

The journey was predictably long, cold and dull. Neither the fantasy novel Sam had given her for Christmas nor the new tracks she'd downloaded could entirely overcome her frustration with the train's insistence on stopping at every single tiny station along the route.

The sun had never properly risen all day, but by the time the train finally dragged itself into Halleith station just before 5, it seemed more like midnight than late afternoon. The sight of Tom standing on the platform cheered her like nothing else could have done. He came over, took her suitcase and helped her down from the train. His chivalry made her feel like she was disembarking from the Orient Express rather than the aging diesel train she'd actually travelled on.

As soon as they were clear of the train, he pulled her into a crushing embrace. Drew back. If she allowed herself the slightest touch of intimacy, she'd be in his bed within moments of arriving at the house.

Tom led her to a battered Land Rover and helped her into the passenger seat before bundling her luggage into the back. He cranked the heating up full-blast, put on some music, then set off.

Even from the rural station, reaching Tom's house required a long drive along endless winding country lanes. They drove in companionable silence. Harriet couldn't take her eyes off Tom. He was dressed for a cold night in the country, just a pair of battered old cords and an even tattier woollen jumper, but he still exuded an unmistakable air of polish and poise. Would it be so wrong to put her hand over his as it lay there lightly on the gear stick?

She looked away. No romance until Richard's plans were complete. No getting back with Tom when she'd have to lie to him every day.

"Thank you for letting me stay," she said, still looking out of the window rather than at him. "But I don't want to lead you on, especially after what happened at the end of term. I know it's strange to ask you for this favour if I'm not treating it as an opportunity to get back together. I hope that's okay."

Tom touched her shoulder. He presumably meant the gesture to be reassuring, but it sent tremors through her. "I understand. I'd be lying if I claimed I wouldn't prefer a romantic break with you, but it'll be fun to have someone around regardless. Highgarden's not really a place to stay alone."

Shortly afterwards, the car drove up a steep hill, through a pair of imposing gates, then came to a stop at the end of a gravel driveway. A huge illuminated pine tree dominated the otherwise darkened courtyard.

The house's size and grandeur should probably have made her feel intimidated, but it felt like coming home.

Inside the main hall, a fire burned in the large fireplace and another giant Christmas tree dominated the space, reaching up into the oak-beamed ceiling. Garlands of holly and sprigs of mistletoe tied with red ribbons covered every inch of the rugged stonewalls and the ornately carved fireplace. Harriet had never seen somewhere that so radiated the spirit of Christmas.

"This is beautiful," she said. "I don't remember you having gone to so much trouble last year."

"The decorations go up on Christmas Eve," Tom replied. "That's the way we used to do it - none of that first of December nonsense. Anyway, you might want to go and freshen up and get changed. Tonight I'm rekindling another old tradition."

Harriet frowned. "What's happening? I was expecting a quiet night."

Tom grinned. "The Boxing Day Hunt, of course. When I was a boy, people from miles around would gather at the house on Boxing Day morning. There'd be bacon sandwiches in the courtyard, we'd all ride off, then some of my family's closer friends would come back for a warming dinner. It was probably the highlight of my father's year.

"After I was turned, I had to cry off it. Even in December, there's too much sunlight at 11am. My father could just about forgive me for abandoning cricket and never appearing at lunchtime, but he found that change hard to stomach.

"Once he died and I inherited, I had an idea. An evening hunt. The dark made no difference to my ability to see. I invited few neighbouring vampires along, and for everyone else it was a novelty and an extra adventure. After about twenty years, it turned into a tradition. I've let it trail off recently, but I thought it would be good to get it up and running again."

Tom couldn't stop smiling and his eyes sparkled. Harriet could barely remember seeing his this excited about anything.

"Isn't hunting illegal nowadays?" Harriet asked.

"I think you'll find that so is drinking human blood, but I've never let that bother me," Tom replied.

"I can't ride a horse," Harriet said. "I certainly can't ride one over wild countryside in the dark."

Tom laughed. "If you're going to be staying for a few weeks, I'll have to teach you. But for tonight, you'll find a reasonable number of the women and the younger and older guests stay at the house. And it's always a spectacle worth seeing when we set up and then again when we return."

