



# Holly and the Viscount

## (Noble Holidays #7)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Some secrets at Christmas are a good thing, but when Lord Thornton arrives at Hartly Hall for his annual tree-cutting visit, he suspects that the daughter of the house, Lady Holly, is hiding a regrettable vice. His efforts to uncover the truth lead to more misunderstandings, until fate intervenes in the form of a gigantic evergreen.

Curl up with a cup of hot chocolate and prepare to be swept into a wintry world full of the charm of bygone days, along with the sparks of a modern love affair.

**Total Pages (Source):** 8

## CHAPTER 1

Lady Holly Belham, eldest daughter of the Earl of Hartley, tilted her embroidery hoop to catch the winter light from the parlor's wide window and pretended to concentrate on her needlework. Never mind that she'd been stitching the same bit of green-threaded vine since she'd picked up her sampler an hour ago. Her sister, Rose, certainly hadn't noticed, being much too busy watching out the window in between turning pages of the novel she certainly wasn't reading.

Both of them were doing a poor job of concealing the true reason they'd spent the afternoon in the front parlor of Hartley House. Not that it had been an unpleasant way to pass a December day. The room was comfortable, with a peat fire burning in the hearth and the tea trolley at hand, replenished by an attentive maid—though generally Holly preferred the cozier sitting room.

However, that room had the disadvantage of being located at the side of the house, with no direct view of the driveway leading to Hartley House's front door. And though Holly liked to think her manner was circumspect, Rose, ensconced in the window seat, was quite obviously keeping watch over the long sweep of rain-darkened gravel.

Thus far, it had remained empty.

The two of them were keeping vigil for entirely different reasons, however. Every time Rose lifted her head to stare hopefully out the window, Holly felt a twinge of apprehension.

“He’s not coming,” Rose said unhappily. She set her book down and began twitching the heavy blue draperies back and forth between her fingers.

“Stop fiddling with the curtains,” Holly said. “Lord Thornton will arrive when he does, and not a moment before. Perhaps the weather has delayed him.”

She rather hoped it was the case. Not that their brother’s friend was frightening, in and of himself. Indeed, over the past few years, she’d seen enough of Viscount Thornton to know that he was possessed of enough kindness to offset his reputation as a bit of a scapegrace.

“But Ash said he’d arrive today .” Rose let out an impatient breath. “It’s almost Christmas, besides. If he’s any later, he might not be able to cut his tree and transport it in time.”

For two Christmases running, Lord Thornton had stopped over at Hartley House on the way to his brother’s estate in North Yorkshire. Hartley House’s grounds abutted the forest of Knavesmire Wood, where the viscount had permission to fell a large evergreen. It seemed his family had enthusiastically embraced the new Christmas tree tradition sweeping England, though Holly wasn’t quite certain of the appeal.

“Perhaps our brother was mistaken.” She raised her brows at Rose. “Why should you worry when, or even whether, the viscount arrives? It’s not as though Lord Thornton is courting you. Unless you wish to collect as many suitors as possible?”

Her sister stopped flapping the curtains and gave Holly a peevish look. “I’m quite happy with Lord Clarkston. No, I was thinking of you. You’re perilously close to being on the shelf?—”

“So you thought you’d thrust me at every passing gentleman?” Holly stabbed her embroidery needle through the linen cloth with more force than was necessary, and

set her sampler on the table beside her wingback chair. “I’m content as I am, thank you very much. And even if I were not, my meddling younger sister would do best to keep her nose out of my business.”

Especially as that business contained secrets that would paint Holly in an unfavorable light, as far as Society was concerned. Which would then reflect poorly upon her family. Her brother and parents wouldn’t be greatly affected, but it was different for a young woman. Until Rose was safely married to Lord Clarkston, Holly must keep her secrets close.

Which ordinarily wouldn’t be an issue. Lord Clarkston was surely planning to propose over Christmas. Even with the proper reading of the banns, Rose would be safely wed by mid-February, when their father would relocate the household to London for the Season.

And Holly would take up her activities once again, without fretting about her sister’s prospects should her work be discovered.

“I’m just thinking of the family’s reputation,” Rose said primly. “It’s not right for the younger sister to be wed before the elder. People might think us odd, and it certainly won’t improve your chances.”

If only Rose knew.

“Lord Thornton won’t be staying long enough for you to work any machinations upon him,” Holly said, keeping her expression mild. “And as you’ve noted, Christmas is in three days. He will cut his tree, and be off.”

“I wish he’d come earlier, like last year.” Rose gave her a too-innocent smile. “Wasn’t it lovely having a handsome viscount here for three days? And then seeing him again at the duke’s Christmas Ball... Don’t you think you ought to further your

acquaintance with him?”

“Not particularly.”

It wasn't the truth, however. Under other circumstances, Holly might have let herself be swayed by Lord Thornton's easy smile and mischievous streak of humor, by the dark hair that fell across his forehead in a wave, and the intelligence in his deep brown eyes...

Oh, what was she thinking!

She was not planning to marry—not since she'd joined Mrs. Caroline Norton's efforts to further the cause of women. It was a scandalous endeavor in many people's opinion, but Holly was a firm believer that Mrs. Norton was the victim of great injustice in her marriage and that her efforts before Parliament were of the utmost importance.

Not that every marriage was fraught with such tragedy and strife. Indeed, Holly's own parents seemed contented enough, and she knew that, in some instances, couples even married for love and were very happy with the results.

But she couldn't imagine any husband endorsing his wife's crusading on behalf of weakening her lord and master's conjugal rights—even if such rights were wholly unjust.

“I think he's coming!” Rose leaned forward and pressed her face close to the window. “At last—I'll go tell Ash.”

Holly swallowed the lump of worry in her throat and endeavored to summon a calm smile. “The butler will inform our brother, I've no doubt.”

“This way, we can welcome him properly.” Rose was already heading for the parlor door. “Do try and look happier about it, Holly. I declare, I don’t know what’s the matter with you.”

Her sister swept out of the room without waiting for an explanation, which Holly would not have given, in any case. She stood and shook out her skirts, dislodging a stray snip of green embroidery thread from the floral-patterned cotton. She was wearing one of her best day dresses, and she’d hesitated over choosing it—but Lord Thornton was a distinguished guest, no matter how she might feel about his visit.

The fact that Rose had once remarked that the colors brought out the gold highlights in Holly’s chestnut hair and hazel eyes really did not signify.

Despite herself, she went to the window. As Rose had said, a rider was approaching. He was swathed in a greatcoat and his top hat was drawn low, no doubt in an attempt to protect his face from the cold drizzle. Still, the dark hair and the long-nosed features proved that, indeed, Viscount Thornton had reached Hartley House.

### CHAPTER 2

Theodore Harrington, Viscount Thornton, spurred his gelding up the curved drive of Hartley House, glad to see the warm lights in the windows of the earl's mansion. It had been a cold, uncomfortable afternoon of riding, and as the gray day blended into early evening, he could think of no better place to be than a stone's throw from a comfortable, well-appointed house.

As he drew near, movement in one of the lower windows caught his eye—the figure of a woman, mostly in silhouette. She turned away, and the lamplight illuminated her face for a moment, revealing her to be Ash's sister, Lady Holly Belham.

Had she been watching for him? He found that curious, as the young lady in question hadn't seemed particularly interested in catching his attention. Indeed, rather the opposite, if her behavior at their last meeting was any indication.

He'd encountered Lady Holly in a somewhat disreputable quarter of London earlier that fall, accompanied by her ladies' maid. She'd seemed quite flustered to see him, and had quickly excused herself, with some story about losing her way while searching for a new apothecary's.

A story that had rung false to his ears, though he'd all but forgotten it until that moment.

Theo's brows drew together at the reminder. That area of London was home to several gaming halls, one of which was known to cater to certain gentlewomen with a too-strong attachment to wagering (though most of the ton pretended such a vice only

existed among men.)

Was his friend's sister inclined toward gambling? He'd have to say something to Ash—though perhaps he should ascertain the truth for himself before stirring the pot.

A groom met him at the front steps to take his horse, and a footman his scant luggage. Divested of his mount and saddlebags, Theo strode up the three wide steps leading to the front door of Hartley House. Although the mansion was a large, square building, the rosy brick facade and double rows of lit windows made it welcoming, rather than imposing.

Or perhaps it was simply the fact that he was finally about to step out of the relentless rain.

