



# His Christmas Reluctant Countess (Christmas Matches of Worth #4)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "I'll stand by your side, not only for this Christmas, but for all the days ahead."

Nicholas Bolton, the Earl of Bernewood, has long avoided society, hiding his past behind a charming facade.

Clarissa Crompton, shunned by the ton after a family scandal, has vowed to rebuild her life and her family's honour.

Drawn together by the magic of Christmas, they must risk everything to claim a love neither thought possible.

Get swept away to a world of sparkling ballrooms, cozy firesides, and the romance of a snowy Regency Christmas. If you love stories with unforgettable characters, a few heartaches along the way, and a sweet, satisfying happily-ever-after, this one's for you.

No cheating. No cliffhangers.

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

London, 1815

Clarissa was frozen in place, her heart racing so wildly she felt that it might burst from her chest. Her hand shook as she read the letter held between her fingers.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

### The Country, 1818

The rays of the sun flooded through the high, mullioned windows of the drawing room. As usual, Clarissa was up before the lark, looking out on the wide expanse of the gardens at their country estate.

A robin was pecking at the lawn amidst the snow, and she had been watching him for some time. Over the years, she had learned that little distractions could be a balm for the soul.

His merry red breast fluttered about, his beak burrowing into the hardened ground beneath. The gardener had left a spade in one of the beds, and the little bird fluttered up onto the handle. It was an image straight from a Christmas card. She smiled at him, wondering how he might spend the remainder of his day and whether he would successfully catch the worm.

She had already had a productive morning herself, settling several matters with the housekeeper and writing three letters—all before her father was out of bed. As she waited for her tea to be brought to her, she turned her face up to the sun, feeling the faint warmth of it over her skin.

The snow had settled on the ground overnight, carpeting everything in a blanket of glistening white diamonds. She sighed as she looked out at it. No doubt her mother would fuss terribly if she took a turn about the grounds later, but she was determined to do so.

The door opened, and their maid entered. She had been with the Crompton family for

many years and had a severe stoop that Clarissa found hard to look at. She carried the tray expertly, but Clarissa could not imagine she was comfortable.

Clarissa stepped forward, took the tray, and placed it on the side table beside the settee. She smiled at the maid.

“Thank you, Poppy. How are you this morning?”

“Oh, cannot complain, Miss Crompton.”

“Is there enough coal below stairs for the fires to remain lit?” she asked. “It is a bitterly cold day.”

“Indeed, Miss Crompton, with the ovens in the kitchen, it is quite pleasant. Too many bodies to feel the cold down there. Never fear.”

Clarissa had spent a great deal of her time analysing her father's accounts over the years. At first, he had forbidden her from any such notion, but as the toll on his faculties had risen, she had begun to assist him more and more. During the winter months, she had taken to deliberately diverting funds, that they might otherwise have spent on her wardrobe or her mother's frivolities, to the servants' quarters. She knew how abominably cold it could become with snow on the ground.

“Very well, thank you, Poppy. Is Papa awake, as yet?”

“His Lordship is in his study. I have brought him some tea. I believe Miss Emily was looking for you.”

“Do send her in.”

Clarissa smiled. She could already hear her cousin's pattering footsteps approaching.

Emily burst into the room only seconds after Poppy had left it. Her dark brown hair was curled in ringlets at either side of her face, and her round, happy expression always brought joy to Clarissa's heart.

"Clary," Emily said, sounding pained. "You promised to wake me up. Look at the snow! I could not believe it when I opened my eyes this morning. Have you ever seen anything more beautiful in your life?"

Clarissa chuckled as her ebullient cousin practically ran to the window. If she had been five years younger, she might have pressed her nose against the glass, but thankfully, at nearly eighteen, she had a little more decorum than that.

"One would think you had never seen snow before," she said teasingly.

"Not in the country! This is my first Christmas here."

Emily had come to live with them two years earlier when Clarissa's uncle tragically died in a riding accident. Lord Crompton had welcomed Emily into the bosom of the family without delay. She was a dear girl, although her enthusiasm and excitement could be tiring at times. She was still not out in society, given the concerns her father retained over allowing this too early, but she was charismatic, beautiful, and strong in character.

Clarissa had taken a little while to grow used to her, however. When Emily arrived, Clarissa felt bitter toward her parents for their obvious excitement and happiness at having two girls in the house again. Despite her own confusing feelings toward Catherine, she still missed her sister terribly and did not like the idea that Emily had been adopted as a replacement.

Since then, however, she had grown to love her dearly. How could she not when the girl was such a ball of happiness?

“Would you like some tea? You are going to wear out the carpet if you hop about like that.”

Emily turned with a grin and came to sit beside her as Clarissa poured some tea for them both. For a blissful moment, all was quiet as Emily sat back on her chair, staring out the window and sipping her tea, her eyes twinkling merrily.

Clarissa settled herself, sighing contentedly and listening to the crackle of the fire. There were three letters beside the teapot that she had not immediately observed, and she now picked them up. Two of them were bills for services rendered. The third she did not recognize and frowned at it.

She opened it without much cause for alarm until she read the missive inside. Clarissa swallowed convulsively, her fingers tightening on the paper, noting its quality and thickness.

They had been invited to a house party at Lady Eleanor Kingston’s country estate. Clarissa rose to her feet and then abruptly sat down again as Emily turned to stare at her in surprise.

She read it again, but there could be no mistake. Lady Eleanor expected the ‘pleasure of their company’ for Christmas.

She suddenly found it hard to breathe and tried her best to tamp down the nervous energy fluttering through her body. It had been a very long time since anyone in good society had thought of the Crompton’s and pleasurable company in the same sentence.

“What is it, Clarissa? You have gone very pale,” Emily said, a little frown marring her face.

Clarissa startled as the door opened behind them, and her mother entered the room. Her mother had an elegant stride, which Clarissa had always admired. They were almost as tall as one another now, but Clarissa had never been able to emulate her poise.

Lady Crompton wore a long plum gown of fine silk. Her blonde hair, streaked with grey, was twisted atop her head in a complicated construction, her expression tight and irritated.

“Good morning, Mama,” Clarissa said carefully.

“Good morning, Aunt,” Emily piped up.

Clarissa swiftly hid the invitation behind her back, giving a warning look to her cousin. Her mother walked immediately to the fire, plucking a discarded shawl from the back of one of the armchairs and flicking an irritated glance at her daughter as she pulled it about her shoulders.

“It is so cold in the house, Clarissa. Are we to have no fires this winter?”

It was an old argument.

Her mother was used to luxury and had not adapted well to being excluded from society. Although her father’s business dealings had picked up in recent months, Clarissa was still loath to overindulge in buying coal. Lady Crompton would have burned all the wood in the estate on the first day of winter if she had her way.

“I will ask Poppy to bank it up for you, Mama. Have you seen the snow? It is so beautiful.”

“It is a nuisance for getting about,” her mother snapped, placing her hands closer to

the fire and sighing heavily. "I would give a great deal to live throughout the year in the sunshine. I cannot abide all this cold."

After a short pause, her shoulders relaxed slightly, and she turned to Clarissa with a half-smile. "I am sorry; I fear I have not had enough sleep."

"Papa's slumber has not improved, I take it?" Clarissa inquired gently.

Her mother cast her a fatigue glance. "It has only worsened."

They shared a smile, and her mother came to sit beside Emily as she poured her a cup of tea. Lady Crompton's gaze settled on the letters at Clarissa's elbow, a frown on her face as she noticed the discarded envelope from the invitation.

Clarissa knew instinctively that there was no use concealing it any longer. Her mother would merely root it out anyway. She pulled it from her side and handed it over. Emily's eager eyes tried to read it while it was upside down under her nose, but she was not quick enough.

"We have received an invitation to a Christmas house party from Lady Eleanor Kingston," Clarissa said quickly, watching the surprise ripple over her mother's face.

"Lady Eleanor?" Lady Crompton replied weakly. "I see."

She proceeded to do the same thing that Clarissa had done, reading the invitation and then reading it again as though to ensure it was genuine. She looked at the back, the front, and then the back again, then lowered it to her lap.

Clarissa waited, dreading the reaction before it came but knowing there was no escaping it.



“Oh, this is wonderful,” her mother exclaimed, leaping to her feet and walking to the fire. She began pacing in front of it, her hands gripping the invitation like a lifeline. She rang for a servant immediately, and a footman entered the room. “Please ask Lord Crompton to join us at his earliest convenience.”

The footman disappeared again, and Clarissa closed her eyes, begging for patience.

“Mama...”

“Lady Eleanor has always been one of my closest friends; I knew she would not abandon us like the rest of them.” She read the invitation again. “Just think of it, Clarissa, a house party for Christmas! There could be any number of people there to whom we are not yet acquainted. It has been so long since... this could be just what we need.”

Her mother never mentioned the elopement or said Catherine’s name aloud, and neither did her father. She was always simply referred to as ‘your sister’.

Despite knowing that her parents did not wish her ill, Clarissa could not help but take the phrase personally. It sounded accusatory, as though she were tainted by her sister’s disgrace.

“Are we truly going to a party?” Emily asked, her eyes sparkling with glee.

“Of course!” Lady Crompton said quickly. “How could we possibly refuse?”

“Mama,” Clarissa said again, her tone cautious and measured, “consider the potential risks.”

Lady Crompton stopped pacing and turned to glare at her. “Risks? What risks?”

Clarissa cleared her throat. “Lady Eleanor may wish for us to attend, it is true, but the very people we would be circulating with might still shun us as a family. It could be yet another humiliation and there would be no escape. We would be guests in a house where we do not belong amongst animosity and derision. We attended so many balls to ‘keep up appearances,’ and I need not remind you how difficult they were by the end.”

“Oh Heavens,” her mother exclaimed. “Those balls were directly after your sister left us. It has been so long that there will be, and have been, a host of new scandals for the gossips to sink their teeth into by now.”

“And if we make a misstep somehow amidst this new company? What then? We would be in a worse position than when we started.”

“Are you planning to misstep?” her mother asked, her eyes narrowing cruelly at Clarissa as though she was intentionally attempting to sabotage her mother’s good humour.

“Of course not, Mama, but—”

“Clarissa is right, my dear.”

They all turned at the deep voice from the doorway. Her father, Lord Robert Crompton, stood behind them, one hand still on the door handle. As he scanned the room, his gaze rested on Clarissa for a fraction longer than the others.

He closed the door behind him and walked into the room, cutting a smart figure in his morning coat. Although he was clean-shaven, he had always had a thick head of hair, and his sideburns and eyebrows had only grown bushier over the intervening years.

Clarissa’s mother hated them.

Lord Crompton took up his position by the fireplace as his wife repaired to one of the sofas. She sat very straight, the invitation still clutched in her elegant fingers.

“What do you mean, my dear?” she asked, feigning nonchalance. “You cannot possibly be considering refusing?”

Her father turned to Clarissa, those bushy eyebrows raising to his hairline.

“Well, Clary? It is you who has shouldered the burdens for this family over the past few years. I think it fair that we hear your views.”

Her mother scoffed derisively. “We have already heard her views—”

“Bernadette,” her father said with quiet comment. “Please let our daughter speak,” and Lady Crompton fell into an uncomfortable silence.

Clarissa hesitated, feeling her mother’s gaze burning into her skin.

It was true; she had shouldered much of the weight of her sister’s disgrace to protect her family. She had continued with her charitable work, attempting, where she could, to be seen within their local community. She had attended a few smaller functions, forcing herself to mingle with friends who had turned their backs on her and making polite conversation with the dregs of their social circle.

She did not miss those days. In the end it had done her little good.

In truth, if Clarissa could have torn up Lady Eleanor’s invitation and thrown it into the fire, she would have. She had no wish to walk into a room and find herself the subject of gossip ever again.

And yet...is this our chance at redemption?

Lady Eleanor was exceptionally well connected, not to mention her influence with the Ton knew no bounds. If they could return to her good graces, they might just stand a chance of being accepted back into society by next season. It was perhaps a fool's hope, but a hope, nonetheless.

She stared at the paper in her mother's hands as her mind dragged her back to that awful day three years before. She would never forget finding her sister's note—the spiked, urgent handwriting so unlike Catherine's neatly looping style. In a few sentences, her sister had managed to destroy everything their family had carefully built over decades. Clarissa felt the familiar ache in her chest at the memory and tried to tamp down her own reaction, aware of her mother's eyes still fixed on her face.

The idea of returning to society terrified her, but remaining as she was, with no hope of a better life or a good marriage, would be worse.

She glanced at Emily. Her cousin deserved to have a future, too. Someone so happy and carefree, just as Clarissa had once been, should not be downtrodden by Catherine's mistakes.

“We must attend,” her mother interjected, giving up on hearing any response from Clarissa. “Refusing would surely be seen as an admission of shame. And the shame is not ours.”

Clarissa clenched her fists, and Emily came to sit beside her, taking her hand. Her cousin knew very well how much Clarissa hated negative remarks about Catherine. Sometimes, the two cousins would discuss her secretly before they went to bed. They would imagine the exotic life she lived in Italy. In Clarissa's mind, Catherine was achingly happy and that was the way she wished her to remain.

She supposed she should have resented her after everything her departure had put her through. But Clarissa could not find it in her heart to do so. In the long years of her

absence, Clarissa had come to recognize how brave Catherine had been. Foolish—to be sure—but brave enough to follow her heart.

Her mother's voice became almost desperate.

“We have been hiding in the countryside for three seasons. We have barely been seen in town and avoided all social functions, only entertaining our closest and dearest friends who still do not invite us to their soirees. This is our chance, Robert.”

Her mother stood up, going to her husband and gripping his hands, looking at him imploringly.

As her parents began to speak urgently with one another in hushed voices, Clarissa's gaze floated to the window. The snow had begun to fall again. She watched it whirl and twist against the pane. She could sympathize with the nervous twitches of each snowflake as they floated to the ground, trying to find their place in a changeable world.

Her family had been ostracised for three long and tumultuous years; perhaps it was time for things to change.

She looked back to her parents as silence fell. All the eyes in the room were now trained on her. The whole family was waiting to hear her decision.

“We will go,” she stated finally, watching the smile bloom across her mother's face.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Lord Nicholas Bolton looked out of the window, frowning at the snow, hoping his ire might melt it all away. He was only back in England for two weeks and already missing the heat of southern Europe.

He had quite forgotten how chilly England could become at this time of year.

It was beautiful, though. The trees were hunkered down as though tucked under a great white sheet; their limbs outlined in silver frost contrasting against their dark trunks.

The gardener had yet to clear the pathways around Lady Eleanor's gardens, and they were peaceful, still, and calm.

Nicholas had no time for such things.

He harrumphed good-naturedly, drumming his fingers against the polished wood of the windowsill, imagining he was back in the south of France beside the sea again. For the tenth time that morning, he reminded himself that he could not abandon his duties indefinitely and that it was just those duties and obligations that had necessitated his return.

A sharp knock at the door pulled him out of his melancholy, and he turned as his younger sister entered the room. She looked somewhat perplexed, her freckled face part joyful and part curious.

As soon as her wide blue eyes alighted on him, however, the joy eclipsed everything else, and she ran at him with such force that she almost knocked the air from his

lungs.

“Good Lord, Rosemary, you have the strength of a mountain!” he said, chuckling at her as she looked up at him. She had grown in the two years he had been away, and his throat tightened as he thought of everything he had missed.

“I cannot believe you are really here,” Rosemary said, finally releasing him and stepping back. “When Aunt Eleanor told me you would be back for Christmas, I did not believe her.”

“And why not? I gave her my word, and I never break my promises.” His sister scoffed, and Nicholas gave a sharp laugh. “I have already told you I did not promise to bring you back a rocking horse, only that they have beautiful examples of them in Spain.”

“You should not write such descriptive passages about things you cannot bring home for me, then,” she said with a disgruntled frown. “I fell in love with them from your letters.”

Her nose crinkled disapprovingly at him. It was an expression he had never been able to resist when she was younger and now was no different.

“You are far too old for a rocking horse, Rosemary.”

“I would not have ridden it,” she protested. “I merely wished to admire it.”

She was now twenty years old. He could not believe that the baby he had once held in his arms was out in society. At two and thirty, he felt ancient in comparison and wondered whether they would enjoy the same easy relationship they had once had now that she was a woman in her own right.

“Well, speaking of things one should not take onto a ship,” he said, unleashing his roguish smile, “a man I met did bring something very unusual aboard on my return journey to London.”

Rosemary rolled her eyes at him, knowing he was changing the subject, but her curiosity was peaked.

“What was it?” she asked eagerly.

“A magnificent parrot.”

Her eyes widened, and then she giggled prettily. “Nicholas, pray, do be serious.”

“I am quite sincere, I assure you. This parrot perched upon his shoulder at the dinner table each evening, a most splendid creature.”

Rosemary was staring at him now, flabbergasted. “But how?”

“Did I mention it could recite poetry?” He grinned, knowing she was captivated. “He informed me it was an extraordinary specimen, a rarity he could not bear to leave unattended in his cabin. He insisted on taking it with him wherever he went.”

“You are a fool if you think I shall believe such folly.”

“I ought to have penned a letter to describe its brilliance. I assure you, every word is true.”

She snorted in a most unladylike fashion and came to lean against the windowsill with him, looping her arm in his. He felt a flicker of guilt as he looked down at her sad expression and squeezed her arm gently. If she had missed him half as much as he had missed her, she had every reason to be unhappy he had stayed away so long.



They stood in companionable silence for some minutes, Nicholas simply enjoying the touch of one another. He had missed casual touches on his travels.

He had certainly not been without companionship—indeed, he had developed quite a reputation in certain circles—but real affection had been lacking. As he contemplated the top of his sister’s dark hair and wondered if she had finished growing yet, the door to the room opened to admit his Aunt Eleanor.

Nicholas straightened, noticing the familiar stern expression on her face. His aunt had been a wonderful guardian and a great companion to Rosemary, but she did have a rather waspish countenance when she was displeased. She could also be exceedingly elegant, but right at the moment, she was advancing on him like a knight about to tackle a dragon.

“Good morning, Aunt,” he hazarded, “you are looking so well these days.”

“None of that,” she said, waving him off and brushing a disapproving hand over Rosemary’s shoulder. “What are you wearing, child?” she asked as Rosemary looked down at herself rather self-consciously. “I have told you countless times that these ruffles are out of fashion. Is this not your dress from last season?”

“It is from last month, Aunt. The seamstress assured me that they were back in fashion.”

“Frivolity!” she said, although her tone was almost affectionate. “None of these modern ladies know how to dress if you ask me.”

Her green eyes swiveled to Nicholas, and he reminded himself he was two and thirty, not five years old anymore.

“You look like a fop,” she said, narrowing her eyes at his waistcoat. It was actually

one of the more modest garments in his collection. His valet constantly bemoaned the colours he wore for evening occasions, and Nicholas rather enjoyed gently riling his aunt with his choices.

“Thank you, aunt,” he replied. She sucked in a breath and stuck a bony finger in his face.

“You are not yet too advanced in years to be taken to task over my knee, young man,” she proclaimed and seemed all the more furious when Nicholas chuckled.

“Over a waistcoat?”

“Over your conduct!” Nicholas’s smile quickly dimmed. “You have been exceedingly lax in your duties, both as my nephew and the heir apparent. I shall not hear another word of you gallivanting off to Europe for a second time in two weeks no less! It is high time you took up your father’s duties and found a suitable wife.”

Rosemary’s fingers clutched tightly to his arm in a silent show of support, and he was grateful for that.

She knew very well how Nicholas felt about marriage. However, before he could reply to his aunt, she had stalked across the room and sat down firmly on the chaise.

She flicked a hand at them, and they both dutifully sat opposite her. She was an exceedingly dapper woman, even in her dotage, and Nicholas could not help but admire how poised she was. The dark red gown she wore perfectly complimented her hair. Despite having exceedingly dark brown hair that often looked almost black, she was still without the grey streaks that her peers were sporting.

“My dear aunt, you know how I feel about settling down.”

Her shoulders remained stiff, her back straight as she eyed him carefully. “I have known of that for many years, my boy, and you have done nothing to persuade me otherwise. However, you are the next Earl of Bernewood. Do you intend to remain unmarried forever?”

If only I could, he thought bitterly.

“I do not wish to displease you, but I have greatly enjoyed my travels. I am in England for two weeks only, and I shall continue to manage things from Europe as I have been.”

“There have been delays throughout the last two years, and many matters of the estate need your attention.”

“I shall endeavour to see to them while I am here, aunt,” he said, flashing a smile. It usually could charm anyone, but his aunt’s face was deeply unimpressed.

It was almost worse when she sighed, her shoulders drooping as she stared at the carpet beneath her feet. He did not wish to evoke such a reaction in anyone, let alone a woman whose opinion he valued so highly.

“Nicholas,” Eleanor began with forced patience. “You are a wonderful man, with excellent prospects. I do not understand why you are so against the idea of matrimony. Would you not like a companion with whom you can share your fortune? Would you not wish to raise children of your own someday?”

Nicholas’s throat tightened at her words. They were so ordinary, yet they invoked a tremor of anxiety in his heart.

Yes, that is precisely what most men in my station would wish for. And I had it. I believed I had everything I wished for in the world in the palm of my hand, only to

have it cruelly snatched away.

“Perhaps, one day,” he managed, “but, as it is, I enjoy my freedom. The estate would tie me to one place for too long, and I cannot think of anyone in society whom I admire enough to marry. I would wish for nothing more than to make you happy, Aunt Eleanor, you know that. But I cannot rush into these things.” He raised a hand as she opened her mouth. “I know you feel I have already taken too long about it, but I believe there is much I can learn on my travels to make me a better husband in the long run.”

Her eyes softened, and the familiar affection reappeared on her face. She sighed.

“Very well, then,” she shifted in her seat. “Do not take me for a fool. I know very well of your charm, Nicholas, and you will not unleash it upon me.”

Nicholas chuckled. “I would not dream of it,” he answered, breaking out his most ravishing smile to emphasize the point.

Eleanor closed her eyes as though praying for patience. “I expect you to be on your best behaviour for my Christmas house party,” she continued sternly. “I shall expect the Earl to be present, not my troublesome nephew.”

“Are they perhaps not one and the same?” he asked as she fixed him with a knowing glare.

“Best behaviour.”

“Of course, Aunt. I would never disgrace you,” he insisted merrily.

Finally, she chuckled, relaxing a little in her seat. Rosemary quickly asked her who she had invited to the party, and the conversation turned to the exclusive guest list.

Nicholas knew his sister was attempting to save him from more questions and accusations, and he was grateful to her for that.

However, despite his attempts to listen to what they were discussing, his mind lingered on the past. His aunt's insistence upon him finding a bride always led to memories of Victoria. The same pain stuttered through his chest as he remembered her beautiful face and the dark depths into which he had fallen because of it.

He glanced at the window, surprised to see that the snow was falling again. He had always loved their country seat, but the house did bear unhappy memories. His eyes strayed to the portrait above the fireplace, his father's steady gaze looking back at him.

Memories flooded to the front of his mind once again, as he recalled the fateful night he had come to the Bernewood Estate after receiving the doctor's urgent missive.

It had been mere hours after his arrival that he had lost his beloved father. The shock had been immense.

At five and twenty, Nicholas was thrown into the whirlwind of duties that came with the title of Earl of Bernewood. He had been in no way ready for the responsibilities that suddenly weighed upon his shoulders. Society's expectations were crushing enough, but the sheer number of decisions and choices he had had to make in the intervening weeks and months had almost overwhelmed him.

It had been a terrible time, and the bright, shining light that had emerged from the darkness had been Victoria.

He had believed her to be perfect for him in every way. A tall, willowy woman with striking red hair, who captured his heart almost immediately from across the floor. They had danced together in every ballroom that season. She was intelligent, witty,

startlingly direct, and exactly what he thought he needed in a wife.

Then, an innocent wrong turn at the final ball of the season had him walking in upon her in a compromising position with another man. Nicholas had stood frozen in the doorway in utter disbelief as Victoria had slowly lowered her leg from the man's groping fingers and turned to him in surprise.

She had laughed at him—joked with him about his affections. She had been cruel and heartless and had made it exceedingly clear that his love had been one-sided.

He closed his eyes as he recalled the desperate letters he had sent her after the event, insisting all would be forgiven and that they could still be together. The foolishness of youth.

Yet despite his own position and wealth, Victoria had chosen a Duke as her husband. She barely gave a second thought to the earl she had humiliated in the process.

Nicholas had not been able to bear it. He had chosen to go to Europe to escape the wretched reality of his broken heart and had abandoned his family at the same time.

He opened his eyes again, and his gaze moved to his sister. Her pretty countenance was alive with excitement as she discussed the party with her aunt. It had been a betrayal for him to leave her.

He had known it at the time but had been too focused on his own selfish pain to heed her pleas for him to stay. He had been gone for far too long, and although he could not agree to remain in England just yet, he knew that his next trip to Europe would be his last.

Another year or two. He promised himself. Then, I will fulfill her wishes and become the earl she wishes me to be.

“Nicholas!”

He was pulled from his thoughts by the realization that Rosemary and his aunt were looking at him expectantly.

“I told you he was not listening,” Rosemary said wearily.

“My apologies. I was considering how I might impress the guests. Perhaps I could learn to juggle? Or I could perform some sort of dance for them?” Despite her disapproval at his tone, his aunt could not entirely mask her smile.

“I was asking,” Rosemary continued, “if you remembered my friend Clarissa Crompton. Do you recall her?”

“I cannot say I do, although the name is familiar.”

“She has accepted our invitation!” Rosemary said, with great animation. “I have not seen her for so long. I was unsure if they would come at all. The scandal was so fresh the last time that I saw her. Thank you for inviting her family, aunt. I believe this will do them all good.”

“I agree; it is too cruel that they have been ostracized for so long,” his aunt said kindly, a slight frown across her brow.

“Now that they are attending, I cannot wait to see her,” Rosemary said excitedly. “She was so dear to me, and I can only hope that this will mean many more visits in the future.”

“Quiet, my dear,” Eleanor said easily. “I was not sure if they would come myself, but I have missed Lord and Lady Crompton’s company.”

Nicholas tried to recall these names being bandied about but came up with nothing. The Crompton name did stir something in the back of his mind, perhaps a scandal about a sister? He had heard it through a friend of a friend. But he had been abroad at the time it broke. London's scandals were not so very important to him then.

As Rosemary and his aunt began to enthuse over the arrangements, he felt uncertain at the prospect of the upcoming party. It was a selective guest list, so at least he would not have to socialize with dozens of people. Yet, he would prefer it was just the three of them for Christmas.

He did not like socializing with people who saw him for his title and reputation alone. He had enjoyed freedoms in Europe that he could never have cultivated in England, but he was not naive enough to believe his exploits would not have reached English shores.

He had cultivated a carefree and open persona on the continent. Some might even call him a rake, but he did not regret losing himself to pleasure and vice. It had been a difficult time, and his freer proclivities had enabled him to move past the heartache—it had felt like a necessary evil. No, he did not regret it, but he was not proud of it.

The thought of packing his rakish ways into a box to become the man everyone expected him to be was not a fulfilling prospect.

He shifted in his seat, schooling his expression into neutral amusement. The easy-going man he presented to the world was not who he truly was. He was loathe to remind himself of who he had once been—the loving, dutiful fool Victoria had destroyed without hesitation.

He did not relish losing the life he had carefully built for himself, and yet a small part of him wondered whether that might not be for the best. Perhaps this Christmas



would herald some changes.

One cannot persist on a lie forever.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

A week later, Clarissa listened to the crunch of snow beneath the carriage wheels as the Crompton family pulled up to Lady Kingston's manor.

The journey had been uneventful, apart from Emily's excitement. Clarissa had been grateful for the continuous chatter of her cousin to prevent her mind from reeling in every direction at once.

The closer they came to the manor, the more her mind was flooded with memories. She had been unable to keep Catherine's face out of her mind.

What will people say? Will the scandal still follow us wherever we go? Was this a mistake?

As the carriage turned a corner into the long driveway, the house came into view. It was a lovely prospect, pale against the blue afternoon sky. The pillars at the front framed the elegant sandstone steps. The house looked out over vast grounds with a lake in the distance. Clarissa's heart clenched as she wondered how many people Lady Eleanor had invited to the house for an extended visit.

As the carriage came to a halt at the manor's entrance, Clarissa glanced at her mother. Bernadette Crompton was a picture of grace and decorum, yet as their eyes connected, Clarissa detected an unpleasant gleam in her mother's eyes. She knew that look well—it was a solemn warning.

Be on your best behaviour; do not disgrace us.

She clenched her jaw, even as her hands trembled. She would not be the source of yet

more scandal for her parents—she refused to be. Her mother’s lack of faith in her was a sharp, familiar sting.

“Smooth your gown, Clarissa. Chin up, head held high,” Lady Crompton stated as the carriage door opened, and they all descended into the hubbub of the manor steps.

A few other carriages had arrived before them, and Clarissa could smell the sweat of the horses as they moved off. An elegant older woman and her husband were ascending the steps. Clarissa did not recognize them from the backs of their heads, and she felt a spiralling panic shudder down her spine as she feared she might have forgotten every name in society after so long an absence.

She took a deep breath, giving Emily a watery smile as her cousin bounced on the balls of her feet beside her, straining to see inside the house. It was her first ball, and Clarissa could not help but feel intense affection for the time she had spent selecting the gowns she had brought with her. Emily favoured autumnal colours, which suited the season beautifully, and she had gold and green bows in her hair.

“Try not to lean around me so heavily. It is not polite,” she said quickly as her cousin practically bent herself in half to see inside the house.

Emily recoiled immediately and stood upright again, looking guilty.

“You appear quite charming, indeed.” Clarissa added so as not to admonish her too harshly, and Emily’s little frown disappeared as she smiled demurely in response.

“There are so many people,” Emily said in amazement as they made their way inside behind Lord and Lady Crompton.

“Yes, well, this is her Christmas ball,” Clarissa replied. She stepped back to let a servant scurry past. “It will be spectacular. Try not to expect it at every event you

attend, however. They will not all be as grand as this one.”

“I simply hope I can attend another,” Emily said quietly. Clarissa gave her an encouraging smile as they began to walk slowly up the steps behind the other guests.

“I would charge you to see if you can count the candles,” Clarissa added. “Lady Eleanor has a reputation for her beautiful displays. Such a variety of colours, you will be amazed.”

Emily’s eyes lit up at the prospect.

Smoothing her hands over her dress for a final time, Clarissa tried hard not to look as terrified as she felt. She glanced about her furtively, catching a few glances from some of the other guests and feeling a tightness in her chest.

Yet there was excitement, too. It had been an age since she had been to a ball, an activity she had always adored. For the first time in a very long while, she felt excitement bubbling deep within her.

Could this be our way back from the edges of society? Could we dare hope to recover our past lives here?

“Miss Crompton!”

Clarissa looked up and felt her cheeks ache with the smile that spread over her features. Standing on the steps before her was Lady Rosemary Bolton, a face she had not seen for many years.

Lord and Lady Crompton were greeting Lady Eleanor, who looked elegantly regal in a silver gown that shimmered in the pale sunlight. Clarissa hastily stepped forward and embraced her friend.

As Rosemary's arms went around her, Clarissa had to hold back tears. She had not been embraced by a friend for many months.

She leaned back to see Rosemary's eyes shining with happiness.

"I am so pleased you have come," she said earnestly. "You look absolutely beautiful."

Clarissa's cheeks flamed at the praise, and she chuckled gently as Rosemary stepped back.

"It is wonderful to see you, Lady Bolton. Thank you."

Rosemary's presence had settled the wildest nerves fluttering in Clarissa's gut, and she smiled broadly at her friend.

Beside her, Lord Crompton's eyes were scanning the crowds warily. As Clarissa introduced Emily to Lady Eleanor, she noticed two women ascending the stairs behind her.

The lady on the right was occupied in examining the snow and making some remarks about how cold it was. The other, however, was looking at her parents with a sharpness in her features that Clarissa knew well.

It was subtle, but the lady leaned over to her friend and said something quickly in a whisper. Clarissa watched the other woman's eyes widen and then run her gaze over Lady Crompton in an assessing way. Finally, her eyes alighted on Clarissa. As soon as she was caught looking, she affected an air of disinterest and Clarissa looked away.

Clarissa stood a little straighter, determined not to let it affect her mood. She turned back to Rosemary, who smiled and welcomed them into the house.

As she ascended the stairs, a hand wafted into her peripheral vision, and her mother tugged at her dress.

“Stand up straight,” her mother whispered in a low voice. Clarissa felt that if she were any straighter, her spine might snap in two. “You look very well, but your concern is showing on your countenance.”

Clarissa clenched her jaw. She knew perfectly well that her face was a neutral mask—after all, she’d had plenty of time to perfect it over the years. She knew how to look blank and polite; it was as automatic as breathing.

“You are quite beautiful when you smile. Could you attempt to look pleased to be here?” her mother asked in a hiss, and then she bustled away, raising her voice to compliment Lady Eleanor’s splendid entrance hall.

Clarissa tried to muster a smile but only managed a faint tweak of her lips as they entered. Thankfully, she was too distracted by the room to feel the sting of her mother’s words for too long.

In truth, Clarissa was rather astounded by the opulence and beauty on display. Huge golden candelabras adorned every corner, and an enormous chandelier was festooned with endless candles above their heads. Wreaths and sprigs of holly were hung on every wall, and the banister of the staircase had been beautifully decorated. The white and gold ornaments perfectly complimented everything about them.

Many more guests would arrive over the next hour or so, and Clarissa swallowed as she thought of all those strangers scrutinizing the Crompton’s after all this time. Nausea rose in her throat once more, and she looked away. Every step she took felt like a judgment, like a test, and she was overwhelmingly grateful to be given a brief reprieve as they were shown to their rooms.

Emily was a wonderful companion. She chattered happily, finding joy in everything she saw. She was a positive ball of excitement, and Clarissa could not help smiling fondly at her.

But when she closed the door of her private room, she finally allowed herself a moment of reflection and release.

She sank into the bed, her fingers clutching at the red counterpane as she closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she listened to the crackle of the fire. Her lady's maid, Annie, was bustling about the room and almost as excitable as Emily. She had not been able to prepare Clarissa's clothes for a dance in years and she was already discussing the styles they might try.

"Did the house not look stunning, Miss Clarissa? I declare I have never seen so much greenery in a hallway before, and there were magnificent candlesticks that cast a warm glow upon the servant's kitchens."

Clarissa listened with half an ear, keeping a smile on her face and nodding at intervals. Annie, a small girl with a buxom figure, moved about the room hurriedly, telling her how well she looked and that her hair was the most ornate of the other ladies they had seen.

Clarissa let her voice wash over her, allowing her breath to settle, her lungs to ease their aching, and her chest to relax.

Please let this be a success. Please let us all come out of this unscathed.

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A little later, as Clarissa readied herself for the ball, Annie fussed over her hair for many minutes. Clarissa was happy to let her have free reign, and when she was

finished, the result was very pleasing to the eye.

Her hair was a honeyed gold colour and much longer than it had been. Annie had twisted small plaits around the base of her head that moved upward onto the crown. She had posted white flowers through the gaps, making a pleasing flutter of white in the centre. The flowers in her hair complimented her ivory gown. Clarissa was a little astonished to see a lady looking back at her in her reflection. She looked poised and capable—there was no trace of the uncertainty churning through her at the prospect of the ball.

Will a facade of propriety be enough to fool them all? She wondered.

The door to her room opened with a jerk as her mother strode in, shooing Annie away. She stood behind Clarissa for some minutes, looking her over and tweaking different parts of her gown. Clarissa tried her best to stay still, suppressing the urge to waft her mother's meddling hands away.

"I thought you would wear the burgundy I suggested," her mother said reprovingly. Clarissa looked at her reflection in the mirror.

"I did not feel comfortable in it, mama."

Lady Crompton scoffed. "You mean you prefer to be a bland girl standing at the side of the room and to be overlooked."

"On the contrary, Mama, the colour does not suit me."

Her mother was dressed in deep mauve, her pale blonde locks styled effortlessly on her head with a little colour about her cheeks. She might be an older woman in society, but she had always had immaculate taste.



“Very well, then, that will have to do,” she said irritably. “Nothing can be amiss this evening. We must all do our best and ensure we make a positive impression upon the guests.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“And you must accompany Emily as much as possible. Do not allow her dance card to be marked by any man who might have a whiff of scandal about him.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“And do not dawdle as you do sometimes. You must be with us; do not hide with your friend Lady Bolton all evening like a wallflower. You are suitable to look at when you stand up straight.”

“Yes, Mama.”

To Clarissa’s relief, the bedroom door opened again to admit Emily, which silenced her mother’s tirade. Her cousin was wearing a dark green gown that suited her beautifully. Clarissa could not help the smile that broke over her face as she bounded in and twirled on the spot to gain her approval. If only I could be so carefree and excited, she thought longingly.

Clarissa glanced at her mother, whose expression had soured.

“Emily, you are almost eighteen. You are not a child. Please desist with this cavorting immediately.”

Emily’s spinning ended, and she quickly came to a complete stop, mimicking her aunt’s posture and flicking an uncertain glance at Clarissa. Lady Crompton swept out of the room without another word, and Clarissa reached for Emily hastily.

“You look lovely,” she said quickly.

“So do you. I have not seen this gown before,” Emily replied, her eyes looking enviously at the beading and lace across the bodice. It was an old dress that Clarissa had altered to suit the current fashions. It was much finer than anything she had worn of late.

“Thank you. Let us make haste before Mother musters her wrath upon us for our delay.”

Clarissa moved toward the door but was stopped by a gentle hand on her wrist.

“You really think I look alright?” Emily asked with concern.

“Of course. You look very beautiful.” Clarissa insisted as her cousin blushed prettily. “What has brought this on?”

“I just...” Emily sighed. “I want them to be proud of me. I want to make a good impression. If Papa were here, he would say the same.”

Clarissa walked back to her and took both her hands in her own.

“You could never make an ill impression, Emily. You are exquisite just as you are. Pay no heed to Mother; her concerns about the ball are borne of anxiety. Cast aside any uncertainties from your mind. We shall be together, and I assure you, we shall have a delightful evening. This ball heralds the commencement of something splendid. I can sense it.”

Emily gave her a brave smile and Clarissa was pleased to find her words had reassured her. She wished she believed them as fervently as she had spoken them.

As they emerged from their room, they joined Lord and Lady Crompton at the top of the long staircase.

Robert Crompton was devoid of emotion as he stood beside his wife. He had trimmed his sideburns for the occasion and looked very smart in a strict black evening coat. As Clarissa approached, she caught his eye, and he nodded briefly to his daughter.

Clarissa knew well the turmoil he had to be experiencing, for she felt just the same.

As they walked down the stairs, Clarissa felt like a gladiator in the days of Rome, descending into the pit to meet her fate.

Dozens of eyes turned toward them as they entered the ballroom. Lady Eleanor was at their side instantly as though to show the world they were welcome in her eyes. She had a warm smile on her face and Clarissa felt a wave of gratitude for this stoic woman who had welcomed them into her home.

There were a great many curious glances from the guests, some less discreet than others. Clarissa kept her head held high, clinging tightly to Emily's hand.

She wished she could choose a different role from the one she had to play, but at least she knew this part well. Clarissa was very good at pretending nothing affected her and keeping her face as blank as possible. As the murmurs began, she followed her parents through the room as they greeted old acquaintances. It seemed an endless journey, but after an age, the stares appeared to die down somewhat.

