



Snowbound with the Earl (Diamonds of London)

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Category: Historical

Description: As the snow flies and the magic of Christmastide unfurls, a love from the past is resurrected.

When Edward Gibson, Earl of Armestead hosts a house party at his country estate as he has every year since his father died, he resigns himself to the fact that he needs to scour the collection of eligible ladies, for he is in search of a wife. He has responsibilities to the title, but with his heart unexpectedly broken from a rejection years ago, he's ignored all of that.

Lady Nancy Wooster, formerly Prentice, is the daughter of an earl. Recently the widowed Viscountess of Havelock, she is glad her husband is six feet under, for his lies won her, and she'd made her decision based on that, but years later, she wonders if she didn't choose the wrong man. When a surprise invitation comes from Armestead's sister for a Christmastide house party, she accepts merely to stave off loneliness and curiosity.

As the days slip by full of Christmastide fun and activities, Edward and Nancy are forced into each other's company, for the roads are impassible with snow and no one can leave. As truths are revealed and secrets admitted between them, they accidentally discover a romance that never had a chance to flourish, but it takes one night of passion for them to see the truth that was waiting for them all along.

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Armestead Hall

North of Watford

Hertfordshire, England

Edward Gibson, Earl of Armestead, sat at his desk in the study of Armestead Hall. A megrim was working behind his eyes, and he rubbed his temples to encourage it to fade.

Why the devil did I agree to throw this house party?

Again.

As he had done every year since he'd taken the title, Edward hosted Christmastide at his country estate.

It was a matter of taking up the tradition his father had left off, and it was the least he could do, for he was often so busy with duties to parliament and his estates while in London that he only got out to the Hertfordshire property twice a year—summer and winter.

However, this year, his heart wasn't in it for various reasons, but his four sisters would be there, and three of those sisters had families of their own that would have the halls ringing with child-like laughter.

And since Kitty, his youngest sister, had married in the spring of last year to his best

friend Reginald, she had been on a wedding trip for months.

They'd only just returned to London in July of this year, and she had promised to come to the house party.

Oddly, out of all his sisters, he'd missed her the most. Probably because she'd always managed to make his life difficult by landing into scrapes and scandals, but when she'd wed Reggie, that had all stopped to a point, but he missed having someone around to argue with.

And if he were honest with himself, the scandalous ones were always the most interesting.

But he could never let her know that.

Beyond having his family around him, he had also invited a handful of acquaintances within the ton, and they'd agreed to bring some friends.

His sister had done the same, so the house would once more be full.

Whether or not everyone would actually follow through was a whole different matter, and if they did, where would he house everyone?

It wasn't the worst problem to have.

Besides, it might be nice to immerse himself in socializing beyond what Town could offer.

There was always the opportunity to enjoy being removed a bit from society through at least Twelfth Night.

Having a Christmastide house party meant a wide variety of activities to take part in, most of them being outside and away from prying eyes.

That was all to the good.

Would any of it be enough to lift the ennui that had been his constant companion for the past few months? Only time would tell.

Briefly, Edward closed his eyes as he continued to dwell on the upcoming house party that would begin in a few days.

Christmastide wasn't his favorite time of year, for he missed his parents acutely and the memories therein threatened to bury him.

Additionally this year, he felt as if he'd lost his best friend too.

Where usually he could have relied on Reggie to pal around and keep him company, that man had been scarce since he'd married Kitty.

They'd taken a yearlong wedding trip, and even though they'd come back in July, they were still very much newlyweds and in the honeymoon period.

They resided in London, true, but they both had other things to occupy their time.

Some Sundays he took dinner with them, but otherwise, they were missing from his life, mostly because Reggie was a busy man besides as he campaigned for a seat in the House of Commons.

Not that he could blame the man. He'd wished to make a name for himself, to set him apart and away from the nickname as "the earl's fool" that he'd been known as before he'd married Kitty.

And that was Edward's fault for treating him as a joke, but since his sister had dressed him down and married Reggie, all of that had changed.

He would be quite the asset once he was accepted into the Commons, going against Edward's own votes in the Lords, but perhaps that didn't matter. Especially since some of his own votes were more and more aligning with his best friend's.

Though he was quite happy for the newlywed couple and content with his own responsibilities, behind that well-worn mask, he was lonely.

As he pulled a leatherbound ledger toward him, the butler appeared in the open doorway.

"Your Lordship, Mr. Healy and Lady Katherine have just arrived."

Some of his melancholy lifted. "What of my other sisters?"

"They immediately took possession of Lady Katherine and whisked her up to the drawing room. The husbands of the ladies have scattered while the children are taking tea in the nursery with various governesses and maids."

That was one of the lovely things about the manor in the country—there was plenty of room for everyone.

"Ah. Thank you Burson. Show Mr. Healy in here." He hadn't expected them so early in the month, but perhaps he wasn't the only one suffering from maudlin thoughts this time of the year.

Moments later, his best friend strode into the study, looking for all the world as if the heavens had opened and he'd had a glimpse of the unexplainable. He grinned at Edward. "Hullo, Armestead. It's been an age, hasn't it?"

“Indeed.” Edward waved him into a leather chair that faced his desk. “Brandy?”

“Yes, please.” Reg shoved the fingers of one hand through his black hair and sighed.

“The trip out here took an ungodly amount of time, and I’ve been chilled to the bone.

” He glanced toward the window. “Roads were rutted with mud. Then the rain had changed to ice, which made any sort of speed impossible. There was a point when we all feared for our lives.”

“At least you arrived. I’m grateful for that.”

“As am I. Poor Katherine was quite rattled.” With the shake of his head, he watched as Edward poured into two cut crystal glasses of the amber liquid from a carafe that rested on the corner of his desk.

Reg was the only person of his acquaintance who called his sister by her full name instead of the shortened version. It was rather gentlemanly of him.

“When we were about to give up all hope, the precipitation turned back to rain for a time before finally switching to all snow, of which there is copious amounts. . I pity the guests on the road now.”

“As do I. It’s my hope the weather doesn’t strand the remaining people we’ve invited.

There is nothing worse than plans askew due to snow.

” He came around the desk, handed Reg one of the glasses of brandy, and then sat in the matching chair next to his.

“Despite all of that, you seem uncommonly happy.”

“Is that right?” Reg sipped his drink, but amusement, as well as happiness, sparkled in his sapphire eyes. “I suppose I am.” With a shrug, he rested an ankle on a knee. “It must be the marriage that agrees with me.”

“Perhaps.” As Edward sipped his own brandy, a bit of envy stabbed through his chest. It had been ages since he’d been simply happy or even content with his life.

Most days it didn’t bother him, but some days—like today—it left him irked and annoyed.

“Kitty is happy, so you must be doing something correctly.”

A faint flush went up Reg’s neck over his cravat. “I don’t know about that, but we are finally acclimating to being wed.” His grin grew wider. “Having a wife about has been both interesting and satisfying.”

“I would rather not hear the ways in which you find life satisfying with my little sister.” He followed the statement with a swallow of brandy that burned his throat on the way down. “Or anything having to do with your marriage, actually.”

Yes, he was thrilled that Kitty and her penchant for scandal was officially off his hands and Reg’s responsibility, he was also a tiny bit jealous she had found someone to spend her life with, someone her made her happy.

Reg snorted. “Truly, Armestead, marriage isn’t bad. Once you find the right woman that is.” He winked then took another sip of his brandy. “Are there any ladies indulging in the house party that you might find favorable toward a potential match?

“That is difficult to say.”

“No willful and wicked widows? No wallflowers desperate to find a man? No

scandalous hoydens looking to be tamed?”

“Honestly, I have no idea if those types of women are here. I didn’t pay much attention to the guest list, and I have no idea who Kitty invited.

” Yet Reg had a point. “While I’m the host of the house party, it’s my duty to make certain everyone is having a lovely time and being entertained.

” With a rue shrug, he took another sip of his brandy.

“I haven’t had the opportunity to sit down and converse with any one lady.

And as to whether they would be good marriage candidates? I would have no idea.”

“What are you not telling me?” The other man slightly narrowed his eyes. “You forget that I’ve known you for many years, Edward, and I know when things aren’t quite right.”

“Well, things aren’t quite wrong either.”

“You aren’t happy.” It wasn’t a question.

Was there harm in admitting to the truth?

“The house party started three days ago. As of yet, after talking and mingling, I haven’t connected with any of the ladies enough to even contemplate a courtship.

” He tossed back the remainder of his brandy then rested the crystal glass on his desk.

“Yes, I have been circulating... before you ask. However, afterward I’ve been hiding in the billiards room or my study. Sometimes I join hunting parties—”

“—so you don’t need to talk to the women,” Reg finished for him. He shook his head. “I never thought you for a coward, Armestead.”

“Yes, well, neither did I.” God, was he that pathetic to everyone? “I have always maintained that I didn’t wish to marry because women are fickle and nothing but trouble. Hell, Kitty served as testament to that fact.”

“I won’t argue with you, but sometimes when women are saucy and unpredictable, they make the best companions.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Edward held up a hand to halt more words from his best friend. “She led you on a merry chase—”

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Again, Reg interrupted him. “—still is, in fact. God, she’s amazing, and so clever.” His wide grin was back. “Why else do you think I couldn’t wait to marry her last year?”

He harrumphed. “Uh, because I found you both in a near compromising position?”

“Ha!” A bout of laughter escaped the other man.

“Sure, you found us in that old folly after we’d made love, but I had already proposed, had already planned to marry her.

” He wagged his eyebrows. “As I said before, when you find the right woman, everything changes, and conversely, everything falls into place.”

“Perhaps for you.”

Edward frowned as he looked at the man who’d been his friend the longest out of anyone.

Unlike Reg, he had never found a woman who’d held his interest, whom he might unbend enough to offer his heart to, for being a mistress was one thing, and love quite another.

Yes, he’d had ladies in his bed and on his arm over the years, but only once did he think he might offer for a woman.

Granted, he hadn’t loved the female in question.

His parents had told him she was a good match and joining the families would have created a powerful alliance within the beau monde .

Additionally, since his father had been the stiff upper lip type, and his mother hadn't talked about how a man needed to let down his guard and show his emotions at times, Edward had never learned how to live with his own emotions—good or bad.

Therefore, he'd shoved them deep down within himself to either be forgotten or to fester into greater problems.

Yet he'd been impressed upon numerous times by his father that he had a responsibility to the title that would eventually be his. He would be an earl someday, and that would require a wife to help quell rumors that he might be a negligent landowner or an absent lord.

So at a summertime ball, he'd danced with the chit—it had been her Come Out year—and afterward, he'd asked to pay his addresses to her.

The lady in question had been thrilled... for all of five minutes, for when she'd asked him if he was in love with her and he'd told her no, she turned all frost and icicles.

After that, she'd made it known quite clearly that she would only marry for love, so she'd given him the cut direct.

Just like that. It had been the scandal of that Season.

In some ways, he'd not recovered from it, for it had been quite embarrassing and a bit aggravating.

He'd been forced to not only leave the ball early, but also retreat to his country estate until the gossip had died down, and it had driven his emotions that much deeper.

He'd vowed to never again offer for a woman—in love or not—for they were nothing but trouble.

“Do stop, Armestead. One rejection from one lady doesn't mean there is something wrong with you.” Amusement wove through Reg's statement.

“Of course not, for there is something wrong with them .” Though he was cognizant enough to hear the ring of arrogance in that response. Edward heaved out a huff of frustration. “I am aware that over the years I have done my best at erecting walls around my person as well as my heart...”

Reg snorted. “That assumes you have a heart. Do you?”

Despite the subject matter, a grin tugged at the corners of Edward's lips. “It is difficult to say. I'm not certain I have ever been in love enough to even know.”

And at the age of eight and thirty, the likelihood of that happening was growing slim.

“Well, if you are desperate to marry, then do it. Perhaps love will come later.” Reg heaved himself out of his chair. He set his nearly empty brandy glass on the desk next to Edward's. “Keep all the mistresses you want, but marry to further the line.”

“That is rather a dim view of looking at it, don't you think?”

“I do.” With a sober expression, Reg peered down at him.

“But that is close to what you told me when I asked you last summer if I could pay my addresses to your sister.” He frowned as Edward gained his feet.

“You told me you were perfectly content with your mistresses and didn't need or want to marry. ”

“I remember.” Yet now that Kitty seemed wonderfully happy in her relationship, and she’d been averse to marriage—for different reasons than he—he thought perhaps he might like to meet someone at the house party who might consent to be his wife. “But your position and mine are clearly different.”

“Societal rankings, yes, but as men? No.”

“I... I have long grown bored of taking mistresses. If you must know, I haven’t had a woman in my bed for a few months.”

“What about a woman against the wall or on a chair?” Reg asked with a cheeky expression and laughter in his eyes.

Damnation, the man was annoying. “No.”

“A pity, that.” For long moments, the other man remained silent as if he were pondering closely over his next words.

“I am not saying you should marry. I’m not even saying go out right now and put a babe in some poor woman’s belly so you’ll have to marry her.

But I am saying that perhaps letting yourself be open to the chance that there are good women out there will give you a different perspective on a few things.

And it is nearly Christmastide. Romance is more easily stumbled over during this time of year than any other. ”

It wasn’t bad advice, but it just wasn’t for him. And Christmastide? Uck. It was a holiday he could largely do without. “I miss my parents and grandparents more during this time of year than any other, and with my sisters busy with their own families, I’d rather just be alone.”

“Like a coward or a crotchety old man?”

Now that wasn't funny. “You know, Reg, just because you are happily married doesn't mean you're suddenly more clever than me.”

“Pardon me, but I think it does. I've learned a lot since taking Kitty to wife, and she's done her fair share of talking to me about you.”

“Oh, God.” There was so much there to tell, more than Reg would have known since becoming Edward's best friend. “Colored through her life though. Take it all with a grain of salt.”

“Piffle.”

“What?”

“You hard me. Piffle. Do you want to know what I think?”

“Not especially, but I feel that you will tell me all the same.” Why was it a good idea to throw this house party again?

“You want marriage and the prospects of starting a family, but you are afraid.”

“I'm not.”

“No? Then perhaps you had your heart crushed at some point in your past by a woman and you've neglected to tell me about that trauma? There must be a reason you are afraid of love.”

“My pain, if there is such a thing that I'm struggling with, is my own.

” As far as he knew, he had never fallen in love.

Had he? Not even with Nancy before she’d ignored his very existence, though he was beginning to doubt that as the years drew on, for while he could easily dismiss her from his mind, evicting her memory from the chambers of his heart was more difficult.

But why?

“Ah.” Reg reached the door and turned back to regard Edward with a grin.

“Not to worry, my friend. We’ll find someone for you before Twelfth Night.

Never fear. And yes, I’ve been wonderfully happy, absurdly so, since marrying your sister.

” He winked. “I want that for you too, and I rather hope it’s with a woman who turns your world upside down, because those sorts of women are the best after all. ”

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Havelock House

Hanover Square, Mayfair

London, England

The desultory rain continued to speckle the window glass as Lady Nancy Wooster formerly Prentice, a daughter of an earl, and widow of Viscount Havelock stared out onto the streets of Mayfair with a frown. Was snow during Christmastide merely consigned to memories of childhood?

It now seemed it always rained during the autumn months and leading into winter.

Whatever happened to the snow that used to occur or even the colder temperatures?

Everyone always remembered the year of the Frost Fair as well as the horrid time two years ago when there wasn't a summer due to terrible clouds, but still.

She would have enjoyed seeing a few lacy snowflakes outside instead of the ever-present rain.

Perhaps she was suffering from ennui. She'd lost her husband two and a half years ago, and though their union had had its problems, not having that companionship—broken as it had been—had left an emptiness in her life.

Yes, she had a twelve-year-old son that she adored to pieces and who was the heir to the Havelock viscounty, but he'd elected to stay at school with his friends for the

holiday, so that left her alone.

And that was entirely his prerogative. He wanted to be there and had been a bit lost since his father died.

It was understandable that he would wish to spend that time with his friends and those with whom he felt the closest.

There would be other Christmastides to be with him, when he hopefully would no longer blame her for the awkwardness between her and his father.

That hurt the most, but she refused to tell him the truth so early in his development, refused to put shadows over his memories of his father.

The soft clearing of a masculine throat at the drawing room door wrenched her from the maudlin thoughts. She turned about to glance at the aging butler—Mr. Farnsworth. He'd been in her husband's employ since before they'd married, and she hadn't the heart to ask him to retire for his own health.

"What is it?" Not that she minded the interruption, but she... minded it if that made sense. "Is all well?"

"As far as I know, it is, my lady." He offered a silver salver. "The post has arrived."

"Thank you." At least there was that distraction. After removing a small handful of envelopes from the tray, the butler departed, and she settled herself on her favorite low sofa near the fireplace where cheerful flames danced behind the ornamental grate.

There were many invitations for the Christmastide season—routs, dinner parties, a ball.

It seemed there was a bit of the Season still left even this late in the year.

None of them interested her, for though she'd ordered a few pretty gowns for the holiday, now that it was here, she wasn't all that motivated to attend.

With a sigh, Nancy set them aside to shuffle through the remainder. There were a few letters from friends who had already settled into their country estates, and one of them was in sunny Rome for the winter.

How lovely would that be? She had never been anywhere outside of England.

Even though her husband had promised her, literally, that he would show her the world, the farthest from London she'd been on holiday had been to Brighton, and beyond that, to Kent where his country estate was located.

In fact, that was where his mother and two sisters lived year-round, and though Nancy had received an invitation for her to stay with them for the Christmastide season, that didn't appeal to her either.

The sisters were both married with families of their own, and her former mother-in-law—the dowager viscountess— was a frail woman whose regard favored her daughters and not much of Nancy.

They were lovely people, of course, and they reminded her a bit of her departed husband, but they weren't the type of people she wanted to spend cozy winter days with, no matter how much those nieces made her smile.

On the other side of that coin was heartbreak, and she just didn't think herself strong enough to survive that.

Then her breath caught as she cracked the seal of a letter and began to read the first

few lines.

This letter was from Lady Katherine Healy, formerly Gibson, youngest sister to the current Earl of Armestead, and it contained an invitation to a house party at Armestead Hall, which was north of Watford in Hertfordshire.

Except the earl was the very man she'd refused a betrothal to thirteen years ago.

Goodness, I haven't thought about Edward in a spell.

Apparently, his sister Kitty wished for her to spend the Christmastide holidays with them and a bunch of friends and acquaintances so she wouldn't feel so alone, and more to the point, since the letter was a few days old, the house party had begun today.

She reread the letter once more before her mind wandered.

Over the years, Nancy had done outings with Kitty and they had visited each other when Edward was out of pocket; she didn't even know if he knew they were friends.

Not close enough to share intimate details of their lives, of course, but it was lovely to have someone to share tea with and the occasional juicy bits of gossip.

To be honest, she hadn't seen Kitty since the woman had returned to London from her six-month wedding trip to the wealthy gentleman Mr. Healy.

After that, they'd shared tea at Kitty's new townhouse and there had been copious amounts of gossip and talking, but none of it centered around Edward. In fact, he'd barely been mentioned.

Perhaps that was as it should be, but if Nancy attended the house party in the country,

she would have to see Edward again.

Good heavens, is that something she wanted?

What was he like now? Had he ever married? Did he have children?

It had been her Come Out year when she'd met Edward as a young woman of eighteen.

Everything had been exciting and new during that time, and there had been no shortage of men paying court to her, for as an earl's daughter, not only did she command a large dowry, but she wasn't horrid looking, and all those years ago, willowy blondes had been the sought after "look" of the Season.

She'd met Armestead at her Come Out ball.

Of course, he hadn't yet been the earl at the time and held one of his father's courtesy titles, but she'd thought him handsome and dashing, but he was also arrogant and thought himself better than others, called his best friend the "earl's fool," and generally portrayed himself as aloof.

She didn't like that, and in those idealistic years when she'd finally been free of the schoolroom and tutors and being "finished," she erroneously thought to marry for love or not at all.

And she'd certainly not loved Edward despite the attention he'd lavished upon her.

