



Once Upon a Gilded Christmas (To All The Earls I've Loved Before #4)

Author: *Heidi Wessman Kneale*

Category: Historical

Description: On a frosty December evening, Edward fell in love with the beautiful Lady Honora. As a second son, Edward had nothing to offer her but his heart. How could he compete with someone else's title?

Alas, their love was torn asunder when Honora was sent off to an arranged marriage.

Decades later, at a Christmas party, he learns the love of his youth is now the Dowager Countess of Harwich. Could he win the heart of the Silver Belle he once thought lost to him forever?

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Edward Russell, the Earl of Lavistock, loved both his sons, a sentiment almost unheard of amongst his peers, who tended to favour their eldest son and, at best, tolerate the rest. While Kendall would be his heir, Edward was determined that his second son Jacob, was not to be neglected.

Not the way Edward had been.

When Jacob had come of age, he had declared him to receive a substantial inheritance, sufficient to live quite well with enough to keep a wife in great comfort, preferably a wife that he adored, for Edward would let his son marry for love.

He wanted a love match for Kendall too, really, though the odds of that were slim.

That was what happened when a son was positioned to become quite titled and somewhat wealthy as soon as the father popped his clogs.

Edward hoped that would not be for another twenty years, at least. Maybe thirty, if he was lucky.

Still, the matrimonial target was on Kendall's back simply because he was born first. The hunters would be out for him.

Prior to each Season, every aspirational young lady worked for months crafting the right kind of magic to entice, lure or trap a noble husband. In the past, Edward had assisted his sons to avoid such traps.

But not this week. Perhaps Edward's efforts had been too successful, for neither son

had any prospective future wives in mind. They seemed quite content to continue their bachelor lives indefinitely. Perhaps it was time to withdraw support?

This week, they were completely on their own. Good luck to them.

Edward and his sons had been the first to arrive at Lady Hammond's Christmas Party, if party was the proper name. They all knew why they were there.

Lady Hammond herself greeted them at the door, a round figure in a plum-coloured gown that made her look like a piece of fruit. She spread her arms as if to embrace him. He did not fall into them. "Ah, my dear Lord Edward!" she gushed. "I see you are not afraid to lead the peers."

Well, someone had to be first. "Cowardice was never fashionable," he replied. He bowed, as was proper.

Lady Hammond dropped her arms and returned the curtsy. She'd buried three husbands already through no fault of her own. While she might not object to a fourth, her primary focus was her own daughter, a blessing from her second husband.

Where was the little mouse?

Edward looked about the entrance hall of Solehill House.

When it had been built over a hundred years ago, it was practically country.

Now neighbourhoods considered more London-than-not had pushed up rather close, enough that one couldn't be considered having "left town".

The House had sufficient grounds to be considered luxury, but the smoke from neighbours' chimneys rose just beyond the treeline.

"So glad you were not delayed by the weather," Lady Hammond declared as the footman gathered their overcoats.

Weather? Other than chill and a vague overcast to the skies lending further grey to the world, one could consider the weather clement. It was neither rainy nor snowy nor windy. Just chill. "Wouldn't miss this."

In memory of all the earls she'd loved before, Lady Hammond had invited every single eligible young lord or lady (and their titled parents) under the pretence of celebrating the holiday season for an entire week. Fourteen desperate families accepted.

Nobody was under any illusion that this was anything less than a matchmaking affair, for Lady Hammond had her own daughter to unload and didn't see any reason to wait. After all, Parliament had been in session since early November.

Edward didn't mind. Subtly, he approved of the plan, as crazy as it sounded. His sons were in need of wives. As they had been rather slack in their own efforts these past couple of years, Edward was not above putting them in this situation.

Oh, he could have gone and chosen wives for them—his late wife Charlotte would thoroughly approve of this—but he would not. He would never inflict his own fate upon them.

Let them make their own choices. They were perfectly capable of dealing with the consequences.

Though consequences were the last thing on their minds right now.

As another set of guests arrived, Lady Hammond's attention turned from them. Edward, Kendall and Jacob retreated to the gantry rail above the spacious hall of

Lady Hammond's grand entrance to watch the rest of the guests arrive.

Not a bad spot, really. "All the better to regard their charms," Kendall remarked.

Edward wasn't fooled. It was the perfect spot from which to stare deep into the young ladies' décolletages.

The lads leaned against the dark wooden railing that would do little to stop them from tumbling to the floor below, should they lean any further over.

One by one, the carriages arrived, dispensing matchmaking mamas and papas along with their scions, hoping for a splendid match.

One could hardly go wrong, for not a soul had been issued an invitation without Lady Hammond having vetted their pedigree.

The Late Lady Russell would not have sniffed once at this guest list. Normally, she had sniffed at everything.

Well, she could sniff the lid of her coffin until Resurrection Day, then she could keep sniffing it, for—

No, that was an uncharitable thought. It was not her fault she and Edward had been shackled together by their parents in the name of A Splendid Alliance.

Yes, the two families had pooled together their resources, their fathers gaining political advantage.

Lands and fortunes were saved and from the outside, all appeared to be well.

But none of them had to live with the Late Lady Russell's voice. Not what Charlotte

said, but the sound of the voice itself. If it didn't make Edward's skin crawl so much, he might have spent more time analysing it to figure out why it sounded so hair-curlingly awful.

Thank heaven above none of their daughters had inherited the sound of their mother. Singing and language lessons helped with that, as well as very little exposure to their mother. Nothing like music lessons for all to drown out the sound of the Late Lady Russell.

Let her rest in peace. The Good Lord could figure her out later. It had been ten years.

This week, it was all about the boys. No matter how old his sons got, they would always be his boys. He wanted nothing more than to see them happy and secure.

But happiness seemed to evade them. Oh, they knew their duty; Edward had seen to that.

So why did they neglect it for so long? Often, young ladies put several complex plans in motion in hopes of capturing Kendall or maybe his brother yet both managed to slip their grasp.

How was it they could not fall in love? These boys needed to learn how to fall in love.

And that involved needing a plan.

If only he knew what that was.

More guests arrived, The Third Earl of Shipbrook, Lady Shipbrook and their daughter Lady Frances.

Kendall sniffed. "Pudgy little thing, isn't she?"

Edward regarded the young lady. Well, 'little' was not an apt description for Lady Frances.

She was a bit taller than one would expect.

Big-boned was the polite term. Well-fleshed was another.

Some would say it a sign of the fortunes of the Earldom of Shipbrook to keep their daughter so well-fed.

She wasn't ugly by any measure. She simply didn't fit the wispy little elfin ideal that was currently popular.

Meanwhile, Jacob trawled through a little notebook he'd brought. "Shame they're Irish."

Kendall sighed.

Edward rolled his eyes. "Looks will not matter so much if her manner is exquisite.

" How often did he have to school his sons to look for the good qualities beyond a fair face?

At least Lady Frances had that clear, creamy skin so well known amongst the Irish.

Her fair hair held a strong tint of strawberry.

Still, his sons smiled and waved to her. She, on the other hand, returned a baffled look.

Next through the door: "William Fermor, Third Earl of Pomfrit."

Jacob scrabbled through his book. "Mary, his daughter by his first wife, who died not long after the birth."

"At least no man with two eyes can doubt she is his daughter," added Kendall. "Her eyebrows are an exact replica of his."

Alas. Now that his son had pointed them out, Edward couldn't not see them. They were like two square caterpillars hovering over her sleepy-looking eyes. He shuddered.

Jacob made a note with a stub of a pencil. "Perhaps she will have good conversation."

Kendall sniffed, echoes of his mother. He didn't need to say anything.

Edward sighed. Three guests in and nothing looked promising.

William Ashburton, the Earl of Baring, had arrived soon after Edward and his sons had, but he brought only his son Bertram, a rather bookish young man whose girth suggested a sessile life.

Here was a lad who was not ashamed of sporting spectacles, as if he hadn't a care in the world for any appearance of virile masculinity.

It was through these he had surveyed Kendall and Jacob, not as rivals, but as.

.. Edward didn't know what. Almost dismissive.

Likewise, his sons had dismissed him as well, for he would be neither rival nor threat. Nothing like a strapping man to attract the young ladies, Kendall often declared.

Boxing, horse riding, and other such pursuits showed a man to be a most desirable specimen.

Bertram, he had declared, was not it.

"Good thing you're not marrying him," Jacob had quipped. Still, he had made notes in his notebook.

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Thus were the impressions of the first guests to arrive at Lady Hammond's Christmas party.

More arrived, with Jacob making notes of each family.

Young ladies and their mamas, lord's heirs with their fathers not yet dead, all with the potential for marvellous matrimony, at least on paper.

Below them, the guests mingled quite casually as they waited for their luggage to be taken to their rooms.

And then there was the magic.

Magic was a feminine art, many considered, for it was slow to build, could be subtle, yet effective.

Only a woman would have the patience it took to employ magic.

It wasn't the sort of thing from fairy tales where one could chant a spell or wave a magic wand and the world would do your bidding.

Instead, magic was like the aethers, free-flowing until harnessed.

The best way to harness it was to catch it and store it in an item—a practice known as 'imbuing'.

Supposedly it took a long time—months, even—to imbue an item with the magic you

wanted.

Not that Edward had much knowledge of such a thing.

Caroline, his late wife, wasn't one much for magic.

She never really needed it, she said. The last time anyone properly explained it to him had been thirty years ago.

He still thought of her from time to time.

Magic worked by proximity. It needed the touch of a person to activate it. Without someone nearby, magic just sat there in whatever item it had been imbued into, patiently waiting until someone came along, or until it evaporated.

Later the guests would all be formally introduced before dinner.

Before then, Edward wanted his sons to see them all from a distance.

From up here at the balustrade, magic had little impact.

All those desperate young ladies (and maybe a few young gentlemen) would have been magicked to the gills with who knew what kind of magical charms?

Unbeknownst to them, Edward knew of the pact his sons had made, to watch out for each other, lest some clever young thing trap one of them in a well-crafted web.

Maybe that would be a good thing, Edward mused, if an entrapment did happen.

If a young lady was dedicated enough to spend months of her life imbuing magic into her jewellery, her silver-shot ribbons, her stationery and more, maybe she'd have the

sort of dedication to be a good wife in the House of Lavistock.

Magic took time. It wasn't like one could cast a charm on an item in an afternoon strong enough to attract a potential suitor. It took weeks, months, or even years to push enough magic into an item for it to be effective. That took much planning and patience.

There had been little-to-no magic in his own marriage. The Late Lady Russell saw no need for such enticements, as she didn't have to win him over (nor he, her). It was the starry eyes of their parents that had united them.

Still, she could have made some effort to dazzle him with some sort of glamour. Might have made the marriage a bit more tolerable. Maybe magic wasn't a bad thing.

Three daughters and two sons was nothing to sniff at. By that metric alone, theirs was a successful marriage.

Shame his evenings lacked the warmth of a pleasant companion.

Now that age had wriggled its way into his life, could there be any comfort better than a companion to sit next to a warm fire on an evening?

He yearned for a pleasant someone across from him, full of interesting conversation sometimes, companionable silence in others, but always present, always pleasant.

He'd experienced it once, a long time ago, a stolen night when a dinner party was avoiding him. He still thought of her.

"Lads," Edward said, "There is nothing wrong with magic. Let her charm you. Let her make you happy. If she is glamorous to you, and works hard to keep it like that, it's not a bad thing."

Jacob straightened. "Are you advocating feminine deception?"

"Not at all. I'm saying a spoonful of sugar in your tea makes it imminently drinkable."

"There is such a thing as too much sugar," Jacob retorted.

"Is there, Jamface?"

At the sound of his childhood nickname, Jacob bristled.

Kendall laughed. "He's got you there."

As a lad, Jacob had once plundered the jam jar. Stole it right out of Cook's pantry. Nurse found him hiding in the wardrobe, jar empty, face covered in jam.

Naturally, Jacob had been scolded. Edward would have never learned of the incident, if it hadn't been for Jacob's defiance.

When Nurse had told him that 'one should never eat a full jar of jam,' he stood up to her. "Why not?" the young lad demanded.

"Because too much sugar will make you sick." Nurse would know. She'd been an excellent nurse to all his children. None of them died, and rarely were they ill.

"Shan't!" was Jacob's unrespectful reply.

Any other nurse might have given him a beating and rightfully so.

Not this one. Instead, she took him to his father and made Jacob tell the story.

Hadn't even cleaned his face first. Edward had sternly berated him for his disrespect.

"Nurse has explained how too much sugar can make you sick.

You will respect Nurse, for she knows these things. "

And had he learned his lesson, this might have been the end of it.

Two more times this happened in a week before Cook learned to lock the jam away.

Not once did Jacob get sick, a fact he declared proudly every time he was punished. A nickname, however, stuck to him longer than any jam ever could.

Kendall was not done with his teasing. "If you don't like sugar, you can have your strawberries plain." He pointed to Lady Frances, who had forgotten about the lads.

The front door opened once more, admitting two figures dressed against the chill December air. One of them threw back her cloak hood from her straw bonnet and stared upward at the three men. It was a young, dark-haired lass whose face tickled at Edward's memory. He must know her family.

True to form, Kendall and Jacob forgot their jammy disagreement and turned their attention to the new lass. Kendall blew her a kiss.

The lass sighed, rolled her eyes and dismissed them. Huh. She must have brothers.

The footman assisted the other first. That must be her mother.

Her back had been turned when the footman helped off her cloak, took her gloves and muffler, and eased her out of her full-length spencer.

Last she removed her bonnet, revealing steel-dark hair elegantly streaked with silver.

Unlike the other matrons, she was not a plump, overfed butterball, but retained some of the slimness of youth in her arms. Granted, her hips bore the signs of a well-lived life, but not to the point of overflowing the seat of a chair.

If anything, it gave her figure a nice curvature that pleased Edward greatly.

Then she turned around.

Edward's breath escaped his body, leaving him gasping. His heart beat as if to escape his chest. He gripped the balustrade as a little moan escaped his lips.

In an instant, thirty years melted away leaving only him and her.

Her. The only woman he'd ever loved, who had been cruelly snatched away from him.

Honora Radcliffe.

Honora Mildmay, Dowager Countess of Harwich, had no choice but to accept Lady Hammond's invitation to her Christmas party.

She had to, scandal bedamned. Honora was under no mistaken impression regarding Lady Hammond's matchmaking intentions.

It was Juliana's best opportunity, considering her circumstances.

The death of her husband Lord Charles had been a bit messier than she'd hoped for. While his son and heir Lord Brook had gotten most of the financial mess sorted out, there wasn't anything he could do about rumour.

In a subtle yet effective manner, that rumour of the ruin of the House of Harwich had

all but tanked Juliana's last Season.

It was not her fault her father died one month in.

While the family had to withdraw from going out during the Social Season, nothing said that visitors could not be accepted.

It would be perfectly normal for them to come express their sympathy, regularly if they so chose.

They had not. Every single young man who'd doted such attention upon her in the beginning had evaporated as if they'd never existed. No visits, certainly no flowers, and not even a note expressing regret.

It baffled Honora until she heard the mostly-incorrect rumour of their financial straits. Not true, of course, once Brook got it all sorted out. Bad bookkeeping, nothing more. But the damage had been done.

Juliana's lonely summer had come and gone. Autumn came, devolving into winter. Nothing enlivened the darkening days, no hope of a future, only coldness.

December came. Honora had spent three hours staring at the letter of invitation from Lady Hammond.

While the flimsiest of tissue-thin rumours had trumped the strength of good bloodlines for the rest of the bon ton, Lady Hammond had ignored that, or so Honora hoped.

Why else would she have invited the Dowager Countess of Harwich and her most eligible youngest daughter to a weeklong celebration of Christmas?

Had to be the bloodline. The Late Earl's family had been impeccable, as had the Radcliffes, from which Honora had descended.

Naturally, the two had united splendidly.

Her eldest son Lord Brook had married well.

Even the second and third of her sons had managed decent enough matches without them needing to purchase commissions or sell their souls to the church.

Her other daughter had done well enough for herself with a baronet, leaving only Lady Juliana.

Poor Juliana, left behind. She'd never liked being left behind, her little legs racing to keep up with the elder children.

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And now here they were, having descended on Solehill House in an unfashionable but safe part of town.

It wasn't so far as to be considered truly country, yet was the sort of ride that would normally make one think twice about popping out for an afternoon, especially in winter. Long enough for the hot bricks to cool.

They had been invited a whole seven days.

The footman eased her out of her winter clothing.

She smoothed out the new fabric of her lavender gown.

It was the first day she dared wear lavender in public.

It would not do to show up to Lady Hammond's in widow's weeds.

Honora was so sick of black and grey. The whole world had been black and grey.

Lavender wasn't much better, but it had a certain warmth to it.

Juliana had been permitted any colour she wanted for the week (barring red and yellow). She'd chosen blue.

If anyone thought to count the days since the Late Earl's death, that would be a person with whom Honora had no desire to socialise.

This was one of Lady Hammond's parties. Honora knew exactly what she was up to.

Anyone else game enough to accept this invitation would not be in a position to criticise this widow.

As she and Juliana arrived, they were ushered in to a rather crowded hall. Two other families conversed with one another, their pleasantries so stiff frost nearly glazed the windows. Both had daughters. What kind of competition would they be?

Juliana sighed. Honora turned to her. "Save your regrets for when you need them."

Her daughter's gaze did not grace her two rivals but was directed upward. "I know my chances, but don't know about my choices." She turned away, a clear snub to whoever was upstairs.

Honora looked upward. What had caused—

Two curious young men looked down. Not bad, but—

A man she'd not seen in years stood next to them. His lush dark locks had thinned somewhat and were more silver than not. But that face! Those eyes, those warm, brown eyes, that had gazed so fondly upon her once upon a time.

A sigh escaped her chest and she laid a hand against her bosom. Did her heart still beat?

"Edward..." His name escaped her lips. She took one step forward, then another.

Without looking away, Edward flowed down the staircase, two baffled young men in his wake. His steps slowed as he approached, caution taking over.

It wasn't as if she intended to flee. How could she, being rooted to the spot as she was. She held out her hand.

He reached out, hesitant.

No, she was not to be snatched away again. She took his hand, lest he flee like the hesitant horse he seemed to be. "Hello," she breathed. His hand was warm, even through her gloves. Such a change from the world she had known this past year.

"Honora." Her name on his lips was like a devotion. He pulled her hand to his chest as if to bury it in his heart.

Someone said something. Edward shook himself. "Ah, yes. I... hear you lost... I mean. My condolences on your, um, recent bereavement."

"Thank you," she murmured. His voice! Still so gentle. It reminded her of warm chocolate on a frosty morning, to be sipped gently and savoured, the cup held close until the hands as well as the heart was warmed.

A voice broke through their moment. "I did not realise you were previously acquainted," said Lady Hammond.

Honora withdrew her hand from the man she once loved. "Oh, um... yes. His Lordship and I have been acquainted ever since my first Season."

"Interesting," added Lady Hammond. "I thought you moved in different circles."

"We... did," Edward added. "Our fathers were not politically affiliated." He turned back to Honora. "How long has it been. Thirty years?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Something like that."

" At the time, Edward had been a second son, hardly fitting for the eldest daughter of the glorious Earl of Derwent, who had insisted on being a most outspoken man until his death a few years ago.

Only the best for him, whether it be a fine new coat or a fine new son-in-law, one whose political alliances suited the late Earl of Derwent's aims.

Not that Honora cared. She had no heart for politics and only tolerated the duties such alliances imposed on the wife of a minor politician.

Thank goodness she was not called upon much to host this party and that dinner.

Her only regret: when one bases one's social circle purely on one's political party, it does make for rather dull company.

The social columns in the newspaper had no interest in such tedious gatherings where everyone was all "Yes, yes, rightly so," and where nothing of interest ever happened.

"I have been following your adventures," she said.

Every morning of her married life, she'd scanned the newspapers for his name.

The Earl and Countess of Lavistock had been a quiet couple with insufficient scandal or societal impact to make the papers beyond the usual hatches, matches and dispatches.

She'd learned of his marriage and the subsequent births of his children.

She read of his brother's death and Edward's rise to the title.

How she had itched to reach out to him, but never followed through.

Still, she scanned the papers. His daughters made splendid matches while his sons liked to dip their toes in scandal, yet not be fully immersed.

It was enough to make them interesting without raising too much alarm.

Racing horses here and there. The eldest once got into a fistfight over someone's honour, though the newspapers did not say who.

Only then did Honora come to full awareness of her surroundings. The two young men flanking Edward must be those sons. They did not look too much like him. Must have favoured their mother.

Honora had never met the Late Lady Russell. Never wanted to.

Introductions were made of the young ones

Kendall and Jacob were his sons' names. Juliana offered the barest of curtses, already disapproving. "Charmed," she replied, sounding anything but.

Honora stepped in. To Kendall, she said. "I see you've recovered nicely from your last adventure."

This took the young man aback. "Have I? Which one?"

