances.

He crossed the parquet floor of her salon, not seeing the elegant Louis Quatorze furniture or the delicate Zuber the heavy dark green drapes were closed against the chill of the day, and a fire roared in the fireplace.

Multi-branched candelabra had been set on both sides of her bed.

The combined effect of fire and candlelight lent the room a warm glow, but even that wash of colour wasn’t enough to hide the pallor of Maman’s cheeks.

He strode to her bedside and sat carefully, taking her hand and leaning down to softly kiss her cheek. “ Bonjour, Maman. Comment vas-tu ?”

Not a flicker of recognition or awareness indicated she knew he was there, and George looked to the doctor for news.

“What can you tell me?”

“My lord, I was called early this morning. Her Ladyship has a fever which we have been trying to bring down, with little success so far. We managed to get her to swallow a small amount of tincture, but she slipped into an unconscious state not long after I administered it. I have done all I can for her for now. You must see that her temperature is brought down. I must attend a birth, but I will return later. Keep her as cool as possible and pray.”

The doctor closed his box of medicaments, bowed, and left.

George set a hand on his mother’s forehead. She was burning up.

He took the cloth from the hovering maid and dunked it in the bowl of water. As he wrung it out, he said, “Bring more cold water,” before wiping his mother’s overheated skin. Sweat prickled and stung his eyes and trickled down his spine, and he tugged his cravat off and flung it aside.

Still too warm.

He dropped the cloth into the bowl, unbuttoned his jacket and stripped it off, then folded back the sleeves of his shirt. In the act of turning back the second sleeve, his eye roamed over the many sources of light surrounding his mother’s bed.

Light . . . light equalled heat.

“Open the windows, get rid of all but one of the candelabra, and damp down the fire. You’ll kill her with so much heat.”

Why hadn’t the doctor noticed?

A maid hurried to do his bidding while a footman doused the flames, leaving nothing but embers.

Gradually, the warmth dissipated and the fresh breeze cooled his bare skin.

George continued sponging his mother's face and arms, and slowly, oh so slowly over the hours that followed, her temperature lowered.

What would have happened if he hadn't chanced to return to Amhurst this morning? If he'd gone for another ride with Viola? How long would it have taken the messenger to locate him?

"Maman, you must wake up and get well, for I have good news."

Sponge, sponge, dip, wring.

"I find myself ready to fulfil the promise I made you before I set out for London. I have found a woman I believe will be an excellent countess, although she is a little unconventional – well, maybe a lot unconventional, but she has a good heart and is as strong-minded as you."

He watched Maman's face intently, desperate for the merest flicker of an eye to show she had heard his news, but her pallor and stillness did not change.

He kept talking, not knowing if his words were intended for his mother's ears, or to stop himself from losing it. She lay so still.

If only Irene lived closer, but his sister now resided in Bath.

He set the back of his hand on Maman's forehead. Was she a little cooler? It was difficult to tell, and George wished Viola was by his side, with her practical view on

life and her determination to protect those she loved.

It was strange, given how short a time they had known one another, but he already knew he would be able to rely on her strength and common sense no matter what life threw at them.

“You’ll like Viola, Maman. She is sweet, like her namesake, but beneath that softness is a woman life will not beat down. Like you, she is caring and compassionate, fair in her dealings with others—”

Beneath the slow, rhythmic movements of his hands, his mother turned her head towards him and mumbled words he could not understand.

She did not wake, and she said nothing more, but it made George feel as though hope had not deserted them. He continued plying the cloth and talking to Maman as though her life depended upon it.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In which our Heroine Feels Betrayed.

Viola pounced on the day's letters as soon as the post was delivered and carried them into the privacy of the front parlour. She flicked through the scant offerings, seeking George's handwriting.

Nothing.

Not from her parents, which she had come to accept as normal, nor, more worryingly for her current tenuous security, from George. The lack of any communication from him made her legs as wobbly as Cook's blancmange, and she sank onto the closest chair.

Six days ago, he'd sent a note to say he had business to attend to and was unable to see her, but they could either ride or go for another drive, whichever she preferred, when he returned to town the following day.

Assuming out-of-town business referred to one of his estates, she hadn't worried when the second day passed and he did not arrive.

Understanding from her father that estates were complex businesses, she decided George had encountered a situation that required more of his time. Another day passed, and another.

Yesterday, she'd waited in all day, but he'd failed to appear.

There had been no word, and again today, no note. Surely his business had been



concluded by now.

Fearful he had decided her escapade in disguise was not, after all, a sign of strength but of a hoyden ill-suited to the position of countess, she closed her eyes. All that did was call up his face in her mind's eye and his kiss on her lips.

Was she a hoyden for acting upon the only idea she'd had to save her family? Perhaps.

Not that she blamed George. She didn't think she was suited to such a role. The difference between her father's baronetcy and the earl's exalted position was great.

Insurmountable in his eyes perhaps, if his failure to communicate with her was any indication. It seemed distance did not make the heart grow fonder.

Viola sighed and opened the day's letters.

An unexpected request from the bank to pay off the rest of her father's loan immediately sat in her hands. She dropped the demand as though it would burn her hands and stared at the black ink on the white page. Such payment would consume all the funds she had won and then some.

Depending on a proposal from George to stop creditors and the bank from pursuing her family was no longer sensible, nor even an option now. Despite all his talk of their compatibility and her strength of character, he might not make her an offer. He might not return to her.

Absent-mindedly, Viola opened another envelope, and tapped the invitation to a musical evening on the rosewood table.

She could attend more events and hope to meet another eligible suitor, but Marie had

pointed out the problem with that plan two weeks ago when she believed she had caught George's interest.

Interest and success were not the same thing, and the bank would not wait a day longer than they said before claiming Winspear House in lieu of payment.

Diana skipped into the room, closely followed by Hermione and Juliet with Marie bringing up the rear. Marie glanced from the invitation in Viola's hand to the small pile of scattered post.

"Anything?"

She knew what Marie meant and shook her head. "Not today," she said, before handing over the letter of demand from the bank.

Her sister's bleak look and shadowed eyes as she read revealed the strain she was under. Perhaps Viola shouldn't have shared the demand letter with her younger sister. For one so young, Marie took on the weight of the world, but the responsibility was Viola's in the absence of their parents.

Waiting for George to return was like believing in fairies. It was up to Viola alone to take action and chase away the shadows in Marie's eyes.

She dropped the invitation onto the table and looked up.

"I am going out tonight."

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In Which our Heroine Returns to Elverson's Hell.

The wig made Viola's head itch, her father's coat needed the attention of a valet, and her stomach was turning somersaults as she walked through the gaming rooms on her way to the one where she had played poker with George and his godson.

Would George be there tonight?

Bile rose in her throat at the mere thought of encountering him. He had told her in no uncertain terms not to disguise herself as Victor again and not to set foot in the gambling den.

But if she was breaking their understanding, so was he, and he'd done it first.

The childishness of that thought did nothing to make her feel better about her decision, and she glanced around, fearful of seeing him.

Last time, he'd given her the impression he seldom played in such establishments, and she prayed tonight would not be one of those instances.

Once through the door of the third room, she paused, assessing the players at each of the four tables.

No George. She puffed out a relieved breath as her name was called.

"Victor, over here."

Seated at the farthest table, Philip and two other men were part way through a hand. Judging by the pile in front of one of them, Philip was not having a good night.

Viola raised a hand in greeting and stepped between the tables. Once there, she rested her hands on the back of an empty chair and nodded at each player in turn. “Gentlemen, Philip, are you looking for a fourth?”

Philip, being the only player she knew, replied, “Join us, Victor. Maybe you’ll change my luck.”

Viola smiled and sat.

Philip gestured at the player next to Viola. “That’s Terence, and this one with a pile of my money in front of him is Roger. This is Victor.”

“Gentlemen.” Viola reached into her jacket pocket and withdrew her precious hoard of notes, half of the sum she had previously won, and almost all of what was left after paying the most pressing bills.

Unsure how the Almighty would regard tonight’s endeavour, nevertheless, she sent up a short prayer.

If she won tonight, Marie would never know she’d taken so much of their money.

Without knowing what had befallen her parents or if they were still alive, and without George’s proposal and the security that would bring, tonight was for her family’s survival.

Her hand hovered over her small pile of banknotes.

Against the winnings of the man opposite her, it looked pitiful.

Indeed, a flicker of scorn crossed his face, so brief, she'd have missed it if she hadn't been watching him already, looking for hints as to what his style of play would be.

The pile of money in front of him suggested he would not be as easy to read as Philip.

She waited patiently while the interrupted hand was played, keenly observing both of the newcomers' games. Roger was cool, appearing relaxed and outwardly convivial, but by his play, she was certain he had picked up Philip's tells.