After a few minutes, Emily went with Clarissa's parents to the refreshments table and Clarissa headed straight to the corner of the room where Rosemary awaited her. Her friend had an easy smile on her pretty face, and as Clarissa came to stand beside her, some more of the tension she felt eased.

“I did tell my aunt not to invite quite so many people,” Rosemary said without preamble. “We do not have enough space for all of them; if they begin a cotillion, they might throw each other through the windows.”

Clarissa managed a smile, and Rosemary hooked her arm through hers and squeezed.

“It is so good to see you. I believe you have grown a full foot since I saw you last.”

That did make Clarissa laugh and she turned to her friend with a sceptical expression.

“What nonsense are you speaking? I last saw you at the charity auction last year.”

“Yes, and you were not taller than me then. You tower above me now.” Her eyes were twinkling, and Clarissa shook her head. There was an inch between them, at most.

“You are ridiculous,” she said affectionately.

Rosemary smiled. “Do you remember the old oak tree at the bottom of the garden?” she asked suddenly.

“I do,” Clarissa conceded. “I am not as tall as that.”

“I am afraid it is dead now. Aunt Eleanor could not understand why it was not flourishing, and in the last two years or so, it has lost all its leaves.”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that. I enjoyed our time on the old swing. I think we were lucky not to break any bones.”

“I believe the tree has been pining for you. We should take a turn tomorrow and see if it perks up at the sight of its old friend.”

Clarissa's throat tightened at the memories of sitting on the swing with Rosemary. They had been much younger and more innocent than they were now.

She remembered a year when it had begun to rain so heavily that they were soaked to the bone. The cook had given them hot chocolate and placed them in front of the fire in the drawing room, wrapped in blankets. They had talked of secrets and daring adventures they would never attempt. It had been a gentle time, and she yearned for it now with an intensity that surprised her.

"Is the swing still there?"

"It is. For better or worse. Perhaps we should both sit on it to see if the rope will snap."

They shared a grin of secret pleasure. Rosemary's grip tightened a little more on her arm, and she glanced sideways at her before continuing. Clarissa knew what was coming before she spoke.

"I will not speak much of it, as I can imagine it is difficult. But have you heard from your sister?" Rosemary's eyes were sorrowful and genuine. Clarissa knew how hard it must have been for her to broach the topic.

"No. No word. She is safe, I hope. Still in Italy."

They fell silent, for there was nothing else to say on the matter, but then Clarissa stiffened as the atmosphere in the room changed.

Immediately on high alert, she looked for her family. Is something amiss? Has one mention of Catherine destroyed us all? She was unable to believe that any change in the environment was not due to her family.

Instead, she found the guests just as they had been, but a great many people were turning to the doorway of the ballroom.

Clarissa glanced over a multitude of heads to see a man standing in the doorway. He was exceedingly handsome, his face sharp, his features pleasing to the eye.

He had dark tousled brown hair and sharp, green eyes and was looking about the ballroom with interest. But it was his expression that intrigued Clarissa the most. He did not appear pompous or arrogant. Many men in good society looked down their noses with cold scrutiny. There was something easy about him, almost suave. Clarissa found herself briefly captivated.

Somehow, despite all the people around them, their eyes connected across the room. As that bright green gaze met hers, Clarissa felt a shudder of something skitter through her. But as soon as she felt it, she looked away. She knew the perils of a handsome face and the wicked allure of charm.

He was announced as Nicholas Bolton, the Earl of Bernewood, and Clarissa was amazed to find that she was standing with her arm linked to the man's sister.

Rosemary had spoken very little of her brother. Clarissa had believed him to be travelling and never expected to meet him in person.

She was aware of his less-than-wholesome reputation. He was well known for entertaining many women abroad. It had been the stuff of salacious gossip she had never paid heed to. Now, her stomach fluttered wildly as she looked upon him. No wonder he had a reputation as a rake. He was by far the most handsome man she had ever seen with a wide, beguiling smile.

She looked away.

She would not let her guard down and uphold her family name. He would be an acquaintance, nothing more. Her heart might be beating wildly in her chest, but she would ensure she did not let that fascinating gaze, or his charm, penetrate the carefully constructed walls she had built over the last three years.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas descended the stairs, watching the whirling dancing with practiced nonchalance.

As he entered the room, he was struck by the interest his arrival prompted. He was not surprised by it, for any eligible Earl returning from years on the continent would pique the interest of society. It was more that he was once again reminded of his status in the world. A status he had been running from for a long time.

He scanned the crowds, noting the usual array of social climbers in the mix. Many mamas were already eyeing him for their daughters. He could almost hear the cogs whirring across the room.

He noticed Rosemary in the corner, standing beside another woman he did not recognize. This must be the ‘Miss Crompton’ she had mentioned. She caught his eyes momentarily but swiftly looked away.

Nicholas frowned. That in itself was uncommon. Most of the women he had met lingered on his countenance rather longer—he would even go so far as to say boldly. Her gaze suggested shyness, which he was not used to. She did not return to look at him again; he found himself a little put out by it. He was unaccustomed to indifference by the fairer sex.

His aunt approached him through the throng, and a familiar pang of guilt passed through him at her disapproving air. He was late. Again.

“Nicholas,” she muttered softly so as to avoid hungry ears all about them, “could you not have been here on time? Just once, I ask it of you. You are so rarely in the



country. It does not endear you to the company to turn up an hour after your guests have arrived. Particularly when you are merely upstairs.”

Nicholas leaned down and kissed her cheek, flashing her a wide grin.

“My dear aunt, I am fashionably late, as is my wont. And as an earl, I would not wish to attract attention away from their wonderful hostess,” he said simply.

“Don’t try your charm on me, my boy, I know you of old. And it is not fashionable to be late to one’s own ball.”

“But this is your ball, aunt, and a very fine one it is too. I have never seen so many people laughing.”

That got her attention, and Eleanor glanced about them. Nicholas was not lying. He was impressed by the atmosphere and joviality of the room. Everyone looked like they were enjoying themselves immensely, and the dancing was lively. It was not too hot, and there were just the right amount of people.

“Truly, it is a triumph,” he added genuinely, and her ire slowly faded from her face, although she gave him a knowing look. “Besides, it was entirely Hargreaves’ fault. He will insist on a waterfall cravat, and it takes an age.”

Eleanor’s eyes flicked to his throat, where his valet had meticulously tied the starched linen. Nicholas had taken longer getting ready for the ball that evening, not wishing to let her down. The effort paid off as she smiled, flicking a gaze over his bottle-green waistcoat and immaculate appearance.

“Very well, that will do. You must dance. I shall not have you skulking at the side of the room as you did before you left.”

Nicholas forced his smile to remain in place. “I did not ‘skulk’ Aunt; I merely knew I would be leaving for Europe and did not wish to break a multitude of hearts before doing so.”

She scoffed. “You skulked and barely smiled at anyone for the month before you left. You seem easier in your demeanour now, however, so I shall expect you to be the talk of the ball by the end of the evening.”

Nicholas was about to protest for a second time at being so flaunted about when a familiar face approached through the crowd raising his spirits significantly.

Lord Henry Addison walked toward him, a happy smile on his face. Henry was one of the most agreeable people Nicholas had ever met and one of the kindest. He had a smile for everyone and lacked the reputation Nicholas had garnered. Henry was polite to a fault, flawless in appearance, and gentlemanly to every woman he met.

“My dear Nicholas,” Henry said happily as they shook hands. “I could not believe it when Lady Kingston told me you would be here. I am astounded you chose to abandon the heat of Spain for our snowy shores.”

“Indeed. I merely came back to speak with you, Henry. I am indifferent to the rest of the country.”

Eleanor cried out in indignation, and Henry threw back his head and gave a hearty laugh, which lifted Nicholas’s spirits. For the first time since he returned, he was genuinely glad to be there. Henry’s company was chasing away the melancholy that had been simmering beneath the surface since he had returned to England.

His friend’s dark blond hair was swept from his face, his patrician nose complimenting his elegant features. He watched Nicholas with startingly blue eyes that were dancing with amusement, with a wide grin lighting up his whole face.

As Eleanor hurried away to tend to her guests, the two men walked to the edge of the room to observe the party. Henry's curious gaze landed on him, and Nicholas raised his eyebrows in response.

"Are you back for good?"

"Not on your life. I am here for two weeks and that is all."

Henry's expression fell. "I had thought as much. I hoped you might be back for a few months at least to see to the estate. Are you sure I cannot tempt you to stay longer?"

Nicholas shook his head. "I am never comfortable in England. I shall be leaving as soon as my business is concluded. If I can persuade my aunt I am not about to immediately marry the first woman she puts in front of me, that is."

Henry chuckled as Nicholas's eyes were drawn across the room to the mysterious Miss Crompton. He found himself willing her to look at him again. He had only seen them briefly, but she had unusually dark eyes. He wanted to examine them to see what colour they truly were. She was speaking to Rosemary, however, and seemed to be perpetually looking at the floor.

"—and besides," Henry was saying, "it would hardly have been seemly for him to keep the club, not after he had inherited."

Nicholas made a non-committal sound, and Henry continued with the story. It was some inconsequential piece of gossip. Someone in trade had inherited a great fortune, it would seem. He was sure most of society would be scandalized to associate with such a man, but Nicholas found himself happy for him. If life dealt you a winning hand, you had to play it before it was taken from you.

Or before someone else trumps your winning card.

“For goodness sake, Bolton, you have been in my company for less than ten minutes and already you are not listening to me.”

“My sincerest apologies,” Nicholas said, dragging his eyes away from Miss Crompton. “You are being exceedingly dull.”

Henry laughed and nudged him playfully with his shoulder. As Nicholas returned his gaze to the floor, a flash of emerald green caught his eye. He felt Henry lean in beside him as he watched a beautiful blonde woman approaching with an elderly man on her arm.

“That is Lady Madeline Wilde and her father. A wealthy widower, recently out of mourning. Her family married her off to a man twice her age, who died and left her rich and with no children.”

Nicholas never failed to be astounded by the rapid summaries society created for some individuals. Henry sounded as though he were listing a business transaction in the way he spoke of Lady Wilde’s history. “Married, widowed, no children.” Nicholas allowed himself a discreet perusal of the lady as she walked through the crowd. She was extremely beautiful.

As his eyes returned to her face, their gazes locked and held, and he saw a familiar glint in her eye. He could have recognized that look in a crowd of thousands. It was an invitation—and a brazen one at that.

She might have secured his interest for a night or two if he had been in Paris watching such a display, particularly now that he knew she was a widower. This familiar game between a man and a woman should have excited him, but tonight, he could not feel the thrill he once had.

Lady Wilde and her father finally reached them, and he was swiftly introduced by

Henry. Nicholas watched Lady Wilde's gaze skim over his figure in a most forward manner. He kept his gaze carefully blank as her eyes moved to his. Her full lips curved up at the edges in a sensual smile.

This was bold, even for a widower, and he redirected his gaze to her father to avoid impropriety.

"I am most interested in your recent travels, My Lord," Lord Wilde was saying. "I hear you have been everywhere in Europe."

"Not quite everywhere," Nicholas said, flashing his smile and slipping easily into the character. "I believe there is one small part of the continent I have yet to uncover, although I believe I have conquered the rest of it."

The old man chortled happily and nodded his head.

"I have always wished to travel," Lady Wilde added. Her gaze was less intense now that she was addressing the group. "I am most grieved that mourning has prevented any further exploration. I long to see Paris again."

Nicholas was surprised to find himself wanting to lean away from the lady. It was a strain to maintain the facade this evening. It was as though he were wearing someone else's skin, an itchiness prickling all over his body to be free of it, to be who he truly was.

"Paris is indeed beautiful," he managed after a short pause. "I have been to the city many times, and I confess I believe it to be one of the most beautiful in Europe."

"I can imagine you would be an excellent guide, my Lord," Lady Wilde said with a wry smile.

“I confess, I am also the best guide in Europe,” he said, flashing his usual grin, and all three laughed. Nicholas’s chest was tight, but he kept his smile in place with an enormous effort. He felt too hot in his coat.

Lady Wilde was a beautiful woman and had made it clear she was interested in him, but he felt trapped in her presence. It was as though his old life and his new life were colliding, and his mind was trying to separate the two in full view of a room of strangers.

Have I really been this man for so long? Why do his easy smiles feel so foreign to me?

“I hope you will be in town for some of the season, my Lord?” Lady Wilde continued.

“Alas, I must be away very soon, but it is always a pleasure to return to England. I have a great love of London Society, not to say anything less of the country.”

Lady Wilde’s long, full lips stretched around her white teeth as she smiled up at him.

The orchestra suddenly began to play, and the first set started a moment later. Nicholas was caught between the Wildes and a desire to remain standing with Henry. However, Henry had apparently marked Rosemary’s card and crossed the room to collect her.

Paralyzed by indecision, Nicholas pasted on a smile.

“Are you engaged for this set, Lady Wilde? If not, I would ask you to do me the honour of dancing with me.”

“I would be delighted, my Lord.” The rapidity with which she disengaged herself

from her father was alarming, and soon, those long fingers clutched Nicholas's arm as he walked her onto the floor.

In public, she had the manner of a polite dance partner who asked the right questions, knew all the steps, and did not step upon one's toes upon the floor. But when they stood opposite one another, or her gaze was just on Nicholas, the calculating glint in her eye was always prevalent.

"You are quite the dancer, my Lord," she said as they spun away from one another and returned.

"I have had the honour of some excellent partners," he said automatically.

"I am sure you have," she said, taking his hand and raising her eyebrows. He returned a polite smile, attempting to defer her amorous gaze, but he was unsuccessful. He had met women like Lady Wilde before and had always been more than happy to entertain them. He had even had a regular dalliance with a few. But a restlessness was building in his mind and body that he could not shake. As he spun around for a third time, he saw Miss Crompton at the end of the group with another man on her arm. For a reason he could not entirely explain, the sight irritated him.

He returned to his partner, determined to finish the set and ensure he did not have to dance with her again.

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A little later, once he had appeased his aunt and danced with a few more of the ladies about the floor, Nicholas made his way to the refreshments, desperately needing a glass of rum punch.

As he approached the table, he noticed his sister in conversation with a young woman

of about her age, perhaps a little younger. She had an array of green and gold ribbons in her hair. As he came up beside them, Rosemary caught his eye. It was only then that he realized Miss Crompton was also there. She had been obscured from his view by a bulky man barging his way toward the wine. Nicholas felt a spike of irritation as her gaze remained on his sister. She did not even glance at him.

“This is my brother, the Earl of Bernewood, Nicholas Bolton. Lord Bolton, may I introduce Miss Clarissa Crompton and her cousin, Miss Emily Crompton.”

Nicholas bowed, rolling the name around his head. Clarissa. It was only then that he realized he had been trying to recall it for the entirety of the evening.

Finally, after what felt like hours of waiting, Miss Crompton’s eyes met his. Nicholas gazed into them as a strange sensation overcame him. The restlessness he had felt since he had arrived in England faded away beneath her steady gaze, only to be replaced by a hum of anticipation.

It was strange to acknowledge that Lady Wilde left him utterly cold, yet this demure and rather shy woman, with the darkest brown eyes he had ever seen, had captivated him entirely.

The moment stretched as their gazes remained caught, hanging in the air like a flurry of snow that could not settle on the ground. He drank her in, her porcelain skin quite unique in its softness. There was a smattering of freckles across her nose, and she had full, berry-coloured lips, the top slightly fuller than the lower.

When he recognized how long he had been staring at her, those dark brown orbs skittered away to another part of the room.

He had never been so intrigued by a woman in his life.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Clarissa's heart was pounding. It was not a pleasant feeling to be so utterly overwhelmed by a single look. She could feel a flush staining her cheeks under Lord Bolton's intense scrutiny.

She was unsure whether she had misinterpreted his regard, yet he had observed her for such a length of time it had felt very deliberate.

Gathering her courage, she looked back at him, immediately caught in that emerald gaze for a second time. He was extraordinarily handsome. His thick mop of dark hair made his chiselled features and strong jaw all the more attractive. A lock of it had come loose and rested above his right eyebrow.

The strains of a waltz began to play through the air, and Clarissa looked up as several couples walked to the floor to begin the next set.

“Would you care to dance, Miss Crompton?”

Clarissa stared at Lord Bolton, wide-eyed. He couldn't possibly wish to dance with me, surely! She thought frantically. But he raised his hand as though the request was quite genuine.

She glanced at Rosemary, who was smiling at her encouragingly. Surely, this was just a brother being kind to a disgraced friend. That seemed more fitting. She had never received an invitation from anyone as handsome or titled as Lord Bolton. She was swept away by her nerves.

But she also knew that Lord Bolton had a reputation. It had been whispered even at

the small gatherings she had been permitted to attend in recent years. Her own mother had commented upon it before they arrived.

What if I make a fool of myself? What if associating with him taints me, and it lowers us even further in society's eyes?

But she could not refuse; that would be even more scandalous given her position. Several eyes were swivelling to watch them. If Clarissa had been flushed before, now her face was positively blazing. What should I do?

Accepting his offer seemed dangerous. He looked respectable, but then so did Mr Harrison, and Catherine was proof that one could never know a man's true character just by his looks.

Were there whispers in the air, or was she conjuring them from thought alone? Her family had been dogged by scandal for so long; was she about to ruin them forever?

The intensity of his gaze had awakened something new and bright within her. It felt like hope, and that was the most dangerous thing of all.

"Thank you, my Lord. I would be delighted," she forced out, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth, her throat dry.

She managed to raise a gloved hand to him, and he took it without hesitation. The warmth of his fingers sent a wicked thrill of pleasure through her body, and she attempted to smother it, mindful of the many eyes upon them.

She glanced at Rosemary, but her friend was all polite eagerness. His sister did not seem surprised by Lord Bolton's offer. Clarissa could not shake the idea that they had agreed to this in advance to ensure she would not be seen as a wallflower. That was more believable than Lord Bolton having any interest in her.

Clarissa breathed deeply through her nose as they walked to their places amongst the other couples. She tried not to stare about the room, watching for the disapproving glares she was sure were being levelled at her behind her back.

To her surprise, there were none. His status as an earl would be enough to protect him from the more slanderous gossip. She imagined few would dare speak badly of his dance partner so openly.

He is not a woman, she thought bitterly, which means he can live as he pleases with far less reproach.

She curtsied as they came together, his hand moving to her waist and the other taking her hand as they began the slow circling of the waltz. Clarissa fixed her gaze on his left shoulder, determined not to get lost in those eyes again. But the hand on her waist was a brand that seemed to pierce her side with heat, his fingers gently pressing against her flesh as they moved about the floor.

She had never been so affected by anyone and could only hope and pray that it did not show on her face. Lord Bolton's body was large and imposing against her own, his steps sure, his back strict. He was an excellent dancer, and she felt safe in his arms. Not since Lord Warrington had she danced a Waltz, and she had forgotten how freeing it was.

She attempted to keep her composure, trying to remember the specific rumours that had swirled against Lord Bolton's name. He was known to have spent company with many women on the continent. There had even been a suggestion that he had set himself up with a wealthy widow for a short time. Everyone agreed he was one of the most charming men of the Ton. Apparently, that was excuse enough of his conduct.

Why am I dancing with this man? He is the very person I should be avoiding. She continued to scold herself relentlessly, her thoughts spinning as madly as the dancers

all around them. I certainly should not be imagining him holding me closer than he is.

Finally, when she could hold back no longer, she moved her gaze to his face. He was already looking at her, and there was a softness in his eyes that was exhilarating and confusing all at once. Was this truly a man who could never be tied down? Who had cast off the aspersions of society without a second thought?

He did not seem like a rake. Something about him felt genuine. It seemed, for all the world, like he had a secret. It was a secret that Clarissa felt she shared. He appeared to be playing a part, pretending to be someone he was not to conceal who he truly wished to be. She understood that position well.

As the dance ended, she realized they had not exchanged a single word. Yet she felt as though they had had a silent exchange that said more than words ever could.

Clarissa curtsied, unable to meet his eyes as she attempted a small smile before he led her from the dance floor. Rosemary was all smiles as she returned, lively and filled with the joys of the season. She watched Nicholas's back disappear through the crowd after he had murmured a farewell and had to drag her eyes away.

The snow was falling outside the window in light flurries, making her feel lucky and happy to be safe and warm in such a fine home. She was glad they would not have to travel home if the snow continued, and at least her mother would not be grumbling about having to burn their wood now that they were enjoying Lady Eleanor's hospitality.

Clarissa listened to Rosemary's chatter as she glanced about the room, still feeling the fluttering uncertainty in her chest. Nicholas was taller than many of the gentlemen present, and picking him out from the crowd was not difficult. He was all charm and politeness, defying her limited knowledge of his character. She was confused and feeling lost by the time the dinner bell sounded, and they made their way through the

room.

She pulled in a sharp breath as Nicholas strode through the crowd toward them. She thought he must have something to say to Rosemary, but instead, he offered her his arm.

“I believe I have the pleasure of your company for a second time, Miss Crompton; please allow me to escort you to dinner.”

She hooked her arm in his, the room suddenly seeming overly bright. The noise around them dimmed as she moved with him through the milling guests and into the dining room.

It was beautifully decorated, with high ceilings. The long dining room table was immaculate, everything set out just so. There were more sprigs of holly at every place setting. The napkins were a myriad of golds, reds, and greens with candles down the centre.

The snow outside the windows made everything seem more magical. The bright fire warmed the room in a pleasing glow, filling the air with its crackling.

Nicholas led Clarissa to the centre of the table, where she was placed opposite Lady Wilde. She was a woman wearing a striking emerald gown, who Clarissa had not yet become acquainted with. Her appearance made Clarissa feel plain in comparison.

Nicholas ensured she was seated comfortably before sitting beside her, and as soon as he was in position, she felt the same lightness of spirit in his company.

She chided herself inwardly for the familiarity she already felt with the man. Considering she knew very little of him, she was surprised by how easy she felt in his company. Perhaps this was his manner, however. He might be skilled at putting

women at their ease.

As the starters were served, she noticed him glance at her and turned to him to be polite.

“Have you recently returned, Lord Bolton?”

He smiled that charming smile. “I have. I had not been back two days before, but my aunt was already ensuring I would be in attendance for this event. She is a ruthless organizer.” His words were playful, and he shot an affectionate glance at his aunt, who was in a deep debate with Clarissa’s father at the end of the table, their heads bowed together.

“How did you like the continent, my Lord? You were there for a number of years, were you not?”

“Indeed. I liked it very well. However, something about the English countryside at Christmas drew me back. I can never feel it is truly Christmas without a warm fire before me.”

“I agree,” Clarissa replied. “I have always enjoyed the winter months. I know many dislike the snow, but I find it a magical time to explore. I saw three and twenty cobwebs in our garden last evening, sparkling with diamonds from the dew that had settled. It is a beautiful time of year.”

She stopped speaking, embarrassed to have revealed so much. Her imagination had run away with her again. She was usually rather quiet at formal occasions these days, and she fancied that she had lost her head with the giddiness of being back in the company of others.

Nicholas was contemplating her with a wry smile, his eyes twinkling.

“Do you know, I couldn’t agree more. It is the best time of year. I am only sorry I must leave it so soon.”

Relief flooded her as she realized his presence would be briefer than she had previously thought.

“You leave England so soon?”

“If my aunt has her way, I will be here forever. But I always intended to see Italy, and I would love the chance to do so before I return permanently. My steward has handled the estate admirably in my absence, and the House of Lords does very well by proxy. I will return, but not quite yet. No matter how alluring the sights of England remain.”

His eyes moved over her face as he said those words and Clarissa could feel the flush creep over her cheeks again. He was entirely disarming, and she could well imagine a woman getting swept away by him.

‘I can deny this no longer. I am starting to have feelings, and I am unable to hide it.’

Her sister’s spiked hand was suddenly prominent in her mind, and she recalled her own shaking fingers as she had held the letter that spelled her ruin.

Yes, she could well imagine the folly such a man could bring if one were witless in one's affections.

“My sister tells me you have known one another since childhood.” Lord Bolton continued, oblivious of her internal battles. “I am sure we met when you were young. I confess I could not recall it. I am much aggrieved.”

Clarissa remembered him. He had been a tall, lanky boy who had ignored her

whenever she had visited the Kingston's. At eleven years older he must have thought young girls very foolish in his youth.

"I do remember you throwing sticks at us once," she replied, surprising herself with the memory.

"Good Lord, did I? You have my humblest apologies."

"Oh, do not worry yourself, my Lord; we started it."

He chuckled. "Two ladies throwing sticks? I am quite affronted."

"Yes, you were at the time, too. Rosemary tells me the oak tree in your garden has died, which is sad news. We used to climb it recklessly, and I believe your sister lured you outside with the promise of cake. When you emerged, we pelted you with conkers from the branches. Most unseemly."

Nicholas really did laugh then, his eyes crinkling with delight. That wayward lock of hair fell back to reveal his startlingly green eyes.

"I cannot believe it. My sister has always had mischief running through her veins, but I am sorry she corrupted you."

Despite herself, Clarissa could not help but laugh at the idea that her demure and kind friend could corrupt anyone.

"I believe my cousin, Miss Emily Crompton, has inherited that mischievous trait. She does enjoy playing games all about the house."

"I shall have it noted, Miss, and be on my guard."



They fell into a companionable silence, and Clarissa could not help allowing the feeling of joy their conversation had triggered to spread through her chest.

She glanced about the table, watching Emily speaking to a man with long dark-blond hair on the other side. She believed him to be Lord Henry Addison, though they were yet to be introduced. Emily was politely explaining her choice of ribbons to him, and he was listening with rapt attention. She hid a smile. Emily would spend her entire inheritance on ribbons if Clarissa did not stop her.

As she finished her soup, she noticed Lady Wilde across from her. Though undeniably beautiful, she had rather sharp features, and her gaze was somewhat calculating. Her eyes moved incessantly between Clarissa and Nicholas, and Clarissa felt her gut clench at the thought that she might be being too open with her feelings for him.

She had always been timid and shy around any man, including those who had been her suitors. Now, she was even more mindful of what her sister had done and never wished to prompt cruel comments from those in society who liked to spy on others.

Am I being too bold in my conduct with him? Surely, speaking of our childhood is not improper.

“Miss Kingston tells me you enjoy reading, Miss Crompton. I am rather an avid reader myself, and I wonder if you might have read Lord Byron?”

Clarissa was surprised that a rake should be interested in poetry, but she answered readily despite her surprise.

“Indeed, I think *The Giaour* is one of the best poems I have read. Although it is rather risqué in places. I do enjoy livid tails of vampires.”

Nicholas smiled. "But surely those are the best parts, Miss Crompton. Such escapism is the spice of life, after all."

His voice was light but something in his gaze gave her pause. It was the same look from the dance floor, like he had forgotten himself and revealed something he had not intended to. What might this man have to escape from? She wondered.

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Once the meal was over and Clarissa had repaired to the drawing room with the other ladies, she could not get Lord Bolton out of her mind. She wanted to believe that he was merely being polite with his interest and that she had misinterpreted his charm for kindness.

Either way, she was glad to be away from him briefly to gather her thoughts. It was not to be, however, for although she had sought out a quiet corner in which to rest, she was soon discovered by Rosemary.

Miss Kingston sat beside her, looking like a woman with a secret to impart, and Clarissa was instantly on her guard.

"My brother and you made a very fine couple about the floor," Rosemary said. Her tone was entirely innocent, but Clarissa's hackles rose instantly.

She did not like the implication that she and Lord Bolton had been considered a couple. The idea terrified her.

"He was very kind to ask me to dance," she said quickly. "Was that your doing?"

Rosemary laughed. "Mine? Goodness, no." She replied as Clarissa's heart sank. "My brother does what he wishes and will not be swayed by anyone. Not even Aunt

Eleanor can convince him to stay in England as he should.”

Clarissa wished to run from the house immediately. She had forgotten how instantly a connection could be made between two people in society. Perhaps Rosemary was innocent in her comments, but other tongues might be wagging. Clarissa did not need to be associated with any man such as him. The reality of what she had done came crashing down on her as Rosemary continued.

“He is unfairly spoken of, you know,” she said, as though discussing the weather. “Nicholas is not so very bad as they all say. I have heard some outrageous things that I cannot believe are true of my brother. He is a gentleman, and I have only seen him act with extreme propriety.”

Her comments only served to confuse Clarissa even more. His sister clearly did not believe the rumours about him, and she would know him best. Yet he had been away from her for many years—how could she possibly know the truth? Anyone could conceal their true character if they were skilled enough. Many men before Lord Bolton had hidden behind their charm.

“I am sure he is the epitome of a gentleman,” she agreed half-heartedly, and Rosemary beamed at her.

There was a general hubbub about them as the other ladies chatted and drank before the fire. Everyone was in a most amiable mood, yet Clarissa could not reach the same sense of happiness that she had experienced earlier.

She was scolding herself relentlessly for allowing her head to be turned by a handsome face. She had always sworn to protect her family from scandal, and as she watched Emily and her mother speaking to one another across the room, her anxiety only grew. No young girl deserved to live through a scandal as she had done. Emily was young enough for it never to taint her character, and Clarissa would not repeat

her sister's mistakes.

Lord Bolton may be just as Rosemary says he is, but I do not believe it. There is no smoke without fire, and our family has had their fingers burned before. I shall keep my distance from him and ensure we all stay far away from the flames.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

The clack of billiard balls rent the air as Nicholas struck the cue ball.

This was one of his favourite rooms in the house. It was set back from the others and often meant he could hide here when his aunt was looking for him. He watched Henry's lithe frame skirt the table, frowning as he considered his counter shot.

“My feeling is that the estate should be entirely entailed to Joseph, but father is adamant he will not inherit. The whole business is largely ridiculous. I shall endeavour to ask Mama for help. She is undoubtedly the most sensible one of the family.”

Henry's father was having tumultuous issues with his inheritance, and Nicholas could only sympathize. Henry, being a second son, was rather set apart from the barrage of abuse his father was receiving from his eldest—Roger. An illegitimate heir had come forward, making Nicholas feel rather lucky that he was not yet a father.

He had been listening to Henry's woes for a while but found that his mind kept wandering to the dance floor and his charming dance partner.

It was strange to acknowledge how quickly one's perspectives could change. That morning, he had been reluctant to stay in England. Even the two weeks he had promised his aunt had seemed interminable. But now, with Miss Crompton's company to look forward to, he felt it might not be so tiresome after all.

“My dear fellow, you are not listening to me again! I dare say you have not been listening to me since you returned. I might as well play billiards with the curtains.”

Nicholas shook himself out of his reverie and attempted to look contrite.

“Sorry, Addison, is there any proof of his claim?”

Henry gave him a wan smile. “I have already outlined it to you in detail. Whatever is the matter with you, old boy? Did you not wish to play? I’m happy to have a glass of port before the fire if you prefer.”

“Not at all. I am being abominably rude; you have my apologies.”

“Is anything the matter?”

I cannot stop thinking about a woman who seems entirely indifferent to me.

“Not a thing. Let us play. I have not trounced you in far too long.”

Henry gave a sharp bark of laughter and proceeded to pot two balls at once. Nicholas managed to get through his next two turns without incident. Still, as the snow began to fall more heavily outside, the snowflakes put him in mind of the sparkling jewels on Miss Crompton’s gown, and he grew irritated by his mind’s inability to focus.

He wasn’t sure what it was about her that intrigued him to such an extent. As Henry took his customary few minutes to assess the table, Nicholas tried to plot it out in his head. Miss Crompton was beautiful in an ethereal, perfect way that unmanned him.

He concluded that the paleness of her skin and the darkness of her eyes were the most captivating. But that was not a reason to obsess over a woman. So what else?

The first thing that had interested him was the way she looked away so quickly whenever he was near. He was rather chagrined to discover that he was more interested in her because she seemed so uninterested in him. He was not used to

women dismissing him. Usually, they fawned about him in a most unflattering way, and he did not enjoy that either.

Miss Crompton had a quietness about her that spoke to a place deep inside him. It was like a ripple of something he had long pushed below the surface, something he had hidden for many years. Ever since Victoria's treatment of him, he had tended to favour bolder women. He liked to know he would not break a heart and that his own would not be broken in return.

Lady Wilde was just the sort of lady he would have had his eye on a few months before. But now, as he absorbed the quiet beauty of the English countryside, things were awakening in him that he had not anticipated. He liked that Miss Crompton was reserved; her shy manner intrigued him.

He had always enjoyed a challenge, and Miss Crompton most definitely presented one. Even during the dance, she had not said a single word to him. It was infuriating and yet utterly appealing.

He shot another ball into the pot, and Henry swore loudly, pulling him out of his rather melancholy thoughts. Nicholas grinned.

"Another game?"

"Absolutely not," Henry muttered, and Nicholas chuckled, slapping him heartily on the shoulder as they returned to the drawing room to reconnect with the ladies.

As they entered the opulent room, his aunt was standing beside the large window, addressing the company. She looked very well in her ochre satin gown. Nicholas always marvelled at how young and virile she looked, even in her later years. Perhaps it was due to all the parties she arranged—she did love being a hostess.

Many of the guests had now departed after dinner, and the select group who would be staying for the whole of Christmas remained. The majority were made up of the Crompton family, the Kingston's and Henry. Two other ladies were present—a Lady Bartholemew and a Lady Garriton who were particular friends of his aunt's. He was pleased the party was not larger.

Nicholas noticed Miss Crompton sitting beside Rosemary to the side of the main settee, watching his aunt, her gown flowing down over her feet, her hands placed in her lap.

She was so very proper. Nicholas had promised himself he would never fall for another woman like that again.

“I propose a game of charades!” his aunt was saying. Miss Crompton's cousin was positively bouncing with excitement. Nicholas could not help but smile at her. Rosemary had told him this was her first house party, and she was positively enthused by everything. Henry, on the other hand, would have paid good money not to play charades.

He held back a groan. Perhaps he could persuade Henry to sneak out the back with him and they could have that glass of port instead.

“Ah, Lord Bolton,” his aunt said loudly, “will you not join Miss Crompton? Everyone else has paired up.”

On the other hand, haven't I always loved charades?

Nicholas walked eagerly across the room, taking a seat beside her. She glanced at him briefly with a gentle nod of her head, but nothing more. He attempted to flash his best smile her way, but it was wasted as she was no longer looking at him.



“I was hoping to be on Clarissa’s team,” came a quiet voice from nearby as Emily was tugged, with a good deal of force, to sit with Lady Crompton.

Nicholas could imagine how intimidating a setting such as this could be for a girl not yet out in society, and he leaned forward in his chair to speak with her.

“But just think Miss Emily, now you can beat Miss Crompton instead,” he said, throwing a smile the girl’s way. Suddenly her round face transformed into a wicked grin, and she sat up a little straighter.

“There we are, Clary; maybe I shall finally beat you,” she said with good-humoured affection.

“Emily, I have no doubt you will. You are an expert at charades,” Clarissa said, a bright light coming into her eyes as she addressed her cousin.

Nicholas was treated to a view of who she might become when she was in less formal company. He was surprised by the force with which he wished to see that transformation.

The game began and there was much laughter and name calling as everyone tried to guess the answer to the riddle that had been read out. Lord Crompton was silent for almost the entirety of the first players turn, but when he did speak he got the answer on his first try. Nicholas could see a ghost of his daughter in his contemplative mannerism. He was starting to like Lord Crompton a great deal.

Soon, it was his turn to stand up in front of them all. He made a show of it, allowing the mask of the clown to fall into place. If people laughed with you they did not mock you. He had learned that many years before. The part of the fool was easy to play. It was always easier to pretend.

He turned to Miss Crompton, who was watching him avidly as he prepared to read out the riddle. She would have the first guess as his teammate. When she concentrated, there was a small line between her brows, and she bit her lip, leaning forward a little in her chair. Nicholas found that he was desperate to win.

Without further ado, he began his riddle:

“My first is much used for the making of holes,

But internally takes the joy of good souls;

My next, like the earth round its centre, revolves,

When impelled on the green, on our pleasure resolves;

My whole is most pleasing well filled with my first;

To the toper, whose wailings are always of thirst.”

There were many murmurings, and multiple heads leaned together, but Nicholas only had eyes for his partner. She had her head down, and her brow was furrowed. Even while she concentrated, she looked remarkable. He found his eyes moving over her hair, looking at the white flowers placed in its design. He found his eyes moving over the elegant line of her neck.

“Something to do with golf?” Henry asked from the back, and Nicholas shook his head.

There were many grumblings about the riddle being too hard, but Nicholas could see that Miss Crompton was getting somewhere.

“Whole,” she muttered, and he nodded enthusiastically. “Always of thirst...” she said, tapping her chin with her finger. Emily was positively vibrating with irritation now—Lady Crompton appeared to be very bad at the game.

“Punch bowl?” Clarissa asked, and Nicholas clapped his hands rather too loudly, making everyone jump.

“Miss Crompton has it,” he said, feeling jubilant that they had won. He caught Henry’s eye at the back of the room and cleared his throat at his knowing expression. Everyone applauded, and the game continued as Emily took to the floor to ask her riddle.

Nicholas felt his heart beating fast in his chest, his breath coming unevenly as he took his seat. His investment in her answer had been far greater than he would have expected, and as he took his seat beside her, a gentle smell wafted over him. It smelled like white jasmine. He had an absurd wish to bring his nose to her hair and memorize the scent.

Instead, he merely nodded his head as he took his seat. “Well done,” he said, trying not to disgrace himself with his enhanced enthusiasm. “However did you get it?”

“Well,” she said thoughtfully. “I knew the first clue must have been ‘punch’ because of the making of holes. But then I couldn’t get the second until I realised ‘on the green’ could mean bowling, and then I had it.”

She was smiling now, and he found himself doing the same.

“Excellent; I know whom I shall partner with in all future games. However, I must tell you, my prowess lies in reading the riddles, not guessing them.”

She laughed softly, a beautiful blush suffusing her cheeks, and he smiled, leaning

back in the chair as they listened to Emily's recital.

Only when the game turned to acting out titles from literature did the competition begin to take shape. Nicholas was thrilled to see Clarissa's competitive side start to show itself, and as the teams began to work together against the rest of the room, he was more excited than he should have been to stand up with her.

They stood side by side, looking at the title they had to act out. It was the book *Pride* he was certain of it. She was entirely vibrant and energetic, sparkling like a diamond in the centre of the room. He could not keep his eyes off her.

She was miming in front of her mouth, perhaps eating or talking. Then, she would point to a music box on the side and repeat the action. After a long moment of watching her—and concentrating rather more on her person than on his guess—it suddenly came to him.

“Chatterbox!” he cried, and the smile she sent his way was nothing short of dazzling. She jumped in excitement, clapping her hands together as the room erupted in applause. They had won!

Nicholas managed a smile as she sat beside him. Miss Crompton was grinning from ear to ear, her eyes dancing excitedly. The same scent wafted over him, and it took all his strength not to take her into his arms then and there.

As he glanced away from her, he caught Madeline Wilde's disapproving gaze from across the room. Nicholas felt a strange uneasiness envelop him as he thought of the two women side by side.

In one lay an easy path he had trodden many times before—an uncomplicated life devoid of broken hearts and ill-feeling. No pain would be felt by anyone if he made that journey.

Then, there was a darker path he had travelled only once before. It had led him to the worst time of his life, where everything had been upended, and all happiness had almost been lost. He was still recovering from the blow Victoria had dealt him, and his feelings for her, in hindsight, had been nothing like the intensity and joy he experienced in Clarissa's presence.

Could he risk opening his heart again? Or was an easy, well-trodden path the safest road?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Clarissa woke to the brightness of a new day. The heavy layer of snow on the ground outside reflected the faint winter sun across the room. It was still very early, but she usually woke at dawn these days.