Theo sheltered beneath the arched cornice above the door and lifted the ornate brass knocker, patterned with a weaving wreath of vines and flowers encircling a stag's head. He let it fall, the thud echoing into the two-storey great hall he knew lay just inside.

A moment later the butler, Mr. Chauncey, opened the door.

"Lord Thornton, welcome." The man bowed in greeting, the top of his balding pate shining slightly in the light of the tall windows and the candle-festooned crystal chandelier high overhead. Theo shrugged out of his greatcoat and gave it a brisk shake before stepping inside and handing it to the fellow, along with his very damp hat and gloves.

The Italian marble fireplace in the hall boasted a crackling fire, and Theo edged closer to the warmth.

"Is Lord Ashby about?" he asked.



“Of course, my lord. We’ve been expecting you. Your usual room is at the ready, if you’d like a servant to show you up.”

“No need.” Theo grinned at Mr. Chauncey. “A year hasn’t dimmed my memory, I assure you—no matter what stories you may have heard of my dissolute ways.”

“None at all, sir,” the butler said impassively.

Theo resolved to try harder to tease a reaction from the fellow, though he had to admit that with Ash about, the bar was set rather high. No one of his acquaintance had a sharper wit than Lord Ashby. Theo nodded to the butler, then made for the sweeping staircase that rose majestically on the other side of the grand hall.

Just before he began to ascend, a thought struck him. He glanced to the door, but Mr. Chauncey had already disappeared with Theo’s dripping outerwear. Just as well—it wasn’t the done thing to seek out his host’s sister without a proper chaperone nearby, but the questions he meant to ask wouldn’t take more than a minute or two.

He veered for the archway on his right which, if memory served, opened to a hallway leading to several parlors and drawing rooms. One of which certainly still contained Lady Holly, unless she’d dashed upstairs while he was dismounting. In which case, he’d find another opportunity to quiz the lady on her propensity for gambling.

The travertine floor gave way to a rich blue and red carpet that muffled his footsteps as he passed through the archway from the great hall. Navigating by instinct, he went by one doorway, then paused at the second. The white paneled door was slightly ajar, and he pushed it wide with his fingertips.

As he’d hoped, Lady Holly was inside. She stood before the fireplace, an embroidery hoop in one hand and a pensive look on her face. The lamplight struck gold threads from her brown hair, and her lips were slightly parted, as though whatever she was

thinking of made her wistful.

Theo rapped softly on the parlor door, and she whirled to face him, eyes widening.

“Good evening, Lady Holly,” he said. “I beg your pardon, but might I have a word?”

The softness of her mouth hardened into a straight line. “Lord Thornton. Do you think it amusing to creep about and startle the members of this household half out of their wits, before anyone even knows you’ve arrived?”

“You saw me ride up,” he said, stung.

“I wish I hadn’t.” Skirts swishing, she marched over to where he stood in the doorway and brandished her embroidery at him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some matters to attend to.”

“Lady Holly.” He lowered his voice and didn’t step out of the way. “Before you go, I have some questions for you?—”

“Thorn!” His friend Ash’s voice echoed from the great hall.

Theo turned, and Lady Holly took the opportunity to slip past him.

“I owe you no answers,” she said, her tone quiet but fierce.

Then the opportunity for private conversation was gone, as Ash strode up to where they stood, followed by his youngest sibling, Lady Rose.

“Welcome,” Ash said, clapping Theo on the shoulder. “Rose said she saw you come up the drive. How was the ride up from...where did you leave from today?”

“Doncaster,” Theo said. “And it was wet. Sometimes I wish the family estate were closer to London than the wilds of Yorkshire.”

“But the hunting’s better.” Ash grinned at him. “Depending on what game you’re after, that is.”

“Holly,” the young lady said, glancing at her sister. “Whatever are you and Lord Thornton doing, standing about in the hallway?”

Lady Holly blinked twice, so quickly Theo barely caught the motion. “I thought our guest would like a cup of tea beside the fire as soon as he arrived. He looks chilled. I was just about to ring for you.”

“Tea?” Ash shook his head. “I’m sure he’d prefer a brandy in my study. Better way to get warm, too. What say you, Thorn?”

“That seems a superior plan.” Lady Holly inclined her head before Theo could speak. “I’ll leave you gentlemen to it.”

“But...” Rose caught at her sister’s arm as Lady Holly swept past.

The lady nimbly evaded her younger sister’s grasp and continued down the hall without a backward glance.

She was nimble-witted as well, Theo thought, to have such a quick answer for why they’d been caught together. He’d have to be clever about questioning her, or she’d evade him at every opportunity.

“Might I join you for a brandy, as well?” Lady Rose asked, giving her brother a persuasive smile.

“Not a chance,” Ash said cheerfully. “Go see what has your sister in such a temper. Did she keep jabbing herself with her embroidery needle or somesuch? I noted that you two were in that parlor all afternoon.”

“Just working on Christmas surprises,” Rose said. “Although, if you keep being so rude, you’ll get none of them.”

“It’s not rude to keep you from the vice of strong drink,” her brother said. “It’s my duty.”

“Speaking of Christmas,” Theo said, “I plan to go out tomorrow to cut my tree.”

“Lord Thornton, don’t say you’ll be leaving us so soon!” Lady Rose clasped her hands beneath her chin. “Can’t you stay a few days, at least?”

Her brother gave her a quizzical look, but Theo shook his head.

“I’m already later than I’d hoped, and Viola will have my head if I don’t bring a tree for baby Sarah’s first Christmas. Not that the infant will notice, being practically newborn.”

“A baby.” Lady Rose let out a little sigh. “How precious.”

“Spoken like a true youngest child,” Ash said, with a superior air. “You don’t have the memory of a screeching, puling baby sister annoying you at every turn, as I do.”

Theo smothered his laugh, then had to apologize when Lady Rose turned to him, frowning in annoyance.

“Forgive me, Lady Rose—but the two of you remind me a great deal of my own brother and sister.”

“I’m sorry you grew up with a terrible bully for a brother,” she said tartly. “It’s most unpleasant, isn’t it?”

“In our case, the roles are reversed,” Theo said. “Viola is the one who thinks she knows best, and isn’t averse to telling everyone around her what to do.”

“But you’re the youngest, too, aren’t you?” Lady Rose looked pleased at the thought. “We have that in common.”

“Rose—are you setting your cap for Lord Thornton?” Ash asked in a tone of curious amusement. “I thought you already had a beau.”

She swatted her brother on the arm. “Of course I do, as you well know. Oh, you’re impossible. Go off and get tipsy with Lord Thornton. Just don’t embarrass yourselves at dinner, or you know that Mother will scold and Papa will glower.”

With that, she tossed her head and went down the hallway.

Ash chuckled. “Sisters! You’re lucky to have a brother, at least, to mitigate the effect of so much feminine foolishness.”

“Lady Holly seems levelheaded,” Theo remarked, still thinking of her quick response.

“To the point of unyielding stubbornness.”

Theo nodded in commiseration. “Viola is much the same. Come, pour me a drink and we can discuss the merits of any new mounts you’ve added to your stables of late.”

Preferably close to the fire—the cold of the road still clung to his shoulders, and his thick hair always took a damnably long time to dry after a wetting.

“Are you really going to hare off so quickly?” Ash asked as he led Theo back out to the grand hall. “At least wait for the weather to improve.”

Underscoring his words, a spatter of rain dashed against the high windows. Theo grimaced.

“It’s December in Yorkshire. The weather’s not going to get any better. The sooner I procure my tree and make for Dovington Hall, the sooner my journey’s done.”

He trailed Ash across the echoing space and to the other wing of the house, which housed the gentleman’s studies—Ash’s father, Lord Hartley’s, being much larger of course—the smoking room, and billiards room.

Ash pushed open the door of his study and indicated the leather armchairs drawn up before the fire. “Sit—I’ll bring you a tumbler.”

He went to the mirrored sideboard and began clinking about, and Theo gratefully took one of the chairs. The study was cozy, the gold-shaded lamps illuminating shelves of books and Ash’s desk, which he kept quite tidy, in marked contrast to Theo’s own habits. Of course, like himself, Ash’s main residence was in London, where the parties and fun were to be had.

“How goes the viscountcy?” Theo asked, as his friend handed him a glass of amber liquid.

Ash settled across from him and took a sip of his brandy. “Well enough, though Papa insists on having his solicitors keep their hands in everything, and constantly advises me on how to proceed.”

“I imagine he wants you to be ready to take over the earldom, when that inevitability arises.”