Terence seemed resigned to losing. His play lacked any pleasure or engagement; in fact, it was absent-minded at best. He appeared to dislike the activity, and Viola wondered why he bothered playing.

As Roger collected his winnings, candlelight glinted off a very fine signet ring.

Philip ran both hands through his hair. "You have the Devil's own luck, Roger." He signalled a waiter to bring more drinks.

Viola noted Roger barely touched his while encouraging the rest of them to "Drink up". She made a show of drinking, but barely a drop passed her almost-closed lips.

The same sting as before reminded her to be very careful not to drink much, especially when she sensed Roger watching her with interest.

There was something about the man she did not like, which was odd in someone she'd only just met. Then the cards were shuffled and Roger dealt around the table, and the game began.

Viola played conservatively at first, seeking to understand each player.

Terence made odd raises that Philip always met, and she tried to work out why he did

that when she was fairly sure from his body language that he had nothing of note in his hand.

Perhaps he was simply a poor player, but she began to combine his tell with Philip's and found her reading of play was accurate.

But she still had to work out Roger's.

She thought perhaps the two strangers knew each other. Was Roger feeding off Terence's odd bidding?

Viola's small pile of money grew very little for several rounds and then, unexpectedly, she won a hand she shouldn't have—not if she was on the right track reading Roger's tell.

Feigning surprise as Philip congratulated her, her gaze skimmed the other men, and there it was in Roger's eyes—triumph.

He thought he had her worked out. Her winnings were confirmation of his mastery of the group and the game. Viola needed to build on that belief and play up her role as Philip's inexperienced friend.

She slapped the table and laughed as she scooped the small pot towards her pitiful pile of notes. "I've got you all on the run now. Watch out, gentlemen!"

"We shall see, Victor," Philip said. "I told you last time that I'd beat you, and I will, you'll see."

"Yes, we shall see," said Roger.

Viola sensed an underlying threat behind his words. Whether he believed her to be a

simpleton or merely inexperienced, he thought she, too, was ripe for plucking, though her funds were barely enough to be worth his while.

Picking up her glass of brandy, she made a show of raising it to Philip and then to Roger.

“Your good fortune, gentlemen,” she said and tipped the glass so it appeared she swallowed a larger mouthful than she did.

Hopeful Roger and his partner-in-crime believed she was becoming inebriated, she set the glass down hard enough to slosh much of the remaining liquid onto the table.

Peering up from under her fringe, Viola caught a brief, shared look between Roger and Terence, and set to work to beat them at their own game.

Play proceeded, but now Viola understood that Terence and Roger were working together.

Perhaps they had marked Philip as the wealthy son of a nobleman ripe for fleecing, but she had no way of proving it or warning him.

The game would have to play out, and she had to play the best games of her life if she were to beat them.

They must be cheating by signalling each other, but she needed to work out how.

All she could do was stay sharp, watch them closely, and focus on her goal: to win their and Philip’s money before Roger realised he had been rumbled. Was that the term she had read in that novel?

Two more rounds fell Viola’s way, both with smaller pots. Philip folded, clearly

dejected that the cards weren't falling his way, when Viola sensed the lightest of tremors in the table.

Ah, that was why she'd seen nothing. They were signalling below the table, out of sight, and one of them had clipped the table leg.

Casually, she took out her handkerchief and wiped her brow, letting the white square fall as though by accident. As she bent to retrieve it, she edged her chair to the side, and when she sat up, her knee was in contact with a table leg.

Play continued, but now, Viola was privy to the crooks' signals, and began to establish their system.

An hour later, Viola's sliver of banknotes had turned into a brick. A thin brick, to be sure, but there had to be enough to pay the bank what they demanded, with a little left over for food and bills.

She leaned back in her chair and gazed blearily at the others.

"Terence, time to go." Roger was furious, his anger barely contained. Terence appeared less drunk than Philip, but that wasn't saying much. He required the assistance of his friend to stagger out of the room.

Viola attempted to assist Philip to stand, but he was heavier than he looked, and fell back onto his chair when she tried to sling his arm over her shoulder.

Shaking her head, she looked around for help, catching the eye of one of the footmen who came to assist. Fortunately, the lad was burly, and he hoisted Philip to his feet with ease.

Viola collected her winnings and shoved them into the inner pocket of her jacket, and



then grabbed what was left of Philip's stake.

Not much, she thought as she tucked his money into his jacket pocket, unwilling to risk accidentally touching him by searching for his pocketbook.

While they waited for their capes to be brought and Philip's carriage to be called, Viola mulled over the wisdom of accepting a ride with him.

If she asked to be dropped off near her home, the coachman would remember the area in which she lived, and she would still have to walk some distance, risking robbery when she had what felt like a king's ransom in her pocket.

She couldn't risk Philip learning where she lived, but nor could she risk losing her winnings. Either she paid off Philip's coachman or took a hackney cab. Both choices carried negative consequences if she chose wrongly.

"Sir, his lordship's carriage is here." The same young footman who had assisted her earlier hoisted Philip to his feet and half-carried him to the carriage. With a deal of heaving and grunting on the part of his coachman and the footman, Philip climbed in and promptly fell asleep.

"Thank you—" She paused.

"Edward," replied the footman. "Happy to help, sir."

"Where to, sir," asked the coachman. "I'm guessing his lordship offered you a ride?"

Viola gave the name of the park not far from her home and settled into the seat opposite Philip. Noisy snoring filled the carriage, and she allowed herself to relax just a little.

As the carriage bounced along, Viola looked through the window as the darkness of night gave way to dawn.

They had played through the night, and already, the day's activity was beginning on the streets.

They passed farm produce on wagons, and flowers destined for Covent Garden markets that perfumed the air sweetly.

Servants from fine homes accepted bread, meat, and flowers for their masters at their doors. It was all so busy.

Exhausted after the long night and feeling oddly confined by her father's clothing, Viola removed her top hat and pulled out the wad of notes from her jacket.

Removing that weight felt better, and she dumped the bundle into the hat and pushed it beneath the seat before stretching out along its length.

If only she could snatch a few minutes of sleep. Her head fell back against the window, and her eyes closed.

##

Shouting woke Viola with a start. The carriage jerked to a stop, and Philip toppled from his seat across her legs. He opened bleary, bloodshot eyes and muttered an apology.

“Get your hands up!” a rough voice shouted from outside.

Viola peeked through the window. Bare branches and a shadowed path running off between thickly planted bushes were visible in the grey light. They must be on the

carriage drive through Hyde Park, usually quiet and empty so early in the morning.

Suddenly, the carriage door was pulled open and the muzzle of a gun appeared, followed by a masked man's face. "Get down and give me your valuables."

Although rough and disguised by the thick mask, there was something about the robber's voice that seemed familiar, but Viola had no time to think as she watched Philip stagger from the carriage. He fumbled as he divested himself of his fob watch and signet ring.

"And you." The masked man gestured at Viola with his gun.

Hands shaking, Viola pulled back the sides of her jacket to show her vest. "I have nothing."

"Pocketbooks."

Was it her imagination, or was the robber staring at the place where her inner pocket was? Where her wad of money had been.

Philip was clearly the wealthy one of the two of them, but she was the one they were interested in? It made no sense unless—

As the masked man turned, the carriage lamp glinted off a ring on his left hand.

A very fine signet ring she had noted earlier that evening.

"I have none."

"Give me your jacket."

That confirmed it for Viola. The masked man was Roger, and he was intent on taking the money Viola had won from him at the table.

She slipped off the too-big jacket, in the process managing to pull her shirt loose from her trousers and hunch her shoulders. Without the concealment of the jacket, it was all she could do to disguise her feminine curves.

Roger turned back and waved his gun at Philip again. “And the cravat pin. That’s a pretty emerald I’ll not be leaving behind.”

Philip slumped against the coach, his hands loose at his side.

“Give it to me or I’ll—”

Viola moved protectively in front of Philip. “Can’t you see he’s too drunk to do more? I’ll get it for you.” She turned her back and removed the pin from Philip’s cravat

It was a beautiful piece with a long shaft and a solid head surrounding and supporting the precious gem. It sat in her palm, catching the first rays of sunlight, too beautiful to be stolen by rogues.

Without conscious thought, Viola took hold of the head, spun quickly, and lunged at Roger in one swift movement.

The sharp end bit into his neck, and blood ran over her fingers before he lifted his gun and hit her on the head.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In Which our Hero Despairs of what to do with our Heroine.

George was glad to be heading back to London and Viola, especially now Maman was much improved in health, and delighted he was about to fulfil his promise to wed. If their conversation about Viola was any indication, the two would get on extremely well.

After a late luncheon, George called on Viola, only to find a very worried Marie pacing the parlour floor.

“My lord.” Marie bobbed a barely polite curtsey and twined her fingers together. “Viola is not at home.”