Compounding the issue had been the fact that her parents had married for love and they were happy. They were the ones who'd unofficially arranged the match between Armestead and herself; their first meeting was at her Come Out ball, and everyone within the ton knew the reason why.

Gossip made society go 'round, after all.

That night, she had danced two sets with him, one of them a waltz, and she had been struck by his looks as well as his potential.

He'd said all the right things, had been everything polite and even charming despite the rumors.

They had been the envy of many people that night, and perhaps that notice had gone to her head...

or perhaps she'd been afraid of it. Even now, so many years later, it was difficult to tell.

When Edward had taken her outside her father's manor house in the Surrey countryside to look at the stars and moon on that summer night, he'd stolen a kiss—her first kiss.

Oh, it had been magical indeed, but she'd always been a bit stubborn, and one of her downfalls was considering gossip as fact.

It didn't matter that there had been a connection on that dance floor or that something had been exchanged between them in that kiss, he was arrogant, thought she would fall at his feet in gratitude for taking her out as an innocent, untried girl.

Hadn't he almost expected her to accept his proposal?

Hadn't he said to his friends that he would be her best offer that Season?

Burning with self-righteous, youthful anger as well as humiliation, Nancy had decided right then on that terrace that the heir to the Armestead title and properties

probably didn't know how to give love except to himself, and if he ever fell for her, he would never love only her, for he was quite popular among society ladies—of good standing and not.

As soon as he asked that all-important question, she promptly turned him down despite the fact that her parents had arranged everything for her.

She'd left him there outside and returned to the ballroom feeling oddly triumphant and a touch regretful.

When he'd come back in, she gave him the cut direct and absolutely refused to have anything else to do with him.

Much to her parents' dismay and the shock of her friends.

Not that it mattered.

Six months later, she was married to the Viscount of Havelock after a whirlwind courtship.

He wasn't the earl her parents had wanted, but he did have a title, and more importantly, he had declared his undying affection and love to her.

At the time, Nancy had been ecstatic with how things had turned out.

Life had never been so rosy or lovely, but it was only a couple of years later, when their first born had his first birthday that she discovered Havelock never loved her at all, that he was in love with someone else and always had been, but because he was a newly minted viscount, he had to make the match with her for legitimacy and to continue his line.

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It had been devastating. Everything she'd worked toward, hoped for, believed in had come crashing down around her feet; nothing she did for her husband over the years could sway that affection from his mistress. Not even when they'd lost their other two children.

Had his mother and sisters known? How could they not? Apparently it had been a love match from when he was a green youth, and though she was a member of the ton, she wasn't part of the beau monde and therefore not considered good enough stock to marry.

By the time her husband had perished in a hunting accident at his country estate while visiting his family—she'd stayed in London that summer with their son—there had been nothing left of their union to try and save.

She'd felt sadness, of course, because he'd been an integral part of her life and had given her three beautiful children, but since there had been no love on his part, and hers for him had dried up early on, it was as if she'd said goodbye to an acquaintance.

The year of mourning had been unfortunate but needed if she were to reset her life.

To add insult to injury, his mistress had called at the townhouse a few days before Nancy was due to travel to the country estate to attend the graveside service. The mistress had offered flowers and condolences, and she'd had the gall to ask if she could pay her respects to him as well.

Granted, the other woman was completely different in the way of looks than Nancy was, and to a point she could see why her husband had been taken with her, but that

visit had been outside of enough.

Nancy had been livid at the effrontery and had sent her on her way.

She didn't care that they'd loved each other—Havelock had been married to her , had promised his love and attention to her .

In the end, he'd lied, and her heart had been broken. That organ now lay well-guarded behind a hedge of thorns, for she didn't think she could ever trust another man so readily.

What a fool I've been.

The snap and crackle of the fire's flames brought her out of her thoughts. Nancy sighed and looked back at Kitty's letter. Words jumped out at her on the page.

"...I realize we haven't made inroads into forming a close friendship, and for that I am quite sad, for I have always found you a lovely person..."

Nancy frowned and turned the page, for the writing had been crossed.

"...come to Armestead Hall and spend the Christmastide holidays with me. We can draw close to each other. I already have three sisters, but what I need is a best friend..."

Because Nancy didn't trust easily, she wondered at Kitty's intentions.

They were of an age—she had turned one and thirty two months earlier—and though she'd heard of Kitty's exploits through the gossip mill, she'd always been rather proud of the young woman's adherence to chasing the life she wanted , not the one expected of her as an earl's daughter.

Is such a thing too late for me?

“...I don’t exactly know what happened between you and my brother years ago—I was much too young to even understand, and Mama never told me anything—but if you can bring yourself to ignore Edward’s bluster and blather as I have, I would really like to have you come and spend time...”

So Edward hadn’t told his siblings about their failed engagement before it had ever begun. That was an interesting tidbit. Did that mean she was actively considering going to Armestead Hall?

Once more, she squinted at the letter as she tried her best to puzzle out the crossed handwriting.

“... and it might be fun to watch Edward stumble around in the quest to find a wife. He’s gotten to the age where he’ll need to think of furthering his line and producing an heir.

Quite frankly, I believe he’s not the boorish lout he wishes others around him to see.

After he changed his mind regarding Reginald marrying me, he’s never referred to him as a fool, so I have fond hopes that he might be changing beneath that hardened exterior... ”

Now that was interesting indeed. It had certainly been one of the reasons Nancy herself hadn’t been too fond of the man, but could she put her—their—past aside enough to attend a house party he was hosting?

For long moments, she stared into the fire’s flames, as if they would give her the answers she sought.

In the end, it was the loneliness that made the decision for her.

She hadn't the heart to entertain since she'd come out of mourning, and at the back of her mind, she feared people would talk about her, remember the gossip that her husband hadn't loved her at all, that he'd continually carried a torch for his mistress throughout the course of the marriage.

Was she strong enough to bear the brunt of such humiliation?

"... also, there is a secret I want to share with Edward and everyone possibly around Christmas itself, but am a bit terrified about it, and since you are the strongest woman I know, could you please see it in your heart to attend and be at my side when I make this announcement?"

Oh, dear. Nancy could only speculate about what the secret was Kitty wished to share, but if her guess was true, she well remembered what such a thing had felt like. That as well as the unexpected compliment solidified her decision.

She scanned the remainder of the letter then carefully folded it and tucked it back into the envelope.

The rest of the invitations she tossed into the fireplace.

Well, if she could manage to avoid the earl for the bulk of the house party, that would be for the best, but she wouldn't mind the company or mingling with others.

Traditionally, the Christmastide season had been one of her favorite holidays of the year, but she hadn't felt like celebrating for more years than she could count.

It was time to usher in a change. Not perhaps for another romance but perhaps to find her footing in society and being with people again. If her son could socialize and put

the past behind him, then so could she.

With that resolve in mind, Nancy crossed the room and yanked on the gold brocade bell pull. When Farnsworth shuffled into the room, she smiled. “I have decided to attend a Christmastide house party in Hertfordshire. I’ll need to have this house put on notice that I won’t be here for the holidays.”

“Very good, my lady. When do you expect to leave?”

“I would say day after tomorrow. I’m already late to the party as it is, so another couple of days won’t matter.” And best of all? Since it was just herself going, if she became too bored or couldn’t stomach being in the earl’s company, she could always come back to London.

“I will see to it that the traveling coach is ready and there is sufficient horseflesh to pull it,” Farnsworth said with a nod. “I hope the weather clears for your travels.”

“As do I. While I do enjoy watching the snow fall, I won’t enjoy being stranded in it should the coach find itself stuck.

” Despite the dangers of wintertime travel, she felt more like herself than she had in far too long.

How odd that the prospect of a house party would have cheered her.

As she reminded herself that she wasn’t yet old and worthy of being a widow put on a shelf, Nancy moved past him into the corridor with the letter still in her hand.

“No time like the present to start the packing, hmm?”

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Armestead Hall

North of Watford

Hertfordshire, England

Edward watched the front drive from where he stood at the floor-to-ceiling window in the portrait gallery.

Many of the guests had broken into smaller groups—some to make paper decorations for the hall, some to compile a list of parlor games they wished to play each night, and some to do nothing more than read in the library.

And one group had decided to make certain everyone knew how to perform the current popular dance steps and were conducting lessons in the ballroom.

He, however, had wanted to do none of that.

Instead, he'd needed a break from his sisters' constant chatter or the bragging from the men, so he'd retreated to the portrait gallery. It was antiquated and old-fashioned, which meant none of the guests naturally wished to come here... unless they wanted privacy for scandalous endeavors.

That had a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

He wanted the privacy, but as of yet, he hadn't found a woman to indulge in scandal with; perhaps he wouldn't during the house party, and that was fine with him too.

As he watched the children cavort on the lawn and play in the several inches of fresh snow on the lawn with their governesses standing by, a traveling coach made its ponderous way up the lane and then turned onto the half-moon drive.

Eventually, the dull black vehicle stopped at the top of the curve.

Once the driver hopped down, he opened the door to the coach and put down the steps.

Seconds later, he assisted a woman out of the vehicle, but she wore a hooded cloak, so she wasn't immediately identified.

Another woman Edward assumed was a maid or a companion exited next.

They stood there with a breeze rippling the folds of skirting and cloaks while talking to the driver, who gestured toward the house, no doubt trying to convince them to go inside.

Who the devil was that? He'd thought all the invited guests had already arrived days ago. Despite himself, he was curious, and he continued to watch the scene below until the women moved out of his sightline.

Tea wasn't far off, so perhaps he could keep himself busy until then, or perhaps he'd go bedevil his sisters.

It was rare that they were together at the same time.

Of course, he could convince Reggie to leave his wife's side and go riding with him through the snow-covered fields.

After all, it was an exercise they used to enjoy together.

The decision was removed from his grasp when Burson found him in the portrait gallery.

“There has been a late arrival for the house party, Your Lordship,” the butler said without his usual preamble. “I thought you should be aware.”

Edward nodded. “Who is it? I saw the traveling coach arrive.”

“Apparently, the roads are quite hazardous with snow, and it took more time than the traveler anticipated.”

“I can believe that, but who is the late arrival?”

“The Viscountess of Havelock. She is a friend of Lady Katherine’s and was invited by her. I informed your sister of her arrival, but she referred me to you as she is busy with her sisters.”

Though he didn’t recognize the title, Edward nodded. “Very well. Where is she?”

“The lady is currently in the entryway, trying to explain to the footmen why she is late and which pieces of luggage are more fragile than the others. I had one of the footmen take some of her luggage as well as her maid up to the guest room she’ll share with Miss Thompson.”

“I see.” Miss Thompson was a younger lady who had tried to gain his attention, for it was no secret she wished to marry a title and wanted an engagement by the year’s end. “Then I shall go down directly.”

“Very good, Your Lordship.” Then the butler departed.

Edward massaged his temples, for yet another megrim was brewing. He might be an

earl, but he didn't enjoy entertaining or socializing, especially when much of it was due to being housebound with all these guests.

By the time he reached the entry hall, he wasn't in a mood to do the pretty with yet another person, but when his gaze connected with the viscountess' as she turned to address him, every muscle in his body froze, for he recognized her.

Why the devil hadn't the butler used her birth title—Lady Nancy?

She stood at an average height with her blonde hair upswept into a messy chignon.

A dress of gray wool paired with an ivory shawl did nothing to showcase her body with curves in all the right places.

She'd just taken off her cloak, for she still held it in her hands.

When last he'd seen her, she had been a willowy slim young girl, but obviously the years had been kind to her; perhaps she was a mother.

Regardless, the change in appearance made her all the more attractive.

He closed his mouth with an audible snap of his teeth.

It wouldn't do to stare at her as if he were a green youth.

"Lord Armestead." Her hazel eyes widened as she beheld him, raked her gaze up and down his figure. "I... I'd hoped Kitty would be the one to greet me."

"She is otherwise engaged at the moment." Good God, what is she doing here?

The woman who'd turned him down thirteen years ago, the woman he suspected had

broken his heart even before he'd known he might have been in love with her?

For that matter, why didn't he realize that she was friends with his youngest sister?

He'd never told Kitty of his rejection, so how did she know?

"Lady Nancy." He stared, couldn't help it, for he hadn't seen her in years, but she had obviously married if she was a viscountess.

"Uh, welcome. I never thought I would see you again after... er, after our last meeting." Well aware the butler looked on with curiosity, heat went up the back of his neck.

The shock on her face mirrored the same uneasiness currently coursing through his veins. "That was another lifetime ago."

Burson softly cleared his throat. "Might I take your cloak, my lady?"

"Uh..." The viscountess looked about the entryway as if monsters would seep out of the woodwork and attack her. "No. Excuse me." Then she wrenched open the front door and fled outside.

Edward blinked. He glanced at the butler. "That was rather unexpected."

"Indeed, Your Lordship." Burson frowned. "Shall I continue to have her luggage brought upstairs? I sent her maid to the servants' hall to settle in."

"Yes, continue. I'll go after the lady and see if can't bring her to calm.

" Though that would be a huge feat, since she no doubt still despised him.

While Burson's expression said that might be more trouble than it was worth, Edward dashed outside, following the viscountess down the handful of steps to the curved drive below.

Snow came down with lazy elegance, drifting through the dull gray skies with big, lacy flakes, but while it was an annoyance to be sure, his attention was focused on the woman donning her black cloak who gazed forlornly after the traveling coach that rumbled off the drive and onto the lane that would lead to the carriage house.

"I wanted to go home." There was such disappointment in her voice that it tugged at his chest. "I suddenly changed my mind; coming here was a mistake."

How she knew he'd come after her, he would never know.

Perhaps she heard the crunch of the snow beneath his bootheels, or perhaps she felt his presence behind her, but Edward couldn't help but frown.

"Is it the prospect of attending a house party you don't like or is it the advancing Christmastide season?"

"When she didn't answer and the snow continued to fall around them, he huffed, and the air clouded in front of him.

"Or perhaps it's my presence you object to?"

They would have things out between them, or he would lock himself in his rooms, for he couldn't survive such a strain over the next couple of weeks, and besides, this conversation was a long time coming.

With a sigh, she turned to face him. The bottom two inches of her dress were wet from the snow, and he hoped she wore half-boots beneath that fabric instead of

slippers. “Everything you mentioned?”

He shrugged. “You tell me, Lady Nancy.” Not wanting to seem weak before her, Edward crossed his arms at his chest. “Why the devil would you even wish to be here? Surely you would have known who the host of the event was.” Was he still a touch irritated after all this time that she’d refused his suit?

Of course. Should he have grown as a person and forgotten that slight?

Again, yes, but seeing her again, taking him by surprise had shocked the hell out of him, and the irrational part of his brain urged him to make a cake of himself again.

I can’t do that.

“Kitty invited me, and for the love of heaven, don’t call me Lady Nancy or even Lady Havelock. You and I have history between us, and quite frankly, I have grown tired of formality.”

That only made her more mysterious. “What does your husband have to say about inviting a veritable stranger—and a man at that—to call you by your Christian name?”

“Ha.” When she blew out a breath, the air clouded briefly about her head. “I have been a widow for two and a half years, and even if I hadn’t been, I long ago ceased caring what my husband thought.”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. There was much to assume in that statement, so he started with the obvious. “You are a widow.” It bore repeating and wasn’t a question.

“Yes. I also have a twelve-year-old son.”

“Ah.” He relaxed his arms, and not knowing what to do with his hands, he clasped them behind his back. “Did you bring him? My sisters have several children between them, and he would be in good company.”

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“Unfortunately, he has chosen to remain at school with his friends for the holiday season.” Sadness briefly crossed her face as she pulled her cloak more tightly around her.

“I was perfectly content to stay in London by myself... until I received a letter from Kitty a couple of days ago and thought it might be lovely to socialize...”

“Except then the reality of the matter pressed in upon you and none of it appealed.” How odd they had that in common.

“Yes.” She nodded. “Where I’ll be the first to admit I am lonely during this time of year and without my son, I’m not certain the answer is to join a house party already in progress.”

“I feel much the same, except I am, unfortunately, the host and therefore must interact to a point.” From his vantage point, he could still see his nieces and nephews chasing each other through the snow.

At least the children enjoyed the weather while he certainly did not.

“I won’t attempt to try and sway your mind.

You can leave if you wish, but I’ll wager traveling here was a wretched trial due to the road conditions and snow. ”

“To be honest, I thought we would be stranded on the road if not the lane leading here more than once.” She glanced past him to the facade of the manor. “Then you believe

I should stay here for the duration?”

“At least until the roads clear. Then you can decide.” Had he just committed himself to more heartache? Yes, she’d turned him down thirteen years ago, and yes, she’d married someone else, but that didn’t mean he had a renewed interest in her, did it? Merely for familiarity’s sake?

“And in the meantime?” She met his gaze, and her eyes were now more green than brown. Was she laboring beneath high emotion?

“Try to enjoy yourself?” When she didn’t respond, he frowned. “If you feel you can’t do that because I am in residence, then set yourself at ease. I will avoid your company as best I can.” After all, he would be a nodcock to wish to pursue her again even if she was available.

A frown pulled at the corners of her mouth. “You needn’t do that. In fact, being under the same roof as you is not what is making me uncomfortable.”

“Then what is?”

“Life?” She shrugged and took a few steps along the drive.

“Trying to discover where I fit into this new existence now?” When she snuggled into the folds of the cloak, he opened his mouth to invite her back inside, but tamped on the urge.

“When I came out of mourning, I assumed that I would become a new woman, ready to reenter society and have some semblance of an existence, but instead, it was almost as if I couldn’t make myself leave the house. ”

“Why?” Despite himself, he was curious about her, and how she’d come to this pass.

When last he'd known her, she had been an outgoing, vivacious young woman with the world seemingly at her feet. "Are you frightened, miss your husband too much?"

"Frightened? That is difficult to say. Perhaps I am of many things." Shadows clouded her eyes as she stared at him. "Yet here I am, baring the dark secrets of my soul to a man I used to know once upon a time."

"Well, isn't that better than doing so to a stranger?" His attempt at a joke fell flat, and he heaved out a sigh. "At least you know I'll have discretion."

"You probably will. Gossip never seems to touch your name."

There was that.

"I suppose I've been desperate to talk to someone, and I couldn't bear to mention my troubles to Kitty, when she was just beginning her romance.

" She waved a hand as if to dismiss everything.

"I often wonder if I will ever remarry. Since I am only one and thirty, I suppose people will say I still have life ahead of me and that I could start again."

"But you don't want that." Again, it wasn't a question. Why the devil were they standing out here talking when he was frozen to the bone?

"I don't know." She blew out a breath.

"You loved Havelock very much, then?"

"Love?" Her bark of laughter held a bitter edge. "I rather think I gave up on love long ago, for my husband admitted to me when our son was quite young that he'd never

truly loved me at all, that his affections lay with his mistress and always would.”

Well, damn.

“I am sorry to hear that. Any man who does that to his wife is beyond the pale.”

“And like a ninny, I believed him, for my head had been turned with his pretty, lying words of how much he loved me .”

“Ah.” With an amazing amount of willpower, he kept his own counsel on the fact that she’d rejected him but then went on to marry a man who’d never loved her at all. But then, he—Edward—hadn’t been in love with her all those years ago.

Had he?

As he’d admitted to himself while talking to Reg a few days ago, there had been no way to tell, but his heart had been bruised, certainly shattered.

For years following that event, he assumed it was because he’d been wildly embarrassed as his name had been thrown into the gossip mill, but as time had continuously marched onward, and he’d had an uncanny ability to connect with a woman beyond the capacity of mistress, he rather suspected he’d cared more for Lady Nancy than he wished to own up to at the time.

Which left him a tad bit terrified himself.

“Also, I am frightened by what I might become if I don’t remarry,” she continued in a desperate whisper as tears welled in her eyes. “What if the second time is as empty and fraught with lies as the first was? Because I can’t, apparently, discern the truth from the dissembling.”

He could no longer stand there as if he were immune to her suffering or keep her out in the cold even if she didn't seem willing to move.