Her bedroom in Lady Eleanor's manor was very beautiful. It had a four-poster bed and long, dark green velvet curtains. She had been examining them for some time since the servant girl had left. The fire was lit, and the room was slowly warming. In any case, she was very comfortable beneath the thick eiderdown above her.

She could not take her eyes off the drapes. They were the wrong shade of green, somehow. She wondered why that might be when the truth of the matter presented itself in a frenzy of images of the night before.

They were not emerald green. Lord Bolton's eyes were startlingly vivid in colour. She wished that the drapes were a similar shade and then clenched her fists, swallowing around the lump in her throat.

I am being ridiculous. She admonished herself. I cannot afford to spend any time thinking of the man.

Before falling asleep, she had spent a great deal of time trying to remember the specifics of his conduct. Lord Bolton had the advantage of being absent from the regular ballrooms, which meant others were targeted in his place. She remembered that his name had been mentioned in conjunction with gambling and a great number of women. However, she could not remember any of their names.

She had definitely been told of a widow. It was allegedly 'common knowledge' in

Paris that he had set himself up with a mistress. The mere idea filled Clarissa with dread. Not only that but she felt an irritating thread of jealousy mixed in with it. Somehow, Lord Bolton had managed to get under her skin in a matter of hours, and she was exceedingly concerned by her own reactions.

Catherine's disgrace might have been at the rear of many minds in good society, but it only took one mistake, one fresh scandal, for everything to be exposed again. Clarissa had lived through it before. She did not believe she could do so again.

Mr Harrison had been charming. He'd had a smile similar to Nicholas's. It lit up the room. Clarissa had been blind to it, always believing him below her notice as he was merely a tutor. Perhaps if she had been less obstinate and paid more attention, the disaster might have been prevented.

I would have stopped my sister from following her heart. Is that better than having lost her?

If she had asked that question of her mother, she had no doubt of the answer. Lady Crompton would never have allowed Catherine any liberties. She would have married her off to the first suitable man who crossed her path and would have no qualms in doing so.

Her mother was not a cruel woman, but in her mind, nothing would have been worth losing their reputation. Catherine's happiness—indeed Clarissa's happiness—was secondary to everything else.

She wondered what she might have done if she had known of Catherine's intentions. Would I have stopped her? What would she say now if I could tell her of Lord Bolton?

And what would she tell her? That she had felt an electric connection as soon as he

had taken her hand that night...that when he looked into her eyes, it was as though he looked into her very soul?

None of that mattered.

What mattered was propriety and getting her family back where they were no longer looked down on by everyone around them.

She pushed the covers off and sat up, shivering at the chill in the air. She got out of bed, pushing the curtains aside roughly, and walked to the window. The floorboards were icy to the touch, and she hopped quickly onto the window seat, hugging her knees to her chest and looking out at the perfect, snow-covered world around her.

Lady Eleanor's gardens were beautiful. Large ferns were at the back, covered with snow, and a fox must have pottered across the lawn in the early hours, for his perfectly round footprints could be seen across the otherwise virgin snow.

Clarissa wondered what Lord Bolton thought of Madeline Wilde. She was a wealthy widow, and she had seen him look at her more than once. Perhaps he would have his head turned while he was here, and she would not have to manage any more intense emerald-green gazes before they left.

Something about that made an unpleasant tendril of discomfort unfurl inside her, but she pushed it away. A tentative knock on the door meant the arrival of Annie, and Clarissa was most grateful for the distraction.

As she dressed, Annie fussed over her hair, placing small pins akin to snowflakes at the back where she had plaited it into circles within the central knot. The overall effect was lovely, and Clarissa was surprised to see a refined lady looking back at her again in the mirror.



It was not as though she had not dressed appropriately before. But being at the edges of society meant one tended not to draw attention to oneself. She was not used to the darker gowns that Annie had brought. Her maid had pulled many that Clarissa had not worn for years from the back of the wardrobe. Today, she was in a lilac gown with mauve ribbons across the bodice.

“You do look well, Miss Crompton,” Annie said as she stepped back to observe her.

Clarissa smiled at her. “All your work, I assure you.” They shared a brief smile but were interrupted by the door opening as Lady Crompton entered the room.

As it was her wont to do, she wafted a hand at Annie to let her know she would no longer be needed. Through force of habit, Clarissa stood a little taller as her mother walked in, looking at her up and down appraisingly.

Once the door closed, however, her mother’s eyes fixed her with a knowing stare. She stepped forward, a look of barely contained excitement on her face as her hands came to rest on Clarissa’s shoulders.

“My dear, you have done very well,” she said enthusiastically, brushing a hand down one side of Clarissa’s dress as though to straighten it.

“Mama?” she asked, her heart picking up at her mother’s expression.

“Lord Bolton showed you some interest yesterday, did he not?”

“Mama!” Clarissa said reproachfully, horrified by her implications. “I have not—”

“No, of course not,” her mother waved dismissively into the air. “You are the epitome of propriety, my dear, but you cannot deny that he favoured you much with his company last evening. The game you played where you had the whole room

behind you. I remarked upon it to your father.”

Clarissa felt sick at her mother’s words. This was exactly what she had feared.

“Mama, I have no interest whatever in Lord Bolton,” she lied. “He is a known rake. You cannot possibly approve of the match.”

“Oh Heavens,” Lady Crompton scoffed, moving around Clarissa and pulling her to face her. “It would be a prestigious marriage for you. It would bring our family back into the heart of the Ton. You must see that.”

Marriage, Clarissa felt as though she might collapse at the speed with which things were moving.

“Mama,” Clarissa managed, her voice thin as her throat constricted, “he has a reputation. The last thing we need is to be associated with such a man. He has only just returned to England and plans to leave again in less than two weeks.”

“He told you so? Well, plans can change. And all rakes settle down eventually, my dear. He was quite attentive. You must encourage him. He is the Earl of Bernewood. The estate is vast, and so is his fortune. Think of what this could do for us.”

Lady Crompton would not be reasoned with, and despite Clarissa’s repeated protests, she would not hear that Lord Nicholas Bolton was not a perfect candidate for a husband.

As her mother left her, Clarissa’s chest was tight with anxiety and uncertainty. She could not take in a full breath, and the composed woman in the mirror who had stood there only seconds before was replaced by a frightened girl—trapped between her own fears and her mother’s expectations.

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When Clarissa gathered herself and entered the breakfast room a little later, she was gratified to see Emily and Rosemary already seated. Rosemary, who had dark hair similar to her brother's, wore a dark red gown of burgundy that suited her very well. Emily looked up as Clarissa entered and gave her a bright smile.

"Good morning, Clary," she said brightly. "Have you seen the snow? I believe another foot at least fell overnight."

"I have. I am surprised I do not find you running about in it," Clarissa said as she sat down.

"I have never liked the cold," Rosemary said with an exaggerated shiver. "I fear your cousin will have to enjoy all the snow on my behalf. I shall stay indoors where it is warm and cozy."

"I could not agree more," Clarissa teased, and Emily looked at her reproachfully.

"You love the snow," her cousin protested. "I shall force you out."

"Perhaps. But only if the paths are clear. I have no intention of having wet feet all day."

The breakfast was excellent, with kippers, boiled eggs, and mountains of toast. Clarissa was not used to such an abundance of food. She had always been sparing at breakfast, knowing that her father did not eat a great deal in the mornings and her mother never ate much at all. To be presented with such an array of dishes not supplied by her accounts was a decadence that Clarissa took full advantage of.

By the time Rosemary's aunt began to outline her plans for the day, Clarissa was on

her third boiled egg.

“Now, after we have broken our fast, we have much to do, ladies,” Lady Eleanor piped up from the head of the table. She had layered the toast in her hand with such a thick layer of butter that Clarissa had to wonder whether it might taste like toast at all. “We will be making Christmas decorations this morning, and I have laid out all the supplies in the drawing room. I am loathe to go out when the weather is as cold as it is, and I am glad that I planned for so many indoor activities.” She took a bite with some relish and gave Clarissa a wink as she did so.

Clarissa hid a smile. She liked Lady Eleanor very much. She had a playful nature and was always excited to try new things.

The far door of the breakfast room opened, and Lord Bolton entered. He looked impossibly dashing in his morning jacket, with a loose cravat about his neck. His hair swept back in a loose style that suited him perfectly.

Despite knowing he would join them for breakfast, Clarissa was caught off guard by his presence. As she looked up at him, their eyes connected, and Clarissa fumbled her teacup, spilling tea all over the saucer beneath it.

Furious at her clumsiness and her foolishness at being so distracted by the man, she chastised herself viciously for such an obvious reaction. Lord Bolton appeared not to notice, sitting with his aunt at the head of the table. Lord Addison came to sit opposite them, and Emily quickly engaged him in continuing their discussion the night before. Both Henry and Emily adored chess, and Emily was speaking to him of a new move she had read about. Clarissa listened in amused silence, occasionally catching Rosemary’s eye, who looked bored stiff by the topic.

As breakfast came to an end, the ladies gathered in the drawing room to make their decorations. Clarissa was pleased that Nicholas had not joined them, and she was

seated with Rosemary and Emily. They were making kissing boughs, and each table had an array of greenery, including holly, ivy, and mistletoe.

Emily's lack of creativity made Clarissa feel that her own bough was rather better formed than the others. Her confidence was wiped clean away, however, when they were joined by Madeline Wilde.

The lady walked across the room with quiet purpose and placed herself at their table with a warm smile at Rosemary. It was returned, though Rosemary's was not quite so pleasant.

Madeline sat beside Clarissa, who found her proximity intimidating. Something about her looks across the dinner table had unnerved Clarissa, and she did not like the way her eyes kept skirting about the table.

Madeline Wilde was very well turned out again. From the little Clarissa' knew of her history—which Lady Crompton had whispered to her the night before—Lady Wilde had been left well-moneyed after her husband's death. She had exquisite taste. Her dresses were of the absolute latest in fashionable designs. Clarissa was even more aware of her own dress, which, apart from the alterations she had made, was three seasons old.

“Miss Kingston, I cannot understand how you get your bough to be so upright,” Madeline remarked, holding hers up. “Mine is flopping about all over the place.”

To Clarissa's eyes, it was perfect. As Emily and Rosemary protested its beauty, Clarissa could not help but think the lady's comment was by design. Madeline's shrewd gaze met hers and she inflicted her with a tight smile. Clarissa was under no illusions that Madeline Wilde disliked her. She had no qualms in returning the feeling in the strongest terms.

“Do you know, I asked your brother to play cards with me yesterday evening and he refused in favour of that infernal game of charades,” Lady Wilde said to Rosemary.

She kept her voice low so as not to insult their host.

“Ah, yes,” Rosemary replied. “My brother found an excellent partner in Miss Crompton,” Rosemary said briskly. The comment seemed rather more pointed than was required, and Clarissa noticed Rosemary was stabbing her holly into her bough with more force than necessary.

“However did you guess that riddle, Miss Crompton?” Lady Wilde said with a high laugh. “I could not think of anything at all that it pertained to. Lord Bolton is so clever with such things.” She looked at Clarissa scathingly. “I suppose it is like any word puzzle. If you know the rules anyone can solve it easily.”

Emily leaned over to address Rosemary. “Was it your aunt who wrote the riddles, Miss K—”

“And, of course, *Pride and Prejudice* is the best novel I have read in years. Have you read it, Miss Crompton?” Lady Wilde said, completely ignoring Emily’s attempt to speak.

“Yes, I have read *Pride and Prejudice*,” Clarissa replied. She glanced at her cousin, who had sat back in her chair and fallen silent.

“Miss Crompton is an avid reader,” Rosemary said swiftly. “I would wager she has read the library at Crompton Manor three times over.”

Clarissa gave her a reassuring smile. “Not quite that many. Perhaps only twice.” That comment prompted a laugh from Emily.

“But of course, reading has its place. I do find those whose only discourse is literature abominably dull.” Lady Wilde said as she tied a bow at the base of her ornament.

Clarissa paused, wondering if she imagined the lady’s tone. Lady Wilde had brought up the topic of books, and it seemed decidedly odd that she was now deriding it. Lady Wilde held up her kissing bough, which was by far the best on the table, and sighed.

“I simply do not know how you do it, Miss Crompton. Yours is so dear and sweet. I have made this great monstrosity.” She laughed at herself and caught the attention of Lady Eleanor who was most quick to compliment her efforts.

As the two women conversed enthusiastically, Lady Eleanor spoke of where the boughs would be hung later in the week. She complimented Lady Wilde by telling her that her creation would be somewhere very central and visible. At that point, they were drawn into discussion with Lady Bartholemew at the next table and turned away.

When they were no longer within hearing distance, Emily rose and went over to her aunt’s table to beg for some ribbon, as she had frayed all of hers, leaving Rosemary and Clarissa alone.

“I do dislike that woman,” Rosemary hissed, to Clarissa’s surprise.

“Lady Wilde?” she asked, pretending she did not know.

“Indeed. She has not stopped fawning over my brother for the past two days, and I know she is only interested in his title.”

“We cannot know that, though,” Clarissa said carefully, eyeing Lady Wilde across the room. She was about to say how pleasing any woman might find Lord Bolton, but she quickly bit her tongue.

“I just hope he is not foolish enough to fall for her charms,” Rosemary said darkly.  
“She is a very beautiful woman. Any man would be blind not to notice her.”

“She certainly has a very fashionable wardrobe.”

Rosemary scoffed. “Too fashionable. We are not in a Parisian ballroom; she is overdressed for a simple morning activity. I hope she skewers her dress with a pin.”

Clarissa knew she should chide her friend for her conduct, but she enjoyed being in someone’s confidence again.

In her heart, any criticism of Lady Wilde also helped to raise her spirits.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas closed the library door, heaving a sigh. It was a relief to find some solitude. The house party had been relatively bearable until now, but he was grateful for the peace and quiet.

The library was ornate and well-designed, with high shelving all around the walls and some narrow nooks where one could find privacy to read alone. He leaned against the door, looking up at the painted ceiling and listening to the quiet amidst the shelves.

There was a long window at one end of the room flooding everything with light. He watched the dust dancing in the pale winter sunshine and took a moment to gather his thoughts.

“Have you not read enough books in your lifetime?” came an ironical voice nearby, and Nicholas grinned as Henry emerged from between the narrow shelves holding a thick tome in one hand.

“Are you studying geography?” Nicholas countered as he squinted at the book in Henry’s hands, which seemed to be a large atlas.

“Goodness no. There is a table in my bedroom that is crooked, and I thought this could go beneath the fourth leg.”

Nicholas snorted. “As if you would use my aunt’s books so ill.”

Henry gave his usual easy smile, but there was a hesitancy about him. Nicholas wondered if he had meant to avoid discovery.

“What secrets do you hope to determine with it?” he asked, looking at the atlas.

“I was merely trying to win a bet with Miss Emily Crompton.”

Nicholas frowned at him in mock outrage. “A bet? With a lady? Unthinkable!”

Henry chuckled. “She is adamant that Sheffield is south of York. I am certain she is incorrect.”

“My dear Henry, you lack direction in everything you do, geography included. Sheffield is sixty miles south of York.”

To Nicholas’s surprise, Henry looked pleased by the news and placed the atlas behind him decisively.

“Then I will tell her she is the winner.” He did not seem upset that he had lost the bet. “Care for a game?” Henry asked suddenly, pointing to the ornate chess set positioned in front of the window.

“Of course,” Nicholas said cheerfully, “I could do with another trouncing.”

Both men wandered to the window and sat down.

The garden was looking particularly chilly that morning, and a spider had threaded a web across a large portion of the window. The gossamer strands were covered with a sparkling layer of frost, neatly frozen in space.

Henry cleared his throat pointedly, and Nicholas realized his friend had already moved a piece while he had been idly staring at the scenery.

“You are so contemplative these days,” Henry said with a smile. “I had expected you

to be bored to tears by this party, but instead, you seem in very high spirits.”

Nicholas shot him a warning glance. “And what is that a reference to?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Henry said innocently as he moved another pawn forward. “It’s just that you did seem rather enamoured with one of your aunt’s guests last evening.” Henry’s eyes were twinkling as he spoke.

Nicholas did his best to keep his expression blank, but he suddenly felt embarrassed that his confusing feelings for Miss Crompton had been so visible.

“Nothing of the kind, I assure you,” he replied quickly, “I was merely attempting to make the lady feel welcome. She is rather shy.”

“As well she might be. This is the first event I have seen Lord and Lady Crompton attend since the scandal.”

Nicholas moved his knight and bit his tongue. He was desperate to probe further into the history of Miss Crompton’s life, but he did not wish to listen to gossip—not even if it came from Henry.

“Surely that was long enough ago?” he asked evenly.

“It was. But it caught the attention of society, unfortunately. These things often do when a family as prominent as the Cromptons are disgraced. They have barely been seen in town for three years.”

“Something to do with the sister, wasn’t it?” Nicholas asked, losing the battle with himself.

“Mmm, she ran off with her music teacher. Eloped in the night. The papers latched

onto the story instantly. It was in every edition for weeks.”

Nicholas’s throat felt tight at the idea that Miss Crompton had been subjected to such a humiliation. Scandals could be brutal when they attracted so much commentary. From her shyness and propensity for standing at the edges of a room, he could see the effect it still had on her.

“You made a good team at charades,” Henry continued, giving him a sly grin. “I have not seen you smile that much in an age.”

Nicholas took Henry’s bishop, only to have his own piece taken immediately after. He was already losing, but he couldn’t clear his head enough to concentrate. He didn’t like to think that his actions had put Miss Crompton under further scrutiny. The last thing he wanted was to make her life more difficult.

I should probably stay away from her, he conceded. It was not a pleasant thought.

He had felt a spark across his skin when their hands had touched the night before. He had been unable to think of anything else when he went to bed. Their time at charades had been the most fun he had had in months, and her dazzling smiles, though rare, were captivating.

But it was her eyes that were the most intriguing of all. They were such a beautiful colour—deep brown, like antique wood, warm and welcoming. Her lashes were long and curled, framing her eyes in a striking outline.

As he looked out the window, he wondered how they might look if snowflakes were to catch on them.

As Henry took his fourth piece, Nicholas smiled ruefully and tried to get his head in the game. He was thoroughly beaten in only a few more minutes, however, and as the

game concluded, the two men rose, walking together at a leisurely pace back to the drawing room.

Tea was about to be served, and as they entered the room, servants bustled about, placing trays amidst the party.

Nicholas's eyes were immediately drawn to Miss Crompton and her cousin standing at the window with Rosemary. He felt the same swell in his chest at the sight of her.

Despite his confusing feelings in her presence, he found his feet moving toward them involuntarily.

He had relished their time playing charades together and found himself eager to recapture the feeling. Their acquaintance had been fleeting, yet it left a lasting impression. He took satisfaction in a particular notion: that he had been able to coax more smiles from her than she might have typically expressed. It pleased him to think their chance encounter had brightened her demeanour, if only briefly.

"And how did the creative exploits of the morning progress?" he asked his sister as he stopped beside them.

Rosemary's eyes twinkled as he joined their group.

"Tolerably well," Rosemary said with a sigh. "Miss Emily has made a beautiful garland which I rather think Aunt Eleanor will place above the mantel in this very room."

"Oh Lord," Emily said with her usual smile. "It will probably fall apart the moment it is hung."

"And, of course, Miss Crompton has always been far superior to me in her

creativity,” Rosemary said with a put-upon sigh. His sister was an excellent musician, but artistry had never been her strong suit.

He turned to Clarissa to gauge her reaction, only to feel dismayed as her eyes quickly flicked away from his, her cheeks colouring a little. She focused on Rosemary and gave her a faint smile.

“You do yourself a disservice, Miss Kingston,” she insisted. “Your bough is very pretty.”

She stiffened as he took another step into their circle; all the easiness of the evening before had disappeared as though it had never been. Her eyes flitted about the room, as though searching for an escape.

“And what were you making?” he asked, trying to keep his voice casual while observing Miss Crompton from the corner of his eye.

“We were making kissing boughs!” Emily answered very readily, oblivious to the tension that had sprung up between them.

Nicholas looked at Miss Crompton and watched, fascinated, as her blush deepened even further. His body was instantly flooded with a heat of a different nature, and his heart beat wildly in his chest.

“Lord Bolton, you are the most fiendish of men not to tell me of your sister’s talents at decoration,” came Lady Wilde’s voice from just behind him as she pushed her way into the group. “I was quite outdone at the table.”

Nicholas chanced a quick glance at his sister. Rosemary had barely refrained from rolling her eyes at Lady Wilde’s arrival. He felt his own bolt of irritation at the interruption. She was very close to him, their elbows brushing as though on accident,

but he was too well-versed in this dance to believe it. Nothing of what she did would be an accident.

He forced a smile, feeling the falseness of it now. With Miss Crompton, his smiles came very easily, but now he felt the mask of the rake slip back into place.

“And did you also make a bough, Lady Wilde?” he asked.

“Indeed, I am embarrassed by my own efforts,” Lady Wilde protested.

“My aunt has already said she will hang yours in the foyer,” Rosemary said with barely disguised annoyance.

“Lady Wilde, such praise from my aunt is exceedingly rare. You must show it to me before we go to supper this evening,” he said automatically, keeping his charming facade firmly in place.

Madeline’s arrival appeared to have made Miss Crompton even more uncomfortable. Nicholas felt an overwhelming feeling of protectiveness for her. He wanted to fix her sad expression and see her easy laugh again.

He gave Lady Wilde a tight smile as she continued to expand on the subject of the kissing boughs for many minutes. Miss Emily was the only person in their group who readily answered her.

As the bell rang for dinner, Nicholas was herded to the other side of the room to look at Lady Wilde’s creation. To him, it was just a bundle of foliage with no artistic value.

“It is very pretty,” he said quickly, wishing to be away from her, but the lady gave a coy smile.

“You flatter me, my Lord, but I thank you for your kind words. I was wondering whether you might join us to make one yourself.”

Nicholas smiled. “I would not wish to attempt to emulate your talents, Lady Wilde. I imagine it would resemble something a cat had tangled together inexpertly. I would ruin the entire household aesthetic.”

She gave a high, piercing laugh that Nicholas did his best not to wince at. He was grateful to be able to excuse himself as he headed to his room to dress for dinner.

As he ascended the stairs, he was already considering what he might wear. He had paid little attention to his clothes in the last few days in his aunt’s house, yet now he was eager to look his best.

When he mentioned such musings to his valet, the man positively glowed with excitement. He pulled out an assortment of waistcoats and asked him which might be to his liking.

As Hargreaves fussed with his selections, picking out this and folding that, Nicholas’s mind was drawn back to Madeline’s attention. He did not consider himself a vain man, though he knew the effect he often had on women. But she could not have been plainer about her regard for him.

Yet the only woman I wish to look at me seems entirely immune to my charms.

Although Miss Crompton had blushed profusely at the mention of the kissing boughs. He had a sudden jolt of desire as he looked at his reflection, imagining having the opportunity to kiss her in the privacy of the corridors of the house. Perhaps they would find themselves unexpectedly beneath a bough, and all other conversation would cease as they stared into one another’s eyes and—



“Perhaps the green coat this evening, my lord?”

Nicholas cleared his throat and nodded stiffly. Hargreaves beamed and helped him to pull the thing over his shoulders.

Nicholas brushed down his sleeves as he considered the many choices he had made in life and the inevitable truth that he would have to make many more—for better or worse.

Lady Wilde was just the sort of woman he should admire. She was beautiful, fashionable, and well-connected with a large fortune. He would have rejoiced in the flirtation—for flirtation, it was—not three days before.

But now, all that filled his mind was Miss Crompton. It was surprising and rather alarming to be so bowled over by a lady.

She was reluctant around him, which he was unaccustomed to. He found himself longing for her good opinion, and as Hargreaves stepped back with a smile of pleasant enjoyment, Nicholas realized that he looked very well indeed as he surveyed the finished ensemble.

For the first time, he looked like the Earl of Bernewood. He wore a strict evening jacket and cream waistcoat, with a complicated construction about his neck that framed his face.

He had never cared how others perceived him up until today. He was desperate for Miss Crompton to see beneath the facade he presented to the world.

For the first time in many years, he finally wanted to be known and not simply seen.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

“Perhaps the pink satin?” Annie asked as Clarissa looked over the gowns that might be suitable for dinner. She found herself contemplating them rather longer than usual, and Annie had picked up on her indecision.

“Should I not have packed the darker pieces, Miss Crompton?” she asked, looking concerned.

“Not at all. I am just so used to white that I have forgotten these others. You are right. The pink will do very well, thank you, Annie.”

The gown was dutifully fitted, and Clarissa contemplated the evening ahead. Lord Bolton’s presence in her life was unexpectedly troublesome and she was struggling to interpret her own feelings.

Before they had come to the house, the idea of an attachment had not entered her head. She had been focused on whether it was wise to come at all and not on who she might meet.

She had been surprised by how friendly everyone had been. True, the attendees were chiefly made up of Lady Eleanor’s, or her own, family. But Lady Bartholemew and Garriton had also been very amiable. There wasn’t a hint that anyone had considered the scandal since the night of the ball. As a result—she had let down her guard.

She had not expected Lord Bolton to be a part of the party, and now that he was, he presented a complication she had not planned for.

Given his history, nothing could recommend him. Rosemary’s reassurances of his

character were of little consequence. Considering that she was his sister and would likely think well of him whatever he did, Clarissa did not put much store by them.

She would be civil but drove any other thoughts out of her mind.

Even so, she still felt a flutter of nerves in her gut at the prospect of another evening in his company. She chided herself for such foolishness, but try as she might, she could not banish those feelings.

As she prepared to head down to dinner, she was surprised to be summoned to the sitting room. Upon entering, she found both her parents waiting for her.

Her stomach in knots, she chiefly concentrated on her father. He was by far the most sensible of the two, and she made a bargain with herself that whatever he asked, she would see it done—just as she had since Catherine left them.

Her father's brow was rather furrowed, and her mother was bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Lord Crompton cleared his throat. Before he began speaking, his gaze moved to his wife before finding hers. Clarissa thought she could detect an element of apology in it.

“Your mother has brought to my attention that you may have formed an attachment with Lord Bolton.”

“He is the most virtuous of men, Clarissa,” her mother interrupted. “To think that you have managed to ensnare an earl with title, wealth, and a great estate. It is beyond my wildest imaginings. This connection could change everything for us.”

Clarissa could not miss her mother's true meaning. Lady Bernadette Crompton was a

social climber. Their fall from grace as a family had hit her the hardest. Clarissa knew how much her mother longed to enter a room and attract attention for the right reasons again.

Before the scandal, Lady Crompton had been the centre of her circle of friends. She had been a shameless gossip, and everyone had been eager to talk to her. She had not coped well when she had learned that the same circle she had belonged to for so many years was only as loyal as her money and reputation allowed.

The knot in Clarissa's stomach now felt like a snake, coiling and turning over on itself. The nausea she had experienced when her mother had first suggested Lord Bolton as a potential match had returned. She attempted to compose herself before her father saw her reaction.

"Lady Eleanor is such a great friend," Lady Crompton continued. "She has favoured us by inviting us here."

Before Lady Crompton could exult in Lord Bolton's virtues for a moment longer, Lord Crompton cleared his throat again, and she was silenced.

"We are all aware of the precarious position we find ourselves in. I believe that we have all been concerned for your prospects, Clary. Despite your obvious attributes and accomplishments, since Warrington's abandonment, I had not considered that you would find a match such as this."

Clarissa wanted to scream. There was no match. It was highly likely that Nicholas would leave England and forget her immediately. This was all much too fast and too humiliating to be born. Her parents had jumped to conclusions despite her best efforts to conceal her emotions.

What if Lord Bolton has noticed my regard for him? What if he is repulsed by it?

Her father's eyes were mixed with hope and concern. As they looked at one another, Clarissa could feel the heavy weight of responsibility on her shoulders that she had carried for so long.

She could barely remember a time before Catherine had left. All was blurred and forgotten in the wake of such a disaster. To her, it seemed as if the entirety of her family's fortunes, happiness and success rested with her.

The panic in her chest fluttered to the surface so quickly she could not prevent it. Her mother's vibrating figure, all but bouncing off the furnishings, did not help matters.

"Papa, I can assure you, you are much mistaken. I have no interest in Lord Bolton," she said desperately, the lie falling easily from her lips. "You cannot be ignorant of his reputation. I most certainly am not." She cast a glance toward her mother. "Lord Bolton is a known rake. Given the circumstances, he would hardly be a suitable person for me to attach myself to. Someone of his experience would not be a candidate I would seriously consider. He is accustomed to flirtation perhaps, but I have seen no evidence of any true regard for me."

Save for a touching of hands that still burns my skin.

She was aware of the irony in her words. She was using Lord Bolton's rakish behaviour to justify rejecting him. Yet every time their eyes met across a room, her heart would skip a beat in her chest.

"I could not risk such a connection and have no plans to entertain it," she concluded.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Clarissa," her mother spat, "you speak as if he were a murderer. All men have their rakish ways, why I am sure even your father had his share of flirtations before he settled down with me." Clarissa watched her father turn pale with anger at that comment, but her mother barrelled on. "Lord Bolton will settle

down, all men do. He is by far the best prospect you can ever hope for, and you must not—”

“My dear,” Lord Crompton interrupted, gently touching his wife’s arm. “We should not labour the point. Clary has told us of her intentions, or lack thereof; we should leave it at that.”

Lady Crompton opened and closed her mouth in shock. Clarissa did not meet her eyes. Looking at the heavily patterned carpet beneath her feet, she wished she had never come to the party at all.

“We should all head to dinner,” her father stated, and Clarissa could not get out of the room quickly enough.

Not only did she have to contend with her confusing and unwanted feelings for Lord Bolton, but she now had the added pressure of her mother’s expectations. A good match would secure their future—yet she could not believe Lord Bolton was the answer. Her own sister had had her head turned by the wrong man, and look where that had left them all.

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At dinner, Clarissa was placed opposite Lord Bolton, who looked unfairly handsome. He had done something with his hair that made him look almost regal. His cravat and cream waistcoat meant that his eyes, already such a vivid green, were startling in the candlelight.

On his right arm was Lady Wilde, who was intent on monopolizing every moment of his time. But on his right was Emily. In that easy way of hers, she was asking him a myriad of questions. It was clear that Emily saw Lord Bolton as akin to an older brother and had no designs upon him herself. To Clarissa’s quiet delight and surprise,

Lord Bolton was extremely patient with her and answered every question with great enthusiasm.

He had impeccable manners, always ensuring that he gave time to both ladies as he spoke. Clarissa was seated beside Lord Wilde, who was rather more interested in his glass of wine than he was in conversing with her.

“You see, I have heard that there are wondrous carriages proposed, capable of travelling at great speeds along iron rails,” Emily was saying as she extolled the marvels of modern engineering.”

“Indeed, though I believe it may not be as simple as it sounds. I attended a lecture on the subject not long ago. Such contraptions rely on intricate machinery and a great deal of power to function. It is said that the motion is achieved through a system of pulleys and levers, harnessing the energy of the horses or perhaps employing some new contrivance of steam.”

“I would be utterly captivated to witness one in action. None of my friends share my enthusiasm for such advancements, but I can imagine nothing more thrilling than observing the future of travel.”

Clarissa was mesmerized by Lord Bolton. His eyes were fixed on Emily as though she were the most important and interesting person in the world. He murmured his assent at her excitement and agreed that he would very much like to experience that kind of future travel.

“They do seem rather dangerous,” Lady Wilde added, and Lord Bolton turned to her. “I have heard that they can travel at over ten miles per hour. That seems exceedingly fast to my mind.”

“You are right, my lady.”

“And on rails,” Lady Wilde added with a shudder. “How on earth could one be expected to trust a line of metal going over the English countryside in such a way? I would not hear of such a thing. I would prefer a carriage and a team of four over something so unruly.”

Clarissa tightened her grip on her wine glass as Lord Bolton laughed and Lady Wilde began to titter along with him. Clarissa was unsure whether it was the laughter's high-pitched nature or to whom it was aimed that made her jaw clench.

“And what would you prefer, Miss Crompton?” Lord Bolton asked suddenly, looking up at her. Lord Wilde took another large gulp of his wine as his glass was refilled for the third time.

“I would say that you are both correct,” Clarissa replied honestly. “These advancements are exciting, but I must admit I would be cautious to try anything before it has been truly tested.”

She was eager to show some agreement with Lady Wilde's opinion. For reasons she could not understand, the widow appeared to dislike her a great deal. Clarissa was far too familiar with people judging her on sight and making incorrect assumptions.

Lady Wilde, however, just took a sip of her wine and gave her a tight smile. Clarissa examined her through the candelabra between them and could not deny she was an uncommonly beautiful woman. Her hair was tied up in a beautiful bun, and on her hands and neck were a multitude of jewels that made Clarissa feel positively plain in comparison.

Why would Lord Bolton just not wish for her company? She is beautiful and diverting, and no scandal dogs her footsteps—merely good breeding and a better fortune.



Clarissa could not help but feel utterly inferior. She returned to her plate without saying anything more.

“Clary is the most sensible person I have ever met,” said Emily, surprising her enough to look up at her cousin. “And I think she is right. Either method of transportation has its methods, but one must understand the risks before one leaps headfirst into something new.”

Clarissa could almost hear her own voice in her cousin’s words and blushed a little. She had said many things like that over the two years Emily had lived with them, usually sourced from her own bitter resentment at her sister’s abandonment.

“Indeed, and what else does Miss Crompton do well besides making sensible choices?” Lord Bolton asked Emily, but his gaze was on Clarissa. She could not look at him, feeling overwhelmed and suffocated by her indecision.

“She reads more than anyone I have ever met,” Emily said with a grin. “How many books have you read this year, Clary?” she asked playfully.

Clarissa wanted to scold her, as she was embarrassed at being called out like this. Lady Wilde looked as though she had swallowed something unpleasant, and Clarissa was not sure what to say.

“I’ll wager she has read ten books this year,” Lord Bolton said, clearly guessing a low number to begin a debate. Lady Wilde brightened.

“I would say twenty,” she said, trying to catch his eye. To Clarissa’s astonishment, Lady Eleanor had been eavesdropping from the head of the table and shouted out that thirty would be more likely for a woman of good education.

By the end, Clarissa was laughing, as everyone except Emily and her parents had

given their guess. Her father had a twinkle in his eye that she had not seen for a very long time, and she rejoiced in seeing its return.

“A shilling that it’s ten books,” said Lord Bolton, and those wicked green eyes caught hers across the table. She could not prevent a smile as they all waited for her answer.

“This year has been a rather slow one,” she remarked as her father gave her a knowing smile from his end of the table. “I am at the end of my current volume, which I confess is only my forty-second book this year.”

There were cries and exclamations of everyone but Emily, who giggled prettily and clapped her hands with delight.

“My goodness,” Lord Bolton stated, but his eyes were intimate and warm as he raised his glass in a toast. “To Miss Crompton,” he said to the company as Clarissa blushed fiercely. “Who makes everyone else here look quite stupid, to be sure.”

The whole table erupted with joy. Lady Wilde leaned in to say that she had read almost that many books herself, and Lord Bolton dutifully responded. But Clarissa could not take her eyes off his hand around his glass.

He had raised it and toasted to her intelligence in front of the entire room. It was as much a declaration of his regard as anything could be. She felt a stirring of unease ripple through her as Lady Crompton’s eyes met hers, and her mother raised her glass in a triumphant salute. Clarissa did not look at Lord Bolton again for the remainder of the meal.

After dinner, the party assembled in the drawing room.

Clarissa had not been in the room two minutes before Rosemary pulled her aside. The rest of the group was conversing around the fireplace. Emily was standing beside

Lord Addison and asking him just as many questions as she had to Lord Bolton.

Clarissa frowned as her friend pulled her to the corner of the room.

“I suspected yesterday, I confess, but after that display, I can hardly ignore the obvious any longer. It appears my brother and you have grown fond of one another.” Rosemary’s face was open and interested, but Clarissa was cold all over at her implications.

Yet another person speaking of her attachment to Lord Bolton wrong-footed her again, and she could not come up with an adequate response. Rosemary raised her eyebrows and waited for her reply, and Clarissa gathered herself as best she could, cursing her easy blushes.

“Lord Bolton is a very intriguing man, but nothing more,” she persisted. “I cannot think he would find any interest in a lady such as myself; he has far too much to occupy him on the continent.”

She did not know whether she should speak plainly of Nicholas’s reputation, but she should not have worried. It appeared his sister was all too aware of the details.

“He certainly has had his fair share of rumours,” Rosemary agreed. “But I believe that some of those rumours were untrue and unkind. Nicholas has experienced great heartache in his life and I believe it was that experience that led him to leave England. He has never confided the truth to me, but I am sure his heart was broken.”

Clarissa’s eyes moved to Lord Bolton.

Yet more contradictions about the man only confused her further. Who was it who broke his heart? She wondered. What woman would ever refuse him?

Her mother was also looking at Lord Bolton from the other side of the room, speaking in hushed tones to Lady Eleanor, and Clarissa felt rage growing within her. She was so tired of people speaking about her behind her back.

Before Clarissa could say more, Lady Eleanor clapped her hands to get the attention of the room.

“Tonight’s entertainment will be a game of snapdragon!” she said loudly, and there were several murmurings of pleasure from those present. Rosemary smiled happily.

“Oh, I do love that game,” she said as they all moved to the centre of the room.

On a high table, a bowl filled with brandy had been placed. Within it floated a multitude of raisins. Clarissa had never played the game before and was astonished when a servant came forward with a match and set the bowl alight. The leaping blue and red flames were beautiful to watch as they licked around the side of the bowl.

“Whoever picks out the most raisins will be the victor!” Lady Eleanor proclaimed, and the whole party gathered around the bowl.

The leaping flames illuminated their faces in a ghostly blue light as the alcohol burned merrily between them.

Clarissa watched her mother, father, and Lady Eleanor expertly stab their hands into the bowl and retreat with their raisins, popping them into their mouths with aplomb and apparent relish.

She enjoyed the spectacle of the thing, and the servants had blown out all the other candles in the room, giving everything an ethereal glow as they played.

Lady Eleanor declared that it was Clarissa’s turn next, and she stepped up to bowl.

Despite her misgivings at reaching through fire, she was determined to have her turn. But when she was close to the flames, she lost her nerve, uncertain how she would not be set alight by the action.

Her breath caught in her throat as someone came to stand beside her. Lord Bolton was suddenly at her elbow, his presence both calming and alarming. His proximity made her chest tight, and her lungs struggled for a full breath.

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Nicholas found himself beside her before he had fully thought through his actions.

He had seen her pause; the flames reflected in her wide brown eyes, and he had acted on instinct. Something about her made him want to protect her. He did not wish to hinder her, and he did not believe her incapable, but he wanted to offer a helping hand should she need it.

Although in the centre of the circle, the crowd around them were talking amongst themselves. Some were watching, but most were distracted, waiting for their turn.

He was able to move a little closer to her and could feel how tense she was.

“Have you played the game before?” he asked, his voice low in the bustling room.

“Never,” she whispered.

“My advice would be to raise your hand much higher than you believe is necessary. It is all in the pace with which you approach the flames. Do not linger long and choose your target wisely. Often, one goes for the centre, but in fact, the opposite edge is easier.”

Clarissa stepped up to the bowl, and Nicholas watched carefully as she raised her hand just as he had suggested. He held his breath as her fingers hovered above the flames, the light shimmering over her porcelain skin. She took a deep breath, plunged her hand into the fiery bowl, and scooped up a raisin as though she played the game every day.