George frowned. “Do you mean she doesn’t wish to see me? I had good reason for my protracted absence, and I wish to reassure her that—”

Marie waved her hands and stepped close to him. “No, you don’t understand. She did not return home last night. I wondered if—” Her cheeks heated, and she dropped her gaze.

“What did you think, Lady Marie? That she was with me?”

“It would have been far better if she had been, but clearly, she was not, so I do not know where she is. I am worried for her safety.”

“Are any of her clothes missing? Is it possible she has gone to visit a friend?”

Lady Marie shook her head. “She would never do that without telling me. No, I am afraid that—”

“If it’s of any help, I know about her disguise.”

Marie gasped. “She told you! I don’t believe it.” She shook her head and then sank into the armchair. Looking up at him, she asked, “And— you haven’t run for the hills. Why not?”

“I admire her resolution and strength of character. Do you think she went out in disguise last night?”

“It is most likely. When she didn’t come down for breakfast this morning, I checked her room.

She hadn’t slept in her bed, and Father’s clothes were missing from their hiding place.

Then I checked the tin where she kept money for the household, and there were only a couple of notes. I think she took the rest.”

“Surely she didn’t despair of my return?”

“I believe she did. You sent no letter, not even a note. And then yesterday, we received a letter of demand from the bank for full repayment of our father’s loan. Viola looked desperate.” Marie bit her lip.

Clearly, the family lived on the edge. If Viola had been half as desperate as her sister now appeared, George was fairly certain she had been to the gambling den last night.

“I arrived home to Amhurst Hall to discover my mother was very ill, but perhaps I

should have sent a note.”

“A brief note would have done much to alleviate her worries, but I do see why it might have been the last thing on your mind.” Belatedly, Marie thought to ask, “Is your mother recovering now?”

“She is, thank you.” George stood, his mind racing through possible scenarios. Had Viola returned to Elverson’s, where play was deep enough to fulfil the repayment?

“I will find her, Lady Marie, and bring her safely home. But tell no one she is missing.”

“Should anyone call, I shall say she is indisposed. Thank you, my lord.”

George set off for the gambling den on Hector, his dark bay stallion. A young footman, coatless and holding a cleaning rag, opened the door to him.

George described Viola-as-Victor to the servant. “Was he here last night?”

“Yes, my lord, with his friend. I heard him call his friend Philip, but all I know of him is that he was three sheets to the wind and needed help getting into his carriage.”

“Did both men leave together?”

“Yes, my lord.”

With a nod of thanks and a coin passed over, George mounted Hector and set off for his godson’s home. He couldn’t imagine why, if Philip had given her a ride, Viola had not returned to her home, but he had a bad feeling about it.

At Philip’s town house, George was shown into the library where he waited

impatiently for Philip to appear. Knowing his godson, he was sleeping off heavy losses at the tables and too much consolation brandy.

Therefore, he was surprised when shortly after his arrival, Philip burst into the library, slamming the door behind him. “George.” He said no more, but his godson was agitated, and his bloodshot eyes confirmed George’s suspicion about the night before.

Philip paced back and forth along a short path from the door to the chair where George was sitting. On his second pass, he stopped directly in front of George and glared at him.

“Philip, did you give Victor a ride home last night? I ask because—”

“I did. I gave him a ride. Did you know, George? Did you know he’s a woman?”

Damn. George had hoped to keep Viola’s identity a secret.

“Have you told anyone else? How did you find out?”

“How did I—” Philip was beside himself. He ran both hands through his hair before dropping into an armchair. “Pour me a brandy, will you?”

Something in Philip’s voice stopped the reprimand George would usually have made at such a peremptory demand. He poured two glasses and handed one to his godson, who tossed half of it down his throat as though it was wine.

“I can’t believe you knew and didn’t tell me. When did you find out?”

George wasn’t clear whether the greater part of Philip’s agitation lay with the fact Victor was a woman, or that his godfather had kept that fact a secret. Not that it



mattered now the cat was out of the bag.

“The same night you met her. Tell me what happened, Philip.” He sipped his brandy and set the glass on the nearby table. If he was to sort out this mess, he needed to keep a clear head.

His godson leaned his elbows on his knees. “I was well in my cups, losing steadily to two men I’d not met before when Victor—when she arrived and joined us. At first, she lost, like me, but after a while, she started to win small pots, and then she started to win big.

“One of the men we played with became angry, but she was playing well. I mean, really well. We called it a night about five in the morning after Victor had cleaned out the other two, and I gave her a lift home.”

George noted Philip’s phrasing; Viola had cleaned out the other two, not Philip, but that was less important at the moment than her absence.

“If you gave her a ride, then why is she not at home now?”

“She’s here. Upstairs in the Blue Room.”

George’s chest grew tight at the last news he could have imagined. His gut clenched, and his hands fisted. Grinding his teeth, he sought to control the monstrous green-eyed serpent towering inside him.

He was jealous, but he wasn’t prideful, was he? So why did the idea of Viola choosing to stay with Philip so upset him?

Had she truly despaired of him and set her sights on his young godson as a way out of her financial woes?

After their picnic, he'd thought they had an understanding. Difficult as it was to believe she had moved on so quickly, the proof was her presence in this house.

His godson's house.

"What did you do to her? Why is she here?"

"Me? I didn't do anything to her."

"Then why—"

"We were held up in Hyde Park. Victor—hell, what is her real name? And how did you know he was a she?"

"Viola. Lady Viola Winspear. What happened, Philip? Tell me now or I swear to God I'll—"

Philip raised both hands as though surrendering. "I'm trying to tell you." He tossed off the dregs of his brandy and put the glass on a table.

"The robber was masked, but it was like he knew one of us had a lot of money. He took my valuables and Vic—Viola's cape and jacket. Then he wanted my emerald cravat pin. I could barely stand, so Viola took it off and stabbed him with it."

"Viola stabbed him?" In the midst of the horrible news, that fact made him want to cheer for her bravery and quick thinking.

"She did, then he coshed her on the head and took off. I've never sobered up so fast."

George jumped to his feet. "She's injured? How badly?"

“She was unconscious so I brought her here and called for the doctor. When we took her clothes off—”

“You removed her clothes?”

Now he was back to feeling jealousy coloured with a deep tinge of anger and then self-loathing. Vi was injured and here he was thinking nobody but him should have been removing her clothes.

“Not me, two of my footmen carried her to a bedroom. Her wig was knocked off while one of them was removing her shirt. The old sawbones realised he was a she and sent the footmen out straightaway. He told me in no uncertain terms that I was a debaucher of young women before he shunted me out too.”

“Have you told the footmen they are not to speak of her?”

“That was the first thing I did. But George, I had no idea he was a she! She played so well. I didn’t know a woman could think like she does.”

“Viola is exceptionally good at reading people.”

Philip rose and came to stand in front of George. “You called her Lady Viola. In that case, I must marry her, of course. It’s the only decent thing to do. She’s a pretty woman, which will help since we do not know one another.”

Under other circumstances, if she were any other woman, George would have been pleased to see his godson stepping up to do the honourable thing.

But this was Viola they were talking about.

Viola, who intrigued and challenged him, who didn’t let him get away with much.

Viola, whom he had decided he wanted to marry, and have by his side when he travelled.

“You will not marry her, Philip.” George stood in front of his godson, watching surprise slacken his clenched jaw.

“I must. She is a lady who has spent the night beneath my roof. In the eyes of society, she will be ruined if I don’t.”

“Firstly, she has not spent the night here, and secondly, she will be ruined whether or not you marry her should word of her escapade ever be made public.

Imagine what the old harpies and sniping mothers would say if it became known that Viola dressed as a man and entered a gambling den.

That information alone would seal her doom.

“No, we must be clever about this. I will arrange something. In the meantime, I need to see her.”

“But George—”

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

“The Blue Room, I think you said?” George turned on his heel and strode from the library, up the stairs to the second floor and on to the first bedroom on the right. Gently, he tapped on the door and paused a moment before entering.

A maid rose from the bedside and bobbed a quick curtsy before returning to sponging Viola’s face.

Viola’s glorious red hair haloed her head against the white pillow, highlighting the pallor of her skin.

George signalled to the maid to stop what she was doing, and then sat on the edge of the bed and took Viola’s hand, dimly aware of Philip stepping into the room behind him.

“Vi, can you hear me?”

A low groan escaped from her before her eyelids opened a little. Perhaps she saw him, perhaps not, but very quickly she shut them, and a frown scrunched her forehead.

She mumbled, “Bright.”

George turned to the maid. “Draw the curtains and set a candle to the side. The light worries her.”

When his instructions had been carried out, George stroked Vi’s hand. “Look at me, Vi. It’s not so bright now.”

With what was clearly an effort, Viola opened her eyes. “George, what are you doing here, and where, precisely, is here?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Upon hearing her speak, Philip rushed up to the bed and took her other hand. “Thank God you are well again. I do believe your bravery saved me from the worst of the attack, but I am sorry you bore the brunt of it.”