On his honor as a gentleman, he needed to take care of her.

For that tenuous thread they might have once had for a night in a ballroom so long ago.

"The only thing I can say is that there are no guarantees in this life, and that sometimes, if we want something, we must go forward in faith and hope for the best."

"Meaning I should just accept whatever is thrown my way lest I spend the remainder of my life alone?"

When a tear fell to her cheek, his chest tightened.

"No, of course not." Because he might be the nodcock he feared, Edward closed the distance between them and gently gathered her in his arms. For several moments, she resisted, her whole body tensed for flight, but then she uttered a tiny sigh and relaxed into him with her forearms caught between them, resting on his chest. "You are a widow within the beau monde, and that gives you so much freedom over unmarried innocents. There are many avenues open for you." He hadn't anticipated how utterly lovely she would feel in his arms or how absurdly the warmth of her called out to him.

But it was the faint scent of lavender that wafted to his nose that had him holding her a smidgeon tighter.

"Hell, if you decided to be wicked and wild, no one would bat an eyelash, because that is your right."

She uttered an unladylike snort. “I have never been wicked a day in my life.”

“Now that is perhaps the most horrible statement of all,” he said in a whisper and caught himself before he pressed a kiss into her hair. “Are you feeling better after unburdening yourself?”

“Honestly?” Nancy drew back so she could peer up into his face. “I am.”

“Do you wish to remain here for the duration?”

Questions appeared in her eyes, but at least the tears were gone for the moment. “I can’t think of a valid reason why I shouldn’t.” Then a shiver racked her body, and she edged out of his arms. “I apologize for talking so intimately to you.”

“There is no reason for apologies or embarrassment.” When he’d first seen her, he wanted to question her as to why she’d refused him, but now it didn’t matter.

She was simply her just as he was always him.

“Allow me to escort you back into the house. We’ll have tea in the drawing room with my sisters and anyone else who wishes to join, and you can work at putting warmth back into your extremities. ”

For long moments, she studied him before finally nodding. “Thank you, Armestead. I appreciate the latitude.”

“As you said, we are past formalities. Call me Edward if you wish to, but the title is fine as well.” Then he offered her his arm crooked at the elbow.

“Honestly, I shall plant myself by the fireplace and drape an arm casually on the mantle but in reality, I’ll be sucking up the fire’s heat without seeming desperate. ”

When they shared a laugh, some of the walls and thorns around his heart shook and shuddered as if that organ were coming awake after a very long sleep.

“I can’t blame you, and a cup of tea will be most welcome.”

It was a start, but to what he couldn’t venture to say. He only knew he felt slightly different than he had this morning.

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Nancy woke at her customary time, even though she'd stayed up a bit late the night before.

Once she'd finally met up with Kitty, that woman introduced her to several other women at the house party, and they'd all had a cozy chat in the drawing room until yawns became more popular than talking.

All Kitty's sisters were lovely, as were those women's spouses, and there were an impressive number of unattached but hopeful women as guests too.

Rumor throughout the house party was that the earl was looking for a bride, and it must have been the truth, for her roommate, Miss Thompson, had her sights set on landing him. She'd told Nancy so as they'd turned in last night.

She'd kept her own counsel on that; clearly if the earl had remained a bachelor over the years, he certainly didn't want to marry, at least not for himself, and wedding merely for the sake of a title seemed a disingenuous thing to do.

Not that she was an expert at marriage since hers had been little better than a sham.

With that less than inspiring thought, Nancy left her bed and then did the necessary behind the painted silk privacy screen.

Since she didn't want to summon her maid and risk waking her roommate, she donned a petticoat as well as a lawn dress in navy.

It was plain and had next to no adornment, but it was early yet in the day and there

was no need for fancy.

If luck was with her, she could enjoy a cup of tea as well as breakfast by herself and then sneak into the earl's library to immerse herself into a delicious book or two in the hopes that the house party would go on without her... and avoid the earl.

After that horrible and surprising string of admissions she'd shared with Edward, the embarrassment had set in. The last thing she wanted to do was see him in any sort of capacity, for she couldn't imagine what he thought of her.

It took very little time following putting on her half-boots and shawl to make her way through the still-quiet corridors and find the breakfast parlor on the second level at the opposite end of the house from the formal dining room.

Because it was half past seven in the morning—and in many country houses still too early for breakfast hours—she was, indeed, the only one in the room, but as soon as she entered, a footman appeared and went directly to the sideboard to fill her a plate.

With a tiny sigh of contentment, Nancy sipped her tea, and then nodded her thanks when the footman put a plate before her.

As she picked and ate from the golden fluffy scrambled eggs, hamsteak, and toast triangles with marmalade, she gazed out the window that looked out onto the back lawn of the estate.

The grounds were covered by snow, and that same precipitation drifted lazily down from gray, overcast skies.

Not that she minded, for it made everything seem that much cozier.

“Oh. I didn't think anyone would rise as early as I do, but I'll leave you to your

privacy.”

At the sound of the earl’s voice, Nancy’s head came up.

Dear heavens, had his presence always filled a room?

Her hand froze with the teacup midway to her lips.

“Uh... I have always woken with the dawn; I don’t know any other way of being.

” She shrugged. “That’s a good indication that I’m no longer a society lady. ” Then she took a sip of tea.

“Bah.” He waved away the comment. “It only means you have certain sleep habits, as do I, and that you probably dislike wasting the day by sleeping until noon.” After greeting the footman, he dropped himself onto a chair near her location on a sofa.

Soon, the robust scent of coffee filled the air as the footman brought over a cup of the fragrant brew. “Thank you, Daniel.”

Though she’d never liked the taste of coffee—it was entirely too bitter for her liking—Nancy admitted to herself that she might change her mind, for the smell was intoxicating. While he indulged in the first few sips of the beverage, she took the opportunity to study him.

He’d aged a bit in the intervening thirteen years.

Faint lines framed his mouth and the corners of his eyes.

Strands of silver glinted in his hair at the temples, and there were shadows in his dark brown eyes that spoke of secrets and disappointments that tugged at her curiosity.

She had no idea how old he was, perhaps nearing forty, but he was nearly as fit as he'd been when she'd last seen him, and with his expertly tailored jacket, waistcoat, and breeches, he was quite an attractive man.

“Do I have something on my face?”

She frowned. “Not that I’m aware. Why?”

“You are staring at me quite intently.”

“Oh, I apologize. Just thought I saw vestiges of the man you’d been...

before.” That was a silly explanation and betrayed more of an interest in him than she perhaps had.

Not knowing what else to say, Nancy blew out a breath.

“No matter how you feel about hosting a house party, I appreciate that your staff is serving breakfast for those of us who rise early. If I had to wait for two hours or so until the regular time, I would go mad.”

One corner of his mouth quirked but he didn’t fully grin. “So then, you aren’t the type of woman who enjoys a mug of drinking chocolate while writing letters as you’re waiting for breakfast?”

“I used to be when I was first married, and especially during the time I was increasing, but I thought it was wasting a portion of the day waiting for that day to officially start.” There were many times that she felt her words didn’t make sense to other people.

“Instead, I answer correspondence in the afternoon a couple of days a week.” She

poked at the food on her plate with her fork.

“And with Andrew away at school now, my days feel long and empty.”

Why couldn't she stop sharing private things about her life with him? Yet there was something about this man that invited confidences. Again, why? She'd never felt that about him before.

He nodded and refrained from commenting while the footman brought him a plate loaded with the same sorts of foods she had. “I have found over the years that responding to correspondence brings a sense of calm at times simply due to it being a benign activity.”

“I suppose.”

They ate in silence, and oddly enough, it wasn't fraught with nerves or uncomfortable feelings. It was as if they'd known each other for ages, instead of only having met one night thirteen years ago.

“How have you been keeping yourself?” she asked him as she pushed a bit of scrambled egg about her plate. “Have you not married?” Perhaps the rumors were wrong.

One of his blond eyebrows rose in surprise. “I assumed you listened to society gossip.”

“I haven't in some time, for I know how it is to be at the center of rumors, and then after a while, I didn't care.

” She took a tiny bite from one of her toast triangles.

“For a long time, I had been consumed by grief and anger, so I ignored what was happening around me in London, so please indulge me. What has been going on in your life? According to my roommate, you hope to find a bride within the guests here at your house party.”

Good heavens, Nancy, stop talking!

A faint trace of a flush rose up his neck. “While it is true I have been putting out hints that I might like to marry, I rather doubt I’ll find the woman I wish to spend a lifetime with here at this house party.”

“How can you know that? Christmastide hasn’t yet arrived, and your party has only gotten started.

” Then she laid her fork on her plate of half-eaten food.

“Not to put to fine a point on things, but you don’t have a paunch, you have all your hair, your breath doesn’t smell like garlic, and you don’t have the pox.

Any woman would choose you above all others if you were to ask.

” In fact, she remembered when she’d been in his arms yesterday as he’d comforted her, that his shaving soap or cologne had smelled like evergreens and wind-driven snow with just a veriest hint of peppermint.

It had been like winter personified.

“Should I be flattered that you have categorized my form in such a way?” His lips twitched, but a grin still didn’t materialize. “Not that I mind your assessment.”

Heat slapped at her cheeks. “I merely made an observation.” When the footman took

away her plate, she nodded her thanks. “However, here is another observation—I don’t see Miss Thompson as the next Lady Armestead.”

He chuckled, then, and when a grin curved his sensuous lips, her gaze dropped to his mouth, and all she could remember was that night when he’d kissed her right before asking for her hand. “Neither do I. She is far younger than me, and I’ll wager she’s a title chaser. Rather desperate at it.”

At least there was that. “Is there someone else here you might have romantic tendencies toward? I only ask because you must have filled your years with something.”

“Not you, too?” He huffed out a breath, finished the last bite of his toast, and then frowned. “You are as bad as Reggie.”

Oh, dear, she couldn’t remember who that was, for once they’d parted, she’d put everything about him from her mind. “I imagine the people in your circle are concerned about your well-being and your future.”

“Perhaps you are correct. My mother would have been so disappointed in my failure to marry and fill my nursery.” He then drained his cup, but the footman was there to promptly refill it and take away the plate.

“The fact of the matter is that I haven’t had the enthusiasm enough to put myself out into society in order to scrutinize the offerings. ”

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“Why? I should think you are popular with any lady, and I rather doubt you have practiced abstinence over the course of your adult life.” Why couldn’t she stop her penchant for plain speaking?

Where was this wildness coming from? That wasn’t the woman she’d been since marrying her husband, but then, perhaps now that she was free and out of mourning, she was merely remembering the woman she was meant to be all along.

It was quite confusing as well as frustrating.

“I, uh...” Edward tugged at the knot of his cravat.

“I have had my fair share of mistresses, this is true.” Seconds later, he lowered his voice.

“I have also been involved heavily in the House of Lords as well as other causes. Then there is my club.” He shrugged.

“I suppose when I go back and look at it, the years were filled with unfulfilling things, but this isn’t the proper conversation for a genteel lady. ”

“They weren’t unfulfilling if you gained a lesson from them. However, I have been that for far too long, and what did it gain me? A husband in love with his mistress for years, a son who hides his emotions by staying at school with his fellows, and two daughters I have had to bury and mourn.”

Was nothing sacred? Why couldn’t she keep aspects of her life private from this

man?

The earl's eyes widened. "I..." For the space of a few heartbeats, he took refuge in drinking his second cup of coffee. "I'm so sorry; I had no idea of the hardships you've suffered. Kitty didn't tell me."

"She didn't know." Feeling suddenly restless, Nancy left the sofa and drifted to the window.

"We are not close friends, but we do enjoy a companionship, and at times, meeting her and having outings with your sister have been all that has kept me uplifted over the past two years. I think that is why she invited me here. She knows I've been lonely and have hidden myself away from society for far too long. "

"I understand that concern. Her husband—my best friend—has taken me to task for nearly the same thing."

How interesting. Why would he wish to hide from society, other than being forced into a marriage? Then an unladylike snort escaped her. "Fear not. I never told her what occurred between the two of us either. She only knows that we met once but didn't suit."

"Then that leads us naturally into the next subject." His voice sounded from directly behind her, and she startled, for she hadn't been aware he'd followed her.

"Why did you decide to give me the cut direct all those years ago after refusing my suit? It wasn't as if such a thing didn't happen all the time.

You had a choice in whether you wished to marry a man or not, despite what your parents wanted. "

Well, drat. How long have I feared this day would come?

“I...” A sigh escaped her, and she rested a palm against the window glass.

Outside, on the snow-covered lawn, a couple of deer crept out from the wooded area to go exploring, no doubt to find food.

“I didn’t like how arrogant you were, how you treated your friends, or that you assumed I would fall at your feet in gratitude that you’d asked me to marry you. ”

Where she assumed he would show annoyance, he merely nodded, and she watched his reflection in the window glass.

“I can certainly understand how I came off as that sort of man, but you must understand, I was a nodcock then. At five and twenty, I was arrogant. I thought that being the heir to an earldom made me better than others, that I could have any woman I wanted.”

“That wasn’t the case?”

“Far from it. In fact, that thinking only led to shallow, empty interactions with nearly everyone I’d ever known. None of them connected with me on a deeper level.”

That was a surprising admission, but perhaps they were both owed that.

“I understand, which was one of the reasons I had to turn down your suit. I didn’t love you, couldn’t fathom marrying a man without at least that.

” Then she blew out a breath and laughed, but couldn’t quite keep the bitterness from that sound.

“In the end, my own thinking was flawed, for I threw you over to marry a man where there was absolutely no love present.”

“If you had known that in advance, would you have wed me?” An odd light of hope appeared in his eyes but vanished with his next blink.

Would she? “I might have taken the chance.” Nancy glanced away as embarrassment warmed her cheeks.

“My husband made a fool of me, but the difference there? You wouldn’t have done the same, even if we’d never fallen in love with each other.

I don’t know how I know, but you would have had more integrity than that. ”

For long moments, he regarded her, and when she returned her gaze to his, speculation shadowed his dark eyes. “Thank you for that, and I am sorry your life didn’t turn out as you’d hoped.”

“Thank you.” She nodded. “Have you changed, then? Are you a different man?” Would it make a difference to her now?

“I would like to hope so.” The sound of rustling fabric indicated he must have shrugged or shifted his stance.

“Much of that came about when Kitty let Reggie illicitly court her last summer. Watching their romance bloom and seeing how in love they were with each other forced me to change my thinking on more than a few things.”

“Oh?” Slowly, she turned to face him, was startled again at just how close he stood to her. So close, in fact, that the scent of his shaving soap teased her nose. “And are you enjoying the man you are becoming?”

“Actually, I am.” The surprise in his eyes was genuine.

“I realized that I had been harsh in some aspects of my dealings with others, and I had also been flippant and uncaring. While it had gained me attention and friends, none of that enhanced my life and they were very shallow, with the exception of Reggie.” Emotions flitted across his face.

“In truth, I want to be more like him, because he is true, what every man should strive to be.”

“What a lovely revelation to have.” She eased her gaze over his jaw and the ruggedness therein, wishing she had the courage—and the privacy—to perhaps dance her fingertips there.

He was so much more... solid and manly than he’d been as a young man all those years ago.

What would a kiss from him feel like now?

“I’m glad for you. Perhaps that will help you in your search for a wife. ”

“Perhaps, if there is such a woman who can arrest my attention. That has been the problem over the years.” The odd intensity in his eyes both intrigued and puzzled her.

“I suppose the question of the moment is this, and especially since you are here at this house party.” He rubbed a hand along the side of his face.

“Do you believe that you and I can begin a new relationship? If we set aside the embarrassment from the past and recognize that we aren’t the same people we used to be, do you believe we can move forward this Christmastide with some semblance of friendship? ”

Was that too much to ask or was it expected from a man who'd changed since the last time she'd known him?

"I think that would be acceptable." She put a hand to her throat, for it was difficult to breathe while this close to him. "If you can forgive my occasional bursts into bitterness."

"You have every right to your feelings." Then he slowly grinned, and it loosed queer little butterflies in her lower belly. "I would like the chance for a renewed friendship with you. Over the years, I have had precious little true friends."

For whatever reason, a tiny bubble of giddiness rose in her chest as she nodded.

"That is how I've felt about my own life.

Perhaps this Christmastide season won't be as horrid as I originally thought...

as long as you don't force me into playing parlor games.

I'm not good at them, and I don't like being the center of attention. "

He chuckled, and the sound tickled through her insides. "Neither do I have that sort of skill, but I wouldn't mind watching the others, especially my sisters, partake."

A semblance of peace came over her, and she gave him a hesitant smile. "I look forward to seeing how the house party gets along." Even if she wasn't certain of him, but then, that didn't matter with a friendship.

Did it?

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Later that day

Edward was in an uncommonly uplifted mood as he went outside with a greenery gathering party that afternoon. The fact he had even joined the group was a surprise to him, but since Kitty had casually mentioned in passing that she and Nancy would go as well, that was what had made up his mind.

Since he'd mended fences with the widow that morning, the uncomfortableness on his part had all but vanished, and oddly faint hope had begun to bloom in his chest.

Everyone making up the greenery party piled into a few sleighs that would take them over the snow-covered grounds to the wooded area at the rear of the property while the hardier members of the group decided to walk through the snow.

Kitty and Reggie were among those who'd decided to make the trip on foot.

Edward occupied one of the sleighs, and just as he thought that had been a poor choice on his part, for a few matrimonial-minded ladies had joined him, Nancy climbed into the sleigh.

When the horse became restless and yanked at his harness and the vehicle lurched unexpectedly forward, she was dumped unceremoniously onto the bench beside him.

As she crashed into his side, he settled her with an arm about her shoulders for a fleeting few seconds.

"Steady, there, Lady Havelock," he murmured, using her title since they weren't

alone. “All right?”

“Yes, I think so.” She nodded but a faint blush stained her cheeks. From his proximity or the cold, he couldn’t say. “I can’t remember the last time I was in a sleigh.” But it had been long enough, for there was excitement and anticipation in her eyes.

“Then it’s a perfect day. Have you ever been in a party to gather Christmastide greenery?”

“I have, actually. One year when my husband insisted we go out to the Kent estate. My son was quite young at the time; I was increasing with my second child.” A tiny catch in her voice was the only outward sign of emotion.

“There wasn’t much snow that year, but two days before Christmas, a storm came through, leaving us with several inches.

It seemed everyone in the country wished to make good use of it, for we met so many people in the lanes and in the woods. ”

“I’ll wager there was a congenial air in the midst.”

“Oh, absolutely.” As the sleigh lurched into motion, she scooted a bit away from him on the bench while the three ladies on the bench across the narrow aisle watched with varying degrees of interest. “Everyone was so happy. There was laughing and joking. Even my husband had been jovial for a time... but he didn’t come back to the manor with us. ”

A muscle in his cheek ticced, for he couldn’t imagine a man treating his wife so shoddily, even if it did happen with regularity with the male members of the beau monde .

More often than not, marriages were made for property and alliances, for social standing and coin, and to a lesser extent, companionship or merely to further a line.

One never heard the stories of two people marrying for love.

His parents had that. Perhaps that was why he was being so picky about taking a bride. Over the years, he'd learned a few things, and he wanted more than the wife, he wanted love.

"Then let us hope that this outing will give you new and happier memories."

At her other side, a younger man nodded. "I quite agree. This time of year is supposed to be to conjure good cheer. If you would like company or someone who can tell you jokes, Lady Havelock, I would be delighted to keep you company."

Oddly, a swift stab of jealousy went through Edward's chest. "How generous of you, Lord Siever, but the viscountess and I have a prior history. No doubt we'll use this time to visit with each other."

One of the ladies across from him tittered and made cow eyes at first him and then Lord Siever. "There are plenty of ladies here for you to chat with. Besides, we will need someone to protect us from tripping on hidden roots or falling in the snow."

And at least one of them would make certain someone saw a compromising position, which would lead to entrapment.

While Nancy tried unsuccessfully to tamp a grin beside him, he shook his head. "Lord Siever will see that none of you injure yourselves. No doubt gathering greenery won't take all that long, and you'll be back warming your hands by the fire at the manor."