She held it aloft with a cry of triumph receiving much applause from those around her. Nicholas felt an ache in his jaw, as he was smiling so widely.

As she stepped back, her hand brushed against his, and the instant spark of connection ignited on his skin once more. He felt as though the fire from the bowl had lit up his whole body, and he gasped as he met her gaze.

For a long, stolen moment, the room about them faded away. He was lost in those deep, brown eyes, taking in the perfection of her face and the exuberant smile she wore. Her beauty was only accentuated by the dim flickering light from the bowl.

It could only have been a second before they stepped away, even though it had felt like an eternity to him.

Nicholas watched as she ate the raisin gleefully, keeping his smile in place. But within himself, Nicholas was in turmoil for the remainder of the game. He participated mechanically, having played many times before, his rakish mask firmly in place.

His mind was swirling madly as each person about him took their turn, his eyes returning time and again to Miss Crompton.

He could not help but examine her delicate features and the animation in her body as she came alive at the game. The excitement and danger inherent in plunging one's hand into a flaming bowl had animated her even more.

The brightness in her eyes and the joy in her gaze were a sight to behold. Nicholas could not understand why the entire company was not captivated by her. He was unable to look away for any length of time and was at a loss as to how he had not instantly seen how exquisite she was.

He was desperate to be beside her again, irritated by the number of people in his way. His heart thundered in his chest, his mind a whirlwind of delight and uncertainty as he tried to contrive a way to move to her side once more.

As his turn came around again, he stepped up the bowl without hesitation, plunging deep and bringing out a handful of raisins that were still alight. He blew on them theatrically, intent on impressing her, and heard her gasp as he doused the flames and ate the raisins in one movement.

He knew he was acting foolishly, and as he moved back to his place, he caught the gaze of Henry, who was standing beside Emily on the other side of the circle. His expression was a little difficult to read in the half-light, but he seemed to be smiling knowingly.

As the entertainment ended and Nicholas was declared the victor he stepped away from the group for a little time, watching the footmen relight the candles all about the place. Clarissa went to speak with Henry and Emily beside the fire, still flushed and breathless from the game.

Never in his life had he felt what he had just experienced over those dancing flames. It was not only her timid nature and quiet shyness that had first attracted him to her. Her indifference to him had piqued his interest, but he could no longer blame his vanity for his regard.

She was the most breathtaking creature he had ever beheld. Not even Victoria had made him feel the depths of emotion that he had experienced in her presence that evening. It was as though he were watching a phoenix rising out of the flames. A tiny thing that had seemed unremarkable and made entirely of ash was now a vibrant, colourful marvel that he was ashamed to have overlooked when they had first met.

What would it be like to truly know her? To find the elements of her character that



she showed to no one else?

She was reserved, proper at all times, and constantly on her guard. But there were moments where she would let down the walls she had built about herself, and he would see the real woman beneath. Something about that called to him like nothing ever had. He, too, was hiding in plain sight, trying his best to survive a world that had treated him cruelly for too long.

As he watched her, a feeling spread through his chest that he had never hoped to experience again. It frightened and unnerved him to be so affected in so short a time.

Who is this woman? She has stripped away all my certainties, all the things I believed were important in life. She makes me question everything I have built around me for so long...

“My Lord, you are pensive this evening. Am I to wonder that you have tired of our company so soon?”

Nicholas felt his jaw clench unpleasantly and his teeth grind together as Lady Wilde approached him. She was in a very fine dress of deep brown that evening with rather an ostentatious feather in her hair. It was too much for the company, just as Rosemary had said, and he was beginning to think she was doing it solely to impress him.

If that is her intention it is having the opposite effect.

“Of course not, my dear lady; I am merely wondering if I have set my skin aflame.”

It was a casual comment meant to change the subject from her inquiry, but to his irritation, she looked pained and gently rested a hand on his arm.

“My Lord, I do hope you are not injured. Must we fetch a doctor?”

Is the woman a simpleton?

“Not at all; I am merely jesting. I believe perhaps the game has tired me. The lights being so dim and the flames so inviting, I have been reminded that it is soon time for us all to be in our beds.”

He regretted the words immediately, as her eyes darkened with obvious interest. He had meant the comment as a general assertion of the lateness of the hour; it had not been an invitation, yet she appeared to have taken it as such.

He was glad they were in a room filled with people, as the hand that had touched his arm was retracted, much to his relief. He had no doubt if they had been alone, she might have made him an offer, and the very idea was more unpleasant than it should have been.

He put on his most charming smile, affecting an air of polite interest. He tried his best not to linger too long on Miss Crompton, although he was not entirely successful.

“I have never been so diverted as at this manor house; I do believe your aunt is one of the greatest hosts I have had the pleasure of staying with. She has ensured that I want for nothing.”

Her eyes flicked up to his face, down over his body, and back up again. The woman was shameless.

“Indeed, my aunt is the very model of a proper lady. She has been a generous and welcome comfort since I returned to these shores.”

“And this manor house is yours, I take it, following the inheritance you received?”

Nicholas nodded. “It is. But I have assured her, as I would any of my relations, that I

have no wish to turf her out. She will remain at Kingston Manor for as long as she chooses. It is her home and has been such for far longer than I have been in residence.”

“You are the picture of humility. So many men would wish to take their country seat—and their seat in town—without any regard for their relations. You are astonishing, Lord Bolton, in your generosity.”

Again, he kept his smile in place, but his skin was itching to leave her side. He looked up hopefully to see if Lord Wilde might be coming to fetch his daughter. It took him a few seconds to locate him, however. The man was sprawled on the chaise longue at the corner of the room, snoring quietly.

Nicholas cursed inwardly that everyone else was so occupied.

Why does this woman constantly seek me out at every opportunity?

As he looked back at her gaze, however, it was easy to answer that question. She was pursuing him quite relentlessly it would seem. He was astonished it had taken her almost two days to bring up his title and his inheritance, given her blatant wish to make an advantageous marriage.

Miss Crompton laughed at something Henry said across the room, and Nicholas’s gaze moved to his friend. A flare of violent jealousy lanced through him, so fierce in its intensity that it surprised him.

Henry was a handsome man, with his hair much longer than the fashion. His figure was tall and lithe, similar to Nicholas’s, if a little less muscular. Miss Crompton seemed very pleased in his company and Nicholas realized he could not bear the thought that she might find interest elsewhere.

How ridiculous to be so besotted in so short a time, he admonished himself. Yet admonishments did no good. He found it decidedly difficult to keep his eyes away from Miss Crompton for the remainder of the evening.

As the festivities wound down Nicholas was sat in an armchair at the edges of the room.

Lord Crompton was telling a story of one of his business acquaintances. It appeared the man had been missing for some days and a great mystery had arisen as to his whereabouts. When he was eventually found, it was discovered that he had locked himself in his own cellar. His hysterical wife heard him calling for help a full two days after it was believed he had died.

The room was filled with gentle laughter. Miss Crompton's eyes were affectionate and kind as she looked at her father, but, once again, the proper exterior was firmly in place. Nicholas found himself desperate to peel away the layers and see that fire within her again.

Weary from his thoughts, he rose to get himself a brandy. He was surprised when he was joined by his aunt.

"Would you pour me one of those?" she asked, as a footman came forward to assist her and she waved him away.

"Of course, aunt, I did not know you enjoyed brandy."

"I believe the raisins have given me a taste for it," she replied, but her stance was wrong, and her sharp gaze was taking him in somewhat carefully. He sighed, looking at her quizzically.

"I know you have not come here simply to imbibe. Although I will happily pour you

a glass of your excellent brandy, what do you wish to say?"

The room was bustling again with the movements of those about the fire. Several people were discussing different topics in smaller groups, and they would not be overheard. Nicholas was glad of it when his aunt began speaking.

"What is there between Miss Crompton and yourself?" she asked, her eyes narrowed and suspicious. Nicholas felt a jolt of uncertainty rush through him. He was unwilling to expose feelings he could not yet name, but he did not want to lie to her. He handed her the glass, and they both sipped.

"What is your meaning?" he asked evasively.

She scoffed and shook her head. "I am not blind, Nicholas. You have been looking at her all evening, and that display over the punch bowl was very gallant but rather unexpected. What are your intentions toward her?"

"My intentions?"

"You know very well of what I am speaking. The Crompton family have been through a great deal and have lost much. The last thing Miss Clarissa Crompton needs is an association that will come to nothing."

She is right, he thought morosely. What can come of this except more heartache? That is all that has ever come from such matters.

His aunt took a long sip of her brandy and gave him a stern glare.

"I am not one to interfere unduly. But all I will say is that if you are interested in the lady, you should think carefully before you act. She is not one to be trifled with."

She left Nicholas speechless.

His eyes returned to Miss Crompton, and his heart clenched at the idea that his aunt was right—that he might have to give her up.

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That night, as Nicholas readied himself for bed his mind was consumed by Miss Crompton. The brief touch of their hands amidst the game had unmanned him. He felt loose and afloat, as though his feet were not steady on the ground beneath him.

He was accustomed to casual dalliances and flirtations. Many came to nothing, but he prided himself in never having broken a heart. He had taken pains to ensure he did not do so, and that was the way things had been for the longest time. But the intensity of his feelings for Miss Crompton had been unprecedented, disturbing him beyond anything he could have predicted.

It had been a long time since he had pursued a woman for more than sport. Miss Crompton—Clarissa—seemed to consume every part of him against his will.

For the first time in years, he began to regret his prior conduct. If he were not known as a rake, and had not indulged so heavily, he might be closer to understanding Clarissa's feelings. She was very guarded around him, as well she might be.

But there had been a reason for his rakish mask. To protect his own heart from splitting open again. It had taken him many years to build the walls that protected it, and yet Miss Crompton was chipping away at them day by day.

Do I dare trust another with my happiness for a second time?

## Page 12

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The next morning, Clarissa contemplated her reflection. Even after a full night's sleep, she still looked flushed, and she could not deny that she anticipated the day with a great mixture of feelings.

She wanted to see Lord Bolton again. But she also wanted to keep her distance from him.

Nothing seemed simple, and as she stared at her face, looking back at her, she could still feel the prickling heat against her palm from the touch of his hand the night before.

She imagined a fantasy of Lord Bolton and herself at a ball as man and wife. It was a silly illusion, but it helped to settle her mind.

She forced herself to picture his wandering eyes as he inevitably grew bored with his wife. She imagined the whispers about them building to a crescendo as her ill-fated choice of husband subjected her and her family to endless gossip all over again.

She shook herself, straightening her sleeve and resolving that today she would be strong, and she would only give a little of herself away to him. It was almost certain he would find Lady Wilde far more diverting, and she had to believe that had been his intention all along.

Otherwise, I will become quite mad from going back and forth on this matter for the remainder of his time here.

She went down to breakfast to Lady Eleanor's happy announcement that the

afternoon's activities would be spent at the frozen pond near her estate. They would be skating as a group on the thick ice that had formed over the winter months.

Clarissa sipped her tea, glancing furtively at Nicholas on the other side of the room. His easy smile flashed as he charmed the other guests and made many of them laugh with his wit.

She could not help feeling a pang of longing that she was not privy to the joke or that she was not in his company and then chided herself fiercely for reneging on her own promise so quickly.

Clarissa spent much of the morning with the other ladies completing their needlework. Although she had always been good enough at sewing, her embroidery was erratic that day, her stitches uneven as her mind wandered through all the possibilities before her.

"Well," said a voice behind her, "I have heard that he favours Lady Wilde."

Clarissa's ears pricked up as Lady Bartholemew spoke in muted tones to Lady Garriton.

"They spoke for some time after Snapdragon, and she is one of the most beautiful women I ever saw. He has returned to the estate after many years away and she is wildly wealthy. I cannot believe it would not be a favourable match."

Clarissa hissed in a breath as her needle stabbed deep into her finger and spotted her sewing. She glanced about, hoping no one had observed her, only to be met with Rosemary's concerned gaze from across the table. She smiled and dabbed at the spot with her finger to try and blot out the stain.

This is why any hopes I have pinned on a known rake are beyond foolish. She told



herself sternly. I will be undone by him, and I will have only myself to blame.

She prayed that Catherine had not suffered the same fate. What if Mr Harrison had deceived her sister, and he had now run away and left her, finding a new object for his affection?

How she longed for Catherine.

She had not had anyone to confide in for so long, and although her sister's own decisions in life had not always been enviable, she was an inordinately sensible person. She would have known just what to say about Lord Bolton.

The very reason I am in this situation is because of Catherine, she thought irritably. Am I so weak that I would forgive her merely to benefit from her council?

She put down her sewing in irritation and went to find her cousin. Emily was always able to raise her spirits.

After luncheon, the party made their way down to the large pond on the edge of Lady Eleanor's estate. The pond was surrounded by a vast, sweeping hillside culminating in a shallow valley that was utterly beautiful to behold.

Long grasses bobbed about in the light breeze, the ground at their base utterly covered with snow. Little had disturbed the white blanket that carpeted everything about them, and the pond was covered with sparkling ice.

Clarissa, wrapped up in her pelisse and fur stole, walked arm in arm with Emily. She was much amused by Emily's shivering frame beside her and felt so sorry for her that she eventually shared her stole. Emily gratefully placed one hand into it, groaning at its warmth.

“You should have brought a scarf along with your hat. Your neck is bare,” Clarissa chided gently.

“I did not think it so cold.”

“The ground is covered with snow, Emily. What did you think the temperature would be?”

“But I will be hot when we are skating, and I did not wish to bring too much with me.”

Clarissa smiled. “I cannot argue with that. You are right. You will soon be warm. Here. Have the stole for now; I am quite warm as it is.”

She handed it over, and Emily beamed as she placed her gloved hands within it. Clarissa felt the cold bite at her fingertips, but she welcomed it. She loved the winter and the snow and was feeling most content as they all reached the edges of the lake.

Her eyes found Lord Bolton at the head of the party, looking exceedingly dashing in his greatcoat and top hat. He cut a very fine figure indeed, and, aware that she was unobserved, she allowed her eyes to run over him briefly, feeling a thrill at the sight of his wide shoulders and strong build.

She was alarmed, however, when he turned to look at her as though he had felt her gaze upon him and approached with a warm smile.

She could hardly pull in a full breath—she had thought him the most handsome man she had ever beheld in a frock coat, but the greatcoat and gloves suited him above all else.

She smiled shyly as he came over, his eyes dancing as he looked at Emily.

“You are shivering,” he said with amusement.

“She insists she will be very warm upon the ice,” Clarissa answered for her cousin. Emily had been complaining she had not slept overly well and was a little short of temper that afternoon.

“May I help you onto the ice, Miss Crompton? It is a rather steep step down.”

Clarissa hesitated, torn between honouring her promise to herself and her deep desire to be close to him again.

“That is an excellent idea,” Rosemary piped up behind her. She walked over to them, full of smiles and a slightly mischievous air. “We have not skated on this pond since we were eight. Do you remember?”

Lord Bolton watched her carefully.

“Indeed I do, I also remember pulling you down onto the ice many times as I fell over. You have my apologies, Rosemary.”

Rosemary laughed prettily. “Nonsense, I am certain I pulled you down just as often. Why were we so horribly coordinated as children?”

“I would say it was due to lack of practice,” Clarissa confessed, and even Lord Bolton laughed at that.

They made their way down to the ice, Clarissa’s hand in Lord Bolton’s as he walked ahead. Her heart beat wildly at the chance to hold his hand, but she was aware of Lady Wilde’s venomous gaze as they approached the ice.

Lord Bolton was very attentive. After Clarissa had donned her skates, he helped her

down the slope and held her hand until he was certain that she was steady on her feet.

Clarissa and her mother enjoyed skating a great deal. Clarissa was very confident on her feet as a result. Emily was rather less so and had an ungainly and erratic style, but as soon as she was out on the pond, she was much more cheerful and seemed a good deal warmer, too.

Lord Addison skated up beside her, and the two chatted amiably. He occasionally offered her cousin his arm as she repeatedly lost her balance.

The pond was large and allowed space for them all to roam freely. Clarissa was both delighted and astonished when, having escorted her, Lord Bolton exhibited a disinclination to part ways and glided alongside her. He had an excellent stance and held his hands pleasingly behind his back, utterly sure of his next step.

The world around them was glistening, sparkling frost on every surface. The cut and glide of the skates reminded her of skating with her sister on the ice many Christmases before. But this time, the memory did not prompt sadness. She was merely happy to be out again with such agreeable people.

As she watched, Lady Eleanor and her mother glided past, laughing hysterically as Lady Eleanor attempted to stay upright. On the other side of the pond, Rosemary was trying to remain standing while laughing merrily at her aunt.

“I declare, if my aunt were so without poise on the dance floor, she would have been cast out of society long ago,” Nicholas said affectionately.

Clarissa laughed, despite herself, as she watched Lady Eleanor falter over the surface. But when she looked back at Lord Bolton, his expression was grave.

“My apologies, Miss Crompton.” He said softly. “I did not wish to speak of the fickle

nature of society so lightly.”

Clarissa should have felt alarmed that he knew of her circumstance, but, in fact, she was relieved. She realized that not knowing what he knew of her family’s disgrace had been a heavy burden for her. She did not wish to discuss it further, but she was grateful he acknowledged it.

“Do not worry, my Lord, I assure you,” she said. “Society and its favour touches us all throughout our lives. I do not object to anyone bringing up its fickle nature.”

He smiled a smaller, more charming smile that he seemed to reserve for his more intimate acquaintances. She fancied that it was more genuine than the charming grin he often employed in company.

“Tell me, Miss Crompton, what do you think of all this snow? I declare I have never known a winter like this one.”

They were a little further from the rest of the group, and Clarissa was gratified to note that they were very much the superior skaters. Some of the others stayed close to the bank, but she and Lord Bolton were making wide circles about the edges of the pond.

“I adore the winter,” she said unguardedly.

His sharp eyes met hers. “Is that so?”

“It is. My mother longs for summer, but I have always loved the snow and ice. The dark days and darker evenings are tiresome, but sitting by the fire watching the logs spit and crackle, warm and content is one of life’s greatest pleasures.”

He was quiet for a while, and when she looked at him, he was smiling.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he confessed.

“But surely you have not experienced many harsh winters in Europe?” she added.

“You are quite right. I have not encountered too many, but when I was younger, I always preferred the winter months. The idea of Persephone leaving our world, only to return on the first day of spring, was one of my favourite stories. I like that the world sleeps, just as we do, to gather its strength for the seasons to come.”

Clarissa nodded as they passed by the others on their second circle.

“I am also rather partial to a thunderstorm,” she confessed. Lord Bolton chuckled as he glanced at her, his expression unguarded and delighted.

“There is nothing like being tucked up in bed listening to a storm raging against the windows,” he said. There was less than a foot between them now, and Clarissa suddenly felt that the open space and wide country around them was very small.

Clarissa found herself embroiled in a fantasy once more, but this time, she was not the source of her family’s disgrace. She imagined just the kind of intimate setting she had described. Lord Bolton and herself sitting beside a fire, speaking of their interests as she learned of the real man behind the rake.

“Oh dear!”

She looked around as a shape came into her peripheral vision at a rapid pace, and Clarissa only just managed to skate out of the path of Lady Wilde as she hurtled headlong into Lord Bolton’s path. He had no choice but to catch her before she fell onto the bank before them.

Clarissa was utterly dismayed as Lady Wilde collapsed against Lord Bolton’s body,

his legs coming out from beneath her as she exclaimed in alarm.

Lord Bolton's strong arms lifted her back to her feet, but the action of righting her brought their faces very close together. Clarissa saw their eyes meet. Lady Wilde smiled widely at him as he slowly released her, and she began apologizing profusely.

"I had not realised the speed with which I was going, and suddenly, the bank was all upon me!" she said, looking very embarrassed. However, Clarissa wondered at her lack of control as she had been skating quite perfectly about the pond until that moment.

"No matter, my Lady, are you injured?" Lord Bolton asked with concern.

Lady Wilde was still incredibly close to him and only distanced herself when Lord Bolton himself stepped away from her to right his balance upon his skates.

"I am uninjured, my Lord, but perhaps a little unsteady on my feet."

"Let me give you my arm, and we shall skate back together," Lord Bolton replied, the very picture of a gentleman as Lady Wilde wound her arm in his.

Clarissa moved out of the way as Lord Bolton moved to skate past her.

"My apologies, Miss Crompton. I shall return to you momentarily."

"Not at all; be sure to make Lady Wilde comfortable; I shall continue alone," she said with a brightness in her voice that she did not feel. She watched them skate away, Lady Wilde's long blonde hair contrasting with Lord Bolton's dark, their arms remaining linked together all the way around the pond.

Clarissa followed at a leisurely pace, noticing how well Lady Wilde was now skating

without any suggestion that she might lose her balance.

Clarissa kept her expression blank as she continued past them as Lord Bolton helped Lady Wilde to the edge. She felt betrayed by her weakness and irrationally angry that Lady Wilde had again insinuated herself into Lord Bolton's good graces. Since she had arrived at the manor, it did not feel that the woman had given him a moment's peace.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

As the afternoon drew to a close the skating party made their way back to the manor. Nicholas was at the rear, having lingered overlong at removing his skates to prevent Lady Wilde from attaching herself to him again.

He was content to stroll without a companion, listening to the crunch of his shoes over the ice. He kept his eyes fixed on Clarissa's retreating form as she walked beside Emily Crompton back to the house.

Nicholas still felt invigorated from their time together. She was an excellent skater, far and above the rest of the party in poise and elegance. He had felt utterly content as they had made their way around the pond.

When they were in relative solitude, she seemed to finally open up to him. He had caught her look many times as they had conversed easily. The picture she had conjured of sitting beside a fire, perhaps with a cup of tea, listening to a storm raging above her, had captured his imagination.

In his mind, they sat together, listening to the pattering rain and the rumble of thunder, alone and happy in each other's company.

He knew she would have been able to descend onto the ice easily without his help, but the chance to hold her hand had been too great to pass up. The vigorous exercise had, if possible, only improved her appearance. She had a glow about her from the reflections of the snow all around, a faint flush to her cheeks, and a nose beautifully reddened by the cold.

None of the women he had associated with since Victoria had ever held his attention

for long. At first, it was due to his own heartache, and later, he simply saw through much of the falseness of the company he kept—men included. The world of high society was a nest of vipers who usually only worked to their own ends.

His eyes alighted on Henry. Perhaps there were some who were pure and good souls, but many were out for what they could achieve and how high they could climb. Nicholas had not met many women who were as open and kind as Miss Crompton.

He watched her walk beside Miss Emily. They were conversing quietly and gently. The rest of the party was more subdued than they had been, many tired from their exertions. Nicholas felt as though his mind was ablaze with questions and thoughts that he couldn't pin down.

As they wound their way back to the house, the snow began to fall gently all about them. Nicholas watched Miss Crompton laugh at something his aunt had said, a pleasant feeling settling in his chest as he saw her so happy.

He followed the stragglers into the house, going up to his room to change for dinner. Hargreaves was again most gratified to see that Nicholas took particular care in his attire for the evening. He had a rather beautiful deep purple waistcoat with a damask overlay of gold. Hargreaves assisted him in putting it on, and Nicholas selected his finest pocket watch to complement it.

He was rather used to seeing himself in the same style day in and day out. Yet, in the last few days, his reflection had changed. He looked more like the man he had once imagined he would become.

He was looking like his father, who he had always had the greatest respect for. The late earl had possessed impeccable taste and decorum, and it had often crossed his mind over the last few years how little his father would have approved of Nicholas's activities.

As he looked at his reflection, Hargreaves brushing down his shoulders as he did so, he looked upon a man quite different from the one who had left Europe. He was softer, somehow, his eyes less guarded, his posture relaxed.

The most marked change was his face, however. He often kept the corners of his lips slightly quirked. He did not wish to appear conceited, but he often found that it put people at ease that way. Now that look was gone, and he was observing a man he had not seen for years.

His time with Miss Crompton had healed something within him. With a dawning sense of apprehension and excitement, he realized that he felt whole again when he had forever believed a part of him to be shattered.

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At dinner, Nicholas found himself seated at the opposite end of the table from Miss Crompton, which was more vexing than it should have been.

He engaged in the usual polite conversation, also missing the company of Miss Emily. She was always lively and amusing in equal measure.

“What was your favourite place that you visited, Lord Bolton?” Lady Wilde asked. She was sat to his left and had barely ceased asking him questions for the entirety of the first course.

“A difficult question, my Lady, but I would say that one of my favourite sojourns was in Rome.”

“Indeed, what was it about that city that captured you so?”

For once, her conversation had not led too heavily to flirtations, and Nicholas was

glad of it. Constantly wearing his mask of charming interest was wearing on him with this woman.

“St Peter’s Basilica is one of the finest buildings I have ever seen. I could have spent many hours beneath its towering ceilings. The place has a reverence about it that was awe-inspiring.”

She tittered in a way that might have been intended as coquettish, but it only annoyed him further.

“I am so envious. My late husband and I travelled far and wide across the continent, but we were unable to visit Rome on our journey. It is my greatest wish to see it. Perhaps you and I might meet there in the future, Lord Bolton.”

Nicholas looked away so as not to engage with her fluttered eyes.

“I hope you will see it one day. It is a place everyone should visit if they have the ability and privilege in which to do so.”

“Alas, a woman travelling alone is not the same as a young man embarking on the Grand Tour, but I shall endeavour to keep my mind open to new possibilities.” Once more, her eye ran over him, and Nicholas found that he could not help shifting in his seat beneath the scrutiny.

How I wish to be seated beside Miss Crompton.

Upon looking at the head of the table, she was engaged in a lively conversation with Henry and Emily about some topic or other. Henry was smiling broadly as he teased Emily about a point she was making, and Miss Crompton’s eyes were warm as she defended her cousin, much to Henry’s mock outrage.

Nicholas felt the sharp sting of jealousy once more and wished he could unravel the many surprising feelings that Miss Crompton prompted within him. He wondered with a jolt of unease whether Henry might have designs upon Miss Crompton. They certainly seemed to get along very well, and Nicholas knew how friendly and affable Henry was as an acquaintance.

He clenched his jaw, stabbing at a potato on his plate with more vigour than he intended. It skipped away across the tablecloth, forcing him to make profuse apologies to Lord Wilde, who looked at the potato as though it were an alien creature. He was already rather far into his cups.

When everyone retired to the drawing room, Nicholas was determined to wrestle Miss Crompton away from his friend and have some time to speak with her again. He longed to talk to her about some new topics based on their conversation on the pond and walked across the room to do so.

Unfortunately, he was waylaid by Lady Bartholemew. She was an old acquaintance of his aunt's and one of the most pompous women he had ever met. He still did not understand why his aunt insisted on inviting her to every occasion they held.

"You will agree with me, Lord Bolton," she said without preamble, standing in his path and gesturing wildly to her friend. Lady Garriton was swaying on her feet and humming to herself. Nicholas rather imagined she had imbibed too much wine.

"I will agree with you on what, Lady Bartholemew?" he asked, tamping down his frustration as he heard Clarissa laughing again on the other side of the room.

He turned to the ladies, aware that he could not afford to be openly rude and simply pass them by—no matter how tempted he was.

"Lady Garriton is quite adamant that a period of mourning should be observed for a

full two years,” she said, sounding scandalized.

Lady Garriton hiccuped before responding. “It shows proper respect if one has lost one’s husband. I was in mourning for two years together when my husband died, and I barely felt it.”

“I believe,” said Lady Bartholemew, “that a full year is sufficient. Lord Bolton you are a good deal earlier in your years. What would you say to the question?”

Nicholas, who had been listening with half an ear as he was observing Miss Crompton, cocked his head to one side to buy time as he attempted to recall what the question was.

“I believe both of your considerations have merit,” he said, aware of Lady Wilde not so far from him. She was watching for his response eagerly and he was nervous that she had only just come out of mourning herself. “It is true that tradition dictates two years to honour the memory of a beloved husband fully. However, the need for companionship and society’s ebullience cannot be overlooked. I believe it is a matter of personal choice; ultimately, the widow must decide what is best for her heart.”

The ladies were all aflutter with his response, but his eyes found Lady Wilde’s again, and he was discomforted by the arched eyebrows and conspiratorial look she threw his way.

His response had pleased her. I would be surprised if she made it through a full year of mourning, he thought bitterly.

He made his way through the room a little further and was waylaid again by Lord Robert Crompton who wished to ask him a trivial matter about his estate.

Nicholas became increasingly restless as Miss Crompton evaded him. He could not

shake off her father's attention without being seen as abominably rude.

Later, as he finally extricated himself from Lord Crompton, his aunt declared that they would be split up into separate tables where games would be played, and once more, he was obliged to be separate from her.

He played three games of Piquette with his aunt, losing in almost all of them as she guffawed with laughter. He was not sad to spend time with her, for she was a formidable and clever woman; however, as he sat at the card table, losing hand after hand, it occurred to him that his feelings for Miss Crompton were perhaps not so much confusing as intense beyond bearing.

He felt like a child who had been denied a piece of cake he desperately wanted. The fact that he could not converse with her was making him very irritable, and if he had been less consumed by it, he would have found his own behavior laughable.

Henry and Miss Emily Crompton joined them for a game, sitting opposite one another as a team and trouncing Nicholas and his aunt so thoroughly that much laughter was had by all.

Nicholas continued to play, trying to keep his expression neutral and not show the inner turmoil boiling within him. He was aware that he was treading a fine line with Miss Crompton and that despite his desire to associate with her, he would have to be mindful of what that association might mean.

His own reputation was blemished in the eyes of society. Certainly, men could brush off much of the scandals surrounding them when they were single and titled, but that did not mean that his interest in Miss Crompton would not lead to further gossip. Gossip that would cause her more pain.

He had his back to her for the entire evening and did not know to whom she was

speaking or whether she was enjoying herself. Henry's nervousness of his increasingly sour mood did not help.

Finally, as the evening drew to a close, everyone rose and prepared to leave the room.

Nicholas could finally watch Clarissa with her parents and cousin as she straightened her gown and prepared to leave. She was at the back of the party, which he was grateful for, and as she drew near, he stepped forward and bowed.

Surprised, she looked up at him, and her cheeks flushed beautifully as she curtsied in return.

"Good night, Miss Crompton," he said as their eyes finally met, and Nicholas felt the same weightiness in the air and drumming of his heart that he had experienced before.

This time, her eyes were wary but happy as she looked at him, and it filled Nicholas with a sense of hope and determination that he had hitherto not allowed himself to feel.

It was over quickly, however, and he watched her leave the room as Henry and Rosemary followed behind.

Nicholas walked to his room some minutes later, listening to the bustle of the house about him. Servants were walking below stairs and there was the odd bang of a door, but otherwise, the house was deadened of the sound of the guests.

He wandered up the wide staircase, once again reveling in the solitude all about him. The window at the top of the stairs was barely illuminated and he watched the flurry of snowflakes falling against the already thick snow on the windowsill. The night outside was quiet, and on the lawn, he saw the shadow of a small animal skitter away



beneath a bush as the moon came out from behind a cloud.

As he entered his bed-chamber, the fire crackling merrily in the grate and the same muffled silence all about him, Nicholas lamented his lack of time with Miss Crompton that evening. Following their time at charades and snapdragon, he had, in a very short time, grown accustomed to her company.

He truly wished her to see the gentleman beneath the rake and for his attentions to be welcomed rather than received with wariness. He was determined, therefore, to spend as much time as he could with her to show her the man he truly was.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Clarissa entered the breakfast room the next morning, her mind still swirling with thoughts of Lord Bolton and their interactions on the ice.

As she sat down to eat, she was joined by her mother, who looked disapprovingly at Clarissa's plate. She had once again piled it high with food. Lady Eleanor's cook was excellent, and Clarissa took full advantage of the delights on offer.

"Things seem to be progressing well with Lord Bolton," her mother said, her voice low so as not to arouse the company about them. Clarissa still felt uneasy as she glanced at her. A knowing glint in her eye made Clarissa's chest tighten.

Before she was forced to defend herself, however, Emily and Rosemary entered the room and came to sit beside her. They were followed by Lord Bolton, who settled himself at the other end of the table. He nodded in her direction with a friendly smile as she glanced at him, and she felt a shiver run up her spine as his eyes darkened.

Mindful of her mother, Clarissa returned to her breakfast and was relieved when Lady Eleanor told them that the activity for the day was to be a treasure hunt.

Clarissa's heart leaped as they were told that everyone in the party would be split into pairs and made to look for clues throughout the day. Despite her fears, she knew in her deepest desires she wished to be placed with Lord Bolton. No matter the impropriety and dangers of associating with a known rake, she enjoyed his company so undeniably that she could not imagine a better partner for the game.

Eleanor placed a hat on the table that appeared to have the names of everyone present inside it. As she drew out each name, there were cries of excitement from all.

Everyone appeared very diverted by the idea of a treasure hunt, and since it was such a grand and beautiful estate, they could not fail to have many places in which to search.

When Clarissa's name was called, she realized she was holding her knife and fork exceedingly hard as she waited with bated breath to see with whom she would be partnered.

“And Miss Crompton will be playing with... Lord Bolton by her side!” Lady Eleanor announced, although there was a look exchanged between her and her nephew, which Clarissa could not decipher.

She looked across at him, astonished by the intensity of his gaze as he saluted her with his teacup. It was a delicate china thing with small pink flowers all about the edge and a gold rim. It looked quite ridiculous in his large, male hand, and she found a smile spread over her face as she watched him raise his little finger in exaggerated superiority. It was clear that he was jesting about them being the superior team, and she hid a smile.

For her part, Clarissa was unsure whether to be excited or terrified at the prospect of spending all day with him.

After breakfast, everyone gathered to receive their first clue, and Clarissa's heart was aflutter and her stomach wild with nerves as she approached Lord Bolton. His eyes were twinkling with excitement, and he greeted her with a warm smile.

She held out the clue, shuddering a little as he took it, and their hands brushed against one another. Lord Bolton's eyes flicked back to hers, and she saw him draw in a deep breath before he opened the paper in his hand. His eyes briefly scanned the words, and he lowered it so that she could read it, too.

They read it together, their heads bowed intimately as they tried to decipher where it might lead them. Lord Bolton's spicy scent surrounded her as she tried to breathe shallowly. It was a faint scent of oranges from his pomade and of pine, woodland, and everything she loved about England.

Before she could be swept away by her wild imaginings again, she focused on the clue, which was brief and in the form of a riddle.

I have a spine but no bones.

Where today comes before yesterday.

They looked at one another, and she could see from his eyes that they shared the same idea. With a conspiratorial smile, they set off. They were mindful that they were competing against the other teams and hung back to avoid being seen by Emily and Rosemary, who were walking swiftly through the hallway.

Lord Bolton had instinctively put a hand on Clarissa's arm to stay her, and she felt a thrill at the unconscious contact. Once Emily and Rosemary were out of sight, they walked quickly across the hallway, keeping their eyes wide for any other teams. Lord Bolton swiftly opened the library door, and they slipped inside.

It was a magnificent room, and as he closed the door, she took a little time to scan through the shelves, wishing she had known of it sooner. She imagined if she got up early, she could start a new book before anyone else was awake.

Lord Bolton's eyes were sparkling as he closed the door. Annie, Clarissa's maid, was with them, always in close quarters to ensure no impropriety could take place. As she entered the room, Clarissa was reminded of her position immediately. She was finding it increasingly difficult to keep good sense in her head when Lord Bolton was nearby.

“We are of the same mind, it would seem?” Lord Bolton enquired, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Indeed, do you think any other pairs have found this clue yet?”

“I do not know, but my aunt told me the clues differ between some teams to make the game more challenging.” He grinned.

Her heart thumped wildly in her chest at the sight of it. She recognized that Lord Bolton’s smile was different in society. It was charming but not genuine. The grin he aimed at her now was wide and unfettered by societal pressures. She had never seen it before, and for it to be revealed when they were alone made something like joy bloom in her chest.

“A spine but no bones,” he said triumphantly, sweeping his hand about the room before them. “A book, one can only surmise.”

“Indeed, but we do not know which book,” Clarissa replied, already enjoying the game, uncertain whether it was the challenge or her partner that was making her feel so alive.

“What was the second part of the clue?” Lord Bolton asked, taking it out of his pocket as they looked it over.

“Where today comes before yesterday...” Clarissa mused, biting her lip as she thought through the options. “Perhaps something to do with history?”

“Or could it be an old newspaper? I know my aunt is privy to reading them in the mornings within this very room.”

“I’ve got it!” Clarissa said, forgetting herself as she clapped her hands and raised her

voice above a whisper.

Lord Bolton did not seem to mind her outburst. He laughed excitedly as Clarissa walked across the room to the collection of uniform green spines on one of the shelves.

Lord Bolton followed eagerly and then chuckled. “Of course! A dictionary. How clever you are to think of it.”

Clarissa opened the dictionary to the required page but found nothing inside. They checked ‘today’ and ‘yesterday,’ but nothing else was forthcoming.

“Aha, these are out of order,” Lord Bolton cried, and his long fingers skipped along the tops of each volume. He was correct. Volume three was misplaced after volume five.

As he pulled it out, the next clue fell to the floor between them. Caught up in the game, both leaned down instantly to retrieve it, and their hands clasped the note together.

Clarissa gasped, returning to her feet and blushing furiously as Lord Bolton did the same. He was rather more composed, and she was mortified by her easy blushes. He was all gentlemanly politeness as he handed her the note. As Clarissa took it, she could feel his eyes boring into her.

“You read it,” he said, his voice a little lower than it had been.

Your uncle’s brother is your father, but what is your relationship with your uncle’s sister-in-law?

Clarissa read it aloud. Once she finished, she looked up at him to find him already

watching her. For a charged moment, their eyes locked. Neither of them looked away, even as they contemplated the answer. It was a complex puzzle, as one had to single out the father to discover the true nature of the final relationship.

They both hit upon it simultaneously, and Clarissa's eyes widened as they said it together.

“The mother!”

Nicholas clicked his fingers and looked up to the library's second floor.

“Lady Edith's portrait,” he said. He sounded like a schoolboy who had discovered a sweet shop. “This way!”

In an instant, Clarissa found herself running after him to the base of the beautiful spiral staircase in the library. They climbed to the balcony, which was stacked with yet more books. At the end of the staircase was an ornate oil painting of an elderly woman who looked very like Lady Eleanor.

“This is Lady Eleanor's mother; it can only reference her. It could not be a mother of one of the players, for anyone could have found the clue.”

“You are right; she was a very stern-looking woman. Did you ever meet her?”

“Only once. When I was a boy, she found me trampling all over the flowerbeds and clapped me about the ear for ruining her roses. I did not go back into the garden for six months.”

Clarissa could not help but laugh. As she did so, it occurred to her that she had not laughed or smiled so much in many months.

Lord Bolton's answering laugh and enthusiastic grin were all the more welcome. Clarissa felt her chest flutter as twin feelings warred within her. Annie stood behind them like the shadow of her lost reputation, and Clarissa was dismayed at how her feelings had changed. The day before, her solemn resolution had been to remain as stoic and reserved as possible. The idea of doing so now caused her some pain.

She greatly enjoyed Lord Bolton's company, and it was becoming clear to her that in the short time of their acquaintance, he was one of the most amiable men she had ever met.

Is this what he was like with the women in Paris...with the widow that he entertained? Am I simply another pawn in a larger game?

Lord Bolton frowned at her as she felt the smile fade.

"Is all well?"

"Yes, quite well," she said, rallying quickly. "I merely wish to ensure we win the game. Do you know of the prize?"

"I do not, but my aunt has a reputation for much opulence on such occasions. I have great hopes for us winning; we make a good pairing."