“Another difference having a brother makes.” Ash grimaced. “You don’t have the specter of a dukedom looming ahead, and can simply enjoy being a feckless viscount for the rest of your life.”

Theo raised his glass in a mock toast, then took a swallow of brandy, letting the fire trail down his throat. In his opinion, Ash took his duties a tad too lightly, but it wasn’t his place to say so. And though he didn’t want to admit it, the prospect of spending the remainder of his days as a gadabout was beginning to lose its charm.

“You must forgive Rose,” Ash continued. “She’s a silly girl, but soon to marry, which ought to settle her down. I’ve no idea why she was so set on flirting with you.”

“Women.” Theo shook his head. “Even having sisters doesn’t give us much of an advantage in understanding, I fear. But what of Lady Holly? Is she likewise planning to wed?”

“She says not, despite Mama’s constant harping that Holly needs to make an advantageous match. Being a spinster bluestocking isn’t the choice I’d make, but as I said, my sister’s stubborn.”

That didn’t square with Theo’s notion of a young lady in the throes of a gambling addiction. Such a woman would be rather desperate to snare a wealthy husband in order to fund her vices, not the opposite—unless she was playing some sort of long game. Thoughtfully, he swirled his brandy in its tumbler, the spinning liquid mirroring the whirl of his thoughts.

“Marriage seems to have agreed with my sister Viola,” he said. “Although that may be because she has her husband and a new household to manage, and is therefore less intent on meddling in her brothers’ lives.”

“Egads, Thorn.” Ash’s gaze sharpened. “You’re not thinking of getting leg-shackled?”

I dislike the notion immensely, myself.”

Theo shrugged. “If I met the right lady, I wouldn’t be opposed to the prospect of matrimony.”

“If this is what comes of one’s siblings marrying, perhaps I should support Holly’s spinsterhood, after all! I’d thought you immune to such sentimentality as home and family.”

“Says the man spending the holidays with his parents and sister.” Theo gave his friend a pointed look.

Ash let out a bark of laughter. “Very well—we can agree to disagree on the subject. What time do you plan to go to Knavesmire tomorrow?”

“I’ve arranged a cart and driver to meet me on the main road from York at ten in the morning.”

“Keeping country hours, now?” Ash sighed. “I suppose I’ll roust myself out of bed to accompany you. I’ll tell the footmen to sharpen the saw and be at the ready.”

“A wise idea. If we get it cut early enough, I’ll head out for Harrowgate after lunch.”

The previous year, the saw had been dull and it had taken an inordinate amount of time to fell the large evergreen Theo had picked out for Dovington Hall’s Christmas tree. When the pair of footmen had flagged, Theo and Ash had stripped out of their coats and helped with the sawing and finally the fir tree had succumbed.

“To sharp saws.” Ash threw back the rest of his brandy.

“And sharper wits.” Theo drained his glass in turn.



He had a limited time to get to the bottom of whatever Lady Holly was hiding, and he suspected he'd need every ounce of guile he possessed to ferret out his answers. In truth, he rather looked forward to the challenge.

### CHAPTER 3

Holly briefly toyed with the idea of pleading a headache and not going down to dinner—but that would cause her mother to make all sorts of pointed remarks about why she might be feeling poorly. From long experience, Holly knew that included things like calling into question her reading habits and harping upon her regrettable fondness for taking her tea black.

No matter how much she might want to avoid Lord Thornton, she wanted Mama's meddling concern even less. Besides, she'd deflected the viscount easily enough. Though she had to admit to a lingering worry over why he'd sought her out, and what questions he was planning to put to her.

The solution, of course, was to keep out of his way as much as possible while still upholding the standards of polite behavior. Skills which, as an earl's daughter, she had in abundance.

She and the viscount were seated across from one another at dinner, but with a series of discreet nudges Holly managed to maneuver the large silver candelabra so that it stood directly between them. Ash, who was next to her, watched with amusement while he spooned up his lobster bisque, but said nothing.

Rose, however, put an end to that strategy after the soup course by brazenly reaching over from her place beside Lord Thornton and moving the candlesticks several inches up the table.

"Whatever are you doing?" Mama asked, giving her a reproving look.

“I’m sorry,” Rose said sweetly. “The glare was making it difficult to see my food.”

Ash let out a snort, and the viscount’s brows rose, but, as usual, Rose managed to get away with behavior that would have earned anyone else a scolding.

“Next time, ask the servants,” their mother said, then let the matter go.

“Yes, Mama.” Rose smiled brightly at Holly. “I was just thinking of what fun we had last year at the Christmas Ball Lord Thornton’s sister hosted.”

“Ah yes, merriment indeed,” Ash said dryly. “Thorn—as I recall, wasn’t that meant to be a matchmaking event?”

“It was,” the viscount said gravely, though the corners of his lips twitched in amusement.

“Well, it succeeded,” their mother said. “Lady Viola found herself an excellent match. You ought to have put yourself forward more strongly, Ash. Lord Thornton’s sister would have made you a fine wife, had you only exerted yourself.”

“What a thought,” he replied, with a barely-perceptible shudder.

“Strange, though,” the earl said from his place at the head of the table.

They all glanced toward him, and when a long moment passed without further elaboration, his wife let out a long-suffering sigh.

“What’s strange, my dear?” she asked.

“I recall a plethora of young women in attendance. One would think Lady Viola would’ve wanted to keep the competition to a minimum.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t Lady Viola who was looking for a match,” Ash said, sending a pointed glance at their guest.

“Oh, she was,” Lord Thornton said, frowning back. “I assure you.”

Holly smiled, hearing what he’d left unsaid. Lady Viola had been searching for a match, but not necessarily for herself. Upon reflection, it was clear she’d been trying to find a suitable bride for her brother, and had accidentally stepped into a betrothal of her own.

“That may be,” Rose said. “But as I recall, Lord Thornton, you danced twice with Holly.”

“I danced twice with nearly everyone,” he said mildly. “This trout is excellent, Lord Hartley. Is it locally caught?”

The earl launched into a conversation about local game, to Rose’s relief. And, clearly, the viscount’s as well, given his obvious change of subject. As soon as Lord Thornton’s attention turned to the head of the table, Holly shot her sister a narrow-eyed glance.

Rose pretended not to see, though her further attempts throughout dinner to direct Lord Thornton’s attention toward Holly were a bit more subtle. Fortunately, that made them all the easier to ignore or brush aside. When the meal finished, Holly breathed a silent sigh of relief, especially when her brother proposed the gentlemen withdraw for a glass of port.

“A fine idea,” the earl said, and as soon as Lady Hartley rose, signifying they might all leave the table, the gentlemen dispersed.

“Stop it,” Holly said quietly as she and Rose followed their mother out of the dining

room.

“I won’t,” Rose replied. “You and Lord Thornton would suit one another perfectly. He ought to have seen that last year at the Christmas Ball, instead of flirting with everyone and choosing no one.”

“I must disagree. We’ve very little in common, and I don’t believe our natures are complimentary in the least.”

“Pish,” Rose said, with an airy wave of her hand. “He’s a good friend of our brother’s, for one thing?—”

“Which, considering Ash’s reputation, should not recommend his friends.”

“—and for another,” Rose continued, ignoring Holly’s interjection, “you are both intelligent, with a quiet sense of irony.”

Holly raised her brows. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely.” Rose grinned at her. “I’ve spent enough time with you to recognize the same traits in others. In particular, Lord Thornton. Not to mention that you have similar stature within the ton. You’d make an excellent countess, Holly.”

“Nevertheless, I’m not in search of a husband.”

“So you say!” Rose shook her head. “Quite frankly, I think you’re deluding yourself.”

“You’re the one with delusions.” Holly paused as they reached the great hall. “You may join mother in the drawing room, if you like, but I’m retiring to my rooms for the evening.”

“Coward,” Rose said as Holly mounted the stairs. “There’s no harm in marrying well.”

Oh, but there was, if one were involved in certain causes. Holly swept up the stairs, determined to pay her sister’s words no mind. The idea of her and Lord Thornton making a match? The notion was simply preposterous.

### CHAPTER 4

Despite Theo's plans to confront Lady Holly, he let himself be distracted by Ash, and glass too many of port. The long day on the road, plus a lingering chill in his bones, conspired to send him to bed early, where he slept long and hard.

