

Everyone agreed the house party was an unmitigated disaster. The weather had been rainy but not cold enough to snow. All of the outdoor events—the ice skating, the sledding, and the gathering of greenery for the coming Christmas holiday—had been cancelled due to inclement weather. No one wanted to traipse about in puddles of slushy mud.

Thus, when the first flakes of snow drifted lazily to the frigid ground the night before the party was to conclude and the guests were to depart for their family estates to celebrate Christmas with loved ones, most of the guests eyed the steadily falling flecks with narrowed eyes. When the worst was confirmed, and the gray morning revealed mammoth snow drifts, howling winds, and a blur of swirling white outside the frosty windows, no one was pleased to be snowbound.

No one but Holly.

She had no one to go home to. She was to spend Christmas with her sister and her sister's family, as she had the last three years, but the experience had always proved more depressing than joyous. Anne and her husband were so happy. They had such beautiful children. They had a lovely home.

They had everything Holly wanted.

For a little while she had thought she was the luckiest woman alive. She'd married a man she loved and esteemed, and they'd been happy. But then James died, and she'd watched all her dreams slip through her fingers.

She hadn't planned to come to the house party. Even if Lady Dorsey was one of her good friends from childhood, Holly had little interest in parlor games or freezing her cheeks and toes to skate in circles around a frozen lake. Some days it felt like it took all of her energy just to breathe. Holiday frivolity seemed a distant memory.

But then Eva—Lady Dorsey—had casually remarked that Lord Ivy would be in attendance, and Holly hadn't been able to decline. Now that she stood in the morning room, peering out the window at the blur of white obscuring objects even a few feet away, Holly considered that Eva had known what she was about when she'd mentioned Lord Ivy. Eva knew Holly blushed whenever Ivy was near and became tongue-tied when he spoke to her. He'd been her brother's friend at school, and he'd often come home with Edward on school breaks. But Adam, now Viscount Ivy, had never paid the slightest bit of attention to shy, quiet Holly.

He'd been much more interested in horses. His family was known to breed and train the very best horses in England. Clearly Ivy's father and grandfather had passed the interest on to the

new heir. Her brother, Edward, had been similarly infatuated with horses, and the two boys spent more time in the stable and paddock than in her parents' house. Holly hadn't minded. She had a clear view of both locations from her bedroom window.

She'd been watching Adam from a distance ever since. She'd forgotten about the viscount when she'd fallen in love with and married James. But after her husband's death and one year of mourning, she went out in public once again and for the next two years she saw Viscount Ivy at practically every turn. He had also been just out of mourning, having lost his father about the same time she lost James.

They had both suffered a devastating loss, but Holly dearly wished they had something else in common.

Adam had been an attractive boy with wavy hair that was neither brown nor blond but somewhere in-between and with the best shades of both running through it. His brown eyes were always warm, as though someone had stirred gold into the brown to make it softer. His face had been rounder when he was younger. It thinned as he grew older, the cheekbones and jaw looking almost as though a sculptor had chiseled away the baby flesh to reveal the sleek bone structure beneath. And though she knew he was not particularly tall, he carried himself in a way that made him seem to tower over other men. His back was straight, his shoulders broad, his thighs perfectly shaped in his tight breeches.

And so, when it appeared that the house party would continue at least one more night and perhaps two, leaving the guests stranded on Christmas Eve, Holly didn't really mind. She pretended to mind, but there were worse things than spending the holiday with her oldest friend and the dashing Lord Ivy, even if she hadn't done more than whisper a hello or smile shyly at him from across the room.

She heard the door to the morning room open and turned with an apology on her lips. She expected to see Eva, coming to scold her for sneaking out of charades in the drawing room. Instead she stared into the handsome face of Viscount Ivy.

He looked as surprised to see her as she was to see him. His eyes widened, and his brows rose. "Mrs. Farthing." He gave a quick bow, recovering his composure.

"Lord Ivy," Holly said, her voice little more than a whisper. If he had come to the morning room, he wanted solitude. She should leave him to his peace and quiet. "I was just leaving," she

said, aware her cheeks must be flaming red. Her face felt as though she was mere inches from a roaring fire.

“You needn’t leave on my account,” he said, moving into the room and closing the door behind him. “In fact, I had been looking for the chance to speak with you.”