Witty banter and joking occupied his time for the remainder of the ride to the wooded area at the southwest corner of his property.

Though he listened with half an ear and only responded every so often, most of his attention was on the woman seated next to him.

She talked politely with the ladies and responded to Lord Siever's flirting with a firm politeness, but none of them were privy to her smiles or soul-deep admissions as he had been.

It had been quite some time since he'd last visited this portion of the estate.

Perhaps it had been when he'd caught Kitty and Reg in that compromising position early last summer, for when he'd returned to London, there had been much to do, especially as his sister prepared for her wedding.

And since she was his baby sister and last remaining sibling to marry, he'd more or less spoiled her... when she let him.

"Lord Armestead?"

A light touch to his shoulder brought him out of his thoughts. With a startled blink, he focused on Nancy. "Yes?"

"We've arrived. Everyone else has left the sleigh."

"Oh." He nodded. "Sorry. I was woolgathering, apparently." After clambering out of the vehicle, Edward assisted her down. "Where is everyone?"

"They left to hunt for greenery." One of her blonde eyebrows rose in question. "Are you quite well? You seem a bit confused."

“Perhaps that might be it. I haven’t been to this section of my estate in quite a while, had forgotten about it, honestly.” Then he fell into step beside her as they entered the woods.

Here, the snow hadn’t accumulated as deep as over the lawn and meadows, but it was still a charming wintertime scene with the bare branches of the trees dark against the stark whiteness of the snow.

A few footmen who’d come out with the party were setting up ladders against some of the oak trees while a group of younger guests waited for others to climb for mistletoe while another group went off in search of spruce and pine as well as holly. They took hand saws with them.

“Should we cut some evergreen boughs?”

Briefly, she held her bottom lip between her teeth, and he couldn’t help dropping his gaze to her mouth.

Would a kiss with her feel as lovely as it had thirteen years ago?

When she released it, a sigh of relief shuddered from him.

“Do I have your permission to walk about and explore? It’s so wonderful here in the trees, where everything is quiet and hushed from the snow. ”

“Of course.” He waved a hand to indicate the area around them.

“You needn’t ask for my permission. Do whatever makes you happy.

” Then when she immediately left to go further into the woods, he could do nothing except follow.

Most of the party was busy, in any event, so his absence wouldn't go immediately noticed.

Not that he cared.

“Oh, heavens, it's like a fairy land back here. So pretty!”

The awe in her voice made him grin. “There is a folly nearby. My sisters used to play in it and have tea parties when they were younger. Just this past summer, Kitty used it as a love nest, which led to her engagement and eventual marriage.”

Nancy laughed and that bit of tinkling mirth did indeed sound like fairy magic. “I can't say that I blame her. Imagine how tucked away and unbothered someone could be back here. I hope the sun comes out at some point while I'm here. I want to come back and see it sparkle on the snow.”

“I'll make a point to escort you out should that happen.” It was England in December, so it was anyone's guess as to whether the sun would make an appearance.

“Thank you.” Amusement danced in her eyes, that were more green than brown. “Might we see the folly? My father had a folly once, but since it was old and in disrepair, it had fallen at some point early in my childhood.”

“Certainly. Come with me.” At the last second, he refrained from taking her hand, but there was an uncommon pull between them... unless it was his imagination.

Nancy pulled the folds of her cloak more tightly around her as they went deeper into the woods.

In the distance, laughter and calls from the greenery party rang on the frozen air, but they were quickly forgotten as she swept her gaze over the breadth of Edward's shoulders and the red muffler he wore above the collar of his greatcoat.

His beaver felt top hat lay slightly tilted at a rakish angle, but that made him even more intriguing.

Perhaps fifty yards into the trees, they came upon a weed-choked clearing where a single castle tower stood as if it had fallen from a large edifice centuries ago.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "In my grandparents' time, it was quite popular to put follies such as this into gardens as a feature of interest, for they serve no practical purpose."

"Are there rooms inside?"

"A couple. I thought about using this as a guest house of sorts, but since it's too removed from the manor, I decided against it."

"Ah." She gazed up at the structure. The tower soared only three stories into the air. A couple of windows looked out onto the world, and a wooden door lay hidden behind ivy and vines. "It's quite charming." And conjured up storybook fantasies of knights and maidens and evil queens.

"You are in luck, for I do have a key with me," he said with a hush in his voice as they approached.

She snorted. "Do you use this as a rendezvous place with your lovers?"

"Hardly. In fact, there has been precious little bed sport with me for months."

How interesting. “Then by all means, show me in.”

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“Anxious, are you?” Edward moved a few of the vines away from the door’s lock, inserted the key, and with some force, turned the locking mechanism. “It’s been made much easier since Kitty utilized the space recently. I remember when rust made turning the locking mechanism much more difficult.”

“It’s impressive, nonetheless. Imagine a hidden place tucked away in the woods where no one would bother you.” As the earl pushed open the wooden door, she held her breath and followed him. The panel creaked and groaned with age and hinges that hadn’t been oiled, but they quickly entered the tower.

“It’s close quarters, but there is a room at the top. That is where my sisters used to conduct their tea parties and play their games.”

“And you? Did you join them?”

“Only if I could be a knight riding to their rescue on my horse.” He closed the door, and shadows swallowed up the space. “Then, because I was a bit of a prick, I would demand they all come home to the manor house where they would learn to act like proper ladies.”

“Clearly, I side with the girls.”

There was a decided chill inside the stone folly, and it was full of shadows since the only windows were high up.

A narrow stone staircase wound tightly upward, and that’s where Edward led her.

Someone must have been tasked with caretaking the structure, for there was not the grittiness of dirt beneath his boots nor were there cobwebs clinging anywhere.

“Of course you would, but I didn’t want them to grow up hoydens.”

“But you also didn’t want them to exclude you in their play time.”

“There is possibly some truth to that.”

She heard rather than saw the grin in his voice. “Yet according to you, Kitty became a hoyden anyway. Did you think you’d failed as her older brother?” It was a fascinating peek into his world.

“A bit, for she was the baby of the family. I wanted the best for her.” The sound of their boot soles hitting the stone steps seemed to echo in the silence. “But everything worked out as it should when she married my best friend.”

“You were quite fortunate in that. She could have married someone you didn’t favor, and he might have taken her away from you.”

“There is that, and for a long time, I fought against her encouraging Reggie’s suit.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t think him good enough for her, but then he made me realize there are many different sorts of men in the world, and they don’t require a title to be useful or even upstanding.”

Then they reached the top where the stairs emptied into a hexagon-shaped room with two windows.

Furnished like a bed chamber in any manor house but on a smaller scale, the room contained a bed, a square table with four wooden chairs, a wooden shelf that still held books and games, all waiting and ready for those four little girls to remember their presence.

Sheets protected the bed, and as Edward tugged the same from a rather comfortable-looking brocade winged-back chair, she suddenly had the opportunity to peer into his childhood.

“Why is there not more dust here? The room has been perfectly preserved.”

“Every quarter, someone comes down to clean the folly and check it over for repairs.” His voice echoed slightly in the silence. “At times, when I’m in residence at Armestead Hall, I pop over here for some quiet reading time... or the opportunity to vanish if I don’t wish to be found.”

“I don’t blame you. It must be a burden having the title of earl bestowed upon you.”

“It is, rather.”

As she looked about the space, she noted a stack of modern novels and books touching on various subjects stacked near the chair.

On a nearby table rested a pipe and a porcelain box that probably contained tobacco leaves; even the air retained a hint of that scent as well as a bit of oak and apple.

A thick woolen blanket had been draped over the back of the chair.

The room held all the trappings of a gentleman’s retreat.

“I’ll wager you come here more often than you care to admit.” Not that there was

anything wrong with that. Even an earl needed privacy at times.

“I won’t deny it.” His chuckle echoed in the room and tickled through her insides. “It’s easier to think here, somehow, and now I understand why Kitty used it to get away from everything... including me.”

“Siblings do that.” She moved to the window.

Down below and in the distance through the winter-bare branches of the trees, the greenery gathering party was visible.

A snowball fight had apparently just gotten underway.

Softly grinning, she turned about to regard her unlikely companion. “It doesn’t mean she didn’t love you.”

“Perhaps. Out of all my sisters, she’s proved the most interesting.”

Nancy nodded. “She is a lovely friend and confidant.”

“Which is odd unto itself. But I shall refrain from questioning you about that for a later time.” He joined her at the window, and immediately the heat of him reached out to her.

“In all honesty, I don’t know what I would do without my sisters and their husbands.

They are my family, and somehow, having them close during this time of year makes me miss my parents a tiny bit less. ”

“I understand that all too well,” she admitted in a low voice. “I miss my own parents terribly; they died in a carriage accident several years ago, and I don’t have any living

siblings.”

“You are truly alone in the world then.”

“Except for my son.” A sigh escaped her. “Life is like that. However, I do keep in touch with my mother-in-law. The dowager viscountess lives with her daughters in Kent. Though she has difficulties getting around, from her letters, she is happy there.”

He briefly touched her hand. Awareness shivered over her skin. “And you will have the training of your son to take the title someday.”

“I will, and that is another thing that worries me. So much of that life was shut away from me, for my husband rarely talked about his position, and he was rarely home as well. What if I fail my son?”

“You won’t, for you are a strong woman. And if you are still on speaking terms with your in-laws, then that whole side of the family wasn’t as foul as your husband.” When she raised her gaze to his, he nodded. “Between all of you, he will have the gist.”

“I can only hope you are right.” What must it be like to lean on his strength for a few moments?

For long moments, he held her gaze, and she trembled from the intensity of that stare. “Why doesn’t she live with you? From what I’ve seen of you, there is quite a lot of compassion and nurturing there, even if you are holding onto anger.”

Nancy narrowed her eyes at him. “As if you aren’t?

” One of her eyebrows rose, and he had the grace to blush.

“The pair of us need to find an outlet for tamped emotions. Perhaps indulging in the snowball fight that is raging outside would be a start.” But she didn’t wish to move from the folly.

There was a certain sacredness here, a removal from the world, and she rather enjoyed sharing these moments with him.

“Regardless, the dowager doesn’t care for London.

Despite wishing to hide from society just now, I usually adore the hustle and bustle of Town. ”

When he grinned, she stared, for it made him appear younger and took some of the stress from his visage. “So do I. There is so much life in London.”

Again, the thought of being kissed by him crossed her mind. “We have already discussed it, but I miss some of the parties and routs in society, but I don’t miss them at the same time. It is difficult to explain.”

“I understand that more than I can also explain.” For whatever reason, he lifted a hand and twirled an escaped lock of hair about his gloved index finger. “Now I wonder if it’s age, a sudden feeling of mortality, or regret that’s holding me captive.”

She couldn’t breathe for he was so close, but the word “regret” bounced about her mind like a soap bubble.

To what did he refer? Had he once loved a woman, but it wasn’t to be?

Then, as she raised her gaze to his, nearly tumbled into those dark depths, the idea that perhaps he regretted letting her go suddenly danced into her brain.

Surely that wasn't true, for they'd barely known each other years ago, and still didn't.

"Perhaps a mixture of both. We all have regrets; we've all tortured ourselves with stories of how our lives might have gone had we made different decisions."

"Even you?" The words were said in a barely audible whisper.

"Yes." Every thought fell out of her head, for he moved his hand to cup her cheek, and his gloved fingers furrowed into her hair. "Yet without the decisions we did make, we wouldn't be the people we are today."

"That is true. When did you become so wise, Nancy?"

The sound of her name in his voice sent a shiver of need down her spine. "I'm not sure I feel particularly wise most times," she managed to get out from a tight throat.

"Perhaps it doesn't matter." Then he lowered his head and claimed her lips with a gentle kiss that left her senses reeling and every nerve ending calling out for more. It was much different than the kiss he'd given her years ago, but it didn't demand her attention any less.

Seconds later, he pulled slightly away, his gaze searching hers for something she didn't know, but she gave him a tiny nod and rested her palms on his chest. A thrill zipped down her spine when he pulled her into a loose embrace and kissed her again.

The firm press of his warm lips had tiny fires starting in her blood and need coiling in her lower belly.

Before she could do much more than curl her fingers into the lapels of his greatcoat, he broke the embrace and let her go.

They stood staring at each other. The shock in his dark eyes mirrored what washed over her, but there was also surprise and a tiny bit of growing hunger there as well.

Exactly what rushed through every point of her body.

“I apologize. That wasn’t well done of me.” His breath clouded about his head, yet oddly enough, she’d forgotten about the cold.

“Don’t ruin the moment with an unneeded apology.” Her laugh sounded far too nervous for her liking as she backed away. “It is somewhat comforting to know you haven’t lost her potency over the years, but perhaps we should head back to the greenery gathering party before they start searching for us.”

“Right.” The earl nodded. “Wouldn’t want to cause a scandal.” A touch of bitterness went through his words.

She blew out a breath. “That’s not it.”

“Then what?”

“I wouldn’t want the magic of this particular moment destroyed by someone who wouldn’t understand the spirit in which it was offered.” Then, because she was swamped with confusion, Nancy fled the room and took the twisting stone stairs more quickly than she ought.

The sound of his bootheels on the treads behind her let her know he’d followed. Once at the ground level, he stayed her with a hand on her arm.

“Thank you for that interlude.” There was nothing but honesty in his expression. “It was unlike anything I’ve had in the past several months. Perhaps it is the shove I’ve been needing to finally make that first step onto my new path.”

She nodded. “You are quite welcome. I hope we both find what we are searching for soon.” Was coming here a mistake after all?

Too soon to tell.

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The kiss from yesterday at the folly still haunted him, and because of that, Edward made certain he wasn't available to most members of the house party for the bulk of the day.

To be fair, there were a few things regarding his ledgers he needed to go over, for his man of affairs was due to visit soon and he wished to be prepared, but he also wanted time alone to think over what exactly he wanted from Nancy or to be to her.

God, why has this woman managed to tie my insides into knots once again?

He planted his elbows on his desktop in the study then buried his head in his hands.

Did it make him a fool if he wanted to spend more time in her company?

Outside of her rejecting him thirteen years ago, he suspected that she had broken his heart even if he hadn't realized it.

Was he in love with her back then? It was still difficult to tell, but his heart had never felt the same after that embarrassing and disappointing summer night.

Eventually, Reggie came to seek him out.

"What the devil are you doing hiding in here? You are the host of this event, and your guests would like to see you."

Edward blew out a breath. "Do shut up, Reg."

“Well, someone is quite grumpy today, and that begs the question of why.” Without being invited, the man came into the room and then threw himself into the same leather chair he occupied a couple of days ago.

“If it was anyone else, I’d say there was a woman involved, but since it’s you, that is quite impossible. ”

“You assume I am either unwilling or unable to find a match at the house party.” It wasn’t a question, for there was no use dissembling. They had known each other for a long time.

“Aren’t you?” Reg leaned forward. He rested his forearms on his knees and let his hands dangle between. When Edward didn’t immediately answer, he huffed. “Your silence means you have, indeed, found someone but you are uncertain about your reception.”

“Why do I even talk to you?” For long moments, he regarded his best friend. “In many ways, though, it’s a good thing. Perhaps you can help me make sense of things.”

Reggie nodded. “I’m happy to help.”

After rubbing a hand along the side of his face, Edward blew out another breath. At this point, he was beginning to sound like a windstorm. “Have you met Lady Havelock?”

“The pretty blonde widow who is past the second bloom of youth but still quite attractive?”

A pox on the man for even noticing! But he tamped his rising anger. “Yes. Nancy was the woman I proposed to thirteen years ago on the advice of my father and hers.”

“And she rejected you out of hand.”

“Yes.” He’d told Reg the story a few times before. “At the time, I had accepted that.”

The other man snorted. “Barely.”

He continued as if he wasn’t interrupted.

“I went about my life, taking a mistress here and there, but I’d always guarded my heart, because deep down, I think she broke it.

” As Reg gawked at him, Edward nodded. “Over the years, I have pondered my inability or unwillingness to connect with a woman on any sort of level that wasn’t shallow.

I still can’t shake the feeling of regret that rejection caused, the regret that I should have pushed for the union.

” He met his friend’s gaze. “I have been unable to forget those feelings.”

For the space of a few heartbeats, his best friend remained silent. Finally, he nodded. “Are you telling me that you have been in love with Lady Havelock for years?” That bit of incredulity in his voice brought Edward back to center.

“Not exactly. I am telling you that I hold her in high esteem, and that those feelings could definitely grow into love if given a chance.” It was an impossible position, for she certainly didn’t want a new relationship let alone a second marriage.

Not that is where this would end. “What should I do?”

Reggie surged to his feet in favor of pacing about the small space. “Well... have you

kissed her?”

“Barely.” Heat rose up the back of his neck as he once more remembered what had transpired between him and Nancy at the old folly.

“Yesterday. During the greenery gathering party. In the folly.” He shrugged when Reggie’s dark eyebrows soared in surprise.

“It was more of an introduction than anything else.”

“Hmm, I’d wondered where you’d slipped off to and figured you didn’t wish to be around any of us.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Did the lady slap you?”

“No.”

“Ah.” Reg continued to pace. “Did she kiss you back?”

“Also no, but she acted as if she enjoyed it, for she curled the fingers of one hand into the lapel of my greatcoat.” As he spoke, Edward put a hand over that part of his chest, almost as if he could still feel the pressure of her hand there.

“Then you should pursue her.”

“Why? She has already rejected me once. I’m not certain I can survive it a second time.”

“Just this.” Reg perched once more on his chair.

“Because you have never shown any sort of interest in a woman like this for years. Usually, you’ll drink too much, bring a woman into your bed, tell me you have a new mistress, and before I can grow accustomed to that, a few months pass and then

you've let her go. ”

Slowly, Edward nodded. “Nancy is... different. She deserves more than such disrespect. Hell, I deserve more than shallow connections.”

That was a rather large admission for him, and he gasped from the truth of it.

Reg stared with his lower jaw slightly ajar.

“Uh...” Then he cleared his throat. “I remember you talking about her, remembered that she married in haste six months after she'd turned you down.

” Surprise threaded through his voice. “That was when you began taking mistresses... as a way to hide how you truly felt. Now everything is beginning to make sense.”

“There is nothing—”

“And why you spoke so negatively regarding marriage, and to my wanting to court Kitty. Your views were colored by that one moment, that one woman, and I had no idea.” He stared at Edward. “Lady Havelock is still quite a handsome woman.”

“She is.”

“And she's a widow.”

“True.”

“This gives her a fair amount of freedom over the innocent ladies here.”

“It does.” Knots of worry pulled in his belly.

A grin curved Reggie's lips. "Then chase her. Find out if she has feelings for you. And besides, it's the holiday season."

Edward scoffed. "What does the time of year have to do with anything?"

"Everything!" If possible, Reg's already broad grin widened. "It makes a romance that much deeper." He waggled his eyebrows. "Take her on a sleigh ride. Alone."

"And do what?" Was he truly this horrible at romancing a woman?

"Enjoy the scenery? Burrow under a blanket with her? Talk to her? Kiss her? Use your imagination, man! It's not that difficult."

Apparently, it is. The heat on his neck intensified. "What did you, uh, do to woo Kitty?" Did he even want to know?

"Whatever she wanted." Reg planted his hands on his knees.

"I went along with her schemes, did everything she suggested. Once, we raced horses across a field, merely so I could have a chance to kiss her." When Edward sputtered, he held up a hand.

"Calm yourself, Armestead. We are married now. But in your case, the trick is to show interest in Lady Havelock's interests.

Make yourself available. Or better yet, show yourself as vulnerable to her. "

He frowned. "Why? That is against everything I have ever been taught."

"Perhaps that is the problem. Dare to be a different man, Edward." The other man nodded. "Trust me. It will help. Just be the man you have always wished that you

were.”

“A different man, a different time, for a woman who is different due to a horrid marriage.”

“Exactly.” Reg winked. “Don’t meet her as the earl or a man with responsibilities to a title. Meet her as a man who is interested in her as a woman. Good luck, and make certain you tell me all the details.”