The footman stirring up the coals in the morning woke him, as requested. Theo dressed, tying his cravat in an informal knot, then went down to find some breakfast. The earl and his wife were in the breakfast room, finishing up their meal, and Theo joined them. He filled his plate from the chafing dishes on the side table, happy to see poached eggs and bangers, as well as an assortment of scones and the delicacy of fresh oranges.

"Off to Knavesmire, is it?" Lord Hartley asked as Theo settled himself at the table.

"Indeed. And, if all goes well, bound for Dovington Hall this afternoon."

"Tea?" Lady Hartley offered, pouring out a cup when Theo nodded. "I find this idea of bringing a tree inside a bit perplexing, I must say. What if there are...creatures within it?"

"Chopping it down dislodges any stray squirrels and the like," Theo reassured her.

"But what about spiders and such?" she asked, with a delicate shudder. "One hardly needs to introduce more insects into the home, after all. And think of the mess! Dirt and sap and needles everywhere."

“It’s not that bad,” Theo said. “Some evergreen needles drop, certainly, but the servants can sweep them up easily enough. As for the rest, I can tell you such things haven’t presented a problem in the two years we’ve had a Christmas tree at Dovington.”

“It still seems a very strange custom to me,” Lady Hartley said, with a sniff. “No doubt it will fall out of fashion soon enough.”

“Even if the queen and Prince Albert continue the tradition?” her husband asked. “I understand such things are usual in Prussia.”

“Well.” She took a sip of her tea, then set her cup down resolutely. “Some places aren’t as civilized as England, are they?”

Theo had no reply to that, and instead applied himself to his breakfast. To his surprise, Ash appeared at half past the hour, his brown hair standing up and his eyes still heavy with sleep.

“Good,” he said, sitting down heavily and accepting the cup of tea his mother slid across the table without asking. “I thought I might have missed you.”

“You’re coming to Knavesmire then, I take it?” Theo smiled at his friend. “I’m impressed you got out of bed for the occasion.”

“Nonsense.” Ash slurped down half his cup of tea, then smiled blearily at Theo. “I can’t let you cut down the blasted tree all by yourself, can I?”

“Mind your manners,” his mother said sharply. “We hardly need such language at the breakfast table.”

Ash rolled his eyes, but reined himself in for the remainder of the meal.



A scant hour later, they were riding through the crisp morning air, accompanied by two brawny footmen and headed for Knavesmire Wood.

“I’m sorry to have missed your sisters this morning,” Theo said. “Are they usually late risers?”

“Rose is, certainly, though Holly usually joins my parents for breakfast. Perhaps she slept poorly last night.”

More likely she was avoiding Theo, and his mouth twisted at the thought.

“Is your sister—Lady Holly, I mean—generally of good moral habits?”

Ash turned a quizzical look on him. “Good grief, Thorn. Why are you asking? You’re not actually thinking of courting my sister, I hope?”

Blast it, that hadn’t gone the way Theo had hoped. And yet...perhaps such a ruse would provide the cover he needed to ask Ash a few pointed questions about his sister. Theo cleared his throat, and resolved to dive in.

“If I were,” he said, “it stands to reason that I’d like to know the lady’s character. To your knowledge, is Lady Holly possessed of any, er, untoward behaviors?”

“I can’t believe you’re actually asking me such things.” Ash shook his head and then blew a plume of frosty breath into the air. It hung a moment, whitely illuminated by the morning sun, before dissipating.

“Humor me,” Theo said dryly.

His friend, brow furrowed, rode silently for a few minutes, and Theo was wise enough not to press. Or to imply that perhaps Lady Holly was overfond of the gaming

tables.

Finally, Ash shook himself and looked over at Theo.

“My sister is, I believe, quite proper in all ways,” he said. “Though she might be unduly stubborn, as I believe I’ve mentioned, she is generally kind and well-meaning.”

“So, she has no propensity toward...” Theo broke off, searching for the words.

“Good gad, Thorn, what are implying? That my sister is a lightskirt?”

“Not at all,” Theo hurried to say. “I’m not impugning the lady’s reputation in the least. I was simply wondering if she had, say, a hidden fondness for strong drink or the like. I’ve heard that—on very rare occasions, mind you—young ladies can sometimes fall into unfortunate behaviors.”

Even as he said the words, he winced. They were coming out all wrong. Yet he couldn’t come straight out and accuse Lady Holly of being an obsessive gambler—especially if he had no idea if it were true. The circumstances of their last meeting were suspicious, and yet, he himself had been in that same unsavory neighborhood, for reasons of his own.

“You are serious about courting her, then?” Ash shook his head.

“I...might be?”

“Well then, never fear—Mama keeps both my sisters on a short string. I can assure you that Holly wouldn’t have any opportunity to get up to mischief, even if she were inclined to. Which, I must say, she’s not. That’s far more Rose’s line. You may court my sister without undue worry, Thorn. Much as it pains me to say so.”

“Thank you.” There was no other response Theo could make. He could hardly argue that Ash was wrong.

“I suppose you’ll be stopping by Hartley House again after the holidays,” Ash said.

“I will?” Theo felt as though he was suddenly riding a horse that had gone wild, careening ahead with the bit in its teeth while he desperately tried to rein it in.

“To do your billing and cooing, I presume. And, of course, to speak with my father.”

Theo swallowed. “I’m not ready to proceed quite so quickly.”

“So now my sister’s not good enough for you?” Ash scowled at him. “Getting a bit high in the instep, aren’t we Lord Thornton?”

Theo inhaled deeply of the crisp morning air, and turned to his friend. This had to stop.

“For goodness’ sake, Ash, stop being such a bear. If this is what you’re like in the mornings, remind me never to call on you until well after noon. I was merely asking a few preliminary questions. That is all.”

Ash let out a peevish snort but, thankfully, didn’t press Theo any more on the matter. They rode in silence for a time, until the crossing to Knavesmire Wood came in sight. There, waiting as promised, was the cartman who’d helped transport the last two trees up to Dovington Hall.

Their party turned into the wood, Theo leading the way and the cartman bringing up the rear. It was only a short distance along the road to reach the stand of fir trees where Theo had gained permission to harvest one evergreen per season.

He pulled his mount to a halt and nodded at the dark green cluster of trees. “That one in front is a likely specimen. Ash, care to help me decide?”

His friend sighed, but swung off his mount and joined Theo in pushing through the brown stalks of bracken fern.

The first tree, as it turned out, was full in the front but thin on the sides and back. Theo rejected it, and two more, before deciding on his prize. Ash’s stalwart footman left their mounts with the cartman and set to work sawing down the evergreen.

“Seems a bit sacrificial, don’t you think?” Ash asked.

“No worse than harvesting a Yule log, or the mountains of greenery I saw the servants bringing in to Hartley House. And once the season’s over, it will make any number of fine fires to help heat Dovington Hall.”

“And what do you put on it, again?”

“Bags of sweets—in fact, Viola asked me to bring a few more up from London. Garlands of ribbons, toys, and this year, balls made of mercury glass. And candles, of course, in clip-on tin holders.”

“It sounds festive, certainly. And flammable.”

“That’s why we keep an extra bucket of water handy.” Theo grinned at his friend, then glanced at the footmen, who had removed their coats, their faces shiny with exertion. “Shall we spell your men?”

“It’s a damnably early hour for exertion,” Ash said. Nonetheless, he rolled up his shirtsleeves and went to take one end of the saw.

The smell of fresh sap freshened the air as Theo and Ash bent to their work. They managed to finish cutting a little over halfway before Theo swiped at his forehead and suggested the footmen resume.

“I thought your men sharpened the saw,” he said to Ash, half in jest.

“If you hadn’t picked such a ridiculously large tree, we’d be done by now.” Ash turned his back on the tree and shook his head. “That behemoth seems far too big for Dovington. In fact, I doubt it would even fit in Hartley House’s great hall?—”

“Look out!” one of the footmen yelled.

Theo watched in horror as the huge tree began to topple, slowly but inexorably, right where Ash was standing. Without even thinking, Theo dashed forward and pushed his friend out of the way. There was a crack that sounded as loud as a rifle, and then the ground seemed to shake as the tree thudded down.

It bounced to the side, the trunk landing on Theo’s ankle with a white-hot pain, the branches smothering him as the needles stabbed through his shirt and trousers.

“Theo!” Ash cried. “Get that tree off him, men. Now.”

The footmen grunted and thrashed, and a moment later they levered the evergreen off Theo.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice coming out more weakly than he’d intended.