“T’was not bravery but anger that drove me, Philip. I didn’t want that horrid man to steal my winnings, and now they’re gone.”

“Forget the money, Vi,” George said. “He could have killed you. If only I had some idea who he was, I’d track him down and turn him over to the law.”

“I know who he is.”

Her words surprised him, but Philip looked astonished.

“How could you possibly know?”

“The man who held us up is the man we played against last night.”

“What, you mean Roger was the robber?” Philip was incensed. “He was masked. How could you tell it was him?”

“I recognised his signet ring. He was so angry when I won all he had, but he cheated, and I don’t like cheats. Once I worked out how he and Terence were communicating, his tell became easy to read. But when he demanded your beautiful emerald stickpin, I thought to save you from their clutches.”

“You—set out to save me? But, but—you’re a woman.” Astonishment and affronted manhood vied in Philip’s voice, youth not liking the idea he had not performed as a man should.

Injured as she was, Viola must have picked up on Philip’s discomposure. She turned her head to the side a little. “I know how to wield a stick pin or a hat pin—whatever woman’s weapon is at hand. I’m sure you’d have done the same for me if you’d not been under the weather, Philip.”

Philip shuffled his feet and harrumphed but appeared somewhat mollified, while George felt himself cheering on Viola’s fighting spirit. Indeed, she had the spirit of a countess.

“Viola, that is, Lady Viola,” Philip brought her attention back to himself. “You would make me the happiest of men if you would do me the honour of becoming my wife.”

That brought Vi’s eyes wide open. She stared at his godson and blinked slowly. “There is no need for that, my lord. No one knows I am here, and no one will, if only I can have my clothes back.” As though she had only now realised how little she wore, Viola tugged the sheet higher over her chest.

Philip stood as rigidly at attention as the Regent’s guards and George suspected his godson had never imagined his proposal would be rejected.

“It’s not that simple, Lady Viola. If anyone sees you leaving my house, your reputation will be ruined.”

“But no one saw through my disguise at the club. And I arrived here as Victor. Why shouldn’t I leave here and continue as Victor until I reach my home?”

George came up with the idea that Victor was a cousin of mine to explain any

similarity of features, so it would be natural enough for him to visit my home.

Tell him, George. Tell him there's no need for such drastic action. "

George felt a smile beginning to form as he looked at her. "You can't know your disguise will hold in daylight, Vi. But you won't be marrying Philip. There is no need. I, not Philip, will be the one to marry you."

Stunned silence from both greeted his announcement.

From Philip he understood.

His godson had not been privy to his pursuit of Viola and therefore knew nothing of his interest in her, but Viola's reaction surprised him.

After all, they had been talking around the idea of a marriage of convenience between them that day by the river.

Both acknowledged their need to wed for the sake of their families, and both were happy with the idea, especially after they had established how physically compatible they were.

At least, George had thought they were both happy with the unspoken agreement.

But now, Viola stared at him. At long last, she spoke. "Why, George?"

"Who else should it be? We have spoken on the subject, and we know each other's reasons for wanting to wed. Our decision to delay was simply to get to know one another better. Now, I feel certain. You will make a fine countess, Vi."

In the back of his mind, George felt good about his decision. His promise, Vi's bank



demands—both problems solved by their wedding vows.

Two birds, one stone.

But something wasn't right.

Vi pushed herself to sit up and glared at him.

“You are now certain. You are certain. After leaving me for the best part of a week with no word, you drop back into my life and announce you are ready to marry me. Well, Lord Amhurst, I am not certain I wish to marry you.”

“But Vi, I—”

“I proved to myself last night that I am more than capable of providing for my family.”

“And according to Philip, you were robbed and lost your winnings.” George was perplexed. He was missing something, but damned if he knew what. “How can that solve your problems?”

He didn't want to agitate Viola by persisting in an argument that had no logic he could see. Reminding himself she'd suffered a blow to the head, he realised perhaps that had upset her.

For all that Vi dressed as a man and played poker like a man—better than most men he knew, if he were honest—she wasn't a man. One glance at her lips was all it took to remind him of how she felt when he kissed her by the river.

And in his coach. How he had kissed her, and there had been no corset hindering his hands on her person.

She was all curves, softness, and passion.

But she was still a woman, liable to fall into female illogic.

“Tell me how playing poker solves your problem.”

“Because I know I can do it again. And again and again as needs be. I find I prefer to rely on myself rather than on a man who may disappear at the drop of a hat.”

“I had a good reason.”

“In your eyes, it will always be for a good reason, George, but I don’t want to live like that.

I realised as I lay here that I want to marry a man who will be by my side, a man I can grow to love.

Physical compatibility isn’t enough to overcome absence.

Only love such as my parents have for each other can do that, and I realised as I waited each day for word from you that selling myself for anything less in marriage is not for me.

So please—take your proposal back to Africa with you and leave me alone. ”

Her anger spent, Viola fell back against the pillows and turned her head away. A hint of pink had returned to her cheeks, but she looked exhausted, and he held his tongue.

George had never considered himself arrogant, but Viola had treated him like an arrogant fool, and perhaps he had been, expecting her to blindly wait upon what she had believed to be his whim.

Although she hadn't asked where he'd been, nor why, neither had he volunteered the information.

It had been remiss of him not to let her know why he had been unable to return to town.

He'd promised to spend the following day with her and had failed to let her know when he was unable to fulfil his commitment to her.

"We'll talk about it later, when you're feeling better."

"No, George, you have my answer. I no longer wish to marry you."

Frustrated, but accepting Vi needed time to calm down and heal, George sat back.

He had her answer for now.

It was not the answer he expected or wanted, but it was what she had given.

One way or another, he'd find a way to change her mind.

There was a discreet knock at the door, and a footman entered bearing a hat which he held upside down.

"My lord, pardon the intrusion, but the coachman just found Mr Victor's hat under the seat and thought he might be desirous of seeing it again after the incident." He bowed and handed the hat to Philip.

"As though you'd be concerned about the return of a hat," Philip muttered, dropping it on the bed.

Viola's lips parted, and she sat up and grabbed it. Thrusting her hand inside, she smiled and withdrew a wad of banknotes.

"He didn't get it!"

George stared in amazement. "You won—all that in one night? No wonder he was angry and came after you."

"Now you see why I know I can look after my family. I'm good, George. Really good."

If she was good enough to discover how a cheat and his offsider were operating and beat them at their own game, she was the best he'd ever met. But that very skill would make her a target for every would-be card sharp who was bested by her.

"Vi, you must see reason now. If you encounter this Roger fellow again while dressed as Victor, he'll try to kill you."

"Then I shall learn to shoot and defend myself."

"Vi—"

"I need to sleep now, and then, Philip, if you'll be so kind as to call me a hackney cab, I shall return home." Viola rolled onto her side, leaving George staring at her back.

He shook his head and motioned to his godson to leave the room. Once outside he said, "When she wakes, let me know and I'll escort her home. Somehow, I need to protect her from this folly."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In Which our Hero Discovers How to Woo His Lady.

George's irritation went beyond Viola's stubborn refusal to marry him.

Three days without seeing her led to the discovery that he missed her vibrant presence and honest conversation.

He missed their physical connection, and kissing her, and the promise her kisses carried of one day knowing her completely.

His body reacted to every thought of her, but he sensed his need for Viola was deeper than mere lust. He needed the whole of her—her conversation and her unusual way of looking at the world.

Sitting about his home pining was not George's way, so he set out to discover how to win his countess.

His first stop was Viola's home, where he enquired if Lady Marie was at home. His luck held as Viola's sister hurried into the parlour.

"My lord." She curtsied and twined her fingers together. "I'm afraid my sister is not home. She has gone to visit the bank manager to make full repayment of our father's loan. Would you like to wait for her or call back later? I can send for tea."

"That would be kind, thank you, Lady Marie."

Once tea had been ordered and the butler gone from the room, George spoke freely.

“Lady Marie, I have nothing to lose by laying my cards on the table, and so I am asking for your help. Your sister has pulled back from the understanding we had and says she no longer wishes to marry me.”

“As is her right, my lord.”

George nodded. “True. We had given no formal undertakings, but I believed we were of the same mind. I wish to marry your sister. I have a great deal of admiration for her courage, and I know she will be a wonderful countess; however, I do not know how to change her mind. I seek your help. Who better knows a woman than her sister?”

“Did she offer any reason for her change of mind?”

“It seemed at first to be about my lack of communication while I was at my mother’s bedside.”

“An understandable omission in the circumstances. Knowing my sister, once you apprised of the reason, that would not be why she changed her mind.”

“I agree, although I haven’t yet had the chance to explain those circumstances to her.

Her state of mind and fragile health after the robbery and attack persuaded me not to overtax her mind.