Edward snorted but a grudging grin snaked across his face. “Why, so you can tell Kitty?”

“Oh, she’ll have the details anyway, but this is strictly for me. So I can tease you once you fall hopelessly in love and know that exquisite torture.”

“I’ll say it again, Reg. Do shut up.”

With very little effort, later in the afternoon, Edward was able to entice Nancy to accompany him on a sleigh ride around his property. A light snow was falling, and even though there were two other sleighs out at the same time with other parties, he felt the most comfortable with her.

As the vehicle started off and the bells on the horse’s harness set up a faint jingle, Edward relaxed into the squabbed bench. “Thank you for agreeing to the ride. It’s one of the few pleasures I have here at the hall.”

“And you wished to share it with me?” Surprise threaded through her inquiry even as her lips curved slightly with a grin. “I must admit, I’m beginning to be quite partial to this sort of transportation.”

“Ah, good. Then I made the right choice.” As his nerves felt strung all too tight, he

wondered why he suddenly was so nervous. “I thought that you might enjoy seeing the whole of the property. There are some beautiful vistas, especially when the sun is actually shining.”

“It’s lovely already and look how the sun sparkles on the snow like a million diamonds.”

“Yes, it is quite the lovely sight.” Except he wasn’t looking at the landscape. Instead, the whole of Edward’s attention was on his companion.

For this afternoon’s outing, Nancy wore a gown of moss green. An ivory brocade pelisse was over that, with a straw bonnet that had been decorated with green ribbons. A rabbit fur muff kept her hands hidden. Already, her cheeks and the tip of her nose were pink from the cold.

Beside him, she shivered. “You have quite an expansive estate. It must be horribly time-consuming to keep it running.”

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“According to my man of affairs, it is, but my foreman does a decent job at it. I don’t know what I’d do without either of them.” Damn, but he really should tell those men how indispensable they were to him.

“I’m glad you can admit that you need assistance in running the estate.

Too many men either think they can do it themselves or they ignore their responsibilities entirely.

” She settled the lap robe about her legs.

There was also a warmed brick he’d put into the sleigh for her feet, but when she also arranged part of the robe over his legs and lap, his chest tightened.

“I’ll wager the lawn is idyllic in the summer. ”

“It is. Usually, I host a summer masquerade, and we take dinner outside. A traveler’s fair sets up at the rear of the property for a few days. All the villagers come to partake of both events.”

“How fun.” A tiny sigh escaped her. “I don’t remember when I’ve enjoyed myself like that.”

Edward frowned. “Havelock didn’t entertain at his Kent estate?”

“Ha.” She uttered an unladylike snort. “The man barely ever visited. Parts of the manor and the grounds are in disrepair. He elected to remain in Town with his

mistress or they would go elsewhere for a holiday.” When she shrugged, her shoulder brushed his.

Tingles of need shot up his arm. “Except that fateful time he decided to travel to Kent over two years ago where he perished.”

Needing to steer the conversation back around to hopeful, positive things, Edward cleared his throat. “Since you never thought you would be a widow and you aren’t overly fond of putting yourself back into society, what do you want from your future now?”

“Well, that is an interesting—and daunting—question.” When she turned her head and their gazes connected around the shallow brim of her bonnet, desire slammed into him, for those eyes were fathomless, and he wished to get lost in those hazel pools. “You are the only person to ask that of me.”

He found that difficult to believe. “Your mother-in-law isn’t even curious?”

“I doubt she cares about me. She only wishes for my son to thrive so he can restore the Havelock holdings to their former glory, no matter that I have been doing a large part of that since my husband died.” A huff escaped her. “But I digress.”

“It is quite all right.” Edward couldn’t help but smile.

His admiration for her grew; he never knew she was skilled with numbers or a leadership role.

“It seems the older we are, the more annoyed we become because that rosy veil has disintegrated. We become aware of the harsh realities of many things, and it is more like work than we had anticipated.”

“That is true to a certain extent. And to another, I always thought I would go into the future with a strong man by my side, that we would meet every challenge together, forge our own path. Perhaps have more children,” she finished in a low, choked voice.

Well, damn.

“I know something about that. For all my insistence I didn’t want to marry, I rather did.

Not for the title or the responsibilities therein, but for me.

To have that companionship and someone to share the little moments with, to look up from my paper and smile at someone at the breakfast table.

” A dose of maudlin emotion dropped over him.

“Not to put such a fine point on it, but I’m a bit lonely I suppose, and if that makes me seem weak, so be it. ”

“Oh, Edward, admitting to such only means you are willing to talk about it and appear vulnerable before others.” Under the lap robe, she touched a gloved hand to his. “That is true strength. More men need to realize that.”

“Indeed.” Had she made that move to signal that she might want their futures to entwine?

He had no idea, but if she liked seeing him vulnerable, he would continue in that vein.

“I never thought I’d come to a place in my life where I would have more regrets than

triumphs, but that has largely been what this year has been for me. ”

“Oh?” She trailed her gaze over his face. “What are your biggest regrets?”

He blew out a breath as he strove for calm even as his heartbeat raced.

“That I never married or started my nursery.” When she squeezed his fingers, something shivered down his spine.

“I could have had a handful of children by now, perhaps even an heir. In some ways, I feel as if I’ve wasted so much time searching. ”

“For what? If it’s perfection, surely you must know that doesn’t exist.”

Ah, how wrong she was.

“Perhaps not perfection, per se, but that one woman I couldn’t live without, the one woman who make a wonderful countess.”

You. It was becoming more and more difficult to hold back the emotions that had been trapped for years beneath the surface.

When she attempted to pull her hand from his beneath the lap robe, he held her fingers and prevented that break in connection. “I am certain once you start a pursuit of said woman, she will be flattered and will fall quickly.”

Only time would tell. He nodded. “Tell me about your son. From everything you’ve said, it sounds like you dote on him.”

“I can’t help it. He’s the light of my life.

” When she smiled, his heart skipped a beat.

“As I’ve said, he is twelve and is exploring the world around him, testing his limits, spreading his wings as it were.

” Briefly, she held her bottom lip between her teeth, and when she released it, he was sorely tempted to kiss those cherry red pieces of flesh. “I named him George.”

“After his father?”

“Bite your tongue.” Her tinkling chuckle sent interest into his shaft.

“I didn’t wish to give that man any sort of legacy.

I named the boy after a character in a book I admired at the time.

” Color appeared in her cheeks, most likely due to the chill in the air.

“But he is smart and clever. He enjoys music and mathematics. I am hopeful his future will be bright... if he can work through his grief.”

“He will need to come home for that to happen. I have discovered for myself that one can’t navigate those waters alone.

” It was another truth he couldn’t believe he shared with her.

There was just something about this woman that invited secrets and confessions that he’d never found in anyone before.

“Have you worked through your own grief and other emotions?”

“Some of them. I don’t imagine the rest will happen overnight.”

“No. There isn’t a magic potion or a timeline for things like that.

When George comes home, I will give him the space he requires but make certain he knows he can talk to me if need be.

” A sigh of frustration left her throat.

“Although, I fear he truly needs a man at a time like this, but that is not enough reason for me to marry.”

“Of course it’s not, for after the boy is grown, you will still have the husband.” A companionable silence grew between them for a long time before he spoke again. “You’d mentioned you had two other children, but they’d died. Might I ask what happened?”

“Oh.” This time, she managed to pull her hand from his.

“My middle daughter died of a sickness. The second daughter was stillborn.” Her swallow was audible, and she looked away, but that slight wobble of her chin had him giving a piece of his heart to her.

“I’ll never forget either of them. Though I might not mourn for their father, he did give me those children, even if I never got to hold the last one or see her open her eyes. ”

“I am so sorry, Nancy,” he murmured as his chest tightened. “I can’t imagine the pain and grief you have been through.”

“It has been difficult, especially with little to no support from my husband.” When

she glanced at him, tears had gathered in her eyes, magnifying the green.

If the man were alive today, Edward would have called him out. There was no excuse to forsake one's wife. "I hope your future provides you more happiness than your past did." He felt like a nodcock, and there was nothing he could say that would make it better, so all he could offer was comfort.

"Thank you. Perhaps if I did marry again, I would have different results."

"That is always the hope." Not knowing what else to do, Edward slipped an arm about her waist and pulled her into his side. She came willing enough, and her warmth was most welcome.

"All I ever wanted was a man who doted on me, a man who loved me for me, not what I could do for him," she said in a soft voice. "But men lie, and we don't know that until we're stuck."

"I'm sorry." It was such a meaningless thing to say.

"Thank you. I'm glad you are here and the one I have talked with over the past few days." When she laid a gloved hand on his chest, his muscles tensed. "There is something comforting about you, Edward, something I never realized before."

Taking that as a good thing, he shifted position on the bench so that he faced her then he tugged her into his arms and tucked the lap robe around them both.

"That is how I feel each time I'm in your company as well, as if I've known you forever instead of having only spent one night at a ball thirteen years ago. "

She tipped her head backward and their gazes met. "Perhaps we met at the wrong time."

Hope and longing reflected in her teary eyes, but he didn't answer; he couldn't.

Did it mean she would welcome a suit now from him where she hadn't before?

Could he take that chance? Instead, he moved a gloved hand to cup her cheek, eased it down to curl about the side of her neck, then claimed her lips with his, driver be damned.

Over and over, Edward gently kissed her, moved over her mouth in a bit to introduce himself to her in such an intimate way. This time, the widow returned his overture, and soon enough, she twined her hands about his shoulders, which layered her upper body against his.

Never once was the embrace broken.

When one of the runners of the sleigh hit a bump or rock beneath the snow, the vehicle jolted, which jostled them apart. He looked at her with a wry grin.

"I won't apologize for the kiss this time."

A slow smile curved her kiss swollen lips. "I don't want you to."

"Good." For the remainder of the journey, they sat side by side and held hands with very little conversation, but then, there wasn't any need for it.

Eventually when the manor house came into view, Nancy stirred. "Will you make up part of the caroling party this evening before dinner?"

He snorted. Cold disappointment went through his gut knowing the outing was nearly over. "I hadn't thought to."

“Please?” Briefly, she let a hand linger on his thigh. “Kitty told me you are a lovely singer.”

“Ha! I dabble, I suppose.” But he was pleased all the same that his sister had said something positive about him to Nancy.

“Well, I am going, at least for as long as I can stand the cold.” She tipped her head back and giggled when a few snowflakes fell on her face.

Damn, what he wouldn’t do to make her warm again. The opportunity to be with her, though, was too great a temptation. “Then I’ll come. For you.” To show her that he wasn’t the arrogant prick she’d used to think he was. To show her he’d changed.

To show her that he was ready for marriage and love—with her—for there was no use in denying it to himself. Those feelings he harbored? They had been naught but love all along.

Later that night

Nancy glanced at Kitty as she came into her room.

“Well, you are quite lovely tonight. Your husband will be hard-pressed to keep from staring at you,” she said with a smile as her maid put the finishing touches on her hair.

The other woman did a bit of simpering before flouncing onto the end of the bed while Nancy sat at a vanity. “I adore pretty clothes, but don’t tell Reginald. In his mind, I’ve made myself out to be a hoyden who’d rather don breeches and go riding.”

“But you like doing that as well,” she said with a smile, for she’d known Kitty long enough that she’d heard of many of her escapades.

“I do.” A faint blush went through her cheeks. “Yet I also love putting on pretty gowns, for sometimes, it’s easier to catch a man’s attention with a décolletage on display and the swish of taffeta skirting.”

She would have no argument from Nancy. Kitty’s gown of white taffeta had white rabbit fur lining the bodice as well as the bottom hem. A sash of crimson satin emphasized her waist and fell into a large bow in the back. A sprig of holly had been placed in her upswept hair.

“The gown is lovely. I’m a tad jealous.”

“You are more than welcome to borrow it.”

Nancy snorted. "I'll wager my hips are wider than yours, and I know my bosom is fuller due to pregnancies."

A soft smile curved Kitty's lips. "Well, your gown is nothing to sneeze at, and the dark green suits you."

"Thank you." Nancy drew her fingertips along the bodice where clear glass beads had been sewn. They were sprinkled over the skirting as well. Red satin ribbons had been fashioned into rosettes and sewn onto the waist. "I wasn't certain if it would be lavish enough."

"It's perfect."

Her maid nodded as well as she wove red ribbons into Nancy's updo. "Do you have a necklace in mind for tonight, Lady Havelock?"

"No. I'll go without." The fact of the matter was she didn't have many pieces, for her husband hadn't given her gifts. He saved the coin to spend on his mistress.

"Then you are finished. I'll carry down your bonnet and muff to the butler so you can don them for caroling."

"Thank you." Once the maid exited the room, Nancy sighed as she glanced at Kitty. "Will you come with us tonight for wassail?"

"I would rather not. My stomach hasn't been quite right since breakfast, so I don't want to chance being away from the manor."

"Ah." She'd eaten the same foods that Kitty had, but Nancy suspected that wasn't the cause of her friend's upset. However, she kept her own counsel. "Well, I promised to make up part of the party."

“I know. Edward mentioned in passing to me that he’s going too.” Speculation reflected in Kitty’s eyes. “Which is odd because he very rarely sings.”

“Does he not enjoy it?”

“I would have no idea, but he is quite good at it.” Kitty smiled again. “Sometimes at Christmastide, my sisters and I cajole him into singing carols with us on Christmas Eve before we all head to midnight services at the church in the village.”

“That sounds lovely.” What else didn’t she know about the earl. With a frown, she turned on the vanity stool to face her friend. “Do you think he’ll select a bride from this house party?”

“I’m not sure. He has been surprisingly absent from many of the activities; he didn’t even help decorate the drawing room or ballroom, and he does like things just so.

” For a few moments, Kitty remained silent.

“For the past couple of years, he’s debated on whether or not he should find a bride and marry, but I rather doubt any of these ladies will catch his eye or captivate his mind. ”

“Why? Aside from my roommate Miss Thompson, there are some pleasant, clever women here.”

“In the simplest terms? They aren’t you.”

Shock went through Nancy’s chest. “What does that mean?”

One of Kitty’s eyebrows went up. “I think he’s still carrying a tendre for you but...”

“But what?”

“Edward hasn’t talked about it, but I think you broke his heart all those years ago when you refused his suit.”

“Oh.” That was what she had feared after spending time with him since her arrival at Armestead Hall. “I didn’t mean to. And how could I have made such an impression on him years ago? We’d barely known each other. I mean, sharing two sets and a kiss didn’t equate to love.”

Did it? If she were to ask her body and her mind, they would both prepare an argument for her.

“Who knows how the male mind works. All I know is that my brother has guarded his heart quite strenuously since that time. As far as I know, he hasn’t let a woman close... except for you this week.”

Nancy frowned. “That’s sad.” And somewhat telling, for she knew beyond any doubt she had never been as comfortable with any man than she was when she was with Edward.

“Perhaps, but that is often how life is.” Kitty’s gaze was bright as she leveled it on Nancy.

“Here’s the question I wish to have answered.

Do you fancy him now? Both times when you and he have returned to the manor after outings these past two days, the pair of you have seemed happier and more animated than I’ve ever seen you, but it’s been more than that. Dare I say content?”

“Oh.” Heat sneaked into Nancy’s cheeks. She suddenly found something interesting

in one of the beads on her skirting. “I don’t know about that, but I might perhaps fancy him if the circumstances were right.”

“Ah.” A wide grin took possession of Kitty’s lips. Delight twinkled in her eyes. “Has he kissed you?”

“A few times.” There was no harm in admitting to that.

Kitty clasped her hands in her lap. “And?”

The heat in her cheeks intensified. “They were lovely.”

“Clearly the nodcock isn’t doing it right.” After a giggle, Kitty cleared her throat. “Has Edward done other... things to you?”

“Kitty!” Her whole body was on fire now merely thinking of what he might do if they let kisses carry them away.

“Well, has he?” The other woman was clearly not repentant. “When the kisses are good, hands get to wandering, and—”

Nancy held up a hand. “No, he has not.”

“That’s too bad. When Reginald and I first coupled, everything changed for our relationship.

I was still very opposed to marriage, but somehow with him, it didn’t seem so terrifying.

” Her grin softened as she no doubt dipped into memories.

“That didn’t mean I fought against it or that he didn’t have to try quite steadily to convince me, but sometimes it takes the mind a bit to match what the body knows.”

A sigh escaped her. It had been a long time indeed since she’d been touched intimately by a man let alone bedded by one. “Well, I don’t think there will be an opportunity for that sort of thing tonight while caroling.”

Their laughter blended together in the room.

“Don’t wait too long, Nancy.” Kitty slipped off the bed.

She shook the wrinkles from her skirting.

“Love is wonderful with the right man. So is the other stuff, but love makes it even more wonderful and right.” Then she winked.

“And if Edward proves stubborn, give him a gentle push. It’s not scandalous for the woman to tell her man exactly what she wants from him. Some men simply need the guidance.”

Oh, dear heavens. Her cheeks blazed. Did she dare to give him a hint that she might be willing to take him to bed? Were they not still strangers? “I’ll bear that in mind.”

Kitty nodded. “I am hoping for the best. It would be such fun to have you in the family and married to my brother.”

“Don’t tempt fate, Kitty. All of this is just speculation, and I want love in my life.

If he’s not capable of that...” As apparently her husband hadn’t been .

“Well, I want something more than I have already been given. I won’t marry again

for less, and I don't know if your brother is even thinking along those lines.

"Regardless of what he'd told her he wanted for his future.

"Remember, darling, it is the season of miracles," Kitty said with a wink then she left Nancy's bedchamber.

They were at the third cottage on the outskirts of the village when the cold began to seep into her bones. Edward had started the evening in the front of the eight-person group, but now he stood next to her in the back row.

Of course, his voice was lovely. That deep baritone sent shivers of need down her spine and awoke butterflies in her lower belly until she was almost drunk on the sound.

A couple of times, she'd been so engrossed in listening to him that she'd stopped her own singing and had to be nudged back into it.

Her husband never did anything like that.

He hated doing anything at his country estate, was very rarely there as she'd told Edward earlier.

And over the years, she had assumed the earl was just like him, but that was anything but the truth.

Unexpectedly, feelings for him rose within her that both confused and excited her.

Why him and why now? When he'd kissed her thirteen years ago, that had been her first ever kiss, and though it had been magical, the kisses he'd given her over the past couple of days had made her feel equally so.

Did that mean she was falling in love with him for little more than attention and kisses? Or was it due to the fact he wasn't the same man she'd known all those years ago? That he'd changed and that she rather liked the man he'd become?

It was too difficult to ascertain.

“Nancy?”

The barely audible whisper yanked her from those thoughts. “Hmm?” She glanced upward into his face, accidentally tumbled into his dark brown eyes.

“We are moving to the next cottage.” Then he took her hand, grasped her fingers, and led her through the snowy field after the rest of the group.

“Oh!” Yet she grinned as she clutched his gloved hand, for he didn't have to touch her at all, especially in the presence of the others in the group, but he had. “Sorry. I was woolgathering, I suppose.”

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Why was being with him easier now that she was older? Now that he was older? Was it simply because they both had life experience and actually knew what they wanted? Internally, she gasped. Was he what she wanted at this time in her life?

After caroling at the last cottage for the evening, the group was treated to wassail and the singers eagerly partook of the rum-laced punch.

It was soothing to her parched and cold throat, but after two cups, she was quite warm and woozy.

From the grin Edward shot her from across the room, he felt the effects of the punch as well.

Then they were once more out into the cold night. The party piled into the sleigh, but she declined to jam herself into the mix.

“I will walk back to the manor. Lord knows I could use the exercise, and perhaps my head will clear from the punch before dinner.” Honestly, she just wanted to step away from the crowd, and it was a beautiful night, regardless.

The few attempts at cajoling her into the vehicle were declined.

“What of you, Lord Armestead?” one of the younger men asked.

He bounced his gaze between her and the group. “I will accompany Lady Havelock home. What sort of gentleman would I be if I left her to her own devices on a darkened country lane?”