"In that case, can you show me to my room so I can change?" Harriet asked.

He picked up her suitcase as though it weighed nothing and led her along a succession of corridors and staircases. She recognised the large door that led to his room, but he deposited the suitcase in a smaller room just along the corridor.

Harriet couldn't help reflecting that it was close enough for her to be able to creep between the two with ease if the fancy took her. *Stop thinking like that. This is an entirely platonic visit.*

Tom had advised Harriet to dress for warmth rather than glamour, but she compromised as best she could with a long dark skirt, suede boots and a soft, clinging jumper. Tom had promised the loan of a Barbour jacket for the outdoor parts of the process.

A little later, there was a knock on the door. The moment Tom opened it, her heart raced. Gone was the charmingly scruffy outfit from earlier. Instead, he was dressed for the hunt - tight white breeches that showed off his shapely legs and thighs, long black boots, an impeccably ironed shirt and the classic red jacket. He sat down next to her on the bed and she suspected she might actually

swoon. She wondered how long it would take her to remove the complicated clothes and whether he'd mind if she crumpled them.

"Are you ready to come down?" Tom asked. "The first guests will be arriving soon."

From his half-smile, Harriet suspected he was all too aware of the effect he was having on her. "As ready as I'll ever be for dealing with your friends," she said.

Tom took her arm and she made no attempt to shrug it off. Surely she could allow herself that one small pleasure.

"Let's make an entrance," he whispered into her ear.

The previously deserted hall and darkened courtyard were in uproar by the time they entered. People dressed much like Tom strolled around chatting loudly to each other, though few if any of them pulled off the look as well as him. Smartly dressed children careered around the hall, weaving in and out of the adults. Some of the women were clearly intending to stay behind, but others were dressed for the hunt in tailored outfits that simultaneously showed off their curves and their breeding. Several of them gave Tom flirtatious glances and her questioning ones. She wished she were dressed like them and able to take part.

"Tom, my good fellow, who's this?" a middle aged man bellowed. "Don't tell me you've found yourself a woman. Your father would be delighted."

Harriet withered under the man's enthusiastic gaze, but she forced herself to channel her mother and give him her most dazzling smile.

"I'm Harriet," she said. "We're just friends."

The inquirer's face fell, though half the women in the room smiled at her. She half wished she'd laid more claim to him.

"Don't worry, I'm sure she'll change her mind later," the man said to Tom. He appeared to be attempting to whisper the words, which meant that he reduced his customary bellow to a normal speaking level. "Your father had quite the way with the ladies, and I'm sure you'll be the same. You're the spitting image of him at your age. Some of those evenings we spent together in the pub and out on the field, I'll never forget them. Is he ever coming back from Singapore?"

Tom looked down at the floor. Harriet suspected he remembered those evenings just as vividly as his companion. "He often mentions you when we speak, Henry. But I don't think he's coming back. His heart's getting weaker and weaker. I don't want to spoil the mood, but I suspect he'll die out there, probably within the year. I'm going out to visit him soon.

Almost unconsciously, Harriet took hold of Tom's hand. It must be so hard to live like that, to watch your friends grow old, to have to pretend to be the son or the grandson of the contemporaries they'd known. It made her want to hold him, to remind him that he could always be honest with her. He squeezed her hand and his expression brightened.

“That’s the spirit,” Henry said, his own frown giving way to a jovial smile. “And look, your ‘friend’ seems to like you after all. Give your father my love, but no more dour talk tonight. Let’s get to the horses.”

Harriet never wanted to let go of Tom’s hand, but she made herself. By unspoken agreement, everyone drifted outside, picking up a torch from a huge pile of them by the main door. The scene in the courtyard made the hall look positively calm. Dogs and horses filled the space and people crowded around.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” Tom asked. “You could ride with me if you like. It’s not very conventional, but I wouldn’t let you fall.”

He pointed to his beautiful glossy horse, which stood a good head above most of them.

Harriet walked over to the horse and stroked its flank. Many of the horses were stamping their feet and chomping their jaws, but this one was utterly calm.

“Have you mesmerised your horse?” Harriet asked when Tom appeared behind her.