Clarissa felt her cheeks burn and turned to the portrait, trying her best not to think of how pleasing it would be to be paired with Nicholas for more than just a trivial treasure hunt.

"Where might the next clue be hidden?" she asked.

"Try beneath the frame."



And sure enough, as she ran her fingers along the edge of the frame, she came upon a small piece of paper wrapped in red and green ribbon.

I have many cupboards but no clothes, I can get hot but have no sun, I'm full of dishes, but I'm not a cupboard, What am I?

They quickly ascertained that they would find the next clue in the kitchen. Clarissa walked behind Lord Bolton, her mind running over the words he had used. They were a good pairing. It was an alarming thing to recognize, but there was no denying it. She had not felt this easy or content around anyone since Catherine had left. It was as though a kinship between them had existed even before they met.

She could only describe the feeling as two puzzle pieces coming together. You looked at the piece in your hand and the space it might occupy, but the picture only became clear when they were placed together.

The kitchen led them to three more rooms in the house, each clue becoming more complex as they continued. Clarissa could hear great shrieks of laughter and joy from the rest of the house as the pairs encountered one another.

There was a healthy level of competition between them all, but she and Nicholas were neck and neck with Lady Wilde and Lord Addison.

Lord Bolton and Lord Addison had a hilarious turn of phrase whenever they met. Clarissa was rather scandalized by the rude way in which they poked at one another, but the depth of their friendship was obvious. Lady Wilde attempted to join in their banter, but most of her contributions fell short of the acidic way the men talked.

By the time they reached the final clue, even Clarissa was keen to win. Lord Bolton's enthusiasm had never waned, and she had enjoyed the privilege of his company for a good hour and a half. They had discussed the arts and literature, and they had learned

that they both had a love of poetry.

Lord Bolton had seen many plays in Europe during his time there, and Clarissa was delighted to find that he adored Shakespeare almost as much as she did.

By the time they reached the final clue, their friendly discussion had never faltered, and Clarissa was dismayed and happy in equal measure at the connection she felt growing between them. It was becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile the rake of her imaginings with the man she saw before her.

She wondered how Catherine's attachment had started, how the spark had sprung between them. Perhaps her sister had been as guarded as Clarissa felt but simply could not hold back from the need that pulsed within her.

As they walked through the house, it was as though the eyes of the many portraits they passed were upon her, the whisperings of society rising to a crescendo as they watched her resolve falter.

Her guard was slipping. She was teetering on the edge of a dangerous precipice.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas was in his element. Spending all these hours with Clarissa was wonderful. No one was there to interrupt them, so he could bask in her full attention and loved every minute of it.

By the afternoon, he was more captivated by Miss Crompton with each passing moment. Her intelligence shone through at every point of the day.

It was not just the clues she had solved so masterfully, but her quick wit had him laughing more than once. She had often found him amusing and particularly enjoyed his teasing of Henry.

As always, Henry had risen to the occasion and was outrageous with his insults. He knew better than to direct any at the ladies, and Nicholas had born them happily, particularly when Miss Crompton had found them so funny.

He was unsure what he made of Henry being paired with Lady Wilde. After a time, it seemed a contrivance that they should cross paths quite so regularly. Nicholas was becoming increasingly irritated with the lady, and he knew that he needed to school his features for her not to take offense.

Miss Crompton may have been happy to be in his company, but she was guarded and careful in everything she did. The maid that followed them throughout the afternoon was a boon and a curse. Nicholas longed to be alone with her, for when they interacted, a look of uncertainty or sadness always followed her smiles.

The penultimate clue of the day took them into the snow-covered gardens. Since he had looked out of the window only a few hours before, all the paths had been cleared.

He was sorry for it. The lawns were decidedly less beautiful with the cobblestones dotted about. He much preferred the thick blanket of white that covered everything beneath it. If only there were such a thing for his own reputation. If only he could remove it from the world.

What has it cost me? And what do I have to show for it? Nothing at all except some stolen memories of those I can barely recall.

“What flows without end, yet aims for the sky?” Clarissa was saying, striking out across the lawn and reading the clue again as she seemed to alight on an idea.

“Perhaps one of these glorious fir trees?” Nicholas attempted, but she shook her head.

“It flows,” she said, looking back at him with a grin. “I believe we are looking for a fountain.”

“Aha! Well then, I have an advantage, for I know just where it is.”

“Lead the way,” she said happily, and he barked out a laugh as he led them beneath the high arch of the privet hedge at the garden's border and through to a small square. In the center was a black fountain. It had once been pale Yorkshire stone, but the edges of it were now darkened, with time and age behind them.

The way was rather uneven, and Nicholas offered his arm to Clarissa for support. As her hand rested against him, he could not prevent the shiver of need that ran through him to have her so close.

The gardens around them were silent, and their breath bloomed in great clouds as they made their way forward. It was exceedingly cold, and the snow was beginning to frost, creating a pleasing crunch every time they took a step.

As they reached the fountain, both exclaimed in astonishment to see the final clue beneath the ice that had formed around the pool.

Nicholas caught a stone from the floor and began gently chipping away at the surface as Clarissa watched. He looked back at her to ensure she was in favor of his methods. As he did so, the sun emerged from behind a cloud, setting the pins in Miss Crompton's hair alight with sparkling beauty. Her dark brown eyes were excited as she gazed at their final clue, her lips slightly parted.

Nicholas could barely catch a full breath before he turned back to his task, his hands shaking a little as he finally broke through the layer of ice. He was finally able to retrieve the final piece of the puzzle.

He fished it out finding that it was a small wooden box and inside it was a folded-up piece of paper that was quite dry.

It is my property and belongs to me, but others use it more often.

They both puzzled over it for some time. Miss Crompton's brow furrowed as she looked this way and that. It was as though she felt the gardens around them might answer for them.

"Something that belongs to you, perhaps?"

"There must be more than one team who will find this, though," he said in puzzlement. "Although I am gratified that we are the first here for our side, for no one else had broken the ice."

Just as he said so, Lady Wilde and Henry appeared, and it was clear they were the final players for their game.

Nicholas hastily withdrew, not wishing to attract any more attention from Lady Wilde. They walked back to the house, still pondering the riddle.

“If Lord Addison is to find the same clue, then it must pertain to both of you,” Clarissa said thoughtfully.

Nicholas shook his head. “I cannot think what might do that unless it is stubbornness.”

She laughed prettily, and he felt an overwhelming yearning to hold her hand again, but she was surefooted across the flat grass, and there was no occasion to offer.

“What about something on your person!” she said suddenly, turning to him and looking over him in a way that quickened his heart.

“About my person?” he asked. “Whatever do you—”

But even as he said it, he recalled his aunt coming to his room that morning and gifting him with a handkerchief for his pocket. She had told him it was a gift she had been meaning to give him for some time, and she had embroidered his initials on it.

“It is my property, and it belongs to me, but others use it more often,” he said. “My God, she is a wicked woman—my name. The clue is my name. Others use it more often than I do, but it is mine. She gave me this today, and I did not even think.” He said, his fingers moving to his pocket. He pulled the square of fabric out, and as he did so, a key, neatly folded within it, tumbled forth and spiraled onto the snowy earth beneath them.

Miss Crompton cried out in triumph. Nicholas saw a piece of paper flutter out also, and she caught it gamely as they both read the final clue.

Your prize awaits if you are fast enough to reach it.

It is where I am.

“Drawing room,” Nicholas cried just as he heard an answering shout from the small garden they had just left. With great speed, Miss Crompton suddenly started running across the lawn with a high-pitched squeal of laughter. He wished he could bottle the sound to listen to it over and over again.

They ran together, breath coming hard, the freezing wind biting at them as they ran at full speed back to the house ahead of Lady Wilde and Henry, who were hard on their heels.

They sprinted inside, just as they saw the other teams, still in the middle of their hunt, watching them with expressions of disappointment.

Nicholas, who was rather taller than his companion, burst into the drawing room to find his aunt standing in the center of the room with a huge smile on her face. She clapped her hands triumphantly as Nicholas ran forward and presented her with the key.

They were both panting as Henry thundered into the room behind them.

“What nonsense!” he exclaimed in feigned indignation. “They have most egregiously deceived us!”

Nicholas turned to him and laughed heartily as his aunt placed the key into a small lock in a chest beside her. Inside was a beautiful book of antique poetry that he knew she had owned for many years.

Lady Eleanor handed the prize to Nicholas, who instantly gave it to Miss Crompton,

and their eyes met with happy glee. It was all the more perfect that they had spoken of their mutual love for poetry on this very hunt.

It was as though the prize had been designed for them, and Nicholas felt intense gratitude that he had been lucky enough to return to England at just the right time.

He looked at Clarissa as she opened the volume, her eyes bright and happy.

At that moment, Nicholas recognized that the true prize he had discovered that day was not the book but his deeper understanding of the lady holding it.

As the treasure hunt ended, his aunt rang the bell for everyone to gather.

As the group emerged from their various places within the house, there was much good-natured grumbling about the quiz master's nephew having won.

However, when they discovered the ingenuity of Eleanor's game, everyone quite forgot it. She had managed to plant something on every person present, and there was much joy and excitement as everyone found the clues on their clothing.

Miss Crompton found a note inside her handkerchief. They were all fluttering with excitement, and Nicholas was glad to watch his aunt bask in the praise from everyone present.

And well she might he thought happily, that is the best game I have played in my life.

Soon, the wearied group were all seated around the crackling hearth in the drawing room. The sky was streaked scarlet behind them as the sun set, and despite the cold snap, everyone was warm and cozy. As they sat before the fire, cocoa was brought out, and everyone was furnished with a steaming cup of it.



Nicholas sat a little apart from the others. Many of the ladies in the group complained of feeling the chill, so he sat aside from the fire. It was a good opportunity to watch everyone without being seen. His gaze invariably fell on Miss Crompton.

Her eyes were sparkling as she recounted the final revelation to Rosemary, who was excitedly bouncing on her seat.

By the time Clarissa had reached halfway through the story, the entire room was enraptured by her tale. She was a magnificent storyteller, knowing exactly when to raise suspense and when to dash it to pieces.

He sipped his cocoa, watching her eyes sparkle as she recounted their mad dash back to the house. As he watched her, something shifted in his mind.

When he had first met Miss Crompton, he had seen a charming woman of whose acquaintance he very much wished to be included. Yet now, with the play of the firelight across her face and her enraptured audience, she was suddenly something else entirely.

His feelings had grown beyond anything he had experienced before. He had supposed himself besotted with Victoria, but he recognized now that his feelings for her had been nothing in comparison. When he looked at Miss Crompton, his body yearned for her in a way that astonished him. He found himself wanting her opinion on anything no matter the topic.

He considered himself privileged beyond bearing that she would entertain him, see past his reputation, and see the man beneath.

He had never believed that he would pursue a lady again. The idea of it still terrified him. He had, until today, been happy with being a bachelor. He had not considered taking a wife or falling in love for many years—if at all.

Yet there she sits—the paragon of everything I want in life.

She had settled before him like a perfect snowflake, and he had looked up to find the world a wonderland of possibility.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Clarissa watched Annie fuss with the beads on her gown as she straightened the fabric. She had rediscovered an older charcoal dress with an ochre underlay. It was a very attractive creation, and she felt it complimented her skin tone well.

The beading across the bodice was very fine. She remembered collecting it at the seamstress with Catherine. It had been three weeks before her leaving with Mr Harrison. Now that she considered her sister's demeanour at the time, on reflection, her activities had been strange.

She had insisted on using her allowance to buy Clarissa this additional gown, telling her how well she looked in it. Catherine herself had chosen the pattern and the colour of the fabric. As Clarissa regarded herself, she missed her sister terribly. What might Catherine say of Lord Bolton? Would she approve?

She would undoubtedly tell Clarissa to follow her heart, just as she had done. Yet what does my heart want?

She had watched many an attraction form across a crowded room. She had listened to endless gossip about marriages or affection between those in her circle. She had always imagined both parties were utterly certain of their feelings. And yet, when it came to her own heart, she was not sure at all.

She had locked away her inner emotions for so long and could not unleash them all at once. She had barely cried for three years, never allowing any emotions to overwhelm her. The thought of letting someone so close again and allowing herself to feel was a worrying prospect.

She had not realised until she met Lord Bolton, just how closed off she had felt since Catherine's departure. Her mother had often said she looked 'cold' at the edges of a room and would deride her for her serious expression. Clarissa had always felt her mother rather cruel for saying such things. But perhaps Lady Crompton had a point.

"How would you like your hair today, Miss Crompton?" Annie asked, holding the hairpins in one hand as she ran her fingers through Clarissa's hair.

"What do you think, Annie?" she asked. Her maid loved to choose how to style it.

Annie smiled. "Perhaps a ribbon today? I have a lovely orange bow that would complement your gown."

"I am in your hands; thank you, Annie."

The maid set to work, getting out her box of ribbons and shuffling through them until she landed on the colour she wanted.

The ribbons reminded Clarissa of the kissing boughs she and the other ladies had made earlier in the week. She wondered where hers might be hung. As she considered it, another thought came to mind.

She imagined standing beneath it, looking up at her creation, and being joined by Lord Bolton. Perhaps they would both observe the mistletoe, a silence forming between them.

Clarissa's hands tightened in her lap.

Perhaps he might turn back to her, those emerald eyes fixing upon hers in that mesmerizing way. They would step closer to one another, their bodies only inches from touching, and he might lower his head, their lips moving toward one another in

a most illicit kiss—

“Are you well, Miss Crompton? You are very flushed.”

Clarissa cleared her throat. “I am a little warm from the fire, that is all.”

She went to breakfast shortly after, aware that she looked very well. Annie rarely took such care over her hair, and the dress was not her usual beige or white muslin. She felt, as she walked into the room, very grand indeed. She even complimented herself that she rivalled Lady Wilde’s elegance.

As she sat down, Lady Eleanor announced that today they would be hanging the kissing boughs about the house. Clarissa’s eyes were drawn to Lord Bolton, who was sat at the other end of the table. He had his coffee cup in his hand and looked at her over the rim. His eyes were just as warm and inviting as they had been the day before.

Clarissa felt her cheeks flame and looked hurriedly away. She wished she could control her reactions around him. He must be able to tell the effect he has on me, she thought with concern. The images she had conjured that morning returned, flooding her mind with Lord Bolton’s lips, his intense gaze, and divine scent.

She piled her plate high with toast, adding another slice as her mother looked at her disapprovingly. She was determined to distract herself by any means necessary.

“Clary?”

Clarissa looked at Emily, who sat beside her. The young girl was moving the egg around her plate forlornly.

“What is it, Emily?” Clarissa asked with concern.

“Do not let Lady Eleanor hang mine,” Emily whispered. Clarissa’s heart clenched at the sorrow in her eyes.

“Whyever not? Your bough was very pretty.”

“No. I am not good at making them. I do not think it would stand up against the others. What if everyone says how good they all are except for mine?”

At times like this, Clarissa was reminded that Emily had lived a very sheltered life. Emily’s father had doted on her, and his death had hit her hard. She wondered if her cousin had ever had anyone tell her she was talented since then. Her mother tended to overindulge Emily but then criticized everything she did in the same breath.

“My dear, Emily, that is not true,” she said softly. “But if you are very unhappy with it let us resolve to fix it together. I think your bough is beautiful, and I would be honoured to have it beside my own.”

Emily’s expression improved a little. She seemed younger than her eighteen years, and Clarissa squeezed her arm reassuringly.

“Shall we go early and find it? We can see what can be done.”

“But you have not had breakfast!”

“I am not hungry today,” Clarissa lied, “I do not like to see you so downcast.”

Emily smiled as they both rose and made their way into the drawing room. All the boughs had been beautifully laid out in a line on the table.

Although Clarissa had been complimentary of Emily’s, she was correct that it did look rather scruffy beside the others. Emily was in the act of hiding it behind the

settee when Clarissa laughed and told her to come over to the table where the remainder of the foliage had been left.

Before the other ladies arrived, they endeavoured to improve it. Clarissa added a beautiful tartan bow to the bottom, and they wound some purple ivy around the edges, which sorted out the unevenness of the holly.

By the time the other ladies came into the room, Emily was beaming again. Clarissa was of a mind that she should always be smiling. She was the happiest creature she had ever known.

Lord Addison approached them, complimenting them both on their boughs. Clarissa smiled as he admired them, but Emily blushed furiously as he raised hers up to look at it.

“I believe this is my favourite, though,” he said with a grin.

“It is the most untidy,” Emily said quietly.

“Is it? Well, I do not care for neat then,” he said cheerfully and handed it back. He then went to assist Lady Garriton who had somehow managed to attach her bough about her person accidentally.

Clarissa lifted her own bough as the other ladies did. She was pleased with it and tweaked the silver ribbon tied at the base. The holly and mistletoe were rather tidier than the others. She certainly had the neatest, if not the most extravagant, bough.

The party broke up as the ladies walked about the house under Lady Eleanor’s direction as she pointed out some suitable spots.

Just as Eleanor had promised, Lady Wilde’s was hung above the clock in the hall,

directly opposite the front door. It would be seen by anyone who entered the house, and Lady Wilde was evidently very pleased with the arrangement.

Clarissa followed her mother and Rosemary to a small archway at the edge of the entrance hall. Lord Bolton was behind her, speaking to Lady Bartholemew, who was entreating him to help her hang her bough.

The kiss she had pictured had her skin alight as she looked at him. She had never entertained such thoughts with Warrington. She had never entertained them with any man. Was this why he was known as a rake? Once you were in his sphere of influence, it was almost impossible to pull yourself out of it.

Lady Eleanor approached her with a small stepladder.

“Your bough will look lovely in the centre,” she said to Clarissa. Lady Crompton seemed affronted that Lady Eleanor had not chosen her own and walked away with Rosemary in her wake.

“Thank you, my lady,” Clarissa said as she settled the steps and prepared to climb them. Lady Eleanor was distracted by Lady Wilde asking her whether her bough was central. Clarissa climbed the steps alone.

There was a small hook from a previous year in the centre of the arch, and she was able to hang her bough there. Being rather small, however, she found she had to reach up to hook it over it, and as she did so, she lost her balance.

For a heart-stopping moment, she felt her foot move from under her and, with a small cry of alarm, toppled sideways.

She was seconds from colliding violently with the floor when a strong arm encircled her waist, large hands holding her steady, as Lord Bolton suddenly stood beside her.



He lowered her gently to the floor. Lady Bartholemew was all aflutter behind him, fussing over Clarissa and ensuring she was well.

Clarissa could not look anywhere but at Lord Bolton. His hands were still around her waist, sure and warm, and his eyes never left hers. They stared at each other as the room about them disappeared, and the bustle and chatter of the other women faded.

Clarissa could have stood there with him forever, basking in the heat of his body and the safety she felt in his arms. But after what could only have been a few seconds, he ensured she was balanced and then stepped away.

“Upon my word, Miss Crompton, are you well?” Lady Wilde glided effortlessly toward them, her hand brushing against Lord Bolton’s elbow as she did so. “My goodness, you could have hurt yourself badly!”

Lady Wilde looked up at Lord Bolton, who was observing her with an expression of concern. Clarissa could not tell if he was concerned for her or at Lady Wilde’s words.

“Miss Crompton, are you alright?” Lady Eleanor asked, hurrying forward.

“Yes, I am alright,” Clarissa said, giving a small laugh. I overbalanced. Your nephew has righted me, however. I thank you, Lord Bolton.”

Lord Bolton said nothing as Clarissa was engulfed by well-wishers and concerned party members. When she looked again, he was gone.

Clarissa spent much of the day with Emily and Rosemary as the day progressed. She enjoyed her old friend’s company, and they discussed many days from her youth. Rosemary remembered Catherine, and although she did not explicitly open the topic, there were some gentle references to ‘your sister,’ which Clarissa was grateful for.

The ladies moved about the house under Eleanor's instruction, putting up more Christmas decorations and lighting some of the candles. The house was positively bursting with Christmas cheer, and Clarissa felt the joys of the season more acutely than ever.

This was by far the happiest Christmas she could remember.

Lord Bolton was always at the edges of her vision throughout the day. She wondered if he might speak to her, but he was taken up with Lady Bartholemew and Lady Garriton's constant requests. Clarissa had the opportunity to observe him often, his smiling eyes and laughter always close by.

His friendship with Lord Addison was obvious; they were more like brothers than friends. Clarissa was also beginning to notice Lord Addison's attentions to Emily. It was a gentle thing, but his eyes rarely left Emily when her cousin was in the room.

She had noticed that Lord Addison favoured Emily's company above anyone else. They were often speaking together or partnered together. Indeed, they had skated on the pond for some time as a pair.

Clarissa would never indulge in gossip. She hated how much of it she had had to endure herself. However, she could not help watching Emily with interest whenever Lord Addison was in the room. It reminded her, rather ashamedly, of how she was with Lord Bolton. Emily never let her eyes linger too long but always sought him out.

As the evening drew near, everyone admired the newly hung decorations. The house was beautiful and smelled of pine wherever you walked. There was a multitude of foliage around every door and the boughs looked very pretty dotted amongst them.

As she stood beside the window, Clarissa was surprised to feel a presence at her back. She turned and felt her palms clench as she saw Lord Bolton approaching.

He came to stand beside her as they looked out of the window at the white world before them.

“I wished to compliment you, Miss Crompton, on your kissing bough.”

The word kissing from Lord Bolton’s mouth gave her a pleasant thrill.

“Thank you,” she said. “It is not the finest of the bunch. Lady Wilde has done an excellent job.”

He looked at her quizzically, and she wished she could ask him outright if he desired her. Lady Wilde was a far easier option than herself and far more moneyed than she. An unpleasant thought occurred to her. Perhaps Lord Bolton was showing her attention to make Lady Wilde jealous. She had heard of men and women of her acquaintance employing such tactics. She hoped it was not true.

She met his warm gaze with a smile of her own. His face was shadowed in the dim light from the window and the sharp angles of his jaw and cheekbones were highlighted. He looked startlingly handsome and more serious than she was used to seeing him.

“Did you not wish to make a bough yourself?” she asked.

“Indeed not; I should be very loathe to take the attention away from the creativity of the ladies. My talents do not lie in making things. I am far better with a good book or a deck of cards than I am at beauty.”

His eyes lingered on her face for some moments after that, and Clarissa was not entirely certain he was still speaking of the beauty of the boughs.

“Lord Bolton,” her mother said as she came up behind them. “The house is looking

most festive, is it not? Your aunt has outdone herself again, it seems.”

Lord Bolton turned politely to her mother and nodded. “She has always loved this season, and it is evident in the love and care she shows to the house. Where is your own bough, my lady?”

“Ah, just above the top step of the stairway. You shall see it when you ascend. I was very pleased with it, although I think I used too much ivy. I have never liked that plant. And what did you think of my daughter’s efforts?”

Her mother’s eyes flicked to Clarissa; their meaning obvious. It was humiliating to watch so evident a display.

“Very beautiful indeed; I have always favoured silver in decorations of that nature. It has been placed at the optimum area of the house.”

“She has always been a very creative girl,” her mother continued, as though Clarissa were not standing beside her.

Clarissa could not bear to watch such a display. She longed to remain in Lord Bolton’s affable company but did not wish to watch her mother disgrace herself. Lady Crompton was desperate to regain her social standing, and Lord Bolton would be her ticket toward such a conclusion.

Clarissa was mortified at her mother’s blatant cajoling as she continued to list her abilities. Her mother had never complimented her daughter so much in the space of only a few minutes. Clarissa could feel herself shutting down as she watched them. She hated everything to do with this blatant persuasion, and she could only hope Lord Bolton could overlook it.

Her palms were sweating, her jaw tense as her mother continued without pausing for

breath.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas was acutely aware of Clarissa's silence. Her face was a picture of conflict as she listened to her mother. Nicholas did not like to see the concern and pain that chased one another across her countenance as she twisted her hands before her in indignation.

Her mother was still speaking, but Nicholas had ceased listening some time ago. As he was about to speak directly to Miss Crompton to attempt to pull her out of her melancholy, he saw his aunt approaching.

"I would speak with you about our next activity, Miss Crompton," Eleanor said, offering her arm. Clarissa took it without question. As the two women moved away, his aunt gave Nicholas a stern look.

His stomach dropped as he thought of all she had told him about his intentions. She believed him to lack honour with Clarissa. And is she not correct? He thought. I have no intention of staying in England for any great length of time. This is foolish.

Then why am I unable to stay away from her?

Seeing Lord and Lady Wilde approaching as though to speak with him, Nicholas quickly slipped out of a rear door.

He stood in the corridor, trying to gather his thoughts, his mind a whirlwind of confusion and guilt. He quickly walked to the library to be in a silent space with his thoughts.

As he closed the door, the hubbub of the voices in the living room faded from

hearing, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He walked to the window, and the action of walking felt so useful that he turned back around and walked to the door. After a little while, he was pacing agitatedly between the shelves, walking up and down, lost in thought.

Is my aunt correct? Should I stop spending any significant time with Miss Crompton?

He knew that it would be the best course of action, but somehow, his mind would not agree to it. He could not get her out of his head. When she had entered the breakfast room that morning, he had never seen her look so beautiful. Her kindness to her cousin only confirmed her sweet nature, and he had been entranced as he had watched her walk about the house. She had complimented everyone and been the picture of kindness.

When she had fallen from the steps, he had been at her side almost instantaneously. In truth, he had been watching her for some time. When her foot had slipped, his heart nearly stopped in his chest. When he'd held her in his arms, it beat so incessantly that he was certain the whole company would be able to hear it.

She had looked at him in a way that had stirred hope in his heart. She did not appear as indifferent as she had seemed. It had felt as though something was shared between them at that moment that could not be taken back.

As he walked about the library in great agitation, the door opened to reveal Henry, who entered with purpose. He had clearly seen Nicholas come into the library alone.

“Whatever is the matter, old chap? You look positively wild.”

Nicholas did not reply, running a hand through his hair, at a loss as to what to say.

“Whatever is it?” Henry asked, although he gave him a knowing stare. “You have been rather distracted today. Or at least, when Miss Crompton was not in the room, you were rather attentive. Your attention seemed to shift rapidly the moment she arrived.” He grinned, but the smile faded quickly as he took in Nicholas’s expression.

Henry came toward him with concern as he looked over his face.

“What is it, Bolton?”

Nicholas opened his mouth to deny it. He usually would have made light of the situation, brushed it aside, and carried on, but he could not do it. Henry’s understanding gaze was penetrating, and he sighed, shaking his head.

“She is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen,” he confessed. Henry’s eyebrows raised in obvious surprise but then he smiled broadly and clapped him on the shoulder.

“That is excellent, my friend. Surely this is to be celebrated?”

Nicholas shook his head vigorously and resumed pacing.

“You know of my reputation, Henry. You, better than anyone. Indeed, you spent some time with me in Paris, and we had... well, it was an enjoyable month.”

Henry chuckled. “It was, but I have always known the reason for it. That hideous woman undid you for the longest time. I very much hope Victoria Maddox, as she is now, is utterly miserable in her Highland castle.”

Nicholas gave him a warning glare as he passed him, his feet unable to remain still.

“I wish I had never met her. I wish that I had had more sense, but I was a young man



and believed my heart to be broken.”

“Was it not?”

“I did not feel for Victoria what I do for Miss Crompton. That is all I can attest to at the moment.”

Henry kept smiling, but his eyes were confused. “My dear Bolton, this is a good thing.”

“How so?” Nicholas cried. “Why would a woman like Miss Crompton look at me? She must know that every good woman in society sees me for the rake I am.”

“The rake you were,” Henry insisted. “You are not like that any longer.”

“I would have been,” Nicholas said guiltily. “I anticipated returning to Paris to meet with many women I had known there. It was my primary target when I came back. I wanted to go to Italy and continue as before. I have not been so very bad as some have said, but I am hardly proud of myself.”

Henry scowled and came forward, taking hold of his shoulders.

“Nicholas,” he said firmly, “you are one of the best men I know. You have guarded your heart, and you have always been honest with any lady you have been involved with. That is far better than many others I know.”

“Precisely,” said Nicholas, shaking him off. “I am the better portion of a very long list of men who I am sure Clarissa Crompton would avoid at all costs.”

“Well then, if you do like her as you say. What will you do?”

Nicholas stopped, turning to his friend in consternation. Henry shrugged.

“If you enjoy her company, and you see a future with her of any kind, how will you convince her that you are a changed man? No matter what you say about your plans for the continent I have believed you to have changed. You are not the witless man with a slighted heart who went to France to find a distraction. You have grown up since then and are becoming the earl your father expected you to be.”

“You are too generous.”

“I am not. You are my best friend. I would not lie to you. Perhaps you have done some things you are not proud of. So have I, as have many. Miss Crompton is a sensible woman. She shall perceive that your character has ample merits to commend it, without perpetually dwelling upon your former transgressions.”

Nicholas rubbed a hand over his forehead. “Perhaps. I do not know. I detest the idea that she might wish to avoid me for things I can no longer change. But I can understand it, too.”

“I will not lie to you. There will be challenges. The Cromptons have been through a great deal of gossip and conjecture these past few years. True, their name is rarely mentioned now, but there was a time when I could not enter a ballroom in London without hearing it.”

“No woman who has been through so much would wish to form an attachment for someone like me.”

“An earl?”

“A rake, Henry, stop being so obtuse.”

“You cannot live by your past actions forever. Convince her. And by all means, if she is the reason for your happiness these last two weeks, do so quickly. I wish to see you settled if that is what you desire.”

“I do not know what I desire. I just cannot bear her thinking ill of me.”

Henry placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I believe then, my dear Nicholas, that you know very well what it is you want.”

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“I have never found anything particularly enjoyable about fishing,” Lord Crompton said as he belched under his breath, taking another glass of port.

Nicholas was nodding and listening politely but had Miss Crompton in his peripheral vision. She was sitting with Rosemary, looking stunning in the candlelight. The earlier clouds had left her face, and she was all jovial happiness in the company. Over the last few days, she had come out of her shell, and in this kind of situation, she was all affable grace and propriety.

“Have you a stream here?” Lord Crompton asked.

“No, but my estate in Hertfordshire has a trout stream, my Lord.”

“Do you enjoy it often?”

“I confess, I am not a good fisherman, but my cousin, Lord James Bolton, has often brought his family to stay with me. He has caught many trout from it.”

“How large is your estate?” asked Lord Crompton. It could have been a casual question if his wife’s eyes had not lit up at the potential answer.

“It is over fifteen thousand acres and a very beautiful aspect. It is one of my favourite places on earth.”

“My husband and I had a similar estate,” interjected Lady Wilde. “Alas, that particular location was given up following his death, but I still enjoy spending time at Leicester Hall whenever I am able.”

“Is that a sizable house, my lady?” Lord Crompton asked.

“Oh yes, very large. Also in Hertfordshire.”

Nicholas risked a glance at Lady Wilde, who was already watching him. Her red lips were parted into a smile, and he hastily took up his glass of wine to avoid her.

He looked across the table to find Miss Crompton watching him. As their eyes met, he had the pleasure of watching her cheeks turn red as she blushed. But then she looked away, and all the doubts flooded back. She was so difficult to read.

Could I be mistaken? Is this all one-sided?

As the party retired to the drawing room after an excellent repast, Nicholas managed to finally manoeuvre himself to Miss Crompton’s side beneath one of the kissing boughs.

“Have you had a chance to review the book of poetry from our prize?” he asked.

She smiled. “I have. It is most beautiful. Lady Eleanor has quite an eye for her activities. Every poem within the book had some reference to the clues that we found yesterday. I must commend her on her commitment to the task.”

Nicholas laughed. “My aunt has always been a stickler for detail, Miss Crompton.

She will not be outdone.”

“Have you read any of the poems of Leigh Hunt?” she asked.

Nicholas felt a bolt of joy that she had heard of that particular artist. Very few of the people he had met knew much of the poet. He was the co-founder of a liberal newspaper called The Examiner, which would be highly derided amongst the upper classes. It was appallingly liberal, which would ruffle far too many feathers in his inner circle, but Nicholas did enjoy being rebellious.

“Do you know I met him once,” he said and saw her eyes light up excitedly.

“Did you? What is he like?”

“He is a passionate man, fiercely kind and very loyal to those about him. He spoke of his mother very fondly when we met, although it was for minutes only. I have not met many people who admire his poems. Are you one of them?”

“Most assuredly, I think him quite a genius.”

“He would be embarrassed to know it, I am sure. I have never met someone with so much talent and so much humility.”

“I am glad of that. So many men are terribly pompous without any grounds for being so.”

“I hope you are not speaking of anyone in the company.”

Her eyes were sparkling now. “I would not wish to be too specific,” she conceded, and Nicholas could not help a hearty chuckle. He was becoming entranced by this side of her. When she was comfortable and had let down the walls about her true

personality, her wit and ingenuity always shone through. It had been the same during the treasure hunt. He was elated in her company and felt privileged to be gifted with her attention.

“You must share the joke, my Lord,” came a voice behind him. Nicholas tensed as Lady Wilde and Lady Crompton approached them. “Indeed, you have been discussing something for many minutes, which has had you both smiling. I must find out the topic.”

I have no doubt you must, thought Nicholas bitterly. Lady Wilde was more irritating by the day. He could never seem to be rid of the woman and her current interruption was most unwelcome.

“We were discussing Leigh Hunt,” he said, hoping she had not heard of him. He was disappointed.

“The radical?” she asked, spouting the usual rhetoric that would have been bandied about in good society. Anyone like Hunt, a liberal and a critic, would have posed a threat to the men and women in Madeline Wilde’s circles.

“Indeed,” Clarissa replied, surprising him. “We were speaking of his poems.”

Nicholas was instantly uneasy as her guard returned. He had not expected her to agree with anyone about Leigh Hunt being a radical, yet she had done so willingly with Lady Wilde.

It was clear to him that she did not like the lady and did not wish to engage in an open debate. She was instantly reserved, moving back from the conversation and falling silent.

He hated the shifts in her. Whenever she opened up and seemed to enjoy things too

much, she would shut herself down almost instantly, as though she had broken an unspoken rule.

Overcoming her opinion of me will not be an easy task, he thought sadly. But I am determined to succeed.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

The following morning, the house was alive with excitement as the entire party prepared to go to the fair in the local village.

Clarissa was excited about the fair and having the opportunity to spend time with Nicholas outdoors again. She longed to be free of the stuffy formalities of the manor house, and to enjoy walking about the village with new things to divert her.

She tried to tamp down the anticipation in her veins, mindful of her mother's expectations. She knew that Nicholas would be leaving England soon. Perhaps she could indulge in some time with him now, but she would always need to remain on her guard. Nothing could come of their association but disappointment, and she was loathe to give her parents any more of that.

The village itself was beautiful. It was quaint, with rickety buildings dating back to the fifteenth century. The facade of many shops were from the Tudor period, with black wood criss-crossing over a cream backing.

The windows were small, tiny diamonds of light that sparkled in the bright sunshine. It was still terribly cold, and everyone was dressed warmly. The ground was covered in snow, but in the cobbled streets, it had mostly melted and been crushed underfoot.

Carriages and wagons lumbered through the streets with many villagers passing them by. Their party received a great many curious glances. It was clear that Lady Eleanor's patronage was most welcome by the store owners, and she received many greetings as they walked through the town.

Clarissa was surprised to find that Lord Bolton was also greatly admired, and many



approached to welcome him.

“He has done a great deal for the village,” Rosemary was saying with a fond smile. “He even paid for the church clock to be restored last year.”

“But surely he was not here at the time?” Clarissa asked.

“No, you are quite right. But Nicholas hired a solicitor called Mr Graham from the town. He is his particular associate, and everyone who requires attention knows to contact him. If Mr. Graham is unable to fulfill their wishes or help in his own right, he will apply to my brother. He sent him a letter from the local townsfolk last year, telling him that the clock had ceased to chime, and Nicholas spared no expense in resolving the matter.”

Clarissa’s heart swelled at the knowledge. He may be a rake, but he was also a man who cared deeply for his tenants.

Clarissa was swept away in the festive atmosphere of the village. The little green was peppered with snow, and everything all around it was very picturesque in the morning sun. The sight was most pleasing to the eye, and the entire scene reminded her of a Christmas card.

Clarissa had not enjoyed Christmas lately, but she was most excited to spend it in this beautiful little town.

The market had been set up some way ahead of them, and there were colourful stalls as far as the eye could see. They offered everything from traditional crafts to seasonal treats. Clarissa could smell roast chestnuts, and at one of the stalls, a man was selling homemade jars of jam.

A band was playing ahead of them, the lilting music spreading over the market and

filling everyone with good cheer. They played hymns and carols, and Clarissa would have happily stood by and watched them all morning. She adored the sound of brass instruments and was astonished by the aptitude of the French horn player. His fingers moved so quickly over the keys she was captivated.

Clarissa, Emily, and Rosemary flitted from stall to stall, taking in the wares on display. Annie followed behind them, and Clarissa was determined to get her something before they left. Annie never spent much of her wages, sending it all home to her ailing mother, and Clarissa was certain she would like a gift for Christmas.

“Would you care to try some spiced cider, miss?” asked a man from behind one of the stalls. Clarissa laughed as Rosemary eagerly came forward to do so. She was so enraptured by the taste that even Emily wanted to try some.

Clarissa sipped the cider offered to her, feeling the spice run down her throat. It was warm and refreshing, and she smiled at the stall owner as she paid him.

They moved on, Annie mentioning how pretty some embroidered bookmarks were at one of the stalls. Clarissa would take no protests from her and bought five for her and her four sisters. Annie was most touched and smiled happily as she stowed them away in the bag that hung from her wrist.

As they approached a fortune teller's stall, Clarissa's eye was caught by Lord Bolton at the other side of the tent. He was laughing with a group of children who had been enjoying a street performer's magic act. He produced a coin from behind one boy's ear and then made it vanish. They were delighted by him.

He is such a contradiction, thought Clarissa as she continued to watch him. On the one hand, I know him as a philanderer, but on the other, he is a perfect gentleman. She shook her head, catching Rosemary's eye as she turned away and cleared her throat awkwardly at her knowing expression.

Clarissa was still attempting to keep her distance, but every time she was in his company, her heart yearned to be close to him. Fighting her inner affection for him was becoming increasingly difficult, and that frightened her more than anything could.

As the morning drew on, Clarissa found herself alone with Annie at one stall. It was selling beautifully crafted fans, and Annie was most excited by them. They were in every colour imaginable, and Clarissa was enchanted. She had far too many fans at home, however, and knew that she could not justify a further purchase.

As she stood there, a peculiar awareness came over her, and she turned to find Lord Bolton standing behind her. She had not expected to see him so close to her and she was so surprised she quite forgot to blush. It was a relief that she was able to retain her composure on a single occasion in his presence.

Her stomach rolled strangely as she took him in. There was something different about his expression. It was utterly unguarded and intimate, as though she was the only person at the fair. She felt the same dulling of her senses as they gazed into each other's eyes, and she swiftly turned away.

"These are most beautiful," he said of the fans, looking down at them appreciatively.

"They are."

"Have you tried any of the roasted chestnuts?" he asked, and when she said that she had not, he produced a bag. He did not forget Annie, and both women took some of the sticky treats in their hands to taste them.

"You have my thanks, My Lord," said Annie shyly, "they are very good."

"I have not tried better, I believe. They are excellent. Are you enjoying the fair, Miss

Crompton?"

Clarissa nodded. "Very much. I do so love this time of year."

"As do I. There is even a lightness to the air, I believe, that is a contagion we all must suffer from. It infuses the mind. One cannot be unhappy at Christmas."