“Suit yourself,” the man said with a shrug.

When the driver looked at Edward, he nodded.

“Take them home, James. I’ll be along in a half hour or so.”

“As you wish, my lord.” With the slap of the reins against the dappled gray mare’s flanks, he urged the animal into motion.

Seconds later, the sleigh left them alone, and even the jingle of bells on the harness faded into the distance. Her breath clouded about her head, and as she glanced up into the sky, the clouds had cleared. Millions of stars lay sprinkled through the midnight velvet heavens.

When she brought her gaze to him, it was to find him watching her. “You didn’t need to escort me back to the manor. I could have managed.”

“It is no bother.” His grin sent flutters into her belly. “Besides, I wanted to, and truly, it was bad form to let you go alone.” As he offered her his crooked arm, he shrugged. “Truth be told, I’m glad for the time alone with you.”

“Oh? Why?” Nancy slipped her hand through the bent elbow, and another thrill went down her spine as he patted her hand with his free one.

“No particular reason other than I enjoy your company.”

“That is lovely to hear, and oddly enough, I feel the same.” There was something almost magical about walking along a country lane in the dark with a handsome man in a snow-covered wonderland. “Have you ever liked a Christmastide in your life?”

“Hmm. What an interesting question.” He adjusted his stride to match hers, and she

so appreciated that, for he was a good half foot taller than her. “I suppose there is one year that stands out in my memories.”

“Were you a boy?”

“A young man, really.” As his chuckle released into the air, a delicious shiver went through her body.

“I was probably sixteen at the time; Kitty was eight to put things into perspective. My parents were busy with last-minute preparations for the Christmas Eve ball and the dinner for the area tenant farmers and villagers. My sisters had been particularly excited for the holidays that year.”

“You did something lovely for them, didn’t you?” Knowing that he had the capacity to think of others above himself endeared him to her all the more.

“I suppose you could say that.” Emotion graveled his voice. “I’d saved my pocket money for a few months in order to buy each of them dolls that had painted porcelain faces as well as a new hair ribbon a piece. One of the maids wrapped them for me since I’m not good at that sort of thing.”

“Oh, that is so sweet!” Holding onto his arm tighter, Nancy was grateful for his warm and solid body that blocked the chilly winter breeze.

“They deserve every good thing in the world, and at the time, I was rather an insufferable prick to them.” The earl shrugged.

“Though it isn’t widely celebrated or even spoken about, after watching my father and mother care for everyone on the estate, I have come to believe that Christmastide is a time to gather together the people closest to you, the people you greatly admire and respect, even love.

” His swallow was audible. “I haven’t been the best at such a thing, but I am trying; I want my family to know that I love them even though I don’t say it with any sort of regularity. ”

“That is perhaps the most honest thing I have heard you say since I’ve been here.” Unexpectedly, she lost a piece of her heart to him in that moment. “I hope they known what a treasure you are.”

He snorted. “I don’t know about that. After everything, I am still their older brother, and I tend to poke into their business and try to manage their lives.”

“With love, because you are concerned for them.” Her mind went to the conversation she’d had with Kitty earlier that day.

Not for worlds would she tell him of her suspicions about the woman, but he would undoubtedly be pleased, for with each passing conversation, he was showing himself as a man who valued his family and held them in high esteem.

What sort of father would he make? “Shall I tell you one of my favorite memories, then?”

“I would like that above all things.” When he turned his head and peered down at her, their gazes connected, and something passed between them.

Suddenly, her throat went dry as she wondered what life would have been like if she’d just accepted his proposal all those years ago. She wanted to know everything about him and tell him of her life, unflattering though it had been.

“Er...” After clearing her throat, Nancy began her story.

“It was my son’s third Christmastide, and the first one when he’d been aware of what

was going on.

Oh, the boy was so joyful and excited to receive a set of tin soldiers from me.

He danced about the drawing room with a soldier in each hand, and then spent the rest of the day constantly lining them up only to knock them down with a little metal cannon that shot out a pretend ball.

” The memory gave her a chuckle. “It was the first time that I realized how lucky I was to have this small human and be his mother; he brought me such great happiness.”

“I could easily see that. What did his father give him that year?”

Some of the warmth of the memory faded as the grim reality came hurtling back.

“Nothing except disappointment. I was in my confinement period, waiting to give birth to my first daughter. Havelock had spent Christmas Eve either at his club or with his mistress; I didn’t bother to ask, but he didn’t come home until it was time for Christmas dinner.

” When tears welled in her eyes and she pressed her lips together, Edward slipped an arm about her shoulders.

“So, that was why I spent a quiet day at home with my son. I wouldn’t trade that time for anything, though.

I hope he knows how much I love him, even though he’s a bit lost right now. ”

“I can almost guarantee that he does. All boys are like that during such an age.” For long moments, they walked in silence. “I’m sorry your marriage wasn’t what you’d

hoped.”

She couldn't help but shrug, which dislodged his arm. “Sometimes they aren't. Relationships are like that.”

“Like what?” The confusion in his tone was honest as well.

“That they don't work unless with the right person. No matter how much one party wishes for things to be different.”

“Then the best we can hope for in this life is to keep trying to find that right person. Everyone should belong to someone, don't you think? To feel nothing more than to fit, to be loved for themselves, flaws and all?”

“Yes, I rather do.” And in that moment, she firmly believed this was exactly where she was supposed to be, walking beside this man who could have been her husband if she hadn't been so naïve and stubborn.

There was no need for continued conversation, for merely being together was special enough. With each step, Nancy grew closer to him, and by the time he stopped her at a specific point on the road, she feared she might like him more than was necessarily good for her.

“Ah, pause here for one moment, if you please,” he whispered and then moved her slightly about. “Right here.”

“Why?” Truly, she was baffled. Then she shivered, for it was quite cold, and the chilly air nipped at her cheeks and nose.

“This is one of my favorite spots in the whole area.”

She couldn't help but frown, for she had no idea what he meant. "Why?"

"Look." The earl pointed and she peered in that direction with her gaze.

"You can see the outline of the hall with the dark shadows of the trees in the background. The sloping lawns, but with the snow covering everything, it's one of the most magical scenes I have ever beheld.

"Pleasure threaded through his voice, and when she glanced at him, his lips had curved into a grin. "Even better now."

Feeling much like a demented parrot, she asked for a third time, "Why?"

"You are here." Edward shrugged, as if the answer should have been obvious. "It makes all the difference." Before she could find the words to respond, he bundled her into his arms and claimed her lips with his.

As he pulled slightly back, she sighed, for it was the height of romantic, and she'd had precious little of that over the years. "Perhaps you have had too much rum punch tonight."

"Or I haven't had nearly enough, for all I can think of in this moment is how much I want to kiss you again," he whispered, and the wicked gleam in his eyes sent flutters into her lower belly.

Throwing caution to the wind, Nancy smiled. "I don't believe I bid you nay, Armestead."

With a soft growl, he pulled her more comfortably into his embrace and kissed her again, moving over her mouth with an assurance and confidence that threatened to swamp her.

As she'd wished to do all evening, she returned his kisses as if she were a wanton, and because he was quite skilled in the art, it took little time for heat to transfer into her blood and her body to awaken with need and awareness she assumed she'd lost long ago.

It didn't matter who might come upon them on the country lane while she shamelessly drank from him, took everything he was willing to give, everything she should have had all those years ago.

There was indeed magic in those kisses, and she wanted so much more with this man who made her look at things so much differently than she had years ago.

Little by little, she fell for him; the sensation of pinwheeling through clouds assailed her on that winter's night, and once more a tiny piece of her heart flew into his keeping.

Am I naught but a ninny for this?

Perhaps it didn't matter because it was so far removed from anything she'd ever received from a man before.

Eventually, they broke apart, for no other reason than they needed to breathe. As she stared up into his face, she giggled, and when he laughed too, her heart squeezed.

"The tip of your nose is quite frozen, Lady Havelock," he quipped as he took her gloved hand and threaded their fingers together.

If she could, she would dance amidst the stars... that was how happy she was in that moment. As they walked up the hill on the country lane, she couldn't help but grin. "Whose fault is that, Your Lordship? You have kept me out in the night air far too long."

“True, but it was quite worth it, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely.” How was any of this possible? Could two people have met at the wrong time then find each other later in life on a whim? “Perhaps there will be hot tea or warm milk at the manor before dinner.”

He chuckled. “No more rum punch? Or even brandy to thaw your toes and fingers?”

Already, she was very nearly drunk on him . “Not unless you want me to do wicked things to you because my mind is fuzzy.”

Had that been her making such a flirty comeback?

There was a barely audible gasp on his part, and he stumbled as he missed a step, which made her spirit soar. “Well then, if you catch me woolgathering at dinner instead of conversing with the guests around me, you’ll know why.”

For the first time in far too many years, the kernel of hope in Nancy’s heart bloomed.

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Edward stood in the portrait gallery gazing down onto the lawn.

The pungent scent of pine from the boughs hung over the windows infiltrated his nostrils, forever reminding him it was the holiday season.

It was once more snowing, and some of the guests had decided to go sledding, while a handful of young men wished to go hunting for the perfect tree to decorate in the drawing room in the Bavarian style.

Regardless, pockets of people moved over the snow-covered lawn, which gave the wintertime landscape dots of color.

From what he understood, his sisters had taken Nancy within their midst, and they were part of the party that had gone sledding.

While he would have enjoyed indulging in that activity merely to go down one of the hills with Nancy, he needed the time to think, for he had been more than confused since she'd arrived back in his life.

Later tonight, he would host the annual Christmas Eve ball for his house guests as well as anyone in the village who wished to attend. Any notables within the ton who were in the area were welcome too.

“I thought I would find you here.”

With a frown, Edward turned about to regard Kitty, who waited five feet behind him with a rabbit fur muff in her hand and a flannel lined bonnet sitting on her blonde

hair. The folds of her pink dress were made fuller by what was probably a flannel or wool petticoat beneath.

“I assumed you were with the others, heading to the sledding hill.”

“I was... well, I am, but I’d forgotten my muff.” She held up the accessory. “Even with gloves or mittens, my hands get so cold.”

He grunted. “Reggie isn’t there to warm you up?” The pair had been scandalous since they’d wed. Hell, they’d been that before the nuptial ceremony, but at least she was happy.

A faint blush stained his sister’s cheeks.

“My husband wasn’t invited. This is a ladies only outing.

” Then an odd expression crossed her face, and she pressed a gloved index finger to her upper lip.

Seconds later, whatever it was had passed.

“In any event, since I had to run back to my room and I hadn’t seen you for a bit, I decided to come looking for you. ”

“Why? We haven’t been in each other’s pockets for months.”

“Gracious, Edward, can you possibly unbend enough to have a moment with me?” Annoyance went through her voice, hearkening back to the Kitty he’d grown to love over the years.

A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Fair point.” He gestured with a hand,

inviting her closer to the window. “Why did you wish to speak with me?”

“Well, you only come to the portrait gallery when your mind is muddled.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

A huff of frustration escaped her. “I have known you all my life. Even when Papa was alive, you acted as if you had the weight of the world on your shoulders. When it became too much or you couldn’t puzzle out a problem, you would come here and brood.”

“I don’t brood.” It was important that she know this.

“Ha! Then you pout.” She shook her head as she gazed out on the snow-covered back lawn.

“Regardless, you mentioned in passing once that being here amidst the memories of our family members who have gone before helps you to think.” With a shrug, she regarded him.

“You have always sought counsel from Grandpapa’s portrait, and now I suppose Papa’s. ”

Slowly, he nodded. “It brings me comfort to be here, knowing that every earl before me experienced his own triumphs and failures.” It gave him hope and strength to be here. “Besides, from the window, I can monitor the goings on of my guests.”

“While hiding from the same.” Amusement sounded in her voice and was reflected in her blue eyes. “What are you worried about, brother dear? Is it a woman that’s got you tied up in knots?”

Was he so easy to read, then? For long moments, he regarded Kitty then finally sighed. “How well do you know Lady Havelock—Nancy?”

“Well enough. We’ve been in contact on and off over the years.

She’d confided in me about the trials with her husband, and I was there for her when the man died.

” Kitty crept closer to glance out the window.

Down on the lawn, a few of his younger nieces and nephews were in the process of making snow angels while a nursery maid and governess stood by.

“We became friends over the years but not close enough, I suppose, to share secrets or confidences, but we kept in touch and met for tea every so often. It was... lovely.”

“I see.” He glowered out the window. “Did you ever speak of me to her in your letters?”

“Only in passing. I told her how much of a snob you were, how you tried to thwart my romance with Reginald.” She shot him a grin. “None of that was lies. And I’ve also told her that since I married, you have changed in tiny little ways.”

Somewhat mollified, he nodded. “I once proposed to her. Thirteen years ago, in fact. Her parents and ours encouraged the match.”

“I figured it was something like that.” For the space of a few heartbeats, Kitty remained silent. “Obviously, something went wrong.” It wasn’t a question.

“She refused me out of hand. Said she would only marry for love.” Oddly, some of the sting had gone out of the remembrance. Was that because Nancy was here, and

they had enjoyed a few kisses between them?

“Yet she had no love in her marriage.” Kitty rested a gloved palm on the window glass.

“I felt so bad for her and the trials she’s been through.

If anyone deserves to have love in their life, it’s Nancy.

She’s such a sweet woman; she’s strong and brave.

Did you know that one of the charities she supports is to help comfort and house returning veterans of the war? ”

“I did not know that.” But it didn’t surprise him. She had a giving heart.

“Apparently, one of her friends had come back from war without a leg. In many circles, he was shunned, couldn’t find work or housing.

” She lowered her voice. “Eventually, he took his own life, and she said she hadn’t known how deeply he’d suffered.

So, because she didn’t want that to happen to anyone else, her charity works to give these men a second chance.

Every man, even heroes, deserve hope to find their calling and destiny. ”

“I will have to remember to congratulate her on the initiative.” He kept his gaze on the tableau below as his chest tightened. “What is her opinion on men who aren’t heroes but have taken up the reins of other responsibilities?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Kitty turned to him, peered at him until their gazes met. “You have spent time with her over the past few days.” It wasn’t a question.

“I have. What of it?”

She shrugged. “Have your feelings for her changed over the years?”

“Why do you assume I have feelings for her?” The conversation was running dangerously close to what was bothering him. Would it be so bad if he asked his sister’s counsel?

“Don’t be more of an arse than you can help, Armestead.” Kitty must be quite annoyed with him, for she only used his title when that was so. “You have remained unattached over the years, almost as if you have pulled away from that part of life.”

“I have been with women—”

“Stop.” She came close enough to him to lay a hand on his chest. “I’m your sister, Edward.

I know things. Mistresses don’t count unless you fell in love with one of them?

” One of her eyebrows rose in question. When he shook his head, she nodded.

“Which I can then only assume means that your heart was broken or at the very least taken by surprise by Nancy all those years ago.”

His heartbeat accelerated, and he resisted the urge to tug at his suddenly too-tight cravat. “I have never admitted to that fact.”

“No, but you have discussed the possibility with Reginald.”

He groaned. “And, of course, he mentioned that to you, because he’s married to you.”

“No, because he is worried for you—his best friend. I am too, as your sister, and I only want you happy. I didn’t understand what that meant, thought it to be a mysterious state found in... everything around me, but then I became involved with Reginald. Everything changed and became--”

“Sharper? That you see things with more clarity, more color?”

“Something like that.” Kitty patted his chest. “Are you in love with Nancy? There is no harm in it. But if you are, I advise that you should do something about it before she slips away a second time.”

And that was the question that had originally brought him up to the portrait gallery.

“Ah, Kitty, why do such things have to be so convoluted and confusing?”

When she smiled, his whole world felt a bit rosier, which was a true testament to how Kitty herself had changed since being married.

“Unfortunately, that is how love is, brother. If it doesn’t wring you out and twist up your insides, and scramble your brains, it’s not love at all.

” Amusement reflected in her eyes. “Have you kissed her yet?”

Heat went up the back of his neck. “Yes, a few times.”

“Have you been intimate with her?”

“Do hush, little sister, and that is none of your concern.”

“Ah. That means no. I’m somewhat disappointed in you.”

He cleared his throat. “It has been a busy time and—”

“Nevermind.” She winked. “Answer my original question.”

“As the days go on, and each time I am with her, yes, I believe the feelings I have always held for her are swiftly changing into those of love.” Damn, but it felt good to finally have that out. “I am in love with Lady Havelock. Are you happy now?”

“Yes.” Her face was lined with that emotion. “Will you tell her at the ball tonight?”

“I’m not certain.” The fear of being rejected reared its ugly head and sapped at his confidence. “If she doesn’t feel the same way, if she doesn’t want a future, then I will always remember Christmastide as yet another failure.”

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It would do no good to tell his sister that, at times, he felt he wasn't as good an earl as his father was, that he wasn't as good a man, that he was doing his best, but it always seemed as if something were missing.

"I don't claim to be an expert at the subject of love considering I only discovered its meaning in all the ways that matter earlier this year.

" She patted his chest once more before lowering her hand.

"However, I do know that it's worth chasing.

And if you have carried a torch for a woman for as long as you have, you shouldn't waste any more time.

The life you have always wanted is on the other side of fear, Edward. Don't let that feeling bully you."

Her words made much sense. "Do you speak from experience on fear?"

"I do." She nodded as tears misted her eyes. "Before I said yes to Reginald, I was terrified of marriage. I assumed it would become a prison of sorts, that being his wife would clip my wings and prevent me from doing what I wanted or meeting my own goals."

That was an interesting glimpse into her life. "What changed your mind?"

"He did." When she shrugged, she smiled, but a few tears fell to her cheeks, which

thoroughly confused him. “Reginald explained to me that he loved me, and he didn’t wish to hold me captive. He only wanted to support me in everything I did.”

“Which he has, I assume?” Hell, wouldn’t he know if Reg had been lying?

“In so many ways.” Slowly, she shook her head even as awe shadowed her eyes.

“He is the most wonderful man I have ever met, and what I feel for him? Well, it makes no sense, but it’s there all the same.

” She raised her gaze to his. “That man loves me even on my worst days, and that means... everything.”

Damnation but he wanted that sort of security, that kind of love. “Do you think that Nancy will...?” He didn’t have the courage to finish the inquiry.

“You will never know until you try.” Then she scrubbed at the moisture on her cheeks with her free hand while clutching the rabbit fur muff to her chest. “May I tell you a secret? I have been bursting to tell someone and wanted to make an announcement tomorrow...”

Immediately, his chest tightened. He steeled himself for bad news. “Are you well?”

“Yes.” When she nodded, her eyes sparkled with happiness, and another wave of tears fell to her cheeks. “I am increasing, Edward. Just over three months along. You should have a new niece or nephew in early June.”

“What?” Shock took hold of him as he stared. “My little sister is going to be a mother,” he said in a soft voice. “That’s wonderful. Reg didn’t tell me.”

“We wanted it to be our Christmas present to the family. Please don’t let on that you

know. I want him to have that moment tomorrow morning at breakfast.”

“Of course.” Then, because he didn’t know what else to do, Edward tugged her into his arms and hugged her. “I’m so proud of you, Kitty. Mama and Papa would have been as well.” When he set her away from him, he grinned like a fool. “I shall remain anxious for you until June.”

“Do stop.” Once more, she wiped her cheeks. “Reginald is beside himself with joy. He will make a wonderful father, I think.”

“I know he will.” Despite his happiness for his sister, he couldn’t help but feel a stab of envy. Had he wasted too much time to have that for himself?

“Edward?”

“Hmm?” He snapped his attention back to Kitty’s face.

“As thrilled as I am with the possibility of being a mother, I am frightened as well, but you know what? I am going to do this anyway, and if I can carry this child and bear it, you can declare your feelings to Nancy. We will both face fear together.”

That sobered him, and he nodded. “Leave it to my little sister to show me up.” Yet it felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “I promise I will talk to Nancy at some point tonight. Will that satisfy you?”

“It will.” She grasped his fingers and then released his hand. “I should join the others outside. They’ll wonder what happened to me.”