“Just a little. Misty’s a good girl anyway, but a touch of mesmerism helps keep her calm on these night rides. I’ll extend it out to the others shortly. Anyway, want to ride?”

Harriet stroked Misty again. “I think I’ll pass. Take me out tomorrow night, just the two of us. I don’t think my nerves can take this.”

Tom laughed and hugged her lightly. “You’re such a little city girl, aren’t you? Have it your way. I’ll see you later.”

With that, he sprung onto the horse as easily as most people boarded a bus. He leaned over, touched something on Misty’s bridle and a light at her neck flickered on. The other riders did the same. The horses seemed much calmer once they could see, or perhaps that was Tom spreading his magic over them all.

“Don’t just stand there gawping, my dear,” a woman said, taking a firm hold of Harriet’s arm. “If you’re not going out with them, and I can’t say I blame you, then help me bring out the Stirrup Cup.”

It took all of Harriet’s effort to turn her gaze away from Tom, who looked like a conquering king on his steed, but she turned to face the newcomer. In the torchlight, she appeared about forty, attractive in a sturdy, no-nonsense sort of way, with boots, a sensible jacket and pinned back hair.

“The hunt usually meets at my house, Wentbury Hall, just across the valley. But I’m so pleased that the Highgarden Night Hunt is back on this year. I loved it when I was a girl. Offered the chance for all sorts of mischief.”

She propelled Harriet towards the house. “As soon as I heard it was happening, I offered to play hostess on the basis that no twenty-something young man, regardless of breeding, is going to take proper care of his guests. His mother’s long-gone, he insists he doesn’t need staff and there’s never been any sign of a potential wife. If I’d known you were auditioning for the role, I’d have taken a step back.”

Harriet blushed so hard she suspected her red cheeks were visible even in the darkness. "I'm not auditioning for anything. I'm not even his girlfriend," she said.

Her new companion shook her head. "Then you're mad. He obviously likes you, and what's not to like back? When I was younger I had such a pash for his father, like most of the girls in the county. I ended up with his best friend instead. I think you met my husband, Henry, earlier. I haven't seen Lord Flyte in years."

*You've seen him tonight*, Harriet wanted to shout, as she followed Henry's wife to the kitchen. How could they all fail to realise that Tom was the same person they'd known in their youth?

"Did anything ever happen between the two of you?" Harriet asked.

The woman raised her eyebrows. "Goodness, I'm not sure I've even told you my name and now you're asking me about my sex life."

"I'm sorry," Harriet said, her blush increasing by the minute. "It was a stupid question."

"Well, in case you're wondering, my name is Helen. And now we've got that out of the way, I'm happy to say that I'm not offended at all. I've always preferred salacious gossip to small talk. Get the cups down. Top shelf in the cupboard on the left."

Helen busied herself collecting various spirits and spices and throwing them into an elaborate punchbowl. She seemed to know her way around the kitchen extremely well.

"It's not changed a bit in years," she explained as Harriet stared at her. "And this is an old family recipe. Some hunts make do with a bit of whisky, but we've always done it this way. I used to make it for Thomas. Lord Flyte, I mean. This Tom's father. And yes, things 'happened between us' as you so delicately put it."

Harriet gripped the cup in her hands a little too hard. "I see," she said.

Helen laughed and added yet more ingredients to the punchbowl. "Don't look so scandalised. This was about thirty years ago. He was emphatically unattached and so was I. It only happened twice. I dreamt he'd fall in love with me, but it was never going to happen. He was rather a cold man under all the exterior charm. I suspect that most of the daughters of the local landowners and most of the girls in the village had something happen with him at least once, but I doubt he had any feelings for any of them.

"His son seems much sweeter. The way he looked at you earlier, there was real love there. I'd have killed to have had my Thomas look at me like that."

Harriet put the cup down on a tray before she broke it. "And what about his wife? Was he in love with her?"

Helen shrugged. "I never met her. He left for the continent just after Henry and I married. He wrote once or twice, and he told us he had a wife, but they continued to live abroad and I never saw either of them again. The next thing I knew was when his son appeared a few years ago and set himself up

in the house. The first time I saw him, I nearly had a heart attack. It was like looking back in time. He never mentions his mother, but whoever she is, she didn't pass on any of her looks."