However, during the extended period of my absence, she received the letter of demand from your father’s bank.

With no idea where I had gone or indeed whether our agreement still existed, she returned to the gambling hell and, well, she probably showed you how well she did.”

“A small fortune to us, my lord. What did she say about that?”

“She found she liked not having to rely on anyone but herself to look after her family.”

Marie’s lips tipped up into a brief smile. “She has always been quite adept at that. It comes in part from being the eldest and having a highly developed sense of duty and responsibility.”

Cook’s appearance bearing a tray of tea things and a plate of biscuits paused their discussion while she set it down near Lady Marie.

“Will that be all, my lady?”

“For now, thank you, Mrs Macey.” Lady Marie poured a cup for George, adding the dash of milk he had asked for and handing it to him before serving herself.

“Do you have any suggestions how I may woo your very self-sufficient sister, Lady Marie?”

She looked thoughtful as she offered the plate of biscuits, and he took one before she answered.

“You will have to show her she can rely on you while maintaining her freedom.”

“A tall order.”

“Not for a man in love.”

George opened his mouth to deny such nonsense. He wasn’t in love. He didn’t believe in the notion.

What was love anyway? Such sentiment was a frothy idea in silly novels meant for

weaker minds.

Out of nowhere, the verse from Corinthians 1 popped into his mind.

‘Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.’

The verse perfectly described Viola’s love for her family; it was in her very soul to love and do right by those she loved, and so the question was simple: did he feel that way about Viola?

Did he wish to make her his countess because she would fulfil the role brilliantly, or did he desire to put her needs above his own and seek to love her with no expectation of receiving hers in return?

The answer hit him like a runaway carriage, bowling him over and forever changing him.

“It’s not a transaction; it’s a gift.”

Lady Marie nodded. “I believe you are beginning to understand at last, my lord.” She took a biscuit and nibbled, giving him time to assimilate the bolt from the blue.

“Our parents’ marriage is not common. They love one another very much, and my sister, indeed all of us, hope to find someone who will love us as much as they love each other.

For Viola to have considered marrying you without such love is a testament to how much she cares about her family.



Giving up her dream of finding the same as our parents have to ensure our wellbeing is the greatest expression of love I can imagine. ”

“She does not have to give up her dream.”

Lady Marie clapped her hands, and her eyes sparkled as she said, “Oh, you do truly love her.”

“I believe I do. I’ve never believed the emotion existed, so I didn’t recognise what I was feeling, but you are right.”

“In that case, my lord, I will do all I can to help her see your suit in a new light.”

“My thanks, Lady Marie. I’d best be on my way, but please send word if— nay, it will be when, for it is a foregone conclusion that Viola will go to the gambling den again.” He handed her his card, bowed, and departed.

A man in love had many things to attend to if he was to woo and win his lady.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

In Which Our Hero Woos his Countess and Our Heroine Takes on a Cheat.

“Victor, join us.” Amid the noise and bustle of the card room at Elverson’s, George maintained the jovial expression his fellow players expected, but he was pleased by how well Viola hid her real feelings behind what appeared to be natural surprise at finding both him and Philip at the table.

After receiving word from Lady Marie that Viola was heading out tonight, and only after many stern words to his godson about the vital importance of not giving away Viola’s identity, George relented, acceding to Philip’s plea to accompany him to the gambling den.

“Good evening, gentlemen.”

George’s greeting had left Viola with little choice but to join them at their table.

Over the last hour, George had worked diligently to allow Philip to win while keeping the fourth chair vacant until Viola arrived.

A tip and a quiet word with Edward, the young footman who now appeared at his elbow each time George visited the club, had ensured they were seated with Reginald Dawson.

Edward also diverted everyone but Victor from joining them.

Suspecting Dawson of being a card sharp, George hadn’t yet managed to catch him at his tricks, but Viola might. Trusting her innate skill at both cards and reading other

players, he believed she would see through the cheat and take him down.

This would show her that he respected her ability and was able to sit back and let her deal with a problem. At least that was the theory.

Confident in Viola's ability and hopeful of his plan, George collected the pot he'd just won, and gathered the cards into a neat pile and began shuffling them while Viola took a seat.

She set a small pile of notes and coins in front of her. "I had not looked to see either of you here this evening." Her tone was polite to the point of blandness, but George noted sparks when their gazes met.

He knew what she would say if they were alone: Don't think showing up like this will change my mind, George-won't-take-no-for-an-answer.

"What can I say, Victor? Philip took it into his head to try to recover some of what he lost a few nights ago."

Viola turned a slightly less cool gaze on his godson. "Is that right, Philip? Well, far be it from me to wish you ill. May the best man win."

She gave the subtlest emphasis to 'man' and there was a definite sparkle in her eye.

Viola Winspear would play hard tonight, but George wasn't going to back down from this battle.

He was playing to win the highest stakes of all—

Her.

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The surge of anger Viola felt upon seeing George at the table dissipated as she fell into the rhythm of the game.

Turn of the card.

Bet—raise—increasing pot.

Her first thought when George called out to her had been that he was trying to change her mind about marrying him, but there was no way he could have known she would be here tonight.

It was an unfortunate coincidence and nothing more.

She would deal with it, and him, and take home enough money to make rehiring staff possible.

It would be good to ease Cook's burden, and their butler wasn't getting any younger.

"Mine." Philip's tone was gleeful as he scooped the small pot towards him.

Viola blinked and sat back, surprised to see the round had ended. She couldn't remember what cards she had played.

Distraction was her enemy in this game. She was here to win, and that wasn't going to happen if she didn't keep her attention on the table.

Dwelling on her family's finances, or George's presence, letting her imagination wander to remember his lips on hers and the fire he'd lit in her—allowing these thoughts to take over would see her small stake dwindle to nothing.

Then there would be no new staff, and the roast joint she planned to buy tomorrow would be no more than a distant memory.

With a conscious effort of will, she fixed her focus back on the game.

She knew Philip's style and suspected George's opening bids held the key to his. But the other fellow, Dawson, was still a mystery, and would remain so until she paid attention.

A number of rounds went by before she noticed what was amiss.

Dawson's tell remained unchanged until each time he summoned one particular footman to pour fresh drinks around their table. The young man seemed to hover nearby until Dawson raised one eyebrow.

As the footman poured, an almost imperceptible smirk flitted across Dawson's mouth, his bets became more aggressive, and he won a larger pot.

Unless her hand was unbeatable.

At those times, his eyes narrowed, and he dismissed the footman with a flick of his wrist.

Dawson was cheating and finally, Vi worked out how.

He had bribed the footman to signal, via the way he poured each player's drink: left hand, player has a losing hand; right hand, you can't win; twist of the bottle at the end of the pour, bid high.

Simple but effective.

Wondering if George had worked it out, she decided she didn't care.

She knew, and now she could stop Dawson from taking Philip's money and beat him at his own game.

George could look after himself while she built her own stake. Each win meant a staff member rehired or another week of security for her family.

The next time the footman approached to refill their glasses, Viola set her cards face down, picked up her half-full glass and, timing her move carefully, stretched her arms, splashing the contents over the servant.

She rose, swaying slightly as she looked at the footman. "My apologies. I do believe I've imbibed a little too freely."

Brandy dripped from the young servant's nose and fringe, and his mouth had dropped open.

"My fault, sir." Collecting himself and wiping a gloved hand over his face, he backed away before turning and hurrying from the room.

"Dash it, now how did that happen?" Viola blinked lazily and slid back into her seat. Through half-closed eyes, she noted Dawson's frustration with glee, and George's hand rising to cover a discreet cough she suspected was a laugh.

Did he know what she'd done and why?

Having removed the collaborator, Viola now focused all her attention on the cheat.

Without his associate, Dawson was on his own, but he still had means of cheating.

Frequent glances at the mirror behind Philip told Viola he was using it to see his opponent's hand.

As for George, she realised he held his fan of cards rather more curved than was usual.

It was likely the angle kept Dawson from reading them in the mirror.

She kept her cards close to her chest and her attention on Dawson.

Over the ensuing hands, his bets became more erratic until finally, he lost the biggest pot of the evening. Throwing his cards down, he pushed to his feet and pointed at her.

“You, sir, are a cheat. I don't know how you've done it, but you're cheating.” His face had turned puce, and sweat dripped down his nose.

Viola rose, leaning on the table towards her accuser. Hating the attention suddenly turned on her, she dug into the role she had taken on. With her chin thrust forward, she stared Dawson down. “Coming from you, sir, that is a ridiculous accusation.”

Beside her, she was aware of George pushing his chair back from the table, but she didn't dare turn her head. In one part of her mind, she was grateful for his presence, while at the same time, the need to prove herself lay deep in her belly.

Don't step in. Let me do this .

He said nothing.