“Do you think that sledding is a good idea, in your condition?”

“I hadn’t planned to actually do any sledding, only watch the children and perhaps

catch them at the bottom of the hill.

” Her smile was serene. “Don’t worry. I won’t do anything to harm the babe, so don’t argue.

I’ve already told Reginald not to treat me as if I’m made of crystal. That applies to you as well.”

A chuckle escaped Edward’s throat. “I quite understand.” He made a shooing motion with his hand. “Go. Enjoy yourself. I need to make my rounds and see for myself all the preparations for the ball are nearly complete.”

She nodded. “I shall see you tonight. Save me a dance.”

“I will.” He turned back to the window. The children had vacated the lawn, but in their place a couple of deer tramped over the snow as they moved to the other side of the property.

What the devil would he even say to Nancy to convince her that he wanted marriage and everything that would entail, especially after her last union was so horrid that she might not wish to repeat the experience?

If this is truly the season of miracles, please set aside one for me.

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Christmas Eve ball

This is so beautiful!

Even though the ballroom had been transformed into a holiday scene out of a fairy story, Nancy fretted at the side as she watched a country reel in progress.

Was her gown of red velvet grand enough?

She smoothed her gloved hands along the front of the dress.

It featured a gold satin underskirt with rows of ruffles at the back, while the bodice, waist, and hems of the short sleeves were lined with a thin band of black sequins to give the outfit a bit of interest and whimsy.

It was perhaps a year out of date, but she hoped that didn't matter.

The ball had opened thirty minutes ago with Edward leading Kitty out for a waltz.

It was only half past nine, and the dancing portion of the night would go on for the next hour.

A buffet-style dinner would follow featuring finger foods and small bites that guests could take with them wherever they wished to congregate.

After that, whoever in the company wished to attend midnight church services was welcome to do so.

The sleighs were to be employed, or guests could walk the couple of miles to the village if they desired.

Now, in the country reel, she watched Kitty, who clearly enjoyed dancing.

A kaleidoscope of color made from lady's skirting twisted and turned on the dance floor.

The scents of powders and perfumes filled the air to compete with the more pungent smells from fir boughs and candles as well as the sweet aromas of clove-studded oranges that had been set about the room and used in floral arrangements.

Two sets of double doors at the back of the room were kept slightly ajar to encourage cooler air into the crowded space.

With so many candles and bodies, it was quite heated, so that contrast was most welcome.

Truly, there was a magical element at play in the air tonight. Everyone was dressed in their best and pleasant attitudes abounded. Excitement and holiday gaiety was all around.

Yet something was missing.

What am I waiting for?

“It is truly a shame that such a beautiful woman lacks a partner tonight.”

With a start, Nancy turned about at the sound of a masculine voice.

When she realized she'd been expecting the earl, a thin coil of cold disappointment

snaked through her belly to find the speaker wasn't him.

Yet she smiled. "Mr. Healy. How lovely to be able to talk with you." Truthfully, she had nothing but respect for the man. He was a good husband to Kitty.

"It has been a rather busy house party, hasn't it?"

She nodded. "It has. And what is more, I never expected to enjoy myself at this house party." Imagine that. "Are you enjoying the ball?"

"For the most part, but if I'd had my druthers, I'd much prefer a quiet evening alone with Katherine." As he spoke, he watched the dancers on the floor. "Isn't she gorgeous tonight?"

Clearly, the man was besotted by his wife, and it was beyond adorable. "She is. That silver gown makes her sparkle along with the decorations." And the grin on her face spoke to how much delight dancing gave her.

"She and I plan to make an announcement to the party tomorrow morning," he said with a grin as large as his wife's.

"Ah, and I'll wager I can guess at what it is," Nancy said with a grin of her own. "I am truly happy for the two of you."

A bit of shock went through Mr. Healy's eyes. "You know?"

"I suspected, but you just confirmed it for me." She laid a hand on his arm. "I didn't know the two of you wanted children." Kitty had hinted in her letters that they hadn't become pregnant... not for lack of trying.

A hint of ruddy color rose up his neck above his collar.

“Starting a family was never something we thought possible, and we are completely happy with the life we’ve built together.

” He shrugged. “But this happened, and whether it will be our only child or the beginning of many, we intend to still take each day as it comes.”

“And remain thankful,” she finished for him in a low voice.

“Yes.” Mr. Healy nodded. “Regardless, I couldn’t love her more. Katherine is quite amazing.”

“Agreed. She has been a good friend to me over the years.” She patted the man’s arm before dropping her hand. “You will both be lovely parents, I think.”

“Thank you.” As he struggled with emotions, he glanced again at the couples on the dance floor. Then he rested his gaze back on her face. “I did have an ulterior motive in seeking you out tonight.”

“Oh? And here I assumed you wished to dance with me,” she said in a joking tone.

“I can, of course, but Armestead is currently glaring at me for apparently having the audacity to even talk with you.” He snickered as they both looked the earl’s way while he performed the steps of the dance. “Regardless of that, I wished to put in a good word with you on his behalf.”

She frowned. “Did he ask you to do such a thing?”

“Of course not. He doesn’t know what I’m about.” When Mr. Healy chuckled, she was set at ease. “He may act like a bounder or an arrogant prick at times, but there is no man better than Edward.”

This week, she had not detected either of those flaws in him. Truly, she believed he had changed since the last time she'd known him. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that I hope you give him a chance. If he is trying, in his odd, hesitant way, to make an overture toward you or plead his suit, I think you should accept him this time." He shrugged and shot her a wry glance.

"Deep down beneath the title and responsibility, he's a decent sort, and I believe all he wants is to settle into a life and have love. "

"Truly, that is all any of us are looking for," she said in a barely audible voice.

Was it true that Edward thought her a good candidate to court or even wed?

Excitement buzzed at the base of her spine.

When she glanced again to the dance floor where the country reel was winding down, her gaze crashed into that of the earl's.

Something passed between them, and it gave her the most delicious shivers.

"I promise to keep an open mind for whatever happens."

"Thank you." Mr. Healy nodded. As the notes from the string quartet ended, he sighed. "It would appear my time with you is at an end, for Armestead is heading this way. Let us both hope he doesn't land me a facer."

She chuckled, for it was so amusing. "Why would he? We are doing nothing except having a conversation."

"Ah, my dear, you are quite naïve yet. The man is horribly possessive and a bit

jealous. That's how much he cares." Then there was no more chance to speak with him, for Edward had joined them, and he had his sister on his arm.

"Isn't this a quaint scene?" He bounced his gaze between them, but there was the veriest hint of jealousy in his dark eyes that had Nancy biting her bottom lip to keep her from laughing.

"I was merely wishing Lady Havelock well for the holiday season." Mr. Healy grinned then he took Kitty by the hand.

"Now I am going to escort my beautiful wife to the refreshments table for some punch or lemonade." He winked at Nancy.

"Surely you can find something to occupy yourselves in the interim."

With heat in her cheeks, she waved to Kitty then turned to address Edward. "Calm yourself, Armestead. Mr. Healy was the epitome of proper."

"Good, because he already has his woman." There was a certain intensity about his dark eyes that she found exceptionally appealing. "Now, if I may, would you please partner me in this next dance? I believe it is a waltz, and a Continental one at that."

Though she had practiced the steps of such a waltz, she had never performed one in public, especially not since her husband had died.

He wasn't one for that sort of activity.

At least not with her. But as Edward offered his gloved hand, she couldn't help but accept the invitation, for she had wondered if he would ask.

When she slipped a trembling hand into his, she nodded. "I would enjoy that very

much, but you should know, I haven't danced this waltz in public."

He met her gaze. "I won't let you fall, sweeting."

The use of the endearment as he led her into an open spot on the dance floor loosed butterflies in her lower belly. "All right." Suddenly, she suspected they were no longer talking about the imminent waltz.

As he manipulated her arms into the correct positioning, Nancy quietly watched him. There was something different about him tonight, something she couldn't quite put her finger on, but it was both refreshing and exciting.

When the first notes of the waltz were released into the air, Edward set them into motion.

Immediately, she surrendered to his mastery in both the steps and the way held led her through them.

Each time she stumbled, his hand at the small of her back steadied her until she found her footing.

As he squeezed her fingers with his other hand, she relaxed into the rhythm of the set.

It was so easy with him; their bodies flowed together as if they were always meant for this dance.

With each turn of the room, her confidence grew, and soon it felt as if her feet barely touched the floor.

Every time he twirled her into a corner, he pulled her slightly closer.

The strength of him, the heat of him threatened to intoxicate her.

A sigh of contentment escaped her throat.

Nancy's skirting twisted about her ankles and his legs, and at one point, her breasts brushed his chest, but she barely noticed the potentially scandalous positioning, for the longer she peered into his eyes, saw the golden flecks in his dark brown irises, the more the sensation of falling assailed her.

The dances they'd shared thirteen years ago were suddenly no longer the measuring stick she'd used against all men; this one was, and she didn't want it to end.

How had this man changed her thinking in a mere handful of days?

And what was more, she'd been a complete fool all those years ago for refusing him.

What would my life have been like?

It was too bewildering to think about, and in doing so, a cloud of sadness descended upon her. She might not have the son she loved now, but she might have had three live children... except she adored her son, and she was coming to feel the same for Edward.

Does that make me hopeful or merely desperate?

As the waltz came to its last notes, Edward escorted her to one set of glass French doors at the rear of the room. Once he had them opened, he encouraged her through and onto the darkened terrace beyond.

She went willingly because she wasn't ready to give him over to another partner. "Goodness, but the night is so pretty." The black velvet sky had been strewn with

thousands of stars. “Thank you for sharing it with me, as well as the dance.”

“It was truly my pleasure.” He led her toward the stone railing and away from the rectangle of golden light made by the candles within the ballroom. With a hand to the small of her back, he urged her into a loose embrace. “Do you remember when we waltzed at your Come Out ball?”

“Of course. It’s a memory I’ll never forget. Why?”

“You wore a light blue gown that day, and I thought you were one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen.”

Nancy snorted. “I was eighteen. Still young. Every woman is beautiful at that age.” Yet heated pleasure wound through her chest.

“Perhaps that might be true, but you are here now, standing with me in the dark, and I still believe you are beautiful. I especially adore seeing you in red.”

“I appreciate that.” Not knowing what else to do, Nancy laid a palm on his chest. “What is truly on your mind, Armestead? I have had the sense over the past few days that something has been uppermost in your thoughts, but you are holding back for whatever reason.”

“Dear God, it’s uncanny how well you know me,” he whispered as he took her hands in his and held them. “I was a fool to not keep coming back after that refusal.”

That didn’t answer her question. “Edward?” Her heart beat so fast she feared that organ might fly right out of her chest.

“Were you planning to go to church services tonight?”

“Not especially. There are a few gifts I want to gather for a few people here and perhaps place them beneath the Bavarian tree in the drawing room.”

“I also have a few gifts. Thank you for the reminder.” For long moments, he peered into her face before finally nodding. “Nancy, will you do me a favor?”

She frowned, for he wasn’t making much sense. “Of course. What is it? Is all well with you?” Concern sat heavy in her chest.

“It is too early to say.” Slowly, he brought one of her hands to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Meet me in the drawing room at eleven-thirty tonight. Everyone should either have left for the church by then or have retired abovestairs, so we will be guaranteed privacy.”

“For what?”

“I don’t wish to say anything now; it’s not the right time.” The intensity in his eyes hadn’t faded, and with a quick glance to the door, he put a curled index finger beneath her chin, lifted her head, and then swiftly brushed his lips over hers. “Just say you’ll meet me.”

“I will.” In the event he didn’t understand, she nodded. “Promise me you are well.”

He chuckled as he pulled away. “I might indeed be slightly mad, but we shall figure that out together later tonight.” As he trailed his gaze up and down her form, she felt as if he’d caressed her with his hands.

“You are lovely tonight, Nancy, and I am so damn humbled to have the opportunity to spend this time with you.”

“You are sweet. It’s an outdated gown, I fear.”

“It matters not.” Then he waved a hand. “You go back first before you catch your death of cold. I will remain out here for a bit to gather my thoughts.”

“All right.” With one last lingering look, she made her way over the terrace and then slipped into the ballroom, leaving him to his own devices.

Oddly enough, she couldn’t stop grinning, for though he was acting oddly, there was so much hope welling in her chest that she looked forward to putting dinner behind her.

Perhaps this would correct a mistake for them both from the past.

Christmas Eve night

Edward's nerves felt strung far too tight and knots of the same pulled in his gut. Why the hell was he so affected? It wasn't as if he didn't know Nancy, yet he meant to secure his future—their future—together, and when he'd hoped to do that thirteen years ago, she'd rejected him.

What if history repeated itself? What if he were to lose her a second time? And if he did this night, it would hurt worse than before, because he was unapologetically most decidedly in love with her this time.

Yet the drawing room, decorated for Christmastide, encouraged him to smile in appreciation.

A large wreath hung on the wall over the fireplace.

A red velvet ribbon had been threaded into the dark green evergreen boughs.

Matching swags had been tacked above the windows and sat on the sills as well as the fireplace mantel.

Tin bells, glass balls, and oranges studded with cloves had been strategically placed within the greenery to lend the room the pungent, spicy scent he associated with this time of year.

On a small round table, the Bavarian tree rested in a box, anchored with dirt from outside.

Someone had come in and decorated it with the same bells and balls, but they'd added strung popcorn and reddish berries as well as ribbons, seed pearls on strings and fastened small white candles to some of the branches.

No doubt when lit, it would prove magical.

Perhaps this time of year isn't that horrid.

After the bulk of the house party went out in sleighs or walked to the village church in order to attend midnight services, he had gone up to his bedchamber to retrieve a small box, and as he entered the drawing room, the long case clock in the corridor outside chimed half past eleven.

Was he ready? Could he take the risk? Needing something to occupy his time while he waited, Edward moved over to the fireplace.

He stoked the wood within, added another log and watched the flames lick at it.

Then he dusted off his hands. Heat plowed through his form, whether due to nerves or the fire itself.

With a muted curse, he removed his superfine jacket, for he'd had ample time to change out of his tailcoat and evening attire.

Still not comfortable, he wrenched off his gloves and cravat then tossed them to a nearby chair where his jacket had landed.

"Edward?"

Bloody hell, she's here.

He turned away from contemplating the flames in the fireplace.

“Nancy.” She wore the red and gold gown she’d had from the ball, and an abstract part of his brain was thrilled, for she was the personification of Christmastide in that gown.

“I am glad you’re here. To be honest, I wasn’t certain you would come.

” As he met her in the middle of the room, he caught her briefly in his arms and kissed her cheek.

“I promised I would.” When she smiled, his world tilted, and he tumbled into those brown-green pools of her eyes. “I have a gift for you.” She held up a small leather pouch. “I hope you like it.”

His chest tightened that she would have thought of him.

“How could I not? And I have one for you.” It sat in his waistcoat pocket.

“Give me one moment to close the door.” His pulse pounded as he raced across the floor.

Once he closed the double doors and locked them both, a bit of his anxiety faded.

At least they wouldn’t be interrupted. Then he joined her once more and slipped an arm about her waist. “Would you join me?”

“Yes. I am interested in why you wished to see me.” As she peered up into his face, questions lingered in her eyes. “You were far too mysterious on the terrace.”

“I suppose I was. Partially because I haven’t been myself this past week.

” After he’d led her to a low sofa with a high back to one side of the fireplace, he settled her onto the mauve brocade cushion.

The back of the piece of furniture was to the door and would provide another layer of privacy in the event someone did come in.

After he seated himself next to her, he blew out a breath.

How to begin this conversation that might—hopefully—change his life? “I... That is to say, we...”

Nancy rested a hand on his arm as she turned toward him. “Perhaps we should start with exchanging gifts.”

“Good idea.” It would give him a few more moments to contemplate his next words.

“I shall start.” Then she handed him the small leather pouch. “I kept this all these years because I couldn’t bear to give it away or pawn it. Truly, I’d forgotten about it.”

“Oh?” How intriguing. When he tugged the strings loose then dumped the item into his palm, he stared, shocked. It was a silver pocket watch chain.

“When I was packing my trunk in preparation for this party, I discovered it again, stuck in the lining. It brought back memories, for I’d thought to give it to you the night you proposed, but...

” With a sigh, Nancy shook her head. “However, after spending the past handful of days with you.... Well, I Er, this belongs to you. I don’t want it anymore.

” She closed his fingers around the cold chain.

He frowned. “Because it reminds you of me, or of other times that are not so savory?”

“Not any longer.” Sadness reflected in her eyes, but there was something else there he didn’t dare to name. “It reminds me of you, yes, but now I view it as a sign of a life well lived, of hope.”

“Thank you. I will attach it to my watch tomorrow morning.” With a hard swallow, he looked at him.

“Hope.” Emotions battered his insides. “Oddly, I have had that same thing since you came back into my life.” He pressed his lips together as fear twisted down his spine.

If he didn’t say his piece now, he never would, and that meant he wouldn’t have the future he wanted.

“Ah, Nancy.” Then he fished out the small rectangle box from his waistcoat pocket.

“You aren’t the only one who has hung onto a piece of the past.” He gave her the box that had been tied with a bit of twine. “For whatever reason.”

“Oh?” Her delicate fingers tugged at the twine.

“Yes.” Edward nodded. “I had planned on giving this to you that long ago summer night, as an engagement gift, but then you rejected me. I thought my heart had quit beating right there outside the ballroom.”

Please don’t do that to me again.

“I’m so sorry.” When she opened the box, she gasped, and tears filled her eyes. “It’s beautiful.” When she plucked the silver, oval-shaped locket from the box, she laid it on her palm to stare at it. A tiny sapphire winked from the ornate front of the piece.

“That locket belonged to my mother. When she died, it became part of the estate, but I’d always thought it pretty, knew it should be yours from the moment I met you.”

“You are so thoughtful and romantic.” Nancy brushed at a tear that fell to her cheek. When she eased the trinket open, tears overflowed onto her cheeks. “Oh, Edward.”

It wasn’t exactly the response he’d hoped for when preparing the gift. Inside the locket, he’d folded two tiny scraps of paper. One said, “Will you...” The other one said “...marry me?”

“Are you serious?” When she looked up at him from the locket, he nodded.

“We made mistakes in the past, didn’t take the chances when we should have.

” For the space of a few heartbeats, he paused, thinking over his next words.

“I don’t want to waste any more.” Then, feeling further inspired, he put the pouch and the chain on the sofa, removed himself from that piece of furniture, and kneeled on one knee before her.

“What are you doing?” Shock wove through her whispered inquiry as she watched him.

“Something I should have done a long time ago.” The candlelight winked and glimmered from about the room and reflected in her eyes.

“I love you, Nancy. Perhaps I always have and carried that tiny hope in my heart in the hopes I would cross your path again.” Daring much, he took her free hand in his.

“Because of you, I know what it’s like to love someone, to give my heart to someone, to trust and hope. To dream.”

“Oh, I...”

He nodded. “To possibly share a life with.”

“Dear heavens, this is unexpected and romantic.” Her hands trembled as she snapped the locket closed. “I don’t know what to say that won’t make me seem like a silly goose.”

The words tugged a grin from him. “Say you’ll make me the happiest of men, that you’ll marry me so we can finally have the life we should have long ago before pride, arrogance, and prejudice got in the way.”

Another tear fell to her cheek. Her eyes rounded, but she smiled, and his world tipped onto its head. “What about me? Do you want me to be the happiest of women?”

“Well, yes, of course,” he hastened to say. His heart felt as if it would burst if she didn’t answer him. “Are you happy without me? If you are, then by all means, we will pretend none of this happened, and I—”

“Edward.”

“Hmm?” His brain refused to process what was happening.

“Yes, I will marry you, because I love you to distraction. I have only just discovered that truth, and like you, I have loved you for years, but I thought it was because I was so unhappy in my marriage, that perhaps I’d looked at the past more fondly than it had been.

” She shook her head as she stared at the locket.

“Over the years, I know that wasn’t true.