Helen beckoned to a solid looking man. "Be a dear, Bert and take this outside. Get someone else to take the tray of cups out."

Harriet followed Bert. However cold it was, she wanted to be in the fresh air. It might take the dizziness away. They set out the cups and the punch bowl on a picnic table. The people who were on foot or staying behind busied themselves pouring out drinks which they passed up to the riders. Helen poured one for Henry, which he accepted with a smile.

"Are you sure you don't want to ride out, darling?" he asked Helen. "I'm sure Tom Junior's lovely lady can keep things under control here."

Helen gave a brittle smile. "I think one lucky escape was quite enough. You're far too old for this. And William is far too young."

Harriet followed her gaze to a boy who looked about fifteen and could only be their son.

"Give Tom a drink," Helen ordered. "Do it before one of those girls beat you to it."

After their conversation, Harriet couldn't even attempt to pretend that wouldn't bother her. She filled the most elaborate silver cup and almost sprinted over to Tom. Between her slight build and his huge horse, she could barely reach to pass it into his hands, but she managed by standing on tiptoes. Tom gave a grateful smile and let his fingers touch hers for a few second longer than was strictly necessary.

"We'll make a country lady of you yet," he said. "You can be my lady of the manor any time."

Almost as soon as he handed the cup back to her, Tom blew his horn and the place was in uproar. And then they were off. Harriet followed as far as the end of Tom's driveway, then drifted back to the house.

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Helen took her back under her wing, leading her to the kitchen to help her prepare a huge ham. As soon as they arrived, she fixed her a large glass of the punch. Just a few sips made everything seem slightly easier to deal with.

"I feel like I should have gone with them," Harriet said. "Tom's going to think I'm such a wimp."

Helen shook her head vehemently. "The Night Hunt is stupidly dangerous. I rode out with them every year from my mid-teens until I was 28, but I was a good rider, a reckless young woman, and a stickler for tradition."

"So why did you stop?" Harriet asked. "Your husband still seems to like it."

“The year I married Henry, something went wrong. My light broke and in the darkness, I lost the pack. My horse panicked. We careered into a fallen branch. In the daytime, I’d have jumped it easily, but I couldn’t see a thing. Nightingale threw me. I’d fallen before, but the second I hit the ground, I knew something wasn’t right. I couldn’t move and I was sure I’d broken my neck.” Helen shuddered, the memories clearly all too powerful.

“You don’t have to tell me if it’s too painful,” Harriet said.

Helen took a deep breath and a swig of punch and visibly composed herself. “I was lying there, convinced that I would die and that even if I lived I’d never walk again. I couldn’t hear the pack and I didn’t believe that anyone would find me in the pitch darkness. I was on the verge of passing out, and then he appeared out of nowhere on his huge horse.”

Harriet didn’t have to ask who *he* was. Her own heart raced as though she were the one lost and broken in the woods.

“He knelt down beside me and touched my neck. In the light from his horse’s torch, I could see his expression, and it told me everything I needed to know. I remember his words so well: ‘I shouldn’t interfere with things like this. But I can’t bear to see Henry walking around with his heart broken and I’ve always longed to make amends to your family.’”

“What did he mean by that?” Harriet asked. She put the ham in the oven and didn’t look at Helen.

“I’ve never really been sure. Look, the story gets a bit strange from here. I shouldn’t tell you, you’ll only think I’m crazy. The moral of the story is that there’s no shame in not participating in the Night Hunt. I’ve never been out since.”

Harriet walked over to Helen and put a hand on her trembling arm. “Believe me, I have a high tolerance for strange stories. Get it off your chest.”

“If you insist. He was kneeling on the muddy ground and then he bit his wrist and let some of his blood drip into my mouth. All the time, I could sort of hear his voice in my head, telling me to relax, telling me to heal, telling me I wasn’t in pain. When he finally stopped, he took my hand and helped me to my feet. I ached all over, but I could walk perfectly and nothing seemed to be broken. I didn’t want to get back in the saddle, but he insisted. Astonishingly, Nightingale was fine too. We rode in silence. I wanted to talk, but every time I tried to start a conversation, he shushed me.”