Holly’s breath caught, and she stared at him in disbelief. “Y-you wanted to speak with me?”

He smiled easily. “Is that so strange? We are old friends, are we not? I asked you in passing, I know, but now that we are alone, I wanted to inquire again. How is your family? How is Edward? I haven’t seen him for some time.”

“Edward?” She understood the question, but she couldn’t quite move past the fact that Viscount Ivy thought of her as a friend. On the one hand, she was grateful he’d noticed her at all. On the other, her feelings toward him were much warmer than friendship.

“Yes, your brother?” Ivy said when she didn’t respond to his question. “How is he?”

“Fine,” she finally managed.

Ivy’s eyes narrowed. “Have I caught you at a bad time? I should excuse myself.”

“No!” She couldn’t let him leave. This was her chance to...to...she did not know what this was her chance to do, but she did know she wanted Adam to keep talking to her. “I mean, I am quite well, thank you. And so is Edward. He has taken over the management of my late parents’ estate. It keeps him well occupied and also makes him very happy.”

“I can imagine. Well, if anyone is up to that task, it is Edward. He was always a brilliant student.” He nodded at her. “And you? How are you? I know this time of year must be difficult for you.” He was referring to James’s passing, of course.

“Thank you. I am sure it is for you and your family, as well.”

“Thank you. Have I told you how much my mother—well, all of us—appreciated your letter of condolence?”

Holly swallowed the lump in her throat. She barely remembered writing the letter when Adam’s father had died as she had been so deep in grief at the time, but she was pleased to know it had been well received.

And then she realized she had not spoken for a minute or two, and the silence dragged on. Ivy ran a hand through his hair and crossed to the window, where she still stood. Holly moved

aside so he could see the storm outside. “When you arrived, I didn’t expect you to be alone,” he said, his eyes on the swirling snow.

“I have my maid,” Holly said.

He smiled and then looked at her. “I meant, I thought you would have married again by now.”

Holly was struck speechless both by the words and by the handsomeness of his features. “Why?” she finally managed, though if she had not been so awed, she would never have been so forward.

“A pretty girl like you,” Ivy said. “What man wouldn’t want you?”

Holly did not know what she would have said next, and she never had the chance to say it because just then the door opened, and Eva entered. “Holly, I have been looking everywhere for you. I—” She stopped when she spotted Ivy. “My lord. I do apologize. I did not mean to interrupt.”

Ivy bowed. “You are never an interruption, my lady. If you’ll excuse me, I believe the men are gathering in the billiards room.”

“Of course.”

Holly and Eva curtsied and did not speak until Ivy had closed the door and his footsteps faded.

Eva grasped Holly’s hand and squealed. “Tell me everything.”

Eva was a petite woman, barely five feet when she stood straight, shoulders back. She had dark hair and green eyes, and the most adorable dimples when she smiled. It was difficult for Holly to deny Eva anything when she smiled and pressed her soft, warm hand into Holly’s.

“There’s nothing to tell.” Holly’s voice sounded breathless, as though she had run a great distance. She put a hand on her chest to still her heart. “Lord Ivy asked after my brother.”

“That’s it?”

Holly felt her face heating again.

Eva smiled. “Tell me.”

“He said I was pretty. He said any man would want me for a wife.”

“I just knew this snow would redeem the party! What will you do now?” Eva squeezed her hand tightly.

Holly shook her head. “I don’t know. What should I do?”

Eva bent and looked into Holly’s eyes. “Make him love you.”

“I can’t!”

“You can. Anything is possible. It’s Christmastime.”

Oh, but that was easy for Eva to say. She was pretty and vivacious and at ease even among strangers. Holly was so painfully shy that even when a man did ask her to dance, she could hardly carry on a conversation. Dinner parties were interminable as she never knew what to say and often became so nervous she could hardly eat.

She preferred to stay home and observe. She could sit at her window in the drawing room and see the people passing on the street below as she sewed or read or simply propped her chin on her hand and watched the world pass her by.

Eva squeezed her hands again. “You will try, won’t you, Holly?” The hope in Eva’s eyes had the effect of sparking a flicker of hope in Holly’s heart. She knew better than to nurture that hope, but she couldn’t help but smile.

“I will try,” Holly said.