Murmurs rose from players at tables further away, and from the corner of her eye, she noted more heads turning as the drama rippled through the room. Cheating was one of the worst sins a gentleman could commit.

“Gentlemen, what’s going on here?” Kingston, the manager—a burly, pugilistic bruiser—pushed past two tables and came to a stop between Viola and Dawson.

Dawson raised his arm, stabbing the air towards her. “Him. He’s a cheat. He’s won hands he shouldn’t have and—”

“I have won hands, it is true, but not by cheating, unlike Mr Dawson.” Her voice stayed steady despite the rippling sensation in her stomach.

“Liar! Cheat!” Dawson lunged at Viola, but George was suddenly between her and him while Kingston stepped in behind and grabbed the cheat in a hold that incapacitated his arms and held his head forward. “Enough, Mr Dawson. Gentlemen, come with me. We’ll take this to my office.”

A babble of voices rose in a trail of indignation behind them until they passed through a door leading to Kingston’s office.

Out of hearing and sight of the establishment’s other patrons, the manager dropped Dawson onto a chair and stood in front of him.

“Now, Mr Dawson, sit there while we hear what his lordship has to say on the matter. Lord Amhurst?”

George shook his head and turned towards Viola. “I knew Dawson was cheating, but I couldn’t figure out how until Mr Watling had his accident with his drink. He is the one you have to thank for catching this cheat.”

The manager turned his attention to Viola. “Sir?”

Surprised that George had handed over the unmasking to her, Viola cleared her throat. Dawson wasn’t the only one in the room duping others, but he was the only



one cheating others of money, and she needed to keep her head and not give herself away.

Deepening her voice, she inclined her head. “I noticed a change in Dawson’s behaviour and betting pattern every time one particular footman refreshed our drinks. I also noticed how often he glanced at the mirror behind Lord Philip.”

Philip’s voice rose in indignation. “You were looking at my cards! No wonder I so rarely won. Why, you—”

George took a grip on Philip’s arm, holding him back from the now cowering figure in the chair. Dawson’s bluster had disappeared, and his anxious gaze jumped from the pugilistic manager to the menace of George’s quiet fury.

Viola continued her accusation. “Between bribing or blackmailing a footman, and using the mirror to see Lord Philip’s hands, Dawson had a good chance of driving up pots when he had even a half-decent hand.

Once he lost his associate, his skill with the cards became notably less, and his anger grew out of control.” Viola shrugged. “And that’s it.”

“My thanks,” said Kingston. “Other players had hinted at their suspicions over his extraordinary luck at the tables, and now we know how he did it.” The manager went to the door and summoned a couple of heavysset men, and pointed at Dawson.

“Get rid of this piece of rubbish, and you—” He thrust his face close to Dawson’s.

The cheat cringed back in his seat, unable to escape.

“Don’t ever attempt to return to this establishment, or my men will drag you down to the Thames and throw you in.”

Dawson was escorted from the room, thick hands firmly gripping both his arms and drawing a low moan from him.

The manager turned back to Viola. “Thank you, Mr Watling. You, sir, are welcome any time. Your drinks will be on the house.” He ushered their little group from his office.

In the hallway, they stopped, and George looked at Viola. “Well done, Vi. You did it. You took him down all by yourself.”

She held herself erect, wishing they were alone and anywhere but here. “You let me do it. Why?”

“Why not? You’re quite capable of looking after yourself. Besides, you saw through him; how he was doing it. I knew something was off, but I missed the connection between him and the footman.”

Viola nodded, not knowing what to say.

Philip stepped forward and gestured towards the entry, away from the gaming rooms. “I suppose after that unmasking, it would be prudent to leave.”

George agreed and met Viola’s gaze. “Indeed. Will you allow me to see you home?” He turned to Philip. “You can make your own way, can’t you?”

“Yes, Godfather. I am perfectly capable of getting myself home. Night, Victor . You chose your name well.”

### In Which Our Hero Presents His Suit

Viola was uncharacteristically quiet on the ride home, while George sat opposite, watching the play of light from the carriage lamps across her face and remembering their first kisses.

Dressed as a young man with a bad haircut in a coat that swam around her slim form did not diminish his desire for her.

She was courageous in her endeavours to care for those she loved, and it struck George that her inner beauty far outweighed the external beauty valued by Society.

Surely he'd known that before, but loving Viola in her several guises had brought it home to him.

As they went through the front door, she asked, "Would you like tea, George, or is a sherry acceptable at this late hour? I'm afraid we don't have any brandy."

"Sherry is fine, thank you." He sat in one of two armchairs turned towards the fire, which had been banked for the night.

Viola handed him a glass, careful not to touch him, and took the other chair.

George raised his glass. "Here's to catching a cheat. May you always be around to best them."

"Why did you leave me to explain what happened to the manager of the club? As the

highest-ranking gentleman there, it was natural he asked you.”

George sipped and set his glass on the table between their chairs.

“Rank meant nothing when you worked out how he was cheating. Until you threw your drink over the footman, I still hadn’t worked out how Dawson was doing it.

I wouldn’t be a gentleman if I took credit when it came to who had the right to explain how you unmasked him. That honour belonged to you, Vi.”

“The ungentlemanly gentleman. And now I am welcome any time in the club, with free drinks. Not that I like brandy, and nor do I like to drink when I am playing. More than a glass impairs my ability to stay focused. The manager got a good deal from his offer to me.”

“Will you return?”

“Perhaps.” Viola set her glass beside his on the small table and then eased the awful mouse-brown wig from her head. After she dropped the wig on the floor, her fingers tunnelled through her hair, scattering hairpins as she massaged her scalp. “That’s better.”

Glorious red tresses tumbled down her back, and George felt a tightening in his loins.

“I notice you did not forbid me from returning to the club. Very wise of you.”

“I can’t imagine any man, other than your father perhaps, being brave or foolish enough to forbid you anything you set your mind to.”

“You did.”

“I like to think I learn from my mistakes. If you feel the need to return to Elverson’s, I would be happy to accompany you, should you wish it.”

“Then you are wise.”

She sipped her sherry, wishing it were a cup of tea, and stared into the embers of the fire. One fell from the grate and cracked open, and a small heart of rich orange flared to life.

Perhaps her relationship with George was not in ashes but simply embers, full of life if she wished it to be. Certainly, he wasn’t behaving like a man no longer interested in her, but would she accept that marriage of convenience, if that was all he had to offer her?

Could she live with him, wanting him as she did?

“Why are you here, George? You could have dropped me at my door.”

“True. I have been thinking about my future travels and our discussion. Indeed, I had a great deal of time to think as I sat by my mother’s sick bed. That is where I was for the week I was away.”

Viola frowned and leaned towards him. “Your mother was ill? Has she recovered now? Why didn’t you tell me that’s where you were?”

“I intended only an overnight visit, but I arrived to discover she was very ill. The doctor had only just sent a messenger whom I must have passed on the road. I sat by Maman’s side for several days as she battled the fever, but eventually, it broke.

Once she was out of danger, we talked. I told her all about you—about what a wonderful countess you would make. ”

Viola looked away and pressed her lips together. “I hope she will not be too disappointed to learn that is no longer the situation.”

“But it could be. I would very much like to marry you, Vi, and there is something you need to know that may change your mind.”

“I don’t believe anything you say can do that, George, but tell me anyway.”

Her response wasn’t encouraging, but at least she was prepared to listen. George would take that as a win.

“It didn’t take me long to realise just how capable you are. I know you don’t want to rely on me, or anyone for that matter, to protect you, but I would like you to feel you can rely on me being there for you. And I will feel good knowing you are there beside me, helping me, caring— loving me.”

Frowning, Viola shook her head. “Our discussions were about a marriage of convenience. We did not speak of love. You do not love me; I know that.”

“We did not speak of love because I did not consider it a necessity to have a good marriage.”

“You told me physical compatibility was enough.”

“It seemed important at the time.”

“What do you mean, ‘at the time’?”

“At a time before I realised that I love you. Now, I cannot imagine any other type of marriage but one where love lives and grows, nor any countess but you by my side.”

Then George waited for Viola to decide.

He was helpless.

He was hopeful.

##

I love you. I love you. I love you.

George's words ran around and around in her mind like a horse on the carousel in John Joseph Merlin's Mechanical Museum.

Her siblings had loved riding on that carousel before their parents had gone to Egypt, and Frederick especially enjoyed the galloping horses and fine music.

She loved it too, but now she wondered how to stop the carousel so she could climb off and talk to George.

"You can't make such an extraordinary statement with no explanation." Viola reached for the glass of sherry and tossed it back.

"I thought you didn't like to drink?"

"Right now, I'd give anything for some of that brandy at the club."

"Why?"

"Because you said you love me."

"I do. I hope you can accept that and perhaps, one day, you might love me too." He

stood and, taking hold of her hands, drew her to her feet.