Clarissa found herself smiling as she looked at the many people in their vicinity. He was right. The decorations on the trees and the merriness in the air were palpable.

"I have not attended a Christmas fair for many years," Clarissa confessed. "I am sorry to have missed it. It is the best thing to do when it is cold outside. Have you tried the cider, my lord?"

"I have," he said with a slight smugness to his expression. "I was also prevailed upon to order some for Lady Eleanor's house. I believe I have been quite badly used by the owner, for he is a wicked fellow and would have me drunk from dawn until dusk."

Both Annie and Clarissa could not help but laugh at that, and Clarissa imagined that cider would be very strong.

"Did you often come to the village when you were here as a child?" she asked.

"Not too often, I confess, but I am all the sorrier for it now. I did not recall it being so beautiful. Perhaps it is the time of year." But once again, his eyes lingered upon her, and she could feel Annie glancing between them in excitement.

Clarissa looked out at the green, where some children had begun a snowball fight, and smiled at their shrieks of excitement.

She was far more comfortable conversing in the open, away from the heat and bustle

of the manor. Although she had enjoyed her time with Lady Eleanor exceedingly, there was nothing quite like being out in the open. She felt far more relaxed with Lord Bolton here and was surprised to find how contented she felt at his presence. She wondered if such easy companionship between them might one day be commonplace.

She pictured them together in a different setting, walking through his local villages in Hertfordshire as man and wife. The thought was unspeakably foolish, but nevertheless, it persisted.

“There he is!”

Clarissa looked across from them to see Lady Eleanor and Lady Wilde approaching. Eleanor's brisk walking made everything seem urgent, so Clarissa watched her approach with trepidation.

“You have been hiding from me, nephew,” she said irritably as she reached them. “Are you enjoying the fair, Miss Crompton?”

“I am, Lady Eleanor, very much. Thank you for arranging this little outing.”

“Not at all. It is one of my favourite markets at this time of year. The variety of cheese they have on display are simply divine.” She rolled her eyes dramatically, and Clarissa found herself laughing. Sometimes, Lady Eleanor had just the same look as her nephew when she was being mischievous.

“My Lord, you must accompany me to the puppet show?” Lady Wilde stated boldly, stepping forward and looping her arm with his. Lord Bolton tensed visibly, his eyes flitting about their group swiftly as Lady Wilde preened beside him.

“Alas, my dear lady,” Lord Bolton said, extricating his arm with some difficulty. “I

have already promised Miss Crompton I will take her to the show.”

Clarissa stared at him in amazement but quickly schooled her expression as best she could as Lady Wilde’s icy glare turned on her. Clarissa was caught between concern and excitement as Lord Bolton offered his arm, and she had no choice but to take it.

She knew very well that this would lead to gossip. Never had Lord Bolton made such an obvious preference for her company before. On the one hand, she was overwhelmed with joy that he would choose her over Lady Wilde and, on the other, terrified that the more time she spent with him, the deeper her feelings would become.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas could see the surprise on Clarissa's face as she took his arm. He had never been happier to get away from Lady Wilde. The woman was insatiable.

As they walked away, Lady Wilde muttered something incoherent, and Nicholas was aware she would not think kindly of him choosing Miss Crompton over her. As they walked towards the puppet show, Nicholas was aware of many curious glances alighting on them.

After looking at some of the faces, he realized that his reputation preceded him. Even here in a village of this size, his behaviour was known. It was a humiliating realization, and for the second time in as many days, he felt real shame for the lifestyle he had previously led.

He wondered if Miss Crompton was aware of the looks being sent their way and if she felt uncomfortable being on his arm. His words to Henry loomed in his mind once again. If there were any way to make her see him in a different light, he would do it.

The puppet show was in a medium-sized red and white striped tent. Several people were gathering ahead the start. The children he had joked with earlier were at the front as they waited for the performers.

It was a traditional production of Punch he thought as he watched Clarissa's slim form climb up the steps and into the carriage. He hoped she might look back at him, but she did not.

He got into his carriage, smiling at Rosemary, who looked flushed and a little cold after her long walk through the stalls.

“Did you buy anything?” he asked curiously.

“I bought a shawl for Aunt Eleanor for Christmas. It has some lovely beading, and I think it will go well with one of her gowns.” She settled back in her seat, clearly tired from the day's exertions. “Did you find anything at the fair?”

I found that my feelings for Miss Crompton have grown beyond anything I could have imagined.

“I may have purchased some cider, but otherwise, no. It was a diverting activity. I am exhausted just thinking of the planning Aunt Eleanor has had to put into these two weeks.”

Looking up at his sister, he was surprised to see her watching him curiously.

“You are changed, brother. Even from when you first arrived.”

He frowned at her. “Changed?”

“Indeed. Something has been lost, I think.”

He frowned even deeper. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Oh, it is not a bad thing, believe me. It is almost as though a layer has been removed. I am looking at my brother now. When you first came home, it was still you, but as though you were acting a part. I told our aunt you seemed to be performing even when you were alone. I think that has gone now.”

Nicholas was speechless. Rosemary got out the shawl she had purchased and started to assess how suitable it might be for her aunt.



Nicholas stared out of the window as the carriage trundled onward. His sister's words had rattled him, and he was trying to discover the cause.

Is this Miss Crompton's doing?

He could not think of any other reason. She was an intelligent, kind, and genuine woman. He felt as though when he was in her company, he could be himself. He had not found anyone abroad who he was as comfortable with as he was with her, and they had only known one another for a matter of days.

In contrast when he thought of Lady Wilde, she represented everything he now recognized he had been running from. He might have returned to England for his duties and to manage his father's estate, but he was also running away. His life had been vacuous and meaningless. All of the wonder he felt he had known abroad paled in comparison to the wonders he had experienced since he returned.

His time on the continent seemed drab when side by side with the hours he had spent in Miss Crompton's company. He was now determined to conclude his feelings one way or the other. Either he would discover that the intensity of emotion he felt would fade, or it would persist. Either way, he would have difficulty persuading Miss Crompton that he was worthy of her notice.

Moreover, he would have to challenge his own beliefs and opinions on the matter of love.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

The drawing room was chilly the following afternoon. Some of the guests had retired before dinner, and Clarissa, Rosemary, and Emily were sitting at tea before the fire.

Lady Eleanor had mentioned a walk about the grounds in the snow a little later, and Clarissa wondered if she could feign an illness to avoid it. She was uncertain about spending more time with Lord Bolton but decided against the pretence of an ailment as she did not wish to draw attention to herself.

She glanced across the room to Lord Bolton, who was sitting on the chaise reading a book. His long legs were outstretched before him. She found her eyes lingering on his fingers as they held the volume. She could not help remembering when their fingers had touched during the dance and a shiver ran down her spine.

Just as it did so he looked up, his expression not quite so warm as it had been. He seemed contemplative, and when he looked at her, he had a slight frown upon his face.

She sipped her tea.

“When do you plan to make your debut in society?” Rosemary asked Emily, and Clarissa was instantly diverted. Her father was sitting far away from them across the room, but she saw his head turn slightly at the question.

“I have discussed it with my aunt and uncle a little,” Emily said. “My uncle has considered next April. But it will depend upon a few factors.”

Emily flicked a glance at Clarissa, and she tried to keep her smile in place. Please

don't speak of Catherine in this room, Emily.

"I would very much hope to debut next season, but I will always follow what my uncle and aunt think is best for me. I would very much like to attend a ball with Clary, she is the best woman I have ever known."

Clarissa glanced at her cousin, surprised by the emotion in her words. Emily's eyes were shining with tears, and she gave her a brave smile. Clarissa leaned forward and squeezed her wrist, feeling tears prick at the back of her eyes.

"Clarissa was a dear friend for many years, and I confess myself angry that I have not kept in touch more frequently," Rosemary said solemnly. "I would like to write to you often. It has been wonderful having you here for Christmas."

Clarissa's mother was leaning toward them and shamelessly eavesdropping, but Clarissa smiled.

"Thank you, Rosemary; it has been wonderful getting acquainted again."

Rosemary passed around a plate of biscuits, and they all took one. The door behind them opened, and Henry entered. He flopped down beside Nicholas, forcing him to move his legs with a huff of irritation. Clarissa loved their relationship; it always made her smile. When she turned back, however, she was surprised to see Emily watching Henry. However, as soon as she noticed Clarissa's gaze, Emily blushed and looked back at her tea.

Nicholas was pensive beside Henry. He had been looking at his book for some time, but his eyes were not moving across it, and he had not turned a page for many minutes. His gaze was darker today, and he had been very quiet.

Clarissa felt the same confusing jumble of emotions as she considered that his regard

for her might have faltered. Perhaps he was eager to be gone from England. It should have been a good thing, given how complex her association with him could become. Yet she did not feel happy with the discovery.

“Shall we depart?” asked Eleanor as she rose from her seat. There was a general murmuring from the group as those who chose to walk accompanied her. Clarissa stayed close to Rosemary, hoping that she could remain at her side around the gardens.

They all put on their coats and hats and departed.

The long path up the centre of the gardens was wide and open and clear of snow. The various large stone pots on either side of the walkway were layered in blankets of white. Cobwebs hung from the trees, and the sky was heavy above them.

“I declare there shall be another snowstorm before the week is out,” Lady Eleanor said as she set the pace.

Clarissa walked beside Rosemary. Ahead of them, Henry stepped up to Emily and bowed, giving her his arm. Clarissa watched them, and she wondered. Henry was jovial and cheerful and had Emily chuckling quickly. Clarissa’s heart clenched at the reminder of simpler relationships.

The sun came out as they walked through the snow-laden grounds, and it made everything glisten beautifully. The skeletons of the trees were encrusted with clumps of snow and all about them the sun’s beams reflected brightly, lifting everyone’s spirits.

Clarissa watched a robin hop over the earth a little way from the path, and she wondered if it might be the same one she had seen some days ago. Perhaps it had followed her here.

“I long for the summer,” Rosemary said quietly as they walked behind the others.

“Would you ever wish to travel to warmer climes with your brother?” Clarissa asked curiously.

“Rosemary detests the sea,” came a deep voice from behind her as Lord Bolton joined them.

“I do not detest it, but I cannot swim. It would be exceedingly unwise to travel in a ship when it might capsize and kill us all.”

Nicholas chuckled, and the sound reverberated through Clarissa’s chest.

“Well then, I shall have to teach you. Perhaps a dip beneath the ice in the pond would do you good.”

Rosemary scowled at him, glancing at Clarissa. “You are lucky not to have brothers, Miss Crompton; they can be quite ridiculous.”

Clarissa smiled but was dismayed when Rosemary excused herself. She gave Clarissa a mischievous wink and walked away to speak to her aunt. Nicholas took the place she had occupied, and they walked beside one another. After a time, she found they had lagged behind the others in the group.

Ahead of them was the high arch of a long hedge that spanned the length of the garden. It led down to the edge of the pond away in the distance and opened out into the rest of the grounds. The sun was so bright that it seemed ablaze with light, the silhouettes of the others black and stark against it.

As she watched, the beams of the sun speared out from behind a cloud, bathing everything in a golden glow.

“I enjoyed our time at the fair, Miss Crompton,” Lord Bolton said. All the good humour in his tone, when he had addressed his sister, was gone. She had never heard him sound more serious. “I am grieved I did not ever attend it before this year.”

“It is a pleasant village,” she managed, her voice hoarse, words sticking in her throat unpleasantly.

“I have often thought so, yet never took the time to explore. My estate in Hertfordshire is near the village of Hatfield. It is similar but a little larger, perhaps.”

“Rosemary mentioned you were a patron of the village. That you had donated to many causes.”

“I try to do my part when I am here, yes.” He cleared his throat awkwardly and they walked along in silence for a few minutes more. “The gardens are truly beautiful. I believe the fountain has frozen over again due to the cold.”

Clarissa was lost in her thoughts of the treasure hunt and the wonderful time they had spent together. They had been unhindered by society in those times, alone and free, simply able to enjoy one another’s company.

“I was surprised by the thickness of the ice on the pond.”

“It certainly does not happen every year. I fell through it once as a boy.”

Clarissa looked at him in alarm. “Goodness, really? Were you injured?”

“My pride most of all, but no. I was extremely cold and idiotic.”

“In that order?”

Nicholas gave a bark of laughter. "You are right; my idiocy certainly preceded my chill." He kept smiling as he continued. "I had ventured out with inappropriate footwear as a dare. I believe it was Henry who put me up to it, the mischievous boy. He was adamant that the ice would be thick enough to hold my weight. I listened to it creak and crack as I walked slowly out there, and only when I was in the centre did I realise my folly."

He shook his head as though to admonish his younger self.

"I fell straight through. Henry, being the gallant upstart that he is, ran onto the ice. He was rather smaller than me in those days, and it bore his weight admirably. I was lucky that it was not so very deep, and the ice did not freeze over above my head. He dragged me out, and my mother and father didn't let us out there alone for years."

"I am most pleased you did not suffer serious injuries. I have heard terrible tales of such things."

"As have I. There is no current in the pond. That is where the worst cases usually take place."

They fell into silence again, and Clarissa could feel the tension rising between them. She did not know what to say or how to interpret this new Lord Bolton. His humour had not died away; it was still there beneath the surface, but it was almost as though his maturity had increased, if that were possible. Since she had known him, he had been all easy smiles and jokes. But now, he seemed to be rather more stoic, in a way that she found she liked.

"Miss Crompton," her heart beat savagely in her chest. "I have enjoyed getting to know you these last few days. I greatly enjoy your company."

Oh, God help me.

“It has been a pleasure to find a companion amidst—”

“Lord Bolton, you must ask the others to slow down. We are fairly lagging behind the rest!”

They turned to find Lady Wilde practically dragging her father behind her as she walked briskly toward them over the path. She had a fur stole around her neck, and her hair was up in another intricate design. Clarissa marvelled that her maid had the time to do it.

Lady Wilde had the faintest hint of colour on her cheeks today, her eyes bright and calculating as she looked between them.

Lord Bolton seemed irritated suddenly, his easy manner diminishing as Clarissa watched him. His smile seemed forced, and she could only bear to hope that he disliked Lady Wilde as much as she did.

Perhaps he merely does not wish to make his affection for her known publicly. Perhaps it is easier for him to associate with someone such as me.

Lady Wilde and her father joined them. Clarissa was quickly pushed to the back, either by accident or by design, and Lady Wilde walked beside Lord Bolton.

After his initial stiffness, Lord Bolton relaxed again and spoke with her easily as they walked about the gardens. Clarissa attempted to engage Lord Wilde in a discussion, but the man mainly complained that he had left his pipe and Tobacco in the house and bemoaned the cold so much that Clarissa had very little to say to him.

Unfortunately, this left her alone with her thoughts, and she found that her mind played back the words Lord Bolton had spoken repeatedly. Whatever did he mean by “finding a companion”? What would he have said if we were not interrupted?



She was alarmed by the strength of her feelings on the subject. Despite all of the reasons she had for fearing a connection with him, she could not dismiss what he had said. She was intrigued by it, and an excitement fluttered in her breast that was most unwelcome.

She knew her feelings toward him had grown beyond anything she could have imagined. Lord Bolton was affability itself; he was kind, good-humoured, and intelligent. Yet there was so much about him she did not understand. She could not go into such an association with her eyes closed to his reputation.

As Clarissa followed behind Madeline Wilde and listened to their inconsequential talk, her mind was a whirlwind of uncertainty. She was still none the wiser as to whether Lord Bolton liked her, or whether she was a useful foil for his real intentions for the widow. He had a widow in Paris, a voice in her head reminded her. Surely, for a rake, Madeline would be the easier path.

As they all regrouped and returned to the house, Clarissa walked beside a silent Lord Wilde. He appeared entirely indifferent to everyone and walked ahead of her, rather rudely, no doubt to get his pipe and a glass of port. She had never seen a man drink so much port in her life.

Clarissa returned to her room, walking swiftly to her bed and dispensing with the many layers of her clothing. Before Annie arrived to help her dress for dinner, she paced before the fire, trying to settle her nerves and her inner thoughts.

She walked to the window, looking down at the myriad footprints the party had left in the snow. Did she dare open her heart to him? Her mother and father approved of the match, but her mother also dismissed everything about his past.

What if I allow this association and it ends in scandal? What if he is interested in me today and follows another woman tomorrow? What if we marry, and he has affairs all

over the country? What then?

She could feel the tears banked at the back of her eyes and as they began to fall, she wished she had a simple answer for what she should do.

She enjoyed Lord Bolton's company, and she admired him. Every time he walked into a room, she could feel his presence before she saw him. There was a connection between them, at least on her side, that she was unable to deny. It seemed that every interaction she had with him was destined to be a joy and a torment.

But how does he feel? Is everything I believe exists between us an illusion?

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas paced before the fire in his room. He was frustrated and angry, attempting to calm himself before he went down to dinner.

Whenever he felt he was growing closer to Miss Crompton, he was thwarted somehow. He knew he needed to prove to her that he was a different man from the one she had been told of. But how was he to convince her when he was constantly dogged by Lady Wilde?

She was beautiful, to be sure, but it had been many days since he had looked at her twice in the same instance. She had a shrewdness and a meanness in her character that he had seen many times. When she believed the company were engaged elsewhere, she criticised everything.

He did not like her and liked even less that she seemed to think she had some kind of claim on him. She was so familiar with him—as though they had known one another all their lives. His irritation at her interruption in the gardens had almost undone him. He had been seconds from telling her to leave them alone. Yet he knew it would have caused Clarissa great embarrassment if he had done so.

Henry's advice had been useful in its way, but Nicholas was at a loss as to how to proceed. He recognized that he needed real advice from someone who truly knew him. Someone who, despite his reputation, still believed him to be the good man he was beneath the rake.

He left his room, walking quickly through the corridors of the house, ignoring any of the guests that he saw. He avoided eye contact with anyone as he passed them and set his expression as one of agitation so as to dissuade the Lady Bartholemews of the

world from interrupting him.

He found Lady Eleanor in her private sitting room working on her embroidery. She looked up as he entered, and the smile on her face was telling. He was convinced she had expected him to seek her out. She was a devilishly clever woman, and she knew him well. If she had not seen his regard for Miss Crompton, no one would have.

“Good evening, aunt,” he said as he closed the door.

“Good evening, Nicholas. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Nicholas walked to the fireplace, putting his hand on the mantel as he stared into the flames. Then he walked to the window, then back to the fireplace. His aunt was entirely still as he did so, her eyes on her embroidery, waiting for him to speak.

After a pause, the damn broke, and Nicholas found himself confessing it all.

“I believe I have formed an attachment,” he said quietly. “I am aware that you have warned me against such a thing with Miss Crompton, but I have found I am unable to stay away from her. She has the sweetest temperament of any woman alive. She is intelligent, witty, and vibrant. I cannot think of another lady I have admired so much.”

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “You know of my past, aunt. You have admonished me many times over the years, both in person and in your letters, about my conduct. I know I have not always done as I should, and I allowed myself liberties out of the excuse of a heart I believed to be broken.

“But I would urgently welcome your advice on this matter. I do not wish to cause Miss Crompton any more pain than she has already suffered. I know what she must think of me. Yet I dare to hope that she might find it in herself to see through to the

man I truly am. Who I should have been long ago. I deeply regret my past actions and wish to convey my feelings to her. I cannot continue to wear the mask that I have perfected over the years. I have defended my heart to the point of pain, never forming any real attachment to anyone. Henry, Rosemary and you were the only people truly dear to me. Until today.”

He covered his face with his hands, running his fingers over his cheeks and heaving a great sigh. It was a relief to get it out in the open, to speak it aloud to someone who knew him so well. But he was terrified that his aunt would tell him that all was lost, that his reputation was beyond repair, and that he would never be acceptable to someone like Clarissa.

He turned to her for her judgment.

His aunt had not put down her embroidery throughout his speech, but now she did. Her eyes held her usual cold, steely gaze, but it was calculating. She stood up, coming to stand before him. Before she said a word, she straightened his collar and brushed down his shoulders.

Having done so, she took his hand and levelled him with a firm stare.

“My dear Nicholas,” she squeezed his fingers. “I have noticed the change in you these last few days, and I have been happy to see it. Miss Crompton has had a great effect on you; I noticed it from the start, even at the ball.” Nicholas could only stare at her in astonishment. “She has brought out a side of you I have not seen in years. A side of you that was a cherished thing to me before you were so poorly used by that woman.”

Eleanor never said Victoria’s name. She had been incensed by her conduct at the time and her ire had never wavered, not even all these years later.

“I had, in truth, feared that that side of you was lost. You are right; your reputation is not favourable,” Nicholas’s heart clenched at her words. “A lady would have every reason to be wary of you. But nothing in this world says a man may not change if he chooses to. The influence of a good woman has done greater things than that to many men of my acquaintance. My advice, my dear boy, is to show her who you truly are through action. She will have heard the rumours and they alone might deter her, but your choices in life and the actions you take will trump them all.”

She gripped both his hands and brought them up between them, her gaze narrowing as she looked at him.

“You must show Miss Crompton your true self through consistent, honourable behaviour. That is the only way she will ever believe you to have changed. Your father was a gentleman, and I have always seen his potential in you. You are a good man who was slighted by a cruel woman. But that does not mean she should define you for the remainder of your life. You are better than the man you were becoming—that you have recognized that is my greatest joy. You deserve happiness, Nicholas. You will find it; you merely have to be yourself. Dispense with any mask that you believed you might have needed. You are enough as you are.”

Nicholas was deeply moved by her faith in him. It was not often that they spoke like this together. She often scolded him or grew angry with him for neglecting his duties, but she rarely spoke of what she admired in him.

It became clear as his aunt spoke that he was not pursuing Clarissa for her affection anymore. He was pursuing her, hoping to uncover the parts of himself that had been buried for too long. His aunt’s words gave him a sense of purpose he had not felt before.

“Now,” Eleanor continued, letting him go and walking to a small side table in her room. It was made of deep red wood with gold edging around the drawers, exactly

the exquisite taste that the rest of the house possessed. Eleanor opened the drawer and drew out a small box, which she brought back to him.

He looked down at it with a frown.

As Eleanor opened it, he recognized the contents instantly. Inside was a small silver locker, no larger than a shilling, intricately decorated with filigree engraving. It had been his mother's, and he had not seen it since her death.

“When the time is right,” Eleanor said, her voice catching with emotion. “I believe you should show Miss Crompton the depth of your feelings with this. If you are serious about forming this attachment—”

“I am.”

“—then your mother would wish for her to have it. Take it and do with it as you must. But do not act unless you are certain.”

“You would approve the match?”

Eleanor smiled fondly. “I have known the Cromptons a long time. Clarissa Crompton has done nothing to warrant the behaviour with which society has treated her. Her sister was a foolish girl who followed her heart, but she ruined their family as a consequence. It was part of the reason I invited them here. I have always liked them, her mother in particular. Clarissa does not deserve to be tainted by scandal forever.” Her eyes grew sharp as she looked up at him. “Clarissa is a sensible, beautiful and intelligent woman. I believe she would be the making of you. Ensure you deserve her.”

Nicholas left his aunt's room with a lightness in his heart and the same sense of fierce determination in his soul.

As he walked back to his rooms, he began to form a plan of how he could show Miss Crompton and everyone around him his reformed character. He clutched the box in his hand, his fingers smoothing over the rim incessantly.

I will prove to her I am worthy—I will become the man my aunt believes me capable of being.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Clarissa descended to dinner, her nerves on edge.

The dining room was bustling with guests and servants as she entered. Emily gave her a pretty smile as Clarissa took her seat beside Lord Wilde and Rosemary.

Across from her, Lord Bolton was speaking with his aunt, their expressions solemn and grave. Again, she noticed the change in him. He seemed thoughtful and attentive, something more genuine in the faint smile she could see touching the corners of his mouth.

Henry was also across the table from her. He sat beside Emily and spoke to her in low, gentle tones as she answered his questions politely.

Once again, Clarissa felt a pang of jealousy at their simpler relationship. When she looked at Henry, it did not seem just polite interest in his gaze. He was leaning into Emily slightly, listening to her with rapt attention, and Clarissa felt a burst of joy for her cousin. Henry was a good man.

“I do hope he stays in England,” Rosemary murmured beside her.

Clarissa turned and raised her eyebrows at her. “Your brother?”

Rosemary nodded. “It was always such a short time for him to be here. I am amazed that my aunt allowed it. Two weeks is barely any time at all for an estate of this size, and half of his time has been spent at this house party. I cannot imagine he will be able to go so soon. I know a list a mile long that his steward needs to speak with him about.”

Clarissa said nothing, eating her food and listening as Rosemary continued.

“If he does stay, I would very much like to invite you to the house again.” Rosemary hesitated and Clarissa felt her fingers clench around her cutlery. “Do you believe,” Rosemary paused again, her eyes flitting about the table to ensure they were not overhead. “Do you believe you will come back next season?”

Clarissa paused, also looking about them, but Lord Wilde was far too interested in his food to listen too closely, and everyone else seemed occupied.

“It has been praying on my mind,” she confessed. “Catherine’s absence has been over three years now. It would be a case of whether the majority have forgotten it.”

Rosemary shook her head. “I believe you are thinking of it in the wrong terms.”

“What do you mean?”

“Society never forgets. That is something I learned many years ago. Some scandals are always discussed. It is whether you can hold your head high and return in the manner of the person you are, not your sister. As far as I can see, your family has been exiled for long enough. I know my aunt would support you.”

Clarissa smiled. “She already has. Perhaps next season might be too soon. But I will see what my father and mother wish to do. I long to see Emily out in society. She had never attended a ball before she came here. I would not wish for her to miss out on such things in future.”

“Do you think married women enjoy balls as much?” Rosemary asked, and Clarissa looked at her in astonishment. They glanced across the table at Emily, who was flushing prettily as she spoke with Henry.

Clarissa looked back at her friend and the twinkle in her eye. "I could not say," she said happily. "But if so, I hope she would still attend with me."

Rosemary's expression was difficult to read. She gave a small smile, her eyes flicking to the end of the table and back, and they fell into a companionable silence.

Clarissa observed Nicholas out of the corner of her eyes throughout the dinner. He was attentive and courteous with everyone. His manner was more reserved than it had been, but not in any detrimental way.

She was gratified to see that Lady Wilde, who was sat opposite her father and next to Nicholas, attempted a few times to draw him into conversation. Although Lord Bolton was always polite and friendly, he did not entertain her for long. He kept his conversation chiefly with Lady Bartholemew and Lady Garriton.

Whatever he was saying had them in fits of laughter, and Clarissa could not help smiling down at her plate at his wit. When she looked up, it was to be skewered by Lady Wilde's uncompromising stare, and Clarissa had no illusions that they would never be friends.

She felt a flutter of hope that Lady Wilde's charms had left Lord Bolton unaffected.

As the meal ended, the party went to the drawing room to hear a poetry reading. Everyone gathered and took their seats. Clarissa was once more reminded of the joys of the season. Everything in Lady Eleanor's house was festive, and mulled wine and minced pies were served as they settled in their seats. The mulled wine had a beautiful spice to it and filled the room with the scents of oranges and cinnamon.

Clarissa sat on the long settee beside her mother. Her father was on the end, lounging happily and rather pink-cheeked. Clarissa simply enjoyed the delightful atmosphere as snow started to fall against the windows again. Lady Eleanor had been right;

another snowstorm was on the way. Clarissa was glad they would not need to make their journey home for some days.

To her surprise, Lord Bolton approached her and asked if he could sit beside her at the end of the settee. Clarissa could think of no reason to object save her own reckless heart, so she nodded with a smile.

As he took his seat, Clarissa noted her mother's approving gaze beside her. The subtle nod that followed spoke volumes of her continued approval of the match.

Various guests stood up and took turns reading. Some more skilled than others in how to recite, others with a great deal of confidence but an inability to read aloud to much effect. Clarissa was extremely aware of Lord Bolton's presence at her side.

There were inches between their bodies, and occasionally, his knee would brush against the edges of her skirt. Their elbows brushed together frequently as they moved or resettled themselves and she was finding it increasingly difficult to remain indifferent.

Under her mother's watchful presence, Clarissa felt her muscles stiffen at their proximity, not wishing to give anything away. In truth, she wanted to lean into Lord Bolton's warmth, imagining a situation where he might put his arm about her, and they could lean back together, cradled in each other's embrace.

Finally, it was Lord Bolton's turn to read, and he stood, straightening his immaculate frock coat as he walked to the head of the room. The fire crackled behind him, and Clarissa did not miss the opportunity to admire his strict, toned figure as he took up his position.

He held out the book he had chosen to read from. There was no cheerfulness in his expression, no teasing light in his eyes this time. He looked at Clarissa, his eyes

gazing upon her for too long to be an accident, and then he began to recite.

“When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,

I all alone beweepe my outcast state,

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,

And look upon myself and curse my fate,

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,

Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,

Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,

With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,

Haply I think on thee, and then my state,

(Like to the lark at break of day arising

From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate;

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings

That then I scorn to change my state with kings.”

Clarissa knew the sonnet well. It was from Shakespeare, who she knew they both

admired.

It spoke of a man who did not like himself. Who longed to overcome his reputation. He envies what others have achieved and wishes he could be like them. When he thinks of the one he loves he is rich indeed.

The one he loves...

Clarissa's hands were clasped in her skirts as those emerald eyes found hers as Lord Bolton finished. Despite her own fears, there could be little doubt of his meaning. Her heart soared at the idea that all her forbidden hopes had been answered. Her mother's hand rested on Clarissa's lap, and she took her hand as Lord Bolton returned to his seat.

As they watched the remainder of the poems, Clarissa felt the heat of him beside her like a physical force. Her breath became more laboured, her chest tight with excitement and fear.

He has thrown down his gauntlet then, she thought hopelessly. Will I answer? Can I answer? She still did not know.

That night, as Clarissa lay in bed, staring at the snow falling outside, she watched the candle beside her bed gutter and twirl in the half-light. She could not get Nicholas's performance out of her mind.

He must have chosen the poem specifically for her. There was no other explanation. They had both talked of their love of Shakespeare; he would have known she understood his meaning.

Did he truly wish to throw off the shackles of the man he had once been and forget his time as a rake? Did he long for her as she longed for him in the deepest parts of

her heart? No matter how unwise it was, she could no longer deny that her feelings for him were deep and endless.

Over the past few days, she had seen him for who he truly was—kind, genuine, and earnest. The memory of his steady, deep voice reciting the sonnet made a thrill rush through her, a spark of joy that could not be concealed.

She could not bear the thought of leaving him, and that made anxiety form in her chest. She had never been so enamoured with a man. His obvious affection and the heat in his gaze as his performance had concluded left her hopelessly breathless.

She clenched her fingers in the covers, pulling them up and over her shoulders and huddling down into the bed. The snow fell silently, acting as a hanging curtain that hid her from the world.

She was terrified to hope that Nicholas felt the same way. It would mean she would finally have to face all the reasons she had convinced herself they could not be together. If he had truly changed, perhaps there was a chance they could be happy. She wished she did not have to tackle so much uncertainty.

At least on one thing she was certain. Against her better judgment and her reason, against her own trepidation and fear, she was falling deeply and irrevocably in love with him.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas opened his eyes to a bright, cold morning.

Today was the day when they would all be taking part in a sleigh ride. Some of the party had returned home to their families, but many remained for the event.

He was alive with desire and excitement. Finally, his mind was clear about what it wanted. He would stay with Miss Crompton for as long as she would have him and if she agreed to be with him forever, he would be the happiest man alive.

The familiar nervousness in his gut remained, but it was overpowered by his feelings of excitement. As he rose, he made the final decision to find time with Miss Crompton—Clarissa—alone and make his feelings known.

As Hargreaves helped him to dress, he selected his very finest attire for the occasion. The locket was a comforting weight in his pocket as he pictured giving it to Miss Crompton. Silver would look beautiful against her porcelain skin, and he could imagine her eyes lighting up at the gift.

At breakfast, his gaze was continuously drawn to her. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks flushed with the excitement of the day. She was discussing the sleigh ride's location with Henry and Emily. Henry was explaining the height of the hill he had been sleighing down since he was a boy.

“Lord Bolton,” Nicholas looked across at Lord Crompton, who was slathering his bread with almost an inch of butter. “I wondered if I might discuss with you the matter of my steward.”



“Of course, my Lord, how can I help?”

“I am in need of a replacement. My man is lately married and is moving away from the estate fifty miles to the North. I would be grateful if you have any recommendations. I know you have many estates across the country, and I am sure they are excellently managed.”

“Indeed, my Lord, I will speak to Perkins, my aunt’s steward directly. He is a good man and has many contacts across England. I am sure he can recommend someone for you.”

“Capital, capital. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.” Please would you allow me to marry your daughter. “Are you joining us for the sleigh ride today, my Lord?”

“I am, against my will. I have never been comfortable moving at speed behind anything that does not have wheels and a team of four.”

Nicholas chuckled and, out of the corner of his eye, noticed that Miss Crompton was observing them. He did not catch her eye, however, endeavouring to steel himself for the events to come. His nerves felt like knives in his stomach now, piercing at him angrily.

He would have loved to believe that Clarissa was so taken with him that he could guarantee her answer. But he was in no way assured of it. He wanted her to accept him, but he also understood if she did not. It was a conundrum. He caught his aunt’s eye, and she gave him a reassuring smile.

He longed to speak with Clarissa immediately and to get it over with. The breakfast room was a bustle of lively chatter, servants, plates being moved and handed about.

He could not imagine a less opportune time to grab her attention. He would have to wait. He could wait.

As the remaining party members went to gather their warm clothing for the sleigh ride, Nicholas took a private moment to himself. He walked out of the drawing room and onto the terrace. Steps on the right-hand side led down to the gardens, and stone pillars surrounded the edge. The space was not overly large, but it backed onto the high windows of the drawing room.

He looked out at the beautiful scenes before him. The hills of the English countryside lay out like a patchwork quilt. Dotted lines of white separated the fields where the hedges stood, the dark shapes of the trees slicing up the white ground into neat little squares.

As he stood, longing for a glass of something to settle his nerves, he thought about what he might say to Miss Crompton. Perhaps he would begin by expressing his regard for her, but that always sounded incredibly trite when his friends told him of their proposals.

Should he focus on her eyes, perhaps? They were the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen, but he did not think she would be the sort of woman who would lack for compliments.

How could he make himself stand out from the others? Had she ever had another suitor, he wondered. The idea was not a pleasant one. He did not like the thought that her head had ever been turned by someone else. Maybe she had had another man who she smiled at just as much as she smiled at him.

Nicholas swallowed, doubts pouring into his mind. Their acquaintance had been so brief; had he misinterpreted her feelings? Perhaps he had entirely imagined them.

As his nerves built and his resolve faltered, he heard footsteps approaching him along the terrace. He turned, expecting his aunt, but felt irritated beyond bearing when he saw Lady Wilde approaching him.

Too late, he realized that he was in the corner of the terrace, unable to move past her without physically pushing her out of the way. It was clearly by design, for Lady Wilde came up to him, far too close to be proper, and smiled her winning smile.

“My Lord Bolton, I am surprised to see you out here alone. Are you not accompanying us to the sleigh ride today?”

“Most assuredly, I was merely taking in the beauty of the view,” he answered as evenly as possible.

She fluttered her eyelashes and looked up at him coyly. He imagined it was a look that would stir many men to disgrace, but it left him cold.

“And how do you like the view now, my Lord?” she asked. It was so bold a question that Nicholas found himself momentarily unable to speak. “I know what game it is you are playing, and I have been thoroughly entertained these last few days. But I believe if you are to declare your intentions, you should do so. We could have a great future together. The alignment of our houses would be most advantageous. Far more so than other connections you may have entertained.”

Nicholas felt a flare of anger now. He was no longer irritated; he was furious. His expression would have deterred anyone else, but Lady Wilde, it seemed, was not to be deterred.

He sucked in a breath as she laid a hand against his chest, leaning into him. Her floral scent surrounded him, and he wished he could leap over the side of the terrace and run full pelt toward Clarissa.

“You toy with me, I know. But I have no objection to a game. All games have their place, but I believe you and I must become a pair to win this one.”

She smiled again, and this time, the lascivious nature of it revolted him. It was not just her forward manner that he disliked; it was the assumptions she had made about his character.

He had gone out of his way to put her off, yet it seemed she did not need a syllable of encouragement to set her sights on what she wanted.

His chest tensed as he leaned away from her, her fingers stroking over his chest alluringly. But enough was enough.

Nicholas gripped her wrist firmly but gently and stood up to his full height. He leaned forward, using his bulk to push her gently back from him, and glowered at her with the full force of his fury. He could not miss her meaning that their family alliance was more advantageous than with the Crompton's. Clarissa's family were still wealthy, and her father was a gentleman, but their status left much to be desired.

I could not care a jot about any of it. I would rather have Clarissa than any woman on this Earth.

Lady Wilde stepped back, looking shocked. Her wrist was still held firmly between his fingers, and he did not release her until he had given her his response.

“Lady Wilde,” he said sternly, “you flatter me with your attentions.” She opened her mouth as though to speak, and he continued more forcefully. “But you are mistaken, my Lady. I am not, nor have I ever been playing any games with you. I would abhor the very thought of leading any woman on. If you, by some quirk of chance, have believed me to be interested in you and shown you affection, I am deeply sorry for it. I can say wholeheartedly that you are a most beautiful woman who deserves

happiness in life. But that happiness will not be found with me. My heart belongs to another, and for that, I would never have entertained what you insinuate.”

He released her, and she stepped back, those coquettish eyes hardening into something that appeared very different. The mask that she wore, just as he wore his, slipped away from her face, and he saw the rage rise as she glared at him.

“I will have no more part in this; I hope I have been plain in that,” he finished firmly.

He turned away from her, the nausea that had arisen at her touch subsiding as he thought of seeing Miss Crompton again. He walked toward the drawing room windows to return to the party, only to see Miss Crompton’s retreating figure running from the room.

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Nicholas cursed under his breath, sprinting after Miss Crompton as fast as he was able.

He ran through the drawing room and into the hallway, skidding to a stop and startling Lady Bartholomew and Lady Garriton. He looked about him frantically, ignorant as to where Miss Crompton had run to and desperate to find her.

He walked to the library hastily, trying to keep his steps as brisk as possible. Upon entering, there was no one to be seen, and he began to despair.

What did she see? If she had entered at the wrong moment, she would either have seen his violent denial of his affections, or Lady Wilde’s hand upon his chest. He closed his eyes, wishing he had pushed her away immediately, but he had been too paralysed with shock.

Show her in your actions...

His aunt's words floated through his mind, and he almost groaned aloud. If nothing else, this would convince Miss Crompton of her suspicions. That he was a rake, that his old ways were returning, that he would be more interested in a widow with fortune than a young, beautiful woman who had faced scandal.

If he had been a different man, he would have run his fist into the wall in his frustration.

There was a bustle of voices from outside, and he left the library, tugging on his coat to head outside immediately.

He emerged from the house to find the sleighs had been lined up. Eleanor had ordered three, all pulled by a single horse each. They were ornate, with gold across the edges, deep red, and very fitting with the season. Each horse was a different colour, one pure white with a long shimmering mane that matched the white countryside behind it.

He looked around frantically at the many faces of the crowd, but there suddenly seemed too many people to count and he could not see Clarissa's amongst them.

"Nicholas!" his aunt called. She was seated in her sleigh with Rosemary and Henry, and she waved at him. There was nothing for it. He could not go back into the house to search for Miss Crompton without embarrassing his aunt in front of all of her guests.