"The one where your horse threw you." Only it hadn't been his horse, but someone else's. That's why it had made the papers.

Kendall held out his hands. "In my defence, it was the saddle.

" He'd ridden into town and left his horse at a public stable while he went carousing.

Upon his return, the stable hands had brought out the wrong horse, same colour, with Kendall's same saddle.

After a few too many tankards, Kendall might not have been able to recognise his horse, but he did recognise his saddle.

Climbed on, tried to take off, and spooked the horse.

The horse threw him and ran off, just as the original owner came up. Likewise, his saddle had been put on the wrong horse. "That was my horse!" the other gentleman declared. "This is yours!"

Kendall got up and dusted himself off. He peered at his horse through his beer-addled wits. "Ah, so it is." With that, he climbed on the horse and took off home, ignoring the angry man behind him. All this had made it to the papers, much to Honora's amusement.

"No lasting injuries, I take it?" Honora asked.

Not when cushioned by alcohol. "In fairness," Kendall offered, "I did return the other fellow's horse the next morning."

Juliana folded her arms and rolled her eyes.

Edward cleared his throat. Clearly he had something he wanted to say, but it seemed his words had escaped him.

A knock on the front door broke the tension. Lady Hammond hastened to greet the next lot of her guests.

Edward found his voice. He offered his elbow to Honora. "Would..." he drew in a

deep breath. "Would you like to join me—us—me by the fire in the library?"

Honora's own breath left her as a memory, as vivid as the day it was born, washed over her.

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Thirty years ago...

Lady Honora Radcliffe, young debutante, had had enough of this dinner party and enough of winter. She was fed up with her stays poking her under her arm and the ridiculous panniers that knocked over glasses on tables and caught on cuff buttons.

The Marchioness of Bath knew how to throw a party.

Such raucous laughter! Such bold flirtation.

It was more like a public tavern than a society dinner party.

Her elder brother was nowhere to be seen, although he should have been chaperoning her.

Maybe he trusted his hopefully-future-brother-in-law, Lord Charles, to keep an eye on Honora.

Too much of an eye, it seemed. She kept having to move away from him.

After upsetting a second glass, she shook the wine off her silver gown and made an excuse to withdraw.

Whatever. Her hostess didn't care. After all, everyone else was having a good time.

But instead of finding a servant to help her sponge wine out of the expensive fabric, she headed upstairs in hopes of quietude. Here lay darkness, with only a few candles

here and there, sole circles of light. The sound of the party was muted here, as if only a memory.

At the end of the corridor she spied an open door, the gentle light of the room beyond spilling across the floor.

A library. What other room would have shelves lined with books, comfortable chairs and a fire crackling merrily in the fireplace?

But most important, it offered solitude.

Finally, peace. Honora approach the fireplace, holding out her hands. Let its warmth be a balm to her frazzled soul, to ease away the noise of Society. "Finally," she declared. "I'm alone."

A cough startled her. Whirling around, she found a young man in one of the chairs by the fire. "I beg your pardon," he said, rising. "I'm alone here too."

Once Honora's heart stopped hammering in her chest, she took a step back. "I did not realise someone was here. Everyone should be downstairs."

"You're not."

She turned, shaking her skirts once more, though that wine stain might be permanent now. Her lady's maid would tut at her. "I had an accident."

The young man returned to the chair. He could not have been more than a couple of years older than her, maybe two-and-twenty, no more.

While his brown hair sported most fashionable curls, he wore it unpowdered, adding to his youthful look.

His finely-tailored coat spoke of wealth and taste, down to the fine silver buckles on his shoes.

"I was one guest too many." He slumped back.

On the table next to him lay an empty plate and a single tankard for ale. He followed her gaze. He pushed the empty plate back as if ashamed. "At least the Marchioness did not toss me out."

"One guest too many?" Honora thought back to the raucous event downstairs. How many guests had there been? She'd not bothered to count.

He picked up the tankard. Alas, it was empty. In disappointment, he set it back to the table. "It seems thirteen is too unlucky a number for our Hostess."

Thirteen. "If Her Ladyship doesn't like the number thirteen, why did she invite that many guests?"

"Her Ladyship did not count on a nephew showing up out of the blue."

Honora folded her arms. "Then why not toss him out instead? Why you?"

The young man chuckled, a sad little sound. "Blood is thicker than water, one could say." He picked up the tankard and tilted it up as if to catch the last drop. "Or as thin as this ale."

Just because their host lacked in manners didn't mean this young man did. "Would you like to join me by the fire?"

Another chair sat opposite the fireplace, close enough to stretch out one's feet to the warmth without singeing clothing. Honora dropped herself in here.

"I'm a lesser son," the young man volunteered. "My only value in society is in making up numbers when lacking."

"Oh." Honora folded her hands in her lap. What else was one to say? She was a daughter of a well-to-do nobleman. Naturally, she had value in that alone. It was pure luck she was also fair of face. Plenty of young men bowed to her and kissed her hand.

She didn't fancy any of them, though. She leaned back in her chair. Was she supposed to make conversation with this unneeded guest, or did it not matter?

He resumed his plate, picking at its contents. "Oh," he uttered, as if he'd come to a realisation. "Have you had enough to eat?"

"I have had enough." She'd left in the middle of the third course. There were four more to go. "I thank you."

"Oh, good." He lifted a forkful of meat. "They'd only given me this one plate and I doubt I'll get more."

As he lifted the fork to his lips, he asked, "You don't mind if I eat?"

"No." Honora waved her hand. "Go ahead."

All she wanted to do was settle back and forget about the burden being social was. If all this young man wanted to do was eat and not bother her, fine by Honora.

Christmas, 1817

The library. Honora Mildmay straightened. "We'd be delighted." She took Edward's proffered arm.

Edward Russell. How long had it been since she'd spied him across a room? Even longer since she'd last spoken to him. Time and distance had not stilled her beating heart.

He had changed over the years, and yet he had not.

His hair, once a warm brown, was more silver than not.

Her own dark tresses had dulled to a grey, nothing so elegant as his.

He'd not gone portly about the middle, as many a man of his age was wont.

If anything, he looked more refined than ever.

No more the forgotten second son. He'd grown well into his role as the Earl.

Those eyes. She'd never forgotten those eyes that had gazed so deeply into her soul so many decades ago. No hand had caressed her skin as thoroughly as his eyes perused her. Her fingers teased along the low neck of her gown, itching to pull it lower, if only to let more of him in.

Juliana sighed. "Why not the parlour?" she muttered, so low only her mother heard her. "At least we could have been offered refreshments."

Honora gave her daughter's hand a chiding tap.

Their hostess surely wouldn't neglect them so soon upon arrival.

"You can ring the bell once we get there.

" So like Juliana, thinking with her stomach.

How the girl could shovel in so much food yet remain so skinny.

It was as if she couldn't eat enough. Then again, she had to beat off her older siblings when it came to food when young.

The library looked like every other library, its walls lined with unread books, a table or desk in the middle, and several comfortable chairs by a roaring fire. Behind her and Edward, the two young men—his sons—murmured quietly to one another.

"At least it's warm in here," Juliana muttered, taking up one of— "Oh!" she cried, rising from the chair just as she sat down.

"Blimey!" came a new voice from that same chair.

Everyone froze.

Juliana squeaked as her hands clamped over her mouth. She backed away, hitting the mantlepiece.

From the chair rose a portly young man, sequestering a book to his chest as if ashamed of being caught reading. "I beg your pardon," he stuttered, though none of this was his fault. He wore spectacles, pushing them up his nose.

Juliana said nothing, her hands still clamped over her mouth. Her gaze looked him over, then shot to the others in the room—her mother, Edward and his two sons. She moved not, a rabbit caught under a hawk's gaze.

It was Edward's eldest who broke the tension. "What are you doing lurking in here, Ashburton?" Kendall gave him a grin that was almost a sneer.

Ashburton, huh? Honora racked her brain for the Ashburton family. Earl of Baring,

perhaps?

Young Ashburton took a step back. "Um..."

Juliana unfroze in a snap. "He was here first," she declared.

"I came here for some quiet," the Ashburton lad admitted. His gaze flickered Juliana's way, then shot off, as if he didn't want to be caught looking at her.

At her side, Edward sighed. "Forgive us for intruding on your solitude. Likewise, we sought our own." He shot Honora a smile that warmed her heart.

He made the introductions. This was Lord Bertram Ashburton, the eldest son of the Earl of Baring. Hah, she'd guessed correctly!

Juliana knew no one, at least, not formally. She'd already taken a dislike to Edward's sons. It was in how she wrinkled her nose every time she looked at them.

Honora completed the social necessity of introductions.

Bertram perked up. "Lady Juliana? Lovely name." He sounded genuine.

Kendall, Edward's eldest, gave a little snort, which Juliana heard. She planted her fists on her skinny hips. "It is a lovely name! It means 'youthful'."

Kendall opened his mouth. Before a retort could escape, both Edward and Honora spoke, their words overlapping.

"Don't—" Edward started as Honora said, "I'll have—" Both broke off at the same time, with embarrassed chuckles.

"You first," Edward conceded.

Honora delivered a warning: "I'll have you know she has several older brothers."

Kendall shot a glance to Jacob. "I'm sure I can hold my against them—"

Honora's chuckle caused his words to falter. "It's not my sons you must fear." She looked to Juliana, whose fists had not left her hips. Oh, she would defy these overproud young men to the end!

Kendal scoffed. "What? She going to beat me up?"

At her side, Edward groaned over his stupid son. "I'm sorry," he murmured to Honora. "I'm happy to let him learn the hard way."

"Does he learn the easy way?"

"I always hoped he might."

Thirty years ago...

So much for banishment. Instead of a solitary meal in a lonely library, Edward found himself in the company of a rather handsome young woman. Her dark hair had been pomade, curled, and powdered until it looked steely grey nearly the same colour as her silver gown.

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Lady Honora Radcliffe was her name, she openly admitted. No one would know they had never been properly introduced. Maybe would never find out they'd met. Edward's hand itched to pull the bell, to summon more ale, maybe more food, but Lady Honora had declared she'd dined enough.

Besides, if the servants discovered her in here, they might shoo her back to the party.

Edward found he disliked this idea immensely. Something about her drew him in

She wore a most fashionable gown, pale blue silk shot with silver, that shone in the light.

A silver belle. Even her name sounded like a peal: Honora.

While her gown, festooned with blue ribbons, might have been most fashionable, it didn't sit right on her.

Or rather, she didn't sit right in that gown.

Maybe it was the panniers. Too structured.

Perhaps she would better suit the softness of a shepherdess' costume, kind and gentle—

No. Something about the set of her jaw, the sulk of her arms warred with that image.

Maybe the clothes of a pirate, a captain's jacket flowing in the wind, a silk scarf about

her waist. Let her stand on desk, the wind streaming through her natural hair, whatever colour it might be.

The powder on her hair did her no favours, her curls too tight, her hair piled too high.

"Have you considered running away to sea?" he asked.

She inclined her head. "More so of late, though I doubt I would act upon it. I hear shipboard food is terrible."

Ah, so she was hungry.

Before he knew it, he'd risen and tugged the bellpull.

"Don't do that," she begged, her hand outstretched.

Too late. What had he been thinking?

He hadn't. The only glimmer of a thought had been he'd do anything to please her, to make her happy.

Instead, a fret worried her brow. "I don't want to go back to the party."

It was too late to unpull the bell. Soon a servant would appear and she'd be compromised. "Hide behind the curtain."

She didn't need to be told twice. Before she sequestered herself between velvet and window, he asked, "What would you like to eat?"

Lady Honora paused. "Eat?"

Edward spread his hands. "I need some excuse for calling the servant." He drew himself up. "I am ready for the next course," he declared in a foppish manner.

Footsteps in the corridor drew their attention.

"Roast beef," she whispered as she disappeared, just in time.

The door opened and Edward turned. It was a different servant than the footman who had brought him here.

This one was a maid, though he could not tell which kind.

"Ah." He clasped his hands. "So good of you to come.

Look. In gratitude to our hostess who could have tossed me out on my ear, I'd like to ease the burden on you and the other servants.

I was wondering if you could bring me a plate of the roast beef course, a serve or two of whatever is going for afters, and three, no four tankards of ale, all at once.

That way you will not have to keep coming back here for each course. "

The maid blinked at him. "Beg pardon?"

Too many big words? "Just bring me all of dinner in one go, then forget about me for the rest of the evening. It doesn't have to be pretty."

"Um, I'll see wut I can do, sir." She bobbed a curtsy before leaving with more bafflement on her face than when she had arrived.

Honora peeked out from the curtain. "Thank you."

He couldn't help but grin.

Honora had to hide behind the curtain again when a footman knocked.

He bore a trolley with Edward's request. Roast beef, with generous helpings of potatoes and carrots, a platter of cheeses, a dish of syllabub, plus four tankards of ale.

"I have your word there shall be no more requests? " the footman strongly hinted.

"Upon my honour." The young lady in hiding would be more than enough company for him.

Once the footman left, Lady Honora emerged. Her countenance brightened at the sight of the trolley. "How wonderful. Thank you."

Her gratitude pleased him to no end. "You're welcome. I don't know what it is, but I'd go to the ends of the earth to bring a smile to your face."

At this, Lady Honora sighed. "It's my enchantments."

"Your... what?"

"Enchantments. I'm magicked up to the lappets with charms." She reached behind her neck and undid her necklace.

This she dropped onto the trolley. Next came the rings from her fingers and two bangles off her wrists.

After that, hairpins. Then the buckles from her shoes.

All these she laid on the trolley, then plucked mournfully at her gown.

"I'm afraid this is enchanted as well, though not as strong. "

She pushed the trolley between the chairs at the fire. After selecting a tankard, she folded her panniers and settled into one of the chairs.

Edward remained standing. "Why are you thus enchanted?"

Honora sipped at the foam. "Because my father wishes a marital alliance with the House of Harwich, and I am to convince Lord Charles this is a good idea."

The bottom fell out of Edward's world. "It's a terrible idea."

She regarded him with amusement. "Oh? Do tell."

He opened his mouth, then realised the ridiculousness of what he wanted to say. Don't marry Lord Charles, marry me. He looked to the various items on the trolley. "I take it the enchantments are working?"

She laughed. His heart rose somewhat. He claimed the other tankard and chair.

"A little too well." She brushed at her gown. "Lord Charles was all solicitous and seeing to my every whim."

Edward looked to the plate of roast beef on the trolley. If only he could melt into the floor and disappear.

"If I supped at the broth, he had to dab my lips with a serviette. If I took a sip of wine, he poured more into my cup. He just wouldn't leave me alone." Again, she swiped at her gown.

Only then did Edward notice the stain. "That was him?"

"I told him enough, but he wouldn't listen. At least he didn't follow me once I got far enough for the charms to no longer have any effect."

He took a deep draught. "Do you want to marry him?"

"Eh," was her reply.

Edward was acquainted with Lord Charles Mildmay, the heir to the Earl of Harwich. He wasn't a bad fellow. Honora could have done worse.

Could she have done better?

Edward sighed. No, she could not. That stung. "I would marry you if I could," he murmured.

She took another sip of ale. "And who are you that you could make me such an offer?"

He shook his head. "I am not. I am a lesser son. My brother will inherit the title and will continue my studies in hopes of... I don't know. Not the church. Nor the military. But that leaves law, or... I don't know. That's the thing. I have nothing to offer you."

Honora thought about this. "Well, that's that, then. I am not for you and you are not for me. I guess the best we can do is enjoy an evening of good company with no expectations being thrust upon us." She sipped again at her ale. "Come to think of it, that sounds delightful."

Delightful. She called an evening with him—Edward, second son, no prospects at all—delightful. "I'd be honoured."

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Edward's heart would not stop beating. Here she sat, Honora Radcliffe—or rather, Mildmay—across from him, the same beautiful eyes, the same delightful smile, the same familiar trolley between them as they claimed the two chairs before the fire.

The young had divided themselves once they had their cups of tea.

Juliana sat on a footstool near her mother while young Bertram attempted to scoot a chair somewhat closer to her.

Meanwhile, his sons sequestered themselves on the other side of the room, heads together in discussion.

Absolute fools, these two, to make an enemy so soon. Did they not know young ladies talked? Once young Juliana became chummy with the others, no doubt she'd share her impressions of his thicker-than-molasses sons, and there went their chances of making a match this Christmas.

They were not strangers; there were no secrets between them. "I trust you're here for the same reason I am?"

"Possibly more so."

"I'm sorry to hear of the death of your husband. Lord Charles was a good fellow."

Memories swirled in her eyes. "He was."

He raised his teacup, but put it down unpartaken. "I hope you came to love him?"

She sipped at hers. "In a way. We respected each other. Gave each other the space we needed." She sighed and leaned back. Unspoken words weighed heavy in her mouth as if she didn't know how to spit them out.

Alas, he returned to his teacup just as they found their way out.

"I wish I had married you," she said.

Oh dear. Honora hadn't meant to say that out loud. Neither had Edward, from the sudden sputtering of tea all over the front of his suit. Mortification froze her.

The children, who had been distinctly ignoring each other, drew their attention back to the two parents.

"Mother? What did you say?" Juliana clutched at her teacup.

Kendall and Jacob popped up like gophers. "Who said what now?" Jacob asked. Kendall looked between his father, who dabbed at his waistcoat, to Juliana, who'd shaded her eyes in embarrassment.

Honora's gaze darted back and forth, her hands glued to her teacup.

Edward managed to wipe the tea from his clothing. He reached over to set his teacup on the trolley, only to miss it, sending his cup teetering.

Oh no! Honora couldn't move to catch it, but Edward did, just in time... mostly.

Some of the tea slopped onto the floor before he righted the teacup.

Juliana rose from her stool. "Mother, did you just...?"

Kendall looked around at everyone. “Wait a minute. Who said what?”

Bertram cleared his throat. “May I be of assistance?” he said to Juliana.

Juliana blinked at him as if she'd forgotten his presence.

Edward looked to Honora, his eyes glistening. He extended his hand. After all these years, she still felt like—

The door to the library opened, making everyone jump.

Edward quickly pulled back his hand. Lady Hammond herself strode in, her gown swishing.

“Ah, here you are,” she declared, her voice rich and loud.

“The servants assure me your luggage has been delivered to your rooms. If you’d like to freshen up after your journey? ”

The way she said it brooked no opposition. Honora gave Edward a glance. Seems like some things never changed. She stood.

Edward took his time rising, both hands on the arms of the chair. While the younger folk filed to the door Honora didn’t follow. She approached Edward and took the hand he’d originally proffered. They were not children—had not been for decades. Who were they that they had to obey their elders?

As soon as her hand clasped his, Edward’s face lit up. “You still love me?”

She responded by pressing his knuckles to her lips.

Only Juliana's scandalised voice interrupted Honora from doing more. "Mother!"

Honora watched her daughter pace their guest bedroom. "I can't believe you did that, Mother!" Juliana had nearly torn her travelling gown while changing, so agitated she was. "You're too old for this sort of thing."

Honora only smiled at her memory as the provided maid helped her change into something more suitable for the afternoon.

Apparently, Lady Hammond had games planned, of the sort one played at Christmastide—Snapdragon and Hide the Slipper, mostly for the young.

No one was under the illusion that this party was anything other than a thinly veiled matchmaking event. Based on what she had been told by the maid of the guest list, nobody else would be taken by surprise.

Was everyone of noble birth? Yes. Were they all diamonds of the first water?

Not really. Everyone had their flaws, ones that would make them less suitable among more stellar company.

But here, without the bright young things that had dominated the society pages of the newspapers, perhaps they would get their time to shine.

"If this was your plan the whole time," Julia declared as soon as her mother's head cleared the neckline of her afternoon gown, "I do not like it. I thought we were here for me."

"We are." Didn't excuse the fact she'd kissed his hand. It had been a spontaneous act, or so she thought.

Or had it been correcting an error from long ago? They did have unfinished business.

Juliana dug her jewellery box out of the trunk. She rifled through her inventory of enchanted rings and necklaces, muttering to herself over what they'd packed. She had wanted charms like Notice Me and Please Me—active charms. Her mother wanted subtler yet more powerful ones like Charm and Beauty.

Juliana started throwing on bangles. "We've only just arrived and already you're proposing marriage to a complete stranger?"

"He's not a complete stranger. I've known him for years."

Juliana folded her arms. "Well, I've never heard of him or his family. Nor have you ever spoken of him. I know they do not move in our circles. So why are they here?"

"It was sheer serendipity that Edward is here."

"Edward? You call him Edward?" Juliana blinked. "How acquainted with the Earl of Lavistock are you?"

"He was not the Earl of Lavistock when we first met."

"Who was he then?" Juliana folded her arms and pouted.

Honora had no idea why her daughter was being so difficult. It wasn't as if she'd stolen the only eligible man at this party. "He was a second son."

"A second son?" Juliana tightened her arms. "I wouldn't marry a second son."

Memory washed over her. "Your grandfather felt the same."