“I find the idea of a marriage of convenience is no longer to my taste, but I must be honest with you. I’ll take whatever form of marriage you will give me, just as long as you will stand by my side.

That’s what love is, Viola: putting the other person’s needs ahead of your own.

Whatever you need—that’s what I want to give you.

What I will always give you, if you’ll be my wife. ”

Viola’s wits were scattered. How was it George had said the one thing—the only thing—that could have changed her mind?

The dawning of her own love for George had begun after their picnic, but there had been no sign he had felt the same.

Wrapping her feelings close about her, she had believed she could marry him without his love. Hers would be enough for them both.

But with his declaration, she needed to know.

“What brought on this sudden change of heart?”

“A good friend asked me the right question at the right time, and I just knew. Viola, marry me. Please?”

“You won’t stop me from attending Elverson’s if I so desire?”

“Never. If you wish for my company, I’ll be by your side.”



“And your trips to Africa and other parts of the world?”

“Always. I will always want you by my side.”

“And you truly love me?”

“I truly, madly, forever love you.”

The dam in her chest broke, and she flung her arms around him. To his credit, George stood firm, simply wrapping his arms around her, holding her, loving her.

“I do love you too, George. Yes, I will marry you. I’ll be your wife and your travel companion.”

“How does a honeymoon in Italy sound, on the way to an adventure in Africa?”

“Perfectly delightful, my love.”

The End

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Meg Dorset hit the floor with a thud. A terrible roaring filled her ears and her army-issue cot lay on its side across her lower legs. Heat beat at her face. Not the usual summer heat of Darwin; this heat was dry and fierce and—loud. Like the droning of a thousand giant mosquitoes circling her.

Disorientated, she pushed herself to her knees and kicked free from the bed sheet and tangle of mosquito netting. The door to the tiny rear room in the nurses' accommodation—the room she shared with Vera Grantham—hung askew on its hinges.

Explosions filled the air, banging one after another, and the floor trembled beneath her palms. Or was she trembling?

A woman's scream rose from the floor below and Meg clambered to her feet.

She grabbed her tin helmet and slung her first aid kit over her shoulder.

Matron had emphasised that they must keep their kit and helmet within reach at all times.

'Although war has not directly touched our shores, it is not far away. Be prepared at all times, Sisters.'

It looked like Matron had been right about the kit and wrong about the war. Aircraft rumbled high overhead. More explosions shook the hotel and dust rained down. Was the roof coming down?

Shoving her feet into her boots, Meg didn't stop to tie the laces. She had to get out of the building.

Heated air scorched her skin as she staggered through the doorway into the smoky hallway. At the far end of the hall where a wall had once been, the port was visible, and Meg gasped.

Flames engulfed a naval ship.

Black smoke columned and thickened like a pyre around the smokestack, consuming the ship.

Grey smoke filled the gaping hole in the hotel, hiding the death throes of the ship.

Coughing, Meg scrunched her watering eyes and covered her mouth and nose with one arm.

The other hand flailed for the handrail.

Her hand found the wood, smooth and warm.

Blindly feeling for each step, Meg lunged forward and down the stairs.

Down and down she staggered, trying not to breathe until she fell through the doors onto the covered veranda.

She bent over, hands on her knees and sucked in a deep breath of smoky air.

Her body was wracked by coughing and she fell onto a nearby chair.

When the fit passed, she sat up, her chest heavy and heaving with the effort of

breathing and looked around. Christ save us, it's Dante's Inferno.

Soldiers, some bare-chested, formed a bucket line that branched like a snake's forked tongue where two of them attempted to douse flames rising from the facade of a nearby building.

She bent down and tied her bootlaces, knowing there must be wounded men all over the place.

People who needed her help. Where should she go?

Thank God the last non-essential civilians had flown out yesterday.

As a nursing sister, Meg was one of fewer than a hundred women allowed to remain in Darwin.

She pushed her hair back with shaking hands and turned in a slow half-circle. Thick black smoke poured from a stricken ship. Suddenly a blinding explosion spewed in a gold and black mushroom next to the smokestack.

Dodging debris and soldiers manning the untidy bucket line, she ran towards the carnage, even as common sense screamed at her to run the other way.

Meg reached the bank overlooking a stretch of beach at the waterfront and swallowed, sucking in air and trying to quell the panic rising from her gut and threatening to burst from her throat in a piercing, useless scream.

A skinny private with pimples motioned her over and took her arm and helped her over the steep side.

'Thanks. Any casualties here?'

‘Over there, Sister.’ He directed her to his right and she hurried across the sand towards a small group of soldiers.

Minor cuts and a possible broken arm by the way one young soldier cradled his elbow against his chest. She headed to him first and kneeled beside him. ‘How did it happen?’ she asked as she examined his arm.

‘Oh my God, look.’ Her roommate, Vera whom she’d last seen when her shift changed over this morning, appeared at her side and pointed. ‘They’ve hit the hospital ship.’

Meg’s fingers dug into the rolled bandage she had just taken out of her kit. ‘It’s clearly marked as a hospital ship. What sort of enemy bombs wounded men and doctors and nurses?’ Her gut clenched and she stood watching, anger and disbelief churning through her.

A soldier with a bandage around his head glanced at her, his expression harsh and dark. ‘That means nothing to the little yellow bastards. I heard they rounded up some nurses and shot them in the islands.’

They shot nurses?

Despite the heat, her skin turned clammy.

When she signed up no one had ever mentioned she’d face an enemy that shot nurses.

Civilians had no idea such horrific acts happened in war.

Surely, Dad would have refused to let her go if he’d had any idea she’d be on the front line?

He'd been unhappy about her joining up, but he hadn't stopped her.

The front line. Where they shoot nurses.

Bile rose in her throat, burning. Frantically, she swallowed it down. She had a job to do, and do it she would. Turning back to the private she bandaged his arm then improvised a sling with another bandage.

As she was tying a knot beside his neck, a ragged cheer rose around her. 'The Peary is firing on the bastards. Go, Peary!'

A single gun on the small American ship continued to fire at the dive-bombers even as other ships around were taking hits. As they watched, the Peary took a hit, but she kept bravely firing until the end.

'It's no use. The Japs are too high for our piddling little guns to reach them. The shells are exploding way below the planes.' The soldier with the head wound slumped to the ground, his head bowed.

'Sister? Up here. You're needed.' A man's voice broke through the nightmarish scene and recalled Meg to her duty.

'Coming.' Thankful she'd fallen asleep in her uniform after a twenty-hour shift, Meg stumbled back up the bank and across the rubble-strewn street and dropped to her knees beside a young soldier. He writhed in pain, moaning words that were all unintelligible, except for 'Mum'.

'I'm here to help you. Try to stay still and let me see what you've done.'

One hand gripped her wrist so hard she thought her bone might break. 'Mum—hurts.'

‘He copped a bit of guttering when it fell. His shoulder’s a mess, Sister.’ The soldier who had called for her help rose with not another word. Picking up three empty buckets, he raced off to refill them.

‘Can you let go of my arm so I can help you?’ Meg looked into the young man’s eyes and forced her clenched teeth to part into a smile—her professional, reassuring smile, the one she pinned in place every day at work at the top end of Australia.

‘I’ll look after you, Private—’ She glanced at the dog tag lying on the private’s chest. ‘Jackson. Look at me. I’m going to check your wound and get you to the hospital, okay?’

He let go of her wrist and gently, she eased him into a sitting position and shuffled around in the dirt until she could see his wound more clearly.

The hot jagged metal had cut and burned through his shirt and skin, exposing a sliver of white bone beneath the red mess that had been his shoulder.

Her guts heaved, but resolutely, she swallowed and focused only on him.

‘I need to cut away your shirt. Do you have a knife, private?’

‘Yeah.’ His reply was a forced grunt, an exhalation of pain. He pointed with his uninjured arm towards his calf. ‘Dad give it me.’

Meg reached for the calf sheath and withdrew a short but sharp knife and set to work removing the remnant of shirtsleeve.

Slicing it, she made a pad of it then dressed the wound with a bandage from her kit.

That would hold him until she could get him to the hospital and clean the wound

properly.

Then she tucked his arm inside the remains of his shirt.

No matter how careful she was, each movement elicited a moan.

‘Stay with me, private. We’ll get you some morphine very soon. ’

Looking around for someone to help her, Meg began to grasp the extent of the situation. Everyone was battling fires or searching through rubble.

Where the Post Office had once been, smoke rose from a pile of rubble.

Wires dangled from telegraph poles. One leaned crazily against the shell of the remains.

The front wall was gone, and most of the building lay in untidy piles, but a solitary desk lay on its side surrounded by two walls.

As she watched, they gave way and crashed, sending up a cloud of dust. With communication lines down, no one would know what was happening in Darwin.