“Good gad,” Ash said, bending over him. “The tree you killed nearly murdered you in turn. We should burn it where it lies. Jones”—he gestured to one of the footmen—“ride to the village and fetch the doctor. Tell him to come to Hartley House.”

“That’s not necessary,” Theo said. “I’m a bit dazed, is all.”

“Can you stand?”

“Certainly.” Clenching his jaw, Theo sat, then attempted to get to his feet.

The instant he put weight on his right foot, agony washed over him in a wave, and he collapsed back into the crushed foliage.

“Thorn, face facts,” Ash said. “You’re hurt. I refuse to repay you for saving my life by letting you act like a fool. We can transport you back to Hartley in the cart.”

“But what about the tree?” Theo glanced at the fallen giant.

“The devil take the tree. It can rot there, for all I care. Let’s get you to the cart.”

With Ash on one side and the remaining footman on the other, Theo managed to get to the waiting cart. He was shaking and sweaty by the time they boosted him into the bed. Ash made a makeshift splint for Theo’s ankle out of a sturdy piece of stick, lashing it onto Theo’s leg with torn strips from the bottom of his shirt.

“Come back for the tree,” Theo tried to tell the cartman as the vehicle lurched into motion, though he wasn’t sure the fellow heard him.

Then it was flashes of pain and the sky overhead, pale blue blurring to white.

### CHAPTER 5

Holly had been surprised, and not pleasantly, when her brother returned from Knavesmire with the injured Lord Thornton. She'd thought he would be long gone by that afternoon, and herself safe from his questions, but unfortunately that had proved not to be the case. At least he was confined to his bed. It should be simple enough for her to avoid him until he was recovered and on his way.

Late that night, a thump outside her door brought her from a fitful doze to full wakefulness. Her bedroom was dark, the coals a faint, ash-covered red glow on the hearth. For a heartbeat, she tried to convince herself that whatever she'd heard was simply the normal creaks and settling of Hartley House in the winter.

Then a muffled moan of pain came from the hallway, and she couldn't deny that someone was outside her door. One of the maids, perhaps, suffering a sudden fit? Though it was inordinately late for any of the servants to be about.

Whoever it was, she must investigate. She struck a flame from the tinderbox on her night stand, lighting the candle in its pewter holder. By the flickering flame, she slipped on her silk wrapper, and went to open her door.

"Hello?" she called softly, lifting her candle and peering into the shadows of the hall.

It appeared to be empty, and she was about to turn away when movement near the floor caught her eye. She glanced down, horrified to see Viscount Thornton slumped against the wainscoting. His dark hair was disheveled above the sheen of perspiration on his forehead, and his eyes were closed. For a horrible moment she thought he

might have expired right there in the hallway, until she saw his chest rising and falling with his shallow breaths.

“Lord Thornton!” She knelt beside him, setting the candle down, and took him by the shoulder. His skin was feverishly hot beneath the long muslin nightshirt she belatedly realized was all he was wearing—but despite the embarrassment flooding through her at the sight of his strongly muscled calves and bare feet, this was no time for missish propriety. “Wake up, sir!”

He half-opened his eyes and squinted at her. “Lady Holly. Are you a wagering woman?”

Clearly the man was delirious, either from pain, or the laudanum the doctor had administered, or both.

“Whatever are you doing out of bed?” she asked. “We must return you to your room at once.”

“The tree,” he said with a distracted air. “Viola will have my head. Must go to Dovington, immediately.”

“The only thing you must do immediately is go back to bed. Stay here. I’ll ring for help.”

“Wait.” He caught her arms and stared intently into her eyes. “The tree. You must promise.”

“Really, Lord Thornton, now is not the time?—”

“Please.” He pulled her so close their faces were nearly touching.



“For heaven’s sake, sir, you are not in your right mind.”

“But...you’re beautiful,” he said, a note of surprise in his voice.

Then, before she could even fathom what was happening, he leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. Startled heat flashed through her, as though the fever had leaped from his body to hers during that brief contact.

Then he did it again, pressing his mouth firmly upon hers. His lips were unexpectedly soft, and she leaned forward slightly, inhaling. It was like being plunged into a glass of champagne, her sense sparkling and fizzing?—

She pulled back with a jolt. Whatever was she doing? They could not be discovered in such a compromising position! No matter how her pulse raced or her lips tingled from his kiss.

“Wait,” he said, reaching for her as she rose.

“Nothing happened here, sir,” she said forcefully, scooping up her candle with trembling fingers. “Except that you collapsed in the hallway, and I just now discovered you.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, praying he was so addled he would believe her. Then she whisked back into her room and yanked on the bell pull for her maid—as she should have done the moment she saw Lord Thornton in the hall. That, and roust her brother, which she intended to do forthwith.

On her way out of her room, she grabbed the lap robe draped over the armchair beside her hearth. At least she could tuck it about the viscount—for modesty as well as warmth.

When she reached the hall, she was relieved to see that Lord Thornton had tipped his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. She draped the blanket over him, and he barely stirred.

Thank heavens. She could only hope that he'd think their kiss a fever dream.

Ash's rooms were at the very end of the corridor where, he claimed, he had the privacy to relax without having to hear the maids fussing over his sisters at every turn. Holly rapped on his door, then listened. Hearing no signs of him stirring within, she knocked again.

"Ash," she said, "wake up. Lord Thornton requires your assistance."

After a brief time, her brother opened the door and blinked at her. "What is it?"

"Come and see." She lifted her candle and marched back down the hall.

He followed, tying the belt of his robe. The narrow door to the servant's stairs opened on the far side of the hall and her ladies' maid, Abby, stepped out, bearing a candle of her own. She wore a plain blue wrapper, and her braid was somewhat haphazardly stuffed into her mob cap.

"What is it, milady?" she asked, then gasped when Holly directed her attention to the unconscious form of Lord Thornton slumped against the wall.

"Egad." Ash pushed past them and crouched beside his friend. "Wake up, man."

He took the viscount by the shoulder and gave him a gentle shake.

Lord Thornton opened his eyes. "Ash. Good—fetch the cartman and I'll be off."

“I don’t think so,” Ash said dryly, then looked at Holly, his brows raised

“When I found him, he was raving about taking the tree to Dovington Hall,” Holly said.

“Yes!” Lord Thornton sat up straight. “Nearly Christmas, isn’t it? I must depart immediately.”

It took Ash on one side, Abby on the other, and Holly behind him to lever the viscount up. He kept all his weight on his uninjured leg, and, one-footed, wavered back and forth, in imminent danger of falling back to the floor.

“How the devil did you manage to get here from your room?” Ash asked rhetorically. “Come on, Thorn, back to bed.”

Between them, they managed to limp Lord Thornton back down the hallway, past Rose’s room—she had a prodigious ability to sleep through anything, and this commotion was no exception—and finally back to his bedroom.

Despite his protests that he must make for Dovington Hall, they got him between the covers. Once abed, he subsided, to everyone’s relief.

“What if he gets up again?” Abby asked, giving the viscount a worried glance.

Ash blew out an exasperated breath and hauled a chair up beside the bed. “I’ll stay with him for the rest of the night. Hopefully, he’ll be more lucid tomorrow.”

Holly handed him the lap robe. “You might find this useful. Good luck.”

“Lady Holly,” Lord Thornton said suddenly emerging from his daze and grabbing her hand. “Don’t forget. The tree.”

He was clearly agitated, pressing her fingers intently. Until the matter was settled, it was plain he'd be unable to sleep.

"Rest, Lord Thornton," she said. "I'll see to it."

"Promise?" he asked.

"Yes. I promise."

"Thank you," he said fervently.

Then, most unexpectedly, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. His lips burned against her bare skin, and she pulled her hand away, breathless. Trying to conceal her reaction, she snuck a look at her brother. Could Ash see the brand of the viscount's kiss blazing upon her lips?

Her brother gave her an exasperated smile and shook his head. "Ever the rogue, I'm afraid. You must forgive him, Holly. He's not himself."

"Of course." She hoped Ash would attribute the color in her cheeks to the exertion of helping return Lord Thornton to his bed and not her flustered reaction to his attentions.

Abby saw her back to her room, then went to seek her own bed. As Holly lay in the dark, she tried to reason away the events of the night concerning Lord Thornton. He had been out of his wits, certainly.

Added to that, he was a rogue, as Ash had reminded her. If he'd been in full possession of his senses, Viscount Thornton would never seriously pay court to his friend's sister.