Juliana relaxed somewhat. "You married father instead. See, that turned out all right."

All the grief and joy of her debutante Season came flooding back to her. True, there had been nothing wrong with Lord Charles Mildmay. Their marriage hadn't suffered the way so many arranged marriages did, but something had been missing.

For some reason, Edward, for all his brief stint in her life, had filled that empty spot. What could their life have been like, had she married him instead? "The difference is, I was not given a choice. You, at least, are being granted that."

Juliana weighed her words. "I'm still not marrying a second son," she declared, though not as vociferously.

"How about you fall in love first, then we can discuss his place in the birthing order?"

Edward's sons still didn't have a clue. After the footman led them from the library and they settled in the one bedroom allotted to all three, there had been no more questions from them regarding Honora's declaration.

Edward, on the other hand, could not get her words out of his head. He certainly couldn't get the imprint of her lips off his hand, not that he wanted to. He pressed the back of that hand to his cheek.

Now that they had changed for an afternoon of what Edward hoped would be the young things flirting with each other, Kendall consulted Jacob over his notebook.

While it was heartening to see two brothers so close, it would not do either of them any good if the young ladies couldn't separate one of them from the other.

He knew every single one of them would be magicked up to the gills in hopes of securing a titled husband; Kendall would have his work cut out for him.

Maybe Jacob would get lucky, if a young lady would be willing to compromise that he would always remain a mere Lord and not become an Earl.

Jacob was fine with that. His ascendancy to the title would have meant the death of his beloved brother.

Edward sent word to Lady Hammond to separate the two at the dinner table. Maybe some enforced socialisation would help things along.

He briefly toyed with sending another message: Sit the Dowager Countess Harwich next to him?

And why not? They had dozens of years to catch up on, a flame to rekindle. Based on their first encounter today, her hissy cat of a daughter would have nothing to do with his own litter of puppies.

Would anyone? Now, there was a conundrum worth considering.

He'd raised his boys, drilling the idea into Kendall of being a good Earl and the idea of good noblemen into both of them.

They knew their social responsibilities to King and Country and their own birthright.

Neither had embarrassed the family too much with their youthful antics—certainly no lingering scandal.

But had he neglected to teach them how to be good husbands and fathers?

Edward pursed his lips at this oversight.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to sit next to Honora, at least, not tonight. Lady

Hammond might take that the wrong way and think a match between Lady Juliana and one of his sons was on the table.

It very much was not.

Before they departed, Edward laid a hand on each son's shoulders. "Boys, once we leave this room, you each have a responsibility to comport yourselves well. We all know why we were invited to Lady Hammond's Christmas party."

Kendall looked to Jacob. "I don't think we do."

Edward blinked. Surely his boys weren't this obtuse. "It's obviously a matchmaking affair."

At this Jacob rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Father. We know that. What we don't know is why us?"

"Because I'm an earl and you, Kendall, are my unmarried heir."

Again, the brothers shared a knowing look. "Lord John Talbot is also an unmarried heir of an earl, but he didn't get invited."

Now it was Edward's turn to blink. "Maybe he was, but had a prior commitment? Besides, he's Catholic."

Jacob shook his head. "No, Father. It's not that. He wasn't invited because he's a capital fellow." He looked back to Kendall, who only rolled his eyes. "True, Lady Hammond invited us because of our title. But she also invited us because there's something wrong with us."

Kendall stiffened. "There's nothing wrong with me."

Jacob tapped his notebook. "Everyone here has a fault, something that hinders them out in Society. We're the broken nobility."

Kendall wrinkled his nose. "Maybe it's you who was invited and I'm just along for the ride."

"Wrong?" Edward bristled at this. There was nothing wrong. They had no family secrets. His boys were not ugly nor mean, and their fortunes were not absent. "What could possibly be wrong with you?"

"We were hoping you'd tell us," Jacob requested.

"How would I know?" Personal doubt niggled at Edward. Had he missed something Lady Hammond had seen?

"Because you were the one who accepted Lady Hammond's invitation."

Thirty years ago...

Lady Honora all-but-engaged-to-someone-else Radcliffe and Lord Edward second-son-with-no-prospects Russell had shared the plate of roast beef and split the dish of syllabub, feeding each other with spoons.

With the support of a tankard of ale, Edward had confessed his lack of a distinct future as a lesser son. Honora had sighed over her arranged marriage. "I wish these things didn't matter," she moaned.

Edward spread his hands. "Do we have a choice?"

"Not really." She took another swig of ale. "Well, I might, but it's not really a choice."

Edward perked up? "What kind of choice?"

"I could make myself abhorrent to Lord Charles and he'd not want to consider a marriage, no matter how big my dowry is."

"What's the alternative?"

She thought about it. "Marriage to someone more distasteful, less prominent." She heaved a sigh. "Then there is always eternal spinsterhood. Old maid. Maiden aunt. Ape leader."

He wrinkled his nose. "That's not much of a choice."

She wilted. "I know." She licked the last of the syllabub off her spoon. "But I'm not going to do that. Lord Charles is not so bad as a marriage prospect. If his father's health does not soon improve, he may be an earl within the year. I could do much worse."

"I am hard pressed to think of how you could do better," Edward said. It hurt to say it, but he was right. He had nothing to offer her compared to Lord Charles. "Is it time to go back and make pretty eyes at him, convince him you'd be a good wife?"

Honora frowned. "No. I'll have him for the rest of my life." She raised her gaze to Edward. "I've only got you for tonight. Can't we just sit here and enjoy each other's company. You're ever so more pleasant than that crowd out there."

His heart soared. "You can stay for as long as you want."

So she did.

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Thirty years ago...

After Edward and Honora shared a fine meal of roast beef and more, they told each other fanciful stories, the wilder, the better.

"Perhaps we shall be wild pirates," Honora declared, rising from her chair, wielding a knife like a sword.

"We shall live as dread pirates upon the southern oceans.

" She shook her hair loose, now free from its enchanted pins.

"We shall drink rum from the shells of coconuts on the sandy beaches at midnight. "

Edward grinned, lifting the last of his tankard. "Hear, hear!"

"The warm tropical breezes will call to us. We shall run to our ship, and set sail to rob the Spanish of their golden doubloons."

Edward also rose. "And with that gold, perhaps we shall buy a second ship, one for you, one for me."

Honora hiccupped, and put a hand over her mouth. "Oh no," she declared. "That will never do. I could never be happy on a ship without you by my side." She grasped his free hand. "After all, that is why we ran away in the first place. If we are to part, we might as well stay here in England."

That took the wind out of his imaginary sails. "You are right. Perhaps it is best we do not run away."

Honora drained the last of her second tankard. "It is a lovely thought, though."

Edward nodded.

Out in the street, the bells of the local church chimed, longer than Honora expected. "Oh dear," she declared, dropping Edward's hand. "Is that really the time?"

"It is," he admitted with reluctance. He consulted his pocket watch. Only ten minutes too slow. He adjusted it to match the hour. "I suppose you must return."

The weight of her reality crushed down on Honora. One by one, she picked up her enchanted hairpins and did her best to restore her curls to some semblance of order. She scooped up the rest of her charms, slipping them into the pocket under her panniers, too dejected to redon them.

They parted by mutual consent, Honora's hand pressed against Edward's lips. "I cannot promise you we will see each other again," she said.

Edward held her hand tightly. "If our paths do cross again, I promise I shall only smile and make my bow as a mere acquaintance. But I cannot promise that every time I dip my spoon into a dish of syllabub, I shall not imagine that same spoon passing your lips."

Her breath hitched in her throat. "The only reason I do not kiss you now is because I want you to remember me as a woman of honour, who keeps her promises."

Edward's eyes glistened. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

With that she fled the room, back to the party, still in full chaotic swing.

To her surprise, no one had noticed her absence. Honora wasn't sure if that pleased her or not.

The memory of spending a delightful evening in the company of young Lord Edward Russell buoyed Honora Radcliffe through the rest of the week. It had been the best night of her life.

And now, for the rest of it: Honora had done as she agreed to her parents; she presented a pleasant front to Lord Charles. Between that and all the magical charms she wore like Success and Charm, the heir had no qualms over the marriage arranged by their parents.

Now she bore two rings on her fingers: a simple, unenchanted sapphire solitaire to mark her engagement on her left, and on her right, one her parents gave her to mark the occasion.

Honora studied the second ring on her finger.

It was an Acrostic ring, with four stones: a garnet, two opals and a diamond, arranged in a row so they spelled out G O O D.

Her mother had spent all year imbuing it with magic to convince Honora's future husband that he'd made a Correct Choice in aligning himself with this family.

"I hope you like it," her mother had said when she presented Honora with the ring. "I recommend you wear it for the rest of your life. It will prevent doubt."

Since then, Honora pondered on the significance of this ring. Did one need magic to keep the faith of a husband? Surely the wedding vows were sufficient?

When she was introduced to Lord Charles by their parents, she liked him well enough, sufficient not to object to an arranged marriage.

Until she met Edward. Even the mere thought of him made her heart pitter-patter in ways Lord Charles did not.

Surely that wasn't love, was it?

No, it had to be infatuation, the reaction of a grateful heart when he had rescued her from an evening of too much raucous laughter and too loud conversation, an evening where she'd applied too many charms and ended up with Lord Charles all but chewing her food for her, so accommodating had he been.

But it had worked—the magic, that is. Within a fortnight, the Earls of Derwent and Harwich worked out the marriage agreement for uniting their houses through Honora and Charles. They were all but married, barring the vows spoken before the vicar.

Yet all she could think about was Edward.

Christmas 1817

Lady Hammond's salon had been given over to games. So focused was Lady Hammond on engaging the young scions in games that she all but forgot their parents and guardians. The parents settled into chairs set along the walls while the young gathered in the middle.

Edward didn't mind. After making the rounds of the others with greetings, he settled next to Honora. "Pass the Slipper," he said. "Have you ever played it?"

She failed to oppress the smile on her face. "Can't say that I have. Lord Charles never took me to those kinds of parties."

"Shame. You strike me as someone who would quite enjoy such fun."

She sighed. "I suppose so."

Time to play. All the young settled onto the floor in a circle, their arms linked behind one another.

Lady Hammond's daughter Marian lifted the slipper from her mother's foot for the game.

She blushed most becomingly as she held the shoe, almost as if she was afraid to initiate the game.

Young Bertram held out his hand for it, and the game began.

Lady Marian turned around while the others passed the slipper behind their back, pausing only when Lady Marian's gaze swept by. Then they passed the shoe on.

Three rounds it took her before she guessed right, her soft voice almost inaudible against the joyous laughter of the crowd.

In the end, she's chose correctly. The young man who had the shoe admitted defeat, then rose to plant a kiss on Lady Marian's cheeks, making her blush even more. She hid her face until the others pulled her down to the circle.

It was the young man's turn next.

Edward leaned to Honora. "Did Lord Charles take you out at all during the Season?"

"Of course. He enjoyed theatre, dinners, that sort of thing."

"Ah. Plays? Concerts?"

"No. Dancers. The ballet, mostly. I preferred the opera. Better stories. More drama." She had to laugh. "I'd watch the drama on the stage, while he'd engage in the drama of politics with whoever had come to our box. I was much happier watching, than participating."

Out in the parlour, Lady Frances Shipbrook was It.

She stood in the middle of the room. For someone who appeared quite well-fed, she looked most elegant in that blue morning gown, setting off her red hair quite nicely.

At least her skin was fair without the freckles that often plagued those cursed with ginger hair.

Round and round she spun, as the slipper was passed behind backs.

When she was ready, Lady Frances cried "Stop!" This brought much giggling from the young seated on the floor.

"Some would think not getting the slipper would be the worst part of the game," replied Edward.

Honora reached out, her pinky linking with his. "If one does not have the slipper, one must find other things to do with one's hands."

Lady Frances pointed to Jacob. He groaned and produced the slipper. Everyone cheered. Lady Frances bounced up and down, setting her ample bosom wobbling most alluringly.

"Now you must kiss her," Lady Hammond declared. "Those are the rules."

He rose and gave the young miss a peck on the cheek, much to the ribbing of his fellows.

Edward sighed. "Such a wasted opportunity."

Honora giggled. "I wonder who taught him to be so proper?"

"Me, I'm afraid." He sighed. "What kind of a fool would miss out giving a young lady a kiss?"

Honora turned her warm gaze to him. "An honourable one?" She slipped her hand fully into Edward's.

Lady Frances, to her credit, gave a comely blush before giving the slipper to Jacob and taking his spot on the floor. Lady Frances linked her arms with Kendall on her right and another young woman on her left.

Jacob gave the slipper to his brother and the passing recommenced.

Kendall passed the slipper behind his back in the other direction. As Jacob turned, the encircled crowd had to pass the slipper without him spotting it.

Much giggling ensued and a few fumbled hands. It was the perfect game for the sort of flirting one normally could not indulge in otherwise.

For the rest of the game, Edward was content holding hands with Honora. How long had it been since he'd been able to hold another person's hand, just hold it, and enjoy their company? Such a simple pleasure.

Had he and Lady Russell ever held hands like this? He couldn't remember. The many times she'd laid her gloved hand on his when he escorted her to a party or the theatre

didn't count, for as soon as they arrived, the ritual was no longer required and they parted hands.

Honora wore gloves, as did every lady present. It was socially expected, especially as December brought a chill to the parlour that the roaring fire at the other end of the room had not yet dispersed.

He loosened his grip on her fingers. She released him, her curious glance shot his way.

Edward kept his eyes forward, letting a teasing smile play his lips. He slipped finger under the top of her glove, to press against the bare skin of her palm.

Honora drew in a breath, then curled her fingers about his singular one, trapping it within her glove.

She pressed her lips and looked away, amusement in her eyes.

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He couldn't help it. He chuckled at the rising flush in her cheeks.

Another burst of laughter rose from the circle of young things on the floor; the slipper had been spotted once more.

It seemed Jacob had forgotten how to play the game as it was meant to be played.

He'd focused on the movement of the slipper and not on who held it.

"You've got the slipper!" He pointed to young Lord Clifton.

Clifton was a wiry fellow, tall yet strong, with a nose so prominent no one could mistake his noble roots.

He couldn't be described as "handsome" by conventional standards, but he seemed to comport himself well enough.

Certainly dressed most fashionable. All glory to his tailor, skilled fellow.

Whoever he was, he was able to bring Lord Clifton's wardrobe to the edge of a Pink of the Ton, without making him look too much like a foppish dandy.

Lord Clifton, whom Jacob had selected, looked baffled that he'd been caught with the slipper. It didn't help that Lady Marian at his side declared Clifton the holder. Of course everyone laughed, even Lady Hammond.

"Not me," he declared with some bafflement.

"You can't pass the slipper to me after you've been picked. I've already had it," Lady Marian declared in all innocence. "He chose you."

This only made the crowd roar in amusement.

Jacob looked about, a little late on the joke.

"Lord Clifton has the slipper," Lady Hammond declared. "You know the rules."

To his credit, the young man rose and batted his eyelashes at Jacob most coquettishly, eliciting even more laughter from the crowd. Even Edward and Honora had to laugh.

Jacob flushed to the roots of his hair. Lord Clifton minced over and tackled Jacob in a rather blatant kiss, startling him.

Poor boy. Jacob looked like he wanted to slink away. Lady Hammond wouldn't let him. She pushed him back to the floor.

Lord Clifton, who had been so bold, dropped the slipper in Jacob's lap. Jacob took it and linked arms with the two young ladies on either side. By now his face radiated beet-red. He passed that shoe as quickly as possible.

For him, dinner couldn't come soon enough.

When the dinner gong rang, Jacob retreated from the circle of young things who had seemed to form a bond. He slunk to his father and begged to retreat to the bedroom.

Edward's heart ached for his younger son.

Before he could offer fatherly words, Kendall came up and whacked his brother on the back of the head. "Jamface, you numpty! I thought you knew how to play Pass the

Slipper.”

“What?” replied a most offended Jacob. “I know how to pass a shoe.”

“You don’t know how to find it,” came Kendall’s short reply.

“But Clifton had it. What was I supposed to do?”

Kendall rolled his eyes. “Point to the young lady by his side, of course. Then Clifton should have passed the shoe to her, unless of course he fancied her, then he would have passed the shoe the other way.” Kendall sucked at his teeth. “He wouldn’t have, you know. I know what’s Wrong with Clifton.”

“Whut?” Jacob sulked.

Kendall put his arm about his younger brother. “Let’s just say when he left school, he brought a bit of the Ol’ Public School with him.”

Jacob gave him a raised eyebrow.

“He’s a bit of a molly.”

Jacob shrugged off his brother’s arm. “I know what you meant.”

“Not before he kissed you, you didn’t.”

Before they could come to fisticuffs, Edward inserted himself between his sons. “I think you’ve lost sight of why we’re here. I also think it a good idea you not spent too much time in each other’s company for the rest of tonight.

“Easy enough,” Jacob muttered. “I’ll dine in my room.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Edward declared. “I did not bring you along so you could hide away.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to find a bride here?”

“Surely you don’t expect me to forbid you from finding true love,” Edward replied, maybe a little sharper than he meant.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “What I meant to say,” with a calmer voice, “was that I will not stop you from finding someone, or not, as is your wont. As I have settled sufficient fortune upon you to support a wife, I’m hoping that will make you attractive enough to any young lady of our station.

” Kendal’s words from earlier niggled at him.

“I know the number of young ladies and eligible fellows here. If some poor gel leaves this party with an empty heart because you chose to hide away in the bedroom the entire week, not only will it reflect poorly on you, but also on me.”

Jacob’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “You telling me I have to get married?” His voice rose to a squeak at the end.

“No. I’m telling you to try. I’m telling you to bill and coo with these young ladies with earnest intent. Maybe none of them will suit you. Determine that fairly.

“Let our reputation be that while you may come away without an understanding, at least your reputation will remain intact that you are a fair fellow.”

Edward wiped the smirk off Kendall’s face with, “Same goes for you. Especially you. As you said, everyone invited here has some flaw. That must include you. Prove them wrong.”

That had taken his eldest son aback. Surely the flaw for which they'd been selected was that the Russell sons were clueless when it came to winning over the fairer sex, and not for something else entirely.

Yet the doubt had been planted in his head. Was there some unperceived flaw that had escaped his notice, but not Lady Hammond's? Not that he would insult his hostess by asking her.

On the other hand, this party did bring Honora back to him.

Wait. Honora and her daughter were here. Oh dear. What could their flaw be?

He gave both his sons a good shake. "We're going to go into dinner. You are not to sit next to each other. You are to sparkle and shine and pay much attention to the young ladies to whom you've been seated."

"But what if we don't like whom we've been seated next to?" Kendall whined.

Edward put this to them. "What is worse: you don't like them for their flaws, or they don't like you for your flaws? I pray it not be the latter."

Lady Hammond had set up her ballroom as a grand dining room, the table a giant U-shape that took up most of the space. While Lady Hammond and a few of the more venerable guests sat at the head, the guests had been divided by age.

To Edward's relief, Lady Hammond had split his sons up, far enough they were not in earshot of each other, conversationally.

Parents had been sat at one arm of the table, the youth at another.

Edward was not sure what kind of luck had him seated facing away from the young.

Perhaps it was better he not see what was going on.

At least good luck favoured him this evening when Honora was placed by his side.

"No such thing," she declared as a footman helped her into her seat. "I asked Lady Hammond to seat me next to you."

Bold and clever. "I'm glad you thought of it. I confess I've been worried over my boys."

Honora turned around—another bold move—and looked at the young scions settling in for the meal. "So many noble youth from noble families. How did we all end up here?"

"I don't want to think about that."

She turned back. Lady Hammond rang a little bell, and all the guests settled.

"Dinner," she announced, "is served."

At this, a dozen footmen burst through the doors, carrying cloched trays of the first course. Lady Hammond and those guests at the head table were served first, then the footmen worked their way down.

"I know why I am here, Juliana and I," Honora volunteered. "Do you want to know?"

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“Desperation,” Honora said. If her wedding, marriage and subsequent widowhood taught her anything, it was that shame was a useless emotion.

It arose from actions of the past, had no remedy for one could not undo past mistakes, and only served to deepen itself unless completely discarded.

As soon as she had received Lady Hammond's invitation, Honora had given it much thought before accepting it.

"I was not going to ask," Edward said.

Oh dear. Had she made it awkward for him. She reached out and patted his hand. "Don't feel bad for me. I know what I'm doing."

As Lady Hammond had honoured her request to seat her next to Edward, she also honoured her request NOT to seat Juliana next to either of Edward's sons, much to her relief.

Lady Hammond had skilfully scattered the young in a most artful manner. Juliana didn't seem to mind. She'd been seated next to Bernard Ashburton and seemed most willing to chat with him. Good. It pleased Honora to see her daughter taking advantage of the situation.

“As you know, I was widowed last year. When my son, the current Earl unearthed the family finances, they were not as, ah, robust as we had thought.” She put up a hand.