No one would be coming to help them. Panic welled in her gut but giving in to the churning emotion was a luxury she couldn’t afford.

Not with a wounded soldier depending on her.

‘Looks like it’s just you and me.’ She squatted beside the young private and slung his good arm across her shoulders. ‘Come on, soldier. We need to move out of here and get you to the hospital.’



She exerted gentle pressure to get him on his feet, and he groaned, but she urged him into a shuffling walk, one arm around his waist and the other bracing his injured arm across his chest. Heat surrounded them, flames consumed the ships behind them, and smoke choked them no matter which way they turned.

Ash floated in the air like black rain and a sharp pain burned her arm.

She shook the ash off, biting back a less than ladylike exclamation. Not that Private Jackson would notice.

His head hung low, but he kept moving beside her. ‘Sister? If I don’t make it—’

‘You’ll make it, private.’

‘Will you see Dad gets my knife—please?’

‘I will, but don’t you go wasting my effort to fix you up.’

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

He grunted, a sound she took as assent as they staggered along the road, skirting debris and running soldiers.

Everywhere was noise and chaos and horror.

Sweat ran down her face, but Meg couldn't risk relaxing her hold on Private Jackson to wipe it off.

Black particles settled into the sweat on Jackson's face. Hers probably looked as black.

'Get down.' As she turned, a soldier ran towards her, and the command rang loud and urgent again. 'Get. Down.'

She glanced up. Lines of bombs were falling out near the edge of town. Lines of bombs from neat formations of planes.

Her breath caught in her throat, but she obeyed the order without question.

Dropping to her knees she dragged the private down with her. The lad passed out and Meg lifted her head. A thunderous roar deafened her as wave after wave of planes flew over the town. Bombs whistled as they fell then cracked and crumped as they exploded.

Dark mosquito shapes. A ragged line of bombs raining on the street ahead of them.

She flung herself over the wounded soldier, shielding him with her body.

Dirt rained on them, and she pressed her face into his good shoulder, one hand instinctively covering her helmet even while she tried to protect his wound.

The patter and thud of chunks of dirt subsided and she raised her head.

The soldier who had told her to get down knelt in front of her, his hand extended to help her up. ‘Sister, you’ve got to get out of here now.’

Meg looked up. The voice belonged to an Aussie sergeant who reached for her elbow and dragged her to her feet. Blood ran down his cheek from a wound above his right eye.

‘I can’t leave him. He’s badly burnt.’

‘Bring your patient this way.’

‘He’s out cold.’

‘Damn it.’ The sergeant knelt beside the private then hefted him onto his shoulders. ‘They’re loading trucks and evacuating the wounded.’

‘But I am essential. I’m a nurse and—’

‘Move, Sister. They’ll need you. Around the next corner.’

Her ears ringing, Meg moved in response to the commanding tone. ‘I should get him to the hospital . . .’

‘Hospital’s on fire. Do what you can for him once you’re out of here.’ The sergeant’s words bounced raggedly as he jogged towards the corner.

A battered truck with wooden slats along the sides and no roof, was parked near the

rear gates of the hospital. Benches filled with wounded servicemen lined both sides.

Examining the crammed vehicle, Meg shook her head. 'There's no room on this one.'

'You'll fit. We can squeeze you both in.'

Meg looked up at the sound of a familiar voice. Sister Patricia Carey, who had been on the shift that relieved Meg's three hours earlier, gestured for her to climb aboard. 'Hurry up, Meg.' Pat squeezed past the legs of a couple of patients and held out a hand.

Meg grabbed Pat's hand and scrambled up onto the flat bed, dangling her legs over the tailgate. It was precarious, but there wasn't another inch of space to shuffle into.

The sergeant put the injured private beside her then shouted to the driver. 'That's it. Go.'

Meg eased Private Jackson's good shoulder and head onto her lap as the truck bounced into a pothole—or was it a bomb hole? He groaned as the truck bumped and ground along the road south. Covering his wound as well as she could, Meg looked back at the city.

Dust spewed up behind the truck, almost obliterating the dirt road. Smoke filled the sky and several thick black columns rose from the harbour. How many ships had been hit? How many sunk? Her heart ached at the thought of the men on those ships. Had any sailors escaped?

Pat slid down against Meg's back. 'Okay there? What happened to you?'

'I'm fine, aside from being tipped out of my bed. The hotel was hit, but I made it downstairs to the street. Someone called me to help this chap. What's happened, do you know?'

‘Tom said the Japs might try to invade us at the Top End. Looks like he was right.’

‘Tom, your brother?’ The truck lurched around a bend past the road to the racecourse. Dirt spooled out as they headed south, leaving the town behind. The heavy choking smoke thinned.

‘Yes. He’s on the HMAS Kookaburra. I heard there was a wave of planes hit the harbour and the big guns first. Once those were out of action, they started bombing the town. My guess is the airport was probably hit, or will be.’

‘The Post Office has gone, and it looked like the telegraph wires are down. No one will know what’s happening up here.

’ Meg went quiet. Her head ached, her eyes were gritty, and hunger pangs hit hard.

Exhausted after twenty hours on the ward, she’d fallen asleep without eating.

But likely she wouldn’t be able to keep any food down.

Not after the shock of waking to a world on fire. Her stomach disagreed.

A wooden signpost pointed the way to Mt Isa and Alice Springs, and Brisbane, impossibly far away.

The truck slowed with a squeal of brakes and a soldier jumped out from the cab.

He knocked the sign names from the post with the butt of his rifle, collected them in his arms and returned to the cab.

With a wheezing groan, the truck rolled slowly onwards.

‘Any idea where we’re going?’ They bounced in and out of a depression in the road.

Pat knocked Meg's shoulder and grimaced. 'Right now? Frankly, I don't care so long as it's as far away from here as we can get.'

'Thank goodness most of the civilian population were sent away when the government decided to station our armed forces up here.'

Pat said nothing for several moments, but she leaned across Meg's shoulder and gently checked Private Jackson's wound.

'That's one of the things I like about you, Meg.'

Even in the direst circumstances, you find something to be grateful for.

'A soldier out of Meg's sight called, 'Sister, can you check my mate?' She squeezed Meg's shoulder before rising and clambering between soldiers seated on the floor between the narrow benches.

Rocking and bouncing on the back of the truck, Meg felt oddly detached from events. Praying this was just a nightmare brought on by too little sleep, her eyelids lowered, and her head bent. The angle made her neck ache, but she was too tired to lift her head . . .

A hand gripped her shoulder and shook her. 'Whoa there, Sister, don't nod off or you'll fall out and wake up in the middle of the track.'

Blinking and wishing the cheery voice with a hint of an Irish accent hadn't dragged her from the arms of Morpheus, Meg turned to see who had saved her from tumbling into the road.

A cheeky grin slashed white across a corporal's dirt-streaked face.

She raised her gaze to a pair of blue eyes, bright beneath a bandage and intense as the

summer sky.

‘Thanks for the save.’

‘Can’t let the prettiest nurse this side of the Black Stump get lost, can I.’

From somewhere behind, Pat raised her voice. ‘Corporal Flanagan, I’m not sure whether to tell you off for being cheeky to Sister Dorset, or take umbrage that you ignored me, who’s put up with your shenanigans through all the hours of night and day.’

Flanagan’s grin grew wider. Ah, but you’re the prettiest head nurse, Sister.’

‘And you’re a rascal I should have discharged this morning.’

‘Maybe you’ll be glad to have an able-bodied man around.’

Flanagan’s sling and bandaged head belied his comment, but his cheery, cheeky flirting made the terrible morning bearable. And when he reached awkwardly into his breast pocket and drew out a small open packet of chocolate and offered it to Meg, she was glad he was aboard their transport.

‘I shouldn’t take your rations but thank you.’

‘Sister, I’ll be offended if you turn down my gift. Besides, I got a wonderful night’s sleep thanks to you.’ He winked, making sure she took no offence.

Her stomach growled and her mouth watered at the scent of chocolate currently wafting beneath her nose.

Flanagan held it close and gave her a small nod.

Reluctantly, but unable to keep from refusing his offer, she took the packet and broke off a single piece, offered a quiet ‘Thanks’ and popped it into her mouth.

Closing her eyes, she let the chocolate melt on her tongue.

A swiftly indrawn breath nearby forced her eyes to open.

‘What is it? Danger?’ She scanned the skies over Darwin and the surrounding bush before looking for an explanation from the corporal.

Flanagan’s gaze was fixed on her. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down before he gave her a lop-sided smile. ‘I haven’t seen anyone enjoy chocolate more, Sister.’

‘It’s the most delicious food I’ve ever eaten.’ She held out his precious bar of chocolate. ‘Thanks.’

‘Keep it.’

‘But—’

‘I’m watching my weight.’ He winked, and, in spite of the carnage they’d left behind, Meg’s day brightened.

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