No matter that his kisses kept said sister awake until the first light of dawn sifted through the curtains, as pale and soft as new fallen snow.

### CHAPTER 6

After breakfast, Holly went to check on Lord Thornton. She wasn't the least surprised to see Ash dozing away in the chair he'd claimed. The viscount seemed deeply asleep, as well. And if she paused a moment, studying the long line of Lord Thornton's nose and the way his dark hair fell over his forehead, well, there was no one to take note of it.

Quietly, she shut the bedroom door and went in search of the footmen who'd accompanied the gentlemen to Knavesmire Wood. She'd a promise to fulfill, after all. And a tree to deliver to North Yorkshire.

And a kiss to stop thinking about , she reminded herself sternly.

Unfortunately, the cartman Lord Thornton had hired to transport the tree had returned to York after bringing the viscount to Hartley House. Neither of the footmen knew where to find the fellow.

"Do you at least know where the tree is?" she asked, admitting to some exasperation.

"Why, in the wood, milady," the younger footman said. "Unless someone's dragged it off for firewood. Make a lovely Yule log, it would."

"More like a half dozen," the other man said. "T'was a beast of a fir tree. Nearly killed his lordship, it did. Good thing the viscount was so quick on his feet."

"Might you go and fetch it?" she asked.

The two men traded uncomfortable glances.

“Would he...want it here, milady?” the younger asked.

“I hardly think it poses a danger any longer,” she said tartly. “We have a cart, don’t we?”

Reluctantly, the footmen agreed to go fetch the fallen tree, no matter how murderous. Holly wasn’t certain how, or even if, she’d manage to send the evergreen from Hartley House up to Dovington, but first things first.

She returned to the breakfast room for a fresh cup of tea, and discovered her brother and sister there. Rose was brightly quizzing Ash about the events of the night, while he hunched over his tea and responded with grunts.

“Oh, Holly, thank goodness,” her sister said, turning to her. “Ash won’t tell me anything. He’s such a bear when he hasn’t gotten enough sleep. What happened with Lord Thornton? Did he really collapse in the hallway, raving about the Christmas tree?”

“More or less.” Holly brought her cup of black tea from the sideboard and settled beside her sister.

“I can’t believe I slept through it!” Rose raised her hands in a dramatic gesture. “I miss all the fun.”

“Hauling a half-conscious man down the hall is no one’s idea of fun,” Ash said, then stretched his shoulders and groaned. “I think I strained something.”

“Is he improved?” Holly asked, ignoring their brother’s transparent attempt at sympathy.

Ash plopped a cube of sugar into his teacup. “He’s lucid, at any rate—which is more than I can say for myself. Sorry if he gave you a scare in the night.”

“It’s no matter.” She hurriedly took a sip of her own tea to hide her sudden blush. “Do you happen to know the address of the cartman he hired?”

Ash shot her a look. “You’re not on about that blasted tree, are you? First he was moaning about it for half an hour in the middle of the night, and now I have to endure more?”

“Did it really almost crush you?” Rose laced her fingers under her chin and stared at Ash. “The servants are saying Lord Thornton saved your life. How does it feel, to have almost died?”

“Wretched,” their brother said, but Holly suspected his ill humor had more to do with lack of sleep than escaping imminent death.

According to the footmen, Ash hadn’t even realized he was about to have a large evergreen land on him when Lord Thornton pushed him out of the way.

“It was quite heroic of the viscount,” Rose continued, a dreamy look in her eyes.

“Does this mean you’re throwing over your baron and setting your cap for Lord Thornton?” Holly couldn’t keep the bite from her voice.

“Jealous?” Rose sat up straight and grinned. “Have you been thinking about what I said, Holly?”

“Not at all.”

“What?” Ash looked at them, his gaze moving from Holly to her younger sister.



“What did you say, Rose?”

“Nothing of import,” Holly said. “How long would it take a cart to go from here to North Yorkshire?”

“Oh, no,” Ash said. “We’re not going to the trouble of sending that tree up to Thorn’s family. It can rot in Knavesmire Wood, for all I care.”

“But Lord Thornton cares,” Holly pointed out. “And he did save your life, after all.”

Ash had no reply to that. He went back to his tea, stirring another lump of sugar into his half-full cup, much to Holly’s disgust.

“The weather’s turning,” he said. “A storm’s on the way, and it would be a fool’s errand. Besides, who knows if the tree is even still in Knavesmire?”

“I might have sent the footmen to fetch it,” Holly admitted.

“What?” Ash frowned at her. “Whyever would you do such a thing?”

Because I promised Lord Thornton. And he kissed me. She hoped her thoughts didn’t show on her face.

“Can we install it here?” Rose asked excitedly. “We could put it in the grand hall, beside the staircase. I wonder if we have enough scarlet ribbons to garland it? Or perhaps white?—”

“Enough.” Ash pushed his chair back and rose. “Take the matter up with our parent. My good deeds are done for the day.”

As soon as he departed, Rose grinned at Holly. “How marvelous—a Christmas tree at

Hartley House! I'll go speak with Mother right away. I'm sure she'll agree."

"But..." Holly pressed her lips together in thought.

She'd told Lord Thornton she'd see about the tree—yet if it wasn't feasible to transport it to Dovington Hall, she supposed Hartley House would suffice. Besides, Ash had sent a messenger to Lord Thornton's family the day before, after it became clear the viscount would be unable to travel. His sister would know that he wasn't coming for Christmas, and surely she would understand that the tree was included in that change of plans.

Still, if the viscount insisted the evergreen go to North Yorkshire, Holly would do her best to see that it did.

"Wait a bit before asking Mother," she said to Rose. "I'm sure she'll agree, since you can always talk her into your schemes—but let me speak with the viscount first."

Rose's brows rose, but she didn't argue. "Then by all means, go have a word with our guest."

Holly gave a sharp nod, more to reassure herself than her sister. Then, before she could lose her nerve, she finished her tea and went to speak with Lord Thornton.

Theo lay in the guest bed, his foot propped up with pillows, and scowled at his ankle. The doctor had told him to stay off it for at least a week—a week! No matter how much he wanted to continue his journey, riding was out of the question. But he refused to remain bedridden through the holidays. Surely Ash could procure him a crutch of some kind, so that he could at least hobble about.

He was sorry he wouldn't reach Dovington Hall in time for Christmas. And sorry about the tree, and how disappointed Viola would be. Theo had to admit that the sight

of a majestic evergreen inside the house, decked with glittery things and sparkling with candles, had become the new hallmark of the season.

The one he'd picked out in the wood yesterday had been the best yet, but, alas, it was doomed to lie there, rotting back into the soil. Which, after that near-disaster, was probably for the best. At least Ash was all right, though the injury to his own ankle was annoying at best. Perhaps, in the future, he wouldn't choose to fell quite as impressive a tree.

A quiet knock came at Theo's door, and he called for them enter—probably a servant with a tisane or somesuch. Instead, Lady Holly stepped inside, leaving the door properly ajar.

“Good day, Lord Thornton,” she said with a tentative smile. “I hope you're feeling better.”

“I am, though my ankle pains me a bit,” he admitted, and gestured to the chair drawn up beside the bed. “Please, sit a moment. I'd be glad of your company.”

She moved gracefully to the indicated seat, and he had a sudden memory of dancing with her at the Christmas Ball last year. At the time, he'd been intent on escaping his sister's machinations to snare him a wife, but even then he'd noted that Lady Holly was light on her feet.

“How did you sleep?” she asked, giving him an intent look.

“Restlessly. I believe laudanum gives me bad dreams.”

“Do you not recall getting out of bed in the night?”

He shook his head. “Ash told me the servants found me wandering the halls.” A scrap

of memory tugged at him—her face, very close to his, gold flecks in her hazel eyes. “Were you there, Lady Holly?”

“Briefly.” She dropped her gaze to the quilted coverlet. “The commotion woke me.”

“Then I must I apologize.” He smiled wryly. “I assure you, I don’t make a habit of wandering about in a delirium.”

“I’m glad to hear it, sir.” She flicked her eyes up to his, then away.

Speaking of habits, this was a perfect time for him to pursue his investigation into Lady Holly’s penchant for gambling. But subtly—Ash’s sister had shown she was quick-witted.

“I’m supposed to stay off my ankle,” he said, nodding at the offending limb. “To pass the time, would you join me in a hand of cards? Perhaps we might also bring your siblings into a game of whist.”