“Oh, we are not as ruined as we could have been but it took some time for him to set

things right.” She sighed.

It felt so good to share this story with someone who cared, who wouldn’t judge or ridicule.

“In the end, we had enough to launch Juliana for a Season and hope she could marry into a good family.” She nudged at the fish on her plate with her fork.

“I hope our status is sufficient to the challenge. Any gold diggers will be sadly disappointed to learn her dowry is not extravagant.”

Edward tilted his head. “And you? What is your fate?”

Honora sighed. “At first, I was expecting a quiet life at the dower house. Alas, we have no dower house, as certain properties were sold to bring our fortunes right. My son Lord Brook should not be expected to provide a separate residence for just me, and my own personal wealth does not extend to a sufficient address. Either I take a step down and live on my own with maybe a couple of servants, or I take a lesser room in Lord Brook’s house.

I cannot do that to Ernestine, his wife. I cannot do that to me.”

Edward shook his head. “Why not?”

She fixed him with a firm gaze. “It is far more difficult to relinquish being mistress of a house to someone much younger than oneself. Oh, I’m sure Ernestine will be fine for she comes from good family, but I find it ever so hard not to speak up while she is finding her way. I should leave, but where do I go?”

Just as Edward was about to lay his hand on hers, she laughed.

It startled him, but she grabbed his hand anyway. “My current fortune is the same as it was when it was my dowry. My son has been more than happy to ensure that. He’s a good boy, is my Brook.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less from Lord Charles’ son—and yours,” he added.

He went back to his original topic. “Desperation, you said. Surely on your part, and not Juliana’s?”

She did not relinquish his hand, but waved her other one.

“Oh, on her part too, I suppose. Her father’s death delayed her Debut, which ended up for the best. I would have hated to launch her on the market with high hopes and promises of beauty and wealth only to have it come crashing down before June. ”

Edward blinked. “Why? What happened in June?”

“Nothing happened in June. But it could have. Instead, Lord Charles died in September last year, though really, one could have died at any time. We did the full year of mourning, and probably should have given over to another half-year of half-mourning, but...” she trailed off.

He gave her hand an extra squeeze, which she welcomed. “I do not see the purpose of all this show of grief. I mean, yes, I missed him, but after a month or so, I got over it. It’s not like he left this hole in my heart.” She gazed up at him. “Not like you did.”

His breath caught in his throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

She offered him a smile. “Of course you didn’t. If you could have, you would have swept me off my feet and carried me away to a beautiful palace with luscious gardens always in bloom.”

A memory tugged at him. "Or run away on a pirate ship?"

Laughter erupted from the other end of the table. Someone must have told a bon mot. Nobody was paying attention to the boring old folk on the other side of the room. Good. The young were having fun. It buoyed her spirits.

Seemed to free up Edward from his encroaching morbs. "Maybe back then. Now, in spirit only."

She laid her free hand on her bosom. "Surely you would not disappoint me so?"

"Well, besides a bum knee and a lower back that always aches and the occasional attack of gout? Sure. Happy to toss you over my shoulder and carry you off."

Of course this made her laugh. It felt so good! How long had it been since she'd permitted herself unfettered happiness? "Just be careful of my left hip. It's not what it once was."

The footman with the soup course reached them, ladling a rich-smelling broth into their bowls. "I remember our first meal together," she said. "Best night of my life."

"Roast beef and syllabub," Edward provided. "Not once have I ever had syllabub and not thought of you."

"For me, it's a tankard of ale. Though no one really drinks ale nowadays, do they?"

"Not in polite company." He lifted a spoon of his soup and offered it to her. She should have turned it down, in all respects, but why? Honora sipped at the spoon. Then she dipped hers and offered it to him. He took it, gratefully.

He lifted his spoon and she tapped hers against his, eliciting a gentle chime of the

silver. "We were too polite a company, weren't we?" he said.

Honora bowed her head. "We had to be. You know that."

"I do." He drew a deep breath. "Damn the right thing. I know it was the best thing, but—" He ran a hand through his silver hair. "I do not regret the things we did. We had fun. I know we did."

Honora nodded in agreement. "I regret we didn't do the things we wanted to, but I don't regret if we had done them and it turned out ill."

Honora had scooped up another spoonful of soup and held it out to him. "Eat," she said. "In memory of syllabub."

He accepted the spoonful of soup.

"I say," came the shocked voice of Lady Fermor, Countess of Pomfrit, from across the table. She laid a hand across her bosom.

Both Edward and Honora turned to her. Honora raised an eyebrow. Then slowly, deliberately, she took another spoonful of soup and offered it to Edward.

He gave her a startled glance. She returned it with a wicked gleam in her eye. Cutting Lady Fermor, he took the bowl of Honora's spoon in his mouth.

"William," Lady Fermor demanded of her husband. "Do something!"

Lord William, Earl of Pomfrit, turned from the discussion he had with the lady on his other side, interrupted. "Eh, wot?"

Said lady leaned over, curious. Soon several of the guests at their end of the table

were looking to Lady Fermor.

Honora pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. Her spoon was still in Edward's mouth, her hand on the handle, her gaze challenging Lady Fermor. She knew how to play this game.

Lady Fermor broke first. "I will not sit here and endure such scandal!" She rose and stalked off, leaving her baffled husband behind.

Everyone froze, wondering what had happened? Lady Shipbrook was the first to speak. "What did I miss?"

Edward did not relinquish the spoon in his mouth. Instead, he handed his spoon to Honora, who continued with her soup. She could not have looked more innocent than if she had whistled.

Lady Shipbrook was no slouch. "Lady Mildmay, I think I like you."

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After dinner they all retreated to the parlour for more games that dissolved into a merrie sing-a-long.

Honora chose this time to depart the festivities in favour of her bed. As she sat before the dressing table, the maid brushed out her steel-grey hair, to put it in a braid for sleeping.

Several enchanted rings and bangles sat out on the dressing table. Honora knew them intimately, for she and Juliana had spent months pushing magic into them to make them powerful.

And powerful they were, for there was not much else to do during the mourning season when all others were out dancing.

She had no interest in embroidering through her grief.

Innate, day-to-day magic was rather weak.

It was not like one could cast spells at a whim or bring about a force of personality to win over the opinions of others.

But magic could be stored. Certain objects held it better than others.

Silver was best, and some natural substances like wood.

Gold, not so much. Lead was perfectly neutral, and iron was anathema to it.

Nothing like an ironbound box to disable the effect of a magical enchantment.

When you imbued magic into an item you did it with purpose and intent. As you pushed the magic into it, you manifested what you wanted the magic to do.

Honora picked up a braided ring. This item held the spell Charm, so that any who looked upon its wearer would find her charming.

While one could push magic of various spells into a single object, this was not as effective as concentrating one's efforts into a single spell.

This made it easy for the wearer to pick and choose what effect one wanted to portray that day.

A bangle for Beauty also lay on the table, not that Juliana really needed assistance in that area. Youth came with its own charm. It was only the hardness of a life lived that made natural beauty fade.

Honora inhaled. Edward did not look old. Every time she looked at him the years melted away from the warmth of his gaze, the delight of his smile. If it weren't for her own aching hip and stiffness in her back, Honora could have forgotten about the decades that had separated them.

Oh, to be young again— no. Honora had no desire to return to youth. Age had brought her many worthy things, including wisdom and now a freedom she'd never had before.

Now she did not have to please a parent in her choices. She could marry as she saw fit.

Marriage. Since her slip earlier, it occupied her thoughts all night.

Surely she and Edward couldn't pick up where they left off? Had too much time passed? So much water under the bridge.

One by one, she returned the jewellery to its box.

The door opened. In waltzed Juliana, a tune on her lips. "I thought you would have been asleep, Mother."

Honora smiled. It pleased her to see her daughter happy. "Had you come in when I was expecting you, I would have been."

"Oh, I have had enough for one night," though the music had not left her bones. She swirled her gown to some tune as she moved to the wardrobe. The maid moved to help her undress.

"I see you discarded some of your jewellery tonight."

"Mmm," was her reply as the maid lifted her overgown over Juliana's head. Once free, she said, "Didn't want it for dinner." Her music disappeared. "There was far too much magic this afternoon, would you agree?"

Honora shrugged. She rose from the table and moved to the bed. "That is the whole point."

The maid finished undressing Juliana, easing her into a nightgown.

Juliana took her mother's place at the dressing table, to let the maid wind her curls back into their rags.

"Someone said something this afternoon about being overmagicked." She gave a moment's thought to this.

“Maybe some are. Maybe there is too much? I don’t know.

“Anyhow, I thought I’d do without magic—well, mostly—for dinner, and see how I went.”

This was quite the change from her earlier attitude. Honora thought back to her observations from dinner. “You seemed to have had a good time?”

A smile relaxed Juliana’s face. “I did.” Her gaze drifted off, possibly recalling the memories of the night? “I mean, I did my duty by being agreeable and pleasant company. But I didn’t go hunting, and I think I ended up better for it.”

“Hunting?”

Juliana’s gaze came back to the present. She regarded her mother through the mirror above the dressing table. “That’s what one of the others called this—a Week at the Hunting Lodge.”

Hunting lodge. Hardly the description Honora would have applied to Lady Hammond’s rather extensive home on the edge of town.

Juliana must have picked up on her mother’s confusion. “We none of us are under any illusion that this week is purely to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour.”

“I suppose not.” Really, the Christmas season didn’t start until the twenty-fourth of December, next week. Then, twelve days of revelry and celebration until the most rambunctious of parties on Twelfth Night.

“Many of them are taking this for what it is—matchmaking.”

Something in her daughter’s tone made Honora sit up. “But you are not?”

The maid had finished the last nobbly knot on Juliana's head.

She brought over the small jug of water and the basin for the cleaning of Juliana's teeth.

Juliana poured a small glass of the water.

As she moistened the end of the birch twig before dipping it into the salt, she said, "Oh, I am. But I thought I'd get the lay of the land first." She proceeded to scrub at her gums.

Good plan. "And what did you discover?"

Juliana rinsed and spat in the basin. "Lord Clifton is as magicked up as any of the rest of us."

This made Honora smile. "Is he now?" Poor Jacob. No wonder he didn't have a chance. She would have to tell Edward of this interesting development. "In hopes of attracting a wife from this lot?"

Juliana suppressed a smile. "Who knows?" She went back to her scrubbing.

"I suppose all the other young ladies were also accoutred?"

She had to wait for Juliana to spit again before she got her answer. "Some are positively desperate. I don't know why. It's not a good look."

"Might work against them?" Honora offered.

"Maybe." Juliana ran her tongue over her teeth and judged them finished. "But I would have thought that the more magic one had, the more attractive one would be.

At least, until this afternoon.” She turned to her mother. “Can one be overmagicked?”

Another memory flooded her mind. “Oh yes,” Honora replied.

Thirty years ago...

Honora Mildmay youthfully danced about her room, much to the consternation of her lady’s maid. Lord Charles was taking her to the theatre! This was to be their first outing in Society since the signing of their agreement.

The thought of being shown off as one’s betrothed thrilled her in a way she had never imagined. An arranged marriage had never struck her as something romantic, but the attention Lord Charles paid her made her heart giddy.

So giddy, she could not decide on which accessories to wear. In one hand she held a necklace charmed for Beauty. In the other, Grace. Both were simple pendants with coloured stones, either of which would suit her gown. “Oh, can’t I wear both?”

The lady’s maid tutted at her. “Ye canna wear both. T’isn’t the done thing.”

“What if we wrapped one about my wrist?” But which one?

“Ye canna do that. It’s a necklace, not a wristlet.”

“I don’t see why that should matter?” Now, Grace or Beauty for the wrist? She held up each necklace in turn.

“Tis too big. T’would fall off.”

In the end, the lady’s maid had her way.

Only one necklace—Beauty—for Honora. However, when the maid wasn't looking, Honora slipped Grace into her pocket.

As long as it was close to her body, its magic would resonate—it didn't necessarily have to touch skin.

Contact with an object was best to activate its full power.

Proximity was the next best thing. Without a person to wake it up, magic merely sat in an object until required.

This was a shame, for it would be ever so useful to enchant objects for useful purposes.

Imagine a lock that could open at a person's mere touch?

Nobody else, only for whom that lock was enchanted.

Or maybe a door that would admit only the kindest of people into one's house.

But that might reduce the chances of anyone coming to visit, and absolutely no gossip whatsoever.

Was Beauty and Grace enough? Maybe she should add a few more rings. Maybe some ornamental hair combs. She wouldn't want to appear lacking, now that she had secured herself a husband.

While the maid's back was turned, Honora slipped the entire contents of the jewellery box into the embroidered pocket under her panniers.

She and her mother had put many months of imbuelement into all these pieces.

It would be a shame for some of them to go to waste.

She closed the lid of the box before the maid returned, so she wouldn't notice.

To Honora's relief, another servant came to fetch her before her theft was noted. Off she flounced before the gig was up.

The magic of all the charms wafted about her head in a giddy swirl of elation. Oh, she would be the most beautiful creature, the most charming, the wittiest...

Lord Charles' carriage had arrived, but it was the tiger who'd come knocking at the door. Never had Honora pulled on her gloves, shawl and spencer so quickly.

He was a but a boy, this servant, who could only stare open-jawed at her, so in awe was he.

"Help me in?" she prompted.

He gathered his wits and proffered his hand.

Up into the carriage she went.

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A single lantern illuminated the inside of the carriage, for the December darkness had fallen on them all.

Lord Charles and his sister Lady Calpurnia sat side by side.

Lady Calpurnia herself had been married once, or so it had been whispered.

It was said she'd been won over by a lesser son who had purchased a grand commission in the army.

Lady Calpurnia had followed him to the Peninsula, where she had been widowed all too soon by Boney's troops.

She had returned home and never another word had been spoken of her brief time as a matron.

She even resumed her maidenly title, though she dressed as a matron.

What more could have been said? It wasn't that Lady Calpurnia was bitter as a person, but rather the shadow of grief followed her against her will. Honora didn't feel it her place to get to know her future sister-in-law that intimately.

Lady Calpurnia did not move from her seat, so Honora had to sit facing backwards. "Good evening," she chirped, hoping to dispel the gloom of the carriage. She held out her hand.

Lady Calpurnia sniffed. Lord Charles, like the tiger, could only stare until his sister

elbowed him.

He shook himself awake and reached for her hand. “Uh, evening.” A smile crossed his face. The charms were working. They worked so well he continued to stare, that dumb smile on his face, much to his sister’s annoyance.

Took him awhile to release her hand.

The carriage jolted as the coachman called to the horses. They were off.

Lady Calpurnia attempted conversation. “Glad you could join us.” Didn’t sound like it, though. “Tell me, Lady Honora. Have you ever attended the Theatre Royale in Covent Garden?”

Honora lit up. “Oh, we’re attending the opera? I adore opera. So dramatic. It’s like a novel with music.” And on she went about how marvellous it was, and she hoped they had good seats, for she truly wished to watch the whole thing.

It was like her mouth had forgotten the rest of Honora and ran away before consulting her brain. Even as she watched Lady Calpurnia give her brother a suffering look, she couldn’t stop.

Lord Charles didn’t care, it seemed. All he could do was listen to her, rapt.

He moved across the carriage to sit next to her. Lifting her hand, he pressed it to his lips. “I love to hear your dulcet voice,” he murmured as he leaned in.

“Charles!” came Lady Calpurnia’s scandalised voice. “What are you doing?”

He planted several kisses along Honora’s neck, trailing them lower and lower.

“You’re making a cake of yourself!” Lady Calpurnia declared, before pulling her brother off his betrothed. “What would the neighbours think?”

Not that they were present. Wasn’t much of any audience other than Lady Calpurnia. But it was enough to mollify Honora. "I am sorry. It is my fault."

Charles looked at her with a fawning gaze. "Oh, nothing could be your fault."

"Really, Charles!" Lady Calpurnia declared. "Stop making a cake of yourself."

Only one thing left to do. Honora stood up, bracing herself against the roof of the carriage, and lifted her skirts.

"What are you doing?" Lady Calpurnia's voice rose several octaves. Lord Charles' eyebrows also raised up, a smile lighting his face. He reached out to her but his sister knocked his hand away.

"Sit down, please, Lady Honora," Calpurnia begged.

Honora ignored Lady Calpurnia. She reached up, lifted her panniers out of the way to get to the laces of her pocket.

Once these released, her pocket fell to the floor with a heavy thunk .

Honora lifted it and placed it on the far corner of the seat.

To Lady Calpurnia's relief and Lord Charles' dismay, she dropped her skirts to a more modest level.

Honora removed her earrings and her necklace, placing them in the pocket. She removed her rings one by one, until she got to the last.

The acrostic ring. She'd forgotten it was on her hand.

Really, it hadn't left her finger since her mother had placed it there.

"Might as well get used to it," she had advised.

"You'll probably be wearing it for the rest of your life.

" It had been charmed to convince Lord Charles he'd made a good choice.

Now, would it work on Calpurnia? Best to leave it on.

Once divested of all her charms, Honora settled down. "I am sorry. I did not realise—" She shook her head. "I do not need all these charms, do I?" She reached across to Calpurnia, her acrostic ring the only jewel she wore, and laid her hand on Calpurnia's arm.

Lady Calpurnia settled, somewhat mollified. "In my day, one would not have worn so much magic."

Lord Charles blinked. "Are you all right?"

Honora sighed. "I suppose so. Are you all right?"

He blinked at her, baffled. She reached over with her other hand, patting him on the arm. "I believe you mentioned we were going to the opera? Which one?"

Lord Charles cleared his throat, but offered no answer.

It was Lady Calpurnia who answered. "Artaxerxes, I believe."

Lord Charles turned away, to look out the window. It was dark out, and not much to be seen.

Honora slumped down, dejected.

Lady Calpurnia took pity on her. She patted Honora's knee. "You're trying too hard, my dear." She leaned back. "You're pretty enough. You've done your part. Next time, leave your charms at home. You no longer need them."

For some reason, that stung.

Who thought that being pretty was more important than being personable?

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To Edward's annoyance, Lord Vernon, the Earl of Shipbrook, waylaid him as he returned to the salon. "Lord Edward, I have something of which I wish to speak with you." His carefully cultivated plummy vowels could not hide the rhotic roundness of his light Irish accent.

Before he could agree or not, Lord Vernon pulled him aside. Edward threw a longing glance in Honora's direction, but she was not looking his way. No hope of rescue there.

Edward sighed. "How may I help you?"

"We all know why we're here. At Lady Hammond's, I mean."

Edward nodded.

"To be fair, my daughter's only sin is to be born of Irish parents. And maybe her red hair, but that canna be helped. She's a fair colleen and we've done our best to see her well-educated. Sent her to the best finishing schools."

Edward knew when he was being sold to. "And now you're seeking to match her up with one of my sons?"

Lord Vernon wrung his hands. "Not so much seeking. My Frances has taken a fancy to your younger son Lord Jacob. I don't know why." He tilted his head in a way that allowed him to give Edward a direct look. "Like I said, we all know why we're really here."

Edward didn't like what Lord Vernon was implying. "Get to your point."

"Before her mother and I decide if we are going to encourage or discourage her wee little puppy crush, I wanted to hear directly from you regarding the suitability of your son."

The suitability of his— Edward drew a sharp breath. "Why would you ask—" He waved his hands. "I can't believe we are having this discussion!"

Instead of taking offence, Lord Vernon simply nodded his head. "You have told me enough, to be sure. I'll dissuade my daughter from making an unsuitable match. I thank you for your time."

The insult sank even deeper in Edward's heart. Did Lord Vernon just insinuate his son as unmatchable? As Lord Vernon moved away, Edward reached out and grabbed his arm. "I don't think I like your tone."

Lord Vernon looked to Edward's hand, then to Edward's face.

"When I inquired about your son, why did you not immediately sing his praises? You said nothing regarding his character, his honour, his suitability. If you do not think him worthy of my daughter, who am I to question your judgement?" He did not pull away but looked pointedly to Edward's hand, still gripping his arm.

Edward released him. "I... my apologies. But you are very direct, sir."

Lord Vernon did not flinch.

"Me daughter is a kind-hearted soul. She needs a husband who will value that. I dinna want some barmy wastrel more interested in his own pleasure than in the duties of husband and father. Dinna think I have not had previous suitors seeking the hand of

my daughter and her ample dowry that we turned down. While many would look to make as high a social match as they can, I am more interested in the character of the man. A title is for life. But who is the man from day to day? I'll give my daughter to an untitled gentleman over a duke any day if he is the fellow who'll make her happy.

" He straightened the lapels of his coat.

"Again, I put to you, Lord Edward. what manner of man is your younger son?"

Edward had to think upon this. Who was Jacob?

Had he ever looked objectively at his boys? He knew them as his sons. But how did the world view them?

"I value him as much as I value his elder brother.

" What else to tell Lord Vernon? "He's a young man given over to his thoughts.

He's a note taker, keeps track of the things he learns.