Each time my son did something wonderful, or when I lost my other two children, at the back of my mind I wondered how you would have counseled me, how you would have supported me, how you would have loved me and been there with me to see me through. ”

“Where your husband never did.” Gratitude slammed through his chest to mingle with the anger toward the dead man as well as the tiny bit of fear he still felt.

“Yes.

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“If I had been at your side, you would never have been made to feel alone or less than.” He didn’t dare let himself feel joy.

Not yet. “I’m sorry for the sorrows in your life, sweeting, and there will no doubt be others, but I can promise you will never need to suffer by yourself.

And I can promise you that I will love you enough to help seal the cracks in your heart, so they don’t hurt as much.

Further, I promise there will be wonderful times, happy times that you can add to your memories. ”

“Oh, Edward...”

“And lastly, I have nothing but love, for you, and have had years of practice holding those feelings, nurturing them, keeping them intact and secret in the event I had a second chance.” He squeezed her fingers, and he meant every word, from the depths of his soul.

“I’m a changed man, sweeting. A man you can be proud of. ”

“I have always been proud of you, even more so now when I see how you care for your family, but I was young and reckless and na?ve back then, perhaps a bit frightened of what being a countess might entail.”

“Neither of us was ready for a life together.”

She nodded. “But I am now.” When she looked at him with moisture-spiked lashes and a quivering chin, he fell all over again. “I have always known you would wait for me, and I love you for that. Please tell me we won’t delay the wedding, because we have waited far too long for that day already.”

It was as if the floor disintegrated beneath him and the sensation of freefalling assailed him. She will be my wife. “You have my word.”

“Good.” Another round of tears rolled down her cheeks. Nancy surged forward, and the leather pouch and watch chain tumbled to the Aubusson carpet, unheeded. She slipped a hand to his nape and then kissed his lips.

Edward’s world exploded into being. The warmth in his chest expanded to obliterate every other emotion except love, and perhaps that was as it should be on this night of nights. He kissed her back, and before the last vestiges of his sanity left him, he pulled back.

“Let me put the necklace on you.” After taking the jeweled pendant from her, he fastened it about her delicate neck. “I have a ring for you with sapphires to match the locket, but I accidentally left it upstairs, for I was wracked with nerves for this conversation.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She rested a palm against the side of his face. “I have all I could ever want right now.”

The long case clock in the corridor chimed the midnight hour, but it went unheeded, for Edward kissed his fiancée, and when that wasn’t enough contact, he joined her once more on the sofa and pulled her into his lap so she straddled his hips.

Interest immediately shuddered along his shaft as her skirting pooled about them.

“After all this time, I have finally managed to win you.”

Her hands rested lightly on his shoulders, and he swore he could feel the burn of each individual finger. “We have both been quite stupid, I think, and have indeed wasted so much time.”

“Agreed.” Since she hadn’t offered a protest, he slipped his hands up her arms to cup her cheeks.

“No more. We will live life to the fullest starting now.” Then he brushed his lips over hers.

“If you wish it, I can try and secure a special license to marry here during the holidays, or we can wed as soon as we return to London.”

A blush spread over her cheeks. “Let me think about it, and I will need to write to my son, and you should probably meet him at some point.” She giggled, and the sound worked to further arouse him.

“We shall talk about everything soon.” Holding her head steady, he fit his lips to hers and kissed her with an intensity that surprised even him.

When she uttered a soft sound of surrender at the back of her throat and one of her hands drifted to his nape, he groaned, settled her more comfortably in his arms, and then set out to kiss the hell out of her. Because he finally could.

Nancy met each one of his advances. The sweet, tart taste of champagne on her lips and tongue spurred him onward.

Clearly, she’d indulged before leaving the ball.

The veriest pressure at his nape from her fingers guided him, let him know what she liked, and he claimed her mouth, determined to discover her secrets, but when she surged up onto her knees and pressed her soft body to his in an effort to kiss him back more fiercely, Edward was in danger of being lost, for each movement, every brush of her form against his ramped his need.

It took very little effort to loosen the laces at the back of her gown, and even less to slide the upper portion of that velvet and satin creation down her arms and torso.

Making short work of the stays and chemise beneath was accomplished in a twinkling and he was well rewarded for that effort.

When her modest breasts were bared with their pert rosy tips practically begging for his attention, he held her gaze with his.

Surprise mixed with desire in her hazel eyes that were now more green than brown.

“I knew you would be beautiful.” And he couldn’t wait to see the rest of her.

“Hush, you, I am quite average,” she answered in a whisper that lit tiny fires through his blood.

That utterance coupled with the anticipation in her expression chipped away at his control.

“I’ll admit, I dreamed about what coupling with you might be like more than a few times...

when things were less than ideal in my marriage...”

Damn it all to hell. Needing to bond with her and hopefully give her new, more

pleasant memories, he kissed her again while kneading the soft globes of her breasts.

Pushing away the awe of finally being able to share intimacy with her, Edward traced the pads of his thumbs around her erect nipples, over and over again, in an effort to encourage her to acclimate to his touch.

Then breaking the kiss, he dragged his lips along the side of her neck, peppered that satiny skin with feather-weighted kisses that continued beneath the underside of her jaw.

The soft sounds of pleasure and encouragement she made sent him hurtling closer to the edge of insanity.

When he brought one breast to his mouth, sucked on that tip, teased the pebbled surface with the flat of his tongue, Nancy writhed on his lap.

Urgency went through his shaft until it throbbed with need.

The moment she held his head between her palms, kissed his lips, his cheeks, his chin, he was hurled perilously close to the point of no return.

“Nancy...” He needed her off his lap to keep certain inevitable endings away, so he gently urged her onto the sofa, laying her on her back while he settled on his side facing her, cradling her body with her head resting in the crook of his arm.

“Bid me nay,” he whispered against the underside of her jaw.

“I’ll leave you untouched with no one the wiser.

We can indulge another time if you’re not—”

“Hush.” She fisted a hand in the fine lawn of his shirt, tugged him closer. Desire reflected in her eyes. “Continue. I want you, Edward, have wanted you for so long.

“Bloody hell,” he whispered against her lips, for he wanted to lose himself in her, to navigate those delicious curves and ferret out all her secrets, make up for lost time.

“Show me you never forgot me,” she said in a low voice then kissed the side of his neck, licked that same spot.

The hold on his control slipped another notice. “I have always wanted you.” Edward dipped his head and took her nipple into his mouth while rolling the other with his free hand.

Her back arched, which put her charms more firmly into his care. A moan escaped her throat, and once more the blonde arcs of her lashes lay against her cheeks in a beautiful design. “Mmm, yes, just there.”

“It has been months since I have dallied with such a beautiful woman.” He drew his hand down her body, from her breast to brush his fingers along her ribcage, to sail along the sweet curve of her hip.

Little by little, he drew up her skirting until he could trace his fingers along the edge of her garter and stocking.

“This is infinitely better, this exploring my soon to be wife.”

“Ha.” Nancy slipped her hand down his chest, leaving a trail of heat behind.

A few tendrils of hair had escaped her elegant updo from the evening, but those wisps and curls framed her face, giving her a touch of whimsy and mystery.

Mischief and wonder warred for dominance in her hazel eyes. “This is hardly a bed.”

“Indeed, it is not, but the sentiment stands.” Unable to help himself, he shoved her skirting out of the way to caress the outside of her thigh. “I want to explore your body.”

“There is nothing stopping you, Armestead.” She continued to ease her hand down, down, down, and when she reached the waist of his trousers, he held his breath. That boldness was all too captivating. “Are we not engaged? That assumes no permission is needed to—”

He silenced her explanation by pressing his lips to hers in an exquisite long and drugging kiss designed to show her without words how much he adored her and how much he desired her.

When he shifted position to ease a knee between her legs, parting them, giving her a taste of what friction would feel like, it was he who became lost in that embrace.

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When he let her up for air, Nancy shivered.

She wriggled into a better position then eased her hand downward to trace the hard bulge of his erection, and he nearly expired on the spot.

Had anything ever felt as sweet, especially after so long?

That daring touch left him gasping. “Explore all you want, love. We’re not going back.

” He grabbed her hand, moved it up and down his straining shaft.

When she smiled, his world shifted, tilted.

Never would he be the same. What would it feel like to bury himself deep into her honeyed heat and hear the sounds of pleasure she made while he thrust?

Soon, he would know.

His length pressed urgently against the front of his trousers, but he couldn’t stop kissing her, exploring her lips while brushing his fingers through the curls at the apex of her thighs.

At her gasp, he slipped his tongue into her mouth to duel with hers.

The deepening kisses were just as he’d hoped, and when she opened her thighs slightly, her moan twined with his.

Edward nuzzled the spot where her shoulder met her neck, and when she shivered, he grinned against her skin.

He adored how responsive she was. As he dragged his lips up the side of her throat, he further encouraged her thighs apart to dance his fingers along her heated flesh.

The acceleration of her breathing urged him onward, then he once more worried a nipple with his tongue and teeth while caressing her folds to draw forth her arousal.

“Edward...” Nancy furrowed her fingers through his hair, applied the slightest bit of pressure on his nape to guide him closer.

As if he needed encouragement. Moving restlessly against him, she again curled a hand into his shirt.

“I am becoming drunk on you; have craved you for far too long.” The whispered admission gave him the permission he sought.

Then she turned more fully into him, and his fingertips traced the rim of her opening. “Oh!” The little squeak of surprise tugged at his heart. “I’d forgotten how lovely this could be when I wasn’t dreading it.”

“God, you’re surprising, wonderful,” he whispered, seconds before he swiped his tongue over a nipple. And she was his.

She clutched at his shoulder, moving her hips, which only caused his fingers to graze along her more sensitive parts. “Make me fly, Edward, make me break. Replace my less than happy memories with better ones.”

It was all the permission he needed, but damn, he wanted to see her naked, burnished by the cheerful fire behind the grate. Perhaps another time, and still he continued to

strum his fingers along her flesh, priming her.

Nancy smiled at him, and there was such heat in her gaze, need shot through his length and tingled in his stones.

“I need you here.” She laid a hand atop his and pressed his fingers against herself, near that swelling pearl at her center.

“Obviously, I have done this before, but with you, I feel it will be different... right.”

“I think so to, but I was giving you time to acclimate...”

“I don’t need it, for I am quite sure.” She met his gaze, and there was nothing but honesty in her eyes. “Claim me.”

“Ah, I...” he managed to choke out from a suddenly tight throat. The trust she’d placed in him left him humbled but with a sense of protectiveness for her. It was heady stuff indeed. When he furrowed his fingers through her curls, a moan escaped him from her readiness. “You are so ready.”

“Then you shouldn’t encounter any resistance.”

The wink she gave him, combined with her state of dishabille, the need in her expression, and the warmth of her flesh, sent him falling down a slippery slope he’d wanted to explore with her years ago.

And now he was here. “Right.” He sucked a pebbled nipple into his mouth while rubbing his fingers over that tiny, hidden button at the center of her pleasure.

“Oh!” Nancy jerked in his hold, but she moved her hand from his to rest on his shoulder. Her eyes opened wide reflecting wonder and hunger; she bumped her hips

against his palm, and it was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen. "Do you know what you are doing to me?" she whispered in a choked voice.

"I have a fair idea." Smug satisfaction burgeoned in his chest. As he worked, his shaft tightened to the point of pain, but he ignored his discomfort to bring her bliss. The faster he rubbed that nubbin, the more her breathing became labored.

Tiny moans and sighs left her throat, and each one pushed him farther to the point of no return.

She clutched at his shoulders while her body undulated against his, and every brush, each new touch was both heaven and hell.

He was perilously close to embarrassing himself, but he couldn't stop—wouldn't continue to other things—until he'd sent her flying.

Her thighs trembled. She pulled him closer and alternately tried to push him away. "Mmm, oh..." She writhed in a restless rhythm. "I will break soon; it's been too long." One of her hands drifted to a breast, plucked at a nipple. Was she even aware she did that?

How erotic was it that she wasn't ashamed to pleasure herself while he touched her?

Was there anything more sensual than a woman on the edge of release?

"Fall over the edge for me, sweeting. Let me see you find bliss," he murmured like a man possessed.

"Show me that you adore my touch, my fingers on you."

"I do, and it's even better than I imagined." She panted, her hips gyrating into his

hand, her body sliding against his as she moved restlessly. “Almost...”

He bent his head and kissed her—hard and deep—and at the same time increased both the friction and the intensity on her swollen button.

“Yes.” The whispered word, the way she nipped his bottom lip, the curl of her fingers into his shoulder sent need streaking through his shaft.

“I’m... Ah!” Her body stiffened. Her fingers flexed on his shoulders, the nails sending tiny pinpricks of pain through his blood, and then her back arched, her eyes closed, and she screamed as she hit bliss.

“Damn.” Quickly, Edward kissed her, took the remainder of the sound into himself to minimize alerting anyone from the house party that hadn’t gone on to church. She shivered and trembled in his arms.

Eventually, she came back to reality, and there was a flush over her chest and in her cheeks.

With a shuddering sigh, she collapsed—melted really—into the sofa and into his embrace.

Flashing an exhausted but satiated grin, she rested the back of her wrist to her forehead.

“That was beyond anything I have ever dreamed of.”

“Then you should truly enjoy what is next.” The hold on his control snapped. It was now or never. Shifting position once more, he settled himself between her legs that were bent at the knee. “Wrap your legs around my waist. This will no doubt go quickly, for I’ve been out of practice for a bit.”

“There will be other times for drawn out teasing.” She’d barely followed his instructions before he kissed her, showed her with his tongue what he would soon do to her body.

It was quite a powerful aphrodisiac, and he was nearly beside himself knowing he had years of this ahead of him with her.

A haze of passion and desire clouded his mind.

Then urgency compelled him to get on with it.

He penetrated her body, not stopping until he’d fully seated himself.

“Never will I tire of this. When I claim you, when I know you are mine, when you surrender to me... love me.” If he wasn’t careful, he would turn into a watering pot.

“I feel as if we were always meant to be here... together.”

“Yes.” This moment of pause while she rested, impaled on his thick length, made him truly realize how damned fortunate he was.

And then he couldn’t wait any longer, for his shaft squeezed in warning.

They communed in a dance as old as time itself.

Again and again, he speared into her, his hips flexing, and when she looped her arms about his shoulders and met each thrust, he had never been happier.

Deeper he went, perhaps in an effort to touch her soul, and she dug her fingernails into his shoulders, and still he worked her body, claimed it, melded them into one being essentially.

Then he changed his rhythm. His thrusts were more frantic, fast, deep. Nancy apparently gave up trying to match his strokes, for she clung to him. All too soon she tipped over the edge once more, and seconds before he lost himself, he thrust inside her again, then his shaft pulsed and jerked.

Edward uttered her name in a graveled voice.

He ground his hips into hers as he enjoyed that bliss.

Afterward, he held her so close the steady beat of her heartbeat was in her ears.

Never would he forget this night. "I am so damned fortunate to have finally won you," he murmured against the satin skin of her neck.

She looked at him with love and joy reflected in her eyes. "I think you have always owned my heart, but this time 'round, I don't intend to lose you."

As they lay together catching their breath and coming back to reality, the sound of the door adjoining the drawing room to the billiards room creaked open.

"Bloody hell." He hadn't thought to lock that door. "Stay silent." Pulling Nancy closer into the protective shield of his arms, he pressed her back into the back of the sofa while peeking around the edge of the arm rest.

Then his sister came into view with Reggie. The unmistakable sounds of kissing commenced for a few moments before she spoke. "It's our second Christmas together, darling."

"Every day since the one I married you has been my favorite." Reggie pressed his forehead to Kitty's. "I can't wait to make our announcement tomorrow."

“Me neither.” She kissed him again. “Our life is about to change again.”

“Life has been surprising and amazing.” As Edward watched, she took Reggie’s hand.

“What say you to being intimate in my brother’s drawing room?”

It’ll be a bit before the others return from church.

” As she spoke, he tugged on his hand, “Perhaps we should...” Then she gasped, for she happened to meet Edward’s gaze and her eyebrows rose.

Dear God. Would she keep his secret? He put a finger to his lips and looked at her with what he hoped was a silent plea.

“This is true.”

Kitty cleared her throat. “However, why don’t we go somewhere more romantic? The orangery is usually always decorated, and it will be as if we’re in the midst of the snow. A bit risqué but I think that fits in with our whole relationship, don’t you?”

“I adore how your mind works, Katherine,” Reggie said and then kissed her again.

Edward rolled his eyes. He didn’t want to hear any more pillow talk between his sister and his best friend.

“Good. Perhaps that means you’ll prove innovative and exciting tonight.” With a wink at Edward, she pulled her husband out of the room.

Seconds later, the soft snick of the door assured him they had fully left.

“I thought they would never leave.” As relief twisted down his spine, Edward relaxed into Nancy and softly kissed her lips.

After a bit, he sighed and moved her more comfortably into his arms. “I honestly think if Kitty hadn’t married, I wouldn’t have had the courage to ask you to marry me tonight. ”

She giggled. The sound went straight to his heart and shaft. “Then I’ll be certain to thank her tomorrow.” With a smile, she laid a hand to his cheek. “Happy Christmas, Armestead.”

“Happy Christmas, sweeting. I can’t wait to start our lives together.”

Indeed, it was sweeter the second time around.

Armestead Hall

North of Watford

Hertfordshire, England

Edward grinned at his wife of nearly two years as she entered the drawing room. Since they'd married in this very room on Old Year's Day two years before, his life had changed exponentially. And even now he was still amazed by it.

"Are the children asleep?" His son, born in September of 1820 looked like him but had the temperance of Kitty, of all people, while his daughter, born in August of this year, favored Nancy and was more like him.

And he dearly adored them both.

"They are." The smile she bestowed upon him never failed to light him up inside.

When she drifted close to his position, he tugged her down onto his lap, and she came willingly enough.

"They are both looking forward to playing in the snow tomorrow... or so I'd like to imagine since they are still too young to fully understand what snow is. "

"I'll be certain to take them out at some point after breakfast. They can play with Kitty's daughter."

Nancy nodded. “To say nothing of your growing brood of nephew and nieces.”

“There is that.” His sisters were constantly reproducing. Then he nuzzled the crook of her neck. “I might be biased, but I think our two are quite smart.”

“I agree.” For a few moments, he indulged in kissing her before pulling away. “When I tell you that my life essentially began anew the day you accepted my marriage proposal, I am not lying. Every day that I wake, I thank whatever deity is listening that I had a second chance with you.”

“We’ve had a good life. You are a wonderful husband and an even better father.” A trace of tears welled in her eyes. “Even to Harry. In fact, you brought him out of his confusion and anger from his own father’s death.”

“All I did was relate to him, told him everything would come out right in the end.” The opportunity to counsel her son from her previous marriage—now a fifteen-year-old young man—had helped him to grow as a person as well. “He will do well as the newest Viscount Havelock when he’s of age.”

“Because of you.” When she nibbled at his ear lobe, Edward nearly launched off the sofa.

“I adore the man you are, Armestead, and I share your gratitude that life brought us back together.” She peered at him with a soft smile.

“These past two years have made me so incredibly happy. I can’t wait to see where we go from here. ”

“I am of the same thought.” He held her closer because he could.

“Ah, Nancy, you are everything I have ever wanted in a wife, a partner, and this night?” Emotions clogged his throat.

“This night was already sacred, but it is a second time because I finally won you.” His voice broke. “To finally live.”

She hugged him close. “We no longer live in the past, Edward, and with each step we move into the future, which is better every time we look.”

“Thanks to you, to our children, to Kitty.” Without her inviting Nancy to that house party, none of this would have been possible.

“And to you, for never wanting to settle for anything less than love.”

“Which I truly believe I had that night you first rejected me... but we were both afraid.” He rested his forehead against hers. “How stupid we were.”

“How clever we are now.” The long case clock in the corridor chimed the midnight hour. When she smiled, his world tilted as it always did with her. “Happy Christmas, Armestead.”

“Happy Christmas, Nancy. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Were there any better words? Never would he tire of hearing them. And, God willing, he wouldn't for a very long time indeed.