She tilted her head, suspicion flashing through her eyes. “Do you enjoy the tables then, sir?”

“Moderately. Growing up, we wagered for almonds. I must say, my sister Viola is quite cutthroat at cards.”

She didn’t rise to the bait, as he’d hoped, only giving him a demure smile.

“If you’d like to play, Lord Thornton, then I will endeavor to indulge you. You’re our guest for Christmas, after all.”

“No matter how unintended.” He shot her a rueful look.

“Yet welcome all the same.” The faintest blush rose on her cheeks. “But that reminds me—if you’ll give me the name of the cartman, I’ll see about getting your tree up to Dovington Hall.”

“Kind of you, but unnecessary. Sadly, my family will have to weather its loss this year.”

Her brows drew together in a faint frown. “Are you quite certain?”

“Yes. The poor driver shouldn’t have to miss his own Christmas to fulfill my whims. And there are trees on the Dovington grounds. Not as splendid, of course, but the entire drive is lined with evergreens. If my sister desires a tree, she can procure one for herself.”

“If you say so.” Lady Holly smoothed her skirts and rose. “I’ll leave you to rest now.”

“Thank you for the visit,” he said. “Don’t forget your promise.”

She startled and gave him a quick glance.

“To play cards with me,” he clarified, her reaction making his suspicions flare anew.

“Of course. I will see you later this afternoon, if that suits.”

He gestured to the bedroom and his own bedridden form. “I’ll be here, whenever you find it convenient.”

With a quick nod, she slipped out the door, shutting it gently behind her, and Theo let out a sigh. At least he’d talked her into a hand of cards. No matter how clever she might be, surely she’d give herself away once they commenced to play.

### CHAPTER 7

Holly returned to Lord Thornton's room that afternoon, only to find him sound asleep. She had to admit to some relief as she closed the door and retreated to her own bedroom. Every indication was that the viscount was an inveterate gambler—which confirmed the suspicions she'd had after encountering him in the not-quite-respectable neighborhood where she'd gone to hear Caroline Norton speak.

She supposed there wasn't any harm in indulging him by playing cards to pass the time. He'd mentioned wagering almonds with his siblings, so she'd brought some up from the kitchens and grabbed a box of cards from the billiards room. Whenever their guest awoke and was ready, she would do her duty as a hostess.

Spending time in his company had nothing to do with the treacherous thoughts that kept popping up in her head regarding their kiss in the midnight hallway. Clearly he didn't recall it at all, and she was relieved at the fact. Truly she was.

Despite the slight hollowness beneath her heart that suggested otherwise.

She set the cards and almonds on her dressing table and decided to go see how the tree was coming along. After Lord Thornton had decided it didn't need to travel up to North Yorkshire, Rose had gotten their parent's permission to install it in the grand hall.

Holly paused on the upper landing and leaned on the railing, viewing the hubbub below. A flurry of maids and footmen swirled about the tree, draping ribbons along the boughs, positioning bright splashes of holly berries here and there, along with

snowflakes cleverly cut from paper. It was astonishing how quickly the evergreen was being transformed into something magical.

“What do you think?” Rose called up to her. “Isn’t it lovely?”

“Quite.”

“I’ve sent to York for candles and clip holders, if any are to be found,” Rose said. “If only we had more sparkling things.”

“You could hang some sugar spoons,” Holly suggested. “Tie red yarn about the handles.”

“A splendid idea!” Rose turned to one of the maids, who nodded and hurried off, no doubt to turn the idea to reality.

Holly watched a bit longer. Hadn’t Lord Thornton mentioned he was bringing gilded nuts up from London for the Dovington tree? She’d have to ask him if he might donate them to the cause.

First, of course, she’d have to tell him that the tree was here at Hartley House. She hoped he wouldn’t mind. Perhaps it would be best to wait until the evergreen was fully decorated, and surprise him with its magnificence.

Despite Theo’s plan to lure Lady Holly into a game of cards, he found himself sleeping a great deal. He attributed it to the laudanum, and resolved to bear the pain as much as possible, without its aid. The maids came in at mealtimes, rousing him as they brought his meals on a tray, and despite his resolution to stay awake, he dozed fitfully.

His fever hadn’t quite abated, and he suspected that, in addition to the ankle, he’d

caught a chill from riding in the rain all day—which, of course, exacerbated his general sense of ill health. At least spending the day in slumber kept him from feeling entirely miserable.

That evening, Lady Rose visited, her arms full of greenery.

“You must have some holiday cheer,” she said with a smile, tucking a spray of holly above the headboard of his bed.

“Thank you,” he said, watching bemusedly as she proceeded to deck every surface in his room with garlands of evergreens: holly, ivy, fir branches, and the like.

“There,” she said, brushing her hands together when she finished. “That brightens things up quite a bit. And doesn’t it smell lovely?”

“Indeed.” How could he help but agree? “Thank you, Lady Rose.”

“You are most welcome. I’ll send my sister in to appreciate it.”

Before he could respond, she whisked out of the room, leaving the door half open. He heard her rapping at Lady Holly’s door, their voices in conversation. A short time later, Lady Holly peeked into his room.

“Oh, you are awake,” she said. “I never quite know whether to believe Rose or not.”

“I am.” He gave her a wry smile. “My apologies if you visited earlier, and I deprived you of your card game.”

“Not at all. Would you like to play now?”

“I would.” He levered himself up a bit more, ignoring the stab of pain from his ankle



as he shifted it.

Lady Holly moved the nightstand down to make a table, then drew the chair up on the other side.

“I brought cards,” she said, laying the deck down. “And almonds, so that we can wager.”

Theo nodded, swallowing his smile. As he thought—Lady Holly was all too ready to place her bets.

They began, with Theo dealing out. To his surprise, Lady Holly lost several hands in a row, and ruefully pushed half her almonds over to him.

“I’m not the best at cards,” she said. “In truth, though it might shock you, I feel my mind is more suited to chess.”

“Do you play cards often?”

“Not at all. Might you remind me of the rules concerning the court cards once more?”

As they played, he studied her. He couldn’t decide if she was a marvelous liar, or truly unskilled. Or both.

“You’ve bested me, sir,” she finally said, pushing the last of her almonds over to him with a laugh. “I see I need to sharpen my playing skills.”

“Don’t you want to play one more hand?” he asked. Surely a gambler wouldn’t be able to say no.

“I’ve nothing left to wager.”

“A kiss.” The words surprised him,

She looked at him, wide-eyed, a blush coloring her cheeks. Then her gaze moved to the greenery her sister had placed over his headboard, and she shook her head.

“Rose is such a mischief maker,” she said. “Can’t we pretend she didn’t put mistletoe over your bedhead?”

He blinked, scrambling for an answer. “That would hardly be in the spirit of the season. Surely you won’t begrudge me a kiss upon the cheek?”

Their gazes met, and she swallowed.

“As long as I don’t have to play another hand of cards for it,” she said softly. “I fear I’m quite spent.”

“Then I won’t insist.” For some reason, his heart was beating heavily in his chest. “Though I’m afraid you’ll have to come to me.”

She rose from her chair and bent over him. Slowly, she lowered her face to his, but rather than turning her head to present her cheek, she brushed her lips over his.

Heat flashed through him, and it was all he could do not to reach up and pull her down atop him. There was something achingly familiar in the sensation, the smell of her, the way a stray lock of her hair brushed his neck.

He lifted his hand, slipping his fingers around her nape and pressing softly, encouraging her mouth to stay with his. Their breaths mingled, and, it seemed, so too did their heartbeats.

When she pulled back, he didn’t try to keep her, no matter how desperately he wanted

to. For the first time in days, he felt restored.

“Will that suffice?” Her voice trembled slightly.

“It will have to.” He glanced at the greenery above his head—the small white berries of the mistletoe unmistakable, now that he knew to look for them. “But you’d best remove that, or I won’t be responsible for the consequences. Lady Holly, I would be happy to kiss you upon the lips all night, until the sun rose.”

“You are a rogue, sir.” Her words were not as heated as her blush.

“And you are a gentlewoman. I assure you, I do not presume to toy with your affections. Or ruin your reputation.”

“What, then?” She cocked her head. “I must warn you, I will not marry.”

“You won’t?” Surprise made his words clumsy. “I thought that was the aspiration of every miss of the ton.”

“Not mine.” Her manner hardened. “Now, I must bid you goodnight.”