Alas, I can't say he's a great observer of the world.

Sometimes you've got to point out the forest for the trees.

But he's not a stupid lad, not really. He's not a cruel lad either.

Never was one much for taunting other children.

" What else could he say about his youngest boy?

"Stuck to his studies. Knows his books. Speaks Latin and Greek better than I ever

could, though I don't know what you'd want with the Classics, unless one wishes to go on to university. "

"Does he?" Lord Vernon asked.

"Not really." At least, Jacob's never said anything in that direction.

Edward wasn't too fussed if he didn't. Sure, it was expected of younger sons, unless they purchased themselves a military commission or some such.

Edward's own schooling hadn't been terribly impressive.

"Not that it matters. I've bestowed a small property on him for his own personal fortune.

He seems to do all right in managing that.

Might entrust him with a few more later. "

Lord Vernon took all this in. "And you brought him here, to Lady Hammond's."

"How could I not?" Edward's heart swelled. "I love him as much as his brother, or any of his sisters. While I can't lay any money on his success in the romantic arts, I certainly wouldn't queer his chances simply because of birth order. He's entitled to love as much as the next fellow."

Lord Vernon didn't comment on Edward's declaration. Sure, it might be an unpopular opinion, to favour a younger son thus, but that was what it was. "I thank you for your candid reflection."

As the festivities wound down for the night, Edward pulled his son aside. "I have

something of interest you want to hear."

No matter how much Jacob pried, Edward refused to spill until they reached the privacy of their bedroom.

"The Earl of Shipbrook approached me, wanting to sound you out for his daughter Lady Frances."

Jacob, whose hand had been reaching for the little notebook in his pocket, slowly withdrew it. "Lady Frances, you say? The tall one," he measured the height far greater than his own, "the one with..." he gestured to his chest to indicate large bosoms.

"That's the one. Apparently, she seems to like you."

"Huh." A small frown of thought creased Jacob's brow.

Edward pressed, "Do you like her?"

Jacob had to think about this. "I hadn't given it much thought."

"Why not?"

Jacob had no answer.

"Do you not like her?"

Jacob tilted his head. "Can't say I have feelings either way."

Feelings either way...? What was wrong with the boy? Even Edward knew Lady Frances carried her fair share of magic, as did the other young ladies. Either his son

was impervious to any and all magic, or he was as thick as two short planks. "When she speaks with you, have you no reaction to her?"

Again, Jacob had to think about this. "She appears to be pleasant company. Haven't been able to figure out what's wrong with her."

"Wrong?"

Jacob gave his father a pointed look. "Everyone here is flawed, you said so yourself. I've been trying to figure out what they are."

Easy enough. "I know what Lady Frances' flaw is."

Jacob perked up. "You do?"

"Yes. She's Irish."

Silence fell between them while Jacob waited for the rest. When his father said nothing more, he prompted, "...and?"

"And that's it. She's Irish, nothing more. She's lovely, she's got a sufficient dowry, she's well-mannered, amiable, educated, all the qualities suitable for a young lady. Her only flaw is that she was born to Irish parents. No other flaws."

Jacob's hand slipped into his pocket, but he didn't withdraw his book. "How do you know this?"

"I spoke with her father."

Jacob rolled his eyes. "Every father loves their child. Of course he'd say that."

Edward turned the tables on his son. "Have you been keeping track of everyone's flaws?"

Out came the notebook. Jacob flipped it open and recited: "Lady Lucy talks too much. Lady Anne talks too little. Lady Marian is a limp dishrag while Lady Juliana is most disagreeable."

"And then there's Lady Frances. What do your notes say about her?"

Meekly, Jacob raised his notebook to his face. "Haven't found her flaw yet."

Edward tilted the notebook his way. "Irish," he said, pointing to the page. "Note down 'Irish', and move along."

Jacob dropped his notebook. "I don't get you, father. First you say we should marry for love. Now you want us to settle for... for..."

"I'm saying stop being so picky."

Jacob pondered on this. "Are you saying you don't care who we marry?"

Edward inhaled. "I'm saying I'm not going to sacrifice your happiness in the name of a politically-expedient marriage.

I care very much about who you marry. But I want you to have a strong choice in the matter.

Not only do I want you to find someone who will make you happy, but who you will make happy.

Someone who will be happy in this life. I want you to find someone who you want to

spend time with.

If you're sitting together by the fire of an evening, I want you to have pleasant things to talk about.

I want you to care how her day has gone.

I want you to be a true companion to her.

I want your heart to lift every time you see her. ”

He rubbed hand over his chin. “Are you capable of bringing a wife happiness?”

Jacob had no answer for that.

"Are you not listed in that notebook of yours?"

Jacob shook his head.

"If you were, what would you have put next to your name?"

"Second son," Jacob admitted.

"Anything else?"

His son gave him no answer.

"You have flaws too," probably. "Yet Lady Frances sees you as someone worthy of attention."

Jacob had to ponder on this.

Edward continued. "If I were you, I'd be flattered. Someone thinks you're worth considering, even if you're not the heir. Just because you're my younger son doesn't mean I'm going to treat you any less.

While the law all but cuts you out of the life that it thinks your brother deserves, I will not be so cruel.

If any of these delightful young women here tickle your fancy, I will support you in your choice.

Jacob weighed those words. "What if their fathers disagree?"

"From what you've told me, I don't think anyone at this party would disagree to any legitimate offer of marriage from the son of an earl, regardless of where in the succession he falls."

Edward gestured to the notebook. "Do you have a list of their good points in that book of yours?"

Jacob shook his head.

"There's another of your flaws. You're looking for an excuse to reject someone. How about you start looking for reasons to accept someone?"

"Start with yourself. Ignore the fact you're a second son. Pretend you're the eldest. Other than a title coming your way, what else do you have to offer a potential wife?"

Jacob couldn't meet his father's gaze. He turned away.

How Edward ached to put an arm about his son, but he was too old for that now.

“It is up to you to determine that. By your actions, you can show you are an excellent catch for any young lady and she will not care you might never be an earl. You are a nobleman’s son.

I took great pains to raise you the same as your brother.

My father did not give me the same benefit, yet here I am. Am I any less noble?”

Jacob looked to his father with some ashamedness. “No. You never treated either of us different.”

He couldn’t help it. Edward hugged Jacob. At first his son stiffened, then gave in to the fatherly embrace.

“Thank you,” Jacob said after a moment, “for not treating me any different.”

“You deserve happiness as much as your brother, as much as I do.”

He released his son before the physical connection became too uncomfortable.

Jacob shifted the subject. “Who is the Dowager Countess Harwich to you? I sense you’ve known each other a long time, yet we’ve never met her before this week.”

She was the reason Jacob had not been neglected by his parent. “Had your grandfather approached marriage the way I hope I approach yours, she is the beautiful young debutante I would have married in my youth.”

Jacob perked up. “What happened?” Jacob slipped the notebook out of his pocket.

“Her father cared more about aligning his family to the Harwich line. She was a mere pawn in a much larger game.” No.

That wasn't all the story. "Even if she was free, my own father would have refused to entertain any idea of my offering for her." The late Earl of Lavistock had given absolutely no thought to Edward's marriage potential, so focused was he on Edward's brother Orwell. It wasn't until his late wife's family, closely related to the Duke of Shomberg, made noises in their direction that he found use for his second son.

Really, the Shombergs wanted Caroline to marry Orwell, but the Earl had already contracted him to another family.

Instead, the Shombergs were willing to take Edward.

Lucky for them when Orwell died without a son, then.

Jacob laid a hand on his father's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Edward pushed away the past. "Interesting how some people's good luck comes as the expense of others' fortune." He looked to his son. "Find happiness where you can. Not everyone gets a second chance."

Edward rose. It was getting late.

Jacob remained seated. "Like you?"

Like him. "Only caveat I give you is to give Lady Juliana a wide berth, for I fully intend to offer for her mother."

Jacob pressed his lips together in a secret smile.

"Please," Edward begged. "Don't waste the opportunity I've given you. Unlike me, you may never get that second chance."

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A cold draft woke Honora the next morning. Juliana had left the blankets down when she got out of bed.

Honora rolled over to pull them back up. There she saw a bundled Juliana at the window, curtains drawn open, staring out. The cold light of morning brightened the bedroom. “What are you doing?” she asked her daughter in a sleepy voice.

Juliana didn’t turn from the window. “It’s snowing.”

Snow? Here in London? Granted, they were the edge of London though not quite country.

Honora pulled her dressing gown about her and came to the window.

Their bedroom looked out across the back garden.

A gentle dusting of white coated the conifers.

Enough snow lay on the mown lawn to show the delicate pawprints of a small animal scurrying for shelter.

All was still. Not a sound could be heard.

A blue sky overhead promised the encroaching dawn.

When the sun rose, would it melt all this winter wonderland away or would it make the world sparkle like a thousand diamonds?

“Who knew snow could look so beautiful?” Juliana sighed. It never looked like this in the heart of London. While winter was always dark and cold, it rarely snowed. When it did, it was brief and light, often melting away by the next morning.

But today? The world wore a diaphanous gown of magic.

“We should go out and play in it before it disappears.” Honora hoped her pattens were sufficient to protect her feet. Snow could be slippery, she had heard.

Imagine, they’d slept through the entire snowfall. Unlike rain, snow fell in silent flakes. One would not know it was snowing unless one was out watching it fall.

Honora hurried to the bellpull to summon the maid. “Do let’s go.”

Juliana stared at her mother, open-mouthed. “You mean to go out and play in it? Like a child?”

Honora rifled through the wardrobe for a walking gown suitable for the weather. “If we do not go now, its magic may fade away.”

“Snow holds magic?” As if it were a silver sixpence or enchanted ribbon?

Honora couldn’t help but smile. “Not actually magic. Something far more powerful. Are you coming?”

A petulant maid appeared at the door. Juliana hesitated, unsure.

After passing her instructions to the maid, Honora approached her daughter.

“If you don’t know, come. Best to confirm that it’s not all it’s cracked up to be, rather than wonder for the rest of your life if it could have been the best thing that’s you’ve

ever seen.

Besides, this is the country,” or close enough to it. “I’ll bet it tastes different.”

“You can eat snow?!”

Outside, the world remained ever so quiet.

Not even the song of a robin broke the stillness.

It seemed a crime against God and Nature to crunch their feet through the fallen snow.

Honora and Juliana stood mittened hand-in-hand as they observed the beauty of the winter world.

Their breath puffed out in clouds above their mufflers.

Had she ever seen anything so beautiful? Juliana hadn’t, not like this. She’d only seen the occasional remains of snow from a carriage in London—dirty, grey, slushy, awful. This was like nothing else.

Honora reached out to a nearby hedge and scooped up a white handful. From the house it had looked like whipped meringue or divinity. Up close, it looked more like white sugar, shaved off the cone.

Didn’t taste like it, though. The child in her heart was disappointed that it was not sweet. But it had its own distinctive flavour, a pleasant, dusty or smoky taste, ever so subtle.

What if one were to pour cream and sugar on it? Then what would it taste like?

A light crunching shook Honora out of her reverie. They were not alone in their enjoyment of the snow.

Edward, bundled up tight against the cold, approached from the house. “Chilly morning, eh?”

Something about him warmed Honora’s heart. “We had to see the snow before it disappeared.”

Juliana sighed and rolled her eyes. “My feet are getting cold.”

Honora glanced down. Juliana had worn her walking boots, but not any pattens. Already the leather had darkened from the damp. “You can go in if you want.” Though it would be better if she stayed to watch the snow.

Juliana crunched her way back to the house, leaving Honora and Edward alone.

“She doesn’t feel the magic,” Honora said in way of explanation.

Once they were alone, Edward put his arms about her. “She’s never seen snow like we have.”

“We’ve never seen snow like this—well, not together. “

Edward murmured warm in her ear, “But we did see snow fall. For one brief moment, it was only you and me and the snow.”

Memories washed over her. “Ah yes.” Honora tilted her head. “We have unfinished business.”

Thirty years ago...

For the next outing with Lord Charles and his sister, Honora Radcliffe had taken Lady Calpurnia's advice and never again ventured out with no more than a couple of charms about her.

The acrostic ring, of course, for she wished to keep Lord Charles thinking that their betrothment was still a good idea, and maybe a necklace or pair of earrings?

She'd chosen Beauty this time, for what else did she have to recommend herself?

This time when the Mildmays picked her up, they took her to a rather tepid party hosted by the Baron Carteret. Honestly! Did they not know anyone of interest? Granted, the Marchioness of Bath could be a wild one, but everyone else of their circle bored Honora to tears.

While Lord Charles didn't exactly ignore her during the carriage ride, leaving his sister to hold up the lion's share of the conversation, he could have made some effort to be personable.

No matter. Out was out. Still, Honora wished she'd brought more charms. Maybe next time she could bring something enchanted with Personality and stick it in Lord Charles' pocket. As it was, he was not doing a good job at holding up his end of the discussion.

Eventually, she let silence slide in between them. With him not paying much attention to her, and her not letting it get awkward, she found it more bearable than not.

Baron Carterer and his pudgy wife had thrown a small sort of crush. Not a ball, not a dinner, just some sort of random gathering with no obvious purpose in mind.

When they got to the party, Lord Charles perked up, especially in male company. His

fellows greeted him enthusiastically. If it wasn't for Honora tucking her arm in his, he'd have forgotten she was there.

The lady wives of his fellows didn't miss her. Turns out of the three noblemen who had pulled Lord Charles in were married. One of them, Lady Alton, took Honora's other arm as if they were the best of friends. "So good to meet you," she gushed.

Lady Alton was no longer fresh of face. While she wore the latest of fashion, all panniers and ruffles and bows with her face painted in the French fashion, the only thing that made her not look ridiculous was the thick wave of magic that flowed off her.

Honora recognised some of the flavours of magic: Youth dominated so much she wasn't able to identify any of the other charms.

"Is it your first Season too?" Honora blurted out before realising what she'd said. "I mean, no, it can't be. Not if you're already married." She bit her lip, wishing she could take back her words.

This set all three ladies laughing. "Such a charming creature," Lady Alton said. "I like her, Charles."

He looked down at Honora, as if he'd forgotten she was there. "Oh, yes. Political marriage," he replied, with some satisfaction. "One of the Earl of Derwent's daughters."

Lady Alton nodded. "Fortune has smiled upon you that she is also a pretty thing. So fresh." With that, she tucked her arm into Lord Charles' other one, effectively framing him between her and Honora.

Turned out the fellows and Lord Charles were content to keep company.

For the rest of the evening, Lady Alton and Lord Charles spent deep in conversation.

Honora didn't care. What could she do? Lady Alton was so thoroughly soaked in magic, Honora would never have had a chance, should she have wanted Lord Charles' attention. Somehow, his arm had released her.

Little by little, Honora found herself nudged further and further out of the circle.

Not that it really mattered. She didn't need to be the centre of attention.

Still, it would have been nice to feel she'd been included, even wanted.

Even Lady Calpurnia had found a couple of matrons with which to chat leaving Honora quite on her own.

Normally, this would be where one could say, "Excuse me, I think I shall seek out some refreshment," but there was no one to whom she could excuse herself.

So she left the circle.

Not that the refreshment table was much better.

She picked among the little cakes and sandwiches, all of which had seen fresher moments.

People came and went, grabbing what they wanted without a second thought, then returned to their friends, their conversations, leaving Honora on her own.

She sighed, so underwhelmed with her solitude.

"This is the most boring party I have ever attended," she said out loud.

As yet another person passed by, he leaned over and murmured, “Or you could follow me...” before departing.

Honora looked up.

Edward Russell. She'd not forgotten that face. He threw a conspiratorial smile over his shoulder before moseying his way to the ballroom doors. He paused, as if waiting for nothing.

Honora glanced around. Absolutely no one was paying attention to her, least of all, Lord Charles.

Why not? Anything was better than being alone in a crowd of people.

He slipped out the doors and she followed. The doors led to a wide balcony overlooking the front of the house. Down on the streets of London more carriages arrived, dropping off further guests for the party.

It wasn't as if the balcony was empty. Several other couples and trios took advantage of the cooler air. The only light came from the doors of the ballroom and the lamps in the street below.

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Only after they reached the edge of the balcony, did Edward turn around, offering his hand. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

Forget his hand. Honora threw herself about his waist. "You are the best thing about this party."

He chuckled. "Oh really? It took you this long to notice I was here."

She pulled back. "And how long were you here?"

"Been watching you have a dreadful time all evening."

"You could have come up and said hello." Honora wanted to pout. As Edward was the best thing to happen to her all evening, she did not want to throw his most-welcome presence away.

"Who's the ape leader who's been bossing you around all evening?"

"Lady Calpurnia, Lord Charles's sister."

"Can't say I know her." He inhaled the scent from her hair. "I did see Lord Charles. How can such a fellow ignore you so thoroughly in favour of Lady Alton?"

Honora sighed. "I'm wearing practically no magic today."

Edward tilted his head. "Ah. No need, now that your father has secured you a spouse?"

"Something like that."

He lifted her gloved hand to his lips. "I don't mind. You're not out to charm me, are you?"

She allowed herself a smile. "Don't need to, do I?"

He held her hand between his. "You could, if you wanted to. But only if you have a ship waiting in the harbour."

She couldn't help but laugh. "If only I could marry you." She gazed up into his face. It had brightened considerably.

And then she saw them. "Oh, look!" Honora pointed upward. "It's snowing."

"Is it?" Edward replied, his eyes only for Honora. Then the first few flakes drifted into his view. They weren't big, but soft enough to float instead of fall like rain. He held out his hand to catch one. As soon as it landed on his glove, it melted.

Honora held out her own gloved hand. The next captured flake lasted a little longer before it too disappeared. "I don't think I've ever seen the snow fall."

"You haven't?" Edward pulled back in surprise. "Ever?"

She shook her head. "I'm always indoors in winter."

"Snow seemed only to fall at night. "This is my first Season. When I say I've never been Out before, I also mean I've never been out, like outdoors."

"She put her fists on her panniers and imitated her grandmother."

“‘Too many bad humours,’ my grandmother would say. She firmly believed the night air was bad for one’s health. ”

Edward inhaled. “And now?” As he exhaled, his breath came out in puffs.

Honora took his hand. Her own breath puffed in the frigid air. “It does not appear to be any worse than the air one is breathing inside. Maybe a little colder, but what is cold?” She herself felt quite warm at the moment.

“What is cold?” Edward echoed. He seemed to have forgotten the snow, now falling a little heavier, like petals thrown at a wedding. It made for a gentle halo about Edward’s head, her angel who’d rescued her from the clutches of tedium and isolation. He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

Honora rose on her toes. If she stood up a little taller, and if he would only tilt his head a little more... Her lips parted in anticipation.

“Lady Honora?” Lady Calpurnia's voice made her shudder.

So close! Why did she have to come ruin it?

Honora released Edward’s hands. She backed away until her panniers hit a trio of other partygoers who’d come out to escape the heat of the ballroom. Automatically, she murmured her apologies before raising her hand and calling to Lady Calpurnia. “We’re over here.” Er, “I’m over here.”

“That’s where you went. We noticed you had gone.”

As her unwilling human shields murmured exclamations at Honora’s shocking intrusiveness, Honora abandoned them. “Is it time to go?”

Lady Calpurnia blinked at her. “No.”

“Oh. If it is all right with you, I may stay out here a little longer. It is a bit stuffy in there.”

Lady Calpurnia folded her arms. “No. There’s some good friends we wish for you to meet.” She beckoned with her fan. “Come.”

Oh. "Must I?"

Calpurnia reached for Honora's hand, tugging her back to the party. "It is important that people get to know you."

“Coming,” Honora conceded with reluctance. Maybe she wasn’t being so ignored.

Alas, as she looked about the dimness of the balcony, Edward had slipped away. Drat! He was about to kiss her!

Little by little, the snow flurries faded and stopped.

Christmas 1817

The sun rose above the horizon, sending rays to glitter against the snow. “Unfinished business?” Edward asked. There had been plenty of that.

“Thirty years ago.”

“Aye...?” What did she mean? He wanted her to say it.

"That party I didn't care for. The snow. The balcony." The young lady who'd been all but forgotten by Lord Charles.

Oh, he'd seen that cheap Lady Alton, mutton dressed as lamb, pouring herself all over Lord Charles while magicless Honora had been pushed aside.

It hadn't been anyone's fault but Lady Alton.

He didn't blame Charles for succumbing to her charms, but really, the man should have kept his head about him, or at least his fiancée by his side.

Would have served him right to have his bride-to-be carried off by Edward that night, to be thrown aboard a waiting ship, all ready to take them to the south seas.

And then came the snow. So magical it had been. Since that day, every time he saw snow, he remembered Honora.

He should have kissed her. Really, he should have. When that ape-leader came looking for Honora, why did he shy away?

Because he was a second son, with nothing else to his name but his honour.