Helen stared at her, as though daring her to comment. Harriet nodded for her to continue, but the story actually did sound strange, even to her jaded ears. Vampires didn’t give their blood to just anyone. It was a sacred, passionate thing. Had Tom had more feelings for Helen than she’d realised, or had there been something else at play? Helen had claimed he’d said something about a debt owed to her family - what did that mean?

“When we arrived back at Highgarden, the rest of the hunt were already at the house and utterly frantic with panic. Henry lifted me off Nightingale and just held me. Thomas told them I’d had a little fall, but nothing a shot of whisky, a hot bath, and a good night’s sleep won’t fix. Everyone fussed around me and hailed Thomas as the returning hero.

“Thomas tried to avoid me, but as soon as I found him alone, out by the stables, I reminded him that my neck had appeared to be broken. I insisted that he’d fed me his blood and healed me. He laughed and said that the shock had obviously left me confused. He claimed he’d merely calmed me and helped me back on to my horse. He held me to him and the same voice that had told me to heal asked me to forget. I nodded and pretended that I had, but I’ve never forgotten.”

Helen dropped eye-contact and her faraway look turned into one of embarrassment. She poured herself another drink and then hurried away to find friends before Harriet could respond.

Around midnight, the unmistakable sound of the hunt returning filled the air. Everyone stopped what they were doing and rushed out into the courtyard. The hunters were in good spirits - no one had been injured and they’d found their prey.

The only person looking a little subdued was one of the beautifully dressed young female riders, whose father had to help her from her horse. “Take Rebecca up to one of the guest bedrooms,” Tom called. “She rode far too hard. Put most of the men to shame.”

Harriet watched her as her father led her away. Rebecca’s vacant gaze and stumbling gait were all too familiar. She had no doubt that if she pulled her smart white scarf aside, there’d be bite marks on her neck. The thought made her even colder than she already was.

Tom handed the reins of Misty to Bert and literally jumped to the ground, landing with vampiric elegance. He headed straight for her, picked her up and spun her around. “Did you miss me?” he asked.

The excitement of the hunt had clearly got to him. Harriet reflected that this little display would do little to help her “definitely just friends” argument, but it was hard to care. Helen’s encouraging words rang in her ears, drowning out her worry about resuming a relationship and her discomfort at what had obviously happened to poor Rebecca.

“I kept myself entertained,” she replied. “Helen has been telling me all sorts of stories about your ‘father.’”

Everyone gathered in the festively decorated hall, tucking into a buffet of roast ham, freshly baked bread and every sort of accompaniment. It had been an odd sort of day, but the happiness of the occasion took hold of her.

Tom beckoned for her to sit next to him. An idle arm draped across her shoulder and she made no attempt to shrug it off. He still looked stunning in his hunting outfit, perhaps more so now it was a little muddy and ruffled. Just being this close to him gave her a thrill.

Gradually, the guests left. Rebecca’s family roused her and all but dragged her to their Audi. The last people left were Helen and Henry and their children.

“I hear you were in the Cavaliers,” William, their teenage son, said, giving Tom the kind of admiring gaze normally reserved for footballers and rock stars. “If I get into Oxford, do you think you could put in a good word for me with them?”

Tom winked. "Of course I can. Though the way you rode today, I don't think you'll need much help. They'll love you."

Harriet wanted to pull the sweet young boy to safety before the Cavaliers could get anywhere near him.

"Anyway, I think it's time to go," Henry said. "Thank you for your hospitality, Tom. Your father would have been proud."

"Thank you," Tom replied. "Helen, you were the perfect hostess, and Henry, you kept the pack in order beautifully."

"Get in boys, I just need to discuss something briefly with Harriet," Helen said. "Goodnight, Tom."

Henry, William and the younger children climbed into their car and Tom went back inside.

"Thank you for telling me your story," Harriet said. "I don't think you're crazy or were hallucinating from shock."

Instead of replying, Helen passed something into Harriet's hands: a picture that looked about thirty years old. Helen hadn't lied about how attractive the now ruddy-faced Henry had been in his youth, though she'd been too modest to talk about her own beauty, which shone out from the photograph and reminded Harriet of someone she couldn't place. Tom was of course unchanged.