He forced a smile, keeping his eyes roaming over all the faces, but Clarissa was nowhere to be seen. He climbed into the sleigh, receiving the blanket over his knees from his sister, and attempted a smile.

"What is the matter?" Rosemary asked with concern. Nicholas looked at her and then

at Henry, seeing the obvious query in their eyes.

“All is well,” he murmured, feeling as though the world were opening beneath his feet and he had fallen into a deep and endless cavern.

As they set off, he took one last look behind him. If he could just ascertain which carriage she was in perhaps he could contrive to swap if they stopped.

He was anxious to speak with her and to explain. He had not seen her face, but the way she had run from the room suggested she had seen the worst. All of her suspicions would have been confirmed. He barely saw the beautiful countryside around him or listened to his sister’s rapturous excitement at the event.

He had never regretted his decisions or the life he had led more completely than he did at that moment.

Curse Madeline Wilde for her misdeeds.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Clarissa waited until Lord Bolton had climbed into the carriage with his aunt before she came out of the house.

The image of Lady Wilde's hand on his chest was burned forever in her mind, and she felt sick. All she had thought of him, her beliefs of his change in character, were dashed to pieces. She had suspected right from the beginning that a beautiful woman such as Lady Wilde would be entirely the sort of person he would pursue. Now she had proof that she had been correct all along.

She was convinced that his interest in her was false. He had done it to deflect any suspicion about his feelings for Lady Wilde.

And yet...

She climbed into the carriage with her mother and father. Her mother was bundled up in long white fur, making her look like a snow queen. Emily sat beside her, a pretty bonnet on her head, adorned with holly on one side.

"You look very pale, Clarissa," her mother muttered, thrusting a blanket at her. "Are you ill?"

"Of course not, Mama," she answered automatically.

"Well, do smile if you are not ill. You look positively ghastly."

Clarissa saw her father look reproachfully at his wife, but he said nothing.



As she settled down under the blanket on the edge of the sleigh, her cousin slipped her arm in hers. Emily had an uncanny ability to read other people and easily recognized Clarissa's turmoil. She leaned into her, and Clarissa tried to relax as they made their way around Lady Eleanor's vast grounds.

The snow was much thicker than it had been, and the sleighs travelled elegantly across the landscape, smoothly and quietly. The horses were steaming in the cold, great clouds wafting from their mouths by their laboured breathing. She tried to focus on the beauty around her, but it was impossible, with the unpleasant images flooding her mind.

Clarissa's eyes were constantly drawn to the sleigh ahead of them. Lord Bolton sat in the centre, easily recognizable by his top hat. She wondered what he might be thinking. He had been found out. Perhaps he was concocting his best excuse to placate her. My intentions were always honourable, but I have never admired you in that way...

She glanced to her left to see Madeline Wilde in the other carriage. She was sitting with her father, their heads bowed together as they spoke. Lady Wilde was speaking to him with quick, jerky movements that became more urgent even as Clarissa watched her.

She frowned, looking away. What man wouldn't want Lady Wilde? She thought skeptically. She is beautiful, accomplished, and rich.

Clarissa had known Lord Bolton for less than a fortnight. That was the reality she was now faced with. His reputation had been forged over years. She had been naive to believe that he would change it overnight—especially for someone as inconsequential as she.

The Cromptons were disgraced. Why would he ever wish to be associated with her

family?

Any man can play a part for a week, she thought furiously. I was a fool to entertain this. I knew it was folly, and yet my heart would not let me give him up.

She pushed herself further into the blankets as the cold wind bit at her face. She felt miserable and stupid. Worse, she felt like she had been duped. Despite all of her walls, all of her defences, he had penetrated every one with his charm. How could she ever trust any man again when even the most amiable were vipers?

Mr Harrison might be just the same. Perhaps Catherine believed him to be one thing, and he turned out to be another. Lord, how I hope she is safe and happy somewhere.

She stared wistfully up at the clouds, wishing to be beside her sister now and ask for her counsel. It had been so long since she had spoken to her or heard from her. There was a real chance that everything in Catherine's life had fallen apart after she had run away. She might have been fooled by Harrison and was now somewhere alone, destitute, and friendless.

Clarissa felt the tears well at the back of her eyes again, and she tried to will them away. She was mortified to have been so taken in and would never forgive herself for her naivete.

And yet...

She watched the snowy trees pass by, and Emily exclaimed happily as a heron, startled by the horses, took flight. Its great wings flapping in leisurely gusts above them, huge and majestic as it passed overhead.

Clarissa replayed the scene in her mind one more time: Nicholas leaning away from Lady Wilde, her hand touching his chest, her fingers digging into him even as she had

watched.

There was a part of her that could not reconcile the Lord Bolton she had just seen with the man she had grown to know over the last two weeks. His attentions to Lady Wilde had been friendly at best, and there did not seem to be any real affection between them.

But perhaps this was his scheme. She was in a vulnerable position, and he had taken advantage. Perhaps that was the only explanation.

The carriage turned a corner as her mind spiralled into oblivion. The horse canted a little to the left, and there was a startled shout from the driver.

Clarissa stiffened, and her mother yelled in alarm. The sleigh banked sharply and hit the edge of a stone in the ground that the driver had not seen. At the same instant, a flurry of pheasants erupted from the woods to their right, and the horse startled violently to the left.

The carriage was sent in the opposite direction to the horse, the axle banking wildly against the long skis at its base.

Clarissa clutched at the sides in a panic as Emily screamed, and the whole contraption tilted sharply. Time seemed to slow down as Clarissa watched her mother's surprise turn to horror as the sleigh bucked upward, skidding over a patch of frozen snow and Clarissa was thrown bodily from the back.

She was light for a moment, flying through the air just as the heron had done. She had no time to scream, no time to react. All she could do was prepare herself for the landing as she struck the ground at a horrible speed.

The breath burst from her lungs, winding her. Pain radiated through every part of her

body as she hit the earth, the cold ground coming up to meet her as she felt the softness of the snow around her injured limbs.

There were screams and cries from all around her, echoing about the wild wonderland of the snow and ice in her vision. Everything was white and bright suddenly, as though the sun had come out reflecting in the dazzling snow.

She blinked. The other sleighs were turning. Are Mama and Papa alright? Where is Emily?

“Clarissa, my God,” a dark shape landed beside her. She could barely see; everything was so bright, but she would know that voice anywhere. “Clarissa! Miss Crompton? Are you alright?”

His voice was frantic, his arms coming up to lift her from the freezing earth. She could not speak, her mind spinning wildly about as though she were still falling from the sleigh. Nicholas Bolton would not sound so frantic. He wanted Madeline Wilde, he had chosen her. Why would his voice sound so afraid now? She was disorientated why was it so cold?

There was a throbbing at the side of her skull and a tendril of blackness before her eyes as though there were a giant hand pulling her downward into nothingness. As her consciousness drained away, she felt strong arms pushing beneath her as she was lifted up from the ground.

Even in her dazed state, as she tried to reconcile the images before her eyes with reality, she could tell that Lord Bolton was holding her. He cradled her protectively, and it felt as though they were returning to the manor at an impossible pace.

The steady rhythm of her heartbeat drowned out every other noise, and as she felt the blackness closing in, she was happy in the knowledge that his arms would keep her

safe.

“Nicholas...” she whispered, and then everything faded to nothing.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Nicholas paced the length of the drawing room. He flexed his hands at his sides, clenching them into fists and unclenching them repeatedly.

Each time he turned to the windows; he felt a jolt of fury at what Clarissa must have witnessed. Henry now stood before him, his expression as grave as Nicholas had ever seen.

“You will wear a hole in the carpet, Bolton. Please, you must sit.” Henry attempted, but Nicholas was too agitated to be still.

His mind was a flurry of panicked images, each worse than the last. He could not get the images of Lady Wilde and himself out of his head. He kept seeing them together, as Miss Crompton might have done, from the aspect of the window. He imagined her shock, her despair—his betrayal.

He thought of the sleigh ride and the turbulence of his mind as he had tried to think how he would convince her that what she had seen was not the reality.

Then he had heard it—a deafening crack as the sleigh Miss Crompton was riding in hit a big stone. Coupled with the ice over the snow, the sleigh had skidded violently. He had turned in his seat as his aunt sat bolt upright. The blanket had fallen from her knees, and she had been half-standing before he had realized the impact of what had happened.

He had turned at the heart-stopping moment when Miss Crompton had been thrown from her seat. It had taken only a second for her to land, but it felt like an eternity. Nicholas had leaped from his sleigh before it had even stopped. His aunt and sister

had called after him in alarm, but all he could think of was getting to Clarissa.

As he thundered through the snow, the depth of it slowing his movements, he prayed that she was safe, that she was not injured. As he reached her, he had been ready to confess his love right there in the snow, telling her she was the dearest thing in the world to him. But she was delirious, with a wound on her head and blood on her cheek. His heart had all but stopped in that moment.

He had carried her to the house, and she had not regained consciousness.

Lord and Lady Crompton were seated at the settee behind him, both rigid and tense. Lady Crompton was pale, her mouth puckered with pain as they waited for news.

The physician was with Clarissa now. Nicholas wanted to insist on staying with her, but he knew it would have been highly inappropriate. The room was heavy with tension. His aunt was seated near Lady Crompton, her face resolute and firm as always, but there was a bright quality to her eyes that he was not used to seeing.

“Please, Nicholas,” Henry implored quietly, laying a hand on his shoulder. “You must be seated; you will drive yourself mad with this.”

Suddenly, there was a cry from behind them, and Nicholas spun round only to see Lady Crompton fall sideways from her chair in a faint. Emily, Eleanor, and Rosemary rushed to her side.

“Nicholas, the smelling salts. Quickly! They are in the draw by the curtain.”

His aunt’s voice brooked no argument, and Nicholas went to the place, returning with the small vial and handing it to her. He watched helplessly as Lady Crompton slowly recovered herself and was helped to an armchair.

His aunt was a pillar of strength, speaking to her soothingly. Emily and Rosemary were in tears, and Nicholas felt he had no power over anything anymore. He longed to know that Clarissa was safe. He could barely breathe at the thought that she was mortally wounded. To have her reject him for his conduct was one thing; to have her gone from him forever was unthinkable.

Suddenly, the door opened, and the room seemed to freeze as the physician entered. He was a tall man with wiry white hair and spectacles balanced on his nose. His large grey eyes were watery and tired, but his expression seemed kind.

He walked into the centre of the room as Emily, Rosemary, and his aunt stood back. Lady Crompton had recovered enough to turn to face him.

“Miss Crompton has suffered minor injuries, and the cold has done her no good.” Lady Crompton clutched at her throat, paling again, and Emily clasped her hand, squeezing it between her fingers. “But she will recover. She needs rest, but her injuries are not severe.”

The entire room seemed to let out a collective sigh, and Nicholas felt Henry’s hand on his shoulder as he patted it reassuringly. Nicholas breathed a long breath, emptying his lungs as relief flooded him.

He turned and found himself face to face with Lord Crompton. The older man offered his hand.

“Thank you for what you did for Clarissa,” he said earnestly. “She would not have been back in the manor and so warm and well cared for without your diligence, my lord.”

Nicholas shook his hand but kept hold of it, watching Lord Crompton’s bushy eyebrows raise in surprise.



“May I have a private audience with you, sir? It will not take long.”

Lord Crompton’s frown did not ease, but he nodded. “Of course.”

Nicholas drew him away from the others.

He could not delay any longer. He knew, with a clarity he had never felt before, that he had to declare his intentions.

They walked to a private corner of the room, far from the rest of the party, and Nicholas began to speak.

“Lord Crompton,” he said resolutely as the other man’s eyes met his. “I am in love with your daughter.”

Lord Crompton’s eyebrows nearly rose up to his hairline at that confession, but Nicholas would not be stopped now that he had begun.

“I am painfully aware of how little I am worthy of her. These last weeks I have battled with myself as to my own history. You may know of my reputation, and it pains me to admit that much of it is true. I did not realise before meeting Miss Crompton how hollow and meaningless my life before her was. She has given me hope in the darkest of times. I had not even known how dark they were until I beheld her. She is the sweetest woman I have ever met; intelligent, wise, and certain in her ways.”

Lord Crompton was watching him patiently and not interrupting, so Nicholas continued.

“She has changed me for the better. For her and for myself, I would endeavour to be a better man. I wish to earn your respect and hers, but actions speak louder than words.

If I can ever deserve her I will be the happiest man in the world. If you can give me this chance, I will spend my life proving it to you, my Lord, and to her. I would ask, therefore, for your permission to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

Nicholas stood with bated breath, waiting for his response. Up close, the man was rather intimidating, all bushy hair and an intense gaze that cut right through to his soul.

Robert Crompton said nothing for almost a full minute. He was still unsure how his intention would be received. Lord Crompton cleared his throat and finally replied.

"You have my permission, my Lord. Whatever your past mistakes, there should be more forgiveness for those who wish to change." His eyes were sad as he said those words, and Nicholas wondered if he were thinking of his eldest daughter. "But I cannot give you the true answer you seek." He held out his hand, and Nicholas shook it enthusiastically. "Only my Clary can tell you whether she believes you worthy, my boy," he gave a faint smile. "I wish you luck."

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As evening fell, the drawing room slowly emptied, but Nicholas could not bring himself to rest. His aunt approached him with a slow step as though wary of coming too close. He looked up at her expression, which was a mixture of worry and understanding.

Nicholas was sitting in an armchair beside the fire and could not imagine rising from his position for several hours.

"Nicholas," his aunt said gently, "you should get some rest."

"I cannot rest until I know she is well," he said darkly, the locket held tight in his

closed fist.

“You will weary yourself,” she said softly.

“Well then, I shall be weary,” he said irritably. In answer, she simply kissed the top of his head and left him to his reverie.

The fire before him was banked high, and Nicholas was glad of it. The accursed snow was falling again. He would have had no argument with the softly falling snowflakes until he had seen Clarissa fly through the air as the sleigh slid on the ice.

Perhaps I shall take her to Italy for our honeymoon; he thought blithely before crippling doubt engulfed him again. He was not certain of her response to him and was terrified that every possible objection would be entirely justified.

The fire crackled before him, the hearth a myriad of patterned tiles, and he found himself lost in them as his thoughts circled around his head.

Robert’s words were paramount in his thoughts. He might have all the good intentions in the world and her father’s blessing, but it was still up to Miss Crompton to accept him. He found himself more concerned on that score than he would have been the day before.

Before Lady Wilde had approached him, he was fairly confident of Miss Crompton’s affections. Throughout the events during the Christmas festivities, he had felt her regard for him on many occasions. He had not been certain of it until the treasure hunt when they had spent all those glorious hours together, speaking of every topic imaginable. He had found they had much in common, and she was exceedingly pleasurable company.

He thought too of the moment when he had held her in his arms for the first time

when she had almost tumbled from the ladder onto the floor. The memory of the kissing boughs and all the fantasies he had entertained over the preceding days of finally feeling her lips against his added yet more fuel to the fire.

As he contemplated the first time, he had seen her dark brown eyes across the ballroom, he recognized how much he had changed since that time.

In hindsight, he had descended those stairs as a jaded and unhappy individual. He had believed himself contented with his lot. Yet his sole requirement in seeing his aunt and setting foot in England was to see to his father's estate, visit his sister, and leave as soon as possible.

Returning to that vacuous life now felt impossible. He had so many acquaintances abroad but no true friends. He had not been lying when he told his aunt that she and Rosemary were the only people he truly cared for. Henry could also be added to that list, but at the top of it, was Miss Crompton.

She had awakened a part of him that he thought long dead. Even three years on, his mind would often wander to Victoria throughout the day. He would remember her insincere smiles and her laughing nature. Now that his eyes were fully opened, he recognized that her smiles and laughter were at the expense of everyone else around her.

She had not been a kind or loving woman, and it had taken him a long time to realize how much he had wasted on her. Thinking of her against Miss Crompton was like comparing night and day.

Victoria was all jagged edges and hot-tempered arguments. Clarissa was quiet and still, yet with a sharpness of wit that he had never encountered in another.

If she agreed to give him the chance, he would spend his life proving himself to her.

He would show her the depth and sincerity of his love above everything else.

As the night drew to a close and the brightness of dawn illuminated the horizon, Nicholas had not moved. The fire had burned down to embers in the grate, the glowing coals almost entirely extinguished as his eyelids began to droop.

Beyond anything else, he was resolved to tell her how he felt. He would lay everything bare for Miss Crompton, regardless of the consequences. If she rejected him, he knew he had done everything in his power to convince her. He knew that to trust him would be to take a risk, and she had lived through enough pain not to wish to take any more of those.

As sleep began to tug at his eyelids, he kept the locket clutched in his hand; his final thought was of her soft brown eyes turning to him with a look of love. He had to believe that it was possible.

Determined but exhausted, his head nodded to his chest. As dawn's early light pierced the sky on Christmas Eve, sleep finally overcame him.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Clarissa's eyes fluttered open on Christmas Eve. She looked out of the window at the sky above and frowned.

How have I come to be here? She thought in confusion. The last thing she remembered was the carriage ride and then that jolt as she had been thrown from Emily's side into the coldness of the snow.

She winced. It was not just the thudding pain in her head that caused it. She remembered the preceding events leading up to the crash. She remembered Lord Bolton with Lady Wilde, her hand on his chest, leaning toward him as though in the act of kissing him.

Her stomach lurched unpleasantly.

"Clarissa."

She looked over at the sound of the plaintive voice and was surprised to find Rosemary beside her. She was very pale, her hand clutching Clarissa's tightly. Rosemary smiled with relief as their eyes met and stood up, brushing some hair from Clarissa's forehead.

"How are you feeling?" Rosemary asked.

"My head hurts, but otherwise, I feel fine. How long have I slept?"

"Many hours. But the doctor insisted we were not to wake you. He said you need to rest to regain your strength. Come, shall I help you sit up?"

Clarissa nodded very gently, mindful of her thundering headache. She was grateful to Rosemary as she stacked some pillows behind her and helped her to get into a sitting position. She instantly felt more comfortable.

As she leaned back, images of Lady Wilde and Lord Bolton flooded her mind again, and she clenched her lips together, fighting back tears.

“Are you in pain?” Rosemary asked urgently, looking at her with concern.

“No. No. I am well,” she lied quickly and settled herself in her cushions, gratefully receiving some hot tea that Rosemary passed to her. It was refreshing for her parched throat, and she smiled at her friend gratefully.

Rosemary’s eyes met hers again, and her expression was very serious. Clarissa’s gut clenched.

“Someone has been waiting outside your room all night long, desperate to see you.” Clarissa held her breath, watching her friend’s eyes grow warm as she squeezed her fingers. “May I admit him?”

Clarissa was torn between a desperate wish to say yes and concern over what she had witnessed. She did not know what to think anymore; all she knew was that she, too, was desperate to see him, for better or worse.

“You may,” she whispered. Rosemary gave her hand a final squeeze and went to open the door. Clarissa’s heart almost beat out of her chest as she watched Lord Bolton enter.

His eyes never left her face as he paced toward her across the room and came to sit beside the bed. Dark circles were beneath his eyes, and his usually happy expression was particularly grim.

Clarissa turned away from him. The image of Madeline Wilde was too recent and too painful to overlook. She fixed her gaze on the snowy landscape out of the window.

As though recognizing their need for privacy, Rosemary stepped to the door where she had remained at the back of the room.

“I shall return shortly,” she said. A look was exchanged between her and her brother, Rosemary’s eyes gleaming with something akin to a warning. Then the door closed behind her, and they were alone.

For several minutes, they sat in intense silence. Clarissa did not know what to say, and it seemed Lord Bolton was also reluctant to begin speaking.

“I am a fool,” Lord Bolton stated simply. Clarissa could not help turning back toward him at those words. She stared at him as he began to speak, hesitant at first but growing more fervent the longer he continued.

“Miss Crompton, you have my unreserved apologies for what you witnessed between Lady Wilde and myself,” he began, his voice low and filled with emotion. “What you saw, despite how it appeared, was entirely one-sided. I have never knowingly encouraged her, nor was I in any way interested in her proposition. She is eager to remarry. I did not realise how firmly she had fixed upon me as her intended choice. Nothing could have been further from my mind when she spoke with me. What you witnessed was my rejection of her advances in the strongest possible terms and nothing more.” His eyes were entreating as he met her gaze.

“I, too, am eager to marry,” he murmured. “But Lady Wilde is not the object of my affection. It has been many days now where one woman alone has captivated my heart. I have found love at last, only to almost lose it in the cruellest circumstances imaginable.



“You have changed me, Miss Crompton, in ways I did not believe possible. I thought I was happy before we met. I realise now that could not have been further from the truth. You make me want to be a better man.” He sighed, glancing away and then turning back to her. “I know of my reputation, of what you have heard of me. I believed I had an excuse for my actions because I thought myself heartbroken. I realise now how foolish that was, and what my conduct might have cost me. I can do nothing to erase my past, but I can make its lessons build my future.”

Clarissa’s heart swelled at his words, but the doubts would not abate. Her family had been through so much. Can I believe him? Does any man ever truly change?

She wanted to trust it was possible, but Catherine’s scandal was prominent in her mind, her sister’s face floating across her vision like a spectre.

Lord Bolton lowered himself to the floor, kneeling beside the bed, and took something from his pocket, his eyes urgent. Pulling it free, he presented her with a silver chain in the palm of his hand. At the base of it was a beautiful locket, engraved with leaves across the lid and more intricate than anything Clarissa had ever seen.

“Clarissa,” he said haltingly. His hands shook as he showed it to her, a thrill of pleasure pulsing through her breast as he used her Christian name. “My aunt gave me this to give to you. It is a family heirloom, a symbol of true and lasting love. My father gave it to my mother when they were married, and it is my dearest wish that I can bestow it upon you, too.” His voice caught on the words. “I have spoken with your father. I know it was presumptuous of me, but I did not wish to let you slip through my fingers. You have no notion of how lost I was before I met you.”

He took her hand in his. She gasped but could not bring herself to pull away.

“He has given me his blessing,” he said solemnly. Clarissa looked at the sincerity of his face, almost unable to believe her greatest wish had come to pass. “I want to be at

your side. I would think it the greatest honour to pass through this life with you, to be loved by you if I can but hope. Will you let me prove my love to you? I will show my devotion for as long as I live, if you will but give me this chance.”

Clarissa felt the tears she had held at bay for so long begin to fall down her cheeks. The man kneeling before her was not the rake of his past but the man of her future. He had opened his heart to love and commitment for the first time, and in his earnest gaze, she found her answer.

She thought through everything she had experienced in the last few weeks. She recalled the sincerity, easy charm, and kindness he had shown her whole family. Lord Bolton had been attentive and sincere since the first day she had met him. His imploring gaze was desperate and hopeful, and her throat clenched as she recognized how her feelings had changed.

“I have been in turmoil these past weeks,” she confessed. “I have tried to stop myself from falling in love with you.” She frowned at him. “You have made it exceedingly difficult.”

He gave a startled laugh and surged forward, gently sitting beside her on the bed.

“I will not lie and say that your reputation did not concern me,” his frown deepened, “but I have come to realise that we are not built by our past actions. I pray and hope that is true of my sister, and I can only hope it is true of you.”

“I swear to you, on everything I love in this world, that I will never return to that life. I was living in a delirious dream, ignorant of the world I truly wanted. Perhaps it was a nightmare; it certainly brought me no fulfilment. Nothing like I had felt with you.”

“And you never thought of Lady Wilde—”

“Never,” he said firmly. “Not once. Since I met you, you have consumed my entire being.” He gave her a gentle smile, his fingers still tangled in her own.

She smiled, her lips trembling as she nodded just once, the fluttering in her chest almost all-consuming.

“Yes,” she said, with pure happiness, “Nicholas Bolton, I will marry you.”

He let out a great rush of air, and that wonderful smile spread across his face—the real smile he reserved for her alone, the smile she had grown to love so much.

With gentle, tentative movements, he took her face in his hands and brought their lips together with a feather-light touch in a wonderful, secret kiss filled with light and love. She felt his hands tighten around her, his scent envelops her, and for the first time in three long years, the pain she felt dimmed to nothing in his presence.

As they parted, both a little breathless, Nicholas rested his forehead against hers, and they each let out a sigh together.

It was the end of something between them and the start of something bright and new.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

One month later...

Nicholas stood in the church with all of his friends and family before him and could not believe where his life had led him.

He was impossibly happy. Happier than he had ever been. Since Clarissa had accepted him, the joy in his heart had only increased day by day.

As the organ began to play and the congregation stood, he held his breath.

Clarissa appeared at the bottom of the aisle, standing beside Lord Crompton. He had trimmed his hair and eyebrows to a more socially acceptable style in the last week or so, and he looked proud and handsome beside his daughter.

Clarissa was a vision. He could not take his eyes off her. Her long honey-blonde hair was tied about her head and adorned with white flowers and pearls. The dress she wore was intricately decorated with silk and beading that sparkled as she walked. She looked open and happy, and as her eyes met his, she smiled that dazzling smile he adored.

He watched her eyes glance about the church as she approached him. They soon settled on her sister Catherine, who sat in the congregation with her husband and their young boy.

After the whirlwind of their engagement, Clarissa had spoken to Nicholas at length about her fears for her sister. She had been adamant that she wanted to find her, for good or ill.

They had spoken endlessly about how she might raise the topic with her parents. Clarissa was terrified of causing them more unhappiness, and the last thing she wanted was to begin a fresh scandal.

In the weeks following their betrothal, a part of her had always been missing somehow. She was incredibly happy but just a little sad. After watching her wrestle with it for many days, Nicholas finally took it upon himself to open the topic to her parents. It had been an unpleasant prospect. He had sat in the drawing room, nerves raging in his stomach, but determined to get it settled once and for all.

Lord and Lady Crompton had been uncertain and nervous about speaking of their eldest daughter. Lady Crompton particularly had been civil to him during the discussion, but only because of her eagerness for the wedding. He knew she hated discussing Catherine, and he had only continued to do so for Clarissa's sake.

After many days of back and forth, Clarissa had agreed with her father that they would make inquiries in Italy as to their whereabouts. He had watched her heart break a little further as they had recovered Catherine's address relatively easily. He knew it had hurt Clarissa to think that over all these years, they might have found her sooner.

Their reunion, when it came, had been swift and turbulent. Clarissa had been beside herself to see Catherine again. Her initial letter had been answered instantly, and it was not long before their ship was arriving in London. As they stood on the dock in the chilly January air and waited for her arrival, Clarissa had been positively vibrating with wild excitement.

Nicholas had recognized Catherine immediately. An elegant lady with Clarissa's features and dark brown hair was suddenly before them, and the tears that had flowed that day had not just been between the ladies. Nicholas had felt quite overcome to see Clarissa's world complete once again.

The joy of all the family when they were introduced to Edgar had been unmatched. Mr Harrison was a gentile, quiet sort of fellow, but Nicholas had liked him immediately. Nicholas could hardly judge a man on his past, after all.

He let out a long breath as his bride finally reached him. Up close, she looked even more breathtaking, and his heart fluttered nervously as he smiled down at her.

“I am unworthy of you,” he said with a catch in his voice.

She took his hand, squeezing it gently. “We are worthy of each other,” she said forcefully, and he could not help but smile.

How I love her. I never believed I could love anyone so much.

His wife would be a pillar of strength for all he had to face in this world. It had never been clearer to him than at this moment.

Nicholas caught Rosemary's eye. She was sitting at the front of the church and grinning at him with much glee. His aunt sat beside her with Lady Crompton, both of them dabbing at their eyes and glowing with pride.

Behind them, Nicholas saw Henry and Emily. Not long after they announced their own betrothal, Henry had shocked Nicholas beyond all expectation by telling him he was in love—and with Emily Crompton, no less.

Clarissa had not been so surprised, and much joy had been felt by all that Emily, a sweet and kind girl, would never be tainted by the scandal that had dogged the Cromptons for so long.

As Nicholas turned to the priest, holding Clarissa's hand in his and feeling the depth of emotion that only she could trigger in him, he believed himself to be the happiest

man in the world.

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After the ceremony, the wedding party returned to Crompton Manor, where Lady Crompton had outdone herself with the lavish wedding breakfast.

Nicholas was getting used to Lady Crompton's somewhat severe nature. He had learned from Clarissa that she was a guarded woman, but once you had won her favour, you never lost it. The atmosphere was one of joy and excitement as everyone gave a toast to the happy couple.

Nicholas had never seen Clarissa looking more beautiful and he told her so just to see her blush. They could not stop touching one another as they walked about the guests. Nicholas's hand was rarely empty, always searching out Clarissa's as they talked happily together as man and wife.

"Have you heard the rumour that is going around?" Clarissa asked him in a quiet moment. He was pouring her a fresh glass of punch and looked up in surprise.

"Dearest, I did not think you held with rumours," he said teasingly as she rolled her eyes at him affectionately.

"Lady Wilde has moved to Scotland with a wealthy widower," she said, her lips a little tight. Nicholas immediately handed her the glass of punch and pulled her to his side.

"Is that so?" he asked, feigning interest.

"It does not intrigue you?"

“Not in the slightest,” he said evenly. “The woman was a nuisance and constantly interrupted me when I was trying to speak to you.” He said happily and watched adoringly as she laughed at him with light in her eyes.

“She has secured the marriage she missed in you,” Clarissa concluded.

“She did not miss me, for I was never aiming in her direction,” he said blithely, placing a kiss on her head and hugging her to him all the more tightly. “And thank God, for I would not be without you. How else will I ever win at charades?”

She hit him playfully on the arm and then they were interrupted by Edgar who always wanted his new aunt’s attention.

As the festivities continued and the whirlwind of guests ebbed and flowed, Nicholas was desperate for some time alone with his wife. It seemed she shared his thoughts as they both quietly gravitated toward the terrace, hand in hand.

The guests were occupied, and they managed to steal a few moments alone outside. They walked out into the snowy wonderland. The cold had persisted into February, and they had both talked of how pleasant it would be once the spring came.

They stood side by side, surveying the garden, whilst observing the snowdrops at the foot of the trees bobbing their delicate heads in the gentle zephyr. Nicholas could not imagine a better future or a better person to share it with.

He glanced at the milling guests behind him and then turned to face his wife.

“I love you, my darling,” he said solemnly, and she smiled up at him.

“I love you, too. More every day.”



He leaned down and captured her lips with his own and just as he did so, the snow began to fall again. As she pulled back from him, he was finally able to see the snowflakes settling on those long, beautiful eyelashes.

He could not help the smile that spread over his face as he leaned down to kiss her again.

~The End~

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

Five years later...

A robin was pecking at the lawn amidst the snow. Lady Bolton had been watching him for some time. He fluttered about, his little wings a flurry of movement as she gazed out at the Bernewood estate.

She held her son close to her breast against the chill coming through the window and looked down at his little face with quiet love and adoration.

She heard the shrieking cry of a child outside the drawing room and walked into the corridor, waiting for the whirlwind to arrive. As she watched, her three-year-old twins, Amelia and Edward, raced down the corridor, screaming wildly.

She could hardly blame them; it was Christmas morning, after all, and they were entitled to some excitement.

Clarissa shifted James in her arms and followed them at a more sedate pace. As she walked down the corridor toward the huge Christmas tree in their grand hallway, she saw her husband descending the stairs. Even after all these years, his appearance never failed to make her heart skip a beat.

His eyes lit up as he saw her, and as he descended the last step, he put a proprietary arm around her waist and hugged her to him, kissing her good morning before doing the same to James.

He pulled away, smiling down at her, and then sighed dramatically as Amelia let out a piercing scream.

“Right, you terrors, come and give your father a hug,” he called to the twins. They squealed delightedly as he chased them and picked them both up in a bear hug, making Clarissa laugh.

Nicholas kissed his daughter on the head so many times that she ran and hid behind the Christmas tree. Edward, on the other hand, ended up on his father’s back, hanging on for dear life.

Nicholas turned to his wife in confusion.

“Have you seen our eldest son?” Nicholas asked. Turning around while holding Edward’s legs in an iron grip. “I declare I cannot find him anywhere.”

“Perhaps he is playing in the snow,” Clarissa said loudly over Edward’s loud protests that he was, in fact, ‘here, Papa.’ Eventually, Nicholas took pity on him and lowered him back to the ground with a grin, and the twins scampered off to make mischief somewhere else in the house.

“Wait for me!” came a plaintive cry from behind them as Edgar ran to follow them. Despite him being two years older, he adored the twins, and they played together often.

“How is my nephew?” Catherine asked as she followed her son into the hallway. “Good morning, Nicholas, Merry Christmas,” she said brightly as Nicholas returned the same.

“He did not sleep half the night,” Clarissa admitted, handing James to Catherine, who cooed at him adoringly.

“Quite right, it is Christmas, far too much excitement to get any sleep,” she said cheerfully.

“Good morning, sister,” Theo said to Clarissa as he came to join Catherine. Theo Harrison had become a valued member of their family. He and Lord Addison were thick as thieves, and Clarissa was looking forward to the whole family gathering together today. It had been too long since they had all been able to be in one place.

She laughed as Lady Eleanor emerged and looked at them all irritably.

“There are gifts to be distributed. Would you stop dawdling in the hallway?”

“My apologies, aunt,” Nicholas said automatically, and Clarissa laughed as he walked briskly after her as though he were a schoolboy.

Soon, they were all sitting around the fireplace in the large drawing room. It had windows that looked out on the Bernewood estate; the snow was thick upon the ground, the sky heavy with snowflakes to come, and everything was filled with seasonal cheer. Clarissa had been grateful for Eleanor’s assistance in the decorations in the house. The lady had an eye for where things should be placed, and Clarissa had been happy to leave her to it. The fireplace was adorned with endless garlands of holly and looked very festive.

Clarissa sat beside her husband, feeling quite content with the world.

“Brother, you are hogging the mince pies,” Rosemary said reproachfully as Nicholas pulled the plate away from her.

“I am doing no such thing. I know you of old. You eat twenty at once.”

“Do not listen to him, Gregory,” Rosemary said to her husband, who sat watching his wife with a knowing expression.

“I do not need to listen to him,” Gregory said, “he speaks the truth. I have not had one

all season.”

Rosemary’s high exclamations of outrage were met with much laughter about the room as her brother reluctantly handed over the plate to her with a grumble.

Eleanor distributed the presents to the children, who happily opened them before the fire. Amelia, Edward, and Edgar all received wooden toys, which they immediately began to play with. James was asleep in Catherine’s arms, and she seemed disinclined to move him.

She watched her sister for a moment or two as Theo leaned in and whispered something in her ear. She gave him a happy smile in return. It was wonderful to see them so happy. All those years of worry had been for nothing, it seemed. Catherine had known her own heart, and had made the right choice.

Clarissa glanced at her father, who was showing Edgar how to use his toy. Her mother sat beside him, her eyes flitting about the children with a loving expression. Clarissa knew Lady Crompton had found Theo’s appearance in their midst the most difficult of them all. She was still angry with him for ‘corrupting’ her daughter, but she had warmed to him slowly over time.

Lady Crompton looked up and caught her gaze and they shared a smile. Things were as good as they had ever been, and that was enough for Clarissa.

She looked at Nicholas as he put his arm around her and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“You have done wonders this year, my love; the house is positively brimming with Christmas spirit.”

She smiled. “I have placed kissing boughs above some of the doors, perhaps you can help me search for them this evening.”

He smiled with a new light in his eyes. "I shall find every one, I can assure you."

She laughed as the family fell into a happy silence as they watched the children play.

"I have an announcement to make," said Rosemary, who had placed down her tea. Gregory sat forward to take her hand, and Clarissa's heart lurched in her chest. Henry and Emily were conspicuously quiet, and Clarissa was fairly certain Emily already knew the news that was about to be announced. She and Rosemary were inseparable these days.

"Come the end of Spring, there shall be another little one to join the family," Rosemary said, all but beaming as Gregory's hand moved to her stomach.

Nicholas was on his feet instantly, grabbing his sister, who gave a cry of alarm as he lifted her up and spun her around in a circle. He soon stopped, however, when Gregory admonished him with a swift 'think of the baby, Nicholas,' and he promptly put her down.

Clarissa glanced at Emily, who gave her a knowing look and rolled her eyes. She watched Henry's hand hover over Emily's swollen belly. She was soon to give birth to their first child, and Clarissa had rarely seen two people more excited.

As she turned back to the happy family scene before her, Nicholas sat down again, looking thoughtful. Edgar and the twins looked up at the adults in the room in some confusion, probably wondering what all the fuss was about.

"Whatever are we to do?" Nicholas asked with some concern.

Clarissa frowned at him. "About what, may I ask?"

"Well, Henry has already promised to name his son after me," Nicholas said

playfully.

“I have done no such thing,” Henry said incredulously. “Do behave yourself, Bolton.”

“But Nicholas is such a fine name,” Nicholas protested. He turned to Rosemary. “Perhaps you could both choose it. That would be very fine. Three Nicholas’s in the family.”

“However, do you put up with him Clary?” Lady Eleanor muttered as she sipped her tea.

“Perhaps we could have Nicholas as a middle name,” Henry conceded, “But I would not wish for him to follow in your footsteps, Bolton. Not unless it is after the advent of your lady wife.”

Nicholas turned to her with a rueful glance, but she knew his days as a rake were long gone.

He had been nothing but devoted to her, just as he had promised, for the last five years. She had not believed such happiness could exist with one’s husband, yet here they were.

The rest of the day was spent eating the sumptuous dinner that had been prepared, with much hilarity in and amongst.

When everyone was bursting at the seams, they returned to the drawing room and collapsed into the various chairs in the room.

Clarissa and her sister played the pianoforte together, as they had once done as children. Even Lord and Lady Crompton could be prevailed upon to sing, and they all began singing carols and revelling in Christmas cheer.

When Eleanor was asked to play, Clarissa happily gave up her seat and went to stand beside her sister. Their arms around one another, they watched the scene before them. Everyone was singing loudly and brashly, but it did not matter.

Clarissa laid her head on Catherine's shoulder, and her sister hugged her tightly.

"I never would have pictured this life for us," Catherine said wistfully. "I never believed I would see you again after I left."

Clarissa pulled back as they looked at one another. "Are you happy?" Clarissa asked.

"I have never been happier," Catherine replied. "I could not have been so without you. I do not ever wish to be parted from you again."

"Nor I you," she said earnestly, and they embraced, all thoughts of the pain from the past forgotten.

As the evening drew to a close, Clarissa and Nicholas sat before the fire. The children were abed, and their guests had gone to their rooms for the night. They watched the flames leaping in the grate, quiet and calm as the snow swirled about the windows.

"Do you know it is five years and a day since you confessed your feelings to me?" she said reflectively.

"I was just thinking the same thing," he said fondly.

Her fingers moved automatically to the locket about her neck and brushed it gently in familiar circles. The picture inside had always been and would always be of Nicholas. She loved him beyond everything that had passed through her life and could not believe they had found one another through such adversity.



“I think I love you more now,” Nicholas murmured, and she turned to him. “I would not have believed it possible, but I do. I am still unworthy of you. I shall strive every day to keep you happy and content. I hope you know that.”

She took his hand in hers, kissing it with a wan smile.

“But I am, Nicholas. As long as I have you, I have everything I need.”

She settled into his side, listening to the snowstorm rage about them, content and warm in the arms of the man she loved.

~The End~

London was the last place Michael wanted to be...

He stared out of the bay window on the second floor of his stately London townhouse, surrounded by the recently refurbished and decorated private study. It had taken months of painstaking work to return the townhouse to its former glory and yet he was in no mood to enjoy the fruits of his labour. His mind was in a terrible state, all because of the city he had no choice but to return to.