And now? "You remembered the snow?" That unfinished business? For years after that night, Edward had wondered what it would have been like to kiss young Lady Honora Radcliffe. Her lips had looked so fresh, so soft. Would she have been tender? Timid?

He would never know. That Honora was gone.

But here was Honora, Dowager Countess of Harwich. Slick as an eel, Honora turned in his arms, raised up on her toes and kissed him.

Hers was not the hesitant pressing of closed lips one would expect of a debutante. This was an experienced woman who knew what she wanted.

As her lips pressed against his, they parted, demanding more.

If she wanted it, she got it. Edward had nothing to lose. He savoured her softness, her hunger. She clung to the lapels of his overcoat, keeping him in place.

Edward cradled her face in his gloved hands. No, she was not going to get away this time. Nothing would ever pull Honora Radcliffe Mildmay away from him ever again.

Her tongue darted in to play against his, fearless, making his heart hammer in his chest.

When she relinquished him, Edward had to cling to Honora to keep from falling over. Her kiss alone left him dizzy. “Finished business nothing! If you had kissed me like that back then, I would have challenged Lord Charles to a duel for your hand.”

She chuckled. “Alas, no duels.”

He dropped a smooch on the tip of her nose. “Are you not flattered that I would fight a duel for you?”

She tilted her head. “Maybe a little.”

He grinned. “Maybe a lot.”

She confessed it so. “But had you fought the duel? It would not have ended well. Either Lord Charles would have killed you, breaking my heart, or you would have killed him, breaking his mother’s heart.

Maybe we could have been married, but at what grief to the families?

Mine would not have welcomed you, at least not until your brother died and you

inherited. Even then, maybe grudgingly.

“As much as you or I wanted it, it was not yet our time.”

Edward sighed. She was so right. “And now?”

A smile brilliant enough to rival the morning sun spread across her face. “We are free to do whatever we want.”

Hope sprang up in his chest. “Like... get married?”

She bit her lip coquettishly. “You asking me?”

“Should I be asking your father?”

This made her laugh. “Maybe you should ask my son instead.”

He made a moue . “Surely he wouldn’t turn me down.”

“Never. Because his mother would threaten to turn him over her knee should he dare.”

Her hands snuck beneath the collar of his coat. “Maybe later than we want, but not too late. Maybe sadder but wiser. Small regrets, but what life doesn’t have those? You are here, and so am I, fully and without bond. Of course I’ll marry you.”

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As wonderful as the news was, Edward and Honora agreed not to mention anything until after the end of the Christmas party.

Edward didn't mind. Honora had come back to him.

While Lady Hammond would be over the moon that her clumsy matchmaking event had resulted in a match, really, it was for the young that she'd thrown this party.

Let the young have their fun.

Alas, for them, by the time the other guests rose, most of the snow had melted into unfavourable slush, not much fun for admiring or playing in.

As a result, everyone chose to remain inside, as Lady Hammond had arranged for more activities—flirtations thinly disguised as “games”.

First up for the morning: a scavenger hunt of sorts, with everyone to be paired up. Lady Hammond had summoned them all—parents included—to the hall. One by one young ladies drew slips of paper from a hat. Each slip had the name of a young man.

Lady Marian, the hostess' daughter, was the first to draw out a name.

Her brow furrowed as she puzzled out the name scrawled on the slip of paper.

"Oh," she declared, realisation dawning on her.

"It says Clifton." This brought some good-natured jibes from the other young men,

as Lord Clifton was pushed forward.

No embarrassment on his part as he held out his arm for her.

She studied his arm the way she had studied his name on the paper before taking it.

Next, Lady Juliana. She drew a slip of paper, opened it, read it, then let out a sound of disgust. "Kendall Russell."

It wasn't her reaction to his eldest son's name that bothered Edward; he had seen that coming. It was the reaction of the rest of the room. As soon as Kendall's name was read out, all the other young ladies breathed a sigh of relief.

Poor Kendall. What had he done to earn their distance?

Immediately Lady Juliana rolled her eyes and loudly offered to swap with Lady Marian. Lady Marian took one glance at Kendall and refused. Her arm tightened about Lord Clifton's. "I am quite content with my selection."

It was as if the all-clear had been sounded.

The other young ladies rushed forward, drawing names from the bowl.

While there were some groans—Bertram Ashburton didn't elicit much enthusiasm from his companion Lady Lucy—none of them were as bad as Juliana's response.

Even when begged to swap, Ashburton's companion turned Juliana's offer down.

Even the Ashburton lad was preferable to Edward's boy amongst the lasses.

That stung. Edward would give half his fortune to know their reasoning.

Jacob's name was called out. Seems Lady Frances lucked out. The way her bosom bounced as she clapped over her success lifted Edward's heart somewhat. Interesting.

Juliana came over to her mother, the young lady's hands full of jewellery.

"Please hold this?" She dumped two bracelets and three rings into her bemused mother's hands.

Lady Juliana reached up and unfastened the pendant at her throat.

This she also deposited in her mother's hands, followed by two earrings, leaving herself quite unaccoutred.

"Seems I won't need any of this," she said, with some bitterness.

Honora's reply: "I'm sorry, love." Her hands curled about the fine items. "Good luck. Behave yourself."

Juliana did not reply. She squared her shoulders and returned to the crowd. There was something different in how she moved

"What was that?" Edward asked.

Honora sighed, then opened her hands to take inventory of Juliana's discards. "Charm, Beauty, Affableness, Luck... Oh dear. She could have kept that one at least. Probably should have kept Affableness as well."

At first Edward was baffled. "You mean, that's all her charmed jewels?"

Honora turned a large, liquid gaze on Edward that made his heart melt. "All that she wore today." Another soft sigh escaped her ruby lips. "She had not expected to be

paired with Kendall."

The tilt of her head made Edward want to gather her up, kiss her and tell her that everything would be all right. She didn't have to worry about anything, now that Edward was there. He reached up a hand to one of her steel-grey curls. "You're so lovely..."

To his surprise, Honora laughed. She held up the handful of rings and bracelets. "No, my charms are strong."

He blinked. The jewellery...

She continued, "Well, yes, I am lovely, but..." She batted her eyelashes at him in a most coquettish manner. "I don't mind if you find me Youthful and Fresh as well."

Her humour appealed to him. Goodness, that magic in her hand must be strong. "I should go put these away," she mused.

He caught her arm as she moved away from him. "No. I don't mind." He felt a little shy asking this, but, "You can keep them. Really." Right now she was the most beautiful creature in the room, outshining even the loveliest of the fresh young ladies.

And she'd agreed to marry him! Could any man on this earth be more fortunate?

She laid one of her soft, gentle hands on his arm. "Edward, not once have I ever used any charms on you, at least, not deliberately."

"I know. The first time I saw you, you divested yourself just like Juliana did. Didn't stop me from falling in love the moment you stormed into the library, angry at Lord Charles."

Her jaw dropped, only adding to her charm. "I was not angry at Lord Charles."

"Fed up with him, maybe."

She tilted her head. Ah, her neck was so lovely. "Maybe fed up with the party."

He enclosed her cupped hands with his. "But you stayed."

And you talked with me. You didn't try to win me over, or even behave like a proper young lady.

You were yourself, and I loved you for it.

"He couldn't help it. Edward bent forward and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. It seemed like the best thing to do.

To his surprise, Honora squirmed out of his grasp and deposited Juliana's stash onto the nearest chair.

The glamour faded. His tunnel vision receded and while he saw Honora in all her middle-aged truthfulness, to be honest, it still lifted his heart. He took her face in his hands. "I still love you. Always have."

He kissed her. He kissed her like he wanted to kiss her that first evening. Gentle, loving, and pouring his entire heart into it. Theirs was not a passionate kiss, that might preclude more intimate activities, but a promise that his heart belonged to her entirely.

After his lips parted from hers, a smile spread across her face. No magic could ever compete with the light that illuminated his heart now. "Always will," he completed his promise.

"I love you too."

Once all the youth had been sorted into their pairs, for better or worse, Lady Hammond clapped her hands for attention.

"Each pair are given a card. Upon this card is written a room name.

Once you have reached that room, you will find a clue.

From this clue you are to identify the item in the room of which it describes.

Once you find that, note the item on your card.

With the item will be the name of your next room.

And thus you follow the clues and the rooms, identifying each item.

First pair to complete their card with accuracy will be declared the winners. "

Several of the young ladies giggled at this prospect. "I hope we win," Lady Frances gushed to Jacob. He only grunted as he studied the card Lady Hammond had handed to him. "This says, 'Parlour'," he announced, possibly louder than she should have.

Kendall perked up. "Parlour, did you say?" He strode off. Juliana hastened after him, grabbing at his sleeve. "Where are you going? We don't start at the parlour."

Kendall leered at her. "But we can get ahead. Obviously the parlour is one of the rooms on the hunt." He pulled his arm out of Juliana's grasp.

All the other young folk consulted their cards in a quieter manner, then slipped away, some through the front door. Interesting, Edward thought. It appeared the game was

not limited to the inside of the house.

"But we don't know if it's the next room. For all we know, it'll be next to last. What about all the other rooms before it?" She snatched the card from Kendall's hand, read the room's name with a quick glance, and stalked up the stairs.

Kendall threw up his hands, muttered something about stubborn women and chased after her.

Edward wanted to go after him, but what would he say? He turned to Honora. "Will they be all right?"

She shook her head. "Maybe we should go after them."

Edward clutched at her arm. "Kendall wouldn't harm Juliana." If he did, Edward would have more than words to apply to Kendall's backside, should he be anything less than the gentleman he raised him to be.

"It's not Juliana I'm worried about."

Lady Hammond clapped her hands once more.

"Speaking of the parlour," this elicited some amusement from the remaining parents, "I have provided for refreshment, if you would like to join me.

This will give you a front row to some of the fun.

Otherwise, you are welcome to roam and watch the game from the other rooms."

As much as a cup of tea and a nice biscuit would be welcome, Edward read Honora's face. It was best to follow Kendall and Juliana, lest Kendall learn first-hand that the

fairer sex weren't always that fair when it came to war.

Honora worried her lip between her teeth.

Yes, Kendall was being a bit of a boor. Didn't explain Juliana's initial disgust of him, though it did explain why she wasn't going to sweeten to him any time soon.

Still, it mattered that her daughter was letting this young man get so much under her skin.

Absolutely not would there ever be a romantic attachment between these two, not that she and Edward had returned to each other, but they were to be siblings.

Some level of civility was expected between them, especially as they were now adults, and such things were expected of sibling adults, even if they could have been terrors to each other as children.

As she and Edward hurried from the hall into a deserted corridor, they realised they had no idea what any of the rooms for the game were. "Where could they have gone?" Edward asked.

Honora thought about that. "Solar, upstairs?"

For lack of a better idea, that's where they went.

Sure enough, the solar was one of the rooms. On the door a small card had been nailed, with a little rhyming couplet:

"While outside I'm ten feet tall,

When in here, I am quite small."

She and Edward read it several times, coming up with nothing. He looked to her, shaking his head in defeat.

They entered the room, but no young couples lurked. "Not this room," Honora admitted. "Where else?"

But Edward was looking about the solar.

This was a lovely room for the afternoon, its windows looking westward over the garden.

The curtains had been drawn open to let in the natural light.

Alas, it also let in the natural chill, in spite of a cheery fire.

Not quite the same angle as was visible from their bedroom, but still a lovely view nonetheless.

The large french doors opened to a small terrace where one could sit outside if the weather was clement.

"Tall outside," he mused, "but small inside." He looked about, hands behind his back. "If we can decipher the clue, we'll find out the next room to look."

Honora's fingers itched to pull the curtains closed to conserve the heat, but them being open might be part of the clue. As she looked out the window for anything that might be tall, Edward looked about the room.

"Oh," he declared, almost immediately. "The Laundry."

"The Laundry?" Honora turned from the window to find Edward gazing at a small

picture of sunflowers.

He pointed to a small card stuck to the frame. "Says Laundry here."

Honora hesitated. "Isn't that... Downstairs?"

"Probably." Edward smiled at her. "If I wasn't so concerned over the children, I'd say maybe we should stay here." He reached for her hand. "I'm sure we could find something to keep us occupied." Removing her glove, he pressed his lips to her bare skin.

She couldn't help but smile. "Are you tempting me?"

His eyes twinkled. "Could I?"

She let out a small whimper before laying her forehead against his chest. That whimper turned into a small laugh. "I'm sure they'll be all right, right?"

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If it wasn't for another young couple—Lord Clifton and Lady Marian—finding the solar as part of their clue, Honora's hands might have done more than unbuttoned Edward's waistcoat.

At least she didn't blush and draw attention to their state of enrapture.

Edward turned away from them to restore some order to himself while Honora asked them about how they were getting on.

"Quite splendid," Lady Marian admitted with more life than Edward had seen in her the past few days. "We've discovered six rooms so far." The solar was the seventh.

"How many more to go?" Honora asked.

"Don't know," the young lady admitted. She did, however, reveal which rooms they'd discovered so far: stables, library, larder, dining room, nursery, pantry. (Edward crowed at the larder; Downstairs was fair game after all.)

"Off we go," Edward declared, grabbing Honora by the hand. "We'll leave you to find the clue in here."

Out they went into the corridor, thankfully free from any other guests. Edward whirled Honora into his arms and planted a kiss on her nose. "Clever girl, to ask Lady Marian which rooms they'd seen."

Honora blushed. "Thank you. Shall we check the library out first, seeing it's on this level?"

Honora's gut had been correct. Unlike the solar, no card was nailed to the door.

Inside, chaos reigned. No sooner did she and Edward enter the room, they saw Juliana launch herself from the large mahogany desk to tackle Kendall to the floor.

Witnesses to the violence were Bertram Ashburton and his companion, Lady Lucy, who cried out before clasping her hands to her face.

Young Bertram looked quite pale himself, clinging to the desk.

While Kendall fought back the best he could, Juliana was giving no quarter. Who knew she could punch like that?

Honora could only stare at her daughter, now quite the grown woman, giving as good as she ever gave her elder brothers.

Granted, the Mildmay boys knew better than to bring any lasting harm to their sister, for Lord Charles was not above whipping Brook or the rest should they show any lady—even their sister—such disrespect, at least, not in front of any adult that had any authority.

But Juliana had to learn her fighting skills from somewhere. Kendall made a mistake, which led Juliana to roll him over and pin his arm in a half-nelson hold. Such talent only came from practice. (Honora made a note to have a word with her eldest son Brook.)

Edward cried out, "Please don't hurt him too much. After all, he is to inherit."

Juliana scoffed. "You've got a spare! It's not like you're going to miss this one."

The distraction was enough to let Kendall break her hold, knocking Juliana back.

Juliana and Kendall wrestled about on the floor in a most inelegant manner before Juliana popped up in triumph, a card in her hand.

Quick as a whistle, she moved back from Kendall, pointing a finger at him. "Stay down or I'll thrash you more."

Kendall was not going to stay down. But as he rose to carry on the fight, his eyes burning, Edward grabbed the back of his coat. "You know better, boy," he growled low into his son's ear.

Juliana read aloud from the card, her voice carrying. "While the Good Lord shall blot out your mistakes, I remember them all." She frowned at the card. "What's that supposed to mean?" She looked about the room.

Young Bertram and Lady Lucy immediately put their heads together and nattered over the clue.

Kendall, his jacket still in the grip of his father, threw out his hand to the bookshelf. "It's the Bible, of course!" he spat.

Juliana gave a narrow glare to Kendall, but went to the shelves to have a look for a Bible. As she passed her mother, she slipped the clue card into her hand and muttered, "Could you stick this back on the door? Kendall thought it capital to take it off and maybe slow down the competition."

While Bertram and Lady Lucy lifted their heads at Kendall's declaration of his solution, they gave each other subtle shakes of their heads, and went back to their ponderings. They sidled over to the desk, where a blotter lay.

While Juliana muttered loudly over how hard it was to find a Bible on the shelf and Edward was having a low word to his son about his behaviour, only Honora noticed

Bertram lift the corner of the blotter and Lucy's gasp at realisation, before the two slipped out of the library.

Honora also saw the small nail on the desk that had been used to pin the card to the door. She followed her daughter's wishes and the spirit of the game and returned the clue to its door.

When she returned, Juliana had found the Bible, large thing that it was. She'd slammed it on to the desk and pawed through it, hoping to spot the clue. "It's not in here," she growled at Kendall.

Edward had released Kendall at this point. He pulled the Bible his way, skewing the blotter. There, underneath, was the card with the clue to the next room: the Larder.

Juliana spotted it the same time as her mother. She jabbed her finger at it. "It's wasn't the Bible," she snapped.

Off she went, presumably to find the larder downstairs near the kitchen.

Kendall only sighed. He moved the blotter back over the clue. "She's being impossible, father," maybe forgetting Juliana's mother was there?

Edward pulled no punches. "You're behaving like an ass. If you do not start acting like the gentleman you were raised to be, I have no compunction but to banish you to the bedroom for the rest of the week."

Kendall hung his head. "Yes, father." He wrapped his arms about him.

Honora turned away. The last thing Kendall needed was a witness to his embarrassment.

Edward wasn't done. "You are a guest. Please behave with the decorum expected of such a one. Now, off you go to the larder, lest Lady Juliana solve the clue without you."

That lit his fire. Kendall's head snapped up, eyes aflame. "You're right." Off he dashed, not bothering to close the door.

Just then, another couple showed up at the library.

Time for Honora and Edward to slip out. Honora subtly pointed to the clue on the door, then to the desk. Sure, the Bible was still on there, but so was the blotter and its concealed clue. She closed the door quietly behind them.

Out in the corridor, Edward sighed. "I am so ashamed over how my son behaved just now."

Honora slipped her arms about his waist. "Likewise, my conscience is pricked that Juliana behaved no better than a brawling fishwife. I am so sorry for her behaviour."

"Kendall deserved it, if you want my honest opinion.

" Edward blinked rapidly. Honora fished his handkerchief out of his inside pocket and offered it to him.

He gave a sad chuckle and took it, blotting his eyes.

"If it was anyone but you here right now, I'd not be able to show my face in public again.

I would take my sons and withdraw to the country, never to be seen of or heard from again. "

Honora swallowed. "I feel the same about my daughter." She laid her head against Edward's chest.

He stroked her steel-grey hair. "A fine pair we make, do we not?"

"So dramatic."

"If it weren't for our obligations to the next generation, I'd say sod the lot and let us run off to the sea. Surely there's some pirate vessel willing to take two salty sea dogs like us?"

"Don't tempt me," Honora said. "Though I fear our children have cornered the market on saltiness."

Edward released her and stretched, his hands going to the small of his back. "Didn't Lady Hammond say she had refreshments in the parlour?"

Was this how it was going to be? Edward wanted nothing more than to sweep Honora up and carry her off. Not sure to where, for the house still crawled with young scavenger hunters. Besides, he was only good for carrying so much weight—much of that the burden of his sons in his heart.

No doubt Honora bore the same weight for her daughter.

Funny, Edward didn't recall his own daughters being so prickly.

But that could have been due to how his late wife Caroline had had the children raised.

Now he thought about it, he hadn't had as much to do with his daughters as he had his sons. Had that been a mistake?

As Edward and the love of his life passed by the dining room on their way to the parlour, the doors flung open. To their surprise, Kendall and Juliana darted out, nearly knocking them over.

Didn't they say they were going to the larder? "What's this then?" Edward exclaimed as both Juliana and Kendall offered their apologies.

Unlike before, it seemed these two had declared a truce.

"We're done," Juliana declared. "We've completed the hunt."

Kendall explained, "The dining room's clue is the nursery. We started in the nursery. Therefore, we're done."

Juliana grabbed his hand. "Stop dawdling!"

Together, they dashed down the corridor to find Lady Hammond.

Edward and Honora looked to each other with a sigh.

They arrived in the parlour just as Lady Hammond congratulated them on completing the scavenger hunt. She consulted her pocket watch before noting the time on their card. "Did you have fun?" she asked.

Kendall and Juliana looked at each other, unsure of how to answer.

Lady Hammond ignored their lack of answer. "You've earned your rest." She gestured to a laden table set against a wall. "Do please help yourself to some refreshment. I dare say you deserve it."

Juliana's eyes sparked with delight. "We did it!" she declared to Kendall. But as she

turned to the table, her countenance fell. There, in the far corner, sat young Bertram and Lady Lucy, cups of tea in their hands, pleased expressions on their faces as they chatted with one another.

Kendall groaned. They'd been beaten after all.

It took another hour or so until the last couple arrived, their card completed. Meanwhile Edward enjoyed some lovely cups of tea and as many biscuits as he wanted with Honora.

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Juliana, in her pique, took her jewellery to the bedroom.

Clearly she did not see the need for it for the rest of this morning.

When she returned, she took up her sulk in the chair next to her mother while Kendall socialised with the other returned young men.

He'd returned to his usual assured self, puffing up about how he solved the clues so fast, and some funny incident outside at the stables, apparently.