"Look at this picture. I watched him closely tonight and I thought with an open mind. Believe me, no one has that much of a family resemblance to their father."

In the wake of Helen's unexpected honesty, Harriet couldn't face her usual approach of outright denial. "Are you trying to warn me away?" she asked.

Helen opened her mouth wide. "Goodness no. Quite the opposite. He's stunning, he's rich, he's titled, he's intelligent, he's charming. And yes, I suspect he's also something else, but I don't think he's something evil. He saved my life after all. I doubt he loved me or anyone else, but I think he loves you."

Harriet almost wanted to laugh. Maybe Tom should be more honest about his vampirism. He went to all this trouble to create new lives for himself, and his neighbours seemingly couldn't give a damn.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," Helen said, in a tone that indicated the subject was firmly closed. She climbed into her car without another word, and Harriet headed back inside.

Tom stood by the fire, staring into the flames. Harriet paused by the entrance for a moment, just watching him. Now the guests had left, she was acutely conscious that they were alone in the house with emotions running high.

"Come here, I'm not going to bite."

Harriet laughed. "I'll hold you to that." She walked across to him with her heart pounding. Most of the time, she forgot that Tom was a vampire, that he was an aristocrat, that he'd been born around the turn of the century. He was just a boy she knew and liked. Tonight though, between the way he

looked and the stories she'd heard, there was no mistaking it. A surge of attraction even stronger than usual fought with an unexpected twinge of fear.

"Did you enjoy the evening?" Tom asked. "I've had a wonderful night."

Harriet nodded. "It was certainly impressive watching you all leave and return. But that girl, Rebecca. You obviously bit her. And Helen was telling me all these tales about you and your endless women thirty years ago."

Tom put an arm around her waist and pulled her into him. "Have I ever denied it? I have to feed, you know that. Seduction's the easiest way and everyone enjoys themselves."

"I think of all the other Cavaliers acting like that," Harriet said with a frown. "Somehow I never think of you in that way. You're just my Tom."

Tom pressed her to him and stroked her hair. "I thought you didn't want me to be yours anymore," he said.

Harriet buried her head in his chest. "I don't know what I want," she replied in a choked voice. "Well, that's not strictly true. Right now I want to rip those elegant clothes of you and pull you down onto that bearskin rug by the fire. But I'm not sure that's the best long-term strategy."

Tom raised his eyebrows and looked at her open mouthed. "That's unusually forthright of you."

Harriet wanted to giggle. Had she actually managed to embarrass Tom? "What can I say? That outfit looks damn good on you."

Tom slipped a hand under her top and ran it up and down her back. Harriet's objections and concerns melted away in a blur of lust. She reached up to remove his carefully knotted scarf, but he caught her hand to stop her.

"What are you planning to do with the knife?" he asked. He clasped Harriet's hand firmly in one of his and used the other to tilt her head back so she had to stare into his dazzling eyes.

"You know I can't tell you," Harriet replied, begging him with her eyes to drop this line of inquiry and resume running his hands all over her body.

"Then I think you're right," Tom said. "We shouldn't be doing this. There are plenty of girls I can have fun with. What I had with you was different, but that's because there were no secrets between us. It was us against the world. I'm happy to let you stay here, but if you won't tell me the truth, I don't think we should muddy the water."

Harriet pressed herself against him in utter frustration. His words echoed what she'd been trying to say all along, but hearing them from him was like a slap in the face.

"Just give me until Easter," Harriet pleaded. "It will all be over then. Maybe we can be together properly, or maybe you'll have no more interest in me." *Or maybe when the dust settles you'll realise you'd rather be with George*, a determined part of her mind whispered, but with Tom there in front of her in all his glory, it was hard to imagine.

“Until Easter then,” Tom replied. He released her hand but tilted her head higher. “Though maybe we can be allowed one kiss to get us through the next four months.”

His lips touched hers and Harriet’s body spasmed. Tom had to tighten his grip to stop her from falling. All too soon, he pulled away.

“You should probably get some sleep. But tomorrow, it’s time for your first riding lesson. If we’re going to make this platonic house guest thing work, we’d better stay busy enough to keep our minds off things.”