The city wasn't at fault, in truth. It was its occupants who bothered him. The people who traversed the cobblestoned street, parading in rouge and waistcoats, feigning respectability. The very same people who would willingly frame an innocent man for their own gain, destroying a family in the process. Those were the very individuals he would have to face now that he had returned to London, and he was not particularly keen on it.

But even though London was not where he wanted to be, it was where he had to be. In order to uncover the truth and clear his father's name, he had to do whatever it took. Even if it meant diving into the den of snakes all over again.

Anger simmered deep in the pit of his stomach. It was never far from his grasp. In the past four years, he drew on it whenever he needed motivation to continue on his path of vengeance. And other times, it consumed him without thought, taking over every bit of his senses until he could focus on nothing else. The past reared its ugly head at the worst times and, on several occasions, he nearly turned from his path. The pain, anger, and sorrow were tearing him to shreds piece by piece.

But then he thought of his father and his dying moments.

He recalled his mother who withered away from grief after his father's death.

He thought of his sister, who remained positive and vibrant despite the social disgrace foisted upon their family and the impact it had on her prospects for marriage.

And he remembered very clearly why he was doing this.

Michael turned away from the window, facing the mahogany desk littered with correspondence and documents. Everything—or nearly everything—he required to establish his father's innocence lay scattered across the vast surface of the massive desk. He had spent countless hours poring over them, going through each and every one of them until he knew them by heart. He put the pieces together over and over again, in his mind and with the physical documents, but it was not enough. There was still one missing, one thing that would ensure he left this matter behind him with nothing but fulfilment.

He had to enact his vengeance. And Lady Elaine Sutton of Suthenshire was his key to doing exactly that.

Michael picked up a letter from an old country lord, whose estate he'd recently left before coming to London. It was one of many, of course. He'd gone from smoky coffeehouses to fabulous estates of retired officials all over England, gathering the evidence he needed to prove that the Earl of Suthenshire was guilty of deceit. That the convictions against Michael's father, the late Duke of Ryewood, were false. Just looking at them was enough to stir familiar hatred in his heart.

"Michael?" A soft knock accompanied the gentle voice on the other end of the door. Michael dropped the letter, turning to face his sister as she slipped into the room.

Her small frown smoothed away the moment she looked at him, but Michael knew it was never far behind. He had not been home for very long and Clarissa had taken to

following him around the house with worry written all over her face. It was a far cry from the little girl who had once followed him around in absolute adoration. The person before him was a woman now and she could tell that something was wrong.

Michael had no intention of disclosing the truth of his obsession anytime soon, so he forced a smile. “Yes? Is anything amiss?”

“Oh, nothing is amiss,” she assured him as she came forward. “I am merely here to keep you company, that is all.”

“Oh? Did you think that my years away from this place have turned me into the sort of man who cannot bear solitude?”

“No, I believe it has made you the kind of man who appreciates the company of a sister he holds so dear.”

Michael felt his smile turn genuine at the sparkle of mischief in Clarissa’s blue eyes. They were so much like their late mother’s, from the hue to the shape to the vibrancy it was always filled with. She shared many things with the late Duchess of Ryewood—the same honey-blond hair that cascaded down the length of her back, its fullness an envy of many other ladies her age, the same slim figure, and the same beautifully, pouty lips. Michael always knew that his sister would have men lining up at her feet for a chance to marry her and, now that she’d debuted for her first Season, that assumption was easily confirmed. He wouldn’t be surprised to find a dozen more flowers waiting for her downstairs.

Michael draped an arm around her shoulders, leading her away from the study, away from the desk. “To think that you’ve turned one-and-twenty and you are still so attached to our companionship.”

“I am not attached,” Clarissa denied immediately. “You have been travelling all over

London for four years and you have only returned three days ago. It is no fault of mine that I wish to spend time with you before the Ton catches wind that the Duke of Ryewood is in London.”

“So it is my fault then?”

“Will you not tell me why you were gone for so long?”

Michael nearly darkened at her words and had to remind himself that she was innocent in all of this. “I was attending to business,” he lied.

Clarissa’s frown deepened, her bottom lip jutting in her signature pout. In her youth, that expression was all she needed to get her way. But it wouldn’t work so easily today.

“Pray, spare me such a glance,” Michael chastised easily, pulling away from her as they made their way down the hallway with no destination in mind. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “You know the position of a duke is no easy one.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I do not want what happened to Papa to happen to you as well.”

“It shall not,” he replied firmly.

“Will you promise me?”

Michael glanced down, noting how she batted her eyelashes at him. He laughed softly, rolling his eyes. “That will not sway me, and you are well aware of it.”

“How do you know it has not already swayed you?”

“Because I have not conceded to your demands.”

“Hm,” she hummed. “Will you be attending dinner with Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Henry? They asked me to confirm your attendance, even though I already assured them you would be there.”

“And why would you tell them such a thing?”

“Because it is the truth.”

Michael sighed. He had more planning to do. He had not been in London very long yet and he knew the rumors of his return were only just beginning. If he was seen out and about, then it would set ablaze all through the Ton. He wasn't ready for that as yet.

“Michael.” Clarissa took his hand, forcing them to stop. She gazed up at him with utmost seriousness. “We have missed you. Not only I, but Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Henry as well.”

The sadness in her voice tore at him a little. Michael was already responding before he gave it another thought. “I shall be there.”

Clarissa's smile was so quick, that he wondered if he had imagined her previous frown. “I shall inform them at once.”

Without warning, she reached up on her toes and pressed a kiss on his cheek before hurrying away with a pep in her step. Michael stared after her, realising a little too late what she'd just done.

He sighed, turning back the way he'd come. He supposed that over the four years they had been apart, Clarissa had only become more adept at getting her own way.

And he was no better at fighting her charms.

Though he supposed spending time with his aunt, uncle, and sister was the least he could do after being away for so long, he wouldn't have to worry about that for now. With dinnertime still a few hours away, he had plenty of time to peruse the documents and go over his plan.

Plenty of time to ensure that when he encountered Lady Elaine for the first time, he would be prepared.

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Tears pricked Elaine's eyes for the second time that day. She fought them valiantly but a lone tear escaped, blazing a hot path down the side of her face. She quickly wiped it away before her father could see.

"Right here," she murmured, her throat thick with emotion. She hoped her father would not be able to tell.

With one arm wrapped around his waist, she helped his frail body settle into the plush armchair facing the window of the drawing room. She tried ignoring the fact that the armchair was now fading in colour, as was nearly everything else in the townhouse. The signs of neglect she'd once been able to ignore now showed themselves in every scratched surface, every faded and peeling wallpaper and every worn piece of furniture.

This particular chair had once been her favourite growing up. She would spend hours reading poetry and working on her embroidery in that very spot. But that was before her world came crashing down around her. Now it was the closest, most comfortable chair for her ailing father to rest in the drawing room when he was not confined to his bed.

“It is quite windy today, Papa,” she said softly, grateful that the lump was now cleared from her throat. She forced a weak smile to her lips. “Would you like me to open the windows?”

Lord Edward Sutton, the Earl of Suthenshire, looked up at her with cloudy eyes filled with something she couldn't name. Pain, she realised as her heart broke in two. He was in pain and she could do nothing to help him.

“No wind,” he rasped. She assumed he wanted to say ‘no window’ but couldn't manage the full sentence. His words ended with a fierce, dry cough.

“Very well,” she said. “I shall fetch your blanket.”

Edward clutched her skirt, the closest thing to his fingers, and held as firmly as he could. “Sit...sit with me...”

Elaine swallowed. For a moment, she could only stare at him, fighting the wave of sorrow that washed over her. Her once-proud father who wore his title and prestige like a badge of honour had been reduced to a skinny, frail man bested by illness. Watching him deteriorate before her eyes had only made the last few years far more terrible than it could have been.

Again, she forced a smile to her face but she doubted this one was very convincing. “Very well,” she said gently, claiming the armchair across from him. “I have been on my feet all morning. It would be nice to rest for a spell.”

Edward sank into the armchair as if he had been using the last of his strength to keep her from leaving. Elaine looked out the window. She couldn't bear to look at her father for too long. It always left her in tears.

“Thank you...my dear,” Edward rasped once more.



“Papa, you should save your strength.”

“I have nothing left. But you...”

Goodness, it was far too difficult to keep herself together today. Perhaps it was because today was the anniversary of her mother’s death five years ago. Each year she expected it to get easier and each year she was proven otherwise. Influenza had claimed her beautiful mother far too early and, shortly after, her father’s health began to decline. Their physicians worked tirelessly to figure out the root of his illness but, as their coffers ran dry, so did the help of those they hired. It wasn’t before long that Elaine was left to take care of her father herself.

“That is not quite true,” she replied, striving for a lightness in her voice, though it sounded flat to her ears. “You have Simon. He may be away at Eton but he would forsake it all, should he know you needed him.”

Edward shook his head slightly. His eyes often watered, a side effect of his illness the physicians had said, but the pure pain etched into his face made Elaine wonder if they were real tears.

“And there is Aunt Lorna and James. They are ever at hand to assist us. We are never truly alone.”

Edward shook his head again as the tears fell down his cheeks. Elaine thought he might have something else to say but then his eyes drifted close and sleep claimed him instantly. She paused for a moment, watching the staggered but very real rise and fall of his chest before she allowed herself to relax. She preferred him when he was sleeping, she decided. He always looked more at peace.

But it gave her a moment of peace that she did not want. With nothing but silence as her companion, there was no stopping the waves of emotional memories that

assaulted her. She would never forget the day she lost her mother, the day English Society lost the Countess of Suthenshire. She had been so well loved that nearly all of the Ton came to her wake.

Elaine never knew many of their names. They paid their respects but they did not care about the disgraced Earl and his children. They gossiped about them behind their backs and had little empathy for Elaine and Simon. Of course, Simon went off to Eton shortly after Edward fell ill so he didn't know the extent of their father's state. Nor did he have to suffer the scrutiny of their ruined reputation and a significant dip in finances. That was Elaine's burden to bear and hers alone.

She spent her days in the same manner. Taking care of her father, maintaining appearances in Society, keeping her brother ignorant of the true direness of their situation, and longing for the opportunity to save her family.

There was a gentle knock on the door. Elaine blinked, realising with a start that she'd started crying again. She wiped her tears quickly and croaked, "Come."

The door opened and their weathered butler, Paul, appeared. His loyalty to the family remained unwavering, even though so many of the other servants had left due to their inability to compensate them.

"Lord and Lady Abney to see you, my lady."

Elaine quickly stood. "Pray show them in," she told him hurriedly as she made her way over to the sofas arranged in the centre of the room. "And please prepare us some tea."

He nodded and slipped out of the room just as Lorna and James appeared. As usual, Lorna's presence was like a breath of fresh air, breezing into the room with a pep in her step. Her son, Elaine's cousin, followed closely behind, his expression as grim as

always.

As mother and son, they were always an interesting sight. The Dowager Viscountess of Abney rarely let her feathers get ruffled, a lively spirit capable of improving the mood of anyone she was near. Quite unlike James, the current Viscount of Abney, who viewed life through serious and critical eyes. Despite his austere demeanour, he was one of the kindest, most gentle people Elaine knew.

Then again, she did not know many people, since she spent most of her days cooped up in the house.

“Elaine, my darling.” Lorna swept to her side and placed kisses on both cheeks like she always did. “How is it that each time I see you, you grow more and more beautiful?”

Elaine flushed. “It is such a pleasure to see you, Aunt Lorna. And you as well, James.”

“Elaine,” James greeted gruffly. He ran a scrutinous gaze down the length of her. “Are you well?”

“As well as I can be,” she confessed, settling into a seat. “Though I was curious when I might hear from the two of you again.”

“Mother is to be blamed for that,” James said, sinking into the sofa next to Lorna. “She feels the need to entertain every one of her friends whenever they pay her a visit. And they are always paying her a visit.”

“Oh, do not be envious, James,” Lorna huffed. “It is most unbecoming of you. If you wish to make as many friends as me, you need only say so and I shall gladly teach you my ways.”

“I do not wish to learn your ways.”

“I would beg to differ,” she huffed, laughing. “It is nothing to be ashamed of, you know.”

James gritted his teeth, getting visibly annoyed. Elaine watched in fascination. She couldn’t understand how James was so oblivious to what his mother was doing. Anyone could see that Lorna liked getting him riled and yet he walked into her trap every time.

“Famous last words of an envious man,” Lorna sang and laughed when James grunted in frustration. “He likes to get himself in a huff,” she said to Elaine. “Let us ignore him. We are here for you, after all.”

Elaine smiled. The last time they’d spoken, Lorna had mentioned sponsoring Elaine’s debut for the London Season. Elaine had spent days imagining what that would be like. She’d hoped to debut at the proper age of ten-and-nine or twenty like most ladies of her station but, given her situation, she supposed she should count herself lucky that she still got the chance to do it at one-and-twenty.

As if she heard the direction of Elaine’s thoughts, Lorna said, “We cannot wait any longer. Any older and you will lose half your potential prospects and that simply cannot be done.”

“I am grateful for the opportunity, Aunt Lorna,” Elaine told her. “But I’m afraid I must admit that I am unsure of what exactly I should do.”

“Oh, goodness, it is such a pity that Margaret left us so soon. She should have been here to guide you. It is not fair that she shall not get the chance to see you debut.”

Lorna’s shoulders sagged with sadness and a moment of silence hung heavy in the

room. As Elaine's maternal aunt, Elaine knew how close Lorna had been with her mother. Lorna was still mourning her as much as Elaine was.

As usual, James was the one to bring them back to reality. "There is nothing we can do to change the past," he stated, though his voice was a little softer than usual. "But we can fix the present. And presently, Elaine, you need to grasp every opportunity you can to get married."

Elaine nodded, determination coursing through her veins. She had to get married. It was the only way to save her family. She was their only hope. Even if her brother were to return and claim responsibility for the earldom, he would be managing a husk of a legacy. But she had the chance to make things right.

It no longer mattered that she had once dreamed of marrying for love; that cherished dream was now painfully beyond her grasp.

"I am ready," she said firmly.

"Marvelous," Lorna chirped. "Lord and Lady Jones' ball is upon the morrow—"

"Upon the morrow?" Elaine gasped.

"Oh, don't worry, darling. I have arranged for everything already. I have a number of dresses for you to be fitted in for the ball, but we shall have to make time to visit the modiste shortly."

Elaine glanced worriedly at James. "Is not the morrow a trifle too soon?"

"It is never too soon," Lorna answered her with a dismissive wave of her hand. "The quicker you are out in Society, the quicker you will be noticed by potential suitors. We do not want them turning their attention to other ladies before you show, now do

we?”

“I suppose not...” Yet it did little to quell the sudden burst of anxiousness trembling within her. She had not expected to have to do it tomorrow.

“There is nothing to worry about, Elaine,” Lorna gently reassured her, clearly sensing her apprehension. “You are a beautiful girl with a lovely, demure disposition—”

“Demure?” James echoed incredulously.

“Yes, demure. At least, that is what the gentlemen will think when they meet her. Men love demureness.”

“Is it not best for me to be my true self?” Elaine asked.

“Yes, of course. But in a demure manner, of course. Worry not, darling, I shall be right there to guide you.”

“And I shall spread the word that you are seeking a husband,” James spoke up.

As Elaine balked— for even she recognised how outrageous that was—Lorna sighed. “You shall do no such thing. You would frighten them all away. We do not want anyone to presume she is desperate.”

James frowned. “But she is desperate.”

“But they need not be aware of it!” Lorna exclaimed. She caught herself and drew in a slow breath. “James, my dear, you should simply focus on securing her a respectable dowry and utilising your connections to ensure we remain invited to any forthcoming events.”

James seemed bemused by Lorna's impatience, which only amused Elaine. While Lorna tended to poke James' buttons for fun, James seemed to be utterly clueless when he did the same to his mother.

But he conceded with a nod. "Very well."

"Lovely." Lorna turned her attention back to Elaine, smiling. "Now, is there anything you would like to inquire of us?"

Elaine frowned in contemplation before shaking her head. "I have no questions. Whatever you instruct me to do, I shall do without hesitation. I am merely grateful for all your assistance."

"You are family, darling," Lorna murmured. "How could I face Margaret in my sleep if I allowed her family to fall to ruin?"

Elaine managed a smile at that, somehow. "Truthfully, I wished I was attending the Season under better circumstances. I longed to be free to choose a gentleman with whom I have fallen in love, rather than merely the first suitable match who might aid in saving my family."

Lorna reached out to grasp Elaine's hand. "Perhaps you will be fortunate enough to receive both."

Elaine knew better than to believe she could be so lucky. The past few years had proven that she was not the most favourable person in London. But she hoped that what little luck she did possess would be revealed in the form of a kind husband who could save her from ruin.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:27 am*

The Earl and Countess of Belington stood facing the front door in their opulent foyer the moment Michael entered. He took one look at their bright smiles and knew that he was in for it.

“Michael!”

Beatrice was the first to break. She flew from her husband’s side, flinging her arms around Michael and pulling him into a warm embrace. The force of her hug was enough to send him staggering back, holding his hands out to steady himself.

“You’re going to topple over!” Clarissa exclaimed as she came up from behind.

“Oh, no I won’t,” Beatrice dismissed easily. “Michael must have grown three feet taller since the last time I saw him. This big, strapping young man is more than capable of keeping us both on our feet, is he not?”

The question was aimed at Michael, he knew. He sighed. “It is nice to see you as well, Aunt Beatrice.”

“Is that how you greet your aunt whom you have not seen in years?” She pulled away, putting both hands on her hips. “Where is love? Where is the excitement? And why must I hear of your return to London from Clarissa and not from you?”

Before he could think of a response, Henry approached from behind her, grinning from ear to ear. “Now, now, dear,” he said placatingly. “I am certain Michael has a perfectly reasonable explanation for leaving his loved ones behind without a proper farewell, while only sending two or three letters every year. Is that not true,



Michael?”

Clarissa giggled behind her hand as she watched the exchange. Michael would have laughed as well, only he knew his uncle was utterly serious.

“I do have a reason,” Michael confessed, though that was the extent of what he intended to say. “I presume you two have missed me?”

“Oh, dear,” Clarissa murmured. “Wrong response.”

Beatrice’s eyes were slowly growing wide. “Miss you? Oh, goodness no! We did not think of you at all in the years you were gone. Not once did we wonder if you were ever coming back. No, not at all.”

“As a matter of fact,” Henry joined in, his tone dripping with the same heavy sarcasm as his wife. “We did not even remember that you were not around. Had Clarissa not told us that you were back, we would have thought you never left!”

“All right,” Michael sighed. “I understand.”

“Does he understand, Henry?” Beatrice asked, turning to her husband.

“I do not think that he does,” Henry played along.

Clarissa finally decided to step in. “All right, you two, don’t be too hard on him. You know Michael is not the type to do anything on a whim. He will explain himself in due time, I’m sure.”

“And I certainly cannot do so on an empty stomach,” Michael chimed in.

Only then did they relent, much to his relief. If given the chance, they would keep it

up for the rest of the night.

“Come then,” Beatrice huffed. “I shan’t disgrace your parents’ honour by failing to keep you fed under our roof.”

“That is the only reason she is feeding you,” Henry whispered to Michael, eyes glinting with mischief.

Michael shook his head, relaxing as he followed behind his aunt and uncle, Clarissa by his side. He knew he’d missed them, but he hadn’t realised just how much until now. They were like his secondary parents and easily slipped into the role when their real parents passed away. Michael thought it fitting since they’d never been blessed with children of their own.

So they would often spoil Michael in his youth. Even though Clarissa was the beloved only daughter, Michael was the firstborn and the heir. He’d received such heartwarming love and adoration from his aunt and uncle that there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for them. Which made their sarcastic ribbing sting a little. He should have done more to keep them from worrying about him.

They gathered in the dining room and, before long, the first course was served. Michael was fully prepared when Beatrice fixed him with a hard gaze and said, “Now, pray tell, what you have been up to.”

“Traveling,” Michael answered nonchalantly, prodding at his beans. “Was that not apparent?”

“Why would you not venture beyond England then, like many gentlemen of your age do? I would scarcely deem that a Grand Tour.”

“That is because it was not meant to be one. How could I learn the customs and

cultures of other countries when I do not fully know my own?"

Beatrice didn't believe him. That much was obvious in the way she narrowed her eyes at him.

But Clarissa spoke next, rescuing him from another question. "It is just as well, Aunt Beatrice," she said. "He has not missed much in his absence. And he's returned just in time for the London Season."

Beatrice sat up straighter. "Does that mean you are ready to settle down?"

Michael didn't dare show an ounce of emotion at that. "I am neither ready nor am I against it. Whatever happens, shall happen. It is Clarissa we should focus on this Season, however."

"Clarissa seems to be doing just fine," Henry spoke up. "I have already had several gentlemen approach me with the intention of marrying her."

Clarissa's eyes widened, her fork dropping limply from her grasp. "Already? The Season has just begun! Is it Lord Gregory?"

"How did you know?"

"Oh, goodness." She put her hand to her temples in consternation. "That man is quite persistent."

"Who is Lord Gregory?" Michael asked, grateful that the attention was no longer on him.

"He is the second son of the Earl of Palwood," Henry explained. "And he is quite smitten with Clarissa. The same night he met her, he asked me for my permission to

ask for her hand in marriage.”

“I hope you said no,” Clarissa muttered.

“I did not say no,” Henry admitted with a cheeky smile. “But do not fret; I did not say yes either.”

“That hardly makes me feel any better,” she grumbled.

“Pay that no mind, Clarissa,” Michael told her. “If he wishes to receive any blessing, it will have to come from me. And if you do not like this Lord Gregory fellow, then neither do I.”

Clarissa visibly brightened at that, but Beatrice rolled her eyes. “You do not know him.”

“I do not need to know him. Clarissa does. And she does not like him. So that is that.”

“So will you simply dismiss any gentleman who fancies her merely because she does not fancy him back?”

“Yes.”

Beatrice sighed. “I wish you all the luck in your endeavours.”

“Mayhap I shall find a more suitable gentleman at Lady Jones’ ball upon the morrow's evening,” Clarissa mused aloud. “The men I have met so far are quite lacking. Will you chaperone me, Michael?”

“I believe Aunt Beatrice will be better suited to act as your chaperone,” Michael responded. Just as her shoulders sagged with disappointment, he added, “But I shall

be attending alongside you.”

“You will?” Clarissa squealed. “How wonderful! You will be all anyone will be able to talk about. The much-discussed return of the infamous Duke of Ryewood.”

Even though her words were meant in jest, the reality was far more sombre. He’d planned it all, of course. Lord and Lady Jones were notorious for throwing grand balls, that nearly the entirety of the Ton would be in attendance. If he wanted to be noticed, tomorrow’s ball was the best way to do so.

Yet, his apprehension simmered deep within him nonetheless. Rubbing noses and smiling in hypocritical faces was the last thing he wanted to do.

Thankfully, the conversation centred around Clarissa and her numerous suitors for the rest of the dinner, but Michael knew that it was far from over. Henry kept giving him curious looks and he knew he would have to face his questioning sooner or later.

As it happened, no more questions were directed his way for the remainder of the dinner. But as it drew to an end, Henry seized the opportunity to ask Michael to share a bottle of brandy with him in the parlour while the ladies went to the drawing room.

Michael accepted out of courtesy. He knew that he couldn’t hold the truth to himself any longer. And if there was anyone he wanted on his side, it was his closest uncle.

Clarissa and Beatrice chatted incessantly as they made their way to the drawing room, talking about today’s fashion and whether they were impressed with the new changes. Michael and Henry were quiet, that silence lasting even when they entered the parlour and Henry went about making them their drinks.

Michael sat in a high-backed armchair and waited.

“Tell me what you have been up to,” Henry stated, his voice devoid of any humour. He wasn’t serious very often, but when he was, it was a force to be reckoned with.

Michael sipped his brandy, letting the smooth liquor warm his insides before he responded. “I’m sure you can guess what has consumed my every thought since the day my father was found guilty of treason.”

Henry frowned, his brows drawing together as concern clouded his gaze. “Surely you have not spent all this time chasing shadows? It is such a futile ambition, Michael, to invest one’s soul in what cannot be caught.”

Michael scoffed. “Were it merely a shadow, there would be little to pursue. Yet in seeking to prove his innocence, I have traversed the breadth of England, gathering overwhelming evidence that my father was condemned unjustly, his trial nothing short of a travesty.” His voice lowered, laced with both frustration and fierce determination, the weight of his quest palpable in the charged air between them.

“Then why haven’t you brought this evidence to light?” Henry pressed.

Michael took another slow sip of his brandy, the fiery liquid barely dulling the edge of his simmering fury. “Because it is not enough,” he replied, his voice tight. “I need more than letters and rumours—I need irrefutable proof. I need a confession from the man responsible for Father’s ruin.”

Henry sighed. “Lord Suthenshire is not the man he once was, Michael. He has aged and is ailing.”

“I have no sympathy for a man who would condemn another to rot in a dungeon on false charges for the sake of political gain! Father suffered at his hands—and for what? Eventually, Suthenshire never gained the power he so desperately sought.”

Henry's gaze filled with sadness. Michael knew he was right. The House of Lords was filled with vipers that would easily tear someone down for more power. The late duke had been the last morally upright gentleman in that place and they ensured that his life would be ruined, all so that he could no longer oppose them.

The Earl of Suthenshire would quickly know how wrong it was to play with the lives of others.

"What shall you do then?" Henry asked softly. Michael noticed that his uncle had not yet touched his drink.

"I intend to approach his daughter, Lady Elaine."

Henry's brow furrowed. "You will seduce her?"

"If I must," Michael replied, his voice cold with determination. "But let us hope it does not come to that. For now, I intend to get close to her, close enough to uncover the full truth of what transpired."

"The consequences of such an action may be far greater than you fathom, Michael."

Michael frowned. "All because the earl is ill?"

"The family has been disgraced," Henry explained with a shake of his head, a grave expression settling on his features. "Lord Suthenshire's action after your father's conviction led him down a path of terrible financial decisions. He has far more debt than he will ever be able to overcome and he has severed ties with a number of influential gentlemen because of that. Associating with his family may only tarnish your own standing further."

Michael paused, weighing his uncle's words. He had heard whispers of the earl's

downfall, much to his satisfaction, though he had not realised the full extent of it. Still, he steeled himself...

“The benefits outweigh the risks,” he said determinedly.

Henry’s expression remained doubtful. “The fragile state of the dukedom’s reputation further complicates matters. Our name cannot bear much scrutiny right now.”

“For now I am working to restore that reputation, starting with bringing the truth to light.”

“And what of the earl’s daughter? Do you deem it wise to entangle an innocent in this web of vengeance?”

Michael didn’t dare let his true thoughts on that matter show, saying, “Whether I involve her or not, she will suffer once the truth is revealed. I shall see to it.”

Henry said nothing to that, finally taking a sip of his drink. The silence simmered in the room but Michael hardly noticed it. His fury, which was never too far away, threatened to spill over at any moment. Taking small sips of the brandy was all that calmed him.

He quelled the pinch of guilt at the thought of Lady Elaine. Henry was right. She was not to blame for her father’s errors. However, if she could assist him in uncovering the full truth, then at least she might play a part in her father’s atonement.



“Michael.”

Michael glanced at his sister, immediately alert at the softness of her voice. They’d left Belington House a short while ago, in mostly good spirits, but now he could tell that something was bothering Clarissa. She stared at him in the dim light of the carriage, hands folded tightly in her lap.

“What is it?” he asked.

Her frown deepened and she drew in a slow breath, as if she was bracing herself for something. “I overheard your conversation with Uncle Henry.”

For a brief moment, Michael only stared at her in bemusement. Then he realised that it meant she’d overheard his plan and had learned of the true reason he had been away for so long.

Quelling his irritation, he looked out the window once more. “I see.”

“Michael...” Clarissa’s hand touched his, squeezing. “You must know that this is not the right way.”

“Do not preach to me, Clarissa,” Michael replied, striving to contain his anger. It was alarming how swiftly he would lose his temper whenever this subject arose. “If you knew of the horrors our father suffered at the hands of that deceitful man, you would be encouraging me.”

“I cannot encourage you to be so deceitful yourself,” she said softly. “I must admit

that it was not proper of me to eavesdrop, but I do not regret it. Hearing you speak with such vengeance in your heart appalled me. This is not the Michael I used to know.”

“The Michael you knew died the day Papa did, Clarissa.” He gripped her hand, facing her fully. “You are kind and pure and far too virtuous for his treacherous world. Leave this to me. Pray, do not burden yourself with thoughts of what I intend to do.”

“I cannot seem to shake this dread,” she cried. “From the moment you departed till the day you returned, I have been consumed with concern. It is clear you are no longer the man you once were, and now I understand why. Have you given any thought to what might become of you should your scheme come to light?”

“It shall not come to light,” he pushed out, releasing her hand. “And I shall get what I want before anyone is any wiser.”

“And the innocent lady you intend on involving? What of her? She may very well be ruined by what you’ll do.”

“It is only what she deserves.”

Clarissa reeled back, shocked. “You cannot truly believe that. Her father’s actions should not reflect on her.”

“Do you know this lady?”

“I do not, nor do I need to. But I know you and—”

“You do not know me, Clarissa! You cannot possibly know me if you fail to comprehend my burning need for vengeance. And you cannot fathom the countless sleepless nights I have endured while meticulously piecing together my evidence, dispelling the falsehoods woven around our father’s name. Our righteous father who

has never acted in vindication and yet suffered at the hands of those wolves.”

As the carriage rattled past a lamppost, light spilling inside for a fleeting moment, Michael caught tears shining in her eyes.

Still, her voice remained strong. “Papa would not approve of this.”

“Papa is not here to stop me. I am doing this for him. For you. For our family. To restore his name and our previous glory. To ensure that those who did such evil will not get away with it.” Michael sighed, leaning his head against the seat. His temples were beginning to throb. “This is important to me, Clarissa. More than words can express. I need you to understand.”

Clarissa was quiet for a long moment. “I do understand, Michael,” she replied softly. “But even so, I cannot, in good conscience, agree.”

Michael decided not to respond to that, ignoring the stab of hurt he felt at those words. As his sister, he’d hoped that she would not oppose his plans when she eventually learned of it. But he should have known better. Clarissa was virtuous, her mind and heart uncorrupted by what happened to their family. Michael could not say the same for himself.

He ignored the faint voice in the back of his mind that warned him he was on the wrong path. He had not spent years chasing this vengeance to be dissuaded by the morally upstanding. Getting his revenge was his only reprieve, the only thing capable of bringing him peace.

He would stop at nothing to achieve that.

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Edward’s chamber was shrouded in darkness, as he preferred, allowing barely enough

light for Elaine to see as she helped him to his bed.

He'd spent most of the day in the drawing room, slipping in and out of sleep, murmuring to himself whenever he was awake. Now Elaine wondered if he might have fallen asleep on her again because he felt heavier than usual, his body weight pressing down on her shoulder.

"Nearly there," she murmured, mostly to herself. She could barely make out the shadowy outline of his bed in the darkness.

At last, she felt the cool brush of the sheets against her knees. Bracing herself against the mattress, Elaine helped her father into the bed, adjusting his stiff limbs until he was settled under the sheets. She tucked him in, certain that he must be deep in sleep by now.

As she began to walk away, his hand caught her wrist with surprising strength. It fell a moment later.

"Papa?" she spoke in the darkness.

She could not see his face but a moment later, his gravelly voice broke through. "Sit with me a moment."

He sounded clearer than usual. Tonight must be a good night. Elaine nodded and quickly claimed the chair that was always by his bed. She would often sit there during the day with her embroidery while he rested, or when she would read to him.

"Yes, Papa," she breathed, taking his hand in hers.

He cleared his throat. Elaine held her breath in anticipation. "I am...so proud of you, my dear."

Tears rushed to her eyes, much to her alarm. She'd done so much crying today already, she couldn't believe she had any tears left in her. "Why?" she asked, trying to sound light. "I have not done anything for you to be proud of."

"You have grown into a beautiful young lady," he rasped. "You have not left me to rot by myself."

"Papa! Why would I ever do that?"

"There is so much you do not know, my dear."

Elaine didn't like the sound of that. She especially didn't like how morose he sounded. She tried changing the topic. "I will be attending my first ball tomorrow evening."

"Ho...how?"

"Aunt Lorna and James have agreed to sponsor me this Season. I am committed to finding a wealthy husband who will be able to help us, Papa. Perhaps I may even enjoy myself in the process."

"That is good. You should enjoy yourself. You should be happy."

"I am happy," she lied, though she couldn't understand why. It was evident that their circumstances were far from joyful.

"I want you to be happier," her father pushed out weakly. "I have made so many mistakes during my life. I do not want you to suffer from them."

"What sort of mistakes?" she asked tentatively, uncertain if she truly wished to know.

Edward said nothing. After a moment, a sob escaped his lips.

“Papa?” Elaine gasped, filled with alarm.

“I am tired,” he told her. “I wish to rest now.”

“Papa...”

“Go now. Rest. You have a lot of preparations to do for your ball tomorrow.”

She wiped her tears and nodded, even though he couldn’t see her. “I shall tell you all about it upon my return.”

“That would be nice,” he said and she hoped that was truly a smile she heard in his voice.

A few seconds later, his breathing grew loud but even, a clear indication that he had fallen asleep. Elaine stayed there for a while longer, thinking about all he’d said. Conversations did not happen often lately and when they did, they were always short-lived and unimportant. This one was different. Her father rarely spoke of his past.

At last, she stood and left the room, when she was certain her tears had dried. But by the time she made it to her bedchamber, they’d returned with full force. Hearing her father speak just now only reminded her of when he had been strong and healthy, when his illness had not turned him into a shell of his former self. When her mother had been alive, her brother had been home, and she’d truly been happy.

There was no changing the past, however. But as she crawled into bed and let her tears lull her to sleep, Elaine resolved to let her present dictate her future.

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Grenshaw House screamed opulence, from the white-washed brick walls to the tiered balconies, to the long driveway lined with painted stone and manicured shrubbery.

Michael had never attended a ball hosted by Lord and Lady Jones, but he had certainly heard the rumours. He was well aware of what others said about their grand ballroom and their endless wealth, how such balls often ended well into the morning because there was just simply so much to do. As his carriage pulled to a stop near the front of the house, Michael wondered if he would have anticipated such an event if his plan for revenge had not been simmering in his mind.

“Michael.”

Clarissa’s soft voice drew a weary sigh to his lips. He knew what she was going to say simply from her tone.

“Leave me be, Clarissa,” he said to her, watching as footmen approached their carriage. “If you do not intend to support my quest then at the very least, do not lecture me about it.”

“I cannot help but lecture you. It is what younger sisters do.”

“An older sister, perhaps,” he murmured. “But as I am the eldest, you would do well to listen to me.”

She was already shaking her head. “Do not purport to be wiser than me, Michael. Not when you are still on your insane quest for retribution.”

“Insane, she says,” he scoffed.

She sighed. “I only wish for you to see that there must be a better way.”

“There is no better way. And I shall not be convinced to the contrary.”

She sighed again but Michael ignored her. The footman was upon them now, opening their door. Michael nodded absently at him as he climbed out of the carriage and then

helped Clarissa out. Right behind them, Beatrice and Henry were exiting their marked carriage as well.

They waited for the two of them to approach before they turned to the house, falling in line with the other arriving guests. The Jones seemed to have an unlimited amount of footmen because they kept pouring out of the house, assisting newcomers out of their carriages and escorting them to the ballroom.

A soft sonata wafted through the hallway as Michael approached, Clarissa on his arm. They were brought to a small flight of stairs that led to a set of double doors. A podgy footman in a black and blue livery bowed at their approach before he swung the doors open.

“His Grace the Duke of Ryewood and Lady Clarissa,” he bellowed to the guests down below.

Michael stepped into the ballroom, his eyes sweeping over the sea of faces that turned to assess him. He did not focus on a single one of them, yet that familiar hum of resentment welled within him as he descended the spiral staircase to the left, slowly so as to accommodate Clarissa’s long gown. He was well aware of their unspoken thoughts: the new duke had returned, seeking to salvage the remnants of his broken title.

“Smile, Michael,” Clarissa whispered to him. “You look downright terrifying.”

“Good,” he grunted right before stepping into the thick of the guests.

The ball seemed to have just begun but the ballroom was already teeming with life. His height afforded him advantages, however. He could easily see over most of their heads, capable of picking out a number of familiar faces. But there was only one person he truly wished to see.



And he had just found her.

Lady Elaine Sutton, daughter of the Earl of Suthenshire, and the key to executing his plan. His extensive research of her and her family made it easy to spot her, but he wasn't as prepared for the gut-punching reaction to the sight of her.

He hadn't expected her to be so beautiful.

Of course, her beauty was unimportant, he reminded himself. He did not intend to seduce her if it could be avoided. Yet, it was quite difficult to ignore how she stood as a beacon of beauty among the common folk. Long auburn hair that sat in delicate curls around her face, most of it pinned up to dangle down her back. He could not see the colour of her eyes but it was easy to see that she had porcelain skin, a small nose, and such lovely, pink lips currently set in a line. Her eyes were round, darting around the room as if she could not figure out what to look at first, yet she held such regal grace in her slim figure that it was hard to believe she'd not done this a dozen times before.

"Michael?"

Beatrice's voice brought him back. He hadn't noticed that they'd approached, hadn't even heard when they were announced.

Beatrice was frowning at him. "What are your thoughts?"

Michael cleared his throat, annoyed by the trance he'd slipped under. "About what?"

"About Lord Hanson."

Michael blinked at her.

"Lord Hanson," Henry supplied slowly. "He just approached Clarissa asking for the

first dance. Did you not see him?”

“I...hadn’t noticed.”

“How could you not have noticed that?” Clarissa asked incredulously, frowning at him as if he’d just grown a second head.

He didn’t blame her. He couldn’t understand it himself, even though he was well aware of the reason.

“I suppose I was lost in thought,” he answered noncommittally. “Was I to judge the man based upon his request to dance?”

“Well, yes,” Beatrice said. “It is your duty to ensure only the proper gentlemen are given the honour of Clarissa’s time, you know.”

“I hardly think one dance will tell me anything I want to know about him,” Michael said.

“And I am more than capable of determining that myself,” Clarissa joined in. “I happen to find Lord Hanson quite handsome and kind.”

“You say that about everyone,” Beatrice bemoaned.

“Not everyone,” Clarissa protested. “I certainly did not say that about Lord Gregory...”

Michael stopped listening, his gaze trailing back to Lady Elaine. She was in the same spot, still looking around as if she didn’t know what to do with herself. At that moment, an older lady approached her. It took Michael a moment to recognise her as the Dowager Viscountess of Abney, Lady Elaine’s maternal aunt. The man who stood at her side bore a striking similarity to her and he assumed he must be the current

Viscount of Abney and Lady Elaine's cousin.

They seemed close, Michael observed. Lady Abney said something to Lady Elaine, which made her smile briefly. The act lit her face a thousand times brighter than the look of apprehension she wore before. Michael suddenly struggled to breathe.

Lord Abney stood by his cousin's side, not partaking in the conversation between the two women yet hovering in an imposing manner. His gaze skimmed the crowd, falling on Michael. Their eyes met and Lord Abney's narrowed.

Michael did not look away right away, though it bothered him that he got caught staring. He didn't need to draw attention to himself, especially not from someone who appeared to be an overbearing family member of the lady he wished to approach. He would have to wait until Lord Abney was not by his cousin's side before he made his move.

Michael's heart trembled with anticipation at the thought. He had been planning this for far too long, years of painstaking detail all leading to this very night.

At last, the beginning of the end.