Alas, for the young ladies, as soon as Kendall drew the young men into his circle, one by one, they were ignored, to wander off into their own clutch. Edward frowned at this. This sort of behaviour went against the spirit of the game as Lady Hammond had intended.

Not every young man was claimed. The Ashburton boy remained in the corner with Lady Lucy, apparently boring her somewhat with the topic of his conversation.

Once the last couple reported in, Lady Hammond rose. "Gather about. Shall I announce the winners?"

The young stirred. Most of them knew they hadn't won. The couple that came last didn't bother to press forward like the rest, but picked over the rather depleted refreshment table. All the nice cake was gone, and only tepid cucumber sandwiches remained.

Lady Hammond called out to them. "Do come over, my dears. I have not forgotten

you."

They looked up from their somewhat empty plates, abashed.

Lady Hammond held out a small beribboned box. "For our last place couple, I hope the reasons for your tardiness were good ones." She even gave them a wink.

They looked to each other, not sure what she was implying. But when Lady Hammond deposited the box into the young lady's hands and she undid the ribbon, both of the young couple lit up. Inside the box was a selection of the finest cakes, just for them.

The young lady tendered a curtsy. "Thank you," she replied. Manners, huh? Good sign. What was her name again? Maybe Edward should be nudging his boys to spend more time with her. She seemed nice enough. How was it they'd not paid any attention to her before?

She and the young man set off to enjoy their last-place spoils.

Lady Hammond let them be. "Third place, for the third fastest time, goes to Lord Clayton and my own Lady Marian." A footman came up next to Lady Hammond, a small bottle and two tiny glasses on a tray. "Your prize is a fine bottle of sherry."

The glasses, already poured, were handed first to Lady Marian, then Lord Clayton, who also received the entire bottle. It wasn't big, and could have easily been swigged in one go. "Enjoy."

Lord Clayton and Lady Marian shared a look of delight, before retreating to their chairs to enjoy their spoils.

"Second place, Lord Kendall and Lady Juliana, who came so close."

Edward did not miss the sigh Kendall gave before plastering a smile on his face. Indeed, nobody had been expecting any prizes to be awarded other than first place. Lady Hammond's magnanimity was generous.

The footman brought out another tray. Their prize was a round-bodied bottle of excellent port, cork already drawn and the bottle breathing.

He'd taken the liberty to pour out two glasses of port.

The first he handed to Juliana, who accepted gracefully.

The second he handed to Kendall, including the port bottle.

Kendall raised his glass and toasted his fellow young men. "My good fortune is your good fortune!" He returned to the group of young men. Taking his first swig not from his glass, but the bottle, he then passed it around them, completely ignoring Juliana.

She stood there. Edward didn't need any help to see the pain on her face at this neglect.

The father in him wanted to stride over and drag Kendall away from the young men, but that would not be cricket.

His son, for all his immaturity, was technically an adult.

He would not embarrass him in front of the others.

That would devalue him. But by gum, he would have a sharp word with him at his next convenience.

Such boorish behaviour, even toward a young lady he despised, would not do.

Honora's heart ached as the joy of a prize—albeit second place—leaked away from Juliana.

Poor girl left alone while Kendall walked off with the prize to celebrate with those who had not done so well.

Couldn't even take a sip from the glass in her hand.

Juliana clutched it to her, countenance having fallen.

Lady Hammond continued, wrapped up in her own glory. "For the first place, our most clever and quickest couple yet, may I present the finest bottle of champagne."

Out came the footman, silver tray in hand. On it sat a rather large bottle, all French labelled and open. Two filled flutes sat on the tray, tiny streams of bubbles trailing their way up the sides.

At this, everyone paused. Kendall frowned and focused on draining his own glass of port. Who came first? they murmured.

"Lord Bertram and Lady Lucy!"

Everyone cheered at this and looked about. Their cheers faded somewhat. Where were they?

They, Lord Bertram and Lady Lucy, were still in the corner, plates in hand. Lady Hammond repeated their names. "Lord Bertram? Lady Lucy?"

The two broke from their discussion. "We won?" Lucy declared, hastily putting her plate aside. She looked to young Bertram. "You didn't say there was a prize."

For once, Bertram had no words.

Together, they came up to accept their prize of glasses of champagne. Bertram accepted the rather large bottle with some grace. He and Lady Lucy lifted their glasses in toast to their fellows, who cheered the couple once more in their triumph.

Bertram sipped his glass most appreciatively. Lady Lucy studied hers, as if mesmerised by the bubbles. "I've only had champagne on my birthday." She sipped at it. "Oh," she declared. "This is delicious!"

Honora came up to Juliana. "How is your port, my dear?" Edward had parted from her, and she didn't blame him. Even now, she watched him have a quiet aside with his eldest son.

Juliana sighed as she regarded her glass. "I suppose I should drink it before Kendall comes back and takes it from me."

Honora watched Edward subtly slip out of the room, his hand firmly about the arm of Kendall. "I don't think he'll be coming back."

Juliana took a sip of the port. She considered it, then declared, "It has a taint, I'm afraid." She handed the glass to her mother.

Honora sipped it. Taint nothing. This was one of the finest ports she'd ever tasted. None of the other young gentlemen who sampled it appeared to object. Alas, she hoped this one event did not taint port for her daughter for the rest of her life.

Across the room Jacob bent his head close to Lady Frances, whispering something to her. She gave him an understanding nod. He slipped out of the parlour after his father and brother.

No good letting fine port go to waste. Honora sipped at her glass. One thing was sure; Lady Hammond had excellent taste when it came to port.

"Excuse me, Lady Juliana?" Ah, young Bertram, with Lady Lucy in tow. "Hello," Lucy added.

Juliana attempted a smile, but failed.

Lady Lucy had enough decorum not to comment. "We wanted to thank you for your generosity in the library."

Juliana blushed. "Oh. That. Please don't mention it."

Lady Lucy laid a gentle hand on Juliana's wrist. "No, really. If it hadn't been for your most noble act of defying Lord Kendall, we might never have known the clue to that room." She gave a small hiccup. "Scuse me. I'm not used to champagne.

"We wouldn't have completed the scavenger hunt if it wasn't for you."

"Certainly wouldn't have won either," Bertram added. "Terribly sporting of you. You didn't have to give us the clue."

At this, Juliana straightened up, indignant. "Of course I did! It wasn't at all the thing for Kendall to take down the clue. You were just as entitled to it as we were."

"Still," Lady Lucy continued. "We wouldn't have won if it wasn't for your thoughtfulness."

Bertram drained his champagne flute and refilled it, holding it out to Juliana. "We consider this prize yours as much as ours. Please."

Juliana clutched her hands before her, her lower lip trembling. Honora gave her daughter a gentle nudge and a nod.

"I..." Juliana started out, then trailed off.

Lady Lucy gave another little hiccup, followed by a blush as she laid fingertips to her lips.

Bertram all but pushed the flute into her hands. "It is a generous bottle. No way would Lady Lucy and I be able to finish it off before it perishes. Please."

It was that final word that tipped Juliana into acceptance. She lifted the flute and took a sip. Surprise blossomed across her face and she took another sip.

This pleased Lady Lucy very much. "Isn't it delightful?"

Juliana regarded the glass. "This is the best champagne I've ever tasted."

As she sipped, Bertram filled Lady Lucy's flute, and between the three of them, they took to the corner to do their best to finish off the bottle.

Honora sighed and tilted the last of her port into her mouth. Juliana would be all right. Perhaps it was time for a word with Lord Ashburton?

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Once they reached their shared bedroom, Edward all but threw Kendall aside. "What were you thinking?"

"What?" Kendall declared.

Really? Did he not know? "You were positively beastly towards Lady Juliana."

"But she made us lose the game!" It was the petulant cry he'd have expected from a boy of five years, not a man of five-and-twenty.

"But you didn't lose. You came second place."

"Second place," Kendall scoffed. "You mean first place loser."

"That is unfair." His son's words stung Edward more than they should have.

Kendall threw a hand out. "Besides. I was generous. I shared my prize with the others."

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose. "With the other young men. Not with the young ladies, and certainly not with Lady Juliana. It was her prize as much as yours."

"It nearly wasn't," Kendall spat. "If it wasn't for her meddling with the card, Bertram and his chit wouldn't have won."

He wanted to shake his son so bad. "If it wasn't for you taking the card, she would not have had to take it off you. For that act alone—" He ran his hands through his hair.

This argument was going nowhere. "Your loss is your fault. Not Lady Juliana's, not Lord Bertram's."

Kendall folded his arms tightly. "I still say it's her fault we didn't come first. She kept interfering at every step. It's like she didn't want us to win."

"What did you do to make her want to win it with you?"

"But she—"

Edward's patience wore thin. "But you! You cannot control her actions, but you can control yours. Don't think I didn't watch you, my boy. You should have done everything in your power to make her want to ally with you, to win the game."

Was that Kendall's lower lid sticking out? "Well, she could have held up her end."

"And what, in your many actions, would have encouraged her to do that? No. This is all on you. From the very beginning, this has all been you." He jabbed a finger at his son's chest.

Kendall stumbled back. "Well, if I'd been paired with someone more agreeable—"

Edward laughed. It was not a kind sound.

"Nobody wanted you. Remember how Juliana asked to swap with Lady Marian? She refused. Even before the game began, she refused. They all refused." He clicked his tongue.

"I'm afraid your reputation has already been set.

Don't think I didn't see you show-pony for all the young men. If I didn't know better,

I'd say Lord Clifton kissed the wrong Russell boy last night. ”

Kendal sulked. “I'm not a molly, father.”

“Then stop trying to impress boys and start flirting with girls. Here they are, magicked up to the gills with more charms than a pool of goldfish and you're nigh on oblivious.

Any more magic on them, and they'd be dragging every stallion, boar, stag and king bee from miles around.

I don't want to have to explain to the local shepherd the reason his ram came knocking on our door was because my son couldn't properly woo a young lady. ”

At least he could give the boy some credit. He didn't argue back or properly pout. Maybe the truth was sinking in.

Edward softened his tone. “I don't want to be ashamed of you, son, through the eyes of any young lady—especially if she becomes your wife.

If you cause her to feel any grief, I will also feel that grief.

” He laid a hand on Kendall's shoulder. His son hung his head.

“While you are the eldest and is it a responsibility for you to marry well, I would that you should find joy in such a union. I do not want marriage to be a burden to you.”

When Kendall looked up, his eyes simmered with grief. “Was Mother a burden to you?”

How to answer that? Edward inhaled deeply. Eventually he admitted, “We learned to

tolerate each other well.” His late wife could have been much worse. They learned how to compromise and not tread on each other’s personal happiness. “I worked really hard not to be a burden to her.

“I was a younger son when we married. In Society, I was considered a second prize—a consolation prize, really, for anyone unable to secure a better marriage. Sure, my father was an earl, but I was going nowhere. Then my brother was an earl, with a pregnant wife. By the time we realised he would have nothing but daughters, he died and only then did I become an earl. The only reason you are going to be an earl is due to someone else’s very bad luck. ”

Kendall could only stare at his father.

Edward was not done. “What if my brother hadn’t died? Or what if one of my nieces had been a nephew instead? Then what would you have had to recommend you? Certainly not a title. What else would you have to offer?”

Edward shook his finger at his son. “That is what you need to present to a potential wife. The sheer fact that you may some day become an earl is terrible luck. For all you know, I might live to be a hundred and five.”

A quiet voice from the corner said, “Does that go for me too?” Jacob slid out of the shadows, hands curled about his notebook, shoulders hunched.

Kendal and Edward jumped. When had he come in?

“As a fellow second son, our charming personalities is all we have going for us. I don’t want you to be seen as a consolation prize either, my lad.” Edward looked to Kendall. “Either one of you.”

Jacob swallowed. “But Kendall’s the heir. He’ll get the title.”

“No one wants a wife who considers the title of Countess as the consolation prize in an otherwise disaster of a marriage.” Edward held out his hand to his downcast second son.

Was this what Lady Hammond had seen, what Jacob had alluded to?

Did his sons have nothing else to offer but titles and maybe money?

Jacob took the hand and let his father pull both his sons into an embrace.

“I don’t want any young woman be sorry she married either one of you.

Title or no title, I want whoever you choose to marry to be happy.

I want her eyes to light up when she sees you in the morning.

I want her to smile when she turns your way, and to seek out your company in the presence of others.

I want there to be a laugh in her throat and love in her heart because of you. ”

To their credit, his sons pondered on this.

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

After a much-needed luncheon, Lady Hammond had an afternoon of music planned.

Honora groaned. Juliana's talents lay in other directions.

Even then, after the events of this morning, she doubted anyone would be inviting her up to perform.

It didn't help that she'd done more than her fair share of helping Bertram and Lady Lucy finish off a too-generous bottle of champagne.

All the chairs had been brought in to the music room, settled in a double-circle about the centre.

The music room was rather well-stocked with a fortepiano, a harpsichord and a few other instruments Honora couldn't identify.

Maybe a viol? Besides that, Lady Hammond had all the latest popular sheet music.

While all the young ladies clapped and gleefully perused the collection, some of the young men inspected the instruments, a few of them poking at the keys.

Juliana was not among them. While her daughter had had music lessons while at finishing school, it never sank into her soul.

Even now, she chose to sit toward the back of the room, her head close to that of young Bertram, deep in conversation. Juliana actually had a smile on her face.

Interesting. It had been like that at dinner last night as well, not to mention this morning. Could it be she had found a suitable match? Honora would have to sound out his father. Her daughter's demeanour toward this young man was the complete opposite of her ire for the Earl of Lavistock's sons.

As for them, they seemed a little more sober this afternoon. Edward must have had some strong words for them.

Edward entered the room, brightening it immediately.

Honora couldn't help but smile as soon as she saw his face.

She sat up straighter in her chair. He made a beeline to his sons, had a quick, quiet word in their ears, and watched them separate and spread out.

Jacob immediately went up to the young ladies pawing through the music.

He cleared his throat and asked them, quite diplomatically, what titles and tunes Lady Hammond had provided.

Right thing to say, apparently, as all of them weighed in at once.

Kendal, on the other hand, sat at the fortepiano and studied its keys. He pressed one note, which sounded out, then ran a quick, skilful scale.

Huh. The boy could play. Next, he picked out the melody line. It took her a moment to recognise "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night". Just the melody and a harmony trickled from his fingers. Yet with those simple notes, in a few moments, he evoked the spirit of the Holiday Season.

Her grandmother used to play the spinet.

Every Christmas, when the family was gathered to her home, she'd insist on carols the whole day.

Her reasoning, with holy music in the home, one would think to pass Christmas more worthily.

It was not until she had married Lord Charles and became subject to his mother's idea of passing Christmas by being subject to tedious Bible-reading, that she wholly appreciated her grandmother's choice.

It was not so much the scriptural passages that Honora objected to, but rather that the Dowager Countess insisted on doing the reading herself, droning on and on in her monotone voice, until even she drifted off to sleep.

Honora missed the happy Christmasses of her childhood.

How could she hold such a heavy heart toward Kendall with such evocative music coming from his hands?

Between this and the snow this morning, for the first time in a long time, Honora had Christmas in her heart.

She followed Kendall's tune, one of her favourites.

"I did not know you could sing," said Edward.

Honora shook herself; she'd been lost in the music. "Sing?"

Ah, Edward! How he lit up her heart. "You were humming."

She averred. "Memories from my youth."

"Like this morning?"

She nodded. "Like this morning. How are you after your perambulation in the snow?" she asked.

He sat in the chair next to her, easing himself carefully. "Not bad. I did not slip once." They looked to the window, where the curtains themselves had been pulled back to let in the light of the afternoon. "It's a shame the snow didn't last too long."

"Ever too brief." She would never see snow again and not think of Edward. "And your sons? I hope they are not too put out from this morning? I should apologise for my Juliana, but I fear if she learnt of it, she'd be most put out with me. I doubt there's a sorry bone in her body."

He took her hand. "Do not fash yourself about it. In truth, my boy deserved that. Though I recommend she not make a habit of it. He has sisters aplenty already."

Lady Hammond had heard Kendall poking about the keys of the fortepiano. "Do not think I can't recognise Clementi. Scoot yourself over boy. I'll play secondo."

Edward sighed. "I tell him to pick up his game with the young ladies, and what does he do? Draws the attention of the oldest lady in the room."

Honora watched poor Kendall meekly scoot to the treble end of the piano.

Lady Hammond counted him off. Together, they began a duet.

Well-matched music filled the room. Honora knew this one.

She'd heard it in concert before. It was a popular one brought out several times during the Season whenever a young lady was too shy to play the piano on her own.

“He is surprisingly good,” Honora confessed. “I did not think young men saw the need to master an instrument.” At least Kendall had one redeeming feature.

Edward explained, “Their mother insisted.”

Honora glanced to Juliana, who watched Kendall, weighing him, measuring him. Likewise, Bertram studied him, his expression unfathomable. Juliana leaned over, whispered something to Bertram. Whatever she asked, he shook his head in reply.

Determination set on Juliana’s face. She patted Bertram’s fleshy knee and gave him a low declaration. She might not have heard the words, but Honora knew Juliana felt the need to one-up Kendall.

She’d only put a stop to it if Juliana took it beyond a mere performance. It would do no one any good for these two to erupt in an argument again.

Kendall and Lady Hammond finished their duet to the polite applause of the gathered party.

But as Juliana rose to defend her pride, the other young ladies acted first, pushing Jacob forward.

“Please do,” they declared, elbowing Kendall out of the way.

They all but carried him to the fortepiano’s bench.

Lady Lucy propped up the selected sheet music.

“I’ve never been able to master the development. ”

Instead of politely returning to the provided seats, they gathered about the instrument

as if they were in a common public house.

Jacob looked bemused, but not afraid. “If that is what you wish,” he replied to them all.

As one, they nodded most eagerly.

Without hesitation, Jacob launched into the opening bars of a sonata she did not recognise. One thing was for sure; Jacob knew what he was doing. His fingers glided over the keys effortlessly, bringing out some of the most beautiful music to grace this room.

Honora had never heard this piece—not that she had had many opportunities to attend musicales or concerts this past year.

Edward, on the other hand, tapped his foot in time to the music.

He confided to Honora, “It took him nearly the year to master this particular piece by Herr Beethoven. I am so glad his practice is paying off.”

In many ways, Honora had to admit. The young ladies clustered about the fortepiano had been captured by his spell. She, too, had been drawn in in ways she’d not expected. Jacob’s playing was so beautiful.

While the Mildmay home had a harpsichord—every noble household needed a musical instrument—Juliana never was one much for music. Certainly Honora's sons never showed any interest. While Honora herself could play, she’s never gave it much time in her life.

What had she been missing?

“Is your house always filled with music?” she asked Edward.

“Pretty much. They all play. Therefore, they all practice.”

“If my house was full of music like this, I don’t think I’d get anything done, so enrapt would I be.”

Edward inclined his head. “Don’t worry. You get used to it.”

Used to it? Never!

A warm idea filled her heart. “Does that mean our house will always be filled with music?”

At her emphasis of the word “our”, Edward turned his attention fully to her. “Do you want it to be?”

“Very much.”

He took her hand. “Then I shall play for you every day.”

Honora straightened. “Wait. You play too?”

He laughed. “I do, though not as well as my sons.”

Jacob’s piece came to an end amid a roar of applause. The young ladies laughed and clapped. Some begged him to perform duets with them, but he averred. “I would much rather hear you play.”

“Oh no,” cried Lady Frances, “for we could never play as well as you.” The rest agreed.

If it wasn't for Lady Hammond coming to his rescue, poor Jacob would have been chained to that fortepiano bench for life.

Honora turned to her daughter. Now would have been a good time for Juliana to take her place at the keyboard. But the fire that Kendall had ignited in her pride had died out. If anything, it looked like she had lost the battle. They both knew Juliana was not anywhere near as good as Jacob.

Bertram ventured, "Do you wish to play, Lady Juliana?"

She shook her head. The wind had been taken out of her indignation. "Do you play?" she returned to Bertram.

"I can, but nowhere as good as that."

Juliana sighed. "Me neither." They sat in dejected silence for a moment.

"We could withdraw to the library, if you wish," Bertram offered.

"Oh yes, please. I'm afraid I don't have the heart for music today."

While all the attention was on Jacob being pushed into another performance, Bertram and Juliana quietly rose. "Next chapter?" she asked, her eyes lighting up.

Bertram offered his arm. "If you wish. I like reading to you."

Reading? Honora thought again of her mother-in-law and hour after hour of her tedious drone at Christmas. Granted, it was not long before age caught up with her, and she could no longer see the pages of the Bible. It was then Lord Charles took over the annual reading of Luke.

By then Honora had picked up the practice of sitting in a far corner to poke at embroidery or some other such project to keep the boredom at bay.

But had it been boring? While Jacob launched into another sprightly tune, Honora sorted through her own memories. Yes, she loved spending hours as a child next to her Grandmother's spinet singing about shepherds watching their flocks.