She snatched the greenery from above his bed, scooped up the cards, and swept out of his room before he could marshal his thoughts enough to stop her. All that was left was a forlorn pile of almonds upon the nightstand, and the sinking feeling that Theo had made a grave error.

If only he knew what it might be.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:17 am*

Upon reaching the sanctuary of her bedroom, Holly sank down in the chair before the hearth. All of her was trembling—her hands, her breath, her heart. She set the cards down and then, with only a moment's hesitation, cast the sprig of holly and mistletoe into the fire. It smoldered for a moment, then caught, emitting a smoky scent of forest mixed with regret.

She wished she had her cashmere lap robe, but she'd neglected to retrieve it from her brother. Instead, she wrapped her arms about herself and stared at the flickering coals, the last berries burning to ash.

What was happening to her?

She'd always thought herself immune to the rogues and rakes who were her brother's friends. But somehow Lord Theodore Harrington, Viscount Thornton, had breached the moat of serene intentions about her heart.

She tried to tell herself he was toying with her—yet he'd denied it, and she had to believe him. It would take the worst sort of rake to attempt to seduce the sister of his good friend beneath the man's very roof. And while Lord Thornton had a bit of a reputation, he was not that kind of man.

Which begged the question—what was he about? Not courting her, surely?

She shivered at the thought.

Her reasons for declining to marry were quite sound—and most certainly shouldn't be cast aside in favor of a handsome fellow with a taste for gambling. No matter how

eligible he might be in all other respects.

The only explanation was that he must still be addled in his thoughts. Surely he'd recover in the next few days. Until then, she'd do well to stay far away from him.

And stop thinking about him.

To that end, she fetched the novel she'd been reading, turned up the lamp, and attempted to distract herself. It worked, at least for a half an hour, until a knock sounded on her door.

Rose burst in, as usual not waiting for Holly's reply.

"The tree's done—come see!" she said, then wrinkled her nose. "What's that dreadful smell?"

"A bit of greenery fell into the fire." Holly narrowed her eyes at her sister, debating scolding her for putting mistletoe above the viscount's bed.

But then she'd have to admit that it had led to a kiss, and the less said of that, the better.

"Speaking of greenery, and fire, the servants are just now lighting the candles. Put your book down—you mustn't miss it." Rose reached and took Holly's hands, drawing her reluctantly to her feet.

"Very well." It would be foolish to remain sulking in her rooms all evening, and she did want to see the Christmas tree in all its glory.

When she stepped into the hall, however, the sight of Lord Thornton made her whirl back around and yank her door open.

“Whatever’s the matter with you?” Rose grabbed her arm and, despite her resistance, towed her over to where the viscount leaned on the ebony cane Ash had lent him.

“Lady Holly,” he said. “Your sister tells me you’ve arranged a surprise for me.”

“I...” She glared at Rose, then smoothed her expression and turned to the viscount. “It seemed the thing to do.”

“Well then, I look forward to discovering whatever it is.” He offered his arm.

“Do help Lord Thornton down the hall to the landing,” Rose said sweetly. “I must go ahead and make sure all is ready. Don’t look until I say!”

She swooped off, her plaid taffeta skirts rustling, leaving Holly alone with their guest.

“We should fetch Ash,” she said, glancing back down the hall.

“I understand he’s already been gathered.” Lord Thornton glanced down at her, his dark eyes contrite. “I owe you an apology.”

“For the kiss? I assure you, sir, nothing more needs to be said of it.”

“No.” He took a breath. “For thinking something of you that was untrue.”

She blinked at him. Was he implying he’d thought her a lightskirt? “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t suppose that you do. I thought you were a reckless gambler.”

She nearly tripped over her skirts, which made him stumble, and for a moment they clung to one other for balance. Once they were steadily underway again, Holly took a breath and attempted to order her thoughts.

“Are you a reckless gambler, my lord?”

He gave her a wry smile. “I am not. It seems perhaps we’ve been at cross-purposes. But I must ask you—what were you doing in St. James that afternoon?”

Here it was; the moment of her undoing. Yet she would not—could not—lie to him.

“I was there to attend a speech by Mrs. Caroline?—”

“Norton,” he finished. “Concerning the injustices suffered by women.”

She halted again, staring at him in shock. “What do you know of it?”

“Why, I was there.”

“To gawk, or protest her sentiments?”

The corner of his mouth curved in a smile. “To support the lady. After coming across one of her pamphlets, I was curious to hear her speak in person.”

“Then you understand why I cannot marry,” Holly said. Her heart felt coated in frost—a distant, icy misery she could not bear to let herself feel.

“No.” He tilted his head. “I understand you wouldn’t want to marry someone who doesn’t also believe that women deserve a more equitable place in the world.”

Her pulse thrumming through her, she met his gaze. “Do you share that view, sir?”

“I do,” he said, very solemnly.

They stood there, staring at one another. Slowly, he raised his hand to cup her cheek, the caress like feathers, like sunlight.

Everything shifted, possibilities opening inside her that she'd barely dared hope for. She'd thought she could never marry, hadn't dreamed that perhaps she might find a man who supported the arguments for women's rights. Let alone a fellow she was already falling in love with...

"Come!" Rose's voice echoed down the hall.

With a sigh, Holly took a step back. "My sister's summons cannot be ignored."

"Shall we?" He offered his arm and she threaded her elbow through his, lending her support to his halting pace. Truly, she was in equal need of steadying. His revelation had left her quite unbalanced.

They continued down the hall, careful not to look at one another, though the prospect of their future vibrated in the air between them.

The corridor ended in an archway leading to the great hall. They stepped through, and Holly couldn't help a soft gasp of delight as she beheld the Christmas tree.

The chandeliers overhead had been extinguished, and the only light was provided by dozens of small candles twinkling among the branches. She smiled to see not only sugar spoons but soup spoons and teaspoons as well, hung from the boughs, the curved silver reflecting the flames.

"But...is that my tree?" Lord Thornton shook his head as they came to a halt at the railing, beside Rose, Ash, and Lord and Lady Hartley.

"The very same one that nearly took my life," Ash said dryly. "It seems more well behaved, now."

His mother sniffed at the reminder, but said nothing.



“We’ve civilized it,” Rose said.

“That you have.” Lord Thornton looked at her. “You said it was your sister’s surprise?”

“Holly was the one who arranged to fetch it out of Knavesmire Wood,” Rose said.

Ash nodded. “You were out of your mind, insisting it go to Dovington. She was nearly ready to carry it upon her back up to North Yorkshire.”

“Ashby,” the earl said reprovingly.

“And we have our parents to thank,” Holly said. “For agreeing to having it installed at Hartley House.”

“You fetched it, though.” Lord Thornton turned to her. “Why?”

“Because you asked,” she said simply.

He looked at her a long moment. “Perhaps there is something else I would like to ask. Dare I hope for your answer?”

Oh, heavens. He wasn’t... He couldn’t be... Tears sprang hotly to her eyes, blurring the candles on the tree into a hundred bright stars.

“You may,” she said, blinking furiously to keep the tears at bay.

Lord Thornton nodded, once, then turned to the earl. “Lord Hartley—you must forgive the abrupt manner of my request. But I seek leave to court your eldest daughter, Lady Holly. Might I have your permission to do so?”

Rose let out a little yelp of glee. She was quickly shushed by Ash, who muttered

something admiring and profane under his breath.

“Most irregular,” their father said, sounding more confused than upset.

“Yet quite satisfactory,” his wife put in, squeezing her husband’s arm. “Don’t you think so, my dear? Viscount Thornton has much to recommend him.”

“Well, in that case...”

They all stood, frozen, waiting for the earl’s response.

After a moment, Lady Hartley let out a sigh, and poked her husband in the side. “You mean to say yes, I believe.”

“Er, of course I do.” He turned to Lord Thornton and offered his hand. “Welcome to the family, young man.”

“Papa,” Rose whispered, “he hasn’t asked Holly yet.”

“That’s quickly remedied.” Lord Thornton turned to Holly and took her hand.

The light from the tree illuminated his strong features and long nose, and she thought she’d never seen a more handsome man. Nor one who saw her in return for who she truly was.

“I’m afraid it’s a bit difficult for me to go down on one knee,” he said. “But I assure you I am kneeling in my heart. Dearest Holly, I can think of none other I would want for a wife, a companion, a fellow crusader. Would you do me the very great honor of becoming my viscountess?”

“I will,” she said, happiness blazing through her, brighter than all the candles on the tree, or the stars in the sky. “I will, indeed.”