And what of her own children? As soon as Lord Charles took over the reading, the spirit of Christmas Day took a shift. As she sulked forgotten in a corner, her children, on the other hand, eagerly gathered about their father's knee as he read to them about those same shepherds.

She had dismissed it at the time, but now remembered how different Lord Charles' reading had been compared to his mother. While she saw it as a necessary Christian duty, he took it more as a fatherly blessing. His reading wasn't a dull vicar's sermon, but a storyteller bringing a tale to life.

Brook, Juliana and the others always gathered about him, warm by the fire.

Honora bit her lip as the memory filled her and threatened to spill out her eyes.

How could she have excused herself from such tender moments?

While Lord Charles had not been her choice for a spouse, he had comported himself well, even loving their children as much as any father could.

It was how he read to them at Christmas.

Not just that, but how they wanted him to read to them at Christmas.

That had been their holiday tradition. Oh, how they must have missed it sorely once

the Good Lord saw fit to take Lord Charles back to His bosom.

Even now, did Juliana miss that of her father?

This Christmas, like last Christmas, could have been a sober one for the Mildmay household.

But not this year. While her son Brook was now the Earl, Honora pledged to herself that they were to have a merry Christmas for his young children.

While she was not very good at music herself, she would insist on carols at the harpsichord.

She would have Lord Brook read aloud of the shepherds in their fields, like his father had.

They would have flaming plum pudding, mourning bedamned.

She didn't mean to sob.

"Honora?" Edward's tender voice broke through her thoughts. He lifted a handkerchief to dab away her tears. "Are you all right?"

"Just thinking of how the family will spend Christmas this year." She took the handkerchief from him to complete the task. "It will be a good day."

Edward relaxed. Oh. She had distressed him.

She wanted to set his mind at ease. "Thinking about all our Christmas traditions.

" She shared of her grandmother's music, Lord Charles' reading, and more.

Christmas in the Mildmay household wasn't so bad, not the way she thought it had been.

That was her fault, and hers alone. "This year, it will be wonderful. "

"I'm glad." He took her hand. "And next year... we have time to think about that."

Next year... of course. "And how does a Russell spend Christmas?"

Edward told of music and games, "if only to balance the vicar's sermon. Christmas should be a time of joy." He traced the lines of Honora's hands. "If our children ever declare a truce, perhaps we could join together."

Honora looked to the door through which Juliana and Bertram had slipped out.

She could very well be married and gone by next Christmas.

"Lord Brook could do the reading. My son has young children of his own now.

" Granted, both Bertie and Maisie were still in long skirts, with Bertie only just learning to toddle and Maisie still an infant.

Yet they might grow up as their father had, having the Christmas story read to them by someone who loved them. "If you could bring the music."

Edward lifted Honora's hand to his lips. "For you, I'll play the piano forever."

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

Thirty years ago...

Christmas was supposed to be a joyful time, was it not? Only two days to go until that blessed holy day—Honora's last Christmas with her family. Only two weeks to go until her marriage to Lord Charles. Then all the Christmasses after that would be with him.

That did not bring joy to her heart.

Neither did this party, hosted by Lady Temple.

Why the Mildmays insisted on dragging Honora everywhere baffled her.

Shouldn't this be a time for family, not gallivanting about London sampling from every hostess' awful wassail bowls?

Already Honora's heart ached for the simple pleasure of her grandmother's Christmas carols, and the flaming plum pudding, where everyone hoped to find the silver sixpence baked in.

Honora had only found it once in her young life.

The home of this particular hostess was festooned with so much greenery that Honora feared some forest had been completely denuded of its branches.

There would be roast goose for dinner and the promise of dancing and cards and all sorts of merriment later.

This promise was the only thing that kept Honora from fleeing Lord Charles' tedious company once more.

He took great joy in much conversation with his peers—friends who briefly admired his soon-to-be-bride in her lovely silver gown ("So festive!

" one had declared), and who forgot her as quickly as she'd forgotten their names.

Even Calpurnia had taken to their conversation, though usually her future sister-in-law did an acceptable job of including her.

Honora sighed and leaned against the wall. What few chairs had been set out had been taken by the elders, leaving the younger and fitter to stand.

She had no wish to stand. Maybe she should wander off, in case a settee had been forgotten in a corner. Even the staircase in the hall would do, if only there was someone to talk to.

"Such a sad face for a silver belle," a familiar voice murmured in her ear. "Especially at Christmas."

Honora turned to find Edward next to her. Her heart lifted. "Yours is a welcome one."

His hand slipped into hers every so subtly. "How are you?"

She hadn't seen him since that night of the snow. "Bored. Lonely. Maybe..." Should she admit the feelings she'd shoved down deep? "They've started reading the banns."

A soft intake of breath from Edward. "I suppose it had to happen sooner or later."

All she could do was nod. No, she would not cry.

Around them the party carried on, loud voices of some merriment as friends greeted one another. Laughter erupted in one corner as the hostess' daughter, the Honourable Miss Edith Temple, danced about with a long stick. Tied to the end was a bundle of mistletoe. With this she teased various guests.

At least someone was having a good time tonight.

Edward's voice was gentle. "How much longer?"

"Two more weeks."

He nodded. "You are not looking forward to it?"

Honora tilted her head side to side. "Mixed feelings.

On paper it is a brilliant match. My head cannot find fault with it.

My heart, however..." she sighed. "It is young and silly and thinks running away to sea is a splendid idea.

"Such a lovely, if foolish, thought. So why did it buoy her heart up?

Edward chuckled. "Ah, there's a smile, is there not?"

She confessed it was a smile. "I can't help it. When you are near, the world seems a better place."

Miss Temple came dancing by, the stick waving about the heads of the guests. She came to a stop before Edward and Honora. "Mistletoe..." she sang, making Honora blush.

Edward's hand gave her a quick squeeze before releasing it. "Oh dear," he murmured. "We've been caught." He reached up and plucked a white berry.

Honora drew a breath. Could they be so bold? She too plucked a white berry, drawing in a deep breath. "Edward...?"

"Mmm?" he answered, his gaze locked to hers. He held up his berry.

Honora touched her berry to his, before rising on her toes.

But as she leaned in, fully intending to complete the ritual, Calpurnia exclaimed. "Look, Charles! Mistletoe." Calpurnia grabbed Honora and dragged her around until she was side by side with Lord Charles.

Honora squeaked in surprise, her face blushing ever so bright.

Miss Temple, taking the adjustment in stride, danced over before Lord Charles, who looked at her in bafflement. It was Calpurnia who elbowed him. "You're supposed to take a berry then kiss your bride-to-be."

Lord Charles looked to Honora. "Oh. Here you are. Where have you been?"

Honora could only gape at him.

"She's been here the whole time," Calpurnia insisted, giving him a strike on the arm.

Lord Charles reached up, plucked a berry, then planted a kind and gentle kiss on Honora's forehead. This brought a few tepid cheers from their group, before they returned to their ever-boring topics.

Wait. That was it? That was all? Honora huffed out in her disappointment.

When Honora turned back to where Edward had been, he was gone.

Several hours later Honora sat in the Mildmay carriage on the way home. It was a scant relief that Lord Charles wanted to snooze and Calpurnia had no desire for any more conversation.

Honora did not want to talk to anyone. In her hand she still held the mistletoe berry, a little sorrier for wear.

After being dismissed by Lord Charles and company, she realised that they truly hadn't noticed her there, no matter what Calpurnia had insisted upon.

It was an easy enough matter to slip away and search the party.

Yes, she was engaged, but she was not married yet. She had two more weeks of freedom.

With the berry in her hand, she roamed the entire party looking for Edward. A kiss. One kiss. That's all she wanted. It was all she could claim. He was a second son. She was destined for another man. They couldn't have anything else, other than futile dreams. And maybe one kiss.

But try as she might, Honora never found Edward that night. It was if he was a phantom that had slipped away like a dream.

She never saw him again.

Every outing she looked for him. Every party she listened to all gossip for word of him. In the mornings she scanned the society pages in hopes of even a hint of his name. Nothing. Honora kept that berry under her pillow until it shrivelled up.

One day it disappeared.

Three days later, she was married.

Christmas 1817

Honora and Juliana emerged from their bedroom to find Edward, Kendall and Jacob waiting. Edward came forward to take Honora's hand, a smile on his face. "There's my silver belle."

Honora chuckled. "More grey than silver." Juliana only rolled her eyes.

Edward stroked the elegant chignon. "In our golden years, you shall always be silver to me." Kendall and Jacob had the self-consciousness to look away.

Edward offered his arm. "Shall we go to dinner?"

As they descended the staircase, followed by their children, Edward talked about Russell Christmasses of the past. Truly, Honora wanted to listen to him.

To listen to his voice for the rest of their lives comforted her more than she thought it ever could.

But it wasn't just Edward's voice she heard.

Behind them, Kendall apologised to Juliana. While Honora couldn't fully catch the words, his tone did sound sincere. She only hoped Juliana had the grace to accept his apology and not push him down the steps.

By the time they all reached the ballroom-turned-dining room, a civil but cool truce had been reached. It would suffice. The doors to the ballroom were shut, guarded by

two footmen. Other guests gathered outside, speculations about the inside of the room running rife.

Lady Frances bounced up to Jacob with the news. “They say we cannot enter until all the guests have arrived.”

Jacob took a quick survey of those present. “Only one more family.”

“As long as we don’t have to wait for Baby Jesus as well,” Kendall muttered. His father shot a warning glance at him, and he straightened.

Bertram and his father drifted over. Juliana brightened when he offered his arm to her.

She gave her mother a quick glance before accepting.

Of course Honora approved. If Bertram continued to treat her with the same consideration for the rest of her life, how could anyone object to the match?

(Brook had better approve, or Honora would turn her eldest son over her knee, earl or no earl.)

At last Lady Hammond appeared, her daughter at her side.

Lady Hammond wore a most splendid gown of light blue silk with a white taffeta overgown, cut and embroidered to look like a snowflake.

On her head she wore a crown of greenery, with several candles sitting on top.

Honora dreaded to think what the dripped wax would do to their hostess’ hair.

Lady Hammond looked like a cross between Saint Nicholas and Saint Lucia. “Welcome,” she called, instantly bringing her guests to silence. “I hereby invite you to our Christmas Wonderland.” At her gesture, the two footmen opened the doors.

Inside, the ballroom had been draped with more pale taffeta.

The pillars sported more than enough greenery.

Candles in little silver sconces lined the room, lending an ethereal glow about the table.

In the far corner a small orchestra struck up a familiar Christmas carol, possibly one of the many tunes they’d sung earlier in the day.

Honora approved of the music. It was not bright and cheerful, but thoughtful, almost solemn.

Instead of three long tables as they’d dined at days previous, one giant buffet table in the middle held roast goose and many other delightful dishes. Around this table sat many smaller tables of four chairs each.

As the guests moved about the room, one of the young ladies asked about seating arrangements, as there were no guest cards.

“You may sit wherever you like,” Lady Hammond said, waving her arm about. “It’s Christmas, and we are all equals under the eyes of God.”

A bleating sound startled them all. Out ran a sheep from the pillars, chased by what looked like a shepherd boy. He grabbed it and quickly headed it back to an alcove. Some of the more intrepid young men chased after it, including Kendall.

To their delight, in the alcove were Shepherds or rather, servants dressed up to look like the Shepherds from the Christmas story, crooks and all, with their one token sheep. From the state of the floor, Honora did not envy the servant who would have to clean up after it in the morning.

Edward tapped her on the hand. “Honora, look.” She turned to where he pointed.

“Fear not.” The pronouncement drifted over to them, a beautiful tenor voice of an angel.

They followed it to the alcove where they found their angel gowned in white with wings and a halo.

As other guests drifted closer, said angel proclaimed their good tidings of great joy.

Honora remembered when Lord Charles had read those words to their children when they were younger.

As they looked about the room, along the wall were little stations of the Christmas story, including a small stable built of crude wood, manger and all. At least Lady Hamilton hadn’t brought in the donkey.

Honora spied one little alcove that appeared to be empty. Or was it? She squinted at the single ball of greenery hanging alone. Wait...

Without warning, Honora pulled Edward along.

In his bemusement, he followed. “What have you found?”

It wasn’t until they stood under the ball of mistletoe, brimming with white berries that she answered him: “What I tried looking for thirty years ago.” She reached up and

plucked a berry. “Do you remember this?”

Edward’s merriment faded. He gave her a sad little nod. “I remember.”

Three hours, three days, two weeks and thirty years of frustration welled up inside her. “The last time I saw you, we had just plucked these berries. But you disappeared.”

“Lord Charles—”

“Lord Charles bedamned! You abandoned me. I looked everywhere for you.” She lifted the berry higher. “I was going to kiss you.”

Edward shook his head, then drew her close. “I would not have wanted to stop at a kiss. I wanted all of you. I could not have you.” His voice grew hoarse. “I had nothing to offer you.”

“You offered me love. And adventure. And a million different dreams.”

He held her close. “You cannot eat dreams.”

Honora whimpered and dropped her head to his chest. “I know. Oh, it took me quite a while, but I came to accept that.” She beat at his chest with her fist. “But couldn’t I have had that one kiss?”

Honora found herself pushed away from Edward’s chest. No sooner did she clock what had happened, than her lips were captured in a deep, hungry kiss. Edward cupped her face and savoured her taste. Her lips parted for his as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Her arms slipped about his waist, her fingers clinging to his back. No way was he

escaping now.

Edward had been right to abandon her then, thirty years ago, as painful as it had been. She'd been betrothed to another man. Granted, Lord Charles had not been her choice, but she'd agreed to the marriage all the same. Her word had to be her bond.

Had she kissed young Edward Russell, second son with little prospect back then, would she have been able to stop at a kiss? Maybe he was right.

What greater act of love could he have given her, than to preserve her honour?

When he finally set her free, she blinked. "You have thirty years to make up to me."

His eyes twinkled. "I am sorry I ran off; I regret that. I do not regret taking you away from what sounds like a not-too-bad life, for I will not be jealous of Lord Charles. That said, I regret never giving you that kiss. If only it could have been just a kiss..."

No. He was right. It would never have been just a kiss. If she reacted then as she reacted now, she would never have been content to stop at a simple kiss.

But now...

"From now on, I will never fail to kiss you every day for the rest of our lives. Never again will I subject myself to regret." With that, he went on to show her how he intended to make up for thirty years of regret.

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Lady Hammond's Christmas party last year had proven to be a success.

Honora and Edward agreed to postpone their own wedding until August, for each family had other nuptials to celebrate.

When Honora asked her daughter Juliana what she found so appealing in young Bertram Ashburton, the Earl of Baring's son and heir, she simply replied, "I like listening to him."

Indeed, for the rest of Lady Hammond's party, Bertram and Juliana had foregone the other planned activities in favour of the warm library and a good storybook. Bertram loved reading, and he loved reading to Juliana. She, in turn, was content to sit and listen for hours.

Their wedding had been set in March, for they saw no reason to adhere to social expectations and wait until June.

For the other couple to get married, June was a little too soon. It took Lady Frances Shipbrook a good half-year to convince Jacob that he did love her.

As part of that, Edward had to teach Jacob what love was. "It's wanting to spend time with someone."

"Like I spend time with Kendall?" Jacob had pulled out his notebook.

"Yes and no." While brotherly love was all well and good, "there's something equally fulfilling when you have that same connection with a spouse."

It wasn't until Edward insisted that Jacob chaperone him and Honora during their courtship that his younger son figured it out, much to Lady Frances' relief.

Thus they set their wedding for July.

As for August, once Honora and Edward's vows had been said, Edward told Honora he had a surprise for her. "Remember how we always talked about running away to sea and become pirates?"

Of course she did.

So when their carriage pulled up to a dock, Honora gasped in surprise at the ship waiting for them. Edward had booked passage. "It's only to Calais, and only for a week, but I expect us to say "Yo ho ho," and drink some rum."

In eagerness, they boarded the ship.

There, they learned that travel by ship is dingy, close, smelly and thoroughly unpleasant, even with clement weather. Calais was lovely and the journey back equally unpleasant. However, the rum was nice.

By the time they planted their feet on solid English soil, Honora and Edward admitted to each other that their stories of piracy on the south seas were best saved for the fire in the library on a cosy evening.

To both their delights, that looked to be every evening for the rest of their lives.

Lady Calpurnia Mildmay had long grown used to shuttling from relative to relative over the course of her years.

While she did not want to be a perpetual burden to any of her family, likewise she had no desire to spend the rest of her life alone, even if she had sufficient personal

wealth to buy a place of her own.

However, when an invitation came to spend Christmastide with the Earl of Lavistock and his new wife, she admitted bafflement as to why her sister-in-law Honora wished for her company.

Best way to discover that was to accept and show up to a fine country seat in Wiltshire.

Russell House rivalled any property held by the Mildmay family; Honora had landed herself well.

To Calpurnia's surprise, as her carriage rolled up, a young boy about three years old came running out to greet it, followed by his father. Both wore heavy coats against the chill December weather. "Aunt Purnia!" the child called, before being scooped up by his father.

Wait... was that her nephew Brook, the new Earl of Harwich? Calpurnia's heart lifted. Had Honora invited him too?

As soon as the servants handed her out of the carriage, Lord Brook embraced her warmly while his son danced about them excitedly. "Is Ernestine here too?" she asked.

"We all are," Lord Brook replied. "Every one of us."

Calpurnia put a hand to her chest. "What? All the Mildmays?"

Lord Brook tilted his head, "Well, all but Sarah, for her confinement is close."

"Oh, another niece," she breathed.

"Or nephew," Lord Brook added.

He held out his arm. "Do come in from the cold. Mother wanted to be the one to greet you, but she's a bit occupied for the moment."

He guided his aunt inside.

The warmth of Russell House embraced Lady Calpurnia like an old friend. As servants divested her of her outer wear, more family members came dashing down the steps.

Ah, there was Juliana, the last of the Mildmays to be married!

Calpurnia wasn't too sure about her choice of husband in the Earl of Baring's son, but the Bertram boy seemed pleasant enough.

The warm looks he and Juliana shared were sufficient confirmation to ease her concerns.

If Juliana loved him, then he was good enough.

Finally, Honora Radcliffe Mildmay Russell, formerly the Dowager Countess of Harwich, now the Countess of Lavistock, emerged to greet her former sister-in-law. "So glad you could join us."

Honora personally led her upstairs to her bedroom. "I apologise for the smallness of the room, for we have invited all the family from both sides, mine and Edward's."

Calpurnia didn't mind. She'd only brought the one maid. "So there is plenty of family?"

Honora nodded, eyes shining.

Calpurnia could not recall a time when she'd seen Honora so happy. She patted her on the hand. "I'm so happy. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

On the morrow, the day dawned cold. No snow, alas, but overcast and chilly. By the time they all got back from the service at the local parish, warm wassail awaited them in the parlour.

While the children chased each other around, the adults lifted glasses in toast to the birth of the Christ Child.

Honora caught Lady Calpurnia before she sat down. "We're not staying in here."

Calpurnia rose. "The Library?"

Honora shook her head. "Not yet. First the music room."

"Music?"

But Honora only tapped the side of her nose.

For the rest of the afternoon the entire family cheerfully ran through every Christmas carol they knew before circling back to sing them again. It pleased Honora when she saw Calpurnia join in. She had hoped all her family would see the joy of music during the holiday season.

For evening dinner they had the traditional roast goose, or rather three, for one was not enough, followed by a marvellous flaming plum pudding.

Brook's wife Ernestine found the silver sixpence, much to her delight.

As bellies groaned and belts were loosened, Lord Brook bade them all come to the library. While Calpurnia offered a little resistance, her old bones wanting to remain

where they were, Honora insisted she come. "Please. I find you will enjoy this."

Honora herself helped Calpurnia to the most comfortable chair in the library, near the fire. "This is mine, of an evening," Honora explained. Edward's, which normally sat close enough they could reach out and hold hands, had been moved back somewhat.

Lord Brook already occupied this chair, the family Bible spread across his knees. All the children gathered about. The Mildmays in expectation, the Russells in curiosity.

As the rest of the family settled about the library, Lord Brook began those familiar words: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed..."

Honora watched Calpurnia's smile broaden as the beloved family tradition was carried out by the next generation. Yes, all would be well.

Honora's hand slipped into Edward's.

Edward leaned over to kiss his wife Honora on the nose. "Happy Christmas, my love."

"Happy Christmas." Honora had no idea how many years she and Edward had left. But for now, they had this one, and all was well.

Before they sat down to listen to Lord Brook and his reading, Honora had one more thing planned. "Come over by the window," she murmured, taking Edward by both hands.

He groaned but followed. "What have you in store for me now?"

"Unfinished business." Hanging from the top of the window was a small bundle of mistletoe.

“You’re not going to let me live that down?”

“I am not.” Honora reached up and plucked a berry. Edward followed suit. She gently touched her berry to his before rising up on her toes to accept his kiss.

The End